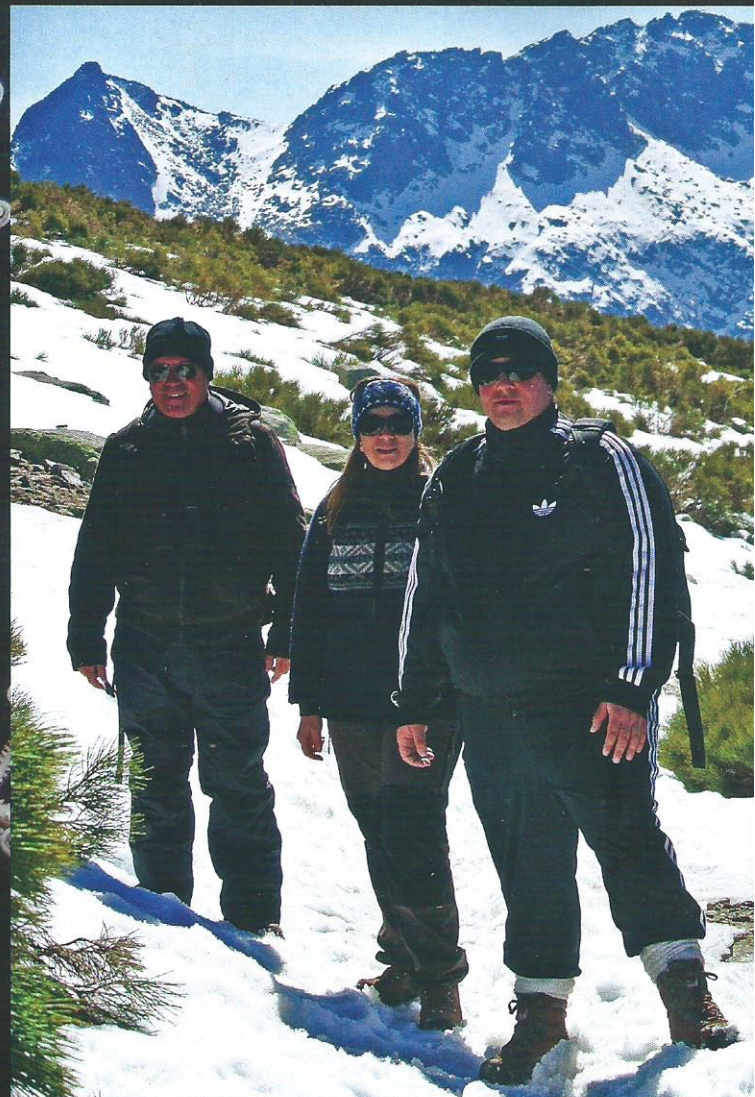


With their gripping tales of canoe trips down crocodile-infested rivers, close shaves with scorpions and vipers and expeditions to the rooftops and ocean floors of the world, sitting around a table with the team at Finlayson Nature Photography is as good as watching a David Attenborough documentary. More surprising still, Gibraltar's top naturalist trio is a family affair, writes Belinda Beckett.



# THE FABULOUS

# Finlaysons

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF FINLAYSON NATURE PHOTOGRAPHY

**Y**ou don't find too many young courting couples discussing their passion for limpets. But the clingy little marine gastropods played a part in cementing the all-embracing relationship between husband and wife naturalists, Clive and Geraldine Finlayson.

A few years later, their son Stewart came along, inheriting his parents' passion for all creatures great and small, and what a team they make!

"The beauty of all us working together so closely is that we sound each other out and help each other, even though we have different specialities," says Geraldine.

Indeed, as well as being top wildlife photographers, the

Finlaysons may well be the only family unit of naturalists working together on the planet. I had to ask how it all started.

Geraldine was on a school field trip to the Rock Nature Reserve when a dashing young science graduate (Clive) "stepped out of the bushes with a camera slung over his shoulder. I developed an instant crush on him," she says, with a girlish giggle. "Later, when we started going out together, we discovered so many common interests. Limpets were only the beginning!"

Other families go on vacations to lie around on sun loungers all day and get a tan. The Finlaysons go on photographic field trips to sweat it out in hides as hot as Hades all day and sometimes get nothing,

And at other times, achieve the unimaginable; such as the first photographs ever captured of a Spanish imperial eagle attacking a fox, taken in Cordoba – just one of the 'results' which make the pain and perseverance worthwhile.

"Last month Geraldine and I sat for seven hours beside a dead sheep in the middle of a field in Extremadura, waiting to photograph birds of prey," recalls Clive with a fruity chortle. "We were in a box just big enough to fit both of us, it was 38 degrees outside, 50 inside, the sheep was stinking to high heaven and we got nothing! People don't think of the failures when they look at our pictures but sometimes it takes weeks and months of hours to get the right shot, and another year's

wait if we miss the window," he adds.

"You wouldn't believe that in any other scenario, Clive is the most impatient person I know, possibly next to Stewart and myself," interjects Geraldine.

