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Alexander Skutch, 99, Expert On Central American Birds

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Alexander F. Skutch, a field naturalist and author who wrote early descriptions of Central America's tropical birds, died on May 12 at his home in Costa Rica.

He was 99, said Dana Gardner, a close friend and an illustrator of some of his books.

Dr. Skutch, who was born in Maryland, began his work in Costa Rica in the 1930's, studying the behavior of the local bird population. He resided in the country for the rest of his life, building a home in the 1940's in the south, which became a center for visiting scientists and fellow naturalists.

He wrote more than two dozen books on birds, and he considered his most important work to be a series about the life histories of Central American birds, published beginning in the 1950's. His best-known books were ''A Naturalist in Costa Rica'' (1971) and ''A Naturalist on a Tropical Farm'' (1980). In his volumes, he described tanagers, flycatchers and several hundred species of tropical birds while observing the rich interplay of life on his 180-acre farm.

''He cut a new path, by describing the birds in their tropical habitat, while they were alive instead of collecting them as specimens,'' said Dr. Robert S. Ridgely, vice president for endangered bird conservation at the American Bird Conservancy, which is based in Washington.

Alexander Frank Skutch began his career as a botanist, receiving his doctorate from Johns Hopkins University in 1928.

While working on a fruit plantation in Panama, Dr. Skutch became interested in hummingbirds, which led to a deeper interest in ornithology. In an interview in 2001, he advised scientists to treat the birds they watched ''with the respect due to sensitive, feeling creatures'' and to publish their findings ''without the needless excess of probability estimates that are making ornithological papers hardly readable.''

In addition to his books, Dr. Skutch wrote essays and philosophical studies in which he defended his theory of biocompatibility, or what he called ''the harmonious association of diverse species.''

Adhering to his beliefs, he removed snakes and hawks from his property to protect the birds.

''I have never intentionally killed a wild or domestic bird,'' Dr. Skutch said in the interview. He was responsible, he said, ''for the shooting of a hawk or two that were preying upon birds that I was studying.''

Dr. Skutch's wife of 50 years, the former Pamela Lankester, died in 2001. He is survived by a son, Edwin Skutch of Costa Rica.

Photo: Alexander F. Skutch in 2000. (Photo by Dana Gardner)