

THE DEVELOPMENT OF *MARINE ORNITHOLOGY*: 2000–2015

ANTHONY J. GASTON

*Outgoing Managing Editor, Marine Ornithology, Tony Gaston Consulting, Unit 11, 174 Dufferin Road, Ottawa K1M 2A6, Canada
(tonygastonconsult@gmail.com)*

FOUNDATION AND INITIAL DEVELOPMENT

Marine Ornithology was started by John Cooper in 1976 as *The Cormorant*, publishing material on African seabirds. The title was changed to *Marine Ornithology* in 1990 and the scope expanded to embrace seabirds worldwide. In 1998/99 the Pacific Seabird Group (PSG) negotiated to take over the operation of the journal from John, and the financing and production of the journal were transferred to PSG as of 1999. The first production editor was Steve Speich, and there were two “hemisphere editors”: John in the southern hemisphere and myself in the northern. At this point, production was running about a year behind the nominal volume year. It was only in the 2000 volume year, appearing in late 2001, that the operation became fully transferred to PSG. Even then, John continued to have substantial, although gradually diminishing, input over the following decade. We reached on-time publishing by 2005 and currently issues appear in April and October.

When PSG took over the operation of *Marine Ornithology*, it approached other seabird groups and suggested that they should help to contribute to creating a truly international seabird journal. The UK, Dutch and Australasian Seabird Groups and, later, the Japan Seabird Group agreed to contribute and do so according to the decisions of their individual executives. All continue to support us at some level.

It was Steve Speich’s vision that the journal would be an “open access” web-based journal, but as the PSG inherited a print subscription list from John we continued to produce print copies as well as the online version. The original subscription list was about 200, half individuals and half institutions. Subscriptions have withered as the use of online journals became more and more familiar. We currently have about 50 print copy subscribers, of which 60% are institutions. In addition, about 20 copies go free to deposit libraries and other repositories.

EDITING

After the initial period of two “hemispheric editors” (Cooper, Gaston) in 2000–2002, an additional European editor was added (Rob Barrett) from 2003 onward so that the northern hemisphere was divided east and west. In 2005, I stepped aside as Editor to concentrate on production, styling myself “managing editor” and the role of North American editor passed to Scott Hatch. An additional southern hemisphere editor (Peter Dann) was added in 2007, so that John Cooper was dealing only with African submissions. An additional northern hemisphere editor was added in 2010, with responsibility for the Caribbean (Tony Diamond). At that time, John relinquished his remaining responsibility, which passed to Peter Dann. He remains on the masthead as “Founding Editor” to acknowledge his great contribution.

When Scott Hatch, who had presided over a period when there were numerous submissions from North America, retired in 2011, we decided to revise the formal structure of the editorial system by going to a more typical format of editor-in-chief plus a board of 10 associate editors, covering a range of regional and topical expertise, to whom papers are delegated. This created a better uniformity of acceptability. I appointed myself editor-in-chief but maintained the position for only two years before handing it over to David Ainley, the current editor-in-chief, in 2013. Since then, I have reverted to my role as managing editor. None of the editors has been paid for what has often been a very substantial investment of time. I am enormously grateful for the support I received over the years, particularly from Scott Hatch and, latterly, David Ainley.

VOLUME AND FINANCING

Early issues of *Cormorant* and later *Marine Ornithology* were produced in a variety of page formats. Since PSG took over production, we have maintained a uniform 8.5 × 11 page size, which is now standard across a whole range of journals, being the most cost-effective under most circumstances. With the format standardized, we can compare volume sizes among years. The number of pages published since 2000 has ranged from 108 to 297 (Fig. 1). We have produced two issues each year, except in 2009 and 2011, when special issues were added addressing particular topics. The overall trend shows an increase from ~155 pages/year in 2000 to ~220 pages/year in 2015.

Our costs are covered partly from print subscriptions, from sponsoring societies, from page charges (currently \$40 black and white, \$100 colour) and from a small amount of advertising sponsorship. The remainder is recouped from the PSG, which has committed up to \$6000 annually from its Publications Fund to support *Marine Ornithology*. To date, we have never requested the full amount. Currently, our fairly fixed income is almost entirely in US dollars, while practically all our expenses are in Canadian dollars. This leaves us at the mercy of exchange-rate fluctuations, which have taken a toll of our finances in recent years. This business model depends heavily on *pro bono* contributions by the editors.

Costs comprise mainly copy editing, layout, printing and mailing. All of these costs relate directly to the number of pages published. Consequently, costs have increased with the size of the journal, which now runs approximately 30% larger than when PSG took over. At the same time, the subscription revenue has fallen, despite an increase in institutional subscription fees from \$60 to \$100 over the same period. Individual subscriptions have always been at a level that makes them revenue-neutral — they just cover the costs of printing and mailing.

