

# Roger Tory Peterson Down Under: an American's influence on Australian birding field guides

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## ABSTRACT

The American, Roger Tory Peterson, has been the single most influential figure in the evolution of birding field guides around the world. He was also a major contributor to the awakening of an environmental consciousness among the wider public in the second half of the twentieth century. In Australia, he provided a powerful impetus to the renovation of the field guide genre from the 1960s onward; and his Australian followers, like Peterson himself, were driven by a conviction that field guides are potent contributors to the conservationist cause. This article explores the myriad ways in which Peterson helped shape Australian birding field guides, including an exposition of his personal friendship with one of Australia's major field guide authors, Graham Pizzey.

**Keywords:** birdwatching, conservation, field guides, Graham Pizzey, nature, ornithology, Peter Slater, Roger Tory Peterson.

No-one has had a greater impact on the evolution of birding field guides than the American, Roger Tory Peterson (1908–96). From 1934, when he published his first field guide, through to the present day, Peterson's innovations have transformed this popular science genre and thereby the field study of birds. His innovations were deceptively simple, consisting largely of distilling descriptions and depictions of birds into summations of the distinctive features, called 'field marks', that distinguish one species from another. Because of their outward simplicity and proven effectiveness, Peterson's field guides became models for artists and authors of guidebooks around the globe, Australia included.

Although Peterson had an immense influence on the development of Australian field guides, the nature of that influence has not previously been scrutinised. In large part, this is because the history of Australian field guides has attracted little scholarly attention. One of the few studies that pays heed to the topic is Libby Robin's history of Australian ornithology, *The Flight of the Emu*, that devotes a substantial part of one chapter to field guides. In it, she refers to Peterson's global pre-eminence in the field guide genre and states that Graham Pizzey's *Field Guide to the Birds of Australia* (1980) was this country's first "'Peterson-style' guide".<sup>1</sup> However, she offers no account of how Pizzey came to compile his guide in Peterson style, nor of Peterson's broader influence on Australian field guides. Robin's more recent and more compact ornithological history, *What Birdo Is That?*, mentions Peterson only once, with no indication of his influence.<sup>2</sup> In a 2022 article on the evolution of Australian field guides up to 1970, I made frequent reference to Peterson and his reception in Australia, but my terminal date ruled out of consideration the guides that bear Peterson's imprint most strongly, those of Pizzey (1980) and Peter Slater (1970 and 1974).<sup>3</sup> This article remedies that deficiency and probes into hitherto unknown facets of Peterson's relationship with Australia.

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<sup>1</sup>Robin (2001) pp. 266–268.

<sup>2</sup>Robin (2023) p. 39.

<sup>3</sup>McGregor (2022a). I also published a study of Australia's first field guide, McGregor (2022b), but this deals with a period before Peterson's guides appeared.

Although the history of Australian field guides has received scant scholarly attention, North American and British guides have attracted greater scrutiny. Environmental historian Thomas Dunlap devoted an entire book to the history of American guides, while broader histories of birding in those places include substantial sections on field guide history.<sup>4</sup> Roger Tory Peterson looms large in those histories. But his influence in Australia is never mentioned. Nor is it discussed in any of the three major biographies of Peterson, by Douglas Carlson, Elizabeth Rosenthal and John C. Devlin and Grace Naismith.<sup>5</sup> Rosenthal's biography, *Birdwatcher: The life of Roger Tory Peterson*, has a chapter titled 'Worldwide Progeny' that offers vignettes of birders and field guide authors from around the world who were influenced (and in some cases mentored) by Peterson. It includes no Australian.<sup>6</sup>

All three biographies make only fleeting mention of Peterson's Australian visits.<sup>7</sup> Yet Peterson visited Australia at least three times, in 1965, 1971 and 1973, and while here he interacted with some of the country's leading ornithologists and birdwatchers (Fig. 1).<sup>8</sup> Intriguingly, Rosenthal's biography refers in passing to a letter Peterson received from 'an Australian pen pal' in 1927, that prompted the young American to tell his friend, Joe Hickey, 'I'm going to go there sometime'.<sup>9</sup> The fact that he did go there is sidelined.

Indeed, Peterson's Australian visits have been so little publicised that they have been almost forgotten. After stumbling across some references to Peterson's visits in the papers of Francis Ratcliffe in the National Library of Australia (NLA), I asked a number of Australia's leading ornithologists and birders if they could provide further information. All but one had never heard of his visits, and several expressed strong doubts that they could have happened.

Yet Peterson himself referred to his Australian visits in his published works. In his 1979 book, *Penguins*, for example, he clearly indicated that he had observed and photographed Little Penguins in Australia. He even named his local host: 'On my first visit to Phillip Island near Melbourne with an Australian friend, Graham Pizzey, we spent the night in a summer cottage where penguins were all around'.<sup>10</sup> Graham's daughter, Sarah Pizzey, was the only one of those among whom I made my initial enquiries who knew of Peterson's visits. She provided many of the crucial documents on which this article is based.



**Fig. 1.** Roger Tory Peterson (far right) at Rhyll, Phillip Island, 1971, with (left to right) Francisco Erize, Sue Pizzey and Barbara Peterson. Courtesy of Sarah Pizzey.

I followed up those initial enquiries with several to the Roger Tory Peterson Institute (RTPI) in Jamestown, New York. At first, RTPI staff told me they had no information on Peterson's Australian visits. About a year later, a new Assistant Curator at the institute, Rachael Kosinski, contacted me to advise that she had located an archival folder labelled 'Australia' in a box in the Peterson collection. Helpfully, she provided a contents list and followed that up with digital copies of the documents I requested. These constitute another major source for this article, along with correspondence in Francis Ratcliffe's papers in the NLA.

The article has two main aims. One is to appraise the ways in which Peterson influenced the evolution of Australian birding field guides, especially during the crucial period of the 1960s and 1970s. It was a distinctive instance of the pervasive cultural influence that the United States has exerted in Australia, especially since the Second World War, although in this article I do not have sufficient space to develop that line of analysis.<sup>11</sup> The second aim is to supplement the existing accounts of Peterson's extensive travels by documenting his trips to Australia. In fulfilment of both aims, I shall provide as detailed an appraisal as the sources allow, but those sources are fragmentary and incomplete. That limitation notwithstanding, the article seeks to illuminate both the human qualities of the world's greatest field

<sup>4</sup>Dunlap (2011). Weidensaul (2007). Moss (2004). Gibbons and Strom (1988).

<sup>5</sup>Carlson (2007). Rosenthal (2008). Devlin and Naismith (1977).

<sup>6</sup>Rosenthal (2008) pp. 260–290.

