

William “Bill” Kiel, Jr.
A Resume in Wildlife Science

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King Ranch wildlife biologist Bill Kiel would tell you he had a dream job, and his resume reflects it. Degrees from Texas A&M and the University of Wisconsin, biologist positions with the precursor to today's Texas Parks & Wildlife Department (TPWD), US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), and King Ranch, and research scientist at Texas A&M University. It's interesting that the scientist best known in South Texas as a pioneer in white-winged dove research began his career as a recognized waterfowl authority in Canada and the northern US. Bill, however, would likely want to be remembered less for his litany of science achievements than for the contributions he made to his family, the church, and the community.

The Foundation. William H. (Bill) Kiel Jr. was born in 1925 and grew up on the family farm near Burton, outside of Brenham, in Washington County. The Blackland Prairie landscape was his childhood outdoors playground, and he bought his first .22 rifle with the money he made trapping 'possums, skunks, and ringtails. In winters, he hunted ducks on nearby Flag Pond with his father. When as a teenager the family duck hole was sacrificed for the Lake Summerville dam project, Bill stood up at a public meeting during the Army Corps of Engineers condemnation hearings and voiced his dissent. He doesn't remember that anyone on the panel listened to his words, but the experience taught him a lesson. Throughout his life, Bill always listened.

After graduating from Brenham High School in 1942, the honors student took a job at the Dixie Poultry Farm and Hatchery in Brenham as a chicken sexer, the job a tedious task of classifying and separating roosters from hens. After three years, he saved enough money to enroll at Texas A&M, graduating in 1949 from the University Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit with a degree in wildlife management. During his tenure at A&M, he earned accolades such as the Distinguished Senior Student Award and was selected for a leadership training fellowship at the Danforth Foundation

Cover Photo: Teenager Bill after a duck hunt on Flag Pond before it was sacrificed for the Lake Summerville dam project.

in Michigan. As a senior, he represented Texas A&M at the 13th North American Wildlife Conference held in St. Louis, with attendees from the 48 states, Canada, and Mexico.

In 1948, 2,288 graduate students applied for six fellowships offered by the Pepsi Cola Company. Bill had only a 0.26% probability of capturing that grant, and when he did, the award made it possible for him to enter the late Aldo Leopold's Department of Wildlife Management at the University of Wisconsin. While working towards his MS degree as a research assistant under new program chairman Joseph J. Hickey, he was based at the Delta Waterfowl Research Center in Manitoba. Although on paper he was supposed to be conducting waterfowl surveys in Canada and the US, Bill remembered that, at first, he was charged with cleaning duck pens. As the new guy in the field, it was Bill who had to portage canoes and other heavy gear across the mud for Delta's senior scientists.

A young Bill on the family farm near Burton, Texas, outside of Brenham, in Washington County.





Bill was a member of the Texas A&M Cadet Corps in the late 1940s.

During his research, Bill established 12 transects across 50 square miles and collected data from an additional 120 Manitoba potholes. In 1952, he was invited to present a paper on the ecology and duck nesting productivity of his study area at the Wisconsin Conservation Congress. A year later, he gave a presentation to the Izaak Walton League titled “Management of Waterfowl in the Mississippi Valley.” During his presentations to area farmers, agricultural agencies, and the Canadian government, he demonstrated a skill that would serve him well throughout his career – compromise. At one Izaak Walton League talk, he advised: “The future will probably bring attempts to drain Manitoba potholes. We won’t be able to keep them all. What we will need to know is which are [the] best and make our stand to save those.”

