

GREAT OUTDOORS

From foot-and-mouth and BSE to Morris dancing and naked hiking, there is hardly a subject BBC's *Countryfile* hasn't covered during its long and successful life.

Regularly watched by more than seven million viewers, Sunday evenings wouldn't be the same without our weekly trip into the British countryside with Julia Bradbury, John Craven, Matt Baker and the rest of the team.

This week's edition of *Countryfile* offers something extra special, because the flagship rural affairs programme celebrates its 25th birthday tomorrow.

"*Countryfile* is one of those staple programmes which has always been there," says Julia Bradbury, 43. "It has its roots in agriculture but has evolved over the decades to embrace the culture of the great outdoors."

"Everyone should care about food provenance and I think we have a growing appreciation of our landscape and wildlife. *Countryfile* taps into these topics and delivers information in a digestible and appreciative manner."

Fellow presenter John Craven, 72, has presented the show for 24 years and believes its ability to attract viewers of all ages and every walk of life explains its longevity. "Whether we live in urban or rural areas, most people love the countryside – we have an affinity with it," he says.

"Viewers get a kind of vicarious trip out into the green acres without having to leave their armchairs. It's classic Sunday evening entertainment and the fact so many people watch can only be good news for the state of our countryside."

Back in 1988, *Countryfile* took over the Sunday morning slot occupied by the long-running *Farming* programme. Then, four years ago, it was promoted to prime-time, attracting millions more viewers in the process. Now it's watched by young and old alike, as John's bulging mailbag proves.

"When I presented *Newsround* and other children's programmes, which I did for 20 years, kids everywhere would stop me for autographs. After quitting children's TV and joining *Countryfile*, less children knew me. If they asked for an autograph, it was normally for their grandma! But since we

went prime time and became a real family show, children want my autograph again. So I've come full circle!"

Julia receives plenty of fan mail, too. "Last month, somebody wrote with just my name and Rutland, where I grew up, on the envelope and it still reached me. I even had a marriage proposal on Twitter last week!" smiles Julia, who finds presenting *Countryfile* "fascinating". She says, "I learn something different every day on the job and am constantly discovering new places."

"Rural Britain is still the most beautiful place on Earth and I'm so lucky to have had

the chance to see just about every corner of it," adds John, who struggles to pick a favourite piece of Britain. But if pushed, he'd opt for the Yorkshire Dales.

"I adore the open landscapes and lush valleys – each dale having its own character. But I also love the Northumberland coast with the wide open beaches and the Cornish coast – in fact, I love almost everywhere."

Reflecting on more than two decades presenting *Countryfile*, John recalls many happy memories of meeting fascinating people, learning numerous country skills and the joy of receiving positive feedback from viewers.

But filming in the open countryside has its challenges, such as coping with strong wind. "In 1993 I reported from Shetland on the Braer disaster, an oil tanker which ran aground," says John. "It was incredibly windy and affected everything. It blew my jacket up like a balloon and I looked like the Michelin man."

Other memorable incidents include an unfortunate moment with a cow.

"I interviewed a vet while she had her hand up its backside. While she was talking, the cow evacuated and splattered us both."

Although many

Left: Julia Bradbury with her *Countryfile* co-stars, Matt Baker and John Craven

Countryfile celebrates its 25th birthday tomorrow with a special anniversary episode. Presenter Julia Bradbury reveals all

items featured in the programme celebrate the countryside, *Countryfile* isn't afraid to tackle big issues.

"We've reported on problems like BSE, salmonella, bovine TB and foot-and-mouth," says John. "But we're not a campaigning programme. We present both sides to issues in a balanced way, enabling viewers to make up their own minds."

Although a team of presenters front *Countryfile*, they rarely get the chance to meet up, as Julia explains.

"The Baker Boy (Matt Baker) and I see each other every week on location for our 'goodbye' link but I only see Uncle John and Adam [Henson] a couple of times a year at most," she says.

"Matt and I are mates, though, so we see one another socially. He's such a great father and gives me parenting tips. Also, I presented *The One Show* with him for a week earlier this year when Alex Jones went on holiday."

Julia's filming days for *Countryfile* are Thursdays and Fridays and she admits every week on the programme is challenging. "We travel the country from one end to the other continuously. Physically, that is quite demanding, compounded by the long filming days in the fresh outdoors. This may not be the glamorous end of telly but it's never dull!"

Although Julia tries hard not to get pigeon-holed in her career, she enjoys being associated with such a popular programme as *Countryfile*.

"I'll keep doing it as long as the body and the young family can cope with the travel," she says, smiling.

John, meanwhile, who's appeared in more than 1,200 editions of the programme, regards himself as one of the luckiest men on TV. He's just signed a new one-year contract with the BBC and has no intention of slowing down.

"I love it. I count myself incredibly fortunate to have been involved with three programmes I'm very proud of – *Newsround*, *Swap Shop* and *Countryfile*. Long may that continue."

Richard Webber

COUNTRYFILE,
SUNDAY, 8PM,
BBC1

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JULIA
BRADBURY

Right: Julia has been presenting the BBC's flagship rural affairs show since 2009

I HAD A MARRIAGE PROPOSAL ON TWITTER LAST WEEK!
JULIA BRADBURY