<sup>7</sup>Carlson (2007) p. 176. Devlin and Naismith (1977) p. 176. Rosenthal (2008) pp. 218–219. Rosenthal mentions only Peterson's visit to Macquarie Island, a tiny subantarctic island administered by Tasmania.

<sup>8</sup>Peterson may also have visited Australia in September–October 1986; his planning calendar for that year lists a visit for those dates, but I can find no further information on it; Peterson Collection, Roger Tory Peterson Institute, box 23.

<sup>9</sup>Rosenthal (2008) p. 21.

<sup>10</sup>Peterson (1979) p. 122, pp. 42, 78–79, 220.

<sup>11</sup>For publications that do, see for example Bell and Bell (1998). Albinski (1985) pp. 395–420.

guide author and the extent of his contribution to the field guide genre in Australia.

## Field marks and sight records

Australians began noticing Peterson's work soon after his first field guide was published. In 1938, just four years after his *Field Guide to the Birds* came out, a Peterson illustration was published in Australia. It was in an article titled 'A guide to the field identification of the waders' by the eminent Western Australian ornithologist, Dom Serventy, in the leading Australian ornithological journal, the *Emu*. Serventy discussed 'the shortcomings of existing [Australian] bird books when it comes to identifying waders' and offered a 'Field Key' to help observers differentiate this challenging set of birds. To supplement the key, he inserted a full-page monochrome plate by Peterson, depicting six species in flight: Curlew Sandpiper, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Greenshank, Grey-tailed Tattler, Grey Plover and Common Sandpiper. Captioned "'Types" of plumage patterns in the waders', in typical Peterson fashion the illustration showed how a bird appeared to a field observer by stripping bare all extraneous detail.<sup>12</sup>

Fittingly for Peterson's first appearance in an Australian publication, Serventy devoted some space to the vexed issue of the reliability of sight records. This had been a matter of contention among Australian ornithologists and birders through the 1920s and 1930s, with growing numbers of birders rejecting the traditional insistence on the need for a specimen before a record could be accepted, while old-school ornithologists continued to insist that the gun offered the only reliable identification tool in the case of closely similar species (as waders are, especially in the non-breeding plumages they wear in Australia). Serventy instanced a 1927 letter to the editor of the *Emu* by A. M. Morgan and J. Sutton of the South Australian Ornithological Association, reproving a Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union (RAOU) member for recording two species of wader (Grey Plover and Bar-tailed Godwit) 'without securing a specimen'.<sup>13</sup> According to Serventy, 'Morgan and Sutton were quite justified in their attitude of caution', but 'were wrong in their belief that our waders cannot be identified at all without recourse to the gun'.<sup>14</sup> All that was needed was the right identification cues and good field glasses. His 'Field Key', together with Peterson's illustration, were meant to provide the former.

<sup>12</sup>Serventy (1938) pp. 65–76.

<sup>13</sup>Morgan and Sutton (1927).

<sup>14</sup>Serventy (1938) p. 67.

<sup>15</sup>Peterson (1994) p. x. Dunlap (2011) p. 74. Weidensaul (2007) pp. 205–207.

<sup>16</sup>Moss (2004) p. 135.

<sup>17</sup>Whitlock (1939) pp. 438–439.

<sup>18</sup>Whitlock (1924) pp. 259–260.

<sup>19</sup>Whitlock (1939) p. 442.

In the USA, the question of sight records had been largely settled by this time. A key figure was Ludlow Griscom, an ornithologist at the American Museum of Natural History, who pioneered the use of field marks as reliable means of distinguishing one species from another in the wild. Griscom was Peterson's mentor in the 1920s, and Peterson later acknowledged that his field guides relied on what he had learned from Griscom.<sup>15</sup> Peterson, in turn, pushed the acceptance of sight records still further. As Stephen Moss argues in his history of birdwatching, 'a far-reaching effect of Peterson's new guide was to give momentum to the drive to persuade the ornithological establishment in the US to accept "sight records" of rare birds'.<sup>16</sup> When Serventy published his wader identification article in 1938, Australian ornithologists were moving in the same direction as, but more slowly than, their American counterparts. Arguably, the lack of reliable Australian field guides was partly responsible for their sluggishness.

Peterson's first Australian appearance was not unreservedly welcomed by locals. Responding to Serventy's wader identification article, renowned field collector F. Lawson Whitlock damned Peterson's illustration with faint praise, judging it 'useful to a limited extent'. It failed to convey accurately a bird's appearance, he maintained, and gave 'an exaggerated idea of the contrasts and purity of the plumage in general, [which] may mislead an inexperienced student'.<sup>17</sup> Whitlock's criticisms are particularly noteworthy since he had long urged the creation of 'a good portable manual of Australian birds, written by a field naturalist, from a field naturalist's point of view'.<sup>18</sup> He ended his critique of Serventy's piece on the field identification of waders by expressing a hope 'that some day we shall have a concise pocket manual of Australian birds emphasising the differences from its nearest allies, rather than the resemblances, of each wader'.<sup>19</sup> Peterson's illustration was designed to do just that, but Whitlock judged it insufficiently attentive to detail.

Serventy responded with a defence of Peterson's illustration and a succinct appraisal of Whitlock's misapprehensions. Referring to Peterson, he wrote:

In view of the reputation of the artist in the portraying of birds in such a manner as to be most helpful to an observer watching the living bird rather than from the standpoint of one examining a skin, it seems rather odd to have to defend him on the charges set out by Mr. Whitlock. And I feel sure that, though he purported to speak from the point of view of the field observer Mr.

Whitlock has, quite unconsciously no doubt, been regarding the matter with the outlook of a student of skins, thereby missing the real purpose of the plate.<sup>20</sup>

Serventy went on to explain in detail why illustrations for field identification should—and must—differ from those intended for the study of skins. The fact that he felt compelled to do so in a 1939 issue of the *Emu* suggests that among many of his colleagues the distinction was poorly understood.

## Towards an Australian Peterson

It took a little longer for Peterson-style innovations to appear in an Australian bird book. The first such appearance was in a 1949 *Field Guide to the Hawks of Australia* by Herb Condon, Curator of Birds at the South Australian Museum. Condon depicted hawks as Peterson did: from a birder's perspective, in flight from below, with attentiveness to pattern rather than detail of plumage. In fact, Peterson had borrowed this mode of depicting raptors from an earlier Canadian naturalist, Ernest Thompson Seton, but it was Peterson who popularised it and drew it into the mainstream of field guide illustration.<sup>21</sup> Like Peterson, Condon sought to provide the observer with 'information on distinctive marks and impressions rather than feather by feather descriptions which are only useful to the collector'.<sup>22</sup>

In 1952 Condon collaborated with Arnold McGill to compile a *Field Guide to the Waders*, again showing the influence of Peterson in both illustrations and text. In the introduction, they explained that because the book was 'concerned mainly with field identification, emphasis has been placed on distinctive markings and characteristic habits. These "field characters" are supplemented by a summary of present-day knowledge of distribution and seasonal movements, habitat preferences, and the relative abundance of the species concerned'.<sup>23</sup> Peterson was not named but his influence on Condon and McGill's wader guide is unmistakable.

