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David Stirling has written many scientific and popular notes and articles for various publications including *The Canadian Field Naturalist*, *The Murrelet*, *The Victoria Naturalist* and *Stitches*. He has co-authored *A Naturalist's Guide to the Victoria Region* with Jim Weston, *Birds of British Columbia* with David Hancock, *Pacific Wilderness* with David and Lyn Hancock, and *Where to Find Birds in Canada* with Jim Woodford.

BIRDS, BEASTS  
AND A **BIKE**  
UNDER THE SOUTHERN CROSS

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DAVID STIRLING

Agio   
PUBLISHING HOUSE

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My thanks to Barbara Begg and Alan MacLeod for drawing my attention to my bad spelling after reading the first draft of this manuscript. More thanks to Alan for scanning pictures, drawings and documents. Thanks to Ursula Vaira of Leaf Press for a professional editing.

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Printed on acid-free paper made without fibre from endangered old-growth forests.

This book is dedicated to Ruth who shared these adventures.



*Ninety Mile Beach, New Zealand, 1956.*

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The first draft of *Birds, Beasts and a Bike* was typed by Ruth in 1960 from the copious notes I made along the way. Nothing has been changed, except for a few bits that here and there refer to the present.

*“...If you haven’t got to travel, you might as well stay at home... I mean the inner necessity, which drives a person to travel though it may be against his more facile inclinations, against discretion, against the will of others: to travel when he can’t afford it, when he is not fit for it, when it means sacrifice and insecurity... This is the kind of travel I have in mind, the kind of travel that is done when one can’t afford to travel at all, when one is taking the risk of being stranded somewhere... It may be the traveller’s intention to return when some of his curiosity has been satisfied, when his urge to see other countries and people have been appeased.”*

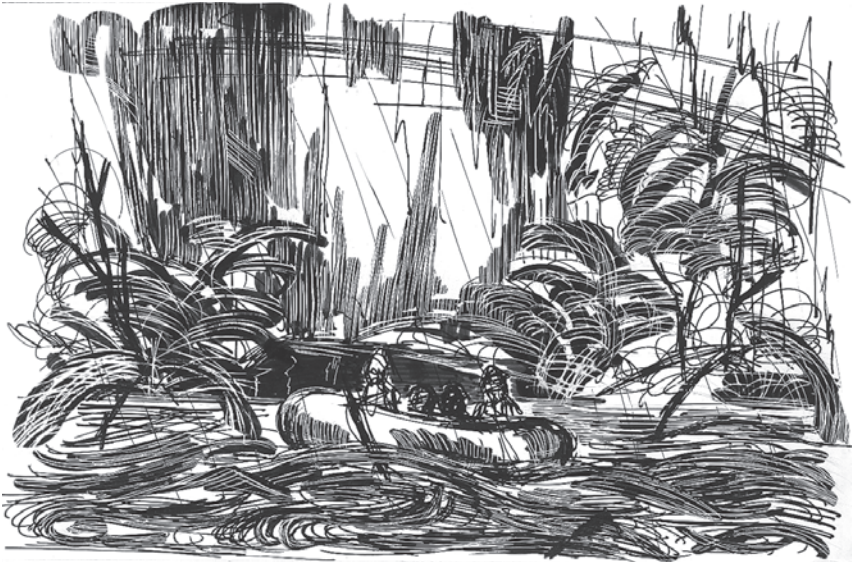
—Rupert Croft Cook, *Seeing the World*  
courtesy of William Hodges & Co. Ltd.

