

TOOWOOMBA BIRD CLUB NEWSLETTER



toowoomba bird club inc.

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

No. 200 - SEPTEMBER 1992

EDITORIAL:

As deciduous trees begin to bud-up and sprout, colouring previously barren scenes a vibrant shade of light-green, the days become noticeably warmer and longer. There's a feeling of rebirth in the air, a renewal of landscape and spirit. A ground-swell of optimism sweeps the community and even grumpy people start smiling again. Sacred Kingfishers miraculously appear on telephone wires as flycatchers, cicadabirds and drongos return from their winter sojourns. Crisp mornings, enriched once more with the calls of koels and orioles, encourage early morning jaunts - not sleep-ins. Birds are nesting, flowers are blooming; there's no need to check your calendar, Spring is here!

Feel like camping? Don't forget the Toowoomba Bird Club campout at Lake Broadwater, end of this month; it's sure to be a beauty and will more than make up for last month's outing (Prince Henry's Drive) which was cancelled due to inclement weather. Some western birds are assured and entertainment is guaranteed. Our A.G.M. evening on 5 October will include either films and/or a guest speaker (as yet undecided), and likewise promises to be entertaining and educational. Be sure to take advantage of these organised T.B.C. events as well as the beautiful Toowoomba Spring weather.

We have (at last) received our grant cheque from the state government, which will be employed in the purchase of display boards, to be used at Toowoomba Bird Club activities. By the way, this is our two-hundredth newsletter. Cheers!

STOP PRESS: THE WADERS ARE BACK

Oh joyous days! those little brown and grey mud-flatters are back on deck early this year. On the afternoon of 18.07 I drove to Seven Mile Lagoon to check on the Freckled Ducks which have plunged this quiet backwater into ornithological uproar in recent months. The F.D.'s were absent but the sighting of four Marsh Sandpipers working the shoreline gladdened the heart, especially in that these northern hemisphere migrants are not due back into Australia until late August at their earliest. And here they were, six weeks early, probing away, unconcerned and oblivious to the reactions their presence was to elicit within the wader watching fraternity.

The following day, with an incredulous P.McC. in tow, we returned to the area and recorded an additional seven of the type at nearby Kentville. On the 20.07, on a bleak and inhospitable day, I visited the area in the company of two Belgian birdwatchers, Philip Theunissen and Gilles Deltorge and their hostess, Ann Shore. We again recorded Marsh Sandpiper and, of an equal significance, a " first of the season "

Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. Sharpies, also, are not due back here until August. I have visited Seven Mile four times since to date, recording both species on all instances with the number of Sharp-tailed Sandpipers rising to * ten individuals on Jul.28. It appears that the waders are certainly back early this year with sightings of c.10 Marsh Sandpipers at Redcliffe on 19.07., (R.Dowling, pers. comm.). On the 1st.inst. I was assisting Peter Driscoll and members of the Queensland Wader Studies Group to cannon-net and band Pied Oystercatchers at Bishop Island when a dozen Sharp-tails flew onto the beach. This sight was greatly exclaimed at in relation to this small flocks' early season appearance. I then related of my recent sightings and a discussion ensued, the outcome of which was that said sightings, given their number and diversity, must be of early returning birds rather than overwintering specimens. Certain references state that very small numbers of these birds may overwinter but the general consensus among the pundits (C.Corbin, P.Driscoll et al) with whom I have communicated is that the waders have returned extremely early this year. This is extraordinary in that there were three Sharp-tailed Sandpipers on the "Boxmore" water-meadow, Grantham on 08.04.92 and 40+ of the species on Keong's Dam, Oakey on 20th. of that month. There must have been incoming and outgoing waders in a holding pattern over the equator which would have given a Mascot air-controller apoplexy.

The continuation of dry conditions, the present mild Winter and the early appearance of these wondrous globe-trotters bodes well for an exciting Spring and Summer. "Away! You Winter Gloom", grab your telescopes and let us take lunch at Seven Mile. Hi ho!

