

Obituary

IRYNEJ SKIRA

1950–2005

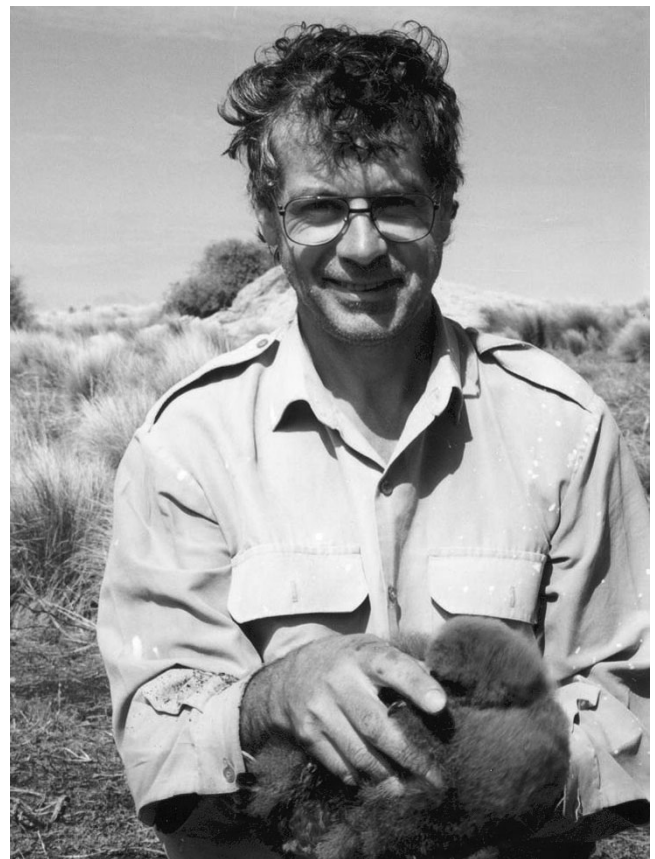
Dr Irynej Skira was recognised worldwide for his research on Short-tailed Shearwaters (muttonbirds), but his work was much broader. From whales to seagulls, pest control and sub-Antarctic islands and a range of wildlife issues, there was little Irynej didn't have some involvement with over his almost 33 years as a Scientific Officer with the Tasmanian Government. Right up to his death, he was secretary of the Department of Primary Industry, Wildlife and Environment Animal Ethics Committee and was responsible for government management of zoos and wildlife parks in Tasmania.

Irynej was born in Launceston in 1950, the son of Ukrainian migrants. His curiosity about the natural world developed early as he began to explore the wilderness of his island home. One of his first work experiences was to assist Dr R. (Bob) Green, the Curator of Zoology at the Queen Victoria Museum in Launceston. His science degree from the University of Tasmania led him to the position of Ranger at Cradle Mountain Reserve in 1972.

Irynej was offered and accepted a position on Macquarie Island in 1972 and he was to revisit twice more. There he studied the ecology of rabbits and rabbit fleas, assisted in research on feral cats and seal and albatross biology. The work established a baseline to monitoring that is still the key to the management program 30 years on. The scientific results have been used in various papers and were the basis of Irynej's MSc, gained in 1980. His work on Macquarie Island equipped him well to represent government on the Antarctic Animal Ethics Committee. Irynej's trips to Macquarie Island were a window to his future as they led to his love of small islands and seabirds.

During the mid-1970s he became field assistant to Dominic Serventy, one of the fathers of Australian ornithology, who had been studying the Short-tailed Shearwater since 1947 on Fisher Island in the Furneaux Group. Irynej assumed responsibility for research and management of that program in 1978. The research has been expanded to collaborative studies with Yamashina Institute for Ornithology in Tokyo, Murdoch University in Western Australia and the University of Otago, New Zealand. Fisher Island continues to be a reference point for visiting scientists, naturalists and artists. Irynej was the author of more than 60 papers and articles published in scientific journals and books. It is largely because of his efforts that the Short-tailed Shearwater is now the subject of the longest-running scientific investigation, spanning more than half a century. A true field biologist, he was able to mesh his field observations with scientific objectivity. As a result, his work brought about a greater understanding and appreciation of the Tasmanian muttonbirds.

Through muttonbirding, in 1975, Irynej became involved with the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. Being responsi-



ble for the Muttonbird Management Program, he liaised with the community, either through individuals or organisations such as the Aboriginal Land Council of Tasmania. His rapport with the community is borne out by his PhD, awarded by the University of Tasmania in 1995.

Irynej was hard-working and always generous with his time, sharing his wealth of knowledge with students, wildlife care groups and volunteers. Conservation of the Short-tailed Shearwater and Tasmania's native wildlife was of utmost importance to him. He despaired as he observed the gradual disappearance of Tasmania's native forests and with them the loss of habitat for other native flora and fauna.

Irynej gave regular twilight talks at the Clifton Bluff Shearwater colony. It was there where he met his wife Suzanne in 2000. They married on his beloved Fisher Island just two months before he died.

Irynej's death has brought a premature end to a remarkable and passionate relationship with nature. This softly spoken, unassuming and unique man, who was greatly admired and respected by his peers, moved gently on the earth, but left a huge legacy. In recognition of Irynej's work and as a personal tribute, the Second International Manx Shearwater Workshop, held late in Northern Ireland in 2005, was dedicated to his memory.

Suzanne Skira