

OBITUARY

KERRY-JAYNE WILSON MNZM
6 March 1949 – 29 March 2022



Leaving Bluff, 27 November 2013. Kerry-Jayne Wilson on the rear deck of MV Akademik Shokalskiy.

In Kerry-Jayne Wilson's passing, just before dawn on 29 March 2022, the natural world lost a resolute friend and immersive story-teller. A dignifying lens of research and commentary is missing from this country's ornithological bedrock today.

Over five decades, Kerry-Jayne dedicated her natural talents as a research ecologist, teacher and author to conserving the biological systems and species to which she was drawn intuitively, even as a young child. She pursued her ambitions for greater human sensitivity to what she termed

'our fellow-travellers on this planet' by connecting people with the wilderness through her science. Hers was a restless energy to do so. It went hand in hand with her longing for adventure. Her abiding affection for birds conveyed her, often alone, to wild places on all continents, some exceedingly remote, with researching and teaching on many continents. The great southern oceans and Antarctica were particularly treasured destinations.

Kerry-Jayne grew up in Dunedin where the birdlife of the Otago Peninsula's placid harbours

and tumultuous ocean coasts awakened her interests in the natural world. She determined in her teens that her future lay in Antarctic exploration. Today, books of Antarctic and Arctic exploration populate much of her library, a not-so-ovivacious link with the frontier research hardships she herself embraced.

Later, in her Waikato adolescence, she plunged into what became a lifelong interest in caving. She pioneered courageous subterranean routes for which she is still warmly appreciated by New Zealand's caving community. At the University of Canterbury, leading petrel scientist Dr John Warham dispatched her to the Snares Islands as his undergraduate field assistant for the 1969–71 summers. There, for the first time, she became immersed in the richly enigmatic world of oceanic seabirds and their isolated, wild islands. Friend Paul Sagar says of her work there; "During her time at the University of Canterbury Kerry-Jayne spent the summers of 1969–70 & 70–71 on the Snares Islands, completing field work on sooty shearwaters and mottled petrels, at the request of Dr John Warham (Warham & Wilson 1982; Warham *et al.* 1982). In addition to these major efforts, Dr Warham also requested that Kerry-Jayne catch 100 Snares crested penguins, and record a series of specific measurements, providing Kerry-Jayne with printed forms on which to record the data. In due course, Kerry-Jayne set aside time at the Snares to complete this task. Like all crested penguins, the birds at the Snares are strong and vigorously object to being handled, and so need to be firmly restrained. Kerry-Jayne set about catching penguins, one bird at a time, sitting down with the penguin's body and flippers held between her legs whilst she used her hands to hold the head and used vernier calipers to take measurements of the beak, which were duly recorded on the printed forms. Everything went well until bird 65 when, perhaps due to a moment's distraction, the penguin freed its head from Kerry-Jayne's restraint and shot its beak up her nose, tearing the internal septum between her nostrils in the process. Tears, blood and no doubt a good dose of Anglo-Saxon flowed copiously as Kerry-Jayne retired to the hut to self-administer first aid. Sometime later she returned to the colony and completed measuring the penguins.

Sometime after the expedition Kerry-Jayne was at her desk in the Zoology Department, University of Canterbury, when Dr Warham appeared with a printed sheet liberally splattered with blood and queried Kerry-Jayne about why there were some measurements missing from bird 65, to which Kerry-Jayne gave a full explanation. Having heard this, Dr Warham explained that the first priority of research was to maintain the quality of the data,

the second priority was the welfare of the birds, leaving Kerry-Jayne to conjecture that perhaps the third priority was the welfare of the researcher!"

This scarring experience did not deter Kerry-Jayne from learning more about penguins. She devoted much of her research time and blood to these birds throughout her life, first in Antarctica and, in her last decade, to the little penguins breeding in decreasing numbers near her home at Charleston on the West Coast.

