

Gang-gang

April 2007

Newsletter of the Canberra Ornithologists Group Inc.

Monthly Meeting

**8 pm Wednesday
11 April 2007**

*Canberra Girls Grammar School
corner Gawler Cres and Melbourne
Ave, Deakin. The meetings are held in
the Multi-media Theatre at the School.
Enter off Gawler Crescent using the
school road signposted as Gabriel
Drive. If that car-park is full, enter
using Chapel Drive.*

The short talk will be by COG member **Bob Shobbrook**, on *Garden birds near the Warrumbungles*.

Our main speaker will be **Professor David Lindenmayer**, on the topic *Novel bird assemblages in a woodland/forest environment - results from a 9-year study*. David will speak on the results of the Nanangroe Woodland Experiment near Jugiong on the south-west slopes of NSW. Some highly unexpected results are emerging that were not anticipated at the beginning of the study. As most of you will know, David is Professor of Conservation Science and Ecology at ANU. He is a COG member and a regular and popular speaker. By now he has published 18 books and 430 scientific papers on wildlife ecology and management.

Everyone welcome

What to watch for this month

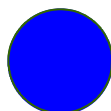
By the end of March most of the early migrants will have left the ACT for warmer climates. While during March there were a number of reports of **Rainbow Bee-eater** and **White-throated Needle-tail** passing through/over, many of the other passage migrants which may come through gardens such as the **Rufous Fantail**, **Sacred Kingfisher** and **Satin Flycatcher** seemed to have done so very quietly as there were very few reports of them. Except for the **White-throated Needle-tail** all these species and the **Dollarbird** should have left by now, and any sightings from now should certainly be recorded and provided for inclusion in the COG database.

Usually at the beginning of April it is time to start looking/listening for migrating **Yellow-faced Honeyeaters**, which can be seen in large numbers, particularly on still days after a cool crisp night. However, this year there have been reports of them migrating very early, with significant numbers passing through Jerrabomberra about mid March, and variable numbers since then. By the time this *Gang-gang* is out, the migration should be in full swing, and towards the middle of April the **White-naped Honeyeater** will be amongst these flocks, predominating towards the end of the migration. While these are the most spectacular as they are the most numerous, other honeyeaters such as the **White-eared** and **Fuscous Honeyeaters** and **Red Wattlebird** often get caught up in the movement.

To learn more about the honeyeater/autumn migration, take part in our annual outing on 15 April. **Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike** and **Noisy Friarbird** also migrate, as do the **Silvereye** and both species of **Pardalote**. Both the **Fairy** and **Tree Martin** also migrate, with the former usually leaving very early, though the latter can stay as late as early May. I've seen very few of either of these species in this area this summer. The **Welcome Swallow** also migrates, though at least some birds stay over winter, often congregating near water. Keep an eye out for these species over the next couple of months, in particular look carefully for any martins in among the swallows.

There have been a number of reports of the **Golden Whistler** arriving in gardens early this year, but as far as I'm aware none yet of the **White-eared Honeyeater**. Towards the end of March there were also a number of reports on the COG chat line of the first **Scarlet Robins** of the season. Watch out for this declining species, as well as the related **Flame Robins** which arrive in mid April. This is the only local "flocking" species of robin and in good years, such as the past few, well over 10 birds can be seen together, particularly in the open grassland areas to the west of Canberra.

Jack Holland



Field Trip reports

Sunday, 11 March — Tour de Lake Burley Griffin

13 participants made it to the start of the second birding by bicycle tour of Central and West Basins of Lake Burley Griffin. The weather was cool at the start and remained so when we made the first stop at Nerang Pool to check (very optimistically, given the fireworks display the previous evening) that the **Lewin's Rail** had not made a re-appearance. We were rewarded with a **Great Egret** flying in to the opposite side of the pool and remaining in position next to a **White-faced Heron**.

Moving right along we stopped next at Aspen Island to check for **Pied Cormorants** and were rewarded with three posing in the usual spot on the next island to the west. We saw the complete set here with **Great, Little Black and Little Pied Cormorants** and **Darters** all visible in the same spot.

