

## Club Announcements

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# Bulletin of the BRITISH ORNITHOLOGISTS' CLUB

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## CLUB ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Chairman's Message

At the beginning of 2017 *Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.* became an online open-access journal carried on the BOC website with the intention of moving in 2018 to the BioOne platform. This first number of the new volume (Vol. 138, No. 1, March 2018) and all subsequent numbers will appear on the BioOne site, where you will also find the previous volume, 137. We look forward very much to working with the BioOne team in establishing a strong web presence, for the benefit both of readers of the Bulletin and authors and potential authors. The recent Newsletter (No. 9) spells out in greater detail the service provided by BioOne. Please let us have any comments and suggestions about these new arrangements.

In addition to our online presence and Newsletters, we continue to meet regularly as a Club and during 2018 we shall have four 'Barley Mow' meetings plus a joint two-day meeting in Liverpool with the Society for the History of Natural History. I hope you will have seen the published details and will join us for what promises to be a stimulating and enjoyable event.

The Annual Review Meeting of the Club will be held in the upstairs room at the Barley Mow, 104 Horseferry Road, Westminster, London SW1P 2EE, at 5.30 pm on Monday 21 May 2018, Papers for the meeting including the financial report and accounts will be issued shortly. The Review Meeting will be followed at 6.30 pm by Dr Bård Stokke's talk on *Host selection by the Common Cuckoo*.

Chris Storey

The 988th meeting of the Club was held on Monday 6 November 2017 in the upstairs room at the Barley Mow, 104 Horseferry Road, Westminster, London SW1P 2EE.

Fifteen friends were recorded as present and three visitors. Friends attending were Miss H. Baker, Cdr. M. B. Casement, Mr S. Chapman, Mr M. Earp, Dr C. F. Mann, Mr D. J. Montier, Mr R. Langley, Mr D. Prŷs-Jones, Dr R. Prŷs-Jones, Dr P. Rudge, Dr D. G. D. Russell, Dr A. Simmons, Mr S. A. H. Statham, Mr C. W. R. Storey (*Chairman*) and Mr P. Wilkinson.

Visitors attending were Mr M. P. Adams, Mr G. de Silva and Dr C. Spottiswoode (*Speaker*).

Dr Claire Spottiswoode gave a talk entitled *Cuckoos vs. hosts: an African perspective*. She discussed the co-evolutionary arms races that arise between brood parasites and the hosts they exploit to raise their young, focusing on various African bird species that she had studied in the field in Zambia: cuckoos, honeyguides and parasitic finches (especially Cuckoo-finch *Anomalospiza imberbis*). First she described how co-evolution can escalate to shape sophisticated signals of identity, leading to a race between host egg 'signatures' and parasitic egg 'forgeries'. Then how co-evolution can shape ancient genetic specialisation within a single species, allowing the evolution of parasitic 'gentes'. The research she described comes from a mixture of field experiments facilitated by a large team of Zambian nest-finders, and museum work enabled by the remarkable egg collection of the late Major John Colebrook-Robjent.

## OBITUARIES

### Michael Patrick Stuart Irwin (1925–2017)

Michael Irwin died in Norfolk on 13 September 2017. He was well known to all with an interest in African ornithology, particularly that of the southern third of the continent. In the 1960s and 1970s in East Africa he was referred to with great reverence as 'Stuart-Irwin' or 'MPSI'.

Of Ulster-Scottish parentage, he was born in Co. Down on 1 July 1925, and took an early interest in natural history, particularly in beetles. He joined the army, serving in the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers in the latter half of WWII, and later in India and the Far East. He travelled to Cape Town, where he found no outlet for his interest in museum work, and in April 1949 he arrived in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) where he had various jobs, including a spell with Rhodesia Railways. His posts had no connection with natural history but did allow him time to explore the bush



Michael Irwin (Julia Duprée)

and its denizens. He began to concentrate on birds and became involved with the (now) Natural History Museum of Zimbabwe at Bulawayo. Although lacking academic qualifications, in 1959 he was appointed Assistant Keeper of Vertebrates, then Keeper (later Curator) of Birds, and from 1975 to 1983, Regional Director. During his time at the museum he built up the bird collection to become the largest in Africa.

