

Obituary: William Kent Treloar

7 May 1952 to 24 July 2020

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After a long battle with cancer, Kent Treloar died in the winter of 2020, aged 68. He was well known and widely respected throughout his home region of Yorke Peninsula in South Australia, as well as further afield, for his active roles with landscape restoration and conservation programs and for his lifelong passion for birdlife, leading to close involvement in state and national survey and research projects over many decades.

Early years and development as a birder

Kent was born into a farming family, the youngest of four children of Roy and Dorothy Treloar, the home property being Trefold, situated around five km south-east of Minlaton on Yorke Peninsula (YP).

Growing up on the farm gave Kent an awareness of seasonal cycles and events and, even when very young, he had an innate interest in the natural world, always disappearing off to explore nearby patches of scrub. When Kent was around nine or ten, older brother Lachlan brought home a book on birds (Cayley's *What Bird is That?*), which Kent became totally absorbed in. He became skilled at identifying local bird species and in locating their nests, and for a short time started an egg collection. These skills lead to a fascination with the choice of nest site and nest construction methods of different species, what they fed the young, etc. All the while, the first chapters of that renowned encyclopaedic knowledge-bank were being stored away, to be recalled later and readily shared in his typical understated manner.

In correspondence found among Kent's notebooks and other records is a typed letter



Kent Treloar at Uluru, 2017. Image Marie Treloar

on South Australian Museum stationery, dated January 28th 1965, to 'Master Kent Treloar' from H. T. (Herb) Condon, then Curator of Birds at the Museum, written in response to one he had received from 12-year-old Kent. Kent's letter included a bird list, and Condon's reply was gracious and encouraging:

Your list is a good one and includes most of the species likely to be met with in the area. I think it should be published in our local bird journal 'The South Australian Ornithologist'. Please let me know if you would be agreeable to this.... It will be interesting to find out whether the birds you see are Crows, Little Crows, or Ravens and I suggest that you examine any dead birds that may be found. If in doubt, you could send the bodies to the Museum for identification.

The list was passed on to the South Australian Ornithological Association (SAOA) Editor Brian Glover, leading to an invitation to join the Association (which Kent did on 30 April 1965) and to continue to record and submit his sightings.

Although that original list never appeared in the journal in its entirety, 10 of Kent's annotated observations were included in the 'Bird Report, 1965' in the *South Australian Ornithologist* (SAO) (Vol. 24 (6), 1966). These included species with tricky diagnostic features, such as Painted Quail [Buttonquail], Grey Plover, Wood Sandpiper and Fork-tailed [Pacific] Swift, and are impressive records from this young observer with just a copy of Cayley to refer to and 'birthday present quality' binoculars. Apparently in response to a letter asking for a typed copy of his list, Brian Glover wrote to Kent on 10 October 1966 enclosing a typed list and encouraging him to submit further records. Still with the letter is the typed list titled: '1964 to 1967 – Birds which I have seen from the area of S.Y.P. – by Kent Treloar', followed by a list of 118 species, set in two columns, complete with numerical species codes in use at that time.

But perhaps there is more to the story of those early years when Kent first came to the attention of the SAOA. To become confident with that number of species at such a young age suggests he may have been mentored by someone more experienced. This probability is somewhat reinforced, as later the same year (October 1965), his older brother Lachlan can recall the then President of SAOA, Frank Chapman, and his family picking up Kent on their way to the annual October long-weekend camp-out at Pondalowie Bay. The location was chosen because of reports of a mysterious 'new' bird species living in the last remaining extensive area of mallee-coastal heath habitat on the foot of YP (which later became Innes National Park).

Everyone in the group heard the 'mystery bird' calling, but Frank Chapman and Kent

were the only two people who managed to see what proved to be a population of the elusive 'Western Whipbird' (described the following year as a separate subspecies by Condon but now included in the nominate subspecies of White-bellied Whipbird *Psophodes leucogaster*). Kent's experience was perhaps mostly by chance however, as later recounted to me: '... it was there calling from thick bush in the swale, I knew it was close, but I sort-of slipped and slid down this sand-dune and out flushed this mallee whipbird that just sat up and we both had a good look at each other!' (paraphrased from memory).

