



14 MINUTE READ

Minsmere and Me: John Grant



from Suffolk Birds 2020

by Suffolk Naturalists' Society

John Grant

it was love at first sight. A sparkling Sunday morning in early May 1975, would change my life forever. As the mini-bus crested the rise of the little red-brick bridge that gave the idyllic hamlet of eastbridge its name, i looked to the east and saw the silhouette of my first-ever Marsh Harrier roller-coastering high in the wide blue sky, above a rippling sea of golden reeds. i was transfixed. i

was elated. i was falling under a spell. Seconds before, we had passed through what seemed to me an enchanted settlement that was – at least to this raw and far-from-worldly-wise 21-yearold who was more used to the functional, stark and urban skyline of my native Portsmouth – like something out of the pages of a fairy-tale. eastbridge. Homely, welcoming, tolkien-esque eastbridge. i half expected a Hobbit to wave cheerily to us from one of the flower-filled gardens. i instantly experienced a strange premonition that this was somewhere that would become central to my life.

Passing by the wonderfully-named and highly-enticing eel's foot inn – a hostelry that would come to mean so much to me – the suspicion took firmer hold. By the time the mini-bus carrying our St osyth Birdwatching and Preservation Society contingent from the clacton area of essex had snaked through gloriously-sunlit and bird-filled woodland to arrive at the rSPB Minsmere car park, i just knew. Pompey, the city of my birth and where my family had lived, loved and worked for centuries, would always be so, so special. But this extraordinary place – magnetic, magical, Minsmere – was calling me to it, irresistibly, and i was only too thrilled to surrender. i fell into its arms, immersed myself in its myriad charms, and the love affair began. throughout that first visit i felt as if all my lucky stars had aligned to produce a magnificent starburst of excitement. that tingling thrill has been repeated on every subsequent visit. Minsmere is at the very epicentre of my universe. it is the Pole Star around which so much of my life revolves. it is a 'local patch' like no other. yes, it

was love at first sight, but, in truth, i had flirted with Minsmere for years before i set foot in it. its reputation went before it. As a shy, introverted, schoolboy growing up in city backstreets but already beguiled by birds, i escaped at every opportunity to the nearby wild havens of Langstone Harbour, farlington Marshes, Hayling island and, when my horizons widened a little, Pagham Harbour and the New forest. By some sort of strange osmosis, the name Minsmere seeped into my consciousness. At first far out on the fringes of my burgeoning birding radar, it gradually filled me with inquisitive interest. What was this paradise far away to the east? could it really be as wonder-filled as reports suggested? i was soon to find out.

When it came to applying for employment during a year at college studying journalism, i chose Suffolk as my preferred option and the East Anglian Daily Times took me on – but i had to wait a while before i could live and work in the county that had struck my imagination so vividly. i was sent to clacton and could only enjoy tantalisingly-infrequent Minsmere forays. A switch to the newspaper's Sudbury office at last gave me Suffolk residence, but it was too far inland for a Pompey lad. it did, however, lead me to meet old-school ornithologist Major William 'Bill' Payn, of Hartest. countless birding trips with Bill – to north Norfolk, the Brecks and the then top-secret Golden oriole wood at Lakenheath – were topped by several trips to Minsmere to see his old friend Bert Axell.

Bert Axell. the mastermind of Minsmere. A towering man and a colossus of conservation. And here was this raw trainee reporter

often sitting in his living room sipping his tea and nibbling nervously at cakes made by Joan, his wife for 63 years until they both died, within about a month of each other, in 2001. Awestruck and tongue-tied do not come close. But i needn't have worried. Bert had a reputation for being belligerent, bellowing, bombastic. in reality, i found him to be precisely the opposite. kind, wise, polite (usually!) and unfailingly helpful. i count myself

fortunate in so many ways in relation to Minsmere, but perhaps most of all because i could count Bert as a friend.

