An Appreciation

HARRY FRITH

In the ten years since Harry's death we have witnessed the flowering of many of the projects in which he turned the first sod. It is an appropriate time to recall his outstanding contributions to Australian ornithology.

Harry was driven by the urgency of conserving Australian birds; this drive spilled over to other wildlife but birds were his highest priority. I recall him telling me that he left the CSIRO Division of Irrigation Research to join the Wildlife Survey Section when he found that his field notebook had six columns to record the attributes of the orange trees that he was paid to study and nine to record what the Zebra Finches were doing in the orange trees. Born at Kyogle and brought up on his family's dairy farm, he had seen the wholesale clearing of the Richmond River scrub by his grandfather and father. He had gone with his father, Richard, in search of pigeons for the pot, each expedition longer than the one before as the scrub retreated before the settlers' axes and fires. He learnt much from his father, a love of birds, a love of the bush, a knowledge of how to read the signs — all motivations of the drive that lay behind his achievements. In the years of the Second World War, when Harry served in the AIF in New Guinea, he saw the riches of tropical rainforest highlighting the potential biological diversity of the fragmented bush on northern rivers of New South Wales. As his career progressed he strove to counter the habitat destruction that was sweeping through the outback.

First and foremost Harry saw the need for real information about the biology of Australian birds. His work on the Malleefowl, reported in the scientific literature and summarised in his classic book, *The Malleefowl*, was one of the first Australian studies in which rigorous experimental science was taken into the field to test hypotheses. His elegant work in the mounds at Yenda provided a wealth of information about the bird and has inspired many generations of students to explore the biology of megapodes. But more than this they showed that experiments could be done in the field, even in Australia.

His ability to grasp the general picture led him to recognise the importance of the riverine plains of New South Wales to Australian ducks. His pioneering studies of the breeding, feeding and moving of Australian ducks began to show the world that Australian birds

Harry and Joe.

were not drab copies of their northern hemisphere counterparts. They had evolved new ways of coming to terms with a land that was both harsh and bounteous. Harry's hypotheses about our ducks were not always correct but they inspired later students to look critically at the boom and bust biology of our inland. Two other outcomes were critically important. Harry went to look at the Magpie Goose in the rice fields of Humpty Doo and, at about the same time, became involved in the practical conservation issues with which the New South Wales government was beginning to wrestle.

Magpie Geese swept Harry off his feet. It was my privilege to work with him on this endearing bird. As he said apologetically one day to a row of geese that we were dissecting, 'It's only because we love you ...'. The Magpie Geese led on to a passion to preserve at least some of the great biological wealth of the coastal plain and Arnhemland. This was early in the development of the Northern Territory and Harry was able to influence the Administration first to have him on their wildlife advisory committee and then to set aside really large tracts of the Top End as national parks. He knew these areas and that knowledge resulted in the conviction carried by the recommendations of the committee. Kakadu is in a real sense Harry's greatest memorial. Many others contributed to its creation, but the only rivals to Harry's pioneering call for a vast reserve there would be the early collectors, Jackson and others, who touched only its fringes. It was Harry who saw its richness for birds, guessed and later demonstrated its richness for other wildlife, and relentlessly pursued its definition through miles of the 'plastic resistance' of the Northern Territory Administration. He was never happier than showing off the magnificence of its varied fauna to those who had not previously experienced it.

Nearer home, in the New South Wales Fauna Advisory Committee, Harry pursued the need to base conservation decisions on observed facts. At a time when waterfowl and kangaroo management policies were forming, he promoted the need for aerial estimates of abundance upon which harvesting quotas could be based. His experience in Darwin, backed by his knowledge of American studies, made his arguments convincing and have led to the development of the sophisticated counting techniques which management now takes for granted.

In later years, as Chief of the CSIRO Division of Wildlife Research, he was able to foster wildlife conservation in many ways. Two stand out. He generated in the Australian states, who have legal responsibility for the fauna, the recognition of the urgent need to build up their own conservation agencies alongside the vertebrate pest control agencies sought by farmers. Secondly, he published a national summary of Australia's conservation needs, *Wildlife Conservation*, a brave venture when little was known about many animal groups and their needs. Again that book pioneered a field to which many have now contributed.

Harry was a pioneer. We can now see the fruits of his struggles. Let us recognise his greatness, the foundation he laid has contributed to the heritage that we and our children enjoy. The research and management strategies he promoted have led to a conservation program that gives greater security to Australian birds and wildlife than they had when Harry's work started.

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