To study birds he also travelled widely in southern Africa and as far north as Kenya. His publications, the first being a short note in 1950, are in excess of 300. These include *Birds of Zambia*, *Birds of Zimbabwe* and many species accounts in the multi-volume *Birds of Africa*. From 1983 to 2006 he was the editor of the highly respected *Honeyguide*, the journal of Zimbabwean and regional ornithology.

Although considering himself a 'social loner' many benefitted from his encouragement and friendship, and he took great care to ensure that his knowledge and ideas were understood and disseminated to those who showed interest. One friend, Julia Duprée, has written 'He was a gentleman with a big heart—totally natural, kind, caring, supportive, lively and with a lovely sense of humour. His depth of knowledge was boundless and his enthusiasm, particularly in all things to do with birds and nature, infectious.'

He was awarded the Gill Memorial Medal by the Southern African Ornithological Society in 1984 for his 'years of dedicated service to the cause of Afrotropical ornithology'.

In the mid 1970s I became involved in a three-way correspondence with Michael and Con Benson on the relationship of the 'bulbul' *Phyllastrephus orostruthus*, as I had field and in-hand experience of this species, and about 30 other species of bulbul. We concluded that it was not a member of the Pycnonotidae. In 1986 Michael and Phillip Clancey erected a new genus, *Arcanator*, to accommodate it. We later discussed its relationships with two other recalcitrant monotypic genera of which I had experience, *Modulatrix* and *Kakamega*. Today these three genera are accepted as having their own family or subfamily, Modulatrachidae / Modulatrachinae.

In the 1990s he and I overlapped for a few days at Tring. He kindly devoted much of his valuable time to discussing sunbird taxonomy with me, particularly generic placings.

In May 2012 Michael moved to Norfolk to live with relatives, and in September of that year moved to sheltered accommodation in Litcham, Norfolk, where he lived an independent life until his final fall which led to medical complications. On 5 October 2017 Michael was buried in Litcham, Norfolk, although he would have preferred to be left in a safari park for the lions!

Michael was pre-deceased by his wives Beverley, and later Nancy, and leaves one biological son, Tony, who described him as a 'great father'.

I am grateful to Michael's son Tony for various items of information, to Robert Prŷs-Jones for assistance, and to Robert Dowsett for allowing me sight of his obituary of Michael to be published in *Ibis*.

Clive Mann

### Michael Patrick Walters (1942–2017)

Michael P. Walters, a curator in the Bird Group at the Natural History Museum, Tring, for more than 32 years, was born in Portrush, a small seaside town on the north coast of Co. Antrim in Ireland on 5 November 1942, the only son of Patrick & Lyndsay Walters. His father, who came from Dublin, was a sergeant in the North Irish Horse, billeted in Portrush during the war where he met and married Lyndsay MacMurray in June 1941. He was tragically killed 17 months later on active service during the Tunisian campaign in North Africa. Consequently, his mother brought Michael up alone whilst also supporting her sick aunt, Maud Macbeth. Lyndsay Walters was an active and well-known figure in Portrush, an amateur actress with the Portrush Players and the Ballywillan Drama Group, as well as being an artist and potter; this backdrop in theatre and art was undoubtedly a major influence on Michael's later life.

Michael attended the Friends' School Lisburn as a boarder, and his first foray into ornithological publishing was a tongue-in-cheek article for the school magazine. This short, rather grandiose account of his visit to the now demolished old Parrot House at London Zoo, and the destruction of his pen by cockatoos, is somewhat typical of Michael's dry wit and unashamedly ostentatious take on life. The Friends' School then had a very strong natural history society, and Michael was certainly greatly influenced by Arnold Benington (1903–82). An ornithologist and enthusiastic teacher at the school between 1927 and 1967, who devoted his life to the study of birds, Benington was the mentor of many at the school and helped establish the Copeland Bird Observatory.

On leaving school Michael took a job in the civil service as a clerk, working first in Belfast and then London. Having been interested in birds from an early age, Michael joined the British Ornithologists' Union in 1964 and the British Ornithologists' Club in 1969. It was at BOU meetings he met the pioneering ornithologist Reginald Ernest Moreau (1897–1970), who encouraged him to consider pursuing a career in ornithology despite his lack of formal qualifications. Moreau recommended Michael to David William Snow (1924–2009), then Head of the Sub-department of Ornithology at the Natural History Museum (now



Michael Walters (Harry Taylor  
© The Trustees of the Natural  
History Museum, London)

NHMUK), and consequently in September 1970, at the age of 27, Michael finally achieved his long-held ambition of joining the bird staff at South Kensington. Much of his first two years at the museum was spent packing up the bird collections, which were being moved to the out-station at Tring. Colin Harrison (1926–2003), then responsible for the birds' eggs and nests in the NHMUK collection, readily delegated responsibility for their curation to Michael, and this was to become his specialism after he transferred to Tring in February 1972, slightly later than other members of staff.

