Early years of wildlife film-making

1956 was the year I finally left the classroom and took up wildlife filming as my chosen career. Let me put the year into context. In June 1953, the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II was a milestone in the development of television. Publicity for good causes was entering a new era. 1954 saw the Bird Protection Act passed by Parliament largely through the influence of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, a small organization then with a huge new responsibility and a need for the support of a strong membership. The RSPB had a need to bring dazzling colour images of British birds, a treasure house of riches scarcely tapped up until that time, for its annual publicity bonanza at the Royal Festival Hall. The audience was ready to fill the seats. 1954 was also the year in which George Waterston, founder of the Scottish Ornithologists' Club and the Isle of May Bird Observatory, and owner of Fair Isle, had handed the island over to the National Trust for Scotland to secure a future for its dwindling population. We had become firm friends and George was a strong supporter of my growing enthusiasm for film as the best means of conveying our shared interest in islands and their bird-life to a wider public.

Moreover, the RSPB was looking for a new cameraman to replace George Edwards who, after a whole season in Scotland, had failed to complete the first major project of the new Film Unit, a documentary on 'Highland Birds' under George Waterston's direction. When I was offered a year's trial contract for the job, I halved my teacher's salary and jumped at the chance.

1956 was the year in which all this came together to my benefit. Through George's intervention on my behalf, my two ventures into movie film, my first in 1955 designed solely to give me a personal record of my time on Foula, the second in 1956 a planned documentary made for the Brathay Group, became my passport into seven years of wildlife filming in UK, much of it in Scotland.

So 1957 found me tackling a job for which I had virtually no experience. The RSPB Film Unit was me, a one-man outfit where I had to learn fast from my own mistakes. The first task was to complete 'Highland Birds': filming, editing, sound-tracks, commentary, the lot. The fieldwork had been exhilarating – golden eagles, dotterel, ptarmigan, crested tits and capercaillie in the pine forest, black-throated divers and Slavonian grebes on the lochs. By July 1957, I had as much film in the can as I reckoned I needed, or could cope with, to complete the 90 minutes of screen time required. Back in Edinburgh, with the huge task of reducing 10,000 feet of film to 1,500 feet maximum, I felt I needed a break before launching into the production.

The break I got was as unexpected as it was welcome. It was in fact yet another dream come true. The telephone rang one evening at my parents' home in Edinburgh where I was still living. It was George Waterston, to all intents and purposes my boss. He asked if I could attend a meeting at the National Trust for Scotland the following morning, to look at and comment on a film just delivered to the Trust by a well-known film cameraman, Charles Everest, of its latest acquisition "in trust for the nation" – St Kilda. The Trust had commissioned him to portray the island and its treasures, both of natural and wildlife importance and of historical and archaeological significance, so that the Council could formulate its future policy for the island. There were many problems, not the least of which was its extreme remoteness and inaccessibility. Everest had, the Council felt, misinterpreted his brief and produced a film that was too clever by half, artistic and imaginative but not what was wanted. The need was urgent.

Irene Kinnear, now Secretary of the SOC and George Waterston's closest ally (and future wife), worked in the Publicity Department at the Trust. She had seen me at work on the Highland film and also sat in on some of the early screening of the 'rushes'. There had always been close liaison between the RSPB and NTS, and so it was that I was offered by George to Jamie Stormonth-Darling, the charismatic Secretary of the Trust, as a possible answer to his crisis. A host of urgent decisions needed to be made for the future of his latest property, about which he and his staff knew comparatively little. Moreover, it was potentially a huge risk. St Kilda's remoteness could make it the Trust's most demanding property in terms of cost, both to administer and to make available to their members, whose co-operation was essential for fund-raising. The Trust needed a factual, revealing film of what it had let itself in for, and at the same time an emotive film that would convey St Kilda's value to the nation.