R.Hobson,
WOODLANDS.
03.08.92

* UPDATE: Approx. twenty of each species counted here on 05.08.92. The area observed, on all occasions, is the shoreline from the swampy SW end of the lagoon unto the intervening channel on the northern end of the waterway. Joined by 16 Curlew Sandpipers and 30+ Latham's Snipe, 10.08.92, 15 Black-tailed Godwits, 14.08.92. Small flocks of Red-capped Plover of up to 15 individuals have also been present throughout these observations. A pair of these little plovers noted with a single, and very young chick at heel, 06.09.92. Red-necked Avocets, varying in number from single birds to c.12 have been present for the full time. By the end of August, the Sharp-tailed Sandpipers numbers had increased into the 2/3 hundreds although Black-tailed Godwit, Curlew Sandpiper, Marsh Sandpiper, Red-capped Plover and Latham's Snipe numbers remained fairly constant. On 31st. Aug. a single Greenshank was observed on the northern extremity of the lagoon. Two Red-necked Stints joined the throng, 04.09.92.

On 20th.Aug., I encountered two Australian Pratincoles here, a very easterly record for this species although it has been recorded at Seven Mile at least once in the past (C.Corbin, pers. comm.). A third pratincole was noted the following day but did not stay. An adult bird was last recorded here on the 6th.Sept., '92 but there has been no sightings of this species since. Heavy rains on the 01/02.09.92 inundated the foreshores where these birds were encamped and this probably forced them to seek the higher, drier habitat which they prefer. Latham's Snipe numbers reduced to 3/4 individuals by yesterday - (R.H./11.09.92).

DOWN AND OUT AND FAR FROM HOME?

On a recent Brisbane pelagic trip (5 September), we had the unusual experience of sighting a small passerine, distinctly pipit-like, some thirty kilometres out to sea. Although no land was in sight, the bird was determinedly heading west; towards the mainland. As to its reason for being thirty kilometres out to sea we could only speculate. (Maybe it was speculating on what ten humans were doing thirty kilometres out to sea?). Perhaps the bird had "jumped-ship" from one of the several large cargo vessels visible

on the eastern horizon. If so, the bird may have been foreign, a true boat-assisted vagrant. Who knows? It was travelling at a height of approximately two metres, a bobbing flight pattern with white outer tail feathers. At one point the bird was only metres from the boat. Guesses on species by those on-board ranged from the familiar Richard's Pipit to some obscure type of North American Bunting! It is destined to remain a mystery. Many unusual vagrants to our shore are thought to be boat-assisted.

Other notable sightings far out to sea included a single Whimbrel heading West and a group of small unidentified waders travelling south down the coast, presumably returning from their breeding grounds in the Northern Hemisphere.

Don Gaydon

"BEYOND THIS POINT THERE BE DRAGONS....."

So stated the charts of the early navigators. Dragons, and other imagined terrors, ensconced in the superstitious minds of early Portuguese seamen, must have given them cause to dismiss the majestic bird following in their wake merely as an "alcatraz". This was the encompassing cognomen which they applied to all such large seabirds, especially pelicans. No room for the romantic when, at any moment, you could be sailing over the edge of a flat earth. The word albatross is believed to be an English corruption of "alcatraz". Linnaeus, steeped in classical lore and with fertile mind, placed these impressive creatures within the Family Diomedidae, named after Diomedes, King of Argos, who, aside to Achilles, was the bravest of the Greek heroes at Troy. On Diomedes' death, his companions were so distraught that they were metamorphosed into birds - aves Diomedae, a fitting epithet for these lovely animals.

Now, off the coast of Wollongong on the 26 Aug., a merry company was gathered upon the heaving deck of the good ship "Sandra K". "Heaving" deck in more ways than one, as the pummelling of the two metre swell, sent more than one distressed Jack Tar to the gunwales, there to contemplate the oceans' awesome depths with jaundiced eye. And feed the fishes. No Old Salts on this crew, and as to students of the Classics, I know not, but a common denominator attracting those assembled was the rich abundance of seabirds which congregate off this coast every winter, especially the various representatives of the Warriors of Diomedes. Don Gaydon and I were on this trip.

We set sail from Wollongong Boat Harbour at 7.30am, under a glowering sky, upon a tumultuous sea; not a promising start. Within minutes of clearing the harbour, however, our forebodings vanished as the first "real" seabird hove to, a Black-browed Albatross, and another, then another..... The smoke stacks of Wollongong were but a stones' throw over our stern and we had albatross in our wake! And Silver Gull, Crested and White-fronted Tern, and Kelp Gull. The barren, wave-thrashed Five Islands group which we had just buffeted past is home to the only breeding population of this last species in New South Wales. Another ten minutes voyaging and we were joined by a second mollymawk, the Yellow-nosed Albatross whilst flocks of Fluttering Shearwaters hurtled by, at a distance frustrating clear observation. Off, on the sea surface we were treated to resting Wandering Albatross, the princes of the day, white and majestic, riding the swells with haughty mien. White, plump and ovine when viewed from afar, it is plain to see why early seamen called them Cape Sheep. Now the throng was joined by a fourth Diomedea, the Shy Albatross, not an appropriate name as this bird readily joined the melee around the boat, competing for the chum of animal fat and chopped pilchards thrown to attract them. So the day proceeded with appearances by Fairy Prions, Providence Petrels, thuggish Great Skuas and White-faced Storm-Petrels, the little wave-dancers. A passing White-headed Petrel caused great consternation. This is a rare species to Australian waters breeding on the subantarctic islands of the Indian and south-west Pacific Ocean. The only breeding population found in Australian waters occurs on Macquarie Island. To many this was the bird of the day. The gulls, being

