

OBITUARY: SHANE ALWYNE PARKER

3 August 1943 – 21 November 1992

Shane Alwyne Parker was born in Colchester, Essex and attended schools there. His interest in natural history was nurtured on walks with his aunt through the English countryside. At the age of 16 Shane began work with the British Museum, both at Bloomsbury and at the Natural History Museum, South Kensington and spent six and a half years there, three devoted to curating the egg collection. A highlight of these years was participation in the second of the Harold Hall expeditions in Australia, to northern Queensland from February to August 1964.

Those seven months in Queensland influenced Shane profoundly and in 1967 he emigrated to Australia. His first position was as scientific assistant at the Arid Zone Research Institute in Alice Springs where his work included research on mammals. A notable publication from this work is his annotated checklist of the native land mammals of the Northern Territory (Parker 1973). Later he moved to Darwin where he met his future wife Erica, whom he married in 1970. They moved to Adelaide soon afterwards and Shane studied for his matriculation at Daws Road High School in 1971. He went on to complete a Bachelor of Science degree at the University of Adelaide in 1975.

During these early years in Australia Shane continued his ornithological research, corresponding regularly with ornithologists around Australia and overseas. In Adelaide he became an Honorary Research Worker at the South Australian Museum and, following the retirement in late 1974 of Herbert Condon, Curator of Birds, Shane volunteered to run the Bird Section until a new curator could be appointed. Fittingly, the appointee was Shane and he became Curator of Birds in January 1976. Shane held that position full-time until late 1985 when he began part-time as Curator of Lower Marine Invertebrates. Over the next six years Shane gradually increased his work in marine zoology, while training me as his assistant to manage the Bird Section, and in October 1991 he relinquished altogether the position of Curator of Birds (which then ceased to exist). By this time though Shane had been diagnosed with cancer and, after fighting bravely for more than two years, he died on 21 November 1992.

The bird collections of the South Australian

Museum have benefited more from the work of Shane Parker than of any other individual. Shane began the process of modernising the collection. He instituted a system of field cards and data sheets for recording details of behaviour, habitat, soft part colours and other details previously neglected. He curated the egg collection and set up an index with details of each clutch on a separate card. He saw beyond the need for skins and established a spirit collection of whole bird bodies, vastly expanded the collection of whole skeletons, and began a collection and register of bird stomach contents. He conducted exchanges with other museums to improve the representation of interstate and overseas species. And with fieldwork and opportunistic collecting he filled gaps in the skin collection — notably downy young and immatures of non-passerines, domestic species and neglected common species. With great foresight, he also adopted the systematic order of Sibley and Ahlquist *et al.* and began reorganising the collections accordingly.

Shane Parker was skilled in museum ornithology. His knowledge of birds of the world, and the Australasian bird fauna in particular, was profound. Among his almost 100 ornithological notes and articles, many in collaboration with others, he published on species from England, Europe, India, Asia, New Guinea, the south-west Pacific, Africa, Madagascar, and Australia. He wrote on a wide range of topics: taxonomy, nomenclature, distribution, ecology, behaviour, eggs and nests, anatomy, historical ornithology and regional listings. Shane published the bulk of his articles in *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club*, *South Australian Ornithologist* and *Emu*.

Among Shane's more notable work was that on the extinct dwarf emu, resulting in the description of the Kangaroo Island Dwarf Emu as a new subfossil species *Dromaius baudinianus* (Parker 1984a). The only other species Shane named was the problematic Cox's Sandpiper *Calidris paramelanotos* (Parker 1982a), described hastily from only two specimens, and now regarded as of uncertain status, probably of hybrid origin (e.g. Cox 1989).

The Australian grasswrens were another of Shane's greatest interests, and he applied his detective skills to the tangled taxonomy of the

Amytornis purnelli — *A. textilis* group with good effect (Parker 1972). He also published on the taxonomy and habitat of *A. striatus* (Parker 1982b). Following fieldwork in the Simpson Desert, Shane, with two colleagues, illuminated the habitat and plumage characteristics of the Eyrean Grasswren *A. goyderi*, correctly assessed its current status and described its eggs for the first time (Parker *et al.* 1978).

