

## **Charles Ellsworth Huntington, 1919–2017**

Authors: Wheelwright, Nathaniel T., and Mauck, Robert A.

Source: *The Auk*, 135(1) : 158-159

Published By: American Ornithological Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1642/AUK-17-200.1>

---

BioOne Complete ([complete.BioOne.org](https://complete.BioOne.org)) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at [www.bioone.org/terms-of-use](https://www.bioone.org/terms-of-use).

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non - commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

---

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.



IN MEMORIAM

## Charles Ellsworth Huntington, 1919–2017

Nathaniel T. Wheelwright<sup>1\*</sup> and Robert A. Mauck<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Biology, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine, USA

<sup>2</sup> Department of Biology, Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio, USA

\* Corresponding author: [nwheelwr@bowdoin.edu](mailto:nwheelwr@bowdoin.edu)

Published December 27, 2017

In 1953, Charles Ellsworth (“Chuck”) Huntington, an Elective Member of the American Ornithologists’ Union (AOU) since 1968, began what would become a 64-year study of Leach’s Storm-Petrels at the Bowdoin Scientific Station on Kent Island, New Brunswick, Canada. More than 60 years later, he was still making the trek to Kent Island, still vitally interested in the natural history of this remarkable bird, still with a gleam in his eye just thinking about banding storm-petrels. When he died on January 2, 2017, Chuck left a legacy of ornithologists for whom he had opened a world of possibilities.

Among them was Edward H. (“Jed”) Burt, who went on to become president of the AOU, the Association of Field Ornithologists, and the Wilson Ornithological Society. In 2009, near the end of Jed’s own distinguished career, he wrote Chuck, “Your dedication to Leach’s Petrels, not just their study, but to the birds themselves and to their island, are an inspiration to me and to generations of Bowdoin students... I can only hope that I will be as successful in inspiring my students as you were in inspiring me.” Doug Gill, who spent a formative summer at the Bowdoin Scientific Station before going on to an illustrious career on the faculty at the University of Maryland, remembers that Chuck “provided me and countless other young aspiring ornithologists a seminal opportunity to launch our careers as biologists.” Peter Hodum, associate professor of biology at the University of Puget Sound, wrote that “Chuck awakened a passion in me for seabirds that I am unsure I would have discovered otherwise.”

Chuck himself was introduced to Kent Island in 1948 by a fellow graduate student at Yale University, Raymond Paynter. Paynter (who later served as curator of birds and senior lecturer at Harvard’s Museum of Comparative Zoology) had spent several summers at the remote field station in the Bay of Fundy while an undergraduate at Bowdoin. Despite the frigid January weather and bleak landscape, Chuck instantly fell in love with the place.

After completing his Ph.D. on hybridization in grackles in 1952 at Yale, under S. Dillon Ripley, Chuck had the



**Chuck Huntington** celebrating the 50th anniversary of the start of his long-term study of Leach’s Storm-Petrels on Kent Island.

chance to return to Kent Island on a more permanent basis. Early in 1953, he noticed an advertisement for a position at Bowdoin to succeed retiring ornithologist Alfred O. Gross. Although the position required teaching physiology, Chuck jumped at the chance despite having little background in the field. According to him, he was the only applicant for what became his “first and only job.” In later years he was able to teach courses closer to his interests and expertise, such as evolutionary biology, ecology, and ornithology. In his ornithology class, he made lifelong naturalists of many Bowdoin undergraduates, including Audubon biographer Peter Logan, who captured Chuck’s passion for birds and teaching (as well as his hair-raising driving) in an article in the February 1998 issue of *Birder’s World* titled “The Professor.”

Chuck was promoted to associate professor at Bowdoin College in 1964 and to full professor in 1970. In 1971 he helped start Bowdoin’s Environmental Studies Program, and he served as chair of the Biology Department from 1973 to 1976. Although he loved teaching undergraduates in the classroom and on field trips, he always considered the best part of his job to be the directorship of the

Bowdoin Scientific Station, a position he held for 33 years.

