



# WILDFILMHISTORY

100 YEARS OF WILDLIFE FILMMAKING

## Paul Reddish : Oral History Transcription

**Name of interviewee:**

Paul Reddish

**Reasons why chosen for an oral history:** Paul is a longstanding producer of natural history films who has worked extensively with the BBC and independent production companies. In addition to this, Paul teaches the only postgraduate wildlife documentary course in Europe at the University of Salford.

**Name of interviewer:**

John Sparks

**Reasons why interviewer chosen:**

Longstanding colleague and friend

**Name of cameraman:**

Alan Griffiths

**Date of interview:**

14<sup>th</sup> October 2009

**Place of interview:**

Bristol, United Kingdom

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**1. The early years**

JS: *So, Paul, to start off, just give your name and what you're doing now and the date.*

PR: It's October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2009. I'm Paul Reddish and currently making a documentary on satellites and how they've transformed our understanding of the planet.





JS: *So we all start off by being terribly interested in animals as small kids and so on and so forth. A lot of people lose that interest, you didn't. So how did you get interested and maintain that interest in natural history?*

PR: Well, I've always been interested in wildlife. My mother tells an apocryphal story except it's true so it's not apocryphal, that's a stupid thing to say. She tells this lovely story of me breaking my collarbone, taking me to the hospital and then the hospital ringing up saying I've run away, they'd lost me and this is me at 2½. They found me in the hospital gardens - this is in Singapore - with my head stuck in an ant nest eyeballing the ants wondering what all the little ants are doing. So from a very early age I've always lived in the countryside, I've been very lucky in that sense as a child and spent all my childhood filling my wellie boots with water, pottering around in ponds, looking for birds, nests, the like and the interest has stayed with me.

Now I think it's always a mystery why people have the particular passions they have but it's a few years since I had my head in that ants' nest but I've still got the same passion for wildlife and the natural world (3).

JS: *But you're also a great fisherman too, aren't you?*

PR: Yes.

JS: *So how do you reconcile the two?*

PR: Exactly. I was going to use the classic defence of Peter Scott who was a great huntsman, a great shooter of geese, and then probably the number one protector of geese in the world and the founder of the World Wildlife Fund. I think fishing takes you into the wild. It also puts you there in a very, very quiet, discrete way so you see, you become part of the place and you see things that you wouldn't otherwise see. On top of that there is just the raw hunting instinct. It may not be an instinct but I've certainly got passion for catching fish. Most of the fish I catch I put back. It's as much an intellectual challenge, what are they feeding on, and you do get an enormous knowledge of wildlife in depth that you wouldn't get otherwise I think if you go fishing.

I was fishing two weeks ago on the Wye, up to my armpits in water, standing in the middle of the river in my waders, fishing away happily and an otter and her cub swam right past me, porpoising down the river. They just kind of looked at me as they went past about 10 feet away, that's why I go fishing.

JS: *But you're now in wildlife filmmaking, a very distinguished one. Can you remember your first experience of watching television or maybe radio when you were young?*

PR: It wasn't radio so much it was television because it was the big thing that had arrived in the household and this is probably not an uncommon story that being born in the early 50s, in the late 50s, early 60s, we got our first tiny, round tube television with flickery black and white pictures on it. It was mesmerizing really and other than the children's programmes which I was growing out of by that time in the early 60s, the things that really switched me on were the classic, entertaining, out in the field, revelatory for their time, programmes about wildlife. There was Cousteau doing his thing with the sea. There was Armand and Michaela Denis with Gertie the rhino (1) and all those amazing things.



So that kept my interest alive definitely and television was an important part of my understanding of the world from then on really, right up till when I joined the industry.

*JS: Of course, today I suppose it's Attenborough, isn't it? Vast numbers of people have their experience of watching natural history on television with Attenborough but they don't all end up in filmmaking, you did. So what made you decide to take that course in your life?*

PR: I wasn't going to do it. I've always sort of been happy with the moment. So I was at university and did fine there and got a decent degree, so I did a PhD and I was fine there. Then a BBC film crew turned up to film my professor and I was part of the whole process and I thought, do you know, this is rather interesting what these chaps get up to. I hadn't ever thought about it up to that point I'd be absolutely honest with you. So this is me in my mid 20s and what intrigued me about it was there was a lovely, almost unique mix of art and science, and there was a genuine value to it. It was a *Horizon* (2) they were doing. They were going to tell very interesting stories about science to the general public. I thought, that's it, that's what I ought to do.

So off I went down to London to talk to *Horizon* (2) and they said very nice, goodbye. So there's another success story and I stayed doing my PhD for a while and I kept in contact with Chris Parsons, a wonderful man who ran the Unit for many years. They invited me down and I came down as a researcher for *Natural World* (3). So it was literally a film crew turning up on my doorsteps at university that triggered the idea: maybe I don't want to be an academic after all, maybe I ought to go off and promote, promulgate the natural world (3) rather than study it.

*JS: What was your first professional engagement? Your first engagement was with the Natural History Unit or with Horizon (2)?*

PR: No, with the Natural History Unit. I worked with Barry Paine and still, despite that, here I am still. Thank you, Barry. I worked as his researcher on a lovely film called *Uninvited Guests* (4) which looked at all the animals that lived in the house with us, and it was a great film to work on. It was intriguing; it had people elements in it but it also a wide range of photographic techniques, everything from the absolute micro to trying to get a sense of time lapse of seasons in the house and so on. So that was a terrific programme to start my career on.