As a postgraduate student, she mapped fur seal distribution in the New Zealand region (1971–74). Expeditions along remote ocean coasts were often hazardous and physically demanding, though none was a match for her determination, as some of her field companions attest. By 1974, field work had also taken her to Antarctica and the challenging Solander Islands. Graeme Taylor relates that "Kerry-Jayne later told a story about how she was dropped off alone at the rugged Solander Islands by a small fishing boat. All her gear was piled into a rowboat and she set off to land at the nearby beach. The fishing boat left with Kerry-Jayne paddling furiously. However, the beach was impossible to land on with the swells and large rocks. So, she had to row around the 120 ha island to the far side in rather rough seas and found refuge on a rocky beach with a sea cave."

Between 1975–77, she worked alone in very isolated Newfoundland communities, recording Canadian seabird distribution and abundance. Later she spoke affectionately of the locals who came nightly to watch her write up her notes, a skill that most in that community at that time did not possess or need to. From 1977 to 1987, she was censusing populations of Adélie penguins (*Pygoscelis adeliae*) at Cape Bird and Cape Hallett. Studies at both locations investigated penguin responses to intrusive human activities (Davis *et al.* 1994).

She joined the International Survey of Antarctic Seabirds as an expert observer during this period. Her six cruises with the Survey extended knowledge of seabird distribution and abundance in the New Zealand/Ross Sea sector of the Southern Ocean (Bassett & Wilson 1983; Harper *et al.* 1984). The biological datasets she and later colleagues compiled annually – first by groundwork, later by aerial photography – help us understand today how climate change affects seabirds and the Antarctic ecosystem.

In 1986, Lincoln University appointed her to lecture in ecology. Her tenure concluded in 2009 when she retired from the position (though inevitably, not from teaching). In that year, the Students' Association celebrated her talents with its Green Award for Excellence in Teaching and

Support. She brought inspiring qualities to her teaching, for which her students remember her warmly. She was a natural historian, a vanishing class of biologist in an increasingly reductionist world. She tolerated statistics but only as a tool to complement direct observation and deduction. Many will recall her caution against seductive mathematical paths to explaining natural phenomena: 'Be sure to test your elegant models against what you see before you. Observation is key'. Not surprisingly then, she remained an outspoken advocate for field ecology as a necessity for undergraduates. Her lecturing and mentoring drew compellingly from her own innate sense of connection and compassion for the natural world. She allowed stories to say how things were. She was passionately an applied ecologist, resolutely dedicated to seeing science serve conservation. She cared as much for her students' intellects as for their souls. She gave everyone a chance, nurturing their particular talents. In return, she challenged her students and colleagues to be critical thinkers and to publish. Through these qualities, and the research she guided, Kerry-Jayne defined what it meant to be a conservation biologist.

She was capable of inspired innovation. Her interest in petrels led to her supervising a series of student projects on the impacts of broad-billed prions on Chatham petrels. Graeme Taylor recalls how Kerry-Jayne pondered for some time on how to exclude prions from the similarly sized burrows of the critically endangered petrel. Prion invasions had seemed an intractable threat to overcome. "Finally, she dreamt up the idea of a neoprene burrow flap with a narrow slit to allow tight access into burrows. We tested this on one of my expeditions to the Mercury Islands to test these flaps on the close relative Pycroft's petrels (*Pterodroma pycrofti*). The flaps worked exceptionally well. The petrels kept breeding and when used on Chatham petrel burrows, most prions were deterred. It was a major breakthrough in the management of these species, allowing for greatly reduced "hand-on" management of the prion competition."

In her professional life and in a very great deal of her own time, Kerry-Jayne worked tirelessly to clarify the biology and status of native bird species in New Zealand. Her ornithological compass was broad and diverse. She researched and supervised projects from the mountains to the oceans, throughout New Zealand and overseas. Whatever and wherever her species of interest, she exemplified the virtues of learning, recording, and reporting systematically. She supervised students and other projects in Germany, Malaysia, Sarawak, Cook Islands, Columbia, Mongolia, and the United States. She was the logical choice to

be Lincoln University's developer and director of the Masters in International Nature Conservation, co-taught with Germany's Georg-August University in Göttingen (2002–09).

