

**Transcript of the original, unedited interview of Bert Raynes by Rebecca Huntington
January 23, 2014**

Rebecca Huntington: I'm Rebecca Huntington, and I'm a freelancer, and I cover a lot of environmental issues here in Jackson.

Bert Raynes: I'm Bert Raynes and I'm not quite sure why I'm here.

Rebecca: Bert, you've written a lot of books. In one of those books, there's curmudgeons in the title, [chuckles] why is that?

Bert: Curmudgeon Chronicles.

Rebecca: Tell us what's Curmudgeon Chronicles about, and why do you call yourself a curmudgeon?

Bert: Well, it's pretty much a collection of a bunch of my newspaper columns and I did not give myself that title. That was imposed upon me by a publisher. But it seemed to stick and it's certainly appropriate. So there it is, Curmudgeon Chronicles. Go to your favorite bookstore.

Rebecca: [chuckles] How long have you been writing your newspaper column?

Bert: I think it basically started in 1976, which was quite a while ago now.

Rebecca: And how would you describe your column? It's not just about nature, you sprinkle a lot of different things in there.

Bert: The title is Far Afield, so I can cover pretty much anything I want to. I don't just restrict myself to nature but predominantly it's a nature column.

Rebecca: You collect a lot of wildlife sightings, but particularly bird sightings and you're kind of well-known locally for your expertise in birding. In fact, I met a couple at a birding outing in Boise, Idaho, and they were so enthusiastic that when they came to Jackson, they got in touch with me, and I sent them to you. And so I'm sure you [chuckles] wouldn't remember them because you've probably been called by all manner of birding enthusiasts.

Bert: Yeah. I like it. I like it. Birders seem to be pretty nice people. Nature watchers are pretty nice folks.

Rebecca: What was the first bird sighting that you had that really made you fall in love with birding?

Bert: It was an osprey, as it turned out. I didn't know what it was. I had no idea what it was. I had snuck down to the edge of a creek in upper New York State, where we lived, to see if I could not scare the deer when they came to drink from a creek called Holly Creeks in the Adirondacks.

I counted myself as skillful if they didn't detect me. And suddenly, this object falls out of the sky, making a big splash close enough that I actually felt some of the droplets, and emerged from the water with a pretty good-sized bass. Well, you have to find out what that is. So you go to the library and it's downhill from there.

Rebecca: How long ago was that?

Bert: Ages. Uh... 1950.

Rebecca: You obviously were already into nature because you were creeping up on deer.

Bert: Yeah.

Rebecca: Where did your love of nature come from?

Bert: My wife. Meg Raynes. I was a city kid and she had rural roots. She taught me everything. Did a good job I thought.

Rebecca: Did Meg love watching birds as well?

Bert: She did for a long time until she got ill. And then we couldn't go out in the field much so she got occupied with other things. But she was really good.

Rebecca: How did you guys end up in Jackson Hole?

Bert: Well, that may be one thing I'm responsible for. I had read about Jackson Hole when I was a kid in books, National Geographic. I started reading Frank and John Craigheads' work, as a youngster. I always wanted to see the Tetons. So, on our first real vacation, we drove out here. Dirt roads, all the way, both ways, coming and going. Mud up to you know, the story. And we came at just the wrong time, it was mosquito time.

We never saw the whole mountain range because of clouds and showers. But we fell in love with the people. It's for us, was the easiest place to make acquaintances, we've ever lived. And I believe, remains so to the day, an easy place to make a friendship. So, we started coming back every September and you fall in love. That's all.

Rebecca: You're known for loving nature but really the people are just as important, it sounds like.

Bert: You bet.

Rebecca: What kind of changes have stood out to you in Jackson Hole these days? What have you seen that's...?

Bert: Well, to us the biggest change was the rate of growth. If a community grows too rapidly at a rate, it tends to lose its cohesiveness. It tends to be more willing to isolate other circles. We've

always regretted that we really don't know any, let's say, lawyers. We know a bunch of doctors as it happens, but lawyers or construction workers. It's not generally what we run into. It's not that we shunned them, and I hope they don't shun us, but it's just the way it works in a community that's growing too fast.

And, Meg used to say we're in danger of becoming a business community instead of a community. And that's the biggest change. Of course, the things that come with too rapid growth, like abuse, and more crime per capita, traffic problems. All that stuff is no fun. And when the growth rate of the population is too rapid, that's what you get. But it's still an easy place to meet people. A lot of very interesting people in this community. You scratch anybody around here, you don't know what you're going to turn up. That's not unusual. I suppose every town feels this way.