*“The world is a book and those who do not travel read only a page.”*

—Saint Augustine

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## 4

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### UP THE CREEK ON THE WANGANUI RIVER

We floated down the Wanganui, a 150-mile-long river, that begins in the mid-island's volcanic plateau and finishes in South Taranaki Bight, at the city of Wanganui. Downriver from Taumarunui, where we embarked with a flotilla from the Auckland canoe club, there are ninety rapids. Sheer rock walls with dripping ferns and moss rose up on either side of the canyon's rim. An exciting roar from hidden cascades reverberated from dark, vegetation-choked clefts where water has worn cuts back from the main river. Along a narrow ribbon of sky, eight hundred feet overhead, grey and fractured clouds rested on the matted treetops. From this nimbus, thousands of feet thick, torrential rain poured down on us soaked and shivering individuals who had chosen





*Merry Christmas, 1956.*

to run this river of rapids, snags, overfalls and record high water in the worst kind of weather in a tiny rubber dinghy. The canoe club members would float swiftly in kayaks and a canoe. Peter, Margaret, Ruth and I, tagalong adventurers, were given this floatation device: a small inflatable rubber raft and four paddles. We got the idea we had been invited along to transport the bulk of the expedition's supplies. The dinghy was bottom heavy with cardboard boxes of Creamota breakfast cereal, cans of herring and a gigantic wheel of cheese. Perched on the dinghy's edge, water lapping against our bottoms, feet up on the cheese, we contemplated our folly. We were intruders in a world of overpowering vegetation and suffocating water.

In preparation for the river run, we had arrived in Taumarunui, the pushing-off place, on December 24. In a quiet cow pasture on the out-

skirts of town we prepared to spend Christmas Day lazing in the sun. Tomorrow, the river. In keeping with the season we had decorated our tent with fern fronds and bought the best lamb chops for a big fry-up. But we had not reckoned on Maori hospitality. On Christmas morning while strolling in the suburbs we came upon a group of Maoris preparing a *hangi*, a native-style feast, where the food, an unfortunate pig with the trimmings, is covered with green leaves and cooked underground on hot coals. The original pressure cooker. We were invited to dinner, a mid-day feast. We couldn't refuse. The lamb chops would have to wait, perhaps; without refrigeration, they were already *off*. What a feast! Roast pork, a plethora of fruit and vegetables, Dominion lager, wine and champagne. Several families were present. A steady stream of relatives and visitors moved in and out. This was only the beginning, we were told. The celebration would last several days. As honoured guests we must make the rounds of all the families. We should have the strength and determination for a celebration of, perhaps, a week of food and booze with short naps between gluts.

It was getting dark. We thanked our hosts, again and again, and asked to leave, explaining over and over that we had a date early next morning with the mighty Wanganui. No way, Jake! The Maoris would have nothing of this. Some of the guests, suffering no doubt from the affects of the heat, alcohol and the season's goodwill were getting belligerent. In the night, when the party slackened off and a general drowsiness overcame the crowd, we silently slunk away to our rendezvous on the riverbank. A drunken, but no doubt joking, mention of *long-pig* added speed to our flight.

The first two days on the Wanganui were delightful: rapids around every corner, magnificent scenery, warm sun, good companions. On the morning of the third day all that changed. The scream of a Long-tailed Cuckoo broke the pre-dawn silence, then a most unusual bird song like the tinkling of a silver bell (I have never heard a silver bell tinkling but this was what it must sound like) announced the arrival of a new day. Another and then another joined the serenade. There were three notes

beginning high, and the birds seemed to be singing in concert. I could imagine a small feathered conductor waving his baton way up there on the tallest rata. Against the silent background of primeval forest, in the grey light of receding night the music had a melancholy effect. It lasted only a few minutes before other birds, Blackbirds, Dunnocks and Song Thrushes, all assisted immigrants from England, took over. We looked out. The sky was a cheerless solid grey. From the shrouding forest, curtains of vapour rose into the aerial reservoir that was about to spill over. Yes, the first drops splashed down, a prelude to a major incoming weather front. Over a damp breakfast, a local weather wizard mumbled, "I think we can expect heavy precipitation."

He was right. The rest of the river trip was wet above, below and sideways. Negotiating one of the many rapids, we skimmed up on a barely water-covered flat rock. The current threatened to capsize us, so Peter and I jumped overboard to steady the dinghy and push it off. Fortunately, the water was only a bit more than waist deep, but unfortunately, our life raft had been butchered by a knife-edge projection just an inch below the water. We were in no danger of sinking as the tube containing the air was intact, but there was a gash in the floor. We were now sitting right on the waterline, the dinghy hardly visible. Most of our supplies were secure in watertight bags but not all. Sometime later we noticed the water in the boat looked like porridge and there was a tail of gruel seeping out behind us. The Creamota sack had burst. There went breakfast. The cheese, the size and thickness of an ancient grind-stone, fared well, for it was case-hardened and indestructible. The cheese had been responsible for the mishap as its weight caused the rubber floor to sag just enough to catch the sharp rock.