But the main reason for the Trust's concern over St Kilda was the strategic decision that year, by the Ministry of Defence, to turn St Kilda, because of its unique position 50 miles to the West of the Hebrides, into a tracking station for the Royal Artillery's rocket range at Benbecula in the Outer Hebrides. St Kilda offered the perfect site for radar detection on its summit 1500 feet above sea-level. It was an irresistible attraction to the 'Gunners'. In April 1957, the RAF Airfield Construction Branch had arrived, complete with bulldozers to start 'Operation Hardrock' and establish a tented camp for 300 men in Village Bay. An early gale soon taught them the problems of St Kilda weather, especially with tents, but Wing Commander Cookson soon showed he was up to the job and a tough 'Cookie'. Alarm bells started ringing at Trust HQ when news came through that he planned to make 'excellent use of the stone ruins of some of the old village houses' as bottoming for his new road to the Radar site at the summit. The Trust, which had taken over the islands largely because of this sort of threat, found itself objecting to the idea without any proper knowledge of what was there and how serious the threat was. There were perhaps 1,000 years of human history and Celtic occupation, uniquely recorded in stone and now under immediate threat of destruction. What the Trust urgently needed was visual data to back up its case.

Although I felt honoured to be asked, I found myself in the strange position of missing out on the holiday I had planned between the fieldwork and the production schedule on 'Highland Birds'. Instead, I was suddenly plunged into making plans to go to possibly the most difficult film location in Britain and take with me absolutely everything I would need technically for the task. Admittedly I was offered accommodation (in a tent) and the usual facilities of camp life, and the RAF cooks would feed me. As this dealt with most of the time-consuming tasks of normal filming projects in remote places, I was only allocated one week with a return to base on one of the LCTs (Tank Landing Craft) which were manned by the army to service the RAF. (Strangely the Navy didn't come into this bizarre mix in offshore Atlantic waters.)

Access had always been the basic problem of any visit to St Kilda. Mine was taken care of because Jamie Stormonth Darling had used his great skill in attracting support for the Trust by persuading a generous member, who just happened to own a shipping line on the Clyde, to loan him a coastal freighter called MV 'Turquoise' to take out a high-powered inspection party. And so it was that, at incredibly short notice, I found myself in a bed on the floor of the converted hold of a cargo boat in the company of several top staff of the National Trust for Scotland, three members of the House of Lords, and specialists and old friends like Ken

Williamson from Fair Isle and James Fisher, the undoubted doyen of British Ornithology. Surprisingly, out of all that coterie of talent, I was probably the only representative with actual personal experience of life in a remote island community such as had survived on St Kilda until the evacuation in 1930 of the last 36 'natives'. To cap it all, we sailed out overnight in a Force 8 gale.

When I struggled up on deck in the morning, we were anchored in Village Bay. I could hardly believe my luck. Ever the optimist, I loaded my camera with a reel of 16mm Kodachrome, the only colour stock available, designed by Kodak's scientists for Californian sunshine. On the day of our arrival, we circumnavigated the whole group of islands on MV 'Turquoise' under grey skies. The most spectacular aspect from Hirta, the main island, was the rock fortress of Boreray and its attendant stacks, Stac Lee and Stac an Armin, four miles to the north and home to the largest colony of Gannets in the Northern hemisphere. With binoculars, I could see swarms of them round the cliffs, and occasionally a fishing party could be spotted plunge-diving like a shower of dazzling white arrows into the sea surface which boiled with their splashes. It was one of the most exciting displays of bird behaviour I had ever witnessed. The reaction of everyone on that distinguished party of inspection was the same. It was virtually impossible to exaggerate the scale and the sheer magnificence of those precipitous fangs of volcanic rock thronged with birds in a wide wilderness of water. The impact was total and overwhelming.

