



The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)

(Founded in 1940 as the Parrot & African Lovebird Society of Australia)

Obituary

Laszlo Erdos

Naturalist, film-maker 1914-1999

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By Tony Barrett

The Sydney Morning Herald

Birds were his lifetime preoccupation ... indeed; he reckoned they helped save his life during World War II. He travelled thousands of kilometres filming, and recording calls of Australian birds in their habitat, but they are largely unknown: the films of Laszlo Erdos, who has died at the age of 85, have never been shown on Australian TV.

Erdos was a pioneer in the filming and recording of Australia's delicate and elusive songbirds. He documented hundreds of species, many never previously filmed.

A striking feature of his films was not only his ability to locate these birds, but also to record them at close range. It was, he said, a "labour of love, a record for posterity".

Erdos was passionate about his subject, and determined to educate others about a little understood and fragile part of Australia's natural environment. His films were self-funded. He and his wife and sound recordist, Jennifer, shared the work, taking each film to the final editing stage in their Prahran home.

By far the best reception of the Erdos documentaries was in Europe. His films have been screened and placed in public institutions and private collections in many countries, including the Vatican.

Ironically, they have never been publicly broadcast in this country ... attracting no real interest from TV networks, or practical support from academia or ornithological groups. This was a big disappointment to Erdos.

Finally, a year before his death, the Australian Cinematographers Society presented him with an award citing "the great work ... done documenting visually the bird species of Australia".

Erdos treated newcomers and old friends with a natural blend of charm and courtesy underscored by a wry sense of humour. He would tell of meeting a film crew in the outback. Sent on assignment to record the birdlife, they had little or nothing in the can. He was asked how he found these elusive creatures. He replied: "I have a bird brain. I see a bird. I know what he will do in the next five minutes. I get there first".

It was as a six year old exploring the countryside outside his native Budapest that he first became fascinated with the rich birdlife. At the same time he would often find ancient fragments of pottery and artefacts. Museum curators taught him about these ancient civilisations' art forms. So began a lifelong study of art and art history.

His education was cut short. Caught up in the German push to the Russian front, he was conscripted and packed off to fight.

He survived the front and imprisonment by the Russians. He credited the local birds with saving his life. Knowledge of their behaviour would lead him to water and food sources, and warn of the enemy's proximity.

He migrated to Australia as a political refugee in 1949, arriving with no family, no money and little English. One menial job followed the next, until his knowledge of art and antiques made him aware of the many fine pieces to be found at auctions.

With meagre savings he brought and resold many pieces to dealers profitably. He soon gained the lasting respect of dealers, auction houses and collectors. For nearly 40 years he built up a business as one of Australia's leading antique dealers.

His gallery in the main street of Sassafras, in the Dandenong Ranges, was a magnet for serious collectors.

Jennifer remains committed to preserving and promoting his work ... the legacy of a quiet achiever, a man whose life was charted by birds.

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