

A feather in the Fitztute's cap

The Percy FitzPatrick Institute was founded in September 1959 by Cecily Niven, the daughter of Sir Percy FitzPatrick, her husband Jack, and their three sons, Patrick, Dan and Desmond. For the first 12 years of its existence the Institute, under the directorship of Dr Jack Winterbottom, was run as a non-profit company affiliated to the University of Cape Town (UCT). During this period, much of the Institute's research effort was devoted to faunistic surveys and general studies of individual species. In 1973, with Professor Roy Siegfried as director, the Fitztute became a postgraduate research institute affiliated to the Zoology Department at UCT. Under Professor Siegfried's directorship it built a significant international reputation for the research and teaching of ornithology and conservation biology. The Fitztute is now 15 years on from adopting its conservation mission, namely 'To promote and undertake scientific studies involving birds, and contribute to the practice affecting the maintenance of biological diversity and the sustained use of biological resources'.

Increasingly in recent years the Fitztute has been called on to undertake research dealing with environmental problems and the exploitation of biological resources, and to advise government and private sector bodies accordingly.



The Fitztute's Niven Library houses the largest collection of ornithological literature in the Southern Hemisphere.

On 29 June 2004, after an intensive international peer-review process, the Percy FitzPatrick Institute was awarded Centre of Excellence status by South Africa's Department of Science and Technology (DST) and the National Research Foundation (NRF). Specifically, it is accepted that the Fitztute will utilise its considerable track record and scientific capacity to use birds as keys to developing ways of conserving biodiversity.

What makes this achievement particularly impressive is that only six such awards were made to South African research groups, spanning the disciplines of health, natural, physical and social sciences, as well as technology.

The DST Centre of Excellence status will bring

to the Percy FitzPatrick Institute not only significant research support for its postgraduate students and staff, but also for key team members who are based at the Universities of Pretoria, Stellenbosch and Wits, as well as the Northern Flagship Institution (formerly the Transvaal Museum).

Most importantly, the grant is for a maximum period of 10 years (subject to ongoing performance), which means that researchers can embark on substantial research projects that are not possible under the usual constraints of short-term funding. The Percy FitzPatrick Institute and its partners will place particular emphasis on attracting some of the top postgraduate and post-

doctoral biologists with an interest in birds.

Just over 200 MSc and PhD graduates have passed through the Fitztute since 1960, and of these 129 MSc and 23 PhDs have graduated since 1990. Many of these graduates currently hold or have held senior positions in conservation NGOs (for example WWF-SA, BirdLife International), universities (across SA and abroad), conservation agencies (Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, Western Cape Nature Conservation Board, NBI, Kenya Wildlife Service, etc.), museums (most South African museums, National Museums of Kenya, etc.), consulting firms, and in the private sector. Further, its graduates have hailed from more than 24 countries, 16 of them in Africa.

In short, the recent DST Centre of Excellence award to the Percy FitzPatrick Institute has been made not only in recognition of the Institute's past successes, but also with the expectation that it will continue to deliver internationally competitive research and highly skilled conservation biologists who can tackle conservation issues in Africa from a sound educational platform.

For further information about the range of research opportunities that exist at the Fitztute, please contact the Director, Percy FitzPatrick Institute, DST Centre of Excellence, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7701. □

Visit the FitzPatrick website: <http://www.fitzpatrick.uct.ac.za>

Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7701, Cape Town, South Africa.

Tel. (021) 650 3290; fax (021) 650 3295; e-mail birds@botzoo.uct.ac.za