

CANBERRA ORNITHOLOGISTS GROUP - President's Report for 2002-03

It is a pleasure to once again provide a report on COG activities during the last year. In stark contrast to the major conservation achievements of the previous year, 2003 has been dominated by the worst wildfires seen in the ACT for a hundred years.

On 18 January 2003, high temperatures and strong winds combined with wildfires in the ranges to the south and west of Canberra to threaten not just the Canberra's surrounding bushland but also the city itself. By the end of the day, much of the bushland in the southern and western parts of the ACT had been destroyed, and 500 houses has been lost, indicating that no part of Australia could be considered safe from wildfire. Apart from the personal loss of property, with some COG members losing their homes and possessions, and almost their life in one case, the environmental damage was devastating. With nearly 1/3 of the ACT severely impacted by the January fires, the birds of our region will feel the effect for some time to come.

The fires have posed a number of conservation problems. There are of course the immediate problems of loss and damage to the forest and woodlands of the Tidbinbilla and Brindabella Ranges. Much of this habitat will recover, but the continuing drought has delayed this process. Massive over-reaction by government officials has seen stands of remaining trees in parts of Canberra Nature Park cleared to protect property, with little to no consultation with the community. And there are plans to open up much of the land in the southern ACT, previously protected areas, to recreational use such as four-wheel drive activities and other forms of development, ostensibly to improve access and facilitate fire management in the future. Management of these proposals and provision of informed comment on the conservation implications of such action are likely to keep COG and other community groups busy for quite a while.

On a more positive note, in March, as part of COG hosting a meeting of BIGNET, a network of NSW bird interest groups, we ran an extremely successful seminar on woodland birds. This was a great success, attracting over 140 people. The seminar aimed to improve community awareness and focussed on the positive side of woodland conservation — what was being done to minimise the threats posed by woodland clearing, and the effectiveness of habitat re-construction. I would like to thank Jenny Bounds for organising this event, who was ably assisted by Tanya Rough, Nicki Taws and Shirley Kral. I would also like to thank all those who spoke at the event, which included COG members David Lindenmayer and Julian Reid amongst others.

We also continued to run an excellent program of field trips. Jack Holland joined the committee this year and took up overall responsibility for management of the COG Field Trips program. Unfortunately the 2003 program as devised with assistance of the Field Trips Team (Alistair Bestow, Jenny Bounds and David McDonald) was severely affected by the 18 January bushfires, which meant that a large number of proposed outings were no longer viable or accessible and had to be either cancelled or rescheduled. Nevertheless, after a slow start, with the strong support of members who suggested alternative venues and offered to lead them, a very active though somewhat flexible program was able to be run, with weekly outings being offered at the peak of the bird season.

These ranged from local half-day trips, including for beginners, to full day outings for the more experienced bird watchers, through to weekend and longer camp-outs. Highlights included the Bournda and Round Hill camp-outs, the walks at East O'Malley, the electric boat up the Molonglo River to see the nesting darters etc, and the swift parrot search around Boorowa. As can be seen the aim this year was arrange a wider range of opportunities, so that there would be at least some trips that appealed to each member.

Field trips are a very important part of COG's activities. Not only do they help members learn about birds and visit places that are other wise hard to get to, but also there are important social and conservation aspects. Thanks to all those who helped lead and organise outings during the year, and we look forward to your continued assistance in a healthy field trips program.

OTHER ISSUES

Committee

The Committee has worked effectively and I would like to thank all for the support they have given me over the last year. Most Committee members have signalled their intent to stand for Committee again, and I'm sure COG can look forward to their continuing support. I would like to especially thank those members who are retiring from committee — David Rosalky, who retired mid year; and Paul Fennell and Doug Laing, who have served on the committee for a number of years, including as president and secretary, respectively, for some of this time.

An organisation can only be effective if it is financially secure and has an active membership. As will be evident from her report, Joan Lipscombe continues to do a great job as Treasurer, and we have a healthy bank account. Thank you once again Joan for all you have done. And thank you also to Noel Luff, our Honorary Auditor.

Membership was 330 at 30 June 2003, 7% up from the same time last year.

It is a unique feature of COG that much of our business is carried out by keen members and project organisers who are not members of the Committee, but nevertheless make a huge contribution to the success of the organisation. Whilst it is not possible to thank them all individually, I would like to mention some names of those who quietly work away in the background.

