

## OBITUARY

Donald Vincent Merton  
QSM, Hon D.Sc., FOSNZ  
(1939 – 2011)

With the passing, on 10 April 2011, of Don Merton (or “Merty” to his many friends and colleagues) the conservation community lost a champion and pioneer who had a remarkable influence on wildlife conservation globally.

About a month before Don’s death OSNZ president David Lawrie visited Don at his home and conferred on him the society’s highest honour, Fellow of the Ornithological Society of New Zealand. This award was well deserved recognition of his contributions, not only to New Zealand ornithology, but to wildlife conservation more broadly. Conserving endangered birds was Don’s passion and his life’s mission.

OSNZ had a formative first influence on Don, through the companionship and mentoring provided by a former President Archie Blackburn. Archie, an accountant in Don’s home town of Gisborne gave him his pre-teen and teenage field experiences with birds, took him on expeditions to out-of-the-way places, endlessly talked birds with him, and introduced him to a birdwatching collective that included other luminaries of the society at that time, like Ross and Hettie McKenzie, Dick Sibson and Graham Turbott.

When Don joined the Wildlife Service as a trainee in 1956 he also had the good fortune to meet Brian Bell, an incredibly effective and influential Wildlife Service species recovery specialist. It was Brian who had the foresight to employ Don in the Service’s Fauna Protection Section and who advised and encouraged him throughout his entire career. Through the 1960s and 70s Don and Brian were behind a number of pioneering “last ditch” recovery efforts. An early episode followed the invasion by ship rats (*Rattus rattus*) in the early 1960s of Taukihepa (Big South Cape Island). Despite their heroic efforts the South Island snipe (*Coenocorypha iredalei*), Stead’s bush wren (*Xenicus longipes variabilis*) and the greater short-tailed bat (*Mystacina robusta*) became extinct. Through their intervention the South Island saddleback (*Philesturnus carunculatus*) only just avoided the same fate. The successful translocation of saddlebacks from Taukihepa to nearby rat-free islands in 1964 led to recognition in the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s Red Data Book that, for the first time, active intervention had averted the extinction of a species. Don’s much-published photo of the last wren propped up on a bare twig is the only colour photo of this sub-species, and is a photo Don once

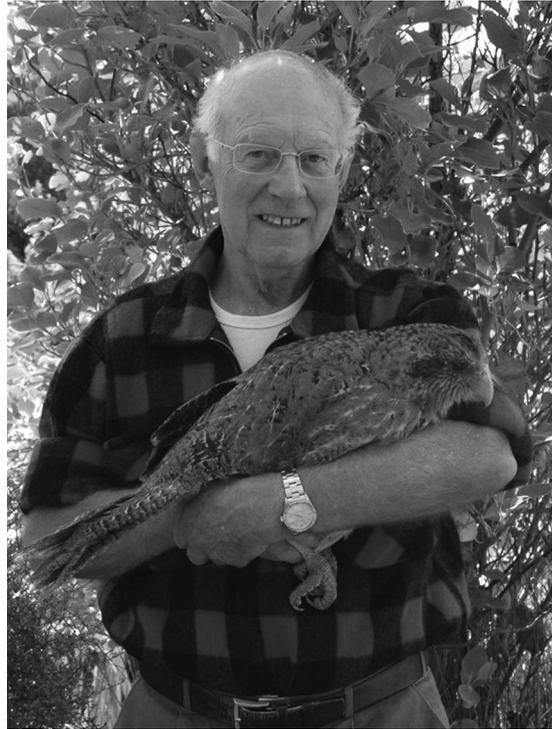


Fig. 1. A poignant last meeting: Don Merton human and Richard Henry kakapo, Codfish Island (Whenua Hou), November 2010 (Photo: David Merton).

described as “extinction + one hour”, for the bird was already dead. It is a photo that haunted Don, as it should all New Zealanders.

Along with Brian Bell and another close friend and noted ecologist Ian Atkinson, who also worked on New Zealand’s offshore islands in the 1960s, Don recognised the critical threat posed to native wildlife by invasive rats and was frustrated by calls from the scientific community for stronger evidence to justify action. He identified the threat the Pacific rat, or kiore (*Rattus exulans*) posed to kakapo (*Strigops habroptilus*) eggs and nestlings and was a strong advocate for their eradication from Hauturu (Little Barrier) and Whenua Hou (Codfish) Islands.

