

EP71 - Wildlife Filmmaking with Doug Allan

Hello, and welcome to the UK wildlife podcast with me, Victoria Hillman, MI Neil Phillips. And we are absolutely delighted to have with us on this episode, Doug Allen, who is a Emmy and B award-winning wildlife and documentary cameraman. So hello, Doug, and thank you so much for coming onto the podcast.

My pleasure. It's good to meet you both. That's good to meet you too. Yeah, I, I think I just mentioned before we go any further that we have a list of people we'd like on the show. , and there's a Doug Ellen, I think it's about fifth from the top. Is it not that he's in order of people we wanna on you, you were quite early on in the list of people we need to ask.

So yeah, when we got contacted saying, did you, do you want Doug on a show? It's like, , yes, please. I'm very flattered. I'm very flattered, but I will, I won't want to know at some point who the other four are. Who's above me in the list. Well, Dave, ATVers on there obviously. Oh, alright. Okay. So good company.

It's good company. Okay. Well, I'll be very happy too, to answer all your questions about whatever you, however you want. that that's that's very brave of you though. yeah. Especially with Neil on. Yeah, yeah, yeah. no, that's fine. But for anyone that, that doesn't know who Doug Allen is and who has been pretty much hiding under a rock for, I don't know how many years he's probably best known for, for works with the BBC natural history museum, such as blue planet and frozen planet and many, many more.

But Doug, do you want to tell us a little bit more about yourself, how you got started and, and what got you into videography in the first. Yeah. Sometime, you know, some people assume that I was one of these youngsters who, who knew from the start, what they wanted to do and, you know, et cetera. But it wasn't really like that.

Although having said that, I, I, I like to think I just built one interest, one passion on top of another until eventually I put all my talents together and ended up doing the perfect job for all those talents. So I mean, I went, you know, I was born in Scotland and, and went to school and was no more interested in the outside world really than any other re boy But I did grow up through the fifties and the sixties.

And that was quite an exciting age. I do remember reading Jacques Cousteau's book, the silent world when I was probably only nine or 10, and then watching his programs on the television and that sort of spurred an interest in diving. And we were lucky enough to take advantage of the old cheap package deals to the Mediterranean.

And of course the med was a great place to, to stick your head under the water, cuz it was warm. It was clear, lots of things to see. So I took an, an early interest in snorkeling and was very fired up by the, by the adventures that Kuo and the others were having underwater. And that got me interested in diving itself.

And so I joined the local diving. with scuba tanks and all the rest of it just before I, I left school. And while I was at school, I decided I would go to Sterling university and do Marine biology. I did biology partly because partly because it was, I felt an knowledge towards science, but I just biology was the sort of simplest science in a way.

Although to be honest, by the end of the sixties, well, biology was a, a really exciting field to be in because, you know, you know, suddenly you, weren't just looking at individual animals and how they worked. You were looking at whole systems and whole ecosystems. In fact, the word ecosystem, you know, became in Vogue in a way in that time.

And scientifically we were looking at. and you could study energy flow through ecosystems. And, and there was this big interest in the environment in the late sixties through, into the early seventies. So biology was a really exciting field to be in. And so I went to something university and studied it, and I also remember it stilling on the wall.

They had those framed up, they had those wonderful national geographic. Maps, which were basically maps of the ocean floor as if you had drained away the seas and what you were left with was all the underwater topography. And they had those canyons and the mountains and, and the vertical scale was hopelessly exaggerated.

I mean, it wasn't as steep as it appeared on the map, but it was just looked like such an amazing place to explore. And at the same time we were going into space. We, we as well, and there was no way I was going into space, but I did another feeling that I would like to, to contribute towards the exploration of the underwater world.

But at the same time, I also realized as I did my biology. That I wasn't really cut out to be a scientist. What I liked was collecting the data. And at the same time, I was also quite surprised how few Marine biologists there were that I met, who actually did that, who actually stuck their heads.

Underwater diving was a lot, a lot less accessible back in those days. There wasn't any party. You couldn't just drift out to the red sea for a week and get your basic diving qualifications and come back. So it was a much harder to, to do diving, but I enjoyed. Working with some of the scientists and collecting their samples, doing their, you know, leave the data crunching to them.

So by the time I graduated, I decided that I didn't want to stay in academia. What I wanted to do was to, was to work on, on diving expeditions or work on expeditions, where I could dive for the scientists, do the, what I thought was the interesting stuff. So I came out of academia and I managed to contact some biologists in the red sea and went out and helped them with some work on akin faster, which was called the crown of the starfish, which was causing a lot concern on the great barrier reef at that.

there was a plague of a and faster on the great barrier reef. And people were concerned that if this thing exploded and they didn't know why the numbers had gone up but if it carried on, then the whole, literally the great barrier reef might disappear. So scientists were studying in the red sea where it existed in a balance with the other natural things there.

And eventually they found out that these plagues were just naturally occurring events. They came up and they lasted for a few years, and then they died out. But anyway, you can imagine having learned to dive in Scotland, what an eye opener it was to, to go to the red sea and dive there amongst the, the coral reefs and, and the sharks and all the rest of it.

But then the real big break came a couple of couple of years after that, where I got a job with the British Antarctic survey. And I worked on one of their research stations down in the south Orne, which is a tiny little group of islands, just about 61 degrees south. And they had several Marine biology programs and several research programs in the lakes.

And they employed a diver to look after the equipment and to make sure that the scientists who were diving got the support that they needed to carry out the work. So we dived through the, through the winter, underneath the ice, when the sea throws through the, through the summer from Zodiacs, inflatables and things.

And it was there that I really got into photography top side and underwater, and I did one contract. with them. I came back to UK, went and worked as a commercial dive. I went back down again to the Antarctic, but this time with some good underwater stoves equipment and you know, perfecting the art or improved, definitely my own skills, underwater photography.

