

## OBITUARY - Brian Douglas Bell, QSM, FRAOU, FOSNZ (1930–2016)

Brian Bell died peacefully at home on 1 October 2016 in view of his beloved garden. He joined The Ornithological Society of New Zealand Inc. (OSNZ) in 1947, and was an active member throughout his life. He served at various times as Regional Organiser in Marlborough and Wellington, Society Councillor (1962-1971), Vice-president (1971-75) and President (1975-1980 and 1989-1995), Rare Birds Committee member 1975-2010, and a super-numerary member of the Records Appraisal Committee 2010-16 (Gill & Heather 1990; author unpubl.).

He was recognised by a significant group of awards: The Queens Service Medal for public service in 1984 – specifically for his contribution to endangered species management and the eradication of exotic animals from islands; the OSNZ Falla Memorial Award in 1987; a Fellowship of the Royal Australasian Ornithological Union (RAOU) in 1990 (only the third award for a New Zealander) and a Fellowship of the OSNZ in 1999 (Moors 1990; Robertson 1999).

Growing up in Christchurch with regular farm holidays as a boy developed an interest in nature, and led to his finding and joining the fledgling OSNZ. Moving to a farm in Marlborough where he worked as a carpenter, Brian was initially most interested in land birds, but he also developed skills and an interest in the practical when dealing with nature.

The first encounter with an AGM of the OSNZ was in Wellington, and he was a regular attendee throughout his life as the meetings moved annually round the country. In Wellington he was introduced to, and subsequently fostered, enduring relationships with the early pioneers of the Society. These regular relationships with other ornithologists underpinned the growth of Brian's amateur and later professional life. There was an ingrained passion for natural history and bird-watching – and for encouraging other bird-watchers – throughout his life. In addition to the various Society offices he held over more than half a century, Brian was the driving force and organiser behind field study courses held at Farewell Spit (1961) and Ward (1980), and was a major contributor at the Kaipara course in 1965. He also led many Society multi-day field trips to sites including Farewell Spit, Maud and Stephens Islands in the Marlborough Sounds.

Seabirds and islands became a special personal fascination fostered by the closeness of the Marlborough Sounds and Cook Strait in those early



Brian Bell September 2012 (Photo: CJR Robertson)

years. He became a skilled operator of small boats, and this was especially useful in later years landing and retrieving expedition teams, and their often-precious ornithological cargo from inhospitable islands and rocky coastlines.

Jobs in wildlife conservation were rare and it wasn't until 1957 that he secured a job in the fledgling Wildlife Branch of the Department of Internal Affairs (later NZ Wildlife Service) as a Fauna Conservation Officer. He moved to Wellington, where he later met and married Sue (also on the staff of Internal Affairs). *'For the next 30 years, his itinerary looked more like a case of going where there weren't any roads, combined with an attempt to visit most of the islands in the New Zealand region'* (Robertson 1999).

Brian was a short and solid character with a determined presence, who cast a long and well organised shadow. The distinguished naturalist Gerald Durrell (1966) records a vivid image of his arrival in New Zealand in 1962:-

*We had meant to creep unobtrusively into New Zealand, film and see what we wanted to, and then creep unobtrusively out again. But when the ship docked in Auckland, we found that the Wildlife Department .... had unrolled a red carpet of embarrassing proportions for us. The first intimation of this was the arrival on board*

*of a short stocky individual (looking not unlike a muscular Tweedle Dum) with round, innocent baby-blue eyes and a wide grin. 'I,' he proclaimed, crushing my hand in an iron grasp, am 'Brian Bell of the Wildlife Service. The department has given me the job of escorting you round New Zealand and making sure you see all you want to see.' ... He handed me a sheaf of typewritten documents that looked like a cross between the plans for a royal state visit and some gigantic army manoeuvres.*

That year of 1962, Brian's diary records (over and above his duties as a Senior Fauna Conservation officer) taking another author naturalist Ronald Lockley to Kapiti Island and the tour with Durrell over 2 months visiting Auckland, Rotorua, Kapiti, Mount Bruce, the Brothers Islands, Dunedin and Taiaroa Head, Takahe Valley, Te Anau, Mount Cook and Christchurch. In October, it was surveys in the Waitaki; tours with the RAOU following his help in organising their conference in New Zealand; a meeting of the OSNZ Council in December and then off to the Auckland Islands for 2 months.

