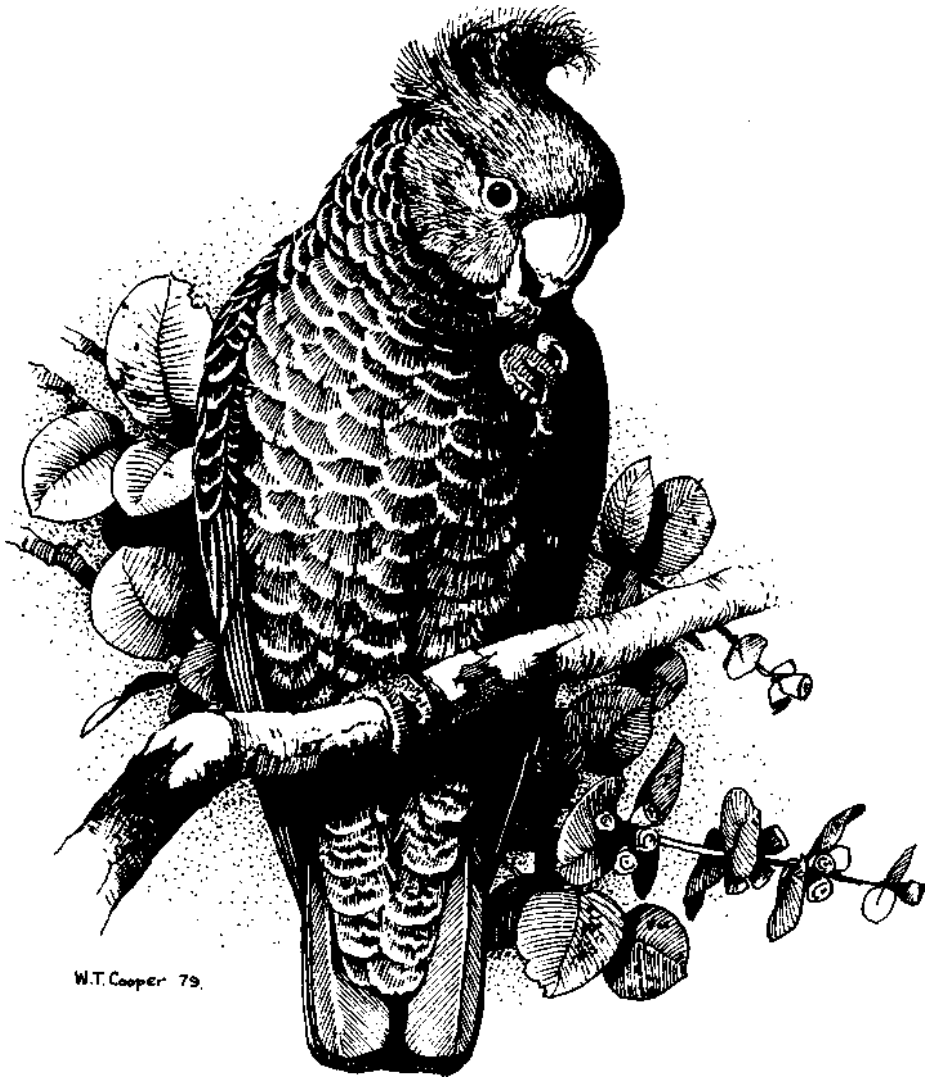
ISSN 0314-8211

CANBERRA BIRD NOTES

Volume 15
Number 1
March 1990

Registered by Australia Post - publication No NBH 0255



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FROM THE EDITORS

This issue of *Canberra Bird Notes,* more by accident than design, contains a number of papers on Pied Currawongs. It also contains a short note on the Common Myna (the Common Myna also gets a mention in "Out and About"). Both species frequently receive the wrath of bird-watchers because they are reputed to pose a threat to bird populations, the Pied Currawong because it eats the eggs and young of other birds and the Common Myna because it competes with other hollow-nesting species for nest sites. But where is the evidence of this threat?

Both of us have a philosophical objection to the presence of introduced species in the wild and do not support the introduction of any alien species. However, we wonder what overall effect introduced species do have on native species in Canberra. If by some potent magic we could make all introduced species suddenly disappear, what effect would this have on native species? Would there be a dramatic increase in the number of native species in Canberra? We doubt it. We suspect that many of the introduced species are filling niches that would otherwise be left vacant. What would replace the House Sparrows, Common Starlings, Common Mynas, and Blackbirds? What do you think?

The arguments against introduced species, and also the Pied Currawong, are largely hearsay. There is an almost total lack of published facts which show examples of the harm that they are doing to native species. If anyone has factual evidence that demonstrates the harm introduced species (or Pied Currawongs) are having on native species we would be delighted to publish them in the form of a paper, "Odd Ob", or Letter to the Editor. If a case is to be made against these birds than it is important that factual information be published. This is an area in which members of COG can make a valuable contribution.

David Purchase and Grahame Clark

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THE PIED CURRAWONG IN URBAN CANBERRA: FRIEND OR FOE?

Michael Lenz

The garden city of Canberra with its extensive plantings of native and exotic trees and shrubs in reserves, parks and bushland corridors provides a home to a diverse avifauna. However, birdlovers do not extend their welcome to all new settlers, introduced species such as the Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* and Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis,* are greeted with regret and dismay. These two species often win the contest against native cavity-nesting birds for the scarce tree holes in which to raise broods. One of our native species, the Pied Currawong *Strepera graculina* also has attracted a lot of attention in recent years and opinions are divided about its possible impact on other birdlife.

