From Air Force to Anorak

My adventures with avifauna and other animals

By Kevin Anderson

"Everyone has a book in them... but in most cases that's where it should stay" is a quote I heard a number of times when I first floated the idea of writing a memoir.

Now that it's finished, I await the chorus of "We told you so"

Cover image of juvenile Great White Egret by Andrew Kirby – www.akwildlifeimages.com

Introduction

I would like to be able to introduce myself as a lifelong naturalist, full of amazing stories about the wildlife I have seen since 'I were a lad', but that would be stretching the truth. Although my interest took root early on and then slowly developed underground, with a few green shoots appearing during my 'middle' years, it only really flowered as a life-changing passion much later. That bit in the middle was a 31 year career in the Royal Air Force, which, after an initial flight of fancy where I thought I was going to be a fighter pilot, took me to parts of the world, and encounters with wildlife, I could never have otherwise imagined. By chance, a posting to rural Somerset in the late 1990s introduced me to a small, but very special, nature reserve which changed everything, *eventually*, and I embarked on a second career in countryside conservation.

I have read many nature books since I picked up David Attenborough's seminal Life on Earth in 1979 - I usually have a small pile of them on the go at any one time - but it is Bill Oddie's writing that really sticks in my mind: whether it be his Little Black Bird Book, or the hundreds of magazine articles he has written over the years. He opened my eyes to birdwatching and wildlife in general. I especially love his humorous, sometimes profound, outlook on life, and if anyone was to ask me who was the inspiration behind this book, then my answer would wholeheartedly be 'Birder Bill'.

You may quite rightly be wondering why you should read this memoir written by someone you most likely have never heard of, especially as the idea does feel a bit hare-brained when you consider that most days I cannot remember what I had for breakfast. My response would be that I have had some unique adventures along the way to becoming, frankly, a bit of a wildlife nut, which I hope will entertain, resonate perhaps, and even make you chuckle, when sometimes there seems little left in this world to laugh at. And if that doesn't convince you, every penny of your donation (thank you in advance) will be going to the Somerset Wildlife Trust (SWT), who do wonderful work for nature conservation in the county I now call home. In the past, SWT supporters have done rash things to raise money for the charity such as jumping out of serviceable aeroplanes and running marathons – on balance, writing a book seems fairly rational to me.

My back-up plan if no-one reads it, is that at least my daughter will have some notes and stories for my funeral.

PART ONE

Chocks Away

1. Hatching and early development

I was born a Yellowbelly. Not quite sure what that term means exactly, and there are many different theories, including the colour of frogs and newts once found on the Lincolnshire Fens, but I am from Spalding, a small town slap bang in the middle of these flat lands. Once internationally famous for its annual Flower Parade, and the wide rainbow stripes of tulip beds that provided its main source of colour, these days you are lucky if you spot anything other than vegetables growing on its extensive fertile fields.

My parents were both from the area: my dad was a sapper in the Royal Engineers and my mum was from a farming family located deep in the Fens. When he left the Army after serving in Malaya, and I was on the way, they managed to scrape enough money together to buy a caravan to live in, alongside a riverbank on the edge of town. I tell you this as my first (unknowing) adventure was that I nearly didn't make it to my first birthday: my mum had an incident with some washing and a single bar heater and almost burnt down the caravan with me still in my cot. Infant mortality in birds is something like 70% in their first year; thankfully for humans in the second half of the 20th century it was much lower, and my father put out the fire without too much damage to me or the caravan.

We soon moved to a tiny semi-detached house near the railway line close to the centre of Spalding, where life was a bit safer, and the next few years passed without further incident until I reached school age. It was then that I started having frequent nose bleeds, often so bad that they wouldn't stop, and I would need to go to hospital. This was tricky in itself as we had no phone or car, so my dad would have to ask our neighbour if he could use their phone to call a taxi. Goodness knows what the drivers thought with me bleeding all over their upholstery – I can only imagine my parents trying to explain that it was medical, and I wasn't constantly getting beaten up. After a number of these episodes the family doctor suspected I had leukaemia and I was subjected to a series of tests and injections, which is probably why to this day I cannot look a needle in the eye, especially if it's about to be sunk into my arm. Fortunately, the tests came back negative and it was explained away as something that sometimes happens in young children so, a bit later than planned, school life began.

I often get asked where my obsession with wildlife originated. I don't recall seeing much other than sparrows (or 'spuggies' as we called them) and 'cabbage white' butterflies around our house and vegetable patch, which at the time were not exactly inspiring for me. However, my aunt and uncle ran a little farm out on the Fens where my two younger cousins and I could run virtually wild. It was the 1960s so environmental historians would probably tell us that this this was not a great time for wildlife, with the effects of DDT[1] and other pesticides having a major impact on numbers. But here there were grey partridges running everywhere, usually trying to avoid being shot, the endless song of unseen skylarks filling the air above, and hares sprinting across the bare fields, also probably in the course of taking evasive action. A couple of memories stick in my mind from this time out on the farm: the first involved greenfinches and red net nut bags, and the second was forming a 'Tiddler Club' with my cousins.

Surprisingly, you can still purchase peanuts for wild birds in small red nets; I thought they had become extinct many years ago as they are so dangerous to the creatures they are meant to feed. If they don't trap a bird in their nylon thread, then grey squirrels will undoubtedly destroy them within seconds of discovery. Back then, they were the only thing you could buy if you wanted to feed birds in the garden, and my aunt used to put one up in a tree alongside a tall tussock of pampas grass. Small birds would flock to the nuts and I think this is when I saw my first blue and great tits, although I probably couldn't tell them apart at that point. The bird that really stood out though, especially when it caught the light, was the greenfinch, which was a common bird before its populations were ravaged by disease[2]. It seemed slightly larger than the other birds and boy did it throw its weight advantage around, taking possession

[1] A synthetic insecticide which persisted in the environment and food chains, leading to thinning eggshells in peregrine falcons, preventing offspring from developing. DDT is now banned in the UK and many other countries.

[2] Trichomonosis decimated greenfinch numbers in the early 2000s; it is a parasitic disease passed between birds often at garden feeding stations which have not been regularly cleaned and disinfected.

of the bag and seeing off all comers by aggressively opening its wings, hissing and pecking in their general direction. All the tits would retreat to the pampas grass until this big green bully had had its fill. I was so captivated that I was inspired to try and get a picture of it from the window on my Kodak Instamatic camera. I did, but it was pretty rubbish and of course had to wait weeks to finish off the film and get it developed. It all sounds so ancient now, doesn't it?

"You talkin' to me?" Greenfinch by Adam Jones.

With most nature autobiographies you would expect the writer to tell you this was just a false start, and that were to be far more successful outings with their camera in the years to come, taking amazing, award-winning photos of wildlife. For reasons that will become evident further on, I did not attempt another bird picture for about 20 years.

The Fens are very efficiently drained by a widespread network of watercourses, very unimaginatively called 'drains' and 'dykes'. In the Netherlands, dykes (or dikes) are the high banks that hold the water in - think about the story of the little boy who put his thumb in the dike to save his town from flooding. In the Fens just about everything with water in it is known as a dyke. When you are a kid, surrounded by a vast expanse of boring fields and very few hedgerows, water can seem very exciting indeed. Although the banks can be very steep getting down to the water, while out on our bikes, my cousins and I found one which was accessible. Being quite

wide with a bridge over it into the fields, I suppose it was more of a drain, and we were able to scramble down below the bridge to the water's edge. The water was clear and teeming with tiny fish, or 'tiddlers' as they were universally known to small children. Whether they were sticklebacks or minnows, I really couldn't say, but to three young boys they were mesmerising… and we had to catch them.

A plot was hatched: back on the farm there were lots of empty jars kept for homemade jam and pickled onions, and an old tin bath in the barn. That evening we decided to form a secret organisation to be known as the Tiddler Club; we made membership cards with a pencil drawing of a small fish and took a solemn oath not to tell our parents what we were up to. This was mainly because we knew playing by the water was not actually part of our free roaming rights.

Next morning, we were off on our bikes with string tied around the neck of the jars; the bath was left in the barn, earmarked as our makeshift aquarium where we planned to study our catch. Sure enough, the large shoal of tiddlers was still swimming about within touching distance and there was great anticipation between us at who would catch the most. On reflection, we probably should have sourced a butterfly net or something similar as the jam jars were completely ineffective. As soon as we threw them in, the fish dispersed into deeper water and no matter what we tried: immersing the jar and holding onto the string or wading bare footed out into the deeper water, brought absolutely no reward. In the end we got thoroughly wet and muddy, had to explain our damp and dirty state to my waiting aunt, who had suspected we were up to something all along, and the Tiddler Club was disbanded on-the-spot. However, for me, a connection with nature had been well and truly established.

Much to the surprise of my parents I passed my 11+ exam and gained a place at the local boys-only Grammar School. Up to this point I was convinced my future lay in professional football having played many times for my Primary School team! This required re-evaluation as football was not part of the Physical Education curriculum at this school. As it turned out, a newly appointed PE teacher was a football fan and he helped our year form a team, which we managed to keep going for the five years up until O-Levels. In the sixth form I joined a rubbish Sunday League team – more of why that was significant later.

Anyone who has been to secondary school (how's that for a catch-all?) will know that the key to success is not to stand out, but to get yourself into a gang of friends as soon as possible. As an only child I was used to my own company and always struggled to make friends, and had a habit of trying to be a bit of a wisecracking joker in an attempt to get noticed, which didn't always endear me to others (it still doesn't). At this stage I would say I had a slight interest in wildlife, but an episode sticks in my mind that probably was the reason it became suppressed within me for many years. The school's summer outing location for the younger boys was usually Dovedale in the Peak District: a lovely spot, totally unlike the Fens, with stepping-stones across the river and all sorts of walks through woodland, packed with wildlife. I recall being fascinated by this large pink-looking bird, with flashes of blue and white, which flew noisily across our path on one of these trips. I had never seen anything like it before and no idea what it was, but one of the other boys excitedly shouted out that it was a jay. That lad got so much stick for showing any interest in something that was not 'mainstream male' territory, I realised very quickly that for once I needed to keep my big mouth shut. I am sure we also saw a dipper that day, but no-one was going to risk putting their head above the parapet and point it out, and certainly not outwardly display any excitement at this marvellous little bobbing bird.

Jay by Derek Moore.

Aware that I hadn't made many friends at school, my mum suggested that I join the Air Training Corps (ATC), as it just so happened that the owners of a house where she cleaned ran the local branch. They were the volunteer Officer Commanding (OC) and secretary, both very welcoming and supportive, and probably just what I needed at that stage of my development. The squadron would meet every Tuesday and Friday (they still do I understand) and I was introduced to a whole new world. The downside was wearing a very itchy woollen uniform, known as the 'Hairy Mary', but this was a small price to pay for a shared identity, learning to shoot on an indoor range at the town's sugar beet factory, getting lessons on RAF history (yes, they were quite short – before any Army or Navy readers mention it), and getting experience of flying; they even had a football team.

Also just to put down a marker for a related story in the next chapter: Spalding Flower Parade's heyday was in the 1960s and 70s and local community groups would go along to help decorate the colourful 'floats' that were driven through the town on a Saturday afternoon, usually in early May, with thousands of people watching on. The floats were basically eye-catching themed wood and wire structures, sponsored by local businesses, built around tractors and trailers, which were then adorned with hundreds of tulip flower-heads. The heads were removed from the plant in the field as part of the process of encouraging the bulb to develop - this was a way of ensuring the flowers did not go to waste, as there was more profit in selling the bulbs. As an air cadet, I helped most years with pinning the heads on the floats. One year Blue Peter came along to film the process with a hero of mine at the time, John Noakes, accompanied by his faithful dog Shep, and they chose the float us cadets were working on, so we all got meet the dynamic duo. Not much ever happened in Spalding so this was a magical moment for me, but for some reason none of us got a Blue Peter badge.

For the next few years wildlife was forgotten and my natural desire to identify things in the air was directed towards aeroplanes. The squadron building was plastered with posters of aircraft silhouettes covering NATO and Russian types and I got quite good at plane spotting. There is a standing joke with my parents (at my

expense) after I called out 'F-one-eleven'[3] at a speck in the distance when we were at Skegness one day when I was about 12. They would not believe that I could have identified it that far out, and for many years afterwards would sarcastically ask 'is that an F-111 Kevin?' at any plane that passed overhead. Parents eh?

The ATC was also good for a bit of travel and 'character building' via their summer camps. The two I went on were held at Catterick, then the home of the RAF Regiment, and Malta at the RAF Luqa air base. There were all sorts of scare stories of what might happen to you while on camp, for example getting your head pushed down the toilet bowl and flushed, or the one everyone feared: getting your testicles blacked with shoe polish. Unless I've blocked it from my memory, neither of those happened to me, but I remember someone at Catterick nicked one of my clean bed sheets from my tent and left a very stained one behind. I like to think that it was only orangeade, but I may be kidding myself. I honestly can't remember whether I then 'passed' it on to some other unsuspecting soul or embarrassingly handed it in.

The incident in Malta was a bit more traumatic. It was the first time I had travelled abroad, and there were just two of us going from my squadron. In the main I had a great time, getting a flight on a Nimrod maritime patrol aircraft, orienteering along the rocky coastline, and travelling around the island in a beautifully decorated bus. Our barracks were a disused part of the Officers' Mess, with about three or four to a room. One night after everyone was asleep some of the older boys decided to go wandering with a doll's head on a broom handle, illuminated with a torch. They were creeping into the rooms of us younger cadets and then waving the head in front of anyone who was sleeping and making ghostly wailing noises until they woke up, invariably screaming their heads off. Sounds pathetic now but it scared the crap out of me.

With Lincolnshire so full of RAF airfields there were lots of opportunities to gain some flying experience. We used to go gliding in open cockpit Slingsby gliders at Syerston, near Newark, which, like my old ATC squadron, is still going strong all these years later.

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[3] The F-111 was a distinctive, impressive looking USAF bomber based in the UK that would often be seen around The Wash.

Gliding was an incredible experience: wind in your face, no engine noise, the winch giving you a rapid rate of climb, the clunk of the cable being released and then it was just the noise of the air rushing over the long wings, looking down on miles of green fields. I really can't imagine what it would be like to be a bird soaring high across the sky, but I reckon this is as close as I'll ever come.

Powered flight was also on offer in single propeller Chipmunks. The pilots always gave you a chance to take control and fly straight and level, try a banked turn and if you were really lucky a loop or barrel roll. Obviously, after a few flights I was hooked, and all my ambitions turned to becoming a fighter pilot. Looking back perhaps I should have tried to get more experience in the air, which might then have revealed that I was confusing my aspirations with my limitations.

A couple of incidents conspired to reduce my potential chances of joining the RAF. The first occurred when the original OC and secretary retired about five years after I joined, and another chap took over – you will note, in the main, I am not naming names for a variety of reasons. The Sqn now had an officer from the RAF Reserves in charge and a retired Warrant Officer (WO) from the regulars, the latter who was very wise to the ways of the Force. We also had a couple of cadet sergeants plus me, and one other, as corporals. None of the cadets was very keen on the new officer, especially as he started asking us to empty the litter bins and sweep up the squadron hut at the end of each parade – we had never been asked to do this before. One Friday I was the senior cadet on duty and the order came that we were to clean up. The WO took me to one side and told me that the officer was claiming money for his wife to act as the building's cleaner. For right or wrong I was outraged and went and told the other cadets, and we agreed that we would go on strike. Obviously, I had not been paying attention to the lessons about military law.

I have a feeling the WO didn't like the officer much either as he was smiling when he went to tell him the cadets had refused to do the cleaning. We were quickly told to form up on parade and then, I kid you not, the officer ordered the *refuseniks* to take one pace forward. It felt like a storyline from a children's version of Dad's Army. After a short hesitation I made that fateful step and behind me, most of the other cadets advanced too. The next bit was the

funniest as he then told us 'traitors' to join him in his office, which was only just big enough for his desk and a couple of chairs. As we all trooped behind him, he realised his mistake and declared that only the corporal was required; everyone else was dismissed. He threatened to have my stripes there and then, but, when I mentioned his wife's cleaning contract, he was a bit taken aback. I refused to tell him where I had got this information, but obviously it couldn't have been anyone else other than the WO. At this point it dawned on me that I might have just messed up any character reference I needed for joining the RAF, but he then declared that we call it a misunderstanding and we would say no more about it. Phew! Interestingly, we were never asked to clean up the hut again.

The second potential career-limiting incident takes us back to football and those damn dykes. Through my part-time job stacking shelves at Spalding's first out-of-town supermarket[4], which, when it opened was probably the most exciting thing that had happened that year bar the Flower Parade, I met a guy who was starting up a Sunday football team. It was called Vernatts, after a watercourse that runs through the town. Not quite River Plate but it seemed pretty appropriate given most of our results went down the drain. They didn't have a goalkeeper so, as I played in goal for the school hockey team, I thought it would be pretty similar and volunteered my services. I was 17 and back then the RAF offered a trial day where they would take you through the officer selection process, which would maximise your chances when it came to the full three days of interviews and tests. I had signed up for one and it was coming up at the end of the football season.

The Vernatts were dreadful in that first year: we had scraped one victory and got thrashed in just about every other game. Our home games were played on a council pitch which had a dyke running across about 20 yards behind one of the goals. As goalkeeper I was sick of fetching the ball when it went behind and dropped down the bank into the water; nothing worse (or so I thought) than soggy socks and boots. Our goal was always pretty busy and on this particular day the ball had already ended up in the dyke a

[4] It was Key Markets for anyone who remembers that chain; their logo looked like a Yale key.

couple of times, so I decided next time the ball went out I would try and stop it going in again. The moment duly arrived: not realising it had actually gone out for an opposition corner, I chased the ball and managed to stop it in time, but I fell down the dyke instead. A bit embarrassed I managed to scramble back up and take my position in the goal, the ball came across, I tried to jump thinking I would punch it away, but instead just crumpled in a heap in agony. The game was stopped, they managed to get me into the manager's car, and he took me to hospital. One x-ray later and I was told I had fractured my leg in two places and would be in plaster up to my knee for six weeks, with no strenuous activity beyond that for another month or so. I have never worked out how I got up that bank and walked onto the pitch with a broken leg. More significantly, the RAF trial day had to be cancelled; my dad was not best pleased as he had been against the Sunday football idea from the start. He thought I had blown my chances of joining the RAF as well as losing my job at the supermarket.

The natural world wasn't completely forgotten as I entered the sixth form to do my A-Levels. I opted for Maths and Physics as these seemed the most appropriate for my chosen career path, but I also decided to do Biology. There is usually an inspirational teacher in everyone's past: mine was nicknamed 'Sammy' and he taught Biology in his own unique style. Sammy was someone you feared and liked in equal measure and was a legend at the school. He taught in a large lab with benches surrounded by cages of white rats, stick insects, animal skulls, and the obligatory plastic human skeleton in the corner. The fear came from the fact that he would not stand for anything but 100% attention in class, otherwise you could expect to be shouted at, followed by chalk, blackboard duster or book thrown in your general direction. I even recall a lab stool being launched across the room on one occasion. No-one was ever late with their Biology homework.

He was quite fierce but that was a veneer as underneath there was a really nice bloke. On A-Level field trips we would see a different Sammy, very likeable and we would be encouraged to identify everything we saw around us, in complete contrast to our school outings in those early years. I was introduced to Ecology

where we used quadrats[5] to sample the flora out on the salt marshes. We even got to meet botanist David Bellamy out at Gibraltar Point (near Skegness); I think he was there filming for one of his TV series.

Although I was set on joining the RAF, the school pushed us to look at degree courses at universities and polytechnics. The only subject I fancied was Ecology and had interviews at Loughborough and the University of East Anglia in Norwich. It was now the late 70s; we had just had the Winter of Discontent and a massive recession, so I struggled to see what I could do with a degree in Ecology. It felt like I was 'going through the motions' visiting these places and, as it turned out, I didn't get the grades at A-Level so probably wouldn't have got in anyway. As my mum was to say prophetically, I could always do a degree in the future if I was still keen. That was a prophecy that would come true almost 30 years later.

By way of contrast, the RAF was having a bit of a boom: the Cold War with the USSR had increased tensions with the West, aircraft were being scrambled almost daily to intercept Soviet planes over the North Sea, and the RAF needed lots of aircrew. After filling in my application at the Peterborough RAF Careers Office, I was invited to attend the Officers and Aircrew Selection Centre (OASC) at RAF Biggin Hill in Kent. It was a three-day process, and the first initiative test was getting there, as they encouraged you to travel by public transport. I can't imagine they were being 'green' back then, so I reckon, like everything over those few days, you were being assessed.

Seems ridiculous, but, at the grand age of 18, I really hadn't been that far on my own: the odd train journey from Spalding to Peterborough to watch the Posh play footie at London Road, which was scary in itself if there were opposition supporters at the station, but never to London and beyond. The OASC joining instructions gave you a pointer of what buses you could get from Bromley or Croydon but otherwise that was it: no Google to check your route, no on-line advance tickets, no hand holding, nothing…

[5] A quadrat is basically a metre-long bamboo cane, with 3m of string attached, which you throw randomly onto the ground and then fashion into a square, to study the flora within the 'captured' sample.

So, in my one and only brown suit, a pocketful of notes and coins for train tickets and bus fares, my date with destiny was waiting for me at the world's most famous Battle of Britain aerodrome.

2. Fledging

All I can remember of that journey is standing at the bus stop in Bromley High Street, waiting for a bus to the Biggin Hill camp sweating profusely thinking I can't take my jacket off in case one of the selection staff was watching. There was a gaggle of us - clearly all going to the same place - young lads dressed in smart suits with small suitcases, but one could easily have been a 'spy', checking that we were maintaining dress standards. I don't recall anyone talking to each other, not sure if it was nerves or being suspicious of the competition, but everyone got off the bus at the camp gates and were soon to get to know each other a whole lot better.

Much of the next three days' events passed by in a blur, but a few details stand out. The first was that we were quickly stripped of any identity: we were given grey overalls and blue bibs with a number. I was now 'B4' – odd how a number stays with you most of all. In all the joint exercises we were known only by our alphanumeric; it was a great leveller. There were lots of medical tests, interviews, written exercises and joint discussions about topical issues, where each of us was given an opportunity to lead one of these 'informal' chats. It was the practical tests though that I am sure were the most important element. I had opted to try out for navigator as well as my main choice of pilot, and the aptitude tests for both of these were quite intense. One involved sitting with a steering wheel in front of you and a revolving barrel to the side which had a pointer on it attached to the wheel. The idea was that there was a line on the barrel, and you steered to keep the pointer on this line.

Simple enough, although I'd had no previous driving experience, but there was a catch: a delay between you turning the wheel and the movement being relayed to the pointer. So, you could see the route coming around on the barrel and had to move your steering wheel ahead of time to keep the pointer on course. This was clearly a test for coordination skills, and I felt I did alright on those and supposed they had relevance for pilots and bomb aiming navigators. The pure navigation tests were a different kettle of fish though, requiring you to look at two marked objects with a stated direction of travel, time and speed. You then had to work out the intercept point, which one would reach it first, and how long before the other object reached that spot. Confused? I was. So much so that I learnt later

that I had failed the navigator aptitude tests - all my hopes were now riding on being accepted as a pilot.

The other main practical exercises tested for leadership skills. Each six-man (no women were there) syndicate was set a series of tasks in an aircraft hangar involving ropes, barrels, planks etc. Every candidate led one of these challenges, which he had to explain to the rest of the group, determine a plan and award penalties if someone infringed, like stepping on the floor when crossing on a rope. Mine involved getting some equipment across an imaginary crocodile-infested river after we had built a rope bridge of sorts. It was going well: we had nearly got everyone and everything across when someone stepped in the 'water'. I was now expected to penalise the team and send us back to the start which is what other leaders had done in their exercises. I made the decision to keep going and we just about finished the challenge in time. I will never forget one of the selectors calling out "B4, why didn't you stop the exercise and make everyone start again?" To which I instinctively replied: "Because I wanted us to finish the task, Sir!" I worried about that response for ages afterwards and whether they thought it was impertinent, downright cheating or actually showed I had some initiative. It wasn't until I saw Will Smith going through the 'Men in Black' selection tests many years later that I convinced myself it must have been a bit of all three.

I then had the summer to wait to hear whether I had been successful in passing RAF selection as well as my A-Levels. Most summers as a teenager I had been working out in the fields somewhere, either picking strawberries for 20p a basket, each taking me at least 20 minutes to fill, or bulb-cleaning[6] at my uncle's farm, but this year an ex-girlfriend invited my best mate and me to work on her family's smallholding. The work would involve tractor and trailer driving and various vegetable picking jobs. As ever disaster wasn't very far away.

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[6] Bulb-cleaning involves removing the outer layers of usually daffodil or tulip bulbs before they are then graded by size and sold on. You would get paid by the bucket. Like strawberry picking, I was pretty slow at it and normally ended up with the smallest pay packet at the end of the week.

Although my mate had already passed his driving test, I'd had no lessons and was still on a moped, which was no preparation for driving a tractor, let alone with a trailer attached. Oddly, I had been able to crack the delayed steering pilot test a few weeks before but didn't seem to be able to drive a tractor in a straight line. My job was to drive alongside another tractor which had some sort of picker attached (I can't remember whether it was bulbs, potatoes or peas) and line up my trailer to receive the produce. I tended to drift across the line towards the other tractor and would end up getting too close, and getting shouted at a lot by the farmer, usually just as the trailer was about to collide with the picker. I would like to say that I was distracted by the singing skylarks, but the truth was that I just wasn't a natural driver.

In an attempt to remedy this, the farmer's wife decided that I should have my first driving lesson while we were out hand-picking cauliflowers. They had a green Mini-van, remember those? I was wearing wellies and would need to reverse and turn 90 degrees to get on the track that ran alongside - guess what - another dyke. What could possibly go wrong? I promise this is the last dyke-related story, but I don't need to tell you what happened next. As the van was sliding down the bank on its near side, I could see everyone running across the field in a panic; fortunately, it was summer and there was very little water in the dyke. Thankfully neither of us was hurt, and a tractor was on hand to pull us out with very little damage, other than to my already tarnished driving reputation. Goodness knows how I thought I had the coordination skills to be a pilot.

The results from OASC arrived before my A-Level grades; the rumour was that if it was a thick envelope then it was good news, but a thin one was a rejection. It was indeed a thick one with an offer to start my Initial Officer Training at RAF College Cranwell (near Lincoln) a week before my 19th birthday. I was about to spread my wings.

I'm not going to bog you down with the details of those 16 weeks of officer training; anyone who has been through any form of basic military induction, or seen it depicted on screen, will recognise the endless, intense hours of making bed packs, 'bulling' shoes and toilet blocks, marching, cross-country runs in full kit, often involving carrying pine poles or oil drums, and learning the ways of their particular Service. For an RAF officer cadet this included lessons

called ‘Customs, Etiquette and Social Responsibilities’, where memorably you learnt how to pass the port to the left without the decanter touching the table. I guess this was a tradition we inherited from one of the Army regiments, as contrastingly, in the Royal Navy, the decanter should always be touching the table. However, as the other two Services will tell you, the ‘crabs’ do not have traditions, being the most junior, just particularly ‘bad habits’.

I do have one tale to tell which is relevant to my overall story. We were expected to develop our public speaking skills on the course, with the cadets required to deliver two talks: a short one on any subject they were comfortable with, and a second longer one which had to have a military theme. At the tender age of 19, having lived a sheltered life in the Fens, I was struggling to come up with topics for these talks. On reflection, given my intimate knowledge of dykes, I probably should have gone with ‘Fenland watercourses and their role in aircraft navigation’; instead, for my first talk I chose the Spalding Flower Parade. These were the days before Powerpoint so any visual aid had to be a photographic slide or OHP[7] acetate sheet. I went with photos of tulip floats cut out from our local paper and glued onto cardboard – what was I thinking? I can’t remember whether I included a reference to John Noakes and Shep, but sincerely hope I didn’t.

Our tutor was a tough RAF Regiment officer and you can imagine his response to flowers as a subject for a talk. I can’t write what he said for fear of offending modern sensibilities. To be fair though, he said he had actually secretly enjoyed the talk, but would be watching closely to ensure my second longer talk was more relevant to a career in the military.

Although I had spent all those years in the ATC, I still couldn’t think of a subject that I knew enough about for a 20-minute presentation without someone in the audience probably having more knowledge and making me look stupid. In a rare moment of inspiration, I decided to talk about military camouflage, with slides of various fighter planes and tanks, and how their various colours were inspired by nature and landscape. This was the first of many

[7] OHP is an overhead projector for anyone reading this below the age of 40 or so.

occasions over the next 30 years where I would somehow conspire to combine military life with what was probably my true calling. I got away with it; my tutor was happy and gave me a reasonable score, but I would be known as 'nature boy' for the rest of the course.

