



IN MEMORIAM

## Brina Cattell Kessel, 1925–2016

Kevin Winker,<sup>1\*</sup> Quentin Cattell Kessel,<sup>2</sup> and Daniel D. Gibson<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Alaska Museum, Fairbanks, Alaska, USA

<sup>2</sup> University of Connecticut, Department of Physics, Storrs, Connecticut, USA

\* Corresponding author: [kevin.winker@alaska.edu](mailto:kevin.winker@alaska.edu)

Published September 28, 2016

Brina Cattell Kessel (November 20, 1925 to March 1, 2016), pioneering Alaska ornithologist, professor, and university administrator, was born in Ithaca, New York, the daughter of Quinta Cattell and Marcel Hartwig Kessel. She was proud to be the granddaughter of James McKeen Cattell, a world-famous psychologist, publisher, and academic who promoted the idea of faculty governance of universities. Brina was raised in Storrs, Connecticut, and attended the Storrs Grammar School and Windham High School. Brina's interest in natural history and birds began at a young age. In an interview in 2003, Brina related that "Both my dad and mother had taken Ornithology courses at Cornell under Dr. Arthur Allen. They were both interested in birds, and we had feeding stations and things around the place. My dad would take me out for hikes, identifying birds. I guess that's where my love of birds began."

After graduating from Cornell University with a Bachelor of Science degree in 1947, she went to the University of Wisconsin to study under Aldo Leopold, the founder of the science of wildlife management. Unfortunately, he died fighting a fire soon after she arrived, and she discovered that Wisconsin did not accept women into the Ph.D. program in wildlife management. For this reason, after earning her Master's degree there in 1949, she returned to Cornell and resumed working with Arthur Allen, with whom she had worked as an undergraduate. She collected some of the first bird-sound recordings at Cornell, completed her doctoral research, and wrote an epic thesis on the European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*), receiving her Ph.D. in 1951.

From Cornell, Brina journeyed to distant Fairbanks, Alaska, to begin as an Instructor in Zoology at the University of Alaska during summer 1951 and then as an Assistant Professor that fall—in the days when the Fairbanks campus was the entire University of Alaska. She never looked back. At the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF), she rose quickly from Instructor to Full Professor, was appointed Head of the Department of

Biological Sciences in 1957 (serving through 1966), and was named the Dean of the College of Biological Sciences and Renewable Resources in 1961, a position she held until 1972. After serving in other administrative positions (Director of Academic Advising, 1973–1979; Administrative Associate for Academic Programs in the Chancellor's office, 1973–1980), she declined further administrative responsibilities to concentrate on research and the development of the University of Alaska Museum. She served as Curator of Terrestrial Vertebrates (1972–1990) and then as Curator of Ornithology until her retirement in 1997. In 1999 she was awarded Emeritus status as Professor, Dean, and Curator of Ornithology.

Brina was a true scientific pioneer, blazing a bold new trail in Alaska ornithology for succeeding generations. For more than 55 years, Brina conducted research and published on many aspects of Alaska's avifauna, with particular emphasis on birds of the taiga and tundra. Her early Alaska fieldwork, in the 1950s, would have taken her to the North Slope, but in those days the Department of Defense would not allow a woman to conduct fieldwork in U.S. Naval Petroleum Reserve #4. She served as principal investigator and worked on the analysis and write-up of the results, but Tom Cade and George Schaller conducted the fieldwork. She was not happy that they would accept her freshman student, Schaller, but not her more experienced self to collect the data. Schaller later became a preeminent conservation biologist. A few years later, with the legendary Olaus and Margaret Murie, she worked in the Brooks Range—an experience and an association she always treasured. Not long thereafter she began a particular interest in birds and avian habitats on the Seward Peninsula, where she conducted fieldwork for many years. Highlights of her scientific contributions include numerous pioneering works on the birds of Alaska and on Alaska habitats (e.g., *Birds of the Seward Peninsula*, and *Habitat Characteristics of Some Passerine Birds in Western North American Taiga*; University of Alaska Press, 1989, 1995). Brina's research took her to nearly every

corner of Alaska. The late U.S. Senator Ted Stevens, in honoring Brina wrote, “She has traveled to scores of Alaskan villages, towns, river deltas, interior lakes, coastal plains, mountaintops, wetlands, highway corridors, Arctic sites—locations where she set up observation posts and studied the many species of birds that live in, or migrate to the northern regions of North America.”

From 1959 to 1963, Brina was the project director for Ecological Investigations for the Atomic Energy Commission’s Project Chariot in northwestern Alaska. The initial ecological investigation was carried out, but Project Chariot, a plan to use atomic bombs to create a deep-water harbor off the coast of Alaska, was later cancelled. In the early 1980s she conducted multi-year fieldwork in the upper Susitna River valley in anticipation of the construction of a hydro-electric dam there. During that time she wore a ballcap in the field emblazoned with the logo of Era Helicopters, Inc. (ERA)—which some thought she wore in tacit support of passage of the Equal Rights Amendment.

Brina received many honors. She was listed in the American Men and Women of Science in 1954, and she was named a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1960. In 1968 she persuaded the American Ornithologists’ Union (AOU) to hold its first Alaska meeting—at University of Alaska, Fairbanks. In 1973 she became one of the first women to be elected a Fellow of the AOU and later served the society as President (1992–1994). She was a Life Member of the AOU, the Cooper Ornithological Society, and the Wilson Ornithological Society, and a fellow of the Arctic Institute of North America. The Fairbanks Business and Professional Women’s Club named her Woman of the Year in 1970, and she received the University of Alaska President’s Distinguished Service Award in 1981. At the AOU’s 111th meeting (its second Alaska and Fairbanks meeting, in 1993), she was honored by the Friends of Brina Kessel Committee who founded the Brina Kessel Medal for Excellence in Science, an award since presented annually to an undergraduate student at UAF. Later, Brina established an endowment so that a monetary award could be added to the honor. At the 2004 Alaska Bird Conference in Anchorage, she received the Isleib Award in avian conservation, and later the Alaska Bird Observatory named “Kessel Pond” in her honor at Creamer’s Field Migratory Waterfowl Refuge, in Fairbanks.

Brina was a warm correspondent with family and friends widely distributed throughout the U.S. and Canada. She made deposits into the University archives at 20-year intervals, leaving a detailed record of her experiences as a professional woman across six decades. The changes she saw were profound, stretching from Alaska’s pre-statehood



Brina Kessel, near Phoenix, Arizona, 2006. Photo credit: Gail Buyske

years to well into the 21st century. She was an early adopter of computers, obtaining one of the first grants for mainframe use at UAF, and she kept up with software and hardware technology as it changed during her career. Brina was also admired as a teacher and mentor, and served as a very effective role model, especially for women students. Brina was a savvy investor and a generous donor. She established a fund for the Birds of Alaska and endowed a Fund for Northern Ornithology at the University of Alaska and made other generous donations, including to the AOU.

Brina was predeceased by her husband, Raymond Roof; a sister, Jo Kessel Buyske; and a brother, McKeen Cattell Kessel. She leaves her sister Edgra Kessel Ringler and her husband, Ira, of Easton, Maryland; and her brother, Quentin Cattell Kessel, and his wife, Margaret, of Storrs, Connecticut.

Memorials Editor: Ted Anderson, ted020@centurytel.net