



A REPORTER AT LARGE

RUFFLED FEATHERS

Uncovering the biggest scandal in the bird world.

BY JOHN SEABROOK



On a wintry evening in January, the Smithsonian threw a book party in the Castle—a turreted folly on the Mall, in Washington, D.C.—to celebrate Pamela Rasmussen’s monumental new work, “Birds of South Asia: The Ripley Guide,” which had recently been published, in two volumes, by the Smithsonian and Lynx Editions. The book, illustrated by John Anderton and other artists, puts the highest standards of professional ornithology into a form that an amateur can use in bird-watching, bridging a schism between professional and amateur bird-lovers that has existed for almost a century. Rasmussen examined everything that is known about birds in India, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Maldives—she measured, described, and plotted range maps for most of fourteen hundred and forty-one species, serving as sole judge in hundreds of difficult decisions about which birds to include on the final list. Along the way, she negotiated many other obstacles, including the death, in 2001, of S. Dillon Ripley, a grand old man of American ornithology, who was the book’s originator and guiding spirit. Most spectacularly, her research helped lead to the unravelling of the greatest ornithological fraud ever committed—a convoluted skein of theft and data falsification that was perpetrated by the late British ornithologist Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen.

At the party, Rasmussen mingled shyly with the clubby, moneyed world that used to dominate natural history, and still lingers in ornithology. David Challinor, Harvard ’43, now eighty-five years old and a senior scientist emeritus at the Smithsonian, greeted her by saying, “Marvellous, Pam, marvellous. You stayed with it.” Rasmussen smiled and nodded, a bit stiffly. She is keenly aware of the differences between her own upbringing, in Oregon, and that of the East Coast scientist-aristocrats she has come to know at the Smithsonian. Rasmussen is forty-seven years old and stands six feet tall in her

Ornithology has relied on “study skins,” but D.N.A.-based research may replace them. Photograph by Martin Schoeller.

high heels. She has Nordic features and wide-set pale-blue eyes. She sometimes appears startled when you address her, as though she'd been thinking about something else. As she made her way around the room, colleagues from the Smithsonian praised her extraordinary ability to notice tiny details about bird specimens that other researchers miss, a condition Rasmussen herself diagnoses as "attention-surplus disorder." Bruce Beehler, a former co-worker, said, "Very few younger researchers have Pam's ability to stay focussed on one thing, one specimen, for hours and hours. They need ten things happening at once."

Conversation returned several times during the evening to Colonel Meinertzhagen, who died in 1967. Meinertzhagen enjoyed a formidable reputation in international ornithology. He was a chairman of the British Ornithologists' Club, and the recipient of a Godman-Salvin Medal, one of the highest honors in British birding. His unorthodox methods and surprising finds had been the subject of rumor during his lifetime, but there was never any substantiated accusation of fraud. Three largely adulatory biographies of Meinertzhagen have been published since his death—one by a soldier, one by a professional game hunter, and one by a birder. "Duty, Honor, Empire" (1970), by John Lord, and "Warrior" (1998), by Peter Hathaway Capstick, don't say anything about fraud. Mark Cocker's "Richard Meinertzhagen: Soldier, Scientist and Spy" (1989) does consider many of the rumors, but ultimately rejects them. It wasn't until more than thirty years after his death,

when circumstances brought Meinertzhagen to the notice of an unusually attentive researcher, that the extent of his deception was revealed.

One day in 1967, when Rasmussen was eight, her father, Dr. Chester Murray Rasmussen, came into her room, glanced contemptuously at the dolls she and her younger sister, Sally,



Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen with a great bustard, in Nairobi, in 1915.

were playing with, and said, "Why don't you girls get interested in something useful?" Her father was an osteopath, and Pam remembers him as "the biggest man you had ever seen." He spent a lot of time in his basement den, which he had decorated with the heads of animals that he had killed on hunting trips. (A few years later, Dr. Rasmussen deserted the family.) Pam's mother, Helen, a strict Seventh-Day Adventist, let the children know that she disapproved of what he was doing down

there. "Sinning," was how Pam understood it.

A couple of days after that encounter, Pam's mother bought her the junior edition of Oliver Austin's "Birds of the World," illustrated by Arthur Singer. Pam had never thought much about birds before, but she quickly became obsessed with the pictures in the book. "I just thought the way the birds looked was so wonderful," she said. She tried to get her sister interested, too. "Pam would open the book and say, 'O.K., which of the birds on this page do you like best?'" Sally told me. "Then she'd do the same thing for the next page—all the way through the book."

After poring over the illustrations, Pam went out to the marsh behind the house, which was situated about twenty miles west of Portland, and recognized a bird—a long-billed marsh wren. "Now that I knew its name, it was thrilling," she said. She had bird-watching birthdays at the Oregon beach, in October. "There we'd be, with Pam, freezing, looking for ducks," Sally, who is now a financial writer, said. For gifts, Rasmussen always wanted bird books. (If it was an expensive book, like the first edition of "Parrots of the World," by Joseph M. Forshaw, it had to cover two or three gift opportunities.) In addition to looking at the pictures, Rasmussen studied the text of these books carefully—except for the chapters entitled "Fossil Birds." Her mother told her not to read those.

At Walla Walla College, an Adventist institution in Washington State where Rasmussen spent six years, earning her master's in biology in 1983, evolution was not taken seriously. "Except," she said, "when we learned what was wrong with

it.” It wasn’t until Rasmussen reached the University of Kansas, where she did her dissertation on cormorants in Patagonia, receiving a Ph.D. in 1990, that she studied Darwin in depth. “It wasn’t like the scales fell from my eyes,” she said. “You don’t really need Darwin to be interested in bird diversity, which is what fascinates me. You need him to explain it.” Compared to the theory of natural selection, religion came to seem silly, Rasmussen says, although her mother still hopes she will return to the fold.

