



TOOWOOMBA BIRD OBSERVERS inc.

(An Affiliated Group of the Bird Observers Club of Australia)

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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. 254 - April 1997

EDITORIAL:

How the pendulum swings. El Nino is in the news again and many districts are enjoying better birding conditions than Toowoomba.

Good to hear Fiona Wells from Warwick is much better after a recent illness and is off to Lord Howe Island with husband, Ken, for a well-earned holiday. We also wish two other recuperating members, Laurie Atzeni and Nicci Thompson, a speedy return to the field. Sadly, we bid farewell to John Lovett, who is reluctantly returning to England. We wish him all the best and hope one day he is in a position to settle back here permanently.

Chris Cameron delivered a thoroughly enjoyable slide presentation to a packed room at the Town Hall on the 14 April and Pat McConnell has published a book on the birds of Redwood Park. Congratulations to both Chris and Pat for jobs well done. More about Chris's talk next newsletter.

Ken Wells wrote last year regarding the exciting wetlands near Moree. Thanks to Ken, the club has received an invitation to visit the Gingham Watercourse NW of Moree. If you want to see breeding waterbirds by the score, this year is the best for many years. Further details are contained in this newsletter.

This newsletter also contains an article on the Red-lored Whistler and I finish a report on Bird Banding.

THE GINGHAM WATERCOURSE WATERBIRD SPECTACULAR

The following article was provided by Howard Blackburn, "Crinolyn", Moree, in conjunction with an invitation to members and other interested persons to witness this wonderful breeding event for themselves. Consequently we have had to act quickly and have proposed a campout for the long weekend 3-5 May. At this stage we would probably dedicate the Sunday to the waterbirds and then Saturday and Monday (if you stay Sunday night) could be used for travel time and bushbirding or whatever.

Shearers huts are available for 12 people at \$10/head/night. They are self-contained with kitchen, a stove, crockery, cutlery, cooking utensils, beds, mattresses etc and a shower and toilet. The huts are OK and central to most of the waterbird action.

The rookeries are on private property and a local guide is required with all groups. Depending on the conditions at the time, sometimes it is necessary to use 4 x 4 farm quadrunners to get to rookeries. These can carry two adults and a bit of baggage. Unfortunately, all this costs time, money, fuel, wear-and-tear etc. It has been suggested that the following charges have to be imposed to cover costs.

- Local guide \$100/day
- Quad. bike \$50/day
- Landholder access \$50/day

Those intending to go must be prepared to share these expenses.

"The Gwydir River was a terminal river within its own valley prior to river regulation in the 1970's. That is the river entered the watercourse area west of Moree and spread out over a vast floodplain and wetland area, which supported abundant wildlife as well as excellent livestock grazing opportunities. Small to medium river flows passed naturally to the watercourse - wetland area. Little water left the Gwydir valley except in times of very high river flows or major floods.

This all changed with the construction of Copeton Dam near Inverell as well as "Tareelaroo" Weir which diverts water from Gwydir to Mehi River, east of Moree and also "Booloroo" Weir, which diverts water from Gwydir River to Carole Creek, north of Moree. These structures have been operated to supply water to ever increasing irrigation demands, resulting in the drying out of the watercourse area causing many changes.

The area of normally wet land has been reduced dramatically and wildlife opportunities all but disappeared. Livestock carrying capacities have been severely reduced and land use has changed largely to cereal cropping in some areas. Changes to water management rules late in 1995 allowed for the watercourse area to receive some water and good rains followed shortly after, then the huge waterbird breeding event of 1996 got under way.

The area again has been blessed with good summer rains and a change of river flows resulting in another truly great waterbird breeding event currently taking place. Prior to late 1995 there had been no significant breeding event for at least 14 years. I believe this current event is larger than the 1996 event. The sheer number and variety of birds has to be seen to be appreciated."

Included in Howard's information were extracts from his diary and a list of 57 species of waterbirds observed in the Gwydir wetlands since 1995 of which 29 have been known to breed there. Some of the more unusual sightings include Freckled Duck, Blue-billed Duck, Black-tailed Native-hen, Brolga, Black-necked Stork, Banded Stilt, Little Bittern and Australian Bittern.

"There are a number of differences between the 1997 and 1996 events. The first is timing. Birds commenced nesting in mid-December 1995 to start the 1996 event, while they commenced in early 1997, about 6 weeks later than last year. The natural flooding which triggers these waterbird breeding events was also different for various reasons, including later rainfall, quite different soil moisture and vegetation conditions. The 1997 flooding extended further west than in 1996, resulting in larger feeding grounds for the birds. There is more bird traffic west of the rookery this season than in 1996.

