

## OBITUARY — Dr Peter Creswick Bull (1920 - 2006)

BSc, MSc, DSc, President and Fellow of the Ornithological Society of New Zealand, Falla Memorial Award recipient 1986, President of the Ecological Society of New Zealand, and Deputy Director of Ecology Division, New Zealand Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR) for over 30 years. These were his credentials as one of the most distinguished scientists in New Zealand's ornithological circles, and probably one of the most modest.

Peter was born in Auckland and educated at Kings School, Wanganui Collegiate, and University of Auckland. There in 1940 he joined the small group of keen birders (including Charles Fleming and Graham Turbott) who founded the Ornithological Society of New Zealand. His university studies were interrupted by war service (1941-45) as a lieutenant in the RNZNVR, but bird watching continued: "During a year's war service in the south-west Pacific the author recorded observations on waders whenever opportunity offered" and the results were published in *Emu* in 1948, the year he completed his BSc at Auckland. He also collected birds "as opportunity offered" and these skins are now in the Auckland Institute and Museum.

He had published several papers before he started his scientific career in 1948 with Wildlife Section of DSIR Head Office in Wellington. His job was to assist Dr Wodzicki with a book on the introduced mammals of New Zealand, which became the main text on that subject for the next 40 years. Dead animals were sent in by people all over the country, and later Peter wrote: "This brought us into bad odour with the Post Office, who became very sensitive about leaks and smells from parcels addressed to us". Animals that were fresh enough had to be preserved, and Peter developed into a fine taxidermist. His comprehensive collection of introduced mammals and wrecked seabirds is in the Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington.

Peter then investigated rabbit parasites, both in New Zealand and on subantarctic islands, producing a book that earned him his DSc at Victoria University. When DSIR and Forest Service reluc-

tantly joined forces to study animal damage to alpine vegetation in Cupola Basin, Nelson Lakes National Park (1962-65), he was put in charge of the research team, and spent about a year on meetings and reports. In a letter to Dr Wodzicki, he commented: "The project has changed so much in the minds of various people that I doubt if at this stage there would be any useful purpose in attempting to write a new report. It would only lead to further fruitless discussions. The main thing seems to be to get some work started..." Eventually it started and he managed to keep the team together, despite continual strife at all levels between the two departments. We had to walk 20 km up Travers Valley to reach the study area, every month for three years, so Peter decided we should use this waste time to do bird counts. Later he told me that, being 20 years older than the rest of us, he needed these stops to get his breath back. Actually, the 5-minute count has now become standard practice (Dawson & Bull 1975), and may well be his most enduring scientific legacy.

In 1965 Peter took control of a new field station in Havelock North to study bird damage to agriculture. This entailed a small team of scientists working on starlings, mynas, rooks, feral pigeons, and finches. The damage reported included newly sown cereals and peas eaten, as well as mature crops, and damage to fruit buds and ripening fruit; some more unusual problems were goldfinches pecking seeds from strawberries, and rooks taking large numbers of walnuts to store for winter. Methods for measuring the cost to farmers of damage compared with the cost of control were developed. Peter always recognised the difficulty of interpreting ecological relationships; for instance, rooks might damage crops but they also ate insects — both harmful and beneficial — removed carrion and scattered animal dung; and simply poisoning a compact rookery could lead to the survivors dispersing to new areas. He spread this message widely to farmers in meetings and popular articles such as "The complexities in assessing bird damage" (Bull 1983), and to the public in his books: "*Common birds*

of garden and farmland" (1968) and "Field guide to town birds of New Zealand" (1983).

He always tried to separate his official and unofficial bird work, because he was so conscientious about spending taxpayers' money, but sometimes this proved difficult. I recall one occasion when someone reported 20 large black birds in Woolworths' car park, just round the corner from our office. "Probably pukekos" said Peter, and got on with his work; but a few of us went to look and found it was a flock of glossy ibises, rare visitors from Australia. I ran back to fetch Peter, who took a lot of convincing we weren't pulling his leg, especially as the date was 1 Apr (1975). Then he agreed to come, adding in typical Peter fashion; "Just a moment while I get the Director's permission to leave the office".

His favourite project was probably the Bird Atlas, a joint project he described (Bull 1970) and organised with Ecology Division, DSIR, the New Zealand Wildlife Service, and the Ornithological Society of New Zealand (Bull *et al.* 1985). He was delighted at the last Ornithological Society meeting he attended in Wellington (4 July 2005) to hear from Chris Robertson how well the second atlas was progressing.

Peter retired from DSIR in 1982, but of course remained active scientifically on the Pesticide Board, the Fauna Preservation Committee, and as secretary of the organising committee of the 1990 International Ornithological Conference, held in Christchurch. This was an enormous task. Chris Robertson recounts that the minutes of their 140 meetings filled a metre of shelf space, and it was all recorded in longhand and typed by Peter. His field work on nest records of birds on a property at Ohau continued until 2005 and the starling project ran for 35 years before he wrote it up last year. One paper is in this issue of *Notornis* and a second is in its final stages.

Although much of his official work was aimed at practical problems, Peter held strong views on the value of basic research to conservation or control, which were expressed in a talk he gave in 1990: "I count myself fortunate to have worked in Ecology Division when "accountability" was assessed in terms of quality of research rather than on short-term dollar returns. If, in the present

economic climate, this sounds like fairyland talk, it is well to remember that applied research, however productive in dollars, usually results from earlier basic research. If we neglect this last, we are spending capital (both knowledge and knowledgeable people) and we do this at our children's peril".

Peter was universally admired for his modesty, friendliness, and extreme honesty in everything he did. He was a keen recruiter of members for OSNZ, telling me in 1966, after I had published a short note in *Notornis*, that I should now join the Society to help pay publication costs. Which of course I did — everyone paid attention to Peter's suggestions, he was such a nice bloke. Even when living in nursing homes, initially to accompany his wife Mary and later on his own, he continued counting birds from his window and on daily walks round the Hutt Estuary and Petone. On our last walk together (15 Feb 2006) I spotted two skylarks flying off, but Peter missed them: "You are probably right", he said. "I usually see a few on that patch of grass." But they did not go down in his notebook. His large collections of notebooks and papers with bird counts made throughout New Zealand are stored in the Ornithological Library, Auckland Institute and Museum, and I can vouch for their accuracy!

Peter is survived by one of their two sons, two daughters, and numerous grandchildren, whose loss we share.

John E. C. Flux

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