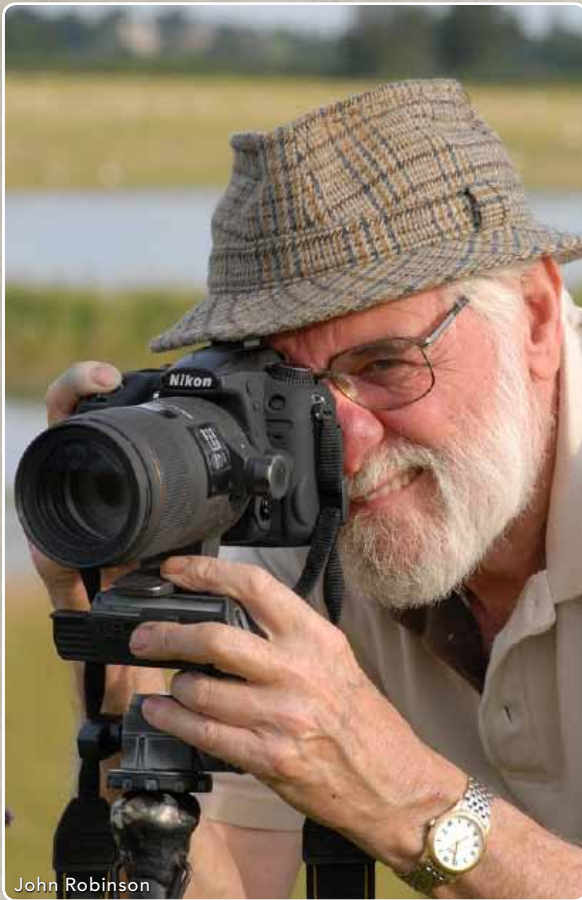


Wildlife Photography, how it all began

JOHN ROBINSON



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A lifelong passion for nature and wildlife photography has been present for as long as I can remember. Even in 1947 at the age of 8, living on the outskirts of Scunthorpe, a steel town in Lincolnshire, I was beginning to take note of anything and everything in the natural world (see photograph of diary).

One of my earliest memories of being really involved with wild things was due to my first junior school teacher, Mr Fontein. One day several of the bigger lads had helped him carry a large oblong brown stone sink into the classroom. He said that for nature class we could keep some newts in it, so we half filled it with water and made an island with some rocks and moss and acquired a couple of Smooth Newts. But the best of all was yet to come. He knew I was interested in nature, and I was put in charge of it! It was the first smidgeon of authority I had ever had. This lasted for a while but eventually the newts got fed up with all the attention and Mr Fontein got fed up with crawling around on all fours every morning trying to retrieve the culprits of the previous night's great escape!

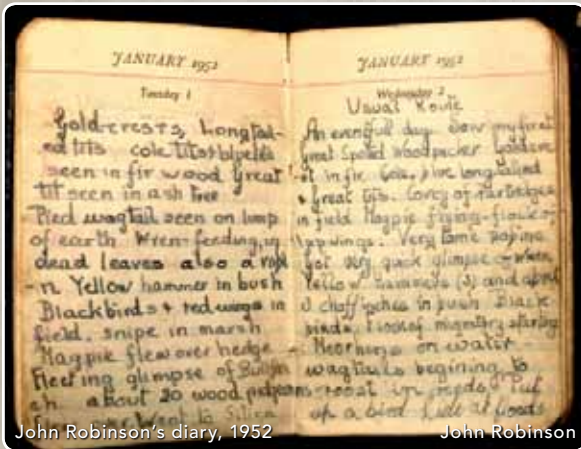
I was allocated a seat in class next to a boy who had an interest in wild things like me but he had a slightly different attitude. Everything he saw he wanted, especially birds' eggs and there was not a thing he didn't know about finding their nests. I too got the bug

and became a bit of an 'egger' myself. The fun wasn't really in getting the eggs, it was in finding the nests and getting to them. We would go off on foot early in the mornings at weekends or in the summer evenings, and covered miles. We would always be in trouble when we got home after dark. Somehow my parents didn't seem to worry too much, not like they would today. They were more worried about my companion who they regarded I think as a bit of a 'rascal', but he and I discovered many secrets of wildlife together for many years and through into adulthood. And yes, my parents were probably right about him!