Rebecca: What about with the wildlife? Have you seen changes?

Bert: Well, you know, that's one of the reasons for having an outfit called Nature Mapping Jackson Hole, it's asking non-professionals, in particular, to report their observations so we can find out what's happening. They're just so many trained biologists and they can't be everywhere at all times. So everybody who goes out and looks around, or stays in his home and looks around, can help define that. It would seem that with only 3 percent of the land in the county occupied and ninety-seven percent of the figure is usually given, is federal land of one sort or another and on some kinds of protection that there wouldn't be too many changes.

But that doesn't take into account millions of visitors each year, lots of traffic and influences, during certain seasons of the year on particular animals. So, we're documenting that. Starting with moose, there's a program every year to evaluate their numbers and habitats in the winter. Elk and pronghorn up the grove want drainage on their migration routes. The influence of just tourists, the influence of hunting. So I don't really know the answer but thank heavens, we still have them all.

Rebecca: How would you explain what nature mapping is and is it something that you created from scratch?

Bert: No, it wasn't my idea. I had an idea wanting to do something, now that I can't get out in the field. And I had a bunch of young biologists here and we were kicking ideas around. And one of the people here, Steve Kilpatrick, who was then with the game and fish, knew about some efforts that had to have a program called Nature Mapping, in a bunch of states in the United States. Mostly the efforts have not worked out. But in a couple of States, they did. Washington State and Iowa. I can't remember any others right now. Maybe Nebraska. And that idea kind of intrigued everybody, and it grew from that meeting. The idea was just to collect data. Make sure it was vetted so it was pretty accurate and accepted by the biologists. And it kind of took hold the first year. We had something like, I think eight thousand observations. And now I imagine we're going for thirty thousand and it's about 3 years old.

Rebecca: And the idea is you basically take citizens, average Joe or Jane Citizen, and you train them how to record the observation so that the biologists can get- use in some way or trust it?

Bert: And we're trying to make the observation procedure much more simple. It's been complicated. These infernal machines called computers, which are instruments of the devil certainly, are easy for some to use and not easy for others. I have a hell of a time with them.

Rebecca: Do you...

Bert: Right now, nature mapping is being operated, if you want to use that word, controlled by, in cooperation with the Jackson Hole Wildlife Foundation. They have staff enough to maintain it properly. As we speak today, I am writing in my column, asking people to report any strange or unusual behavior of animals, in and around Teton County. Now that we're in a federal government shutdown, are the animals taking advantage, changing their migration, doing anything differently because all of a sudden there's a big drop-off in human traffic. Which would not go unnoticed, I'm sure. So far, I haven't heard of much.

Rebecca: The humans might not be able to go observe because they're kicked out of [laughs] the park but I think I had the same question.

Bert: Did you?

Rebecca: Yeah, do the animals, you know, enjoying the quiet of the parks now it's all shut down and what might they do differently?

Bert: Yeah. I've heard that there are oodles of tourists patrolling the remaining roads that are open. Going up and down, up and down with their cameras. And they're finding stuff. Great gray owl, wolves, considerable moose reports. The animals can't recognize the quiet I would think. The lack of disturbance. And the ordinary observer, the ordinary nontrained biologist can certainly, may not be able to tell the difference between a short tail, long-tail weasels easily. But a moose or an elk is reasonably distinguishable.

Rebecca: You are saying the nature mapping is that you've kind of created a monster. Why is that?

Bert: Yeah, people are reporting that, and they're not calling me up and saying, "Hey." But I'll take it. Is this what you wanted?

Micah: Mhmm.

Rebecca: Micah, did you want to jump in?

Micah: Sure, let's go back a little bit and tell me a bit about your life growing up.

Bert: Grew up on the mean streets of Jersey City, New Jersey. With very little opportunity to get out and away from the streets. And it wasn't until I went to college and away from home, that I knew anything much different than that little bit. We used to vacation on farms. That my parents are farmers, places that my parents knew. But pretty much a city kid. And uh, I knew nothing

about the out-of-doors really. I'm not crying, by the way, I'm just answering your question.

Micah: Did you know that you were missing out on nature living in the city, or was that a [inaudible]?

Bert: No, because I used to read a lot and I read a lot of nonfiction. And so I knew it was out there. I think I knew about the West, probably when I was seven or eight years old, starting to read copiously. And then when I went away to school, well here's my, the anecdote that lives with me. It was freshman week at Penn State, in the middle of Pennsylvania, and I went into the drugstore. The drug store. And I got a Coke or some- something like that. And when I walked in, the guy behind the counter looked at me and said, "Hello." And I could not recall ever having had a person in that situation, say "hello" to me. And I thought, "Ooh, this is different." And I opened myself up to the new things around me.