Gone to Texas. Bill’s first job after graduating in 1953 was as a field assistant with USFWS in Manitoba, Canada. That year he married Wisconsin native and Madison General Hospital nurse, Jean Schlicht. Their daughter, Kathy (Kiel) Smith, says that the newlyweds first lived in a historical Frank Lloyd Wright house – in the basement. In 1954, they set off on an adventure when Bill took a position with the precursor to today’s Texas Parks & Wildlife Department (TPWD) as State Game and Fish Biologist in the South Texas border town of San Juan. His initial responsibilities were white-winged dove nesting surveys in Mexico and the Rio Grande Valley under TPWD’s Director of Wildlife Restoration, Gene Walker, and aerial waterfowl surveys under TPWD Program Leader, J.R. (Bob) Singleton. With his characteristic modesty, Bill says the latter job was nothing more involved than “flyin’ around trying to count ducks.”

A story Bill related speaks volumes about his curiosity and passion for wildlife. During the 1950s, the number of black-bellied whistling ducks in the Lower Rio Grande Valley was down to just 150 nesting pairs, and their survival was in question. When Bill followed a hen and found her nesting site, he says: “I probably shouldn’t have done it, but I crawled up the tree to look at the eggs.” From his perch, he found the hen had been shot. He took the dozen or so eggs to a hatchery and raised five to adulthood. For several years, Bill’s duck project was a favorite topic in local newspapers.

White-winged dove numbers were also dropping precipitously during the mid-1950s. Bill was responsible for collecting TPWD’s census data, and in his 1956 survey, he reported 117,000 nesting birds, which was below TPWD’s 250,000 target. That year, the whitewing hunting season was closed, and Bill volunteered to deliver the message to South Texas sportsmen and outdoor writers. Bill strongly advocated educating the public about natural resources, believing it invaluable to the future of wildlife and its research, and he often took the time to present research findings to hunting organizations and civic groups.



Bill (left) capturing ducks during his waterfowl survey research in 1951 at Whitewater Lake in Manitoba. Photo by Rex Gary Schmidt, No. FWS-2124.

Bill had an idea that nesting whitewings in Mexico might migrate north in sufficient numbers to offset low populations on the US side, and in 1957, he banded 2,000 fledglings in Tamaulipas in addition to his Texas birds. An important result of the work was demonstrating that whitewings return to previous nesting sites each year. He also led a program to lease and purchase high-impact nesting acreage from area landowners. During negotiations in 1957 to purchase the first land, the Longoria tract, TPWD Commissioner Henry LeBlanc showed up to review it in his Cadillac, and Bill later joked: "It drove the price up!"

Mourning Doves. In the spring of 1958, the Kiel family moved north to Laurel, Maryland where Bill took a position with the USFWS at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center as a research biologist and mourning dove project leader. Eighteen-thousand doves were banded as part of a five-year program to better understand migration patterns, and to establish a relationship between bird production and harvest. At the project's conclusion, Bill presented a paper titled "The Mourning Dove Program for the Future" at the 1961 North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference.

King Ranch. The next chapter in Bill's career was made possible by Richard M. Kleberg Jr. of King Ranch and its wildlife biologist, Val Lehmann. Lehmann was recognized as an early pioneer in wildlife management in Texas and throughout the nation. In 1945, he was hired as a wildlife biologist at King Ranch. By the late 1950s, however, Lehmann had developed health issues, and although he would remain at King Ranch until 1971, it was agreed to provide him some help. In 1962, Bill Kiel headed back to Texas.

King Ranch offered Bill the opportunity to tackle a wide range of studies, and he relished the challenge. Among his first projects was one called the "mallard experiment." Wildlife managers had earlier abandoned the model of releasing wild ducks to supplement native populations but were now curious if introduced wild ducks could establish nesting areas outside of their normal range. During the fall of 1962, 3,000 ducklings reached Kingsville by air freight. Bill converted a ranch house into his mallard brooder facility, and as his mallards matured, introduced them into the wild via rearing pens. When they could fly, they were released at several different King Ranch wetlands. Some of the mallards lived in the wild for eight years, but they never

nested. Bill compiled the results of the mallard experiment and a second project on mottled duck nesting in a presentation at the Migratory Waterfowl Conference in 1972.

