



TOOWOOMBA BIRD OBSERVERS inc.

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

NEWSLETTER No. 215 - DECEMBER 1993

EDITORIAL: What a great finish to the year for TBO members !

A rather hot, but rewarding day on beautiful North Straddie for our November Outing.

Then good rain , the best in years , a wonderful Christmas present for our drought-stricken farmer friends . Good also for our feathered friends .

This edition contains four very different reports , something for all budgets , time constraints and of course birds to be observed . Rod has a report of the recent Straddie Trip , Ann's writes of her small alternate outing at Flagstone Creek and Nicci gives us her impressions of a September jaunt to Cameron's Corner . Then Michael gives us some Grasswren genre.

Finally, I would like to wish all TBO members a Happy and Safe Christmas and naturally "May the birds follow you".

TOOWOOMBA BIRD OBSERVERS NOVEMBER OUTING : Brisbane southern bayside and Oradbroke Island - Point Lookout environs , 27/28.11.93 .

Campouts and overnight trips are becoming a regular activity on the Toowoomba Bird Observers itinerary and, judging by members' responses, a very welcome addition. The November outing proved no exception with members from Warwick, Helidon, Toowoomba and Brisbane attending. Aside to seeing species rarely, if ever recorded in the Toowoomba area most attending were able to obtain " new " birds for their Australian lists.

Saturday's events were centred around the wader spots in the Wynnum, Thornside and Wellington Point districts. Mud flats, rocky outcrops, sand bars and mangrove habitats were all visited throughout the day and a very good list of birds , especially waders culminated the day. No species of particular rarity were recorded but a good representative list was produced. The high tide roost at the Wynnum marina produced hoards of Bar-tailed Godwit and Grey-tailed Tattler, as well as Pied Oystercatcher, Curlew Sandpiper, Eastern Golden Plover, Red-necked Stint, Terek Sandpiper, Large Sand Flover, Mongolian Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, Eastern Curlew,

and Whimbrel, numerous Great Knot and an occasional Red Knot. Additional species recorded at the Lytton high tide roost included Greenshank, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper and Marsh Sandpiper. The Lota mudflat species were represented by Collared Kingfisher, Striated Heron, Mangrove Gerygone and Mangrove Honeyeater. Other birds of note in transit between sites included Brahminy Kite, several Ospreys including an advanced young in nest, Crested, Little, Gull-billed and Caspian Terns, Chestnut Teal, Brown Quail, Little and Large Egret and Sooty Oystercatcher.

By the end of the first day participants were "birded-out" and most retired to Don's place to watch cricket and relax for an early start next morning. Three carloads and two push-bikes assembled at the Cleveland Ferry terminal for a 6:45 am departure for Stradbroke Island. Fair weather and calm seas greeted the arrivals and such conditions persisted throughout the day to follow. Across the bow of the ferry, close in on the island passed a continual stream of Short-tailed Shearwaters, interspersed with occasional Fluttering Shearwaters. It was unusual to see these species so close to land above such calm waters but very welcome to excited TBO'ers lining the gunwales and raising many an eyebrow from the "ordinary" passengers upon the deck.

On reaching port fall we proceeded by many and curious a route to our destination for the day - the rocky headlands of Point Lookout. Comfortable viewing platforms were selected and telescopes were erected for the day's ocean watch. It wasn't long into the morning before the surprises arrived and by midday watchers were quietly smug having added some impressive sightings to the weekend's tally. Common Terns, more Short-tailed Shearwaters, Brown Booby and single sightings of Tahiti Petrel and Providence Petrel effused birdwatchers with a feeling of a morning well spent. These last two species were particularly well met as these open water birds are rarely sighted so close to land and under such ideal conditions. All the writer's previous experience of them has been whilst vainly trying to keep a footing on the slippery deck of a lurching boat miles out in the briny. Midday saw a return to the welcoming shade of the Banksias near the village for lunch, idle chatter under the ever-present White-cheeked and Brown Honeyeaters.

The afternoon was whiled away back at the headlands but with little addition to the tally. The highlight of the afternoon watch was the appearance of a pair of Wandering Tattlers among the spume over the wave-washed rocks below our vantage. Ornithological highlights were enhanced throughout the day by appearances of several pods of Bottlenose Dolphin and Green Turtles below the crag faces. The appearance of a pair of majestic Mantas early in the morning held all in their thrall. These great fish continued their ethereal patrol along the cliff edges throughout the day, sometimes deep as great diamond-shaped ghosts, at times cutting the surface with upturned "wing-tips" or rolling over to expose white bellies. To the writer, and to many others present he suspects, all the petrels combined did not manage to relegate these wondrous fish to second place - truly a magnificent spectacle and, in itself, worth the effort on the day.