The next two stops were primarily intended to check moored boats for signs of nesting **Silver Gulls** but the boats were all clean. Passing by Yarralumla Nursery a **Yellow Thornbill** was heard, but did not oblige with a good sighting. By now the day had warmed up and the traffic on the bike path was quite heavy; these factors may have conspired to reduce the bird presence in Westbourne Woods.

Arriving at Acacia Inlet Park the high water level of the lake was evident. Here we were treated to a great display of formation feeding by some 30 **Little Black Cormorants** together with a few **Little Pied** and **Great** members of that family. **Little Black Cormorants** continued to be the focus at the final stop on the bike path between Black Mountain Peninsula and Sullivan's Creek. A good number of nests were visible and most had tiny chick-heads emerging from underneath the adult on the nest. Two Darter nests were also easily seen, one with three large fluffy chicks posing nicely for the camera.

Altogether 47 species were recorded. Reviewing the list afterwards I noticed that we didn't see any **Common Mynas** nor **House Sparrows**. Also missing from the list were a number of common species including **Galah** and **Laughing Kookaburra**: possibly recorder (me) error. Many thanks to those who turned up and especially Jack Holland for comments from his knowledge of the area and his duty as tail-end Charlie! — **Martin Butterfield**.

17-24 March 2007 — COG Lord Howe Island Tour

Petrel sniffing, money laundering and a trip to India were on the agenda for 21 lucky members on the Lord Howe Island trip. This combined the usual birding and other delights of LHI with a survey of landbirds designed by Peter Fullagar and organised by Peter and myself (the group leader). The survey was undertaken on three mornings over the accessible parts of the Island, and the group tackled this with much enthusiasm and good humour; even after a shaky start where some teams found their GPS units guiding them out to sea over the cliffs!! A trip to India was one of the more difficult and challenging locations on the cliff side at North Bay. Some people enjoyed the surveys so much they even asked for the more difficult sites. Congratulations to everyone. The data collected is expected to be useful in the planning for rat eradication on the island.

We were fortunate on this trip to see all 14 seabirds which breed on LHI or its offshore islands, including **Little Shearwater** and **White-bellied Storm Petrel** which I had not seen on the last COG trip - there is a small window at this time of year when all 14 species can be seen. The **Providence Petrels** were back to begin their winter breeding with many thousands circling around the higher peaks near Little Island in the late afternoon. The boat trip to Ball's Pyramid was, as usual, a highlight, with large numbers of various seabirds, including **Red-tailed Tropicbirds** and the special **Kermadec Petrel**, with a **Greater Frigatebird** seen by one group. **Black-winged Petrels** circled noisily around their nesting cliffs at Ned's Beach as we did the reef walk, where Mark Clayton caught one and Peter Fullagar talked about his favourite seabirds, petrels, and their unique musty smell (petrel sniffing).

The island's landbirds included the very tame **Woodhens** - in fact some were spotted on our arrival in the garden at the airport terminal as we waited for the bus - numerous **Buff-banded Rails**, and the **LHI Golden Whister** and **Silvereye** which were everywhere. While we did not see it,

Photo by Jenny Bounds



Providence Petrel
(*Pterodroma solandri*)

we did hear the introduced **Masked Owl** near our lodge. Various wader species were easy to view on the grass around the airport or on the tidal flats, and one night we ate pizza on the beach as the **Flesh-footed Shearwaters** came in to their burrows. Swimming and snorkelling proved very popular, especially at Ned's Beach, North Bay, and the "four spot snorkel" on the



Photo by Jenny Bounds

lagoon reefs, over several hours, from a boat, where highlights included some very large fish such as the Bull-nosed Wrasse, Moray Eel, Lion or Butterfly Fish, Stingrays, Galapagos Reef Sharks and the endemic LHI anenome fish. Some people even took their wallet with them (money laundering!!). Thanks to all for making this a great week, especially to Peter Fullagar and our guide Ian Hutton. Congratulations to Lia Battisson and Noel Luff who did the Mt Gower climb - see photo. — **Jenny Bounds**

