

OBITUARY

Norman Tait FRPS: photographer, natural historian and past president of GNHS. (10th August 1942 - 16th December 2024)

Norman Tait was an active member of GNHS from soon after joining the staff of the University of Glasgow until his death, following a period of illness on 16th December 2024, aged 82. Norman was interested in natural history from an early age. Professor Jim Dickson recalls meeting Norman on Arran in 1959 while both were botanising and, recognising a kindred spirit, encouraging him to join GNHS. When Jim joined the Botany Department of the University of Glasgow in 1970, he found Norman already there as photographer, a post he took up in the late 1960s, having taken evening classes in photography after leaving school. Alison Moss remembers that when she was doing her postgraduate research in the late 1960s, based both in the Botany (now Bower) Building and in the Mycology Unit in the basement of Chemistry (where she grew fungi on agar plates), Norman regularly came over to photograph her specimens. The technician in charge of mycology was Pearl McKenzie. Pearl and Norman married in 1971.

Norman was born in Wishaw in 1942, worked in Glasgow, and lived in Renfrew, which may explain the remarkable fact that he was a member of all three of the local natural history societies: Hamilton, Glasgow and Paisley. Fiona Murdoch reports that Norman was a founder member of the re-established Hamilton society, attending the first meeting on 19th January 1960, aged just 17, and over the years contributing many photographs, articles and talks: he and Pearl became honorary members in 2008 (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Norman Tait and Audrey Wallace celebrating the 50th anniversary of Hamilton Natural History Society in 2010. (Photo: courtesy of Fiona Murdoch)

Professor Richard Cogdell recalls the work Norman did as Botany Department photographer. From the 1960s to the 1990s, before new technology began to take over

“when you wrote and submitted a scientific paper, you had to provide hard copies of the figures: Norman produced all of these. If you were going to present a seminar, you had to have slides made: Norman made all of these. If you went to a conference and needed a poster, Norman made it. He was central to our success in those days. His passion, though, was photographing plants and insects. Every few years, he would give a seminar and present his pictures. He was remarkably skilled. Indeed, now in the Bower Building, several of his beautiful pictures are on the walls in the central atrium.”

Richard Sutcliffe remembers visiting Norman in his office and darkroom in the Botany Department, where he was usually smoking his pipe while looking through newly developed photographs. He was a perfectionist. On one occasion he put his scissors through almost all of 36 slides he had just had processed. Only one or two of them were good enough for his high standards.

Norman's dual skills and interests in photography and natural history made him much in demand on the local scene, where he gave many lectures both to natural history societies and camera clubs, and judged in photographic competitions. Duncan McEwan reports that, when the Paisley International Colour Slide Exhibition introduced a nature section in 1975, Norman became an annual entrant (except in the four years when he was a selector), gaining many awards, including twice providing the Best Scottish Entry. He also prepared and delivered a commentary on the natural history slides for several years. Duncan especially remembers an image of a lacewing taking off, using a multi-flash technique that was particularly impressive for the time. In 1980, Norman was made an Associate of the Royal Photographic Society, and in 1982 he was awarded a Fellowship, the ultimate accolade (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Purple hairstreak (*Favonius quercus*) feeding at an emerging acorn. (Photo: Norman Tait)

In GNHS, Norman is credited for work on the illustrations in *The Glasgow Naturalist* from 1994, when

the journal started to be able to publish colour pictures, to 2002. Around this time, Norman was a constant presence on the Society's Council, including serving a term as President (1996-1998). He provided photographs for several important natural history books: *The Changing Flora of Glasgow* (2000), *The Flora of Renfrewshire* (2013), *The Flora of Lanarkshire* (2016), *The Amphibians and Reptiles of Scotland* (2016), and a book chapter in Scottish Ornithology Club's *The Birds of Scotland* (2007). His published papers demonstrate a wide breadth of interests: birds, insects, plants, habitats and history.

In more recent times, Norman became interested in the use of digital techniques in the restoration of photographic archives. He worked particularly on the early 20th century photographer and taxidermist Charles Kirk, restoring many of his pictures (loaned to him by Glasgow Museums for copying), and publishing *Kirk on the Craig* (2005), an account of Kirk's hazardous work photographing on the cliffs of Ailsa Craig. Roger Downie recalls Norman's kindness in restoring a very battered but sentimentally valued photograph of his wife Naomi's early 20th century ancestors. Norman's interest in historical aspects of photography and natural history was evident in two papers he wrote for the 2001 *Glasgow Naturalist* supplement celebrating the 150th anniversary of GNHS. For the centenary of the Andersonian Naturalists Society in 1985, Norman not only dressed in period costume, but also brought along a period plate camera and tripod (see *The Glasgow Naturalist* 23(6), 2001).

Norman was a knowledgeable and enthusiastic field naturalist, spending much time in and leading excursions to favourite local sites such as the Scottish Wildlife Trust's Glen Moss reserve near Kilmacolm and the Boden Boo woodland near Erskine Bridge (Fig. 3). Richard Weddle recalls Norman showing him holy grass (*Hierochloe odorata*) at its only Renfrewshire sites on the banks of the Cart: Norman wrote several articles on the local history of this species. Opportunities for exploring further afield came on Botany Department field courses to Tenerife and on the Glasgow Expedition to Papua New Guinea (1987), led by Jim Dickson and generously funded by the Trades House of Glasgow. The team collected orchids, begonias and ferns to be cultivated in Glasgow Botanic Gardens and then displayed in the Tropicarium of the Glasgow Garden Festival throughout 1988. Norman was the expedition's photographer and an album of his pictures is kept in the Trades House.



Fig. 3. Norman Tait (front right) leading a fungal foray to Boden Boo, near Erskine Bridge. (Photo: courtesy of OneRen)

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Roger Downie and Richard Weddle