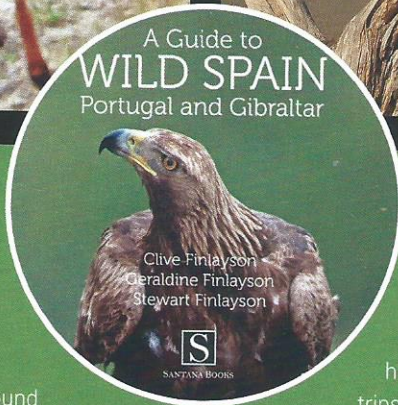
When they're not trekking across Sweden's icy wastes in snow shoes, pursuing wildlife across the Serengeti or sitting around a campfire in Australia seeing the world from the viewpoint of Aboriginal elders – just some of the places they've been either individually or collectively – they're writing scientific papers, authoring books, working with *National Geographic* (the magazine and the TV channel) and sharing the fruits of their non-profit photography business with Facebook fans.

The beauty of a limpet (top, captured by Geraldine 36 metres underwater, off Gibraltar)



Bonelli's eagle favourite ph

### A Guide to WILD SPAIN Portugal and Gibraltar



Clive Finlayson  
Geraldine Finlayson  
Stewart Finlayson



It's an education meeting this family of two PhDs and one in waiting. Stewart's taking his in how Neanderthals exploited birds – pretty revolutionary, since for decades scientists thought that they didn't know how to. Geraldine and Clive's qualifications cover ecology and archaeology, zoology, geology and marine biology. She's an expert diver and marine photographer, he's a leading ecologist and what he doesn't know about birds hasn't yet been written. All three Finlaysons look after Gibraltar's heritage as board members of the Gibraltar Museum and project leaders of Gibraltar's UNESCO World Heritage bid.

"We never stop working; it sounds corny but we live what we do and most of our work, and even our field trips, generally link back to Gibraltar," says Clive.

Most days, they can be found

either in their office at the end of the Museum's rabbit warren of corridors, or burrowed below ground in their 'Time Machine' at Gorham's and Vanguard Caves, continuing their groundbreaking research into Gibraltar's Neanderthals. But when time and funds allow, they pack their cameras and 5kg lenses into their 4x4s and hit the road in search of some new natural wonder.

"We are incredibly curious people, that's why we're scientists, never satisfied with the 'yes' or 'no' answer," says Geraldine. "We always need to ask, 'yes but why?', as Stewart did constantly when he was little until I was tempted to tell him, 'because I told you so!'"

Just as Clive did with his own father, Stewart was accompanying his parents on field trips almost as soon

as he could walk. Last year he co-authored his first book with his parents, *A Guide to Wild Spain, Portugal and Gibraltar*, based on early natural history books on Spain which he devoured avariciously throughout his childhood.

"I was practically raised in places like Doñana National Park, the Laguna de la Janda and the Upper Rock Nature Reserve where I'd spend

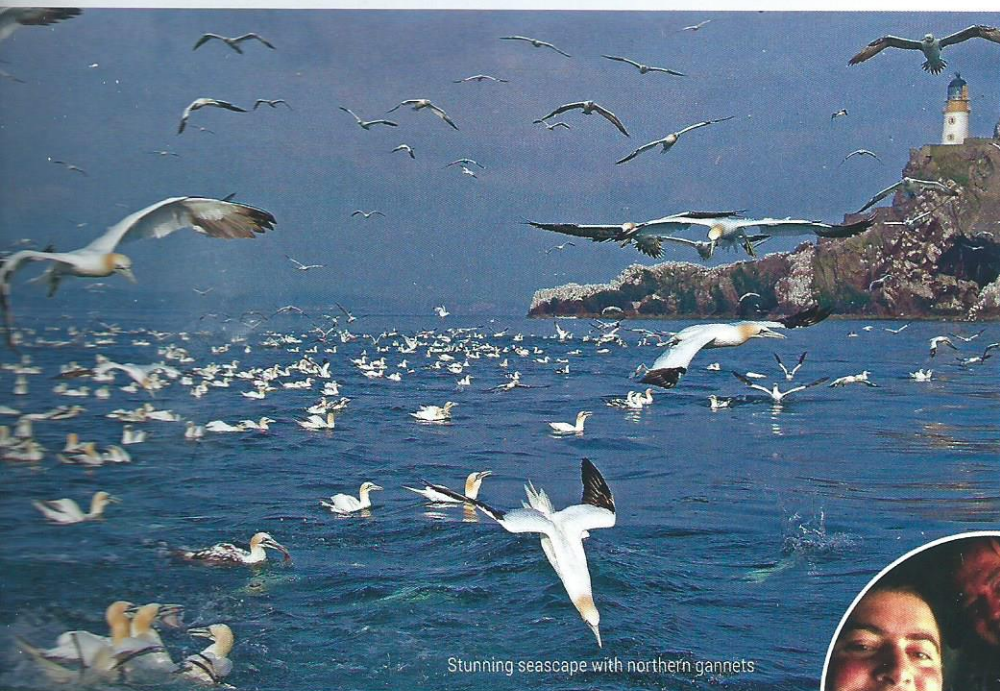
hours watching bird migrations," says.

