



In Memoriam: David William Snow, 1924–2009

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David Snow, a member of the American Ornithologists' Union from 1958, a Corresponding Fellow (1969) and an Honorary Fellow (1979), died at age 84 on 4 February 2009. David was born on 20 September 1924, one of four children. His parents emigrated to Australia shortly after his birth, but returned to the United Kingdom after only a few years. His early interests in birds led him to Eton. After Eton, he joined the Royal Navy and served on antisubmarine vessels in the Atlantic. Immediately after the hostilities in Europe ceased, and still with the navy, he traveled through the Mediterranean to India, Southeast Asia, and Australia. He kept a bicycle aboard and took every opportunity to go birding ashore.

After navy service, David entered Oxford. His enthusiasm for birds caused him to leave the classics and switch to zoology. While an undergraduate, he went on several expeditions (including one to São Tomé and Príncipe), the choice often influenced by Reg Moreau, then at the Edward Grey Institute (EGI) of Field Ornithology. Snow became involved with EGI students working in Wytham Woods. It was almost inevitable that, on graduating, he should go on to complete his Ph.D. (1953) under David Lack on the systematics and ecology of the genus *Parus*. His research included a month-long field trip to northern Lapland in midwinter to study how Siberian and Willow tits coped with such short days and in attendant conditions of temperatures to -37°C . On a subsequent trip, he visited forests in the North African Atlas Mountains to collect specimens of all the *Parus* subspecies there. This involved driving some 2,300 miles on an elderly motorcycle, carrying a highly visible shotgun on the luggage rack. Not long after this, such trips, with or without a shotgun, would have been impossible.

A postgraduate study of the Spotted Flycatcher in the Oxford area was abandoned and David switched to Common Blackbirds. This investigation produced his first book, *A Study of Blackbirds* (1958). He reflected, "This was rather different from most of the many books on individual bird species that have been produced since then..." Indeed it was; it has not a single statistic, but a vividly clear description of the blackbird's life. In some ways this epitomized David's writings: detailed field observations, succinct text, simple tables and figures—usually without a statistical table in sight. The reader is left with a clear picture of the bird and its lifestyle.

After Oxford, David moved to the New York Zoological Society's Field Station in the Arima Valley, Trinidad. The facility was set up by William Beebe. David was soon followed by his fiancée, Barbara (née Whitaker), and they were married in Trinidad. Barbara, herself an ornithologist, had been the warden of Lundy Island, where she studied the behavior of the Shag for her Ph.D. Much of their future work was done jointly. In Trinidad, David became intensely interested in the relationships between fruit-eating birds and the fruit-bearing trees.

In Trinidad he studied frugivorous birds, and his work on Black-and-white Manakins was one of the first detailed population studies of a tropical species and is still one of the most comprehensive. He worked on Oilbirds and became deeply interested in the cotingids, another group of frugivores. From Trinidad, the Snows returned to Oxford for a year before David accepted the directorship of the Charles Darwin Research Station in the Galápagos Islands. Because he was the only scientific staff member, there was little administration involved. In the Galápagos, he studied the breeding seasons of tropical seabirds in general and, in particular, the biology of the Swallow-tailed Gull, the only nocturnal-feeding gull.

David returned to Britain to serve as research director of the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO; 1964–1968) and as director of the bird collections of the British Museum (Natural History). At that time both were in Tring. While at the BTO, he worked on projects that included kestrels and molt. He also analyzed the spread of foot and mouth disease during one of the outbreaks, showing that it did not fit with the movements of birds, as had been generally supposed. He developed projects that tested the validity of some aspects of the BTO's schemes, and helped prepare the way for the BTO's first atlas of breeding birds. But, as always, his interests lay with his own detailed field studies; the large cooperative surveys, which are one of the strengths of the BTO, were not really his forte.

His efforts at the museum were made more enjoyable because at that time it was possible for the director to go off on prolonged field trips. This enabled him to make many more expeditions to different parts of South America. Two books, *The Web of Adaptation* (1976) and *The Cotingas* (1982), resulted from these efforts. Although *The Web* is now 30 years old, it is still considered an outstanding introduction to tropical ecology.

In addition to his research work, David was an excellent editor. While at the museum, he edited the *The Atlas of Speciation in African Non-Passerine Birds*, based on the distributions of birds in the collection, and a sister volume to *The Atlas of Speciation in African Passerine Birds* (Hall and Moreau 1970). He edited the Proceedings of the XIV International Ornithological Congress (Oxford, 1966) and was editor of *Ibis* (1968–73), *The Status of Birds of Britain and Ireland*, and the *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club*. He was also key to the production of the *Concise Edition of the Birds of the Western Palearctic*; only someone with his immense knowledge, coupled with daunting powers of concentration, could have reduced the weighty detail of the nine original volumes to a highly readable two.

In 1973, David and Barbara were jointly awarded the Brewster Medal for outstanding work on Neotropical birds (full citation in *Auk* 90:171–189). He was the president of the British Ornithologists' Union (1987–1990) and was awarded its Godman-Salvin medal in 1982.

After retirement in 1984, David continued to publish on a variety of subjects. He and Barbara were the first to use color-banded birds to unravel some of the odd mating arrangements of the Dun-nock, a system later studied in greater detail by others. But birds and fruits remained a primary interest, and he and Barbara published *Birds and Berries* in 1988. His autobiography, *Birds in Our Life*, appeared just before his death. He wrote that “Barbara and I

have felt that we were fortunate to have done our research in the four decades 1948–88. It was a period when...using simple [equipment]...one could add significantly to knowledge of...birds.”

Material incorporated in this memorial was supplied by Christopher Perrins, Oxford University. *The Auk* is grateful for his cooperation and generosity. A longer obituary, written by Perrins, appeared in *Ibis* 151:611–613.