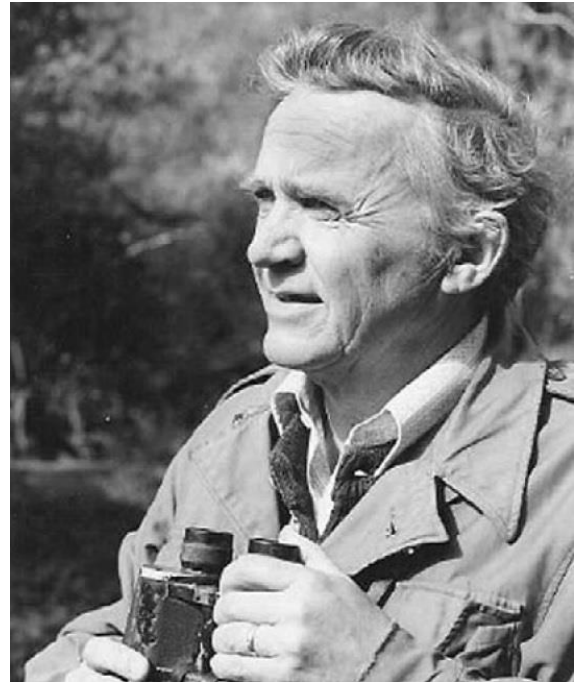


**1919-11-12**

**Westerskov, Kaj Ejvind F:Jacobsen**

Af C.J.R. Robertson

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### **Obituary**

**Kaj Ejvind Westerskov  
1919-2003**

The modern study of ornithology in New Zealand has benefited greatly from the intellectual contributions and techniques of those professional practitioners who migrated here. Kaj Westerskov was, with F.C. Kinski and K.A. Wodzicki, one of three European ornithologists and ecologists arriving in the 1940s and early 1950s who were to have a lasting influence in their adopted home.

Born in Vejle, Denmark, Kaj was attracted to the outdoors at an early age, starting to keep a bird diary at the age of 12 and publishing his first paper on observations of the Great Ringed plover in 1936. He went on to watch, research, teach and write about birds throughout a career where birds of the feathered variety were work, hobby and life. His early ornithological expertise and research on black grouse provided a cover for his gathering information (as a member of the resistance) about airstrips being built by German occupation forces.

Caught cycling down a runway without lights he was able to convince one of his German captors (a hunter in peacetime) that he was checking the "booming" calls of grouse, and was duly released. Together with Kirsten Dons (later his wife), he was apprehended boating near a bridge to check if it was wired with explosives, and again a "bird study" explanation came to their rescue. His book on black grouse, published in 1943 during wartime when aged 23, is still regarded as one of the best of its kind.

After the war he obtained a Diploma in Forestry at the Danish Forestry School, before graduating MSc in wildlife biology from Ohio State University and returning to a post as biologist at the Danish Game Research Station. Here his major research interest was in the ecology of game birds. The decision to migrate and settle in New Zealand during 1952 was a major transition in the lives of the family (three children each born in a different country), but was to cement a pattern of regular migratory worldwide travel throughout a many faceted life.

Appointed as a research scientist with the Wildlife Service, Department of Internal Affairs, he was quickly involved in research on pheasant populations which led, in 1956, to a PhD from Victoria University of Wellington and the publication of an important monograph. His first place of work was at Turangi - in living quarters for two years with no running water or electricity! Moving to Wellington there were regular weekend visits

to the game farm at Bulls in the Manawatu to monitor the breeding of grey partridge that were introduced to New Zealand under his mentoring.

From game birds Kaj traversed to large birds - especially albatrosses - when he participated in the Denver Museum of Natural History Expedition to remote Campbell Island in early 1958. He was responsible for the collection of many of the specimens making up the spectacular diorama in that Museum today, while his own studies led to a number of publications on the birds of Campbell Island, and particularly of the royal albatrosses. This interest was continued in some of the studies at the Thiaroa Head albatross colony in Dunedin after Lance Richdale retired and while Stan Sharpe was still the ranger.

He was head of the research section of the Wildlife Service from 1960-1964. During his time with the Wildlife Service he published widely on a range of other topics, in a number of languages, and not confined only to birds resident in New Zealand e.g., bird counts in Matamata, pheasants (a wide range of issues here and overseas), bird pox in New Zealand pipit, taxonomic status of the redpoll in New Zealand, spread of the magpie, bobwhite quail, the Danish partridge as a game bird (a wide range of issues here and overseas); training for the wildlife profession; the preservation of island avifaunas of New Zealand; and conservation in New Zealand. In 1961, he was awarded a Canadian National Research Council Fellowship and spent a year at the University of Alberta where he successfully extended his research on partridge commenced in Ohio in the 1940s'

The importance of managing wildlife had clearly been deeply ingrained throughout this period and, in 1964, he shifted south to Dunedin -to commence a Readership in Animal Ecology at the Zoology Department, Otago University. The following year he introduced the one-year post-graduate Diploma in Wildlife Management- a first for Australasia. Until his retirement from Otago in 1985 as Assistant Professor of Zoology, his course was a practical expression of the appreciation of applied wildlife studies. He supervised 69 post-graduate research students during this time and his influences survive today in the field of conservation and game management in New Zealand. He was remembered for his broad-minded and practical approach - appreciating the deer and bird both in the wild and on the table. Even dissection of a chicken in the laboratory served both an academic and culinary purpose, with instructions for the breasts of the chicken to be removed with care and with the addition of vegetables in a Pressure cooker, to be served once the class ended. Even Kirsten's culinary expertise was of assistance, with many ornithological field trips finishing with fine Danish pastries at the professorial home.

