

WILLIAM (BILL) R.P. BOURNE, 1930–2021

PAT BAIRD

Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia V5A 1S6, Canada

This tribute is a compilation of obituaries by Michael Harris¹ and Mark Tasker², Craig Harrison's speech at the ceremony for Bill's Pacific Seabird Group (PSG) Lifetime Achievement Award in 1997³, Michael Harris's eulogy at Bill's memorial service in Scotland, and emails I have received from PSG members, as well as from my memories of a very long friendship with Bill and his wife Sheila spanning over 30 years.

Bill Bourne (W.R.P. Bourne), a well-known seabird scientist from the United Kingdom, died in Scotland in 2021 at the age of 91. The death of Bill, one of the founders of the Pacific Seabird Group (PSG), marks the end of an era in the seabird world: the loss of one of its giants. The formation and success of PSG in North America had its beginning with the vision and encouragement that Bill imparted to two US scientists in Alaska, who then spearheaded its formation.

Many of us in PSG have been lucky to have known Bill since the late 1970s and have been inspired by his love of seabirds and bright mind, as well as his lighthearted wit. Bill encouraged all of us in our careers and willingly gave us advice, not always seabird related. His knowledge of English history was as deep as his knowledge of seabirds. Those of us who knew Bill were indeed very fortunate, and we will never forget how he influenced us in our careers.



Bill Bourne, 1978. Photo credit: Mike Harris

Bill was the power and inspiration behind many of the key decisions on seabird conservation over more than 50 years, in the UK and elsewhere. He was a man of great energy and vision, and he was exceedingly well read. His enthusiasm and drive were infectious, and part of his legacy—indeed perhaps his greatest contribution to the seabird community—is the global network of seabird groups and bird clubs that now exist, including the Cambridge Bird Club, the Cyprus Ornithological Society, the Seabird Group in the UK, and the Pacific, African, Australasian, Dutch, and Japanese seabird groups that still exist today.

The Seabird Group, the world's first seabird group, was established with Bill's urging, following a meeting of the British Ornithologists' Union in 1965 specifically devoted to seabirds. There, Bill issued a "Proposal for the Formation of a British Seabird Society," with the objective of bringing together all those studying British seabirds and to organize systematic investigations of all aspects of the biology of British seabirds. This proposal was well supported, and the Seabird Group, without a geographic identifier, was formed. Bill was Secretary for 12 years, during which time he was instrumental in setting its aims and objectives. He steered the organization's goals towards conducting a comprehensive census of the abundance and distribution of seabirds breeding along the coasts of Britain and Ireland. The account also quantified seabird passage via sea-watching from the coasts, and coordinating beached bird surveys to record the incidence of oiled birds. His proposed census of the breeding seabirds of Britain and Ireland had never previously been attempted and was a huge undertaking, given the extent of UK coasts and islets, the number of species involved, and the remoteness of some of the colonies. Operation Seafarer, a seabird census prompted by the *Torrey Canyon* oil spill in 1967 and funded largely by a public appeal afterward, was organized by the Executive Committee of the Seabird Group. Bill agreed to name the survey Operation Seafarer at James Fisher's suggestion because "The Seafarer" was the name of an Anglo-Saxon poem written ca. 685 CE, with the earliest existing written version in the "Exeter Book" ca. 1000 CE (S. Bourne pers. comm.). David Saunders was employed as organizer and his enthusiasm, linked with Bill's driving force, ensured that the census was a huge success. The census was undertaken on a shoestring budget and was staffed largely by amateurs and volunteers, an early large-scale demonstration of citizen science. The resulting book, *The Seabirds of Britain and Ireland*,⁴ has become a seabird classic and, at times, has been updated. Bill's at-sea survey methods in Operation Seafarer were incorporated by PSG member Pat Gould at the US Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) Office of Biological Services – Coastal Ecosystems (later renamed the US Geological Survey) in the 1970s for their shipboard surveys in Alaska. In 2014, the Seabird Group gave Bill the first of only two Lifetime



Bill Bourne receiving The Seabird Group's first Lifetime Achievement Award with Mike Harris (left) and Russell Wynn (centre) in 2014. Photo credit: Mark Tasker

Achievement awards ever presented to date (as of 2022, M. Harris pers. comm.). Bill's contributions to the study of British and Irish seabirds were also recognized with the Stamford Raffles Award by the Zoological Society of London.

