



toowoomba bird
club
inc.

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

Number 194 : MARCH 1992

EDITORIAL :

".....of droughts and flooding rains,". I'm sure that, even if pressed, Dorothea MacKellar could not have envisaged a better example of our country's variable weather patterns than Queensland's climate during past years. From the harsh depravity of a long drought which initiated and saw numerous unusual movements among bird populations, to the lush time of plenty in which we now find ourselves, the Toowoomba region has been a fascinating area for those interested in birds and their climate-related movements and habits. The dry weather resulted in concentrations of such species as Cotton Pygmy-geese on certain water-bodies, and the arrival of several rarely-recorded wading species including Greenshank, Black-tailed Godwit, Red-necked Stint and Red-capped Plover, and western species including Black-chinned Honeyeater and Red-tailed Black Cockatoo. Sightings of previously uncommon raptors like Fork-tailed Kites, Little Eagles, and Black-breasted Buzzards increased in response to movements and dwindling numbers of prey species.

Recent rains, however, have injected new life to the dry, brown landscape; grasses such as Green Panic have burst into flower and seed, providing abundant food for such species as Plum-headed Finches. Magpie Goose numbers in the Lockyer Valley have also increased, and all species seem to be thriving on the current climatic conditions.

Included is a report by Ann Shore on our participation in the Hobby'n'Craft Spectacular, whilst Lorraine Wilson has informed me that the theatre-night presentation of "Pygmalion" was a huge success, from the perspective of both entertainment and fund-raising. Approximately four-hundred and forty dollars will be shared by the Withcott Progress Association Incorporated, the Withcott P&C, and the Toowoomba Bird Club. Due to increased postal charges, the recently completed Annual Species Summary for 1991 will be available from the Secretary to interested parties upon request.

TOOWOOMBA BIRD CLUB FEBRUARY OUTING - Thorneside, Lota and Wynnum, 23 February 1992.

Wader-watching!! Exhilarating to a rare few, a challenge for all, and downright frustrating for most! Wader identification often involves an inordinate amount of skill and care with no guarantee that a dangling question mark won't follow the final choice.

The fact is most birders rarely get to reinforce their familiarity with these unadorned, avian enigmas that bide their time incognito on one leg at high tide or dutifully avoid positive identification while feeding. Those useful field characteristics common to so many bush birds, such as call and flight pattern, rarely apply or stay in mind where waders are concerned. Winter plumage, shape and relative size are your usual clues but even these don't tend to help the rusty birder. (Yours truly required an urgent refresher course the week before to be "right" on the day. Lucky we didn't strike any curly ones!). Practice with the common species goes a long way. In achieving this, I've always found it better to have a person that could confirm your hunch immediately, pointing out the main features, rather than agonising over whether the field guide picture matches the nondescript bird in your telescope.

We were fortunate to have Red knots and Great knots feeding together at Thorneside and Mongolian and Large-billed plovers huddled together on the hightide at Wynnum. These similar species were readily compared and their differences highlighted. Although no Spoon-billed Sandpipers or Asiatic Dowitchers presented themselves there was plenty of variety and many of the group were pleased to have the assistance in identifying Grey-tailed Tattlers, Red-necked Stints, Greenshanks and the like.

To wind up, we gave generously at the mobile blood bank on the Wynnum mangrove boardwalk. A truly remarkable experience for both birder and mossie and probably quite amusing for one very cute Owlet-nightjar.

I recorded a very enjoyable outing, 54 species and several new acquaintances for the morning.

Michael Atzeni

HOBBY'N'CRAFT SPECTACULAR

I always enjoy the 'hobby show'. Despite much time spent beforehand on the necessary organisation to achieve and man our display, it is a worthwhile event and gives the club and its aims splendid publicity.

This year's stand was quite the best ever due to the unstinted generosity, time and effort put into the display preparation by Lorraine Wilson. Her brilliant idea of asking the Queensland Museum for possible loans led to the focal exhibit of the White-bellied Sea-Eagle which stopped people short in their tracks and then tempted them in to see what else the Toowoomba Bird Club had to offer. From comments made and talk with just some of these visitors we realise what great interest there is in the natural environment and know how fortunate we are with such a vast and varied avian fauna around us. My many grateful thanks are due to all the people who helped in whatever way to make our part in the show such a success.

