

In Memoriam

David F. DeSante, 1942–2022



Dave DeSante, photographed in Lagunitas, California, shortly after his 80th birthday (photo by Hillary Smith).

David (Dave) DeSante, well known conservationist, ornithologist, and lifelong birder who devoted his professional life to understanding and addressing causes of bird population declines, died October 18, 2022 in Marin County, California, at age 80. Dave's long and highly productive ornithological career began with his doctoral studies at Stanford University in the early 1970s, where he conducted groundbreaking work on bird migration and navigation. His research focused on a phenomenon he termed "mirror-image misorientation" that results in a trickle of vagrant migratory birds showing up on the central California coast every autumn, thousands of miles off the normal route between their breeding grounds in eastern North America and their wintering areas in Central America and the Caribbean. The last moments of Dave's life, before he succumbed to a heart attack, were spent in joyful pursuit of an ultra-rare vagrant Willow Warbler (*Phylloscopus trochilus*), a migratory species that breeds across much of Europe and winters in Sub-Saharan Africa. The species had never before been observed in California, and the bird likely found itself there due to a version of the phenomenon Dave had studied decades earlier.

Dave was born August 12, 1942, in Akron, Ohio to Irene and Gilbert DeSante. He discovered his lifelong love of birds as a young child. Their colors and songs caught his attention, and he became even more interested when he realized that

some of them disappear during the cold, snowy winters but return the following spring.

After graduating from high school, Dave enrolled at Case Institute of Technology, receiving a B.S. in Metallurgical Engineering in 1963. He then enrolled in the Materials Science program at Stanford and completed an M.S. (1966) before deciding to align his professional life with his passion for birds by entering Stanford's Biological Sciences doctoral program to study birds. His doctoral advisor was the eminent botanist Peter Raven and he earned his Ph.D. in 1973.

After completing his doctorate, Dave taught at Stanford for a year before accepting a position as Assistant Professor of Biology at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. During his three years at Reed, he began conducting ornithological fieldwork in California's High Sierra, igniting a lifelong interest in Sierra Nevada birds, and initiating a multi-decade field study in the Hall Natural Area near Yosemite National Park that would lead to important findings on the ecology, population dynamics, and responses to climate variation of subalpine birds. Dave was never happier than when he was counting birds or looking for their nests in the high-elevation meadows, coniferous forests, and talus slopes of his long-term study area, where he also cultivated many lifelong friendships with colleagues and field assistants. He especially delighted in bringing his children there to play and explore during the late summers, and journeying throughout California's remarkable wildlands, sleeping under the stars in high deserts, and visiting nature preserves.

In 1978 Dave left the academy to become Director of Landbird Research at Point Reyes Bird Observatory (now Point Blue Conservation Science), where he pioneered the standardizing of bird population monitoring methods and published provocative findings about the possible effects of fallout from the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in causing nesting failure of birds as far away as coastal California. Recognizing a need for more extensive and standardized bird population monitoring that could better document such effects in the future, Dave left Point Reyes Bird Observatory in 1989 to found The Institute for Bird Populations (IBP), with its flagship project being the Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship (MAPS) program, a cooperative, continent-wide bird-banding program designed to study the demographic rates (e.g., annual survival and reproductive output) of landbird species.

Dave was a visionary who recognized not only the need for demographic monitoring to better understand the causes

of changes in landbird populations, but also the power of a well-conceived, standardized protocol to facilitate meaningful participation by researchers and bird banders across North America. From a small project with just one harried field intern in Yosemite National Park in 1989, Dave led the growth of MAPS into a continent-wide monitoring program, still coordinated by IBP, with data collected from well over 1,300 monitoring stations. The data comprise over two million individual capture records and are used extensively for scientific research, population monitoring, and conservation planning to benefit bird populations across the continent.

Before Dave stepped down from his role as Executive Director of IBP in 2008, he established several other important bird research and conservation initiatives under the auspices of IBP, including the MoSI (Monitoreo de Sobrevivencia Invernal) program, a cooperative effort among agencies, organizations, and individual bird banders in Latin America and the Caribbean to monitor migratory and resident bird populations, which continues to thrive today. Dave served as President of IBP until his death. He also continued to publish, ultimately producing more than 80 scientific papers and book chapters, and hundreds of technical reports for government agencies. Besides being a tireless champion for the study and conservation of bird populations, Dave is remembered by family, friends, and colleagues for his huge and loving spirit,

his encyclopedic knowledge of the world's birds, his ability to bring people together to help birds, and his generosity in advising and mentoring younger scientists and birders.

Dave was an Elective Member (1985) and Fellow (2005) of the American Ornithological Society (AOS). He received several awards in addition to those conferred by the AOS. Partners in Flight presented IBP with its Investigations Award (2003) "for efforts to develop conservation strategies for landbirds". The Western Section of the Wildlife Society presented Dave its Conservationist of the Year award (2005), and the American Birding Association presented him its Chandler Robbins Conservation and Education Award (2010).

Dave is survived by his son Forest and daughter-in-law Sara, his daughters Marie and Eve, the children's mother Eden, and three beloved grandchildren. IBP is planning to hold a memorial event for Dave in Marin County in the spring of 2023.

Rodney B. Siegel

The Institute for Bird Populations, PO Box 518,
Petaluma, California, USA

Corresponding author: rsiegel@birdpop.org

Memorials Editor: Ted Anderson, tanderson@americanornithology.org