



Canberra bird notes

ISSN 0314-8211

Volume 4 Number 3

July 1978

EDITORIAL

Editorial policy regarding scientific names to be used in Canberra Bird Notes has been previously set down in CBN vol. 3 no. 6.

The Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union has just published in Emu vol. 78 supplement (1978) a list of Recommended English Names for the Birds of Australia. In future, Canberra Bird Notes will follow the English names used in this list, which can be obtained from the RAOU, 119 Dryburgh St, North Melbourne, Vic. 3051. Alternatively, A pocket list of Australian birds, just published by C.O.G. and available from the Publications Officer, P.O. Box 301, Civic Square, A.C.T. 2608, contains a list of Australian birds which generally follow the RAOU's recommended English names.

HOW MANY BIRDS BREED IN CANBERRA?
SUGGESTIONS FOR WORK TO EVALUATE THE STATUS OF THE BREEDING
BIRD POPULATIONS MORE EFFECTIVELY

Michael Lenz

Summary

The author suggests three methods for measuring quantitatively bird populations and recommends especially one which could be easily applied in Canberra.

It seems quite unrealistic to ask a question like this. But is it really so? In the northern hemisphere a great number of ornithologists have devoted their time over the last twenty years especially to censusing breeding bird populations in a variety of habitats (species, number of territories per given area) (Emlen 1977; Oelke 1966, 1974).

In Great Britain and northern Europe, indices derived from population counts are used to monitor population changes over large areas from year to year with the intention of continuing them for longer periods (e.g. Batten and Marchant 1976). With the help of studies of that kind, British ornithologists were among the first to draw attention to drastic declines in several warbler species, amongst others, a few years ago (Batten 1971). These findings initiated work all over Europe to develop population measurements and to monitor the future population trends as well as to study the causes of the decline (the Sahel drought played an important part) (Berthold 1973; Winstanley, Spencer and Williamson 1974). These indices have naturally become a most valuable aid for conservationist activities.

Over the years a practicable set of rules and standard procedures for bird census work have been developed in Europe and the United States (Emlen 1977; Oelke 1974), even though a lot of improvements may still be implemented, as recent critical reviews have shown (Berthold 1976; Lenz 1971, for example). At present procedures for estimates of populations outside the breeding season are being developed.

The efforts were most concentrated in some of the larger cities in obtaining quantitative information on the status of the birds with regard to their distribution and actual numbers (e.g. Erz 1964; Mulsow 1968; Saemann 1973). These are the places with a normally high density of bird observers.

Let's have a closer look at one example, the big coastal city of Hamburg in Germany with an area of 2135 km (in comparison with the A.C.T., excluding Jervis Bay, 2286 km²; 'urbanised' Canberra 217 km in 1976; gazetted Canberra 605 km). On the basis of more than seventy-eight studies (Eggers 1975) on sections of all of the main habitats, density means (territories) could be calculated. Knowing the percentage each habitat occupies from the entire area, it was possible to estimate total numbers (anon. 1976). In addition, species with discontinuous distribution were counted over large areas. These and related studies enabled the Hamburg ornithologists to place the breeding species into six categories according to the actual number of pairs: 1-10; 11-100; 100-1000; 1000-10 000; 10 000-100 000; 100 000-500 000. In the last group you find the common species of blackbird *Turdus merula* and house sparrow *Passer domesticus*. The mallard is placed in the fifth category. For 142 breeding species the general and vague terms 'very common', 'less abundant' etc. could be replaced by more accurate figures on total numbers and densities in different habitats. Over the next few years bird observers in Hamburg will concentrate on closing the gaps in their knowledge of some lesser studied species and habitats (anon. 1976) .

I arrived a few months ago from Berlin, Germany, another big city, where bird observers carried out similar work as described above. I am impressed, here in Canberra, not only by the rich bird fauna but also by the wealth of information compiled about the birds, under, as I would consider it, far more difficult circumstances than in middle Europe. *Birds of the Australian high country*, the *Field list*, 'The status of birds in Canberra' and the *Canberra Bird Notes* are excellent sources of information. But on the other hand, the status of the breeding species is given in rather general terms only, such as 'common, abundant, rare' in any of those references.

Searching through volumes 1-3 of the CBN (1968-77) I found only a small number of contributions on counts of breeding birds/resident bird populations for a given area within the A.C.T. (Beidlemann 1974; Bell 1977; Green and

McWhirter 1973; Marchant 1973).

