On 1 March 2014, Professor Peter Ryan assumed the directorship of the Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology at the University of Cape Town. Peter is well known to readers of this magazine through his insightful articles, but we thought we’d get to know a bit more about him and his vision for the Institute.

The Institute has been in existence for nearly 55 years, and you’re inheriting the mantle of leadership from some venerable peers; the four previous directors were Jack Winterbottom, Roy Siegfried, Morné du Plessis and Phil Hockey. How do you feel about assuming this role?

To be honest, it’s a bit daunting. When Morné du Plessis interviewed for the position following Roy Siegfried’s retirement, I remember he said that he felt he had been training for this position all his life. I certainly don’t have anything like his confidence. I have tended to eschew leadership positions, and have a habit of skiving off to do something else, perhaps because I was involved in the process throughout. Roy Siegfried always pushed the staff and students to compete on the international stage, and that ethos has persisted. The focus has changed somewhat from assessing the roles of birds in ecosystems to a mix of systematic, behavioural and conservation-oriented research, but we have always striven to gain a better international reputation; to contribute to the global understanding of birds, and the many ways this knowledge can be harnessed to improve the quality of life for people, birds and the environment in general.

Are there any innovations that you would like to see or new directions that you’d like the Institute to take?

I don’t foresee any major changes in direction, but I would like to see a greater emphasis on working with implement-oriented agencies and NGOs to ensure that our findings make a difference to the way we manage and conserve biodiversity. We lack the capacity to undertake advocacy directly, but we need to forge strong partnerships to ensure that our work makes a real difference. That’s not going to happen unless there’s a far greater recognition of the importance of conservation and blue sky research, just that in an increasingly crowded world we have to work harder to mitigate human impacts.

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