JOURNAL PHILOSOPHY

High-end journals consider not only the validity of a study and the correctness of the results, but also the importance that attaches to those results, in terms of their value in pushing the boundaries of science. They reject valid results that are merely confirmatory, or perhaps only local in application. The mandate of the PSG is to further communication on seabird science and conservation. Building on this philosophy, *Marine Ornithology* publishes any material that genuinely contributes new information, ideas or opinions to the science of marine ornithology, regardless of how “exciting” the result. It is our aim to be a “journal of record” for seabird studies.

We do not publish material of only local or anecdotal interest, but obviously there is some interpretation required in deciding what is eligible for publication. We are generally more lenient with material from places where there is no obvious local outlet (e.g. Patagonia, Indonesia) than with those for which a local outlet is available (e.g. Europe, Japan, North America). To date we have been seen as a good outlet for “data-heavy” papers. Although we are not currently constrained by space as much as by our collective time to deal with the material received, we should not burden the readership with more undigested numbers than are strictly necessary. Consequently, we often ask authors to publish data tables as online-only Appendices.

In addition to data-heavy papers, we receive quite a few from people who are not native English speakers. This is excellent, and we want to encourage those authors. However, there is an impulse to be more lenient with them than with Europeans and North Americans in terms of quality. This is probably less helpful than it appears, because if we do not encourage them to match current scientific standards it will delay their development towards scientific parity. Consequently, we do not compromise on the validity of the science.

RECENT AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

No one reading this editorial can be ignorant of the huge changes and the rapid acceleration in scientific publishing, driven by new technologies and by the increased significance of citation metrics. Currently, *Marine Ornithology* is not included in Thomson Reuters databases (Current Contents, Web of Science, etc.) but is included in Scopus (SCImago Journal Ranking), where it ranks near the top of the third quartile among both “animal science and zoology” and “oceanography” journals. Given that many papers we publish are of very limited interest, this ranking appears quite good and is similar to *The Wilson Bulletin* and *Waterbirds*.

It has been argued, sometimes by me, that we need to increase our ranking to attract more and better papers. This is a laudable goal, but it does require some caveats. Given our current finances, it is not possible to publish many more papers than we do at present.