And, and that was really where I think I could see myself doing something in the long term, something to do with underwater photography, expedition type photography, bit of writing. What have you. And then I met this man in 1981 who came onto our base for just two days with three other people. And that man was David Attenborough and he was in the Antarctic on HMS endurance for just about a month or.

and, and they were just hitching a ride. So to speak on this Navy ship that went round parts of the Antarctic peninsula. And by pure chance, they wanted to come to her base ship, wanted to come to her base to do some new hydrographic surveys of a couple of the bays on our island. So David and the other film crew were on board and they asked if they could come ashore for a couple of days so that David could do some pieces to camera in front of the animals and it fell to me to help them.

And so for two days I worked with that film crew and I peppered them with questions and, and watched how they were working and just was blown away by. by what they were doing in this sort of lifestyle that they described. I think after the Anta, when they all went back to the, to, to the Falklands, the next stop was a Galapagos.

So I, you know, I just thought what a great way, what, what a great time these people are having. And, and also they were very generous with the information that they offered about, about how to get into the business. Because bear in mind, I hadn't touched a movie camera at this point. I knew nothing about movie.

But they explained that, you know, you get yourself, what's called Aho or show. You can use a camera, et cetera. And so I was quite, I, you know, I could see what I wanted to do, but I wasn't quite clear about, you know, how I might get into it. But then I had another break in as much as I came back from that.

And was offered another contract with the Antarctic survey, but this time at our base where there was no diving, no biology. In fact, the nearest rock was 150 miles away from where our base was, cuz this was a base that did I PHX. But

what was interesting to me was that 12 miles from this base, there was a colony of emperor penguins.

Now emperor is they're the ones that breed through the Antarctic winter. So they're quite hard to access. The only way you can get in for shots of emperor penguins, breeding, emperor penguins on their eggs is really to over winter, somewhere in the Anta. So I leap in with both feet, bought myself a 16 millimeter camera and contacted the producer that I had met working with David.

And he put me in contact with another producer who was just starting a series about birds. And I went and spoke to him. he gave me some film. And when I came back and gave him the film, he asked me to do some more filming for his series in the Anta and, and that was really where it all kicked off. So it was a while, you know, from, from getting an interest in diving it took me 10, 12 years via various expeditions via all that time.

In the Antarctic meeting, David getting an eye in for photography, learning how to shoot movies. It, it took me a while to move into the business properly. But it was just a case of building one passion on top of another. And it definitely helped to have. That's a unique set of skills, you know, to be happy working in the cold.

I don't know what would've happened. If I'd met David on a coral reef, suppose I'd been working on an expedition in a coral reef, then, you know, there were dozens of divers that David could have met, like me working on coral reefs. But I think even here as we were chatting, either him or the producer, they kind of implied that it was good to have met me because in the Antarctic, because I think it was Ned, the producer who.

You know, if I wanted to go to Africa, there's a dozen people I could phone and talk about elephants or chimpanzees, or we have to go to film these things. But if I have to, if I want to come back to the Anta thing, I'll have to come to you. Or I welcome to you because I don't know anyone else who knows the animals, who knows the underwater conditions, who knows you know, what sort of clothing, how to manage in the cold and all the rest of it.

So those are very good. Those are, that's a good USP to have to know how to do that. And I have to say that, you know, the Antarctic and the Arctic back in the mid eighties were so much, so much less filmed than almost any other part of the world. So to, to have an expertise about those places and to have a feel for

them to know how to work on sea ice, which is very different from, from you know, working in a boat.

I mean, the sea ice is a very dynamic environment, but I had a feel for, for sea ice. So to know all that of stuff was a huge advantage. So I heard the grounds running and chose to make that my special area. And that's why I've done a disproportionate amount of cold stuff ever. But I do do hot stuff as well.

I don't any producers listening to this, you know, I do. I'm quite happy to do coral reefs as well, you know, come and contact me so that was how it all started. But I also should should say, you know, that, that people might know me most for the, for the wildlife, but always right from the start. I did other things.

I've done travel documentaries, I've done expedition films, you know, I've, I've been on Everest a couple of times, not to the top, but filming the climbers and going up fairly high. Done the odd commercial, tiny bit of dramas to the feature film last year. So I enjoy working, you know, across the genres because I think you can learn how to do different techniques of filming and You know, I, people wildlife is one thing, but I, I like doing, what's called OBOC documentaries, which are documentaries with people in them, but you're not controlling what the people are doing.

So you're going into unscripted situations and listening to what they're saying to each other. And, you know, sometimes moving a camera around depending on what the people are saying, but you wouldn't ask them to redo it again. You're looking to capture those moments of, of genuine emotion in the people.

i.like doing that as well as doing the animals, obviously as well. So what what's easier people or animals? Probably, eh, four. That's an interesting question. I think probably people, probably people because people are almost always talking to each other and it's the talking that's going on that will drive the story forward, whereas with animals they obviously don't talk in the way that we do.

So you're looking to, to put together a sequence in a different way when you're faced with a piece of animal behavior than you are with, with people doing something. But on the other hand, it, you know, it kind depends. Some people don't want to be filmed, whereas animals, you can keep back from them with a long lens.

Although underwater that's, what's fascinating about underwater. When you think about it, you can't hide from an animal underwater where you can see the

animal, the animal can see you. . And so therefore it's all about how you behave in the water. It's all about the vibes that you give off. And the same thing can be true on land too.

I'm a great believer in the fact that wherever you are, but especially on the water, it's really important to, to be thinking the right way because human beings, when they're interacting with each other, and when they're interacting with animals, we give off all kinds of cues from the way we behave, which in some cases are almost subconscious.

If you tune into them, if you become a good people watcher or a good people, observer, and you're, you're watching two people talking to each other, you can tell when, when one is boring, the other one, for example, you know, or if you've got that top bit me, if you've got that touch, you know how there are some people who can walk up to a baby that's crying.

And within two minutes, the pair of them are calm. They're playing with each other, et cetera. And other people will go up to that same baby. And within two minutes it's cry even more loudly. And that's because the person who can calm down the baby and, and get on them and get on their wavelength, they're just tuning in to the right sort of vibes.

And, and it's a great, it is a bit of a gift. It's a gift that you can refine, but I think the best wildlife camera of people, especially those maybe underwater. Whereas I say, you can't hide your animals. I think body language and, and tone of your voice and how you breathe. All these things can make the difference between getting the experience that you want or seeing the experience that you want and not seeing it.

