

IAN J STRANGE MBE

AN APPRECIATION

by

Jim McAdam, Stephen Palmer and Maria Strange

Ian Strange, who died in September 2018 aged 84, was a naturalist, accomplished wildlife artist and photographer who championed wildlife conservation in the Falkland Islands since the early 1960s. Reflecting the quality of his artwork and widespread knowledge of the Falklands, he was a Crown Agents stamp illustrator and designer and a prolific author of books and articles, including some scientific papers, on the natural history of the Islands.

His love of nature and affinity with wildlife and wild places went back to his childhood days at his family home in the Fens. Ian was born on 20 July 1934 in Market Deeping in Lincolnshire, the son of Leonard and Vera Strange (nee Corfield). He attended Secondary Modern school in Wolverhampton, where the family had to relocate for work (although his heart was never there); he then studied at Wolverhampton College of Art. He specialised in botanical illustration and graphics at Art College and studied botany as an extra mural student at Birmingham University. He completed a degree in agriculture at Essex Agricultural College. Ian joined the British army, serving with a specialist unit in the 16th Independent Parachute Brigade, most of the time being spent in the Middle East.

In 1959 he was recruited by the Hudson's Bay Company, for the Falkland Islands Company Ltd (FIC), to travel to the Falklands to manage a venture aimed at diversifying the local economy from a virtually exclusive dependence on sheep farming. Mink were not present on the Islands and FIC proposed that they could be reared for their pelts on the surplus sheep meat – the Falklands' industry was then largely based on wool production and surplus animals were simply culled. Ian had previous knowledge of breeding mink, having farmed them with his young wife in England. He threw himself enthusiastically into the task, and he and his wife plus the mink and two red setters arrived in Stanley on Christmas Eve 1959.

The eventual closure of the farm five years later can in no way be attributed to the thorough and professional manner in which Ian executed his duties: indeed, it is somewhat ironical and a tribute to his foresight and the concern he had developed for the wildlife of the Falklands that, on winding up the project, he personally undertook the complete extermination of a species from the Islands. Had any of the mink under his charge escaped into the wild, the consequences would have been disastrous for

the bird population of the Falklands, as has been found to have happened in other locations.

Ian knew on arrival in the Falklands that he would become immersed in the landscape, wildlife and natural history and it was not long before he took every opportunity allowed by the mink farm to explore nearby coastlines and offshore islands, acquiring the *Gleam*, a 10-ton cutter. He discovered with some concern that early estimates of fur seal and sea lion colonies dating back to 1930 were outdated and inaccurate, giving the local government no authoritative steer on the granting of sealing licences. He carried out his own surveys by overflying known colonies and searching remote islands and coastal areas for new breeding grounds. His population estimates that sea lion numbers were less than 10% of those reported over 30 years earlier were potentially shocking. Fur seal numbers were similarly drastically low, actual values being clouded by the inability to confirm an estimate of the largest colony on Island made in 1951. During subsequent visits eventually made to Beauchêne (see below) no fur seals were found to remain there. Without his approval, his survey results were released to the local government (through the involvement of the British Antarctic Survey). This gave the government the opportunity to suppress the report and to allow sealing to recommence in 1963. However, there was some satisfaction in noting that sealing activity had to stop not long after, largely because there were too few seals to be hunted – exactly as he had demonstrated.



Fig. 1. At work in a tussock grass plantation. Photo IJS collection.

Beauchêne is a remote outlying island, the most southerly and difficult to access of the archipelago. From his first visit in 1963 (with the Royal Navy) Ian saw the tremendous importance of this island with its huge populations of seabirds as one of the Falklands' greatest assets. He campaigned for its protection over many years, and perhaps the island's isolation remained its best protection. It now has reserve status at last, and the Falkland Islands Government (FIG) restricts access only to occasional checks by scientific personnel who have to abide by a number of rules and conditions.

Ian continually pressed for adequate protection for small untouched offshore islands and islets, particularly those which still held tussac grass cover which had not been overgrazed or totally eaten out by sheep. Within a few years of his arrival and based on his observations and surveys, he was making recommendations to the FIG on matters of wildlife and conservation importance and paved the way for the passing of early legislation, in 1964, which gave protection to pristine offshore islands. Kidney and Cochon Islands were amongst the first to be afforded this cover. It is not easy to summarise his battles with officialdom over the years: his struggles and achievements are documented in his 1976 autobiographical book *The Bird Man*.

