

Wader studies in New Zealand: A tribute to Richard B. Sibson (1911-1994) and Barrie D. Heather (1931-1995)

The Ornithological Society of New Zealand recently lost two of its very select group of Honorary Life Members, Dick Sibson and Barrie Heather. Both were keen amateur members, both were honorary editors of the society's journal *Notornis* (1955-72, and 1978-94 respectively) and above all, both were wader enthusiasts. Full obituaries have already been published (Bull & Lovegrove 1994, Robertson 1997), and so this introduction concentrates on their contribution to wader studies in New Zealand.

Dick Sibson (Sib as he was affectionately known to his many friends and former pupils) arrived in New Zealand from Britain in 1939, and joined the teaching staff of Kings College, Auckland. Within days of his arrival, Sib began to explore the many arms of the Manukau Harbour within cycling range of the school. Ornithologically, Kings College is strategically placed on the narrowest part of the Auckland isthmus, right beneath the flight path of godwits and knots working the three hour difference between the Tasman and Pacific tides. Sib soon realised the potential of the upper Manukau, with its many inlets and broad intertidal flats. Sib was quick to explore more distant parts of New Zealand, and on these travels he discovered the rich wader habitat on the western shores of the Firth of Thames around Miranda in July 1941. Together with Ross McKenzie, Sib gathered and published wader records on the Manukau Harbour and Firth of Thames in the Classified Summarised Notes and Annual Locality Reports of *Notornis*, and in numerous short notes and papers over the years. These early surveys developed into the Manukau and Firth of Thames censuses, which have been methodically undertaken since 1960, amassing a wealth of valuable data and revealing some important long-term trends (Veitch & Habraken 1999, Veitch 1999). As a result of this work, the Firth of Thames, especially the Miranda coastline, gained recognition as a locality of prime national importance for the study and conservation of shorebirds. The growing interest in the Firth led to the formation of the Miranda Naturalists' Trust, and later the Miranda Banders and the New Zealand Wader Study Group, who have studied internal and offshore migration patterns of waders (Davies 1997, Riegen 1999). In recognition of his contributions to ornithology in New Zealand, Dick Sibson received the Falla Memorial Award from the Ornithological Society of New Zealand in 1983, and then in 1986 he was elected one of only four Honorary Life Members permitted in the society.

As a keen young member of the Kings College Bird Club in the 1940s, Barrie Heather's early interest in birds was nurtured by Dick Sibson. Choice wader roosts on the Manukau Harbour, such as Puketutu and Puhinui were within easy cycling range of Kings College, and waders soon became Barrie's main birdwatching passion. Perhaps because of family commitments and as a result of living in 'boring' places remote from good wader habitats, Barrie concentrated on conducting detailed field studies on the ecology and behaviour of waders, especially the Black-fronted Dotterel (Heather 1973, Dennison & Robertson 1999), and encouraging and participating in a series of nationwide studies of the numbers and movements of waders (Sagar *et al.* 1999, Sagar & Geddes 1999, Pierce 1999). In more recent years, Barrie spent much time at Lake Wairarapa and was pleased that his efforts helped to settle long-standing disputes over the management of water levels in the lake (Robertson & Heather 1999). In recognition of Barrie's contribution to New Zealand ornithology, Barrie was presented with the Falla Memorial Award in 1989, and Honorary Life Membership of the Ornithological Society

in 1994. At a local level, Barrie was very proud to be awarded the “Ornithological Freedom of the Wairarapa” by members of the Wairarapa Branch of the society as thanks for the time and energy he put into fostering bird study, especially wader study, in the region.

Both Dick Sibson and Barrie Heather were prolific writers. Dick Sibson published over 170 short notes, papers, or letters in *Notornis*, and was the co-ordinating editor and co-author of the several editions of ‘A Field Guide to the Birds of New Zealand and Outlying Islands’ (Falla *et al.* 1966, 1979). He also wrote three other books: ‘Birds of Fiji in Colour’ (Belcher & Sibson 1972), ‘Birds at Risk’ (Sibson 1982) and ‘From Penguins to Parakeets’ (Sibson 1990), and assisted many others in their publications. Barrie wrote 28 short notes or full-length papers in *Notornis*. He wrote ‘A Biology of Birds’ as a chapter in a high school textbook, and this was later published separately (Heather 1966). With Don Brathwaite, he wrote many of the wader texts for ‘The Reader’s Digest Complete Book of New Zealand Birds’ (Robertson 1985). Barrie then co-edited ‘A Flying Start’ (Gill & Heather 1990), compiled the invaluable ‘Fifty Years of Bird Study in New Zealand’ (Heather & Sheehan 1990), contributed much New Zealand material on waders in volumes 2 & 3 of ‘The Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds’ (Marchant & Higgins 1993, Higgins & Davies 1996) and was co-author of ‘The Field Guide to the Birds of New Zealand’ (Heather & Robertson 1996) and ‘The Hand Guide to the Birds of New Zealand’ (Robertson & Heather in press).

