

# Gang-gang

July 2011

Newsletter of the Canberra Ornithologists Group Inc.

## JULY MEETING

7:30pm Wednesday 13.7.11

*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.*

To start the proceedings **David Rees** will show the second part of his film of **experiences of birding in the North Island of New Zealand**. This focuses on central and southern areas, in particular the central lakes area around Rotorua. Continuing on from the first film a number of New Zealand's special birds will be shown.

For the main presentation, **Victoria Sheean**, a PhD student at the Fenner School of Environment and Society ANU, will discuss "**Brown Treecreeper Reintroduction in Eucalypt Woodland**".

Species reintroductions are increasingly important tools to redress population declines and improve biodiversity by aiming to establish self-sustaining populations, particularly when natural re-

*(Continued on page 3)*

## What to watch out for this month

Over the past couple of months the dry weather pattern seems to have re-established, and judging from reports on the COG chat line, the cold end to autumn and start to winter has lead to a decreased number of bird observations. This includes sightings of mixed feeding flocks (MFF), for which reports virtually stopped at the end of May. Perhaps subscribers have become tired of reporting them, or are avoiding the Canberra winter on their annual holidays, but certainly in my GBS site they have been harder to find. You need to be right upon them/under the tree to hear them (for example the **Spotted Pardalotes** have been calling very quietly), and then there are only a few birds of a few species compared with the many of both in autumn. So for this year at least, MFFs seem to have been an autumn rather than winter phenomenon.

An interesting question was raised on the chat line by Denis Wilson following the observation of a mixed feeding flock of **Silvereyes**, **Superb Fairy-wrens** and **Red-browed Finches** working their way through shrubbery seemingly looking for small insects - are the latter species, usually thought of as dedicated seed eaters, occasional insectivores? Examination of HANZAB indicates they certainly forage in the company of committed insectivores from time to time, and also will eat insects. While I have occasionally had Red-browed Finches in MFFs in my GBS site this autumn, they have really been at the fringes, and haven't appeared to be eating lerps which has seemed to be the main food for pardalotes, silvereyes and weebills which have formed the nucleus of the MFFs.

Away from my GBS on Cooleman Ridge and Narrabundah Hill, the finch/firetail MFFs I have been observing (**Red-browed and Double-barred Finch** and/or **Diamond Firetail** are often the most numerous species) are certainly very different in composition and habits in that the activity is largely on the ground compared with the foliage/shrubbery. I had always imagined they were eating seed, but certainly there are almost always some insectivores amongst them, notably the **Superb Fairy-wren** and **Yellow-rumped Thornbill**.

*(Continued on page 2)*

Everyone welcome

There have still been some reports of straggler summer migrants notably several **Mistletoebird**, a **Western Gerygone** and a **Rufous Whistler**. The **Superb Parrot** has also still been reported, and has been regularly seen at the Belconnen Golf Course. Of those species traditionally the last to leave Canberra, the **Grey Fantail** and **Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike** are still present and being reported, while there have been none in the past month of the **Olive-backed Oriole** or the **Dusky Woodswallow**, a surprise for the latter considering the numbers that over-wintered in 2010.



**Crescent Honeyeater** ( *Phylidonyris pyrrhopterus* )

**Photo by Rhonda Hansch**

Of the altitudinal migrants, the **Flame Robin** is certainly present but in low numbers only, including in my local patch of NW Cooleman Ridge and the southern part of Narrabundah Hill. There have been limited reports of the **Crescent Honeyeater**, but several of the **Yellow-tufted Honeyeater**, another species you're most likely to see in Canberra during winter. To my mind this also applies to the **White-bellied Cuckoo-Shrike**, several of which have been reported, with David Rosalky making the observation I have noticed previously that it tends to forage in the tops of low bushes, compared with its more arboreal cousin. Though I have yet to see it, the **Restless Flycatcher** has been reported from Narrabundah Hill; again this has been fairly regular in

my local patch in late autumn/winter. There have also been further reports of the **Rose** and **Pink Robin**, including possibly a male of the latter in the Australian National Botanic Gardens.

