

Gang-gang

December 2009

Newsletter of the Canberra Ornithologists Group Inc.



COG Christmas Party
Wed 9 December
Black Mountain
Peninsula — 6-8 pm

Sausages, bread, onions, beer, wine and soft drinks will be supplied.

Please bring either a salad or a dessert to share (with serving spoons), your own plates, cutlery, glasses, table and chair.

Prizes for the "Bird Charade" (more details on p 5) and for guessing the value of 'A' in Martin Butterfields' graph of GBS Myna numbers (see page 8).

Everyone welcome

What to watch out for this month

Who would have expected less than a month after writing about the cool and wet October, and predicting a bumper nesting season, that Canberra would have suffered heatwave conditions for almost all of November and dried out completely. It's yet another example of thinking the drought may be over, but being wrong again. It's also tempting to speculate that the large number of **White-browed** and **Masked Woodswallows** which moved through during the Blitz week and weekend knew this was going to happen with, to my knowledge, none recorded since. The questions remain: how did they know, where and how far did they go or, for that matter, where did they come from?

As the weather warmed up and dried out into November it appeared that the spring migrants were starting to focus more on establishing territories and breeding. Certainly the **Rufous Songlarks** in my patch, which had been round for about a month, suddenly became much more vocal and obvious, and in the first week of November I estimated about 15 territories being set up. These stretched from the SW corner of the former Narrabundah Hill pine plantation and adjacent horse paddocks to about 2 km along the SW edge of the NW end of Cooleman Ridge, where they kept very much to the lower slopes. This represented about 50% more than the previously recorded maximum number of territories. Over the next two weeks as the weather got hotter and conditions rapidly dried out there was some further movement, with unusually about ten territories in the former site, but none on the extreme NW tip of Cooleman Ridge, which generally has the largest numbers.

In my experience actually confirming breeding in this species can be very difficult because they nest on the ground, and I've been reluctant to disturb the area too much for fear of treading on nests. I've watched birds taking food to a nest a number of times and found it very difficult to locate, despite the bird always coming back to the same spot. It's usually still up to a metre away and a very well hidden cup in a grass tussock or similar. So watch out for this species breeding in your area, and also for it post-breeding when it too can be very cryptic. In good years they will stay around until about the end of January, sometimes giving a different call and keeping together quietly in small groups. On these occasions they can be very difficult to tell apart from pipits, their rufous rump being the main diagnostic feature. This is also the best field mark for those few birds that seem to over winter, when in particular they skulk around.

(Continued on page 2)

With the first observation of **Horsfield's Bushlark** close to the end of October, all the summer migrants you might expect in most years have been recorded in 2009. However, how well they will breed is another question. Certainly, apart from the above, activity in my local patch is the lowest it has been since the fires in 2003, with a number of species absent for the first time. Likewise activity in Campbell Park during the nest workshop (see separate report) was as low as I've seen in the seven years I've lead this outing, despite conditions being seemingly better than in some years. One cannot overestimate the effect the 20 years or so of drought or at best average annual rainfall has had on bird recruitment. This makes recording any breeding event and making sure that these details are entered into the COG database ultra important; I cannot overemphasise this point. By the time of writing my next column in two months' time, the breeding season will essentially be over, with most songlarks/bushlarks as well as trillers having already departed, so please keep good records, including of their departure dates.

I was fascinated by the November presentation on the **Owlet-nightjar** and very pleased that we were able to bring Lisa Doucette down to give it. Part of my fascination is that it is probably not uncommon in the ACT, yet very few people observe it, with the 2007-2008 Annual Bird Report noting the pattern of low level of reporting of this species, with no breeding recorded. The most usual way is to accidentally find it sitting in the front of a hollow, as we did most famously in one of our nest workshops at Campbell Park a few years ago. I found very interesting Lisa's response that the traditional way of trying to flush them out of the hollow by scratching or tapping the trunk with a stick had a 100% failure rate in her experience. The other way I've recorded this species is through their "chirr" calls, particularly when camping overnight on COG trips. I've always had the impression that they were moving through quickly catching insects such as moths on the wing, but again I'm probably wrong. It's more likely that they were calling to each other from a perch, or perhaps hopping along the ground eating ants! One wonders how we could do a proper census of their status in the ACT; now there's a challenge for someone.



