

Obituary

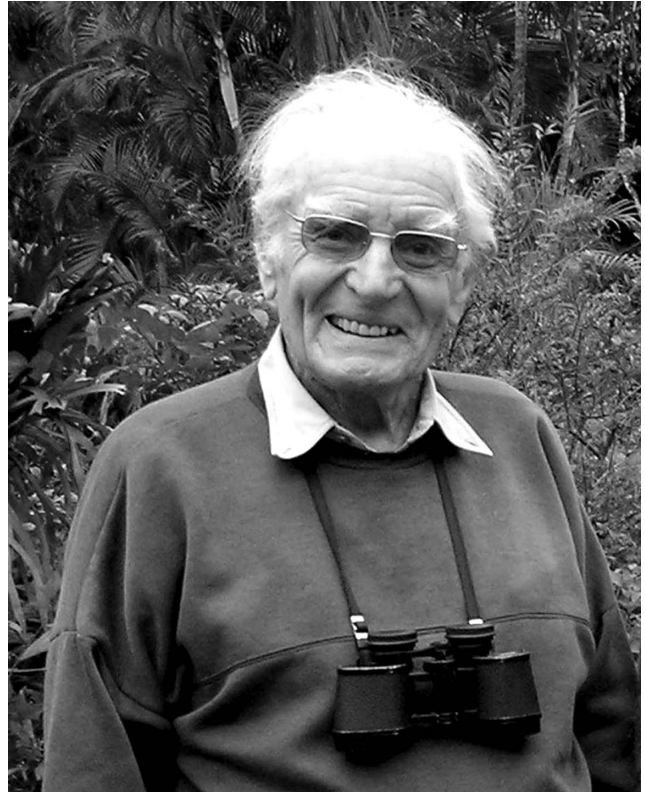
IAN ROWLEY

6 February 1926–29 May 2009

Ian Cecil Robert Rowley was born in Edinburgh, Scotland on 6 February 1926 and went to school at Wellington College in Berkshire. He completed one year of an arts degree at Cambridge University before joining the Royal Navy in 1943. He served as a Midshipman on HMS *Corinthian* in the North Sea, was commissioned in the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve and served on various landing craft in Combined Operations across the English Channel during the Normandy landings. According to Ian, his craft was shipping large quantities of fresh eggs to the American troops, while the British had to make do with the powdered version. After the war he undertook critical duty on a minesweeper.

Ian came to Australia in March 1949. He was asked “what’s the use of an arts degree?” and so decided to study Agricultural Science at Melbourne University instead. It proved a good choice as he was awarded the Wrixon Exhibition in Agriculture at the end of the course. Ian’s lifetime passion for birds was kindled early in life during a holiday on Exmoor with his father and it was during his undergraduate days in Melbourne that Roy Wheeler introduced him to Australian birds. On graduation in 1952, Ian joined the fledgling CSIRO Wildlife Survey Section as an Experimental Officer to investigate methods of rabbit control, first in Tasmania and later in NSW and the ACT, initiating a study of individually marked rabbits by CSIRO. Around this time, he also assisted Robert Carrick, who was working on the ecology and behaviour of the Australian Magpie *Gymnorhina tibicen*, a species Ian would return to nearly 50 years later in Perth. Francis Ratcliffe, then Officer-in-Charge of the Survey Section, encouraged his research staff to spend ten per cent of their time on a study of their own choice, outside the scope of their core duties. These became known as CDK projects (Chief Doesn’t Know). This was actually a misnomer – he did know, but not officially. It was under this guise that Ian began his pioneering study on the Superb Fairy-wren (*Malurus cyaneus*) in the grounds of the CSIRO laboratory (the old Gungahlin Homestead) in Canberra. This classical study was based on detailed observations of wrens fitted with leg bands in unique colour combinations and was the first published study of an Australian cooperatively breeding species. The work raised considerable international interest and Ian became a major player internationally in the study of cooperative breeding in birds.

In 1953, Ian helped Robert Carrick to develop the Australian Bird Banding Scheme (now the Australian Bird and Bat Banding Scheme), after which, banding for individual recognition became a crucial technique in his future research. Ian held one of the very earliest banding licences (No. 5) and his colour allocation scheme was named ‘*Special after Rowley*’. It was perhaps fitting that his eulogy was given by the holder of the next lowest extant licence, Stephen Davies (No. 60). This was the start of Ian’s long and productive research on the ecology and behaviour of around 15 species of Australian birds, particularly fairy-wrens, corvids and cockatoos. His *modus operandi*, ‘To study the ecology, social organisation and demography of a colour-banded population’ has



since been followed in countless other Australian ornithological studies.

