

Obituaries

Janet Kear (1933-2004)

Following the devastating diagnosis in September 2004 that she had a brain tumour, Janet Kear, in her typical matter-of-fact fashion, went home to order her affairs in her beloved Devon country cottage by the River Mole on the King's Nympton estate. That done, she accepted devoted care in South Molton Community Hospital from early November, until she passed away peacefully on 24th. With her passing, we lost a warm friend, an outstanding scientist, a conservationist of enormous standing and an unrivalled authority on global wildfowl.

For a waterfowl fanatic, it was impossible to sit in Janet Kear's picture window at Martin Mere and gaze out over the multitude of water-birds without feeling close to heaven. Spectacular view or not, it was equally impossible to be in Janet's house and not to feel completely and utterly at home. Enthusiastic and kind, a great listener, with a keen wit and a dancing, captivating conversation punctuated with girlish laughter, Janet was warm and welcoming with her hospitality. She was also great fun, and it

was hard not to fall under her spell. And as if all this was not enough, she made the most wonderful gravy and mixed a mean gin and tonic for her guests!

Whilst Janet will, of course, be remembered for her sharp intellect, vast breadth of knowledge and her incredible achievements, it was her passion, warmth and humility that moved and inspired so many from various different walks of life. Janet was truly for birds and for people. It was no coincidence that she was just as able to melt hard-nosed businessmen into contributing funds to develop her beloved Martin Mere Centre as she was to lend a hand 'scribing' and mucking in with a team of muddy ringers cannon-netting Pink-footed Geese *Anser brachyrhynchus* on the Mere. Her warm and generous spirit was selfless in encouraging and supporting others, especially the underdog. It is no surprise to find that many leading characters in nature conservation enjoyed a formative association with Janet at some stage in their career.

Janet started her distinguished academic career with a PhD on finch feeding behaviour, under R. A. Hinde at Cambridge. When Peter Scott offered her a position at the then Wildfowl Trust at Slimbridge in 1959, he launched a glorious association with the Trust that was to last the remainder of her days. Initially, she distinguished herself in many fields of waterfowl research, being amongst the first to study behaviour, cognition, development and disease, and even undertook pioneering work on agricultural conflict, working with her first husband, Geoffrey Matthews. She became deeply interested in captive-animal health issues and was a pioneer in the improvement of avicultural techniques and tackling problems of disease, typically putting the welfare of the birds first. When offered the position of Curator of the Martin Mere Centre in Lancashire, Janet made the remarkable transition from Principal Scientific Officer to



Photographer: unknown

III. Janet Kear, with her husband John Turner, outside Buckingham Palace, after receiving her OBE in 1993.

successful manager of one of northwest England's foremost wetland spectacles and tourist attractions. Here, she was to meet her much-loved second husband, John Turner, and forged a lifelong and deeply happy partnership, which was to inspire many with their hard work, friendship and kindness. Later, Janet was to become Assistant Director of the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, and its Director of Centres before formally retiring from the Trust in 1993. Latterly, she had served as Trustee and Council member of the WWT. She would, undoubtedly, have made the best CEO the organisation never had.

Such a glowing career ought to be enough for any person, let alone for a woman, since prominent and successful women remained rare in the ornithological world at that time. Yet if she had been hard done by prejudice and her career path encumbered by the intervention of masculine egos, you would not have heard about it from the lips of Janet Kear. What she achieved in her life she did so on merit, by being good, by just being Janet. She stood as a great but quiet inspiration to the many women who worked with her through the years. Nor was she content just with the 'day job'; despite a consuming professional life and increasing management responsibilities, Janet was determined to contribute to ornithological research, both by encouraging others and by editing the British Ornithologists' Union's world-ranking journal *Ibis*, which she did from 1980 to 1988. She developed the journal and its global profile before ultimately becoming vice-president of the BOU and subsequently its first female president, a post she held from 1990-94 with well-justified personal satisfaction. Janet devoted herself to causes many and varied, reflecting both her energy, wide interests and great commitment. At various times, she served the Association for the Study of Animal Behaviour, the Avicultural Society, the Zoo Federation, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (through its Endangered Waterfowl and Captive Breeding Specialist Groups), the British Trust for Ornithology, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust, Devon Birdwatching and Preservation Society, National Museums Liverpool and English Nature, amongst others. This was, however, never a mere list of duties, each of the organisations and their respective staff remember Janet for her personal commitment,

her down-to-earth good advice and her shared pride in their achievements. And proud she too deserved to be, especially during the three difficult terms with the Council of the fledgling English Nature, spanning almost a decade until 1999, a time upon which she always looked back with great fondness. Janet was always deeply concerned that the nature of these Isles should be entrusted to good hands. Recognition of her substantial talents and contributions came in the form of an honorary doctorate (and title of 'Professor', which characteristically she never used) from John Moores University in 1990, an OBE in 1993, and the BOU medal in 1998.

