



Gang-gang

March 2007

Newsletter of the Canberra Ornithologists Group Inc.

Monthly Meeting

**8 pm Wednesday
14 March 2006**

*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.*

Bird-of-the-month

The **Crimson Chat**: a short
talk by Geoffrey Dabb.

And for something completely
different, we present
A Naturalist in Patagonia.
From the Andes to the Straits
of Magellan, Patagonia is the
stuff of travellers' dreams. In
December COG member,
naturalist and broadcaster Ian
Fraser visited this land which
runs south for 1000km towards
the Antarctic from the latitude
of Hobart. Its rich biodiversity
is a product of Gondwana, of
long isolation, and of its
eventual collision with North
America. This talk is about the
glacier-carved landscape, the
plants and other animals, as
well as the birds.

Everyone welcome

What to watch for this month

While the conditions at the end of February are so different from the severe drought at the end of January, the wetter conditions seem to have come too late for many of our summer migrants, judging by the lack of reports on the COG chat line over this month. Mid month there were reports of the **Rainbow Bee-eater** migrating. This is rather early as they often pass through/over Canberra early in March, and it will be interesting to see if any more are recorded. Keep an ear out for them as they can be easily heard and seen quite high overhead, with their characteristic "pirr pirr" call and orange underwing making them relatively easy to identify from a distance. They can also migrate at lower levels, such as along a creek line or river. There have still been a few reports of **Dollarbirds**; they too will have left by mid March. Despite the many storm cells and fronts there have been relatively few reports of the **White-throated Needletail** and none, if I recall correctly, of the **Fork-tailed Swift**; these species can still be seen right until April.

As March ends, start looking/listening for migrating **Yellow-faced Honeyeaters**, which can be seen in large numbers, particularly on still days after a cool crisp night. While these are the most spectacular as they are the most numerous, other honeyeaters such as the **Red Wattlebird** and **Noisy Friarbird** also migrate. If my local area is any guide, most of the latter seem to have departed already. While some species depart, other birds start to come into the gardens from the mountains during March like the **White-eared Honeyeater** and the **Golden Whistler**; indeed there was already a report of a female of the latter in a Weston garden late in February.

Jack Holland

Photo by Peter Cowper



Golden Whistler

(*Pachycephala pectoralis*)

Field Trip reports

Mallacoota – 9-12 Feb 2007

COG breaks the drought! A group of COG members journeyed to Mallacoota for an extended weekend camp/accommodated visit. To say Saturday and Sunday were damp would be an understatement. However, in between showers and downpours some very good birding was had.

Before I go much further I believe a word of thanks should be said for Ian Anderson who led the trip and for the local birding guru Bob Semmens who showed us some very special places and some very special birds.

Some of the highlights for me were the **Superb Lyrebird's** nest in a low fork of a tree (how the bird could fit into the opening of the nest is a marvel in itself); the two **Little Tern** chicks scurrying between tufts of grass on the beach; and the seven **Ground Parrots** that flushed for us. Adding a bit of excitement to the day was a waiting **Hobby** which began hunting the parrots. Fortunately it did not have any luck and we quickly left the area before it did.

Other good birds included **Scarlet Honeyeater**, **Rose Robin**, **Crested Shrike-tit**, **Little Grassbird**, **Black-faced Monarch**, a **Pallid Cuckoo** being fed by a **Rufous Whistler** and a very co-operative **Superb Lyrebird**. Over 100 birds were seen on the visit.

Mallacoota is a delightful area and I hope it remains that way. There is some concern that this may not always be the case. A marina/breakwater is proposed for Bastion Point (where the lake flows into the ocean). This will have an adverse effect on the local beach environment as well as creating an eyesore and hazard for other users. More information can be found on www.savebastionpoint.org. — **Noel Luff**

Tallaganda State Forest – 25 February 2007

Eleven COGites met at the Queanbeyan Swimming Centre at 8:00am, including some new members who were very welcome. Luckily the weather didn't threaten, although it remained cloudy through most of the outing. Previous rain had encouraged the leeches and they were out in force.

