

Obituaries

DEREK ALMEY RATCLIFFE (1929–2005)

Derek Ratcliffe was one of the outstanding naturalists of the past 50 years. Not only was he a superb field worker, but he was also an eloquent and persuasive writer, a formidable debater, an encouraging boss and very much a human being. His overall contribution to ecology and conservation cannot be overlooked or disregarded.

Derek came, as he would say, from humble beginnings. Although he was born in London, his family soon moved north towards Carlisle and that is the place he considered his first real home. He soon began to explore the Lakeland hills and having covered most of this area, turned his attention to the Scottish Highlands and then the Welsh mountains. Like many other naturalists, he was encouraged and enthused by a local teacher and members of the local natural history society, but his own determination and energy was apparent in his teens, when he often used to cycle and walk miles through Dumfries and Galloway. There he discovered the wild areas where animals and plants existed in abundance and he could learn about their behaviour and requirements.

He went to Sheffield University initially to study zoology, but changed to botany after being inspired by Roy Clapham. His PhD at Bangor was on the mountain vegetation of Snowdonia.

Derek then did his stint of National Service in the Army, where he met John Mitchell and they used to accompany each other on field excursions. Derek's detailed notebooks started from an early age and he encouraged John to write down his observations which led to many papers and a *New Naturalist*.

Then in 1956 Derek obtained a job with the Nature Conservancy based in Edinburgh. His remit was to survey the vegetation of the Scottish Highlands. Whilst this might have intimidated many people, it was just the sort of opportunity Derek relished. As many present day ecologists know, there are not many parts of the British Isles that he did not visit to search out new sites for plants and animals, photograph and record in detail, providing an excellent basis for future observations and monitoring.



Derek Ratcliffe recording Military Orchids in Suffolk in 1984.

During his Scottish explorations his co-worker was Donald McVean and together they wrote the *Plant Communities of the Scottish Highlands* in 1962. But his observations were not restricted to plants and he had already begun his study of the peregrine falcon and ravens.

Derek relocated to the new station at Monks Wood near Huntingdon to lead the first national survey of peregrines in Britain and Ireland. It was there that I first met him when he fleetingly appeared between field trips and I often wondered where this very knowledgeable man was about to explore on his next expedition into the British countryside. All was revealed with the publication in 1977 of the *Nature Conservation Review*, which is still one of the most authoritative sources of the most important sites for conservation. New concepts of naturalness, diversity and fragility were included which described the cornerstones of site selection and rationale. In producing the SSSI Guidelines we debated the importance of mosaic sites where areas did not fit neatly into

habitat categories, but were of undoubted interest. We finally concluded that the sum of the individual elements on these sites added up to a greater value than those sites which had just one main habitat.

Derek became deputy director (science) of the Nature Conservancy from 1970–73 and then the chief scientist of the Nature Conservancy Council until his retirement in 1989. One of his special contributions was in defence of the Flow Country – the large unspoilt tract of peatland in Caithness and Sutherland. These areas became prime targets for investment and tax evasion for pop stars and others. It was also viewed initially as a sensible use of a wilderness area. Derek mobilised his team to collect the scientific evidence and masterminded the production of the report. But more importantly, he clinically presented the eventually undisputed evidence that led to the cessation of conifer planting on these fragile areas.

Just after this, the NCC was split up into the different country agencies and The Joint Nature Conservation Committee, a fact that the then chairman of the NCC, Sir William Wilkinson, sought to hide from him, as he knew that he would feel it a divisive step in conservation terms.

In 'retirement' Derek continued to write landmark books, many in the *New Naturalist* series, *The Peregrine*, *The Raven* and *The Lake District*. He spent many of the summer months touring Norway and Sweden, with Jeanette, his wife, closely observing and enjoying the wildlife, resulting in his latest book on Lapland.

Derek left us suddenly, when about to set off on another summer's tour of Scandinavia, but he leaves us with so much to remember him by. The many readable, informative, erudite volumes, which eloquently describe his enthusiasm for the natural world and explain its continuing value to us today, are just part of his legacy. Although he was perceived by many as a quiet, droll man, to those who were fortunate enough to have time to know him and especially to be with him in the field, he was a total inspiration, an amusing companion, with a depth of knowledge that one felt privileged to share. He has succoured a new generation of ecologists and conservationists who continue to uphold the principles which he held so dear. There is no doubt that future generations will have the opportunity to discover one of Britain's best natural treasures – Derek Ratcliffe.

