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# *In Memoriam*

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## IN MEMORIAM: ALEXANDER F. SKUTCH, 1904–2004

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With the death of Alexander Skutch on 12 May 2004, one week short of his 100th birthday, ornithology lost perhaps the last of its great field naturalists. His stream of publications on the lives and habits of Neotropical birds over a 70-year span stimulated whole areas of inquiry into avian sociobiology and life-history strategies. A member of the AOU since 1930, he became an Elective Member in 1938, Fellow in 1945, and Honorary Fellow in 1979, and received the Brewster Medal in 1950. Author of some 200 scientific papers and 20 books on birds, he also wrote nearly 50 articles and four books on philosophy and three autobiographical books that blended both. Skutch's singularly vivid and graceful writing carried his philosophy of nature to a much wider audience. After settling on his "Los Cusingos" farm in southwestern Costa Rica in 1941, he pursued a reclusive, ascetic lifestyle, such that few ornithologists had the opportunity to know and work with him. As one of that privileged few, I mourn the passing of a truly unique person of singular integrity, and a warm, critical, and stimulating friend.

The eldest of four children, Alexander Skutch was born on 20 May 1904 in Baltimore, Maryland, and spent much of his boyhood on a farm in the green Maryland hills. There he developed a deep love of animals, a lifelong

compassion for living things that led him into nature study "without passing through the egg-collecting stage so characteristic of budding naturalists" of his generation. He absorbed his father's love for books, and as a student read widely in history, literature, and philosophy. Entering nearby Johns Hopkins University, he decided to become a biologist through the influence of an inspiring professor of botany, Duncan S. Johnson. He accompanied Johnson on field trips to the Maine coast and to Jamaica, financed by the United Fruit Company, where he first encountered tropical nature and committed to studying the leaf anatomy of the banana plant for his doctoral dissertation. College experience at a bird-banding station "put him off" ornithology for years, because subjecting birds to the indignity of being handled repelled him.

Following completion of his doctorate in 1928, he spent several years continuing his study of the banana plant at United Fruit plantations in Panamá and Honduras, but the wealth of bird life there increasingly claimed his attention. He devoted time to studying the nesting habits of several species, beginning his conversion "from foliage to feathers." His first ornithological paper, on the nesting of the Common Tody-Flycatcher, appeared in *The Auk* in 1930. Delving into the literature on Neotropical birds upon his return to the United States, he found that knowledge of species' and subspecies' taxonomy was extensive but their habits were virtually unstudied. He decided to devote his life to learning about the lives of these birds in their natural setting, observing but not disturbing. That determination was a natural outgrowth of his evolving philosophy of life, in which the quest for understanding and appreciating the beauty and harmony of nature was paramount.

There followed several years of wandering in Central America, staying for varying periods in farms and haciendas, supporting his ornithological studies by tutoring his hosts' children and later by collecting plants for several important herbaria. He spent time at the new field station on Barro Colorado Island and there knew Frank Chapman, whose life-history studies surely influenced his own work, though he was totally unsympathetic to the scientific collecting of birds. Indeed, Alexander Skutch was a striking anomaly among North Americans engaged in prolonged field work in the Neotropics: he never worked as an ornithologist for a museum, university, or government agency and never collected a bird. Plant collecting was his profession when he arrived in Costa Rica in 1935 to stay, and it provided him with the funds for purchasing, in 1941, the farm where he would live for the rest of his life, save for relatively brief trips to other Neotropical countries to study their birds. The number of plant species named for him attests to his capacity and diligence as a plant collector. In 1950, he married Pamela Lankester, the daughter of Charles Lankester, an English immigrant to Costa Rica and outstanding naturalist, who for 50 years had studied its butterflies, birds, and especially orchids. Childless, the couple adopted and raised Edwin, the mistreated son of a local worker who accompanied Alexander in his observations for years before leaving the farm to make his own way.