One little 'project' that we did together in school was to make a scrap book of pictures and articles about birds and other wildlife. Most of these came from newspapers or old magazines. My companion however got slightly carried away and we both received attention to the buttocks from the headmaster, when it came to his attention that a number of books in the school library had gaps where there shouldn't be any, and neatly scissored holes in pages where once illustrations had resided. That slowed the scrap book idea down a little, and only served as a good excuse for mother to endorse strongly her views about this rascal friend of mine. But still we roamed the countryside and had many adventures. There wasn't an



John Robinson as a young boy

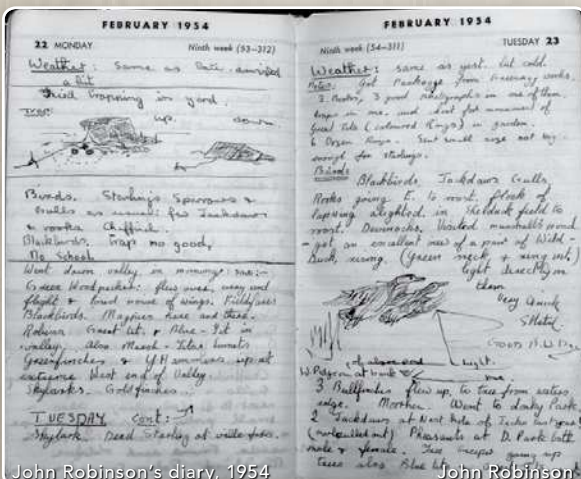


inch that we didn't know backwards, and every bird call, sighting, or bird's nest we recognised without effort.

By some miracle I managed to pass my eleven plus and gained a privileged place at Brigg Grammar School some 15 miles away. This meant I would have to go by bus every day. In 1952 I really had the natural history bug and would record everything I saw on the way to school and back, and whilst roaming the countryside in any spare time. There would be a full diary page written every day and I still sit and go through them. They are a sad indictment of the way the countryside and its wildlife have changed in my lifetime.

Even at that age, I had a desire to know more about the birds in the small garden we had behind our council house. I sent for a spring net trap and started ringing sparrows and starlings with coloured rings. There were no licences in those days! I even tried to ring some Grey Wagtails which fed in an open sewage stream near the house (no Health and Safety then either!)

I was captivated by the bird photography books which were becoming popular at the time by people like Hosking, Yates, Thompson, Brook, and the Kearton brothers (I still have them all). I knew however that the



equipment I would need in order to do it myself was way out of my reach. I managed to borrow a 'Ful Vue' type camera with a screen on the top which you looked down into. The first picture I ever took was of a stuffed Green Woodpecker tied to a stick in the back yard. It was rubbish but I treasured it for ages. It was to be some time before my excursions into the photographic world went any further.

My nature ramblings and bird nesting went on though, and I loved the biology lessons at school, the only thing I did love about school in fact. Natural History was an obsession. I left school and did an apprenticeship in horticulture at the local Parks Department nursery and managed to attain my RHS Diploma. And then came National Service which really turned out to be a blessing in disguise. I was called up in 1959, and went into the Ordnance Corps. After training at Portsmouth, and Blackdown, I was posted to Chillwell where my job was to order ball bearings for tanks. I then got a



posting to Germany where I was able to extend my Natural History interests.

And then the photographic side of things took off. I had managed, with some help from Mum and Dad, to get a Kodak Retinette camera. After a lot of experimenting with bits of string and stuff I managed to work out how to focus it at different distances and get a sharp negative. I would put food out on a concrete wall and sit with my camera behind a piece of old army blanket



Male Lesser Redpoll

John Robinson

which was my first hide. How I treasured those first pictures of Starlings and Jackdaws. I gazed at them for hours. We had a camp photographic society and the Commanding Officer asked me to run it. I was the only member, but I had full use of an enlarger and developing equipment.