Australian Owlet-nightjar (*Aegotheles cristatus*) — Photo by Geoffrey Dabb

Wednesday 13 January — Members' night

As is traditional, for our January meeting we will be having a "**Members' Night**", with the opportunity for COG members to contribute short presentations (no more than 10 minutes) on a range of bird related topics. So if you have a favourite birding moment for 2009, some special photos to share with members, a birding story to tell, or a poem to read etc, please contact Jack Holland on 6288 7840 or preferably by E-mail on jack.holland@environment.gov.au. — **Jack Holland**

Field Trip reports

Sunday 8 November — Tuggeranong Hill NR

I was joined by some enthusiastic members, guests from the Tuggeranong Hill and Conder Wetlands Parkcare Group and, surprisingly, a friendly pair of first-time visitors to Canberra - all the way from California - for an exploration of the Tuggeranong Hill Nature Reserve. Conditions were ideal, with clear and calm skies. Some of the highlights of this enjoyable morning were:

- exploring a sheltered gully of the hill and seeing, amongst dense shrubbery, a lot of small birds, including **Double-barred Finch**, **Buff-rumped Thornbill** and **Striated Thornbill**;
- looking on high over the Murrumbidgee River as we enjoyed morning tea and watching a **Noisy Friarbird** returning to and from a nest in a nearby tree, as well as seeing the **Striated Pardalote** up-close;
- seeing an area of good quality grassland and recovering woodland, on the western side of the reserve, that was conserved through the efforts of local residents and will provide good habitat for birds in years to come;
- on the western side of the reserve visiting the Conder Wetlands, which is a good example of how to create bird habitat as a part of the urban storm water system. Seen here were **Dusky Moorhen**, **Hard-head** and an **Australian Hobby** soaring overhead; and
- watching a **Sulphur-crested Cockatoo** emerge slowly from a hollow in a large remnant Blakely's Red Gum.

This reserve contains some good recovering habitat for birds and hopefully COG can return for a field trip again in future years. — **Matthew Frawley**

Sunday 15 November — Nest Workshop, Campbell Park,

Despite the forecast for a very hot 35°C, close to 30 members and guests joined me on this seventh annual event, with as usual Anthony Overs helping me lead the spilt group. As foreshadowed by the reccie I did a week earlier, bird activity was surprisingly quiet, particularly in the gully that runs through about 200 metres from the car park where all the breeding occurred in the first few workshops. We'd hardly seen a bird, let alone breeding activity, in the first 30 minutes when Stuart Rae arrived and showed us one of his **Tawny Frogmouth** nests, with dad still brooding the smallest chick on the nest in a very large upright fork, and mum and a two siblings a couple of metres away. This was a first for this workshop and much appreciated by all participants, and was soon followed by another first, a female **Common Bronzewing** sitting on a nest in a rather untidy clump of dead mistletoe.

The latter was at the start of the line running roughly NW/SE through the horse crossing, where again all the activity was centred, as in the past two years. We soon found a **White-throated Gerygone** nest made almost completely of wool, clearly borrowed from the sheep in the paddock a 100 metres or so away, but with a typical pony tail and side entrance. While looking for a **Willie Wagtail** nest with young we soon found in the same tree another **Common Bronzewing** nest, with a male sitting this time, and then a well disguised and flimsy **Rufous Whistler** nest, with again the male sitting. He had alerted us to it as he moved off to fend away another male of this species.

Nearby was a **Noisy Friarbird** nest with young, again in a very woolly cup, and within 20 metres a silent pair of **White-winged Trillers** were building/starting to incubate; in contrast to previous years they were the only trillers for the day. While this is a known tiny nest with just a rudimentary rim it was very small even for this species, and was also low and very well camouflaged in amongst the foliage, with a number of participants not able to find it until the much more conspicuous male swapped duties with the female after some 10-15 minutes of watching.

Across the horse gate were several pairs of **Leaden Flycatchers**, with one pair soon found busily building a nest in a surprisingly open position on a bare dead



Australian Ornithological Services P/L

PO Box 385
South Yarra 3141
Victoria
Tel: 03 9820 4223
Mob: 04173 10200

enquiries@philipmaher.com

New Plains-wanderer weekend
5/6 December 2009

2010

29 Jan to 7 Feb
SW Western Australia
bird and mammal tour

8 to 12 Feb
Christmas Island

11 to 28 March
Thailand
co-led by Uthai Treesucon

New Guinea
Postponed to 2011

23 June to 7 July
Top End
Darwin, Kakadu NP, Katherine,
Kununurra & Mitchell Plateau

11 to 15 July
Alice Springs &
MacDonnell Ranges

July
New Caledonia

4 to 22 September
Strzelecki Track Outback Tour
31st Strzelecki tour!

