

In Memoriam

Jean Delacour

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TODAY, ONE HEARS LITTLE ABOUT a "Renaissance man," still less about a Renaissance ornithologist. In our era it may not be entirely impossible to make significant contributions to a variety of topics of bird study, but it would be hard to equal the accomplishments of Jean Delacour, who died in November 1985, at the age of 95, and was perhaps the finest exemplar of a Renaissance man in ornithology. He was universally recognized as the world's greatest aviculturist, the foremost authority on pheasants and waterfowl, the expert on the distribution and taxonomy of birds of Southeast Asia, a pillar of the international conservation movement, and the author of several hundred papers and a dozen books that defined knowledge on any number of groups of "difficult" birds.

The term Renaissance man springs to mind for Delacour because in addition to his substantial and time-consuming interests in ornithology, he was a discriminating art collector, an accomplished gardener, in his youth a gifted singer, and always a brilliant conversationalist whose breadth of knowledge, caustic wit, and deadly accurate imitations made him a delightful companion until the last day of his life. There seemed hardly a personage, from Winston Churchill to the Emperor of Annam, from Edwardian ornithologists to Elizabeth Taylor, whose path he had not crossed and of whom he had not a funny tale. Conscious that in life he had enjoyed every advantage and seen most of the world in the last era before modern forces unravelled long-established civilizations and still older natural ecosystems, he was not optimistic about the future, but he faced it with wit and went on working hard at what he believed important. At about 88, for example, he sat down and translated into his native French his definitive *Pheasants of the World*, a book he had written originally in English in



Jean Delacour at Clères in 1970, at the age of 80. Photo/Wesley E. Lanyon.

1951. In his nineties he still contributed valuable reviews and notes to ornithological journals.

Jean Delacour was born in Paris in 1890, into a rich and well-connected family of the haute bourgeoisie. He was exposed to nature, both domestic and wild, at the family's country place in Picardy, where he was first fascinated by the variety of barnyard fowl. When he was eight years old, a gardener showed him an orchid, *Stanhopea wardi*, in the greenhouse; the boy was transfixed—he never imagined that anything could be so beautiful as the flower before him, and the experience sparked a lifelong interest in botany and horticulture that was second only to his love of birds. Two years later, the young Delacour, at ten, had his first

aviaries. Soon afterward, he began stocking the grounds as well; four acres, for example, were given over to ostriches, and an increasingly comprehensive collection of waterfowl lived on the lake. As a young man, at school in Paris, at the University of Lille, and in the army, birds remained his obsession, and his reputation in European avicultural circles rose with his successes keeping and breeding exotic and delicate birds. Tragically, in 1918, the chateau and the grounds on which he had worked so hard were substantially destroyed by the retreating German Army, and most of the birds were killed.

After recovering from the shock, Delacour decided to recreate and expand his bird collection at another site. In 1920, he bought the Chateau de Clères, in Normandy not far from Rouen, which became his principal home for the rest of his life. Nestled in a narrow valley with a fast-flowing stream and a small lake, its meadows, hills, islands, and outbuildings were ideally suited for maintaining a large and varied collection of wildlife. Within a few years, more than a hundred species of waterfowl, as well as rheas, cranes, screamers, trumpeters, curassows, pheasants, macaws, and pigeons, were living at semi-liberty or in large, elegantly landscaped flight cages. The mammals present included blackbuck antelope from India, Chinese waterdeer, two species of wallabies, and gibbons. Inside the chateau, in specially heated rooms, were hummingbirds, sunbirds, kingfishers, and birds of paradise. Colette, the French writer, described Clères as "an earthly paradise," and, indeed it was, where art and nature imitated one another: the mixture of brilliantly colored birds and graceful animals evoked those oversized 17th and 18th Century paintings of exotic menageries, but at Clères the birds, with only the most discrete encouragement, nested and raised their young, and were studied by naturalists from all over the world.

The 1920s also saw the expansion of Delacour's activities in other aspects of ornithology. In 1920, he founded the journal *L'Oiseau* and, as editor, made it the leading ornithological periodical in France. In 1922, he was one of the founders of the International Committee (now Council) for Bird Preservation, which was, in fact, the first international conservation organization of any kind; later, from 1938 to 1959, he was the Council's president.

