

PROFESSOR BRIAN JOHN MARPLES**1907-1997**

Professor B.J. Marples was one of the co-founders of the Ornithological Society of New Zealand. He became Organising Secretary, in 1938 sending a first circular entitled 'A Proposed Ornithological Society of New Zealand' to a small group of ornithologists, including G. Archey, C.A. Fleming, E.G. Turbott, R.A. Wilson, R.H.D. Stidolph, A. S. Wilkinson, W.R.B. Oliver, P. Moncrieff, L.W. McCaskill and E.F. Stead, names that became known for papers and books on New Zealand birds over the following years. The list had been drawn up by R.A. Falla, then Director of Canterbury Museum. Marples served as Secretary-Treasurer of the new Society from 1939 to 46 and was President from 1946 to 1948. In 1943-44 he also edited *New Zealand Bird Notes*, and was co-editor with R.A. Falla in 1944-46. In a Supplement to Vol. 1, 1946, he published the first 'checklist': List of the birds of New Zealand. At the 1980 AGM of the Society he was unanimously elected an Honorary Member, then the highest honour that the OSNZ could bestow (Gurr, in *Notornis* 1980:386-387).

Brian Marples was born in Hesse, Yorkshire and educated at St Bees and Exeter College, Oxford University, where he gained an MA and where he was a student of two eminent zoologists, Edwin F. Goodrich (who gave him a good grounding in comparative anatomy) and Sir Gavin de Beer (of evolution and *Archaeopteryx* fame). He was a Lecturer in Zoology at the Universities of Bristol and Manchester (graduating MSc from Manchester University) before taking up the Chair of Zoology at the University of Otago, where at the age of 29 he succeeded Sir William Benham in February 1937. He maintained a keen interest in evolutionary anatomy as his future students would witness.

Hitler's War broke out seven months after Marples's arrival in New Zealand. During the war he continued to lecture with a small staff of lecturers (Misses M.L.

Fyfe, B. Brewin and V.E. Todd and an occasional lecture by Honorary Lecturer L.E. Richdale) to an increasing number of students, the Zoology 1 course being obligatory for intending Medical and Home Science students. Marples was an inspirational teacher, known for presenting his lectures without glancing at notes and also for fine drawings on the blackboard. His artistic skills were inherited from his father, an artist and art teacher, who was also interested in birds. A monograph *Sea Terns and Sea Swallows* (1934), written by his parents and beautifully illustrated with excellent photographs in addition to several skilful drawings of terns, eggs, chicks, tracks, maps, and diagrams, all 'by the authors', as the title page records. It would appear that their 'antipodean' son inherited from them not only his drawing skills but also some birdwatching genes as well.

During the early part of his stay in New Zealand, Brian Marples commenced his first local ornithological study: between June 1938 and June 1940 he assembled the carcasses of 243 Little Owls, the response to letters published in newspapers, offering a reward of one shilling per bird! Stomach contents were analysed, and weights, measurements, and development of gonads recorded, a worthy counterpart to Hibbert-Ware's enquiry into the food of the Little Owl in Britain in 1936-37.

In 1942, at the second meeting for the year, he gave a lecture to the Otago University Biological Society, of which he was the Patron, on 'The Scientific Study of Birds', which was not published. During the war he was also involved in the assembling and production of the first Summarised Reports in the *First Annual Report* of the Society (later in *New Zealand Bird Notes* and *Notornis* called Classified Summarised Notes, a feature which is still going strong). He also started a trapping and banding programme of Silvereyes in Dunedin, with the help of students, while C.A. Fleming in Auckland was similarly involved. Marples collated and reported on the results of all trapping and banding of Silvereyes in New Zealand, which were published in *N.Z. Bird Notes* in 1944, along with notes on the songs of songbirds in Dunedin. Bird study during the war was a 'do-it-yourself' challenge. Considering facilities and equipment available today, it is a sobering thought that Professor Marples himself made the bands out of old aluminium pots and photographic film containers!

Field trips to the limestone deposits at Duntroon were memorable events for participating students and became important for fossil-fossicking. The trips paid rich dividends in the finding and description of six new penguin species, and in descriptions of a bone attributed to an extinct albatross, a new species of fossil baleen whale, and fossil dolphin brains. These field trips to the limestone caves were made more memorable by evenings at the Duntroon Hotel.