Through the 1950s and 1960s, the influence of Peterson is apparent in some Australian field guides, but only in those devoted to specific families and orders, like Condon's and McGill's. The guides of national scope, John Leach's *An Australian Bird Book* and Neville W. Cayley's *What Bird Is That?*, showed no influence whatever from Peterson, even

though they continued to be republished in new editions throughout these years. Behind the scenes, some people were working to change that.

CSIRO ecologist and founder of the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), Francis Ratcliffe, had long striven to secure a Peterson-style guide to Australian birds. He was impelled by a conviction that 'a field guide for bird identification is genuinely grass-roots conservation'.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Ratcliffe maintained that a field guide 'is needed in Australia urgently' to help cultivate 'a public opinion supporting the ideas and practice of conservation'.<sup>25</sup> Considering Leach's and Cayley's books hopelessly outdated, he worked tirelessly to promote a Peterson-style guide.

Peterson shared Ratcliffe's faith in field guides as agents for conservation. By helping connect us with nature through personal, sensory experience, Peterson believed that field guides made invaluable contributions to safeguarding the living things around us. Many agreed, even crediting Peterson as a major shaper of the modern environmental movement.<sup>26</sup> As ecologist Paul Ehrlich wrote in the 1980s:

In this century no one has done more to promote an interest in living creatures than Roger Tory Peterson ... His greatest contribution to the preservation of biological diversity has been in getting tens of millions of people outdoors with Peterson Field Guides in their pockets.<sup>27</sup>

David Clapp of the Massachusetts Audubon Society maintained that Peterson's 'field guides opened a door and, culturally, all of America has walked through it. By becoming aware of birds, we essentially opened up all of our environmental thinking'.<sup>28</sup> Ratcliffe hoped that a Peterson-style guide to the local birds would open a doorway to environmental appreciation through which Australians would walk.

If Ratcliffe's earliest efforts had gone smoothly, Australia would have acquired not merely a Peterson-style guide but a guide by Peterson himself. In the mid-1950s, the CSIRO Division of Wildlife, headed by Ratcliffe, considered sponsoring the production of a field guide with Peterson as the proposed illustrator. This was shortly after Peterson published his first major non-American work, *The Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe* (1954), in collaboration with Guy Mountfort and P. A. D. Hollom. Ratcliffe hoped he might do something similar for Australia but was persuaded

<sup>20</sup>Serventy (1939) p. 45.

<sup>21</sup>Dunlap (2011) pp. 42, 103.

<sup>22</sup>Condon (1949) p. 2.

<sup>23</sup>Condon and McGill (1952) p. 2.

<sup>24</sup>F. Ratcliffe to A. D. Butcher, 6 October 1966, Francis N. Ratcliffe: Papers relating to conservation, 1931–71, National Library of Australia (NLA), MS 2493 (hereafter Ratcliffe papers), box 5.

<sup>25</sup>F. Ratcliffe to J. D. Macdonald, 13 January 1966, Ratcliffe papers, box 5.

<sup>26</sup>Weidensaul (2007) pp. 209–210.

<sup>27</sup>P. Ehrlich quoted in Moss (2004) pp. 135–136.

<sup>28</sup>D. Clapp quoted in Carlson (2007) p. 3.

by his colleagues that the American was too busy and his services too expensive. Shortly afterwards, in 1956, Ratcliffe met Peterson in America and informed him of those discussions. Peterson told him that ‘he would have loved to come to Australia and do the job’ and ‘was sorry that we did not approach him’.<sup>29</sup>

Attempts to engage Peterson on an Australian field guide stalled in the mid-1950s, but collaborations for creating a guide in Peterson’s style were just beginning.

According to Peter Slater, he and ornithologist Eric Lindgren had toyed with the idea of compiling a field guide as early as 1951 or 1952. That hazy ambition was firmed up in 1955, in a discussion with CSIRO scientist Robert Carrick ‘which included the introduction to us of the Peterson field guides [which] gave us the inspiration to continue with our project’. Slater added that ‘it became obvious on comparison [of his own] with Peterson’s drawings that a great improvement was necessary before ours would be suitable for the purpose’ and to that end he had ‘studied bird painting and has achieved a style he thinks adequate to the task’.<sup>30</sup> At this stage, a Slater field guide was a rather distant dream but it was Peterson’s guides that inspired him to persist.

Slater and Lindgren began working in earnest on their field guide in the early 1960s. When Lindgren first approached eighteen Australian ornithologists and bird-watchers in August 1964, seeking assistance and advice for their projected guide, he began by specifying that it ‘will follow the style of Peterson, Mountford and Hollom’s Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe and Pough’s Audubon series’.<sup>31</sup> Clearly, they were not slavishly following Peterson’s style but his was the name they most frequently invoked for comparative purposes. It was also the name most commonly cited by their supporter at the ACF, Francis Ratcliffe. While their guide was still in preparation, he explained that Slater and Lindgren ‘have always described it, right from the start, as a field guide patterned on the Peterson lines’.<sup>32</sup>

After Slater’s field guides were published (in two volumes in 1970 and 1974),<sup>33</sup> some birders called attention to their Petersonian qualities. Writing in the *Bird Observer*, for example, Margaret Cameron noted of the first (non-passerines) volume of the Slater guide: ‘The pictures in the style of Roger Tory Peterson, are “patternistic” rather than photographic, the birds being positioned to show their field-marks, and similar species depicted together to facilitate comparison’.<sup>34</sup> Yet while Peterson’s influence is discernible in Slater’s guides, in those of his friend and sometime rival,



**Fig. 2.** Roger Tory Peterson, photographed by Graham Pizzey in 1971, at Rhyll, Phillip Island. Courtesy of Sarah Pizzey.

Graham Pizzey, the influence is obvious and overt. This is probably because, unlike Slater, Pizzey was a personal friend of the American artist and received direct guidance from him during the compilation of his guide (Fig. 2).