At present I see three main avenues which could be followed to improve the existing knowledge on the status of the Canberra breeding birds with regard to their distribution and numbers:

1. Census/mapping of all territories of all or a few species, depending on the interests of the observers, for a given, limited area (smaller part of a suburb, stretch of the lake shore, park etc.). It is important that for the selected area all territories (held by pairs or groups of birds) are evaluated.

2. Census/mapping of all territories of a single or a few selected species over a larger area than in (1). The most appropriate unit would be a suburb or at least a substantial part of it or any other large habitat unit, such as a slope of one of the urban mountains.

3. A mini 'atlas scheme' for urban Canberra. At present investigation is under way regarding the suitability of different maps on which we could draw a grid system of small units that could easily be covered, either to look for the number of breeding species or the number of breeding pairs/territories of selected species with discontinuous distribution.

For all the three kinds of studies knowledge about breeding seasons, nesting habitats and all the behaviour patterns which indicate breeding or that the birds are holding territories is most essential. A lot of information can be extracted from the references for Canberra mentioned above and from other publications, but in addition members should report or publish all relevant information to give others access. Examples are given by Green (1974) and Stokes (1971, 1974a, b, c).

The following text gives a few more explanations on the three proposals:

1. All observations are recorded on maps (small scale); special attention is given to all indications of actual breeding (a nest or fledged young would be the best proof). From the clusters of data on the maps one can separate the different territories. Details of the procedure could be given elsewhere. One question which could be answered by this method, for example, is: what significance do the different parks have for breeding birds? What is the comparison between those with native and those with exotic trees?

July 1978

As an example of this type of study the author mapped the breeding birds of the ANU campus (c. 110 ha). The study will be continued in the coming breeding season. Results will be given later.

2. At the information desk of the NCDC excellent maps for each suburb are available (free of charge). They show every block. They are ideal for the purposes outlined here. How many red-rumped parrots or silvereyes (or whichever species you like) breed in your suburb? As an example of this type of study the author recorded all nesting magpies in the 1977 season. Results will be given elsewhere.

3. Judging from the positive reactions and support the Australian Atlas Scheme received from Canberra ornithologists and with the experience gained there so far, this proposal out of the three should be the one to interest (and even activate) the C.O.G. members most.

The present system of collecting data in the C.O.G. still favours too much the 'unusual' record (see e.g. the observations book at the meetings). This project would 'save' many everyday valuable observations which up to now simply get lost.

Since most of the members live in urban Canberra, they are already in the study area and don't have to travel far, if at all. Many register already every bird in and flying across their garden (examples: Hasten 1973, 1977; Vestjens 1970). But it would now be even more worthwhile 'to look over your own fence' as well. The walk to the shopping centre or the bus stop are some of the many occasions on which you could look for breeding birds. Or you could check one or a few squares of the grid for the number of breeding species.

As far as I understand Canberra ornithologists either have many individual projects already or prefer to enjoy observing birds outside the A.C.T. Now new proposals are put to them. No. 1 (mapping territories of several/all species) asks a lot and might consume considerable time and might therefore not appeal to many. But already suggestion no. 2 (mapping one or a few species only) is a proposal to which many could contribute without too much interference with their own interests. For the magpie count in Higgins, for example, six morning walks (three weekends) of 2-3 hours each were necessary. Using a bicycle the time needed could be considerably reduced (in the special case of the magpie, one additional count was necessary in February to evaluate the breeding success). Actual time requirements

might differ from species to species.

No. 3, the 'mini atlas scheme', seems to be the most attractive of all suggestions. Garden list recorders will hopefully 'transform' to 'my grid' or 'my suburb' enthusiasts. The Mammal Survey Group of Victoria provides an example on similar scale with report and distribution maps on the mammals of the Melbourne metropolitan area (Seebeck 1977).

A most practicable way would be to ask the members (each equipped with the grid map) firstly to record all observations of a few species during the next breeding season. Results could be presented during meetings and/or in CBN. The following season(s) could be used to concentrate on still white squares to see whether the species is really missing from there or whether it has just not been recorded so far. With this information one should be able to tell habitat preferences, numbers in some cases, or conduct further special surveys. From work like this, of course, much additional information on the species concerned (and most likely you can't help recording other birds as well) will be gained.

One could compare older, established suburbs with the newly developed ones, or could follow changes in species composition which occur over the time from pre-settlement to the built-up situation. For the first time all this could be documented. For example, in *Birds in the Australian high country* it says about the Galah: 'In a little more than two decades the Galah has built up its numbers so rapidly in the Canberra district, where it was formerly a rare visitor, that it has now become one of our most common birds and even breeds in suburban gardens.' But still there are strong differences between suburbs, as my surveys in Higgins and the ANU have already revealed. Does the build-up in numbers still continue? What happened in the case of the Galah was most likely preceded or followed and is going on with other species as well. How does urban Canberra compare to the surrounding farm- and bush-land? Which species are the most favoured by city sprawl and garden proliferation? Which species keep their range outside Canberra? Endless questions, to which such programs could provide some insight over the years to come.