Sunday 25 March — Marulan

I'm always a little nervous when taking a group to a spot that I've not been to before, but as soon as the big party of COG members, supplemented by a sizeable group of Goulburn Field Naturalists Society members, pulled up beside the very large lake/dam in the centre of the private property it was clear that we were at a special spot. We spent a couple of magical hours on the shores of this large body of water, highlights including a number of late departing **Latham's Snipe**, estimated as at least nine birds, which were flushed repeatedly from the long grass and could be viewed flying low over the water. Other highlights were at least a dozen **Great Crested Grebe**, mostly in full breeding plumage with, on several occasions, pairs of birds displaying by facing up to each other with necks well extended and pointed black crests clearly visible. At other times they rested on the water with their very white puffed out chests clearly visible while their heads were tucked away. Everyone had great views, both with the scope and through binoculars — I certainly had some of my best ever locally.

Another species seen which is no longer common in Canberra was the **Musk Duck**, with good numbers of females and a smaller number of males, which also gave their characteristic displays. Both species, particularly the females of the latter, were also seen amongst a raft of 60-70 **Hoary-headed Grebes** that appeared to be feeding together on the far shore. Whether they were "fishing" on the surface was unclear but they moved together taking apparently rather shallow dives, seemingly in pursuit of prey. Other rarer ducks seen were a number of **Australasian Shoveller** but just a few **Pink-eared Duck**.

Thirty nine species were tallied in these two hours, topped off perfectly by a mature **White-bellied Sea-eagle** which alighted in a dead tree across the lake while we were having a late morning tea. We found it difficult to tear ourselves away from this great spot to visit the patch of mature *Banksia marginata* to look for some bush birds. Unfortunately this patch had suffered badly from a windstorm, and many of the trees had been blown over and were dead, and only the **Eastern Spinebill** seemed to be frequenting the few extant trees that were in flower. However, in the adjacent wattle-lined gully we picked up four of the five local thornbill species, and the fifth (**Striated Thornbill**) shortly after when we had a quick look at the swamp gum patch.



Australian Ornithological Services P/L

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By this time the wind had really picked up and birds were scarce and difficult to find in what looked like perfect habitat, the highlight being several **Varied Sittellas** identified by their call and orange wing patches as they flew over.

On our return two **Wedge-tailed Eagles** were seen high over the lake as we walked to our idyllic lunch spot, the boat shed beside the lake. In total 58 species were seen for the day. My sincere thanks go to Rodney Falconer of the GFNS for suggesting this spot and for having twisted my arm to agree to going there - my apologies again for doubting his judgement. COG would also like to sincerely thank William Davies for allowing us to visit and have a free run of his property. In summary another very successful joint outing with the GFNS and COG looks forward to sharing many more. — **Jack Holland**

Photo by Jenny Bounds



Lord Howe Island

View from the tidal flats at North Bay

Future Field Trips

The Guidelines for the conduct and advertising of COG field trips are published on the COG web site. Both trip leaders and members/participants should familiarise themselves with these guidelines. In particular, the Registration Form should be completed for each field trip.

Sunday 15 April – Honeyeater migration

The autumn movement of thousands of **Yellow-faced** and **White-naped Honeyeaters** (and lesser numbers of other species) from the mountains to warmer climes along the coast and further north is a feature of the Canberra birdwatching calendar. On a good migration day thousands of honeyeaters can be counted passing through the Angle Crossing area. To witness this spectacle, and to help count the honeyeaters, meet Nicki Taws at 8:30 am in the car park on the Tharwa side of the bridge across the Murrumbidgee. As the bridge is closed, travel to Tharwa via Point Hut Crossing. Bring something to sit on, a hat, sunscreen and morning tea. Enquiries to Nicki (6251 0303, ntaws@bigpond.com). As usual if the weather's not the best for honeyeaters we will visit the Tharwa Sandwash for some general birding.

Wednesday 18 April — Midweek Walk

Martin and Frances Butterfield have kindly offered to have the Wednesday walkers visit their property at 101 Whiskers Creek Road, Carwoola. Take the Captains Flat Road south from the Kings Highway for 13 km, then, after crossing Whiskers Creek turn right into Widgieva Rd. After 2.5 km turn right into Whiskers Creek Road. The gate (usually open) to the property is at the end of the road (1 km). Meet at 9 am. Bring morning tea. Contact Michael Robbins on 6231 7391 or jrobbins@netspeed.com.au to arrange car pooling down to Carwoola.

