

OBITUARY – Michael John Imber (1940-2011)

Mike was born at Banbury, England during an air raid at nearby Coventry in November 1940, an explosive arrival for a man who during his working life demonstrated such a relaxed operational style.

Following the war he returned with his mother to Banffshire in North-east Scotland where he was educated at Fordyce Academy, and obtained the Scottish Leaving Certificate in 1957/8. Soon thereafter he migrated to New Zealand with his mother and one brother. Having competed a BAgSc and MAgSc at Massey University over 6 years during the early 1960's (including a thesis – *Reproductive physiology of rodents in relation to population density*), he was faced with finding a job and supporting his new family – having married Miriel Aitchison in 1965. An interview was scheduled with the then Ecology Division DSIR for a project to study rooks (*Corvus frugeliger*). However, the disemboweling of the family motor vehicle prevented attendance, and thus the possibility of a different line of ornithological work than that which eventuated.

He was accepted into the New Zealand Wildlife Service of the Department of Internal Affairs in January 1966 (later to be consolidated into the new Department of Conservation in 1987), on the recommendation of his mentor at Massey University, Lou Gurr. Going to work to support his family, instead of progressing to a PhD, he promised Lou that he would eventually progress higher academically.

Though enrolled for a PhD at Victoria University of Wellington in 1972, he continued to work at the Wildlife Service offices. In 1973 he became aware that he could change, with advantage, to undertake the necessary independent study for a DSc, while continuing with employment which the Department both wanted and needed. His Director, Gordon Williams wrote "I am convinced that his proposals are the best for the Department (which will now get the benefit of his full, continued and unbroken services) and best in the long run for him." He was at the time working on the restricted and rare Cook's petrel (*Pterodroma cookii*) and black petrel (*Procellaria parkinsoni*) on Little Barrier Island, and the harvested grey-faced petrel (*Pterodroma macroptera gouldi*) on Whale Island.

In 1986/7, he was conferred with a Doctor of Science degree by Massey University – a degree rarely awarded, for his substantial body of published scientific work undertaken on seabirds and especially the *Origins, Phylogeny and Taxonomy of Gadfly Petrels*. The external adjudicator was the distinguished academic from Aberdeen – George Dunnett – himself a longtime seabird researcher, especially on the northern fulmar (*Fulmarus*

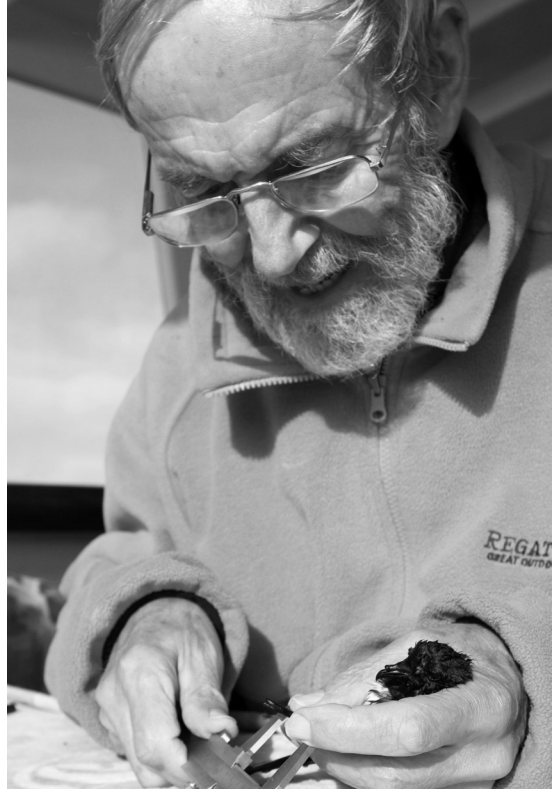


Fig. 1. Mike Imber measuring New Zealand storm petrel 27 Nov 2009. Neil Fitzgerald.

glacialis). They had presented concurrent papers at the International Ornithological Congress in Canberra 1974 – with Mike presenting on black petrel.

Though Mike will be remembered internationally primarily for his wide-ranging researches on squids and small seabirds, his first work for the Wildlife Service was on Canada geese (*Branta canadensis*). The forced attachment of its Director as a junior author to his hard-worked paper on the *Mortality Rates of Canada Geese* did not please him at the time, and may have resulted in a tendency for many years to be the sole author of his research papers.