Everyone is familiar with the large flocks of **Sulphur-crested Cockatoos** and to a lesser extent **Corellas/Galahs**, particularly in South Canberra over winter, where they are often seen feeding on the grass, but some other large flocks have also been reported including well over 50 **Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoos**, possibly the biggest for some time. Others include **Little Ravens**, **Australian Wood Ducks** and **Magpie-larks**. I had well over 100 **Crested Pigeons** in/near my GBS site in mid June, the biggest number I can remember seeing together; so many were close together that they blackened the wires on which they were perched.

Reports of breeding have been much lower in the past month, largely still dependent young of the cockatoo species mentioned above. In one case the question was posed, are the **Sulphur-crested** delaying breeding so they can feed their young when the acorns are ready? Perhaps it's just a sign of the very good breeding season. Personally I have noticed dependent young **Little Corellas** still being fed in a tight little family group of four, as well as an immature **Australian Magpie** still making begging noises.

I'm about to undertake my annual migration to warmer climes, and so there won't be a column from me in the August Gang-gang. By the time I write again many of the altitudinal migrants will have already departed, and some of the early spring/summer migrants (**Welcome Swallow**, martins, cuckoo species, **Dusky Woodswallow**, **Olive-backed Oriole** etc) will have already arrived. So please record the last and first sightings of these species, as well as any important sightings you see of the above-mentioned or any other species, and ensure all significant observations are reported for inclusion in the COG database.

— **Jack Holland**

colonisation is unlikely. For her project Victoria reintroduced 43 Brown Treecreepers (*Climacteris picumnus*), within seven social groups, into Mulligans Flat and Gorooyarroo Nature Reserves in November 2009. Through releasing social groups within an experimental framework and daily radio-tracking of individuals for three months, she was able to obtain important data on survival, movement, behaviour, and habitat selection. In particular, Victoria will examine observed patterns of behaviour and micro-scale habitat use by birds, and the implications for the restoration efforts currently ongoing in the reserves. She will also present how individuals explored their new environment, the types of habitats settled within and the consequences of their choices.

## Field Trip Reports

### Wednesday 15 June - Shepherds Lookout Mid-week Walk

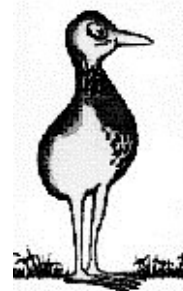
Shortly after 0900 as the group of 19 starters were called to assemble for introductions, etc., co-leader Terry Bell called out, pointing to a **White-bellied Sea-Eagle** rapidly coming into view. Borne on the thermal up draught from the Murrumbidgee Valley this majestic bird seemed aware of our very presence, banking several times and inclining its head in our direction for a better look. From the partially speckled or mottled appearance, our surprise visitor was apparently a juvenile bird. Later on, returning from the valley floor, several members also observed two sea-eagles perched high in a distant tree. Increased rainfall, localised flooding, full dams, fast flowing rivers, plus regular sightings in this area, are all factors that could suggest a breeding occurrence.

Two mixed feeding flocks (MFF) were studied, one near the lookout and the other near huge piles of driftwood on the bank of the Murrumbidgee River. A total of 30 species was recorded with highlights including Speckled Warbler, Golden Whistler and Double-barred Finch, as well as four more species of raptor: Wedge-tailed Eagle, Nankeen Kestrel, Brown Falcon and Peregrine Falcon. On this outing the birds were either on top or down near the confluence of the two rivers with very little in between. However, the extended scenic views are really beautiful and should ensure that we come this way again.

Terry Bell

**White-bellied  
Sea-Eagle**  
(*Haliaeetus leucogaster*)

Photo by Lindell  
Emerton



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### 2011 tours

3 — 22 September 2011  
**Strzelecki Track, Outback**  
4 places available

### Plains-wanderer Weekends

26 & 27 November 2011  
New Year's Eve 2011

### 2012 tours

9 — 25 January  
New Zealand

4 — 11 February  
Tasmanian bird & mammal tour

**Mid May Gulf Country**  
Cairns, Georgetown, Karumba,  
Gregory R, Cloncurry & Mt Isa

1 — 13 July **Top End**  
Darwin, Kakadu NP, Kununurra

17 — 23 July  
Alice Springs/MacDonnell Ranges

6 — 25 September  
Strzelecki Track, Outback

31 Oct — 7 Nov  
New Caledonia

11— 19 November  
SW Western Australia

See itineraries & trip reports on the website

[www.philipmaher.com](http://www.philipmaher.com)



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## Saturday 18 June - Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve- Superb Lyrebird Survey

The eighth annual survey of the **Superb Lyrebird**, designed to provide an index of population numbers since the 2003 bushfires, was run under cool and unfortunately very windy conditions.