The formation of the Seabird Group was soon followed by the formation of the PSG. PSG co-founder Jim King stated that "Bill seemed to be light years ahead of anyone in America on seabird conservation matters." When Jim went to Scotland in December 1971 for the 1st International Swan Symposium, he was invited to visit Bill and his wife Sheila, and he and Bill drew up plans on how to form a similar group in North America. With Bill's ideas of the mission, goals, and structure of a North American group, Jim Bartonek (USFWS) and Jim King decided "something needed to be done."⁵ At the Western Society of Naturalists meeting in December 1972, they suggested forming a seabird group in North America. Serendipitously in 1973, the Arab oil embargo occurred, and the US began to develop oil sources off its Outer Continental Shelves (OCS), spurring new research on associated seabirds via the OCS Environmental Assessment Program (OCSEAP). PSG's first official members came from a list of people at the seabird workshop and a list of seabird researchers hired via OCSEAP. An organizational period followed through 1973, culminating with an interim executive council, and the first meeting was held in 1974 in a former college for nuns (Providence Heights Education and Conference Center in Issaquah, Washington, USA).

One can unequivocally say that without Bill's foresight of how important seabird research was in understanding marine ecology, PSG would not exist today. He was indeed a giant of PSG's past. At Bill's Lifetime Achievement Award ceremony on 11 January 1997, presenter Craig Harrison stated that "PSG hopes that drawing attention to the giants of our past will inspire future giants to walk in their footsteps"⁶ and help shape the development of seabird science as well as conservation. Bill's are big footsteps to fill.

Not all seabird scientists have a straight path from university to a seabird career. Bill's sinuous path proves that one can be a top seabird biologist without pursuing the straight route from university



Bill Bourne accepting the Pacific Seabird Group Lifetime Achievement Award in 1997 from Craig Harrison (left). Photo credit: Vivian Mendenhall

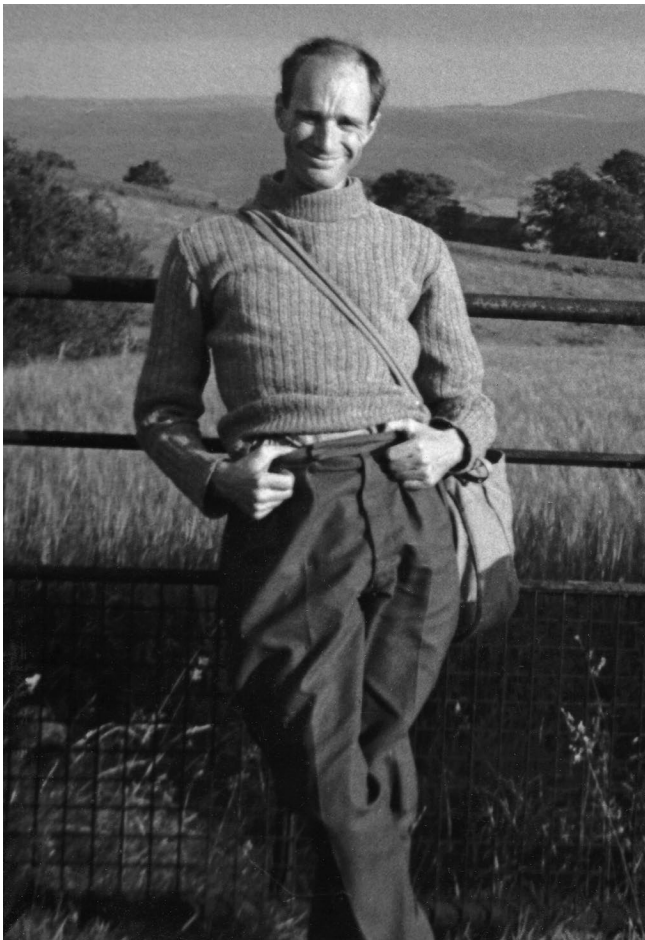
to job and without keeping quiet on critical conservation issues in order to be funded by various agencies or industries. Bill studied seabirds by a very indirect but brilliant route, and he was not shy about speaking his mind. To understand how Bill fits into the field of seabird biology, one must begin with the Second World War.

Bill was born in Bedford, England, in 1930 and was evacuated from London with his family and many others during the Blitz in 1940/41. He spent that time in Bermuda, where he further developed a love of birds that had first been instilled by his maiden aunts in the English countryside. He returned to England in 1944 and viewed his first oiled seabirds at that time. His enthusiasm for birds was evident from his teens, when he co-founded a natural history society at school and was co-Secretary of the Cambridge Bird Club. He studied Medicine and Zoology at Cambridge University, and Mike Harris noted that Bill travelled so widely during his undergraduate days that it is hard to see how he fitted in his studies. For example, after a summer visit to the Cape Verde Islands, at age 21 Bill published his first major paper in *Ibis*,⁷ followed two years later by another paper in that journal.⁸ While at the Cape Verdes, Bill also collected a peculiarly pale Purple Heron that was subsequently determined to be a distinct subspecies. It was named Bourne's Heron *Ardea purpurea bournei*,⁹ an honour few ornithologists receive. He also assisted in the distinction of three newly described seabird species: the Yelkouan Shearwater *Puffinus yelkouan*, Balearic Shearwater *P. mauretanicus*, and the Cape Verde White-faced Storm Petrel *Pelagodroma marina eadesorum*.

