



Born Free

Wildlife photographer Martin Hayward Smith has travelled the world taking pictures. But his heart is still in Norfolk. Paul Dickson meets this talented man

MARTIN HAYWARD SMITH learnt his fieldcraft during boyhood jaunts into the countryside around his native Fakenham and in the creeks and sandbars of Scolt Head Island.

Spells in the Royal Navy and on oil rig support ships broadened his horizons and, inspired by his father Brian, a newspaper photographer, he travelled everywhere, camera in hand.

Today, Martin is a frantically busy wildlife cameraman working

primarily for the BBC. He has been camera lens to eyeball with crocodiles, wild boars and gorillas. But also, with the help of an outdoor studio at his home not far from Fakenham, he completes UK film projects for the BBC and conservation charities such as the RSPB.

But he has recently returned to his first love, the North Norfolk Coast. Martin and collaborator David North have published *Elements of the North Norfolk Coast*, the area's first coffee table book, lavishly illustrated with his atmospheric photographs.

"It all began when Dad gave me my first camera when I was eight," said Martin. "It was an old Rapide 35mm. He also gave me all the black and white film I needed and my brother and I learnt to develop our photographs in his darkroom. It was a time when a ▶

▷ young lad could safely wander around the countryside on his own."

Martin's father was a keen sailor and kept a boat at Brancaster Staithe. "Dad would drop me off on Scolt Head Island. The warden, Bob Chestney was very kind to me. I was left to roam my own desert island with a pair of binoculars watching the wildlife."

A place at Yarmouth Art College was turned down when Martin decided to follow a family tradition and join the Royal Navy. He travelled the world for five years with his camera and trained as a ship's diver. "I went to the Far East on HMS *Yarmouth* and dived on the reefs off Mombassa and Oman. It was absolutely spellbinding."

Martin left the Navy aged 21 and worked on oil rig supply ships based in Aberdeen and Stavanger. After two years he transferred to Africa's Ivory Coast and worked three months on, three months off.

"I used my time off to go travelling and explored the Himalayas. Then I wrote to George Adamson of *Born Free* fame to ask if I could help him as a volunteer during one of my leave periods. I

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received a positive response, was advised by the Royal Geographical Society not to disturb him too much and to take whisky with me. So I set off for Nairobi on Aeroflot via Moscow."

Martin had an eventful flight, including a mysterious stopover at a freezing airstrip somewhere in the Soviet Union, followed by a brush with guerrillas in Entebbe Airport, before arriving in Nairobi.

"I tracked down the local flying doctor who flew me to a narrow landing strip in the middle of the bush. We had flown over George

Adamson's camp on the way. The pilot said: 'stand under the tree over there, George will be with you soon.' So I walked over to the tree which displayed a helpful sign 'if lions come please climb tree!'"

Twenty minutes later, Martin heard a rattling old Landrover approach and was soon face to face with George Adamson. "I was his sidekick for one and a half months, walking with lions. It was a great inspiration. I saw *Born Free* when I was ten and had always said that I would meet George Adamson. Here I was investigating the bush with only a pistol for protection. I kept my experiences to myself when I returned home – nobody would have believed me."

Martin spent five years on oil rig supply ships and even had a spell towing icebergs out of the shipping lanes off Newfoundland. A US take-over, combined with a move back to the North Sea, encouraged him to 'jump ship' and head off to Southport College of Art to study large format photography.

He returned to Norfolk in 1986 with a City and Guilds distinction, secured a job in a commercial studio in Norwich, then had a lucky break. "Bill Makins, owner of Pensthorpe Waterfowl Park, wanted someone to photograph the park to capture the seasonal changes. I had an absolutely fantastic time."

Meanwhile, Martin was trying to get some experience with Anglia TV's *Survival* wildlife unit. He spotted a piece in the *Eastern Daily Press* about local cameraman Chris Knights filming for *Survival*. "I had another lucky break. Chris agreed to take me on as his assistant. I worked with him for four years on two films and also set up my own photographic studio in Fakenham."

Martin ran his studio until 1992, combining it with the *Survival* work. But eventually filming around the world took over and he became a full-time wildlife cameraman. He went to Madagascar,



Oman and Peru with *Survival* as well as a project close to home on the River Wensum. Then in 1997 he began working for the BBC and was involved with *Life of Birds* and *Living Britain*. He has also filmed with Bill Oddie and Alan Tichmarsh and has contributed to the *Natural World* series. But it is not all wildlife filming, as Martin has recently been 'grafting' on *Jimmy's Farm*.

"I am self-employed and really do not know where I am going next. My life has always been a bit nomadic and my filming career continues in that vein. I am very comfortable with my own company, which is essential when you spend hours on end looking down a lens waiting for 'the' shot."

Martin filmed in Madagascar's crocodile caves. "All there was between me and 18ft crocodiles was a bit of cloth. I was focused on looking down the lens, turned round and realised that my guide had run away!"

Wild boars provided the next close encounter. About 100 wild boars thundered towards his filming position in the jungle. Some of them poked their noses into his hide. "The sound of the boars grunting and groaning was amazing. I used the camera arm to push them away."

