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For birds and for wilderness

Obituary: Luc Hoffmann

Luc Hoffmann, ornithologist and conservationist, died on July 21st, aged 93



WHEN it came to birds, Luc Hoffmann was no elitist. Every species was precious to him. At boarding school in the Swiss Alps he watched migrating passerines—barn swallows, wrynecks, pied flycatchers—flocking through the passes between the peaks. His first scientific article, written at school, was on migrating shorebirds; his first long expedition, at 16 with his friend Dieter, was to Brittany in search of gannets, a bird rarely spotted in France. His doctoral thesis at the University of Basel was on the colour variations in the down of the chicks of the common tern. As an old man, standing tall and straight, he liked to watch the valiant efforts of brightly coloured bee-eaters to fly, and catch their food, in the *mistral*. And his binoculars often searched for his favourite, the collared pratincole, so small and neat in its brown and white, which also hunted in the air.

The birds he was most closely associated with, however, were the greater flamingos of the Camargue in south-eastern France. He first saw them when he was still a student, chasing the big grey chicks through stones and tamarisk in an effort to ring them. Everything about them fascinated him, from the wondrous pink-and-scarlet of their adult plumage to their strange tongues, spined and hooked to filter food from water like a baleen whale, to their surging flights in flocks of thousands from one lagoon to the next. In 1948 he bought an old farm at Tour du Valat, without water or power, with a mind to live there for ever and set up a centre for study.

He did both. His centre eventually welcomed up to 100 researchers; the flamingos, which had declined sharply in the 1960s, were monitored and re-established within a decade. And his ambitions embraced the wetlands themselves. His “emotional predilection” for such places in boyhood—a typical *Basler* understatement—had become, in the water-lit land of the Camargue, a *coup de foudre* of both mind and senses. The world’s swampy, estuarine places were then mostly ignored by naturalists. But to him they were like plants, with their roots reaching down to hydrate the whole planet. If they were drained, the birds and all nature died in consequence. He was passionately determined to save them.

A pot of gold

In this he was not alone. Others too, like Peter Scott and Julian Huxley, were thinking that way. What distinguished him was an enormous pot of money. His grandfather had founded Hoffmann-La Roche, and he himself was a majority shareholder in what became a giant pharmaceutical company with annual sales, in this century, in the billions of dollars. This wealth was never flaunted. He drove a Fiat Panda, and stayed in hostels. At Tour du Valat his four children were brought up as little *camarguais* with the children of the estate workers, and told that their grandfather had a “chemist’s shop” in Basel. Only the glass of Montrachet offered to a visitor, or the glimpse of a Braque in the drawing room (Braque, a friend, had also fallen for the Camargue), hinted that Mr Hoffmann could have led a different, self-centred life.

Wherever and whenever he thought good, he gave money. It was done either overtly, as grants or loans with his name attached, or covertly, through donations from organisations whose finances he controlled. When the World Wildlife Fund was set up in 1961, Scott invited him to

be president, but he declined; he became its second vice-president, and made quietly sure his money bankrolled the WWF to success. His dollars, as well as his drive, also saved the wetlands at Coto Doñana in Andalusia, home to imperial eagles; the Banc d'Arguin in Mauritania, the stopover point for millions of migrating waders; the Faia Brava in Portugal, haunt of griffon vultures; and many others. In 1971, at Ramsar in Iran, he oversaw the signing of the first global treaty protecting wetlands.

His charm, tact and optimism proved important, for in setting up protected areas he was often dealing with difficult people: officials of Franco's Spain, Soviet Russia and Mao's China, and industrialists and developers of every stripe. He was dealing, too, with many struggling, suspicious locals who earned their living from the wetlands. His technique was to bring them alongside, showing that they could benefit from conservation—even the Camargue rice-farmers, who each spring found flamingos foraging among their newly planted crops. In Faia Brava the dwindling band of hill-farmers were encouraged to open their houses to hikers. In Banc d'Arguin tribal fishermen were given exclusive access to the waters of the reserve. His motto, reversing the theme of conservation to that point, was "with man, not against him". Few understood, though, how far he meant that philosophy to go. The concept of reserved areas deeply dissatisfied him, for he wanted the whole globe to be a place where man lived in harmony with nature, and no special protections were needed any more. He was no militant, seeing the cause of conservation as going far beyond partisan politics or the shock tactics of Greenpeace; but in old age he shared much of their frustration. Small successes had been notched up here and there; not much more. Like the bee-eaters battling the wind, he was grateful to have caught a few flies on the wing; but his real ambition had been to change the wind itself.