WILDERNESS TRACKS - EPISODE 10
CAL MAJOR

RESOURCES
Here are some resources linked to projects and topics discussed during this episode.

Paddle against Plastic:
Paddle Against Plastic hopes to inspire and empower positive change, and bring hope and pride in being part of the solution.
https://paddleagainstplastic.com
Vitamin Sea:
A short film documenting Cals journey from Lands End to John O'Groats by paddleboard.
https://www.calmajor.com/vitamin-sea
Samaritans:
A UK and Ireland based charity that provides emotional support to anyone in emotional distress, struggling to cope or at risk of suicide, usually through telephone services.
http://samaritans.org
Vetlife:
A UK based charity that provides free and confidential support to anyone in the UK veterinary community who are facing emotional, health or financial problems.
https://www.vetlife.org.uk

SPEAKERS
Cal Major, Geoff Bird

TRANSCRIPT
Geoff Bird 0:11
Welcome to Wilderness Tracks, in which artists, scientists, writers and thinkers, tell me about six pieces of music that connect them to the natural world. In this episode produced in conjunction with Kendal Mountain Festival, I'm meeting the remarkable Cal Major, whose record breaking adventures on the back of her paddleboard, have been driven by an ever growing activism and her passionate desire to protect the health of our rivers, lakes and seas.

So, you've chosen six tracks for us.

Cal Major 0:45
Yes.

Geoff Bird 0:45
I have to say I've done a few of these wilderness tracks podcasts with various guests. And my children have never been so thrilled as with your list. They...

Cal Major 0:56
What does that say about me?

Geoff Bird 0:57
It says you got very good taste according to them. They put each of them on a playlist last night and they danced through each and every one of them.

Cal Major 1:06
Well, that makes me feel really good because I did the same. And I spent about 20 minutes just dancing, listening to these songs, when I first decided on them. It's so hard to choose six tracks.

Geoff Bird 1:16
They're very positive and not entirely, but they've got a very positive energy about them, hence, the dancing. And I was struck by the extent of your positivity, not not just, you know, as part of your personality, but it seems to be very much a part of your kind of outlook and the way that you apply yourself to your activism. How important is that? Need for positivity?

Cal Major 1:44
I'm really, yeah, it feels great that you've picked up on that, because I feel like it's core to my activism. I think, you know, we all know that our planet is facing catastrophic crises if we don't do something about it. Erm...but I think doom and gloom is just a turn off, it's not going to make change. It's not going to get people excited or engaged or involved. I think positivity and optimism are so essential for communicating to people about the natural world and how we can protect it. And also protecting ourselves from the psychological harm that can come from learning about the problems that our natural world faces. So for me, they are the absolute pivotal point of my campaigns and certainly with a paddle against plastic campaign. The kind of motto is positive engagement and bringing positive solutions to the plastic pollution crisis. So yeah, very, very important.

Geoff Bird 2:33
And the paddleboarding you, for those who don't know, you travelled via paddleboard from Land's End to John O'Groats a couple of years back.

Cal Major 2:44
Yeah, right. That's right. Yeah, in 2018.

Geoff Bird 2:47
Which was nearly 1000 miles over 59 days. Is that correct? Yeah. I'm kind of curious to know which bits of you hurt the most, when you're doing though, because, obviously, the shoulders and the arms are gonna hurt. But I'm kind of thinking that's a recipe for just agony all over, isn't it?

Cal Major 3:06
Yeah, I mean, the first few weeks, my shoulders were just in pieces. And I had them, I like K tape just strapping up my shoulders and my neck and my upper body, you kind of get used to it, you get used to both the movement you're doing and also the agony and it just being a bit

painful for months on end and not really sleeping because you're in a lot of discomfort. But I do feel like my body really adapted to that repetitive movement and over a period of time it became less painful but some days you know the be like a twinge in my ribs or other days it'd be my back and other days it'd be my shoulders I think my body that really did its work and swapped the pain from one area to another to mean that I could manage the two months. But also I kind of adapted my technique. You know, if my shoulders are really painful one day, I'd put my paddle, make my paddle a bit smaller so that most of the strain went into my back and then my back would start hurting sort i'd make my paddle longer again. And yeah, it was I dunno, it's something you just learn to live with a bit bit of discomfort.

Geoff Bird 4:03
I don't think I would.

We'll talk about it as we go on. But you mentioned the pain of choosing these six pieces of music. How did you finally choose to go back to them, what was your structure? What was your plan?

Cal Major 4:15
Well, I've deliberated over them for a long time because when you first contacted me about this, I thought, gosh, I'm not really like I'm not like very musically knowledgeable. Normally on a day to day my music is so eclectic. I listen to everything from metal to Taylor Swift, and I was thinking how can I find six tracks that connect me to nature? I connect to nature by going outside and being in nature, and then when I started looking into it, so every time I've got an issue or something I need to sort out or something I need to plan, I get a big A2 piece of paper and a do a mind map and so had in the middle like music and nature and then just did loads of branches and had a section of music that makes me feel punk to protect nature and music that makes me think of nature. And then I kind of went through a chronological kind of journey of my path from, you know, playing around in the water to dedicating my life to protecting it and kind of looked at all the tracks that were really meaningful. And then that was the hard bit because I had about 15 tracks like "right, now I have to really whittle this down". So I came up with a bit of a story. And the six tracks I've chosen, they actually tell a chronological story of my journey around activism and my own kind of connection to nature and how important it's been in those different parts of my life. And so hopefully, it will kind of sing something to other people as well.

Geoff Bird 5:36
And even if it doesn't, they can dance.

Cal Major 5:37
Yeah, exactly. They're very danceable tunes.

Geoff Bird 5:41
The first one then, do you want to introduce it?

Cal Major 5:43

I would love to introduce it. So my first track, and this is a song that everybody knows it's Bob Marley and Three Little Birds.