Birds are difficult to see on the ground this year because of increased vegetation. There are larger groups of White-faced Herons and greater numbers of Royal Spoonbills, egrets and Pacific Herons in the Gingham Watercourse this year. Another difference is the condition of the birds on arrival in the watercourse. They were strong healthy birds and seemed to get straight on with the job of nesting this year. Straw-necked

Ibis were laying eggs within 2 weeks of the first drop of rain. In the previous season, birds appeared tired and lean and needed to rest up and put on body weight before getting excited about the nesting job.

The western area of the Gingham Watercourse is now a real banquet area for the birds as water is receding into pools, trapping tonnes of frogs, tadpoles, water borne bugs and beetles of various types, with a sprinkling of grasshoppers as well. At this stage chicks are doing very well. Water levels in the rookery have been maintained at a satisfactory level for the ibis so far."

Howard Blackburn, "Crinolyn", Moree 2400

BIRD BANDING (Continued)

Banders.

Banders are carefully trained how to catch, handle and band birds without injuring them. Training normally takes two years and involves a great deal of practice. There are now about 800 banders around Australia with another 250 in training.

Banding and Recoveries.

Like all research, a banding project starts with a question the bander wants to answer. The ABBBS can help banders decide how to collect the right information to answer their question. Bands are sent to banders and their work begins. As time goes by, banders send in information about where, when and what type of birds their bands were put on. The ABBBS records the information on computer. If one of those birds is caught again, they work out the minimum distance the bird has travelled. As many parts of Australia are sparsely populated, many banders recapture birds which they have banded.

Band Design.

Good band design means making sure that the bands don't injure or change the way they live, even after many years. A band must be the correct size and shape and be tough enough to outlast its wearer without causing injury. A band for a Willy Wagtail needs only to last 15 years while a band on a Wandering Albatross might have to survive more than 60 years of constant dunking in seawater! **Band size** is most important - too loose and the band might slip down over the foot, but too tight and it could cut into the bird's leg. **Band shape** is also important for some species. Pelicans have legs that are egg-shaped and pelican bands must be shaped that way also so they don't rub and cause injuries. Some kingfishers have very short legs, so narrower bands are needed for them. Penguins' legs are so short that leg bands can't be safely used at all. Instead, flat metal tags are put around their flippers.

In time, even metal tags can wear out. How quickly depends on the habits of the bird, where it lives and what the material from which the band is made. Some of the earliest bands used on seabirds were made of copper but corroded too quickly and had to be replaced. The metals used now are long-lasting and hard-wearing. Small sized bands are mostly constructed from pure aluminium alloy. Larger bands are usually made from stainless steel.

Other marking techniques.

Sometimes banders can collect enough information without re-trapping birds to read their bird numbers. There are several ways to do this:-

Colour bands.

Several coloured bands can be placed on the legs of birds. The combination of colours can be seen at a distance to identify individual birds.

Leg flags.

These are plastic leg bands with a coloured flap which are easier to see than a colour band by itself. Leg flags are commonly used on migratory wading birds to show the area where they were banded rather than to identify individual birds.

Colour dye.

Dying plumage is used only for short-term studies because dye lasts only until the birds moult their feathers (one year at most).

Readable bands.

Metal or plastic bands with large numbers have been very successfully used on several types of birds including Silver Gulls and Peregrine Falcons. Birders often have to use binoculars to read these bands.

Wing tags.

These are patches of coloured fabric and usually have a number on them. They are attached to the wing and have been used successfully on egrets, kookaburras and cockatoos.

Technological solutions.

Radio Tracking.

Many researchers have attached small (1-2 gram) radio transmitters to birds to track them as they go about their lives. The tiny batteries last only a few weeks.

Satellite tracking.

More powerful (and heavier) transmitters can be tracked by satellites and have been used on larger birds such as albatrosses, geese and cranes. As transmitters and batteries become smaller, it may be possible to track smaller birds the same way.

Passive induction transponders (PITs).

PITs are small devices that can be injected under the skin. A special scanner can read the PIT's numbers when it is close by. PITs are commonly used to identify pets and livestock and have been used to study Penguins in the Antarctic.

Smart tags.

These tags can be used to collect and store information such as temperature, air pressure and light intensity. When the tag is recovered, its information can be unloaded and analysed. Smart tags are already being used to study tuna and will soon be used to study albatross.

Other countries.

Many other countries also have banding schemes and their bands are occasionally found on birds in Australia. The ABBBS sends information about these recoveries to the foreign banding schemes, which in turn pass on the information to the people who banded the bird. Likewise, overseas schemes send the ABBBS information about the band they have recovered. Among these countries are Brazil, Japan, China, New Zealand, France, Russia, Germany, South Africa, Great Britain and USA.

