

Obituary

Bernard King (1907-1987)

Bernard King was an exceptional birdwatcher. Unbounding enthusiasm, great kindness to others and an intense desire to commit his observations to paper were the hallmarks of this amateur ornithologist. Many young birdwatchers, some of whom have gone on to put their interest to professional advantage, had him to thank for settling them in an engrossing hobby.

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91. Bernard King (1907-1987), Cornwall, June 1977 (*K. E. L. Simmons*)

Bernard was born on 9th August 1907, in Bristol, of Cornish parents, and those two areas were eventually to dominate his life and his birdwatching. He attended Bristol Grammar School and Kent College, Canterbury, before taking an Honours Diploma in ceramics at Stoke-on-Trent. He took up birdwatching late by today's standards, in 1937, when in his thirtieth year. By the time war came, he was totally absorbed by the new hobby, and he continued to make observations during this difficult period, when conditions permitted. Indeed, his first contribution to *British Birds* was during the war, and the idea was suggested by H. F. Witherby when Bernard (kitted out in his Army private's uniform) called on him at his house. Bernard was always keen to acknowledge Harry Witherby's help with this note ('Unusual migrants in Surrey', *Brit. Birds* 36: 76) and many subsequent ones. Another early mentor of Bernard's was Humphrey Tetley of the Bristol City Museum.

All activity was interrupted, however, by active service overseas, first in Africa attached to the Royal West Africa Frontier Force and then in Norway with the army of liberation. Reunited once more with his wife, Marjorie, and their young daughter, Elizabeth, after the war, he settled back into their bungalow, 'Mayfield', in Saltford, near Bath (soon to be the 'hub' of much ornithological activity), where he joined the staff of the Ministry of Defence (Naval)—'the Admiralty'—as a civilian, in 1945.

He quickly established himself as one of the most active birdwatchers in the 'Bristol district' (he liked to define the area around Bristol in this way) and in Cornwall, where he spent his annual leave in late summer or autumn every year from then until his retirement in 1971, when he moved down to Newlyn.

Excursions in winter included The New Grounds in Gloucestershire, where goose-watching then was not as easy, but possibly much more exciting than now. Bernard took a keen interest in the developments there as Peter Scott established The Wildfowl Trust. The 'wilderness' may have been encroached upon, but Bernard could see the benefits. He became an honorary warden and was a judge at the annual Christmas/New Year competition for school teams. He would put any amount of effort into helping youngsters with their birdwatching. He organised a group of them in Saltford, and the keener members joined him on some of his other activities, especially duck counts. These he organised in Somerset for 23 years, from 1947 until 1971; it is as a duck-counter that many people remember Bernard. When Chew Valley Lake was flooded in 1952, he counted almost the very first birds to arrive, and during the following two years he held the only birdwatching permit, much to the chagrin of other local birdwatchers. He counted Chew in both summer and winter and walked the 19-km circuit regularly in all weathers. He also organised the BTO's Heronry Census in Somerset for 15 years (1953-68) and was a prominent member of the Bristol Naturalists' Society, being one of its Vice-Presidents as well as serving on several of its Committees and, not least, taking an active interest in the junior section of the Society. He also regularly attended two groups of informal gatherings, the 'Redstarts' in Bath and the 'Waxwings' in Bristol, during which birdwatching activities were discussed amongst friends.

What Bernard enjoyed most of all, though, was being out in the field, watching birds. Keen to see a rare bird, yes (he and David Hunt added Northern Parula *Parula americana* to the British and Irish List: *Brit. Birds* 63: 149-151), but he also earnestly endeavoured to find out as much as he could about the common birds, which he felt many people ignored. His notebooks were quickly filled with the raw material which he was to draw on over the years to come. Within ten years of the war, he had 28 'Short notes' published in *BB*, and the following three decades produced an amazing flow of yet more Notes (some co-authored), not only to this journal, in which a total of 164 Notes has been published to date, but also another 86 spread through issues of *Reports of the Wildfowl Trust* (16), *Sea Swallow* (7), *Florida Field Naturalist* (10), *Somerset Bird Report* (1), *The Avicultural Magazine* (1) and *Bristol Ornithology* (51). It is an exceptional

contribution to the ornithological literature. Bernard's friend, Dr K. E. L. Simmons, recently described him as 'an ornithological miniaturist': a description that Bernard would have liked, for, although he wrote eight papers (three jointly), he always preferred to concentrate on writing his 'Notes'. He was well aware of his limitations, and left it to others to connect his observations of detail to the broader spectrum.