Kerry-Jayne's recognition of the need for an integrated approach to conserving kererū (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*) on Banks Peninsula illustrates the reach and conviction of her applied-science thinking. She took a leading role in creating the Kaupapa Kererū programme, which brought together Ngāi Tahu, Lincoln University, Department of Conservation, Landcare Research, and the Banks Peninsula community (see for example Norton *et al.* 2005). She supervised much of the post-graduate and post-doctoral research underwriting the programme. Topics included studies of seasonal food preference, analysis by radio telemetry of kererū movements, predator impacts, feral cat ecology, and community-based survey methods. The research revealed that exotic plants, in particular tree lucerne, are important as kererū food and that kererū are seemingly able to raise chicks on plant foliage and are not obligate consumers of higher-quality foods such as fruit, as previous studies had concluded.

Kerry-Jayne's impressive publication record in Notornis (appended below), her broad teaching and supervising interests, and her deepening interest in the future of the swiftly evolving new direction in Kiwi guardianship of our natural heritage attest to the diversity of her research.

Kerry-Jayne employed the instinct and ability of the natural historian to interpret her knowledge and discoveries for specialist and lay audiences alike, in terms and language accessible to all. Fully aware of the cost to her academic publishing record, she chose to translate her science for the lay public through books rather than papers. Flight of the Huia, her impressive review of our natural heritage, was the first book to traverse the history of faunal change in New Zealand. It reviewed the ecology and conservation of those animals and was a finalist in the 2005 Montana Book Awards. Her West Coast Walking: A naturalist's guide (co-authored with the late David Given) reveals her sweeping knowledge of our remarkable biota and its places. Her final book, New Zealand Seabirds: A natural history, is a simply prodigious work whose writing she sustained through formidable willpower as her health deteriorated.

The Ornithological Society of New Zealand benefited significantly from her sense of vocation and her leadership as a mentor and researcher. She served in governance roles as South Island Vice President of the Society (1997–2003), was the inaugural Convenor of the Society's Scientific Committee (2001–2004), and represented

the Society's oceanic seabird interests in the Australasian region as the Society representative on the Australasian Seabird Group. She compiled and edited the State of New Zealand Birds reports from 2005 to 2009. She joined the local organising committee for the 20th International Ornithological Congress in Christchurch. From 2001–2010, she represented the Society on the organising committee for Australasian Ornithological Conference's (AOC). She chaired the organising group for the Blenheim AOC in 2005. Kerry-Jayne was always alert for candidates not yet aware of tasks they were uniquely suited to perform. An innocent comment at the 2003 AGM resulted in Bruce McKinlay being tasked to support Tom and Hazel Harty in their organising of the Scientific Day at Oamaru's 2004 conference.

After retiring to her charming house above the Tasman Sea in Charleston, Kerry-Jayne pursued her seabird interests through founding the West Coast Penguin Trust. She chaired the Trust until her health began to fail but remained its scientific advisor throughout. Here, in the final chapter, her duty to conserve as well as observe, was fully formed. Kerry-Jayne insisted on evidence-based approaches to Trust projects and was integral to everything the Trust did. This was literally mud-and-blood devotion to her beloved penguins and petrels, from rough-country field work in the middle of the night to retrieving data-loggers from penguins, managing research projects, advancing expert evidence in resource consent hearings, and all the day-to-day decisions and operations in-between.

Under her guidance, the Trust extended its original focus on little penguins/kororā to Fiordland crested penguins/tawaki, Westland petrels/taiko and other threatened seabirds. At the same time Kerry-Jayne downloaded a lifetime of experience and expertise to a series of significant reviews on seabirds (e.g. Wilson & Croxall 2012; Wilson & Waugh 2013; Rodríguez *et al.* 2016; Jamieson *et al.* 2016). Thomas Mattern, a colleague from the Tawaki Project recalls, 'What I admired most about Kerry-Jayne was that she would never give up. She just kept on going. Her resilience and – let's call it – stubbornness allowed her to achieve incredible if under-appreciated successes that most of us can only dream of – burrow flaps (for Chatham petrels) and initiating work on Westland petrels are just two examples that come to mind'. Thomas recalls that Kerry-Jayne's encouragement especially during and after the first year of the Tawaki Project was crucial for the project to carry on against all odds. She was always part of the first discussions to fathom what it all might mean.

