

Roy W Rhodes

June 8th, 1945 – March 31st, 2022

I had the extreme good fortune to have known Roy as a good friend, confidante, and neighbour for some 44 years. Over that period, we collaborated on countless projects, surveys and conservation works and shared chats and emails on an almost daily basis right up until the afternoon before his passing on 31st March 2022, ironically 18 years to the very day since he had retired.

I first met Roy on a school trip to Jumbles Reservoir in 1978 where he was leading a guided birding walk in his capacity as the new Countryside Warden for North West Water (NWWA), now United Utilities (UU), in the Jumbles/Wayoh/Entwistle valley. I soon had volunteered to help Roy in undertaking a myriad conservation task during weekends and school (and later work) holidays and we soon became good friends as we shared many common conservation and natural history interests and ideals.

Whilst our combined efforts henceforth were concentrated on the West Pennine Moors (WPM) around Belmont, I did accompany Roy on a few trips to his old stomping grounds around Leigh. The most memorable of these trips was perhaps in June 1983 when we stumbled across a White-winged Black Tern at Pennington before rounding the day off with breeding Nightjars, Turtle Doves, Whinchats, Curlews, Woodcock and Grasshopper Warblers on Chat Moss (in the days before Astley Moss East was destroyed by peat-milling). Equally unforgettable, was assisting Roy in his work capacity checking the security of a breeding colony of Black-necked Grebes, nesting on one of NWW's small, private operational sites.

From 1983 onwards we studied in detail the breeding birds of some 25km² around Belmont (that we called the Belmont Study Area) which culminated in the detailed report 'Breeding Waders in the West Pennine Moors 1990-1994'. Those were great days and I learned so many aspects in respect to correct fieldcraft, identification and survey methodology under Roy's watchful eye. Roy was an expert nest-finder of the old-school and hundreds of young waders and other upland breeding birds were ringed; looking back perhaps of most note were the 15 Short-eared Owl nests found over an eleven-year period. Roy had endless patience and would sit (being slowly consumed by midges) behind a stone wall for hours waiting for a pair of Short-eared Owls to swop-over at the nest to reveal its location. I remember Stonechats receiving special attention too, with Roy working out that the female would leave the nest every $\frac{3}{4}$ hour or so. Thus, territories were watched until the female appeared and Roy would not let her out of his sight for the 15 minutes of feeding before she would return to the nest. Roy was extremely cautious in not revealing what he was observing or the location of a nest to any distant observer and often worried that he felt as visible as 'a pea in a bowl' on the open landscape of the WPM. Hence, nests were largely

only visited at dawn and dusk with 6am being the common meeting time with Merlin nests requiring a 4am start! This secretiveness resulted in breeding bird locations not being shared outside of Roy's inner circle with the broadest locale possible, often 'near Belmont' or in 'West Pennine Moors', being the most that he would allow to be revealed. Even this information was only released post-breeding season as he had no time whatsoever for birders with 'loose lips' who bragged to others contemporary information on scarce breeding birds.

Over the decades, Roy had a series of three German Shorthaired Pointers, called Max, Finn and Tansy, who became useful allies in the search for nests as they were specially trained to point, and not flush or chase, any sitting bird (dog owners take note!). With Finn, one early morning we found three Dunlin and Golden Plover nests; the birds sitting tight until Roy called Finn obediently back to heel. The record for the number of Skylark nests located must have been set on some of those mornings too. Later, in a similar vein, Tansy was equally obedient and skilled with Tree Pipit and Wood Warbler nests springing to mind as successful finds.



Roy, in typical jolly pose, ringing two Oystercatcher pulli on Belmont Reservoir island (hence the lifejacket) - 17th June 1993.

Roy was well known on the slideshow and indoor meetings circuit until his retirement in 2004, with many natural history societies throughout the north-west revelling in his

knowledge and photography skills, these included the LOS (Derby Room), RSPB (Bolton School) and Bolton Field Naturalists (Bolton Museum) as Roy was invariably on their annual program. Perhaps his most famous talk was 'Where Solitude Reigns', a superb, evocative, and haunting voyage through the wealth of wildlife of Chat Moss, mainly Astley Moss East, before its destruction. After moving to Belmont in 1978, he slowly developed and refined 'A Moorland Parish' which was equally poignant and memorable. All included Roy's superb photography as Roy was a member of the old-school of bird photographers preferring fieldcraft and working-in hides to nests rather than the long-lenses and the digital enhancements enjoyed today. However, perhaps Roy's most famous photo involved neither fieldcraft nor hides, as the distant Golden Eagle photographed near Belmont in October 1983 was merely a very fortunate flyover!



