

Susan J. Cunningham citation

Susie grew up in New Zealand and completed her undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Ecology there. She moved to South Africa in 2010, joining the FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology, Department of Biological Sciences, UCT, as a post-doc on the Hot Birds Research Project – an international collaboration aiming to understand the impacts of climate change on birds, involving the University of Cape Town, University of Pretoria, University of New Mexico, and University of Western Australia among others.

The major focus of Susie's research is understanding the mechanistic links between temperature and fitness (using proxies such as breeding success and body mass maintenance) in birds under climate change. She is now the co-PI of the Hot Birds Research Project, together with Prof Andrew McKechnie at the University of Pretoria. Susie leads the behavioural ecology side of this research while Andrew's focus is on the underlying thermal physiology. In recent years, Susie and Andrew have increasingly published and co-supervised students together on projects which closely combine these two themes, leading to publication of high impact cutting edge work which can realistically be argued to lead this field internationally.

Identifying the existence and critical importance of 'missed-opportunity costs' associated with behavioural thermoregulation is probably Susie's most valuable recent contribution to her research field. Susie, together with her students and collaborators, published the very first empirical data on this theme for birds between 2012 and 2020, building the case for the profound impact of behavioural costs of thermoregulation across multiple taxa throughout this time. These impacts have the potential to alter species persistence and ecosystem functioning as the climate continues to warm. This work, together with conference symposia on this topic that she organised at the International Society for Behavioural Ecology Congress in New York City in 2014, the North American Ornithological Congress in Washington DC in 2016, and the International Ornithological Congress in Vancouver in 2018, has stimulated global interest, including new output from research teams in the USA and Australia, which heavily cite Susie's series of papers.

Susie describes herself as one of the lucky ones, in that she knew from a very young age that she wanted to pursue a career as a biologist working with birds – and that she had the support and opportunities to follow this dream. She is particularly grateful to her mentor and PhD supervisor, Dr Isabel Castro of Massey University, New Zealand, who supported her in her ambition to become a field biologist ever since they first met when Susie was 11 years old. Susie always strives to 'pay forward' this support to her students and post docs and to help them to also achieve their ambitions. She feels strongly that much of the credit for this award is due to the incredible team of collaborators and students with whom she has the privilege to work and recognises that this is their achievement as much as it is hers.