RED-LORED WHISTLER

The Red-lored Whistler *Pachycephala rufogularis* is regarded as an uncommon to rare species and is one of the harder Australian birds to find. It is a mallee species found in limited localities in South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales. Brouwer and Garnet (1990) record the habitat as mallee eucalypts with a moderately dense but patchy shrub layer of Fringe-myrtle *Calytrix tetragona*, Porcupine Grass *Triodia irritans*, Desert Hakea *Hakea muelleriana*, Mallee Ti-tree *Leptospermum coriaceum*, Broom-bush *Melaleuca uncinata* and Desert Banksia *Banksia ornata*.

In December 1996 Terry Reis and I searched an area of mallee in Nombinnie Nature Reserve with the sole aim of seeing the Red-lored Whistler - the only mallee species to have eluded us. At first we searched areas with a fairly dense shrub layer of Broom-bush in association with Porcupine Grass and fallen timber. To see the whistler in this habitat would be very difficult even if we did manage to hear the bird calling, as we could only see a few metres in front of us in any direction. As this was proving very frustrating, if not impossible, we decided to try a different tactic. We would systematically search roadside habitat at specific intervals trying areas where visibility was greater.

On sunrise of the second morning we put our new plan into action. Within two hours of leaving the vehicle we were successful. At first we were frustrated by the sighting of a bird in juvenile plumage. In this plumage they are extremely difficult to separate from the Gilbert's Whistler *Pachycephala inornata*, a species of similar size also found in the mallee. We were confident with our identification but weren't really happy until the juvenile bird was joined by an adult male and female. Eventually excellent views were obtained. These were the only three individuals we saw in two days of searching. The habitat here was sparse, short mallee (about three metres high) with some triodia, Broom-bush and Spurwing Wattle *Acacia triptera*. Mallee Pine *Callitris preissii verrucosa*, though present elsewhere in the park was not present here. There was very little fallen timber in the area and visibility, though not good was better here than in areas which according to the literature appeared to be better.

The reserve is a very interesting area to bird with other species of interest being Black-eared Cuckoo, Spotted Nightjar, Southern Scrub-robin, Shy Heathwren and White-fronted Honeyeater.

Pat McConnell

Reference

Brouwer, J. & Garnett, S. (1990) Threatened Birds of Australia - An Annotated List. *Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union Report Number 68*. Melbourne : RAOU .

BIRDS OF REDWOOD PARK CHECKLIST

Our records officer, Pat McConnell, recently published a comprehensive and very useful booklet, "The Birds of Redwood Park Toowoomba - an annotated checklist". Pat has also included additional lists of mammals, reptiles and amphibians. The booklet is forty seven pages long and costs \$5.00 for TBOI Members and \$6 for non-members. Contact USQ Press on 312852 or 312630. Pat is happy to autograph copies.

I would like to congratulate Pat on behalf of TBOI for his initiative and hope his efforts raise public awareness regarding this great birding spot located on our doorstep. Please show your support by buying a copy and spreading the word.

Michael Atzeni.

WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY

World Environment Day will be celebrated on 01 June at Lake Annand.

This year the **theme** will be **For Life on Earth**. Please come along and celebrate from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Once again the TBO will have one of their very **informative displays**. We would be extremely grateful if you could volunteer to man the display for all or part of the day. Contact Ann if you can help out.

COMING EVENTS

April Outing: **Location:** Coal Creek, near Ipswich
 Date: Sunday, 27 April
 Leader: Ken McKeown 076 303 774
 Time: 7:30 a.m.

Info: UBD Map 47 A E1. Take the Kholo Turnoff on the Ipswich Bypass. Turn left at the first intersection and follow the Mine Museum signs. Turn right at the gravel road sign and meet in the carpark. Coal Creek is the botanical gardens of Ipswich and features many different habitats including the Bremer River. BYO everything including telescopes.

May Campout: **Location:** Gingham Watercourse, NW of Moree
 Dates: Sat/Sun/Mon, 3-5 May
 Coordinator: Michael Atzeni 076 392 761
 RSVP: Sunday, 27 April

Info: Refer to article in this N/L. We will probably have to meet a quota otherwise it will be too expensive for some to attend. Please contact Michael for directions. Allow 5 hours travel time from Toowoomba.

May Outing: **Location:** Hampton
 Date: Sunday, 25 May
 Leader: Michael Atzeni 076 392 761
 Time: 7:30 a.m.

Info: Meet at the Esk turnoff at Hampton. We will be visiting two private properties near Hampton, one of which backs onto remnant rainforest. Expect a variety of bush birds. BYO everything.

June Outing: **Location:** Braemar State Forest . No.4
 Date: Sunday, 29 June
 Leader: Malcolm Wilson 076 622 604

Info: This state forest near Kogan is well worth the trip according to Malcolm. More in next newsletter.

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