

## David Cobham : Oral History Transcription

**Name of interviewee(s):**

David Cobham

**Reasons why chosen for an oral history:** David Cobham is a film producer and director whose natural history films have contributed significantly to wildlife conservation.

**Name of interviewer:**

Eddie Anderson

**Reasons why interviewer chosen:**

Longstanding friend and colleague

**Name of cameraman:**

Jeremy Brettingham-Smith

**Date of interview:**

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**1. The early years**



# WILDFILMHISTORY

100 YEARS OF WILDLIFE FILMMAKING

Int: *David, your role is to tell us who you are and what you are, and you can even tell us how old you are.*

DC: I'm David Cobham. I'm a retired or semi-retired producer/director and the date I think is 11<sup>th</sup> March 2010 and I am almost 80.

Int: *David, right at the beginning what was it about natural history and wildlife? Can you remember your first inspirations when you were a wee thing?*

DC: Well, on my mother's side they were all natural historians. I suppose [my] great great grandfathers grew up during the heyday of natural history, they all kept daybooks saying what the wind speed was, where it was coming from, what birds they saw. A lot of them were artists and one of them was a professional natural historian who became Professor of Geology at Oxford University.

So it was in the genes and I was very lucky, my mother was keen on natural history and then when I went to school I met a wonderful man, Neville Aldrich-Blake whose son Pelham was a producer with the Natural History Unit at Bristol. He allowed me to run the Natural History Society and I got Eric Hosking along to give a talk and he was a wonderful man. He'd just lost his eye and he gave us a wonderful talk on owls, and owls, birds of prey, and waterfowl, they're really the things that make me tick I think.

Int: *What sort of age were you, when was this?*

DC: When I saw Eric Hosking I would have been 15 or 16, something like that. That really took the end of school and then I suppose when I went to Cambridge I read Natural Sciences so still continuing in that theme. I tried to draw birds, not terribly well. I thought that I was going to be a professional bird artist.

Int: *You wanted to be an artist?*

DC: I wanted to be an artist. I actually had a very good exhibition at Eden Lilly (now closed department store, Market Street) in Cambridge, it sold out but I just felt I wasn't good enough. I did write to Walt Disney and ask to be a cartoonist but I was turned down. I also about that time saw the true life adventures that Disney had produced: *Living Desert* (1), *Vanishing Prairie* (2), *Water Birds* (3), those kinds of things. But probably a bigger influence was seeing Arne Sucksdorff's *The Great Adventure* (4) and that decided me that I wanted to make animal movies. With a guy called John Buxton, who became a very good cameraman for Anglia Survival, we started making our own great adventure about a family of foxes, and we built a big enclosure to film them in. Unfortunately it was blown down and where there'd been no foxes at all Horsey, which was where we were doing it, there are now foxes.

Int: *So you were inspired by one particular film and you wanted to do it your own way?*

DC: Yes. I was inspired by Arne Sucksdorff's *The Great Adventure* (4) which is about two boys who found an otter that had been captured by a fisherman, released it, kept it as a pet, kept on seeing a fox as well in the wilderness and decided that they must let the otter go. It was a beautiful film and John Buxton who is

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now the same kind of age as me, older in fact, we got a camera and started to make our own great adventure.

Int: *Did you finish it?*

DC: No, we didn't because the weather finished it. We built this enormous, great enclosure to film the foxes in and unfortunately it blew down and the foxes escaped. There had been no foxes at Horsey and suddenly there were foxes at Horsey which was not at all popular.

Int: *You didn't quite complete *The Great Adventure* (4) at Horsey and you introduced foxes.*

DC: That's right but I did make a film nonetheless with Noel Cunningham-Reid. We hired a **35mm** camera, a wind-up **Eyemo**, and we made a 20 minute film in black and white on training a hawk. Our experience, apart from the bad experience of foxes at Horsey, was just gained from cinemas and at Cambridge you could go and see a different film every night. We used to write down a shot list each day and go out and do it. We hired equipment and some of it was duff and scratched the film but we finished the film and to our amazement, it had cost £500, Exclusive Films took it and it was shown on the cinemas as a filler and made us money back straightaway.

Int: *What year would that have been?*

DC: That would have been in 1954/55.

Int: *Was Noel Cunningham-Reid used to the idea of backing films?*

DC: In fact we put up money equally. I sold all my textbooks after leaving Cambridge and that provided my half and he provided the other half.

Int: *So you are self-taught?*

DC: Yes, absolutely self-taught. Having done that I then tried to show it to Desmond Morris who was starting a thing called *Zoo Time* (5). He refused to see it. I tried with the BBC and met this charming man, Brandon Acton-Bond who was starting a fledgling Natural History Unit and he wasn't interested either. So what I had to do was to start right at the bottom. I went and worked at Pearl & Dean making commercials, did that for six months, and then went on and did 12 years in documentaries.

Then in 1968 a film I'd made about Donald Campbell in Australia trying to break the land speed record, which was quite a decent film, got to the attention of the BBC and I was summoned in front of Richard Cawston and asked if I would like to do a *One Pair of Eyes* (6). There was no subject that we could agree on but he said is there anything you'd like to do and I said, yes, I've always wanted to make a film of T H White's book *The Goshawk* (7) (8). He said, well, I think you ought to go and see David Attenborough. So I wrote it up and sent it to him and went and saw him. He sat me down and he said, David, yes, we'd like to do this if you can find half the money and I was actually gob smacked. So that was my start at the BBC.



I found the other 50% of the money easily and I always remember it was just when colour had started. He switched the set on and there was a lovely shot of bluebells in a wood and he said look at the colour of that blue, David. He's a lovely man and that gave me my start.

Int: *Just tell me a bit more about who you worked with on *The Goshawk* (7).*

DC: Duncan Carse who's an extraordinary man, part explorer. He'd been one of the original television presenters. He played T H White in the book. John McCallum was a cameraman and all sorts of weird people, most of whose name's I've forgotten now. But it was just about one man really and the battle of wills between him and the goshawk he was trying to train.

Int: *You had to have a goshawk, of course, and train it.*

DC: Have a goshawk, yes. I can't remember where it came from now but I remember it had flown into a fence and one eye was much redder than the other, and we did actually lose it as T H White lost his goshawk during the filming but it was recovered.

Int: *How amazing.*

DC: It was shown on BBC2 about five times and then once on BBC1. It was nominated for a BAFTA and that was my stepping stone into the BBC.

Int: *Quite an important step.*

DC: A very big one, yes.

## **2. Vanishing Hedgerows**

Int: *What was your next project?*

DC: I did *To Build a Fire* (9), a Jack London short story that was a big success again. I did a *One Pair of Eyes* (6) on John Skeaping in the Camargue and about that time Henry Williamson came to my attention. He'd written an article in the Saturday Telegraph (10) which was a colour supplement all about his field at Ox's Cross in Devon, bemoaning the lack of hedgerows and all that kind of stuff. I'd made a lot of films for the Midland Bank on how farmers were being encouraged to rip out all their hedgerows, sack all their staff and just concentrate on dairy and corn, cereals. I thought I must do something to just put that back.

So I met Henry Williamson in London and I said we must make a film about the vanishing hedgerows (11) and



he said, yes, this interests me. I'd like to work with you on this and, lo and behold, the BBC said they'd like to do it. Then they got cold feet because they could see that the farmers would be up in arms about the story that was being told because it was what really happened between 1936 and 1947 when there was a real revolution in agriculture. So we were asked to put another story within the story, so we patched in the story of the grey partridge and how that survived during the year. So everyone was mollified and we shot it around here in Norfolk.