*JS: Yes. I know you worked on Flight of the Condor (5).*

PR: I worked on the follow-up to *Flight of the Condor*. They'd just finished *Flight of the Condor* when I joined the BBC and I worked on *Making of a Continent* (6) which was Mike Andrews' follow-up series, a three-parter on kind of geological determinism if you like for Western USA. It was a fantastic thing to work for. Mike had done lots of aerals already for *Flight of the Condor* and carried on that expertise into working in North America. So I learnt a great deal about aerals. I was like the location manager, back-up crew for Mike while he did most of his filming and it was a very successful series. In fact, they did a follow-up I think. Ned Kelly did the follow-up series (7) to it and it won the Peabody Award in the States, not due to me but due purely to Mike's brilliance I think.

*JS: Mike was a very distinguished producer in the Unit. What did you learn from him? Was he very crucial in your development as a wildlife filmmaker?*

PR: Yes, I think he was. I think he should get a great deal of credit. He was very strict, that should be no surprise. I mean his nickname as we all know was Chalky but he was also very fair. He expected a great deal of hard work and a degree of thoroughness. His production skills, I think, were second to none really, just how he set about making a project, laying it out, planning it. He was meticulous and that's something that even though I look shambolic behind the shambolic there's more shambolic and behind that there's meticulous, there you are. If you believe that you'll believe anything.

JS: *He didn't suffer fools gladly, did he?*

PR: No, he didn't.

JS: *He didn't suffer fools at all.*

PR: Yes, but he put up with me for a year so I don't know how he did that.

## 2. Learning the ropes

JS: *That was the second major project you worked on, was it, after working with Barry on The World About Us?*

PR: It was just a very interesting time because Peter Jones had just arrived and it had stopped being *The World About Us* and become *The Natural World* (3), so it was the beginnings of *The Natural World* (3). 81, 82 I think that is. So I worked with Barry (Paine) on the house programme (8) and then because you just do the research on the front of these things, I then went off and worked with Mike Andrews on *Making of a Continent*. Also Peter Jones was persuaded by Alan McGregor, a very distinguished cameraman at the time, that we should make a film on the Danube Delta (9) which was then still very much in the depths of the Ceausescu Romanian regime. They sent me off as a researcher, brand new to television, 'Reddish, go and sort out the Romanian bureaucracy!' So off I went and sorted out the Romanian bureaucracy.

Alan went out and started filming there. I went off and did all the research and location managing for Mike in western USA and came back and found that progress hadn't been quite as good as expected. Peter said, well, go and produce the Danube film. So I was dropped from a great height into a European swamp, thank you.

JS: *So apart from starting the process of the downfall of Ceausescu. So that Danube film was the first film that you actually produced and had almost total responsibility for?*

PR: I can't say I had total responsibility because I picked it up, largely because Peter was busy obviously running the strand and thought he was going to produce it, but I think wisely decided that he didn't have the time to do it. I'd set it up, gone away and then came back and looked at it and thought, gosh, we are missing one or two sequences to put it politely. Then Alan and I laboured away and came back and delivered the film. But, yes, I am credited. It's my first credit if you like. There you are, it's my first film.



JS: *In those early days when we all went into the business and then we blunder around a bit because we haven't necessarily got all the skills, was there any piece of advice you were given which has stood you in very good stead since then and you've always sort of held by that?*

PR: Well, lots actually. I mean there's not one particular one but there's four or five key ones. Your one, you always used to say, listen, remember it's entertainment. Don't go diving off and writing vast academic treaties because people don't want to know. It's entertaining. You've got to entertain and I think you used to say the audience is the Daily Mirror, not The Times. You're the very person who quoted The Times this morning to me but there we are.

So that was always a good piece of advice because I think I have a tendency because everything fascinates so I'd like to tell you everything in depth and you're quite right, that's as much as people want to know. That's the information get it across and get it across entertainingly. So you're to blame.

JS: *I'm duly flattered by that. I was sent out by a chap called Ron Webster with a full sync crew when I didn't know anything about filming and I haven't forgotten that, and I decided I would learn all about it before being in charge of a film crew.*

*I think we did discuss when we last met, you of all people have spent really quite long periods in the field as opposed to short filming trips. What's the longest you've ever spent, in a sense the most memorable?*

PR: Gosh, well, several. I think the longest undoubtedly I spent was making a film on Alaska (10) which is still to this day a remote place but in the 80s it was very remote. So the only way we thought we could do it was to actually just go out there and then move around. The only way you can move around Alaska is to take charter float planes. So off you go and then you land on some remote lake in the middle of nowhere. Basically there's one road that runs north to south in Alaska, that's it. So you can't do much filming using a car.

So we used to fly out, camp for maybe 8 to 10 days, come back, have a shower because we were a bit smelly in Anchorage and then fly back out and do another stint and we did this for 13 weeks. It became a way of life for me and the cameraman. We just went off and did this all the time. We thought we could keep doing this and we literally got on the British Airways flight home as if we were on yet another float plane going home, and we looked out the window as we were flying over and I thought, damn, we can't land this one, we're going home.

It was glorious fun. I mean family wise it was a terribly irresponsible thing to do to be away that length of time. Great fun, very productive but it became a way of life. You thought, oh, I can do this for evermore, this is great. It was memorable because we were filming walrus one week, brown bears the next week, polar bears the week after that. I mean it was just fantastic.

The other big, memorable trip was the Birds of Paradise film (11) I made with David where we travelled around. I think we did six weeks travelling around the island of New Guinea and some of the offshore islands like Batanta and Halmahera with David, and that was enormously fun. It was just great fun. I mean nerve wracking. You had the great man with you and everything had to be like clockwork, and New Guinea's maybe not the best island to try and do a clockwork shoot in but it worked. It all went terribly well, not due to me but due to the PA's organisational skills. The combination of living in a rainforest, we were camping the







whole time, and waking up to the sounds of Birds of Paradise and then going and seeing them, and just watching David's genuine enthusiasm for these fabulous creatures, that will last with you forever.