So I think I have that gift with animals where certainly don't have it with people. See people and run the other way. well, you know, that that's that's quite possible, but I lo I mean that, that's why there is this thing. Isn't there between dogs and people and horses and people and stuff like that.

And whale and people, you know, I've been lucky to, to, to have some. Close encounters with humpbacks and, and humpbacks will recognize what you recognize each one from the pattern of the black and white under their tail. And if you're lucky and you spend enough time as, as we did in Toga where the water's good, the water's clear you actually identify the friendly whale and you can look for them.

And the more time often you spend in their company, the more relaxed they will become until eventually you will have a whale that you, you have a very easy going friendly relationship with. And, and that's when they start opening up and, and letting you see more intimate parts of their lives. You say, you said talk better that, do you, can you sort of say you can't talk, talk when you've got a mask on, but do, do you sort of.

Make noises to, or talk to 'em a little bit. Did they respond at all? Well, yeah, it's, it's interesting, you know, it's the, the best example I've got of that was belugas up in the Arctic belugas are these all white whales, which you only find in the Arctic small dolphins effectively, there's two thrills and they go around in the high Arctic in the, in the summer, nearly spring summer, they come up from their wintering grounds and they, they come up.

And they, they often hang around these swim pods anywhere from 10 to 20 belugas, you know, together. And when you see them coming, you'll be sitting on the ice and you're looking down the edge of the ice and you can see the blows coming from a mile away, you know, maybe longer you slip into the water and you will hear them long before you can see them.

And the sound they make is like a flock of birds. They chirp and they whistle and they grunt and they make, when they come close and they're all around you, but you may not even be able to see them. They really is like being in the middle of a flock of birds, whistling and chirping. As I said, now, there was one occasion.

Now we don't know what they're saying. They can produce sounds very high frequency sounds, which they use like a beam of sonar, which they might use to detect schools of fish or blue is often go under quite heavy park ice. And it's, it's reckoned that. One of these uses of these narrow beam sauna that they can produce is to see holes in the ice.

Because when they go into heavy ice, they do a V-shaped dive. There's a scientist, put recorders onto them, which recorded the shape of the dive that they made. And they found out when they went into heavy the ice, they would make a V dive. They would go down deep and stay down for a little while and then they would shoot up to a breathing hole.

And he reckoned that. That was cause when, when they went and turned on ice or heavy ice, they could go down deep and then scan the ice above them, see where there was a hole, big enough ahead of them to breathe and make a Beline for that whole. So we know they can do that. But the complexity of the sounds

that they're making there has to be more going on between them has to be communication between the beluga.

What they're talking about. We have no idea. I had one occasion where. There was just a single beluga came up to me and there were no other ones around I could hear. So I knew that all the sounds that I could hear were coming from this particular beluga and he came up and he, he was about two meters away looking at me.

Now, they make all these sounds in their forehead. They've got a big kind of fleshy domed forehead, which is called the melon. And as they make different shapes, as they make different sounds, you don't see bubbles coming out of the blow hole of their mouth. They don't speak like we do. They make their sounds by squeezing air, through little canals in the melon.

And there are valves in these canals and by contracting the valve or opening it, they make different frequencies. So this beluga is in front of me and I can see the melon is changing shape, you know, as it's making the sound sometimes more pronounced, sometimes it's more flat and at one. for not very long, there were two very distinct creases or folds ran laterally across the melon.

And I thought, as I was watching, I thought that's exactly the kind of folds that go across your forehead when you're talking to someone who can't make out what you're saying, you're your forehead and sort of frustration. And, you know, I sometimes wonder whether that beluga was there and he's making all the communication noises that, that he can for another beluga.

And he's just thinking, why don't I get something back from this guy? Why can't, you know, how can of talk? And, you know, that leads you to think that, you know, we're spending billions of dollars. Sending remote vehicles to Mars, which trundle around. And they're looking for the tiniest evidence of alien life, tiniest evidence of some life on this other planet.

And we've got this alien life on our planet. It's called a beluga and it lives in a world that we are only beginning to comprehend and, and lives in a way that we can't really imagine. And imagine what we would learn if we could talk to beca. And it's interesting, there is a very well funded project and the moment I think, quite a lot of the money's coming from Virgin, you know, the, the Richard Branson's company, which has.

Is willing to put their money out there. And they're trying, they've got a, they've got a lot of money in a 10 year project to decipher what sperm wheels are

saying to each other. And they've got all kinds of scientists on board, but also linguistics experts who have analyzed all many of the different languages around the world and analyze it from a computer point of view to work out, you know, what are the characteristics of a language?

And they're going to apply those sort of software programs to the sounds that sperm whales make, cuz they're very vocal and they keep together and they got a strong social system, etcetera. And the idea is that, or the hope is that they will decipher. What they're saying in the next 10 years, which is a great idea.

It's a great project, but we'll see. But I certainly think that you know, the, the tooth whales, generally, they had a scientist at a straw pole a few years ago to say what's the most intelligent animal or, or culturally advanced animal after humans. Now that's a kind of, I wouldn't say intelligence because intelligence is, is hard to define.

It varies so much from culture to culture. But if you say we have a very advanced culture, obviously as human beings, what animal has got the most advanced culture. And they came up, killer whales came up top of the, in terms of the complexity of the behavior that they show the, the strength of the, the, what goes on within a pod, in terms of the learning.

What does one animal learn from another? You know, how specific are the behaviors? And again, long term studies of, of dolphin families in, in places like monkey Maya, where the same groups have been followed for 30 years, you know, the scientists find it impossible to, to, to describe what the animals are doing or to, to give reasons for why the animals might be doing things without coming into some really human based traits and emotions like jealousy and, and paying back a favor and this sort of thing, you know, you just can't get away from it.

Scientists don't like to, to, they like to put animals separate, but we're finding out more and more that, that there's a great deal of. Between many animals and, and humans in terms of their, their sentient, not just their, and that just doesn't mean, you know, the fact that they'll move away from something that is harmful to them.

It means, you know, a kind of overall awareness, other environment and awareness of other members of their species. And, and, you know, it's a great scale obviously, but it's interesting. What's being done just now in proposed. I think we're, we're much further down, down the road to understanding and

appreciating the complexity of animals than, you know, than we were even a few years ago.