Mike was reluctant to progress further with research on geese and an early breeding study at Lake Forsyth was never written up. However, he determined that the giant Canada goose (*Branta canadensis maxima*) present in New Zealand was not the goose everyone thought had been introduced. Mike was demonstrating early, the attention to fine detail which accompanies a progressive and

inquisitive nature. As an evolving international and authoritative specialist on seabirds, and especially petrels in the broadest sense, Mike was continuing a line of previously distinguished New Zealand researchers including Fleming, Richdale and Warham. Islands for him became a storehouse of things to study – these included Whale, Little Barrier, Codfish, the Chatham, and Antipodes Islands.

His broad ranging and high quality studies led him initially to concentrate on seabird food and foraging behaviour. He was frustrated in his examinations of bird guts by an absence of suitable identification guides for squids (and their beaks), key seabird food, so he set about compiling one by revising the complete taxonomy of the Cranchiidae squids and thus became an acknowledged world authority on this group.

Mike worked and published regularly on storm petrels and prions, shearwaters, and *Pterodroma* petrels generally – grey-faced petrel, Pycroft's petrel (*Pterodroma pycrofti*), Chatham Island taiko (*Pterodroma magentae*), Cook's petrels and black petrels specifically, to canvas but some.

With a working style described as independent and self-sufficient, he could be quietly controversial, but he also demonstrated that even if his hypothesis was wrong (albeit rarely), his patient explorations of ideas and backwaters were needed to demonstrate those factors that should be eliminated. This was well demonstrated by his methodical hunt for the Chatham Island taiko in places his colleagues often dismissed without ever looking.

He could often be viewed as absent minded or a ditherer. This was a deceptive image, one which I suspect he deliberately cultivated at times, especially to ensure that he was not pushed into areas of activity which might distract him from what he really wanted to do. It also enabled him time to methodically think out a rebuttal of points in a discussion, or to explore the finer details of the habitat through which he was moving – usually a long way behind others in the party. Often that party would return to look for him, and find Mike lying down with an arm down a burrow, trying to extract the resident bird – accompanied by a muttered commentary such as “the bastard won't bite me” as he endeavoured to grip the bird. Occasionally more rapid movement was induced, and clothes removed when attacked by other residents of the burrow - fleas!

In his annual reporting for his Department of Conservation employer in 2002 he commented that he “was tired and losing energy but hanging in there as there are still things to do – I want to see the rats off Little Barrier before I leave.” This was an indicator of the growing health problems with his lungs and an aggravated mitral valve heart condition which led to increasingly slow movement

and exhaustion on and after field trips. Years of working with specimens preserved in formalin may have contributed to an effect on his lungs similar to asbestosis.

He was retired early by the Department of Conservation in June 2005 and the Department awarded him the title of Honorary Research Associate at that time. It was a regrettable loss of valuable scientific and management knowledge, and Mike's Departmental file carries the commendation – “quiet unheralded contribution to a wide range of seabird issues ... undeniably one of the world's leading seabird biologists.”

Mike made a number of international excursions during his career and developed close working relationships with fellow seabird biologists around the world. He was for many, the key seabird biologist in the seabird centre of the world (Bourne 2011; Zonfrillo 2011). In return, he was able to study extensively the specimen material and field programmes of other researchers and collections, to broaden his interpretations from the purely New Zealand level.

Seabird people have to be resourceful and resilient, even bloody single-minded at times, for they pit themselves as much against the physical elements as the vagaries of their subjects. Mike was a fine scientist and field observer, with a firm belief in having repeatable simplicity in a study, to produce reliable results. He was particular about what he did – his method, his way!

His other important contributions were in advice and peer review for colleagues both locally and internationally, alongside a considerable participation in the design and field operation of conservation programmes for some of New Zealand's and the world's rarest seabirds. He was intimately involved with recovery programmes for the black petrel, Cook's petrel, the Chatham Island taiko, and their associated eradication exercises for the removal of predators such as rats, cats and weka (*Gallirallus australis*). Following retirement, Mike spent time assisting in the explorations and interpretations related to the recently identified New Zealand storm petrel (*Pealiornis maoriana*) in the Hauraki Gulf. He was a staunch supporter of the Ornithological Society of New Zealand, especially its Beach Patrol Scheme operations and by his service for many years in the production of *Notornis* as an editorial board member and reviewer.

He was well respected by his peers both locally and internationally. Quietly unassuming, his special subjects were the seabirds of his adopted homeland. His explorations expanded our knowledge of that rich assemblage of New Zealand's endemic birds, which give us a pre-eminent position as the Seabird Capital of the World. Like that earlier petrel specialist Lance Richdale, Mike was a persistent

and inquisitive searcher for the proof, and provided a magnificent legacy of publications (listed below in full) upon which future seabird biologists can build.

Mike is survived by his wife Miriel and their children, Hamish, Jane and Cameron.

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