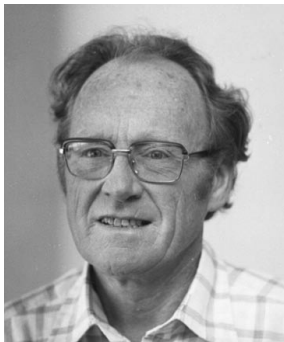


## Obituary

### John Anthony Gibb 1919-2004



Although he was a professional ornithologist of international repute, John Gibb may require introduction to many *Notornis* readers because of his low profile in OSNZ circles; he never held office and seldom attended meetings. His classic ornithological work, on titmice (Paridae),

was carried out from the Edward Grey Institute of Field Ornithology (EGI) at Oxford, and on arrival in New Zealand he studied rabbit populations. His enduring claim to fame will undoubtedly be as an ecologist in the field of predator-prey relationships and population limitation. Yet it is indicative of his stature that he was selected to review the first 50 years of OSNZ in *A Flying Start* published in 1990.

John's interest in birds, and his impressive critical and literary skills, were honed by two brilliant mentors: G. K. Yeates, his English master, an accomplished author and probably the best amateur photographer of birds in Britain; and David Lack, his supervisor at Oxford. Of Yeates a reviewer wrote: "Such a nature would not tolerate fools gladly, and he doesn't. Yet he is genuinely modest about his own work, and entirely selfless about helping others. A likeable man, determined and intense, but with a ready sense of humour..." John's character fitted this description remarkably, an intolerance of fools being illustrated in 1953 when defending the UK nest record scheme, of which he was the original organiser, against unjustified criticism: "As regards a bias towards artificial habitats, nests never have been and never will be found properly distributed among the various habitats; and no one in their senses... is likely to assume otherwise." According to one of his co-workers at the EGI in Oxford in 1952 "Dr. Lack has done much for the realisation that bird-watching which is conducted on the most rigidly scientific lines is, in the end, the only bird-watching worth doing..." Little wonder, then, that John's sharp mind and legal training (he had an MA in law) eagerly adopted scientific ornithology.

Work at Oxford was interrupted by World War II. He spent four years in the Royal Artillery defending Malta, where spare-time studies resulted in three publications on birds. One of these, on the rarely studied spectacled warbler (*Sylvia conspicillata*) quotes a paper by G K Yeates, his former schoolmaster, on the same species.

After the war he returned to the EGI as a field assistant, and produced the classic studies of titmice while working for his D Phil. A widely accepted criterion of the value of a scientific paper is the number of times it is used (cited) by other scientists. An independent analysis of all ecological work worldwide, published between 1947 and 1977, lists a paper of John's in the top 80, having been cited 130 times. This paper, "Feeding ecology of tits, with notes on treecreeper and goldcrest", published in 1954, John himself seldom referred to. His own favourite seemed to be one on rock pipits (*Anthus spinoletta*) in which he wrote: "It was realised first in December 1949 that the daily food consumption of one rock pipit might be measured if the identity of the foods, and the rates of feeding and time spent on each food, were known". This was admittedly a tall order, but the prospect was alluring as such information has rarely been obtained in the field for any bird (see e.g. Lack 1954). This comprehensive study included the calorific value of the foods eaten, and possible competition for food with other shorebirds (none; they ate different sizes of invertebrates). It led to the conclusion that territory size was determined by food resources, and food shortage limited population density. These principles, now widely accepted, guided most of John's later work.

In 1956 he was awarded the Bernard Tucker Medal for outstanding services to British ornithology. This fittingly closed the first chapter of a brilliant career, for in 1957 he came to New Zealand to study rabbits in what was later to become Ecology Division of DSIR. Bird work was a sideline but his counts of unexpectedly high native bird populations in Kaingaroa forest in 1961 stimulated the development of 5-minute bird counts and his use of starling nest boxes (on fences surrounding his rabbit enclosure) presaged extensive work on starlings in Hawkes Bay and Wellington. Other birds were studied as part of ecological programmes he designed when Director of Ecology Division (1965-81) - in Hawkes Bay on bird pests, and on native birds in the Orongorongo Valley near Wellington and at Mt Misery, Nelson

Important as these studies were, they are not the main legacy John left. He thought and wrote meticulously, re-drafting many times before he was satisfied; and he expected the same of his staff. He also encouraged his young scientists to study at overseas universities with a record of quality ecological research. And, unlike modern managers, he directed by personal example. The resulting cadre of very competent field ecologists now occupy important positions throughout the country. All carry part of the flame kindled by Yeates and Lack, which John brought to New Zealand.

