

**Martha Kearney**

# 'Cate Blanchett looks stylish in a bee-suit': Martha Kearney on her wild new interview series

The former Today presenter has swapped news coverage for grilling the famous on their love of nature while out walking



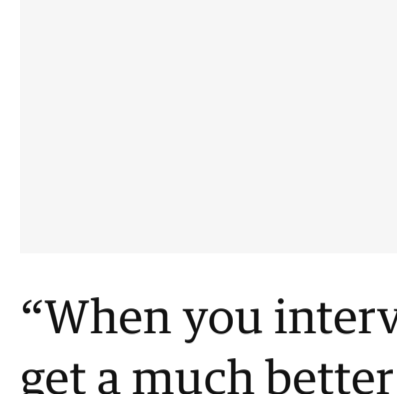
Martha Kearney, seen here at Redgrave and Lopham Fen, will host a new Radio 4 series called This Natural Life. Photograph: Joshua Bright/The Guardian

**Patrick Barkham**  
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As a presenter of the Today programme and Newsnight's political editor, **Martha Kearney** spent decades seeking "gotcha" moments in hard-hitting interviews. Now the broadcaster is unearthing rather different revelations for her new Radio 4 interview series.

Here comes Hollywood star Cate Blanchett rocking a beekeeper suit, the wildlife presenter Hamza Yassin explaining how he learned English as a small boy from David Attenborough, the actor Martin Clunes losing a blind dog and the naturalist **Richard Mabey** driving an electric boat and being blessed by a bittern.



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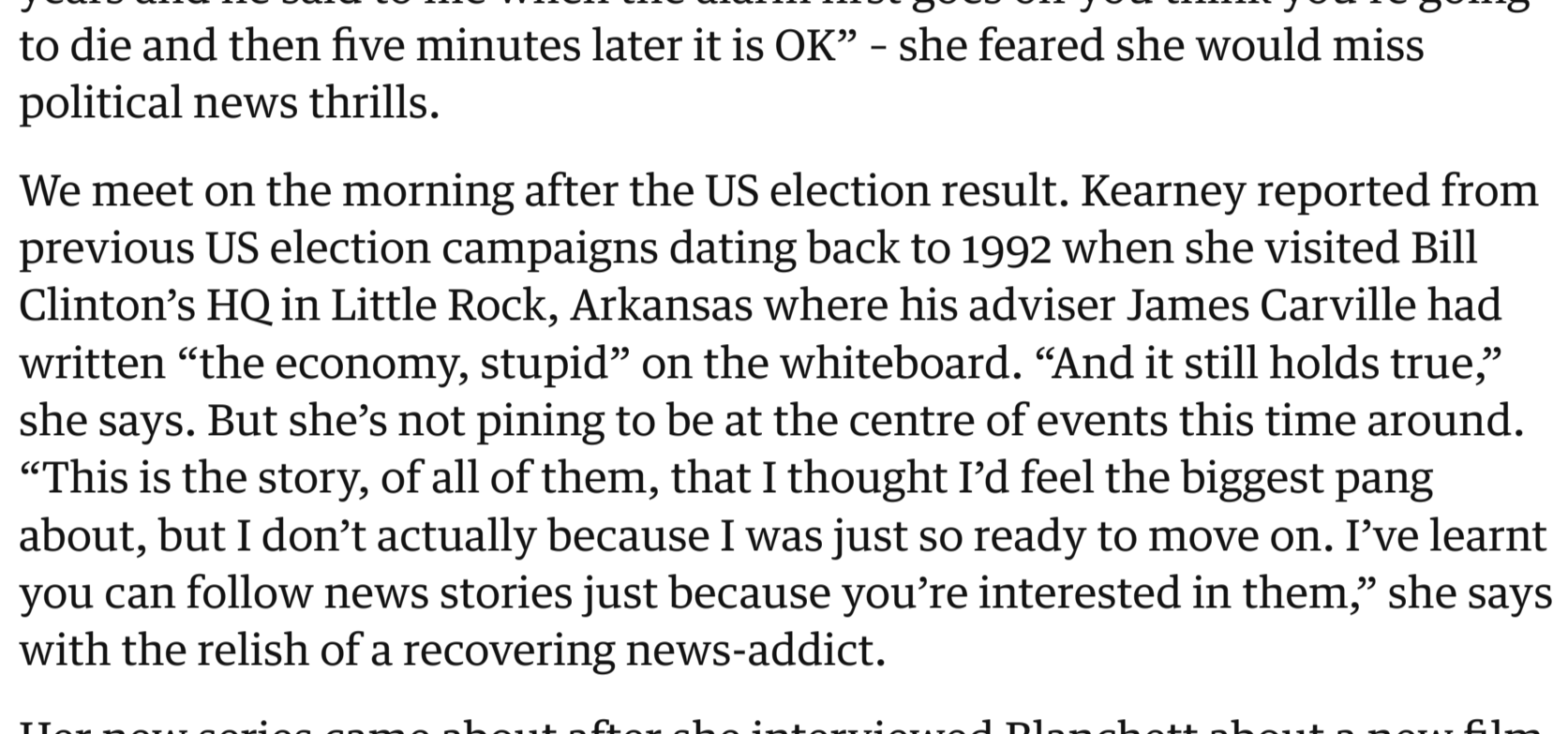
This **Natural Life** sees Kearney interviewing well-known public figures about their less publicised passions for wildlife. And rather than a barrage of probing questions, Kearney deploys a different technique - interrogation by the natural world.

