

Obituary

RICHARD A. ZANN

27 November 1944–7 February 2009

Associate Professor Richard Zann, who perished tragically with his wife Eileen and daughter Eva in the bushfires that ravaged Victoria on Saturday 7 February 2009, was both a 'scholar and a gentleman' in every sense.

His informal training in biology commenced as a boy growing up in the township of Casino, in the north-east of NSW, where he and his brothers spent many wonderful times together exploring the local rivers, forests and beaches and, as he put it, 'harassing' the local wildlife. Boyhood interests in wildlife led to formal undergraduate training at the University of New England, from which he graduated with a First Class Honours degree in 1965. He then went to the University of Queensland where in 1972 he completed his PhD on the behaviour and vocalisations of grass finches under the supervision of Professor Jiro Kikkawa.

He joined the Department of Zoology at La Trobe University as a Research Fellow in 1972 and remained there for the following 36 years, steadily building an international reputation as an ornithologist and ethologist. From 1974 to 1979 he served on the Council of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union. He was also a founding member of the Australasian Society for the Study of Animal Behaviour.

Early in his academic career, Richard made the very astute decision to focus his attention on the behavioral ecology of the Zebra Finch (*Taeniopygia guttata*). All around the world scientists were using this species as a model animal in a variety of experiments and studies; it had become the avian equivalent of the white rat. However, until Richard's work in the field and aviary, comparatively little was known of how it behaved in its homeland of Australia. His ground-breaking studies were ultimately drawn together in his *magnum opus* on the species: *The Zebra Finch: a Synthesis of Field and Laboratory Studies* published in 1996 by Oxford University Press.

The esteem in which Richard's research was held by his fellow scientists is reflected in a letter I received from a colleague, upon hearing of Richard's death:

'Richard's book is a constant source of valuable insight, and it is rarely far from my desk. It is a measure of the meticulous and thoughtful manner in which Richard conducted his work that there is virtually nothing we have 'discovered' about the Zebra Finches in our wild population, that Richard had not already written about, extensively in his book.'

Richard was a curiosity-driven researcher, who was fascinated by the intricacies of the natural world; in particular the behaviour of birds. He simply wanted to understand why animals behaved the way they did. He carried out his science with minimal technological assistance, relying instead on the potent



combination of his binoculars, note book, tape recorder and an outstanding intellect. With this simple but formidable armory of tools he built an international reputation as a world class scientist. He generously shared his skills, time and study-animals with a string of international collaborators. Unlike some, he was not motivated by a need for recognition, acknowledgment or prestige. Nevertheless, in 1998, he was awarded Australia's most prestigious accolade for ornithology, the *D. L. Serventy Medal*, by the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union for his outstanding life-time contribution to the scientific ornithological literature; this included 34 papers on zebra finch biology, as well as 10 papers on the biogeography of the birds of the Indonesian island of Krakatau. In recent years he turned his attention to studying mimicry in the superb lyrebird (*Menura novaehollandiae*); one of the most fascinating but challenging study-animals imaginable.

Richard was much more than just a scholar; he was also truly a fine gentle man with some wonderful virtues. He was a reserved, humble, self-effacing man with a particularly dry sense of humour, who often made fun of his own shortcomings. His seven PhD students, 30 honours students and generations of undergraduate students can attest to his incredible patience, even with the most academically challenged. His patience with students was in striking contrast to his intolerance of pomposity or grandstanding by fellow academics. He took some delight in puncturing over-inflated egos. He had no hesitation in declaring 'the emperor had no clothes' and, as a true friend does, if he thought your ideas or thinking were a bit flakey, he would not hesitate to point out your lack of trousers. Richard set us an example not just as a scientist but also as a family man, who managed to balance the demands of an academic life with devotion to his wife and children, whom he clearly adored and who clearly adored him. One could not ask for a finer colleague, mentor and friend.

Mike Clarke
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