

## WILD AT HEART

## Bill Oddie

Attacked by Twitter trolls, branded a murderer, labelled a hypocrite – and all because of rats.

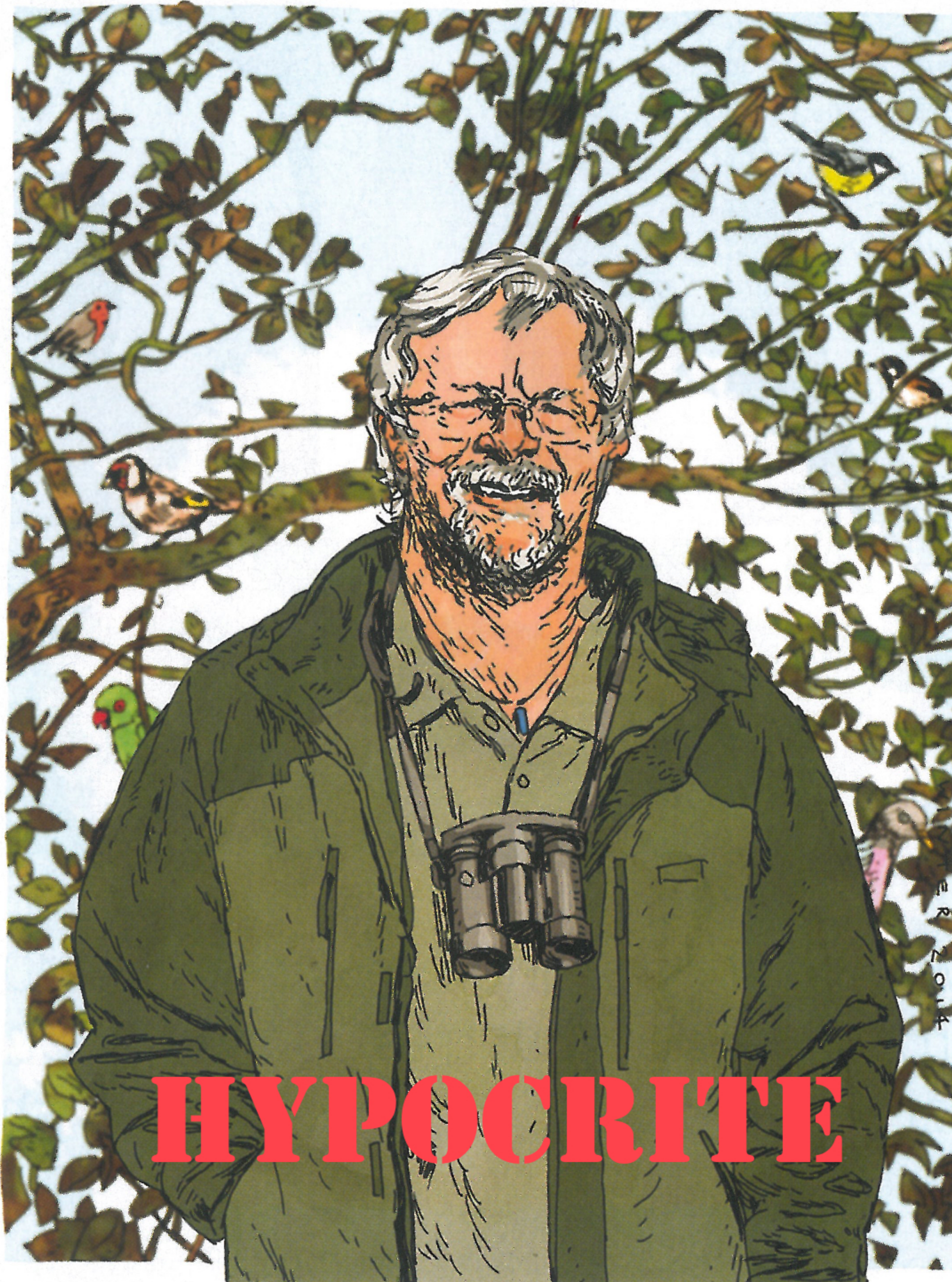
**M**any people love rats. Kate Humble keeps one as a pet – look out for *Rating Live* – and did I not see the *Springwatch* team lowering their anxiety levels by stroking one during a lull in nestbox action? Personally, I do not crave an intimate relationship with the world's most ubiquitous rodent, but I most certainly regard them as wildlife and not vermin.