Our first port of call was Axel Avenue, where the birding was certainly very good. The probable highlight of the trip was a male **Rose Robin** that treated us all to very good views. **Rufous Fantails** were definitely out in force as were lots of young **Golden Whistlers**. A **Superb Lyrebird** and **Eastern Whipbird** remained out of sight, as did a frustrating **Black-faced Monarch** that only two lucky members got glimpses of. The mystery bird of the day was a strong calling bird that sounded like a **Blackbird**. If it was, we reckoned it to be a bit out of place in the wet, remote habitat.

At Lowden Forest Park, we had morning tea in the company of some trail bike riders. Highlights from two short walks we did in the Forest were: a **Red-browed Treecreeper**, a **Flame Robin**, more **Rufous Fantails**, and lots of eucalypts flowering with six species of honeyeater enjoying the food source.

Our group acknowledged that valued COG member Tom Green, who died just a few weeks ago, had planned to lead this field trip, as Tallaganda was one of his favourite places. In proceeding with the trip, we honoured his memory, and recalled the fine contributions that Tom had made to COG and to the community more broadly. Thanks to David McDonald for stepping in and leading this outing. — **Tobias Hayashi**

Photo by Tobias Hayashi



COGites encouraging leeches, Lowden Forest Park, Tallaganda State Forest

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 11 March – Lake Burley Griffin – Birding by Bike or the "Tour des Birds de LBG"

The recently returned Martin Butterfield will lead a repeat of this bicycle tour of the Central and West Basins of Lake Burley Griffin, intending to visit a number of locations with good chances of seeing some of the less common sights of Canberra (in addition to the birds there is always the possibility of encountering a bagpipe player or a naked jogger).

Martin's expectation would be at least 40 bird species including four **Cormorants** and **Darter**, and most of the other usual lake and parkland suspects. In addition the edge of Westbourne Woods can generate some of the less common bush birds, and the extra exposed mud around Acacia Inlet has recently produced some crakes and at least one sighting of an immature **Little Bittern**.

Meet at Mr Spokes bike hire in Acton Park at 8 am, and we'll head off clockwise (for those with digital watches, that means towards the Carillon). He expects to have at least nine 'formal' stops with many others possible. We'll cover about 20 km, at a polite pace with no big uphill, in about 3 hours. At least one water bottle per person is advised, and although he doesn't intend to go off road, a spare inner tube each would be good insurance. Wearing a helmet is compulsory. For further information please contact Martin Butterfield (Ph 6238 2637 or 0422 753 230, E-mail martinflab@gmail.com).

Sunday 25 March – Marulan – day visit to private property

As part of our continuing links with the Goulburn Field Naturalists Society (GFNS) COG members have been invited to join an outing to a property near Marulan. This contains a very large drought proof dam where the **Great-crested Grebe**, **White-bellied Sea-eagle** and other waterbirds are known to regularly occur. **Musk Ducks** are common breeding residents. It also has significant areas of natural woodlands/forests (including Swamp Gum open forest) where a variety of land birds occur. Of particular note is a stand of massive *Banksia marginata* that is a local hotspot for small birds. The house paddock has been part of the Open Gardens Scheme and borders the lake roughly in the middle of the 800 hectare property.

