



TOOWOOMBA BIRD OBSERVERS inc.

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MEMBERSHIP : Adults/Families \$18 Students \$10

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

NEWSLETTER No. 213 - OCTOBER 1993

EDITORIAL:

Klaar-Klaar Klew-Klew. Hark, is that a currawong I hear? Despite their bad-guy image I continually find myself utterly bewitched by their beautiful calls. Crystal clear, tumbling and rolling like a mountain stream; some notes sweet and melancholy, other phrases wild and ringing with the essence of the wilderness. To my ears, a 'parliament' of currawongs gathering before a storm to yodel and warble in anticipation is one of nature's exquisite treats.

In terms of human justice, they're definitely villains. Many a small bird has lost its brood or eggs to a marauding currawong and occasionally I've seen them destroying empty nests, seemingly for their own wicked pleasure. People continually curse them. Birds without morals!

We should remember, however, that the concept of 'morals' is our own invention; designed for application within human society. Extrapolation to the natural world is silly. There are no morals in nature - only laws. Poor old maligned Mr Currawong; he is what he is. Would you have him give up his evil ways and confine himself to the sipping^{of} nectar from flowers? Sing on, currawong!

I hope everyone is having a good Spring with the avians. The winter migrants are back and I've heard many reports of nesting birds. Its extremely interesting to watch the nest activities of even the common birds; its a phase of their life-cycle that often goes unnoticed. Are both parents involved in feeding the chicks or sitting on the eggs? What sorts of food are they bringing in? Nest-watching adds another dimension to birdwatching.

A new TBO executive will be sworn in during the AGM this month, and due to other commitments I will not be renominating as Editor. I wish to thank all members who have helped me out with articles over the last two years, but particularly to Rod and Betty Hobson for camaraderie during the initial stages of my editorshp, and Nicci Thompson and Barbara Wilson for their excellent support in photocopying and collating this news-sheet. Good birding!

TOOWOOMBA BIRD OBSERVERS SEPTEMBER OUTING - Upper Lockyer, 29.09.93.

"Shorelands" at Withcott was the first stop on our birding foray on this brilliant Spring morning. There was a great deal of activity, especially in the fruiting mulberry. We followed the back roads over the foothills to the Grantham abattoir. Water was scarce and though there was plenty of calls the

bush birds were elusive and difficult for our novices to catch in their binoculars.

We had a great view of a Pallid Cuckoo perched on a power line in an open paddock but the 300+ Magpie Geese on the dams at the abattoir were hard to beat. Bill and Eileen Jolly had invited us to spend our morning-tea stop at their property on Lockyer Creek and here we had magnificent views of many birds. In particular, the Scarlet Honeyeater showed no concern for us as we relaxed under the callistemon in which they were feeding.

At the end of the morning the newer members of the group were adamant that the birds of the day were the jewels of the bush - the male Red-backed Fairy-Wren and Scarlet Honeyeater, and the Rainbow Bee-eaters. Who can deny this ?

Lesley Beaton

THE ENCHANTED FOREST

On the evening of 29 September, Don Gaydon and myself were in Redwood Park looking for owls, when our attention was drawn to a number of small flashing lights down in a gully. Upon closer inspection we soon found ourselves surrounded by masses of Fireflies (actually a beetle - Order Coleoptera) flashing away contentedly, as if joyously announcing the arrival of warmer weather. I and I proceeded to enjoy the spectacle whilst pondering its meaning. The possibility of a courtship ritual was bounced around, but the flying beetles did not seem at all interested in each other. This remarkable display was first noted just on dusk and gradually tapered off, apparently concluding altogether just after dark.

Consulting Lawrence and Britton in CSIRO's *The Insects of Australia - Second Edition* revealed that what we had witnessed was part of the typical courtship ritual of Australian Lampyrid Beetles (ie Family Lampyridae). Males fly for a period just after dusk emitting a series of luminous flashes originating from the 5th and 6th abdominal ventrites. Interestingly, females also flash (from the 5th ventrite) but have not been observed flying with males. Adults apparently do not feed but the often luminous larvae predate small land snails. The species in question was probably *Luciola lychnus*.