In 1923, the first of seven major zoological surveys took place to what was then French Indochina, organized and led by Delacour. Each expedition lasted several months—in one case, over a year—and brought back thousands of birds, live or as specimens for museums. Some 1100 species and subspecies were found, including hundreds new to science. Delacour's writing, culminating in the monumental four volumes of *Les Oiseaux de l'Indochine Francaise*, are today among the few sources on one of the most substantially altered and inaccessible parts of the world.

The productive but tranquil life of the 1920s and 1930s, with the flourishing collection at Clères, expeditions to Indochina and Madagascar, shorter visits to museums in the United States and around Europe, and the resulting publications—on widowbirds, megapodes, whistling thrushes, sunbirds, and babblers, to name some of the more obscure groups—was shattered by World War II. The chateau was struck by bombs in May 1940; many of the birds were moved elsewhere to safety, and a few animals, including at least one gibbon, survived the entire war while living on an island in the lake, but Delacour saw little he could do by remaining in France.

He came to New York, where he was immediately snapped up by the New York Zoological Society. For seven years, he served there as Technical Advisor, one of the four principal officers who jointly ran the Bronx Zoo. At the same time, Delacour became a Research Associate at the Department of Ornithology of the American Museum of Natural History, where many of the specimens he collected in Madagascar and Indochina already reposed, and was a Collaborator of the United States Fish & Wildlife Service. In the latter capacity, he was particularly influential as an advisor on waterfowl policy.

He made several visits, for example, to Yellowstone National Park to oversee the management program for the Trumpeter Swan.

Following the War, Delacour returned to Clères to see the damage and ponder what could be salvaged. The chateau was uninhabitable, but the grounds were, for the most part, intact. Having lost for the second time his greatest life's work, he decided once again to start over, on perhaps a smaller scale. Within a few years, birds and animals again flourished on the grounds, although the gardens could not be returned to their former splendor, and Delacour himself had to live in the much smaller manor house adjacent to the chateau.

Once restoration of the collection was in progress, Delacour decided to accept a new challenge, an offer from the Los Angeles County Museum to become its director. The job meant he would have very little time at Clères, but he was attracted by the new possibilities of gardening and maintaining a small group of birds in southern California, as well as running a museum with great potential. In the years Delacour was director, 1952-1960, the Los Angeles County Museum nearly doubled in size. Its programs in history, art, and science all grew. Delacour himself oversaw a major zoological expedition to Amazonian Brazil.

These postwar years in America were also a time of great scientific productivity for Delacour. Beside a sub-

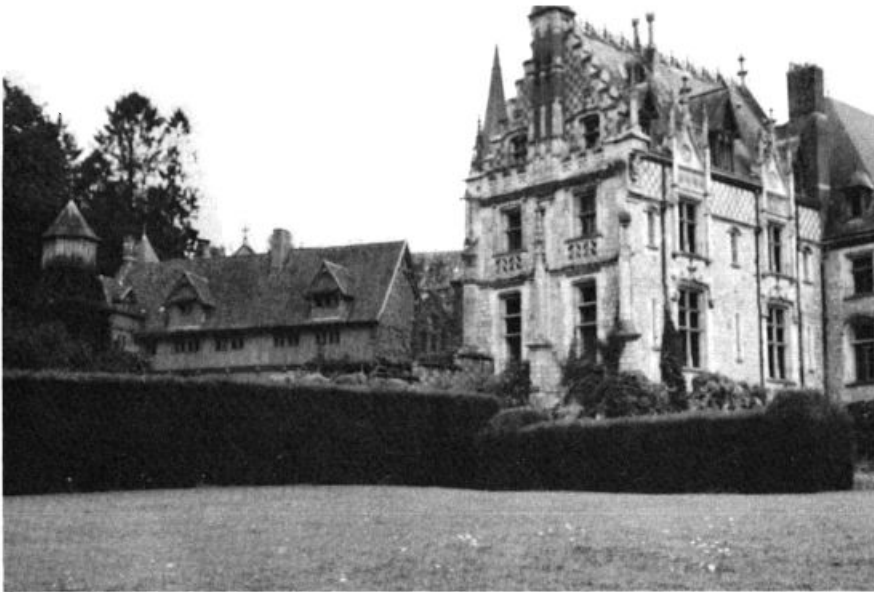


Delacour in New York in 1950 at age 60. Photo from The Living Air. Country Life Limited, London, 1966.

