

# Obituary

## 'Masta Pisin' — The Bird Man of New Guinea FRED SHAW MAYER M.B.E. 1899–1989

'In 1950 a remarkable person had been introduced to me in Singapore. He was a tall, thin man whose gentle face gave him the look more of a parson than an explorer. No man knows New Guinea better than he, because for the last twenty years or more he has been constantly in and out of that country and for the last three years he has lived there continuously. His name was Fred Shaw Mayer. He was on his way to London with a collection of the most exquisitely made-up skins of birds that I have ever seen. Fred is an artist-collector of the old school whose every specimen is a masterpiece, and in their making he scorns the use of the stick thrust through the vent which so many modern collectors use.'

So wrote Loke Wan Tho in *A Company of Birds* in 1958, an excellent description of a remarkable man.

Frederick William Shaw Mayer died at Nambour, Queensland, on 1 September 1989, 25 days short of his 90th birthday. Born on 26 September 1899, Fred was educated at Sydney's Homebush Primary School, Petersham High School and finally the Sydney Grammar School. He started out to be a surveyor but found that work not to his liking and tried the building industry which also had no appeal. He had a burning interest in wildlife since childhood and a deep innate ability to care for wild creatures. Aware of a continuing demand internationally for live specimens and skins of unknown and rare birds and other tropical animals, he decided to try his hand as a collector for zoos and museums. To establish a reputation his first collecting venture to Asia was self-financed. His ability as a collector of living birds and other small animals and as a preparator of mammal and bird skins was quickly recognised. He was soon collecting museum specimens from South-east Asia and New Guinea for Lord Rothschild's Tring Museum and living birds for the London Zoo and for the private collections of Herbert Whitney, Alfred Ezra, John Spedan Lewis and Jean Delacour.

Fred collected extensively in the Moluccas and Western New Guinea (now Irian Jaya) in the period 1928–31, with most of his bird skins going to the Tring Museum. In 1932 Rothschild's bird collection of 250 000 skins was purchased by Harry Payne Whitney's widow for the American Museum of Natural History, New York, in memory of her late husband. Shaw Mayer told sadly of being shown through the Tring Bird Room soon after the sale by Rothschild without that great man

once indicating it was nothing more than an empty mausoleum. The cabinets that once held the vast collections by Albert Meek, William Doherty, Albert Eichhorn and many others as well as those of Shaw Mayer were empty.

Fred Mayer used his given name Shaw on his collecting labels to avoid confusion with both the German ornithologist A.B. Meyer, who published extensively on New Guinea birds between 1874 and 1895, and the American Ernst Mayr, who was in the field in New Guinea at much the same time as Fred's early collecting expeditions there.

The practice of distinguishing the various 'Mayers' may have begun at the time of Fred's trip to the Arfak Mountains and south Halmahera in 1928–29, probably at the suggestion of Lord Rothschild. Dollman (1930) described many of the mammals collected by Fred on this trip in a paper 'On mammals collected by Mr. Shaw Mayer in New Guinea ...'. Rothschild (1931) followed with 'On a collection of birds made by Mr F. Shaw Mayer in the Weyland Mountains, Dutch New Guinea, in 1930'. Two German authors subsequently formalised the distinction with Rümmler (1932) naming a rodent *Leptomys ernstmayri* (now *L. elegans ernstmayri*) and Stein (1932) naming a striped possum *Dactylonax ernstmayri* (now *Dactylonax palpator ernstmayri*) after Dr Ernst Mayr. In a paper submitted to the Zoological Society of London in November 1934, Rothschild & Dollman (1936) wrote:

'It gives the authors great pleasure to associate this striking new Tree-Kangaroo with the name of the collector, Mr. F. Shaw Mayer. As we have already named a *Dendrolagus* after Dr. E. Mayr as *Dendrolagus mayri*, in order to avoid confusion we have decided to use the name *shawmayeri* for this remarkably handsome animal.'

Fred pronounced his surname 'Mair' but he was known throughout New Guinea and scientific circles as Mr Shaw 'Mire'. After his retirement to Nambour he reverted to being Mr Fred Mayer. He was known to the New Guinea highlanders as 'Masta Pisin' — the 'Bird Man' in neomelanesian pidgin.

