

TOOWOOMBA BIRD CLUB NEWSLETTER



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

Number 196 : MAY 1992

EDITORIAL:

Gegroet vogelaars vrienden! Ik hoop dat jullie de laatste tijd veel verschillende soorten vogels hebben gezien! Holland is a country with a population equal to that of Australia, yet a land area half that of Tasmania. It's probably the most densely populated country in the world, and, though by all reports beautiful, possesses no remaining areas of purely natural vegetation or forest. Why am I prattling on about Holland? Well, lately my life has been absolutely choc-a-bloc with Dutchfolk. My room-mate is Dutch, I do a lot of my birding with another Dutchman, and there are pretty Dutch girls at work. All are visiting students; all keen to travel; and, strangely enough, all educating me on just how lucky we are here in Australia.

Within the borders of one country we have magnificent stands of virgin rainforest, temperate through to tropical; pristine desert, mallee, mulga and spinifex; high alpine meadows and forests; snow-capped mountains; tropical coral-reefs and glorious natural wetlands; stands of enormous Karri, Jarrah and other eucalypts in wet and dry sclerophyll forests, not to mention a huge variety of coastal heaths and scrubs; mangroves and mudflats; raging streams and slow, meandering rivers. We tend to take all this for granted, and sometimes it takes someone like a visiting European with a love of nature, flabbergasted by the natural diversity within Australia, to teach you how fortunate you are. Particularly when it comes to future questions of land-use and population-growth, let us never forget the lesson. Proost! (cheers!).

TOOWOOMBA BIRD CLUB APRIL OUTING - Meringandan 26 April 1992

On a dull grey morning an enthusiastic group of hopeful bird-watchers drove into my yard just before 8 A.M.. Prospects were decidedly not good - reminding me of the last outing to my place two years ago, when it was cold and rainy. Maybe I should have a bird club outing to my place each time I need rain!

However, in spite of this, there were some great highlights amongst the fifty-two species recorded on the day. To each of us, one or all of the following sightings was of special significance. While we were walking along a wet, grass-seed infested track, a juvenile Spotted Harrier was observed gliding from fence-post to fence-post in the open paddocks. It was grand to watch its graceful movement just above the ground searching for prey. It finally disappeared into a stand of iron-bark trees. The next special sighting was provided by a flock of several Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos. They had been in the area for some days,

and put on a spectacular display as they moved from tree to tree, only a few metres from us. Their sheer size is demanding of attention, and more so when there are several together.

In one corner of my property is an old brickworks clay-pit, now a very good dam with sheer walls on one side. This wall provides a well-protected and permanent nesting site for a group of Striated Pardalotes. Three of these delightful small jewels of our bush settled on a dead branch in the open overhanging the water, not more than four or five metres away from all of us. We stood there for several minutes, spellbound by the exquisite beauty that no words can do justice in describing. After exhausting the possibilities at my place a few members moved on to Cooby Dam, where several more sightings were made.

Alan Davidson

"VIEW FROM A WINDOW"

Pied Currawongs frequent the lush growth of trees outside my window at work. This year they raised two young in a tall gum tree and, with extra mouths to feed, the adults missed few opportunities to catch unwary prey. On two occasions I saw them with small birds in their bills. I never obtained a positive identification on these birds but suspect they were Brown Honeyeaters which often feed outside my window. They were the right size and colour.

Currawongs, like butcherbirds, sometimes hang or wedge their prey on or between branches. I observed a currawong do this and quickly ran down to inspect its prey but it had been removed before my arrival. Further on their behaviour, three weeks later I saw the two adult and two immature birds mobbing a male Little Red Flying Fox. The currawongs dived on the bat making contact on numerous occasions. The flying fox facing them as much as it could opened its mouth and wings to present a threatening-looking adversary. On my approach the flying fox flew to a nearby gum tree where it was more exposed. The currawongs continued their harassment for an hour or so before losing interest. As I left work that afternoon, the flying fox was resting quietly having lived to fight another day.

Pat McConnell

"WHATSOEVER YE SOW, SO SHALL YE REAP..."

On 28.12.91 Pat Cleary, Janice Lyons and I witnessed the 'planting' of a mistletoe seed onto a sapling. A pair of Mistletoebirds were feeding on Mistletoe which was growing on a tree approximately one metre off the ground. Beautiful little birds! The female plucked three berries from the plant and dropped them all (deliberately it seemed; maybe the berries were too large for her to consume?). She then flew to a nearby sapling and deposited a seed (which was encased in a sticky gel) onto a branch before flying off, the only evidence of their visit being the Mistletoe-seed as it hung beneath the branch, thus ensuring further food for the species.