By the time graduation came around I was mentally and physically shattered and was hoping for a couple of weeks' leave before pilot training began. Nope, not a chance: I got the weekend off and was told to report to RAF Swinderby (just a few miles away from Cranwell) to join the Flying Selection Squadron (FSS[8]) on the Monday morning. I would like to be able to use that as a reason for what followed, but tiredness was probably the least of my problems.

FSS had a handful of Chipmunks and retired RAF pilots, including some who had flown Spitfires, and their job was to sort the wheat from the chaff. You would get 14 hours in the cockpit over a number of sorties, where the instructor would show you something once, such as taxying, take-off, flying straight and level, and landing, which you then had to replicate. The first week was given over to getting kitted out, safety briefs and reading the aircraft manual so you understood what all the gauges were for and suchlike. There was no time for the flying staff to teach you these details - you were expected to know this stuff before you climbed into the cockpit for the first time. I naively thought my previous flying experience would help get me through this phase of the training.

My card was indelibly marked within five minutes of the first sortie. The Chipmunk cockpit is a tandem arrangement with the student in the front and the instructor behind. It also has a short tail wheel so when you are taxying you can't see straight ahead, as the nose is pointing skywards: you have to weave using the rudder pedals to see where you are heading. However, before we even got going, I was in trouble, as the instructor asked me whether we had enough fuel for the trip. My mind went blank; I am looking at the gauges in front of me and couldn't see one that remotely mentioned fuel. Stupidly I replied: "Yes plenty Sir". His response was "I don't know how you worked that out when the fuel gauges are on the wing

[8] The military loves a TLA (Three Letter Acronym) – I am trying to keep them to a minimum.

and I didn't see your head turn either way to look at them". That set the tone for my 14 fleeting hours as a fledgling pilot, I'm afraid.

Some of the flights went reasonably well - I hesitate to call them lessons as there was very little instruction - this was more about determining whether you had a natural aptitude for flying and getting rid of those who were likely to fail at some point, without wasting too much resource on them. I mastered take-off, flying straight and level, and some of the manoeuvres, but there was one big issue: landing the blasted thing. As much as I tried, my brain/hand/eye coordination couldn't cope with the workload to safely descend, which seemed to defy logic, as the joystick, instead of adjusting pitch, now controlled speed, and the throttle affected whether the nose pointed up or down. Some of those strange tests at Biggin Hill now started to make sense.

My other major problem was that I tended to keep my head down looking at the instruments rather than watching what was going on outside the cockpit. On one such occasion I was flying back towards the airfield getting ready to land, and the instructor asked what I was going to do next. I replied that I was going to use the radio to ask the Air Traffic Control tower for permission to land. His response was cutting: "Well why don't you just open the bloody canopy and tap on their window to ask - you are that close. Now get your head up and look where you're going." At the debrief, after he taken back control of the aircraft and landed safely, he added that he thought I was trying to kill him! It therefore came as no surprise when I was one of the three students, from the 12 on the course, who got 'chopped' at the end of those few hours in the air.

Although I was expecting my wings to be well and truly clipped, it was still a chastening experience to find out you are not as good at something as you thought you might be. The other two who failed had both passed the navigator tests, so they had something else to fall back on. I, on the other hand, was not in that position and could have left the RAF at that point. To my relief I was given a couple of weeks' leave to consider my future and report back to Biggin Hill. Given that I had just endured four months of basic officer training and the world outside hadn't changed much in that time, I started thinking about what other trades might suit me. One that jumped out was Supply, or Logistics as it is called these days. There seemed to be a variety of opportunities here, ranging from managing

some very expensive aircraft equipment and personnel, all sorts of specialisations, including fuel and explosives, but one that really appealed to me: movements/mobility, which offered lots of travel and getting closely involved in operations away from the main base.

So, I returned to Biggin Hill in the rank of Pilot Officer, which seemed a little ironic, probably more aptly 'officer without portfolio', such was my current predicament. This time it was much less intense, and after a couple of interviews I was accepted into the Supply branch and posted back to Cranwell for trade training towards the end of the year. In the meantime, I was given a three month 'holding' posting with the Supply Management staff at RAF Brampton, near Huntingdon, which at the time was the Headquarters of Support Command (HQ SC), in charge of all the non-front line RAF stations. As I hadn't yet done the Supply course there was very little I could contribute, or so I thought.

One of the more affectionate names for suppliers is 'blanket stackers' and although they didn't get me doing this physically, the task I was set was perhaps the strategic virtual equivalent. It still being the Cold War, there were lots of exercises and planning going on in case the worst happened. HQ SC set the allowances, or scales, for all the domestic kit that was held in reserve in times of nuclear war. And yes, this included blankets, but also respirator spares, protective suits, buckets, sandbags, brooms, tents – you get the idea. My job was to review each RAF station's holdings of these items against their war scale and re-allocate them accordingly around the country. With a computer and spreadsheet this would have taken a few minutes, but such technology had not reached us then, so graph paper was the order of the day. It took weeks, as there were still lots of RAF bases, and I had to manually write 'signals' to be sent out by telex operators to the units concerned. The next day the phone would be ringing with someone from RAF Wherever asking why they had to send 50 blankets to RAF Somewhere Else, and why couldn't they find their own bleeding blankets etc. etc. Welcome to the real RAF.

My only other significant memory of that short posting was that the Officers' Mess did not serve baked beans, as these were not considered an "officer's vegetable" - another bad habit obviously. I was therefore quite relieved to get back to Cranwell to start the Supply course and find baked beans back on the breakfast menu.

However, no offence to the instructors, but this was a very tedious ten weeks learning about the world of storing and issuing things, manual and (limited) computer accounting, visiting large RAF stations and warehouses; all of which reminded me of my time working in the supermarket. It did however give me the chance finally to take driving lessons and start enjoying the special social life the military offers, and I was playing football again.

We were all expecting postings to supply squadrons up and down the country at the end of the course, raring to get our teeth into new careers. For some reason everyone except me got a proper posting. I was to be sent on yet another course, but this time it was Air Movements at RAF Brize Norton, which was the specialisation that had drawn me in when I had been looking through the Supply Branch recruiting material. It would be another three months 'holding' – this time at Brize on the Air Movements Squadron (AMS) – but things were definitely looking up.

One of the most valuable lessons you learn in training (and perhaps in life) is always listen to the voice of experience. In the RAF this equates to the senior NCOs (Non-Commissioned Officers): the sergeants, flight sergeants and warrant officers. At the AMS I was allocated to one of the duty-shifts that looked after the passenger terminal and loaded VC10 aircraft with cargo, baggage and the 'walking freight'. This particular shift was officer-less at the time and the senior NCOs were asked to take me under their wing – a really good move for me as it turned out. They 'suggested' that I should learn all the jobs (and names) of everyone on the shift by putting on a pair of overalls and getting stuck in. So that is what I did: crawling up the back end of VC10s, stacking suitcases, chatting to the lads and lasses, helping to load pallets of freight, checking in passengers, and filling out cargo manifests and trim sheets.

Trim sheets were particularly important as this required working out the weights of the various elements of the load, correctly mapping each one to the compartment it had been stacked, and calculating how this would affect the overall balance of the aircraft, which then allowed the pilot to adjust the trim controls to offset these forces. Again, there was no computerised version then, so it was all done manually and there was usually a bit of stress involved as the aircraft's crew would often be waiting for you to finish it so they could complete their pre-flight checks. Perversely, I enjoyed doing the trim

sheet under pressure and got quite adept at it, certainly an improvement on my flying skills.

All this hands-on experience paid dividends, once I started the course itself, as I'd already mastered much of what they were about to teach us. It was probably the only course in my RAF career that I thoroughly enjoyed and passed with flying colours. It also featured a week in Cyprus loading and unloading C130 Hercules (aka 'Fat Albert' or 'Hercs') cargo planes, and getting into trouble in the local taverna, usually involving food fights with fast jet aircrew also on detachment at RAF Akrotiri.

The Falklands War was in full swing while we were at Brize and, and as the course concluded, I was hoping to get a posting which would allow me to play a part in the South Atlantic theatre of operations.

3. Migrating South

My wish was duly granted as I was posted to RAF Marham (in Norfolk) to provide mobile supply support to the Victor air-to-air refuelling aircraft, and also the newly arriving Tornados. I'll come back to the Tornados in the next chapter, because it was the Victors that gave me that opportunity to head south.

Although the Falklands War had ended a couple of weeks before I arrived at my new post, the Victors were still very busy supporting the endless stream of Hercs ferrying freight and passengers backwards and forwards along the 8000 miles from the UK to the islands. A number of Victors were based at Ascension Island, which was strategically well-placed about halfway along the route. The current holder of the role was on Ascension and understandably keen to come home now the war was over and move to his next job. It seemed sensible to send me down to replace him and conduct the handover there rather than in the UK. So, within a few days of arriving at Marham, I was getting kitted out with tropical gear, climbing aboard a Fat Albert and heading to Ascension for my first proper job.

Nothing quite prepares you for your first sight of this island, just south of the Equator in the middle of the South Atlantic Ocean: incredibly remote, arid, mostly tree-less, reddish-brown in colour - a volcanic desert - but quite beautiful in its own way, especially the combination of mountainous peaks and sandy beaches. The island has quite a history, which I won't go into here, suffice to say that it is a British Overseas Territory which displays its British naval past in the capital, Georgetown, but the main military use in recent years had been by the US Air Force at Wideawake Airfield. These two locations would feature heavily in my life for the next 5 months and were where I would be spending my 21st birthday.

Georgetown had a colonial look with more buildings than I was expecting, most dating back to the naval docks and Royal Marine Barracks of the 1800s. I thought I might be housed in a tent, but in true RAF style some of these old buildings had been commandeered for officer accommodation. I was housed in the 'Zymotic', which had been an isolation hospital, and it certainly had that feel to it, but with running water and electricity, it was a whole lot better than sleeping under canvas. There was a veranda looking out

to sea, where most of us inmates would while away any spare time, and a white beach in between which was full of craters. But these large hollows weren't the result of enemy action: they were the nesting holes of green turtles. Unfortunately for me this was the wrong time of the year to see them egg laying or hatching, but there were other wildlife delights coming my way during my stint on the island.

Before I get carried away telling those stories, there was the little matter of supporting the Victor tankers and their crews in the aftermath of the Falklands War. Wideawake had probably never seen so many aircraft and support personnel, and the airfield was now littered with temporary hangars, huts and tents. The Victor Supply Detachment was housed in a large white inflatable dome and inside were all the aircraft parts, tools, oils and paraphernalia required to keep them in the air, and their support crews equipped and (reasonably) content. And as much as I put my mind to it, I cannot recall anything of working in there, so I will concentrate on all the interesting stuff that happened 'beyond the dome'.

One of the popular downtime pursuits on Ascension Island was 'letterboxing', where a tin box could be found at the top of each volcanic peak. They contained an ink pad and rubber stamp with the name of the mountain, which you could use to mark your postcard or whatever. I guess it was the forerunner of geocaching[9]. The idea was actually to leave your mail in the box and for the next person to visit to post it for you: a practice that started in the 17th century when passing ships would leave their letters on the island and the next returning ship would carry them home to be posted. That felt a bit risky to me so I just used letterboxing as a way to discover the island. Most of the peaks gave good views out to sea, but there seemed little life up there amongst the rocks and cinder. The exception was Green Mountain where shrubs and trees from around the world had been planted in the 1800s by the British, with a helping hand from Charles Darwin and botanist Joseph Hooker. During my time there the shrubbery, mainly bamboo and eucalyptus, was confined to the upper

[9] Geocaching has become very popular in recent years where you use your phone/GPS to locate a small box containing a swappable trinket and a log card to record the fact that you found it.

slopes, but I understand these days it has run riot almost down to the sea and has to be properly controlled. I don't remember seeing any bird life[10] on Green Mountain but there were lots of small, yellow land crabs running around that didn't look terribly friendly.

However, my favourite pastime during that detachment was fishing. Not something I'd ever really been into before, other than a few unsuccessful trips with my dad to the Vernatts where I always got my line tangled, and of course the ill-fated Tiddler Club. Here everything was different: you could just throw a line in the water with a float and some bait, wait a while, and inevitably something would come along which you could reel in and then put on the barbeque. The usual catch was grouper (also called rock hind), about a foot long, quite an ugly fish, but incredibly tasty - if you could avoid the hundreds of spiny little bones. I am ashamed to say that I forgot about my line one day and left it overnight. The next morning, I pulled out a small, dead mako shark, which I guess had probably eaten what I had caught first and then drowned trying to get off the hook. Landing a live shark might have been 'interesting' so perhaps it was lucky (for me, not this poor creature) that it was dead when I brought it ashore. It was about two feet long, blue/grey and perfectly formed with impressively sharp teeth, quite something to study at close hand. And yes, before you ask, it did end up on the barbeque.

The ultimate fishing experience for me was when a massive oil tanker arrived at the island to deliver vital fuel supplies. The British Esk had quite a young crew and they were keen for our supply team to come aboard and sample their way of life. The ride on the RIB[11] from the port to the moored ship was memorable in itself, as it brought my first close-up of dolphins (bottlenose, I assume) riding the bow wave, but the best was yet to come. On board, the crew had set up heavy duty rods off the back of the ship and we would be fishing for tuna. Although we were a long way up from the sea surface,

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[10] In fact, the only birds I recall at all were a few frigatebirds that were flying around offshore. At the time no birds bred on the main island because of rodents and cats that came with the early ships, which had decimated nests and seabird colonies.

[11] RIB stands for Rigid Inflatable Boat – a widely used small, fast, lightweight unsinkable craft.

when one of the yellow-finned giants jumped out of the water it took your breath away, especially when you'd only ever seen tuna in cans before. I didn't catch one, but a couple were brought aboard which went down to the galley to be prepared for our meal later.

Everyone who is enthusiastic about wildlife probably has a 'Top 5' of their experiences, and one of mine duly arrived while I was aboard the British Esk that day. I had taken a rest from tuna fishing and went for a walk along the side of the ship. Below where I was standing, I caught sight of a large hammerhead shark swimming quickly towards the stern where the other guys were still fishing. I can only surmise that it thought this might be a fishing opportunity too, but before I could share my sighting with anyone, a pod of dolphins arrived, about the same size as the shark, and one rammed the side of the hammerhead. The shark turned tail and swam off at speed. Wow, did I really just see that? Of course, no-one believed me: they thought I was just making up a fishy tall tale as I hadn't caught any tuna. Back then you couldn't just Google it and prove that dolphins do indeed attack sharks, but perhaps that was what made it so special for me. Researching it now, you can find film footage of such occurrences and an explanation that probably there were calves in that dolphin pod, and they were seeing off a potential predator of their young.

The day was topped off by a visit to the crew bar and a bit of high jinks. Given the crew were hosting the RAF they decided to set up a 'game' of Dambusters. Everything was new to me at that stage so I eagerly volunteered to 'pilot' the Lancaster bomber – I did check first whether I would need to land it, as that might be problematical. Four other guys were recruited as engines and they held onto broom handles which would act as the wings of our imaginary aircraft. There was a clue about what was to happen next as we were then decked out in full wet weather gear, and I was handed a torch. Behind me was the 'bomb aimer' and he had to carry a 1.5 Volt battery between his legs which would be the bomb, and a beer glass placed on the other side of the bar was our target. Our task was to shuffle in loose formation across the room in the dark and drop the bomb over the target. I started the engines in turn, and each would give a whirring noise and an arm would be turning to represent the propeller. So far so good, but everyone else in the room was standing either side of the target humming the Dambusters' theme

tune, armed with beer cans, mostly empty but some less so. At the call of 'FLAK', the cans were launched in our general direction. Being an engine turned out to be the worst job as someone would shout 'Fire in No. 1 (2, 3, or 4) engine' and beer would be poured over that person to extinguish the flames. We crashed before reaching the target, which was probably understandable given my piloting skills. It had been a brilliant day, and we left the ship - slightly damp and drunk - but with memories that would last a lifetime.

Swimming was allowed on one beach only, English Bay, where there was less chance of the current pulling you out to sea or getting attacked by 'black piranhas'. These were actually triggerfish and were a source of constant fascination to me. Until I was told their true identity, I called them 'kettle fish', because, if you threw any food scraps into the sea from the beach, dozens would be on it within seconds and the water would bubble up like a boiling kettle. Apparently, this behaviour is unique to Ascension Island, something to do with the numbers that live there with relatively few predators. Also, although they look black from the surface, close-up I gather they are a very dainty, beautifully marked fish – appearances can indeed be deceptive. Many years later I discovered the delights of warm water snorkelling, marvelling at the incredible biodiversity and colours around a coral reef, and wanting to say "Oh wow" every time something else comes into view – not a great strategy with a snorkel in your mouth. What I would give to go back and see those triggerfish from that perspective.

These days I am not a great fan of celebrating my birthday (yes, I am a grumpy old man), but reaching 21 was a bit of a milestone and would have to be marked. There were plenty of bars dotted around the island, including one on the airfield. It was in another of those inflatable white domes, and I am pretty sure it was called the Volcano Club, run by the USAF. I had this daft idea that I would take the team down to the bar, after we finished work, the evening before my birthday, and remain at the bar until I turned 21 at midnight. Not one of my greatest ideas, especially when I was introduced to a cocktail called a white spider. You will find various recipes for this in books and on-line, but probably not the version served at the Volcano, which was eight shots of clear spirits, mainly vodka, with others added depending on availability, mixed with condensed milk, and served in a goldfish bowl-shaped glass.

I am a lightweight drinker, but this special occasion required me to step up and not throw up early on. Apparently over the course of the evening I drank three of these things in between an awful lot of American beer. The 'supply' team lived up to their name and kept the drinks coming, drafting in other people from the detachment to take it in shifts to join the celebration, and sing 'Happy Birthday' come midnight. They even made sure someone was sober enough to drive me back to Georgetown afterwards; I was virtually out of it by then and laid in the back of the Land Rover with the tailgate down, looking up at the stars, and two blokes holding on to my feet to stop me shooting out the back. Upon my return to the Zymotic, instead of heading for bed, I went out onto the beach and crashed in a turtle hole and wasn't found until the next afternoon. Thank goodness I didn't decide to go for a midnight swim.

Towards the end of my five-month detachment, as it became clear the RAF would be based at Ascension Island permanently, additional support staff started to arrive, and it felt more and more like an RAF station back home. Suddenly there were duty officer rosters and more rules, including banning swimming at all the beaches, which didn't go down well. There were three administration staff and their office was a tent, which became known as 'Handbrake House'. They even had their own parking spaces outside. The indignant rebel in me (last seen during the ATC hut 'cleaning scandal') came to the fore again, and, as a parting gift, I arranged for parking signs to be made up in RAF blue, with HH1, HH2, and HH3 painted on them. On my last night, I coerced a couple of the team to help me erect these outside their 'office'. After I got back to the UK, I found out the plan had backfired, as the 'shineys' considered them to be badges of honour (perhaps they thought HH stood for something different) and the signs remained in place for many months.

I returned to RAF Marham on the evening of the Officers' Mess Christmas party, and it was quite surreal seeing all the chaps in black dinner jackets and ladies in long dresses, while I was still wearing my sweaty tropical uniform carrying all my baggage. For once I went straight to bed.

4. Migrating West

Although I would still get some more good trips away with the Victors, such as Bermuda, Goose Bay (in Canada) and Iceland, my main focus now turned to supporting the Tornados. This would become a recurring theme for me, culminating in the Gulf War of 1991.

The original concept for the Tornado was that it would operate from large, well established airfields in the UK and Germany to fend off the Russians. It was a fantastic piece of kit, in all its variants, but not really designed to be supported away from the main operating base: its avionics needed large specialist workshops for repair, and some of the ground support equipment was extremely bulky and heavy, and thus not very mobile. But it wasn't very long before 617 Squadron ('Dambusters'), re-formed at Marham with Tornado bombers, along with 27 Squadron, were being invited to attend air shows and bombing competitions around the world.

Spares availability dogged the early years of the Tornado and trying to put together a 'Fly Away Pack' (FAP) of equipment to support these detached operations was much harder than for other more mature aircraft, such as the Victor. The FAP would be constantly 'robbed' to keep aircraft flying on the front line; failing that, other squadron aircraft had to be stripped of their assets - these were known un-affectionately as 'Christmas trees'. My first trip with the Tornados would be to Toronto with 617 Squadron for the Canadian National Exhibition Air Show of 1983. Spares were so short that I spent most of my time in the airport, chatting up customs officials, trying to expedite our kit in and out of the country. Amazing what favours you could muster with a handful of RAF and squadron stickers (or 'zaps' as they were called). I did manage to squeeze in an outing to Niagara Falls, but wasn't terribly impressed – far too touristy for me. However, all of this was a dry run for a much longer and more enriching detachment to North America in 1984.

Exercise *Prairie Vortex* would see me spend most of that year in South Dakota, USA, with the Dambusters taking part in a bombing competition. Our little mobility team had to plan and manage the move of great swathes of equipment and personnel across the Pond to support the six detached Tornados. This was a big challenge, especially when we were told by HQ Strike Command

(HQSTC) that there was not enough air transport available to make this happen. Instead, much of the kit would have to be transported by road and sea in 40-foot shipping containers.

We had only been trained in movement of freight by air, so this was going to be new ground for all of us. I don't think the squadron technicians ('techies') were very happy to hear that much of their short-supply equipment would be out of reach for weeks and risked getting damaged at sea if we didn't get it right. Thankfully, we got some help on site from the Government Freight Agent[12], and used an awful lot of wood, rope and chains to tie it all down. I was mainly trusted to do the paperwork. As it turned out, of the dozen or so containers we loaded, all but one arrived with no damage – one unfortunately was dropped by a crane at the port badly damaging a rather expensive Ground Power Unit. Predictably though, the techies still blamed us stackers.

We were located at Ellsworth Air Force Base, home at the time to massive B-52 bomber aircraft and housed in nearby Rapid City, right in the middle of 'cowboy country'. Before anyone asks, we stayed in local hotels, and must have propped up the local economy, as well as many Western saloons, that year. I had the additional responsibility of 'imprest holder', which meant I was Mr Moneybags, looking after thousands of US dollars to pay local bills and dole out cash to everyone on the detachment. This was because we were all entitled to 'local overseas allowances' to cover the additional expenses of being away from home. We called it 'beer money'.

In all I spent seven months in South Dakota, which gave me plenty of time to get a flavour of the local culture and the surrounding landscape. I also got down to Denver, and the Rockies, a couple of times as I had a sergeant based at the airport handling our freight, just as I had done in Toronto the year before. The Midwest was an incredibly diverse place to explore: Mount Rushmore was not far from Rapid City and eminently displayed one side of US history with its presidential carvings, state flags and modern visitor centre, but just down the road the unfinished monument of Crazy Horse gave you a sense of a completely different version of the past. And the

[12] They are called 'freight forwarders' nowadays and provide specialist help with packing goods for export.

contrasts continued with the Black Hills National Forest, with its pine-covered, black looking hills, famous for the Gold Rush, and the dramatic bare rock formations of the Badlands National Park, displaying layers of reds and yellows in its rugged peaks. Joining these areas together was the wide expanse of grassy prairies; here there were herds of free-roaming bison, which were making a comeback after facing extinction in the late 1800s, and a creature I had never heard of before: a prairie dog.

I was really taken with the prairie dogs, unlike local cattle ranchers[13], and spent ages watching them: they were about a foot long, and reminded me of overweight meerkats with the way they stood on their hind legs, hanging around in gangs, and disappearing down their burrows at the first hint of danger. They are actually a species of ground squirrel, but their warning calls sound like a high-pitched bark, hence the canine reference in their name. Whereas the rest of the detachment were drawn to places like Deadwood, where they could re-live the antics of Wild Bill Hickock and Calamity Jane, I found myself being more and more attracted to a different sort of wild life. None more so when each of us was given a few days off to draw breath before the main bombing competition began, with more intensive flying, when we would all be working flat out to keep the Tornados in the air.

I had a brainwave and decided to hire a car and drive to Yellowstone National Park, which was the best part of 500 miles away in Wyoming. Either everyone thought I was mad, or didn't fancy my company for that long, as no-one took up my offer of a seat for this road trip. The park had mythical status for me, having seen it on the TV so many times during my childhood, and I thought this might be my only chance to visit. Just to add to the mystique and mileage, I decided to do a dogleg and visit Devils Tower, featured prominently of course in the 1977 film Close Encounters of the Third Kind. I reached the Tower quite early, before anyone else was around, and it was easy to understand why it was considered sacred to indigenous people, as it had such an aura about it. The only signs of life I saw were a few white-tailed deer, which I believe are fairly

[13] Many ranchers believe prairie dogs compete for forage and their burrows are a hazard to cattle.

common, but they just added to the other-worldly atmosphere of the place.

The rest of the journey must have been uneventful as I cannot now recall any details of it, but my stay at Yellowstone will live forever in my memory. I had booked a couple of nights in the Lodge, which felt like a cross between an alpine log cabin and colonial mansion, if that makes sense. The park itself is immense (2.2 million acres) and unsurprisingly I had no hope of getting around it in the next day and a half, but I gave it a good go, marvelling at the geothermal features such as Old Faithful Geyser, the many colourful hot springs and the overpowering smell of rotten eggs at the bubbling mudpots. I had forgotten that Yellowstone River has its own Grand Canyon, which was a stunningly beautiful surprise, especially its waterfalls. However, it was wildlife that I had driven 500 miles to see.

I was at the park in the years before wolves were reintroduced, but there were still plenty of other big mammals to look out for. I saw bighorn sheep, elk and moose[14], and heard howling coyotes, but the highlight was seeing a black bear cub on my second day as I drove along one of the popular trails. I guess its mother wasn't too far away, but this area felt a bit like a safari park as there was a stream of cars behind me, so I took that as my cue to head back to base. The place left an indelible mark on me and, nearly 40 years on, I still hope to go back and visit the place properly one day, and perhaps hear a wolf calling in the wild.

[14] Although in Europe we often think of moose and elk as the same animal, in the US they are separate species.

5. Migrating North and East

Not long after returning from South Dakota I was posted to RAF Kinloss in northern Scotland. Looking back, I cannot believe I spent a year there and did not visit the ospreys just down the road at Loch Garten when I had made that marathon trip to Yellowstone just a few months previously. For some inexplicable reason I decided to buy a ridiculously bright yellow MGB roadster and managed to irritate most of the local population driving around with the top down, blasting out the Human League and Howard Jones on my extra bass speakers.

The highlight of my time in Scotland, other than managing to get a ticket for Live Aid and travelling south the night before on the Aberdeen 'sleeper' train, which is another story completely, was driving along the west coast road with a mate and staying in Ullapool. That winding drive along the Highland crags and moors must be one of the most picturesque and driver-distracting routes in Britain. A story I had almost forgotten was that, when we got parked, there was hardly anyone about, it must have been out of season, other than a Russian trawler, which had us imagining Cold War spies were everywhere. We went for a drink in a rustic café/bar on the front; again we were the only ones in there apart from one other person: Terry Scott![15] He was trying to get away from it all, so goodness only knows what he thought to us turning up to ruin his peace and quiet, but the three of us shared some silly jokes and a few drinks; he even gave us a rendition of 'My Brother' at one point.

Towards the end of 1985, I heard that there was a real possibility that Saudi Arabia would buy a shedload of Tornados from the UK as part of a project called Al-Yamamah. My first thought was to wonder where all the spare parts were going to come from, given the problems we'd had at Marham, but my second was 'tax free pay - where do I sign up?' I had spent some time in the Middle East the year before with 27 Squadron, when four Tornados were deployed to

[15] Again, for anyone under 40, Terry Scott was a quite a famous face at the time in Carry On films and TV sitcoms. His 1962 comedy record 'My Brother' was a firm favourite for many, many years on the 'Junior Choice' BBC radio show.

Thumrait in Oman, and I quoted this experience to my 'Desk Officer'[16] while we were discussing my next posting. I'm not sure if that swung it, or if every other RAF Supply officer had given the project a wide berth, but I was posted to the project team in London, before being seconded to British Aerospace (BAe) at Dhahran Airfield as their Tornado Supply Officer for two years.

I moved back home for a few weeks so I could store my stuff, reluctantly sell the MG[17], and commute down to London before going off to Saudi. The project team had taken over a floor in one of those anonymous office buildings in Central London. You knew it was a Ministry of Defence building from the cheap, off-white (dirty) net curtains that hung from every window. The head of the team was an 'old school' Wing Commander, who took an instant dislike to me saying I was far too young-looking to have any credibility with the Saudis. It didn't help my cause when I managed to accidently break his coffee mug during the first week. When I asked about the potential spares availability issues, I was told that the Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF) would take priority, which would include re-directing equipment bound for the RAF if necessary. I could only imagine what the techies back at Marham would make of that little bombshell.