Kerry-Jayne's achievements acquired due recognition over the years. The Society nominated

her for the Robert Falla Memorial Award in 2012. She was honoured by the Queen as a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to seabird conservation in 2019. However, as Thomas Mattern observes, Kerry-Jayne regarded awards and recognitions as by-products of her purpose in life and she would have been more happy to trade them for a better understanding and protection of seabirds.

BRUCE MCKINLAY
11 Brugh Place, Dunedin

EUAN KENNEDY
5 Banks Avenue, Christchurch

With contributions from: Thomas Mattern, Paul Sagar, Graeme Taylor

LITERATURE CITED

- Bassett, J.; Wilson, G. 1983. Birds and mammals observed from M.V. Benjamin Bowring South Atlantic (sic) and Ross Sea. P. 277 *In*: Fiennes, R. *To the ends of the earth*. Hodder & Stoughton, London.
- Davis, L.S.; Miller, G.D.; Wilson, K-J.; Barton, K.; Wilson, P.; Cockrem, J. 1994. Effect of different levels of disturbance/handling on recruitment in Adélie penguins. P. 40 *In*: Fraser, W.R.; Trivelpiece, W.Z. (eds). Report on Workshop on researcher-seabird interactions, July 15–17 1993, Monticello, Minnesota, USA. U.S. National Science Foundation, Washington D.C.
- Harper, P.C.; Knox, G.A.; Spurr, E.B.; Taylor, R.H.; Wilson, G.J.; Young, E.C. 1984. The status and conservation of birds in the Ross Sea sector of Antarctica. Pp. 593–608 *In*: ICBP Technical Publication, No. 2.
- Jamieson, S.E.; Tennyson, A.J.D.; Wilson, K-J.; Crotty, E.; Miskelly, C.M.; Taylor, G.A.; Waugh, S.M. 2016. A review of the distribution and size of prion (*Pachyptila* spp.) colonies throughout New Zealand. *Tuhinga* 27: 56–80.
- Norton, T.; Pauling, C.; Wilson, K-J.; Ogilvie, S.; Nugent, G.; Couch-Lewis, Y.; Manawatu, T.; Cranwell, I.; Schmechel, F.; Spencer, A. 2005. Kaupapa Kererū – an iwi-lead, community based, multi-agency approach to enhance the New Zealand native pigeon (Kererū) on Banks Peninsula. Australasian Ornithological Conference, Blenheim, 6–10 December 2005.
- Rodríguez, A.; Holmes, N.D.; Ryan, P.G.; Wilson, K-J.; Faulquier, I.; Murillo, L.; Raine, A.F.; Penniman, J.; Neves, V.; Machado, F.; Rodríguez B.; Negro, J.J.; Chiaradia, A.; Dann, P.; Anderson, T.; Metzger, B.; Shirai, M.; Deppe, L.; Wheeler, J;