The Pied Currawong certainly stirs up emotions. In broad daylight it will boldly rob nests, grab clumsy fledglings and even swoop at adult birds in full flight, right before peoples' eyes. As a rule, other predators of bird nests and young choose the cover of vegetation and darkness, and will shy away for as long as humans are close by. This almost fearless behaviour of the Pied Currawong has probably more than anything else contributed to the loathing this bird is given. When we think of potential predators of bird broods, the Pied Currawong is likely to be the first to come to mind. What about other predators such as cats and birds of prey? They all act more secretively, and what we don't see, can't be so bad, can it? Members who attended the 1989 RAOU Congress in Canberra will remember the talk by Richard Major on nest losses of the Norfolk Island Scarlet Robins *Petroica multicolor*. A camera with remote control revealed the culprits - we were shown a few nice close-ups of rats! In Canberra, we tend to blame brood losses of our birds on the Pied Currawong. How does this compare with the toll inflicted by cats, rats and others? Nobody knows.

It is time for COG members to lay emotions to rest and take a fresh look at the so-called "Currawong problem" and collect and record more facts about this species. The story of the Pied Currawong in urban Canberra is, like those of many other birds within the city, quite fascinating, but is poorly documented. This brief account, largely based on my own observations, will raise more questions than it answers, but hopefully it will encourage others to pay more attention to this species.

The Pied Currawong breeds in the tall eucalypt forests of the Great Dividing Range. During autumn and winter the birds flock and move to lower altitudes and frequently appear in human settlements (Rowley 1984). In spring, the birds leave these areas and return to the mountains. At least this was the case in Canberra in earlier years, but at first a few. now a good

number stay behind and breed in the suburbs - the first pairs were noted nesting in Forrest and near Black Mountain about 25 years ago (Marchant 1965). Since then, the suburban breeding population has increased steadily, e.g. at the ANU from 6 pairs in 1977 to 14 in 1988. Similar increases have occurred in inner Canberra (e.g. Ainslie) and in the National Botanic Gardens (G. Clark pers.com.). New suburbs are colonised as soon as trees become available that are of suitable size and structure to allow nesting.

In mountains, breeding pairs are widely dispersed. In the woodlands surrounding Canberra the species is found only infrequently, but in parts of the reserves bordering the suburbs, and especially in older sections of Canberra, it breeds at densities which exceed those found in its original breeding habitat.

The key to understanding these changes is likely to be food. The Pied Currawong is omnivorous. In autumr/winter it feeds mainly on fleshy fruits, seeds and other vegetable material, and on insects. In settlements it also feeds on various food scraps in places such as streets, gardens, school yards, and picnic grounds. The human-provided component of their diet, including the fruits from exotic trees and shrubs such as Privet *Ligustrum* sp., Firethorn *Pyracantha* sp., and many others, which are especially common in the older suburbs of Canberra, has probably contributed to a higher survival rate of Pied Currawongs during winter than in the past. The birds would also have learned quickly that discarded potato chips, remains of sandwiches, and apple cores are not seasonally restricted, but form an all-year-round food supply. These items, together with food put out by people to "pacify" their local Australian Magpies *Gymnorhina tibicen,* supplement the insects, earthworms, snails and birds that can be collected in suburban gardens, parks and public lawns during spring and summer (Cooper and Cooper 1981). Therefore, it is not difficult to understand what enticed some Pied Currawongs to stay and breed in Canberra where the pickings can be quite easy. Indeed, some birds nesting in Civic probably rely to a large degree on food provided (unwillingly or willingly) by people.

Let us look more closely at the food item that causes all the problems - birds. In general, a city is inhabited by fewer species of birds than were present in the woodland or forest it has replaced. However, the number of individual birds per given area is higher in towns than in natural environments. Some seed-eating and omnivorous species are especially favoured in cities, e.g. House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* and Common Starling. I have no figures on the number of breeding birds per area from mountain forests (e.g. the Brindabellas), but the dry sclerophyll forest on Black Mountain supports 5.2 birds/ha during summer (Bell 1980). The figures for the suburbs of Ainslie, Hackett and Aranda range from 11-18 birds/ha, and of these 72-79% belong to the "undesirable" group such as House Sparrow, Common Starling and Blackbird *Turdus merula* (Lenz in prep.). The corresponding numbers at

the ANU campus in the years 1977 to 1988 are 8-11 birds/ha and 43-45% exotic birds (Lenz in prep.).

The number of breeding Pied Currawongs has more than doubled at the ANU from 1977 to 1988 as mentioned earlier, but the populations of many other species have changed little, if at all. Some, notably shrub-nesting species whose nests are vulnerable to currawong predation, have significantly increased. In species which have declined, such as the European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis,* other reasons than the presence of currawongs explain the changes. The Pied Currawongs at the ANU are certainly not better behaved than those in or near your garden - they also rob nests and catch fledglings, but the percentage of nests and birds they take has little or no impact on overall bird numbers. Many species nesting at the ANU and in our gardens breed more than once in a season and readily build replacement nests should an earlier attempt have failed. Hence, they are able to compensate for at least some of the losses. It is very much a matter of scale: no doubt currawongs can cause the decline of birds in an individual garden, but they are unlikely to do so for an entire street, or all the gardens of a suburb.