But the grid map could also become useful for surveys outside the breeding season. Winter distribution of birds, directions of movements of migrating honeyeaters and of currawongs on their roost flight could be well documented. C.O.G. members will certainly find more examples where this

scheme/map could support their own activities and interests.

The proposals put forward here are at least worth a trial. They offer something for many tastes, at least from the author's experience from Berlin. The local team worked on all the prospects mentioned here. The Berlin biannual report in the first years was just a handful of pages, mostly with unusual records, but this swelled to a considerable volume with packed information once the grid map was introduced and after a few examples from the results were published. It was then for the first time that the section on breeding birds could well compete with the section on migrants. Best of all, valuable information is now recorded, kept and used amongst other things for advice on management of parks, wetlands and other habitats of Berlin city (e.g. Maas and Elvers 1977; Witt 1972).

Let's come back to the question at the beginning of this article. I don't think it is necessary, for the time being, to go as far as the people in Hamburg did. But once we have become aware of the gap in the knowledge about the birds of Canberra compared to what has been achieved overseas, and with the encouraging example of the 'Atlas of Australian birds', sufficient impetus should be there to work along those lines suggested here.

Furthermore, in a review of the second edition of the Field list of the birds of Canberra and district in *Emu* 72 (1972), p. 38, it reads: 'Such publications can bring to light data that observers, or even casual visitors, often think are not worth publishing' and '... C.O.G. leads the field and jolly good luck to it'. Why not then go a step further? From the special, rather unique character of urban Canberra with its comparatively large number of ornithologists, this city offers the best conditions for the successful achievement of the goals outlined here. We could set an example for Australia.

The author is prepared to take the main burden for organising surveys of that kind and collecting the data. Those willing to carry out field work or to contribute and assist in any other way are kindly asked to contact me so that a meeting could be arranged. We should start working with the grid map (and on related projects) in the 1978 breeding season. Suggestions for the first species to be recorded: Red-rumped Parrot, Kookaburra, Willy Wagtail, Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike, Mynah, Greenfinch.

Finally, I would like to thank Grahame Clark very much

for most helpful discussions.

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LEWIN RAIL OBSERVATION - A RETRACTION

D. Balfour

Canberra Bird Notes vol. 4 no. 2 (April 1978) carried a report by me of the sighting of a Lewin's Rail *Rallus pectoralis*.

There is now doubt as to the validity of this sighting. Indeed it seems certain that the birds seen were Latham's Snipe *Gallinago hardwickii*. This follows a field investigation of the claim by an experienced observer for the purposes of the Bird Atlas survey.

I am concerned at the apparent error in identification and feel that it is worthwhile making the following comments.

As indicated in the April *Bird Notes* I saw two birds, but only for a matter of seconds. However the second bird was sighted very clearly in excellent light flying across my line of vision at close range - 'I saw distinctly a long straight slender bill (pale rather than dark), a mottled brown/black body above and a significant pale area underneath - certainly throat and breast. The 'pale rather than dark' bill might better have been described as a 'yellowish/ ivory'.

An examination of Slater's visual index established that the bird(s) seen could only have been a Snipe or a Rail.

Reference to Plate 30 (Small Crakes and Rails) established that if the bird was a Rail it must be a Lewin Rail. Indeed the Slater illustration seemed in all respects to be precisely what I saw.

Reference to Plate 43 (Snipes etc.) resulted in the conclusion that if the bird was a Snipe it could only be a Latham's Snipe. However I noted that the bill was illustrated as very dark. Furthermore the colouring, while certainly approximating that of the bird I saw, seemed paler and less distinctly mottled. My impression had been of a much richer colouring. I also noted the darkish breast and white abdomen - my impression had been of reverse colouring, but I would be less confident on that point.

In identifying the bird(s) as a Lewin's Rail I took into account all seemingly relevant factors - the similarity of habitat (accepting that a Rail would normally favour a somewhat denser vegetation), the size of a Lewin's Rail as compared with a Latham's Snipe (a difference of only about 50 mm), the flight habits, or

lack of them (I saw no zigzag pattern), the apparently similar type call, etc.

However the decisive factor was the colour of the bill. So far as the Snipe is concerned Slater's illustration (Plate 43) shows a very dark bill; the text at page 293 refers to 'bill buffy brown, darkening to tip'. *Birds in the Australian high country* (Plate XII) shows a very dark bill and the text at page 189 refers to a 'black' bill.

