



TOOWOOMBA BIRD OBSERVERS inc.

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

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'To encourage the observations and study of the birds of the Toowoomba area'

NEWSLETTER No. 217 - FEBRUARY 1994

EDITORIAL:

This month's weather reports seem to indicate a welcome change for the better and all things associated with it. Well not all things! I actually remembered how to start the whipper-snipper earlier this month. It's been nearly a year since I had the pleasure of turning grass into hay.

No, it wasn't Wendy's nagging or observation that toads weren't her favourite animals. No, it was the editor's observation that he was glad he hadn't lost the old side-step as he walked down our drive late one afternoon. I don't know who received the greater fright, the young brown snake or myself, but the next day the hay was on the way.

For all members who missed the January jaunt to the Boonah District, the executive have endeavoured to entice you to our next outing - a closer venue - Holmes' Railway Siding and surrounds near Murphy's Creek.

Also many thanks for the articles from ex-editor Don, new member John and tyro Brett and of course - Ann Shore who is a regular contributor as is Nicci who has written about the Eyre Bird Observatory. This newsletter also contains details of newsletters held by Sharyn and arrangements for the next outing.

TBO JANUARY OUTING Boonah District and Lake Maroon

As I mentioned in a previous newsletter, Ann and I were impressed with the countryside when we visited Maroon Dam for the Naturesearch Conference last October.

However, we didn't see as much of the area as we would have liked, and resolved to return for a much more leisurely observation of this interesting district. To help in these matters, we enlisted the help of the Fassifern Field Nats. In hindsight, it was a very wise decision.

In all, twelve members (four from Warwick) completed the two hour trip through the verdant Fassifern Valley to our meeting place with our hosts. Our first port of call was a privately-owned rainforest adjoining the Mt French National Park. After a humid walk into the very thick scrub, we were puzzled by an amazing sound emanating from the left of the track. To our delight, we discovered a small camp of Black Flying-Foxes *Pteropus alecto*. This is the largest flying fox and has short black hair over its body with a reddish collar around the back of the neck area.

Continuing ever upwards, we detoured to a clearing to admire the lush green farms below. Here we were lucky to spot both Shining and Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoos as well as Golden Whistler and Crimson Rosella. Returning to the track, we were afforded glimpses of Emerald Dove, Brown Cuckoo-Dove and a soaring Grey Goshawk above the forest canopy. At last we came to the end of the track to be confronted by huge fig trees and a refreshing spring of cool water. It was here, Lionel, one of the field nats, saw the elusive Regent Honeyeater late last year.

We next visited the local sewage ponds to check out the waterbirds. Here we found Pink-eared Duck, Hardhead, Grey Teal, Australasian Shoveler and many Great and Little Black Cormorant.

Our generous hosts then guided us through Boonah to Burnett Creek Road to a wonderful picnic area where the creek enters Lake Maroon. This little gem has huge shade trees and a wonderful fig tree which was laden with ripe fruit.

Here, Channel-billed Cuckoos and Figbirds vied for the riches and almost deafened us during lunch. Later, sharp-eyed Michael spied a Yellow-eyed Cuckoo-shrike in this same tree as we moved towards the dam. This was a new sighting for many members.

As we walked on, we were amazed by the number of baby cane toads in the now dry backwaters of the dam. We also discovered numerous stranded fresh-water mussels. Quite often the observant John Crepin drew our attention to Latham's Snipe shooting past to land in tall grass. Out on the lily pads, we observed several Comb-crested Jacana moving about, seemingly walking on water.

Then the highlight of the day - as we reached the dam itself, two magnificent White-bellied Sea-Eagles perched on a tall dead tree. As we watched quietly, a Whistling Kite appeared and began to harass what I thought was a small Wedge-tail. On closer inspection, we discovered it was a darkish-coloured immature sea eagle which then demonstrated how manoeuvrable a large raptor can be when being pursued. Talk about David and Goliath! To finish the day we found a tree complete with Rainbow, Scaly-breasted and a lone Musk Lorikeet.

All up, we counted 110 species. A long day, but well worth the effort. The TBO would like to thank the enthusiastic and knowledgeable Fassifern Field Nats who certainly know their local flora and fauna.

To Noela and John, Lionel, Melva, Wendy, and Clive, we hope to repay your hospitality in the future.