After retirement in 1981, John continued long-term work on a sparse population of rabbits in the Orongorongo Valley. He also started bird counts in the bush fringing his Lower Hutt garden, publishing the results of those 25 years of observations in *Notornis* in 2001, his last paper.

He was not a prolific writer, but the quality is ample compensation; and despite ill-health he

managed to print practically all his material- a favourite joke was that publication deadlines become literal as one gets older. New Zealand ornithologists have lost a friend and champion many were unaware they had. We extend our sympathy to all his family.

John E. C. Flux

## Obituary

### Kaj Ejvind Westerskov

1919 - 2003



The modern study of ornithology in New Zealand has benefited greatly from the intellectual contributions and techniques of those professional practitioners who migrated here. Kaj Westerskov was, with F.C. Kinsky and K.A. Wodzicki, one of three European

ornithologists and ecologists arriving in the 1940s and early 1950s who were to have a lasting influence in their adopted home.

Born in Vejle, Denmark, Kaj was attracted to the outdoors at an early age, starting to keep a bird diary at the age of 12 and publishing his first paper on observations of the Great Ringed Plover in 1936. He went on to watch, research, teach and write about birds throughout a career where birds of the feathered variety were work, hobby and life. His early ornithological expertise and research on black grouse provided a cover for his gathering information (as a member of the resistance) about airstrips being built by German occupation forces. Caught cycling down a runway without lights he was able to convince one of his German captors (a hunter in peacetime) that he was checking the "booming" calls of grouse, and was duly released. Together with Kirsten Dons (later his wife), he was apprehended boating near a bridge to check if it was wired with explosives, and again a "bird study" explanation came to their rescue. His book on black grouse, published in 1943 during wartime when aged 23, is still regarded as one of the best of its kind.

After the war he obtained a Diploma in Forestry at the Danish Forestry School, before graduating

MSc in wildlife biology from Ohio State University and returning to a post as biologist at the Danish Game Research Station. Here his major research interest was in the ecology of game birds. The decision to migrate and settle in New Zealand during 1952 was a major transition in the lives of the family (three children each born in a different country), but was to cement a pattern of regular migratory worldwide travel throughout a many faceted life.

Appointed as a research scientist with the Wildlife Service, Department of Internal Affairs, he was quickly involved in research on pheasant populations which led, in 1956, to a PhD from Victoria University of Wellington and the publication of an important monograph. His first place of work was at Turangi – in living quarters for two years with no running water or electricity! Moving to Wellington there were regular weekend visits to the game farm at Bulls in the Manawatu to monitor the breeding of grey partridge that were introduced to New Zealand under his mentoring.

From game birds Kaj traversed to large birds – especially albatrosses – when he participated in the Denver Museum of Natural History Expedition to remote Campbell Island in early 1958. He was responsible for the collection of many of the specimens making up the spectacular diorama in that Museum today, while his own studies led to a number of publications on the birds of Campbell Island, and particularly of the royal albatrosses. This interest was continued in some of the studies at the Taiaroa Head albatross colony in Dunedin after Lance Richdale retired and while Stan Sharpe was still the ranger.

He was head of the research section of the Wildlife Service from 1960-1964. During his time with the Wildlife Service he published widely on a range of other topics, in a number of languages, and not confined only to birds resident in New Zealand e.g., bird counts in Matamata, pheasants (a wide range of issues here and overseas), bird pox in New Zealand pipit, taxonomic status of the redpoll in New Zealand, spread of the magpie, bobwhite quail, the Danish partridge as a game bird (a wide range of issues here and overseas); training for