The colouring of the bill in the Rail in Slater (Plate 30) seemed to be exactly what I saw, although I noted at page 268 that the bill is said to be 'black or rose grey above, pink below'. I was less happy with the illustration of the Rail in *Birds in the Australian high country* (Plate XI) and noted at page 160 that the beak was there said to be 'reddish brown'.

Thus identification was based primarily on the two illustrations in Slater - Plates 30 and 43.

In more recent times I have acquired the book *Every Australian bird illustrated*. This includes (page 82) a photograph of a Lewin's Rail which shows clearly a reddish bill - certainly not the colour I saw.

There is also (page 97) a John Gould illustration of a Latham's Snipe which shows a pale, ivory-coloured bill for half of its length with a darkening tip. That bill is closer to what I saw, although I was not conscious of any darkening of the bill. Otherwise the colouring of the Gould illustration seems less rich than of the bird(s) I observed.

I accept that the bird(s) I saw must have been a Latham's Snipe, not a Lewin's Rail. Nevertheless it has been a useful exercise and the point of it all is, I suppose, that clearly wide reference, caution and inquiry needs to be undertaken when it comes to the identification of rare or unusual birds. Not only are bird watchers fallible but, it seems, reference books are not necessarily accurate in all respects.

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CURRAWONGS AT BERRIMA, N.S.W.

Isabel Crowe

With reference to G. Tibicen's notes on Pied Currawongs, in the April 1978 issue, we have seen these birds take fully feathered Magpies from the nest, behead an adult Sparrow in flight, destroy the nests of Red-browed Finches by burrowing in from the rear and eat the young feathered Starlings and Blackbirds out of the nests. (The Starlings built in a piped limb of a eucalypt.)

The Currawongs regularly, each winter, go around all the eucalypts on our property and strip off the bark at the bottom of the trunks, eating all the insects and larvae hiding there. These would be wood lice (slaters), beetles, spiders, beetle larvae, together with a few immature jassids. We have also seen them catch and devour field mice, which they hold under their feet, lizards and also grasshoppers.

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UNUSUAL SILVER GULL BEHAVIOUR

Doug Ross

Towards dusk on 28 March I saw a Silver Gull riding on a Pelican's back in the Central Basin. The pelican was actively fishing and, while it must have been aware of the gull's presence, did not react to the gull or attempt to dislodge it. For its part the gull simply stood there, something that called for delicate balancing when the pelican brought its head back to swallow. The gull seemed to show no interest in the pelican's frequent catches or in any underwater or surface activities brought on by them. The observation began with the gull in situ; when it ended ten minutes later the gull was still there.

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FISHING FOR BIRDS IN GREECE

Steve Wilson

On leaving for overseas on 12 April 1978, Nonie and I headed for Athens and on 15 April we landed on the island of Ydra, about 10 km from the mainland and 80 km south of Athens.

The town of Ydra faced the mainland and is situated on a deep-water harbour less than 300 m across each way and from the entrance hills rise steeply to form a circular basin about 3 km across, with the hills behind the town reaching about 600 m. A steep ridge comes down from the highest point and ends with a vertical rock outcrop behind the town.

About 200 m above the outcrop and on the spine of the ridge is the ruin of an old windmill, a round brick structure now about 3 m high on the downhill side.

While we were sitting on the cobblestoned harbour front at one of the many cafes about 5 p.m. on 15 April, I noticed an unusual activity at the old windmill and inquiries showed that the locals in fact 'fished' for swifts there.

Mid afternoon the following day we set out to climb to the ruin, which is about 300 m above the town, a steep walk up the cobbled and stepped lanes which are too steep for wheeled transport, so donkeys are used. The houses cease about 100 m from the ruin.

On a stone fence just below the ruin three men were 'fishing' and on the ruin were a woman, two teenaged boys and two boys of about 8 and 10 years. Between them they were operating five rods and while none spoke English I was able to examine their equipment and watch their methods. Two or three long bamboo sticks were tied together to make each 'fishing rod' and each was between 7 and 10 m long. No reel was used but a very light monofilament line was tied to the top of each rod, the line being about 15 m long. A single fish hook of very small gauge was attached to the free end of each line and the hooks 'baited' with a 40 mm white feather, the hook being passed through the shaft. The breeze was quite strong so high on the ridge and the

feathered hooks were taken well out towards where a loose flock of some 200 Alpine Swifts *Apus melba* were circulating.

