



TOOWOOMBA BIRD OBSERVERS inc.

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

P.O. Box 4730, Toowoomba East 4350

MEMBERSHIP: Adults/Families \$20 Students \$10

CLUB OFFICERS:

President -	Ken McKeown	07 4630 3774	Treasurer -	Gloria Glass	07 4630 7054
Vice-President -	Jack Lund	07 4697 6390	Records Officer -	Pat McConnell	07 4697 6141
Secretary -	Nicci Thompson	07 4634 3074	Committee Members-	Olive Booth	07 4633 0553
Editor -	Michael Atzeni	07 4639 2761		Helen Wilson	07 4636 4362

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

NEWSLETTER No. 278 – June 1999

Editorial

Some interesting waterbirds have been seen lately in the Lockyer Valley including **Freckled, Musk and Blue-billed Duck at Lake Clarendon**. Several birders tried for the Australasian Bittern there as well but only Pat McConnell, Kath Watson and a couple of their USQ colleagues were successful. They had marvellous views of the bird standing out in the open, in the late afternoon, at the same spot John Hadley had seen it a couple of days earlier. Yours truly, ignoring my recent advice to everyone about seizing the opportunity, elected not to go with Pat that Tuesday afternoon and paid the price.

I tried the following weekend, and whilst I missed the bittern, I was happy to finally catch up with the **white Black Swan** that has been hanging around the Lockyer Valley waterholes for what must be nearly two years now, if memory serves me correctly. Quite a remarkable sight, amongst his normal kin - all white, apart from the red bill and pale orange legs. I was also glad to meet Dave Stewart of Nature Sound fame, who was up from Mullimbimby, hoping to add the Australasian Bittern to his impressive Queensland list, and perhaps even to his list of recordings. Since Dave dipped too, I didn't feel so bad!

Following on from last month's piece about swifts in our area, this newsletter contains details of three sightings of **White-rumped Swiftlets** by Bill Jolly, at his Helidon property, "Abberton". Bill has also chipped in with some interesting observations along the creek below his property. A report from Michael Hirst on Christmas birding at **Charters Towers** provides a nice change from the usual reports about the regular birding spots in the north. And Gloria details two recent observations, one regarding her encounter with the **Black-breasted Button-Quail at Gowrie Junction**, the other about the diet of **Silvereyes**.

By all accounts, the Mt Clunie outing last month was excellent, but more about that next month.

Silvereyes

They don't just eat grapes and apricots and such! Recently, while I was trying to gather some seed from a few trees, there was a Silvereye feeding in a White Tamarind *Elatostachys xylocarpa* (grows NSW & Qld). This tree has tough, woody capsules which open into three parts with a black seed 4-5 mm long lodged between each segment in a little hollow. (The woody segments are a pretty pink when they open.)

I thought the silvereye was going for the insects that are sometimes present with a seed, until I watched it poke its bill into what must have been a partly-open capsule, grab a seed and swallow it.

Gloria Glass

White-rumped Swiftlet sightings at "Abberton", Helidon.

White-rumped Swiftlets (*Collocalia spodiopygius*) are sedentary in coastal northeast Queensland, from the Claudie River, south to Finch Hatton Gorge-Eungella National Park, near Mackay. They occasionally stray further south, having been recorded in SE Queensland, NSW and SA (Pizzey and Knight, 1997).

Bill Jolly has recorded White-rumped Swiftlets at his property, "Abberton", just outside Helidon (27.33' S 152.08'E) on three occasions since 1987 and he has kindly provided the details for publication. (They have maintained monthly checklists for "Abberton", supplemented by notebooks, for a little over ten years). In acknowledging the identification difficulties associated with swiftlets, Bill felt it prudent to point out that he has met swifts and swiftlets in Australia, PNG, Java, Malaysia, China and elsewhere. Even Pallid Swifts in the Canary Isles! (But best of all Moustached Tree Swifts at Veimauri River).

