

REQUIEM FOR A BIRD LOVER

PETER ESPEUT

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MURDER IS SO COMMON and so frequent in Jamaica that, for many of us, it fails to shock or appall.

The stabbing to death last week of internationally famous Jamaican environmentalist Robert Sutton of Marshall's Pen, Manchester, was murder most foul, and the abduction and stabbing of his wife, Dr. Ann Haynes Sutton, ostensibly for ransom, is further indication of the depths to which we have sunk as a people. But those tragic events passed without being much noticed, itself quite tragic.

Robert Sutton was more Jamaican than most of us, being able to trace more than one of his ancestors back to the English invaders in 1655. Indeed, he is a direct descendant of Richard James, the first baby born in Jamaica under English rule. But that does not mean much to some people, for Robert Sutton was a white Jamaican, born into an old Jamaican family.

Robert was born in Mandeville, and went to DeCarteret College. His father was a cattle farmer and he learnt the family business at an early age. After managing cattle properties in St. Elizabeth and Westmoreland, he took over his father's farm in Manchester in 1979, and he remained a cattle farmer until his murder last week. He was a respected cattle breeder; one of the bullkins bred on his property, Marshall's Pen, was purchased and raised by a local farmer and later won the prize at a recent Denbigh Show.

But Robert's local and international fame and his enduring contribution to Jamaica is in connection with his passion for and expertise in Jamaican birds, specially recording bird songs. You might have seen his recent book published jointly with his cousin, Audrey Downer, by Cambridge University Press: *Birds of Jamaica: a Photographic Field Guide*; or you might have seen his recent set of tapes/CDs of Jamaican bird calls published in 2000 jointly with G. Reynard by Cornell University Press: *Bird Songs in Jamaica*. He was just beginning to set down for the rest of us the wealth of knowledge he had gained over his lifetime and was planning a new book and a

new series of sound recordings. He shared his knowledge freely, and encouraged and trained many local people. He was always willing to volunteer to take groups from the Natural History Society of Jamaica and the Gosse Bird Club (now BirdLife Jamaica) into the field, and had infinite patience when trying to introduce people to birdwatching. His untimely death is a great loss to the environmental community, and to the environment itself.

His expertise in Jamaican birds was called upon in many ways. He was the natural person for visiting film crews to turn to as a consultant on Jamaican bird life: he was a consultant to the BBC Natural History Film Unit when it filmed David Attenborough's *Life of Birds* in 1997 *Spirits of the Jaguar* in 1995 on location in Jamaica. Similarly, visiting scientists usually contacted him for advice about how to implement their bird studies, taking advantage of his comprehensive knowledge of Jamaican birds and their habitats. He carried out assessments of environmental impact all across Jamaica for almost thirty years. To name a few, he assessed the JAVAMEX Project for CIDA (1977), the Royal Palm Reserve Project for the Petroleum Corporation of Jamaica (1987), and the hazards posed by birds to aircraft at the Sangster International Airport for the Airports Authority of Jamaica (1992).

Most Jamaicans know that many North American birds migrate to Jamaica to spend the winter months.

These birds spend about eight months of the year in Jamaica, so they are really Jamaican birds which migrate north for the summer months when the insects on which they feed are abundant]. But where do our birds reside during the four months they live up north? Robert Sutton dedicated a good part of his life trying to find out.

He qualified himself as a bird-bander through the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and over the last 30 years he has placed uniquely numbered metal bands on the feet of thousands of migrant birds. Birders in the US who observe the bands communicate with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, which means that we in Jamaica can know which parts of the USA we are organically linked with through our birds.

By banding Jamaican resident birds, he has studied the survival, ages and the plumages of these creatures throughout their life cycle, and their longevity, which has advanced the science of Jamaican bird ecology and identification. His serious and scientific approach to data collection was reflected in his long-term commitment to the Meteorological Service. He maintained the weather station at Marshall's Pen and received several awards for his service, most recently as Champion Observer for Manchester in 2001. In his own quiet (and unsung) way, this Jamaican man has made a serious and lasting contribution to our understanding of Jamaica's natural history.