Michael worked as a curator and ornithologist, mainly on the egg collections, for the majority of his career. His main personal interests were eggs and historical ornithology, but he also contributed to the curation of other areas of the ornithology collections, especially the type collection of skins. His former colleague, Alan Knox, even recalled that when a large number of frozen birds urgently needed preparation as skins, Michael, who had then never skinned a bird and wasn't all that keen on getting his hands inside the corpses, conscientiously put his head down and quietly got on with it, though he was 'all thumbs' to begin with.

Michael was not an avid birder or field ornithologist later in life, but in his younger years he did take part in Operation Seafarer (1968–71), when he counted Northern Fulmars *Fulmarus glacialis* and Black-legged Kittiwakes *Rissa tridactyla* along a stretch of coast south of Aberdeen. He was at heart a museum ornithologist and over the course of 50 years published nearly 100 papers, abstracts and notes on a wide variety of topics. These ranged from the standard ornithological, e.g. his description of eggs of Coral-billed Ground-cuckoo *Carpococcyx renauldi*, to his more idiosyncratic notes, e.g. on the curing of warts by the application of potato. Likewise his lifelong interest in cryptozoology led to him joining the editorial board for *Cryptozoology*—the interdisciplinary journal of the International Society of Cryptozoology—from 1992 to 1998. His enduring interest in extinct bird species was first piqued by Walter Rothschild's (1907) *Extinct birds* and made him a very appropriate choice to co-author, with Alan Knox, a 1994 monograph on extinct and endangered bird specimens in the NHMUK collections. His extended notes on the subject were subsequently used as a basis for the wider and very well-received 2012 monograph *Extinct birds*, co-authored with Julian P. Hume.

Michael was an impassioned and remarkably colourful character, whose detailed knowledge of eggs and the history of ornithology was equalled by his enthusiasm for theatre and world-renowned expertise on the lives and works of Gilbert & Sullivan; he was publisher and editor of his own newsletter, *Gilbertian Gossip*, for many years from 1975. He was an avid amateur performer of musical theatre and Shakespeare in Richmond, where he lived, and a somewhat biting critic. As Marc Sheppard, his co-author on the ongoing, definitive, *Variorum Gilbert & Sullivan*, wrote in his November 2017 obituary in *The Palace Peeper*, published by the Gilbert & Sullivan Society of New York, 'his blunt opinions weren't always appreciated', and this is undoubtedly equally true for his life in ornithology. His interactions with some of his colleagues were now and then tempestuous, not least because he did not easily accept criticism himself, and he tended to work in isolation; by his own admission he occasionally made curatorial decisions that, with the benefit of hindsight, he clearly regretted. There are few careers like being a museum curator for introspection—alongside the best of our efforts we inevitably leave a legacy that subsequent generations question and fault without necessarily understanding the context of decisions. Ultimately, the three decades that Michael dedicated to eggs in the NHMUK resulted in an impressively well-ordered and catalogued main collection, but also a residue of an array of important unincorporated collections he had taken on for NHMUK but had lacked time to curate. Overall, the NHMUK egg collection stands as one of the two largest in the world and the most comprehensive in terms of species richness.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity of spending valuable time learning about curation of the NHMUK egg collection from Michael before he retired in May 2003, and he continued a level of involvement with the Bird Group for nearly a decade subsequently as a Scientific Associate, initially working on type specimens supported by a Leverhulme Emeritus Fellowship. As well as his curation, Michael leaves a legacy of numerous scientific papers and much important academic research on the Victorian theatre. His ornithological books include *The complete birds of the world* (1980), the popular *Eyewitness Handbook: Birds eggs* (1994), *Extinct and Endangered birds in the collections of the Natural History Museum* (1994, co-authored with Alan Knox), *A concise history of ornithology* (2003), in which his fascination with historical ornithology and taxonomy are given full rein, and *Extinct birds* (2012, co-authored with Julian Hume).