A keen outdoorsman, deerstalker, duck shooter and fisherman Kaj was always keen to talk, to educate and to write. During his university career his writings continued to cover a broad international spectrum - on Australian brolga, marsh crake; grebes and the southern crested grebe, pheasants and partridges, New Zealand parrots, chukar, pukeko and white-capped noddy on historic figures e.g., Professor Erwin Stresemann, Johannes Carl Andersen and Reischek's observations of kokako, kakapo, and his ornithological collecting in New Zealand; and on general topics such as principles of wildlife management and the effects of man and introduced mammals on the fauna of New Zealand. He also published his popular book "Know your New Zealand birds".

For one so widely travelled it was appropriate that he should be honoured by various international awards, as Fellow of The Explorers Club (New York) in 1979, Honorary Membership of The Wildlife Society (1980), Fellow of the Linnean Society (1986) and as

a member of the International Ornithological Committee. He was active within the University, being at various times acting Head of Department, President of the Lecturers Association, while outside activities included the executive of the Otago Branch of the Royal Society of New Zealand.

In the field of conservation he served both as president of the Otago Branch and also on the national executive of the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society. As a Rotarian he took the rare occupational classification of ornithologist and was on one occasion with a visiting Rotary colleague of the same classification charitably fined for conducting a serious academic discussion of the classification of albatrosses at the dinner table. During Team New Zealand's first defence of the America's Cup, and watching a race on the TV with the same colleague, the viewing rapidly evolved into a discussion of the mechanics and patterns of albatross flight demonstrated by the peak of modern sailing techniques.

Like all good educators Kaj touched the lives of many individuals. His final monumental work – a dictionary of New Zealand ornithology that was almost complete at the time of his death - may yet prove to be his most important contribution to his adopted country. He lived an active and varied life, firm in his belief that good science should support the principles of good wildlife management and of the necessity to use New Zealand's natural resources wisely. Kirsten and his three children, Kim, Laila and Tui, who all contributed to and participated in his endeavours, survive him.

Fra [www.royalsociety.org.nz](http://www.royalsociety.org.nz)

#### KAJ EJVIND WESTERSKOV, FLS (1919-2003)

Professor Kaj Westerskov was a leading ornithologist, first in Denmark, where he was born, and latterly in New Zealand, where he was successively a PhD student at Victoria University College, Reader in Zoology at the University of Otago and subsequently Professor there. He published his first book (on the black grouse) when he was 22; subsequently he published extensively on New Zealand birds; as an academic he introduced partridge into New Zealand. He set up world-renowned programmes at Otago University in wildlife management.

He is survived by his wife, Kirsten, who shared some of his underground ornithological experiences in Denmark.

#### **Know your New Zealand Birds**

by K. E. Westerskov.

Whitcombe and Tombs Ltd., Christchurch, 1967. \$2.25.

Kaj Westerskov, Biologist, Reader in Zoology and perhaps above all a family man, has set out to write a compact, lucid book on field identification of New Zealand birds, so that the amateur may share with the expert the pleasures of bird watching and identification.

The author's two oldest children, a senior scout and guide respectively, probably helped stimulate him to compile this excellent book.

The first paragraph of the preface sets out the book's aim—it is a guide to New Zealand birds for young people, guides and scouts, students, trampers, shooters, campers, immigrants, overseas visitors and budding bird watchers. This aim it will achieve—it requires little refinement and thus leaves little room for criticism. However, it does fall short of its aim to be a pocket guide—nobody could comfortably sit on it and it would require an extremely generous pocket anywhere to accommodate it. If it was paper-backed rather than hard-backed it would then conform to pocket requirements.

There are four different ways for bird identification. (1) the index and (2) the quick reference are useful for those with a good idea as to what bird they are looking at. But the next two sections, (3) the field key page 166 and (4) identification by habitat, with ten habitat types listed, are ideal for the novice. In other words these sections will go close to permitting “anyone’ to identify their birds down to species.

There are sections on sex and age determination, song tracks, birds found on roadsides, dead on beaches, game birds, bird journals and organisations etc.

The bibliography is ideally selected. There are 16 colour plates taken from Buller's Birds of New Zealand, and 75 photographs, some of which have not reproduced well, e.g. the sooty and fluttering shearwaters, the spotted shags and the pukeko. I am sure these could have been improved on, had the author used photographs taken by others, rather than remain restricted to his own collection, good as it is.

Overall, the amount of information packed into 143 pages is astounding and the manner of presentation excellent, making the book worthy of success.