

Visitor centre will mark work of father and son bird experts

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A VISITOR centre celebrating the lives and work of two of Scotland's most respected ornithologists is set to be created as the centrepiece of what it is hoped will become the nation's first "bird town".

The former Dalry home of late ornithologist and artist Donald Watson and his son Jeff would be turned into an exhibition centre as part of the project, while Mr Watson's art studio would be opened up for the use of young wildlife painters and an annual bird festival held in the town.

Mr Watson, who died in 2005, was a renowned bird specialist and artist who illustrated the Oxford Book of British Birds. He was also the world's leading authority on hen harriers and was president of the Scottish Ornithologists' Club - while Jeff, who died in 2007 aged just 54, was a director of Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) and one of the world's leading experts on the golden eagle.

Plans for the Watson Bird Centre in Dumfries and Galloway are to be unveiled today by project coordinator Professor Roger Crofts at the launch of Mr Watson's final book, *In Search of Harriers*, in Dalry.

Chris Rollie, a close friend of Mr Watson and area manager for RSPB Scotland in Dumfries and Galloway, said: "We wanted to create something that would celebrate the life and the work of Donald Watson and his son. Given Donald's standing in the art world and Jeff's work in his own right where he is a world renowned authority on golden eagles, we wanted to recognise what they did.

"Dalry has already been a focus for bird lovers for the past 50 years because of both the wildlife in the local area and Donald's connection here."

A feasibility study for the project has been carried out by a steering group, including representatives from Southern Uplands Partnership, SNH, RSPB Scotland and members of the Watson family.

Prof Crofts said the idea for Dalry to become known as Scotland's "bird town", came from the similar branding of Wigtown as a "book town" and Kirkcudbright as the "artists' town" due to its link to the Glasgow Boys artists.

"Dalry was the home to one of the greatest bird artists of the 20th century and we are lucky to have his studio here intact," said Prof Crofts.

The group is also in the process of acquiring a shop in the centre of Dalry which would be turned into an information centre for visitors planning to go bird watching in the area, while Mr Watson's archive would also be opened up to enthusiasts.

Prof Crofts added that the group was in need of around £800,000 to help pay for the project - to acquire Mr Watson's former home from his family and to buy the property in the village - and will apply to the European Leader fund and the National Lottery for funding.

In a statement, Mr Watson's three daughters, Louise, Pam and Kate said: "To the family it seems entirely fitting that a Watson Bird Centre should be established in the house at Dalry whose wildlife and landscapes provide such inspiration for both naturalist and artist.

Chris Miles, area manager for SNH, added: "The centre is an ambitious idea and would be a tribute to a father and son who made huge contributions to wildlife art and bird conservation in Scotland. "We hope to continue supporting this endeavour - which would fit so well with the landscapes and wildlife that make Dumfries and Galloway such a terrific place to visit."

DONALD Watson was the world authority on hen harriers and one of Scotland's greatest ornithologists and wildlife artists. His interest in ornithology began at Edinburgh Academy, where he met a former pupil, George Waterston, then director of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in Scotland.

After attending Oxford University and then war service in India, he continued his study of birds in Dumfries and Galloway.

His first solo exhibition was held in Edinburgh in 1949 followed by further shows in London, Glasgow, Oxford, Dumfries, Toronto and Luxembourg.

He illustrated more than 30 books, including the Oxford Book of British Birds and became a founder member of the Society of Wildlife Artists, and President of the Scottish Ornithologists' Club.

Before his death in 2005, aged 87, Mr Watson passed on his love of birds to his son, Jeff, who became an expert in the golden eagle.

Jeff, operations director of Scottish Natural Heritage, died of cancer three years ago, aged 54, shortly after being awarded the RSPB Conservation Medal.