

Ian George Jamieson

2 March 1957 – 2 February 2015



Photo: F. Anderson

Professor Ian Jamieson was born in Nova Scotia, Canada, and died 57 years later in Dunedin, New Zealand. I had the privilege of being his friend, colleague and confidante for the last 35 of those years.

I first met Ian when we were both graduate students at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada, where he had come to do his Master of Science in ecology. In those days, he was a skinny white kid with thick red hair and a beard. And, in a sense, he never looked any different throughout the rest of his life – at least, until the last few months, when chemotherapy robbed him of his beard and his hair. He was always youthful and playful in his approach to life as befitted his Peter Pan appearance.

If you had to summarize Ian in four words, it would be difficult to go past, “worked hard, played hard.” The thing that distinguished Ian from the rest of us was his split personality: on one side, the party animal; on the other, as serious an academic as ever entered a university. He was to science what Mick Jagger and Keith Richards are to music.

When he arrived in Edmonton, he had just completed his BSc(Hons) degree at Acadia University in Nova Scotia. For his Honours thesis he studied the nesting behaviour of ospreys, from which he published four papers in top scientific journals: an extraordinary achievement. At the University of Alberta, he studied the behaviour and ecology of blue grouse under Professor Fred Zwickel. His Masters thesis produced six journal papers and a book chapter. Extraordinary. A pattern was beginning to emerge.

It was during this period that Ian met Dr John Craig from the University of Auckland. He had met his match. John’s partying spirit was at least the equal of Ian’s and, furthermore, John was at the cutting edge of the newly emerging discipline of sociobiology. Upon completing his MSc, Ian came to New Zealand on a Commonwealth Scholarship to undertake a PhD on pūkeko with John.

The pattern continued: Ian produced nine papers and a book chapter or two from his thesis. Yet, despite the volume of his outputs, there was a change this time. The titles of Ian’s previous publications from his Honours and Masters theses had all featured the name of his study animal, either osprey or blue grouse. Those papers were essentially descriptions of the animals’ behaviours and ecology, the outputs of an acute

observer of nature. However, the papers from Ian’s PhD rarely had the word pūkeko in the title. They were much more about the subject area itself: communal breeding.

Ian had transformed himself into a theoretical behavioural ecologist – no longer just practising the discipline but defining it too.

There followed a period back in Canada as an NSERC Postdoctoral Fellow at Queen’s University, working with Professor Patrick Colgan on the mating behaviour of stickleback fish. But New Zealand called to Ian again, this time in the form of a job as lecturer in behavioural ecology at the Department of Zoology, University of Otago, which he took up in 1990.

Together, Ian and I co-taught courses in behavioural ecology for undergraduates and postgraduate students. It was exhilarating: definitely the most fun you can have in a classroom and still be legal. Not only did Ian make learning enjoyable and insightful, at the heart of his lectures was a deep respect and love for the students and his role as their teacher. In addition to being an excellent teacher, Ian was a dedicated and outstanding supervisor. He supervised over 40 Masters and PhD students, passing on his critical approach to science to a cohort who have gone on to make their own marks as scientists.

Yet there was still more change in store for this evolving academic. Towards the end of his career, Ian’s focus shifted to avian conservation biology. He became particularly concerned with the plight of our threatened native birds – especially how inbreeding and the loss of genetic diversity affected reintroduced populations. He was a key member of the Takahē and Kākāpō Recovery Groups, and he also provided scientific advice for the kiwi, kōkako, black robin and mōhua recovery programmes.

For all his achievements as a scientist, I am sure Ian would say that his greatest achievement was marrying Frances Anderson. Theirs was a special relationship and one that brought much happiness to the last two decades of Ian’s life, which ended with Frances by his side. A life that he led to the full. A life where work was not work but his passion. A life where friends and family were his priority. In all but the end, it was a charmed life.

It is hard to overstate Ian’s impact as a behavioural ecologist. One could use the usual metrics and list his 152 publications, or the number of times his research has been cited, or add up the dollar-value of the research funding he attracted – but none of that even gets close. One could talk about the new generation of ecologists and behavioural ecologists he has nurtured – and that is getting closer. Or the improved prospects of many of our native birds – closer still. To my mind, two moments underline the importance Ian himself placed upon his ecological research.

The first occurred soon after Ian received his terminal diagnosis. We went out to lunch and I asked him what he would do in the months he had left, expecting that he would resign from the university and go travelling or something similar. Instead, he looked me in the eye and said, “I have this experiment I want to do.” It turned out to be an experiment involving the translocation of South Island saddlebacks to the fenced sanctuary at Orokanui. His previous experiment had not been as successful as he would have hoped, but Ian figured he knew how to make the translocation work and that is what he most wanted to do – and what he did do – with his remaining time.

The second occurred when I went to see him in his office, hunched over his computer, still writing even though the end

was very near. Behind him, on his wall, was a plethora of distinctions and awards. But the one in pride of place, the one that gave him most satisfaction of all, was the 2012 Te Tohu Taiao Prize from the New Zealand Ecological Society for ecological excellence.

That says it all really.

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Chronological list of Professor Ian Jamieson's publications

- Bergner LM, Dussex N, Jamieson IG, Robertson BC 2016. European colonization, not Polynesian arrival, impacted population size and genetic diversity in the critically endangered New Zealand kākāpō. *Journal of Heredity* 107: 593–602.
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