A further parallel with fishing was in the use of small white feathers thrown into the breeze as a burley. We didn't see any birds actually caught though the party had one dead bird. Its white breast feathers provided part of the burley while we were there. The manager of our guest house, who spoke excellent English, told us that the group were reported to catch from ten to twenty Swifts per day, and that those caught were eaten.

The one we were able to handle was about the size of a White-throated Needletail *Chaetura caudacuta* and while the flight muscles were well developed, it would require several birds to provide a meal for one person.

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PIED CURRAWONGS AND KOEL CUCKOOS IN THE BERRIMA DISTRICT

Isobel Crowe

During the last nesting season, 1977-78, there has been an invasion of Koel Cuckoos in the Bowral and Mittagong areas. Some of the birds have probably arrived from bushfire areas not far away, where their usual haunts have been destroyed.

Their habit of calling loudly all day and in the very early hours of the morning, from 2 a.m. onwards, upset residents' sleep and one of my Bowral friends reported getting out of bed and putting on earplugs to shut out their calls. Towards the end of February and during March the calls were still very evident at certain times, and this same friend found a Pied Currawong sitting on the TV aerial, during daylight hours, imitating the Koel Cuckoo call. Up until a week ago this was still going on.

The question now is: how long will the Pied Currawongs, in that area, continue calling like Koel Cuckoos?

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A POCKET LIST OF AUSTRALIAN BIRDS

The third edition of the list is now available from the Publications Officer of C.O.G.

The list uses the latest RAOU English names and arrangement of species.

Copies are available at 50\$ each plus 25\$ postage and packing, or \$2.00 for five copies, plus postage and packing. Special discount for clubs buying in bulk.

FEBRUARY OUTING

The eighteen or so members who braved the strong winds at the 12 February outing to Lake Ginninderra were rewarded by seeing forty-three species. Highlights for the day were close views of Whiskered Terns in various stages of breeding plumage, and at least one large flock of Hardhead (± 70). For those who stayed until the end, Musk Ducks were displaying in the area near the naval transmitting station, and a flock of about fifty Australian Pelicans were circling high over Melba. A 'low light' was the sighting of five Mallards (two cream coloured and three dark) just up from the Ginninderra Drive bridge, and a single normal-coloured male, about one and a half times the size of a nearby Pacific Black Duck, again behind the transmitting station.

It was interesting to note the lack of Grey Teal, only two definitely being seen. This could be because the birds have all moved to northern Queensland after the recent flood rains.

It will be interesting to watch what is happening to our local lakes birdwise as the central areas of N.S.W. (and Australia) dry up with the drought - note the large numbers of Hardheads.

UNCOMMON BIRDS OF THE A.C.T. - THE LITTLE GRASSBIRD

Stephen Garnett

A common sound of reedy marshes in southern Australia is a rather sad trisyllabic whistle. The three notes are all at the same pitch, but the first is an abrupt introduction to the more drawn out sounds that follow. This call indicates the presence of a Little Grassbird.

In the A.C.T. the Little Grassbird, although rarely seen, is not uncommon in waterside vegetation. The most likely place to find it is at the east end of Lake Burley Griffin but it occurs in the denser clumps of bulrushes all round the lake and at Lake Ginninderra. For a bird that likes cover, it appears in remarkably isolated situations. Among other places, I have found it on reedy dams at Uriarra, Royalla and Hoskinstown. On a wider scale it has been recorded in such distant areas as Finke Gorge in central Australia and Cloncurry in Queensland.

The Little Grassbird most commonly appears as a wren-like bird fluttering from one set of reeds to another. It is smaller and darker than a similar bird of that habitat, the Clamorous Reed Warbler, and tends to keep to the base of the reeds whereas the reed warbler is often seen on emergent stems. A better view is obtained only by patient observation of the reeds where a bird is calling. Although Little Grassbirds are present in the A.C.T. throughout the year, the best time to find them is in spring and summer. At this time they can be tempted into easy view by imitation of their call. It is one of the easiest of bird calls to imitate and some Little Grassbirds will approach within a few feet.

It is in spring, also, that their nests can be found. Little Grassbirds lay between three and five eggs in a somewhat bulky feather-lined grass nest. The eggs are pale pink with dark pink spots all over them. Once a pair of birds has been found, the nest is not difficult to discover. The situation is similar to that of the reed warbler and the Little Grassbird will sometimes use the old nest of a reed warbler.

Excellent descriptions of this bird can be found in any of the standard reference books.

