

ORGANIZATION AND ADMINISTRATION OF ORNITHOLOGY

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Birds of a feather flock together! A particularly apt quotation to introduce this chapter, and incidentally one that appeared for many years on the title page of *EMU*. In any community individuals with special interests sooner or later sort themselves into organized groupings for mutual benefit as in the mediaeval trade guilds or because they want to be in friendly association with people of similar interests like the members of the early natural-history societies.

EVOLUTION OF SOCIETIES

Though scientific societies, as we now know them, began in the seventeenth century (the Royal Society of London was founded in 1660 under the patronage of Charles II, with the support of Prince Rupert), ornithologists, like naturalists generally, became sufficiently numerous in the community to become aware of themselves as a definable group, worthy to be organized, only in the nineteenth century. Associations of people with a common bond invariably begin as fairly comprehensive bodies. Thus, when the British Ornithologists' Union was first started in 1858 it included a variety of people interested in birds, though because of the prevailing fashion of the time it was predominantly of people whose interest in birds centred round the collection of specimens and of birds' eggs. And also because of the special interests of the men who were its founders, and of Professor Alfred Newton of Cambridge in particular, it appeared forbiddingly technical to several members. To one who complained that *IBIS*—the Union's journal—was out of his depth, Newton unsympathetically replied: 'You must learn to swim.'

It naturally followed that, as specialized interests with ornithology developed, new organizations would be born, either as splinter-groups from the parent body or as new societies. Not only the separation of specialities would be involved; there would also become apparent a stratification based on degree of interest or depth of scholarly attachment. First, societies or clubs came into being catering for the special interests of egg collectors, protectionists, bird-watchers, aviculturalists, bird-banders, students of behaviour, seabird specialists and so on.

This pattern of organizational evolution has been experienced by most scientific societies, and often evoked some regret from the stalwarts of the parent bodies. Thus, the Royal Societies of the various

States in Australia, once the fountain-heads of all scientific learning in the community, have seen their membership and influence dwindle in the course of time by specialist groups splintering off and forming their own societies—the chemists, physicists, geologists, anthropologists, agricultural scientists.

Secondly, the various bodies in the field of ornithology have varied degrees of interest and capacity, from the local field clubs catering for persons who feel a pure joy in simple birdwatching as part of a general enjoyment of nature, to erudite organizations of trained academic scientists engrossed with rather high-powered studies on such subjects as the physiology of avian reproduction or radar investigations of migration.

All this organizational differentiation has happened naturally, without any authoritarian direction from 'Big Brother', and by a purely natural process of catering for needs as they arose. Just after the last war there was a strong movement in Europe for the regimentation of scientific activity under 'Authority'. Michael Polanyi (1947), criticizing the moves on philosophical grounds, argued the cause of 'co-ordination without intervention of any co-ordinating authority'. Natural historians can point to a remarkable example of a highly successful international undertaking, achieved by the co-operation of private scientists without the intervention of any government action whatsoever. This is the system of zoological and botanical nomenclature, having no official system of sanctions, working admirably; and all practising biologists observe the codes. Yet it is all voluntary!

In the matter of associations of naturalists, purely by a process of natural selection a hierarchical structure of societies has come into being. Some societies, whose use has been by-passed, have languished and disappeared and others, meeting new demand, have arisen. This may be expected to continue indefinitely and an idealized static structure should not be expected or aimed for. Nevertheless it is of interest and value to note what the present situation is in countries like Great Britain, France and Germany, where there is a high degree of awareness of natural history. In those countries we see a sort of pyramid of organization in general, excluding the narrow specialist societies, each catering for a more sophisticated level of interest, and in consequence, having to be resigned to a smaller membership at each rising level.

THE UNITED KINGDOM

Most RAOU members will be more or less familiar with the present structure of societies in Great Britain. Throughout the country there are numerous local clubs, which organize regular outings, often training newcomers in field identification and introducing them to simple co-operative projects. They publish local reports, often only annually, summarizing the events of the ornithological year in their own districts. Many of these groups contribute to national undertakings sponsored by associations higher in the organizational hierarchy. These local societies vary a good deal in quality, and many are ineffectual as units in a grass-root system of local reporting of ornithological events.

Among the national groups the best-known, most influential and richest, is the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds formed in 1891. It is *the* property-owning society, and besides its impressive headquarters in a manorial setting at Sandy in Bedfordshire, it owns and manages various reserves, where particular species and habitats are preserved. Its membership includes most of those who are *generally* interested in birds and appreciate its popular publications like the well-edited and finely illustrated *Birds*, issued every two months. This society's activities, though fundamentally concerned with bird protection, are rather more widely ranging than its name implies, and they appeal to people who like birds, who like watching them, and who may not be greatly concerned in more technical studies in ornithology. Of course many members *are* and they use the society's reserves and other facilities for serious research. It is this latter section of the membership who are also actively associated in other bodies a stage upwards in the hierarchy.

