



# Ahead of the Game

HRH The Duke of Edinburgh's 57 years as patron of the GWCT reflected a pragmatic, pioneering approach to conservation

WRITTEN BY JOE DIMBLEBY

**H**RH The Duke of Edinburgh was patron of more than 800 organisations, making his particular commitment to the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) all the more remarkable. His involvement first as president then patron spanned half a century, reflecting a lifelong passion for conservation. Ahead of his time, he saw the risk to wildlife from the evolution of agriculture and urban encroachment on the countryside. In the foreword to the 1970 review of what was then The Game Conservancy, he wrote, "Changes in the way land is used are so rapid in these days that it is essential to keep a close watch for any signs that game and wildlife in general are suffering. The sooner these signs are detected the sooner solutions and remedies can be worked out and applied."

His Royal Highness knew that for such remedies to work they had to fit into modern farming regimes. The GWCT's director of policy, Alastair Leake, met The Duke

on several occasions, including two private visits to the GWCT's research and demonstration farm, the Allerton Project, at Loddington in Leicestershire. He said, "Prince Philip recognised that farmers had to continue to make a living. He was a realist and a conservationist."

Roger Draycott, the GWCT's director of advisory, concurred. He said, "The Duke of Edinburgh was a great example of a working conservationist because he really understood UK agriculture and species conservation and canvassed the views of the people on the ground. In this way, he was a wonderful advocate for the GWCT approach."

His Royal Highness also shared the trust's view that game-management techniques hold the key to solving the problems of farmland conservation and he was frustrated at those who deny the huge part shooting has played in preserving habitats and restoring declining wildlife. In 1970 he wrote: "Contrary to what uninformed people seem to think, European

Conservation Year has made it more and more apparent that the man who shoots over his land is usually the most active supporter of the conservation movement. He fights to retain hedgerows and a sensible pattern of crops, he will protect ponds and marshes for duck, he is careful of the effect of chemicals. He is concerned with living things."

There remains a widespread failure to accept this apparent paradox. In the wake of The Duke's death, some commentators referred to the fact that he loved both wildlife and shooting as a 'dichotomy'. According to Alastair Leake, "The refusal to acknowledge shooting as a driver for conservation was a real bugbear for him. He knew, from first-hand experience, that on a wild grey partridge shoot such as Sandringham the only reason you can harvest the game is because the person running the shoot is an extraordinary conservationist. You will never get a wild shoot out of an environmental stewardship scheme on its own – there's just not enough there."

At Sandringham, The Duke had a cottage near the marshes where he could escape the goings-on at the main house and gain great pleasure from watching the shorebirds. He believed a shared love of the natural world should bring conservation and shooting communities

together. In 1965, he wrote: "A few years ago the idea that the many organisations with apparently conflicting interests in the countryside could meet in reasonable harmony would have been treated with scorn. Yet it has happened and I very much hope that this will lead to the realisation that areas of conflict between them are much smaller than areas of agreement."

Sadly, 56 years on, in many ways the conservation movement is more polarised than ever. However, there are signs that growing concern about environmental issues and an increasing threat of local wildlife extinctions may build bridges. The recently established Curlew Recovery Partnership England is cause for hope. Chaired by wildlife campaigner Mary Colwell and born out of Curlew Recovery Summits hosted by HRH The Prince of Wales, its partners include a grouse-shooting estate alongside the RSPB, Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, the British Trust for Ornithology and the GWCT.

The Duke's legendary sense of humour was also in evidence in private meetings with staff. One year, Alastair Leake and the trust's press officer were representing GWCT at a Buckingham Palace Garden Party. When asked about her work, the press officer was naturally keen to tell The Duke about the recent fantastic TV and press coverage of the Monnow River Project to restore water voles. As Alastair recalls, "He made a kind of incredulous expression, then, when she finished, he looked straight at her and said, 'What's the point of that? You can't shoot water voles!'"

On another occasion, at lunch with The Duke and HM The Queen at Buckingham Palace, the conversation turned to winter feeding of gamebirds, which helps songbirds survive the hungry gap. Alastair said, "He asked me if we fed through the winter at Loddington and, if so, how much and for how long. Then he asked me if I could guess how much they fed at Sandringham. The estate is about 20,000 acres so I took a guess based on what we did and went for 200 tonnes. The Queen was sitting opposite and he laughed and said, 'I'll say this quietly so she doesn't hear. It's 900 tonnes.'"

Winter feeding is one of a range of conservation measures born out of game management, the effectiveness of which has been proved by the trust. The Duke knew the GWCT's scientific research is essential to secure the future of the sport he loved. In his foreword to the Game Research Association's 1967 review, he wrote: "Shooting men are prepared to pay a lot of money for their sport, but there are still too many who do not appreciate



Clockwise, from left: The Duke visiting the GWCT's Allerton Project; at the Dersingham Bog Nature Reserve, 2013; at a Young Shots competition at Sandringham in 2002

that in the future game populations will depend on the association's research. I therefore hope that there will be much stronger support for research into game."

During his long tenure as patron, The Duke made several visits to the GWCT's demonstration farms and its headquarters in Fordingbridge, Hampshire. He chose to visit the farm at Auchnerran in Aberdeenshire as recently as 2016, the year before he finally retired from public duty. He also sought the GWCT's advice on his conservation work at Sandringham. The trust's involvement with the estate stretches back decades, with wild grey partridge counts submitted every year since 1956. GWCT advisors have been regular visitors since the 1970s, when it was clear that the partridge population was in decline. In a prescient piece in 1971, His Royal Highness wrote of the grey partridge: "This bird is more than just our favourite game species. It represents a typical wild bird that suffers from all the pressures of intensive agriculture, urbanisation, pollution, over-population and a host of other ugly sounding words and phrases. If we can solve the problem for partridges, we shall be conferring enormous benefits on many other like species that are in trouble."

The trust continues to support the large-scale habitat improvement initiative at Sandringham, which began when David Clark arrived as headkeeper in 2001. It saw a huge increase in supplementary

winter and spring feeding and year-round habitat provision. Roger Draycott who has overseen GWCT's work at the estate for many years, said, "Prince Philip was very much a driver of this pioneering project. Predator control was already in place but greater emphasis was put on habitat creation, some of which was funded through agri-environment schemes and some voluntarily. His Royal Highness recognised the importance of getting the farming tenants on board, without whose support the fantastic recovery couldn't have happened. Over 20,000 acres, it is a truly impressive landscape-scale partridge project."

Since HRH The Prince of Wales took over the running of Sandringham the commitment to the improvement of the farmed environment has continued unabated. In terms of research, the GWCT is probably doing more on the estate than ever, including grey partridge counts, invertebrate monitoring and comparing food availability for partridges and other wild birds in organic and non-organic farming systems.

HRH The Duke of Edinburgh once said, "You don't go round thinking about your legacy, you just get on with it." The shooting community, the conservation movement and the GWCT in particular may have lost an extraordinary champion, but his legacy is assured. ■

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