

## **Johnny Kingdom - Exmoor wildlife filmmaker**

David Parker and Wendy McLean at Available Light produced and directed Johnny Kingdom's television programmes for the BBC and ITV. As a tribute to Johnny, the BBC is going to repeat the last series that we made with him.

### ***Johnny Kingdom's Year with the Birds***

Monday 24<sup>th</sup>, Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> and Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> September BBC FOUR at 7.30pm



## **Obituary**

**Johnny Kingdom Exmoor gravedigger and wildlife filmmaker born Brayford, North Devon on 23rd February 1939. Died on his and Julie's land in Knowstone, Devon on September 6th 2018.**

Alongside the magnificent red deer that he loved so much, the sight of Johnny Kingdom scanning the countryside of North Devon, complete with camouflage clothing and feather and

badge covered hat, was one of the iconic images of Exmoor; one Exmoor legend in pursuit of another.

Outside the pub, a hard February frost covered the moor. By contrast the air inside was warm and dry, a roaring fire in the corner of the bar saw to that. The three of us tucked into a delicious lunch of home-baked ham, local eggs and twice-cooked chips was on the menu, washed down with Exmoor ale. Johnny Kingdom talked and we listened. He talked about himself, about his life on Exmoor, about the moor, and about his passion for wildlife. He talked with boundless, breathless enthusiasm, stopping only to take another mouthful of the ham or the beer.

Then it was out of the London Inn, at one time a coaching inn on the old road to London, now an utterly charming 'local', nestling under the hill and out of the winds and just above the village of Molland.

Our feet crunched the frosty grass as we walked out across the moor. Johnny carried on talking. His theme now was our quarry for the afternoon, a glimpse of Exmoor's wild red deer. This magical little corner of South West England is the only place in the country where you can see large numbers of this magical beast; Britain's largest wild mammal. And even then, people like our guest had never seen one before, not in all her many visits to the moor.

Johnny told her what to look for, the signs on the ground, the footprints - slots as they are called, the racks, the places where deer scramble up and over the steep hedge banks crowned with beech, the shape of their poo. By now we were off the hill and walking through an ancient track protected by those hedge banks. For the first time that day, Johnny stopped talking and told us to be quiet too. In a whisper he gestured to us to keep our heads down. He gingerly climbed and peered over the hedge. Then he beckoned to the visitor to do the same. She was rewarded with a sight she had never witnessed before. In the field, not twenty meters away and right in front of our noses, was a herd of Exmoor's glorious red deer. The weak February sun shone, back lighting their vibrant brown winter coats.

She was overcome. As we returned to the cars little was said, instead we reflected on the scene we had been privileged to view. She said thanks to Johnny for organising such a wonderful experience and we headed back home to Bristol.

For her it was the end of a journey. But for Johnny and I it was just the beginning of a much longer one. The visitor was the head of programmes at the local television broadcaster, HTV. It had taken me, an independent producer, six months to persuade her to come to visit this extraordinary man in this astonishing landscape. I had shown her Johnny's videos and clips of the man himself but she had not been convinced but that day on the moor changed everything. Straight away she commissioned us to make a short series with him. The day on the moor changed our lives forever. Myself and my partner Wendy McLean, went on to produce more than fifty documentary films with Johnny, a joyous fifteen year roller coaster ride of production for ITV and the BBC.



Over those years we got to know Johnny and his sometimes long-suffering wife Julie, very well. We began to appreciate the brilliant and unique skill he brought to his work for television. He had no formal training as a wildlife cameraman or presenter; those skills came to him naturally and intuitively. He had been interested in wildlife since childhood, he knew the moor like the back of his hand, and hundreds of friendships with small farmers and landowners had given him

permission to roam where others might not. He would spend his spare time watching red deer, badgers, foxes and a myriad of birds in these secret places.

He had worked as a woodsman and a terrible accident with a piece of machinery had left him emotionally scarred and depressed. A friend lent him a simple video camera to help him recover and suggested that he use the camera to film the wildlife he loved. Johnny did so and he never looked back.

I met him while making a film about deer hunting on Exmoor. He showed me some videos he made and sold at local markets. The films were like nothing I had seen before in wildlife television. Though they were extremely rough and ready his unique character and approach shone through like a breath of fresh air. He broke all the rules of programme-making. He rarely used a tripod so the shots were wobbly and the focus sometimes a little loose. He talked or whispered constantly as he was filming, and he tried to edit the programmes in the camera by often panning or zooming in and out. But none of this mattered because he had qualities that I had not seen in other wildlife programmes.

As you watched the films you felt that you were there with him as he filmed the deer or badgers. Because he did it by himself he would often turn the camera around and tell you what was happening. He had not a day of training yet could do naturally what many professionals take years to perfect. With no script or prompting he could hold the lens like a no one else I have come across. And unlike those in many wildlife programmes, Johnny's shots were never faked. When he was filming a badger or a fox you knew that it was real and not added in later by an editor with a list of stock shots.

Johnny was 'everyman'. He was not an Oxford educated zoologist who had found his way into the BBC Natural History Unit. He was a working class, rural, self-taught enthusiast. It was this authenticity which not only set him apart from the wildlife experts, but helped him connect with viewers in ways that they could not, 'If Johnny can do it, then why not me.'

But he also knew his stuff. He knew almost every blade of grass, tree, and hidden copse on Exmoor. And he knew his fieldcraft too. He knew where the deer were during the rutting season, where you could see a badger in spring bluebells, the whereabouts of a greater spotted woodpecker's nest at feeding time. His many hours spent on the moor, had given him a wonderful set of fieldcraft skills. He could read animal footprints, tell you what sort of deer had been through and how long ago. He knew the calls of different birds, the habits of a vixen and her cubs and he had the one thing you need when watching wildlife: patience. He would spend hours and hours waiting for the animal to come to him, and always with the wind in the right direction.

His love of everything wild on Exmoor shone through in all his work. When someone told him about a newborn deer calf caught on a wire fence, Johnny rescued it. The vet saved her life minus one leg and Johnny looked after the three-legged 'Bambi' for more than ten years and was affectionately affronted when someone called her 'tripod'.

When a pigeon's nest disintegrated in a tree close to his home, he used chicken wire to rebuild it, twice, and rescued the chick from the ground. He then watched over the mother and baby until it fledged. In itself a wonderful piece of wildlife rescue, but Johnny had the sense to go further. He filmed it all on a small video camera, by himself.

Ten years ago he was able to buy 52 acres of meadow, woodland and stream close to Exmoor where he spent much of the rest of his life, creating his very own garden of Eden. It's where he buried his beloved Bambi, where he built a pond, any number of hides and where he rigged cameras with the help of his friends and family. He was happiest on his and Julie's land, and it is both poignant and fitting that it is where he spent his last hours.



What is the legacy that Johnny leaves? He will be remembered for bringing an absolute, unadulterated passion for wildlife in general and Exmoor's wildlife in particular, to huge audiences. The millions of people, from eight to eighty, who watched his television programmes or went out on an Exmoor Safari in his old truck, saw in him the chance and the right for themselves to appreciate the natural world in all its simple beauty. Exmoor will be a lesser, if quieter place, without him.

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David Parker's book 'Johnny Kingdom's Wild Exmoor' is published by Halsgrove.