Within a couple of weeks, I was heading off with the Wing Commander and a couple of others on the team for negotiation meetings in Saudi Arabia. I found the Saudis very welcoming and they were interested to hear of my experiences supporting the Tornados abroad, and that I had been working with the USAF, especially as they were about to purchase a version of their stock control computer system, called Autolog. The Wing Commander didn't fare so well as, upon our return, the Saudis sent word that they didn't want him back in their country for any future meetings – apparently, they didn't like his over-bearing manner. Ouch!

Before I could take up my post in Saudi, I had to attend orientation training with BAe at Samlesbury in Lancashire. A flight

[16] Desk Officers were the military officers who managed your career, sent you on staff courses and postings, and (hopefully) would put in a good word for you at promotion boards.

[17] I had just had the dashboard re-wired after the car stereo caught fire – I suspected sabotage by an 80s' pop music hating Scot.

sergeant and a couple of corporals were also being seconded, just for one year though, to help set up warehouses and accounting systems at Dhahran. One of them had been with me at Marham so it was good to catch up and discuss how we would spend our extra earnings, with a house deposit as my top priority. However, on the first morning of the course, I felt terrible and went to the on-site Medical Centre, where they diagnosed chickenpox and sent me straight home. I was laid up in bed for the next three weeks, which was very frustrating as the rest of the team had now flown out, and I was in danger of losing the job, as the Saudis wanted the officer out there 'yesterday'.

Fortunately, they remained patient and I got there a month after the others. The history of the Al-Yamamah arms deal is well known, infamous even, and I won't go into that here, but I got a sense of it on the first day, when I was shown to a small office, empty other than a desk and a bookcase, on the RSAF base. This was to be my desk and sitting on top were piles of French publications covering all aspects of the Mirage fighter jet. The rumour was that the French negotiation team had upset the Saudis, and Margaret Thatcher had stepped in with an offer they couldn't refuse, resulting in the French being kicked out almost overnight. Clearly you didn't mess with the Saudis, or Maggie.

Most of my two years in Saudi were spent walking around the warehouse looking for Tornado equipment which couldn't be found after Autolog had given it a new, unrecognisable identification code. I got quite good at locating our kit amongst the rows of racks and what size of box it would be in – once a spotter always a spotter. We lived in a compound in downtown Al-Khobar and, as the working hours were 5am to 1pm, to avoid the searing afternoon heat, we had a lot of spare time. Once you had got used to the censored newspapers and magazines, which looked similar to a redacted government Freedom of Information response, the beef-bacon and lack of beer, as pork and alcohol were not allowed in the country, you could almost be in a 1950s' holiday camp. I joined the on-site theatre company and graduated from sound engineer to a brother in Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, in a very fetching bright pink dish-dash, and then King Rat in Dick Whittington, requiring me to wear a black leotard and tights while catching a ballet dancing cat

above my head. The photographic and video evidence of my costumes and performances remain under lock and key to this day.

Similar to my time in Scotland, I am struggling to write about any wildlife anecdotes from my time in Saudi Arabia. The only occasion I got away from Dhahran and Al-Khobar was on a four-hour road trip with the Flight Sergeant to attend a meeting in the capital, Riyadh. We saw lots of camels as we drove across the featureless desert, but I assume these weren't wild mega-fauna and more likely to be free roaming livestock. That particular journey was memorable as we were so hungry, we stopped and shared a spit-roasted chicken at a roadside stall in the middle of nowhere. This was one of the things they told us on the orientation training to avoid, but of course we knew better. It was delicious, but two days later I was in hospital with severe food poisoning. The Flight Sergeant? No ill effects whatsoever. Following my brush with chickenpox a few months before, it just seemed to confirm to the team that officers were not made of the same stuff as senior NCOs.

Not only was the pay generous, but we also got good leave benefits including free return flights to the UK a couple of times a year. I now had the travel bug and spent these holidays just about anywhere but in Britain. One of the last ones was a summer holiday in Crete, where I met my future wife. A long-distance relationship ensued, accompanied by some eye watering telephone bills, until I returned from Saudi in early 1988. Although I had very much enjoyed my time in the Gulf, I did not expect to return any time soon.

6. Nesting and breeding

I am under strict instructions from my better half not to write anything about her, and perhaps quite wisely she wishes to remain anonymous, so, ever the dutiful husband, I will honour that memo from Command Headquarters and keep this chapter very brief. Suffice to say, upon my return from Saudi, I was posted to a base near Leighton Buzzard in Bedfordshire, where the RAF Supply mainframe computer system was located, and we eventually got married and bought a house a few miles away in Buckingham. The Saudi nest egg hadn't lasted long, but it had been a godsend for the deposit. Anyone who remembers the sky high mortgage interest rates from that time, and the negative equity which quickly followed, will probably shudder at the thought.

As fate would have it, our next-door neighbour was a very keen birder, and I guess this is the point where my subconscious, sporadic interest in wildlife finally surfaced permanently. I was in the front garden one morning and this little green bird, with a yellow streak on its head, was flitting around between the shrubs. I wasn't sure what it might be, but my friendly neighbour instantly identified it as a goldcrest, and rattled off loads of fascinating stuff about it being our smallest bird and how it used its crest to display to other birds; up until then I thought that wrens were our tiniest birds, but what did I know?

Goldcrest by Francis C Franklin.

It turned out that, not only was he a birder, but also a warden for a local nature reserve where he would ring owls and survey for other species, and generally look after the place. This all sounded very interesting and within a few weeks, he had taken me to this inspirational site and was helping me identify the many different birds, insects, and plants to be found there around the lake and reedbeds. It had been created from an old brick industry clay pit and demonstrated what could be achieved through the dedication of conservationists and volunteers.

You may recognise the name of this wonderful reserve: Calvert Jubilee. As I write this in 2020, it is being destroyed by the HS2 project to reduce train times between London and Birmingham by a few minutes. Words almost fail me, which is a rarity in itself, other than to say I will never forgive or forget this act of unnecessary environmental vandalism, and how, as a nation, we can then condemn similar crimes in other countries is beyond my comprehension. Before I go off at a massive tangent, let us return to 1989/1990…

When you start a hobby such as birdwatching, each species you see for the first time is immensely exciting, but also frustrating when you struggle to correctly identify it – more of that in a later chapter. However, just as I discovered this whole new world, it had to be put to one side, as life was about to change significantly in more ways than one. The birth of my daughter was the first, but, just a few months after that monumental event, I was off to war.

7. Fighting for territory

After the Falklands War of 1982, there had been a period of relative calm for the military with our ongoing focus to prepare for a potential conflict with the USSR, involving many NATO exercises and tactical evaluations. These were known as the dreaded 'Tacevals', which would see you holed up at the base on a war footing for three to five days (and nights) reacting to 'injects' from the Directing Staff, who came specially from HQSTC in High Wycombe to make our lives hell for a few days, dreaming up tests that we described as 'practise bleeding'. For us loggies, this would usually mean dispersing stock around the airfield buildings so all your eggs weren't in one basket, and reacting to scenarios such as the loss of a fuel installation as if it had been bombed or sabotaged by the Russians. However, with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the break-up of the Soviet Union towards the end of the decade, everything was changing, and it looked like the Tornado might be obsolete without a post-Cold War role.

Nothing could have been further from the truth, as the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussain's Iraqi forces in 1990 signalled a new era of world conflict, with the Tornados taking centre stage. As soon as I heard the RAF were deploying Tornados to Dhahran, where I'd spent two years not that long before, I knew the phone would be ringing, and would be off on my travels again. I returned to Saudi in October, six months after my daughter was born, and three months before the First Gulf War began.

Those three months were probably the most intense and meaningful of my RAF career. I was still a relatively junior officer, and suddenly it was all very serious and a lot different to any detachment I had been on before - this was no exercise. However, I clicked into 'Taceval mode', so the training had worked after all, and got the supply team to disperse the spares around the base, preferably in hardened buildings. These were at a premium and much of the Tornado detachment was located in portable cabins adjacent to the aircraft parking, so we were sitting ducks. Alongside the engineers, I was arranging high cost contracts for the local manufacture of concrete gabions to act as blast walls for aircraft and personnel shelters, and negotiating with the Army for sandbags, or anything else we thought might help protect us. If only we had war

scales, like those I had been working on back at Brampton almost ten years earlier.

It focuses the mind when you think you might be about to get bombed. We had no real idea what Saddam was capable of, so preparation for chemical warfare became an important element of our routine. All those annual tests to get my respirator on in nine seconds[18], and getting a mouthful of CS gas when I failed, now potentially had more severe consequences. We practised every day, learning how to remove and replace our chemical suits, rubber over-boots and gloves without contaminating ourselves or others. We were also introduced to ColPro (Collective Protection): complex tent-like structures erected inside the larger buildings and hangars, which had a portable ventilation system, preventing the ingress of chemical agents, and requiring us to properly decontaminate before entering, hence all the undressing drills. It was a time for learning fast and ensuring practice really did make perfect.

It was also a time of innovation. In normal circumstances the Tornados would be refuelled via bowsers after they had shut down their engines for safety reasons. Part of our supply role was to operate a temporary aviation fuel installation – this was basically some very large black rubber 'pillow' tanks that were laid out on the other side of the airfield, which would then pump fuel into the bowsers. This operation took time, so we looked at alternatives, especially as we expected the Tornados to land and want a very quick turnaround. The pillow tanks were alongside a taxiway, so we attempted a 'hot refuel', pumping directly into the aircraft with its engines running - a practice more familiar during helicopter operations. It worked, but it wasn't much quicker than refuelling via a bowser, especially as the aircraft was burning fuel while it stood there, so, although it was a contingency in case the bowsers broke down or were destroyed, we never used the procedure in anger.

Christmas was cancelled that year for all of us - it was just another day getting ready for war - no-one felt they had anything to celebrate. However, it was good to know the great British public were thinking of us, which was evident from the thousands of shoeboxes

[18] It was drummed into you during training to 'mask in nine' or face certain death during chemical warfare.

which turned up on almost every resupply flight in December. Each box was neatly wrapped in festive paper and contained lots of goodies, Christmas cards with best wishes, and some even had photographs of the sender (usually female), as well as telephone numbers, for the single lads to follow up. They certainly kept everyone's spirits up just at the right time.

As the mid-January deadline for Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait approached, it looked more and more likely that we would be going to war. Ironically, the Russians had been trying to broker a last-minute peace deal and we were able to watch developments live on CNN, which was a mixed blessing. We knew we were within range of Iraq's Scud missiles, but the big unknown was whether they would be armed with chemical warheads, and this was particularly unnerving. I remember writing a letter to my daughter for her to read on her 18th birthday if I did not return, and saw others becoming more religious and attending the services run by the detachment padre within our accommodation compound. I shared a room with an Army Captain from the Royal Signals who kept a loaded pistol under his pillow. He said he kept it there in case we were attacked by insurgents in the night, but it was pointed towards my bed, so I did wonder if he just wasn't very trusting of RAF officers.

Keeping a diary was never something I had considered before. It might have helped me write this book, but there you go - afterthought is an exact science. I did however keep a few notes in my trusty Filofax during this extraordinary period, usually to remind me what I had to do the next day, but once the war started I found myself wanting to record events happening around me. I discovered them again recently, so before I lose them for good, I have included some of the more printable entries below in *italics* with brief explanations of what was going on at the time…

16 January 1991: Deadline passes at 0800hrs. We know the kites will go off at 0300hrs tomorrow. Running around compound in respirators at 0100hrs – big laughs!

17 January: Enemy hit heavily by allies. I am on night shift. No response from Iraq until early next morning. One Scud taken out by a Patriot missile. One of our guys was out checking the pillow tanks

and warned us by radio: "They're firing at us – missiles". He now has hero status with the rest of the supply detachment.

18 January: That was some night – Israel hit badly. We are now taking NAPS – they make you feel terrible. Two more alerts on the nightshift, but no Scuds.

Hard to believe now that two hours before the aircraft ('kites') were due to launch, we were messing about, but I suppose that was a coping response. There was to be no nonsense for the next few weeks once the Scuds started raining down, hopefully to be intercepted by the US Patriot missile defence system. To be honest though, I thought we were probably at more risk from the cocktail of drugs we were ordered[19] to take: we had already had vaccinations for Anthrax, amongst others, and been taking Biological Agent Pre-treatment Sets (BAPS) tablets, but once we were ordered to take NAPS (Nerve Agent Pre-treatment Sets), it felt like we were in unchartered territory, as this was the first time they had ever been used on a large scale. All these years on, I still have my medical card, which records the various vaccines we were given, just in case there is ever another inquiry into Gulf War Syndrome/illnesses. I would hate to say we were 'guinea pigs', but there was sufficient evidence in the war's aftermath to convince me personally that having more children would be risky.

19 January: Very quiet night – too quiet.

20 January: Mega Scud night. Got caught out in the open when the Patriots launched – had to crawl into cover and got covered in mud. More Scuds launched later. Still OK so far.

[19] The MOD says these drugs and vaccines were administered 'on the basis of voluntary informed consent'. From House of Commons Select Committee on Defence Seventh Report (Apr 2000): https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199900/cmselect/cmdfence/125/12506.htm accessed Oct 2020.

21 January: Hard to believe what I experienced last night: in the open, explosions, missiles – I shall never forget the ear-splitting BANG, and my feeling of isolation. Thank God I'm still here to tell the story. More Scuds tonight but they went over the top and into the sea. Terrible feelings when I saw our beaten-up pilot on TV – hatred.

These days being able to watch a crisis unfold minute-by-minute via live TV news is par for the course. Back then it was something new and felt very surreal, especially on the first night when a CNN reporter was describing exactly where the Scuds were exploding. He was standing on top of the Hilton hotel, which overlooked our airfield, and he was acting like an Iraqi bomb aimer. We were unimpressed, and not just because he was staying in a hotel and the RAF contingent were not. It also didn't help each morning with the tabloid reporters hanging around the briefing tent asking if anyone had been killed in the Scud attacks the night before. To then see one of the shot-down, captured Tornado aircrew on TV, who had clearly been tortured, had a very noticeable negative impact on our morale.

22 January: First light and the fourth on-target Scud. One of the guys knocked himself out scrambling into the air raid shelter, we had to drag him in. The explosion rocked us. The blokes are still in good spirits though. Later – tried to call home, but then explosions overhead and had to dash for it. Found out later, it was nine Patriots launched, but no Scuds. My nerves are shot to death.

23 January: Two more Scuds shot down – debris fell on the roof of our bomb shelter – we had a singalong: 'Always look on the bright side of life'. Have been told the ground battle will start soon. Also, we will get the bodies from the frontline – grim thoughts. A couple of blokes are to be shipped back with shellshock – they keep hitting the deck every time they hear loud noises. We are all twitchy, but I'm not at the point of insanity yet…

24 January: One of the Tornados from here bought it, and another has heavy battle damage. Yet another false air raid alarm as Riyadh is targeted, not us.

One of the enduring images for me was seeing first-hand the Tornado aircrew returning from bombing missions having been under heavy fire from the ground: haunted, drained, and dishevelled; totally at odds with their usual energetic, confident, and smart demeanour that you would see day-to-day, which could sometimes be galling for us 'mere mortals'. Up until that point I had harboured a 'chip on my shoulder' about not making the grade as a pilot, but that had changed overnight. I now had immense respect for what they were being asked to do, and no longer begrudged them their 'flying pay' – it was the very least they deserved for what they were going through.

25 January: Now on day shift. Early morning (0330hrs), real thing, stayed in bed with my helmet and respirator on. Our OC Engineering is going back to the UK exhausted, shame, but it has all caught up with him.

26/27 January: More and more people showing signs of cracking. It's only loud explosions and dread of the unknown at the moment – God knows what they'll be like when there are bodies scattered everywhere.

28 January: Another boring day of running around wiping people's backsides – boy will I be glad to go home. Got to grit my teeth and just get through this. Another round of injections today.

29 January: Felt like being sick hearing about the injuries the Iraqis are suffering, and what lays ahead for the ground battle? In tears looking at photos of my daughter sent from home – she seems grown up already.

30 January: Tropical uniforms arrived today to replace our sweaty green ones. Every senior officer wants them before anyone else – bunch of children.

I will leave a gap here, as the next few entries are all personal stuff. There was however a hint that I might go home and be replaced at that point, but it wasn't to be…

4 February: No signs of me leaving whatsoever. The boys have just sung 'Leaving on a jet plane' at the breakfast table – piss taking sods.

5 February: They get worse, this time they had a request put on Forces' radio for Kevin of the '641st Scud Duckers': 'Sloop John B'; lyrics: 'Let me go home, I wanna go home, this is the worst trip I've ever been on'. Amazingly apt words.

The logistics building number was 641, hence the clever little title for our outfit. Someone even had t-shirts made up with a cartoon of a pair of eyes peeping out from under a helmet with '641st Scud Duckers' printed on the front. I dread to think where they came from, and I didn't ask, as we weren't supposed to go shopping downtown to the souks.

6 February: Another quiet night – still no news of going home. The lads are going to be posing for The Sun with a big Valentine's card. I said 'no', I'd never live it down. I told them I'd only do it if it was for the Daily Mail! Took a lot of stick for that comment.

7 February: Nothing to report until 25 Feb. It is now a boring routine of working 14-hour days, chasing spares and other stuff, with false Scud alarms keeping you awake at night.

25 February: The unimaginable happened tonight – the war is nearly over and a stray Scud hit us. The US Army got it – 30 dead, 100 injured. Just behind the souks on my route from the compound. War really sunk home with us tonight.

26 February: Saw the destruction as I left for work this morning: it was a warehouse being used as barracks; it's just a steel skeleton now – the whole place just blew up. There but for the grace of God.

Looking back, the Scuds were perhaps our generation's equivalent of the doodlebugs from the Second World War: they were very random and had little strategic value, but carried an ever-present nagging impact on morale, and when one struck it would have devastating consequences for anyone unlucky enough to be

underneath. Fortunately, in both wars, they did not carry chemical weapons, which could have resulted in very different outcomes.

27 February: It's looking good. The air war has crucified them and the ground war has been minimal. Looks like a cease fire will be announced in the early hours.

28 February: Yes, 0500hrs – 42 days of air war, 100 hours of ground war – it's a resounding victory. Later Stormin' Norman, standing on a trailer alongside President Bush, gives us a marvellous brief on how it was done. Fantastic achievement. Might be home in two weeks.

1 March: Driving around the base this morning (0430hrs), it was eerily quiet as if nothing had ever happened. The only clue was the clinging black fog, which was a reminder of the burning oil fields in Kuwait.

Stormin' Norman, of course, was US General Schwarzkopf who led the coalition forces during the First Gulf War. He was a very impressive character who we all thought was larger than life. My final entries in the diary were as follows:

7-10 March: One day this week the Prime Minister visited us to say, 'Well done'. That evening OC Eng gets us to work 24 hours without pause to plan the airlift bid home – initially 90 Hercs. Shattered, but the next day we are dragged in to plan the sea move. I'm told I can then go home. However, when I come in to pack, I find a Wing Commander supplier has just arrived from the UK who now tells me I have to plan the return of our 1400 personnel. Very unhappy with him and everyone else. Took me two days solid, but it's done and I'm getting the next plane out, whether he likes it or not.

11 March: It's been one hell of a week and one hell of a war, but I am going home at last. Later at Brize Norton, daughter walks across the terminal to meet me.

You have probably gathered that those five months were an emotional rollercoaster for me, as they were for everyone who had left young families behind to go to war. I hadn't realised I moaned so

much, but to be fair, my wife has been telling me that for years. Shameful really when you see what others go through in times of conflict. I only had a small taster, and the one 'after-effect' for me was diving for cover under the bed, the first time there was a loud thunderstorm in the middle of the night. However, it was enough for me to develop a lifetime's respect for those whose war experiences change their lives forever.

I will finish this chapter on a high, as a couple of events proudly rounded off my Gulf War experience. The first was to be invited to a reception in Spalding during the 1991 Flower Parade, organised by the Rotary Club, where each local 'veteran' was presented with a personally engraved tankard which included the words 'South Lincolnshire Salute the British Forces', which was a lovely gesture.

Then, in June, I was incredibly privileged to take part in the victory parade through London. Luck was really with me that day as I got to host Princess Diana at the reception in the Guildhall afterwards. She was absolutely charming, and, as hard as I tried, I couldn't resist my customary wisecrack. She had been at Royal Ascot earlier that week when, coincidentally, General Schwarzkopf had been in the UK, so I asked whether she had considered inviting him along to Ladies' Day. As quick as a flash she replied, "Oh no, who knows what hat he would have worn!"

8. Watching

Back again in the UK, I vowed to get out more to study wildlife, but birds in particular – don't know why, they just caught my eye, like that greenfinch in my aunt's garden all those years before. It was about this time I started reading Bill Oddie's books and articles, which inspired me to start my own little black notebook of sightings, lists and ticks[20]. In addition, there was a TV sitcom with the same title as this chapter which somehow made birding attractive to me. Anyone who remembers Malcolm and Brenda's daft adventures will understand how preposterous that sounds but watching them identifying bird species I had neither seen nor heard of before inspired me to get outdoors more and do the same.

A couple of chapters previously I mentioned the excitement and frustration of seeing and correctly naming a species for the first time. Although my helpful next-door neighbour had given me a head start with our visits to his local reserve, there is no substitute for getting out there on your own and developing those identification skills. Like the Gulf War diary, I still have my old notebook with its awful sketches (Bill's look like Thorburn's Birds in comparison) and descriptions of what I was observing for the first time. Should anyone reading this be in any doubt whether they wish to start wildlife watching as a hobby, I offer the following extracts to urge you to give it a try, and frankly you couldn't do any worse than me. The 'drawings' however will not be shared! The entries tell their own story, warts and all, of how I became obsessed with our avifauna. Thirty years on, I am still learning and getting it wrong, but I hope you can sense the joy and escapism birding gave me during those early years after I returned from the Gulf:

21 Aug 91 – Farmoor Reservoir, Oxfordshire
Solitary duck-like diving bird; dived for long periods and distances. Long beak and white neck, reddish black crest, white face, black

[20] For the best definition of birding terms such as lists, ticks and twitching, I refer you to Bill Oddie's Little Black Bird Book. Every new birder wants the longest list with the most ticks. However, I never really got into 'twitching', despite a couple of trips in the early days, as you will see.

collar, brownish/blackish back, flashes of red on diving. I got attacked by horseflies on return to the car. At home, identified bird with my field guide as Great-crested Grebe.

I find it hard to believe now that I had never seen a great-crested grebe before this point, and reading my 'in-depth' description, I'm not quite sure how I managed to identify it correctly. I learnt very quickly that I did not have the patience to write long notes, and instead committed the cardinal sin (according to most birders) of referring to my field guide… while in the field.

Great-crested grebe by Brian Phipps.

25 Aug 91 – RSPB Lodge Sandy, Bedfordshire
Small bird flitting around, about 10cm long, thin/black/long bill, chest light fawn, streaked back. Saw lots later flying around the Lodge; told they were Spotted Flycatchers – very exciting. Call is a very slight 'tstee', feeds between middle to upper tree; watched one swallowing a long insect.

Almost immediately I was drawn to the behaviour and calls of the bird I was watching, in a similar way to those greenfinches in my childhood – obviously I didn't realise it at the time, but it is easy to see now how my interest slowly turned from fascination to obsession.

31 Aug 91 – Stony Stratford Nature Reserve, Buckinghamshire
Quite a day – best yet. Started very slow, 30 Canada Geese and an unidentifiable duck: green head, white neck, black body. Neighbour calls it a 'Heinz 57' on account of its hybridised heritage. However, it all changed when the missus spots a Kestrel, then a silky blue flash and we saw a KINGFISHER – my first ever, great stuff.

Then popped around to see neighbour to share our sightings and he took us along another part of the Great Ouse River and we saw our first Yellow Wagtail, Bullfinch and Linnet.

To top it all walked to our local lake at dusk and watched a family of <u>five</u> foxes sniffing around, jumping on each other; one came as close as a couple of yards from me. What an amazing NATURE DAY!

You never forget your first kingfisher sighting. Trying to get a decent prolonged view is another matter altogether, and I had to wait many more years for that. Like many rare wildlife encounters, it was worth the wait.

4/5 Sep 91 – Railway Embankment
Usual array of Robins and tits; however, spotted juvenile Bullfinch – no black cap. Went back next day for another look. This time heard a squeaky call like a young bird of prey, but found only 3 adult Bullfinches with their distinctive white rump flitting along the hedgerow. Must listen out for that call.

Describing calls has always been a bit of an Achilles heel for me, and I am sure everyone hears birds slightly differently. Bullfinch especially is a difficult one to describe, and has tripped me up a few times over the years, as you will read later on.

7 Sep 91 – Frensham Great Pond, Surrey
Bird just like flycatcher with very pale chest – Chiffchaff? Treecreeper on same tree. In reedbeds, unseen bird with distinctive call: 'chuck, chuck, chuck' almost clucking. Reed Warbler, I think.

On heathland unidentifiable pipit or was it a chat? Dark cap sat on post about 14cm. Not pipit. Continued to sit prominently over heather. Later identified as probably a female/juvenile Stonechat. Another Flycatcher-like bird, Red rump, no cap, feeding on ground. Female Redstart?

After seeing those spotted flycatchers very early on in my birding development, it seems I must have adopted it as my benchmark for comparison for other small birds that I was not able to instantly identify. For the record, chiffchaff and redstart do not look a bit like spotted flycatcher.

13 Sep 91 – St James Lake, Brackley, Northamptonshire POSSIBLE ICTERINE WARBLER – olive above, yellowy below, distinct yellow eye streak and primary/covert feathers, sleek looking. In gardens adjacent to lake and rosehip bush. Call quite harsh/repetitive whistle. Good views, not at all shy. What a spot! Spoke to our neighbour about it, who was not totally convinced. He said I would need far more notes to get a positive ID. He thought it was most likely a Willow Warbler.

Note added in 1992: still don't think it was just a Willow Warbler; maybe it was a Wood or Melodious – who knows?

Obviously a willow warbler – classic mistake by an over-zealous novice birder! I am surprised I didn't compare it to a spotted flycatcher.

Not an icterine - willow warbler by Jonathan Osbourne.

14 Oct 91 – Along from Railway embankment
My most amazing birdwatching experience yet. Saw lots of white-barred birds in ploughed/harrowed field (think it had been a wheat field). On closer inspection, field full of Chaffinches, Greenfinches and very orange-breasted birds (Bramblings?). Almost hidden by colour of the soil; suddenly they were disturbed and 150+ birds disappeared into hedgerow. Source of disturbance? No, not me, a large, long-tailed Kestrel – incredible! (Later note added crossing out 'Kestrel' to be replaced by 'female Sparrowhawk'). After bird of prey left, 1 or 2 finches appeared – scouts perhaps? So many questions: are these birds immigrants? Why are different species feeding together?

Was I really that excited about a field of finches? Well, actually, yes, and to this day I will always stop and look at large gatherings of common birds feeding, not just for the potential rarer species that might be hanging around with them, but just to soak up the sounds and movements of the flock. And when was the last time you saw dozens of greenfinches together? A lot has changed in 30 years…

Nov 91 – 30th Birthday Weekend, Hampshire
Farlington Marshes/Langstone Harbour: Grey/white wader with long red legs – REDSHANK; 1000s of Dunlin and Brent Geese; also Ringed Plover, Shelduck, Stonechat, Teal – beautiful. Large flock of Curlews – flashing their white underparts as they turn in flight.

Successfully stalked large Short-eared Owl perched low in a tree – marvellous. Took loads of photos with OM10 – guess they'll be rubbish as usual.

Yep, they were, which ended any last urge to be a bird photographer. I gather it is easier these days with the longer lenses and digital cameras. I'm afraid I am too tight to buy one and have another try. My efforts these days are confined to snapshots with my phone, as you will see in the second part of this book.

5 Jan 92 – The Wash, Lincs

Large flock (c200) of TWITE which I originally mistook for Linnet. Very similar antics appearance except minus pink chest and crown. (Later note added suggesting perhaps they were Linnets in winter plumage)

I still can't answer that one to this day, but if it looked like a linnet and acted like a linnet, it probably was indeed a linnet. I guess that is the advantage of having a decent camera for record shots or doing your birding with an expert, but I think that would probably take much of the fun, and mystery, out of the whole experience.

19 Jan 92 – Pentimore Woods, Northants
After long wait, Coal Tit and close-up of Treecreeper, then two Firecrests. Very vivid orange crown in one. Firecrest ID suspect – did not see white eye stripe, could have been an aggravated Goldcrest. Neighbour a little suspicious of my description.

Pair of goldcrests, no question! However, how often do you see a male goldcrest displaying that orange flash in its crown? So I think my mistaken ID here was forgivable. I have seen many goldcrests, and firecrests, since that encounter, but can't remember seeing another displaying in that manner.

22 May 92 – Garden
Party of 6-8 Spotted Flycatchers arrived in the evening – first I've seen this year. Fed in the garden for ages – wonderful sight. Four Curlews flew over.

