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Obituary

John Warham

11 October 1919–12 May 2010

John Warham was born in Halifax, Yorkshire, UK, on 11 October 1919 and died in Christchurch, New Zealand, on 12 May 2010. In the intervening 90-year period he became world-renowned for his wildlife photography and research into seabird ecology.

Soon after his birth, John's family moved to Doncaster and then to Retford, where he attended the local grammar school; it was here that John developed an interest in natural history. At the age of 18, he began his working life as a laboratory assistant at a local textile firm. His plans to complete a degree in colour chemistry were sidelined by the Second World War, during which he spent 6.5 years in the British Army. John met his future wife, a nurse, Pat Sabido, at a camp outside Taunton, and they were married in 1943 at Retford. Following demobilisation from the army in 1946 with the rank of Captain, John returned to the firm he had left at the start of the war and became involved in management, instigating many efficiency measures.

In 1951, John's nature photography and interest in natural history led to his first book, *Bird Watcher's Delight*, on the birds of Sherwood Forest. Long hours spent watching the birds closely from a hide led to a change of emphasis from photography to studying the behaviour of birds and to allow individual birds to be recognised, John became a bird bander. About this time John and Pat made a trip to Skomer, where they became acquainted with auks and Manx Shearwaters – the latter being the first of the petrels that were to feature so strongly in their lives.

By 1952 the Warhams were able to sell their photographs with some confidence, and so decided to leave the UK to look at the wildlife overseas before it was all gone. Consequently, they shipped a 15-cwt truck that had been used in the Western Desert, a large tent, a small library and equipment to run a darkroom without the need for mains electricity out to Western Australia and for the next 9 years wandered Australia, often camping in remote areas for long periods. They travelled extensively from Leeuwin to the Kimberleys, across the Nullarbor Plain to the eastern states and Bass Strait, north to the tip of Cape York Peninsula, and then through the Red Centre back to Melbourne. Along the way they visited many offshore islands, with seabirds being of particular interest. At the end of this period John spent 15 months as a biologist with the 1959–61 Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition to Macquarie Island, where his main study projects concerned Rockhopper Penguins, Royal Penguins and White-headed Petrels.

In 1961, on their way back to the UK, John and Pat spent 10 weeks in New Zealand, where they saw much of the unique wildlife. After John completed a B.Sc. with First-class Honours at the University of Durham in 1965, he and Pat returned to New Zealand, where John had obtained the position of Lecturer in Zoology at the University of Canterbury. John's research initially concerned crested penguins and involved expeditions to The Snares (for research on Snares Crested Penguins), Campbell Island (Rockhopper Penguins), Antipodes Island (Rockhopper and Erect-crested Penguins) and a mainland site on Jackson Head (Fiordland Crested Penguin). These trips to the subantarctic islands also allowed John to initiate studies of albatrosses and petrels – particularly Buller's Albatross, Sooty Shearwater and Mottled Petrel.

John Warham holding his Australian National Antarctic Research Expeditions Medal. Photo by Matt Walters, School of Biological Sciences, University of Canterbury, New Zealand.

As an academic, John was incredibly focussed on the tasks at hand; he was always willing to help students and colleagues who sought assistance, but during work hours he had no time for idle chitchat. Once the questions were answered, the discussion ended and he would subtly – but always politely – herd you toward the door, which seemed to open miraculously then close behind you. As a supervisor he was of the old British school: he expected his students to show a high degree of independence. John accepted that his students may not meet the exceptionally high standards he set for himself but woe betide those who did not strive for these exacting standards. John kept a fatherly eye on the careers of his former students, and from time to time he would phone with an insightful critique of a recent publication. He would begin with an overall assessment of its contribution and then perhaps draw attention to papers that could profitably have been cited or to grammatical errors that remained. John was a stickler for detail; you may get something past referees and the editor, but not John's eagle eyes.

Kerry-Jayne Wilson's career began as an undergraduate working as John's assistant on The Snares, and what budding ornithologist could ask for a better start. John was a tough but fair taskmaster. He expected students to work hard and he required the job to be done well; if work was not up to his rigorous standards, they were told so in no uncertain terms. One cold rainy day, Kerry-Jayne returned to the hut, wet, cold and filthy and commented adversely on the long hours and harsh conditions. John replied that to work on birds is a privilege that requires dedication and rigorous attention to detail;

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if Kerry-Jayne was not prepared to pay the price, she was not deserving of the privilege. She may not have thanked him for that little lesson at the time, but has remembered it on numerous occasions during the subsequent 40 years.

John's first concern was always for the welfare of birds, but this had to be based on good solid science. One of Kerry-Jayne's tasks on The Snares was to catch, weigh, measure and band every Fiordland Crested Penguin that came ashore. One rainy day she took a penguin to the hut then, while seated, leaned forward for calipers and notebook. These penguins are large and feisty and the bird reached up, got one mandible up each of her nostrils, and cut both nostrils to the bone before piercing her nasal septum. This was extremely painful and the blood loss profuse. The bird was released with the bill length unmeasured. Months later John enquired about the missing measurement, and Kerry-Jayne recounted the circumstances, describing in particular the pain and blood loss. John then told her that her first concern should always be for the welfare of the bird, second to obtain a complete set of accurate data, and then, and only then, to attend to her own injuries. John lived by this creed: his hands bore the scars of innumerable seabird bites.

John's lectureship included examining theses written by post-graduates, and so he decided to write one himself, based on the data he had collected on biometrics of the petrels. This formed the basis of his M.Sc. thesis submitted to his parent university at Durham and in due course he was awarded this degree in 1968. Another advantage of moving to the University of Canterbury was that it was possible for staff to complete a Ph.D., and he was awarded this in 1973 for his work on crested penguins. In this thesis, John brought together the results of his field work on five of the six species of crested penguins undertaken at The Snares and Antipodes Islands, Macquarie Island and South Westland. These results were published as a series of papers that, 30 years later, are still important references. A further academic honour followed in 1985, when John was awarded a D.Sc. from the University of Durham.

John officially retired from the University of Canterbury as a Reader in 1985. Over the years he studied a large number of petrel and penguin species and his published record of these studies is prodigious – approximately 140 papers and articles; from his fieldwork in Australia and New Zealand alone he published at least 60 scientific papers on seabirds, covering aspects of the biology of at least 23 species.

The results of John's research in Australia were summarised in The Handbook of Australian Seabirds, which he co-authored with the Serventy brothers in 1971. Following his official retirement, John embarked on his most ambitious projects – a two-volume monograph of the petrels – the first volume published in 1990 and the second in 1996. In conjunction with this monograph, widely acclaimed as the definitive text on the petrels, John compiled more than 14 400 references in a bibliography of petrels from Aristotle to the present.

The significance of John's contribution to ornithology has been widely recognised in Australia and overseas. His many honours include the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union Serventy Medal in 1992. He became a Fellow of the Ornithological Society of New Zealand in 1999 and in June 2001 he achieved an honour rare for a field biologist when he was made a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to ornithology.

John's legacy is a greatly enhanced knowledge and appreciation of the biology of seabirds throughout the world, photographic essays of remote places in an earlier time, and a body of former students inspired to continue high-quality long-term ecological research, sometimes in remote places of the world.

Paul Sagar
Kerry-Jayne Wilson