

Bulletin of the BRITISH ORNITHOLOGISTS' CLUB

Vol. 133 No. 4

Published 3 December 2013

CLUB ANNOUNCEMENTS

Chairman's message

I am delighted to say that Robert Prýs-Jones has assembled an excellent series of talks for the 2013/14 meetings programme. We began with an overview of the birdlife of the Malagasy region by Dr Roger Safford, outstanding both in exposing the extraordinary biodiversity of this region and in the innovative nature of its presentation. It was based on the magisterial new book that he has recently co-edited (Safford, R. J. & Hawkins, A. F. A. 2013. *The birds of Africa*, vol. 8. Christopher Helm, London), which should be of great interest to most Club members. At the meeting on 19 November, Dr Christina Ieronymidou discussed the effects of land use and agricultural change on the birds of Cyprus, providing a fascinating insight into an issue that all of us were familiar with but from an environment that most of us were not. During the first half of 2014, Richard Porter will bring many years of research to his talk on the birds of the beguiling island of Socotra on 25 February and Guy Kirwan will do likewise when he discusses the taxonomy, ecology and conservation of the birds of Cuba at our AGM on 20 May. All will be in the upstairs room at the Barley Mow (see opposite): the venue provides an agreeable lecture space plus good food and drink at reasonable prices. I very much hope that as many as possible will join us there for what are very enjoyable evenings.

Chris Storey

The 974th meeting of the Club was held on Tuesday 24 September 2013 in the upstairs room of the Barley Mow, 104 Horseferry Road, Westminster, London SW11P 2EE. Eleven members and five non-members were present. Members attending were: Miss H. BAKER, Mr K. F. BETTON, Cdr. M. B. CASEMENT, Mr K. HERON JONES, Mr G. M. KIRWAN, Mr D. MONTIER, Mr R. PRICE, Dr R. PRÝS-JONES, Mr N. REDMAN, Mr P. RUDGE and Mr C. STOREY (*Chairman*).

Non-members attending were: Dr R. CHARLES, Mrs J. HERON JONES, Mrs M. MONTIER, Mr W. PRICE and Dr R. SAFFORD (*Speaker*).

Dr Roger Safford spoke on *Recent advances in the knowledge of Malagasy region birds*. The Malagasy region comprises Madagascar, Seychelles, the Comoros, the Mascarenes (Mauritius, Réunion and Rodrigues) and a small number of other isolated, coralline islands. Madagascar and the granitic Seychelles formed part of the supercontinent of Gondwana; with the latter's break-up, they have been separated from Africa for well over 100 million years, but remained connected to India somewhat longer. More recent volcanic activity created the Mascarenes and Comoros, while periodic sea level lows added more islands, most not currently exposed, between Asia and the Malagasy region.

Molecular and other techniques have permitted the arrival time and phylogeny of most bird lineages in the region to be assessed. The seven oldest groups are the elephant birds (Aepyornithidae; extinct), cuckoo rollers (Leptosomidae), mesites (Mesitornithidae), asities (Philepittidae), ground rollers (Brachypteraciidae), tetrakas (Bernieridae) and vangas (Vangidae). These are the endemic families as currently recognised, although the first three may merit treatment as orders, and the vangas cluster among a group of Asian and African shrike-like birds of long-uncertain affinities and their status as a family may be questionable. The Bernieridae are a newly recognised family numbering at least 11 species formerly placed among the bulbuls (Pycnonotidae), babblers (Timaliidae) and warblers (Sylviidae). The Vangidae embrace an extraordinary diversity of morphologies including genera closely resembling Sittidae (*Hypositta*), babblers (*Mystacornis*), bulbuls (*Tylas*), Platysteiridae (*Pseudobias*) and Muscicapidae (*Newtonia*), and arguably rate as the finest example of adaptive radiation among all birds.

