

Forest and Bird

the beginnings

FOREST AND Bird began with Kapiti Island. Not the creation of a bird sanctuary – that happened earlier, in 1900. But with a fight to ensure that the island *stayed* a sanctuary.

Captain Val Sanderson, Gallipoli veteran and bird lover, remembered Kapiti Island as the playground of his childhood. But on a visit to the supposed sanctuary in 1922 he found 5,000 cattle, goats and sheep, the forest floor bare, erosion rampant and birds hard to find.

Thus began a fight to force the government to return the island to its designated status. After a brief but heady battle and with the backing of the Wellington newspapers, Sanderson and his supporters forced the government to have the stock removed.

It was then suggested to him that the problems of conservation in New Zealand were merely Kapiti on a grander scale and he resolved to set up a society to fight for the protection of the country's native birds.

His gift for organisation and generating publicity ensured that the public meeting on 28 March 1923 at the Dominion Farmers' Institute building in Wellington was well attended. Sanderson moved successfully "that a Native Bird Protection Society be formed . . . with the object of obtaining unity of control on all matters affecting wildlife and also the advocating of a bird day for our schools".

Forest and Bird had good connections from the beginning. Sir Thomas MacKenzie, former Prime Minister and high commissioner to London was elected the first president. Internationally renowned botanist Leonard Cockayne was the second. Sanderson was secretary. The membership fee was five shillings (50 cents).

Sanderson was the main force in the society for over 20 years. He remained secretary until 1933 when he became president. Even then he continued to

Next month Forest and Bird will celebrate its 70th birthday. IAN CLOSE looks at the early years of the society and the man who founded it.



Captain Val Sanderson, founder of the Native Bird Protection Society and driving force in the society's first decades.

carry out most of the secretarial duties until his death in 1945, many of the expenses being met from his own pocket. "Being alive to the fact that the accumulation of wealth should not be a man's sole aim," he later wrote, "I retired from active money-seeking early. At the same time an idle life without aim or object did not appeal to me, and moreover, it seemed that a man should do something for his country to warrant his existence."

At first the society was largely run from

Sanderson's home at Paekakariki, then from various shared and leased offices in town. A permanent typist, a Miss Dickson, was employed to assist him with the increasing load of work.

The society from the beginning put out a regular bulletin titled *Birds* to its members which, in addition to the objects of the society, proclaimed on the front cover that "the foundation of true conservation is in the setting aside of sanctuaries efficiently and rigidly controlled by men who know how".

In 1933 the bulletin became *Forest and Bird* and the society followed suit with a name change a year later, giving recognition in its title to the importance of habitat in conserving native animals. The "Royal" prefix didn't come until our 40th anniversary in 1963.

One of the first issues faced by the society was the problem of introduced animals and their effects on forests and native wildlife. Early articles in the magazine refer to the "ravages of deer" and the "menace of introduced animals". It might seem that nothing has changed, but deer and possums were then protected and Forest and Bird took on the powerful acclimatisation societies. The protection was lifted from deer in 1930.

Membership of the society remained relatively small in the first decades. At Sanderson's death in 1945 it was only 800. Ten years later it had doubled but the big increases came later with the fight to save Lake Manapouri in the 1960s and early 70s, and the struggles of the 70s and 80s to save native forests.

Today Forest and Bird is a large professional organisation with over 55,000 members and 15 full-time staff. Seventy years traditionally measures the term of a natural life, but the society at 70 shows no signs of slowing down.

Throughout this anniversary year Forest & Bird will feature a number of articles relating to the history of the society and its future challenges.