



# TOOWOOMBA BIRD OBSERVERS inc.

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**MEMBERSHIP: Adults/Families \$20 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. 238 - November/December 1995**

**EDITORIAL:**

At last the drought appears to be over as there are reports that even Lake Clarendon has water in it for the first time since it has been extended. Any other depression in the valley is also full to the brim and this should allow the TBO to once again have its once famous Lockyer Wetlands tour. A few years ago, I remember the group aiming for 100 species for the day and finally calling it quits with around 150.

Thanks to all the expatriates who contributed to this newsletter. Dana McCown (American) who has written about her trip to India, Michael Hirst (English) who recently returned to the Old Country to visit relatives, and Ann Shore (English) who finishes her overseas trilogy with her trip to Turkey. This naturally leads me to the question of what the native-born TBO members are doing? C'mon Aussie C'mon, we desperately need your articles.

The October Species Census summary and list of species recorded is also included in this issue.

Please note this a joint November/December newsletter to allow some time to address other important matters in the lead up to Christmas and New Year. You never know when and where that next party will be! On behalf of the Executive I wish all members a very enjoyable Christmas and prosperous New Year, especially in the birding department.

**TEMPORARY RETURN OF THE EXILE**

A trip to England in September taught me a couple of things, firstly how much more difficult hedgerow birds are to see in summer than winter when the leaves are gone and secondly how rusty was my recognition of English bird calls. Despite this I was able to brush up on quite a few of the more common birds.

One of the noticeable absentees was the Song Thrush. I saw a pair from our bedroom window on the first morning of our visit, but saw no more during the trip. I do not quite understand why, as the hedgerows were flourishing in our part of Gloucestershire and there were plenty of snails, their favourite food, present. Swallows were gathering for their journey south, and they too were in much smaller numbers on the telephone lines than of yore. Apparently a severe snow storm on the Continent during their migration a few years ago decimated their population.

I didn't see a Skylark, and a partridge is a rarity. The dozing of the hedgerows in the eastern counties and the downs areas in the south, together with changing agricultural practices, such as monoculture and the earlier harvesting of cereal and silage crops is probably to blame. The decreased game keeper control of predators would also have had a detrimental effect on the partridges, though on the reverse side of the ledger, more sparrowhawks and kestrels would be present. The small bird population has also been hit by the increase in magpies, previously a favourite candidate for nailing on the keeper's vermin pole. Luckily for me, I saw my first pair of buzzards.

A menace that was new for me was the Mink. Animal Liberation supporters freed many of these animals from their cages, where they were farmed for their fur and they now pose a real threat to native wildlife. I even read of one entering a kingfisher's nesting hole and killing the chicks. Good swimmers, they affect aquatic as well as land creatures. Again the shortage of gamekeepers in some areas has allowed them to spread unchecked.

This leads me to a happier subject, the re-establishment of the Red Kite. These had been reduced in the UK to a handful in mid-Wales. The British Trust for Ornithology have set up a breeding program in their country of origin, Spain. After much negotiation with the bureaucracy, the young birds were taken to the Chiltern Hills, acclimatised to the conditions there and gradually released ( hacking in falconry terms ) in the Wormsley Valley. Good relations were established with the gamekeepers and I understand that only one bird has been shot, while thirty young birds were reared this year.

A cousin of mine, who is a keen birder, took us to the area, and whilst driving along a very narrow lane on a wooded ridge, we stopped at a gap in the trees where there was a passing point. Below us was the Wormsley Valley, bathed in the evening sun, and as we watched we saw a Red Kite, then a pair quartering the land looking for their prey, then twisting and turning among the trees as they entered the adjoining woodland. A lovely red colour on their backs, their tail much more deeply forked than that of our own Black Kite. This was one of my birding highlights!

For those who may be interested and might visit this area of England; the Valley lies in the Stokenchurch, Turville and Hambleden areas in Buckinghamshire (between Watlington and High Wycombe). Warning!! The estate belongs to Mr Getti, the oil millionaire, and trespassers are not welcomed!

There is a nature reserve on the crest of the Chilterns nearby. Here, there is a problem with scrub reclaiming open downland. As a controlled experiment, sheep are run on part of the reserve to control the scrub and retain grassland for birds such as larks, wheatears and partridges and possibly make the rabbits more accessible to the kites.

