Obituary

Sir Peter Scott CH CBE DSC FRS (1909-1989)

Like many of my generation, my early teenage interest in birds was nurtured on a diet of ‘Nature Parliament’ and ‘Look’. I remember listening enthralled as Peter Scott related tales from his recent visits to East Africa, while James Fisher endeavoured to cap them with some of his extensive North American bird knowledge. The early ‘Look’ programmes, in black-and-white of course, introduced millions to natural history films, including such classics as Heinz Sielman’s ‘Woodpeckers’.

In 1960, I went to work at the Wildfowl Trust and was soon aware both of Peter’s breadth of vision and of his endless concern with small details. The former was apparent in his part in the founding in 1961 of the World

6. Sir Peter Scott (J. F. Leach)
Wildlife Fund (now the World Wide Fund for Nature) and then, just a few years later, in the large expansion of the Wildfowl Trust, from two centres, at Slimbridge and Peakirk, to a total of seven, including the major wetland reserves at Caerlaverock and the Ouse Washes.

Peter’s attention to detail—his wanting things ‘just right’—showed up typically in the design of birdwatching hides at the various Wildfowl Trust centres, with seats, elbow rests, viewing slits and shutters all carefully tailored to aid the birdwatcher, yet not disturb the birds. No other conservation organisation has produced hides anything like as good.

This same love of detail, which was of course an integral part of his immense painting skill, led to the now famous study of Bewick’s Swans Cygnus columbianus, which began at Slimbridge in 1964 when Peter realised that the black-and-yellow patterns on the birds’ bills were individually different. The discovery was not, in fact, completely new—the existence of three basic types of bill pattern was reported in British Birds (17: 63-64) as long ago as 1923—but it was Peter, with his ability to put down on paper what he could see, in the minutest detail, who made a major research project out of it: one that is still going strong two PhDs and many published papers later.

An ornithological discovery that Peter always remained proud of was the separation of the Greenland race flavirostris of the White-fronted Goose Anser albifrons. As he described in his autobiography, The Eye of the Wind (1968), he took great pleasure in showing Harry Witherby the two different races at his pre-war Lincolnshire lighthouse collection, a European Whitefront taking food out of one of Witherby’s hands, a Greenland Whitefront feeding from the other.

Another major study that Peter initiated was that on the Pink-footed Goose A. brachyrhynchus. He was involved in the discovery of the major breeding grounds of the species in central Iceland, and pioneered the development of rocket nets for catching the geese in Britain in winter. His enthusiasm for goose-catching clearly took the place of his earlier passion for wildfowling, a passion that he found difficult to account for in later life.

This obituary has concentrated on some of Sir Peter’s ornithological achievements. Others have described his feats as Olympic yachtsman, wartime hero, champion glider pilot, saviour of the Hawaiian Goose Branta sandvicensis, fervent defender of whales, and so on and so on.

This multi-talented man was also generous with praise, approachable at all times, and an inspiration to those fortunate enough to work for the Wildfowl Trust (now the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust), his finest memorial.

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