Saturday 28 April 2007 – Tallaganda State Forest – evening owl search

This will be an evening field trip in search of Powerful Owls that inhabit the gullies in this area. We will spotlight and play calls from about 8 pm until 10 pm or when owls are seen. We will depart from the Spotlight carpark in Queanbeyan at 4.30 pm to get to Tallaganda State Forest by dark. The road through the forest is rough and dusty so please carpool. Participants must be able to walk on a rough road in the dark and must stay with the group. Hopefully we will be home by 11pm. Participants must book with Anthony Overs, Ph 6254 0168 (AH) or anthony.overs.reps@aph.gov.au.

Sunday 13 May — Botanic Gardens — Bush Birds for Beginners

This morning walk will be the first for 2007 aimed specifically to help beginners and new members identify birds and to learn about their behaviour and calls. The Botanic Gardens are especially suitable for such an outing, as they allow the opportunity to observe a range of local bush birds in a variety of habitats. Due to the available food supply they are also a relative haven for birds during late autumn/winter. Anthony Overs will lead this outing, which will consist of a stroll

through this lovely part of Canberra for a couple of hours from 9.15 AM, meeting at the bus shelter. Please book your place with Anthony (6254 0168, or by email to anthony.overs.reps@aph.gov.au), who will be happy to discuss whether this outing is suitable for you. Please also don't forget to bring your binoculars and field guide.

9-11 June, Far South Coast, long weekend campout/ caravan park/accommodated

For this long weekend COG will visit the far south coast, and our stay will be centred on the town of Merimbula which offers a variety of habitats for bird watching. We will be undertaking some joint outings with the Far South Coast Birdwatchers, notably visiting and learning about the Panboola Wetlands and Heritage Reserve, in which they have a key management and maintenance role. We may also sample either of the two bird routes they have developed, walk along the Merimbula boardwalk and/or bird watch on some private land. Overall the proximity of a number of National Parks/reserves and the mix of habitats ranging from open grasslands, bush, forests and heath, to beaches, lakes, rivers, dams and swamps, as well as the sea/ocean should ensure a large variety of birds are seen over the weekend.

However, one problem is that it is the weekend of the Merimbula Jazz festival and accommodation bookings are already heavy. While there are two caravan parks close to the centre of town, as well as a range of other accommodation such as motels and apartments, COG will be staying at the Scrymgeour's property, "Timbarra", near Wyndham outside of Merimbula. This has plenty of camping spots, as well as some basic, more sheltered accommodation, an outside toilet and a communal BBQ. Intending participants who prefer to stay in more comfortable accommodation in town are strongly advised to book now - Jack Holland (6288 7840 H or jack.holland@environment.gov.au) can provide some details of options.

Another problem is that while Jack Holland is currently organising this trip, he will be away from late April until shortly before this event. So if you are able to help organise or lead, he'd be very keen to hear from you.

Organisers/leaders needed

There are still a few organisers/leaders needed for some identified trips, as well as still some unidentified venues for local or mid distance day or overnight trips. So if you have any offers or comments to make please contact Anthony Overs on 6254 0168 AH or anthony.overs.reps@aph.gov.au. We are particularly looking for a volunteer to lead a morning outing to a local nature park on Sunday 27 May.

Report of March COG meeting

When the carpark is almost full half an hour before a COG meeting is due to start, it is testimony to the drawing power of two well known and popular speakers. By 8 PM, the lecture theatre contained more people than I have ever seen at a COG meeting and they were not to be disappointed. Geoffrey Dabb's short talk on *The Tri-coloured Epthianura* or **Crimson Chat** was, as usual, beautifully illustrated with still photos and a video of chats from many parts of the eastern half of Australia, highlighting Geoffrey's patience and ability to get the perfect shot of birds feeding, nesting, bathing, etc. The five species of chats in Australia belong to the honeyeater family, with the Crimson being the most honeyeater-like. It is nomadic or a seasonal migrant



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Your Guide



Andrew Patrick

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in semi-arid and arid Australia, and has occasionally been recorded in the ACT, most recently in November 2003. This bird was feeding among Paterson's Curse, a plant the Crimson Chat is often associated with. It favours scrubby, weedy growth and bare ground, as well as fine-limbed day or dead acacias.