*JS: We'll come back to that one again. Something perhaps we should have picked up on a little earlier. What was the first film or programme you were totally responsible for in terms of originating it, scripting it and so on and so forth?*

*PR: It was Wildlife on One (12). I must have been absolutely wet behind the ears assistant producer, brand new, so it was very brave. I think it was one of the great things with the Unit in the 80s that it was growing in stature, growing in confidence but still able to go, go on, take a chance, off you go and do it and they did it with me and I'm eternally grateful. So I came up with a completely crazy idea to make a film on humming birds. They're easy in one sense that they're not frightened of people per se and they will come to a flower. That's it, that's the easiness over. The rest of it's technically very hard to do but when you're young you're even more arrogant than I am now, have even more belief in yourself than I do now, and you think of course we can do it.*

So that was my very first film, a *Wildlife on One* (12) on humming birds which was luckily a great success due to lovely Attenborough commentary, due to great camerawork and I got towed along with the rest of the guys.

*JS: You rightly said in some ways they're very easy because they come to flowers and that's where they feed and set up. You also said they're very challenging than others. So can you say something about that and how you cope with that?*

*PR: Humming birds are easy in one way as I say but the challenges with humming birds are just they are so fast and the wing beats are so extraordinary. But if you really want to understand what they're doing you have to film them at high speed and then you have all the problems of high speed. In those days you had one option, you took a **Photo-Sonics** camera with you which went to 500 frames (per second), double perf (perforated), ripped film all over the place, turned it into dust more often than into beautiful images. So you had all of those technical problems and we were working either high altitude in Ecuador or down in the rainforest. In the rainforest there's no light so there you're trying to light areas in a rainforest. I can remember trying to connect cables together in lashing rain in a little clearing in the rainforest thinking probably I shouldn't tell the health and safety man what we're doing at the moment.*

But we did it. We took lights with us and we took high speed cameras and we just blundered our way through really. A dint of enthusiasm I think got us there.

*JS: You hinted that probably you chose that subject out of foolishness or you didn't really understand what you were getting into. Would you have actually done that had you realised what the difficulties were at the time? Would you have still taken it on?*

*PR: Would I have taken on humming birds if I'd known how difficult? I think you can probably still say the same thing about every project I take. Would I have taken on satellites had I known how technically impossible it is to understand them? No, but once you start. I think it's always the case and I'm still as nervous as a pussycat at the beginning of every production I do because you're going, well, what have I got here? Can we make it? Will I make a complete fool of myself? So nothing changes I don't think.*



You learn a lot but the lovely thing about filmmaking is no matter what you learn there's always something new. Every production has a new challenge to it and the speed of technology means you're pretty much working with new kit these days anyway.

### **3. Birds of Paradise**

*JS: So from if you like humble beginnings as a researcher through to making your first film on humming birds you've now got a long list of productions to your credit and some of them very distinguished. Which one gives you most pride looking back and thinking, gosh, that's really absolutely right?*

*PR: I think if I look at all the films I've made over the last 25 plus years, I think the one that probably gives me the greatest pride is *Attenborough in Paradise*. I think it is a good film but also it was probably the most ambitious film. I mean we were even madder than we were to try and make a film on humming birds in the early 80s than to try and make this film with Attenborough. In the mid 90s we did that one. At that time, very little was still known about many of the birds of paradise. Some of them no scientist or western person had ever seen them display and we dived in as only fools can. It was a huge challenge and I think in some ways a success simply to have filmed them but I think the cameramen did much better than that, they filmed them in really quite good style.*

*JS: I mean in some ways you were entering an unknown field because of the nature of these birds really. So what was the key to success of the behaviour you got?*

*PR: If there was one decision made on birds of paradise that made it a success more than anything else it was to put two researchers into the field, very carefully pick the two researchers. Both had experience of working in New Guinea, both were good ornithologists, amateur but good ornithologists.*

*JS: Who were they?*

*PR: Phil Hurrell and David Gibbs were the two guys and they were both tough. Phil knew Papua New Guinea well and that was an English speaking country so he was fine there. David Gibbs, who's actually a professional entomologist, not only was a terrific field ornithologist but he spoke Bahasa Indonesia which was great, so he could go off and speak with the local people. We put them into the field for six weeks I think before the cameramen came out. So they went round and looked out everywhere, met the local people, kind of oiled all the wheels because the politics of working in New Guinea is as complicated as the hardship, the physical difficulties there.*

So I think those guys made all the difference really because they found the places, they found the birds and they had time enough to go, well, that's nice but we'll find somewhere better.

*JS: I know that you used one very interesting technique to get the birds at their bowers and display areas, very useful having someone looking in. So I think people would like to hear that story.*

PR: Well, if you've got Attenborough you've got a start to start with and you've got someone who's just a great communicator but we wanted to do more than that. I don't know if people still do this anymore but in those days the great thing to do was to get the two shot, convince people that Attenborough was really there right beside the birds. Well, it's hard to do that with most of the birds of paradise but bowerbirds, well, they're on the ground and they have their bower and they're keen on their bower but they're still wary birds. They won't let you approach very easily and you don't have David six months to acclimatise.