Henry Williamson, I should have known better about this but the first day's filming he had to say something like '5,000 miles of hedgerow is being grubbed up every year'. 'Now I should understand that', he said, 'because I'm a farmer and I know that you need bigger fields for bigger machinery.' I can remember hearing him. My room in the Black Swan at Walsingham was next door to him and all night long I could hear him pacing up and down trying to remember his lines. What I should have done, what he told me the next day when he couldn't get two words out in the right sequence, is I should have just let the camera run and let him do it ad lib which, of course, I did do later on and it worked very, very well.

Int: *Now this was because he was an old man really or because he was unused to it, and explain what it was about him that made it?*

DC: He was a very, very uptight person, if that's the right word, very anxious, always anxious and just having to do anything to order was against what he could cope with. Yes, he was an old man, he was 70 probably when we made the film but very nervous. I remember we did another bit where we'd found a partridge's nest and I just said to him we'll put a mike on you, just go and look at the partridge sitting on the nest and talk as you go in there. He did a lovely bit about the hen bird sitting on the eggs and knowing that the cock bird was probably watching from the hedgerow opposite. Now he said I must creep away very quietly because we mustn't disturb her.

Int: *He presumably had been for many years in his wilderness as it were. You were the first to get him out again.*

DC: Yes, you're right because he was tainted by his association with Moseley which was over a very short period in fact, over about a year when he went to Nuremburg. One of his cottages in Stiffkey I think still has got the tar swastika emblazoned on it. I remember one day we went into a pub I think at Morston (Norfolk) just for our lunch and all the locals started chattering in the corner. Henry did his practical joke which was to say I've heard that that blaggard Henry Williamson is in the district, does anyone have anything to say about him?

Of course, he farmed at Stiffkey and he saw the whole agricultural revolution from 36 to 47, and we were able to film at that farm which was in an incredibly run down condition. He was never able to achieve all the things that he wanted to achieve. He could always see how he had to do it but at the same time he didn't have time because he always trying to write pieces to earn money to keep the family together.

Int: *You used his book, A Story of a Norfolk farm (12), didn't you, as extra padding in a way to sell the Vanishing Hedgerows (11)?*

DC: Yes, I think we did probably. I can't remember what we used out of it.

Int: *But you gave it a literary peg, as it were.*

DC: Yes, I suppose so to make it more palatable to people.

Int: *I've always believed that Vanishing Hedgerows (11) is probably the first really political conservation film that the BBC made. Is that true do you think?*

DC: I'm sure it was the first conversation film they made and they were anxious not to do it to start off with, and it needed a letter from Peter Scott to David Attenborough saying how important he thought the story was to actually get things shifting.

Int: *What year would that have gone out?*

DC: I think it went out in 1973 but we made it in 1970/1971, it was shot over a year obviously.

Int: *Did it have an impact?*

DC: It did, yes. An absolute avalanche of letters and Clive James gave it an absolute glowing review I remember. It was the first television review he did in The Observer and an absolute blinder, and also it won every prize at Monte Carlo which was very nice.

### **3. Private Life of the Barn Owl**

Int: *Soon after that the Private Life of the Barn Owl (13) presumably was hot on the heels was it?*

DC: Yes, that's right, and what happened there was that I'd gone to Jeffery Boswall who did the *Private Life* (14) series and said I'd like to do the barn owl. I suppose the barn owl had come up really because Henry Williamson used the barn owl on his book jacket as a kind of colophon, I think that's the phrase. I said to Jeffery I'd like to do the barn owl and he said I just can't see you doing 25 minutes on the barn owl. You might get five minutes on nesting and that sort of thing. I said, no, I'm sure that it's a very interesting bird and we can make an absolutely super film.

So we started on that and we did have seven tame barn owls, each one had particular attributes. Some were very good at coming back if you called them, others were good at foraging and looking as though they were flying, hunting out for stuff, and it was a very interesting film to make.

Int: *Rather back to the Disney days in that you were using a mixture of captive and wild because the bird was actually rather rare at the time.*



DC: It was, yes, and that is my excuse for using trained birds is that it takes pressure off any wild bird that otherwise perhaps people would think you were harassing. You had to have a Schedule 1 licence in fact then to film them at the nest and we did try very hard to get our tame birds to nest in a set but they didn't. We'd almost finishing filming when Mick Rhodes, who was the Head of the Natural History Unit then, happened to be doing a lecture down in Gloucestershire I think it was, and a young man called Andrew Anderson said, well, I've got a lovely sequence of barn owls nesting in a church tower, would you like to see it? That was the sequence that we actually used in the film, it was wonderful and showed some quite unusual footage that had never been seen before.

Int: *You also used image intensifiers, didn't you, which you'd borrowed from the army to do catching mice in total darkness I think and that was quite innovative at the time.*

DC: Yes, I mean Roger S. Payne had done a whole lot of experiments on barn owls knowing that because of their asymmetric hearing they could actually pinpoint a mouse just by sound alone. We recreated those experiments using an image intensifier which had been used in Northern Ireland I think because there was a lot of stuff in Northern Ireland at that time, and we got some very good results. We had to use car lights covered over in red.

Int: *Sort of imitation of infrared.*

DC: Yes, I think so or perhaps we had infrared lights. I think we used infrared lights, yes.

Int: *I seem to remember it all took a long time.*

DC: It did take a long time but it did work. Eric Ennion did some very good drawings to encapsulate what actually happened during those particular flights. The other thing I was going to say that happened in the barn owl film was we wanted to show what happened to a mouse when it was actually caught by an owl, and this meant we had to x-ray the owl. I actually knew an x-ray specialist in Norwich at the time and he provided us with the right liquid to dip the mouse in, and told us to go to Wells Cottage Hospital where he was sure the matron would do the business for us.

So we put this very tame barn owl on a perch in front of the x-ray machine, put a mouse into its mouth, it swallowed it, first photograph taken, and then we had to wait. We couldn't just wait for three hours and do nothing so we went off to do some more filming, and told the matron that if anything happened it would be quite safe for her to move the owl. We came back and somebody had come in with a broken wrist and she'd had to carry the owl out of the X-ray Department and x-ray the guy's wrist, and then put the owl back again which was very clever of her I think. Anyhow we got the whole series of photographs, X-rays

Sometime later I was talking to Mr Maxwell who was the x-ray guy and he said I had a patient come in the other day and I had your x-rays of the barn owl, and I convinced her that the x-rays were her x-rays which she thought was terribly amusing.

#### **4. Tarka the Otter**

Int: *That could have been rather alarming. So after *The Private Life of the Barn owl* (13) you were back to Henry then, weren't you, or was there something else between?*

DC: Well, at the end of the filming of *Vanishing Hedgerows* (11), on the last day of filming at Ox's Cross in the field by this hut, he said, David, have you ever thought of doing *Tarka the Otter* (15), making a film of it. I said, no, I haven't but I certainly would love to. He said, well, Disney's always been on to me about it and offering miniscule sums for the rights, and he went off anyhow and made a film called *Flash, the Teenage Otter* (16) which I saw and was absolutely disgusted. But if you'd like to have a go at it you have my blessing to do it.