He might have died in Doñana too, if he hadn't been stopped from picking up a scorpion in the nick of time.

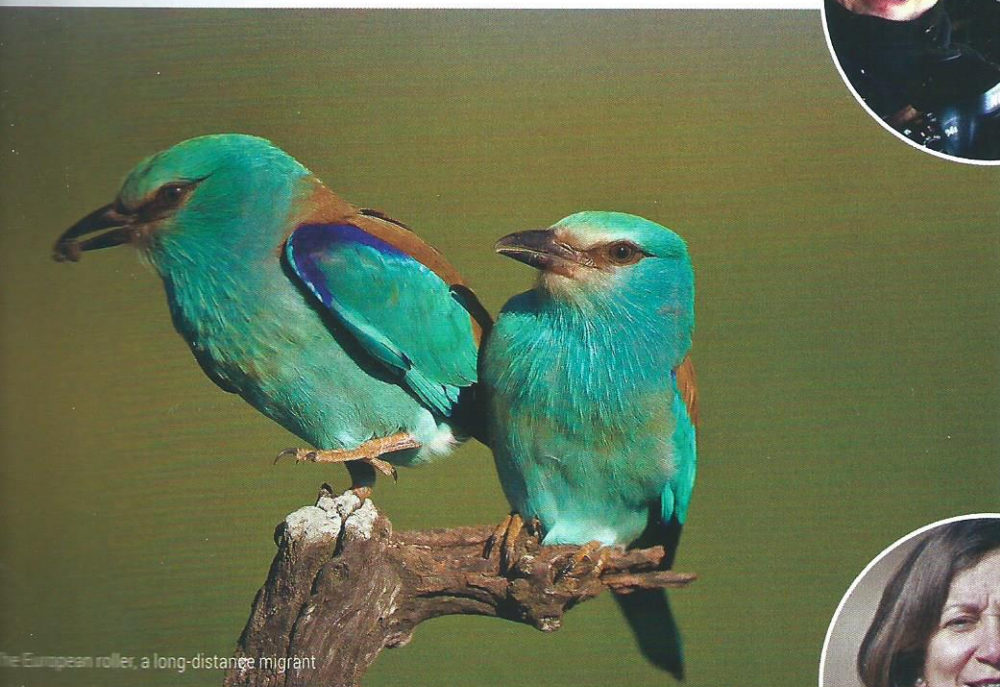
Years later, he repaid the favour saving his father from a potential lethal snake bite. "We were putting mist nets to catch birds for ringing and I was about to tie a guy rope onto a bush when Stewart spotted a viper curled on a twig by my finger and pulled me away," recalls Clive. "A good job too, as they're nasty bit of work," he adds with his signature understatement.



Common kingfisher shows off its colors



Stunning seascape with northern gannets



The European roller, a long-distance migrant



Flight with young bearded vulture



Then there was the time they arrived at a mountaintop hide in darkness to photograph golden eagles. As dawn broke, they saw that their hut was inches from a sheer drop. "There was a strong wind gusting and it didn't comfort us to know that two of the previous huts had blown right off the cliff," says Clive. "But, considering the amount of field trips we go on, we haven't had too many close shaves. We do weeks of homework first and go properly equipped."

To my surprise, Clive and Geraldine are going on a cruise in August. They don't seem the type?

"We go every year, to lecture," explains Clive. "It's with Seabourn of Seattle, very prestigious, they like husband and wife teams so they keep inviting us back and we get to choose where.

We're sailing from Edinburgh to the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Greenland and Labrador in Canada to give six Ice Age lectures. It's also the perfect excuse to promote the Neanderthals of Gibraltar, who survived the Ice Age," he adds.

Sitting around a table with this engaging family is as good as watching David Attenborough on TV (and they've met him twice, once as advisors on bird migration for his phenomenal *Life on Earth* series). The wide-ranging conversation veers from puffins migrating over the Strait, to the elephants and lions that roamed Iberia circa 100,000 years ago, to how fossilised hyena poo can tell Geraldine what Neanderthals might have eaten for breakfast! They'd make great dinner party guests except everyone would be far too fascinated to eat.

Meanwhile, Clive, who has slipped out of the room, returns with the most adorable swift chick cradled in his hands. "People bring them to us when they fall out of their nests and we take care of them until they can fly," explains Stewart, as his father gently opens the chick's beak to drop in a food ball of mince meat, egg and meal worms. The tiny bird gobbles it down, chirping appreciatively. The McFinlayson burger is a big hit!

Swifts are one of Stewart's favourite birds but so are snowy owls, wall creepers, ospreys, goshawks... now all three Finlaysons are chipping in with their favourite species, a long list that covers half the birds of the air and beasts of the field.

Finally, Geraldine settles the argument, summing up the ethos of this extraordinary family. "We can't decide," she tells me emphatically. "It would be like asking a parent to choose their favourite child."

Further information: [www.finlayson-nature.com](http://www.finlayson-nature.com)