The next day our supply load was dried figs, McIntosh toffees, canned corned beef and two cases of Eno's fruit salts. Our victualler had ordered the fruit salts in the belief that the chemicals would counteract the starch-cheese diet and lack of exercise. Another theory was the salts could be a purifying agent for the Wanganui water. But nature can screw up the best laid plans and theories. The river water was carrying a load



*Ruth and Margaret launching the dinghy.*

of waste from the interminable herds of sheep and cows grazing on the grassy hills above. Only two days on the river and everyone was heading for the bushes clutching soggy bits of note paper or a handful of rough fern leaves. We hadn't heard of e-coli in those days. We had *the Wanganui fox-trots*. A fierce epidemic of explosive dysentery or something so close one couldn't tell the difference had struck and continued spasmodically until journey's end. Our quartermaster had goofed. A recipe for discomfort: Wanganui water, two cases of Eno's Salts but no toilet paper.

That night we slept in a shearing shed after an almost impossible, slippery climb up a mud cliff. The shed was dry but a thousand sheep had recently left their mark. When we were tucked in dry in our sleeping bags, the roar of the rain on the tin roof gave us the comforting feeling that the abundant sheep turds were really only wild grapes.

Disaster struck again on the oatmeal-cheese day. Our floating home

developed a slow air leak. A long day in a rubber dinghy is uncomfortable anytime but on half inflation it is godawful. Aches developed in every muscle and fanned out to congeal in an acme of pain. There was no relief because of the sagging feather-bed effect of our craft. Manoeuvrability, not great at any time, was reduced to zero. There was a pump in another dinghy somewhere along the river. It had to be there because we didn't have it. We drifted into an eddy, hanging back. We thought dinghy number two was somewhere behind us. While we waited we heard loud caterwauling reverberating from the canyon walls. Then a canoe, barely afloat, with two voyageurs, appeared. Only the fore and aft ends of the canoe were above water. Two men sitting up to their life jackets in the same liquid were paddling furiously and singing, "*In the Blue Canadian Rockies.*" Even in our state of numbness it was a hilarious scene. We were partly submerged but safe on an underwater rock when around the bend our rescuers appeared. They had the pump. Soon the rubber ring was swollen and we pushed off into swift water. More trouble; the bung blew out! Over inflation. Now we did have a problem. We were in mid-river, up the creek, but with paddles this time. Sheer dripping banks on both sides. We dug in our paddles. Peter had his thumb in the bung hole slowing the exit of air. We pushed for a ledge that miraculously jutted out from the black face. We piled up on the finest little rock table I had ever seen. Perhaps the Wanganui River goddess, looking up from her slimy home, decided to give us another chance; perhaps she was just having some fun.

Long after dark, wet and chilled, we and most of our companions trickled in to a roaring bonfire and welcome accommodation in an old Maori meeting house well above the river. We were delighted to thaw out and to have dry beds. Our feet and butts had that corrugated feel of *washerwoman's hands*. Others were not so fortunate. A couple decided to camp on a ledge near the river instead of attempting the treacherous climb in the darkness up the mud cliff. A midnight downpour collapsed their tent and soaked their sleeping bags. In the morning they staggered in, more dead than alive.



