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GRAHAM MARTIN PIZZEY, A.M., D.App.Sc. (Hon.)
Naturalist, Photographer, Author
4 July 1930 – 12 November 2001

With the death of Graham Pizzey, we have lost a giant among those who have made outstanding contributions to our understanding of the nature of Australia. His infectious enthusiasm and energy, and his rare ability to reach out to ordinary people through his photographs and words, meant that Graham brought conservation alive to thousands upon thousands of Australians. At the same time his intense capacity for detail and scholarship resulted in considerable ornithological achievements.

Born in Melbourne, Graham Pizzey grew up in East Ivanhoe on the Yarra River, where he commenced his education. Although destined to become an outstanding naturalist, Graham's early schooling was along traditional family lines, with the intention of him becoming a major participant in the family leather business.

But Graham was his own man, even in those early days. At the age of seven he convinced his father to purchase a copy of Leach's *An Australian Bird Book*. He seized the opportunities provided when boarding at Geelong Grammar School to explore the local countryside and to indulge in his love of the natural world, and of photography. Undoubtedly these student days also provided him with his command of the English language, and enabled him to develop his gift of painting word-pictures which in later years so clearly provided the reader with an understanding of the text.

After matriculating he joined the family firm as a trainee in 1948. But even then he had not forsaken his involvement with the natural world, for in the same year he published his first article in the *Wildlife Magazine*, edited by the legendary Crosbie Morrison, who fostered Graham's talent.

From 1948 to 1960 he continued to pursue a career in the family business, including undertaking overseas study tours and studying Commerce part-time at the University of Melbourne. But all the time he was publishing articles and photographs on natural history.

In 1957 he married Sue Taylor, who became his lifelong supporter and partner in work, assisting on field expeditions and typing his manuscripts.

Three years later, with Sue's strong support, Graham decided to follow his instincts and to forsake an assured career to become a freelance natural history writer and photographer. This was a very courageous move in 1960, when natural history and conservation were barely appreciated in Australia. It would be another six years before the publication of Jock Marshall's controversial *The Great Extermination* awakened many to the need for better understanding of our flora and fauna and the actions needed to ensure their continued existence.

Over the years Graham wrote for the *Melbourne Age* (1954–64) and the *Melbourne Herald* (1965–83), often



illustrating his pithy and enjoyable articles with photographs he took himself. So, over a period of nearly 30 years, Graham Pizzey became a household name, a voice for conservation that thousands of people heard and trusted.

During this time he also wrote for many overseas journals, including *National Geographic*, and took part in some early ABC television natural history documentaries. Besides these media activities, he was also working closely with academics and scientists who valued his knowledge and advice.

I first met Graham in May 1964 when he was working with Dr Doug Dorward of Monash University and Max Downes of the Victorian Fisheries and Wildlife Department on projects to conserve the disjunct populations of Cape Barren Geese. This was one of many conservation issues with which Graham became involved. Another, in which he played a pivotal role, was the saving from clearing of the Little Desert in Victoria.

As the consummate searcher for the truth, Graham would seek the facts and present them — often in great detail — in his direct, but courteous, manner. Thus he was a forceful and effective advocate for wildlife conservation and the establishment of well managed Parks and Reserves.

A major event was a commission from Collins in 1965 to prepare *A Field Guide to the Birds of Australia*. This project consumed Graham for the next 15 years as he diligently

sought the information he needed. He took many field trips with his family to remote parts of Australia, because he wanted to compile his own field notes on every Australian bird, believing that his personal notes added authenticity to his texts.

Graham was not satisfied with less than the complete data on a topic, and would keep going until he obtained it. This might be when seeking information from a scientist or government agency, or when seeking the best photograph of a bird, or the best recording of a bird call. To this end he also accumulated an excellent natural history library. He was then able to compose the concise and precise narratives for which he was noted.

Graham's meticulous attention to detail meant that the Collins project took somewhat longer than originally planned. The *Field Guide* was published in 1980 and immediately became a major reference work. For this book Graham received the C.J. Dennis Award for Literary Merit, a remarkable achievement for a natural history text, and also the Whitley Award of the Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales. It has been reprinted 14 times. A new edition, in a new format and with illustrations by Frank Knight, was published in 1997, and has achieved even greater acclaim.

Graham's energy also enabled him to serve on many boards and councils, including the Peninsula Conservation League (Founding President), the Australian Conservation Foundation (Council Member), the Victorian National Parks Authority (Council Member), the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (Councillor, Member of the Records Appraisal Committee), the Friends of the Museum of Victoria (Founding President) and the Victorian Wetlands Trust (Founding Council Member). He was also an Honorary Ornithologist to the Museum of Victoria from 1975.

The publication of the *Field Guide* in 1980 gave Graham the time to pursue new fields. He had always been passionate about communicating his love and understanding of the natural world to others, and he was intensely interested in managing and creating habitats to foster flora and fauna. So his appointment as the first Warden of the Coolart Reserve near Westernport Bay in Victoria provided him with some hands-on opportunities.

Graham helped fine-tune the new 'Minsmere'-style hides at Coolart, and he designed the extensions. He created the New Wetlands at Coolart to complement the original lagoon built by Tom Luxton in 1937 and amended by him in 1964. And he continued his education role with regular lectures and slide shows using his own excellent photographs.

His outstanding work at Coolart led to his appointment as a consultant to The Briars, another wetlands reserve on the

Mornington Peninsula, where he also designed new hides and wetlands, and developed audio-visual presentations for the visitors.

Graham was passionate about communicating his love for, and knowledge of, Australian natural history to as wide an audience as possible. In addition to his work at Coolart he led Bird Week tours at Gypsy Point in Victoria and at O'Reilly's on the Lamington Plateau in Queensland.

In 1992 Graham and Sue purchased 40 ha of degraded woodland in the Grampians in Western Victoria. This property provided more opportunities for Graham to manage and rehabilitate natural ecosystems, as well as build a new home. 'Heathlands', as it came to be named, provided Graham with more information on the relationships between plants and wildlife, as well as providing opportunities for visitors to join Graham in exploring nature.

He continued writing, again receiving the C.J. Dennis Award in 1988 for *A Garden of Birds*, in which he presents his experiences and observations over the years. This theme was also the basis for *Journey of a Lifetime*, published in 2000. In 1991 his biography of his friend and mentor Crosbie Morrison was published.

In addition to his literary awards Graham became a Member of the Order of Australia in 1977, received the Australian Natural History Medallion in 1986 for 'an outstanding contribution to Australian natural history', and was granted an Honorary Doctorate of Applied Science by RMIT University in 2000 for his contribution to the understanding of Australian natural history.

Many of his friends and colleagues have commented on Graham as 'forthright', 'persistent', 'meticulous', 'patient', 'thorough', 'unruffled', 'honest', 'impatient with bureaucracies'.

Graham has left a remarkable legacy — nine outstanding books; better wildlife habitats at Coolart, The Briars, Heathlands; excellent bird hides at visitor sites (especially Coolart and The Briars); some of Australia's best wildlife photography. Much respected by all who came into contact with him, Graham was passionate about Australia's natural resources with an earnestness that was always polite. He was a pleasure to know and a valuable source of information and advice.

He is survived by his wife Sue, his children Caroline, Sarah and Tom, and four grandchildren.

It has been an inspiration and a privilege to have known him and worked with him on Australia's birds.

Sid Cowling