The Reserve had been closed to the public the day before due to high winds but, despite the survey starting off under ideal conditions, the wind soon got up with gusts up to 60 km per hour recorded.



**Superb Lyrebird** ( *Menura novaehollandiae* )

Photo by David Cook

previous years, with the number seen depending very much on the trail walked, with Gibraltar Rocks-26, Devil's Gap-17, Fishing Gap-11, Ashbrook-13, Camel Back-8 and Lyrebird/Cascades-6, indicating that the wetter, eastern facing slopes appeared to be the most affected by the wind. Although no species were reported on all trails the most frequently recorded were the **Superb Lyrebird**, **Brown Thornbill**, **Superb Fairy-wren** and **White-throated Treecreeper**. Unusual sightings, all along the Gibraltar Rocks trail, were **New Holland Honeyeater**, **Crescent Honeyeater**, **Yellow-tufted Honeyeater** and three **Hooded Robins**. Although the **Scarlet Robin** was reported, there were no sightings of **Flame Robin** or **Satin Bowerbird**. No raptors were recorded during the survey although a pair of **Wedge-tailed Eagle** was seen near the Visitors Centre.

At 1.00pm the party assembled in the lecture room at the 'Depot' for a presentation by Peter Fullagar and Chris Davey on the recovery of lyrebirds at Tidbinbilla after the 2003 bushfires.

Many thanks to the participants, to the authorities for waiving the entry fees, and to David McDonald, who with his computer, came to the rescue of the presentation.

*Chris Davey*

The eight COG members were joined this year by 23 members of Conservation Volunteer Australia (CVA) who volunteer their services in the Reserve. We were all assembled at the car park by 8.00am and after breaking up into teams soon started to survey the five main walking trails. For the first time the number of participants allowed us to form a sixth team and we were able to survey the redesigned Lyrebird/Cascades Trail.

Taking a minimum count and not including the Lyrebird/Cascades trail, 13 individual lyrebirds were recorded within the Reserve compared with 6, 14, 12, 12, 19, 19-20 and 20 in previous years (Gibraltar Rocks-2, Devil's Gap-0, Fishing Gap-2, Ashbrook-3, Camel Back-6 and Lyrebird/Cascades-2).

During the survey 33 species were recorded, similar to

## Committee News

Now is the time for the community to put its views on proposed urban development in Throsby. Letters to Commonwealth and ACT Government Ministers have been sent by COG, the Conservation Council and other groups. An email has been sent to the COG chatline encouraging members to start writing letters to the Ministers. COG's position is that there should be no development in Throsby' that is, none of the land east of Horse Park Drive to be developed, as this is the best way to protect the Superb Parrot breeding areas.

Woodland Project: The statistical analysis on habitat relationships is proceeding well. The winter survey period is 18 June to 26 June, but some locations have been affected by reserve closures in June for kangaroo culling.

40 Drooping She-oaks have been planted at Bush Heritage's Scottsdale property. This was made possible by a donation from COG of profits from the Birds Australia campout.

**REMINDER** For those members interested in COG's submissions on various conservation issues, including Throsby, they can be found on the COG website under 'Conserving Birds'. Scroll down until 'COG Conservation Strategy' appears on the left hand side, click on the link and a list of various submissions will appear.

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## 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.

### Saturday 9 July – Urambi Hills (morning walk)

The meeting place is next to 34 Meredith Circuit, Kambah, ACT 2902. There is plenty of off-street parking on dirt next to the entry gate to the Urambi Hills Nature Reserve. Meet at 9am to walk along the back of the Hills and, if participants like, climb up to the saddle between the two peaks in search of further birds and better views.

Michael Robbins will lead this walk. Hopefully we will see both Flame and Scarlet Robins, and maybe Diamond Fire-tails. We are likely to see mixed feeding flocks among the low wattles with an opportunity to distinguish several species of thornbills, Weebills, and maybe Southern Whiteface.