essentially land-lubbers were to leave us about half way into our outward journey but the true-blue pelagics accompanied us throughout, almost until docking.

We were unable to travel the usual distance from shore that these trips are wont due to the heavy seas. This was a disappointment to the seasoned sea-birders amongst us but, to the tyros - Don and I included, the day was shot through with magic. To watch these wondrous birds, literally within touching distance, would rank as one of the great pleasures of ornithology. Complete masters of the air, skimming the surface without wing beat then, with a minute flexion of wing tip, soaring in mighty arcs across the sky. These albatross attract the birdwatchers to Wollongong but what lures the albatross to their winter quarters? In a word " food ". Superabundant numbers of the Giant Cuttlefish, *Sepia apama* congregate in the inshore zone off Bellambi, about 6km. north of Wollongong every winter. These cephalopods are said to represent the greater majority of prey items in the diet of the Wandering Albatross which they catch, in most cases, by surface seizing. Moribund and dead cuttlefish also feature predominantly as a food. The other species of albatross mentioned eat a greater percentage of fish but still take large numbers of cephalopods. All albatross will scavenge readily, the Black-browed especially so, and an abundant source of such food is discarded by the large fishing fleet deployed off Wollongong. At one stage a Fairy Prion alighted near our vessel and began picking over the putrescent carcass of a cuttlefish, unusual(?) for a species which takes, primarily, euphausiids (krill) and other small crustaceans. Close to shore, on our inward journey, we were to encounter the great scavenger and pillager, *Macronectes giganteus*; the Glutton, the Giant Fulmar, Vulture of the seas, the Bone-shaker, Nelly, Stinker, all eloquent synonyms for the Southern Giant-Petrel. Five birds of the species were sighted including a rare white morph, said to be present in only 15% of some giant-petrel populations. This was my bird of the day. In this area, also, we hand-netted a female Wandering Albatross, " less than 10 years old and of the New Zealand race, *Diomedea e. exulans* ", decreed the sage heads gathered. The bird was so gorged with cuttlefish that she was unable to take flight thus making capture easy. On deck the massive size of this species could be greatly admired. The beak was tied closed, not in the fear of human flesh being rent, but to discourage the vomiting of copious amounts of semi-digested and putrefying cuttlefish over all and sundry. The great bird was very placid throughout these indignities, even when being thrust unceremoniously into a bag for return to shore. The object of all this ado was that she be measured and weighed, then fitted with a radio transmitter prior to release as part of a long term study of the species' biology being conducted from Wollongong.

The albatross carried the day with their majesty - easy to be anthropomorphic about these creatures. A pilchard pilfering Australian Sea-Lion, *Neophoca cinerea*, distinguished from our fur-seals by its tightly curled ears and blunt muzzle, claimed centre stage for a time but failed to oust the albatross from the limelight. In all, a day which will rank as one of the best, hopefully to be repeated again next year. Who's interested in making it a party? You won't be disappointed even if you have to eat New South Wales Railways' food en route but that's another story. Albatross survive on decaying cuttlefish !!! As I conclude a Shy Albatross carves a leisurely arc across the inward eye. Then gone. Over the edge of the Earth.

Ref:

" Handbook of Australian, New Zealand & Antarctic Birds ", Marchant S. & Higgins P.J. Co-ord's., Oxford, 1990.

" The Handbook of Australian Sea-birds ", Serventy D.L., Serventy V. & Warham J., Reed, 1971.

" Seasonal Abundance and Spatial Distribution of Albatrosses off Central New South Wales ", K.A.Wood, " The Australian Bird Watcher ", Vol.14, No.6, June 1992.

R.Hobson,
WOODLANDS.
13.08.92.

