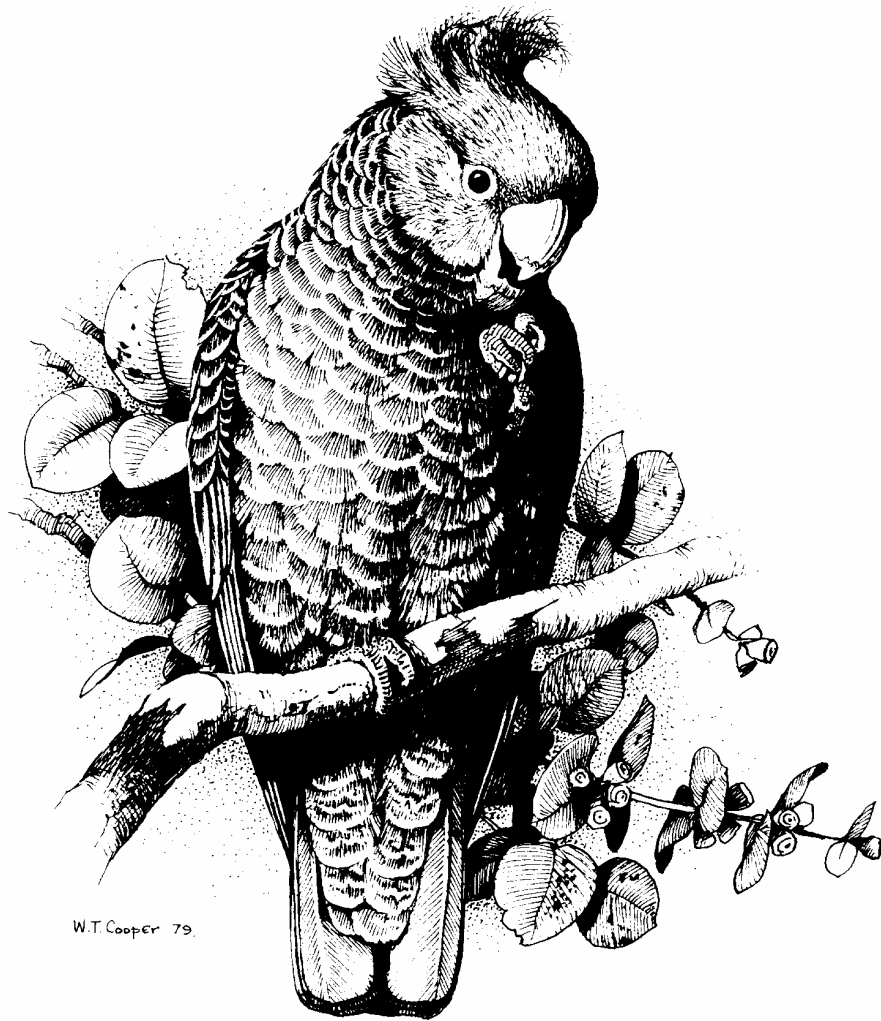


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CANBERRA ORNITHOLOGISTS GROUP

PO Box 301 Civic Square ACT 2608

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Email contacts

Canberra Bird Notes cbn@canberrabirds.org.au

COG membership membership@canberrabirds.org.au

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Gang-gang monthly newsletter gang-gang@canberrabirds.org.au

GBS coordinator martinflab@gmail.com

General inquiries cogoffice@canberrabirds.org.au

Sales barkeramsay@velocitynet.com.au

Unusual bird reports rarities@canberrabirds.org.au

Website webmaster@canberrabirds.org.au

Website

www.canberrabirds.org.au

Other COG contacts

Databases	Paul Fennell	6254 1804 (h)
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SLEUTHING THE BLACK-CHINNED HONEYEATER IN THE ACT

Martin Butterfield

101 Whiskers Creek Rd, Carwoola, NSW 2620

Abstract: *This note records the 2007 observations of Black-chinned Honeyeaters Melithreptus lunatus in the ACT and how they have been recorded in the COG databases. This is followed by a review of past reports of this species in the ACT and nearby areas. For narrative purposes the chronology followed is that of events in 2007 rather than relating to the timing of observations of the species.*

Background

The Black-chinned Honeyeater *Melithreptus lunatus* is not mentioned in Wilson (1999), which has been used, de facto, by many observers as the ultimate reference for birds sighted in the ACT. Until recently, it was not listed as a species in the on-line COG Atlas data entry system. It has never been listed in the systematic lists of birds in the ACT published each year by COG.

Looking at the sightings reported in the first Atlas of Australian Birds (Blakers et al. 1984) the closest point to the ACT in the nearest grid cell containing observations of Black-chinned Honeyeaters is approximately 70 km in a straight line.

Recent observations

On 12 June 2007, Peter Milburn posted a report on the COG chat line detailing a sighting he had made at Campbell Park:

'I was in the gully at the northern end of Campbell Park in the late afternoon (about 16:20) watching a mixed feeding flock in the last rays of sunshine. A flock of honeyeaters

dropped out of the sky and to my amazement each of the 6 or 7 birds that I had clear views of were Black-chinned Honeyeaters. As the flock departed noisily to the south east I counted 14 individuals, all apparently the same species. They behaved essentially as Yellow-faced Honeyeaters do when they are travelling so I moved as quickly as I could along the edge of Campbell Park thinking that they would be reluctant to head across the paddocks. There was no sign of them before dusk however'.

A record was submitted to the online Atlas database, as soon as a code for the species was made available. This was the first record lodged in the database for that species. An unusual species report has not been lodged so the record has not been endorsed by the COG Rarities Panel.

At least one other observer went to Campbell Park as soon as possible, but was unable to relocate the birds.

On 16 June 2007, Alastair Smith went to the woodlands of the Newline Quarry site, on a hunch that, if the flock reported by Peter Milburn had moved in a south-east direction from Campbell Park, they

may have lodged at Newline. He observed a single specimen associating with Yellow-tufted Honeyeater *Lichenostomus melanops* and Crested Shrike-tit *Falcunculus frontatus*. The target bird was also observed at that time by Frank Antram.

Several other observers arrived by which time the bird had moved from

the tree in which it had originally been sighted. After approximately an hour of searching by up to 12 observers, a Black-chinned Honeyeater was located feeding in a Yellow Box *Eucalyptus melliodora*. After further searching by a number of observers two Black-chinned Honeyeaters were located a short distance away.



Photo: Martin Butterfield

Unusual species records were lodged that day by Alastair Smith and Martin Butterfield and have subsequently been endorsed by the COG Rarities Panel (COG 2007).

The following day other observers went to the site and the target species was photographed by Geoffrey Dabb. One Black-chinned Honeyeater was also observed in a Woodland Bird Survey (WBS) site at Newline Quarry by Sue Lashko during a regular WBS count. The last sighting of the species at Newline Quarry reported to the chat line was

by Julian Robinson on 29 July 2007. His posting described interactions with White-plumed honeyeaters *Lichenostomus penicillatus*:

‘... on first sighting it was being pursued by a pair of White-plumed [Honeyeaters] into a tree to which it escaped and began feeding (the tree was not in flower). Some 10 minutes later its quiet feeding was rudely interrupted by another [White-plumed Honeyeater] vectoring in out of nowhere straight to the Black-chinned and chasing it I think beyond the edge of the paddock’.



Photo: Geoffrey Dabb

With the exception of Peter Milburn's initial observation the species has not been reported from any other location in 2007.

Previous reports

Following the posting by Peter Milburn, Marnix Zwankhuizen reported to the chat line on 14 June 2007 that the Black-chinned Honeyeater record nearest to the ACT was a record from the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) at Marulan (approximately 34°42'S, 150°01'E). It appears that the Marulan observation is an outlier from the area where the species is commonly observed.

On 13 June 2007, Alastair Smith posted a message to the COG chat line recalling a posting to the Birding-aus national chat line concerning a Black-

chinned Honeyeater record in the ACT, apparently from July 2005. Alastair Smith subsequently contacted the observer for that record and was advised that the observer – who was not familiar with the area – had withdrawn the observation since the quality of the view had not been sufficient to support the identification of a new species for the ACT.

In researching the usual range of the Black-chinned Honeyeater using the new Atlas of the Birds of Australia (Barrett et al. 2003) this author noticed that an outlier record of the presence of the species was indicated in the one degree square 35°S 149°E. This was significantly both West and South of the location of the village of Marulan and thus unlikely to be the NPWS record referred to above. Following an interrogation of the

database of records received by COG from Birds Australia, a record was found referring to a sighting in August 1998 of Black-chinned Honeyeater at Lake Ginninderra, with geographic coordinates 35°14'45"S 149°3'44"E.

At this juncture the sleuthing became positively Holmesian as the observer was not known to this author. After some digging into history I was able to contact them and in an exchange of emails was delighted to find that after nine years they still had their field notes of the observation and could recall putting in an unusual bird report to the Atlas team. The completed form, endorsed at the time by the Atlas organisers, was duly obtained from them and submitted to the COG Rarities Panel for consideration at their next meeting.