### Saturday or Sunday 23 or 24 July – Your Favourite Local Hotspot

If anyone is interested in leading a morning walk to their favourite local bird area, please contact Daniel Mantle ([danmantle@hotmail.com](mailto:danmantle@hotmail.com)) to discuss. New leaders are particularly requested and are not expected to be expert bird-watchers. Only a reasonable knowledge of the area to be visited is required. There are always several keen birders who will join in on the day.





**Diamond Firetail ( *Stagonopleura guttata* )**  
**Photo by Lindsay Hansch**

### **Saturday 13 August - Lake Ginninderra Beginners' morning (in conjunction with the Australian Science Festival)**

This is the second of our bird walks in 2011 that is aimed specifically at beginners. Meet Anthony Overs (bookings essential on 6254 0168 or [anthony.overs@gmail.com](mailto:anthony.overs@gmail.com)) at 8.30am in the car park at the western end of Diddams Close on Ginninderra Peninsula (also known as Diddams Close Park - see Yellow Pages Map 38, ref A9). We will walk the shores of the peninsula around to the eastern side, then back to the car park along Diddams Close. We should be able to view several species of waterbirds up close, focusing on the identification features of the common species such as the various ducks, "waterhens" and cormorants. A variety of bush birds are also likely to be seen. Bring your binoculars and field guide.

### **Saturday 27 August – Kambah Pool to Red Rocks Gorge (morning walk)**

The path between Kambah Pool and Pine Island offers a fairly easy walk to Red Rocks Gorge along (although mostly well above) the Murrumbidgee River. It is about 2.5 km to the Gorge with a steep-ish down-and-up (about 30 metres elevation with some steps) halfway along, where the path dips to the river. There is potential for interesting sightings, especially Peregrine Falcons near the Gorge. The vegetation is regenerating quite well since the 2003 bushfires, especially during the last twelve months. However, there is still not as much canopy as before fires, so bring sunscreen, water and something for morning tea. Meet Michael Robbins at 9 am at the car park at the south end of Kambah Pool, second turning left after you cross the cattle gird at the entry to the Bullen Range Nature Reserve.

### **Friday-Sunday 2-4 September – Little Forest Plateau near Ulladulla**

This trip focuses on birdwatching in the heathland of Little Forest Plateau and reserves near Ulladulla. We will stay in a caravan park at Ulladulla that has cabins and campsites. Participants will need to arrive by Friday night ready for an

early start on Saturday. Be aware that the road to Little Forest is gravel and car-pooling is encouraged for the drive to the Plateau. We hope to find a variety of heathland birds including **Beautiful Firetails** and **Southern Emu-wrens** as well as other coastal favourites. The walk at Little Forest Plateau will be easy-to-moderate grade, but if you are unsure please give us a call to discuss. Please book a place on this outing with Kathy Walter or John Goldie on 6241 7639 or email [walter.goldie@optusnet.com.au](mailto:walter.goldie@optusnet.com.au). We will be happy to discuss whether this outing is suitable for you. The trip will be restricted to 20 participants and filled on a first reply basis. More detailed instructions will be provided closer to the day.

## ADVANCED NOTICE

### Monday-Saturday 19-24 September, Green Cape NSW

Built in 1883 and perched on the edge of a peninsula, Green Cape Light Station is the tallest and most southerly lighthouse in NSW. Its octagonal tower juts out from a square base in dramatic contrast to the low-lying landscape surrounding it. It looks across Disaster Bay – the site of many shipwrecks.

#### Accommodation

Two cottages that were previously the assistant keepers' residences have been carefully restored to offer superb 3.5 star heritage accommodation. Each cottage contains a fully equipped kitchen, dining room, bathroom, master bedroom (with queen-size bed), second bedroom (with two single beds) and family/lounge room (with sofa bed). Linen is available for hire. Each cottage can accommodate up to six people. We have booked for six nights from 19 September to 24 September – that is to arrive on Monday (after midday) and depart on Saturday morning.

#### Costs

The commitment is for a 5-night stay – no concession for shorter stays. The total accommodation costs will be in the order of \$250 per person but Daniel Mantle will contact all participants closer to the date about final costs and how to pay. There is also a \$7 fee per car per day to enter Ben Boyd National Park. This can be paid at a self-registration booth on arrival.

#### Catering

Each person/couple will be asked to cater for one evening meal for 6 people. Bring your own food for breakfasts and lunches – and BYO wine/beer/spirits. Please note that there are no shops nearby so bring all food and drink items with you.

