

Major John F. R. Colebrook-Robjent
1935 - 2008

Africa's foremost oologist, John Robjent, died on Monday 17th November 2008 in Lusaka, Zambia, having been ill for some time. John's contribution to our knowledge of Zambian birds' eggs and breeding habits was unparalleled.

John was born in April 1935 and during the war years lived in London where, as a small boy, he began collecting eggs in Hyde Park. At Tabley House School in Cheshire, John's passion for birds was cemented by his headmaster, John Leicester-Warren, who encouraged boys to take advantage of the school's 4000 acre estate and pursue all avenues of natural history. Each year there was a nature notebook competition which John won time and again. This habit of writing meticulous notes remained with him throughout his life.

He became Head Boy at Tabley and after leaving school worked first as a ghillie in Scotland and then taught for a short period before joining the army. He was commissioned in 1959 into the First Battalion of the Royal Ulster Rifles and soon embarked on a tour of duty in Cyprus. It is said that whilst driving his car in Cyprus once, he saw a rare bird and was so mesmerised that he demolished a house in his path.

John then spent time in Borneo and also Uganda where he was seconded to the King's African Rifles when Idi Amin was the regimental sergeant major. He is said to have started a mutiny which resulted with him and his officers being locked up in the regimental officers' mess whilst their wives were sent back to the UK. Once released, John was given the task of collecting specimens for the Kampala Museum.

John arrived in Zambia in September 1966, seconded to the Zambian Army, based in Kabwe. After a couple of years he resigned his commission and moved into tobacco farming in Choma where he remained for the rest of his life. He studied the birds in this area intensively and recorded his findings in great detail.

When discussing John with those who hadn't met him, it has always been frustrating, yet inevitable that one would quickly find oneself defending his character. In an age when collecting eggs is such a taboo, people often find it difficult to accept the enormous scientific value of oology. The condemnation of egg-collecting is perhaps a luxury of those who come from countries already possessing large museum collections. What John has done for Zambia is help establish baseline data on which so much future work will depend. Furthermore, his approach was always meticulous, rigorous and scientific.

Stepping into his house was like walking into a museum. John had a fine library and an extensive skin collection, but the eggs were his main focus. Listening to him talk about his latest findings, one became entranced by his boundless enthusiasm, particularly if it related to brood parasitism. His investigations into the breeding habits of cuckoos *Cuculidae*, honeyguides *Indicatoridae* and parasitic finches *Viduidae* were staggering and this work is being continued by Claire Spottiswoode at Cambridge University. John also had a love of raptors and did some pioneering work on nightjars.

John made regular field trips to other parts of Zambia with a small team of assistants whom he had trained. Lazaro Hamusikili in particular began working with John from the age of 10 and his now a highly skilled skinner, climber and nest-finder. Such expeditions invariably resulted in exciting discoveries and John was the first to describe the nests and eggs of many species.

He collaborated with a number of other ornithologists, most notably the late Charles Sibley, to whom he regularly sent specimens and samples, and for whom he had tremendous respect. It was Sibley who arranged for John to go on a seven week collecting trip to Madagascar with Jali Makawa (Con Benson's collector).

John was full of surprising contradictions. His passion for scientific collection and his ledgers filled with hand-written notes seemed to be from a bygone age. He had a vivid sense of duty, history and tradition and was fascinated by genealogy. At the same time, he was quick to embrace new ideas such as genetic taxonomy and would always have a eye on current trends. He devoured the Harry Potter books with child-like glee and in fact the late Dylan Aspinwall once described him, rather fittingly, as being like 'some sort of wizard.'

John could come across as bombastic, arrogant and slightly wild-eyed, but by those who knew him well he will be remembered as a charming, self-deprecating, passionate and hugely entertaining gentleman. His collection will be going to the British Museum.

Pete Leonard