Chuck's work on the Kent Island storm-petrel population served as the basis for collaborations with numerous ornithologists and resulted in a wide array of publications in many of the most prestigious scientific journals. To our knowledge, no individual in the history of biology has ever carried out a continuous field study of a single population of animals or plants for as long as Chuck did. At the 2017 meeting of the Society for Integrative and Comparative Biology in New Orleans, Chuck coauthored—at age 97—a paper titled “Telomeres and lifespan in birds,” just the latest of many scientific collaborations that would not have been possible without his detailed, long-term fieldwork.

When Chuck retired from the faculty of Bowdoin in 1986, one of us (N.T.W.) was hired as his successor. Chuck couldn't wait to introduce Nat to his beloved Kent Island. So, the summer before his job started, Nat made the trek to Kent Island with Chuck. If the tides and weather cooperate, it is a lengthy journey from Brunswick to Kent Island—including a five-hour car ride, a two-hour ferry, and a one-hour ride in a lobster boat—before transferring to a skiff and walking 20 minutes across the muddy, algae-covered intertidal, around a tidal basin, and through woods and fields for another quarter mile. Chuck relished every moment of that trip and every trip he took to Kent Island.

Upon arrival at Kent Island on Nat's first trip, the students who had been left in charge of the field station rushed up to Chuck. They recounted how they had dealt with some local troublemakers in his absence. “We decided to be rude to them to give them the hint to go away,” they said. Nat has never forgotten Chuck's response: “I've always thought that you should be nice to everyone.” In all the years that either of us knew Chuck, we never heard him say a bad word about anyone (other than certain politicians and a few arrogant or stuffy academics).

In 1990, Thomas C. Grubb, Jr., another Kent Island alumnus, introduced one of us (R.A.M.) to Chuck, who was looking for help managing his storm-petrel data. Thus began a collaboration both long and fruitful. From the start, Chuck's deep knowledge of storm-petrels was obvious. More impressive, however, were Chuck's unbridled enthusiasm and affection for Kent Island, for storm-petrels, and for just about everything else in life. It was an enthusiasm evident from early childhood.

Born in Boston on December 8, 1919, Chuck was one of three children of Rachel Brewer and Ellsworth Huntington. When Chuck was 10 years old, he began keeping lists of the birds that he spotted near his home. A year later, he became (in his own words) “more methodical.” Knowledge was a lifelong pursuit and passion for Chuck, and details mattered.

Much of Chuck's early education came from traveling the world. His father, an eminent geographer at Yale, was best known for his studies of the relationship between climate and culture (work that in later years was seen by some as controversial). That research took the family to Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Chuck attended boarding school in Switzerland during one of his father's trips and spent the year after high school at the Cranbrook School in Kent, England. As a young boy, he met Princess Sofia of Bulgaria, who affectionately stroked him on the cheek and gave him a cannonball as a gift. He could list the currencies of all the countries of Africa and Asia and knew the names of 20 kinds of winds—boras and siroccos, simoons and williwaws. Chuck never lost his fascination with exploring new lands. He took advantage of one sabbatical to spend the year at the Edward Grey Institute of Field Ornithology at Oxford with support from a Guggenheim Fellowship. During other sabbaticals, he and his family traveled throughout Europe and New Zealand.

Chuck's formal education while growing up in Connecticut included the Foote, Hopkins, and Pomfret schools. He received his B.S. in biology from Yale in 1942. With World War II in full swing, he enlisted in the U.S. Navy, spending time on Espiritu Santo Island in the South Pacific (where, he proudly recounted, he managed to talk a friendly officer into letting him briefly take the helm of an aircraft carrier). He completed his service in 1946 as a lieutenant commander.

It was on Kent Island in 1956 that Chuck proposed to Louise Slater. They were married on December 22, 1956, and had four children, George, Bill, Kate, and Sarah. Chuck was predeceased by his brother, George; his sister, Anna; and his son George. He is survived by his wife, Louise, their three other children, and five grandchildren.

We thank Louise Huntington, Kate Huntington Gray, and Elizabeth Pierson for information on Chuck's early life and their comments on an earlier draft.

---

Memorials Editor: Ted Anderson, ted020@centurytel.net