

Obituary

Professor L. S. Stepanyan (1931-2002)

Professor Leo Surenovich Stepanyan, who died in Moscow on 16th February 2002 following an illness, made an outstanding contribution to ornithology, primarily as a taxonomist. He was born on 19th March 1931 in Yerevan, Armenia, his Armenian father and Russian mother having been posted there from the Russian capital. Subsequent moves were to Kislovodsk on the north side of the Caucasus in 1937, then to nearby Yessentuki, evacuation after the outbreak of the Second World War to Kyrgyzstan in 1941, to the Crimea in 1945 and, soon afterwards, the return to Yessentuki, where Leo completed his secondary education in 1950. Leo first became interested in birds when about 10 or 12 years old, and began his own collections of birds and their eggs in 1946-1947.

Immediately after leaving school, he became a student at the Department of Vertebrate Zoology of Moscow State University, graduating in 1955. It was during his student days that he began actively to study birds and he also undertook expeditions to areas of the former Soviet Union relatively poorly known ornithologically (e.g. the Tien Shan mountains). In 1962, Leo gained his Candidate Degree (PhD) with a thesis based on data and specimens collected in the Terskey Ala Too range of the Tien Shan. While still a student, he became intimately acquainted with many of the country's leading ornithologists, who were then working on the multi-volume *Birds of the Soviet Union* with Georgiy Petrovich Dement'ev as Chief Editor. The new information and specimens from Leo Surenovich's expeditions aroused great interest among them. The person to have had the greatest influence on him was undoubtedly Dement'ev, while E. P. Spangenberg was most influential as a field ornithologist.

After graduating, Leo Surenovich worked in Moscow University's Zoological Museum, but after two years he changed to a teaching job, in the Department of Zoology and Darwinism at the Moscow State Pedagogic Institute, where he is still remembered as a first-rate lecturer. Teaching, however, restricted the possibilities for expeditions and ornithological research, and in 1975 he took up a new post, still in Moscow, as Senior Research Assistant, in what is now called the A. N. Severtsov Institute of Ecology

and Evolution (Russian Academy of Sciences); he later became Research Director. In 1991, he was persuaded to defend a doctoral dissertation (for the degree of DSc) based on his 1983 book *Superspecies and sibling species in the avifauna of the USSR*.

Leo Surenovich wrote some 230 scientific works, almost always as the sole author, mostly papers, but including six books. Proof of his capacity for hard work is the fact that, while still a teacher, he managed to write two books, *Composition and distribution of the bird fauna of the USSR* (1975, 1978). These, and the later *Conceptus of the bird fauna of the USSR* (1990), and also *Superspecies and sibling species* (1983), are Stepanyan's best-known works in the former USSR and probably outside the country as well. They made him the leading authority on taxonomy, nomenclature and the composition of the avifauna of the former USSR, and the most frequently cited author in Russia on ornithological topics, which is likely to continue for many years to come. Leo became virtually a one-man information bureau for Moscow's ornithologists, not only on taxonomy, but on general biology and its history. Among subspecies first described by Stepanyan for the territory of the USSR are *Accipiter nisus dementjevi* (1958), *Passer ammodendri nigricans* (1961), *Paradoxornis heudei polivanovi* (1974), *Regulus ignicapillus caucasicus* (1998) and, most recently, *Certhia brachydactyla rossocaucasica* Stepanyan (2000). A supporter of the Biological Species Concept, he nevertheless accepted many now widely recognised taxonomic revisions – e.g. *Gavia pacifica* and *Anas carolinensis* – quite early (before 1986).

Within the borders of the former USSR, Leo Surenovich took part in about 30 expeditions between 1949 and 1978, destinations including the Caucasus, southwest Caspian, Pamir and Tien Shan mountains, Sakhalin and Kunashir (Kuril Islands), and also Mongolia. Outside the former USSR, it was Vietnam which commanded his attention. He worked mainly in primary tropical rainforest in the southern part of Central Annam and his book *Birds of Vietnam* (1995) describes about half of the breeding bird fauna. He continued working on and interpreting the material he had collected

in Vietnam practically to the end of his life.

Leo Surenovich was an enthusiastic collector of bird books and his library contained many old and rare items, which colleagues were welcome to consult. He also collected birds, using a strictly selective approach and employing great skill in the preparation of specimens. Many of the skins were deposited in Russian museums, while much of the Vietnamese collection was donated to the Science Research Centre in Hanoi. His private collection of 2,784 skins greatly facilitated his scientific work.

Leo Surenovich was unusually attentive and considerate towards those closest to him and undoubtedly gave and received much happiness within his family. Here was a man for whom the most wonderful creatures in the world were women, falcons and tigers, someone who was never in a hurry, and who knew how to enjoy life. With a glass of brandy and a pipe of good tobacco, he emanated harmony and was a bril-

liant conversationalist. Other interests apart from ornithology included jazz, world history and the world's main religions. A love of classical literature showed itself in his ability to recite much of Alexander Pushkin's 'Eugene Onegin' by heart and in the impressive eloquence and clarity of expression which characterised his own spoken and written Russian.

He greatly benefited from the constant support and assistance of his wife, Elena Nikolaevna, who herself has followed an ornithological career. Her help was also vital in the revision of Stepanyan's *Conspectus* (1990), on which he worked up until the last few days before his death, happily managing to complete the task. Publication of a new edition in 2002 will be a fitting tribute to Leo Surenovich Stepanyan's remarkable life. He is survived by Elena Nikolaevna, their son, Igor, and his brother, Valeriy Surenovich.

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