#### Activities

There will be ample opportunity for good seabird watching from the cape, and the heathlands surrounding the cottages are excellent for birds including Ground Parrot, Southern Emu-wren, Striated Fieldwren, Tawny-crowned Honeyeater and other typical eastern Australian coastal heathland species. COG has made two previous organised visits to Green Cape and details can be found at:

[http://peter.fullagar.com/2005\\_10\\_01\\_archive.html](http://peter.fullagar.com/2005_10_01_archive.html) and

[http://peter.fullagar.com/2007\\_10\\_01\\_archive.html](http://peter.fullagar.com/2007_10_01_archive.html).

For more information consult the National Parks and Wildlife Service website at: <http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/NationalParks/parkAccommodation.aspx?id=N0003>

Those interested in being part of this year's trip please contact Peter Fullagar on 02 6251 4672 or at [peter.fullagar@gmail.com](mailto:peter.fullagar@gmail.com) to confirm your booking. A personal telescope and tripod would be very useful at Green Cape. **THERE ARE EIGHT (8) SPACES STILL AVAILABLE.**



**Tawny-crowned Honeyeater ( *Glyciphila melanops* )**  
Photo by Geoffrey Dabb





**Black-winged Stilt ( *Himantopus himantopus* )**  
**Photo by Dimitris Bertzeletos**

### **Sat-Mon 1-3 October – Buddigower Nature Reserve – Bird banding**

In response to numerous member requests over the past year, I have decided that the banding team will run a bird banding session over the October long weekend at Buddigower Nature Reserve near West Wyalong. This reserve is near to our usual banding site at The Charcoal Tank NR. This is not designed to take people away from the COG trip to Capertee Valley but is an additional trip. October is very pleasant in this region, especially now the drought has finally broken.

Please contact Mark Clayton (email: [chollop7@bigpond.com](mailto:chollop7@bigpond.com)) if you are interested and need directions to the site. Accommodation will be camping with a strict 'bring everything in, take everything out' policy. There are NO facilities in the reserve.

### **Sunday & Monday 2-3 October – Capertee Valley Tour (led by Carol Proberts)**

Carol Proberts (a professional bird and wildlife guide in the Blue Mountains) will run a short birding tour for COG members over the early October long weekend. To enable everyone to drive down leisurely on the Saturday, the tour will start on Sunday morning (~7am, unless everyone is keen to start at dawn) and continue till lunchtime on Monday. The cost of the tour will be dependent on the number of people attending and is likely to be less than \$70 per person.

Accommodation can be either camping (on Carol's property with minor fees for amenities) or at local guesthouses. The closest locations recommended by Carol are Binalong self-catering (contact April Mills – 02 6379 7326) or Oskas Cottage (02 9713 5344). For further non-camping options see Carol's webpage (<http://www.bmbirding.com.au/valley3.html>). Please contact Daniel Mantle ([danmantle@hotmail.com](mailto:danmantle@hotmail.com) or 0413 554 500) to book your place. **TRIP FULL – ADDITIONS TO WAITING LIST ONLY.**

### **Saturday & Sunday 22-23 October – Eden Pelagic (two single day trips)**

As there is sustained interest in the Eden pelagics, two further single day trips have been organised for October. These will again be run from Eden Harbour with Freedom Charters. As usual we will travel to the edge of the continental shelf in search of seabirds, cetaceans and seals.

October is one of the peak months for seabird migration off the east coast of Australia and we hope to see a wide diversity of seabirds. We will meet at Eden Harbour early each morning (time to be confirmed) and aim to return to dock by 3pm, thus leaving enough time to drive back to Canberra on Sunday afternoon. Organising travel and accommodation will be each individual's responsibility but no doubt there will be opportunities for car-pooling and an informal get-together for dinner/drinks in Eden on the Friday and Saturday evenings.

As with all boating activities the trip will be weather dependent and rough seas could lead to the cancellation or postponement of the trip. Seasickness pills or other remedies are recommended for those prone to seasickness. All participants should bring water, lunch, and sunscreen. More detailed instructions will be available closer to the day. The cost will be \$100 AUD per person.

To book a place on this outing, please contact Daniel Mantle (0413 554 500 or [danmantle@hotmail.com](mailto:danmantle@hotmail.com)), who will co-lead this trip with Anthony Overs. Both trips are restricted to 12 participants and filled on a first reply basis.

