

Celebrating the Life of Dato Sri Gathorne Gathorne-Hardy, the 5th Earl of Cranbrook (Lord Medway) 1933 – 2026

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Gathorne, fifth Earl of Cranbrook, more widely recognised by the Peninsular Malaysian birding community as Lord Medway, originator 60+ years ago of a 'Malayan [pre- 'Malaysian'] Bird Report' (co-authored with the writer), died at his Suffolk, UK home on the 24th of August 2026. He was 93.

To the end deeply committed to wildlife, conservation and people in Malaysia, especially Sarawak, Gathorne's career in the region began in the mid-1950s. Having just graduated, he reacted to an offer thrown open on a Cambridge visit by Tom Harrisson, then curator of the Sarawak Museum, of a job for anyone qualified who could get themselves to Kuching. Once there, he was assigned to the museum's Niah Cave archaeological excavations to investigate Niah's vast swiftlet and bat colonies. To this task was soon added vertebrate palaeontology: reorganising the collecting and identification of the excavation's bone finds. All of these areas of interest would be set to last him a lifetime.



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With a PhD that incorporated some of his Niah work completed Gathorne returned to Malaya in 1961, this time to KL and a lectureship in the University of Malaya Zoology Department. A decision made on arrival was that he would need to live closer to nature than was possible in suburban (albeit still tiny) Petaling Jaya. Result, a weekend explore (with graduate student assistant, the writer, in tow), up to Fraser's Hill, an overnight camp-out in an uninhabited bungalow, then back over Genting Sempah until, at 16th mile Ulu Gombak, there was spotted the roof of an old Public Works Department (JKR) quarters poking out of the undergrowth. In cool, submontane forest and help with repairs and garden clearing from Orang Asli neighbours this became his home for a decade – shared at various times with a siamang, an otter, indigenous hunting dog, numerous visitors and, having installed a (bamboo)-piped water supply, ultimately his arriving family.

16th mile Ulu Gombak also became his writing retreat and an active and diverse research base, including for his work on flat-headed bats in, at first sight, inaccessible giant bamboo culms; his large-sample survey of forest tree phenological cycles; and long-term mark and release investigation of the lower storey forest bird community. By far the greatest of Gathorne's Gombak achievements, however, was his success in convincing the University that for both teaching and research purposes it needed a field station, and his even greater success in securing a Nuffield Foundation grant towards costs of construction, on a site just a few hundred metres upstream from his house. Now internationally known as a field research

destination (Ulu Gombak Field Studies Centre), to date it has also provided some 60 generations of Malaysian biology undergraduates with a critical educational experience.



An aerial view of the Ulu Gombak Field Studies Centre. Image is a screenshot from the State of Nature Conservation in Malaysia 2025 Symposium video from Lord Cranbrook.

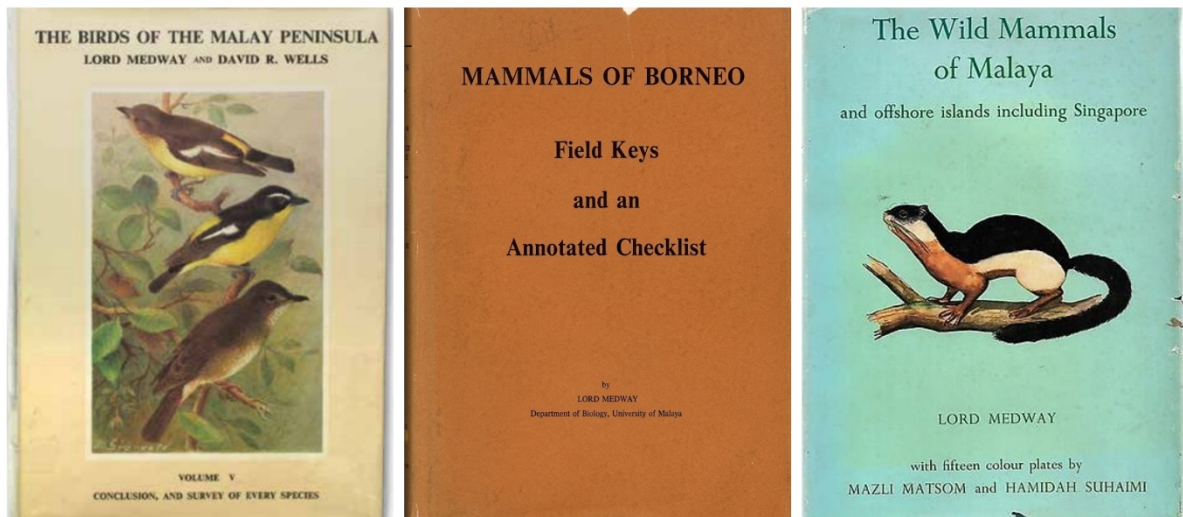
Staying with Gathorne's ornithology profile, establishing the University of Malaya Bird-ringing Project (UMBRP) with its own ring size and numbering systems, and local reporting address opened wide opportunities for fieldwork, also including: his monitoring of invading Black-crowned Night Heron numbers at their then only known local nest colony site in Perak