In another early King Ranch project, Bill and Val Lehmann partnered with the Mexico Department of Forest and Game to establish that country's first whitewing program, and it followed similar science guidelines as King Ranch. Another success was the purchase of 1,300 acres of nesting acreage in the Rio Grande Valley, with funding made available by the Ceasar Kleberg Foundation for Wildlife Conservation and the World Wildlife Fund. Bill contributed data and findings from this period and his earlier TPWD work to the seminal book *Whitewings – the Life History, Status, and Management of the White-Winged Dove* (1968) by Dr. Clarence Cottam, director of the Welder Wildlife Foundation.

Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Foundation, USFWS, and the Canadian Wildlife Service jointly funded Manitoba waterfowl research as a continuation of Bill's initial graduate studies, and in 1964, Delta Waterfowl and USFWS research scientist, Arthur Hawkins, visited Bill at King Ranch to compile the additional findings. Their presentation at the

North American Wildlife Conference summarized several new duck breeding threats, notably the impact of farm road construction on natural drainage, brush clearing, the effect of predators on nesting success and, on the US side of the border, shortstopping of waterfowl during their southern migration as an unintended consequence of mid-continent wildlife refuges.

In the late 1960s, Bill joined Jim Teer of the Welder Wildlife Foundation who, with Robert Kleberg Jr., initiated the Caesar Kleberg Foundation for Wildlife Conservation graduate research partnership with Texas A&M. When Bill was named King Ranch wildlife manager in 1971, his job description reflected the new academic position. Between 1967 and 1991, Bill directed ten major research projects by 12 science students on King Ranch. Topics included white-winged doves in Mexico and South America, game species productivity, bobwhite quail ecology and production, chachalacas, wild turkey nutrition, wintering ecology of geese, nilgai population counts, the vitality of the Laguna Madre shoal grass, wintering redhead populations, and the biological and economic implications of wildlife leases on large land holdings in South Texas.

Comparing notes during waterfowl survey research at Whitewater Lake in Manitoba, 1951. Bill is seated with Arthur Hawkins to far right. Photo by Rex Gary Schmidt, No. FWS-1966.



Bill is credited with initiating King Ranch's entry into its profitable hunting lease ventures. According to former King Ranch manager Tio Kleberg, Bill provided him with a back-of-the-envelope estimate of the revenue he thought could be generated by leasing ranch land to hunters. Before the conversation ended, Bill was assigned to draft a lease contract and outline a pilot program that began with three leases in the Encino Division. When Tio and Bill stipulated that each corporate lease was required to employ a wildlife biologist, the result was immediate. Four major companies provided funding to support seven Texas A&M graduate students.

For more than three decades, researchers continued to collect waterfowl nesting production data along the same traverses Bill originally laid out in the 1940s and 50s. In the 1980s Bill, with his old friend Arthur Hawkins, compiled these data for a chapter titled "Manitoba's Duck Factory" in the benchmark book *Flyways: Pioneering Waterfowl Management in North America* (1984). The pair also extended their collaboration to include studies of redhead wintering grounds, their work contributing to the designation of the Laguna Madre as a high-priority area for preservation under the USFWS North American Waterfowl Management Plan.

Bill retired from King Ranch in 1989 and continued his Texas A&M academic graduate faculty role until 1991. During his education and career, he produced 22 peer-reviewed research publications, and another 16 conference papers. Those papers reflect not just his productivity, but his research diversity. He was most proud, however, of the impact he had on his students.

Giving Back to the Science Community. Bill was an important contributor to the Texas Chapter of the Wildlife Society (TCTWS). The national organization, dating to 1937, was originated by a group of renowned researchers that included Aldo Leopold. Among its guiding principles was promoting and disseminating science-based wildlife biology and management studies. Bill was a founder of the Texas Chapter, which was established in 1965. At its first

meeting, he was elected secretary-treasurer and became its president during the society's second year.

