



# BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIRS

## S. DILLON RIPLEY

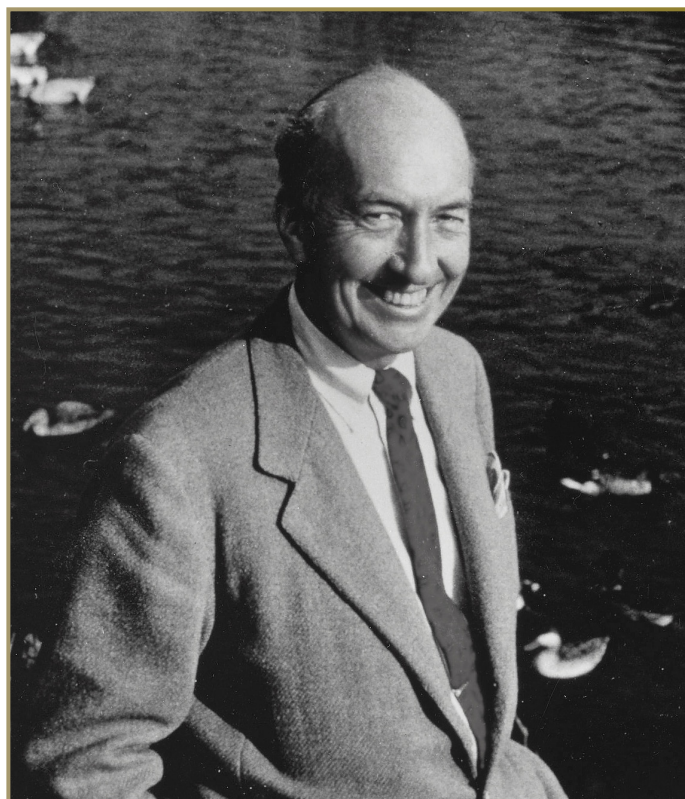
September 20, 1913–March 12, 2001

Elected to the NAS, 1968

*A Biographical Memoir by Bruce M. Beehler*

**ARGUABLY THE GREATEST** of the Smithsonian Institution's long line of secretaries, Sidney Dillon Ripley II provided prodigious leadership, fostered substantial growth, and expanded the institution's scope of scholarship. Ripley was one of America's preeminent science administrators, rivaling Joseph Henry, Spencer Fullerton Baird, and other national luminaries in accomplishment. His leadership in international nature conservation also was profound, having served decades in senior oversight roles with the World Wildlife Fund and the International Council for Bird Preservation (now BirdLife International). His greatest scientific achievement was his taxonomic, systematic, and ecological documentation of the avifauna of the Indian Subcontinent, a multi-decadal effort carried out in close collaboration with the great Indian ornithologist, Sálím Ali.

S. Dillon Ripley II (henceforth "SDR") was born into wealth in New York City on September 20, 1913. His great-grandfather, Sidney Dillon, was founding chairman of the Union Pacific Railroad and in 1869 drove the ceremonial last spike completing the nation's first transcontinental rail line. SDR's father, Louis Arthur Dillon Ripley, was a real-estate entrepreneur and member of the New York Stock Exchange. SDR's Canadian-born mother, Constance Baillie Rose Ripley, met Louis Ripley in New York City, and they married in Rhode Island in 1900. The marriage produced four children: Constance, Julie, Louis, and SDR being the youngest. The family spent summers at Kilravock, their estate in Litchfield, Connecticut, built by Louis Ripley in 1905 and which burned down in 1976. One must assume that the



**Figure 1** Portrait of S. Dillon Ripley at his duck ponds in Litchfield, Connecticut (April 1969). *Smithsonian Institution Archives, RU007008 [SIA2011-1488]*.

house was named for Kilravock Castle, near Inverness, Scotland, family seat of the Rose Clan (presumably antecedents of Constance Rose, SDR's indomitable mother).

In 1916, SDR's mother sought a divorce, relocating with the children to the Boston area. Constance enjoyed international travel, with a taste for Europe. In 1927, she took the children to India. While there, SDR, age thirteen (with his sister Constance) made an adventurous six-week trek into Ladakh, in India's northernmost Himalayan highlands, which led to a lifelong fascination with the Indian subcontinent. In addition, as a teen he fell in love with waterfowl, and his book *A Paddling of Ducks* recounts his adventures



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collecting, owning, breeding, and observing ducks, geese, swans, and other large water-loving birds. He practiced his aviculture on duck ponds constructed on the family property in Litchfield.

SDR graduated from St. Paul's School in New Hampshire, received a bachelor of arts degree in history from Yale University, and then pursued a Ph.D. in biology at Harvard University. Family members recommended that SDR choose a career in law, but he opted for ornithology. SDR's choice in a professional career was sealed when, as a recent college graduate, he was invited to join a group of young adventurers who sailed from Philadelphia to New Guinea in 1936 to study indigenous cultures and wildlife there. Memorialized in his popular book *Trail of the Money Bird* (1942), this two-year voyage gave Ripley his first substantial experience with tropical ornithology, which remained a lifelong passion. In 1939, SDR served as ornithologist for George Vanderbilt's expedition to Sumatra. This gave him additional tropical field experience. SDR built his expertise through unpaid stints studying the bird collections at New York's American Museum of Natural History; the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia; and the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History. In 1943, Ripley completed his Ph.D. at Harvard with a dissertation focused on the avian biogeography of the western Sumatran islands.

