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"TO ENCOURAGE THE OBSERVATION AND STUDY OF THE BIRDS OF THE TOOWOOMBA AREA."

NO. 186 - JULY 1991

FROM THE EDITOR: The weather has certainly been ideal for bird-watching lately. Some of the more unusual birds that have been sighted around Toowoomba include a lone Red-necked Avocet at the Helidon Spa; Pink-eared Duck at Karrasch's Lagoon near Grantham; and Musk Lorikeets around Toowoomba in company with Scaly-breasted and Rainbow Lorikeets. The female Red-backed Kingfisher is still in residence along Gowrie Creek at the same place as described in the last newsletter.

This month's outing has been planned for Girraween National Park via Stanthorpe. Some of the more unusual species that could be sighted include Turquoise Parrot, Superb Lyrebird, Chestnut-rumped Hylacola, European Goldfinch, Southern Whiteface, Flame and Hooded Robin, and Plum-headed Finch. Members could camp over the week-end or travel down on Sunday (about 2-2½ hours drive from Toowoomba). A car pool will be arranged for Sunday; please contact Ann Shore if you would be interested in sharing a vehicle.

Any articles of an avian nature would be appreciated for the newsletter; so if you saw anything unusual over the holidays please put pen to paper. I was interested to see a baby Black-necked Stork (Jabiru) with its mother on the Noosa Lakes while we were canoeing. We were able to creep up to within 20 feet of them without their being aware of our presence. The baby was about the same size as the mother but did not have the adult plumage, i.e. it was brownish where the adults are black and had brown legs instead of the bright red ones of the adult. We also saw a spectacular diving display by two Australian Gannets who repeatedly tucked their wings back and free-fell into the lake after fish.

JUNE FIELD OUTING REPORT: FLAGSTONE CREEK / STOCKYARD

Sunday the 23rd June dawned in glorious fashion, offering in its clear blue skies and crisp still air the promise of a delightful winter's day. Seventeen keen bird-watchers chose the frosty morning in preference to their warm beds, assembling ready for action at the base of Flagstone Creek road equipped with coats, beanies and binoculars. Our venue for the day's outing was the Flagstone Creek/Stockyard area and by 7.45 am we were under-way, a mighty convoy in search of close encounters with nature! Our first stop yielded fine views of Superb Blue Wrens, Rose Robins and Rainbow Bee-eaters; "firsts" for several people. As our group spread along the side of the road and onto the bitumen, we managed (on several occasions) to test the accident-avoiding techniques of passing motorists. The sight of a large horde of birds scattering from the road at the last moment was no doubt an unexpected feature of their morning drives.

I am pleased to say, however, that we sustained no casualties and one motorist even stopped and invited us onto his property to observe the birds. We gratefully accepted his offer, and spent a very pleasant half an hour skirting the creek which ran through his land. This stop produced excellent looks at Striated and Spotted Pardalotes, female and eclipse Red-backed Wrens, a male Rose Robin, and the hard to miss "Domesticus chookus". A recently deceased Dusky Moorhen was found on the grass in perfect condition which enabled us to closely examine its physical features. Following a stop at the Gorman's Gap cairn, we proceeded to Helidon for relaxed morning tea. Here we were joined by the venerable Records Officer and after a short

rest the whole entourage mounted a full-frontal assault on the region's waterbird mecca, Hood's Lagoon. With the aid of three telescopes no bird remained hidden from our eyes.

After a most educational sojourn, the official outing was then called to a halt with most people heading home for lunch. The beautiful winter weather had combined superbly with some interesting bird-watching on the day, and from the comments of other participants I realised I was not the only one who enjoyed the outing. Total species 70.

PIGEON'S REVENGE BY ACID DROPPINGS: Bird droppings now cause more damage to your car's paint work than ever before. It's not because the paint is thinner, or of an inferior quality. According to a report by the Ford Motor Company, the paint damage is worse because the bird droppings are more acid than they used to be. The world-wide acid rain crises means that surface water (such as lakes) is more acid than before. The birds drink this more acid water, and then excrete more acid in their droppings. So you should wash off the bird droppings as soon as possible - the longer that they are left on the paint work, the worse the damage will be.

