



Gérard Morel, 1925–2011

Author: Browne, Peter

Source: *The Auk*, 132(2) : 522-524

Published By: American Ornithological Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1642/AUK-15-18.1>

BioOne Complete (complete.BioOne.org) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at www.bioone.org/terms-of-use.

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non - commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.



IN MEMORIAM

Gérard Morel, 1925–2011

Peter Browne

115 Crichton Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1M 1V8, Canada
pbrowne@primus.ca

Published April 1, 2015



Gérard (wearing hat) with staff of the Richard-Toll Ornithological Station engaged in bird census activities on the arid savanna of northern Senegal. Date and photographer unknown.

Gérard Morel was a pioneer in bringing scientific ornithology to a part of the world that lacked it. After his education in France, his whole career (1953–1992) was spent in an isolated village in West Africa. He became the recognized authority on West African ornithology, as evinced by his contribution to the worldwide survey of ornithology in the 100th Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club (Morel 1980). But, though isolated, he was not alone. He had married another ornithologist, Marie-Yvonne, and together they established one of Africa's foremost ornithological stations at Richard-Toll in Senegal (16°25'N, 15°42'W), where they lived and brought up four children, until Gérard's retirement in 1992. Back in France, they settled in Normandy and Gérard continued to contribute as president of the West African Ornithological

Society (WAOS) and through correspondence with the international ornithological community.

Gérard was born in Amiens, north of Paris, in 1925 and had his high school education there, following the classics curriculum. The River Somme was very near, and he showed an early interest in nature, spending much of his free time among the river's marshes, exploring and identifying the plants and animals he encountered. Amiens was frequently bombed during World War II, and in August of 1944 it was liberated from German occupation, but only after fierce fighting. Gérard and other young men were forced to bring in the corpses from the streets, a terrible memory that stayed with him all his life.

Gérard studied biology and botany at the University of Paris, graduated with a master's degree in 1950, and was

awarded a doctorate in 1962. His future wife was at the same university, and they married in February of 1951. In the postwar period, increasing urbanization in French West Africa led to a burgeoning demand for cereals. Consequently, crop depredation by birds, especially the Red-billed Quelea, became a more serious problem than it had been. The French authorities first tried to eliminate the birds, but this was only partly successful and it contaminated the area with dangerous poisons, so they decided to investigate other methods of control. They broadcast a call for an ornithologist to study the biology of Red-billed Queleas. Gérard, frustrated by not being able to find a position in the field (actually bored at working in a laboratory dealing with the physiology of human nutrition), heard the call and immediately applied. He was accepted.

Gérard arrived by ship at Dakar, Senegal, in 1953. His first contact was Prof. T. Monod, then director of the *Institut français d'Afrique noire* (IFAN), and he also benefited from the unfailing support of Prof. F. Bourlière, for many years one of the central personalities of French ecology. He was appointed to the Agronomic Research Center at Richard-Toll in the north of the country to create a department of ornithology. Marie-Yvonne, who joined him with their two young girls 6 months later (by plane), recounts that her first impression of their new abode was thankfulness for having a roof over their heads, after the wartime and postwar deprivations in France. With the independence of Senegal in 1960, ORSTOM (French government overseas research body, now IRD) decided to take over the Richard-Toll research center as its main field station and its only station dedicated to ornithology, to be carefully maintained and managed by the Morels until their departure in 1992.

During this period of research in Africa, Gérard and his team helped clarify numerous important aspects of Red-billed Quelea biology, including migration, molt, sex ratio, predation loss, food, nutrition, clutch size, effects of photoperiod and rainfall on breeding, fledging success rate, nesting productivity and densities, damage estimates, and effects on rice (Bruggers and Elliott 1989). Other ornithologists also conducted research on Red-billed Queleas elsewhere in Africa, and the results were shared in international fora that Gérard attended. New, more successful and less dangerous control methods resulted from this knowledge.

At that time, West African ornithology was poorly developed except in Nigeria, and the “two-volume Bannerman” (Bannerman 1953) was the only field guide for ornithologists in that part of Africa. Collecting birds for a reference collection was then considered indispensable for the study of an avifauna, and Gérard first devoted himself to training, systematically and meticulously, a team of African collectors and taxidermists, who maintain the

skills acquired to this day. This was the opportunity to discover and determine the subspecies present in Senegal. The collection is perhaps the finest in West Africa. After the departure of Gérard, the skins and supporting documentation were reconditioned, moved, and are now housed in the ORSTOM laboratory at Mbour in Senegal.

The collection was also the basis for three major publications: the first modern identification guides to the birds of the region in English and French (Serle et al. 1977, Serle and Morel 1979; Gérard wrote the sections dealing principally with the birds of the Sahel and Guinea regions) and an authoritative checklist of the birds of Senegal and The Gambia (Morel and Morel 1990). In addition, he and Marie-Yvonne coauthored with H. Fry the section on pigeons and doves for *The Birds of Africa* (Urban et al. 1986). Gérard also tested newly developed methods for censusing birds (by quadrats, transects, or points—the thesis subject of his doctorate in 1962), thus providing the first calculations for Africa of the densities of breeding birds and migrants, and their relationships in a Sahel savanna. The biology, breeding, and dynamics of granivores also occupied him much during a period when their status was changing as a result of drought and conversion of land to agriculture.

