



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'

NEWSLETTER No. 241 - March 1996

EDITORIAL:

The big news this month was of course the **RAMSAR CONFERENCE** in Brisbane. I have written a background to it. (Thanks to the Australian Nature Conservation Agency.) In keeping with this theme is a story of a **wetland breeding colony** from Nicci Thompson. Good to hear that Richard Thomis' broken leg is on the mend after a very rugged game of Soccer. He also found time to **document his birding sojourn to Cairns**. We also have another part of **Koji Tagi's** visit to the same area and an **outing report** from Gloria Glass. Many thanks to all these contributors.

1996 RAMSAR CONVENTION

The sixth Conference of Contracting parties to the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Convention) was held at the Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre from 19-27 March 1996. This was the first time the parties have met in the Southern Hemisphere. The Conference marked the 25th anniversary of Ramsar and it was particularly appropriate that Australia hosted this conference, being recognised as the first Contracting Party to the Convention.

What is the Ramsar Convention?

On 3 February 1971, representatives of 18 nations, including Australia met in the small Iranian town of Ramsar to put their signatures to the text of a remarkable treaty. The Convention aims to conserve one of the most threatened group of habitats, wetlands. These are shallow, open waters such as lakes, rivers and coastal fringes, and any land which is regularly or intermittently saturated by water, such as marshes, swamps and floodplains. Presently there are over 80 countries which are Contracting Parties to the Convention covering 75% of the world's lands. This number is expected to increase to 100 within the next 2-3 years.

How does the Ramsar Convention operate?

The Ramsar Convention Bureau, based at Gland in Switzerland, provides secretariat support for the implementation for the treaty. The Bureau is funded by annual contributions from each of the contracting countries. Every three years a Conference of Contracting Parties is held where the activities

are reviewed and new policies and initiatives are set. Each party presents a report of its activities including a record of additional listed sites, and any difficulties with the management of these sites, and its efforts to promote the wise use of wetlands nationally.

Wise Use

Many human practices or activities are ecologically unsustainable and cause degradation and loss of wetlands. The Ramsar Convention has developed guidelines for the wise use of wetlands. This concept seeks to modify human use of wetlands so there is continuous benefit to present generations while at the same time the natural properties such as the food webs and other ecological processes are maintained for future generations. In the next newsletter I will discuss Australia's role in Ramsar and the results of the conference. Already the good news is that two new sites have been selected in Queensland - Currawinya in the south-west and Shoalwater Bay near Rockhampton.

BEAL'S PROPERTY OUTING - 24 FEBRUARY 1996

Six members arrived at the Beal's property on newly-named Magpie Lane hoping especially to see the much-advertised Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater. They were not disappointed as it was one of the birds seen in the first few minutes near the house. Snatches of song were heard later, with a far-away sighting.

Very light rain overnight made the long grass and rough terrain sodden as we climbed the hill. However, flocks of finches, both Double-barred and Zebra more than made up for the discomfort. There were a few Superb Fairy-wrens too, as well as several Speckled Warblers.

A commotion by Grey Butcherbirds and Black-faced Cuckoo-shrikes and others enticed a few of us through shoulder-high cobblers pegs to see what the fuss was all about. Was it a snake, a goanna or an owl? A number of Noisy Miners and a Striped Honeyeater were identified with the other screaming birds and, at last, a well-camouflaged (from us, but not alas from the screaming birds) Boobook could be seen. We quickly withdrew lest the Boobook feel it had to vacate the area and, shortly after as we struggled around through the c-pegs, we were pleased to see the Miners depart and the screaming stop.

Diana Beal, arrived up Baxter's Road with our morning tea and reported the Frogmouths were in their day-time roost in Glencoe Road, a spot they have used on and off for at least ten years. Alex said he could see a Wedge-tailed Eagle high overhead, but the rest of us thought he was joking about an aircraft and missed seeing it before it disappeared behind a cloud. Both small raptors - Nankeen Kestrel and Black-shouldered Kite were seen floating on the strong wind. As some members had duties calling at home, we made our way back and had to miss looking for the Rufous Fantail and Yellow Thornbills had seen the day before.

Along with the Boobook, the finches were undoubtedly the Birds of the Day. One Double-bar's nest in the hanging baskets on the house veranda contained young, while at least six nests were counted in and orange tree in the garden. The full list of 34 species has been lodged with the Records Officer.

Gloria Glass

WILDLIFE WATCHING AT CAIRNS PART 3

The first thing I had to do was to pick up my friends from Cairns after saying goodbye to Jan and John. As I had some spare time, I stopped on the Black Mountains road where I was greeted by a family of Lovely Fairy-wrens. To my mind, the male Lovely Fairy-wren is much more colourful than the male Variegated Fairy-wren.

At 9:00 am, I arrived at Cairns to collect my friend, Mr Kurisaki, who is a famous birder in

Japan. He has seen over 470 species in Japan! (Japan has approximately 570 species.) Our plan was to reach Julatten Kingfisher Park. As we were in no hurry, we decided to visit several promising sites, but unfortunately, didn't see anything of special note.