The Rarities Panel has not been able to endorse the observation. This reflects the difficulty of establishing the first record for the ACT of a species some nine years after the event, in the absence of a photograph or a traditional collected specimen.

There are interesting issues about how the earlier record slipped through the cracks of the system for quality control of Atlas records and the COG databases. These issues are not being examined in this article. There would however seem to be some merit in an appropriate officer of COG extracting from the Atlas system (perhaps using the functionality of BIRDATA) a listing of all the species falling within

the COG area of interest to ensure that there are no further "surprises" lurking therein. The author has followed this approach at the degree square level and believes that undertaking the more precise exercise would be worthwhile.

It is of interest that Geoffrey Dabb reported to the chat line on 18 July 2007 that 11 of 15 respondents to an online poll, conducted by him on the chat line, rated the Black-chinned Honeyeater as being previously overlooked, while four of 15 reported it as 'not here' in the past.

Summary of current situation

The first endorsed record of the Black-chinned Honeyeater in the ACT is that by Alastair Smith lodged on 16 June 2007.

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A 'SONG' OF THE PIED CURRAWONG

Geoffrey Dabb

24 Brockman St, Narrabundah, ACT 2604

The question might be asked whether it is useful to apply the term 'song' to any of the sounds of the Pied Currawong *Strepera graculina*. Gill (1995) says that 'song' refers primarily to the vocal displays of territorial male birds, and connotes long vocal displays with specific, repeated patterns. He concludes:

'There is, however, no real dichotomy between songs and calls in either their acoustical structure or their function. Yet the term song is so entrenched and alternatives so lacking that continued use seems certain'.

In a similar vein, HANZAB (1990) notes in its introductory section:

The difference between calls and songs is somewhat artificial and arbitrary. We use these terms rather loosely, 'call' generally for the more simple and stereotyped vocalisations of most species; however, we use 'song' for a number of species (or groups) where we felt it more appropriate ... songs are generally more complex and longer vocalisations and are generally restricted to males during the breeding season ...

With respect to the voice of the Pied Currawong, HANZAB (2006) chose to deal with the 'song' separately from the 'call'. Significantly for present purposes, the song:

[d]oes not sound like other vocalisations of this species and may

not be recognised as given by Currawongs.

Given that song repertoires might vary between different populations or individuals, I find it helpful, in trying to sort out the basic currawong sounds, that Tony Howard has reported one example of song thus:

Near Sydney, at c.0445 in early Oct, a song rendered kwee, kooweee (with the koo very short) uttered at regular intervals in a long sequence.

That description suggests to me a song I have heard in Canberra in the early morning, over the last few springs.

Following the raising, in October 2007, of a question on the COG chat line about an early morning call (perhaps this one, perhaps not) I took a closer interest in the sound I had heard.

Over the last three springs at least, a pair of currawongs, which I had assumed to be the source of the sound, has nested in a street tree about 20 metres from my bedroom window, in Brockman Street, Narrabundah.

During the week following 10 October 2007, I noted that each morning:

(a) A currawong made the relevant sound from a perch in another street tree, 15 metres from the nest tree;

(b) The 'singing' lasted for 8-10 minutes, usually between 0435 and 0450 AEST, concluding before 0500. (A single exception was when I played back its own song to 'my' bird at 0500, causing it to begin again);

(c) 'My' bird was not the first to sing, another currawong about 200m away being the first to start by a few minutes. At least 3 birds, probably more, would call in succession, all ending by 0500;

(d) The 'song' consisted of 3-syllable segments, the third being a long whistled syllable and the second, when heard at close range, a guttural 'kronk', made by the bird extending and distending its throat, thus 'whit-(kronk)-wheer', the stress being roughly as in 'what no BEER';

(e) The number of segments in each phrase varied from one to four, the longest noticed being four-and-a-bit, this ending, atypically, with the 'what'. Times between phrases varied, seeming to depend on the cycle of the distant calls.

On three mornings I made audio-recordings. A sonogram of one phrase (the four-and-a-bit one), prepared by Peter Fullagar, is at Figure 1. The upper trace is the amplitude envelope and the spectrogram is below. Peter has noted as follows:

The wide frequency band shown in [Fig 1] is due to the fact that I have reduced the frequency scale to signals under 4 kHz. ... [T]he strong signal is at about 1600 Hz (with what appears to be the fundamental at about 800 Hz) and it will be this first harmonic above the fundamental that gives the clear and pleasing quality of the call to our ears. This is the pitch we think we hear when we listen to this call. The three rapidly repeated notes are seen to be lower with lower fundamentals (500-600 Hz). The frequency drop in the first part of each call is also clearly shown (falling from about 2 kHz to about 1.4 kHz for the strong first harmonic).

My conclusions are:

(1) That the sound in question is the early morning voice of the Pied Currawong, made for a short time at first light;

(2) That the voice is probably a 'primary' (or 'territorial', 'advertising' or 'full') song, heard typically in Canberra in October, and, as Cramp (1988) suggests, is:

usually under the control of sex hormones ... and therefore largely confined to the breeding season.

(3) From personal communications by other observers, that it is a common early-morning sound in spring in Canberra and in parts of Sydney, for observers awake at the relevant time.

This particular vocalisation of the Pied Currawong is not described in the field guides.

Since initially submitting this note, I have noticed that during November the described song ceased to be heard in the early morning. However, on 21 and 23 November I heard fragments of the song in the afternoon, in the Brockman Street area. On both occasions there was only a single phrase, with three segments. On both occasions a Common Koel *Eudynamis scolopacea* was also calling, and the koel and currawong sounds had the same distant echoic quality.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Tony Howard for our short discussion on this sound, and

to Peter Fullagar for the sonogram.

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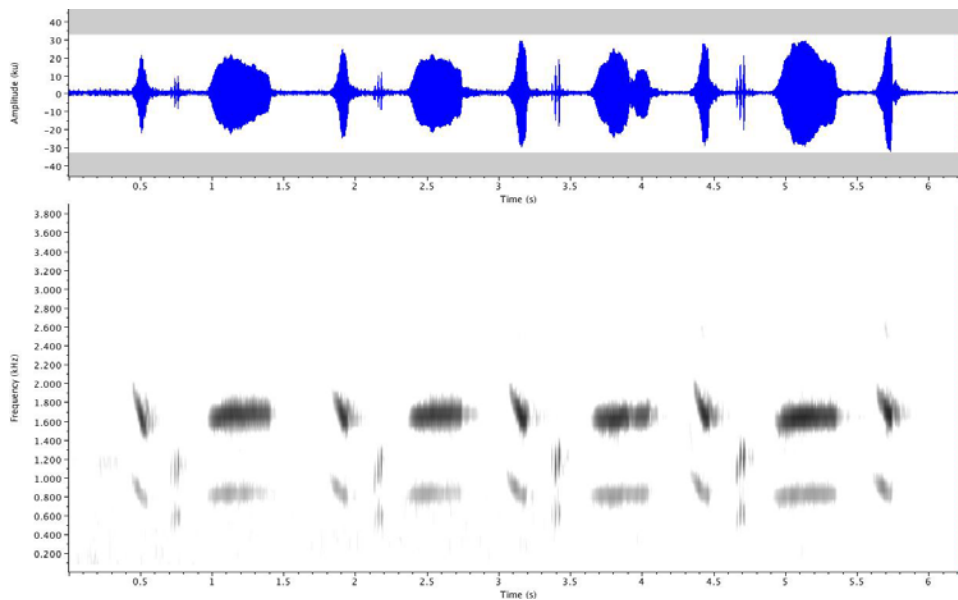
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Figure 1. Sonogram of Pied Currawong call (sonogram by Peter Fullagar).



NESTING WHISTLING KITES AT JERRABOMBERRA WETLANDS

Rod Mackay

48 Spowers Crt, Holder, ACT 2611

I first became aware of possible raptor breeding activity while paddling Jerrabomberra Creek on 2 September 2007. I sighted a large untidy nest high up in a tree on the banks of the channel that runs from the creek towards the Molonglo River. A large raptor was visible near the nest and a second bird actually vacated the nest as I approached. I was unsure as to species (Whistling Kite *Haliastur sphenurus* and Little Eagle *Hieraaetus morphnoides* were my prime suspects) but subsequent investigation by Geoffrey Dabb confirmed they were Whistling Kites. Geoffrey and Julian Robinson posted some excellent photos on the COG chat line.

I was unable to return to the area until 17 October. When I did return the nest had at least one chick in it. The top of a small head and one eye were visible just above the rim of the nest. Two adult Whistling Kites were very active in the vicinity soaring overhead and landing just above the nest or in trees about 50 metres distant on the other side of the channel. A pair of Willie Wagtails *Rhipidura leucophrys* and a pair of Magpie-larks *Grallina cyanoleuca* having a dispute were forced to call a truce and take evasive action when one of the Whistling Kites either got hungry or took exception to their noisy presence and decided to drive them off. It was quite a sight to see

the larger bird dodging through the willow branches from tree top to ground level, but I didn't see the result of the pursuit.