Formal awards are a pleasant recognition, but the true rewards Janet Kear brought to us were through her skill as a communicator, her ability to reach and touch people, especially those with no common interest. She had a fearfully impressive intellect and a capacity to store apparently unbounded knowledge, which she could convey onwards to us less-endowed folk with a bewitching ease. She was an outstanding lecturer, and was an excellent speaker at conferences, but her written production was also prodigious and impressive. Her beguiling Poyser book *Man and Wildfowl*, with its rattling pace and abundance of riches, was perhaps one of her most fondly remembered. In her busy life, she somehow managed to find time to write seven books (including two classic monographs, *Hawaiian Goose* and *Flamingos*), to edit the WWT journal *Wildfowl* for many years and to publish no fewer than 90 scientific journal articles! Among the latter was, of course, her Bernard Tucker Memorial Lecture to the Oxford Ornithological Society published recently in this journal (*Brit. Birds* 96: 217-233). Her final and undoubtedly most important book was at the printers when she died: the Oxford University Press series *Bird Families of the World* describing the *Ducks, Geese and Swans*, conceived and edited by Janet, was published in March 2005. It has been an incredible labour of love based on contributions from over 73 different authors around the globe and, despite a difficult gestation period, is set to become Janet Kear's fitting and enduring memorial.

Lists of achievement are as nothing when we remember how much poorer we are for the loss of a timeless polymath and such a good friend to those of all ages. Despite experiencing diffi-

cult years, Janet was always a potent force for the positive. We shall fondly remember her for the vigour with which she tackled all of her life, not least for her courage in the last weeks as she fought with the knowledge and reality of her illness. She leaves a great gap in all who knew her, especially her soul mate John Turner, and an army of friends and admirers. Janet Kear leaves but one single unfinished task: that of the biography of St Werburgh, the seventh-century princess of Mercia, perhaps best known for banishing wild geese (by power of persuasion)

from plundering the cornfields of Weedon, in present-day Northamptonshire. Werburgh was one of the best-loved of the Saxon saints, despite a difficult life. She was renowned for her wisdom and humility, knowledge and devotion, charm and charisma and because it was said that despite her eminence, ‘...to all in her care she seemed rather the servant than the mistress’. What a clever trick. No wonder Janet Kear found such deep affinity in her story!

Tony Fox

Colin Joseph Bibby (1948-2004)

Colin Bibby died at home in Cambridgeshire on 7th August 2004, after an illness which he faced with the same good humour and clear objective analysis that characterised his professional work. Knowing that his illness was terminal, Colin spread the news to colleagues and friends, and set about making the most of his last months, weeks and days.

Born on 20th November 1948, he was educated at Oundle School and Cambridge University. The term ‘conservation biologist’, largely unknown when he started his career with the RSPB in 1971, could have been made for him. He brought the passion of a convinced conservationist to guide the topics of his scientific research, and brought incisive rational argument to guide priority-setting and action in bird conservation.

He was a thinking conservationist who would challenge sloppy arguments and accepted dogma. He had a major influence on the criteria for the first Red Data List for UK birds. This thinking remains the bedrock for setting bird conservation priorities up to the present day, and has been carried forward by others to influence the priorities for all wildlife enshrined in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. Colin argued that conservation needed a robust and defensible framework to guide resources wisely. This is now second nature to many bird conservationists, but less than 20 years ago such thinking was largely absent.

Once conservationists know which species deserve their attention, Colin argued that they then need a rational way to choose the best approaches to their conservation. He championed the use of Species Action Plans within the RSPB, learning from their use in other coun-

tries, and again this way of working is now widespread in UK conservation – and not just for birds.

As a scientist, Colin carried out important work on a range of subjects. His PhD study of the Dartford Warbler *Sylvia undata* helped to guide conservation action for the species. He also carried out influential work on reedbeds and the species that live in them, the Merlin *Falco columbarius*, woodland birds, seabirds and migration strategies. In 1986, he became the RSPB’s Head of Conservation Science and had a lasting influence on the Society’s work through recruiting a strong team and directing its work.