So began a lifetime of discoveries and unique experiences leading to significant contributions to ornithology, rural landscape preservation, and nature conservation in South Australia centred on the YP region. At Birds SA's 118th Annual General Meeting in April 2017, then president Dr David Paton presented Kent with a Platinum Certificate in recognition of 50 years of continuous membership.

School, teenage years and sport

Kent's formal schooling was at the local primary and high schools in Minlaton. Even before completing schooling, Kent's skill on the football field was noticed by Adelaide Football League scouts, leading to an invitation to train with the North Adelaide Football Club, which arranged an electrical trade apprenticeship for him at the British Tube Mills factory at Kilburn. But life 'in the big smoke' was never going to suit this boy from the bush and he left the apprenticeship early and returned home to work on the farm and to take up off-farm income opportunities, such as shearing and other seasonal work. Like everything he turned his hand to, he became proficient at shearing, but he never really enjoyed the work.

Kent's skill and on-field determination playing for Minlaton lead to his selection in the YP Football Association teams to play against other

SA regions for 18 years in a row. Playing at these Country Carnivals included matches on Kangaroo Island each year, where he was known to slip off for short periods during training, to follow some bird that had appeared, or to check out patches of nearby scrub. There are many tributes and trophies attesting to Kent's skill, tenacity and leadership when playing football and basketball and from later, when he took up coaching and umpiring roles with Minlaton teams that continued until he became ill in 2018. Fittingly, he was awarded life membership of the Minlaton Basketball Club in 2011.

Life on the farm entailed familiarisation with machinery and vehicles of all descriptions and, like most farm boys in the district, Kent became adept at repairs to all things mechanical and later as a teenager to re-building and modifying machines, particularly motorbikes. He was a skilled and fearless rider; never satisfied just to follow, he was always the one to 'get there first.' At his memorial service on July 28th, a close mate gave accounts of memorable rides when they were young: 'there were actually two Kent Treloars: one, the quiet bloke out in the bush, and the other, the full-on, highly competitive whatever-it-takes-to-win bloke on the footy-field, basketball court, or on a motorbike out with his mates.' These tenacious characteristics not only served his sporting teams well, but carried into farming endeavours and community roles where his leadership and creative initiatives set him apart.

Marriage and family

Throughout their time at school, playing sport, and socialising around town, Kent and future partner Marie Aldenhoven were among the similar-age crowd that turned up to every local event. Marie recalled his converging passions during a couple of years of courting and engagement: 'Kent was always a bit different from the other boys ... quite early on when we were going out, he got all serious and told me that "some weekends he would still need time

to go bird watching" as well as spending time with me.' She took that in her stride and they were married in 1976 and settled into their first house together on the outskirts of Minlaton, with Marie continuing her secretarial career with a local business until the first of their two children arrived in 1982.

Before the children were born, Kent and Marie continued involvement with occasional SAOA outings and October long-weekend camp-outs. These included trips to the southern Flinders and Gawler Ranges, Gluepot, and to Lake Merreti north of Renmark. Marie's recollections of those camp-outs were of their 'very small second-hand tent' and of 'having minimal camping gear, no chairs or anything', and 'not able to cook anything much, just on a campfire ... but we were happy with this and Kent just lived for those times and we both enjoyed the chance to see something new.' She spoke of their time together: 'we had a wonderful 44 years of marriage, but I really only had him for half of those years ... trees and birds had him for the other 22!'

With Kent as a father, the children had interesting times as they grew up on the farm. Daughter Paula recalls: 'going off with Dad to check the sheep, but spending most of the time checking nest hollows in the scrub', and either her or her brother Chad 'driving the farm ute home after dropping Dad off to various hides ... one was at a water trough and another an old woolpack mounted up on an old windmill frame near a Wedge-tailed Eagle's nest', and 'dodging around posts in the middle of every paddock as there was always a plover or pipit's nest to watch out for.' Marie recalls spontaneous overnight camps with the children, sometimes at their own or at neighbouring scrub patches, and 'looking for orchids as well as birds ... checking Kent's nest boxes for pygmy possums ... cooking toasted sandwiches on the fire ... exploring the bush after dark with torches.' Both children also helped to plant out hundreds of saltbush and native trees, while sitting on the tree planter

behind the tractor.

