

Obituary

ERNST MAYR

1904–2005

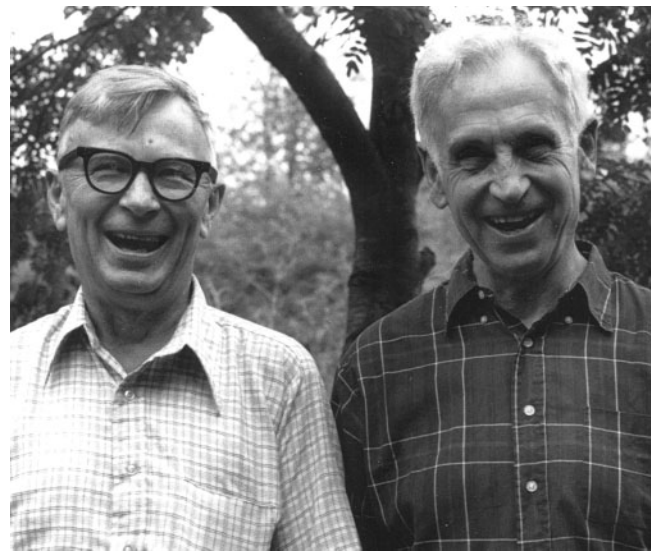
With the death of Professor Ernst Mayr on 3 February 2005, the world lost one of its most renowned and innovative evolutionists. From the viewpoint of Australian ornithology, Ernst was the leading expert on New Guinea and South Pacific birds. Research and documentations on the latter, using the American Museum of Natural History's magnificent Whitney Pacific Collections and Rothschild Australian collections, were to bring to light basic biogeographic and speciation processes with implications extending well beyond birds.

Through his definitive work, *Systematics and the Origin of Species* (1942), and the subsequent *Animal Species and Evolution* (1963), Mayr was to reshape and clarify thinking. The books remain as basic readings. Mayr helped to form the Society of Evolution in 1946 and became the first editor of the journal *Evolution*. With his solid basis in museum research he developed the methodology work, *Principles of Systemic Zoology* (1979). Increasing interest in the historic dimension led to *The Growth of Biological Thought* (1982). These seminal works were developed alongside a production of some 300 research papers on birds. During his career Mayr described 26 species of birds. He remained an avid ornithologist right until he died at the age of 100.

Mayr's major works on Pacific birds were his *List of New Guinea Birds* (1941), *Birds of the South-west Pacific* (1942) and, in 2003 at the age of 98, the final *Birds of Northern Melanesia: Speciation, Ecology, and Biogeography*. The last was written with Jared Diamond and will long be a definitive work on island evolution.

Mayr's work on Australo-Pacific birds began in 1927 when, after meeting with Lord Rothschild at the International Zoological Congress in Budapest, Hungary, he was persuaded to forsake his plan to be a medical doctor in favour of bird studies in New Guinea. He worked and collected in Dutch New Guinea in 1928, the Mandated Territory in 1928–1929, and the Solomon Islands in 1929–1930. Mayr emigrated to North America in 1932 to become Associate Curator of the Whitney and Rothschild Collections in the American Museum of Natural History, where he remained until 1953.

The 1930s to 1960s saw the production of the American Museum's unique series of *Novitates* on Pacific birds. The papers included studies by Robert Cushman Murphy on pigeons, *Conopodera* flycatchers, various petrels (especially *Puffinus pacificus*) and, with Gregory Mathews, *Zosterops* (white-eyes). Dean Amadon wrote definitive works on the avifaunas of various island and taxonomic groups also to make a name for himself in Australasia. Mayr contributed review works on geographic variation, morphology and evo-



Ernst Mayr (right) with Dean Amadon, his long-time associate at the American Museum of Natural History, on the occasion of his 75th birthday, 5 July 1979.

lution in *Halcyon chloris*, *Erythrura*, *Rhipidura*, *Pachycephala*, *Miagara*, and *Petroica* and, with S. Dillon Ripley, *Lalage*. Mayr's study on the birds of Rennel Island, the endemic-rich island at the end of the Solomons' chain, was outstanding. Such papers are not routine taxonomic works. They are characterised by exquisite details of morphology, insights into basic biology, geographic variation, and interpretation. The southern Pacific area was identified as an exuberant zone for variation, speciation, and evolution. For example, *Pachycephala pectoralis*, in its 50-plus geographic races, showed how plastic and responsive bird populations may be, and pointed to the potentially striking effects of geographic isolation on variation and evolution. *Petroica multicolor*, with minimal morphological geographic variation through its thousand-plus continental Australian range has multiple very distinctive races on islands only hundreds of miles apart.

An obliging friend and prompt correspondent, Ernst was an inspirational tutor to Australian ornithologists. He developed joint papers with Dom Serventy and Keith Hindwood. This writer is especially grateful to Ernst for endless rewarding discussions and supervision.

A minor interesting aside may be introduced here. Mayr's *List of New Guinea Birds* and South Pacific books came out early in the Pacific war. In his introduction to the latter he expressed the hope that its timely appearance would help bored American ornithologist servicemen to identify and enjoy the endemic island birds. This certainly applied to some of us Australians in New Guinea. Though limited to this 'list' without descriptions, we were able to 'deduce' a great many identifications.

Mayr was made a Corresponding Fellow of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union in 1939. But it was 1959 before he was able to spend a significant period in Australia when at last he had the opportunity to spend time in the field with many Australian colleagues. His omnipresent influence on world ornithology was reflected in his Presidency of the International Ornithological Congress at Ithaca in 1962.

Mayr was appointed as an Alex Agassiz Professor at Harvard in 1953 and was subsequently Director of Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology. A visit to him at the Museum of Comparative Zoology in the 1990s was an inspiring experience. He operated from three rooms at the Museum: one housed his library on evolution and he did his writings on that subject there; another well-equipped room housed his books on the history of biology; a third 'expanded' room, also with a writing table, housed Ernst's huge personal library on birds. Mayr explained that moving

during the day between the contrasting subjects broke boredom, refreshed the mind, stimulated thinking, and accelerated productive writing in all three areas!

Since his death many published tributes have been paid to Ernst Mayr (see, for example, the broad based one by Jerry A. Coyne in *Science* (307, 1212–1213). In *The Living Bird* (24, 5), Kris Snibbs quotes Ernst's response to his question about the latter's longevity: 'I have worked hard all my life, and I think that's part of the answer. The other part is ... I am never depressed. I am somewhat optimistic ... I have what the psychologists would probably consider the right kind of attitude toward life.' These rationalisations are undoubtedly valid. A more relevant explanation might be that throughout life Ernst remained a dedicated bird-watcher.

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