

# Robin Restall: a celebration of a full life

Nigel Redman

A tribute to Robin Restall (1937–2023)—ornithologist, author, artist and more besides—from his principal publisher.

Robin Restall's name will be familiar to many in the ornithological world, but especially to those with an interest in Neotropical birds. His books and articles on birds in the Neotropics are well known to NBC members, but Robin's interests spanned much more than this. He came to ornithology from a different route than most birders or ornithologists. Robin was an avid aviculturist for most of his life, and a respected name in the avicultural community. He kept mainly local birds in large aviaries in his garden, wherever he was living, and had a particular interest in seedeaters—he chose to specialize in species that are frequently ignored by the ornithological community. He was a regular contributor to the *Avicultural Magazine* from the 1960s and his first book, *Finches and other seed-eating birds*, was published by Faber & Faber

in 1975. Illustrated with his own artwork and line drawings, it gave insights into the world of bird breeders, allowing one to appreciate their contribution to our knowledge of birds.

Robin didn't just keep birds for fun. He studied them. He studied their behaviour, kept copious notes and painted or drew meticulous drawings of them. When he was living in Hong Kong, his interest turned to munias and mannikins, a group of undistinguished estrildids that occur mainly in Asia and Australasia. He kept many different species of *Lonchura* spp., producing fabulous and accurate paintings of them, often with their wings outstretched in the style of Charles Tunnicliffe's famous 'scale drawings' of British birds. Robin's work as an advertising executive had enabled him the opportunity to travel extensively, and during his long career he was posted to Venezuela (1976–79, where he met his second wife, Mariela), Chicago (USA), Tokyo (Japan), London (UK), and finally Hong Kong, retiring as the head of J. Walter Thompson's Asia-Pacific office in 1995. Much earlier in his career, he had trained as a draughtsman which undoubtedly helped him hone his artistic skills.

Sometime in 1995, not long after I began my career in publishing, the publisher Christopher Helm and I received a letter from Hong Kong, together with an unsolicited book proposal. It was from Robin. He wanted us to publish a monograph on munias and mannikins. On expressing interest, the manuscript soon appeared, complete with a comprehensive set of colour plates illustrating every possible plumage variation in these birds.

The subject was esoteric, even by the standards of our specialist publishing house, but I was impressed by the detail and scholarship of the work, and we felt that it would make a worthy addition to the Helm Identification Guides series. The key feature of the book was the artwork: a series of magnificent plates painted from living aviary birds and museum specimens, and including scale drawings of birds with wings spread open.

1 Robin Restall pond-dipping (Nigel Redman).