2010 Plains-wanderer Weekends
20/21 November 4/5 December 18/19
December 2010

**Tour itineraries, bird lists, checklists
and latest news are on the website.**

www.philipmaher.com

branch with another just above. Next **Varied Sittellas** were seen starting to build their dainty nest, typically wedged in an upright fork of a small dead branch. However, the most open nest clearly was that being built by the **Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike** in a dead tree, which must have been exposed to the full sun for most of the day. A better chosen spot was the **Grey Fantail's** nest, which was a surprisingly high fluted one but hidden and quite low amongst the shrubbery.

In total 36 species were found, well down from previous years and for the first time a number of species such as **Dusky Woodswallow**, **Olive-backed Oriole** and **Western Gerygone** were not seen, though the latter two had been present the week before. However, a **Dollarbird** was seen perched in a dead tree, in fact refusing to fly to show the white spots in the wings, the first for a couple of years. Fifteen species showed some kind of breeding activity, and five of the 10 basic nest types were seen, including the nest hole a pair of **Eastern Rosellas** was seen inspecting. My special thanks go to Stuart Rae and Anthony Overs for helping to lead/find nests for the group. This event continues to be very popular, and I look forward to leading it again next year. — **Jack Holland**

18 November — Wednesday walk to the Pinnacle

Eight members and guests met at the Pinnacle for a walk led by John Brannan. We focussed on the woodland area and the many nest-sites known by John in the area. As well as nests recently vacated (notably the two **Tawny Frogmouth** nests) we observed breeding activity by 12 species: **Striated Pardalote** (NB), **Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike** (DY), **Australian magpie** (DY), **Magpie-lark** (NB), **Crimson Rosella** (NY), **Willie Wagtail** (ON), **Common Starling** (NY), **White-winged Triller** (ON), **Welcome Swallow** (DY), **House Sparrow** (CF), **Varied Sitella** (ON) and **White-winged Chough** (ON).

Other less common birds included **Superb Parrots**, **Southern Whiteface**, **Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo**, **Rainbow Lorikeet** and **Fuscous Honeyeater**. In total we recorded an excellent 44 species.

There will be no mid-week walk in December as it's too close to Christmas. For January activities will be to some extent driven by the weather (too hot or a fire-ban and there will not be a formal walk) but a possibility is a full day trip to the Tinderries. An announcement will be made through the Chatline closer to the date. — **Martin Butterfield**

Saturday to Sunday 21-22 November — Frogs' Hole Creek, Frogmore

Unfortunately, due to the forecast of a succession of hot days of temperatures round 40° C, with high fire danger and the very strong possibility of total fire bans, this overnight camp-out on private property had to be cancelled.

This disappointed a number of intending participants, and I'm looking at rescheduling it for the autumn of 2010. If conditions haven't improved by then, I'll put it on the calendar for 2011. — **Jack Holland**

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 6 December — The TSRs and Nature Reserves of the Bungendore area

We will bird at the delightful, varied, woodland and grassland TSRs and Nature Reserves of the Bungendore area. Meet at 07.30 am at the Queanbeyan Swimming Pool car park, Campbell Street, Queanbeyan, for car-pooling. Be prepared for hot weather conditions. The field trip will conclude at lunch time at a Nature Reserve. If you have brought your lunch you can have it there. If not, Bungendore will be just ten minutes drive away. This field trip will be led by David McDonald and Martin Butterfield. Registration is not required.

Sunday 17 January 2010 — Brindabellas

The traditional opener to the field trips program is on again! A visit to the Blundells Creek/Warks Roads area of the Brindabellas and an opportunity to see how this area is continuing to regenerate from the fire of 2003, and also to see what birds have returned here this summer. Meet Bruce Lindenmayer at Uriarra Homestead (cnr Cotter and Uriarra Rds) at 8.30 am. *Note there are actually TWO intersections of Cotter and Uriarra Roads, the other one being just up the road from Eucumbene Drive, Duffy!* Participants will need to take either road and travel the 15 or so km to Uriarra Homestead

Christmas Party

*Black Mountain Peninsula
Wednesday*

9 December — 6-8 pm

Join the "Bird Charade".

