

OBITUARIES

Edited by James Wiley

(To whom obituary manuscripts should be sent)

Robin A. Hughes, 1934–1991—Although *Ornitología Neotropical* does not usually publish obituaries so many years after the death of ornithologists who worked on Neotropical birds, exceptions can be made occasionally. This is the case of the life and ornithological work of Robin Hughes in Peru, which the Editorial Board felt deserved to be recorded.

At the end of 1991, Peruvian ornithologists, especially those dedicated to shorebird study, received very sad news. Robert Hughes, better known as Robin, an English naturalist dedicated to ornithology, who surveyed and counted bird populations in southwest Perú for 36 years, died on 5 November in a home accident in Mollendo, Department of Areq-



Robin A. Hughes, 1934–1991.
Robin A. Hughes (left) and Oscar González (right) in Mollendo, Perú, September 1991.

uipa. The water heater developed a gas leak, and he was asphyxiated. He was found unconscious the day after by his servant and, after three days in the hospital, he passed away. Robin was buried in the family mausoleum in the cemetery of Mollendo; it was not possible for his relatives to fulfill his wish that he be cremated and his ashes be sent to Wales, his native country.

I remember very well the day I met him: 4 September 1991, two months before his death. I had come to his house in Mollendo to ask his advice about doing research on the birds of the Tambo valley wetlands, and I also had the opportunity to ask him personal questions. He was a typical Englishman, 1.95 m tall, methodical, shy, frugal. Many of his neighbors looked upon him as a hermit because he lived alone in the outskirts of Mollendo for 39 years, with a couple of servants. He loved these servants as his own family.

Robin was born on 22 December 1934, in Derby, Wales Country, United Kingdom. His parents were English and Peruvian. His father, Robert E. Hughes, was an Englishman who had come to Perú to work for Cable West Coast Company, an enterprise of maritime communications. In Mollendo he met Lily Roberts, descendant of another Englishman, and eventually they married. Afterward they traveled to the United Kingdom, establishing their home in the countryside of Colwin Bay, and Robin was born. After suffering hunger and the bombs of the Second World War, his father returned to Perú at the invitation of his brothers-in-law to work at the Roberts' customhouse agency in Mollendo. Robin and his mother came back some years later, by ship via Buenos Aires, Argentina. Robin arrived in Perú when he was 15 years old.

He was smart and learned Spanish by himself. He also studied accounting by mail with a British University. First he worked with his father in Mollendo, and afterward he took

his father's post in the customs house agency. He kept himself informed about the world political situation by listening to the BBC radio of London. He never married, nor had any descendants.

His interest in nature developed when he was a teen-ager in Wales. A strong influence on his character was probably his time in the country. At the beginning he collected butterflies, and in Mollendo he continued with this hobby. He traveled with his mother to the forest, visiting places like Tingo María and Puerto Maldonado. Afterward, in his trips as auditor of Roberts Company to the interior of southern Perú, he spent his free time visiting new places and collecting butterflies. In Mollendo, he also recorded the air and sea temperature daily as well as the precipitation. He discovered that in previous years the rain had fallen later in Mollendo. He knew about the plants of Mollendo's lomas (fog vegetation areas), and in later years, he missed the greenness of these lomas, which were mostly destroyed by livestock. In time he lost all of his butterfly collection to moths and started birdwatching. He never collected birds, except for washed-up corpses on the beach that constituted noteworthy records. In a short time, he began to guide tourists to the Mejía lagoons, which were close to his house.

Once, he was a victim of the ignorance of the Peruvian authorities regarding biological studies, when he was taken for a foreign spy for using binoculars on a beach. At the time of the last military government (in the 1970s) there were rumors of foreign spies in Arequipa, and Robin had the bad luck to be confused with a spy by policemen who were new to the district and did not know him. He was birdwatching, as he did almost every day on a beach near the state petroleum plant, when he was arrested. They took his notebook to be analyzed by a graphologist; it seems they were suspicious of the small handwriting and strange words (scientific names). These

authorities were contemplating sending him to Lima, but he got his freedom when another policeman arrived and recognized him.

Robin was the first person working in field ornithology in this area of the Pacific Coast (Mollendo). He described the weather, geography, vegetation, bird migration (census, seasonal frequency) and bird reproduction. He had precise statistics of migratory birds, going nearly every day to the Mejía lagoons and the lomas. He had strategically placed blinds for watching birds. Robin recorded 12 bird species for the first time on the coast of southern Perú. In his second-to-last paper, he reported 230 species in the Islay province, his home region, after 36 years of observation. He stressed the importance of the Mejía wetlands as a place to rest for migratory birds, as it is in a desert area between Pisco/Paracas bay and the Huasco river mouth in Chile. Robin was instrumental in modifying an irrigation project that would have drained the Mejía lagoons. Now the Mejía lagoons are a protected area for birds: the Santuario Nacional Lagunas de Mejía

Robin Hughes was a prolific writer to those with whom he corresponded. He gave his time and knowledge to those fortunate enough to visit him in Mollendo, as I can tes-

tify. Robin left us a legacy of nearly two-dozen papers in scientific journals such as *Ibis*, *Condor*, and *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club* — papers that are very useful to ornithologists now. He wrote his field annotations in 39 notebooks, beginning in 1955. After his death Manuel A. Plenge sent the notebooks to the Louisiana State University Museum of Zoology. His books (72 on birds, 29 on butterflies and 33 on diverse issues), along with the collection of scientific journals (18 titles and more than 400 numbers), were given to the Museo de Historia Natural de la Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos by his cousin Reynaldo Roberts of Arequipa.

It is very doubtful that another person can replace him.

I am very grateful to the relatives and friends of Mr. Hughes for giving me valuable information about his life: Mssrs. Alfredo and Reynaldo Roberts, Mrs. Cecilia Friederich de Muñoz-Najar, Mr. Edmundo Pinto, Mr. Manuel Contreras and especially Mr. Manuel A. Plenge, who corrected a previous draft of this paper. Terry Walker corrected the English version.—Oscar González M., Departamento de Ornitología, Museo de Historia Natural, Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, Apartado 14034 Lima 11, Perú.

