toowoomba bird club inc.

Newsletter of the

TOOWOOMBA BIRD CLUB inc.

p.o.box 67 - darling heights q 4350

MEMBERSHIP : Adults/Families $18 Students $10

" To encourage the observation and study of the birds of the Toowoomba area "

No. 208 - MAY 1993

EDITORIAL:

For probably the first time in club history this newsletter contains three reports from the one outing; that being our latest escapade to Cunningham's Gap. Three different reports, three different perspectives. One, the standard outing report; another, a report from one of our old favourites who totally missed us at the rendezvous point and ended up going birding with a different group!; and last but not least, the outing as seen through the eyes of a newcomer on their first trip. They say variety is the spice of life!

We have received notice that the Bird Observers Club of Australia (BOCA), of which some of you may be members, are again conducting a survey of the food of Pied Currawongs during Autumn/Winter 1993. The purpose of the survey is to find out more about the food eaten by flocks of Pied Currawongs during their autumn and winter wanderings. Particularly because Pied Currawongs include nestlings and small birds in their diet, some people have expressed concern at seeing a local build-up of Pied Currawong numbers during the autumn and winter. If you are interested in assisting with their survey (which simply involves noting currawong numbers and food observed eating), contact the BOCA directly. Their address is PO Box 185, NUNAWADING VIC 3131, telephone (03) 877 5342, fax (03) 894 4048. They will then send you the necessary information sheets.

TOOWOOMBA BIRD CLUB APRIL OUTING - Cunningham's Gap, 25 April 1993

A large group gathered at Cunningham's Gap, Main Range National Park, on what turned out to be a very enjoyable day's birding. Though greener than Toowoomba this area is also feeling the effects of the drought. This quickly became obvious to us as our first walk took us along a dry creek bed where very few birds were seen. We quickly changed tact and headed for the lusher areas of Mt. Mitchell.

This change brought with it a change of luck. The birding improved quickly and, along with it, our spirits. Though not necessarily the most unusual bird of the day, the Wompoo Fruit-dove certainly proved the most colourful as it perched unconcerned quite close to the track. This bird was seen in the rainforest area which forms the start of the Mt. Mitchell track. We quickly left the rainforest behind and headed into a patch of sclerophyll forest. The ecotone of these areas, as is often the case, provided the best habitat for bird-watching and our list quickly climbed. The Red-browed Treecreeper, which was to many the bird of the day, was seen here.

Though similar in many respects to the White-throated Treecreeper, the Red-browed is darker and has a distinctive red eyebrow. It was a new bird to many present and one long absent from the lists of some others. Other Mt. Mitchell sightings included White-headed Pigeon, Topknot Pigeon, and Rose Robin to mention just a few. The Eastern Whipbird was also seen here and was more co-operative than its usual secretive self. Despite the good birding, lunch was beckoning, and only half-way to the summit we headed for home.

Blue-faced Honeyeaters kept us entertained during lunch giving members great views of one of our larger Meliphagidae. During this break in festivities we noticed that bird activity was starting to pick-up along the track we had earlier abandoned. So with binoculars at the ready it was back down the creek again. This proved most rewarding and we added a swag of birds to our list. They included Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo, White-eared Honeyeater, Yellow-tufted Honeyeater, Satin Bowerbird and, though not a bird it is worth noting that the rodent we saw run across the track in broad daylight was a Swamp Rat, *Rattus lutreolus*. All in all an excellent day's outing with a species list totalling fifty nine.

Pat McConnell

FROM THE OTHER SIDE ...

On Sunday 25 April I set out for the Cunningham's Gap outing but having over-stepped the rendezvous, carried on along the highway. However, at the Cunningham memorial I came upon a Queensland Ornithological Society (QOS) group gazing upwards at a pair of Wedge-tailed Eagles. Recognising friends there, I stopped to talk and found they were having their outing also in the same area. So, instead of re-tracing my steps I decided to go with them and investigate Mt. Cordeaux.