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SIGHTING OF GLOSSY COCKATOOS AT COCOPARRA IN JULY 1977

Julian Land

On the way to western N.S.W. on a camping and bird watching trip, I camped for several nights at Cocoparra National Park, near Griffith. On a number of occasions I saw a small group of black cockatoos - numbering two on one occasion and three subsequently (twice). I believe these birds to have been Glossy Cockatoos.

If this was the case it indicates that the distribution map given by P. Slater (A field guide to Australian birds, vol. 2, p. 357) is somewhat inaccurate as this map indicates that the Glossy Cockatoo is predominantly a coastal bird. On the other hand W.R. Wheeler (Birds and where to find them, New South Wales, p. 53) indicates that Glossy Cockatoos, but not the Red-tailed Black Cockatoos, are found at Cocoparra National Park.

On the three occasions when the birds were seen they passed some 6 m away, at a height of about 6 m, across the clearing in which I was camped. Surrounding trees were small cypress pines, but the birds were not seen to land. I was not able to see coloured markings, as the birds were silhouetted against the sky. The sightings were made about one hour after sunrise (twice) and about one hour before sunset (once).

I believe the birds were Glossy Cockatoos, and not Red-tailed Black Cockatoos, for the following three reasons. Firstly, in comparison with Galahs flying nearby, their size - particularly wing-span - did not appear greatly different, although they did have longer tails. They appeared considerably smaller than the Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo with which I am familiar. (The Red-tailed Black Cockatoo is of course somewhat smaller than the Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo.) Secondly, none of the birds appeared to have crests, although the mature male of the Red-tailed Black Cockatoos does have a large crest. Finally, the calls were certainly not 'loud and harsh' as stated by P. Slater.

W.J. Land, 5 Davis Street, Weetangera, A.C.T. 2614.

Editor's note: The presence of the Glossy Cockatoo in western N.S.W. was first reported by Mrs V. Jenkins in 1973 (*Birds* 7:72-4) and further reference was made by L.C. Llewellyn (*Emu* 74:249-53).

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Box 123
Moruya, N.S.W. 2537
28 January 1978

Dear Sir,

I do not disparage Canberra Bird Notes or C.O.G. in any way. Indeed, the Group has initiated various ornithological happenings and published useful and necessary information. However, every organisation must constantly review its activities if it is to remain dynamic and the Editorial in your January issue (vol 4 no. 1) raises matters of principle regarding the functions of regional ornithological bodies and their publications. In short, if there is not enough material submitted to maintain four issues of Canberra Bird Notes with a comfortable assurance that there is enough on hand at any one time for at least two future issues, are four issues per year too many? From experience I know that future issues of Emu are not always assured, even though that journal presumably taps a wider range of submissions than Canberra Bird Notes, and I have had a few mauvais quarts d'heure.

To consider the matter more widely, are quarterly issues of a regional publication too ambitious? I have always thought so. If a regional society has rather few members and thus quite modest revenue, it seems to me that, as regards publications, the society is best advised to conserve its funds for one substantial publication per year rather than dissipate them on several issues, which must contain less substantial material. The substance of such an annual publication is often a comprehensive report on the area covered by the society, not only recording new and unusual occurrences and alterations in the status of species in the area but also assessing and confirming the status of all the commonest birds, even if only negatively (no change). There is also usually an opportunity to include one or two substantial articles on particular subjects.

This seems to me to be the really valuable contribution that local societies can and must make, though often the value is realised only far in the future. In this way, too, a local society may be able to adopt a more prestigious publication produced by

letterpress or offset methods on better paper and of a more customary shape and size than Canberra Bird Notes at present.

It may be thought that the loss of quarterly issues would loosen the cohesion of the group as a whole. I do not see why this would be a danger, seeing that monthly meetings would presumably be maintained and that a short quarterly newsletter could be issued at no great expense to keep members aware of forthcoming events.

S. Marchant

BLACK FALCON OBSERVED NEAR CAPTAINS FLAT

Neil Hermes

On 18 January 1978 I visited the property Moodong on the Shoalhaven River near Parkers Gap south-west of Canberra. A large dark-coloured falcon was observed perching on a fence post in association with other falcons identified as Brown Falcons *Falco berigora*. The dark-coloured bird was completely black including feathers down the legs but excluding a small lighter coloured throat patch. On closer approach the bird flew off with rapid regular wing beat revealing a completely black underwing. This bird was identified as a Black Falcon *Falco subniger*.

