

CLUB ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Bulletin of the BRITISH ORNITHOLOGISTS' CLUB

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CLUB ANNOUNCEMENTS

The 992nd meeting of the Club was held on Monday 12 November 2018 in the upstairs room at the Barley Mow, 104 Horseferry Road, London SW1P 2EE. Twenty-five people were present: Miss H. Baker, Mr P. J. Belman, Mr R. Bray, Mr S. Chapman, Ms J. Childers, Ms J. Day, Mr R. Dickey, Mr R. Gonzalez, Mr K. Heron, Ms J. Jones, Mr R. Langley, Dr C. F. Mann, Mr F. Martin, Mr D. J. Montier, Mr T. J. Pittman, Mr R. Price, Dr O. Prŷs-Jones, Dr R. Prŷs-Jones, Dr D. G. D. Russell, Mr P. Sandema, Mr S. A. H. Statham, Mr C. W. R. Storey (Chairman), Dr J. Tobias (Speaker), Mr J. Verhelst and Mr P. Wilkinson.

Joe Tobias gave a talk entitled *The shape of birds, and why it matters*. Birds vary widely in size from the Bee Hummingbird *Mellisuga helenae* to Common Ostrich *Struthio camelus*, and come in a staggering range of shapes. Last century, the field of eco-morphology began to shed light on the way birds are shaped by habitat preferences and foraging behaviour, but studies focused on relatively few species and left numerous gaps in understanding. Joe's talk explored recent research based on detailed measurements of almost all of the world's bird species, and described how this new influx of information has been combined with spatial, phylogenetic and ecological data to help answer some fundamental questions, such as how does bird diversity arise, and how can it best be conserved?

REVIEWS

McGhie, H. A. 2017. *Henry Dresser and Victorian ornithology – birds, books and business*. Manchester Univ. Press. 368 pp, 62 colour plates and 78 other illustrations. ISBN: 978-1-7849-9413-6. Hardback, £25.

A good museum curator is a combination of organiser, manager, historian and detective, and Henry McGhie has expertly used all four skills in this extremely useful book, which is so much more than just a biography of a man obsessed by birds. McGhie explores the very unusual life of Henry Eeles Dresser (1838–1915), who clearly displayed these same four skills, plus those of businessman, publisher and bird collector. Dresser came from a wealthy Yorkshire family, who had made a fortune in the timber trade. His parents made sure their son had the right education to succeed in this by sending him to school in countries heavily involved in timber—Dresser thereby became fluent in German, French and the Scandinavian languages, which stood him in good stead as an avid collector of birds and their eggs. He travelled all over the Old World for business, but had special connections with Canada and the Baltic.

On his very first day at Manchester Museum, McGhie came across a box of archival material belonging to Henry Dresser and was hooked from that moment. Dresser's bird collections (skins and eggs) are found in museums all over the world, but the Manchester collection is particularly rich. McGhie has the added bonus of having being able to purchase, for the museum, an important album of portrait photographs and letters from Dresser's correspondents. This is a gold mine of portraits, with autographs, of the most important and influential ornithologists of the times. McGhie's book is liberally scattered with these gems: John Harvie-Brown leans nonchalantly on his gun, whereas Ernest Shelley seems about to fire his. Both are dressed in immaculate three-piece suits, whereas 'The Old Bushman' Horatio Wheelwright is more suitably dressed for the field, posed with both his gun and working dog.

Dresser is described as a man with 'demoniacal energy', with a striking and intense appearance set off rather strangely by an ill-fitting wig. He always talked at great speed and rarely about anything other than birds. He was a leading light in British natural history societies—most notably the British Ornithologists' Union (BOU) and the Zoological Society of London—and a prolific speaker and correspondent. Undoubtedly Dresser's most important publication is the monumental *A history of the birds of Europe*, published in 84 parts between 1871 and 1882, but he wrote more than 100 books and articles on birds and their eggs.

Henry McGhie's stated purpose for writing this book was to explore the world of Victorian ornithology, and how the world of the birds and the attitudes to ornithological collections in museums have changed over time. How can the modern museum perform better to support nature conservation? What values should curators have today and what choices should they be making? How should these attitudes be explained to the general public?

