

# LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

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The Pacific Seabird Group occasionally honors major contributors to seabird science and conservation with Lifetime Achievement or Special Achievement awards. The Lifetime Achievement Award recognizes an individual whose outstanding work for seabirds has influenced the course of research, conservation, and/or education throughout the Pacific or the world.

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## PSG LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD FOR JOHN COOPER

By Alan E. Burger



John Cooper with an Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross on Gough Island. Photo: Ross Wanless.

The Pacific Seabird Group seldom gives awards to seabird biologists whose principal area of activity is outside the Pacific Ocean. But, in giving the Lifetime Achievement Award to John Cooper, who has worked primarily in southern Africa, the Subantarctic and Antarctic, PSG is recognizing an exceptional international contribution to seabird research, conservation and publishing. The award was presented on 10 February 2012 at PSG's annual meeting on Oahu, Hawai'i.

John was born in 1947 in the United Kingdom, migrated southward at a young age, and spent most of his life in southern Africa. Growing up in

unspoiled African bush, he developed a love of nature and a lifelong desire to study and nurture birds and their habitats. After graduating from the University of Rhodesia (then a college of the University of London), John moved to South Africa where he started working on seabirds. He arrived in Cape Town at the time of great concern over the status of the African (Jackass) Penguin (*Spheniscus demersus*). This iconic species, the only penguin species that breeds off Africa, was undergoing precipitous declines, which continue in much of its range today. Among the many factors contributing to the penguins decline were (and

still are) oil spills from the thousands of ships passing the Cape of Good Hope each year, and competition with fisheries. Hired to work on the African Penguin, John joined the staff of the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 1973. Over the next 35 years he was a well-known and easily identified fixture at UCT, first at the FitzPatrick Institute (1973-1996) and later at the Animal Demography Unit (1997-2008). During much of this long period John was unmistakable for his unruly Afro-style hair and whimsical Spike Milligan-style humor.

Working under Professor Roy Siegfried at the FitzPatrick Institute, John was part of a research team that began a new era of groundbreaking research into African and Subantarctic seabirds. John's field work during this period entailed long months on some of South Africa's isolated guano islands, primarily Dassen and Marcus Islands near Saldanha Bay. The guano scrapers of that era were all alumni of the toughest South African prisons, and John developed essential skills in negotiating with people of very diverse viewpoints. This was often hot, dusty work, but it gave John a solid grounding in field techniques and fortitude. John would organize volunteer work expeditions to these islands, inviting students to help with nest monitoring, banding, and other field work. As an undergraduate participant in several of these guano island work parties, I too was initiated into the scruffy fraternity

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of seabird biology. Even today the scent of dried guano conjures up wonderful memories of long hot days counting and banding penguins, punctuated by memorable feasts of the freshest rock lobster, washed down with flagons of cheap Cape wine.

It is no exaggeration to say that John Cooper has contributed in a major way to research, public awareness, and conservation of every southern African seabird species. His work on the African Penguin, Bank Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax neglectus*) and African Gannet (*Morus capensis*), in particular, was solid and remains very relevant decades later. John has written or coauthored over 300 research papers, books, book chapters and other publications dealing with seabirds and their conservation. He has been a mentor and collaborator with many leading researchers in our field, including Rob Crawford, Bob Furness, Peter Ryan, Rory Wilson, and many others.

During his long tenure at UCT, John played a pivotal role as the honorary librarian for the Southern African Ornithological Society (now BirdLife South Africa). Through a clever array of reciprocal agreements with other societies, the FitzPatrick Institute received nearly all the leading ornithological and zoological journals at almost no cost; as a result, the institute's Niven Library now has the best ornithological collection in the southern hemisphere. For this contribution to African education and research, part of the Niven Library was named the John Cooper Antarctic Collection. In 2012 John received the Gill Memorial Medal Award from BirdLife South Africa, its highest honor, for outstanding lifetime contributions to ornithology in southern Africa.

In the 1980s John began working on seabirds on the subantarctic islands nearest to Africa. First at Marion and Prince Edward Island, and later at Gough Island and the Tristan da Cunha Islands, John contributed significantly to understanding, managing and

conserving these magical islands and their globally important seabird populations. He was among the first to raise the alarm over the impacts of longline fishing (often illegal), which was killing tens of thousands of albatrosses and petrels in the Southern Oceans. He has also contributed

significantly to studying and removing malicious introduced plants and animals in these vulnerable Subantarctic ecosystems. Partly as a result of his international lobbying and collaborative work, there are today strong programs in place on these islands to restore and protect the island ecosystems. John is a member of the Management Committee for the Prince Edward Islands Special Nature Reserve, and these islands are the first Subantarctic RAMSAR sites. John is an honorary Conservation Officer of the Government of Tristan da Cunha. He drafted the current conservation legislation for the Tristan islands and he serves on the Tristan Biodiversity Advisory Group (T-BAG). John is not just a boardroom biologist — it seems his greatest joy is to be on these islands doing hands-on work, like banding seabirds or pulling alien weeds which are threatening the local vegetation and bird nesting habitat.