THE PITTA'S BREAKFAST

As the early morning sun crept gently up from below the horizon, more and more carollers joined in the dawn chorus. What had started in the dim half-light with the singular piping of a Eastern Yellow Robin now resounded throughout the whole forest like a symphony; wrens, warblers, lorikeets, currawongs, whipbirds and seemingly all their kin were voicing their joy at the arrival of the dawn. Under a pale blue sky I sat cross-legged on the grass and solemnly contemplated whether there was anywhere in the world I'd rather be than here at Ravensbourne National Park.

Somewhat disconcertingly, I managed to think of numerous places. This didn't worry me an awful lot, however, on that glorious summer morn amidst all those celebrating birds in their beautiful forest. Soon

after beginning the short circuit walk, I came upon a Noisy Pitta engaged in battle with an unseen foe beneath the leaf-litter. The bird was in the process of dealing the creature a series of sickening blows with its bill, in addition to an occasional vigorous shaking. I tried in vain to glimpse the recipient of the pitta's attention; the leaves were too thick on the ground. Still, as I watched over a period of perhaps ten minutes, the pecks continued to rain down upon the hapless brute in merciless fashion.

All of a sudden, at the completion of a shaking session, the pitta lifted its head and pulled an enormous earthworm some ten centimetres out of the ground. The bird was a young one, bare skin still evident around the gape and feathers relatively dull, and I could almost see the look of surprise on its face regarding the nature of its catch. "What in the name of Harry Butler is this thing!", I could hear it thinking as more and more worm appeared from beneath the ground. The giant earthworm, relatively common at Ravensbourne but seldom seen, lay motionless with its head (?) absolutely mutilated. The pitta continued to pull the worm further from the ground, gripping it by the end of its messy cranium, and although I did not see the beast fully extracted, I estimated its length to be greater than thirty centimetres and its diameter to be approximately fifteen millimetres. The bird was continuing to shake the worm vigorously by the head as I left it to its hearty breakfast.

Don Gaydon

(date of sighting 28/12/93)

A SURPRISE VISITOR

On 17 January at 9:30 am, I was sitting inside my house at Forest Hill, when a brightly coloured and marked female Red-backed Button-quail walked past my back door whereby I followed her around the yard having excellent views showing yellow bill and light eye. I have always regarded these birds as more coastal.

John Hadley
Forest Hill
14/01/94

EYES

Of late my attention has been drawn to eyes. Not so much to consider the functions and mysteries of bird's eyes with their often incredible powers of sight but rather to ponder over pattern and colouration of the visible organ and surround.

To the unscientific human observer, eyes may be seen purely as augmenting the beauties of plumage but although little knowledge seems to be readily available to further curiosity, one is tempted to wonder at the reasons for specific diversities. Are such variations to aid recognition by friend or foe, for bonding purposes, for camouflage, to threaten danger and aggression or ?

Some eyes readily disappear into their background; others are emphasised or even appear enlarged by surrounding patches of brightly coloured bare skin and similar trompe l'oeil effects. Some are circled or outlined by a conspicuous contrasting colour while yet others merely have an accent to one side or maybe an eyebrow to change the general appearance or a stripe to totally disrupt the shape. The variety of shape is limitless. There are also those brilliant orbs with an almost luminous quality set against a plain background of features.

It was some of these last features which aroused my curiosity. The first was the bright yellow eye of the Pied Currawong and another the startling scarlet eye of the Common Koel, both in sunlight at close quarters. A third was the luminous blue eye of the Satin Bowerbird. All these eyes stand out against black plumage. Perhaps even more startling than her mate's is the intensity of the female Satin Bowerbird's violet blue eye when seen in conjunction with the subtle beauty of her grey-green head and delicately patterned breast. Some connections spring to mind, such as the colour of the male Satin Bowerbird's eyes and his collections of blue objects to decorate his bower; others leave one puzzled as to reasons and meaning, just promoting wonder and beauty.

Ann Shore
SHORELANDS

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EYRE BIRD OBSERVATORY

Last year, the management committee of our Club decided to join the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union. R.A.O.U. was founded in 1901 and is Australia's oldest national conservation organisation.

Members are dedicated to the study and conservation of the nation's native wildlife and the promotion of the same. "Wingspan" is the official newsletter of the R.A.O.U.. It is about 30 pages long and features a range of articles and short snippets, illustrated by coloured or black and white photography. Copies of "Wingspan" which is published quarterly will be placed in our library and will be available for borrowing from our librarian.

