

Canberra bird notes

No.9 October 1970

EDITORIAL

Public awareness of the problems of conservation and pollution has increased tremendously in recent months stimulated by the publication of alarming reports about the way in which man is defiling his planet. Hardly a day passes without news of drastic measures being adopted to curb pollution and to ensure a future for wildlife and wild places. This sudden concern for the environment has come none too soon. The outlook now is less bleak than it was five years ago, when the warnings and protests of scientists and conservationists were mere voices in the wilderness.

The Canberra Ornithologists Group is playing its part. On September 1, David Peters and Graham Clark gave evidence before the Select Committee on Wildlife Conservation. Among other submissions, attention was drawn, to the large-scale destruction of coastal heath-land by real-estate operators. Mr Peters expressed concern that the proposed development of the East Basin of Lake Burley Griffin would have a disturbing effect on the waterbird populations there.

THE BARREN GROUNDS NATURE RESERVE

David A. Rogers

The Barren Grounds Nature Reserve is on the Illawarra escarpment, overlooking the coastal plain from Kiama to Berry. It is controlled by the National Parks and Wildlife Service of New South Wales and covers an area, including additions presently under resumption, of about 4500 acres. Being about 160 miles from Canberra, it is close enough to be of interest to A.C.T. ornithologists for weekend visits.

The Barren Grounds is a 2,000-foot high plateau of Hawkesbury Sandstone. The combination of high rainfall (80-100 inches a year) with infertile soils has given rise to extensive heathlands which form the dominant habitat on the reserve, and provide the main ornithological interests. They range from dry heaths with clumps of mallee *Eucalyptus stricta* on the ridges to buttongrass *gymnoschoenus sphaerocephalus* swamps in the peat-filled valleys. The better drained ridges support dry sclerophyll forest dominated by Black Ash *Eucalyptus sieberi*. Wet sclerophyll forest dominated by Blackbutt *E. pilularis* grows on the richer soils below the escarpment, with depauperate rainforest (Coachwood, *Ceratopetalum apetalum*, dominant) in the gullies. There is also a pocket of wet sclerophyll and rainforest on the plateau itself. The area is subject to fairly frequent bushfires. The last one, in November 1968, burnt all but ten acres of the Reserve.

The main reason for the establishment of the Reserve in 1956 was the presence of two rare heathland birds: the Ground Parrot *Pezoporus wallicus* and the Eastern Bristlebird *Dasyornis brachypterus*. The parrots have been the subject of a study over the past six years by Drs Peter Fullagar and Joe Forshaw of CSIRO, who estimated their numbers before the fire at about 40. The present population appears to be less than ten - a far from healthy situation. Censuses are taken by a line of beaters flushing the birds from the heath. When flushed they behave like quail, flying away low over the vegetation and dropping back into it. They never perch in trees, and I have only seen one even enter a timbered area. At present the only way for visitors to see a Ground Parrot is to join in a census. Extra manpower is often needed, but only the fit should volunteer; it is a very hard day's walking.

However precarious the status of the Ground Parrot on the Barren Grounds, there is at least the consolation that healthy populations exist in other areas. This is not true of the Bristlebird, which exists in good numbers only on the Barren Grounds and adjacent areas (A. McGill, voc.). Happily, this species survived the last fire very well. A population study which I carried out during the last breeding season indicated at least 14 territories in an area about one mile square (one-seventh of the Reserve). The survival difference would seem to lie in the fact that while the Ground Parrots were deprived of both feed (seeds of sedges) and cover (heath vegetation) by the fire, the Bristlebirds still had a modicum of both.

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They are at least partially insectivorous - one was seen after the fire hawking for insects in the rafters of a shed (P. Foster, Field Officer N.P.W.S., voc.) - and they are usually found in mallee and other tall shrub; in and around the heathlands. Being dark brown, they were not too conspicuous even in a tangle of blackened sticks. Moreover, they can live in forest if necessary; there is a pair in one of the heaviest stands of timber on the Reserve. Visitors are more likely to hear than to see these birds, as they have a piercing call but are very retiring and reluctant to fly. However, with patience sightings can be made.

