

# OBITUARIES

## Martin Woodcock (1935 – 2019)

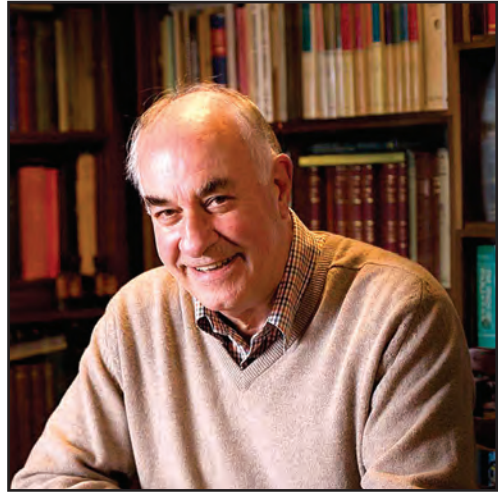
Martin Woodcock, the globally renowned ornithologist and wildlife artist, was a great supporter of OSME, having been a member since its foundation in 1978 and previously of the Ornithological Society of Turkey since 1970.

In the early days of OSME he would often attend the AGMs in London and regularly donated paintings to raise funds and for raffle prizes. An example is his fine Sacred Ibis, painted for an exhibition of the work of Nature Iraq in England in 2010 and which helped raise money for OSME's Middle East conservation programme. His thoughtful words that accompanied this painting show his artistic sensitivity: "The important sub-text for me has been the recovery of the marshes from their near destruction. I chose the Sacred Ibis, and its position and background as a sort of symbol of this. White, of course, stands for purity. The bird is looking back at the damaged marshes represented by a brown and burnt background, but it sees the 'green shoots' of recovery. More symbolism than art, maybe, but at least it has a meaning for me."

Educated at Christ's Hospital in England, Martin, after completing his National Service, became a stockbroker in London. After 18 dreary years he eagerly accepted an invitation in 1973 from the publisher, Collins, to take up illustrating and writing about birds full time. He was a self-taught artist since early childhood and up until then had spent several years working in his spare time on illustrations for what was to become *A Field Guide to the Birds of South East Asia*, which was published in 1975.

In addition to the Asia bird guide, Martin wrote and illustrated the *Handguide to the Birds of the Indian Sub-continent* and *Safari Sketchbook*, about his travels in Africa. He also illustrated the *Collins Gem Guide to Birds* (translated into three languages), and, of course, the monumental, seven volume *Birds of Africa*. For this he painted 2,200 species, requiring some 6,000 images in total.

From a Middle East perspective his greatest contribution was illustrating *Birds of*



*Oman*. In the late 1970s, he was approached by Quartet publishers and asked if he would collaborate with Michael Gallagher, another luminary of eastern Arabia, who was to author the book. Two major research trips followed in 1978 and 1979 and resulted in an impressive tome that appeared in an English and Arabic edition. Indeed it was a result of this book that led to Martin being asked by the African ornithologist, Leslie Brown, to

illustrate the proposed *Birds of Africa*. The rest, as they say, is history.

A very quick totalling of his published illustrations (including those in *Handbook of the Birds of the World*) shows he painted close to 4,000 species. That's two fifths of all the species in the world. I don't believe that any other artist can claim that.

As well as being a renowned ornithologist and wildlife artist, Martin was a fine poet, writer and pianist. With his wife, Barbara, he was an ardent traveller, notably to Africa, and they were both unstinting supporters of wildlife conservation organisations and causes. In 1993 he and friends founded the African Bird Club and became its first chairman and later President.

That aside, Martin would probably have described himself, in his most modest way, as simply a wildlife lover. And indeed he was.

### Rodney P. Martins (1957-2019)

I first met Rod in autumn 1983 at the weekly pub meetings of the Cambridge Bird Club students and from the beginning he was memorable: lean, laconic and somewhat weather-beaten, with entertaining stories of the rare birds and birding scene in the UK in the 1970s and 80s and of his recent birding experiences in Turkey and Asia. I soon realised that Rod was not only a leading UK birder, with a list near 400, and with a British first to his name (Rüppell's Warbler in 1977, so appropriately a Palearctic 'special'), but that he had also done a great deal of reading and study of species distribution and identification in the birding literature and had developed a wide social network of birdwatcher contacts.

As a transitional Afro-Palearctic area with relict montane avifauna (including two gamebirds), and not covered by any field guide, Yemen already fascinated Rod back then and so it was no surprise that two years later he was a member of the 1985 OSME Ornithological Expedition to North Yemen, which I had the luck also to join. We spent eight weeks in the field as part of a 13-strong team studying the bird communities, threatened species and endemics of that little-known land. The first month involved several hundred transects across the Tihamah coastal plain and each late morning, as the

He loved watching and absorbing wildlife and the wild places wildlife lives. Great fun to be with, his wry, understated sense of humour and generosity of spirit is something that really will be missed at gatherings of his family and friends. He embraced his diagnosis of incurable cancer with dignity and without an ounce of self-pity, always acknowledging the wonderful life he had been blessed with.

All Martin's important art archives, ornithological notes and letters are to be kept for posterity in the Natural History Museum at Tring, England and a memorial foundation is to be established in his memory to foster an interest in drawing and painting birds in young people, notably in Africa, India and Arabia where his illustrations were so influential.

Richard Porter



Rod Martins in the mythical Tien Shan mountains of Kyrgyzstan, May 2013. Note trademark 'gentleman's cap' as he liked to call it, rubber-bands ever-ready on wrists, and plimsolls - perfect for chasing snowcocks on the scree-slopes and snowfields just above. © Duncan Brooks

intensifying heat put an end to surveying, we would retire to the nearest village and enjoy