Many of the birds taken by the Pied Currawong are exotic species. They pull young Common Starlings out from under the eaves of buildings as they beg at the nest entrance, and House Sparrows are picked from their roosts at dusk. So, is it acceptable when Pied Currawongs take exotics? After all, these exotics compete for nesting space and food with our "desirable" native birds, and they can be quite a nuisance to us. Just think of the mess roosting Common Starlings are making in Civic. Fewer Common Starlings and Common Mynas, means better breeding chances for our parrots, clearly the Pied Currawong is our helper and friend! However. does the Pied Currawong turn into a "nasty" bird when it plunders a Willie Wagtail's *Rhipidura leucophrys* nest? But stop, the parrots can be quite a nuisance in a garden, too, breaking the rose buds in spring and damaging the apples on your tree in summer. And the Silvereyes *Zosterops lateralis* know earlier than you which grapes are ripe. I don't want to continue to argue this way, I just want to demonstrate that there can be two sides to all, if not most things.

It is likely that "nest-spotting" is easier for the Pied Currawong in our gardens than it is in its primary breeding habitat, the tall mountain forests. The forest vegetation is far more complex, consisting of many layers, extendlng over a greater height, and is more continuous in all dimensions compared to the suburban greenery. City trees usually do not reach the height of those in the forest; trees and shrubs are frequently planted singly, or widely- spaced in rows, with the lower branches pruned. Undergrowth is likewise absent or patchy. Houses, driveways, lawns, and roads strongly subdivide the components of the suburban vegetation. As a consequence. breeding sites for birds are far more limited and their locations more predictable than in the forests. You will usually have little trouble finding the nests of Red

Wattlebirds *Anthochaera carunculata,* Silvereyes and other species in your garden. Try the same for the many species that breed in the Brindabellas! No doubt, your success rate will be much lower, and the same probably applies to the Pied Currawong.

With the above comments in mind two measures can be taken to make a garden less attract to Pied Currawongs and a better breeding place for the more desirable species:

(1) Reduce the "food potential" of your garden for the currawong, by not putting out any food items such as bread and meat that may be accepted by currawongs as well as other birds; but if you do e.g. for "your" magpies, feed only the amount the magpies will consume in one session, don't leave oversupplies lying around. Do not plant privet or firethorn bushes, and pull out any that are already in the garden, as their berries are much sought after by currawongs, and they are also serious bushland weeds.

(2) Improve the "breeding potential" of your garden for desirable species. Plant native trees and shrubs of various heights in mixed clusters, which provide expanses of multi-layered vegetation, offering a choice of breeding sites that allow birds to slip away from their nests under cover without having to give the nest site away when danger approaches. If your neighbours already have trees and bushes on their side of the fence, continue plantings on your side, therefore creating a bigger forest island; or surround single trees with groups of bushes and smaller trees.

I think one of the main reasons that breeding birds do so well at the ANU, some even increasing in numbers despite the high population of Pied Currawongs, is that in many areas the extensive mixed planting of trees and shrubs, and the planting of larger clusters of one vegetation type has created many "safe" nest sites which give birds enough cover and protection so that they can respond to disturbances without unnecessarily exposing their broods.

The case of the Pied Currawong has an interesting parallel in Europe. The Carrion Crow *Corvus corone* and the European Magpie *Pica pica* fill a similar niche there as is filled by the Pied Currawong here. They are also omnivorous, rather bold and have a taste for the contents of bird nests. They invaded villages and cities from the surrounding countryside and are now quite common in many settlements. For decades they have been blamed for the decline in songbirds by birdlovers and for the decline of gamebirds by shooters, and they can be hunted and prosecuted all-year-round. But now opinions are changing; even bird protection societies are calling for "a fair go" for these species. At long last data have been gathered on their potential role in the decline of other birds. In natural environments with little human

interference and disturbances, a diverse avifauna can be found in the presence of Carrion Crows or European Magpies. Wherever breeding birds experience frequent and lasting disturbance by humans, so that birds are forced to leave their nests unattended for some time or have no time to cover their eggs (e.g. ducks) before leaving the nest, Carrion Crows inflict a noticeable toll. In cities they take (apart from natural food items and discarded food scraps) mainly the surplus of Blackbirds, House Sparrows and Greenfinches *C. chloris,* all species that will nest three times and more in a season. Most vulnerable are the first broods, usually started at a time before the deciduous trees and shrubs have fully developed their protective foliage. Later broods, in better cover, are far more successful in settlements. The same rule applies as in natural environments: the better the plant cover and the less frequent and lasting the disturbances by people, cats and dogs, the better the chances that a pair can raise its brood, even in the presence of predators. The common urban species reach densities in European cities far greater than in natural habitats. Such a surplus of "prey species" will inevitably attract predators - the Carrion Crow and European Magpie. Numbers of prey and predator are usually closely linked, increases or decreases of the former determine the number of the latter. More balanced assessments of the role of the crow and the magpie have indicated that in the past their impact on other birds has been (often vastly) overstated. The potential impact of these two (and other) species pales considerably when compared with human-induced declines in bird numbers.

Let us now look at other aspects of the Pied Currawong's biology in the suburbs. If we read the accounts of its breeding biology as described by Rowley (1984,1986) we can see that a few changes have occurred and are occurring in the urban population. I describe these changes without attempting to interpret the reasons for them:

(1) Breeding season: In the ranges this commences in October which means the young will be out of the nest by around Christmas. Some city birds start nest building as early as late August/early September (i.e. the young will leave the nest by early November).

(2) Nesting trees: Usually tall eucalypts in forest areas. Eucalypts are still the preferred trees in cities, but they no longer have to be tall and they will nest just as successfully in pines and various deciduous trees, in the latter case sometimes starting to breed well before the foliage has developed.

