

## CLUB ANNOUNCEMENTS

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# Bulletin of the BRITISH ORNITHOLOGISTS' CLUB

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The BOC's 2022 Annual Report and Accounts were published on 6 October 2023: the document is available to read or download at the following link: <https://boc-online.org/wp-content/uploads/BOC.AnnualReportandAccounts.2022.pdf>.

The 1008th meeting of the Club was held on Monday 22 May 2023 in the upstairs room at the Barley Mow, 104 Horseferry Road, London, SW1P 2EE.

Thirteen people were present: Mr P. J. Belman, Mr K. Betton, Mr S. Chapman, Dr C. Fisher, Mr M. Howard, Mr A. Jackson, Dr R. Prŷs-Jones, Dr D. G. D. Russell, Dr R. Sales (*Speaker*), Mr S. A. H. Statham, Mr C. W. R. Storey (*Chairman*), Mr S. Watson (*Speaker*) and Mr D. Whitelegg. The meeting was recorded and a video of the event is available online at <https://youtu.be/KU7MPekp41c> and also via the Club website <https://boc-online.org>.

Dr Richard Sales, renowned for his wide-ranging research and publications on raptors, notably British falcons, and Steve Watson, who has been conducting a decades-long field study on the Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* in Gloucestershire, jointly presented a very well-illustrated talk entitled *The Peregrine Falcon*, based on their groundbreaking recent book of the same name. Richard's area of special research interest, namely the interaction between anatomy and behaviour underlying the Peregrine's flight characteristics and prey capture, synergistically complemented the broader focus by Steve on ecology and population characteristics, resulting in a particularly comprehensive overview. Broader discussion of the wide range and complex taxonomy (approaching 20 subspecies according to most authorities) of the species was not neglected, and the authors' detailed research included fascinating novel nuggets of information, including that the Peregrine's visual acuity is likely to be even greater than generally understood.

The 1009th meeting of the Club was held in conjunction with the Linnean Society of London at Burlington House, Piccadilly, London W1J 0BF, on Monday 6 November 2023 when Dr Will Smith spoke on *Rock Doves and the process of 'extinction by hybridisation'*. A detailed account of this meeting will be included in the March 2024 issue of the Bulletin.

## OBITUARIES

### Mary Nelson Muller (1925–2023)

The bird world has lost a staunch supporter with the death in Bath, aged 98, of Mary Muller. Mary was born in Bournemouth in 1925, the daughter of Everard Nelson Exton, a WWI war hero, who was descended from a cousin of Horatio Nelson, and Clara Farnell-Watson, a teacher. Mary went to secretarial college and during WWII worked for the Special Operations Executive, the nature of her work there being still sealed by the government. In 1945 she went out to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) as a volunteer but was diverted to India.

Mary married Lloyd's underwriter Charles Muller in 1950; he was noted for taking on the insurance of 'large objects' such as airplanes, boats and dams. Charles's work took him all over the world, especially to South America, and Mary often went with him, binoculars at hand. They trekked up mountains, voyaged along the Amazon, and visited many remote places such as Robinson Crusoe Island. Birdwatching was always a big part of their travels. Mary and Charles raised four children, living firstly in London (where Charles was a councillor for Kensington and Chelsea Borough and he and Mary served as mayor and mayoress in 1968–69), then for many years in the mill house at Painswick, and from 2004 in a maisonette just off the Royal Crescent in Bath.



Mary Muller (photographer unknown)

Mary spent as much time as possible doing charity work, using her secretarial skills in hospitals, schools and old peoples' homes, and with the organisation of the Poppy Appeals in Painswick, but birds were her priority.

Mary joined the British Ornithologists' Club in 1986, and became a stalwart of the organisation, attending many of the meetings (both domestic and foreign). She taught herself to use a computer when she was in her seventies so she could compile the annual index for the *Bulletin*\*. Her children helped her with changing fonts but were otherwise banned from disturbing her and rather dreaded the weeks each year she was incarcerated with her task. Two noisy parrots and a large collection of bird books, sculptures and pictures also testified to her passion for birds, and just before her death Mary was photographed avidly watching wildfowl and waders from the wheelchair-level window in her favourite hide at Slimbridge. She is survived by many friends, her four children, eight grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

Clemency Fisher

\* Prior to the advent of electronic 'tagging', such work was a true labour of love, and the present Hon. Editor and my predecessors, the late Dr David Snow and Prof. Chris Feare, are truly grateful for Mary's indomitable and always timely efforts.—THE HON. EDITOR.

### Robin Restall (1937–2023)

There can be few visitors to the Neotropics unacquainted with the artwork of Robin Restall, especially through his illustrations prepared for his *magnum opus*, *Birds of northern South America* (BNSA), which spawned a series of national field guides covering Trinidad & Tobago; Aruba, Curaçao and Bonaire; Ecuador; and Venezuela.

It is less well known that Robin's 'day job' was as an advertising executive at J. Walter Thompson, where he enjoyed a highly successful professional career spanning 35 years, during which he rose to become a vice-president and member of the board. Throughout that time, and wherever he lived, Robin kept local birds in cages and aviaries, studying and writing about them. From 1960 he was a regular and well-known contributor to *Cage and Aviary Birds* and *Avicultural Magazine*. With his enthusiasm, energy and formidable autodidactic capacity, he wrote and illustrated his first book, covering four families and 350 species, *Finches and other seed-eating birds*, published by Faber & Faber in 1975. The illustrations, mostly line drawings, showcase his considerable artistic talent and his already recognisable style.

