



OBITUARY

Robert Spencer BA MSc (1923-1994)

Bob Spencer, who died on 21st September 1994 at the age of 71, was a national figure in the ornithological scene for 40 years. He joined the staff of the British Trust for Ornithology in 1954 as its first professional head of the Bird Ringing Scheme, following the retirement of Miss Elsie Leach, who for many years had occupied the role in a voluntary capacity.

During the next 30 years, Bob was to preside over the many developments which resulted in the bird-ringing technique becoming the major ornithological research tool which it is recognised to be today. He initiated many changes in the quality and durability of materials, and in trapping, handling, ageing and sexing techniques to maximise the value of information obtained, yet always preached—and taught—a proper concern for the welfare of the bird in the hand. Amongst the first to use imported Japanese mist-nets, he drew on his own experiences with them to draw up a code of conduct (under the aegis of the BTO's Bird Ringing Committee) for their use by British ringers; he dealt firmly with any instances of carelessness which came to his attention. When cannon-netting and rocket-netting techniques were devised, he insisted on there being operating rules (with the birds' welfare in mind) for those who wished to use them in conjunction with BTO rings—withdrawal of which was the ultimate sanction. He refined the system of bird-ringing licences and devised strict training standards, to ensure that ringers operated within their individual levels of experience and competence.

Bird rings were redesigned to make them safer, yet more durable. Always the well-being of the bird—in the hand and after release—was a primary consideration: Bob saw clearly that ringing was justified or worthwhile only when the results could provide reliable and unbiased data for analysis, which required unharmed and unhandicapped subjects. Ringers were taught and encouraged to maximise the opportunities when a bird was captured; detailing moult and measurements became a stepping stone to ageing and sexing, which were seen as essential in using ringing data for studies of population structure. Bob saw that ringers re-trapping their own birds in subsequent seasons were able to provide data of greater worth than the small percentage of 'exciting' distant recoveries. This led him to advocate in Britain the concept of the Constant Effort Site, to which he had been introduced in Germany, and which he developed during his own field-work around Tring. In time, this became an integral part of British ringing philosophy.

It is no exaggeration to say that, during Bob's reign over the BTO Ringing Office, the 'ringing scene' in Britain (and in Ireland, where he went out of his way to encourage growth) changed out of all recognition. These changes were reflected in quantity (a ten-fold increase in ringing totals), in methodology and documentation (which led inevitably to computerisation), in approach (planned population-oriented projects superseding random ringing), and in analytical scope (encouraging ringers to use their own data, as well as making the national database available to students and professionals). Though not himself a prolific contributor to the scientific literature (regretting his poor grounding in statistical methodology), Bob's concepts are nevertheless being put to good use by others,



Plate 87. Bob Spencer, Hertfordshire, August 1982 (*Alison Spencer*)

aided by this major reorganisation and upgrading of ringing as a scientific method.

Bob was born on 12th March 1923 into a Quaker family, and was brought up in Cheshire, where he attended King's School in Macclesfield. He was of the generation to be caught up in the Second World War, and spent four years (1942-46) in the Royal Navy, where he once had his ship torpedoed and sunk under him in the Mediterranean. On demobilisation, he entered Durham University, where he took a BA in general studies; later in life, he was to be awarded an Honorary MSc by his old university in recognition of his work in ornithology.

After graduation, he chose teaching for a career, took a Diploma in Education, and obtained a post in Chelmsford, Essex, where he specialised in English Language and Literature. It was there that I met him in 1951—as teacher and pupil. One of Bob's early steps was to found a school natural history society, and he soon had us parading the seawalls of Essex, teaching us how to identify the birds we saw. When he obtained his own BTO ringing permit at this time, his infectious enthusiasm had his pupils helping to a degree which would now be impossible owing to Bob's subsequent tightening of the licensing system. The Romford Ringing Station was founded in the early 1950s, and duly became widely known for its experiments with trapping methods and its adaptations of

bird-observatory techniques (such as moult-recording and the collection of ectoparasites) to an inland trapping station. By now, ornithology had become more attractive to Bob than teaching; and soon afterwards (in 1954) he applied successfully for the newly created BTO post of Ringing Officer. Five years later, I was to join him as his assistant.

With his teaching background, lecturing came naturally to him. As an informed and confident speaker, he was much in demand, and to a large extent became the public face of the BTO. For some years, he was a regular contributor to BBC radio natural history programmes; and for more years than he cared to remember he ran ornithological evening classes at Morley College, which brought numerous amateur birders into the BTO's fold. Bob understood well that the BTO was indeed the sum of its members, and did all that he could to encourage their participation in projects and meetings. Himself a regular participant in the Trust's two (sometimes three) annual conferences at Swanwick, his approachability, friendliness and genuine interest in what others were doing, and his readiness to offer advice and encouragement, made him a popular figure.

There was also an international aspect to Bob's thinking. He was a regular attendee of international ornithological congresses, participated in major expeditions to Spain, Bulgaria, Jordan and Morocco, and lost no opportunity to establish long-term contacts with ringing and migration workers in other countries—visiting them whenever he could. Thus it was that Bob had a considerable role in the founding (in 1963) of the European Committee for Bird Ringing (EURING), which led to the establishment of a centralised databank of European ringing recoveries, housed in the Netherlands. Now that we are all so used to the idea of European co-operation, it is hard to visualise the problems which were presented in the early years and which it needed great tact and patient persuasion to overcome.

These last attributes Bob possessed in large measure. When he retired in 1983, by then being the Trust's Director of Services, he returned to his beloved Cumbria, but not to inactivity: he was pressed into taking over the secretaryship of the Rare Breeding Birds Panel, whose annual reports he compiled for 1983-93. Though the Panel had then been in existence for nigh on a dozen years, it was still held in suspicion by a few fieldworkers and recorders who feared that centralised collection and summary publication of sensitive information might lead to security breaches. This had not ever happened, but fears persisted in some quarters. With his reputation for tact and integrity, Bob was able to persuade most such doubters to co-operate with the RBBP, the reputation of which was enhanced by his stewardship. He was elected as an Honorary Subscriber to *British Birds* in 1992 (*Brit. Birds* 85: 504).

Only Bob's close friends were aware of the true nature of his protracted last illness, but a much wider circle had reason to mourn his passing.

Bob Hudson

Contributions to The Robert Spencer Memorial Fund, to provide help for amateur ringers, may be sent to Alison McLeod, BTO, The National Centre for Ornithology, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk IP24 2PU.