



West African Ornithological Society
Société d'Ornithologie de l'Ouest
Africain



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News & Letters — Nouvelles & Lettres

Abbé René de Naurois, 1906–2006

René de Naurois, French priest and ornithologist, died on 12 January 2006. Born in Paris on 24 November 1906, he spent his childhood and youth as the eldest of five sons on his father's large estate, near Toulouse, where he very early developed a keen liking for wildlife. It took him many years, however, before he returned to the passion of his youth. Recently, in a book entitled *Aumônier de la France Libre* (2004, Perrin, Paris), he told his story, of a tremendously active life on many fronts, especially as chaplain in the Free French Forces during World War II, before he eventually became a fully fledged ornithologist. As Jacques de Naurois, one of his many nephews, observed, in birds he must have found an uncommon sense of peace after the horrors of the war, a feeling he shared with many ornithologist colleagues. In the first chapter of this book, he tells how, when he was barely ten or eleven, he would draw eggs and nests of all the familiar birds on the estate with such accurate detail that he still marvelled at them as an old man when they were rediscovered in the family house. Every year, too, his mother would make it a special festival for the five boys to celebrate the day the Hoopoe was first seen in the spring over the fields. He also tells the very moving moment when, some 50 years later, in the depth of a forest in São Tomé, he heard the song of an African species of oriole that recalled to him the familiar song in his father's garden.

His parents having insisted that before becoming a priest (in 1936) he go to university, he took degrees in mathematics and physics, then theology and finally German philosophy, which he went to study in pre-war Berlin. There, from 1933 till 1939, he was in contact with German opponents to rising Nazism and was able to send regular reports to his Archbishop, Mgr Saliège in Toulouse, on the awful dangers looming ahead for Europe. He was therefore very well prepared to take an active part in the local resistance in Toulouse after 1940, helping fugitives or Jews to escape during the occupation of France, then joining De Gaulle in England after escaping himself from Toulouse through Spain as the Gestapo was about to arrest him in 1942. There, he joined the Kieffer Commando as chaplain and landed with his close friend, Lord Lovat, on D-Day, on a beach in Normandy. He was made *Compagnon de la Libération*, a special order created by De Gaulle for his war companions, but was also most proud when he received the Military Cross from the hands of Colonel Dawson, with whom he had also landed and who became his closest friend in England afterwards until his death in 1987.

It is only in 1954 that he came out as an ornithologist with a future, after publication of two articles in *Oiseau Rev. fr. Orn.* 24, on raptors in the Toulouse region and vultures and Lammergeier in Morocco. In 1959, he followed Noël Mayaud's and Henri Heim de Balsac's encouragements to explore the West African coastal avifauna, and was the first to describe and detail the wealth of nesting species of Banc d'Arguin, a major investigation in what has become a paradise for

ornithologists. South of Nouadhibou (formerly Port-Etienne) in Mauritania, were multitudes of pelicans, cormorants, herons, spoonbills, flamingos and gulls, as he made clear in a long article (1959, *Alauda* 27: 241–308). In 1976, this part of the coast became the Banc d'Arguin National Park, now under special protection of the trustees of the Banc d'Arguin International Foundation, an initiative led by Luc Hoffmann. Between 1960 and 1971, de Naurois, by then Researcher at the French CNRS, led explorations of this coast between former Spanish Sahara and the Republic of Guinea, the results of which eventually went into a Doctorate Thesis. This voluminous work, *Peuplements et cycles de reproduction des oiseaux de la côte occidentale d'Afrique* (1969, *Mém. Mus. Nat. Hist. Nat.* 56; 312 pp.), would have deserved translation for all the wealth of first hand observations and descriptions it contained. But most of all, it offers a remarkable reflection, from a biogeographical viewpoint, on the privileged position of a maritime coast at a position that both unites and divides the Palaearctic and Afrotropical zones. Although 66 years old by then, René de Naurois went on undeterred, investigating difficult territories and forlorn islands, with ever renewed relish in the same risky landings on uninviting islets every time he sensed he could hit upon a new species. Over 30 articles published between 1964 and 1992 testify to his having explored the Cape Verde Islands through and through. In 1995, Cornelis J. Hazevoet, the Dutch ornithologist, published his *Birds of the Cape Verde Islands* (British Ornithologists' Union, Tring) with these words: "Dedicated to René de Naurois who has done more for Cape Verde ornithology than anyone else". Between 1978 and 1985, the indefatigable Abbé published seven articles on the birds of New Caledonia and left a nearly finished book on this island in the Pacific Ocean. Again, from 1973 to 1988, he also issued 18 publications on the birds of São Tomé and Príncipe islands, and a bilingual guide, in French and Portuguese, *Les Oiseaux des Îles du Golfe de Guinée (São Tomé, Príncipe et Annobon)* (1994, Instituto de Investigação Científica Tropical, Lisbon). This same year, another guide came out with the same publisher, *Les Oiseaux des Îles du Cap-Vert*. He had an invaluable collection of bird eggs, collected across the world and the years before 1975, after which date he refrained from collecting and finally handed over the collection in 1992 to the Museum of Natural History in Geneva.

His last scientific expedition took place in 1987, in New Caledonia, where he climbed his last tree. After this he still went to Israel in 1989 and to New York in 1994 after being declared "Righteous among the Nations" for the help given to persecuted Jews during the war, and to Oxford (The Edward Grey Institute) or Tring for more occasional ornithological work, always very thankful for the warm welcome and the efficient help and care he would meet there at all times. On 12 January 2006, he was back from a very tiring trip, in biting cold, to Toulouse to see his dying brother. He had met there many friends and younger colleagues, and planned ahead for further publications, and filled his agenda with forthcoming meetings and collaborations of all kinds. He died so to speak by surprise, of a heart attack, in the late morning, conscious to the very last, as he had lived.

Gisèle Venet

Birds of Mauritania: request for information

An annotated checklist of the birds of Mauritania is in preparation. Ornithologists are kindly requested to send their records to the main author: Paul Isenmann, CEFE/CNRS, 1919 route de Mende, F-34293 Montpellier cedex 5, France; <paul.isenmann@cefe.cnrs.fr>.

Les oiseaux de Mauritanie: demande d'informations.

Une liste commentée des oiseaux de Mauritanie est en préparation. Ceux qui souhaiteraient enrichir cette liste par leurs observations sont invités à les envoyer à l'auteur principal: Paul Isenmann, CEFE/CNRS, 1919 route de Mende, F-34293 Montpellier cedex 5, France; <paul.isenmann@cefe.cnrs.fr>.