

King Bertie of Minsmere

Derek Moore

Inspired by the recent piece on Denzil Harber by Tony Marr (*Brit. Birds* 96: 132-134), I reflect here on another giant of the pioneering days of birding and nature conservation. It would be churlish not to acknowledge the enormous contribution made to ornithology that Herbert Axell MBE so eloquently described in his books *Minsmere: Portrait of a Bird Reserve* (with Eric Hosking; Hutchinson, London, 1977) and *Of Birds and Men* (Book Guild, Sussex, 1992) – in fact, his efforts were truly outstanding, and the number of ‘scrapes’ on nature reserves throughout the world are a further tribute to him. Bert was, however, a difficult character and ruled Minsmere as something of a tyrant when dealing with colleagues at the RSPB, volunteers, members and reserve visitors. That is not to say he could not be the most charming and perfect of hosts, but many never saw this side of a man of considerable physical stature and acid tongue.

As with many successful men, Bert was cajoled and encouraged by his wife, Joan. Tony Marshall, a regular at Minsmere, described Joan wickedly but aptly as ‘the Rear Axell’. It was she who set the moral standards of the reserve, and woe betide anyone who got on the wrong side of Joan. It was in the 1960s that a small group of volunteers, including me, used to go regularly to the reserve each weekend to assist with the construction of the scrape, in exchange for the run of Minsmere to satisfy our birding lust. On one occasion, I remember

that we were particularly excited, as a young female volunteer had appeared for the first time. ‘She will be staying in that hut for a few weeks,’ beamed Bert. We were delighted. Returning the next weekend, we discovered to our horror that the hut was deserted and the young lady departed. In blissful ignorance, I enquired of Joan where she had gone. ‘Dismissed!’ came the sharp reply. Feeling that she needed to explain further, she offered, ‘The hussy was inflaming my Herbert. She hung her flimsy underwear out to dry in full view of his office!’

Bert ruled Minsmere as if he were the head of a kingdom. He chose who would be allowed in and who would not. In those early days, you had to write to The Lodge for a permit in advance, and Bert would run his eye over the list to see if any of his ‘blacklisted’ names appeared. One fine morning in June 1971, there was a superb female Wilson’s Phalarope



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246. Bert’s Hut (aka the Visitor Centre), Minsmere, Suffolk, 1960s. The Hut was truly his domain, and many feared to cross its threshold. Bert would sit at his battered typewriter, peering over his small spectacles, and visitors could never predict whether he would welcome them with gushing charm or send them packing in a fit of rage. I will never forget the Hut, now safely demolished.

Phalaropus tricolor on the scrape, but the reserve was closed that day and no visitors were about. Nonetheless, assistant warden David Mower had found David Tomlinson on the beach so had invited him in to enjoy our North American visitor. Bert turned up minutes later and, after blowing his top, ejected David on the grounds that he worked for the *Shooting Times!* You could be blacklisted for almost anything, but it depended on Bert's mood on the day. This even applied to loyal volunteers.

Bert had the same attitude with colleagues from The Lodge, especially those senior to himself. I have seen him tell a very senior member of staff to go away because they had not made an appointment and he was busy. They were told to come back at a more convenient time. The exact opposite was true if, in Bert's eyes, the visitors were important or influential. A small cabal of celebrities enjoyed favoured status at Minsmere, which, I have to say, included the regular volunteers. Household names now sadly gone like Freddie Grizewood, Joyce Grenfell and Robert Dougall were regular visitors, as were members of the Royal Family. Not all celebrity birders fared so well though, and Bill Oddie was among those shown the gate during the early days.

The day at Minsmere began at dawn if you were a volunteer. The first job was to scour the reserve for birds and, in particular, look for rarities. Bert believed that the bigger the list of species that could be found the more status the reserve would enjoy. My regular partner in those days was the late Brian Brown, of Low-

estoft. Searching the scrape and beach, we managed to find a national rarity on several occasions. I remember particularly a Richard's Pipit *Anthus novaeseelandiae* in October 1969, which was the second record for Suffolk. We made our notes and, when satisfied, jogged back to the centre to tell Bert. He leapt up onto his trusted tractor (see plate 247) and went off to see the bird. Brian and I handed in our written-up descriptions and relaxed, happy that our ID was accepted by Bert. We were less enthusiastic when the record, duly accepted by BBRC, was published and credited to H. E. Axell *et al.* This became a regular practice and we never complained lest we were banished forever. Incidentally, the late Michael Seago always referred to me as '*et al.*' until his death in 1999.