Whatever ornithological fact you might be looking for from Henry Dresser's period, it will be in this book, carefully referenced. It is a mine of information and the result of much meticulous research.

Clemency Fisher

Nowak, E. 2018. *Biologists in the age of totalitarianism: personal reminiscences of ornithologists and other naturalists*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne. 358 pp, many black-and-white photographs. ISBN (10): 1-5275-1099-9 / ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-1099-9. Hardback, £65.99.

For many British and American ornithologists, this book will provide novel, fascinating, and frequently terrifying insight into the lives of continental European, and some Asian, ornithologists during the 20th century. Their names will often be known, indeed familiar, from the ornithological literature, but the conditions under which many had to struggle just to survive, let alone undertake research, under brutal, competing, totalitarian dictatorships will be almost incomprehensible. Dr Eugeniusz Nowak, an ornithologist and conservationist who was born in 1933 in Poland and now lives in Germany, himself lived through these events and, as the title suggests, writes from personal knowledge of nearly all of the 40 or more individuals included.

The focus of the book, based on earlier editions in German, Russian and Polish, is very much on the personal lives and challenges faced by the individuals discussed, rather than on the details of their scientific output. Binding the whole volume together is the towering figure of Erwin Stresemann (1889–1972), probably best known to English-speaking ornithologists from the 1970s translation of his seminal early 1950s survey of the history of ornithology, written in the ruins of post-WWII Berlin. His account, at 35 pages, opens the book and is much the longest in it, but his name recurs repeatedly thereafter as he had contacts with, taught or otherwise influenced numerous of the other individuals. It seems extraordinary that there has been as yet no English-language version of his biography produced. I was amused to read of his nickname as the 'Pope' of ornithology, as I had always understood that it was Allan Octavian Hume who had held this title (Collar & Prŷs-Jones 2012)—maybe a little further digging will reveal a hitherto unexamined chronological succession of ornithological pontiffs!

Fascinating background details of individuals previously known to me only from papers they had written or species named after them leap out from these pages. Back in the 1970s, when writing a thesis on buntings *Emberiza*, a paper that excited me sufficiently to get translated from the Russian was by Stegman (1948), recounting his studies in the delta region of the River Ili in Kazakhstan into the counter-intuitive differences in winter feeding ecology between thick- and thin-billed Reed Buntings *E. schoeniclus*. Since then I have always had a vague aspiration to visit this exotic-sounding area, but Nowak's account of the circumstances of Boris Karlovich Stegman's self-imposed five-year exile to this remote environment places my naïve thoughts in a harshly factual framework, as well as informing me that Stegman actually wrote a book about his experiences, unfortunately only available in Russian! On a less personal note, the amazing history of the Jankowski family, notably Michal Jankowski (1842–1912) of Jankowski's Bunting *E. jankowski* fame, was totally unknown to me, including their links to the Brynner family, with their son Julka, the future American film star Yul Brynner.

A frequent reaction I experienced to reading the accounts here was the desire for further information; often this is actually available, as the excellent reference list points out, though not normally in the couple of languages that are all I can even attempt to read. One notable exception is someone who here receives merely a passing mention, namely Gerd Heinrich (1896–1984), who collected birds for Stresemann in then exotic places such as Sulawesi, but was by inclination an expert on the Ichneumonidae. The truly mind-expanding travels and travails of this man, born in the much fought-over region that has at different times been part of Poland and Germany, encompass most of the 20th century and have been recounted in a compelling biography and family history, *The snoring bird*, by his son Bernd Heinrich (2007), himself an outstanding American academic biologist and writer on avian natural history.

A sideline that emerges from Nowak's account touches on contacts during WWII between German ornithologists, such as Stresemann and Günther Niethammer, with captive British servicemen who had ornithological interests, such as John Buxton and George Waterston. The experiences of the latter men have of course previously been written about, an insightful summary being by Niemann (2012), but it is intriguing to acquire brief glimpses of these interactions from a central European perspective. Throughout his book, Nowak presents a remarkably balanced account not only of the struggles of the individuals he covers both to survive and to undertake ornithological research, but also of the moral failings that he and others have perceived in some of them, highlighting the extraordinary conditions under which they lived, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions as to how they might themselves have behaved in similar circumstances.