The **three** sightings of *Collocalia spodiopygius* since 1987, all in the 6am to about 8am period, were:

- 18 January 1991 Approx 150 birds feeding on flying insects to the west of the property. They moved slowly eastwards, overhead, and then away to the east over a period of around 20 minutes. A generally rainy period. Needletails in numbers the day before.
- 20 December 1991 Large flock of Fork-tailed Swifts (*Apus pacificus*) with up to 10 *C. spodiopygius* amongst them. Again, following heavy storm rain.
- 25 November 1998 About 60 *C. spodiopygius* hawking overhead, moving to the west. A very stormy period. Needletails earlier in the morning.

Other swifts have been reported at "Abberton" in the following months since 1988:

White-throated Needletail (*Hirundapus caudacutus*)

- Every November and December
- January 1989, 1991, 1992, 1998
- February 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991
- March 1989, 1997, 1998
- April 1988, 1990.

Fork-tailed Swift (*Apus pacificus*) is much less frequent:

- 1990 - Feb, March
- 1991 - Dec
- 1992 - Jan, Feb
- 1998 - March

The presence of swifts at "Abberton" is similar to that reported for the entire local survey in last month's newsletter, although I note Bill's data fill a few gaps. It remains a challenge for all club members to be on the alert for White-rumped Swiftlets in the club's survey area, particularly in advance of stormy weather in the Spring/Summer period.

Thanks, Bill, for helping raise awareness of this interesting vagrant to our area. It is probable this species has been overlooked by others in the past, or dismissed as some other species, so I encourage all members to polish up on your swift/swiftlet/swallow/martin identification and help further our knowledge of this group in our local patch. Who knows, you may even turn up the first Barn Swallow or House Swift for the area instead!

Michael Atzeni

Reference

Pizzey, G. and Knight, F. (1997) Field Guide to the Birds of Australia. Angus & Robertson, Australia.

Christmas in Charters Towers

A Christmas holiday spent with family at Charters Towers did not produce as many birds as I had hoped, but there were a few interesting sightings. I spent as many early mornings as possible "birding" and some notes on the various places visited, and birds seen, follow.

First of all the garden of the rented house on the outskirts of Charters Towers – rather boring with few native plants, lots of lawn, Japanese Balsam and palm trees. Mainly sparrows and magpie-larks, though a Brown Honeyeater was often heard in the melaleucas fronting the street.

I thought that the scrub surrounding the foot of the Towers (the big hill giving the town its name) would be very productive but it was not: a single male Red-backed Fairy-wren and a few Silvereyes were the only small passerines that I saw. It was a highly degraded with Parkinsonia, Chinese apple and yuccas among the old mine workings. The most interesting sight was a dozen or so Black Kites which soared in the updraught as the day warmed up. They would perch on the water tower and the wireless masts: one day I saw a Kestrel, whose territory had been obviously invaded, stoop repeatedly at the circling kites.

Of more interest was a quiet lane alongside the western railway line, just out of town. It was here that I saw finches in some numbers, Singing Honeyeaters, Singing Bushlarks, Rufous Songlarks, cisticolas and pipits. Fairy Martins were hawking round the railway culverts, and a Forest Kingfisher was perched on power lines with several Black-faced Woodswallows. Masked Lapwings were on the lawn of a house on a rural block, and I saw a Black-shouldered Kite on each visit.

In the town itself, a drain by the tennis led into a swamp, with plenty more lapwings, a snipe and Pacific Black Duck. Some of the lapwings seemed to resemble the nominate race, others the Spur-winged Plover (*novae-hollandiae*).

Another interesting sighting in a tiny park in the city heart was a White-breasted Woodswallow fiercely harassing a peewee or magpie, I forget which, I went back later to see if it had a nest, but could see nothing in the tree where the encounter took place.

Moving further away, we visited the weir on the Burdekin River which supplies the town. Numerous cormorants and pelicans were perched on the rocks below the wall and swimming in the current, with a Little Egret standing in the water waiting.

