



Canberra bird notes

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EDITORIAL

In *A field-list of the birds of Canberra and district* many species are included whose occurrence and status is quite uncertain in our area. In the series of articles regarding the status of birds which has appeared in CBN this has been stated sometimes in language intended to provoke response; the response has been poor.

We need to improve the quantity and quality of reports coming in. This necessitates untiring leadership, which is now being provided by Dr Michael Lenz - see his articles in CBN vol. 4 no. 3 pp. 2-9 and in this issue.

We have a large pool of people making regular observations for the Atlas scheme, and we look forward to Michael receiving a lot of co-operation. Then we will be able both to improve our Annual Bird Report and revise the 'status' notes in the light of better information.

Note: As the species names in *Birds in the Australian high country* have been used throughout the 'status' series, this practice is continued in the concluding article appearing in this issue.

BIRD RECORDING IN THE A.C.T. - THE NEED FOR IMPROVEMENT
AND A CHANGE IN POLICY

Michael Lenz

Judging from the Annual Bird Report (ABR), regularly published in Canberra Bird Notes, the A.C.T. has a very strange bird community: it consists mainly of rarities and waterbirds concentrated at the east end of Lake Burley Griffin. During the breeding season it must be very quiet in bush and suburbs, with hardly any breeding birds present! This is obviously incorrect.

Birds of the Australian high country, the Field-list and 'The status of birds in Canberra' present valuable information about bird life in the Canberra area and are excellent guides for putting one's own observations into perspective. But we need more detailed accounts of the status of the birds, e.g. numbers of breeding birds in different habitats, distribution patterns, fluctuations in numbers during the course of the year etc.

BACKGROUND

Since the above-mentioned publications came out, it would appear from the ABRs that little work has been done to improve knowledge of the status of the birds of the A.C.T., but this is not the case. Regular work goes on in the Brindabella Ranges, in the Botanic Gardens, around Lake Burley Griffin and in various suburban localities. However it is obvious that there is no overall co-ordination at present.

There are two problems involved which have been considered by the C.O.G. committee:

- (a) Some data are not made available to C.O.G. and other information, valuable from the ABR viewpoint, is not recorded.
- (b) Data come to the Records Officer in a variety of formats which have made the preparation of the ABR difficult. Unless the whole is transcribed to a card system, detail not used in the particular ABR is virtually lost.

In the past ABRs have been as good as possible having regard to the limitations of the material available and its nature.

Informality has been a key note of C.O.G. and its activities in the

relatively short period of its existence and its publications are a great credit to it. Without destroying that essential informality, the Committee has decided that we must try and obtain a better picture of the bird world around us.

Experience in Australia has shown that our bird watchers are eager to contribute in a practical way to organised ornithology and one has only to look at the successes of the Australian Bird Banding Scheme, the Nest Record Scheme and the Atlas to prove this point.

THE FUTURE

The Committee has decided to provide a variety of surveys in which members may participate at any level of their own choosing. There will be no pressure to participate. However the programs are attractive and general co-operation is hoped for.

The other new development is in the form of recording. The past varied and haphazard presentation of records to C.O.G. has itself been a grave limiting factor; we can do no better than in the past unless the data come forward in a format which makes them available for analysis, i.e. on cards (or similar sized papers) with one species per card.

PROPOSED SURVEYS

- (a) *Differences in composition of bird species and in number of birds in relation to habitat*

This will be a suburban survey on a once a month basis counting species and birds in a local suburban street with native trees and one with exotic trees. Both old and new suburbs will be included.

- (b) *Breeding birds census*

As a beginning six species have been selected for the 1979 and 1980 breeding seasons. These are: Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike, Willie Wagtail Superb Fairy-wren, Noisy Friarbird, Indian Mynah and Australian Magpie.

All records indicating breeding of these species, especially from the city and suburbs, are requested.

Breeding records of other species are also needed from anywhere in our area, but the main objective is to get as complete a picture of these six species as possible.

(c) *Migration*

(i) The *Field-list* indicates the periods when each species can be expected to be seen here but little verification of these data has been carried out in recent years. A form will be available on which the first (and last) three observations of each species can be recorded, say from the member's local suburb or from any regularly visited area. We plan to follow changes occurring in migrant populations from year to year.

(ii) It is also desirable to monitor the annual visible migration of honeyeaters from as many points in the area as possible, (Record numbers, species, direction and period of observation.)

(d) *Regular observations in particular areas over the whole year*

Many members keep constant watch on the birds of their garden, suburb etc. through all seasons, an activity which can only be recommended. The way those data were presented varied. It would be appreciated if at least the maximum number for each species per month or better still for each ten days (= three records per month) could be given. Such information becomes valuable in monitoring the yearly fluctuations in bird numbers over a wider area of the A.C.T.

Some members visit favourite areas frequently and it is suggested that some form of regular recording of numbers and species etc. be instituted if this is not already done and the results reported to C.O.G. at the end of June each year.

(e) *Waterbird surveys*

Surveys commencing in June 1979 are already organised for our two urban lakes, Lake Burley Griffin and Lake Ginninderra, on the basis of a complete simultaneous check once every two months by quite a number of observers. Provided the scheme can operate successfully, and this is expected, it will be extended as soon as possible to the two natural lakes, Lake George and Lake Bathurst, which are, from the number of waterbirds found on them, certainly of national importance. Further volunteers can be used.

