

OBITUARY

Simon Aspinall

Every now and again someone comes along who touches our lives and makes a difference. Simon Aspinall was one such person. When he died in October 2011, after bravely living with motor neurone disease for four years, the Middle East, and its birds, lost a true friend. He was 53.

Simon's passion for birds started as a schoolboy in England. Graduating in environmental science from the University of East Anglia, he first visited the Middle East in 1991, stopping off in the United Arab Emirates during one of his world birding trips. Later he was to work there for over 15 years, first for the then National Avian Research Centre and later as an environmental consultant, bringing a wealth of experience from his time with the RSPB and NCC, much of it in Scotland. He had a love affair with the famous Fair Isle bird observatory and his last paper, with his brother, was in *British Birds* on the Fair Isle Wren.

In the UAE Simon helped establish the Emirates Bird Records Committee, chaired the Emirates Natural History Group, became environmental editor at *Emirates News* and undertook studies for the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey. Detailed surveys of breeding seabirds, Sooty Falcons and other wildlife on the offshore islands led to the identification of those of conservation importance and to QarNein island being given full protection.

Simon made a major contribution to the UAE chapter in BirdLife International's *Important Bird Areas in the Middle East* and later wrote the UAE section for *A Directory of Wetlands in the Middle East*—seminal works for wildlife conservation. He was as proud of receiving the UAE's premier environmental award, the Sheikh Mubarak Award, for his contributions to knowledge of the country's natural history, as he was of his Emirates bird list being an unmatched 411, 23 of which he added, and of accompanying Sir Wilfred Thesiger on a journey through the edge of the Empty Quarter and showing Sir Wilfred his first Golden Eagle nest in Arabia.



Plate 1. Simon measuring a Socotra Scops Owl, 2004.
© RF Porter



Plate 2. "I found this picture of Simon, which I took on Jebel Akhdar, near Nizwa, Oman in 2005. We were both part of the UNESCO biosphere selection team in Oman, which resulted in Jebel Samhan being designated. Simon was at the forefront of the necessary documentation work. He is wearing the tie, because we were informed that we would be giving our presentations to the Ministry of Environment in Muscat that morning after rushing from the mountain." © Gary Brown



Plate 3. “Simon walking in the Liwa dunes, Abu Dhabi, 2010, when we searched for breeding Golden Eagles.”
© Tommy Pedersen

Simon lived for travel. In the Middle East and Central Asia he journeyed to most countries, studying birds, working with UNESCO on plans for nature reserves and taking part in BirdLife International’s surveys on Socotra and helping their programme in Syria training young biologists from Nature Iraq.

He was a prolific writer, authoring or co-authoring over 100 papers and books, notably on the Middle East, its birds and ecology. The following only gives a flavour: *Birds of the United Arab Emirates* (2011, Helm Field Guides), *Birds of the Middle East* (2010, Helm FGs), *Breeding Birds of the United Arab Emirates* (2010, Environment Agency-Abu Dhabi), *Important Bird Areas of the United Arab Emirates* (2006, *British Birds*), *Important Marine Areas for Birds in Abu Dhabi Emirate, United Arab Emirates* (2004, in *Marine Atlas of Abu Dhabi*), *Saline Wetland Reserve Management: A Case Study from the United Arab Emirates* (2002, in *Sabkha Environments*, Kluwer), *Environment Development and Protection in the UAE* (2001, in *The United Arab Emirates: A New Perspective*, Trident), *The Shell Birdwatching Guide to the United Arab Emirates* (1998, Hobby), *Status and Conservation*

of the Breeding Birds of the United Arab Emirates (1996, Hobby).

For the *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Arabia* he supplied over 1100 records and wrote several of the species accounts. He was an editorial adviser for *Sandgrouse* and was on the team that produced the OSME Regional List.

Whilst his main interest was birds, ‘our feathered friends’ he called them, Simon (Plates 1–3) took a keen interest in all of natural history and enjoyed nothing more than ‘scratching around’ to see what he could find. That helped to make him such a great and knowledgeable companion in the field. Charming with dashing good looks, he had a wry, witty repartee and people were easily attracted to his charisma and natural warmth. His eyesight and hearing were remarkable and his fieldcraft second to none. But most of all he was courageous, continuing to travel, latterly with sticks and wheelchair, to the Middle East and far-flung corners of the world, never once complaining. That spirit and his contribution to ornithology and conservation is the legacy he leaves.

Richard Porter