Southern Emu Wrens *Stipiturus malachurus* were very common in the heath country before the fire. They are poor fliers (they are a comical sight in a high wind, when they lose control of their long tails) and apparently suffered considerable losses during the fire. Immediately afterwards the survivors crowded into any little clump that had escaped burning; put a foot in, and they would burst out like grass hoppers. Very soon they virtually disappeared, except in the ten-acre refuge, but during last summer they have been steadily re-colonising the heath.

Beautiful Firetails *Zonaeginthus bellus* and Chestnut-tailed Heathwrens *Hylacola pyrrhopygia* were never at all common, but there are still a few of either species to be seen. Typical habitats are *Banksia ericifolia* and the ground under mallee respectively. The only heath species which failed to reappear is the Crescent Honeyeater *Phylidonyris pyrrhoptera*, which was always rare. Yellow-winged Honeyeaters *Meliornis novaehollandiae* were formerly common but are greatly reduced in numbers. Due to the slow recovery of their favoured thickets of *Banksia integrifolia* they are not increasing at all rapidly.

The Barren Grounds checklist now stands at 108 species, of which four need confirmation, and several others have not been seen in recent years. Those mentioned above might be called the specialties of the Reserve. I will now mention some other common or noteworthy species according to habitat.

Of the additional heath species, Pipits *Anthus australis* and Grey Currawongs *Strepera versicolor* are common, Brown Quail *Synoicus australis* and Japanese Snipe *Gallinago hardwickii* moderately so, and an occasional Swamp Harrier *Circus approximans* may be seen. The dry sclerophyll areas are typified by Crimson Rosellas *Platycercus elegans* and Gang-gangs *Callocephalon fimbriatum* and Scarlet Robins *Petroica phoenicea* and *P. multi-color* and White-browed Scrub-Wrens *Sericornis frontalis*. The latter are also found in wet sclerophyll forest with Lyrebirds *Menura superba*. Pilot Birds *Pycnoptilus floccosus*. Eastern Whipbirds *Psophodes olivaceus* and White-browed Treecreepers *Climacteris erythrogastris*. In the rainforest, White Goshawks *Accipiter novaehollandiae* were recorded before the fire, while Yellow-throated Scrub-Wrens *Sericornis lathamii* and Spine-tailed Logrunners *Orthonyx temminckii* are known to have survived it.

Perhaps some of our "rarities" are as interesting as the well-established species. Neither Peewees *Grallina cyanoleuca* nor Noisy Miners *Manorhina melanocephala* have been recorded from the Reserve. The first Welcome Swallow *Hirundo neoxena* and the second Willie Wagtail *Rhipidura leucophrys* in two years were recorded this month (April 1970).

The 1961 Handbook (out of print) lists Tree and Fairy Martins *Hylochelidon nigricans* and *H. ariel*, Brown Flycatchers *Microeca fascinans* and Yellow-tailed Thornbills *Acanthiza chrysorrhoa*, but none of these has been seen in recent years. Peter Fullagar has one record of Eastern Rosellas *Platycercus eximius* and Common Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris*.

Visiting ornithologists are always welcome on the Reserve, and the Ranger appreciates lists of sightings. The entrance is on a gravel road between Robertson and Jamberoo; it is ten miles from Robertson and six from Jamberoo, which is the nearest source of supplies. Camping is allowed and there is no fee. Camping permits can be obtained on arrival, but it is helpful to apply in advance if possible. Write to The Ranger, Barren Grounds Nature Reserve, P.O. Box 8, Jamberoo, N.S.W. 2533. The nearest motels are at Moss Vale and Kiama. One mile towards Jamberoo from the entrance there are simple cabins; run by Mr and Mrs A.W. Page, "Ben Ricketts", Mountain Rd, Jamberoo. They are normally booked out by regular clients during long weekends and school holidays, but at other times they welcome visitors with an interest in the Barren Grounds. The stone lodge on the Reserve is available only to staff and official parties.