COG members will meet at the Shell Service Station on the Federal Highway, Watson at 7:00 am (daylight savings ends that morning) for car pooling in order to meet GFNS members at or near the property by 8:30 am. To put your



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Mob: 04173 10200

enquiries@philipmaher.com

2007 Birding Tours

Northern & Central Thailand
7–24 April
co-led with Uthai Treesucon

Top End
14–29 May
Darwin, Kakadu NP, Kununurra
& Mitchell Plateau

**Gulf of Carpentaria
Cairns return**
17–28 June 2007

New Caledonia
22–28 July 2007

2nd Outback (Strzelecki) Tour
7–25 September 2007

**Central Coast NSW
inc nearby national parks**
1–14 November 2007
Barrington, Gloucester & Copeland
Tops, Munghorn Gap and several
others parks

**All above tours are accommodated
Plains-wanderer Weekends 2007
late November and December
Itineraries are on the AOS website**

www.philipmaher.com

name down or to seek any further information please contact Jack Holland (6288 7840 AH or by E-mail on jack.holland@environment.gov.au). Morning tea and lunch should be taken. We expect to return home mid-afternoon.

Sunday 1 April – East Basin/Molonglo River – Electric boat cruise

This will be the last outing/cruise for 2006-2007 on the upper parts of Lake Burley Griffin (East Basin) and the adjacent Molonglo River. While this has been done a number of times on different dates, the experience last year was that this is the peak time for nesting. While the main objective will be to view nesting, with three species of **Cormorant** and **Darters** known to breed there, the area is also rich in other water birds, and a variety of land birds can be seen on the banks.

The boat trip will last about two hours from 8 am and will cost \$20, payable in cash on boarding. Please book your place on the boat with Jack Holland (on 6288 7840 AH or by E-mail on jack.holland@environment.gov.au). Depending on the numbers we will travel either in the electric boat the "E.L. Cygnet" which takes a maximum of 10 passengers, or the new appropriately named "Darter" which can carry 16 people, and though it has a motor is very quiet at slow speeds. The boats allow both a quiet approach as well as access to areas normally difficult to get to. The point of departure will be the little landing adjacent to the car park in Bowen Park opposite the new Landmark Apartments. This car park may be accessed off Bowen Drive (going either way). At the deadline for publication there were still plenty of vacancies on the boat.

6-9 April 2007 – Easter camp-out – Willandra Lakes – accommodated

COG's Easter campout will be held at Willandra Lakes near Hillston, about seven hours' drive from Canberra. There are camping facilities (access is suitable for camper trailers but not caravans) and the shearers' quarters (sleeps 24 in bunk rooms that open onto an enclosed verandah), both of which have been booked. There are still a number of spaces available for accommodation in the Shearers' Quarters or in the camp ground. If you are interested, please email Sue Lashko on susan.lashko@cggs.act.edu.au or phone 6251 4485.

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.

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.

2007 COG Field Trips Program

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, Ph. 6254 0168 AH or by E-mail on Anthony.Overs.Reps@aph.gov.au.

News from the committee

- A small group is working on updating the Annotated List of Birds.
- A business plan is under development, identifying some key areas of work.
- Michael Robbins has volunteered to lead Wednesday walks.
- A letter was sent to the ACT government about water extraction from Yerrabi Pond and possible impacts on Musk Duck breeding.
- Comments were also made about proposed changes to the Domestic Animals Act, suggesting strategies to better protect wildlife from domestic pets.
- Jenny Bounds provided input to a Conservation Council submission on Molonglo Valley development.
- Comments on the Preliminary Assessment for the proposed feral-proof fence at Mulligan's Flat were also provided.
- The latest COG Woodland Bird Monitoring Project data analysis report (1998-2005) is complete and available on the website (see page <http://canberrabirds.org.au/ConservingWoodlandBirds/ConservingWoodlandBirds.htm> for links to the report and the accompanying graphs).
- There have been some changes to the coordinators of surveys at some woodland sites – Sue Lashko will be site coordinator at Newline, Jenny Bounds at Callum Brae, and Lia Battison at Tuggeranong Hill.
- The 2007 trips program is available on the website at <http://canberrabirds.org.au/Trips/TripsInfo.htm>.
- Bruce Ramsay has volunteered to take over the Sales Table at meetings from Carol, who has done a wonderful job for some years.
- A very generous donation has been made by Mrs Helen Moy to the Bird Conservation Fund, in memory of her husband.