Whatever the size of your plot, it is always worth keeping an eye on, as you just never know what might drop by. Keeping a 'garden list' is obligatory for any self-respecting birder. Our neighbours recently had a male black redstart in theirs, probably on its way to winter on the coast. I was not at all bitter that the bird did not pay us a visit…

27 Jun 92 – Thursley Common, Surrey
Afternoon: after much self-doubt, Whitethroat/Stonechat-like bird served to confuse, realised it was Dartford Warbler. Long, flicked-up

tail, orange legs, slight crest, back dark, rufous belly, slightly lighter below.

Evening trip to listen for Nightjar. Heard a mechanical 'churr' which thought at first was distant roadworks! Three birds then flew up right in front of us with white patches – must have been NIGHTJARs – super experience. Got bitten a great deal though.

These are two birds always worth making a special trip to see (and hear) but sadly there seem to be few suitable heaths and commons left for them to occupy. I will always remember Bill Oddie prancing around in the dark with two white handkerchiefs, like a lost Morris dancer, trying to attract nightjars by mimicking their white wing spots, successfully as I recall. As I said earlier, Bill is my inspiration, but fortunately I did not have to copy on him on this occasion to get to see this unique bird.

7 Jul 92 – Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire
Warm, humid and cloudy. Mid-afternoon at Tilshead – not very good watching. In fact, terrible – attacked by the Army! Shell whizzed overhead – took me back to Gulf War, looking for cover, explosion was fairly distant thankfully. Did hear Quail though, I think – bubbling chatter. Difficult to pinpoint in wildflower field – no views.

I cannot remember why I was out on Salisbury Plain that afternoon, or whether it was business or pleasure, but I do seem to have a bit of a habit of getting into 'scrapes' when I am out birdwatching as the next entry will confirm.

30 Jul 92 – River Wharfe
At special part of the river near home at 8pm, excellent evening that later turned slightly bizarre. Heard and stalked GRASSHOPPER WARBLER – just like a fishing reel; also views of juvenile Redstart and four Willow Warblers. Witnessed vicious rabbit fight. However, later on found a complete set of women's clothes by the river, including knotted tights. Very odd so I reported it to the police when I got home. I showed them where it was and ended up having to give a statement at the station. Thought they were going to arrest me under suspicion of murder at one point.

And there you have it: birders are always viewed with a degree of suspicion. Had I been walking a dog or jogging in bright clothing, that would have been a perfectly reasonable alibi for being out by the river in the evening. Camouflage gear, binoculars, and 'lurking' around near bushes is clearly not.

24 Aug 92 – River Wharfe
Weather cooling feels like autumn already. Long views of Kingfisher near bridge – beautiful. Also heard 'tchack, tchack' in tree then 15 thrushes burst out. Looked very weary – think they were first migrating FIELDFARES of the season. Early?

Or were they mistle thrushes? Many years later I learnt that they flock at the end of summer, so that was perhaps a more likely explanation. I had now been birdwatching for a year, and thought I had a fairly good grasp of species identification; clearly that was not the case.

18 Oct 92 – Ripon
Female Sparrowhawk in middle of city holding down and mantling a feral pigeon. Our car disturbed her and she had to let go and it escaped – sorry.

Like the garden-watching, you just never know when you may get a ringside seat to some unfolding wildlife drama. Almost worth going shopping sometimes…

24 Jan 93 – Garden
Blackcap joins Blue Tits on red wire peanut feeder. Gale force winds meant this was the only feeder available in the garden, but it has made numerous visits this week. No reference to nut feeding in books – other than visiting bird tables. Sent letter to British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) on 2 Feb. They advise that there are no previous records of Blackcaps on nut feeders.

Evolution in action: these days blackcaps of course are seen at garden feeders all through the winter, and will take what they can

get however it is presented; also though, sending letters to organisations? That is so last century.

6 Mar 93 – Fairburn Ings
Daughter and daddy birdwatching! Sun is glorious today – summer weather with winter birds – Shoveler in breeding plumage, Goldeneye, Coot nesting and Reed Bunting feeding on bulrush.

Catch them while they are young, they say. What could possibly go wrong taking your toddler along birdwatching? Read on…

24 Mar 93 – Thursley Common
Reports of a grey shrike. Saw it at distance perched low on burnt log but, before we could get close enough to decide if it was a Lesser or Great Grey Shrike, darling daughter ran after it and scared it away – we were not very popular with the other birders there. It was not seen again that day.

That little episode still haunts me. I think this was my first 'twitch' (going to 'tick' a rare bird that someone else has found) and had there been social media then, would probably have been my last, with me being named and shamed. It might have also led to us, as a family, being banned from going on our one and only organised bird holiday to Lesbos a few weeks later…

13-20 May 93 – Lesbos, Greece
[10 pages of records which I won't bore you with, other than my concluding summary:]
See typed list for full details of all birds seen – 119 to be exact. Life list now extends past 200!

Needless to say, we were the only young family on that trip and stood out like a sore thumb, especially on the day that my three year old daughter threw up on a coach trip going to one of the birding sites. Putting that to one side, so to speak, I don't think we would ever have seen so many birds, especially the rarer ones, without a guide. However, as a holiday it was incredibly intense, and included bird talks every evening, which tested even my enthusiasm. I/we have not been on another birding holiday since.

3 Jun 93 – Bishop Wood, N Yorks
Turtle Dove over railway. Spent 10 minutes trying to see very vocal 'ground-warbler' with squeaky call. Turned out to be a Field Vole. Tree Sparrow, Cuckoo and lots of Sedge Warblers about.

Not quite sure how I latched on to the term 'ground warbler', perhaps from an American field guide, but it's surprising how often you hear squeaking noises coming from the undergrowth. As for it being a field vole: I'm sure someone once told me that only shrews call like that. Must fact check that at some point.

18 Sep 93 – Spurn Head, Humberside
Quite a day at Spurn – twitchers and all. Weather lovely, little windy. Twitched the following: BARRED WARBLER in hedgerow, RED-THROATED PIPIT on the marsh, and a COMMON CRANE in a cornfield (along with 200 other birders – not sure how I feel about that)

Clearly, my second 'twitch' was a lot more successful than the first, but it did turn out to be my last. I still have the image of that pipit etched in my mind, but not in a good way. I take my hat off to birders who have the detailed eye to confidently identify a rarity, but as I took my turn in the crowd surrounding this unfortunate creature that had dropped in on its migration south from the northern extremities of the continent, I could not tell it apart from any other pipit. Being in winter plumage, it was without its red throat, but of more concern to me was that it would either die of fright or get stepped on. I left that day feeling a bit less guilty about the shrike incident at Thursley.

2 Oct 93 – Wet day on Thursley Common
Currently sitting beneath a leaning tree trunk, trying to keep dry – not working – it's throwing it down. I love birdwatching! So far: Tree Pipits, Nuthatch, and Jay. Found interesting lake, got lost, got drenched, but enjoyed every minute.

Says it all really.

Lunchtime walks from MOD Harrogate site:
10 Nov: Singing Dipper under bridge – sounds like a high-pitched, scratchy Robin.
11 Nov: Sparrowhawk taking Blackbird right in front of me – incredible.
15 Nov: New binoculars arrive, purchased using money left by Grandad in his Will. Zeiss Dialyt – expensive – but they reveal whole new world of detail.

Going for a walk on my tod, at lunchtimes has always been a bit of a thing for me, particularly when I would be stuck in an office all day, and it was a great way of getting a bit of fresh air to stimulate the brain cells again. Tried the gym thing, didn't like it. Those binos are still in use today. I thought they were expensive then at £600 – they are three times that price now.

30 Oct 94 – Spurn Head
8 x Snow Bunting by the shore. Stalked pair of Firecrests. Wonderful views of roosting Long-eared Owl right by the road in hawthorn hedge – filled telescope view and even coughed up a pellet. Sorted Snipe from Jack Snipe. Hardly any twitchers about today.

So, a year later, I ventured back to Spurn, avoided the crowds and had a far more rewarding day. I probably missed a stack of other rarities, but to be able to see that owl's natural behaviour, without disturbing it, was as good as it gets, in my opinion.

2 Jan 95 – Blacktoft Sands
Another year, another birding trip. Barn Owl right in front of hide, which went talon to talon with a Marsh Harrier and then got attacked by a Merlin – wow!

Another unique encounter that I doubt will ever be repeated. Those are the occasions when you do wish you had a camera with you.

14 May 95 – Fleet Pond
Yes, long time, no watch, too busy at work. Early evening walk around the pond. Two Common Terns, and loads of Reed Warblers.

8.15pm – wonderful views of Hobby: stooping and diving; could clearly see dark moustache and red trousers. Swifts' reaction was to climb high into sky out of reach.

A lot is written these days about nature and its positive effects on mental health and wellbeing. Reading this series of notes back after I pencilled them half my lifetime ago, I think that was exactly what was going on here, unbeknown to me at the time: all these 'new' bird species had me concentrating solely on the moment and what was literally right in front of me, especially their calls and behaviour, distracting me from daily stress and negative thought until they simply dissolved away, challenging me to broaden my knowledge, and opening my eyes, ears and mind to fully appreciate the wonderful detail of life around us.

Hobby by Andrew Kirby.

9. Migrating even further South

I suppose the previous chapter could be described as a birder's-eye view of the five years after I returned from Saudi Arabia. It skims over three postings: RAF Abingdon, where I was a member of an audit team for Logistics training courses; MOD Harrogate, writing a paper to close one of the RAF's storage depots in Gloucestershire, which made me very unpopular with the Group Captain station commander who was there at the time; and RAF Odiham, as OC Supply and Movements Squadron.

Every RAF Supply officer would probably tell you that their ambition was always to command a squadron of a hundred personnel, or thereabouts, on a front-line base. I was no exception, but naively thought that if I were given that opportunity it would be on a Tornado station. It therefore came as quite a surprise when I was posted to Odiham, in Hampshire, which was home to Chinook and Puma helicopters. Don't get me wrong, I was immensely pleased to get that job – I just felt I had no relevant experience to call upon - and was worried that I would be a fish out of water. And that turned out to be the case right from the off.

To give me a taste of things to come, the guy I was taking over from invited me to join him on an exercise the helicopters were involved in up in Scotland. Great, I thought, nice hotel on the Borders, probably time to fit in some good birdwatching. Nothing could have been further from the truth. The main role of the Chinooks and Pumas, of course, was to support the Army in the field. Well, in a field in this case, a very muddy one at that with hundreds of large green military tents connected by duckboards, providing both the working area and accommodation. A few years later I was at one of the wettest Glastonbury Festivals on record where cases of trench foot were reported, as people were wading knee deep in mud just to get to the toilets. Even that would have been no preparation for this Scottish quagmire. Perhaps this was karma for all those nights in hotels while following the Tornados around the world?

Not long after I took up post at Odiham, we had to plan the deployment of a number of helicopters to support NATO operations in the Balkans. This was nothing like planning a move of fast jets to an already well-founded air base. Fortunately, I had a seasoned team around me who knew how to set up a tented logistics support park in

the middle of nowhere. I had always been very hands-on up until that point, so this was a much different experience. My role now was more about leading and encouraging others, trying (and probably failing) to look like I knew what was going on, and watching them, rather than me, deploy abroad to serve in conflicts.

During an incredibly challenging 18 months at RAF Odiham, where I learnt a lot about helicopter support and managing people, but struggled with my high stress levels, birding unfortunately had to take a backseat, hence the long gap in my notes starting in the second half of 1995. Knowing what I know now, obviously I should have made more time to get out with the binos: it might have helped to cope with the demands of the job. I thought that situation might continue when my next posting notice arrived, but there again it did have some interesting wildlife potential: I would be spending the next six months in the Falkland Islands.

I would be away from home for Christmas again, and my wife decided it would be a great idea to celebrate in October before I left. So up went the tree and decorations, daughter in delight as there would be two Christmases that year, and we had a party, but not before some of the squadron had stood on the doorstep loudly singing carols – the neighbours must have thought we had all gone potty or there had been a time warp.

The last time I had travelled down to the South Atlantic, it had been via Hercules, which, although has its attractions, such as using the freight pallets as a makeshift bed, is a very slow, noisy and cold way to travel. This time it was on a VC10 passenger plane, sheer luxury by comparison, although you were seated facing the rear of the aircraft (for safety reasons apparently), which felt a bit strange. There was a stopover at Ascension Island to refuel – I was intrigued to see how it had changed over the 14 years since I had left. It was almost unrecognisable: all the temporary huts and domes had gone to be replaced by permanent buildings. I had a quick look outside the Admin office to see if my Handbrake House car parking signs had survived, but alas no – the joke had probably worn thin many years before.

My five months on Ascension had not been at the best time for wildlife, but this stint in the Falklands would coincide with the austral summer. This meant there was a good chance I could observe the breeding season for a lot of species, if I could find a way

to get some time away from Mount Pleasant Airport (MPA), where I would be based. Even in 'summer' the weather could be atrocious, including savage winds and heavy rain, but clearly much better than winter, when you could be stuck indoors, or not allowed to drive off-base, for days on end. This was why it was home to the dubious honour of having the world's longest corridor, linking the messes, barracks and leisure facilities. It was about half a mile long and known as the 'Death Star'.

My role was OC Supply Squadron again within a joint logistics unit run by an Army Colonel. Having just spent the last 18 months working with the 'pongos', and, as the aircraft based in the Falklands included Tornados and helicopters, I now felt right at home, completely the opposite of when I arrived at Odiham. We would work Monday to Saturday lunchtime, so there was downtime on a Sunday, which most people spent either in the gym or chilling (literally) down on nearby Bertha's Beach. I saw this as my opportunity to get out and do some high-quality wildlife watching. However, you couldn't just go wandering out onto the many deserted beaches and extensive peatlands as you might in the UK; there were still many minefields on the islands, so you had to be sure where you were heading. As already established, my navigation skills had never been something I could confidently rely upon, so I was glad to note that most of the dangerous areas were fenced off and well signed. The lack of human traffic in these areas was a major attraction for penguins and other wildlife too light to set off the mines, so I spent many a happy hour leaning over the barbed wire straining to get a better view to tick off a species from my Falklands' list.

One of my first purchases from the Naafi[21] shop, which was about midway along the Death Star, was a cracking little field guide to the wildlife of the Falkland Islands and South Georgia by Ian J. Strange. This became my bible for the next six months and I set myself the task of attempting to see as many of the bird species as I could for the Falklands' section. I looked longingly at the list for South Georgia, with wandering albatross almost jumping off the page, wondering whether there might be a way of fashioning a trip down to

[21] Naafi stands for Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes.

that little hotspot, which had caught my eye a few years before watching Attenborough's Life in the Freezer.

Of the 60 bird species listed as Falkland Islands Breeding Species, I managed to see 44 of them, plus a few of the Annual Visitors and Vagrants, which I thought wasn't a bad effort for an unguided beginner. There were many highlights, but it was my encounters with the penguin colonies that really stand out. Wildlife documentaries on TV give you a great sense of the sights and sounds of these places, but they do not give you any idea of the smell. One of the commonest penguins was the gentoo, a friendly looking creature easy to identify by the white triangular patch on its head, just behind the eye, and they nest out in the open in large colonies often close to the beach. Their nests were small mounds of sand or mud, lined with jealously guarded stones, and I reckon they must have been held together by fresh guano such was the incredible stench. The mounds were reminiscent of the mudpots I had seen at Yellowstone, and the odour was pretty similar too.

I was lucky enough to follow the gentoos from egg laying, to rearing their chicks, right through to the colony dispersing for the season. Lots of little dramas are played out at these sites, just as they show you on telly, and I'll never forget watching the adults trying to fend off the various scavengers who were after their eggs, chicks, food, and, in the case of one species, faeces. This delightful poop-pilferer was the snowy sheathbill, the polar opposite of the cute penguins. I guess you would say it looked and moved very much like a white pigeon, but most of the ones I saw were covered in filth which wasn't surprising given their diet.

Another bird which is apparently partial to a piece of gentoo poo, which must be rich in undigested fish, is the striated caracara, or Johnny Rook as it is known locally. I only ever saw them stealing eggs and chicks, and they were very good at it with their limitless patience and guile around the colony. They look like a cross between a buzzard and crow, with no fear of humans, and they would come very close to check you out. One day I was hiking along a fence line and a young Johnny Rook followed me for ages hopping along the fence posts, not that I saw it moving. It reminded me of that old game, 'Creeping up on Grandma', where children try to sneak up behind you, ninja-like, and then stand stock-still when you turn around. All very unnerving and I'm convinced it would have had the

rucksack off my back, with my lunch inside, had I not kept an eye on how close it was getting.

In contrast to the surface dwelling gentoos, Magellanic penguins nest in burrows. Slightly smaller than the gentoos, with a wavy white line running from behind the eye to the throat, these penguins are also known as jackasses. There was a large colony in one of the bays near Port Stanley overlooking the shipwreck of Lady Elizabeth, which I made sure I visited whenever I needed to drive the 30 miles or so to the capital from MPA. It didn't take long to understand where their alias comes from: Magellanics are a noisy bunch, especially at the start of the breeding season, and the best description of the call is that it sounds just like a braying donkey. When hundreds are making that call, it is almost as overpowering as the smell of the gentoo colony. During the next few months, I saw three more species of penguin, king, chinstrap and rockhopper, and all manner of strange and exotically named birds, such as giant petrels, crested caracara, flightless steamer ducks and dark-faced ground tyrants.

Although there was an ever-present threat that Argentina might attempt to retake the Malvinas, and there were frequent exercises to prepare for that possibility, life for the military at MPA was fairly laid back. There were lots of bars around the base, and everyone had their favourite, but the Supply Squadron's fortnightly 'Bluey Nights[22]' were the stuff of legend. These were held to say farewell to those who were close to crossing off the last day of their chuff chart[23], and 'welcome' new arrivals with repeated chants of "Who are you?". The packing area in the squadron building was a big open space which could easily accommodate 200 people, and, although as the officer in charge I did worry about security, there was a strict rule that everyone was only allowed two cans of beers a night, so it never got too out of hand. The highlight of each event was a performance by some of the loggies who would dress up and do a

[22] Blueys were the blue fold-up letters (no need for an envelope) that military families and personnel would hand write and send to each other free of charge to stay in touch, before email and Skype were invented.

[23] A chuff chart was basically a calendar which you would use to cross off the days until the end of your tour of duty.

‘Stars in Their Eyes’ turn as their favourite band. There was even a Hall of Fame in the office corridor with photos of the many acts that had performed over the years. One of the best I saw was four lads who made their own dresses and did a brilliant Spice Girls – who of course were massive in 1996/97 – resourcefulness and talent very much on show. One of the sergeants suggested we should have an officer and senior NCO performance, which hadn’t been done before to our knowledge.

Not wishing to be seen turning down a challenge, I went along with it; we found a few old green overalls, cut them down, painted the tops in black lacquer, made sure they dried with the collars up, added ‘T-Birds’ on the back, and Grease was about to be reborn. I wanted to be Danny but was impolitely informed that I did not have enough hair. Most of us had two left feet but we managed to master the key moves to Greased Lightning, which we then had to perform on gym benches in front of a large noisy crowd, lip syncing as best we could over the din. I found drinking your two cans before going ‘on stage’ helped. We did alright and ran for a couple of weeks, but it wasn’t long before the Spice Girls were being asked to reform and return for the next Bluey Night.

Probably one of the best things about being a Supply officer was that I could always find a reason not to be sitting at my office desk. There would always be personnel or assets dotted around the airfield that you would need to visit and check on. In the case of MPA, we had a remote refuelling point for the helicopters out on West Falkland at Fox Bay, manned by a couple of loggies. Rather than the pillow tanks that we had during the Gulf War, this time the fuel was held in much smaller air portable rubber bladders, or ‘bollocks’ as they are known in the trade. So, checking on the refuelling team and their bollocks was actually part of my job!

It isn’t until you get up in a helicopter and see the vast barren terrain from above that you start to grasp what an incredible achievement it was for British Forces to yomp/tab the 56 miles, with full packs, across that landscape to retake the Falklands in 1982 – true British grit and steel once again at the fore. Any Falklander you talked to would always be full of praise for how they had been liberated, and the small settlement at Fox Bay was no different. During my short visit it was sheep shearing time, so there were quite a few additional people about from all over the islands, but everyone

was so welcoming and friendly. I stayed on one of the farms and it was humbling to hear how they had lived under Argentine occupation, the raids by Royal Navy Harriers, and their immense relief and gratitude upon liberation. I'll also never forget the mutton stew the farmer's wife served: probably the tastiest meat I'd ever had. "Wears a bit thin when you have to eat it every day" she said, before warning me to be back before midnight, as I was going out that evening along to the community bar to have a drink with the loggies and sheep shearers.

I assumed she just didn't want me coming back drunk, released from the two can rule for a night, but it was far more fundamental than that. Predictably, I got carried away playing pool and chanting 'Sheaaaarer[24]', whenever one of them was at the table, and left at closing time which was five minutes before midnight. I hadn't really noticed before but there was a constant mechanical humming around the settlement; a few minutes later, there wasn't, and it went silent and pitch-black. I think the locals enjoy not telling you that the generators are switched off at midnight come what may. Although I have never seen so many stars in the sky, literally I could not see my hand in front of my face. There cannot be many inhabited places left in the world where the darkness is so impenetrable. After a good laugh at my surprise and predicament, one of the team produced a torch and guided me back to the farm.

On a six-month tour you were usually entitled to a few days R&R[25] and it was no different in the Falklands. Most personnel would team up with a few friends and head off to one of the smaller islands where the local residents would put you up for a few nights, similar to my trip to Fox Bay, allowing quality time to explore the wildlife and battlefield sites. There was also the opportunity to fly your family down on a military flight, using the 'Indulgence Scheme[26]', and stay in a purpose-built family room on the base or in accommodation at Port

[24] This will only make sense if you remember how popular England footballer Alan Shearer was after Euro 96.

[25] Rest and Recuperation is a military term for time off when you are serving overseas unaccompanied (i.e. without your family).

[26] 'Indulgence' flights offered spare seats on scheduled military flights for entitled families at a vastly reduced cost than equivalent civil flights.

Stanley. I managed to arrange this for my family, and, even better, the trip would coincide with daughter's 7th birthday. Although she has completely forgotten the details - and she says I'm losing *my* memory - her mother and I still often fondly recall events from that week together 8000 miles from home.

My colleagues in the joint logistics unit included the Commanding Officers of the Cargo Port, Motor Transport, and Catering, and between them they came up with a plan for a birthday she wouldn't forget… well not for a while anyway. First, she got to steer a little boat, under close military supervision of course, out from the port in Mare Harbour to a seemingly uninhabited island, which was covered in tall tussock grass and felt quite prehistoric. Once we disembarked, we discovered it was actually full of residents, mainly southern sea lions and turkey vultures, plus some other small bird species I hadn't seen on the mainland. But this wasn't supposed to be a birdwatching trip for me, so we were soon off to her afternoon adventure, which was driving a tracked personnel carrier around a muddy test route on the base, which was great fun for everyone. Back at the Mess, a birthday cake had been prepared by the cooks and the team gave her a large soft King Penguin toy – quite a day.

I had promised my family they would see dolphins during their stay, and out on the boat we saw lots of 'puffing pigs'. These are Commerson's dolphins, fairly common in the Falklands, which are quite small and stocky, and distinctively black and white, looking very much like a saddleback pig. They were very playful and noisy breathers (hence 'puffing') around the boat making them a delight to watch. We also saw the much larger Peale's dolphin, but they kept their distance. Whales would be more difficult to find, I'll go into why in the next chapter, but I had heard that a pod of orcas had been seen over at Goose Green, about an hour's drive away along a very bumpy road. The Colonel had thoughtfully lent me his plush Land Rover for my R&R, so off we went to see if we could find them.

We found a spot overlooking the large deep bay, or sound, and it wasn't long before we saw killer whales, four of them as I recall, including two smallish calves. We watched them for ages, mooching around, surfacing and hunting – another 'Top 5' wildlife experience. A few years before, we had visited Florida and watched 'Shamu' perform at Sea World. Seeing orcas in the wild puts into

context why these animal-shows really need to be consigned to history.

Goose Green was, of course, the scene of one of the major battles to retake the islands, and I wanted to visit the memorial to the sixteen members of 2 Para[27] who had fallen there almost fifteen years before. You have to climb a hill to get to the monument, but it was guarded by a red-backed buzzard, which continually dive bombed me, making me keep my head bowed low, all the way up and all the way down. Why it took a disliking to me I don't know - it completely ignored my wife who was filming the encounter - perhaps it had a youngster nearby. However, I hope it is not inappropriate to say that I thought it might have had some maroon in that red back, and it was just reminding me how to show respect at that sombre place.

We finished the family R&R with a couple of days on Saunders Island, a privately owned site, which is internationally designated as an Important Bird Area. To get there you fly out on a small two-engine Islander; we were the only passengers aboard plus some mail and freight piled in the back. The island is the fourth largest in the Falklands and run as a sheep farm. The accommodation was a little stone cottage away from the main farm, which felt like being in a remote Scottish croft, but with penguins as neighbours. Most of the king penguin colony had already dispersed for the season, but there were still quite a few stragglers about, both adults and large brown chicks. There were lots of rockhoppers on the island, which provided endless entertainment with their seemingly clumsy, but ultimately effective, climbing skills over the rocky outcrops. We were also treated to close-up views of a large black-browed albatross nesting site. This is the only bird I've ever seen that looks like it has been applying eye shadow, which gives it quite a stern, almost bald eagle-like, appearance.

It was very special to have shared some of my Falklands' experience with my family, and, waving them off as their VC10 left for the UK, I had only a few weeks to go before I would be joining them. However, just like that jaunt to Yellowstone, I figured this might be the

[27] 2nd Battalion, Parachute Regiment, commanded by Colonel 'H' Jones who died there charging a machine gun post.

only time I would be close enough to visit another mecca for me, South Georgia.

10. Wandering down to South Georgia

During my time in the Falklands, there was a small Royal Marine detachment on South Georgia, which was resupplied every few months by a Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA) vessel, and one was scheduled about a week before my tour of duty was due to end. I was also aware that the 'bootnecks' had stocks of fuels and oils at their base at King Edward Point. I had suggested to my Colonel on a couple of occasions that someone should go down there and do a safety check their holdings, and added that I would be happy for my tour-end date to be put back by a couple of weeks so I could undertake the trip. I wasn't sure whether he was 'buying it'.

One morning, out of the blue, I received a call from the office of the Commander of the British Forces, an Army Brigadier, to say he wished to see me. Of course, I thought the worst, as it felt like a summons to the headmaster's office. He said that the Colonel had told him I was keen to go down to South Georgia to check their fuel stocks, but, in fact, the main reason was that I was a bit of a 'tree-hugger' and wanted to check out the island's wildlife (thanks Boss!).

This did not sound very promising, but nothing could have been further from the truth, as he went on to say that the curator of the Whaling Museum, also located at King Edward Point, had contacted him with a request for help. Apparently southern elephant seals had taken up residence on a beach across the bay, but it was still littered with military detritus from the Argentine invasion of South Georgia in 1982. So, the curator was asking for a 'beach clean with a difference', and the Brigadier was offering me my first wildlife conservation project.

To be totally honest my first thought was… land mines, but I was assured there were none, and that the most dangerous things we would face were masses of barbed wire, and the elephant seals themselves. There was no way I was going to turn this opportunity down, so my tour in the Falklands was extended by a few weeks, and I might actually get the chance to tick off wandering albatross, and some other 'goodies', from the South Georgia species list.

It was a nine-day trip: three days sailing down on the RFA Grey Rover, three days on the island with the Marines, and three days back, calling at the nearby Bird Island Research Station to drop off supplies for its resident scientists. On board with me was a small

troop of Gurkhas, who were also on a conservation mission, of sorts. Back in the early 1900s, Norwegian whalers had introduced reindeer to South Georgia for hunting and as a meat source. The whalers left in the 1960s, and without a natural predator, the reindeer were rapidly multiplying, and, in their high unnatural density, causing an environmental impact on plant biodiversity through overgrazing. Therefore, a few would be periodically culled[28], with some of the meat brought back to the Falklands for consumption. The Gurkhas were travelling down in the ship's hold and cooking up their own food and promising to serve everyone reindeer curry on the return journey.

Over the three days sailing down, sea conditions got gradually worse, and having misread the instructions, I was overdosing on motion sickness pills, which really numbed the senses. However, they seemed to work, and I spent most of the time on the aft deck, below the open helicopter platform, looking out for whales and birds. It was the morning of the second day when I started to see terns and tiny prions; I hesitate to name the actual species, as, looking back now, my notes were pretty inconclusive. However, there was no doubting the monster bird that soon joined us and followed the ship almost all the way down to South Georgia: wandering albatross. My 'holy grail' moment had arrived.