It took about five or six years to get it off the ground and eventually we had to do a little pilot film showing we could actually use otters but eventually we did get it off the ground. That resulted in 2½ years, the longest I've ever worked on a film I think.

Int: *That, of course, was a cinema feature, 90 minutes.*

DC: Yes. It was made for the Rank Organisation and the National Film Finance Corporation. As I say, we started preparation in 1976 and finished at the end of 78/79.

Int: *You were able to cherry pick the right people? I mean you chose who your staff would be and you did everything.*

DC: Yes. I had Ron Eastman as the cameraman, John McCallum did the main shoots with the actors. I had a very good stills photographer, Steve Downer, assistant otter handler, Peter Talbot, who was always getting bitten. Otters are lovely, furry creatures and they'll come and sit in your lap, and I can always remember our particularly very tame otter. After he'd done a bit of filming and got thoroughly wet he'd come and burrow under my sweater and dry off for half an hour and then off he'd go but he did bite. I can remember one day certainly at Wicken Pond Farm, (Syderstone Common, Norfolk). I was holding the otter and waiting for the sun just to come out, and the otter knew there were some fish in the pond and it suddenly couldn't bear to wait any longer and it just bit across that finger there. It was incredibly painful, very sharp teeth.

Int: *In order to follow the story, given that otters don't do as they're told and none of the other animals do, it must have been a pretty exasperating. I seem to remember at one point your shooting rate was pretty high.*

DC: We were always told by Rank to be absolutely profligate with film, to shoot masses and masses of film because there might be some little bit of behaviour that would happen which if we'd just cut we would never get. We could trick the otters into doing things that would appear to be quite natural by putting scents on rocks and things like that. We used to have a bag which had some mushed up old trout in it and you just put that on a rock and the otter would swim down, always come out, sniff as though it was following a female otter or whatever, and that's the way we did a lot of it.



Int: *Tell me about Henry because he was getting to be an old man and not very well while you were doing this.*

DC: Henry had retired from the scene. I offered him the chance to write the script and he wrote 100 pages and there was not even one mention of an otter in it. It was all about the First World War which, of course, was his fixed idea the whole time. So Gerald Durrell came in and wrote a script. By that time Henry really was out of it and he'd gone into a retirement home, and there was one remarkable thing that happened. When we were filming the death of Tarka it was a beautiful day and we were filming on the Torridge all day, lovely. We'd filmed the death of the hound, Deadlock, and then we had to do the three big bubbles in the river going downstream to the sea which was the death of Tarka. We finished all that and came away.

Then the next day which was a Saturday we had some pick up shots to do and Richard Williamson, Henry's son, came up to me. He shook me by the hand which I thought was rather strange and he said, David, I thought you'd like to know that when you were doing those death scenes yesterday Henry just put his hands on his chest and died. It made the hair on my back stand on end because it was a very spooky thing to happen but absolutely true.

Int: *So really Tarka was the big film that you nearly made at the beginning?*

DC: That's right, yes. Yes, it was a lovely film to make and absolutely exhausting and I've probably never recovered from it either.

## **5. Combining drama with natural history**

Int: *Of course, it's a drama and was taking you more away from documentary and into proper drama but you stuck with wildlife or wildlife centred.*

DC: Yes, I did although what happened with Tarka is that it opened doors for a lot of children's drama. I did a big 13 part series for Southern Television, *Brendon Chase (17)*, which had a lot of natural history in it but it was about three boys who'd run away from home and live in a big forest, and then *Seal Morning (18)*.

Int: *Just tell us a bit more about Brendon Chase (17).*

DC: It was by a lovely man called Denys Watkins-Pitchford, also known as BB. The book was set during the 20s and these three boys live with their maiden aunt in the Dower House and she was a real curmudgeon. She ruled like the military and actually they had to do lessons. The vicar came in to give them divinity classes and they were having a difficult time. They were only there because their parents were in India. They decided they'd had enough of it and they decided to escape, and they borrowed the gardener's 22 rifle and off they went, and lived off the land in this big forest. But, of course, there were all sorts of thing that came up against them.

There was this domineering journalist, Monica Hurling, who heard about the boys and their escape and was determined to track them down. There was also a circus nearby and a bear that escaped, and they always seemed to be one step behind the bear and then the bear nearly caught up with them. There was one day they were with Smokoe Joe (Paul Curran), who was the local charcoal burner, they were in his cabin and the bear suddenly appeared at the window. It was very exciting, very exciting stuff and there was an aeroplane, the journalist flew an aeroplane. There was a policeman who was always trying to catch them. It had all the right kind of stuff, a really ripping good adventure.

Int: *Is that in the late 70s or early 80s?*

DC: That was late 70s, yes. I think we actually made it in 1980.

Int: *Of course the story, there is a sort of recurring theme here, the Jack London survival stories and now you've got sort of Jack London in *Brendon Chase* (17). This is perhaps what you've been searching for. So then after *Brendon Chase* (17) is that when *Seal Morning* (18) came along?*

DC: Yes. I think first of all I did a series for Television South West called *Secrets of the Coast* (19), and just thinking about presenters and all that kind of thing. There was a lovely girl called Sue Ingle who presented it who I think had been in *Blue Peter* (20) and she was one of these daring girls who would do anything. She would rock climb, fly a microlight, swim underwater, anything to make the right impression. She was a very good presenter.

Int: *She married a cameraman, that was pretty dangerous! And still lives in Norfolk. So that was wildlife, fairly strictly wildlife still.*

DC: There was one interesting thing. In the last episode Prince Charles had agreed to do a little piece to finish off the film and we did this at Peninnis Head in the Scilly Isles. There were just two people with him, his agent from the Duke of Cornwall's estate and himself, and asked how long it would take and all that. I said it'll probably take an hour at the most. We went along there, set up, filmed him and it was a bitterly cold day and then it was all over and the Prince of Wales went off. Then one of the crew wanted to have a pee, disappeared behind a boulder and found he was peeing on the hand of an SAS guy who'd been hidden there the whole time with a whole group of them round where we'd been filming. That's how well he was looked after.

Int: *So that was *Secrets of the Coast* (19), then straight on to more drama.*

DC: I did another series of Jack London's stuff in Canada, *Tales of the Klondike* (21), which was shown on Channel 4, and then it must have been *Seal Morning* (18) which was shot in 1985 and that was about a girl, an orphan girl who went to live with her Aunt Miriam in Norfolk. They're presented with an abandoned seal pup and should they look after it or should it be returned and that was really what the story was about: should you attempt to restrain something that's basically wild. It did very well. There was an American biologist who was working on Brent geese and also there was a kind of love interest there, and he was found to have an English fiancée, so that all became very involved. Eventually they returned the seal to the wild and everyone was happy ever after.

Int: *That was for Granada?*



DC: No, that was for Carlton.

Int: *Of course, you transposed the location, didn't you, because there was quite a bit of a scandal about the original book (22), wasn't there? Had that already been revealed?*

DC: I don't know if it had actually been revealed then.

Int: *The book (22) was Rowena Farre, wasn't it?*

DC: Rowena Farre, yes, and it was always meant to be true and it was set in Scotland, you're absolutely right. The edition that I've got had wonderful drawings by Ralf Thomson, I think it was. She was living in Australia when I bought the rights but shortly afterwards it was found that she had made up the whole story and had not lived in Scotland at all. So it was bogus but anyhow it made a very good series and that was all that really mattered.