Immature Golden Eagle
West Pennine Moors, 28
October 1983
(Roy Rhodes)

Roy was a brilliant birder with an ability to identify species from the slightest view, from a brief call or from jizz/silhouette at great distance. He didn't 'twitch' and listing was never discussed (Roy didn't approve of such triviality) referring to bird-listers as 'one of those'. However, he did keep a garden total, which stood at 111 species (one hundred and eleven!) which is amazing for an inland site not overlooking a waterbody. This list consisted of 64 species seen in, and 47 species seen from, his Belmont garden in 44 years with his last addition being Willow Tit in 2020. His birding was always with purpose, rarely purely recreational (hence his views on listing) apart from on holiday. The pursuit of science, site-protection, surveys, and evidence-gathering being his *raison d'être*. I say Roy was a brilliant birder, but he excelled at most other taxa particularly botany and lepidoptera and I would struggle to think of a better all-round naturalist. But he had depth to that encyclopedic knowledge, having been so involved with conservation projects, ringing, surveys, and a plethora of other skills he could rarely be outshone on wisdom having 'walked the walk', but would listen intently and ask with acumen to those with specialist knowledge that could add to his own. His understanding of the ways of the countryside and the needs of farmers/land managers and gamekeepers/shoot tenants meant he could converse as an equal on aspects of farming and shoot management and gain the trust of those originally sceptical; but he invariably either got his way or procured their help through the application of sound science and facts.

Whilst most will be aware that Roy was one of the LOS's founder members and later held committee roles, he also held the position of chairman of Bolton Field Naturalists' Society in the 1980's and was instrumental in bringing together the recorders to produce the book 'The Natural History of Bolton' in 1989. He also, in an honorary capacity, was the voluntary warden of The Lancashire Wildlife Trust's Longworth Clough Reserve in the 1990's bringing his ability to recruit and retain volunteers through his infectious enthusiasm to good effect. Roy was patient and helpful with novice and budding naturalists and would extol with enthusiasm various aspects of natural history with the young and developing. But he didn't suffer fools, as many so-called professionals and persons in position/control found out during Roy's many occupational and volunteering positions as he would not hold back on giving a frank and clear view on his thoughts. When told by a fellow birder of a bird sighting that he thought unlikely; Roy would invariably respond with "Oh Aye" in a friendly, almost believing, tone. This code for a sighting he considered dubious became almost his catchphrase and it became a secret running joke within his inner circle when an innocent recipient was given an "Oh Aye"!

Roy was a manufacturer of nestboxes, both big and small, on an almost industrial scale with many hundreds, possibly thousands, being constructed in his garden shed over the years. One didn't quite know what was being manufactured but the sounds of sawing and hammering announced something new was under construction; Wallace and Gromit would have been envious. The boxes were mostly Tit/Flycatcher/Redstart type, but also many Owl/Kestrel and Dipper/Grey Wagtail types as well as more specialist boxes for species such as Swift, Little Owl and Goosander plus rafts for Terns/Grebes and even Long-eared Owl baskets. Special frames to protect scarce local plants such as Dwarf Cornel were constructed whilst the seeds of other local scarcities such as Bog Myrtle, Marsh Andromeda, Globeflower and Bog Asphodel were taken grown-on and planted out to bolster the local populations. Of course, nestboxes need erecting, maintaining and checking; so Roy's company LandRover was rarely without 3-section ladders attached. The joys of ringing Pied Flycatchers, Barn Owls, Long-eared Owls and many more species were sometimes lessened by receiving a face-full of fleas or angry wasps when opening up a nestbox with the occasional fall from a tree treated as an occupational hazard. The most memorable of these exploits included the ringing of a brood of young Ravens in the WPM in 1993; this being, at that time, the first Raven nest to have ever been recorded in the WPM. A few years later, Roy was repeatedly hit on the head by a very irate and aggressive Short-eared Owl whilst ringing her young and I well remember having to wear goggles to protect one's eyes when ringing Tawny Owls.

