



# Canberra bird notes

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## EDITORIAL

The following comparison between the items contained in volume 2 and volume 3 is of interest:

	Vol. 2	Vol. 3	
Birds	37	76	+39
Topics	10	77	+67
Birds of areas	14	5	-9
Status of birds in the A.C.T.	7	4	-3
Letters to the Editor	5	1	-4
Reviews	2	13	+11
Authors (number of papers)	66	129	+63
Authors (number of individuals)	35	50	+15
Obituaries	0	1	+1
Excursions	0	10	+10

That discloses a very satisfactory situation. Keep up the good work.

THE LAKE EYRE BASIN AT THE END OF THE GOOD YEARS  
(AND ANOTHER SUCCESSFUL SEARCH FOR THE EYREAN GRASSWREN)

*Richard Schodde*

When Richard Weatherly, wildlife artist, returned from a trip to the eastern fringes of the Simpson Desert in June 1976, he rang me rather excitedly about grasswrens whose footprints he had seen and calls others had heard among the cane grass tussocks crowning the sand dunes there. Could they have been the Eyrean Grasswren? These observations were in fact the first of the spate of records of this species that came from that region later in the year.

So we set about planning a search of our own with that competitive lister, John L. McKean, and his comrade-in-arms, J.H. 'K' Lewis. Weatherly and I had a special reason for going: we wanted to gather first-hand material for a book on Australian wrens we are writing and here was a chance to find two little-known species, the Eyrean and Grey Grasswrens. The latter was known to occur in lignum on Goyder's Lagoon nearby on the southern edge of the desert. We estimated that about two weeks in the field would suffice and, being something of slouches in organising simple expeditions, we didn't get away until five months later, on 16 November, when the weather was beginning to heat up.

There were five of us - McKean, Lewis, Weatherly, his adaptable! wife Jenny and me - all squeezed with our paraphernalia in Weatherly's small utility and McKean's station wagon. Experienced bushmen like us didn't need four-wheel drive! Our route lay via Adelaide and on through the Flinders Ranges to Marree, then up the Birdsville track to Birdsville, birding as we went.

Because Schodde had a date with a bird in the National Museum of Victoria, he and the Weatherlys set out together a day or so behind McKean. Our rendezvous was the derelict homestead at Lake Harry, about 30 km up the Birdsville track out of Marree. Weatherly is not renowned for slow driving and we did the stretch from Adelaide to Marree with daylight to spare, plus one blow-out, a fruitless detour for a lost tyre and more than a couple of watering stops on the way. The cold ale at the Marree pub, the last we would have for days, was difficult to leave and the land was hidden in the inky blackness of the moonlessness of nightfall as we drove up the 'track' in search of Lake Harry.

The lonely flickering of a camp light on our right, a

twist of the steering wheel and the ruins of Lake Harry homestead loomed up. And there were the two Johns, fit and hearty after finding feral Ostriches out of Port Augusta and Thick-billed Grasswrens in the saltbush just south of Lyndhurst. We thought we'd headed John L. in our watering on the way up but the state of the camp revealed we still had a lot of catching up to do. What a jolly trip it was going to be!

Next day saw the beginning of serious birding. The traditional pre-breakfast ramble produced traditional desert birds: Black-faced Woodswallows, Little Crows, Orange Chats, Richard's Pipits, Galahs, Little Corellas, Nankeen Kestrels nesting in a red gum and Black-tailed Native-hens in the lignum. To those of us familiar with the birds of the western New South Wales swamps, 'Booligal Bantam' is a much better name for the hen. It is morphologically appealing and drenched with the vernacular - RAOU English Names Committee please note!

Lake Harry itself was full. Black Swans in thousands, many with cygnets, Hoary-headed Grebes, Gull-billed Terns, Pink-eared Ducks and Banded Stilts were all there and other species too. We didn't find any stilts breeding but they could have been; we didn't stay long enough to find out. First stop after breaking camp was Cannuwau-kaninna bore where Dave Stewart had found the Chestnut-breasted Whiteface breeding some months before and which McKean had never seen; he still hasn't and has come to believe that it's only a colour phase of the Banded Whiteface. We did find a Painted Snipe on the overflows there and a single Japanese Snipe, **of which we took unequivocal proof**. This is one of the very few verified inland records of this species. The bullrushes Typha on the bore were full of the clattering of Reed Warblers and one Brown Quail was flushed from long grass nearby.

Then we were off to the crossing on Cooper Creek. The flooding monsoonal rains over northern Australia during the previous three years had filled the drainages of the Lake Eyre basin. On Cooper Creek the water was backed up for miles and we had the novel experience of crossing by punt. Water birds were again abundant: Gull-billed and Caspian Terns fishing up and down the river, Silver Gulls, Darters, Pelicans, Yellow-billed Spoonbills, and three different species of cormorant perched in the coolabahs - Little Pied, Little Black and Pied.

Despite abundant water in the drainages, the land around was flat, dry, barren and baking in the hot November

sun. Most of it was stony gibber plain broken here and there by low stony gibber hills and a few gnarled hakeas, mulgas and dead-finish. In the shrubbier washes of chenopods, Cinnamon Quail-thrush, Calamanthus, White-winged Fairy-wrens and Brown Songlarks were to be found, but on the desolate stony rises there was nothing except a few Zebra Finches and Banded Whitefaces in the occasional stunted tree or a few Gibberbirds if there were no trees at all. The trilling notes of the Banded Whiteface, incidentally, are much more musical than those of the Southern.

We pressed on, flushing an occasional Black Falcon from perches on stones along the side of the road. On the billabong at Mungeranie Head Station we found three Masked Plover, one with black running broadly down on the sides of the breast as in the southern 'spur-winged' form, another without any black there as in the northern 'masked' form and the third intermediate between the two. If ever a field observation could drive a nail into the taxonomic coffin of separate species for the 'Masked' and 'Spur-winged' Plovers, that did.

A little further on, we came upon the low grey coolabahs lining Kirrawadinna waterhole. They were full of old stick nests festooned with the fur of rabbits and Long-haired Rats *Rattus villosissimus*. Sitting on bare branches above them, quite exposed in the late afternoon sun, was a group of about twenty delicate white birds looking rather like a flock of perched seagulls. Suddenly they all took off, flying and gliding gracefully up into the sky, the broad black stripes beneath the wings showing clearly. We had come across a colony of Letter-winged Kites, the first I had ever seen.

