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'I'd like to think I could be a David Attenborough'

My weekend

The TV presenter Julia Bradbury tells **Hilary Rose** about ambition, ageism, and quitting the BBC's *Countryfile*

Here is the funny thing about Julia Bradbury. We associate her with looking a bit windswept, marching cheerfully up mountains in her wellies. But off-screen, she turns out to be the quintessential West London woman: Notting Hill townhouse, expensively cut hair, navy Joseph shift dress, a penchant for Stella McCartney clothes and expensive shoes. But though the anorak is absent, it's her engaging personality — big smile, boundless enthusiasm and raucous laugh — that has helped to double *Countryfile*'s viewing figures, and helped to propel it from niche show for farmers to prime time viewing for the whole family. She also presented many other outdoor programmes for the BBC, including *Wainwright Walks* — and, in the process, earned the nickname "walking man's crumpet".

"I think that's hilarious," she says, grinning. "There are much worse things to be called than walking man's crumpet."

It's nearly 20 years since Bradbury began her TV career, and six since she joined *Countryfile*. Now, she's leaving for ITV, news that was announced the same week that Susannah Reid also defected.

"I am not leaving the BBC," she says firmly. "I'm leaving *Countryfile*. I don't know Susannah Reid and I haven't spoken to her, but the breakfast show is a different world. She's gone, she's left the BBC, whereas I've only left *Countryfile*. I left on good terms, and I'm still talking to them."

Bradbury got the *Countryfile* gig when she was 38, and the programme moved to its primetime slot. Miriam O'Reilly, who had recently turned 50, was jettisoned and furious: she took the BBC to an employment tribunal, and won a claim for age discrimination. Was Bradbury, now 43, uncomfortable to get the role in those circumstances?

"It wasn't something we were instantly aware of," she says carefully. "Also, we didn't know at that stage that Miriam was going to react in the way she did... I've been through millions of programme changes where they say: 'Sorry, love, we've changed the slot.' It happened with *Watchdog*: they brought Anne Robinson back."

She may, though, have been less sanguine about it if, like O'Reilly, she'd been 50, not 40. "Perhaps. It's interesting. With Miriam, the decision certainly wasn't made because she was old. The decision was because they were changing the programme."

She does not, however, appear con-



cerned that the work might dry up for her. "I think I'm entering that threshold, in your forties, that's the interesting time for women in this business. It's a bit soon for me to say it's tough, but certainly there aren't that many women above 60 who have a consistent presence on British television. But I think our culture is changing, and I'd like to think I could be a David Dimbleby or a David Attenborough."

Bradbury's last hurrah at the BBC — for the time being — is *Keeping Britain Safe 24/7*, a programme about the unsung heroes behind national life: not just doctors and nurses, but engineers trying to restore power lines after the spring storms, and workers at a blood processing facility. It's the sort of programme at which she excels: the smiley everywoman, asking interesting people nice questions.

The only downside is the travelling, which she enjoys less since she became a mother at the age of 40. Zephyrus, known as Zeph, is named after the Greek god of the west wind.

"My mum is Greek, so we wanted a Greek name, and he was a breath of fresh air for us. Zeph's 2½, and every single day he says something new, or does something new. I don't want to miss that. I waited a long time to be a mum. I'm still ambitious, but it changes: Zeph is now the most important thing in my life, and the most rewarding and lovely thing, so if I'm going to spend two days away from him it's got to be something I'm genuinely excited by."

Equally, she says she can't afford to give up work and be a full-time mum, and nor would she want to.

"I'm just not built that way. I come from a working family, we all work, and I certainly haven't made enough money not to work. I'm not in light entertainment! What I can afford is fantastic support, and I've got loving parents and a sister and a really good support system. I'm very lucky. I think it's good for Zeph to see his parents working."

Zeph's father, Gerard Cunningham, is a property developer who stays out of the limelight. She once said that, when she became pregnant, she wouldn't have described him as her boyfriend and that their situation was not necessarily very conventional. Now, she says she was about six months pregnant before the full significance of being pregnant hit her, although Cunningham twigged rather earlier.

