

prolific polymath



Professor Peter Ryan awarded the Gill Memorial Medal

On 28 May at BirdLife South Africa's AGM, Peter Ryan was presented with the organisation's coveted Gill Memorial Medal. Here Professor Claire Spottiswoode pays tribute to Peter and highlights the huge contribution that he has made to ornithology.

Professor Peter Ryan is the director of the FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology at the University of Cape Town. Peter's career has combined the highest scientific distinction with a genuine impact on bird conservation. He is well known to southern Africa's birding community as an author and editor of classic field guides and handbooks (including, most weightily, the seventh edition of *Roberts' Birds of Southern Africa*), as a prolific and authoritative writer and photographer for *African Birdlife* magazine and as a former honorary president of BirdLife South Africa. Peter's phenomenal energy and productivity stem from a total passion for birds, for Africa and its surrounding oceans and for mentoring and

training the next generation of ornithologists and conservationists.

His international distinction as a scientist is hard to overstate. He has made particularly important contributions to the fields of seabird ecology, marine plastic pollution and its impacts on seabirds, mitigation of seabird bycatch by fisheries and evolution in oceanic island birds. Aside from this distinctly marine flavour, Peter has led important work on the systematics and phylogeography of continental African birds and on the effects of energy infrastructure (such as wind turbines and power lines) on land birds.

Peter's intellectual heart is definitely at sea, however. He has a long-held passion for the Tristan archipelago, 2800

kilometres west of Cape Town, and in particular for Inaccessible Island, which he first visited as a young student in 1984. This was to be the beginning of his nearly 40 years of long-term studies and conservation efforts that made a pivotal contribution to Inaccessible Island being declared a nature reserve in 1997 and, together with Gough Island, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2005. Peter's research there has yielded fascinating and diverse findings. He revealed how the islands' finch species have independently speciated ecologically on Inaccessible and nearby Nightingale islands to specialise on the seed sizes available on each. He also demonstrated that most oceanic plastic pollution comes from ships rather than land-based sources, with important implications for mitigating this threat to marine life.

Marine plastics and their impacts on wildlife fascinated Peter for decades before their current prominence in the public and scientific consciousness. His studies began during his MSc in the mid-1980s on the effects of plastic ingestion in seabirds. Many of his recent efforts, together with those of his students, have focused on understanding the sources and fates of plastics at sea, directly informing conservation policy. Some of this research has been conducted in collaboration with his wife, marine scientist Coleen Moloney, herself a distinguished UCT academic.

One of Peter's qualities that most inspires awe in his academic colleagues

is his sheer productivity. He routinely publishes approximately 30 scientific papers a year, many of them in the highest-ranked international science journals. About a third of his papers have one of his postgraduate students listed as 'first' author, which indicates Peter's dedication to ensuring that his students publish and thrive in the tough world of academia.

Peter sustains this remarkable level of scientific productivity alongside his prolific popular science writing, membership and leadership of multiple international steering committees, teaching on several courses at UCT and spending significant amounts of time collecting his own data in the field. In recent years this has included surveying plastic pollution in some of the world's remotest oceans and shores in the Antarctic and Arctic and playing a leading role in the mouse eradication programmes on Gough Island and (imminently) Marion Island. Nonetheless, Peter is somehow able to ensure he begins most days at home on the Cape Peninsula with a surf in the ocean near his house or a survey of his long-term bird-monitoring plots on the local fynbos-covered mountain slopes. His colleagues would all love to know the secret to his phenomenal focus!

His depth of knowledge and clarity of vision also make Peter a brilliant communicator of ornithology. His crisp writing, clear and pacy talks and superb photography are always inspiring. These qualities render him an insightful and exacting editor and he has mentored generations of students in raising their game as writers and presenters.

Peter has supervised more than a hundred UCT MSc and PhD projects – a staggering number. His students have been inspired not only by his passion for birds and conservation, fearsome intellect, meticulous approach to science and deep knowledge of ornithology and ecology, but also by his sense of adventure and fun. A field trip with Peter always results not only in a better understanding of the world, but typically also in some excellent stories!



CALLAN COHEN

above Peter listening for Fynbos Button-quails in his local patch.

opposite Peter Ryan (left) on his first visit to Gough Island in 1984, with Barry Watkins, Stevi Broni, Jim Enticott and John Cooper.



One of Peter's most enduring contributions to African ornithology and conservation has been his founding leadership of the FitzPatrick Institute's MSc course in Conservation Biology, which he led for 22 years. This course has helped to train hundreds of African scientists, alongside hundreds from elsewhere in the world, and then launch their careers. Seeing its graduates provide expertise and leadership to conservation efforts throughout Africa and beyond has rightly given Peter great satisfaction.

His exceptional scientific achievements have been widely recognised. Peter is the first (and still the only) ornithologist to have received an A-rating from the National Research Foundation of South Africa, putting him in a select group of the country's best scientists who are regarded as world leaders in their field. He was awarded the Gilchrist Memorial Medal for his contributions to marine science and elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of South Africa. It is hard to think of

anyone more deserving of BirdLife South Africa's Gill Memorial Medal.

Peter became director of the FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology in 2014, following Professor Phil Hockey's untimely death. In his eight years as director he has contributed enormously to maintaining and raising the institute's excellent international standing. He will retire as director at the end of 2022 and will be sorely missed in this role. He intends to remain active in research and, knowing him, we can be reassured that he will be busier than ever. As a community we will no doubt for decades to come continue to be inspired – and more than a little awed – by his knowledge, productivity and insight. ♦