

## How I became interested in Natural History

DAVE SCOTT

My first memory of 'natural history' was getting up one wet weekend morning in spring and going in pouring rain with my parents to try to see the cuckoo, which we could hear calling but which, in fact, we never found. I can't remember exactly what age I was but I was certainly under ten and my interest had been stirred!

My interest in butterflies and moths began at the age of 10, on finding a Cinnabar Moth, whose exotic colours fascinated me (and still do). This interest quickly extended to include all lepidoptera. Attending Kings Norton Grammar School I was fortunate to find a friend with similar interests in the first year and together with another local friend we joined the Birmingham Natural History Society (BNHS) as junior members. Joining proved to be hugely beneficial as the older existing members of the entomological section very generously pointed us in the right direction to find some of the more 'special' butterflies and moths not readily encountered in Kings Heath and its surroundings, although living opposite to Billesley Common I did find the following in an adjoining old meadow (long since the site of Billesley Girls School); Small Heath, Meadow Brown, Large and Small Skipper butterflies and moths such as Burnets and Chimney Sweepers amongst others.

Most of our earlier trips were made by bus and/or local train and we were able to get to places such as

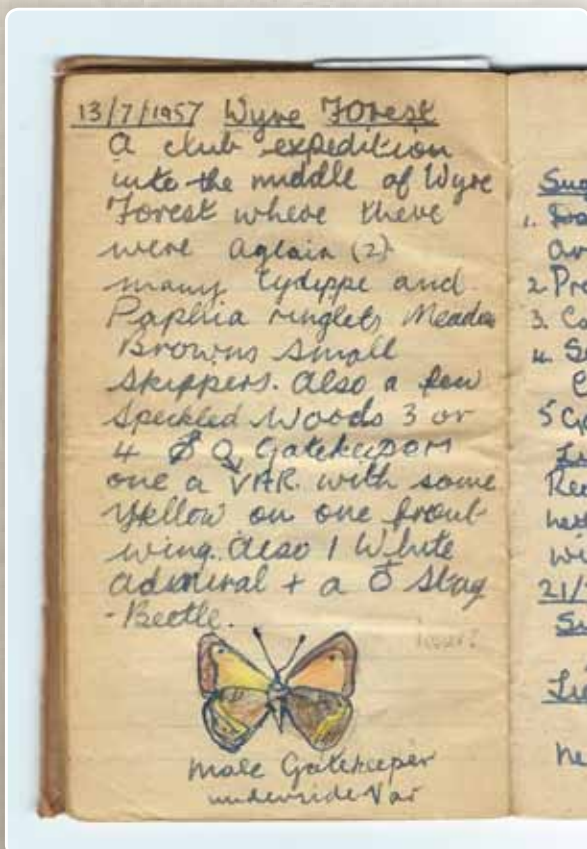


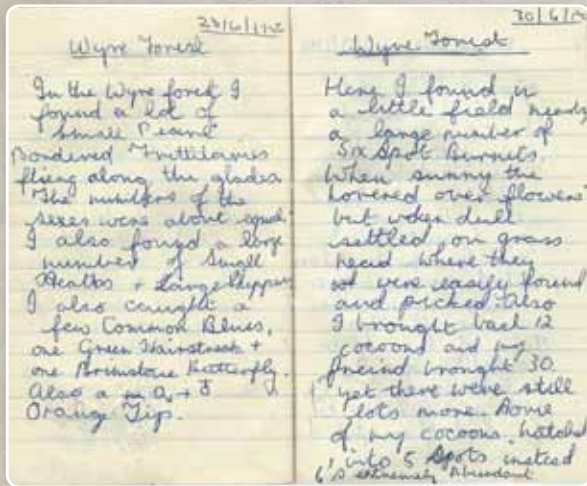
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Wilmcote Common in Warwickshire for Marbled Whites and Dark Green Fritillaries and also, more locally, to Clowes Wood and Windmill Naps near Earlswood. We had already visited Ribbesford Wood where we saw Silver-washed Fritillaries, but then decided to explore Wyre Forest which we did by walking up the west bank of the River Severn to Hawkbatch where we found Pearl-bordered Fritillaries. Soon afterwards we began to travel into Wyre by good old Midland Red bus to Bewdley then by BR diesel railcar to Far Forest Station, thereafter walking down to Dowles Brook and into Wimperhill Wood. This had been replanted mainly with very young conifer, which, combined with the widened rides, produced wonderful habitat for many of the butterflies we wanted to find such as High Brown, Silver-washed, Dark Green, Pearl-bordered and Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary, also Grizzled and Dingy Skipper. It was additionally an opportunity to see new day flying moths such as Burnet Companion, Speckled Yellow and Small Purple-barred.