"He was the one who said: 'Do you think we should actually live together?' and I was like: 'Really? No. Should we?' Oh, OK! I was happy being single and I didn't de-

Julia Bradbury's perfect weekend

Lake District or Cornwall?
Lake District
Full English or porridge?
Full English. I hate porridge
Pilates or personal trainer?
Personal trainer
Newspaper or Twitter?
Both
Dressed up or dressing gown?
Dressed up. I like Sandro and Zadig & Voltaire
50 Shades or Lady Chatterley's Lover?
50 Shades. It's trash but, of course, I've read the first two
Ageing gracefully or disgracefully?
Disgracefully
Wellies or Louboutins?
Louboutins
Wine or water?
Wine
I can't get through the weekend without ...
Kisses and cuddles from Zeph

“The forties threshold is the interesting time for women in this business. Our culture is changing”

spair of finding Mr Right. I had an exciting life, but I was anxious that I was never going to have children. I'd always wanted one, but always put it off. Other things got in the way. I never wanted to settle down, that was not an ambition, and I definitely wasn't one of those girls who grew up dreaming of a white wedding dress."

Behind the genial, immensely likeable exterior, Bradbury is clearly nobody's fool. She left school at 16 and says she was never academic. Growing up in Rutland, she was desperate to go out and earn her own living. She thinks that drive came from her entrepreneur mother, who set up her own fashion business and had shops in Sheffield and London.

Her father, an executive in the steel industry, was, she says, the opposite: scholarly, academic, and slightly disappointed that his daughter wasn't. Instead, she got a job as a receptionist at an advertising agency.

"I think I was a brilliant receptionist! I answered the phone quite well, I was very efficient and I was always smiley."

From there, she went to work with her mother and sister, Gina, in the family business, but didn't enjoy it. "I needed to do my own thing. Growing up, my hero was Joan Bakewell, so I said to Mum: 'I think I want to be a television reporter.' I'm going to knock on people's doors and see if I can get some gigs."

At the time, Janet Street-Porter was setting up LIVE TV with the former editor of *The Sun*, Kelvin Mackenzie. Bradbury heard that Street-Porter collected hotel towels, so she got one from the Ritz and sent it to her with a note asking for an interview. She got the job, and a year later moved to LA as a correspondent for GMTV. The timing was immaculate, because she'd had "a proper falling-out" with Mackenzie.

"I refused to take part in the *Sex Show*. It was their nightly round-up of sexual matters, including testing dildos, and I said categorically: no. Can you imagine what the *Daily Mail* would have said, when 20 years later, I ended up presenting *Watchdog* and they'd dug out some on-screen of me testing a dildo? It was my first corporate wrangle, where I had to face down the men and it was only because I was quite bolshie that I stood my ground."

Since then, she's done everything from *Countryfile* and *Wainwright's Walks* to *Watchdog*, the National Lottery, game shows and *Top Gear*, the latter because she's a self-confessed adrenaline junkie who loves fast cars. She only sold her Porsche 911 when she had a baby, a couple of years ago, and looks wistful at the mention of it.

"Oh, I loved my Porsche but it had to go — babies, family life. The 911 is the best car in the world. Jeremy Clarkson doesn't agree with me, but what does he know?"

But it is *Countryfile* that has really seen her fanbase rocket. She gets letters from all ages, including little girls who want to be her when they grow up. "I've also got many an octogenarian who'd like to marry me, and dads saying: 'I wish you were my wife.'"

Her new programme at ITV will be a five-part series about the landscape. She's been involved in its development, as well as presenting it, and says that after six years on *Countryfile* the time was right to make a move. After years of travelling the world as a glamorous singleton, it's now home life that comes first.

"I cannot explain the feeling of



TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER: CHRIS MCGOWEN

Julia Bradbury; top left: with *Countryfile* presenters Matt Baker, left, and John Craven

happiness that I get, and the family gets, from Zeph being in our lives. Amazing is such an over-used, corny word, but it genuinely is. Maybe there's something about having children later in life, and certainly if there's a possibility that you weren't going to have children, but I feel incredibly blessed."

