

THOMAS H. DAVIS, JR., 1943-1986

ROBERT S. ARBIB, JR.

Thomas H. Davis Jr., was born in Jamaica, New York, on 17 July 1943 and died in Far Rockaway, New York, on 15 July 1986. In the 43 years between those two dates, Tom crowded a lifetime of experiences that many of his peers would have been happy to have lived. He developed into one of North America's leading experts on the field identification of birds, devoting at least the last 25 years of his life to what he called his "obsession" with ornithology and bird study in all its various fascinations. Although he didn't seem to devote special attention to it, his life was also that of a gentle, caring, concerned human being with friends literally around the world. For many of us, that was as important a facet of his character as was his expertise and devotion to birds. We will truly miss this sweet, natural man for all his services to his fellow birders. We value the congenial memories we have of him.

Tom Davis, as everyone knew him, will be remembered perhaps primarily for his close association with the Linnaean Society of New York, where he served as its youngest recording Secretary (1967-69), Vice-President (1969-71), President (1961-73) and member of the Council. For 12 years (1972-84) he held the double role of editor of the *Linnaean News-Letter* and editor (and voice) of the New York City Rare Bird Alert. He was known to a wider audience, as frequent contributor and Regional Editor of *The Kingbird* for Region 10, as a member of the NYSARC from 1977 to 1985, for summaries on shorebird identification at Federation meetings, for articles and reviews in the journal *Birding*, for leading field trips to favorite places like Cox's Ledge off Montauk Point (where he was the expert on pelagics) and even more remote places like Surinam, Venezuela and Guatemala.

In the field, Tom was an active participant in Breeding Bird Census work, the New York State Breeding Bird Atlas, breeding bird counts, big day counts and Christmas bird counts. His particular passion was shorebirds, and his studies at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge developed original and definitive data on shorebird migration timing, plumages and molts, and identification. Among his many talents were those of photographer and of recordist. VIREO and the Cornell Laboratory are both beneficiaries of his photographic and tape legacy, and many of his friends still cherish the photographic shorebirds on his Christmas cards.

Tom as not exactly an overnight sensation. He felt his love for birds came from remorse after he had dispatched one with a BB gun at the



Photograph by Don Riepe.

age of nine or ten. When he was 15, a summer vacation in Vermont in company with another 15-year old, Craig Parenteau, and the curator of the local museum opened his eyes to the wonder of birds. From then on, he was "hooked for life!" His first pair of binoculars was a battered pair of Bausch & Lomb's, a gift from his grandfather. Later he managed to save enough money to buy himself a fine pair of Bushnells, which he used until his death. His first birding was in the backyard in Woodhaven, Queens County; it expanded into Forest Park, and then to Jamaica Bay, which was, in later years, a focus of his concern. But with maturity came wanderlust and with it trips to the Caribbean, Venezuela, Colombia, Guyana, Surinam, Haiti, Guatemala, Panama, the Galapagos Islands, Ecuador and Mexico. In each of these locales his surveys added to the ornithological knowledge of the region as well as to the knowledge of those who travelled with him.

When Tom was 16, he began to attend meetings of the Brooklyn Bird Club, which met in the Brooklyn Academy of Music. At these meetings he met some to-be-lifetime friends, including John Yrizarry, Esther Swayer, Irene Parks, Helen Dumont, Frank Bader. Other members became a continuing guide and inspiration. As for academia, he had graduated with honors from his parochial school, had won a Regents scholarship, and went off (Uptown) to Hunter College, where he fulfilled a promise to his parents to stay at least a year. But Tom was impatient to establish an independent life, and dropped out in favor of one or two meaningless jobs, finally and it was his career joining the New York Telephone Company, where he soon rose to become the top of his field, an administrative-technical job which I never did understand. However, Tom was a wizard with long-lines switchboards. You could be conversing with him about some ornithological question and he'd interrupt with "Hold on a minute, I'll get Jon Westcoast, Janet Arizona, and Ted Saskatchewan and let's talk." A minute later, and a five-way, cross continental conference would be in progress. It never failed to amaze me, even though I knew it was routine for him.