Few people have the fortune—or the fortitude—for the lifelong practice of a reasoned philosophy of life. Alexander Skutch had both; having found in the Hindu doctrine of *Ahimsa*—"live simply, harm no sentient being"—a philosophy akin to his own, he made this his way of life on his farm. His interpretations of his observations were often permeated by his philosophical leanings: he viewed nature as a harmonious association of species living together, with predation as a disrupting, destructive force. In the foreword to perhaps his most revealing autobiographical work, *The Imperative Call* (1979), Skutch wrote that "two voices [religion and nature] summon men with a call so imperative that few who hear can resist"; "following either, we may neglect wealth, security, solid comfort and social status...." His recognition that the two voices are in fact one, "in different tones," helps us to understand how, as religions have done since time immemorial, he in effect reordered the world in his own image and was never able to accept predation as an integral part of nature; he killed snakes, in particular, with a vehemence startling to see in one so gentle toward most animals.

As a scientist, Alexander Skutch's salient characteristic was a capacity for incredibly persistent, patient, careful observation, made with sympathy and respect for his subjects. He reported his observations with detachment and objectivity, and in his writings it is generally clear where observation ends and interpretation

begins. Much (in some cases, virtually all) of what we know about the lives of some 300 species of Neotropical birds derives from his work. The three volumes of "Life histories of Central American birds" published in the *Pacific Coast Avifauna* series would alone make an impressive life's work, but he published several other volumes on life histories, as well as the monumental *Parent Birds and their Young* (1976), which brings together an enormous amount of information on avian natural history worldwide. From the late 1970s on, he was increasingly troubled by a neck ailment that made it difficult and finally impossible for him to raise his head (and binoculars), and he turned increasingly to the writing of volumes summarizing his and others' observations on particular families of birds (beginning with *The Life of the Hummingbird* in 1973) as well as philosophical works, perhaps the best known being *Life Ascending* (1986).

My own association with Alexander Skutch began in 1966, when, as a student in one of the first courses offered by the Organization for Tropical Studies, I made a pilgrimage to "Los Cusingos" at the height of the rainy season. After a four-hour odyssey by car, mule, and foot from the town of San Isidro, with roads knee-deep in mud in spots, I was a sorry sight indeed when I arrived at his farm, but Alexander and Pamela received their unheralded visitor with the gracious hospitality that ever made visits to them special occasions. A stimulating discussion about hummingbirds and predation, a bird walk in the rain to see a nest of the Silver-throated Tanager, and my initiation to two specialties of the Costa Rican cuisine, *pejibaye* palm fruits and yucca-flower salad, remain in my mind as highlights of that visit, the first of many that I made following my return to Costa Rica to live five years later. On a later bird walk, a biting, screaming pair of Bay-headed Tanagers locked in combat fell literally at our feet; I was bemused by his comment that "almost every great symphony has some dissonant notes." We met with increasing frequency through the 1980s as we were working on the guide to Costa Rican birds, and had many a lively discussion on numerous points. Alexander would listen to my arguments courteously and then present his own arguments with impeccable logic and quiet vehemence. After once winning a point regarding English names, he flashed a wickedly whimsical smile and said, "Well, you know you're up against a very stubborn Dutchman!" Alexander was indeed obdurate on points related to his philosophy of life. He never approved of my capturing, banding, and collecting birds, even though this supplied considerable new information for the guide, and often upbraided me for "loving ornithology too much and birds not enough!" His commitment to a simple life was total: he refused to have electricity on the farm to the end, much to the dismay of long-suffering Pamela: "Alexander, the power line runs past our front gate and I need a refrigerator!" The death of Pamela, his faithful companion of 50 years, in 2000, was a severe blow to Alexander: though rarely given to outward shows of affection, he was deeply devoted to her. His health declined rapidly thereafter, and when I last visited him six months before his death, he was bedridden and weak but his memory and fortitude were unimpaired—he remarked that he hoped that I was observing birds more than collecting!

The legacy of Alexander Skutch to Neotropical ornithology is, quite simply, the largest body of natural-history information ever collected by a single observer. We still remain ignorant about the basic biology of most species in the world's richest avifauna, and the possibilities of obtaining that knowledge are declining—not only because of the destruction of tropical habitats, but also through our changing ways of doing and publishing science—ever less pure observation, and more deductive reasoning and statistical hypothesis testing, a trend that Alexander deplored. The Alexander Skutch Awards of the Association of Field Ornithologists represent a commendable effort to support research in the Skutch tradition, but they are the exception in this day and age. The death of Alexander Skutch leaves a void in Neotropical ornithology that may well be impossible to fill; we are fortunate to have had the benefit of his self-denial, dedication, patience, and persistence in the study of his beloved birds—qualities we have never needed more.