On 31st January 2002, Professor Dr K. H. Voous, a winner of the Gold Medal of the British Ornithologists’ Union, an Honorary Member of the BOU and an Honorary Subscriber to British Birds, died at his home in Huizen, the Netherlands. He was in his 81st year.

Born in 1920, in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, the son of a first-team soccer player with the renowned local club ‘Ajax’, Karel became interested in birdlife at a very early age. His first publication, in the Dutch journal De Levende Natuur, was written when he was only 16 years old. At that time, he was a member of the Netherlands’ Youth Organisation for the Study of Nature (NJN), a more or less anarchistic club in which the members of the local branch roamed the fields and marshes surrounding the city, teaching each other the fine details of bird identification in an age when field guides were virtually unheard of.

This love of nature led Karel, in 1938, to enrol as a student of biology at the University of Amsterdam. Here, the lectures on zoogeography by Professor L. F. de Beaufort of the Zoological Museum (ZMA) soon attracted his attention. Karel deplored the fact that the professor paid little regard to birds, a failing which was largely the result of the museum having insufficient specimens to enable anything more than some theoretical examples to be demonstrated. In an attempt to resolve this situation, Prof. de Beaufort made Karel his assistant in 1940. At that time, the bird collection of the ZMA consisted of little more than a few thousand mounted birds and a handful of skins, the latter mainly of aberrant individuals such as albinos. Karel persuaded his old friends to send in as many dead birds as they could pick up, in order to create a workable, instructive and modern bird collection. The intervention of the Second World War, however, soon put a stop to all such activities, and Karel decided to direct his attention instead to the proper labelling of existing specimens. During the course of this pursuit he came across several new taxa for the Dutch avifauna. Owing to a scarcity of paper during the war years, the number of publications from Karel’s pen was as yet small, and a heart condition also prevented him from spending long days working on the collection; during this period, he temporarily used a wheelchair, but whether this was because of the lack of appropriate medicines during the war years or was a way of avoiding the German Arbeitseinsatz (‘mobilisation of labour’) is a matter of debate.

Soon after the war, the situation improved greatly. Thanks to Karel’s efforts, the ZMA collection increased markedly, not only as a result of the renewed contacts with former friends, but also through the setting up of a network of lighthouse keepers who sent in the corpses of lighthouse victims. All ‘superfluous’ specimens were exchanged with other museums for alternative material, and in this way a collection was built up which comprised specimens from many Palearctic countries and which, by 2002, numbered about 50,000 well-labelled bird skins. At the same time, the number of Voous’s publications also rose markedly, culminating in his 1947 thesis on the geographical variation and speciation of the Great Spotted Woodpecker Dendrocopos major and its allies, to be followed later by many other reviews of Palearctic species. In 1949 Karel Voous became Bird Curator of the ZMA, and in 1955 he was appointed as Professor in Biogeography at the University of Amsterdam.

The steady flow of papers on geographical variation, and the appearance in 1960 of his Atlas of European Birds, ‘an exciting and original work illuminating bird distributions for amateurs and specialists alike’ (Ibis 117: 430), bestowed upon him an international repute. This inevitably gave rise to several invitations from abroad to accept professorships elsewhere, all of which Professor Voous declined. When the Free University of Amsterdam offered him a position as Professor in Zoogeography, however, he could not refuse, because this post provided him with the opportunity to establish an entirely new laboratory, with his own staff, where he could also undertake work on avian ecology and nature conservation. He left the University of Amsterdam at the end of 1963, although he still retained formal links with the ZMA in the form of a working room and secretary, while most of his students were housed in
the ZMA during their practical work. At the Free University he supervised a great number of students, of whom 13 produced doctoral theses and several are themselves now professors. The ringing stations of the Free University’s field laboratory on the isle of Schiermonnikoog were famous among students, as also were the excursions to such areas as Falsterbo, in south Sweden, the French and Spanish Pyrenees, and the former Yugoslavia, places which were, in the 1960s, considered remote. Voous, because of his poor health, often remained the whole day in an easy chair on a slope near the base camp, while his students made long forays on foot; it was not unusual for Voous, at the end of the day, to have logged more species than had his students.