## Pizzey and Peterson

Graham Pizzey contacted Peterson at least five years before he embarked on his field guide. Their first contact seems to have been a letter from Pizzey to Peterson dated 20 July 1960, seeking advice on how to organise ‘a lecture tour on Australian birds in the U.S.’. With the letter, Pizzey enclosed a copy of his recently published book, *A Time to Look*, that he described as a ‘rather slight first book of mine’ but worth sending to Peterson ‘because I sense a fellow feeling about birds and the natural world in general’.<sup>35</sup> He was right about this, for both men were passionately devoted to nature and its preservation.

<sup>29</sup>F. Ratcliffe to N. Wettenhall, 12 May 1965, Ratcliffe papers, box 7; F. Ratcliffe to R. D. Piesse, 28 April 1969, Ratcliffe papers, box 6.

<sup>30</sup>P. Slater to ACF, 12 October 1965, Ratcliffe papers, box 5.

<sup>31</sup>E. Lindgren to J. Bravery and others, 11 August 1964, Ratcliffe papers, box 5.

<sup>32</sup>F. Ratcliffe to G. Pizzey, 7 March 1967, Ratcliffe papers, box 6.

<sup>33</sup>Slater (1970, 1974).

<sup>34</sup>Cameron (1975) p. 3.

<sup>35</sup>G. Pizzey to R. T. Peterson, 20 July 1960, Peterson Collection, box 33.

Pizzey's initial reply came from Roger's wife, Barbara Peterson.<sup>36</sup> Over subsequent years, a significant amount (probably over 25 per cent) of the Petersons' correspondence with Pizzey and other Australian interlocutors was by and to Barbara. This was consistent with Barbara's role more widely, for throughout their marriage (from 1943 to 1976) she effectively acted as Roger's secretary and manager.<sup>37</sup>

There is no indication that Pizzey had ambitions to write a field guide when he first contacted Peterson. That ambition was awakened in 1965, when his friend, artist Robin Hill, asked if he would write the text for a guide that Hill would illustrate. This followed an approach to Hill from the British publisher William Collins, who believed the Australian market was ripe for a new field guide.<sup>38</sup> Pizzey took to the field guide task enthusiastically, although it would be fifteen years before it reached fruition as his *Field Guide to the Birds of Australia*.

During those fifteen years, the projected field guide changed in myriad ways. Its scope expanded enormously. Initially envisaged to cover only the birds of the south-eastern quarter of Australia,<sup>39</sup> it eventuated as a guide to the avifauna of the entire continent and adjacent islands. The artists engaged on the guide changed, Robin Hill being replaced first by Hermann Heinzl, then by Roy Doyle. Throughout the many changes, a constant was Pizzey's adherence to Peterson's system of bird identification.

Early in his guide's gestation, Pizzey explained that its 'outstanding feature will be the use of the Peterson system of identification, for which Collins hold world rights'. He was referring particularly to Peterson's 'use of pointers' in illustrations, to direct the reader's gaze to 'the individual features possessed by almost every species of bird, which set it apart from all others'.<sup>40</sup> That Collins held 'world rights' to this Peterson pointer system seems to have been widely believed by the Australians who were involved in the genesis of Pizzey's guide, including Ratcliffe.<sup>41</sup> They were probably mistaken on this point,<sup>42</sup> but the fact that it was widely believed may have been a factor deterring Slater from too closely following Peterson's style of illustration. Slater's publisher was Rigby.

Pizzey not only adhered to Peterson's system of bird identification; he also agreed wholeheartedly with Peterson on field guides' capacity to boost the conservation cause, and

hoped his own guide would have that effect here. When Pizzey wrote to the philanthropist Major Harold Hall in 1965, requesting funds for the preparation of his field guide, he explained that by enabling people to 'become familiar with birds', Peterson had done great service to conservation:

If people can name something, they will often take an interest in it. The Peterson Guides have resulted in greatly increased support for and membership of organizations devoted to conservation, and it is precisely this support we need in Australia. It is for this reason that we are keen that the Field Guide should be produced as soon as possible, and done well. If successful, it should enhance the reputations not only of the artist and the author, but of the Australian Conservation Foundation.<sup>43</sup>

Throughout Pizzey's correspondence with Peterson, the two men's passion for conservation shines almost as brightly as their passion for birds.

### First Australian visit, 1965

Peterson first came to Australia in December 1965. There may have been additional reasons for his visit, but the main one was that Australia was on the way to Antarctica. On 7 December 1965, his Australian host, Graham Pizzey, wrote that he 'saw Roger Peterson off yesterday on the *Nella Dan*'. MV *Nella Dan* was the most famous icebreaker in the fleet of the Australian National Antarctic Research Expeditions. Pizzey added that Peterson would be back on 21 December, when he would take the American birding around Victoria and southern New South Wales.<sup>44</sup>

Peterson's precise itinerary for his 1965 visit is unclear, but he certainly packed as much birding as possible into the limited time available. He was immensely impressed by Mallee Fowls and 'all the wonderful parrots' he saw.<sup>45</sup> Galahs drew his special admiration. He asked Pizzey to show him one, so the Australian showed him a whole flock of Galahs coming to drink at an earthen dam on the Riverina plains at sunset. Peterson was entranced by the spectacle and enthusiastically filmed it.<sup>46</sup> As he realised, the beauty of Galahs was often underappreciated by locals, but his comments on the bird reveal the different

<sup>36</sup>B. Peterson to G. Pizzey, 2 November 1960, Peterson Collection, box 33.

<sup>37</sup>Rosenthal (2008).

<sup>38</sup>Email, R. Hill to R McGregor, 23 October 2023.

<sup>39</sup>G. Pizzey to F. Ratcliffe, 26 May 1965, Ratcliffe papers, box 6.

<sup>40</sup>G. Pizzey to H. Hall, c. October 1965, Ratcliffe papers, box 6.

<sup>41</sup>F. Ratcliffe to I. W. Wark, 23 November 1965, Ratcliffe papers, box 6.

<sup>42</sup>Rosenthal (2008) p. 285.

<sup>43</sup>G. Pizzey to H. Hall, c. October 1965, Ratcliffe papers, box 6.

<sup>44</sup>G. Pizzey to F. Ratcliffe, 7 December 1965, Ratcliffe papers, box 6.

<sup>45</sup>R. T. Peterson to G. Pizzey, 14 February 1966; R. T. Peterson to G. Pizzey, 3 March 1966, Peterson Collection, box 33.

