

Obituary

Eric Simms (1921–2009)

Eric Simms, writer, broadcaster, film producer and pioneer of wildlife sound recording, died on 1st March 2009 at the age of 87. Throughout a lifetime dedicated to the study and promotion of wildlife and conservation, Eric deservedly earned his place as an outstanding conservationist. Underlying his prolific output, which included 7,000 radio broadcasts and 700 television appearances, numerous books, papers and articles, was an almost insatiable drive to bring a greater understanding and appreciation of natural history to a wider audience. His undoubted success in stimulating enthusiasm and enjoyment of wildlife in a whole generation is a fitting memorial to his inspiration, dedication and determination. He was unstinting in giving of his time and energy to numerous committees and groups, which benefited enormously from the depth and breadth of his experience.

Eric was born on 24th August 1921, the son of the head gardener of Ladbroke Square, in North Kensington. His youthful birdwatching was carried out in the Square, in the grounds of nearby Holland House, the Royal Parks and Hampstead Heath and later in the Home Counties. As a boy he was greatly encouraged by his botanist father and two outstanding ornithologists of the time: Col. Richard Meinertzhagen, who lived in Kensington Park Gardens, and Arthur Holte Macpherson, then one of London's best-known observers. In 1939 he followed his elder brothers to Merton College, Oxford, where he read history and joined the Oxford Ornithological Society, helping to run the bird-ringing trap on Christchurch Meadows.

He entered the RAF in 1941 and joined Bomber Command in 1943 as a Flight Lieutenant, flying in Lancasters from RAF Wickenby in Lincolnshire as a bomb aimer and second pilot. He flew in 27 operations, and his bravery and unconquerable spirit were recognised when he was awarded a DFC in 1944. His citation states that 'he has displayed cool courage... skill and determination which have been an inspiration to the crew with which he flies... and has shown complete disregard of danger in the face of the heaviest enemy defences'. His wartime experiences undoubtedly had a considerable influence on him. He felt that

he was lucky to survive the war and that, after that, every day was a bonus.

On his release from the RAF, Eric took a Diploma in Education at Oxford and then taught in Rugby and Stratford-upon-Avon. He was sworn in as the first Special Constable for bird protection in Britain and while at Stratford he discovered an important migration route for birds across England from the Wash to the Severn. He also lectured for the Extra-Mural Department of Birmingham University and served on the Research Committee of the West Midland Bird Club.

In 1950 Eric was chosen to succeed Dr Ludwig Koch as director of the BBC's wildlife sound-recording projects, based in London. This marked the start of Eric's long and fruitful career in, and his outstanding contribution to, broadcasting. He became resident ornithologist to the BBC and, between 1950 and 1958, made the first wildlife sound recordings in Britain on magnetic tape, introduced parabolic reflectors and radio links and made the first underwater recordings of fish. With engineer Bob Wade, he added many new animal sounds to the BBC's Sound Archives.

His radio features on the behaviour and



F. R. Elwell

120. Eric Simms recording Common Nightingales *Luscinia megarhynchos* with a midgit recorder and 18-inch parabolic recorder, in Warwickshire in 1962.

vocabulary of individual species such as Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*, Stone-curlew *Burhinus oedicephalus*, Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*, Common Crossbill *Loxia curvirostris* and Badger *Meles meles* were made possible only by his pioneering of new recording techniques, and were a milestone in natural history broadcasting. Many British recordings were first broadcast in *The Countryside* programme, which he created in 1952 and which he broadcast over 38 years without break until its end in 1990. He also visited the Camargue, Spain and Switzerland on some of the first BBC sound-recording expeditions in search of wildlife sounds.

In 1961, Eric joined the newly launched BBC Schools' Television service where, with Felicia Elwell, he produced and presented a number of natural history and environmental study programmes for primary schools. He also became Sound Advisor to British Transport Films. He went freelance in 1967, to have greater freedom to express opinions on conservation, but continued to broadcast regularly on national and local radio and on the British Forces Network. From 1967 to 1978, he presented the weekly *Nature Notebook* on the BBC World Service and from 1977 to 1987 he had a weekly spot on London Broadcasting. He was also general editor, producer and announcer for 14 wildlife recordings for BBC Records and, in 1972, he was appointed to the Advisory Committee to the Department for the Environment on Bird Sanctuaries in the Royal Parks.

Eric was a prolific author, writing some 20 books on various aspects of natural history and sound recording, including four in the Collins 'New Naturalist' series: *Woodland Birds* (1971), *British Thrushes* (1978), *British Warblers* (1985) and *British Larks, Pipits and Wagtails* (1991). In 1976, Eric's autobiography *Birds of the Air* was described by David Attenborough as 'a fascinating account of his experiences by one of the pioneers of natural history broadcasting'. Jointly with Myles North, Eric produced *Witherby's Sound Guide to British Birds* (1958, 1969), which was the first sound guide in the world to the avifauna of a region. *Birds of Town and Suburb* (1975) was based on his research, between 1951 and 1970, into the birdlife of his home patch in Dollis Hill in northwest London and *The Public Life of the Street Pigeon* (1979) was the first biography of what was then considered a much exploited and disregarded bird. Eric also

contributed chapters and sections to a number of books including *The Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Birds* (1990), *The Definitive Guide to the Birds of the World* (1990) and *Fauna Britannica* (2002), and to many journals and magazines. One of his own favourite books was *A Natural History of British Birds* (1983), illustrated by Robert Gillmor, in which he sought to bridge the gap between field guides and more scientific works.

Eric was elected a fellow of the Zoological Society in 1953, and served on the Council of the RSPB during 1953–63 and the Council of the World Wide Fund for Nature and its Advisory Panel during 1977–86. He was President of the Skylarks Nature Reserve at Holme Pierrepont in Nottingham, the first nature reserve designed solely for the physically disabled. Eric was also Borough Sites Officer in the London Borough of Brent for the Herts and Middlesex Trust for Nature Conservation, a founder member of the Welsh Harp Reservoir Conservation Group and President of the Lincolnshire Bird Club from 1981. He was also a magistrate in London and Vice Chairman of the South Witham Parish Council in Lincolnshire.

In 1980, Eric moved to South Witham with his wife Thelma to begin a very active retirement. Near the village he discovered a neglected area of roadside verge, recognised its potential, and adopted and so transformed the area that by 1992 it was designated South Witham Nature Reserve, with Eric as manager. He found the work both inspiration and reward as it brought him much pleasure and physical activity, from removing scrub and clearing litter to censusing the birds and photographing the butterflies. Under his stewardship, the reserve won conservation awards and much recognition. Also in Lincolnshire, Eric continued his Blackbird *Turdus merula* studies, making detailed observations on the behaviour of birds in his garden.

Eric had a wide range of other interests, including geology, aviation, local history, architecture and classical music. Eric lived a rich and fulfilling life, always convinced of his good fortune in being able to pursue his fascination with conservation and pioneering wildlife recording while still managing to have 'so much fun'.

Eric is survived by his daughter Amanda and son David. He will be much missed and without doubt his tremendous legacy to conservation will continue to inspire generations to come.

Leo Batten