Int: *Much wildlife in it?*

DC: A lot of wildlife, yes: Brent geese, harriers, lots of seals, of course, foxes.

Int: *Did you employ wildlife cameramen specialists to shoot that?*

DC: Yes, I did. I had Mike Potts who I worked with a lot after that, wonderful. He would spend hours marooned on a sandbank filming the seals with the sun coming up behind them. I remember that, it took ages to get exactly the right angle to get the sun coming up behind them. He was brilliant.

## **6. A Fierce encounter**

Int: *Just remind us what the film was and what might have made it.*

DC: Sometime previously someone said to me why don't you make a film about Jack London's *To Build a Fire* (9). It's a story about a man and a dog during the gold rush trying to survive. I read the story and I could immediately see that it was absolutely perfect. It had great drama in it. I went to the BBC and again David Attenborough said if you can find half the money we'll do it. By this time I was quite hot, they were quite pleased with what I was doing and Richard Price, who is my agent for selling things then, said, well, I think Group W in New York are quite interested in financing it but they want to talk to you about it first. So you'll have to go over there and talk to the guy there.

So I went over and talked to this guy and he said who have you got in the film, and I said, well, we've got a



fellow called Ian Hogg who's going to play the **Chechaquao**, that's the tenderfoot who was going out in the gold rush. Never heard of him he said. I said, well, that's a pity but what about if I got Orson Welles to do the narration? He said if you get Orson Welles you've got the money. Orson Welles had an office in London and I rang his secretary and he agreed to do it. His uncle had been on the gold rush so that was a kind of way in and he admired Jack London because of his social writing and all that kind of stuff.

So we made the film and I'd just done a fine cut and Orson Welles actually came into the office and said I know you've got a recording studio here, can we do the voice over there? I said, no, I haven't shown it to David Attenborough yet. It would be foolish to do it without letting him check it first. So we showed it to David Attenborough and it was all okayed. I rang Orson Welles's office and then they said he's not in London at the moment, he's in Munich, can he go to Munich and do it? So I said, yes, I can go to Munich, that's easy, and I was just about to go to Munich and I ran the offices again just to check where I was to meet him, he's in Rome now, can you go to Rome? I said, yes, I can go to Rome. Again, I was just about to go the airport to fly out to Rome and just checked and, no, Orson Welles is now in New York, can you go to New York? When you get to New York you're to ring Arnold Weissberger, his lawyer, and he'll tell you exactly where Orson is and you can ring him and arrange a recording studio and all that kind of stuff.

So I flew to New York and as I got off at Kennedy Airport I ran Arnold Weissberger and he said you won't believe this, David, he's now in Los Angeles, you've got to go there, can you go there? I said, yes, I can actually go there and I'll try and arrange a studio to do it down there. Where is he staying, I said. He's staying at the Beverley Hills Hotel, just ring him there and he'll be prepared to talk to you. So I rang him and the answer came, 'Mr Welles is not taking any calls' so I thought, God, how the hell am I going to get through to him? So I rang back saying I was Arnold Weissberger who wanted to speak to him, got through to him and he said, 'dear boy, where have you been? I've been expecting you to call. We can do this tomorrow, can't we?' and I said, yes, I've got a studio booked up and will you come to the studio which is at the Lockheed Aircraft Corporation at 2.15 tomorrow? 'Yes, I'll be there' and sure enough the next day he appeared in a black limo which I'd organised and he stepped out, and he was wearing what I would call North Vietnamese, black pyjama suit. Enormous man, quite big, and a Homburg hat with a big box of cigars under his arm.

We went in and because it was a security place they wanted him to sign in and immediately there was a terrific kafuffle. He didn't want to sign in because he was being chased by the IR for back taxes and all that kind of stuff, and I thought for a moment that was the end of it, there was gong to be no recording at all. But we somehow managed to smooth things over and we got into the recording booth. I was terrified of him, of course, because he was larger than life and a bit of a bully, and I'd heard that wonderful Bird's Eye commercial where he'd taken the account executive to pieces and said you people are absolute pests.

Anyhow he did the recording and he was very gracious and he asked if there were any bits I wanted him to do again and there were a couple of bits we did again. He was lovely and his voice was absolutely wonderful. He played it very close to the mike and there was just this wonderful great chest of his which made the recording absolutely perfect.

Int: *So that was the fiercest wildlife moment?*

DC: Absolutely.

## **7. Filming in Japan**

Int: *Let's get back to some wildlife as well. After you'd done Seal Morning (18) you went on to what?*

DC: I did a series in Japan (23).

Int: *Yes, with the cranes and stuff.*

DC: That's right, yes.

Int: *Who was that for?*

DC: That was for the BBC. That was under John Sparks who was Head of the Natural History then and it was three parts. It was about art and wildlife, about religion and wildlife, and then about modern world in Japan. Art and wildlife was really about cranes and we went out to Okaido and filmed the cranes there and also various other places. Monkeys was the religious aspect, the three monkeys. In fact, we found there were four monkeys and I can remember sitting in a temple in Kyoto listening to this man explaining about the four monkeys and it was so cold. I was getting colder and colder and colder, and eventually he said you must be frozen, shall we have some noodles? So these great steaming bowls of noodles were brought for us. We never got to the end of the four monkeys there but we did include them in the film.

Int: *Who was your camera operator for that?*

DC: We had Mike Potts doing the wildlife stuff and also Mike Herd who was a very good cameraman who lived up in Scotland and they alternated between doing monkeys and cranes, and all that kind of stuff. We had a Canadian cameraman who lived in Japan who did what I would call the unit filming, the bits to camera and all that kind of stuff.

Int: *Was that for the UK audience only?*

DC: Yes, it was for WNET / Channel 13 and quite curiously they chose the modern Japan as their one for fundraising when it went out and, of course, they were some very bloody stuff in it with all the business about pilot whales and dolphins. That was an extraordinary thing that happened. We knew that at Taiji the Japanese were herding these whales and dolphins into a cove and then slaughtering them. We tried to find out if they would allow us to do it and like the Japanese, it was very rude to say no but they wouldn't actually say yes. We were very lucky, one day we were coming back from lunch and I saw right out in the distance this flotilla of boats in a kind of V coming in towards the shore. We stopped everything and got the cameras out. We were very lucky to get the whole business of the whales and the dolphins being hustled into this narrow little cove. Actually heartbreaking because the baby dolphins were bashing themselves against the rocks and you could hear them clicking away in alarm. Then the day after we went round and the place was absolutely awash with blood, absolutely crimson and steaming because they'd started harvesting them.

Int: *Had that been filmed before for Western audiences do you know?*



DC: I don't think it had been filmed. I'm pretty sure we were one of the first. It was well-known that it was happening. But when we were doing a **recce** we were threatened by some of the (Tigi) fishermen who looked very menacing in their frogmen outfits and great big, almost machete knives they were despatching the whales with. The sea was absolutely blood red and steaming. It was extraordinary. After we'd filmed the whales being driven in, a couple of Japanese tourists came up to us and they said, gosh, we're so lucky to have seen this. We've been up the road to the dolphinarium and seen the tame whales and dolphins performing there, and then to come here and see all that happening as well, that's really made our day. That seemed quite bizarre to me that they thought that seeing the whales being harvested and driven in like this, and beating their brains out against the rocks was a good thing to have seen.

Int: *It is an extraordinary cultural difference as well, very sad.*

DC: It is, yes.