The remote Jason Island group to the far northwest of the Islands, in Ian's view, held the key to the survival of much of the Falklands' wildlife. Two were privately owned and stocked with sheep from Pebble Island; these had decimated substantial areas of valuable tussac grass, the most productive species found in the islands and which, if actively managed, could be of tremendous benefit to farmers and wildlife alike. The remaining smaller islands of the group were Crown owned and it was for these that Ian continually pressed for adequate protection. Government were only prepared to designate some Sanctuaries rather than Reserves – the former status still permitted activities such as farming and only disallowed the hunting and killing of certain species.



êê

Fig. 2. IJS (2nd from right) with Len Hill (extreme right) and BBC Natural History Unit film crew on Steeple Jason early 1970s. Photo BBC unit.

Ian was a catalyst in the eventual purchase of Grand and Steeple Jason – by Len Hill, the philanthropic owner of Birdland, an avian wildlife park in England. Although Ian would have preferred a purchase by a recognised international wildlife organisation, he put considerable personal effort into supporting Hill in his efforts for the purchase. He is recorded as recommending the re-seeding of eroded parts of Grand Jason with native grasses – then largely unheard of. Eventually Steeple and Grand passed to the Wildlife Conservation Society of New York and remain under their protection today.

Roddy Napier, owner and resident on nearby West Point Island, practiced sustainable management of tussac and other grasslands on West Point and, as a result, the island was a haven for wildlife, something which Ian greatly admired and respected. He and Roddy became good friends and supported each other in the eventual purchase of New Island, one of the most significant developments in wildlife conservation in the Falklands in the early 1970s.

The value of tussac grass to the Falklands has long been recognised. Over much of his active career in the Islands Ian documented the extent and quality of tussac stands, drawing attention to the huge losses of this valuable coastal habitat since sheep farming had been introduced. His underpinning evidence has spawned much later research and interest into the reintroduction of tussac around the islands, most of this with active support of farmers and the general public.

The Falklands holds large populations of upland and ruddy-headed geese, species which some farmers felt were significant competitors for the grassland resource and therefore should be seriously culled. The 1905 livestock Ordinance allowed for the payment of a bounty on beaks of geese killed. To illustrate the consistency of his approach to wildlife preservation, Ian gave some support to the economic value that geese could have as a potential food source and tourism revenue gatherer. He argued that persecution was relatively ineffective and that strategic siting of re-seeds and other grassland improvement practices to avoid shedding groups of geese and better to align with their territorial separation would prove more effective. These suggestions were later verified by the findings of a significant research programme on these species.

On completion of the mink farm project, in 1966, Ian and three friends undertook a 22,000 mile journey overland from Montevideo in Uruguay to San Francisco and on to New York in a Land Rover he had rebuilt in the Falklands. All along this journey he was able to observe wildlife and to witness land management practices. In the USA he wrote articles and gave illustrated talks to promote what the Falklands had to offer in terms of natural history and lifestyle. Starting then and over subsequent years Ian made a number of very useful high-level contacts which would later assist him in his conservation work.

When one of us (JMCA) undertook a lesser journey from the same setting-off point in South America in 1978 he asked Ian for advice based on his experience. He gave two pieces of advice which stood the author in good stead: sleep off the ground to avoid snakes, and carry a good stock of mixed nuts and bolts – your vehicle will shake to bits on the poorly graded roads. He was right.

While in New York at the end of the road trip Ian met pioneer travel operator Lars Lindblad at the point when Lars was about to launch the first small expedition cruise to the Antarctic – at that time in a chartered vessel, later building his own MV *Lindblad Explorer*, the pioneer ‘little red ship’). Ian suggested that the Falklands might be included in the itinerary, and pressed for calls at Stanley, West Point and Carcass Island. He knew that Roddy Napier on West Point and Cecil and Kitty Bertrand on Carcass managed their farms successfully for sheep and wildlife. And thus began small expedition ship tourism to the Islands!