We camped that night at Mirra Mitta, too well satisfied with our progress and birding to worry about the dust and sweat of the day's journey. Mirra Mitta is about half way up the Birdsville track. The bore there was flowing and the long brakes of bullrushes along the drainage lines were filled with the usual metallic cacophony of singing Clamorous Reed Warblers. But as for greater shelter for the camp on that stony plain, we had to bear 360° of treeless horizon.

As dusk drew in, we noticed a number of dark shapes fluttering like great butterflies over the reedy plain of the bore flood-out. They were hunting owls and the prey, as McKean found later, was *Rattus villosissimus*. We thought it most likely that they were Barn Owls but, to be sure, **we**

**took a specimen.** To our delight we found them to be Grass Owls. This was the second record for South Australia, the first being from Goyder's Lagoon only a little further north and a year or two earlier. Grass Owls have been thought to be one of the rare Australian owls but they are now known to be quite abundant on the grasslands of central north-eastern Australia from the Barkly Tablelands east to the Atherton tableland. Their feeding strategies appear to be rather like those of the Letter-winged Kite. *Rattus villosissimus*, whose plagues they follow, is one of their staple foods. As food fluctuates, so apparently do the numbers of kites and owls. That night we counted at least fifteen Grass Owls over Mirra Mitta and a few days later we saw several more at Koonchera on Goyder's Lagoon.

Next morning dawned with the threat of thunderstorms. The pre-breakfast sortie flushed five Grass Owls from their tunnels in the reeds and discovered large Grass Owl pellets packed with the bones of the Long-haired Rat and covered with its hairs. Flock Pigeons and a solitary Black-shouldered Kite were seen flying about and Purple Swamphens were found in the reeds - a long way inland for them.

Our destination that day was Koonchera waterhole on Goyder's Lagoon, within easy driving distance. As events proved, we only just made it. The first part of the journey took us through desolate stony landscape to Clifton Hills. A group of five Bustards was put up en route and Lewis thought he saw a White-browed Treecreeper in a patch of open stunted mulga. The locality lay between the known ranges of eastern and western subspecies.

Anxious to keep moving to Koonchera waterhole and Grey Grasswrens, McKean and Lewis forged ahead while Schodde and the Weatherlys dallied to 'pluck daisies'. A stop in a dry, coolabah-lined creek just north of Mirra Mitta found them more Letter-winged Kites and the distinct chirruping of the eastern Wedgebill. Trying to find the bird, they came across three Grey Falcons. What a superbly swift raptorial machine that falcon is: heavy in build with short, no-nonsense tail and strong sharply pointed wings.

At Clifton Hills the road to Birdsville forks. The inside track to the left is shorter but only available in dry weather; the longer outside track is supposed to be all-weather. At the time, the inside track was 'out' and the outside track was 'in', so we turned right and made for the coolabahs on Damperainie waterhole for lunch. The hawks Weatherly had promised us at Damperainie had flown but there was much else to occupy us - a pair of Tawny

Frogmouths, a Barn Owl, six Painted Snipe on the shaded banks of the water's edge, Black-fronted Dotterels, Wood Duck, Grey Teal and Black Duck, Little Quail, a pair of Australian Magpies, White-backed Swallows and Little Corellas.

A huge thunderstorm had built up across the track, and while the rain kept ahead, we soon found the mud it left behind. Slithering and sliding mile after mile, we were more than relieved when the long red sandhill of Koonchera appeared and grew closer to cut the road. The track to Koonchera waterhole branches left off the road there and follows the edge of the sandhill west to the hole. Weatherly's high-stepping, large-wheeled utility handled the conditions well but McKean's low-slung station wagon was having trouble. Matters came to a head at the turn-off into Koonchera. The new track started off through a sandy claypan which had turned to quicksand in the rain. First McKean bogged; then Weatherly bogged trying to pull him out. We winched Weatherly out and moved McKean on, only to bog them both again in another few metres. It was mind-boggling. The afternoon was drawing on as we tired and a cold wind from the south spattered us with rain to mix with the mud from the bogs. The thought of being stopped in that soggy wasteland overnight, still miles from our first goal, was depressing.

But we got out on to higher, drier ground as the sun was sinking low and the race was on to make the waterhole before nightfall. Weatherly is just not the sort of man to lose that kind of race, but as he charged into the campsite on the edge of the billabong he tried, in a fit of bravado, to run right up over the top of the sand dune there - and bogged himself hopelessly. Trying to pull him out, we bogged the station wagon again, for the nth time. Slow hand winching sorted it all out in the end. Camp was finally set in the gloom of nightfall and much of my stock of port was later needed to restore and fortify the soul.

We woke on a hot, sunny morning to find we'd set up camp among huge bushes of lignum at the end of Koonchera dune by its nearby waterhole. To the west stretched miles and miles of the now dry lignum-covered swampland of Goyder's Lagoon. The dune provided us with sunbaking and the waterhole, which was full and had a sandy bottom, with bathing, fish and yabbies. It was tempting to take time out to just laze about, but the call of Grey Grasswrens (which we couldn't yet hear!) was stronger. A pre-breakfast search of low lignum near the camp was unsuccessful, so at 8 a.m.

we set out for further afield. The party had split, the two Johns going one way and the two Richards the other in a stretch of tall, old lignum when Schodde drew first blood: a party of three Grey Grasswrens jumping and churring in inquisitive agitation on the top of a clump of Lignum 40-50 metres away. Weatherly and I had several good, clear looks but the birds had ducked for cover and gone by the time the two Johns had responded to our urgent calls. What frustration: had McKean missed his only chance to see this elusive bird?

Subsequent search that morning was rather fruitless, revealing only that the western and central Australian race of the Variegated Wren was abundant in the lignum and the central north-eastern Australian subspecies of the Singing Bushlark, not often recorded in South Australia, was breeding in the swards of dry *Eleocharis* sedge-land between. Grey Grasswrens were about - we could hear their reedy, cricket-like contact calls from clumps of lignum here and there - but they always managed to elude us, by keeping low and moving (running) from clump to clump in such a way as to keep one or more bushes between us and them.