I once attempted to illustrate a point on one of my programmes when we showed two sleek-bodied, bewhiskered little creatures swimming across a suburban river, grooming their whiskers with delicate little paws and looking as cute as can be. Had I told the viewers that these were water voles, I'm willing to bet many people would have believed me. They weren't, of course – they were rats.

For some reason, rats worry people. Even David Attenborough has admitted that rats are the only creatures that really freak him out – and even I have to concede that they are not great conservationists. There is barely a seabird island anywhere that hasn't had its colonies ravaged by the arrival of rats from a visiting vessel, though if they were fleeing from a (literally) sinking ship, who could blame them for swimming ashore?

If this kind of misbehaviour were confined to distant islands it might not upset us so much, but rats are even more at home in our own back yards and gardens – including mine. About a year ago, a small family of rats began scavenging under my birdfeeders. They were quite welcome – they tidied up the spilt seed, groomed their velvety fur and posed for some very sweet video footage.

Sadly, the rest of my family did not agree, and I was told to Get A Man In. I refused. Instead, I tested claims I'd read suggesting



that rats can't abide unfamiliar objects close to their holes, and would probably abandon their homes if one appeared.

My garden is not short of unfamiliar objects. I began with a small plant pot, but the rats didn't give it a glance. Next I tried a coloured ball, which they simply nudged out of the way to get at the birdseed. So each day I added another object. A small garden gnome. A big garden gnome. A plastic duck. Nothing bothered them. Finally, I introduced my ultimate deterrent – a stuffed cat. It was not – nor ever had been – real, but it was

**"A CASCADE OF RATS TUMBLED OVER THE FENCE – SCURRYING, JUMPING, SWINGING AND CLIMBING LIKE A TROUPE OF CIRCUS ACROBATS."**

very realistic. I got a splendid video of two baby rats snuffing the cat's whiskers while my local robin perched on its head.

Those rats were sensible enough to grow up and seek pastures new, and for a while my garden remained a rat-free zone – until, one morning last month, I found five rats inside the squirrel-proof feeder. When I opened the back door they scattered, but I knew they'd be back.

And how! The next afternoon, I witnessed a veritable cascade of rats tumbling in over next door's fence – scurrying, jumping, swinging and climbing like a troupe of acrobats (acro-rats?) at a circus. Smaller ones attempted to break the 'Most Rats in a Feeder' record, but got overexcited and kept falling out. Others chased each other up and down a tree trunk. Amid the hyperactive melee, I tried to count them – at least 50!

This time I had no choice – I Got A Man In. Before he did whatever he had to do, I pointed out that next door was "having work done", which yesterday had involved pneumatic drills.

Could the noise have disturbed the rats?

"It's not the noise," he replied. "They respond to the vibrations as if an earthquake or eruption were imminent, fleeing before disaster strikes. And not just from next door – they can cover quite some distance." The Man called it migration; I called it evacuation. Very wise animals, rats.

I deemed it worth tweeting – which was not so wise. It made a couple of daily papers ('Bill Oddie's Giant Rats!') and the TV news. I was called a murderer and a hypocrite. All I can say is: life sometimes presents us with dilemmas. Especially wildlife.

Meanwhile, don't mention the plague. ☒

Former Goodie **BILL ODDIE OBE** has presented natural-history programmes for the BBC for well over 10 years. He featured in the recent series of *Springwatch*.