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JOHN EDGAR COURTNEY

John Courtney was born at Glen Innes, NSW, in 1934 and raised on his parents' property 'Ashgrove', Swan Vale, in the Inverell district. Following the death of his father he took over the running of the property at the age of 16. He was educated to sixth class by correspondence when his schooling was terminated.

Always interested in natural history, John joined the then RAOU in 1959 and was the New England Regional Representative from 1971–1978. During this period he assisted notable wildlife photographers Michael Morcombe, Roly Paine and William R. Eastman Jr when they worked in his area. He pursued bird photography himself and his work is represented in the National Photographic Index [now Nature Focus].

In 1974, John assisted Phil Carne and Ray McInnes of the CSIRO Division of Entomology in their research on the Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo and cossid moth larvae in forestry plantations. Observations on a captured bird held at John's farm showed that the birds construct a 'chopping board' on which to stand during the lengthy process of cutting a grub out of the wood, a unique piece of animal behaviour.

John attended the 16th International Ornithological Congress in Canberra in 1974 where he assisted in presenting bird calls from the collection put together for that occasion by John, Norman Robinson, Syd Curtis, John Hutchinson, Ray Swaby and others. This eventually formed the basis of the first ever Field Guide to Australian Birdsong produced by the Bird Observers Club of Australia and which ran to 12 cassettes published over 22 years.

For many years John has been interested in the juvenile food-begging calls of birds, particularly the parrots. In a presentation to the RAOU's first scientific meeting in 1978 he showed for the first time that these calls are similar in closely related species and are very different in distantly related species. In recognition of the novelty of this work, combining as it did aviculture with sci-



entific research, John was awarded the first *Avi-award, Meritorious* by the Avicultural Society of Australia. This study has recently been published in four papers in *Australian Bird Watcher*.

Between 1965 and 1983 John published 12 papers in *Emu* and ten in *Australian Bird Watcher*. In a notable world first he showed in one of his papers, 'The juvenile food-begging call of some fledgling cuckoos — vocal mimicry or vocal duplication by natural selection?' (*Emu* 67, pp. 154–157), that vocal mimicry of the young of their host-species is used by some young cuckoos; in the process he showed that vocal mimicry existed outside the passerines.

John has always cooperated with the University of New England and many students have used 'Ashgrove' in their studies, as did Richard Noske in his PhD studies on treecreepers.

As a self-taught amateur who has made a significant contribution to Australian ornithology, John Courtney is a very worthy recipient of the John Hobbs Medal.

Stephen Debus
(information provided by John's wife, Yvonne)