

# 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'

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## NEWSLETTER No. 219 - APRIL 1994

### EDITORIAL:

It has been sixteen years since the last list of Recommended Names of Australian Birds was published by the RAOU, and the argument has raged ever since. The 1994 list of recommendations of the Taxonomic Advisory Committee is also expected to be very controversial. Since the TBO is a member of the RAOU, the executive has responded to the invitation to put its views to the Union.

As the name changes will affect us all, I have included an article from GEO magazine to help newer members and confused experienced birdos understand the history and background as to why the names, like the times, keep on changing.

This newsletter contains Don's Outing Report, two welcome contributions from Vera Simon and Anne's article on birds in dry conditions.

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### **MARCH OUTING REPORT - Coastal Brisbane, 27 March 1994.**

Sunday the 27 March saw six of the TBO's finest meeting at Lytton on the coastal edge of Queensland's largest city. Although the hustle and bustle of Brisbane lay nary a stone's throw away, we could have been miles from anywhere as we crouched in the long grass and reeds watching reams of migratory waders on the tidal flats. Why is it that wading birds (sandpipers and kin) inspire such curiosity and interest amongst many birders, and downright love and devotion amongst others? Is it their remarkable way of life which fascinates us the most? Or is it the open, uncomplicated, sometimes melancholy environments in which we always find them? Maybe it's the undeniable challenge with which their identification presents us?

I suppose it's a combination of all three things, but regardless of whether you're an old hand or a new chum it's impossible not to experience a sense of awe on consideration of the incredible migrations which these birds perform every single year. From breeding grounds in the far Northern Hemisphere,

many species travel more than 13,000 kilometres in more-or-less continuous flight to reach their wintering grounds here in Australia. They arrive in drab non-breeding plumage and spend our summer months feeding and resting on mudflats and tidal areas. Come late summer however, mature individuals begin to moult back into breeding plumage and some mysterious biological impulse triggers a restlessness in the birds. Soon after, they are gone - back to Siberia or Mongolia, and the cycle starts again. Some, such as Red-necked Stints, are barely larger than sparrows! It has been determined that stints can make the journey from Siberia to Australia through burning the energy equivalent of 20 grams of body fat. Now there's efficient travel for you!

Our timing for this particular outing was perfect, as many individuals from different species had begun to moult into their spectacular breeding adornment. Next month would have been too late. Lytton was dominated by Bar-tailed Godwits, many of them resplendent in their russet breeding plumage. Smaller rust-coloured waders proved to be Curlew Sandpipers while the delicate barring on the flanks of the Grey-tailed Tattlers indicated an imminent conclusion to their time in Australia. Great Knots are among the easiest waders to pick whilst in breeding plumage, their heavy breast-speckling so thick it almost appears as a black wash. Many of the individuals sighted also displayed the beautiful rufous and black scapulars, typical of full breeding colours. Other highlights of the day consisted largely of behavioural observations and further stunning views of waders in breeding plumage. The Ruddy Turnstones at Manly Boat Harbour were truly spectacular in their bright contrasting colours, while subtle hues in the plumage of several Red-necked Stints were enough to take the breath away.

As the outgoing tide proceeded to uncover more and more feeding areas (mudflats), we were an audience to the characteristic hunting techniques of many species at Lota. We compared the stealth and patience of the Great Egret with the energetic endeavours and prey-flushing tactics of his impatient smaller relative, the Little Egret. We watched turnstones turning stones, godwits probing, terekks sprinting and Greenshanks dancing. Unfortunately, we were unable to satisfy the phenomenal desire of young Trent to see a Red Knot. Maybe they'd already left for Siberia?

The day ended with a casual stroll out to King Island from Wellington Point. A lone Mangrove Kingfisher surveyed us serenely from its rocky perch on the mudflats as the car-load of well-rewarded Toowoomba folk chugged away westward. (Sorry Nicci, purred away westward.) So it's farewell again to the migratory waders - may they continue to become more and more fascinating each year.

Don Gaydon

Total number of species: 62

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### BIRD WATCHING by CAR .. THE LAZY BIRDWATCHERS WAY.

Bird watching by car, as one cruises the many Queensland highways, can be very rewarding .. and the naked eye can hardly err when confronted by the larger species which at times congregate at the side of the road. This proved to be the case when my husband and I ventured North to Mackay during June 1993.

Our prize exhibitionists were two Jabiru , North of Gympie. Standing in a small soak right near the side of the road, within 20 m of the main highway, they appeared completely unruffled by the proximity of the noisy, busy traffic, standing in regal splendour and positively glistened in the early morning sun. Their mauve, pink legs looked so clean, whilst their shining black and white bodies contrasted with the green surroundings. As my previous sightings of these most glamorous birds had been at a distance, such a close encounter really " made my day ".

North of Rockhampton we passed many Brolgas feeding on up-turned insects, along with many Magpie Geese.