Come dressed as your favourite (or any other) bird for a chance to win fabulous prizes—senior and junior divisions.

Who could possibly forget last year's colourful entrants?

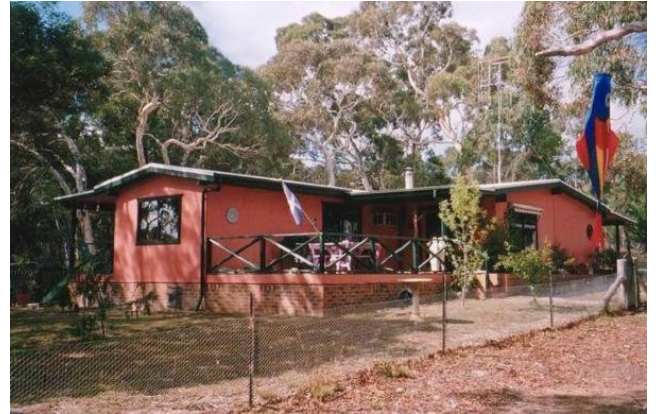


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at the other end. Following a quick look at the waterbirds on the large dam there, we will car pool, and also do the usual shuffle, leaving some cars at the top of Blundells Creek Rd and some at the bottom so we only need to walk downhill. If you are excited by the prospect of seeing birds such as the **Flame Robin**, **Satin Flycatcher**, maybe even **Rufous Fantail** and **Pilotbird**, as well as other wet forest birds, then be sure to register for this trip. Those intending to participate please ring Bruce (6288 5957, mobile 0417 418 759) beforehand as due to the sensitivity of the area and potential parking problems it has been agreed to limit numbers.

Sunday 7 February 2010 — Jerrabomberra Wetlands — morning outing

To celebrate World Wetlands Day, there is no better place to visit than Jerrabomberra Wetlands and the adjacent Fyshwick Sewerage Ponds. We will search for ducks, waders, rails and birds of the surrounding bush and grasslands. Meet in the carpark off Dairy Road at 7.30 am. The outing is expected to finish by 11 am. Bring a scope if you have one, as well as hat, sunscreen and water. Please book with Sue Lashko on 6251 4485 or by email to SMLashko@gmail.com. Should numbers become too large, the group will be divided in two, so if you are prepared to help lead this outing, please contact Sue.

Committee News

- There are still a few gaps in the outings program for 2010, but Outings Officer Matthew Frawley is making good progress with the program.
- A small group of committee members is now working on conservation issues. Jenny Bounds, Michael Robins, Con Boekel and Chris Davey will share the conservation work.

(Continued on page 6)

COG'S BIRD BLITZ 24-25 OCTOBER 2009

A progress report

Datasheets are still trickling in following our fifth bird blitz, but here are some interim results:

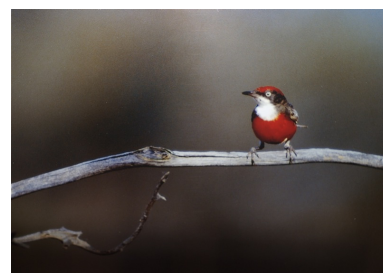
- 271 datasheets have been received thus far (209 hard-copy, 62 electronic).
- 89 named participants and the usual few nameless souls were involved.
- 109 grid cells were covered, though this total may vary slightly as I check the coordinates given against the COG grids.

172 bird species were recorded, 65 of them breeding. It was excellent to find records of breeding **Banded Lapwing**, a species generally confined to COG's broader area of interest; and the **Black-tailed Native-hen** obliged by staying around to be recorded. The **White-fronted Chats** also obliged this year, as did the **Powerful Owl** in the ANBG, but not **Boobooks** or **Nightjars** or **Koels**. The highlight of the 2009 blitz had to be the many records of **White-browed** and/or **Masked Woodswallows** which delighted all who saw them. Swings and roundabouts, as always.