In heavily-industrialised Pennsylvania, the pigeon droppings are now a threat to steel bridges. When the acid pigeon droppings are mixed with industrial pollutants, salt from the roads, and acid rain, they can form acids that are strong enough to eat through bridge girders. In 1985, Pennsylvania spent a total of \$200 000 to clean up some 100 bridges in Pittsburgh.

Article submitted by Ian Kennedy and taken from Popular Mechanics, March 1985, p36 and Science Digest, January 1985, p18.

WHERE BLUE-FACED FINCHES RUN RAMPANT.....

It's not a difficult matter to find fellow bird-watchers when you're in Cairns. They're the ones with tripods and telescopes gazing out over the Cairns Esplanade. It was through this well established medium of introduction that I met Ulrika Wittmann, a (very pretty) young German bird-watcher who was nearing the end of a six month birding expedition around the great southern land. Over the previous week I had travelled down from Cooktown through Cape Tribulation bird-watching, and, because she was keen to get information on this region (the final leg of her trip), I found myself in the onerous position of having to take her out to tea to talk birds. I'm such a self-sacrificing soul.

The first thing that I found out was that she had observed considerably more Australian species of birds in five months than I had in near a decade of bird-watching. This tended to quieten me a bit. In fact, over medium ham-and-pineapple, I took in considerably more information on good birding areas than I gave out. It's amazing the number of foreign touring birdos who are absolute encyclopedias on Australian birds! They should have more manners, it's disgusting.

Anyway, one particular piece of information which I accepted with enthusiasm and without disgust, was a "sure spot" for a White-tailed Kingfisher, apparently still completing its nesting activities prior to migrating north to New Guinea. The ridiculous thing, however, was that the bird was nesting in the middle of a caravan park! What sort of caravan park has a White-tailed Kingfisher nesting in its grounds.....?

Despite having planned to travel back towards Toowoomba from Cairns, the next day found me travelling north again, to Kingfisher Caravan Park, Julatten. On arrival, I knew that it wasn't your average caravan park. For a start, it appeared to be nicely nestled into the rainforest. Secondly, there were birds and butterflies everywhere: I've never encountered anything like it before. The park is situated at the base of Mount Lewis, and the whole region is clothed in a unique rainforest, which is the only home in the world of several creatures including the White Lemuroid Possum.

After two days I had observed such birds as Yellow-breasted Boatbills, Pied Monarchs, Macleay's and Yellow-spotted Honeyeaters, Lemon-breasted Flycatchers, Shining Starlings, Yellow-footed Scrubfowls and Black Butcherbirds, not to mention the famous White-tailed Kingfisher itself (all in the confines of the caravan park); whilst higher up on Mount Lewis such birds as Blue-faced Finches, Mountain Thornbills and Golden Bowerbirds were seen. One night, on investigating the rustling of leaves in a tree above my tent, I found that the region also played host to Hercules moths (the world's largest with a nine inch wingspan!) and a resident colony of Red-necked Crakes.

The place really is a must for birdos travelling north, and the owners Geoff and Sandy Nicholson (themselves keen naturalists), encourage bird-watcher patronage and will talk for hours on nature with anyone of a like mind. Julatten is the type of place that you could drive right through and not even realise it was a town if it didn't have a sign up saying "Julatten". There really isn't much more than the local primary school and two caravan parks there. Remember, Kingfisher Caravan Park is the one, and the whole area is (thank goodness) world heritage.

Don Gaydon, 28 March 1991

BIRD BEHAVIOUR - COLOUR VISION: (part 14 of a series)

Birds have well-developed colour vision that is very like our own and plays an equally important role in their lives, but there are some basic differences. Like amphibians and reptiles, but unlike any mammals, birds have coloured droplets of oil in the cone cells of the retina of their eyes. The function of the droplets has long been disputed, but there is now evidence that they significantly affect the bird's perception of its environment.