The result, masses of evolutionary engineered masterpieces flashing away as part of an ancient courtship ritual and turning a familiar section of Redwood Park into a mythical world of fairies.

BIBLIOGRAPHY.

Lawrence, J.F. & Britton, E.B. (1991). Coleoptera IN: *The Insects of Australia - Second Edition* (C.S.I.R.O.), Melbourne University Press.

Colin Dollery

HIGHFIELD'S FALLS BUSH REGENERATION GROUP

The Highfield's Falls Bush Regeneration Group are interested to know if any TBO member has records for the Highfield's Falls area. This group is presently clearing privet and other exotic plants and fostering native regrowth. They are keen to survey the wildlife populations in the area. If any member is willing to help them with bird surveys please phone Patricia Gardner - (076) 308 505.

DOWN WITH PRIVET ENTERPRISE

Taken from *The Best of WILDLIFE IN THE SUBURBS*, by Densey Clyne, Oxford University Press.

Today I pulled up one hundred and fifty-seven trees with my bare hands. Target for the week five hundred of the wretched things, and if that sounds like hard going let me explain that they range between sprouts only five centimetres high to saplings of two metres or so. Privet has shallow root which makes even the big ones fairly easy to pull up, given a fair bit of grunting and groaning, an some minor risk to the lower back. Anything shorter than five centimetres you can't get a good grip on. The way the game is played, a handful of small seedlings is counted as only one, and remember that you are on trust. If you break a stem and leave the roots in, it doesn't count, so it's wise to plan your campaign to follow rain or a good soaking with the sprinkler. I think this game is played by good many people. Except perhaps those unspeakable ones who, on a par with defenders of bunny rabbits, sparrows and feral cats, hotly defend their privet's right to breed.

And breed they do, these unwanted immigrants. You have only to go into any of the small bush reserves sprinkled about the metropolitan area - those precious bits of small change out of what was paid for our city - to see signs of a take-over bid. Privet holds sway everywhere, despite the efforts of enlightened local councils and small groups dedicated to bushland preservation. But privet doesn't spread without outside help. Certain native birds who find easy pickings in the privet thickets are mainly to blame for my sore knees and blistered hands, and - more importantly - for what might be called pollution by privet enterprise.

A few years ago I did some detective work to see why all those little nursery beds were spreading over my garden. You other privet pullers probably have the same clues to work on. If you have any time left for bird-watching, sooner or later you'll notice a currawong sitting on a branch with a funny look on its face. Keep watching. You'll see this big black bird open its beak and forcibly disgorge a lot of messy-looking stuff. Bury this collection of *ejecta* in a pot of good garden soil. Hey presto! A forest will sprout. Mine contained seventeen Large-leaved Privet, *Ligustrum lucidum*, six Small-leaved Privet, *Ligustrum sinense*, and three cotoneasters.

You can't really blame the currawongs for accepting this exotic food in place of the berry bearing native plants we've destroyed. Berries form a large part of the currawongs' diet. Only the flesh is eaten, and by disgorging after a meal the bird gets rid of the seeds before they work their way too far into its system. My local currawongs usually disgorge near a leaky tap or around the fish-pond. Perhaps they need a drink to help get it all up. Whatever the immediate reason, by sowing the seeds in damp places they assure themselves and future generations of a continuing supply of food.

Along the edges of creeks and storm-water channels at this time of year the dense thickets of privet are in full berry. No, the culprits are not the currawongs, but our forefathers. It was they who imported this tamed and clipped prisoner of British suburbia. Perhaps they did this as a reminder of home and a hedge against the alien bush. Little did they dream that the privet would make a bid for freedom in its new land, joining forces with such other aliens as lantana and blackberry. So if you've any privet flowering or fruiting in your garden, don't think twice - off with its pretty head! Otherwise we'll have only ourselves to blame when we find that all our public land has been converted to privet property.

