

Biographical Portrait

PÉRRINE MONCRIEFF

(1893–1979): A FIRST FOR NEW ZEALAND

By Robin Hodge

Joseph Banks, the gentleman-naturalist on Captain James Cook's first exploration of New Zealand between 1768 and 1771, brought to the Northern Hemisphere's notice the islands' dawn chorus of bellbirds.

This morn I was awakd by the singing of the birds ashore...their voices were certainly the most melodious wild musick I have ever heard, almost imitating small bells but with the most tuneable silver sound imaginable.¹

During the next 150 years several books about New Zealand birds were published by scientists and amateur ornithologists. But the books were often impracticable for outdoor use because they were large, or heavy, or written in a discursive literary style more suitable for leisure reading than field identification. They usually required some knowledge of taxonomy. The first true field guide for New Zealand's birds was published in 1925. It was compiled by Pérrine Moncrieff (1893–1979), an English-woman who had migrated to New Zealand with her husband, Malcolm, and two sons only four years before. Intending to settle in British Columbia after traveling the world, they fell in love with Nelson, a small city in the north of the South Island, and never went on to Canada.

Moncrieff came from an upper-class family with amateur science, artistic, and sporting interests in the natural world. The Pre-Raphaelite painter John Millais was her grandfather. Her uncle John Guille Millais was an ornithologist, big-game hunter, and early conservationist. He inspired Moncrieff's passion for birds and stimulated in her an interest in field studies. She became a leading amateur ornithologist in New Zealand largely through her own efforts. Her education in Britain had not included science. Focused on lan-



Pérrine Moncrieff with two of her pets, including Miss Micawber, her macaw parrot, sometime in the 1930s. The macaw (on the right) had a broken wing when she bought it from a pet shop in the 1920s. The other is either a parrot, or possibly a budgie, as she kept those as pets in Britain. Reprinted with permission of the Nelson Provincial Museum Trust Board.

guages, art, and music, it was typical for girls of her class at that time.

After arriving in New Zealand, Moncrieff quickly sought to learn firsthand about the country's birds. There were indigenous species, Northern Hemisphere species introduced by nineteenth-century immigrants, and a few self-introduced species. Exploring mountainous forests, wetlands, and coasts to see birds in their natural habitats, Moncrieff realized the value of a pocket field guide, as she had used in Britain. Her idea for a book was based on *The Ready Guide to British Birds*, by B.A. Carter. This was one of many compact guides produced at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when field research

developed and became popular.²

Moncrieff's book, *New Zealand Birds and How to Identify Them*, published in 1925, was the result. Like Carter's book, it used the bird's size as the primary identification. Moncrieff's core list ranged from the 3-inch rifleman to the 44-inch royal albatross, the measurements being those of male birds from tail tip to bill tip. Presenting four or five birds on each page, she gave brief notes on coloring, flight, habitat, ground movement, voice, and any distinguishing characteristics, plus each species' binomial name and order. She thought the approach an effective way for novice birdwatchers and children to get to know birds: if they saw a bird about six inches long, they could look

PÉRRINE MONCRIEFF COLLECTION, ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY, WELLINGTON, N.Z.

under “6 inches” and identify it from her notes.

Moncrieff also wrote an introductory essay on birds in general and the necessity for their conservation. (By conservation she meant the permanent protection, especially of indigenous birds.) She obtained permission to use some of Carter’s material on British birds, some of which had been successfully introduced to New Zealand. She provided cross-referencing lists of birds by their orders, habitats, and scientific, English, and indigenous Maori names. The latest field and taxonomy research material was supplied by New Zealand’s two leading scientific ornithologists, Walter Oliver and Robert Falla. Moncrieff welcomed their help because even though she did not use scientific classification to structure her book, she wanted the science to be accurate and current. About one-third of the species were illustrated by black-and-white photographs of museum specimens—not ideal, of course, for field identification. But they were the cheapest images available, and she wanted the book to be affordable. The cover featured her own drawing of the now-extinct huia, in striking red, black, and white.

New Zealand Birds and How to Identify Them was more than a field guide. Moncrieff also promoted her enthusiasm for field ornithology and her passion for conservation. Both aspects were summed up at the end of her introductory essay: “The study of birds in their natural surroundings should be the aim of every naturalist, and how can we attain this better than by seeing first and foremost that our birds, those unrivalled denizens of New Zealand, are well protected.”³

Four more editions followed. For the second edition, in 1936, she offered hints for observing birds. Beginning with that edition, the illustrations improved, with reproductions of paintings by Lily Daff from the Otago Museum in Dunedin. Daff’s painting of the kaka was featured on the covers of this and subsequent editions. For each edition, Oliver and Falla updated scientific information, and Moncrieff strengthened her conservation message; in the third, in 1948, for example, she quoted Louis Bromfield: “You cannot do violence to Nature without paying for it as an individual and as a nation.” In the fourth edition, in 1952, Moncrieff included the exciting “discovery” of the takahe, thought to be extinct but found in



The first edition of *New Zealand Birds and How to Identify Them* featured Moncrieff’s own drawing of the now-extinct huia, in striking red, black, and white. Subsequent editions featured artwork by Lily Daff (right).

remote mountains of the South Island. The fifth and last edition appeared in the late 1950s.⁴

In its day, her book received a positive response, especially from conservationists and from teachers, who welcomed it for school nature study. The book’s longevity and multiple editions are testaments to its usefulness and popularity. It offered easily accessible information for a novice bird-watcher in concise language and a compact format. Its message was original, too: Moncrieff wrote in the belief that indigenous birds could and should be conserved, and that it was possible to do so. In contrast, earlier ornithologists had expected most indigenous birds to become extinct.

