



# Max Nicholson – The Founder of the BTO

Jeremy Greenwood looks back on the life of one of the most important voices in conservation of the 20th century.

In 1931, Max Nicholson published his fourth book, *The Art of Birdwatching*. In it, he argued that “A Society of Birdwatchers on a national scale, and a central clearing-house for information and direction of team-work, present themselves with growing insistence as inevitable objectives”. Two years later, he founded the BTO, the embodiment of that vision. Such drive, determination and ability to persuade others to help him take action proved to be Max’s life-long characteristics.

By 1935, when Max became the Trust’s Hon Secretary (a post he held until 1939, serving simultaneously as Hon Treasurer for a year), it had already undertaken 12 projects. By 1939 the annual report was able to claim that the Trust had “for the first time made organised team work by observers a normal everyday feature of birdwatching in Britain”. From the start, the list of papers published and the results of BTO fieldwork were important items in the annual reports, a reflection of Max’s conviction that the Trust’s role was establishing and communication of the facts.



Front cover of BTO’s 1952 report, encapsulating Max’s vision.

## Oxford

Max had grown up knowing no other birdwatchers. Nonetheless, he had begun to keep systematic records from an early age and then, in his early 20s, censusing House Sparrows in Kensington gardens and studying (from the open-topped buses) the flight-paths of London Starlings. At this time, he was making his living as a journalist and writer. The editor of *The Times*, for whom he wrote third leaders, fortunately persuaded him to try for a scholarship to Oxford, where he went up in 1926, at the relatively late age of 22. Since Oxford zoology was, in those days, the study of dead animals rather than living ones, Max did not pursue what might seem the most obvious course, choosing history instead.

The Oxford Ornithological Society (OOS) had been founded a few years before but Max decided not to join it, because he thought its members not to be

interested in serious ornithology. We must be thankful that he relented, for through the OOS he was able to experience at first hand the benefits of collaboration with others of like mind: he was involved in a collaborative ringing project on Christchurch Meadow (see below), started the Oxford Bird Census in 1927 and



The Christchurch Meadow trapping station.

organised a national census of heronries in 1928. The latter, undertaken annually ever since, was the first national bird census in Britain. The seeds that were to grow into the BTO were sown.

As if this was not enough, he founded the University Exploration Club and went on expeditions to Greenland and British Guiana. To the bird book that he had published before he went to University, he added two more while he was an undergraduate.

## Civil Servant

After Oxford, Max returned to his writing career. He became assistant editor of *The Weekend Review* and in 1931 wrote a National Plan for Britain. This led to the setting up of Political and Economic Planning (PEP), the original think-tank, with Max serving as its secretary for most of the 1930s. As Max later told me, this was an exciting time, with energetic people of his generation convinced that the world would be a better place if we knew more about it and managed it in accordance with real knowledge, rather than prejudice. Max himself, as Bob Boote has written, “would not tolerate any case not founded on thorough research and sound intellectual premises”.

Max’s work with PEP drew him increasingly into the world of public affairs. Just before the war, he and a colleague were asked to visit Paris, to ascertain the French reaction to the informal suggestion that had been made of some sort of union between Britain and France, as a signal of their determination to hang together in the face of German aggression. Max recounted, with a mixture of relish and contempt, how they had called on the Frenchman who was supposed to be

working on this idea at 11 o’clock one morning, and found him still in bed with his mistress. The French not having treated the union idea seriously, Max returned to Britain.

Some of PEP’s reports had been devoted to war preparation and Max was pulled into the Ministry of Information on the outbreak of war. He soon left in disgust at the time it took to do things but his birdwatching acquaintance, Lord Hurcombe, who was head of the Ministry of War Transport, then recruited him. As head of the Allocation of Tonnage Division he was responsible for Atlantic convoys and for keeping Mediterranean countries loyal to the Allied cause by ensuring their food supplies.