Int: *Have we missed out any wildlife filmmaking? You went to Antarctica, didn't you?*

DC: No, it wasn't really wildlife. That interesting thing about that, the pretext for going there was to do a film about Duncan Carse, *Survival in Limbo (24)*, who went there in 1960 I should think. His marriage had broken down and he just wanted to be on his own. He wanted to do Met readings and study the penguins, and he was put ashore by the Navy with a prefabricated hut who put his hut up, and then there was a tsunami and it washed him away and he had to survive for four months with what was left over.

Int: *You reconstructed that?*

DC: Yes. The most exciting thing we did was we reconstructed his hut at Ealing Studios. We had these two enormous great canisters full of water which on my say-so, Duncan was asleep in the bunk, let loose and the whole thing washed away, very exciting. Duncan was very good at doing long pieces to camera. He could remember exactly what happened.

He was off the booze then. He wasn't allowed to. He had to take some awful anti-booze I think it was. If he tried to touch even eau de cologne or anything like that it made him terribly sick. No, he was very good, for three months, we run that for three months and he never touched a drop. But when he got back to the Falkland Islands at Port Stanley he went absolute berserk and wasn't seen for three days. Eventually he ended up back in the hotel, without most of his clothes and with a lady's glove. I remember there was a lady's glove.

## **8. Beyond Timbuktu**

Int: *You've reached a stage where you can pick and choose.*



DC: Well, it's quite interesting how that happened, *Beyond Timbuktu (25)*. I was sitting in the kitchen at North Creek and Bruce Pearson, the well-known artist, burst in and said, David, I've just been to this incredible place in Mali where there's a floodplain where all waders and ducks come during the winter. It's all going to be destroyed by some dams they're going to build on the River Niger. We've got to go out there next year and film it, it's absolutely mind blowing. This was one of the occasions when the BBC move incredibly quickly. I can't remember who was in charge of the Natural History Unit then but we got a commission. We went out at the following January and **recce'd** and filmed as we went.

Bruce was absolutely wonderful. He's not only a very good artist but he's a wonderful person to have on an expedition like that because we were living and sleeping out in the open, hoping that hyenas weren't going to eat our heads off and things like that at night. We were set up at a village. Really what we were doing was from the end of the Sahel (desert) which was Timbuktu, right up to the banks of the Niger, so the film was divided up into I suppose four sections. At each section you would paint a big picture which we would do very quickly because it was hot there and you could paint it. You didn't have to worry about waiting for things to dry or anything like that.

A lot of these people had never seen cameras before and Polaroids were a great source of joy to them. We could take a little Polaroid camera and give them a print, and they would then seem to have some idea of what we were trying to do.

Int: *This is when you used the paintbrush technique?*

DC: That's right, yes. Right at the end where we got towards the River Niger there was a big lake called Lac Debo and there's a little Lac Debo as well, and in between there was a choke point. The people in Mali, all the fishermen used to come there at flood time and as the flood went down they've had their nets ready and they could fish 24 hours a day, and then spread out the catch on the banks to dry. But, of course, it not only attracted the fishermen but all the birds as well and I can remember night herons particularly. They would spread their wings out and we devised this way that we'd take a shot of a night heron squatting, making a shadow so that fish would come in. Then Bruce's hand would come in with a brush and you would see the completed little sketch of the night heron.

I can remember doing the CGI at the Moving Picture Company and the gasp of amazement when this actually worked for the first time, and this all came out of a cartoon I'd seen hundreds of years early by David Hand about Johnny Appleseed, where a paintbrush would come in and painted the apples onto the thing. I thought why can't we do this and it worked terribly well, and it's been taken up by a lot of people. Lots of people do it now.

Int: *Have we got to the peregrine yet because you made a very nice film for World About Us (26)?*

DC: I've done three films about peregrines. *The World About Us* was the first one (27) and I think it was the first time that peregrines had been filmed at a nest.

Int: *What sort of year would that have been?*

DC: That would have been in 1974/75. We spent ages looking for the right location, for the right place with a good nest site which we could film. Eventually we found one near Cannich near Inverness and Roy



Dennis was our driver, and he said this is the only place you're going to be able to do it. The BBC Art Department manufactured a very good camouflage spot on the outside of the hide, and that was lowered down very carefully alongside the nest with steel hawsers. This is after the eggs had hatched. They would be about 10 days old, something like that. The bird was only off the nest for about half an hour and then we had to get out of the way. The next day was absolutely critical. We were told that if the birds hadn't come back the whole thing had to be cut down.

Int: *Is this because they're so rare?*

DC: Yes. A pair of peregrines were actually laying there because this is a fairly new nest. If they were lost that was terrible.

Int: *Who's we by the way?*

DC: This is Maurice Tibbles who's a wildlife cameraman who was an amazing guy and I worked with him a great deal. He took the first watch of two hours and I can remember him coming down the hillside, his face long. He always looked rather like Eeyore anyhow and he said, no good, David, they haven't come back. Up you go, you go and do it for two hours and then if they've not come back that'll be it, we'll have to cut it down. So I went up and I lay there watching and watching and watching. An hour went by, an hour and 40 minutes, and then suddenly the peregrines appeared with a kill and took it to the plucking point and started ripping it apart, and vanished. Then about another five minutes later the falcon came in, grabbed the kill, went up to the nest site and the four young rushed forward, and I knew it was all right.

Int: *Again, that was an innovation, wasn't it, to get a complete natural history using wild birds?*

DC: Yes, it was really. The only tame birds we used in that, we did a little bit on falconry and Steven Frank did some flying for us at Dornoch with a trained bird.

Int: *Hawks have been quite important throughout your whole life.*

DC: Yes, absolutely, hawks are very, very important. They are at the top of the web of life and if they're okay then we should be okay. Everything depends on that web of life.

Int: *Where are we then in wildlife filmmaking then? Well, Woof! (28) of course took up a lot of your time, I know that's not really wildlife but an awful lot of people watched you.*

DC: Never work with children and animals. I remember being offered by Lewis Rudd who was Head of Children's at Carlton, or Central as it was then, saying, David, there's this new story based on a book. He had episode two in script form and he had episode four in script form, he didn't have episode one and three. He said, David, there are lots of people who'd like to do this, it's make your mind up time. If you want to do it, read the scripts and then we'll start as soon as the other two episodes are written.

Int: *He brought it to you, not the other way round?*



# WILDFILMHISTORY

100 YEARS OF WILDLIFE FILMMAKING

DC: He brought it to me, yes.

Int: *Did he know your work?*

DC: The writer's name was Allan Ahlberg, he wrote the book, and two wonderful guys, Richard Fegen and Andrew Norris wrote the scripts.

Int: *Actually you'd better just tell us the name of the book and the name of the writer and when this all was.*

DC: The book was called *Woof!* (29) written by Allen Ahlberg and Lewis Rudd commissioned scripts by Richard Fegen and Andrew Norris, and I was presented with episode two and episode four and asked to make up my mind whether I could do it or not. It was a comedy drama which I'd never done before but I could see it had terrific potential. It was about a boy who for no particular reason turned into a dog with very amusing consequences and vice versa, he would turn from a dog into a boy and, of course, he wouldn't have any clothes on then. It had terrific possibilities. We did a pilot and that was incredibly successful. It was taken up by Disney and won an Emmy and I think we did 90 episodes altogether.

