

Who has done most for British nature? Derek Ratcliffe was a redoubtable champion

Who was the greatest British naturalist of the past seventy years? Many might answer David Attenborough, Peter Scott, or Max Nicholson, but, among professional nature conservationists at least, the answer would probably be Derek Ratcliffe. Although less well-known to the general public, it was Ratcliffe who proved the disastrous effect of pesticides on Peregrines and other birds-of-prey, who came up with a system of defining the best places for wildlife in Britain, who led the fight against afforestation of the uplands, and who ensured that nature conservation was led by sound ecological science and not mere value judgements. His knowledge was encyclopaedic – he was a google before Google. He was equally expert on ravens and raptors, waders and plovers, mosses and peat-bogs, alpine plants and mountain ecology. He was a fearless defender of nature: a David surrounded by Goliaths. Though quiet and unassuming, and almost unknown outside nature conservation circles, he was greatly admired for his wide expertise and scientific integrity.

Little has been written about Derek Ratcliffe, but now, on the tenth anniversary of his death in 2005, aged 75, a group of his friends and former colleagues have contributed a collection of essays on Derek. These cover an exceptional range of his interests and contributions to nature conservation, and have been edited by three long-standing friends, Des Thompson and John and Hilary Birks. The book includes five papers by Derek himself that give a flavour of his style and approach to nature and field surveying. The book is profusely illustrated, including many photographs by Derek.

In the Foreword to the book, **Professor Sir John Lawton CBE FRS** writes: “I hope this book will bring his life and many achievements to the attention of a much wider audience – he was, indeed, nature’s conscience... In a world where too often nature struggles to survive, the Peregrine is emblematic of recovery and improving fortunes – and we have Derek Ratcliffe to thank for that.”

Professors John and Hilary Birks, both botanists, commented: “In preparing this book, we have been astonished at the breadth and depth of Derek’s work – an exceptional legacy, and without his influence we would not have the level of protection afforded nature in the UK today. Derek was probably the greatest ecological polymath of the 20th century.”

Peter Marren, writer and champion of wildlife conservation, commented: “Derek was a naturalist’s naturalist. He was never anyone’s lackey but stood up for nature forcefully and from the heart. His knowledge was bottomless and his integrity unimpeachable. To me he was a wildlife hero. I am proud to have known him and to have been his colleague.”

The book is written for a wide readership, especially aspiring ecologists, naturalists, and environmentalists who should be inspired by what Derek did, and stood for.

Notes for editors

Nature's Conscience: The Life and Legacy of Derek Ratcliffe

Edited by Des Thompson, Hilary Birks and John Birks

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The 30 chapters illustrate aspects of Derek's life as:

- young naturalist – in search of nature
- botanist – understanding vegetation in mountain landscapes and discovering rarities in remote areas
- ornithologist – searching for and saving birds in wild places
- conservationist – protecting nature
- communicator – through writing and photography