Geoff Bird 6:47
Fantastic, Bob Marley and the Wailers from the Exodus album. Go on then, why?

Cal Major 6:51
How can that not cheer you up, first of all? If you talk about positivity, that is the ultimate positive song. The reason I chose this is, so I, as you correctly said, I'm a vet, I went to vet school when I was 19. I spent a year in Australia, learning to scuba dive, had the best time of my life. And I've never really felt a connection to the ocean like I did when I went to Australia. And it was that that was so pivotal in my life in terms of finding my own personal connection to the ocean. And I was hooked, absolutely hooked. And throughout my time at uni five years at Edinburgh University, all I wanted to do was look after the fish, basically. And I remember asking so many of my lecturers, how can I be there and look after fish. And that, you know, the answer time and time again was ah, you know, you could be an aquaculture vet, which I had just no interest in doing. So I kept an interest in scuba diving and in my water sports, I surfed loads and wakeboarded. And when I graduated uni, I decided that I was going to go and learn to be a divemaster, scuba diving dive master. And a friend of mine and I basically went to the Philippines for a couple of months and learnt to be divemasters. And so for, you know, months, six weeks, every day, we were in the water three times a day scuba diving, and we lived on this tiny little beach, it was absolutely gorgeous. And it's still my happy place. If I'm ever feeling stressed or upset and a need to go to a happy place. It's, it's that little tiny hut that we lived in on this beach. And it was above a reggae bar. And they played Bob Marley like day in day out all night, you know, some nights til three in the morning. And that song, it just reminds me, just transports me back to that beach, sitting on this beach, where it was my home for six weeks where I really just solidified my love for the underwater world. And I don't think I've ever been as happy as that in my life. I think that was the happiest time I've ever ever had, that time just everyday just in the water, under the water. With my mate, like we were speaking every day about how we were going to, you know go about protecting this amazing place that we're spending every day. So I think that was a really pivotal time for me. And and after that, you know, I got my diagnostic qualification and my plan was to spend six months of the year being a vet, six months of the year scuba diving which never really came to fruition but it was... yeah, it was a really pivotal time in my life and then just really solidified that that love for the for the underwater world.

Geoff Bird 9:22
And when you left presumably you're kind of full of remorse for leaving this paradise?

Cal Major 9:28
I really mourned leaving it, yeah. And then I moved to Wales, moved to Southwest Wales and became a farm vet which was very, very different to living on a beach above a reggae bar and listening to Bob Marley every day.

Geoff Bird 9:41

But how torn were you then? Because you have this, these two potential life paths opening up before you and if you weren't able to kind of mix them together. You're gonna have to leave one behind and this obviously meant a huge amount to you, each of them.

Cal Major 9:57
Yeah...

Geoff Bird 9:57
So how troublesome was that?

Cal Major 10:00
Yeah, I mean, I think at the time, I'd just graduated, I felt like my life, my whole life was in front of me. You know, it's like when you're that age, you feel invincible. You feel like you can do anything you want, and you've got all the time in the world. And so for me, I just, I knew that one day, my life would be about protecting the ocean. I just, I just knew that it would. But I also knew that at that point in time, just graduated from vet school, I'd spent, you know, every minute of my studies, desperately trying to pass my veterinary exams since I was seven years old, basically, when I decided I wanted to be a vet. And, and so I kind of followed a really typical career path, I went into mixed animal practice in Wales, majority of my work was farm work, and then kind of defaulted into small animal practice. And, yeah, it was, it was a real wrench not being able to be in the water every day. But at the same time, I had this other focus, which was that I needed to get a good basis in veterinary practice, so that I could then you know, spend six months of the year being a vet, and six months a year, you know, scuba diving or whatever. And I think at that point in time, like I said, I just felt like time was stretching in front of me and I had all the time in the world to do what I wanted, so, and I always knew it would be there.

Yeah...

Geoff Bird 11:12
With the vet, the vet side, your connection with animals, you know, we're gonna talk a lot about the natural environment and the oceans and water particularly, but how important are animals and have they been to you through your life? Where did that come from?

Cal Major 11:29
I think that's one of the main reasons that I am an environmentalist. I think the animals are what I'm trying to protect, what I'm trying to preserve. So I've always loved animals. And when I was seven, my mum and my dad for Christmas, they got me a couple of horse riding lessons. And that was it, I was hooked. I just, I loved horses so much. And I remember saying to them when I was a kid, like I want to be a lady farmer, because I just wanted to be around animals, just loved them so much. And I think, it's like anything isn't it? You don't know what you love unless you experience it. And so at that point in time, I'd experienced horses, I loved horses, and cows and sheep, you know, I worked on farms when I was at school in my summer and Easter holidays and loved that. And it was then experiencing the animals out in the ocean. When I scuba dive, the turtles and the fish and the sharks and dolphins, and really experiencing them, when you get

to know them, you can form a love for them. And that's what's then kind of driven me to look more into the kind of conservation side of things. When I was in my fourth year of uni, I think, I was lucky enough to go to South Africa and work with some wildlife vets out in South Africa. And this idea of conserving wild animals was so powerful to me, like that's, that meant everything to me, that meant more to me than treating individual pets. And I think that's kind of why I've deviated a little bit from the traditional veterinary pathway of, you know, vaccinating pets or whatever or, you know, treating individual domesticated animals and more towards looking at the bigger picture and treating these animals in the wild that I've had the privilege of seeing and experiencing and being alongside

Geoff Bird 13:11
So you don't like pets, is that what you're saying?

Cal Major 13:13
Absolutely. You have no idea how much I'm petitioning to get a dog right now! Absolutely love them, anybody who knows me, you'll know that I've got, you know, I've got a medical condition whereby if I don't touch a dog once a day, I'm basically like, I'm useless. I can't function. I love animals, love domestic animals. But for me, I feel like I've got so much passion for protecting wild animals. And that's where I need to be concentrating my efforts. There are some amazing, amazing vets out there. You know, some of my colleagues are just phenomenal vets and small animal practitioners, domestic animal vets, and they do an amazing job. I don't see my role in this world, if you like, is doing that solely. I feel like I have so much need to protect the animals in the wild. But that's where I need to focus my, my energies, if that makes sense.