Finally, visitors are advised to come prepared for the Barren Grounds weather; it is often cold, even by Canberra standards, and it is very much wetter.

Barren Grounds Nature Reserve, Jamberoo, N.S.W.

UNUSUAL FEEDING BEHAVIOUR IN A MUDLARK

Ellen M. McCulloch

On January 20, 1970 I watched a male Mudlark *Grallina cyanoleuca* walking around in the grass by the side of Lake Burley Griffin, Canberra. We were having lunch, and on seeing us the bird flew over to land at out five feet away, and then walked to within half that distance, obviously used to being fed there by visitors.

We threw it pieces of bread and cheese, which it collected until it had a beakful, picked a caterpillar, then flew up the hill and across the road out of sight. It returned, and was thrown a piece of crust about 2 ½ inches long. The bird put its right foot forward on to the bread, then put its head down and pulled, holding the bread down with its foot. It then raised its head, lowered it again, and raised its foot with the bread in it to its beak (Fig. 1). It did not appear to get anything off the crust. It then flew off with the crust, calling in flight, and disappeared again. It came back in a few minutes, but did not accept all the food thrown down, seeming to lose interest. It continued to forage in the grass close by.

I have seen Magpies place a foot forward to hold food on the ground, to get better purchase, but have never seen a Mudlark do this before.

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Several interesting points arise. Was this simply an accidental occurrence? Is food taken by this species likely to be difficult to deal with, using only the bill? Is this a habit acquired by this particular individual as a result of living in an area where picnickers provide hard food? Or is it a regular feeding habit?

I have seen a sketch (Emu 67: 295) of similar behaviour in a Bald Coot *Porphyrio porphyrio* which is very reminiscent of the Mudlark's action. For all I know this may be a common feeding technique, but it looked most extraordinary to me.

6, Sullen Avenue, Mitcham, VIG.

WANTED..... Information on the number of Eastern Bristlebirds in Gurumbi Nature Reserve, near Jervis Bay. If interested in helping with a survey of this reserve, please contact the Excursions Officer, Mark Clayton, on 487122 (working hours) or 489737 (after hours). Mark has been organising regular weekend trips to Gurumbi, and Bristlebirds were noted there on one occasion.