A huge "thank you" to all who took part, especially to the novice surveyors, all of whom did precisely the right thing and added notes about the species which confused them, rather than taking a guess and reporting them. At the prize giving ceremony at the November COG meeting, the following members' names came out of the "lucky draws":

- the "Steve" Stephinson framed photograph of a **Crimson Chat** was won by Gail Neumann, from amongst the five-year blitzers
- the Vivian Pinder watercolour of a **Scarlet Robin** was won by David Rosalky, from amongst the two-day or more than 10 datasheet blitzers in 2009
- the Dick Schodde bottle was won by John Goldie, from amongst the observers of **White-browed** and/or **Masked Woodswallows**
- the Margaret Aston Christmas pudding was won by Roger Curnow, from amongst the observers of a vulnerable species (in John's case, a **Little Eagle**)

Photo by
Graham Stephinson



Crimson Chat
(*Epthianura tricolor*)

And the following blitzers were the lucky draw winners of Steve Stephinson photographic cards or books donated by Penny Olsen: Phyl Goddard, Bruce Lindenmayer and Alison Mackerras: Ian Anderson, Rosemary Blemings, Trish Boekel, Wendy Fahy, Matthew Larkin, Ethel Luff, Duncan McCaskill, Stuart Rae, Michael Robbins, Nicki Taws and Ros Walcott.

All blitzers were eligible to select a native plant, generously offered by Greening Australia. Many thanks to all prize donors.

If there is anyone who hasn't as yet sent in their datasheets from the blitz weekend, please do so asap so that the analysis of the results can begin. As usual, it will be published in a forthcoming issue of *Canberra Bird Notes*.

— Barbara Allan

(Committee News — continued from page 5)

- The new edition of *Birds of Canberra Gardens* is being printed, and copies will be available for sale at the Christmas Party.
- Work has started on the next Annual Bird Report.
- A small group has been convened to examine options for redevelopment of the COG website

DRAFT PROGRAM – COG 2010 FIELD TRIPS

I am delighted to coordinate a year of field trips to many varied locations, both within our area of interest and beyond. I encourage you to enjoy the opportunity they provide to learn about our birds, to see new places, to spend time with friends and make new friends. I welcome any suggestions for locations and volunteers to lead – just call me on 0423 439 889 or email me at frawley.matthew@gmail.com.

Date	Place	Type of Event
Sun 17 January	Brindabellas	All day
Sun 7 February	Jerrabomberra wetlands (World Wetlands Day)	Morning
Mon-Thu 15-18 February	Ulladulla	Post School Holidays mid-week accommodated
Sun 21 February	to be advised (tba)	Morning
Sat-Mon 6-8 March (8/3 is Canberra Day)	Nangar National Park	Long weekend camp-out
Sun 14 March	Molonglo Reach	Morning boat cruise
Sat 27 March	Gungahlin Hill	Afternoon
Fri-Mon 2-5 April (Easter)	Errinundra National Park	Extended long-weekend campout
Sat 10 April	Brindabellas	Afternoon-evening (owls)
Sun 18 April	Scottsdale surveys	Morning
Sun 2 May	Botanic gardens	Beginners morning
Sat 15 May	Wanniassa Hills Nature Reserve	Morning
Sat 29 May	Kelly Swamp	Community event
12-14 June long weekend	Budderoo National Park	Long weekend camp-out
Sat 19 June	Tidbinbilla	Lyrebird survey
Sun 27 June	Newline	Afternoon
Sun 18 July	Winter birds	Day bus trip
Sun 25 July	Wollongong or Eden (to be confirmed)	Pelagic day trip
Sat 7 August	Lake Ginninderra	Beginners morning
Sun 22 August	tba (leader required)	Morning
Sat 5 September	Little Forest	All day
Sat-Sun 11-12 September	Private property near Mundoonen NR	Camp-out on private property
Fri-Sun 17-19 September	Monga National Park (4WD only)	Weekend camp-out
Sat-Mon 2-4 October long weekend	Croajingalong	Long weekend camp-out
Sat-Sun 9-10 October	Joint outing with Goulburn Field Naturalists	Overnight accommodated
Sun 17 October	Scottsdale surveys	Morning
Mon-Fri 18-22 October	tba (leader required)	Mid-week camp-out
Sat-Sun 30-31 October	6 th Annual Bird Blitz	All day atlassing
Sat 6 November	Private property near Collector	Morning
Sun 14 November	Campbell Park	Nest workshop
Sat-Sun 20-21 November	Bumbalong Valley	Overnight camp-out
Sat 4 December	Yanununbeyan (near Captain's Flat)	Morning

Garden Bird Survey Notes

There have been relatively few recent chatline postings that are directly GBS-relevant.

