

John Reilly's Profile

I have always been fascinated by natural history. Indeed, my earliest recollections date back to family picnics, when my brother and I would spend many a happy hour, grovelling on hands and knees, skirting cow-pats, in search of elusive four-leaved clovers. Although this challenge was most likely a ruse to allow my parents a post-prandial nap, the excitement generated by our occasional success helped kindle my childhood interest in the countryside. My epiphany, if indeed a secularist can experience such an event, came when I was taken to a local town hall to hear the acclaimed naturalist and artist, Sir Peter Scott. The omens were not promising; Zimmer frames crowded the foyer, huddled groups of octogenarians blocked the aisles, and the aroma of naphthalene would have seen off any butterfly or moth for miles. Nevertheless, the lecture was one of those life-changing events, and as I scrambled my way to the exit, autograph in hand, I determined to pursue a career as a bird watcher.

To further my nascent interest, I joined the school's 'Field Club', since it ran fun trips to North Wales to look for ravens and dippers, and to Leighton Moss for the elusive bittern. My basic knowledge of seabirds was gleaned from my school friend Nick Davies during regular outings to the tidal island of Hilbre. I also helped with the school's 'Field Club Magazine' and assisted with the collection of records submitted by members. An individual's tally, based on the number of accepted sightings, was clear proof of observational prowess, and I would love to say that most were suffixed by 'JTR'. Unfortunately, that would be far from the truth, although I can still recall with pride the single entry bearing my solitary initials; 'Ring Ouzel, 1 pair, Moelfre, Oswestry, April 28th - JTR.'

During the sixth form, I developed my life-long interest in the Arctic and immersed myself in the history of polar exploration. I subsequently undertook climbing and sledging trips to Iceland, Greenland and Spitsbergen, with birding taking a back seat. However, I continued to note the species seen and will never forget opening up the tent after a five-day blizzard and being confronted by a bemused Ivory Gull! While in Greenland, I met the late Angus Erskine, a polar explorer of the 'Heroic Age' who asked me to act as a guide for two of his planned tours to Spitsbergen. While I enjoyed the experience, it made me appreciate the people skills and patience required of a bird guide and I was left in no doubt that it was not a career for me! It may not have helped that I was unable to find a Ross's Gull for a particularly demanding client. Instead, medicine, marriage, and children dominated the next phase of my life and, as a result, I had little opportunity for either travel or serious birding. My obsession with the Arctic remained, however, and I managed to find time to write several books on the history of Spitsbergen (sadly, you will not find them on any best seller list!)

Now that I have retired, and with both children having flown the nest, I am busy making up for lost time. With an understanding wife and a continuing passion for travel, I have been able to bird a number of far-flung destinations. One of these, Ghana, had an unexpected outcome, as the trip's target species - the Yellow-headed Picathartes - opened my eyes to the field of avian evolution. As a result, I now try and target species that have important evolutionary stories to tell.