**Boston Globe**

**Alexander Skutch, 99, famed ornithologist**

By Los Angeles Times  |  May 24, 2004

LOS ANGELES -- In 1941, he bought a 178-acre swath of tropical rain forest in Costa Rica that he named Finca Los Cusingos for the fiery-billed aracaris birds nesting all around. For the next 63 years, he lived in a house he built himself, with no telephone or electricity, simply watching the neotropical birds from dawn to dusk.

When Alexander Skutch died on his self-sufficient "finca" at San Isidro on May 12, eight days shy of his 100th birthday, he left a legacy for the field of ornithology that specialists said was paralleled only by that of the legendary John James Audubon.

Not that many people know Mr. Skutch's name. When Jim Bonner, curator of birds at Pittsburgh's National Aviary, organized an Alexander F. Skutch Exhibit in 1998, he described the bird watcher as "one of the most famous unknown men" in science.

Mr. Skutch's property, however, is now a public nature reserve managed by Costa Rica's Tropical Science Center, available to international researchers, students, naturalists, and bird watchers in an area otherwise razed for agriculture. And for laboratory-bound scientists and armchair adventurers and birders, Mr. Skutch's three dozen or so books detail the life histories of 300 avian species -- along with colorful accounts of his tangential coexistence with revolutions, earthquakes, and deforestation.

It was Mr. Skutch who, by observing raucous brown jays in 1935, discovered what he called "helpers at the nest" and ornithologists now label "cooperative brooding" -- the avian phenomenon of several birds working together to raise nesting babies. Mr. Skutch considered that discovery, along with writing about the life histories of tropical birds, his greatest accomplishments.

"I have regarded it a duty to make available to others, in readable form, the results of my studies of nature," Mr. Skutch once told the interviewer for the reference Contemporary Authors. The comment echoed the advice he always gave prospective naturalists -- make your findings readable and don't clutter them up with mathematical probability estimates. A prolific writer of scientific papers and essays, he began publishing books in 1954, with the first of three volumes titled "Life Histories of Central American Birds." His non-avian books included "The Quest of the Divine: An Inquiry into the Source and Goal of Morality and Religion."

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