In 1970, Professor Voous organised the XV International Ornithological Congress in The Hague, Netherlands, having been appointed as Secretary General of that IOC, and in the same year he was also deeply involved in the organisation of the European Conservation Year, acting as Chairman of the Netherlands Committee. These additional tasks, together with his workload at the University, where students were demanding increased participation, as well as his editorship of several journals, became too great a burden for his health to withstand: he suffered a relapse and, in fact, never regained the energy which he had possessed before. He had little option but to accept early retirement from university duties in 1975.

Nevertheless, Karel Voous managed to work on quietly behind the scenes, being actively involved in the work of various bird- and nature-conservation bodies. Of the hundreds of papers that he wrote (a full listing of the titles of which covers 45 pages of A4 format), most of those produced before 1975 were published in internationally renowned journals, but his production of papers in subsequent years in popular Dutch journals is scarcely less impressive: he did everything to make the Dutch people and government aware of the importance of maintaining reserves for marsh birds and of protecting red-listed species such as raptors (Accipitriformes, Falconiformes) and owls (Strigiformes). He also wrote a number of books in his later years, the ones which received widest attention being the *Birds of the Netherlands Antilles* (1983) and *Owls of the Northern Hemisphere* (1988), the latter acclaimed as ‘Bird Book of the Year’ by *British Birds*.

A further significant achievement was the appearance of the ‘List of Recent Holarctic Bird Species’, originally published in two parts in *Ibis* (1973, 1977) and then produced in a separate, amended version (1977, reprinted 1980). Voous, irritated by the wide variation in species sequences in various bird books, published a
standard order, which for some time was widely accepted. Although this taxonomic list now tends to ‘break up’ as a result of increasing knowledge about species relationships obtained from DNA research, this in no way detracts from its importance in the context of the history of Holarctic ornithology.

Karel Voous was also a fundamental figure in the early planning of the *Handbook of the Birds of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa: The Birds of the Western Palearctic* (widely referred to simply as *BWP*). When he heard that Stanley Cramp wished to rewrite and expand Witherby et al.’s *The Handbook of British Birds* (1938-41), Karel arranged a meeting between Stanley and Urs Glutz von Blotzheim, the main author of the *Handbuch der Vögel Mitteleuropas* (the first volume of which had already appeared in 1966), in the hope that the two of them would co-operate and co-ordinate their efforts. Much to Voous’s regret, he did not succeed in persuading them to reach agreement, with the result that two handbook series appeared at the same time.

Having promised beforehand to help Stanley Cramp with taxonomy, Voous found himself back in the ‘Cramp camp’. Although the first stages in the planning for *BWP* were set in 1970, it took several years before agreement on its format could be reached (a delay which could have been overcome had the Glutz format been accepted), and Volume 1 did not appear until 1977. In this volume, 30% – and, for some sections, nearly 50% – of the texts delivered by the authors had to be cut for reasons of space, and the sections that were consequently shortened did not always contain the least interesting information (Stanley, as chief editor, reduced the wealth of data available for the sections for which he was responsible, namely, ‘Distribution’ and ‘Population’, to very meagre entries). From the beginning, Voous took a fair part in the formatting and editing of *BWP*, and, notwithstanding his poor health, he managed to edit parts of the text right up to the time when the final volume was completed in 1993.

In his last few years, Voous managed to publish some popular accounts (in Dutch) on the speciation of ducks and swans (Anatidae) and a booklet about the former distribution and the human threats to survival of the Lion *Panthera leo* (De Leeuw, 2000). When busy on a similar book on the Leopard *P. pardus*, his strength slowly deserted him, and he died peacefully after completing the last lines.

During his very full life, Karel Voous held numerous ornithological posts in addition to those mentioned above; these include, as examples, Honorary Secretary of the Nederlandse Ornithologische Vereniging 1946-56, Council Member of the Nederlandse Ornithologische Unie 1957-68, and Honorary President of the 12th International Conference of International Bird Census Committees and European Ornithological Atlas Committees in 1992. The importance of his work was widely acknowledged, and numerous honours, again in addition to those already mentioned, were conferred upon him, such as Honorary Fellow of the American Ornithologists’ Union, and Honorary Member of many national ornithological societies.

Professor Karel Voous was a man of great influence in twentieth-century ornithology. Yet his whole life was a struggle between poor health on the one hand and, on the other, the eagerness to discover as much about birds as possible and to disperse this knowledge among a wide audience. Because of his health, he often had to restrict his research to a few hours each day, but, thanks to his loving wife Henny, he survived for much longer than any of his intimates had expected him to. His death is a huge loss to ornithology, but his stimulating ideas will live on among his students and readers.

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