The matter of privet infestation is certainly an issue for Toowoomba people. Not only are considerable areas of the escarpment bushland dominated by privet (decreasing the diversity of food and shelter supplies available to native birds), but an 'unnatural' increase in the numbers of the nest-robbing Pied Currawong may also have resulted due to the increased food supply, thereby further pressurising other native bird species. Privet is basically bad news, but is it sensible to clear-fell large areas of privet on steeply-sloping ground as the Toowoomba City Council is doing in Redwood Park? Without any substantial erosion control measures immediately in place after the clearing, large scale top-soil loss

threatens an even bigger disaster than the privet. Clearly it is desirable to have native vegetation over the privet mono-culture, but privet is better than nothing (which is what we might end up with if we lose substantial topsoil from the steep clear-felled areas in Redwood). Possibly there are other solutions to the problem; for example, thinning of privet to allow native vegetation to gain a foot-hold, with a view to full eradication of the privet in the long term. A pertinent issue for people with an interest in the future of Toowoomba's escarpment. - Editor.

OWL ATTACK !

The following account of unusual aggression by a wild Powerful Owl towards humans was taken from *Birds of the Night*, David Hollands, Reed Books Pty. Ltd.

' Dale settled down before dusk to watch from about 100 metres away. Just after 6.00 pm the male flew to the nest tree and perched above the hole, calling softly to the female. He had no food but she came out and flew away while the male looked down into the hollow. Shortly afterwards she returned and Dale stood up to walk away. He had not been concealed but had been sitting still and it seemed that it was only then that the male owl saw him for the first time and immediately flew straight at him. Dale was taken completely by surprise as the owl came on and struck him on the shoulder with great force. Powerful Owls have never been known to be aggressive at the nest and Dale had protective clothing as he made his retreat under repeated attack from the owl. Time after time it hurled itself straight onto him with talons extended and its full weight behind the blow. To look round was to risk talons in the face but not to look was to be in total ignorance of the bird's whereabouts. Several times Dale glanced up to see the owl perched a few metres away, facial feathers puffed-out and eyes glaring, leaning forwards in preparation for another assault. Only when he had been accompanied for over half a kilometre did the owl leave him and it was a very shaken Dale who regained the safety of his car.

Two nights later, complete with helmet and goggles, Dale returned ready for the assault to be repeated and hoping to be able to photograph it happening. It certainly happened and, despite the protective gear, Dale suffered a talon injury up one nostril and got no photographs. A few nights later Rob Watkins was knocked to the ground by the ferocity of one blow and, on another occasion, Betty Flentje, sitting quietly by the campfire nearly a kilometre from the nest, was suddenly assaulted as the male owl came silently out of the darkness. She was forced to take refuge behind a tree where her husband, returning later, found her still, not daring to come out.

A formidable bird indeed and it shows the risks that exist in working on owls unless one always takes precautions. It was always thought that the Powerful Owl would not defend its nest from humans but here was a bird that was more aggressive and dangerous than any raptor, nocturnal or diurnal, that I had ever come across. The risks are also that much greater when the attack comes unseen out of the night'

BIRD BEHAVIOUR: Instinct and Learning

A bird's senses give it a different view of its surroundings so it would be incorrect to ascribe human motives to a bird's actions. It may be reacting to stimuli that we are not conscious of and ignoring others which are obvious to us. Understanding a bird's motivation or working out 'what is going on in its head', is even more difficult. The robin which attacks a bunch of red feathers is responding automatically to a simple stimulus. To human eyes it is stupid, but to judge that birds are simple-minded automatons on the basis of such observations is to miss the point. In normal circumstances, its behaviour enables a bird to cope with its natural environment, to keep itself alive and produce offspring.