*On the Wanganui River.*

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We didn't see many animals on the trip and any seen were promptly shot. Other than a couple of bat species there were no mammals in New Zealand prior to the coming of the Maoris and later, the Europeans. With the Europeans came a veritable zoo of exotic species both domestic and wild. Lacking natural predators, goats of several kinds and Red Deer were knocking supreme hell out of the vegetation. Perhaps the most famous of the assisted mammal immigrants is the *Captain Cooker*: a powerful, hairy wild boar introduced to the islands by Captain Cook in order to give the natives a good source of protein and to steer them away from cannibalism. Domestic pigs have taken to the hills since Cook's time, diluting the original stock. Today many wild pigs are indistinguishable from the tame variety. A true *Cooker*, with massive head and front

— SATURDAY, DEC. 22, 1956. —

## CANADIAN VISITORS

### MOTOR-CYCLE TOUR.

Mr and Mrs D. Stirling, of Canada, have set out on what they expect to be a two-year tour of the world by motor-cycle. So far, they have only got as far as Palmerston North, but time is no object to this carefree couple.

Brought up in Athabasca, Alberta, Mr Stirling has been working in Victoria, British Columbia, for the last two years, first as a fisheries inspector for the Government and later as an electrician in a ship yard.

Mr and Mrs Stirling first took bus to San Francisco where they joined the Orion and arrived in Auckland on May 14. They worked around Auckland for five months and then in the first week of November set off on their tour.

Two other Canadians, Mr and Mrs P. Duval, who have been working in Palmerston North, are also travelling by motor-cycle through New Zealand.

They plan to leave here on Monday for Taumarunui to join the Auckland Canoe Club's Wanganui River trip. The party leaves Taumarunui on Boxing Day in rubber dinghies (for the "tenderfoot") and canoes. So far 60 have booked in for the journey which is expected to take 10 days.

New Year's Eve will be spent in Pipiriki where a party and dance has been arranged.

Mr and Mrs Stirling will then return to Palmerston North for the rest of their gear and then head southwards to Wellington and the South Island.

After that they will probably spend some time in Australia. "Our plans are a bit vague at present," was Mr Stirling's comment.

## DOWN RIVER TRIP

### CANADIANS RETURN.

#### RAIN SPOILS VOYAGE.

Down the Wanganui River with the Auckland Canoe Club's party between Christmas and New Year was a worthwhile experience for the Canadian couple, Mr and Mrs D. Stirling, who have returned to the city motor camp after making the trip.

The couple travelled on the river with another Canadian pair, Mr and Mrs P. Duval, who have also come back to the city. Mrs Stirling summed the experience up with enthusiastic praise for the scenery. The only thing which went wrong was the weather. It rained and rained most of the time, a contributing factor which made the Canadians decide to pull out on New Year's Day at Pipiriki instead of carrying on.

Mrs Stirling would have liked a few photographs of the river on the way down from Taumarunui, but with so much rain the cameras were wrapped up securely and it was not worth getting them out.

When the bad weather persisted it was decided to spend a day in a shearing shed. "It had been used quite recently by sheep, but it was so wet we were glad to see that shearing shed."

This day also provided a respite from tinned meals. Some of the party were upset by this type of food. All there was to do was just float along and eat," said Mrs Stirling.

The best day saw the various crafts cover 30 miles, but it needed a fair amount of paddling to get as far as that. The Canadian couples were together in a rubber dinghy. On one occasion the valve slipped and the dinghy quickly deflated when the craft was on a stretch of water from which high banks sheered up on both sides. One solitary ledge at just the right place enabled the dinghy to be landed in the nick of time.

And still the rain kept on, so the Canadians, having seen what was described as the best part of the river, had had enough. After all, for most New Zealand campers such a trip is an annual holiday, but when all the equipment in the dinghy is your "house" it is worth looking after. Besides, light raincoats were badly tattered and the rain was still coming down.

From the  
MANAWATU STANDARD

Dec 22 & ??, 1956

quarters, long legs and a black, hairy razor back, is a formidable beast. The pigs and their families with their tough, but sensitive snouts are blamed for much carnage among the native plants.