Michael retired to the family home in Portrush he had known as a child, which sadly somewhat isolated him from the bird and theatre worlds he had previously enjoyed. Here, his life-long routine of reading, commenting and wry observation continued, despite growing ill health, and he died peacefully in hospital on Sunday 22 October 2017 at the age of 74. He titled his short 2005 autobiography in *Zoologische Mededelingen* 'My life with eggs' and it is assuredly with eggs he will forever be associated and remembered. His funeral was held at Roselawn Crematorium, Belfast, on Friday 27 October.

I am grateful to Michael's former colleagues and friends, especially Alan Knox, Robert Prýs-Jones, Revd. Selwyn Tillet and Arthur G. Chapman, Joanne McGaffin and colleagues at Friends' School Lisburn, and John Stanage for their help. A fuller, focused account of Michael's contribution to theatre and Gilbert & Sullivan scholarship, authored by Marc Shepherd and Selwyn Tillet, will be published in *Gilbert and Sullivan News* in 2018.

Douglas G. D. Russell

### David John Pearson (1941–2017)

Ornithology, and particularly African ornithology, lost a modest giant when David John Pearson died on 20 September 2017. By profession a biochemist, David was by avocation one of the finest ornithologists of his generation; his signature contribution was the long-term investigation of a major migration route of Palearctic passerines through the Ngulia Hills of southern Kenya in midwinter, long after the species involved would have reached the tropics. His first paper on this (Pearson & Backhurst 1976) described 'very large falls' of migrants attracted to the bright lights of the Ngulia Safari Lodge, especially on rainy or misty nights. Remarkably, ringing activities at this site have continued ever since, enormously increasing knowledge of migration of Palearctic and African passerines.

David Pearson was born 26 January 1941 in Bedford, his family moving to Suffolk in 1947; David returned here after he retired and was active in local bird-ringing, as he had been when on leave throughout his time in Africa. He studied biochemistry at Cambridge (Ph.D. 1965) before moving to Uganda to teach at Makerere University College, where he published several bird papers on wintering Palearctic migrants.

From 1970 to 1990 he lectured in biochemistry at the University of Nairobi; it was there that I knew him during my time in the Zoology Department of the Chiromo campus (1976–80). David introduced me to several birding sites and to other local ornithologists, and we both contributed to the *Birds of East Africa* (Britton *et al.* 1980); at regular meetings of co-authors working on the book, David's detailed technical knowledge of the East African avifauna was delivered with calm authority.

I recall sharing only two field trips with David. On one to the Kenya coast to mist-net migrants I was introduced to many identification subtleties, notably of *Acrocephalus* species and subspecies, which demonstrated the depth of his knowledge and his eagerness to share it. His abiding interest in disentangling the taxonomic affinities of the many warblers of several genera wintering in East Africa is evident in his numerous publications in this area (e.g., Pearson & Backhurst 1988, Pearson 1989). On the other occasion, we visited a nearby sewage works at Kariobangi where he had sorted out the breeding origins of confusingly yellow-headed Yellow Wagtails *Motacilla flava* (Pearson & Backhurst 1973); we mist-netted through the morning and as he predicted, both fat scores and body mass increased detectably over a few hours as the wagtails gorged on the abundant insect fauna of a tropical sewage farm.

David published more than 150 scientific papers, the great majority on birds, and most of those from East Africa, many long after he had retired, but his regular visits home on leave, and his time at Cambridge, yielded a number on British birds too; his abiding interests in moult and Bearded Tits *Panurus biarmicus* were combined in an early paper in *Bird Study* (Pearson 1975). He also co-authored several monographs including *Reed and Bush Warblers* (2010) with Peter Kennerley, *Birds of Kenya and northern Tanzania* (1996) with Dale Zimmerman and Don Turner, and he contributed particularly extensively to vol. 8 of *The birds of Africa*.

David leaves his wife of 53 years, Maggie, two daughters, and many friends and colleagues who mourn his passing but are grateful for his enormous personal and professional contributions.

I thank Graeme Backhurst and Robert Prŷs-Jones for help in preparing this tribute.

A. W. (Tony) Diamond

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### FORTHCOMING MEETINGS

See also BOC website: <http://www.boc-online.org>

**BOC MEETINGS** are open to **all**, not just BOC members, **and are free**.

Evening meetings are in **an upstairs room at The Barley Mow, 104 Horseferry Road, Westminster, London SW1P 2EE**. The nearest Tube stations are Victoria and St James's Park; and the 507 bus, which runs from Victoria to Waterloo, stops nearby. For maps, see [http://www.markettaverns.co.uk/the\\_barley\\_mow.html](http://www.markettaverns.co.uk/the_barley_mow.html) or ask the Chairman for directions.

