

## Memories of Richard Zann

Tim R. Birkhead

Department of Animal & Plant Sciences, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, S10 2TN, UK.  
Email: t.r.birkhead@sheffield.ac.uk

Richard Zann was the authority on Zebra Finches (*Taeniopygia guttata*) and as such played a pivotal role in the careers of several others who, like myself, mainly studied domesticated Zebra Finches in captivity. I met Richard in 1988, we became friends and over the next 20 years we worked on several projects together. On that first visit, Richard told me how the recent forest fires that had claimed many lives, not far from where he lived, were still very fresh in his and his wife Eileen's minds. On the evening of 6 February 2009, as I watched the television news, reports of the dreadful bushfires near Kinglake reminded me of their concern and I feared for their safety. Two days later, an email confirmed my worst fears: Richard, his wife and daughter had died on 7 February. His death, which cut short our relationship, deprives the ornithological community of an excellent researcher, and his friends and family of a charming, generous man. This brief account of how we met is a memorial to Richard and his family.

I kept Zebra Finches in my bedroom and in an aviary in the garden when I was a teenager growing up outside Leeds in Yorkshire in the 1960s. Passionate about birds and bird watching, I had no qualms about keeping Zebra Finches in captivity since they seemed so content and because they allowed me such privileged access to their lives. Watching Zebra Finches at close range as they went through their entire life cycle, from courtship, nest-building, egg-laying and chick-rearing to their inevitable death, was an extraordinary experience and an important part of my ornithological education. My parents encouraged my interest in birds, although later, when I started missing lessons in order to go bird watching, they were less enthusiastic and warned me of the risks of ignoring my studies. Their admonishments had little effect until the day my father, frustrated by my lack of scholastic aptitude, told me very firmly that if I didn't 'pull my socks up' I would end up working in one of the clothing factories that Leeds was then famous for. The thought filled me with absolute dread; it was the antithesis of what I loved and almost overnight I became more focussed.

In 1976, I was fortunate to find myself a position as a university lecturer in another Yorkshire town, and I have been based in Sheffield ever since. During the first 7 years there, I spent each summer in the Arctic, continuing with the seabird studies that had constituted my Ph.D. research, but throughout this time, amidst the icebergs and polar bears I continued to think about using the Zebra Finch as a study species. As an undergraduate I had been inspired by the topic of sperm competition – a heady combination of evolutionary thinking and sex – and I wanted see if what had been discovered in insects was also true of birds.

To some this didn't seem very promising for everyone 'knew' that birds were monogamous. My Ph.D. studies on guillemots (*Uria aalge*), however, convinced me that sperm competition had a lot going for it, so in the early 1980s with my wanderlust somewhat depleted by looming paternal responsibilities, I picked up where I had left off as a teenager and began keeping Zebra Finches again.

Grudgingly, I think, I was given space in a cellar-like part of the Zoology Department. Although the facilities were basic, the birds didn't seem to mind and were wonderfully cooperative. With the enthusiastic help of a technician Jayne Pellatt, and an undergraduate, Fiona Hunter, we quantified and documented the behavioural aspects of sperm competition in our captive Zebra Finches. These were exciting times: behavioural ecology was new; studies of sexual selection and sperm competition, especially in birds, was also new and our results gratifyingly consistent with what theory predicted.

There was just one problem – as several of my colleagues were quick to point out: how did I know that what my domesticated Zebra Finches were doing in captivity was what Zebra Finches did in the wild? I began writing to various ornithologists in Australia to see if there might be somewhere suitable I could study wild Zebra Finches. Most of the replies were disappointing as it was pointed out to me that Zebra Finches breed unpredictably more or less where and when they like, which was hardly compatible with persuading my head of department to give me study leave. I had almost given up when in late 1987 I received a letter from Richard Zann and suddenly everything seemed possible.

Richard told me that he had a study population of individually colour-ringed Zebra Finches at Wunghnu in northern Victoria that reproduced fairly predictably (because the area was irrigated) and he invited me to visit him. I couldn't believe my good fortune.

So, for 6 very hot weeks in early 1988, distracted occasionally by goannas, brown snakes (*Pseudonaja textilis*) and unprecedented numbers of flies, Richard's Zebra Finches confirmed everything we had seen in captivity. Field research is risky, but on this occasion everything went pretty well to plan and the entire experience – even those days when it reached 45°C – was thoroughly enjoyable. In part this was due to an excellent field assistant, Keith Clarkson, a former Ph.D. student of mine who accompanied me. In addition, Pat and Arthur Shone, with whom Richard had arranged for us to stay, made sure we enjoyed our Australian experience, including catching and eating yabbies and some unlikely snake stories.

Central to our success of course was Richard and his knowledge of Zebra Finches. When I first arrived he was away in Alice Springs, so we didn't meet for another 3 weeks. That was fortunate because, by the time we did meet, I felt less like a wild Zebra Finch novice. Richard and I hit it off immediately. It was obvious that he was someone who knew his birds and was quietly, but deeply, passionate about his research. We talked non-stop for almost the entire day and I learnt a great deal from him, both then and later. Richard knew the history of each of his colour marked birds; he knew when and where they were breeding, what they ate, how long they lived and the colour of their beaks – in fact, he knew almost everything there was to know about them. His was an exemplary, and I now realise a rather unique, study system. The nests were conspicuous, easily accessible and the birds eminently watchable and catchable. Whilst at Wunghnu I decided that not only was the Zebra Finch a model species, Richard's study was a model system.

Over the ensuing years Richard and I exchanged emails on a regular basis, comparing results from our various Zebra Finch studies and keeping each other informed of our respective lives. I was delighted when in 1995 Richard asked me to read drafts of the chapters for his Zebra Finch book and even more delighted by the finished product. My students and I are still using it.

Richard Zann was an excellent, efficient and modest scientist. He was from an era when those characteristics were sufficient to launch a career in biology. How things have changed! They changed during the latter part of Richard's career. Suddenly, the main characteristic a researcher needed was testosterone, buckets off it, for beginning in the 1990s, research funding became extremely competitive. Richard wasn't competitive and he suffered as a consequence. When he told me of his struggles to secure the funding necessary to keep his Zebra Finch field work going, I was disappointed both for him and by the fact that the funding bodies and their referees were incapable of seeing the value of his long-term studies. Although no one can doubt that competitive funding has resulted in some excellent research, it has done so at a cost. One of the main costs is a short-term view of the world. With a mere handful of notable exceptions, long-term studies are out of favour. Short-termism breeds a scientific superficiality, and in particular a superficial knowledge of one's study species – a risky foundation on which to build. Richard Zann's approach to research was exactly the opposite. He knew his bird, he loved research and he also loved teaching – telling others about the natural world. In many ways, he is the model academic we should aspire to.