Robin was in many ways a quintessential Victorian naturalist. Birds were his vocation; he never received a professional salary, nor was he academically trained, and, although he did not collect, during his later years he dealt largely with skins, only occasionally venturing into the field, mainly on collecting expeditions. His principal contact with live birds was via his aviaries, where he kept and studied the small finch-like species beloved of aviculturists but often ignored by ornithologists, latterly *Sporophila* and *munias* and their allies.

Between 1989 and 1995 Robin lived in Hong Kong with his Venezuelan wife Mariela, where he ran J. Walter Thompson's Asia-Pacific office, and travelled throughout the region. He put this opportunity to study estrildids in their home range to good use, which led to the monograph *Munias and mannikins* and his first international recognition. Once the book was completed, Robin took the decision to leave his job, return to Venezuela and dedicate the rest of his life to painting and studying South American birds. Shortly after his arrival, Kathy Phelps, widow of Billy Phelps, offered him the title of Research Associate at the Phelps Ornithological Collection (COP), an honour subsequently conferred by John P. Phelps Tovar. After a day in the library and museum, Robin would retire to his house in one of the leafier parts of Caracas to document his menagerie of birds. Rigorous observations found expression in articles on Venezuelan species like: Is the Ring-necked Seedeater (*Sporophila insularis*) from Trinidad extinct, or is it a cryptic species widespread in Venezuela? (*Dept. Life Sci., Univ. West Indies, Trinidad Occ. Pap.* 11: 37–44) and (with ML) A new species of *Amaurospiza* blue seedeater from Venezuela (*Auk* 120: 600–606). But his curiosity quickly began to generate more questions than answers.

Robin quickly realised that, notwithstanding decades of published efforts by the Phelps family to document the country's avifauna (making Venezuela one of the best-studied countries in South America), there was still much to learn even about the identity of its birds, let alone their biology. One of the conundrums that Robin and ML faced in the process of identifying specimens that entered the collection was the marked inconsistency between the plumages represented in existing guides and the textual descriptions; this was exacerbated by the lack of depictions of juveniles and immatures. Robin soon began to feel the need to channel the results of his own investigations into producing a permanent catalogue and guide that others might use. Robin's friend, the publisher Christopher Helm, was immediately enthused by the idea, giving rise to his collaboration with ML and Clemencia Rodner on BNSA.

Over a period of ten years Robin invested thousands of hours in this project, which aimed to depict every distinct plumage of every bird in the region—painting more than 7,000 illustrations of in excess of 2,300 species. He was to be seen working up to 13 hours per day, six or seven days a week ensconced in his corner

of COP, poring over a group of skins and surrounded by paints, typically to a jazz CD accompaniment. Apart from the vast amount of work undertaken at COP, the team covered their own costs travelling to collections in New York, Washington, Boston and Louisiana.

The aim of BNSA was to produce a reference manual of the region's birds, in which Robin aimed to complete his goal to compile an illustrated catalogue of plumages. His work presented visually the immense diversity of plumages that a species can show both geographically and by age and sex, resulting in, for example, 18 figures for Bananaquit *Coereba flaveola* and 20 for Yellow Warbler *Setophaga petechia*! The plumages of some species remain poorly understood, like the diversity found in Bright-rumped—or Polymorphic—Attila *Attila spadiceus*, which Robin nonetheless faithfully painted. He was at pains to clarify that the plates were not intended to be used as a field guide, but as a supplement to the books specifically designed as field guides. In fact, Robin took great care to have his paintings show as much of the bird's plumage as possible, as one might expect to be able to appreciate in a museum—and this was typically at the expense of realistic natural poses, something for which he has sometimes been unjustly criticised. Robin worked like a draughtsman, ensuring that each species was depicted at the correct relative size within each family on a plate; and as all of his paintings were made primarily from skins, any plumage detail featured on the finished plate almost always corresponds to a character visible at close range or in the hand. Not until he was entirely happy with an illustration would he paint the sliver of highlight onto the eye, indicating that it was finished.

Apart from his more 'serious' art, Robin was always happy to put brush to paper to help a good cause, and he made countless paintings for book covers, calendars and papers, at the request of others or merely for pleasure. These sketches arguably showed him at his artistic best, allowing him much more freedom to express his flare for composition, for capturing the ineffable character ('jizz') of birds and—doubtless incorporating his advertising experience—for marrying text and illustration into an educational product. Besides birds and jazz, Robin took a keen interest in philately, publishing numerous scholarly articles on stamps in specialist journals.

Reluctantly, Robin moved with Mariela to Cambridgeshire, UK, in 2011 where they lived until his death. It is perhaps telling that he did not change his professional address, presumably (like so many Venezuelans) anticipating an eventual return to his tropical adoptive home.

Miguel Lentino & Christopher J. Sharpe



Robin Restall working in the American Museum of Natural History, New York, during preparations for the *Birds of northern South America* (Miguel Lentino)

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## REFEREES

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The BOC has since 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:

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## The Bulletin and other BOC publications

Since volume 137 (2017), the *Bulletin* of the BOC has been 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 five to six months. Prospective authors are invited to contact the *Bulletin* editor, Guy Kirwan ([GMKirwan@aol.com](mailto:GMKirwan@aol.com)), to discuss future submissions or look at <http://boc-online.org/bulletin/bulletin-contributions>. Back numbers up to volume 136 (2016) are available via the Biodiversity Heritage Library website: [www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/46639#/summary](http://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/46639#/summary); vols. 132–136 are also available on the BOC website: <http://boc-online.org/>

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