

OBITUARY

David Edgar Crockett
25 March 1936 – 24 August 2023



January 1978 - David Crockett with the first 2 taiko caught.¹

David Crockett was born in 1936. He had one sister, who was killed in the Christchurch earthquake. David and his wife Ruth, met when at training college. As David told the story, he thought he had come first in an exam but discovered that Ruth had beaten him and decided to meet her. With that mischievous grin that he had, he said, "I couldn't beat her in an exam, so I married her!" They were a good team, and while they did not have any children themselves, their lives were dedicated to the education of children.

David was called up in the ballot for compulsory military service at 18, and from the stories he told, it seemed he enjoyed his time in the army. He wasn't one to let the truth get in the way of a good story though, if a little embellishment made it more interesting. He loved to yarn and had a great sense of fun.

I first met David in 1971 when he moved to Whangarei from Whanganui after he had been on an OSNZ Far North field expedition the previous summer and seen what birds the Northland area

¹ The original photographer for this image, to my knowledge, is not known, but it is suggested that it was taken by his wife Ruth. The Chatham Island Taiko Trust, who are in possession of the image, are acknowledged for its use.

had to offer. I think it was the beach patrolling that did it.

On his arrival, he enthusiastically took over the role of Northland and Far North Regional Representative from Sandy Edgar, and roped everyone he could into helping with various OSNZ activities, and particularly beach patrolling. Seabirds were always his passion. Island trips to the Cavalli's and Stephenson's were regular events of those early years. Pouto and Far North Lake Surveys were others. They were fun times. David's orange expedition boxes were a feature of any island trips and these were coincidentally the same colour as Wildlife Service expedition boxes. I remember David being asked by some Wildlife Service personnel once how he got hold of some of their boxes. Allan Wright of the Wildlife Service told me when they went to the Chatham's they had to be careful not to mix up theirs and David's boxes on the wharf.

His work took him all over Northland and he made many contacts during his travels. These were very useful in organising OSNZ activities for help with transport, e.g. along beaches, out to North Cape, etc., for a variety of accommodation options, and of course, for more personnel. He was good at organising these kinds of things.

As science advisor to schools, he encouraged many young people's interest in nature. Junior Naturalist Clubs were fore-runners of the Kiwi Conservation Club now run by the Royal Forest & Bird Protection Society and David ran the local Whangarei Junior Naturalist Club for many years.

As I recall David's story of how he became interested in the tāiko (Chatham Island taiko, *Pterodroma magentae*), was as a 15-year-old schoolboy looking at bird bones in the Canterbury Museum. He researched the bird from then on, for 20 years before his work began on the Chatham's.

David's Chatham Island work began shortly before he moved to Northland, when he partook in a Wanganui Museum Expedition to the Chatham's. His own privately organised Chatham Island Expeditions began in 1972. I was lucky enough to go on the 1974–75 trip to the Chatham's and saw the tāiko on that trip although we did not catch it then.

Although many people suggested it before the first birds were captured in 1978, David was adamant that shooting a tāiko was not an option. In all he made over 100 trips to the Chatham's. Figures I heard at his funeral were 106 and 109. Anyway, it was a lot!

He was well known and respected over there, and I recall a story he told us once, about Manuel Tuanui (the Tuku landowner) ringing him up one morning from the Chatham's, when a Wildlife Service person / scientist arrived at his house seeking permission to go to the Tuku and look for tāiko. Manuel told him, "That's David's bird" and

rang David to find out if it was OK with him to let him go.

David had a lifelong involvement with the Ornithological Society. There are articles written by him in *Notornis* going back to 1951 when he was 14. See Appendix. He was a member of the 1964 expedition to the Kermadec Islands, where he studied the wedge-tailed shearwater (*Ardenna pacifica*) on some of the smaller islands. This expedition was cut short, when Raoul Island erupted and people were evacuated.

He was a council member for many years and also served time as Vice President.

David was awarded, in chronological order: the Royal Society of New Zealand's Rutherford Science and Technology Medal in 1996, the Ornithological Society of New Zealand's Sir Robert Falla Memorial Award in 1997, and the Queen's Service Order (QSO) medal in 2000. He put his heart and soul into his Chatham Island tāiko work and he thoroughly deserved these honours.

When Bill Bourne mooted the possibility that *Pterodroma magentae* could be the same as the Chatham Island tāiko, he finished his paper with a paragraph on the conservation situation with the Bermudan cahow (*Pterodroma cahow*), when it was rediscovered after 300 years. It was in "acute danger of extinction". He finished with this sentence, referring to the tāiko; "It may therefore be urgent that the situation of these birds be properly investigated as soon as possible before it is too late to see to their conservation." David Crockett did this and the survival of the tāiko is his legacy.

The last years of his and Ruth's lives were spent at Puriri Court rest home in Kamo, Whangarei. Ruth predeceased him by two years, and David died on 24 August 2023.

PATRICK MILLER
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APPENDIX: List of publications by D.E. Crockett.