Despite Oliver’s and Falla’s contributions, Moncrieff’s field guide has been discounted in ornithological historiography. Even contemporary scientists found her descriptions of birds imprecise, poetic, and sentimental. They deplored her combination of impressionistic notes and factual material.⁵ But the scientific critiques must be seen in context. Moncrieff was on the cusp of change, at a time when science in New Zealand was becoming self-consciously professional. Subsequent books on birds were written by professional ornithologists, although the next field guide, by Falla, E. G. Turbott, and R.



B. Sibson, was not published until 1966. Nevertheless, Moncrieff’s field guide is remembered affectionately by some scientists for its objective of encouraging nature study and conservation in children. Don Merton, now internationally recognized for his “recovery” work on endangered bird species, is one of several who credit her book as an early influence.⁶

In the 1920s and 1930s, Moncrieff was recognized in New Zealand and Australia as a leading ornithologist. She, like other New Zealand amateur and professional ornithologists, belonged to the Melbourne-based Royal Australasian Ornithologists’ Union (now Birds Australia). She contributed field research articles to its journal, *Emu*. She was its first woman president (1932–33), something “unknown in New Zealand, where gendered expectations confined women’s role to the private sphere, or health and welfare agencies in the public sphere.”⁷ She was also a founding member of the Ornithological Society of New Zealand (OSNZ), established in 1940. She was asked to write an article on New Zealand conservation for the British-based *Journal of the Society for the Preservation of the Fauna of the Empire*.⁸ Her article, “The Destruction of an Avian Paradise,” appeared in June 1944.

But, like her field guide, she herself



Pérrine Moncrieff (left) on Stephens Island in 1933 with a group from the Cawthron (Research) Institute in Nelson, New Zealand.

disappeared from the ornithological record. There are several reasons for this. Firstly is her amateur status in an increasingly scientific world. Secondly, she was one of the few women in ornithology and the butt of private jokes by New Zealand's male ornithologists.⁹ Thirdly, she ceased her participation in the ornithology discourse because she disagreed with trends in ornithological science. Her final article for *Emu* was in 1938 and she resigned from the OSNZ after only two years.

She held a vitalist view of birds, believing that field research should never interfere with the welfare of the birds. She was opposed, for example, to experiments in the 1940s to prove desertion theories because, she said, they kept gannets off their nests for hours.¹⁰ She also disagreed with experiments to breed endangered birds in captivity, promoted by scientific ornithologists as a conservation measure. Moncrieff thought captive breeding useless when birds' natural habitats were being destroyed and their populations reduced by exotic predators like stoats and rats. She made this point in her "Destruction" article. She also feared that commercial trade between breeders and collectors might develop.¹¹ As an alternative, she advocated stricter predator control and more protected reservations. Scientific ornithologists considered her policy "ineffective" and "unventuresome."¹² Moncrieff told

Margaret Morse Nice, the American ornithologist with whom she corresponded, of her concerns and of her decision to resign from the OSNZ. Nice replied:

How strange to want to raise native birds in captivity instead of preserving their habitats and protecting them from imported enemies! I entirely agree with your point of view. But wouldn't it be better to stay with your bird organization and do missionary work?¹³

Moncrieff remained an avid bird-watcher but spent the rest of her life as an advocate for nature protection. She became involved in the campaigns of the Native Forests Action Council and the Friends of Nelson Haven and Tasman Bay, and aided the younger generation of conservationists with financial donations and public appeals well into her 80s. She achieved the permanent protection of nearly 50,000 hectares (123,500 acres) of national parks and reserves, including Farewell Spit, a sand dune peninsula near Nelson. Recognized today as a wetland of international importance, it is one of the areas from which godwits migrate to Alaska for their breeding season. Moncrieff secured the area's legal preservation in a series of reservations over decades, beginning in 1938 when its tidal flats were

declared a sanctuary. As a gazetted wildlife ranger, Moncrieff also watched over the birds as they summered there, to protect them from poachers. Her actions were certainly consistent with the beliefs about preservation she expressed in her introductory essay to the first edition of her field guide, *New Zealand Birds and How to Identify Them*. □

Robin Hodge is an independent researcher in Wellington, New Zealand. Recently she has researched environmental issues for the Waitangi Tribunal. This is a judicial body which investigates land and other claims by Maori for redress of injustices experienced under the 1840 founding Treaty of Waitangi.

NOTES

1. J. C. Beaglehole, ed., *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks 1768–1771* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1962), 1:454.
2. David Elliston Allen, *The Naturalist in Britain* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), 238.
3. Pérrine Moncrieff, *New Zealand Birds and How to Identify Them* (Auckland: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1925), 21.
4. Extant records show that it appeared between 1957 and 1961.
5. E. G. Turbott to author, 10 July 1995.
6. Note from Geoff Park to author, 17 November 1994.
7. Robin Hodge, "Seizing the Day: Pérrine Moncrieff and Nature Conservation in New Zealand," *Environment and History* 9 (2003): 414.
8. This society is now called Fauna & Flora International and its journal is *Oryx*. Formed in 1903, it was the first international conservation organization committed to animal protection. Moncrieff's uncle, John Guille, was an early member.
9. Male bonding was helped by the telling of sexist jokes at her expense. See Hodge, "Seizing the Day," 413.
10. Moncrieff to Cunningham, 14 July 1948, copy in author's possession.
11. Moncrieff to Falla, 17 November 1942, Pérrine Moncrieff MS Papers 2366 Folder 67, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.
12. Quoted in Ross Galbreath, *Working for Wildlife: A History of the New Zealand Wildlife Service* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books with Historical Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1993), 172.
13. Margaret Morse Nice to Moncrieff, 18 January 1943, Moncrieff MS Papers 5642 Folder 04.