(f) *Roosts*

A number of local species gather for the night at communal roosts. Good examples are Pied Currawongs, several parrots, Common Starlings, Australian Magpie-larks etc. The habit of some of these species of using fairly constant routes to approach the roosts facilitates the counting of their numbers. In this way we can get an idea of the size of a population from a large area. Any information about roosting of any species is important and should be reported.

DISCUSSION

These programs designed to improve our knowledge of the status of the birds of the A.C.T. show many connections with each other. Most of them are applicable to every part of our area. The birds nesting at your shopping centre, the honeyeaters passing over while you work in the garden or the Australian Magpie nest you see on your way to work or from your office window are all worth recording and reporting for the ABR. So, even if you can afford only a little time for bird watching, you still can assist in many ways.

The main change in recording policy is simply not only to send in your observations of rare species, of sightings outside the normal range as indicated in the *Field-list* or of large numbers, but to concentrate equally on the 'normal' bird life, which, regularly surveyed, can be equally fascinating, full of questions and problems, but most of all enjoyable, too.

Remember the Annual Bird Report depends not only on information supplied by members but also on ideas supplied by those same members. Therefore if you have any suggestions or ideas about the matters raised above, the author and the committee would be only too pleased to hear from you, either verbally or in writing.

ORGANISATION

To cope with the programs mentioned above some form of organisation will be necessary to avoid placing an unacceptable burden on the Records Officer. Accordingly there will be a co-ordinator for each aspect. Details of the various programs and of co-ordinators will be discussed at future C.O.G. meetings. If you can participate in any way please come along to meetings or discuss the matter with the author.

One interesting facet that should appeal to the less

experienced is that most of the more formal work is planned to be done by two people and often these will be an experienced worker and one not so experienced. This will then provide a training in bird observing.

The various programs are envisaged as being ongoing and not merely for a short period. As we gain experience and gather data, no doubt the nature of the various programs will develop and new ones may be instituted. Remember, the activities are planned so that all can participate.

METHOD OF REPORTING

As remarked earlier, the limiting factor on the past ABRs has been the method of reporting. The recording methods for regular surveys need not change but it is essential that results be reported, species by species, on cards or card-sized slips so that these may be analysed and filed for future reference.

(i) The records book at meetings

The famous 'records book', available at every C.O.G. meeting, will change from June 1979. Eric Andrew has replaced it, following a suggestion from Richard Schodde, with two folders, one for non-passerines, one for passerines, each in the standard sequence. Each species has its own sheet, with columns for dates, numbers, locality etc. It will now be very easy to extract information about a species for the ABR, whereas previously this has entailed many hours of work.

(ii) Records arising from regular surveys

The crux of the matter is that to make the material readily available for analysis for the ABR and for the future, a system of reporting everything by species should be adopted by all members. These should follow the format given in Appendix 1. Generally for example in home garden surveys it will be possible to record an analysis of a year's observations on slips and in this case the 'card per species' system should still be followed. A printed form will be available shortly for this form of reporting.

In general members are encouraged to write their observations for the ABR at home, with their diary and notes next to them, timing it so that the notes are available to the Records Officer by the July meeting. The 'records books' should be used chiefly by visitors to our area, for observations from the wider surroundings of the

A.C.T. and by those who feel this is the better way for them to let others know of their observations.

Information has been provided by Henry Nix, Grahame Clark and Steve Wilson, who have also assisted with discussions during the preparation of this paper.

APPENDIX 1

General records

Use separate sheets of approximately postcard size for each species. Give name of species and of observer(s), date(s), number of birds, locality (suburb and street or nearest reference point for observations outside the urban area), remarks (points of interest such as habitat, food, behaviour, moult, direction of movement etc.).

Example:

Grey Teal	P . Smith
14.1.79	110 Fyshwick, Sewage Ponds, 80% on
4.2.79	pond with low water level
	5 Acton, Sullivans Creek, much
	shyer than Black Ducks

c. 10.5 cm x c. 15 cm

Breeding records

As before, use separate sheets of approximately postcard size for each species. Give name of species and observer(s), date(s), number of pairs/groups/territories, and the quality of record:

A territorial singing during breeding season

B resident pair/group in breeding season

C carrying nest material or food

D feeding fledged young ones

E nest with content

locality (suburb and street or nearest reference point for observations outside the urban area and if possible the indices for the corresponding square of the UBD Tourist Map for Canberra (a letter and a number); with the latter information it is possible to plot the records precisely on a master grid map), remarks.

Example:

Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike P . Smith 19.11 - 25.11.78 1 P (B) Ainslie, Corroboree Park (AA17) 31.12.78 1 P (E) Ainslie, Ainslie Oval (Z16) 20.1.79 2 P (E) Acton, Balmain Cres. (V21 + W21), young in both nests nearly fledged

c. 10.5 cm x c. 15 cm

APPENDIX 2

Information on six selected breeding birds of Canberra for which all breeding records in the coming seasons 1979 and 1980 are requested.