Bill finished his medical training in 1954, but his true love was birds, and for the rest of his life, he combined the professions of medicine and ornithology. In the mid-1950s, conscripted into the army upon completing his studies, he was declared unfit for service overseas, but in his typical manner, he managed to get this decision reversed and served two years of National Service as a Royal Air Force (RAF) medical officer in the Middle East during the Suez Canal crisis. He was transferred to Cyprus, where he spent his spare time bird watching and helped found the Cyprus Ornithological Society, in which he became its first recorder. In Cyprus, Bill discovered that migrating birds could be

seen by radar, and following his discharge from the RAF in 1958, he was invited by David Lack to do a bird radar study at Oxford University. Under David's supervision, Bill began his Doctor of Philosophy degree at the Edward Grey Institute and completed his two-volume dissertation in 1963.¹⁰ Bill's examining committee included Geoffrey Matthews and Niko Tinbergen, who requested specific changes in Bill's dissertation after the exam. However, Bill, ever the contrarian, did not agree with the suggestions, and thus Geoffrey and Niko did not sign off on the dissertation. Thus, despite completing all the coursework, finishing the research, writing a dissertation, and defending it orally, he was not awarded the PhD degree. This formality was not a setback for Bill, and it did not stop him from continuing his lively life-long study of seabirds and their conservation. At Oxford, he met his future wife Sheila and wed her on 18 August 1962 after a prolonged courtship. Mike Harris stated that "no man could have been luckier in his partner and had a more loving and supportive wife." I have been friends with Bill and Sheila for over 30 years, and I can definitely attest to Mike's statement. He and Sheila often would quote Shakespeare sonnets to each other, and they enjoyed discussing everything from birds to English literature.

After Oxford, Bill returned to his medical career in 1970 as a physician at Watford General Hospital in Aberdeen, Scotland. As oil and gas exploration escalated in the North Sea, he took up a post



Bill Bourne in Wales, 1962. Photo credit: Sheila Bourne

at the University of Aberdeen to work on a Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) project on the distribution and ecology of seabirds at sea, supervised by George Dunnet. A major part of the study involved ship-based surveys, and Bill's contacts among the navy, ferry operators, and the oil industry were invaluable in establishing a network of survey routes. However, the surveys did not produce the results they wanted, and the NERC grant ended in 1975. However, in 1979 the Joint Nature Conservation Committee's Seabirds at Sea Team¹¹ took up the gauntlet of carrying out seabird surveys, and have since produced quality work, improving on the prototype surveys by George and Bill.

From 1975 to 1978, Bill studied seabirds and wrote many papers on conservation in his spare time. He figured out how to work on seabirds full time by becoming a Surgical Officer in 1983–1991 on Royal Fleet Auxiliary vessels in the South Atlantic, Indian, and Antarctic oceans. These cruises gave him abundant data on distributions of seabirds in oceans that had yet to be surveyed. He also became the honorary scientific advisor to the Royal Naval Birdwatching Society (RNBWS) and collated their 30-year collection of at-sea records. Bill, travelling as ship's doctor, was instrumental in founding and building up the RNBWS and setting up protocols for what are now standard bird observations on British Royal Navy vessels.

Bill's list of publications spans 10 pages in Academia.edu, and many have been seminal reviews, such as his 1976 review entitled "Seabirds and Pollution".¹² Bill was also passionately committed to conservation and campaigned for the protection of threatened areas, both globally (e.g., Henderson Island, Pitcairn Island group, an uninhabited coral atoll in the central South Pacific) and closer to home (e.g., preventing the Loch of Strathbeg in northeastern Scotland from becoming the UK's largest North Sea gas terminal). His cruises into the South Pacific, Atlantic, and Indian oceans as Ship's Surgeon enabled Bill to view many of the world's current world heritage sites and thus be able to lobby for their protection. Bill's publications on the Chagos Archipelago south of the Maldives were among the first to recognize that the biggest threat to many tropical species were introduced species. Bill was a leading witness against the proposal to establish a military base on Aldabra Atoll in the Seychelles, and he also campaigned against the proposal by developers to build the third London Airport at Foulness Island on the east coast of England.

