

OBITUARY



John Mitchell (15th January 1934 - 16th March 2019) Photograph taken in Touch Hills, Stirlingshire, spring 2007, at the location where Schleicher's thread-moss (*Bryum schleicheri* var. *latifolium*) was rediscovered, the only remaining population in the British Isles.

John Mitchell is widely and justifiably recognised as an outstanding all-round naturalist with a broad and deep knowledge of both fauna and flora. He was well known to many members of Glasgow Natural History Society and made a remarkable contribution to the understanding and conservation of the Loch Lomondside area.

John, originally from Peterborough, Cambridgeshire arrived in Glasgow in the early 1960s but his interest in natural history was by then well developed. This interest appears to have blossomed in the 1950s during his two years of National Service, a time when he first encountered the young Derek Ratcliffe, which he amusingly recounts in an article (Mitchell, 2015). His subsequent interactions, over many years, with the soon to be famous naturalist Derek Ratcliffe were to have a profound influence on his future career and interests.

John was born at the family home in Muswell Road, Peterborough on 15th January 1934 and baptised at Orton Waterville Parish Church (St. Mary's). From 1938 to 1944 he attended West Town infant and junior school, and later attended a local grammar school - The Deacon School - where he stayed until he was 16 years old.

John came from a musical family. His father and younger brother both played trumpet whilst his paternal grandfather played euphonium. John was started on piano but switched to trombone when his arms grew long enough to reach the sixth position. During his youth John played with the Salvation Army Junior Band, the Peterborough Junior Orchestra, Northants T.A. Regimental Band, as well as the pit orchestra for the local Gilbert and Sullivan Society and a brass quartet, most of these with his brother Neil.

When it came time to leave school, he was interested in bird-watching, which was his favourite hobby, and music. He attended a meeting with the school careers advisor who recommended he consider a career in pig breeding! His father wanted him to go into banking. Since neither of these appealed to John, he applied to join the army as a musician on boy's service, auditioned with the Royal Signals, and was accepted as a trombonist. He moved up to Catterick Camp, in North Yorkshire, to join the Royal Signals where the next chapter of his life was to begin.

Although John was, in his own words, "a fair trombonist", he was not totally enthusiastic about the obligatory requirement for physical exercise during his role with the Staff Band of the Royal Corps of Signals. He recounts how his attempts at avoidance led him to take refuge in the Education Building, where he noticed an invitation to join a fledgling field club instigated by the Sergeant Education Instructor, one Derek Ratcliffe. John humorously recounts how one of the benefits of forming a club meant that Derek could then get access to an army vehicle and driver to enable excursions! Following visits to many places in the north Yorkshire area, John notes how he and his fellow members were in awe of Derek's breadth and depth of knowledge at the time, an accolade which most of us would now happily impart about John.

As part of his days in the Royal Signals, John was required to train on a second instrument. Because he was over six feet tall, he was told he was to play double bass for his second instrument. Playing the double bass meant that John could earn extra money playing in the officers' mess and also play gigs outwith the confines of the army barracks.

John left the army in the mid-1950s and became a much-in-demand musician, holding down London residencies

at venues such as The Dorchester Hotel and The Piccadilly Club. He would also go to seaside resorts to do a summer season, which was well paid work. He played in North Wales with The Harry Leader Big Band, Birmingham with 'Johnnie Gray and His Band of the Day' and, crucially, a summer season up in The Beech Ballroom, Aberdeen. It was here that John was amazed by the fact that you could drive for half an hour and be completely lost in the countryside. His intention had been to stay in Scotland for this six week summer season. He was to spend the next 60 years in Scotland, only returning to Peterborough for a short holiday each year.

John explored further afield and fell in love with the riches of the Loch Lomond area. He sought out work in the nearest city, which was Glasgow, and joined the 'Dave Mason Big Band' where he held down a residency at The Majestic Ballroom. It was in Glasgow that John met his future wife Sandra. Driving home from his gig in November 1962 he saw a woman being accosted by a drunk on Renfrew Street and stopped his vehicle to rescue her. They eventually married and lived at first in a caravan park in Cardowan near Stepps. After the arrival of their sons - first Andrew then Cameron, they moved to the vicinity of Gartocharn, on the southern edge of Loch Lomond.

It was at this time that John's natural history interest took centre-stage and gradually phased the music out. This change came about due to another chance encounter with Derek Ratcliffe. Reading an article in *Scottish Field* magazine in a Glasgow dentist's waiting room, John learned that Derek, whom he had not seen for ten years, was now in Scotland working for the Nature Conservancy. John and Sandra visited Derek in Edinburgh and not long after they rekindled their mutual interest in field excursions, with trips to the northern Pennines and the Cairngorms, studying respectively the nesting of golden plover (*Pluvialis apricaria*) and dotterel (*Charadrius morinellus*). It was on his trip to Caenlochan that he was introduced to its rich arctic-alpine flora, a passion which he continued to enjoy for many years after.

