

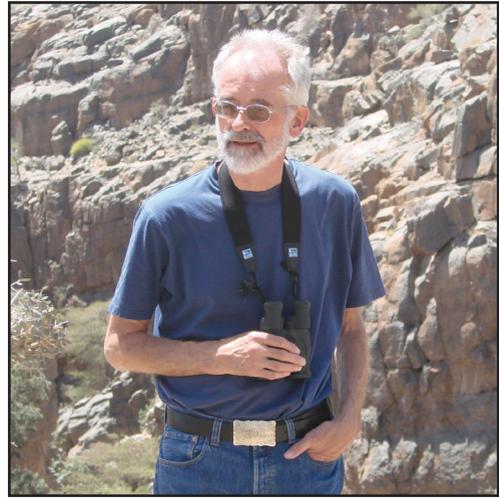
OBITUARIES

Peter John Cowan (1947 – 2019)

Peter, known to many as PJ, was born on 5 November 1947 at Kingsbury, London. The family moved to Hastings in 1962, with Peter then attending Hastings Grammar school. A teacher at his school encouraged Peter and his friends to watch birds and keep records, and so his natural history journey began. As was so typical of Peter he took up this challenge with enthusiasm and even at the young age of 14 he volunteered at RSPB Minsmere during the school summer holidays. The following year he was at Havergate Island guarding breeding Avocets *Recurvirostra avosetta* and the next summer at Abernethy protecting Ospreys *Pandion haliaetus*.

It was at the University of Hull in late 1966 that he met his future wife Elaine. Soon after graduating they married and sailed off into the sunset with one-way tickets to the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Canada via Montreal (courtesy of a wedding gift from Elaine's father). Peter went on to complete his Masters and PhD at the University of Manitoba under his supervisor Dr Roger Evans, a 'gull man' who, once Peter had successfully passed his PhD oral, said he never really understood what PJ's research was all about but just let him get on with it as it always seemed to work out OK with good publications. Peter's Masters was on *The contrast and coloration of seabirds* and his PhD on *Parental recognition of voice in Canada Geese*.

Peter and Elaine moved to Aberdeen for five years where Peter became a Poultry Research Specialist at the College of Agriculture at Craibstone. Then came Peter's first encounter with the desert environment that helped shape his later life. In September 1980, the family (Anne-Marie was born in August 1979) moved to Libya, as Peter was appointed as Assistant Professor in Zoology at the Higher College of Technology, or HIT, 400 km south of Tripoli. Here he enjoyed regular trips into the desert to explore dunes, wadis and shrimp lakes, and to learn more about associated species and cultural history. Peter loved his time in the deep deserts of Libya and established himself as a desert biologist with a special interest in birds and



a general interest in other taxa. It was during this time that Peter became a member of OSME and in the following years did his best to attend the AGM if his travels allowed.

The family returned to Scotland for a few years before Peter and Elaine once again headed back to the desert, this time to the Middle East where he taught at the University of Kuwait from 1988 until 1998, with a brief spell back in the UK during the Iraq war. Prior to the war, Peter often visited the border area hoping to get into Iraq to do some ornithological exploration, but his attempts were politely curtailed by the border guards. Such attempts became impossible from the early 1990s; even trips within Kuwait were curtailed due to the chance of coming across unexploded munitions. Consequently a safe trip was planned to Dubai, where Peter narrowly missed drowning in a flash flood! Although many areas of the Kuwaiti desert were out of bounds, there were still places where Peter and his friend David Newman could go out looking for the specialist desert larks – mainly in the areas that had been supposedly cleared. At this time Peter also became good friends with Gary Brown, a birder and botanist who was equally hooked on deserts. He also had a stint working on Kuwait's new aquarium project, where his key task was to help populate the various exhibits with species ranging from Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus* to Saltwater Crocodiles *Crocodylus porosus*! Rather romantically, he purchased two Brown-necked Ravens *Corvus*

ruficollis as a birthday present for Elaine. In the early 2000's Peter did some consultancy work on the biodiversity of Wadi Bura (also known as Jabal Burra) in Yemen enabling him to travel to Sana'a and Hodeidah.

Most recently he worked for 10 years at the University of Nizwa in Oman. Here, he and Elaine commenced joint studies of dragonflies at various springs and wadis across Oman. One wadi pool became scientifically their own after so many repeated visits. As Elaine stated in their joint talk at the OSME Summer Meeting in 2019, "I did the photos but Peter always did the real science".