Lorraine Wilson

"FOLIAGE-BATHING AND OTHER DOINGS"

In Rod Hobson's article "Of Australian Hobbies, Flycatchers and Finches" in the February issue of this newsletter, he tells of watching the above behaviour

by a male Leaden Flycatcher last November and of reading about similar acts by an Australian Hobby.

This reminded me of the two occasions when I too had witnessed such scenes. One of these concerned a small party of Superb Fairy Wrens in the winter of 1987 (N/L No. 139, July 1987) when the tiny birds were seen "bathing in the raindrops amongst the leaves on top of the Honeysuckle outside the kitchen window. They remained for some minutes, fluttering their wings and twittering in obvious enjoyment".

The second observation, which I cannot date, occurred about breakfast-time on a fine morning when again the foliage was laden with heavy dew or raindrops. I was alerted by movements in the canopy of our Bauhinia bushes and for a while could not make out the bird responsible. However, moving quietly underneath and watching carefully I realised it was a Mistletoebird bathing and splashing in the moisture cupped in the leaves. Between each dip it moved to a nearby twig to shake and preen itself before repeating these obviously satisfying ablutions over and over again.

Looking up from gardening to scan the sky on a sultry evening in early February with ominous storm-clouds hanging around, I again witnessed seemingly unusual behaviour seeing what at first I took to be Fairy Martins hawking nearby. This did not surprise me as both swallows and swifts had been very active on several preceding evenings, weaving about at high speed and carrying out low-level insect-catching runs over the open ground, but there was something strange about these birds. They couldn't be martins; woodswallows perhaps? (hopefully). Quickly collecting my binoculars I went around the house for a better view. To my surprise they were Common Starlings; fluttering upward with wings and tail outspread, then swooping back to the big dead Casuarina tree used as a perch by so many birds. I had seen the little flock fly in moments earlier but had not thought the two groups connected. As Rod says, such little observations constitute so large a part of the pleasure of birdwatching.

Ann Shore

"OBSERVATIONS ON FRECKLED DUCK"

On 19 April 1992, Rod Hobson, Terry Pacey and myself observed a group of Freckled Duck, *Stictonetta naevosa*, on Jandowae Town Dam. At least six (6) birds were present among large numbers of Plumed Whistling Duck, Hardhead, Grey Teal and Black Duck. The dam possessed heavily vegetated banks, primarily Smartweed, *Polygonum* sp?. This followed an unconfirmed sighting by Terry Pacey the week previous at the same location, and a positive sighting by Rod Hobson of two (2) birds on a farm dam near Gatton, 15 April 1992.

The Jandowae group included several individuals displaying a distinct but faint red cast to the upper bill, presumably males either entering or leaving breeding phase. As stated by Frith in "Waterfowl in Australia" (P.122, revised edition), little is known of the persistence of the red colouration or its exact relationship to the breeding season or sexual cycle. In captive birds, the male's bright red upper bill has been observed to take three weeks to develop and is retained for at least five months. Frith also states that the red colouring may develop in the absence of breeding. In the face of this uncertainty, it is impossible to make conclusions on the breeding status of the observed birds.

Frith suggests the birds do not have a definite time of year in which they breed, rather they respond to flooding and changes in water level. The regular breeding range of the Freckled Duck is western New South Wales and parts of

South Australia and Western Australia, however Frith states that members of the population may move widely in the non-breeding season and in dry weather generally. In such circumstances there exist no records of breeding and the birds appear to adopt a wandering lifestyle, not staying anywhere for long. The birds sighted on the farm dam near Gatton stayed only one day, and it appears that the Jandowae group have been present for at least a week. Continuing observation will confirm, however it is probable that both groups are wandering in the face of dry "homelands".

The "Handbook of Australian, New Zealand, and Antarctic Birds", P. 1161 states that the Freckled Duck is "... best described as dour and irascible by nature...". A snippet of such cantankerous behaviour was displayed by one of the individuals on Jandowae Town Dam. Without any apparent reason or provocation a swimming Plumed Whistling Duck was the recipient of a vicious "nip" to the back of the neck, immediately followed by a small (1 metre) chase through the water with the Freckled Duck still firmly claspng the back of the whistling duck's neck with its bill. Maybe it was saying, "Get out of my way, I'm an endangered species!".

Don Gaydon

A single drake of this species was sighted on Hood's Dam, 21.04.92, R.G.H., and remained in residence there until 2nd.inst.

RecordsOfficer.

"STRIATED PARDALOTE ATTACKING FROGHOPPER NYMPHS."

On the mid-morning of March 25 this year I was birdwatching along Jone's Road, Withcott. This rural area lies on the western edge of the Lockyer Valley, S.E. Queensland. The area in question is of open eucalypt forest running to the tall open eucalypt forest of the Great Divide (Main Range) escarpment to the west. The Striated Pardalote is a very common foliage bird of this open forest. The Spotted Pardalote is less common in this habitat but replaces the Striated Pardalote as the dominant form in the ranges.