N. Hermes, c/- National Parks and Wildlife Service, 189 Kent Street, Sydney, N.S.W.

SWANS BREEDING AT KELLY'S SWAMP

Jim McNaughton

They bred on the main swamp (beside the road) 6.10.74 (5 cygnets); on one of the little islands in Jerrabomberra Creek (where it widens out) 9.2.75 (4 cygnets). These were still about on 23.3.75, 20.4.75, by which time they had moved over to sewer ponds. Again bred on little island about October 1976 as I have record of 5 cygnets on 10.10.76. These were down to 3 cygnets by 19.12.76. One of my earliest recollections of Kelly's is of swans breeding on the long arm of water not far from the boat harbour - probably about 1967 or 1968.

SAFARI IN NORTH-WEST AUSTRALIA

Shirley Kral

Members may be interested in my recent travels around north-west Australia and my fleeting observations of the bird life.

On 13 May, in Alice Springs, I joined a fifteen-day 'safari' in a Toyota four-wheel-drive vehicle, towing a large trailer which contained our water, food, tents etc. The vehicle was owned and driven by Doug Fearon; it seated six passengers very comfortably and had equipment for contacting the Flying Doctor in an emergency.

We headed north-west from Alice Springs into the Tanami Desert, on a dirt road little used apart from the occasional late model Holden, dangerously overloaded with Aborigines, veering wildly about the track. Sometimes we were approached by these groups and asked for petrol; we were unable to assist them, for we were using diesel fuel. We saw about twelve Wedge-tailed Eagles, scaring them away from a carcass on an animal on the track. They perched in nearby trees and we were able to approach them closely.

Leaving the ranges of hills behind, we drove into completely flat country, pincushioned with spinifex, occasional trees and red-flowering bushes. Stopping for morning tea at the Rabbit Flat road-house - surely Australia's most remote eating house - I saw an immature Black-shouldered Kite perched on the top of the radio aerial.

After two days in the desert, we emerged at Hall's Creek, where I saw the first of many Black Kites. Heavy rain struck when we camped at the Geikie Gorge, near Fitzroy Crossing, and as we were staying there for a couple of nights I had time to wander with my binoculars and bird books. Geikie Gorge was possibly the best area of the whole trip for the variety of bird life. Literally hundreds of kites were drifting upwards in the thermals above the coloured cliffs. On the boat trip up the gorge I saw, along with all the freshwater crocodiles, Darters, Rufous Night-herons and Great Egrets. Along the footpaths I watched Pied Honeyeaters, Rainbow Bee-eaters and Weebills (yellow form).

It was only for the fact that the vehicle was so well equipped that the Main Roads Department allowed us to proceed up the Gibb

River road after the heavy rain. This road from Derby to Wyndham takes you through the heart of the Kimberleys. The Toyota proved its value as we careered through long stretches of deep mud and rushing creeks and sometimes humped our way cautiously over rocky dry creek beds. The Kimberleys looked astonishingly beautiful after the 'wet'; lush 1.25 m high growth of grass starting to turn golden in the sun. Long ridges of pink and purple exposed rockface and 80 km valley views. Distant, colourful mesa-like formations which did not seem like Australia at all. We camped each night at a different gorge, Windjana, Adcock, Manning, all with plenty of flowing water. Pools, edged with Pandanus palms and covered with yellow and purple water lilies. We glimpsed many Brolgas, Australian Bustards, Lorikeets, Little Corellas, Sulphur-crested Cockatoos and Red-tailed Black Cockatoos. We also saw many healthy-looking wild donkeys.

Past the Leopold Ranges and approaching the Durack and the Pentecost Rivers, I thought I identified a Striated Grasswren (perhaps wrongly, as the maps indicate that it would have been too far north for that bird). At one creek crossing we surprised a Great-billed Heron. I noted a Red-backed Fairy-wren and many Crested Pigeons. Australian Pelicans made their appearance at the Pentecost River and later at Lake Argyle.

Briefly, we visited Wyndham, Kununurra and the Ord River Scheme and drove for kilometres by the Victoria River to Katherine. In the Katherine Gorge National Park I noted a Blue-faced Honeyeater and Black-chinned Honeyeater. The ranger kindly pointed out a Great Bowerbird's bower in the bushy median strip of the main track leading to the Gorge. The bower was decorated with ring pulls from lemonade cans, white bones, stones and bits of concrete. Finally, at the hot springs at Mataranka Station I saw a Dusky Honeyeater.

Doug Fearon trades under the name Kooroora Safaris and if any member should be interested in joining one of his safaris, inquiries can be made at the Canberra Tourist Bureau. Doug also has a longer trip which, instead of returning to Alice Springs as we did, continues on from Katherine across the Gulf country and through northern Queensland to Cairns. He mentioned to me that he could be interested in arranging a charter trip to suit specialist groups such as bird watchers, with much more time to walk and observe.

