

## ALWYN LEONARD ('ALEC') BULL (1927–2023)

Alwyn Leonard Bull was born on 26 August 1927 and died peacefully at home with his family at his side on 8 August 2023. We all knew him as Alec and that was the name he preferred and the one he published under. He was brought up on the family farm at Hitcham in Suffolk, the son of Leonard J. and Judith Bull (née Somers). He went to school in Bury St Edmunds but left in 1941 at the age of 14 to help out on the farm. His main task was looking after the small herd of dairy cattle and his subsequent working life would be spent in farming, looking after various herds of cattle in Norfolk and Suffolk until he retired in 1992.

In 1944 Alec became interested in natural history, mostly birds at first but by the middle of that year he was also making records of plants, butterflies and anything else that attracted his attention. He joined an ornithology club that he heard about on the radio and later the same year he was elected to the Suffolk Naturalists' Society. He remained a member throughout his life and at the time of his death he was their longest serving member. In 1948 he married Rita Roper, who shared his interest in ornithology and general natural history, a marriage that was to last until Rita died in 2017. They set up home at nearby Icklingham, in a cottage that came with the farm where he started a new job. Thereafter they would move to various farms in Suffolk and Norfolk as he became an experienced herdsman. In 1960 he took a job in Cranworth, which came with accommodation large enough for what was now a family of six.

It was whilst living at Cranworth that he responded to an appeal from the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) for volunteers to undertake recording for the Common Birds Census. He took this on for 246 acres of the farm where he worked, which involved 8 to 10 visits between 21 March and 21 June, recording on large scale maps every bird seen and heard, and what they were doing. Despite moving away, he carried on with the survey for 29 years, recording the devastating decline in farmland birds brought about



Alec Bull, Earl Soham, Suffolk, 2005. Janet Negal

by the industrialisation of farming which occurred during that time. For much of this time he was a regional representative for the BTO.

It was also at Cranworth that Alec became involved in systematic plant recording for C.P. Petch and E.L. Swann's *Flora of Norfolk*, published in 1968, and for *An Ecological Flora of Breckland*, edited by P.J.O. Trist (1979). The latter allowed him to obtain his first pass into the Stanford Military Training Area (STANTA) and this became a very special place to both him and later to Rita when she was able to join him. He continued his recording of the plants, birds and fungi there for over 50 years and in 2011 published *A Flora of STANTA*, covering his records of vascular plants and bryophytes from 1990 to 2010 and fungi from 1980 to 2010.

When the 1968 *Flora of Norfolk* was published, Alec noticed that almost all the bramble records were still based on the work of the Rev. E.F. Linton, who was in Norfolk for ten years between 1878 and 1888. He saw this as a challenge and having obtained a copy of the *Handbook of the Rubi of Great Britain & Ireland* by W.C.R. Watson, and with the encouragement of Eric Swann and later that

of Eric S. Edees and Alan Newton, he set about learning brambles, with increasing success. He published 14 notes and papers on *Rubus* in *Watsonia* between 1980 and 2009, including the names of nine new species and a major paper mapping the species in Norfolk and Suffolk (1985). He was appointed as *Rubus* Referee for Eastern England in 1996, a role he held until 2017. He also wrote a book entitled *Looking at Brambles* (2011) which catalogued the distributions of the 104 species of *Rubus* that he recorded in Norfolk with detailed descriptions of many. By the time that his active collecting career came to an end, his bramble herbarium contained over 3,000 mounted specimens of more than 260 species, which are now housed in the herbarium of the University of Cambridge (CGE).

Alec joined the BSBI in 1970. In 1984 he took on the vacant post of Vice-county Recorder for East Norfolk (v.c. 27). It was a busy time to be a Recorder. Gathering data for the BSBI Monitoring Scheme ran from 1987 to 1988, collecting records for one in ten 10km squares across Great Britain and recording three designated tetrads in each one. Five of these 10km squares fell into East Norfolk. Alec then began to work systematically towards a tetrad flora for the county of Norfolk in conjunction with the recorders for West Norfolk (v.c. 28), Gillian and Ken Beckett. The aim was to cover all the tetrads in Norfolk (which they almost achieved), including over 1400 in East Norfolk. Data for the tetrad flora continued to be gathered until 1998, co-ordinated by Alec and Gillian who built competent recording teams by holding regular recording meetings in their respective vice-counties and giving encouragement and training on the job. This was the foundation of what came to be known as the Norfolk Flora Group. *A Flora of Norfolk* was published in 1999.

The data for the BSBI Monitoring Scheme had been entered at the Biological Record Centre (BRC) but all the data for the flora was entered onto computer by Alec and Gillian themselves and was then forwarded to BRC for inclusion in the BSBI's *New Atlas of the British and Irish Flora*, which was published in 2002. After *A Flora of Norfolk* was completed, Alec retired from the post of Recorder

in order to focus on STANTA, brambles and his other interests but he carried on tetrad recording for a few years with the Norfolk Flora Group, organising regular visits to northern parts of Suffolk to contribute to a flora of that county. He would turn up at occasional meetings after that, especially if they were in an area under-recorded for brambles, and he led bramble workshops for the group.

Alec was a long-standing member of the Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society (NNNS) and served as secretary for several years. He was elected as President of the society twice, the second time jointly with Gillian Beckett after the publication of *A Flora of Norfolk*. The role he most enjoyed, however, was that of Chairman of the Research Committee. It was under his leadership that they organised detailed surveys of Catfield Hall Fen, the results of which were published as an occasional publication of the Society in 2008. Later on this provided evidence for the species richness of the area, which was being damaged by water abstraction, licences having been issued to nearby farmers for irrigating their crops. The owners of the fen disputed these licenses which eventually lead to a Public Inquiry, which ruled that the evidence was overwhelming and the licences were revoked. Alec was delighted.

Alec was also active in the Little Ouse Headwaters Project and the Norfolk Moth Survey. He ran a moth trap at his home at East Tuddenham for many years, regularly recording 300 to 400 species in a year, and this became his main focus in his declining years. He also wrote a second book on farming life, *The Lowing Herd* (1999), following his earlier *Muck on my Boots* (1976). This charted his life as a herdsman and the changes he saw in dairy farming and agriculture in general, many detrimental to the natural world he loved.

In 1999 Alec's work as a naturalist was recognised by the award of the Sydney Long Memorial Medal, which is awarded jointly by the NNNS and Norfolk Wildlife Trust for services to conservation. Alec was probably one of the most knowledgeable all-round naturalists of his time in Norfolk and Suffolk, and his career in farming and his life-long recording of wildlife gave him a deep understanding of the

countryside. To spend a day out recording plants with him was always a great privilege, educational and most of all, great fun.

Alec is survived by three daughters as well as grandchildren and great-grandchildren. He and Rita

gave their family a keen love of nature and several of them have acquired an interest in natural history.

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**Bob Ellis**