A pair of Gull-billed Terns patrolled the pool above the weir, where a Darter was perched on a semi-submerged snag. On a second visit there was a small fresh, with noticeably fewer waterbirds, probably because the water was too turbulent and muddy for successful fishing. A pair of Red-winged Parrots was in the paperbarks and Yellow-throated Miners in the trees in the picnic area.

Another visit to the Burdekin, or at least an anabranch thereof, was to the Big Bend, 40 minutes drive north of Charters Towers on the Lynd Highway. There I saw both Squatter Pigeons and Common Bronzewing. A Black Duck and 4 Great Egrets were the only water birds seen. A Bustard beside the highway on newly burnt ground was, I presume, searching for scorched insects and reptiles.

I was interested in a pair of Pale-headed Rosellas, whose chests and bellies were a uniform very dark lavender blue; in extent similar to the *palliceps* race illustrated in the new Pizzey and Knight, but much, much darker.

A visit to the Pajingo Mine Exploration Camp south of Charters Towers produced more Common Bronzewing and Squatter Pigeons, as well as Grey-crowned Babbler and Apostlebirds. The midday heat was not conducive to finding many small bush birds!

Our final outing was along the Flinders Highway as far as the White Mountain National Park on the Great Divide: too hot and rugged, so we returned to the Canaspe River near Pentland, with a nice picnic area and a sandy running stream for the grandchildren to wade in while granddad went birding. The finds there were a White-throated Honeyeater and a Little Button-Quail. Plenty of Apostlebirds foraging around the picnic tables and a Pied Butcherbird ready to hijack the scraps and a pair of Red-winged Parrots in the trees. The miners there were the Noisy; those on the Burdekin, the Yellow-throated.

Two kills of interest were a Boobook on the road to the weir and a frogmouth in some grass near the house.

I nearly forgot the frequently calling Koels, the Channel-billed Cuckoos forever flying over the town, and the clumsy Pheasant Coucals, which were the most conspicuous large bird in the scrub surrounding the Towers.

Species List:

Pacific Black Duck, Darter, Little Pied Cormorant, Little Black Cormorant, Great Cormorant, Australian Pelican, White-faced Heron, Little Egret, Great Egret, Nankeen Night Heron, Black-shouldered Kite, Black Kite, Wedge-tailed Eagle, Brown Falcon, Nankeen Kestrel, Australian Bustard, Little Button-Quail, Latham's Snipe, Masked Lapwing, Gull-billed Tern, Common Bronzewing, Squatter Pigeon, Galah, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, Rainbow Lorikeet, Red-winged Parrot, Pale-headed Rosella, Common Koel, Channel-billed Cuckoo, Common Koel, Pheasant Coucal, Southern Boobook, Tawny Frogmouth, Forest Kingfisher, Laughing Kookaburra, Rainbow Bee-eater, Dollarbird, Red-backed Fairy-wren, Noisy Friarbird, Blue-faced Honeyeater, Noisy Miner, Yellow-throated Miner, Singing Honeyeater, White-throated Honeyeater, Brown Honeyeater, Grey-crowned Babbler, Magpie-lark, Willie Wagtail, Black-faced Woodswallow, White-breasted Woodswallow, Pied Butcherbird, Australian Magpie, Torresian Crow, Apostlebird, Singing Bushlark, Richard's Pipit, House Sparrow, Zebra Finch, Chestnut-breasted Mannikin, Mistletoebird, Fairy Martin, Rufous Songlark, Golden-headed Cisticola, Silvereeye.

A Black-breasted Button-Quail Encounter at Gowrie Junction

On 3/5/99, I was lucky enough to see the Black-breasted Button-Quail at the Gowrie Junction site. It was 11 am, when I saw one female, who vigorously scattered leaf litter around, only 15 metres or so in from the edge of the scrub, south of the dam. Actually, it was on my second sortie into that spot.