Micah: Did you meet your wife Meg at Penn State?

Bert: You bet.

Rebecca: Bert. Can you tell us how you guys met?

Bert: Huh?

Rebecca: How did you and Meg meet?

Bert: Well, in those days, those long-gone days, we were tall people. She was a 6'1 and a half. That happens all the time now where it didn't happen all the time then. And I was tall. And I saw this tall woman, running around with a bunch of little girls. Half her size. It seemed I had to meet her. So, I met her. It was a very small place, then. It was still a Pennsylvania State College. Abraham Lincoln had just signed the land title to it, the signature was still wet. And um, she didn't like me. And I persisted,

Rebecca: [chuckles] How did you know that Meg didn't like you?

Bert: There's no difficulty knowing what Meg's feelings were like. You can tell. But we liked to talk. And you know, she snagged me. [chuckles]

Rebecca: Like that Osprey, catching that fish. [laughs]

Bert: Pretty much. Headfirst. The way Ospreys carry fish. So that's how that all started. And then we lived in Upstate New York Schenectady. And the opportunities there to get married in the backcountry were good... You had a car so we eventually got a car. And fell in with a bad crowd of people that went out on weekends and had sleepovers and who'd lie in their tents. And before they even got out in the morning, could hear and identify thirty birds. And then you had to say "How did you do that?" And, you know, it just, as I said, downhill from there.

Rebecca: When you moved to Jackson, did you meet the Murie's right away? How did you?

Bert: Yeah. Well, I didn't meet Olaus, I shook hands with him but I don't think he was interested anymore in things. But we got to know Mardie very well. And Wheezy Murie very well. Mardie Murie used to have a Wednesday evening cross-sticks puzzle get-together. Where people brought food in and did a puzzle. It's a kind of complicated, crossword puzzle, and just socialize and there was usually, or often, some guests who could be a world figure in conservation or biology or just anything. Because she welcomed everybody to her cabin. And we did that for about 20 years. And those were great evenings.

Ah, we got to know the Craigheads pretty well, and the younger Craigheads. And now starting the younger, younger, younger Craigheads. And there's a lot of research on animals. Going on between among the park and the forest and Yellowstone and Grand Teton and all kinds of little outfits that have grown up to do something special like a Kreuger's or a Beringia South, who does a lot of stuff on a lot of things. So you have a chance of meeting some very interesting people.

Rebecca: The people who helped write the Wilderness Act right?

Bert: You bet. You bet.

Rebecca: Do you ever meet city kids coming out here and getting their first taste of nature? That, that you...

Bert: I used to. When I could get around. I used to have some classes for the Teton Science Schools on birds. And yeah, it's very fun to open somebody's eyes the way mine were opened. It's really rewarding. You can sit there and see them get this spark and think, "There, I ruined another life. They're going to be birdwatchers. Satisfying." I could teach that at the university.

Micah: What did you study in college?

Bert: Chemical Engineering.

Micah: Is that what you end up doing?

Bert: Yeah, I did that for a career. I had wanted to be a chemical engineer since I was a kid. Nobody remembers, how I got that bug, it was nobody else in the family, certainly. But that was my desire. I made it. I wanted to be a world-class scientist. And I ended up, medium-aged chemical engineer instead. But I got a chance to work on some issues like water pollution control, sewage refuse handling, mundane things that needed more attention.

Micah: And what year did you move to Jackson Hole?

Bert: Pardon?

Micah: What year did you move to Jackson Hole?

Bert: Permanently, in '72.

Rebecca: Did you work in chemical engineering here In Jackson?

Bert: I had a consulting practice for a while. Mostly back east or the Midwest. And that was before FedEx's and emails and fax machines. So, fortunately, the business failed. And I didn't have to do that anymore. [laughs] Just think I could still be engineering.

Rebecca: How did you start writing your column Far Afield for the news and guide?

Bert: When we came here, the Jackson Hole News had an outdoor column and it was written by Reverend Daniel Abrams. Who was, besides a Reverend, a really good fly fisherman. And he wrote a lot about fly fishing and occasionally about big mammals and less occasionally about a bird or two. Well, he retired, and Paul Broun, a well-known fisherman, outdoors person here in Jackson Hole and elsewhere, took it over. And I had been supplying Dan Abrams with occasional observations and he would put them in his column. and occasionally he asked me to write a column. I can't honestly remember whether I asked the news if I could write on birds. I presume that's what happened or they asked me to help out with a column. I probably had to implore them.