- Hodum, P.; Gouveia, C.; Carreira, G.P.; Delgado-Alburquerque, L.; Guerra-Correa, C.; Couzi, F.-X.; Travers, M.; LeCorre, M. 2016. A global review of seabird mortality caused by land-based artificial lights. *Conservation Biology* 31: doi: 10.1111/cobi.12900
- Warham, J.; Wilson, G.J. 1982. The size of the sooty shearwater population at the Snares Islands, New Zealand. *Notornis* 29: 23–30.
- Warham, J.; Wilson, G.J.; Keeley, B.R. 1982. The annual cycle of the sooty shearwater, *Puffinus griseus* at the Snares Islands, New Zealand. *Notornis* 29: 269–292.
- Wilson, K-J.; Waugh, S.M. 2013. New Zealand Seabird Research Priorities Workshop, Te Papa, Wellington, Sunday 5 May 2013. <http://www.birdlife.org.au/images/uploads/branches/documents/ASG-Seabird-Priorities-may13.pdf>
- Wilson, K-J.; Croxall, J. 2012. New Zealand albatross and petrel research and monitoring priorities workshop, National Museum of New Zealand- Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, 11 August 2012. <http://www.osnz.org.nz/news/nz-albatross-and-petrel-report>
- APPENDIX:** List of Publications by Kerry-Jayne Wilson in *Notornis* and *Southern Bird*.
- Campbell, K.L.; Schotborgh, H.M.; Wilson, K-J.; Ogilvie, S. 2008. Diet of kereru (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*) in a rural-urban landscape, Banks Peninsula, New Zealand. *Notornis* 55: 173–183.
- Campbell, K.L.; Wilson, K-J.; Ogilvie, S. 2008. Notes on the breeding biology of kereru (New Zealand pigeon, *Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*) on Banks Peninsula, South Is, New Zealand. *Notornis* 55: 98–100.
- Challies, C.N.; Wilson, K-J. 1999. John Warham. Citation for election of John Warham as a fellow of the Ornithological Society of New Zealand. *Notornis* 46: 414–416.
- Freeman, A.N.D.; Wilson, K-J. 2002. Westland petrels and hoki fishery waste: opportunistic use of a readily available resource. *Notornis* 49: 139–144.
- Gangloff, B.; Wilson K-J. 2004. Feeding frequency, meal size and chick growth in Pycroft's petrel (*Pterodroma pycrofti*): preparing for chick translocations in *Pterodroma* species. *Notornis* 51: 26–32.
- Jarrett, M.; Wilson, K-J. 1999. Seasonal and diurnal attendance of kea (*Nestor notabilis*) at Halpin Creek rubbish dump, Arthurs Pass, New Zealand. *Notornis* 46: 273–286.
- Ridley, A.R.; Wilson, K-J.; Stewart, G.H. 1999. The feeding ecology of kereru and bellbird in a modified forest remnant, South Canterbury, New Zealand [Abstract]. *Notornis* 46: 408–409.
- Spurr, E.B.; Wilson, K-J.; Sagar, P.M. 1990. Bird species recorded at Cape Bird, Ross Island, Antarctica. *Notornis* 37: 37–44.
- Walsh, J.; Wilson, K-J.; Elliott, G.P. 2006. Seasonal changes in home range size and habitat selection by kākāpō (*Strigops habroptilus*) on Maud Island. *Notornis* 53: 143–149.
- Warham, J.; Wilson, G.J. 1982. The size of the sooty shearwater population at the Snares Islands, New Zealand. *Notornis* 29: 23–30.
- Warham, J.; Wilson, G.J.; Keeley, B.R. 1982. The annual cycle of the sooty shearwater, *Puffinus griseus* at the Snares Islands, New Zealand. *Notornis* 29: 269–292.
- Waugh, S.M.; Poupart, T; Wilson, K-J. 2015. Storm damage to Westland petrel colonies in 2014 from cyclone Ita. *Notornis* 62: 165–168.
- Wilson, G.J. 1973. Birds of the Solander Islands. *Notornis* 20: 318–323.
- Wilson, G.J. 1976. Sighting of a yellow-nosed mollymawk off Stewart Island. *Notornis* 23: 252.
- Wilson, K-J. 1993. Observations of the kuramoo (*Vini peruviana*) on Aitutaki Island, Cook Islands. *Notornis* 40: 71–75.
- Wilson, K-J. 1999. Birds of Canterbury symposium. *Notornis* 46: 405–406.
- Wilson, K-J. 2002. Westland birds symposium. *Notornis* 49: 188–189.
- Wilson, K-J. 2002. The takahē. Fifty years of conservation management and research, by Lee, W.G.; Jamieson, I.G. Book review in *Notornis* 49: 196–197.
- Wilson, K-J. 2008. A brief survey of breeding seabirds on 4 islets off Banks Peninsula, South Island, New Zealand. *Notornis* 55: 101–103.
- Wilson, K-J.; Sullivan, W.; Gangloff, B. 2001. Prion problems alleviated. An update on research toward the conservation of the endangered Chatham petrel (*Pterodroma axillaris*). *Notornis* 48: 183.
- Wilson, K-J.; Barthel, A.; Lipson, M.; Fogwill, C.; Turney, C. 2018. New breeding records of seabirds at Carnley Harbour (Auckland Islands), Cossack Rock (Campbell Island) and south coast of The Snares. *Notornis* 65: 168–173.