Other regulars began to doubt Bert's own ability to identify birds in his fanatical rush to add more and more to the reserve list. Certainly, his own confidence was visibly shaken when his Red-necked Stint *Calidris ruficollis* of autumn 1973 was adjudged not acceptable even though he had caught and ringed the bird (*Brit. Birds* 72: 270-271). To this day there are competent observers (not me – I was not present) who doubt the accepted records of Pechora Pipit *A. gustavi* and Upland Sandpiper *Bartramia longicauda* (suspecting Tree Pipit *A. trivialis* and Ruff *Philomachus pugnax* respectively) from Minsmere, but never disagreed publicly because they surely would have been banned for life.

Bert was not terribly interested in people or birds on adjacent reserves or sites. Previous to joining the Minsmere band, I had spent much

time with the Dingle Bird Club at nearby Walberswick. I had been introduced here by my old schoolmaster, Chris Benson. I often wondered why both these great men never mentioned each other, only to be told later that Bert refused to speak to Benson and had banned him from the reserve because Benson did not agree with his assessment of the



247. Bert with his beloved tractor; Minsmere, Suffolk, September 1961. All and sundry used to ride on the tractor, sitting on the bonnet or tumbling about in the bucket, with Bert proudly at the wheel, a modern-day Health & Safety nightmare.

number of Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* nests in one particular year. On another occasion, there was a Trumpeter Finch *Bucanetes githagineus* at Sizewell, the first for the UK. I was working with Bert on the scrape and I asked what the small band of birders moving down the beach were after. 'Just an escape,' he retorted, 'not worth bothering with.' So I didn't and, as far as I know, nor did he (and as a result I have yet to see this species in Britain).

Bert had arrived at Minsmere from Dungeness, in his native Kent. He had worked for the Post Office before that and was an officer in the army, where he learnt his surveying and engineering skills, so essential when creating habitats at Minsmere. He also invented the modern-day ringing pliers (originally known as 'Dungeness pliers') as well as a peculiar harness made from parachute cord which ensured that your binoculars did not swing about when walking or ringing, for example (plate 248). His great success at a time when the RSPB had little money was due, in no small measure, to his supreme resourcefulness – he was truly a man of his time. Like so many others of his generation, he would have found things much more difficult in the modern era with the need to comply with rigorous Health and Safety guidelines.

On his retirement, Bert moved to the edge of the Minsmere reserve, which in hindsight was perhaps a mistake. Certainly, his successor, the likeable Jeremy Sorenson, stood no chance with Bert, who – bizarrely – effectively banned himself from his beloved reserve. Only when Geoff and Hilary Welch took over a decade later was Bert back and established as a fixture at Minsmere. Thankfully, he was then able to enjoy his creation and bask in the glory with those visitors old enough to remember him. Sadly, Bert and Joan became very infirm and were restricted in their latter years to home, hospital or nursing homes, definitely not the preferred habitat of a man like Bert. They passed away within a few weeks of each other in 2001. Their only child, Roderick, spoke of his father at his funeral, sadly attended by few who had enjoyed the freedom of Minsmere. Roderick referred to their family name of Axell, of Nordic origin and said to date back to Viking royalty. The latter were renowned for being

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248. Bert modelling his ingenious parachute-cord harness, which took some of the strain of using heavy binoculars, August 1960.

arrogant, self-assured, self-confident and certain that their opinion was the only one of substance, and it was Roderick who pointed out the similarity between the legend and his father.

It is my belief that people who have pushed back the barriers in whatever they do need the qualities which many people found so unacceptable in Bert. His single-mindedness got the job done when others might have given up. Personally, I found Bert inspiring. After all, he had once played in a cricket team which had dismissed the opposition for nought. He changed my approach to birdwatching too, and led me into nature conservation. Indeed, many of us working in conservation may have inherited some of his qualities. He was a Big Man in every sense, and rightly earned the title so mischievously applied by us volunteers as *King Bertie of Minsmere*.

