

Conservator of beloved wildlife

Colin John McKechnie

Naturalist, conservationist, bird and wildlife breeder

Born: August 12, 1938; Adelaide

Died: March 10, 2005; Gumeracha

FROM his time as a Sacred Heart College schoolboy living in Plympton with his father's large backyard aviaries, to his death, Colin McKechnie bred, raised, nurtured and worked for the protection of birds and the saving of some of their species, and other wildlife.

As the owner/manager of the Gorge Wildlife Park, Cudlee Creek, which he operated as a family business for more than 40 years, with wife Yvonne and son Steven, he was a no-nonsense man of work with a colourful personality, vocabulary and ideas he put into practice.

Colin, father Bob and brother Ted, both deceased, were the first to export Australian wildlife into wildlife parks in the U.S., including kangaroos and camels. They operated a pet shop in Twin St, city, had an animal breeding farm in Payneham and were pioneers in establishing the deer industry in Australia.

But the development of the Gorge Wildlife Park, once the largest privately owned wildlife parks in Australia, became the core of Colin's life around which he built vast knowledge – to the benefit of wildlife.

The park began with a trickle of visitors in the late 1960s but the thrill of his life was when, after years of visitors numbering in the high 30,000s, last year it topped 42,000. Confident of the future, Colin had just seen the completion of extension work a few days before his sudden and unexpected passing.

Colin was a practical man, but realised the need for structure and, in 1985, he was a founding member of the Consultative



Committee for the Keeping and Trading in Native Fauna – now known as the Captive Fauna Consultative Committee – and was a committee member until his death.

He was on the Wildlife Advisory Committee established under the National Parks and Wildlife Act to advise governments and the National Parks and Wildlife Council on wildlife issues, including threatened species, sustainable use, biological survey and other policy matters relating to wildlife.

This also included trial and commercial farming of native species, advice on the issue of National Parks and Wildlife permits involving all aspects of native fauna, and the allocation of research grants under the Wildlife Conservation Fund.

In 1997, he was awarded a Statewide

Appreciation Certificate by the minister for conservation in appreciation of outstanding and long service to consultative committees. He was also founding member of the Wildlife Exhibitors' Association of SA.

The head of veterinary science at the Adelaide Zoo, Dr David Schultz, said in a graveside eulogy: "Colin was a practical person who could see the need for bureaucracy, but only in small doses.

"His involvement in wildlife advisory committees was from his philosophy that if you were going to influence proceedings you had to be there. He provided the no-nonsense approach. He was an integral part of statewide breeding programs and his relationship with the Zoological Society of SA was one of tremendous respect and involvement.

"He took great delight in breeding the creatures he cared for and philosophically thought that eventually captive breeding was going to play a big role in the preservation of some species."

Colin was involved in the yellow-tailed black cockatoo recovery program on Eyre Peninsula, incubating eggs and hand-raising a number of chicks for release to the wild.

Dr Schultz described Colin as "the best animal handler over the whole animal spectrum I have ever seen – from dasyurids, to deer, fairy wrens to ostriches. He was a bloke with extreme common sense, who understood the need in the animal field to develop new methodologies when his own were found wanting and his willingness to listen and learn and apply the principles of animal health to his park. His knowledge of basic ecology was outstanding, long before ecology became a buzz word".

Colin is a loss to birds and wildlife; also to the community of Cudlee Creek where he was larger than life figure.

Geoffrey Williams