On this morning I noticed a Striated Pardalote, race *melanocephalus*, feeding low in a sapling wattle, *Acacia concurrens*. I was able to get good views of the subject from close range through 10x40 binoculars. The bird was feeding close to the ground and I was drawn by the sight of it probing the "cases" of froghoppers or spittlebugs, *Cercopoidea*. The nymphs of these bugs form frothy enclosures by " air being taken into the ventral abdominal channel and expelled posteriorly through a film of anal excreta, thus forming bubbles ", p.467 " The Insects of Australia , C.S.I.R.O. ". It is presumed that these spittle cases thus formed protect the nymph from desiccation and predation - except from Striated Pardalotes!

The bird worked over the spittle cases for approximately four minutes before being put to flight by a female Rufous Whistler. Several of this last species were harassing the numerous small passerines in the area at the time. I have often observed pardalotes gleaning the upper foliage for lerps etc. but this was the first instance that I have had experience of them attacking these nymphs.

I wonder, how many froghoppers go to fill a pardalote?

R.G.Hobson,
Ingoldsby, Q.
26.03.92

"LOCAL BREEDING RECORDS - WANDERING WHISTLING-DUCK"

In a recent Queensland Ornithological Society Newsletter, March 1991 issue, there appears an interesting article by Neil McKilligan, Toowoomba. Neil relates of an instance in which he recorded the breeding of the Wandering Whistling-duck (*Dendrocygna arcuata*, south of its present breeding range. The author points out that the "Atlas of Australian Birds" records this species as not having nested "south of longitude 25 in recent years". He then continues to reveal his sighting of an adult bird and five ducklings, Lowe's Road on 16.1.91. This area is west of Gatton, approximately 3.6 km off. Gatton lies at 27° 22' : 152° 17'. Historical records, however, do mention this species nesting on the Clarence River (29°) in the 1880's.

On 5.12.89 I was beating the long grass verges of the bank running between both bodies of Gatton Apex Lake. Little Grassbirds live there and, at this time of year, is shelter to migratory Baillon's Crakes. These are the species I was intent on putting to wing but instead managed to put a pair of adult Wandering Whistling-ducks onto the water. These birds were rapidly followed by three ducklings of a few days age. Obviously these ducks had bred by the lake someplace. This, then, is a second instance of *D. arcuata*'s breeding in the Lockyer Valley.

It is pleasing to see this bird extending its present breeding range into this area. Let us hope that the Lockyer is only a stepping-stone, south bound to the Clarence, a way back to how things used to be

R.G.Hobson
Grantham
20.5.91

NEWSLETTER ARTICLES

I am keen to receive articles written by members for publication in this newsletter. Personal observations of bird behaviour and biology, interesting snippets you may have heard or read, even reports on interesting locations.

Apart from members, our little newsletter is received by bird-watching organisations around the country and overseas, and I believe our greatest contribution to knowledge will be from articles about personal observations on behaviour and distribution, which we publish. We are only a small club but that is a job we can do well. Short articles are very useful, but any length will be gratefully received. My address is 20 Kunden St, THORNESIDE Q 4158.

Editor

"HAIRY-NOSED WOMBAT"

The Toowoomba Bird Club has just donated \$10 to the Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Hairy-nosed Wombat appeal. The Northern Hairy-nosed Wombat, previously known from several isolated areas in Queensland and New South Wales, is now totally restricted to a small area of semi-arid grassland and eucalypt/acacia woodland on Epping Forest station, central Queensland. This population is highly vulnerable and money raised from the appeal will be used for research into the animal's biology. Please feel free to make your own donations at any Commonwealth Bank.

***** T.B.C NOTICE-BOARD *****

The executive has decided to make a section of the news-sheet available as a notice-board for members wishing to buy, swap, or sell any items relating to natural history. This may include books, binoculars, tapes etc. Members may also use the notice-board to seek the company of fellow birdwatchers on outings/trips to share petrol etc. Feel free to contact the editor with any requests.

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

Caryll and Matheus Teffer, Lot 4 Meringandan Rd, M.S. 582, Toowoomba.
Josita Mitchell, "Mitchell Park", M.S. 224, Murphy's Creek 4352.
Rhonda Nobbs-Mohr, 48 Reithmuller St, Toowoomba.

Welcome to the club and may interesting birds continually appear in your presence.

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

May 1992 Outing: Ingoldsby/Junction View, 31 May 1992
Leader: Rod Hobson, (074) 627 364
Assembly Point: Apex Lake, Gatton.
Time: 7.30 a.m.

June 1992 Outing: Queens Mary Falls National Park, Killarney
28 June 1992
Leader: Ken Wells



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