

Obituary



John Ash (1925–2014)

If the long life of John Ash can be characterized as one of unswerving dedication to ornithology, his professional career is remarkable for the way it fell into two very different parts. In the 1950s and 1960s the focus of his work was on issues relating to the management of gamebirds, particularly Grey Partridges *Perdix perdix*, and he was almost certainly the first ecologist in Britain to recognize the damage that pesticides could inflict on farmland bird populations. In the 1970s and 1980s his attention turned to fieldwork in Africa, resulting in the discovery of two new bird species to science, two major books (*Birds of Somalia* with John Miskell in 1998, and *Birds of Ethiopia and Eritrea* with John Atkins in 2009) and a host of important observations in other countries.

John Sidney Ash was born in Gosforth, Northumberland, on 26 May 1925, the eldest of four brothers in a family that was related to the socialists Sidney and Beatrice Webb, and hence both to the flawed ornithological giant Richard Meinertzhagen (*Ibis* 109: 617–620; 149: 636–637) and to Meinertzhagen's niece Theresa Clay, whose consuming interest in avian ectoparasites John shared. *Ab ovo*, John was a brilliant, passionate, methodical birdwatcher, and by his early teens he was

publishing new county records and starting to ring birds whenever he could. At this time he was close friends with Matthew (later Lord) Ridley, whose son Matt reports that 'as far as I can tell they spent every waking hour each spring finding truly astonishing numbers of nests and ringing birds all over Northumberland', and with Matthew's younger brother, the future Conservative minister Nicholas (always 'Nicky' to John) the pair later published their own evidence of movements and survival of Wood Pigeons *Columba palumbus* and Stock Doves *Columba oenas* (*Br. Birds* 49: 298–305). In the years 1947–50, whenever free of his national service and academic commitments, John ringed large numbers of seabirds, notably European Shags *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*, on the Farne Islands, a project so successful it was placed on a permanent basis by the Northumberland and Durham Natural History Society.

After attending Pocklington School, Yorkshire, he studied agricultural entomology at Durham, 1942–45, before joining the RAF for the mandatory 2 years (being based near Gloucester he soon made friends with Peter Scott at Slimbridge). He went back to academia to obtain first a Diploma of Imperial College (DIC), 1948–51, during which he met and soon married Helen Jonquil Gudgeon, who was training in tropical pest control, and then in the years 1951–54 a PhD, 'A study of the Mallophaga and other ectoparasites of birds, with particular reference to their ecology' (honed into shape for *Ibis* 102: 93–110), while he was working for the then ICI Game Research Station at Fordingbridge (director Doug Middleton, senior researcher Terence Blank). With Blank in particular, throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s John undertook a huge amount of pioneering ecological and pathological work on Grey Partridges (e.g. *Ibis* 98: 379–389, *Proc. IOC* 12: 118–126).

Just as he started this work, considerable numbers of birds and some farm workers were being poisoned by dinitro herbicides. By 1952, John was documenting incidents in which more than 100 adult Grey Partridges and hundreds of other species were killed by Schradan, an organophosphate insecticide. Given that their employers were ICI, John and his colleagues had to be extremely cautious about implicating commercial

agricultural poisons. Nevertheless, they called for an urgent investigation into the use of 'dangerous chemicals' under field conditions and submitted crucial evidence to the Zuckerman Inquiry (*Toxic Chemicals in Agriculture: Risks to Wild Life*, 1955, HMSO). This report urged further research into agricultural sprays on farm wildlife, including 'the effect on birds of the killing of large numbers of insects'. During this time, John also set up what is now the National Game Census, to monitor population trends in response to agrichemical use. For this he painstakingly mapped the movements and recorded the survival of more than a thousand individually marked partridges – gruelling work in the days before GIS. Throughout, he also kept meticulous records of raptor abundance and control, in addition to his work on parasites (see, for example, his study of raptors on a 'game-preserve' in *Br. Birds* 53: 285–300). Most importantly, from 1955 he documented avian mortalities caused by dieldrin seed dressings, but in 1959 the then Chairman of ICI's Metal Division, Dr Beeching, in a foretaste of the logic he was soon to deploy on the British railway network, closed down his company's game research team while developing its body of game advisors. Regrouping with dedication, determination and frighteningly meagre resources, in 1961 Middleton and Ash founded the Game Research Association (GRA), with John as its senior scientist and from 1966 its director.

