

# Packham's progress

Chris Packham  
co-presents

**SPRINGWATCH**

RETURNING 30 MAY

TWO

As his revelatory new memoir goes on sale Chris Packham shares the secrets of his past with *BBC Wildlife*.

Interview by  
**James Fair**  
and **Ben Hoare**  
Photographs by  
**Charlie Best**

**A** photo taken around 1986 shows the original line-up of the ground-breaking children's natural-history programme *The Really Wild Show*. There's Terry Nutkins looking avuncular and reassuring, Nicola Davies resembling an eccentric aunt and, of course, the young Chris Packham. Nutkins and Davies are smiling affably at the camera, but Packham glowers under his peroxide blond quiff, arms folded, seemingly keeping the world, or at least the people in it, at bay.

Thirty years on, and the wild child of wildlife conservation has relaxed his posture, unfolded the arms and let the world in. In his new memoir *Fingers in the Sparkle Jar*, he alludes to everything that has shaped his life and led him to his present position of popular TV guru and outspoken campaigner for the health and well-being of nature.

Since Packham joined *Springwatch* in 2009, he has become one of the most visible of natural-history TV presenters. Now, through this painfully honest memoir, a very different Packham is revealed. "I'm Asperger's," he says, "but it's perhaps at the more manageable end of the spectrum. As a child, I was aware of being different, but it wasn't difficult until I reached adolescence. I didn't

understand it, and I felt angry and confused by the separation it precipitated.

"Things like dyslexia and Asperger's weren't known then so you weren't given any protection. These days bullying is very much on teachers' and parents' minds. In those days it was a fact of life. Kids are cruel, they identify with the norm and persecute anything that doesn't conform with that."

Inevitably, being different led to scrapes at school. "I was bullied physically and mentally," Packham recalls, but with no bitterness. "There were people who wanted to pass an O-level in punching Chris. But then I did say inappropriate things – if someone had BO, I said they smelled."

In his book Packham outlines how his isolation shaped him. He remembers telling his psychotherapist how, as a teenager, he had started to feel like the lead character of the TV series *Captain Scarlet*, lined up against his arch enemies, the Mysterons, armed with indestructible self-confidence.

How did it manifest itself, she asked him. "Fearlessness I suppose, complete fearlessness, reckless disregard for my own safety, health, well-being," Packham replied.

It's not hard to draw a direct line between his youthful tendency to blurt out comments that most of us, even as teenagers, would have kept to ourselves and his risky, sometimes risqué approach to presenting *Springwatch*. ▶

The making of a naturalist: Chris Packham revisits one of his favourite childhood haunts in Southampton.



## He sees his Asperger's as a positive influence and a force for good.

It's not just the playful attempts to crowbar the song titles of his favourite bands into the script, but the occasional *double entendre* that wouldn't look out of place in

*Viz*, a publication that describes itself as an "irreverent mix of foul-mouthed, childish cartoons and sharp satire". "I love *Viz*," says Packham. "I read it every month. I read a letter in it recently from someone who asked if it was true that grey squirrels are just old red ones."

Packham is very clear that his Asperger's has had a positive influence on the way he interacts with the natural world. He sees it as a force for good, starting with his remarkable capacity to recall events. "But that's just part of it," he says. "The ability to recognise instantaneously and record immense detail has been a tremendous asset to me. Hypersensitivity to smell, sound and colour are part of it."

"I watch people with the same intensity as I watch animals. Spending time with my partner Charlotte and Megan, my stepdaughter, I can see that they see the world very differently to me. Charlotte says we can be driving along and she looks out of the window and sees a field with cows and some trees, and I look out of the window and I see six oak trees, an ash tree, two willows, mould on the leaves, and the cows facing left to right – it's that detailed."

Packham was born in 1961 in Southampton. He lived in an ordinary neighbourhood with a parade of shops that included the first Chinese restaurant to open in the district and a fresh-fish shop where he would go to stare at the wares lying on a marble slab. "I loved looking at the fish; asking the fishmonger to turn them over so I could see what they looked like."

His hard-working parents instilled a love of learning and an appetite for industry in both him and his younger sister

Jenny, who is a fashion designer. They were "taken to every art gallery, museum and castle going", and their parents bought – at vast expense – the complete set of *Encyclopedia Britannica* that Packham pored over from a young age. "My parents believed in a meritocracy. They said that if you work hard and acquire abilities, you will succeed."

What would the young Christopher Packham have thought if he'd known his life would turn out the way it has?

"He would have burst, just burst. I never would have believed that I would be able to travel to places like Sri Lanka, and swim with sperm whales. It was beyond my wildest dreams. I still can't believe it – that I've been that fortunate to see all these things and go to all of these places."

### TURNING PUNK

Packham acknowledges the trend that saved him as he struggled to cope with adolescence. It was the mid-1970s, and he was a politically aware teenager for whom reading newspapers and watching *Panorama* were almost mandatory. "It was the Three-Day Week, there was high unemployment, and if I couldn't find work I could always join the army. The Swinging 60s had become the S\*\*\*\*y 70s." Then came punk. "I could separate myself from the rest of the world by dyeing my hair blue and sticking safety pins in my shirt. People would cross the road to avoid me. It was perfect."