All Kearney's interviews are conducted outdoors for the series, which is first broadcast on 28 November. She is convinced that placing her subjects in natural settings opens them up.



"When you interview people in a place that means something to them, you get a much better interview than in a studio or sterile office," she says, as we test her conviction by talking in the tranquility of Redgrave and Lopham Fen, a nature reserve close to her Suffolk home.

You can hear it in a person's voice, she says: "Something changes. In general, radio is a better and more personal medium for interviewing people than television because you're not surrounded by cameras or lights. But there's still something quite intimidating about being in a studio. There's a lightness and an engagement about the way people open up [outdoors]."



Cate Blanchett let slip to Kearney that she was a beekeeper. Photograph: Luca Carlino/NurPhoto/Rex/Shutterstock

When **Kearney stepped down from the Today programme** this summer after eight and a half years of 3am starts - "Nicky Campbell's done breakfast for years and he said to me when the alarm first goes off you think you're going to die and then five minutes later it is OK" - she feared she would miss political news thrills.

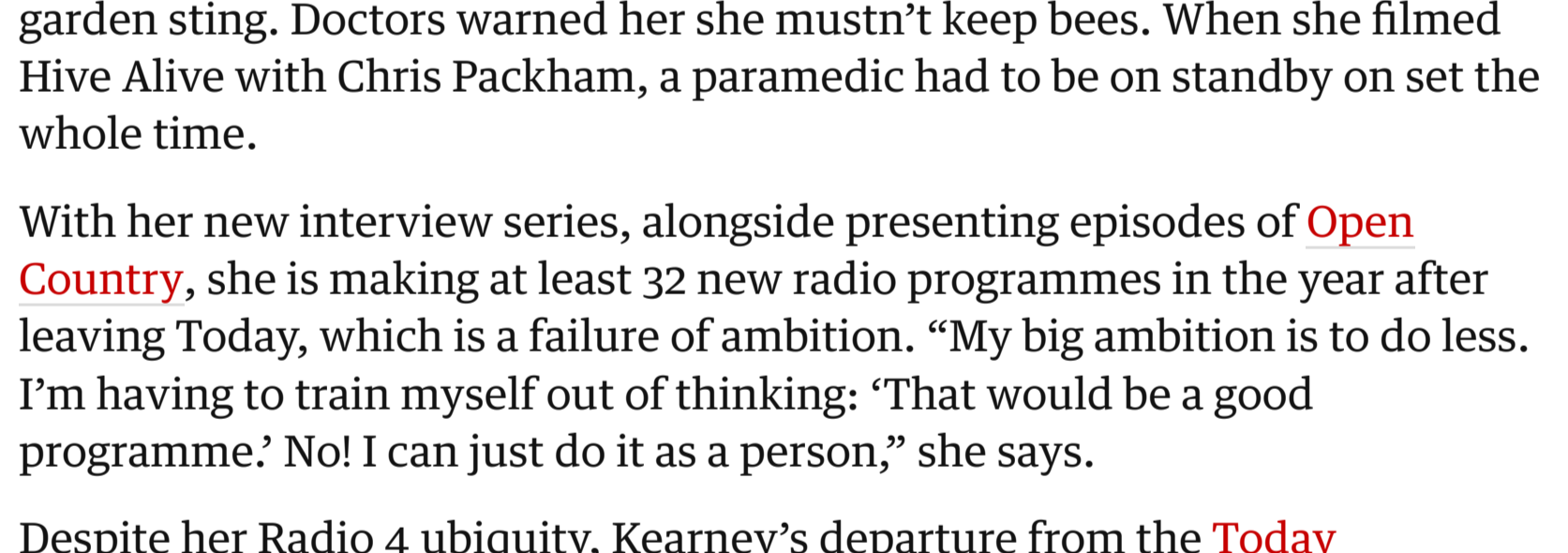
We meet on the morning after the US election result. Kearney reported from previous US election campaigns dating back to 1992 when she visited Bill Clinton's HQ in Little Rock, Arkansas where his still Carville had written "the economy, stupid" on the whiteboard. "And it still holds true," she says. But she's not pining to be at the centre of events this time around. "This is the story, of all of them, that I thought I'd feel the biggest pang about, but I don't actually because I was just so ready to move on. I've learnt you can follow news stories just because you're interested in them," she says with the relish of a recovering news-addict.

