

# SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

The Pacific Seabird Group occasionally honors outstanding contributors to seabird science and conservation with a Special Achievement Award. At the 41st Annual Meeting in Juneau, Alaska, in February 2014, PSG presented the Special Achievement Award to Vivian Mendenhall. The transcript of Pat Baird's tribute to Vivian in Juneau appears, in slightly edited form, below.

## VIVIAN MENDENHALL

Pat Baird

Vivian has been a member of PSG since 1986, was PSG secretary for four years, and served as editor of *Pacific Seabirds* for 14 years. She continued the work started by her predecessor, Steve Speich, to raise the publication from a newsletter and summary of summer research into a refereed journal that was carried by about 30 libraries at the height of the hard-copy journal era. Vivian has been an ex-officio member of PSG's Board, the Executive Council, or EXCO, for 14 years, contributing much via rewrites of the bylaws, archiving various documents, and of course, being our Parliamentarian. She has also conducted research on seabirds since the 1970s through the present, often volunteering on projects worldwide. She was Marine Birds Coordinator for the US Fish and Wildlife Service's Alaska Region. She was manager of the USFWS Seabird Colony Database from 1986 to 1998, during which time she actively sought updated colony data and initiated new surveys. She also was on a planning team for the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council, and conducted cooperative research with colleagues in Russia. Although she has not been presenting her research on seabirds since her retirement from USFWS in 1998, in previous years she was a regular contributor to the papers sessions of PSG's annual meeting. I would like to begin this presentation by reading a poem by Dag Hammarskjöld. This poem was the first poem he wrote, and was found after his death, along with many others. These were later published posthumously under the title *Markings*. Dag, for those of you who are younger, was the second Secretary General of the United Nations and held this position from 1953- 1961.

*THUS IT WAS 1925*

*I am being driven forward  
Into an unknown land.  
The pass grows steeper,  
The air colder and sharper.  
A wind from my unknown goal  
Stirs the strings  
Of expectation.  
Still the question:  
Shall I ever get there?  
There where life resounds,  
A clear pure note  
In the silence.*

Who is Vivian Mendenhall? I think of her as the mild-mannered Clark Kent who dressed in conservative clothes and who was always diligently working in the background as the "mild-mannered reporter," but who also was the complete opposite and who did amazing things. You all may think of Vivian as Clark Kent too—diligently editing all the draft reports and manuscripts that came her way as editor of *Pacific Seabirds*: stuck behind a computer with her red

markers, cutting and pasting. However, there is a different side. I have had the pleasure, as Associate Editor of *Pacific Seabirds* in 2012 and 2013, to get to know Vivian. Within our usual editorial back and forth emails or phone calls, would occasionally pop up a throw-away comment from her such as "when I was white-water kayaking," or "when I was rock climbing," or "when I was flying airplanes..."

Yes, that is our Vivian: tirelessly working in a bland government cubicle, data crunching, or as most of you know her, cryptically slogging away at



Vivian Mendenhall checking Ancient Murrelet burrows on Talan Island, Russia, in 1994.

the thankless job of editor of *Pacific Seabirds*. However, in her other life she is a Beryl Markham, a Vita Sackville-West, a Liz Robbins, or a Claire O'Hara, perennially pushing the limits, testing herself, living life to the fullest. A first child, born in Birmingham Alabama, she moved to Pasadena California before she was two years old. Vivian was no ordinary stay-at-home-with-dolls girl, and her joy in nature began at an early age. She was lucky to have parents who were climbers and back-country skiers. This was unusual in the 1940s, and as Vivian said, "they were

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Four-wheelin'! St. Paul Island, Alaska, 1995.

probably considered exotic and crazy.” Vivian adopted climbing at six years of age – without a harness. She also skied at an early age, and often fished and contemplated nature. She climbed trees or played Huck Finn when she found an abandoned raft (her first at-sea experience). She climbed in the Sierras with her sister, or backpacked in the Sierras and the Cascades with her family in the years before light internal frame packs. Vivian had an early interest in birds and science. She started birding at age 11. She also was an early adopter of good editing skills. Her mother was a journalism major, had her kids diagram sentences, and often corrected their English.

Vivian went on to college at UCLA where she produced an honours thesis on spermatogenesis in the House Finch while she continued to hike, climb, and occasionally cave. After her junior year she went to Austria where she discovered kayaking. It was at the University of California, Berkeley where her ties with marine birds started, and her thesis was on the Feeding Ecology and Behavior of the Willet. Vivian moved to Alaska in 1969, keeping in line with her spirit of adventure, and worked at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks where she lived in a 12-foot square cabin and got into cross country skiing. Vivian always does

things to the max, and so she went on a week’s ski expedition in the Brooks Range during this time. She also had her first experience in the bush between Nome and Point Hope during this time. In her spare time, Vivian kayaked down the Alsek River from Haines Junction, Yukon territory, to the Alaska coast (140 miles). The Alsek is rated as one of the most celebrated whitewater rivers in the world, and is part of the legendary Triple Crown of North American Whitewater class V+ big-water runs. On this trip, Vivian portaged 10 miles across a glacier. This is the Vivian that most PSG members do not know: adventurer, climber, mountaineer, kayaker.