**SATURDAY TRIP FULL. THREE (3) SPACES LEFT ON SUNDAY TRIP.**

### **Saturday & Sunday 10-11 December – Deniliquin Plains Wanderer Weekend**

This year COG will return to the Deniliquin area to search for some of the special birds of the region, including the enigmatic Plains Wanderer. The weekend tour will be led by Phil Maher in the same manner as his regular 'Plains Wanderer Weekends' and will incur similar costs (\$270 per person). This early notice is to advise those interested that

(Continued on page 10)





Nankeen Kestrel



Eastern Rosellas



Turquoise Parrot

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(Continued from page 8)

accommodation should be organised shortly as there are limited local options and they will likely be busy in early December. One recommended option is the Deniliquin Riverside Caravan and Cabin Park (03 5881 1284).

This weekend outing will be limited to 14 people and will be filled on a first reply basis. A deposit of \$50 will be payable upon registering for the trip. Please contact Daniel Mantle ([danmantle@hotmail.com](mailto:danmantle@hotmail.com) or 0413 554 500) to book your place. **ONLY ONE SPACE LEFT.**

## MUDBRICK COTTAGE

### Mallacoota

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

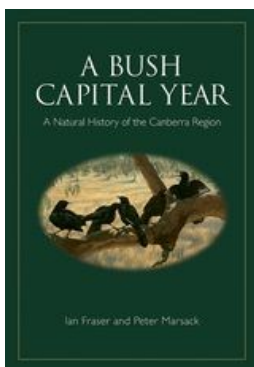
It is set amongst the trees in Mallacoota, Victoria (approximately 4 hours drive from Canberra). It is only 10 minutes walk to the beach, 5 minutes walk to the golf course and about 15 minutes walk to town. It sleeps 4-6 upstairs and there is a sofa bed downstairs.

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# COG SALES

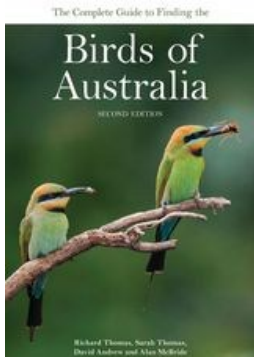


## **A Bush Capital Year: A Natural History of the Canberra Region** Ian Fraser , Peter Marsack

*A Bush Capital Year* introduces the fauna, flora, habitats and reserves of the Australian Capital Territory and includes the most recent research available. It also emphasises often unappreciated or even unrecognised urban wildlife. For each month of the year there are 10 stories which discuss either a species or a group of species, such as mosses and mountain grasshoppers. While never anthropomorphic, many of the stories are written from the organism's point of view, while others are from that of an observer. Beautiful paintings complement the text and allow better visualisation of the stories and the subjects. Members price \$32

## **What Makes a Good Farm for Wildlife?** David Lindenmayer

Based on thirteen years of intensive research, the book breaks the discussion into chapters on key environmental and vegetation assets and then discusses how to make these assets better for biodiversity. The work encompasses information on vertebrates and invertebrates on farms and their relationships with significant vegetation and environmental assets: woodland remnants, plantings, paddocks, rocky outcrops and waterways. A chapter is dedicated to each asset and how it can be managed. Members price \$27



## **The Complete Guide to Finding the Birds of Australia 2nd Ed** Richard Thomas , Sarah Thomas , David Andrew , Alan McBride

First published in 1994, this was the first ever book of its type in Australia – a complete guide to locating every resident bird species. This fully revised second edition describes the best-known sites for all of Australia's endemic birds, plus regular migrants such as seabirds and shorebirds. It covers all states and territories, and is the first guide to include all of Australia's island and external territories. A comprehensive Bird Finder Guide details site information on all Australian bird species, and the authors provide valuable travel advice. Member's price \$32 – expected for the April meeting.

## **Stray Feathers: Reflections on the Structure, Behaviour and Evolution of Birds** Penny Olsen , Leo Joseph

*Stray Feathers* showcases some of the remarkable adaptations of Australian birds. A brief introduction describes how evolution shapes form and function, followed by a series of vignettes illustrating the wondrous variety of forms and functions shaped by evolution. For example, did you know that barn owls can hunt in absolute darkness and that cuckoos commence incubation before their egg is laid? Members price \$39 – expected for the June meeting

Also titles from CSIRO Publishing's *Australian Natural History* series (\$29.00 each for members): *Kookaburra*, *Australian Magpie*, and many more.

