

OBITUARY

Major Michael Desmond Gallagher MBE FRGS

OSME was sad to learn that one of its founder members, Major Michael Desmond Gallagher, who was also an OSME Vice-President 1987–1997, died peacefully 27 July 2014 shortly before his 93rd birthday. While he is mainly remembered for his *Birds of Oman* (1980) and for the Oman Natural History Museum that he was instrumental in setting up in Muscat, his experiences, successes and influence in the world of natural history went far beyond these—yet ‘Mike’ Gallagher left school at the age of 18 and was entirely self-taught.

Michael was born into a military family and went to schools with strong military links. His eighteenth birthday fell on the day that the Second World War was declared, 3 September 1939. He volunteered and followed his father into the Royal Army Service Corps where his wartime service took him to Egypt, Tunisia and Libya followed by Sicily and mainland Italy before returning to Britain to join the Normandy landings on Juno beach in 1944. After the war, his army career took him initially to Palestine, Gibraltar and then Christmas island in the 1950s (he recounted several times the story of being ordered to tell his men to turn round, close their eyes and put their hands over their ears when the atom bombs were being tested). He was subsequently based in the Aden protectorate, British Guyana, Bahrain and Sharjah. His interest in natural history developed and flourished in all these locations where few studies had been conducted and it was after a year on Christmas island that he produced his first published papers. His bibliography contains a total of 114 books, scientific papers and articles in popular journals. These papers and articles appeared in *eg The Lancet, Journal of Parasitology, Ibis, Oryx, Sandgrouse, Fauna of Saudi Arabia, Sea Swallow, The Journal of Oman Studies* and *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists’ Club*.

One of the many skills that Michael possessed was his ability to develop networks of like-minded people and to encourage them to work together. He founded and

became secretary of the Christmas Island Natural History Society; when he was posted to Bahrain and then Sharjah in what was then the Trucial states, he started the Gulf Birdwatchers group as well as their monthly newsletter (1969–1971). He was the man behind the Oman Bird Group and then *Oman Bird News* which he edited 1986–1998 (volumes 1–21). In the very first cyclostyled one page issue he wrote “The enclosed list of birdwatchers will enable you to keep in touch with others, and to make contact if you visit their patch.” He developed this into a glossy production, complete with colour photographs. If he thought it worthwhile and important, he would support different specialist societies. For example, in addition to becoming an OSME life member as well as Vice-President, he was a staunch supporter of the Royal Naval Birdwatching Society for over 30 years and was their local representative for the Persian gulf and Arabian sea 1982–1996. He was the prime mover behind the development of the Oman Bird Records Committee. Together with Ralph Daly, Adviser to the Sultan for the Conservation of the Environment as Chair, himself as Secretary, Michael set up this committee to examine claims of rare bird sightings. The committee was also responsible for ensuring the careful recording of all sightings, something that Michael excelled in. This was initially kept meticulously on a card index but is now an electronic database. Without him, this database would not be as complete as it is today.

It was during his time in Bahrain and Sharjah that he led several scientific groups into the desert and the mountains in the east—notably Exercise Tayur Watch in 1970 and Exercise Lapwing in 1971. He was able to travel in comparative comfort since he used these expeditions as training exercises for the troops under his command so that his tent and bed were erected, his meals cooked, his kit neatly laid out while he was out collecting or later skinning specimens (his bird skinning skills were described as exceptional). It was also during this period

that he produced *A Guide to the Birds of Bahrain* with Mike Strickland (1969) and *Birds of Bahrain* with Terry Rogers (1973). In 1973 he led a reconnaissance expedition to study an area of the Jebel Al Akhdar in Oman with a view to establishing a national park for the endangered Arabian Tahr. The following year he was selected to join the 1974–1975 Zaire River Expedition as both a quartermaster and vertebrate biologist; he was able in fact to bridge the military and the scientific sides of the expedition and won the respect of both.

While still in the army, he was invited to lead the 1975 Flora and Fauna survey to Jebel Akhdar—this was an opportunity to assemble diverse teams of expertise with a mandate to fully explore the area and really understand its wildlife and its inhabitants. He retired from the army in 1976 but was invited back to Oman the following year to work in the Office of the Adviser to the Sultan for the Environment. From there he organised the second Flora and Fauna survey, this time to Dhofar in 1977, an area of Oman that was only emerging from a long war with communist insurgents. Michael's final 'official' expedition was the Royal Geographical Society's Wahiba Sands Expedition (1985–1987) on which he was a pivotal member and was described as a consummate field naturalist—passionate, diligent, highly knowledgeable and very hard working in the field. It was recognised that his training as a soldier and his passion as a naturalist made a strong combination.

