

IN MEMORIAM
Thomas Z. Atkeson, Jr.
1912 - 1999



An illustrious career in conservation, ornithology and wildlife management came to a close with the passing of Tom Atkeson of Columbia, Alabama, on 12 July. Tom's career was centered at Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge near Decatur, where he served as Refuge Manager for 25 years, from 1962 until his retirement in 1987. He began his career there in 1939 when Wheeler Refuge was just getting organized and, after service during World War II with the Army's 5th Armored Tank Group, became Wildlife Management Biologist before becoming Refuge Manager. He had an uncanny ability to recall every location on the over 34,000 acres of the refuge and could describe, after many years, just what wildlife should be expected at every place. This was evidence of his superior intellect, which he used so well in managing that refuge.

Wheeler is the largest wildlife refuge in Alabama and one of the largest in the Southeast. During Tom's management, he developed it into a wintering refuge for thousands of ducks and geese and a refuge throughout the year for many species of birds, mammals and other wildlife. During his administration, he developed many facilities for environmental education, including a wildlife

interpretive center with museum, waterfowl observation pond, a program of wildlife films and other activities, nature trails, observation towers, boardwalks, picnic areas and public fishing facilities. Under his administration, Wheeler Refuge was also instrumental in preserving significant wetland and other habitats, in particular the Beaverdam Creek Tupelo Swamp that has been designated as a National Natural Landmark and is representative of the very important southern bottomland hardwood forests that are greatly in need of preservation.

Tom, during his many years of service, was recognized for his contributions to the wildlife refuge system and conservation. He received the Interior Department's Meritorious Achievement Award (1949), the American Motors Conservation Award (1960), the Special Act Award from the Fish and Wildlife Service for co-authoring the publication "Farming for Waterfowl" (1963), the Alabama Wildlife Federation Conservationist of the Year Award (1964), the Fish and Wildlife Service Achievement Award for Superior Service (1984 and 1986), and an award as Outstanding Federal Employee from the President of the United States (1983).

Tom authored and co-authored many bulletins on wildlife management, wrote a weekly "out-of-doors" column that was used by 14 newspapers and on local radio and television stations, and wrote numerous articles that appeared in a wide variety of state and national publications. He served as Vice-President of the Alabama Ornithological Society, and some of his articles were in its scientific journal, *Alabama Birdlife*.

Tom always took a prime interest in collecting data on all types of birdlife in the refuge and was instrumental in organizing the Wheeler Refuge Annual Christmas Bird Count that continues today. He rendered wise counsel on many conservation issues, including the necessity for preserving refuge lands, the adverse effects of stream channelization, and the need for higher water quality. The City of Birmingham and Birmingham Audubon Society recognized him for his many contributions and accomplishments by a Citation in 1983. At his retirement ceremony in 1987, those contributions and accomplishments were further recognized by the Morgan County Commission, the City of Decatur, the Decatur Chamber of Commerce, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Alabama's Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and the Tennessee Valley Audubon Society.

Tom Atkeson preferred not to dwell on his many achievements, but did say he appreciated the awards from his local friends most of all. He preferred, instead, to think of Rudyard Kipling's words about Tommy Atkins in his "Barrack-Room Ballad":

"I ain't no thin red hero,
I ain't no blackguard too,
But an ordinary human
Most remarkably like you."

Tom's was a life well-lived and one which few can duplicate in his remarkable devotion to service, our natural world and the environment that he recognized we need to be more diligent in preserving. The Alabama Ornithological Society and the Birmingham Audubon Society, as well as many other organizations, extend our deepest sympathy to his daughter Mary, his son Tom, and all his family.