

Evelyn D.V. Prendergast (1918-2001)



Figure 1. Evelyn Prendergast in The Gambia, November 2000. Photo M.J. Parr.

Abstract

E.D.V. Prendergast retired from a military career in 1973 and henceforth actively pursued many natural history and field sports interests. Studies of birds were followed in the later years by significant work on Odonata. A systematic study of the species' distributions of Gambian dragonflies and conservation work involving *Coenagrion mercuriale* were especially important.

Obituary

Obituaries in *The Times*, 20 July 2001 and the *Telegraph*, 29 September 2001 focussed on and described in some detail the extraordinarily successful military career of Evelyn David Vereker Prendergast, who died on 30 June 2001. However, retirement from military duties in 1973 enabled him to pursue actively his many natural history and field sports interests. Publications from this second half of his life have enriched the ornithological and odonatological literature and he contributed to many botanical, bird and dragonfly surveys and studies.

Prior to his military retirement Evelyn became increasingly involved in natural history and conservation. In 1972 he wrote a paper for the Nugent Committee on the use of Defence Lands that led to the establishment of a Ministry of Defence Conservation Officer. He had a life-long interest in fishing, shooting and many aspects of the countryside, including birds and ringing, and many aspects of botany, as well as latterly, dragonflies. He immersed himself in detailed studies, accomplishing much of value and interest on a variety of different natural history subjects, including mistletoe surveys and ferns in Dorset.

In the earlier years Prendergast's particular interest lay primarily with bird studies. In 1983 he co-authored with J.V. Boys 'The birds of Dorset' (published by David & Charles) which was the first comprehensive account of that county's birds published since 1888. Of this book Evelyn says "My involvement has been due solely to neglect of the elementary military maxim: Never have a bright idea, or you'll end up doing the work yourself". An aspect of his bird work was an interest in duck decoys and he was particularly involved in the use of the decoy at Abbotsbury to facilitate ringing of waterfowl.

It is uncertain when Evelyn first became seriously interested in the Odonata but it was probably in the 1980's when he joined the British Dragonfly Society. In November 1988 he happened to be sitting next to Robert Gambles (RMG) at a meeting of the BDS and mentioned that he had been to The Gambia earlier in the year, when he had observed and caught some Odonata. The result of this was that Evelyn agreed to try and organise a BDS party to visit The Gambia in the autumn of 1989 in order to map dragonfly distribution, with RMG as leader. Unfortunately, about two weeks before the party was due to depart, RMG became ill and Evelyn had to take over the leadership of the expedition. This he described as "a case of the blind leading the blind" as there was no one with any real knowledge of African Odonata in the group. The main emphasis was on the coastal area, although three nights were spent at Tendaba Camp about 100 km up the Gambia River. The collections brought back were identified by RMG and subsequently the results were included in Gambles et al. (1995), which listed 62 species from The Gambia and their distribution per 10-km squares up to the end of 1989.

The first systematic study of Odonata in The Gambia was by Norman Moore who spent two months in 1949 collecting in three main areas. In 1958 RMG, en route to Nigeria, landed at Banjul from a mail boat and collected for about an hour. In 1980 RMG collected in various parts of the country in October and November, and Matti Hämäläinen did so in December of the same year. Also two short expeditions from Lund University, Sweden, in 1977 and a few records from other sources have contributed to the knowledge of Gambian dragonflies. However, it was Prendergast's party in 1989 that

started to assemble the data from The Gambia in an organised and systematic manner. Evelyn divided the country into 10-km squares conforming with those of the UTM Grid Zone 28, which were numbered from 1 to 162 and this has formed the basis for the continuing work on species' distributions. He further divided the country into three arbitrary sectors: the Lower (near the coast), Middle and Upper.

In October and November 1996 Prendergast led the second BDS group to The Gambia with the aim of filling in some of the gaps in the known distribution records. This visit found 13 species not previously recorded, bringing the country's total to 75 and added many new species/square records (Prendergast 1998c).

Between the 1996 visit to The Gambia and his final one in 2000, Evelyn organised a four-man team to visit Madagascar in April 1999 in order to collect and study odonates of the northern region of that vast island. At least three species new to Madagascar were recorded, but the determination of all the specimens has not yet been completed and several present considerable taxonomic difficulties.

In the summer of 2000, Evelyn asked me if I could accompany him to The Gambia, with the result that we spent two weeks there in November, with approximately the same objectives as the previous BDS party in 1996. We collected and observed dragonflies in 34 10-km squares, of which 21 had not been visited previously by BDS groups and we recorded four new species for The Gambia. Very unfortunately, at the end of this last Gambian visit Evelyn fell seriously ill, delaying our departure for several days, and sadly, although he rallied temporarily, he never regained full health. With his work in The Gambia, he ensured that dragonfly distribution in that country is better documented than in any other African state.

In addition to his interest and rapidly acquired expertise in aspects of African odonatology, Evelyn was very active in conservation issues involving *Coenagrion mercuriale* (Charpentier) in his home county of Dorset. This work was centred on Ministry of Defence land on the Povington Ranges and focussed on two sub-colonies of the damselfly situated at Orchard Cottage Mire and the adjacent Outflow Mire, both areas being Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Evelyn monitored the condition of these sites and was responsible for annual counts of *C. mercuriale* from 1992 until 2000. In co-operation with the English China Clay Company (whose water outflow created the Outflow Mire), the Ministry of Defence, Environment Agency, English Nature, U.K. Southern Damselfly BAP Steering Group and the Dorset Wildlife Trust, Evelyn was primarily instrumental in achieving management of the sites which would best benefit the *C. mercuriale* colony.

Evelyn Prendergast possessed an extraordinary ability to communicate in a friendly and effective manner with whoever he came in contact. I find it difficult to believe that he ever made any enemies and those of us who have had the pleasure of working with him appreciated his many good qualities, often displayed under very trying conditions in the field. His enthusiasm for natural history, especially birds and dragonflies, was infectious and in his death we have lost a man whose ability to inspire others was unsurpassed.

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