

**Obituary**  
**W. Richard J. Dean**  
**10/08/1940 – 03/08/2022**  
*Compiled by Richard and Sue Dean*

**R**ichard, a resident of Prince Albert since 1987, was born in Durban. Birds were his passion from childhood, and he roamed the hills and shores watching bird behaviour, collecting eggs, and shooting and eating birds on overnight camping trips. His first copy of *Robert's Birds* (1949 edition of Austin Roberts) is very tatty and thumbed. He left school in 1956 and was apprenticed at 16 as a Process Engraver in the family business, Dean's Printplate Service in Durban, started by his grandfather, where he gained skills in drawing and etching. His teenage passions were fixing and fishing and building up his collection of birds eggs and building and racing motorbikes - he raced a Velocette at several tracks in South Africa. His interest in motorcycles lasted throughout his life, but birds and their life-histories dominated all other interests.

In 1971 an opportunity arose to escape from the printing industry and become a full-time professional ornithologist, the position eagerly taken up. From 1972 (Jan)-1973 (Dec) he worked as a field ornithologist for the Peabody Museum of Natural History, Yale University, based at the McGregor Museum, Kimberley, collecting specimens in Angola, Cabinda, Namibia, Zimbabwe and South Africa.

From 1974 (Jan)-1978 (Mar) he was a research assistant for the Transvaal Division of Nature Conservation at Barberspan Ornithological Research Station in the western Transvaal (now Northwest Province), ringing ducks and other waterfowl, and studying aspects of the biology of several aquatic birds. In 1978 (Apr) he accepted the position of Officer-in-Charge of Tzaneen Nature Reserve, northern Transvaal (now Limpopo Province), responsible for setting up a new nature reserve. From 1979 (July) until 1982 (Dec) Richard was Officer-in-Charge of Nylsvley Nature Reserve (site of the Savanna Biome Project), responsible for management planning and general running of the reserve. It was here that he met Sue, a student botanist working on the Reserve. After resigning this post at Nylsvley, he was employed from January-April 1983 by the Transvaal Museum to sort and catalogue the collection of birds' eggs at the Transvaal Museum (now the Ditsong National Museum of Natural History) and then set out to become self-employed as a builder of wooden boats in Knysna.

Richard and Sue moved to Prince Albert in 1987 to develop and manage a long-term ecological research station on the farm Tierberg for the National Research Foundation and University of Cape Town. Richard's official position from July 1986 until his retirement on 31 December 2005 was Research Officer at the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, University of Cape Town, based in Prince Albert. Over the years he investigated topics as diverse as ant and spider behaviour, cicada biology, bird-plant interactions, fluctuations in the densities of birds in rangelands lightly and heavily grazed by domestic livestock, seed dispersal by birds and collaborated with model-makers to understand the movements of nomadic birds in the Karoo.

Beyond the Karoo, he studied Albatrosses and other birds on Inaccessible Island (Tristan da Cunha group), South Atlantic Ocean, was a guest Scientist in Leipzig, Germany where he documented the return of biodiversity to old agricultural lands and abandoned cherry orchards. He raised funding from the Leverhulme Foundation to visit museums in the UK, France and Germany to document and publish details of all southern African birds in these collections.

Despite the lack of an undergraduate degree, and because of his experience as a bird collector and his published research on birds, he was allowed to register for a post-graduate degree under Rule 33 at the University of Natal (now UKZN), completing a Master of Science



*Richard Dean*

in 1991. In 1995 his PhD degree (UCT) was awarded for a thesis entitled *Where birds are rare or fill the air: the protection of the endemic and the nomadic avifaunas of the Karoo*. Richard Dean was elected an Associate Member of the Transvaal Museum in June 1982 in recognition of services to the museum. In March 2009 he was awarded the Gill Memorial Medal for lifetime service to ornithology south of the Zambezi on 21 March 2009. From 2000 until 2006 he served as Editor of the *Ostrich* (the ornithological journal published by *BirdLife South Africa*).

Richard's over 200 scientific publications include a synthesis of research in the Karoo (Cambridge University Press, 1999), a monograph on the birds of Angola (British Ornithologists Union, 2000) and a book on nomadic desert birds (Springer-Verlag, 2004), editing (jointly with PAR Hockey and PG Ryan) the revision of *Roberts' Birds of Southern Africa* (2005), and a book on the history of bird collecting in Southern Africa (Jacana Press, 2017), and co-authored a farmers guide to management and ecology of Karoo rangelands. He liked to say that in his world, he reached the top of the mountain!

When not engaged in research Richard made wooden boats and furniture, built a Lotus sports car, and reassembled motor bikes, tractors and farm machinery. In 2007, together with his wife Sue, he founded a Non-profit organisation to protect the natural and cultural environment on Wolwekraal Nature Reserve and started the Renu-Karoo Veld Restoration cc, the plant nursery and veld seed supply business on the Kruitfontein road. After his retirement he remained a research Associate of the Percy FitzPatrick Institute and the South African Environmental Observation Network and continued research gathering data on the historical distribution of birds in southern Africa, and conducted various small studies, including regular waterbird counts and bird community studies in Prince Albert, as well as writing for the *Prince Albert Friend*.

His students, colleagues and friends remember him for his enthusiasm, insight as a scientist, his enquiring mind, mentorship, his dry sense of humour, and as a gentle, considerate and ethical person who hated injustice.

He leaves behind his daughter Deborah Camilleri and grandson Joe in Australia, his son Robin Dean and grand-children Jessica and Matthew in England, his sister Trudy Brain and his wife Sue in Prince Albert. Sue would like to thank all those who helped and supported Richard in the last three weeks of his life. ●