
Obituary

Jack Skead, 1912–2006

CJ Skead, 'Jack' or 'Skeado' to his friends, died peacefully on 28 May 2006, just a month after his 94th birthday. Born in Port Elizabeth on 30 April 1912, Skeado attended Grey High School in Port Elizabeth and then St Andrew's College in Grahamstown. He trained as a dairy farmer at Reading University (UK) and Grootfontein Agricultural College, after which he farmed at 'Gameston' on the Highlands road near Grahamstown for 17 years. Here he began his bird observations, with the first publication appearing in *Ostrich* in 1943. In 1949 Skeado moved to King William's Town as director of the Kaffrarian (now Amathole) Museum. From 1961–1966 he served as a research officer for the Percy FitzPatrick Institute, although he remained based in the Eastern Cape. After this interlude, he returned to the Kaffrarian Museum as a biologist until his retirement in 1972, when the family moved to Grahamstown. His son David was a fine ornithologist, who died tragically in a light aircraft crash. Following the death of his wife, Skeado returned to Port Elizabeth and lived there in a retirement village from 1985.

Without any formal scientific training, Skeado embodied the finest qualities of the old-fashioned term 'naturalist' — a keen observer and a meticulous recorder of information, with wide interests, which extended far beyond biology. Many of his bird papers were entitled 'A study of ...' and formed the basis for our knowledge of the biology of species as diverse as the Hadedah Ibis and the Black Cuckooshrike. Six papers were published in *Ibis* and one in *Auk*, but the bulk appeared in *Ostrich* — more than 50 notes and articles. Two papers in *Koedoe* provided the first reviews of the avifauna of the Mountain Zebra National Park, and the Tsitsikamma National Park, the latter co-authored with Richard Liversidge. Skeado attended the first two Pan-African Ornithological Congresses, in Livingstone (Zambia) and in Pietermaritzburg, and contributed papers to these proceedings. Perhaps his most-cited publication is the *Ostrich Supplement* 'The ecology of birds in the Eastern Cape Province' (1967). He also authored or co-authored five volumes in the *South African Avifauna* series.

Books represent a major part of his output. During his working years, Skeado was the main editor of 'Sunbirds of southern Africa' (1967) and 'The canaries, seedeaters and buntings of southern Africa' (1960), two volumes which are valued today as much for their content as for their rarity as *Africana*. He had a keen appreciation of the importance of history, and his early comments in the *Annals of the Cape Provincial Museums* on the significance of historical records of bird and mammal distribution were followed up by the 'Zoo-historical Gazetteer' which appeared in the same journal just after he had formally retired. Retirement was perhaps his busiest time, as the files of information on a myriad of topics expanded to fill cupboards at home, and the portable typewriter clattered away. His later letters were characterized by the worn keys and indistinct print of this over-worked machine; he never changed it, but relied on his daughter Peggy to retype his documents on a word processor. In his retirement he produced two volumes on historical mammal distribution in the Cape Province, an account of the natural history of the offshore islands of South Africa, a gazetteer of place names in the Algoa region along with four publications on Khoekhoe and Xhosa place names, a history of the Skead family, a monograph on stone walls on Eastern Cape farms, a compilation of bird sightings by early travellers, another of historical plant records and an account of early plant collectors, and two items on the early history of the Eastern Cape Region. Two volumes of natural history notes on Eastern Cape birds summarise the raw data which had not been included in earlier publications, thus preserving his field notes for future students. Finally there were six slim books in which his sense of humour was allowed full play, to relate anecdotes of his birding days for family and friends. Yet even these are no mere comic pieces, but are also full of information, searching questions, and the wisdom of someone who had spent many hours in patient observation.

Few 'amateurs' have been more worthy of formal academic recognition, and Skeado received honorary doctorates from Rhodes University (1982) and the University of Port Elizabeth (2004). He was awarded the Gill Memorial Medal by the Southern African Ornithological Society (1966), but managed to avoid giving the customary lecture associated with the presentation. In 1977 the Zoological Society of Southern Africa awarded him their Gold Medal, citing especially his 'Zoo-historical Gazetteer' and his contribution to clarifying the activities of early collectors in this region. He received honours from other societies (a gold medal from the Grassland Society in 2002), and his contribution to museums was recognised by a special award from the Eastern Cape government in 2005. Skeado always tried to stimulate more amateurs, bird-club members and the like, to be involved in the systematic collection of field data, and wrote numerous popular articles in *African Wildlife*, *Bokmakierie*, *Bee-eater*, *Diaz Diary*, *Eastern Cape Naturalist* (later entitled *The Naturalist*) and *Piscator*, as well as a regular column in the *Evening Post* newspaper during his years in King William's Town.

Though quiet and self-deprecatory in manner, Skeado was no recluse. He retained a wide circle of contacts, and received many visitors. Often a letter with more information and suggestions about other sources would follow promptly after a conversation or a phone call. By the time I knew him, he no longer joined bird club outings as he had in earlier days in Grahamstown, but his interest in birds never slackened. After the death of Cecily Niven he became the patron of the Diaz Cross Bird Club, which he had nurtured since its formation in 1973. Earlier this year he gave me a file of typed observations on the birds of his retirement village, and these will appear in *Diaz Diary* (suitably re-typed). As neighbours we became friends, and for 26 years I have been privileged to learn from him. When Skeado moved to Port Elizabeth I was saddened, but his letters were a new source of pleasure, laced with his wry sense of humour. An account of anting included a marginal illustration labelled 'pants waiting for ants'! All who knew him will miss his conversation and his letters, yet he has left an extraordinarily valuable written record, which will be consulted for decades to come, especially by anyone involved in the Eastern Cape.

Adrian Craig
Department of Zoology & Entomology
Rhodes University, Grahamstown