So I thought, well, we have to find a way of getting these birds familiarised with people so that when David turns up he can just walk in there, do his piece and the bird will bounce around him. We thought and thought and thought, and it had to be convincingly David and it had to be shippable. Well, the answer was, dare I say it, an inflatable dolly which I have to confess for my sins, and it is a terrible thing to confess, I wasn't brave enough to go down to a sex shop and buy. I sent my PA (Personal Assistant) to the sex shop to buy the inflatable male dolly who was quite a disgusting object, particularly when you blew him up which we did in the office. We then dressed him in David's trademark clothes of the denim shirt and the khaki trousers, and there he sat in his inflated glory in the rainforest for about six weeks before David turned up and David replaced him. Hardly anybody noticed the difference, certainly the birds didn't and we got our shot. There you go.

JS: *Right, and it's still upstairs, is it?*

PR: Well used, yes.

JS: *Yes, you were talking about one thing that you always remembered was entertainment. Some of your programmes, there's another one that I seem to recall which had a good kind of sense of humour in it as well: Look Who's Talking (13).*

PR: That is a film that you commissioned, John, and I'm delighted you did and very brave of you too because it was definitely not run of the mill *Natural World* (3) fodder in any sense.

JS: *If I may interject, Neil Nightingale got his name on the end.*

PR: Yes, that's a bone of contention for all of us I suspect.

JS: *It was a film about parrots.*

PR: *Look Who's Talking* is a film about parrots that John Sparks very bravely I think commissioned because it was definitely mould breaking. The sales pitch that I used was simply that parrots would tell their own story. We would get parrots to talk and to a degree I think we succeeded. It was a bowl of cherries film - that's a John Sparks-ism by the way - which meant it was lots of interesting pieces but no specific story to it. So what we did was made it as a series of chapters and the parrots introduced each of the chapters. We found remarkable people in this country who had Amazons and African Greys which are the best talkers, and we gave them enough time, months, to get their birds to say the various bits and pieces.

Some of the owners and some of the parrots were just fabulous characters. There was one lovely one with a real beautiful Dorset burr who used to chat away: who's my little lover then? Just a lovely parrot but the best



one was the one that opened the film where there's a little parrot sat beside the camera and goes 'lights, camera, action' and the film started. It was quite wonderful and it was a hoot. It was a lot of fun to make and I think some of that fun came through in the final film too.

*JS: Since I'm being quoted I also said every film has to have a good story with a beginning and middle and end.*

#### **4. An ever-changing industry**

*How do you think the business has changed? You've been in it a good span of years and you must have seen changes in technology which might make things easier to some extent, maybe more difficult.*

PR: How's the business changed? Gosh, in the 28 years I've actually been in the business; now it's changed fundamentally. Business wise it's changed fundamentally, technology wise it's changed fundamentally, they are two different things. Business wise it is a huge international business now. No one broadcaster can fund things, probably not even the BBC quite honestly. They need these days to get a definite, the ink dry on a signature before they can go forward with their huge projects, and that makes the job. You spend half your time I think now selling ideas and getting things off the ground, and the other half actually making them. If you're my age and remember what it's like then I know which half I enjoy more. That's not going to change though, that's the way the industry is.

Technology wise pluses and minuses. HD (High Definition) is a great plus I think, it's a wonderful medium but it has drawbacks in the sense that unless you go onto **Phantoms**, which aren't really HD cameras, not even television cameras, you can't do high speed. So some of the really nice, artistic things you could do you do with much greater difficulty now than you used to do. But HD is the future and I suspect we'll go to Super HD at some point and that wall there will become one giant television set.

So there are changes both in what the industry's doing business wise. There are technology changes. There's also a continuously evolving change in tastes, what wildlife programming is and I think it's inevitable that wildlife as a genre has followed television generally, and despite the screams of protest from the executives it's dumbed down. It's rather sad really to see it dumbed down because it takes away the value of the production. If it's purely entertainment *Strictly Come Dancing (14)* does it better in my opinion. There's got to be a value to what we're doing but that makes me sound very old-fashioned which I'm quite happy to be.

*JS: Where does it go from here do you think?*

PR: I don't know. I really don't know because I'm not sure I can predict where television generally is going. I think the problem is that the whole thing is accelerated because in most people's minds, in young people's minds, television is for brain dead entertainment and that's a very rude way of putting it but you know what I mean. You just sit down, switch off and watch the telly. Switch on the telly and switch off our brain. If you want to know things you don't go to the television anymore you go to the internet and that has accelerated this dumbing down I think.

The fact that we have thousands of channels, certainly hundreds of television channels, means that the old-fashioned sit down and watch event type stuff where everybody would sit down and watch it doesn't happen because daughters want to watch fashion on the fashion channel, sons want to watch sport on the sport channel, father does and so on. So television itself has disintegrated really, it's fractured into lots and lots of smaller markets and the core market of what the BBC used to do is shrinking all the time, and I think it threatens the BBC unfortunately.

*JS: With the rapid expansion of the internet where people are going to be watching visual entertainment, whatever you like to call it, do you think there's a place for in-depth programmes of the sort that maybe were being screened 20 or 30 years ago? Whereas, as you rightly say, the intellectual level is now way down on what it used to be.*

*PR: I hope so. I'm not sure. I'm not sure I'm confident about that. I sort of, from a purely selfish point of view, hope it'll hang out for a few more years till I can collect my pension but I'm not sure that people will go there. I think they'll go to the internet for that. The problem then is that that is such a fragmented area that even people who want to go out and make something that has content and some value to it, I think those are good words to use, won't have the budgets to do it because they're going to go out to tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands, not to millions. Therefore they are just not going to be able to draw budgets. ITV's the first one to face it but I think the business model is broken. I'm not sure how they're going to fix that really.*