LYNNE FARRELL

RICHARD CHARLES PALMER

1935–2005

Richard Palmer was born on 21 June 1935 and died at a nursing home in Dorchester, Dorset on 29 March 2005. He became a scholar at Eton College before coming to read Classics at University College, Oxford in 1953 and obtained a first in Mods in 1955 and a second in Greats in 1957.

Richard worked on Oxford dictionaries for 42 years and colleagues respected him as a quiet, conscientious old-style lexicographer with a sense of humour. He worked on the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* until editorial work ended in 1981; he then contributed to the *Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary*, from 1984 to the shorter *Oxford English Dictionary*, and finally to the revision of the *Full Oxford English Dictionary*, retiring in 2000. The OED had benefited greatly from his botanical knowledge, which found expression in many definitions in this area.

With his severe stammer, which he had difficulty in overcoming, Richard was a shy and private person. This did not stop him from

being a churchgoer and sidesman, being good company with close friends and children, and being generous to the less well-to-do.

Nor did it prevent some brilliant achievements as a botanist. Here he was meticulous, painstaking and thoroughly sound: I came to accept for the *Flora of Oxfordshire* a record tentatively identified by him more readily than firm claims from almost anybody else. His careful observation elucidated some difficult plants such as pondweeds, sedges and hybrid foxtails and docks and, through his grasp of the literature, many unusual aliens. He found Britain's first *Elodea nuttallii* (Nuttall's Waterweed) and refound *Equisetum sylvaticum* (Wood Horsetail), seen by Baxter in 1825–1826 but deemed extinct by Druce. Good as his own judgement was, he referred an unbelievable number of his difficult finds to the acknowledged experts.

His many records came to me ordered alphabetically or by date or tetrad; this was true for his own findings and for the abstracts he

made from the Botanical Exchange Club reports which helped to fill a serious gap in the history of Oxfordshire botany. He recorded in 180 tetrads in the county, an amazing achievement when he relied on public transport to reach almost all of them. He loved natural and above all wetland habitats; I remember on a joint excursion, after we had identified several rewarding aliens and plants of man-made habitats, his obvious pleasure on moving on to a marshy stream.

Perhaps his finest achievement relates to Shetland. During a visit to Scalloway in 1955 he met Walter Scott and they soon conceived the idea of a joint Shetland flora. It was preceded by a check list, a stream of records in *Proc. BSBI* and *Watsonia*, and a contribution to *New Naturalist* 64. They brought different skills to the Flora, Richard his sharp taxonomic skill, evident especially with sedges, grasses, dandelions and eyebrights, his extensive study of herbaria and libraries, and exhaustive study of the originals of references. Walter contributed more practical aspects including producing the MS and typescript, and enlisting a sympathetic local publisher.

In 1987 after 29 years' gestation "*The flowering plants and ferns of the Shetland Islands*" was timely in view of growing threats from the oil industry and farming, and because as it said "nature conservation has got off to a bad start". It documented 827 species including every thing from natives to critical species (13 endemic *Hieracium* (hawkweeds)) to casuals and garden plants. But it is far, far more than a

catalogue; it is a great book to browse. Among the more discursive accounts are variation in *Juncus bulbosus* (Bulbous Rush), a very full key to *Galeopsis tetrahit* and *G. bifida* (the hemp-nettles), the colour patterns of four *Mimulus* (monkeyflowers) and the decline of rowan and oysterplant due to sheep grazing. *Cerastium nigrescens* ssp. *nigrescens* (Shetland mouse-ear) gets three pages. The book was a great success, fully sold out, with second-hand copies now at a premium.

To the Fielding-Druce herbarium in Oxford (OXF) he left a legacy and over 1100 excellent UK specimens, mostly from Oxfordshire but also from Shetland, Cornwall, Sussex and elsewhere. His annotations, in a graceful, highly legible hand, always cited the date, nearby landmarks and tetrad but not the now-fashionable 6-figure grid references, and he never took to computers. There were 50 sheets were of dandelions with the colours of leaves, stems, and styles carefully noted. About 290 foreign plants included 140 from the Balearics and 91 from Turkey. A by-product of his knowledge of Latin was his help to many Oxford post-graduate students in writing Latin descriptions of new taxa. From 1988 onwards, over 1600 Shetland specimens, nearly all gathered by the two authors, were presented to the South London Botanical Institute. The Institute wrote: "their value lies not only in the care with which the specimens have been identified and mounted, but in the detailed notes on the habitats and ecology"

JOHN KILLICK