

35 YEARS

in the wilderness

Ray Mears reflects on his TV career, why he made his home in the county and what irks him about his imitators

WORDS: Angela Wintle



RIGHT:
Ray leads a bushcraft class

BELOW:
Eating fish al fresco, Ray Mears-style

Ray Mears comes across as a reluctant celebrity. He usually avoids the limelight, rarely appears on the red carpet or TV panel shows, and when he does (his 2015 appearance on the BBC's *Room 101* springs to mind) he seems out of place in the bright lights of a television studio, like a woodland creature displaced from its native, leafy habitat.

In person, he is more genial than his measured television persona might suggest, although he speaks just as knowledgeably and eloquently about his passions. It's important to remember that television sought *him* out, not the other way round. In 1993 Ray was poached by a canny television producer who had seen him giving a lecture. He became the subject of a documentary, and as he needed to find a way to boost his income, he found an agent and made it known that he was available for more work.

"I had a meeting with a producer at Pebble Mill who was making a magazine-style series about the outdoors and thought I might be able to do five three-minute items," he says. "I did a screen test and ended up doing six ten-minute items. This is how my first ever TV series, *Tracks*, was born. Back then, nobody had done bushcraft on television. At the time, it was called survival, which is the shorthand of bushcraft. It's what you teach if you don't have much time. It doesn't require finesse to get by. But in bushcraft there's a lot of finesse; it's the study of a lifetime."

Ray is chatting at Woodlore, his wilderness bushcraft school in deepest East Sussex. It doesn't take long to pinpoint its whereabouts online, but he is nonetheless reluctant to discuss its precise location – "we try to keep a low profile".

He grew up in Kenley, in Croydon, Surrey, and isn't far removed from the small, self-contained boy who spent much of his childhood camping out on the North Downs and tracking foxes in his local woods. The fact that he was an only child was significant.

"I'm very happy in my own

company, and I like being alone in the wild. Being alone means there are fewer disturbances, so you see more."

Ray didn't go to university and had hoped to get into the Royal Marines, but was thwarted by poor eyesight. Instead, he read voraciously and taught himself bushcraft, seeking out experts and badgering them to pass on their skills. He worked in the City briefly, but chafed at the constraints and started running bushcraft courses instead, alongside a career as a natural history photographer. That led on to books and television.

It was the dense woodland of the High Weald that originally attracted him to Sussex. "I can't live without trees and East Sussex is the most wooded part of England," he says. "Sussex also has an amazing variety of wild plant species because we have such a diverse range of habitats – from freshwater wetland areas and salt marshes to shingle shores."

Last year marked the 35th anniversary of his school, which runs two-day and week-long courses on fundamental bushcraft, woodlore tracking and wilderness navigation, as well as expeditions abroad following in the footsteps of the heroes of Telemark, tracking leopard and rhino with the Kalahari bushmen or travelling to the frozen Arctic Circle to sleep beneath the beautiful glow of the northern lights. This year, Ray will be leading some of the expeditions

himself. Courses do not come cheap, but Ray maintains that they are the best at what they do, despite the growing competition.

"We don't advertise and we have a very small team of outdoor instructors who come through our system. The fundamental bushcraft course is where we start people, which is a broad-based introduction to the subject.

"Bushcraft is about people and nature – bringing the two closer together. So if I was to take you for a walk in the woods and told you what's there, I wouldn't just be telling you the names of things. I'd be showing you their uses and values, which makes it easy to remember them. Once you know the trees and plants around you for what they can do, you cherish them. It's a very practical way of involving people in large conservation issues."