Amazing things stations. You've been in the water with leopard seals and you've been filming polar bears and you've also been in, well, this extreme environment is an understatement. How do you stay focused and cope with filming a leopard seal when you know, not that they want to attack us, obviously, but if they wanted to, they could do some serious harm.

Is that go through your mind? You just, do you manage to filter it out somehow or? Well, it's pretty obvious when you get in the water with any Mamel or any big fish or anything really that you're definitely in a, in a foreign environment, you are in the, you are at a disadvantage. These animals are so much faster roundabout you, but the fact is that there are very few animals that will.

Come out of the blue and attack you. They're usually if they do attack, you it's or do give you do your harm. It's usually defensive, you know, you've done something silly roundabout them when their pop isn't far away or the youngsters been far away or you've invaded their, their, their private space.

So to speak. Some animals have got an, an unfair reputation. Leopard seals are one of them, you know, I, I see so much BS about, about Leopard seals, you know, and how brave the camera of people are to get close to them. Photographers, leopard seals are the easiest animals. One of the easiest animals in the world to get dramatic pictures of.

Having said that there was a Marine biologist in the Antarctic who was drowned by a leopard seal. She was snorkeling leopard seal came up, grabbed her, took her down, held her down long enough to she drowned. But that was a case of mistaken identity. Occasionally leopard seals do take elephant seals and she, I think was mistaken for an elephant seal, came up, grabbed her, took her down very, very unlucky because 99 times 700, the leopard seal would, or any animal would take a bite and realize that whatever, whatever it is, I've bitten is not a seal.

So I'm gonna let it go, you know, but somehow she was taken down, but, but leopard seals, when they're hunting penguins, it's like a cat with a mouse. They. Take the penguin and it is often almost like they will bring the penguin over to you and do all the fleeing action and all this sort of stuff right in, in front of you.

It's almost like they're playing with the pray. And then Le seals also when they're fronting, they like to do it on their own. So sometimes what happens is

the lepro seal will come over and it will see itself. It will see itself reflected and they almost always domed front of the lens. And when they see themselves, they think it's another seal.

And so they start to do all the threat behavior, the open, their mouth, why they gate, they lunge at the other seal, they lunge at the camera, et cetera, cetera. And so my point is that they just seem to be partly born show offs, but partly, you know, you're not in danger from that. The seal that's most likely to nip you is actually a seal line.

A first seal, you know, the ones that stand up on the front floor, flippers that are a different group of seals. They're the ones that are much more likely to nip you because they get together in big sociable groups and they often have this game whereby they ho they huddle each other and take a nip each other as they come past.

So you get where them, and they accept you into your group, which is a great privilege. Then they start treating you like another seal. They start coming up towards you and taking naps at your shoulder and NS at your elbow and NS at your fins. And what's a playful nip between four seals is a hole in your wet suit and maybe a puncture and marking your elbow.

What have you. So you really want to, you know, bail out from them and then polar bears again, you know, polar bears do kill people. They, they are one of the few animals, which, which will hunt people stalk them. And kill them. If the polar bear is hungry enough. And if the person is perceived as being easy enough pray.

But if you see a polar bear from a long way away, that's the, that's the way to stay safe. See it from a long way away, watch it all the time. And if it begins to come close, start to, you know, wave your hand, shout at it. If you've got a snow machine drive at it, polar bear's, you know, they don't like that.

They'll once they lose the element of surprise they'll, they'll leave, you know, and, and almost all the cases of polar bear's killing people are they've been in the summer where the polar bear is hungriest and they will come into a camp unnoticed and suddenly, you know, they've got somebody and then the poor polar bear gets killed out of self defense, so to speak when it comes to getting into water with them, you know, I, I, I did try to dive with them on one occasion.

But. They weren't really interested in coming close to me. So, you know, when I stayed on the surface and watched them paddling towards me, when they saw me on the surface, they would just go round about me. So then I took to, to going down on the water and looking up in the direction that they were coming, the problem with that was that as soon as I saw them, I couldn't see them that soon.

And as I, as they paddled over my head and I came up and tried to film them as they came past, I realized they were swimming much faster than I could keep up with them. So we ditched the idea of being in the water with them and tried and more successful eventually in getting one that we could go alongside with a boat.

And we used a very small remote camera on the end of a pole to put it down in the water and get some lovely, big, close up relaxed shots of the pool of beer swimming. But, you know, you've gotta be. Aware every time you go out on the sea ice roundabouts fall bar or in the sea ice off a lot of the Arctic you're going into polar bear country.

And, you know, they can smell you from a mile, a mile and a half away. You know, I've seen polar bears hunting seals, and I've seen them react to a seal. The only seal there could be, I've seen the seal re they probably react from a mile away. You'll see it sniffing. And then suddenly it's got something and it will slowly hone in on that seal.

You know, keeping, keeping in the cent that's coming off the seal. And as it gets closer, it's, you know, it goes behind pieces of ice slips into the water. They're really, really clever. And the Inuit that I work with a lot there in the Arctic, they've got great saying that they say, it's not the polar bear.

You can see that's gonna get you. it's the one that you just you're switched off. You're two keen on filming one, watch out for the other one coming up your back, you know, because they're very, very clever animals and there are some of them which see undoubtedly human beings as potentially something to eat, but, you know, that's, that's what makes the poles exciting, you know, it's, it's nice to be out there with an animal that you can't hide from.

Yeah, it's a bit different to a few horse flies and a Fox that I deal with well, cause the other thing is the Arctic, you know, the Arctic, the antic are much more comfortable places to be, you know, I'd much as rather be keeping an eye on how cold my toes are than swatting away, the sweat bees or the mosquitoes, or picking off the leaches.

You know, in the rainforest infinitely, preferable much healthier environment in the cold. There's no bugs. There's nothing where you get cold is in the plane coming home. That's where that cold that's where you get there. That's where you come off feeling like, you know, off the plane. So, what advice would you give for anyone that wanted to kind of get into natural history, videography or that career path?

