

Presidential Welcome

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RIN08 - Orientation & Navigation

Birds, Humans & Other Animals

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Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

Welcome to our conference on the Orientation and Navigation of Birds, Humans and Other Animals, romantically entitled “RIN08”. Welcome also to the Royal Institute of Navigation.

This conference is organised by the Institute’s Animal Navigation Group. The Institute is immensely proud of its Animal Navigation Group and of the Animal Forum. Let me tell you why.

I doubt that most of you who are not - yet - members of the Royal Institute of Navigation know much about the RIN. After all, we do live in different worlds. Most of you are scientists: your role is to examine the world in all its strangeness and wonder, and form hypotheses to explain it. Many of the other members of the Institute are engineers, like me: our role is to take knowledge, including sometimes knowledge that you have discovered, and create navigation systems and techniques from it. We do have different world-views.

The RIN is one of the two large institutes of navigation, with world-wide membership; the other is the US Institute, about the same size. But the RIN is different in the sheer breadth of our interests. Of course, we spend a lot of our time on satellite navigation. GPS is one of the great technological success stories of the late twentieth century, a star among science-based industries. It’s given us products and systems for our daily lives we simply didn’t dream of just of a few years ago. It provides location information for hundreds of different industries. It’s what ties together all our telecommunications networks, keeping mobile phones and email and the Web up and running. It has become simply a key part of our national infrastructure, a new utility, as the telephone became and later the Internet.

And unlike most high-tech industries, people do love satellite navigation. We don’t pollute the atmosphere, and we don’t frighten the horses. No one had a bad word to

say about GPS until they discovered that it obliged huge German juggernauts to thunder through pretty English country villages demolishing the thatched cottages!

But our Institute knows that GPS is easy to jam, can be spoofed into giving false positions, is interrupted by solar flares. So the Institute makes itself unpopular in some quarters by arguing against letting massive container ships and super-tankers rely on GPS alone as they sail at high speed through our crowded sea-lanes. The consequences of collisions and groundings can be catastrophic not only for people but for many of the species you know and love.

The RIN is also unique among institutes of navigation in the sheer breadth of its interests: land vehicles, people on foot, light aviation, airlines, small craft sailors, shipping, history; land, air sea and space. But there one activity that people around the world always want to talk about when I speak to them as President of this Institute, one area that simply fascinates the folk in the rest of the navigation world: and that's you. What you are doing, your research, is to them eye-opening and mind-blowing. That's why the Royal Institute of Navigation is so proud of its Animal Navigation Group and its Animal Forum.

Look at the sheer breadth of topics in this conference, look at the range of species, from chaps, like you and me, to ants. Which is the higher species, by the way? From the London Mayor to newts. And amongst the great singers, from frogs to songbirds.

People are watching your research, some in wonder, some out of scientific interest and others for what they can learn and employ in the service of the rest of the world of navigation. Among those others, especially in the US, is the defence community which is undoubtedly taking an ever-closer interest in your work. You may or may not welcome that.

Perhaps the wheel has come full circle. A key to the success of the Animal Navigation Group is the immense effort and enthusiasm put in by my distinguished predecessor-but-three Air Commodore Pinky Grocott, Moderator of the email Animal Forum. Pinky was himself a distinguished navigator, one those who opened up the air routes across the Atlantic in the Second World War. He has beaten his sword into a ploughshare and moved with equal vigour and enthusiasm into your world of animal research. I somehow doubt Pinky wishes to go back to being a warrior.

So, welcome: welcome to Reading; welcome to the Royal Institute of Navigation; and welcome to what I am sure will be not only the sixth, but the very best, conference of the Animal Navigation Group. I'm looking forward to it.

Thank you.

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