



ELIE HARRISON

Meet the naturalist and broadcaster who stars in BBC Countryfile, the most watched factual programme on British TV

INTERVIEW: **SARAH STIRLING**



ELIE fell into TV presenting by chance while studying ecology and geography at King's College, London. She was supporting herself with temping jobs, including a stint working as a secretary at Channel 5. When the star of the BAFTA-winning children's programme, *Michaela's Wild Challenge*, went on maternity leave it left some empty wellies. Who could fill them for nine months? Eyes roamed over the office.

Perhaps it was her huge smile that caught the attention of the commissioner for children's TV programmes; Ellie is charismatic in a very British way (she grew up in rural Gloucestershire). She also had expertise in wildlife on her side – it had been working in Zimbabwe, the troubled and fought-over 'jewel of Africa', that had attracted Ellie to study a wildlife-based degree. Ellie was invited to screen-test for the programme, which was all about undertaking unusual wildlife trials in order to highlight species' extraordinary traits.

"I went to a garden in Richmond and pretended there were elephants behind me for the screen-test. I was bloody awful," she laughs. Ellie was actually writing a thesis in elephant conservation at the time. "But they let me go with them to Namibia, South Africa, New Zealand and Indonesia, where I learned about a hundred lessons every single day of the shoot."

Ellie went on to become one of the original presenters for *The One Show*, filming stories on the best of British wildlife. She then moved to New York with her fiancé Matthew, where she worked on Canada's live science show, *Daily Planet*; on the Discovery Channel, and as presenter of *The World Without* for Discovery Science.

When the couple returned to the UK, the *BBC Countryfile* opportunity came up – and Ellie had the perfect CV to join the programme, which attracts up to 9.4 million viewers. Ellie tells us she's only occasionally recognised: "Perhaps in a garden centre!"

Despite the demands of the show and her family, Ellie finds time to work on plenty of other factual and wildlife-based programmes, including *Secret Britain* (BBC1, 2015), *Dinosaur Britain* (ITV, 2015), and *Britain's Sharks and Britain's Whales* (ITV, 2016). She's also written and given presentations on topics including wildlife gardening, and is President of Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust and patron of the Humanist Association.

SS: I gather you grew up in the countryside with chickens; can you tell us about your childhood?

EH: Our house was at the end of a track at the end of a valley. In the winter the snowdrifts were so high we couldn't walk through them for days. Dad was a carpenter and had a huge shed that always smelled of pine. Mum has spent 50 years in the NHS; back then she'd work night shifts then look after us in the day.

Our nearest neighbours were an elderly couple. They became well-known locally as the husband was terminally ill and one day, when his wife was out shopping, he took rat poison. She became an advocate of euthanasia after that.

SS: Were you interested in wildlife?

EH: My dad liked the idea of the *Good Life*. He grew vegetables and made an incubator for the chicks to hatch his own hens. I remember being disappointed that they didn't

From a chance temping job at Channel 5, Ellie's now watched by millions of viewers

emerge from the egg yellow and fluffy, but black and slimy! I used to watch the hen sitting on our fence, and I remember feeling sad for the fox even then.

After my parents divorced when I was six we moved to a town with a steep-sided acre of wild garden. Life was different and I only really used the garden to escape into my dreams then.

SS: What's your first adventurous memory?

EH: I remember being about seven in Greece on our first foreign holiday. My sister, brother and I were all strong swimmers because Mum had grown up by the sea and had us all swimming before we started school. We were on a boat hired for the day and decided to jump out half a mile from shore to swim back. The sea was clear and I felt strong and free.

SS: Did you travel before university?

EH: When I turned 18 I went with a boyfriend to Zimbabwe. We canoeed by ourselves on Lake Kariba. I was getting into photography and decided to get an artistic picture of him holding on to a petrified tree naked. My canoeing skills were just developing and after 10 minutes he was yelling and pointing at crocodiles! We camped beneath Kariba dam and listened to lions and poachers in boats in the night. It remains the most unusual place I've ever camped.

SS: Who's your heroine and why?

EH: Ava DuVernay. She has walked her own path as a film director, refusing to ask for permission to follow her dreams, creating opportunities where none existed before and, best of all, turning right back around to help the people next in line. Among millions of Instagram accounts, her one always lifts me up.

