

British bird-photographers

19 Eric Hosking

Plates 41-46

Being by nature friendly and gregarious, Eric Hosking is probably as widely known, both nationally and internationally, as any British ornithologist. As a bird photographer he is pre-eminent and his pictures and books can be found in almost every country. It surprised nobody, therefore, that his autobiography *An Eye for a Bird* (1970) was an instant best-seller.

To earn international acclaim and to make a substantial living as a bird-photographer required not only the highest professional skills but an unflagging enthusiasm for his chosen métier. Moreover, bearing in mind that his career began in the depths of the depression of the early 1930's, it required an unusual degree of courage and self-confidence to embark on an enterprise which, at that time, offered the bleakest of prospects. Today, having won every worthwhile award and distinction in his chosen field, Eric remains what he has always been, modest, cheerfully unpretentious and proud of his Cockney background. Never completely satisfied with his own work, he goes on adding every year to his superbly indexed collection of pictures, which now approaches the quarter of a million mark. Servicing the demand for his photographs by the world's press and publishing houses is almost a full-time task, but his first interest is with the living bird and he is happiest when trudging, camera in hand, across wild country. His interest in conservation is well known and he has given generous assistance to the World Wildlife Fund and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

For many years Eric was greatly in demand as a lecturer and broadcaster, finding no difficulty in filling London's Festival Hall. His lectures were not intended to be profound in content, but audiences responded warmly to his enthusiastic delivery and obvious enjoyment of his subject. However, when the constant travel and arduous preparation involved in lecture tours began to inhibit his field work, he wisely gave them up.

He has pioneered many of the technical developments from which bird-photographers benefit today. If a gadget to improve the performance of a camera does not exist, he invents it, experimenting patiently until it is perfected. From the photography of nocturnal birds with the aid of flash bulbs in the 1930's, he graduated to electronic flash, adapting a photo-electric shutter release so that the bird itself fired it when in the exact plane of focus. Thanks largely to his insistence with manufacturers, the originally heavy flash equipment was progressively reduced to today's miniaturised models.

An unforeseen bonus for ornithology emerged from electronic flash—the detail obtainable on the negative was so minute that food carried to nestlings could be accurately identified.

Eric Hosking's knowledge of cameras is encyclopaedic. Having progressed from an early box Brownie and a 1909 mahogany quarter-plate Sanderson field camera, he experimented with all the British, German and Japanese 35 mm cameras. Manufacturers competed for his endorsement. In 1966, when he and I were passing through Moscow, he spotted the new Russian 1000 mm mirror lens and immediately acquired one. Though critical of some of its technical aspects, he later demonstrated its capacity by successfully photographing an Ibex *Capra hircus* at a distance of a quarter of a mile in the rugged Kirthar mountains of Pakistan. He is, incidentally, a capable mountaineer and tree climber, in spite of the loss of an eye and the handicap of a permanently damaged foot.

Between 1955 and 1967, I was fortunate enough to be able to recruit Eric as principal photographer on nine major expeditions of ornithological exploration in various countries. There is no better opportunity, when the going is really arduous, for judging a man's character. Even when our vehicle was wrecked in the Jordan Desert, or when the U-2 'spy plane' incident resulted in our being temporarily sequestered behind the Iron Curtain in Bulgaria, Eric's cheerful disposition remained unruffled. Although never able to master any foreign language, he established an immediate rapport with the natives of every country we visited, whether they were frontier sentries, local princes, or bare-footed peasants. After a strenuous 16-hour day in tropical heat he would stay up half the night to repair someone else's camera by torchlight. He was generous, too, in many small ways, such as letting other members ride in the coveted front seats of our jeeps, or in lending his own precious equipment.

Although now widely travelled, Eric never permits foreign customs to interfere with his staunchly conservative personal habits. Official occasions, exalted titles, or opulence make no impression on him. For example, when members of our Pakistan expedition were invited by the Amir of Bahawalpur to dine at the magnificent Sadiq-gahr Palace, he simply ignored the formalities. Some choice French wines accompanied the elaborate meal. Eric, as a strict teetotaller, did not hesitate to demand his invariable beverage—tea, which the Amir obligingly ordered a liveried servant to produce. On another occasion in England, when Eric was chatting with a royal duke, he casually called him 'old boy'. Such is his personal charm that in neither of these incidents was the VIP in the least offended.

In the thirty years I have known him, I have seen him really angry only once. This was when he found a nest which had been heavily 'gardenised' by a bird-photographer. His own code of conduct is strict and he refuses to attempt even a much needed picture if he judges that desertion might result. He will tie back an obscuring branch, but scrupulously restores both the nest vegetation and his own track to the nest-site.

The selection of Eric's photographs shown here typifies his work and range of interests. Four of them were obtained in Spain, in three different years, and two others also resulted from trips abroad, to the Netherlands and Norway. The Black Vultures *Aegypius monachus* (plate 42a) and Eagle Owls *Bubo bubo* (plate 45b) are two examples of species very rarely photographed at the nest. The other six were obtained in Britain, at some of his favourite spots: Minsmere, Suffolk, and Hilbre Island, Cheshire, where he has so often taken full advantage of the opportunities to photograph waders, and in the wilds of northern Scotland. Indeed, the Green-shank *Tringa nebularia* settling on to its eggs (plate 46b) was photographed in Sutherland as recently as June 1976.

