

Folkert Nieuwland 1925 - 1999



Folkert Nieuwland with an injured bittern, brought to him for treatment from the Whangamarino Swamp.

Photo: New Zealand Herald

Folkert was brought up in den Haag, and from an early age was interested in natural history, particularly birds. With his family, he experienced the horrors of occupied Holland during the Second World War. At the outbreak of war, Folkert was thirteen. By 1944, food was very scarce and the situation had become grim, and he went into hiding to escape house to house searches in which young men were enslaved in the munitions factories of the Nazi war machine. His older brother Piet had suffered just that fate, and the family lost all contact with him until after the war. Folkert's younger brother Albert, eight years his junior, regarded Folkert as a father figure, (their father had died in 1939). Young Folkert was already an outspoken personality, older than his years, with a strong will and warm feelings towards others. Albert recalls a harrowing 120 km journey together on bikes with wooden tyres evading German patrols, to a farm where Folkert was doing a practical year as part of studies at the High School of Tropical Agriculture. The cunning and kindly farmer was already risking his life by hiding two young men, and Folkert had risked his own to bring to the farm his young brother, already suffering from hunger oedema. In the big towns, the hungry population had been subsisting on a very meagre diet, which included sugar beets and tulip bulbs. The farm lay at the point where the Allied forces were to cross the IJssel, a big branch of the Rhine, and shortly before the Allied advance, the farmhouse and outbuildings were bombed to flush out suspected German soldiers. As the bombs fell, Folkert rescued the

elderly farmer and his wife by bundling everyone into the potato cellar. Folkert had always had a good ear for languages, and it was in the cellar that Albert recalls being taught to say by heart "we are civilians" in English. A few hours later, a nervous Canadian soldier, gun in hand, opened the door to be met by a chorus "we are civilians!" They were free.

After the war, Folkert completed his studies in tropical agriculture. He was then sent off to Indonesia to do compulsory military service, defending the then Dutch East Indies from the guerilla forces of Sukarno in western Java and Sumatra. There, Folkert found that his attention was more often than not focussed on the bird song in the jungle canopy rather than the job at hand. From there he came to New Zealand in 1950.

Folkert's first job in New Zealand was at a dairy factory in Opunake, where he met and married Shirley - the manager's daughter. He distinguished himself by being the first foreigner in New Zealand to win a scholarship to study Veterinary Science at the Sydney Veterinary School. After graduating, he worked in Stratford and later in Cambridge and Hamilton. The demands of a busy practice, where the door was always open, and a young family, kept him fully occupied, but family holidays in the Bay of Plenty provided opportunities to explore the numerous arms of Tauranga Harbour and the nearby Kaimai Ranges in pursuit of birds.

When Folkert retired in 1982, he joined the Ornithological Society's very active Waikato team, and numerous harbour surveys and trips to islands such as the Chathams, Little Barrier, Cuvier and the Mercuries followed. TGL first met Folkert in about 1983 on a nocturnal trip to Kawhia, organised by Dick Veitch, BHS and her husband John, to mist net some of the black stilts which regularly winter there. We didn't catch any stilts, but a surprisingly balmy July evening was spent in deck chairs on a remote Kawhia sandbank, sipping mugs of hot coffee, talking about birds, and indulging in too much of Folkert's legendary shortbread. Later, Folkert and several others of the Waikato OSNZ team, helped TGL with a transfer robins from an area of threatened native forest to an island off the Northland coast. This was the first attempt to transfer North Island robins, and capture and handling techniques refined during that first attempt, have helped to ensure the success of a number of recent robin transfers to restored mainland sites. Folkert and the Waikato team were also regular members of TGL's field trips to Stanley Island, and helped to ensure the success of a series of experimental saddleback transfers to Kapiti.

Folkert was the OSNZ Waikato Regional representative from 1984-1988. During his term as RR, he helped to organise one of the first "live-in" AGM and Conference weekends, which was held at Waikato University. Folkert also served on the OSNZ Council from 1989-1992. Many members who attended AGMs or council meetings during this period, will fondly remember his sharp wit and humanity. His love of shorebirds took him regularly to Miranda, and he was soon involved with the Miranda Naturalists' Trust, serving on the Council from 1984-1994. On the Miranda shellbanks, Folkert was often busy with his camera. His greeting cards, with superb photos of various waders, were always in demand at the centre. He became closely involved with planning and construction of the Shorebird Centre, where his 6'6" frame and

incredible reach were put to good use painting the highest parts of the ceiling!

During retirement he also did some contract work for the Department of Conservation. This included a Fernbird survey of the Whangamarino Swamp between 1990 and 1992, and assisting with the monitoring of Little Spotted Kiwi on Red Mercury Island, following aerial poisoning to remove kiore in September 1992. The work in the Whangamarino had its moments, when apparently he fell into a deep peaty hole, which would have been fatal for anyone of lesser stature. On Red Mercury, his veterinary expertise was called upon in case an antidote was required for the kiwi following the poison drop.

Folkert's many other interests included Japanese, in which he became a fluent speaker, and Japanese culture, and he shared with his wife Shirley, a passion for classical music.

All who knew Folkert will miss his enthusiasm, wit and friendly smile. We extend to Shirley and family the sympathy of all members.

Betty H. Seddon and Tim G. Lovegrove