Geoff Bird 14:00
It does, it does. And good luck with the petitioning for the dog.

Cal Major 14:03
Thanks very much, if you could just tell my boyfriend, that would be great!

Geoff Bird 14:07
Well he's off making films of all your adventures, so you'll have to do some kind of trading off there.

Cal Major 14:11
Well, that's it, isn't it? Maybe not the lifestyle for a dog.

Geoff Bird 14:17
Let's get on to your second song. What's your second pick?

Cal Major 14:20
My second song is... ah, okay! So... we've just, you know, I've been a vet now for a year in South Wales and I basically defaulted into small animal practice, always wanted to be a horse vet and started to go down that route. But it didn't really work out for me. And I defaulted into

smaller practice. I got injured and basically couldn't handle the physical work at that point in time. And I moved to Plymouth on the south coast of Devon. And I had like, just an entire new world open up to me, a world of everybody there that I met were either surfers, mountain bikers, paddle boarders, kite surfers, windsurfers, and all of a sudden I moved into this house, a tiny house with three other boys. And they were all like, you know, really into the water sports and I love that kind of thing. But I'd never really had the opportunity until then to really pursue the kind of water sports side of things. And I was just plunged into this world of having fun out on the water. I bought a camper van. And basically for two or three years that I lived in Plymouth, my life was about travelling to where the surf was, going surfing every moment I possibly could, working four days a week, four really long days a week as a vet. And every single second I wasn't in the practice. I was out, you know, exploring adventuring, mountain biking, travelling to far flung places to go surfing. My entire life is about having fun on the water. And this next song, I first heard this song, when I watched a video of... it was a mountain biking video I think. And it just hit me and this song just for me, it's all about rebellion. It's all about 'I'm no longer just a vet working and then you know, eating and sleeping'. I'm a vet, but my identity was so entwined in this outdoor lifestyle that I developed. And it was such a formative and, it really formed my identity those four years in Plymouth, learning how to explore the ocean by paddleboard and this song for that just really encapsulates that time of my life. So this is Buffalo Springfield's For What?... For What It's Worth. I nearly forgot the name of the song then!

Geoff Bird 17:07
It's just such a great song.

Cal Major 17:08
It's so great, isn't it?

Geoff Bird 17:09
Yeah.

Cal Major 17:09
I could listen to it on repeat.

Geoff Bird 17:11
Yeah, totally. No matter how many times you hear it. What I, what struck me listening to it again for this, was actually that it's quite a call to activism...

Cal Major 17:20
It is, yeah.

Geoff Bird 17:22
I don't think I'd really spotted that. You hear it so many times and you just kind of join in with the chorus and...

Cal Major 17:27

Yeah, I think it kind of has these connotations of social activism, doesn't it? Which is, as we know, you know, in 2020 of all the years we've realised how intertwined social and environmental activism are. And I think it's such a powerful song like you say, when you listen to the lyrics, and for me, it does, it really stirs something, it really kind of stirs a desire to move and to be an activist and to stand up for what I believe in. And, and, and also, like I say, it takes me back to that period of time when I just was having so much fun and really kind of solidifying my relationship with the natural world. It was no longer this kind of, you know, it was no longer out there, it was no longer mountains out there or the sea out there or mountain biking paths out there somewhere, that was such a part of my life in that period of time. And I was absolutely obsessed and I think having all that time and that fun and that kind of relationship building with the natural world with wild places, with the ocean, with mountain biking trails with erm, yeah, with the coastline that I was living near was so formative. And yeah, that's what makes anybody want to protect it isn't it? Is having a relationship with a place.

Geoff Bird 18:40
And in the film Vitamin Sea about your trip from Land's End to John O'Groats, you talk very powerfully about that missing piece, as you describe it, that we're not going to actually try and protect anything until we meaningfully engage with it. And learn to not just love it, but experience it and realise we're a part of it.

Cal Major 19:01
Absolutely. And that's so... that's something that I really learned as I went through my campaigns was that, you know, I could go to somebody and say, you know, I could say to you, you shouldn't use plastic water bottles, but you could, you know, turn around and say to me, 'well, I've no idea what you're on about' But if you've been to a beach and you've experienced plastic in the water there and also you have a connection with that beach because you surf there, you paddleboard there and you appreciate what it means to your well being and how important that place is for you, then you can understand that message more. And I think it really, this idea that we have to form a connection with a place or connection with something before we can be expected to love it and protect it. And I think that, that massively changed the way I approach campaigns. And it certainly, we're skipping ahead a few years now, but that's absolutely pivotal to what I'm doing now and currently setting up a charity specifically to help people find a connection to the natural world so that they can have the mental health benefits. They can appreciate that relationship, what it means to them. And they're more likely to become stewards of that environment as a result. And then, yeah, it's, to me, it's the missing piece. And I know i'm getting very animated about this, but it honestly feels like such an... it's absolutely crucial, it's vital. We've got a massive swathe of the population who care about the environment, because they have experienced it, been privileged enough to experience it. And we have a massive swathe of the environment who've no understanding or appreciation that they're a part of that conversation too. Because for whatever reason, they haven't had the opportunities to experience it or to create meaningful connections. And oftentimes this I dunno it's, it's just, it just feels so obvious. Now you hear stats, like one in five kids has never been to the beach in the UK, an island nation. And, and yet, we wonder why our seas aren't adequately protected. It's

because we don't have enough people who connect to nature and care about it enough to stand up for it.

Geoff Bird 20:57
Or Isn't this the point in your life where you start hooking up with surfers against sewage as well?