My attention was drawn to a low leafy branch that moved as if a bird had flown off it. There was no wind just there. So I waited. ... Then I heard a scrunch. Under the tangle of vegetation where the branch had moved I saw lots of what could have been platelets in the deep leaf-litter. I waited some more, then slowly and carefully moved around the tangle. I made a few scrunches, but heard another scrunch across from the tangle. Then I saw the bird - her black face, 'silvery' sides to breast, and brown streaked back. Actually she was a bit far away to see clearly, and she was a bit close for my binoculars. (Dash! I'd forgotten to bring my shorter-focus binocs.) So I never did see her clearly. But there was no doubt it was HER.

She whirled around (I think clockwise) scattering leaf-litter, then again. (Later I saw there were about 4-5 platelets in that area. The area is a lot drier now than when I was there before. Seeing those fresh platelets, I realised that all the platelets in the general area were fairly fresh too.) I had moved a bit while she was whirling and scattering leaves, but stopped when she stopped. The trouble was she just sat ... and sat ... My limbs were aching, so eventually I moved to ease the pain ... still she sat. Eventually I moved some more to get more comfortable, I stood, and looked, and still she sat. She must have stayed in the one spot, moving her head only slightly once or twice, for about ten minutes. I edged around to try to get a better view, making a bit of noise of course, and she had disappeared without a sound.

Thinking back, I don't suppose she had flown from that moving branchlet anyway. I don't suppose these Button-Quails perch on branches much, even low ones. Maybe she just brushed it as she moved off quickly as I approached.

Update on the Gowrie Junction Scrub Block

Since the above sighting, the block of land has been sold. The new owner has said he seems to find trespassers on the block almost every time he goes there. One of these carried a shotgun and said he was going to shoot 'scrub turkeys', and had been coming there for years! The owner has stated he will not give permission for anyone to visit the block, so we must respect his wishes and keep off.

However, the good news is that he has said he intends to fence off the scrub areas from the cattle and goats he intends to graze there. So it seems the Black-breasted Button-Quails are safe. The new owner has added Blue Bonnets to the bird list I sent him.

Gloria Glass

Azure Kingfishers as Potential Prey

We watch the creek every day from our verandahs. As well as plenty of coming and going along the creek, there is also a much favoured log which regularly serves as a vantage point for Azure Kingfishers, as well as a resting place for cormorants, moorhens, turtles and others.

This limb emerges from the stream at around 45 degrees, then turns upward to maybe 70 degrees as it tapers to finish about a metre clear of the water. This is the point which the kingfisher visits several times a day as he proceeds from one creekside platform to another, and is also the point from which cormorants like to hang out their

wings. But being a pinnacle, there is only ever room for one bird at the top, and there is often competition for the spot.

Two dramatic incidents occurred on the morning of 21st April, both involving birds on this favoured perch. The first concerned an Azure Kingfisher, the second involved two Little Pied Cormorants and will be the subject of a separate item.

The Kingfisher

An Azure Kingfisher had been journeying between its usual vantage points along the creek bank as we watched him leave a small overhanging casuarina on the split-second journey to his regular mid-creek perch. But before he could drop his feet onto the log a Collared Sparrowhawk shot into view from the trees on our side of the creek in an unsuccessful sortie aimed at the kingfisher. A couple of seconds of confusion ensued, then the sparrowhawk returned to cover in a tall *Eucalyptus tessellaris* in our main garden, empty-taloned. Within less than a minute the undaunted Azure Kingfisher was back on the mid-creek perch, and continuing his usual routine along the creek. The Collared Sparrowhawk, which has been terrorising small passerines around the garden for a couple of days, flitted quietly between several trees, before heading out of sight.

This is not the first time we have watched an Azure Kingfisher under attack, and for the sake of completeness, I am including a diary entry I made at this time last year when a similar incident occurred involving an Azure Kingfisher, an Australian Hobby and the same mid-creek perch.