Conservation

Once again COG received funding from the ACT Government for the third year of its threatened species woodland bird monitoring project. These funds continue to provide valuable support for our woodland work, which has been running for eight years now. We again focussed on using existing data to identify and set up long term monitoring sites for listed threatened species (Hooded Robin and Brown Treecreeper), and to nominate additional birds for threatened species status. These submissions were managed by Nicki Taws and forwarded to the ACT Flora and Fauna Committee for assessment. I understand the matter may be currently with the ACT Environment Minister for determination.

Julie McGuinness has continued to work as our Conservation Officer, ably assisted by Jenny Bounds. Jenny is also vice-President of the Conservation Council for the SE Region and Canberra, and both represent COGs interests in that forum, participating in campaigns and various working groups of the Council. They have prepared submissions on a range of environmental issues of concern to COG, including the Draft Woodland Strategy (which incorporates the Action Plans for threatened birds), the proposed development of East O'Malley woodland, the future management and land use for the southern ACT following the January bushfires, the North Gungahlin Structure Plan (concerns about the expansive growth of Gungahlin and its encroachment on the borders of Mulligans Flat Reserve), and management of Common Mynahs. Through the Conservation Council, both Jenny and Julie had substantial input to an options paper to Government on the management of domestic cats in the proposed new suburbs of Forde and Bonner adjacent to Mulligan's Flat, to better protect the biodiversity of Mulligan's Flat and the new Gooroo reserve.

During the year, the Government announced two new reserves at Gooroo in East Gungahlin and Callum Brae, which will protect a large area of important woodland for threatened birds. However, COG remains very concerned about the future of remaining Yellow Box/Red Gum woodlands in the ACT, and the two resident, threatened birds, the Brown Treecreeper and Hooded Robin that continue to decline. This is against a background of Government decisions to develop remaining areas containing woodlands such as East O'Malley, to continue with full scale development in Gungahlin which will destroy much remaining woodland there and impact on the reserves adjacent to housing, and plans to develop in the future the Molonglo Valley and Kowen Forest for greenfields housing as announced in the recent Draft Spatial Plan.

Communications and Publications

During the year Tanya Rough did a wonderful job editing and publishing our newsletter, including. Thanks also to Rosemary Ryan and Lia Battison and the team of helpers for distributing *Gang-gang*.

Lia has now taken on the role of coordinating the mailing of *Gang-gang*, and we thank her predecessor Rosemary for her contribution.

Harvey Perkins and Barbara Allan continued to do a professional job in editing *Canberra Bird Notes*.

Mike O'Shaughnessy maintained COG's web site <http://www.canberrabirds.dynamite.com.au> for much of the year. The website presents information about COG presentations and field trips as reported in *Gang-gang*, together with other useful information about COG and its activities. Thank you Mike for providing such a good service over the last few years. David Cook has now taken over and is doing a great job.

COG's email discussion list 'canberrabirds', managed by David McDonald, continued to operate effectively throughout the year. It has over 140 subscribers and averages about four messages per day, providing a useful forum for members and friends of COG to discuss topical issues relating to birds and birding in the Canberra region. One role it has filled this year has been that of an unusual bird alerting service, facilitating the rapid spread of information about interested bird sightings in the region.

Atlas, Woodland Survey, Garden Bird Survey, Waterbird Survey, Databases

COG runs a number of bird monitoring projects, some of which have been operating for many years. Before referring to these projects individually, I would like to thank all those who have contributed data to these projects for a number of years, and continue to do so. The value of these projects relies upon sustained contributions from participants, and the level of support, which we receive in this area, is remarkable. Thank you to all those who contribute records so diligently.

As part of Birds Australia's Ongoing Atlas project, COG members are encouraged to collect records for COG's area of interest, especially at regular 2-hectare sites. It is very important to collect this data over time. Thank you to all members who continue to collect records, and particularly those who have adopted regular 2-hectare sites. It is these sites that form the backbone of much of our environmental monitoring, providing data capable of detecting future changes in bird abundance.

The other important component of COG's environmental monitoring program is the Woodland Monitoring Project. COG's surveys in grassy woodland habitats continued with further support from an ACT Government Environment Grant. Jenny Bounds coordinates this project with Nicki Taws and myself forming the other members of the Management Team. Alison Rowell was contracted to coordinate the quarterly surveys and data collection. Surveys are now conducted at 11 Grassy Woodland locations in key areas, in all a total of 113 sub-sites are monitored every three months. Thank you to the people involved in this project, which include Jenny Bounds, Isobel Crawford, Geoffrey Dabb, Paul Fennell, Malcolm Fyfe, John Goldie, Michael Lenz, David McDonald, Julie McGuinness, Harvey Perkins, Nicki Taws, and Kathy Walter. This year the data collected since 1995 was analysed by Ross Cunningham, an expert statistician in biodiversity projects to guide future work on the project. A preliminary report on this analysis has been provided to interested members and is also available on the COG website.