When we reached Kingfisher Park, we greeted the owners Geoff and Sandra who informed us that the Buff-breasted Paradise Kingfisher had been seen quite recently. There are bird-feeders in the park at which both Yellow and White-throated Honeyeaters can be seen regularly. All you have to do is sit down in sight of a feeder.

After 3:00 pm, we walked around the camp. Black-faced Monarchs and Little Shrike-thrushes visited from the forest and disappeared again. Red-legged Pademelons were more common than the larger Agile Wallabies in the park. Near the gate, we saw something fly into the bushes - a blue bird with a white rump. Buff-breasted Paradise Kingfisher!! It perched on a low branch in dense scrub and was easily recognised by its red beak, orange belly and blue back. Unfortunately, this very shy bird was not interested in being photographed.

At night we went looking for nocturnal birds and were lucky enough to find at least three Barking Owls including a chick. We failed to see the Lesser Sooty Owl although we did hear its hysterical call. (To be continued in next edition...)

Koji Tagi

MEMBERS' BIRD NOTES: All sightings are submitted by members of the Toowoomba Bird Observers Inc. Accuracy not vouched for by TBO. Please check with observer before citing.

Diamond Dove	20.12.95	Merifield Pk, Withcott	DMc
Little Bittern	29.02.96	Forest Hill	JH
Whiskered Tern	11.02.96	Lockyer Ck, Helidon	AS
Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos (3)	18.03.96	Table Top Est	K&WMcK
Red-tailed Black Cockatoos (7)	06.02.96	Harlaxton	J&OB
Spotted Harrier	19.03.96	DPI, Toowoomba	MA
" "	20.03.96	Grantham	JWH
Rainbow Bee-eater	20.03.96	Wilsonton	NT
Buff-banded Rail (2 adults + chicks)	14.02.96	Helidon Spa	AS,AW
Rufous Songlark	14.02.96	Back Flagstone Ck Rd	AS,AW
Down Songlark	14.02.96	Iredale Rd	AS,AW
Great Cormorant (200+ flying)	28.02.96	Range near Rocky Ck	AS,AW
Square-tailed Kite	03.03.96	Hood's Lagoon	RH,MA,PMc

MA	M Atzeni	J&OB	J & O Booth	JH	J Hadley	JWH	J Harris
RH	R Hobson	PMc	P McConnell	DMc	D McCown		
AS	A Shore	NT	N Thompson	AW	A Warburton		
K&WMcK	K & W McKeown						

A WETLAND BREEDING COLONY OF SOME MAGNITUDE

One Saturday in mid-February a small group of local birders shared a very enjoyable experience. During the week we were informed of an extensive breeding colony of waterbirds in a swamp on private property near Dalby. This property owner is aware of the conservation value of the colony and keeps all access gates to the swamp locked to protect the breeding birds. We were fortunate indeed to be allowed to share his delight in this colony.

The swamp is a natural ephemeral fresh water type that forms after heavy rain. It is ringed by

Brigalow and the odd Poplar Box, but the trees around which the swamp accumulates are mostly Belah. The treed area which is quite shallow and contains many fallen logs and some emergent reeds is about 500 metres long and averages about 100 metres in width. To the north-east of the swamp is a dam which provides deep open water. To the south is open swampy ground covered by dense grass.

We found it difficult to estimate the number of nests or birds in the area, but a conservative estimate of birds present would be 5000. Some Belah trees contained as many as thirty-five (35) nests and birds were present in all developmental stages (eggs to adults). Species nesting in the trees were:-

SPECIES	PERCENT	POSITION OF NEST
Royal Spoonbill	10	Very tops of trees
Rufous Night Herons	10	Top to middle, near centre
Pacific Herons	1	Very tops, small colony
Intermediate & Great Egrets	50	Middle branches
Little Black & Little Pied Cormorant	9	A few trees in the centre
Sacred Ibis	20	Mainly lower branches

These figures are estimates, but with limited time it is the best we can do. Other evidence of breeding includes :-

Hardhead	1 brood of 8 swimming in open dam
Grey Teal	1 brood swimming in open dam
Pacific Black Duck	1 brood of 11 among logs in swamp
Pink-eared Duck	1 brood of 3 swimming in open dam

Other species present, but not providing evidence of breeding were:-

Black Swan (2), Dusky Moorhen (2), Eurasian Coot (5), Australasian Shoveler (2), Little Egret (2), Wood Duck, Straw-necked Ibis (20+), Gull-billed Tern, Whiskered Tern, White-bellied Sea-Eagle (2), Whistling Kite (2), Hoary-headed Grebe, Australasian Grebe, Black-winged Stilt.

I have included in the above lists only the birds in the Murray-Darling Census. There were, of course, many of the other species that one would expect in that habitat. It is a very rich and diverse little site. It also appears to be a healthy colony. We only saw a few dead birds and there was no stench of rotting eggs or carcasses. For kilometres around the swamp there was the continual movement of foraging adult birds.

