

THE RESEARCHERS

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This month Ward Clarke interviews Christopher K. Mylne, B.A., F.R.P.S., Scotland's leading ornithologist who is better known to his many friends as Chris.

WHEN Chris Mylne left Cambridge in 1951 and did a post-graduate year at Moray House, Edinburgh, it looked as if he was all set to follow his father's footsteps and be a Classics Master. His career began conventionally enough with eighteen months teaching in John Watson's. Then he took his first aberrant step. He took a job in the remotest island of the Shetlands, to be a Missionary Teacher to a tiny community numbering then about seventy souls.

That move was not only to change his life, but alter his whole attitude towards people. "I went to teach, but I learned from these wise and intelligent folk more than anything I could give them. I suppose you could say I have lived a sheltered life until then. I was 27. I had never seen a dead body. But my first job in Foula was to conduct a funeral and attend the kisting ceremony, when the lid of the home-made coffin is finally closed.

"I had just to confess that I knew nothing about it and be guided by the Elders. These people don't tolerate pretentiousness. Life is real—and so is death. I conducted the service, and I soon discovered that as well as being their Minister in theological matters, I was also their scribe in correspondence with officialdom in the outside world.

"The chief thing Foula taught me was the true value of labour. These people were poor and lived in what we would call minimal standards of comfort, but money meant nothing. True wealth was the strength to do things for yourself. For example there was one old lady who refused a rise in the old age pension. She said she had enough. In this communal society able bodied men cut the peats of those who couldn't do it for themselves. I'll never regret going to Foula. It's still my spiritual home."

With only three weeks left on Foula, and a borrowed Ensign 16mm cine camera, he set out to secure a record of this remarkable bird island whose cliffs are the sheerest in Britain and where, on the moors above the crofts, breeds the largest colony of great skuas in the northern hemisphere. The results so excited him that he returned the following year to expand the film, this time with a borrowed Bolex and three lenses

CHRIS MYLNE

on its turret. From simple beginnings do great things spring.

George Waterston saw the film. He was enthusiastic, and that moment happened to be momentous, for the R.S.P.B. were soon to find themselves looking for a photographer to finish off a film on Highland Birds. Chris was asked to show his film to Philip Brown: and he got the job.

There is more to it than that however. Water will always find its own level. From the age of seven, when Chris noticed the rosy pink and black head of a bullfinch he had been fascinated by the beauty of birds. And since the days when his Scoutmaster took films at camp, and did tricks with the projector to make felled trees stand up again and have everybody running about backwards, he had hankered to make films for himself.

He was electrified when to the school one day came a lecturer to show bird films, and when he said wistfully to a Master: "That's what I would like to do," he was given the encouraging reply that there was no reason why he should not. It would cost a lot of money and needed a lot of skill. Meantime he could do it by proxy by collecting as school prizes the finest bird photographs ever published in the books by Eric Hosking.

Then when he went to Sedbergh in north-west Yorkshire at 13 there opened a wider horizon when on four half-days a week he would take his box camera and go out on the moors and crags looking for buzzards, peregrine falcons, dunlin, golden plover and the like. Even the Army contributed when he went into the Royal Signals and studied wireless and telegraphy, including a year at Oxford studying science, all part of the training, now that photography and sound recording are so electronic.

So the ex-President of the Bird Club at Cambridge became a photographer at £450 a year, nor did it rise above £750 for several years. "It was once even suggested that I should get about on a bicycle," he recalled with a wide grin. "Highland Birds," finished in that first season of 1957, was acclaimed everywhere as a triumph. "People liked it because it was so amateurish. It was so like the films they themselves

would like to make, nothing sophisticated or slick. Now, after all these 'Look' programmes the public expect something better."

"It was a new kind of bird watching for me, sitting in hides and looking at eagles, dotterel, ptarmigan, blackcock, crested tits, greenshank and other Highland species through the lens. Now I can hardly think of bird watching any other way.

"The thrill when the bird comes back to the nest, as with the peregrine falcon this year which nearly beat me. I failed last year—you know it's a vanishing bird due to toxic chemical poisoning. That is what the film's about. But we didn't know just how scarce it had become until we tried to find an eyrie where photography would be possible. Most of them failed to rear chicks, or were hopelessly inaccessible.

"Then we got an eyrie in the Borders with a hide-position 75 feet from it. Three eggs had been laid but only one young hatched. For three days I occupied the hide from seven in the morning. The female usually came in with food about 11.30. Imagine, I was changing a reel when she came in on the second day. But the third morning made up for it, when she came in three times in 45 minutes and I had great filming, the kind that makes any disappointment worth while.

"But the very best filming came on the 21st June, when the chick was large and quite an actor. It was all the better because the preceding three days had been thundery and very wet. The stuff is to be shown by the R.S.P.B. for European Conservation Year and my contribution includes merlin, hen harrier, short eared owl as well as peregrine—all of them birds of prey seriously threatened by toxic chemicals."

Chris is contributing to this film on a free-lance basis, for he has been working for himself since 1966. The years when he did it full-time for the R.S.P.B. more for love than money are over. But these apprentice years gave him more than money. They gave him a platform, in the Festival Hall, and alongside Peter Scott on the "Look" programme, thanks to a contract between the B.B.C. and the R.S.P.B.