With success of re-establishing Kites, Osprey and possibly the White-tailed Eagle, it appears easier to re-establish lost large birds than to protect the habitat necessary for the survival of once common small birds.

Michael Hirst

## IMPRESSIONS OF AN ANCIENT LAND

Although I had landed on the Mediterranean coast of Turkey over thirty years ago to look at classical ruins, that had been my only visit to the country. Now I was to learn a little more of a fascinating and ancient land and something, albeit a smattering, of the local avifauna, flora, geography and history.

Outside the sprawling and none-too-beautiful city of Ankara, I was introduced to the rolling, rugged and barren world of hills of soft volcanic debris overlaid with harder rock continually eroded by the weather. The arid tree-less hills had a beauty of their own; the rocks and soils many hues, while below the edging watercourses, were pockets of varied and contrasting greenery. The beautiful silvery greens of countless shrubby trees, deeper tones of Lombardy Poplars and other species while every other piece of fertile ground was intensively cultivated and producing grain and fine vegetables, plus vines, apricots, pistachios, apples, and cherries. Road sides were colourful with a myriad of different wild flowers, remnants of a brilliant display of earlier weeks.

We heard the joyous songs of Skylarks and the twitter of Goldfinches, saw striking Black-headed Buntings sitting a-top tall docks and thistles. In one area, near water, we saw a nest or two of the Great White Stork balanced precariously on the top of a power pole or on man-made supports put up especially for their benefit and each carrying two or three young in varying stages of development. Occasionally we saw Black Storks or the odd Grey Heron searching a lake's foreshore and once a lone Ruddy Shelduck.

Here and there we passed closely built groups of high, ugly and half-finished houses in advantageous positions, all seemingly waiting for some population explosion in the future, but the villages were picturesque, if mostly primitive, many tumbledown and very old. Groups of beautiful dark-eyed solemn children stared silently, then broke into smiles and laughter as we waved. Their parents, more reticent at first, soon also responded and turned out to be warm and friendly people who, at one place, served us glasses of yoghurt, taken with a sprinkle of salt. Womenfolk in the country all observing strict Muslin decorum, were clad in voluminous figure-hiding garb from head to toe. Both men and women toiled long hours bent double in the fields as they tended their crops by hand. Antique wooden-wheeled carts drawn by donkeys lent the scene some Biblical air. Indeed, the only apparent modern aids were huge old tractors and engines lifting water from their bores or wells.

From roadside copses and along tree-lined watercourses came tantalising bird voices or brief sightings. Plain brown birds with lovely songs we tentatively identified as Nightingales. Once a beautiful Red-backed Shrike, another time a Grey Wagtail waiting quietly on a wire with a mouthful of food. We could not locate the nest. In all the towns and villages we noticed House Sparrows by the dozen, Collared Doves, Feral Pigeons and Starlings.

The highlight of my Turkish visit was to spend four days in Cappadocia, a strange and fascinating area where old volcanic plateaux had been eroded over the centuries into bizarre conformations. Many sticking up now like tall, thin pointed fingers, were still capped with topknots of basalt of a different hue, others looked like ungainly mushrooms with "Tam-o-Shanters" set at crazy angles known as "Fairy Chimneys". Many had rock-hewn dwellings, some of which were still inhabited, as were the rows of pigeon lofts, noticeable everywhere and used by the numerous Feral Pigeons. A strange and amazing scene.

All around the chimneys, Swallows and Martins swooped and soared while, particularly in the evenings, large companies of Swifts dived in, out and around at break-neck speed, screaming with those high-pitched cries which to me are so evocative of Mediterranean holidays of the past.

From our hotel in the Cappadocian village of Urgup we heard the tales of a bird paradise in the Sultan Marshes some 70 km to the south. This we were determined to check out. Rather late in the day

we found the place, a huge broad valley, flat, open and treeless, covered in a heavy haze. A strong gusty and chilly wind blew across the marshes which was a surprise after the heat we had just left. At the tiny hamlet, we learned that birdwatchers came frequently and were taken by punt by the cafe owner. He gave us a good meal of Kebabs accompanied by helpings of bulgar. This we discovered was a much used grain in Turkey, perhaps akin to barley. Had we been adequately clad and had enough time, we could have departed then and there. Instead we walked as far as possible on dry land and watched the activities of Black-headed Gulls, Squacco Herons, White-winged Black Terns, a Great White Egret and others, intermittently put to flight by a low flying raptor, possibly a harrier. Unfortunately our time was too limited to return to this promising wetland area.

