



ROBIN RESTALL (1937–2023)

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There can be few visitors to the Neotropics unacquainted with the artwork of Robin Restall, especially through his illustrations prepared for his *magnum opus*, *Birds of northern South America* (BNSA), which spawned a series of national field guides covering Trinidad & Tobago; Aruba, Curaçao and Bonaire; Ecuador; and Venezuela.

It is less well known that Robin's 'day job' was as an advertising executive at J. Walter Thompson, where he enjoyed a highly successful professional career spanning 35 years, during which he rose to become a vice-president and member of the board. Throughout that time, and wherever he lived, Robin kept local birds in cages and aviaries, studying and writing about them. From 1960 he was a regular and well-known contributor to *Cage and Aviary Birds* and *Avicultural Magazine*. With his enthusiasm, energy and formidable autodidactic capacity, he wrote and illustrated his first book, covering four families and 350 species, *Finches and other seed-eating birds*, published by Faber & Faber in 1975. The illustrations, mostly line drawings, showcase his considerable artistic talent and his already recognisable style.

Robin was in many ways a quintessential Victorian naturalist. Birds were his vocation; he never received a professional salary, nor was he academically trained, and, although he did not collect, during his later years he dealt largely with skins, only occasionally venturing into the field, mainly on collecting expeditions. His principal contact with live birds was via his aviaries, where he kept and studied the small finch-like species beloved of aviculturists but often ignored by ornithologists, latterly *Sporophila* and *munias* and their allies.

Between 1989 and 1995 Robin lived in Hong Kong with his Venezuelan wife Mariela, where he ran J. Walter Thompson's Asia–Pacific office, and travelled throughout the region. He put this opportunity to study estrildids in their home range to good use, which led to the monograph *Munias and mannikins* and his first international recognition. Once the book was completed, Robin took the decision to leave his job, return to Venezuela and dedicate the rest of his life to painting and studying South American birds. Shortly after his arrival, Kathy Phelps, widow of Billy Phelps, offered him the title of Research Associate at the Phelps Ornithological Collection (COP), an honour subsequently conferred by John P. Phelps Tovar. After a day in the library and museum, Robin would retire to his house in one of the leafier parts of Caracas to document his menagerie of birds. Rigorous observations found expression in articles on Venezuelan species like: Is the Ring-necked Seedeater (*Sporophila insularis*) from Trinidad extinct, or is it a cryptic species widespread in Venezuela? (*Dept. Life Sci., Univ. West Indies, Trinidad Occ. Pap.* 11: 37–44) and (with ML) A new species of *Amaurospiza* blue seedeater from Venezuela (*Auk* 120: 600–606). But his curiosity quickly began to generate more questions than answers.

Robin quickly realised that, notwithstanding decades of published efforts by the Phelps family to document the country's avifauna (making Venezuela one of the best-studied countries in South America), there was still much to learn even about the identity of its birds, let alone their biology. One of the conundrums that Robin and ML faced in the process of identifying specimens that entered the collection was the marked inconsistency between the plumages represented in existing guides and the textual descriptions; this was exacerbated by the lack of depictions of juveniles and immatures. Robin soon began to feel the need to channel the results of his own investigations into producing a permanent catalogue and guide that others might use. Robin's friend, the publisher Christopher Helm, was immediately enthused by the idea, giving rise to his collaboration with ML and Clemencia Rodner on BNSA.

Over a period of ten years Robin invested thousands of hours in this project, which aimed to depict every distinct plumage of



Robin Restall working in the American Museum of Natural History, New York, during preparations for the Birds of northern South America (Photo: Miguel Lentino)

every bird in the region—painting more than 7,000 illustrations of in excess of 2,300 species. He was to be seen working up to 13 hours per day, six or seven days a week ensconced in his corner of COP, poring over a group of skins and surrounded by paints, typically to a jazz CD accompaniment. Apart from the vast amount of work undertaken at COP, the team covered their own costs travelling to collections in New York, Washington, Boston and Louisiana.

The aim of BNSA was to produce a reference manual of the region's birds, in which Robin aimed to complete his goal to compile an illustrated catalogue of plumages. His work presented visually the immense diversity of plumages that a species can show both geographically and by age and sex, resulting in, for example, 18 figures for Bananaquit *Coereba flaveola* and 20 for Yellow Warbler *Setophaga petechia*! The plumages of some species remain poorly understood, like the diversity found in Bright-rumped—or Polymorphic—Attila *Attila spadiceus*, which Robin nonetheless faithfully painted. He was at pains to clarify that the plates were not intended to be used as a field guide, but as a supplement to the books specifically designed as field guides. In fact, Robin took great care to have his paintings show as much of the bird's plumage as possible, as one might expect to be able to appreciate in a museum—and this was typically at the expense of realistic natural poses, something for which he has sometimes been unjustly criticised. Robin worked like a draughtsman, ensuring that each species was depicted at the correct relative size within each family on a plate; and as all of his paintings were made primarily from skins, any plumage detail featured on the finished plate almost always corresponds to a character visible at close range or in the hand. Not until he was entirely happy with an illustration would he paint the sliver of highlight onto the eye, indicating that it was finished.

Apart from his more 'serious' art, Robin was always happy to put brush to paper to help a good cause, and he made countless paintings for book covers, calendars and papers, at the request of others or merely for pleasure. These sketches arguably showed him at his artistic best, allowing him much more freedom to express his flare for composition, for capturing the ineffable character ('jizz') of birds and—doubtless incorporating his advertising experience—for marrying text and illustration into an educational product. Besides birds and jazz, Robin took a keen interest in philately, publishing numerous scholarly articles on stamps in specialist journals.

Reluctantly, Robin moved with Mariela to Cambridgeshire, UK, in 2011 where they lived until his death. It is perhaps telling that he did not change his professional address, presumably (like so many Venezuelans) anticipating an eventual return to his tropical adoptive home.

Miguel Lentino & Christopher J. Sharpe

ROBIN RESTALL AND THE NEOTROPICAL ORNITHOLOGICAL CONGRESS

We were fortunate to have Robin as the author of the icon of the VIII NOC held in Venezuela in 2007. To this end, Robin selected the White-bearded flycatcher, a nearly endemic Venezuelan species whose genus honored the eminent ornithologist William H. Phelps.

Acerca de *Phelopsis inornata*, en las palabras de Robin
About *Phelopsis inornata*, in Robin's words

"... It seemed to be an almost overdue tribute, when a unique flycatcher, formerly placed in *Myiozetetes* and then *Conopias*, was showed by Traylor to deserve monotypic status, re-classifying and re-naming the bird as *Phelopsis inornata*. Having a genus dedicated to somebody is a singular recognition, and this beautiful and quite distinctive endemic species seemed to me to be the only possible bird that I could consider as the icon for this singular and quite unique congress"

Robin Restall

"... Fue un tributo casi tardío cuando Traylor demostró que un atrapamoscas único, inicialmente clasificado como *Myiozetetes* y luego *Conopias*, merecía ser considerado un género monotípico, y lo reclasificó como *Phelopsis inornata*. Dedicar un género a alguien es un reconocimiento muy singular, y por la belleza y distinción de esta especie endémica, me pareció ser la única ave que podía considerar como símbolo de este singular y único congreso."

Robin Restall



Left: Robin working on the paintings of Whitebearded Flycatcher *Phelpsia inornata* at the Phelps Ornithological Museum. Right: The final painting of Robin portrays a beautiful study of the endemic Whitebearded Flycatcher, the icon of the 2007 Neotropical Ornithological Congress (Photos: Carlos Bosque).

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