

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

struck him at 15 and left him weak and with a strained heart. Good health might

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 acceptance of his letters and articles in England suggested that there he would find both a welcome and escape from the destruction he saw.

In 1874 he sailed for England. There, however, he did not receive the friendly welcome he'd hoped for. In Argentina he was an expert, contributing unique observations; in England he was an outsider, an amateur with irrelevant knowledge and skills. No doubt Sclater would have been happier had the patient observer stayed at home and continued making valuable contributions to Argentine ornithology.

His early life in London on the periphery of an elitist society of professional scientists was lonely and penniless. One wonders how this dedicated naturalist could bear the noisy, smoky capital, so far from the familiar wildlife of the pampas and virtually rejected by those from whom he'd anticipated a great welcome.

Somehow his spirit prevailed. He was forced to take odd jobs but eventually turned to writing, drawing on his fund of vivid memories of the pampas as the basis for early stories.

As in Argentina, Hudson spent as much of his life as possible in solitary wanderings, watching country creatures and listening to country folk. Though one ungenerous Cornishman called him "nothing but a common tramp," through his writings his influence was to extend enormously, and in later years a London Times obituary was to describe him as "unsurpassed as an English writer on nature."

He never called himself an ornithologist, preferring the modest term field naturalist,

his way to becoming the new 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, blending field notes and social history, poetry and science in an easy, anecdotal style.

He became the archetypal naturalist of the era, as Sir Peter Scott was for my generation, and as a writer-naturalist he was also being included in the literary circles of the time, in contact with the likes of Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford and D.H. Lawrence.

The success of his books enabled him to spend longer in the field. To escape from London always made him feel "as if I had sloughed off a frayed and rusted envelope and come out like a ring-snake in new green and gold."

With his new field glasses, and by 1900 with his own "safety" bicycle, he delighted in spending his days spinning through country lanes, exploring, observing and gathering ever more material, no doubt remembering as he did so days long before in his youth, when his "wheels" had been a horse's legs.

Hudson was told, in 1892, that in 100 years few birds would be left, so he devoted his remaining years to ensuring that this didn't come true, and at his death left everything he owned to the RSPB for them to continue the fight. Since then the RSPB has grown toward a membership now nearing 500,000.

At their headquarters hangs his portrait, unrecognized by many visitors, although it is to his visionary love of wildlife that we owe so much. Now, 100 years later, that so many birds survive is in part due to his vision and to his efforts.

He was a naturalist who not only observed, but also wrote using his skills to educate, and in so doing he contributed more to the natural world than ever he took from it.