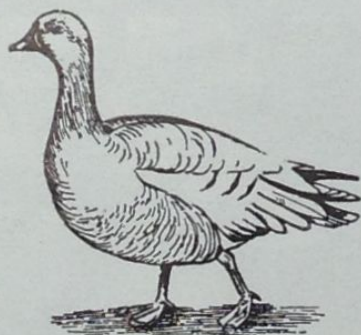


Above: Mackenzie Thorpe as he is today.

'KENZIE'

*The Wild Goose Man of
Long Sutton*



by Leonard Walker

He shot his first goose in 1924 and his last one in 1971. Now a wild life preservationist, he prefers to shoot with his camera . . .

WHEN MACKENZIE THORPE a wildfowler well-known in the Wash area, saw a four foot tidal wave sweeping towards the estuary of the River Nene on the night of February 1953 flood disaster, he hurriedly rounded up the members of his shooting party, who were dispersed across the marsh, and guided them to the safety of the sea wall. Two members were reluctant to leave their cover in spite of the biting north west gale and a foot of near freezing sea water swirling round their legs. As he brought them back across the fast-filling creeks, 'Kenzie' remarked, "This is no ordinary tide. You'll see the water top the bank tonight".

The wild life of the inhospitable marshes holds an uncanny attraction for wildfowlers and a novice could easily be cut off by the tide in his eagerness to put another "in the bag". Many years experience of the hidden dangers of the saltings from Terrington to Drove End has taught 'Kenzie' the wisdom of wariness. His knowledge of nature brings parties from all parts of the country to accompany him on shooting expeditions. He can almost guarantee to find them whatever they want to shoot at, whether it be wild geese or wigeon, mallards, teal or pintails.

PLAYED TRUANT FOR SIX WEEKS!

The big, muscular wildfowler first picked his way across the creeks and gullies at the age of nine. Wild life has always fascinated him. He would play truant for weeks at a time to wander round the countryside

watching the weasel and the wigeon, the rabbit or the rat. "Once, mother took me back to school to report that I had played truant that morning", he recalls. "When the headmaster had checked the register he told her that I had not been to school for the past six weeks!"

Scholastic attainments took second place to nature study, and today Mr. Thorpe suffers from an irksome inability to spell. As compensation however, he has the amazing ability to cast a spell over many animals and birds. He can bring a rat from its hole, a rabbit from its burrow, and his imitative calls in answer to those of the pink-footed geese as they flight over the marsh, brings them within range of his double-barrelled shot gun. "Geese are very crafty. They can see danger from a great distance. You have to try to outwit them. It's part of the game", he smiles.

The wildfowler is out on the marsh before dawn or at dusk. He hides in one of the many creeks, or if these are full of water, he digs a pit four feet deep and camouflages it with marsh grass and mud. With first light the birds rise up and flight inland to feed on the young wheat, returning to their mud-flat sleeping quarters at sundown. "Unless you can call them you just hope they will fly over your position," Mr. Thorpe explains.

Even the most hardened carcase collector is impressed by the beauty of these morning flights when the geese in their 'V' formations are outlined against the lawn sky. Many enthusiasts declare that the call of the grey goose is the most wonderful sound in nature.

Constant reminders of the most outstanding audiovisual impressions are to be found by 'Kenzie' in his collection of pinkfeet, grey geese, shelducks, wigeon, pintails, teal and mallards in an enclosure at his home, and in the paintings he produces of the more memorable marshland scenes.

WRINKLES FROM PETER SCOTT

"I never had any proper art training. Just messed around sketching birds to amuse myself until I went to work for Mr. Scott. I picked up one or two wrinkles from him, and now I can't paint pictures fast enough to supply the demand".

When Peter Scott, the famous ornithologist, writer, and artist, turned the disused lighthouse, on the east bank of the Nene Estuary into a sanctuary for wild fowl, Mr. Thorpe, or 'Mac' as he was known there, became his assistant. He learned a lot about the marshland visitors from other lands, and remembers Anabel in particular. She was a pink-footed goose.