Early in the trip someone bagged a young goat. The meat was parceled out at tea time. The same day, one of the club's officers knocked over a magnificent Captain Cooker. The carcass was hung by the heels for all to admire. It wasn't eaten. It was pronounced *wormy* and was probably as tough as an old horse with its harness on. Still, it seemed a shame to shoot this noble beast in the first place and to leave it for the bluebottles. Once we saw a young goat standing on a tall boulder completely cut off by the rising river. The kid looked our way and bleated, perhaps hoping for rescue. Two men in a canoe swept around the corner. The crash of a .303 rifle filled the canyon. Another carcass to feed the eels. The piteous cries of the goat and the crash of the gunshot echoed over and over again. These sounds last only a moment; the murmuring and gurgling of the Wanganui will go on for another million years.

Speaking of eels; in New Zealand they grow big. How big? We heard many tales of great eels *as thick as a man's body; ten feet long; bent the tines of the pitchfork when I speared it; if Jonah had lived in New Zealand he would have been swallowed by an eel.* No doubt there is a bit of piscatorial exaggeration in these stories, but we did see several big black specimens that would rival two lengths of the six-inch thick stove pipe that was connected to the airtight wood stove on the old homestead. Near Golden Bay on the northwest corner of the South Island, a woman had been feeding eels for umpteen years. Gentle, big fellows of fourteen pounds ate hamburger from her hand and lay patiently for a tickle under the chin. Perhaps eels, like most other animals, need only a little T.L.C.

In New Zealand, as elsewhere in the world, people considered eels either a delicacy or an abomination. In the Australian outback we met a homesick Cockney who reminisced, almost tearfully, about jellied eels in parsley sauce. On the other hand, eels are slimy. *Slimy* is really off-putting. It is often used to describe a politician. Eels resemble snakes (another term for an unloved person); a good excuse to bar them

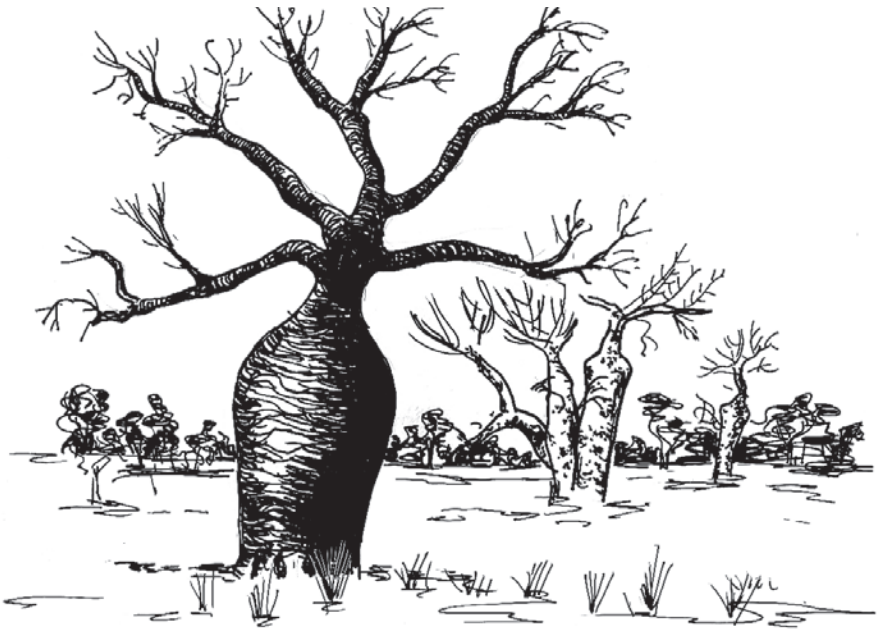


from the dinner plate. The eel's tenacity for life is proverbial; it doesn't stop twitching until digested – a put-off for all but the most unfeeling gourmet.

Fishing for eels was a favourite activity on the Wanganui. With torch and a bit of meat on a hook, eels were pulled out with astonishing rapidity. They would even snap on to a piece of white rag on a string and hang tight until grounded. Another method of decimating the slimy animal's population is to toss the entrails of a luckless rabbit, pig or whatever into the stream and stand by with torch and spear.

Our flotation device successfully negotiated the last two major rapids on the river and deposited us at our destination, Pipiriki, a backcountry sheep town. Since it was New Year's Eve we had a booze-up and dance at the local *Palaise de Dance* where a Maori band entertained us with their rendition of *Po Kari Kari Anna* and *Mambo Rock*.