(3) Nest height: Given as 7-25m in various sources. Urban pairs will build their nest at heights as low as 4m.

(4) Nest size: Described as between nests of the Australian Magpie and the Australian Raven *C. coronoides.* Many suburban nests are notably smaller, no larger than nests of the magpie.

(5) Clutch size: On average 3 eggs. sometimes only 2, occasionally 4. I have (with one exception) no figures of clutch size from suburban birds, but the average number of fledged young over several years at the ANU and in suburbs is 2.2 (range 1-4). In most years it is just around 2.0 or a bit below, but in 1987 brood success was as high as 2.7 fledged juveniles per pair (ANU). The number of young is not necessarily an indication of the number of eggs laid, but it is likely that suburban birds do not reach their full breeding potential compared to their mountain cousins. I hope that in coming breeding seasons COG members who spend time in the ranges during summer will provide me with some figures on the number of young mountain pairs of currawongs are able to raise.

(6) Breeding density: As mentioned earlier, in the mountains breeding pairs are widely dispersed. Each pair defends its territory vigorously against other currawongs. In Canberra breeding pairs are also very territorial but they often nest much closer to each other. For example, the ca. 400m long strip of pine trees along McCaughey St between Masson St and Barry Drive in Turner was home to three pairs of Pied Currawongs in 1989!

(7) Not mentioned in the descriptions of Pied Currawong biology are the presence during the breeding season of flocks of non-territorial birds which do not breed. I have noticed such flocks over the last 4-5 years at several places in urban Canberra. Flocks composed of younger birds or birds of lower social status are a regular feature in Australian Raven and Australian Magpie societies. Just like the larger autumn/winter flocks of non-breeding Pied Currawongs. they will feed in an area for a little while and then move on to a different site. They probably follow a daily route through the suburbs.

These groups of non-territorial Pied Currawongs in spring/summer are of special interest and may provide the answer to the question one inevitably has to ask: How much further will the urban breeding population of Pied Currawongs increase? The newer suburbs are a future growth area as the vegetation develops and begins to meet the species' requirements for breeding. In the older suburbs with already well established populations only continuous monitoring will tell. But remember, breeding pairs defend their territory very strongly against other intruding currawongs, and in a contest between a resident bird and an intruder, the resident tends to win. The story is different when a whole flock of intruders appears. These non-breeding birds also like to inspect bird nests and take out their contents, be it the nest of a Blackbird, Silvereye or Pied Currawong! I have witnessed one case of currawongs interfering with a conspecific's nest, the other evidence I have is only indirect. In one part of the ANU where three pairs of Currawongs regularly nested and commenced doing so again in 1989 no broods were raised. The difference in

that year was that a group of non-breeders made this part of the campus its regular feeding haunt. It is likely that these birds interfered with the nests of the breeding pairs. In all other parts of the ANU that received only occasional visits of non-breeders the resident pairs managed to raise broods. Clearly more evidence is needed about the potential role of summer flocks of currawongs in regulating breeding populations of their own species. I urge COG members to keep an eye on flocks of currawongs during the breeding season and to see whether and how resident and non-resident birds interact with each other.

A similar parallel exists with the Carrion Crow in Europe where flocks of non-breeding birds pose the greatest threat to eggs and small young of breeding crows (the young are left alone once the feathers have grown enough to give them a crow-look) (Tompa 1975; Wittenberg 1968).

Things get even more complicated: The Australian Raven is becoming more and more accustomed to urban Canberra as well. It already nests in several inner Canberra parks. magpies and currawongs raise the alarm and swoop whenever a raven appears near their nests. They clearly perceive the raven as a threat. On the other hand, if given a chance, currawong will not hesitate to rob raven nests. Over several years I believe currawongs were the most likely cause for the poor breeding success of two pairs of Australian Ravens on the ANU campus.

To sum up, irrespective of whether you consider the Pied Currawong as a threat to other birdlife or see it playing a welcome part in reducing the numbers of introduced birds or simply accept its role in predator/prey interactions, we need more data on all aspects of its biology both in urban Canberra and in its natural environment. In the flrst place the question is not really "Friend or Foe?" but "What are the birds doing in town?" Many other species have also changed in status in recent years, the parrots, Maned Duck *Chenonetta jubata,* White-winged Chough *Corcorax melanorhamphos* and Noisy Friarbird *Philemon corniculatus* come immediately to mind. It is necessary to keep a close watch on those and other species and to compare thelr blology in the city and the surrounding countryside.

You may have thought you were living in a quiet, boring suburban street, but after my comments on the Pied Currawong, you may realize that it may be qulet but it is unlikely to be boring! All it needs, is for you to be prepared to keep your eyes open and ask a few questions about the birds in your area. You will also require patience, as a few years of observation may be needed before you are able to find answers to your questions. A lot of questlons can be answered satisfactorily only if many members contribute. I appeal to all COG members to become more conscious of the point that our understanding of the bird life in our city, in the Canberra Nature Parks and COG's area of concern and hence COG's ability to advise on land management

and conservation, will be only as good as the effort members are prepared to give in collecting data. It makes no difference, whether you just count the House Sparrows and Silvereyes in your garden, or seek the rarities on lakes or remote parts of the Brindabellas, both sets of data are equally needed to understand the "web of birdlife".

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Brendan Lepschi for his helpful comments on this text.

