Peter Evans, 1937–2001: A tribute
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Viewed from across the choppy and grey North Sea, Peter Evans belongs to that select band of first-rate scientists with a strong affinity with coastal habitats. At an early stage, Peter realised the potential of forming strong international links, with the double aim of advancing knowledge for its own sake but more than that (and perhaps especially) marshalling new insights to preserve these habitats and their inhabitants worldwide. He brought to this mission a rare blend of credentials, having by the age of 29 already defended two doctoral theses. (In 1961, he was awarded a PhD in organo-metallic chemistry from Cambridge and in 1996, after a career shift endowed by the Nuffield Foundation, a D.Phil on bird migration under the supervision of David Lack at the Edward Grey Institute at Oxford.) In his Lackian years, Peter overlapped and interacted with, among others, Ian Newton, Chris Perrins and Tom Royama and he acknowledges the editorial support of the legendary Reg Moreau. Certainly Peter’s first bird papers bear the stamp of his incisive style, coming directly to the point — and mining no words when the question required carcass analysis (“One hundred and twenty (yellow buntings) were caught…”), whose enthusiasm infected me with a similar deep interest in this group of birds.” (p. 5, Coastal Waders and Wildfowl in Winter, 1984).

Beyond the local university scene, and well beyond the horizon of Seal Sands or Lindisfarne, Peter was a visionary with the conviction that a brotherhood of researchers could transform the study of coastal ecology and bring the realities of environmental degradation to the notice of the responsible authorities. The first step was to provide a vehicle to draw mudflat enthusiasts together, and this was arguably Peter’s most lasting achievement. All of us have, at some stage, profited from the unfettered exchanges that were the hallmark of the series of conferences initiated by Peter at the 1972 gathering in Durham (and continued at Liverpool in 1975 and 1979, Switzerland 1977–78 and at Texel in 1981 to mention the runners-up). In retrospect, the special feature of these meetings, originally convened under the somewhat cumbersome title “Waterfowl Feeding Ecology Discussion Group” was the informal and supportive atmosphere. To a very great extent this was attributable to the ebullient optimism of Peter himself who had the knack of drawing out the most promising feature of any and all contributions in the manner, if you will, of the understanding elder brother or chief scout. For me personally, and our group in Groningen, a meeting with David Bryant at Durham was of great strategic importance. Peter had always been interested in employing sophisticated techniques whenever possible, and had prevailed upon David to give us the latest news on the perspectives offered by the doubly-labelled water technique for...
use in the field. This exposition revolutionised our thinking, and led to the postdoc involvement of Klaas Westerterp from our lab followed soon after by the method’s successful transplant to the continent. The technique has since come into its own and has provided an enormous impetus to avian field energetics. We often think back to the somewhat austere ambience of St Aidan’s in dreary weather, leavened by Peter’s optimism and the explosion of interest generated at the meeting he chaired so effectively.

The Texel meeting had considerable impact because it resulted in a readily available and attractive book, Coastal Waders and Wildfowl in Winter (1984, Cambridge University Press), due in no small measure to Peter’s tact and perseverance as senior editor. The finished product far transcended the original presentations and achieved a synthesis attractive to the two research traditions that had grown up around waders and wildfowl in winter: not only the pursuit of the individual in its daily routines offering observational opportunities far superior to most other birds, but secondly building a causal bridge to the band of census takers with strong links to specific wintering haunts. The geographic scale of the overview was ambitious to the point of overstretch, but achieved the goal of acting as a signpost to continued expeditionary work. Thus the cover depicts the conundrum of declining foraging time with increasing body mass of the wader assembly at the Banc d’Arguin, one of the points sparking debate at the meeting and leading to eco-physiological work in the years thereafter.

A logical follow-up for Peter’s own group was to link up with researchers in northern Norway to explore the ecology of spring stopover in migrating waders resulting in the expeditions of 1985 and 1986 to the Balsfjord. The seven-man team from Durham joined up with ten Scandinavians and had notable success in catching large numbers of knot. These proved to belong to the islandica population headed for Siberia-bound as previously thought, and representing a secondary “polar” route in addition to the movement through Iceland. The capture of knots ringed originally by the team at Teesmouth must have been supremely exciting to the students on an ambitious individual-based project on heron ecology. The band from Durham (more than 30 PhD students in all) has filled many key positions in international bird conservation and will provide continued leadership over the coming decades as a living legacy of Peter’s inspiring trail-blazing example. Honours include the prestigious Godman-Salvin Medal 1995 from the BOU (of which ten have been awarded over the past ten years, see Ibis 138: 605–606, 1996) and Peter enjoyed Visiting Professorships in Guelph and Uppsala. Felled by cancer, Peter leaves behind him his wife and two sons (one of whom, Rob, studied biology as well and crops up in the acknowledgements of later papers) and leaves those of us who knew him to regret the loss of what he still had to offer all of us.

Overlapping as he did with John Coulson (another Godman-Salvin medallist) who doggedly pursued his kitiwake and eider studies from Durham University, the era of Peter Evans 1968–2001 helped to bring his university to a pinnacle of international standing in ecology. It is sad to reflect that at the end of the day Durham University withdrew its support for a Professorship in ecology at the systems level, a position Peter had worked very hard to create. Time will tell if the University he served with such distinction and utter commitment will see its way to continuing the research tradition he helped to foster. Assuredly the need to extend the core of pure science vital to the future of the birds and their habitats is more urgent than ever. Readers of this journal do not need to be reminded that “bad ecology leads to bad public policy” (Ludwig, TREE 9: 411, 1994) so we need to band together to keep up the pressure. This jubilee number is a fitting tribute and reaffirmation of dedication to the long-term.

**PETER RICHARD EVANS: LITERATURE CITED**

(a) Biographical


(b) Chronological selection of major contributions by P.R. Evans to avian ecology


Evans, P.R. & Smith, P.C. 1975. Studies on shorebirds at Lindisfarne,

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