Int: *You employed just about every actor in the UK.*

DC: That's right. I remember Lewis Rudd saying to me after we'd done the first series, there were all these middle aged actresses complaining they don't get any work, why don't you try Penny Keith and see if she'll do one? So Penny Keith came and did one. She enjoyed it and from then on we had no trouble getting anyone we wanted: Nigel Havers, Stephen Fry, anyone you care to mention really.

Int: *Liza Goddard.*

DC: Liza Goddard, yes.

Int: *Woof!, (28) with so many episodes that was presumably nine years.*

DC: Nine years, yes.

Int: *Not much wildlife though but lots of fun.*

DC: There were, yes, there were. There was one episode where a badger sett was being threatened by builders and we had a happy time filming badgers. A wonderful badger sett just outside Nottingham and a wonderful display.



## **9. Formulating Film ideas**

Int: *What did you do after Woof! (28)?*

DC: I did one other natural history programme which was *Birdscape (30)* for Channel 4 which was really six different locations and the birds, again with Bruce Pearson, and we used that same technique of a paintbrush coming in and ending up with the painting. I'm just trying to think what they were. We went to Welney, we went to Wales, we went to Cornwall, we went to the Flow Country. I can't remember where else we went.

Int: *Who was that for?*

DC: That was for Channel 4 and it was Bruce Pearson's favourite landscapes really. We went to Camborne Heath near Bournemouth.

Int: *Dartford Warbler country.*

DC: Yes, Dartford Warbler and fires and motorbikes and things like that, nightjars.

Int: *This is something you didn't make but I remember you wanted to make a really big documentary about hunting in the world, do you remember that?*

DC: That was what spawned the Japanese series. Yes, subsistence hunting.

Int: *This is 30 or more years ago when there was a lot more of it about and it should have been made and didn't.*

DC: That's, right, yes. That was put up to the BBC and they fastened on the Japanese bit because the Japanese, the Iki fishermen who are the people at Taijii, were subsistence fishing but, of course, they weren't, they were just killing dolphins and pilot whales really to pander to the Japanese love of something like whale meat. It was shipped straight up to Tokyo and found in the fish market there.

Int: *I remember you saying it should be made because really it's an anthropological series and it would all stop in due course and, of course, there was mounting pressure of things being seen killed by man and of course it would be almost impossible to make it now.*

DC: I don't think you could, no. I'm sure you couldn't, no.

Int: *Because the viewers wouldn't tolerate it?*



Int: *A sort of blood and guts, warts and all, hunting series is not really acceptable television today.*

DC: No, I don't think it is but on the other hand people seem to have a lust for seeing lions eating zebra or antelopes or tigers eating something else. It's a very strange thing altogether I think.

Int: *Your literally reasons for making programmes have been consistent throughout your life, haven't they? I mean there's Jack London and we picked on Williamson and so on. You've always been very keen on art, wildlife art, wildlife writing, nature writing, conservation writing so you're not just a movie maker.*

DC: No, I've always tried to find a theme, a good story within which one can weave a wildlife story. It's about humans and animals I think. It meshes together very well. Although it can be a pain working with children and animals it does work very well.

Int: *You said that when you first started out you found you were making films, as you said, for banks and so on about how to improve your farming. I mean have you always got in your mind a real long-term purpose in filmmaking, that it is to make amends for that or is it that you've got no strategy?*

DC: No. I did have that particular crusade having worked for the Midland Bank for a long time and seeing exactly what they did to farms: plough everything up, fill all the ponds, rip out all the hedgerows, sack most of the workers. So I felt that it had gone far enough and that there was a reason for making a film to show exactly what damage had been done, not only to the land but also to the wildlife, and that just happened once really.

Int: *So what stories haven't you made that you'd like to make?*

DC: Well, there are two stories I always wanted to make. There's one about the red-breasted goose which came to Norfolk which the BBC spent an extraordinary amount of money setting up and we were within, I think, a fortnight of starting filming in Norfolk, had all the cast. There was unfortunately a change of Head of Screen One and a new broom came in and it wasn't actually made. But we actually trained a whole lot of red breasted geese and Brent geese so that they'd fly in formation together. All the hard work really was done and all we had to do was to bring in the cast and do the filming scenes in Norfolk and in Norway which was doubling as Russia.

Int: *So quite a lot of money got spent on that?*

DC: Yes, I think it was something like £120,000 without anything really to show for it apart from some very well trained geese, some of which are still alive today and now and then appear at Pensthorpe (Norfolk Nature reserve) where they were reared because they've still got the rings on which we put on them.

Int: *How long ago was that?*

DC: That was 1995 I think.

Int: *I suppose fifteen's not that old for a goose, is it?*

DC: No, think of the swans coming back to Welney, they're 20/30 years old I think, aren't they, some of them.

Int: *Another book I know you're very keen on is *The Peregrine* by Baker (31).*

DC: Yes. I first heard about the peregrine book in 1993 I think it was. I took an option on it. Other people had tried to do it. Hugh Miles had tried to do it.

Int: *But you still might do it?*

DC: I still might do it. I've got a very good script. The BBC got terribly excited about it two years ago and again I spent a lot of money getting it organised.

Int: *Is it still relevant because when the book was written the peregrine was thought to become extinct virtually or was almost, and now it's become probably more numerous than ever in history?*

DC: I think it is relevant because it's about one man's obsession with a bird and trying to record what it was like during those particular dark days. It's a man and bird, it's a big landscape, tiny man and the bird up in the sky, and he identifies with one particular bird, and he tracks it and tracks it and it gets to know him. So he's able to get much closer to it and then he becomes ill and he almost can't keep in touch with it. In a shamanistic way he's found one of the bird's feathers and he uses to get in touch with the bird again, and he's able to shake off his illness and follow it again. After studying it for 6 years I think it was or 10 years he thinks he's found everything that he wants to know about this particular bird which has come back year after year after year. He takes out the feather and drops it and the bird which he's approached at dusk on a perch where it's roosting just disappears.

Int: *A metaphysical moment but that is a film that could still be made?*

DC: Yes, it could.

Int: *And should be made.*

DC: Yes, it should be and the book is being re-issued this year and his other book that he wrote, *The Hill of Summer*, and also the journals which I was given are being published as well by Collins (31).

Int: *What other stories or books do you feel that you ought to have or might make that should be made? Have you still got a burning title?*



DC: I don't think I have quite honestly, no.

Int: *Because you've done an awful lot.*

DC: Actually there is one other, *Adventure Lit Their Star* (33), Kenneth Allsop, about the little ringed plover appearing in England, that's a good story. It's perhaps not a very charismatic bird though. I mean the peregrine is a very charismatic bird whereas a little ringed plover, which really set the bird world alight when it arrived, doesn't stimulate the imagination so much as a peregrine.

### **10. Sculthorpe Moor Nature Reserve**

Int: *Today, of course, when you're not reading or writing scripts or whatever you are fairly busy with Sculthorpe because the hawks and the owls haven't gone away for you.*

DC: No, they haven't.

Int: *Just tell me briefly about that.*

DC: Sculthorpe Moor Nature Reserve came out of what used to be known as The Doctor's shoot. It's about 40 acres of what used to be impenetrable reed, bramble, silver birch, willow, absolute jungle. But Nigel Middleton, who's our warden, in 2000, I think it was, was watching two recently fledged harriers and thought this would be a wonderful place to have as a reserve. It just so happened that the doctors had become old and those 40 acres had become more and more impenetrable, and they decided to give up their shooting lease. So we managed to nip in there, get the lease, and Nigel had the imagination to see exactly how it could be turned into a reserve.