It was during his time in Oman when Peter took over as Editor of the OSME journal *Sandgrouse*. He was co-opted onto OSME Council in 2008 and edited his first issue that year (Volume 30, issue 2). Peter made an immediate impact on the journal with a new style and layout which is still evident more than a decade later. As Editor he introduced a new scientific rigour to the journal and insisted that papers should be peer-reviewed prior to acceptance. He oversaw the editing and production of 22 issues of *Sandgrouse* along with several special issues, most notably the 50th Anniversary Supplement for which he also contributed a paper *The unnatural history of desert birds in the Arabian Peninsula*.

From the time that he spent in Kuwait, Oman and Yemen he submitted many records and observations to the *Arabian Breeding Bird Atlas* project as well as contributing to *Phoenix*. In the words of Mike Jennings "he was one of the few Arabian birders who had an interest in the more mundane records of Crested Larks, Bulbuls and Sand partridge!" Towards the end of 2018 Peter emailed me to say that he felt the time was right to stand down as *Sandgrouse* Editor and he edited his final issue in the spring of 2019. His significant contribution to OSME was recognised at the Summer meeting in 2019, when the OSME Council was able to present Peter with a print of his favourite *Sandgrouse* cover – Cream-coloured Coursers *Cursorius cursor* taken by Amir Ben Dov. His love for desert wildlife was clearly illustrated in the talk he gave with Elaine at that same meeting entitled *Diurnal wildlife at a wadi pool in northern Oman*.

Peter passed away peacefully after a short illness on 3 August 2019. He will be sadly

missed, but his many contributions to Middle Eastern ornithology will live on.

Rob Sheldon

Chris Naylor (1961-2019) and Susanna Naylor (1965-2019)



Chris and Susanna lived and worked in the Middle East for 20 years, from 1989-2009. In 1995 they set up home in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon, where Chris, a keen birder and science teacher, frequented the Aammiq Wetland (Plate 1) which they could see from the roof of their apartment. They discovered that it was a Ramsar site, but that conservationists had given it up for lost. The ever-shrinking marshes were being encroached for agriculture and afflicted by over-pumping of water, fertiliser pollution, pesticide abuse, over-grazing, fires and hunting. Susanna was not a birder, but she appreciated the high value of the wetland for local wildlife and vast numbers of migrating birds which used it as a stopover site. They agreed that action was needed. Talking to Dr Chris Walley, a geology lecturer at the American University of Beirut, they heard about A Rocha, a Christian organization engaged in scientific research, community-based conservation and environmental education. Now working in 21 countries, at that time A Rocha was a single project in Portugal and A Rocha Lebanon became the second when Chris and Susanna became Team Leaders in autumn 1997. At the start of the year, Susanna had given birth to Josh in Zahlé Hospital, so now had three children under the age of seven, but for the next twelve years she hosted visitors, welcomed volunteers and undertook much of the admin and financial management. It was essential



Plate 1: The Aammiq Wetland (Lebanon), eight years after A Rocha began working with local landowners to restore it. © Rich Prior

to have the support and understanding of Lebanese churches and so, in May 1998, a large assembly of Christian leaders met in Beirut to hear Rev Dr John Stott and Colin Chapman plead for environmental stewardship as a normal part of Christian discipleship.

Chris Walley recalls those early years of A Rocha Lebanon: "Chris and Susanna made their home, with their children, in Qabb Elias, an area that the British Embassy considered unsafe for UK citizens to visit, let alone inhabit. The rumbles of artillery from the southern Bekaa were a normal background noise and Israeli air raids in the valley were not uncommon. It was bitterly cold in winter and baking hot in summer. The road over to Beirut was legendary in its difficulty with Syrian army checkpoints, snowdrifts in winter and an unnerving number of accidents. Indeed, for the first few years of the work, the northern limit of the Aammiq Wetland was marked by an ominous line of south-facing Syrian tanks and armoured vehicles. Chris and Susanna were, in every sense of the word, on the frontline. They achieved an enormous amount. They had studied Arabic and worked hard to develop their skills with the colloquial form, and through it made many friends and contacts. Chris was remarkably gifted at getting alongside people and soon won the friendship – and certainly the respect – of the landowners, hunters and often volatile mixture of individuals in Qabb Elias. There was a gentle grace about him that placated even men with automatic weapons who either had – or claimed they had – authority in this part

of the Bekaa. Chris's ability to make friends was also apparent in the endless meetings with landowners, the various government ministries in Beirut and with other concerned NGOs. When I was with him I was always impressed by his courage, wisdom and grace. In a culture which depended on the creation of links, loyalties and obligations, the way that Chris and Susanna displayed an open and unshakeable integrity was impressive. Everyone knew they could not be bought or manipulated: and that meant that they could be trusted."