I went back the next day to find one of the adult Whistling Kites was actually at the nest, but I could not see any evidence of a young one.

I re-visited the area as part of the Bird Blitz on Saturday 27 October 2007. As soon as the nest came into view I saw not one but two chicks clearly visible, while both adult birds were perched in that same dead tree some 50 metres away on the other side of the channel. When I returned about half an hour later the chicks had adjusted their position to face east rather than west. It was slightly bizarre to see a deflated orange balloon hanging off the outside of the nest – I hadn't noticed THAT before and wondered how/why it came to be there.

As an added interest in the general area I discovered that the warring Willie Wagtails and Magpie-larks of 17 October had nests within a few metres of each other, and Australian White Ibis *Threskiornis molucca* appeared to be establishing a breeding colony. Straw-necked Ibis *Threskiornis spinicollis* and a pair of Royal Spoonbills *Platalea regia* in breeding plumage were also loitering with intent.

About 90 minutes later I was paddling back down the creek proper when one of the adult Whistling Kites flew directly overhead carrying what I suspected was food. I watched it disappear down through the trees in the general direction of where I thought the nest would be. I decided to visit one more time and found both youngsters standing upright in the nest. Did this indicate they had been fed? I wasn't sure. One of the adults was perched in the dead tree on the other side of the channel where I had seen them before, but there was no sign of the second adult.

On my final paddle along the far eastern bank of Lake Burley Griffin I found the other adult bird perched low down on a large dead log – a somewhat grisly sighting as the bloodied remnant of its dinner, with a quite large grey wing attached, was clearly visible through the binoculars. While I was viewing I was not paying attention and drifted too close, whereupon the Whistling Kite decided to vacate the spot, rose about half a metre, then dropped back down to grab its meal before

heading back towards the channel. The wing appeared to be from an Australian Wood Duck *Chenonetta jubata*, but the Kite was certainly not carrying the whole bird when it flew over me 20 minutes previously.

By 3 November the Whistling Kite chicks looked ready to take their first gravity defying leap. One had left the nest and was perched in the tree, and the other was standing at the edge of the nest. I had excellent views of the immature plumage, brown backs with pale buff spots, fronts heavily streaked, a notable first for me. A grey wing and other remnant bird parts were caught up in the tree below the nest, possibly the material I saw the adult bird carrying during the Bird Blitz.

I had intended to return on the following weekend to check on progress, but a sewage leak into the lake meant the closure of the area to all activities including boating. I remain hopeful that there will soon be reports of not one or two, but three or four Whistling Kites soaring in the area.

ODD OBS

An ACT record of the Australian Painted Snipe

On Sunday afternoon 14 October 2007 we were in the Cygnus Hide at Kellys Swamp in the Jerrabomberra Wetlands Nature Reserve in Canberra. We were scanning the opposite bank with a telescope, looking for crakes, when to our surprise we found an Australian Painted Snipe *Rostratula australis*. When first seen it appeared to be involved in a confrontation with a Purple Swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio*. The snipe had its wings outstretched and held forward with the upper surface towards the swamphen, which retreated. The snipe then assumed a more relaxed posture, and fed briefly, although remaining in the same small area. After watching it for a while we left to alert other people to the bird's presence. On returning we had some trouble relocating it, but eventually found it in the same place we had first seen it. Its camouflage was very effective, and it was difficult to pick up, even with a telescope, while it remained still. Other birders arrived and discovered that better views could be obtained from a bank adjacent to the Bittern Hide at the northern end of the swamp. As well as a number of other people seeing the bird, Geoffrey Dabb obtained images, some of which were posted on COG's email chat line. Unfortunately the snipe was not

found again the following day or subsequently.

Kellys Swamp is an area of open water with well vegetated banks; the Painted Snipe was in shallow water with short, emergent vegetation immediately adjacent to reeds, behind which it partly retreated on a couple of occasions. It appeared to feed occasionally, but was more often standing quietly, and remained in the same small area throughout the time we observed it. It had several apparent aggressive encounters with a swamphen that seemed quite curious and cautiously approached it a number of times. As well as repeating the open wing display described above, on at least three occasions the snipe lunged at the swamphen; the larger bird retreated each time. The snipe reacted in a similar manner to a White-faced Heron *Egretta novaehollandiae* and a Dusky Moorhen *Gallinula tenebrosa* that came near it on separate occasions.

As far as we could tell the snipe was an adult male. It lacked the chocolate brown head and breast of an adult female. It had a very prominent white harness on the side of the breast, and showed clear, large buff spots on the flight feathers. Juveniles are similar to adult males but the harness is less white, and the buff spots not so distinct. The bill is also darker (Marchant and Higgins 1993; Geering et al. 2007).

Although there have previously been suggestions that the Australian Painted

Snipe may be a separate species (eg Marchant and Higgins 1993), it has usually been classified as a subspecies of *Rostratula benghalensis* of southern Asia and Africa. However, recently published DNA studies show it to be widely divergent genetically from overseas populations; it also differs in measurements and colouration, and should be considered a distinct species endemic to Australia (Baker et al. 2007).

The last record of an Australian Painted Snipe in the ACT appears to have been in 1978 although there were a number of reports prior to this (Wilson 1999). The species is considered widespread but rare with an estimated population of just 1500 (Geering et al. 2007). Its current conservation status nationally is vulnerable (Department of the Environment and Water Resources 2007). However, with such a small population and with its wetland habitat suffering serious environmental stresses in many parts of its range, a status of threatened may be more appropriate. The species has been the focus of annual surveys by Birds Australia's Threatened Bird Network since 2002 (Oring et al. 2004).

Thanks to Geoffrey Dabb for images and Chris Hassell for advice on plumages.

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Steve Holliday and Prue Buckley
90 Duffy St, Ainslie, ACT 2602

Black-eared Cuckoos in the ACT

On 9 October 2007 I walked from Shepherd's Lookout to Uriarra Crossing, hoping to add a few spring migrants to my ACT list. At noon, needing some sustenance and a bit of a rest, I unloaded my backpack at the picnic area just south of the crossing. It was a beautiful, sunny day with only a few clouds and a negligible wind. If I hadn't had obligations later in the day, I would have found a soft spot for a siesta. Just as I was getting ready to begin my return, I spotted an unusual bird in the casuarinas bordering the parking lot. On closer inspection, after rejecting the most obvious possibilities, I began to think

that I was looking at my first Black-eared cuckoo *Chrysococcyx osculans*.

Seen at relatively close range (four metres and a 30 degree gaze angle with 7x36 binoculars), the bird appeared larger and more chunky than the Yellow-faced Honeyeaters *Lichenostomus chrysops* that were feeding in the area. Its tail seemed about the length of its body with a short primary projection. The bill was uniformly black, slender and slightly decurved. The upper parts were grey and the lower parts white. There was no streaking or barring on the breast, belly or flanks. The feathers on the under tail were grey with white barring and edged white.

Its face showed a black, decurved eye stripe extending from the base of its bill to the auricular area. This was bordered raggedly with a white supercilium that was of equal width.

I did not have a camera with me, but nabbed a passing Japanese visitor who, probably thinking me somewhat deranged, was cajoled into taking a few shots. Unfortunately, these were not sufficient for a clean identification. Not to worry. Several keen ACT birders, including Stuart Harris and Geoffrey Dabb, visited the area over the next two days and saw not one but up to three individuals of the species and were able to capture some wonderful images. It was evident that the cuckoos were feasting on an outbreak of small caterpillars.

Pizzey and Knight (2006) show that the Black-eared Cuckoo is widely distributed throughout Australia but not within far eastern Queensland, NSW or Victoria. It inhabits a variety of areas including drier woodlands and riverside thickets. According to Taylor and COG (1992) there are only seven records of the Black-eared cuckoo in the ACT. It has not been seen here since 1989 (Wilson 1999).

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Chip Scialfa
Department of Psychology
University of Calgary
Calgary, Alberta, Canada

Evidence of Red-capped Robins breeding at Mulligan's Flat

On Melbourne Cup Day morning, three intrepid birders (Anthony Overs, Peter Fullagar and myself) set out to record bird song at Mulligan's Flat. Conditions were not ideal for recording with very cool and intermittently gusty weather.

At one point alongside the main track in a group of mixed eucalyptus, we came across an active group of vocal birds. Varied Sittella *Daphoenositta chrysoptera*, Leaden Flycatcher *Myiagra*

rubecula, Brown-headed Honeyeater
Melithreptus brevirostris, Rufous
Whistler *Pachycephala rufiventris*,
White-throated Treecreeper
Cormobates leucophaeus and
Mistletoebird *Dicaeum*
hirundinaceum, were among them.

When Peter and I had finished recording them, Anthony remarked that he had heard a Red-capped Robin a little further away. I passed the recording device to Anthony and we advanced a few metres into the bush towards a small patch of shrubby eucalypts and acacia. I trailed behind the two recorders so as not to disturb the recordings with ambient noise.