By 11 a.m. it had become too hot for us and the birds, so we struggled back to an almost shadeless camp to rest. An open canvas tent that kept in as much heat as it kept out was the best shelter we had. At 4 p.m. we set out again, this time in Weatherly's truck and with mist nets, to the place we first found the wrens that morning. We wanted to catch a bird so that Weatherly could photograph and sketch it in life for the illustration in our book. The going and coming failed to unearth any more Grasswrens but, with our single-minded interest in finding them somewhat satisfied, we took the opportunity to take in more of the birdlife around us.

On Koonchera waterhole and smaller waterholes in the nearby lignum were Straw-necked Ibis, White-necked Herons, Great Egrets, Pink-eared and Black Ducks, Grey Teal, Plumed Whistling Ducks, Pelicans, Hardheads, Royal and Yellow-billed Spoonbills, Nankeen Night Herons, Red-capped and Red-kneed Dotterels and Painted Snipe. Of migratory waders, McKean recorded Greenshank and Ruff (rough?), and Schodde a Wood Sandpiper on a muddy pool in lignum. Letter-winged Kites had a nest with three young in the coolabahs, and other raptors seen were Little Eagles, Wedge-tailed Eagles and Fork-tailed and Whistling Kites. Crested Pigeons were abundant and small groups of Flock Bronzewings flew over

camp in the early morning and towards dusk. White-plumed Honeyeaters (in the coolabahs), Australian Magpies, White-backed Swallows and both Australian Raven and Little Crow were there too.

There was a race next morning to the nets, but in vain. No grasswrens. Nor were we rewarded with more than a glimpse of them through the rest of the day as they twittered and sneaked through lignum ahead of us. During the day we found an even larger group of grasswrens in another patch of tall lignum - breeding having finished, territories appeared to have broken down somewhat - and we moved the nets to it, again without success. The early afternoon siesta that day, abetted by the oppressive heat, was a rather despondent one. In the evening Jenny Weatherly, a wizard with a camp oven, revived us with a meal of some superb wild game (rabbit, fish etc.) soused in vino.

Unfortunately our timetable didn't allow us another day at Koonchera. So, fearful of what we wouldn't find, we set out early next morning to take in the nets. The first held nothing; so did the second and the third. Then Schodde, approaching the last, lurched forward, grabbed and held a netted bird. A live Grey Grasswren had been snared and Weatherly had got his photos and sketches; and McKean made very sure of his first good 'look'. Camp that morning was packed with a zeal and enthusiasm that can only come from knowing that you've just made it by the skin of your teeth.

It took us over half a day to drive the 160 kilometres or so into Birdsville. Despite sun and heat, the storms of three days ago had left the track wet and boggy and Weatherly had to pull McKean through two bad patches. At about 2 p.m., hot, dusty and thoroughly uncomfortable, we crossed the Diamantina causeway into Birdsville, passed the beckoning cool showers and washrooms of the camping ground without so much as a sideways glance, and poured desperately into the pub for a cold ale and sandwich.

The first thing we saw in Birdsville were House Sparrows. The last we had seen were in the ruins at Lake Harry. Perhaps they had reached Birdsville by way of the towns and roads of Western Queensland. We thought a Selander-style study of variation in *Passer domesticus* in Australia was overdue, but who was there to do it?

Some hours later, with the inner man well satisfied but the outer still unkempt, we showered and cleaned up at the camping ground and left for our camp 29 kilometres west



of Birdsville near Blue Bush yards where the great, rolling red sand dunes of the Simpson Desert begin. At last we had reached the country of the Eyrean Grasswren. The camp site was delightful, a cleft in a sand dune filled with shady coolabahs and a Letter-winged Kite's nest with young in the trees overhead. Many birds used that shady spot for shelter and roosting - Australian Ravens, Galahs, Diamond Doves, Singing and White-plumed Honeyeaters and even Straw-necked Ibis from nearby soaks were there. And it was there, some months previously (June) that Weatherly had taken an indisputable photograph of an Olive-backed Oriole in first year plumage.

We left at first light next morning for a sand dune 16 kilometres away where Weatherly had seen what he took to be the tracks of the Eyrean Grasswren. The dunes of the Simpson Desert run north-south for miles and miles. Each long dune is about 30 metres high and the distance between them about a mile or more. The swales are usually well vegetated with shrubs and small trees (Acacia, coolabah) and the dunes themselves are clothed with spinifex on the sides and cane grass (Zygochloa) on the crests. Ours had the usual crown of tussocky clumps of cane grass, which, because of the good seasons, were lush and seeding well. As we clambered to the top, the party split, the two Johns going north and Schodde and the Weatherlys south. In 3 kilometres of searching we found no birds other than the inevitable parties of White-winged Fairy-wrens, but a few groups of footprints that could have belonged to the Eyrean Grasswren.

The day, however, belonged to McKean and Lewis. They came back with a sight observation of a small 'grasswren', white below and very rusty rufous above. It had run rapidly between several tussocks ahead of them, flipped over the top of another and then disappeared. It couldn't have been anything else than an Eyrean Grasswren asserted McKean. We all went back to the spot, but an hour's search revealed nothing. So we consoled ourselves with a sortie through the coolabah woodland on the nearby plain surrounding Blue Bush yards and were rewarded with an Owlet Nightjar, Red-browed Pardalotes, Masked Woodswallows and Brown Songlarks.

But now it was 10 a.m. and as the sandy red desert began to shimmer and bake under a relentless sun in a searing blue-white sky the birds or what there were of them quietened and hid. We retreated to camp, but finding it still too hot and dry made for lunch in the cool of the Birdsville pub. Later that afternoon we drove, little worse

for wear, out to sandhills just east of Birdsville from where Weatherly had had other reports of grasswrens. The blank that we again drew there was made more bearable by an all-too-tame Spotted Harrier hunting low over the dunes.

McKean and Lewis decided to leave next day. Lewis's back had been giving him trouble ever since he had fallen off the back of Weatherly's ute on a skylarking drive around a gibber hill south of Clifton Hills to flush birds. And they had seen the Eyrean Grasswren, so what was left for them to do? We made another trip all together early next morning to the place where they had seen the bird on the previous day, but again without success. By 11 a.m. they had packed camp and left.

