At the Queen's Hall – Ray Mears Born to go Wild tour

Ahead of the tour date in Edinburgh in October we have a Q & A to share with you which will perhaps give you more insight into the man himself.

Q: You are a busy man – you are embarking on a British tour this autumn with a new show entitled, "Born to Go Wild – The Joy of Going to Wild Places and you have a new ITV series this autumn – Australian Wilderness with Ray Mears" What do you enjoy so much about live performance?

A: What's fun about touring is meeting the television viewer face-to-face. That's very important. A live show is real – it's unmediated. I also get some great questions. The youngest people ask me the best questions. They're very demanding. A 16-year-old once asked me, "What is Nature?" That was pretty difficult!

Q: What else appeals to you about doing live shows?

A: I love communicating my ideas. I have been teaching for 35 years, so I do know my subject. You get a very immediate connection with a live audience. That's my favourite aspect of it.

Q: This is going to be an upbeat show, isn't it?

A: Absolutely. On my last tour, I talked about a wartime secret agent who died in a concentration camp. Although I got lots of amazing letters from people who said they gained great strength from it, it was quite downbeat. This show is not like that. We are determined to make this more light-hearted. It's going to be a really fun show.

Q: What subjects will you be covering in “Born to Go Wild”?

A: In the first half, I’m going to demonstrate a few things. For instance, I’m going to talk about fire. I’m going to underline how important it is. Making fire is a skill unique to human beings – remember the monkeys in The Jungle Book singing about wanting to learn how to make “man’s red fire”? We are the only creatures who can create it. It’s the thing that separates us from other creatures.

Q: Can other creatures utilise fire once it is lit?

A: Yes. For instance, birds such as whistling kites can pick up the embers of a fire and drop them where they like. Once the birds have placed the fire, lots of reptiles will flee from it, and they become easy meals for the whistling kites. Birds know exactly where to put fires. In the same way, falcons will fan the flames if a fire is not doing its job properly. It’s really interesting.

Q: What subjects will you be majoring on in the second half of “Born to Go Wild”?

A: I’ll be talking about my recent trip to Australia where I was filming my new ITV series **Australian Wilderness With Ray Mears.** One of the most fascinating places I visited was Walpole Forest in the south-west corner of the country. It’s a remarkable place. The fourth largest forest on the planet, it is full of huge tingle trees. Surveyors looking at the forest for exploitation have said that we must conserve it. I was profoundly moved by that. It showed great, unexpected wisdom.

Q: What other Australian experiences will you be discussing in the show?

A: I swam with whale sharks, which are the largest fish in the ocean. That was amazing. When you look a dog in the eye, you can understand it. But when you look a fish in the eye, it’s different. It’s the size of a bus, but you can’t communicate

with it. You expect to gain understanding from it, but you can't. That sort of communication only happens in the mammalian sphere. That was really intriguing.

Q: Did you also encounter crocodiles in Australia?

A: Yes, I saw a lot of them. What are they like? They're big and will eat you if they get the chance! So I spent my whole time there not giving them that chance! At one point, we had to wander through crocodile-infested waters. My aboriginal guide said that if we were attacked, she would throw herself into the crocodile's mouth to save me. That was very moving.

Q: Have your team come face-to-face with crocodiles before?

A: Yes. While making a previous series, three of my crew had a very close encounter with a crocodile. We were on a billabong that was drying up quickly. There were a lot of very big crocodiles around. Suddenly, the crew members in another boat spotted a buffalo which they wanted to film. So without checking properly, they rushed out onto the bank. They ran to one side of a tree and didn't see that on the other side of it a 3 ½ m crocodile was lurking. If they had gone to the wrong side of the tree, they would have been bitten. As you can imagine, my local guide and I went white!

Q: Why are crocodiles so dangerous?

A: Because you can't see them strike. They're so quick. They can attack you from the side. They only have to grab one finger and they've got you. Big crocodiles are not frightened of us. They look at us as a mere food source. No one has survived being bitten by a 4 metre crocodile.

Q: Did you also see some incredible birds in Australia?

A: Absolutely. The bird life in Australia is staggering – it's as good as Africa. The birds are also the source of some great

aboriginal stories. For example, they say that the black cockatoo got its markings because the white cockatoo threw it into a fire and scorched its tail. But as a punishment, the white cockatoo was given a really bad call!