1. *Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike*

Breeding season: October to January

Nest - shallow, saucer shaped, made from small sticks and bark, bound together with cobwebs, almost invisible from below

mostly found in mature eucalypts, built on horizontal branch from 6 to 25 m high

2-3 eggs from blue-green to olive in colour, may be spotted

2. *Willie Wagtail*

Breeding season: October to January

Nest - small neat structure of fine grasses tightly bound with cobwebs placed on horizontal branch, usually close to ground;

verandas and sheds can also be used as nest sites

several clutches in a season, 3-4 eggs, pale creamy-brown to yellowish-white, spots sometimes forming a zone

3. *Superb Fairy-wren*

Breeding season: mid August to January

Nest - small dome-shaped grass ball with lining of softer material, entrance on one side usually in dense bush or tussock up to 2 m above the ground several clutches in a season, young from earlier nests may help feed later broods, 3-4 white eggs, may be spotted

4. *Noisy Friarbird*

Breeding season: November to January

Nest - large, deep, open cup attached by its rim to an outer horizontal forked twig, strips of bark and dry fine grass are used from 1.3 to 15 m high, in outer branches of eucalypts

3-4 eggs light to dark pink buff in colour, spotted and blotched

5. *Indian Mynah*

Breeding season: October to March Introduced to our area some years ago

Nest - in holes and crevices, often in buildings and in dense vegetation

- 3-6 eggs, pale blue

6. *Australian Magpie*

Breeding season: August to October

Nest: - a basket of sticks lined with wool, hair, grass (in urban areas also with wire) usually found in outer canopy of eucalypts, 6-15 m above ground, in urban areas also in exotic deciduous and pine trees 1-6 eggs, blue or green blotched with brown, re-laying may occur after a failure

Note: The breeding season range quoted applies to the Canberra area; elsewhere it could be more extensive.

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ATTRACTING BIRDS TO GARDENS

Merle Baldwin

There is no doubt that birds can be attracted to gardens by the provision of artificial food and water, but whether they should be encouraged is another matter, which has been ably discussed by G. Tibicen (*CBN* vol. 4 no. 1). I believe that if a garden provides natural food from flowering shrubs and trees, and maybe has damp, mulched corners where birds can 'dig their own', little harm is done by supplementing the supply in times of need. Indeed if all householders could be persuaded to turn their sometimes unkempt backyards into bird-attracting areas, the resulting network of green lanes would induce birds to come from the periphery into the town itself and so spread and increase the population. Such a scheme would preserve the territorial rights of the birds, which could be interfered with by overfeeding in isolated pockets. The making of natural habitats for birds has one advantage which seems to have been overlooked, and that is the therapeutic value to aged, invalid and lonely people.

In his informative article, David Purchase (*CBN* vol. 3 no. 11) gave a list of trees and shrubs suitable for attracting birds to Canberra gardens. These species also suit the Northern Tablelands, where hot dry summers and cold frosty winters are experienced. David stresses the importance of trees in the garden, and rightly so - birds certainly appreciate the shelter, food, shade and nesting sites provided. Incidentally the shade temperature beneath small trees in my garden is 3°C below that in the house and 12°C below that in the sun.

Water and food bring bird visitors to a garden but they will only stay if there is shelter from predators. Steve Wilson (*CBN* vol. 3 no. 11) mentions the importance of this. I consider shelter essential and food and water a secondary consideration. S. Graculina (*CBN* vol. 3 no. 12) points out the dangers of feeding to the point of dependency - this should not be encouraged for it is obvious that cessation of supply could bring hardship, even death, to birds through the ensuing struggle for food and territory.

Isabel Crowe (CBN vol. 4 no. 4) states that less pesticides are needed when birds are present in the garden. I have found this to be so and have noticed that Yellow-rumped Thornbills return in spring when aphids are breeding and the Striped Honeyeater comes back to harvest case moth larvae (Baldwin, CBN vol. 3 no. 6).

Here we have an ideal place for birds - a small block within 8 ha of woodland and open spaces. There is one other house with an old established garden of trees and shrubs. Our own garden is comparatively new but has trees to 10 metres high and an abundance of shrubs. On hot afternoons birds congregate on the lawn in the shade and seem to find an abundance of insects. Grain is provided for finches, parrots, pigeons and doves. Australian Magpies, Australian Magpie-larks and White-winged Choughs also enjoy grain when other food is scarce. One problem was the gobbling of food by the larger birds before the smaller ones were satisfied and this we overcame by building cages of wire netting and in these food was placed - grain for the finches, crumbs for the insect eaters. According to their food requirements the birds pop in and out of these cages, thus avoiding aggression. Finches are usually spring and summer visitors but, with feeding, Double-barred Finches stayed on and Red-browed Finches had only a short winter absence.

Laughing Kookaburras, Australian Magpies, Australian Magpie-larks and White-winged Choughs tend to come for food only when inclement weather reduces the natural food supply. All the birds that I have studied prefer to give nestlings natural food, but they appreciate a quick snack of artificial food for themselves. Finches strip half-ripe seeds and regurgitate them to feed the young - so scatter a handful of bird seed about the garden and grow them some! Birds like a green pick - *Mesembryanthemum*, *Gazania*, clover and native herbage are favoured.

Fresh water is necessary - some birds will come to the garden for that alone. Shallow earthenware dishes are preferred - perhaps the water tastes better. Small birds like shallow pools to bathe in, larger birds need deeper water where several can splash about. Always place a rock or branch at pools with slippery sides so that birds accidentally immersed can scramble to safety. Most birds approve a branch placed in such a way that they may walk down it from perch to water. It soon becomes smoothed by the passage of feet.

Superb Fairy-wrens, Yellow-rumped Thornbills, White-plumed Honey-eaters, Rufous Whistlers, Crested Pigeons,

Red-browed Firetails and

Double-barred Finches have nested in our garden. Larger birds seem to like the woodland close by.

Some thought could be given to making earth banks in which Striated Pardalotes and Rainbow Bee-eaters could burrow. Provide an open perch for the latter; both species will return if the nest site suits them. A disused nest placed in a shrub was slept in throughout one summer by a party of finches. At dusk the nest rocked and bulged as the adults piled in!