Yeah. Well, there's a lot of people trying to pursue that. I think one of the major decisions would be whether you go to do a university course in it, and there are degrees that you can do in wildlife filmmaking. There's well, in sulfur, there's one in pharma, for example, or whether you decide to go straight away, you know, with a freelance type thing, it's always easier to learn in a group.

On the other hand, it's expensive, you know, doing a degree in things and, and the thing that will get you a job as a wildlife filmmaker, or get you your first contract as a word life filmmaker, because we are still almost all. Freelancers, there are some companies wildlife filming has there's a lot wildlife filming going on in the last five to six years, mostly because the streaming companies have all wanted one, at least one big series, you know, under their belt or, or on their streamer.

Having got that one of two series, whether they will continue to make them is a bit of a moot point. It will really depend how well those series doing. They've got all the analytics on that. So whether we've seen a bit of a boom and whether now it might contract a little bit, I'm not sure, but the first thing that will get you, your contract is what's called urial, which will be something that shows what you can do.

And you know, you, you just have to be passionate about wanting to make films, films, as opposed to taking stills. because there's a world of difference. Most people don't think because the wildlife film, the finished product that you see is so seamless. And so professional, the most people don't think about how many individual shots have gone together to tell that story smoothly and how well it's been edited and how cleverly the narration has been brought in and the music and all the rest of it.

It's a whole different ball game from taking a, still taking a still you're looking to press the trigger at the right time to capture all the elements. And you can do a lot to a still afterwards in terms of with Photoshop, you can change all the kinds of parameters, much, much more expensive to do that with film with, without a movie you know, with a series of clips, but you need to be able to show that you can film.

That you can collect shots, which can then be edited together. So you produce what's called a reel and then of course you need to network, which is, it's a sort of dispassionate sounding thing, but I prefer to say, you need to engineer, you need to make face to face meetings with some of the people who might offer you a job.

And there are a number of film festivals that you can sign up to and go to and mix and, and, and maybe, you know, meet producers. You can send them your show reel. You can back it up with a, with a meeting. You keep that meeting short because these people are busy, et cetera, cetera, and eventually hope by dint of showing them your technical skill, but also showing your showing what you're like as a person, to be honest.

Cause nobody likes pushy folk, you know, is there enough folk trying to get in who are good people without. You know, if you're a pair in the nurse, you won't, you know, people won't employ you, but your first job will someone who knows you in some way, someone who has probably done a face to face with you.

A lot of camera people nowadays use assistant. And so you can come in at the assistant level. What's what makes good assistant is sort of a willingness to, to do some of the grunt work, but also a reasonable technical knowledge of the cameras. And certainly the the sort of downloading of the cards, the storage, the digital cause in a wildlife shoot where you might shoot a lot of material in a day that all has to get downloaded at night and backed up and all the rest of it.

And that's something that the, the assistance will often do. There's a lot of information on the web. Just simply Googling, how do you become a wildlife filmmaker, but don't just read. One person's CV or one website is a bit of advice, read as many as you can. And you'll find that certain key things keep being emphasized.

And you then have to apply yourself to those filmmaking. Filmmaking is a skill to be learned and, and sometimes some people learn it quicker or more innately than others. The sort of timing of shots, how long they should last for the skill of editing. You know, you begin to learn, I mean, I'm entirely self taught.

I never had a proper formal lesson. What I could do with a better knowledge of these days is perhaps more, more of the technical side of it, all the formats and, and then, and the menu systems within cameras. But the fact is you could know all that. . But if your shorts are not well posed, if they're slightly too short, if they're not sufficiently different to be able to be edited together, if the overlaps

aren't there, if the big closeups aren't there, if that innate feeling of when to move the camera with the animal went to let it go.

When to use a bit of slow motion. We're not, those are all things which you, you only learn by. shooting stuff yourself and then maybe trying to put it together yourself, but then putting it in front of someone who, whose opinion you respect, whether it's an editor or a camera person that you know, and, and listening to what they say about how you can make it better.

And I've mentors the wrong words, but, you know, I've felt I've helped a few people to get themselves on. On the lower wrong either by commenting on, on ideas that they've got or looking at a film that they've made and, and saying, I think this could be better by doing this, or by introducing them to contacts.

You know, there's a number of things you can do. You can go and do a degree, but remember that when you're doing your degree, you should be trying to make contact and, and getting as much work experience in the holidays with places as diverse as well, basically anywhere where any part of the filming process is being done higher companies are great places to go to get hands on with equipment.

You know, you'll, you'll be at the bottom. You'll just be maybe cleaning equipment and putting it back in his box. And then you'll be asked to test stuff before it goes out. But the fact is when you get your hands on the camera and you put the battery on the back and you fire it up and you look down and you make sure that all the symbols are there and the view finder, all that is immensely valuable.

On the other hand, being a runner. In, in a post-production company where no filming is being done, that may give you a chance to get to know an editor and editors are, if you wanna be a good camera person, talk to an editor, cuz they are the people who have to do something with what you bring in. So an editor, there's a much better judge of what is good material than another camera person or even the producer because the editor he's looking for the ways to put together what he's got in as many varieties of ways of seamlessly, etcetera.

And even now there is a huge range between, you know, some editors or editors will, will tell you if you press them, who are the camera people that they like working with. And they're the ones that give them all the material, other ones. You know, they'll be say, well, no, he or she is good, but you know, something I hardly ever get enough, big closeups, or they're always a bit wobbly.

You know, the shots are nice, but they're not as pinch sharp composed, as you know, as I would like them from the other person. So, you know, all these things come together, but it's a big wide world out there. And every year there are two or three people go from arrival to making a living from it. But I would say it probably takes from, from deciding you want to do it to being established and making a living at it is going to take you between three and five years.

You know, if you work hard, if you learn, if you listen to people, if you do all these things, get work, experience in as many places as you can and begin to get a few contracts, then you should. By the end of, of that sort of time three years, if you're lucky, five years, more like you should be making a living from it.

If you're not, then maybe it's time to ask yourself why that's some really great advice. And I think that, you know, it goes for, I mean, I know Neil's signed to a bit more video. But yeah, I think it's, it's really good advice. And for, for quite a lot of areas, I guess not just videography, but like the whole thing, it's, it's a lot of things you can take away from that for different kind of areas of work.