The surrounding country is partially or wholly cleared gilgai soil which is pock-marked with "melon-holes" - all full and hosting myriads of insects and small vertebrates. Frogs are abundant. The colony is still very active and most species are still actively building. We observed birds from all species returning with building material. Belah and Brigalow twigs and leaves appear to be the favoured material. Rufous Night Herons seem to prefer Brigalow twigs and leaves for this purpose. Many of the juvenile birds are still present especially young egrets and night herons. Many of these juveniles have congregated on the logs below the Belahs. It is hoped that they will be independent before the water evaporates and they are vulnerable to attack by foxes and feral cats.

Malcolm Wilson was able to return to the swamp on 24 February and reports that numbers have reduced slightly, but a great number of juveniles are on the swamp itself, fighting, feeding and exercising their wings - a wonderful sight. One group of visitors had reported some Straw-necked Ibis nesting, but

Malcolm could not verify this. Apparently between 5 pm and 7 pm there is great activity as the Egrets and Ibis return to roost for the evening and the Rufous Night Herons depart to feed.

It was a very enjoyable experience and we feel it is probably a significant breeding site in good years. The property owner indicated that it had been used by large numbers of waterbirds in the past, when conditions were conducive to breeding.

Nicci Thompson

BIRDING IN NORTH QUEENSLAND

One of the ornithological highlights of a recent trip to Cairns was a day's outing with Del Richards of Fine Feather Tours, around Mossman. We managed 105 species for the day with 15 new birds for me.

The previous evening we booted into Newell Beach caravan park as we would be leaving from there at 6.30am the next morning. Brown-backed Honeyeaters were nesting in the park, Torresian Imperial Pigeons flew overhead and Sunbirds were common. We boarded Del's 4WD with much excitement and anticipation. Great views of a Collared Sparrowhawk were quickly obtained as it chased Plumbeous Friarbirds in an area where Metallic Starlings had a nesting colony. The more manageable prey may have held the hawk's initial attraction and it was unsuccessful with the friarbirds. A quick visit to mangroves produced Macleay's Honeyeater and Mangrove Robin before we headed to higher ground away from the mosquitoes.

We visited rainforest next and in quick succession saw Noisy Pitta, Yellow-spotted and Graceful honeyeaters, Grey Whistler, Yellow-breasted Boatbill and Victoria's Riflebird. I realised how on previous trips to Cairns I had done a number of Yellow-spotted Honeyeaters a dis-service, thinking I was still seeing Lewin's. Del's local expertise proved invaluable at such times. No such identification concerns at our next stop as the Buff-breasted Paradise Kingfisher appeared on cue to Del's tape of its call, and we had excellent views of it. As a bonus, a pair of Bridled Honeyeaters also appeared.

The non-birding highlight of the day was definitely lunch as Del's trailer was magically turned into a mobile barbecue. Spectacled Monarchs entertained us while we ate and Black Butcherbirds reminded us we were in the tropics. Nearby we found Brown-backed and Yellow Honeyeaters nesting in adjacent trees.

While we were driving through savanna woodland, a Lemon-bellied Flycatcher was deftly located, a bird I would have surely driven past on my own. A unique feature of the day was the great range of habitats we were able to visit. This was exemplified by a salt marsh, otherwise hidden within a cane-farm. Here we saw Singing Bushlarks, Eastern Curlew, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Lesser Golden Plover and Beach Thick-knee.

As we neared our base, Barn Swallows were noted on the telegraph wires, but a more exciting find were the Pacific Swallows. This bird has recently been discovered in the north by Del and Lloyd Neilsen. As a fully accredited bird bander, Del had been able to confirm the identification at close quarters.

All in all it was a great day's birding. Fine Feather Tours are to be strongly recommended and I would urge any members visiting the area to make themselves a booking. Del Richards' address is PO Box 853, Mossman, Queensland 4873 or on 070 983103.

Richard Thomis.

COMING EVENTS

March Outing:

Location: Ravensbourne N.P.
Date: Sunday, 31 March
Leader: Michael Atzeni 076 392 761
Time: 7.30 a.m.

Meet at the bottom picnic area. BYO everything.

April Outing

Location: Silver Pinch/Blanchview area
Date: Saturday, 27 April
Contact: Pat Cleary 303 352
Time: 7:30 am

Meet at the junction of the Blanchview and Flagstone Ck Roads. We will have access to two private properties during the course of the outing. BYO everything.

May Outing:

Location: Redwood Park, Toowoomba
Date: Sunday, 26 May
Leader: Pat McConnell 976 141
Time: 7:00 am

Meet at the bottom entrance on the straight stretch of the highway descending down to Withcott.

June Outing

Location: Girraween NP
Date: 30 June
Leader: Sharon Frederiks 331 169
Time: 7:00 am

More in next newsletter.

If undeliverable return to
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