Rasmussen entered the job market in the early nineties, just as molecular biology was beginning to emerge as a new way of doing avian systematics—the naming, description, and classification of birds. Morphology (the study of form and structure) was being superseded by molecular genetics, but Rasmussen wanted to study birds, not bird code. Owing in part to the peculiarly pre-Darwinian circumstances of her education, she wanted a job that would let her do what the nineteenth-century ornithologists had done: travel widely, observe and collect birds, and work with specimens in museums. In 1992, Rasmussen found that job, as the assistant to S. Dillon Ripley, the former secretary of the Smithsonian. Ripley’s maternal great-grandfather, Sidney Dillon, had been the chairman of the Union Pacific Railroad, and young Dillon cultivated his interest in birds on the family’s estate, in Litchfield, Connecticut. When he was a young man, he made several expeditions to India, in the grand style, meeting dignitaries while collecting birds. As a professional ornithologist, he wrote a ten-volume tome on the birds of India with the renowned Indian ornithologist Salim Ali. The Indian subcontinent, because of its turbulent political history and localized record keeping, was one of the last regions on earth where the avifauna was still not fully catalogued. Now, as his final project, Ripley wanted to produce a field guide that would be the last word on the subject.

In determining which birds to include on the final species list, Ripley was strongly predisposed in favor of museum specimens, and against photographs and eyewitness accounts, which would be allowed only if the evidence was what he deemed “diagnostic”—clear images, accompanied, if possible, by recorded bird-

song. For Rasmussen, this meant examining tens of thousands of the two hundred and thirty thousand specimens from the region, which are scattered around museums in the United States, Great Britain, and India, as well as in Paris and Berlin. There would also be lots of field work to do. “The job seemed like it was too good to be true,” she told me. Not long after the project started, Ripley became too ill to continue working, and Rasmussen took over.

Like all branches of natural history, the traditional science of ornithology is based on specimen collections. The taxonomy of birds (the naming of species and subspecies) and their phylogeny (the ordering of species into ancestral families) were done using so-called “study skins.” With the recent advent of DNA-based research, scientists are now revising this scheme, working on a grand new system of classification, called “genetic phylogeny,” which will reflect the new information gathered from DNA. What role specimens will play in the new molecular world is unclear, and some researchers, Rasmussen among them, fear that, once DNA has been harvested from old specimens, future generations of ornithologists will see the skins as mere curiosities, artifacts of an earlier age.

Study skins differ from the mounted exhibits one sees in museums. Mounting birds, often in natural poses, is a good way to express what birders call the “jizz”—the bird’s wild essence. But mounted birds are difficult to measure precisely, and minute variations in size are crucial in making taxonomic distinctions. In a study skin, the soft parts of the bird—brain and organs—have been removed, without disturbing the shape, so that the specimen resembles a dead bird in hand. If the skin has been skillfully dressed in the field, the feathers remain attached. The three largest collections are in London, New York, and Washington; among them, the natural-history museums in these cities have almost three million skins. Most were gathered in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before bird science developed professional degrees and standards. Collectors were often wealthy gentlemen who pursued ornithology as a hobby. Sometimes a museum would sponsor their birding expeditions to far-flung places, and in

return the collectors would promise to contribute their skins to the museum. More sedentary collectors could also acquire skins from natural-history dealers, such as Maison Verreaux, in Paris, or John Bell’s shop, on Worth Street and Broadway in Manhattan, where as a young man Teddy Roosevelt bought specimens. Another popular source was the “plume hunters” who worked for the millinery industry, finding birds to provide feathers for ladies’ hats. One of the most successful plume hunters of the nineteenth century, Joseph H. Batty, was also a collector for the American Museum of Natural History.

The Age of Collection waned in the twentieth century, mainly as a result of the growing popularity of the conservation movement. In his history of American ornithology, “A Passion for Birds,” Mark V. Barrow, Jr., explains that around the time the passenger pigeon, a once common North American bird, became extinct (the last one died in 1914, in the Cincinnati Zoo), the public began to grow aware of the possibility of species extinction, and of the need to preserve birds in the wild. The nature writer John Burroughs called skin and egg collectors “men who plunder nests and murder their owners” and suggested that the “skin-collector should be put down, either by legislation or with dogs.” He also called museum-based ornithologists “not only the enemy of birds, but the enemy of all who would know them rightly.” Out of these sentiments grew modern birding, a phenomenally popular outdoor recreational activity (today, forty-six million Americans call themselves birders) in which many collect not skins but “sight records”—eyewitness accounts, supported when possible by sound recordings and photographs.

Scientists regarded sight records as unreliable (“I wouldn’t have seen it if I hadn’t believed it” is how ornithologists refer to some birders’ eyewitness accounts) and held fast to the principle that specimens were the ultimate standard in ornithology. (A recent example of skepticism about sight records is the controversy over the ivory-billed woodpecker, an extremely rare species that several birders claim to have observed and recorded in the southeastern United States, but which other ornithologists continue to maintain is extinct.) However, the eth-

ics of conservation gradually won out over the interests of science, and legislation was passed in many countries that made collecting more and more difficult. This forced the scientists into a complex and paradoxical relationship with amateurs. On the one hand, they were at pains to distinguish themselves, as professionals, from the birders, whose standards they generally deplored. But, on the other hand, because they were often unable to work with fresh specimens, the scientists had to rely more than ever on the skins amassed by the old amateurs. But who were they? What were their standards, these gentlemen scientists who did the early collecting and classifying?

Richard Meinertzhagen was one of the greatest of the old amateur collectors. His collection of twenty-five thousand skins, most of which he shot himself, was acquired by Britain's Natural History Museum in 1954—one of the largest private collections garnered by that museum in the twentieth century. In an obituary, the *Times* of London said that Meinertzhagen “will be remembered as an eminent and outspoken ornithologist of international fame and as one of the best and most colorful intelligence officers the Army ever had.” The list of his military accomplishments would have been familiar to many readers: if not exactly a historic figure, he had been witness to a lot of history, especially in British East Africa and Palestine, where he served with T. E. Lawrence during the First World War. In later life, he made his reputation as the ultimate ornithologist, a sort of birding superhero. He could get to the remotest part of Afghanistan, find a bird no one had ever seen there before, shoot it, and prepare the skin in the field. (Toward the end of his collecting career, he managed to get around restrictions on killing birds by carrying a small gun concealed inside a walking stick.) Meinertzhagen always had beautiful skins, which is one reason that his collection was so valuable to scientists.

