

OBITUARY — Roger Robertson Sutton (1921–2006)

With the death of Roger Sutton in September 2006 at the age of 84, the Ornithological Society of New Zealand lost a long-standing and stalwart member.

A member of the OSNZ for nigh on 50 years, Roger became the Southland Regional Representative in 1966, and served in the role for 17 years, years during which ornithology made considerable strides in Southland and when the local membership reached its peak. Roger was an inspirational RR, introducing many young (and some not so young) people to the delights of bird watching and study. During his time as RR the Southland Region hosted the highly successful 1969 field study course. The members who took part completed the 1st full survey of the main wader sites in the region, and started annual summer and winter wader censuses that were then undertaken at all main roost sites from 1976 to 1999.

Roger also contributed significantly to a 5-year study of the spur-winged plover (Barlow *et al.* 1972), undertook a banding study of the Australasian shoveler (Sutton *et al.* 2002; Caithness *et al.* 2002), served on the OSNZ Council from 1969 to 1981, and assisted and encouraged other members in their own ornithological projects. He also had the reputation of being an enthusiastic, keen-eyed, and scrupulous observer and note-taker.

Locally though, Roger will probably be best remembered for his devotion to ensuring that the southern landscape and its wildlife were enhanced and protected. It was not without thought that Environment Southland, in 2000, conferred on him a Special Environment Award, dubbed by some the “Conservationist of the Century” award, “for a lifetime of dedication and commitment to environmental sustainability in Southland.”

Environment Southland was the successor to the Southland Catchment Board on which Roger served for 15 years. It was just one of many public bodies and organizations, all concerned with the environment and its inhabitants, with which he was involved. To all he brought a wide range of attributes and talents: – tenacity; integrity; honesty; self-reliance; and the ability to research problems and come up with solutions. He achieved results in almost every area in which conservation and the environment could be advanced and was far ahead of most others in seeing problems arising. He was awarded a richly deserved MBE for his services to conservation in 1984.

The 2nd of 4 children, Roger spent his early years on farms at Taramoa, Lillburn Valley, and



An unusually serious Roger Sutton, in the field, 1981. Photo courtesy of the Sutton family.

Makarewa. After attending Southland Technical College he took up a cabinet-making apprenticeship only to have it interrupted when he was drafted into the army at the age of 18.

After serving in the Home Forces he was, on turning 21, posted to the 2nd New Zealand Division in Egypt, arriving just as the campaign in North Africa was ending. Becoming a member of the 23rd Infantry Battalion he then served in Italy, where he survived such experiences as being one of 3 New Zealanders who crossed the Sangro River before the New Zealand Division's night attack, and the horrors of the Battle of Monte Cassino. He was camped on the Trieste waterfront when the war in Europe ended.

On his return to New Zealand in 1946 he resumed

his apprenticeship, later working for the Southland Education Board making school furniture. Then in 1948 he married Christina McMillan, who had corresponded with him through the war years. She was to remain his rock throughout his life until her death 2 years ago. They had 3 sons, all born 3 years apart.

In 1957 Roger gained a position as gamekeeper and ranger with the (then) Southland Acclimatisation Society and it was there that he found his true vocation. In subsequent years he became a Field Officer and then Senior Field Officer/Manager with responsibilities covering freshwater fish, game birds, and protected wildlife, before retiring in 1984.

At the time of his appointment, the Society had a game farm at Otatara and one of his first jobs was rearing mallards. Subsequently he was involved with many other aspects of wildlife management and control, notably the Southland paradise shelduck recovery programme and the banding of Australasian shoveler to establish movement patterns. The latter involved much hard hiking through the Waituna Wetlands over an 8-year period from 1971, and it was here that he had an ally in his faithful old Black Labrador dog, Meg, who was adept at finding the moulting birds and bringing them back for banding.

As a foundation member of the Southland Conservation Committee, established in 1970 to organize local activities for the annual 'Conservation Week', Roger solved the committee's fundraising problems by initiating an annual sale to the public of native trees and plants that he and Christina had initially begun propagating with a view to their being used for roadside plantings. The sale, which was run for the committee by the Girl Guides, proved highly effective: and became a much-awaited event for the public during the 10 years that it was held. Roger and Christina's role was subsequently recognized nationally when in 1979 they were jointly awarded the Loder Cup for their work in the promotion of New Zealand native trees and plants as well as the role that Roger had played in the late 1960s/early 1970s in having the Waituna Wetlands, an area noted for its outstanding native plant community, made a reserve.

Elected to the Southland Catchment Board in 1974 with the aim of preventing the further downgrading of water quality and the degradation of wildlife and fisheries habitat, he went on to serve a total of 15 years as a councillor. This in turn led to his appointment as the advocate for wildlife interests on the National Water and Soil Conservation Authority from 1987 until its dissolution in late 1988.

From 1979 until 1997 he was the Southland regional representative for the Queen Elizabeth II National Trust, during which time some 70 natural features and wildlife habitats on freehold land

were covenanted in perpetuity. He was a member of the Southland Conservation Board from 1990 to 1999, including one 3-year term as chairman, and in 1996 he was Chairman of the Working Party on the Environmental Effects of the Redevelopment of the Monowai Hydro-electric Scheme. From 1996 until his death he was a member of the Waiau Fisheries and Wildlife Habitat Enhancement Trust, set up by ECNZ (now Meridian Energy) as a mitigation package for lost wildlife and fisheries habitats in the Waiau River catchment.

It was through his OSNZ activities that Roger became involved in yet another conservation battle. On visits to the New River (Invercargill) Estuary with the late Barrie Heather in the 1960s, they became aware that the continuing spread of the introduced *Spartina* grass was having an adverse effect on wading bird habitat, especially favoured high tide roosting sites. Roger was later able to initiate some independent chemical spray trials that in time led to the implementation of a control programme which, by 1985, was starting to have a noticeable effect. Unfortunately this was halted after his retirement from the Southland Acclimatisation Society. As a result of a meeting called by Roger in 1989, the Department of Conservation recommended spraying and the 800 ha of *Spartina* that existed in 1989 have now been reduced to less than 1 ha.

In 2002, Roger published a book recalling his battles in the conservation cause. Its title, *Keeping Faith with Fin and Feather* encapsulates his approach to wildlife management, for in earlier years little thought was given to the welfare of living things in the drive to bring more land into production. Over the years he had some notable victories over bureaucracy and industrial indifference in his struggle to protect water quality and increasingly vulnerable natural habitats, but he continued to emphasize the need for vigilance. Southland is much the richer for his having lived there.

Roger is survived by his 3 sons and 5 grandchildren.

WYNSTON COOPER
PETER MULLER

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