Among the most important, particularly in the role of organizing co-operative projects for volunteer observers in ecological studies, is the British Trust for Ornithology, colloquially referred to as the BTO. It was started in 1932 following the success of a national census of heronies organized by E. M. Nicholson in association with H. F. Witherby through the journal *British Birds*, one of the few journals not produced by a bird society. This nation-wide organization serves not only to co-ordinate purposeful activity by the local societies but also to cater for wider undertakings such as nest-recording, common bird censuses and other types of network research. In essence (and it emphasizes this itself) it is an organization run by professionals for the benefit of amateurs. This type of organization will, obviously, accumulate a lot of basic data for detailed professional research, and the vast body of amateurs can be organized, if they wish to do so, to become what E. M. Nicholson has termed the eyes, ears and long arm of the professional.

Soon after its formation the BTO in 1938 spawned the Edward Grey Institute of Field Ornithology, originally independent under the direction of W. B. Alexander, so well-remembered by us in Australia. It has now been absorbed as a unit in the Department of Zoology at Oxford and concerns itself wholly with professional research in birds and the attainment of academic qualifications by university ornithologists.

Great Britain during this same period has become festooned with bird observatories, most round the coast and on islands, some started by individual enthusiasts, others by local naturalist groups and trusts. I need only mention them because Mr. Lockley is elaborating on the important role they play.

Between all these, from the BTO organization down to the local societies, there are places for most professionals, all serious amateurs and a good few amateurs who like to be more serious than they can find time for, as well as for a good many persons who like to do something more than mere bird-loving.

At the apex of this British pyramid of bird societies now stands the pioneer of them all—the British Ornithologists' Union on which our own Union was originally modelled. Like the RAOU the activities of the BOU centre predominantly on its quarterly journal, *Ibis*. This has now been upgraded to fill the need for, ideally, a fully professional society with an international membership, not only as a shop-window to the rest of the world but also as an aspect of legitimate national pride. By this time of course membership is inevitably reduced to professional ornithologists and serious amateurs. The BOU did not evolve to this final stage until after R. E. Moreau assumed the editorship in 1947. And he, may it be marked, was not an academically trained professional, but a talented amateur of great discernment who outshone many men with formal training.

AUSTRALIA

One may look on the British organizational system as approaching a Utopian idea. What may we learn from it to suggest or predict developments in Australia?

At the basic level we have numerous field naturalists' clubs throughout the continent, in which bird observers constitute an important element. In several centres of population independent bird societies have been formed, as in South Australia (South Australian Ornithological Association), Victoria (Bird Observers' Club, Victorian Ornithological Research Group), Tasmania (Bird Observers' Association of Tasmania), ACT (Canberra Ornithological Group), New South Wales (NSW Field Ornithologists' Club) and Queensland (Queensland Ornithological Society). Victoria, always an active centre of natural history work, had several others that no longer exist, such as the Leach

Memorial Club. A type of organization, which has no real parallel elsewhere, is the Gould League in such States as New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia. These leagues are not always exactly equivalent in function but all cater primarily for the interests of school children keen on birds. They bridge the organizational gap between school and adult societies. They should be fostered and encouraged in all States.

At the apex of all stands the RAOU. Apart from the South Australian Ornithological Association (formed in March 1899), it was the earliest purely ornithological body (dating from 1900), and aimed to encompass all aspects of ornithological activity. It aimed to be all things to all men, and time proved how unrealistic this ideal could be. In recent years the uncertainty about the role that it ought eventually to play in this age of specialization caused a good deal of heart-searching in the Union. This culminated in the setting up of review committees in 1966 and 1968 (see Report of the second Review Committee by D. L. Serventy and A. R. McEvey, 1969, where the history of the Union's activities is summarized and a plan for the future proposed). Eventually the RAOU decided to 'follow its traditional beacon', the BOU, and to upgrade its standards to conform with that body's alignment with the 'new ornithology' of the present-day. Despite some opposition it decided to prune out time-consuming, unproductive and duplicated activity—leaving these to existing societies—and to concentrate 'on basic aims befitting a leading ornithological society in the country'.

FUTURE NEEDS AND POSSIBLE GROWTH

What we most obviously lack in the existing Australian organizational situation is an effective structure of societies corresponding to the RSPB and the BTO. But we do have the nucleus here for the evolution of both.

In my opinion the existing society most able to develop into and occupy the role of the RSPB, if it chose to do so, is the Bird Observers' Club of Victoria. It has a very large membership, extending to other States, conducts enthusiastic regular meetings and excursions, including interstate tours. It has conducted various co-operative enterprises in the past, including censuses of species, sponsored the Altona Group's study of the Silver Gull, and by its publication of a series of Australia-wide identification books on various groups has extended its influence and authority well beyond Melbourne and Victoria. This has warranty for its expansion as an all-Australian body, based on a Melbourne headquarters with branches in other States. It has the potential of becoming the Australian society for the *ordinary* bird-lover, taking on the popular role once embraced by the RAOU.

