



CALLAN COHEN

above Rob, seen here with Claire Spottiswoode, Jessie Walton and Jackie Huber, recently collaborated in a study of Brown-backed Honeybirds.

left Taking a break after birding back in the day... From left to right: John Martin, Rob Martin, Keith Morgan, Elsie Martin and Aileen Morgan.

Robert John Martin

The Western Cape lost one of its most experienced birders when Rob Martin passed away peacefully in his sleep on 29 May 2017. Rob started birding in the 1950s, thanks to his parents, John and Elsie Martin, who enrolled him as a member of the Cape Bird Club at the tender age of four! It was an era when there was still plenty to discover about the birds of the region and it was on an outing with Professor C.J. (Dirk) Uys that Rob and his parents first saw a Booted Eagle near Piketberg in 1963. As Rob recounted in his article in this issue, hard as it may be to believe now, at that time the species was virtually unknown in the Cape.

Over the next decade Rob, John and Elsie confirmed that there was a vibrant population of Booted Eagles in the region, far removed from their Palearctic breeding range. Rob spent much of his lifetime exploring the Cape for Booted Eagles, finding nearly 300 nest sites and a similar number of suspected sites. His paper with Dave Pepler and Bertie van Hensbergen estimating the breeding population of Booted Eagles was based on more than 650 000 kilometres spent criss-crossing the Cape over a period of nearly 30 years. Along the way he built

up arguably the best knowledge of the region's birds.

Rob also mentored several generations of birders, all of whom can attest to his kind temperament and generosity. Among his closest birding friends were Dirk Uys, Pete and Mim Neatherway, Dawn Tyler, Jessie Walton and especially Dave Pepler, with whom Rob worked and regarded as a brother. Rob served as a statistician in the Department of Forest and Wood Science at the University of Stellenbosch. He retired early, partly to care for his ageing mother, whom he took on all his birding outings. Although almost blind, she still had her antique binoculars slung round her neck till the last.

Rob was a lifelong member of the Cape Bird Club and most of his nigh on 300 publications appeared in the club's magazine, *Promerops*. Although raptors were his first love, he published on all manner of birds. He contributed substantially to the *Atlas of the Birds of the Southwestern Cape* and the *Atlas of Southern African Birds*, wrote the species account for Booted Eagle in *Roberts 7*, and most recently wrote accounts on raptors, mousebirds and a diversity of passerines for Peter Ginn and Geoff McIlerron's *Ultimate Birding Companion*.

Although Rob's passion for Booted Eagles never waned, he loved new projects and in the mid-2000s he started a study with Jessie Walton on the 'mystery' brown buzzards breeding in the Cape. Once retired, Rob put his birding expertise to good use, assisting with bird impact studies on a plethora of wind-farm applications. It was on one of these studies that he and Jessie discovered the first communal Black Harrier roost.

On one outing in 2014 he stopped to look for a Booted Eagle nest near Botrivier, but instead found a Karoo Prinia nest parasitised by Brown-backed Honeybirds – the second such nest (the first, in Elgin in 2012, was reported in *African Birdlife*, May/June 2013). With virtually nothing known about the breeding biology of honeybirds, Rob and Jessie started an ongoing study of these fascinating birds. Rob used his prodigious nest-finding talents to locate prinia nests, while Jessie ringed and took blood samples from the chicks in collaboration with Claire Spottiswoode. The project, which has already delivered a number of surprising findings, is about to start its fourth season, but it won't be the same without Rob's dedication, perspicacity and dry wit.

Rob leaves behind his brother and family in the UK, to whom we extend our heartfelt condolences.

PETER RYAN AND JESSIE WALTON