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QUEEN'S BIRTHDAY HONOURS June 2000

The services to conservation in New Zealand by 2 long-time members of the Ornithological Society, Rhys Buckingham and David Crockett, were recognised in the first Queen's Birthday Honours List of the new millennium for their individual and single-minded efforts over many years. Rhys and David share the desire to search out species thought lost. One has found his Holy Grail, the other is still searching with an equal tenacity and energy for a goal that has often seemed to be tantalisingly close.

The Society congratulates Rhys and David on their well-deserved distinctions that show the community's appreciation of their efforts and continuing contribution to the maintenance of New Zealand's wild heritage. Such honours are bestowed neither lightly, nor frequently, on field biologists. The following summaries of Rhys and David's contributions to the study and conservation of New Zealand birds were compiled by friends and colleagues.

Rhys Philip Buckingham (MNZM)

Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit,
For Services to Ecology

Rhys Buckingham's contributions to ecology have been at, if not the grass roots, then the forest floor, with a level of commitment in the field to the rare and elusive birds that dwell on the edge of extinction that would leave most of us exhausted. Indeed, so great have been his efforts in the field, that it is not unknown for him to come out of the bush near to collapse.

That passion and drive has been directed for many years towards his intense interest in near-extinct birds. Over the past 25 years he has spent many strenuous months in the field searching for clues to the presence of kokako, wrens, and laughing owls. His trips in search of the South Island kokako have taken him to the remote forests of Northwest Nelson, the Richmond Ranges and their outliers in Nelson and Marlborough, the montane valleys of Nelson Lakes National Park, and many other valleys in Buller and Westland. He once walked the length of Fiordland from south to north, making extensive notes on the birdlife along the way. He could be described, as much as any individual, as a "modern day Charlie Douglas", emulating that nineteenth century stalwart of southern Westland exploration in his enthusiasm for places where few or no people had ventured before.

If someone still in their prime can be said to have had earlier years, his were spent as a tramper at home in some of the most forbidding country in the South Island, such as Sinbad Gully, over the tops to Anita Bay and to the coast via the Transit Valley, and again over the tops to Poison Bay. This was before the Wildlife Service found

kakapo in these areas. In 1975, Rhys was back in the Sinbad, Tutoko, Poseidon, and Transit Valleys as a volunteer working on kakapo, monitoring progress of the known males and surveying for new individuals. Later, he helped trap the birds subsequently taken to Maud and Little Barrier Islands.

He found time to complete a degree in zoology at Otago University. However, at he did not go as far academically as Professor Kaj Westerskov thought he should or could have, preferring instead to go further in a physical and practical sense, dealing with New Zealand wildlife and its problems in the field. There his skills in the bush and mountains have been put to good and energetic use for many years. In the late 1970s, he worked on contracts with the then New Zealand Forest Service and Department of Lands and Survey to survey and report on the fragments of native forest throughout the Catlins, including in his brief, descriptions of places of historical interest, walking tracks, fauna, flora, and special features such as waterfalls. For the Forest Service, he also surveyed the Rowallan Forest and Longwood Range in western Southland and the Victoria State Forest, areas now recognised as being of great ecological importance.

One of the best forest bird observers and bushmen in the business, he is completely at home "in the scrub", to the extent that it is not unknown for him to take his sleeping bag, leave a perfectly good hut and sleep under a rock in the bush. While he *is* around camp, others have sometimes complained that he does all the chores. His idea of a day off from rising at 0430 to listen for kokako is to lie in until 0600 and then do odd jobs around camp for the rest of the day.

After a stint in 1980 surveying D'Urville Island for birds and rodents for the DSIR, he went on to more bird surveys in the Caples and Greenstone area in the early 1980s, again under contract to the Forest Service. It was here that he started to accumulate information on the possible survival of the South Island kokako, catching fleeting glimpses of birds, recording strange calls, and finding unusual signs of "grubbing" in moss. Recording calls has become another passion, and his range of recorders and microphones has earned him the title of "gear freak" but the proliferation also attests to his being a music addict.