"Reed Warblers" and "Swallows at the Mill" were two outstanding films which impressed Peter Scott. "These swallows

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were really satisfying birds to work with. Everything went so well, including breeding success, for the two broods reared 20 young. And I didn't even need a hide. You were in the dark behind the lights, and they grew so accustomed to the brightness and the heat from the lamps that they sunbathed, basked until they grew uncomfortable and began to pant. To actually film one laying an egg was a great thrill. I enjoyed filming these swallows much more than golden eagles.

"And in a sense this film shows my philosophy about how nature films should be used. You can show people how and where they can watch things for themselves, such as nest building, mating, feeding, flying, brooding or dive-bombing an invading cat. And you can reveal things that few ordinary observers are ever likely to see—such as the laying of an egg. I get mad with people when they tell me that 'I must have lots of patience'. I am not patient. I am the very reverse but waiting hours and hours and hours is just part of the job. You have to accept it."

Chris admits he is restless by nature. You could guess this by the speed at which

Chris Mylne filming on Rhum. This shot of a moth-expert putting a mounted specimen in his box involves changes of angles, long and close shots and panning with zoom lens. But the shot on the screen will last only 30 seconds or less. But only the maximum impact will satisfy this photographer.

he communicates thoughts to words and by the very alertness of his face and flashing smile. "I'm really an impossible person when I'm filming. I'm rude, bad tempered, inconsiderate and a lot of other things. You would have to ask my wife for a list. She just won't come with me. She's had it too often!"

I asked Chris if he didn't find it precarious being a free lance film maker, not to mention the sheer labour of being your own sound-recorder, cameraman, script-writer, film editor and salesman. "I haven't lost by being a free-lance. But I have to make all my time productive. I can't sit back. But I do have some security.

"I'm an adviser on natural history for the National Trust for Scotland, and I'm public relations officer for the Scottish Wild Life Trust. This not only gives me a basic income, but the work is tremendously important, because you are trying to show end educate the public into a wiser use and enjoyment of the countryside.

"I'm convinced that the roots of crime and discontent spring from being cut off from nature. People need and must have the countryside if they are to live a full life.

They need space for recreation and tranquillity. This is why wild life reserves are so important, and green places near towns. Whatever happens, we must make room for recreational areas. You know the plan to make a country park at Hamilton, keeping the good wild life area at Bothwell Bridge, but developing the upper part for boating by the creation of a lake on the Clyde. This is positive land-use in an area of high-density population.

"The fact that people want more about wild life on television is an indication of their general interest in the countryside. This is what we've got to foster. I'm doing a film for the Scottish Wildlife Trust right now. And I'm also doing one for the Films of Scotland. You remember my St. Kilda film. This new one is about the Isle of Rhum and I want it to really tell the story of what man can do to his environment negatively and positively. I'm also making twenty single special films for the Rank Film Library, ten on garden birds and ten on water birds, for use on eight millimetre loops. No, I wouldn't say that I've found film-making precarious."

The real trouble is making time for all the



other things. You know the "Afield" programme I do on B.B.C. sound radio. I am also presenting some programmes for B.B.C. 'Schools' television. I'd love to have more time for writing, and I could do with about a year working on my negatives in the dark-room, but you've got to have some family life too, and I have two boys, Kenneth, six and Andrew, four, so there it is. I'm not complaining, I love the work I am doing or I wouldn't do it."

Yet where is the man without some regrets about something? The one that makes Chris look over his shoulder is the certainty in his mind that he was weak to pursue the Classics career expected of him by his family when his bent was in zoological science. He evidenced this as a schoolboy and at Cambridge where he took part in three expeditions to the south-western tip of Norway to study the September exodus of birds setting off from Lista to cross the North Sea. The big year was 1951, when they not only had exceptional numbers and varieties in Norway, but as they themselves travelled home across the North Sea they actually saw the birds fluttering their way across. Then they got busy at Monks House to study the end of the migration in Northumberland. There was a great fall of robins that year at Fair Isle, and weighing returns there showed that they had lost weight by as much as 30% in the big sea crossing.

Much bird migration is chance. The wind dictates where the migrants will cast up. But if the timing of the journey is right, the odds are in favour of the birds casting up roughly where they want to be. The same sort of thing happened to Chris Mylne when he went to Foula fifteen years ago at the age of 27. His timing was right when he made that 600 ft. film which led onwards to the R.S.P.B. Film Unit. And it was right again in 1965, when after two years as Principal Field Officer for the National Trust for Scotland he forsook the security of a good salary to try his luck as a free-lance.

The tide that swept him to Foula was the most important single event in this man's life. And he has taken it at the flood ever since. The easy way is not for him. □



(ABOVE): One of Chris Mylne's favourite pictures shows a close-up of an adult swallow feeding young.

(BELOW): Now to work. The lens is a 400mm., invaluable for long-range close-ups. Some of the best wild life film on Scotland has been shot with this. He made the decision to abandon school-mastering for filming to try to interpret nature the hardest way, by capturing unrevealed secrets with the camera.