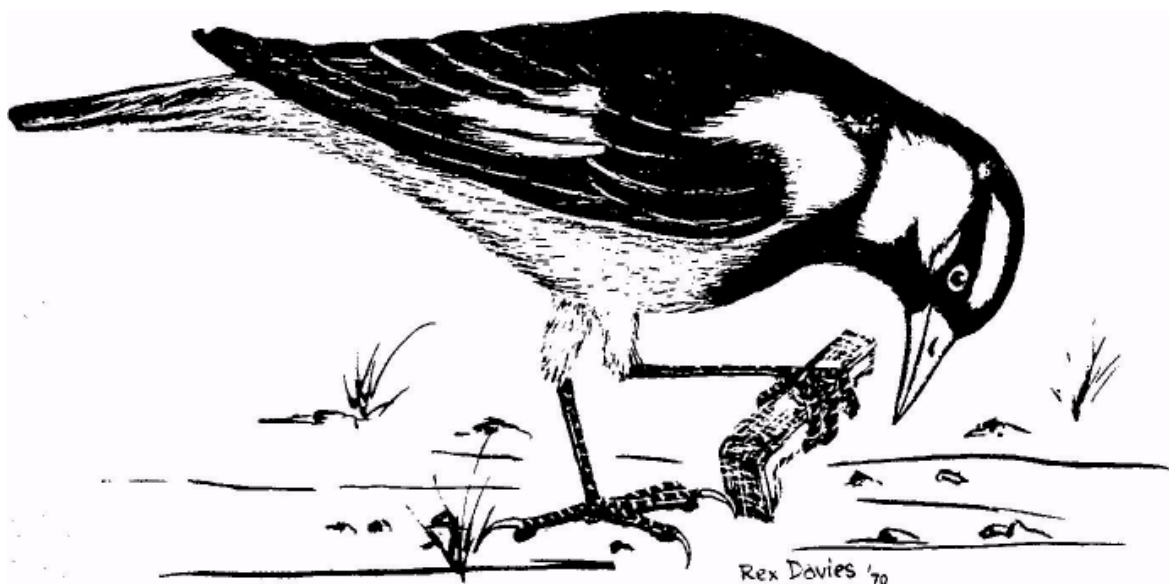


Figure 1. Unusual feeding behaviour in a Mudlark. (Drawing by Rex Davies)

BIRDS IN A CANBERRA GARDEN

Wim and Corrie Vestjens

On July 13, 1970, at 1245 hrs, an immature White-faced Heron *Ardea novaehollandiae* landed on the terrace of our garden at Ainslie, A.C.T. It perched for a while on a fence, then left in the direction of Braddon.

This bird, which is unusual in a suburban garden, must have been attracted by the two ponds in which goldfish and tortoises are kept. These ponds are regularly visited by a number of birds which drink and bathe at their margins.

Our garden contains a variety of native and introduced trees and bushes, providing birds with food, shelter and nesting sites. Of these, the most important as a food source are: Hawthorn, Bottlebrush, Cotoneasters, Grevillea and Honeysuckle. Shelter and nest-sites are provided by the following: Cedar, Cypress, Pine, Poplar, Goat Willow, Silver Birch, Oak, Maple, Hawthorn, Judas Tree, Cootamundra Wattle, Black Wattle, Silk-tree, Eucalypts, Argyle Apple, Irish Strawberry, Barberry, Box, Russian Olive, Golden-bells, Grevillea, Hakea, Leptospermum, Oleander, May, Snowball, Arbor-vitae and Viburnum.

Since 1960, the following species of birds have been identified in the garden:-

White-faced Heron One immature (above) attracted by water.

Straw-necked Ibis Three were recorded when the garden was less well established.

Peregrine Falcon One, attracted to the finch aviary.

Little Falcon One seen feeding on a House Sparrow.

Boobook Owl Two, roosting in the Black Wattle.

Domestic Pigeon A flock feeds on the nature strip and lawn.

Gang-gang Cockatoo Three feeding on Hawthorn.

Galah Three feeding on Hawthorn.

White Cockatoo Several recorded.

Crimson Rosella About seven, feeding on Hawthorn and cotoneasters.

Eastern Rosella About 20, feeding on Hawthorn.

Budgerygah Six, feeding in pheasant enclosure. Presumably escaped birds.

Pallid Cuckoo Recorded once.

Kookaburra Several. Early morning visitors hunting goldfish.

Sacred Kingfisher One, seen sitting in Silver Birch above the fishponds.

Dollarbird One, perched high in a eucalypt.

Blackbird Two pairs recorded since 1964. One pair bred in 1969, but lost all except one fledgling through predation by Pied Currawong. Nest-building again in September 1970. Nests in Viburnum.

Superb Blue Wren a group of three in 1965. The females

left after the male had been shot by boys.

Yellow-tailed Thornbill Small groups, mainly in wattles, Silver Birch, Hawthorn and eucalypts. Breeding in the Black Wattle.

Willy Wagtail One pair, feeding on insects above the ponds. Has nested in the Oak.

Grey-breasted Silvereeye About 50, feeding on berries and insects. Commonly hunts aphids on rose bushes.

Yellow-tufted Honeyeater Several, feeding on nectar of Bottlebrush and Grevillea.

White-naped Honeyeater Several, nectar-feeding as above.

Noisy Friarbird Five, feeding on fruits and berries.

Red Wattlebird Groups of 3-5 birds, feeding on nectar and berries, bathing in ponds.