Under the damping influence of Atlantic weather, that week soon became a fortnight, with continuous rain or mist making colour filming nigh on impossible. One day I was reduced to filming the raindrops along the edge of the tent and the boots of servicemen squelching through the mud, in my efforts to convey the trials of life on St Kilda. I had managed in rare snatches of better light or even glimpses of sunshine to cover the initial inspection party from the 'Turquoise' going through the village street, inspecting the old houses with most of their pathetic contents still intact – rusting bedsteads, an iron pot hanging on a rusty chain, huge millstones, broken furniture or window-frames, collapsed roof timbers and roofing felt perished after 27 years of neglect and decay. The older black-houses had lost their thatch, and the famous *cleits*, or stone storage sheds, were mostly still roofed with turf, sprouting a lush hat of green grass; but it was all a rather sad sight for my camera lens.

Gradually I filled in the essential components of a portrait of this extraordinary place, far more abrupt and precipitous than Foula, with astonishing numbers of fulmars everywhere, puffins in favoured spots where there was good turf for their burrows, and the agile, brown Soay sheep, even wilder and more sure-footed than the Foula sheep, having been unshepherded for 27 years.

There was no doubt whatever that this group of islands was a national treasure, with both forbidding and attractive elements, a place of superlatives to take your breath away if the wind hadn't done so already. It was hard work with a heavy haversack of gear to carry everywhere on my own.

On the first day of reasonable weather, I heard that 'Cookie' was going to inspect the progress of the road, so I hitched a lift in one of the Land Rovers, to film the man who had threatened the ruined village, hurtling up the road he had had to build with quarried stone instead. It would be a key shot for the sake of the commentary that would cover it. And he was happy to co-operate, just so long as he got the job done; which by sheer personality, he did.

So far as I could tell, there were no women at all in his workforce. It was a strange all-male atmosphere, and the language was unbelievable. The noise of the generators was constant and a problem for my sound recording, but with 500 lbs of sausages in deep freeze, the Quartermaster really needed power.

I had put the word around that I wanted a fieldmouse for close-ups and one of his kitchen staff caught me one in a big aluminium tank. Before we released it, I got some attractive shots of a St Kilda subspecies cleaning its whiskers. A crowd of RAF men stood watching me. I wondered how many of them realised that these tiny creatures, slowly evolving different characteristics from their mainland cousins, were unique examples in Britain of the evolution of species in action. I could see no difference between *Apodemus sylvaticus hirtensis* and his Foula counterpart *A. s. thulensis*; but their survival was really important evidence of a great scientific truth and a great philosophical controversy. Geographical isolation was spawning the evolution of a new world species. On stormy St Kilda 'the survival of the fittest' was the obvious means of natural selection. The tiny St Kilda wren was another vigorous contender for sub-specific status. Their sweet shrill warbling was audible even over the diesel generators.

After sixteen days it was time to go home, on a trawler with an army Captain as its skipper. Nothing was normal on St Kilda. With no land in sight and a journey of fifty miles of open Atlantic to cross, the sense of isolation was far stronger than on Foula. I began to see why they lived so much more as a community, in a close-knit cluster of houses with a Kirk and a school at one end of Main Street. But how they managed to survive the winters with virtually no accessible peat and only fulmar oil for their lamps was hard to contemplate, even though their diet of birds from fowling was undoubtedly as nutritious as any in Scotland. Yet the same men who went fearlessly down those awesome cliff faces to harvest the birds scarcely ever took the risk of losing a boat by going fishing. They knew their own strengths but also understood the risks.

It was the ageing of the population which undermined their spirit in the end. I couldn't help but wonder whether the same fate would overtake Foula in the long run. How I wished I could have known some of the Gaelic-speaking St Kildans as I knew the Foula folk with their Shetland dialect full of words of obvious Norse origin. Was it a question of racial characteristics which determined that one community would survive where the other decided of their own volition to quit? Perhaps Foula's Viking spirit was one answer.

St Kilda was an unexpected diversion. The disappointing weather was only to be expected, but it had served to convince me that here was a subject that demanded better coverage than I had been able to give it. Somehow I felt that one day I would just have to go back. But meanwhile I had to concentrate on my first ever full-length production, so my footage from St Kilda was edited and produced by Mr Maclean, a professional editor in Edinburgh, from whom I learnt a few useful tricks of the trade.