Our shady garden, plus water and some food, has attracted about forty species of birds. Twenty species - 100 birds - are daily callers and the rest visit from time to time. A highlight occurred when nestlings were brought and left in our care! There was a great chattering of small voices when Red-browed Firetails arrived with eight fledglings, introduced them to the food cage and left them there to feed themselves. Willie Wagtails left three young in the crumb cage and flew off about their business. A Red Wattlebird parked its offspring in a shrub overhanging a pool, returning at intervals with food. One must feel honoured and humble at being considered worthy to act as custodian of fledglings!

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WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Nonie Wilson

Recently while driving some English friends near Narooma, we stopped the car to enable them to hear Bell Miners calling. The air was filled with the lovely bell-like sounds and our visitors were most impressed. Then one of their party, a 9-year-old boy, remarked that it sounded like the sonar sound from a submarine (he watches a lot of TV!).

We all agreed that this was so - then the observation was made that if these birds were only now being discovered they could well have been called 'Sonar Birds' or 'Sonar Miners'.

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FLOCKING OF BLACK-FACED CUCKOO-SHRIKES

Chris Sonter

During my residence in the Berrima district I found the Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike *Coracina novaehollandiae* to be a resident breeding species with flocking occurring in late summer and autumn. Flocking may have been due to partial migration involving mainly immatures, the size of the flocks varying from four to twenty-five individuals. However, due to the density of timber and vegetation, the flocks may have consisted of more than twenty-five birds but counting became difficult owing to their concealment as they dropped from flight to rest or feed in the canopy.

It was not until moving to Dareton, N.S.W., that I took a greater interest in this species and found that flock formation must form an important part of the life-style. During the autumn and winter it is not uncommon to see flocks of over 100 individuals and I remember counting 145 in one group. They would settle on the vines and also on the ground, where, due to the vines being bare of foliage at this time of the year, observation was relatively easy. Their movements were interesting as they settled down to rest and on dull days they had a ghostly appearance since they always remained silent and fluttered in like bewildered grey moths. No feeding was observed in the vines.

As I watched them through most of the pruning season I found the flocks varied in size but this was only temporary as a passing flock could join a resting flock and all take off together when flight movements resumed. Their directional movements indicated that no specific route was being followed since a flock that had drifted in from one direction could move off almost in the direction from whence they had just come. Most specimens in the flocks were of birds in immature plumage. The flock movements seemed to be of a nomadic and wandering nature rather than a migratory one.

Previous to my observations of them at Dareton, Hobbs (1969) made comment of their complete silence both near and in their roosting tree. My observations revealed almost a total silence and found that if calls were made they came from a lone individual or an odd pair. This is in marked contrast to my observations and those of Mrs Crowe

(1978) of birds in the Berrima district, where flocks were quite noisy and vociferous. A simple explanation may be afforded by the fact that the vegetation of the Southern Tablelands is denser and higher and necessitates the use of contact calls to keep the flock together. Those birds at Dareton frequenting open and lightly timbered flatter country would have little need to use a contact call and rely on sight. It is of interest to note that Hobbs centred his notes around the unusual clustering and colonial roosting behaviour of the Black-faced Cuckoo-shrikes at Buronga, some 20 km from Dareton. I must point out that to date I have not observed this behaviour in either Dareton or Bowral.

References

Mrs I.F. Crowe, 'A concentration of Black-faced Cuckoo-shrikes at Berrima, N.S.W.', *Canberra Bird Notes* 4, 4, October 1978.

J.N. Hobbs, 'Colonial roosting in the Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike', *Sunraysia Naturalists Research Trust - Sixth Report*, April 1969.

Chris Sonter, 72 San Mateo Avenue, Mildura, Vic. 3500.

EUROPEAN GREENFINCH AT KELLY'S SWAMP Jim McNaughton
The European Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris* is not a common bird in our area but it has been present in the general Kelly's Swamp - East Basin area with a maximum of fifteen recorded on 7 February 1979.

Whistling kite in Canberra Steve Wilson
The Whistling Kite *Haliastur sphenurus* seems to have declined in numbers near Canberra with the development of the city. For this reason the sighting of a bird in good plumage over the south-eastern end of Mugga Way on 4 January 1979 was of interest.

RED-KNEED DOTTEREL Jim McNaughton
Between 7 February 1979 and 4 March 1979 there have been three Red-kneed Dotterels on Kelly's Swamp in the Dairy Flat area, one of which was a juvenile. There has been no evidence of local breeding.

BIRDERS 'DISCOVER' TROPICAL AMERICA

Don Lamm

The 'tourist birder' is a relatively new phenomenon, brought into existence by such factors as rapid air transportation, modern medicine, acceptable accommodation and, particularly, modern bird guides. Today all countries, including Australia, which have extensive or novel bird populations are seeing more and more tourist birders. The species is occasionally solitary, but is normally found in small flocks, escorted by a group leader. The latter is also a brand new type. He must be able to identify immediately any bird in his region on sight, no mean feat in a country like Colombia with 130 species of hummingbirds, 149 tyrant flycatchers and 143 tanagers. He usually (always in Latin America) must have a good command of the local language, be able to find and arrange transport and accommodation, and to find substitutes for those selected when things go wrong, be even tempered (all such groups have at least one 'difficult' person) and ready for any emergency from illness to bandits. His work hours would horrify any good trade unionist, and his pay is hardly commensurate. Moreover he has to be constantly finding new remote spots for the clientele, and devising means of getting them there, because this is an increasingly competitive business. He is a professional birder, certainly, and some of them are professional ornithologists (there is quite a difference). Often they are post-graduate students who are doing this to make ends meet until they find more permanent employment.