Q: What other animals did you enjoy observing in Australia?

A: It was great fun looking for wild red kangaroos. They're very difficult to get close to as they normally run away. But we managed it by hiding under a camouflage net at a watering hole. We spotted a red kangaroo drinking just 10 metres away.

Q: In cases like that, you employ your field-craft expertise. Can you run through the most important elements of it for us, please?

A: The key to it is staying out longer. I always go out with a stove and a brew kit. You also have to find the right place – for example, in the shadow of a hedge where you don't need camouflage. In addition, you need to be comfortable and protect yourself.

Q: Did you get to meet a lots of aboriginal people in Australia, too?

A: Yes. Most people have a very negative view of aboriginal people. But that view is really stereotyped. Unless you talk to them, you won't find out about them. On this trip, I saw a group of aboriginal people under a tree. One man was blowing smoke on another man's injured foot. Some people might have misunderstood that, but in fact the aboriginal people were simply practising their own herbal medicine.

Q: You pioneered the popularity of bushcraft in this country. Why do you think it is so crucial?

A: Nobody was doing it before me. My company, Woodlore, is now the oldest in the world doing Bushcraft – it will have been going 35 years next year. People can understand Bushcraft.

It’s all in the details. There is no shortcut. The long road is the best road to knowledge, but the journey is interesting in its own right. We live in a world where everyone takes the escalator rather than the stairs. The stairs are tiring, but they make you stronger.

Q: Can you please expand on that?

A: I see a lot of companies selling things by putting the word “bushcraft” in their literature, but they have no idea what it is. Bushcraft is the wheel, and the hub is the love of Nature. The spokes can be anything from the use of plants to watching wildlife. What unifies Bushcraft is the ability to take care of yourself. It makes us all more competent outdoors. I learned much about it from reading about the things they couldn’t do in the Second World War. Should we ever have to face trials, we will be better equipped to deal with them if we know about bushcraft.

Q: Could everyone benefit from learning about bushcraft?

A: Absolutely. There is something in it for everybody. It has built upon its successes. Everybody is good at something in bushcraft. That makes us respect each other and encourages us to tackle things we are weak at. With mutual support, we can help each other. I brought over those principles from judo: maximising efficiency while minimising effort. Those are great life lessons.

Q: What other lessons can we learn from bushcraft?

A: You mustn’t waste a day. Life passes very quickly. Bushcraft teaches you how finite life is. It’s a very profound subject. Some people bogusly attach spirituality to their bushcraft activities. But we teach people to let Nature take its own course. People have preconceptions about bushcraft, which are reinforced when they go camping with the wrong information. But taught properly, camping can be very rewarding. The magic of bushcraft is that it can draw people

in who never thought of doing it. It has a profound ability to change people's lives.

Q: Can you give us an example?

A: We provided a course for a First Nation woman in Canada. She had lost touch with her bushcraft. But after the course, she wrote to me that, "I never imagined I'd get so much out of six days. The whole experience was spectacular. It was life-changing." That's very moving. Bushcraft has an amazing ability to reach out and touch people's hearts in the most incredible way. The only sad thing is when people in their 50s come along to our courses, and Bushcraft works its magic. The flame is lit, but you think, "If only you'd started doing it 30 years ago!"

Q: Might Bushcraft help some teenagers not to be so obsessed with their computers and phones?

A: Yes. I don't do social media. It's a distraction I don't need in my life. It's a waste of my time. Nature is important. If we can get young people to put their equipment down, leave it behind, and experience Nature, that can be very powerful.

Q: Where would you recommend practising Bushcraft?

A: In Australia. I'd encourage you to camp out and sleep under the stars. The first night you'd be terrified of snakes and scorpions. But then you would lie back, look at the stars and forget about everything else. All you need is a swag, a tarpaulin, a metal bucket for water and a canvas bucket for showering. The joy of camping is its simplicity. That's its essence, and it's a very liberating experience.

Q: What one item do you always want with you when you go camping?

A: A brew kit. I've made a point of always having a brew in the most exotic places. In Australia, I would very discreetly

have one in a fire zone. A ranger would come along, and before he could complain about the fire, I would ask him, “Would you like a cuppa?” That always works!

