New director appointed

SAMANTHA STOFFBERG

Phil Hockey, who takes the reins as Director of the Fitztitute.

With effect from 1 July 2008, Professor Phil Hockey was appointed as the new Director of the FitzPatrick Institute and its associated DST/NRF Centre of Excellence. Phil has been the Acting Director since September 2007.

Phil has had a long association with the Fitztitute – his first visit was in 1976, when he spent three months studying sand plovers at Langebaan Lagoon. After researching the winter behaviour of seaducks off the east coast of Scotland (during which time he swore he would never be that cold again), he returned to the Fitztitute in 1979 to undertake his PhD on the African Black Oystercatcher. His work on oystercatchers continues today (although he did graduate with his PhD in 1983), making this one of the longest single-species datasets in southern Africa. His early work on the species, much of which was carried out on islands off the coast of southern Africa, developed into more detailed studies of the interactions between shorebirds and their food supplies, particularly exploring the question of whether food alone could explain the large differences in shorebird densities around the coast and at islands. This work provided proof that nearshore nutrient status was indeed a key factor mediating bird densities. Not only did it explain variations in the rate of algal growth, but Phil was able to follow the consequences of this for the growth and reproduction of marine invertebrates, which themselves provide food for coastal birds.

His research then branched into the interaction between migratory shorebirds and their food supplies. In particular, he addressed the question of why the densities of migratory shorebirds on the Palearctic-Afrotropical flyway increased the further they flew from their breeding grounds. Previous work had suggested that the shorebirds at the southern end of their migration route were driven there by competition (that is, they were at the bottom of the pecking order). However, work by Phil and his students showed that this was not the case and that the high densities of birds in the south were linked directly to rapid growth and high reproductive output of their prey.

Phil's studies then encompassed more general questions about migration, exploring in particular the ecological factors that drive some birds to be migratory and others not. Although the powerhouse of migration research has always been the New World, Phil and his students were able to show that this flyway is, in fact, the 'odd man out' and that so-called paradigms put forward from the New World did not necessarily hold in the Old World.

In recent years, Phil's research has focused increasingly on conservation issues, in particular explaining how the ecological and evolutionary attributes of individual bird species may or may not place them at risk in the face of a changing planet, whether that change be direct habitat transformation or the indirect effects of larger-scale phenomena, such as climate change.

Although Phil has spent his entire career as a research scientist, he is a firm believer that the results of scientific research need to be made accessible to the public (who, in many instances, are paying for that research). He is a regular contributor to *Africa – Birds & Birding*, and is an author or co-author of several books, including *Sasol Birds*, *Waders of Southern Africa* and *The African Penguin: A Natural History*. Most recently, he was Editor-in-Chief of the seventh edition of *Roberts Birds of Southern Africa*. This book has had a long-standing tradition of being the region's 'birders' Bible', and this edition was no exception, with the print-run selling out within three months of publication.

Many readers will also know that Phil is an accomplished public lecturer. Hopefully, he will be able to combine his scientific, media and management skills to guide the highly successful Fitztitute to even greater heights. □

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