

## *Gordon Lindsay Maclean (1937–2008)*

Gordon Lindsay Maclean, Professor Emeritus of Zoology of the University of Natal (now the University of KwaZulu-Natal), internationally famed ornithologist and author of the fifth and sixth revisions of *Roberts' Birds of Southern Africa* died in Howick at the end of March after a long battle with cancer.

Maclean was born in Durban in 1937 and grew up in Basutoland (now Lesotho) and the neighbouring eastern Free State. He had to leave school after Standard 8 (Grade 10) to do farm-work, where the outdoor life and the timeous gift of a bird book kindled his interest in birds. After completing his schooling by private study, he was admitted to the University of Cape Town



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Medical School for six months until his funding source dried up. He then joined De Beers to prospect for diamonds on the Skeleton Coast, where his abiding fascination with deserts and the adaptations of desert birds was born. His academic career began at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, where he graduated with a BSc (Hons) in 1963. Then it was back to semi-desert in the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park for 19 months doing doctoral research on the Sociable Weaver. He spent a year at Cornell University in the United States, prominent at that time in the use of sonograms for the study of bird song. And while in America he took the opportunity to visit deserts in Chile and Argentina.

In 1968 he was appointed a lecturer in the Department of Zoology at the University of Natal, becoming an associate professor in 1975 and a full professor in 1986. Here he was subsequently awarded a DSc for his desert bird research (thus gaining two doctoral degrees in five years), and he retired in December 1997 as Emeritus Professor of Zoology. During those years some of his numerous tasks involved the supervision of various postgraduate students whose names are all associated with advances to knowledge of southern African birdlife and who filled nearly every significant ornithological post in museums and provincial conservation departments in South Africa and Namibia.

A common experience for such students was of being ‘stretched’ by Maclean’s rigorous and uncompromising scientific standards and by his mastery of language. His English was impeccable and he was also fluent in German—self-taught by translating classical German choral works into English and by association with the Namibian German-speaking community during his diamond-prospecting years. Woe betide any student who used what he termed ‘non-words’ (such as ‘predated’), and his liberal use of a red pen on student scripts could produce a draft that Professor Steven Piper aptly described as looking ‘like the parting of the Red Sea’.

In the 1980s he was invited by the trustees of the John Voelker Bird Book Fund to revise *Roberts’ Birds* and the university granted him unpaid leave for two years so as to give the task his full-time attention. He rewrote the work completely and when his fifth edition was published in 1985 it rapidly became a best-seller and ran to six impressions. An entirely new feature was sound reproductions (sonograms) made from recordings of bird calls.

In 1993 Maclean produced the sixth edition of *Roberts’* incorporating new information which had become available through the published literature, through personal observations by other ornithologists and his own research and experiences in the field. Illustrating 907 species of birds in full colour, it incorporated a number of special features including revised and corrected bird names in English, Afrikaans, eight African languages and German (besides the scientific Latin-based names). The colossal, five-kilogramme seventh *Roberts* (2005) is no improvement in omitting not only the sonograms but also the bird lists in every language other than English and Latin. Moreover, Maclean was unashamedly scornful of the new bird names which it incorporates.

Other Maclean publications include *Aids to Bird Identification in Southern Africa* (1981), *Ducks of Sub-Saharan Africa* (1986) which won the Lady Usher Prize for Literature the following year, and *Ornithology for Africa* (1990), besides academic papers and invited contributions to the proceedings of international and local congresses and symposia. He was also well-known as a member of the radio panel for the weekly programme ‘Talking of Nature’ on the SABC.

Maclean was awarded a fellowship by the University of Natal in 1992 in recognition of his academic achievements and he was the recipient of the Gill Memorial Medal of the Southern African Ornithological Society for services to ornithology south of the Zambezi River.

In 1994 he played a pivotal role in campaigning for the choice of South Africa (rather than contenders Israel, India, Canada and Japan) to host the 22nd International Ornithological Congress in Durban in 1998. This was only the second time an IOC had been held in the southern hemisphere, and the success of the Durban event is now history.

In retirement Maclean took up painting in watercolours, an activity in which he soon demonstrated great skill, his pictures usually based on slides which he had taken of Namibian scenes. He even held a successful solo exhibition of his work.

He is survived by his wife Cherie and their children David and Marion who, together with those who knew him well, will fondly remember his penetrating (and often caustic) comments and his sense of humour, and rejoice in the rich legacy of his achievements.

JACK FROST and TERRY OATLEY