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SUCCESSFUL BREEDING BY A DISABLED PIED CURRAWONG

Rob Parnell

The Blakely's Red Gums *Eucalyptus blakelyi* in the middle of Northbourne Avenue in Civic lead a precarious life and owing to a variety of causes their ranks have been reduced. The advancing senility of those remaining is highlighted by the young vigorous River Peppermints *E. elata* that have been planted in the gaps. The spring of 1989, however, was kind to the Blakely's Red Gums that remain outside the Jolimont Centre and they were covered with fresh green growth. During the spring a pair of Pied Currawongs *Strepera graculina* nested in one of these trees and subsequently hatched two young.

This was an exceptional pair in that one of them did not have a tail. The tailess bird made an unusual and somewhat comical sight when chasing off other currawongs or when bringing food to the nest. Despite the lack of a tail this bird was able to balance. I have seen it stand on a branch and quiver its outstreached wings, seemingly for balance, and it appeared to have no difficulty landing on a branch near the nest and hopping to a closer one to transfer food to its mate or two chicks. I have also seen it do a perfect vertical dive off the Jolimont Centre and land on an area the size of a postage stamp three storeys below on the roof of the General Post Office. At no time did I see this bird incubate the eggs or brood the nestlings.

What I assume to be the same pair (on the basis that one of them did not have a tail) defended a territory during the previous season in Mort Street and could be seen flying around the bus interchange and the courtyard at the back of the Private Bin Tavern.

A pair of Australian Magpie-larks *Grallina cyanoleuca* built a nest two trees away from the currawongs. On one occasion they helped the tailless currawong chase away another Pied Currawong. Both pairs share their trees with Galahs *Cacatua roseicapilla* which come in at sunset and roost there.

I observed a Pied Currawong's nest (with squawking young) at Blackheath in the Blue Mountains at which one of the parents had only one eye. What gladdens me is how these disabled birds are able to ward off the attention of other Pied Currawongs with their notorious appetite for nestlings, including those of other currawongs.

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THE USE OF WET SOIL IN PREENING BY A PIED CURRAWONG

David Purchase

At 1143hrs on 2 November 1989, my attention was attracted by the sound of what I thought was a juvenile Pied Currawong ***Strepera graculina*** begging for food in the front garden. I looked out of a window overlooking the garden and saw two adult Pied Currawongs (no brownish plumage on underparts, and yellow eyes): one was preening on an area of almost bare soil by the bird bath; while the other was nearby searching for food. As I watched, the preening bird gave several begging calls and the other bird flew to it and appeared to feed it, and then flew from the area.

I continued to observe the remaining bird (at a distance of 3 to 4m) which had stopped making begging calls. As I watched, it picked up a small lump of soil in its beak, shook off the excess, and used it to preen its feathers. The area had been watered during the previous day so that the soil, which contained a lot of clay, was quite moist. It repeated this process about every 20 seconds. It was not seen to use its preen gland. The body, wing, and tail feathers all received attention and the method of preening appeared quite normal except that it was using soil instead of preen oil. On four occasions it stopped preening and bathed for 10 to 15 seconds in the bird bath - the water becoming muddier each time.

Thirty minutes later (possibly because it was alarmed by the sound of a vehicle leaving the house next door) it stopped preening and flew onto a branch of a nearby eucalypt. Two minutes later it left the area altogether.

I suspect the Pied Currawongs were a pair that had a nest in a eucalypt in a nearby garden. On 24 October, the sounds of an unknown number of young could be heard in the nest. The bird that was preening had a very large and oedematous brood patch.

This is probably not the first time a Pied Currawong has behaved in this fashion in the garden. On two occasions during the previous fortnight I had been puzzled to find the bird bath full of muddy water.

I cannot find any reference to Pied Currawongs, or other birds, using wet soil during preening, although Rowley (1978. ***Ibis*** 120: 178-197) describes White-winged Choughs ***Corcorax melanorhamphos*** picking up beakfuls of dust and forcing it into their plumage.

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PIED CURRAWONG FEEDING ON LERP

Brendan J. Lepschi

Lerp (the sugary exudate of sap-sucking insects (psyllids (Hemiptera: Psyllidae)), found on the foliage of various plants, but mainly on eucalypts), is a food source for many birds chiefly honeyeaters and pardalotes, and to a lesser extent some parrots (personal observation, Loyn 1985, Barker & Vestjens 1989) and thornbills (Loyn *op. cit.,* Recher *et al.* 1985); other species may also include lerp in their diet occasionally (Morrison 1981, Nix 1985, Ford *et al.* 1986).

At around 1100 hrs on 2 April 1990 at the CSIRO site on Black Mountain, ACT, I observed an adult Pied Currawong *Strepera graculina* feeding on lerp on the foliage of a mature Yellow Box *Eucalyptus melliodora.* The bird perched on a branch or twig and grasped a nearby leaf in its beak and then drew it along the leaf to dislodge the lerps. The bird stripped a small number of leaves in this manner before flying off.

I am not aware of any prior references to this species taking lerp.

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ODD OBS

PIED CURRAWONGS TAKING FOOD ON THE WING

Shirley Chittick

On 8 October 1988 at Moruya Heads, a Pied Currawong *Strepera graculina* was seen by a friend and me to take a Welcome Swallow *Hirundo neoxena* on the wing. The currawong dived from above, caught the swallow in its bill, and carried it to the ground, where it proceeded to tear it to bits.