The droplets are mostly red, orange-red or yellow. These are colours with long wavelengths, and the droplets act as selective filters removing shorter wavelengths at the blue end of the spectrum, but transmitting the longer wavelengths of light. In combination with the sensitivity of different types of cone cells, this gives pigeons, and other plant-eating birds that have been tested, a peak discrimination of shades in the red, yellow and green range. The part of the pigeon's retina on which images fall when the bird is aiming its pecking is particularly rich in red droplets, which will heighten this sensitivity. Green is the colour of chlorophyll with the minor pigments coloured red and yellow, so the sensitivity of the pigeon retina matches the colours of the pigeon's food. This enables it to distinguish different leaves and thus choose what it eats. Flowers and seeds which are coloured red will stand out against the background foliage and hence attract birds. A world-wide survey of bird-pollinated plants showed that 80% had mainly red flowers.

A second property of red, orange and yellow filters is the ability to cut through haze. This is probably the function of droplets in the eyes of birds which hunt above the sea. Cutting out blues makes the sky darker, so white-bodied gulls, gannets, albatrosses and terns are able to see each other at greater distances because they contrast strongly with the background sea or sky. Birds which pursue their prey under water eg shearwaters have few red and orange droplets and so can see better in an environment bathed in blue and green light. As droplets reduce the total amount of light stimulating the retina, they are also a disadvantage in dim light, and nocturnal owls and nightjars, which need great sensitivity to low light levels, also have few droplets. Filters that darken the sky would also be a disadvantage to birds that have to catch insects on the wing, and there is far less coloured oil in the eyes of swifts, swallows and martins.

There are two further attributes of the birds' eye which makes their world different. The human eye is insensitive to short-wave ultra violet light, but the bird eye has two peaks of sensitivity: one in the green and a second in the ultra-violet. This sensitivity must affect what birds see, but it is a subject that has not been studied. Ultra-violet light penetrates clouds and may enable migrating birds to detect the position of the sun on overcast days. They may also see the ultra-violet "nectar guides" on flowers that orientate visiting insects. The many palatable fruits that are black to the human eye may reflect ultra-violet light and so be a bright signal to birds.

Birds can also detect polarized light, which for us is as hard to imagine as seeing ultra-violet light. Dust and other particles in the sky scatter sunlight and set up a pattern of polarization which changes throughout the day. Bees are known to navigate by polarized light and some migrant birds use the pattern of polarization in the sky to locate the position of the sun when it is obscured by cloud or just below the horizon.

by Barbara Weller

Adapted from Bird Behaviour by Robert Burton, Granada Publishing, 1985.

NEW MEMBERS: We welcome Alex and Sharyn Fredericks, 18 Mahogany Street, Toowoomba to the club and hope their stay with us is a long one with lots of good birding.

FUTURE OUTINGS: TOOWOOMBA BIRD CLUB

- Sunday 28 July Girraween camp-out or day trip. For more information contact Barbara Weller on 329821. Meet at National Park Headquarters at 9.30 am on Sunday. Car pool for day trippers - contact Ann Shore 303207.
- Sunday 25 August Murphy's Creek and Helidon area. Leader Lesley Beaton - 308481.
- Sunday 22 Sept. Leyburn forestry. Leader Rod Hobson - 074 661379.
- Sunday 27 oct. Bird-a-thon.

MUSEUM VISIT: As mentioned in the last newsletter a visit to the Queensland Museum has been organized for Saturday 10 August. The purpose of this visit is to view bird skins of the more unusual owls, raptors and honeyeaters. This could be combined with a visit to Slaughter Falls, Mount Coot-tha where a pair of Powerful Owls nest every year. The club could hire a bus if enough people are interested in travelling to Brisbane by bus. Please let Ann know if you are interested in the bus.



"He's been impossible to live with since he sighted a short-toed tree creeper."

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