It must be obvious, of course, that a transformed BOC, such as I have suggested, cannot practicably be run by a voluntary staff as hitherto. There comes a time with all amateur organizations when growth (equated with success) reaches a level where no further progress is possible unless full-time paid officers can be appointed. The BOC now numbers some 2,000 members, one half resident in Melbourne and the balance shared approximately equally with the rest of Victoria and other States. The RSPB has 100,000 members and if the BOC filled an equivalent role here and enjoyed similar support, it would, on a population basis, expect to enrol 25,000 members.

At present only 25 per cent of the members of the BOC subscribe to its prestige journal, the *Australian Bird Watcher*. It is obvious, therefore, that this journal is not to the taste of most members and something more popular should be provided, on the lines of the British publication *Birds*.

What can become the Australian equivalent of the BTO? There is no need for an exact parallel to British activity. Circumstances are never the same in two countries, and the same functions could be carried out in this country by rather different organizations and with, perhaps, a greater economy of effort. The re-modelled RAOU has established in its fold a Field Investigation Committee, which, with more finance at its disposal and a scientific director appointed, could become the Australian BTO.

The RAOU already differs from the BOU in being a property-owning society, owning a comprehensive ornithological library and other archival possessions. For historical reasons associated with the H. L. White bequest, it cannot divest itself of an important part of its library without loss, but under present circumstances the library is ineffectively used. A move is afoot in Union circles to establish a permanently staffed headquarters, for the better servicing of its membership, including the better use of its library. An ambitious forward look, too, in connection with the scheme, is to explore the possibility of a site in the environs of Melbourne where such a headquarters could be placed in a tract of natural bushland that could be used as a field station. The RAOU Review Committee (Serventy and McEvey, 1969) drew attention to the manner in which the precursor of the BTO was established: it was 'first inaugurated through the providential availability of our former Vice-President, Editor of the *Emu* and Fellow—the late W. B. Alexander. Mr. Alexander, an outstanding man of ripe experience, a firm believer in the utility of co-operative projects and team work, "happened" to be on the spot when the need for such a man arose. He had the advantage of a modest private income and so was able to start work with zest when only limited funds were available at the outset of the scheme.

Can we find an Australian Alexander to start a comparable Australian scheme? Even if we cannot at the moment, the Field Investigation Committee should be set in being with a volunteer chairman, and whatever funds the Union can spare to help organize the scheme and start its records. . . . The scheme, thus proposed, we envisage as developing into an Australian Institute of Field Ornithology, like the English and South African ones, of independent status and with close links with the RAOU. We feel that for such positive objectives clearly set out, donations and grants will be freely forthcoming. A paid director and staff can then be provided.'

This might sound an unduly optimistic objective. However, it is well within the practicability of early attainment. The field-station adjunct to the RAOU Melbourne headquarters would serve as a training ground for amateur ornithologists in a variety of modern field techniques, as well as providing valuable research data for one area over a prolonged period. It could be the nerve centre for a network of all-Australian field projects on BTO lines. The expanded RAOU library service within it would aid Australian field workers everywhere, amateur and professional.

Similar centres to this ideal RAOU central one are already being mooted elsewhere. The one nearest to realization is the Keith Hindwood Memorial Study Centre in Sydney. Admirers of the late Keith Hindwood have gathered donations by which the comprehensive library formed by him is being acquired, and with his manuscript records it will be housed for the time being in quarters made available by the Australian Museum in Sydney. Associated with the Centre (to be staffed on a roster basis by the NSW Field Ornithologists' Club) will be a wetland field-study centre at Long Neck Lagoon, in the Hawkesbury River area. The Gould League will co-operate in managing it as an area for investigation.

One can envisage similar developments in other major centres of population in Australia, for the primary benefit of amateur ornithologists. Like stimulates like. They could, ultimately, be brought into voluntary association with the RAOU scheme—if that eventuates.

Mention should be made here of another activity in this general field. This is the National Photographic

Index of Australian Birds, the brain-child of Mr A. D. Trounson, a retired British diplomatist now living in Australia. Despite some early scepticism and indifference it has now developed into a viable and exciting ornithological development in Australia, linked with the Australian Museum in Sydney, and supported by an influential fund-raising trust under the chairmanship of the Hon. Sir Percy Spender. The scheme is expanding its scope and in the course of its future progress it may well mesh in with possible developments in the RAOU.

These possible developments in the RAOU presage, nay demand, an adequate supply of finance. We should not depend on largesse from governments; these are perennially short of funds for their own purposes, and any grants from them may be capriciously terminated, causing embarrassing problems. It is very true also that he who pays the piper calls the tune, and we should not be at the mercy of ever-changing governments. Financial independence should be strived for. The money we need should be harvested by a revenue-raising committee or trust. How effective a well-planned fund-producing campaign for a deserving cause, well documented and presented, can be, was abundantly proved by Mr. Trounson's success with his Photographic Index. Ample money is available in the community for commendable projects. To tap it is not an insuperable difficulty, but a case has to be skilfully, objectively and honestly prepared.

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