Rasmussen had never heard of Meinertzhagen when she began the Ripley Guide, but she soon came to recognize his name on many important specimens from the region. He was the sole authority for fourteen species and subspecies on the subcontinent. Like other noted British collectors who were posted to remote

corners of the Empire, he had shot and skinned and classified birds as a break from colonizing. (Another major collector in the region, Louis Mandelli, had been a tea-plantation manager in Darjeeling.) Ripley had relied heavily on Meinertzhagen's skins in his work on the birds of India, and he had never said anything to Rasmussen about suspect specimens. (“He didn't talk to me much at all,” Rasmussen says.) Salim Ali, Ripley's co-author and a towering twentieth-century ornithologist, wrote favorably about Meinertzhagen in his autobiography, “The Fall of a Sparrow.” Rasmussen therefore had no reason to think, as she put it to me, “that there was anything wrong with the skins.”

In 1996, when she was already a few years into planning the Ripley Guide, Rasmussen came across an article in an issue of *Ibis*, the journal of the British Ornithologists' Union. It was written by an Irish ornithologist named Alan Knox, a former curator at the British Natural History Museum who is now at the University of Aberdeen. Knox argued, convincingly, that several of Meinertzhagen's redpoll skins had been relabelled with incorrect data. Knox based his argument on the fact that skin collectors have characteristic styles of “making” a skin. Some slice off a small piece of the skull, in order to scoop out the brains, whereas others cut off the whole back of the skull, while still others take the brains out through the palate. Some birds are made with a full belly, others with a flat belly. The kind of thread, cotton, and internal supports used in making the skin can also differ from maker to maker. Based on an analysis of several preparers' styles, Knox concluded that at least two redpoll skins which Meinertzhagen claimed to have shot in Blois, France, on January 17, 1953, were probably stolen from a series of birds in the Natural History Museum, which had been collected by Richard Bowdler Sharpe decades earlier, in Hanwell, Middlesex, on November 17, 1884. Meinertzhagen had replaced the tags on the birds' feet with new tags, containing false data about where and when they had been collected.

On reading Knox's paper, Rasmussen was immediately concerned. “I thought to myself, If he went to the trouble to steal and change the data on a common bird like a redpoll, wouldn't he also try

to fake some of the rarer birds in his collection?”

Several weeks later, Rasmussen travelled to Britain to meet Robert Prys-Jones, the head of the Natural History Museum's Bird Group. The museum's birds are kept in Tring, an hour's drive northwest of London, on the grounds of a private museum established in 1889 for Lord Walter Rothschild, an heir to the banking fortune and an insatiable bird collector. The collection is housed in a new building that abuts the museum, which is now open to the public. The bird skins, the feathers still as soft as the day they were shot, in some cases a hundred and fifty years ago, lie on their sides in acid-free cardboard boxes, on tightly spaced sliding trays, in large white cabinets that form long spooky corridors stretching the width of the building. The corridors are filled with the intensely musty odor of moth cakes. Many of the older specimens bear traces of “arsenic soap,” which collectors used to preserve their skins from insects. Among the historical curiosities in the cabinets are birds that James Cook brought back from the South Pacific, and the finches collected by Darwin, among others, on his Beagle voyage, on the beaks of which the theory of natural selection was built. In the basement, there is a long wall of cabinets filled with Lord Rothschild's beloved cassowaries, large flightless birds from New Guinea and Australia that used to roam freely in the park; now they're stuffed and mounted. (The vast majority of Rothschild's birds aren't in Tring, however—a subject that still causes pain within the Bird Group. Some two hundred and eighty thousand Rothschild skins were bought by the Whitney family for the American Museum of Natural History, in 1931. Rothschild, sixty-three at the time, sold the birds for two hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars, in order to help pay off a peeress who was blackmailing him over an old affair by threatening to tell his mother.)

Rasmussen had been hoping that Knox was wrong about the redpoll frauds, but Prys-Jones assured her that he was not. After the *Ibis* paper, the British Ornithologists' Union asked Prys-Jones and Nigel Collar, an ornithologist at the conservation group BirdLife International, to evaluate the Meinertzhagen specimens. Prys-Jones had a Meinertzhagen redpoll

skin X-rayed, and compared the image with an X-ray of a Sharpe skin. "They were obviously from the same maker," he told me.

The possibility of widespread fraud put Prys-Jones in a tricky position. His first responsibility, as head curator of the collection, was to the collection itself. He had heard rumors that the redpolls were not an isolated case. If fraud was pandemic, it might damage the collection at a time when some scientists were beginning to debate the value of keeping large collections. In the same way that card catalogues in libraries were disposed of once their contents were digitally rendered, so, perhaps, could specimens be removed from museums, once they had been digitally sampled and photographed—freeing up valuable space for revenue-generating attractions like planetariums. "Serious people have seriously suggested that once you digitize the specimens you don't really need them," Rasmussen told me, indignantly. "People are asking what collections are good for, why do we need to keep them?"

Nevertheless, Prys-Jones told Rasmussen that he would collaborate with her in trying to track down all the Meinertzhagen frauds among South Asian birds; together they would publish their results. "In the end, what else could we do?" Prys-Jones said.

