

Richard Burness 1943 – 2020

Berkshire County Bird Recorder 2016 -20

Like many birders of his generation, Richard Burness was a birdwatcher from boyhood. As a young man living in Kent, he “stomped” the North Kent marshes in all weathers, when wildfowl numbers were larger than they are now, and was a regular “shingle basher” at Dungeness where he stayed at the Bird Observatory, in the days of Bob Scott’s wardenship.



Birds were a passion that he managed to weave into his work life as a meteorologist. He served for 15 years as a meteorological observer on North Atlantic Ocean Weather Ships, from which he provided data on seabirds and cetaceans for research on their populations and he published occasional articles in *The Marine Observer*. On the *MV Quattro Venti*, he worked on a seabird and cetacean census of the Mediterranean, the islands of the British Isles and upwelling areas of the continental shelf for WWF and the Edward Grey Institute. This was important work in the years leading up to the international whaling ban in 1986. For ten years, he lived and worked in Fife, where he was a founder member of the Fife Bird Club in 1985. There he was a WeBS counter for the southern Tay Estuary and low-tide counter at Fife Ness.

Holidays were spent on birding trips across Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. As a rather hippie young man in the 1960s, he was something of a pioneer of many of the areas that have since become popular destinations for British birders, like eastern Poland and Morocco. He went several times to the Middle East. One year, with a few friends and his cousin Peter, he drove overland through Europe and Turkey to northern Iran to spend a month recording spring migration along the southern shore of the Caspian Sea, something that could not easily be done now. Later, he and Patricia, who he married in 1986, made a series of trips to California, which they loved and to some of the east coast US birding sites.

Scilly had a special place in his life. He made the autumn pilgrimage annually from 1968 to last year. For many years he stayed on the island of St Agnes; he was part of that group of people who made Scilly the birding Mecca that it was to become in the 80s and 90s. More recently, he and Patricia would stay on St Mary’s, along with birding friends from Berkshire and across the country.

A few years after they were married, he and Patricia moved to Berkshire, where he worked at the Meteorological Office in Bracknell. Since retiring from the Met Office (as Manager of Upper-air Observations and Thunderstorm Location), in 2003, and despite his problem with a rare anaemia, he threw himself into local ornithology, in the field and at his (not always reliable) computer. He was a prolific surveyor and meticulous record keeper. He was a long-standing WeBS counter here as he had been in Scotland and he was an important contributor to the county atlas and to our annual reports.

Four years ago, he took on the job of County Recorder, a crucial role in turning the myriad observations of amateur bird watchers into good citizen science. It is a role that demands knowledge, judgement, sensitivity and, above all, the ability to command confidence and respect from the community. Richard did this wonderfully. His unassuming manner encouraged collaboration and he brought transparency to a sometimes opaque system. Quietly, he brought together an expert team and reset the county's recording system. He built something we can be proud of and he gained the gratitude and respect of all of us who worked with him.

Renton Righelato February 2020



Richard Burness died suddenly on 29th January 2020, aged 76, with complications arising from thrombocythemia, a bone marrow disease that had required intermittent hospital treatment, but which he did not let dampen his love of birding. He leaves his wife Patricia and his sister, Susan.