- **Eastern Koels** are again filling in the quiet moments around the ACT (and on the chatline),
- **Australian King-parrots** were observed copulating in (upper) Aranda.
- The Carwoola pair of **Tawny Frogmouths** have successfully raised two chicks.
- Two **Superb Parrots** in Curtin – that is **SOUTH** of the Lake!

Charts!!!!

We have 82 Charts in Year 28, compared to 72 Charts for the past two years. Many thanks to all contributors. A first run through of the new analysis system was pleasingly boring and results are expected to be passed to ABR authors on time!

Any Charts not in my possession by now will not be able to be included in the Year 28 analysis for the Annual Bird Report (but will be added to the database for later reference).

The competition continues!

A core summary statistic from the GBS is the measure of abundance, designated as 'A'. This has demonstrated the dramatic decline in **Common Mynas** in recent years. In Year 25 the value of A for this species was 4.95 and in years 26 and 27 it was 3.29 and 2.36 respectively. What will it be for Year 28?

I invite people to send me their estimates by email to martinflab@gmail.com. I have put a more complete time series on the chatline. A few entries have already been received and the closest answer will get a valuable prize, to be awarded at the COG Christmas Party. — **Martin Butterfield**.

Just in time for Christmas!



The revised and updated
edition of
Birds of Canberra Gardens
will be available at the Xmas
party
\$20 to members, \$25 with the
CD of Canberra bird calls

Fenner School Research

In November, COG members took part in their 25th bird survey for the ANU's Fenner School of the Environment & Society (formerly known as CRES).

The various studies, which commenced in 1996, have involved COG members' participation in:

- Tumut (long established pine forests and native remnants, between Tumut and Canberra);
- Nanangroe (recently established pine forests on former grazing land, north of the Tumut study area);
- Jervis Bay (long term environmental and post fire studies in Booderie National Park);
- Restoration (a comparison of native remnants and restored/replanted sites on private properties, covering a large area of the Riverina); and
- Mulligans Flat/Goorooyarroo (Canberra Nature Parks).

All the studies have involved detailed assessment, selection and matching of field survey sites, followed by the on-going monitoring of habitats, arboreal and terrestrial mammals, reptiles and amphibians as well as birds. In total, more than 1000 sites are monitored in southern NSW, and the ACT.

The ANU team of more than 30 scientists, statisticians and post-graduate students, includes several experts permanently located in the study areas where they have close contacts with local land owners and state and regional stakeholders. The studies are funded from grants from Federal and State governments, private companies, benefactors and foundations in Australia and overseas. The team has recently been funded for a long term study of recovery of Victorian forests burnt in the February 2009 fires.

Over the years, this work has greatly increased the understanding of the ecology and environment of the study areas, has led to the publication of several hundred scientific papers and more than 20 books and resulted in higher qualifications for gifted students.

Most importantly, it has led to acceptance by governments and land holders of changes in policy and practice in forestry, salvage logging, land clearing, land care & restoration and selection and maintenance of nature reserves. COG members will be aware of exciting developments at Mulligans Flat/Goorooyarroo with completion of the feral proof fence and the forthcoming reintroduction of locally extinct animals.

David Lindenmayer and Adrian Manning are planning to talk to COG on these projects in 2010.

On a personal note, I would like to thank all those skilled and highly motivated people who have been willing to travel long distances and get up before dawn for days on end, sometimes in unpleasant weather. However, if I can echo someone else, there's much more hard work to come!" — **Bruce Lindenmayer.**



Crowdie Head & Comboyne Plateau

6 & 7 February 2010

5 days/ 4 nights — \$2275 pp Twin or Dble — \$180 Supp

This trip has been especially designed to cater for Canberrans; starting and ending in Canberra with the aim to take you out to summer coastal weather and into the Mid North Coast which is quite splendid and often overlooked. There is a generous diversity of bird life here and as you move back to the moist forests around Comboyne with their 40 odd waterfalls.

Few people remain unmoved by the beauty and diversity of Crowdie Bay: the spectacular view of the broad sweep of Crowdie Beach, striking Diamond Head rising abruptly before dropping away gently to the wetlands and heaths of the coastal plain. Birds are prolific with well over a hundred species in the surrounding estuaries and national park.

Resident coucals at our accommodation right on Crowdie Head will delight with their lolling walk. And below, beside the beach Chestnut-rumped Heathwrens surprise with their inquisitive gaze while Figbirds yelp and then softly sing in the banksias.