At Eungella National Park, three Forest Kingfishers sat on the wires near the guest house. The

owner of the guest-house, a bird watcher "from way back" informed us that the National Park was putting in a claim for a new bird - the Eungella Honeyeater ... which we didn't see, but were told it was something like a Lewin's.

Two Cassowary crossed the road north of Mackay, and whilst driving into the Hillsborough National Park Resort, we had to stop near the reception area for twenty or more Scrub Turkeys which are the park emblem. As we ate in the resort grounds, the turkeys hang around for scraps. Six Peaceful Doves were also amongst the scavengers. Oh .. those beautiful blue eye-rings!

But I never will be sure of the identity of the five birds which arose from a squatting position at the side of the road whilst driving out of Hillsborough. A turkey size bird, brown flecked, which ran with their heads tucked down. Stone curlew? beach curlew? I'm left to wonder.

### THE UNEXPECTED.

The advertisement read \_ SAIL the TWEED RIVER for FOUR HOURS.

Feeding the birds was part of a delightful four hours we were going to spend on the beautiful Tweed River.

The day was superb. One of those basking, sun-drenched days, with fantastic depth and clarity of colour. The launch departed from the Boyd's Bay Bridge. We paused to feed the cormorants, pelicans, Gulls and terns which at low tide collect on the seemingly endless sandbank seen from the road. It was here we were to witness our first bird episode of the day as one pelican swallowed a large fish and had great difficulty in passing it down his throat .. in fact after fifteen minutes it was still visible and no matter how hard the endeavour, which was well worth watching, when his mate (?) came to the rescue. He came up behind him and bit him quite savagely on the tail. This shock tactic did the trick .. and we could all relax. But .. do pelicans do this on purpose to assist one another .. or was it just greed?

The cruise continued up the Tweed and we came to a spot where dense rainforest dipped down to the water's edge. " Now, we'll feed the birds," explained our captain. What birds they were! Raptors! at least twenty or more, mainly Sea-eagles, Brahminy Kites and Whistling Kites coming from the rainforest and gliding over the boat, sometimes two or three at a time, then diving into the river to retrieve the meat scraps which consisted mainly of fat, as this floats on the surface longer. Identification was easy as we were so near that their feathers shone in the sun. The Brahminy Kites, with their red wings were spectacular. They dived down with legs out-stretched and picked the meat off the surface with never a splash and ate it as they soared on high, then dived again. This aerial ballet continued for thirty minutes .. accompanied by Tony O'Conner's music Rainforest Magic played over the boat's loudspeaker. Pure Magic!

After lunch we passed a nesting Osprey. "They only eat fish," informed our captain.

So, if you want to see raptors aplenty close at hand, I recommend this trip. Cost for the trip, with a fish and salad lunch included, was \$42 .. or so it was last June.

Vera Simon

### **BATHTIME BEHAVIOUR**

The recent lengthy drought and heat brought some compensations for this birdwatcher at least, observing behaviour differing from the norm.

The three juveniles from Showlands' resident Peewee's second brood decided that they knew best how to keep cool in the exhausting January heatwave. All three stood by the hour on the edge of the

largest container set out for drinking and bathing a short distance from the house. Apart from sips of water and occasional preening, they scarcely moved until harassed or their thin-looking parents arrived with mouthfuls of food. The most demanding offspring was fed then the parent stood in the water with mouth agape looking quite done-in before a quick drink and bath and was off again on the endless quest for nourishment for their plump and demanding young.

Another fact of note around Christmas was that the parents sometimes appeared to dunk their insect mouthfuls before flying on to the nest - or were they merely trying to gain moisture themselves?

The Peewee young had to scatter occasionally for larger birds such as Magpies but resumed their positions as soon as the coast was clear. Smaller fry, however, didn't get a look-in at that watering hole and had to be content with a splash or drink from one of the other watering containers which allowed for little in the way of extended water frolics and needed constant re-filling.

On four or five successive early evenings in January a male Koel favoured me with good views as he too felt the need to drink - something I had never witnessed before. Another unusual sighting for this area, was a pair of White-throated Honeyeaters, among other small birds at a neighbour's birdbath at the height of the heatwave. Sadly, as Withcott becomes more and more suburban, bushbirds become scarcer and such occasional sightings correspondingly more precious.

Ann Shore.

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The following article is published with the kind permission of GEO Australia and the author David Andrew (RAOU).

### A BIRD BY ANY OTHER NAME

Birds hold a prominent place in our rich language and the etymology of their names is a fascinating field. We can all name a few birds, but most birdwatchers can reel off names of hundreds, if not thousands, of species without batting an eyelid.

Birds are probably the most-named group of animals on earth. Every species, and there are more than 9000, has a name. New ones are being discovered and rediscovered every year, and each has a name assigned in a short space of time. Only a birdwatcher could talk about a racquet-tailed drongo, the superciliaried hemispingus or the Comte de Paris' buff-breasted star-frontlet ( a type of hummingbird ) with a straight face. But there is a grand design behind it all.

