

Eliot Howard and Bird Territory

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The work of Eliot Howard (1873-1940) came to my attention recently and reminded me of the study of Hartlebury Common by John Tucker and colleagues, published by Hereford and Worcester County Council in 1986. Here John Tucker, (later Conservation Officer for Shropshire Wildlife Trust), presents an appraisal of Eliot Howard and his achievement. Born at Stone House near Kidderminster, christened Henry Eliot, a birdwatcher since boyhood, Howard became an amateur ornithologist whilst also a prosperous industrialist as director of the tube manufacturer Stewarts and Lloyds, at Halesowen.

After 1900 his home was at 'Clareland', an imposing house at Titton, near the edge of Hartlebury Common. Without using rings or hides he studied the birds on the Common regularly from dawn before travelling to work. By studying single species which showed some difference between the sexes, he was able to identify and follow the behaviour of individual birds revealing their territoriality. Unknown to Howard, the main features of bird territory had been revealed in 1868 by Altum, in Germany, and in 1903 by Moffat in Ireland. Howard was the first to give a thorough and extensive exposition of the theory and its implications, that males establish and defend what he called 'territory' with a food supply, into which the females migrate. His book in 1920, 'Territory in Bird Life', brought international recognition, and was reprinted by Collins in 1948.

Contemporary with Howard, another amateur ornithologist, Edgar Chance, (1881-1955), was conducting similar work at Pound Green Common, in Wyre Forest. Thanks to the effort of Godfrey Jones, the films and books of Edgar Chance have become more widely known after a long dormancy. Filming

in the field (itself an innovation in 1920), Chance was able to demonstrate how cuckoos behaved in the wild, clarifying a lot of myth and controversy.

These days the internet affords easy access to biographical information and references, such as 'The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography' so there is no need for repetition.

As so often happens in science, once discoveries are made and established, the knowledge passes into the main stream and becomes taken for granted. The origins and circumstances of the research are forgotten. This applies to Edgar Chance and even more so to Eliot Howard. There seems to be little or no awareness of Howard or his work.

Chance and Howard were friends and well acquainted. Both were eminent industrialists, amateur ornithologists and members of the British Ornithologists Union. The work of these two men, living and studying locally, produced observational science of a high order. Both were pioneers in the study of animal behaviour, now 'ethology' and a familiar branch of biological science. Their discipline and the rigour of their studies affords remarkable illustrations of the way the amateur naturalist can make a real contribution to scientific understanding, which should be an example and standard for others to emulate.

References

- Howard, Eliot, 1920, Territory in Bird Life, Murray. Collins Edition, 1948.
- Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2004, OUP Online.
- Tucker, John J; Zaluckyj, Sarah; Alma, P J; Editors, 1986. Hartlebury Common; a social and natural history. Hereford and Worcester County Council.



Godfrey Jones with a replica of Edgar Chance's hide, Pound Green, 5 July 2008

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