We got a small Lottery grant to open it up and put in the first boardwalk and a hide, and then we got a much bigger one later on to put in a much longer boardwalk, several hides and also an education centre. It's featured on *Springwatch* (34) and is really very well-known now.

Int: *There's a sort of inevitability about you having more or less your own nature reserve with owls and hawks on it.*

DC: Well, it's very good for marsh harriers. We have three pairs of marsh harriers. So one of the things we've done which is what *Springwatch* (34) latched onto, is we've put a miniature little camera which is about the size of a 20 bore cartridge on a pole surrounded by reed, camouflaged by reeds. I think we got what is an absolute classic, the first ever shots of a brood of marsh harriers being reared in the open.

Int: *Presumably you'll use the same site if you can for other innovations?*



DC: Yes, absolutely. We've got cameras in nest boxes for barn owls, tawny owls. There are otters on the reserve. We've built artificial holts for them. There are cameras there. There are about 10 cameras altogether that are monitoring kingfishers and otters.

Int: *Who needs a director?*

DC: Exactly.

### **11. Memorable collaborations**

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Int: *Where do you think wildlife photography or at least wildlife production is going to go because everything is available now and it wasn't available, 30, 40 years ago? We've seen most things.*

DC: The equipment is so sophisticated now that there's practically nothing that you can't do and I'm sure that there will be other series done but I think we're just about up to here with series at the moment. I would like to see some more impressionistic films made on wildlife, birds in the rain for example, I don't think anyone's ever done that. There's an awful emphasis on killing the whole time: lions killing antelopes which we were just talking about.

Int: *What about people and animals because many of your films have been about the relationship between individuals and birds and animals?*

DC: Yes, I suppose mine have been slightly **anthropomorphic** in that it's the bond between people and animals and perhaps that's too **anthropomorphic** really. But people who work with animals I think are fascinating like Gavin Maxwell and his otters.

One film that I'm ashamed of is the film that I was asked to make by the Natural History Unit which is called *Ring of Bright Water and Beyond* (35) which is about Maxwell about 10 years after he died. It was far too early to do a proper film on Maxwell. I remember getting a very bitter letter from Bill Travers who'd been in *Ring of Bright Water* (36). Maxwell would trade as a very squeaky clean person, he was not, he was not a very nice person at all. He was lovingly eccentric but he was a very bitter, difficult, quite unpleasant man and we tried to show the darker side of Maxwell in this film and I don't think anyone was quite ready for it. It's only now really that it should be done because Douglas Botting wrote a wonderful biography of him which showed the other side of Maxwell, which was done just 10 years after he died and was done far too soon.

Int: *There were other camera operators. We've talked about the anthropomorphism of films, the relationship between cameramen and you as a producer and director. You've mentioned Maurice Tibbles. I know that Maurice Tibbles was quite a characterful person. You mentioned Hugh Miles, John McCallum, Ron Eastman. You have worked with a very, very broad range of wildlife cameramen, haven't you?*

DC: I've been very lucky to work with all those cameramen because they are absolutely indispensable. You give them a few notes on what you want and they go off generally without food, work for incredible hours

under very difficult conditions. I remember we wanted a particular shot of a fish eagle catching fish when we were doing *Beyond Timbuktu (25)*, and Mike Potts sat in a hide for 10 hours in baking heat waiting for this fish eagle which would be calling up in the tree, waiting for it to come down and catch the fish in the river. Never actually got it but it's the absolute dedication that they show and a great deal of knowledge of wildlife to be able to get the shots which they do achieve. All of them are absolutely wonderful using all sorts of trickery now with these mini cameras and all sorts of things like that, remote cameras and what have you.

Int: *The cameraman always gets the glory if there is to be glory, as it were, behind the camera but producers and directors are equally important. I mean you would have been a cameraman or you started out making our own film, pressing the button but you didn't stick with that. You are a director more than a wildlife filmmaker.*

DC: Yes, I suppose I wanted to be in charge and although I did do a little bit of filming. I was sometimes asked to operate a third camera if there was a very tricky bit of animal behaviour to somehow get on film but very, very rare. No, I don't want to be a cameraman at all, directing is quite enough of that.

Int: *But you're always looking for the kind of things that should be made, aren't you? You're always talking about films that ought to be made or could be made or should be made.*

DC: Yes. I was just saying the thing that I don't think has been done is these little impressionistic essays. If you like, they used to have the potter's wheel as an interlude with no narration, just music and sound effects. Birds in the rain, birds going to sleep, birds just feeding, just preening, there's not enough of that kind of filming I think.

Int: *Are there any other guys you wanted to talk about because I know this series is very interested in the operators and so on? I mean Hugh Miles was one we talked about.*

DC: I don't think I mentioned Mike Potts, Mike Herd.

Int: *The other guy with Ron Eastman, his assistant on Tarka (15), what was his name?*

DC: Terry Channell.

Int: *He's still making films, isn't he?*

DC: I've no idea.

Int: *Steve Downer, he was the stills guy.*

DC: Steve Downer is still going, yes. He specialises in **macro** or **micro**, insects and things like that. Yes, he's still going.



Int: *But there are an awful lot of people that I know of just round here in Norfolk who are grateful to you for the leg up or the encouragement. I don't know whether that's always been a deliberate thing or you can get young chaps because they're very keen and energetic but there are a lot of people. I mean Alistair Fothergill is another one who I think you helped at a very early stage.*

DC: Well, I used to play cricket with Alistair's father, David, and I remember David ringing me up one day and saying why don't you come to lunch, Alistair's here and he's got a kestrel and he wants a bit of advice about how to fly it or something like that. I went along and met him, lovely boy, and then he wanted to get into the Natural History Unit. In those days there was a thing called the Mick Burke Award and he entered a film for that which he'd done in the Okavango I think. I did champion him a bit and Mick Rhodes was then Head of the Natural History Unit and I banged on about him and he did get taken on. So I did push him a bit and he is a wonderful guy I must say. I think he did do a spell as Head of the Natural History Unit but he I think, if you're talking about presenters, he would be the natural person to take over from David Attenborough.

Int: *Tell us again about why he should have been a presenter.*

DC: Yes, I think if there was ever an heir apparent to taking over from David Attenborough I think it was Alistair because I've seen him do it and he's a very safe pair of hands and he's not like David, he doesn't gesticulate with his hands all over the place. When you're working with David you really have to tell him to keep his hands there otherwise they're in front of his face and get in the way.

Int: *Has anybody ever managed to keep his hands down?*

DC: Well, I think I did because he fronted *Private Life of the Barn Owl (13)*. I remember there was one sequence we did with a gin trap and he was waving his hands about. Hugh Maynard was the cameraman and he very quietly said to me we have to do that again, David, because David's hands are all over the place and you have to ask him to keep his hands down.

Int: *But you've had quite a long relationship with him anyway.*

DC: Yes. The other very nice thing about David Attenborough – there are two nice things. When we started shooting the bits to camera which he did, we were sitting in my study and he was sitting at my desk and he had a tame barn owl on his hand. He looked up at me and he said, David, you should actually be sitting here really doing this because you know much more about barn owls than I do which I thought was a charming thing to say. He lived in our house for about a week while we were doing all these bits to camera and he was writing a book at the same time. We had a lovely lady who used to come in and clean called Gladys. He doesn't drive and I got a taxi to take him to the station, and he was just about to get into the taxi and he said I forgot to say goodbye to Gladys. He rushed back into the house to say goodbye to Gladys and I thought that just shows what a lovely man he is, what a gracious, kind person he is.

