
The Man Who Loved Giants: David Shepherd, FRSA, CBE, dies aged 86

Tribute by Rosalind Reeve

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On 19 September 2017, renowned British wildlife artist David Shepherd passed away after a battle with Parkinson's disease.

Born in 1931 in Surrey, England, David was passionate about wildlife and the fate of the planet. A dedicated conservationist for nearly 60 years, he raised millions through his art to save critically endangered mammals, in particular pachyderms, and to fight wildlife crime. Before founding the David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation (DSWF) in 1984, he supported WWF as a trustee. A vocal supporter of DSWF's long-standing campaign to ban the ivory trade, he said he didn't want to learn about what an elephant eats, just to stop the trade.

David put his considerable achievements down to luck, but his path wasn't easy. As a boy he wanted to be a game warden, but his dream ended when, fresh out of school, he travelled to Kenya only to be turned down by the Head Warden. He painted birds to earn his ticket back to the UK, and applied to London's Slade School of Fine Art where he fared no better. His painting of seagulls was described as a depiction of "birds of dubious ancestry, flying in anatomically impossible positions over a lavatorial green sea"! David, who had a wonderful sense of humour, said "I couldn't have put it better myself!"

His fortunes turned after a chance meeting at dinner with maritime artist Robin Goodwin. Goodwin took him on as an apprentice in his London studio, reportedly saying "I have never seen such a lack of talent in one painting [seagulls] in all my life. I must take you on as a challenge!"

From that moment, David never looked back.

Within four years, he had transformed himself into an aviation artist, and in 1960, he received his first wildlife commission from Britain's Royal Air Force, which took him back to Kenya. His painting of a rhino chasing an RAF Twin Pioneer hung for many years in the Officers' mess in Eastleigh outside Nairobi.

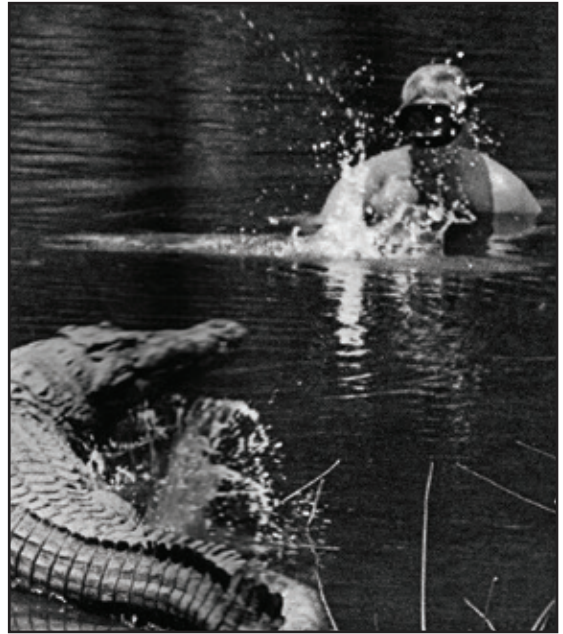
David's wake-up call came on a visit to the Serengeti with his much-loved wife, Avril. Seeing the sky black with vultures, they "found a waterhole that had had battery acid poured into it. There were more than 200 zebra lying dead on the ground, and when you see something like that you never forget it". Overnight, he became a conservationist.

David's wildlife paintings became hugely popular despite the views of elitist critics. His art was realistic—in a single captured moment he could convey an animal's soul. Some of his most famous and iconic paintings are of African elephants, including *The Ivory is Theirs* and *Wise Old Elephant*. He worked long hours, continuing to paint after he was diagnosed with Parkinson's (he reportedly wore the same three pairs of paint-encrusted trousers—which doubled as brush cleaners—throughout his career).

I was privileged to know David for nearly 25 years. Outspoken and direct, his passion, laughter and utter dedication to wildlife never failed to lift and inspire me. When he walked into a room, it would light up with his enthusiasm and energy.

In 1972, he featured in the BBC's *Man Who Loves Giants* and in 2008 he was awarded a CBE for his services to conservation. His other lesser-known passion was steam engines. The Chairman of the UK's North Norfolk Railways described him as "one of this country's greatest pioneers of railway preservation".

David wished to "be remembered as someone who did their bit for wildlife". At DSWF's thirtieth anniversary dinner, he said "What more could an artist wish for but to repay my debt to the animals I painted."



We say farewell to our conservation friends, colleagues and family who have passed away in 2017 and 2018.

Above left. Esmond Martin (Courtesy of Chryssee Martin).

Above right. Alan Root. (Courtesy of Fran Michelmore-Root).

Below left. David Shepherd (Courtesy of Becky Thomas).

Below right. Krisztián Gyöngyi.

See *Obituaries* on pp. 132-137