Ian Fraser then shared his experiences of his trip in December 2006 to Patagonia: a place of space, water, mountains and wind. Extending from 43°-53°S (the latter 1000km south of Hobart's latitude) in both Chile and Argentina, Patagonia is a largely treeless land of lower wet and higher dry steppe, with spectacular mountain scenery. Its' rich biodiversity is a product of: Gondwana when it was connected to Australia via a vegetated Antarctica; its long isolation from about 50 million to 3-5 million years ago; and then its eventual collision with North America. We were treated to wonderful photos of **Condors** soaring against the spectacular Andes, as well as others showing the richness of waterbirds, including **geese**, **swans** and **Steamer Ducks**. The stunning **Red-legged Cormorant** thrives in the very rich cold seas, along with three other species of cormorant. **Darwin's Rhea**, one of the old Gondwanan ratites, **Magellanic Penguins** and **Peruvian Pelicans** thrive in this area, but the dominant birds are passerines, such as **Funarids** and **Tyrant Flycatchers**. Ian's talk did not just feature birds; there were guanacos, marine otters and skunks, as well as plants familiar to us including Nothofagus, Proteaceae, peas and verbenas. We were left with a desire to see this fascinating part of the world for ourselves.

News from the committee

- There will be no increase in COG membership fees for the 2007-2008 financial year.
- The Easter trip to Willandra Lakes is fully subscribed.
- A response to the draft management plan for the Jerrabomberra wetlands has been submitted. COG's position is largely supportive of the draft plan, but comments have been made on aspects such as increased motorised activities on the lake, feral animal control, proposed housing developments, bird viewing infrastructure, weed removal, habitat enhancement for certain species, and stewardship in the future.
- Jack Holland and Jenny Bounds have met with the NCA to discuss plans for an additional wetlands area under the Griffin Legacy plans.
- Jack Holland attended the Bignet meeting in Merimbula. The program included some interesting presentations on pest species removal.
- The Committee's most recent meeting was held at the Conservation Council's new premises, and the Committee agreed to a request that COG sponsor one of the chairs in the meeting room. Other member organisations of the Conservation Council are being asked for similar support, in return for use of the meeting room.

GBS Notes

May I begin this note by echoing the Committee's thanks to David Rosalky for his work as Coordinator while I have been absent overseas.

While there is much great birding in New York City it isn't in the residential areas. From our apartment I only recorded 12 species in 20 months and a majority of those were in the East River. By way of contrast, seven weeks after moving into our current location in Cawoola, I have already recorded 56 species in my GBS site (and others are expected).

More generally, as Coordinator of the GBS, and to help me get a handle on which sites are active in year 26 it would be helpful if people could send me an email (martinflab@gmail.com) letting me know the sites they are reporting for this year. This will make it a lot easier to make sure that all is safely gathered in at the end of the year, and expedite production of the Annual Bird Report.

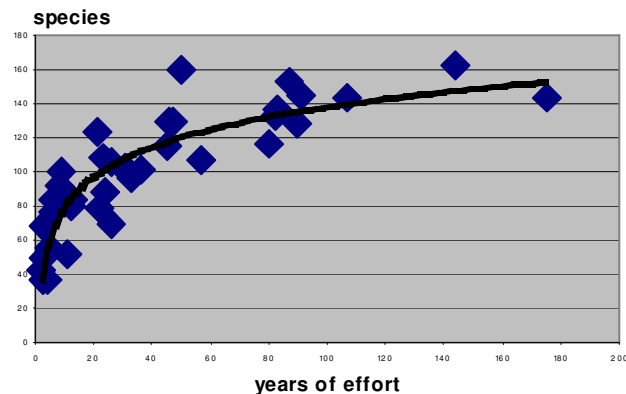
One of the joys of the role of Coordinator is being able to explore the data set and see what hypotheses can be formed

HAVE YOUR SAY

In addition to the usual request for articles and trip reports (see page 12) the Editors invite members to contribute shorter pieces for publication in Gang-gang.