Another essential, of course, is the field guide. When, in 1935, I first ventured down to Barro Colorado Island in Panama, virtually the only volume of its sort for all South and Central America was Bertha Stergis's *Field book of birds of the Panama Canal Zone*. I have that well-worn book beside me now. It has a few photographs, mainly of habitats, a few colour plates, each of a single species, and a few line drawings. For each species there is a Latin name, an English name (both long since outdated), a short description, and a few lines about the bird. Primitive it certainly is compared with its modern counterpart, *Ridgeley's Guide to the birds of Panama*, with excellent colour illustrations of virtually all species, fifteen to twenty on

each plate, posed to emphasise the markings by which it can be identified (Peterson has a patent on the little arrows to show the important identification marks). Still, Mrs Sturgis's book played a role in my decision to go to Panama, just as, many years later, Frank Smithe's *Birds of Tikal* drew me to those Mayan temples in the heart of the jungle in Guatemala.

While the field guides certainly attracted the tourist birders, the latter, in their turn, provided a market for these books, which have been appearing in considerable numbers in recent years. In spite of this fact, the three largest countries in South America - Argentina, Brazil and Chile - are still without field guides of the modern type. However De Schauensee, with his *Guide to the birds of South America*, did produce a useful field book, though of course containing pictures of only comparatively few of the birds. In this he achieved the monumental task of covering all regularly recorded species for the continent, which has a total of 2926 species listed for it. Moreover new species are being discovered annually; indeed the addenda of that book include two that were described after the book was finished. These birds are not that uncommon; I saw both of them in a single day in southern Brazil, where they were shown to me by Bill Belton, who will be remembered by old Canberra hands. He has been working for ten years now on the birds of the State of Rio Grande do Sul.

All readers will recall the vexing problem of English names which has faced Australia in recent times. The tourist birders (mostly English speaking) understandably demands English names. However in tropical America the problem has not been so vexatious, since no such names existed for most birds. Eisenmann made a start at modern English nomenclature with his 1955 publication, *The species of middle American birds*, and De Schauensee created such names for all the South American ones. The American Ornithologists Union, in its Thirty-second Supplement to the Checklist, stated that its 'general policy' will be to follow these two sources, so hopefully we may avoid the conflicts which have occurred in this respect in southern Asia and parts of Africa.

It is unlikely that all this tourist birder interest in tropical America will result in any great advance in scientific study of that region. There is some evidence, however, of an indirect but very important gain, namely greater local interest in the establishment of more national parks and reserves, action to maintain them (some

are on paper only) and other steps to preserve the rapidly dwindling forests with the aid of the World Wildlife Fund and other organisations .

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A RED-BACKED KINGFISHER NEAR TARAGO

Margaret Scrivener

On 9 December 1978 on a road approximately 14 km to the east of Lake Bathurst (grid ref . 285667), whilst standing on a bridge over a mud-walled intermittent stream, and watching Fairy Martins *Cereopsis ariel* , we noticed a kingfisher flying downstream above the left bank towards us. At first sight this bird appeared to be the frequently seen Sacred Kingfisher *Halcyon sancta*. However when about 20 metres from us it swerved to the right, across the stream and up into a dead Eucalyptus beside the road about 30 metres from us. The red back of the bird was immediately seen by us all, being clearly visible as it flew away from us and up to its perch.

The bird was the Red-backed Kingfisher *Halcyon pyrrhopygia*. Both Slater's *Field guide* and *Birds in the Australian high country* were referred to during the sightings.

After the bird landed it turned to face us and proceeded to call repeatedly, a single loud clear cry which continued for about 15 minutes. No amount of noise, trunk rubbing etc. would drive the bird away from this perch, though it was only about 8 metres up. Eventually it flew to a tree just downstream of the bridge, and proceeded to make this now very monotonous call again. After a further 10 minutes it flew away.

Professor B.L.C. Johnson and Miss Nina Johnson shared this experience.

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STATUS OF BIRDS OF CANBERRA AND DISTRICT

Previous articles in this series appeared as follows in *Canberra Bird Notes*.

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2	9	22-23			

With this item the series 'Status of birds of Canberra and district' is concluded.

Several of the waders mentioned herein are migrants from the northern hemisphere where they breed. Most listed are fairly common visitors to Australia and are regularly reported from the summer feeding areas of these species in the various States.

In our area we have very little suitable habitat for migratory waders, the area from the east basin of Lake Burley Griffin to the Fyshwick sewage treatment works being the only real swampland in the A.C.T. The shores of Lakes George and Bathurst provide a further small amount of suitable habitat.

In Australia, despite some over-flying of the continent, waders mostly frequent coastal lakes and estuaries. Their status is therefore that of accidental visitors to our area, with most reports being of birds seen during migration. Where these circumstances apply, comments under the various species are limited.

SOUTHERN STONE-CURLEW (BUSH THICK-KNEE) *Burhinus magnirostris*

The Southern Stone-Curlew has an eerie, penetrating call and if it were about Canberra it would seem certain to be reported because of this. It was reported on 9 July 1967 from Weetangera Lane (CBN vol. 1 no. 3 p. 5) and from O'Connor on 7 August 1968 (CBN vol. 1 no. 7 p. 9). We would like all records of this species in our area to be forwarded.

