

OBITUARY

HENRY LAWRIE BELL 1929-1984

Although it is certain that I knew Harry Bell through personal chats at the Sydney monthly ornithological meetings much earlier, the first recorded evidence of mutual field study is on December 1, 1957. We visited the then inviting tidal flats at the mouth of Cook's River estuary in Botany Bay and also the Eastlakes swamps, mainly fringed by golf courses and part of the early water reservoir area of Sydney. However, the best-remembered early outing together, this time associated with Keith Hindwood and Ern Hoskin, was a visit to the Garrawarra Primitive Area, now a part of the Royal National Park, on 31 August, 1958. That occasion was memorable for two reasons. First, Harry's keen eyes had located the Spine-tailed Logrunner in that isolated patch of near-coastal rain forest shortly before, which when reported at the meeting had aroused much interest. Secondly, it was very soon after I had purchased a camera suitable for taking colour slides and some of those taken at my first attempt were of our outing that day.

It had long been a curious puzzle of discontinuous distribution that the Logrunner occurred in the forests approximately 100 km north of Sydney and certainly was not uncommon in the Illawara scrubs to the south, but unknown at that time in apparently suitable habitats between. In *The Birds of Sydney* (1958, p 75) its known occurrence nearest to Sydney was at Burning Palms, the name of the beach adjacent to the Garrawarra brush. Somewhat vague records by A.J. North include 'Geire' and 'Gera', which probably refer to what is now known as Garie, which is adjacent to Burning Palms. The same author, in his *Nests and Eggs of Birds found Breeding in Australia and Tasmania* (vol. 1, p 317, 1901-1904), mentions Port Hacking, which certainly requires more explicit evidence to support it on present knowledge. Such remembrances indicate the ability in the field and keen enthusiasm of Harry Bell, even in such early years. The outings we had together were clearly indicative of his talent for ornithological study. For many years I engrossed the history of Botany Bay birdlife and the assistance Harry was able to contribute from the Maroubra-La Perouse area was very helpful.

Harry's interest in birds started early. While a pupil at Maroubra school he came under the helpful guidance of a teacher, David Leithhead, who at the time was the NSW Gould League Secretary. In a recent discussion David told me that Harry frequently reported to him unusual sightings and nesting habits of the local birds, indicating enthusiasm and ability at that age.

Unfortunately, his army engagements and subsequent move to New Guinea prohibited the close friendship in field work that was clearly apparent in the 1950s and 1960s. The 16th International Ornithological Congress held in Canberra in August 1974 was a splendid opportunity for renewal of our long-standing friendship. Harry and his family then lived at Canberra. My wife and I enjoyed very much a part of that time at his home. He was a person with a tremendous desire for achievement, which I realized in our walks around Canberra and so many other places.

His move to New Guinea from 1975 to 1978, with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel, opened the way for him to become involved even more deeply in ornithological research. On his return Harry mentioned that he had accumulated so many data that he would have difficulty finding journals willing to publish it all. The impact of his studies and subsequent papers on the international scientific community can best be illustrated by the words of Professor Jared Diamond in *Nature* (vol. 312, pp 669, December 1984).

"Most biologists have their permanent homes in the temperate zones. The most species-rich biological communities are in the tropics, the rainforests of which are often described by stereotypes such as 'seasonally constant' and 'complex'. Dr Harry Bell of the University of New England in Armidale, Australia is responsible for one of the few uninterrupted and intensive ecological studies by biologists resident in the tropics and his recent papers provide a wealth of quantitative information for tropical bird communities of New Guinea."

"Until recent decades, tropical ecology was regarded as hopelessly complex, and graduating ecologists were advised to study simpler communities like the desert and the arctic. Bell's papers set new standards for quantitative long-term tropical work and show that rainforest studies are complex and fascinating but not hopeless."

Harry returned to Australia in 1978 and undertook a four year study of the ecology and behaviour of thornbills for his Ph.D. There is every reason to believe that this will become as widely read and respected as his New Guinea work. In his reply to my letter of congratulation he told me that he could not decide whether he should be addressed as Dr or Lieutenant-Colonel, but I was assured that he definitely knew which title was the hardest to obtain!

Australasian ornithology is all the poorer that Harry passed away at such a comparatively early age. It is particularly tragic so soon after he had reached profes-

sional status. He had only recently been invited to address conferences of both the British Ornithologists' Union and the American Ornithologists' Union.

Even though our personal acquaintances have been so limited in recent years I know that I have lost a valuable,

long-esteemed and knowledgeable friend. My deepest sympathies are extended to Harry's widow Naomi and to his three children, Ian, Bruce and Ann.

Arnold McGill