World War II interrupted SDR's rise as an ornithologist. Because of his experience in Asia and the Pacific, he was invited to serve in the Office of Strategic Services, working out of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and Thailand. He trained local intelligence agents deployed in Southeast Asia and also worked to recover Allied air crews downed behind enemy lines in Thailand. Ever the ornithologist, when emerging from a shower in preparation for a cocktail party while in Ceylon, SDR heard a lesser yellow-naped woodpecker. Clad only in a towel, he grabbed his shotgun and bagged the bird. The gun's recoil caused the towel to drop, much to the amusement of those already at the party and alerted by the gun's loud report. The details of this event are noted on the specimen label in pencil by SDR. Today, this bird lies in repose in a neatly organized tray featuring examples of this species in the Division of Birds at the National Museum of Natural History, where SDR had a research laboratory for many years.

SDR met his future wife, Mary Moncrieffe Livingston, in Ceylon, where both were OSS operatives. Returning from the war, SDR took a junior teaching position in the biology department at Yale University and remained there from 1946 to 1964, rising to full professor and taking on the directorship of the Peabody Museum of Natural History. During this period, he conducted ornithological fieldwork in Asia and the Pacific, boosted by a Fulbright Fellowship in 1950 and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1954. He also

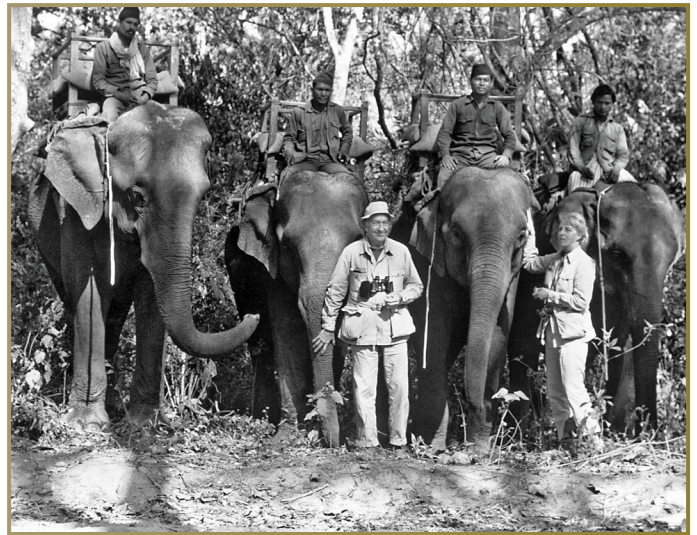


Figure 2 S. Dillon and Mary Ripley with elephant transport in the field in India in 1976. Smithsonian Institution Archives, RU00613 [2005-7935].

became seasoned as a science administrator and raised the reputation and increased the public outreach of the Peabody Museum. While in New Haven, SDR established a summer home on the family property in Litchfield, revitalized his avicultural collections there, published extensively in ornithology, and expanded his network in the world of East Coast fundraising.

In 1947, SDR was in India for its celebration of independence from Great Britain, in the company of his colleague and collaborator Sálim Ali of the Bombay Natural History Society. Ali would become SDR's major partner in Indian ornithology. The capstone of Ripley's scholarship was his 1961 *A Synopsis of the Birds of India and Pakistan*, one of the great traditional synoptic checklists for a major avifauna. Ali took the lead on the co-authored ten-volume *Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan*, which has had continued life through revisions and various reformulations by Oxford University Press over the decades. This masterwork defined the ornithology of the Indian region in the latter half of the twentieth century.

As an ornithologist, SDR loved the Old World. Many of his geographically focused works centered on the arc from Pakistan southeastward to the great island of New Guinea, but included, in particular, Indonesia, the Philippines, Nepal, and India. He made five expeditions to Bhutan and northeastern India with Ali. In 1964, Ripley also completed a full revision of the thrush family for Peters's *Check-List of Birds of the World*. In 1977, he authored *Rails of the World*, a large-format monographic treatment of the avian family Rallidae. Lavishly illustrated by J. Fenwick Lansdowne and handsomely designed by Crimilda Pontes, it was one of *Time* magazine's suggested "picks" for Christmas shoppers of that



year. At that stage in his life, when Ripley did something, people noticed.

This high visibility was certainly because of his long tenure as secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, which he began in 1964. By his retirement in 1984, few scholars would question the simple declaration that SDR was the greatest secretary the Smithsonian ever had. This is even more obvious four decades on. SDR oversaw the addition of eight museums during his tenure. Ripley's grand worldview, his brilliant arrogance, and his determination gave him the strength to win key battles against naysayers within and without, and to lead the Smithsonian to new heights of accomplishment, outreach, and inclusiveness. Ripley's Smithsonian was a national institution without walls. He made the Smithsonian the nation's museum and cultural center. For this, SDR was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by Ronald Reagan in 1985. The impact of that institutional legacy has been steadily eroded ever since SDR's retirement.