In February 1961 I was demobbed, and went back to the Parks Department in Scunthorpe. But I couldn't settle. Army life and the stupidity of it all had left its mark. I handed in my notice, and started work in a local camera shop. The boss was good to me and one day he gave me a secondhand Exacta reflex 35 mm camera and an enlarger. He said if I was going to sell the stuff I had better learn how to use it!

I photographed everything – flowers, insects, fungi, trees, views - the lot. But the subject of my obsession, bird photography, was still out of reach. I couldn't get a telephoto lens to go with the camera. Then a friend of Dad's provided an old 8 inch telephoto lens from an antique plate camera. An engineer on the steelworks made a brass screw adapter and I had my first telephoto lens, even if it was a bit of a 'bodge'. I put a hide up on a Marsh Tit nesting in a rotten birch stump and it worked! It was nothing compared to today's standards but it was a start, and that was in 1963.

After getting married I went back to the Parks and

was promoted to head gardener on a large country estate which the County Council had taken over. I was able to get some better equipment such as a Pentax camera and a Tamron 70-210mm telephoto lens. I had already entered the world of home processed colour negative pictures and was well settled into colour transparencies. These I used to give talks, and I then taught Natural History at local colleges. That helped me to acquire more pieces of equipment. There were wonderful species to photograph around the old iron ore mines of the area, especially grebes, Redshank, Snipe, Little Ringed Plovers, Lapwings, owls, Kestrels, Whinchat, and many others. The Whinchat pictures in fact got me started in the publishing world which I suppose is every photographer's dream. At least it was in those days when there were so few doing it. It was the first picture I ever had published and it was a full page in the 'Encyclopaedia of Birds'.

Then, in 1972, I managed to get a job with the Nature Conservancy and moved to Castor Hanglands National Nature Reserve near Peterborough as warden. Here were fresh species to vent my photographic anger upon and we were near to Norfolk and the coast which gave even greater scope. I gave more talks and was beginning to accumulate large numbers of pictures many of which were used in magazines and by organisations like the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). After working on the ecology of Great

Wyre Forest Study Group

Crested Newts for 7 years in my own time, using their belly markings as a means of identifying individuals, I was awarded my Senior Wardenship.

I heard on the grapevine about a new National Nature Reserve and moved as Senior warden to Wyre Forest in early 1978, 36 years ago. Here again was a whole new range of species to enjoy. I started to travel more, taking photographs in Wales (especially on Skomer), Scotland, Ireland, Holland, France, and Spain. A weekly magazine called 'The Living Countryside' came out spread over two years and I supplied many pictures for it. At that time I was providing many government departments with pictures too but free of charge unfortunately! In 1981 I entered the 'Wildlife Photographer of the Year' competition and won the Plant Section with a picture of Burr-reed giving off pollen (see photograph). David Bellamy, who became a friend, presented my prize in London, a Cosina camera. I think this is the only competition I've ever entered. My idol from childhood days, Eric Hosking was there too. I had saved enough to buy a Mamiya 645 large format film camera for £1000 which was my pride and joy. It sold for ten pounds two years ago.

The digital age had arrived, and in 1999 when I retired, I bought my first digital camera, a Nikon D70, and since then I have had six more models. Sales of photographs to magazines were good in the early days but as the



John Robinson with his hide

years have moved on, things have changed. There are so many people doing it now and equipment is so easy to acquire and use that publishers have too much choice. They don't even have to pay for pictures most of the time. At the moment I still have all my original negatives, thousands of them, and all my original colour slides, at the last estimate 25,000 and thousands more not even mounted. I sit here now, and before me, inside that chunk of metal within that computer, are 54,301 bird images and 21,500 more of other natural history subjects. I wonder where they will all end up. I don't know, but many wonderful memories will go with them.



Treecreeper

John Robinson