stantial stream of articles in the ornithological journals, books written in this period include *Birds of the Philippines* (1946, with Ernst Mayr), *Birds of Malaysia* (1947), *Pheasants of the World* (1951), *Waterfowl of the World* (four volumes 1954-1964), *Pheasant Breeding and Care* (1959), *Guide des Oiseaux de la Nouvelle-Caledonie* (1960), and his autobiography, *The Living Air* (1960). In 1973 came *Currassows and Related Birds*, written with Dean Amadon, and a fifth edition of *Pheasant Breeding and Care* was published in 1978. These volumes, like the shorter papers, were definitive work at the time they appeared, and many remain so.



An aerial view of the chateau and grounds at Clères. Photo from The Living Air. Country Life Limited, London, 1966.



Front and side views of the Delacour residence at Clères in 1970. Note the birds feeding on the lawn in front of the chateau. Photos/Wesley E. Lanyon.

Delacour was obliged to retire from the Los Angeles County Museum at the age of 70, in 1960. He had accomplished much there, but was glad to have more time to devote to Clères, and to visiting those parts of the globe, like Australia, he did not yet know. For a person of his tastes and interests, the general trend of the world was not promising, particularly in the newly-independent countries of Asia and Africa where, in the old days, the colonial administrators had assisted his scientific work. He made haste, therefore, to see what remained.

The last twenty five years of Delacour's life were devoted to writing,

travel, and aviculture. Typically, he spent the warm months at Clères, departing in the autumn for New York, where he worked at the American Museum, and spending the winter in Los Angeles. In spring, there was another stop in New York en route to France. The routine was punctuated by travels to scientific meetings and, into his eighties, to tropical climes. The friends and colleagues of his earlier years had inevitably disappeared, but wherever Delacour went he was welcomed by devoted admirers younger than he who relished his vast knowledge and resourceful wit. Increasingly a legendary figure himself, he was, for example, at

the centennial meeting of the American Ornithologists' Union in 1983, able to recall many of the early pillars of the organization, founded only seven years before his birth.

Not until the very end of his life was Delacour seriously inconvenienced by the effects of great age. At least into his ninetieth year he still escorted friends around the aviaries and lake at Clères, bringing with him a special cane with a metal tip to impale and pick up the occasional scrap of paper left by a less fastidious visitor. Such a walk and such a cane were perhaps emblematic of Delacour's personality. He never tired of sharing his interests with others. The grounds at Clères had been open to the public since 1925. Delacour was delighted to see how popular they had become. His greatest life's work was a gift to the people, but he knew it took his own continuous hard work and attention to detail to keep it up to the standards he set for himself; even on a stroll after lunch he did his bit to keep the place immaculate. The impedimenta of old age, like a cane, became an instrument of improvement. As he passed each bird he gave insightful comments on its individual personality and the nature of the species. At the same time, his wit, sharp and pointed like his cane, was also at work impaling the hapless; mention of a colleague or acquaintance not up to his standards would provoke a wickedly comic epithet to add to the lexicon of Delacour put downs long treasured and imitated by his friends.

Delacour's standards in birds and in people were the same: he expected good looks with style, intelligent behavior, and peaceable tolerance for others. Birds of this character were welcomed at Clères. People of similar inclination, who shared Delacour's enthusiasm for wildlife, for horticulture, for art, or for music, or his tendency to look on human behavior with humor and slightly cynical detachment, were given as generous a welcome and were treated to a personality of distinctive vision, charm, and intellect. The ornithological world was lucky indeed that birds caught his attention so early and so lastingly, and that he gave us nearly a century of his best efforts.

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