BANDED PLOVER (BANDED LAPWING) *Vanellus tricolor*

The Banded Plover seems to be declining in numbers, especially near Canberra. It was once fairly numerous near Lyneham, in Belconnen and

near the Airport as well as near Bungendore, but there have been no recent reports from those places. Most records over the last five years have been from outer Canberra suburbs and from the area above the east basin, though it does not appear to occur regularly anywhere around Canberra. All records are requested.

RED-KNEED DOTTEREL *Erythrogonys cinctus*

The *Field-list* shows a dotted line from January to August with no records in the last four months of the year. There is a record of one bird at Lake George on 29 October 1967 (CBN vol. 1 no. 3 p. 4) and in the A.C.T. records in October, November and December in various recent years, though records in the first three months of the year are more numerous. There are no local breeding records and the birds appear to arrive here after breeding. Sightings appear to have been more regular in recent years.

WHITE-HEADED STILT *Himantopus leucocephalus* (BLACK-WINGED STILT *Himantopus himantopus*)

The Stilt breeds in the area in suitable years and is usually about in the warmer months. It is less frequently reported between April and August, Breeding records are requested and also reports of its presence during the colder months.

RED-NECKED AVOCET *Recurvirostra novaehollandiae*

The first record of this species was on 2 December 1967 and one bird was recorded on three further occasions to 7 February 1968 (CBN vol. 1 no. 3 pp. 4-5). There have been no recent records but odd birds may be expected over the summer months. This species breeds further inland.

EASTERN CURLEW *Numenius madagascariensis*

This species is common on the coast of N.S.W. and some birds remain over winter, though the breeding area is in the northern hemisphere. The only A.C.T. record was of one bird on Kelly's Swamp on 9 January 1977 (CBN vol. 3 no. 12 p. 15).

WOOD SANDPIPER *Tringa glareola*

There were eight records covering ten occurrences in the last Bird Report (*CBN* vol. 4 no. 4 p. 7). It seems irregular in its appearance here but should be looked for in the summer months.

GREY-TAILED TATTLER *Tringa brevipes*

One bird was reported from the Kelly's Swamp area on 28 November 1977 and two birds possibly of this species were reported from the same area on 8 December 1977. The C.O.G. Identification Subcommittee (*CBN* vol 3 no. 6 p. 5) have not yet accepted these records as they have not been confirmed by written descriptions.

COMMON SANDPIPER *Tringa hypoleucos*

Two records appear in the *Field-list* and there have been various records in annual Bird Reports. Such occasional records are to be expected here.

GREENSHANK *Tringa nebularia*

As well as the note in the *Field-list* there have been records of this species in nine issues of *CBN*, indicating that it is fairly regular in its appearances here. The extreme dates are 29 August and 22 January.

MARSH SANDPIPER *Tringa stagnatilis*

There have been no records further to those in the *Field-list*.

JAPANESE SNIPE (LATHAM'S SNIPE) *Gallinago hardwickii*

The Snipe is regularly recorded in the A.C.T. during the warmer months because it takes advantage of a variety of habitats from the lake margins on Sullivan's Creek and the East Basin areas to the more extensive farm dams and sphagnum bogs high on the Brindabella Ranges. Recent reports have been between September and February.

BAR-TAILED GODWIT *Limosa lapponica*

The first record of this species was reported on 17 December 1972 (*CBN* vol. 2 no. 5 p. 19). There have been no other records.

SHARP-TAILED SANDPIPER *Calidris acuminata*

A regular visitor in small numbers, with records between 12 August and 9 April in most annual Bird Reports. Most birds occur here during the spring migration.

PECTORAL SANDPIPER *Calidris melanotis*

The first local and A.C.T. record was of one bird at Kelly's Swamp on 17 September 1972 (*CBN* vol. 2 no. 4 p. 19). A further unconfirmed record was of a single bird at the same place on 28 November 1977.

RED-NECKED STINT *Calidris ruficollis*

This species has been reported in six issues of *CBN*, the last in the Bird Report for 1976-77 in vol. 3 no. 12. In Australia the species is usually seen in flocks on beaches, estuaries and coastal lakes. In our area it seems natural that most records have been from Lakes George and Bathurst, but there is one A.C.T. record - a bird at the Dairy Flat Road area on 17 October 1971 (*CBN* vol. 2 no. 2 p. 19 and no. 5 p. 13).

CURLEW SANDPIPER *Calidris ferruginea*

The *Field-list* shows only one record but between 1972 and 1977 inclusive there have been reports in six different issues of *CBN*. Records have come from the Kelly's Swamp/Dairy Flat Road area and from Lake George. There are records of ten birds and eight birds and all have occurred between 24 August and 16 January.

BROAD-BILLED SANDPIPER *Limicola falcinellus*

CBN vol. 1 no. 3 p. 20 provided a record of this species and another classed then as probable. There were further references in *CBN* vol. 1 no. 7 but one date differs. Later inspection of photographs taken at the time casts doubt as to the identification, so these are best left as possible records.

C.O.G. IDENTIFICATION SUBCOMMITTEE

It seems appropriate here at the end of these particular notes on the status of some uncommon and hard to identify species of our area to refer to two articles of great importance in accepting, or

otherwise, records of an unusual nature. All organisations such as ours have a vetting system and publish notes regarding the details which should be recorded at the time of unusual sightings, and so it is with C.O.G. The code detailing what should be noted appeared under the heading 'Rare bird records' in *CBN* vol. 2 no. 9 pp.7-9. All the more unusual records are looked at by C.O.G. Identification Subcommittee before acceptance (*CBN* vol. 3 no. 6 p. 5). That article ends with these words: 'Develop the habit of making full field notes regarding unusual sightings and look particularly for diagnostic plumage details and behaviour.'

