Obituary

Martin Woodcock (1935–2019)

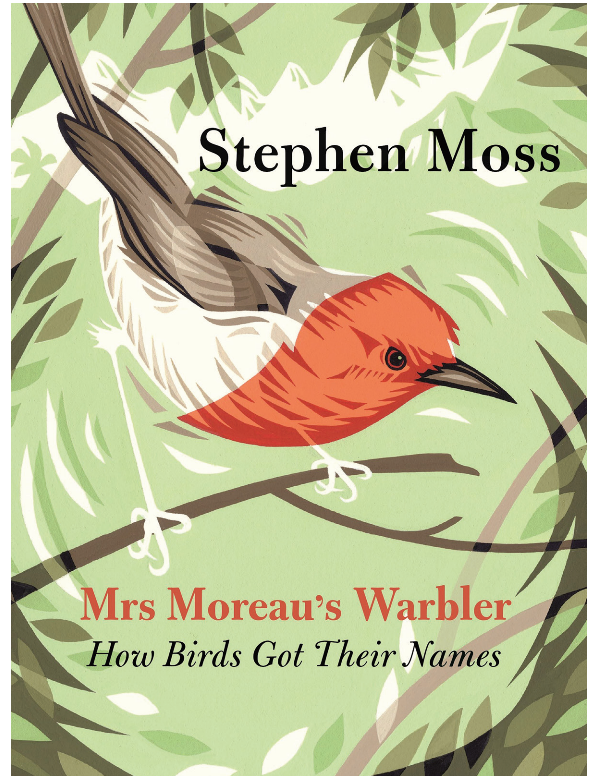
I met Martin in 1965 at a meeting of the British Ornithologists' Club. Earlier that week, on home leave after a three-year stay in Thailand, I had just signed a publishing contract with William Collins for a *Field Guide to the Birds of South-east Asia*. Martin was working as a stockbroker but he was keen to show me that he could produce the illustrations for this field guide. He invited me to visit his home and see his work and he kindly agreed to work not on a fee basis but for a share of the royalties! Given that Collins had suggested sales would probably not top 3,000 copies this was a most generous agreement on his part. In the end the field guide sold over 50,000 copies and I believe Martin was fairly rewarded. To gain experience of Asian birds Martin came to stay with me in Bangkok and we took him to Chiengmai and Doi Suthep for a serious plunge into Asian birds and he went on to stay with friends in Kuala Lumpur to gain further field experience. Eventually Ben King joined the team and took over the leading role but his conflicts with Collins over massive changes to the text that he had originally submitted delayed the book for several years and publication was not till 1975. Ben later operated Kingbird Tours which were all to Asia and introduced Asian birds to several hundred keen birdwatchers and began to transform Asia into the hugely popular destination for European and American bird-watchers that it is to-day.

Before I met him, Martin at age 26 had been to Uganda to visit his sister and had begun his long love affair with African birds. After leaving London and stockbroking he moved to Staplehusrt in Kent with Barbara his second wife and later they moved to Wiveton near Cley on the north Norfolk coast where many other well-known ornithologists have lived and enjoyed the abundant and varied wildlife.

Martin's most important body of bird illustrations is undoubtedly from the seven-volume *Birds of Africa* (1982–2004) initiated by the Academic Press, for which he painted over 200 large plates, each covering an average 20 to 25 species. This involved him in multiple field trips in Africa where, on later trips, he particularly enjoyed Ethiopia. Alongside that he produced numerous single species paintings that demonstrated he was an exceptional artist as well as a very effective and accurate illustrator. But Martin also published a pocket guide to Indian birds in 1980 and, with Michael Gallagher, created the first definitive work on the birds of Oman in 1981. In 2010 Martin self-published his delightful *Safari sketchbook: A bird painter's African odyssey*. Martin was an active member of the British Ornithologists' Club, the African Bird Club, and the Oriental Bird Club. He is survived by his second wife Barbara, and by children, and grandchildren from his first marriage.

— Edward C. Dickinson

Book Review



Mrs Moreau's Warbler: How Birds Got Their Names

by Stephen Moss; May 2018,
Guardian Faber; pp x + 357 (hardbound); Price: Rs 1,199/-.

The renowned British natural history writer and television producer, Stephen Moss, takes readers through, what can most succinctly be described as, a history of humanity's interactions with avifauna. The intriguing title of the book itself deserves note, but we'll come to that a little later. Right from the days of onomatopoeic names, names based on colour and other prominent physical features, to the colonial-era race for eponymous names, to the current debates on fairer, more modern and international naming conventions, Moss leads readers through a great sweep of time and straddles the history of science, natural history, and even linguistics. While this is the broad scope of the book, there are absorbing asides that will interest not only the ornithologist or the seasoned birder, but also the uninitiated.