The book is nicely produced and generally very well translated, although unfortunately sufficiently expensive to potentially deter many who might otherwise consider reading it. I would strongly urge them to make the investment, and thereby begin to flesh out their knowledge of the lives behind the names of some leading ornithologists of the past 100 or more years.

Robert Prŷs-Jones

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OBITUARY

James (Jim) W. Wiley, 20 January 1943–19 September 2018

Jim Wiley commenced his professional life as a physician in the Vietnam War, and it was only on his return to the US that he realised that he wanted to be a biologist. Firstly he worked as an ichthyologist and later as a herpetologist, but birds eventually captured him for the rest of his life. Few colleagues are perhaps aware that Jim's first visit to the West Indies was to Cuba, not as a biologist, but as a student with two friends, after his history professor had suggested that they might witness the arrival of the Castro rebel caravan into Havana on 1 January 1959. As an ornithologist, his first visit to the Caribbean was in the early 1970s, when he went to Puerto Rico to study columbids. Jim's main focus became the study of threatened species in the Greater Antilles such as *Amazona* parrots, Plain *Patagioenas inornata* and White-crowned Pigeons *P. leucocephala*, raptors, and many others, but it was a study of the invasive Shiny Cowbird *Molothrus bonariensis* which enabled his Ph.D. in 1982 from Miami University. His second visit to Cuba was not until the late 1980s but the country soon became a major attraction to Jim, with many interesting, poorly known and threatened species.

My first contact with Jim was at the Museo Nacional de Historia Natural de Cuba, Havana, where he was collating information concerning the museum's material as part of a project to database all Cuban specimens around the world (Wiley *et al.* 2008). Afterwards, I offered him a lift on my bike (this was during the Special Period when public transport was terrible), never suspecting that I was taking an Olympic cyclist (he competed in the 1968 Mexico City games), but I soon realised that he was the best field ornithologist I had ever met. We soon became good friends and excellent colleagues.

His support of my studies and those of many other Cuban ornithologists was infinite and his company unforgettable, always lots of work but many laughs along the way. I never understood how he could conduct so many projects so well, and make the impossible possible. He responded to every e-mail immediately and reviewed every paper in detail, yet still produced his own work. He was a person who never said no to anybody, and was always ready to help, especially those lacking basic materials or references, but also by supporting expeditions and research with his own money. Such support was spread far and wide across Cuba, even to people that he hardly knew, as just the recommendation of a colleague was more than enough to enlist his help. It was not always an easy task for Jim to obtain a work visa for Cuba, but despite these and many other adversities his love for Cuba's nature and its people kept him going. That and his indomitable will to continue and improve his detailed studies, even in the worst field and health conditions, many times



Left: Jim Wiley, Ciénaga de Zapata, Cuba (Arturo Kirkconnell)

Right: Arturo Kirkconnell (left) and Jim Wiley researching hole-nesting birds, Ciénaga de Zapata, Cuba (Arturo Kirkconnell Posada)

totally covered by mosquitoes in the Zapata Peninsula, or riding his bike for many kilometres carrying his huge backpack full of equipment.

It was a Cuban doctor who recommended that he leave the country right away, to try to tackle the cancer that would ultimately take his life (albeit not until several years later). I tried to change his mind, but nothing could prevent him from continuing, thus he remained another three months in Zapata on this visit. Even to convince him to take a lift from somebody, instead of cycling everywhere along rough trails, proved futile. Some of the local people in Zapata referred to him as the biggest protector of the forest and its birds.

It is Jim's spirit, camaraderie and desire to share and help others that will live with me longest, and impressed me most, but he also possessed a quite amazing curriculum vitae that included more than 300 scientific publications. He also participated in several books, among them *A guide to the birds of the West Indies* (Raffaele *et al.* 1998)—the successor to Bond's field guide—and *The birds from Hispaniola: an annotated checklist* (Keith *et al.* 2003), but perhaps most importantly his sole effort, *A bibliography of West Indies ornithology* (Wiley 2000), a compendium project that perhaps only Jim, or someone of similarly unshakeable resolve, could have completed successfully. In addition, he was a founding member of the Society of Caribbean Ornithology and the first editor of its publication *El Pitirre* (now the *Journal of Caribbean Ornithology*) overseeing, during his nine years at the helm, its transition from newsletter to fully fledged journal and helping countless young and inexperienced authors along the way.