Grahame Clark has told me that he also saw a Pied Currawong taking a bird on the wing in 1978 in the National Botanic Gardens. The surprise was that the bird was an adult male Blackbird *Turdus merula* - a very different matter to taking a Welcome Swallow. The attack in this instance was also from above.

The literature mentions that Pied Currawongs will take small birds or young, but I have always assumed this to be "nest-robbing" rather than active capture of flying birds.

S.C. Chittick, 2 Johnson Place, FARRER ACT 2607

COMMON MYNAS AT BAWLEY POINT, NSW, AND AINSLIE, ACT

Bryan FitzGerald

On 24 December 1989, at 0920hrs, when driving past Corroboree Park, Ainslie, I was aghast to see a Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis* fly across the road into the park. Until then I believed that Ainslie was free of mynas.

Until the summer of 1989/90, I also believed that Bawley Point was free of Common Mynas. Holiday bird lists that I had compiled for the area each summer since 1986/87 did not include the species. However, on 21 December 1989 I observed a pair feeding young in a 40m-high eucalypt about 40m from the surf at Bawley Point Beach. The nest was in a spout facing SSE about 4m below the lowest foliage and about 20m above the ground. On 30 December 1989 and 6 January 1990, the pair were still feeding the young. However, on 6 January there were four additional mynas in a nearby tree.

Bryan FitzGerald, 36 Winnecke Street, AINSLIE ACT 2602

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PRESIDENT'S REPORT 1989

Ladies and gentlemen, 1989 may have appeared to many of you to have been a fairly quiet year. Any committee member will tell you that that has not been the case.

You will recall that we started the year without two of our most involved and experienced committee men, Doug Ross and Jack Holland. We were shortly to suffer another loss when our president Neil Hermes resigned in May due to pressure of work and what he saw as a conflict of interests. It is now a while since Neil's resignation but may I take this opportunity to again pay tribute to and thank him for his significant contribution to COG while in the chair. Ladies and gentlemen, that COG saw out the remainder of 1989 without any perceptible hiccough was due entirely to our committee. I cannot speak highly enough of the members and the quality and quantity of their contribution.

Generally one should not pick out individuals for particular mention but I feel sure that the other committee members will be right behind me when I offer a special vote of thanks and appreciation to Sue Armstrong for her boundless enthusiasm and energy in undertaking the role of, as she put it, COG's "exhibitionist". I wish that she had received the support that she deserved. Her inability to stand again in 1990 is a real blow. In 1989, principally as a result of Sue's efforts, COG contributed by means of walks, stalls, prizes or displays to the Environment Fair, Recreation Expo, Heritage Week, ACT Science Fair, Bird Week, Downer Community Fair and the ARA/RAOU Congress.

COG is at this moment at something of a crossroads. 1989 saw the completion of a couple of major projects in which the membership has been very actively involved - the ACT Avifauna Database, otherwise known as the Atlas project and the urban lakes segment of the Waterbird survey.

As you know we are now negotiating with the National Capital Planning Authority and hope to bring the Atlas project to a successful conclusion with the publication of the Atlas of the Birds of the ACT later this year. Tribute has been paid to the effort which Ian Taylor has put into the Atlas project. We should also acknowledge the countless hours of work put in by so many members in the gathering of data without which the project could not have come to anything.

Thanks are also due to all who took part in the collection of data for the urban lakes survey and to Brendan Lepschi who did so much to keep the interest going and to ensure that the teams went out and their records came in. Completion of this data collection work left something of a void in many

people's lives and there has been some shuffling of feet as they wait for any excuse to get back out there doing that.

And so where from here?

Thanks largely to a substantial push from Michael Lenz, we have assembled two teams, I am delighted to be able to say two very well qualified teams, one to prepare a plan for COG's project work over the next five to ten years and the other to set up a program for ongoing work on the Garden Bird Survey. The project group have the first stage of their work ready to present to us and that they will do at our meeting here on 14 March.

The year saw COG co-hosting the Congress of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union. Responding to a call from the Union for COG to get involved in the Congress our members did us proud. The presentation of papers by professional and non-professional alike was of the highest calibre and it was doubly fitting that the award for the best paper by a non-professional went to Philip Veerman for his presentation on COG's Garden Bird Survey.

I think that we should all be aware of and, as a group, respond to the obvious commitment of Brian Collins the President and Phil Moors the Director of the RAOU to encourage a much closer working relationship between the Union and groups such as COG.

The year also saw us deluged with papers on development projects which are under consideration in Canberra. The Jerrabomberra Wetlands issue is far from finalised and ACT Parks and Conservation has warned that they are going to be looking to COG for a major input shortly. We, or should I be fair and say Hugh Possingham has submitted papers in relation to the Canberra Nature Park, the Gunghalin External Travel System and the National Capital Plan. We still have on our plate Environment ACT, Lake Ginninderra Management Plan and the Australian Museum Site Development. COG has been a significant contributor on such issues in the past, our submissions have been highly regarded and for that reason we shall be looked to to continue providing input. I have said before and I do not make any apologies for saying again that COG members must put their shoulders to the wheel and help. There is a substantial source of knowledge amongst you out there which has to be tapped. Please come forward if you have any feeling for, or interest in any of these projects.

The committee moved during the year to get some of our deliberations out from behind the screen and into *Gang-gang* for your information. We hope that you find this open government style useful. If anyone has questions relating to committee work about which they would like more information please raise it with a committee member.

Our Community Development Grants for 1989 turned out to be a rather mixed success story. We have purchased two telescopes for which a lending policy will now be determined. Sadly, our walks for senior citizens did not work out in the limited time that we have available and we had to hand the $500 grant back to the government.