I would like to thank Ken Wells, Ken McKeown and Graham Thompson for the kind use of their cars for the weekend, also Don Gaydon for handling the bookings and for accommodation and for Wendy McKeown for her deft display with the mobile phone. To all who attended thanks for making this trip one to remember, easily a contender for Best of '93. And thank you Straddie - may you never be bridged.

- Rod Hobson
WOODLANDS
30.11.93

SHORT MORNING OUTING to the FLAGSTONE CREEK AREA. 28.11.93

Four members met at the junction of the Flagstone and Upper Flagstone Creek Roads for a little quiet birding on Sunday morning 28 November while more adventurous members were sampling ocean birds at Stradbroke Island.

There were plenty of bush birds around as the sun came over the hill on what promised to be a very warm day. However, most were identified by calls giving our newest club recruit a hard time as she tried to learn some of the familiar sounds of her native land after many years of absence and birding overseas. A halt further down the valley yielded more impressive results when a pair of Pacific Bazas obligingly circled around and landed nearby.

By the next stop, where the Stockyard Creek Road branches off, we were looking for shade in earnest, luckily finding both it and plenty to observe. Beautiful Rainbow Bee-eaters were hard to beat but a pair of Kestrels caught our attention with one visiting a nesting hollow in an ancient eucalypt. A fish-tailed Spangled Drongo was a good bird to identify. Magpie-Larks at their mud nest; Superb Fairy-Wrens; finches and a pair of Rufous Whistlers plus numerous others kept us busily on the watch. The cooing of Spotted Turtle-doves sounded familiar to ears attuned to English birding. A brief stop to the Stockyard Road for necessary refreshments and to check lists completed a satisfying morning.

Ann Shore
SHORELANDS

BIRDING in INLAND AUSTRALIA

In early spring Ken McKeown and I joined a private group who were travelling through south-western Queensland and north-western New South Wales with the avowed intention of birdwatching. We were away for two weeks and travelled approximately 4000 km. Our route took us westward along the main South-western highway - Roma, Mitchell, Charleville and all points in between, south to Cunnamulla, west again to Eulo and south to Currawinya National Park and the border town of Hungerford. From Hungerford we travelled west to Wanaaring and Tibooburra - gateway to Sturt National Park and Cameron Corner. The return trip took us north through the Wampah Gate to Bulloo Downs, Thargomindah and the Dynevor Lakes before tracing our outward bound steps along the highway as far as Roma where we turned south to Surat, Glenmorgan and home.

We experienced a range of habitats - suffering in varying degrees from the ravages and stresses of the prolonged drought. There had been some rain in the south-west about a fortnight before our trip which had greened the country and settled some of the dust, but had dispersed the birds throughout the area to take advantage of every swamp, lagoon and puddle that had formed. Good for the birds but not for the bird-watchers. The over-riding impression of the country west of Charleville is of grey mulga on flat red plains that seemed never ending. This is of course, quite wrong as both flora and fauna and the terrain vary considerably, but the flatness and redness do tend to linger in the mind's eye. West of Wanaaring and the lignum swamps of the Bulloo Overflow the country changes again to shiny gibber plains interspersed with clay pans, saltbush and samphire, but few trees, except along the water courses. Northwest of Tibooburra, on the way to Cameron Corner the traveller again makes the acquaintance of red sandy soil, but here it forms long red dunes that run mainly north - south and have been stabilized by sparse vegetation. The road to Cameron Corner does not run due north from Tibooburra so these dunes have to be crossed quite often and they have the ability to deteriorate into some of the worst road corrugations I have ever encountered.

Having dealt with the When and the Where, how about the Who and the What - the avian fauna - our primary target.

Despite the drought, we did see a lot of birds - many species comfortably familiar friends known also in the east - many new and exciting species endemic to the west and specific habitats. Most of the waterbirds we see regularly in the east with the exception of the Freckled Duck (*Stictonetta naevosa*). Raptors appear to be more numerous than in the east but it is much easier to spot a raptor over 360 degrees of unobscured sky than among the hills and forests of our environment, so maybe they're more visible, not more common. Black Kites (*Milvus migrans*) were very common and competed with crows and ravens for road kill and pickings at urban garbage dumps. The most spectacular raptor of the trip for me was a Black-breasted Buzzard (*Hamirostra melanosternon*) leisurely quartering the blue skies over Lake Numulla - its dark underbelly highlighted by the whiteness of the "window" patches on the underwing. Interestingly, we did not sight a single Black-shouldered Kite (*Elanus notatus*) during the trip.