For further information on any of these matters, please contact a committee member (contact details on back page).



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Andrew Patrick

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COG Sales Desk

The committee is very pleased to announce that Bruce Ramsay has agreed to take over the duties of the COG Sales Desk from Carol Macleay, as of March 2007.

So it's thank you and welcome Bruce, and once again a special thanks to Carol for having undertaken this significant task efficiently and cheerfully for the past 6 years.

GBS Co-ordinator

The committee is also pleased to announce that on his return from his sojourn at the UN in New York, Martin Butterfield has again taken over as co-ordinator of the Garden Bird Survey. Welcome back Martin, and a heartfelt thank you to David Rosalky for having taken on this important task and having looked after this project so diligently during Martin's absence.

Other activities of interest to COG members

Woodland surveys

Woodland Survey Period

For the information of site coordinators, the survey period for autumn is Sat 24 March to Sun 1 April, with the usual flexibility to go a week either side if it's not possible to do the survey then.

Next Mulligan's Flat Survey - Saturday 31 March

Regular survey participants, please note the date for the autumn survey; meeting at the usual gate at 7.15am. Bring clipboard, pencil, eraser. It is likely Jack Holland will be the on-site manager of this survey in my place. I will send out a reminder by email. — **Jenny Bounds**

Bignet

The first BIGnet meeting for 2007 will be hosted by the Far South Coast Birdwatchers at Merimbula on 17-18 March. While Jack Holland will be officially representing COG, other members' participation in all or part of the events would be welcome. While the agenda has still not yet been finalised, it will include "Bell Miner Removal, a Case Study", and there will be opportunities to bird watch before, during and after the meeting depending on demand.

If you are interested in participating in any way, please contact Jack Holland (6288 7840 AH or by E-mail at jack.holland@environment.gov.au). for details of the agenda and associated events.

Scottsdale

On Saturday 10 March, the Friends of Grasslands (FOG) will visit Scottsdale from 9:30 am to 4 pm. Scottsdale is a 1300ha grassy ecosystem property on the Murrumbidgee River, north of Bredbo (NSW), which was purchased by Bush Heritage in early December 2006, as part of the Kosciuszko to Coast (K2C) project of which FOG is an active member. This will be the first opportunity for FOG members to visit Scottsdale which contains some exciting grassy ecosystem vegetation, and some real weed challenges. Come and learn about and/or contribute to Bush Heritage's plans to restore the degraded pasture, dominated by African love grass (ALG) and serrated tussock (ST), to natural grasslands, and the plans for the recovery of other grassy ecosystems on the property. The trip will include a visit to **Ingelara** (a property just north of Scottsdale) to hear about Pete Bottomley and Gina Osborne's, and Tobias and Beatrice Koenig's work on replacing ALG and ST with native pasture.

The plan for the day is to meet on the Monaro Highway, just south of Johnson Drive (Tuggeranong) and visit Ingelara from 9:30 am to 11 am and Scottsdale from 11:30 am to 4 pm. At Ingelara, Tobias will describe their strategies and methods which are based on a holistic/organic practices and show people around. At Scottsdale, Owen Whitaker and Lauren Van Dyke will outline the K2C project and the Scottsdale component, and will show us an ALG site (before lunch), and the river and the woodland heights (after lunch). Lunch will be a barbeque planned for 1 pm. For morning tea, FOG will provide hot water, coffee, tea, milk, sugar, juice and biscuits, and for lunch sausages (or meat substitute), onions, bread, coffee, tea, etc. FOG plans to charge \$5 per head, payable on the day, to cover costs.



The Murrumbidgee River at Scottsdale

Photo by Nicole Pyne

reproduced by permission of the Australian Bush Heritage Fund

For catering possibly car pooling purposes, contact Geoff Robertson on 6241 4065 or by e-mail at geoffrobertson@iprimus.com.au.