As I watched them three birds flew, away from the patch they were recording in, to a few saplings a metre or two from me. When I focussed my binoculars, there was a female Red-capped Robin *Petroica goodenovii* being pestered by a single juvenile. The female initially had her back to me but turned enough for me to see a faint reddish patch on the forehead. The young bird facing me had obvious juvenile plumage and demonstrated juvenile begging behaviour.

Within seconds a third bird flew into and out of my binocular vision. It was the male Red-capped Robin, which led the others to another small sapling a few metres away. There was a certain amount of begging again by the juvenile as all three moved around in the tree. This time the only clear view I had was of the male who obliged by perching on a

peripheral branch before taking off for a further tree, closely followed by the female and juvenile birds.

Jenny Bounds, in an email to the COG chat line, reported on her Bird Blitz efforts in eastern Mulligan's Flat and northern Gorooyaroo nature reserves where she found:

... a substantial number of Red-capped Robins (3 nesting pairs recorded in different spots) a species which seems to be well established in the reserves now.

A quick look at Red-capped Robin records in the COG database reveals a handful of breeding records over the past thirty years.

Nest with young records:

3/11/2004 Aranda Bushland

Nest building records:

2/09/1994 Southwell's Crossing

31/08/2002 Lyndfield Park Gunning

Dependent young records:

4/01/1987 Mt Ainslie

17/09/1995 Tilyard Dr, Fraser

9/01/2003 Mulligan's Flat NR

21/01/2004 Tidbinbilla NR

28/10/2006 Woodstock Reserve

Perhaps the severe five year drought has brought about an increase of Red-capped Robins, including breeding birds, into the ACT.

Shaun Bagley

1/23 Carstensz St, Griffith, ACT 2603

Red-backed Kingfishers in the ACT

The 2007 Bird Blitz weekend revealed an apparent influx of Red-backed Kingfishers *Todiramphus pyrrhopygia* into the ACT. Below is a brief summary of reports made to the COG chat line.

On 27 October, Stuart Harris reported seeing a Red-backed Kingfisher at the locked gate entrance to Namadgi NP, a couple of kilometres past Caloola Farm in the Naas Valley.

Noel Luff also reported seeing Red-backed Kingfishers in the deep south of the ACT. On 27 October, Noel heard and observed a pair and possibly a third bird, at two sites on the Long Flat Fire Trail (GrI28).

Also on 27 October, Joe Barr reported observing a pair of Red-backed Kingfishers on wires near the old sewerage buildings in the area known as West Macgregor (GrI11).

Joe's report of two birds in a reasonably accessible area allowed a number of birders to get a look at these visitors. Several birders observed breeding behaviour over subsequent days:

- on 29 October Stuart Harris observed the birds entering a nesting hole in the bank above Ginninderra Creek on numerous occasions; and
- on 10 November, Frank Antram observed a pair of Red-backed Kingfishers copulating.

Carole Elliott, on 4 November, reported three Red-backed Kingfishers at the West Macgregor site.

Frank Antram was at the site again on 11 November, where he too observed three Red-backed Kingfishers:

There was a male on an overhead wire near to me calling, and I could see the female in a dead willow over to my left, and there was a third bird calling in response from the far side of the creek. It sounded some way up the hill. Over a period of about 2 hours, the birds were calling on and off, but I couldn't locate the third bird, although there is no doubt it was there.

Also on 11 November, Rosemary Bell observed two Red-backed Kingfishers:

... taking turns at sitting in dead willows in Ginninderra Creek and flying into a hollow in the bank on the Macgregor side of the creek, just above some active Fairy Martin nests.

Roger Curnow also visited the site on 11 November. Roger was fairly certain that there were at least four Red-backed Kingfishers on Ginninderra Creek between Jarramlee Pond and the NSW border.

On 18 November, Frank Antram again visited the site. He observed the male Red-backed Kingfisher feeding the female on two occasions – first with an insect about the size of a bee, and secondly with a small lizard. Frank also observed the male trying to swallow a large cicada with some difficulty. A third Red-backed Kingfisher was heard calling from some distance away.

Frank Antram revisited West Macgregor on 26 November and observed the female Red-backed Kingfisher perched on one of the dead willows in the creek.

There are very few records of Red-backed Kingfishers in the ACT in recent years. A single bird was observed by Malcolm Fyfe in May 2001 at Jerrabomberra Wetlands. A single bird was also observed by David McDonald, Harvey Perkins and Alastair Smith in October 2002 at the horse paddocks at Addison Rd, Duntroon.

The most recent record prior to 2001, was a record endorsed by the Rarities Panel, of a bird at Acacia Inlet, in October 1989 (Wilson 1999).

Joe Barr, whilst going through some old photographs, came across several shots of a kingfisher he had taken in September 2005 at West Macgregor. At the time, Joe considered the bird a Sacred Kingfisher *Todiramphus sanctus*. An inspection of the photographs confirmed that the bird was indeed a Red-backed Kingfisher. Joe suggested that his misidentification was a result of his lack of experience with the species. Is it possible that Red-backed Kingfishers have been in the West Macgregor area for two years?

References

Wilson, S. (1999) *Birds of the ACT: two centuries of change*. Canberra Ornithologists Group.

Anthony Overs
50 Ross Smith Cres, Scullin, ACT 2614

COLUMNISTS' CORNER

Masters of the (Bird) Universe: Rarities Committees

Panels that rule on the validity of reports of rare or unusual birds have been established for many different countries and parts of countries. *Stentoreus* agrees that this is a good idea, but there are some curious features of the process.

COG has its own rarities panel which rules on the acceptability of reports of birds unusual for the local area.

In his chatty little birding expose *Birders: Tales of a Tribe* (2002), Mark Cocker describes how wrong claims might be either innocent (i.e. self-delusional) or elaborately contrived. He says the need to screen out 'bogus claims' led to the establishment of the British Birds Rarities Committee in 1958, to 'protect the integrity of ornithological records'.

Among European countries verification is regarded as a serious matter, so serious that there is an 'Association of European Rarities Committees' (AERC). According to the AERC, published observations of unusual occurrences that have not been checked by a competent committee 'are scientifically worthless and should no longer burden the scientific literature'. Moreover, just to reduce the fun further:

Rarities committees are not made mainly to verify claims of twitchers or to produce long country lists. The occurrence of rarities is a biological phenomenon to be studied like any other part of ornithology ... one recklessly accepted report may distort a whole pattern of occurrence.

Among AERC's 'Guidelines for Rarities Committees' is:

Every rarities committee should take care that rejected reports are not referred to in the literature.

One wonders how any committee could do that. Moreover, I notice that this injunction is not entirely consistent with Rule 1.6 of the Birds Australia Rarities Committee (BARC), which states:

The function of the Committee is to accept or not accept records submitted to it. It does not reject records and its decisions are not binding on any person.

The truth is that submission of a record necessarily involves an element of advocacy. As BARC says:

... it can be remarkably satisfying to not only find a rarity, but to document it well enough to clinch its identification and to convince the ornithological community that you have done so.

Putting that another way, Bill Oddie says:

It is surely an understandable human tendency that if you submit a record, you want it to be accepted. You therefore try to make the description appear

convincing and your tone confident – even if you're not ...

And in a tongue-in-cheek section labelled 'Fooling the committee':

Rather like a policeman 'revising' his evidence to present to court, you write it up nicely, add a little here, take a bit away there, type it out nicely, and make it more presentable. And like the policeman's evidence, a description can be reworked judiciously to fit whatever facts you want in order to secure a conviction! (Bill Oddie's *Little Black Bird Book*, 1980).

BARC says that about 20 per cent of records submitted to it are not accepted and that in most instances:

... records of non-acceptance are caused by insufficient evidence or poor documentation rather than incorrect identification.

It follows that a non-accepted record might well be of the claimed species, and that a more skilled or committed advocate might have secured its acceptance. As long as rarities panels see themselves as adjudicative rather than investigative authorities, procedural rigidity is likely, sometimes, to get in the way of a scientifically useful result. No-one's rights will be prejudiced by having a dialogue or allowing a resubmission, perhaps with the help of a more accomplished advocate.

I am not suggesting committees should not be strict. Photographs and video can be strong evidence, but neither need be conclusive. Bill

Oddie, in *Gripping Yarns* (2000), refers to the practice of the Dutch rarities committee (CDNA) of giving reasons for rejecting submissions. The reasons given in one case were:

Kittlitz's Plover. 30 April 1990. Identification accepted, but CDNA is not convinced that the photograph was actually taken at Den Helder, based on the extremely sharp contrast of the shade and the high position of the sun in the photograph, the fact that the location of the photograph could not be found and the fact that the grass species in the photograph would all be blooming extremely early in the year.