In 1961, Ian began his research on Australian corvids. This work was initiated in response to the impact of crows and ravens on lambing flocks. Ian carried out a taxonomic review of the genus, added one new species (*Corvus mellori*), described the distributions of the five Australian species and provided a comparative account of their ecology and social organisation. The Australian Raven (*C. coronoides*) was one of these species and Ian was involved in a detailed study of its social organisation around his property at Geary’s Gap, near Canberra. In his spare time, he conducted a study of the White-winged Chough (*Corcorax melanorhamphus*), another cooperatively breeding species that occurred on his property. It was while making these observations that he narrowly escaped being shot – at a distance, a man peering through binoculars while sitting still on a shooting stick must look remarkably like a kangaroo.

Following Ian’s study on corvids, Harry Frith, then Chief of the Division of Wildlife Research (the successor of the Wildlife Survey Section), told Ian that if he wanted to continue working on birds he would have to move to Western Australia to work on the Galah (*Eolophus roseicapilla*), ‘the last available pest species’. Accordingly, in 1969 Ian moved to Perth to join the Western Australian laboratory of the Division of Wildlife Research. There

he began his eight-year study of the ecology and social organisation of the Galah which he completed in 1977. During this time, Ian published his first book 'Bird Life' (1974, Collins: Sydney), a review of those Australian bird species which, to that date, had been studied in detail, and which he dedicated to his father, Duncan. In 1990, he published a second book containing the results of the Galah research, 'Behavioural Ecology of the Galah *Eolophus roseicapillus* in the Wheatbelt of Western Australia' (Surrey Beatty: Chipping Norton, NSW). Between 1978 and 1991 Ian, with long-time friend and colleague Graeme Chapman, studied the ecology and social behaviour of the Major Mitchell Cockatoo (*Cacatua leadbeateri*). This was his first official conservation project; all his earlier official studies had been of species deemed to be pests of economic importance.

During his cockatoo research, Ian continued his interest in cooperatively breeding species and, in 1973, began a study of the Splendid Fairy-wren (*Malurus splendens*) on Gooseberry Hill, a reserve close to the CSIRO laboratory on the outskirts of Perth. This part-time project received official sanction in 1982. Michael Brooker joined this program in 1983, when it was expanded into a broader study of cooperative breeding in fairy-wrens and the impact of wildfire on small passerines. In its heyday in the mid 1980s, the Gooseberry Hill study area of 120 ha contained more than 100 adult individually colour-banded wrens living in 32 territories, for which reproductive output and movements were recorded and their progeny banded. This population attracted the attention of many international visitors, including Bob and Laura Payne of the University of Michigan. It demonstrated, for the first time, the extremely high level of extra-group fertilisation now known to be characteristic of the genus *Malurus*. The fairy-wrens on Ian's original 1973 area are still being monitored in 2009.

With his wife, Eleanor Russell, Ian also studied the threatened Purple-crowned Fairy-wren (*Malurus coronatus*), the White-winged Fairy-wren (*M. leucopterus*), the Red-winged Fairy-wren (*M. elegans*) and the Blue-breasted Fairy-wren (*M. pulcherrimus*). Although Ian retired from CSIRO as a Senior Principal Research Scientist in 1991, some of these studies were continued into his retirement. In 1997, Ian and Eleanor published

a monograph on the Maluridae 'Fairy-wrens and Grasswrens' (Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK). Throughout his career, Ian's research was recorded in over 100 scientific papers and reports. Until recently, Ian and Eleanor had been conducting a study of the social organisation and breeding of the Australian Magpie on the flood plains at the confluence of the Swan and Helena Rivers, near their home in Guildford.

Ian was a long term member of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (now Birds Australia) and was elected a Fellow in 1989. In 1991, he was awarded the inaugural D. L. Serventy Medal for excellence in Australian ornithological publications. Between 1990 and 2000, he was the last Editor of *Emu* who also managed publication of the journal before this was undertaken by CSIRO Publishing on behalf of Birds Australia. As an editor, he patiently helped many budding authors, both professional and amateur with wise words of caution and gentle castigation. He was elected a Corresponding Fellow of the American Ornithologists Union in 1974, in recognition of his work on communal breeding. He was an Australian representative to the International Ornithological Committee (IOC) in 1974 and was elected to IOC's Permanent Executive Committee in 1982, remaining there until 1991. In 2005, Ian received a W. Roy Wheeler Medallion awarded by Bird Observers Club of Australia for excellence in field ornithology.

Ian's boundless enthusiasm and delight in ornithology encouraged many to study birds and the meticulous methodologies he developed benefitted their research. In his quiet self-deprecating way, Ian was always willing to offer assistance and advice to both professionals and amateurs, sometimes so unobtrusively that his role as their mentor may not always have been realised.

Ian died on 29 May 2009. He had not been well for some time and his death came after a short period in hospital. He is survived by his wife, Eleanor Russell.

Denis A. Saunders
Michael G. Brooker