We ascended to the summit, viewing the old gold mine as we went, and whilst taking refreshments on top observed wanderers on Mt. Mitchell across the gap. Little did I realise I was viewing you Toowoomba Bird Club members whom I could not recognise! There were thirty odd members in the QOS group, most of whom went on to Bare Rock. Some of us returned to base via the rainforest and were delighted to have our paths crossed by an Albert's Lyrebird.

At the summit we had seen Red Wattlebirds, Spotted Pardalotes, and looked down on Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoos and a flight of White Ibis heading for Moggerah Dam. We had seen Green Catbirds, Satin Bowerbirds (male, immature male, and female), Yellow-throated Scrub-wrens, Golden Whistlers and Eastern Yellow Robins aplenty, Red-backed Wrens, Mistletoebirds etc.. It was a rewarding day on a very dry mountain-side, with magnificent views of the Fassifern Valley.

Barbara Wilson

MEMOIRS OF A FIRST-TIME BIRDO

I'd never been very interested in birds. One birdo in our family was more than enough and often proved to be an ornithological experience in itself. Childhood memories of discovering a Barn Owl corpse in my school lunch box (ask Donald how it got there) probably quashed any inclination I may have had towards our feathered friends. So, scaling Mt Mitchell with a flock of birdos was the last place I expected to find myself one early Sunday morning. As we trudged single-file along the track, my initial perception that the tranquillity of the area indicated sparse bird-life was changed by members who, with their finely-attuned senses, were picking up even

the tiniest flutter of wings, rustle of leaves, nonchalant chirping and fleeting glimpse of colour, showing me that we were really amidst a world teeming with life.

It wasn't until somebody proclaimed a good sighting of a Spotted Pardalote that I saw the bird club in full flight. In a well-rehearsed manoeuvre, birdos huddled together in little heaps and, with necks extended and binoculars protruding from beneath their hat brims, began the ritual of pointing at the treetops and oohing and aahing at the little bird's antics.

I watched them and it seemed easy enough; field-guide between knees, use both hands to focus binocs, and voilà, the bird is yours. After quite a few unsuccessful attempts, I was starting to feel paranoid - are there really birds up there, or is this some kind of joke? ...Is there something wrong with me? .....And then the disagreements over identification started to flow - was it striated or non-striated? Was it male or female? Did it have blue eyes or brown eyes or hazel eyes? (!) My identification dilemmas were on a more basic level - am I looking at a bird or a piece of bark? All of this didn't concern the more seasoned birdos who patiently explained locations, pointed, and guided my lost eyes to rest on some splendid birdlife.

By the end of the outing I'd identified my first bird, a Golden Whistler (which I mistakenly proceeded to call Golden Wattler for the remainder of the weekend) and it was a strangely rewarding experience. During the outing I also admired wildflowers, tasted berries, looked at fungi and insects, identified trees and thankfully avoided reptiles.

To this day, the force which propelled me out of bed on that cold Sunday morning to go birdwatching remains a mystery. But I'm glad I had the opportunity to go for a stroll in the bush, meet and learn from some very knowledgeable people and dine in true bird club style with birdos (who are quite their own species) and birds alike. My neck will hopefully recover by next outing.

Jane Gaydon

BIRD BEHAVIOUR : Smell and other senses

It used to be thought that a bird's sense of smell was so poor that it could be conveniently ignored when considering the way it perceived its environment. Vision and hearing were held to be the essential senses, although the suggestion that a bird might have a sense of smell came as long ago as 1569, when a Portuguese missionary in Africa reported that honeyguides flew into his church when he burnt beeswax candles. Honeyguides attack bee's nests and are uniquely capable of digesting wax. Recently, the veracity of the missionary's story has been proved by burning beeswax candles set out in trees.

The bird first proven by experiment to use a sense of smell was the Kiwi, whose abilities in this direction were suspected because the olfactory bulb of its forebrain is much larger than in most other birds. Kiwis feed by probing for earthworms, and experiments indicate that they are guided by smell, the nostrils being conveniently placed at the tip of the bill rather than at the base, as in most long-billed birds. Large olfactory bulbs are found in some other birds, especially albatrosses,petrels and some new-world vultures, suggesting that they too are using a sense of smell.