Relating the story, 'Mac' says, "We had a number of pinioned pink-feet in the enclosure and a single goose, arriving ahead of the main migratory flocks, heard their calls and came down to join them. This was on September 26th, 1936. She made herself quite at home and remained throughout the winter. When the geese from the marsh migrated northwards again in February, Anabel stayed behind. She was apparently content to enjoy the advantages of regular meals and friendly surroundings; but on May 15th, the migratory instinct proved too strong for her and she headed after the others, two months late!"

She survived the hazards of the long, lone journey to her kin on their breeding grounds in Greenland, Spitzbergen or Iceland, for on October 9th she returned to the lighthouse. "A few minutes after landing she was walking tamely up to Mr. Scott in answer to his call. Peter recognised her as a father would his child," he goes on.

The pink-foot is the shyest of its kind and it requires great skill and cunning to get within five yards of one out on the marshes. Anabel seemed to know she was with friends. Nevertheless, on May 7th, again two months after the rest had gone, she slipped off on her long journey northwards. She never came back and it is almost certain that she fell victim to the wildfowlers' guns, the arctic fox or the falcon. 'Kenzie' concludes, "On the same day that Anabel left, eight other birds flew in. That's how it was. Though some of the rarer species were pinioned to prevent their departure, others came in and went out as they pleased."

BEAN GEESE

With the outbreak of war, Mr. Scott left his lighthouse home and the birds were billeted out with various naturalists. 'Mac' resumed his professional wildfowling, and in 1941 he had the good fortune to observe a bunch of bean geese. This species is now rare on the east coast, though it is not protected. There were 18 of them and quite legitimately 'Kenzie' shot nine of them. No bean geese have been seen by him on that marsh since. They have an almost human memory for danger areas!

'Mac's' personal record was set up when he was out shooting wigeon on a moonlight night in 1942. On this occasion he shot 63. He recalls that another keen wildfowler, the film star and falconer, Mr. James Robertson Justice, once shot 78 with one shot! He was using a 22 stone punt gun. The three pounds of shot would consist of 1,088 pellets.

In 14 years, 'Kenzie' had shot 1,753 geese. His record season was in 1951-52 when he collected 414. He has also captured six geese alive this season and these have been forwarded to parks and ornamental pools. In 1947 he sent 32 male pink-feet and 31 females to the Severn Wildfowl Trust, which is now under the direction of his ex-employer and friend, Peter Scott.

Here, a numbered ring is placed on the birds' legs

Below: 'Kenzie' at work in his studio in 1950.



and the creatures are released. If they are shot or captured at a later date, some indication of their movements is obtained. Last year, 'Kenzie' shot 14 geese bearing rings, some of which had been put on by Peter Scott in Iceland. This year he has sent details of seven rings to the Severn Trust and the Natural History Section of the British Museum, which also conducts investigations.

The tenacious marsh mud often causes some literally sticky situation. Recently 'Kenzie' placed one of his party in a good position telling him not to move from there. On returning to the area he found that the novice had wandered and was knee deep in soft silt, unable to move. "He was quite cheerful though, and unaware of the difficulty of extricating him. He seemed highly amused by the fact that he couldn't possibly fall over," 'Kenzie' recalls.

ONE AND A HALF!

There is a special way of walking through mud to prevent suction under the soles of the rubber thigh boots. 'Kenzie' squelched his way to the unfortunate man with assurance born of experience. "I had to lift him bodily out of his boots and throw him on to firmer ground nearby," he continues, "When I tried to get his boots out, one of them parted in the middle like a cracker, and he finished the shoot wearing one boot and a half!"

Most of the marsh migrants have already chosen their mates and settled down in their northern nursery to rear replacements. The shooting season ended on February 21st so the stragglers will be safe until next season. Whilst most of us look forward to the end of winter weather, 'Kenzie' is wishing it were a misty night in October again with the 'honk-honk' of the geese overhead, heralding their return to their winter feeding grounds.

Below: A smiling Mackenzie Thorpe.

