

CSIRO Publishing

# Emu



Volume 98, 1998  
© Birds Australia 1998

All enquiries and manuscripts should be directed to



**CSIRO**  
PUBLISHING

*Emu*

CSIRO Publishing  
PO Box 1139 (150 Oxford St)  
Collingwood, Vic. 3066, Australia

Telephone: 61 3 9662 7622

Fax: 61 3 9662 7611

Email: [emu@publish.csiro.au](mailto:emu@publish.csiro.au)



Birds Australia

Published by CSIRO Publishing  
for the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union

[www.publish.csiro.au/journals/emu](http://www.publish.csiro.au/journals/emu)

## FRANK NORMAN ROBINSON 1911–1996

Norman was born in England on 22 October 1911 and after studying economics and languages at Cambridge, joined the British American Tobacco Company and was stationed in Singapore from where he travelled widely in Malaya, Thailand and Borneo. After a brief rather hectic time in the Malayan Air Force flying Tiger Moths against the Japanese invasion and an even briefer time in the Navy, he was taken prisoner and spent three and a half horrific years in a POW camp on Sumatra. After recuperating in England, he returned to Singapore to finish his time with BAT. He married a childhood neighbour, Joan, on leave in Australia, and their daughter Shona was born in Singapore. On doctor's orders, Norman was not allowed to remain in the tropics and in 1949 the family settled in Australia, living their first year in a tent in Canberra, which was a bit of a contrast!

After two years with the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Norman transferred to CSIRO in 1951 as Technical Secretary of the newly formed Wildlife Survey Section, a role which he held for ten years, being responsible for the administration of the rapidly growing unit at the time myxomatosis broke out. One of Norman's favourite stories was that he prematurely started the 1954 duck shooting season near Corowa. At three in the morning, the team that he was assisting to sample rabbits to test for virus found that they were a few short and he volunteered to shoot the necessary extra ones. This he did and the entire Murray Valley erupted as the duck shooters who had been waiting for dawn to break on the legal start to the season felt that they had been upstaged by some early bird! Always interested in birds, by the late fifties he was working in cooperation with Dom Serventy in the study of shearwaters in south-east Australia. An important outcome of this work was his interest in the recently discovered mixed breeding colonies of Short-tailed Shearwater *Puffinus tenuirostris* and Wedge-tailed Shearwater *P. pacificus* on Montagu Island.<sup>1,2</sup> This annual census work continues to the present as an uninterrupted long-term study of nearly 40 years.

When Harry Frith succeeded Francis Ratcliffe as Chief in 1960, he gave Norman the opportunity to develop his early interests in radio towards the newly emerging subject of sound recording, in particular of animal sounds<sup>4,5</sup> and to set up the Division's first sound



laboratory. In the course of this, Norman collaborated with ABC Rural Department commentator Fraser Parkes to produce some fascinating and widely enjoyed broadcasts explaining and introducing some of Norman's earliest recordings. These programs opened the eyes of many Australian ornithologists to a developing technology.

Harry Frith and Norman developed an intensive study of Superb Lyrebirds in the Tidbinbilla Fauna Reserve near Canberra. By using microphones at various points throughout the study area and by monitoring environmental conditions, they explained the use of song by Lyrebirds in the defence of territory and in attracting a mate.<sup>16</sup> One of many people influenced by Norman's enthusiasm was a long-time fishing mate, the then Chairman of CSIRO, Sir Frederick White; Fred provided the necessary impetus for the compilation and preservation of the CSIRO Wildlife Sound Library, a catalogue of which was presented by Norman at the 1974 International Ornithological Congress in Canberra (a later edition was published in 1987<sup>18</sup>). This long friendship meant that Fred, as an eminent physicist

himself, appreciated the importance of rapidly developing technology and generously donated a new Kay Sonagraph that enabled the sound laboratory to prepare the sonagrams for the vocal sections of the first two volumes of HANZAB.

