

D.L. Serventy Medal 1996: Citation

CLIFF AND DAWN FRITH

This is the first time that two people have been nominated jointly for the Serventy Medal. This is because the majority of their work and publications in Australia are produced as a team of two, and if awarded the medal it would be only fair that it should be a joint award.

Cliff Frith came to Australia when his parents migrated from England, and his first job was at Taronga Park Zoo, Sydney. From 1967–70, he served with the Harold Hall Expeditions from the British Museum, collecting in northern Australia. Following this, he spent a year for the Royal Society studying the birds of Aldabra Atoll in the Indian Ocean, where he met Dawn, who, after obtaining her Ph.D from London University, was a visiting scientist there at the invitation of the Royal Society, studying invertebrate populations.

From 1974–77, they worked in Thailand, the last three months with the BBC. From 1978–81, Cliff was a full-time post-graduate student of Monash University, working for a Ph.D. At this time the team embarked on an extensive study of the ecology of several rainforest birds at Paluma near Townsville. Cliff did not complete his Ph.D. Instead they became resident in North Queensland, embarking on several long-term studies of individually marked birds of species hitherto little known; in particular the Tooth-billed Bowerbird *Scenopoeetes dentirostris*.

During this period, they also made repeated extended visits to New Guinea; in particular, four two month stays in the area around Tari Gap where they caught and banded many different species. From these long-term studies, they have written the first, and often only accounts of the nesting biology and behaviour of a number of birds of paradise and bower birds. At present, they are contracted to Oxford University Press (with Bruce Beehler) to produce a book on Birds of Paradise in the Bird Families of the World series.

All this work has been entirely at their own expense, funded by the sale of high quality photographs, and latterly, by the publication of a series of excellent small books on the fauna and flora of Australian tropical rainforests, and most recently by a very substantial book on the natural history and ecology of Cape York, written by Dawn.

The Friths have been extremely prolific publishers of their work. Between 1978–1995 papers have appeared in *Emu* (16), *Australian Bird Watcher* (10),



Bulletin of British Ornithologists' Club (6), *Sunbird* (5), *Corella* (4), *Muruk* (4), *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum* (2), *Ibis* (2), *Condor* (1), *Biotropica* (1).

Their contributions to ornithology in Australia have been significant in two areas.

Their many 'popular' publications on the fauna of North Queensland present good factual information on natural history with excellent photographs; they sell well, and introduce visitors and locals alike to the value of what is around them. This must be significant in promoting an understanding of the need for conservation in this fragile environment.

Their studies of the biology of birds in the tropics began before rainforest conservation became a crusade. Much of the available information on birds in New Guinea and northern Australia comes from relatively short-term collecting expeditions, and the detail of the avifauna of New Guinea/tropical Australia is less known than that of tropical America or Africa. Longer term studies by people who live in their study area are scarce. As well as the Friths' many papers on the important things they have encountered along the way, the papers based on their long-term studies of marked individuals of several species of bowerbird are a major contribution to ornithology and tropical biology.

The Friths represent all that is best in truly amateur ornithology. Their contribution as a team to our knowledge of the birds of New Guinea and northern Australia has occupied their lives for the past 18 years, and although they have produced a long list of what must be considered scientific publications, one can only say that they have done it all for the love of the subject.

Ian Rowley