When the chance came in 1977 to take charge of the East Anglian Daily Times' Leiston office i had to give it serious thought. i accepted within two seconds! to have Minsmere as part of my professional reporting 'patch' – and to be able to live within five kilometres of it – was the stuff of this now fully-qualified journalist's dreams.

By then, Bert had moved on from managing Minsmere to become the rSPB's roving land use adviser and Jeremy Sorensen was now the reserve's senior manager. Jeremy and Bert. chalk and cheese, save for an unswerving devotion to Minsmere. in his time at Minsmere, Jeremy always exuded an air of charming eccentricity.

Minsmere Memories – October 1st 1979.

News didn't travel as fast then as it does now. No WhatsApp groups, not even any mobile phones. for example, i learnt of Britain's first Greater Sand Plover, at Pagham Harbour, while i was spending christmas 1978 at home in Portsmouth. After a few days

down there, my mum remembered she'd been keeping a newspaper cutting for me – it was the story of the sand plover just a few miles along the coast! i was there later that same day! And i frequently recall a Suffolk example of news travelling more slowly in the 'good old days'. in the following year, 1979, i'd been in Portsmouth for my sister's weekend birthday celebrations. returning to Suffolk on the Monday i went straight to Minsmere (of course) and 'found' a Long-billed Dowitcher on the Scrape. i raced back to triumphantly announce my great 'discovery' – only to be deflated when Jeremy Sorensen casually told me it had been there all weekend – and i had been down in Pompey, blissfully unaware of the big news!

My abiding memory of Jeremy is from the early 1980s when bird-races - manic, 24-hour challenges chalking up as many species as teams possible in order to raise money for conservation causes – were annual events. Jeremy was invariably the star of debonair David tomlinson's Country Life team that took on Bill oddie's somewhat less organised crew which always included Walberswick National Nature reserve supremo cliff Waller. i can see Jeremy now in my mind's eye – in a flashy, open-top sports car wangled for the day by David, wearing a bizarre Biggles-type leather flying helmet. Jeremy is one of two birders i have met over the years that had faculties approaching the supernatural. As well as being a thoroughly wonderful human being, the incomparable richard richardson had the sharpest eyesight i have ever witnessed. His astonishing observational skills were simply uncanny. And Jeremy had ears like Jodrell Bank – so to avoid any

muffling of sounds and to maximise his 'radar' on bird races he folded the ear flaps of that flying helmet out at 90 degrees to his head. Hilarious as it made his appearance, it worked. I well recall being in his backup team one year and finding a singing Wood Warbler at Sutton Heath. David's sports car roared into the car park and, even before the engine was switched off, Jeremy exclaimed 'Wood Warbler singing away to our left!' of course, he was right.

Minsmere Memories – July 5th 1985.

Lured to West Hide on a misty dawn by a phone call the previous evening from assistant warden Trevor Charlton, David Bakewell and I peered across the Scrape to see the ghostly shape of a Greater yellowlegs materialising in the mare's tail. David confidently announced that if there was such a rarity here there must be 'something else' up the coast. After a fruitless search at Benacre Broad we returned to Minsmere and joined a queue of birders outside North Hide. We assumed that they were waiting for the 'Legs' and said nothing. Eventually inside the hide, I was sitting next to Derek Moore when he exclaimed 'there it is!' I scanned the Scrape and couldn't see anything of note – only to be told that it was hawking insects high up. Strange, I thought. Until I realised that the rest of the birders were watching a Black-winged Pratincole! What a double!