In 1965, Norman transferred to the Divisional laboratory in Western Australia where he devoted his expertise in sound recording to establishing a reliable census method for the Noisy Scrub-bird, then on the verge of extinction, a species that is renowned for its invisibility.<sup>6,10,11,17</sup> He was also instrumental in developing an acoustic method for protecting grapes from Silvereyes *Zosterops lateralis*.<sup>14,15</sup> During his time at Tidbinbilla, Norman had amassed many miles of tape recorded lyrebird song and he spent much of the last thirty years analysing these calls, developing a theory on the evolution of bird song to explain the widespread use of mimicry and, in particular, its role in affording social contact, 'phatic' communication.<sup>7-9,13,19</sup> Norman and his long-time friend and fellow lyrebird enthusiast Syd Curtis studied and recorded the differences between the two lyrebirds (Albert's and Superb), culminating in a joint paper on the vocal displays of these birds.<sup>20</sup>

After Norman's retirement from CSIRO in 1971, he and Joan spent the winters in Kalbarri, where he continued to record a wide variety of bird song, returning to Perth each summer. Besides his personal efforts in sound recording a variety of birds, Norman was extremely generous with his time and advice to others and in many ways he may be regarded as the 'father of Australian bird recording'. The peak of his achievement has been the initiation and establishment of the archival collection of recordings of animal sounds now held in The National Wildlife Sounds Collection in Canberra. Most of us owe a debt to Norman for his exemplary search for perfection in recording and his insistence on precise, detailed annotation of all recordings.

Norman will be sadly missed by his many friends. Few people have influenced Australian Ornithology so widely and selflessly. He died in his sleep after a brief illness, on 1 December 1997. He is survived by his wife Joan, daughter Shona and grandchildren Ben, Gus and Emily.

Ian Rowley

#### Publications of F. Norman Robinson

- 1 1962. Shearwaters breeding on Montague Is. N.S.W. Emu 61, 292-293.
- 2 1963. The breeding of the Sooty Shearwater on Courts Is. Tasmania and Montagu Is. N.S.W. Emu 63, 304-306.
- 3 1970. Catalogue of recorded bird calls. Technical Memorandum No. 4, Division of Wildlife Research, CSIRO.
- 4 1970. Regional variation in the visual and acoustic signals of the male Musk Duck *Biziura lobata*. CSIRO Wildlife Research 15, 73-78.
- 5 1971. How to record bird song. Electronics Australia, March, 12-15.
- 6 1972. Some recent developments in the study of the Noisy Scrub-bird *Atrichornis clamosus*. Abstract. Pp. 683-684 in Proceedings of the XV International Ornithological Congress, The Hague, 1970. Ed. K.H. Voous. E.J. Brill, Leiden.
- 7 1973. Vocal mimicry and bird song evolution. New Scientist 58, 742-743.
- 8 1974. The function of vocal mimicry in some avian displays. Emu 74, 9-10.
- 9 1975. Vocal mimicry and the evolution of bird song. Emu 75, 23-27.
- 10 1976. The Noisy Scrub-bird: an interim report. G.T. Smith and F.N. Robinson. Emu 76, 37-42.
- 11 1976 The Noisy Scrub-bird — fact and fiction. F.N. Robinson and G.T. Smith. Western Australian Naturalist 13, 119-123.
- 12 1977. Environmental origins of the Menurae. Emu 77, 167-168.
- 13 1977. Mimicry in bird song. Australian Bird Watcher 7, 1-4.
- 14 1978. A preliminary report on an acoustic method for protection of crops from damage by Silvereyes *Zosterops lateralis*. T.A. Knight and F.N. Robinson. Technical Memorandum No. 14, Division of Wildlife Research, CSIRO.
- 15 1978. A possible method of protecting crops by using an acoustical device to interfere with communication calls of Silvereyes. T.A. Knight and F.N. Robinson. Emu 78, 235-236.
- 16 1981. The Superb Lyrebird *Menura novaehollandiae* at Tidbinbilla, ACT. F.N. Robinson and H.J. Frith. Emu 81, 145-157.
- 17 1982. The Noisy Scrub-bird in Western Australia. S.J.J.F. Davies, G.T. Smith, and F.N. Robinson. Pp. 117-127 in Species at Risk: Research in Australia. Proceedings of a Symposium on Biology of Rare and Endangered Species in Australia, 1981. Eds R.H. Groves and W.D.L. Ride. Australian Academy of Science, Canberra.
- 18 1987. A Guide to Recorded Australian Wildlife Sounds — Birds. Eds P. Fullagar and F.N. Robinson. National Film and Sound Archive and Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.
- 19 1991. Phatic communication in bird song. Emu 91, 61-63.
- 20 1996. The vocal displays of the lyrebirds (Menuridae). F.N. Robinson and H. Sydney. Curtis. Emu 96, 258-275.