
O B I T U A R Y

LAWRENCE WESLEY SWAN

(1922-1999)

Raja of the Autonomous Native State of Cooch Nahai

Educator and explorer of the high Himalayas and herpetologist, Lawrence Wesley Swan (born 1922), passed away on 5 May 1999. Swan described himself as an “ecologist-zoogeographer, anatomist, evolutionary philosopher with entomological, avicultural, botanical, behavioral and molecular biases and an obdurate dreamer”.

The son of Methodist missionaries, Swan was born and raised near Darjeeling, in what is now the east Indian State of West Bengal. Swan attended the University of Wisconsin and Stanford University, receiving both masters and doctoral degrees (1952) in biology from the latter institution. In 1954, he returned to India and Nepal as a member of the first American Himalayan Expedition, researching the zoology of the high Himalayas, coming again for a second expedition, with Sir Edmund Hillary, in 1960, as part of a team to conduct high-altitude research. Throughout his career he led numerous additional educational expeditions to other parts of the world, including Africa, South America, Australia, New Zealand and Asia.

Swan was an outstanding educator and one of the pioneers of television education in the western United States; he was a brilliant lecturer and on his last trip to India (1984), he addressed the Bombay Natural History Society on the roof of the Society building in Bombay (now Mumbai). In 1967, Swan received the Distinguished Teacher Award from the California State University.

Among Swan’s most important contributions to science was the discovery and definition of the Aeolian Zone at the upper border of the alpine region. This zone is devoid of autotrophic vascular plants and supplied with air-borne nutrients, such as pollen and oceanic albuminoids. Autotrophic algae, lichens and moss, as well as a variety of heterotrophic animals and plants occur here. Swan further classified the aeolian zone into terrestrial, nival and aquatic divisions. An abiding interest of Swan’s was the so-called ‘Abominable Snowman’ or yeti, the subject of

some of his writings, such as a 1958 note in the prestigious journal, *Science*. Swan concluded that the footprints hitherto attributed to the yeti, were, in fact, those of the mountain fox, known for its curious hopping gait. Swan concluded the elongated “footprint” and the toe-like impression were caused by sublimation of one of the exposed sides to a greater degree than the other. With Alan E. Leviton, in 1962, Swan prepared a review of the herpetofauna of Nepal, an essential biogeographic synthesis of the fauna; this was the subject of his (Swan’s) masters thesis.

Swan was a born collector. One of his early notes from 1956 in *Turtox News*, was on the utility of insect nets for field personnel (uses include picking up hot dishes, catching chickens for dinner, obtaining frogs and lizard specimens, paddle

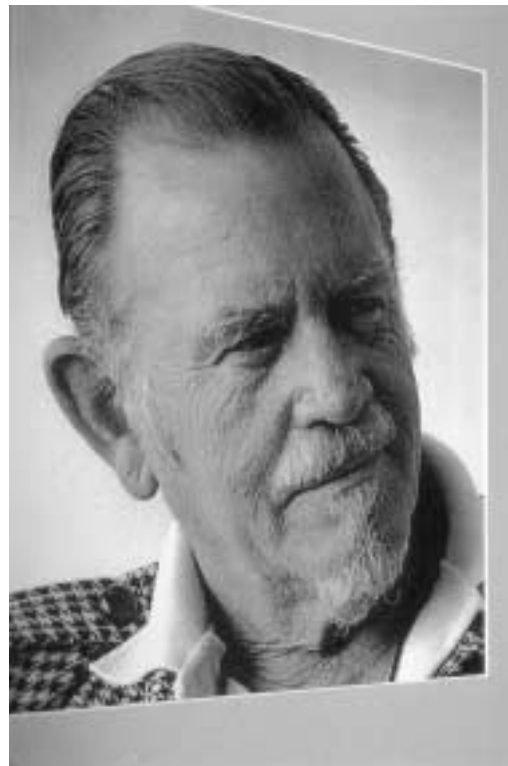


FIGURE 1: Portrait of Lawrence W. Swan (1922-1999).



FIGURE 3: Robert C. Drewes at the Tomb of the Unknown Frog, Autonomous Native State of Cooch Nahai.

for an air-mattress boat, keeping snow out of the eyes, while permitting vision during a blizzard, scaring buffalos and dogs, decoy for leeches, use as sieve, mosquito net, tent pole, seat, fan, pillow and even for catching insects).

Eccentricity often accompanies genius. Larry Swan “seceded” his 40,000 feet property in Redwood City, California, from the USA, appointing himself Raja of the Autonomous Native State of Cooch Nahai (literally, ‘nothing’ in Hindi); his wife Ruth became the Rani. Cooch Nahai printed its own stamps (Fig. 3), had a national holiday (21 June, coinciding with the summer solstice), a national symbol (the extinct dodo, also the currency of the State), and its memorials include the Tomb of the Unknown Frog (Fig. 4) and the Great Wall of Cooch Nahai, upon which he cemented oddities collected around the world by his graduate students. In a tongue-in-cheek letter to S. H. Cantwell, Jr., then Minister of the

Department of Public Works, County of San Mateo, CA, dated 3 April 1979, Swan drew the attention to the existence of this Autonomous State and its secession on 21 June 1978 from the USA, witnessed by “one hundred and fifty loyal subjects” (most of whom were fellow faculty members and students, current and past, of Swan’s at San Francisco State University). Cooch Nahai was the repository for obscure collections by his students as well as his own of stamps, ethnic masks, books and biological oddities including a two-headed cat. Cooch Nahai was famous for its network of walk-in aviaries which were interconnected by wire tubes, some of which were even vertical. To visit this independent Native State was to be surrounded by flocks of birds, from finches and weavers to imperial pigeons.

Numerous honours and awards have come his way. He was a Fellow of the California Academy of Sciences, a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. At least two species names honour Larry Swan- the Nepalese frog, *Rana* (at present *Sphaerotheca*) *swani* and the glacier flea, *Machilanus swani*. Swan’s eminently readable autobiography, completed in 1999, and published posthumously in 2000 (with a Foreword by Sir Edmund Hillary), details the world of this high altitude explorer.

Contributions to Larry Swan’s memory can be made to the Himalayan Trust, founded by Sir Edmund Hillary, in support of a Sherpa school in Kathmandu, Nepal at: The Himalayan Trust, c/o Larry Witherbee, 267 Exmoor Avenue, Glen Ellyn, Illinois 60137, USA.

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Robert C. Drewes¹ and Indraneil Das²
¹Department of Herpetology, California Academy of Sciences, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco 94118, California, USA. Email: rdrewes@CalAcademy.org
²Institute of Biodiversity and Environmental Conservation, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia. Email: idas@ibec.unimas.my

FIGURE 2: Larry Swan on St. Patrick's Day.
FIGURE 2: Stamps issued by the Autonomous Native State of Cooch Nahai.

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