What his contributions reveal is his overriding interest in the behaviour of birds, particularly that related to migrant birds or to feeding. About one-fifth of his Notes report on migrants—unusual occurrences or numbers—and on identification or plumage characteristics. He took great pains to check through the literature, a task made easier by his own very extensive library of books and journals.

Amongst the papers are two, written jointly with his friend and duck-counting colleague, Hugh Boyd, on wildfowl subjects. 'A breeding population of Mallard' (*11th Report of the Wildfowl Trust* 1958/59: 137-143) was a study at four North Somerset reservoirs, which showed the enormous impact of the recent flooding of Chew Valley Lake (a more than doubling of the pairs) and also looked at aspects of breeding success, and the other was on the 'Effects of the severe winter on ducks in north Somerset' (*15th Report of the Wildfowl Trust* 1962/63: 47-50). Typically, his paper on 'The incidence of albinism and melanism in grebes' (*Bristol Orn.* 6: 25-28) and its sequel, 'Additional records of . . .' (*Bristol Orn.* 8: 108-109), started from his discovery that an albinistic Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* which he saw at Durleigh reservoir, Somerset, was the first ever recorded in Britain and Ireland.

Although some of his Notes may have been slight in content and others of seemingly well-known behaviour (although, in fact, previously unrecorded), he would be quick to put down such criticisms (if that's what they sounded like) by pointing out how often his work was cited by other writers (e.g. 35 times in the first four volumes of *BWP*). He had no doubt about the value of the Notes, and urged many other people to follow his example. He enjoyed his reputation as 'Short Note King', as he was affectionately dubbed.

When the Bristol Ornithological Club was formed in 1966, Bernard became its first Honorary Life Member, in recognition of his distinguished service to ornithology in the Bristol area. He was tremendously excited by the prospects for the new Club, and over the years was one of its most loyal advocates. Many of the Club's early Committee meetings were held at his bungalow, where the Committee would take over the lounge whilst Bernard and Marjorie exiled themselves to the kitchen and other rooms, to appear only at the end, with trays of coffee and cakes. Visitors to 'Mayfield' or 'Gull Cry' (in Newlyn) soon realised that Bernard and Marjorie provided hospitality that was unstoppable.

After the move to Cornwall, Bernard retained his close connection with the Club, and often travelled up to Bristol to attend meetings. But retirement to Cornwall now gave Bernard not just more opportunities to study migrants, but also seabirds—another passion of his. In 1946, he applied for membership of the Royal Naval Birdwatching Society,

normally open only to service personnel, but a change in the rules enabled him to become the first civilian member.

His enthusiasm and stamina were epitomised by one trip he made in 1973. Confident that there was great potential in pelagic birdwatching, he enrolled as a 'supernumerary' with the crew of 16 on the MV *Goram*, a 1,600-ton cargo ship due to sail from Penzance to Sardinia. During an alarming episode, when the engines and generator had failed and the vessel drifted helplessly for 18 hours through the night in a stormy Bay of Biscay, Bernard was on deck in the darkness listening to a number of Wilson's Petrels *Oceanites oceanicus* calling as they flew around the ship. His description of this event and the many others on the ill-fated journey left those who heard it both enthralled and astonished. The Wilson's Petrel saga is vividly recalled in a short paper (*Bristol Om.* 11: 31-32).

It was on another such pelagic birdwatching trip, although this time on calmer seas, that Bernard died on 26th March 1987. He was in Florida with Marjorie, visiting their daughter and grandchildren. He was in excellent form by all accounts, and had gone off on a day's birdwatching on a fishing vessel to look for seabirds off Florida's east coast, when he was struck down by a heart attack. His ashes were later scattered at sea off Newlyn, from the Mousehole lifeboat, on a beautiful calm day.

For a purely amateur ornithologist who claimed, with genuine humility and sincerity, to 'know very little about birds', Bernard's contribution to British ornithology is unique. And there are many birdwatchers who will have good reason to remember him with gratitude. ROBIN PRYTHERCH