



Obituary

Peter Conder OBE, Hon. MA (1919-1993)

Back in 1960, when I took my first hesitant steps into the world of professional ornithology and conservation, my first boss was Peter Conder. At that time, he was Assistant Secretary of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, with responsibility for, amongst other things, the Society's fledgling network of reserves.

The early employer-employee relationship quickly changed to one of friendship. On first impressions, Peter was a quiet, shy man, but beneath the exterior he held a burning passion for conservation, linked to a firm belief that the only way to save the jewels amongst the bird sites was by ownership and management. He was to

remain a friend and associate up to the time of his death. Chatting over birds and birdwatching with Peter was a pleasure, be it in the RSPB library, across the table at a British Ornithologists' Club dinner or at one of the RSPB members' gatherings.

Peter's quiet, rather subtle sense of humour earned him the respect of the growing band of staff within the RSPB. I recall a response I received from him early in my career, when funds were in extremely short supply. I had asked for permission to purchase a hammer and nails; back came the reply: 'Buy the nails, but try and borrow the hammer!'. Much later, when his hearing began to fail him, he demonstrated to me the intricacies of his new 'high-tech' hearing aid. Placing a control pad (rather like a pocket calculator) on the table in front of us, he explained how, by punching in one code, he could hear all the background noise of bird song on a walk through the woods; another code would enable him to concentrate on a nearby companion in a noisy room; 'And', he said, 'if I punch in this code, I cannot hear my wife at all!'.



30. Peter Conder OBE, Hon. MA (*RSPB*)

Peter John Conder was born in Streatham, London, on 20th March 1919 and showed his first interest in birds before reaching his teens by identifying a 'Willy Wagtail' from a child's bird book his sister had been given for Christmas. It was at Cranleigh School, however, that the interest developed. At the Junior school, he won a prize for completing a bird diary—although he was apparently the only pupil to manage the completion, so competition was not too strong. Later, however, it was the Cranleigh School Ornithological Society and its organising master, Marston Henniker-Gotley, that gave him the basis of his ornithological knowledge. At 5 a.m., and without waking anyone else, he would slip out of the school dormitory, through a passage window and be on his bike for some early-morning birdwatching.

After completing his education at Lausanne, Switzerland, where he learnt French, Peter spent six weeks with the British Schools Exploring Society in Newfoundland. He described this experience as 'tough and very character-building'. In the spring of 1938, with formal education behind him, he joined the voucher department of the family advertising firm, *S. H. Benson*. This period of his life, although short (he was called up for military service the following year), taught him much about British newspapers and advertising—all of which stood him in good stead when he eventually came to oversee the RSPB's meteoric growth in the 1960s-70s.

Peter would talk little about his wartime experiences. Commissioned as a second-lieutenant in the Royal Corps of Signals, he was attached to the 51st Highland Division and was captured at St Valery-sur-Somme in June 1940. He was to be a prisoner of war for five years. This did not stop his birdwatching, and his German captors soon became used to his activities to such an extent that he became a useful look-out during escape attempts. He made detailed observations on Goldfinches *Carduelis carduelis*, recording his results on whatever material was available, including German toilet paper. Eventually he escaped, just months before the end of the war, and made it safely to the American lines.

Following the war, Peter could not settle back into advertising, and, after a brief spell at the British Museum (Natural History), he accepted, in 1947, the post of warden with the West Wales Field Society on Skokholm. It was on this island that he studied the Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*—the subject of his final and arguably finest publication in 1990. Before completing seven years of island life, he had met and married Pat Higginson in 1952. It was after this period that Peter was to make the career move that presented him with the opportunity to make a significant and important contribution to conservation in general and bird protection in particular. He accepted the post of Assistant Secretary with the RSPB, becoming its Director in 1962.

Whilst its reins were in his hands, the Society's success was quite phenomenal. Membership rose from 20,000 to 200,000; a national campaign was waged (and won) against the use of persistent pesticides in the countryside; the Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* was re-established as a breeding bird in Scotland; a strong research base was established; and conservation issues began to be tackled at government level. His one declared regret during his 13 years as Director was that he could not achieve a merger between the RSPB and the Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves (now RSNC). In

1975, at the age of 56, Peter Conder retired from the RSPB. He could see the wisdom of new blood moving into a very different Society from the one that he had taken on 13 years earlier. He also perhaps wanted to return to a quieter way of life, for the continual round of meetings and committees kept him farther and farther from the birds that he loved. Throughout his career, he was essentially 'an amateur bird man' and delighted in a windswept day on the coast, binoculars around his neck and just one or two friends for company.

When time allowed, he enjoyed gardening and painting at his home in the village of Comberton on the outskirts of Cambridge. Following his retirement, however, with more time available, Peter began to travel widely—to Pakistan, Jordan, Mallorca, Galapagos, Nepal—sometimes on holiday, sometimes as leader or guest lecturer for tours and sometimes to give management advice or write management plans for protected areas.

His expertise was widely sought, and he served on the Advisory Committee for England of the Nature Conservancy Council, on the Conservation Panel of the National Trust and was a founder member of the Rare Breeding Birds Panel. Following his retirement, he was awarded the RSPB Gold Medal, and received an Honorary Master of Arts degree from the Open University in 1977. He was created an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in 1976 for his work in conservation. The staff who had worked with him commented that it should have been a knighthood.

Peter Conder described himself as 'desperately middle-class', an 'academic failure' and 'a bit of a loner'. He changed from a nest-robbing schoolboy into a man who played a major role in developing the conservation movement in Britain. He held the respect and friendship of all those who worked with him—and many of his values and beliefs rubbed off onto those staff (amongst whom I gladly number myself) who continue with the RSPB today. It was an honour and a pleasure to have known and worked with Peter Conder. He is survived by his wife and two children.

BOB SCOTT