Meinertzhagen was born in 1878, when the British Empire was at its zenith, and he lived to see its nadir. His mother, Georgina Potter, came from a well-known family of liberal intellectuals; her sister was Beatrice Webb, the Fabian socialist and co-founder, with her husband, Sidney, of the London School of Economics. The Meinertzhagen house was full of important late-Victorian thinkers and liberal politicians. As a boy, the biographer Mark Cocker notes, Meinertzhagen was taken on natural-history outings by Herbert Spencer, the philosopher who coined the phrase "survival of the fittest," and Thomas Huxley introduced him to Darwin, who allowed him to sit on his knee. Richard's father, Daniel Meinertzhagen, was a banker of German origin, who had little interest in his wife's liberal ideas and friends. He once fled the house when George Bernard Shaw came to visit.

Richard, called Dick, was taught to



"I suppose it all started with casual Fridays."

skin birds by Richard Bowdler Sharpe, whose redpolls he would later steal. Sharpe was one of those astoundingly energetic Victorians who collected and catalogued a vast number of natural-history specimens of all types. He was the first curator of the Bird Room at the new British Museum (Natural History), which occupied Alfred Waterhouse's cathedral-like, terra-cotta-sheathed building that opened in 1881 on Cromwell Road, in South Kensington, to house specimens that had overflowed the confines of the British Museum, in Bloomsbury. (The name of the new building was officially changed to the Natural History Museum in 1992.) As a teen-ager, Meinertzhagen spent many hours skinning and classifying birds there. He also began keeping a diary of his ornithological exploits; this lifelong project would become as critical to his legacy as his skins.

Meinertzhagen had hoped to pursue his natural-history interests at university, but his father had no faith in his scientific ability and sent him to work in the family banking firm, in the City. Meinertzhagen quit after a year to join the Royal Fusiliers, sailing for India in 1899. Moving to East Africa, in 1900, he discovered an avocation for killing. "I have myself felt the magnetic power of the African climate

drawing me lower and lower to the level of a savage," he wrote in his diary. He satisfied his bloodlust by slaughtering animals, and, occasionally, men. "I was surprised by the ease with which a bayonet goes into a man's body," he wrote in an account of an attack on an East African tribe, in 1902. He seemed determined to reject the liberal pacifist philosophy of his mother's side of the family, which he called "a foul, infectious disease." However, he didn't entirely forget his scientific ambitions while in Africa: he identified a previously unknown species, the giant forest hog. Named *Hylochoerus meinertzhageni*, the hog is in the British Natural History Museum's collection.

In 1917, Meinertzhagen served as an intelligence officer for Sir Edmund Allenby, the commander of the British forces in Palestine. While he devised ways to defeat the Turkish Army, he also studied ornithology, using calibration instruments at anti-aircraft gun stations to calculate the speed and altitude of birds. In Palestine, he came to know T. E. Lawrence, who memorably describes him in "Seven Pillars of Wisdom": "A student of migrating birds drifted into soldiering. . . . He was logical, an idealist of the deepest and so possessed by his convictions that he was willing to harness evil to the char-

iot of good. He was a strategist, a geographer, and a silent smiling masterful man; who took as blithe a pleasure in deceiving his enemy (or his friend) by some unscrupulous jest, as in spattering the brains of a cornered mob of Germans one by one with his African knob-kerri." Meinertzhagen asked Lawrence to remove this account from later editions, but it remained in the book.

Palestine was the scene of the Colonel's most celebrated wartime action—the Haversack Ruse, in which he duped Turkish forces into thinking that the British would continue their drive toward Jerusalem by attacking Gaza instead of Beersheba. He allowed forged secret documents purporting to be detailed plans for a Gaza offensive to fall into Turkish hands, by making it appear that he had lost the haversack containing them while he was wounded and under pursuit. Not only were the orders and the plans faked but there was also an easily broken code that allowed the enemy to intercept fake messages. The Turkish generals apparently fell for the ruse, and the British achieved a complete surprise and victory at Beersheba, which helped lead to their conquest of Jerusalem, a month later.

After the war, Meinertzhagen was a member of the British military delegation to the Paris Peace Conference, where, in opposition to Lawrence and the Arabists, he aligned himself with the Zionists, vigorously backing Arthur Balfour's Declaration pledging British support for a national homeland for Jews (which was expressed in a 1917 letter to Lord Rothschild, who was a prominent Zionist). This was the beginning of Meinertzhagen's long support for the state of Israel (a square is named after him in Jerusalem). In Paris, the Colonel also had several memorable encounters with Lawrence, which he recorded in his diary and later used in his book "Middle East Diary 1917-1956," published in 1959, twenty-four years after Lawrence's death. One evening in the summer of 1919, Meinertzhagen wrote, a distraught Lawrence appeared at the door of his hotel room. He confessed that the book he was writing about his experiences in the war was not all true, that he "had been involved in a huge lie—'imprisoned in a lie' was his expression," Meinertzhagen wrote. Lawrence then went on to reveal that when he had been captured by the Turkish gover-

HALLEY'S COMET

Miss Murphy in first grade
wrote its name in chalk
across the board and told us
it was roaring down the storm tracks
of the Milky Way at frightful speed
and if it wandered off its course
and smashed into the earth
there'd be no school tomorrow.
A red-bearded preacher from the hills
with a wild look in his eyes
stood in the public square
at the playground's edge
proclaiming he was sent by God
to save every one of us,
even the little children.
"Repent, ye sinners!" he shouted,
waving his hand-lettered sign.
At supper I felt sad to think
that it was probably
the last meal I'd share
with my mother and my sisters;
but I felt excited, too,
and scarcely touched my plate.
So Mother scolded me
and sent me early to my room.
The whole family's asleep now
except for me. They never heard me steal
into the stairwell hall and climb
the ladder to the fresh night air.

Look for me, Father, on the roof
of the red-brick building
at the foot of Green Street—
that's where we live, you know, on the top floor.
I'm the boy in the white flannel gown
sprawled on this coarse gravel bed
searching the starry sky,
waiting for the world to end.

—Stanley Kunitz
(1905–2006)

nor of Deraa, in 1917, he had been sodomized by the governor and his servants. Meinertzhagen begged Lawrence to tell the truth ("I loathe fakes," he said). In a later entry, Meinertzhagen said of Lawrence, "He has a trick of inflating the truth so that one cannot tell which is basic fact and which is embellishment."

