

George Shannon 1920 - 2013

George Shannon, died in Bromsgrove on November 12th aged 93. He was the first Hon Sec of the KOS when it was founded in 1951. He was also much involved in the establishment of the bird observatories at Dungeness & Sandwich, and the country's leading bird cinephotographer.

Born in Swansea in 1920, George was raised bilingual in rural Wales by his grandparents. His mother had died after a subsequent childbirth and his father was abroad administering the Empire. After qualifying in dentistry at Birmingham in 1942, George joined the Royal Navy serving in the Portsmouth area. On demob he joined the schools dental service in Swansea before moving to Deal in 1948, working at the school clinic in Sandwich. John Hollyer recalls George as a kindly anaesthetist at another local practice there. After a spell at a practice in Folkestone, he set up his own practice in Ashford in 1952. By this time the family home was in Hythe, with one of Kent's last pairs of Wrynecks using a nest box in the garden.

At Sandwich he had met Dennis Harle and together they visited some of the then newly-established bird observatories - Skokholm, Fair Isle, the Isle of May & Gibraltar Point. These trips provided the inspiration for both Dungeness & Sandwich Bay Observatories.

George served as Hon. Sec. of the fledgling KOS for three years from 1951 then as Vice-President and a committee member. He never ceased to be interested in the ornithological scene and for the KOS's 50th Anniversary Conference produced a fascinating film with clips of building the first Heligoland trap at DBO and three Wrynecks in the hand together as well as the Hythe nest box birds.

In the 1950's his interest in photography expanded into cine work, and he made trips abroad, often with Eric Hosking. When Guy Mountfort assembled his high-profile team to explore the wildlife of the Coto Donana in southern Spain, George was a natural choice. Other members included Sir Julian Huxley, Roger Tory Peterson, Max Nicholson, James Fisher, Lord Alanbrooke, John Parrinder, Eric Hosking, Phil Hollom and James Ferguson-Lees - quite a "dream team"!

Described in Mountfort's book "Portrait of a Wilderness", and the film Wild Spain, shot by George and others, the expeditions of 1956 & 1957 confirmed the wildlife value of the area resulting in the establishment of the national park. Further expeditions followed, filming Lammergeier's in the Pyrenees, in 1959, and with Mountfort again to Bulgaria (1960) & Hungary (1961) (Portrait of A River), Jordan in 1963, '65, & '66 (Portrait of a Desert) and Pakistan in 1966 & '67 (The Vanishing Jungle).

George's cine films were used to promote the conservation message through lectures around the country and depict habitats with abundant birdlife so much of which has now vanished.

Pressure of an increasing family meant that George's filming could only be pursued on an amateur basis but in other circumstances he could have well have been a household name as the interest in natural history was encouraged by television, but he felt it too risky to give up a busy practice for the uncertainty of a filming career. He was much involved in community life through Rotary in Ashford and later in Bromsgrove. On retiring George & Edna moved to Bromsgrove, closer to family and his native Wales but he often lamented the relative lack of birdlife there by comparison with Kent.

He is survived by Edna, who is now in a care home, and Geoff, Mark & Philly and their families.

Chris Cox, with thanks to Geoff Shannon and others.