Part of Ripley's great success at the Smithsonian related to timing—he arrived there in 1964, in the era of post-Sputnik science wars with the Soviet Union. Both Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon supported Ripley's expansive vision. Moreover, SDR's rapport with Congress was critical to the flow of funds to the Smithsonian. He charmed appropriators with his patrician manners, evocative stories, show-and-tell, and droll humor. In contrast, today's political leadership does not believe in government-sponsored natural science for science's sake. Despite repeated public warnings by such renowned public figures as E. O. Wilson and Peter Raven about the looming global biodiversity crisis, government funding for museum-based biotic surveys and systematics has steadily declined. This is tragic, and would have broken SDR's heart had he lived to see it.

SDR was not a man to limit himself or his work. He hungered to address every issue and do more. This is illustrated by his additional career as one of the early leaders in the international nature conservation movement. His name would certainly appear on the short list of key personalities who created this movement—along with those of Sir Peter Scott, Jean Delacour, Jack Vincent, Julian Huxley, Kai Curry-Lindahl, and Jean Dorst. Ripley served for many years on the board of the World Wildlife Fund's U.S. branch and was the third president of the International Council for Bird Preservation (now BirdLife International). He personally involved himself in the recovery efforts for the Hawaiian goose or nene, providing a breeding facility at his estate in Litchfield. His waterfowl collection, begun as a teenager, continues today as a nonprofit conservation and aviculture center, with species from around the world (now known as the Ripley Waterfowl Conservancy).

SDR had a style all his own. He loved people, but especially those in positions of power, elected, or inherited. England and France were favored destinations, and he felt at home in both countries. He was a man continually on the move. Even without the press of Smithsonian duties, in retirement he was always traveling—to check on his beloved waterfowl collection in Litchfield, or to his pied-à-terre in New York City. A visit to his home along Washington's embassy row was to enter a world of rare books, tiger skins, New Guinea artifacts, vast oriental rugs, Audubon originals, and evocative bric-a-brac.

His wife, photographer and self-taught entomologist Mary Moncrieffe Livingstone Ripley, was a fitting mate. She traveled the world with him and camped in the field in places as remote as Nagaland, Netherlands New Guinea, Bhutan, and Arunachal Pradesh. They made a wonderful, if idiosyncratic, pair. I remember them in a bush camp in Andhra Pradesh (now Telangana), sitting in folding camp chairs after dinner by their large sleeping tent, lit by the harsh illumination of a Coleman kerosene lantern. Dressed in bush khaki, they smoked their tobacco of choice (his a small cigar, hers a brown-wrapped cigarillo) and sipped a nightcap of whisky. They were at home in such environments. I suspect this 1985 encampment looked little different from what one might expect to have seen in a 1930s expedition. The Ripleys were content in the field but buffered the rigors with whatever comforts available. I recall a call for "ice" during an April heat wave in Andhra Pradesh, India, that led to a prolonged, but eventually successful, excursion by an assistant and driver on a Sunday afternoon. Mary Ripley's premature death in 1996 was a great blow to SDR and the family.



**Figure 3** Sâlim Ali (front, second from left), Ripley (front right), Mary, and three young staff of the Bombay Natural History Society, in the field in India, 1976. *Smithsonian Institution Archives, RU00613 [SIA2007-0155].*

SDR's several hundred scholarly publications primarily focused on the distribution, systematics, and taxonomy of birds of Asia and the Pacific. Although these may be largely overlooked today, S. Dillon Ripley the man continues to cast a substantial shadow. His intelligence, beneficence, and leadership touched a whole generation of researchers, from Panama to Papua New Guinea, from Indonesia to the Galapagos, and from the Philippines to Sri Lanka. His legacy to natural history and nature conservation will not be forgotten.

Ripley died on March 12, 2001, at age eighty-seven. He had earlier suffered a debilitating brain injury in a fall in New Haven, Connecticut, where he was attending a memorial service for his Yale University mentor, G. Evelyn Hutchinson, one of the fathers of modern ecology. A patrician renaissance man, "Mr. Ripley," as he was known to those who worked for him at the Smithsonian, was an extraordinary leader, often inspiring and at times obscure, but always innovative and courageous in his championing of ideas that deserved a hearing, especially those that would foster the intellectual flowering of his beloved Smithsonian Institution. SDR is survived by his three daughters, Julie, Rosemary, and Sylvia, as well as 13 grandchildren, and 11 great-grandchildren.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Roger F. Pasquier and Warren King, who co-authored with me the 2002 memorial for SDR (*Auk* 119:1110–1113). I have borrowed liberally from that narrative for this memoir as well as from Roger D. Stone's 2017 biography, *The Lives of Dillon Ripley* (Waltham, Mass.: ForeEdge Publishing). Pamela C. Rasmussen critically read the final typeset version of the memorial.

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