

Serventy Conservation Medal for 2006

Each year the Serventy Conservation Award is made to a very special person who has been outstanding in their commitment to the preservation of Australian wildlife. This year the Award was made to **Lindsay E Smith OAM of Unanderra** in New South Wales for his outstanding wildlife conservation work involving seabirds.



**Lindsay Smith being presented with the Serventy Conservation Medal for 2006
by The Hon Bob Debus MP, Minister for the Environment**

Lindsay Smith has, through his devotion to wildlife conservation, become one of Australia's experts on seabirds, especially the albatross. Although he would modestly describe himself as an amateur, he is frequently called upon by the media to speak about seabirds and in 1987 the Australian Museum employed him as an ornithologist for research on Middleton and Elizabeth Reefs. Lindsay, with others, has been actively studying the seabirds visiting the coast near Wollongong for over fifty years. This represents one of the longest continuous albatross study in the world. He was involved in the foundation of the Southern Ocean Seabird Study Association in 1994. As a result of SOSSA's work, the plight of albatrosses and other seabirds was brought to the attention, not only of Australians, but of people throughout the world.

Lindsay believes the Illawarra coastline of New South Wales is one of the most unique places on the planet for marine wildlife. It is right on our doorstep and most people are totally unaware of its great diversity. Lindsay's lifelong mission has been to bring wildlife and people together. With seabirds it is often a case of "out of sight, out of mind". The greater albatross is one of the most regal of birds and has no fear of people. Many of the world's albatross and petrel species are threatened with extinction, mainly because of the impacts of long line fishing.

Lindsay's long dedication to the saving of endangered species makes him a worthy recipient and winner of the 2006 Serventy Medal and prize.

Acceptance speech by Lindsay Smith

I would like you to have a little understanding of how I came to be here today. I am a Naturalist and I study wildlife as do many of my colleagues.

Since I was a very young boy, I have been blessed with a fascination of the natural world and a passion to share it with others. *Southern Oceans Seabird Study Association* is the organisation I represent.



Members of SOSSA. L to R: Robert Thorne, Jackie Vrkcic, Terrill Nordstrom, Lindsay Smith, Janice Jenkin-Smith, Carl Loves, John Boness

While it is not a true reflection of what we study, and what we can offer advice on, I am often called on to advise on all manner of natural history issues in the Illawarra region of New South Wales, seals, frogs, reptiles, fresh water fish, turtles, sea snakes, and marine turtles, whales and dolphins.

My interest in seabirds began at a very early age when my family lived in a tent on an estuary adjacent to an extensive ocean beach.

This offered the opportunity to observe many species of seabirds, shorebirds and many other creatures found beach-washed on their shores, particularly after storms.

It was not until I moved with my family to Western Australia many years later that my interest in seabirds was rekindled and developed.

The turning point for me was when I came across *The Handbook of Australasian Seabirds* by Dominic Serventy, Vincent Serventy and John Warham in 1971.

At last, I was able to identify many of the seabirds that I had encountered in my youth. I also learned that there were a far greater number of species of seabirds recorded in Australia than I could possibly have imagined.

It was here too that I first read of the wandering albatross; Doug Gibson and others catching and banding them; right where I had lived!

On my return to the Illawarra I began studying the local breeding populations of sea and shore birds at the Five Islands Nature Reserve. These studies and more continue to this day.

It was here that I had the pleasure of meeting Dough Gibson and Harry Battam who introduced me to the New South Wales Albatross Study Group and the magnificent wandering albatross.

I soon joined the banding project, which was initiated by Dough Gibson and others at Bellambi in 1956.

Wandering albatrosses were the principle species studied, as they were plentiful and were far more easily captured than the smaller more agile species.

Each year hundreds of wandering albatrosses were drawn to the Illawarra in winter. The attraction was the annual post breeding die-off of the giant cuttlefish *Sepia apama*.

Whilst just to the north, at Malabar near Sydney, a sewage ocean outfall provided a constant supply of offal from the nearby Homebush abattoirs for over sixty years!

In the early 1970s albatross numbers began to dwindle. No longer were the birds to be seen in their hundreds.



Wandering albatross (adult and juvenile)
(photographer Darrly McKay, SOSSA)

An initial decline was to be expected after the closure of the Malabar ocean outfall in 1969. However by the early 1990s the birds had all but disappeared from inshore. In a normal season we could expect to capture over one hundred individuals within ten kilometres of shore. By the end of the century we were managing to catch fewer than ten individuals, for the entire season! **Something was seriously wrong!**

An initial clue to this dramatic decline came in 1991 when Nigel Brothers of Tasmania published a paper on albatross mortality and associated bait loss in the Japanese longline fishery in the Southern Ocean. He conservatively reported a by-catch rate of **0.4 birds/1,000 hooks set**. In the Japanese fishery alone this accounted for **44,000 individuals per season!** Sixteen years later and “**still they die!**”

The problem became perfectly clear. Man was killing the birds faster than they could reproduce. They are on a fast track to extinction!