The succession of contracts to government agencies and private business are a theme both in Rhys's work and in the general life of those who want to deal with matters beyond the certainty of present knowledge. To go and look for what might or might not be there demands the sacrifice of a secure job, because the country finds it difficult to value in material ways such endeavours as finding the remnants of the national heritage.

Still keen on finding the elusive kokako, Rhys spent his Decembers and Januarys in 1981-1987 exploring the headwaters of the Freshwater and Rakeahua valleys with Forest Service and Wildlife Service personnel, and collected evidence of the birds from 12 different places, yet more tantalising glimpses, more strange calls, and more grubbed moss. Finding a fresh feather confirmed by DNA analysis to be from a member of the Callaeatidae (the family to which the kokako belongs) was as close as you can get without holding the live bird in your hand.

After the formation of the Department of Conservation in 1987, Rhys continued in harness, monitoring kakapo on Codfish Island and writing reports on the history of gold mining on the Howard River in Nelson Lakes National Park. Not averse to heading away to offshore islands, he helped in surveys of North Island kokako in the central North Island and in the Hunua Ranges, south of Auckland. Still further afield, he has helped with work on albatrosses and other birds, in particular on the subantarctic Auckland and Antipodes.

More recently, his interests have been documenting the forest birds of the South Island, and at the same time searching for the ever-elusive kokako. He was contracted to Timberlands Westcoast Ltd as an independent biologist to undertake biological surveys of about 90,000 ha of beech forest zoned for production in northern Westland, in the Grey, Inangahua, Maruia, and Buller valleys, and in the Paparoa Range and many smaller valleys around Murchison. Some of the surveys entailed intensive monitoring of bird populations and computer modelling that had not been attempted before, so whatever one's political beliefs, Rhys's bird work in that area is unique and was made possible by funding from Timberlands. In the larger picture, the extent of his travels and surveys over many years means that his knowledge of the fauna and flora of much of the South Island's remaining forest, particularly in the more remote areas, must be unrivalled. That is also a result of the full and careful notes he takes, and his uncanny ability to identify most if not all the squeaks and whistles of hidden bush birds. Those who speak of his abilities include some of the best and most experienced field workers, who say that Rhys's knowledge of bird vocalisations and mimicry is shared by very few. One day, perhaps, he will stay out of the bush long enough

to compile data from his huge resource of notes on forest birds and extensive series of reports in forestry and Department of Conservation files into the several books that his experiences could fill.

On his personal quest for the South Island kokako, Rhys has continued his field work when time and opportunity permit, with recent efforts including time spent in remote valleys of northwest Nelson and Westland. His drive to locate remnant populations of the species results from his belief that it can be saved. If a "common denominator" can be found it might allow remaining birds to be captured and transferred to the safety (from predators at least) of an island reserve such as Codfish (Whenua Hou). To end with a quote from a scientist who has known and worked with Rhys on and off for 20 years: "If all this makes Rhys sound like a bit of a paragon, it's probably not far from the truth. He has his down times, but these seem to lead him only to dissatisfaction with his own life, not with others – he's unfailingly pleasant and fun." We wish him well in the hunt.

David Edgar Crockett

Companion of the Queen's Service Order, For Public Services

When he was 10, David Crockett was lucky enough to be taken under the wing of by Dr (later Sir) Robert A. Falla, then Director of Canterbury Museum. Dr Falla took it upon himself to teach a group of schoolboys about seabirds, specifically the petrels that could be obtained by patrolling the beach at Brighton. The birds were brought back to the museum (to the possible regret of the tram drivers) where they were examined, compared with material in the collection, and identified.