This was indeed a 'mega tick' in more ways than one. Even at a distance, you could see this was a bird with a massive wingspan, easily 10-11 feet, the longest of any living bird apparently. It reminded me of a large white glider, as it never seemed to flap its black-tipped wings; it would just wheel away, gain a little height, soar for a while, and reappear behind the vessel without any discernible movement, presumably using the high winds and ship's slipstream to its own advantage. I watched it for long periods, reluctantly dragging myself away to eat or whatever, but thankfully it would still be there upon my return, gliding close behind us, even after dark. In all that time, I never saw it feed once. It was an experience I shall never forget, and certainly helped pass the long hours at sea; it was also a

[28] Despite these periodic culls, numbers of reindeer continued to grow causing unacceptable environmental damage and the herds were permanently eradicated in 2013 – 2015 (Source: Wikipedia, 2020).

once-in-a-lifetime moment, as I did not see another wandering albatross on the trip.

The steep, snow-topped mountains of South Georgia appeared on the horizon on the third day and became ever more impressive the closer we got to the 100-mile-long island. We moored off King Edward Point, overlooking Grytviken Whaling Station, and Shackleton House, which was being used as barracks for the Marines. Their young officer came out to collect us in a RIB, and the final stage of my South Atlantic adventure, spanning 15 years, was about to begin.

The bay was dominated by the abandoned whaling station: masses of rusting buildings, equipment and large vats, with shipwrecks, harpoons clearly visible, dotted either side; all in stark contrast to the clean and pure, white-painted Norwegian church that stood behind at the foot of the hill. I believe the site has been tidied up in recent years to make it safer for the many cruise ship visitors that now drop by. Walking inside some of the buildings, it was as though the whalers had just downed tools and left: massive hooks and chains still dangled from the rafters, vicious looking implements hanging on the walls, and the concrete slipways stained black from the blood of thousands of whales and seals butchered there. This truly was a ghost town.

The station closed in 1966, because whale stocks had almost been wiped out, and 30 years on very little had changed, as, other than those orcas at Goose Green, I had not seen one whale in the South Atlantic. Fast forward to 2020, however, and there would appear to be hope with 'astonishing' numbers of blue whales returning to the waters around South Georgia[29].

After a quick meeting at the barracks and tour around with the Museum curator and Marines' officer, I was off for a bit of solo wildlife watching (no surprise there) and a walk to Sir Ernest Shackleton's grave, which wasn't far away. I was advised to shut the gate of the graveyard as elephant seals had developed a tendency to get in and take up residence. One of my target species was the South Georgia pintail - I had seen flightless ducks in the Falklands -

[29] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-51553381 accessed May 2020.

now I wanted to tick off a flesh-eating one. In the UK, my favourite duck is the pintail: a delightfully marked and serene water bird that brightens any winter's day. Its South Georgia equivalent is the ugly cousin of the family: not much to look at with some dubious habits.

It didn't take long to find some in the bay: very drab coloured, but not ugly, to be fair, other than its habit of feeding on the carcasses of dead seals. Finding a duck this close to the Antarctic was perhaps remarkable in itself, so I guess it is a case of 'needs must' if it cannot dabble for plant and invertebrate life when their feeding pools ice over.

Approaching the white fenced graveyard, I noticed the gate was open, so someone had obviously not been paying attention to the safety brief. There were about 60 graves in there: other than the great explorer's, a few were of those who had died from a typhoid outbreak in 1911, and most of the rest were of whalers and sealers. So perhaps it was fitting that stretched out across the far side of the cemetery was an elephant seal. Although a pretty large animal, at about 10 feet long, this was a female and nothing like the massive 18 foot/3.5 ton males I had just been hearing about from our hosts.

Apparently, looking on-line now, you are supposed to toast 'The Boss' with a glass of whisky while you are at Shackleton's graveside. Unaware of that tradition at the time, I crept quietly to his grave, not wishing to awake the sleeping giant, paid my respects and retreated, keeping one eye out in case it did a 'Johnny Rook' on me.

A couple of RAF techies, who had also come from MPA to do some repairs and checks, had volunteered to join me on the beach clean, along with a few of the Marines. We were warned not to get too close to the elephant seals, not get between them and their escape route to the sea, and definitely not underestimate them, as they could move very fast if disturbed. We loaded the RIB with wire cutters and gloves and were off to the far side of the bay beyond the graveyard. The officer explained the events of early April 1982 when South Georgia had been invaded, how the small band of British Marines had put up a fierce fight, shot down an Argentine helicopter, above where we were heading, and their surrender in the face of overwhelming odds.

Arriving at the beach, we could see lots of elephant seals, adults and pups, but they were a bit further up, about 30 yards away. As they were pretty docile, it looked safe to disembark and get on

with the job in hand, even though we were in their path down to the water. It was mainly empty ammunition boxes, bits of wood, and lots of barbed wire, partially buried in the sand. Occasionally you would hear loud grunts from the colony, but we soon forgot about them and concentrated on pulling up the wire, which was clearly a hazard to the seals, the pups in particular, and getting it into the boat. We stopped at one point to watch two bulls rear up and have a noisy disagreement; they looked enormous even at that distance, like massive sumo wrestlers squaring up to each other.

As we were approaching the end of the day, I was in the process of rolling up a long piece of barbed wire with one of the other guys, when there was an urgent shout that those two males were heading our way, and, of course, we were between them and the sea. We didn't really have time to think, just abandoned what we were doing and stepped aside, as these behemoths thundered down the slope, blubber rippling, passing a little bit too close for comfort over the wire we had just dropped. I thought they might get caught in the barbs and take it with them, but fortunately the wire was still there after they had entered the sea. Given the circumstances, I'm not sure if this qualifies as one of my 'Top 5' close encounters of the wildlife kind, but it had indeed been a 'beach clean with a difference'.

Once all the formal tasks had been completed at the barracks, we were offered another trip out in the RIB to view the penguin colonies and a nearby glacier. With austral winter just a few weeks away, all the penguin colonies were now largely abandoned, but it was still wonderful to get this privileged view of the island. Out at sea we saw some black shapes surfacing from the water; I thought initially they might be cetaceans, but as we got closer we observed gentoo penguins porpoising, just like dolphins on a bow wave – something I hadn't realised they did – looking much more at home in the water than on land.

The highlight of the day though was getting close to a huge blue wall of a glacier, hearing the constant creaking of the ice, and then being in awe as a large piece broke away into the sea, creating its own mini tsunami, by which time we had safely retreated.

All too soon my South Georgia adventure was over and it was back onto the Grey Rover for the return leg, and my home flight to the UK once back at MPA. We had a quick stop at Bird Island but weren't allowed to disembark for biosecurity reasons. It was so foggy

I couldn't see anything of the place either. Although I got to tick off two more species of albatross - grey-headed and light-mantled - there was no further sign of the wandering.

The consolation was the reindeer curry served with all the trimmings by the Gurkhas below decks. As billed, it was excellent, but I think on balance the Fox Bay mutton stew was my favourite. I decided not to share that opinion with the cook just in case he had his kukri[30] close by.

Wandering albatross by Liam Quinn. (File:Wandering Albatross flying over the South Atlantic (5656444654).jpg - Wikimedia Commons)

[30] A Gurkha's traditional 18-inch curved knife, which instils fear in all their enemies and sometimes allies.

11. Changing Direction

In almost ten years of marriage, we had moved house seven times, and when the next posting notice arrived, thoughts were turning to putting down some roots, and providing some stability for our daughter. My growing helicopter experience brought us to Yeovilton, a Royal Naval Air Station in South Somerset, probably best known for the on-site Fleet Air Arm Museum, just off the A303. Like many others that pass along that busy trunk road on their way to the delights of Devon and Cornwall, I had never given Somerset much thought. Over 20 years on, and I would argue that it is probably the most underrated county in the country, particularly for wildlife and natural beauty.

We actually started our house-hunting in Devon, thinking I would live on base and come 'home' at the weekends, but that was never really going to be practical, so we switched the search to a few miles radius of Yeovilton. Driving around the local villages, you get a much better feel for a place than looking at property pages in a newspaper, and we stumbled on a good-sized house that we hadn't seen advertised. It had been up for sale for the best part of a year and looking extremely neglected inside and out, but still well beyond our budget. However, I put in a ridiculous offer, and, after a bit of negotiation, we had secured our 'forever' family home.

Living in this little village, on the eastern edge of the pretty Polden Hills, felt a bit like being on holiday in the country: strolling down to the local shop or pub, and going on scenic walks from our doorstep. It was on one of these walks that I 'discovered' a small nature reserve, hidden behind a high hedgerow, that would, without exaggeration, change my life.

There was only one clue that it was a nature reserve: a dilapidated plywood sign, partially covered in ivy, engraved with 'Green Down Nature Reserve, Somerset Trust for Nature Conservation'. Climbing over the stile, it opened up onto a steep grassy slope, looking down on the winding River Cary and across to a wood on the other side of the valley. The reserve is actually two long narrow fields along a south facing slope, bisected by a privately-owned horse training gallop, with a railway line providing the lower boundary. It didn't have any interpretation boards, and there was no obvious indication why it was special, other than some good areas of

scrub, and the limestone downland which looked like it contained some interesting plant species. There was also a little stone and brick building that reminded me of a sentry box, which I later found out was a Powder House that had contained gunpowder and lamp oil used during the construction of the railway in the early 1900s.

That first visit was in May and walking around I could hear various warblers, linnets and bullfinches, so I instantly clocked the place as a cracking place for birds and made a mental note to find out more about the reserve. The internet was still in its infancy towards the end of the 90s, and we were yet to invest in a PC, so it took a bit of detective work, including a visit to the library, to establish that the organisation responsible for Green Down was now called Somerset Wildlife Trust (SWT), with their headquarters in the Quantock Hills.

One phone call later, and a cheque in the post, I signed up as a member and eagerly awaited more information on this nature reserve and the 70 others they managed in the county. It turned out there were two more almost on my doorstep: one a traditionally managed, species rich hay meadow, and the other a large mature woodland. By utter chance, it seemed I had hit the jackpot.

I have dedicated a chapter to Green Down in the second part of this book, but to cut a long story short, the reason it was so important, other than the diverse calcareous[31] grassland, was that it was one of the original sites where the large blue butterfly had been successfully reintroduced just a few years previously. Butterflies had not really been 'my thing' up to that point, but after bumping into a renowned lepidopterist who had been responsible for the project on one of my rapidly increasing visits, and hearing about this insect's fascinatingly complex life history, I developed another wild passion.

In those early years after the large blue's reintroduction, and even now to a certain extent, there was a threat of rogue butterfly enthusiasts stealing adult specimens for their collections, or eggs in an attempt to establish the species somewhere else. Wardening the site when the butterfly was on the wing, and egg laying, was therefore essential. Initially this had to be done by volunteers, until eventually money was found for a student to spend six weeks up there each

[31] Calcareous, or alkaline, grasslands are very precious habitats, which are flower-rich and support some rare invertebrates.

summer. In that first year, I took a week's leave from work to warden the site, and spent it patrolling the slopes, walking a transect[32] route to record how many large blues were on the wing, and engaging with any visitors, even though most of the site was supposed to be closed to the public.

This was new ground for me, and on the back of my minor conservation experience the year before on South Georgia, I started to realise that my interest in wildlife was not just about watching it; I wanted some practical involvement too, perhaps as a way to put something back, but more I think to deepen the connection that I felt when I was in these special places. During that week as Large Blue Warden, I met the volunteer who kept an eye on the site all year 'round and had been doing so for many years. In an exception to the rule in this book, I am going to tell you her name: Anne Moxley.

Anne became my mentor and inspiration over the next ten years or so. Her main interest was bees and wildflowers, and she would reel off their Latin names like it was her second language. When we met, Anne was in her late-60s with me still hanging on to my 30s, but she would be up and down those slopes like a mountain goat, with her long walking staff, pointing out species I had neither seen nor heard of before, rattling off their scientific names, with me stumbling behind, scribbling notes and trying to keep up. I felt like the sorcerer's apprentice at times, especially when she would call me a 'stupid boy' for not remembering a plant's name from our previous visit! I became her deputy as reserve warden, until many years later when she was no longer as nimble thus handing me the full reins. We would regularly go along to SWT meetings and training sessions together, learning about lots of different species groups and conservation management techniques, developing a good friendship along the way.

One of my recurring nightmares is turning up somewhere and being expected to deliver a talk in front of an expectant audience, but stupidly forgetting to bring my script and slides. Well, that sort of happened when the local history group asked me to come along to a meeting to discuss Green Down. I had taken the call from the

[32] A transect is a route, often a straight line, through a habitat which is walked to survey an individual, or group of, species.

secretary and interpreted it as a gathering around a table, looking over old photographs and a nice cosy chat about the reserve. I had invited Anne along, knowing she would have far more knowledge to impart than I ever would, but it wasn't until we were walking to the venue that we noticed a poster advertising an illustrated presentation about Green Down by its two wardens.

Sure enough, inside the hall, the seats were all facing the front towards a white screen and slide projector table. I came out in a cold sweat, wanting to walk straight back out again, but Anne's response was a shrug and to say 'Well, this is going to be interesting then, my boy'. I had to make an embarrassing apology to the secretary, but thankfully only a handful of people turned up, and we did indeed end up sitting around a table looking at old photographs of the site and having an interesting discussion about how it had changed since the railway had been built. Anne even regaled everyone with the story of how she had once chased off butterfly collectors along the railway line waving her stick at them!

Through my new SWT membership I also latched on to a couple of nature reserves out on the Somerset Levels, or, as part of this area had been recently re-named, the Avalon Marshes. This gave me the opportunity to hone my wetland birding skills, especially bird calls, as you tended to hear more species than you saw out in the reedbeds. These reserves were Westhay Moor and Catcott, and another owned by English Nature (later to become Natural England[33]), Shapwick Heath. Ham Wall, managed by the RSPB, which is probably now the most well-known of the cluster, was still under development, with staff and volunteers growing reeds from seed and hand planting thousands of them on the worked-out industrial peat beds – now, that's what I call dedication. Again, I have a lot more to say about the Avalon Marshes in the second part of the book; the reason will become clear towards the end of this chapter.

It would be fair to say that work would now often risk getting in the way of my wildlife watching and volunteering: I joined a practical conservation group that every couple of weeks would be on a different site, coppicing, scrub bashing, or hedge planting; became

[33] Natural England is the Government's adviser for the natural environment in England.

a bird surveyor for the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), undertaking all sorts of population counts; started writing a regular wildlife column for the village newsletter; and also took on the reserve warden role for the hay meadow I mentioned earlier. However, I was still hoping for promotion to secure a decent RAF pension, so work had to remain my overall priority, and happily that arrived after three years at Yeovilton. I had been in charge of a dedicated team of civil servants who managed the purchase and repair of helicopter engine parts, involving contractors in the UK, France and USA.

Promotion was often used as the carrot to get you to up sticks and move to the other end of the country into a role no-one else wanted (in my experience); that turned out to be half-true in this case. Although I got to stay within commuting distance of Somerset, travelling daily to Andover in Hampshire, the new job was linked to an ill-fated IT project that was supposed to simplify and revolutionise logistics accounting across all arms of the military. It was clear to most Service personnel involved that this was beyond ambitious, less so to the many highly-paid consultants on the project.

This was actually my third posting into the computing world, and it hadn't dawned on me why I kept getting these jobs. A mate who was on the same Supply course at Cranwell reminded me recently that we had all sat a computing literacy test while we were there, although some of us were blissfully unaware of where passing it might lead. Most people, I now discover, including my so-called friend, failed it on purpose to avoid that particular career path.

I had no desire to be involved with IT, as evidenced by an old school report which said I was "one student whose life would never be affected by technology". This was a reference to the fact that I couldn't see the point of spending ages creating punch cards to send to a computing bureau, when none of my 'simple' programmes ever worked, after waiting weeks for the meaningless results to come back on reams of green bar listing paper. It was actually quite an insightful observation, as it was only in the last couple of years that I was talked into giving up my trusty Filofax for a new-fangled electronic device.

After the project failed to meet its objectives and much of the team disbanded, I was sent to Pristina in Kosovo on my one and only NATO posting. It was 2002.

My role was ‘Theatre Head of Contracts’, or THOC for short, overseeing multinational purchasing teams in four countries, which also included Macedonia, Greece and Albania, supporting NATO forces in the region. It goes without saying that I was hoping this would present more wildlife encounters, but I hadn’t accounted for the fact that travel was still severely restricted following the recent troubles in Kosovo. Other than essential trips, we were virtually in lockdown at the crowded Pristina base. Bitten by the volunteering bug, I did help out at a nearby horse rescue centre which would get me out every Saturday afternoon; this was rewarding, but shovelling horse manure did metaphorically feel a bit too much like the day job.

In a similar fashion to the coronavirus crisis of 2020, I tried to find solace in the nature around me. The compound had very little greenery so my Kosovo ‘species list’ was stuck on zero for the most part. However, one afternoon I was walking around the base with a group of German, French and Italian officers inspecting a potential building site, when a large butterfly caught my eye which was hanging off a solitary weed by the barbed wire security fence. In a break with military protocol I dashed over without explanation to investigate before it flew off: it was a scarce swallowtail butterfly. What a beauty with its tiger-like stripes and long tail. Unlike ‘our’ swallowtail, which is incredibly rare in the UK, found only on the Norfolk Broads, this one is a misnomer as it is not scarce at all, widespread across southern Europe. Saying that though, I have never seen another one since. It was always difficult to get the other European representatives to agree on anything, but my excitement at finding this gem of a creature in such a place, had them all of one opinion: I was a ‘Crazy Brit’.

Scarce swallowtail by pamsai. (File:The Scarce Swallowtail (Iphiclides podalirius) (7466756266).jpg - Wikimedia Commons (cropped))

This description was extended to the rest of the British contingent when one of our Army Majors suggested that we should celebrate the Queen's Golden Jubilee by organising a 'street' party for our NATO colleagues. Within the compound, each country had its own social club, and ours had an area outside which was big enough for a couple of lines of open-sided military tents housing rows of trestle tables. All the Brits then used their contacts back home to acquire as much Union Jack bunting, merchandise and flags as they could muster. The invites were sent out announcing that we would be serving traditional fare to our honoured guests. Of course, the French were expecting roast beef, after all we were '*les rosbifs'* to them, and everyone else thought it would be fish and chips. However, we wrong-footed them all and served that other traditional British menu: beef madras curry, followed by jam roly-poly and custard. Just the ticket in the 30-degree heat.

Our little shindig was the talk of the compound for a few weeks until another monumental event took over: The FIFA World Cup. The compound at Pristina became a sort of fan zone as many of the NATO contingents, even the USA, were represented at the tournament, and it wasn't long before we were going to each other's social clubs to watch the game when that particular country was playing. It was great fun and really added to the atmosphere, and for once I didn't mind too much that, as expected, England went out to Brazil, as we had already done better than the French (bottom of their qualifying group as reigning champions) and Italy (beaten by hosts South Korea, who also knocked out Spain). Germany, as usual, were another matter, and their fellow nationals on the base were convinced that they would win the competition.

You can probably credit Pele for being the reason why Brazil are most people's second favourite national football team. You can also 'credit' the British for having the most mischievous sense of humour, as we were responsible for urging each despatched nation's personnel to obtain yellow Brazilian football shirts in time for the final against Germany. This wasn't too difficult, as one of the concessions of living in the compound was that we were allowed just outside the gate to purchase items from local traders. They had been doing a roaring trade in cheap 'replica' football shirts, but now it was one nation in particular.

Not wishing to be outdone by the Brits' Jubilee celebrations, the Germans invited everyone around to their place for bratwurst, Warsteiner beer and to watch the World Cup Final with the nailed-on champions. What they hadn't bargained for was the fact that just about every non-German arrived wearing a yellow Brazil shirt. To be fair, they took it in good heart, and we didn't smirk too much when the Brazilians deservedly lifted the trophy – yeah right!

Despite the lack of wildlife watching opportunities, I thoroughly enjoyed making friends with comrades-in-arms from the other nations on that tour in Kosovo, and strangely felt quite sad as I left for the airport, after handing over to my Polish successor and receiving my NATO medal from a friendly Spanish General - never been hugged by a General on parade before. I soon regained my more usual focus at the airport though: as we were stood by the taxiway waiting for our plane to arrive, I could plainly hear the unmistakeable rasping call of a corncrake in the adjacent long grass. Like the scarce swallowtail, I have yet to encounter another.

My Kosovo tour was followed by another tedious IT-related job at Andover. For once, I wasn't complaining though, as it meant we could stay in our house and deepen those all-important roots in Somerset. Call it a mid-life crisis, or the fact that I now found myself in a 'fur-lined rut', but it was clear that my decision to push for postings in the South West would be career-limiting, and I was in need of a new challenge. Then, and now, I would do my thinking when I was on Green Down. I would find a big old, hopefully uninhabited, anthill, and sit there watching the natural world go by, listening for unfamiliar bird calls, making a note to find out what they were when I got home, and consider whatever was troubling me. It was up there I realised that the worst day outdoors was far better than the best day in the office, and decided I wanted to get more into local nature conservation, with the ambition of a career change to work for a wildlife organisation. More recently, it was where I came up with the idea to write this book. Clearly that anthill has a lot to answer for.

Day dreaming was all very well, but actually pursuing a completely new career seemed very daunting. I was already putting hundreds of hours into conservation volunteering, so I thought that was a good indicator I saw serious about this change of direction. However, I wasn't sure if this would be enough to secure employment

in what had become a very competitive sector. I had in passing mentioned my ambition to one of the SWT directors at a volunteers' conference, and she very supportively invited me for an informal interview to discuss my aspirations and how I might take them forward. It was a bit of a reality check. Whereas I thought my years of life experience in the military would hold me in good stead, in fact, I was unlikely to be considered for any conservation-related job without a degree. In terms of specific roles, it sounded unlikely that I would be able to accumulate sufficient practical qualifications to compete for a reserve manager's job, but my wildlife identification and resource management skills might be conducive to a career as a field ecologist.

A few more sessions on that anthill and I decided to look at distance learning degrees. For some reason, I didn't initially consider the Open University (OU) - can't exactly remember why - it might have been the heavy science-based course content, or that they expected you (at the time) to attend summer school in Milton Keynes. I finally settled on Exeter Uni who had just launched an accredited course in Ecology and Wildlife Studies. By now it was 2005 and I had been posted again, back to helicopter (Sea King) support; this time working out of an office block in Sherborne, Dorset, but crucially much closer to home. This gave me more quality spare time to study in the evenings, not drained by the daily commute. I also tried to read the material at lunchtimes at my desk, but there were too many distractions in the office, and would end up sitting in the back seat of my car with my head down in a book, which led to various unprintable comments from passing colleagues.

It was odd to be studying academically again, and it felt like I was being given a chance to improve on my poor showing at A-Levels all those years before. Most of the modules were fascinating, and to complete your degree you had to gain the required credits at three levels, basically the equivalent of a three-year, full-time course. It took me six years, spanning three postings.

Had it not been for the subject matter, and Anne's reassuring encouragement, I don't think I would have stayed the course. In the Ecology module we had to write a management plan for the reintroduction of water voles at a fictional site in Devon. I also completed an observation-based study of breeding sparrowhawks in some woodland adjacent to Green Down. Next, I wrote a paper on

the lack of bitterns breeding on the Avalon Marshes, and concluded that a reintroduction project would be required. Anyone who knows the story of their recent natural phenomenal recovery will be laughing out loud at this point, but I'll pick this up again later. However, disaster struck as I finished Level 2: Exeter closed down the accredited programme - never did find out why - and I was in danger of not being able to complete my precious degree.

The only place I could find that would recognise the credits I had accumulated was the OU, and even then, for an honours degree, they required me to re-take half of Level 2 again and sit an exam. It was getting more serious than I had bargained for, but I was determined to stick with it. They had by now dropped the summer school element, instead there were regional tutorials, which were good for meeting fellow students, but little else in my opinion, lots of assignments and those dreaded end-of-module exams. They were tougher than I expected and took me back to A-Level days, and we all know how those went. The final dissertation had to be presented as a website, which I thought was quite novel, and did mine on alternative approaches to the badger cull being implemented in parts of Somerset at the time.

I found the OU programme really challenging, but I learnt how to use and interpret climate modelling software, got to debate some of the issues from the point of view of a low-lying Pacific island, studied Adonis blue butterfly DNA and the threats of in-breeding, and did a practical exercise at Green Down involving max/min temperature thermometers, discovering how mature trees actively control their immediate environment. Mind-bending, inspiring stuff! I managed to squeak through before all the course fees trebled again, but would thoroughly recommend the Open University to anyone considering a change of career. My only gripe was that you weren't allowed to wear a mortar board at the graduation ceremony; an RAF-like, 'bad habit' from another relatively junior establishment? If I had known that before I started, it might have been a deal-breaker.

As I got closer to finishing the degree, the doubts started to set in again: was I making the right decision, should I just hang on until I retired at age 55, did I really think that another career was realistic, and at what point should I resign my commission?

Fate took over again, as in 2011 the military had a major strategic review and declared they wanted to shed 22,000 posts over

the next four years. There was to be a redundancy programme with 1,000 RAF jobs going in the first phase, and I was in the qualifying bracket. My application for voluntary redundancy was in the very next day, which I think shocked my Desk Officer slightly. I know a lot of Service personnel were upset or angry to be made compulsory redundant, and I fully understand that. However, when my boss called me in a couple of months later and solemnly told me I was getting the 'push', I was ecstatic, and he remarked that he had never seen anyone so happy at losing their job before.

There then followed four months of 'resettlement': learning how to write your CV and become employable beyond the military, going on courses of your choice, and looking for relevant work experience. Suddenly all the talk was of 'transferable skills' and 'elevator pitches'[34]. I chose to do courses which might help me become a field ecologist, but soon realised that most of these roles were linked to land development. Around that time, I'd had a couple of run-ins with the local planners over some proposed developments in our village, where I was basically told that mature hedgerows, bat roosts, and my 'amateur' bird notes were not particularly important factors in the decision-making progress. The whole affair had been quite dispiriting, and as a result I felt that becoming a field ecologist might not be for me after all, so I was soon back on the anthill considering my options.

I was constantly scouring the environmental job websites, and getting more than a little concerned that nothing that I thought might suit me was coming up in the South West, but then, hidden away in the less-read Volunteering section, an advert for a six-month unpaid placement with Natural England at Shapwick Heath jumped off the page at me. This was an engagement and communications role, with the aim to get the reserve and the Avalon Marshes more into the public eye. I was convinced I had the right transferable skills for this, especially my ability to 'blag for Britain', and was sure there was a 'people-person' in me somewhere. I applied, endlessly practiced my elevator pitch, went for a 'job' interview - my first for 30 years - and got it. They told me a few weeks later that I had been the

[34] Which, for the uninitiated, is having just 30 seconds to explain who you are, and leaving the 'right' impression on the person you are pitching to.

only applicant, but that didn't matter to me one jot - I now had a foot in the door.

At that stage I hadn't quite left the RAF, but as part of the resettlement process, I was allowed to work part-time over at Shapwick. My first task, which I think was more of an initiation ritual, was to prepare and cook a mountain of onions for the annual conservation volunteers' barbeque, which literally had me in tears. Whereas the launch of my time in the RAF was stalled by my lack of flying skills, my second career in wildlife conservation was off to a frying start…

PART TWO

Another Happy Landing

12. Great Whites and other delights

I guess for most people 2012 will be forever associated with the London Olympics and the Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebrations. For me, I will always remember it as the year I finally left the RAF, followed by my voluntary placement with Natural England, which then evolved into my first paid role in wildlife conservation. The latter development was entirely due to the arrival of a pair of rare birds that decided to build a nest in the reedbeds of Shapwick Heath.

Before I get into that story though, I ought to reflect on my 31 years of military service. Joining at age 18, I basically knew nothing about anything, and ended up going with the flow, learning and maturing along the way. And I think that is the key to life in the Forces: if they recruit you young, they are able to mould you to a certain way of thinking, which is vital to the success of the military ethos. Don't get me wrong, this is not another moan, I thoroughly enjoyed most of my time, especially the travelling and some of the incredible places I got to visit, and of course the financial benefits that come with the territory. However, personal priorities and attitudes develop and change with age, and once I had declared that I wanted to stay in the south west, my career was ostensibly over, which was the point I started to consider my future.

My final job in the RAF had been back with the Sea Kings, working alongside Westland Helicopters (as it was best known[35]) in Yeovil, supporting their final tour of duty out in Afghanistan. Somehow it seemed fitting that I was leaving just as this workhorse of a helicopter, and the ever-adaptable Tornado, which had both formed a major part of my preceding three decades, were also being put out to grass.