<sup>46</sup>Pizzey (1965).

perspective of the outsider (as well as his difficulties with the local spelling):

I'm also very much taken with the gallahs [as written] – beautiful birds, perhaps so common in parts of Australia that their spectacular beauty is taken for granted. All parrots are exciting but the gallah has a special distinction – partly because of its combination of gray and rose and also because of the attractive landscape in which it lives.<sup>47</sup>

It wasn't only birds that Peterson was eager to see. He was fascinated by kangaroos and asked Pizzey to show him some. Pizzey obliged, showing him several mobs of Red Kangaroos on the same Riverina trip as that on which they admired the Galahs. He avidly filmed those 'fantastic and wonderful animals' too.<sup>48</sup>

As well as the Riverina, Pizzey took the American birding at some local hot-spots, including the Victorian mallee and the Grampians. On these outings, they were accompanied by several other birders including Dr Norman Wettenhall, a prominent RAOU member and benefactor.<sup>49</sup> Peterson thanked Pizzey for taking 'me under your wing for such an extended period' and promised to return the favour if Pizzey came to America, although he warned that 'we have nothing as exciting as kangaroos or parrots'.<sup>50</sup>

Early in Peterson's visit, Pizzey expressed enthusiasm about the advice the American could offer but also betrayed some misgivings, telling Francis Ratcliffe that:

His visit will be a boon, as it will not only afford Robin Hill and I an excellent chance to discuss his approach to Field Guide production, but might also serve to head him off. I'm not sure that he's not interested in starting a similar venture himself. Had this been a possibility two years ago, I would have done what little I could to help the venture along, but having spent a fair bit of time in preparation of a similar undertaking, I feel like seeing it through.<sup>51</sup>

His suspicions were probably groundless. Nothing I have seen in writings by or about Peterson suggest that he had any interest in compiling an Australian guide at this time.

Probably, Pizzey was hypersensitive because he had recently discovered that he had competition as a field guide author, from the Slater-Lindgren duo. There were also rumours that British ornithologist J. D. Macdonald was compiling an Australian guide.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, Ratcliffe seems to have taken Pizzey's suspicions about Peterson's ambitions seriously.<sup>53</sup>

After leaving Pizzey, Peterson travelled to Canberra, where he met several CSIRO scientists and possibly finessed arrangements for his forthcoming trip to Macquarie Island.<sup>54</sup> He then went to Sydney, where he met Australia's preeminent amateur ornithologist, Keith Hindwood, who took him for a day's birding somewhere in the vicinity of that city. To judge from Hindwood's remark in a letter to Peterson—'Sorry you were not able to see more of our birds the day you were here with us'—they had limited success.<sup>55</sup> Probably this was because Peterson had contracted an illness that drained him of energy. 'Normally I am almost tireless in the field', he told Hindwood, 'and I felt embarrassed about having a let-down on that most-important day'.<sup>56</sup> From Sydney, he boarded a ship bound for Macquarie Island, recalling that he felt 'much improved' by this time.<sup>57</sup>

At Macquarie Island, he met CSIRO ornithologist Robert Carrick who helped introduce him to the local birdlife.<sup>58</sup> One species he saw there for the first time came to have a special place in Peterson's heart. On a dull, windy day—as days on Macquarie Island usually are—in December 1965 he saw a rookery of King Penguins. He had previously seen other species of penguin, but this was his first sighting of the strikingly-coloured King, the second largest penguin in the world. Peterson was smitten, though also saddened by the knowledge that the species had been brought to the brink of extinction in the nineteenth century by hunters who boiled the birds down for their oil. By the time of his Macquarie Island visit, their population had recovered. Later, when 'asked to choose a bird name as my pseudonym', he 'decided on King Penguin, my favorite species in my favorite family of birds'.<sup>59</sup>

After Macquarie Island, Peterson sailed to New Zealand, where he spent New Year's Eve in Christchurch, in company with noted American ornithologist Olin Sewall Pettingill and his wife Eleanor Pettingill. In New Zealand, Peterson met British naturalist Peter Scott and New Zealand

<sup>47</sup>R. T. Peterson to N. Gamble, 22 February 1966, Peterson Collection, box 33.

<sup>48</sup>R. T. Peterson to N. Gamble, 22 February 1966, Peterson Collection, box 33.

<sup>49</sup>N. Wettenhall to R. T. Peterson, 21 March 1966, Peterson Collection, box 33.

<sup>50</sup>R. T. Peterson to G. Pizzey, 14 February 1966, Peterson Collection, box 33.

<sup>51</sup>G. Pizzey to F. Ratcliffe, 7 December 1965, Ratcliffe papers, box 6.

<sup>52</sup>Correspondence in Ratcliffe papers, boxes 5 and 6.

<sup>53</sup>F. Ratcliffe to G. Pizzey, 8 December 1965, Ratcliffe papers, box 6.

<sup>54</sup>R. T. Peterson to R. Carrick, 22 February 1966, Peterson Collection, box 33.

<sup>55</sup>K. Hindwood to R. T. Peterson, 29 April 1966, Peterson Collection, box 33.

<sup>56</sup>R. T. Peterson to K. Hindwood, 2 March 1967, Peterson Collection, box 33.

<sup>57</sup>R. T. Peterson to R. Carrick, 22 February 1966, Peterson Collection, box 33.

<sup>58</sup>R. Carrick to R. T. Peterson, 20 April 1966, Peterson Collection, box 33.

<sup>59</sup>Peterson (1979) p. 74.

ornithologist Don Braithwaite, the three travelling together to Arthur's Pass to see Keas.<sup>60</sup> Peterson returned home to Connecticut in mid-January 1966. It is not clear whether he went back to Australia in the meantime.

## Between visits

After returning home, Peterson continued writing to Pizzey and offering advice. In April 1966 he sent the Australian a copy of his latest field guide, recommending 'that we follow its layout closely'.<sup>61</sup> Pizzey complied, advising Peterson that in his field guide he was 'following pretty much your style of layout and treatment in the latest Western Guide, and I'm hopeful that it will pass'. With apparent diffidence, he added that 'I don't think we have a hope of reaching your standard of completeness of detail, but will give a fair account of available knowledge, plus my own field observations, which now cover something like 500 species'.<sup>62</sup>

Their correspondence was not confined to commentary on field guides but extended to personal matters, gossip and birding adventures as well. Pizzey's letter quoted above, for example, went on to keep Peterson up to date with what was going on in the Pizzey household as well as the birds he had seen. 'I still haven't seen another Little bittern, but did see a Broad-billed sandpiper and a single Red-necked phalarope the other day, which was fun', he recounted.<sup>63</sup> Pizzey's letters to Peterson bear the clear stamp of personal friendship, and the mail in the opposite direction carries the same flavour.