I feel privileged to have such memories, and they've been added to greatly in more recent years. I have always maintained that birding is about far, far more than simply the birds, as endlessly

fascinating as they are. for me, it's also about the landscapes to which we birders are drawn, the fun we have and the friendships we form. over six decades now, Minsmere has provided riches beyond my wildest dreams in all three of those categories. there can't be many more gently beautiful, more intoxicatingly-alluring nature reserves than Minsmere can there (neighbouring Sizewell A, B and, perish the thought, c, aside)? it's something that's often overlooked by more blinkered birders, but such landscape beauty adds immensely to the pleasure of watching birds, common or rare. At least, it does for me. this beauty, and the fun and the friendships, lures me back to Minsmere time and time again. the place even made working a pleasure for me! i spent the last few years of my journalistic career working as the East Anglian Daily Times' environment correspondent and i really did have to go to Minsmere when stories broke, honest guv! the Springwatch years (and the fun-filled after-show gatherings at the eel's foot), the endless habitat management, and, yes, the twitches – they all had to be covered! i moved back to live in Leiston about 20 years ago – even the 25 miles or so from ipswich to Minsmere had proved too far for me. i was inexorably drawn back, the pull irresistible. Now, from my converted loft-cum-bird-observatory at my home on the northernmost edge of town, i can scan the airspace above the reserve, beyond a wide horizon of kenton Hills and Sizewell Beach. Poking up from my skyline there's my 'sticky-uppy tree', a giant Wellingtonia, and a tall, skeletal communications mast. Both are visible from many parts of the reserve and i use them in some sort of trigonometry of the mind to fix points at Minsmere when i stare out from home, and vice

versa when i'm on the hallowed ground.

Minsmere Memories – May 9th 2011 and July 8th 2020.

i've been lucky enough to experience that electrifying pulse of excitement on finding a rarity several times – but these two occasions in particular had me properly panic-stricken and frenetically frazzled! on May 9th 2011, i scanned the gulls on the Scrape's 'Wiggly Bund' for the umpteenth time that morning and nearly exploded. A superb adult Audouin's Gull – Suffolk's first individual of the species (and only the sixth for Britain) – was staring back at me. A plea to a rather bemused visitor who had a camera and a breathless radio call to the Visitor centre (i was a volunteer guide back then) ensued when i had almost regained my composure and the rest is ornithological history, as they say. talking to some charming visitors on the public viewing platform on July 8th 2020, they must have thought i'd lost my senses when i shouted 'get onto this tern!' A skua-like shape over the distant ruined chapel had caught my eye and when the penny dropped that it was a tern, at that distance either Bridled or Sooty, i became a gibbering wreck. frustration over, its departure to the south thankfully ended when it lingered at Sizewell.

it's an obsession. Minsmere – its varied habitats, its breath-taking biodiversity, its landscape beauty, its visitors, its staff – has become the dominant force in my birding life. My family often joke that it's the dominant force in my life, full stop.

Such is the bond i feel with the place, i rarely go birding

anywhere else. it's a local patch par excellence – is there a better one anywhere in the uk? i am forever grateful that fate, with a little determination on my own part, has conspired to offer it to me as 'my' local patch. i walk its trails virtually daily, often casting my mind back to characters sadly no longer with us. i see Bert striding confidently ahead, or sit with my much-missed eastbridge friend kerry cobb on what he called the 'grandstand' in the dunes and i can hear his dry wit once more. or i stroll with Derek Moore, lapping up his improbable, obviously embellished but highly entertaining tales and feel his arm around my shoulder once again. these and so many others i miss dearly. But the birds, always, always, snap me out of any maudlin mood.

Starlings at Minsmere on November 5th Jeff Higgott

i spend so much time on the 'patch' that the law of averages has kicked in and i've had the good fortune to stumble across a few exciting rarities and reserve 'firsts'. i generally dislike listing, but i have to admit i'm somewhat proud to have seen, at the time of writing in January, 2021, a total of 311 species on the reserve – perhaps more than anyone else in history! But i've experienced some painful misses too of course! Some highs and lows are recalled in the panels that accompany this text but words cannot convey the true depth of emotion such incidents create when they unfold on a site you love as much as i love Minsmere. if you thoroughly, and intimately, immerse yourself in a local patch, the birds – indeed all of its biodiversity – take on so much more meaning and are endowed with an extra layer of resonance and wonder.