Tāiko rediscovery

Crockett, D.E. 1979. Rediscovery of the Chatham Island tāiko solved century old mystery. *Forest & Bird* 13(4): 8–13.

Crockett, D. 1988. A Wild Taiko Chase *Part 4 School Journal Number 1*.

Crockett, D.E. 1994. Rediscovery of the Chatham Island tāiko *Pterodroma magentae*. *Notornis (Supplement)* 41: 49–60.

Imber, M.J.; Crockett, D.E.; Gordon, A.H.; Best, H.A.; Douglas, M.E.; Cotter, R.N. 1994. Finding the burrows of Chatham Island tāiko *Pterodroma magentae* by radio telemetry. *Notornis (Supplement)* 41: 69–96.

Imber, M.J.; Taylor, G.A.; Tennyson, A.J.D.; Aikman, H.A.; Scofield, R.P.; Ballantyne, J.; Crockett,

D.E. 2005. Non-breeding behaviour of magenta petrels *Pterodroma magentae* at Chatham Island, New Zealand. *Ibis* 147: 758–763.

Lawrence, H.A.; Scofield, R.P.; Crockett, D.E.; Millar, C.D.; Lambert, D.M. 2008. Ancient genetic variation in one of the world's rarest seabirds. *Heredity* 101: 543–547.

Lawrence, H.A.; Taylor, G.A.; Crockett, D.E.; Millar, C.D.; Lambert, D.M. 2008. New genetic approach to detecting individuals of rare and endangered species. *Conservation Biology* 22: 1267–1276.

Lawrence, H.A.; Millar, C.D.; Imber, M.J.; Crockett, D.E.; Robins, J.H.; Scofield, R.P.; Taylor, G.A.; Lambert, D.M. 2009. Molecular evidence for the identity of the magenta petrel. *Molecular Ecology Resources* 9: 458–461.

Non-tāiko papers - not a complete list

Crockett, D.E. 1951. Notes from the Christchurch estuary. *Notornis* 4(6): 137.

Crockett, D.E.; Kearns, M.P. 1975. Northern little blue penguin mortality in Northland. *Notornis* 22(1): 69–72.

Crockett, D.E. 1975. Kermadec Islands Expedition reports: the wedge-tailed shearwater (*Puffinus pacificus pacificus*) in the northern Kermadecs. *Notornis* 22(1): 1–9.

Crockett, D.E. 1975. First record of the Antarctic petrel in New Zealand. *Notornis* 22(3): 249–250.

Crockett, D.E. 1977. First record of the Christmas Island shearwater in New Zealand. *Notornis* 24(4): 285–286.

Crockett, D.E.; Reed, S.M. 1976. Phenomenal Antarctic fulmar wreck. *Notornis* 23(3): 250–252.

The Ghost Bird

by Patrick Miller (1975)

In 1867, on a ship south of Tubuai,
A ship's crew shot a seabird,
Subsequently named *magentae*.
They took it back to Italy,
From whence it was described,
By Giglioli and Salvadori,
Men who have long since died.

Then a man named Osbert Salvin,
An ornithologist of some note,
In 1876 of *P. magentae* wrote.
And also a man named Godman
In nineteen hundred and ten,
But then it was forgotten & not heard of again.
Until in 1964 Bill Bourne made the claim,
That *Pterodroma magentae* could be of Taiko
fame.

Now the Taiko was a seabird,
Common amongst sub fossil bones,
And known to quite a number,
Of osteological gnomes.
It was formerly found on the Chatham's,
And by the islanders used to be taken,
As a type of muttonbird for their larder,
Of that they weren't mistaken.

The Ghost Bird they had called it,
And of it they had said,
That it very much looked like a bird,
Which did not have a head.
The last time they had taken it was in 1903,
But since then only rumours
Of its existence were to be.

And then along came Davy Crockett,
A dedicated man and true.
He said, "I'll find the Taiko, if it's the last thing
that I do."
For 20 years he worked on unrelenting research,
And his dedicated interest was never allowed
to lurch.

On his first trip to the Chatham's,
Of the Taiko he found nought,
But that did not deter him,
Again he went and sought.
And this time saw the Ghost Bird
At 10.30 one misty night.
The four of them shivering at the net,
 marvelled at the sight.

The Taiko circled overhead and dived right at
the net,
But then it banked up steeply and passed it
overhead.
So they did not catch the Ghost Bird,
But went away without dismay,
"We shall return," Davy said, "And soon
without delay."

The third trip to the Chatham's went off after
one slight hitch,
And again they saw the Ghost Bird,
Which again they could not catch.
So the Taiko still roams wild in the bush and
out at sea,
But not for long we shall return
And capture one, you'll see.

Note: This poem describes the situation up to the summer of 1974–75. The tāiko was finally captured on 1 January 1978, thus proving to the sceptics its continued existence. David Crockett continued the search after this for its breeding grounds in the bush at the southern end of Chatham Island in the area known as the Tuku, after the Tuku-a-Tamatea River. Conservation work on the tāiko continues to this day.