Vivian decided to go on for her Ph.D., and this time she chose the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, where she worked at the Culterty Field Station and studied the fledging success of Common Eiders on the River Eyethen estuary. Her dissertation was titled “Growth and mortality factors of Eider ducklings in north-east Scotland.” Even in Scotland Vivian still found time to hike during the summer and winter. Since her life was not filled enough, she learned Gaelic and Scottish history during her time there. Then the job search started, and she finally found a position at Patuxent Wildlife Research Center—after her application was first

rejected because her brain had flat-lined as she incorrectly answered the yes/no questions on the Standard Form 171 (“Are you a US citizen,” “Are you a member of the Communist party,” and “Have you ever been convicted of a crime”). She remedied that and was put to work in the contaminant section and later in the Brown Pelican project where she monitored their success in South Carolina and Florida. She also conducted experiments on Barn Owls using DDT, dieldrin, and rodenticides.

Happily, Vivian found that the east coast also had an outdoors, and she continued climbing and skiing, although she returned to the west to continue mountaineering. After a brief stint in Australia, in 1980 she landed a job with the USFWS Refuge System in Alaska where she was on a planning team for the Alaska Maritime Refuges, and where she was thrown together again with seabirds. From there she moved on to a new position of Marine Bird Coordinator, unfortunately mostly desk work and editing. Always restless to return to the field, she convinced her bosses that she needed to help in monitoring studies so she would know what the biologists were talking about. So she went to St. George and St. Paul Island, where she worked on shearwaters and kittiwakes. Vivian eventually took over Art Sowl’s Seabird Colony Database. During this time, she served on a planning team for the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council and taught classes for fisheries observers on identifying seabirds. Some of those students went on to study seabirds. An especially rewarding part of her job was cooperating with colleagues in the Russian Far East in Magadan in 1989 and on Talan Island in 1994.

In 1998, the USFWS offered early retirement, and Vivian took it. This gave her time to accept (in 2000) the volunteer job of editor of *Pacific Seabirds* and to bring that publication up to her mom’s journalism standards. She has loved the job because she has been able to interact with seabirders from all over the planet. She learned desk-top publishing, graphic arts, copy-editing and executive

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editing while editor, all of which skills helped to launch the journal into another league. Besides that job, she served as Secretary on PSG's ExCo for four years. Vivian found volunteering for PSG very rewarding. Vivian has been instrumental in helping to write new bylaws for PSG, and has been the much-needed PSG Parliamentarian (really: who else can remember all those Roberts Rules of Order?). She has also been a life-saver for the archival memory of PSG.

In retirement, Vivian has kept busy volunteering for other organizations in addition to PSG. She is on the board of Anchorage Audubon as well as other NGOs, has commented on draft EISs, and has testified on habitat conservation before municipal governments. Always eager to get back out into the field, Vivian has volunteered on a number of seabird surveys. Vivian was the staff seabird expert on the "Harriman Revisited Expedition" in 2001 from Homer along the Alaskan peninsula, into the Bering Sea, and over to Far East Russia. Never one to rest on her laurels, she started a local research project in Anchorage recently on incubation behavior in Sandhill Cranes and their responses to disturbance in the Coastal Wildlife State Refuge.

Vivian still hikes and does eco-tours with her husband in places like China and Tanzania, Galapagos, the Amazon, Antarctica, and the Falkland Islands. Her most rewarding bird experiences have been not just with seabirds like penguins but also finding the Black Woodpecker in France and Snow's Guillemot in the Kurile Islands. In recent years, Vivian also has indulged her love of music and joined the Anchorage Opera. But that was not enough. She has always liked folk dancing, and so now she leads a Scottish Country Dancing group. She and her husband Jim still visit their salmon set net site in southwestern Alaska (Nushagak Bay) but they no longer fish there.

Vivian has always believed in volunteering, whether for PSG or for other groups, and her many contributions to PSG over the years

have greatly improved our society. I am encouraging her to become our first appointed Archivist. Vivian has been active in the natural world from the time she was a toddler, and we are lucky to have had someone with so much knowledge and experience be a part of our group all of these years.

I started with the first poem ever written by Dag Hammarskjöld, and I will close with his final poem, written August 24th, 1961 (his plane was shot down over Africa on 18 September 1961).

*[UNTITLED]*

*Is this a new land,  
in a different reality  
from today's?  
Or have I lived there  
before this day?  
Woke up,  
an ordinary day with grey light  
reflected from the street,  
woke up –  
from a sombre blue night  
above the tree line  
moonlight on the moor  
the mountain ridge in shadow.  
Remembered  
different dreams,  
remembered  
the same mountain landscape:  
twice did I climb the ridges,  
I lived by the inmost lake  
and followed the river  
towards its source.  
The seasons have passed  
and the light  
and the weather  
and the hour.  
But it is the same land.  
And I am beginning to know the map  
and the points of the compass.*

It's been a good run for Vivian—28

years isn't bad. Sincere and heartfelt thanks to her for her service to PSG, contributions to seabird biology, and her friendship.



*In the Anchorage Opera Chorus for the performance of Eugene Onegin, 2010.*