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## Avian Whimsy #89 — On the Wave of a Crest

Some of the most impressive bird ornamentations are in the form of head plumes, or crests, and they are very widespread across a range of families. In Australia a dozen native breeding species either have ‘crested’ or *cristatus* in the name, but of course there are many more than that which could have been so monikered. Overseas there are some amazing crests, familiar even to us, among hoopoes, the Secretary Bird (a raptor), various penguins, cocks-of-the-rock, the Victoria Crowned Pigeon, crowned cranes, some lapwings, birds of paradise, hummingbirds, peafowl – well, you can insert some of your own favourites.

The general agreement is that the purpose is for display, the idea being that the bigger and gaudier the display, the more attracted a female will be. However this seems to me to be too trite – we should always ask ‘why?’. Accept for a moment that the female is really making a decision as to the father of her eggs based simply on what we would call aesthetics; in that case, it is reasonable to assume that her sons will inherit nifty plumes too and will be successful – but there’s nothing in it for her daughters. In such a situation I think it is more that he is effectively saying ‘look, I’m so strong and clever and have such great survival skills that I can afford to carry around this idiotic frippery – even though it makes me more of a target for predators – and *those* are the characteristics you want for your chicks, sons *and* daughters’. We can see this taken to extremes with the peacock’s tail, the Irish Elk’s antlers, and the ludicrous wing appendages of some bowerbirds, nightjars and hummingbirds.

However, most cresties don’t go nearly this far, but have a more modest crest that can be erected when required and tucked away at other times, and in most Australian examples the female has a crest too, though it is often more discreet than her mate’s. There are, it seems to me, two possible explanations for this. One is that in fact both sexes are assessing the other’s crest (presumably among other indicators) as a gauge of general health – we can see this with Great Crested Grebes, where both wear the same courting headgear, and perform a coordinated dance with equal roles. The other explanation that I can think of is that the female inherits the crest genes too, just as part of the genome, but in a more dilute form and it plays little or perhaps no role. In species such as Sulphur-crested Cockatoos where both sexes have an erectile crest, at least part of its function seems to be as punctuation to a warning screech.

There are also some ground-feeding birds – Crested and Spinifex Pigeons for instance – where the crest is evident all the time in both sexes. Might this not be a way of keeping track of your colleagues when you are all feeding head-down on seeds among grass clumps?

The Australian Owlet-nightjar (*Aegotheles cristatus*) is one of five native Australian birds who are formally dubbed ‘crested’ via their scientific name, though if I were to ask 50 birdos to make a list of five crested Australians, I doubt that the owlet-nightjar would feature. The reference is to the ‘rictal bristles’, simple feather shafts that protrude up and out from around the bill, not a crest as we might normally understand it. All nine owlet-nightjar species have them – I assume that the Australian species was honoured with the name because its ‘crest’ is the smallest and least conspicuous of all of them. However it raises an interesting insight into one function of crests. In 2010 a couple of Canadian ornithologists (Sampath Seneviratne and Ian Jones) did a study which began with the genus *Aethia*, four auklets, diminutive diving birds from the north Pacific which are shamelessly adorned with feathery whiskers and crests. They nest in the dark in rocky fissures and Seneviratne and Jones wondered if the adornments had a directly practical tactile function. Putting the birds in dark mazes, some individuals had their fancy feathers temporarily taped down; these birds bumped their little heads two and a half times as often as those with their crests flowing free. Further, individuals of species with short crests got more head lumps than those with longer ones.

These crests then were filling the role of a mammal’s whiskers, telling the birds about their surrounds. The authors went further, examining a whole range of non-passerine species and scoring them according to the length of their facial fancy-wear and their lifestyles; they found that there was a real correlation between length of crests and a life that involved night activity and ‘complex, cluttered habitats’. They suggest that this gives an unexpected clue as to why such ornamentation originally evolved.

For not the first or last time, a Whimsy has thrown up more questions than answers, but this is no bad thing. Perhaps it could even suggest a discussion on the Cog-line, as an addition to its show and tell function. (Or of course you could just look for the answers on the Crestacon web site.)

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

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