Beautiful Parrots were a feature of the areas we traversed. We saw flocks of Galah (*Cacatua roseicapilla*), Sulphur-crested Cockatoo (*Cacatua galerita*) and Cockatiel (*Leptolophus hollandicus*) similar to those of the east, but the fast-wheeling green and yellow flocks of Budgerigars (*Melopsittacus undulatus*) rising from the ground or decorating the bare branches of a dead tree were quite special. So too were the flocks of Little Corella (*Cacatua pastinator*) as they floated into river red gums along the water-courses and lagoons, announcing their arrival in quavering, mournful cries - ghosts of Australia's past? We encountered other parrots in twos and threes as we moved through the scrub - unbelievably delicately coloured Pink Cockatoos (*Cacatua leadbeateri*) who took to the skies on large slow wings; flashes of red and green heralded Red-winged Parrots (*Aprosmictus erythropterus*) feeding high in the foliage; multi-coloured Mulga Parrots (*Psephotus varius*) brilliant against the grey foliage once located, but strangely difficult to find initially; elegant Mallee Ringnecks (*Banardius barnardi*) with their long dipping flight and the charming Blue Bonnet (*Northiella haematogaster*) whose plumage became progressively duller as we travelled west and the exquisite Bourke's Parrot (*Neophema bourkii*) located feeding among the samphire and saltbush at Currawinya on a very fresh morning when cold wind ruffled its basically brown and pink plumage to reveal the deep blue underneath.

Bourke's Parrot was revealed as we followed flocks of Crimson Chats (*Ephthianura tricolor*) and White-winged Fairywrens (*Malurus leucopterus*) through the saltbush. Vibrant Orange Chats (*Ephthianura aurifrons*) were seen regularly on the saltbush and gibber plains of Sturt National Park. Fairywrens were reasonably common. As well as the White-winged Fairywren we saw shimmering blue Splendid Fairywrens (*Malurus splendens*) and richly coloured Variegated Fairywrens (*Malurus lamberti*) - seemingly more richly coloured than their eastern relatives.

Other species not often seen here were the Inland Dotterel (*Peltohyas australis*) running and posing among the gibbers; Erolga (*Grus rubicundus*), strutting along sandy ridges and wading in the reedy shallows of the lakes, their deep red facial mask brilliant against grey plumage; Kori Bustards (*Ardeotis kori*), pacing regally through low open vegetation or crossing the open plains in slow cumbersome flight - No wonder they have been decimated - They make it all too easy; graceful Australian Pratincoles (*Stittia isabella*) standing tall on the ground or circling buoyantly over the plains on long elegant wings; tiny Diamond Doves (*Geopelia cuneata*) their red eyes very obvious against softly spangled grey feathers; Crested Bellbird (*Oreoica gutturalis*) not often seen, but announcing their presence with distinctive and melodious calls; Chirruping Wedgbills (*Psophodes cristatus*) perky brown birds who obligingly sit on the top of available bushes for bird watchers to observe; Cinnamon Quail Thrush (*Cinclosoma cinnamomeum*) runningly secretively through the salt bush on rocky ridges only to pause and peer about when they felt they were no longer being observed; a plethora of Thornbills - Inland (*Acanthiza apicalis*), Chestnut-rumped (*Acanthiza uropygialis*) and Slaty-backed (*Acanthiza robustirostris*) as well as many of the species regularly seen in the east; many honeyeaters including Singing (*Lichenostomus virescens*), Grey-fronted (*Lichenostomus plumulus*), Pied (*Certhionyx variegatus*) and the ubiquitous White-plumed Honeyeater (*Lichenostomus penicillatus*); the Spotted Bowerbird (*Chlamydera maculata*) jealously guarding his bower in the same way as his eastern cousins and my favourite birds, the Babblers - Grey-crowned (*Pomatostomus temporalis*); Hall's (*Pomatostomus halli*); Chestnut-crowned (*P. ruficeps*)

and White-browed (*P. superciliosus*) - all of whom bear a close visual resemblance to a "band of thieves" an illusion heightened by their incessant chattering, whistling and scolding as they go about their highly hyperactive but family orientated lives.