The following day we ventured into one of the underground cities, excavated out of the volcanic tufa and deepened progressively to provide extra dwelling space as refuges in times of trouble from the fifth century onward. Later that day we crossed a wide plateau with the extinct volcano, Hasan Dag, still partially snow-covered, looming in the distance. We descended into a chasm-like, hidden valley - Ihlara - with the old village at the bottom nestling beside tall Poplars edging the Melendiz River. A quiet walk beside the rushing stream gave us sights of Rock Nuthatches, glimpses of a Spotted Woodpecker species and Nightingales to listen to, while Swallows and Martins swooped and dived above the water. As we left, we saw a beautiful little Black Redstart.

On our drives I sometimes caught sight of different and exciting birds. Once we disturbed a marvellous pair of Hoopoes and saw Bee-eaters sitting on a powerline. But when we stopped of course all the birds vanished!

Tantalising, fascinating, strange and above all crying out for another visit - these were some of my impressions from this ancient land.

Ann Shore

## TWITCH-A-THON

Congratulations are in order to members, Pat McConnell and Kath Watson, who teamed with Terry Reis and Michael Mathieson, to come second in this year's Queensland Twitch Competition in October. Their team recorded 207 species in the 24 hour period and were pipped at the post by a Townsville Team with 223. They were winning right up until the final phone call. No doubt Pat & C are already strategically planning for next year's attempt at the title.

## BIRD LIFE IN INDIA

Shortly before my departure for India, Ann Shore arrived with a book for me to read entitled "The Fall of a Sparrow" by Salim Ali. This autobiography by India's foremost Ornithologist changed my priorities and enriched my time in India. However an impending trip to India is not a prerequisite to enjoyment of this beautifully written book.

Upon arriving at ICRISAT near Hyderabad in central southern India, I discovered that this Research Centre had over 3,000 acres of land ideally suited to birdwatching, with lakes, woodlands, crops and grasses. There was a check list of over 250 species well prepared with locations and time of year sighted. The campus library had the 10 volume set of Salim Ali - Indian Birds. My own single

volume book seemed very inadequate in comparison.

My day often started at 6:00 due to the oppressive heat in June. By 10:00 I could be found in the air-conditioned library trying to discover what these birds were. Except for the waders most were completely new to me. A few of the most impressive included the Hoopoes, which looks like a woodpecker in drag, the Grey Hornbill, whose double hooked bill makes for top-heavy flying, the Pheasant-tailed Jacana, which was probably designed by a committee, and last but not least the majestic Peacock. My list added up to 133 species, however about 70 on the checklist are winter visitors. I've requested that our return trip next year be in the winter for more reasons than one.

One highlight was a weekend trip with the Andra Pradesh Bird Club to Rollapadu Bustard Sanctuary. The Great Indian Bustard is threatened with extinction due to increasing cultivation of the grassy plains they depend on. We travelled 300 km south of Hyderabad by mini-bus arriving at the forestry guest house to find accommodation to be one small room for 22 people. We overcame that problem with the 7 women just fitting with sleeping bags covering the floor. The men found shelter in the education centre.

We set out soon after on what seemed like a wild goose chase but eventually we all had good sightings of the Great Bustards. We found about 12 birds which was far short of what had been seen in previous years. We also sighted numerous larks and finches typical of those rocky plains. The most impressive sight was watching the Bustards take off in flight with their wingspan of 7-8 feet. As the only foreigner on this trip I felt privileged to be accepted as any other birder and came away having made many friends.

The Spotted-bill Pelican is another Indian bird threatened with extinction. The loss of suitable nesting trees is one explanation. In Kanataka, the pelicanry thought to be over 500 years old is having problems. The population has dropped from 2000 breeding birds to 330 birds today. Nestlings are falling out of trees and either starving or being killed by dogs. Volunteers have started a nursery to feed and return nestlings back to the wild. These nestlings eat one kilo of fish a day. I combined a trip to this area, 900 km south west of Hyderabad, with a trip to the Mysore Bird Sanctuary and the Kabini Jungle Lodge. The pelicans nest in January so I'll have to wait for my next trip to see the nestlings but at Mysore the season is in full swing.

