## Los Angeles TimesObituaries

Alexander Skutch, 99; Author and Expert on Neotropical Birds

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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 car and no telephone or electricity, simply watching the neotropical birds from dawn to dusk.

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

Not many people know 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 birdwatcher as "one of the most famous unknown men" in science.

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 birdwatchers in an area whose natural vegetation has been otherwise razed for agriculture.



And for laboratory-bound scientists and armchair adventurers and birders, Skutch's three dozen or so books detail the life histories of about 300 avian species -- along with colorful accounts of his tangential coexistence with revolutions, earthquakes and deforestation.

It was 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 adult birds working together to raise nesting babies. Skutch personally considered that discovery, along with writing about the life histories of tropical birds, his greatest accomplishment.

"I have regarded it a duty to make available to others, in readable form, the results of my studies of nature," Skutch once told an interviewer for the reference work 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.

Skutch's own published observations read like poetry. For example, in the 1980 autobiographical "A Naturalist on a Tropical Farm," he wrote:

"Sometimes, when I stood watching the birds in one of these trees while the sun still hung low above the wooded ridge across the river, a flock of great scarlet macaws came from the east, as though riding down the level sunbeams.

"Two by two they flew, with steady, laborious wing beats, their long tails streaming like slender pennants behind their heavy bodies, their scarlet underplumage glowing vividly where touched by the horizontal rays.

"As the macaws passed overhead, their raucous shouts made them as objectionable to the ear as they were pleasing to the eye. Often these flamboyant birds flew directly above the crown of a flame-of-the-forest tree, in a gorgeous display such as one expects of tropical nature."

A Times reviewer praised that book as "an old-school natural history of a kind that has almost disappeared among university types

Skutch started out observing far less lovely birds -- common pigeons he made into pets at the farmhouse where he grew up surrounded by nature and books on the edge of Baltimore. His fascination with animals and birds quickly turned the boy into a vegetarian.

The inquisitive youth assuaged his thirst for literature at the private Park School of Baltimore, and for science at Johns Hopkins University, where he earned bachelor's and doctoral degrees in botany.



His first forays into the Central American tropics were to study banana plants for United Fruit Co. But his gaze repeatedly rose from the microscope to the rufous-tailed hummingbird outside his window, building her nest and raising her brood.

Years later, he would write eloquently:

"To me, a hummingbird was, and is, a fairylike bird, with a tiny body of slender grace, that hovers, miraculously suspended between two broad sectors of misty light, like the separated halves of a halo, giving forth now and then a bright glint of green from its back, and sending out a low, murmurous humming from those wings vibrated into an unsubstantial haze, while it probes the cool depth of some bright corolla with a long and delicately slender bill."

When the young botanist returned to the U.S. from his banana plant study in Panama, he delved into ornithology, discovering that most neotropical avian species had been collected, named and described but that hardly anything was known about their habits. He had found his life calling.

Collecting plant specimens for museums through the 1930s to support his research, Skutch soon bought the finca and settled down to watch the birds.

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." Despite his 1956 "The Quest of the Divine: An Inquiry into the Source and Goal of Morality and Religion" and 1970's "The Golden Core of Religion," Skutch's books primarily chronicled birds and his life watching them.

The titles cataloged his work: "The Life of the Hummingbird," "Parent Birds and Their Young," "A Bird Watcher's Adventures in Tropical America," "Nature Through Tropical Windows," "The Life of the Woodpecker," "Life of the Tanager," "Birds Asleep," "Life of the Pigeon," "Orioles, Blackbirds and Their Kin," "Antbirds and Ovenbirds," "Life of the Flycatcher," "Trogons, Laughing Falcons and Other Neotropical Birds."

The reclusive scholar occasionally espoused iconoclastic theories, as in his 1985 book on evolution "Life Ascending" or "The Minds of Birds" in 1996 or his final book -- on biodiversity -- in 2000, "Harmony and Conflict in the Living World."

He declared that birds thought and felt emotion; he condemned predatory species (he even shot snakes on his property that threatened birds); he dismissed meat-eating as evil; and he touted, not biodiversity, but biocompatibility, in which species were conserved only if they weren't preying on each other.



Mainstream scientists might have differed with those theories, but they always respected Skutch for his painstaking scientific as well as literary contributions.

"Dr. Skutch has studied and written in detail about the private lives of more neotropical birds than anyone in history. His contribution to our knowledge of birds is truly remarkable," Robert Ridgely, author of guidebooks to birds of Panama and South America, says in the current issue of Living Bird magazine.

In recent years, nearly deaf and with failing eyesight, Skutch suffered from osteoporosis, which curtailed his peering up into the trees to observe birds.

Skutch was married to Pamela Lankester, daughter of a British naturalist in Costa Rica, from 1950 until her death in 2001, and they raised an adopted son, Edwin. Skutch leaves a brother, Rafael, in Baltimore. Information on other survivors was unavailable.

The self-made ornithologist was buried Friday at Finca Los Cusingos, said Elissa Landre of Massachusetts Audubon, chairwoman of the Pamela and Alexander F. Skutch Fund Committee.