House Sparrow Common. Breeding in nestboxes and under eaves. Dustbathing on sandy patches in the cactus garden, bathing in the ponds.

Goldfinch Pairs and small flocks. Feeding on the seed-heads of annual and perennial flowering plants. Has bred in the Hawthorn.

Starling Pairs and large flocks. Breeding in nestboxes and on neighbouring roofs. Feeding in large flocks on the lawns, bathing at the ponds. Congregations of up to 600 birds in the eucalypts and poplars.

Magpie Lark Pairs and single birds feeding above the ponds and on the lawn. One small flock of seven birds in a eucalypt.

Pied Currawong Winter and spring visitor. Up to 12 birds devouring berries and stripping bark from trees in search of insects. Also scrabbling in the compost heap. One preyed on Blackbird fledglings (see above).

Black-backed Magpie One pair feeding at the lawn and using the eucalypts and Black Wattle on the edge of their territory. Often accompanied by immature birds.

43 Sherbrooke Street, Ainslie, A.C.T.

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IT HAD TO HAPPEN....

On September 18, several observers reported that a White Egret, a Little Pied Cormorant, several ibis and a Mallard at Sullivan's Creek were fouled with black oil on the neck and breast. The ibis, egret and cormorant were apparently still able to fly.

Oil was smeared along the stone embankment under Ward Bridge, and there was an oil slick on the water. The authorities have still not managed to trace the source of this oil, which has been polluting Sullivan's Creek for quite some time.

A KEY TO THE FIVE MALE "RED" ROBINS

Tony Stokes

All five 'red' robins of the genus *Petroica* can be seen in the A.C.T. during the year. I have listed, below, in the form of a simple key, the main features to look for in each male bird of the five species when identifying it in the field. I wish to thank Steve Wilson for making valuable comments on the draft of this key.

Notes on the Key:-

1. Work methodically from left to right, making first one choice and then following the lines to the next until the species name is reached.
2. Remember only two characteristics need be noted for three of the species. There are three decisions to be made to identify the other two.
3. The Flame Robin *Petroica Phoenicia* has an orange rather than a red breast. It can be deceptive, however, and has been classified as 'red' in the first choice to distinguish it from the obvious 'rose' in the other part of the choice.
4. All male robins in adult plumage have a basic grey to black colouration on the upperparts, whereas the females and immature males are brown. The female Scarlet Robin *Petroica multicolor* has a noticeable wash of red on the breast, and the foregoing point must be used to distinguish it from the males.

EASTERN CURLEW AT AN INLAND SWAMP

Anthony H. D'Andria

Among specimens collected last August during a CSIRO survey at Barrenbox Swamp, near Griffith, N.S.W., was a female Eastern Curlew Numenius madagascariensis.

The bird was seen on August 20 feeding on a mud-flat in the company of Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus*. It had not been there on the previous day.

The skin is now in the CSIRO Division of Wildlife Research collections Reg. No, 125160. The measurements were as follows:-

Weight, 615 gm; bill, 185 mm wing, 330 mm; tarsus, 96 mm. The oviduct was convoluted, the oocytes minute. The bird's stomach contained the remains of a freshwater crayfish *Cherax albidus* (identified by Mr W. J. Vestjens).

Condon (1965) lists only one occurrence of this species inland - at Holland's Lake, in southwestern New South Wales, in November 1961.

Reference

Condon, H.T. & A.R. McGill, 1965. Field Guide to the Waders 3rd Edition, Rev. Bird Observers Club, Melbourne.

10 McCrae Street, Garran, A.C.T.

SHORT OBSERVATIONS

CRESTED GREBE *Podiceps cristatus* One in winter plumage two miles below Scrivener Dam on August 19 (T. Gourlay). Four in full breeding plumage at West Lake on Sept. 23 (A. D'Andria).

BLACK-SHOULDERED KITE *Elanus notatus* This species and the Barn Owl seem to have irrupted from the west in the wake of the recent mouse plague. Regularly reported from many parts of Canberra. One even entered a suburban garden at Scullin (N. Clark).