The heat of the day inevitably drove us into the Birdsville pub for lunch. On the way we stopped to photograph an Australian Pratincole nesting in a patch of gibbers. The stones were so hot that the bird had to continually shift from one foot to the other when perching on them; eventually it found some relief by settling in a puddle of cooler water on the side of the road.

We decided to do something different that afternoon and made for the coolabahs lining the Diamantina. It was a fortunate decision. Masked Woodswallows were abundant and we found several pairs of Grey Shrike-thrushes of the pallid inland form of the eastern Australian subspecies, judged from their grey heads and tails and olive-brown backs. The highlight, nevertheless, was finding occupied nests of the Little Eagle and Black-breasted Buzzard.

Even more fortunate was our decision to go back next morning to the site where McKean and Lewis had seen their Eyrean Grasswren. We had found nothing as we climbed the dune at first light so we pushed on to the next dune a mile away. Apart from many tracks of what we presumed were grasswrens, there was again no sign of the bird. So we wandered back despairingly to the first dune again. As we climbed, I heard Weatherly begin to laugh hysterically. There, almost at his feet, at the same spot where McKean and Lewis had seen their bird, was an Eyrean Grasswren. We watched it for some time and Weatherly was even able to take photographs and make an excellent field sketch. It was very rufous above and white below and, seeming to lack a rufous wash on the flanks, was probably a male. Its bill, which it may use to husk and eat the seeds of the cane grass, showed up as being particularly heavy and stout. Its thin dark moustache stripe, which Allen Keast overlooked and as a result incorrectly put this species in

the Thick-billed instead of Striated group of grasswrens was visible in the field at close quarters. We could verify too that the tracks in the sand that Weatherly thought belonged to grasswrens were in fact of this species.

We were elated and determined to remain one more day for a last look. So we adjourned then and there to the Birdsville pub to celebrate and to loaf away the rest of the day. Schodde indulged his botanical interests with a visit to the bora trees (*Acacia pence*) that stand like grey sentinels on a few square miles of rolling gibber plain just north of Birdsville. Elsewhere they survive in an even smaller stand near Andado on the western edge of the Simpson Desert, mute testimony of the invasion of eastern central Australia by that desert in the last great arid period of Australia's history. That night we dined well on some luscious spare ribs provided by the local school teacher and superbly knocked up (but not out) by Jenny.

Our last morning in the desert dawned with a grey sky threatening rain from the west. A quick visit to the grasswren dune was again fruitless, so we packed camp and left for Birdsville with speed, before the rain could catch us on the road. Now that the objectives of our expedition had been achieved with sufficient success there was really little else left to do than go home. Money was beginning to be limiting and, as for time, Schodde's conscience was battling to get him back to Canberra for a wedding anniversary on 29 November.

The next question after the decision to return was: by what route? Ever adventurous, we opted for the eastern track through Cordillo Downs to Innamincka, and the Strzelecki track from there to Lyndhurst in the northern Flinders Range and on the main road down to Adelaide. Rain, we were told in Birdsville, was still too far west to worry us. So at about midday on 26 November we left Birdsville for Innamincka. The road ran east to Durrie Station, then south to Cordillo and Innamincka. The weather, under an overcast sky, was cool and made travelling comfortable. At Durrie there is an extensive expanse of lignum-covered flood plain which looked likely habitat for the Grey Grasswren. But we had no time to find out. We had to be in Innamincka that night.

The road to Cordillo Downs and beyond passed through endless gibber plains running south to Sturt's Stony Desert, which, at the height of summer droughts, is a nightmare to cross. The rains of the last few years must have been particularly consistent and heavy in this region

because the desert had come to life. As far as the eye could see it was a green sea of knee-high mitchell grass. We had little time for birding but we did see many more Emus and Spotted Harriers hunting than we had anywhere else, and found thousand upon thousand of Black-tailed Native-hens about a small billabong southh of Cordillo Downs. It was near there too that we saw our one and only flock of Australian Dotterels for the trip. About twenty of them were on a small patch of bare gibber amid lush fields of mitchell grass. For once, habitat for them was limited. Gibber plain gave way to low rolling sandhill country and night fell as we approached Innamincka. The sky cleared and one by one stars came out. In the flat, boundless blackness of a desert sky stars in thousands seem to come so close that you almost feel you can pluck them out by hand. We got to Innamincka soon after 9 p.m. As we sped through the coolabahs of the channels of Cooper Creek get there we flushed a large owl from the road. It was a Barking Owl, rare in South Australia. Camping in the dark is not much fun and we were not going to do that if we could get accommodation, a meal and the first shower in three days at the Innamincka motel. We did.

Lyndhurst was our destination next day and we opted for the old Strzelecki track that followed the creek of that name, thereby avoiding the principal roads to and from the Moomba gas fields. The real reason for going that way, however, was the bird life of the creek. Strzelecki Creek is lined with good coolabah woodland throughout its length and is well known as a refuge for birds of prey. We were not disappointed. I have never seen so many raptors at one time: Wedge-tailed Eagles, Black-breasted Buzzards, Whistling Kites, Black Kite, Collared Sparrowhawks, Spotted Harriers, Nankeen Kestrels, Brown Hawks, Little Falcons and Black Falcons. They were all there, often four or five different species in view at any one time, with Black Kites in their hundreds in the van, spiralling, gliding, flying above and through the trees.

About half way down the track, Weatherly and I got out to chase some Chestnut-crowned Babblers with their unusual brown-crowned, chestnut-breasted juveniles, when a long red utility carrying a great ladder contraption pulled up beside Weatherly's vehicle and the driver began to chat to Jenny. It was Jack Cupper of Mildura a mate out to film birds of prey. Jack had just got on to the nest buzzard that was rearing Nankeen Kestrels! (see Australian Bird Watcher 1 (1977) 69-73). We followed Jack down to the nest,

putting up more Black Falcons and the bluish inland race of the Red-rumped Parrot on the way. At last we came to it, a great bulky mass of sticks about 12 metres up in a coolabah. A buzzard flushed from the nest spiralled up on air currents above us and young kestrels seemed to be perched and fluttering everywhere. We wondered if any would become food for the next generation of nestlings. Kinky?

