

Obituary

In memory of Professor Vladimir E. Flint (14 March 1924–23 March 2004)

Professor Vladimir E. Flint passed away soon after his 80th birthday. He was the founder and a consultant of the Working Group on Waders (the wader study group of the former USSR and later the wader study group of the Russian-speaking countries) and a widely known and respected ornithologist and organizer of animal science and conservation in Russia. He was a unique personality and mentor and friend of many of today's ornithologists. He was irreplaceable and his death is a painful loss to all who knew him.

In the history of Russian ornithology, the first third of the 20th century is associated with P.P. Sushkin and S.A. Buturlin, the mid-century with G.P. Dementiev, while the key influence of the latter decades was V.E. Flint. His death means the end of an era during which Russian zoology made a gradual transition from the inventory and consumption of natural resources for their "rational use" to the conservation of those resources and efforts to protect them from loss and degradation.

A number of tributes to Flint have already been published (mostly in Russian). These describe his role as a leader of Russian science and nature conservation. Many more are likely to appear in the coming years. Therefore here in the pages of the *Wader Study Group Bulletin* the accent will be mostly about the role of Vladimir Flint in the history of "waderology" as he called the branch of science related to the study of waders.

It needs to be said that the scope of Flint's interests was not at all limited to waders. After graduating from Moscow State University in 1953, he started by specializing in the population structure of small mammals in relation to their epidemiological role and this was the topic of his PhD and Dr of Sci. dissertations. From the early 1950s, however, he published papers on birds. Later he extended his interests to herpetology and, in the 1960s, to large African mammals.

Flint's love of birds was persistent and manifested itself in a variety of different ways. As an undergraduate working on the White Sea in 1952, he made a number of notable observations of birds including waders. These were published in a review of the region's avifauna by K.N. Blagosklonov (1960). *The Field*

Guide to the Birds of the USSR (1968), later reproduced in English, was the first publication to bring Flint widespread recognition in ornithology. This book played a colossal role in stimulating a new generation of Soviet ornithologists.

Flint's interest in birds, especially during the early years of his rodent studies in the 1950s, showed itself in egg collecting. This activity was led by such zoologists as E.P. Spangenberg and A.P. Kuzyakin who formed a kind of unofficial club, which met after ornithological seminars in the Zoological Museum of Moscow University. Competition between collectors in hunting for the eggs of rarities and increasing the species diversity of their private collections was a stimulus for the exchanging of egg-sets after each field season and contributed to the sharpening of skills in finding nests and the art of preparing and preserving the fragile material. Flint's oological collection was considered to be one of the most valuable according to both the quality of the eggshells and species diversity. In January 1969, after Flint replaced Spangenberg in the Zoological Museum of Moscow University, he was finally able to devote himself to his love of birds. He donated his entire collection of 760 egg sets to the Museum. This became the basis of what is now the largest oological collection in Russia. Stories are now circulating about how Flint loved to show the Museum's growing egg collection to anyone who expressed an interest. On those occasions he would excitedly point out, for example, the unusual beauty of the eggs of the Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva* or the breathtaking variability in the colour of the eggs of the Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos* laying out rows of egg sets that gradually intergraded with another colour characteristic of the closely related Sharp-tailed Sandpiper *C. acuminata*.

In the early 1970s, Flint undertook several expeditions to the Siberian tundra which to a large extent were related to the continuation of egg collecting for the Zoological Museum. This collecting interest determined the dates of most field seasons. Flint joked: 'A chick is just a destroyed egg'. By early July when the chicks start hatching on the tundra, he was back in Moscow. In this creative period, waders became Flint's primary focus as he considered them an especially diverse, interesting and poorly-studied bird group. He was interested not only in their distribution, but also in issues of species-specific colouration of eggs, in behaviour and in species habitat preferences. As to



Vladimir Flint taking photos and being attacked by a Ross's Gull in the Arctic in 1972.