Inevitably, this leads us on to global warming. He acknowledges it's a depressing subject and deals with it by trying not to think about it too much. "There's a real lack of leadership in politics. It's all about point-scoring rather than making any attempt to make the world a better place. It has been very disappointing to see Donald Trump undoing the good work

GOOD TO KNOW

Ray Mears is celebrating the 35th anniversary of his bushcraft school, Woodlore, with a return to the field as a course leader this year. Participants will have the opportunity to work closely with him and master the skills of wilderness travel. To find out more, visit raymears.com



Photo: Courtesy of Ray Mears

Photo: David Osborn



of previous American presidents, who have set an example in terms of world conservation. I suspect that America, in time, will come to regret that.

“You only have to look at the physique of the man to see that he’s not an outdoorsman, which is a great pity, because if he had been taken out on expeditions when he was younger I suspect his leadership and communication skills would be better, he would be more perceptive and a better all-round human being.”

Ray is rarely this outspoken. The only time he gets a little heated is when I mention his TV imitators, but he’d prefer not to name names. “I’ve steered away from putting bushcraft on television because I got sick of people copying what I was doing,” he says. “This is oxygen that I’m not going to provide to others.

“But what really concerns me – and I’m referring to what I’ve seen on channels in other countries – is the veracity of the information shown. They don’t do things honestly and they show things that are patently wrong. That concerns me. I don’t have someone whispering in my ear telling me how to do something. I do it for real. If you have a 15-year-old watching a programme and they’re inspired by what they see, they will emulate it. I would hate to see them come to grief by copying somebody doing something idiotic or downright dangerous, which I’ve seen in buckets on television.

“Once you know the trees and plants around you for what they can do, you cherish them”

“It used to be said that presenters knew what they were talking about and then they worked with programme makers to make television. Now what happens is that programme makers come up with a crazy idea and then look for somebody stupid enough to host it. That’s very dangerous and damaging. It also undermines the strength of documentary filming.”

He has more TV in the pipeline, but declines to say more. “I’ve got lots of ideas. Getting people to understand how good they are... that’s the difficult thing. Commercial pressures are also much greater now. Budgets are tight.”

I ask if he feels under pressure to maintain his television profile and whether the continued success of his bushcraft school relies on it, but he shakes his head. “I don’t think of it that way. In fact, that side of it is a bit of a nuisance when you’re teaching because you lose your anonymity. Also, when people come on my courses they think they know you because of who you are on television.”

He has always guarded his privacy. In his autobiography, published in 2013, he offered a rare insight into his personal life, outlining the death in 2006 from breast cancer of his first wife Rachel, which left him angry, bitter and confused. He never thought he’d find love again, but remarried in 2009, to Ruth, and has a stepson.



Photo: Courtesy of Ray Mears

ABOVE: Bushcraft is about bringing people and nature closer together, says Ray

LEFT: Ray demonstrates some of his whittling skills

They met when he was doing a book signing after a lecture. “She arrived with such energy, wielding one of my books in her hand, that she literally knocked me off my feet and I fell to the floor,” he laughs. “When I got up, I felt completely different. There was just this instant connection. I have no idea how, but she just broke through the fog that had been surrounding me.”

Away from the cameras, he relaxes by watching wildlife and feeling in tune with the seasons. No change there then, I remark, and he laughs. “I also like cooking. I’m quite cheffy. What I learnt about fungi many years ago led me into the world of cooking. If you travel outdoors, cooking is a very important skill. If, at the end of a rotten day, you have a very good meal, everything is good again.”

You sense this could be a metaphor for his life now. ♦

My favourite Sussex

Restaurant: The best restaurant in Sussex is taking a picnic into the Ashdown Forest.

Shop: Am I allowed Trevor Mottram, the wonderful cookware specialist on the Pantiles in Tunbridge Wells? I know it’s in Kent, but it’s not far from the Sussex border.

View: If you go up onto Bo Peep Hill, near Alciston, and look north across the Weald, the view is lovely, particularly at certain times of the year when you can see very rare orchids and woodland in the distance.

Place to visit: Chanctonbury Ring, near Steyning. It’s amazing to think Charles Goring planted those trees as a young boy in 1760 and they matured in his old age.



Photo: Courtesy of Ray Mears