

# IN REMEMBRANCE OF BETTY KIMBALL: PIONEERING BIRDER AND CITIZEN SCIENTIST IN THE CENTRAL VALLEY

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We each began our birding careers as teenagers in the Sacramento Valley in the 1960s. In seeking out others who shared our interest in local bird life, we soon discovered the Sacramento Audubon Society, its newsletter—the *Observer*—and its seasonal observations column, written by a sweet, gray-haired lady named Betty Kimball. In no time we were in regular correspondence with Betty, eagerly sharing our observations of what were, at least to us, rare finds and fascinating behaviors. Betty always responded with appreciative enthusiasm.

In those days before eBird and the listserv—even before rare bird alerts—folks like us all over the Sacramento area called or wrote to Betty to report their observations, which she dutifully recorded in her small, fine print on lined-sheets in ringed binders for the better part of three decades. Betty was modest and shunned the limelight, but her extensive collection of notebooks of seasonal observations, now archived in the Fisheries and Wildlife Museum at the University of California, Davis, stands as a testament to her remarkable spirit, and it is in remembrance of that spirit that we present this brief history of her life.



Betty was a leap year baby, born Elizabeth Graham in Chicago, Illinois, on 29 February 1908. When she was three or four years old, her family moved to Auburn, California. Her father was at first a farmer, and then a realtor. Her mother was a musician who taught piano and voice.

Betty took an early interest in birds, evidently encouraged by her father. Her copy of Hoffmann's *Birds of the Pacific States* and Peterson's *Field Guide to Western Birds* bore annotations for the date and place that she saw certain life birds; e.g., Red-breasted Sapsucker and Acorn Woodpecker in Auburn in 1920, and "Long-tailed" (Yellow-breasted) Chat in Auburn in 1926.

She attended College of the Pacific in Stockton, majoring in music. There she met Harold Kimball, a classics major who grew up on a farm in Oakdale. They married in 1929, a year before she graduated, and moved to Sacramento, where Harold had found a teaching job at Sacramento High School.

The Kimballs had two daughters, Helen and Beth. Helen's early interest in insects, nurtured by her parents, propelled the family into weekend nature outings. This expanded Betty's passion for bird biology at a time and place where bird-watching was not yet a popular pursuit.

As early as 1934, the Kimballs began to visit the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco to become acquainted with its zoological collection. Betty's notes show that she visited Dr. Robert T. Orr there in 1942 to discuss identification of *Empidonax* flycatchers.

Her birding opportunities got a boost in 1938, when the Kimballs bought a home near Sacramento High School. They acquired the vacant lot next door (one of several nearby) and started a garden, which Harold kept full of flowers, fruit trees, and vegetables. Theirs was a bird-friendly garden, and Betty kept a yard list for almost sixty years. She began to keep notebooks of her field observations. She was ever meticulous, and her identification of unfamiliar or difficult species was cautious.

As her children matured, Betty had more time to devote to birds. The family attended its first Sacramento Audubon Society meeting in November 1950 at American River Junior College, and took part in the subsequent Sacramento Christmas Bird Count. Betty later became editor of the *Observer*, and especially enjoyed her role as compiler of the seasonal observations column. The family became involved in the nature education and wildlife rehabilitation activities of the recently opened Junior Museum, a non-profit nature education center at the old California State Fairgrounds, about a mile from the family home.

Betty regularly birded nearby East Lawn Cemetery, keeping detailed notes. Perhaps because she lived "in town," rather than out in the suburbs like most other Sacramento Auduboners, Betty was area leader for the

Sacramento City portion of the Sacramento Christmas Bird Count for many years, censusing the city's parks, cemeteries and stretches of the Sacramento and American rivers bordering town.

Two other of her favorite birding locations were Gray Lodge State Wildlife Area and the rolling hills above the American River—an area now submerged under Folsom Reservoir.

Betty gradually became the go-to person for bird-finding in the lower Sacramento Valley, and expert birders from around the country paid visits to the Kimballs. This was an era in which birders communicated by writing letters, because long-distance phone calls were so costly. Because she was the compiler of seasonal observations, Betty was the obvious choice to serve as chair of the Sacramento Audubon Society committee responsible for producing the several editions of the *Checklist of Birds of the Sacramento Area*, a post she held for many years in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition, she regularly compiled summaries of the seasonal observations she received (Engilis 2013) and submitted these to the regional editors of *Audubon Field Notes* (later, *American Birds*).

Beginning in 1977, Betty started using assistants to help write the seasonal observations column and archive data, but remained actively involved in the process until the end of 1983. She was hard to replace; indeed, beginning in 1984 it took a committee of four or more people to handle the various aspects of collecting, compiling and summarizing for publication all the reported observations Betty had previously handled all by herself! Before handing over the job, and in recognition of the potential long-term value of the data compiled in her notebooks, Betty oversaw the photocopying of all the notebooks to preserve additional copies distributed in a number of different locations in the event that the originals were damaged or lost.

Modest soul that she was, Betty did not accumulate the many colorful anecdotes that gather around more flamboyant characters. She had a somewhat impish sense of humor, however, and was capable of delivering, with a twinkle in her eye, a seemingly innocuous, yet comically devastating, statement. One such occasion was detailed in an article, in the April 1977 *Observer*, on Sacramento Audubon Society's annual field trip to the Merced Grasslands that year. The incident involved an exchange between Betty and long-time Sacramento Audubon member Ben Eizinger:

*'Approaching the Mesquite Duck Club at the south end of the Grasslands Water District, Betty Kimball calmly announced, "Large white birds on the left". Ben promptly corrected her by saying, "My dear girl, what you are seeing are decoys". Betty curtly replied, "I beg to disagree. They are flying".'*

After making a positive impact on the lives of a great many people and contributing importantly to documenting the status of Central Valley birds over the course of nearly the entire 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Elizabeth Kimball died in 2003 at age 95.

We thank Beth Kimball and Helen Court for graciously providing information about their mother's life. We owe a debt of gratitude to Harold and Betty Kimball for their endless generosity in showing us the birds.

#### LITERATURE CITED

Engilis Jr., A. 2013. The Kimball Journals: An archive of historical bird observation from the Sacramento Valley, California. Central Valley Bird Club Bulletin 16: 64-69.