Next day we had to get back to Palmerton North where our bikes were waiting. We begged a lift with a wealthy resident who, with his large empty station wagon, was the only person going out that day. He charged us two pounds each for the thirty-mile ride. We were so astonished we paid him. Two pounds was a fortune for us at that time. Fortunately, his kind is a rarity in New Zealand.



## 13

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### THE WET

The sun rose higher, the heat got hotter, the southeast trade winds dropped to an airless calm, broken occasionally by hard, swirling bursts from any quarter bringing intense but brief dust devils. The mercury got stuck in the high 90s F. Inland, great anvil clouds mushroomed into a sky of molten brass above the shimmering grey bush. At day's end we biked out to the high ground at Nightcliffs, to enjoy the sunset. The sun, blood red from the smoke of bush fires and pockmarked by sun spots, seemed to hang motionless for a moment before plunging into the Timor Sea. A terrific sizzling noise and a cloud of steam would not have been a surprise. Crepuscular rays shot up from sun's bed. Sea, sky and clouds turned to pink and gold. With darkness, continuous lightning

played around the southern horizon, illuminating the distant boiling thunderheads. For a storm watcher it was magnificent. The monsoon was just over the horizon.

The stratosphere-punching cauliflower columns were at the mercy of the fickle breezes that broke the oppressive calm most mornings and evenings. The land breeze of night produced, by morning, massive clouds over the sea and clear skies over the land. The deluge seemed imminent. Nothing happened. By smok-o the great clouds were barely mole hills. By noon, only blue sky over the sea. Now, a light but refreshing on-shore breeze took command, building towering thunderheads over the land that in turn disappeared with the contrary winds of night. One day the sea breeze was stronger and did not give way to the nightly land breeze. A great current of humid air moving down from the equator had given a kick in the rear to the local winds. The Wet had arrived.

The thunderheads grew until the sky could hold no more; lightning joined clouds and ground; violent downdrafts sent termite-riddled trees crashing to earth. Then rain – not gentle rain, but violent suffocating rain – rain that did not penetrate the baked ground, but instead, covered the flat land inches deep and rolled off in flash floods down the gullies. Local clouds, brewing up fast, frequently destroyed themselves with a crashing downpour.

A swift change came over the Earth. The monotonous sameness of the Dry was replaced by the dynamic instability of the Wet. There was new living energy in the air. Frogs, surveying the world from their homes in knotholes, croaked a deafening welcome to the rain, before hopping away to ancestral breeding puddles. Mindil Beach residents now had to battle mosquitoes and other insects that increased a thousand fold overnight. The vegetation shot up so fast that some plants didn't appear to have a young stage. Dry clumps of grass merged into waving waist-high acres of green. Everything that was not treated to a daily airing sprouted a sheen of mould.

A remarkable change came over the birdlife too. In the up-drafts, just ahead of the rolling squall clouds, hundreds of sickle-winged swifts

gyrated, their wild *scree-scree* calls in keeping with the awesome turmoil in the sky. The Koel, a large blue-black member of the cuckoo tribe; the Dollar Bird, a roller, and the beautiful fat Nutmeg Pigeon (Pied Imperial-Pigeon) returned from spending the dry season in Indonesia. A pair of nutmegs set up house-keeping in our shade tree and repeated non-stop *ook!-whuu*. Brilliant lorikeets, rosellas, fig-birds, Yellow Orioles and honeyeaters became abundant with the appearance of new blossoms. A Pheasant Coucal sat in the pandanus trees venting a loud *coop-coop*. The spectacular dry-season concentrations of water birds began to break up as they scattered to breed in the new wetlands. Shore birds arrived, riding the north wind from their summer breeding grounds on the Siberian tundra. Some only lingered for a day or two before drifting off farther south. Largest of the lot was the Far Eastern Curlew. Whimbrels, another of the curlew family, were common along the shore. The third species, the Little Curlew, arrived *en masse*. One morning I watched hundreds materializing from out a particularly black storm front, dropping to the grass and standing motionless as if exhausted. How far had they flown? Two days later they had all moved on. Pacific Golden Plovers, Terek Sandpipers, Greenshanks, godwits and Marsh Sandpipers were some of the many Eurasian migrants that stopped or passed through. In the short evenings we biked out to check for the latest bird arrivals and watch the sunsets from Nightcliffs. Here be Grey-Tailed and Wandering Tattlers on the rocks, a row of Brown Boobies roosting on an old pier cable, and a pair of ubiquitous Ospreys at their nest on a disused pylon.

