

Obituary

Tony Soper HonFBNA by Roger Tabor HonFBNA BNA President

Tony was an outstanding naturalist, renowned as a birder. A pioneer of natural history TV, consummate presenter of many wildlife series and author of bird books, he died on 18th September 2024 aged 95 years.

He was a recipient of the British Naturalists' Association's Peter Scott Memorial Award, the highest award of the Association. He was an Honorary Fellow of the BNA, long term BNA Vice President. From when I asked him if he would take on the role of President of the BNA's Young Naturalists in 1995, remarkably he held the role until his death, 29 years later. He kindly gave a memorable talk to the BNA's national meeting after receiving the Peter Scott Award, saying he was honoured to accept the award especially as it was in Peter's name, and reminisced about working with Sir Peter on the BBC's "Look" TV series.

Tony was born in 1929; he gained a love of the sea from his shipwright and ship's agent father where he was brought up at Plymouth. He joined the BBC on a youth training scheme in 1947. By 1950 he was working in radio at Bristol with wildlife programming pioneer Producer, Desmond Hawkins, with series "The Naturalist" and "Birds in Britain". Peter Scott was one of the main contributors as was Maxwell Knight (Peter later became a BNA Vice President & Max Knight became a BNA President). Although I was young at the time, I remember the sensational impact in 1955 that the woodpecker's programme had with remarkable footage by Heinz Sealmann, who was interviewed by Peter Scott, produced by Desmond Hawkins on which Tony assisted. That one-off programme immediately led to the "Look" series fronted by Peter Scott, and by 1956 Tony was the series producer. He suggested to Desmond Hawkins, who had become Head of Programming for the West Region, that a wildlife unit should be established, which became the BBC's Natural History Unit in 1957.

Tony produced the first TV series with Gerald Durrell, then the first wildlife diving series with Hans and Lottie Hass. His first role on screen as a presenter was in 1960, "Out of Doors" for children, and two years later he was naturalist presenter with Johnny Morris on the newly formed "Animal Magic" BBC TV series (a decade ahead of me).

His first book, "The Bird Table Book" was published in 1965, which to his surprise became an international best-seller. Numerous wildlife books were to follow including his monographs on "Owls" and "Penguins".

He began leading boat trips to see avocets wintering on the Tamar.

He presented many TV series through the 1970s and 1980s, including "Soper at Large", "Wildtrack", "Beside the Sea", "Birdwatch", "Nature", "Discovering Birds", "Discovering Animals", "Reefwatch" and "Go Birding". I had the great pleasure of being featured by Tony in "Wildtrack" in the late 1970s and "Discovering Animals" in 1985. His friendly, laidback, but knowledgeable way made him not only enjoyable to work with, but also for viewers to watch.

From the beginning of the 1990s onwards Tony developed a second career, pioneering leading polar wildlife cruises in the Arctic and Antarctic. This gave rise to his best-selling field guides to both regions.

I remember while visiting Tony at his home that had a marvellous vista over a Devon estuary, he walked me down to the edge, to show me the adjacent copse he had taken on to benefit wildlife. In asking for my view on this, despite his own huge wildlife knowledge plus his greater local experience, it showed his continuing passion for wildlife and his pleasure in talking about it.

Via television, radio, his books and leading wildlife cruises, he has encouraged so many to gain a greater love and interest of wildlife (including those in the BNA). He was a pioneer of natural history TV, helped the birth of the BBC's NHU, pioneered polar wildlife cruising, he had an amazing life.