Back at the vehicles, Jack and his mate treated us to some huge Mildura grapefruit, told us about grasswrens they'd seen on nearby sandhills and urged us to stay on with them. The Weatherlys were willing but Schodde's resolve held - just. Time had also moved on and we only had a few hours of daylight left to make Lyndhurst. Weatherly's supreme ability at finding every bump in the road at speed came to the fore; how Jenny and I and the vehicle reached Lyndhurst that evening with nothing broken I'll never know. And we had once more reached dry, droughty country.

We boarded at the Lyndhurst pub that night for \$6 a head. The staff were off to a shindig at Mt Serle that night and gave us the run of the kitchen then and for breakfast. Regrettably they locked the bar and cellar before leaving. The next day, our last of the trip, was to be a simple, easy run down to Adelaide. Before leaving, however, I was to introduce Weatherly to his third grasswren of the trip, the Thick-billed. I knew just the spot, a rolling saltbush-bluebush plain a mile or two south of Lyndhurst where that indefatigable South Australian bird man, Gordon Ragless, had shown many to me and the American ornithologists Walter Bock and Lester Short in the spring of 1974. The two Weatherlys and I beat up and down that area for hours in the early morning. We found Chirruping Wedgebills, Orange Chats, Calamanthus, Pipits and Black-faced Woodswallows, but no grasswrens. What I'd thought was the easiest grasswren of all to find was missed. Still, you can't win them all.

For the rest of the day it was milkshakes at Copley, more milkshakes at Snowtown and then unpacking and sorting our personal belongings at my brother Peter's at Adelaide. Peter's excellent larder and superb cellar helped that night to wash away the empty despondency that comes at the end of an amenable and successful trip. On the following day, the 29th, I drove home to Canberra.

#### *Epilogue*

We had seen the eastern deserts at the end of three fat years, when the drought that is still with us began to grip. Pied Honeyeaters and Chestnut-breasted Whitefaces had

come and gone, but Letter-winged Kites, Grass Owls, Eyrean Grasswrens and the inland water birds, although over their peak, were still in good numbers. The crash and dispersal of these populations since has become history. Letter-winged Kites in search of food reached the corners of the continent, from Werribee to Darwin; Grass Owls also reached Darwin in numbers. Pelicans and other water birds have appeared in greater concentrations on eastern coastal waters and estuaries than they have for years. The Eyrean Grasswrens have dropped back, apparently, to isolated hummocks of seeding cane grass in the Simpson Desert. These desert birds are opportunists, well adapted to survive the vicissitudes of their environment. Their past record of survival suggests they have ample in reserve to take advantage of the next good period. If we want to know more about them and to understand better how they do this, we too must be opportunists ourselves, ready at a moment's notice to use changes in the seasons to study them.

*Dr R. Schodde, 30 Bamford Street, Hughes, A.C.T. 2605.*

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ODD OBS

ANOTHER GREAT CRESTED GREBE?

*Doug Ross*

On 12 August 1977, at the Jerrabomberra Creek entry into the Lake, I saw what I think must have been a Great Crested Grebe on the wing. The sighting was not perfect but I picked up:

- a colouring and colour pattern very similar to that of a Little Grebe in flight
- a conformation very similar to that of a Little Grebe in flight
- a flight pattern very similar to that of a Little Grebe using its energetic flight style (no fluttering) the bird was well above the water

And the bird was nearly twice as big as a Little Grebe.

ODD OBS - KELLY'S SWAMP

*Jim McNaughton*

Greenshanks: 2 on 18.12.77; 1 on 29.12.77; 4 or 5 on 1.1.78; 3 on 8.1.78; 4 on 15.1.78.

Wood Sandpiper: 2 on 28.11.77; 2 on 8.12.77; 1 on 11.12.77; 1 on 18.12.77; 1 on 29.12.77; 1 on 1.1.78; 1 on 8.1.78.

## DISPLAYS BY THE MALE MUSK DUCK

*Doug Ross*

In an earlier note (CBN 3 9, January 1977) it was half jokingly suggested that the male Musk Duck *Bizura lobata* in the Canberra area must be regarded as sexually precocious in the light of what Frith (1967) has to say about the display process.

My remarks at the time were based on impressions and recollections. To put the matter on a more systematic basis, regular observations were made throughout 1977 (not an abnormal year in any sense) in Central Basin, between the bridges, the Mundaring Drive area and Jerrabomberra Creek. June and December were the only 'thin' observing months but observation conditions obviously were often far from ideal at times when frequent visits were possible.

Even the most vigorously displaying male tends towards invisibility in strong wave conditions.

The observations are tabulated below.

1977	Days visited (a)	No of visits on which displays seen	(1) No. Of displays	(2) (3):(2)	Ratio
Jan.	26	24	24		1.0
Feb.	25	14	19		1.36
Mar.	28	19	24		1.26
Apr.	22	1	1		1.0
May	26	7	7		1.0
July	26	-	-		-
June (b)	7	21	40		1.9
Aug.	22	24	42		1.75
Sept.	20	25	40		1.6
Oct.	22	14	16		1.14
Nov.	26	32	61		1.91
Dec. (c)	15	23	58		2.52

(a) More than one visit was made on some days.

(b) Absent from Canberra 3 weeks.

(c) Absent from Canberra 2 weeks.

The low spot in the year was the April-May period (June being inconclusive because there were visits on seven days only) but weather conditions during these two months (high waves etc.) may have concealed displaying birds. Displaying was common in all other 1 months.

The ratios in column (4) are given to eliminate bias in favour of days when two or more visits were paid. One might have wished the emergence of some sort of clear seasonal pattern.

Some notes in explanation and amplification follow.

*Definition* I accepted as 'display' any one or more of the following characteristics: initial, strong kicking; whistling (with or without subsidiary kicking); the typical display silhouette-cum-rotation (head up, tail up and over) for birds in the distance.

*Times and light* Sightings were made at all hours between 7 a.m. and 7.30 p.m., in all light conditions (including several, based on whistling, after dark in the winter months) and under both smooth and rough water conditions.

