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Obituary

Barbara Snow, 1921–2007

Barbara Snow, née Whitaker, was born on 21 February 1921 in Evershot, Dorset, the eighth and youngest of the family of a country doctor. From her earliest years, roving with her brothers and sisters in the Dorset countryside, she began to develop the deep interest in birds and plants that lasted throughout her life. Her father's death when she was 8 years old left her mother in financial straits, which her family helped to alleviate by the seasonal collecting of all the edible products of the surrounding countryside, including rabbits caught by their dogs, mushrooms, fruits, and trout which Barbara learnt to tickle from the River Toller that flowed past the garden of the bungalow at Maiden Newton to which they moved after having to leave the large house at Evershot. Here she became familiar with the local birds, regularly finding the riverside nests of Kingfishers, Grey Wagtails and Dippers.

When she was 18 and had just left school the war started. She joined the ATS (the women's branch of the army), which she was in for 6 years, rising to the rank of Sergeant. Her various postings took her all over the country, from an anti-aircraft unit at Newcastle to an ack-ack practice camp on the north Cornish coast. When she was demobilized, the Higher School Certificate which she had gained at the end of her schooldays qualified her for a government grant for university. With her interest in plants she got a place at Reading University to read horticulture. After her first year, however, largely through the influence of Professor Hawkins, a noted palaeontologist, who kept his department open in the evenings and at weekends for students to meet and study specimens, she realized that she was more interested in geology than horticulture and was able to switch to geology for her remaining 2 years.

Shortly before going up to university, she had worked for a few months at a market garden in Dorset. She stayed in lodgings near by, and here occurred one of those chance events that alter the whole course of one's life. The couple with whom she was lodging took the *News Chronicle*, an excellent daily paper now long deceased, and in it she read an article about the Skokholm bird observatory. In spite of her great interest in birds, pursued in isolation in the Dorset countryside, she did not know that such things as bird observatories existed. She wrote to Skokholm, asking if there was any chance of her being able to help them there, and spent several weeks of the 1946 summer, and of her first long vacation from Reading in 1947, cooking for the visitors and helping with the field work. The warden in 1946 was Ronald Lockley, who had started the bird observatory in the 1930s, and he was followed in 1947 by Peter Conder, who after years in a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany was starting an ornithological career which was to end with his outstanding achievement as Director of a spectacularly expanding RSPB.

Having graduated with a BSc in geology, Barbara wanted to do something that involved field work, and got a job with the Coal Board, which at that time was surveying areas suitable for open-cast mining. She was posted to an office near Newcastle, and later to one in South Wales. Clearly she had maintained her contact with the bird observatory world; she had been over to the Farne Islands and had visited Eric Ennion's field centre near Seahouses, but how it was that she heard about the chance of becoming warden of the Lundy bird observatory, and successfully applied for it, I do not know. But she did, gladly giving up a reasonable salary for the £150 a year, with keep, that the Lundy Field Society could offer, and began to live on Lundy early in 1954.

In addition to the routine work of trapping and ringing migrants, and keeping a daily log of bird numbers, she became very interested in the breeding Shags and spent as much time as she could studying them at close quarters, colour-ringing many of them that she was able to catch at the nest, watching and photographing (with a heavy old quarter-plate camera) their courtship and other behaviour, and amassing quantitative data on their nesting activities.

She impressed the visitors who sometimes accompanied her by choosing to climb barefoot down the steep rocky slopes to the nests. All this resulted in the publication of two long papers, one in *Ibis* and the other in *British Birds*, and forms the bulk of the sections on 'Social pattern and behaviour' and 'Breeding' in *Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Years later, when we camped for 2 weeks on a beach in the Galapagos within a hundred yards of a small breeding colony of Flightless Cormorants, she made the first significant observations of their behaviour.