As local and expatriate scientists and artists joined the team, Chris and Susanna oversaw the development of outdoor environmental education to enhance school curricula (nationally, a novel concept) based at a centre on the Skaff Estate. Chris was in his element when busloads of youngsters arrived at the marsh. Their first reaction was usually fear of the bugs and attempts to kill them. Chris would calmly split the students into groups, to pond-dip or birdwatch, and delighted in the transformation as they responded with awe to storks drifting overhead and curiosity as they examined tadpoles and freshwater invertebrates. The team encouraged young naturalists by publishing bird and butterfly identification booklets in Arabic and launching *wildlebanon.org* with entirely Lebanese content, still a unique resource for schools that rely heavily on American or British text books.

Research was an important element. In April 2001, A Rocha Lebanon re-launched the ringing scheme (abandoned in the early 1970s)

and was rewarded on the very first evening when a Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*, roosting in the reed beds, was found to be carrying a Budapest ring. Bird studies included autumn raptor counts, winter surveys of waders and ducks and a year-long study of harriers at Aammiq, which showed that once the annual burning of the reedbeds stopped, Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*, Hen Harrier *C. cyaneus*, Montagu's Harrier *C. pygargus* and Pallid Harrier *C. macrourus* used them to roost, particularly in January and February. A detailed hydrological survey throughout a 12-month period during 2002/2003 provided baseline data on water sources, water quality and recommendations for management. Amphibians were studied at Aammiq by visiting herpetologists in 2004, leading to a survey of 76 sites throughout the country in 2005, bringing together herpetologists from A Rocha, the Université du Liban and the American University of Beirut.

Once the urgent need to protect Aammiq was being met, and the wetland was expanding in size, Chris turned his attention to other hotspots. In partnership with the Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon (SPNL), for three years from 2005-2007 he led field research on a national scale: over 30 sites were assessed with a total of 320 site visits and over 3000 hours of field monitoring. It was the most extensive bird research project ever undertaken in Lebanon and led to the establishment of a national bird database. Before the work started, there had been four Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in the country (including the Aammiq Wetland and the adjacent Chouf Cedar Reserve). The work resulted in the declaration of 11 new IBAs by BirdLife International. Afterwards, Chris and colleagues from SPNL ran courses in bird identification, conservation advocacy and site protection at each of the new IBAs so that local people could look after their forest, valley or mountain.

Perhaps Chris and Susanna's most ambitious dream was to set up an eco-restaurant in the Bekaa Valley to provide employment, using local, mostly organic food and wines, thus benefiting small businesses, with a percentage of the income going to the ongoing protection of the Aammiq Wetland and nearby Chouf Cedar Reserve. Funded

through the Swiss Development Agency and with support from Susanna's accounting skills, Tawlet Aammiq opened in 2012 and provides much-needed facilities for visitors from near and far.

By then, the Naylor's were supporting A Rocha Lebanon from a distance, living in England where they had first met, though Susanna's childhood was spent in Ghana, Mexico and the USA. Both had degrees from Cambridge University, Susanna in Medical Sciences MA, BA (Hons), and Chris in Natural Sciences MA, BA (Hons). As a newly married couple they moved to Kuwait to teach, planning to stay for at least a few years, but the invasion by Saddam Hussein inevitably changed their plans, though not their desire to embed themselves in the Middle East. They studied Arabic for a year and a half in Jordan, expecting to teach somewhere in the Gulf States, but Susanna had a recurring dream of them living in a red-roofed house on a mountain which descended to the sea, with a clear sense that it was where God intended them to be. One day a postcard arrived, showing the hills above Beirut, which was exactly as she had described to Chris, even to the position of the trees. They had already agreed to work with the Christian mission agency, Interserve, which was looking for a science teacher for the secondary Evangelical School in Zahlé. Qabb Elias became their home for the next five years, then Zahlé, and then Beirut. They moved to the UK in 2009, and the following year Chris became Executive Director of A Rocha International. In 2012, once their three children, Sam, Chloe and Joshua had begun adjusting to life in England, Susanna became a Form Teacher and then Head of Science at Kitebrook Prep School, Gloucestershire. She was just six weeks into her new role as Head of Science at Christ Church Cathedral School in Oxford when she and Chris died together in a car accident during a working visit to A Rocha South Africa.

For more information, see the obituary in *British Birds*, a short video of Chris at www.arocha.org/en/people/chris-naylor/ and his book, *Postcards from the Middle East: How our family fell in love with the Arab world* (2015).

Barbara Mearns