The first Rhinoceros Hornbill ringed in Malaya, by Lord Medway.
Image source: The Birds of the Malay Peninsula Volume V.

mangrove forest; mass ringing of Barn Swallows at urban night roosts in Perak and Pahang, with many controls reported from their North Asian breeding range; monitoring of warbler and shrike populations wintering in mining land reed-beds then surrounding KL; and, most famously, a chance discovery by Gathorne one misty night in 1966 of green pigeons being collected at a security-lit ridge-top radio pylon, leading to more than a decade's worth of mist-net sampling of the night migration stream as it crossed Fraser's Hill in autumn and spring.

During those years he also ran or participated in international expeditions, to Kinabalu, Gunung Benom and, with Natural History Museum (UK), Gunung Lawit in Ulu Terengganu. Books among his many publications from that era include the fifth volume of 'The Birds of the Malay Peninsula' (co-authored with the writer, 1976), completing the pre-WW2 Robinson and Chasen series, with illustrations by the original artist; and 'Mammals of Borneo' and 'The Wild Mammals of Malaya and Offshore Islands including Singapore', both running into updated editions.



Some of the books published by Lord Medway. He also published extensively in the research literature.

In 1970, while still only in his late thirties, Gathorne resigned his university post to return to the running of the family's UK estate. With the death of his father in 1978 he acceded to the Cranbrook title and took his place in the House of Lords where he continued his father's political work on wildlife conservation legislation. Chairing the environmental sub-committee of the House's European Community committee he ultimately introduced his own Environmental Protection Bill. Through the 1980s he also served on the UK government's Nature Conservancy Council and in 1990 was appointed first chairman of its successor organisation, English Nature. Other governmental appointments included serving on the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution; with the landfill regulator 'ENTRUST' (chaired ENTRUST from 1996 to 2002); and on the NERC Centre for Ecology and Hydrology advisory committee. At European Union level he served with the Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP).

Non-governmental roles included being a trustee of the Natural History Museum (UK) and chairman of the International Trust for Zoological Nomenclature (chaired ITZN from 2001 to 2008), finding the latter a new administrative home at Singapore's Lee Kong Chian Museum.

Throughout this intensely busy part of his life, and to the very end, Malaysia was never far from Gathorne's thoughts, with visits back to friends and students especially in Sarawak that increased in frequency during 'retirement' and continued for as long as he was physically able, into his high '80s. These had involved deputy leadership of a large Royal Geographical Society-Sarawak government expedition to the then proposed Gunung Mulu National Park. They also

saw a productive surge of his interest in swiftlet taxonomy, ecology and 'house farming', with the discovery that farmed birds were being traded across Southeast Asia and the unexpected finding that nowhere are these identifiable as any one wild species but are genetically distinct. A 2002/2014 book (Swiftlets of Borneo: Builders of Edible Nests) co-authored with Dr Lim Chan Koon discusses this new regional entity, including its potential impacts on the conservation of wild species.



Lord Medway at the Niah Caves. Image Copyright: Family of Gathorne Gathorne-Hardy. Used with permission.

Recognition of an extraordinary life's achievements came with a Royal Geographical Society Founders' Medal, election as a Fellow *honoris causa* by the Linnean Society, WWF International's Duke of Edinburgh Conservation Award, and, in Malaysia, the Panglima Negara Bintang Sarawak which was awarded for contributions to the State, carrying the title of 'Dato Sri', and a Federal government Merdeka Award. Most of the latter's money value Gathorne ploughed back into student and community-led wildlife research and conservation efforts



around the region, including notably a locally run project to rescue what remains of megapode populations on the Mantanani Islands, Sabah.

In disbelief that this longtime friend of Malaysia is no longer with us, the Malaysian Bird Report community offers its sincere condolences to his wife Lady Caroline and their family.

Acknowledgements

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