I was given a 'Happy Retirement' card by the team on my last day in the RAF, which was nice, but they had missed the point slightly: 'Happy?'- yes, definitely; 'Retirement?' – nope, furthest from my mind. It actually felt like a new beginning working alongside a fiercely committed, talented, and enthusiastic bunch of conservationists, all from very different backgrounds, but everyone

[35] Before it merged with the Italian helicopter manufacturer, Agusta, and latterly became a subsidiary of Leonardo.

sharing the same powerful, uniting cause. Much of my time was spent dreaming up educational activities to engage children with wildlife, working with primary schools, designing interpretation materials to be displayed around the nature reserve, and writing articles for the local press about what was happening at the Avalon Marshes. It was valuable experience and although I continued to scour the environmental job websites, I was now hoping that something - wasn't sure exactly what that might be - would come up with one of the organisations on site. When it did, it was totally unexpected.

By now bitterns had started nesting in the expanding reedbeds, and once I admitted that I had written a paper suggesting that there was little chance of that happening without a reintroduction programme, I had to get used to the inevitable 'banter', which was quite reminiscent of my military days. But bitterns were not the only heron-species taking advantage of this rapidly developing habitat.

In 2010, us birders had got very excited that a handful of great white egrets (GWEs) had appeared on Shapwick Heath and Ham Wall. This was a very rare bird in the UK at that time, and like the first little egrets that arrived in the early 1990s along the south coast, hopes were rising that they might stay and breed.

There is a clue in their name that GWEs are large, noticeable birds, about the same size as grey herons, but, put them in a tall reedbed, which is their favoured surroundings, and they quickly disappear. Also, I should say that the reedbeds in the Avalon Marshes are vast, and mainly inaccessible, which can add to the challenge of trying to understand what is going on out there sometimes. So, a local birdwatcher sitting in one of the hides at Shapwick Heath in April 2012 couldn't believe his luck when he observed a GWE repeatedly carrying reed stems into an area around the lake. The only problem was he couldn't see where it was landing to confirm that it was nest-building, although the available evidence would suggest that was exactly what it was doing. He alerted the Natural England (NE) Senior Reserve Manager, which triggered a sequence of events that resulted in me being offered my first contract in my new career.

A meeting was convened by NE with the Somerset Ornithological Society and RSPB, where everyone agreed that the activity strongly suggested nesting behaviour. Moreover, although

the GWE was a common bird in other parts of the world, the 'novelty' value to egg collectors of a first nesting attempt in the UK warranted a 24 hour monitoring operation, and that any news of the activity would be suppressed during the incubation phase. As it turned out, egg collectors were not the main threat on this occasion, but more of that later. The incubation period for this species is 26 days, but we had no real idea of when the eggs might have been laid, if at all, plus the observed bird might have been bringing in reeds to maintain an already occupied nest with a sitting female.

The three organisations confirmed they would try and drum up some staff or volunteers to help with the wardening, and NE agreed to fund a project officer to coordinate the operation, manage the watch schedule, and handle the inevitable media interest once the story broke. Crucially, this person would need to start straight away. Talk about being in the right place at the right time…

We had no problems finding volunteers for the watch – in all over 50 took part. Filling all the night-time slots however was not so easy and I found myself on almost permanent graveyard shifts alongside one of the younger RSPB guys. I hadn't worked nights since the Gulf War, so that took a bit of adjustment, and quite a few times I had to be woken up and reminded it wasn't a sleeping (or snoring) duty. NE had arranged for a Land Rover and caravan to be on the track alongside the estimated position of the nest, about 150 yards away, and we started a logbook of the comings and goings of the GWEs in that area.

You will be relieved to read that, although I still have the logbook, all 120 typed pages of it, I am not about to share it here, as it is rather monotonous: "GWE in, GWE out" – you get the idea. The first challenge was explaining to people passing by what we were doing out on the reserve, morning, noon, and night. This is where my 'blagging' abilities came to the fore, as I devised a cover story that we were monitoring booming bitterns[36] on the reserve for a national project. We felt that this didn't qualify as lying to the public, as we did indeed log the booming from that watchpoint, discovering these birds

[36] 'Booming' is the call male bitterns make to attract a female, likened to the sound made by blowing over the top of a bottle. It is incredibly enigmatic and for me defines the Avalon Marshes.

were active all night. We had one quite close to the caravan that was particularly noisy, calling every five minutes or so throughout the night, but not quite loud enough to stop me dropping off at about 3am.

'It went thataway' – some of the volunteer wardens.

From the frequency of the two GWEs going in and out of that same unseen area of the reedbed, which was usually two or three times in a 24 hour period, we were now fairly sure there was a nest, but still had no real idea of whether there were eggs or nestlings in it. We also soon discovered that one of the pair was ringed. A volunteer warden, who was also a bird ringer, followed this up and found that this bird had been ringed in the nest in Besné, southern Brittany, in May 2009, along with its siblings; one of which had also been spotted in the Avalon Marshes. Our nesting bird had turned up later that year in Lancashire, Wales and Gloucestershire, before it arrived at Catcott in April 2010, and then appeared to stay in Somerset, clearly making its home here, by raising young a number of times in subsequent years. Although we didn't know for sure, we had a theory that this bird was female; the reason for this will become clear a bit further on.

By mid-May we still hadn't really seen anything conclusive, other than the two adults coming and going, and were getting concerned as it was now well past the estimated incubation period,

and it appeared both GWEs were often away from the site for long periods at the same time. Then on the 21st there was a sustained attack on the nest site by a male marsh harrier while the adults were not around, which had the duty wardens holding their breath. It hovered and went into that spot continually for the next 10 minutes but flew off 'empty-handed'. This seemed to tell us two things: first, that there was indeed something in the nest, and secondly, it was big enough to fend off a formidable raptor. We took a leap of faith and went public with the news that GWEs had nested in the UK for the first time.

Life for me on the watch until that point had been fairly straightforward: organising schedules, noting down the movements of the birds, keeping discussions with passers-by as short as possible, maintaining the tea kit in the caravan, emptying the camping toilet etc. That changed overnight once our press release went out, coinciding with a planned announcement on BBC Springwatch. NE had wanted to get Shapwick Heath and the Avalon Marshes on people's 'radar', and this achieved it in an instant. Local people started arriving to see the birds, many who hadn't realised this incredible place was on their doorstep, and also lots from further afield keen to add GWE to their UK list. However, patience was required to see them, so I put some chairs out and people would happily sit for a couple of hours watching and chatting to the volunteers until that moment of excitement arrived as a 'Great White' appeared drifting elegantly above the reeds. There were one or two confused looks from those visitors who didn't know why we were all sitting there, especially from children when we used this abbreviated form of the bird's name. I have heard various rumours about crocodiles being out in the marshes, but fortunately no sharks as yet.

Then a week later - the moment we had all been waiting for - one of the young GWEs was observed wing stretching at the nest site, and a few members of the public were there to see it too. The bird was much bigger than expected, but because we weren't sure when the eggs had been laid or hatched, we had no accurate idea of its age. Something else significant occurred around this point: the un-ringed bird stopped visiting the nest, leaving the ringed bird to do all the work to feed this well-grown 'chick'. This was the unscientific basis of our theory that the ringed bird was female.

If it was female, she was a bit of a 'super-mum' as, over the next few days, a second and then third, noticeably smaller, nestling appeared, wing stretching and begging for food, to the delight of the increasing number of watchers. There was no leap of faith required with the second press release confirming the UK's first nesting GWEs had been successful with three young being raised.

There was a lot of media interest, with local TV news crews coming out to film what was going on at various intervals. There was one such occasion when everyone involved was extremely relieved that they decided against a live broadcast, which had been the original plan. I was being interviewed on the main reserve track, a bit further along from the watchpoint where it was quieter, waxing lyrical to the reporter about some element or other of GWE life history, when one of the birders came racing towards us on his bike, wildly pointing to the sky, shouting "Kev, Kev, there's four f***ing storks flying this way!".

They don't say "Cut!" in the TV world apparently, but filming was halted at that point. That moment became a standing joke for weeks afterwards, but more importantly, at a personal level, it was the first time I had seen white storks in Britain. This was long before they were reintroduced in this country and were in fact wild ones doing a wide sweep over the southern counties before drifting back to mainland Europe. The Avalon Marshes is a place where this sort of encounter is becoming more frequent - I am not talking about ones with foul-mouthed birdwatchers - but exciting glimpses of pioneering species dropping by from the continent, which might eventually stay and breed. I will make no predictions about what might be next given my past history in this department, but we have seen spoonbill, purple heron and glossy ibis in recent years, so there are lots of exciting candidates.

As mentioned earlier, one of the main reasons we were maintaining such a close eye on the nest was the threat of egg collectors, which unfortunately are still a threat to rare birds in this country and around the world. We had mug shots of past offenders and happily we did not have any sightings of these unwelcome visitors. I only had concern for the welfare of the nest on two occasions. The first was when a freelance photographer who supplied the main tabloid newspapers asked me where he could hire a boat or canoe to get a closer shot of the nest site. I thought he was

joking; he wasn't but at least he asked us first, and we were able to put him straight. The second incident was altogether more bizarre.

Once the three youngsters were on display, their antics, which reminded me of Bambi on ice, were keeping most visitors entertained, but also distracting them from a new development further along the track. We had noticed another GWE purposefully carrying reeds and sticks, and sure enough a second nest was being built. Again, we wanted to keep it a secret, but this time it was going to be more difficult as the nest was higher up in a willow bush and we could see exactly what was going on. Our strategy was to keep people's focus on the three youngsters from the first nest, while keeping one eye in the distance and noting down what was going on there. Although we thought we had got quite good at this low-level deception, we obviously had not fooled everyone.

I was at the watchpoint talking to some visitors when I saw this chap with a notebook, head down, doing his best to ignore us. Strangely, he seemed to be counting out his paces, and every so often would stop and mark a line with his boot, stare out into the reedbed with his binos, furtively write a note, and then go through the whole process again. Occasionally, you get a feeling that something isn't right, and alarm bells start to ring in your head. When this guy stepped off the path, in line with where the second nest was located, and started to wade through the undergrowth, I had full air raid sirens going off in mine. I immediately phoned the Senior Reserve Manager back in the office and set off to intercept this potential nest raider. By the time I reached him, he was back on the track writing another note. After informing him that he wasn't allowed off the path, I asked him what he was doing; he was evasive, saying it was none of my business, to which I replied that it most definitely was when I thought he might be disturbing a protected species[37].

I was absolutely convinced he was an egg collector, and when I highlighted my concerns to him, he became very defensive, saying he would never take anything from a nest, but then proudly told me that he was in a competition with a friend from the Midlands

[37] Actually GWE isn't a declared protected species, but it was nesting, although I wasn't going to admit that to him, which did give it a level of 'protection'.

to see chicks in the nest of as many bird species as possible. His friend had been on site the week before and had a suspicion that there was a second GWE nest and that they might be able to view the young inside. Oddly, even though they were in competition, they shared notes and maps, hence the pacing out along the track, and were both nearing 200 species in the UK. His friend must have been a lot less conspicuous during his expedition, as none of us wardens had spotted anything suspicious before this moment. However, on this second nest we had a really good idea when the eggs had been laid, and they were still a way off hatching, so these two gentlemen were obviously planning to return, and this had been a reconnaissance mission.

By now, the reserve manager had arrived and told our interloper in no uncertain terms that he would not hesitate to call the police if he continued to act suspiciously. His reply was that if we weren't around, his passion to see birds in the nest would have driven him to continue to try and get closer, regardless of the danger to himself or the GWEs. Nevertheless, he agreed to leave, and we stepped up the watch again, as we had dropped the 24-hour monitoring once it was clear the first nest had been successful. Never a dull moment.

It was interesting that this second nest was elevated, as, if you cast your mind back to the summer of 2012, it rained a lot. So much so, that the water level of the lake rose quite noticeably. The first nest we thought was very low down in the reeds, and thus out of sight, so we were relieved that the young had fledged before the rising water became an issue. This was not a problem for nest two, and we had privileged views of the sitting bird, the interactions with its partner, including mutual preening, making a 'snap' noise with their bills, and synchronised neck stretching; we even thought we could see the top of the grey-ish coloured eggs as she adjusted her position on the surprisingly small pile of reeds and sticks.

I have mentioned a few times already my 'top' wildlife encounters, but little beats being able to follow the development of new life from egg to fledging. Whether it be a penguin colony in the Falklands, or a blue tit in a nest box rigged with a camera - all without disturbing the parents and their young I hasten to add - this is nature at its fundamental best, and these egrets gave us a unique opportunity to do exactly that.

By this stage, we were down to a handful of keen volunteers and me, keeping a watchful telescoped eye over nest two and engaging with passing visitors. This time we could predict to within a couple of days of when the eggs would hatch. It was only two chicks, and soon we were watching and hearing them squabble as they developed into bony punks with white-feathered Mohican hair styles. And the sibling rivalry got fiercer as the parents seemed to be making less food deliveries than we had observed with nest one. This may well have been due to the atrocious weather, but one morning we arrived to find one of the nestlings hanging limply over the right-hand side of the nest, clearly dead. Our theory was that it possibly got its leg trapped in the nesting material during one of the fights, and hadn't been able to pull it free, perhaps breaking it in the process.

Adult GWE and chick at second nest by Andrew Kirby.

The sole remaining nestling then seemed to become quite lazy, not showing any eagerness to wing stretch like the first three chicks had done in the other nest. They had had various amusing (for us at least) crash landings into the reedbed and trees before finally fully fledging. This one seemed totally set against flying, and would climb gingerly down from the nest, picking its way to the water's edge and wait for a parent to fly in and feed it, then steadily make its way back up the willow afterwards for a well-earned rest. It eventually fledged aged nine weeks and was still being fed at the nest site after twelve weeks (in September), which was contrary to all

the field guides we had read. We wished it well as we finally closed down the Great Egret Watch.

However, that wasn't quite the end of the story as the reserve manager offered a few of the wardens a chance to canoe out onto the lake, which was a rare treat in itself, to inspect the empty nest sites. It was now October so there was no risk of disturbing any nesting birds and before the influx of wintering wildfowl, so this was the perfect window to go and look. We couldn't find nest one; it looked like it had been consumed by the higher water level, but nest two was still there, literally a scruffy pile of a few sticks and reeds, with the carcass of the dead bird hanging to one side. One of the volunteers gently removed it and found it did indeed have a broken leg.

It had been an epic summer never to be forgotten with four successfully fledged GWEs, 3500 visitors coming to the watchpoint, the volunteer wardens giving up 2000 hours of their valuable time, many going on to become bittern counters, coming out to the reserves at 4.30am twice a year to count booming males[38], and the Avalon Marshes now indelibly on the map. The story had been covered by local news teams, BBC Springwatch and the One Show, and appeared on media sites as far away as the USA and Burma.

I had no idea how I was going to follow that.

[38] The count takes place an hour around dawn in mid-March and April, and is the best time to hear the bitterns calling across the reserves. It is another testament to the dedication of volunteers to give up their sleep to undertake the count, but they do get treated to a well-earned breakfast afterwards.

13. More on the Marshes

As much as I adored Green Down, the birder in me was constantly being drawn to the developing wetland of the Avalon Marshes, formerly known as the Peat Moors. I am sometimes asked where this more mystical description, of what is more accurately a post-industrial landscape, came from. There would appear to be a parallel here with the monks of Glastonbury Abbey declaring, over 800 years ago, that the legendary King Arthur was buried in their grounds, and that Excalibur had been thrown into a nearby watercourse around the true Isle of Avalon. This was all with the sole intent to boost the number of tourists, then known as pilgrims, coming to visit the town. And although no-one seems to want to admit to coming up with the new title for our slice of Avalon, making it more attractive to potential visitors must have been at the forefront of their mind. The other salient point is that the area is no longer made up of extensive peat moors, as much of the carbon-trapping black stuff has been extracted, bagged in plastic, and shipped around the country as horticultural compost.

But we won't dwell on that as, whatever you want to call this patch of Somerset, these 1500 hectares of reclaimed wetland habitat are developing into probably one of the best places in Britain for avifauna and wildlife in general. When I first started visiting the Avalon Marshes in the late 1990s, it was pretty much unknown, lacking basic facilities, and you only ever saw a handful of other hardy birders out there at any one time. The only exception being when an osprey dropped by to hunt over the largest lake on Shapwick Heath, usually August Bank Holiday weekend, when we would all be crammed into the little 'shed on legs' attempting to get an elevated glimpse of this magnificent masked fish raider before it continued its journey to Africa.

Times have changed since then, but I really cherish some of the 'firsts' that I experienced in those early years, which paved the way to me becoming almost intrinsically linked with this dynamic landscape. Apart from the fact that over 10% of my UK bird list is made up of species I first saw on these reserves, it is categorically not just about ticking off a quantity of names, it is the quality of the encounter that really matters to me.

For example, I had seen starlings coming into roost at Blacktoft Sands a few years before, but I had never experienced a full-on murmuration. My first of those was at Westhay Moor, before Ham Wall became the starling capital of the world, and 'bucket lists' became a thing. That bitter, but bright, winter's afternoon I stood on a rutted track by a reeded lake, with just a couple of other people about, and witnessed a spectacle that left me open-mouthed, which is not advisable when hundreds of thousands of these birds are flying together overhead, and you realise that it is not rain splashing into the water. I believe the 'murmur' in murmuration is a description of the noise of the wings as they whoosh by, but that felt like a euphemism for what sounded more like the demonic hissing of one massive shape-shifting being. And that metaphor continued as a peregrine appeared and the mighty beast launched high into the air, rippling as it moved, tentacles forming and dwarfing the raptor, which knew when it was beaten and disappeared from sight. It was something bordering on the surreal from a bird which, in small numbers, attracts very little interest feeding in the garden.

Starling murmuration by Val & Al (www.avalonprints.uk.com)

Shapwick Heath is the biggest of the Avalon reserves, with a diversity of habitats, including wet woodland and meadows, along with the reedbeds so attractive to the herons and egrets. It was where I saw my first otter and remains the only area in Britain where I have encountered them. And if you are lucky, which basically means spending as much time on site as possible - fortune favours the

patient - you may get prolonged views. I was walking along the main track through the reserve one quiet Saturday afternoon, looking for marsh harriers, when I heard a loud plop in a smallish oblong lake on my left: a large dog otter. My first reaction was to look around to see if anyone else had clocked it, but this was yet another moment to enjoy on my own. It is very open along that path, which was once a railway line, so I stayed low and camouflaged my outline beside a nearby elder bush.

'My' otter was moving through the water in a similar fashion to those porpoising penguins in South Georgia, until it disappeared, and I thought that was the end of the heart thumping encounter. However, it then reappeared on the far bank at the edge of the reeds about 40 yards away. It had caught a large fish, and proceeded to devour it, giving me a brilliant view through my binos of its ice-white canine teeth against the red flesh of the unlucky fish. You do not need to travel the planet to see nature in all its gory glory.

Nor do the encounters have to be 'breath-taking' to be special. Visit the Catcott reserve in winter, much of which was once arable farmland, and you enter a soundscape that was the inspiration for me to concentrate on identifying the calls of different bird species. My efforts up until then had not been great: describing a bullfinch's call as like 'a young bird of prey', rather than a 'rusty gate hinge', in my first birding notebook is slightly embarrassing, but we all have to start somewhere. The best hide at Catcott looks east towards Glastonbury Tor, providing a stunning distant backdrop, but it can be a teeth-chattering few hours when the wind is blowing in your face in January or February. The reward though is a wall of noise, mainly from the shrill whistles of thousands of wigeon squabbling and interacting right in front of the hide. Once you have tuned out that backdrop, it is possible to pick up the other calls: the 'yip, yip' of the much smaller teal, the rasping quacks of female shoveler, while the elegant, seemingly silent, pintail keeps its distance from the cackling mob. Throw a hunting raptor into the mix and the final crescendo is reached with the clapping of thousands of wings as all the ducks take immediate evasive action and leave the theatre in a mad panic.

The performance changes with the seasons, but my favourite is in May when it becomes more contemporary with the arrival of the migrant warblers, who do their very best to drown out the resident Cetti's opening solo riff. A background beat is added by

the monotonous disco-like reed warblers, with scratching hip-hop provided by the occasional whitethroat or sedge warbler. Musical sophistication is delivered with gusto by blackcaps and the virtuoso garden warbler. The bass section is made up of booming bitterns, with cuckoo on comedy whistle. Even a marsh harrier may get in on the act with some distant subtle fluting, which for me had gone unnoticed for many years until I really opened my ears. The jazz-like ensemble is seemingly conducted by the smartly dressed hobby which swoops low over each section of the reedbed drawing out the erratic music from the hidden orchestra.

With these, mostly weekend, experiences behind me, I was so chuffed to be taken on by Natural England and able to spend more time out on the reserves, and thus very much hoping this would continue beyond the Great Egret Watch. I mentioned that in those early years the Avalon Marshes was fairly 'rustic' when it came to facilities, with whatever limited available investment quite rightly going into maintaining the habitats, rather than people comforts. Many stalwarts will remember the 'green' compost toilet of the original Peat Moors Centre, and there are some who are adamant it should have all stayed like that so they could continue to enjoy the wildlife without too many other people about. That all started to change once Bill Oddie featured the murmurations in one of his TV programmes, and of course with our GWE press releases in 2012.

As you may have gathered, I prefer to do most of my wildlife watching on my own, away from the crowds, and there is a part of me that would like these places to remain under-visited, but that's a selfish and short-sighted approach. If we are serious about conserving wildlife, then we have to share these experiences, get others enthused to want to support it, or connect with it, in whatever way they can. If ever the Government decided to sell-off Shapwick Heath to the highest bidder, as it tried to do with the woods managed by the Forestry Commission, I want there to be the same outcry, with communities coming together to save this incredible place, which was perhaps where they saw *their* first bittern, otter or egret (not that it helped Calvert Jubilee unfortunately). It is a delicate balance between protection and promotion, and perhaps we don't always get

it right, but increasing public exposure is the lifeblood of the Avalon Marshes conservation partner organisations[39].

Bittern by Andrew Kirby.

The reason for that little rant was that tucked away in one of the green draughty portacabins making up the Avalon Marshes Centre (AMC), formed from the defunct Peat Moors Centre, were a couple of project officers: one working up a plan to create a 'proper' visitors' centre, and another on the verge of landing the best part of £2million from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) for a number of initiatives across the partnership. These ranged from building some replica historic structures, including an Anglo-Saxon long hall at the Centre, a new car park and toilets at the rapidly developing Ham Wall reserve, and a variety of other projects to increase local community

[39] Although the composition of the 'Avalon Marshes Partnership' tends to alter depending on the breadth of a project and its funding, the core players are Somerset Wildlife Trust, RSPB, Natural England, Hawk & Owl Trust (who own the Shapwick Moor reserve) and South West Heritage Trust (project managers of the replica historic buildings at the Centre).

and volunteering participation. Of course, if these two major programmes were successful, they would irreversibly enhance the profile of the area, but, at a personal level, might offer opportunities to continue working at the Marshes.

Long story short, but, after various iterations, funding to develop a conventional visitors' centre was not forthcoming and the AMC would have to continue to evolve organically, starting with the compost loo being replaced by a slightly sweeter smelling toilet block. The HLF bid however was successful, and it was announced, just as I finished the Egret Watch, that there would be three full-time project delivery roles covering Heritage, Education, and Volunteer Development.

Looking at the job specification, I thought I could take a punt at the latter role: it required a relevant degree (Hah! Big tick), two years' experience with a volunteer organisation (tick), working with partnership organisations (done that frequently in the military), delivery of a communications and publicity project (Great Egret Watch), involvement in community development (would have to think about that one), and a whole load of energy and enthusiasm (Tigger has nothing on me for those attributes). If I got an interview, it would be a lot different to the one the year before with Natural England: for a start there would be other candidates, probably far more formal, and it was for a three-year initial period, contracted to the lead partner, Somerset Wildlife Trust. After 31 years cosseted in the RAF, this felt more like the real world, but it seemed the last seven years, since I took the plunge to change direction and study for a degree, had been leading to this moment.

Cometh the hour, cometh the competence-based recruitment process. This was a new world for me, and although the military resettlement course had tried to bring us all to speed on how this worked, I struggled with the concept. Trying to recall what I did yesterday is bad enough but attempting to articulate past experiences so that they fit a framework to adequately demonstrate a trait or competence, let alone write this book, was an anathema to me. If a stand-up comedian has not already based a routine around 'Tell us about a time when…' then they are missing a trick. After numerous versions of my application form, and with a little help from some of the younger members of staff, who relished my predicament, I sent it off.

I was delighted to be invited for an interview, but then spent the next two weeks solid recalling scenarios where I had dealt with conflict, used my initiative, led the team, been a team member, enjoyed success, learnt from failure, displayed my strengths and weaknesses etc., etc. I filled an A4 hardback notebook with various situations and the competences I thought they might demonstrate. Don't worry, I have since ditched (recycled of course) that particular book, so those stories have been well and truly lost to the literary world.

I cannot remember most of the hour of questioning, which felt more like ten minutes, other than waffling on about a systems approach to training and Kaizen[40] change management, neither of which had been in my scenario notes, and that I needed a lie down afterwards. Why on earth I mentioned these two techniques, much loved by senior military officers and the expensive consultancy firms hired to implement them, I shall never know, especially as I thought most of it was "the emperor's new clothes" guff. During one such session towards the end of my military career, when we were forming a new helicopter project team, we were given a pile of magazines and asked to cut out pictures which might depict how we wanted our organisation to look in the future. I kid you not. However, I digress, the next day the project manager offered me the job, so the interview must have gone okay. Thankfully, he never mentioned anything about me applying Kaizen principles to our emerging team.

From the job description, I wasn't really sure what to expect as it was less well defined than the Heritage and Education roles, but the next three years were varied and broadened my horizons beyond wildlife, which proved to be extremely useful when the HLF project came to an end. For now though I would have to brush up on my Mesolithic.

In all there were six of us on the newly formed Avalon Marshes' team, which was put together to support the partner organisations, or to directly, deliver the 60 HLF-funded projects and work programmes.

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[40] Kaizen is Japanese for 'improvement' and is a management approach based on 'continuous improvement' leading to 'personal efficiency'. I will not comment further…

My first task was to recruit some 'Hands-on Heritage' volunteers who would be creating replicas of two of the ancient trackways which had been found buried deep in the peat over the years. More than 40 wooden trackways have been discovered, and even a couple of dugout canoes, by local peat diggers. The age of these structures is mind-boggling: The Sweet Track, which is probably the most well-known, dates back almost 6000 years, built by Neolithic man, getting on for 1000 years before Stonehenge appeared. I put up a couple of posters in Glastonbury and advertised on some volunteering websites, and it wasn't long before we were getting enquiries. Although we do a lot of practical conservation out here, learning ancient, green woodworking skills was something a bit different and we managed to put together a real diverse bunch of volunteers, who I would never describe as 'heritage'. Their efforts can still be seen out on Shapwick Heath, along the 'Sweet Track Trail', and also at the Centre where these amazing people have turned their attentions to building an authentic Anglo-Saxon hall, which even has a stained-glass window made by one of the volunteers, part of a Roman villa, and an Iron Age roundhouse, to replace those that once stood at the old Peat Moors Centre.

Anyway – to return to the story in hand - I want to take you back beyond the Neolithic[41] to the Mesolithic[42] period when hunter-gatherers repopulated Britain after the last Ice Age and we became an island as sea levels rose. One of the requirements of gaining HLF funding was to provide ways of celebrating the landscape and finding novel ways of engaging people with their local history. Our lead archaeologist from the South West Heritage Trust floated the idea of running a Mesolithic day to demonstrate how people would have lived out on the marshes during that period. This would also be as 'hands-on' as possible and include clay-pot making, flint-tool demonstrations, den building with reeds and willow, archery and 'time-tasting', with food representative of the period from a nearby smokery.

I wasn't quite sure where my 'skills' were going to be utilised, eating might have been a possibility, but I am not a big fan of

[41] Aka the New Stone Age: 4000-2300 BC.

[42] Aka the Middle Stone Age: 10,000-4000 BC.

smoked food. However, it was suggested that I should learn how to use an atlatl. Never heard of an atlatl? No, nor had I. When it was first mentioned I thought they were talking about something from Star Wars, but that is an AT-AT[43], of course. An atlatl is a spear-throwing lever that if used correctly can significantly increase the speed and distance of your missile; think about the Velcro-covered whip-like dog ball-throwers and you get the idea. As ever, one of our clever Heritage volunteers fashioned a pliable length of wood, willow I think, into a curved shape to hold the small spear, with a notch on the end to provide the contact with the killing weapon.

I am a numpty when it comes to throwing - couldn't throw a javelin at school to save my life. However, with this remarkable device, which took hardly any effort to use effectively, I reckon I could have given Tessa Sanderson a run for her money. On the day, we set up some targets and a very large safety zone in a school field in Glastonbury; my job was to show the kids how to use the atlatl and a Mesolithic-type bow and arrow, and get them to have a go. I drew the line at dressing up for the period (as you will see from the photo), but had a ball getting the budding young warriors to imagine they were in a reed swamp, very hungry, and that the targets were bitterns, pelicans, or ducks, and that they would have to spear one for lunch. There were a few questioning comments from some disapproving parents, but I think I just about got away with it, especially once I had got them throwing atlatl-powered spears as well. Afterwards, I would point them to the food stall where they could try smoked duck, trout or eel. The themed activities went down very well - people saying it made a change from celebrating the Romans - and there were smiles all 'round. On the downside though, there was an awful lot of smoked eel left over – no idea why.