New Guinea biological literature records the following Shaw Mayer collecting localities:

Arfak Mountains, Irian Jaya: July–August 1928 (Dollman 1930); south-east Halmahera, Moluccas: Jan-

uary 1929 (Gilliard 1969); Gebroeders Range, Weyland Mountains, Irian Jaya: June–August 1930 (Dollman 1930; Rothschild 1931; Rothschild & Dollman 1933; Gilliard 1969); Wandammen Mountains, Irian Jaya: September 1930 (Gilliard 1969); Huon Peninsula (Sattleberg), Papua New Guinea: June 1931 (Gilliard 1969); Kratke Range, Papua New Guinea: May–November 1932 (Gilliard 1969); Mount Maybole, (south slopes), Fergusson Island Papua New Guinea: September 1935 (Brass 1956; Gilliard 1969); Upper Waria River, Bowutu Mountains, Papua New Guinea: December 1936 (Gilliard 1969); Purari-Ramu Divide, (south-east Bismarck Mountains, Papua New Guinea: April–June 1940 (Hinton 1943); Mount Simpson, south-east Papua New Guinea: 1940 (Laurie 1952; Brass 1956; Harrison & Frith 1970); Hagen Range (Menebe), Papua New Guinea: October 1946 (Sims 1956; Gilliard 1969); Hagen Range (Tomba): June 1947 (Gilliard 1969); Mount Wilhelm (north slopes), Papua New Guinea: June 1949 (Gilliard 1969); Mount Wilhelm (north and south slopes): March–June 1950 (Mayr & Gilliard 1951; Laurie & Hill 1954; Gilliard 1969); Kubor Mountains (Minj River), Papua New Guinea: October–November 1950 (Sims 1956; Gilliard 1969); Hagen Range (Tomba and Welya), Mt. Giluwe and Lamende Range, Papua New Guinea: December 1950–July 1951 (Sims 1956; Gilliard 1969); Hagen Range (Tomba): September–October 1952 (Loke Wan Tho 1958; Gilliard 1969).

In 1953 Fred took over as Manager of Sir Edward Hallstrom's aviaries at Nondugl in the Wahgi Valley of the Western Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea (Brass 1964). The aviaries had been established in 1948 in conjunction with a sheep breeding station, the latter as a joint project with the Administration of the then Australian Territories of Papua and New Guinea (Simpson 1954). Captain Neptune (Ned) Blood, himself a competent naturalist and collector, was the first manager of the joint facility. In 1953 Hallstrom handed over the sheep breeding operation to the Administration, but retained the aviaries.

Fred continued to collect widely using Nondugl as a base, primarily seeking live birds for establishment in captivity. Nondugl was used by Hallstrom as a staging post, with most of the established stock going to Taronga Zoo in Sydney or to overseas zoos, in exchange for stock for Taronga Zoo (Sir Edward was Chairman of the Taronga Park Trust). The Victoria Crowned Pigeons *Goura victoria* at Taronga are the survivors of about 50 birds collected by Fred in the Ramu Valley, north of

Nondugl, during this period. Not all these birds went to the zoo directly, Taronga getting their initial stock via Sir Edward's private aviaries around 1959. The very successful White-bibbed Ground-doves *Gallinula jobiensis* at Taronga were also collected by Fred, either from Yule Island or the mainland opposite. Regrettably, few of Fred's Nondugl-based activities have been reported in the literature.

During his collecting trips Fred obtained many forms new to science and had a number named after him in addition to the tree-kangaroo. In ornithological circles Fred is best known for his association with the discovery of *Astrapia mayeri*, described as a new species from the two central tail feathers, three other tail and two wing feathers, which he obtained from a missionary and sent to the British Museum from Singapore in 1938. Only 28 days later, Stonor (1938) accurately described the bird to a meeting of the British Ornithologists' Club. Appropriately, Stonor concluded his description:

'In view of the trouble he has taken to establish its existence, and as a slight recognition of the efforts he has made during the past few years to add to our knowledge of the family as a whole, it is a pleasure to name this most striking new bird after its discoverer, *Astrapia mayeri*, Shaw Mayer's Bird of Paradise.'