*JS: You of all people, if I was to think of someone who has very often combined natural history with, if you like, science, the sort of physical things. I'm thinking of a film that you made as a co-production I think with the Australians about the whole spectrum of the life of this planet and its origins, and then maybe some of the things you've been doing for Austrian television. I mean you have combined science to some extent with a lot of natural history. Is this something you hope to continue with and do you think that has a future?*

*PR: In my career I've done pure natural history, we've talked about some of those. I've also done films that combine science and natural history, and I suspect they might have more of a future than pure natural history for the middle market because it appears to be the case that you can still get funding for blockbusters, because they become landmark things and everybody will get down and get round a television set and watch them. *Life (15)* is the latest example where you should be able to draw huge audiences but they cost enormous sums of money to make and they take a very long time.*

The middle market, what was the home of *natural world (3)*, I think is the one that's threatened most because it can't compete with *Life (15)*. *Life (15)* is actually sort of destroying its value because they go, well, that's not as good as what I saw last night. I saw those dolphins from space and they were zooming around and you can't do that with a *natural world (3)* budget. But what you can do with a *natural world (3)* budget is bring more story and you can bring science and you can bring revelation that isn't hugely expensive, visual revelation or behaviour revelation, it's information revelation.

So, and this is not a plug because we're not plugging to anybody, but the current film I'm doing is about satellites and it's about the extraordinary things that satellites have found out about our planet which I think 99% of the audience don't know. So there will be revelation there but not in blockbuster, Hollywood visual style but in 'did you watch that programme last night? Did you know the sea's got hills and valleys in it which it has by the way, 140 metres high permanent hills in the sea and the valleys are 80 metres deep?' Everyone thinks water's just smooth, it's going to be a flat surface -not true. There are permanent hills and valleys in the sea. The Irish were always right, you can go water skiing.

JS: *But in a sense you can make those spectacular because of the amazing power of computers that bring sophisticated graphics to the screen, can't you?*

PR: That's an area that, well, kicked off. I think *Walking with Dinosaurs* (16) was the thing that really launched that area and it's become mainstream. They've just cancelled the latest Impossible Pictures thing (17), haven't they? ITV have just cancelled it. Anyway, that's the warning to us all because the problem is that computer animation, that highly sophisticated computer animation is expensive. So in tough times ITV pulled the plug on it. I'm sure it's an economic decision not an editorial one. But, yes, you can go into areas that are just impossible to film. You can film dinosaurs. You can't film them, obviously they don't exist.

I've worked on a series that went the other way. It was called *The Future is Wild* (18) and for the sake of trying to find an entertaining way to talk about evolution we created future worlds and populated them with animals, and then got them computer animated and put on the back plates and so on. In fact I'm currently doing pre-development work on a second series with Sounds Like and Warner Brothers has just signed a contract for a feature film based on *The Future's Wild* which I'm sure I shan't be working on. So, John, don't look at me like I'm going to make my millions because I shall be discarded I'm sure before I reach anywhere close to Hollywood.

## **5. Stories from the field**

JS: *Ever been in danger?*

PR: No, never, not with tigers and hippos, all fundamentally safe animals. Various foolish things, they're all my own fault and I think they always are your own fault if you get yourself in danger. One of the physical really stupid things we did was filming in those long periods where we thought we were really just living the life when we were in Alaska. We were in Prince William Sound which is just the most fabulous place. It's tens, dozens of glaciers pouring into a complicated kind of near estuarine situation and carving off icebergs everywhere. On the icebergs were seals, well you expect those, but also sea otters.

We came across this wonderful iceberg that had been in the water quite a long time and they melt in a most peculiar way so it looked like translucent blue Gruyere cheese. It had lots and lots of holes in it and there was water sloshing in out of the holes making a lovely noise, and laid over this thing, three times the size of this room in area, there were about 50 sea otters. So we were in the boat and we were sneaking around ever so closely but, of course, you have to use a wide angle lens, you're in a boat. I thought, no, this won't do, typical pushy producer. We're going onto this iceberg. We got the tripod out, drove the tripod spikes into the ice and the cameraman and I are on the edge of this iceberg and we filmed away. We got all the shots and the little otters woke up and went what's it all about, into the water, and we were, oh, fantastic.

The boat came up, nudged the iceberg, we jumped aboard and the whole iceberg flipped and I thought you're a silly bugger, Paul, because they do it all the time. They just melt at differential rates and then the whole centre of gravity's wrong and this thing just turned arse over tit, and that was it we would have been dead. So that was a particularly stupid one but there's many more I can tell you.

Well, I think everybody who's worked in the industry any length of time is going to have harem scarem type

stories. The iceberg's certainly one of them and there are many more. We had a brown bear into our camp but that's quite a long story so I'll tell you a shorter story. Back in the 80s we were making a film in North America. The BBC were making a series on North America and I was doing the desert film (19). So we were in the Sonoran Desert and I wanted to film coral snakes because they're just terrifically beautiful things. They're lovely banded things, brightly coloured and terribly, terribly venomous with neurotoxins and therefore not to be messed around with. They're quite small and they're fessorial and normally up to that point really people have just given you a kind of beauty shot of one swimming across the surface.

So I thought, no, we're going to do it properly. So we made a little set out in the desert in the field. A scientist turned up with the box with said snake and I said, well, how are we going to handle this thing? He said, 'well, this is what you do, you use welder's gloves', really heavy duty, thick, suede leather welder's gloves because they can't bite through it. So he gives me the snake and the cameraman's there, half buried in the sand with his camera looking down these artificial tubes. My job is to insert the snake into the tubes and off it swims straight towards the cameraman and then to grab it before it gets to the cameraman. We do this once or twice and it's all going extremely well, and I put the snake in again and this time of course the snake's had enough of this silly game and it's got bored of swimming along this thing. So it's in there.