When Tom joined the Linnaean Society of New York, he brought with him a reputation for the sharpest eyes and ears, and the tallest frame, in the local scene. It wasn't long before he was leading field trips to beloved Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, Forest Park, and further afield and afloat. His many positions in the Society have already been noted. During the years he was active, no one came anywhere near his hours of devotion and service to the Society. He edited numerous News-Letters, wrote and delivered onto tape at least 1000 Rare Bird Alert reports (some of them with backgrounds of classical music), attended regular and council meetings and committee meetings, and led

field trips. Meanwhile he was an active bird bander, largely with Frank Enders, photographer, recordist and contributor of articles and book reviews to *Birding*, *The Kingbird*, and other ornithological publications.

Anecdotes and memories flood in. The little blue Duster with the license plate TOUCAN, a reminder of tropical adventures. The times he would call me to good-naturedly question a photograph in *American Birds*, "Hey, Bobb-eeee, are you sure that's an Iceland Gull?" Trying to keep up with his long-legged stride in the hills and valleys of Forest Park seemed to leave the older, and shorter, followers panting in his wake. One friend remembers a repair job on a toilet in his apartment; when it was finished he telephoned the plumber to complain that it was still not right. To prove it, he played for the astonished plumber a recording of the mellow-sounding flush before it broke down, and then, the discordant flush after it had been 'repaired.' "You hear the difference?" Tom asked. It was tuned. Arthur Morris remembers Tom with fondness. He remembers one time when they were together and heard a warbler give a typical "chit" call. Art cried "Wilson's Warbler!" where upon Tom corrected, "Black-throated Green." He could identify 29 warbler species by chips alone.

As an expert, Tom was increasingly in the news media when there were questions to be answered. An article on the visit of the Rufous-necked Stint to Jamaica Bay was featured in the *New York Times*, with lengthy quotes by Tom, who saw the bird with the help of friends who carried him around East Pond on a stretcher. An article in the *Wall Street Journal* quoted Tom on birdwatching in Surinam, which had undergone a political upheaval. One of Tom's statements, taken out of context from that article, won him the honor of being declared an enemy of the state. Tom got wry amusement from that.

The crippling stroke that laid Tom low in 1985, and from which he never recovered, shocked all who knew him. Still a young man, tall, thin, looking some thought half-starved, and with the most productive years of his life surely ahead of him, he seemed in normal good health when suddenly an artery burst, leaving him laterally paralyzed. One would be superhuman to experience such a blow in good spirits, or with optimism, and Tom was human. His various moves from one hospital to another were painful, tiring, and at times, must have made him feel bleak and without hope. Frankly, he was not a good patient; he resisted therapy no matter how his caring friends pleaded with him. A few weeks before his death, I visited him at his specially equipped apartment in the Rockaways. He asked me to bring him a bottle of red wine, dark rum, and later to go out for some stuffed clams. He couldn't manage any of them. Against my better judgment, I fetched them. The

apartment was neatly stacked with his tapes, slides, notebooks, and books, which were offered as gifts to friends upon his death.

He attributed the first stroke to an overdose of amphetamines, but there is no medical support for this theory. A weakened artery in the skull had caused an aneurysm, which had ruptured, damaging part of the brain — not the thinking, hearing, seeing part, but the motor responses on his left side. It could have had any number of triggers, even including a genetic weakness, but it was typical of Tom to blame himself.

The American Birding Association has set up a life endowment in Tom's name. The Linnaean Society has been collecting signatures on a petition to the National Parks Department to rename the East Pond as the "Tom Davis Pond," and to place an appropriate stone or bronze marker. You simply can't walk around this pond without thinking of his infectious enthusiasm, good humor, inquiring mind and that long lean figure bent over a telescope with a crowd of friends, students and beginners around him.

226 Guion Drive, Mamaroneck, NY 10543