His personal development combined with his influence on the broad conservation activities of the Wildlife Service are the back story to many endangered species and restoration projects not only in New Zealand, but world wide. Wilson (2004; p275) records an extract from a Wildlife Service report in 1961 by Brian Bell:-

*The relative abundance of many rare species is a position we should not allow ourselves to accept with complacency. In many cases this remains their last stronghold and active steps should be taken to find more about their habits and life histories and consideration given to transferring some to safer islands with comparable conditions. The accidental introduction of rats is an ever-present threat.*

A defining event in Brian's career occurred in 1964 with the irruption of a ship rat (*Rattus rattus*) plague on Big South Cape Island, south of Stewart Island. Endangered birds and vegetation were under a rapid and serious threat, or in precipitous decline. Urgent action was taken with attempts at translocation of 3 species to other islands. Not all were successful (2 species became extinct), and many of the practical difficulties were defined by what is often described as the worst ecological disaster in New Zealand history (Bell *et al.* 2016). Recognising and solving the difficulties of saving small numbers of very rare species defined the ongoing life of Brian and his Wildlife Service colleagues, and their practical solutions underpinned the many translocation and species survival programmes which were undertaken in subsequent years.

There were tensions with many of the proposals

to protect and enhance native bird survival. Many distinguished ecologists were slow to accept that species that had evolved in the absence of mammalian predators could not survive on the mainland in the presence of introduced predators, and considered that much of the decline of species was the result of habitat destruction and fragmentation (Bell *et al.* 2016).

One could surmise that Brian really became a farmer, and his estate was the length and breadth of New Zealand and its islands. If species could not survive on the mainland then the refuges were the islands which had been the focus of attention throughout his travels. Many were rejected as suitable homes until their own infestations of introduced predators could be dealt with. Thus, rare species management became rapidly integrated with habitat and island restoration.

The removal of goats from Macauley Island and Whale Island, cats from Cuvier and Little Barrier, sheep from South-East, Mangere and Campbell Islands, and the commencement of revegetation programmes on Stephens and Mangere Islands were all examples of the development of these skills. Brian was a firm believer that control of predators would not work, total removal was essential.

Brian was responsible for the planning and direction of the Wildlife trainee scheme for 15 years. The trainees became his second family especially when working alongside the Bell children in locations such as Maud Island, wader counts at Farewell Spit and on working bees at his home in Seatoun building the 'infamous' orange wildlife expedition boxes, or packing OSNZ Christmas cards for dispatch.

The Wildlife traineeship scheme - a 4-year apprenticeship - was arguably the best in the world



'The last goat on Macauley Island' (Photo: R.H. Simpson). Left to right: Gordon Williams, President OSNZ & Wildlife Service; John Yaldwin Dominion Museum; Brian Bell, Vice-President of OSNZ & Wildlife Service; Wim Speikman, Dominion Museum.

Fencing and sheep shooting party, Campbell Island  
January-February 1970.

Back: Mike Rudge (Ecology Div. DSIR), Bob Simpson (Wildlife W/L), Brian Bell (W/L), Ben Thorpe (Dept. Lands & Survey), Chris Smuts-Kennedy (W/L), Chris Robertson (W/L), Kerry Horgan (W/L).

Front: Rowley Taylor (Ecology Div. DSIR), Peter Ross (Ecology Div. DSIR), Dick Veitch (W/L), Mike Soper (Doctor). Absent, Colin Meurk, botanist.



and 4 to 5 new trainees a year became Brian's responsibility. There were critics who argued that it lacked an academic component, but while not devaluing the importance of academic studies, Brian was looking for other practical attributes desperately needed for conservation field work. Graduates had experienced supervised work in all aspects of Wildlife Service activity, fauna conservation, game management, law enforcement, fresh water fisheries, bird banding, information and publicity and captive breeding (at the Mount Bruce National Wildlife Centre). Under Brian's leadership the trainees learnt their own special style of diplomacy and work ethic. It was unique to the Service, it made them a family and united them in a common cause. They were taught that common sense was the yardstick by which actions should be measured (Rodney Russ, *pers. comm.*).

Some may have thought Brian lived by the rule that it is often better to seek forgiveness than ask permission. Risk taking was encouraged because he knew the greatest risk was to do nothing at all. He risked a lot in each of his staff and trainees, and though he was quick to give responsibility, was always there for help and guidance as required. He was quick to give credit and praise to his team, some of whom benefited from this fostering and went on to achieve local and international reputations for their own successes and innovations (Butler & Merton 1992; Galbreath 1993).

