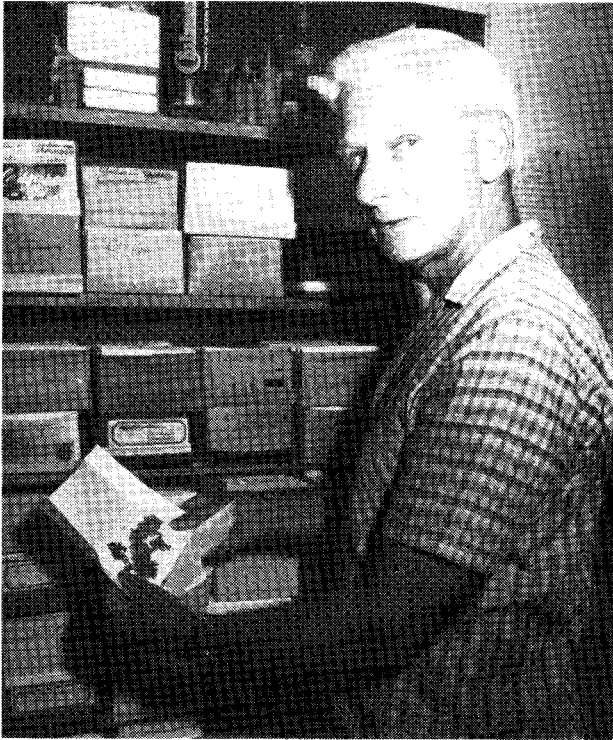


OBITUARY

PETER CHILD

BSc, Dip. Ed., Dip. Wildlife Management

1923-1986



Peter Child, Central Otago's amiable naturalist, died suddenly in Alexandra on 7 April 1986. Ornithological Society members join with Peter's family in mourning his untimely death for, in his 63rd year, he was still in full stride on the schist ranges and gravel riverbeds of his beloved Central.

A southerner to the fore, but with intermittent tropical excursions, Peter spent his school years at Lawrence. During the late 1930s he trained with the Post Office at Awarua Radio Station and Milford Sound before serving as a radio operator in the Gilbert and Ellis Islands (now Kiribati and Tuvalu) during World War II.

After the war, Peter attended the University of Otago, where he gained his BSc in Physics. Soon after, the Pacific beckoned again and he returned to the Gilbert and Ellis Islands, this time as Education Officer with the Education Department, accompanied by his wife Margaret. Bird observations during his stay gave rise in 1960 to the Pacific Science Board's bulletin *Birds of the Gilbert and Ellis Islands Colony*.

Returning to New Zealand, Peter took up brief teaching positions in Wanaka and Geraldine, before moving to Alexandra in 1960. There he was head of the science department, then deputy principal until his retirement in 1981. In his spare time, he preferred to be climbing in alpine meadows or surveying river birds, clocking up mile after mile with relentless ease. His trained eye, however, recognised the correct time to pause, observe and record, often to the relief of less fit companions. At other times, the dependable black billy was drawn from his pack to "boil up for a brew".

Over the years Peter built up an unrivalled knowledge of Central Otago's birds. Evenings saw the observations meticulously filed, and many records were subsequently published – local topics formed the bulk of his impressive total of 35 contributions to *Notornis* (and more to *OSNZ news*). But for some holidays, the mountains and rivers were forsaken for equally profitable ventures to Fiji, Western Samoa, Cook Islands, Tuvalu and Kiribati.

Not satisfied with weekends and holidays alone, Peter took one year's leave of absence from teaching to complete a Diploma of Wildlife Management at the University of Otago, presenting a dissertation on riverbed birds. Another major contribution was his survey of birds of Mt Aspiring National Park, published in 1981 (Nat. Pks. Sci. Series No. 4). The field work for this daunting task occupied much of his spare time in summers from 1971 to 1976, and very few of the Park's valleys remained unvisited. In acknowledging field assistants, Peter wrote ". . . often in rather rugged terrain and under difficult conditions", understating the frequently arduous climbing conditions and days of torrential rain. His ability in the hills and his air of confidence reassured many a tired and drenched companion.

During his retirement ("liberation", as he put it) Peter pursued natural history and conservation projects with renewed vigour. The lichen collection flourished. With Margaret, the challenge of nesting Black-fronted Dotterels became a successful study. In the 1985-86 season, Peter was an outstanding participant in the Banded Dotterel project. His efforts resulted in 100 Central Otago dotterels being colour-banded, the quest for the 100th being fulfilled on his favourite range – the Old Man. One painstaking job, which Peter delegated to himself and Margaret, was to prepare a master index for all *Notornis* volumes.

Peter's interests extended well beyond ornithology. His late brother, John, inspired his interest in lichens. Peter's collection of over 3000 lichen specimens, all carefully catalogued, is the result of long hours in both field and laboratory and is an everlasting asset to the country. His environmental awareness extended from schools' outdoor clubs to the fight against the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Always he was ready to listen, and to share his vast knowledge.

Yet, we will remember him as an ornithologist, outstanding in his support of OSNZ camps, projects, the journal and newsletter. The Society has acknowledged this support in awarding Peter posthumously the Falla Memorial Award. The geographical isolation of Alexandra was no barrier to his influence and achievements – ". . . an advantage my boy" he would have insisted, his hand waving emphatically across the richness of Central. He will be sadly missed.

R. J. Pierce