

Obituaries

Bert Axell (1915-2001)

Known to most of his friends as Bert, he was also Herbert to many, and H. E. Axell on more formal occasions. However you knew him, he was famous in birding circles for half a century, and something of a legend in his own lifetime. When he died, in November 2001, an era seemed to have come to an end.

Bert Axell left many friends to mourn his passing, and there are lots of us around who learned much from him and were influenced by his thinking. It was not all sweetness and light, though. Big, forceful, and fiercely independent, he could sometimes be opinionated and awkward, and, sadly, it has to be said that not all of his professional colleagues were endeared to him. The problem was, however, as often as not of their making as much as his, and perhaps not enough consideration and understanding were always given to his determined and single-minded approach to his job – which, for a significant part of his life, really boiled down to making the RSPB's reserve at Minsmere, in Suffolk, the best bird reserve on earth. He probably succeeded.

He will always be associated with Minsmere, but his involvement in birds dates back way beyond his time there. He grew up as an enthusiastic young birdwatcher on the coastal borders of Sussex and Kent. Dungeness was part of his youthful patch, and it was at Dungeness that his life as a professional ornithologist and conservationist took off. That was in 1952, after a career in the Post Office interrupted by war service and terminated through ill health. At the Society's invitation, he became warden of the RSPB reserve, and more or less simultaneously also became warden of the fledgling Dungeness Bird Observatory.

Bert moved to Minsmere in 1959, and it was there that his resourcefulness, ingenuity and imagination as a reserve warden

came to full fruition. Perhaps his most obvious memorial is The Scrape (which should be spelt with initial capitals, since it is, in a sense, the 'type specimen'), but it should be borne in mind, too, that the pioneering use of Minsmere as a reserve capable of handling hundreds of visitors (and showing them birds at close quarters) was just as much a product of the Axell philosophy. His early efforts had earned him an RSPB medal, and his work at Minsmere was rewarded in 1965 when he was honoured with an MBE. It also won him a Churchill Fellowship, which he used to good effect when he left Minsmere in 1975 to travel overseas, advising other reserve-managers on 'scrapes' and many other things. He became a land-use adviser for the RSPB, finally retiring from the Society in 1980. Even in retirement he kept very busy, globetrotting with his wife Joan, meeting people, watching and talking birds and advising on their conservation.

He led an enviably full and fulfilling life, and to appreciate it (and him) properly you have to read his excellent autobiography *Of Birds and Men* (The Book Guild Ltd, 1992). His *Minsmere: Portrait of a Bird Reserve* (Hutchinson, 1977) is an important record of an historic chapter in the saga of nature-reserve management. Of his assorted contributions to the more purely ornithological literature, his paper *Eruptions of Bearded Tits during 1959-65* (*Brit. Birds* 59: 513-543) stands as the most important.

Bert was one of the best fieldmen I ever went out with. By today's lights, he was probably an old-fashioned birdwatcher, the product of another age; but there was something awesome about the huge breadth of his knowledge and experience. He would hold his own, easily, in any company. Above all, Bert Axell was a great pioneer in a pioneering age, and he left an indelible mark on the ornithological world.

Mike Everett

J. M. B. King (1924-2002)

J. M. B. (Mike) King was one of the first ringers to use mistnets when they arrived in Britain during the 1950s. This was just one small hint of his pioneering attitude to his ringing activities. In the mid 1960s, he responded to a request for a ringer to visit the North Ronaldsay lighthouse-keeper, Ken Walker, who wanted somebody to train him to catch and ring birds there. Mike's visits to this Orkney outpost became annual, and he was largely responsible for putting 'North Ron' on the migration-studies map, subsequently helping with the setting-up of the Bird Observatory. He then became involved in assisting, along with several friends, in the ringing of migrants on Lundy, in the Bristol Channel, making regular visits to the island from the late 1970s to the 1990s. During this period he joined the Chew Valley Ringing Station, became its chairman, and spent much time there once he had retired.

Mike was about to embark on a trip to Australia in 1994 when an opportunity suddenly arose to visit The Gambia, to set up and organise a ringing project there. The air tickets were swapped, and he was off on the first of many visits to catch Palearctic migrants on their wintering grounds. Many other ringers joined him on subsequent expeditions. He was still actively involved in this project up to his death, in January 2002.

Despite special efforts by the BTO to fast-track a paper, written jointly with John Hutchinson, on 'Site fidelity and recurrence of some migrant bird species in The Gambia' (*Ring. & Migr.* 20: 292-302), it appeared just a few days after his death.

Mike King was a tower of strength and enthusiasm among ringers, and he will be greatly missed. He is survived by a daughter, Carla, and son, Tony.

Robin Prytherch