Many of us old-timer birders feel this way – i know that our editor Nick Mason feels exactly the same way about his beloved heaths of Hollesley for example – and perhaps with global travel adding to the unfolding climate crisis there's all the more reason to adopt local patches more fervently in future.

Minsmere Memories – July 12th 2015, May 31st 2019 and September 28th 2020.

With the highs come the lows. these three dates are etched on my heart. i know i'm not alone in experiencing a few personal disasters in life – family losses, relationship breakdowns, work crises. each one horrific, as they would be to anyone. But, in birding terms at least, these three take some beating. When Adam rowlands, Minsmere's senior manager at the time, phones me at home and asks if i'm sitting down, i know what to expect. A rarity at Minsmere. But i categorically do not expect to be told there's a Black-browed Albatross sitting on the pool behind South Hide! As Adam is giving the gory details he breaks off. it's flying, he says. Seems to be heading south over the dunes. Within minutes i'm at Sizewell, gazing despairingly out to sea. one of the biggest dips of all time. fast forward to September 28th 2020. An albatross dip that's even worse! Scouring the Sluice Bushes, news comes through of a (the same?) Black-browed Albatross heading south, first off Lowestoft and then, tantalisingly, off Southwold. Scan from the dunes. Nothing. then the crushing news. it's been

seen to the south, off Sizewell and thorpiness. We needed height

to see the distant passing giant. We were too low – and i was low for days, if not weeks, afterwards. it was the bunting blues that kicked in on May 31st 2019. i'd walked the dunes twice that morning. Nothing. News of a possible ortolan seeped out while i was at home having lunch. Hints later that it may have been a crettschmar's. race back out to the dunes. Nothing. And that night excruciating photos of the bird emerged – it was indeed a crettschmar's and it had been present while i searched just a few metres too far to the north. Low points in my enduring love affair with Minsmere do not come much lower than that.

i shall tread the trails of Minsmere for as long as i am physically able to do so, although there is currently a sense of impending doom, an ominous dark cloud, hanging over this most treasured of places. if the powers that be had any real respect for our environment, the catastrophic impact that Sizewell c would have on Minsmere would instantly make such a prospect unimaginable. i, and many thousands of others, live in hope that Minsmere does not have to suffer such a fundamentally-damaging blow and that sanity will prevail.

As i travel the winding woodland road to Minsmere, i am always tingling with anticipation, just as i was in that mini-bus from clacton all those years ago. And, without wishing to sound too pretentious, i'll let you into what has been a long-held secret of mine – i sometimes tweak in my mind my favourite sentence in all of english literature. it's from JA Baker's incomparable masterpiece *The Peregrine* and he's referring to spending a winter following and studying the species in the bleak marshlands

of north-east Essex. In this stunning sentence, he writes of the 'winter land' but it's a paraphrase that haunts me as I approach Minsmere. I say to myself: 'My pagan head shall sink into Minsmere's land, and there be purified'.



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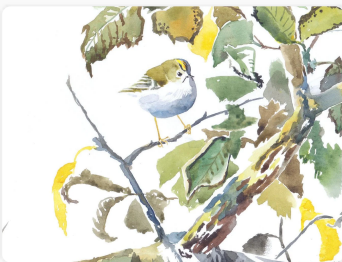
Index of species

7min pages 228-232



A Guide to recording Birds in Suffolk

12min pages 219-223



List of contributors

4min pages 216-217



introduction

5min pages 62-63



Appendices

7min pages 212-215



Steppe Grey Shrike at Benacre: Andrew Moon

17min pages 55-61



Greater Yellowlegs at Dunwich: Adam Rowlands

6min pages 52-54



Rustic Bunting in Lowestoft: Rob Holmes

5min pages 50-51



Booted Warbler at Sizewell: Dave Fairhurst (and Adam Rowlands)

8min pages 47-49

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