All of the endemic families would be restricted to Madagascar but for the recent colonisation of the Comoros by a vanga and the Cuckoo Roller *Leptosomus discolor*. Endemic genera, arriving more recently, are mainly found in Madagascar, and include many ancient or basal lineages among such families as starlings (Sturnidae), African warblers (Cisticolidae) and estrildids. Some have arisen on, or colonised, the smaller islands but sadly many of these (and other species), mainly on the Mascarenes, were wiped out by human colonists. Most of the islands' extant avifaunas comprise genera shared with Africa and Asia, although many species are highly distinct. Much current ornithological work is focused on taxonomy, systematics and phylogeography; many gaps in knowledge remain and studies on, for example, Rallidae, *Zonavena*, *Upupa*, *Copsychus*, *Tylas*, *Ploceus*, *Humblotia*, *Amphilais* and Banded Kestrel *Falco zoniventris* (to name just a

few) would be of great interest. Palaeontological studies continue to yield remarkable findings, despite the poor prospects for fossil preservation in many areas. Study of the conservation biology of the many rare and endangered species is and must remain a priority, with common species such as the vasa parrots *Coracopsis* having astonishing life histories. Indeed, regrettably little attention is given to natural history and ecology, to the extent that even the extraordinary Cuckoo Roller is very poorly known. Finally, recent years have seen a rapid increase in raptor and especially seabird tracking studies, particularly on Seychelles and the Mascarenes.

Alexander (Alec) David Forbes-Watson 1935–2013

Born at Wylam in Northumberland, UK, on 26 February 1935, Alec came to Kenya as a child and spent much of his early years at the family home first at Kitale, and later at Ruiru near Thika. He was educated at the Prince of Wales School in Nairobi and, following a short period of military service with the Kenya Regiment, he spent four years at the University of Cape Town. His interest in birds started as a very young boy and was greatly influenced by such well-known ornithologists as Charles Belcher, Myles North, John Williams and Leslie Brown.

On his return from Cape Town in 1959, Alec joined the Kenya Game Department and for the next four years until 1963 was stationed at Kapenguria near Kitale, and at Kilgoris in the Trans-Mara District of south-west Kenya. In late 1966 he was fortunate to follow in John Williams' footsteps as head of the Ornithology Department at the National Museums of Kenya in Nairobi where he and his trusted assistant Joseph Mwaki added several hundred important specimens to the Nairobi collection, which at the time was on a par with those in the Bulawayo and Durban museums as important repositories of Afrotropical bird specimens.

Alec's reputation as an extraordinary ornithologist was recognised by everyone who came in contact with him, particularly those of us who spent time with him in the field. From March 1964 to February 1966 he made a series of collections for the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, the most notable of which was his 1964 Socotra collection that included the discovery of *Apus berliozi*, described and named Forbes-Watson's Swift by Dillon Ripley in 1966. Later, while still working for the Smithsonian, on the Kenya coast in January 1966, Alec collected two additional swifts flying over Gedi Forest near Malindi, described by Richard Brooke as a new subspecies (*A. b. bensoni*) of his Socotra birds. The following year he was engaged by the Mount Nimba Research Committee to make a collection of birds from the Nimba region of northern Liberia. During his two years there (May 1967–December 1968 and January–April 1971) Alec made one of the most important collections of birds from a hitherto little-known area of West Africa, including the discovery of Nimba Flycatcher *Melaenornis annamarulae*, which he described and named after his wife Anna in 1970.

On his return from Nimba, Alec soon turned his attention to the birds of Madagascar and the Malagasy region, and for the next few years he and I made several visits to the Comores, Seychelles, Madagascar, Réunion and Mauritius, while in 1976 we were able to resuscitate the Pan African Ornithological Congresses (PAOC) with a very successful and well-attended fourth PAOC in the Seychelles. By the time of PAOC5 in Lilongwe, Malaŵi, in 1980 and PAOC6 in Francistown, Botswana, in 1985, Alec was one of only a handful of individuals fortunate to have attended all of these gatherings up to that time, such was his passion for Africa and its unparalleled birdlife. Later, in 1993, he co-authored with Bob Dowsett a *Checklist of the birds of the Afrotropical and Malagasy regions*.

