

Gill Memorial Medal – 28 May 2022
Citation for Professor Peter Ryan

Professor Peter Ryan is the Director of the FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology at the University of Cape Town. Peter's career has combined the highest scientific distinction with a genuine impact on bird conservation. He is well-known to southern Africa's birding community as author and editor of field guides and handbooks (including the seventh edition of *Roberts' Birds of Southern Africa*), as a prolific and authoritative writer for African BirdLife, and as a former President of BirdLife South Africa. Peter's phenomenal energy and productivity stem from a total passion for birds, for Africa and its surrounding oceans, and for mentoring and training the next generations of ornithologists and conservationists.



Peter's international distinction as a scientist is hard to overstate. He has made particularly important contributions to the fields of seabird ecology, marine plastic pollution and its impacts on seabirds, mitigation of seabird bycatch by fisheries, and evolution in oceanic island birds. Peter has also led important work on the systematics and phylogeography of continental African birds, and on the effects of energy infrastructure (such as wind turbines and power lines) on land birds.

Peter's intellectual heart is definitely at sea, however. He has a long-standing passion for Tristan archipelago 2,800 km west of Cape Town, and in particular for Inaccessible Island which he first visited as a young student in 1984. This was to be the beginning of his nearly forty years (and counting) of long-term studies and conservation efforts which made a pivotal contribution towards Inaccessible Island being declared a nature reserve in 1997, and (together with Gough Island) a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2005. Peter's research

here has yielded fascinating and diverse findings, from revealing how the islands' finch species have independently speciated ecologically on Inaccessible and nearby Nightingale Islands to specialise the seed sizes available on each (published in the top-ranked journal *Science* in 2007), to demonstrating that most oceanic plastic pollution comes from ships rather than land-based sources, with important implications for mitigating this threat to marine life (published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA* in 2019).



Marine plastics and their impacts on wildlife have fascinated Peter for decades before their current prominence in the public and scientific consciousness. His studies began during his MSc in the mid-1980s on the effects of plastic ingestion in seabirds. Many of his recent efforts, together with his students, have focussed on understanding the sources and fates of plastics at sea, directly informing conservation policy. Some of this research has been conducted in collaboration with his wife, marine scientist Coleen Moloney, herself a distinguished UCT academic (their daughter, Molly, is a UCT science undergraduate).

One of Peter's qualities that most inspires awe in his academic colleagues is his sheer productivity. He routinely publishes around 30 scientific papers a year, many of these in the highest-ranked international science journals. About a third of his papers have one of his postgraduate students as "first" author, which indicates Peter's dedication to ensuring that his students publish and thrive in the tough world of academia.

Peter sustains this remarkable level of scientific productivity alongside his prolific popular science writing, membership and leadership of multiple international steering committees, teaching on several courses at UCT, and spending significant amounts of time collecting his own data in the field. In recent years this has included surveying plastic pollution in some of the world's remotest oceans and shores in the Antarctic and Arctic, and playing a leading role in the mouse eradication programmes on Gough Island and (imminently) Marion Island. Nonetheless, Peter is somehow able to ensure he begins most days at home on the Cape Peninsula with a surf below his house, or a survey of his long-term bird monitoring plots in the mountain fynbos above it. As his colleagues we would all love to know the secret to his phenomenal focus!

Peter's depth of knowledge and clarity of vision also makes him a brilliant communicator of ornithology. His crisp writing, pacy talks and superb photography have inspired wide audiences. These qualities also make him an insightful and exacting editor, and he has mentored generations of students in raising their game as writers and presenters.

Peter has supervised over a hundred UCT PhD and MSc projects – a staggering number. His students have been inspired not only by his passion for birds and conservation, fearsome intellect, meticulous approach to science, and deep knowledge of ornithology and ecology, but also by his sense of adventure and fun. A field trip with Peter always results in not only a better understanding of the world, but typically also some excellent stories!



One of Peter's most enduring contributions to African ornithology and conservation has been his founding leadership of the FitzPatrick Institute's MSc course in Conservation Biology, which he ran for 22 years. This course has helped to train and launch the careers of hundreds of African scientists, alongside hundreds from elsewhere in the world. Seeing its graduates provide expertise and leadership to conservation efforts throughout Africa (and beyond) has rightly given Peter great satisfaction.

Peter's exceptional scientific achievements have been widely recognised. Peter was the first (and is still the only) ornithologist to have received an A-rating from the National Research Foundation of South Africa, putting him in a small group the country's best scientists who are regarded as world leaders in their field. He was awarded the Gilchrist Memorial Medal for his contributions to marine science, and elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of South Africa. It is hard to think of anyone more deserving of BirdLife SA's Gill Memorial Medal.

Peter became Director of the FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology in 2014, following Professor Phil Hockey's untimely death. In his eight years as Director he has contributed enormously to maintaining and raising the Institute's excellent international standing. He will retire as Director at the end of 2022 and will be sorely missed in this role. He plans to remain active in research and, knowing him, we can be reassured that he will be more

active than ever. As a community we will no doubt continue for decades to come to be inspired (and more than a little awed) by his knowledge, productivity, and insight.



Prof. Claire Spottiswoode, 4 April 2022