During his meeting with Derek he found himself agreeing to take on the annual monitoring of peregrines (*Falco peregrinus*) and ravens (*Corvus corax*) in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs area, an endeavour which John noted came "to occupy all of my spare time every April to June for the next 25 years". The connection to the Loch Lomond area would become the defining feature of John's prowess as a natural historian, as he became the authority on the local history of Loch Lomondside. This knowledge grew quickly during his tenure with the then Nature Conservancy as the reserve warden for the Loch Lomond National Nature Reserve (NNR), a position he held for 27 years before retiring in 1994. He was also involved with the setting up of the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park, Scotland's first, established in 2002.

As his knowledge and experience grew, John was invited to prepare a course of lectures on Loch Lomondside for the University of Glasgow's Department of Further Education. The need for an affordable and comprehensive resource for students resulted in John and a group of fellow tutors producing a booklet in 1974 entitled *A Natural History of Loch Lomond*.

A search of the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI) database reveals John contributed some 3,500 botanical records, mostly of interesting plants found at Loch Lomondside but also many wider Scottish mountain species. His records span over 40 years from early days with GNHS members such as Robert Mackechnie and many with his good friend and close collaborator the late Allan Stirling; more recently he made excursions with Edna Stewart and Pam Murdoch. Jim Dickson enjoyed excursions with John during the 1970s to 1990s. He considers John was an "outstanding natural historian" and recalls that his "pleasant company and great, broad knowledge of natural history was of no little benefit to me".

John was well respected by former colleagues during his time as reserve warden, including fellow warden John Cameron and bryologist Nick Hodgetts who worked for a short time as an area officer in Balloch. Nick enjoyed many excursions with John, considering him great company and "one of the last of the old school warden-naturalist breed". They visited the national rarity Schleicher's thread-moss (*Bryum schleicheri* var. *latifolium*), which John, and former GNHS members Gerry Rodway and Allan Stirling, rediscovered in 1968 in the Touch Hills. John also found the diminutive rarity dwarf bladder-moss (*Physcomitrium sphaericum*) at Wards Pond on the reserve in 1980. After Nick got married in 1987 he recalls John's tongue-in-cheek words of advice "When you're married, the most difficult step of any botanical journey is the one that takes you out of the front door"!

John's knowledge of the local flora extended to details of populations and ecology, based on many years of observations. He could combine his visits to study birds with seasonal observations of plant populations; perhaps it is not surprising that many of his interesting local botanical finds were of specialists of water margins such as the eight-stamened waterwort (*Elatine hydropiper*), pillwort (*Pilularia globulifera*) and mudwort (*Limosella aquatica*). I encountered John on several occasions when studying populations of Red Data Book species on Loch Lomondside. John was the first, and most valuable, stop for information and localities of the eight-stamened waterwort, Scottish dock (*Rumex aquaticus*) and elongated sedge (*Carex elongata*).

Norman Tait fondly remembers John leading local botanical field trips around Loch Lomondside where he introduced him to many new and interesting plants. Norman also highlights the range and quality of the many slides and prints which he helped to process for

John's prodigious output on local history and natural history topics.

Over a period of some 50 years John was a prolific writer of articles and notes on a remarkable range of subjects and topics. His long bibliography includes papers on many aspects of the flora (including cryptogams), ornithology, mammals, fish and diverse invertebrate groups. However, his knowledge also extended to authoritative accounts on local geology, folklore, landscape and vegetation history, plus biographies of local naturalists and historical articles on Loch Lomondside and the Drymen area, where he lived in retirement with Sandra. John was the first chairman of the newly formed Drymen and District Local History Society in 1981.

David Clugston has noted that "John was a gifted writer who had the ability to engage the reader by making his chosen subject really interesting and not too technical". This is perhaps most ably manifest in his contribution to the Collins 'New Naturalist' series - *Loch Lomondside* (Mitchell, 2001), about which Jim Dickson writes "In my opinion it is one of the very best, a very fine memorial to John". John himself has written that without the constant encouragement and support of Derek Ratcliffe, the book may never have seen the light of day.

John was awarded an Honorary MA by the University of Stirling (1991) and the Fellowship of the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (1994). As a very long-standing member of GNHS he was recently awarded Honorary Membership for his outstanding contribution in writing around 50 papers and notes for *The Glasgow Naturalist*.

David Clugston has written that "John was a thoroughly nice guy and very good company. Although tending to shun the limelight he was always happy to pass on the wealth of both his natural history knowledge and increasingly on the history of the Drymen area".

John will be long associated with Loch Lomondside, and his memory will live long thanks to his extensive written legacy. He will be sadly missed but he will be fondly remembered by many members as intelligent, enthusiastic, amusing and deeply knowledgeable.

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- Mitchell, J. (2001). *Loch Lomondside*. HarperCollins, London.
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