Gardening was another of Roy's passions and his garden only included plants which were beneficial to nature. Hence it became a wildlife haven with the 'wilder' sections hosting swathes of Snake's Head Fritillaries and Globeflowers, and with nectar sources abounding, the air was full of butterflies, the hum of bees plus by night, moths and unfortunately

midges! Several nights a week an eerie glow (or two or three) would emanate from his garden, signalling that one or more of his three moth-traps were in operation. Opinions on tricky identifications over coffee and biscuits often followed the following day.

As first a local Countryside Warden, then regional Conservation Officer and lastly regional Estate Manager for UU (formerly NWW), Roy could bring his many talents to bear where it perhaps mattered most, with the region's largest landowner. Here his influence on policy, schemes and projects was immense and that is no over-statement as the paragraphs below will illustrate. The lagoons, island and environmental centre at Hope Carr, the similar educational facility at Worthington Lakes, the engagement of the RSPB for raptor protection in Bowland, the Twite feeding, monitoring, and ringing projects in the Pennines, the Fazakerley reedbed scheme, the funding and later sponsorship of the first Lancashire Breeding Bird Atlas and countless more regional projects and scheme mitigations were all Roy's initiatives. But it was perhaps his influence on the landscape and individual species that I think was Roy's finest legacy. Throughout the WPM, there are countless ponds, wader scrapes, formed islands, fenced-out specialist wildflower areas, numerous nestbox schemes, many native woodland copses, reedbeds, wildfowl sanctuary areas, wader nesting 'beaches', amphibian pools, artificial Badger setts and so on, that owe their existence to Roy. Since Roy's passing, I cannot go for a walk locally without being reminded of his legacy through these physical environmental improvements and their myriad inhabitants; many that would not have a toehold in the WPM were in not for Roy. As I write these notes; Dippers, Grey Wagtails, Swallows, Kestrels, Pied Flycatchers, Redstarts, Stock Doves, Starlings, Swifts and three species of owl (to name but a few) are feeding young in Roy's nestboxes and the Brimstones flitting in the garden remind me that their presence locally is due to Roy's planting of many Alder Buckthorn at Belmont.

Roy was extremely fortunate to have a very supportive wife, Jennifer; herself knowledgeable in natural history albeit geology is her speciality. Jennifer was super-accommodating in both allowing Roy endless time for his multiple projects plus endless assistance (and patience) with Roy's 'understanding' of IT, phones and other such 'modern' gadgets! In retirement, the motor-home headed both throughout the UK and abroad with visiting their daughter Elli, her partner Garreth and their son, Alistair in Whitley Bay his favourite. Here he basked in east-coast migrations, locating his last 'good' bird, a Bluethroat, on a local headland...over 40 years since one of his first 'good' birds, the county-first Great Reed Warbler at Pennington in 1977.

Roy was also a proficient environmental campaigner. His letters and emails on planned developments, local/regional plans, damage to sites/species were hard hitting, factually incontestable and won many a planning battle, policy alteration and mitigation result. During the years 2014 to 2016 when it seemed as though the WPM was yet again going to be overlooked for SSSI designation (despite the overwhelming evidence), Roy's succession of probing correspondence to the policymakers must have sent reverberations down the corridors of Natural England HQ. In the end, as most local naturalists would know, the SSSI

was finally notified in November 2016, in no small way thanks to Roy's incessant lobbying. In fact, Roy was at the genesis of the WPM SSSI process, for it was at his house early in 1983 that a group of WPM naturalists met to discuss what was to morph into an ultimately successful, 33-year journey of evidence gathering, a conspectus and consultation. Besides Roy, present that evening amongst others was the botanist Peter Jepson (Lancashire County Council), Geoff Morries (Lancashire County Council), Chris and Tony Johnson (Bolton RSPB), Rick Parker (Bolton BTCV) plus a naive teenage birder called Steve Martin! I distinctly remember the privilege I felt in being asked to attend alongside these eminent naturalists and assist in the breeding bird surveys over Anglezarke and Withnell Moors that ensued from 1983 onwards.