*Place* Most sightings were made in the Central Basin and from Mundaring Drive. Smaller numbers were made in the Jerrabomberra Creek area and the top end of the Lake closest to Dairy Flat Road. One was made at the Sewage Farm.

*Male maturity* Most displays were by males with developed lobes but several were observed from young birds whose lobes were barely perceptible; so much so that, in the absence of the display activity, one would have been doubtful of their sex. As regards the latter cases, in two instances the display activity could only be described (in anthropomorphic terms) as fumbling or inept. This suggests that young birds coming into some sort of sexual maturity may have to 'practise' before their display behaviour fully emerges.

*Display routine* I have no new remarks to make on the routines and sequences of the display. Frith's 'plonking' still has to be heard by me - perhaps the sound effect is different when the display takes place in a confined area. All the displays seen by me were on open water or among fairly thin reed beds.

It does, however, appear that a bird that commences the initial strong kicking is by no means committed to the full display routine. On several occasions I have seen



birds break off from strong kicking to submerge, presumably to look for food if time under water is any criterion, and on surfacing either recommence kicking and continue with the full routine or take up some other activity.

The fact that display activity can be broken off (when some stronger instinct breaks in?) raises, to my mind at least, some questions about the purpose(s) of that activity and the strength and duration of the instinct that causes it.

In 1977 I observed some 330 display activities (not all, of course, from start to finish) without coming across a single case that could be said to have culminated in copulation. Yet obviously the Lake colony is breeding. Very many displays, in fact, took place when it was clear to the observer in an elevated position, though not necessarily to the male at water level, that no female was in sight, let alone within view or hearing range of the display. Often the only birds within such range were themselves male and it was these alone which were seen, during 1977, to exhibit any 'interest' in the display. Such behaviour frequently resulted in the intrusive male being chased off. (Chasing off, in varying situations, seems rather more prevalent, on my experience, among Musk Ducks than among the other species of duck to be seen in the Lake area.)

Two instances involving groups seem to add point to my questions about the purpose(s) of displaying.

On 24 January 1977 a fully lobed male was displaying at the mouth of Jerrabomberra Creek. A group of six birds (two males with incipient lobes, four females?) came straight from the body of the lake to the displaying male, stood off from him at about 2 metres distance for a few minutes hesitatingly as it were (the male displaying all the while), then closed in on him, getting splashed in the process and sidling backwards and forwards about him. The male also swam backwards several times, something I had not previously seen in a displaying male. The male then swam up the creek as though calling the group on but without producing any recognisable response. Taken in isolation, the incident might be viewed as a case of a male displaying to rally a flock.

Again, on 26 February 1977, sixteen ducks were seen in three groups of four, four and eight. When first seen, the third group (four well-developed males, two 'beardlings' and two?) were gathered together, almost side by side, with one of the full males displaying. I did not arrive on the scene early enough to see whether the group assembled

because of the display. After moving up and down for some time, still in a compact group - with the usual occasional chasing off by the bird displaying - the group widened out, the display ceased, and feeding began. Much cry, little wool, on the face of it. The only positive conclusion I draw from this instance is that display is not associated with any sort of territorial urge.

Do other species have similarly high (330:0) non-success ratios with their displays?

#### Reference

H.J. Frith (1967), *Waterfowl in Australia*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney

A.D. Ross, 64 Sprent Street, Narrabundah, A.C.T. 2604.

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#### OUR FIRST OBSERVATORY

*The following note appeared recently in the Sydney Sun-Herald - Ed.*

An abandoned telegraph station at Eyre, on the south coast of W.A., about 250 km west of the S.A.- W.A. border, is being restored to begin a new life as Australia's first bird observatory.

The station, which was built in 1897, was closed thirty years later when the intercontinental telegraph line was superseded.

The idea of turning it into a scientific outpost originated with Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union, which is working with the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife and the Post Office Historical Society to complete the project.

The RAOU president, Dr Stephen Davies, said yesterday that a working party from the three organisations had restored the roof of the building, dug wells, cleaned out the underground water tank, begun repairing the floor and improved the road from Cocklebiddy during the May holidays.

It included a section of the coast extending from Israelite Bay to a few kilometres east of Twilight Cove. The mallee and other flowering shrubs attracted silvereyes and honeyeaters, which were thought to go there during the cold and return to the south-west during summer.

This made Eyre a good site for bird-banding because migratory birds banded in remote areas stood a better

chance of being recovered when they returned to more populated districts.

#### A SIGHTING OF LEWIN WATER RAIL

*D. Balfour*

On 5 November 1977 I tramped in an area between Gidleigh and Ingledow (beyond Bungendore, N.S.W.).

The country is hilly, in part cleared but mostly lightly timbered. The particular area I examined is of the miniature 'catchment' type, various depressions between the hills serving to feed a creek at the lower level.

One of the main feeders, and an apparently almost permanent one, is a long, gently sloping, grassed depression. The centre strip of the depression, which is perhaps 6 metres in width, is covered for most of its length with close-growing, bright green grass. In the lower slopes there are clumps of coarser, knee high grass scattered about, in some parts quite thickly, in other parts less so. The area, although drying out, is still damp. Water still seeps through the centre of the depression towards the creek. In times of normal rainfall the area would be marshy.

I had commenced to cross this feeder at its widest point, close to its junction with the creek, when a medium-sized bird suddenly rose from the clumps of long grass in the centre of the depression in front of me and flew low, directly away from me, into the dry grass and timber on the opposite rise. Although coming to ground immediately it entered this area I was unable to sight it there.

The impression I gained from the colouring of the bird was that of a quail. However, the flight was not that of a quail and the body was less plump.

I had moved a few steps forward when a little to the right of where the first birds rose a second bird took to the air. This bird appeared anxious to gain some height. It performed a clockwise climb and passed from left to right in front of me at a distance of about 4 metres and a height of about 3 metres. It gained no further height. Indeed on completing its circle it lost height as it headed towards and disappeared behind the bushes at the creek junction. I judge it came to ground not far to the right of the first bird. I saw neither bird again.

The rise from the ground of this second bird appeared to require

some effort, though thereafter the flight seemed reasonably strong with a medium wing rate. There was an element of panic in the flight. The bird gave an alarm call as it flew which I recall as short, single, harsh or guttural notes.