Ms S. Kral, 3 Cygnet Crescent, Red Hill, A.C.T. 2603.

OUT AND ABOUT

G. Tibicen

There are certain beliefs that are embedded in one's consciousness from an early age - things like the sky being blue, the sea being salty and owls having superb hearing and night vision so that they can hunt at night. Once more however fondly held beliefs have been shattered by a cynic disguised as a scientist who rather than accepting the belief actually questioned it. It turns out in fact that the night vision of an owl is no better (or worse) than that of a human being. If you want to read more on the subject there is a good article in the New Scientist dated 12 January 1978. It really is quite interesting.

A sign of the times? Recently the Botanic Gardens made available a simple one-page bird list of the birds in the Gardens. Rather than worry about taxonomy or the deliberations of the RAOU English Names Committee to name their birds they took a step into the future and gave the birds the numbers that are used for the bird Atlas. Now it doesn't matter whether you personally call a bird a Magpie Lark, a Mudlark, a Murray Magpie or a Peewee - it really is a 415.

Following on from the last item it seems to me that there is an opening for Canberra Ornithologists Group to show it too is forward thinking. Why for instance doesn't our committee set up an English Numbers Committee? This committee could after considerable discussion produce a pronunciation guide for numbers like 415. Should it be pronounced 'four-one-five' or 'four-fifteen' or 'four hundred and fifteen'? Surely a possibility like this of bureaucracy's sake should not be missed - especially in a place like Canberra!

The Readers Digest have recently republished their Australian Atlas. The cost is about \$20.00 and for this price you get a full set of

1:1 000 000 scale maps of Australia all nicely bound together. For people who travel or who are keen Atlassers this must be considered as an extremely useful book. Remember it is cheaper to buy direct from the Readers Digest than to buy from a retail outlet.

Recently I was sent a copy of *The Flycatcher*, which is the journal of the Herefordshire and Radnorshire Nature Trust Ltd. In it was an article about the nesting of Peregrine Falcons in Radnorshire. Did you realise their nest sites have to be guarded twenty-four hours a day to give the birds any chance of nesting success? In 1975 despite the guard the young birds were taken just as they were about to fly. In 1976 the birds fledged successfully. In 1977 the young birds (three) were again taken. This time the culprit was located, caught twelve hours later and charged. The birds were returned to the nest and two fledged successfully.

In the latest edition of the Australian Conservation Foundation newsletter there are a series of letters from members talking about the development of a personal environmental code. In other words the things a good environmentalist should do to preserve the environment. How many of us who profess to be environmentalists are continually saying what they should do without thinking what we can do to help. If you are interested get hold of a copy of the newsletter and read it. (A.C.T. subscription is \$10.00 per annum and their address is 672B Glenferrie Road, Hawthorn, Vic. 3122.)

ODD DBS - KELLY'S SWAMP Jim McNaughton
Sharp-tailed Sandpiper: 2 on 8.12.77; 2 on 1.1.78.
Pectoral Sandpiper: 1 possible on 28.11.77.
Glossy Ibis: 1 on 15.1.78.
Painted Snipe: 2 on 18.12.77.
Pink-eared Duck: 2 on 8.12.77; 2 on 11.12.77; 2 on 8.1.78.
Chestnut Teal: 1 on 8.1.78.
Great Crested Grebe: 2 on 11.12.77 where siltration trap put in, near railway bridge.
Red-kneed Dotterel: 2-3 since 28.11.77.
Shoveller: 1 on 8.1.78.
Zebra Finches: 2 (at least) on 15.1.78.

CONTENTS

| | Page |
|--|------|
| Editorial | 1 |
| How many birds breed in Canberra? | 2 |
| Lewin Rail observation - a retraction | 10 |
| Pied Currawongs at Berrima, N.S.W. | 12 |
| Unusual Silver Gull behaviour | 12 |
| Fishing for birds in Greece | 13 |
| Pied Currawongs and Koel Cuckoos in the Berrima district | 14 |
| A pocket list of Australian birds | 15 |
| February outing | 15 |
| Uncommon birds of the A.C.T. - the Little Grassbird | 16 |
| Sighting of Glossy Cockatoos at Cocoparra in July 1977 | 17 |
| Letter to the Editor | 18 |
| Black Falcon observed near Captains Flat | 19 |
| Safari in north-west Australia | 20 |
| Out and about | 22 |

Canberra Bird Notes is published quarterly by the Canberra Ornithologists Group. Subscriptions (due 1 July) :

Single member \$5.00
Couple (with one CBN) \$7.00
Couple (with two CBNs) \$8.00

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