

# Obituary: Brian James Blaylock

13 July 1947 to 8 August 2022

## PHILIPPA HORTON

Brian was born at Rose Park, Adelaide on 13 July 1947 and was adopted at a young age by Winifred and Arnold Blaylock of Queenstown. Arnold was abusive but died in 1959, leaving Winifred and Brian in financial straits although free of his cruelty. Brian left school before matriculation in order to find full-time work, including as a clerk with Elder Smith's and then as a mail sorter with the Postmaster-General's Department. In March 1970 he married Joanne Tilby and at the end of that year was appointed as a Trainee Computer Operator in the Department of Defence in Canberra. He remained in the Computer Services Division of that department for some years, with several promotions to more senior grades, and in 1982 was awarded a prize in the Staff Suggestions Scheme, for his solution of editing difficulties in a computer pre-processor.

In 1984 Brian and Jo returned to Adelaide, with young daughters Amy (born 1975) and Kirrily (1978). Before moving to Canberra they had bought a block of land at Eden Hills which they now cleared of olives and planted with fruit trees, also building a house into which they moved in 1992. As with previous properties, they created a garden filled with fruit, vegetables and flowers, becoming largely self-sufficient for food. Brian continued to work in the Commonwealth public service, in the Information Technology Branch of the Department of Education, until briefly working elsewhere before early retirement at the age of 55.

From an early age, Brian was interested in natural history, joining the South Australian Ornithological Association (now Birds SA) in



Brian Blaylock in the Bird Section, SA Museum, 2012.  
Image P. Horton

1963 and the Junior Field Naturalists around the same time. Bird watching and plant collecting were his main passions and over the years he contributed more than 2,300 plant specimens to the State Herbarium of South Australia and many thousands of bird records to the Biological Database of South Australia (BDBSA). Before moving to Canberra, he frequently went bird-banding with Max Waterman's group, with highlights including banding Osprey on an island off Pondalowie Bay, Peregrine Falcon in Onkaparinga Gorge and Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo at Myponga, as well as mist-netting White-bellied Whipbird at Pondalowie Bay. Once he had bought his first car, a blue Mini Deluxe, he made many banding trips, including one to Port Lincoln 'loaded up with mist nets, poles, food and five young lads' (Blaylock 2001).

After returning from Canberra, Brian participated in more than 30 biological survey field trips, valued for his plant and bird expertise, including those with the Environment Department and the Scientific Expedition Group. He was a team member on all but one of the Birds SA bird surveys of Nature Foundation's Witchelina Nature Reserve from 2011 to 2020 inclusive. He and Jo also did regular bird surveys from 2007 at O'Halloran Hill Recreation Park as part of the 'Million Trees Project' of the Environment Department's Urban Biodiversity Unit. Their survey site was in a cleared area that was being revegetated and so species counts were low but provided an essential basis for future comparisons.

Brian was or had been a member of BirdLife Australia, the Field Naturalists Society of South Australia, Friends of Shepherd's Hill Recreation Park and Friends of Gamble Garden at Blackwood, being at one time President of the last. Together with Amy, he was one of the founding members of Friends of Sturt Gorge Recreation Park, formed in 1999, and was both a committee member (as treasurer, website coordinator and secretary) and active participant in working bees for 20 years. Since 2012 he was one of the Directors of Worlds End Conservation Pty Ltd, a company dedicated to the conservation of hilly grasslands, woodlands and scrublands in the Mid North of SA; he also assisted with their administration and in running bird identification workshops.

In July 2001 Brian offered his services as a volunteer to the SA Museum Bird Section and from 21 August 2001 he worked with me for several hours on most Tuesdays over the next two decades. In November 2020, in recognition of his long-standing contributions to the Museum, he was made an Honorary Associate of the Museum. His duties were varied but significantly included assistance with IT matters as the Bird Section and its collections rapidly became digitised. He improved the quality of information in the bird specimen database

by standardising place names, increasing the accuracy of geographic coordinates and entering additional information from undigitised records.

On a practical level Brian assisted with curation of the collections whenever an extra pair of hands was needed. He also assisted with assessment of mounted bird specimens and writing species information in preparation for the Museum's new Biodiversity Gallery, opened in February 2010. He contributed to answering the many ornithological queries directed to the Bird Section, for example in identifying birds on 17th century Japanese screens held by the Art Gallery of SA, using a field guide to Japanese birds from his extensive personal library.

