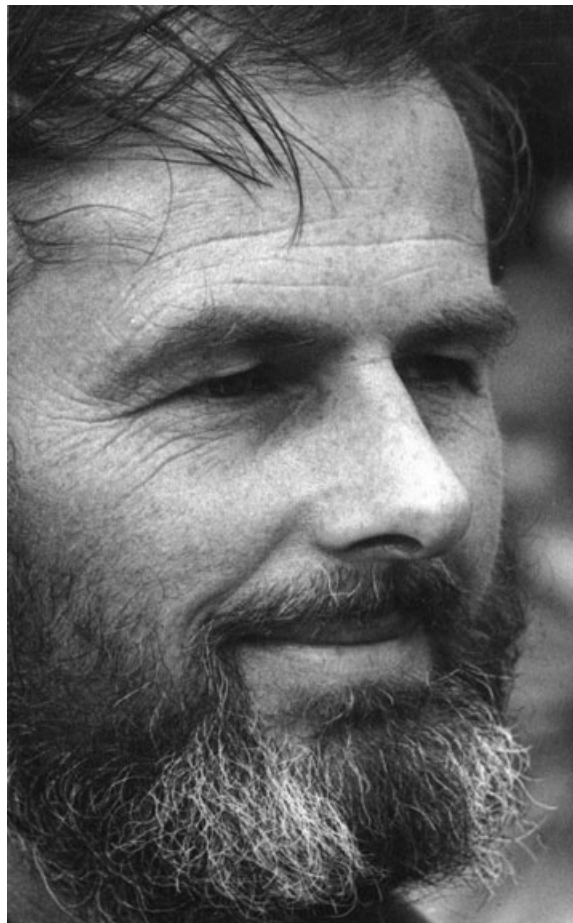


Obituary



David William Snow, 1924–2009

David Snow was born in 1924, one of four children. His family emigrated to Australia, but returned to the UK after only a few years. He gained a scholarship to Eton by which time he was already very interested in birds, regularly visiting Slough sewage farm. After leaving Eton he joined the Navy, serving on anti-submarine vessels in the Atlantic. Immediately after the hostilities in Europe ceased, and still with the Navy, he travelled through the Mediterranean to India, south-east Asia and Australia. He took every opportunity to go ashore bird-watching

and somehow managed to keep a bicycle aboard, which enabled him to travel farther on his bird-watching trips.

On leaving the Navy, David went up to Oxford; he was then 22. In this immediate post-war period there were unusually large numbers of students as many ex-servicemen, like David, were admitted at the same time as the normal student intake. At this point David realized that he did not want to pursue his original plan to take a degree in classics, and his enthusiasm for birds influenced his switch to zoology.

While an undergraduate he went on several expeditions (including one to Sao Tomé and Príncipe), the choice being often influenced by Reg Moreau, who was then at the Edward Grey Institute of Field Ornithology. At the same time he became involved with helping EGI students who were doing research for their doctorates in Wytham Woods. It was almost inevitable that, on graduating, he should go on to complete (in 1953) a D. Phil in the EGI, supervised by David Lack, on the systematics and ecology of the birds of the genus *Parus*. Never one to take the easy route, one of his field trips was a month in northern Lapland in mid-winter. There he studied how Siberian and Willow Tits *Parus cinctus* and *Parus montanus* coped with short days and temperatures down to -37°C . Another trip involved visiting forests in the Atlas Mountains, collecting specimens of all the sub-species of *Parus* there; this entailed covering some 2300 miles on an elderly motor cycle, carrying a highly visible shot-gun on the luggage rack. Not long after this, such trips, with or without a shot-gun, became impossible.

After finishing his thesis, David joined the EGI staff as a Research Officer, becoming a Senior Research Officer in 1955. He looked for another species to study and started with Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*. However, for this he needed access to several very large gardens in Oxford (sadly, there are no longer any flycatchers in Oxford gardens). Although this was readily obtained, whenever he settled down to watch the birds, the occupants were wont to come out with biscuits and coffee and chat while he was trying to watch; David was much too polite to shoo them away. He abandoned the flycatchers and studied the Common Blackbirds *Turdus merula* in the Botanic Garden, for which he had a key, enabling him to make his observations in private before the gardens opened and after they closed. This study resulted in his first book (*A Study of Blackbirds* 1958). He said of this: '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 remains 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 – leaving the reader with a clear picture of the bird and its life-style.

