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John Kerr interviews Bert Raynes

Geoffrey O'gara: Bert Raynes, author, bird watcher, conservation activist, oh, and curmudgeon too. Next on Wyoming Chronicle.

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Geoffrey: If you've read the long-running columns by Bert Raynes in the Jackson Hole News, you know him as an observant bird-watcher, a campaigner for wildlife protection, and a poet and prose writing about the outdoors. He won the Rungius Award for Conservation along with Wallace Stegner and Mardy Murie. And with his late wife Meg, he set up a foundation to fund wildlife studies. Maybe you didn't know he was a city kid from New Jersey or that he got a degree in Chemical Engineering and worked for a big corporation in Cleveland.

Now in his 80's, Raynes is not as light the foot as he once was, but his mind is as nimble as ever. In this interview with Wyoming Chronicle's John Kerr, he talks about wildlife and his life.

John Kerr: So Bert Raynes, welcome to the Wyoming Chronicle.

Bert Raynes: Thank you, John.

John: And thanks for joining us here today.

Bert: Thank you, John, very much.

John: I want to go right to the heart of it and learn how a city kid from Jersey City gets to Wyoming and wins the Rungius Award for Convers-, uh, for Conservation and joins Wallace Stegner, and Mardy Murie, and E. O. Wilson, and the Craighead's, and Jane Goodall. And how does that same kid get here and win the Wyoming Outdoor Hall of Fame Award with Teddy Roosevelt and on and on? How did this happen, Bert?

Bert: I think I can only answer the first part of your question, which was how did I get here. I read a lot of books when I was a kid. And I read about the west because I grew up in a very urbanized setting, with no nature at all to speak of it. Literally, literally true, and always wanted to see the west. Then I got lucky, and I met my future wife who was from a semi-rural se-setting in Pennsylvania. And she showed me some of nature. And that I had that professor, that changed my life who told everybody who would listen at the time that natural resources are finite.

John: Who is that professor?

Bert: Uh, Black Mike Cannon his name was.

John: Where was he? Where was he?

Bert: Penn State College in those days.

John: Penn State College.

Bert: Penn State College.

John: That's where you went?

Bert: Yeah.

John: And what did he tell you? What did he teach you?

Bert: That there are natural resources, but there are limits to them. They will not last forever. And we should all conserve and use the resources wisely. That had a big impact then. All those things did.

John: Did you ever tell him so?

Bert: I went back... Actually, my wife was invited back to Penn State [clears throat], and she had all these conferences and things. And I took the time and see my old school. And I did tell Black Mike. And I've always been grateful that I did because he died very young. It was a great loss.

And after World War II, first chance we got, Meg and I took an automobile trip out here and went to Jackson Hole because I read about the Craigheads. I read about the Muries and read about Jackson Hole, and we got enchanted. And that's how I came here.

As for getting these awards, I have no idea. I think they were desperate.

John: [laughs] Well, the Rungius, let's be clear about that from my point of view at least. The Rungius Award for Conservation, nothing desperate about it. As I said, Wallace Stegner, Mardie Murie, E. O. Wilson, the Craighead's, Jane Goodall, and on and on. This award that's on the table right here, I'll spin it, is from The Wildlife Heritage Foundation of..

Bert: It is to both Meg and me, which is why I'm very fond of it. Because lots of times just the guy gets the credit or the woman gets the credit, not the person who's back in the background doing all the work.

John: Well, a lot of the people who got this was Teddy Roosevelt. Speaking of this award.

Bert: Yeah.

John: So you're joining some quite a fair.

Bert: He wasn't too shabby.

John: No. [chuckles] And neither are you, Bert. Talk to me a little bit about Meg's influence in, in your life. You've lost Meg now.

Bert: Yeah.

John: But um, Meg's with you every day. And goes on you're still partners, in a sense.

Bert: Yes.

John: Tell me about that.

Bert: Well, we met as students, freshmen in college. And we didn't get along at first. And then we started to talk, and we never finished talking.

John: Hmm.

Bert: So her influence was constant.

John: What was her influence? You've become a leader in conservation. You're modest about it. You're sometimes even grumpy about it. But you have, and what was her influence in all this? This is, by the way, a picture of that you have in your house that you've let us of you and Meg. Tell us about it.

Bert: Oh, that was in '73, and we have moved here permanently instead of coming out every year [clears throat] for several weeks. And we had invited a friend who took the picture because he wanted to see how we were doing. We know we were from the east, and this was the Wildwest. And in 1973, it was a lot different than the society is now. We have fresh fruit now and fish coming to markets. Things like that.