Painted Storks and Open-billed Storks were predominant but Pond Heron, Night Heron, Ibis and Egret were present in the thousands. The Jungle Lodge gave me the opportunity to see woodland birds such as the Golden-backed Woodpecker and Racket-tailed Drongo to mention only a few.

Next year my plan is to go to Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary in Rajasthan, Northern India, in their winter around November, which is prime season there for birdwatching. This sanctuary was established due to the work of Salim Ali. The water body had been created by the local maharajah for a hunting area. Reports give the number of birds shot in one morning as being in the thousands. It is now the largest bird sanctuary in India attracting visitors from around the world. Bicycles are available to cover the large distances and boats are also used to advantage. But I must stop now and wait until I have been there and have another instalment.

Dana McCown

### SPECIES CENSUS, 28-29 October 1995.

This year's census of the club's survey area was well-supported and, as usual, was an enjoyable, hectic affair. A total of 147 species were recorded for the weekend. The shift to a 48-hour period (as opposed to the 24-hour period of previous counts) was welcomed by participants but, in somewhat of a

surprise, had no significant impact on the total number of species recorded compared with the previous year (145 species).

The effect of the prolonged drought on the local waterbird habitats and the prevailing hot conditions during the census definitely didn't help our cause. I suspect that for the same amount of effort in a good year, we could reasonably expect another 10-20 species at least. There were several noticeable absentees from the list. Of these, some were absent as a result of the drought. Nocturnal species were missed because, to my knowledge, nobody went spotlighting around Helidon, while the remainder were simply downright uncooperative on the day. The more common species we missed included:

Royal Spoonbill, Yellow-billed Spoonbill, Great Egret, Intermediate Egret, Rufous Night Heron, Banded Lapwing, Latham's Snipe, Little Lorikeet, Southern Boobook, White-throated Nightjar, Singing Bushlark, Tree Martin, Golden Whistler, Restless Flycatcher, Tawny Grassbird and Rufous Songlark.

The number of species and significant or interesting sightings for each sector are summarised below. Thanks to all participants in the census for a job well done. If anyone is interested in doing a similar census at another time of the year I would like to hear from them. It would be good to repeat the exercise in Autumn for instance if we can muster enough starters.

Sector	No. spp	Highlights
1	40	Wedge-tailed Eagle, Lewin's Honeyeater
2	39	
3	93	White-headed Pigeon, Yellow-tailed Blk.-Cockatoo, Yellow-eyed Cuckoo-shrike
4	62	Eurasian Coot
5	64	Australian Owlet-nightjar
6	53	Brown Falcon, Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo
7	99	Collared Sparrowhawk, Painted Button-Quail, Satin Flycatcher, Plum-headed Finch, White-winged Chough
8	58	Magpie Goose, Spotted Harrier, Marsh Harrier, Brown Songlark

**Total number of species: 147**

**Sector Areas:** 1=NW Toowoomba; 2=SW Toowoomba; 3=NE Toowoomba incl. Redwood Park; 4=SE Toowoomba incl. Waterbird Habitat; 5=Withcott, Postman's Ridge, Lockyer Siding; 6=Blanchview, Stockyard Ck, Flagstone Ck; 7=Helidon, Carpendale; 8 Lower Flagstone Ck areas.

**Species recorded:** Australasian Grebe, Darter, Little Black Cormorant, Little Pied Cormorant, Pacific Heron, White-faced Heron, Cattle Egret, Sacred Ibis, Straw-necked Ibis, Magpie Goose, Plumed Whistling-Duck, Pacific Black Duck, Grey Teal, Hardhead, Maned Duck, Black-shouldered Kite, Pacific Baza, Collared Sparrowhawk, Wedge-tailed Eagle, Spotted Harrier, Marsh Harrier, Australian Hobby, Brown Falcon, Australian Kestrel, Australian Brush-turkey, Brown Quail, Painted Button-Quail, Dusky Moorhen, Purple Swamphen, Eurasian Coot, Masked Lapwing, Black-fronted Plover, Black-winged Stilt, White-headed Pigeon, Feral Pigeon, Spotted Turtle-dove, Brown Cuckoo-Dove, Peaceful Dove, Bar-shouldered Dove, Crested Pigeon, Wonga Pigeon, Galah, Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, Rainbow Lorikeet, Scaly-breasted Lorikeet, Australian King-Parrot, Cockatiel, Pale-headed Rosella, Red-rumped Parrot, Pallid Cuckoo, Brush Cuckoo,