An element of the Woodland and Atlas monitoring programs is to set up long-term monitoring sites for threatened species, the Hooded Robin and Brown Treecreeper, using a selection of existing woodland and 2-hectare sites where these species have been recorded. COG has engaged Nicki Taws to work in consultation with Environment ACT (ACT Wildlife and Monitoring) to coordinate this work. Surveys of these sites are being conducted twice a year, in September and December using either the woodland or Atlas methodology as appropriate.

Thanks to Philip Veerman, and his successor Mark Clayton, for their work in managing the Garden Bird Survey, and to Kay Hahne for continuing to assist with entering the data. This project has now been in existence for over 21 years and is our longest running monitoring project. In particular, I would like to acknowledge the efforts of Philip, who ran this project for many years.

Another long-running project is the waterbird survey. Thanks to Michael Lenz, who not only conceived the idea for this work, but still continues to manage the survey. Unfortunately, because Lakes George and Bathurst are currently dry, there has been limited activity on this project over the last 12 months.

Paul Fennell continued to manage COG's databases, ensuring that data are effectively curated and files regularly backed-up. Special thanks to those members who assisted with data checking and entry during the year, including Chris Davey, Malcolm Fyfe, Tony Harding and Harvey Perkins. The efforts of Tony Harding, who left the ACT some time ago now but who continues to support our data entry, deserve a special mention.

Annual Bird Reports

Many thanks to Barbara Allan, Grahame Clark, Bob Digan, Malcolm Fyfe, Ian McMahan, Harvey Perkins, David Purchase and Nicki Taws and others who have managed to keep the Annual Bird Reports up to date.

Monthly Meetings

Barbara Allan has again organised an excellent program of presentations for our monthly meetings. The reports in *Gang-gang* and on the COG website every month attest to the quality of our meetings. Special thanks also to Carol Macleay and her numerous helpers for running the monthly stall and raffle at COG meetings. Barbara Allan also organised the refreshments for the meetings.

COG Administration & the COG Office

COG continued to hold its meetings at the Canberra Girls Grammar School theatre, which is proving to be an excellent venue. We are very grateful to Sue Lashko for arranging this venue.

The COG Office is now a focal point for Committee administration and storage of COG equipment, data sheets, the COG computer and database and the COG slide collection.

Barbara Allan took over the running of the office when our office manager resigned to have a baby and kept things running smoothly. During the year John Lang provided assistance in the office as part of the Work for the Dole scheme for a period of six months. I would like to record the committee's gratitude for the work that he did whilst working with COG.

David McDonald, Joan Lipscombe and Geoffrey Dabb were always available to provide quality advice on COG's constitutional and organisational framework.

Canberra Birds Conservation Fund

The Canberra Birds Conservation Fund is able to receive tax-deductible donations from COG members and the general public, and uses the donated money on activities that help to achieve COG's environmental objectives, especially promoting the conservation of the Canberra region's native birds and their habitats. Members continue to give generously to this fund. The Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies (CRES) provided a donation of \$1500 in recognition of the valuable contribution made by COG volunteers in undertaking fieldwork for research projects being conducted by David Lindenmayer and his team.

The Fund's first grant was made last year to Mr Adrian Manning of the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, ANU, to assist in a study he is now close to completing: "A multi-scale study of the Superb Parrot". This project aims to examine the impact agricultural practices are having on the survival of Superb Parrots, leading to the development of related conservation strategies. The Fund's Management Committee has recently approved a second grant, details of which will be announced soon.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone else who has provided with me assistance, not just over the last year, but also over the last four years that I have been President. For those that aren't aware, I am leaving Canberra for Hobart where I will continue with my work on the conservation of seabirds. I

have enjoyed my time in this position, and have only regretted the limited time that I have had to attend meetings during this time, because of extensive travel commitments with work. I am extremely grateful for the support given by so many of COG's members to ensure our group continued its good work promoting the birds of Canberra and their conservation. COG is a great organisation, and it has been an honour to serve as President. I wish the group and all its members well for the future.

Barry Baker 12 November 2003.