He was tasked in 1977 to write a book describing the birds of Oman. This was not a simple undertaking since it had to be authoritative despite starting from a very small pool of existing information. In addition to museum specimens, newsletters and notes made by previous birdwatchers, some published, most still in the form of original notes, he consulted both the few expatriate amateur naturalists present in the country and Omanis, many of whom spoke only Arabic or one of the other southern Arabian languages, from the remoter areas of Oman where many of the lesser known birds were to be found. There was the added complication that the names used by these Omani observers, who knew their area extremely well, were often used only locally and did not necessarily appear on



Plate 1. Mike Gallagher in the Oman desert with a Brown-necked Raven *Corvus ruficollis* on his arm, 1978. This raven was a friendly camp follower for a couple of days, and roosted on MW's suitcase. © Martin Woodcock

any existing list of Arabic names. It seemed an impossible challenge but one grasped by Michael (Plate 1) with his customary vigour and meticulousness. When *Birds of Oman* was published in 1980, illustrated by Martin Woodcock, it rightly became the standard reference for the area and was cited in numerous subsequent papers and reference books. In addition to detailed information on the identification of each species, the book contained seasonal distribution ranges and breeding information; but it went beyond ornithology and covered the ecology of Oman, and its determinants of geology, geomorphology, climate and propitious location. An Arabic edition was published a few years later.

His lasting legacy in Oman must be the Natural History Museum, opened in 1985, which is visited by large numbers of school parties, tourists and Oman residents—without his tenacity and dedication, the different halls would never have been created or contain such detailed information. In addition to the specimens that he collected himself, he persuaded his numerous contacts to bring in dead birds, bats, reptiles, mammals or invertebrates that they had found or trapped. The whale hall that was opened in 1994 as part of the museum expansion contains a whale that he had persuaded a road contractor to bury on the beach; three years later he arranged for it to be dug out and transported to the museum before flensing, boiling and drying prior to reassembling it and hanging



Plate 2. Michael at Buckingham Palace, having just been appointed a Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE) at the Investiture ceremony held on 5 May 1994 (photographer unknown).

the whole skeleton from the ceiling using an ingenious system of pulleys and ropes to raise the two ton skull. As part of the Museum he established the National Herbarium of Oman and its associated Botanic Garden, as well as the shell and coral collections, the insect, invertebrate, fossil, osteological and other collections.

Perhaps the most important indicator of Michael's contribution to Middle Eastern zoology is the number of species that include his name. Very few biologists end their careers with even one species that honours them either through their having discovered it or

having it named after them as a tribute by a third party. There are 30 species or subspecies that end in *gallagheri*, a remarkable and lasting testimony to his contribution; these include one scorpion, one pseudoscorpion, one crustacean, 19 insects, two molluscs, one bat, one rodent, two geckos, a fish and one plant. Moreover, the bat that he collected on the Zaire River Expedition in 1974, *Tadarida gallagheri*, is still the only specimen in any museum or collection.

In 1998 Michael retired from Oman to his house on Pagham beach, Sussex, that consisted of three railway carriages cleverly joined together and of which he was inordinately proud. He remained active in his retirement, regularly exhausting his many visitors as he took them on long walks along the shingle and round Pagham harbour, pointing out things of geological, ornithological, cultural and historical interest. He suffered a stroke in 2010 but was able to return to his home for a couple of years before having to move into a nursing home in Chichester.

Michael's contribution to Zoology in the Middle East was recognised publicly. He was elected Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society in 1975 and was then awarded the Zoological Society of London's Stamford Raffles Award for 1983. In the 1993 New Year's Honours List he was awarded the MBE "for services to wildlife conservation in Oman" (Plate 2) and in 1995 he was elected Fellow of the Linnaean Society of London. When he left Oman in 1998 his achievements were celebrated with a seminar, resulting in a book in his honour *The Natural History of Oman. A Festschrift for Michael Gallagher* (1999). Michael never married and was predeceased by his two sisters.

Ian Harrison