Bill and Sheila eventually retired in 2000 to live in Dufftown, Moray, Scotland, north of Aberdeen, to be near their daughter Mary and her family (husband Ian, children Peter and Lizzie). Bill delighted in his grandchildren and knew far more about children's TV programs than I, even making me sit and watch an episode of the TeleTubbies with them during one visit—an unexpected but endearing memory. Bill had almost a child-like wonder about nature and love for everything in it. Those who had the good fortune to chat with him informally soon discovered this and came away from those encounters encouraged to further their studies and inspired by Nature herself. However, Bill's wit and sarcasm were always there, and one had to have an inkling of whether Bill was serious so as to not take offence or to believe what he said was absolutely true.

Bill could not separate his love of seabirds from his love of history, and he would always combine the two on any outing. PSG member David Duffy related a bird + history excursion with Bill when they

spent “a delightful day” after an Aberdeen conference visiting seabird colonies in Scotland; Bill provided a running commentary about James Boswell’s and Dr. Samuel Johnson’s visits to the same sites in 1773. My bird + history tour with Bill was more mundane: after a Seabird Group conference, he was heading to northern England and I hitched a ride, the likes of which I will never forget. He had his eyes more on birds than on the road ahead (amazingly we did not crash) while he kept up a nonstop monologue of British history as we sped by various historical places. I learned more about the War of the Roses and the Window Tax than I ever had at university. I was astonished when he abruptly stopped the car and leapt out into a muddy field, wearing his leather shoes and wool pants, binoculars at the ready. I have no idea what bird he saw.

Colleagues had much good to say about Bill throughout his life, even though there was a bit of disconnect in experiences between colleagues on both sides of the Atlantic. PSG member Craig Harrison described Bill as “one of the most interesting people you can meet. An enigma to many, his acid tongue and barbed pen are legendary.” Craig confesses he was sometimes on the wrong end of Bill’s acerbic remarks. Bill was mistaken about what would become important in seabird ecology in only one instance: at a 1982 conference of the International Council for Bird Preservation at Cambridge University. At dinner one night, Bill sat across from long-time PSG member Spencer Sealy and wondered why Spencer and his student Harry Carter would be concerned about the Marbled Murrelet *Brachyramphus marmoratus*, because there was no reason to worry about the status of such a widespread and common bird. Those of us in PSG would say “the rest is history.” But it was refreshing to have someone like Bill who would always speak his mind.

David Jenkins and George Dunnet reviewed Bill’s career¹³ and ended with an enigmatic statement that “stories of Bill’s energy, knowledge, eccentricity, and unpredictability are probably mostly true,” and that he “continues to be a thorn in the side of the Establishment.” Bill described himself in *Who’s Who of Ornithology*¹⁴ as “throwing metaphorical bricks at stained glass windows,” meaning that he publicly challenged the establishments and institutions he thought lacking. He “had a reputation of keeping ornithological societies on their toes” regarding procedural issues. At Bill’s memorial service, Mike Harris stated that an early Secretary of the Seabird Group, upon being told of Bill’s death, said “I sometimes dreaded going to Seabird Group committee meetings in case the paperwork was not in order, but nothing takes away from Bill’s immense passion and stimulating influence on seabird science and knowledge.” Another former Secretary of the Seabird Group said, “I feel truly privileged to have known him, and he was always kind to me and interested in what I was doing.” Jenkins and Dunnet continued in that vein stating:

People who remember Bill mainly for his diatribes and apparent Introversion often forget, or may not know about, his whole-hearted and genuine interest in others. Bill has an international circle of true friends, and a genuine interest in the young, and in newcomers in the field. Bill always championed young researchers, providing endless encouragement, introducing them to key people, pointing them to obscure literature and advising them on the logistics of getting to remote colonies. [...] Bill had a genuine interest in others and this interest has produced an unusually wide and international circle of real friends and acquaintances.

I can certainly agree with that statement. I met Bill more than 30 years ago at a meeting of the Seabird Group. When he drove me to a friend’s in Preston, we first stopped by his aunts’ storybook cottage where Bill had spent his summers as a boy. Over tea they regaled me with stories of young Bill and how they had shown him the magic of the birds attracted to their feeders. He corresponded with me from then on, and our family always visited Bill and Sheila when overseas. But it was not just our family whom he and Sheila welcomed; colleagues worldwide often dropped by their cottage throughout the years.