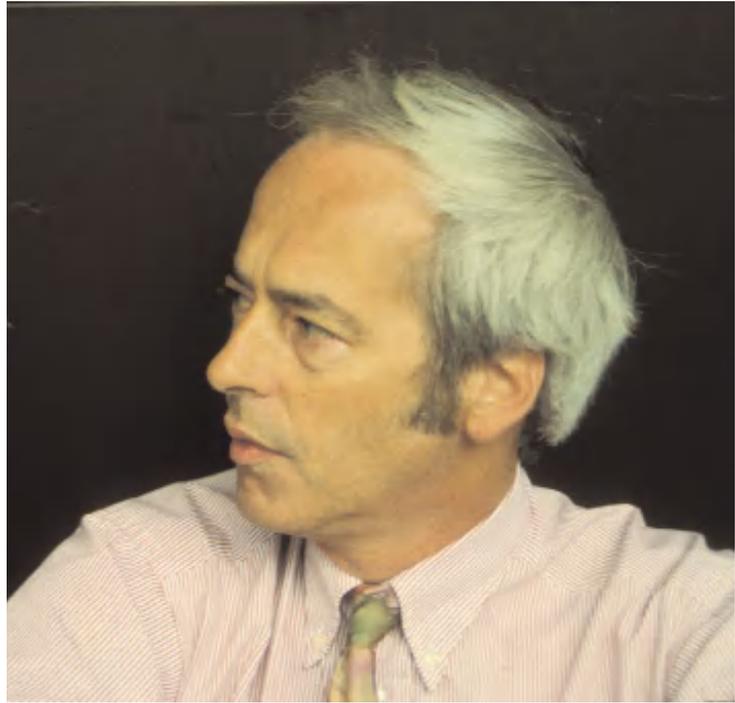
After leaving the RSPB in 1991, Colin took the post of Director of Science and Policy at BirdLife International, where his first major project involved working with a team to complete a study on Endemic Bird Areas (*Putting Biodiversity on the Map*, BirdLife International 1992). The take-home message of this global analysis was that many of the world’s birds have restricted distributions and that often such species live in the same places. Therefore, a rather small proportion of the Earth’s surface (less than 1% of its land) would, if properly managed and protected, suffice to conserve a surprisingly large proportion (about 25%) of the world’s birds. Such an approach to biodiversity hot-spots has become an increasingly strong plank of conservation efforts for many species in recent years.

From 2001, he devoted much of his time to working with international companies in an attempt to influence their environmental footprint. Colin saw this approach as negligently neglected, and he regarded it as extremely important for the future.

Over 50 clearly written scientific papers are a lasting testimony to Colin's scientific output but the communication of his ideas went much further. Three books (*Bird Census Techniques* (1992), *Expedition Field Techniques* (1998), *Conservation Project Manual* (2003)) helped to provide a wider audience with access to the thinking and techniques behind well-designed survey work. He was a keen supporter of *British Birds* and a long-term member of its Behaviour Notes Panel. He was an enthusiastic writer of book reviews, and a highly respected judge of the joint

BB/BTO Best Bird Book award. He was also closely involved with the BTO as a member of several of its committees. As a public speaker, Colin was sometimes both inspired and inspirational – and his ability extended to enthusing audiences of scientists, conservationists, bird-watchers and the general public. Sometimes in conversation, one felt that Colin's brain had raced ahead several steps and one was struggling to keep up – and this meant that he was liable to leave some people bemused in his wake – but his probing questions and clear insights led many to a much clearer understanding of issues.

If this account gives the impression that Colin was an impressive intellectual with at times a rather forbidding air then, yes, he could be that, but he was much more too. Colin knew his birds from firsthand experience as a bird-watcher and a ringer (he was a founder of the Wicken Fen Ringing Group), and was a knowledgeable and stimulating companion in the field. My fond memories of him include bouncing around in an absurdly small boat in frighteningly big seas in the Azores, watching the sun set over the Tagus Estuary while



M. Poulsen/BirdLife

112. Colin Bibby, at the BirdLife International conference, at Rosenheim, Germany, in 1994.

studying Pied Flycatchers *Ficedula hypoleuca*, and being introduced to the study of birds through Dartford Warblers in Dorset. In all cases, the memories of his delight in the birds and the places where they live are coupled with those of the stimulating and increasingly irreverent alcohol-fuelled discussions at the end of the day. Very few people who can fill in a moult card have as impressive a grasp of the politics of protecting areas for wildlife as Colin did. And few who can argue with decision-makers that bird numbers are an important measure of whether or not development is sustainable would be the first of a group of over 100 birders to identify a Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris* on a field trip in The Netherlands.

Colin's work was recognised by the receipt, in 1994, of the Dr A. H. Heineken Prize for Environmental Sciences, on behalf of BirdLife International, in recognition of its excellence in research. In 2004, he received the RSPB Medal to mark his contribution to ornithology.

He is survived by his wife, Ruth, a medical doctor, and their three sons.

Mark Avery