**Species recorded (continued...)**

Fan-tailed Cuckoo, Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo, Shining Bronze-Cuckoo, Common Koel, Channel-billed Cuckoo, Pheasant Coucal, Tawny Frogmouth, Australian Owlet-nightjar, Azure Kingfisher, Laughing Kookaburra, Sacred Kingfisher, Rainbow bee-eater, Dollarbird, White-backed Swallow, Welcome Swallow, Fairy Martin, Richard's Pipit, Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike, White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike, Yellow-eyed Cuckoo-shrike, Cicadabird, White-winged triller, Varied Triller, Eastern Yellow Robin, Jacky Winter, Crested Shrike-tit, Rufous Whistler, Grey Shrike-thrush, Black-faced Monarch, Spectacled Monarch, Leaden Flycatcher, Satin Flycatcher, Rufous Fantail, Grey Fantail, Willie Wagtail, Eastern Whipbird, Grey-crowned Babbler, Clamorous Reed-warbler, Golden-headed Cisticola, Brown Songlark, Superb Fairy-wren, Variegated Fairy-wren, Red-backed Fairy-wren, Large-billed Scrubwren, White-browed Scrubwren, Speckled Warbler, Weebill, Brown Gerygone, White-throated Gerygone, Brown Thornbill, Buff-rumped Thornbill, Yellow-rumped Thornbill, Yellow Thornbill, Striated Thornbill, White-throated Treecreeper, Red Wattlebird, Striped Honeyeater, Noisy Friarbird, Little Friarbird, Blue-faced Honeyeater, Noisy Miner, Lewin's Honeyeater, Yellow-faced Honeyeater, Fuscous Honeyeater, Brown-headed Honeyeater, White-throated Honeyeater, White-naped Honeyeater, Brown Honeyeater, Scarlet Honeyeater, Mistletoebird, Spotted Pardalote, Striated Pardalote, Silveryeye, House Sparrow, Red-browed Firetail, Zebra Finch, Double-barred Finch, Plum-headed Finch, Chestnut-breasted Mannikin, Common Starling, Common Myna, Olive-backed Oriole, Figbird, Spangled Drongo, Regent Bowerbird, Satin Bowerbird, White-winged Chough, Australian Magpie Lark, Grey Butcherbird, Pied Butcherbird, Australian Magpie, Pied Currawong, Torresian Crow.

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

**December Outing**

**Location:** Lockyer Wetlands  
**Date:** Saturday, 16 December  
**Leader:** Michael Atzeni 392 761  
**Time:** 7:00 am

**Info:** Please note the changed date and venue (previously Redwood) in response to the recent rains. At last we can really tour the wetlands of the valley. As some find it hard to make the Sunday outings, we're having this outing on Saturday. Forget the Christmas shopping. Meet at Lake Apex, Gatton. For those who want to kick off earlier (say 5am), ring me by Friday and we'll arrange a meeting place. BYO everything including a hat, full petrol tank and gumboots.

**January Outing**

**Location:** Bunya Mountains N.P.  
**Date:** Sunday, 28 January  
**Leader:** Michael Atzeni 392 761  
**Time:** 7:00 am

**Info:** Should be magnificent after the rain. BYO everything. Meet at Dpt. Environment and Heritage headquarters in the Park. More in next newsletter.

**February Outing**

**Location:** Beale's Property, Gowrie Junction  
**Date:** Saturday, 24 February  
**Leader:** Gloria Glass 307 054  
**Time:** 7:00 am

**Info:** This is an area of softwood scrub on the north-western side of Toowoomba. Gloria has an excellent species list for the property which tends to attract species of drier habitats such as the Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater, one we don't record often a little further east. Head west along Bridge St till about 3 km past the airport, then turn right into Gowrie Junction Rd. About 4 km on you'll cross the railway line and the creek. Turn left at the shop and proceed about 1.5 km and take a sharp right onto a small dirt road (Maggie Lane) with a letterbox marked 'Beale' at the entrance. BYO everything.

If undeliverable return to  
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