BARN OWL *Tyto alba* One at Scullin on July 5 (NC). One at Curtin, July 25 (N. Schlaeppi) one at the A.N.U. flying at midday of August 23 (S.J. Wilson); One on Mount Taylor on August 31 (S. Bennett). Dead birds were found in many parts of Canberra. One on rocks at Lake Bathurst on Sept. 17. On flushing it was mobbed by Silver Gulls, and had difficulty reaching the main shore (AD).

POWERFUL OWL *Ninox strenua* One at Lee's Creek on June 6. Its call was a very loud "woo-hoo, woo-hoo", repeated at 10-second intervals (TG).

SWIFT PARROT *Lathamus discolor* Thirty at Dickson, A.C.T. on July 7 (J.L. McKean).

INDIAN MYNA *Acridotheres tristis* Two at the Causeway during July (AD). Two on a house roof at Narrabundah on Sept. 4 (M. Carins). One at Lyneham on Sep. 9 (J Calaby).

RAVEN *Corvus coronoides* A partial albino (white flight-feathers and tail) at Scullin on July 19 was accompanied by a normally coloured bird (N & G Clark).

BREEDING INFORMATION WANTED

At present the C.O.G. Committee is producing a new edition of A Field-List of the Birds of Canberra and District. During the necessary editing of the information for this publication (most of which was supplied by membership

a lack of nesting data for certain species came to our notice.

If you have seen any of the birds listed below nesting in the A.C.T, area and can supply dates of the observation, please inform Steve Wilson, Grahame Clark or any other member

of the Committee. Also, during the nesting season just starting and subsequent ones, please keep a special note of any nests of these species observed.

The species have been arranged in three groups for which the headings should be self -explanatory.

Almost certainly breeding in this area

Sparrowhawk	Stone Curlew	Striated Pardalote
Wonga Pigeon	Powerful Owl	Satin Bowerbird
Spotted Quail-thrush	Skylark	Indian Myna
Brown Songlark	Grey-crowned Babbler	

Possibly breeding in this area

Nankeen Night Heron	Little Black Cormorant	Y/T Black Cockatoo
Barn Owl	Brown Bittern	King Parrot

Potential breeding

White-necked Heron	Yellow-billed Spoonbill	Pink-eared Duck
Straw-necked Ibis	White Egret	Royal Spoonbill
Freckled Duck		

LETTER TO THE EDITORNest desertion by Grebes

The notes (in Canberra Bird Notes No. 8) on the nesting of the Hoary-headed Grebe were most interesting. In 1965 at Lake Gol Gol, in far southwestern New South Wales, I witnessed the total abandonment of a colony when the water fell to an inch or two in depth. Some 20 nests were destroyed. A somewhat tragic side of this was that after the adults left the area the eggs continued to hatch in the sun. In one case a Red-kneed Dotterel took over a deserted grebe's nest, eggs and all.

A case of a Great Crested Grebe nesting on an islet some two feet above water level appears in British Birds XLVIII, p.127. It appears without comment and incidental to an observation on food-offering. I knew the locality well for many years - Hamper Mill Lake - and it always had a static water level. It was a flooded gravel-pit adjacent to the River Colne, with peaks of the rubble heaps appearing as islands.

Yours, etc.,

JOHN HOBBS

Katoomba, N.S.W.

BOOK REVIEWCOMMON AUSTRALIAN BIRDS OF TOWNS AND GARDENS

Graeme Chapman

Lansdowne Press \$2.95

This handsome publication is a deluxe expansion of Graeme Chapman's COMMON CITY BIRDS (Periwinkle Books). It is a hardback the 9½" by 6" covers (with attractive dust-jacket) enclose 143 pages, including 64 colour plates and 44 black-and-white photographs and diagrams.