Largely because it was new, and partly because we had some luck with Golden Eagles, which are spectacular in a uniquely Scottish way, 'Highland Birds' was a success and received some favourable press comment when we showed it in London at the Royal Festival Hall to a capacity audience. Luckily, London Scots are loyal and the RSPB had hit on a new method of tapping their loyalty. England still didn't have Golden Eagles or very much in the way of snow-covered mountains with ptarmigan and white hares. So it boosted the Scots' morale to show off their country's wealth of natural assets.

Next however, in 1958, the RSPB's main arena of bird protection and popular Reserves in East Anglia had to be exploited, and I spent the winter, spring and summer months at Minsmere, making a totally different kind of film which included 75 species of birds in a reserve of great richness and variety of habitats, the ultimate bird-watching scene for an increasing army of weekend naturalists.

The work meant long hours and constant use of many hides, each with an optimum time of day according to the light and the behaviour of the birds, so that each day had a complicated time-table of cramped hide-work and snatched meals.

The next year, 1959, seabirds were the theme and the great off-shore islands of Pembrokeshire the venue, and the hottest, driest summer for years saw us working round the clock for weeks on end making 'Seabird Summer'.

These long documentaries were a real challenge with increasingly high expectations by our audiences and the new medium of television already beginning to set new standards and demands. Yet audiences would happily sit through 90 minutes of screen time provided the interest was there and the editing and artistic standard high enough to satisfy the film critics as well as the naturalists.

They were heady days, for we were already competing for TV time with the likes of Angela and Michele Denis, working in Africa's sunny climate, and a young David Attenborough bringing overseas wildlife to British screens with budgets and equipment way beyond our capability. However, for 1958 I had won my case for a Reflex Bolex and had bought a second-hand 400mm Kilfitt telephoto lens from none other than Eric Hosking. With a solid tripod, this superb lens soon became my standard lens for daily use, especially for all those small birds which were the daily challenge in places like Minsmere. A magnification factor of eight times made all the difference for those intimate shots of bird behaviour which were beginning to give audiences a new appreciation of bird life on film and TV.

Peter Scott was a new ally, presenting his long series of wildlife specials on BBC's 'LOOK' weekly for over 150 programmes. A brilliant idea of Philip Brown's to make a species study of Reed Warblers, which he knew intimately from the Minsmere reedbeds, gave me a chance to do something that had seldom been done before – a whole half-hour documentary on a single species, exploring in depth their fascinating nest-building technique and breeding behaviour. As luck would have it, the date allocated for our first 'LOOK' programme co-incided with a strike by all the BBC's studio staffs. Both Peter and I were a long way from home and from busy work schedules and wanted to stick to the date. So we found ourselves having to shift the studio furniture into place with only the house lights to show us and our exhibits to the TV audience. Surprisingly the studio footage, drastically shortened, was still usable and as a result far more of my film, unaffected by the strike, was used by the editors.

So the industrious little birds stole the show, much to this cameraman's delight. This set a new pattern for the next few years. My job was to produce, single-handed, a complete one and a half hours of screen time for the Festival Hall, usually on one major theme like 'Garden Birds' in 1960 or 'Birds of Strathspey' when I returned to Scottish birds in 1962-3. More studies in depth followed, like 'Swallows at the Mill' – my most successful single species film – or ‘A Waterbirds’ World’, a study mainly of Great Crested Grebes on the Berkshire gravel-pits. With such a demanding programme, and a new contract with the BBC to supply two titles a year for their ever-increasing output of natural history films on television, it was hardly surprising that my links with Foula became memories of a wonderful interlude in my life, with the occasional letter and the Christmas exchange of parcels to keep me in touch.

There was however one exception – in 1959, after my return north from Pembrokeshire where we had explored and filmed the birdlife of a whole new batch of offshore islands: Skokholm, Skomer, Bardsey and Grassholm with its huge gannet city on a flat lump of rock far further out than the rest. 1959 had been the hottest, sunniest summer any of us could remember. Skomer, which is carpeted with acres of bluebells in spring, had gone brown as the grassy cliff-top pastures died and the thousands of rabbits were threatened with starvation. So when we returned to Scotland in August it seemed the best opportunity to take advantage of the unusually long anti-cyclone to go back to Foula.