Cal Major 21:04
Yes. So yes, so back down to Plymouth. And yet, that's when I first started volunteering with surfers against sewage. And, again, that was really pivotal for me. And the next song that we're going to hear so...I'm just going to introduce the next song if that's ok?

Geoff Bird 21:18
Yeah.

Cal Major 21:19
So there's a band called Cat Empire.

Geoff Bird 21:21
Yeah, never heard of Cat Empire.

Cal Major 21:22
You've never heard of Cat Empire? Oh, where have you been?!

Geoff Bird 21:24
I'm really old

Cal Major 21:27
They are amazing. So Cat Empire, back in those halcyon days at Plymouth, and I was just living my best life. You know, I was such a party animal and I'd go and stay away in my van at the beach and there's amazing bars.

Geoff Bird 21:39
Can I just say you're making a lot of people very sick here. You're like 'Oh this perfect life, you know, the camper van and the parties and the beach...'

Cal Major 21:47
It was fantastic! But that was before, those were the days where you know, I could have a skin full of a hangover the next day now can't even handle one beer, so I'm looking back on these with rose tinted spectacles. But then there's this amazing bar on the beach in Perranporth called the watering hole. And these have loads of live music on there. And, and, you know, I used to basically spend every weekend going and listening to bands playing on beaches and (it was) amazing, and one of the bands. It wasn't in Perranporth, it was at Fistral beach in Newquay. It's called Cat Empire. And I had the privilege of seeing them live. And they're a ska band, and

they're very high energy. And the first few albums that I got to know were really, like, really pumped really, you know, you could have a few beers and dance to your heart's content. It was amazing. And those are the fun days. And this next song that I've chosen is from one of their later albums. And I feel like that my journey with Cat Empire, they kind of mirrored each other. I don't know what the time frame was for Cat Empire. But certainly when I discovered this new album, it was almost like Cat Empire matured. And I kind of matured at the same time. And there's one song on this, the two songs on this album and I had to choose between them.

Geoff Bird 22:53
Okay, oh...

Cal Major 22:53
The other song that I didn't choose which I really implore everybody, everybody listening to go and listen to it. It's brilliant. It's called Wild Animals. And it's on the album Steal the Lights by Cat Empire. And one of the one of the verses that basically says, 'Look out the tiny window frame that sits behind your desk, with your big computer screen and your jars of fountain pens.'

Geoff Bird 23:17
Yeah.

Cal Major 23:17
'What are you doing in this prison with your psychopathic boss, and your brokenhearted mornings and your backstabbing friends? You were born free.' That is basically the gist of this song. And it's amazing. And there's so many so many tracks on this album, which they allude to our need to be wild or need to be connected to the natural world and this song that I've chosen called Steal the Light. And one of the first lyrics is 'she's wearing flowers not snakes up in her hair tonight'. And it just feels like it was a real kind of almost resignation to that to my cause, almost, um, yeah a resignation to my path. And my path was no longer about having a jolly on a beach. Like I'd formed that connection. And now I was seeing plastic on the beaches. I was seeing the destruction of habitats that were places that I played, places where I was seeing dolphins and seals that I loved. And it was almost like, right, well, I've got to do something about it. And this song for me, the kind of the feel of it really encapsulates that feeling.

Geoff Bird 24:14
I hope i've chosen the right bit. Right let's have a listen....

Excellent stuff. So is this when you set up Paddle Against Plastic?

Cal Major 25:07
Yes.

Geoff Bird 25:08
Is that the right?

Cal Major 25:08
Yes, exactly. So yep, I decided that partying wasn't as important as paddling against plastic. And basically, I couldn't stand seeing all this plastic on the beaches and not do anything about it. So, like we're talking about before wanting to bring a positive message to this issue because there's so much negativity in the media, so much doom and gloom. And, and so I basically, I was quite naive still at this point in time in terms of my paddle boarding experience, but basically just decided I was going to paddleboard around the hole of the Cornish coast, which is about 300 miles. I've never really paddled more than 10 miles before that, how hard can it be it's Cornwall in the summertime. And so it'll be, you know, nice, flat, calm seas, mirror flat, calm seas, and I was going to get a six pack and a tan, and paddle with dolphins. And in reality, as you can imagine, the Cornwall summer isn't always like that. And that was very, very quickly thrown into this world of six foot waves and, you know, gale force winds and fog. And, you know, my life was in danger on several occasions, and it was absolutely amazing to actually be doing something rather than be looking at this stuff and thinking, oh, this is horrendous. Just to be out there on my board, talking to people at beaches and felt like I was making a difference to this issue, even if it was just, you know, odd people here and there who'd pay attention to this message. It felt really important to me to actually be out there talking to people about it. And so yep, so I passed around Cornwall. And then the following year, paddling around the Isle of Skye in Scotland, which was...

Geoff Bird 26:46
And became the first woman to do that.

Cal Major 26:47
Yes, it was just the most amazing couple of weeks. So for two weeks, I was completely alone, I didn't know anybody on the island didn't have any phone signal. And, and, you know, I was talking about creating this relationship with the natural world through my adventures and my hobbies. And then I'd never really switched off, never really spent time there switched off, and this expedition allowed for that. So for two weeks, just me and Scotland basically, and everything, all the busyness of the natural...of our society just kind of quietened down. And I just felt so immersed in that environment, and even more passionate about our needs to keep it wild. At that wildness really almost reached into my soul and touched me so deeply. And when I came back to normal life, should we say, after that expedition, after two weeks of that complete immersion, I found it really hard to readjust because I think I've had that experience of how we are meant to have... how we've adapted to be humans, basically. And then all of a sudden thrown back into this busy society where my brain hasn't had enough millennia to develop to the business of what we're dealing with, and the noise of cars and, you know, the instant gratification of emails and all that kind of thing. And so, you know, we talk about, I talk a lot about my Lands End to John O'Groats expedition as it's the biggest expedition I did, but actually, I'd say that Isle of Skye trip was, for me the most powerful, powerful trip I've I've done in a lot of ways. So yeah, it was, it was an interesting few years, just absolutely determined to talk to people about this issue of plastic and what we can do to to help alleviate the issue.

