

PETER WORMELL, BEM (1930-2012)

Peter, who died in May, was probably best known as a lepidopterist and forester, but he was also one of the best field naturalists I have met, with a keen eye, an inquisitive nature, and an all-round understanding of plants, animals and their habitats. He was not very good at writing papers, but in the field he was inspiring, and listening to his stories recalling past adventures and discoveries was a treat.

It is about 25 years since I first met him in Scotland, when he was area officer for much of the west coast. He proved difficult to track down in the office, and when I finally met him, it was obvious why – he was in his element in the field, and not sitting behind a desk. His love and enthusiasm for all creatures great and small was soon apparent, and like all good entomologists, he knew his plants well, and the inter-relations between the different kingdoms.

He was born, however, in flat Lincolnshire, failed his 11 plus examination, and left school at 16. So how did he overcome a rather unindustrious start, to become one of the people to whom many other naturalists turned for information and advice?

After working with a supplier of biological specimens in London, he ‘joined up’ for National Service, which took him to Singapore and the tropics. Then he trained at the Forest of Dean School of Forestry, where he learnt practical techniques, such as setting up and running small tree nurseries using locally collected seed. In 1954 he joined the colonial forest service and was sent out to Northern Rhodesia to map and record the native forest resource. Many people sent out to a vast wilderness with few facilities, trekking on a compass bearing for several weeks at a time, would soon have given up, but this period was inspirational to Peter himself, and he often talked about it as though it were just yesterday.

To give you an idea of his indefatigability, he decided to visit forestry colleagues 400 miles away on Lake Mweru, so he constructed a canvas and wood canoe and set off down the Luapula River in the upper part of the Congo. His friends did not expect to see him again, but not only did he survive, he made a cine film recording the people and the wildlife he met along the way.

His endurance would serve him well in his next job as the first warden naturalist for the Nature

Conservancy on the Isle of Rum. Those who have been there will know that it is not a landscape for the faint-hearted or unfit. Nor were the local community relationships easy. Inter-island sports were organised, he married the local postmistress, Jessie, and they established a family, in addition to a whole-island recording programme.

Thirteen years later he left and settled at Ledaig, north of Oban, Argyll, where he was an area officer for the patch that stretched from Morvern to the Mull of Kintyre, including all the islands. He explored these in his Landrover, always with the moth trap in the back, and by boat, often a canoe. He established a tree nursery in his garden, took a particular interest in Juniper and Scots Pine, and campaigned for the conservation and recognition of Argyll oakwoods. He changed attitudes in the Forestry Commission through his expert knowledge and enthusiasm, gained through practical application and years of experience, and he persuaded landowners and farmers to enter into positive management agreements and to become custodians of their own special habitats.

Peter first took me to the Isle of Mull in the 1970s. It was a wet, cold day in June and all I could see was greyness and dark rows of conifers. It changed overnight and the next day was bright and sunny, so we set off in a RIB (rigid inflatable boat) for the Wilderness on Ardmeanach peninsula to search for the rare Burnet moths, and we found them in a new area. The wind got up, the tide changed and we were ‘washed-up’ onto a beach where we had not intended to land. After an hour, holding the boat chest-high in relatively warm sea water to prevent the engine being clogged with sand, we decided that we just had to try and paddle out off-shore and then re-start the engine. Three attempts later we succeeded and then persuaded our three companions and a dog, to jump aboard again, rather than walk the eight miles out round the rough coastline. I guess he passed his sense of adventure and some of his vast enthusiasm and knowledge on to me, as well as to his three daughters.

LYNNE FARRELL



Peter Wormell (1930–2012). Photo taken on Rum in the 1960s from the collection of Mrs J. Wormell