The sighting was at about 8.30 a.m., the sky was clear and the sun was behind me. Although I saw the bird close for only perhaps 5 or 6 seconds the sighting was uninterrupted. I saw distinctly a long, straight, slender bill (pale rather than dark), a mottled brown/black body above, and a significant pale area underneath - certainly throat and breast. The body was short and plump but not exceptionally bulky, the bird medium size. No colour was visible other than those mentioned. I do not recall seeing the legs.

I had no idea of the species, but a later examination of Slater in particular (but also Birds in the Australian high country) satisfied me that the birds seen were Lewin Water Rails *Rallus pectoralis*.

I say this notwithstanding the rarity of sightings of this bird in this district. I have had regard also to the fact that Rails are more likely to run than to fly. As to this, the habitat in question, although apparently right for this type of bird, is somewhat restricted in area and probably less dense in cover than desirable. Perhaps this fact prompted flight rather than running. Furthermore, the area is isolated and would I think be little visited. That fact may have given the birds confidence to move about in it, but not the confidence in an emergency to seek their sanctuary there.

D. Balfour, 24 Calvert Street, Ainslie, A.C.T. 2602.

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ODD OBS

WHISTLING KITE

Doug Ross

At midday on 3 August a Whistling Kite was seen over the central basin of the lake, making swoops over the water from a height of about 60 metres. It came in towards a flock of gulls closer to the water, then passed down through them in a leisurely glide to take something - I could not see what - from the surface of the water. There was nothing suggestive of a 'strike' in the pick-up process. The bird made off with its prize towards the Molonglo's entry into the lake.

## INTERNATIONAL CONSERVATION ACTIVITIES

At the October 1977 meeting Joe Forshaw spoke on co-ordination of international conservation activities and described the framework set up to facilitate this co-ordination. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), with a permanent staff located at Morges, in Switzerland, provides a continuing support service to international bodies, including the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), the major forum for discussion on international conservation problems. Member states and organisations contribute to the operating costs of IUCN.

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) services IUCN by raising funds through international appeals for conservation projects. Many countries have their own national sections of WWF and these are responsible for conducting the appeals in those countries. WWF does not operate in Australia, and this is unfortunate. There is a tendency for the major proportion of WWF funds to be allocated for projects in undeveloped countries, where there are acute shortages of finance for conservation projects.

Conservation of birds is specifically catered for in the international arena by the International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP), which is the oldest international conservation organisation, having been founded in 1922. ICBP is a principal advisory body to IUCN and, on behalf of IUCN, produces the Red Data Book - Aves, which is universally adopted as the official world listing of endangered species.

ICBP operates through National Sections in member countries, a mechanism that is ideally suited to participation by bodies such as RAOU and Bird Observers Club in efforts directed toward conservation of birds and their habitats. In many instances success has been more readily achieved by local bodies operating in a concerted effort through ICBP than could have resulted from a fragmented approach at a national level. In Australia, following the 1974 ICBP World Conference, the Commonwealth Government acted on a number of resolutions initiated by local organisations and endorsed by the World Conference. Mr Forshaw concluded by outlining the Commonwealth Government's involvement in international conservation effort, primarily as a

Contracting Party to a number of international treaties and agreements. The Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service is the Government's servicing authority for these agreements.

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## THE PELICAN'S FEEDING HABITS

Doug Ross

The number of Australian Pelicans *Pelecanus conspicillatus* on Lake Burley Griffin rose sharply from mid November. Instead of the occasional single bird, or small group, groups of thirty became commonplace. My largest count on a single day (without going into all potential sighting spots) was sixty. Among the birds seen were some with distinctly juvenile plumage and others with traces of juvenile plumage remaining.

With the larger numbers, group food seeking by between six and fifteen birds has also become a frequent sight. Two aspects of group feeding are particularly impressive to the observer.

First, there are the speed and ease with which the group can change direction as the fish being chased change course. Given the size of the pelican and water drag, collisions would seem quite natural, but a flock can reverse direction at once, each bird turning on its own axis.

Changing course is made all the easier when, as often seems to be the case with group feeding, the birds are paddling along with their wings half extended in a crooked conformation.

Half extension is obviously not for purposes of balance - the pelican has an excellent balance on the water - nor for purposes of body distance since at other times birds hunt flank to flank. Presumably half extension takes place either to reduce glare from the water surface (cf. one of the African herons which I understand brings its wings round its head when stalking to eliminate all glare) or to increase the size of the birds' visual presentation to the fish being driven, or a combination of these two purposes. The latter purpose is, no doubt, predominant in that half extension occurs regardless of whether the birds are moving up-sun, down-sun or across the angle of reflection.

D. Balfour

Canberra Bird Notes vol. 3 no. 12 (October 1977) seeks further reports of the Hooded Robin *Petroica cucullata*.

In July 1976 I saw a male Hooded Robin on the lower slopes of Mount Ainslie, eastern side. Two or three weeks later I saw one male and at least one female Hooded Robin in the same area. On this latter occasion I observed a female fly from the ground to a nest, on which she sat. I did not investigate further.

These events are quite clear in my mind, but unfortunately I cannot be more precise as to dates, being unable to locate rough notes which I made at the time. (I also, on one of these two visits, sighted two Rufous Fantails *Rhipidura rufifrons* towards the top of Mount Ainslie in the area where it drops to the saddle between Ainslie and Majura.)

Following receipt of the October 1977 Bird Notes I revisited (on 24 September 1977) the area on Mount Ainslie where I had earlier seen the Hooded Robins and, after a time, saw two female Hooded Robins; a little later, some short distance away, I sighted one male. It may be that there is a small resident group in this area.

Hooded Robins have been seen on other occasions as follows:

December 1973	}	
and	}	between Hoskingtown and Forbes
March 1975	}	Creek, N.S.W.

