The Independent

Alexander Skutch

Old-fashioned naturalist who became the world's foremost expert on Neotropical birds

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Alexander Skutch, the naturalist and writer, has been described as one of the most famous unknown men in science. From 1935 until his death just a week short of his 100th birthday, he lived in a remote valley in Costa Rica where he lived self-sufficiently and studied and wrote about wildlife, especially birds.

Alexander Frank Skutch, naturalist and writer: born Baltimore, Maryland 4 May 1904; married 1950 Pamela Lankester (died 2001; one adopted son); died San Isidro del General, Costa Rica 12 May 2004.

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He wrote some 40 books and over 200 papers on birds and his life in the rain forests of Central America, all in a warm, unfashionably graceful, and often poetic style. He disliked statistics, and based his bird studies purely on detailed observation and interpretation. Believing that even ringing birds was wrong, he recognised individual birds on his estate by small differences in their plumage.

The writer he admired most was Plutarch, who, like him, "believed in the integrity of non-human creatures". Skutch considered that the minds of birds were revealed in their behaviour, and showed them to be "not unfeeling automata, but sensitive creatures aware of what they do".

His important discovery of "co-operative breeding" in Brown Jays led to a lifelong interest in the ways birds help one another, especially in parenting and nest-building. He preferred, he said,

the birds that get on with other birds . . . To have raptors on a small reserve like this is disastrous, so we try to keep the hawks out.

He allowed one exception: the Laughing Falcon, on the grounds that it ate snakes.

Alexander Frank Skutch was born in Baltimore, Maryland, but his family moved to a farm on the outskirts of the city when he was three. He attended the privately run Park School in Baltimore, and read Botany at Johns Hopkins University. His first foray into the tropics was to Jamaica shortly after graduation where, to pay for his passage, he worked on banana-leaf tissue for the United Fruit Company. Further work on banana crops after his return led to his doctoral dissertation in 1928.

Tropical birds entered his life on a subsequent trip to Panama when, at work in the company's laboratory, he watched a hummingbird building its nest in a shrub just outside. Back in the United States he saw many Panamanian birds in aviaries but found that hardly anything was known about their habits in the wild. He had found his life calling.

Financing his bird-watching forays by collecting tropical plants for museums in America and Europe, Skutch spent several seasons in the forests and mountains of Guatemala, Honduras and Costa Rica. In a then-remote forested valley near San Isidro del General in Costa Rica, he found his ideal study site. In 1941 he bought 76 hectares of land and built a house there, naming it Finca Los Cusingos after the local name for the Fiery-billed Aricari bird, a relative of the toucan.

A lifelong vegetarian, Skutch grew corn, yucca and other crops, and, without running water until the 1990s, bathed and drank from the nearest stream. He believed in "treading lightly on the mother Earth". With his wife Pamela, daughter of the English naturalist Sir Ray Lankester, whom he married in 1950, and their adopted son Edwin, he stayed there for the rest of his life.

Skutch saw it as a duty "to make available to others, in readable form, the results of my studies of nature". He wrote many original books about the lives of around 300 birds, from humble pigeons to colourful hummingbirds, woodpeckers, orioles, tanagers and trogons, which together made him the foremost expert on Neotropical birds.

With Gary Styles he produced *The Birds of Costa Rica* (1989), one of the first field guides to a tropical country. He chronicled his life in detail in books like *The Imperative Call* (1993), about his early adventures in Maryland, Jamaica and Guatemala, and *A Naturalist in Costa Rica* (1971), perhaps his most-read book. Other subjects also included his views on evolution ( *Life Ascending*, 1985), and on religion ( *The Quest of the Divine*, 1956). His last book, *Harmony and Conflict in the Living World*(2000), advocating a more peaceful co-existence with wildlife, was influenced by changes he had witnessed which left his Finca a forest oasis in a stripped landscape of sugar-cane and coffee plantations.

Primitive living clearly suited Skutch. He enjoyed good health into his nineties, and wrote his last book at the age of 96. His farm is now owned by the Tropical Science Center and managed as a nature reserve. He received many honours in recognition of his work. The Pamela and Alexander Skutch Research Award for studies in avian natural history was established in 1997. The American Association of Field Ornithologists created an Alexander Skutch medal for excellence in field ornithology.

A film portrait of Skutch entitled *A Naturalist in the Rainforest*was made in 1995.

Peter Marren