

## ERIC RICHARD MEEK (1947–2017)

Eric Meek was born in Newcastle upon Tyne on 19th June 1947. He went to Gosforth Grammar School and eventually became Head Boy and won a scholarship to study geography at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge. He also became a very successful sportsman, playing rugby for England at schoolboy level.

While he was at school, Eric became passionate about wildlife, especially birds. After graduating from Cambridge in 1968, Eric trained as a teacher and secured his first job, in Newcastle. In 1972, however, he took a year out, to work as an Assistant Warden at Fair Isle Bird Observatory. It was then that he visited Orkney for the first time, on a day trip to North Ronaldsay. After that year off, he returned to teaching and quickly rose to become a head of department at Blyth School in Northumberland.

In 1981 he made the brave decision to give up teaching and move away from Northumberland, where he had become firmly established. He took his young family to Orkney and became the RSPB's Area Officer,

a job he loved and which he carried out with great skill and dedication for 31 years. During his time on Orkney he undertook pioneering research into the Merlin and Hen Harrier and oversaw a huge increase in the area of land RSPB owned and managed. By the time he retired, a quarter of the entire Orkney land area was RSPB reserve. At times, the situation in Orkney was extremely difficult, with huge controversy about RSPB's increased land ownership, much of it directed very personally at Eric. It says much that by the end of his career on Orkney he was universally respected by those who had earlier opposed him.

It was during the 2006 BSBI field meeting to Orkney that I first encountered Eric the botanist, having met Eric the ornithologist on Orkney many years earlier. A few years later, in 2009, Eric decided that his final sabbatical while working for the RSPB (having spent previous sabbaticals in China, Uganda and Azerbaijan) should be spent more 'greenly' in Scotland. He asked me, as BSBI Scottish Officer, if he and his partner, Aileen, might help with the BSBI's Threatened Plants

Eric Meek and Swona on top of Maeshowe, Orkney, with Loch of Harray in the background, 2005. *Steve Sankey.*



Project (TPP). I jumped at the offer and soon developed a long list of rare plant populations that had not been seen for years for Eric and Aileen to re-find and record. This was a challenge they relished so much that they timed their marriage in July 2010 so that they could spend their honeymoon doing TPP surveys.

Eric and Aileen continued to volunteer for an entire fortnight every year right up until his retirement from RSPB in 2012, after which their devotion to the BSBI increased greatly. In addition to the Threatened Plants Project, they made great contributions in these early years to Atlas recording and helped lead field meetings on Orkney.

More recently, Eric volunteered to monitor rare plants on protected sites, as part of the voluntary work the BSBI does for SNH. One of the sites he took on was Morven & Mullachdubh SSSI, near Ballater. This was going to be challenging because the site is extensive and mountainous and had never been thoroughly surveyed before. Eric visited it ten times over the summer of 2015, and eventually found 50 populations of seven out of the site's eight rare species, as well as collecting over 1,300 general plant records. This was an important baseline for future monitoring and great testimony to Eric's drive and determination.

Over the years Eric amassed a total of 57,000 records across Scotland – largely on Orkney. This is a remarkable tally given that he was never a Vice County Recorder himself, although he did contribute hugely to the records held by Elaine Bullard, VC Recorder

for Orkney for many years, and her successor, John Crossley. Eric and John went on to publish a *Scarce, rare and extinct vascular plant register* for Orkney three years ago, that is, in my opinion, one of the best. The other major area of Eric's botanical activity was in the north-east of Scotland, where he moved from Orkney to be with Aileen. He helped nearby BSBI Recorders Ian Francis, David Welch and Robin Payne, either directly or via a BSBI project to promote recording in the Cairngorm National Park. Eric wasn't so keen on computer work, always preferring a day in the field. Despite that, he and Aileen entered vast numbers of records into the BSBI database.

Eric became chairman of the British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee in 2002 and the Fair Isle Bird Observatory Trust in 2014. He was also a popular member of the BSBI Committee for Scotland from 2014 and BSBI Council from 2015.

Eric died on 16th February 2017, aged 69, having collapsed suddenly a few days earlier. We can only imagine the contribution that he would have gone on to make in the BSBI. We have lost a great friend who volunteered his time, effort, expertise and enthusiasm so generously. Eric is survived by his two children from his first marriage, Terry and Sally, and by Aileen.

I am grateful to John Ginnever for a contribution about Eric's early career.

---

**Jim McIntosh**