Well, I, yeah, I think that, I think that, you know, filmmaking is a collaborative business and I happen to think that for someone like me, who likes being in the field in front of the animals, Being a camera person is the best job, but I wouldn't be there. If the researchers hadn't uncovered the stories. If the producer hadn't seen the potential of the story and decided to invest programs, money in putting me into what he or she thought was the best place at the best time, with the best support, but then equally what I bring back.

If it's not put in the hands of a good editor, a sensitive editor, then it just might miss it. Doesn't quite come together. The editor, their hand might do a great job, but the producer puts on way too much music or way too much commentary or something, or the grader doesn't quite get the colors just as all the rest of it as it wants.

So it needs everybody throughout the whole process to be. on song and if they're all on song and they're all good, that's when you get the whole, you know, being greater than the sum of the parts. And that's what I like about it. And I look on the, on the camera person, as I say, because that's what I like doing.

You know, but if you were sitting in at the top of the rocket about to get all the experience that you really like, you are only there because of all the people that have done the job. You know, below you and the end product has still got a long way to go from what you hand in to being a great end, you know, end film.

And I would consider myself fortunate to have most of the time worked with some of the best people in the business. You've worked in these extreme environments at the top of mountains up near the pole. But I noticed recently you worked on a project in a pub garden. can you tell us a bit more about that?

Yeah, that was, was a little bit of a contrast for you. No, that was an interesting one. My agent found that one, it all came from a gin company called Warners G. Their PR company working with PR company and they had this idea that wouldn't it be good if we could promote the idea of wildlife gardens being havens for wildlife and encourage pubs that had gardens around the whole country to make their gardens as wildlife friendly as they could.

It could be as simple as just, just leave a little bit to go wild. You don't have to grow the grass all the way to your edges. You know, put up a few bird boxes. If you've got the space, maybe put in a pond, you know, of something different sort of wildlife environments. So anyway, so they came to me and, and they came to my, in, they, they said we're looking at a camera person who can make a wildlife film to.

A good standard. They talked about planet earth at the time, which I thought was a bit ambitious to make a pub garden, make a story of a pub garden in two to four days. So I thought two to four days, that's another challenge. Because obviously, you know, the weather is the big thing. But anyway, I'd agreed to take on and, and they, they also had the pop garden in mind, which was the place called the castle hotel ups rupture, which was an ideal example.

It had an area of lawn with tables on it and an area at the back that just let them let it go. Well, they had some bird tables up there. They had a patio and with a sort of raised bed of flows and things like that. So I looked at it and I thought, yeah, given the weather, we can do something here. So inevitably the end film had them.

we didn't really have a chance to do, to do, to do a job on the, the small mammals, the, the mice Andrus that undoubtedly must have been Curring around there somewhere, but it takes you time to find those runs. And then you have to put down humane traps to You know, to catch them and then you need to build a set, you know, or, or some means of filming them.

And, and we just didn't have time to do that, but I did find some nicely habituated Robins and couple of black birds, and there were pigeons flying in and out and, and they had a couple of nest boxes that were being used by Bluetooth. So that was okay. And then by equipping myself with various macro

lenses and then going around and collecting the, the various small beasts and things we were able to, to, to make a very small macro studio, so to speak and film some of the other ones, it was more a case of sort of little portraits of things, but we also used a special.

Lens a probe lens, which is effectively like a very wide angle lens on the end of a long tube. And I, I wanted that because I could, I felt that the film about a pub garden, we definitely needed some shots where we had the animal and people drinking, obviously in the background. And there was a lovely little tree growing at the back of the garden, just on the very edge of the lawn type area with, in front of it.

Two or three tables, dotted the slope going down. And I'd seen a, what a Robin perching in on, on, on one part of that tree. And so I thought if I, I know he goes there. If I can sit there, he's probably habituated. If I can sit there and I got a couple of people to sit on the tables and we waited for the Robin and sure enough, the Robin came in and we got that nice shot.

And then with the problems, it had the advantage that you could. Put the lens very close to the, the top of a flower. And you could get the hole of the top of the flower, filling the frame, which made the bee on the outside of the flower look big and obvious. But at the same time, you could put people in the background out of focus, which and drinking and things.

And the fact that the B in the floor were sharp. The people in the back were out focus, but obviously real that, you know, tho those, those were the sort of cleansers for me that was, if we had hand shots simply of the animals and then simply of people in the pub garden, then we wouldn't have had that connection necessarily between them.

We could have, could have done it with a commentary, et cetera, cetera, but I felt it was gonna be really per to get, you know, to get two shots with the two things happening. So we were lucky. We got four days of filming and good days at the beginning and the end, the change in. In, in behavior of the invertebrates when it's warm is like night and day, you know, in the dull days when it wasn't so warm, the number of bees and things being active was tiny.

Whereas you get this sun out and suddenly, woo they're all there. So we were able to do is some of what you call macro stuff on the, not so good days because the very, some of the very smallest stuff needed a bit of artificial lighting on it, but we could set up a very small set. That's one advantage with small animals.

You don't need big sets, but we could set up small set and just get those little shots of wood lace walking along twigs and, and things like that. And snails. And obviously we, we went out, collecting around the garden in the morning, looking for things that we wouldn't find later on. So where are we ready to go?

Ger, so to speak of some of the smaller stuff. So it was a good thing to get involved with. And the idea is that if you go into the Warner's website. They have, what's called the Warner's nature, mark, which is a wee plaque that if you know a pub or which you would like to sponsor, then you can put them forward.

And if they can satisfy the criteria for having a world garden, which is friendly to nature, then they'll get a Warner's nature, mark plaque that they can put up somewhere saying we are a wildlife friendly pub. And, and I think that anything that we can do to encourage interest in, in UK wildlife, I mean, it'd be great if, if families, you know, decided to collect the pubs that have the nature mark, you know, within their county, it encourages them to go look at different places.

And if, again, if the, if the, if the pub landlord was keen, you know, he could, you know, you know how they've got. The board with the specials of the day, he could have a, a board with a wildlife specials of the season. So for example, this month inner garden look for. So and so you know, and change that as the seasons go through.