In early 1967, Peterson told Pizzey that he expected to return to Australia later that year. Pizzey passed on the message to Ratcliffe, advising him that 'Roger Peterson probably arrives [in Australia] in September for six months', adding 'but mum's the word for the moment'.<sup>64</sup> Why the projected visit had to be kept secret, he did not explain. The main purpose of the planned Peterson visit was to make nature films with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. That would seem hardly a matter for secrecy. Perhaps Pizzey did not want to alert Slater and Lindgren to the fact that he was receiving personal assistance from Peterson in the preparation of his own guide. In any event, Peterson's planned visit of 1967 did not eventuate, being first postponed to the following year, then abandoned altogether for reasons that remain unclear.

By 1969, Robin Hill had terminated his involvement with Pizzey's field guide; the author was looking for another artist; and Pizzey himself had become increasingly frustrated by his slow progress on the guide. This was the context in which Ratcliffe, in April 1969, indicated that the idea of engaging Peterson to work on the guide had been revived, or at least that it was in the mix of ideas on how to propel Pizzey's guide more quickly into publication. The proposal seems to have originated with Kenneth Wilder, Managing Director of William Collins' Australian branch, who was trying to expedite completion of the field guide that was under contract to that firm.<sup>65</sup> The fact that Ratcliffe, who had done so much to promote a Peterson-style guide for Australia, was in failing health at this time may also have encouraged the idea of engaging Peterson. It went nowhere.

## Second Australian visit, 1971

Peterson's second Australian visit, like his first, was associated with the Antarctic (Fig. 3). Both he and Barbara were employed as lecturers and leaders on two Lindblad *Explorer* tours of the Antarctic, beginning and ending in Hobart, in January and February 1971. They intended following this with between six and nine weeks travelling and birding in Australia. Roger asked Pizzey for advice on how best to do this, specifying that he was 'thinking more in terms of relaxed enjoyment rather than high-pressure. I'd like to see as many new species of birds as I can and also do quite a bit of still photography'.<sup>66</sup> Pizzey provided plans, itineraries and recommendations on accommodation, hire cars and birding sites, as well as linking Peterson into a network of birders around the country.<sup>67</sup> In view of his other commitments, Peterson decided to confine his travels to eastern Australia, going no further west than Adelaide and deferring a visit to the Northern Territory until his intended return in 1974 for the International Ornithological Congress that was scheduled to be held in Canberra that year.<sup>68</sup>

In 1971, Peterson covered a lot more of Australia than he had in 1965. The Lindblad tour disembarked Roger and Barbara in Hobart but they spent little time in Tasmania before travelling to Victoria in company with Francisco Erize, a young Argentinean nature photographer who

<sup>60</sup>Petersons' New Year's letter 1966–7, Papers of Graham Pizzey (hereafter Pizzey papers). Access generously facilitated by Graham's daughter, Sarah Pizzey.

<sup>61</sup>G. Pizzey to F. Ratcliffe, 5 April 1966, Ratcliffe papers, box 6.

<sup>62</sup>G. Pizzey to R. T. Peterson, 14 March 1967, Peterson Collection, box 33.

<sup>63</sup>G. Pizzey to R. T. Peterson, 14 March 1967, Peterson Collection, box 33.

<sup>64</sup>G. Pizzey to F. Ratcliffe, 14 April 1967, Ratcliffe papers, box 6.

<sup>65</sup>F. Ratcliffe to R. D. Piesse, 28 April 1969, Ratcliffe papers, box 6.

<sup>66</sup>R. T. Peterson to G. Pizzey, 25 October 1970, Pizzey papers.

<sup>67</sup>G. Pizzey to R. T. Peterson, 29 July 1970, Pizzey papers.

<sup>68</sup>R. T. Pizzey to G. Pizzey, 15 November 1970, Pizzey papers.





**Fig. 3.** Roger Tory Peterson (far right) at Rhyll, Phillip Island, 1971, with (left to right) Francisco Erize, Graham Pizzey and Barbara Peterson. Courtesy of Sarah Pizzey.

travelled with the Petersons for the first three weeks of their tour. In Victoria, Pizzey took them to see some of the state's special birds, including the endangered Helmeted Honeyeater, then considered a distinct species but now a subspecies of the Yellow-tufted Honeyeater.<sup>69</sup> Peterson seems to have been even more impressed by the numerous Little Penguins that nested—and brayed noisily all night—around Pizzey's home near Rhyll on Phillip Island. On that island was Summerland Beach, where the penguin parade was already a popular tourist attraction drawing up to 5000 people a night. Pizzey took him there; and far from being put off by such a touristy bird show, Peterson delighted in it, believing that such spectacles helped cultivate a conservation consciousness in the wider public (Fig. 4).<sup>70</sup>

While organising his trip, Peterson told Pizzey that he would like to see the hordes of Rainbow Lorikeets that were fed daily at the Currumbin Bird Sanctuary on Queensland's Gold Coast. 'I know it's a touristy show', he remarked, 'but I would like to see it'.<sup>71</sup> After seeing it, the Petersons were so impressed that Barbara included a whole paragraph on this 'spectacular bird show' in her 1972 New Year's letter,<sup>72</sup> while Roger published an article on it in *International Wildlife* magazine. 'I found myself deeply moved by the winged pageantry of Currumbin', he enthused, adding that:

I have seen the pink masses of flamingos on Kenya's Lake Nakuru, the scarlet ibis roost in Trinidad's Coroni Swamp, the guano islands of Peru, and the emperor



**Fig. 4.** Roger Tory Peterson (left) and Norman Wettenhall feeding Black Swans at Lake Wendouree, Ballarat, 1971. Courtesy of Sarah Pizzey.

penguin rookery at Cape Crozier; I would rate Currumbin's lorikeets with these as one of the great bird spectacles of the world.

At that time, Peterson would have been among the widest-travelled birders in the world, lending a special cachet to his praises. 'I have never seen a bird show with more audience participation', he marvelled, explaining that such intimate interactivity with birds helped educate people on the imperative of conservation (Fig. 5).<sup>73</sup>

In north Queensland, the Petersons stayed with Billie Gill and her family in Innisfail. Gill was an expert amateur ornithologist and an exceptionally enthusiastic birdwatcher. In 1966, she, with Fred Smith and Eric Zillmann, had made the first recorded observation of Sarus Cranes in Australia, thus adding a new species to the Australian list. When, years later, avian systematist Richard Schodde classified the Australian Sarus Crane as a distinct subspecies, he named it *Grus antigone gillae* in honour of Billie Gill. She had begun communicating with Peterson in January 1964, her introductory letter telling him, in characteristically plain-speaking style, that 'it's about time you came to Australia and gave the birds your full attention'.<sup>74</sup> She kept up the correspondence over subsequent years, encouraging the Petersons to come to Australia and offering to accommodate them when they visited her part of the country.<sup>75</sup>

When they eventually did, in April 1971, the area was awash. Innisfail is normally an extremely wet place, although by that time of year the rains usually ease to some extent. Not

<sup>69</sup>R. T. Peterson to F. Raymend, 30 May 1971, Pizzey Collection, box 33.

