

## W. R. P. Bourne 1930–2021

Bill Bourne, the main founder of the Seabird Group died on 31 May 2021, aged 91. Bill was born in Bedford in 1930 and spent four years during the Second World War in Bermuda. Following school in Brighton, he read medicine and zoology at Christ's College Cambridge, and completed his medical training at St Bartholomew's Hospital in 1954. An enthusiasm for birds was evident very early in his life as he co-founded a natural history society at school and was co-Secretary of the Cambridge Bird Club. He travelled widely while at university and published a paper in *Ibis* on a visit to Cape Verde. The pale subspecies of Purple Heron from São Tiago of the Cape Verdes was named Bourne's Heron *Ardea (purpurea) bournei* after a specimen that he collected there.

Bill served a period of National Service in Cyprus as a Royal Air Force medical officer in the mid-1950s and while there helped found the Cyprus Ornithological Society. Following this he attempted, but did not complete, a DPhil at the Edward Grey Institute with David Lack on *Bird Migration in Scotland studied by Radar* using data collected at RAF Buchan in northeast Scotland from 1958 to 1960. Bill went back to his medical career as Geriatric House Officer at Watford General Hospital. He continued to work on seabirds in his spare time and became the honorary scientific advisor to the Royal Naval Birdwatching Society collating their at-sea records. Bill married Sheila in August 1962.

In 1965, after having discussed the idea for a number of years and following a meeting of the British Ornithologists'

Union specifically devoted to seabirds, Bill issued a Proposal for the formation of a British Seabird Society to some 222 people. The objective of this Society was essentially to bring together all those studying British seabirds and the organisation of further systematic investigations of all aspects of their biology. The first *Sea-Bird Bulletin* (the forerunner of *Seabird*) was issued by Bill in August 1965 and was essentially a compilation of responses to his proposal. The majority of those responses were favourable (particularly from the younger non-establishment



Figure 1. W. R. P. Bourne, mid Wales, 1962. © Sheila Borne

consultees) and so the Seabird Group was formed under a committee part-elected, and part-appointed by existing national societies at its initial meeting in January 1966. Bill was Secretary of the Seabird Group for 12 years during which he pushed the main objectives of the group at the time, a comprehensive census of British and Irish seabirds, sea-watching from the coasts of seabird passage, and investigations of beached birds, including oiled birds.

The seabird census proved more challenging than originally thought but received a boost in its urgency following the wreck of the Torrey Canyon off Cornwall in 1967. Public response to this disaster provided funds for this census (including from myself following the roadside sale of daffodils from my parents' garden!). The census was named Operation Seafarer and was organised by the Seabird Group under the chairmanship of James Fisher who had previously censused Fulmars *Fulmarus glacialis* around Britain and Ireland. David Saunders was employed as the organiser and worked with Bill to drive the project. The counts were undertaken largely by volunteers as an early large-scale demonstration of citizen science. The resulting classic book was *The Seabirds of Britain and Ireland* (Cramp, Bourne & Saunders 1974).

From 1970–75, in response to oil and gas exploration starting in the North Sea, he moved to the University of Aberdeen to work on the distribution and ecology of seabirds at sea under the supervision of George Dunnet. A major part of the study involved ship-based surveys, and Bill's contacts in the navy, oil industry and ferry operators were invaluable in establishing a network of survey routes. This work

involved much time observing at sea, but the study did not achieve its objectives, partly due to poor design but particularly due to lack of large-scale data analysis skills. Bill though continued to have many interests in seabirds and in 1976 published many diverse papers including on oil and chemical pollutants, the names of birds, winter colony attendance and feather wear. He had a hand in the recognition of three new seabird species (e.g. Yelkooan Shearwater *Puffinus yelkouan* and Balearic Shearwater *P. mauretanicus*) and three new sub-species (e.g. Cape Verde White-faced Storm Petrel *Pelagodroma marina eadesorum*).

Bill was a man of great energy and vision, and was exceedingly widely read. His enthusiasm and drive were infectious, and part of his legacy is the myriad Seabird Groups that now exist, including the Pacific, African, Australasian, Dutch and Japanese Seabird Groups. The Pacific Seabird Group gave him their Lifetime Achievement Award for his role in their establishment in 1997. The Seabird Group finally caught up in 2014, giving Bill their first Lifetime Achievement Award at their 12th International Conference in Oxford.

He passed on the role of Secretary of the Seabird Group in the mid-1970s but never lost interest in the Group. He was always keen to ensure that everything conformed to the constitution, and successive chairs of the Seabird Group were sure to check that everything was 'Bill-proof' ahead of Annual General Meetings.

After his university work, Bill continued to live in Aberdeen but returned to medicine first as Geriatric House Officer in Aberdeen from 1975–78, and then as



**Figure 2.** Bill (right) receiving the Seabird Group meeting lifetime achievement award, Oxford 2014, from Mike Harris (left) and Russell Wynn. © Mark Tasker

a Surgical Officer on Royal Fleet Auxiliary vessels in the South Atlantic, Indian and Antarctic Oceans in 1983–91. He and his beloved wife Sheila eventually retired to live in Dufftown in Aberdeenshire to be near his daughter Mary and their two grand-children.

Bill never ceased to rail against 'Authority', be that in the seabird, ornithological or wider world. He claimed to have had more letters published in *The Times* newspaper than anyone else. Those on the receiving end of these letters knew instantly who they were from as his typing was as forceful as his words, with individual typed characters frequently punching through the paper. His style frequently caused offence which undoubtedly led to many of his good ideas and thoughts being disregarded. By contrast, he had a reputation as a kind and compassionate doctor and was also similarly helpful to young researchers, particularly drawing on his encyclopaedic knowledge of often obscure literature.

Bill was not driven by self-advancement and remained committed to conservation throughout his life. Among many causes, he helped defend the marshes of Essex from being developed into an airport in the 1960s, wrote many letters to prevent the establishment of (American) Mink *Neogale vison* farms on Orkney in the 1970s and campaigned for the protection of many remote islands globally.

Bill's death marks the end of an era in the seabird world and we have lost one of its giants. The Seabird Group owes him huge gratitude. He was one of the great amateur scientists that never quite made the transfer to the modern professional world, but his legacy of many scientific (around 200) papers will always be with us to inspire international endeavours for seabird research and conservation.

**Mark Tasker**