Among his students during the war (and later staff at Otago) was Lou Gurr who had a deep interest in birds, and later became Reader in Zoology in the new Massey University. After war's end, Marples was able to attract students and staff from overseas, breaking the isolation of the war years. Amongst them were Jiro Kikkawa from Japan (later Professor at University of Queensland) and Colin Beer

(later Professor at Rutgers University, Newark, USA). And in 1964 he invited the writer to come to the University of Otago to set up a new postgraduate course in Wildlife Management (combining ornithology with aspects of protection, management, control, utilization, and conservation of threatened species) and ornithology and ecology.

One of the remarkable attributes of this excellent teacher of zoology was his breadth of interest, his contributions being in such varied fields as ornithology, palaeontology, limnology (a book *An Introduction to Fresh-water Life in New Zealand* was published in 1962), arachnology (spiders), vertebrate evolution, comparative anatomy, and invertebrate feeding mechanisms. He also made important contributions to the study of fish circulatory systems. To this diverse academic expertise, in his retirement to England he added the very different fields of church architecture and archaeology, his later publications including such topics as the evolution of Saxon crosses and bale tombs, the vertebrate remains obtained in Oxford archaeological digs.

On study leave in 1956-57 he first went to Australia, then on to England, visiting the British Museum (Natural History) and Oxford University, followed by visits to 12 zoology departments in the United Kingdom; and attendance at a Limnological Congress in Helsinki, Finland.

During another overseas trip in 1958, he attended the XVth International Zoology Congress in London. In 1959 he took part in a special symposium in Melbourne and read a paper on the 'Evolutionary History of Penguins'. He spent his study leave in 1960-61 in England, attached to the Bureau of Animal Population, Oxford University. On his return trip, he spent some time in Indonesia. Brian Marples was a Fellow of the Indian Zoological Society. During several visits to that country and Indonesia he added temple architecture to his already crowded agenda.

In 1953 he was elected an FRSNZ. Two fossil species of penguins: Marples' Penguin *Palaeudyptes marplesi* Brodkorb 1963 and Simpson's Penguin "*Platydyptes marplesi* Simpson, 1971 and the genus *Marplesornis* Simpson, 1972 were named in his honour.

During his retirement years at Old Woodstock near Oxford, his home was open to friends from Down Under, the result of lasting friendships with colleagues and former students as well as recent zoology graduates studying at or visiting Oxford University. The latter group he regarded as his "zoological grandchildren". He was a good and kind host, ably supported by his cheerful wife, Molly, herself a respected academic, who retired at the same time from the post of Associate Professor in the Microbiology Department, Otago University. At their retirement Brian and Molly Marples established an "Ecology Fund" to help students attend conferences and for their studies. They started it off with a generous donation, then auctioned their furniture in a jumble sale and added the proceeds to the fund.

His death in 1997 brought to an end a long and distinguished career. His upbringing and education in England were followed by 30 years as Professor of Zoology (1937-1967) at the University of Otago (with teaching, travels, research and publication), then 30 years (1967-1997) as Professor Emeritus with new and challenging interests and contributions.

Kaj E. Westerskov

Ornithological publications by B.J. Marples

- MARPLES, B.J. 1942. A study of the Little Owl, *Athene noctua*, in New Zealand. Transactions and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New Zealand 72: 237-252.
- MARPLES, B.J. 1944. Notes on the songs of certain birds in Dunedin. N.Z. Bird Notes 1: 62-64.
- MARPLES, B.J. 1946. List of the birds of New Zealand. N.Z. Bird Notes 1. Supplement: i-vii.
- MARPLES, B.J. 1946. Notes on some neognathous bird bones from the early Tertiary of New Zealand. Transactions of the Royal Society of New Zealand 76: 132-134.
- MARPLES, B.J. 1952. Early Tertiary Penguins of New Zealand. Paleontological Bulletin 20:1-66.
- MARPLES, B.J. 1974. Fossil penguins. New Zealand's Nature Heritage, ed. R. Knox. (Hamlyn House, Auckland), vol. 1, pt. 5: 142-144.
- MARPLES, B.J. 1990. Reminiscences. A Flying Start, eds. B.J. Gill and B.D. Heather (Random Century, Auckland), pp. 64-65.
- MARPLES, B.J.; Gurr, L. 1953. The Chukor in New Zealand. Emu 53: 283-290.