The dawn bird chorus changed. Not much in the realm of song but the melancholy *hooting* of the Pied Imperial Pigeon, *cooing* of the Peaceful Dove, *cooping* of the Pheasant Coucal and the *cooeing* of the Koel combined to make a pleasant bush symphony. We missed the mass twittering of a thousand wood swallows that greeted sun-up in The Dry. Absent too, was Jacky Winter, the chanting flycatcher that entertained us with a twenty-minute recital every morning: *Tuitty fruity, tuitty fruity, what's your beer, tuitty, fruity*, plus at least ten more phrases that I can't translate into English.

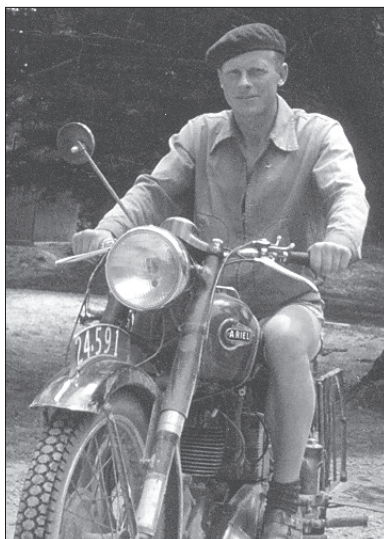
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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### DAVID STIRLING



*Sandhurst, 1945*



*New Zealand, 1956*

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David Stirling was born in 1920 in Athabasca, Alberta. While growing up on a pioneer farm, he developed a keen interest in natural history: from butterflies and weather phenomena, to birds and botany. In World War II he served in the Canadian army in Canada and the UK, and graduated from the Royal Military College in Sandhurst, England, as a first lieutenant.

He married Ruth Carter in 1951. After working with the federal ministry of fisheries in Windsor and Winnipeg, they left on a two-and-a-half year journey around the world that included travelling by motorcycle, working at seasonal jobs and enjoying the natural world in New Zealand and Australia. On his return to Canada, he worked for the federal forestry ministry. He later moved to British Columbia Parks where

he helped establish a nature interpretation and research program that was recognized as a model for other Canadian provinces.

At this time he became involved in the research and organization of overseas nature and wildlife tours. He led nature tours to Turkey, the Yukon, East Africa, the Galapagos Islands and other locations. After his retirement from BC Parks, David Stirling devoted more time to nature tours and travelled to Antarctica, the Russian Far East, the North West Passage and China.

David Stirling served on the boards of the American Birding Association, the Canadian Nature Federation and the Pacific Northwest Bird and Mammal Society. He helped in the founding of the Federation of British Columbia Naturalists. He was a member of International Council for Bird Protection, and is a member of The East Africa Wildlife Society and the Ornithological Society of the Middle East. He taught bird identification courses at Victoria's community college, and toured Canada and the United States with the National Audubon Society's wildlife films and Jim Bowers' wildlife presentations.

David Stirling received the Victoria Natural History Society's distinguished service award in 1989 and was given an honorary life membership in recognition of his long involvement with the society. He received Parks Canada's Interpretation Award of Merit in 1985. He was presented with the Queen's Jubilee Visit Medal in 2002 and also honoured in 2006 for his work with BC Parks. In 2008 he received the BC Field Ornithologists Award for ornithology.

Ruth Stirling died in 2002. Daughter Patricia, husband Cyril and their two children, Siobhan and Rory, live in Duncan, BC. David Stirling lives in Victoria, BC, Canada.