Even developing pre-eclampsia in her last week of pregnancy, followed by a 33-hour labour didn't dent her enthusiasm or matter of factness: it was her birthday

the next day, so she checked herself out of hospital and went home for a slap-up birthday lunch with 25 mates.

"We had this posh chicken Kiev delivered from Scalini's in South Kensington. It's my favourite thing. Zeph was there in his little Moses basket at the end of the table, and it was the best birthday lunch I've ever had. The most perfect birthday."

Keeping Britain Safe 24/7 is on BBC One at 10.35pm on March 18 and March 25

Great days out this weekend

Action Open Weekend, London Transport Museum WC2

Explore the "Year of the Bus" show with behind-the-scenes tours, miniature bus rallies, Lego displays and a bouncy bus. There will also be storytelling, films and craft activities.
Today and tomorrow, 11am-5pm, adult £10, child free, ltmuseum.co.uk

The Big Bang Fair, NEC, Birmingham

Children can create special-effects films, compete in robotics challenges and watch an explosive show about gunpowder. Build a turbine and watch your pulse come to life on the big screen.
Today and tomorrow, 10am-4.30pm, free, thebigbangfair.co.uk

Traditional Toys, Riverside Museum, Glasgow

Learn the rules and tactics of traditional games and play with unusual toys, before making a toy to take home.
Today and tomorrow, 1.30-4pm, free, glasgowlife.org.uk

Whalefest, Hilton Metropole, Brighton

A two-day festival to promote whale and dolphin conservation. Includes storytelling, virtual whale watching, shark encounters, craft stalls, and a talk by the actress Virginia McKenna on freeing two bottlenose dolphins from captivity.
Today and tomorrow, 9am-5.30pm, £12.50, under-12s free, whale-fest.com

Life Through a Lens, World Museum, Liverpool

Expert curators will show you how to use microscopes and delve into the world of the minuscule creatures in our seas, lakes and rivers.
Today, 1-4pm, free, liverpoolmuseums.org.uk

Lambing Open Day for MS Society, Rushall Farm, Berkshire

Celebrate the lead up to spring at this organic farm where children can bottle-feed lambs and see newborn calves and piglets.
Today and tomorrow, 11am-5pm, adult £5, child £3, rushallfarm.org.uk

Meet the Oogly Boogly, Oakfield Community Centre, Co Antrim

A guided woodland walk with outdoor storytelling will accompany the unveiling of ten fairytale garden

sculptures. Make your own model to put on show at home.
Today, 11am and noon, free, woodlandtrust.org.uk

Beautiful Books, Keats House, London NW3

Choose your favourite story and give it a twist, or invent a tale of your own at this drop-in workshop where you'll create a pop-up storybook from scratch.
Tomorrow, 1-4pm, free, cityoflondon.gov.uk

Royal Artrageous Workshop, Beningbrough, North Yorkshire

Enter an imaginary kingdom as a prince or princess. Build a palace, decorate your own crown, dress up and play games in the beautiful rooms of this mansion.
Tomorrow, 1-3pm, adult £12, child £6, nationaltrust.org.uk

Wildlife Discovery Day, Robinswood Hill, Gloucester

Discover the wildlife that inhabits this country park with mini-beast hunts, wildlife quiz trails and mammal workshops. Take a stroll up the hill to soak up the amazing country views.
Tomorrow, 2-5pm, free, www.gloucestershirewildlifetrust.co.uk

The Spooky Town Tour, Carmarthen

Take a *Horrible Histories*-style walk through the town's past in the company of a magician who will entertain with tricks and illusions.
Today, 5-6.30pm, adult £7.50, child £5, thespookymagiccompany.co.uk

Archaeology Month, Thackray Medical Museum, Leeds

Find out how archaeologists investigate the past and uncover fossils. Hear stories about intrepid explorers and create a trifle with layers that represent those inside the Earth.
Today, 10am-noon and 1-3pm, adult £7, child £5, under-5s free, thackraymedicalmuseum.co.uk
Compiled by Naomi Firsh



The Big Bang Fair in Birmingham