Volunteers needed to help save the Black-eared Miner

The Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC) owns a wide range of properties with high conservation values throughout Australia, and employs a team of ecologists to manage them. They are currently involved in a project to relocate colonies of the endangered **Black-eared Miner** (BEM) from Gluepot Reserve to their 65,000ha mallee property 'Scotia' on the NSW/SA border. As part of this project the AWC is looking for around 25 volunteers to conduct BEM surveys at Scotia. The surveys will be organised in 1-week blocks over the last 3 weeks of September. Participants can volunteer for either 1, 2 or all 3 of these time blocks.

Volunteers will need to be proficient at identifying mallee bird species. It would also be an advantage to have experience with reading colour bands in the field, and also with navigating through bushland by GPS. Good motel-style accommodation, with spacious kitchen and dining room, is available. Assistance will be provided with food costs.

Surveys will normally be conducted each morning by walking a 5km mallee transect, with afternoons being free. Scotia has extensive feral-proof areas, where there will be opportunities to see several endangered mammals - Greater Bilby, Brush-tailed and Burrowing Bettong, Numbat and Bridled Nailtail Wallaby.

For queries and an application form please contact Richard Jordan - emutours@aapt.net.au or tel (02) 66559456

Field Guide To Australian Birdsong

The Melbourne Age of 17 February (Section A2, page 22) reported that the Bird Observers Club of Australia (BOCA) has now published the tenth and final CD in the above series. Details are available from Information@birdobservers.org.au or the BOCA website.

Myna Matters Update

2006 was a big year for the Canberra Indian Myna Action Group Inc. Since starting in April the group now has over 200 members and just over 200 people in the Canberra / Queanbeyan area with traps, almost 300 people are on its email news distribution system and around 160 people on the CIMAG Chatline. Collectively CIMAG members have now removed some 8,200 Indian Mynas from the Canberra district, giving our native birds some breathing — and breeding — space. The group's website www.indianmynaaction.org.au has been established with information about Indian Mynas, the CIMAG Strategy, Protocol on Animal Welfare, past issues of the Myna Matters Bulletin and other relevant information.

Trapping in December in the Canberra region saw the demise of a further 1,136 Indian Mynas: the highest monthly count so far and took the known grand total to 8243. People trapping mynas report that the small native birds are returning to their gardens after the myna numbers have been substantially reduced through intensive trapping activity.

Bill Handke

Canberra Indian Myna Action Group

(02 6231 7461 / handke@grapevine.net.au)

Paringa Images

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Web site not complete as yet, many images to be added.

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Avian Whimsy—continued from page 11

Most species use saliva to some extent, produced by specially adapted large glands, to glue the nest together; the **Edible-nest Swiftlet** constructs it entirely this way. Now I'm a fairly adventurous eater, but somehow bird spit just doesn't appeal. Nonetheless, very many people disagree with me, and the international trade alone (particularly from Sabah and Sarawak) accounts for in excess of 20 million nests a year. The future for the birds in these circumstances cannot be good, as the nests are harvested twice each breeding season.

Another curiosity of many swifts is that they go into torpor at low temperatures, and perhaps at times of limited food. Until recently it was asserted that they share this characteristic only with **hummingbirds** and an **American nightjar**, but further investigation has revealed other practitioners, including **Tawny Frogmouths** (*Podargus strigoides*) and **Australian Owlet-nightjars** (*Aegotheles cristatus*).

Yet another remarkable trick practised by several species of cave-dwelling swiftlets (including the **White-rumped Swiftlet** (*Collocalia spodiopygius*) of Queensland) is the ability to echo-locate, analagous to that of bats. While it is not nearly as finely-tuned as a bat's – swiftlets don't use it to capture insects – it's still pretty effective in avoiding bumping into things in the darkness of the caverns. The stream of double clicks emitting from the syrinx (the normal bird 'voice box') enables White-rumped Swiftlets to avoid hanging objects only three millimetres in diameter. The clicks are considerably lower in frequency than the echo-location calls of bats and are quite audible to humans. (The only other bird to do so is the strange nightjar-related **Oilbird**, which emerges from its South American cave to dine on fruit.)