[43] Any fellow Star Wars 'anorak' will know that AT-AT stands for All Terrain Armoured Transport, used during the Clone Wars. They will also have instantly spotted my nod to young Obi-Wan in the title of this part of the book.

Some odd bloke using an atlatl.

I was on more solid ground organising conservation training, which was directed at our many dedicated volunteers, but we were also looking to involve the general public, so, while we had some specialist courses to identify, for example, those tricky wetland waders for bird surveyors, we also had basic identification courses to help local people and inspire them to undertake the Annual RSPB/BTO Gardenwatch. These went down very well, and all the courses would be combined with a guided walk on the nature reserve to put newly developed skills into practice. By now, bird calls had really become my 'thing' and I would always have one ear open when talking to people ready to impress them with an unseen species I could hear in the reeds or wherever. On one such occasion, I was sure I could hear a distant bullfinch, even though the habitat wasn't right for that species. I was so convinced that I announced it,

describing it as a ‘rusty gate hinge’, obviously, which others then noticed. A gentleman next to me turned up his hearing aid so that he could try and pick it out, which only seemed to make the bird sing louder. At this point I realised the ‘call’ was actually feedback from his small aural device. Pride goes before a fall, and these days on guided walks, I re-tell this story and now describe a bullfinch’s call as similar to ‘metallic feedback from a hearing aid’.

A key requirement of my volunteer development role was to target new groups: those perhaps who you would not usually see out on the nature reserves. I’d had a ‘bee in my bonnet’ for a long time about the conservation organisations in that they were really good at engaging with the very young, through activities for primary schools, and the older, usually retired, age group via talks, walks and practical volunteering groups, but little or nothing for teenagers. It occurred to me that there had been no openings beyond my school A-Level Biology field trips to get any exposure to what might be out there in the conservation sector way back then. Had there been, my career path may well have been different.

Fate has played quite a part in my story, and it delivered again when I met a teacher out on Westhay Moor, Sue Sherry, who was about to retire as the Environmental Science A-Level tutor at the local college. Sue was keen to continue her links with the youngsters and I mentioned that I was looking for a way to get that age group out on the reserves and offer them the opportunity to do some real practical conservation work. She had the contacts at the college, and I had access to all the resources we needed to make it happen, so we teamed up, and the Young Conservation Volunteers’ project was launched.

Sue arranged for us to go into the college and make a pitch to the Environmental and Archaeology students to see if we could get enough to sign-up to make the project viable. They were all very polite and far more respectful than I recall being at that age, and some had just been on a field trip to Iceland, which was incredibly impressive, and I thought the Avalon Marshes might not seem very exciting in comparison. To my surprise, there was bags of interest and Sue gathered lots of names and email addresses.

The aim was to give the students a taste of working on a nature reserve by doing some habitat management and species surveying across as many sites as possible. For the next three years

during two terms of the school year, Wednesday afternoons were dedicated to running these sessions as an 'Enrichment' activity on the college's calendar. It was massively rewarding to see these young people getting stuck into every challenge they were set. There cannot be many sixth-formers around the country who can say that they have helped to restore a natural bog, dug a 'scrape' for wading birds, created habitats for bumblebees, put up nest boxes, and completed surveys for birds, small mammals and various invertebrates. However, any task involving a bonfire appeared to be their favourite as every session would end with toasted marshmallows, and a snack I'd never heard of before - s'mores - a highly nutritious American delicacy apparently[44].

Most of them had not spent much time in the surrounding countryside and certainly had never been let loose with bowsaws and loppers before. With each new intake the first question would always be "why are you asking us to chop things down, when surely we should be 'conserving' it?". It was a brilliant, insightful question and opened the door for Sue and me to discuss maintaining special habitats for threatened species, which we would then later go and look for.

It does seem counter-intuitive to cut down trees on a nature reserve, but suddenly terms like 'succession' and 'plagioclimax'[45] come to life for the students, especially when you then show them the sphagnum mosses and carnivorous sundew plants which need wet conditions to thrive, and you explain how much water those trees are transpiring away from the peat bog which they are standing, or bouncing, upon. Once they had got the hang of using the tools the biggest challenge was making sure they didn't chop too much down.

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[44] 'Traditionally' made with some form of cookie, but chocolate digestive biscuits work well as a British alternative to hold the melted marshmallow, according to the students.

[45] Plagioclimax is the term for preventing a habitat succeeding to its ultimate state, such as broad-leafed woodland, through grazing or conservation management, usually to benefit specific species which might be lost otherwise if the land was left to its own devices.

Damselfly meeting a sticky end on a carnivorous sundew plant at Westhay Moor.

News quickly spread about the group's success and soon we were being invited beyond the nature reserves to do conservation work in the wider community. A county-wide Housing Association invited us to help create a wildlife area on one of their estates, which saw us decked out in waders, that leaked, cleaning out a deep silted-up pond, planting marginals and litter picking alongside the many residents who were inspired to come and join the fun. Even better when some of them returned in the summer to do a dragonfly survey. We also helped create a woodland path on an eco-friendly Glastonbury campsite, and even archaeology got a look-in as we cleared the entrance to a medieval well at a private manor house garden in a nearby village.

In all, over 50 students took part giving up 800 hours of their Wednesday afternoons, and they all received certificates, which they were able to mention on their university applications, some saying it really helped when going for interviews. A handful have gone on to pursue careers in the conservation sector, keeping us informed of their progress. When the project ended, Sue became a regular butterfly surveyor at Shapwick Heath and now runs identification courses for beginners - once a teacher always a teacher.

Sue with some of the Young Conservation Volunteers at work.

Towards the end of the three years of the contract, the focus of the role shifted from volunteers and more towards visitors, which developed into a bit of a niche market for me. I will return to that further on, but for now, I would like to take you on a tour of the meadows and woods that I described as being 'almost on my doorstep' in Chapter 11.

14. Babcary Meadows

This little gem of a place is just a couple of miles from our house and used to be an easy cycle ride from my home; these days I feel like I take my life in my hands trying to get across the A37 which runs between Yeovil and Bristol. I don't want to keep banging on about the past (strange statement from someone writing their life history, I hear you say), but traffic has increased exponentially over the past few years along that road. I blame satnavs and Amazon deliveries, but that may be wide of the mark. I hate to think what effect this has had on the wildlife in the adjacent hedges and fields.

So, on the other side of this busy road, it is with a sigh of relief that I freewheel down the slope into the little village of Babcary, with its many attractive stone cottages made from Blue Lias extracted from nearby quarries. And as the stress peels away, so do the years, as it really feels like entering a bygone age approaching the river that provides the southern boundary of the nature reserve, Babcary Meadows. The first thing you encounter is a ford and it is easy to imagine the horses and carts that would have crossed carrying the scythed hay back to the farm on the hill. Coming back to the present, I have learnt that if you are leading a walk of young children to the site, then you literally need to lead from the front, otherwise the little blighters will be splashing about in the river before you get down there with the rest of the group.

You don't actually need to get your feet wet to enter the meadows as there are a couple of pedestrian bridges close by to cross the River Cary, which is not much more than a stream at this point, although you may still enjoy a brief encounter with a kingfisher or water vole if you are really lucky. It's also full of sticklebacks, which daughter and I many years before had fished to stock the newly dug wildlife pond at home, with a lot more success than the Tiddler Club; small nets being a great improvement on jam jars. As I am writing this in autumn, I will start this 'time tour' during that colourful season and try and give you a sense of why, like Green Down, it is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

When initially thinking about writing a book, I considered making it a year's diary of these grassland reserves. That was until I read Meadowland by John Lewis-Stempel and realised that I did not have the depth of vocabulary to do them justice. John's descriptions

are like poetry and, not wanting to get my expectations and limitations mixed up again, my prose will be much briefer and more prosaic.

History of the site is sketchy, but it would appear that these meadows somehow escaped the modern plough and agrochemicals, unlike most of the British lowland countryside, which is why it is so florally rich, with swathes of orchids and other wildflowers in spring and early summer, including 14 classified as 'notable' in Somerset. There is evidence however of medieval strip arable farming in a couple of the ungated eight fields that make up this SWT reserve, from the distinctive corduroy appearance of ridge and furrow[46] undulations. In early spring the damp furrows host cuckoo flower, attracting orange tip butterflies. I am not expecting to see many flowers today as it is well past the mid-July hay cut and there are 'aftermath grazing' cattle in the fields, who all turn their heads in unison to look at me like a stranger entering a wild west saloon.

But, as usual, I am being overly pessimistic as deep purple patches of devil's-bit scabious and black knapweed catch my eye, with their attendant faded common carder bumblebees and a gaudy looking small copper butterfly. For a moment, I am sure my eyes deceive me, but the ground beneath my feet looks like it's moving. Once my eyes re-focus from my little black book as I scribble these notes, I realise that thousands of craneflies are emerging. All around they are taking to the air attracting the attention of a passing family of swallows, probably on their migration south. I can also hear skylarks, lots of them passing overhead on this overcast autumn day, making a sound like someone running their thumb over the teeth of a comb.

Each field is hidden from the next by tall A-shaped, uneven hedgerows contrasting the surrounding farmers' fields where the short flat-top hedges remind me of a neat, manicured suburban avenue. Those at Babcary Meadows do get cut on a longer rotation to maintain their shape, and stop them encroaching on the ground flora, but unfortunately I am sure this still significantly reduces the

[46] A result of single sided ploughing which moves soil from the edge of the strip to the centre. Strips would traditionally be a furlong ('furrow-long') in length (about 220 yards) and up to a chain wide (about 22 yards), which fits well with those at Babcary Meadows (taken from SWT Management Plan 2011 – 2020).

annual crop of sloes and haws, unlike the sprawling, berry-laden blackthorns and hawthorns on Green Down, which have never seen a flail.

An unseen great tit scolds me as I pass through the gap to the next field. I want to have a look at a big old willow whose massive trunk had split four ways and was inexorably advancing into the river under the weight of its thick upper branches. Over the years, despite its injuries, it has lived on, hosting nesting little owls and is full of smashed snail shells (I have never managed to establish if the owls were responsible for those), but I thought it was finally on its way out. Wrong again, as a couple of SWT practical staff had pollarded the tree last winter, removing all of its heavy upper limbs, and I gasped and chuckled as I saw it now, sprouting with new life, its thin branches all the same length, looking a lot like it had just been given a bright green 1970s' frizzy perm. A robin popped out of the tall stack of cut branches leaning against the trunk, now a 'habitat pile', and into the main crevice of the cracked tree. This old willow clearly has life in it yet and more stories to tell, which I will follow with interest.

I make my way to the highest field, shaped a bit like a dome, where a couple of mysteries await. This area has three obvious mounds towards the top and in places you can see large dark shaded circles in the short grass. The humps I can't explain: perhaps ancient burial mounds or another as yet undiscovered archaeological feature? The circles though, of course, are the sites of 'fairy rings'; no mushrooms are showing yet, but it won't be long. There is a way of working out the age of the rings by measuring their diameter, which also gives an indicator of how long the meadow has avoided the plough. Some of these are so wide they must easily be over a century old.

I sit on the highest mound - no anthills here - to take in the scene, muttering to myself about the amount of traffic I can see on the distant A37, when I notice what looks like a tideline about two feet high at the base of the young blackthorn forming part of one of the mature hedgerows. It reminds me of when the meadows flooded in that very wet summer of 2012. Wife and I had come over for a walk to see whether there had been any damage and were confronted by a deep lake alongside the river: a frequent event in winter, with little consequences for wildlife. However, this felt like a mini (beast)

disaster, as we could see hundreds of floating beetles and grasshopper nymphs. Something had to be done. Not quite International Rescue, but off came the boots and socks and we waded out to our knees, picking off all the stranded insects and depositing them on higher ground. It probably made no difference whatsoever, but at least we tried, and it gave us a good story about the day we saved the Babcary beetles.

Back to the question of what had caused the 'tideline': it couldn't be flooding as this was the highest field in the meadows. After a while, it became obvious I wasn't alone when I noticed something was flicking me a V-sign with its ears – a rabbit lying very low in the grass by the hedge, and then others. Now I had a theory: they had grazed the blackthorn as high as they could, giving them unfettered access when they would need to race back to the warren under the hedge. It wasn't long before a dog walker came past, giving me an odd glance, sitting in a damp field, scribbling away with a smile on my face, with him and his dog oblivious to the departing rabbits disappearing quickly down their burrows, which I reckoned had just unequivocally proved my hypothesis. It probably also provided further material evidence of my evolving status as 'wildlife nut'.

At this time of year it is the hedgerows that provide most of the wildlife interest; I am hoping to find brown hairstreaks, the last of our butterflies to appear - not seen today I'm afraid. Instead my attention turns to a female kestrel perched right at the top of one of the dead elms, a climbing frame for ivy, with a twitchy, watchful flock of meadow pipits in the next skeletal tree. Then suddenly the sun appears for a few minutes, the temperature rising noticeably, and the sky is full of raspberry-blowing house martins, whining buzzards, and husky ravens. Are they feasting on the ascending craneflies, I wonder? I can't answer that question, but whoever said there was nothing to see after the hay cut?

My next visit will probably be in winter when the hedgerows will all look like those leafless elms, and I will scour the younger blackthorn for brown hairstreak eggs. They are pinhead sized, white dimpled spheres like microscopic golf balls which are laid in the fork of the lower branches. Close focus binoculars are a real help for this task, but if that dog walker spots me again, this time with my head

deep in a hedge, poking around for no apparent reason, I suspect he will me give me a very wide berth indeed.

I am not a big fan of winter, and don't get me started on Christmas, and spend a lot of that season anticipating the arrival of spring; for instance, impatiently watching for grey herons returning to their breeding grounds across the river from Green Down, looking forward to hearing the guttural prehistoric noises they make once they are back to claim their lofty nests. Before that, they often gather in large groups in the fields below the heronry, which is always a good sign, and provides me with the reassurance that the shorter, grey days will end, and a brighter, greener future awaits once again. And as we get to the warmer, longer days of April, I will be making my final mental list of all the local sites I want to visit this year during the next couple of non-stop busy months. First on the list is always Babcary Meadows to see the green-winged orchids.

Green-winged orchids at Babcary Meadows.

When I first became volunteer warden for the site, I had never seen this particular orchid species before, and my first question to the SWT Reserve Manager showing me around was 'why are they called green-winged?' Many years on, I usually lead a walk or two each spring for local community groups and can almost guarantee that as soon as they see their first 'GWO', someone will ask exactly the same question. These orchids can be found in purple, pink and,

occasionally, white, and various shades in between. Although they provide a wonderful carpet of contrasting colour to the yellow cowslips which, until nearly the end of April, will have had the meadows to themselves, they certainly do not have obvious green wings.

And, just as the Reserve Manager instructed me on my first visit, I ask people to look a little closer, on their knees if possible, and study the sepals and petals of the flower, which form a hood, where the answer will reveal itself. In fairness they should be called 'green-veined', which perhaps better describes them. Individually, I think these small orchids look a bit 'scruffy' with no real shape, but thousands standing together in bloom make a stunning curtain raiser for the season ahead.

Within a couple of weeks, a more pleasingly shaped (in my opinion) group of wildflowers appears in the damper areas of the reserve: the marsh orchids. Southern marsh orchid is fairly common, not just at Babcary, but this site also has early marsh, and blotchy-leaved hybrids, which I understand are a result of shenanigans with common spotted orchids. I love the tapering, more robust, look of these flowers, which are easy to distinguish from the daintier green-winged. However, sorting out what is what in the world of marsh orchids is a lot trickier, and well beyond my sketchy botany skills.

Over the years, since I came out as a fully-fledged wildlife enthusiast, I have amassed a large pile of field guides, covering a wide spectrum of British nature, usually bought at local charity shops, or given to me as presents - I am dead easy to buy for on birthdays and that other annual 'celebration' I mentioned a few paragraphs previously. However, despite loads of material on wildflowers, I cannot get my head around the variability in some species, and marsh orchids are particularly notorious in this regard. It is interesting, and helpful, that specific variations emerge in the same spot within each of the main fields every spring, and for years I have guided people to the spot where the 'earlies' appear in the middle field. They are very light pink, with lovely, bold markings on the lower lip of the flower. That was until a real botanist informed me they might actually be a pale form of southern marsh. You should note she said 'might' not 'were'.

As for the southern marsh orchids, which can be found in the next field along, they don't grow very tall - I have seen much

bigger ones at other sites - these all tend to be a uniform dark pink. The confusion arises in their leaves, which range from unmarked, through lightly spotted, to almost leopard-like. One of my orchid books mentions a so-called leopard marsh orchid variety, which gave me another 'icterine warbler' moment, and similar to my old neighbour in Buckingham, the current Reserve Manager remains far from convinced. Thankfully, the bee and pyramidal orchids which appear later on are far easier to confidently identify.

The 'marsh orchids' of Babcary Meadows.

By June, oxeye daisies are the dominant species making the meadows look like a scene from 'Honey I shrunk the kids' where the garden lawn and tiny common daisies have taken on a very different perspective. However, at the end of the day it is a hay meadow, and the grasses will then take over before the annual cut. Once again, in contrast to the surrounding fields, this is a diverse grassland multi-culture, rather than a monoculture of rye grass. This is where I should now try and describe the many different species that occur at Babcary, but you've guessed it, despite taking many samples and attending two grass identification courses, I am still pretty clueless on these plants, so will avoid that particular minefield. Instead let's take a walk in the woods…

Babcary Meadows in June.

Brown hairstreak on blackthorn.

15. Great Breach Wood

About three miles from our house, in the opposite direction to Babcary, lies a wide tract of woodlands sitting atop the East Polden Hills. It's an uphill cycle all the way, and I am sure the gradient gets a little steeper each time I visit Great Breach Wood (GBW), as it seems to take just that bit longer to get up that hill, and I am more out of breath when I reach the entrance gate.

The wood is part of a complex of reserves managed by SWT along this ridge, where a commercial conifer plantation has been removed to restore the original downland, and if you are driving between Somerton and Street you may notice the eroded slopes of the scarp, which are known locally as the Red Rocks, and give me a subtle reminder of the Badlands of South Dakota. The view from the top, along the lines of hills down to the green grid of grass moors below is superb and among the best around. In my opinion, it is beaten only by the panorama from another SWT reserve, Bubwith Acres, in the nearby Mendip Hills. This looks down onto Cheddar Reservoir and out across the Levels to Bridgwater Bay, ignoring the distant blot along the coastline that is Hinckley Point Nuclear Power Station, although the giant mechanical cranes out there do have their own appeal. I digress again.

Back at the entrance to the wood from the road, there is no clue of the wonderful vista I have just described, as there are still dense stands of conifer here on all sides owned by a forestry company, with lots of signs urging you to 'Keep Out' as there are 'ground birds nesting'. Now, notwithstanding that, back in 1993, I naively thought some sort of ground warbler[47] had found its way to North Yorkshire, I am sure these signs are meant to say that there are 'ground-nesting birds' (mainly pheasant and partridge from the adjacent shooting grounds) to get walkers to keep their dog on a lead, rather than declaring that a very rare species has taken up residence on their property.

The actual entrance to GBW is tucked around the corner, which takes you off the main track and into meandering areas of

[47] 'Ground warbler' describes a group of American avian warblers that live mainly, and nest, on the ground.

mature oak, ash, beech and hazel, dissected by a network of open rides and glades. In the main, these days the wood is allowed to get on and do its own thing, with most of the conservation efforts going into maintaining the open areas. The hazel, alongside the paths, is coppiced on a seven-year rotation, and the species-rich grassy glades cut and raked every two years. This is where I started my practical volunteering, learning how to use a bowsaw and loppers safely to cut down the hazel stems to the ground in winter, and use the branches to form a wigwam to protect the remaining 'stool' from browsing deer next spring. My least favoured task though is raking, which always results in blisters, regardless of whether I wear gloves or not, and ticks that I will discover embedded in my leg a few days later. I'm not really selling it, am I? Joking aside, the various volunteer groups that do this kind of work, week in week out, in all weathers are great fun, and an excellent way of getting an insight to how reserves are managed and show relevant commitment to potential future employers in the conservation sector.

My visits to the wood these days are usually during the week, and more often than not I will have the place to myself, giving me the best chance to see and hear the wildlife it has to offer. However, as I turned the corner one day, clearly a grey bearded gentleman thought he also was alone in the woods, as he was wearing nothing but a smile and a long lens camera. Living near Glastonbury, you have to expect this sort of thing; I was just glad I wasn't leading a walk for the local school or Women's Institute that day.

What I am really hoping to encounter are nuthatch, marsh tit, treecreeper and lesser spotted woodpecker. The first three are fairly straightforward, as they inhabit the wood in good numbers, and with most of my bird 'watching', it will be the calls that alert me to their presence. Nuthatches typically repeat a penetrating single note that travels long distances through the trees, which drowns out all others, apart from a jay's Jurassic squawking, and should catch anyone's attention, birder or otherwise. During the breeding season, the call goes up another notch, if that is possible, and seems almost manic. Often they can be tricky to spot in the tops of fully leafed oaks, but keep following the noise, and the inevitable tap, tap, tap as it tries to prise a morsel from the branch, and this plump, masked tree dweller may reveal itself scuttling head first down the tree.

Marsh tit is a misnomer - I have never seen one in a marsh - but the deciduous trees in this wood hold lots of them. If I were in charge of bird naming, I would change this one to sneezing tit, as that seems to better describe them. They have a range of calls, which I am always confusing with blue and great tits, but once they start 'aachoo-ing', there is no doubt that this smart little bird with its black flat cap and bib is close by. Treecreepers can be trickier to see or hear. Usually spotted closely hugging a tree trunk, they resemble a brown mouse running around, until you notice the hummingbird curved bill searching in all the small crevices looking for microscopic invertebrates, and its striking white underparts. Their call is also a bit of a rodent-like squeak, quite high pitched, and is often the one that people lose first from their hearing range.

Finding lesser spotted woodpecker in Great Breach Wood is a challenge that now appears to be bordering on Mission Impossible. I religiously visit the wood every February and March, again killing time until spring arrives, which is supposedly the best time to catch up with them, but the only one I ever see is the image on the interpretation panel at the entrance. The records show that they used to nest in the wood, along with hawfinch - of all things - which I have seen on occasions around the few hornbeam trees, but I am convinced this sparrow-sized woodpecker is not just elusive, it is no longer there. Like the Avalon bitterns, I hope I am proved wrong one day, but a full survey of the wood in 2020 by a team of optimistic birders found lots of great spotted, but no lesser. The silver lining to that particular cloud though was finding a firecrest whizzing around deep in the wood, which was a wonderful surprise.

A couple of years ago I signed up with the Woodland Trust to become a volunteer tree health surveyor at the site. This role made me look at trees differently as you have to study each one closely and not just indirectly as a potential bird feeding station. Admittedly, I am looking for pests and diseases but you soon start to appreciate their individual beauty. You are probably going to tell me it's a form of forest bathing, but try staring at a tree in the same way you might study a painting in a gallery. The colours, the shapes, the textures, the detail - nature paints its own pictures and creates priceless, irreplaceable works of art. Just don't do it with anyone watching. I am hoping that if I stand and watch one particular

mature oak tree long enough, eventually a lesser spotted woodpecker might come and find me rather than the other way around.

There really is something to be said for just sitting down and taking in what is around you (Top Tip: always have a plastic bag in your pocket for a damp-free perch wherever you might be!), especially on a micro-scale level. I once watched a common blue butterfly, that had settled on a blade of grass right next to my foot, laying a single egg – those close focus binos coming into their own again – leaving me to admire the miniscule white pearl left behind as it fluttered off to its next stop. On another occasion, a large hornet was buzzing noisily right by me, which was slightly un-nerving, but knowing that they are supposed to be less aggressive than wasps, I sat tight and was rewarded with a one in a million moment. Close by, a grasshopper leapt from the grass, and within milliseconds the hornet had caught it in mid-air and brought it down just a couple of feet away. I was then treated to the gruesome, but quite incredible, sight of the hornet devouring the head of the unlucky grasshopper. The decapitated body was discarded and presumably would become lunch for an ant colony or other nearby insects.

My most memorable moment at Great Breach though was not a hungry hornet, the naked naturist, or a brilliant bird, but involved battling bucks (that's my alliteration allowance used up for this chapter). On another quiet autumn day, I was returning from the depths of the reserve to the main track where the 'ground birds nesting' signs are located, when I heard what sounded like wood knocking on wood, a bit like kids having a 'sword fight' with sticks. I was pretty sure I was alone so I stepped slowly and silently out of the trees and, just a few yards along in the open, two roe deer bucks were locked antler to antler, with their heads down, totally oblivious to me.

Roe are much smaller than red deer, which is the species that 'the rut' usually brings to mind, and the males only have up to three points on each short antler, but what they lack in size they make up for in aggression, and these two were having a right set-to, shaking heads and crashing into each other. One looked slightly bigger than the other and may well have had a two-point advantage over the other in the antler department, so perhaps it was a territorial dispute with a younger buck trying his luck. I am told these conflicts can result in fatalities, and there looked like only one potential winner

here, but before this fight was settled a dog came bounding along the path, which did grab the bucks' attention and they leapt off together with the dog in hot pursuit into the commercial area of the wood.

I never saw the owner, but clearly neither they nor their uncontrolled dog gave a damn about the possibility that any mythical ground birds, deer, or human visitors, might have been disturbed that day by their inconsiderate behaviour.

16. The plastic duck with a funny Bill

Meanwhile, back on the Marshes, the Avalon Partnership Project was coming to the end of its three year funded period. Although it had been a great success with conservation work, festival events, school activities and the like, some of the bigger initiatives, such as the historic building replicas, had not quite reached fruition, hindered by very poor weather and delays in the planning process. The latter brought on by the changing situation with the re-development of the Centre site. The Heritage Lottery, which had provided most of the cash for these 60 projects, obligingly granted us a year's extension, giving the six team members a stay of execution, who of course would be out of a job upon programme completion.

Despite the fact that the Avalon Marshes Centre seemed destined never to join the realms of becoming a fully-fledged facility, with multimedia interpretation displays, National Trust-style café etc., I was convinced we could do a bit better on the visitor information front. It was currently a few nature reserve leaflets left on a table, with a couple of worn posters, in another uninviting portacabin behind the outdoor refreshment kiosk. Part of the duties on my volunteer placement with NE, before the Egret Watch took me elsewhere, had been to keep an eye on leaflet stocks and periodically tidy up the cabin as far as possible. It was interesting that every time I was in there or the car park, visitors were coming over, asking for directions to the reserves, and the Sweet Track, or enquiring about the wildlife they might see. I quite enjoyed imparting my developing knowledge, helping people on their way, and hopefully enthusing them a little about the amazing place they were about to visit.

A facility along those lines would have been useful on one particular weekend in April 2015 when a Hudsonian godwit, 4000 miles off-course from its usual spring migration route from South America to Alaska, ended up in a large flock of black-tailed godwits feeding on Shapwick Heath. With my twitching days well and truly behind me, I was not one of the 1000 people that turned up to see this species on our shores for the first time in nearly 40 years, even though it was just a few miles down the road. However, I did spend the whole weekend fretting that we should have had someone out there, at the very least rattling a donation tin to gain some financial benefit from the hordes that had descended upon the site.

So, never one to miss an opportunity, as we entered our extension period, I pitched the idea of setting up a staffed information point for tourists and local visitors, bringing together some of the elements that we had been working on over the past three years. We now had new cycle and walk routes that volunteers had helped me to survey, a set of flashy leaflets about the species and heritage of the area, and loads of wildlife film clips captured via a range of newly purchased remote cameras. These devices, which were a combination of 'trailcams' and modified outdoor security cameras connected to a leisure battery and portable video recorder, showed where I had been going wrong all those years before, wandering around with a conventional camera and hoping to get close enough for a decent photograph.

With a bit of trial and error positioning the cameras, it was possible to get great footage of wildlife with no personal skill or effort whatsoever. I certainly never thought 'I' would ever be able to get close-ups of a sprainting (defecating) otter, three young kingfishers together on a tree branch, or some revealing underwater shots of diving beetle larvae. However, I will brush over the thousands of clips of rustling reeds, and the trailcam I managed to ruin by leaving it too low on the bank of a ditch, while trying to film water voles, a couple of days before a flash flood immersed it completely.