Over a career spanning more than 50 years Don played key roles in rescuing other critically endangered species, notably the Chatham Island black robin (*Petroica traversi*) and kakapo from the brink of extinction (Fig. 1). He pioneered innovative techniques such as ‘marooning’ birds on refuge islands and adapting and applying captive management techniques to wild birds. He worked alongside a small group of similarly dedicated and resourceful Protected Fauna Officers such as Dick Veitch, Richard Anderson, Rodney Russ, Rod Morris, Andy Cox, Dave Crouchley, and Ron Nillson.

In 1973 Don was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to study endangered bird management in North America and Europe. He was able to visit recovery programmes for species such as the Hawaiian goose (*Branta sandvicensis*), whooping crane (*Grus americana*) and peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) and to observe first-hand novel techniques, including the application of captive management techniques to wild birds. This trip had a big influence on him. His refinement of 'close order management' techniques such as supplementary feeding, nest manipulation and cross-fostering used so effectively in the Chatham Island black robin and kakapo recovery programmes stemmed from his observations overseas.

Don also assisted in species recovery and island restoration programmes elsewhere. In 1977 he was appointed by the Australian Government as the first Conservator on Christmas Island, in the Indian Ocean. He was instrumental in establishing a National Park on the island to protect Abbott's booby (*Papasula abbotti*) and other ecological attributes. In 1983 he was invited to lead a recovery programme for the Noisy scrub bird (*Atrichornis clamosus*) in Western Australia. Using a combination of translocation and close order management techniques a second population was successfully established and the survival of this species is now more assured. A feature of the Noisy scrub bird operation was Don's promotion of the involvement of volunteers – an approach now used much more widely in conservation management around the world. He facilitated the involvement of over 60 New Zealand wildlife managers in species recovery projects overseas, in the process providing a skilled workforce that helped forge an international reputation for New Zealanders as committed and effective field operators. Carl Jones, a good friend of Don's and fellow conservation pioneer working in Mauritius once commented that he preferentially tries to employ kiwis for sensitive and difficult recovery work.

Between 1984 and 1989 Don was invited by the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust to help on various projects in Mauritius. Working with Carl Jones, Don provided advice on the recovery of the critically endangered Mauritius parakeet (*Psittacula eques echo*). He also led a small team, including Wildlife Service colleagues, to eradicate rabbits from Round Island which, at that time, was the largest island from which rabbits had been eradicated. He helped prepare a management plan for the island to guide on-going restoration activities. Beginning in 1992, at the request of BirdLife International, Don led recovery actions for the endangered Seychelles magpie robin (*Copsychus sechellarum*). He successfully raised funds and organised eradication operations to save this species. His legacy of

conservation achievements lives on there, and his memory also; the Seychelles Nation newspaper published an obituary to mark his passing.

The dis-establishment of the Wildlife Service in 1987 and the creation of the Department of Conservation (DoC) in its place was a difficult transition for Don. Endangered species management responsibilities were decentralised in the new department with the consequence that people with specialist skills and experience were no longer available nationally. Instead, enthusiastic but inexperienced staff found themselves in the invidious position of having to manage critically endangered species with little advice or support. A small number of ex-Wildlife Service staff within DoC, including Don, prepared a proposal for a national unit to be created to ensure recovery programmes were effectively coordinated and appropriately supported. This proposal was approved and the Threatened Species Unit, which I was asked to manage, was established in 1989. I appointed Don as the unit's operations coordinator and, alongside half a dozen highly experienced colleagues including Don's old friend Dick Veitch, he was once again able to participate in field activities as part of the black robin and kakapo programmes, and to influence the direction and priorities of other programmes. The Threatened Species Unit was highly effective, with its members working alongside departmental staff wherever they were needed. These were productive years for Don who, like most of us, worked best when he was supported within a team. It was during these years that an ecological management skills training programme was established within the department and a process of species recovery planning was instituted.

Following an independent review which was highly critical of DoC's management of the kakapo recovery programme a National Kakapo Team was created and another of Don's old Wildlife Service colleagues Paul Jansen was appointed to manage it. Paul immediately appointed Don as the team's operations officer and added two other excellent young recruits, aviculturist Daryl Eason and scientist Graeme Elliott. Over the next 10 years this team set the benchmark in endangered species management internationally. Don's knowledge of the past was vital to its success, as was his mentoring of the many young field staff and volunteers who participated in summer field operations keeping watch on nests and providing supplementary food to key breeding birds.

