



Photograph by Clark Stumida, courtesy of the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology

JEAN DELACOUR, 1890-1985  
(From a photograph taken in 1977)

## IN MEMORIAM: JEAN (THEODORE) DELACOUR

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Jean Delacour's death marks the end of an era in ornithology. He was unique in the diversity of his contributions to ornithology, he knew the birds of all faunistic regions, he wrote authoritative monographs of individual orders and families, and he vastly added to our knowledge of tropical birds. He was the last person able to maintain a large and diversified bird park and one of the few to use this treasure

of live birds as the basis of his research. Finally, he was one of the great leaders of international conservation.

Although born in Paris (26 September 1890) he spent much of his youth at the family estates in the Picardy, where he developed his love for plants and animals. His father built him some large aviaries, where young Delacour (not yet 10 years old) raised

the majority of species of birds customarily kept in aviaries at that time. What is quite remarkable is that Delacour became an ornithologist by way of being an aviculturist. Neither did he start a skin collection, as did so many of his generation, nor was he ever a bird watcher. Rather, he was a collector of rare living birds, and bestowed upon them all his love.

Delacour was educated at the best schools, apparently always being the first in his class. He studied a diversity of subjects, but being most interested in parks and horticulture when he was a student, he completed his studies at the University of Lille with a doctorate of biology.

The first World War, the end of Europe's so-called belle époque, was a total tragedy for Delacour, perhaps more for him than for most other Europeans. He experienced from the very beginning all the perils and deprivations of service in the French army, and his only surviving brother was killed by artillery. For many months the battle lines went through the family estate, leaving such total devastation that after the war Delacour had to look for another place to live. He found it in Chateau Clères in Normandy where, starting from scratch, he built up a wonderful zoological park for the second time in his life. Since his boyhood Delacour had the dream to create a Garden of Eden on earth. And, indeed, he succeeded as closely as this is practical. Gibbons, gazelles, kangaroos, flamingos, cranes, numerous kinds of waterfowl, and other wildlife roamed freely through his park; carnivores of course were excluded. The smaller and more delicate birds were kept in aviaries. Eventually, Delacour achieved his goal of having the finest private zoo in the world, particularly rich in birds. They numbered on the average 3,000 individuals belonging to more than 500 species. He often had several pairs of the most rare species.

Before World War II Delacour was very active in French ornithology. Dissatisfied by the publication facilities in France, in 1920 he founded the leading ornithological journal in France, *L'Oiseau*, and was editor until World War II. In 1938 he served as Secretary General of the Ninth International Ornithological Congress, which met at Rouen. This provided a wonderful opportunity for ornithologists from all over the world to admire the treasures of the aviaries at Clères. At the time of the Rouen congress, the Proceedings of the Oxford (1934) Congress had not yet been published, and it became Delacour's ambition to publish the Rouen proceedings (of which he was the editor) earlier than those of Oxford. And so they were, owing to his extraordinary efficiency.

Delacour was one of the most successful tropical explorers. Beginning in 1922, when he went to Venezuela and the Guianas, until the beginning of the second World War, he conducted an expedition almost every year. Among these were seven expeditions that he took to various parts of Indochina be-

tween 1923 and 1939. The priceless collections that he brought back consisted of 30,000 birds and 8,000 mammals, eventually divided among Paris, London, and New York.

With his friend Pierre Jabouille, an associate on all of the expeditions to Indochina, Delacour summarized his knowledge of birds of that region in the authoritative four-volume "Les Oiseaux de l'Indochine Française" (1931). Although much work has since been done, this handbook is still the standard account of the region. Delacour discovered several new species, including the spectacular Imperial Pheasant (*Hierophasis imperialis*), as well as many hundreds of new subspecies. In the single family Timaliidae, for instance, he described one new species and 40 new subspecies, almost all of them based on his own collections. In his charmingly written and copiously illustrated autobiography ("The Living Air," 1966) Delacour was able to recreate the flavor of life in that vanished past. Particularly valuable is his fascinating account of the old Indo-China.

Among his other expeditions was one in 1929 to Madagascar, where Delacour led a highly successful Franco-Anglo-American expedition. Delacour stayed in the field for four months, but A. L. Rand and R. Archbold continued for two years, bringing back magnificent collections, later worked up particularly by Rand.