The NE Site Manager liked the idea of a manned information point, and a corner of the main building at the Centre was freed up to accommodate it, but my original notion that all the staff would share the duty of working at the desk didn't go down so well, and I ended up working there most of the time – I think the rest of the team were glad of the peace and quiet without me in the office. It would also need to be staffed at weekends, which of course was the busiest time for visitors, so they ended up seeing even less of me at my old desk. Volunteers came to the rescue, as usual, so that I didn't have to work on Saturdays, and soon we had a happy band of smiling guides providing information about local wildlife and history, and answering the myriad of questions coming our way. My natural urge to make notes came to the fore again and we started recording where visitors were from, how they had heard about the Avalon Marshes, and the information they were seeking.

The early results were quite revealing: over two thirds of people we spoke to were first time visitors, many coming long

distances, and it was the draw of the wildlife more than anything that had brought them, often via personal recommendation from other birders - the Hudsonian godwit being mentioned quite often - although the TV coverage of the great white egret had also helped to spread the word. Of more interest was the fact that many were on their way somewhere else, good old Devon and Cornwall again, and hadn't really considered staying locally. Armed with this intelligence, I started contacting local campsites and accommodation providers and organised guided tours to show the owners what the Marshes had to offer, giving them the opportunity to advertise their businesses on the back of us. We also established closer links with Glastonbury Town Council which ultimately resulted in the re-launch of a safe cycle route from the middle of town, through Ham Wall and Shapwick Heath, to the Avalon Marshes Centre, as the 'Bittern Trail'.

As quick as a flash, and 6000 visitors to the information point later, the 12 month extension was reached, which meant the end of the Heritage Lottery funding and the disbandment of the project team, and it would be left to the in situ partner organisations to maintain this gathering momentum. Such is the nature of fixed period programmes. It had been hoped that the full scale re-development of the Centre might have kept more of the 'Avalon Marshes' approach and initiatives going, but as that wasn't to be, it looked like I would be soon trawling the countryside job sites again. However, I had a last minute reprieve and some money was found between the partners for me to continue in a part-time role to keep the information point going, which by now was seen as an essential part of the service provided at the Centre. Into 2017, and it was a real shame that the rest of the project team had gone, as the Avalon Marshes was about to enjoy a return to the spotlight.

Out of the blue, Somerset Wildlife Trust (SWT), as lead partner, was contacted by the National Lottery to say the Avalon Marshes Project had been nominated as a finalist for their annual awards, in the Environment category. There were a number of other nominees including a conservation project at Chester Zoo, and a similar one to ours over in Norfolk, very publicly backed by Stephen Fry. The Lottery would highlight details of each of the projects on-line, and via social media, for the public to vote for their favourite. I thought we had no chance of winning, given the profile of the 'opposition', but the SWT Communications Manager told me not to be

so pessimistic, and start dusting off the contact details of everyone who had been involved in the project: volunteers, schools, local businesses, event attendees etc. and politely ask (aka beg) for their vote. All the partner organisations were requested to do the same.

Part of the process, we were told, was that a TV crew would be in touch and they would visit each of the finalists to gather some footage to use on a promotional basis and perhaps at the awards ceremony, which would be shown on BBC One in September. As, by now, I was the only staff member left wearing the Avalon Marshes logo, it would be down to me to show the crew around. Two young producers duly arrived a couple of weeks later for a recce of the site, and I walked them around Catcott, where the Heritage Lottery had funded a new tower lookout/hide, along with a connecting wooden boardwalk which SWT volunteers had spent several hard months building. They also had a quick look at the replica historic buildings at the Centre, which were by now almost complete, and Ham Wall. They seemed content with what they saw, and said they would contact us in a few days to agree a date for the full film crew to come along to do their bit. They said it might be a while as they had to visit all the finalists.

Perhaps my warning indicators should have been flashing when they finally confirmed a date for filming a couple of days after voting had finished, but as I was convinced we weren't in the running, I never questioned it. They asked whether I would be available to escort them again, which was fine, but I mentioned that I had a dental appointment in the afternoon. No problem they said, as it would be no more than a couple of hours filming for a short piece. However, they requested that we have as many elements of the project on show as possible, so we arranged for some of our ex-college students to be at Catcott doing a practical activity, the 'Hands-on Heritage' volunteers working at the replica buildings, and some children pond dipping at Ham Wall with RSPB staff. Wasn't quite sure how they could condense all of that into a few minutes of footage, but what did I know? And so, what would become probably the most surreal day of my life, since being chased down a beach by elephant seals, had been planned and added to the calendar.

It had been a couple of years since I last saw Sue and the ex-Young Conservation Volunteers, most of who were now at university, but home for summer, so it was great to chat to those who

had been able to make it on the appointed day at such short notice. I think they were quite excited at the prospect of being filmed, and they went off to Catcott with the Reserve Manager to get stuck in to clear an overgrown path, while Sue and I waited for the TV crew to arrive. When they did, there were far more of them than I expected, but still my alarm bells remained silent.

The plan was that we would be filmed in the tower hide, along with a couple of staff from the partner organisations, talking about the incredible wildlife to be found on the Marshes, while another part of the crew would interview the students as they worked. The set-up took a while, with us being wired for sound, and cameras fixed outside the hide looking in, as well as lights on stands inside, but with one side of the 'shed on legs' blacked out so we couldn't see along the path below. This was explained away as creating the right light conditions. Filming began and it wasn't long before a hobby appeared in front of the hide being chased by a kestrel - that would make great TV everyone agreed after they had flown out of sight. After that it went a bit thin, a little grebe family down on the lake, but not much else. We sat there awkwardly, trying to make relevant conversation for the cameras, but it seemed most of the crew were distracted, and time was getting on; it was all slightly bizarre, given what they had to capture 'in a couple of hours filming'.

Eventually, after what felt like ages, one of the producers joined us up in the hide, which was already pretty cramped, and he explained they had looked at all the footage so far, and they wanted another angle (we were all inwardly groaning at this point). He then proceeded to open the blacked out window so that we could see along the path. "Kevin, I want a shot of you looking out through this window with your binoculars and saying what you see". "Err, nothing?" I replied. "Keep looking". So, I did as requested.

Then I caught sight of something moving about 50 yards down the track from behind a willow. A plastic duck. It was one of those decoys used for shooting – a bit odd? Hang on, it's attached to a leather bush hat, and then a very recognisable figure appeared from behind the tree with the duck on his head, carrying a set of placards with the words "Hello Kevin" printed in big letters on the first one, at which point I burst into laughter, and blurted out "What's Bill Bailey doing down there?!"

My identification was correct on this occasion, thankfully, with the next two signs confirming that he was indeed Bill Bailey – the sequence reminding me of that famous Bob Dylan video – and the whole team were now looking out and enjoying this unexpected spectacle. The next one though was the biggest surprise, and a rare moment that left me open mouthed and speechless, it said: "You have won".

Lots of cheers and hugs followed, but I don't think any of us really believed it, as we whispered that perhaps they were filming the same sequence with all the finalists, and then just showing the winning one on the night. With hindsight, that might have been a bit cruel on everyone else. The sound recordist, who could still hear us in his headphones outside, confirmed it wasn't a hoax, and the Comms Manager, who had known what was going on all along, gladly reminded me of my initial pessimism and was clearly enjoying my stunned expression.

Much of the rest of this strangest of days passed by in an accelerating blur. First I had to show Bill around the reserve, walking along the boardwalk, forgetting to tell him about the thousands of hours of volunteer toil that gone into creating it, and introducing him to the students who were all still working away and getting interviewed by the other crew. Next, it was back to the Avalon Marshes Centre for a 'media hour'.

It was another shock when we arrived at the car park – I had never seen it so rammed with vans and cars. Someone had been busy behind the scenes, as both BBC and ITV regional news teams were there, along with loads of newspaper reporters, and representatives from the partners and Lottery. Bill presented us with the 'fingers-crossed' trophy live on BBC Points West lunchtime news, with Somerset correspondent Clinton Rogers linking back to the studio, followed by photographs and interviews. The 'hour' turned into two, but there was still filming to be done, and I was due at the dentists, which was now looking unlikely, so I called to cancel. I never like cancelling anything at short notice, and thought I better give them the reason. "Sorry, but I can't make it today, as I am unexpectedly filming with Bill Bailey" is not something you get to say very often. I didn't think the receptionist was buying it so I urged her to watch the local evening news later.

Bill signed the trophy before it went back into its protective bag and the Lottery staff re-claimed it for the televised awards ceremony, which would be in a couple of weeks' time. The rest of the afternoon was taken up with filming the Heritage volunteers working on the Anglo-Saxon hall and then on to Ham Wall, where a keyboard was waiting for him to do one of his famous musical arrangements, signing autographs for visitors, and pond dipping with some very patient children who had been there waiting all afternoon. The film crew left the site at 6pm with enough material to fill a mini-series, and Bill kindly letting me have his duck-hat as 'compensation' for my missed date with the dentist.

The subsequent awards ceremony was held in London on the South Bank of the Thames in an ITV studio, which was curious given it was BBC programme, with a handful of us from the partner organisations staying in a very pleasant hotel right by the Tower of London. Before we were bussed over to the studio in our Sunday Best, we got to meet all the other award winners in the various categories over afternoon tea, and did wonder whether we were in the right place, given their incredible achievements, some with heart-wrenching stories.

I was hoping Bill might be there to officially present the trophy to us, but alas no, it was another set of celebrities, all getting their photographs taken for tomorrow's tabloids. I recognised Bear Grylls, but beyond that, nope, sorry, no idea, I don't watch much daytime TV. It was a brilliant evening though, hearing about many inspirational projects and people, and seeing their accompanying video clips. In the end, each was only about five minutes long, and ours didn't feature the students or Bill doing his ditty on the keyboard at Ham Wall, but it seemed to come across well. However, it had captured my embarrassing open mouthed moment in the hide when we had found out we had won, which drew a laugh from the studio audience. At the after-show party, a couple of the content editors came over and explained that they had created our piece and how much the 'reveal' had had them chuckling all week, as usually most winners had sussed out long before what was going on, and consequently their reactions were much more subdued. D'oh!

The only saving grace, I thought, was that, as the programme would be going out quite late mid-week, not many people would actually watch it, particularly anyone who knew me. What I

hadn't bargained for was coming home from work a couple of days later, switching on the TV for the national 6 o'clock news only to see that moment again in a trailer for the forthcoming Lottery Awards Show. That went on repeatedly for two weeks, most evenings. Ex-colleagues from my military days, who I hadn't seen or spoken to in six years or more, were getting in touch out of the blue, basically to take the p***.

You can leave the mob, but you can never escape the banter.

17. Green Down

In this final chapter we return to the spot which was the catalyst that sparked my career change; my 'happy place', where I can escape the madness of a world that often baffles me with its lack of common sense or perspective, recharge my batteries and do a bit of mental filing, clearing the decks for the next challenge. For most wildlife watchers, Green Down is really only of interest during the large blue butterfly's flight period, and tends to be the sole time they visit during the year. Even if I were not the volunteer warden, making regular visits to check the integrity of the site, doing some practical work, or undertaking species surveys, I am sure I would have adopted it as my 'local patch' and still spent much of my spare time up there, observing the stark and subtle changes with each passing season.

Like much of the British countryside, winter is the quietest season, but it is when I see large flocks of yellowhammers in the hedges at the top of the slope, nervously dropping into the adjacent fields, one by one to look for weed seeds and spilt grain, but then all disappearing together in a flash, deep into the tangle of branches, at the first sign of danger. Mixed flocks of tits, sometimes containing a marsh tit or two, possibly from nearby Great Breach Wood, flit along these hedgerow highways, using them for foraging and also an element of safety from the ever-present sparrowhawk. If I stay still under the arch formed by the blackthorn on either side of the narrow muddy path, chattering long-tailed tits and squeaking goldcrests often pass by, close enough to touch.

Most of the time these are the dull, wet months, and often quite mild, with those herons I mentioned previously returning to the heronry across the river earlier each year, by the first week of February sometimes, with confused small tortoiseshells and red admirals adding an unexpected extra dab of colour. One or two years have been harsher, bringing in a passing pair of stonechats, and even lapwing and golden plover to join the nervous yellowhammers in the bare fields. The winter of 2018 was extended into March when the Beast from the East hit. In 20-odd years, I have never seen such deep snow on Green Down. Our village was pretty much cut off for a couple of days, giving me the chance to slowly trudge up to the reserve to marvel at the drifting snow, which had

formed an elongated breaking white wave engulfing the fence at the top of the slope. The many blackbirds and overwintering thrushes (redwing and fieldfare from northern Europe) were less impressed by the landscape and looked like they were struggling to find any feeding opportunities, so I went back down to the village shop, which was the community's saviour over those few days, and bought up the last of their eating apples and scattered them up on the reserve to provide a little sustenance.

Green Down – March 2018.

Back home I cleared a patch of snow on the front lawn and offered what was left of the apples, and within minutes a large handsome fieldfare had found them - a new 'garden tick' for us - where it stayed until the thaw to defend this handout from all-comers as if its life depended on it, literally. Later that day, I got excited phone calls from fellow villagers to say they had also seen unusual birds in their garden, including redwing, lapwing and, amazingly, a snipe probing into a patch of bare earth in one lucky person's vegetable patch.

As quick as the thick snow arrived, it had melted, causing torrents of water down the path and onto the railway line below, and a few days after that the first male brimstone was on the wing, its flickering primrose wings signalling that spring would not be delayed any further. The redwings and fieldfares usually take the hint to leave at this point, and their 'seeping' and 'chacking' calls are quickly replaced by 'chiffing' chiffchaffs and the descending notes of willow warbler. The hedgerows were soon be covered in white again however, not snow this time, but the abundant blossom of blackthorn, providing a mass feeding point for the insect world's early risers, such as bumblebee queens tempted out of hibernation by the warmer days. Winter is vanquished.

From this point onwards everything seems to happen at breakneck speed: nearly all our summer avian visitors in a hurry to refuel, find a mate, build a nest, raise their young and leave again while the going is good. Each year, I will also race around trying to catch up with all these birds, along with the ephemeral butterflies, getting my annual fix, desperate to take in every moment while it lasts. A sort of local patch twitching, perhaps? There are however a couple of species that for me make time stand still, and cannot be simply ticked off a list: they are my animal equivalent of 'forest bathing', and both often grace Green Down, albeit fleetingly.

Everyone has heard of the first of these, but far fewer have heard it perform, let alone actually seen one. Much has been written about the deep thumping rhythm it produces from the impenetrable undergrowth. I hesitate to call it a 'song', as this is not a pleasant ditty by a robin or blackbird; this is a visceral, bone-shaking outpouring, like an audio-only version of the haka. I am of course talking about the nightingale.

As a breeding species, the nightingale is just about hanging on in the county, so to have the odd male periodically dropping by for a couple of weeks in April is manna from heaven. In Say Goodbye to the Cuckoo, Michael McCarthy talks about the 'sense of wonder' that he and his son experienced listening to one in a wood in Surrey. For me, it is the 'sense of place' conjured up by this skulking brown bird. The sound feels incongruous with the agricultural Somerset countryside, and more suited to a tropical rainforest, especially when it is singing with gusto at night alone, the operatic aria resonating

through the hollow darkness, without competition from the usual home team.

In the same book, Michael reveals that sedge warblers mimic other species, such as whitethroats, to add to their repertoire and impress potential mates. I would be very surprised if it had the range to copy the inimitable nightingale, and conversely, that this elitist would ever need to resort to plagiarism to get itself noticed. Unfortunately, I don't think there are any females passing through here these days for him to find a mate, which is probably why the nightly performance seems to get more intense after a few days, as he gets more and more desperate; until all is silent again and I assume he has moved on to set up his stall somewhere else. Lockdown in April 2020 was made a lot more bearable by the chance to go and listen repeatedly, as daily exercise of course, to my favourite songster, transporting and lifting me temporarily to another world.

Singing nightingale by Amy Lewis.

The second of my Green Down 'clock-stoppers' is a butterfly, not the large blue, but one that usually emerges afterwards in late June, sometimes in very impressive numbers. It is a member of the brown family and doing my transect I can easily count hundreds of them, outnumbered only by its less conspicuous relative, the meadow brown. I had never encountered them before during my UK travels, but they are not particularly rare, especially on the chalky downland slopes of the south west. Despite supposedly being a

‘brown’, it is actually a black butterfly with white markings: the marbled white.

Marbled white at Green Down.

The field guides will tell you that it looks like marble - not sure I go along with that. Again, if I were in charge of species names, this one would be the chequered white, which I think better describes its delicate patterning. On the wing, this is a delightful creature, gently fluttering its monochrome wings between flowers, frequently alighting, usually on knapweed, and feeding with its wings fully open so you can study the contrasting colouring at close hand. I don’t know why, but people will come many miles to see and photograph the large blue, but the marbled white seems to attract little attention. When they are on the wing, there is no better place than perching on one of those anthills on a sunny day and just wallowing in the kaleidoscope of reflected light and movement created by these impressive butterflies. The females are slightly bigger than the males, and to my eye, have a yellow tinge, and often lay their eggs while in flight, in the hope that they will land on one of the grasses

eaten by their caterpillars. I am convinced that if I watch for long enough, one day I will witness this strange behaviour. No luck so far.

In terms of a life-cycle, the marbled white's sounds pretty straightforward, with those eggs that fall on the right grasses, such as sheep's-fescue or cocks-foot, hatching, feeding and surviving as caterpillars over the winter months deep down in the sward, before burying into the soil to morph into a chrysalis and emerge as an adult butterfly in summer. However, the large blue sits right at the other end of that scale and must have one of the most complicated lives known to natural history. I mentioned earlier talking to one of the scientists responsible for bringing back this insect from extinction in Britain. Until his study in the 1970s, that life-cycle was still very much a mystery.

I am sure you don't need me to wax lyrical about the now well documented relationship that exists between the large blue and a particular species of red ant. In short, the butterfly lays its eggs on wild thyme, and once hatched the caterpillar feeds on the flower, drops to the ground and the ants 'adopt' the caterpillar by taking it back to their underground nest nearby. The ants are fooled into thinking the caterpillar is one of their grubs via chemical mimicry, and once inside the nest the erstwhile herbivore turns carnivore and eats some of the ant brood. It overwinters underground, eventually emerging from the nest as a butterfly next summer.

Large blue with wild thyme and mating on quaking grass.

Obviously that is a vast over-simplification, but you get the idea. For me, the remarkable bit of the story is that this species of red ant prospers only within a certain ground temperature range, which is determined by the height of the grass sward. Too short and the ants overheat, too long and they are shaded out - it has to be just right for them to build their nest. And without the 'Goldilocks' ant, no large blues, which gives a good pointer to why the butterfly became extinct with changes to grazing practices over recent times, and myxomatosis devasting those otherwise reliable grass cutters, rabbits.

Bringing this back to Green Down, which has become the most productive of all the sites where the butterfly was reintroduced, inevitably a large part of the conservation management effort revolves around maintaining optimum conditions for the ants, which comes as a bit of a surprise when I am explaining this to visitors on the reserve. Dorset horn sheep from the adjacent farm do a great job of keeping the sward in check, and much of the human intervention is directed at preventing the scrub encroaching too far on the slopes. As a birder at heart, scrub bashing always feels counter-intuitive because this tends to be best habitat for avifauna, especially nightingale and warblers, and generally speaking these 'scruffy' patches are not favoured by anyone, whether they be farmers, gardeners or conservationists.

Bottom line though is that Green Down is managed for an incredibly rare butterfly (or red ant, depending on how you look at it), and after bending the long-suffering Reserve Manager's ear about the next area of scrub to be tackled, I accept compromises have to be made and we get on with it. I tell you all this, because perversely, like the undergraduate bittern predictions, when it comes to wildlife, I relish being proved wrong when there is a positive outcome. In 2012 it was decided to clear a large part of the lower slope, approximately the size of two tennis courts, which was thick with mature scrub, mainly blackthorn, bramble and elder, and well on its way to becoming woodland. The stated intention was for it to return to diverse calcareous grassland and thus become favourable for wild thyme, those fussy ants, and eventually more large blues.

I was convinced that it should be left for the birds and thought it was too 'far gone' for it to be turned back to species-rich downland. Once I had got my daily rant out of the system, we rolled

up our sleeves, and, while the professionals buzzed away with their brushcutters, I was allocated my least favoured job, raking the resulting cuttings. This was no ordinary raking though, this was 'extreme' raking down the steep slope to the crackling bonfire below. Gathering up the spikey branches, rolling them into massive 'scrub balls' and making sure they didn't tumble down out of control and take out another worker below, while avoiding taking a leg-breaking tumble yourself, were the order of the day.

We returned a few days later to finish the job, until the whole slope was a dusty bowl of bare earth. I think this was the largest continuous area that had ever been cleared on the reserve, and silently (to everyone else's relief) I was still very sceptical, believing that we had probably just created a big potential nettle and thistle patch. And in the short-term, that's exactly what it became, with no complaints from the egg-laying peacock butterflies or seed-eating goldfinches and linnets; however, slowly but surely, with annual effort from the Reserve Manager to stop the scrub re-encroaching, even my untrained eye could see the changes to the flora beneath my feet.

First, after about three years, it grassed over, with lots of ground-ivy showing, and I was pleased to see marbled whites checking it out. Fast forward to the summer of 2020 and I was spotting more and more valuable flowering plants, such as knapweed, lady's bedstraw and bird's-foot trefoil, some of which are indicator species of limestone grassland. I haven't seen wild thyme on there yet, or any red ants, but the area is clearly well on its way to extending the available habitat suitable for large blue butterflies. Patience is a virtue I have never developed, but nature runs on its own timescale, and if you are prepared to let it take its course, eschew persistent clock-watching, the rewards will reveal themselves… eventually.

Further along the lower slope is a natural terrace, formed I assume by years and years of soil creep – if I remember my O-Level Geography correctly - creating convenient narrow steps that make it easier to climb, which also seem to be favoured by smaller, delicate plants, including eyebright, milkwort and bee orchids. Another orchid species grows on the terracette and is the last to flower each year: Autumn lady's-tresses (ALTs). Without Anne Moxley I don't think I would ever have spotted these very un-orchid like little beauties. As she would regularly point out to me: sometimes you need to focus on

the immediate ground below and not be looking ahead all the time. I don't think she meant that to be profound, and was directed more at my annoying propensity to be always scanning for birds in the sky or bushes, but it is good advice all the same - perhaps not if you are piloting a Chipmunk or riding a bike though.

On Green Down ALTs tend to appear in August, rather than Autumn, as green spikes no more than a couple of inches high, bejewelled with a spiral of dainty white flowers running around the stem, supposedly looking like long tresses. To see them at their best, and really appreciate the floral arrangement, you need to lie carefully on the grass, avoiding any other precious wildflowers, and study them at their level. They don't usually appear in great numbers, but in one particular year, hundreds appeared along a small stretch of those steps. Anne and I spent the afternoon tip-toeing up and down the terrace, eyes firmly on the ground below, counting each individual spike until we reached over 500. We sat down for a rest and agreed that this was a very special day indeed.

For some reason or other, after that exceptional year I kept missing them whenever they were in flower. Also, Anne soon retired from her wardening duties, as she was finding it too difficult to tackle the slope, saying it felt steeper each time she visited (that must have been where I got my line about the road up to Great Breach Wood), and moved with her husband to be closer to their family in Swindon. Anne sadly passed away in 2019 and later that year I managed to find a couple of ALTs flowering again on Green Down, immediately bringing my dear friend to mind. I had been thinking previously that my imaginary species re-naming committee would have changed the 'A' in ALT from Autumn to August, but given this flower's poignant meaning to me now, a much more fitting description would be "Anne's Little Treasures".

I had known for many years that Anne was an extraordinary person: she had an encyclopaedic knowledge of flowers, both wild and garden, and would always generously share that learning, along with cuttings from her garden, to all those she came into contact with. She was also a staunch supporter of The Wildlife Trusts, volunteering for them in Wales and Somerset, as well as being heavily involved with another charity, Cats Protection, where she would regularly rescue and rehome cats and kittens. I recall Anne telling me about the awful conditions she sometimes faced to collect these unfortunate

animals, and when asked how she would tackle those awkward situations, her answer was that she would play the ‘old lady card’ to get in the door, and then get out as fast as she could! However, it wasn’t until after her death that I learnt about her earlier life, such as environmental campaigning as far back as the 1970s, taking Yellow Pages to task over using unrecyclable paper dye, and keeping dead wild birds in her freezer in the name of scientific research. She was also quite the philanthropist, often befriending hitchhikers she passed on the road and bringing them home for a meal and a chat to help them on their way. Definitely a life well-lived.

Now there’s an autobiography I would love to have read.

Autumn lady’s-tresses (or “Anne’s Little Treasures”) on Green Down in August.

Epilogue

In the blink of an eye, and the turn of a few pages, I find myself in my 60s – I can hear my older ex-RAF colleagues shouting, 'Get some time in, lad'. It's hard to believe I was demobbed a decade ago, and have been working at the Avalon Marshes for all that time since, substituting my Yellowbelly drains and dykes with Somerset's ditches and rhynes. I seem to have found my niche quite unexpectedly as a visitor guide, as not only do I continue to run the information point at the Avalon Marshes Centre, I also now have a similar role out on Westhay Moor and Catcott, working for Somerset Wildlife Trust. Running guided walks on these two fantastic nature reserves, as well as Shapwick Heath, is perhaps the best part of the job, with the chance to showcase some of the incredible wildlife found here to as many interested people as possible. Marsh harriers, bitterns and great white egrets are regularly seen on our wanderings, but one attendee felt my description of them as 'wildlife walks' was misleading as I had only pointed out bird species at one such event. I am therefore seriously considering re-labelling them as 'birding bimbles'.

My navigation skills, or lack of them, so cruelly exposed during the RAF selection process have not improved, so it's a good job I know these nature reserves well and have no need to refer to a map when I am leading guided walks. Off duty I do a lot of walking, which could be asking for trouble, but have discovered the South West Coast Path, mainly to watch nesting peregrines and grey seal colonies, and the fact that if you keep the sea on your left on the way out, and right on the way back, you can't go too far wrong. I await my first basking shark encounter, which would instantly make my 'Top 5'.

At the beginning of this book I described myself as 'a bit of a wildlife nut'. I'm not sure if that is the most accurate term, but do know that without nature, in all its guises, my life would be much poorer; more so as I get older, which means perhaps I am getting 'nuttier'. As my family would testify, just about every one of my waking hours is taken up with something wildlife-related whether it be work, volunteering, days off, holidays, or choices in TV programmes, magazines and books. I try to find interest in all wild creatures, something else I learnt from Anne. She once urged me to save one of the used blue tit nests I clear out each November from the boxes

on Green Down and send it to a flea expert she knew personally, as she had in the past also studied this group of insects. Before you ask: sealed jiffy bag via parcel post. This gentleman sent me a handwritten letter back a couple of weeks later on headed notepaper, embossed with a large image of a flea, with the quantities and names of all the species found. I was fascinated and impressed in equal measure.

Even those uninspiring 'spuggies' and 'cabbage whites' I saw as a child find favour with me these days. During the depression of 2020 (in the first lockdown, specifically), it was uplifting to see our local house sparrows skirmishing noisily over the seed we had put out for them under the kitchen window, and watching closely for the dominant male with the biggest black bib to make his presence known. Phil Daniels sums it up nicely in that brilliant record, Parklife by Blur: 'I sometimes feed the sparrows too, it gives me a sense of enormous well-being, and then I'm happy for the rest of the day, safe in the knowledge there will always be a bit of my heart devoted to it'. And during that difficult summer, while out on my sanity-saving daily exercise, I came across clouds of what I believe were small whites, fluttering madly in all directions over an expansive wheat field. I can't for the life of me work out why there were literally thousands of these butterflies congregating over a crop that seemingly has no value to them. If anyone knows, please get in touch!

Finally, on the subject of music that strikes a chord, there is a tune by a band I saw at Glastonbury many years back, who I understand have since broken up, with one of its members going on to work as a nature reserve warden in Wales; spookily, he too is into bird song, apparently. If ever there were lyrics that summed up my metamorphosis from office-dweller to outdoors-addict, then it is these below. You will have to imagine the catchy banjo accompaniment (or you could download it, so I am told), but this track, called We are the Battery Human by Stornaway[48], says it all:

[48] Lyrics copyright of Warner Chapell Music, quoted with kind permission of Stornaway.

Where are we going this fine morning?
What are we doing this fine day?
We're doing the same as every morning

We're staying inside on this fine morning
Staying inside on this fine day
We'll stare at a screen like every morning

And outside the window spring is here
We're going to hibernate all year
Under a pile of A4 snowflakes

'Cause we're the new generation
We are the battery human
But we were born to be free range

We've got the whole world at our fingers
We've got the whole world in our hands
We get the blues as we grow richer

'Cause we need to fix our loose connection
Out in the natural World Wide Web
We're humans evolved in three dimensions

We were tuned in by natural selection
And we need to go online each day
But inside we don't get no reception

So join the new revolution
To free the battery human
'Cause we were born to be free range…

That's two records sorted for my funeral playlist.