Geoff Bird 28:32

And you do, obviously the campaign is explicitly about plastic, and that is your primary focus. Yeah. But again, and again, when I read your stuff, or see you speaking, you mention mental health.

Cal Major 28:45
Yeah.

Geoff Bird 28:46
And it's, it seems to be absolutely ingrained in everything you do as well. And it's just just as important almost in a way if perhaps not front and centre to what you do. You mentioned the difficulty readjusting.

Cal Major 29:01
Yeah.

Geoff Bird 29:02
How did that element of your life or your activism kind of come into play?

Cal Major 29:11
Yeah. And that was, I think this kind of connection between my environmental activism and mental health advocacy was very surprising for me as well, very unexpected. So when I paddled around Skye, okay. Even the term mental health wasn't really even my vocabulary. And I'd heard about mental illnesses, heard about depression. It was a world away from me, was something I didn't really know anything about. And, that was only three years ago. If now I went back and paddled round on the Isle of Skye, I could more articulately say this is phenomenally important for my mental health. My mental health is benefiting here from being in the wild and I feel much calmer and mentally well from having spent time here. At that point in time, all I knew was I felt great. It felt great being there. And I think this is a distinction that I've been able to make in the last few years is that we all have mental health. We don't necessarily all have mental illness, but we do all have mental health that we can protect and look after. And that's what was happening there. I was nurturing my mental health without realising it. I think my kind of appreciation of the importance of mental health came, and not long after it finished paddling around the Isle of Skye, and one of my very, very closest friends in the world, she called me in tears and told me that she was really really struggling, and that she'd been admitted to hospital with suicidal thoughts. And at that point in time, I was like, I don't... like, I understand people feeling down and depressed. For me, suicidal thoughts was just that it was thoughts of suicide, but I couldn't imagine anybody ever going beyond that. Like, why on earth would you want to leave this world? This world where you can go surfing and mountain biking? And you know, I just could not get my head around it.

Geoff Bird 31:06
So in talking to her when she, you know, when you're on the phone, speaking with her, did you? Did you feel at sea almost, do you feel ill equipped to kind of deal with that whole conversation, that terrain?

Cal Major 31:18
Massively, massively. And my response to that was, first of all, I was like, well, I come up and I'll look after you. And I couldn't because she was in hospital. And she needed to be in hospital. But my, my second response was, okay, what so... At this point in time, I lived in North Devon, and I had this beautiful little house, a mile from the sea, but 180 degrees sea views, tiny little place, but it was my beach house. And that place gave me so much nourishment, and so much peace. And so I knew that my friend, she's called Sarah, I knew that the happiest I've ever seen her was when she was in Sri Lanka at the sea every day. And she spent every day in the sea by the water. And she talked a little bit more eloquently and a little bit more intelligently about mental health than I was able to at that point in time, and I knew that's where she was happiest. So I was like, right 'well, when you get out of hospital, come to mine, come to Devon, you can live here for as long as you want. You know, we can do anything, we can do nothing. You can sit in your pants if you want to, like do what you want, but come and live by the sea.' Because I just thought like, obviously, if you live by the sea, if you come and live by the sea with me, everything's going to be fine. Without that real appreciation of how deep rooted depression and mental illness can be. And what I didn't realise at the time was that Sarah was actually severely mentally ill. And a few weeks later, I had a phone call from a very good friend of mine, mutual friend, to say that Sarah had taken her life. And that for me was, it was so, it was such a wake up. Like, there's somebody I know who is like, she was, so she meant so much to me. And her support of my expeditions that she believed in me every step of the way. And those few years when I was practising as a vet, my God, they were so hard. And as well as you know, my fun times and my surfing and everything being what kept me going and nourished me. And it was good for mental health without me realising that's how to articulate it, she was as well. She was my support network, and so to lose her to suicide, which to me was like, what the hell, like people actually, you know, someone I know has committed suicide. It really, really shook me to the core. And I went through such a deep grieving process because not only was I in shock, but she was, she was, my she was my everything like she was my closest friend and my support network. And all of a sudden, she was gone and I felt everything from guilt to anger to complete and utter just confusion, like why has she done this? And then, at that time I was planning, I was just starting to sow the seeds for a trip from Land's End to John O'Groats. And actually, I, you know, I was struggling to decide like, do I still do this? Do I not do it? Because she'd been so supportive of my previous trips, so I'll have to do it for her. And so I did it in her honour and also raising money for charities that she was very passionate about.

Geoff Bird 34:25
Samaritans.

Cal Major 34:26
Samaritans. and Vet Life, yeah. So vets are four times more likely than the national average to commit suicide. It's an incredibly stressful profession. And she was trustee and very proud to be trustee of this charity, which supports the mental health of veterinary professionals. And so I thought, right well, I'm going to do it for her. And in the months leading up to this expedition, you know, I was really unwell with grief. And I kept talking to my friend and the place I felt most

connected to her was at the beach. I'd walk down on the beach and you know, I couldn't stop thinking about her the whole time, but when I was at the sea, I could actually have a conversation with her. I remember time after time, like just sitting on this pebble ridge by the beach at Westward Ho where I lived, and just looking up to the sky and talking to her, and it felt as close to her as I'd ever be again. And, and so, I mean, we're skipping forward a bit with the Lands End to John O'Groats expedition, but when I actually embarked on that expedition, one of the things I was most worried about was this grieving process and whether I was well enough to paddle. But actually, one of the most miraculous things of it was how it healed me. So bearing in mind that the sea was where I felt closest to Sarah, when I was paddling, that two months of being out in the ocean gave me the time that I needed to actually process what was going on. So I spoke to her nearly every day, I shouted at her some days, I was angry at her, I cried, I asked her for support, like every range of emotion. Being on the water, I felt like I had that space, physical space, because the horizon around me and also the mental space away from all the rubbish we go through in our daily lives, it's so irrelevant, to actually process what she meant to me and how to deal with that grief. And so the next song that we've got, if it's alright for me to introduce...