From 1985 a major initiative of the SA Department of Environment and the SA Museum was the Census of South Australian Vertebrates, with the fourth edition being published online (the Birds chapter in 2013). The fifth edition of the bird chapter (2020) was a standalone online publication as *Annotated List of the Birds of South Australia*. Brian was a co-author for the fourth and fifth editions, adding all subspecies to the latter. He spent many hours checking questionable records and compiling other records to add to the distribution maps, produced by the Environment Department, for the fourth edition. Using his IT skills and an online mapping package, he produced the distribution maps for the fifth edition, uploading these to the Birds SA website. For many years previously, he had crafted maps for papers published by Andrew Black and myself. He also monitored online literature and checklists for new taxonomic papers relevant to SA birds, his last update to me being less than three months before he died.

Another major production of the Bird Section was a history of ornithology at the Museum from 1856 to 1939, published as a book chapter (of 217 pages) in 2018. While Andrew Black and I wrote most of the text, Brian contributed facts and figures and obscure pieces of information

that would otherwise have been missed. Because most SA Museum ornithologists were members of the SAOA, and usually committee members, this chapter is also closely entwined with SAOA history. During this project we became aware of the enormous number of 'duplicate' bird skin specimens donated to the SA Museum by the then British Museum (Natural History) in the early 1900s, providing the former with a significant coverage of non-Australian bird families. One of Brian's last major tasks at the Museum was to check and compile a list of these, numbering more than 1,000. Hundreds had been registered at the BM(NH) but no record was kept at the time of what specimens they sent to which museums, so Brian's list will enable current curators at The Natural History Museum finally to annotate their records with 'sent to SA Museum'.

An almost completed project that Brian spent many hours working on was an annotated list of the type specimens of birds in the SA Museum. From a brief list that I began many years ago, it expanded greatly as Brian researched the S. A. White Collection and collaborated with Mary LeCroy of the American Museum of Natural History where the Gregory Mathews collection is housed. Mathews made use of many S. A. White specimens in his *Birds of Australia* (1910–1927) and, in answering queries from LeCroy as she prepared multiple volumes of *Type Specimens of Birds in the AMNH*, Brian discovered dozens of secondary types among our collections. Checking our types list prior to its publication was a high priority for us until COVID-19 and Brian's illness intervened; it remains a priority for me.

Brian's volunteer work for the state's scientific institutions extended beyond the Bird Section. He took part in two of the Museum's *Out of the Glass Case* roadshows to schools in rural and remote regions, presenting talks on birds of the local areas, and he was a volunteer for many years at the State Herbarium.

The greatest beneficiary of Brian's time and energy was Birds SA. While in Canberra, he joined the Canberra Ornithologists Group, formed in 1970, but retained his SAOA membership until 1984 when it lapsed. He rejoined the association in 1998, was elected Assistant Secretary in 1999, and became Secretary in 2000, remaining in that position until April 2018 and serving as an ordinary committee member until the end of 2018. His tenure of 18 years as secretary is the longest in the history of the association, comparable only with those of John Sutton (1922–1938) and Bob Brown (1962–1975), and in 2018 he received a Long Service Award, bestowed by the Committee in recognition of his outstanding service.

Brian's expertise in digital technology was of immediate value to the Birds SA Committee as its new website went online in May 2001. The web pages had been designed by Anna Mobley but Brian provided much of the content and he was in charge of maintenance and updates. In 2012 he began the process of revamping the whole website. Among his initiatives was adding the website in 2008 to Fat Birder's Top 1000 Birding Website, a 'ranking by traffic' site that monitors usage; currently Birds SA sits in 45th position, one above Birds of Ukraine (Avibase is 4th, Birding NZ 35th; Brian loved these details). He also set up a page of links to other birding and conservation organisations, a page of bird identification guides and related information, and the 'Where to go' page, providing localities (with maps) and bird lists for numerous birdwatching sites around SA, together with habitat and historical information for each site. This is an exceptional resource for local, interstate and overseas people birdwatching in SA. All of these pages were works in progress and he continued updating them until only a few weeks before his death.

