

J.N. Hobbs Medal 2024 Citation – Brian Venables



With enough time spent in far north Queensland, sooner or later most people with an interest in the natural world will come across Brian Venables. From birdwatchers on the Cairns Esplanade to visiting scientists from around the world, many people have benefited from their interactions with Brian.

Born in Cairns in 1947, second son of a brood of five brothers and five sisters, Brian cut his naturalist teeth amongst the rainforests, swamps and creeks in and around Edge Hill, which during his youth was a wild outer suburb. There spawned a life-long passion for the natural world around him. Although he worked variously as a crocodile skin trader, timber buyer, sandalwood cutter and butcher, his one constant was the natural world.

In 1987, Brian purchased a 5-acre freehold block at Cape Weymouth, north of Lockhart River, Cape York Peninsula, where he is well-known and much respected by the Kuuku Ya'u, Wuthathi, Kanthanumpu, Uutaalnganu, Umpila and Kaanju Traditional Owners of the region. Here he built an emergent pole house overlooking Packers Bay. Between there and his home in Cairns, Brian has generously offered a base camp for literally dozens of visiting scientists, students, artists and naturalists over the past three decades. During that time he has also provided additional free logistical support in the form of personal vehicle loans, gear storage, and advice about natural history, travel, and fieldcraft. One example of this generosity is best explained by Dr Michelle Hall:

Brian provided invaluable support as we developed and ran a research project on Lovely Fairy-wrens, without which we would not have learned nearly as much about this previously relatively unstudied species. Based on his incredible knowledge of birds in the area, he scouted potential study sites before our arrival and then helped us by learning to find the birds, recognise their calls, etc. Brian's almost encyclopaedic knowledge of local natural

history made spending time in the field with him fascinating, and his personal generosity in loaning cars and helping with accommodation, gear storage, etc was inspiring.

And from project member Jess Bolton:

Brian is exceptionally generous with his time, resources and knowledge. He is an amazing character full of stories and inspires all those around him. With a complete lack of arrogance he is willing to share his amazing breadth and depth of knowledge across the board with scientific leaders in their fields, amateurs and children alike.

While his logistical support has been worthy of recognition in its own right, it is Brian's intellectual contributions to scientific collaborations that make him an outstanding recipient of the 2024 Hobbs Medal. His interest in the natural world knows no taxonomic boundaries, which is reflected in his list of peer-reviewed publications. His unapologetically questioning mind and capacity to collect reliable data have made him a valuable member of many research projects throughout northern Queensland. To note a few examples, together with Dr Graham Harrington, Brian played a key founding role in BirdLife's Carpentarian Grasswren surveys which have been providing transformative information about the conservation management of this endangered species for over a decade.

And another example that highlights his enduring dedication is his collaboration with Dr Julia Hazel on studying a rapid increase in urban nesting by Torresian Imperial-Pigeons (TIPs) around Cairns after Tropical Cyclone Yasi in 2011 (see Hazel & Venables 2017). Together with other volunteers, they are working to better understand how this species responds to severe disturbance events. As part of this project, Brian conducts nest-monitoring rounds by bicycle nearly every day during the TIP breeding season, and from 2012 to 2024 he has personally found and documented close to 9000 TIP nests.

Beyond data collection, and to illustrate his commitment to conservation, Brian goes one step further and sends the TIP nest locations (and those for Rufous Owls and the endangered Bare-rumped Sheathtail Bat *Saccolaimus saccolaimus nudicluniatatus* he has been monitoring for several years) to Cairns City Council so they may avoid disturbing nests and roosts during their garden-maintenance program. Along a similar vein, after the construction of the 'award-winning' new visitor centre at the Cairns Botanic Gardens, Brian regularly recorded bird window strikes (the glassy exterior of the building was a death trap for Metallic Starlings, especially, and located directly in a regular flight path), and used the information to try to lobby the Council to install devices to reduce the incidence of mortality.

Brian's contribution to Australian ornithology, and natural history more broadly, is impressive. This contribution has been recognised previously through the assignment of his surname to a new species of *Diospyros* tree that grows near his home at Cape Weymouth. According to the botanist who described it, Dr Wendy Cooper (Cooper 2022, p.79), the honour was in recognition of Brian:

a raconteur and naturalist who often resides on eastern Cape York Peninsula. He has been very helpful to me and to many biologists studying flora or fauna especially in the Iron Range and Cairns areas and deserves recognition for his generosity and contributions.

That Brian should now receive additional recognition for his contribution to ornithology specifically through the Hobbs Medal is, as she later notes, entirely appropriate and well-deserved.

But the final word in this citation goes to Julia Hazel, who sums up Brian's contribution and skill so simply:

Having anyone as dedicated for as long as Brian has been, is so rare. If only we could clone Brian, we would know far more about our wildlife.

References

- Cooper, W. (2022). *Diospyros venablesii* WE Cooper (Ebenaceae), a new and endemic species from the Iron Range area, Cape York Peninsula. *Telopea* **25**, 75–79.
- Hazel, J. & Venables, B.L. (2017). Can island specialists succeed as urban pioneers? Pied imperial-pigeons provide a case study. *Wildlife Research* **44**, 40–47.

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