

# Jean Delacour, 95, Dies; Was World's Leading Ornithologist

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Jean Delacour, French-born scientist, explorer, museum director, and pre-eminent aviculturist, has died at age 95.

Delacour died November 5, 1985 at St. John's Hospital in Santa Monica, California. A memorial service was held at Holy Cross Cemetery where he was buried beside his mother.

He was an unexcelled aviculturist, at one time owning the world's largest private zoo and aviary located on his 12th-century ancestral estate of Villers-Bretonneux in Picardy. As a child and young man, Delacour designed and built up an extensive collection of plants, animals, and birds and was well advanced in his plan to create another Garden of Eden. His family was one of the richest in France so he was able to devote much time and money to the project.

The First World War utterly destroyed the chateau and park at Villers and the entire collection was lost. During the war, Delacour and his brother served as officers in the French army. Delacour was wounded; his brother was killed.

When the war ended, Delacour began anew building his collection at a new location, the Chateau de Cleres in

Normandy. The years between the two great World Wars were active and fruitful for him wherein he led numerous scientific expeditions into Indochina and other parts of the Orient to study and collect wildlife. During these expeditions Delacour discovered several animals and birds hitherto unknown to science. Many of the rare creatures were added to the collection at Cleres where they were housed under the most excellent conditions.

The collection of rare birds and animals at Cleres grew in richness and diversity until the outbreak of the Second World War. German bombs and shells damaged the chateau and killed many of the exotic animals and Delacour's second Garden of Eden was seriously disrupted.

During the Second World War Delacour, now in his fifties, lived in the United States where he served as technical advisor to the Bronx Zoo and as a research associate of the American Museum of Natural History.

In 1946 he became a naturalized American citizen and in 1951 took over as director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History and Art. He

led the museum to world-class status and retired in 1960. He then spent his summers in France building his Normandy estate into a major zoological park which he eventually willed to the French government.

During the winters, Delacour lived at the California Club in Los Angeles where he was near many friends and professional colleagues. During this period of his life, which lasted 25 years, many local aviculturists gained acquaintance with the great man. My wife and I feel greatly honored to have shared some time with Delacour and hold many fond remembrances. Despite the great setbacks in his life's plans he retained a delightful sense of humor. On one occasion after having climbed about 40 stairs cut into a steep, dirt bank he looked at the aviaries, then pondered the problem of getting back down the stairs. He was nearly 90 at the time and hobbled about with a cane. He solved the problem by sitting down and bumping on the seat of his pants down the stairs, displaying good humor at the awkward situation.

Aviculturists, as you well know, always try to impress one another with the rarity of this bird or the expense of that one. Years ago while Delacour was walking from flight to flight looking at my birds, I became impatient as he lingered before a pen of white cockatiels. I wanted to show him other, more rare and expensive birds but he just stood and looked at the cockatiels. Finally he said, "They are so beautiful," and I was instantly humbled. The great aviculturist did not measure a bird's beauty by its price. He loved each bird for its intrinsic qualities, not for the artificial values placed on it by men.

Of all the birds, I think Delacour liked the pheasants the best. He was the world's leading authority on the pheasant family and wrote a classic book describing each species. He also wrote a major work on the waterfowl of the world as well as many other books. His papers and articles were published in many scientific and popular publications. He graciously wrote the species descriptions for the A.F.A.'s *Endangered Species Portfolio*.

For the greater part of this century Delacour worked with ornithological, avicultural, and conservation organizations. In 1922 he founded the International Council for Bird Preservation and he served as president or director for many other organizations. His influence on aviculture, ornithology, and conservation will be felt probably forever.

With Delacour's death an era has ended. ●

Photo by Jack Whittier, El Monte, California



Dr. Jean Delacour and Sheldon Dingle after a long day building aviaries. In his 90th year Delacour still enjoyed getting out to visit. During the building he pointed his cane here and there and delighted in the whole process.