

# WILLIAM RICHARD JOHN DEAN

## 10 August 1940 – 3 August 2022



In birding circles, Richard Dean is perhaps best known as an editor of the seventh edition of *Roberts Birds of Southern Africa*, but he was a prolific naturalist with a varied career in research and conservation. In addition to writing more species accounts in *Roberts* 7 than any other author, he published more than 200 scientific papers, co-compiled a bibliography of birds of Angola and wrote *Nomadic Desert Birds* and *Bird Collectors during the mid-19th to mid-20th Centuries in Southern Africa*. He also edited a synthesis of research in the Karoo (with Sue Milton) and a farmers' guide to rangeland management (with Karen Esler and Sue Milton); served as editor of *Ostrich* from 2000 until 2006; and was awarded the Gill Memorial Medal for lifetime service to ornithology in southern Africa in March 2009.

uncanny ability to find birds' nests was put to use to collect eggs for Charles Sibley's ground-breaking studies of bird evolution based on DNA hybridisation and other genetic markers.

From 1974 to 1978 Richard was a research assistant at Barberspan Ornithological Research Station, ringing ducks and other waterbirds and studying aspects of their biology. He was then appointed officer in charge, responsible for setting up the newly proclaimed Tzaneen Nature Reserve. From mid-1979 until 1982 he was officer in charge of Nylsvley Nature Reserve, site of the Savanna Biome Project. It was here that Richard met his second wife, botanist Sue Milton, starting a partnership that has revolutionised our understanding of arid rangeland ecology and that touched the lives of hundreds of students and farmers throughout the Karoo.

After leaving Nylsvley, Richard was employed to sort and catalogue the Transvaal Museum's egg collection before he moved to Knysna to start a business building wooden boats. However, he gave this up when he and Sue were offered the chance to establish a long-term study site for ecological research in the Karoo as part of the Foundation

for Research Development's Biome Programme. This saw Richard being appointed as a research officer at the FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology in mid-1986, a post he held until his retirement in 2005.

Richard and Sue set up the Tierberg Karoo Long-term Ecological Research Station near Prince Albert to study plant-animal interactions in the region. Today it remains a monitoring site as part of the South African Environmental Observation Network. Among the many studies conducted by Richard and Sue were investigations of soil nutrient status, cicada and ant biology, the impacts of grazing on bird densities, the role of road verges as refugia and corridors, and collaborative modelling studies on the movements of nomadic birds.

As a young student at the Fitz, I got to know Richard and Sue on several 'larking' trips to the central Karoo. When I was setting up my PhD on the endemic finches of Tristan da Cunha, I was extremely fortunate to have Richard and Sue spend three weeks with me on Inaccessible Island. Together they helped me to learn



the island's plants and pointed out how seabirds influenced plant communities. Richard did not have a great head for heights – he only once made it to the island's plateau – but he revelled in the bird-rich environment and showed me the only Inaccessible Rail nest I've seen!

Although he lacked an undergraduate degree, Richard's extensive field experience allowed him to register for an MSc at the University of Natal (now UKZN). He completed his thesis in 1991 on the ecological effects of mound-building by the harvester ant *Messor capensis* on Karoo plants, and in 1995 he was awarded a PhD from the University of Cape Town for his study of nomadic birds in the Karoo. He then went on to supervise the research projects of several MSc students as well as Colleen Seymour's PhD on the key-stone role played by camelthorn trees in the Kalahari.

After retiring, Richard and Sue set up Renu-Karoo, an award-winning nursery and consultancy to help restore degraded Karoo rangelands, creating employment for members of the Prince

Albert community. Richard remained a research associate of the FitzPatrick Institute and the South African Environmental Observation Network. In addition to gathering data on the historical distribution of birds in southern Africa, he conducted regular waterbird counts and bird community studies and was instrumental in helping Prince Albert improve its water management and recycling.

Richard's hands and mind were never idle. In addition to running a flourishing business, he found the time to restore several vintage motorbikes, a Lotus sports car and two old tractors, and draft a Master's thesis on the history of 19th-century bird collectors. Even as his health was failing, he wrote up some of Carl Vernon's unpublished bird observations, produced a chapter of a forthcoming book on the role of gardens in the biodiversity of arid areas and was working on a review of birds in African mangrove forests.

Richard leaves behind his wife, two children, three grandchildren and a legion of colleagues who had the pleasure



above Richard with a Familiar Chat fledgling in the Renu-Karoo shed in 2011.

top, left to right Richard with Ferdi the bat-eared fox on Tierberg in 1988; celebrating supper with a Soft-plumaged Petrel on Inaccessible Island in 1989; and with Sue Milton in the Bo Kouga in 2014.

of spending time with him in the field. The many tributes to Richard after his death attest to his kindness, generosity and unparalleled knowledge of his environment. He will be sorely missed.  
PETER RYAN

above Richard Dean in 2001 on the Tierberg Long-term Ecological Research Site near Prince Albert that he helped to set up in the 1980s.