The object was to fulfil an ambition of Elizabeth Adair, a talented producer of radio programmes at BBC Edinburgh, with whom I had done my first TV programmes in series like ‘Out of Town’ and radio programmes like ‘Afield’. My stories of my time on Foula had inspired her to plan a visit, and to persuade George and Irene Waterston to come too. So playing it very much by ear on the day, we recorded and produced a 45-minute programme for BBC Radio Scotland in which I tried to represent as faithfully as I could something of what it was like to live in such a remote community.

We hired Hansie Smith’s boat ‘Hirta’ from Scalloway to do a circumnavigation of the island and were able to do justice to the west cliffs, which I had only seen once before from the sea. I realised then that, though St Kilda is a more rugged and varied collection of dramatic cliff scenery, Foula has by far the most impressive wall of rock rising sheer out of the sea in a vertical barricade of Old Red Sandstone, fully three miles long and never less than 500 ft high. No wonder that when the Atlantic gales meet that barrier, it forms dangerous *flans* on the leeward side of those hills, *flans* that can pick you up and deposit you, barrow and all, in the ditch, or whisk the surface of the Mill Loch up into a funnel of water and carry it off across the moor.

From below, the West cliffs of Foula, seen from a small boat, are truly awesome so that one can only gaze and gasp and feel very humble and privileged to be in such an inspiring place. The layered wall of sandstone strata, laid down in oceans lost in the enormity of geological time, challenges our imaginations to comprehend how brief is the timescale of one human life. At the base, the process of erosion, stretching back millions of years into the recent past, still goes on, undercutting caves where the grey seals often lie on rock shelves, like rows of sleek sausages when seen from above. St Kilda’s volcanic past is perhaps easier to understand but equally strange and in some ways more spectacular. The cataclysms which gave rise to both have left behind places where men of character and determination found security, finding in these wild and difficult green acres a refuge and a secure home. That is perhaps the greater marvel which these cliffs have made possible. On this inexplicable chance has depended the history of a hardy, self-reliant breed of people whose success in living as a tolerant, civilised society has laid down a pattern which, in spirit if not in detail, the world will now have to learn if mankind is to survive on Planet Earth.

Islands like Foula and St Kilda, and perhaps especially now Utsira, off the west coast of central Norway, have so much to teach the human technocrats about their total dependence on Nature. This is not sentimental or romantic dreaming. It is hard – if inconvenient – fact. When comparing the two remotest Scottish outposts, perhaps I can no longer see it objectively, but somehow Foula is more friendly, more fertile, less forbidding and harsh to human survival. Both certainly come into that category of experience which produces what C S Lewis called "the sense of the numinous", which gives meaning to the mystery of life at all levels struggling to survive on an unforgiving planet. As we wonder, are we in awe of God, or is that just the name we have invented for what we cannot yet explain about our own existence? Both St Kilda ands Foula have the power to make us rethink the question and to face the two basic challenges of why we are here, and how, in the face of climate change, we are going to preserve our planetary home as a safe refuge for humanity.

It is now clearly a matter of a new way of life, or death. But in 1959, when I tried to convey at least to a BBC Radio audience both that sense of awe at the cliff face of the Kame and the sense of humility I felt in that genuinely civilized community, there was no way I could then have made a case for remote islands as a blueprint for the future of mankind. The world was blissfully unaware then of the prospect of mankind triggering drastic changes in our climate, and I was one of only a few 'lone voices' warning that world population would soon outstrip the carrying capacity of the planet. Now after only fifty years of my own lifetime, the world's population has doubled twice and as a result climate change now threatens not only humanity but all life with imminent extinction.