Leading-edge farming from Trefold to Trehoven

Among Kent's records is an 'Application for a Sanctuary' to be applied to a portion of Trefold under the Fauna Conservation Act of 1964-65. Dated and signed by R. B. Treloar (Kent and Lachlan's father) on 26 May 1971, the purpose is stated as 'the preservation of native fauna'. Although not clear if this is a copy or the original application that was perhaps never submitted, it is likely that it reflects an enlightened attitude to land stewardship that was passed down to the sons, influencing their farming practices and environmental awareness.

As well as shearing, Kent continued to share work on the home farm with Lachlan through the 1980s. They were aware that broad-scale clearance of native vegetation during the agricultural development era had resulted in the subterranean saline water-table rising across the region, adversely affecting low-lying areas in particular, causing not only depleted productivity but also the loss of much of the region's biodiversity. Working to address the salt-affected problem areas on Trefold, they were among the first in the district to commence corrective landscape restoration measures. Initially it was recommended to plant areas of Tree Lucerne and saltbush to help lower the water-table, then this progressed to establishing areas of native vegetation around salt-scalds using local mallee and salt-tolerant shrub species. Later these were extended to provide shelter-belts along fencelines, which doubled as refuge habitat and corridors for birds and other wildlife across the property. Collectively, these measures worked through increased transpiration to lower the underground water level and damaged paddocks became more productive.

In 1990, R. B. Treloar and Sons won an Ibis Award, in recognition of their substantial

revegetation initiatives to combat salt-affected soils, their protection of remnant scrubland for posterity through Heritage Agreement title caveats and appropriate management for wildlife habitat, and their innovative and sustainable farming practices (they were among the first in the region to adopt minimum-tillage soil preparation methods, and to introduce legumes into their crop rotation cycle).

In 1985 Kent and Marie purchased a neighbouring property and moved onto what became their own family farm, which they re-named Trehoven (a combination of surnames). Their vision for managing Trehoven was to continue the same land restoration and sustainable farming practices that had been introduced at Trefold and, with that depth of experience to guide their efforts, the reclaimed areas on Trehoven came to life. Kent continued to work in partnership with Lachlan on Trefold until 1992, after which they farmed independently, but he still made time to explore the Peninsula and became uniquely familiar with most of the region's remnant privately-owned scrub as well as National Parks reserves in both inland and coastal areas.

The man of trees and Landcare advocate

A friend once said of Kent that 'he was actually a tree ... or at least he thought like a tree ... he could see the value and function of trees in the landscape in a way that others could not.' Underlying this assessment is a commonly held deep respect for this man, and everything he came to stand for in working toward protecting what remained of the native vegetation across YP.

In a tight-knit rural community, people tend to be involved in several organisations and Kent was no exception. Besides sporting clubs, he was active as a member of the Naturally Yorke Conservation and Community Action Planning group, Natural Resources Management Board, Northern and Yorke Declining Woodland

Birds Recovery Team and the Friends of Parks Landscape Management Board. Preceding these roles, in 1989 Kent was instrumental in forming the Southern Yorke Peninsula Landcare Group, of which he was the inaugural Chairperson, a role he held until 2020. In his involvement with these organisations, he had much contact with young professionals in both agricultural and environmental fields of government and they, without exception, speak of their respect for his knowledge and his willingness to share his experience. One wrote:

He was always one of our biggest supporters, regularly attending any events, be it community awareness days, manning stalls at the Minlaton show, attending our project launches, school student field trips, travelling to conferences and countless meetings for both southern and upper YP. I am so grateful for the support he has provided me in my work ...

Under Kent's leadership and through an alliance with Trees For Life, the Landcare Group initiated several farm-based and community revegetation projects. To facilitate these ever-expanding revegetation projects the Group established a seed bank from local sources, with the shearing shed on Trehoven being transformed into a drying, sorting and packaging shed for the quantities of seed required for direct seeding and planting projects, together with a working nursery producing hundreds of seedlings ready to plant out.