We also encountered at Currawinya a large bearded member of the TBO who was relentlessly pursuing reptilian fauna. The weather was kind and birding was good. Both Ken and I returned to Toowoomba, promising ourselves a return trip in the very near future but for now the workday world has claimed me and like A.B. Paterson I too think of Clancy who

"...sees the vision splendid of the sunlit plains extended
and at night the wondrous glory of the everlasting stars."

Nicci Thompson

TRIALS, TRIBULATIONS and GRASSWRENS.

Butchers Creek, 15 km west of Cloncurry on the way to Mt. Isa - alleged home to two species of grasswren - Dusky and Carpentarian. Therefore, destination "Numero Uno" and generator of soaring hopes and much excitement for four very grasswren-deprived birders.

We arrive mid afternoon. Rufous-throated, Brown and Grey-fronted honeyeaters are busy along the dry, gum-lined creek. Varied lorikeets screech and wheel overhead. Two spinifex-clad rocky hills, one each side of the creek, seem the obvious place to look. We can almost smell our quarry. Bojongs in place to ward off spinifex spikes, we trek off expectantly, scanning ahead for any tell-tale movements, ears pricked for any wren-like calls.

As time rolls on, "Over hill, over dale, they're here, we cannot fail!" becomes our unspoken motto that sees our search broaden exponentially and our morales sag at a similar rate. For, apart from fleeting glimpses of Black-footed rock wallabies and an equally sure-footed Euro, the only sign of birdlife inhabiting those hills is a solitary group of Variegated wrens. They cause a fleeting adrenalin rush in the interval between hearing and seeing them as we think we are finally onto our quarry. By this stage, at least 75 % of us are convinced there are no grasswrens in the area - no calls, no birds bobbing above the boulders or spearing into the spinifex clumps. Even the habitat had started to look "wrong" and several frustration-borne theories, including the presence of cattle, were tossed into the ring as to why but we agree to try again at first light.


Next morning unveils nothing again and we are left scratching our heads. Then all of a sudden, one bright spark (may have even been me !) suggests that we drive down the road, find another spinifex-clad hill and make our own luck ! Stamp our mark on grasswren knowledge by finding a new site. His words were to be prophetic for 2 hours later, 1.7 km further west and several hundred metres from the road, the Magnificent Four were enjoying a fantastic view of a pair of Dusky Grasswrens that obligingly perched in full view on and off for several minutes. This followed a couple of fleeting glimpses in other areas.

I badly gashed my thumb on a rock that day when I tripped while clambering to where we first saw the grasswrens. I now look at my legacy - a discoloured section of my thumb nail - and fondly remember tracking down grasswrens, no matter which species, has always been both an exasperating and exhilarating experience for me. Yes, we dipped on the Carpentarian grasswren, but that makes it all the more desirable and challenging next time.

What did we learn from this singular experience with Dusky grasswrens that may aid location in the future ? Certain features of the landscape seem important. The birds were only seen in areas of dense spinifex in the higher regions and where rocks were salmon-coloured rather than the black rocks that dominate much of the area.

Searching in areas where cattle had been grazing was apparently a waste of time as there were no sightings in grazed areas with Butchers Creek being a prime example. On the other hand there's an awful lot of spinifex out there and the grasswrens may be locally nomadic. Conclusion: we have a lot to learn.

Michael Atzeni

 SUBS ARE NOW DUE. If not paid soon, this will be your second last newsletter!

LOST: Three RAOU CALENDARS were misplaced at the recent AGM. IF you know of them, please contact Ann Shore 303 209

RECORDS OFFICER: Rod Hobson, would like more members to submit interesting sightings.

The Executive Committee would like to thank Alex Fredericks for his kindness in typing the Master List.

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

We welcome new member, Adele Warburton, from England, to the club:

May our Australian birds follow you.

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

January 1994 Outing:

Location: Lake Maroon
Date: 30 January
Leader: Ken McKeown (076) 303 774

Info: This outing will take place at Lake Maroon near Boonah. It has a patch of Vine Scrub, rugged hills and cleared picnic areas for lunch. BYO everything.

February 1994 Outing:

Location: Brisbane Forest Park
Date: 27 February

Leader: Mick Atzeni. 392 761

Info: More in the next newsletter.

SURFACE MAIL

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