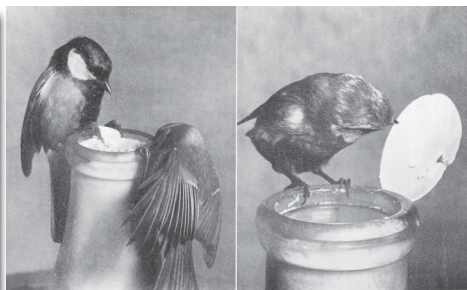
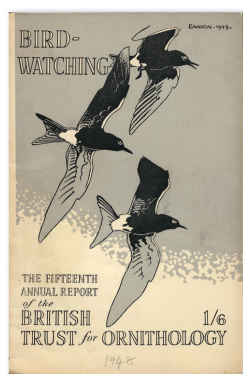
Birdwatching was not forgotten. Max birdwatched on Atlantic convoys and at the conferences in Cairo, Quebec, Yalta and Potsdam. He and Lord Hurcombe broke the deadlock at a meeting by letting the participants stew while they listened to a Black Redstart singing outside the window. But, although he wrote in the 1940 annual report that “the existence and proper functioning of the Trust depends upon a continued increase of members, with which the war must not be permitted to interfere”, he himself had to relinquish the secretaryship of the BTO.

Max’s organizational skills had been



Black Redstart – a breaker of deadlocks. Photograph by Tommy Holden

revealed by his war work. In 1945, Herbert Morrison recruited him to head his office as Lord President of the Council. That office was a powerhouse in the modernising of Britain, its effectiveness dependent on the political skills of Morrison and the drive and organization of Nicholson. It got the Agriculture Act and the Town and Country Planning Acts on the statute books. Max himself was secretary of the committee that ran the Festival of Britain and built the Royal Festival Hall (magnificent contrasts to the Millennium Dome!). Above all, he was deeply involved in the years of work that culminated in the establishment of the Nature Conservancy (NC). Reading between the lines of the histories, one can



1948 Annual Report. An early survey was of Tits opening milk bottles.

see that this must have been a task that depended thoroughly on Max having such a wide network of acquaintances both within and outside government, combined with his ability to pull on the levers of power at the right moment.

### BTO and conservation

In the middle of all this, he found the time to serve as BTO Chairman from July 1947 to October 1949. At the first meeting that he chaired, he presented a substantial paper about BTO policy and within a year there had been two major discussions on the Trust's development. For the 18 months of his Chairmanship the Council minutes take up almost as many pages as during the whole of previous eight years, a measure of the change in pace that he instituted. The 1948 annual report was much expanded, with a cover illustration and photographs inside (see above). In the same year, the subscription was doubled, the first full-time paid secretary was appointed (the great Dr Bruce Campbell) and the Regional Representatives network set up. In the annual report, he urged members on: "Nor can we rest content with the relatively limited extent of current field work, when so many equally important and rewarding problems await intelligent attack, and when increasing diversity of research can so much enrich ornithology".

In 1951, Max had to step in when the editor of *British Birds*, Bernard Tucker, died. Characteristically, Max drew together a team to take on the editorial role, rather than trying to do it all himself. He remained a member of that team for 20 years.

Next year, he was a member of a UN/FAO survey team in Baluchistan. There, he contracted polio, which left him with a limp for the rest of his life. There was no rest for him, however, for he had already agreed to become Director of the Nature Conservancy in succession to Cyril Diver.

This seemed an extraordinary move. He was, at the age of 49, one rung off the top of the civil service ladder. The NC was a tiny, poorly-funded organization that no one had ever heard of, doing something that most people thought unimportant. But to Max it was an opportunity to promote nature conservation and to be able to do so with a degree of independence that he could not have in the mainstream Civil Service. How fortunate for us in Britain — and, indeed, for conservation across the world — that he made that choice; as a result, he was able to catalyse the emergence of the

Oxford, was a criticism of bird protection policies and practices. It pulled no punches: "All bird lovers must hope that the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds will pull itself together". At this time, the RSPB seems to have been suspicious of science, which to Nicholson had to be the very basis of rational conservation policies — in *The Art of Birdwatching* he wrote "It is, for example, through birdwatching that the trend of bird protection policy is principally determined". The series of contracts that the NC/NCC/JNCC issued to the BTO to provide ornithological information and advice began under his directorship. (Given that he later served as its President, Max was presumably content that the RSPB did, indeed, "pull itself together"!)