On Foula, nothing very much seemed to have changed in the three years since my brief visit in 1956. My former pupil Vina was now a big girl just starting her secondary education out in Lerwick. We were there to see her off on her first day of departure with only a doubtful prospect of getting home before Christmas, even for a weekend. It was hard to say who was more distressed that summer morning, the tearful girl of 13, hurrying down past Ham to the pier clutching a flimsy suitcase, or her mother and grandmother trying so hard to be positive and cheerful, but in truth even more upset than the brave youngster. She would be well cared for in the Hostel and would be with other island children from the outliers, all in – or rather, temporarily not in – the same boat. But she would undoubtedly meet with urban influences far removed from the gentle, caring love which Foula folk lavished on their bairns and which had, without interruption, been her lucky lot so far in life.

In the Schoolhouse kitchen that day, the subject was how education was the greatest stumbling block for parents who were otherwise keen on and dedicated to the island way of life. It was undoubtedly the chief cause of the depopulation of the most isolated communities in Scotland, not just because it disrupted families and their cohesion, but because it sowed the seeds of discontent with the tougher, less sophisticated, island way of life. No wonder that Shetland's chief export was always declared to be human talent; the brain drain was very real and just one of the problems our radio programme touched on.

We talked to nearly everybody whose accent was, we hoped, still intelligible to BBC listeners, even some who might only be partially understood. Some were articulate and their English was impeccable. Others like old Meggie Ratter and Jeannie Isbister at Punds were tongue-tied at first but delightfully direct in their own expressive way after a few leading questions. George Waterston recorded a long interview with James Andrew Ratter of Broadfoot, who was a professional diver engaged at that time on a job in the harbour at Fair Isle. He remembered well personalities and fascinating tales of the old days of bird-fowling on the cliffs, when it had been so essential for the survival of a community of over 200 to maintain the essential skills with ropes and snares, culling the seabirds for food and feathers.

Mary Henry gave us a vigorous demonstration in the Schoolhouse kitchen, complete with the sound effects alongside my running commentary on what she was doing, of the complete process of making kirn from sour milk with all the traditional Foula touches.

As with the Brathay film I had made in 1956, it was not difficult to enlist the help of musicians and dancers alike to perform the Foula reel in the Schoolroom, for the BBC microphones. Likewise, we recorded Bobby Isbister at South Biggins performing his lament about leaving Foula for the last time, while he both sang and played the foot-pedal organ in his front room. His old father Robbie also sang for us, but to his shearwaters in their burrows at the back of the Noup. Dutifully, like ghostly voices from Hades, the sitting adults responded with their wailing "cock-a-leeko" cries from underground. There was no doubt the old man was truly in tune with his environment, after such a magic performance in the dusk light on the edge of the Atlantic.

In addition to the sound recording for radio, I took the opportunity to add some film footage, in what little time I had to spare, of another Brathay party arriving on the 'Hirta' from Scalloway. They were lifted up to Ristie by Ken Gear, this time driving a proper 4-wheeled tractor towing a trailer big enough to take all the gear for a party of a dozen. Transport had moved up a notch or two in three years. I also filmed a sequence in the school of the current teacher, Alastair Holbourn, second son of Professor Iain Holbourn, who had bought the island at the turn of the century. He had been my mentor in Edinburgh before I left to take up the post of teacher myself four years earlier, and here he was fulfilling that role himself and already with a slightly larger class of children than I had taught. If nothing else it would be a nostalgic reminder for me of all those happy hours I had spent with my five pupils, of whom only Eric Isbister was still there. His father still ran the shop on a very small turnover, which he declared was no longer really a business, but rather a service to the community he felt obliged – and honoured – to maintain for the common good.

Both the shop and the school were good indicators of a living community with a beating heart, so long as fit adults could be found to run them. Our recordings were presented as an audio picture of an island whose people were bound by a deep sense of belonging to Foula as their chosen home, proud of their origins and their island culture but also well aware of the problems which falling numbers and old age inevitably bring.