<sup>70</sup>Peterson (1979) pp. 122, 164, 220.

<sup>71</sup>R. T. Peterson to G. Pizzey, 15 November 1970, Pizzey papers.

<sup>72</sup>Petersons' New Year's letter 1972, Pizzey papers.

<sup>73</sup>Peterson (1974) pp. 44–46.

<sup>74</sup>B. Gill to R. T. Peterson, 7 January 1964, Peterson Collection, box 33.

<sup>75</sup>B. Gill to R. T. Peterson, 18 August 1964, Peterson Collection, box 33.



**Fig. 5.** Roger Tory Peterson with Rainbow Lorikeets at Currumbin Bird Sanctuary, Gold Coast, Queensland, 1971. Courtesy of the Roger Tory Peterson Institute.

in 1971. The Petersons were drenched not only at Innisfail but on the adjacent Atherton Tablelands and Cairns region as well, putting something of a damper on their northern birding. Gill was distressed by ‘the long too wet, wet season that you [the Petersons] experienced here so unfortunately’; and with the birding not up to her expectations she felt she had let the Petersons down, telling them that ‘it’s silly but I felt responsible!’ She hoped that when they returned in 1974, as planned, she could show them the local birdlife to better advantage under sunnier skies.<sup>76</sup>

The deluge notwithstanding, Gill managed to show the Petersons numerous birds, including three species of bowerbirds (presumably Golden, Satin and Tooth-billed Bowerbirds) plus their bowers. Roger was impressed by Gill’s ‘extreme skill



**Fig. 6.** Roger Tory Peterson commanding the swans at Lake Wendouree, 1971. Courtesy of Sarah Pizzey.

in the field’.<sup>77</sup> But Barbara was astounded by her birding attire:

Billie travels around the rainforest and fields barefoot and barelegged. Knowing that most Australian snakes are more deadly than cobras I asked tentatively, “Billie, do you see many venomous snakes?” She said: “No, I don’t watch my feet.”<sup>78</sup>

Evidently, she was too engrossed in the birds. Gill maintained a friendly correspondence with both Roger and Barbara until at least 1974, informing them of the doings of her family (she had eight children) and, inevitably, of the birds. ‘You’d love the 2 sunbirds who keep coming in and digging their faces into the flowers on a couple of Gladioli spikes sitting on the fridge’, she told Barbara in April 1974.<sup>79</sup> It was a relaxed friendship of nature-lovers (Fig. 6).

## After 1971

Shortly after returning to America, Peterson told Pizzey how relieved he would be when he finished his Mexican field guide. ‘Doing a field guide is rather like serving a prison sentence’, he ruminated.<sup>80</sup> This could hardly have been encouraging advice, since Pizzey had grown increasingly frustrated by how long his own guide was taking. The causes were many, but the primary one was Pizzey’s perfectionism. Still, he persisted and kept Peterson informed of his progress. On 1 September 1972 he told the American that his ‘field guide is assuming final form. It seems almost

<sup>76</sup>B. Gill to B. and R. T. Peterson, 11 July 1971, Peterson Collection, box 33.

<sup>77</sup>R. T. Peterson to B. Gill, 5 May 1971, Peterson Collection, box 33.

<sup>78</sup>Petersons’ New Year letter, 1972, Pizzey papers.

<sup>79</sup>B. Gill to B. Peterson, 8 April 1974, Peterson Collection, box 33.

<sup>80</sup>R. T. Peterson to G. Pizzey, 7 May 1971, Pizzey papers.

unbelievable but we can just see the end of the project toward the end of this year or early 1973'.<sup>81</sup> His optimism was misplaced. In fact, the end of his project was still eight years away.

In November 1973 Peterson again visited Australia, although only its fringes. On board Lindblad's *Explorer*, that Barbara described as 'like a second home to Roger', he visited Lord Howe and Norfolk Islands as well as Green Island on the Great Barrier Reef just offshore from Cairns. This seems to have been as close as he got to the Australian mainland on this voyage, that also took in New Caledonia and the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) and terminated in New Zealand. On board the *Explorer* and sharing lecturing duties with Peterson was the Australian popular natural history writer, filmmaker and broadcaster, Vince Serventy (brother of Dom Serventy), whom Peterson had first met on his 1971 tour.<sup>82</sup>

Ever since that 1971 tour, the Petersons had said that they would return to Australia in 1974 to attend the International Ornithological Congress in Canberra and go birding further afield in the Northern Territory and Western Australia. In numerous letters to Australian friends and acquaintances they reiterated their excitement at the prospect of returning and seeing again the wonderful birdlife this country offered.<sup>83</sup> But they did not come. Although the Petersons' 1975 New Year's letter makes no mention of Australia, it does indicate that in August 1974 (when the Canberra ornithological congress was held) Roger was on the Lindblad *Explorer* in the Canadian Arctic. I have been unable to find an explanation for why he was there rather than in Australia as planned.

A still greater mystery surrounds the Petersons' relationship with Australia around this time. Correspondence between them and Australian interlocutors seems to have petered out. At least, I have been unable to locate a single letter in either direction after the mid-1970s. Possibly there is correspondence that I have not yet located, but present indications are that communications diminished greatly and perhaps ceased altogether. The very last item of correspondence from the Petersons to an Australian recipient that I have been able to locate is their New Year's letter dated January 1976, that they sent to Graham Pizzey.

It was in this letter that Barbara announced her impending divorce from Roger. 'We will remain as friends', she explained, but 'this will be the last letter that will be

signed jointly by us'.<sup>84</sup> Herein, perhaps, lies a partial explanation for the attenuation of Peterson's communications with Australia. Barbara had long been effectively his manager and secretary, whereas his next wife, Virginia Westervelt, made no pretence of fulfilling those roles. Roger himself, while immensely talented and ambitious as an ornithologist and naturalist, was not adept in organisational or secretarial matters, and had left those matters almost entirely in Barbara's hands.<sup>85</sup> It is plausible to suggest that Roger's loss of Barbara's practical and logistical support resulted in a deterioration of his communications with Australia. However, the diminution of those communications seems have begun a year or two before the divorce, so other factors were likely in play as well. Graham's daughter, Sarah Pizzey, recalls that her father always spoke fondly of the Petersons and that there was no falling out between them.<sup>86</sup> It seems, rather, that either communications simply petered out or the relevant correspondence has not yet been found.