Numerous researchers visited Richard-Toll to learn from Gérard or to coauthor publications, not only from France (e.g., C. Chappuis, J. Dorst, R. D. Etchecopar, R. de Naurois, F. Roux, Jean Marc Thiollay) but also from elsewhere (e.g., R. E. Moreau and A. Tye from the United Kingdom; N. Collias, E. Collias, and R. Bruggers from the United States; M. Smeets from Belgium; and P. Browne from Mauritania), resulting in invitations to, for instance, Los Angeles, Rome (FAO), Brussels, Ottawa, and to address the British Ornithologists' Club in London. Both of the Morels' homes were in interesting settings. In Senegal they resided near the south bank of the wide Senegal River, the source of water for irrigation of rice paddies, which were the target of Red-billed Queleas and other granivores. Their house in Normandy was near the coast, the site of the Allied landings in 1944, their garden wall still showing shrapnel marks. All visitors appreciated the Morels' hospitality, their perfect organization in the field, and their culinary specialties, including warthog cold cuts in Senegal and venison in Normandy. Particularly striking was Gérard's insistence on having his coffee beans not only ground daily but roasted fresh every morning. In return, they were delightful guests. Amberley Moore, formerly secretary of the WAOS, remarked that, within minutes of arriving at her home in England, Gérard had noted the most common bird in her garden that was absent from his and had asked for a stepladder to investigate a flycatcher nesting in the garden wall. In Ottawa, I was struck by Gérard's interest in the differences of New World and Old World birds—for instance, he

noted immediately that the American Crow was smaller than its European counterpart and that the tail of the Bronzed Grackle must require some adaptations to flight techniques. He had a wry sense of humor—Amberley has an abiding memory of him at the International Ornithological Congress in Christchurch, New Zealand, ruefully looking at the door of his rented car, the lining stripped off by a Kea that he had not noticed in time. When writing about how he needed to prompt the authors of *The Birds of Africa* to let him know about progress, he observed: “Pas très bavards ces auteurs! [Not very chatty those authors!].”

Gérard naturally established close links with ornithologists working elsewhere in West Africa. Most were in Nigeria, where the Nigerian Ornithologists' Society (NOS) had been established in 1964. They published an English language journal (*Bull NOS*). In 1979, Gérard together with such NOS ornithologists as R. E. Sharland, J. Elgood, and C. H. Fry, founded the WAOS to replace the NOS, with the aim of covering the entire region (28 countries) and publishing a bilingual (English–French) journal, *Malimbus*. Gérard described *Malimbus* as “a valuable and durable collaboration” to promote ornithology throughout the whole of West Africa and was keen to develop this further. He was elected vice-president of the society for 9 years, then president for 19 (until 2006). He played an active role in the society, including the initiation of its website and the organization of WAOS meetings in Normandy and council meetings at his home there. He also participated actively in the Pan-African Ornithological Congresses. In 1984, he was the president of the 6th Pan-African Ornithological Congress at Francistown, Botswana. He never ceased to back the work of French-speaking ornithologists and bilingualism, fostering the attendance of francophone Africans at meetings and encouraging West African students to choose ornithology.

In recognizing the contribution of Gérard to West African ornithology, we must not forget the vital role of his wife Marie-Yvonne. He would not have made the contribution he did without her being there to ensure that he lived and worked in Richard-Toll all that time. She was an ornithological researcher in her own right (awarded a doctorate in 1963), and this gave her the understanding to encourage him in his work. She was his partner in much of his research and the coauthor of many of his publications. In addition, she provided a smoothly running

home. Thirty-nine years in a small village in Africa is no mean accomplishment for the pair of them!

There were great changes during the second half of the 20th century, in ornithology as well as for the birds of Senegal. But we owe today's knowledge of African birds to quiet, persistent, rigorous, and passionate individuals such as Gérard. Young ornithologists visiting Senegal, perhaps making discoveries unthinkable 50 years ago, or perhaps browsing the WAOS website, may be unaware of the role of their predecessors and the extent to which people like Gérard patiently opened the way for them and established an indispensable basis of knowledge, under difficult conditions and with much less well-developed equipment and techniques. Who today would live for 39 years in an isolated savanna village to document an avifauna so rigorously? We owe Gérard Morel our thanks for having laid the foundations that enable us to advance the study and knowledge of the birds of West Africa.

Acknowledgments

I thank R. Bruggers, R. Cheke, A. Craig, M. Guyonnet, P. Jones, A. Moore, M.-Y. Morel, M. Smeets, A. Tye, F. Walsh, and R. Wilkinson for providing information that made the compilation of this memorial possible, as well as J. M. Thiollay for permitting me to use some of the text of his obituary of Gérard Morel (Thiollay 2011).

LITERATURE CITED

- Bannerman, D. A. (1953). *The Birds of West and Equatorial Africa*. Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh, UK.
- Bruggers, R. L., and C. C. H. Elliott (Editors) (1989). *Quelea quelea: Africa's Bird Pest*. Oxford University Press, New York, NY, USA.
- Morel, G. J. (1980). Fifty years of ornithology in West Africa. *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club* 100:66–68.
- Morel, G. J., and M.-Y. Morel (1990). *Les oiseaux de Sénégal*. Éditions de l'ORSTOM, Paris, France.
- Serle, W., and G. J. Morel (1979). *Les oiseaux de l'Ouest africain*. Delachaux et Niestlé, Neuchâtel, Paris, France.
- Serle, W., G. J. Morel, and W. Hartwig (1977). *A Field Guide to the Birds of West Africa*. Collins, London, UK.
- Thiollay, J. M. (2011). Gérard Morel, 1925–2011. *Malimbus* 33: 100–101.
- Urban, E. K., C. H. Fry, and S. Keith (1986). *The Birds of Africa*, vol. 2. Academic Press, London, UK.