And the column took off, people seem to like it. So, I kept writing and they kept publishing. And I hope they still do. People seem to enjoy talking about birds. Surveys around here, the most recent one I can remember, and it was done twice to make sure it was pretty much on the ball, said, this may be two years ago now, that eighty-five percent of the people living here come here for the wildlife in large part or that eighty-five percent of the reason they're here. I forget which, but anyway, a great interest in the wildlife. So, I'm not really surprised that people like to know that the bears are in hibernation. Or that the elk are on the move. And if you are a hunter get ready, that sort of thing. So Paul Bruun's column is very popular. And I like to think mine is too. Don't dissuade me.

Rebecca: I know some people who- that's one of the first things they read...

Bert: Hot damn.

Rebecca: ... when they write their weekly. [laughs]

Bert: Are we allowed to say hot damn.

Micah: I think so.

Bert: Good. This is Wyoming.

Micah: Yeah, it's encouraged.

Bert: Yeah, makes you feel... West.

Rebecca: Bert, do you have a favorite story of one of your birding outings or wildlife outings that you did with Meg?

Bert: Well, [clears throat], when we still lived on the outskirts of Cleveland, Ohio, in the vaunted snow belt, we used to lead a bird walk in one of Cleveland's parks. Cleveland for all you hear about it had and I guess still has a ring around the outskirts of the city of parks that are connected more or less. You can make a circuit of it on your car. And one of the parks, we took over to lead bird walks in the spring migration for 6 weeks. Open to everybody. And they got written up in a newspaper. We usually got pretty good people.

And one day Meg, I think she's still recovering from Achilles heel surgery. She sat on a park bench near a pond, and I took the people around on the prescribed path so we could keep track of it, the birds are on a checklist. And when we tally things up, she had seen and heard more birds than we did. Partly, because a bunch of people makes a bunch of noise. And partly, because I used to make the people pick up trash and there was grumbling about that. But it helped clean the park. But that was interesting.

And so we did it a couple more times and the person sitting had a very good chance not only of hearing and seeing but the birds would spend more time with her. You got to be able to study them and watch them and enjoy them for a longer time. And that opened our eyes to what we call Birdsit. Which came in handy later when I couldn't walk around much. And if you're lucky, you can do very well. You don't have to be a monumental hiker, to get to see a lot of wildlife. It works for other wildlife too, of course, sitting down and being quiet. I think nowadays people aren't able to sit down and be quiet. You're a kid. Tell me.

Rebecca: Yeah, you're right. It's hard to sit down and be quiet.

Bert: Yeah. You gotta make so many miles.

Rebecca: What kind of wildlife watching do you do from here?

Bert: Well, I have feeders on the south side of the house, but unfortunately, they don't get filled regularly enough. A moose sauntered by the other day. A bull, and a cow and a calf, just over the way. I have a garden. Thanks to that young Terry who was just here. And the deer and the elk when they're moving around like to take advantage of that. I don't keep lists anymore. It's so a lot of people like to keep a list of what they've seen. But, in this vicinity, just about everything in the way of birdlife you can expect around this valley shows up sooner or later. There's a little pond down a quarter of a mile away here. I have water for the birds. So, I get foxes sometimes, coyote less often. I'm getting raccoons now that know-how to disassemble a bird feeder overnight and take them away. Raccoons are a new, relatively to the valley, I think, 20 years, maybe.

Rebecca: I always loved watching when the yellow-headed blackbirds show up.

Bert: Yeah.

Rebecca: Along the pond. That's when I might drive off the road because I'm always looking for

them in the reeds.

Bert: You know, the little marsh behind the visitor center in Jackson. That's good yellow-headed Bird territory. They like it there.

Rebecca: I just have one last question, though. Do you use computers when you write your newspaper columns? Do you do those on the computer now?

Bert: Oh no. I don't type. Longhand. But now I do fax it in. I have one-way fax. Goes out.

Rebecca: That was the compromise to fax it because before would they come to get it?

Bert: I used to go take it in. But now, I don't drive. So the fax machine has been giving trouble lately. And I have this horrible feeling that they're no longer being made. That their outdated technology. Would anybody know?

Micah: I don't know.

Rebecca: Yeah, I think the people are using scanners now so they scan it.

Bert: Yeah, I'm outdated by the second here.

Rebecca: Well Bert, thank you for sharing your bird-watching and other chronicles with us.

Bert: Oh, I haven't told you about my desire when we came here to become the town drunk.

Micah: [laughs].

Rebecca: What happened?

Bert: I saw the competition.

[END]