Robert Cushman Murphy, the doyen of American seabird studies, suggested in 1936 that smell was important to tube-nosed seabirds - storm-petrels, fulmars, shearwaters and albatrosses - after he had attracted them to slicks of warm bacon-fat and whale-oil. Serious experiments, which were not carried out until many years later, involved attaching sponges or wicks soaked in cod-liver oil to floating buoys. After a series of observations it was clear that the tube-nosed birds were attracted from downwind; but gannets, gulls, and auks took no notice. A good sense of smell

might be especially useful for tube-nosed birds because they often forage at night.

Shearwaters and petrels also visit their nests nocturnally, shearwaters preferring very dark nights when visual navigation must be difficult. Some species of petrels approach the nesting colony upwind, and there is much experimental evidence that they can identify their own nest by its particular smell. They certainly do this when they have landed nearby, and it may be possible when flying overhead.

The remaining senses of birds are not well known either in terms of their physiology or their use in birds' behaviour. The discovery that smell plays a more important role in bird life than was realised, shows that touch, taste and temperature sense should not be overlooked either. Some birds also seem to use another sense; the earth's magnetism particularly during migration.

The temperature sense is used in a general way to monitor the bird's environment and inform it whether steps need to be taken to keep warm or cool. The Mallee Fowl is one bird which has a specialised use for its temperature sense. While the male tends its compost-heap nest, it continually monitors the temperature by probing the heap with its bill.

Taste - the sensitivity to acid, bitter, sweet and salty substances - is apparently the same in birds as in humans, although birds have far fewer taste buds. There are only thirty to sixty taste buds in a pigeon's mouth and 400 in a parrot's, compared with 9000 in a human mouth. What we call flavour is the combination of true taste sense with an appreciation of the smell of food in the mouth. It is often said that birds of prey eat foul-tasting shrews, which are rejected by mammals, because of an insensitivity to flavour. However, tests have shown that birds are aware of the palatability of different foods, and the fact that many insects rely on an unpleasant taste for protection from predatory birds confirms this.

The sense of touch is well-developed and birds are quick to react to a touch on their plumage. They do this by means of specialised, bristle-like feathers known as vibrissae, which lack vanes and are sensitive to the slightest deflection. These vibrissae may allow a bird to detect the pattern of airflow over the body in flight, giving it an advantage over a human pilot. Within the skin there are other specialised organs of touch, called Herbst's corpuscles. These occur mainly on the legs and bare skin, but also around the base of each feather and in particular on the bill and tongue. The degree of sensitivity in the tongue is very much related to the feeding habits of the bird. A heightened sense of touch is found in the tongues of woodpeckers, for probing into insect borings; the bills of waders for exploring sand and mud, and those of ducks for sifting edible and non-edible particles. A sensitive tongue and bill are also found in spoonbills and avocets which feed by sweeping the parted bill through the water and snapping it over any small creature they touch.

The Herbst's corpuscles are very versatile sense organs for, as well as being sensitive to touch, those on a bird's legs respond to vibrations on the ground or perch, alerting the bird to approaching danger when it is roosting. In at least one group of birds, the finches, these corpuscles can also detect infra-sound, so that the bird can 'hear' certain noises with its legs. Birds are also sensitive to atmospheric pressure with pigeons being able to detect the slightest changes in pressure which enable them to determine their height to within ten metres. This explains many birds' sensitivity to changes of weather and migration often occurs when the atmospheric pressure is rising as this brings the most favourable weather for the journey.

Barbara Weller

Adapted from *Bird Behaviour*, (1985) by Robert Burton, Granada Publishing, London.

BIRDS OF PREY IN THE GULF

Doomadgee is one of those places that people go "where's that?", and then go "Oh" when you tell them it's an hours flying north of Mt Isa. It's an aboriginal community of about 1200 people. And nearly as many Fork-tailed Kites. The Nicholson River is the sandy bit in the gully over the road. The stretches that do have water in them gave me my first interesting sightings. In between paranoiac fits about crocodiles and taipans, I saw an Osprey lazily flapping up the river. And then not so lazily drop into the river for a quick snack. It turned out to be the fish's lucky day as a Black-breasted Kite swooped on the Osprey, scaring the .... um, fish out of its talons, so to speak. The Osprey high-tailed it, while the kite hung around for a while, probably hoping the fish would go belly-up. The next good sighting is one of those that you'll all doubt me for. Walking along the road, I saw, unfortunately into the sun, a low-flying UFO. A sleek, grey body moving leisurely over the trees, with somewhat shallow wing-beats, pointy wingtips and a typical falcon shape. I tried in vain to get some sort of marking from it, but the only extra thing I can add is that it may have had a slightly darker crown, either real or because of the position of the sun. Grey Falcon ?