In its first 15 years, the NC established over 100 National Nature Reserves and gazetted about 2,000 SSSIs. At Monks Wood, it established the first major centre for applied ecological research in Britain. And, as has often been said, in terms of practical policy it "punched well above its weight". This was no easy ride, however, for in the early years even its very survival was in doubt. The Treasury, many landowners and some MPs tried to abolish it and its funding was savagely constrained. Fortunately, Max's personal ability and his knowledge of the inner workings of Whitehall won the day.

One of his tactics was to work closely with the voluntary movement, setting up new organizations, encouraging existing ones to be more ambitious, and building a public base of support for conservation. He was a driving force in the *Countryside in 1970* conferences, drawing in the Duke of Edinburgh in a way that brought wildlife conservation into the mainstream of British life.

### Active retirement

Max 'retired' in 1966. Some retirement! His first action was to set up Land Use Consultants, the first significant environmental consultancy, which he chaired during 1966–89. He continued to play an active and stimulating role in conservation circles both at home and abroad. Indeed, he was active beyond conservation: he and colleagues stirred up the need for a proper celebration of the Queen's Silver Jubilee, Max coming up with the idea of the Silver Jubilee Walkway. At the age of 92, he set up the New Renaissance Group.

environmental movement from complete obscurity to centre-stage.

### Opposition thwarted

Max's interest in conservation went back a long way. His first book, *Birds in England*, published before he went up to

And he continued to write. Ornithology benefited from his part in editing *Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Public life benefited from two other books: *The System: The Misgovernment of Britain*, which has been described as "an indictment of the inadequacies of the administrative civil service", and *The Environmental Revolution: A Guide for the New Masters of the World*, in which he presented the case for new attitudes by politicians and administrators in face of strong public awareness of environmental threats. "I tell them [civil servants and politicians]", he used to say, "about the Goldcrest finding its way across the North Sea. If they had a tenth of the ability and sense of that tiny bird, the world would be a much better place".

### Man of vision

Max continued to be interested in the BTO. He was showered with honours during his life (he was both a CB and CVO) but the unique Founder's Medal that the Trust presented to him when he was 90 was especially treasured. He would occasionally drop into Tring or Thetford (usually with boxes of archives — he was a conservator of paper as well as birds). These were not occasions when a great man descended so that his disciples could worship at his feet but straightforward working visits. Max's life was too busy for any sort of pomposity. I remember meeting him on a railway platform once. He was heading for his first class seat but soon found his way down to the second class carriage where Stephen Baillie and I were ensconced; despite his age and his bad leg, he refused to sit down but squatted on the edge of a seat and talked birds with us for well over an hour.

I count myself remarkably fortunate to have known Max. When he entertained me to lunch just a couple of months before he died, I asked him whether he was more or less optimistic about the future than he had been 70 years ago. "More optimistic" he replied. For him, there was always something new to be aimed for, plus conviction that one's aims could be achieved through bold determination based on rational argument. So different from much of British public life, which in *The System* he saw as being afflicted by "fear of facing new facts, fear of facing the people and fear of facing the future".

Last year in BTO News, I described Max as a man of vision. His response was "I don't know why people keep calling me a visionary. To me, it's just common sense". That is exactly why I consider him to be a visionary: he could see for himself what others had to be helped to see — and he certainly never stopped trying to get the rest of the world to see what he saw.

The BTO is one of Max's great legacies. His example will inspire us to carry on what he started. ➤



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