BROLGA IN CANBERRA

Richard Gregory-Smith

On Friday 10 November 1978 I was driving from Russell Offices to Civic when I chanced to look up while halted at the Anzac Park traffic lights. Something very large was flying over from Lake Hurley Griffin towards the National War Memorial at about 150 m. The light was good as it was just after noon and I could clearly see the grey underside of the body and wings. The neck was stretched forward and the feet aft while the broad short wings flapped at a leisurely pace. This was clearly my second sighting (the first being along the Murray Valley) of the Brolga *Grus antigone*. It was a frustrating sighting as the lights changed and I had to continue my course. When I was able to stop again the bird had disappeared over Mt Ainslie. I believe this is the first authentic sighting of a Brolga over Canberra, if not in the A.C.T.

I am familiar with other Crane (*Grus*) species in the Indian subcontinent.

R. Gregory-Smith, Brassey House, Barton, A.C.T. 2600

Our parrot wears a plastic mac; the reasons here are stated: he wears it as he wants to be - polyunsaturated!

OUT AND ABOUT

G. Tibicen

The latest issue of the *Ibis* contains a paper describing a new species of bird which was found near the town of Ankober in Ethiopia. The bird has been named the Ankober Serin *Serinus ankoberensis* and lives in the highlands at an altitude of 3000 m. Serins are a group of seed eaters, very similar to sparrows, and this particular species is a ground feeder and a hole nester.

The author of the above paper, J.S. Ash, as well as describing the bird also collected a nest and eggs after the birds deserted. He continues in his paper: 'The nest was lost in the course of my hasty evacuation from Ethiopia ...' Another example of the fact that bird watching is not all beer and skittles!

More on the Peregrine Falcon. There was a recent article in the Guardian Weekly about the British populations of this bird. The RSPB estimate that from a low of 100 breeding pairs in the 1960s Britain has now nearly 400 breeding pairs, about half the entire European population. In 1976 nest robbers took about eighty eggs or chicks but both 1977 and 1978 were good breeding years, with old nest sites being recolonised. One episode of nest robbing led to three eggs being recovered after having been stolen from an eyrie in the Yorkshire Dales. They were then transported to an incubator in Bedfordshire, where two eggs hatched but one chick died. The remaining chick was taken by RAF helicopter to an eyrie in the Scottish Highlands, from which it eventually fledged - no doubt a very mixed-up bird (not knowing its tiercel from its falcon!).

Two cut price books that attracted my attention the other day were Frank Morris's *Field guide to the hawks* at \$12.50 (originally about \$19 from memory) and the second edition of *Forshaw's Parrots of the World* \$29 (originally \$39) . If you are interested the organisation selling them is the

World Record Club, P.O. Box 76, Burwood, Vic. 3125.

AN UNAWARE BEGINNING

Alistair Drake

An English birdwatcher newly arrived in Australia is faced with the considerable task of becoming familiar with an entirely new avifauna. However well he may have known the birds of his homeland, he inevitably suffers an initial period of confusion during which the sight of so many unfamiliar species is almost overwhelming. In my own case this confusion was almost total as I came to Australia at rather short notice, and in consequence I had been unable to do any preparatory reading about the continent's birds. I was, of course, aware that kookaburras, Budgerigars, muttonbirds and Emus were to be found here, but that was just about the full extent of my relevant ornithological knowledge, and I realised that it was unlikely to provide an adequate background for what I was about to see.

I arrived in mid January, just over a year ago, and moved into temporary accommodation on the ANU campus. For the first few days I almost deliberately avoided even seeing birds, for two reasons: I found that the settling-in process was keeping me fully occupied, and I still hadn't managed to obtain a bird book of any sort, so I knew that any observations I might make would be almost uninterpretable, at least in the limited time I had available. However I could hardly avoid seeing a few birds while walking about the University. On one occasion, for example, two quite large bright red birds flew across my path no more than two paces in front of me, squawking loudly and showing a flash of vivid blue; these were not easily overlooked, and I tentatively concluded that they might, perhaps, be parrots of some kind. In retrospect, the puzzlement these early observations caused me seems quite amusing, and is perhaps worth recording. Incidentally, the first entry on my Australian 'list' was as familiar as it was undistinguished: it was, inevitably, a House Sparrow, seen on the tarmac at Sydney Airport.

In Canberra, the first birds I noticed were the Australian Magpies. Of course, at that stage I did not know this name, and thought of them only as 'large black and white ground-feeding birds'. Because of their size, and habits, I decided that they might be crows; the black and white pattern reminded me particularly of the Pied Crow, a species I

had seen in Africa. At first I happily ascribed all black and white ground birds to this hypothetical species, but I soon began to notice that some were neither crow-like nor very large. These, of course, were Australian Magpie-larks, but at that stage I couldn't even decide whether they were passerines or plovers. I then determined to look at all the black and white ground birds more critically and I soon noticed that both species were sexually dimorphic; of course I still didn't know which birds were the males and which were the females.