So anything that we can do to just encourage an awareness of nature, I think is really important. Yeah. It's reaching that audience that wouldn't necessarily do so. Isn't it as well. Exactly, exactly. Yeah. Yeah. Cause I, I mean, I'm a great believer. I think one of the best things that's that I've heard of coming through is it was a friend of mine who.

Who got it off the ground. A woman called Mary post Mary suddenly again, Mary, you never forgive me. If I forget. Mary was, there was the wife of Julian Hector who used to be head of the naturalist unit, and Mary's very into Carlos Carlos of her thing. She's done several walks to raise awareness of Carlos and she has been pushing for a number of years to get a natural Mary Cowell, Mary Cowell.

Well, Don NASET, Mary, a thousand apologies for isn't that one on the list. That's why well, Mary's great. Mary's great. And for, for years, she's been pushing to get a natural history GCSE onto the syllabus, and I see that it is now, and it's either on the syllabus this year, but it's definitely in there and being created.

And I think that's, you know, just what we need. Just what we need is to get people out into nature, to reestablish that connection with it. And, and, and with that, and awareness of the sense of wonder and a sense of responsibility and all the sort of stuff that if we, if we had it all the way up through everybody, we wouldn't be setting where we are to do.

You won't get any arguments for me. I work in environmental education, so, well, yeah, yeah. I'm fully on that page. Yeah. We're gonna stick with the UK. Do you have a favorite wildlife site or reserve in the UK? We're gonna start with the UK and then we'll go further a. Well, I like wild places. And I come from Scotland.

So I would, in some of my formative diving experiences, two place off UL, just north of UL. There's a place called an island in the bay, north OU called Al Martin. And I remember going out there in the club Zodiac and it was, you could look down and see the bottom 60. About 25 meters below. It was one of these gin clear days.

And I remember slipping over the side and going down into the kelp and finding Dogfish and all sorts of other stuff. We also found little Arctic cos that you wouldn't think cos you find cos in UK, but you do trivia article, lovely lot of species. It's only about a centimeter long, but it's a classic carry, you know, the ridges going over it.

And they sit on the kelp and I was just amazed to see that and you know, diving with seals and other things around UK. So, you know, when you combine that, when you get out there with, if it's not a diving day, you can head for the Hills. And so, you know, get into the wilderness and all the rest of it. And there's one or two.

Peaks in Scotland player, one Sullivan, which is a lovely, it's a sort of, yeah, it's very difficult to do Sullivan from the main road and back again in a day. So I want to go there and just camp out overnight and, and hit the peak the next day, the next morning. So amongst the, you know, the wilderness spots in UK would definitely be up, up in the wild of the, the Northwest of Scotland.

I finally went there two weeks ago. Was it up in Laur and around there? So Ben, Ben, I Ben eing, is it? I think, yeah. Ben. Yeah. Yeah. Beautiful where it's AB it's amazing. It's a remarkable piece. And I mean, you know, you, you've got, you've got the league district, Sarah, that there's so many more people there and, and they're so much smaller, you know, compared to the Highlands of Scotland, Highlands of Scotland.

Just seem to go on further again, you know, April, may, September, they would be. My favorite month, so that something to do the mids perhaps, well, you know, it can avoid the mids and the most of the people, to be honest, that's that's it. That's why I would go there. but it's not having, having worked up in, on the islands in Scotland.

You know, if you get nice breeze, the midges don't don't bother you. No, that's true. Yeah, no, no. What do you mean by a nice breeze? I always find that finding this strong enough to keep them away. Exactly. Yeah, yeah, yeah, no, it needs to be a fairly strong breeze. I remember my grandfather used to parade around and night.

He would roll newspapers up fairly tightly and then light these and hold them close to his head. And he SW blamed that we'd keep them much away. But I dunno, that was my grandfather. We, we had one little spot at the, like the highest point of the island we were living on, but I lived on a little island called Eastdale island for eight months.

When I was working up there and we found there was a nice little spot right at the top of the island. And it, you pretty much always had a good breeze up there. So there were never any Midge. So if we needed to make phone calls, it was also the only place on the island with phone service. So everyone would be up there on their phones, Midge free.

That's great. I didn't know what everyone was on about when I was for the first three days. Like there, it was beautiful sunshine and there's like the odd mid Jod, miss mid John, you know, horse flyer was a bit of a pain. And then the cloud came over for the first time in one afternoon and I stepped out the back door it was just sort a, ah, you know, I like me insects, but that was, I don't ever run away from insects before.

you know, got two meters out, putting the washing out uhoh this is not good. Do the, well, I think that's the beauty about working on the boats up there as Well's like, once you're on the boats and you are. Oh, yeah, no, no. Yeah, yeah, you're fine. She, yeah, I helped out with that BBC series on or a few years ago.

And they wanted me to walk across this Bo and then into these area of trees, cuz there aren't many trees on. So first of all, I've got the camera on my shoulders. The first thing I do is basically fall into the bog where the camera is going. So, you know, you got the shot of me sort of walking across it, something, I disappear into this hole and I pick myself up and then go into the trees.

And I just about 10 seconds was as long as you could stay there and try to see something coherent because by the end you were just slapping yourself and wanted to get out from all you know, away from all these, these mids. Yeah. Now, this is what I'm saying is the we stuff. When you're filming the we stuff is much, much more dangerous and annoying than the big stuff.

Do you have a best sight in the world? Best part in the world is, is difficult. I've been lucky, you know, I've seen an awful, awful lot of the poles, you know, of Antarctica and the Arctic, the police, I would like to spend more time is the Pacific islands actually. And as because, you know, I was lucky enough to do some work with with a coral reef conservation people called living oceans foundation, and we visited a few nice places in the, in the Pacific.

And also I spent time in Tonga and it would be a matter. there's two elements to wildlife film often there's the animals and there's the people. And I just found the people of the south of the Pacific islands, you know, to be fascinating their cultures and, and the way that they live often, you know, with their, with the nature in a way that we tend not to.