In the early nineteen-twenties, Meinertzhagen was a chief political officer in Palestine and Syria and then held important positions in the Colonial Office in London. He retired from the Army at the

age of forty-seven, with his pension, resolving to devote himself to ornithology and to spend more time with his wife, Anne Constance Jackson, whom he married in 1921. (He wrote in his diary that he had been offered several attractive diplomatic posts in other countries, including the governorship of the Falkland Islands and Ambassador to Japan, and though he would have liked either, he turned them down because Anne didn't want to leave Britain, "and her happiness counts far more than worldly advancement.") Sup-

ported in part by Anne, who came from a wealthy family, Meinertzhagen travelled widely in pursuit of birds, including one long trip during 1925 and 1926 to Sikkim and Ladakh, when he collected many of his fourteen unique records on the Indian subcontinent; he published a two-part paper on his work in *Ibis*.

Three months after the birth of the couple's third child, Randle, in 1928, Anne, then thirty-nine, was killed in an accident on her family's estate in Scotland. She and Meinertzhagen were practicing outdoors with a revolver and, as Meinertzhagen was going to retrieve a target, Anne accidentally shot herself in the head while inspecting the gun. The death certificate said that she died of "injury to spinal cord & lower part of brain from a bullet wound at short range." She left the income from her estate to her husband on the provision that he never remarry; he never did. Meinertzhagen's cousin Theresa Clay, who was seventeen at the time of Anne's death, and thirty-three years younger than Meinertzhagen, became his protégée and ultimately his lifelong companion. They lived next door to each other in London, at No. 17 and No. 18 Kensington Park Gardens, but an indoor passage connected the two houses. Under Meinertzhagen's guidance, Clay became an expert in Mallophaga, a type of chewing louse that infects birds. The pair spent the nineteen-thirties travelling together. He would ask the curators of the great skin collections around the world, many of whom were his friends, whether he and Clay could use the collection in order to gather Mallophaga, and further her work. In 1939, they spent one Sunday entirely unsupervised in the American Museum of Natural History, in New York, "shaking out" skins. Clay also accompanied Meinertzhagen on epic birding trips, collecting many birds herself. In 1937, the Colonel named his prize possession, the Afghan snowfinch, a species new to science, after her—*Pyrgilauda theresae*.

In his later years, Meinertzhagen received a series of honors, including Commander of the British Empire. He published a major work of ornithology, "Birds of Arabia," in 1954, and in his final decade produced four volumes of memoirs, mined from his diaries, which became important primary sources for historians of British East Africa and of the First

World War. He was bedridden during his last years, after a collision with an overenthusiastic dog in Kensington Park Gardens left him with a broken hip.

When Rasmussen and Prys-Jones embarked on the evaluation of Meinertzhagen's rare South Asian birds, they began with the assumption that the data on the tags were not reliable. They suspected that, as with the redpolls, Meinertzhagen had not only stolen the birds from a museum or a private collection but also invented the data. For this reason, Rasmussen feared that it would be impossible to determine who had actually collected the birds. But the answers were hidden in the skins. Rasmussen and Prys-Jones figured out ways to extend Alan Knox's basic forensic method, building a diagnostic file of the characteristic preparation styles of the major collectors in the region. In hundreds of cases, they X-rayed skins to reveal characteristics that weren't superficially obvious. Once they had identified a suspect Meinertzhagen skin as being made in another collector's style, they could check the museum's register to see if one of that collector's birds was missing. Often, the bird that the Colonel had stolen would prove to be the best specimen of a series of birds shot around the same time. This method allowed Rasmussen and Prys-Jones not only to identify whom Meinertzhagen had stolen the bird from but also, by placing it within a series, to restore much of the data that Meinertzhagen had destroyed when he removed the label.

In several cases, they discovered that stolen birds had been remade by Meinertzhagen, probably in order to conceal the hand of the original maker. The most dramatic example of this type of fraud was *Athene blewitti*, a forest owlet, one of the rarest birds in India. The last reported sighting of it was made by Meinertzhagen, who claimed to have shot the bird at Mandvi, on the Tapti River in Gujarat, in October, 1914. The previous forest-owlet sighting was recorded in 1884, when James Davidson, a colonial

official stationed in Western Khandesh, shot several in the jungle below the Satpurus, in Maharashtra, about three hundred miles away. Rasmussen and Nigel Collar, of BirdLife, who had once regarded Meinertzhagen as his hero, asked Prys-Jones to lend two of the Natural History Museum's owlets to the Smithsonian—the Meinertzhagen bird and one of the Davidson specimens. The Smithsonian's bird-collection manager, Phillip Angle, slit the wing of the Meinertzhagen owlet, and along the humerus he found a yellowed piece of cotton that the Colonel had probably neglected to remove when he remade the bird. Rasmussen sent a sample of that cotton, along with a sample of cotton from the Davidson bird, to an F.B.I. lab, for fibre analysis. The fibres proved to be identical.

Eventually, Rasmussen and Prys-Jones were able to prove that all fourteen of Meinertzhagen's unique records for species and subspecies in the Indian subcontinent were frauds. The Siberian accentor he claimed to have collected in Ladakh in April, 1925, had actually been collected in Peking by a man named Kibort in September, 1878. The three male willow warblers he claimed to have taken on the same day in January, 1952, in Nagaland, northeastern India, had actually been collected between May and July of 1885 in northwest Siberia by Seebohm and Brown. His single specimen of Père David's snowfinch, which he said he collected in Sikkim in March, 1952, in fact had come from Mongolia, and was collected by Severtzov in 1877. Many more rare birds in the collection turned out to be frauds, too. Meinertzhagen's two Blyth's kingfishers, which he reported shooting in Burma, actually came from the island of Hainan, in China. The Colonel's Andaman tree pie and his extremely rare Seychelles paradise flycatcher were also stolen and fraudulently labelled. In many cases, the false Meinertzhagen data had been incorporated into the subsequent literature; Ripley himself had used the false data in his books. Meinertzhagen brazenly published many of his false records in *Ibis*, "almost like he was daring people to catch him," Rasmussen said.