In 1972, with Annie Gisby and Roddy Napier he was able to purchase New Island. He saw this as being the perfect platform to demonstrate how sheep farming and specialist wildlife tourism could be managed and the flora and fauna studied in a reasonably pristine state, even though the island had been ravaged in the past by sealing, whaling and much other and more recent depredation. Sheep farming continued on a reduced scale and was eventually phased out. A small operation – and the first of its kind in the Islands - brought wildlife and conservation enthusiasts to

the island and this continued until transport difficulties following the 1982 conflict made access to New Island rather difficult.

Focus was then turned to all aspects of natural history research to allow long term projects, several of which continue to this day. In the hope of protecting the island and its projects in perpetuity, Ian founded and developed what is now the New Island Conservation Trust, a non-profit charitable conservation organisation. Reaching this point was not without many trials and tribulations but Ian's fierce independence and determination did not waver in achieving his objective. The island was the focus of over 40 years' work and an uphill struggle to ensure its protection, during which time he continued to operate the day-to-day running of the reserve. Through personal contacts he was able to secure funding for a field station to be constructed on the island, the first purpose-built field research facility in the Falklands and one which has welcomed scientists and field workers for 20 years.

New Island's links with the eastern seaboard of the United States was of great interest and Ian made research visits particularly to Nantucket, from where many of the early sealers and whalers who plied Falkland waters came in the 18th and 19th centuries. The island's link to Captain Charles Barnard was especially researched and much of the restoration of the building at the head of the Settlement harbour, named after the marooned captain, was carried out by Ian and volunteer helpers.

Ian remained honorary adviser to FIG and from 1982 to 2013 he also advised MoD and British Forces Falkland Islands on environmental matters. He championed the creation of marine reserves, submitting proposals to FIG on several occasions. When FIG proposed revising the existing Wild Animals & Birds Protection Ordinance and Nature Reserves Ordinance he was asked to suggest principles for, and make proposals on, new draft legislation for use in the Falklands. The suggestions he made were accepted and in early 1988 he was requested to produce a report covering the many different aspects of conservation in the Falkland Islands, with recommendations to assist the formulation of policy and new legislation. His substantive 1989 report was a watershed document. He was awarded an MBE in the New Year's Honours in 1992.



Fig. 3. Greeting and showing HRH Prince Andrew his wildlife display at the opening of MPA in 1985. Photo MoD.

He published his first book in 1972 – *The Falkland Islands* – in the David & Charles *Islands* series. It became the standard source of information on the islands and surely attracted many visitors with its easily readable style and comprehensive, authoritative coverage. The book was revised in 1981 and had a third edition, in 1983, updated to include the impact of the Falklands war. The research involved in writing the book resulted in Ian becoming familiar with the contents of the Falklands’ archives, and over a number of years he championed the need for suitable storage and protection of records and books which for far too long had not been afforded a proper depository. The late Jane Cameron, after whom our present Archives are named, recorded her thanks for his efforts in attempting to preserve this part of the Islands’ heritage. He strongly supported the *Falkland Islands Journal*, contributing an article (*The Conservation of Wildlife*) to the first issue in 1967. In 1973 he and Maria were part of a small Editorial Committee (along with A. G. Barton and John Smith) who “rescued” the *Journal* (see Foreword).

Ian subsequently produced several more books (some with his younger daughter, Georgina) on Falklands wildlife, nature and the beauty of people and landscapes through photography. He was particularly pleased to be able to write and illustrate the *Collins Field Guide to the Wildlife of the Falkland Islands and South Georgia*, which remains in print and is a popular title to this day. He also wrote many popular articles on Falklands wildlife in high-profile magazines and journals and most of his research passed peer review scrutiny to appear in appropriate scientific publications.

Ian was described as the modern successor to Audubon, and his paintings with their clear, crisp lines and attention to detail are much sought after (see front cover picture). A select listing of his bibliography features in the next article in this journal (S Palmer, FIJ).



Fig. 4. At work on a bird painting, 1978. Photo Fred Strebeigh.