Geoff Bird 36:14
Absolutely, yeah.

Cal Major 36:16
It's the Temptations, My Girl. And it's...there would be days when I was on the water when it got really tough, but both emotionally and also through sheer exhaustion from the expedition. There would be days when it was just grey and horrible and miserable, I'll be battling against the side wind, and I was really in a bad way. And normally, I could draw Sarah to me and harness that kind of love that we had for each other. But some days I needed a little bit more, and this song just brought me to her and the first, the first couple of lines of the song are... oh, gosh, 'I've got sunshine on a cloudy day. And when it's cold outside, I've got the month of May.' And that's what it felt when I was on the water in just all worlds of either physical pain or emotional pain. It's like, well, I've got sunshine on a cloudy day. And that's my Sarah, even though she wasn't with me physically. That was her. So this song's really, really yeah, a really powerful, powerful song for me.

Geoff Bird 38:02
Beautiful.

Cal Major 38:03
Yeah.

Geoff Bird 38:03
Do you still talk to her?

Cal Major 38:05

Yes, I do. Not as often as I used to. And I think I've really processed a lot of those feelings. But I still do, especially if you've got... it sounds a bit daft. But if I ever used to have a big decision to make, she'd be the first person I'd call. And, so now sometimes, if I've got a big decision to make, and I'm really stuck with it 'what would Sarah, what would Sarah say?' Or another another time I speak to her a lot is, I suffer with a lot of self doubt. And we all do, don't we? self deprecation, self doubt. And I've got an amazing coach called Penny who's just been instrumental in helping me, kind of, navigate my career path, my life. And she often you know, if I'm struggling with something, she'll often say to me, what would Sarah- like, you know, if I'm being really hard on myself she'll say, 'what would Sarah say to you? when you're there saying you're worthless?' or whatever, you know, good. 'What would Sara say about that?' And I think that you know what, she's my biggest cheerleader. She'd tell me to, you know, stop being so unkind to myself. And then yeah, just, you know, be kind to myself, that was one of her sort of most powerful messages was this act of being kind to yourself. And that's been really pivotal in, in kind of creating the narrative for myself, but also around my campaigns. And we're talking about sort of, picked up on before about how the mental health aspects of stuff has become, as important to me as the environmental side of things. And I think that that is through my understanding. So when I was paddling from Land's End to John O'Groats, I met lots of people who had had mental illness or really understood their own mental health. And a big part of their connection to the ocean was the appreciation of what it meant to them to be there. And this was forming for me as well, like my appreciation of the necessity being on the ocean had my grief process. And it made me realise that if we can appreciate that we have mental health and that time on the water is beneficial for that. And that's what helps us to create those really meaningful connections with the water, then that's gonna make us want to protect it as well. And so, for me, the two aren't mutually exclusive, we've got understanding of our mental health and the importance of being in nature to protect it, and that creating the love for the environment, and then us wanting to protect the environment, and it's all intertwined, I think.

Geoff Bird 40:20
Do you think similarly, as a parallel that, to some extent, we have to go through really quite awful experiences, not necessarily as awful as, as the one you've been through with your friend. But in order to connect with nature, we need to have a meaningful relationship with it, you have to get up close with it. And with our mental health, we have to, I guess, have that shake and have our vulnerability exposed to us through ourselves, or our friends or family or loved ones, before we can really value it and start to nurture it and look after it.

Cal Major 40:58
I think so, in a way, yes. And I think in terms of creating a real understanding of our mental health, yes, that can be a catalyst for it. But I do also think that there are a lot of people who may be again, like I was when I was 25, whatever, you know, in my camper van surfing every weekend, I wasn't doing that specifically because it benefited my mental health. Unlike now, when I'm feeling down or you know, I know I need to go for cold water swim once a week specifically for mental health, back then, I was doing all that stuff, because my job was really, really bloody stressful. And I knew that at the end of the week, I needed to go surfing, to feel

okay. And that was, that was looking after my mental health without any real realisation that that's what I was doing. And I think one of the reasons that, like over the years, that when I have struggled with mental health was when that hasn't been the priority for me. So I think yes, I think I think both I think, you know, we can have that catalyst where all of a sudden we're much more aware of it, but also a lot of people are doing it without realising it. And that I think that's okay, too.

Geoff Bird 42:06
What would your friend say? Sorry, what was her name?

Cal Major 42:09
Sarah.

Geoff Bird 42:09
What would Sarah say were your greatest strengths?

Cal Major 42:15
Oh, gosh. I think she'd... the one that I'd be most proud of, I think she'd say that I am very kind. And I think I channel, channel her into that as well. There's an amazing phrase, you know, everybody's fighting a battle that you know nothing about, be kind always. And I think something I feel very proud of, and I think she would feel proud of me for is that I am empathetic towards other people. And, you know, if someone's being an arse, it might not be that they're a nasty person, they might have something awful going on. And I think being kind, like, being kind to people, regardless of the situation is powerful. And it's important...

Geoff Bird 42:52
And even if they are an arse...

Cal Major 42:54
And even if they are an arse, you know, what's the point in bringing more hostility into the world, the world needs kindness more than anything.

Geoff Bird 43:01
Okay, so we got kindness. Give us one other strength.

Cal Major 43:07
I'm a good friend, and I care about my mates and I like to make my friends laugh.