MEMBER'S BIRD NOTES: All sightings as submitted by members of Toowoomba Bird Club. Accuracy not vouched for by TBC. Please check with observer before citing.

Brolga (3)	Jimbour	26.06.92	T.P.
Blue-billed Duck (2F,2M)	Lake Clarendon	20.06.92	R.H.
Diamond Dove (8)	Jandowae	02.07.92	T.P.
" " (5)	Ballon Forestry	06.07.92	T.P.
Red-back. Button-quail	Woodlands	02.07.92	R.H.
Little Button-quail	Junction View	13.07.92	R.H.
" " "	Jimbour	07.08.92	R.H.
Red-kneed Dotterel	Spa Park, Helidon	06.06.92	L.A.
Australian Pratincole (11)	Jimbour	07.08.92	R.H.
" " (2)	Seven Mile Lagoon	20.08.92	R.H.
Caspian Tern (1)	Hood's Dam	01.08.92	P McC.
Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove	Redwood Park	24.06.92	P.McC.
Red-tail. B.Cockatoo (19)	Gilmour Ct., T'mba	13.04.92	N.B.
" " (18)	Grantham	04.04.92	B.fm., J.L.
" " (2)	"	14.07.92	T.P.
" " (2)	"	19.07.92	L.B.
Yellow-tail. B.Cockatoo (7)	Blanchview	25.05.92	A.S.
" " "	Helidon Dip	11.07.92	L.A.
Swift Parrot (2)	Lake Clarendon	20.07.92	R.H.
Turquoise Parrot (female)	Blanchview	21.06.92	L.B.
Little Bronze-Cuckoo	Rocky Knob	07.03.92	L.B.
Powerful Owl *	Redwood Park	24.06.92	P.McC.
Masked Owl**	" "	"	L.B., P.McC.
Marbled Frogmouth (female)	Mt. Glorious	29.07.92	R.H., P.McC.
Blue-winged Kookaburra	Woodlands	22.08.92	R.H.
Scarlet Robin	Girraween N.P.	31.07.92	R.H.
Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater	Withcott	14.08.92	A.S.
Black-chin. Honeyeater ***	Woodlands	02.07.92	R.H.
Black Honeyeater ****	Nudley Forestry	"	R.H., T.P.
Plum-headed Finch (3)	Iredale	03.04.92	L.A.

L.A., L.Atzeni; B.fm., Booth family; L.B., L.Beaton; N.B., N.Belcher; R.H., R.Hobson; J.L., J.Lund; P.McC., P.McConnell; T.P., T.Pacey; A.S., A.Shore.

* with remains of juv. Australian Brush-turkey in talons.

** a female, perched in opening in dry vine scrub canopy in daylight.

*** This bird/s has been in continuous residence from the above date until these notes went to press, 11.09.92. 3 x this species sighted Helidon Dip, 14.06.92, Gijs Kurstjens - visiting Dutch birdwatcher, and Ron Dowling, QOS. (pers. comm.).

**** a female, very easterly record this species. Chinchilla Field Naturalists' Club have very occasional, single sightings of this bird as far east as Goombi, 26.41':150.24'. Nudley Forestry record C.65km's ESE of that area.

- Records Officer

To all persons who have sent in records regarding the implosion of Red-tailed Black Cockies into our area, I would like to extend my thanks on behalf of the TBC. Club members Olive and Jim Booth, and Mrs. Hazel Haak of Robert St., Grantham are deserving of special mention in recognition of their efforts. Space does not allow of separate mention of each sighting but such are providing a comprehensive data base for the preparation of a detailed article at a future date. Please keep the sightings rolling in. This is a significant ornithological event " on our manor, Guv'nor ".

- Records Officer

HAS ANYONE SEEN.....

a Channel-billed Cuckoo earlier this season than the lone individual sighted flying SE over Gatton this morning early, 11.09.92? If so, let's know.

***** NEW MEMBER *****

We welcome the following new member to the club :

Sister Marjorie Carroll
13 Anzac Avenue
TOOWOOMBA Q 4350

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

September 1992 Outing : Lake Broadwater Camp-out
Date: 26-27 September 1992
Leader: Terry Pacey, Phone (076) 685582
Please bring own drinking water.

1992 A.G.M. : C.W.A. Hall, Withcott
Date: 5 October
TALK. Time: 7.15 p.m. for 7.30 p.m. start

October 1992 Outing: Annual Bird Count
Date: 25 October

Bird Week 1992 Dates: 24 October - 1 November
We will present our usual display at the Toowoomba Library.

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