Next is the best look at a Black-breasted Kite one could ever expect to get. Flying along, being harassed by small birds, the white windows in the wings dazzlingly obvious. With so many Fork-tailed Kites around it became frustrating to try and distinguish a Square-tailed Kite from them, but persistence does pay off. Look for the paler one first, then look at the buffy trousers and the small crest. It's like a needle in a hay-stack but they're there. Other BOP's here are Whistling Kites, Australian Goshawks, and one of the largest Wedge-tails I have ever seen. The Fork-tailed Kites looked like swallows next to this thing. There are probably others here as well, but as yet they haven't put in an appearance. The area is fantastic for birds, despite the heat, the flies,.....

David Hill

AUSTRALIA'S WORST INTRODUCED SPECIES

Have you ever wondered which is the most environmentally-disruptive and noxious species yet introduced to Australia? Initially it appears a difficult question, as visions of Cane Toads, European Carp, rabbits, starlings and various other 'villains' crowd the mind. Each has caused havoc in natural ecosystems, and displaced many native creatures. Surely it's a hard matter to judge which is the worst?

If you really think about it, however, the answer soon becomes crystal clear. In fact, it's so obvious that it's painful. All it requires is a little change in your perspective. The worst foreign introduction (by a long, long way) is us; European man. Environmental destruction caused by all the other introductees together pales into insignificance beside our glorious track record. We're responsible for introducing most of them, anyway. Yet, in one of the most blatant examples of double standards that it's possible to conceive, we habitually curse and rave about the foul, introduced Cane Toads (or Common Mynas, foxes, etc) and what they're doing to the Australian environment, simultaneously relegating them to the lowest possible category of life-form. We're somehow more acceptable to the native ecology than the Cane Toad, are we? Hmm, that's interesting. Next time you're about to curse one of these other introduced critters, remember that as bad as they are, you're a good deal worse.

As far as I can make out, burgeoning human numbers is considerably more worrying than the spread of cane toads, worrying though that surely is. How can we really hope to solve Australia's and the world's ecological problems while we continue to view the world from out of our own elementary passage?

Don Gaydon

WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY

We shall be christening our new display board (bought with the state government grant which we have received) at the World Environment Day celebrations, Laurel Bank Hall and Park, on Saturday 5 June. Make sure you seek out the 'Toowoomba Bird Observers'.

**** COMING EVENTS ****

May 1993 Outing:

Location: Jubilee Park, Toowoomba
Assembly Point: Woolridge Street
Time: 7.15 am for 7.30 am start
Date: 30 May
Leader: Ann Shore (076) 303 207

Info: This is certainly an outing which precludes distance as an excuse for not coming! Jubilee Park, on the Toowoomba range adjacent to Mt Lofty, has long been a favourite haunt of TBC members with open eucalypt forest containing a good variety of our local bush birds. Access is extremely easy, the assembly point for the outing being the end of Woolridge Street. Being so close to home, this outing will allow members to stay for as long or as short as they like. Plenty of experienced birders will be on hand to assist beginners, so make a note in your diary.

June 1993 Outing:

Location: Coal Creek, Ipswich
Date: 25 April
Leader: Rod Hobson (074) 627 364

Info: The Coal Creek area abuts the Ipswich Botanical Gardens on the Bremer River. The vegetation consists primarily of dry vine-scrub and parkland, and it is by all reports a most interesting place to visit. Resident Powerful Owls should be enough to incite the interest of most birders. Approximate distance from Toowoomba is 90 km, so 1 hr should provide sufficient time for travel. Contact Rod for more details.

SURFACE MAIL

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