Perhaps the most significant locality for us was to be Oversley Wood in Warwickshire. Here there was an abundance of White Admirals and this is where it was suggested we could 'work' the wood to obtain records for the Birmingham Midland Plateau Survey, with which the BNHS was involved for many years. From the age of thirteen this led eventually to several years of camping overnight in the wood with MV light, petrol generator, transformer, tripod, bulb plus, of course, a tent and food.

At this age we were obviously too young to drive even if we could have afforded a car, but luckily Oversley was accessible by Midland Red bus from Kings Heath





in Birmingham to Alcester, followed by at least a mile on foot whilst carrying a very big knapsack containing all the above mentioned equipment, making the pack weigh over 60lbs. Strangely we found it easier to take turns carrying the whole lot rather than dividing it between us. Luckily, after a while we met the old man who lived in the gamekeeper's cottage at the edge of the wood and he offered to keep the tent in his front porch and hall (where his hens roosted!), so generally we left it there, although we still transported the MV and generator back as we would use it elsewhere in the meantime.

We visited the wood regularly for several years and saw many unusual moth species, including Death's-head Hawkmoth, Lappet and Silver Cloud. We were on the whole very lepidoptera orientated but over the course of our time there we saw three Nightjars along the rides but surprisingly never heard one. Also we eventually realised that the noisy cricket we used to hear in the big open clearing was in fact a Grasshopper Warbler! Nightingales were abundant and sang in competition with our rather noisy ex-army generator, although numbers became much reduced when Forestry Commission began thinning and underplanting the wood with conifers.

As three intrepid fifteen year olds we also took our camping gear by train to Rockingham Forest to search for Chequered Skippers. The tent was still kept at Oversley Wood but we were confident that our newly acquired waterproof sleeping bags would be sufficient to keep us dry and warm in mid-May. We woke after the first night's camping at dawn (about 4.30am) and spent a few happy hours around the wood, seeing large numbers of Clouded Silver Moths at rest, but by mid-morning it had completely clouded over and started to rain. This persisted for the rest of the day; our sleeping bags turned out to be anything but waterproof, and

we were lucky to be able to find shelter in an old barn where we spent the rest of the night, returning home the next morning without even catching a glimpse of our elusive prey!

During this time BNHS organised trips in small coaches to more distant 'good' locations. Thus we became familiar with sites such as Cranham Common in the Cotswolds, Salcey Forest in Northamptonshire, Whixall Moss in Shropshire and others. These were often family outings for the older members, when wives and children would come along and amuse themselves (eg Cricket on Cranham Common SSSI!). All told, joining the Society was of great benefit to me as the members were an endless source of help and advice and I still remain a member, albeit a very dormant one.

I suppose, because they regularly turned up in the moth trap, I became interested in Caddis Flies and was able to identify a limited range of species where genitalia and a microscope weren't necessary. In January 1962 in Dowles Brook I collected, amongst other larvae, a *Hydropsyche* species which spins a silk net between stones of fast streams and waits for the current to wash prey into it. In captivity I used a shallow dish with stones and the larva quickly spun a new web and was fed mainly on Chironomid larvae from my garden pond. I poked these into the mouth of the net with forceps from where they were seized by the caddis. It managed to survive my 'ad hoc' treatment, pupating two or three months later and hatched in early summer. Unfortunately I lacked the resources and skill to positively identify it to species level.

At the time of my early to mid-teens we also became interested in mammals including voles and mice but especially in mustelids. Lacking other than an



Dave Scott with his ferrets



# Wyre Forest Study Group



occasional glimpse of perhaps a Weasel or Stoat my friend and I bought, via Exchange & Mart, Ferrets, or preferably Polecat x Ferret crosses, which looked more like the native Polecat. These became surprisingly tame and with care could be walked on a lead. We went rabbiting with them until the day we were chased and caught by the police and subsequently prosecuted for 'trespassing in pursuit of game, namely Coney' - fine £1! On seeing the police we made off in the opposite

direction only to be apprehended by more police waiting at the other end. This seemed a bit over the top for two teenage poachers until we realised that the second police had been there coincidentally attending a road accident in the lane.

At the end of 1962 and the beginning of a very long winter with heavy snow and frozen conditions I started going walking at the weekends with one of my friends in the surrounding countryside of Worcestershire, Warwickshire and Shropshire. In view of the distinct lack of invertebrates I began to broaden my interest in birds learning to identify them not only by sight but also by song. This interest has continued to the present day and I have taken part in various BTO surveys for a number of years.

I suppose 18 is an appropriate time to end this short trip around my childhood and teenage years other than to say that all of these interests have continued to occupy large amounts of my free time and still do today. They led me to becoming a member of Worcestershire Wildlife Trust and this in turn introduced me to practical conservation work which has been my other great continuing interest.



Dave Scott sketching in his notebook, Longdon, 2 July 2014

Rosemary Winnall