Two of Roy's greatest outcomes were prevention of two, potentially highly damaging schemes that were the result of him putting his 'head above the parapet' internally with his employer. Not afraid that opposition to schemes would have made him most unpopular internally within certain sections of NWW, he steadfastly believed that the two schemes (that had their genesis in the 1980's and early 1990's respectively) would be fundamentally disastrous for wildlife locally and openly criticised the plans. The first of these schemes was a vast conifer shelterbelt plantation that would have stretched some 5km along the A675 from Belmont Reservoir to Abbey Village, through the breeding habitat of many of the WPM's key moorland breeding birds. The second was a windfarm on the deep-peat moorland of Turton and Longworth Moors which would have not only destroyed the hydrology of the blanket-bog but also displaced many important moorland breeding birds. Roy won these internal battles and the plans for the plantation and windfarm were shelved; but few ever knew of the spectre of these schemes or the part that Roy played in safeguarding the wild moorland landscape and wildlife of the WPM.

Undoubtedly though, his greatest achievement was the conservation works undertaken at Belmont Reservoir, all planned and managed by Roy, which propelled the site from one of local standing to one of international importance in little more than a decade. In the early 1990's, as regional Conservation Officer for NWW, Roy was implementing conservation schemes all the way from Carlisle in the north to Crewe in the south and chose his doorstep as the trial to target methodology to enhance breeding waterbird and amphibian populations. What followed was a series of landscaping works to form scrapes, shingle areas, islets of varying sizes, rafts, bunds to retain water, pools of varying shapes, sizes and depths for waders, wildfowl, and amphibians alike at Belmont between 1994 and 1996. The results were instantaneous, with 12 pairs of Lapwing on the main island alone together with up to 6 pairs of Little Ringed Plover and 4 pairs of Oystercatcher in subsequent years. Predation of these species' nests/young by Crows became a constant worry and Roy suggested that if "a few pairs of Black-headed Gull" could be attracted to breed on the island they could provide an aerial exclusion zone to Crows. So, a shallow scrape on the island was formed and within it we placed a score of special small, wooden islets (designed and made by Roy) to encourage Black-headed Gulls to nest. The next year (1997) 33 pairs of

gulls bred here, rising to 70 pairs by 1999 and the rest is history: with the gullery increasing to 2820 pairs in just 10 years (2006) and on to a mammoth 13,528 pairs by 2021. This huge gullery is now by far the largest Black-headed Gull colony in the UK hosting some 10.4% of the British breeding population which would compute to a staggering 0.55% of the world population. Mediterranean Gulls first bred at Belmont in 2005 and have slowly increased to an impressive 106 pairs in 2021, some 8.8% of the UK population; the only sizeable colony away from the SE and S coast of England and is, by far, the largest inland colony in the UK.



**The beginning of the gullery.
Roy (wearing trademark floppy hat) with LandRover on the island in Belmont Reservoir, July 1996.
Note the islets created to attract nesting Black-headed Gulls.**

Hence Roy's concept of "a few pairs of Black-headed Gull" has been somewhat of a skyrocketing success! With the site now hosting 13,639 pairs of five species of breeding gull and under consideration for SPA and Ramsar designation (international and global importance respectively), Roy's scheme must rate as one of the most successful avian conservation success stories ever at a single site.

On a personal level, I owe Roy so much...he was my mentor, friend, and confidante for over 40 years and to say I learned immensely from him is a vast understatement. It was an honour to be his disciple for all those years.

'A forgotten hero of conservation' is a title often bestowed to naturalists who achieved great things, generally locally or regionally, without really getting the credit they undoubtedly deserved. With Roy, I cannot think of a title that is more wholly and fully justified. For Roy never sought self-promotion or his name in print; so few knew of his immense influence on conservation or the great sacrifices of time he gave to promote wildlife and the wild places. He didn't tweet, post or blog or do anything remotely to promote his name or enhance his reputation or standing...he just got on with it!

Put simply, he personally ensured the natural world around him was left a far, far richer place than when he arrived.

So very few can claim to have achieved that.

Steve Martin

Belmont - June 2022