Whilst paintings and photographs by and of Falkland subjects had appeared in postage stamps, in the 1970s Ian was the first to complete a Falkland design fully ready for security printing. The Crown Agents were in charge of commissioning artists and designers in those days and this first issue was the first of some 40 others, totalling close to 200 individual stamps. Only in more recent years did he turn to a computer to produce various designs using his photographs as well as some of his daughter Georgina's, whom he encouraged to take on similar work.

Ian fully realised the impact that our offshore fisheries could have on wildlife, and conducted population estimates of key species such as the black-browed albatross, introducing careful aerial surveys and detailed counts using high definition photography and backed by computer technology for accuracy. The survey results were not without controversy: at a time when albatross populations elsewhere were in decline, it was difficult to convince officialdom and other bodies that the Falklands' birds were doing very well and that some colonies had indeed increased.

He also participated actively and gave informed opinion when preparations for oil exploration commenced in the late 1990s, taking part in advisory groups and familiarisation visits overseas as an independent.

Ian was not a man to compromise on principle and although he was often portrayed as rather intransigent, in hindsight, a wider view of his position can be taken. He did accept the need for multi-functional use of the land resource and did not find this incompatible with wildlife conservation. He believed strongly in co-existence if even for only economic reasons, but wildlife was his clear priority.

Ian Strange was both a man before his time and a man ahead of his time. In the 1960s, farming in the Falklands operated as a semi-feudal system under the control of a small number of landowners who managed very large farms on a minimal input basis. Conservation did not feature high on their agenda and his warnings, proposals and recommendations often raised objections or fell on deaf ears. Some farmers actively opposed him, regarding him as an interfering nuisance. The recommendations of Lord Shackleton's Economic Survey team in 1976 that the land ownership issue needed to be addressed by subdividing the large farms into smaller, largely family-based units and transferring ownership from the company structure to mostly individual Falkland Islanders, revolutionised the farming structures and attitudes in the Falklands. Post-Shackleton, wildlife was seen in a different light and tourism gradually became a significant new revenue source. Ian had never opposed increasing the exposure of wildlife and the natural environment to tourism – indeed he was one of its earliest and primary advocates. He saw it as a source of revenue which could benefit farms if properly managed and which could and should actively exist alongside farming.

Those who respected his pioneering efforts and took the time to consult him, found that behind a somewhat shy, quiet and reserved exterior was a generous and kind man who was always willing to give wise and sensible advice based on his vast experience and expertise. When one of us (SCP) stayed with Ian for five days on New Island he was a generous host who insisted on doing all the cooking of the meals. Long conversations late into the night cemented a lasting friendship.

He was a man who was willing to compromise, and always saw the positive side of people and situations. Despite his prodigious published output (see next article in FIJ) he was not comfortable writing for publication and it was a struggle for him. Against that, he was a very practical person, for example skilled in working with wood and this practicality was reflected in how he managed the mink farm, subsequently lived in the Camp and travelled widely round the islands and further afield. He threw himself into his work and causes with huge dedication and developed a strict work ethic. He relaxed by listening to the radio and watching films.

Ian married first Irene Hutley in England in 1958. They had three children: Shona Marguerite, Sharron Irene and Alistair Ian. He married, secondly, Annie Gisby in the Falkland Islands in 1969. Ian and Maria Marta Villanueva worked and lived together from the mid1970s; they had a daughter, Georgina, and were married in the Falklands in 1984.



Fig.5. IJS Photo; Georgina Strange.

A great believer in “conservation for everyone” Ian was greatly encouraged by younger Islanders who took up the challenges and purchased and put aside land and small islands as private reserves. In recent years he had some misgivings about modern day (and sometimes political) pressures which might remove the enthusiasm, incentive and freedom of Falkland Islanders to be their own independent conservationists.

There is no latter-day advocate to replace him. The cause he started and struggled with, often alone and with fierce resistance in the early days, is now firmly embedded in the policy and practice of local government, society and the farming and tourism sectors in the Falklands. Much of the work is now being undertaken by NGOs such as the New Island Conservation Trust and Falklands Conservation, a local membership non- governmental organisation that works to conserve the natural environment of the Falklands for future generations and which owes him an immense debt of gratitude. All now follow the path he laid out. Such is his legacy.

Ian was laid to rest on New Island, as was his wish.