

## Roger Geoffrey Clarke (1952–2007)

Roger Clarke was a remarkable and talented ornithologist, who through diligence, unflagging enthusiasm and originality of thought became one of the world's leading experts on harriers *Circus*.

A chartered accountant by profession, Roger was born in Bedford on 8th July 1952, though might never have made an impact on the world of ornithology but for the chance sighting, when on a fishing expedition in the Fens near his home in Cambridgeshire, of a lovely grey-plumaged male Hen Harrier *C. cyaneus*. Roger's interest was immediately engaged by its grace and beauty, and his curiosity aroused, so that harrier watching soon became a passion and replaced angling as a weekend activity. At that time, in the early 1980s, the inspiration for most Hen Harrier-watchers was the artist and author Donald Watson, thus it was inevitable that as Roger began to study and question as well as observe, the two should correspond and eventually collaborate. Together with Tim Bennett they launched in winter 1983/84 the Hen Harrier National Winter Roost Survey, which in 2006/07 reached its 24th season. Donald Watson (replaced latterly by Chris Rollie) organised the Scottish counts while, after Tim Bennett's withdrawal, Roger single-handedly dealt with England and Wales, also analysing each winter's results.

For most amateurs this task would have been sufficient, but Roger sought to develop the study by identifying prey remains in pellets regurgitated by roosting Hen Harriers. The collection of pellets began in winter 1984/85 and, in due course, Roger decided to tackle the analysis himself. This was no easy undertaking, for what little guidance was then available dealt mainly with owl (Tytonidae/Strigidae) pellets and so Roger started to assemble his own reference collection, sometimes even scavenging feathers from road-kills. In letters sent to me in the late 1980s, Roger charted the growing

number of prey species identified, in one writing excitedly, 'I think we have our first Dartford [Warbler *Sylvia undata*]' next to a mounted body feather of that species. Although in the early days some mistaken identifications were made, these were soon corrected and in no way detract from Roger's considerable achievement in making himself an unrivalled expert in raptor pellet analysis.

Roger put his hard-won knowledge to further good use by examining the pellets of three other harrier species (Marsh *C. aeruginosus*, Montagu's *C. pygargus* and Pallid Harriers *C. macrourus*), as well as those of other raptors such as Red Kite *Milvus milvus* (for the then English Nature's re-establishment programme) and Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug* (*Brit. Birds* 93: 136–143). Of particular value was his work for the Joint Raptor Study Langholm Project, which examined the predation of Red Grouse *Lagopus lagopus* by Hen Harriers and Peregrine Falcons *Falco peregrinus*. At the time of his death, Roger was compiling a guide to the identification of avian remains in raptor pellets and it seems doubtful whether his unique contribution to dietary studies (further developed when it occurred to him that the diet of seed-eating passerines on farmland in winter could be monitored through raptor pellets; *Brit. Birds* 96: 360–375) will be matched. Roger's PhD in Biological Sciences, received from the University of Liverpool in 1999 for his thesis on raptor feeding ecology, was richly deserved.

His expertise and a capacity for hard work led to Roger's close involvement with a number of

ornithological bodies, notably the Cambridge Bird Club (as Chairman 1995–2000), the Hawk and Owl Trust (Projects Committee Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Trust 1993–96) and the BOU (Treasurer 2000–06). This last organisation recognised his outstanding contribution to ornithology with the award of its prestigious Union Medal in 2007 (*Ibis* 149: 189–190).

India became another strand in Roger's life, following a visit to the world's largest currently known harrier roost site (consisting mainly of Montagu's but with substantial numbers of Pallids), in the grasslands of Velavadar National Park, Gujarat. The appreciation and collection of bird art was another interest close to Roger's heart. He particularly admired the marvellous skill of his good friends Donald Watson and Bruce Pearson, and also the genius of Eric Ennion (I well remember Roger's enthusiasm when showing me a series of sketches obtained from Ennion's son Hugh, each tiny but brim-full of life and movement).

Despite his considerable workload, Roger somehow found the



Janis Clarke

III. Roger Clarke.

time to research and write numerous articles and papers, mostly but not exclusively concerning harriers. Although many appeared in international journals, including *Bird Study*, *Ibis* and *Fork-tail*, he did not neglect local British bird reports, thus adding considerably to the knowledge of raptor ecology in counties such as Norfolk and Wiltshire. It was wholly characteristic that many of Roger's papers were co-authored, even when their compilation and content were largely his work, for despite a growing reputation he never underestimated the input of others and was at pains to acknowledge their help. Also characteristic was that Roger's papers usually contained thought-provoking ideas, such as the suggestion that the amount of rainfall in the western Sahel region of Africa

influences Montagu's Harrier breeding numbers in Britain (*Orn. Anzeiger* 41: 143–158).

Roger authored the Hen Harrier account for the BTO's *The Atlas of Wintering Birds in Britain and Ireland* (1986) and followed this by three well-written books: *Harriers of the British Isles* (1990), *The Marsh Harrier* (1995) and *Montagu's Harrier* (1996). He was also asked to co-author a new edition of Donald Watson's classic monograph *The Hen Harrier* (1977), though it was soon obvious that the task was considerably more than just a simple revision. Watson was by then in declining health (he died in 2005) and thus all the work fell to Roger, who was unexpectedly stricken by illness in early 2006 and diagnosed as suffering from terminal cancer a few months later. Despite knowing that

he was unlikely to live long enough to finish the book, he continued working on it to the end, writing to me on 3rd January 2007 that, 'now the monstrous Predation and the Diet chapters are complete... I'm hacking away [at] Communal Roosting... That way, if interrupted, there will be at least three solid finished chapters contributed... My condition is progressing more lately.' Roger died on 28th January 2007, aged just 54.

Roger's early death is a hard blow to the study of his beloved harriers and to his many friends, but an even harder one to his wife Janis and their two children Mostyn and Bethan. He will be missed.

*Pete Combridge*

## Rarities Committee news

### *BBRC appoints new secretary*

Following the death of Mike Rogers in October 2006, BBRC has now appointed a new secretary. The specification set for Mike's replacement was demanding; the successful applicant was required not only to be organised, knowledgeable, motivated, a communicator with good writing skills and a background in bird recording, they also had to be expert in appropriate aspects of IT, including web design and database management. We asked for all of this in return for an extremely modest honorarium. Despite this exacting specification, we received five high-quality applications. After further short-listing and a series of telephone interviews, BBRC is pleased

to announce that Nigel Hudson has been appointed as the new Secretary. We would like to extend our wholehearted congratulations to Nigel, but also to thank the four other outstanding candidates who applied.

Nigel is based in the Isles of Scilly and will be familiar to many birders who visit the islands in the autumn. His background and knowledge of bird recording and management will be a real asset to the committee, while his ability to handle all the relevant aspects of IT should make the final transition to an almost completely paperless system a reality.

Nigel will start his work with BBRC over the next few months as

duties are transferred from Pete Fraser, who has done an outstanding job of holding the fort over recent months. Observers should continue to submit records by e-mail to the following address: [secretary@bbrc.org.uk](mailto:secretary@bbrc.org.uk) Other mailing and contact details will be available from the BBRC website at the appropriate time and will also be circulated to all county recorders and bird observatories



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