

The Great Storm of 1987, and Tony Soper visits East Anglia

Recollections of the Great Storm of October 1987 have been in the news, thirty years on. Chris Durdin shares some memories of that autumn.

It's a cliché to quote where you were when you heard that various famous people died – who that is may depend on the era and your interests. I suspect more people, of the right age, remember where they were on the night of 15/16 October 1987, simply because of its physical impact. I was at home in Thorpe St Andrew: a few roof tiles blew off, one old fence was blown down, minor impact compared with what many had to deal with.

Putting aside what weatherman Michael Fish did or didn't say, fallen trees, road traffic accidents, human casualties, loss of power and so have inevitably been recalled. Stories about the storm's impact on nature have concentrated on famous tree collections such as at Kew and at Wakehurst Place in Sussex.

In East Anglia, there was also a big impact on nature reserves and the wider countryside – and not all detrimental. At Minsmere, the RSPB's famous nature reserve on the Suffolk coast, fallen trees over the entrance roads meant the reserve was shut for several weeks. I'll come back to that in a moment.

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Three weeks later, in the week commencing 9 November 1987, TV naturalist Tony Soper was in East Anglia giving a series of talks. 'Celebrity lecture' tours were organised by Kate Berry from RSPB HQ's Development Department as an offshoot of her normal role of organising RSPB film shows. My understanding from Kate was that Tony gave the RSPB a week of his time every year in those days to support the Society. He signed and sold a few books, of course, but any financial rewards would have been modest. Tony was certainly grateful that I was able to arrange free accommodation at the Hotel Nelson in central Norwich, courtesy of the manager Peter Mackness, a keen RSPB member.

One of my jobs as Assistant Regional Officer was to introduce Tony at packed event on the Monday evening, 9 November, in a school in Norwich, laid on by what was then called the Norwich RSPB Members' Group. The introduction wrote itself: how I and probably many in the audience had been encouraged in our interest in wildlife by early TV programmes such as Peter Scott's *Look and Soper at Large*. Tony Soper is still very much 'at large' ... and here he is.

The evening was essentially Tony chatting amiably and introducing clips from *Soper at Large*. However it was interrupted early on by a power cut. Tony turned to me and said, "Do you know any bird jokes, Chris?" As it happens, there had been quite a rich vein of jokes running in recent copies of Bird Life, the magazine of the junior branch of the RSPB, then called the Young Ornithologists' Club (YOC). I reeled off a few of these, to a mixture of laughs and groans. It filled the time nicely and power was soon restored.

Tony had put himself at the RSPB's disposal during the following day. It was an excuse for some regional TV coverage and we travelled to Minsmere to look at the impact of the storm. By then a fundraising appeal was under way, to re-coup the cost of the storm's impact. The line coming out of HQ, linked to the appeal, was that the storm was a disaster for wildlife. Tony didn't entirely buy this version of events, raised this as we travelled to Minsmere and was happy that I agreed. What about natural regeneration, after all?

We rendezvoused with Minsmere Warden Jeremy Sorensen on Minsmere's entrance road from Eastbridge, and met the Look East crew. Tony delivered a nuanced interview about the storm's impact for birds and the RSPB, starting off: "Well, if you were a woodpecker ..." He then moved onto the visual impact of the downing of the avenue of limes along the

Eastbridge road, a classic entrance to Minsmere from this direction, and then the volume of work that the storm had created for RSPB reserves' teams.

This last point was very real: effectively a year was lost from work programmes while roads, paths and firebreaks were opened up or made safe. That was expensive and set back management work on Minsmere's wetlands and heaths while staff and contract assistance dealt with the storm's aftermath.

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A few months later I drove to Minsmere for a meeting. I noticed a cluster of tree-planting tubes by the entrance road from Westleton: not many, but very obvious. "Why are we planting trees?" I said to Jeremy Sorenson, natural regeneration being obviously better in my mind. It was for show, Jeremy said, recognising that people wanted to see obvious signs of action; given the money that had been raised in the storm appeal, a fair point.

Elsewhere near the Suffolk coast, the impact of the great storm was largely beneficial. Huge swathes of pine trees blew down in Tunstall and Rendelsham forests. The clearfell areas created resulted in a population surge for woodlarks and nightjars. Some of that increase is maintained to this day by areas kept open with these birds in mind, alongside the improved management of heathland in the Suffolk Sandlings.

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Site managers everywhere had tricky decisions to make. The value of fallen timber for wildlife was well-known then as now, but that had to be balanced with health and safety in public places. No doubt many fallen trees were removed unnecessarily and trees planted where natural regeneration would have made more sense.

However two trees close to home in Norwich that blew down on that night in October 1987 have been allowed, by accident or design, to recover naturally. I have kept an eye on them ever since. A lime tree in Lion Wood Local Nature Reserve was upended but remained partly rooted. The original trunk runs along the ground and growing upwards at right angles to the prostrate trunk are new trunks, or perhaps upright branches describes the new growth better. A birch on Household Heath fell but lodged at an acute angle, where it still grows. Like the lime it has new branches growing at the angle you'd expect a tree to grow. Both are living history, a reminder of that dark and stormy night 30 years ago.

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Left: lime in Lion Wood. Right: birch on Household Heath