

Robert 'Bob' Evison 1946 to 2024

In June 1962, whilst at Knaresborough Ringing Station (KRS) beside the River Nidd, I had occasion to shout at a youth on the opposite bank who was inspecting the nest-hole of a Kingfisher, and told him to go away and leave it alone. Three days later I answered a knock at my door to find the same young man coyly showing me an injured Golden Plover. It was Bobby, as I always knew him in those early days, and during our conversation it became obvious that he was very interested in birds and so I invited him to the Ringing Station which was the start of a life-long friendship. He soon became a regular visitor, helping with the management of the reserve and, after joining the British Trust for Ornithology, eventually trained as a bird ringer, receiving his permit in 1963. In the mid 1960s we embarked on a programme of ringing young Grey Herons and Rooks in their nests when Bob would climb the trees, often very high and flimsy, whilst I from the safety of the ground offered reassurance and urged him to climb higher to reach more nests, something which would be frowned on today with the overly protective health and safety directives.



Bob at Knaresborough 1971 (Photo: JRM)

In the 1971 KRS Annual Report 'Personalities' feature I wrote:

'...A first class field man, possessing remarkably acute hearing, enabling him to pick up the calls of Noctule Bats flying overhead whilst we are sitting in the ringing laboratory. He is a careful and cautious observer with a keen realisation of the need for accurate documentation of records and is fully aware of their perspective in relation to any particular area. He enjoys working alone and spends much time watching at the local gravel pits and neighbouring localities as well as being keenly involved in the day-to-day running of KRS. He is quite happy studying the commoner species and seldom chases after rare birds. 'Tick-hunting' in Bobby's case simply means an interest in ecto-parasites.'

He was a member of the Harrogate and District Naturalists' Society (HDNS) for 61 years and Editor of the Bird Report from 1975 to 1980 and 1991 to 1995. He was also responsible for finding the following rare or unusual birds in the Society's recording area (in chronological order): Savi's Warbler at KRS in 1979, seven Bearded Tits at Hay-a-Park in 1974, Spotted Sandpiper at Farnham Gravel Pit in 1977, three Kentish Plovers at Hay-a-Park in 1980, Purple Sandpiper at Hay-a-Park in 1981, Black-throated Thrush in his Knaresborough garden, first seen by his wife Sue, in 1989 and a Penduline Tit at Hay-a-Park in 1992.

His first trip abroad was in 1965 when he joined a six-man expedition, which I led, to the Camargue in southern France. In 1971 after he and good friend John Gandy, having read Guy Mountford's classic book 'Portrait of a Wilderness' which detailed an expedition to the Coto Doñana in southern Spain, staying at the then famous Palacio, they were inspired to visit. John wrote to the University of Seville which was then administering the building as a research centre and spun a yarn about them carrying out a survey of the birds and they were given permission to stay, providing they took their own food. He joined myself and two friends in 1976 on a memorable safari to Kenya and subsequently on many other trips with KRS colleagues to India, Nepal, Canada, the eastern and western USA, Holland, Austria and Yugoslavia where we stayed in the small remote village of Kupinovo, sleeping five on a large old bed, four side by side and one across the bottom, covered with wolf skins.

On a KRS trip to Point Pelee beside Lake Erie, Canada in May 1982, we encountered two American lady birdwatchers and, after spending most of the day birding with us, one of them (Sue) took a shine to Bob and whisked him off to her home in Michigan to meet her parents and six-year old daughter Dawn from a previous marriage, returning him to our cabin three days later in time to join us for the flight home. They kept in touch and, on 4 July, Bob proposed and Sue said 'yes'. She flew to England in September,

returned home to make the necessary arrangements and came back on 28 November with Dawn, tying the knot at Harrogate Registry Office on 10 December to live in the Knaresborough house Bob had bought in 1976, remaining there throughout their 41 year marriage. They travelled extensively together as a family including regular trips to the USA to see Sue's parents and also visited Portugal, Marrakesh, The Gambia and a nostalgic return to Point Pelee.

Although primarily an ornithologist, Bob's involvement with KRS in the early days was an invaluable learning experience, with the help of specialist members of the Yorkshire Naturalists' Union who were invited to investigate the various life forms on the reserve, something in which he took a keen interest leading to the acquisition of a working knowledge of several 'other orders', notably flowering plants, in addition to studying the small mammals, butterflies and operating a moth trap. He was responsible for catching many of the 110,000 birds ringed at the station and continued as an independent ringer at Staveley and in his garden when KRS closed down in 1989.



Bob at Staveley Nature Reserve 2021 (Photo: JRM)

In the early 1970s, Bob and several other members of KRS started to visit Staveley Gravel Pits which were nearing the end of their working life and in the process of being closed down. The habitat eventually developed into an excellent birdwatching site, becoming known as Staveley Lagoons and, with permission from the quarry manager, a hide was built in 1972. Bob produced an annual bird report as a private venture until 1992, when discussions took place between the quarry owners, the bird group and the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust (YWT), who agreed to accept responsibility for the site, thus ensuring its establishment as a nature reserve. Bob became chairman of the management committee and continued to produce their annual reports, single handedly compiling details of birds and all the 'other orders', and was a first class and enthusiastic editor, having had experience as assistant editor of the KRS Annual Reports for many years. His close association with the YWT staff and much help from the small team of local volunteer friends, helped to create the varying habitats which are an integral part of this important reserve and his keen and unstinting long-term commitment cannot be praised too highly.

In his younger days, after leaving school, he trained as an auto-electrician at the West Yorkshire Road Car Company which then operated the local bus service where he worked for 28 years until being made redundant in 1990. After just one year, he was offered the position of an

administrator at the British Lending Library in Boston Spa where he stayed for 20 years until finally retiring in 2010. In 1999, he had a quadruple heart by-pass which served him well until, in 2023, he was diagnosed with cancer. Eventually admitted to St. Michael's Hospice in Harrogate, he died just one day later on 18 May 2024 and with his passing HDNS lost one of its most active, experienced and long-standing members. His funeral on 4 June at Stonefall Crematorium was very well attended, with representatives from HDNS and the YWT, followed by a gathering of friends and colleagues at the Royal Oak Inn, Staveley.

A usually quiet, reserved and unassuming demeanour belied a jolly sense of humour and a fierce determination to pursue any task and see it through to fruition and his contributions to the natural history and success of Knaresborough Ringing Station and Staveley Nature Reserve cannot be overstated and I am honoured to have been responsible for encouraging and developing the formative years of this deeply committed naturalist and dear friend. He will be missed by those who knew him well and our thoughts are with Sue, Dawn and sister Mary.

John R. Mather