During breakfast an Azure Kingfisher appeared on the casuarina opposite, sat, fished, sped away, reappeared on the limb that serves as a vantage point in the middle of the creek, and generally came and went over the next half-hour or so, sometimes there, sometimes not. An Australian Hobby scythed into view, through the *tessellaris* and away from us high along the creek heading west at speed. A moment later the Kingfisher reappeared on the mid-creek limb, and suddenly the Hobby was there, arcing down at enormous speed onto the Kingfisher! The action was so fast and the shock so stunning that we are not clear just what happened. Within a couple of seconds, the Hobby had swept around and was away swiftly along the creek, back to the west. Of the Kingfisher there was no sign. At the moment of impact, if there was one, a big splash occurred beneath the birds. Did the Kingfisher escape? Did he fall stunned into the water? Did both birds hit the water before the Hobby carried his prey off for eating? We watched the creek and its margins closely for much of the morning, but with no sign of the Kingfisher.

As a footnote, we didn't see any Azure Kingfisher for a week or so after the Hobby incident, and when a kingfisher did reappear we had no way of knowing if it was the bird involved. Interesting isn't it that we wanted the kingfisher to escape, but we also want the BOPs to come here and to be successful. It's one of those mixed feeling situations, like watching a tree snake eating a Green Tree Frog.

Bill Jolly

Members' Bird Notes

Members of the Toowoomba Bird Observers have submitted all sightings. Accuracy not vouched for by TBO. Please check with observer(s) before citing.

Australasian Bittern (1)	25/05/99	Lake Clarendon, via Gatton	PM, KW
Freckled Duck	26/05/99	Lake Clarendon, via Gatton	JH
Musk Duck (1)	26/05/99	Lake Clarendon, via Gatton	JH
Square-tailed Kite (1)	29/05/99	Glencairn	JH
Cotton Pygmy-Goose (12)	30/05/99	Lowe's Rd Swamp, Placid Hills	MA
Ground Cuckoo-Shrike (4)	30/05/99	Lake Clarendon, via Gatton	MA, JH
Gull-billed Tern (1)	30/05/99	Lake Clarendon, via Gatton	MA
Grey Goshawk	06/06/99	Yarraman State Forest	PM, KW
Peregrine Falcon (1)	08/06/99	"Abberton", Helidon	WJ
Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater (1)	09/06/99	Lake Apex, Gatton	JH
Peregrine Falcon (1)	14/06/99	New England H'way, s. of Toowoomba	MA
Peregrine Falcon (1)	14/06/99	Mitchell	KM
Little Eagle (1)	14/06/99	Mitchell	KM
Pacific Baza (3)	19/06/99	Table Top Estate	KM
Blue-billed Duck (2)	20/06/99	Lake Clarendon, via Gatton	JH
Bell Miner*	20/06/99	Upper Flagstone Ck Road	MA

* Still present (at their only known local site) despite the extensive roadworks in the vicinity.

MA M. Atzeni JH J. Hadley WJ W. Jolly PM P. McConnell
 KW K. Watson

COMING EVENTS

June Outing

Location: Helidon Hills
Date: Sunday, 27 June
Leader: Pat McConnell 07 4697 6141

Info: Meet in the Helidon Picnic Area on the Warrego Highway at 7.30 a.m. BYO everything

July Outing

Location: Gorman's Gap, Lower Flagstone Ck
Date: Sunday, 25 July
Leader: Michael Atzeni 07 4639 2761

Info: Meet at the junction of the Lower Flagstone Ck Rd and Stockyard Ck Rd at 7.30 a.m. BYO everything

Swift Parrot/Regent Honeyeater Survey

Date: 7-8 August

August Outing

Location: White Rock, Ipswich
Date: Saturday, 28 August

September Outing

Location: Pikedale via Stanthorpe
Date: Sunday, 19 September (tentative)

Info: Joint outing with the Stanthorpe Field Naturalists Club to a private property on the **third Sunday** of the month.

October Species Census

Location: TBOI Survey Area
Date: 30-31 October

Reminder: *Leaders should take the Attendance Book and First Aid Kit on all Outings. All attending members and visitors should sign the Attendance book for insurance purposes.*

If undeliverable return to
 Toowoomba Bird Observers Inc
 PO Box 4730
 TOOWOOMBA EAST Q 4350

**SURFACE
 MAIL**



P McConnell*
 17 George Street
 HELIDON 4344