The profound unreliability of the Meinertzhagen specimens not only put the Ripley Guide in peril, it also threat-



ened to undermine Rasmussen's faith in the efficacy of skins in general, on which she had based her career. Nothing else this large has been known to have occurred in the world of ornithology. The only case that comes close is that of the Hastings Rarities. Between 1892 and 1930, thirty-two of forty-nine new taxa added to the British List—the complete record of the more than five hundred species in the British Isles—were taken from within twenty miles of the town of Hastings, in southeastern England. In fact, the birds were brought from other parts of the world and sold as genuine British birds to collectors eager to have a complete, up-to-date set. The chief suspect was a local taxidermist and gunmaker named George Bristow. When the frauds were finally detected, in the nineteen-sixties, some thirty species had to be removed from the British List.

But Meinertzhagen wasn't interested in money, as Bristow seems to have been. He wanted reputation. In this aspect, his actions resemble those of a British botanist, Professor John Heslop Harrison, of Newcastle University, in the nineteen-forties. Harrison was growing Arctic-alpine plants in his garden, among other places, stealthily replanting them on the Isle of Rum, in the Inner Hebrides, and then using his "discoveries" as evidence

to bolster his theory that vegetation pre-dating the last Ice Age survived in some parts of the British Isles. He, too, was suspected during his lifetime, by an amateur botanist named John Raven, but Raven was never able to get a full accounting of the hoax published in a scientific journal.

To Rasmussen, one of the most shocking aspects of the case was the revelation that the authorities at the British Natural History Museum had known for years what the Colonel was up to. In 1995, Prys-Jones began to read the museum's files on Meinertzhagen, and he and Rasmussen discovered official memorandums showing that Meinertzhagen had been caught stealing birds as far back as August, 1919, when, shortly after his return from the Paris Peace Conference, he was apprehended with nine birds in his briefcase as he left the museum. He was subsequently banned from the Bird Room, but managed to get reinstated in 1921, with the help of Lord Rothschild, even though he, too, suspected Meinertzhagen of stealing birds from him. The Colonel had been caught stealing skins again in 1934, and in 1935 he was investigated by Scotland Yard for having removed a volume of the journal *Parasitology* from the museum's library, and for tearing pages out of another volume. But

charges were never pressed, and Meinertzhagen escaped public censure. On the contrary, he was made an Honorary Associate of the museum in 1954, and was issued a pass key.

Prys-Jones thinks that some individuals at the museum might have been afraid to accuse Meinertzhagen, out of fear of losing his skins. In 1947, Meinertzhagen had threatened to bequeath his collection to the American Museum of Natural History. The eminent ornithologist Ernst Mayr, who was then the curator of the museum's Rothschild collection, called the Meinertzhagen skins "the finest private collection of birds in existence" and confessed that he was "almost breathless" at the prospect of acquiring it. But the British birdmen, having lost the Rothschild collection to New York twenty years earlier, weren't about to lose the Meinertzhagen specimens. "I think some individuals at the museum might have figured, if he stole birds from them, it didn't matter so much, because they'd get the birds back in the end, when he left them his collection," Prys-Jones told me. "I don't think they knew he was changing the tags, which is a far more serious matter." In any case, the interests of the gentlemen's club prevailed over the interests of science. As was the case in the celebrated fraud involving the Piltdown Man—the fossil, "discovered" in Sussex by Charles Dawson and unveiled in 1912, that purported to show a missing link between the Neanderthals and the Cro-Magnons—the clubbiness of science would keep the truth buried for decades.

As Rasmussen and others began to publish papers on the frauds, she met people who, in one capacity or another, had known Richard Meinertzhagen. A sixty-eight-year-old retired librarian from Tring, Effie Warr, remembered Meinertzhagen from the time she had spent working in the Bird Room in London when she was a young woman. "The museum had given him his own gallery," Warr told me, "and that was where he kept his birds. He was quite old by that point, and nearly deaf, so you really couldn't talk to him, other than say hello. We were told to keep an eye on him, but they never accused him of anything, because they didn't want it to get into the public domain. Because they wanted his birds, you see."



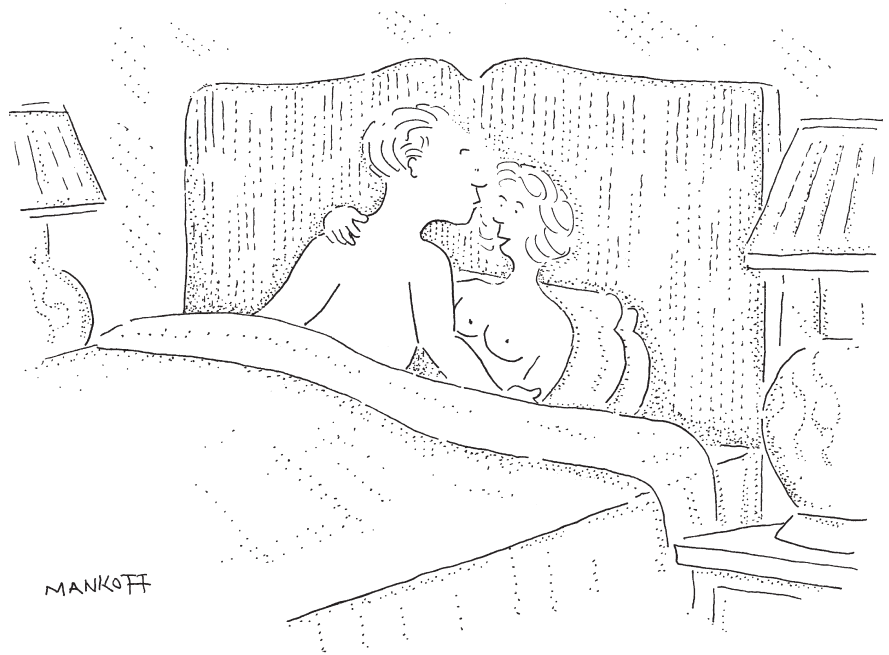
"The latest poll shows your approval rating holding steady at a hundred per cent."

