

WESTERN TANAGER



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Remembering Alexander Skutch

by Dana Gardner

For many years I have made pilgrimages to Alexander Skutch's farm, Los Cusingos, to visit and make paintings in the peace and quiet of his little patch of tropical forest. This year I planned my trip to coincide with his 100th birthday. A couple of weeks before the event, however, I went down to stay with him for a few days. I am very, very glad that I did, as he passed away eight days short of his birthday. Because it was unseasonably rainy, I set up my painting table in the office where Skutch would sit and read each morning, and we kept each other company. Although Alexander had been deteriorating physically for the last couple of years, was confined to a wheel chair, and had become hard of hearing, he remained mentally alert and in very high spirits. Last year when I arrived for a visit I found him reading a book on planetary physics. (He asked me what I thought of the Big Bang Theory.) This year he was rereading many of his own books that he had written years earlier. He told me he was refreshing his memory. He still received occasional visitors and graciously welcomed them, apologizing for not being able to rise to greet them. He wished them a pleasant walk in his forest, something he had been unable to do for several years, but he enjoyed hearing about what birds they saw.

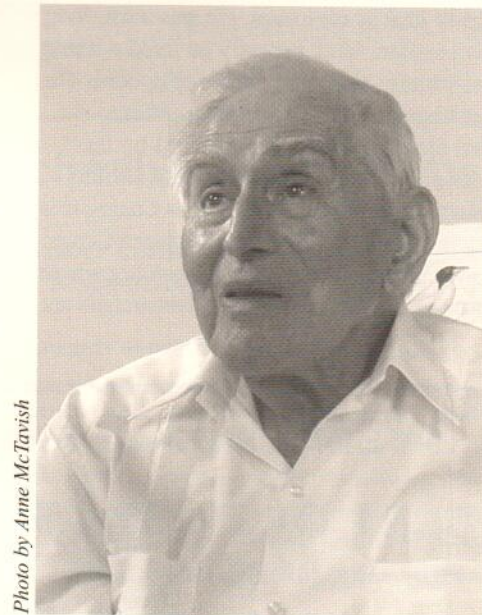


Photo by Anne McTavish

Alexander Skutch

Only on the next to the last day of my stay did a nagging cough rapidly escalate to the point where he could barely talk and his breathing became erratic and labored. I sat with him that night and held his hand; I was sure he was about to die. He half opened his eyes, saw me, and struggled to tell me something. I thought I was to hear the last words of this wise old naturalist, and they turned out to be a request to have a dentist appointment made for him the next week! His tired old decrepit body

was sending him a message, but he was having none of that – he was making plans for the future. I realized then that he wouldn't die quite yet. The next day was my planned departure day. He had quit coughing and had slept well, had eaten breakfast, and was once again reading. It was a beautiful sunny morning, the first sunny morning in more than a week of overcast weather. A gorgeous Turquoise Cotinga came out to sun itself in a bare tree at the edge of the yard. I left Los Cusingos in the early afternoon and planned to return for his 100th birthday party the next week, but I found out later that Alexander's health quickly deteriorated in the afternoon, and he died peacefully early that evening.

He was buried at Los Cusingos, as he wished, a few feet from the worn out, but still beautiful, old house that he built by hand some 62 years ago. Nearly 100 people showed up for the interment, including neighbors of many years, birdwatchers young and old, and a group of school children in their uniforms. His wife, Pamela Lankester, died in 2001.

Alexander Skutch's death is a great loss to neotropical ornithology and to birdwatchers and armchair travelers the world over. He considered his best work to be the detailed life histories of over 300 neotropical birds and the discovery of "helpers at the nest", now called

co-operative breeding, where several adult birds co-operate to raise one brood of nestlings. But his 30 books also include volumes on religion and philosophy, travel, nature stories for young people, and several books on specific bird families that are full of scientific information but written for the general bird enthusiast.

Though he led a few tours and taught the occasional ornithology class, he preferred to stay on his beloved farm. He disliked the bustling crowds and fast pace of the city. He told me during my last visit that he would have liked to have visited Australia and seen its interesting birdlife. But I remember that he was invited to Australia many years ago to attend an ornithological congress and chair the sessions on co-operative breeding. When he found out he would have to deal with the crowds at Los Angeles and other big airports in order to get there, he turned down the invitation. Over the years, however, he welcomed thousands of birdwatchers that came to visit Los Cusingos. Many will fondly remember sitting on the veranda with Alexander and Pamela, watching the colorful tanagers and honeycreepers coming in to the feeder to eat bananas.

Though recognized world wide as one of the greatest living ornithologists, Alexander Skutch was a very modest and humble man with a very simple personal philosophy: Don't do anything that hurts



Alexander Skutch named his farm "Los Cusingos" after the Fiery-billed Araçari. This black-and-white line drawing was done by the author, Dana Gardner.

other feeling creatures, and live simply and modestly so as not to tax the environment and its resources. He was a life-long vegetarian. Until recently he lived without electricity, and never had a telephone. He arranged to have his money put into a scholarship fund, administered by the American Field Ornithologists, for the study of neotropical birds. Los Cusingos is now owned by the Tropical Science Center, and is maintained as a bird sanctuary where tourists, birdwatchers, and researchers are

welcomed. His beautiful old house will be restored and turned into a museum. An anthology of his writings will soon be published by Axios Press. 🐦

Dana Gardner first met Alexander Skutch in 1973 when he was a soldier (and birdwatcher) in the Panama Canal Zone. He has illustrated 18 of Alexander Skutch's books. Dana lives in Berkeley, California.

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