Behaviour is, broadly speaking, of two types: instinctive and learned. Instinctive, or innate, follows a general pattern within each species so that it is possible to say that gannets dive for fish. It is fixed and inherited from one generation to the next. Instinct evolved slowly through natural selection and adapts a species to a particular way of life, in the same way as the shape of its bill or wings. The species can cope with gradual changes in its environment but not with rapid ones. One example will serve to show the rigidity of instinctive behaviour through what happens when something goes wrong. Occasionally a pigeon develops a mis-shapen bill with a long down-curved upper mandible. This appears to be a congenital deformity and the pigeon is handicapped because it aims unsuccessfully and pecks at food as if the bill were normal. If the pigeon is caught and its bill trimmed it can pick up food normally. So its pecking behaviour is stereotyped and instinctive. There is no ability to adapt and not surprisingly, these deformities remain rare in pigeons.

In contrast, learning is the process whereby an individual changes its behaviour. It can be rapid with the individual adapting to sudden changes to its circumstances. A robin with the whole of its bill missing learned to put its head on one side and scoop up food on the bird table with its tongue. It had been able to change its behaviour when faced with a catastrophic situation. This does not imply that robins are cleverer than pigeons but simply in respect to picking up food, an individual robin proved more adaptable.

Deciding whether an action is governed by instinct or learning is not necessarily straightforward. For example, it is easy to believe that young birds learn to fly rather than being born with this ability. While still in the nest they flap their wings as if practising and, after leaving the nest, the first landings are often heavy. Yet birds reared in constricted circumstances and unable to open their wings go on to make maiden flights as successfully as those with an unconstrained upbringing. Taking to the air is instinctive and there would be an enormous mortality rate of young birds if this was not so. The control of manoeuvring and landing, however, needs practice.

It used to be believed that much of bird life was under the control of instinct and that birds were mere automata, compared with the quick-thinking mammals. However, as bird behaviour has been studied in more detail and in more natural circumstances the distinction between instinctive and learned behaviour is dissolving and it is now realised that the two are complimentary in the control of birds' actions.

Instinct is vital when there is no time to learn but modifications of the basic instinct can take a variety of forms; for example, the feeding behaviour of farmyard chicks. They emerge from the egg with the instinct to peck at small objects that contrast with the background, so they automatically peck at objects which could be edible grains. They might also be small pebbles or marks on the ground, so by a process of trial and error the chicks learn what is edible and what is to be avoided.

Imprinting is a special kind of learning which takes place when a bird is young and happens only during a short 'sensitive' period. Ducklings or other young birds that leave the nest soon after hatching very quickly learn to recognise their parents by sight and sound. Normally the parent bird is the first suitable object that the chick sees but it can be fooled by a substitute. This was discovered by the Austrian naturalist, Konrad Lorenz, who found that when he crept around the garden quacking to a brood of orphaned ducklings, they soon looked upon him as 'mother' and followed him everywhere.

Barbara Weller

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

**** COMING EVENTS ****

October 1993 Outing:
TBO Annual Bird Count

Location: Toowoomba Area
Date: 23/24 October
Leader: contact Pat McConnell (076) 976 141

Info: This is a major annual activity of the club. A number of small groups, each containing at least one birding guru, will cover the TBO study area counting species. A great opportunity for inexperienced members to extend their knowledge of local bird-life under the guidance of an experienced birdwatcher. Counting takes place between midday Saturday and midday Sunday, although you may only wish to join in for a few hours. Contact Pat for allocation to a group.

Theatre Night :

Date: 22 October
Time: 8 pm
Contact: Ann Shore or Pat Cleary

info: The production will be Noel Coward's *Private Lives*, tickets \$10 each including refreshments. From previous experience, these evenings are exceptional value and most worthwhile. A proportion of profits from the performance will go to our club.

November 1993 Outing:

Location: Stradbroke Island Campout
Date: 27/28 November
Leader: Rod Hobson (074) 627 364

info: This outing may consist of one day spent watching waders along the foreshores of coastal Brisbane, followed by the next day at Straddie after whales, dolphins etc., and waders. Possibly the format may be a campout for the two days on North Stradbroke Island. Contact Rod for more details.

*** NOTICE ***

This is a reminder that subscriptions are due on 1st November at the rates shown on the front page. Ann also has several RAOU 1994 Bird Calendars still available at \$15 each.

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