

The birdman of Ayrshire

JOHN STIRLING MOIR

Twiddle-oo, twiddle-ee-dee, twiddle-oo twiddle.

A robin calling from a bird feeder in Robert 'Mac' Ramage's garden brings a smile of delight to the ninety-two-year-old Scottish ornithologist.

From an early age, Mac found birds fascinating, and it wasn't long before he started keeping records of his avian sightings. But as Christmas of 1948 approached, Mac decided to take this recordkeeping to a whole new level.

"I got the idea that for 1949 I'd record every bird I saw for the entire year," Mac tells me. "I purchased a large-format Boots scribbling diary and set to work."

As Mac entered his first records of nuthatches and wagtails, he had no idea that he was embarking on a remarkable natural history chronicle that would continue uninterrupted for nearly half a century. By year's end Mac had accumulated thousands of entries, and he had fallen in love with the process.

"It was very satisfying collecting all the information," he says. "I developed a format where I recorded not only each species I saw but the location, weather, number of individuals,

summer or winter plumage, and other pertinent information.

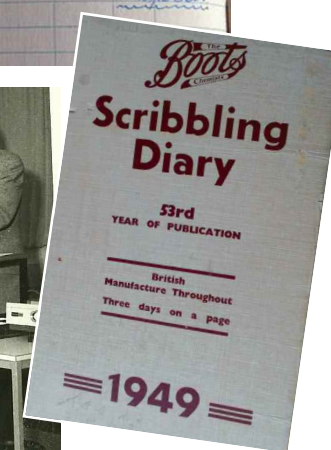
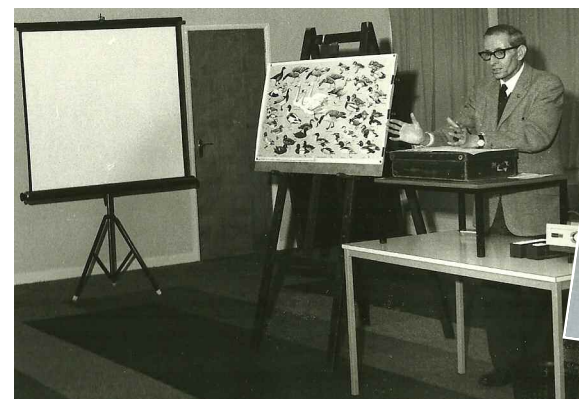
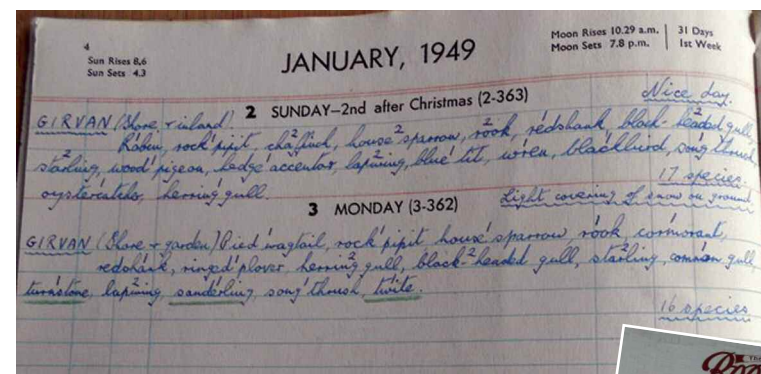
"At the start of 1950, I purchased another diary and kept on going."

Mac's interest in birds began at age ten when an aunt gave him his first bird book.

"My father found me a second-hand pair of binoculars, and I started roaming the countryside, learning the birds."

As a young man, Mac studied at the University of Cambridge but the Second World War interrupted his education. After spending five years in the RAF, he returned to Cambridge and eventually became a teacher at Gordonstoun School in north-east Scotland. But his interest in birds never waned.

After the war, Mac met his wife, May, at a youth hostel at Loch Lomond while he was on a birding holiday. As his ornithology skills grew, he was asked to teach classes at Kindrogan, Scotland's National Centre for Excellence in Field Studies and Biodiversity Training. Eventually, he spent more than twenty-five years teaching birdwatching classes through the University of Glasgow and leading birding tours all over Britain.



Top, Mac Ramage's first entries of bird records that he began keeping in 1949 in the diary (right); above, Mac conducting a bird identification class at Kindrogan Field.

Although Mac's birding classes covered species recognition, habitats, and migration, his specialty was birdsongs.

"I reckoned I could identify any British songbird by its call."

Meanwhile, he continued his meticulous recordkeeping.

"When my daughter, Kay, was four years old, she asked me what I wanted for Christmas," Mac recalls, his eyes

twinkling. "I told her I could always use a bird diary for the next year."

It became a tradition.