In concert with these broad-scale projects, in the mid-1990s a nursery was also established at the local school under the leadership of two local teachers and Landcare members, Rick Hawthorne and Peter Haines. The school project focused mainly on the propagation of River Red Gum seedlings grown from seed gathered from trees on nearby Gum Flat (the only occurrence of this species on YP). Then later, in conjunction with Trees For Life, these seedlings and a range of other local species were planted out

by students at Gum Flat, with assistance from members of the school community and the Landcare group led by Kent.

While steering these Landcare projects to completion, and through contact with landowners to access remnant native bushland to survey the bird species present, Kent made many friends and built both reputation and respect as the go-to person regarding anything to do with birds in the region.

One of the largest areas of bushland on YP that Kent spent a lot of time in was right next door to Trehoven and known locally as Crosers Scrub. This remnant area of intact native vegetation was recognised as retaining a high diversity of plant species and birdlife habitat. Because of his long-standing attachment to the Crosers Scrub section, Kent and Marie always wished they could preserve it by adding it to Trehoven. However, when the property was to be sold in 2005, Kent could see another way to ensure its protection and urged Nature Foundation SA to acquire the property through their BushBank land and biodiversity conservation scheme. His lobbying efforts were successful and Crosers Scrub was protected for all time by a formal Heritage Agreement in August 2007. After the Heritage section was fenced the property was placed back on the market, now tailored to suit the interests of a buyer with a commitment to nature conservation. It was subsequently acquired by an Adelaide-based physician, Dr Peter Anastassiadis and family in 2008, who have said the purchase was largely inspired by the hope that Kent would continue as 'property steward' and 'bush mentor' to the family and also to continue the lease of the cropping and grazing paddocks. A successful agreement and partnership ensued and a strong friendship was forged, and in Peter's words 'Kent assisted us to substantially enhance and expand the revegetation and re-wilding of the property ... by 2020 we had achieved around 15,000 additional trees and plants through annual plantings of seedlings and direct seeding

projects.' After Kent's passing, his neighbour and friend wrote a glowing encomium for the *Yorke Peninsula Country Times*, and in further tribute has renamed the Heritage Agreement bushland as Kent's Scrub.

Birdlife and life with birds

While focusing his keen interest on local birdlife from such an early age, Kent's natural skill-base developed without him recognising it, enabling him to intuitively absorb details of the behaviours and habitats of different species and also to recognise the unusual when it occurred. While it all came naturally to Kent, these skills left many people, including fellow birders, in awe, as he was almost always able to quietly roll out a wealth of accumulated knowledge on a specific aspect of a species' behaviour or habitat, always modestly delivered and often peppered with laconic anecdotes.

From pre-teenage years on, Kent continued to submit incidental and often important sight records to Birds SA, with 42 such records reported in the SAO Bird Reports through the 1970-80s, as well as 34 later records appearing in SAOA Newsletters. While these were mainly from the YP and Mid North regions, there are many later records from when travelling, many of which were contributed to BirdLife Australia's Atlas of Australian Birds. Because of his skills and knowledge of species' distribution and remnant habitats, he fulfilled the role of Regional Coordinator to vet other observers' Atlas survey reports for YP and the Mid North regions. One task in this role was to correct thornbill records from the region, from Brown to Inland Thornbill.

Standout observations attributed to Kent are many; besides that early experience with a whipbird at Pondalowie, they include: the first SA record of a Little Ringed Plover in 1980 (SAO 28: 204); a colonial breeding event of Little Egrets in mangroves at Price in 1983 (SAO 30: 20); a Little [Black-backed] Bittern breeding record on the River Murray in 2009 (SAO 41: 73-5);

and rare inland Hooded Plover breeding events recorded at Litster Lake (salt), on a neighbouring farm to Trehoven, in 2014, 2016 and in 2018. Also found among his records is an undated list of 212 bird species recorded on YP, with 127 listed as breeding there.