After Oxford, David moved to the New York Zoological Society's Field Station – newly set up by William Beebe – in the Arima Valley, Trinidad. He was shortly followed by his fiancée, Barbara (née Whitaker, they were married in Trinidad), herself an ornithologist (see obituary in *Ibis* 150: 662–663). Much of their subsequent work was done jointly. In Trinidad David became interested in a topic which was to run through much of his future research – the inter-relations between fruit-eating birds and the fruit-bearing trees.

He made a number of studies of frugivorous birds, including the Oilbird *Steatornis caripensis*, a mysterious nocturnal fruit-eating relative of the nightjars, and the Golden-headed *Pipra erythrocephala* and Black-and-White Manakins (now called the White-bearded Manakin) *Manacus manacus*, the latter being perhaps the first detailed population study of a tropical species and still one of the most comprehensive. He also became deeply interested in another group of frugivores, the cotingids.

From there, the Snows returned to Oxford for a year before David accepted the Directorship of the nascent Charles Darwin Research Station in the Galapagos. He was the only scientific staff member when he joined and there was little administration. He investigated breeding seasons of tropical seabirds in general and in particular the biology of the Swallow-tailed Gull *Creagrus furcata*, the only nocturnal-feeding gull in the world.

After returning to Britain David had spells as Research Director of the British Trust for Ornithology (1964–68) and as Director of the Bird Collections of the British Museum (Natural History), both in Tring at that time. It is probably fair to say that neither of these posts was ideally suited to David's primary talents, which always lay with detailed and highly skilled field studies. He was not a Committee man and wrote '[I] said rather little, in contrast to those who liked being there and said a great deal – some of them very much to the point, others much less so'. At the BTO he worked on a number of subjects, including Common Kestrels *Falco tinnunculus*, and moult. He also analysed the spread of Foot and Mouth Disease in one of the outbreaks, showing that it did not fit with the movements of birds, as had been generally supposed. He developed projects testing 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 and the large, co-operative surveys, which are a strength of the BTO, were not really his forte.

At the Museum David enjoyed prolonged field trips, an opportunity no longer afforded to Directors. These trips enabled him to make many expeditions to different parts of South America where he and Barbara expanded their studies of manakins and cotingids, based as always on long hours of detailed observation. Just prior to one expedition to British Guiana (now Guyana), Barbara broke her ankle. Many couples would have aborted the trip, but not these two. Although Barbara clearly had an unpleasant trip out there, she also had to do her observations encumbered with a heavy plaster cast. David removed this at the due time with his penknife and commented later that they had probably made rather more successful observations with Barbara largely immobile than they would have had she been able to be more active.

Amongst the outcomes of these visits were two books, *The Web of Adaptation* (1976) and *The Cotingas* (1982). Although *The Web* is now 30 years old, it remains in my view an outstanding introduction to tropical ecology.

In addition to his own original work, he was an excellent editor. At the Museum, he edited the *The Atlas of Speciation in African Non-Passerine Birds* (1978), based on the distributions of birds in the collection and a sister volume to *The Atlas of Speciation in African Passerine Birds* (Hall & Moreau, 1970). He edited the *Proceedings of the XIVth International Ornithological Congress* (Oxford, 1966), was Editor of the British Ornithologists' Union's journal *Ibis* (1968–73), their *The Status of Birds of Britain and Ireland* (1971), and the *British Ornithologists' Club Bulletin* (1991–98). He was also key to the production of the *Concise Edition of the Birds of the Western Palearctic* (1998); only someone with his immense knowledge and daunting powers of concentration could have reduced the weighty detail of the nine original volumes to a highly readable two.

After retirement in 1984, David continued to publish on a variety of subjects. He and Barbara were the first to use colour-ringed birds to unravel some of the odd mating arrangements of the Dunnock *Prunella modularis*, a subject later studied in greater detail by others. But, again, birds and fruits were high on the list, with a book (*Birds and Berries* 1988) jointly with Barbara; again in my view this should be required reading.

He was the Union's President 1987–91 and the recipient of the Godman-Salvin medal in 1982. He was a member of the American Ornithologists' Union from 1958, being elected a Corresponding Fellow in 1969, and an Honorary Fellow in 1979. In 1973 David and Barbara were jointly awarded the A.O.U.'s Brewster Medal for outstanding work on Neotropical birds (full citation in *Auk* 90: 171–189). But perhaps he would have been most pleased that an ant-wren, *Myrmotherula snowi*, and a cotinga genus, *Snowornis*, were named after him.

He wrote an autobiography (*Birds in Our Life*, William Sessions, York, 2008), which was published just before his death. In this he says: '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'.

He certainly did that.

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