

Obituary

John Courtney 1934–2025



John Courtney in the field, 2014. Photo: Julianne Farrell

John Edgar Courtney was born in Glen Innes, New South Wales, in 1934 of convict ancestry on one side, and passed away in July 2025 at the age of 91, after a long life of significant contributions to ornithology. In his childhood there were no school buses from Glen Innes or Inverell to take him to primary school, and no opportunity for high school. At age 16, being under-age, he was granted a special driver's licence, to enable him to run the family farm after his father died. John performed his National Service military duty in Sydney, but was exempted from overseas service because of his status as a farmer.

Much of John's relevant background is given in his John Hobbs Medal citation (see below). John continued to publish in the following decade since that award. I well remember him showing me his Musk Lorikeet and Little Lorikeet nests on his farm and at the Elsmore Common, which helped to gel the co-authored paper expressing his concern at the loss of nesting habitat and hollow trees of the Little Lorikeet. That paper was instrumental in nominating the Little Lorikeet for Vulnerable status in New South Wales.

At various times John also showed me, on his farm Ashgrove at Swan Vale, the historical nest site of Regent Honeyeaters, whose eggs Mervyn Goddard had collected, and another nest area on a back road near Inverell airport, the eggs also collected by Goddard – locations where the Honeyeater has not nested for decades. John's real

love was parrots and cockatoos, and his papers on them were seminal. Although associated with aviculturists, he used captive birds as a means to understand parrots and their relationships, through their juvenile begging calls and other aspects. He was sceptical of aviculturists' claims of saving endangered parrots, given the common obsession with mutants and hybrids, opining that '[captive-bred birds] will all be blue' (that is, colour mutations). I also remember him guarding, with his rifle, wild Turquoise Parrots nesting in a stump after a feral cat had taken the previous brood of chicks (it did not take any more). He shared an interest in raptors and owls, and showed me a Square-tailed Kite nest and White-bellied Sea-Eagle nest that formed my first studies on those species.

John had long worked on his theory of relationships among Australian and other parrots, until that was superseded to some extent by the DNA-based phylogenies emerging, although he was keen to read those papers. The congruence of both approaches, reflecting his insights, was remarkable. He maintained that the DNA evidence should be accompanied by evidence from biology and behaviour. In later years, he seized opportunities to travel and observe parrots on Cape York Peninsula and in the Outback.

John the farmer and grazier was a gentleman and a scholar, leaving a legacy of outstanding amateur ornithology, despite schooling by correspondence only until Grade 6, after which he pursued self-education through reading, writing, and collaborating with students and staff at the University of New England and on his farm. He habitually referred his pre-publication parrot drafts to the eminent George A. Smith, whom he admired as a 'wordsmith'. John was also a bird bander and an avid photographer, some of his later papers being illustrated with his evocative photographs. He joined the then Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union in 1959, and attained honorary life membership after 50 years, although he insisted on continuing to pay his annual subscription to *Emu* (though he, like some others, found *Emu* increasingly esoteric in recent years). He was amused to receive requests for reprints of his papers addressed to 'Dr' or 'Professor'. In 'retirement' he moved to suburban Inverell, though continued to graze cattle at Ashgrove.

Among John's ornithological achievements, he also was a pioneer in recording frog calls for identification purposes, well before others made cassettes, CDs or apps generally available. I am grateful to John for providing me with those recordings, and for his (and wife Yvonne's) hospitality in Inverell whenever I visited, including overnight for early starts around his field sites. He also freely provided his bird and other nature photographs for reuse. Within the last decade or so, John donated his library of valuable books to the Glen Innes Historical Society, where he hoped it would be curated as the 'John Courtney Natural History Collection', and available for students to peruse.

In spite of his lack of formal schooling, John always told his three daughters that getting a good education was very important, and girls could do anything they wanted – visionary for a man of his time. As a farmer, he was also an avid conservationist, long before it became normal for farmers to respect their environment.

John the husband and family man was, in later years, a carer for his wife Yvonne until she predeceased him. He is survived by his three daughters, and his grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren. His gentleness, earthiness and common sense will be missed. I'll let his bibliography speak for itself.

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