It turned out, too, that in his great work, "Birds of Arabia," Meinertzhagen had relied upon the unpublished manuscript of another ornithologist, George Bates, who had died before finishing his own book. Meinertzhagen had used a copy that he had taken from the British Legation offices in Jidda, not realizing that another copy was held in the British Natural History Museum. The duplicate copy, Warr said, revealed the extent of Meinertzhagen's borrowings.

Rasmussen also heard from some of the Colonel's old friends, who continued to support him. In a review of a book that included an article by Rasmussen and Prys-Jones about Meinertzhagen, Bill Bourne, a senior British ornithologist, wrote that "the usual people dance on Colonel Meinertzhagen's grave," noting that he "did more good work than most of their critics put together."

As the ornithologists were exposing the Colonel's bird-skin frauds, several researchers were examining other aspects of his life and legacy. One of these was an independent T. E. Lawrence scholar, J. N. Lockman, who published "Meinertzhagen's Diary Ruse," in 1995. Meinertzhagen habitually typed his diary entries and left behind no handwritten notes, so it is impossible to know to what extent he rewrote or embellished his life and observations. Lockman concluded that "Meinertzhagen's twelve Lawrence entries are virtually complete forgeries of much later date, cleverly conceived but sloppily executed." Diary entries about Lawrence, such as "I believe I was the only one of [Lawrence's] friends to whom he confided that he was a complete fraud," dated 1919, were actually written in the late fifties. (Seen in this light, Meinertzhagen's account of Lawrence saying to him, "Someday I shall be found out," may really be Meinertzhagen talking to himself.) Lockman pointed out that the suspect diary entries that he saw were typed on a different kind of paper than the surrounding entries, with a different typewriter ribbon, and he also noted that the sequence of page numbers does not match the pages immediately preceding and following the entries.

In 2001, Rasmussen met a Los Angeles writer named Brian Garfield, the author of "Hopscotch" and "Death Wish," among other novels, who was working on a nonfiction book about Meinertzhagen.



"What do you say we leave the rest to the imagination?"

Among the mysteries Garfield was researching was an old rumor, apparently widespread at the time, that Anne Jackson's death wasn't an accident. Garfield suspected that Anne, who was also an accomplished ornithologist (she was an honorary member of the British Ornithologists' Union), had discovered what her husband was up to. She had accompanied him on portions of his long South Asian birding trip in 1925 and 1926, and she might have known that many of the rare birds he claimed from this trip, published in his *Ibis* paper, were not in fact his. When she threatened to expose him, Garfield theorized, the Colonel flew into a rage and shot her.

Garfield, whose book "Meinertzhagen Mystery" will be published this fall, wrote to me recently, "I can add only that my own personal belief—not a fact but an opinion—is that the two doctors' description of the bullet path suggests an angle of entry and exit that is not consistent with accidental discharge of a revolver while it is being checked. To me it suggests that the handgun was slightly above her head, pointed at a downward angle, so that the bullet would enter the frontal lobe and exit farther down through the spinal cord. (If you were to shoot yourself in the eye while looking down the barrel . . . you'd blow off the top or the back of your

head—not your spinal cord.) Annie was vigorous but not very tall. Richard was about six feet five. Nobody else was present. No inquest was held. No one was charged with any crime."

Meinertzhagen deposited the seventy-six leather-bound volumes of his diary with the Bodleian Library of Commonwealth and African Studies at Rhodes House, at Oxford University—some four million words chronicling his life as a soldier, birder, spy, and observer of historical personages. Randle Meinertzhagen, a seventy-eight-year-old retired investment banker who is the Colonel's only surviving child, controls access to the diaries. Ran, as he is known, bears a striking resemblance to the Colonel. He seems like a decent man in the difficult position of trying to protect his father from charges that he knows are at least partly true. "I think the old rogue did take a few birds," he told me when we met in London, but added that he probably had some good reason for doing it. "He believed the birds weren't properly skinned or cared for and he could do a better job of it himself." For his father, the ends always justified the means. Ran had a rather distant relationship with him. "If I ever asked him about himself," he told me, "my father would say, 'You can find out

THE QUICK-RESPONSE FORCES OF
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In 1948, while collecting in the Himalayas, Meinertzhagen writes of receiving a letter from Clay in which she expresses her desire for independence, saying (he reports), "I have to face up to the fact that I shall be left alone at a time when a woman is most likely to feel lonely." Meinertzhagen writes, "Life for me without her would be unbearable, unthinkable, and utterly impossible," and he goes on, "I feel like some caterpillar who for well nigh twenty years has been browsing on a beautiful shrub and has stripped it of leaves and flowers." In the end, however, Clay did not leave him; she remained his companion until his death, marrying only when she was in her mid-sixties. She died, an esteemed entomologist, in 1995. The chewing lice that she and Meinertzhagen collected also went to Britain's Natural History Museum.

Historical artifacts of many kinds are pasted into the diary. One is a letter from Chaim Weizmann, dated June 14, 1948, shortly after Weizmann became Israel's first President, in which he tells Meinertzhagen that he is "deeply grateful . . . to you for your friendship and confidence and help through all these years." There are three pigeon feathers with coded messages written on the shafts. There is careful documentation of the Haversack Ruse, including a letter from the wife of the haversack's owner announcing the birth of a son, which Meinertzhagen forged to add a personal touch to the contents, and a handwritten letter, in Turkish, supposedly found in the rubble of Gaza, that recounts in credulous terms the interception of the Colonel's haversack.