Geoff Bird 43:17
But it's really interesting to me that you know, because of the kind of obvious strengths you got... the fact that you can bloody paddle up from Land's End to John O'Groats. Physically, you're clearly very strong, but also you've got all those kinds of mental resources to draw on, you've got determination, and the fact that you're kind of picking out kindness, and you know, the love of your friends is quite beautiful, I think.

Cal Major 43:40
But why did I do that trip? It's because I cared about the sea...it's...anybody can do, like, anybody can do something outside of their comfort zone, if they've got a reason to do it. You know, I was pushed along on that journey, because I cared so much about the environment I was in, and maybe that's a form of kindness. It's a form of empathy towards the natural world. And that's what drove, like, I was desperately sad at the state of what we're doing to our planet and I desperately wanted other people to care and so that's what made me do it. I, you know, I'm not, I'm not a wonder woman. Um, you know, I get injured, I wasn't very good at training for this trip. I was naive. I got into trouble at times. I was in agony a lot of the time. I was exhausted and if you ask James, my boyfriend who was there with me for some of it, he'll tell you I was quite frankly a little bit grumpy for parts of it. But you know, it was driven by something so much more than a desire to say that I could paddleboard from Lands End to John O'Groats. I wasn't trying to prove that I was strong, it was something much deeper than that. And I think it's amazing what we can learn about our physical strength and all these kinds of attributes that are so important in society like strength and mental resilience. But actually, if you've got a reason to be that then anybody can do that. I'm not saying anybody could necessarily paddle Lands End to John O'Groats. But there are people who maybe, you want to cycle around the world? I couldn't cycle around the world. But if you're driven by something that means that it means that much to you, then you know, you can do that. Do you know what I mean? It's...

Geoff Bird 45:09
I do know what you mean. I think with all that motivation in the world, like I still couldn't paddle Lands End to John O'Groats

Cal Major 45:14
You haven't tried!

Geoff Bird 45:15
Unless I had the next song in my back packet...back pocket, even. So introduce this next one, again my girls were so excited about this, because I didn't realise this, but Lin Manuel Miranda from Hamilton fame, wrote this, which is...was news to me. Anyway....

Cal Major 45:33
News to me as well. So the next song was something that if they're going got really tough, we're talking really tough, this is the one that would always pull me out of the depths. Now, I hope nobody loses all complete respect for me for having a Disney theme song.

Geoff Bird 45:47
Not at all, this is a brilliant song! By any measure.

Cal Major 45:50
This is from the Disney, the Disney movie, Moana, my.... apart from Ali G in da House, my favourite...

Geoff Bird 45:57
Now you've lost respect!

Cal Major 45:59
Favourite film in the whole world, I love this film. And it is about a girl, if you've not seen it, go and watch it, Moana. It's about a girl who doesn't understand her place in the world. And yet she knows she's drawn to the water. And she knows she needs to do something to look after the natural world. And there's another song on the album called I am Moana, where she screams 'I am Moana!' And there's been many times on my paddleboard where I've had that on as well. And I'm in the middle of this, like, horrible, like, messy ocean with waves everywhere and I'm knackered. And I'm like 'No! I am Moana!!!'

But this song is called How Far I'll Go. And this was a real motivation for me, because it brought me back to that movie and all the motivations behind that. And it's such a beautiful, pure film. And I think it kind of really cut through all the negativity that I might be feeling, or all the kind of nonsense around what was going on. And really just brought me back to 'why am I doing this?' and it's because I love the sea. I love the animals in it. And I believe it's worthy of protection. And this would keep me paddling in the hard times. So this is How Far I'll Go.

How can that not make you smile?

Geoff Bird 48:08
It is a brilliant song. So there's a...the film Vitamin Sea, which charts your journey is extraordinary. It's beautifully shot by your boyfriend I should say as well, some gorgeous, some gorgeous photography there and cinematography. And it does show how difficult it is at times for you. But there's a, there's an extraordinary bit at the end of the film, where you're just about to finish. And you're obviously emotional. And of course you are, and anybody who would be in a situation, but you say something that really struck me about how you're really torn. You wanted, you just wanted to stay out there. And you wanted it to heal you and to wow you, to continue to do that. And I just wondered when you did reach land...

Cal Major 49:00
Yeah.

Geoff Bird 49:00
You know, how, how hard did that...was that process for you?

Cal Major 49:06
Yeah, it was really, really tough. So yes, when, by the time I was getting towards finishing, that last week had been hellish. The tides had meant that I was on the water 1am and then the next day 2am, and then the next day 3am for a week, just really, really early morning tides and I was you know, it's like, you're at the end of something big and your adrenalin drops and I was absolutely exhausted. And I just needed to stop. I really did, I think because I'd put that end on it

and I'm nearly at the end. At the same time, paddling towards John O'Groats harbour, all I could think was this is my place, this is where I want to be. And I think because I've had that journey with grief and because it has helped so much with that and I felt so privileged to have been able to see the things I've seen, I just didn't want to stop.

And when I finished... I mean the first couple of days I was just as you can imagine just an emotional mess. I'd wake up at like three in the morning, like, screaming like 'oh my God, I've missed my alarm. I've missed the tide, I'm gonna lose it.' And for about four nights I had this recurring dream that I had 10 miles left to go and I hadn't finished and I was just being lazy and sleeping instead. But, you know, I kind of stayed up at John O'Groats for a couple of days and like, I can't leave. I had to stay still for a couple of days up at John O'Groats. Then James, bless him, had to, my partner who was with me at the time, at John O'Groats. He had to go to Lands End to do a job at Land's End. So we drove from John O'Groats to Land's End in I think two days where it taken me two months to paddle. And I just went home to my house in Devon, and the next few months were...I'd say in fact the next couple of years were the hardest journey I've ever had to go through like harder than that two months on the water without a doubt. I had an enormous crash, I was exhausted.