Wiley's legacy was extraordinary, and his data and knowledge of Cuban endemic birds staggering, some of which will form part of a BOC checklist to the country's birds that is currently being edited for publication (Kirkconnell *et al.* in press). Jim's final research was focused on the largest of the West Indies, on the breeding and foraging ecology of Gundlach's Hawk *Accipiter gundlachi*, a study of cavity nesters such as Cuban Parrot *Amazona leucocephala*, Cuban Pygmy Owl *Glaucidium siju*, Bare-legged Owl *Margarobyas lawrencii* and the country's woodpeckers (Picidae), as well as Bee Hummingbird *Mellisuga helenae*. Jim's desire to know the intimate details of the natural history of Cuba's threatened and endemic birds was unsurpassed, because his commitment was to their conservation, the ultimate goal that drove every piece of research he conducted.

Jim was the recipient of several awards (including the Alexander F. Skutch and Gundlach medals) for his contribution to bird conservation. It is some measure of the respect in which he was held that he was the first foreigner to be recognised with the latter by the Cuban Zoological Society. I am deeply honoured to have counted as a friend such an outstanding ornithologist. A mutual friend wrote after he passed on 'It is a terrible loss to Caribbean ornithology, and we know that he achieved more than most people do in about three lifetimes.' Rest in peace dear friend, we all miss you!

Arturo Kirkconnell

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Corrigendum. The melanistic variety of Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris rufa* continued

by Hein van Grouw, Ludovic Besson & Benoît Mellier

Received 12 February 2019

Following the publication of our paper regarding extant specimens of melanistic Red-legged Partridges (van Grouw *et al.* 2018), another such specimen, apparently not yet adult, came to our attention (Figs. 1–2). It was received by the Muséum des sciences naturelles d'Angers (MHNAn) from the Catholic University of the West in Angers (Université Catholique de l'Ouest = UCO). Freedom of teaching was granted in France on 1 July 1875 after many universities had been temporarily disbanded during the French Revolution. The French bishops decided then to found five Catholic universities and Angers, thanks to Bishop Charles Émile Freppel (1827–91), was chosen to serve western France. The university was founded in November 1875, and possesses some natural history collections from the 19th century. In late 2014, due to lack of space, the UCO asked MHNAn if the museum was interested in parts of the university's collections. Among the specimens was an '*atro-rufa*'; a melanistic Red-legged Partridge. Unfortunately, no labels or any associated data came with this specimen, so its origin appears unknown. However, we can speculate that it may be connected with Michel Honoré Vincelot (1815–77) and perhaps also Eugène Lemetteil (1822–90).



Figures 1–2. Mounted specimen of a melanistic Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris rufa*, originally part of the collection of the Université Catholique de l'Ouest, now in the Muséum des sciences naturelles d'Angers, France (Michel Beucher, © Musées d'Angers)

Lemetteil was a keen amateur ornithologist from Bolbec in Normandy, northern France. He had a melanistic partridge that was sent to him by Abbot Vincelot (Lemetteil 1869), but it seemed to be lost (van Grouw *et al.* 2018). Michel Honoré Vincelot (1815–77) was an abbot at Angers (Crépon 1877), an amateur ornithologist and a member of the Linnaean Society of Maine-et-Loire. He also was honorary canon at the Saint Maurice Cathedral of Angers and a member of the Departmental Council of Public Education (Port 1878), later the Catholic University of the West in Angers. Vincelot had an egg collection, including some eggs of *atro-rufa* (Vincelot 1867). Although he did not mention specimens, he must have had at least one melanistic Red-legged Partridge as he sent that to Lemetteil. Most of Vincelot's egg collection is at UCO (BM pers. obs. 2018), and was probably donated by Vincelot himself or a next of kin. One can assume that, if Vincelot also had skins / mounts, these were donated to UCO too, meaning that the mounted specimen now at MHNAn can be assumed to have originated from Vincelot's collection. Whether it was the specimen he had sent to Lemetteil initially, and perhaps was returned to him, or that Vincelot had a second specimen is a mystery.