But if there is a Rosebud in the diaries—a key that unlocks Meinertzhagen's motives—I didn't find it. I came away with the feeling that the pages were like the skins: some are no doubt authentic, but so many others may contain false data that one can't be sure what to believe. The Lawrence passages are obvious forgeries, for all the reasons that Lockman pointed out in his book, but, as he noted, these were perpetrated when the Colonel was nearly eighty and more careless: "Only as an eighty-year-old could the once master forger have so lost his touch." What about a memorandum that Meinertzhagen supposedly wrote to David Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister, dated Paris, 1919, which predicts with uncanny accu-

anything you want to know about me in my diaries," which were kept in the drawing room in No. 17 Kensington Park Gardens. Meinertzhagen would add, "Just don't ask me anything about them afterwards."

I spent several days in Rhodes House, reading the diaries. I saw an entry from 1913, when Meinertzhagen returned to birding after years of pursuing larger game: "I fell to the altar of ornithology, as the distressed brain takes refuge in religion." In 1924, on hearing of a report that George Bristow, the Hastings taxidermist, was suspected of claiming birds killed elsewhere in Europe as British birds, he writes, "I know of several cases of disloyalty among egg-collectors, but this is the first occasion on which I have come

across dishonesty among skin collectors." His only comment on his wife's death, in 1928, is "We had been practicing with my revolver and had just finished when I went to bring back the target. I heard a shot behind me and saw my darling fall with a bullet through her head." However, in the year following her death there are several long, anguished descriptions of a sort of soul sickness, among them: "My life has been transformed into a desert, which no persons can now people."

In addition to the diary entries, there are many photographs of the beautiful Theresa Clay. She is sometimes depicted in the act of "shaking out" a bird skin for Mallophaga. There is also one nude photo, taken at the beach when Clay was around the age of fifteen.

racy the 1948 Arab-Israeli War? Could this have been written after 1948? What about the pigeon feathers? The Weizmann letter? It's not even clear that Meinertzhagen conceived the Haversack Ruse or that it actually fooled the Turks. But, if the ruse is itself a ruse, then which is the better ruse? And where does the ruse end?

From time to time during her research, as a welcome break from specimen work, Rasmussen went birding on the subcontinent. She made expeditions to India (where, near Darjeeling, she was walking through a rain forest under an umbrella and realized that the fat drops slithering down the sides were actually leeches), the Andaman Islands, Burma, and the Himalayas, in many cases visiting the places where Meinertzhagen had collected his rare birds.

Rasmussen knows how to shoot birds (she learned in Patagonia, where she collected cormorants) and also how to skin them, but she didn't use her skills very often on these birding trips. (However, she did manage to collect a few specimens in Burma, using a fine-mesh net to entrap the birds. "Then you just give them a little squeeze and that's it, they're dead," Rasmussen said tenderly, adding, "I mean, think of how many birds die because a skyscraper goes up in a migratory area.") But almost everywhere she birded on the subcontinent, taking specimens was politically impossible. "Now, with avian flu, it's even worse," she said.

Sometimes, in the course of her research, she found herself in awe of the magnitude of the Colonel's fraud. He was, for better or worse, the last man to unite science and birding, before the great schism. (His rarest bird, the *Pyrgilauda theresae*, turns out to be authentic.) Occasionally, she said, she had the feeling that Meinertzhagen was her father, although, being of a scientific cast of mind, she doesn't put much stock in notions like this. "In some ways, Meinertzhagen does remind me of my father," she told me. "He was brave, tall, strong, he liked killing animals, and he was unreliable. But that's pretty much where it ends."

The most memorable of her birding trips took place in 1997, when Rasmussen went to India in an unlikely attempt to find *Athene blewitti*, the forest owl. Without the Meinertzhagen specimen to

skew the data, Rasmussen guessed that the bird's range might be much narrower than previously thought, and that ornithologists had been looking for the bird in the wrong places. She searched the jungle near where Davidson, from whom Meinertzhagen had stolen the owl, had collected his birds. But most of the jungle had been cut down, and after several days of looking Rasmussen was ready to admit that the owl, lost to science for a hundred and thirteen years, was truly extinct.

On the day before the expedition was due to end, Rasmussen began as she often did, at 4 A.M., listening for owls. By eight-thirty, it was getting hot, and Rasmussen was opening her water bottle when the expedition's leader, Ben King, said, "Look at that owl," pointing up into a tree. Rasmussen looked and said, in excitement, "It doesn't have any spotting on the crown and the mantle!" (The common spotted owl displays such features.) The forest owl remained there long enough for Rasmussen to shoot it. The video was diagnostic, and the owl made the list.

The birds of South Asia represent only a fraction of the twenty-five thousand birds in the Meinertzhagen collection: the European and African skins, which could be equally riddled with frauds, await examination by other researchers. Prys-Jones thinks that, ultimately, five thousand of the skins in the Meinertzhagen

collection could turn out to be fraudulent. Rasmussen and Prys-Jones are preparing a paper, which will enumerate other frauds in the South Asia birds.

Rasmussen, who is now an assistant professor of zoology at Michigan State University, says that while the Meinertzhagen frauds tested her belief in the reliability of specimens, ultimately her detective work with Prys-Jones and others reaffirmed the importance of the skins. "If this fraud had been done only with photographs, or with sight records, we never would have been able to figure out what happened," she told me.

In addition to the bogus Meinertzhagen birds, Rasmussen removed eighty-five other species from the final South Asia list, categorizing them as "hypothetical," largely because she judged the sight records supporting them to be insubstantial. Her decisions were praised by the scientific journal *Nature*, which, in a glowing review of the Ripley Guide, called Rasmussen "brave" and said, "The book's greatest value is that Rasmussen has taken nothing for granted, even information published in Ripley's own works." But the reviewer for a leading birding journal, *British Birds*, chided Rasmussen and her lead illustrator, John Anderton, for excluding so many "undoubtedly valid recent field observations." He added, "Doubtless this reflects the fact that the authors are primarily museum workers." ♦



"And when I became a man, I put away childish things. Thingamabobs. Whatever."