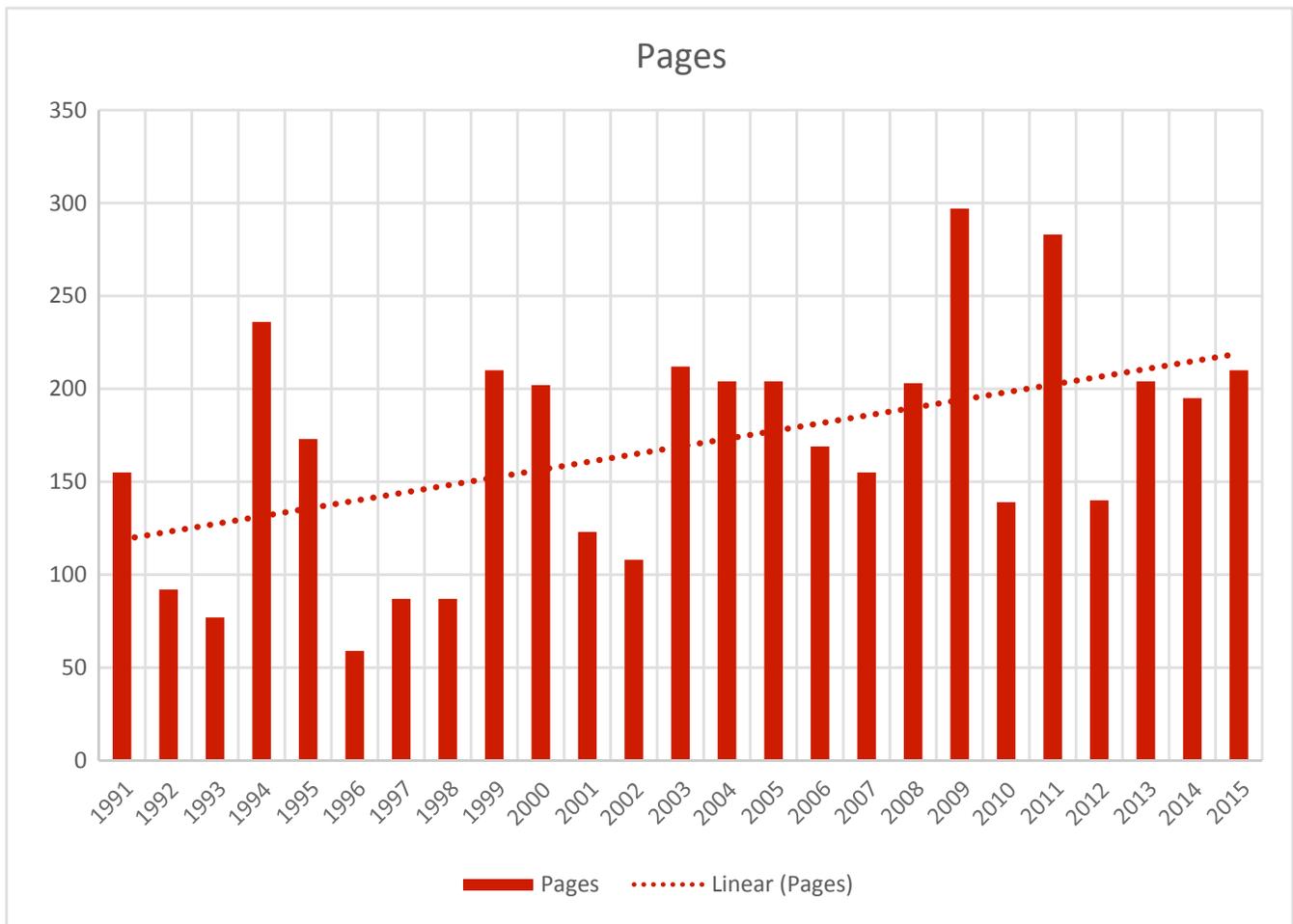


Fig. 1: *Marine Ornithology*: Page count by issue year.

Consequently, if we begin to attract significantly more papers we will need to be more selective, and our goal of publishing everything that provides sound information on seabirds will need re-evaluation. Also, the already heavy burden on the editors will increase. Some of this might be alleviated by the use of journal management software, but the routine task of reading and evaluating papers cannot be automated as yet, and it is this which takes the most time. Like most things in life, expanding the journal requires financial investment. We need to consider how additional resources can be raised. This will be a priority for the new managing editor.

From 2014 onwards we have been publishing papers online before the completion of individual issues, thus shortening the time from acceptance to publication. Many factors contribute to publication speed, not least the time taken by authors to revise their submissions. However, once a paper is accepted, the time to publication is mostly under the control of the journal, and rapid publication upon acceptance is becoming the norm for scientific journals. We hope to post the majority of papers within two months of acceptance, although this has not always been the case to date. At this point I should mention the work of Ben Saenz, our *pro bono* webmaster, who has done all of the online work for the journal since 2002. The availability of someone with Ben's skills and an interest in seabirds has been a major reason why the online edition of *Marine Ornithology* has come as far as it has. From time to time he has posted material from as far afield as Antarctic research stations. I am tremendously indebted to Ben.

Periodically, the suggestion arises that we drop the print edition of the journal. Initially, Steve and I felt that having a scattering of copies in major libraries around the world was a guarantee that the journal would be around for posterity. In 2015 this argument looks less convincing. Many libraries are liquidating their paper holdings and relying on backing up electronic versions, or on the ability of journal aggregators to do so. And the journal landscape is increasingly populated by online-only journals. I would guess that the paper copies that currently go to libraries are very rarely consulted, given that, wherever you are, *Marine Ornithology* is only a mouse-click away.

Dispensing with the print edition and moving to a software-based journal creation system, along the lines of *Environment and Society* or *Avian Conservation and Ecology* would simplify the work and reduce the expenses. However, right now, it would still leave a revenue shortfall, as the institutional subscriptions exceed the costs of printing and mailing and are therefore one of our main sources of income. There has been a steady erosion of these subscriptions over the past decade, so their importance as a source of revenue will probably decline. Again, we need to consider the revenue

stream in any initiative to change the structure of the journal. In the meantime, posting papers on acceptance costs us nothing, improves the attractiveness of the journal, but does not initiate the flood of papers that some suppose might happen if we were listed on Web of Science.

MANAGEMENT

To date, the effective management of *Marine Ornithology* since 2002 has been in my hands. I have provided an annual report to the PSG giving details of our finances and the numbers of papers published and, to date, feedback has been rather limited. I decided the format (mostly continuing from John Cooper's original format), designed the covers, made decisions on what to publish in colour, what to relegate to appendices, where to waive page charges and what to accept in the way of advertising. From time to time I have consulted with John Cooper, with other editors, with the authors, and with our technical editor, Carolyn Brown, who has an excellent knowledge of publishing in general. At the World Seabird Conference in Victoria in 2010 a group of supporters had lunch together and discussed the future of the journal. Many excellent ideas were put forward, but few have come to fruition. I bear the blame for this failure.

I think that it would be better for the journal if the responsibility for management were a little more widely spread. I am all in favour of a one-party state as long as I am the dictator. I think leaving the implementation of policy to a single executive officer, in this case the managing editor, is the only solution for a small operation like *Marine Ornithology*. However, I recognize that broad strategies are best developed by discussion among a group with varied talents and interests. Therefore, I would like to see the creation of some sort of visioning or oversight committee, advising the managing editor and dedicated to moving the journal into the 21st century. Some individuals have already expressed an interest in taking part, but I think it is the responsibility of the PSG to create the necessary structure.

FAREWELL

Running *Marine Ornithology* has been an enjoyable, if sometimes frustrating, task. I find I work best with a small group of like-minded people and I have been very blessed in the editors and others with whom I have worked over the past 15 years. I learned a lot from John Cooper in the early days, and the combination of academic and technical tasks definitely suited my half-baked mentality. I hope I can continue to mentor my successor for a while and look forward to seeing the journal leap forward now that it is released from my somewhat wayward grasp. Good luck.