

In Memoriam: Karl Walton Kenyon, 1918–2007

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IN MEMORIAM: KARL WALTON KENYON, 1918–2007

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Karl Walton Kenyon, a member of the American Ornithologists' Union since 1944 and an Elective Member since 1961, died on 27 March 2007, at the age of 89. Karl was born on 23 February 1918 in La Jolla, California. Growing up, Karl spent much of his spare time collecting eggs, skiff-fishing, and observing migrating Gray Whales (at a time when most cetologists thought they were nearly extinct). He attended Pomona College from 1936 to 1940 and then entered Cornell University to earn a Master's degree in 1941. Karl's academic studies ended when he was drafted into the military. In World War II, he served as a naval aviator aboard the *USS Sangamon* in the Pacific theater, where he flew 97 sorties. He was shot down over Leyte Island in the Philippines and rescued at sea. After his discharge with honors as a Lieutenant Commander, he bought a 25-foot sloop and spent two months exploring the coast of Baja California. Observations made during this trip led to early publications on bird distributions. He had become a member of the Cooper Ornithological Society in 1934 and published prolifically in *The Condor*.

Karl was an instructor in Zoology at Mills College (Oakland, California) from 1947 to 1949. However, academic life was not to his liking, and he joined the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Seattle. Karl initially worked under the supervision of Victor B. Scheffer, and his first assignment was to census the fur seals on the Pribilof Islands. His careful, on-site census was so far below the official numbers that embarrassed bureaucrats delayed publication of his report for several years. He spent six months at sea in 1952 on an international pelagic research program on sealing. In 1955, Karl began intensive research on Sea Otters in the Aleutian Islands. On 27 October 1961, while returning to Adak at the end of an aerial survey, his float plane crashed during an attempted landing on a lake. Karl escaped with minor injuries, but four of the nine people aboard died. Before Karl's studies, virtually all attempts to transport Sea Otters and hold them in captivity resulted in their early deaths. His work to develop proper handling techniques made it possible to re-establish populations of Sea Otters in areas where they had been extirpated. Subsequent translocations were instrumental in the survival of this once near-extinct marine mammal. Karl's monograph, *The Sea Otter in the Eastern Pacific Ocean*, was the first comprehensive account of the species' biology and natural history. He also did pioneering work on the Pacific Walrus at Little Diomed and Round islands in the Bering Sea. He completed the first aerial census of Steller Sea Lion populations throughout the Aleutian Islands and western Gulf of Alaska.

Karl coauthored seminal works on the breeding, distribution, and life history of Laysan and Black-footed albatrosses and

the Hawaiian Monk Seal. In his *Man versus the Monk Seal* (1972), he alerted the world to the plight of these mammals. In 1978, his work verified the extinction of the Caribbean Monk Seal. Karl's pioneering efforts on birds include one of the first beached-bird surveys in San Diego County (1943), and he was among the first to note the ingestion of plastic by seabirds. A leader in work on the homing ability of Laysan Albatrosses, he flew incubating albatrosses to various Pacific Rim air stations and then released them and measured the time required for the birds to return to their nests on Midway Island.

Karl was deeply committed to conservation and the application of science to issues of societal importance. After Bing Crosby visited Midway Island with a United Service Organizations (USO) show in the late 1950s, he mentioned on his radio program that the Navy was killing albatrosses to prevent air crashes. Karl was dispatched to address the problem of bird-aircraft collisions. The island's Commanding Officer (CO) thought that Karl's presence was tacit permission to remove the nuisance birds. Karl did not agree. To prove his point, he permitted removals from a triangle where runways met. As birds were killed, others came to replace them. The CO loudly berated Karl for his refusal to continue the killing; Karl, a civilian, was free to respond and raised his voice loudly enough to be heard throughout the second floor of the administration building. Embarrassed, the CO immediately moderated his attitude. It was apparent that simply removing albatrosses was not the solution, and everyone agreed that some other form of management was required.

Karl and Dale Rice then recommended removal of the revetments and dunes that bordered the runways and that the dunes be leveled for a distance of at least 300 feet from the tarmac, which placed the birds out of harm's way. The work cost millions of dollars but saved thousands of albatross and perhaps some pilots' lives.

Karl retired from federal service in 1973, a year after the Marine Mammal Protection Act went into effect, citing "too much paperwork needed yesterday." His work in conservation continued and resulted in halting the bombing of Seal Rocks in Washington, a target he himself strafed during his "top gun" years. Karl was an accomplished wildlife photographer, watercolorist, and oil painter, and he wrote for popular magazines. Kenyon's Dome is a geological feature on Bogoslov Island, an emerging volcanic cone in the Aleutians, named in his honor by G. Vernon Byrd of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. A subspecies of the Northern Sea Otter, *Enhydra lutris kenyoni*, was named for him in 1991. A cormorant species, Kenyon's Shag (*Stictocarbo kenyoni*), based on a complete skeleton Karl had

collected in 1959, was named in his honor by Douglas Siegel-Causey in 1991. In 1993, Karl received the inaugural Lifetime Achievement Award from the Pacific Seabird Group.

Karl Kenyon is remembered for his landmark contributions to both marine mammalogy and ornithology. He is survived by

his companion of 39 years, Clarence Larson, two nieces, and two nephews.

In writing this memorial, I relied heavily on one published in *Marine Mammal Science* in 2007.