It was birds that brought us together. In December 1954 she visited the Natural History Museum at South Kensington, to check the identity of a Yellowthroat, the first British record, which she had trapped, examined and ringed, and which on being released had conveniently left one of its tail feathers in her hand. This confirmed its identification. Later we met twice at the annual post-Christmas student conferences which David Lack ran for many years at the Edward Grey Institute. In 1957 we became engaged, and planned that, after she had completed a final season's work on her Shags, we would be married in Trinidad, where I had for some time been working at the New York Zoological Society's tropical field station.

Living in a valley in Trinidad's Northern Range, surrounded by hillsides clothed in primary forest, Barbara began to concentrate on a few species. Chief among these was the Bearded Bellbird, one of the four bellbird species whose calls are the loudest of all birds but whose other activities are so difficult to watch that almost nothing was known about them. The nests of two of them were still unknown, and only one or two of the others' (including the Bearded) had been recorded. It was well known that the males gave their extraordinarily loud, hammer-like rather than bell-like calls from the tree tops. This was how they were always, and comparatively easily, seen, but it was not known that their courtship displays take place on special low perches well below the forest canopy. This was one of the first things that Barbara discovered, and her patience and persistence, sitting quietly a few yards away, resulted in their getting so used to her harmless presence that she was able to observe, many times, the whole sequence of strange displays leading finally to mating. The same patient watching, sitting on the ground, later enabled her, on one of our visits to Guyana, to watch for the first time the equally strange displays of another cotinga, the Calfbird.

Thanks to her persistence in watching the foraging of the very inconspicuous females she saw one collecting nest material and followed it to its nest, which was so inconspicuous that she would never have found it otherwise. Later she found three more; the clutch was a single egg, all that the nest could hold. She found that the food, for both adults and nestlings, consisted entirely of especially nutritious fruits. This enabled her to understand the factors that, in rich neotropical forests with many nest-predators, have led to the evolution of specialized frugivores where the males have developed striking plumages and elaborate courtship displays and the females build very small inconspicuous nests, in many cases only large enough to hold a single egg.

Her other main studies in Trinidad were on two of the hummingbirds, the Green Hermit, the males of which gather at traditional singing assemblies, and the Rufous-breasted Hermit, whose mainly streamside distribution has led to a completely different social organization in which the males are territorial and defend stretches of stream that include two or more females, whose nests border and often overhang the streams.

After Trinidad, and a year spent near Oxford writing up some of our Trinidad research, Barbara had a year in the Galapagos, where we were based at the recently established Charles Darwin Research Station. Here, though having also to care for a 2-year-old son, she was nevertheless able to make very interesting observations on the two endemic gulls, the very peculiar colonially nesting Swallow-tailed Gull, a nocturnal forager with a previously unknown breeding cycle of 9–10 months, and the Lava Gull, a solitary breeder with widely spaced territories along flat stretches of coast which make up a small proportion of the Galapagos coastlines, and consequently probably the least numerous of all the world's gulls. These very varied studies of the ecology and behaviour of neotropical birds earned her the award of the AOU's Brewster Medal in 1972.

Back in England, our field research became a joint activity. First was a 5-year study of a small Dunnock population, whose unusual social organization had never been examined in any detail. We found that males, either single birds or two together, one of which was dominant, held large territories which might include up to three much smaller female territories. Later, and partly stimulated by our paper, Nick Davies and his students at Cambridge carried our understanding of the Dunnock's unique breeding behaviour far beyond where we had taken it.

Our second joint enterprise was prompted by the interest in frugivorous birds that we had developed in Trinidad, a 5-year study of fruit-eating on our home ground in the Vale of Aylesbury and its immediate surroundings, resulting in *Birds and Berries*, of which Barbara was deservedly the senior author as she had done a good deal more of the field work than I had. Again, her remarkably acute observation, coupled with endless patience and, perhaps more importantly, delight in the birds around her, from Flightless Cormorants to hummingbirds, enabled her to discover much that could only be discovered by sitting and watching.

D.W. Snow

(Writing an obituary of a wife or husband is unusual; but I have been asked to do so because, after her years on Lundy, Barbara was associated with no other colleagues who could undertake it.)