When he was 14, Packham famously raised a wild kestrel chick after being refused a falconry licence, and nurtured and loved the bird until it died in his arms six months later. It meant everything to the young Packham – he got up at 6am every morning to feed and fly it, then ran home from school at lunchtime to check it was OK. As he writes in his book: "A real live kestrel, my own real live kestrel on my wrist! I felt like I'd climbed through a hole in heaven's fence."

Its death brought about a major bout of depression. As he points out, 50 per cent of people with Asperger's suffer from depression because they are reluctant to seek help from ►



other people. “I am not good on sympathy,” he says. “I don’t need it and I don’t give it out.” Many years later, in 2003, when his dog was run over, he fell into such a mental trough that he became suicidal. It was, he says, only the realisation that he didn’t have enough pills to be certain he would die that stopped him from going through with it.

Packham’s poodles, Itchy and Scratchy, feature prominently in his life. “My dogs are umbilically linked to me. We share everything in life. We go to bed together, wake up together, we’re the best buddies in the world. Some people over-train their dogs, they seem to want exact control over them. I want my dogs to express themselves, I love them for what they are. I call them my joy grenades – they bring me more happiness than anything else and part of that is their character. I don’t want to suppress their characters. I should have got them straight after my last dog died. As

**“I call my dogs my joy grenades – they bring me more happiness than anything.”**

soon as I got Itch and Scratch, the healing process started.”

There is no hint in any of this that Packham feels remotely sorry for himself. He feels privileged to have achieved what he has. Being on TV was never a conscious ambition – he got involved almost accidentally.

“I’d started taking wildlife photos, and I needed money to pay for Kodachrome and petrol. I got a job as a camera assistant for a bloke making films for the BBC Natural History Unit. It was through him that I found out about *The Really Wild Show* and orchestrated an audition for myself. It was a great opportunity, is still, but whatever happened I would have just got on with it and worked hard.”

Despite this assertion, the drive to be creative is a strong one. “I love making things,” he says. “When I was a kid I was massively into art and wildlife – it was always between the two. I got into photography after doing my zoology degree. For the best part of 10 years I’d had to concentrate on science and I was really frustrated. It was the lack of being able to make things – make music, make art.”

In the 1980s Packham decided to teach himself to write. “A man interviewed me for Radio 4 in 1990 who happened to be an English professor. I’d been writing short stories to try and teach myself how to write – no intention of showing

them to anyone. However, I let him see them and ended up sending them to him and he’d provide vicious critiques, which was excellent and I learned a lot.

“I wrote the whole of my memoir without having a publisher. I hadn’t spoken to anyone about doing it. I was working on it for about a year – huge pieces of graph paper on the wall designing the narrative, and Post-it notes for each of the units. Charlotte had read bits of it and thought it was OK, and then I gave it to [former *BBC Wildlife* editor] Roz Kidman Cox and asked what she thought. I wasn’t worried about what was in it, I was worried about the quality. She said I must publish.

“I’m self-conscious about what I am. I’m not a celebrity, I make wildlife programmes. So many people write appalling biographies. I took it to five publishers and I said, ‘If you happen to like this, if you in any way want to publish it, there will not be a picture of me on the cover. It has to be more than a book about me, it has to stand alone.’ I wanted it to be a book people would have to be thinking about as they were reading it, so I’ve written in lots of levels and hidden things you’d have to be really reading into it to find.”

#### INSIDE THE SPARKLE JAR

The sparkle jar of the title is a plastic bottle filled with a solution containing glitter for children – often autistic ones – who find it hard to calm down. They shake the bottle and watch the glitter falling, which distracts them from whatever is troubling them. The metaphor seems obvious – Packham can’t just stand by and watch the sparkle jar, he has to reach in and explore whatever is inside. But he intended a double meaning for the title. “For all the shiny, beautiful living things I found as a kid.”

TV has given him reach and influence. Viewers are better informed about the threats to wildlife in this country now than when he started on *Springwatch* seven years ago. But, he believes, there’s still a long way to go. “We are that generation who are aware of everything that’s going wrong and at the same time we’re learning more quickly than ever before. For me, the science, the gadgetry, the progress we’ve already made and we’re building on is so astonishing now that it’s invigorating. In a way that should increase our motivation to protect what’s left.” 🐾

## 6 SECRETS ABOUT CHRIS PACKHAM

- Abstract expressionists such as Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning are his favourite painters.
- He enjoys reading military history – most recently the sinking of the *Bismarck* in World War II.
- The bird he would most like to see is the Araripe manakin, a species only found in the Atlantic rainforest of Brazil. He calls it the Duran Duran bird, because of its bright red crest resembling a quiff.
- His most memorable wildlife spectacle is watching “one million flamingos” flying in to land on Lake Victoria. “I could have burst, it was beyond comprehension.”
- He always keeps a roll of bin bags in his travel bag – he can use them for wet clothes or dead specimens.
- A favourite joke is: “I was at the zoo the other day and I saw a bloke trying to chat up a cheetah – he was trying to pull a fast one.”

**CHRIS PACKHAM** is a conservationist, presenter and columnist. Fingers in the Sparkle Jar: A Memoir (Ebury Press, £20) is available now.