A TOUGH OUTDOOR MAN

Robert Sutton was a pioneer in Jamaican Nature Tourism. He took great pleasure in taking groups of local and foreign people into the bush to see birds and was one of the first Jamaicans to work with bird-watching tours for overseas birders tourists, and has arrangements with US and UK tour companies – including Victor Emmanuel and Ornitholidays – which has brought thousands of tourists to Jamaica. He took tour groups all over Jamaica - from Barbecue Bottom in the Cockpit Country to the John Crow Mountains in St. Thomas - exposing them to the beauty of God's creation in Jamaica. He was a tough outdoor man, fit of mind and body. He

was murdered – stabbed in the heart as he fought with the intruders to protect his wife.

He was not a narrow environmentalist. He supported the local community around Marshall's Pen. His family donated land for the Mike Town Community Centre and the Mike Town Missionary Church, and he regularly attended local Community Council meetings and was quite vocal on local and national issues. He was the sponsor of the Mike Town Basic School. He was a past president of the Manchester Horticultural Society, and treasurer of the Jamaica Junior Naturalists, an environmental education NGO for the youth of Manchester.

In my own work, Robert Sutton (and his wife) did extensive research for us on the resident, migrant and transient birds of the Portland Bight Protected Area. Of course, he could identify the species of birds just by hearing them chirp. And he banded hundreds of our birds. He was a world-class expert in his field; a big Jamaican! He will be sorely missed.

Rest in Peace, Gallant Robert!

Peter Espeut is a sociologist and is executive director of an environment and development NGO.

ROBERT SUTTON MEMORIAL FUND

Dear Colleagues,

Robert Sutton – internationally-known Jamaican Ornithologist and author of *Birds of Jamaica*, husband of Ann Sutton (Ornithologist & Secretary of SCSCB) – passed away, tragically, on July 22nd, 2002. Robert was stabbed during a robbery of the Sutton's home – Marshall's Pen. Ann was treated at the hospital and released. We are thankful that she is alive and hope she will have the strength to carry on after this devastating loss.

Robert touched many lives and had a profound and positive influence on Jamaica's birds and environment. In addition to co-authoring *Birds of Jamaica: a Photographic Field Guide* (Cambridge University Press), Robert also published in 2000 a set of tapes/CDs of Jamaican bird vocalizations (with G. Reynard by Cornell University Press: *Bird Songs in Jamaica*). His expertise in Jamaican birds, especially their songs, was called upon by many, including visiting film crews, NGOs, and scientists, as well as local residents and environmental groups. He and Ann were pioneers in promoting Jamaican Nature Tourism. Robert took great pleasure in taking local and visiting birders into the bush to see birds. Not only did Robert provide expertise to overseas birdwatching tours, but he and Ann extended warm hospitality and friendship to all who enjoyed seeing birds in Jamaica. His legacy will live on in the many individuals that he taught and inspired.

This senseless tragedy is beyond comprehension. Our hearts go out to Ann and Robert's family for their loss. The bird conservation communities in Jamaica, the Caribbean, and throughout the world also mourn the loss of a dedicated environmentalist who worked tirelessly, along with his wife, to study and conserve Jamaica's birds. Many of you have asked how you can help. The SCSCB is pleased to announce that, with the kind assistance of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, a Memorial Fund has been established to honor Robert's memory. The funds will go towards supporting an aspect of Jamaican bird conservation especially important to Robert (to be announced).

If you would like to contribute to the fund, please send a check, made out to National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, to the following address:

National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
1120 Connecticut Ave NW, Suite 900
Washington, DC, 20036
Telephone: 202-857-0166, fax: 202-857-0162

NOTE: It is VERY IMPORTANT that you write "Robert Sutton Memorial Fund" directly on the check. This will ensure that all contributions are documented and accredited to this fund, and that NFWF mails you a thank you letter that includes the tax deductible donation credit.

As soon as a decision is made as to how the fund will be used, we will notify you.

Thank you in advance for your support.

Yours sincerely,

Lisa Sorenson & Patricia Bradley, Co-chairs, WIWD Working Group of the SCSCB
Eric Carey, President, and other Executive Officers for the Society for the Conservation and Study of Caribbean Birds