So I'm looking where it is and I've got my hand down with the glove at the other end where the cameraman is. But then the snake decides it will come out and it thinks, oh, a lovely dark hole here and it swims inside. So now I've got one of the most poisonous snakes in the world, not outside but inside between my skin and the glove. So I thought this is not good, this is not a good situation to be in, at which point I decided the only way to get out of this quick is to launch. So I just launched a welding glove and the poor coral snake about 50 yards across the desert at which point the scientist screamed quite rightly and we all ran after it. The poor snake was still cowering inside the glove, probably much more frightened than I was of the snake but it just shows you. With all safest, careful planning if you let an idiot close to it, i.e. me; what happens? The bloody snake climbs inside the glove, nice cosy place to live. Sadly the snake didn't bite me so I'm still here.

## **6. Presenters**

*JS: Any great people you've met when making films?*

*PR: Well, we've mentioned Attenborough and he's one of the greats I think. He is one and still remains. He was doing wonderful things before I joined the industry. He's still doing wonderful things. He'll probably still be doing wonderful things after I've left the industry. He just keeps going on and on. So he's the number one great.*

A lovely moment for me, I never worked with him but thanks to the BBC, it was their 25<sup>th</sup> or 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary bash party, Heinz Sielmann came over and he was always one of my heroes, ever since he did that wonderful, wonderful film on black woodpeckers (20). I remember as a boy watching that film four or five times just wowed with what he'd done. The amount of effort he'd put into it, the ingenuity he'd put into getting shots of a woodpecker inside a nest. That's long before I went to university. That must have been a little germ, a little seed that was stored and must have meant something because here I am, still haven't done it but one day. Maybe in my retirement, John, we'll go and film black woodpeckers in the Bavarian woods.

*JS: If you weren't Paul Reddish, who would you like to have been?*





PR: I don't think I've ever asked myself that question. I have no idea. It would have to be someone who had a lot of fun because that's the point of all of this. You've got to enjoy what you're doing and translate some of that joy and passion across. I think it would be someone in the industry I suspect. No, I don't think I've got a name for you. Sorry about that. Isn't that smug? I'm quite happy with who I am.

JS: *What do you think of some of the celebrities? A lot of natural history these days you've got presenters who like getting in front of the camera and somehow they seem to take on greater importance than the animals themselves. This seems to be a trend. Is this something that appeals to you?*

PR: Not at all, the exact opposite. I can understand some of the arguments they make for it but personally I don't like it at all. If you're my age and you came up through the industry the whole point of joining the industry was to convey the wonder of the natural world, the revelation of it, the excitement of it. It's just a fantastic place and it's a sad indictment I think that you think it's so boring that you need to put a presenter in it to make it interesting. Now it might be case.

The argument against that is people like Steve Irwin brought a new audience to natural history and I think they brought a new audience but I don't think they brought a new audience to natural history, they brought an audience to Steve Irwin. I won't take anything away from him as an entertainer, he was an absolute natural. He was just wonderful to watch on television but he was basically strangling snakes for light entertainment. There you go, is that strong enough?

No, I think it's shocking. I think it's very sad and it's a sad indictment of lack of imagination, lack of courage by executives in television that they always go this lowest common denominator, dumb it down route because they're so scared of taking a risk and losing an audience.

JS: *You mentioned TV executives. We both Nigel Marvin who's actually a very good zoologist, very good film man, made some nice programmes over the years and yet as an independent he says he has to do that kind of television to get himself as a personality in order to get his projects accepted.*

PR: I wouldn't disagree. I think Nigel knows the industry as well as anybody and I think that's probably true. It's sort of a rod for his own back because once Nigel got himself in front of the screen then they'll go, well, Nigel, we want more. Let's be rude, shall we, for a moment? I mean most commissioning editors are very uncreative, they very play safe. I mean what happens is you make one *Changing Rooms* (21) film and suddenly schedules are full of the bloody things because they all go, oh, that worked, we'll have more of that. Currently *River Monsters* (22) is all that's important in American natural history filmmaking at the moment because they did one series and it did extremely well. The execs would never have commissioned it as mainstream. It just surprised them and now they go more and more of that.

So Nigel sort of is a victim of his own success because he did well. He was a very good presenter and now Nigel Marvin, yes, you have to present, you act up in front of the camera. But I think he's definitely one of the better presenters. He's genuine, he's passionate, he's well-informed which can't be said for many of the celebrities in front of cameras.

## 7. The future of the industry

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JS: *You have an infinite amount of money and resources so what is there left? If you want to leave this planet of ours with a film which is in a sense your memorial, what would you make?*

PR: What's left to do if, and it's a big if, if I had infinite resources or had the gift of commissioners saying we're going to take it whatever it is. From an arts point of view and a revelatory point of view I've always wanted to make a film about clouds and the water cycle. They're just exquisitely beautiful things and they're enormously important to how the planet works but it would be very much a long form art film, and that's probably what I will do in my retirement because now the technology's there that I can go out and do it without needing broadcast size budgets.

Outside of that I think the area that excites me most now is what Phantoms can do. These new research cameras that are basically revolution wise way above HD. So you can run them to even 5,000 frames a second and we can go back to where Oxford Scientific was working, we can go and look again. There's a lot of science going on using them. So you've both got revelation in terms of new information and you've got revelation in terms of seeing creatures like you've never seen them before, working in ways you've never seen them before, and particularly some of the faster moving animals which live in that time world. It would be stepping into a different time world is what I'd like to do.