A holistic approach to conservation management and the operational direction of the OSNZ was central to his *modus operandi*. He knew people everywhere around the country from his OSNZ contacts and departmental travels. They all had an input with opinions and especially observations of the environment and the birds around them. Crucial to the many debates were the various inter-governmental agencies of the day – especially the Fauna Protection Advisory Committee and the Outlying Islands Committee.

The relationship with the Chatham Islands and their conservation problems was another specific area of Brian's interest, especially as it encapsulated all his skills and interests starting with his first visit in 1961; island restoration, negotiation of land and islands as reserves, saving endangered birds. Brian embodied in the Chatham programmes the attitude of taking direct action and never giving up on endangered species, no matter how overwhelming the odds (Miskelly 2008). I recall Bunty Preece (the ex-County Chairman) telling me in 1996 that the Wildlife Service and especially the Black Robin survival had put the islands on the map, which underpins much of the positive publicity the islands receive today. From my own experiences during the 1970s in the Chathams, I recall that there were initially 3 types of people 'Chatham Islanders', 'Mainlanders' and 'bloody civil servants'. By the 1990s, 'Mad Bird Men' had been inserted before the 'mainlanders' and still before the 'bloody civil servants'. The islanders came to recognise the family nature of the teams, where rank was not visible to outsiders. In fact, if you are stuck on a cliff, you cannot pull rank to get out of the fix you are in, but you can rely on family skills and collegiality.

In the latter part of his Wildlife Service career he provided consultancy advice to numerous international bird and conservation projects in Australia, Seychelles, Mauritius, Christmas Island, Papua New Guinea and Kiribati. By this stage he had progressed up the ranks of the Wildlife Service to Assistant Director after a life time of fighting for funds, trying to work out policy and management programmes, arrange expeditions and often having to carry them out in the field as well. The new Department of Conservation into which the Wildlife Service was subsumed in 1987, inexplicably could find no place for this very experienced and internationally respected conservation operator. On his retirement from Internal Affairs in 1992 he remained tight lipped and reluctant to discuss the

circumstances of this decision “*I’m not too upset about [it] .... work like this is never complete, you’ve got to take it as far as you can and pass on the baton ..... it’s a bit like a relay*” (Williams 1992).

The importance of the OSNZ membership and the Bell relationships was emphasised by his participation as an important member of the NZ Ornithological Trust Board who organised both the 20th International Ornithological Congress (Christchurch) and ICBP (BirdLife International) Conference (Hamilton) in 1990. Most of the Board worked in Wellington, which ensured a continual, and often daily flow of discussions and quick decisions on organisational matters. Brian had a specific responsibility for developing the pre- and post- conferences tours programmes. Here his years of experience and contacts were again to the forefront. These conferences were enormous undertakings, but Brian as the OSNZ President at the time greatly encouraged the OSNZ membership to participate as volunteers. Some 140 on the ground during the week in Christchurch for the IOC were instantly recognisable in their colourful Congress staff shirts and were a major organisational highlight, greatly appreciated by delegates.

So, what of the latter years? Continual local and international demands for advice and assistance led to his formation of Wildlife Management International Ltd., which undertook projects for the British Government, European Union, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Galapagos Conservation Trust and Falklands Conservation. Today the company continues to operate throughout the world led by family members Mike and Biz Bell - ecologists with specialities in predator removal from remote islands, programmes of seabird research and translocation, and bird surveys etc. Other members of the family often provide backup and assistance when required. It is a testament to the importance of their parenting that so many of the family are involved and carry the various aspects of their life with birds and conservation into their own vocations. We thank Sue and the children (Cathie, Biz, Paul, Mike, Dave, Rick, Lou, Phil and Andy), who have participated, supported, and often survived without Brian during his service to conservation. His roles with the Ornithological Society of New Zealand included the foundation in 1989 of *OSNZ News* (now *Birds New Zealand*) newsletters which, along with the journal *Notornis*, enhance the aim of the Society to foster bird study and the enjoyment of birds, while providing the information upon which good decisions can be made.

Appended below is an extensive list of publications where Brian Bell was the lead, contributing or sole author. They do not include the many unpublished reports originally laboriously

drafted in longhand, now residing in the archives of the Department of Internal Affairs, or the decisions of the Rare Birds Committee. All this is a record of a talented observer with a boundless range of activities and an amazing memory and love for animals, plants, places and people. As I wrote in his Fellowship citation, he continually tried to push the boundaries of what people generally expect is possible by operating, in his own words with a ‘tenacious pigheadedness’.

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