Share your experiences, the good and the bad, in prose or poetry.

about the birds or the Survey. This month I started by looking at the relationship between the number of species reported and the number of years for which sites had been in the survey. The relationship was not strong – possibly due to the wide variation in species recorded in sites reporting for one or two years. However, noting a comment that the variety of birds in an area matures as the suburb “ages” I grouped sites according to the year in which their suburb was first settled. This gave a reasonable (0.8) measure of correlation on a logarithmic trend as shown in the chart.—**Martin Butterfield**



Other activities of interest to COG members

Surveys

The dates for the **Swift Parrot** and **Regent Honeyeater** surveys for 2007 are the weekends of 19-20 May and 4-5 August.

There are usually several COG members who participate by going out to the western slopes or the south coast. Why not form your own group and go to your favourite spot where gums are flowering or survey local reserves such as Mulligans Flat/Campbell Park/Mount Ainslie as Swift Parrots do pass through Canberra in most years, even if only briefly.

For further details contact Belinda Cooke, the new Swift Parrot Project Officer, Department of Environment and Conservation, NSW on swiftparrots@yahoo.com.au, or Freecall 1800 66 57 66.

Black Throated Finch Recovery Project

The **Black Throated Finch** Recovery Team is interested in records (old or new) of the southern subspecies of the Black-throated Finch (*Poephila cincta cincta*).

If you have sightings of this species that may not have been previously registered with any of the major wildlife databases then the team would like to hear from you.

Important information includes the number of Black-throated Finches seen, the date and location of observation(s). Location information should be as accurate as possible and preferably obtained using a GPS. If this is not possible then accurate locality descriptions are needed. Please indicate the datum for any GPS locations.

Other useful information may include notes on the weather, what the birds were doing, and habitat (eg waterhole, woodland, roadside). Details of sightings can be sent to Marnie McCullough, PO Box 1085, Townsville Qld 4810, Ph: 47222519, Mob: 0428739819 or e-mail marnie.mccullough@dpi.qld.gov.au.

Journals—Free to a good home

George Guy is offering the following to anyone keen to pick them up: *Emu* 1975-1980 and *Canberra Bird Notes* 1986-1997. Please call George on 6247 2469 if you are interested

Gleanings from the Chatline

A small selection of items from the COG Chatline which caught the Editor's eye

In Morton NP on the Canberra Day long weekend, Kathy Walter and John Goldie spotted seven different honeyeaters in the same flowering eucalypt - **Yellow tufted, Yellow faced, White cheeked, White naped, New Holland, Scarlet and Eastern Spinebill**. Owl hunting in Booderee NP wasn't quite as productive for them. In spite of hearing a couple of **Boobooks** and the whistle of **Sooty Owls** in the trees just above them they were unable to locate them with their spot-light.

* * * * *

Matthew Frawley had a brief but spectacular view of a **White-throated Nightjar**, at 8:00 AM on 20 March, roughly midway between the small footbridge over Jerrabomberra Creek and the Fulica hide, initially roosting on a pale rock before it took off and glided away. The following evening, the hunt was on and participants were rewarded with a brief view of the Nightjar flying past Fulica hide. Frank Antram reported that on 25 March, a group of five COGers, assorted partners, friends and kids had sensational views from about 18.35 hours for about 10 minutes as the bird hawked to and fro over the woodland in the Fulica hide area. The next night a crowd of about 18 turned up for the show but was disappointed as the bird failed to put in an appearance, and there have been no further sightings.

* * * * *

The Milburns reported that in the middle of the day on 20 March the skies over the ANU, Turner and O'Connor were teeming with **White-throated Needletail Swifts**.

* * * * *

Both Barbara Preston and John Brannan reported **Golden Whistlers** near or in their respective backyards in Florey in the week commencing 18 March. Barbara also reported a pair of active **Grey Fantails** as well as **Eastern Spinebills, Striated Thornbills** and lots of other birds.