In post-Apartheid South Africa John ventured away from academia for two years, when in 1996 he was invited to be a Ministerial Advisor to the late Kader Asmal, the highly respected Minister of Water Affairs and Tourism in Nelson Mandela's cabinet. In this capacity John honed his skills at international diplomacy, including work with the Independent World Commission on the Oceans. During this



John Cooper doing field work on Gough Island. Photo: Ross Wanless

phase he also underwent a significant change in sartorial appearance. The wild Afro hair and wrinkled T-shirts disappeared and John the guano islander acquired a collection of spiffy shirts and silk ties.

Currently John is an honorary Research Associate at the Centre of Excellence for Invasion Biology at Stellenbosch University. He continues management-related research on southern islands and delves into the history of the South African National Antarctic Programme and the Subantarctic Prince Edward Islands.

One of the primary reasons that PSG is recognizing John Cooper with this award is his major contribution to global seabird conservation initiatives. He contributed significantly to seabird management within the Scientific Committee for Antarctic Research (SCAR). From 1997 to 2001 he initiated and coordinated the global Seabird Conservation Programme of BirdLife International. He was one of the major contributors to the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP), which is a remarkable example of international cooperation and foresight (its URL is <http://www.acap.aq/>). ACAP is a multilateral agreement that seeks to conserve albatrosses and petrels by identifying and mitigating threats to

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Lifetime Achievement awardees on the Galápagos Islands—John Cooper (left) and John Croxall

their populations. ACAP came into force in February 2004; it currently has 13 member countries and covers 29 species of albatrosses and petrels. John served as the Vice-Chair of the ACAP

Advisory Committee, and he remains as the honorary Information Officer for ACAP. He researches and writes daily news items for the ACAP website. John has been a major organizer and contributor to international conferences on penguins and albatrosses, in which capacity he is well known to many PSG members. He was asked to give the closing plenary to the 2004 Waterbirds Around the World conference in Edinburgh, and he warmed up the crowd for the final speaker, HRH Prince Charles.

Perhaps our greatest debt to John Cooper is for his work as editor and publisher over a period of 35 years. In 1976 John founded the Southern African Seabird Group and was the editor of its journal, *The Cormorant*. With John at the helm, the group soon evolved into the African Seabird Group, and in 1990 *The Cormorant* changed into *Marine Ornithology*. In 2001 *Marine Ornithology* became truly international, when, under John's

guidance, it became a joint venture of five groups: the African, Pacific, Dutch, UK, and Japanese seabird groups. John continued as senior editor and guru until 2009. Under his watchful eye the current editors are striving to maintain the rigorous standards of editing and layout precision that John long maintained.

For his significant and lengthy contributions to seabird research, international conservation and education, and his dedicated work leading to the establishment of a truly international seabird journal, *Marine Ornithology*, the Pacific Seabird Group is pleased to honor John Cooper with its Lifetime Achievement Award. John is also the first Honorary Member of PSG.

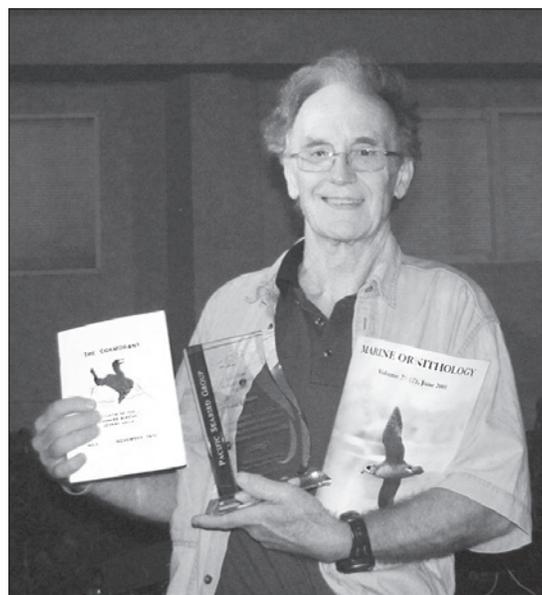
A partial list of John Cooper's scientific publications is available on this website: [http://adu.org.za/jc\\_public1.php](http://adu.org.za/jc_public1.php)

### Acknowledgements

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John Cooper receiving his Lifetime Achievement Award from PSG Chair Pat Jodice, 10 February 2012



John Cooper with his award, together with the journal he founded: *The Cormorant* (left), and its continuation to the present day, *Marine Ornithology*