As Mark Tasker put it, “Bill was a man of great energy and vision, and was exceedingly widely read. [...] 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 indeed inspired many early career researchers, taking time to talk with them and discover what they were interested in. He built up quite the overseas correspondence with some PSG members, carrying on with seabird discussions long after he was able to attend meetings in person.

Bill’s rivalries and antagonistic friendships go all the way back to Oxford and Cambridge. Bill and another long-time seabird researcher and Waterbird Society member, Ian Nisbet, spent 70 years sparring with each other in jest over publishing. Bill studied skylark migration in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and he felt that his observations would revolutionize understanding of bird migration. When he had not published after a period of years, Dr. Chris Smout and Ian told him they did not think he would ever publish the account, and Ian said he would eat the paper if Bill did publish. As of 1971, Bill still had not published but was ready to, and so Jenkins and Dunnet wrote that Bill “still looks forward to the day when Dr. Ian Nisbet fulfills an undertaking to eat a copy of any published results” of his studies.



Bill Bourne, 2009. Photo credit: Mary Bourne

Finally in the early 2000s, Bill published the account in the annual report of the Cambridge Bird Club and subsequently Ian “duly ate 3% of the paper in recognition of his judgment of its scientific quality” and discarded the rest, so he (“thankfully”) has “no documentation of these supposed events” (I. Nisbet, pers. comm.).

At Bill’s memorial service in Scotland, his daughter Mary caught the true spirit of Bill, in these words:

He had two loves: his family whom he adored, and nature, which he perceived with the eyes of a clear scientist and with the emotional wonder of the arts. Seabirds were his specialty and he appreciated nature as an interconnected whole. I remember one day after he returned from hospital he asked me to drive him to the Cabragh to view some limestone cliffs where he knew there were rockroses; and where there were rockroses, a certain kind of butterfly lived. We drove up there and saw the limestone cliffs, but there were no rockroses and no butterfly, but we sat in the sun and listened to the birds, and it was beautiful.

At the end of the service, Bill would have enjoyed hearing the soundtrack of gulls at a Scottish seabird colony that was played for two minutes.

Bill’s death marks the end of an era, the golden days of pure research by some of the first scientists whose main interest was seabird ecology and conservation. The PSG owes him a huge debt of gratitude for urging Jim King to help establish the organization. Bill’s legacy of ~200 scientific papers will continue to inspire international endeavors for seabird research and conservation, and his relentless pursuit of speaking out against development of seabird nesting or foraging areas will give others confidence to do the same. We will all miss his cutting wit and offhand remarks about a myriad of things historical. Bill’s memorial service

included this quote, which sums up his whole-hearted love for all things nature:

*For all knowledge and wonder
(which is the seed of knowledge)
is an impression of pleasure in itself.*

Francis Bacon (1561–1626)

(Endnotes)

- ¹ Harris, M. 2021. *British Birds* 114: 490–492.
- ² Tasker, M. 2021. *Seabird* 33: 123–125.
- ³ Harrison, C.S. 1997. *Pacific Seabirds* 24: 114.
- ⁴ Cramp, S., Bourne, W.R.P. & Saunders, D. 1974. *The Seabirds of Britain and Ireland*. New York, USA: Taplinger Publishing.
- ⁵ King, J.G. 2008. *Attending Alaska’s Birds: A Wildlife Pilot’s Story*. Bloomington, USA: Trafford Publishing.
- ⁶ Harrison, C.S. & Divoky, G.J. 1997. PSG Honors Its Founders: Lifetime Achievement Awards for Bourne, King and Bartonek. *Pacific Seabirds* 24: 51–53.
- ⁷ Bourne, W.R.P. 1955. The birds of Cape Verde Islands. *Ibis* 97: 508–556.
- ⁸ Bourne, W.R.P. 1957. The breeding birds of Bermuda. *Ibis* 99: 94–105.
- ⁹ Avibase. 2022. *Cape Verde Heron*. Port Rowan, Canada: Birds Canada. <https://avibase.ca/E3C46304>
- ¹⁰ Bourne, W.R.P. 1963. *Bird Migration in Scotland Studied by Radar*. PhD dissertation. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Department of Zoology.
- ¹¹ <https://jncc.gov.uk/our-work/monitoring-seabirds-at-sea/>
- ¹² Johnson, R. (Ed.). 1982. *Marine Pollution*. New York, USA: Academic Press.
- ¹³ Jenkins, D. & Dunnet, G. 1971. *British Birds* 71: 123–125.
- ¹⁴ Pemberton, J.E. (Ed.). 1997. *Who’s Who in Ornithology*. Peterborough, UK: Buckingham Press.