



In memoriam: George Atkinson-Willes

12 December 2002

George Atkinson-Willes

With the death, just after his eightieth birthday celebrated with great glee in September, of George Atkinson-Willes, wetland and waterfowl conservation has lost one of its earliest pioneers, and also one of its most colourful characters. It was George who set up the international waterfowl counts, which identified many of the prime wetlands for conservation, and who, with his hunting background, provided the basis for the notion of wise use of wetlands and their birds.

George came from a military background. Almost the only tie he was ever seen to wear was that of his regiment, the Eighth Hussars, who were involved in the Charge of the Light Brigade in the Crimean War, in which (so he always claimed) several of his ancestors died. He took an active part in the Second World War, so active that he lost a leg in the fighting, and spent the last fifty odd years of his life with an artificial leg. He had been expected after the war to go into banking and finance, but decided that life in London's financial districts was not for him. If ever he had to go through the City, he would peer at passers-by and say "They don't look happy, do they?". Instead, he joined the research team at the Wildfowl Trust at Slimbridge in Gloucestershire, which had just been established by Peter Scott, and become one of those who made Slimbridge the white-hot world powerhouse of research on waterbirds from the 1950s. His was not an academic background; he came to ducks and geese through his practical experience in wildfowling; he claimed to have shot (and eaten) the eighth British record of Red-breasted Goose. But he was able, through his wide contacts, to bring together a team of enthusiasts (George's army, as he called them) who went out as volunteers to count ducks once a month through the British winter from the early 1950s. It very rapidly became apparent that there was no point counting ducks in Britain alone, so from the mid-1960s he instigated the International Waterbird Census, beginning with counts of ducks throughout Europe, North Africa and The Middle East and soon extending to many other parts of the world. These investigations identified the major wetland sites, and provided the first indications of the numbers of each species, nowadays a fundamental concept.

As well as being involved in collection and analysis of basic data, George was concerned with measures for the conservation of the birds and their habitats. He was one of the most active participants in the MAR (for MARsh, MARais, MARisma, MARsch) conference organized in the Camargue in 1962 where the first call was made for an intergovernmental convention on wetlands. In the 1960s he master-minded production of the ground-breaking booklet "Liquid Assets", published by UNESCO, which for the first time set out the ecological and economic values and functions of wetlands. He attended the successor conferences during the 1960s where the concept and text of the Convention slowly advanced, and of course the Ramsar conference in 1971 which set up the text of the Convention. At the early Conferences of the Ramsar Parties in the 1980s, it was George who led the discussion on criteria for identifying wetlands of international importance, and who carried through the principle that sites holding one per cent of a population of migratory waterbirds were of international importance; indeed, someone called him "Mr One Per Cent". The work initiated by George was continued by his successors at the International Waterfowl Research Bureau (IWRB) and subsequently Wetlands International. Indeed, at the latest Ramsar COP, the third edition of Waterbird Population Estimates has just been presented, along the lines set out by George.

But over and above his contribution to the cause, George had a quite unforgettable presence of his own. Anyone who has worked at Slimbridge will remember the sound of George's wooden leg stomping along the corridor for a consultation. He had all the background of the English country gentleman, with his country house, his garden - till his dying day his real passion - where he hosted garden parties at IWRB meetings. Above all a man of unparalleled urbanity; no one could ever possibly refuse his mild requests for cooperation; yet below it all an exceedingly sharp mind; in fact he did not suffer fools gladly, but nobody would have guessed. We shall not see his like again.

-- Mike Smart

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