SS: How important is your position as a role model to girls and women?

EH: The conversations we have about gender in public are so loaded with unconscious bias that they're not always useful or honest. I am a feminist. I'm also an egalitarian. I was raised in a matriarchy.

SS: What was it like presenting for the first time?

EH: Everyone can present, so it isn't like there's a secret you have to learn. It's just walking and talking towards a camera. My producer calls it 'talking out loud'. The trick is to be the truest version of yourself, or failing that, to be the best actor!

SS: You must have learnt a lot about wildlife through your work. What was the most extraordinary wildlife trait that emerged on *Michaela's Wild Challenge*?

EH: I loved that series. The aim was to show how brilliant animals are at doing what they do by showing us failing at it. One that leaps out is the cartwheeling spider in Namibia. When under threat and unable to burrow, it will turn on its side and cartwheel down a dune to get away from predators at a metre per second.



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SS: How was your stint in New York?

EH: I think everyone is part town mouse, part country mouse, but in different proportions. I'm 40% town mouse so I loved it. I worked on *Daily Planet* in Toronto for Discovery Canada and on a

programme called *The World Without*, looking at how the world would be without something fundamental, like sunlight. We went to the acid caves in Tabasco, Mexico to see an entire ecosystem based on chemosynthesis. And to Barrow, Alaska where it was minus 50 degrees. By the time I'd finished a piece to camera my face was so cold I couldn't form the words.

SS: You're best known for presenting *Countryfile*. What are the best and worst things about it?

EH: The best thing is being given access into people's lives. Because the programme has been around for so long there's a lot of trust between us and the people we talk to. I also love that we complete something every week: a team come together, and by the time we've all added to it there's a finished programme.

A whole hour a week is a lot in production terms and it can be challenging. The winter is particularly hard. I have Raynaud's and I struggle with not just the low temperatures, but the hours of standing still in an icy wind. It can also be quite demanding, with a five-hour drive on a Friday evening at the end of a shoot.

SS: *Secret Britain*: what's your favourite bit of the country that you discovered through this programme?

EH: I loved Northumberland and the Highlands.

SS: How about *Dinosaur Britain*; while we're on this track, what was the most fascinating fact you learnt while filming this series?

EH: Everything was fascinating. Each species that has been described, the unlikelihood of there even being surviving fossils at all, the timescales, which boggle the mind (300 million years). But also the world of the people who find the fossils: the skullduggery.

SS: You must have had some scary moments, too?

EH: Taking a photo of a great white shark lying on the outboard of a small boat in South Africa. Poor visibility meant only the director saw how close a shave we had!

Ellie is passionate about the natural world in all its forms, from deep sea creatures to those that roamed the earth millions of years ago

SS: Tell us about the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust?

EH: I bang the drum about the work of the charity. What I love is that their sites and their experts are free for everyone – member or not – to get closer to nature. We're currently working on returning pine martens to the Forest of Dean and beavers to the rivers.

SS: You're also a patron for the Humanist Association.

EH: I believe that we have this lifetime to be a decent member of the human race and to do what we can to help relieve suffering everywhere.

SS: What project are you currently working on?

EH: A life-coaching retreat, using nature to help make us well. And a screenplay about the lengths one man went to to find love after the Second World War.

SS: You've been vocal on the gender pay gap; thoughts in brief?

EH: The gender pay gap and equal pay are different things. The gender pay gap is poor, the equal pay issue is even poorer. There's such a long way to go.

SS: What are your hopes and fears for your children in this digital age?

EH: I hope young people recognise that the truth of their story is far, far more interesting and liberating than photos with a glass of fizzy wine. I also hope that social media will continue to give people access to truths they may not have wanted to see before.

SS: Any thoughts on turning 40?

EH: I had an all-out mid-life crisis. Not the sports car kind, but the one that asks about an authentic self. Indulgent but surprisingly useful. Never waste a good crisis.

SS: That's a useful tip! And finally, how do you relax?

EH: I meditate. *oag*

Scariest moment? Taking a photo of a great white shark lying on the outboard of a small boat in South Africa. Only the director saw how close a shave we had!