When Pizzey's guide was published in 1980, both Australian and American reviewers noted that it was modelled on Peterson's.<sup>87</sup> It was even more enthusiastically welcomed by birders and the wider public than Slater's two-volume guide had been some years earlier.<sup>88</sup> Both, however, were landmark publications that ushered in a new generation of Australian birding guides; or as ornithologist Harry Recher puts it, they sparked 'an explosion of Australian field guides'.<sup>89</sup> The old standbys—Leach's *Australian Bird Book* (first published in 1911) and Cayley's *What Bird Is That?* (dating from 1931)—were superseded by a swathe of more sophisticated guides that made the field identification of Australia's avifauna quicker, easier and more accurate.

## Conclusion

Peterson was a major inspiration behind the two field guides that led the renovation of Australian birding guides from the 1970s onward. Of the two Australian field guide authors, his influence was strongest and longest lasting on Pizzey, sustained by personal friendship between the two men. When Peterson came to Australia in 1965 and 1971, Pizzey was his main contact here, taking him birding, drawing up his travel itineraries and putting him in touch with a network of

<sup>81</sup>G. Pizzey to R. T. Peterson, 1 September 1972, Pizzey papers.

<sup>82</sup>Petersons' New Year letter 1974, Pizzey papers.

<sup>83</sup>See for example R. T. Peterson to V. Serventy, 10 May 1971, Peterson Collection, box 33; B. Peterson to L. D. Miller, 29 October 1973, Peterson Collection, box 30.

<sup>84</sup>Petersons' New Year's letter 1976, Pizzey papers.

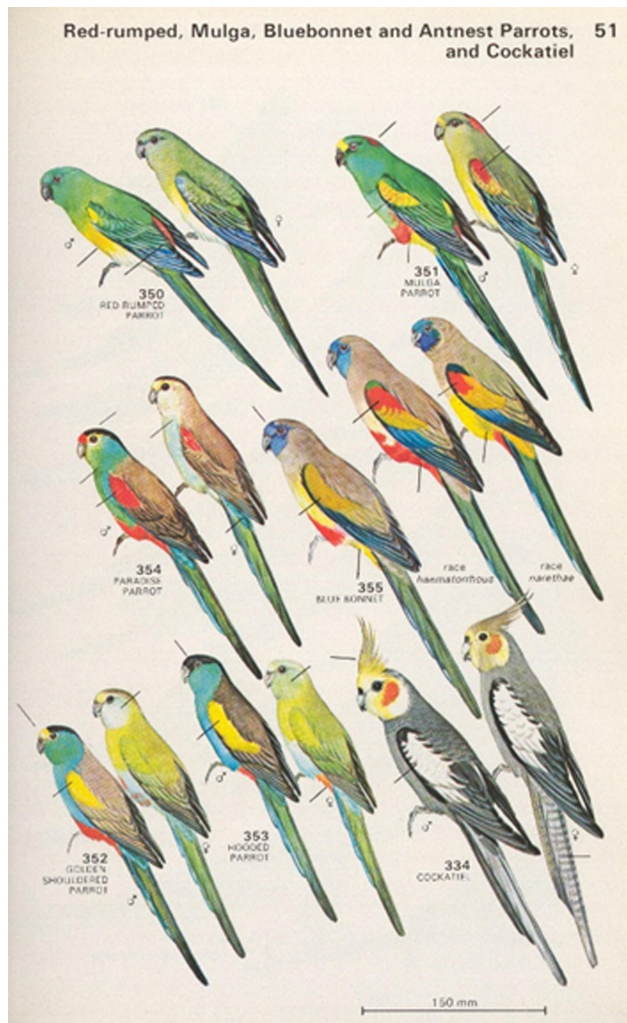
<sup>85</sup>Rosenthal (2008). Carlson (2007) p. 107.

<sup>86</sup>Sarah Pizzey, pers. comm., June 2024.

<sup>87</sup>See for example Jarman (1981). Mott (1981).

<sup>88</sup>See for example Garnett (1980). Serventy (1981).

<sup>89</sup>Recher (2017) p. 316.



**Fig. 7.** A plate by Roy Doyle from the 1980 edition of Graham Pizzey's *Field Guide to the Birds of Australia*, showing the standardised poses and pointers to field marks that had become Peterson trademarks. Courtesy of HarperCollins.

birders around the country. Slater, by contrast, had no personal contact with Peterson and seems never to have exchanged correspondence with him. He was inspired to embark on a field guide by seeing one of Peterson's, and the American's work offered a model for his own. But the influence was far less intense than it was for Pizzey, a fact that is apparent in their respective field guides. Pizzey's field guide is clearly of the same genus as Peterson's. Slater's has only a family relationship (Fig. 7).

Both Pizzey and Slater shared Peterson's conviction that field guides serve grander objectives than merely helping us pin a name to a bird. They believed that field guides also helped bond people with nature and thereby cultivate a

commitment to conservation. Their supporter at the ACF, Francis Ratcliffe—who was an important conduit for the transmission of Peterson's field guide style and system to Australia in the 1950s and 1960s—held equally fervently to that belief. Writing to Slater soon after hearing he had embarked on compiling a field guide, Ratcliffe explained that the ACF was interested in sponsoring such works because they regarded them 'as education in conservation at the grass-roots level'.<sup>90</sup> At his urging, the ACF financially supported the production of both Slater's and Pizzey's guides.

Extolling the necessity of a conservation consciousness in a 1995 interview with Gregg Borschmann, Pizzey averred that 'the natural world is the absolute fundamental base, it's all our past, it's all our future ... the natural world is the great truth, the one thing that we need to know about. I personally believe that it can answer most of our spiritual cravings'. To which Borschmann responded: 'in that sense then, ... this field guide was your hymn, it was your testament'. 'Yes', said Pizzey.<sup>91</sup> Their exchange calls to mind British birder Simon Barnes's declaration that 'every field guide that was ever printed is not merely a book of helpful hints on how to tell one bird from another. It is also a hymn to biodiversity'.<sup>92</sup> Roger Tory Peterson would have heartily endorsed that declaration.

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<sup>90</sup>F. Ratcliffe to P. Slater, 8 November 1965, Ratcliffe papers, box 5.

<sup>91</sup>G. Pizzey interviewed by G. Borschmann, March 1995, NLA TRC 2845/67, transcript of cassette 3, side 1, p. 5.

<sup>92</sup>Barnes (2004) p. 59.

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