Int: *I think a lot of people have got much to thank him for.*

Int: *You don't really make scientific films. You haven't made science films. All your films have got a human warmth about them, whether there's somebody in the front with the bird or not, that's a common denominator. I know you said you called it **anthropomorphic**.*

DC: I'm very interested in wildlife art certainly I suppose because I used to try and paint myself. There are two little paintings by George (Lodge) just there but they all stem from what I think is the greatest artist portraying birds of prey, Joseph Wolf, who was an extraordinary man. He was born in Germany. He illustrated a great big textbook on falconry and somebody saw these beautiful life size portraits of falcons and brought him over to Regent's Park, to the zoo, and he became their official draughtsman for any new animal that was discovered. But at the same time he had a yen to be a real artist and so he produced some works for the Royal Academy and was hung, I think the first time that he pushed something forward. Quite interestingly the hanging committee turned the picture down which I think was of a woodcock but Landseer who was probably president then I think intervened and said this is a great painting and it must be hung.

That was his springboard really and everyone patronised him, and he had the entrée to all the big houses in Scotland. He could paint ptarmigan, golden eagles, and he always used to say that what he liked to try and portray was the difference, for example, between a snowy owl whose plumage was soft and absolute dedicated to silent flying and the golden eagle's pinions which would rattle like cardboard. If he could get that effect over he felt he was painting well.

Int: *Today wildlife artists are, I won't say ten a penny, but it's the one area of art that is flourishing even in recession, isn't it? Do you feel that a picture on a wall is as important as a natural history film?*

DC: I've got a great love of today's wildlife artists. I think there are some absolute brilliant ones: Robert Gilmore who lives at Cley-next-the-sea (, Norfolk), Bruce Pearson who I worked with. They all have different styles and they're breaking away from traditional, what I would call almost textbook illustrations and being much more impressionistic which is really what I was banging on about, filmmaking I think needs to be much more impressionistic now. Breaking up a bird, a barn owl in flight, into little blocks of light produces a wonderful effect and it's just something completely different. It can sometimes go a bit too far so you don't actually what bird they've been trying to portray.

Int: *Something similar's happening in writing too, the way people write about wildness and wilderness and man's relationship with it all. There seems to be a whole new area of perhaps once would have been called romantic but now seems to be a new way of looking at the world and Richard Mabey is (inaudible - background noise)*

DC: Yes, I mean Richard Mabey when he writes he writes with the soul of a poet. I mean he's a brilliant writer and I was very lucky to do a film with him, *The Unofficial Countryside* (37), about London's wildlife very early on. A very charismatic character, a wonderful choice of words to describe situations and wildlife.

Int: *He doesn't necessarily approve of modern styles of presenting wildlife on television now I think.*

DC: No, I don't think he does and that's a pity because I think the BBC have probably taken against him. He had a big career at one stage fronting natural history programmes for BBC Bristol and then suddenly I think because of his column, which he writes every month in the *BBC Wildlife magazine* (38), he's a bit too vociferous.

Int: *He says it's all too cosy.*

DC: Yes.

Int: *Maybe he's right and maybe then the potter's wheel style, the preening prayer is the way of rectifying that.*

DC: Yes, I think probably one of the things we do wrong in natural history filmmaking is to have too much voiceover. There's nothing like letting the image to tell the story. I think that was one of the good things we did in *Tarka the Otter* (15), that we pruned down Peter Ustinov's voiceover to an absolute minimum that was necessary to tell the story and let the wildlife and the landscape tell the story.

Int: *What are your final words?*

DC: I've been very lucky to have worked with such amazing people and on such amazing stories and perhaps in a small way helped people to see how wonderful the natural world is.

Int: *Do you have any Ustinov stories?*

DC: I didn't like Peter Ustinov.

Int: *Just tell us why you encountered him.*

DC: We needed a narrator for *Tarka the Otter* (15) and my particular choice was James Mason because I think he had a wonderful voice and I knew his agent quite well, Maggie Parker. We made overtures but other people thought that Peter Ustinov would be much better and also he would do it for £1,000 providing the money was given to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), I think it was because he was a UNICEF ambassador at the time. He came in to do the voiceover on a Sunday which was embarrassing because of double time and all that kind of stuff and it was during Wimbledon I remember. He was quite amusing while we were waiting for everything to be set up. He'd talked to Bjorn Borg and he was a very good imitator and he said Bjorn Borg just said 'I just want to be the best tennis player in the world'.

Anyhow we came to do the actual recording and he did the recording. I asked for a couple of retakes on a bit and the editor asked for a bit and he refused to do it. He said 'that's what you get, that's it and you have to take it and lump it, what I do first time is fine'. So I think he's a very amusing gentleman.

Int: *But you won't be working with him again.*

DC: That's right.

DC: I took an option on the peregrine in 1993 because Hugh Miles had had the option before that and started looking round for someone to work with, a cameraman in particular. John King who I'd known down at Bristol, his son Simon was starting to be very well-known and was employed almost full-time by the BBC doing stuff in Africa or whatever but also doing bits and pieces of wildlife in England. I went to see John and

Simon in Birmingham at Pebble Mill, and John was saying, well, I think Simon's got a couple of months free in January, we could do it then. I got very excited about it, the scripts had been written and all that kind of stuff, and then there was pressure on Simon to do more stuff in Africa which is really where his heart is or at one time his heart was. It just made the whole thing evaporate but he's certainly a very, very nice guy and I did keep in touch with him from time to time but I haven't talked to him for years now.

But one other very interesting, very good cameraman came out of the peregrine, that was Ian McCarthy who I worked with on another story about peregrines with Dick Treleaven down in Cornwall. He's absolutely ace at following peregrines and got some very good kills. I remember being with Dick Treleaven on the day when Dick saw his hundredth and first kills of peregrines and pigeons on the Cornish coast.

Int: *Chris Packham; I was just thinking of people you've given a helping hand to.*

DC: Yes. I think Chris is a breath of fresh air in *Springwatch* (34), I must say. He and Kate Humble together are a wonderful combination. Of course, after the barn owl film I made with Hugh we had some surplus barn owls and I remember getting a message from Chris Packham, who must have only been 13 or 14 at the time, saying did I have a pair of barn owls he could have. I sent them down to him and I don't know what he did with them. He presumably bred with them or whatever, released them. He now, of course, is the bigwig in *Springwatch* (34) and he's going to be our new president of the Hawk and Owl Trust. He's a real breath of fresh air because he's a scientist and the combination with him and Kate Humble I think is a very good one.

Int: *She had four sets of lambs last night, live on telly. Well, thanks, David.*

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## Glossary

**Anthropomorphic:** To attribute human form or feelings to a non-human species or object.

**Recce:** an assessment of an intended filming location to ascertain it's suitability and any potential logistical problems

**Chechaquao:** A Mexican song in Spanish

**Eyemo:** 35mm motion-picture film camera manufactured by Bell & Howell Co., Chicago

**35mm:** 35mm wide film gauge widely used in the film industry





**Macro photography:** A dedicated lens system designed to magnify a subject by a minimum 1:1 object to image ratio

**Micro photography:** The photography of microscopic objects

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