

# the last word

GOES TO BILL ODDIE

talking to Rob Mansfield



**How did your love of birds and wildlife come about?**

Well, I was a delinquent schoolboy egg collector, which we all did in those days. But that developed into an interest in birds, and by the time I went to school in the Midlands, there was a nice little group of us who were into them.

**And now, 50 years on, you're officially "Britain's most famous birdwatcher"...**

It's quite funny – we're generally ridiculed for wearing anoraks, aren't we? But if you were standing in the cold and wet, watching wildlife, you'd be wearing something similar. The image of birdwatching changed some time ago, though. Thirty years ago, people didn't really care about the environment.

**So you're definitely not a twitcher?**

Oh no. I can't think of anything worse than joining 10,000 other bearded blokes on a Kent housing estate trying to spot a rare bird. Twitchers are just about rarity-hunting and they make for a funny snippet at the end of the news. Calling all birdwatchers "twitchers" is like calling all athletes "sprinters".

**Natural history is a far healthier world to work in than comedy. They're a funny bunch**

**And you're about to host *Britain Goes Wild...* again, which is bigger and better than last year.**

Yes, I love live programmes and this year we're doing it for three weeks, against last year's one. Kate Humble and I will probably be quite exhausted by the end of it, but we'll also probably get a completely new cast of birds and animals too, which will be exciting.

**You live in London, which could be seen as an odd choice for someone who's so into wildlife.**

Well, possibly, but actually I think I prefer wildlife in the city. A couple of years ago in late September, I was on top of Hampstead Heath early one morning, and suddenly I was surrounded by swallows. Over the course of 90 minutes, 10,000 flew past, all heading south for the winter – that was phenomenal. And you can bet your boots that 99.9 per cent of London never noticed.

**You're also famous for your comedy, of course. Both that and birdwatching seem like quite solitary pursuits – would you agree?**

That's interesting. I tend to enjoy wildlife pottering around on my own, or with one other person, but we film in small crews. As for comedy, I couldn't do the solo stand-up thing. I started out at Cambridge with John Cleese, Graeme Garden, Graham Chapman, Tim Brooke-Taylor, etc, and it was a team thing. I wouldn't have had the nerve to do it if it hadn't have been.

**Do you still mix in those circles?**

Not really, no, although Graeme Garden and I meet up occasionally. I spend more time with natural-history crews nowadays and it's a far healthier world to work in. They're a funny

bunch – we have some very scurrilous conversations and a big laugh.

**Do you have faith?**

No, I don't. It's not something that it's good to get me talking about either. I fear that most of the evil in the world has come from organised religion – just witness what's happening now. I get my inspiration from watching my three daughters do something they enjoy.

**It's amazing that you're 63 this year. Do you still feel young?**

That's a terrible shock. I wish you hadn't told me! Strangely, I don't feel any different. I think it's to do with the generation I come from. I'm the same age as The Beatles and The Rolling Stones. The 60-year-old of today is a very different creature to the 60-year-old of when I was a kid. ■

■ *Britain Goes Wild with Bill Oddie* runs on BBC2 for three weeks from 31 May.