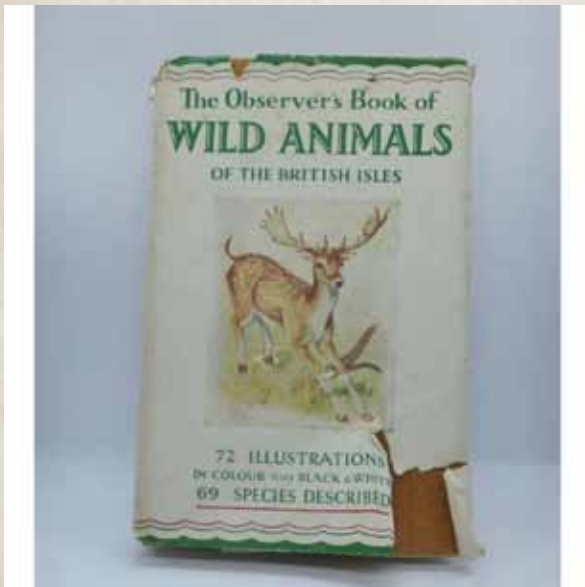


What Drew Me to an Interest in Natural History

MIKE AVERILL

You are the product of your surroundings and mine for the first 14 years of my life was growing up on a smallholding on the Worcestershire/Herefordshire border at Cradley. This was in the 1950's when Cradley, although only 11 miles from Worcester, may as well have been 50 miles away as there was no electricity, only septic tanks and water pumped from a spring $\frac{3}{4}$ mile away. It was definitely a case of all hands to the pump from an early age and I loved it.

There were always animals to look after and I knew I loved it there but probably didn't appreciate it at the time. Living close to nature like that, growing and rearing things makes you understand quite a lot about how things connect, but the one thing that you may not know is their proper scientific name. Mum and Dad were never much for having books around and any that I acquired usually came via my grandparents and the first one of those was the Observers Book of Wild Animals.

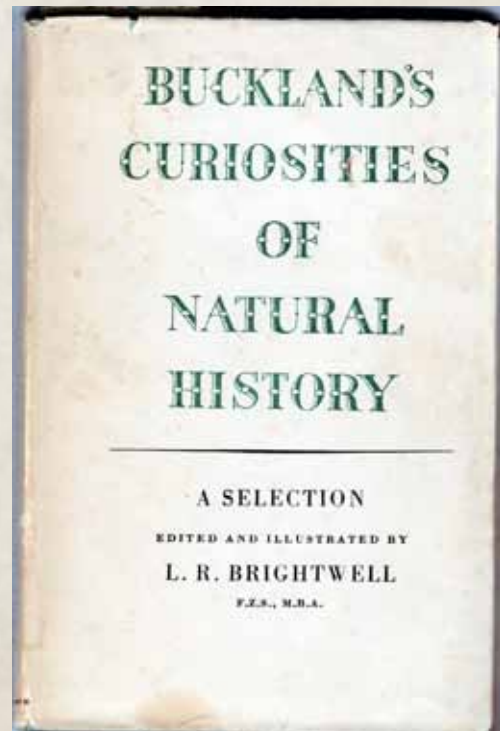


This little book must have been the first for a lot of youngsters at the time. Other books followed mainly about birds and trees. My grandparents were very interested in local history, geology and particularly trees and I suppose that love of trees has stayed with me to this day. They also had a collection of New Naturalist books up to volume 40 and I only mention this as I came to inherit these much later in my thirties.

For those who know that series you will understand my disappointment that they hadn't gone on with the collection as number 41 was a classic issue on dragonflies. There are always other memorable books that stick in a young person's mind and one I remember well was Buckland's Curiosities of Natural History. This was a book I won as a prize at school aged ten and it was a collection of stories written by Francis Trevelyan Buckland (1826-80). He was a man who lived at the time

of Darwin and was a typical Victorian collector and he would collect anything and everything that moved or had moved. His life as told in his stories is a collection of encounters with animals from keeping a monkey at home, dosing a sick porpoise with brandy, to finding out how a strongman could crush stones with a blow of his fist. He also had stories about what you could find in a horse-pond apart from mud and duckweed and began the notion in my mind that no matter how small the pond might be, it was the whole world to its inhabitants!

As a youngster I never really knew what I would end up doing when I grew up but I knew it had to be something outdoors. There was a possibility that I might try auctioneering as apparently during an auction of some pigs at home when I was about eight, I was heard to



shout- 'surely she is worth more than a tanner' when I misheard the call at the fall of the hammer of 'a tenner'.

Well the sad day came when we gave up farming and moved to Worcester and I had to come to terms with the fact that the countryside was something you saw after a bike ride out of town. The good news for me was that I got to take 'A' levels at the local Technical College where there was a very inspirational geography lecturer who opened up the rest of the world to me. Field trips to places like the Gower were suddenly on offer and the whole physical side of geography captured my imagination. It seemed only natural then that I go on to study Geography and Geology at University. The course included field trips to Spain and that was the icing on the cake as it was the first time

that I had travelled abroad.

After graduating I was lucky to get a job on a small research project near Gloucester, looking at urban and rural catchments and their runoff characteristics. This led to other jobs in water resources and monitoring with Severn Trent Water Authority so I had managed to get the sort of job that would take me anywhere in the West Midlands and near the places that I loved.

When is the 'Road-to-Damascus natural history moment' coming you ask. Well it was coming together, because by 1982 I had met and married Linda, who I was able to share interests with and we began to spend more time exploring the countryside and helping the County Wildlife Trust.

A very big factor all along was photography and I always had a camera of some sort or another from the Brownie 127 taking my first shot of a sheep (well it was an animal) later winning butterfly photo competitions and making the eager change to digital.



My first photograph

Mike Averill

Freshwater life; mammals; trees; insects have always been a strong theme in the photographs and it was taking a shot of a creature that I saw catch and eat a wasp near Falmouth one day that started me in pursuit of knowing more about Dragonflies.

Luckily there had been a landmark book by Cyril Hammond in 1977 which enabled a reasonable chance of identifying dragonflies & damselflies and I never looked back.

Once you realise you can positively identify things, with the correct keys, you naturally want to move to other groups, identification is the first step and then you want to see how all these different creatures live together. I had intended to get to grips with dragonflies as a smallish group and move on but although I have extended since to lots of other groups, dragonflies will always be a comfort zone and it's thanks to them that I was initially drawn in to the world of insects and they have continued to entice me to some wonderful places ever since.

Luckily for me my involvement with the Worcestershire



Southern Hawker eating a wasp

Mike Averill

Wildlife Trust and Wyre Forest Study Group has opened many avenues of interest and I will always be grateful to those who have shared their knowledge freely with me.

To me an interest in Natural History is just part of an interest in the natural world and while I have become fascinated by so many aspects of our world, we all have our favourites don't we?