* * * * *

An avian brouhaha broke out about 9:00 AM on 21 March about 10 metres from Muriel Brookfield's home in Cook: six **Pied Currawongs** were harassing a **Tawny Frogmouth** and a pair of **Gang-gangs** in a stringybark. The Gang-gangs made a colossal noise, with the female finally hanging upside down from the branch. They then flew off.

Meantime, the Frogmouth was barking fiercely with wide-open beak. Eventually the Currawongs drifted away. Later in the morning the Frogmouth preened and began to call, but very, very quietly. In the evening it began take-off preparations. At 7:30 PM it stretched first one long wing, then the other, shuffled and rotated its head. It repeated this at intervals until 7:40, when it was quite a bit darker. Then it floated two dark shapes to two nearby trees, one adult Tawny and one smaller. A family reunion, followed by a bit of hawking near a streetlight, and then off hunting in more distant places. To Muriel's dismay they did not return during the night.

* * * * *

Several reports of **Yellow-faced Honeyeaters** on the move in the week commencing 18 March, with increased numbers sighted the following week.

* * * * *

On 23 March the North Curtin horse paddocks provided Richard Allen with good views of **Pipits** and a **Red-capped Robin**.

* * * * *

Con Boekel observed two interesting MFFs on Black Mountain about 4 PM on 24 March, after the rain. The first had at least 15 **Spotted Pardalotes**, a mixed flock of about 10 **Rufous** and **Golden Whistlers** (mainly the latter), over 20 **Grey Fantails**, a **Scarlet Robin**, a **Grey Shrike-thrush** and several **Buff-rumped Thornbills**. The second had 17 Grey Fantails, several whistlers, several Spotted Pardalotes and at least one **Brown Thornbill**. Both congregations moved very slowly into a very slight westerly breeze.



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David Rosalky's garden entertained a variety of visitors during March: a mixed feeding flock of nine species; 12 **Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos** testing the strength of a medium sized Banksia; and two **Noisy Friarbirds** flying through, the first he had seen for over two months. Rick Kuhn spotted 40 YTBCs over Aranda early on 30 March.

* * * * *

On Friday, 23 March, Rod Mackay paddled his kayak across Durras Lake to Cumbrallow Creek taking in some birding highlights on the way including a pair of White bellied Sea Eagles, a Rose Robin on the western shore, and a pair of **Azure Kingfishers** along the creek banks. For Rod, Saturday was Tuross River day, paddling in still, glassy conditions and accompanied by a chorus from the "who's who" of coastal bush birds. Highlights were a suspected **Little Egret** (based on size alone as it kept flying ahead) and an **Osprey**. On the drive home a stop at Tuross was rewarded by views of eight **Pied Oyster Catchers** and six **Bar-tailed Godwits** sheltering where Coila Lake nearly meets the sea. While driving along the highway Rod bagged a flock of **White-throated Needleetails**, just north of the Tuross turn off, and a **Pacific Heron** near one of the farm dams.

* * * * *

And David Rees's lunch in Telopea Park on 28 March was enlivened by the passage overhead of a flock of about 20 **Rainbow Bee eaters** heading westwards, all calling to each other.

(AvIan Whimsy — continued from page 11)

Elizabeth was crucial to this, producing over 600 beautiful illustrations for the books. In this she was mentored in the earlier years by employee Edward Lear, better known now as the man who brought limericks to the public's attention, but also a superb illustrator, specialising in large

colourful species such as parrots and toucans. (Having the misfortune to have 19 older siblings – and one younger – I imagine he had to try pretty hard to be noticed!) John himself never claimed credit for the paintings (though it seems he was a skilful enough illustrator to provide the basic sketches for many of them) but Elizabeth was for quite some time written out of history.

Gould has been castigated as ruthless and unfeeling for going on working and even training a replacement after Elizabeth's sadly premature death aged just 37. I think though that it behoves none of us to judge the expression of another's grief.

Many scientists have become entrepreneurs; not many entrepreneurs though have trained themselves to directly contribute as much to science as did John Gould. I think we're the richer for it.

Ian Fraser ianf@pcug.org.au

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Avian Whimsy #51 — Gouldian Glimpses

In a previous Whimsy on John Gilbert (#35, in the Gang-Gang of October 2005) I expressed the desire to say more about Gilbert's employer John Gould, perhaps the closest the 19th century could come to a David Attenborough. (I say this as a fan and acolyte-in-my-dreams of Sir David incidentally, an admiration from afar which began when I sat entranced as a schoolboy in the Adelaide Town Hall in the early 1960s to hear him speak about South America.)