Q: When did your fascination with the natural world begin?

A: I had an interest in it from a very young age. I wanted to know everything about Nature. I became very interested in tracking animals and wanted to stay out late doing that. I didn’t have any equipment, so had to learn survival techniques. The North Downs, where I lived, is a spectacular place for plant life, so I learnt all about that. You soon start down the road where every question teaches you something special.

Q: How did you break into TV?

A: I was in the right place at the right time. The BBC programme Tracks asked me to demonstrate what I do, and that was a good way in. I soon realised that you can either present or you can’t. I don’t use a script but when we are filming, I’ll have really done my homework.

Q: Why is that so important?

A: It particularly matters in America, where a TV presenter is described as a host. That’s the lowest form of life there – it’s even worse than being a journalist! That can be a real problem. The person you’re interviewing can completely dismiss you as a hairdo with no brain. For instance, I made a series about the Wild West in the US. I went to the Museum of the Horse Soldier in Tucson, Arizona. I looked at a photo and said to the expert there, “Aren’t those men Al Sieber and Tom Horn?” The guy’s jaw just dropped. After that, we got on really well. You have to know your stuff in order to justify your existence.

Q: Is TV a good educational tool?

A: Definitely. TV is the most profound form of communication. It enables us to see things we wouldn't otherwise see and hear stories we wouldn't otherwise hear. In recent years, TV executives have been very scared of competition from the internet, but the internet will never provide real competition. TV is a unique medium. I'm a real believer in TV.

Q: Your TV shows are renowned for their authenticity. Is that very important to you?

A: Yes. It's vital that people understand that the TV I do is real. I think some people are mistrustful of TV at the moment. Luckily compliance is in place now and everything is a lot more transparent. I used to have arguments with producers where words were used such as, "We do it for real, or we don't do it at all!" I don't have those arguments anymore.

Q: Can you give us an example of something you have learnt from your travels?

A: I'm a massive believer in the Commonwealth. I've come to realise how magical it is. I understand why people seek independence, but I think it's a massive error. In the Commonwealth, we speak a common tongue, we make fun of each other, and we would give each other the shirts off our backs. We genuinely want to do good and not harm others. We are somehow embarrassed about the Commonwealth, but we shouldn't be. It's truly the most remarkable force for good in the world, and it doesn't get celebrated enough.

Q: And what have your travels taught you about Britain?

A: Hollywood always rewrites history to make us the bad guys, but we're not. We have done amazing things that the rest of the world has benefited from, but we don't crow about it. Understatement is very important to the British. I try to bring that to my TV work. As a presenter, I try to be the quiet man. I mistrust braggarts.

Q: Can you explain why observing Nature is such an important activity?

A: What looking at Nature does for us is very special. We still have a vestigial set of skills from when we were hunting and gathering. We have an ability to spot things in Nature. When you're watching Nature, you exercise those latent abilities. You start to see it as dynamic and buzzing. You can only see that if you choose to, but it's tremendously rewarding.

Q: Do you think city dwellers have lost contact with Nature?

A: I don't see the city as anything different. You can think of it is a landscape of canyons which have been man-made. Nature is there if you just take the time to look for it. The problem is that we close our minds to it.

Q: Do you worry that we are neglecting our natural environment?

A: Yes. The rate we're going at, we're not going to last very long. I worry about disunity in the world. Nature is wonderful, and we need to protect it. So it's very important that people sign up to the Paris Accord.

Q: Can one ever know everything about Nature?

A: Absolutely not. You never stop learning. You're forever looking for the horizon of knowledge to cross, but that horizon never gets any closer. It's good to keep learning. I never stop learning from Nature.

Q: How can our lives be enriched by Nature?

A: It can enlighten us all. Everyone jumps on the bandwagon and says that we have lost touch with Nature. But certain people are still very much in touch with it. In the past few years, I've made many documentaries with conservationists and rangers. They have very low incomes. But they all have the key

to happiness: they are in touch with Nature. They have gone beyond the mundane and the everyday. That is a very profound gift.

Information about Ray Mears' Born to Go Wild tour can be found at https://blog.raymears.com/2017/02/15/ray-mears-tour-dates-for-2017-born-to-go-wild/