Don's retirement from DoC in 2005 came on the heels of the wonderfully successful 2002 kakapo breeding season and his realisation that the future of the species was much more assured. He continued to participate in recovery programmes. In 2006 he led a major search to determine if any

kakapo continued to survive in Fiordland. He also contributed advice in support of the black robin programme, and other conservation projects in the Chatham Islands, and advised on proposed rodent eradications in the Pacific. He was invited to give talks to community groups all over New Zealand, often featuring some of his wonderful photography, as well as presenting at international conferences. He was still receiving requests for inputs to scientific papers, and for presentations when he was quite ill. Don had difficulty declining any request and he gladly gave an inordinate amount of his time in acceding to such requests.

Don was a true conservation champion who worked tirelessly to achieve conservation objectives. He would promote species recovery in any forum despite being an essentially quiet and reserved man. Extinction, to him, was a personal tragedy and his passion to prevent it was obvious to all who knew him. He had a mix of other attributes which underpinned his effectiveness as a species recovery specialist and the enormous influence he had on wildlife conservation in New Zealand, and around the world.

He was humble and self-effacing and would quickly point out that successful recovery programmes were invariably team efforts, and he was fulsome in his praise of the efforts of his colleagues. He was also essentially positive, although this trait was tested as much around Head Office as it was in the field. He was introspective, but with a quiet confidence in his own decisions and a determination (some would say "doggedness") to follow them through.

Don would often go well beyond the "normal call of duty" to achieve his objectives. On one occasion he contemplated mortgaging the family home to pay for a shipment of rodent bait for an overseas eradication project he was involved in as an adviser. He had enormous difficulty saying "No" to requests for his time and insights. No community group was too small, or their request too trivial for his support. While some offered to cover his travel the financial costs to Don and Margaret must have been significant. His commitment to contribute to scientific papers and other publications continued to the end. He was also a wonderful mentor and teacher who was always prepared to explain what he was doing, and why. Many wildlife trainees and other colleagues benefitted over the years from Don's wisdom and experience.

He was the "quintessential wildlife officer" who was never happier than when he was in the field – often for extended periods, in remote locations. In camp he would often be first up in the mornings, dressed and have a "brew" on before anyone else

had even climbed from their sleeping bags. He was fastidious around camp and a stickler for routine. Most of the time these attributes were seen by his colleagues as strengths. Don's detailed and insightful observations of bird behaviour were perhaps the most striking feature of him as an ornithologist. His conclusion that the kakapo was a lek species stunned the international ornithological community when he published his observations in the prestigious journal *Ibis*. He was also a meticulous record keeper who would often sit up late at night in camp writing his notes by flickering candlelight, or to the constant background hiss of a kerosine lantern. His genealogy of the Rangatira (South-east Island) black robin population on the back of the hut door was a masterpiece of detail and precision in the days before laptop computers.

Don was bestowed with many awards for his services to conservation including the Queen's Service Medal (1989), the Royal Society of New Zealand's Sir Charles Fleming Memorial Award for Environmental Achievement (1990), an Honorary Doctor of Science from Massey University (1992), an invited member of the IUCN Breeding and Small Populations Specialist Group (1992) and a Royal Society for the Protection of Birds medal for his 'international contribution to species survival' (1994). The World Parrot Trust awarded Don its Carolina Medal in recognition of his outstanding work in parrot species conservation, one of only three people in the world to have been awarded the honour. He was elected to the United Nations Environment Programme's Global 500 Roll of Honour (1998), named as one of "100 Great New Zealanders of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century" in the New Zealand Listener (1999), awarded BirdLife International's Conservation Achievement Award for achievements in the rescue and recovery of endangered birds within New Zealand and elsewhere, and in 2012, the Department of Conservation created the Don Merton Conservation Pioneer Award to be awarded annually. The Fellow of the Ornithological Society of New Zealand award was the last Don received before his death. For a sadly short time he joined his good friend Brian Bell, his former workmate Christopher Robertson, and his early mentor Graham Turbott as holders of this award. Despite his impressive list of awards Don remained a humble and essentially private man who was deeply committed to his family and close friends. Though he is sadly missed, he leaves a legacy of conservation successes that will continue to inspire us and the generations to come.

ALAN SAUNDERS

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