Our monthly meeting presentations have been most successful. If I must pick out one for special mention it has to be the joint venture with the Society for Growing Australian Plants at which Graham Pizzey delighted all who were there with his presentation, in spite of the equipment failure. I believe that we should think about doing more of these joint functions with other groups. Those who attended also thoroughly enjoyed the lake shore Christmas breakfast which ended with Bruce Lindenmayer auctioning everything that didn't appear to have any owner. This event appears to be on the calendar to stay.

An important subject about which we do not really hear as much as we should, is Barren Grounds. Some of you may not know that we are represented on the management committee. Lyndal Thorburn until her recent decision to hand in her resignation has very ably represented COG on the committee for some years and we owe her a debt of gratitude for all the travel undertaken on our behalf and a job very well done. The RAOU is currently encouraging management committees of the bird observatories to take over the bulk of the administrative work so that the wardens are left free to fulfil their research and education roles. We are very fortunate that Tony Lawson has compulsorarily volunteered to take over from Lyndal and we look forward to his assessment of COG's future role and level of involvement. The President of the RAOU has made it plain that he would like to see COG take a higher profile in relation to Barren Grounds. He is, of course. thinking of more than financial support.

Outings in 1989 were fairly well attended. Unfortunately we received little feedback to tell us whether the program satisfied consumer needs. The outings calendar for 1990 is largely settled with some emphasis on visits and work in Canberra Nature Park. We plan also to fit in five campouts and in Spring two nest workshops.

The Lake Bathurst and Garden Bird Surveys will continue in 1990. Both need your support and an increased level of participation.

At the December meeting I touched briefly on a report that two Regent Honeyeaters had been collected as specimens in the ACT. As promised then we contacted the ACT Administration to obtain details of the controls which exist and the way in which they are administered in the ACT. We also contacted the RAOU on the matter.

The COG committee has decided that COG have a policy on the collection of specimens of native birds. The committee also believes that there should be a basic national approach. It was with much interest, therefore, that we learned that the Council of the RAOU has the topic on their agenda for a meeting this month. To facilitate their deliberations we have provided them with copies of our correspondence with the ACT Administration.

We have asked the RAOU to inform us of the outcome of the Council's discussion and have advised the ACT Administration that we are likely to make submissions to them on the subject.

Ladies and gentlemen, it remains only for me to convey my own personal thanks to the outgoing committee, my very best wishes to the incoming office bearers and committee, to wish you good birding in 1990 and to ask each of you to consider how you can put a little bit back into COG this year.

Malcolm Fyfe, February 1990

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OUT AND ABOUT

G. Tibicen

Recently the Regent Honeyeater *Xanthomyza phrygia* has been in the news with conflicting reports about the status of the bird and the number left. For those people who wish to read more about this interesting species the following articles are suggested:

Franklin, D., Menkhorst, **P.,** and Robinson, **J.** (1987). Field Surveys of the Regent Honeyeater *Xanthomyza phrygia* in Victoria. *Australian Bird Watcher* 12:91.95.

Franklin, D.C., Menkhorst, P.W., and Robinson, J.L. (1989). Ecology of the Regent Honeyeater *Xanthomyza phrygia. Emu* 89:140-154.

Morris, A.K., and Kurtz, N. (1982). The status of the Regent Honeyeater in the Upper Macquarie and Castlereagh Valleys" *Aust. Birds* 16:44-52.

Perhaps somebody could review the records of this bird in the ACT?

The Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis* is a species that attracts quite a bit of "bad press" for its behaviour in ejecting native birds from nest holes. Most of this is based on hearsay evidence, rather than documented fact. Therefore, it was interesting to see in the October/December 1989 issue of *Birds International a* documented case of eviction by mynas. Geoff Moon in an article on Sacred Kingfishers *Halcyon sancta* mentions three cases in New Zealand where the kingfishers were evicted from their nests, and their eggs destroyed. In one of the cases mynas subsequently nested in the usurped burrow.

Do any of our readers have specific instances of eviction by mynas in Australia?

In the same article on page 70 there is an excellent photograph of a young Sacred Kingfisher showing the considerable amount of rufous that young birds have on their breasts. This rufous colouration is not well shown in the field guide, and can easily result in identification of juvenile Sacred Kingfishers as Azure Kingflshers *Ceyx azurea.*

The Canberra Times has recently started publishing each Sunday a feature called "Earthweek: a diary of the Planet". It is an interesting brief summary of the environmental news of the week. The following item is taken from Earthweek of 26 January:

> "A rare American bittern blown off-course while migrating from North to Central America, made an epic flight across the Atlantic only to be promptly killed by an Irish hunting dog. "This is a tragedy," top Irish ornithologist Killian Mullarney said after the death of the large brown heron was reported. "It was the flrst American bittern known to have reached Ireland since 1973, so lots of people would have liked to see it "Mullarney lamented" ".

It is sad that the top Irish ornithologist was more interested in the fact that lots of people could not see the bird rather than the demise of the unfortunate bird. I always thought Irish jokes were bit of an exaggeration now I am not sure after hearing of an ornithologist who is interested more in people than in birds.

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RARITIES PANEL NEWS

The Regent Honeyeaters *Xanthomyza phrygia* and Common Koels *Eudynamis scolopacea* are still around. There is still no positive record of a female koel although there are rumours of a "female plumaged" bird making the "coo-ee" call.