Swifts are fabulous. Before I bunker down for winter, I hope I get to hear them screaming at least one more time.

Ian Fraser ianf@pcug.org.au

MUDBRICK COTTAGE

Mallacoota

Our mudbrick 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.

FOR SALE

Binoculars, Vixen Ultima 9 X 63, made in Japan, top condition & quality, leather case. Excellent for birdwatching at dusk or in poor light or for watching waterbirds, \$295. Contact Chris Bellamy, Nowra (02) 4421 3467 or 042 919 1047

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

(02) 6286 1564

or e-mail gramsay@actewagl.net.au

COG SALES

- **'The Long Paddock** - a Directory of Travelling Stock Routes and Reserves in NSW' by Rural Lands Protection Board - \$31.00
- **The Birds of Western NSW: A Preliminary Atlas** - NSW Bird Atlassers - **reduced** to \$5.00
- **Finding Birds in Darwin, Kakadu and Top End** by Niven McCrie and James Watson. \$24.00.
- **Wet and Wild** - A Field Guide to the Freshwater Animals of the Southern Tablelands and High Country" by M Lintermans and W Osborne, \$28.00 (RRP \$34.95).
- **Wildlife on Farms** - by David Lindenmayer RRP \$29.95, **special price** for COG members - \$25.00.
- **Where to Find Birds in NE Queensland** - Joe Wieneke - \$16.00.
- **Reptiles and Frogs of the ACT** - Ross Bennett - \$13.00.
- **Native Trees of the ACT** - \$6.50.
- **Birds of Rottnest Island** – by Denis Saunders & Parry de Rebeira - \$15.00
- **Birds of Rottnest Island** – a check list - \$1.00
- **Grassland Flora** – a Field Guide for the Southern Tablelands (NSW and ACT) – by David Eddy et al. - \$13.00
- **Our Patch** – Field Guide to the Flora of the ACT Region - \$13.00
- **The Nestbox Book** – Gould League - \$12.50
- **Birds of Queensland's Wet Tropics and Great Barrier Reef** by Lloyd Nielsen - \$25.00
- **Field Guide to the Birds of the ACT** – by Taylor and Day \$14.00
- Simpson and Days' **Birds of Australia CDROM** Version 5.0 **special price** - \$45.00
- COG Atlas - \$12.00
- COG Car Stickers - \$2.00
- COG Birds of Canberra Gardens Poster - \$4.00
- COG Garden Bird Survey Chart (New Version) - \$1.00
- COG Badges – two colour versions - \$5.00
- COG Birds of the ACT – Two Centuries of Change – by Steve Wilson - \$25.00
- COG Annotated Checklist of the Birds of the ACT - \$1.00

COG T-shirts, Polo shirts, all above and other books on local flora and fauna available at the monthly meeting sales desk or by contacting Carol Macleay (for post and packing costs) on 02 6286 2624.

Avian Whimsy #50

‘The Elation that Comes of Swift Contact...’

(Quote from Agnes Repplier, ‘The Luxury of Conversation’, albeit in a slightly different context...)

As summer slumps into autumn, the great flocks of swifts (**White-throated Needletails** (*Hirundapus caudacutus*) towards the coast and **Fork-tailed** or **Pacific** (*Apus pacificus*), **Swifts** generally more inland) start to gather before abruptly leaving for the other side of the world. To stand on a hill-top in a swirling shrieking flock of needletails, hurtling by on huge boomerang wings, is one of the most thrilling of birding experiences.