The main section deals with the 57 species of birds that have successfully adapted to life in city streets, parks and gardens. Each species is illustrated by one or more photographs, and the colour reproduction in most of these is excellent. There are, in addition, supplementary chapters on the biology of birds, bird study and conservation. These are illustrated with copious photographs. The book ends with appendices, indices and a useful bibliography.

The text presents a wealth of information and is written in a lucid style. I could find only a very few inaccuracies, the main one being on page 54 where the Domestic Pigeon is described as a "congener" of man, the word meant being presumably "commensal". On page 16 the secondary remiges are correctly depicted as attaching to the ulna in the diagram, but their point of attachment in the text is given as the radius.

These are minor slips of the pen, however, and they cannot detract from my recommendation of this book as a valuable addition to the ornithologist's bookshelf. It would be unequalled as a vade mecum for city-bound nature lovers taking their first steps into the world of birds.

AHD

C.O.G ACTIVITIESJuly 8

The Committee for 1970/71 was elected. It is as follows: Dr G.F. van Tets, Chairman; Mr G.S. Clark, Sec/Treasurer.; Mr A.H. D'Andria, Editor (Canberra Bird Notes); Mr M. Clayton, Excursions Officer; Dr P.J. Fullagar, Messrs T, Gourlay, G. Horey, D. Peters, E. Slater, S. Wilson, Members. The rest of the meeting was taken up with debate on the Canberra Ornithologists Group submissions to the House of Representatives Select' Committee on Wildlife Conservation. A list of proposals was compiled for submission to the Select Committee. The Brains Trust which was to have taken place at this meeting was postponed, indefinitely.

July 15

At the first Committee meeting for the year, the Editor was given the responsibility of vetting any observations of rarities in our area. Accordingly, all records of rare or unlikely occurrences submitted for publication in future must be accompanied by adequate written field-notes and sketches and the corroboration of at least one witness, if possible. These basic requirements must be met before any such records can be considered for acceptance.

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August 12

The full capacity of members who attended this meeting were regaled with a magnificent colour film - "Wild Wings" - about the Wildfowl Trust at Slimbridge, England. Other features of the full programme were a dissertation upon the problem of Corellas at Kununurra by Dr van Tets and a useful reference key for identifying the five brown robins by Tony Stokes.

August 16

About 25 members and friends attended for the COG outing to the Botanic Gardens, Canberra. Thirty-two species of birds were either seen or heard. Excellent comparisons between the three larger 'pied' species - Magpie, White-winged Chough and Pied Currawong - were obtained. Other birds seen to advantage were Brown Weebills, Scarlet Robins and White-throated Treecreepers.

September 9

Peter Temple-Smith, a postgraduate student at the A.N.U., spoke on "Behaviour in the Spurwinged Plover". After introductory comments on taxonomy and morphology, he showed a wide selection of slides depicting behavioral postures ranging from anxiety and aggression to courtship and nest defence. Question time lasted far into the evening, an indication of the great interest in bird behaviour. "Birds of the Month" were the Western and White-throated Warblers, described by Barry Baker with the aid of tape-recordings.

COMING MEETINGS

October 14

Mr J.L. McKean, of the CSIRO Division of Wildlife Research, will give a talk on "Bats as Mammalian Birds".

November 11

A lecture on Queleas will be given by Mr H.J. de S. Disney, Curator of Birds at the Australian Museum, Sydney. Queleas are pest birds which infest agricultural land in central and southern Africa.

The above meetings will both be held at the CSIRO Lecture Theatre, Black Mountain at 8 p.m.

RAOU AFFILIATION CONFIRMED

The Council of the RAOU granted affiliation to the Canberra Ornithologists Group at its meeting of 27th June, 1970. In a letter to Steve Wilson, Mrs Rosemary Balmford, RAOU Secretary, welcomed the Group as the first organisation to affiliate.

We in turn welcome the Union as a subscriber to Canberra Bird Notes, and are grateful for the publicity which CBN was given in the Union's August Newsletter. It has resulted in several new subscribers.