One of the reasons I've put off doing so is that there is simply so much to say about Gould, and the story has oft been told before. On the other hand, this is a Whimsy rather than a scholarly account, so I feel free to flit through his life like a Gouldian Finch through the richness of the tropical grasslands, selecting seed heads of information as they appeal to me. (Meantime you of course are free to flit off and read something else.) While we are in the east Kimberley incidentally, we generally know that John named the gorgeous finch *Poephila gouldiae* for his stunningly talented and devoted wife and artist, formerly Elizabeth Coxen. "But did he have a choice?" I was once asked (no, I really was!). "Sure *gouldiae* is feminine, but isn't this just in required agreement with the noun, the genus *Poephila* ('grass lover')?" Well actually he did have a choice; if he had just wanted to call it 'Gould's grass lover' he could have used *Poephila gouldiana*. Instead he chose to use the species name in the genitive sense (basically, a modifying noun, rather than an adjective) whereby he could make it clear that he was honouring Elizabeth, in that such a formulation must refer to the gender of the person, rather than the genus.

What we have just learnt (apart from some pretty arcane trivia) is that John Gould was a serious taxonomist indeed. Indeed, by my calculation Gould is the author of 176 Australian bird names and 39 mammal names in current use! This tells us that he was a careful scientist – carelessly described species rarely retain their names. In addition he assigned another 150 or so Australian bird species names that have been superseded. In conjunction with the fact that he had no formal training in the field – he was a gardening apprentice by the age of 14 – this is pretty remarkable. It was John Gould (still aged just 33) who Charles Darwin approached to identify his Galapagos bird specimens on his return from the world-changing Beagle expedition in 1837. Gould was by then employed by the Zoological Society of London, but as a taxidermist rather than taxonomist. ('taxi' in each means an arranger, but of skins in the first case rather than of the living animal in the whole scheme of things.) There is perhaps some irony that Gould, who was and even remained a convinced creationist (as was Darwin at that point), gave Darwin the information he needed to make his momentous first steps onto the path to *The Origin of Species*. Gould recognised that the finches were separate species, and crucially were close to South America mainland species. The key thing about the finches is that in the absence of competition they had evolved a variety of bill-shapes (some distinctly 'un-finchlike') to fill vacant niches on the islands. Darwin initially took these bills at face value. He interpreted them as implying that their owners were not closely related, and didn't even recognise some of them as finches, but Gould was not fooled.

There was no compulsion on Gould to do the hard graft of describing new species – his publishing and taxidermy business was spectacularly successful – so it was presumably a passion. I think it was also to his credit that he withdrew the first two volumes of *The Birds of Australia*, presumably on the realisation that he didn't yet know enough to do it justice. His two years in Australia resulted directly from that.

Gould was lucky in two aspects of the timing of his birth. He grew up as the mania for collecting and displaying dead animals (for reasons of social status rather than science) was burgeoning, and the process of lithography was becoming widely available. (See Whimsy #49, February 2007 for more detail on lithography; essentially though it enabled the artist also to become publisher.) On the other hand he was astute enough to recognise the significance of these facts, and an energetic and creative enough entrepreneur to take advantage of them. He was already a spare-time professional taxidermist while gardening in his teens, but went into it full-time at age 20. Business boomed, and was further boosted by his getting the gig of stuffing George IV's late lamented pet giraffe. The associated publishing business followed, based on high-quality illustrations of (stuffed) animals, particularly birds.

(Avian Whimsy continued on page 9)



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COG welcomes the following new members:

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Harvey Andersson and Felicity Leigh, Higgins

Next newsletter

May deadline

Wednesday 25 April 2007

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or c/- The Secretary COG, PO Box 301
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Articles should be less than 500 words (300 for reports of 1-day field trips; except by prior arrangement with the editor.

Photographs (prints or electronic) with or without articles are encouraged and welcomed.

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Donations to this fund are tax deductible.

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