Given the special interests that Sib and Barrie shared in waders and in publishing, the Council of the Ornithological Society of New Zealand decided to commemorate their significant contributions to the study of waders in New Zealand by publishing this collection of papers as a special memorial issue of *Notornis*. Unlike other fields of ornithological endeavour in New Zealand, wader studies have been carried out largely by amateur ornithologists, by university students or by professional ornithologists in their leisure time, rather than by paid government scientists. Included in the amateur ranks (in roughly historical order) are such names as: Edgar Stead, Herbert Guthrie-Smith, Dick Sibson, Ross McKenzie, Sandy Edgar, Don Brathwaite, Barrie Heather, Maida Barlow, Peter Child, Beth Brown, Jenny Hawkins, Adrian Riegen and Stephen Davies. Each of these people has made a huge contribution to our understanding of the ecology, behaviour and habitats of waders in New Zealand.

The seventeen papers or short notes on waders in this issue are split into three topic areas: distribution and numbers, seasonal movements, and general ecology of waders. These were all areas of special interest to both Sib and Barrie. These papers were solicited from a variety of Ornithological Society members, and include the publication of results from three major national projects of the society (Pierce 1999, Sagar & Geddes 1999, Sagar *et al.* 1999), long-term studies by many society members in the Auckland region (Battley 1999, Riegen 1999, Veitch 1999, Veitch & Habraken 1999), and in the Wairarapa (Dennison & Robertson 1999, Robertson & Heather 1999). The issue also includes papers on a wide variety of other research or conservation management projects on waders. Most of the authors of these papers were influenced in their formative years by either Sib or Barrie, or both, and were keen to contribute to this memorial issue.

Sib and Barrie’s philosophy on life and the joys they derived from watching birds are well summed up by a quotation from Sib’s notes about the bird club in the Kings College magazine of 1959: “The important things are to get out in the field; observe

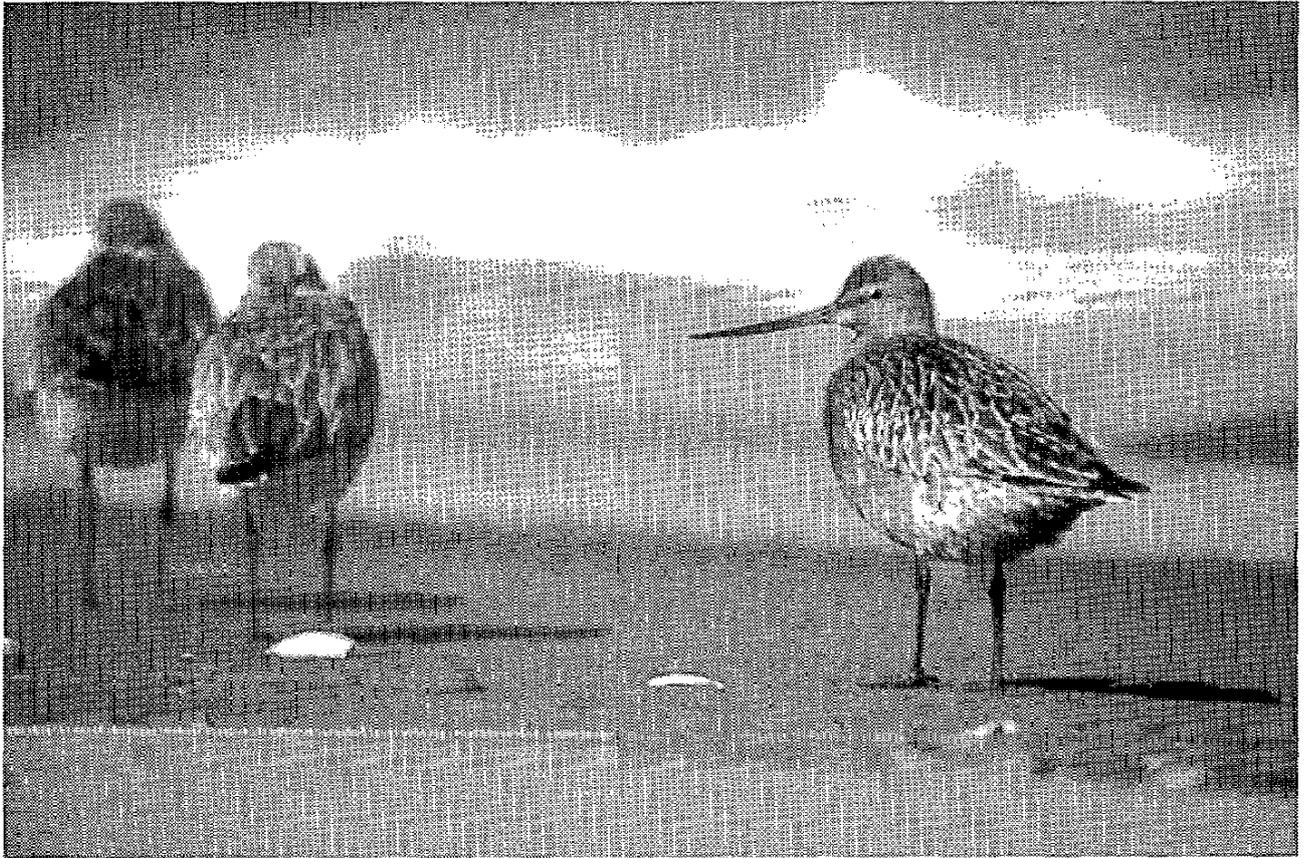
with a critical eye; make notes; draw if you can; and above all, get some fun out of your bird watching” – to which we might add “ publish your findings for others to share”!

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Eastern Bar-tailed Godwits (*Limosa lapponica*).

(Don Hadden)