But it is in a stack of mostly old 'Elders' notebooks, amongst day-to-day farming notes, that most of his observations and lists are to be found, often cryptically annotated and many frustratingly without dates. A cursory glance through these reveals many gems. For example, some local observation notes found tucked in a recycled pocket diary for 1980 include: 'several Australian Pratincole in fallow paddocks at Wauraltee' and at least one 'nest with one egg'; nesting Striped Honeyeater with young on Trefold 'using same nest as last year'; two Brolgas at nearby swamp 'been there a fortnight'; 'Black Falcon chasing starlings' which 'went to ground in a mob of sheep'; and a 'Spotted [Australian] Crake at the tap at the pig sty'. There are later entries recording Letter-winged Kites and flocks of Budgerigars appearing in the district in 1993, and Flame Robins turning up on Trefold in the autumn of 1990 and again in 2003 and 2005. There are many more such observations yet to see the light of day.

Kent was once quoted as saying he had a 'different perspective' with birding, that was while 'looking out from the tractor seat' and at the same time 'getting bird report messages' in real time, via the CB radio network, from farming friends and neighbours who were also out on tractors etc. Although not a twitcher, Kent was always keen to follow up reports of rare or unusual species. This led to a nearly 3,000 km round trip to the far North West of SA in 2008 following a friend's report of possible Night Parrots, seen at night in spinifex country. However, Kent's experience was the same as for most birders seeking this species – he could find no trace of it. Like many committed birders, Kent submitted to the SA Museum numerous bird specimens that he had found dead, including

some that are still the only representatives of their species from YP in the collection.

As an active member of the Department of Environment and Water (DEW) Northern and Yorke Declining Woodland Birds Recovery Team since 2006, Kent made significant contributions towards understanding the status of woodland bird species across these regions. His wide knowledge and familiarity with otherwise little-known patches of native vegetation across the now fragmented landscape of YP, and of which bird species could still be found there, were invaluable to this group. This level of contribution was irreplaceable, as his knowledge was drawn from a lifetime of first-hand experience. Among the concerns he was able to authoritatively express to the Recovery Team was the declining status of both the Southern Scrub Robin and Shy Heathwren across their former range in the region.

Because he was so well known and respected throughout the Peninsula, Kent was able to gain access to otherwise restricted areas to conduct regular surveys, such as the Price Saltfields and the Point Pearce Indigenous Protected Area, including Wardang Island. This in turn provided many privileged opportunities for several of his birding friends during shorebird and migratory wader surveys.

In later years Kent's volunteer roles with birdlife research and conservation programs were prolific and highly valued by the organisations involved. Examples of these roles include: Hooded Plover surveys from 1996 to 2014; annual Malleefowl surveys in Innes National Park; assisting rangers with bird surveys of Troubridge Island, Warrenben Conservation Park and other National Parks reserves; a community presentation at a Birds and Habitat ID workshop in March 2007; participation with boat-based surveys of coastal raptor habitat around the coastline of YP and nearby off-shore islands; Fairy Tern census surveys in 2011-12; participation in DEW biological surveys of

southern YP in 2010; and a Banded Stilt tracking project in 2012.

In 2018, in his leadership role with the Southern Yorke Peninsula Landcare Group, Kent instigated the process of seeking a Federal Government Landcare grant for an Osprey recovery and conservation project on YP. This was successful and led to the preparation of a recovery plan for the species on YP and to further philanthropic grant funding for the first of several artificial nest platforms in the region. Largely thanks to his motivation and zeal, this outcome stands as a model for what can happen elsewhere across SA where Osprey are recognised to be in decline.

Retirement

Kent and Marie had just leased out the cropping paddocks on Trehoven and started their long-planned retirement years of road travel and adventure, when Kent took seriously ill while in northern Western Australia in July 2018. As they travelled, they had warnings that his health was not quite right, but they had managed several adventures including visiting national parks in the Pilbara and a boat trip to Ningaloo Reef, there swimming with whale sharks. Then, on reaching Broome, his health deteriorated and he went into hospital through the Emergency door. There he was stabilised, but it was clear that they needed to get home. A harrowing time ensued, before his death two years later.

Kent is survived by Marie, his life-partner and best friend over 44 years of marriage, their son Chad and partner Hollie, daughter Paula and son-in-law Sam, and three grandchildren. His legacy will live on through them, through our collective memories and enduring respect, and through his lifetime achievements in ornithology and conservation.

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