So I would love to spend more time. It'd be great to have a yacht than just putter around. So to speak, taking time in, in different small island groups in the, in the Pacific, if there's one thing you could see off film, what would it be? I'd like to spend some quality time with around of tans, actually, actually, you know, I've seen.

I've seen a lot of the whales, you know, male NALs would be very attractive with their big, long tusks, but I've kind of seen them albeit briefly, but I haven't seen Anyang tans. I spent some time with chimpanzees some time with mountain gorillas, but Aang tans somehow seem the biggest and the wisest and the most laid back of them.

And there are some wonderful chimps chimpanzee, some wonderful Aang AAN Aries in the world. And I would love to visit one of those and, and just be with them, but also go out and, and spend some time with them in the wild cuz they're another animal that I think, you know, it's all about the vibes you give off and, and, and you look them in the eye and if you have a close encounter, then I'm not a spiritual person, but.

There is definitely stuff passes between a human being and an animal when both of you are in the right mood. And that mood is usually being relaxed with each other and confident to some extent, but respectful and trustful and just in

that right mood, that's when things happen. So I'd love to be in that mood with, I rang a turn.

So any producers listening I really hope you get the chance. I mean, we, we went to Borneo quite a few years ago now, but nine years ago to be precise actually for our honeymoon. And we were went to one of the rehabilitation centers. We actually went to a couple and we were just lucky enough to have some incredible encounters and experiences and stuff that will stay with us.

The rest of your lives. Yeah. You know, so I really, really hope you get that chance to go well, I it's, you know, I would, I it's, it's one thing I talk about and I realize that, you know, you can wait maybe for a program to go along or you can go and do it. I should think carefully. Cause I've got friends, I'm a good friend who is closely involved.

His wife runs Anton project scientific project. And he himself go works with, and he gets some lovely photographs and things and I should contact him about spending some time. Yep. Do it. Last question, Vic. We know you've got talk coming up in November. Talk, do you wanna kind of, so us a little bit more about that.

Yeah, sure. I I've been doing theater tours as I call them organized by my agent. More or less one a year. COVID obviously interrupted a bit anyway. This year is Ireland is on the list. So I'm going over to Ireland. And through the month of November, I'm doing about 15, 15 theaters. If you go on my website, Doug allen.com, there's a full list of all the venues where I'll be doing my talk.

It's a two hour show. It's like an hour and then a, an interval and then another half hour or so. And it some extent they're like an extended version of these 10 minute diary pieces that are very popular at the end of the main wildlife show, so to speak. So I'll take you behind the scenes on some of the filming encounters from the filming shoots that I've done.

Explain how we did it. Look at the science, you know, tell you the funny, bit's tell the adventures, but, but also, you know, it's a sort of reflection of, of. 35, 40 years of wildlife filming the highlights and the, the moments of thoughtfulness, you know, when an animal does everything in front of you, it's, it's a wonderful privilege, but it's also just a wonderful privilege to be able to spend all that amount of time in wilderness places, waiting for animals.

Just because you don't see the animal doesn't in any way, make it, you know, in any less of an experience and to actually be there. So it's a look at, at, at those

sort of things. I wrote a book few years ago, and I've copies of the book for sales, who do that. I've got a few I'm doing a talk in London.

For the Manter trust I'm a great admirer, a lot big animals, big animals are easier to film in small animals, actually much easier to focus on a big animal than is in a small animal. And one of my arrest encounters in the red sea all those years ago was with a few mantra. And so I've always had a soft spot for them.

And I filmed mantras a few years ago with with the help of these people called the man trusts. And so I've been in contact with them for a while and they they, they are having The man trusts evening, so to speak on the 17th of September and the RGS in London. So they asked me if I would do a talk at that.

So I'm going along to do that. And I've got one or two other ones for you know, there's a camera club in Darlington and there are the joint nature Conservancy council, stuff like that. But the main thrust this year will be the tour in November. But I do like I do like talking to the public and, and as I say, increasing, hopefully increasing their awareness of the natural world and, and letting them feel, or know in a constructive way, just you know, how we can do more, what we could be doing, what we should be doing to, you know, to make things better for the, for the planet.

It sounds absolutely fascinating. I mean, anyone that's listening, if you can get to one of Doug's talks, please do. Cuz you will absolutely love it. I'm I'm sure it'll be amazing. And if you ever make it to free, you have to let me know. Okay. Okay. No, I, I do like it and I, I, I like the questions at the end and I, I, I love talking to, to schools, I've done a number of primary schools and secondary schools.

It's just great. When you know, all, all human beings have got it, but especially youngsters, they just, they just, they, they naturally love the natural world. And when you go in the thing, when you do a primary school is you can't just do one class. You have to somehow organize it that you do the whole school.

Otherwise they feel left out. So it's great to get the, the, the schools together. And if they've got a big enough hall, then you can maybe run two classes together and get through three or four presentations in a day. But when you set the kids down there. what I do is I start with, when I say, right, I'm gonna test your, your knowledge.

So you put on the noise of cows moving and, and say, okay, who knows where this is? And no, don't put your hands up, just shout out. You know? So they all

start shouting cows, and then you put sheep up and and they all go sheep. And then the next thing you put up with these beers, and you can see they're a bit confused and they say, is this some is this birds, is this, but no, no, it's not birds, birds.

And then you say, no, no, this is a whale. And you show them a picture of the whale. And from that point, you've just got them. They just. Love it. And you take in, I've got an old bit of well bone, I've got an invertible disc from a whale and you take that in, in this thing, you know, it's big and you get them asking, you know, what is that?

And you pass around to polar bear's tooth and this sort of thing. And if you've got a bit of show and tell and a few pictures, then by the end, there's complete honor key. And as much as the kids are all shouting and you know, all the rest of it be, it's such a great thing to do. It's such good fun with them.

All we need to say now is thank you so much for coming on Doug. It's been absolutely fascinating talking to you. It has been an, an absolute honor and delight. Thank you so much for, oh, your time to come on the podcast. No, it's my pleasure. As I say, it's, it's always good to talk to fellow enthusiasts and I wish your podcast all the best.

Big, thanks again to Doug for coming on the podcast, you can find him on Twitter at Doug Allen camera, and you can find details of his tour on his website@dougallen.com.