

*Towards the end of the 'European Era' of ornithological studies in India, there were two Britishers associated with the BNHS who made significant contributions to Indian Ornithology: Norman Boyd Kinnear and Hugh Whistler.*



## **N.B. Kinnear Ornithologist across Continents**

Illustrations of *Corvus macrorhynchos culminatus* and *C.m. macrorhynchos* from the Vernay Scientific Survey of the Eastern Ghats by Whistler and Kinnear, published in series in the *JBNHS*



**N**orman Boyd Kinnear was born in 1882 in Scotland. He studied at the Edinburgh Academy before moving to Trinity College, Glenalmond. Before following his interest in natural history, he worked as an assistant in an estate in Lanarkshire and volunteered at the Royal Scottish Museum with the British ornithologist Dr. W. Eagle Clarke from 1905 to 1907. He then joined Dr. Clarke at Fair Isle. In 1907, Kinnear went aboard a whaling ship around Greenland to collect bird specimens. Having a sharp skill for identifying talent, Dr. Clarke

recommended Kinnear to the post of Curator at BNHS and so Kinnear entered the Society's service in 1907.

With over a quarter of a century of progress and development, the Society's collections had grown considerably by 1907. They had been donated to the society by enthusiastic amateurs, who were residents from all across India, Burma, and Ceylon. This massive collection of materials was lodged in the Society's rooms at 6, Apollo Street, Bombay. It was looked after and maintained by several keen and devoted amateurs who dedicated their time after office hours to this work. Kinnear took over as curator of these collections. During his tenure, Kinnear did the Society an incredible service by reorganizing the entire museum on a sound scientific basis, through rearrangement, labelling, and cataloguing of the collection. He brought to his work the art of organization and a detailed thought to specificity which not only benefited the museum as a whole but also contributed towards training the small team that worked under

him. He also served as one of the editors of the *Journal*, and wrote in it prolifically.

In 1911, the Society decided to undertake a systematic survey of the mammals of India, Burma and Ceylon. Professional collectors were engaged to secure a systematic series of skins and skulls of mammals, so as to aid a comprehensive study of the status, variation, and distribution of mammals of the Indian subcontinent. It was Kinnear's task to assemble this enormous collection, provisionally identify and catalogue, and arrange their dispatch to the British Museum in London for further clarifications. The growth and advances seen in systematic mammalogy through the Survey were largely due to Kinnear's organization and the utmost care with which he carried out this task.

During World War I, large collections of birds, mammals, reptiles, and insects were shipped to the Society by its members serving with the Expeditionary Force in Mesopotamia. Kinnear was then associated with the Brigade Headquarters, Bombay,

as Intelligence Officer. In spite of the new responsibilities on him, he succeeded in preparing and presenting a pamphlet on the 'Animals of Mesopotamia', which was circulated among the officers and men serving with the Expeditionary Force. It became a frequent book of reference and proved a great help for those who were collecting specimens.

Like the mammal survey, the Society undertook the Vernay Scientific Survey, an ornithological expedition to the Eastern Ghats in 1929. The important bird collections obtained during this survey were studied by Kinnear and another notable ornithologist, Hugh Whistler, and the results were published in the Society's *Journal* under their joint authorship in 16 parts from 1931 to 1937.

In 1920, Kinnear joined the British Museum (Natural History) as an assistant in the Bird Department and later served as Deputy Keeper of Birds. During his years of service in India, he had acquired an extensive knowledge of the birdlife of the region, and he soon made a mark in the field of ornithology. In 1945, he was appointed Keeper of Zoology, and went on to become the Director of the British Museum. He was the President of the British Ornithologists Union from 1943 to 1948 and was knighted in 1950.

Having contributed immensely to institutions of natural history both in India and England, and served in a number of scientific societies, Kinnear died in 1957 on his 75th birthday at his home in Wimbledon, leaving behind a vast repository of knowledge for future generations across continents. ■

