



# Call of the wild

Bagshot-born wildlife presenter Steve Backshall's latest TV series takes him to some of the most remote and unexplored places in the world. **Simone Hellyer** finds out how his childhood love of adventure books led to a life of exploring

**S**tuck in the shackles of a nine to five or a boring commute, many of us have daydreamed about jetting away to a far off land in search of adventure. But with just 20-odd days of annual leave to play with, most of us will have to keep on dreaming. Perhaps that's why modern-day adventurers like Surrey's own Steve Backshall continue to draw in big TV audiences.

*Expedition*, the Bagshot-born wildlife presenter's latest series is currently available to watch on UKTV Dave and is his most adventurous yet. The 10-part series takes Steve into uncharted territories in pursuit of new discoveries and

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is something that he has been planning since the late 1990s.

"My feeling was that everything has been discovered, but it turns out that's not true; there are plenty of places for us to discover. It just takes a little bit more creativity and a little more effort," he says. "The very last expedition in Borneo was very special because we discovered a cave system that isn't mapped and doesn't have any names.

**ABOVE:**  
Steve Backshall

Inside this cave system were works of art that date back at least 40,000 years and are some of the oldest examples of primitive art on the planet. We were the first people to get up close to them in tens of thousands of years and for that to be possible in this day and age feels pretty extraordinary.”

*‘You feel like there is just mould and fungus growing on each and every inch of your body’*

He adds: “Bhutan was also extraordinarily beautiful and very wild, but where there are people, they have clung to their traditions in a way that is really remarkable. I think it’s one of the best countries in the world for that.”

One of the great things about Steve’s documentaries is how stuck in he gets, with the audience able to abseil down rock faces and kayak rapids vicariously through him. That adventurous spirit was evident from an early age while growing up on a smallholding in Bagshot surrounded by rescue animals. “I was pretty much kicked out of the house first thing in the morning and only came back in when it was dark and I was getting hungry,” he jokes.

But it wasn’t all plain sailing, he nearly drowned in uncharted water during the first recorded descent of a white-water river in Bhutan, encountered a river full of piranhas in South America and came alarmingly close to a Polar Bear during his trip to Greenland, where he also attempted to kayak the largest fjord in the world through lethal and ever-shifting sea ice.

“Spending extended periods of time in the rainforest in Suriname was one time when I felt like I was really being ground down, though,” he admits. “You feel like there is just mould

and fungus growing on each and every inch of your body and you’re being eaten alive by mosquitoes, leeches and tics. Eventually that just starts to chip away at you – missing home, good food and a decent night’s sleep. After a while you definitely start to tire of it all and wish you were home.”

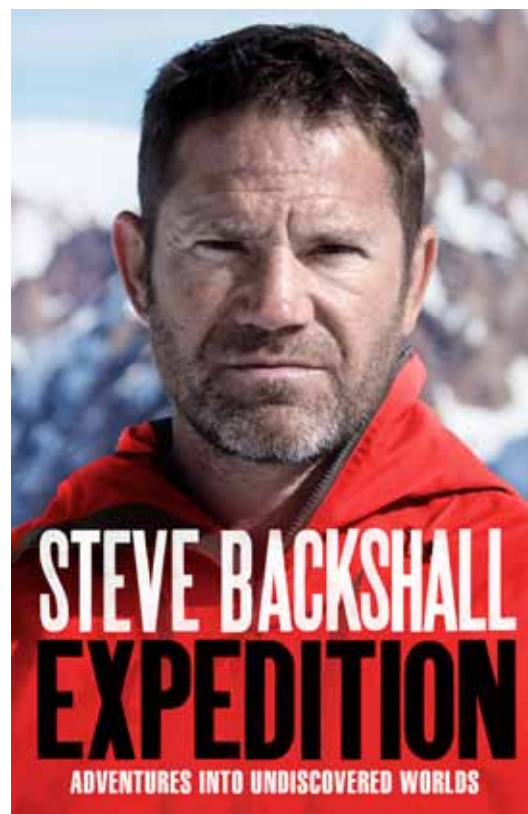
This homesickness was more potent during this series as Steve’s wife, Olympic champion rower Helen Glover, gave birth to their first child in-between the first and second expedition. “Most of the time I was away on the road I had a little baby at home who was changing day by day. I was missing all of that so it was a big deal,” he explains.

The mental resilience needed to take on these expeditions is something that Steve speaks openly and honestly about in the book he wrote to accompany the TV series. *Expedition: Adventures into Undiscovered Worlds* gives a vivid description of what it feels like to be in the middle of an expedition, thanks to the fact that Steve wrote most of it while on location.

“There are lots of elements to an expedition that you can only really describe in books. By me keeping a diary every day there have been little things like smells, sights and conversations that tend to miss the camera lens or get bypassed completely. These things give a full sense of what being on an expedition is like, as you’d never be able to cram all that into an hour-long television programme,” he says.

Writing is something that Steve says comes naturally to him, as it is where he started off his career – working for travel guide publisher Rough Guides. As a child Steve was heavily inspired by books like *Call of the Wild* by Jack London and the writings of naturalist and explorer Alfred Russel Wallace. And while half way down a rock face in the first episode of *Expedition* he also references *The Lost World* by Arthur Conan Doyle.

This led him to write a series of fiction novels aimed at children called *The Falcon Chronicles* about two youngsters on the run who become “wildlife vigilantes”. The last one was published in 2016 and Steve says he hopes to write



more in the future.

Indeed, throughout his career, there has been a strong focus on encouraging children to explore nature and the outdoors, with TV shows like BBC’s *Really Wild Show* and *Deadly 60*, which Steve was heading off to film in Borneo the day after *Surrey Life* spoke to him. “A massive part of my career has been trying to show that there are just as many, if not more, things to be gained from old fashioned pursuits like kayaking, hiking, trekking, bird watching, pond dipping and rock pooling – all these things that have blessed my life,” explains Steve. And these are all skills that can be pursued a little closer to home in Surrey, just like Steve did. ♦

**ABOVE:**  
Steve’s book  
*Expedition:  
Adventures into  
Undiscovered  
Worlds*

**Steve Backshall will be in conversation as part of Guildford Book Festival on Sunday, October 14, from 4 to 5pm at Yvonne Arnaud Theatre. Tickets £20, under 18s £12.50. Price with a signed copy of the book, £35. Book at [yvonne-arnaud.co.uk](http://yvonne-arnaud.co.uk) or call 01483 440000. *Expedition* by Steve Backshall is out now, published by BBC Books, £20.**