Among the BARC rules is:

4.2 It will not appraise records of birds which the Committee reasonably believes to be of captive origin.

That might not be too difficult to apply when appraising a record of a bird 'rare in Australia or its Territories'. However, for a regional committee like COG's it is more difficult to be 'reasonably satisfied' that some parrots and finches, for example, are ex-captives rather than simply out of their normal Australian range. As the BARC rule is framed, there would need to be, one would think, a reasonably substantial ground for finding that the relevant bird was an ex-captive to justify 'not appraising' the record. (*Stentoreus* understands that COG is about to publish its own 'rarities policy'; it will be interesting to see whether there is any departure from the BARC approach, and if so the reason for that).

A surprising feature of the process is the absence of an explicit standard for the

opinion that the individual experts must form. In one of his articles republished in *Gripping Yarns* (2000), Bill Oddie describes his unhappy experience with a Spectacled Warbler. His record was accepted as the third for Britain. Then the first record, a trapped bird, was re-examined and found to be a different species, whereupon the second record was reappraised and found to be inadequate for a first record. Then Oddie's own record was reappraised and also found not good enough for a 'first'. A later confirmed record did not lead to reinstatement of the earlier records.

It is understandable that committees might apply a tougher test for an unlikely and unrecorded species than for one that is to be expected occasionally. Absence of a previous record or of a nearby record is simply part of the evidence to be considered.

The European guidelines say nothing about the test to be applied. BARC says that it considers:

whether there is any chance that a misidentification occurred, and whether a record meets basic standards of documentation.

Within our legal system the two familiar standards applied in different situations are:

- satisfaction beyond a reasonable doubt; and
- satisfaction on the balance of probabilities (i.e. more likely than not).

The first test seems close to satisfaction that there was no chance of a misidentification, and seems appropriate for a record of a major rarity. But then comes the equally critical procedural test. A record where the committee was satisfied there was no chance of misidentification is to be 'not accepted' if the standard documentation is not complete, for example if it omits the 'discussion of the criteria' used in the identification. Why not just go ahead and discuss them?

One can only hope that preoccupation with certainty and form has not led to the loss of too many interesting records. Why is there no category of 'probable occurrences' to cover the case of a report that the committee thinks is 'probably valid' rather than 'absolutely certain'? Can't national or regional lists accept a bit of ambiguity, adding any necessary caveats?

Furthermore, surely there is case, in fairness, for attaching a permanent 'Observer's Advocate' to every rarities committee, to avoid penalising the inexperienced submitter.

A. stentoreus

Birding in cyberspace, Canberra-style

Occasionally COG's Annual Bird Report includes records of *Gallus gallus*, aka Feral Chicken, Red Junglefowl or simply 'chook'. In the Canberra region these seem to be escapee (or escaped) domestic chickens. Would anyone want to spend time studying the familiar chook? The answer is yes indeed, as evidenced by a request posted to the national email-based birding announcement and discussion list Birding-Aus www.shc.melb.catholic.edu.au/home/birding.

Dr. Paul G. McDonald from the Centre for the Integrative Study of Animal Behaviour at Macquarie University said:

A colleague here is interested in possibly finding some feral junglefowl populations to work on. Does anyone know of the status of any feral (presumably red?) junglefowl pops here in Oz? Is there a population still present on Heron Island or the NW Islands of the Capricorn Group? HANZAB also mentions Goat Is in Sydney, are there still any there?

If there are none in Australia where would be the closest and most easily accessible spots in SE Asia to find either red or green junglefowl?

Strange as it may seem, despite the bucket loads of research done on caged chooks, little work has been done in the field to 'ground truth' much of the conclusions.

A quick search of the online Ornithological Worldwide Literature (OWL) database

www.egizoosrv.zoo.ox.ac.uk/OWL

reveals just 36 articles with 'junglefowl' in the title, confirming Paul's comment about the lack of information about this species in the wild. I hope the researcher has found a population to study. If so, it would be interesting to find out where it is located.

The Zoological Record www.scientific.thomson.com/products/zr/ (you need a subscription to access this, or you can search it at the National Library) produces only 86 records on 'junglefowl'.

Now, I'm unclear if our editor wants me to go here, but I was intrigued by the question posed in the title of the second-most recently published article on the junglefowl: Parker, T.H., Thompson, D., Ligon, J.D., Schneider, B. & Byrn, F. (2006) Does red junglefowl comb size predict sperm swimming speed and motility? *Ethology Ecology & Evolution*, 18: 53-60.

Here is Parker et al.'s answer:

In male red junglefowl (*Gallus gallus*), comb size is the only male morphological trait repeatedly shown to predict female mate choice. Comb size in two different groups of yearling male junglefowl was compared with a composite variable assessing sperm speed and motility. This variable, derived through principal component analysis, captured variation in the percent of sperm motile, swimming speed of sperm, and directional swimming speed of sperm. In one group of males, sperm movement was greater in smaller combed males. In the other

group, sperm movement was uncorrelated with comb size. Thus we found no evidence that females will gain fertility benefits through faster, straighter-swimming sperm when mating with large-combed males.

Most birders bump up against avian taxonomy at some time, including the linked issue of bird species' Atlas numbers. We do this, for example, when we need to include a write-in on our Garden Bird Survey charts, that is, when we write in the name of a species we have observed in our garden not already listed on the chart. Ditto when we fill in a COG Incidental Record form www.canberrabirds.org.au/Forms/COG_Incidental_Record_form.pdf. In both cases we are required to provide the 'Atlas number'. Good-oh, but where, pray, do we find this number, and to which Atlas does it refer? This is actually a non-trivial question, as evidenced by this brief exchange on Birding-Aus. Someone asked:

Can anyone tell me which bird was given the number 462?

And the response was:

In the original Atlas, many long years ago, 462 was the Mangrove Gerygone (then known as Mangrove Warbler). However, in the more recent Atlas list, Mangrove Gerygone is 460 – can't see a 462 in that list.

The 'original Atlas' mentioned here is Blakers, M., Davies, S.J.J.F. & Reilly, P.N. (1984) *The Atlas of*

Australian Birds, Melbourne University Press, Carlton and the 'recent Atlas' is Barrett, G., Silcocks, A., Barry, S., Cunningham, R. & Poulter, R. (2003) *The new atlas of Australian birds*, Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union, Hawthorn East, Vic. Sadly Birds Australia's unofficial national checklist www.birdsaustralia.com.au/checklist/index.html does not include Atlas numbers, nor does the 'official' checklist Christidis, L. & Boles, W.E. (1994) *The taxonomy and species of Birds of Australia and its territories*, Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union monograph 2, RAOU, Melbourne, Vic.

How the Atlas numbers came to be, and are currently revised, is a long and convoluted story into which I shall not go. Suffice to say that COG's Observation Record form www.canberrabirds.org.au/Forms/COG_obs_form.pdf contains the Atlas numbers of most of the species that we are likely to observe locally, as does COG's Annotated Checklist of the Birds of the ACT canberrabirds.org.au/chklst.htm.

Birds make all kinds of noises and, setting aside things like bill-snapping and wing-flapping, most seem to be classified as either calls or songs. So what's the difference, if any? Alastair Smith provided some useful details from an academic source to someone who asked this question on Birding-Aus recently, and local gun birder John Leonard provided an additional succinct explanation that I found of interest and wanted to share with you:

... calls are innate, that is, even birds brought up in isolation from any

individuals of their species will develop them and use them. But song has to be learnt, individuals raised in isolation from other members of their species never learn to sing 'proper' songs, much as children, if they don't learn to speak by the age of ten or so, never do learn the full range of language.

Oh, and only passerines have song, non-passerines only have calls.

Technological convergence used to be something forecasted, but is now very much a reality with respect to digital devices. For example, the sleek little device with which I occasionally receive or make telephone calls (my partner calls it a mobile phone) plays MP3s (just one of the scores of features it provides) which means it is just the thing for listening to podcasts. Readers may be interested in the monthly Nature's Voice podcasts from the RSPB (the UK-based Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) www.rspb.org.uk/podcasts/naturesvoice.asp. They are described thus:

A monthly podcast with features and interviews reflecting our work to protect birds and the environment, both in the UK and around the world. From the joys of watching and looking out for the birds in your back garden, to facing up to the challenges of global climate change, Nature's Voice keeps an entertaining, informative and campaigning eye on the world of birds.

Each episode lasts 15-20 minutes, and recent topics have included 'Homes for wildlife', 'Sumatran rainforest on the brink', 'Birds at sea

and a wetland recreated', 'Birds of prey still under threat' and 'Saving the albatross and Spring on Islay'. If you are unsure about podcasting, a recommended information source is www.abc.net.au/services/podcasting/help.htm.

Still on the topic of technology convergence, what about blending binoculars, making audio recordings of your bird observations, recording the bird's calls and songs, and having access to a bird call/songs field guide, all in one? That's RememBird www.remembird.com. It is described as follows:

The first digital audio recorder to have been designed by a birder, for birders. It can be attached to your binoculars to let you whisper your observations without taking your eye off the bird; record the bird's call and play recordings of hundreds of species from audio field-guides on plug-in memory cards (optional).

