

# Charles Roberts



IN MY VIEW

## A delightful trek into wildest Norfolk

A straightforward interview/mardle about his latest project was all I expected when I called in on Martin Smith, Norfolk born and bred naturalist and globe-trotting wildlife photographer.

I should have known better, for when Martin is working on film or stills within his beloved home county, he likes nothing better than to share it with his interviewer – and that means an excursion into a wild Norfolk with which most of us rarely come into contact.

As, for example, when he and I insinuated ourselves into a cramped little hide for several bone-aching hours, to watch badgers go about their daily business (This was for his TV film, *Norfolk Wood*); or trekked along unspoiled banks of the Wensum (for a film on this enchanting little river) in quest of otters at work and play.

So when I pulled up outside his cottage, there he was on the doorstep, wearing his trade-mark welcoming grin. Almost before I'd said "Good morning" he was enquiring: "Brought your wellies?"

"Well, no, I . . ."

"Never mind, I've got a spare pair."

"But where are we going?" A reasonable question, I thought, since I'd come to talk to him about a series of stunningly different aerial pictures of the North Norfolk coast. The grin broadened.

"Mystery tour," he responded laconically.

Soon we were heading towards Wells – until we turned off down a deeply rutted, narrow track and rolled and thudded for a mile or so between banks of broom . . . to emerge, suddenly, on a remote edge of the sea marshes.

The sun shone from a blue sky. Away in the distance, Blakeney Point's arrow of sand gleamed sable. Nearer at hand, a magical flight of dunlin sped low over the water like blown leaves, their wings flashing silver as they caught the sun. From the car Martin hauled a hefty rucksack and pulled it on to his back. "Photo equipment," I thought, but asked no questions.

We joined a hikers' pathway, heading seaward, and relished the profusion of bird life. Ragged shoals of brent geese scudded overhead, in an excited agitation which heralded their imminent departure for the far, far north. Shellduck in profusion were on the wing, showing off against the clear light their clean-cut lines and lushly defined colours.

We reached a river, weaving through the marshes. Conveniently, Martin's brother keeps a tiny boat nearby, which we slithered to the water and ferried across to the other side. Our walk continued, closer now to the open sea, accompanied high overhead by a single skylark, singing enough for 20. A solitary turnstone, wedge-shaped bill ready for business, homed in to pick up what the mussel-gathering men had left behind.

"See that boat?" inquires Martin, pointing into the distance across the marshland. "That's mine."

It was very small, and seemed to be entirely stranded, far from anywhere. Why was it out here? I queried. It was, said my guide, his retreat from the world, where he could watch birds – or build sandcastles with his little daughter.

By the time we reached the craft a stiff breeze was keening, chilly despite the sunshine. Martin unlocked a miniature door giving access to an even more miniature cabin, from where he extracted a couple of small mattresses and dropped them overboard to windward. "We can sit on them while we have lunch."

Whereupon, comfortably out of the wind, I watched as that mysterious rucksack divulged a flask of tea, packs of ham rolls, pork pies and biscuits. "Thought we might need a snack," beamed Martin.

Like Mole and Ratty on the river bank, we set to with a will, and in that setting a simple meal became a feast . . . with the added attraction of an expert commentary on every feathered creature which flew over us, or cheeped and paddled in nearby little pools; or sang sea songs at every point of the compass, encouraged by piping courtship calls of amorous oyster catchers.

When unfriendly clouds started to blot out of the sun, the boat was made secure, and off we set for home. There, at last, we settled down to talk about Martin's helicopter-eye photos of the coastline, including that marsh haunt from which we'd just returned . . . pictures of such vibrancy of colour, texture and clarity, that one could believe they were the creations of a boldly inspired painter's hand.

Shortly a selection of them will be appearing in *EDP Norfolk* magazine, our monthly "glossy", plus a word picture telling the story of how they came into being.