Another valuable resource on the Birds SA website is the Photo Gallery, set up by Brian using photographs donated by members and by the public, each image requiring resizing and

the addition of details and copyright marks. His last addition to the gallery was on 15 July 2022, taking the total number of images to 4,612. As a keen bird photographer himself, Brian's photos are included in the gallery. He was particularly proud of an exquisite photo he took of two Chestnut-breasted Whiteface at Bon Bon Station in August 2018, that adorned the front cover of *The Birder* issue No. 248 (Summer 2018). Less obvious but equally important was the 'Ask an expert' facility at the bottom of the website, again set up and managed by Brian, with all queries, mostly about bird identification, directed to and answered by himself. These queries are now being answered by Andrew Black and we have become aware of how much time Brian put in to running this facility.

Aside from website and secretarial duties, Brian assisted Birds SA in other ways. He managed the official email accounts, enabling day to day operations for different tasks by the Management Committee. Due to his initiative and drive the association was able to receive tax-deductible donations for conservation purposes; he redrafted the Rules in 2006 to achieve this status and establish the Birds SA Conservation Fund. He served on various subcommittees including the rarities, distribution and Important Bird Areas subcommittees. He re-scanned many of the older issues of *South Australian Ornithologist* to upload onto the website and added new PDFs as each issue of the journal (and *The Birder* magazine and Historical Series) was published. Articles from the journal are among the most frequently downloaded items from the website by members and the public worldwide.

Always keen to promote Birds SA to the wider public, Brian often assisted in staffing the Association's stand at open days and fairs, such as the Sturt Gorge Recreation Park Open Day in May 2014 and the Laratinga Bird Fair in October 2016. He participated in the day field trips, often as trip leader, and organised the October 2013 campout to Bimbowrie Conservation Park and the October 2014 campout to Hiltaba Nature

Reserve. Occasionally he made time for private birdwatching, organising trips for himself and Jo to various locations around Australia and overseas, such as Cocos and Christmas Islands (in 2009) and Spain (in 2019).

In 2002, then Birds SA member Colin Clark set up an Access database in which to store the Association's vast accumulations of bird records from field trips and individual members. Brian quickly joined in this initiative and became its manager, adding thousands of records to the database himself. Periodically, he made the database available to the Environment Department for uploading to the BDBSA, thus contributing enormously to the distribution maps discussed above. In producing maps for the website, Brian obtained distribution data from the Atlas of Living Australia, BDBSA, Birds SA and SA Museum databases and other sources, and created Excel files for sight and specimen records before and after 1970 from which he created the maps. These were vetted by the Bird Records Committee before being uploaded by Brian. This service is highly valued by Birds SA members and by the scientific community and birdwatching public.

Brian was co-author on five notes or papers in the *South Australian Ornithologist* but it was his chapter in Birds SA's centenary book that was his greatest publishing achievement. In 'A Century of Presidents' Brian meticulously researched the 37 presidents of the SAOA from 1899 to 1999 and provided a short biography of each, an immensely valuable resource for historians (Blaylock 2000). Brian also produced the revised fifth edition of *A Field List of the Birds of South Australia* (2017 with a 2020 update), the first edition to be a downloadable website version and again an extremely valuable resource.

With so many activities and duties the question is how did he fit them all in? Perhaps by occasionally diverging from his colleagues' expectations, perhaps by spending less time with his family than he might have, and certainly

with no time wasted in frivolous conversation, but always with boundless enthusiasm, determination and dedication to natural history and conservation. In July 2022 the Birds SA committee began preparing a nomination for Brian to be awarded Honorary membership. Sadly, this was conferred posthumously on 30 August 2022 but, when Andrew Black told him about it five days before he died, he expressed his utmost appreciation.

In November 2019 Brian began to suffer from painful recurring pancreatitis and, after a number of procedures, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in April 2021. In July 2022 his condition deteriorated; he entered the Mary Potter Hospice on 27 July and died on 8 August. A moving funeral, complete with bird song both recorded and live, was held graveside at Wirra Wonga, Enfield Memorial Park, on 15 August. A celebration of Brian's life was held at Belair National Park on 18 September; among the large gathering were family members from Canada and representatives of the numerous organisations for which he had volunteered. All were in awe of Brian's tireless contributions, for which we remain immensely grateful. We extend our deepest sympathy to Jo, Amy, Kirrily and family.

## References

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