

Obituary



Richard G. B. ('Dick') Brown, 1935–2010

Richard G. B. ('Dick') Brown who died in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, on 26 March 2010 spent most of his professional life as a Research Scientist working for the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) of the Government of Canada. After a brief spell studying the impact of American Robins *Turdus migratorius* on fruit orchards in Ontario, Dick shifted in 1971 to completely new ground as the head of, and for much of his career the sole exponent of, CWS seabirds-at-sea research, based at the Bedford Institute of Oceanography in Dartmouth. In collaboration with Paul Germain at the University of Moncton, he established what was then the world's leading pelagic bird survey (PIROP; Programme Intégré de Recherches sur les Oiseaux Pélagiques). This initiative was well in advance of similar surveys in Europe and elsewhere in North America, especially in its use of computerized data input and mapping. From the 1970s through to the late 1980s, Dick was the leading researcher in the study of seabird distributions in relation

to oceanography. This was his most outstanding contribution to ornithology.

Dick began his research career at Oxford University, under the tutelage of the Nobel laureate Niko Tinbergen, where he completed in 1962 a thesis on the behaviour of fruit flies *Drosophila* before shifting to his real interest, birds. As an undergraduate he had already become a serious ornithologist with trips to Denmark to observe raptor migration (1956) and to Finmark to study bird behaviour in continuous daylight (1957). After completing his doctorate, Dick studied the breeding biology of Herring *Larus argentatus* and Lesser Black-backed *Larus fuscus* gulls at Walney Island in Cumbria, England. In 1965 he teamed up with David Hessel and Nick Blurton Jones to study the breeding behaviour of Sabine's Gull *Larus (Xema) sabini* in Alaska, an aberrant species that filled out the Tinbergen team's study of family-wide behaviour of gulls. Later, the trio drove back to Ontario, stopping off at the AOU meeting in Ann Arbor, MI, en route.

Major publications on marine bird ecology and distribution came in the form of the *Atlas of Eastern Canadian Seabirds*, with a later update and accounts of at-sea ecology from the Senegal upwelling off West Africa to the fjords of southern Chile, all studies conducted on board the Canadian oceanographic research vessels *SS Hudson* and *Baffin*, based out of Dick's home town. He was among the first to identify the importance of marine hotspots to seabirds and to correlate distributions with upwelling processes.

During his time in Dartmouth, Dick was a pillar of the local birding community and, as a confirmed bachelor, a major supporter of the local restaurant industry. His home life was spartan, to say the least. On one occasion, when invited to his very modest apartment for a meal, I was impressed to find that he owned no crockery, making do for his infrequent home meals with paper plates ('saves on washing up' was his response to my surprise). He was a polymath, who was as literate in the classics as in science. He introduced me, then a recent immigrant to Canada, to contemporary Canadian literature, especially Hugh McLennan and Robertson Davies (his first recommendation, Davies's *Fifth Business*, was a revelation). His interest in literature was not all as a consumer. He published one novel, *Voyage of the Ice-berg: The Story of the Iceberg that Sank the Titanic* (1983, James Lorimer & Co., Publishers, Toronto, Ontario) and for many years wrote a regular column for *Nature Canada*, the magazine of the Canadian Nature Federation.

Dick was a thinking person who saw potential research topics well ahead of others. He was a pioneer

of the systematic ecology of seabirds at sea. With a compendious knowledge of science and natural history, he was an inspiring colleague and an invaluable source for information and references in the pre-Google/Wikipedia era. The tragic early onset of dementia stripped him of his mental powers prematurely,

depriving him and science of what should have been a productive old-age.

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