For instance, Moss narrates how James Bond, the world famous spy, had ornithological origins. Ian Fleming, whilst working to meet a fast-approaching deadline for *Casino Royale*, noticed the name of the author of the *Birds of West Indies* on his shelf, and was taken in by it. The author was renowned American ornithologist, James Bond! Though probably well known to many birders in India, Moss tells us about Alan Octavian Hume, the British civil servant who played a key role in the formation of the Indian National Congress, and was an accomplished ornithologist

(and naturalist) with a legendary collection of specimens. Hume, Moss tells us, could not finish his magnum opus on the birds of India, a great loss to ornithology. After spending the winter of 1884 away from his home in Shimla, he "returned to discover—to his unimaginable horror—that all his research papers, weighing several hundredweight and containing more than twenty-five years of detailed notes and information, had been taken down to the local bazar by his servants to be sold as waste paper" (pp. 218–219). Besides such asides, the main threads of narrative are what make the book important reading for the more serious birder and even for the ornithologist.

The book is organised into seven chapters, preceded by an introduction, and prologue, and followed by an epilogue. The cover illustration is of Mrs Moreau's Warbler, the central figure of the book (with not too much screen time, however). This warbler was named by Reginald Ernest Moreau after his wife and fellow ornithologist Winifred Moreau. Moss tells us that Winifred actually contributed a great deal to ornithology, and "in a less chauvinistic era" would probably have been given due credit for her contributions. This exquisite and rare bird, found in Eastern Tanzania in the Uluguru Mountains, does make a cameo appearance in the epilogue when Moss (and friends) travels to catch a glimpse of this wondrous bird. An engaging appendix to the volume has lists of odd, noteworthy, and outright bizarre bird names put together by Moss, with a little help from his friends.

Colonialism's influence

The bulk of scientific study (modern classification and naming conventions) of avifauna developed alongside the colonial project. Though significant texts appeared in eighteenth century Britain, the widespread and large-scale international specimen collection, a part of the "race" to find undiscovered species, picked up pace in the nineteenth century. While Moss's engagement is certainly international, it is one that is centred on Britain and its former colonies. After all, most bird specimens would eventually find their way to Britain. For the Indian reader, there is nothing here about the pre-colonial engagement with avifauna in India (of Mughal records of avifauna, or indigenous names of birds). The author concerns himself primarily with English-language bird naming conventions, and engages sparsely, if at all with other languages, except when he is discussing the origins of bird names which were derived from mainland European languages. Moss notes that today English is the lingua franca for birding globally. The naming of birds and their scientific classification was undeniably part of the British colonial project of studying the natural world. It is no surprise then that almost all birds were discovered and identified during the colonial era. What changed subsequently was the classification of birds, which led to large increases in species of birds, since already known birds were split into subspecies or classified as new species.

Bird names today

Moss's discussions of the contemporary debates in the birding and ornithological community are informative and give much needed perspective. All birders will notice that certain bird names have been changed, or certain species are split into newer species. There are a few reasons for this. There is a push towards renaming birds in a way that is simple, logical, and easy to use for birders worldwide. Bird names have been, like much of the English language, guided by popular usage more than by top-down imposition. This has meant that some names are politically incorrect bird names, unhelpful bird names (that mislead), and others that are no longer appropriate (named after a place birds have nothing to do with anymore). Many names of birds are Britain/United Kingdom centric, even though these species occur elsewhere. So many birds are given names that begin with "common", while they are not common wherever else they occur. There is an argument to change such names to make them more accurate internationally, and some have indeed been rechristened "Eurasian" for instance, given their range. North American bird names, however, continue to be different for some species from the British ones, and this difference has so far been largely irreconcilable, and both are used depending on where one is birding.

The other change is about the way birds are grouped into families and how species are related to each other. Using DNA techniques, Charles Sibley argued that it is possible to find genetic similarities between distinct species which helps understand their evolutionary changes (phylogenesis). This does help find more accurate relations between groups of species and some findings have found wider acceptance, but it also leads to unacceptable groupings such as putting flightless penguins and albatrosses into the same "super family" (p 293).

The third change, which is the main cause for the splitting of species we see happening more often today, is to do with debates about what constitutes a species. Even as there are perhaps very few undiscovered species left to find in the world, those that we already know of need to be organised scientifically, and there is a lot of debate about this. For instance, the ubiquitous Purple Swamphen was split into six species in 2015. The one in South and South-east Asia is now called the Grey-headed Swamphen. Similarly, as species are split each year, some are lumped together as well, leading to newer (or fewer) names and classifications.

Names as history

For Moss, with every change in the name of a bird, a part of its history is forgotten. In a way, Winifred Moreau would be forgotten if it was not for the warbler's eponymous name. There are those names that have eventually become utterly inappropriate, like the Kentish Plover, which has little to do with Kent in England (the habitat it did occur in when it was named by John Latham in the eighteenth century). Yet all names have a history that tells us a little bit about humanity's interactions with avifauna, and are in that way invaluable.

Naming and classification, however, remain hotly debated, and emotions run high when new proposals for change are discussed. While homogeneity in naming conventions probably makes it easier for birders who move around the world, or to help compare notes across continents, folk or indigenous names too have their own significance. While there is a need to fulfil the many social, political, and scientific needs of bird naming, Moss is of the view that perhaps there is no need to be overzealous about changing the names of birds. Why favour international names over local names, just to achieve homogeneity? Why not let all exist, while knowing how to compare them? Bird names are, after all, a part of human culture and history, and represent our collective relationship with the natural world.

– Abhishek Shaw
E-mail: abhishekshaw@gmail.com