

Co-founder of SEO/BirdLife and saviour of Doñana dies aged 89

Title

Mauricio González-Gordon Díez, a key figure in nature conservation in Spain and Europe, has died aged 89. His loss is deeply felt by SEO/BirdLife, which he helped create in 1954, and which today loses the last surviving member of its founding fathers.

Born in London in 1923, he inherited the Gonzalez-Byass sherry business, which he chaired until 1996. Those who knew him remember his affable and friendly character, exquisite manners, intellectual stature and humanist spirit. One of his abiding passions was nature conservation, and he was one of the main campaigners for the protection of what is now Doñana National Park.

Doñana is the last intact part of the great wetlands around the Guadalquivir river. González-Gordon's family owned land in Doñana, and he began to study and appreciate the richness of the wetland ecosystems and their birdlife, and made contact with ornithologists from all over Europe to encourage them to visit.

The spark that led to the creation of the Spanish Ornithological Society was an expedition to Doñana by Professor Francisco Bernis and José Antonio Valverde (later the first director of the Doñana National Park). There they got to know González-Gordon, the expedition's host.

But the marshes were threatened by drainage proposals, and in 1953 the first eucalyptus trees were planted. Mauricio and his father, fearful that irreparable damage could be caused in Doñana, asked Professor Bernis to write to General Franco to halt the planting.

In November 1953, Bernis sent Franco a masterful report, highlighting the exceptional natural value of Doñana, and arguing for the creation of a protected area. González-Gordon and his colleagues encouraged scholars and influential people from outside Spain to join the campaign. As a result, the Franco Government turned down the drainage plans, and in 1969, the area received the highest level of protection when it was declared a National Park.

The struggle to save Doñana brought together the pioneers of ornithology in Spain. Bernis, Valverde and González-Gordon drew up draft statutes, and the founding assembly of the Spanish Ornithological Society took place in Madrid in May 1954.

In 1957 González-Gordon translated the Peterson Guide to the birds of Europe, just three years after it was published in English.

There were further expeditions to Doñana, when González-Gordon explored the marshes with renowned British naturalists such as Max Nicholson and Julian Huxley, whose presence helped encourage the newly-formed Spanish association of ornithologists.

González-Gordon chaired the Board of SEO/BirdLife from 1966-68. In 2004 he received the Bernis Award for Ornithology from SEO/BirdLife, for a lifetime's dedication. "Although in the modern era the fight to conserve nature seems hard, it was even harder for pioneers like Mauricio González-Gordon, who with his passion and visionary spirit opened the way for all of us who came after him", said Asunción Ruiz, Chief Executive of SEO/BirdLife. "We are all in his debt, and our society as a whole ought to thank him today, because it is thanks to him we are able to continue enjoying places like Doñana."