John: All kinds of fish.

Bert: Almost civilized here.

John: Take me back to um, y-y-you said you went to Penn State.

Bert: Yeah.

John: And where did you go then? What did you do then, Bert?

Bert: My first real job was that connected in New York for the great General Electric Company Research Laboratory. Where I was the baby of the laboratory. And the baby of the laboratory gets shown around the lab by the outgoing baby of the laboratory. So, you get to meet some really wonderful people which you might not otherwise meet. Really tough figures in Science.

After 5 years, we went to Cleveland, Ohio, the outskirts of Cleveland. And I got hooked on research, so I've worked for two small independent research companies. Which gave me a chance to work in a variety of fields which I enjoyed.

John: What were those companies?

Bert: Rand Development, and Horizons Incorporated.

John: And in Rand, at Rand Development, what did you do?

Bert: Well, I had been offered an opportunity to work on pollution control research. If I could just get the finances for, you know, I was given a position go out and do something. And I was lucky, and also I worked hard, but luck has had a lot to do with all these things. I worked on mostly water pollution control trying to improve their existing processes or invent new ones.

John: Now, I took a look at the, at the website. And it says, you were Vice President for Applied Research, and you worked in pollution abatement.

Bert: Yeah.

John: Uhm, you were in Ohio at Cleveland.

Bert: Yeah.

John: What was going on with waterways and river ways and stuff like that there? You must have been right and a thick of it.

Bert: The waters of our country had begun to stink.

John: Hmm.

Bert: And they've been cleaned up some in all these years. That was in the 60s. But there's still 40% of our waters are polluted to one extent or another. Lake Erie, in particular in the fall, was getting so little water supply for the whole Cleveland area, was not potable.

John: Hmm.

Bert: You couldn't stand the smell or to drink it.

John: And what did you do about that?

Bert: Well, I didn't do very much about the Lake Erie thing, but I tried to improve sewage treatment plant cost and efficiency.

John: How?

Bert: Well, in that particular one was better use and disposal of the sewage sludge that results from one of the major, the major water sewage treatment processes in the country and most of the world, actually. By pipelining it away and using the material to reclaim strip mine areas and other areas that need fertilizer.

John: So...

Bert: Because it's a great fertilizer.

John: So, poop for purpose or poop for profit?

Bert: I never had thought of that at that time.

John: Too bad you didn't patent it.

Bert: Where were you when I needed you?

John: [laughs] What's this picture here? This was in your folder. This is a couple of handsome devils.

Bert: Well, that was a process using coal as a medium to remove impurities from sewage.

John: Is this you right here?

Bert: That is I.

John: And who is this fellow right here?

Bert: Young Stewart Udall.

John: Stewart Udall, the Secretary of Interior?

Bert: Secretary of Interior.

John: What's this gizmo?

Bert: Oh, just some gauges that we had. I couldn't tell you precisely anymore what they are.

John: What were you doing here?

Bert: We were showing off a filtering process that used coal. That was on its way to be burned for energy to remove impurities from sewage.

John: Hmm.

Bert: In this way we made cost savings. And also it was happened to be very good for removal of phosphorous, which is a big problem in sewage treatment effluent because it's a good fertilizer. The effluent goes into some receiving water or stream or lake. And if you have too many pollutants, too many goodies for things to grow that you don't want to grow, they'll grow.

John: And so, let me get this straight.

Bert: That sort of thing is what we were doing.

John: You came from Jersey City in New Jersey.

Bert: Yeah.

John: You came west, but in the way west, you stopped at Penn State and you stopped at Union College. You stopped in Cleveland.

Bert: I don't know what took me so long. I wasn't too bright.

John: [laughs] And you worked in sort of conservation but mainly in Engineering.

Bert: Yeah.

John: [sighs] How did you go from there, Bert, to becoming what I think of and most of us in your newly adopted state here in the west as one of the leading conservationists of our times. How did that happen?

Bert: Well, I don't know that I can go along with that characterization. But I've been writing and talking about the need for pollution control. The need to retain some wildness in our lives. Once you learn about the therapeutic value of a natural area with wild things in it, you can't take that out of your mind. And I've tried to teach other people that. Some of it through bird watching. I've ruined a lot of lives and turned people into bird watchers.