Then there were the clay-eating scarlet macaws of Peru. Martin had to change planes four times to get to Cusco where he had arranged to meet his local 'fixer'. The 'fixer' was two hours late. "I was becoming really frustrated and was going to sack the fixer, but a beautiful Peruvian called Doris tapped me on the shoulder, introduced herself and any thoughts of dismissal were forgotten."

Martin was taken upriver in an open canoe for three days before arriving at the filming location. He sat on top of a 20ft scaffold, 18 hours a day, listening to the riverbank crumbling below him and waited for the birds to arrive. Fortunately, the day before he had to leave, 40 scarlet macaws arrived and began nibbling the riverbank's clay – a delicacy that apparently aids their digestive system.

One of Martin's closest encounters was in Uganda with a large silverback gorilla called Oscar. "I was allowed an hour with him. He was ripping up bamboo, snapping it like a matchstick. I was ten feet from him, then he turned round and headed in my direction. I couldn't move because the bamboo was hemming me in, so I held my ground and averted my eyes. The gorilla swept past just inches from me. I was in awe of this elegant creature."

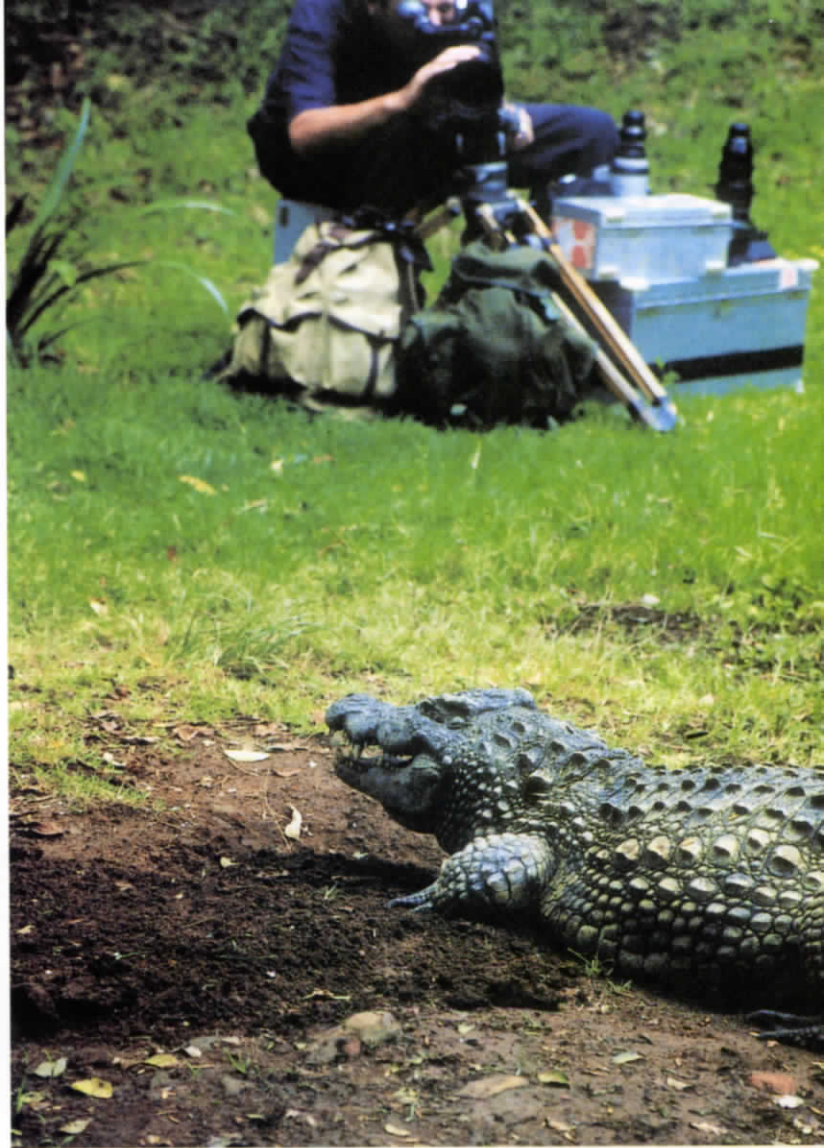
Martin's back garden provides a slightly less exotic, but equally enchanting, filming location. The River Stiffkey which flows along the boundary is ideal for kingfishers, eels and brown trout. A man-made pond provides a perfect wildlife location decorated with reeds and grasses. Martin even has a perspex tank where underwater scenes can be filmed. The most recent setup in the tank featured Eider ducks and a mussel bed for the RSPB.

But the project closest to his heart has been the North Norfolk Coast book. "I wanted to show people what the coast looked like from the air." Working with former Pensthorpe colleague David North, who wrote the text, the book gradually evolved over six years between Martin's filming assignments.

"We published *Elements of the North Norfolk Coast* ourselves. It was a great moment when we received the books but then, of course, we had to set too sorting out distribution."

Distribution has to be fitted into the work schedule, including another trip to *Jimmy's Farm*, followed by a 'shopping list' of warblers and chaff chaffs. □

● *Elements of the North Norfolk Coast* is published by Birsdeyview Books, www.birdseyeviewbooks.com tel 01263 761450.



Previous page: Unloading filming equipment and provisions for a two-month trip to Peru

This page, above: Filming crocodiles in Madagascar

Below: Martin in front of the camera for a change