Vladimir Flint on the tundra with horse and sled, 1972.



behaviour, he was particularly interested in the reaction of waders to human approach to nests (Flint 1973, 1977). This interest was easy to explain because of his enthusiasm for searching for bird nests. He officially described his personal research topic in the Zoological Museum as 'Ecological, ethological and morpho-physiological adaptations of birds to landscapes with waders as an example'.

Together with A.A. Kistchinski, Flint undertook a difficult expedition in 1971 when for over two months they surveyed a southern part of the remote Indigirka River delta in Eastern Siberia using canoe. That expedition was the beginning of a close long-term friendship between these two ornithologists, which led to fruitful collaboration and further joint expeditions. This happened in spite of differences between their interests and their personalities. They conversed with warmth and humour complementing each other while solving the communal tasks. This can be well seen in a series of their co-operative publications. The majority of these papers were devoted to waders: to distribution and natural history of Red *Calidris canutus* and Great *C. tenuirostris* Knots, Sharp-tailed Sandpipers and Red-necked *C. ruficollis* and Little *C. minuta* Stints, Ruff *Philomachus pugnax* and Long-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus scolopaceus*.

During the same period that he was running expeditions to the Arctic, Flint found that it was possible to organize topical scientific conferences and to publish their proceedings in the framework of the Moscow Society of Naturalists. He grasped this opportunity and was the main organizer of regular ornithological meetings for 15 years until the late 1980s. The first in this series of conferences took place in March 1973 and was devoted to Flint's favourite bird group: waders. That historic conference became a strong stimulus for the broadening of wader studies in various parts of the USSR and for the forming of a countrywide alliance of enthusiasts for the research and conservation of waders. In all, Flint organized three All-Union conferences on waders, and at the last one that took place in October 1987 the Working Group on Waders of the USSR (WGW) was formed. By that time, Flint had been involved in a variety of other interesting and important ornithological and nature conservation activities and was not able to devote as much time and effort to waders as he had before. That was why he agreed to play the role of only a consultant to the newly formed WGW. The constitution of the WGW, published in the first issue of the group's annual bulletin, is an example of Flint's legal creativity. He attended two more domestic wader confer-

ences organized by the WGW (in Donetsk in 1990 and Moscow in 2000) giving key talks and thus continuing to be a strategic, far-sighted leader of the movement. By February 2004, when the latest, sixth wader conference of Russian-speaking countries took place in Ekaterinburg, Flint was already quite ill and was not able to attend.

In spite of the fact that in the latter stages of his life Flint was not directly involved in wader research or other specifically wader-related activities he was constantly expressing his keen interest in this fascinating group of birds and everything related to them. When the WGW was celebrating its tenth anniversary he expressed his enthusiasm for the WGW and waders in a note (published in the eleventh issue of the WGW bulletin) with the over-the-top title: "Waders are the most admirable birds!" By the way, wishes expressed in that note can be considered to some extent as his legacy to the WGW.

I personally was extremely lucky to know Professor Flint and especially to have him as my mentor. He thus influenced the path my life has taken ever since my days as an undergraduate student. He was the person who first took me to the Arctic and who showed me how to find nests and what they looked like. He opened wide my perspectives in ornithology and supported me in various ways during important periods of my life and it was he that brought me to work at the Zoological Museum of Moscow University. His lenience to the pranks of youngsters, his genial tuition, his wise advice, his unpretentiousness and his readiness to share both his knowledge, which couldn't be found in manuals, and the last piece of bread during a difficult expedition – all these are unforgettable. Also his unostentatious lessons of love for birds and nature in general, as well as for sustainable hunting, and deep deference to his predecessors in the lovely science of ornithology are only some of the qualities that could be copied from this kind personality and strategically thinking scientist. He had a difficult and bright life, filled with a deep sense of the meaning of life. Even in his absence he remains a guide in our affairs and lives.

Pavel Tomkovich



Vladimir Flint blowing an egg, 1973.



On the tundra of Yakutia in 1972.