John: [chuckles] You were the founder or are the founder of the Jackson Hole Bird Club.

Bert: Yeah.

John: What's that been like?

Bert: Along with another fellow.

John: Who else?

Bert: Reverend Dan Abrams...

John: Hmm.

Bert: ...who lives in Montana now. [clears throat]

John: When you come into Jackson from the north, near the visitor's center, there's a place there where you can see the water birds and so forth. I notice that it's called Bert's Walk. Is that after you?

Bert: Yeah, it's me. A Bert Walk, yeah.

John: A Bert Walk.

Bert: And out on the national refuge are two trees protected by a big fence that are planted in honor of Meg.

John: Oh, how wonderful. Where are they?

Bert: You can see them from the new National Museum of Wildlife Art of the United States.

John: There you go.

Bert: It's right adjacent to the path that the sleigh rides to go.

John: Oh, yeah.

Bert: ...across Flat Creek to show people the elk in the wintertime.

John: You're quite an author, Birds of Grand Teton, Valley so Sweet, Curmudgeon Chronicles, Winter Wings, anything else?

Bert: Finding the Birds of Jackson Hole.

John: Quite an effort.

Bert: Piece of cake.

John: Piece of cake.

Bert: [chuckles]

John: But you've really influenced, so far, a lot of lives. And you're influencing a lot right now. I noticed that in the 4th of July Parade in Jackson that there was a certain fella right here, sitting in the back of this old truck with the sign "Bert." And I understand that as you were driven through the town, much in the way people were tarred and feathered in other times, you were treated to applause. And to, "Bert, Bert, Bert."

Bert: And you're entirely responsible too.

John: Well, this is...

Bert: That's your truck, and you're driving it.

John: I have, in the spirit of full disclosure, to tell you that this is my truck. And I invited you to

do it, and you said, "Not a chance in Hades." And which I took as a yes. And it was quite a day.

Bert: You're a persuasive young man.

John: [laughs] Bert, where does the inspiration come from that you found and that others are finding to be stewards for this vast and wonderful wildland and for creatures that can't speak for themselves? Where does it come from for you?

Bert: Well, I don't think it's inspiration or...

John: What is it?

Bert: I think it's just a recognition that came to me, fortunately, while I was in college that things needed to be done. And perhaps I could do one or two of them. And I would give it a try. So I still give it a try. I am still trying to get people involved, people to understand it, their involvement, why they're involved, and get enthusiasm for maintaining what we can of our planet. There's a lot of loose talk about how we are going to populate, establish populations on other planets.

John: [chuckles]

Bert: Well, I wouldn't hold my particular breath. Especially at my age not even at your age. It's a long way off, and it will be just a few of us. Not 9 billion that they're predicting in a short time. So, this is what we have. And [clicks tongue] those astronaut boys when they show the picture of the Earthrise over the moon and that little blue dot you had to be impressed.

John: Yeah. You do and humbled too.

Bert: Awful thin layer that were support, we're dependent on around it, Earth.

John: If you're just joining us on Wyoming Chronicle, I'm speaking with Bert Raynes. He's a conservationist, and columnist, and self-described curmudgeon, and outspoken, and indefatigable teller of the truth as he sees it. And a defender of our planet.

Bert: May I correct you?

John: Okay.

Bert: The word, the title curmudgeon was given to me by the publisher of that book.

John: Oh, it was?

Bert: I would have not chosen that.

John: But what about the title of SOB?

Bert: I might have chosen SOB.

John: Tell us about that.

Bert: Well, I always assumed that whenever anybody called me an SOB, they meant Sweet Old Bert.

John: [laughs]

Bert: So I've gone with that.

John: Well, Sweet Old Bert.

Bert: Sweet Old Bert.

John: I don't know. So, what keeps you going? What keeps the gleam in your eye? You got limited mobility now.

Bert: Yeah.

John: You've lost your life partner.

Bert: Yup.

John: You've spent some time thinking while looking at the hospital ceiling. What keeps you going? What role do your friends play? What keeps the spark in those eyes of yours?

Bert: Well, we've been very lucky to have wonderful friends. And a lot of them including you, sir.

John: Thank you. Well, I'm honored to be your friend. Tell me about the Meg and Bert Raynes Wildlife Fund. What it's about?