Some names, such as curlew, are derived from the call the birds make. Others may describe their behaviour. Thus we have oystercatchers and turnstones. Some are descriptive - wrybill, pied stilt or blackbird. Still others have names whose origins are lost in the distant past: skua and godwit.

Many Australian birds were named by Anglo-Irish settlers who probably grasped at any token of familiarity when naming our often bizarre and unusual wildlife. In a land of duck-billed mammals and hopping marsupials, the red-breast of a small black and white bird must have provided nostalgic relief, and it became known as the scarlet robin.

Thus we have robins, flycatchers, warblers and magpies, although the Australian species of these names are not necessarily closely related to their old world counterparts. Indeed, confusion is rife when one considers that these names are in use the world over and can apply to many completely unrelated birds in different continents.

Take the robin, for example. The word is of English origin, and applied to the familiar garden

woodland bird of Britain. Robin red-breast, as it is also known, has gone under a variety names in the British Isles: Bob, redcock, Tommy-liden.

English settlers in America encountered a common bird which had a red breast and decided that it, too, was a robin. The American robin is unrelated to the European robin; it is a migratory member of the thrush family, but the name has stuck.

And with robins in Britain, America and Australia - none of them closely related - and various magpie-robins, thrush-robins and thrush-chats in other parts of the world, the picture becomes rather confused.

If there was a seemingly endless variation in the names of birds among English-speaking peoples, where a common bird such as the blue tit could be called Billy pick-cheese, pitfinch or pink-pink depending from where you came from, the situation became even worse across different languages.

An *autillo* to a Spaniard is a *zwegohreule* to a German, a *dvärguv* to a Swede, and *hibou petit-duc* to the French.

Although the bird doesn't normally occur in the UK, the English appellation is scops owl. Obviously, for the study of such a diverse group such as birds, some sort of order had to be established.

The first truly successful attempt at this was published in 1758 as *Systema Naturae* by the Swede, Carl Linnaeus. In the language of scholars, animal and plant names were standardised to a strict, simple formula: the latin binomial.

Those that were obviously closely related, such as ducks, went under a generic name. Thus we have *Anas superciliosis* (black duck), *A. gracilis* (grey teal), *A. rhynchotis* (Australian shoveler) and so on. With a few variations, this system has been in use ever since its inception. The derivation of scientific names for birds is in itself an interesting topic and full of apocrypha, folklore and humour.

But what of popular names? Somewhat chauvinistically, these are called English names, although their derivations are often anything but English. It may seem that with Latin names scientists can communicate in binomials and leave the rest of us to call birds what we like. Not so.

The study, classification and naming of birds is in constant state of flux. As the techniques of study become more refined, the divisions between species become finer, or in some cases, appear where there were thought to be none.

Just what constitutes a species becomes, at times, a matter of opinion and vigorous debate. Despite the innovation of the binomial, in a effort to provide stability and consistency, over time it has been realised that English names provide more stability than the Latin name designed specifically for that purpose.

Consequently, it is deemed necessary to have a standard list of Recommended English Names (REN). The last list of REN for Australian Birds was published by the RAOU in 1977 and the Taxonomic Advisory Committee (TAC) is now in the process of updating them. In the introduction to the 1977 list, the main guidelines for usage of names are stated:

1. For species endemic to Australia, traditional names or those widely used are respected.
2. For species that range beyond Australia, the name most widely used, or authoritatively used internationally, is preferable.

For instance, Australian reed warbler becomes clamorous reed-warbler, because that is the name for *Acrocephalus stentoreus* throughout most of its range.

It follows that, for non-breeding migrants, English names prevalent in the literature on the birds of those countries where the species breeds are preferred.

3. If taxonomic change combines two or more former species, the name for the result ought to be the most fitting English name.
4. If the name of an Australian species duplicates a well-established name for a species overseas, it is desirable to change the former.
5. If the name is inaccurate or misleading, change ought to be made, especially if a simple descriptive name is available.

These principles are sound enough and the TAC is bearing them in mind as it deliberates over the changes in taxonomy that have come to light through specialised techniques now being used in Australia and overseas.

Although the TAC is composed of researchers, the English names which in their judgement, are deemed most suitable will obviously affect everyone interested in birds and their efforts to communicate this interest to others and among themselves.

Therefore, it is only fair that the **opinions** of writers, photographers, birdwatchers, bushwalkers and any other interested parties be aired in response to the proposed changes.

The resulting judgements will come together in a *Checklist of Australian Birds*. They will be debated at the next International Ornithological Congress (IOC), to be held in Vienna this year, before integration to a standard list of English names for birds of the world.

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#### NEW MEMBER

A friendly TBO welcome to Narelle Barden, 2 Warner St, Toowoomba.  
May the birds follow you.

#### \*\*\*\* COMING EVENTS \*\*\*\*

#### April Outing :

**Location:** Lake Broadwater, Dalby  
**Date:** 24/04/94  
**Leader:** Michael Atzeni (076) 392761

**Info:** Drive to Dalby (about 1 hour) and take the Moonie Highway. Proceed 19 km and turn left. The lake is about 10 km further. BYO everything.

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