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FORTHCOMING MEETINGS

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

BOC MEETINGS are open to **all**, not just BOC Friends, **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.marketaverns.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.

Monday 20 May 2019—6.30 pm—Julian Hume—*Birds of Lord Howe Island: past, present and future*

Abstract.—Lord Howe Island, situated 790 km north-east of Sydney in the Tasman Sea, was first observed on 17 February 1788, making it one of the last islands to be discovered by Europeans. An endemic gallinule, pigeon and parakeet were quickly hunted to extinction, but habitat alterations were minimal; therefore a diverse forest bird fauna remained intact. The accidental introduction of Black Rats *Rattus rattus* in 1918 and barn owls (*Tyto*) in the 1920s resulted in another wave of bird extinctions, but several endemics survive including a flightless rail. Seabird diversity is also high and they still breed in large numbers, although rat predation is an ongoing problem. I present the results of a recent palaeontological and ornithological survey of Lord Howe Island, highlighting fossil discoveries and conservation successes, and also discuss the pros and cons of plans to eradicate rats entirely from the island in 2019.

Biography.—Julian Hume has travelled widely in search of avian palaeontological deposits, especially in the Mascarene Islands of Mauritius, Réunion and Rodrigues, on Madagascar and in Hawaii. More recently, he has turned his attention to islands off the Australian coast and he spoke to the Club in early 2017 on his research into the dwarf emus *Dromaius* spp. of the South Australian islands. By profession he is an artist specialising in extinct birds, but also has a Ph.D. in avian palaeontology and is a Scientific Associate of the Natural History Museum, Tring. He has written a number of books and published many papers on birds and their fossil history, his most recent book being the second edition of the widely acclaimed *Extinct birds*.

Monday 16 September 2019—6.30 pm—Pat Morris—*The Hastings Rarities: taking the long view*. Note change in date compared to previous announcement.

Abstract.—It is now more than 50 years since hundreds of bird records were dismissed as potentially fraudulent on the grounds that it was unlikely that so many rare species would turn up within a short period of time and a limited area around Hastings. Statistical analysis confirmed a significant difference between the numbers of records in that area and time compared to other areas of Kent / Sussex and with later periods. In ornithological terms it makes limited difference, as most of the suspect species have been found subsequently in that area. It has long been widely accepted that fraud occurred and that a local taxidermist, George Bristow, was responsible for perpetrating this. Bristow was unable to defend himself, having died, and the taxidermy profession was besmirched. Although protests were made at the time the issue appears closed. However, worrying doubts remain when the evidence is examined closely. Equally, in retrospect there may be further evidence to confirm Bristow's guilt. A colleague, Philip Redman, has also been studying details of the Hastings affair, and may hopefully be able to join us from Paris.

Biography.—Dr Pat Morris was Senior Lecturer in Zoology at Royal Holloway, Univ. of London, and well known for his studies of mammal ecology. He is a past Chairman of the Mammal Society, a former Council Member of the National Trust, and has published >70 scientific papers and c.20 books. A consultant to several major publishers and the BBC Natural History Unit, in his spare time he has pursued a long-standing interest in the history of taxidermy and was appointed the first Hon. Life Member of the Guild of Taxidermists. He was awarded the Founder's Medal by the Society for the History of Natural History and made MBE in the 2015 Honours List 'for services to the natural and historic environment'.

In addition the Club will be holding a one-day joint conference with the Neotropical Bird Club on **26 October 2019** in the Flett Theatre of the Natural History Museum in South Kensington, London. Attendance is open to all and entrance is free. The conference will include a range of talks on Neotropical ornithology and full details of the programme will appear on the Club's website and here in due course.

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

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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), if you would kindly inform him if you intend becoming a Friend of the BOC.

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 future submissions or look at <http://boc-online.org/bulletin/bulletin-contributions>. Back numbers up to volume 132 (2012) are available via the Biodiversity Heritage Library website: www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/46639#summary; vols. 132–136 are available on the BOC website: <http://boc-online.org/>

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