During a visit to Tsavo West National Park in November 1969, Alec noticed that large numbers of Palearctic migrant birds were attracted to the floodlights of Ngulia Lodge, and so alerted Daphne & Graeme Backhurst, Hazel & Peter Britton and David Pearson, all experienced ringers, to witness for themselves the opportunity to ring hundreds of migrants on their southward passage. This phenomenon has now been studied in some detail, and since the mid 1970s huge numbers of migrants have been ringed annually by both local and overseas ringers, and the Ngulia Ringing Group, now in its 37th year of operation, has ringed well over 500,000 birds to date, all due in part to Alec's timely observations back in 1969.

With a long outstanding commitment to write up his field work at Mount Nimba, Alec resigned his position at the National Museums of Kenya and in 1978 sent his specimens to the British Museum where Peter Colston and Kai Curry-Lindahl were able to start work on the entire Mt Nimba collection. After several delays the report itself (*The birds of Mount Nimba, Liberia*) was finally published by the British Museum (Natural History) in 1986.

In 1979 Alec traveled to the USA where long-time friend and colleague Frank Gill arranged for him to work on the VIREO photographic project at the Academy of Natural Sciences Philadelphia. Alec remained in the USA for a few years before going to England in 1983, then back to the USA in 1985–86. He returned to East Africa in 1988 and in 1990–92 participated in bird surveys of several Uganda Forest Reserves under the auspices of the IUCN Tropical Forest Programme. However, his health was deteriorating badly and, following a minor stroke, he was forced to move into the Nanyuki Cottage Hospital in 2003 where, under excellent medical supervision and care, he remained until his death on 16 September 2013.

Alec's commitment to African birds and his enthusiasm for birding was palpable at all times. He was also a talented artist and some of his many line drawings adorned the book *Oh Quagga* published in 1983 by

Ian Parker and Alan Root. He was constantly the life and soul of many parties and impromptu get-togethers, so much so that he will be fondly remembered by many friends and colleagues in the USA, the UK, as well as in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and several other African countries, as a fount of knowledge on not only birds, but on all aspects of natural history. With no surviving next of kin, his two brothers having been killed under tragic circumstances several years earlier, Alec Forbes-Watson, an extraordinarily talented individual, will be long-remembered by many of us who were so fortunate to know him as a true friend and colleague.

Don Turner

REFEREES

I am grateful to the following, who have reviewed manuscripts submitted to the Bulletin during the last year (those who refereed more than one manuscript are denoted by an asterisk in parentheses): Fernando Angulo, Wayne Arendt, Bas van Balen, Richard C. Banks, Brett Benz, Don Buden, Robert Cheke, David Christie, Nigel Cleere, Pierre-André Crochet, Marco Crozariol, Sidnei M. Dantas, Edward C. Dickinson (*), Coleen Downs, Robert J. Dowsett (*), Françoise Dowsett-Lemaire, Guy Dutton, James Eaton, Knut Eisermann (*), Steven Emslie, Jeremy Flanagan, Juan F. Freile, Errol Fuller, Steven Gregory, Steve N. G. Howell, Julian Hume (*), Morton L. Isler, Helen F. James, Leo Joseph, Krys Kazmierczak, Robert Kennedy, Alan Knox, Oliver Komar, Neils Krabbe, Frank Lambert, Daniel F. Lane, Alexander C. Lees, Mary LeCroy, Huw Lloyd, Wayne Longmore, Michel Louette, Jen Mandeville, Clive Mann, Gerald Mayr, Robert McGowan, Gerardo Obando, José Fernando Pacheco, Alan Peterson, Doug Pratt, Thane K. Pratt, Robert Prÿs-Jones, Robin Restall, César Sánchez, Richard Schodde (*), Thomas S. Schulenberg, Frederick Sheldon, Alejandro Solano-Ugalde, Frank Steinheimer (*), David Steadman, Joseph Tobias, Colin Trainor, Dick Watling, Andrew Whittaker (*), Iain Woxvold and Kevin J. Zimmer.—THE HON. EDITOR