The cash bar opens at **6.00 pm** and those who wish to eat after the meeting can place an order. **The talk will start at 6.30 pm** and, with questions, will last c.1 hour.



**Please note that in 2018 evening meetings will again take place on a Monday, rather than Tuesday as hitherto.**

*It would be very helpful if those intending to come can notify the Chairman no later than the day before the meeting.*

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**Monday 21 May—6.30 pm—Dr Bård G. Stokke—Host selection by the Common Cuckoo**

*Abstract.*—The Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* is a generalist parasite at the species level, known to have utilised more than 100 host species in Europe alone. However, in general individual females are host specific, utilising and often mimicking the eggs of a particular host species. This talk will focus on the spatial variation in host use in Europe, and I will discuss characteristics that are important for parasite utilisation of passerine hosts. The research and results that will be described stem mostly from a thorough search for cuckoo parasitism events throughout Europe, which has so far resulted in c.65,000 cases of parasitism.

*Biography.*—Bård Stokke works in part as a researcher in the AfricanBioServices project at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Trondheim, and also as a research professor at the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research (NINA), Trondheim. He was awarded his Ph.D. on avian brood parasitism at NTNU in 2001. Bård has studied co-evolution between brood parasites and hosts extensively both in Asia and Europe for 20 years. He is a co-author of the recently published book *The Cuckoo – the uninvited guest* (Wild Nature Press, Plymouth, 2017), which so far has appeared in Dutch, English, French and German editions.

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**Thursday 14 and Friday 15 June**—Joint two-day meeting in Liverpool with the Society for the History of Natural History (SHNH) on the subject *Bon voyage? 250 years exploring the natural world*. Please note that there will be a registration fee for this meeting and prior booking is **essential**. Participants can register for either one or both days, and there is a discount for SHNH and BOC members and friends. A full provisional programme of 24 talks, together with a link to the booking form, can be found at: <http://shnh.org.uk/news/registration-open-bon-voyage-250-years-exploring-natural-world/>. Linked to the conference, a guided tour of Knowsley Hall, the ancestral home of the Stanley family (Earls of Derby), has also been arranged for Wednesday 13 June (leaving 12 noon from Liverpool city centre). If interested, prior booking and payment for this via the booking form is also **essential**.

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**Friends of the BOC**

The BOC has from 2017 become an online organisation without a paying membership, but instead one that aspires to a supportive network of Friends who share its vision of ornithology—see: <http://boc-online.org/>. Anyone wishing to become a Friend of the BOC and support its development should pay UK£25.00 by standing order or online payment to the BOC bank account:

Barclays Bank, 16 High Street, Holt, NR25 6BQ, Norfolk  
Sort Code: 20-45-45  
Account number: 53092003  
Account name: The British Ornithologists' Club

Friends receive regular updates about Club events and are also eligible for discounts on the Club's Occasional Publications. It would assist our Treasurer, Richard Malin (e-mail: [rmalin21@gmail.com](mailto:rmalin21@gmail.com)), if you would kindly inform him if you intend becoming a Friend of the BOC.

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**The Bulletin and other BOC publications**

From volume 137 (2017), the *Bulletin* of the BOC has become an online journal, published quarterly, that is available to all readers without charge. Furthermore, it does not levy any publication charges (including for colour plates) on authors of papers and has a median publication time from receipt to publication of six months. Prospective authors are invited to contact the *Bulletin* editor, Guy Kirwan (GMKirwan@aol.com), to discuss prospective submissions or look at <http://boc-online.org/bulletin/bulletin-contributions>. Back numbers up to volume 131 (2011) are available via the Biodiversity Heritage Library website: [www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/46639#/summary](http://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/46639#/summary); vols. 132–136 are available on the BOC website: <http://boc-online.org/>

BOC Occasional Publications are available from the BOC Office or online at [info@boc-online.org](mailto:info@boc-online.org). Future BOC-published checklists will be available from NHBS and as advised on the BOC website. As its online repository, the BOC uses the British Library Online Archive (in accordance with IZCN 1999, Art. 8.5.3.1).