Ann Shore

A TIME OF PLENTY

On September the sixth, 1991, Rod Hobson and I set off to explore the Bedourie area having heard stories of an abundance of wildlife. As with any trip to far-western Queensland the anticipation of reaching one's destination makes the first two days driving drag on. However a pleasant end to the first day was the nearby calling of a

Barking Owl at Charleville.

The second night though was not as restful. Camped two-hundred kilometres east of Bedourie, we were awoken by an impending storm. This was not a good place to be caught by bad weather so, with the car packed in record time, we headed for Bedourie, not realising what good fortune lay ahead. Due to a year of good rainfall, the abundance of wildlife quickly became apparent. Swarms of Long-haired Rats crossed the road and breaking this monotony was the occasional smaller rodent, some of which were identified as Sandy Inland Mouse and Fawn Hopping-mouse. However the night's highlight was still to come. At 1.50 am just off the side of the road was a Rabbit-eared Bandicoot (Bilby). We quickly stopped the car (at risk to all and sundry) and watched this magnificent animal for several minutes before it quietly moved on. We could have gone home then and been happy with the trip. We were tired but happy when we reached Bedourie at sunrise. Driving two-hundred kilometres takes a long time when you stop every kilometre to enjoy the wildlife.

Three days were spent near Bedourie while we waited for the weather to settle. One moment storms were threatening, the next, we were swallowing dust. They were, however, three days of exciting birding. The water holes were swarming with wildlife. Night-herons, cormorants, egrets and ducks were everywhere, not to mention the millions of Long-haired Rats which came out on dusk. With all this prey around the predators at the top of the food chain were also abundant. Two Black Falcon nests were found. One had four chicks, the other two. Perhaps they were the reason why so many Nankeen Night-heron bodies littered the ground, half-eaten. The predators were also out at night with owls frequently being seen at the limit of the car lights. Persistence pays off though, and we were rewarded by a very cooperative dark-phase Grass Owl which stood in the middle of the road, eyes fixed on our vehicle. Australian Pratincoles and Inland Dotterels were also observed on our night time forays. Our camp was also graced by the presence of Crimson and Orange Chats, Bustards, Spotted Harriers, Flock Pigeons and numerous small flocks of Budgerigar. This was my third trip to south-western Queensland but never before had I seen the birdlife so abundant.

Leaving Bedourie on September the tenth, we headed north in search of Yellow Chats and Letter-winged Kites which can be found near the bore drains in this area. Each of these bore drains is literally an oasis in a harsh landscape. The water under pressure rushes to the surface at near boiling temperatures (86 degrees Celsius where we were) and flows for several kilometres before seeping into the soil. Along this path grow stunted trees and thick reed beds which are magnificent for wildlife. Birds of prey constantly circled overhead and included Spotted and Swamp Harriers, Black and Whistling Kites, Brown and Black Falcons, Wedge-tailed Eagles and, at times, up to fifty Letter-wing Kites. The highly sought-after Yellow Chats were numerous among the reeds with Gibber, Orange and Crimson Chats also present. Spotless Crakes were often heard and Flock Pigeons and Budgerigar were commonly seen overhead. One poor Budgerigar, on seeing the water, alighted on its surface for a quick drink only to find that eighty-six degree temperatures were not to its liking.

The Long-haired Rats abundant at night would also on occasions make short forays during the day often to become the prey of the numerous hawks and, on one occasion, of a Brolga. The basic quiet of the day changed as the sun set. Darkness became the time of the Long-haired Rat. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, swarmed across the Mitchell Grass plains near our camp. The plague had reached its peak, food was now scarce and the rats were becoming desperate. Fights among them were numerous. They chewed the valve-stems on the vehicle's tyres, pinched the rubber "on-off" buttons out of our torches, regularly ran over us in our sleeping bags and, on the second night of our stay, they were eating each other. The rat plague no doubt accounted for the large numbers of owls which we saw in our car headlights as we did our night patrols. Unfortunately, good looks were not obtained

and their identity remained a mystery. They were probably a mixture of Barn and Grass Owls.