These long narrow scything wings certainly provide a capacity for great speed – White-throated Needletails are said to attain 170kph – but in fact the primary function for such a wing is to fly *slowly* without stalling. This might sound counter-intuitive, but it’s hard enough to intercept and snatch an insect on the wing without the extra complication of doing it at lightning speed. If however you can slow down and cruise up to the prey things get easier. And what about the capacity of the eye which can spot a tiny flying insect from a distance and hold it in focus as the distance to it decreases to the length of the beak? This beak is actually quite small, but the gape is huge.

The family name, Apodidae, means ‘without feet’; until very recently at least this was widely believed to be literally true. The feet exist though and, while tiny, are strong and sharply clawed, designed for climbing vertical surfaces. This need comes back to the long slim ‘high aspect ratio’ wings, which make it very hard indeed to take off from a horizontal surface. Instead the birds land on a cliff face or tree trunk, or climb up out of a tree hollow roost to launch into their true element – the air. Perhaps only the frigatebirds can come close to the swifts in their degree of adaptation to life aloft. The extent of this commitment to life on the wing has been the subject of much debate and even some hyperbole. Despite many assertions to the contrary there is no evidence of swifts mating or sleeping on the wing in Australia (though such evidence would be hard to collect); unlucky swifts colliding with planes at night in Russia are supposed to have been dozing. Apparent aerial mating records from elsewhere are all capable of other interpretations. (I am referring to extra-aeroplane activity, you understand.)

Until recently it was widely held that swifts never alighted in Australia. Some clever radio tracking work in south-east Queensland by Michael Tarbuton at the end of 1991 however, showed a needletail apparently going to roost in a tree hollow. This bird went to roost just after dark, suggesting another reason for the lack of records. There are reports too of them roosting in hanging eucalypt foliage and tumbling out in the morning.

The two southern Australian swifts are children of two hemispheres, covering vast distances between their breeding grounds in China and Siberia and their summer quarters here. Even while here they probably cover thousands of kilometres, following the storm and fire fronts which swirl up the aerial plankton they rely on, and avoiding low pressure systems.

Other adaptations to an existence on the wing include a large eye with patch of dark mobile bristly feathers in front of it, to provide ‘dark glasses’ for life where there is never any shade. Their haemoglobin is especially efficient at delivering oxygen in situations where it is relatively limited.

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WONGA

Bawley Point
South Coast of N.S.W.

Two well equipped timber cottages in 50 acres. Damp and dry warm temperate forest, kunzea and rock provide for a diversity of birds and other animals. A short walk down the driveway leads to sand dunes and beaches, sea birds and Hooded Plovers. Close to National Parks, lakes and historic sites.

patricia.walker@bigpond.com
phone 02 6251 3136

www.visitnsw.com.au (follow the links to accommodation and Wonga)

NEW MEMBERS

COG welcomes the following new members:

Richard Harding, Kaleen
Ros Greenwood, Philip
Bill Kerley, Deakin
Simon Bennett, Canberra
Belinda Cooke, Aranda
Fred and Heather Allsopp, Woden
Alana Wilkes, Bruce
Alan Mann and Joy McCann, Duffy

Next newsletter

April deadline

Wednesday 28 March 2007

Please send, articles, advertisements, updates etcetera to the Editors at
gang-gang@canberrabirds.org.au
or c/- The Secretary COG, PO Box 301
Civic Square, ACT 2608

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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Canberra Birds Conservation Fund

Donations to this fund are tax deductible.
Funds are used to support projects that protect and enhance native birds and the environments that sustain them.

COG website

www.canberrabirds.org.au

Office

COG no longer maintains an office. For all enquiries or access to COG's library phone Barbara Allen on 6254 6520

COG membership

2005-2006 memberships:

- Individuals, families and institutions: \$35
- school students (under 18): \$17.50.

COG E-mail Discussion List

COG has an email discussion list for members and friends: 'Canberra Birds'. Join the list by following the links on the COG website or by sending an empty email message to canberrabirds-subscribe@canberrabirds.org.au

Editor Canberra Bird Notes

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Gang-gang

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