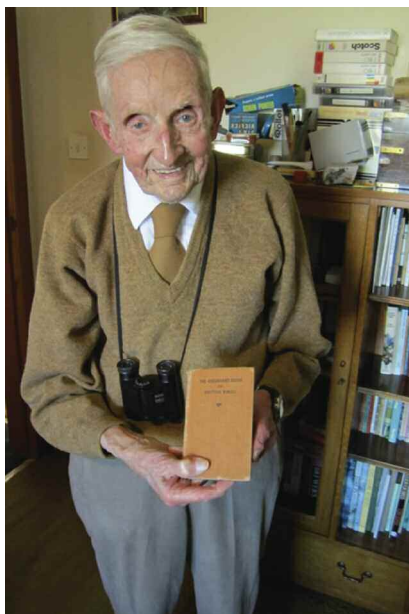
Even as an adult, every Christmas Kay would present her father with a diary book for the next year's bird log. And each evening Mac would sit at his desk in his home office and record the day's sightings.

"The logs track the changes in

British bird life over decades,” he says. “In an unfortunate number of cases, the sightings show a decline of native species. Some of the birds that were once common, like the song thrush or the corncrake, are now hard to find in much of their former range.”

Kay says the detailed diaries also tell the story of her parents’ life. By noting her father’s location, she can tell from day to day where he was and what he was likely to be doing.

Mac became a familiar figure in Ayrshire, where he led countless birding trips. He always wore an anorak jacket, corduroy pants and a toorie bonnet



Mac in his study displaying the bird guide he was given at age ten that led to him becoming an ornithologist.

that Kay knitted for him when she was a child. As the years rolled past and the volumes of diaries accumulated, Mac became known as the Birdman of Ayrshire.

In recent years, Mac has faced some difficult challenges. His wife of forty-three years succumbed to cancer. Not long after this loss, Mac noticed that the wings and feathers that were once were so sharp in his binoculars had developed a disconcerting blurriness.

“I was diagnosed with age-related macular degeneration,” he says. “There wasn’t much the doctors could do, and I lost most of my sight. Fortunately, my eyes have now stabilised, but all I have left is some of my peripheral vision.”

Despite his near-blindness, Mac still can identify species by their songs. But he can no longer sustain his decades of fastidious recordkeeping.

Recently I spent a day visiting Mac and Kay in Prestwick, on Scotland’s south-west coast. He is pleased to welcome me into his tidy brick house where he has lived for forty-nine years. Mac is slender and fit with a ruddy face and sports a V-neck sweater, brown tie and corduroy slacks.

“He always wears a shirt and tie,” Kay tells me.

Mementos fill the rooms: Kay’s childhood teddy bear, a model of a Spitfire, the aircraft Mac worked on during the Second World War. Bird pictures cover the walls, and Mac’s office shelves are filled with nature books.

“Here’s the bird book that got me started,” he says, pulling an ancient

guidebook from the shelf.

His face comes alive as we talk about birds. Some of his favourites are kingfishers, ibises, puffins, and white-tailed eagles.

“Every year, at the front of each diary, I’d list the birds I still hoped to see in my lifetime. As the years passed, that list shrank, but there was one bird I found especially intriguing that continued to elude me: the red kite.”

This stunning black-and-white and rufous-coloured raptor was once common in Britain, but relentless hunting, poisoning, and egg collecting decimated the bird’s population until only a few pairs survived, and these were in South Wales. In recent years, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and other groups have mounted a conservation effort to save the red kite. These distinctive, fork-tailed birds have now been reintroduced in some areas of Britain.

“Recently, I heard the kites were being brought back in the Dumfries and Galloway region,” Kay says. “Even though it’s quite a long journey, and despite my father’s poor eyesight, I suggested we take a trip there.”

“After driving for nearly two hours, we came to open country where the kites can be found. Eventually we spotted one, hovering over a distant field. But it was too far away. Nowadays, my father can only see blurs and shapes, so

we had to get close. We continued on to a farm where the kites are encouraged to nest and discovered eight or ten of them in an oak tree.”

Kay stood behind Mac and helped him aim his binoculars. Soon the farmer’s wife strode across the muddy field. She wore Wellingtons and carried a bucket of dead rabbits. She laid the meat on a plank, and several kites flew down from the oak to feed on the carcasses. With the kites close by, Mac was able to see a blurry image of the birds and listen to their cries.

“They were swirling overhead and calling with a high-pitched whistling sound — beautiful birds,” Kay says. “But the best part was the look of satisfaction on my father’s face.”

The red kite is the last entry on the last page in Mac’s final diary, marking the conclusion of an extraordinary lifetime achievement for the Birdman of Ayrshire.

Mac is presently exploring options to make his data trove available to the scientific community.

And on sunny days, when the sparrows and blue tits and robins flit about in his garden, he still loves to sit outside and listen to the birdsongs that have provided the music for his life. ■

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