Unfortunately the calls/songs of Australian birds are not yet available in this form. Watch this space!

The Shorebird Conservation Toolkit shorebirds.org.au is a fine web resource for any birder interested in Australian shorebirds—and note that one does not need to go to the coast for shorebirds, Kellys Swamp is just the spot! The site's purpose is '... to help protect and enhance shorebird habitat across Australia' and to:

- increase awareness and understanding of shorebirds and their conservation needs;

- improve the sharing of information between shorebird research and conservation groups and the broader community; and
- inform development, implementation and monitoring of shorebird conservation projects.
- Find out about frameworks in place to help protect shorebirds - global, international and national conventions, bilateral treaties and agreements, the EPBC Act and the Wildlife Conservation Plan for Migratory Shorebirds.
- A list of organisations (government and non-government) involved in shorebird conservation in Australia.

The toolkit is funded by the Australian Government's Natural Heritage Trust. Specific topics covered include:

- Why do we need a toolkit? How can it help and who can use it?
- Search lists of migratory, resident and vagrant shorebirds. Interesting facts about shorebirds.
- Find out about shorebird migration and the East Asian-Australasian Flyway.
- Locate internationally and nationally important sites for migratory shorebirds in Australia. Identify new sites to add to these lists - learn how to conduct a shorebird inventory for your site.
- Identify and assess the impacts of management issues at your site. Select potential management options, prioritise actions and develop your own monitoring program(s).
- Useful information for developing, funding and implementing your own project. Recruiting and managing volunteers. Examples of signs, brochures, posters and case studies from projects across Australia.

Linked to this initiative in ways not immediately clear to your columnist is Birds Australia's new Shorebirds 2020 project. Early information on this initiative is provided in the August 2007 issue of Tattler, the newsletter of the Asia Pacific Flyways www.tasweb.com.au/awsg/tattler/tat-Aug07.pdf (see page 4), where we are advised that Shorebirds 2020 is funded jointly by the Australian Government's Natural Heritage Trust, James Fairfax, Lady Southey and the Myer Foundation. The Tattler article summarises a July 2007 presentation by Graeme Hamilton, CEO of Birds Australia, about the initiative:

- Shorebirds 2020 is a reinvigorated national shorebird monitoring program building on 25 years of shorebird monitoring in Australia;
- it would respond to increased demand for information on population trends and identify significant sites;
- ... the Program will be formally launched later this year; and
- appropriately qualified staff have been recently appointed by Birds Australia.

An October contribution to *Birding-Aus* advised these contact details for people interested in being involved:

To register your interest in getting involved in this exciting project, please contact Joanne Oldland at Birds Australia National Office on (03) 9347 0757, email j.oldland@birdsaustralia.com.au. Check out the Shorebird Conservation Toolkit at shorebirds.org.au/ and join the Shorebirds Australia Yahoo Group at groups.yahoo.com/group/Shorebirds_Australia (or Shorebirds_Australia-subscribe@yahoogroups.com (to keep informed on the project and join a discussion on Australia's amazing shorebirds.)

COG is fortunate to have many members who volunteer their time and expertise on various projects, and among these volunteers is David

Cook, the web manager of the COG website www.canberrabirds.org.au.

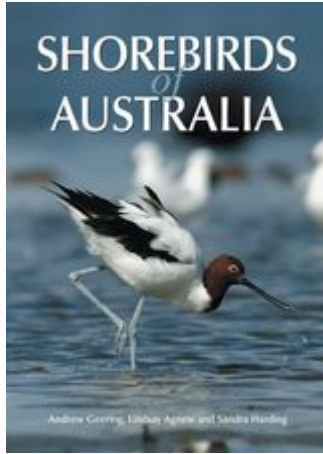
Have you noticed, at the foot of the home page that he has created for the website, the tag Fat Birder Birding Top 500 Ranking, followed by a number somewhere between 1 and 500? Clicking through on this link will explain this somewhat cryptic text; it is an automated listing of the world's top 500 birding sites, ranked by number of hits (visits/visitors) they receive. The last time I checked the global rankings there, the COG website was ranked 210 and the Canberra Birds Photo Gallery www.photogallery.canberrabirds.org.au/ was ranked 207. This is a fantastic achievement on the part of David and those who contribute material for use on COG's websites.

T. alba

Details on how to subscribe to *Birding-Aus*, the Australian birding email discussion list, are on the web at www.birding-aus.org/. A comprehensive searchable archive of the messages that have been posted to the list is at bioacoustics.cse.unsw.edu.au/archives/html/birding-aus.

To join the *CanberraBirds* email discussion list, send an email message with the word 'subscribe' in the subject line to canberrabirds-subscribe@canberrabirds.org.au. The list's searchable archive is at bioacoustics.cse.unsw.edu.au/archives/html/canberrabirds.

BOOK REVIEW



Shorebirds of Australia

by

**Andrew Geering, Lindsay Agnew
and Sandra Harding**

Colour photographs, Tables, Bibliography, Index
256 pages, 248 x 170 mm
Publisher: CSIRO PUBLISHING
Publication date: June 2007

Reviewed by Sue Lashko

As a group, shorebirds present some of the most difficult identification problems that a birdwatcher is likely to encounter.

So says the preface of *Shorebirds of Australia* and this is precisely why this book will find a place in the bookshelves of all those interested in waders or in improving their knowledge of a bird group that is often put in the too hard basket.

1981 was a significant year for waders in Australia, with the Japan-Australia Migratory Birds Agreement coming into force, the first national shorebird count and the formation of the Australasian Wader Study Group. The Victorian and Western Australian Wader Study Groups had been formed two years earlier, and more recently, groups have formed in New South Wales, Queensland and Tasmania. They undertake regular surveys, banding, community education and

conservation advocacy. This book started out as a project of the Queensland Wader Study Group to cover Queensland species but grew into a very comprehensive coverage of Australian waders and those that use the East Asian-Australasian Flyway.

The early chapters cover evolutionary history and taxonomy, breeding ecology, migration, feeding ecology and habitat selection, and plumages and topography. While this may sound daunting they are written in such a way that only a basic understanding of biology is required. Tables are used very effectively throughout these chapters, but particularly so to summarise the breeding ecology of Australian-breeding shorebirds. Maps and photographs add further interest to these chapters. I found the chapter on plumages and topography gave a clearer and more user-friendly explanation than I had encountered

in any other wader book. In case you are confused at this point, topography refers to:

... the external parts of a bird and the way in which the feathers are arranged on the wings and the body

A series of comprehensively labelled diagrams accompanied by clear definitions of terms used greatly enhances the reader's understanding.

Of course, most interest will be in the 78 species descriptions. Fifty five of these shorebirds occur regularly in Australia and each of these has a double page spread containing a map, usually three photos, and notes on breeding and non-breeding plumage, juveniles, flight, voice, range, habits and similar species. This latter section should prove invaluable to all those who puzzle over closely related species. The photographs show each species in at least two and sometimes four different plumages with, appropriately, non-breeding birds featuring the most. The 23 species considered to be vagrants each

warrant five to 12 lines without photographs, with the final listing being the Grey-headed Lapwing *Vanellus cinereus* which attracted so much attention last year.

The final chapter discusses threats to shorebirds and conservation actions. It draws particular attention to the reclamation in Saemangeum, South Korea, and pressures on wader feeding areas on the Yellow Sea, both of particular concern because of their effect on birds that use the Flyway.

Shorebirds of Australia, whilst not a field guide, is light enough to tuck into your backpack when next you head to the coast, inland or even Kelly's Swamp. It will most certainly aid in the identification and understanding of waders, those wonderful birds that:

... are a source of fascination to many birdwatchers around the world.

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

President's Report for 2006-2007

It is a pleasure to provide my fourth and final President's report, this time on COG activities for the period October 2006 to the present.

Looking back on my term as President, it has been a period of consolidation and expansion of COG's strengths rather than of taking on many new or innovative directions. We continue to run very well attended monthly meetings, and a varied and popular field trip (outings) program. Our work on conservation matters remains involved and demanding, and our range of surveys and the databases into which these feed continue to provide extremely useful information to government, industry and the public. Our chat line has become an ever more popular vehicle for the exchange of information and views on a wide range of birding topics, for both members and non-members, and our ever expanding website continues to be accessed by the public, in particular the very popular Photo Gallery.

Keeping our activities within bounds has been quite a deliberate policy on my part, as my experience is that it is quite easy to stretch a volunteer organisation beyond its capacity through the taking on of ambitious and time consuming projects. However, my biggest failure as President has been the inability to spend more of COG's large surplus

of funds. This is despite my convening, together with Tony Lawson and Bruce Lindenmayer, a small group to revise COG's forward plan into a simpler one with some agreed priorities and to assign some tentative dollars to these tasks. I have to say that we were disappointed at the limited involvement by the wider COG membership, in particular the complete lack of any feedback when this plan was published. COG also continues to do very little specifically to attract younger members, including in the areas of education, and we still have limited ability to regularly partake in exhibitions. Maybe these are areas that the incoming President Chris Davey will give some priority.

