

Steve Wing 1957-2024

Steve Wing, who has died suddenly at the age of 67, was a highly respected and engaging ornithologist who was warden of Birdwatch Ireland's Cape Clear Bird Observatory off west Cork. The "birders' birder", Wing employed humour and wit to impart his knowledge to thousands of students and visitors to Cape Clear island over the years. 'There is no such thing as a seagull,' was one of his first pieces of advice to participants in Birdwatch Ireland courses which he ran with colleagues at the observatory.

Steve was born in February 1957 in Bradfield in Berkshire and was one of a family of three boys. He attended Bradfield primary school and completed his education at Bideford Grammar School. His passion for birds developed early in life and he trained as a bird ringer in the Chew Valley with Michael King and Cyril Matthews. Regarded as the brainiest of the family, one of his brothers recalled he would often recite Latin while walking to catch the school bus. A keen Liverpool football supporter, he would hitchhike to their games, and he maintained a lifelong interest in sport.

Steve's first job was in a tax office, and he then worked in the pay office at Appledore Shipyard in Devon before moving into construction. When he applied for a nine-month work scheme on Lundy, it was to change his life. On Lundy, he met his long-term partner, Mary Gade, who also shared his passion for birding. They lived on Lundy for six years together before moving back to Appledore in the mid-1980s. Steve continued his ringing activities on Lundy, where he began to appreciate the magnetic attraction of islands for vagrant species.

When he was back working in construction, Steve received a phone call from a good friend, scientist Geoff Oliver, to say the Cape Clear observatory was looking for a warden. He took the first of several 13km ferry journeys there from Baltimore in March 1998 — and then moved there permanently with Mary. The observatory building required some work and Steve once more employed his building skills for its extensive renovation.

'Steve diligently carried out his duties as warden — everything from the domestic running of the observatory to walking the beat around the island to count birds, running weekend courses, ringing birds and tirelessly filling out the daily log', his close friend Dick Coombes recalled at his cremation. Such was his amiable nature that he provided 'the perfect link between islanders and visiting birders', Coombes said, and he and Mary immersed themselves in island life. Wing worked as observatory warden till 2012 and the couple then ran Cotters pub where their weekly 'Thai night' meals were legendary.



▲ Steve Wing (photo: Thyes Kavanagh).

After Mary became ill, the couple made many journeys to hospital until she passed away in Devon in May 2018. After her death, Steve resumed his post at the observatory with the new title of wildlife officer, and worked to complete a book published four years ago, entitled *The Natural History of Cape Clear 1959-2019*, with contributions by specialists on the island history and on marine and wildlife. As he explained, many migratory species, both wing and finned, track by the island which has its own micro-climate. The light from the Fastnet Rock Lighthouse is said to be one of the reasons why rare birds sometimes also land there.



▲ Mary Gade and Steve Wing on Lundy, October 2015
(photo: Tim Davis).

During his time on the island he recorded some very rare birds, including Western Bonelli's Warbler, Arctic Warbler, Greenish Warbler, Eastern Olivaceous Warbler and Short-toed Lark. He recorded Ireland's first Chimney Swift and spotted a Black Kite several months ago — only the second recorded on the island.

As an instructor, Steve would spend many happy hours with students explaining the biology of fragile little birds and demonstrating ringing techniques. His smiling, bearded face on the quay was often a visitor's first introduction to the island and he would be there on the quay to see course participants off again.

Cape Clear resident Michael John Cadogan described Steve as a great ambassador for Cape, and said 'he is a big loss to us and to the bird watching community of Ireland and beyond. Both Steve and Mary were islanders. They came to us from Lundy and were part and parcel of the community in Cape for 25 years'.

Steve once told someone he would like to come back as a chough in his next life, Coombes told mourners in his eulogy. 'For those who don't know, that's the black crow with a red bill and red legs that you see tossing about the cliffs on Cape,' he said, adding: 'We'll be keeping an eye out for you Steve.'

This obituary is adapted with kind permission from that written by Lorna Siggins for the Sunday Independent on 24th November, 2024.



▲ Mary and Steve in No. 2, Quarters (photographer unknown).