During his time at Christchurch West High School (now Hagley High School), David displayed a growing interest in botany, but it was his other interests that set his course in science. He resolved to continue his interests in science in general, and ornithology in particular, from a stable base, training at Christchurch Teachers' College. His contribution and commitment to science education can be measured by his efforts as Senior Science Advisor of the Auckland Education Board in Whangarei for many years, before his retirement in 1994.

In the early 1950s, he spent his after-school hours helping Ron Scarlett with the osteological collections at the Canterbury Museum. There, he associated the many bones of an unidentified petrel from deposits on the Chatham Islands with an unknown gadfly petrel reported by Charles Fleming in 1939 and known to the local Maori as the taiko. He wrote to Fleming's informant, H. G. Blyth, who had farmed on the southwest side of Chatham Island in the first half of the twentieth century and learned that at least one colony of the mystery birds was thought to have survived. Views on the identity of the bids breeding at this colony ranged from Chatham petrel, to mottled or Kermadec petrels, but Fleming had concluded that it was a *Pterodroma* similar to the grey-faced petrel. The prospect of the continued existence of the taiko sparked a quest that has kept David committed — and busy — in his "spare" time ever since. On the other side of the world, Dr W.R.P. Bourne was pondering the same problem, and, after examining the original specimen of a mysterious petrel, collected once east of the Chatham Islands by naturalists on the Italian research ship *Magenta* in 1867, concluded that it was the Chatham taiko discussed by Fleming. There was obviously a problem to be solved and from 1969 David devoted himself to finding the missing bird.

Museum work and speculation were put to the test in a series of expeditions, starting in 1969. From the very beginning, the search was an exercise in logistics as much as field biology. David enlisted groups of volunteers,

setting up progressively more permanent camp facilities to make the task of searching for a nocturnal bird in rough, almost unmapped rugged terrain in usually foul weather, bearable as well as possible. The first hint of success came in early January 1973, when 2 birds were seen in the beams of the powerful generator-driven lights set up on ridges to attract petrels down out of the mist. Tantalisingly, these birds were *not* attracted down to the waiting watchers. Success did not come until nearly 5 years and 3 expeditions later. As has now been fully documented in the Supplement to *Notornis* published in 1994, success came on 1 January 1978, when 2 birds were captured, examined, photographed, measured, weighed, and banded: the first taiko seen in over 100 years. The description matched the birds from the *Magenta*: the Chatham taiko was indeed the *Magenta* petrel.

Until 1978, all the expeditions had been privately funded, but with success came a grant from the Wildlife Service and a Mobil Environmental Award. Further grants from the Ornithological Society and the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society were added to sponsorship for equipment and support from the World Wildlife Fund, New Zealand to acquire equipment and maintain the now permanent camp at the Tuku. This camp hosted a 6-month expedition (November 1978 to May 1979) by relays of a total of 45 volunteers under David's direction and leadership. Although no occupied burrows were found during that expedition, 3 new birds were captured and banded and 2 disused burrows were located, which finally solved the problem of where the remaining birds bred.

David's efforts, especially during the many expeditions, resulted in excellent relations with Chatham Island residents. The goodwill between all concerned resulted in Chatham Islanders Evelyn and the late Manuel Tuanui donating 1028 ha of their land in the Tuku Gully area as a conservation reserve for the taiko and other rare wildlife. The couple, who own most of the land on which taiko have been found nesting to date, had fully supported the taiko project from the very beginning.

After the rediscovery, David did not rest on his laurels. He continued — and continues — to lead expeditions to study the taiko and especially to locate and protect the breeding burrows. After 47 years, his interest in the bird has never waned, and he has been the prime mover in its rediscovery and conservation. During the long years of the search, David also has found time to contribute to the Society and its objectives in many ways, not least as a long-time Regional Representative, one-time Convenor of the Nest Record Scheme, Councillor, and Vice-President and North Island Vice-President. He thoroughly deserves the recognition bestowed on him by the community at large, for his efforts in many fields of public service, especially the conservation of one of our unique birds.