Committee

I have again been very well supported by the Committee over the past year, and I thank them all. This year none of the present members will be standing down, though it continues to be important to attract 'new blood' with fresh ideas and new enthusiasm.

While no-one is formally leaving the committee Barbara Allan, who retired as secretary last year, has over the past year relinquished some of her many involvements such as co-editor of Canberra Bird Notes and our Annual Bird Report, organiser of speakers for meetings and driver of

the records management committee, though she still retains her roles of secretary of the Rarities Panel and organiser of our bird blitz. On behalf of everyone I again offer our sincere thanks to Barbara for all the work she has done for COG, her efforts have been most appreciated.

Again many members not formally on the committee have helped COG in its daily activities, making a huge contribution to the success of the organisation. It is not possible in this report to individually thank all, and I apologise to those I have inadvertently, or for reasons of space, neglected to mention.

I would, however, like to make a special mention of Tom Green's contributions to COG activities, and to record how his untimely passing earlier this year shocked and affected so many members.

Members as at 30 June 2007 were 367 'subscriptions', including a number of family memberships, 11 BIGnet exchange organisations; and one copyright deposit organisation – in terms of actual individuals, this equates to a membership of over 500.

Conservation

Jenny Bounds continues in her role as COG Conservation Officer, with assistance from other members on a project basis. As President of the Conservation Council for the South-East Region and Canberra, she also represents the interests of birds in that forum.

Responding to the Molonglo Valley urban development plans is a significant current issue for COG and other environmental groups, with submissions on the Preliminary Assessment for the Central and East Molonglo areas due at the end of November. While COG has not opposed urban development within the degraded (former) pine forests, the loss of significant bird habitats in the central Molonglo Valley area (around 655 hectares of grassy woodland), and a group of Brown Treecreepers, is a particular concern. We are also concerned about the potential loss of raptor species from the valley.

In September 2006, COG nominated the Little Eagle to the ACT Flora and Fauna Committee, as a vulnerable species in the ACT. The submission was drafted by Jenny Bounds, with input from two raptor experts. The nomination was timely given the proposed Molonglo Valley development plans, as the Little Eagle's last two known breeding territories occur in the valley. While we await an official announcement, we understand that the nomination has been recommended to the Minister.

Over the year, COG provided submissions/input on the following:

- the Jerrabomberra Wetlands Nature Reserve Draft Management Plan 2006;
- the Lower Cotter Catchment Strategic Management Plan;

- the ACT Government about water extraction from Yerrabi Pond and impacts on Musk Duck breeding;
- the Preliminary Assessment for the proposed Feral Proof Fence at Mulligan's Flat NR (part of the research project in the reserve);
- the ACT Planning System Reform Project (review of planning legislation); the main concern being the need for improved environmental assessment processes where bird habitats are impacted;
- amendments to the Domestic Animals Act, supporting measures to protect birds/wildlife from roaming domestic cats;
- a joint letter with the Conservation Council asking the ACT Government to develop a cat containment policy for the ACT; this follows on from the introduction of the first cat containment suburbs in Forde and Bonner adjacent to Mulligan's Flat NR;
- the proposed four new fire trails for Namadgi NP (for fire management); the ACT Government has since announced that three of these will not go ahead as proposed due to the significant environmental damage to the park; and
- suggested text for the birds segment of the 2007 ACT State of the Environment Report.

The above gives a good picture of the very broad range of conservation issues COG faces.

Field trips

COG has continued to run a very active program of field trips, which have been well patronised. Anthony Overs has taken overall responsibility for management of the COG Field Trips, and the 2007 program was devised with the assistance of Jenny Bounds and me. The aim of the program, to offer a wide range of both local and further afield outings opportunities to attract a broad cross-section of the membership, was maintained.

Highlights included the Mallacoota, Far South Coast and Buddigower NR camp-outs, the accommodated trips to Lord Howe Island and Mittagong, and the day trips to Monga NP and Hospital Hill in Namadgi NP. Some places were revisited successfully such as Castle Hill and Googong Dam and the overnight camp-out in the Bumbalong Valley. Boat trips on Lake Burley Griffin and the Molonglo River to view Darter and cormorant nesting, and the nest workshops at Campbell Park, have become annual features. We have continued our links with like-minded organisations, holding another outing with the Goulburn Field Naturalists Society with the trip to Marulan. My thanks again to all those who helped lead and organise outings during the year and who wrote up reports of trips for Gang-gang and on the chat line.

Communications and Publications

Greg Ramsay has continued the task of editing and publishing our newsletter, Gang-gang, very ably assisted by Sue Lashko, while Judy Collett co-ordinates the wrapping and mailing with her team of helpers. Thanks to all involved for ensuring COG's newsletter is prepared and distributed efficiently.

Harvey Perkins and Barbara Allan both stepped down as co-editors of Canberra Bird Notes, and Anthony Overs has taken over. Articles included the status of the Hooded Robin and the number of breeding Little Eagles, and on what determines Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo numbers in Canberra. Thanks go to both Harvey and Barbara for their long reign as editors and to all contributors to CBN.

David Cook has maintained and continued to expand COG's website, <http://www.canberrabirds.org.au>, and has updated all sections to present a consistent interface. The Gang-gang newsletters continue to be available on the website in PDF format, or viewable as web pages; the online Birds of Canberra Gardens, courtesy of Paul Fennell, is now available through the COG website; and indices and abstracts for recent Canberra Bird Notes volumes 28 (2003) to 32 (March and June 2007) are available. There are now approximately 2,500 photographs of ACT region birds submitted by COG members on the Photo Gallery – requests for their non-commercial

use continue to come in. There have been approximately 19,000 unique visitors making 26,000 visits to the COG website in 2007 to date, and 77,000 unique visitors making 90,000 visits to the Photo Gallery over the same period. Thank you once again David for continuing to provide such an excellent service.

COG's email announcement and discussion list CanberraBirds, managed by David McDonald, continued to operate effectively throughout the year. The membership has remained fairly stable, at about 220, and continues to provide a very useful forum for COG members and friends to discuss topical issues relating to birds and birding in the Canberra region. It increasingly serves as an excellent way for members and non-members to rapidly disseminate reports of interesting sightings in the local region, as well as a useful medium to help less experienced birders improve their birding skills by benefiting from the advice and wisdom of the more senior subscribers.

Atlas, Woodland Survey, Garden Bird Survey, Waterbird Survey, Databases

COG continues to run a number of bird monitoring projects, some of which have been operating for many years. It remains very important to collect records for COG's area of interest, despite the New Atlas having been published in 2003. My thanks go to Tony Harding for the data input; and Nicki Taws, Chris

Davey, Barbara Allan and Harvey Perkins for checking datasheets. The successful second blitz during Bird Week in October 2006, aimed at providing a snapshot of the birds present across the whole of the ACT over one weekend, was very helpful in raising the profile of the COG database. Data may now be submitted electronically, thanks to a program devised by consultant Tony Muzik-Smith and much hard work by COG's database manager Paul Fennell; many of our members have welcomed this development and now submit their data by this means, though of course hard-copy datasheets are still welcomed.

The COG Woodland Bird Monitoring Project has now been running since 1998. There are now sites at 15 locations in grassy woodlands around the ACT. Some sites at Mulligan's Flat have been surveyed continuously since 1995. The success of this long running project is due in large part to the significant commitment of the site coordinators, supported at some sites by regular volunteers. Again my thanks go to all involved in this important, long-term project for COG.

Jenny Bounds is Convenor of the Management Committee which coordinates this project and organises much of the operational work, with Nicki Taws and Jack Holland forming the other members of the Management Team. Alison Rowell, Environmental Consultant, continues to have a key role as consultant to the project,

coordinating the quarterly surveys and data collection at sites, as well as providing a voluntary input.

In early 2007, Jenny Bounds, Nicki Taws and statistician Ross Cunningham completed an analysis and report on data collected from 1998 to the end of 2005, including some analysis for Mulligan's Flat and Gorooyaroo north sites. The report was published in CBN in June 2007 and is also available on the COG website. The next data analysis is likely to be undertaken once we have achieved 10 years of data at a majority of sites in the second half of 2008. While the analysis is providing interesting trends, and much clearer pictures for some species as time goes on, it has been difficult to determine clear trends for certain species of interest (those believed to be declining such as Diamond Firetail, Jacky Winter) due to low numbers at sites. We hope that improved statistical methods will assist with the analysis of these species in the future.