Much of the wildlife of these areas is dependant on the bores with many of them in this area being supplied by the deep, fossil waters of the Great Artesian Basin. This water cannot be readily replenished and is not unlimited in its supply with some of the bores now reported to be flowing at half the rate of when they originally began early this century. To leave them running continuously means that this precious resource may well be quickly used up. To turn them off would be to the detriment of the local native wildlife which includes the rare Yellow Chat, not to mention the stock which so many depend on. Much careful work needs to be completed so that the correct decisions can be made for the benefit of all. On leaving this area it is very evident just how fragile this environment is.

Pat McConnell
6-19/9/91

MEMBER'S BIRD NOTES:

All sightings as submitted by members of Toowoomba Bird Club. Accuracy not vouched for by T.B.C. Please check with observer before citing.

Intermediate Egret	T'mba Waterbird Habitat	04.11.91	M.J.
Black-necked Stork	Karrasch's Dam	15.01.92	B.fm.
Plumed Whistling-Duck	T'mba Waterbird Habitat	01/03.01.92	K.T.
Stubble Quail	near Flagstone Ck. Weir	17.11.91	P.McC.
" " (& 2 Juvs)	Cambooya	08.03.93	R.H., J.L.
Painted Snipe	" Abberton ", Helidon	11.11.91	A.S.
" " *	farm dam E. of Grantham	06.12.91	R.H.
Grey Plover	Woody Point	27.12.91	R.H.
Latham's Snipe	T'mba Waterbird Habitat	21.10.91	M.J.
Silver Gull	Hood's Dam	17.01.92	B.fm.
Rose-crown. Fruit-dove	Redwood Park	15.12.91	P.McC.
Yellow-tail.B.Cockatoo	" Sylvan Court ", T'mba	01.12.91	M.J., S.P.
White-tail.B.Cockatoo	John Stuart N.P., Perth	05.03.92	D.G.
Gang-gang Cockatoo	Thredbo Village, N.S.W.	21.01.92	R.H.
Ground Parrot	Barren Grounds, N.S.W.	19.01.92	R.H.
Green Rosella	Spreyton, Tas.	09.09.91	D.G., D.H.
Port Lincoln Parrot **	Range St., Toowoomba	26.11.91	D.M.
" "	Manjimup, W.A.	04.03.92	D.G.
Powerful Owl	Redwood Park	15.12.91	P.McC.
Masked Owl	Seventeen Mile Rd.	05.12.91	R.H.
Forest Kingfisher	Lilydale	29.09.91	P.McC.
Olive Whistler	Dead Horse Gap, N.S.W.	22.01.92	R.H.
Red-capped Robin	Jones Rd., Withcott	29.10.91	A.S.
Eastern Bristlebird	Barren Grounds, N.S.W.	18.01.92	R.H.
Calamanthus	Table Cape, Tas.	10.09.91	D.G., D.H.
Tasmanian Thornbill	Asbestos Ra., Tas.	16.09.91	D.G., D.H.
Yellow Wattlebird	Spreyton, Tas.	09.09.91	D.G., D.H.
Spiny-cheek. Honeyeater	" Shorelands " Withcott	02.11.91	A.S.
Painted Honeyeater (20+)	Inverai	20.12.91	R.H., T.P.
Beautiful Firetail	Barren Grounds, N.S.W.	18.01.92	R.H.
White-winged Chough	Helidon Refuse Tip	5/10.02.92	J.L.
White-breast. Woodswallow	Iredale Road	12.01.92	A.S. et al
Masked Woodswallow	Soda Springs	08.12.91	L.A.

* 7 birds; 5 males & 2 females, 1 female being an immature.

** 4 birds - aviary escapees - feral population ? This species now believed to be a race, zonarius, of the Mallee Ringneck, *Barnardius barnardi*.