R.A.O.U. maintains four Bird Observatories - Barren Grounds (N.S.W.), Broome (W.A.), Rotamah Island (Vic) and Eyre (W.A.). All the observatories are open throughout the year, with the wardens in attendance. Courses are conducted regularly on a variety of topics, and casual visitors are welcome, but you should probably book - just in case.

While on vacation recently, my husband and I decided to spend some time at Eyre Bird Observatory which is on the coast of the Great Australian Bight, just south of Cocklebidy. Access is by four wheel drive only (and only 4WD's with good clearance make it). However, the wardens will collect you if you are driving a conventional vehicle.

The observatory is housed in an historic old stone building which began life as a Telegraph Station. One room of the building is devoted to a museum featuring the telegraph line and honouring the people who maintained the lonely stations and the line between them. Nowadays, it nestles among the Mallee scrub at the foot of huge sand dunes which are threatening to engulf it. Club member, Noela Caffin, has worked at Eyre with the volunteer teams who are attempting to stabilise these dunes and so save our history and a haven for birdwatchers.

While a guest at Eyre, you can choose to join in the daily activities of the wardens or be completely independent and access the beach and walking tracks in your own way.

Highlights of our stay were watching Singing and Purple-gaped Honeyeaters competing with Brush Bronzewing for the bird baths as we breakfasted behind sealed observatory windows; the leisurely lunches and dinners on the northern verandah accompanied by the calls of the Grey Currawongs and Ravens and entertained by the resident flock of Pink Cockatoos who excelled in performing acrobatics for us on the old telegraph wires; gathering in the lounge at night for the daily Bird Call, which evolved into good humour, bird stories and snake yarns as the guests relaxed; and the 12 km trip down to the beach and back that takes 45 minutes to 1 hour each, hoping all the way that you will see a Mallee Fowl.

I didn't, but it is a great way to spend all or part of a vacation, so consider the observatories when you are next planning your next vacation.

Nicci Thompson
12/02/94

TBO LIBRARIAN

Sharyn Frederiks has the following club newsletters which members may borrow.

Fassifern Field Naturalist Club

Queensland Ornithological Society Inc.

The Bird Observer - The Bird Observers Club Of Australia

The Darling Downs Naturalist - Toowoomba Field Naturalists Club

Urimbirra - Newsletter of Chinchilla Field Naturalists Club Inc.

Wingspan - The Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union Newsletter

Wildlife Australia

EDITOR'S CORNER

My sincere thanks to all contributors over the last few months. However now is the time for all club members to help maintain the high standard of the TBO newsletter.

Don has set up the excellent format of the newsletter but we really need you to supply your thoughts and experiences - past and present - to help continue the effort.

Stories may be contributed in any form - typed, written or supplied on either size floppy disk in WP 1 format. I've even taken them over the phone. My address is :-

PO Box 408
Toowoomba Mail Centre 4352

To illustrate that it's not too daunting, here is a short item from one of our youngest members - Brett Silcock who is ten.

The Red Wattlebird

I find there is no bird more interesting than the Red Wattlebird. With those red wattles hanging down from under its ear it looks as if someone cut through its feathers and skin and pulled some dry flesh out. It calls to its mate with a harsh "chokk chokk", and looks for food all day and roosts in trees by night.

The wattlebird inhabits the same area most of its life and feeds in the one area too. I first found one in my gum tree building a nest, and have seen him almost every day since.

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

February 1994 Outing :

Location: Holmes' Railway Siding / Murphy's Creek
Date: 28/02/94
Leader: Michael Atzeni (076) 392 761

Info: This month's outing will be held at a venue close to Toowoomba so that more members might attend. We will meet at the Spring Bluff turn off at 0700. Holmes' Siding is approximately 4 km west of Murphy's Creek township.

March Outing :

Location: Wading Outing
Date: 27/03/94
Leader: Rod Hobson (074) 627 364

Info: More in the next newsletter .

Theatre Night:

Info: To be advised. This a very good fund raiser for the club so come along and have a great night all you closet thespians.

***** NOTICE *****

Please remember that **SUBSCRIPTIONS** are due on 01 November at the rates shown on the front page.

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