In parallel with Rachel Carson in the USA, John was producing crucial evidence of the impact of chlorinated hydrocarbons on birdlife, resulting in a series of critically important reports co-authored with Stanley Cramp (for the British Trust for Ornithology) and Peter Conder (for the RSPB), including a landmark journal publication (*Angewandte Orn.* 2: 15–22). Nevertheless, despite these major contributions, in 1968 under the chairmanship of V. C. Wynne Edwards, the Nature Conservancy, which was supporting the GRA programme, instigated a review of its external funding. The Wildfowl Trust and BTO were considered to have justified their public subsidy, but the GRA was not so fortunate and John's partridge research at Fordingbridge was truncated for a second time. This must have been a crushing blow to a man who, now well into mid-career, had done so much to secure not only the British countryside but also his fellow citizens from the insidious effects of certain pesticides.

But throughout this period of game research, John had continued to pursue his wider love of birds, particularly through his interest in migration. A visit to Ottenby in Sweden during his doctoral work, to collect bird parasites, led him to reflect on what might be done on a similar south-facing promontory not too far from Fordingbridge, at Portland Bill, where K. B. Rooke had just started regular watches. John was a visitor there from at least 1952 and, with his gift for record-keeping, produced the first formal (and continuing baseline) paper on birds of the site (*Proc. Dorset Nat. Hist. Arch. Soc.* 76: 171–191). With the redoubtable Helen Brotherton, among others, he helped set up the bird observatory at the Old Lower Light in 1960 and on a visit the following year identified Britain's first Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha calandra* as it flew in off the sea (*Br. Birds* 55: 44–46). After 1962, for which he compiled the observatory's annual report, he travelled increasingly to Europe, Africa and the Middle East in a series of holidays and expeditions, resulting in papers on, for example, a raptor decline in France probably attributable to pesticides (*Bird Study* 12: 17–26), autumn migrants on Rab island, Croatia (*Larus* 21–22: 121–129), spring migrant weights in Morocco following his participation in two of the four 'Defilia' expeditions (*Ibis* 111: 1–10) and, with Hilary Fry and James Ferguson-Lees on an official British Ornithologists' Union (BOU) expedition, spring migrants at Lake Chad (*Ibis* 112: 58–82).

With the dismantling of the GRA this personal interest in migration proved decisive for the direction his career was to take in 1969. Combined with his professional interest in pathology and infectious disease (e.g. *Nature* 212: 431–432) it made him the perfect choice for a new job studying the role played by migratory birds in the transmission of parasites and pathogens. This took him to Ethiopia for 8 years with funding from the US Navy's Medical Research Unit (NAMRU#3), in an intriguing reflection of the US Army's Migratory Animals Pathological Survey (MAPS), which ran in Asia from 1963 to 1975 under the direction of H. E. McClure – a man who, like John, lived to the age of 88 and similarly ringed some 100 000 birds (*Auk* 116: 1125–1126).

Being paid to do what, more than anything, he loved to do – watch, catch, ring and sample birds – John must sometimes have had to pinch himself for his good fortune, but he took his remit very seriously, setting out to visit as many as

possible of the 479 half-degree grid squares that fit over Ethiopia (he achieved almost 70% coverage). Single-mindedly, and for much of the time single-handedly, he plotted out the distributions of birds in the country, adding a dozen or more species to the national list, discovering the Ankober Serin *Serinus ankoberensis* (*Ibis* 121: 1–7), almost discovering what is now known as the Liben Lark *Heteromirafra archeri sidamoensis* (*Bull. Br. Orn. Club* 105: 141–143) and contributing a stream of published notes that clarified the status of species in the country. Steph Tyler remembers how ‘even after a long day, after my husband and I and children had gone off to bed, John would still be up writing his day’s catch and report, and doing a final net round for nightjars and owls before raising the nets to allow antelopes below’. The terrain was often far from welcoming, and his daughter Caroline reports that on one occasion his exacting quest for evidence led him to spend an entire night up a tree to escape the attentions of an enraged hippopotamus.