Other taxa named in his honour include:

- a monotypic genus of small moss mice of the montane forests *Mayermys ellermani*, collected on Mount Wilhelm, the Hagen Range and Mount Giluwe in 1949–51 (Laurie & Hill 1954);
- a central highlands subspecies of Muruk or Dwarf Cassowary *Casuarius bennetti shawmayeri* from the Kratke Range in 1932–33 (Rothschild 1937);
- a small prehensile-tailed mouse *Pogonomys shawmayeri* (now *Chiruromys forbesi shawmayeri*) from Fergusson Island, south-east Papua New Guinea (Laurie 1952);
- a honeyeater subspecies *Xanthotis chrysotis mayeri* (now included in *X. c. rubiensis*) from the Gebroeders Range of the Weyland Mountains, Irian Jaya, in 1930 (Salomonsen 1967);
- three mosaic-tailed mice, *Pogonomelomys mayeri* (Rothschild & Dollman 1932), *Melomys shawi* (now *M. moncktoni shawi*) (Tate & Archbold 1935), collected in the Weyland Mountains in 1930, and *Melomys levipes shawmayeri* from the Kratke Range in 1932–33 (Rümmler 1935);

- the Pygmy Ringtail Possum *Pseudocheirus mayeri* collected in the Weyland Mountains in 1930 (Rothschild & Dollman 1933);
- a small dasyurid *Phascogale mayeri* (now *Antechinus naso mayeri*) collected in the Arfak Mountains in 1928 (Dollman 1930);
- a small enigmatic mouse described as *Rattus shawmayeri* (Hinton 1943) collected in the Bismarck Mountains in 1940, later synonymised with *Pogonomelomys ruemmleri* (now *Coccyzus ruemmleri*);
- a white-eye subspecies *Zosterops novaeguineae shawmayeri* (now included in *Z. n. wahgiensis*) from Mt. Wilhelm, Bismarck Mountains, in 1950 (Mees 1961; Mayr 1967).

In addition to those named for him are many other species first brought to the attention of science by Fred. These include the spectacular striped possums *Dactylopsila megalura* from the Weyland Mountains, *D. tatei* from Fergusson Island and the diminutive striped bandicoot *Microperoryctes papuensis* from the south-east mountains of Papua.

Fred relied extensively, if not exclusively, on local hunters bringing specimens to him. He delighted in re-counting how he released some surplus tree-mice back into the forest on one of his collecting expeditions in Irian Jaya, then Dutch New Guinea. He found the local people had brought in many more specimens of one of the prehensile tail mice (*Pogonomys*) than he needed. He found, as others have, these were rather delightful little rodents. He couldn't just take them out to the nearby bush and let them go, because the locals who followed him everywhere wouldn't understand after they had gone to so much trouble bringing them in as he had asked. The one place they didn't follow was down the track to the pit latrine — so that's where he let them go at night.

He was very observant and noticed that if their young weren't doing very well, female birds of paradise would capture certain kinds of spiders to feed them. He assumed they had some medicinal effect and sought out the same spiders to feed to birds he was hand-rearing when they went off-colour, apparently with some success. He was an expert on hand-rearing young birds, concentrating on birds of paradise. He shaped a small pencil-sized stick, cut it at a shallow angle to produce a spatula, similar in size and shape to the mother bird's beak, and used this to pick up a pea-sized piece of food, inducing a gaping response from the nestling by touching the container or moving his hand over the bird.

Without doubt, the most photographed and filmed bird of paradise was the male *Paradisaea raggiana salvadorii*, hand-reared by Fred at Nondugl in 1959 and later housed for many years at the Baiyer River Sanctuary. While still in prime condition at the age of 25 years, it was killed by a python. This bird, which became known as 'Fred Raggiana', responded to Fred's bobbing finger by going into a display routine in front of visiting dignitaries and natural history photographers.

Much of his success with wild animals in captivity was due to his extensive use of natural foods such as the dried pupae of tree-nesting ants that he used in his daily bird of paradise feed mix.

Fred was a craftsman in everything he did and made. His animal travelling crates of plywood were designed with the comfort and health of the occupant in mind — from the placement of perches to the sliding trays at the bottom to facilitate cleaning (and continuous monitoring of the condition of droppings). He had a number of breeding and hand-rearing successes at Nondugl and might have had more given more freedom. He was most distressed on one occasion when ordered to take a female Blue Bird of Paradise *Paradisaea rudolphi* off the nest to fill an export order for an overseas zoo. A rare and protected species, the Blue Bird of Paradise has yet to breed successfully in captivity.

With great skill and taste he extended the gardens commenced by Ned Blood at Nondugl. There were three large ponds, one below the other, the lowest with a small island. With one pinioned female he soon had New Guinea's only endemic waterfowl, the far from common Salvador's Teal *Salvadorina waigiensis*, coming in from the wild to feed on all ponds with one pair breeding regularly on the island. At first Fred was thrilled when each of the three ponds became the defended territory of a breeding pair, with nests at the two without an island well hidden in rank grasses close to the shore. He found that these nests were consistently predated by wily New Guinea Quolls *Dasyurus albopunctatus* but they would not cross the water to the island in the third pond. Further breeding attempts at the two higher ponds were discouraged.