Sullivan's Creek provided me with a few early surprises. The Purple Swamphens could hardly be missed, and I recognised these as a gallinule of some sort. I also noticed a Dusky Moorhen, and realised that it must be closely related to the similar European species. As I had already seen a Eurasian Coot (on Lake Burley Griffin, while being driven from the airport), my Australian list at one early stage consisted largely of rails. This, it seemed to me, was a rather unexciting introduction to a supposedly exotic avifauna. More impressive, however, was the sight of eight Australian Pelicans fishing together at the head of the Creek. In Europe pelicans are rare birds, and to find them one must travel to the remoter parts of the south-east; I have seen them in the Danube delta, for example, in Romania. A European, therefore, does not expect to find wild pelicans in the middle of a university, and the sight left me more than a little astonished.

The cacophony that awoke me on my first morning in Australia was such a contrast to the familiar English dawn chorus that for a while I didn't even realise that it was being produced by birds. The dominant sound, of course, was a hysterical belly-laugh, and it didn't take me too long to guess what was producing this. Most of the other sounds, I discovered, were being made by the two species of 'black and white ground bird', and the extraordinary noise produced by the larger of the two was quite enough to convince me that it could not be any type of crow.

Fortunately this period of almost total ignorance did not last long. During the first weekend after my arrival I was able to find time for some more systematic bird watching, and as I had by then managed to borrow a bird book I was able to make some sense of my observations. The book I had obtained was the size and weight of a large dictionary, so I was obliged to leave it in my room and venture out with notebook and pencil, returning from time to time to interpret the descriptions I had made. Armed, at

last, with my binoculars

and, more importantly, with the intention to see birds, I found any number of new species right on my doorstep. Indeed, my first foray took me no more than twenty paces from my room, as by the time I had covered that distance I had seen quite enough to send me back to study the identification guide. During these early forays I obtained my first sightings of such now familiar species as the Willie Wagtail, the Superb Fairy-wren and the Red-browed Firetail; I also found Eastern and Crimson Rosellas and, of course, discovered that the latter was a species I had already seen. By the end of the weekend I was able to venture as far as the Botanic Gardens and the shore of the lake without being overwhelmed by unfamiliar species, and I had built up a respectable list of native birds which included such attractive species as the Black-shouldered Kite and the Royal Spoonbill and which also, to my surprise, contained no less than three species of cormorant.

This brief success turned out to be short-lived as, after less than a week in Canberra, my work took me to Torres Strait, where I found I had to start all over again; but that is another story. This account of my first few days amidst the Australian avifauna has been written to amuse rather than to instruct, but beginners at least may learn from it what more experienced bird watchers already know: that a little background reading is amply repaid in the field, and that if one doesn't look one doesn't see, or at least one doesn't see enough to form an accurate picture.

V.A. Drake, 48 Brigalow Court, O'Connor, A.C.T. 2601

C.O.G. EXCURSIONS

Mark Clayton

Thirty-seven species were recorded by the C.O.G. party at the Cotter Dam Reserve on 18 March 1979. Highlights were:

- (a) the sighting of several hundred Australian King-Parrots throughout the picnic area; strangely only one adult male, the rest being females and juveniles, and all were quite tame;
- (b) several female Mistletoebirds in the casuarinas by the river; these were seen well but males proved elusive; and

- (c) a single Rufous Fantail moving through the casuarinas below the suspension bridge below the dam; probably it was migrating north.

Other species noted were White-faced Heron, Maned Duck, Little Eagle, Dusky Moorhen, Gang-gang Cockatoo, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, Crimson Rosella, Eastern Rosella, Australian Owlet-nightjar (dead), Laughing Kookaburra, Welcome Swallow, Eastern Yellow Robin, Rufous Whistler, Grey Shrike-thrush, Grey Fantail, Willie Wagtail, Superb Fairy-wren, White-browed Scrubwren, Brown Thornbill, White-throated Treecreeper, Noisy Friarbird, Yellow-faced Honeyeater, White-eared Honeyeater, New Holland Honeyeater, Spotted Pardalote, Silvereye, Red-browed Firetail, Satin Bowerbird, Australian Magpie-lark, Dusky Woodswallow, Australian Magpie, Pied Currawong, Grey Currawong and Australian Raven.

Bird migration as it is known in Europe and the Americas, where large numbers of birds pass a given point, is almost unknown in Australia, with the exception of the movements of the Short-tailed Shearwater off the south-eastern coast.

Not so well known is the movement of the Yellow-faced and White-naped Honeyeaters, and possibly nowhere is it more obvious than at Point Hut Crossing on the Murrumbidgee River.

The C.O.G. outing on 15 April ,1979 was treated to a spectacular display of these honeyeaters moving through the picnic area in thousands. Yellow- faced Honeyeaters predominated but mixed in were several large flocks of White-naped Honeyeaters and a sprinkling of White-eared Honeyeaters, Fuscous Honeyeaters and Eastern Spinebills.

Usually when large congregations of small birds (or animals) are found, they tend to attract numbers of predatory species, but surprisingly the only bird of prey present was one Australian Hobby, whose presence caused considerable panic amongst the migrating birds.

The list of other species recorded is Little Pied Cormorant, White-faced Heron, Crimson Rosella, Welcome Swallow, Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike, Scarlet Robin, Grey Shrike-thrush, Grey Fantail, Superb Fairy-wren, Brown Thornbill, White-throated Treecreeper, Silvereye, European Goldfinch, Common Starling, Olive-backed Oriole, Australian Magpie, Pied Currawong and Australian Raven.

M. Clayton, 81 Maribyrnong Avenue, Kaleen, A.C.T. 2617

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