Albatrosses are not the only by-catch of modern fisheries. Just as longline fishing practices are not the sole culprit associated with the demise of seabird numbers.

There are many other factors and fisheries practices implicated by this decline. These include plastic ingestion, over-fishing of food resources, introduced pests and diseases and climate change - these are but a few of the problems that they are faced with.



**Adult wandering albatross
(photographer Darryl McKay, SOSSA)**

Government agencies have responded to the problems of incidental by-catch of seabirds in pelagic fisheries by implementing a Threat Abatement Plan, including a whole suite of mitigation measures. However, the existence of mitigation measures does not always mean their implementation or compliance. Instead it is often a case of out of sight out of mind, business as usual.

In January 2001, five wandering albatrosses that had been caught on a longline (line still attached) were found washed ashore on the south coast of NSW. This unfortunate incident was reported to the Australian Fisheries Management Authority for attention.

In recent years members of SOSSA have been working with teams from The Agreement on the Conservation of Albatross and Petrels (ACAP) based in Hobart, Tasmania and the New Zealand Department of Conservation in an effort to deter seabirds from taking baits.

In 1984 The Wollongong Seabird Group began conducting regular pelagic trips to beyond the continental shelf, up to thirty nautical miles to sea off Wollongong.

Initially these trips were intended to allow us to better understand the diversity and movements of seabirds and marine animals which occurred off our coast.



Southern royal albatross

An experience that was to change my life forever

There are few animals that have the presence and charisma of the great albatrosses. I would like to convey to you my initial encounter with the magnificent wandering albatross.

There on the horizon, silhouetted against the sky, it rose, high into the air. I could see it at 1,000 yards, maybe more. Glistening white in the sun, growing larger as it bridged the gap between us. It came straight in, just a few feet above our heads. So close that we could hear the rush of air as it passed over its long narrow wings. It settled on the water, not a hundred yards away to feed on a moribund cuttlefish.

A few minutes later this giant bird was settled in my lap. The temperament of this magnificent old “snowy albatross” was amazing; docile and placid, showing no fear or aggression, despite having being captured only moments before. I was spellbound.

We had no idea how old this bird was. Its brilliant white plumage indicated that it was a very old male. Maybe sixty years or more! Where had it come from? How far had it travelled?

I needed to know more!



Northern Royal albatross
(photographer Bill Moorhead, SOSSA)

Great albatross facts

Did you know? Wandering and royal albatrosses have the most expansive wing spans of any bird - more than three metres. Most will not breed until ten to twenty years of age. We still do not know how long they live (no one has studied them long enough to know).

They mate for life. If their partner dies, they do not attempt to breed again.

They produce only a single egg, once in two years. If the egg or chick is lost before it fledges, no replacement is laid.

Each individual has to live for at least thirty years, just to replace itself in the population.

They can travel over a thousand kilometres, just to find food for their chick.

Their home range includes the whole of the “Great Southern Ocean”.

Eighty percent of their energy needs for flight is provided by the wind and waves of the ocean.

They regulate their body temperature by pumping blood through their feet and bills.



Juvenile Gibson's albatross
(photographer Darryl McKay, SOSSA)

Environmental Education

I believe by bringing interested people and many species of seabirds and marine animals 'face to face' we were successful in not only adding greatly to our knowledge but also in bringing attention to the plight of these wondrous creatures.

“If wild animals and wild places are to survive into the future it is research based tourism that will give them economic value.”

We are recognised internationally and not only by scientists. People come from all over the world to Wollongong to view our magnificent seabirds and marine animals, along with supporting our valuable research.

Hopefully, they will learn more about them and respect their importance to our environment.

By working in pelagic waters and developing new strategies and techniques we were able to capture a far greater variety of albatrosses and petrels than we had been able to inshore.

By capturing the birds at sea and on their breeding grounds simultaneously we are gaining a greater insight into population structures and the health and diet of the birds at sea.

The latter has proven invaluable in advising zoos, vets wildlife carers and rehabilitators on how to better care for albatross and other seabirds.

As part of our education program, we are distributing an educational kit about seabirds and other marine animals. Both my wife Janice and I present talks and presentations to school children of all ages, service clubs and institutions, and basically anyone that will listen.

At SOSSA we do what we can!

In accepting this award I would like to thank Bernie Clarke OAM for nominating me for this prestigious award. Bernie is a previous recipient of the Award.

I would like to share this great honor with my wife Janice Jenkin-Smith OAM and long-time colleague and mentor Harry Battam. Without the ongoing support, dedication and commitment of these key people, SOSSA would not be where it is today.

Finally I would like to say that SOSSA is a registered, charitable, incorporated organisation (NGO). With donations and tax deductibility we have been able to continue this increasingly important work for the environment, just because we love it!!

We have a wonderful network, many volunteers both in the field and behind the scenes who share my commitment to preserving all manner of natural history.

I sincerely thank them all, the field workers, vets, and zoos, aquariums WIRES, NANA, AWARE and the media, the list goes on and on and on.

Thank you once again for this prestigious award today!!

Lindsay Smith OAM