The Nondugl Bird of Paradise Sanctuary, as it became known, was soon the top Papua New Guinea showplace for visiting dignitaries: prime ministers, ambassadors, etc, and an essential stop-over for prominent international ornithologists. These included Jean Delacour, Nils Gyldestolpe, Tom and Margaret Gilliard and Peter Scott who left behind a delightful pen sketch of a

pair of Salvadori's Teal on one of the ponds entitled 'A pair of Salvadori's Ducks drawn at Nondugl for Fred Shaw Mayer by Peter Scott, December 1956'.

In 1966 when Hallstrom decided to sell his remaining Nondugl interests he offered part of his private collection of birds of paradise to the Government. This led to the establishment of 'The Hallstrom Park Bird of Paradise Sanctuary' at Baiyer River under the control of a Trust. The Trust employed Fred to establish and manage the Baiyer River Sanctuary. He moved Sir Edward's gift birds to temporary aviaries in March 1967. After setting up Baiyer River, late in 1967, Fred's health began to fail and he was obliged to seek treatment in Australia. He returned less than a year later and suggested to the Trust that they arrange with the Government for Graeme George to manage the Sanctuary. 'In August 1968 the Sanctuary was officially opened by Sir Edward, Mr Shaw Mayer retired and Mr G.G. George was appointed Manager' (Anon. 1970). Fred stayed on for several months after he 'retired' to lend a hand and to pass on to Graeme more of his wealth of practical knowledge.

Probably during the first half of 1969 he moved to Lae where he stayed with his sick friend Dick Tebb. After Dick died Fred stayed on in Lae for a period. He kept an eye out for young tree-kangaroos and cuscuses brought into the Lae market and sent several up to Baiyer River. Descendants of Matschie's Tree-kangaroo *Dendrolagus matschiei*, obtained by Fred during this period, are now well established as a captive breeding population in United States zoos. His final New Guinea field collecting trip was from Lae to Kabwum in the Cromwell Mountains of the Huon Peninsula in January–February 1970. On this trip, sponsored by American naturalist/photographer Crawford H. Greenewalt, Fred obtained a number of the locally endemic birds of paradise and the Spangled Honeyeater *Melipotes ater* for the Baiyer River Sanctuary.

Fred invested in stocks and shares over the years and bought a house on National Park Road, Nambour, after returning to Australia. Here he kept exotic finches and again demonstrated his gift of rapport with wild creatures, at one stage having a wild Eastern Whipbird *Psophodes olivaceus*, a very shy species, often come right into the house! Doubtless for this it would have been rewarded with tasty mealworms. He moved into the Sundale Retirement Village nearby after having a blackout. The Village management built him two quite large aviaries in the grounds. He kept some pheasants

and foreign finches in them, establishing his mealworm cultures and a small workshop under the units nearby.

For his work in establishing the Nondugl and Baiyer River Sanctuaries and the breeding of birds of paradise, Frederick William Shaw Mayer was honoured in 1972 by the Queen with the award of Member of the Order of the British Empire. Although not a member, he was made the first Honorary Life Member of the Papua New Guinea Bird Society.

He was very generous. Appropriately in December 1973 (Papua New Guinea attained self-government on 1 December 1973) he presented the fledgling nation with two very valuable original paintings of birds of paradise, *Astrapia splendidissima* and *Drepanornis bruijnii*, by the renowned bird artist J.G. Keulemans. These were purchased by Fred when they and the other originals painted by Keulemans to illustrate R. Bowdler Sharpe's classic *Monograph of the Paradiseidae or Birds of Paradise and Ptilonorhynchidae or Bower Birds*, were auctioned in London about 1930 (Peckover 1976). He progressively gave away much of his collection of natural history books to friends who visited him over his years at Sundale Retirement Village.

Fred never married and he is survived by his sister Miss Janet Mayer, of Sydney, to whom sympathy is extended. We would like to thank Janet, Betty Drewett of Nambour, and Mary K. LeCroy of the American Museum of Natural History, New York, for their assistance in compiling this short biography, and John Calaby, Brian Coates, Peter Colson and Clifford Frith for their suggestions and comments on the original draft. Material for this obituary was also obtained from the sources listed below.

W.S. Peckover and G.G. George

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