And I basically, very quickly, slipped into a very deep depression. And we were talking earlier about my, my kind of journey with understanding mental health. This the first time in my life, I'd suffered with depression. And it was the first time I was able to forgive Sarah, because I could finally understand why she did what she did. Not saying that what I was feeling was the same way that she was feeling. But finally I could get my head around why she decided that it was too painful to stay on this planet. Because up until then, you know, I'd be having the most you know, I'd have an amazing day on the water. I'd be thinking, 'Sarah, you've left this, like you've like, what? how could you leave this beautiful ocean?' And I'd be so upset that she would never get this experience of being on the water ever again. And yet there I was now like, in such a hole, that the idea of going to the water, like, I didn't want to be alive. And I was so terrified, I thought I was dying. And it was the hardest, hardest thing to come to terms with that I was depressed. Because I'd always been so positive, I'd always been the life and soul of the party, had always been so capable and independent. And there I was unable to get out of bed without James physically getting me out of bed. I couldn't surf, because if I didn't catch a wave, I'd beat myself up so bad that it was, you know, I'd just end up in tears. It was, it was awful. And it took me a good couple of years, I'd say only really this year, maybe the last six months only really have I actually felt like myself again. And it was as...as much as it was the hardest journey I've ever been through.

I must say that I feel very grateful to have gone through it. Because I feel now like I can move forward in my campaigns with the ability to relate to people on some level, everyone's mental health journey is different. I'm not suggesting that I went through the same as anybody else. But I can at least have a slightly higher degree of empathy for that. And also it is informing the charity that we're setting up and, and that kind of, like, during those really dark months and years, the only glimpses of pleasure that I had were the really, really fleeting moments of when I was out in the water, out by the water or in nature. Like I got no pleasure from anything else.

Like I'd eat three slices of cake a day to try and get some kind of pleasure from something as grasping onto something. The only times I felt real pleasure was when I was outside in the water. And that's when I started cold water swimming so, it gave me such a buzz, it's the only time I laughed for you know, months on end was when I was immersed in, you know, five degree water in the northern Lake District in February or whatever. And then...I think I'm so grateful to have come through the other side and hopefully be able to kind of help other people understand that there is, there is a light at the end of the tunnel for them as well. And just to maybe kind of transfer some of the things that help for me, helped for me too.

Geoff Bird 53:55
You say you've kind of returned to yourself, to your normal self.

Cal Major 53:58
Yeah.

Geoff Bird 53:59
just wondering how separate those things are. How have you incorporated some of what you've learned into yourself? Is that new Cal Major a rather different person

Cal Major 54:10
Completely different Caj Major. So I spent a lot of time looking back to the old me, the old me that would drive around in my camper van going to gigs on beaches, and you know, that feels like a lifetime away and, and I won't ever be that person anymore. I can't drink for start, like I'll never, I don't drink now, because one pint and I'm depressed the next day and it's so terrifying to even feel a little bit depressed having been in such a deep hole as I was to feel even the slightest inclination that you're slipping back down that slope again. I won't put myself through it so I don't drink anymore. So it's a really, really kind of huge change but you know, I'm really conscious of what I eat because I know that certain foods make me feel depressed. And I think the biggest part of this whole journey is that now I prioritise over everything else time outside. So for me every day I have to go outside, and I have to exercise. And, and maybe this is because I'm still healing maybe I'm not as resilient as I used to be but I know how important this is now. So every morning, the first thing I do when I get up, put the kettle on, it's a routine now and I don't even have to think about it. I get up, put the kettle on, make a flask of green tea, put a dry robe on so that it doesn't matter what the weather is, even if it's absolutely bucketing it down. It's not an excuse, because I've got all my waterproofs on, put my walking boots on and I walk to the lake. And I go down to the lake with my cup of tea. And I don't... I either don't take my phone with me, or I put it on silent in my pocket. And I walk to the lake, the same route every day, so I don't even have to think about it. And I go and I watch the birds. And it sounds so simple, but that there's mornings I go and I see my Robin, and he's there every morning. He's fat, and he's fluffy. And he's so cute. And it brings so much joy. And I see the blue, the blue tits and the great tits and I never used to care about these things. But now I get to see these little birds and they mean everything to me and I listen to the geese, the pink footed geese, as they fly across the lake. And I sit in and I watch the lake. And I say the lake because this is where my boyfriend lives in Keswick, where I spend a lot of time now. I'm either there or I'm at my house

in North Devon. And if it's in North Devon it's the equivalent but I go to the ocean, I walk to the sea and I do the same, I look at the birds and I watch the waves. And for an hour every morning when I get up I'm so focused on what's going on in front of me. And it's mindfulness, isn't it? It's the equivalent of a meditation.

Geoff Bird 56:27
It is.

Cal Major 56:27
In nature....

Geoff Bird 56:29
And we're running out of time, I'm afraid. Another thing that does bring you joy.

Cal Major 56:33
Yeah.

Geoff Bird 56:34
That is deeply connected, I think with your connection with the natural world is the final song.

Cal Major 56:39
The final song. So yeah, very briefly 'cause I know we're out of time. But the final song is... it's called Youngblood and I'd listened to this a lot when I was not feeling great. And it brings me...it makes me feel wild again. When I was, I was caged basically in depression, I was completely confined by it. And for me, this song is an expression of freedom. And it's of being able to just escape our boundaries, escape that cage of depression, escape our societal expectations and just be free. And there's a line in it 'start your life in the middle of the jungle'. I just think that's so beautiful. Like wherever you are now like draw a line in the sand, like start your life in the middle of the jungle like immerse yourself into the wild. How powerful is that for so many people? And so yeah, this, this song it really kind of, yeah, brings me lots of... lots of joy.

Geoff Bird 57:34
Brilliant. That has been fabulous. Cal, thank you so much for sharing your wilderness tracks.

Cal Major 58:31
Thank you so much for having me. It's been a real pleasure.

Geoff Bird 58:36
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