Further inland Comboyne Plateau developed on the deep rich red loam derived from basalt. Large pockets of sub-tropical rainforest remain where Noisy Pitta, Logrunners, Fruit Pigeons and Eastern Whipbirds utilise these plant communities. Along the roadsides Regent Bowerbirds and Scarlet Honeyeaters are expected to wow you with their spectacular colour.

Dates
6 & 7 February 2010
5 days / 4 nights

Summary
* Coastal Summer escape
* Spectacular Mountain Vistas
* Beautiful Beaches & Headlands
* Mountain Rainforest Birds

Leader [Alan Morris](#)

Featured Birds
* Noisy Pitta
* Logrunners
* Regent Bowerbirds
* Figbirds

Contact us for an itinerary

Follow That Bird – Birds and Camaraderie

Tel 02 9973 1865 — email: tours@followthatbird.com.au
Website: www.followthatbird.com.au

MUDBRICK COTTAGE

Mallacoota

Our mudbrick cottage (*Blue Wren Cottage*) is available for rental for all those nature lovers out there!!

It is set amongst the trees in Mallacoota, Victoria (approximately 4 hours drive from Canberra). It is only 10 minutes walk to the beach, 5 minutes walk to the golf course and about 15 minutes walk to town. It sleeps 4-6 upstairs and there is a sofa bed downstairs.

It is fully self-contained with a kitchen and laundry.

Contact:

Barbara de Bruine (02) 6258 3531, barbdebruine@hotmail.com, or see <http://www.stayz.com.au/25595>.

PASSIVE SOLAR HOUSE

South Rosedale

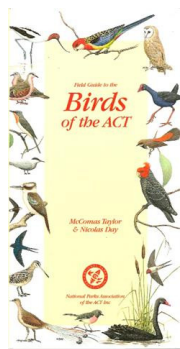
Arupingi is a passive solar house situated in a peaceful bushland setting in South Rosedale.

Birdwatching is possible from the comfort of a chair on the front or back deck, while for the more energetic, Guerrilla Bay and Burrewarra Point are within walking distance. The wetlands at Barling's Beach are only a few kilometres away. Rich birding is available in almost any direction.

Contact Greg or Sallie Ramsay

6286 1564 or
gramsay@actewagl.net.au

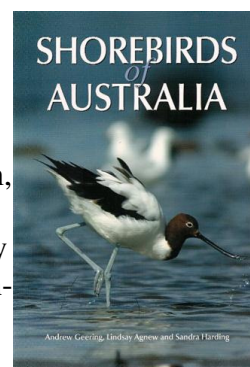
COG SALES



Field Guide to the Birds of the ACT (Taylor & Day) - \$16.00 — Bird identification in the ACT has just become much easier! Here are all the birds of the ACT in colour, with easy-to-follow text and key biological data, in a compact field format that will fit easily in your pocket.

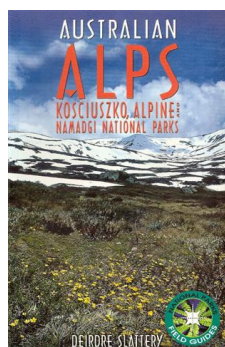
Shorebirds of Australia (Geering, Agnew & Harding)

\$33.00 — This title brings together the latest information about the evolution, ecology and behaviour of shorebirds and how they are distributed in Australia. This is a highly sought after title in the popular "CSIRO Publishing" series.



Birdwatching on the Far South Coast (see

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Avian Whimsy No 78

Woodswallows? Yes they would!

In the last Whimsy I started to muse on **woodswallows**, but of course used up my space allocation long before saying much that could have been said. This is to assuage all those *Artamiphiles* who contacted me to lament the fact – or at least who would have done so had there not apparently been a mysterious mass server outage just as they were about to send. You can read – and probably have read – all the information of substance in field guides etc, so what follows is a bit of a random collection of ‘other information’ about woodswallows.

John Leach in his 1908 classic *An Australian Bird Book* (see Whimsy #72) rhapsodised ‘they are the Blue-birds, Summer-birds or Martins of our youth’. I was interested to see the Summer-bird name, as my father used it for **Black-faced Cuckoo-shrikes**, though I’ve not heard of anyone else doing so. Other names applied to more than one of the six Australian species are Blueie, Skimmer and Cherry-bird. **White-browed Woodswallows** have attracted the delightful monikers of Four-year-bird (presumably for their sporadic appearances, well known to us in Canberra) and Sky!