He had to flee almost as quickly in 1977 when Ethiopia under the Derg switched its allegiance to the Soviet Union (he had about 48 h to leave the country), but after a year at the Smithsonian’s Division of Birds to complete the documentation of his Ethiopian material, he found himself back in the Horn of Africa, this time to work with the FAO Quelea Control Programme in Somalia. Here, forming an alliance with John Miskell, he again used a half-degree grid-square system and sought systematically to record birds across it; and, again, he found a new species, Ash’s Lark *Mirafra ashi*, plus a handful of new subspecies (*Bull. Br. Orn. Club* 101: 399–403; 102: 106–114), while increasing the number of species known from the country by over 50 (*Scopus* 7: 54–79; also *Scopus Spec Suppl.* 1). Thus, in little more than a decade of fieldwork, John established baseline maps and qualitative abundance estimates for Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia, and it is hard to think of an instance – A. R. Wallace comes to mind – where so much was done in so short a period by a single individual to advance the understanding of an entire regional avifauna.

Posted by FAO in 1981–1982 to Uganda, John once again sought to deploy his mapping system (this was to be taken up and completed 20 years later by other authors). Retiring at the age of 57, he and Jonquil proceeded to divide their time between their New Forest home (where he stored and

ordered every scrap of paper relevant to his multifarious ornithological enterprises; much of this material is now at the Alexander Library, Edward Grey Institute, University of Oxford) and travel to many parts of the world, often for extended periods. In 1982–83 they spent 6 months in Bali, Indonesia, where John discovered a major migration of small raptors, revisiting the island in 1990 to gather more data on the phenomenon (*Forktail* 9: 3–11). Returning to Uganda in early 1983 he found a new species of weaver, *Ploceus victoriae*, although this one proved to be a hybrid (*Ibis* 129: 405–407). A small FAO contract took him to the Maldives in 1984 and he went back there in 1993 to produce the latest and fullest account of birds in the islands (*Forktail* 10: 3–32). He was invited to work in Nigeria in the mid-1980s, duly found Grey-necked Picathartes *Picathartes oreas* in the country and hugely increased our knowledge of the baffling Ibadan Malimbe *Malimbus ibadanensis* (*Bird Conserv. Int.* 1: 93–106). When the Derg was overthrown in Ethiopia he was soon back for a visit, during which he rediscovered the Yellow-throated Serin *Serinus flavigula* (*Bull. Br. Orn. Club* 110: 81–83).

Potted accounts of John’s life (*Who’s Who in Ornithology*, Buckingham Press, 1997, pp. 25–26; *Ibis* 139: 603–604) list his many other achievements, his honours (BTO Tucker Medal 1967, BOU Union Medal 1997) and his service to various institutions, but they can scarcely do justice to his genius as a field observer or to his character as a human being. Some idea of the former can be derived from his success in finding Ash’s Lark and other cryptic taxa, and from the titles of his many short notes in *British Birds* (e.g. ‘Evidence of young-carrying by Lapwing’), but the really important qualities that allowed this genius to flourish were an unabated vigilance and a relentless sense of order – he was always on the lookout, he kept his attention fixed firmly on the issue of the moment, and he unfailingly documented the evidence. But it would be a mistake to assume that such steely discipline reflected a steely personality. Wherever John went, his patience, kindness, courtesy and good humour – he could not speak three sentences without launching into a colourful anecdote, invariably accompanied by his characteristic short back-of-the-throat laugh – stood him in good stead, and he left behind him friends and goodwill in equal measure. Phil Hall tells how everyone in a large village near Ibadan, expecting a visit from Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands in his capacity

as President of World Wildlife Fund, mobbed John when he dustily materialized out of the bush, assuming he was the anticipated royalty: John, confused but amused, carried himself with such aplomb that nobody ever suspected the mistaken identity. On reflection now, with his interest in game and exploration and with his benign and charming personality, John had all the makings of a prince in his own right.

John died on 6 January 2014, just three days after Jonquil. His memory had migrated a few

years earlier, but the memories he left others will not quickly depart. Everyone who knew him will recall him always with the greatest respect, the sincerest gratitude and the deepest affection.

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