We left with our reels of magnetic tape on 'The Island Lass' on a smooth sea rather late in the day. As we arrived at Walls, there was a colourful evening sky out to the west, with the great hulk of Foula's black outline etched against it on the horizon as I ended my last direct contact with the island and its people for many years. I still managed to see Foula several times in the 60s and 70s, but always from the deck or the bridge of a large ship as I gave the live commentary on the island, sometimes to more than a thousand passengers cruising under the flag of the National Trust for Scotland in one of the British India Company's Schools Cruise ships.

Just as that first film record I made of Foula in 1955-56 led to my entry into a career in wildlife film-making, so my active role as lecturer and commentator on the National Trust for Scotland's 'big-ship' cruises led to my being invited to join their staff as Principal Field Officer in 1963 with responsibility for organizing their Cruises and running their new scheme of adventure camps for young people on a few chosen properties. Both suited me down to the ground and ensured that I could stay in Scotland, which suited our family needs with two sons born in 1963 and 1965.

Both schemes were hatched in the fertile imagination of Jamie Stormonth-Darling, the Trust's dynamic Director, whose original plan was to enlist my film-making skills in much needed publicity, especially for difficult properties like St Kilda. But with the Duke of Edinburgh's initiatives on the environment leading up to European Conservation Year 1970, prestigious, well-funded film units were being formed by companies such as British Transport and the oil giants, so that in-house movies suddenly became pointless when major polluters saw film-making as a way of 'greening' their reputations. As a result, the Trust suddenly found film publicity available at no cost, with television promotion and videocassettes to sell to their members as a bonus. Inevitably, the alternatives I was offered entailed office work, for which I had neither any experience nor any stomach.

So, in 1966, I started on a freelance career, with the Trust's blessing, together with a part-time responsibility as its Adviser on Natural History. My seven years running the RSPB's Film Unit as one-man-band had been a wonderful introduction to the world of film-making but at best at a semi-professional level. I found the cut-throat world of the film industry's Trade Union rules a nightmare, where the minimum film-crew size was often seven. I ended up making films mostly for charities, where I could offer a professional standard at about a fifth of the price of most production companies. I had learnt the art of keeping control of the budgets and the costs by doing most of the work myself, but this became increasingly difficult as the technology of low-contrast film for TV became ever more complicated.

I was pleased to have finished my RSPB filming stint with much of my last season in 1963 working on the great adventure and challenge of filming Scotland's only nesting pair of ospreys. Since 1956, ospreys had been struggling to return to the fishing lochs of Strathspey from which the egg collectors and trophy hunters had banished them at the start of the century. This was the beginning of a long hard struggle to establish these glamorous predators of large fish to their rightful place in the Highlands; but it turned into one of the RSPB's biggest successes in bird protection and rehabilitation, a story I was to play a larger part in in years to come. In 1963 it was enough that, as the official photographer for the RSPB, I was the only person allowed to put up a hide at the top of a Scots pine and film Scotland's only pair of ospreys from fifty yards away. With my equipment, it wasn't close enough but it was exclusive and better than nothing; and 'The Return of the Osprey' was on TV. The year after I left, "Birds of Strathspey", my second Scottish bird film, was shown on BBC2.

Now of course we have technical revolutions beyond my wildest dreams in the 1950s and 60s. It's astonishing to think that when I started in 1957, the BBC had virtually no film at all on wildlife subjects. It is also gratifying to think that the strength of the RSPB, as well as its political clout, rocketed in the 60s and 70s under the influence of the moving image, first on the cinema screen and then on TV. By the Millenium, membership had passed the million mark and the RSPB had become the largest wildlife conservation body in Europe. Bird-watching, valuable in its own right as a hobby, has also been a powerful force in our care for the environment. Problems for birds, accurately measured by an army of volunteers under the British Trust for Ornithology, are now used by the Government as a reliable pointer to problems in the British countryside. And Ospreys and Red Kites are back in force, restored to their rightful place in the British scene due to the potent public support resulting from the RSPB's hugely successful publicity policy through local film-shows. Bird-watching was 'in' with a vengeance. Such changes were also evidence of the increasing influence of TV in forming public attitudes towards the countryside as essential for human spiritual welfare.