Just two years after its founding, TCTWS was invited to sponsor a symposium at the American Institute of Biological Sciences' annual meeting. Bill was on the committee that organized the prescient "Introduction of Exotic Animals: Ecological and Socioeconomic Considerations" and a second series titled "Wildlife Diseases." He was on its panel for the 1969 white-winged dove symposium, recognized with the TCTWS Outstanding Service Award in 1972, and organized its wild turkey symposium in 1975. In 1992, he received an Honorary Life Membership. Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute's Charlie DeYoung remembers that Bill was selected by his peers as the Southwest representative to The Wildlife Society's national council for several terms in the 1970s, and that the recognition was "a pretty big deal in science."

In Texas, landowner commitment to and investment in wildlife management has been critical to its success. Bill and the TCTWS recognized the landowner role from the beginning. During each annual meeting, panel discussions were organized that included a landowner, sportsman, biologist, and state legislator. It is impossible to calculate the impact of the TCTWS's forward thinking on wildlife science as we know it today.

The Last Chapter. Bill Kiel died in March 2014. Part of the legacy Bill left for us is the importance of applied research in managing wildlife on private lands in South Texas. This legacy provided a rationale for establishment of the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute at Texas A&M University-Kingsville (then Texas A&I University) in 1981. It helped shape CKWRI at the time, and continues to this day.

A decade after his passing, Bill's family and friends recall his quiet but confident nature. Butch Thompson, who had a long career at King Ranch as Chief of Security and Chief of Wildlife Programs, says he was "a great guy who was very passionate" about wildlife and wildlife management.



Bill teaching a wildlife class at King Ranch in 1974.

John Davis, now Vice President of Development for Delta Waterfowl, relates a story from his time in Kingsville while working on a wildlife and fisheries degree. His first Sunday in town was spent at church, where a parishioner introduced herself, welcomed him to the community, and invited him to lunch. He was awed to learn his hosts were Mrs. Jean Kiel and her husband, Bill. John spent several more Sundays as their guest, and he never forgot their hospitality or “talking ducks” with Bill.

Don Steinbach, Texas A&M Professor Emeritus of Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences, shared the back porch of Bill's family home in Burton during Bill's final years. He reflects: “I believe the early part of Bill's life had a major influence on his wildlife career. Those early years were shaped by the German heritage of his native Washington County, and he had to work hard to overcome a lack of money to get his education. There are striking parallels between Val Lehmann and Bill. They both grew up in Washington County, overcame similar challenges, and they both later had very similar natural resources interests.”

Bill's oldest daughter, Kathy, remembers a family that spent their leisure time in the outdoors, and a father who exposed his daughters to as much hunting and fishing as the boys. Kathy still has a mount of one of her King Ranch bucks displayed over her mantle. Growing up, she remembers, too, that: “You never knew what you were going to

eat at the Kiel house!” Bill loved to barbeque wild game the family harvested and even trialed a few unconventional items.

I had the privilege of interviewing Bill in 2010 at his home in Kingsville for a book I was researching on Texas waterfowl. I thought Bill might be a good resource for my section on South Texas, and I remember him gently protesting that he probably couldn't provide me with much, as: “My main subject was whitewing doves.” For a researcher with a lifetime of diverse wildlife science, and whose contribution to his peers, the public, and research students was as great as his science, it was a mighty humble summary.

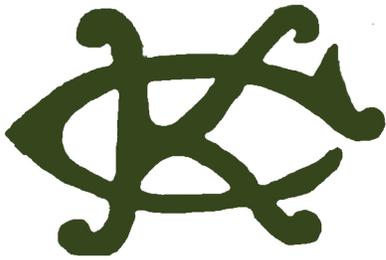
The writer is grateful for input from Tio Kleberg, Fred Bryant, Don Steinbach, Charlie DeYoung, Butch Thompson, John Davis, Lisa Neeley, Jim Kiel, and particularly Kathy (Kiel) Smith.

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Bill banding redheads on the King Ranch Laureles Division in 1988.