Shane delighted in historical ornithology and unravelled details of the collecting expeditions of A. S. Meek (Parker 1966), John Gould (1984) and Samuel White (1980). Shane was largely responsible for the productive cooperation between Samuel White's descendants and the South Australian Museum, which led to the donation to the Museum of Capt. S. A. White's African bird skin collection in 1976, and the main skin and egg collection in 1988. His final work with the Whites was to take part in the early planning of the Museum's exhibition 'Captain White and the House of Birds'. Regrettably he died only 24 days before the exhibition opened.

Shane was the senior author of parts of *An Annotated Checklist of the Birds of South Australia* (Parker *et al.* 1979, 1985). They are typical of the detailed and critical research that Shane could carry out and are among his greatest contributions to South Australian ornithology. Regrettably, Shane did not continue with further parts of the checklist, as by the time the second part appeared he was ending his ornithological research. Much of Shane's other work and observations never appeared in print, largely through lack of time, and perhaps the most unfortunate is that on the Night Parrot *Pezoporus occidentalis*. In 1979 he joined safari-leader Rex Ellis on a search for the Night Parrot around Cooper's Creek, travelling by camel. He was rewarded with the sighting of four birds east of Lake Perigundi but did not publish a detailed account of the observations.

Shane was a member of the South Australian Ornithological Association from 1970 to 1989 and was Vice-President in 1979-1981 and 1985-1986. He was honoured by the naming of a new subspecies of Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater *Acanthogenys rufogularis parkeri*, from a single specimen purportedly from Torres Strait (Parkes 1980). Two species of feather louse from the Mallee Fowl *Leipoa ocellata* were also named after Shane: *Megapodiella parkeri* (Price and Emerson 1984) and *Lipeurus parkeri* (Emerson and Price 1986).

Sadly, Shane had a series of unnecessary argu-

ments with a few professional and amateur ornithologists, particularly in the early 1980s, and his over-sensitive nature led him into deeper conflicts than need have been. In addition he faced ill-informed criticism from the public about collecting birds, sparked by his collection of Eyrean Grasswrens (see Shane's excellent defence of collecting for scientific research, Parker 1977a, b). These combined to sour Shane's attitude to ornithology, hence his decision to move to a fresh field: the neglected lower marine invertebrates.

In marine invertebrates Shane found endless pleasure. He completely organised the accumulations of lower invertebrate groups and identified them as far as possible. He corresponded with experts in these groups and began to specialise in polychaetes, leeches, sponges, stony corals, and particularly bryozoans, making major contributions to the higher taxonomy of the last. He discovered new distribution records and described new species, relishing the full-time commitment to alpha-taxonomy. He published prolifically, often in conjunction with others, and was still writing manuscripts even when very ill. One of his major articles was a monograph on the stony corals of South Australia, Victoria and Tasmania, of which he was junior author with S. D. Cairns of the Smithsonian Institution (Cairns and Parker 1992).

Above all else, Shane Parker was an unforgettable character, an English eccentric. His enjoyment of detective searches through taxonomic mazes and his winter dress of wing collars and Edwardian frock coat were befitting of his admiration for Conan Doyle's hero; indeed he was a member of the Sherlock Holmes Society. He was widely read and skilled at languages, as is clear in the impeccable literary style of his publications. While commuting on the train he taught himself Latin and he also took lessons in Gaelic. Shane loved fine music and learnt to play the harp. He also saw the merits of more casula compositions — his collection of bawdy English folksongs was legendary. He was a talented artist and apparently so from an early age; he purchased his first bird book with money from selling his bird paintings to relatives and school friends. One of his main hobbies was stamp-collecting, particularly of stamps printed with fine detail. Food was also a great passion; some eat to live while others live to eat, and Shane was in the latter category. He was a founding member of the Museum's select dining club *De Gustibus* and present at its inaugural outing to the railway station

pie cart, and was the editor of its occasional organ *The Gullet*. Working for him was at times infuriating, with his forgetfulness for matters practical, but he was sympathetic, good-humoured and amusing, tolerant, and understanding.

Shane is survived by his wife Erica and their sons Gathorne and Tolle. To them we extend our heartfelt sympathy.

PHILIPPA HORTON

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