I'd love to make a film on dragonflies and damselfly. I'd like to revisit humming birds and actually see how they really work because we don't know is the truth.

JS: *I quite agree, most stunning almost landscapes that you see just weaving around, fantastic.*

*What's your favourite programme, natural history programme? Is there one that stands out?*

PR: There's a few. There is not one per se because they all do slightly different things in truth. They all sort of tick different boxes. They set out to tick the different boxes. As a piece of beautiful filmmaking I suppose it's not going to surprise everyone, I think David Hughes's *Namib* (23) is probably hard to beat I think. It's an exquisitely beautifully crafted film. It is more than that. It's got lots and lots of animals for the time no one had ever seen behaving in the most intriguing and interesting ways, and always tied to the thesis of this. It's an extraordinary place and animals do extraordinary things here, and he put Pink Floyd music on it which was an enormously brave thing to do and it worked. It worked perfectly. It's very beautifully crafted.

That's not really answering the question but is there a film I admire more than any other, I suspect it might be *Namib*. I don't think you could make it today.

JS: *You are teaching now?*

PR: Yes.

JS: *You are obviously in touch with a lot of young people who obviously I would say probably hope to get into the industry. Apart from teaching the mechanics of it and doubtless the history and so on and so forth and techniques, what advice do you give these young people when they say, right, okay, I've done the course, give me a bit of advice which I can follow which will help me get on in making wildlife films?*





PR: I'm teaching the only wildlife documentary postgraduate course in Europe actually at the University of Salford. It's a one year course. We've just finished the first year so I've got my first cohort of graduates. Well, in fact, they've not even graduated yet. They will graduate in a couple of weeks time but they have finished their course. They submitted all their work in September and a very fine high standard work it is too. I've sent a message to everybody involved saying we ought to be quietly proud, very pleased of what the students have done despite our best intentions to derail with giving them wrong facts and such like.

The advice I've given them is really just be true to themselves first and foremost, don't go chasing. You come into the course because you want to go into the industry. You must have had a reason what it was that you wanted, stay true to that, go chase it. If you want to do environmental films, go and talk to the environmental big NGOs. They now have their own film units. RSPB has one, Greenpeace obviously has been making films and things like that. Go there. Secondly, take your film to as many film fests as possible because there is now a completely alternative route to funding which is outside of having to go to really dreary, dull dullards that are some of the commissioning editors these days. If you do well in Sheffield or one of the international film festivals with your short film, and a lot of those festivals are built around beginner's films, you will find people knocking on your door wanting to give you money.

So that's the other route I tell them and finally I say if you want to do what I did which is get into the industry and be part of the industry and accept that you're there to put things on a television screen and entertain people, then you've really got few choices. But the number one place to go still is the BBC. Go and knock on the BBC's door. The second one these days is Tigress and so far three of our students have already got jobs and several others are about to get jobs and they haven't even graduated. So I hope we shall populate.

Part of the reason I'm doing it is I've reached an age where I think it's about time I started passing on my skills before I'm totally doolally and therefore hopeless and not able to do it. Partly because I think it's important that students get taught by people who are still in the industry and still know what it's all about because I think if you're out of the industry these days for 10 years you're out of touch and you shouldn't really be doing it. Sadly that's most people who teach film in universities; they are out of touch. So I think that's important.

Partly because the BBC no longer is able, I'm not criticising it, not just able to train people like they used to do it and I feel enormously privileged. I mean we've made several comments about the BBC that might be seen as critical but I am enormously grateful to the BBC for the training I got there. That doesn't happen anymore. There's no independent big enough to be able to take up the baton in training terms so I think universities have to do it and that's what we do.

*As an independent you've worked for the BBC, in Austria and so on. You've got quite a lot of experience of putting together financial packages from different parts of the world. Do you find that they are very different in their requirements and, how easy is it to get them all interested in any single project?*

PR: Well, since I left the BBC in 96 or 97, it's a long time ago actually; I think we've managed to survive. The big difference being independent is unfortunately there's not a John Sparks that you can go to and say, John, I've got this great idea on parrots and he says, right, off you go mate. What are you hanging around here for in this corridor, there aren't any parrots here, get on a bloody plane and film them, which is the right answer. Sadly, John, there aren't anybody like you outside so you go through this long rigmarole of selling ideas.

In terms of the process each broadcaster has their own kind of institutional culture and therefore they're

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almost like a personality when you work for them. ORF is one of the easier ones to work with because they're small enough and therefore nimble. You can go, yes, that's a good idea, well, let's go with it. We like that and that will work for us, and they're very clear on what their audience wants and very successful because they have huge audiences. Others are slower just because they are bigger institutions so it takes a very long time for the ideas to bounce around, and then vast armies of lawyers hidden in a darkened room somewhere have to go over the budget to prove that they're worth their enormous salaries. So that all takes time.

I think there are two things. The biggest problem is you can't get any broadcaster to fund anything anymore, they just haven't got the money to do it, even for the mid range *Natural World* (3) equivalents which is what we as a small company have very sensibly specialised in. You need to get several people. Then you hit that different institutional culture. So someone might say yes very quickly and take a very long time somewhere else.

The other problem you hit, and this is really unfortunate, is that if anything you'd think as more and more programmes were made as international co-productions and therefore one product came out, we'd get this globalisation or Americanisation of tastes of everything. That's not happening from my perspective. What's happening is very much the opposite that everybody knows they have to collaborate to make the film but everybody wants very different films. So you're making one film for National Geographic who want something very, very different from what ORF would want and the BBC who's in a different position again. Yet there's one budget and there's one set of camera days and you've got to come back to please three very different people. Their timescales and the way they work and the way they work with you is also very different.