L.A., L.Atzeni; B.fm., Booth family; D.G., D.Gaydon; D.H., D.Hill; R.H., R.Hobson; M.J., M.Jacobs; J.L., J. Lund; S.P., S.Pottinger; K.T., K.Treschman; D.M., D. Mears; T.P., T.Pacey; A.S., A.Shore.

"FISH PLEASE - AND THROW IN A TURTLE"

I think he'll be to Rome
As is the osprey to the fish, who takes it
By sovereignty of nature.

- Shakespeare, "Coriolanus".

Some years back I remember an instance of a golfer being clobbered by a piscatorial missile launched from a passing bird of prey - a "fish-eagle", the scribe related. If my memory serves me correctly the missile was of the mullet type, a large and fresh projectile.

The exact species of the raptorian bombardier was never revealed nor can the events which preceded this scaly onslaught ever be deduced. However, the Osprey, *Pandion haliaetus*, could well be implicated as the malefactor in this little drama. Thus are the most unlikely inducted into the ornithological Hall of Fame.

Ospreys are very dependant on fish, and given an area of water rich in fishlife, can weave out a halcyon existence. All popular field guides agree, "Food: Fish", ergo the synonym fish-hawk. On the afternoon of May 19, 1991, I was watching a feeding Osprey on a dead tree in the backwaters of Atkinson's Lagoon. I assumed the prey to be a fish but a closer scrutiny exposed it to be a freshwater turtle. All the reptile's protruding bits had been done for and the bird was attempting to winkle morsels from between plastron and carapace. The meal was hastened to its conclusion by the untimely arrival of a Marsh Harrier. The Osprey was put to wing by the harrier and eventually forced to jettison the turtle cadaver.

Over the years I have seen a number of feeding Ospreys. To my recollection I have not observed prey to be other than fish. Field guides support this and the fact seems incontestable. The Osprey is very fond of fish - they keep it alive. Delving deeper into the literature, however, reveals the Osprey to be a bird of catholic tastes, supplementing a fish diet with creatures "many and various". Grossman and Hamlet write in "Birds of Prey of the World", "although it subsists mainly on fish up to four pounds in weight, the Osprey has been known to take small mammals, small ducks, sandpipers and other birds, crustaceans, turtles, frogs, sea-snakes (in the tropics), and large sea snails (Australia) whose shells are smashed on rocks."

In the excellent "Hawks in Flight", Dunne, Sibley and Sutton, Dunne remarks that, "prey other than fish is infrequently taken" but adds that swimming snakes are sometimes captured. He also comments on muskrat skulls having been found in Osprey eyries. It may be that these skulls are but part of the bric a brac with which Ospreys adorn their nests.

Ospreys are rare visitors to the Lockyer Valley and the above sighting is of interest. The fact that the bird was eating a turtle was a bonus. A great consequence of field observations is the wealth of information gleaned by enquiry generated by an unusual sighting. Now I know that Australian Ospreys eat large sea

snails (?) which they smash open on rocks. And turtles. A week ago I never knew this.

R.G. Hobson
Grantham
20.5.91

*****STOP PRESS*****

NEW AUSTRALIAN BIRD: Red-throated Pipit, *Anthus cervinus*, reported at the main sporting oval, Broome, W.A., 6 January 1992. This species breeds in the Arctic from Scandinavia to Eastern Siberia. Winters tropical Africa and Asia. A dead specimen previously recovered from a wharf at Albany, W.A., 13 May 1983, however not included on Australian check-list due to the possibility of being ship-assisted. (references: "WINGSPAN" #5 March 1992, "THE BIRD OBSERVER" #717 March 1992).

****** NEW MEMBERS ******

We welcome the following new members to the club:

Ruth Morgan, 130 North Street, Toowoomba	382750
Jack Lund and family, 15 George Street, Helidon	976390
Hedley & Barbara Dearling, M.S.103, Highfield Rd, H'fields	308248

****** COMING EVENTS ******

March 1992 Outing : Camp-out at Crows Nest Falls National Park.
 28-29 March 1992
 Leader : Lesley Beaton
 For people attending Sunday only, assemble 7.30 am,
 main picnic area. Camping permits \$5 per tent.

April 1992 Outing : Meringandan
 Leader : Lesley Beaton

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