

W.H. Hudson — a visionary bird lover who was both a naturalist and a writer

Wild Watch

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In the last light of a cold October day I waited and at last caught a faint sound. As dusk fell, a great cackling flock of geese, thousands strong, streamed across the cloudless sky and swept in to their roosting site at the edge of the coastal salt marshes.

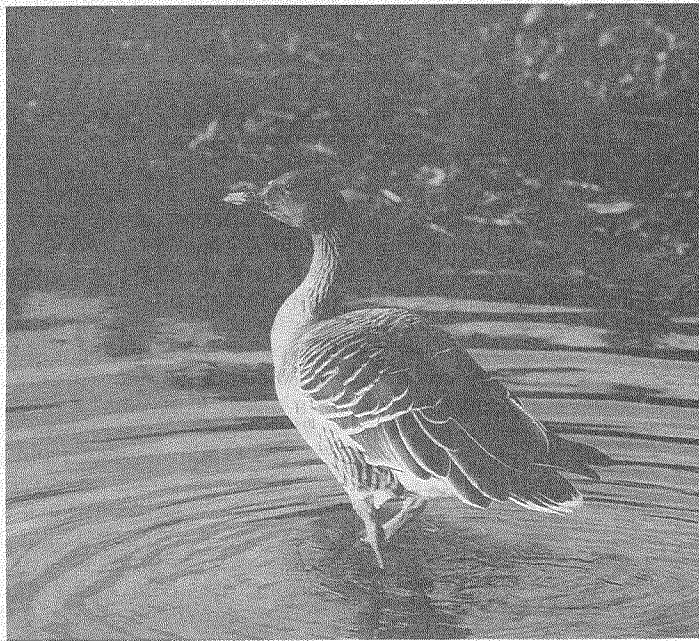
As they flew over I paid homage to a childhood hero, naturalist and writer W.H. Hudson, who had described his own sightings, at the same spot exactly 80 years before, as the most magnificent spectacle he'd ever seen in England. I can only agree with his description.

Yet when Hudson watched those Norfolk goose flocks he was far from home, and perhaps they conjured up images of great waterfowl flocks he'd watched and loved as a boy.

Born on the wide-skied pampas of Argentina in 1841, Hudson had grown up an inquisitive lad, exploring the countryside with all the curiosity of a child today in a toy shop. He grew up spending hours observing and learning about the lives of the fascinating creatures he found, from gorgeous butterflies to deadly pit vipers.

On calm nights he heard, over the insect chorus, ringing cries in the darkness, the sound of wings and the calls of migrating swans, the mating chorus of the marsh frogs filling the air — a first-hand education for a nature-writer to be.

The depth of his appreciation of life was enormous, and his later ability to describe it



NORFOLK goose of type often sighted by English naturalist-writer W.H. Hudson. MARK BRAZIL PHOTO

was deeply moving.

Two events in particular shaped his life. His discovery of "A Natural History of Selborne," Gilbert White's great work, gave him inspiration and an affinity with distant England. Could Hudson possibly have dreamed that future

have forced him along a different path (and robbed us of a great naturalist), but the need for convalescence set him free to travel and study.

During the 1860s and 1870s, he traveled widely in South America, observing his beloved wildlife. For a while he

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generations (mine for example), would grow up not only on White's books, but also on his own?

The second momentous impact was his illness. First typhus, then rheumatic fever struck him at 15 and left him weak and with a strained heart. Good health might

collected specimens for museums, and began corresponding with eminent ornithologist Dr. Philip Sclater of the Zoological Society, London, who edited his notes about the life histories of birds.

Hudson's youthful pleasure from natural history emerged in print, contributing significantly to ornithology alongside the leading scientists of the day, such as Swinhoe, Pere David and Darwin — all before he was even 30.

But Hudson's beloved pampas were being drained, fenced and cultivated, the great hordes of birds he loved to watch hunted toward extinction, and species which had been common in his youth, such as the pretty South American painted snipe, declining as wetlands disappeared.

He began to dread the future, and the ready accep-

but through his own love of nature he had defined his own faith, in the "Earth life." He urged that it was *living* creatures that mattered, that the natural lives and habitats of wild creatures should be studied and understood lest they be lost, and that wildlife and human life together made up the chain of nature.

Today millions of TV viewers watch programs based around these themes. They appear under different headings, and few will have heard of Hudson, but today "survival," "conservation," "ecology," and "Gaia," are all new ways of expressing Hudson's "Earth life."

In England he found nature also exposed to terrible ravages. Birds were being persecuted and exterminated. The contemporary fashion of wearing feathers and wings encouraged the killing of huge numbers, while the popularity of cage birds fueled a vast, and cruel trade in wild birds.

Several groups battling against these trades ultimately joined forces, forming the Society for the Protection of Birds (SPB). Membership was at first confined to women, but a special exception was made for a revered supporter, adviser and guest of honor at their meetings — Hudson.

He now directed his talents toward conservation of the wildlife he cared for and wrote widely quoted educational pamphlets about the bird massacres. Helped by the efforts of Hudson and others, the SPB battled on and was transformed. It became "royal" in 1904, and was on its way to becoming the now world-famous RSPB.

During this period his essays, blending travel, adventure and evolutionary debate, developed a strong following. Eventually he had distilled 30 years of learning and passion, and within four years of the SPB's modest beginnings, "The Naturalist in La Plata" and "Idle Days in Patagonia" were published and hailed widely as masterpieces.

The SPB's official writer had emerged from obscurity to wide acclaim. Many books followed (the most famous being the novel, "Green Mansions"), and he began to take his material not only from his Argentine memories but also his English experiences,