17 September 1977		between Gidleigh and Butmaroo, N.S.W. (male and female)
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Other recent unusual (to me) sightings have been:

Spotted Quail Thrush <i>Cinclusoma punctatum</i>		
23 July 1977		between Hoskingtown and Forbes Creek, N.S.W. (a small group of about six)
6 August 1977		past Forbes Creek, N.S.W., in open area opposite Butmaroo fire trail (two birds, one clearly male)

Fantail Cuckoo *Cacomantis pyrrhophanus*  
17 September 1977 between Gidleigh and Butmaroo,  
N.S.W. (one bird)

Eastern Shrike-tit *Falcunculus frontatus*  
24 September 1977 Mount Ainslie, lower slopes,  
eastern side (one bird in low  
tree, viewed clearly for two  
minutes)

Indian Myna *Acridotheres tristis*  
July 1977 heard in area of St Mark's  
Library, Barton, A.C.T.  
August 1977 one bird sighted in back yard of  
house in Captain Cook Crescent,  
Griffith, A.C.T. (about 1 mile  
from Manuka shops)

*D. Balfour, 24 Calvert Street, Ainslie, A.C.T. 2602*

(The winter sighting of two Rufous Fantails recorded above  
is unique -*Ed.*)

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#### BOOK MARKET FOR SALE

We hope to have a few new copies of the Field guide to the  
birds of Nepal available shortly. The price will be  
approximately \$14 and further details can be obtained by  
writing to Book Market. This field guide was published in  
Nepal and is up to normal field guide standards of text and  
artwork.

#### WANTED

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Address: P.O. Box 301, Civic Square, A.C.T. 2608.

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## C.O.G. EXCURSION

*Sandy Cox*

On 15 January 1978 fourteen members of C.O.G. attended a morning excursion to Lees Creek in the Brindabella Ranges. The weather was very hot and windy, so it was good to see the following members: Rose and Clay Allen, Eric Andrew, Barry Baker (leader), Cedric Bear, Rod and Sandy Cox, Mike Doyle, Bryan Fitzgerald, Suellen Fitzgerald, Janine Lewis, Don and Marilyn McColl, Janet Wyatt.

After assembling at the Uriarra Forestry Settlement, the party made its first stop at Uriarra Homestead dam, to observe water birds. The route then was through the pine plantations to Lees Creek, an area of wet sclerophyll forest.

The bird sightings which caused the most excitement at Lees Creek were the Pilot Bird, Rose Robin, Rufous Fantail and Crested Shrike-tit, other birds recorded were: Hoary-headed Grebe, Little Grebe, Australian Pelican, White-faced Heron, White Ibis, Black Swan, Cape Barren Goose (escapee?), Black Duck, Grey Teal, White-eyed Duck, Wood Duck, Little Eagle, Nankeen Kestrel, Dusky Moorhen, Coot, Masked Plover, Wonga Pigeon, Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo, Galah, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, King Parrot, Eastern Rosella, Crimson Rosella, Kookaburra, Dollarbird, Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike, Flame Robin, Eastern Yellow Robin, Golden Whistler, Rufous Whistler, Grey Shrike-thrush, Grey Fantail, Willie Wagtail, Eastern Whipbird, Superb Blue Wren, White-browed Scrub-wren, Brown Thornbill, Striated Thornbill, Yellow-rumped Thornbill, Red-browed Tree-creeper, White-throated Tree-creeper, Noisy Friarbird, Yellow-faced Honeyeater, White-plumed Honeyeater, Eastern Spinebill, Striated Pardalote, Silvereye, European Goldfinch, Satin Bowerbird, White-winged Chough, Australian Magpie Lark, Australian Magpie, Pied Currawong. Before or after the group assembled the following birds were also observed: Wedge-tailed Eagle, Grey Currawong and Australian Raven. Sixty-one species in all were observed, plus one Black-tailed Swamp Wallaby.

*S. Cox, 10 Du Faur Street, Mawson, A.C.T. 2607.*

OUT AND ABOUT

*G. Tibicen*

An interesting newspaper cutting that came my way recently was entitled 'Bird sightings this week' and was taken from the Boston Globe of 3 December 1977. It shows just how seriously Americans take their bird watching and was a list of the unusual birds seen in the Boston area during the previous week, and how to get to one of the places where they were seen. To quote part of the cutting: 'In South Peabody the Hermit Thrush was seen. In Framingham 20 Pine Siskins and 25 Ruddy Ducks were seen. A Dickcissel was found in Truro at Cora Hill. At Great Pond Braintree there were 3 Horned Grebes, a Pied-billed Grebe ..." and so on. No Partridges in a pear tree, though.

Such articles leave me in a quandary. I am not sure whether to praise them because they hopefully show an increased community awareness of birds or 'to damn them because they take the fun out of bird watching, replacing it with the magic 'ticking' mentality. Has anybody any strong views on the subject?

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Talking of newspapers, have members noticed the recent comments in the Canberra Times about Pied Currawongs and their tendency to eat other birds, especially fledglings? I had been informed by banders that Pied Currawongs had shown some intelligence by using mist nets as a food source if the net was left unattended for any length of time. Now it appears that they have shown further intelligence by feeding on young Blackbirds and Goldfinches. Perhaps if we can breed up enough Currawongs we can also teach them to eat young Indian Mynahs, Starlings and House Sparrows and thus solve the problem of introduced species?

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One of the nicest local (or vernacular) names for a bird I have heard for some time comes from Don Byrne of Cobram in Victoria. He says that down there the Willy Wagtail has been called the Night Warbler. Anybody who has camped near a nesting pair of these birds

on a moonlit night is welcome to join the 'Call a Willy Wagtail a Night Warbler' committee. This will make strong representations to the RAOU (with the aid of a special 12-bore taxonomist's telescope) to persuade them to change the Willy Wagtail's name.

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## BIRDS

*Jon Prance*

The Persian fur  
moved closer by an inch,  
and froze in his line of death.  
I looked, and saw the object  
of his eyes, a spot of feathered greenness  
in a tree, low and innocent  
amid the blossom and a morning's leafy music.  
And I turned the hose  
and washed away the target  
with an arc of silver droplets into its song.  
The old cat meanwhile watched  
with slow disdain  
and ambled idly into his bush of shade.  
But then I looked again,  
the jet, the dripping tree,  
my rude and cooling act of charity -  
and saw ten little things,  
ten blobs of dancing pleasure in the sun,  
ten bathing balls of rainy white and green,  
a shower of shaking silvereyes in spring.

*J. Prance, 2 Millhouse Crescent, Higgins, A.C.T. 2615.*

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