The Regent Honeyeaters successfully bred at Castle Hill and at least one bird was recorded south of Captains Flat. Are any of these the Campbell Park birds? (see the previous endorsed list).

Perhaps the above-average rainfall and the resultant copious growth of grass since February 1989 may account for the eruption of Brown Quail *Coturnix australis.*

Other interesting sightings were the Common Sandpiper *Tringa hypoleucos* at Uriarra Crossing, the Spotted Harrier *Circus assimilis* near Bungendore and the repeated sightings in 1989 and 1990 of Little Friarbirds *Philemon citreogularis* at Fraser.

The Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* are an indication that there may be more interesting birds around the margins of Lake George now that it is full.

Reporting Guidelines. Now that the Atlas is finished. the Rarities Panel intend to use the information gathered from it to re-assess the status of some species. The first decision is to change the status for unnaturally coloured budgerigars. In future there is no need to report budgerigars which are in unnatural colours (i.e. yellow, blue, white, grey or mixtures). Green budgerigars should still be reported.

RARITIES PANEL ENDORSED LIST No 25

Category 3

Intermediate Egret
2;25 Nov 89;J.Bissett; Jerrabomberra Wetlands
Glossy Ibis
4;17 Jan 90;P.Veerman; Lake George North
Whistling Kite
1;24 Mar 89;I.Crawford; Jerrabomberra Wetlands
White-bellied Sea-Eagle
1;7 Sep 89;H.Possingham; Lake Burley Griffin West
1;20 Jan 90;J.Bissett; Jerrabomberra Wetlands
Spotted Harrier
1;1 Feb 90;B.Wilson; 2km S Bungendore

Brown Quail
1;16 Nov 89;N.Clark; Between L.Ginninderra College and University of Canberra
1;26 Nov 89; J.Bissett; Kambah Pool Road
1;17 Dec 89; J.Bissett & S.Chittick; Lake Tuggeranong
2;18 Jan 90; J.Bissett; Kambah Pool
1;28 Jan 90; H.Possingham; Urambi Hills N.P.
Common Sandpiper
1;13 Nov 89; B.Pennefather; Uriarra Crossing area
Little Lorikeet
10;14 Jan 90;D.McDonald; Castle Hill area
Common Koel
1M;30 Nov 89;P.Veerman; Lyons/Chifley
1;3 Jan 90;J.Bissett; Fisher
Singing Bushlark
2;17 Dec 89;J.Bissett & S.Chittick; Lake Tuggeranong
White-bellied Cuckoo-shike
1;18 Jun 89;H.Possingham; O'Malley East
Little Friarbird
1;1 Jan-8 Feb 89;J.Penhallurick; Fraser
1;9 Jan 90;J.Penhallurick; Fraser
Regent Honeyeater
2+1J;14 Jan 90;D.McDonald; Castle Hill area
1;15 Jan 90;H.Stephinson;18km S Captains Flat
2+1J;20 Jan 90;P.Veerman; Castle Hill area
Masked Woodswallow
Pair;15 Oct 88;I.Crawford; Grid 157 North

Escapees
Little Corella
1;1 Sep 89-15 Jan 90; S.Wilson; Kambah
Budgerigar (Blue)
1;Dec 88; G.Elliott; Holt
Mallee Ringneck
1;26 Aug-15 Sep 89; G.Lucas; Watson
Port Lincoln Ringneck
1/2;1 Jun-31 Aug 89; W&R.Casper; Farrer
Zebra Finch
1;16 Mar 89; J.Redmond; Farrer
1M;14 Jan 90;M.Butterfield; Kellys Swamp area

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FOR SALE

The following are available from Canberra Ornithologists Group, PO Box 301, CIVIC SQUARE ACT 2608:

A POCKET LIST OF AUSTRALIAN BIRDS — Price 50c

This booklet lists the names of all bird species recorded in Australia. Alongside the names are ten columns that can be used to tally the species seen in different localities or on different days. It greatly simplifies the recording of field lists.

A FIELD LIST OF THE BIRDS OF CANBERRA AND DISTRICT — Price $3

This booklet lists the bird species found in the Canberra region with indications of the frequency of occurrence, time of breeding, preferred habitat, localities where they may be found, and nest details. It is designed to provide supplementary local detail to larger publications which need to be consulted for identification.

BIRD SONGS OF CANBERRA — Price $10

This cassette contains recordings of the songs and calls of 73 birds that are commonly heard in Canberra gardens and parks. The majority have been recorded in Canberra or the surrounding area. Seasonal variation in songs have been included where appropriate.

GARDEN BIRD SURVEY CHART — Price 50c

This is the means of contributing to our Garden Bird Survey and keeping track of what happens in your area.

ACT BIRDWATCHERS HOTLINE — Telephone 247 5530

An up-to-date five minute recorded message with interesting news such as returning migrants, rarities, meetings, outings, and bargains for birdwatchers in Canberra. Twenty-four hour service up-dated every Sunday.

Canberra Bird Notes is published quarterly by the Canberra Ornithologists Group. Contributions are welcome. These should fit into one of the following categories: major articles (up to about 3000 words); short notes and "Odd Obs" (up to about 300 words); reviews of books and articles (up to about 500 words); and where to watch birds (up to about 800 words). The articles and notes should cover matters of the distribution, identification, and behaviour of birds in the Canberra region (i.e. New South Wales coast north to Jervis Bay, and west to the Riverina). Contributions can be sent to the editors c/o David Purchase, 5 Orchard Place, Melba, ACT 2615 (Tel 258 2252).

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