I'd like to thank David Rosalky who managed the Garden Bird Survey (GBS) until handing back to Martin Butterfield in January 2007. Also my warm thanks go to Kay Hahne for continuing to enter the data, a huge task, especially as the number of charts increases. Thanks also go to Anne Hall for volunteering to join the team working on Year 26. This major project has now completed 26 years and is COG's longest running monitoring project. Close to 70 Charts have been received for 2006-07 and approximately 70 charts have

been distributed thus far for year 27. It is used increasingly by researchers and its results are used to support policy submissions. However, it is clear that the potential use of the GBS data is largely untapped. With the 'Silver Jubilee' year completed, a Review of the Survey, aimed at ensuring that it remains a members' survey whilst keeping up with developments in technology and science, is underway. Chris Davey is convening a team of experts who have long histories with the GBS. I look forward to the team reporting by the end of 2007, and that the report will include suggested strategies for expanding the scientific and community use of the data.

COG's Rarities Panel, comprising Richard Allen, Jenny Bounds, Grahame Clark, Dick Schodde and Nicki Taws, continued to meet quarterly to consider, and endorse for publication where appropriate, records of unusual species seen in COG's area of concern, and to continuously review the status of birds in our area. My thanks go to previous panellist Mark Clayton, who resigned during the year. We welcome back Dick Schodde and thank all panellists for their hard and often underappreciated work.

Annual Bird Reports

Thanks go to Paul Fennell and David Rosalky who extracted and collated the data for the 2005-06 annual bird report, which was compiled by a dedicated team of writers, Barbara Allan, Grahame Clark, Chris Davey,

Michael Lenz, David McDonald, Ian McMahan, Harvey Perkins, David Purchase and Nicki Taws, who produced the species reports. Thanks to all those involved, for their work in getting this most valuable report out in a timely fashion.

Monthly Meetings

We again enjoyed a varied program of speakers at our monthly meetings. Topics ranged from 'local' matters such as Noisy Miners, Grey Fantails and Superb Parrots, and the Holbrook revegetation study, to mouth-watering overseas destinations including the Galapagos Islands and Patagonia. Our thanks to Sue Lashko for continuing to facilitate our use of the Canberra Girls Grammar School venue; and to Carol Macleay for her lengthy commitment to the sales table. We welcome Bruce Ramsay who has now taken over this important function from Carol with great enthusiasm.

COG Administration & the COG Office

COG no longer maintains an office. For the time being, our records and library are housed by a former committee member. Access is by arrangement with the secretary or, in her absence, with any member of the COG executive. Our camping and display equipment and archival records continue to be held in storage in Belconnen and again may be accessed by arrangement with any of the executive.

Canberra Birds Conservation Fund

The Canberra Birds Conservation Fund receives tax-deductible donations from COG members and the general public, and uses the donated money on activities that help to achieve COG's environmental objectives, especially promoting the conservation of the Canberra region's native birds and their habitats. Members give generously to this fund and are encouraged to continue to do so.

During the year, the Fund's fifth grantee, Mark Clayton, was funded to purchase mist nets for use in monitoring the birds of the Kama Agistment, with particular emphasis on the frequency of breeding events

prior to, during and following the Molonglo developments and with a special emphasis on the Brown Treecreeper. The Fund continues to welcome applications from individuals and organisations seeking support for activities that will help to achieve COG's environmental activities.

Conclusion

I would like to thank everyone else who has helped me over the past four years and, though I'm stepping down as President, look forward to many more years of involvement with COG.

*Jack Holland
10 October 2007*

RARITIES PANEL NEWS

The undoubted highlight of the Endorsed List on this occasion is the record of a Painted Snipe at Jerrabomberra Wetlands Nature Reserve on 14 October 2007. Steve Holliday was the astute observer – well done! The male bird obligingly stayed around long enough to be photographed and viewed by a few other birders on the day. According to Steve Wilson, in his *Birds of the ACT: two centuries of change*, Painted Snipe were banded in 1964 when Lake Burley Griffin was filling; they were seen occasionally during the 1970s at the Jerrabomberra Wetlands; and the most recent record was of a bird observed on 7 January 1978 at Fyshwick Sewage Ponds by Michael Lenz and Grahame Clark. It is hard to tell if the birds are being overlooked, or are simply not visiting our area.

Another surprise was the lone Bar-tailed Godwit, also at Jerrabomberra Wetlands, from 24 October 2007. The godwit was first observed by former COG member and now interstate visitor, Mat Gilfedder, and subsequently by many others. And, unlike the snipe, it obligingly stayed around long enough to be counted in COG's 27-28 October bird "blitz". The most recent ACT records are from Lake Burley Griffin in December 1979, although the species is seen fairly regularly when there is water at Lake Bathurst and The Morass.

A third surprise was the Black-eared Cuckoo in casuarinas at Uriarra East picnic area, observed on this occasion by visiting overseas academic Chip Scialfa on 9 October 2007. Subsequent observers recorded up to three individuals of this species at the same location. We are on the very eastern edge of the range of this dry country species, the most recent endorsed record prior to this one being 26 February 1989. The black eye stripe, extending from the base of the bill to the auricular area, and the white supercilium are diagnostic features, as is the pale rump. The Uriarra cuckoos were feeding on hairy caterpillars which Ted Edwards of CSIRO Entomology suggested were the larvae of the moth *Anestia semiochrea*.

There were two other notable and possibly drought-induced observations of inland species. A White-fronted Honeyeater overwintered at Philip Veerman's at Kambah, and was able to be readily observed and photographed by many. The only previous records in the ACT of this nomadic species came from Jerrabomberra Wetlands Nature Reserve earlier this year. Perhaps less surprising was the lone Chestnut-rumped Thornbill observed north of the ACT by Marnix Zwankhuizen in June. There is one previous record of a group of four of these thornbills in the Campbell area in 1961. Identification features of this thornbill, aside from the rump colour, are the pale face and the

characteristic 'seep seep' call, unlike that of any of the local thornbills.

The Panel also considered a report from Carol Newman of a Sulphur-crested Cockatoo with an exceptionally long bill, which had not been worn down by normal eating. The Panel assumed that this was the start of beak and feather disease, a sadly not uncommon condition suffered by local parrots.

And finally, following the interest generated earlier in the year with the observations of Black-chinned Honeyeaters in the ACT, the Panel considered a report passed on to it from Birds Australia, of a 1998 record of the species at Lake Ginninderra. Considering the age of the report, and its brevity, the Panel noted it but felt that it was not adequate to be endorsed as the first record of the species for the ACT.

ENDORSED LIST 71, dated 25 October 2007

- Bar-tailed Godwit** *Limosa lapponica*
1; 25 Oct 07; Alastair Smith; Jerrabomberra Wetlands NR GrL14
- Painted Snipe** *Rostratula benghalensis*
1; 14 Oct 07; Steve Holliday & Prue Buckley; Jerrabomberra Wetlands NR GrL14
- Major Mitchell's Cockatoo** *Cacatua leadbeateri*
1; 7 Jul 07; Jack Holland; Chapman GrI15
- Black-eared Cuckoo** *Chrysococcyx osculans*
1; 9 Oct 07; Chip Scialfa; Uriarra E picnic area GrG12
- Chestnut-rumped Thornbill** *Acanthiza uropygialis*
1; 2 Jun 07; Marnix Zwankhuizen; Lade Vale Rd GrM3
- Little Wattlebird** *Anthochaera chrysoptera*
2; 17 Jun 07; John and Samantha Layton; Yarramundi Reach GrJ14
1; 12 Jul 07; Alastair Smith; ANBG GrK13
1; 13 Jul 07; Martin Butterfield and Maurits Zwankhuizen; ANBG GrK13
- White-fronted Honeyeater** *Phylidonyris albifrons*
1; 5 Jul - 31 Aug 07; Philip Veerman; Castley Cct, Kambah GrJ16
- Scarlet Honeyeater** *Myzomela sanguinolenta*
1; 12 Dec 06; Mike Ogden and Shirley Kral; Kowen GrR14
- Black-faced Monarch** *Monarcha melanopsis*
1; 21 Oct 07; Alastair Smith; Reid GrL13
- Pied Butcherbird** *Cracticus nigrogularis*
2; 14 Apr 07; Jack Holland; Cooleman Ridge GrI15
1; 25 Jun 07; Michael Lenz; Barton Hwy S Murrumbateman GrI6
- Singing Bushlark** *Mirafra javanica*
1; 27 Nov 06; Michael Lenz; Lake Bathurst GrZ7
5; 31 Dec 06; Michael Lenz; Lake Bathurst GrZ7
1; 11 May 07; Michael Lenz; Lumley Rd, Morass GrZ8

Canberra Bird Notes is published quarterly by the Canberra Ornithologists Group Inc, and is edited by Anthony Overs. Major articles of up to 5000 words are welcomed on matters relating to the distribution, identification or behaviour of birds in the Australian Capital Territory and surrounding region. Please discuss any proposed major contribution in advance. Shorter notes, book reviews or correspondence are also encouraged. All contributions should be sent to cbn@canberrabirds.org.au.

Please note that the views expressed in the articles published in *Canberra Bird Notes* are those of the authors. They do not necessarily represent the views of the Canberra Ornithologists Group. Responses to the views expressed in *Canberra Bird Notes* articles are always welcomed and will be considered for publication as letters to the editor.

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