Her new series came about after she interviewed Blanchett about a new film earlier this year. "I bought her a jar of apple jelly. She said, 'Oh, I should've given you some of my honey.' I said, 'What? Wait! You're a beekeeper?' And she's a beekeeper, and I used to keep bees." Blanchett agreed to give another interview about her love of nature and the environment, so they went to look at beehives at Wakehurst, the Sussex outpost of Kew Gardens. "I put on my bee-suit and looked rather like the Michelin man," says Kearney. "She managed to look stylish in a bee-suit. She had these brilliant yellow glasses and she just looked amazing. She's a very funny, stylish woman."

Kearney interviewed Yassin in a bird hide at the London Wetland Centre, a sanctuary for the camera operator during his **Strictly Come Dancing days**. A peregrine falcon kept distracting them as he recalled how he couldn't speak a word of English when he arrived in Britain from Sudan as an eight-year-old. "So his parents put wildlife programmes on the television. He says he learnt his English from David Attenborough, which is really lovely."

Kearney thinks people also reveal more of themselves when talking while walking, not looking at each other eye-to-eye, although on a country ramble with **Martin Clunes** they managed to - temporarily - lose one of his blind dogs.

In such natural settings - Kearney explores **the mental health benefits of the wild world** with the Oxford professor of biodiversity Kathy Willis - what moments of revelation have occurred? "It's often how personally moved people are by nature," says Kearney. "Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall was very interesting about being very much an interferer and an organiser and wanting things to happen. He was very keen to get a kingfisher on his land. He dug lots of ponds and put out branches for them to perch on. And nothing happened for many years. There's a lesson there that I'm sure he'd acknowledge. One day, a kingfisher did appear and he burst into tears."



Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, seen here speaking at the RHS Hampton Court garden festival, finally managed to entice a kingfisher to his land. Photograph: Jeff Gilbert/REX/Shutterstock

Kearney, who is a youthful 67, might have been expected to spend more time at home (Beehive Cottage) with her beloved bees. She became fascinated by bees after she was given a hive as a wedding present, but she had to give up her seven hives after she was taken to hospital because of an innocuous garden sting. Doctors warned her she mustn't keep bees. When she filmed **Hive Alive** with Chris Packham, a paramedic had to be on standby on set the whole time.

With her new interview series, alongside presenting episodes of **Open Country**, she is making at least 32 new radio programmes in the year after leaving Today, which is a failure of ambition. "My big ambition is to do less. I'm having to train myself out of thinking: 'That would be a good programme.' No! I can just do it as a person," she says.

Despite her Radio 4 ubiquity, Kearney's departure from the **Today** programme leaves a gaping hole in the BBC's coverage of biodiversity issues, which reflects more widely the absence of the nature crisis on the political agenda. In recent months, Today presenters have been **criticised for making lighthearted quips** after grave reports on the climate crisis and endangered bats but Kearney says plenty of other former colleagues will cover environmental stories.

"Somebody who is very good is **Justin Rowlett**. He does do a fair number of those kinds of pieces. I do know that the [Today] editor, Owenna Griffiths, is very interested. There's been a very good long-running series about the River Avon that Emily Knight does. I might not be there and there has definitely been a decline in the stories about bees, which may be a blessed relief to the audience, [but] they will bring in other people. Other nature presenters are available."

For all the absence of the nature crisis in mainstream politics and media, Kearney still believes "we are a country of nature lovers. People do care about it. Sometimes if all you hear about is we're one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, or nightingales have declined by 90% since the 1960s, you can end up with despair. Obviously there are terrible problems [but] in these programmes, I'm keen to look at the way people can make a difference - that it's not hopeless."

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