This period of Delacour's life terminated when, apparently owing to arson, Chateau Clères was burned totally on 15 February 1939. Shortly afterward World War II broke out. After the French front collapsed, Delacour escaped, reaching New York about Christmas 1940. Through his friendship with Fairfield Osborn and Laurance Rockefeller, he was appointed technical adviser at the Bronx Zoo, the first paid position he had ever held in his life. Fortunately, this position left him enough time to work at the American Museum of Natural History for long hours almost every day. Before Delacour's arrival, the Old World collections of birds at the AMNH had been completely reclassified, integrating the magnificent series of the Rothschild collections with J. P. Chapin's African collections, the material of the Whitney South Sea Expedition, and collections recently brought back by Archbold and Rand, Heinrich, Stein, and other AMNH collectors.

These beautifully arranged series were ideal material for systematic revisions, and Delacour soon produced a long sequence of papers. He reviewed entire families that had not been revised since the British Museum's multivolumed Catalogue of Birds (1874-1898). These included the Pycnonotidae, Estrildidae, and Nectariniidae, as well as many difficult Old World genera, including *Cettia*, *Macronus* (*Mixornis*), *Euplectes*, *Vidua*, *Irena*, *Myiophoneus*, *Lophura*, *Branta*, and several others. Through his avicultural interests he had an unrivaled knowledge of the

Anatidae, and he joined me in working out an entirely new classification of this family (1945). Although subsequently modified in detail, it is now the universally adopted classification of that family. After my "Birds of the Southwest Pacific" was completed, the publisher asked me to do a similar volume on the birds of the Philippines. Jean agreed to share this task with me, and we divided all the families; he would do half, and I the other half. Delacour was famous for the speed with which he worked. It was rumored that he had done (with P. Jabouille) the four volumes of the "Oiseaux de l'Indochine" in just a little more than one year. In our work on the "Birds of the Philippines," Jean and I exchanged each morning the manuscripts of the parts we had done the previous day and night, and this kept both of us working at top speed. We had started the project on 13 March 1945, and the completed manuscript was mailed to the publisher three months later, 13 June 1945. Delacour followed this with the "Birds of Malaysia" (1947).

This enormously productive period of ornithological research came to an end on 1 February 1952, when Delacour accepted the directorship of the Los Angeles County Museum of History, Science, and Art. Thus, at 62, Delacour started a new life, supervising the rapid expansion of the Los Angeles Museum and in every way encouraging the large community of aviculturalists and horticulturalists of southern California.

By the time Delacour had reached retirement age (1 October 1960), he also had restored his zoological park at Clères almost to its former splendor. From then on he spent every summer at Clères and every winter in the United States, visiting New York and Washington, but living mostly in Los Angeles, where he had so many close friends. He continued publishing the series of handsome, well-illustrated handbooks started in New York: "The Pheasants of the World" (1951), "Wild Pigeons and Doves" (1959), the four-volume monograph "The Waterfowl of the World" (1951-1964) and (with Dean Amadon) the "Curassows and Related Birds" (1973).

His mind was as keen as ever (as was his somewhat sardonic humor) up to the last months of his life, but

physical infirmities increased in his final year. He was the star of a large party given by his numerous friends in his honor on the occasion of his 95th birthday, on 26 September 1985. Soon afterward he had to enter the hospital, and after a few days he died of heart failure on 5 November 1985.

Delacour was the outstanding and also the last representative of that school of ornithologists who rejoiced in the diversity of birds, loved to search for rare and undiscovered birds, and unashamedly enjoyed birds for their beauty. The living bird, particularly when in an aviary, was of equal interest to him as the specimen in a collection. He knew a great deal about bird behavior, but in a sort of holistic manner; he never dissected it into individual components, as is done by the ethologists. He had little use for the experimental researches of avian physiologists or for ecological modeling. The three areas where he left the greatest impact are the ornithology of southeast Asia, aviculture, and conservation. Through his extensive connections with leading personalities all over the world, Delacour advanced not just international bird protection, but the cause of conservation as an international movement. He was a founder and for many years president of the International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP).

As a systematist Delacour practiced the principles of the new systematics. He unmasked large numbers of so-called species as somewhat isolated members of widespread polytypic species. He was a great believer in broad genera, showing for instance the invalidity of the loss of a toe as a generic character in woodpeckers and kingfishers.

Those who knew Delacour personally will always remember his keen mind, his charm, his indestructible cheerfulness (in the face of one tragedy after the other, experienced during his long life), his enthusiasm, his helpfulness to others, and his generosity. It was always fun to be with and listen to him holding forth on matters of ornithology, the sad state of the world, or the foibles of mutual friends. Delacour never married, but, as the last surviving son, he was devoted to his mother and took care of her until her death at the age of 94. He bequeathed Clères and its Zoological Park to the French nation.