

OBITUARY

A Tribute to Rob Strachan (1958 – 2014)

The otter world lost one of its gifted champions when Rob Strachan died on the 17th May 2014. For many years Rob's name was synonymous with national otter surveys in England, and in later years Scotland and Wales, but for many he is also intimately connected with water vole conservation and research. He was well known to many in the world of conservation, from both the research and practitioner perspectives. He was quite simply one of the most gifted and observant field naturalists I have known, a careful and enthusiastic teacher and communicator, and a very good friend, and his tragic death to pancreatic cancer after a



Rob in March 2014. Photo taken by Dave Lewns

mercifully short illness took him from us far too early in his life.

Rob was born in Billericay in Essex, and it was in this county that he had his formative years and developed his acute field skills. When he was three the family moved to Tiptree where he went to school, and he studied for his 'A' levels in Colchester. He then studied Biology at Lanchester Polytechnic in Coventry, and for his sandwich year he worked at the famous Kew Gardens, working on the classification of orchid species based on pollen morphology. Although Rob's higher education specialised in botany, he was already a well-rounded field naturalist, having been an explorer of the environment around him from an early age, frequently bringing home specimens for further observation and analysis. One of four brothers, he seems to have lived an almost Gerald Durrell-like life in his early years, fascinated by the natural world and sharing his knowledge with his younger brother Chris, who followed in Rob's footsteps and is now one of my colleagues in the Environment Agency.

When I met Rob in 1990 I had already corresponded with him over several years beforehand, because by this time he had already undertaken national otter and pine marten surveys for the Nature Conservancy Council and a national water vole survey for the Vincent Wildlife Trust (VWT). Rob had been one of the two principal surveyors for the national Otter Survey of England in 1984-86, along with Johnny Birks. When he approached me at a Mammal Society conference in London, it was to ask for my help in looking at some of the alternate 50km squares (those not part of the core survey) for the 1991-94 Third National Otter Survey of England, funded by VWT, for which he was to be the sole field surveyor.

From our first meeting we were good friends, sharing a passion for wildlife and travel which animated us every time we met. Rob was always 'there', someone to talk to about mammal conservation matters, otters, and in fact any natural history subject at all, because Rob was an extremely competent all-round naturalist with particular skills in ornithology, mammalogy and botany, and an interest in everything else!

Rob spent ten years of his life as an itinerant wildlife surveyor working on pine marten, otter, and water vole surveys, this last being an eye-opening national survey

which highlighted for the first time the scale of the national decline for this mammal. I and many other friends around the country gave Rob an occasional roof and a pint and a meal at the pub during his roving surveys when he was on 'our patch'. By this time I was working for the Environment Agency (EA) in the Thames catchment, and in due course we were in discussion with Oxford University's Wildlife Conservation Research Unit (WildCRU - headed by Professor David MacDonald) about research opportunities to investigate the decline of the water vole and the role of American mink. I did not hesitate to recommend Rob as a valuable asset to David's team, and knew he was 'available' having just completed the 1991-94 national otter survey. Many happy years of collaboration ensued between the University and the EA, with some ground-breaking research undertaken by the team at WildCRU of which Rob immediately became a key component, leading to the publication of the Water Vole Conservation Handbook (now in its third edition) along with other papers and publications. In 1995 Rob's excellent book *Mammal Detective* was published by Whittet.

During his WildCRU years for a time Rob also was seconded to the Environment Agency for two days a week to provide riparian mammal advice to staff and others from around the country, and he built up particularly extensive experience of development issues as they affect water voles during this time. He always kept his hand in on otter conservation matters as well, and while still working at WildCRU was the principal surveyor for the national otter survey of Scotland in 2003/4, allowing him to visit some of the most wonderful parts of the country that he loved so much. When he finally left WildCRU in 2005 to join the EA in Wales, he could apply all his conservation skills and knowledge to the work of a statutory environmental regulator. In 2009 Rob co-ordinated and undertook part of the field survey work for the Fifth National Otter Survey of Wales.

Throughout this time Rob was an active supporter of the Mammal Society, giving talks at conferences, providing advice to local mammal groups, leading youth group expeditions and supporting numerous other events, and sharing his exceptional knowledge of mammal ecology and field signs with a broad audience. He gave an enormous amount of time to others to help them understand and care for the natural world, and all this with incredible calm and gentleness. In 2008 he quite rightly was awarded the Society's Medal.

Rob had a rich treasure trove of wildlife encounters and experiences from both home and abroad, and always seemed to be in the right place at the right time to see something special. His stories included the nurse who nearly fainted as a wriggling botfly larva was removed from his head, and the otter he rugby-tackled after seeing it hit by a car only to find it wasn't quite as injured as he thought! He enjoyed sharing these experiences, and never lost his thrill and wonder at the natural world, nor his desire to pass this wonder on to others.

Rob was still with the EA's Welsh successor, Natural Resources Wales (NRW) when he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in early spring 2014. He had been living with his partner Jane at Tretower for a few years by this time, and I can only think that Rob's last great endeavor was to hang on so that he could marry Jane at their home, on the day before he died.

Rob's knowledge of otter ecology and conservation was extensive, and he will always be remembered for his passion for this species, and his field survey skills, just as he also will be for his water vole expertise. But his knowledge and skills went far beyond these two species – he was an exceptional field naturalist, and an incredibly kind and helpful human being.

His family and friends have lost someone very special, and the conservation world has lost a very humble and talented hero.

Graham Scholey,
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Chair – UK Otter Biodiversity Action Plan Steering Group.