

getting to know...

PETER RYAN

On 1 March 2014, Professor Peter Ryan assumed the directorship of the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology at the University of Cape Town. Peter is well known to readers of this magazine through his insightful articles, but we thought we'd get to know a bit more about him and his vision for the Institute.

The Institute has been in existence for nearly 55 years, and you're inheriting the mantle of leadership from some venerable peers; the four previous directors were Jack Winterbottom, Roy Siegfried, Morné du Plessis and Phil Hockey. How do you feel about assuming this role?

To be honest, it's a bit daunting. When Morné du Plessis interviewed for the position following Roy Siegfried's retirement, I remember he said that he felt he'd been training for this position all his life. I certainly don't have anything like his confidence; I have tended to eschew leadership positions, and have a habit of skiving off to remote islands whenever possible. However, there comes a time when you have to give something back. I have thoroughly enjoyed my time at the Fitz; when we needed someone to step up and assume the mantle I had the pedigree to do so.

You have been at the Fitz for many years. When did you join the Institute?

I registered as a Masters student at the Fitz in 1984 to study the impacts of plastic ingestion on seabirds, a project that I chose largely because it entailed visiting Marion and Gough islands. But I started field

work through the Western Cape Wader Study Group with John Cooper while still at school, and worked for John at the Fitz during my undergrad vacations. After finishing my Masters I took a year off to travel and did some contract work in Antarctica before starting my PhD at the Fitz on the ecology and evolution of Tristan's *Nesospiza* finches. I joined the academic staff as a lecturer in 1993, after a brief stint as a post-doc at the University of California.

How radically has the focus of the Fitz's research altered during your tenure there?

If you could compare the Fitz now with how it was in the 1980s, doubtless there would be some marked differences, but I'm hard pressed to single any out – perhaps because I was involved in the process throughout. Roy Siegfried always pushed the staff and students to compete on the international stage, and that ethos has persisted. The focus has changed somewhat from assessing the roles of birds in ecosystems to a mix of systematic, behavioural and conservation-oriented research, but we have always striven to gain a better insight into the lives of birds, how birds interact with other organisms, and the many ways this knowledge can be harnessed to improve the quality of life for people, birds and the environment in general.

Are there any innovations that you would like to see or new directions that you'd like the Institute to take?

I don't foresee any major changes in direction, but I would like to see a greater emphasis on working with implementing agencies and NGOs to ensure that our findings make a difference to the way we manage and conserve biodiversity. We lack the capacity to undertake advocacy directly, but we need to forge strong partnerships to ensure that our work makes a real difference. That's not to say that there isn't scope for 'blue sky' research, just that in an increasingly crowded world we have to work harder to mitigate human impacts.

Do you feel that the Fitz attracts a sufficiently representative selection of students? Unfortunately not. The life sciences, especially at the organismal level, fail to attract students from the full spectrum of South

African society. Somewhere the message is not getting through that there are exciting, viable career options in the life sciences. There is no shortage of students from elsewhere in Africa, but there we are handicapped by the lack of bursary support as well as institutional constraints regarding the equivalence of primary degrees from many other African countries. This is a real shame, as the Fitz's conservation biology Masters course has been extremely successful in training students from all over Africa, many of whom have had a marked impact on local conservation efforts on their return home.

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In the current economy, how important is it to ensure that students are equipped to put their knowledge to good, practical use and gain entry into the job market?

Our graduates go on to make a difference in a wide variety of spheres. Although only a minority become ornithologists, many remain in the broad environmental management field, and still others put the analytical skills they learn to good use in other fields. Ultimately we strive to provide graduates with the ability to think critically, and communicate their ideas effectively both verbally and through written media. These skills stand them in good stead in virtually any professional environment.

What other challenges does the Institute face in this day and age?

Funding for ornithological research is often perceived as a luxury. We need to show that we offer valuable, cost-efficient services,

both through our applied research and through educating critical thinkers. The Fitz has done extremely well since being recognised as a Centre of Excellence (CoE) in 2004. The funding this brought increased the quality and scope of our research and training, and forged extremely valuable partnerships with researchers at other institutions. The biggest challenge we face in the next six years is maintaining that momentum when this funding comes to an end (all the CoEs established in 2004 have been informed that their funding will be phased out from 2020).

If you could change one thing about birding in South Africa, what would it be?

That's a tough one! If I had a magic lamp, I'd ask the genie for a much broader-based appreciation of birds, to ensure that birds – and what they tell us about the health of our ecosystems – influence the way we manage our activities. At a more modest level, I'd like to see a resurgence in amateur ornithology. There's still so much to learn. We have arguably more birders than ever before, armed with an amazing array of sophisticated observational tools. There is a pressing need for solid natural history information on many common birds, which only requires a keen eye for observation and a desire to share your findings. I applaud the Animal Demography Unit for establishing *Ornithological Observations* to facilitate this kind of endeavour, and we need to make *Ostrich* readily accessible to a broad readership.

On a personal note, you are a somewhat formidable one-man-band when it comes to birding: not only is your research internationally recognised, but you manage to go on extended field trips and are renowned for writing popular articles, books and field guides, as well as taking excellent photographs. Presumably some of these may be assigned a back seat as a result of the demands imposed by your new position?

Hopefully not too much! I'm writing this on the *S.A. Agulhas II* while conducting oceanographic research off Marion Island; I find that time in the field is essential to stay focused (and sane). If anything has suffered in recent years, it's been my birding – I seldom have the time to travel to watch birds any more. ♦



CALLAN COHEN