I am somewhat disconcerted to learn that **Dusky Woodswallows** have also been known as Sordid Woodswallows. There is no innocent explanation either – in this sense as in the broader one it means ‘dirty’, referring to the ashy plumage. Nor do I think that Bee Bird was fondly applied to the same species, despite Leach’s measured argument for the defence. ‘Occasionally, a company has discovered that a good food supply can easily be obtained close to a beehive. Thus rarely they do a slight amount of harm, but the balance is overwhelmingly in their favor.’

And speaking of bees, Leach also described one of the most-oft remarked upon woodswallow traits thus; ‘some of these birds have the remarkable habit of hanging in cluster similar to a great swarm of bees.’ Later, Alec Chisholm in his 1934 *Bird Wonders of Australia* likened such a cluster to ‘a great bunch of epiphytal orchids’. Up to 200 or so woodswallows will cling thus to bark, often around a tree fork, to spend the night. All species apparently indulge, though most references are to Dusks. One story claims that Dusky parents, once their chicks are sufficiently feathered to keep themselves warm, will head off at night to join the swarm in preference to a domestic night at home. Its sounds a bit Bohemian, but given that I try to rein my anthropomorphic impulses in as far as possible, I have to acknowledge that on the face of it, staying warm is an obvious explanation. However apart from the observation that one might expect that the chicks’ wellbeing would also be a significant factor if extra warmth were required, there are the inconvenient reports of such swarms forming in hot and humid conditions, including during the daytime in the inland.

It is interesting too that such generally strongly carnivorous birds – they are all essentially aerial insectivores – are also important foragers on nectar and pollen, and may be significant pollinators of major inland plant groups including eucalypts, grevilleas and mistletoes. Nectar is apparently so important to them that they have independently evolved a honeyeater-like brush-tipped tongue to draw up nectar by osmosis, rather like a paint-brush. This is a complex and very specific structure, whose evolution must have been driven by strong forces, yet while all woodswallows indulge in nectar occasionally, only Masked and White-browed do so on a regular widespread basis. Did their ancestors utilise this resource much more, and subsequently adopt a primarily aerial insect-hunting lifestyle? This one puzzles and bothers me.

If I had not eschewed anthropomorphism, I might also be bothered by their propensity to kleptoparasitism (though I love the word!). Chisholm described an aspect of it, using the old ‘Blue Jay’ to refer to Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike. As a young cuckoo-shrike waited to be fed, he saw a male White-browed Woodswallow arrive and lurk with intent. When the youngster’s parent came with a meal the woodswallow ‘flashed between the two, grabbed the food and made off as fast as his wings would take him, with the elder Blue Jay in hot pursuit’. This kleptoparasitism has also been regularly reported in Dusky Woodswallows though they, to their shame, apparently prefer to pick on smaller birds, flying at thornbills, pardalotes and whitefaces to steal the food they drop in their panic. One sordid gang was observed assaulting a Restless Flycatcher and pinching its food; it is not recorded how they divided the loot.

After that, the observation that woodswallows are the only family of all the passerines to have powder-down, located on both breast and back, seems a little tame, though it is intriguing. Powder down feathers have tips which disintegrate to provide a grooming powder, and are best known in parrots and herons.

The wonderful woodswallows; there is much more to be said of course, but I must leave it there. As ever I await your response – along with a pterodactyl among the woodswallow flocks drifting high overhead this summer.

— Ian Fraser (ianf@pcug.org.au)



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February deadline

Wednesday 27 January 2010

Please send, articles, advertisements, updates etcetera to the Editors at
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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.

COG info

President—Chris Davey, ph 6254 6324
Email: chris_davey@aapt.net.au

Vice President—TBA

Treasurer—Lyn Rees
lynlev@iimetro.com.au

Secretary—Sandra Henderson 6231 0303
cogoffice@canberrabirds.org.au

Address for correspondence

The Secretary
COG, PO Box 301
Civic Square, ACT 2608

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Sandra Henderson ph 6231 0303
membership@canberrabirds.org.au
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Editor Canberra Bird Notes

CBN@canberrabirds.org.au

Gang-gang editors—Sue Lashko and

Greg Ramsay

Email: gang-gang@canberrabirds.org.au



Gang-gang

If undeliverable, please return to
Canberra Ornithologists Group, Inc.
PO Box 301, Civic Square ACT 2608

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