There are many other ways in which Eric has contributed in his chosen field. For more than 16 years, from 1960 until June of this year, he was photographic editor of *British Birds*. He initiated the annual feature 'More examples of the best recent work by British bird-photographers', which has provided a showcase for his amateur and professional colleagues, and also the series 'British bird-photographers', in which he himself now appears here.

Eric's life is a full one. Photographer, ornithologist, technician, inventor, lecturer, broadcaster, author, foreign traveller, holder of high office in half a dozen societies, winner of a drawerful of medals and a happily married family man with a wide circle of friends. What more can life offer? In concluding this tribute I cannot do better than quote from HRH Prince Philip's foreword to Eric's autobiography: 'Anyone can see what marvellous pictures he takes and he has amassed a wealth of experience and knowledge, but no one could be kinder or more encouraging to beginners and to the amateur.'

GUY MOUNTFORT



PLATE 41. Above, Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus* in nesting cave, Spain, May 1959. Below, female Snowy Owl *Nyctea scandiaca* with young, Shetland, June 1967 (photos: Eric Hosking)





PLATE 42. Above, Black Vultures *Aegypius monachus* at nest, Spain, May 1972.
Below, female Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* at nest with young, Spain, May 1972
(photos: Eric Hosking)



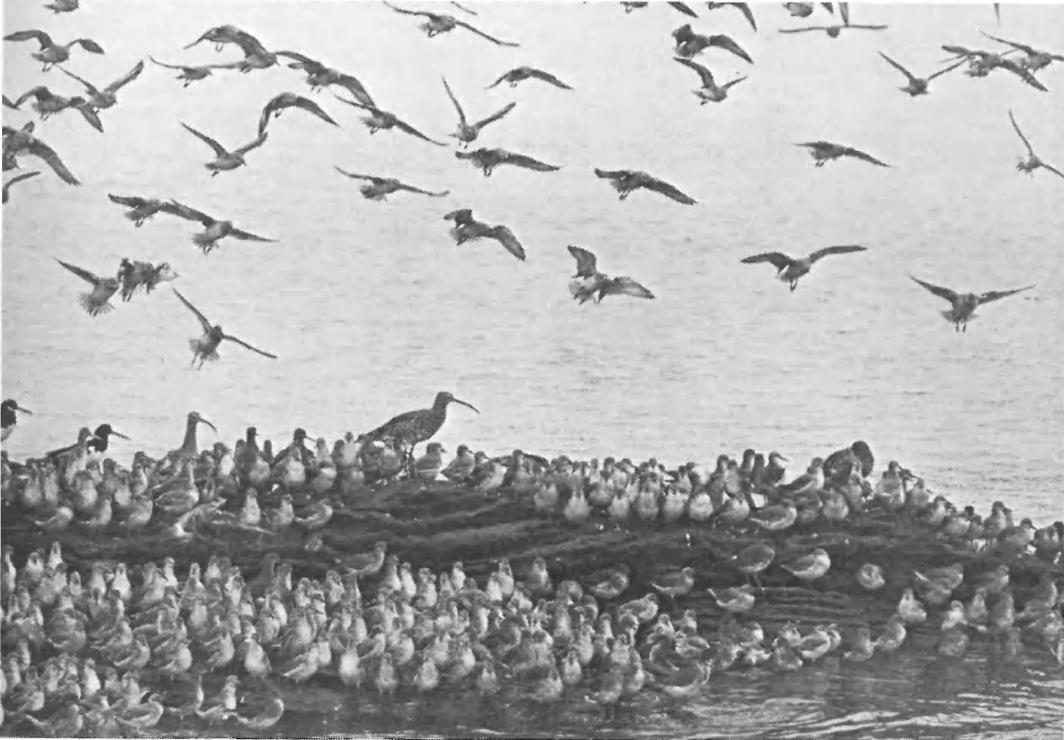


PLATE 43. Above, massed waders, mainly Knots *Calidris canutus*, but also Curlews *Numenius arquata*, Oystercatchers *Haematopus ostralegus*, Redshanks *Tringa totanus* and Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*, Hilbre Island, Cheshire, October 1968. Below, Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus*, Minsmere, Suffolk, early August 1966
(photos: Eric Hosking)





PLATE 44. Above, Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia* at nest with young, Suffolk, June 1953. Below, male and female Little Bitterns *Ixobrychus minutus* at nest, Netherlands, June 1952 (photos: Eric Hosking)





PLATE 45. Top, Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* at nest, Spain, May 1956. Bottom, Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo* at nest with young, Norway, May 1964 (photos: Eric Hosking)



PLATE 46. Great Skua *Stercorarius skua*, Shetland, June 1968 (photo: Eric Hosking)



Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* settling on to eggs, Sutherland, June 1976 (photo: Eric Hosking)



PLATE 47. More 1975 rarities (pages 321-368). Top, Desert Warbler *Sylvia nana*, Humber-side, October (photo: K. Atkin). Bottom left, Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes*, Devon, November; right, Black-and-White Warbler *Mniotilta varia*, Scilly, September (photos: Nigel Tucker)



PLATE 48. Three American waders. Top, Buff-breasted Sandpiper *Tryngites subruficollis*, Cambridgeshire, September 1975, one of an unprecedented 60 or more reported in that autumn (pages 338-339) (photo: Howard B. Ginn). Centre, Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos*, Scilly, October 1970, the most frequent Nearctic species in Britain and Ireland (photo: K. Atkin). Bottom, Wilson's Phalarope *Phalaropus tricolor*, Ballycotton, Co. Cork, September 1974 (photo: Richard T. Mills)