Some go here's your money, off you go. Yes, you've been around the houses a few times, come back with a rough cut. Other ones want to know the absolute detail of everybody you've talked to.

*JS: You're inter-versioning in a big way effectively.*

*PR: Well, yes, but they don't fund the versioning because post production can be a good third of your budget. So if it's a third of your budget and you have to make three versions you can't do it because you'd turn round, yes, I can make you the perfect National Geographic or BBC or ORF film but it'll take this number of extra days. We will go back into the cutting room and we will re-edit and then more importantly you have to re-dub and that's seriously expensive. You have to redo all the soundtracks, re-grade, it's an expensive process.*

They understand the problem but nobody's got an answer for it. There's not enough money to do bespoke versioning for everybody. There's not enough money for them to commission uniquely the film themselves.

*JS: It must mean that inflation in the business has been very, very great over the years. So is wildlife, natural history filmmaking of the kind that we all understand becoming really too expensive?*

*PR: It is for the middle ground. I mean you can still do *Life* (15), you can do the blockbusters. But, gosh, I'd love to know BBC Worldwide how they work out how they get their money back on those things but they do because they sell it so widely because it is the blockbuster, the landmark series. The middle ground which I think we owe the British public otherwise you're just going to have *Life* (15). Every two or three years you'll have a blockbuster and that's all you're going to see.*

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There ought to be more regular programming of the genre that's natural history. That's much trickier because of the budgets. Inflation's gone up undoubtedly. The industry I think is running slightly ahead of normal inflation levels so it's actually inflating faster than the general economy. At the same time the budgets are shrinking, and this is again talking out of turn I think, but there's an awful lot of talk of what people really want now is people in these films. We don't want just animal films and behaviour films, we want people. That's spin in my humble opinion. That's editorial spin to cover up the fact that really the only films they can afford to commission are people based films because you don't put behaviour into them, you just fill them up with people chattering or doing action events. That's what's happened to *The Natural World (3)* and it's happened everywhere quite honestly and I think that's purely an economic force. I think *The Natural World (3)* as we understand it is an endangered animal.

JS: *Yet the BBC gets, what, £2.5 billion a year and Jonathan Ross gets £19 million over three years!*

PR: I think that's more that they paid you John!

End

#### **People, films and organisations mentioned**

Alan McGregor  
Armand Denis  
Barry Paine  
Chris Parsons  
David Attenborough  
David Gibbs  
David Hughes  
Heinz Sielmann  
Jacques Cousteau  
John Sparks  
Jonathan Ross  
Michaela Denis  
Mike Andrews  
Ned Kelly  
Neil Nightingale  
Nigel Marvin  
Peter Jones  
Peter Scott  
Phil Hurrell



# WILDFILMHISTORY

100 YEARS OF WILDLIFE FILMMAKING

Ron Webster

Steve Irwin

British Broadcasting Corporation BBC

BBC Natural History Unit

BBC Worldwide

British Airways plc

Daily Mirror

Impossible Pictures

Independent Television (ITV)

National Geographic

ORF

Oxford Scientific Films (OSF)

Sounds Like

The Times

Tigress

University of Salford

Warner Bros Pictures

Western USA

World Wildlife Fund

1. ARMAND AND MICHAELA ON SAFARI (Travellers' Tales) (tx 1958)
2. *Horizon* (BBC, tx 1964 – Present)
3. *Natural World* (BBC, tx 1983-2006)
4. UNINVITED GUESTS (Wordpictures, tx 1999)
5. FLIGHT OF THE CONDOR (The World About Us) (BBC, tx 1982)
6. *The Making of a Continent* (BBC, tx 1983)
7. *The Making of a Continent* (BBC, tx 1986)
8. A HIGHLY DESIRABLE RESIDENCE (The World About Us) (BBC, tx 1983)
9. PELICAN DELTA (The Natural World) (BBC, tx 1983)
10. THE FIRST AND LAST FRONTIER (Land of the Eagle) (1990, BBC/WNET)
11. ATTENBOROUGH IN PARADISE (The Natural world) (BBC, tx 1996)
12. Wildlife on One (BBC, tx 1978 – Present)
13. PARROTS - LOOK WHO'S TALKING! (The Natural World) (BBC, tx 1995)

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# WILDFILMHISTORY

100 YEARS OF WILDLIFE FILMMAKING

14. *Strictly Come Dancing* (BBC, tx 2004)
15. *Life* (BBC, tx 2009)
16. *Walking with Dinosaurs* (BBC, tx 1999)
17. *Primeval* (ITV, tx 2007)
18. *The Future is Wild* (BBC, tx 2004)
19. LIVING ON THE EDGE (Land of the Eagle) (BBC/WNET, 1990)
20. ZIMMERLEUTE DES WALDES / CARPENTERS OF THE WOODS (EWU, tx 1954)
21. *Changing Rooms* (BBC, tx 1996 – 2004)
22. *River Monsters* (Discovery, tx 2009)
23. NAMIB (Partridge Films, tx 1976)

**Dubbing:** Post production process of recording and adding sound tracks on to moving image film

**Grading:** Post production process of enhancing and changing the colour of film by altering the luminance, hue, and saturation, for artistic or corrective purposes

**Phantoms:** Ultra high speed cameras used primarily for creating slow motion sequences with excellent depth of field and image quality

**Photo-Sonics:** Innovative manufacturers of photographic equipment since 1924, who in particular made significant contributions to developing the high-speed photographic industry.

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