Bert: Well, we recognized, Meg and I, when we used to talk about these things that the government, the federal, the state the local authorities have limited resources to measure and determine the wildlife distribution and occurrence locally. There just aren't that many eyes. But if we could enlist all the citizens and motivate them to turn in their reports of what they see in their backyard or in the backcountry, and collate and make all those things available, the managers who have to manage wildlife, the planners who have to plan our development and our traffic patterns and transportation. All those things. If they have more data, they could perhaps, we hope, make better decisions. And so we started this fund to ask people to turn in their observations. We started with one day when people were asked to tell us what most they saw, where they saw it and when, and what the sexes were. Which is, we used them pretty easily with most, and that seemed to be a big success. Game and Fish people seem to enjoy having that additional data.

And then we had a 5-week program in the Gros Ventre mountains to watch antelope, elk, bighorn sheep, wolves, mountain lion if they having it coming, whatever came. And now, we're not doing this all ourselves. We're doing this in partnership with other organizations like the Wildlife Foundation, with the Teton Science Schools, with the Game and Fish Department, with the Forest Department, US Forest Service.

John: How are young people and how are some of the retired folks and others involved in this?

Bert: Well, if they know how to use this newfangled computer stuff. We're trying to make it as simple as we can.

John: And if they don't, do you use paperwork?

Bert: Yeah, or even a telephone call.

John: Hmm. So, I just want to get this straight. So what you've done with your own savings, your own resources funded this effort that is intended, as I'm understanding you, to give us a better idea of the wildlife and the natural features that surround us and sustain us. Am I right?

Bert: Yeah.

John: And that will go on after your lifetime.

Bert: I certainly... That's our intention, yes.

John: Wow. What a contribution.

Bert: Well, we've had a lot of help. And...

John: How many people has it involved so far?

Bert: Well, with folks, advisors, and so forth. It's about 7. Mostly biologists.

John: Core, core group?

Bert: Core group.

John: And then how many people total do you think of them, the staff in this so far?

Bert: Well, I think they've trained, and I have to say they because I am not doing very much of the work, I'm afraid. Uh, fifty-eight people who are regular. We've had, for example, a pika project going in the valley and then the surrounding area, along with the Teton Science Schools. And a hundred and fifty sites were identified with GPS's and mapping...

John: That's tough.

Bert: ... uh, in the first 2 months.

John: Wow.

Bert: Now, this includes some sites that were known about. But we didn't have to identify it until...

John: Well, they say nothing of the thousands of people who read your weekly column in the paper.

Time is running short on this as it always does. I want to show one thing here. This is a pen that has Lyndon Johnson's signature on that outside of the box, maybe on the pen. What was this pen used for, Bert?

We've only got a little time.

Bert: It was one of those pens to see presidents signing their names on abruptly. Obama is doing it very carefully now.

John: What was this for?

Bert: He was signing bills that included some water pollution control money.

John: You were involved?

Bert: Yes, I was involved in that.

John: Wow. So, you have taken [clicks tongue] your early life, your partnership with Meg, your time in an urban area, you've come west, and you have inspired thousands, maybe tens of thousands. And you're modest about it. You got the name "curmudgeon." You're Sweet Old Bert, SOB, and looks to me like you're going to probably do some more damage before you're done. What's ahead for?

Bert: Go, keep on, keep on, working on a couple of books.

John: Really?

Bert: And uh... [chuckles]

John: You're going to cause some more trouble?

Bert: Oh, I hope so.

John: I hope so, too.

Bert: I hope so.

John: I loved talking with you. Thank you for coming in and joining us on Wyoming Chronicle.

Bert: Thank you.

John: And good luck to you. And hats off to you.

Geoffrey: I checked out the website of the Meg and Bert Raynes Wildlife Fund and was pleased to find the project devoted to one of my favorite creatures, the pika. A small rodent you'll hear peeping among the boulders high in the Rockies. The project maps the location of pikas based on observations reported by people like you and me. So, keep your eyes open.

The people and stories we cover on Wyoming Chronicle are larger than we can fit into our half-hour format. We hope we've just whet your appetite, and you'll dig deeper. Reading the books, listening to the music, and debating the issues that we cover here. If you want to go further down the path with interesting people like Bert Raynes, visit our website in wyomingpbs.org and go to the Wyoming Chronicle page. Make us a habit.

[music]

Geoffrey: The Wyoming Chronicle doesn't end when this half-hour does. It continues on our website, wyomingpbs.org. But with your help, we begin in an ongoing dialogue around the topics we discussed on the air. Share your experiences and tell us what you think and why you're at it. Post ideas on us for future topics and guests.

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