

## **CANBERRA ORNITHOLOGISTS GROUP - President's Report for 2005-2006**

It is a pleasure to provide my third President's report, this time on COG activities for the period October 2005 to the present.

Though I feel there have been ever more demands on my time, looking back over the past 12 months there seem to have been fewer notable achievements compared with those for the previous two years. Again the reasons for this are unclear, but possibly related to when you start a job less is expected of your involvement in the day to day running of the organisation, but as time goes by and you become more familiar with the many aspects and demands this involves, the more you get tied up with the everyday happenings. For example, a significant proportion of my time in the past year seemed to be needed to sort out COG's volunteer insurance required as part of the more exacting demands of Environment ACT for the receipt of the woodland grant.

After 3 years as President, and with the expectation of continuing for another year, it's perhaps a good time to reflect on how well I think COG is running. In my view there are some things we do pretty well. We run very successful meetings with an excellent range of interesting speakers, which continue to attract a significant part of the membership etc each month. We have a very varied and popular field trip (outings) program, which continues to be very well patronised and to find new places to go to, though perhaps not quite as exotic as in the past. Our work on conservation matters remains very involved and demanding, and our views as a well balanced and apolitical organisation continue to be valued. Our range of surveys and the databases into which these feed continue to provide extremely useful information to both government and industry. Our chat line has become an extremely popular for the exchange of information and views on a wide range of birding topics, and our expanding web site now carries a wealth of useful information as well as the very popular Photo Gallery.

While anyone reading this report will have to be impressed by COG's range of activities and the sheer volume of effort expended by our members, there are still many things that COG continues not to do well, or at all. For example, COG continues to do very little specifically to attract younger members, including in the areas of education, and we still have not been able to regularly partake in exhibitions, other than static unattended ones. We continue to carry a large surplus of funds. While the committee has continued to be cautious to ensure that before we embark on anything new it is carefully examined, particularly the likelihood whether COG can deliver in a timely and professional way, we would welcome ideas from the membership how this could be put to better use. Hopefully with the handover of some of my responsibilities that I've carried for the past 3 years, I'll be able to devote some of my time and energy in driving one or two projects in these areas. I'd certainly be very happy to hear of any ideas you might have.

### **Committee**

I have again been very well supported by the Committee over the past year. This AGM quite a few Committee members are standing down, which is understandable as everyone, no matter how energetic and hardworking, needs time to refresh. So it certainly is the time to attract "new blood" with fresh ideas and new enthusiasm, who can help carry on and build on the good work of their predecessors.

I would like to especially thank those members who are retiring from committee. For many years Barbara Allan has done an excellent job for COG wearing many hats as Secretary and more lately our Public Officer, co-editor of Canberra Bird Notes, excellent organiser of speakers for our meetings, driver of the records management committee and our Annual Bird report, organiser of our bird blitz, etc, etc. On behalf of everyone I'd like to offer our sincere thanks to Barbara for all the work she has done for COG, and to wish her well as she starts a period of lower involvement. Nicki Taws, my vice president for the past 3 years, is also stepping down from the committee after a much longer involvement in surveys and organising/leading outings etc. David Rosalky is also finding that being retired is not allowing him as much time as he would like on COG matters. My thanks to both for their contributions.

Members as at 30 June 2006– 362 "subscriptions", including a number of family memberships, 11 BIGnet exchange organisations; and one copyright deposit organisation – in terms of actual individuals, this equates to a membership of over 500.

Again many members not formally on the committee have helped COG in its daily activities, making a huge contribution to the success of the organisation. It is not possible in this report to individually thank all, and I apologise to those I have inadvertently, or for reasons of space, neglected to mention. A particular mention and thanks should, however, go to Alastair Smith who has both developed and maintained the COG membership database for the past 6 years.

COG is regularly asked to provide speakers, or to take bird walks for the general public. My thanks go to Geoff Dabb and Anthony Overs, for talks, and to Anthony, Louise Muir, Harvey Perkins, Tom Green, Alastair Smith, Henry Nix, Jenny Bounds and many more who have led bird walks on our behalf.

## **Conservation**

Jenny Bounds and Julie McGuinness have continued to work as COG's Conservation Officers, although Jenny has undertaken much of this work in the last six months. Julie, unfortunately, has had to step down from this role, and I thank her for her contribution over many years on the committee helping with conservation matters. Jenny, as President of the Conservation Council for the SE Region and Canberra, also represents the interests of birds in that forum.

The Molonglo Valley has emerged as an important area of interest for COG, with ACT Government plans to develop parts of the Valley for housing. Our concerns range from protection of the significant raptor community in the Valley, some 13 species including possibly the last two breeding pairs of Little Eagles in the ACT. Little Eagles have declined as a breeding species from some 13 breeding pairs identified in the ACT Atlas survey in the late 1980s. Jenny Bounds, on behalf of COG, recently drafted and submitted a nomination of the Little Eagle as a 'vulnerable' species to the ACT Government.

Other areas of concern this year include the ACT Government's budget cuts to environmental staffing and services. COG wrote to the ACT Chief Minister expressing concerns about the impacts for on-ground staff and environmental programs, the possible loss of the ACT Parks and Conservation Service name and Gang-gang logo, and the loss of a visible public identity for the environment within a large municipal services portfolio. COG is very concerned about there being inadequate on-ground staff to undertake the full range of environmental services, compliance work and community education functions associated with the management of our parks and reserves and the very large land estate in the Lower Cotter Catchment. Ranger levels are already very low and some tasks like regular patrols in our nature reserves and national parks no longer appear to be possible due to other priorities such as fire and weeds management. It is disappointing to see that illegal, sophisticated mountain bike jumps are again appearing in some of our urban reserves, going un-noticed for months, and that trail bikers have taken over in the Lower Cotter (former pine forest estate now part of the water catchment). While we understand the Gang-gang logo will be retained in some form, the final outcome of the re-structure and staffing cuts is still unclear.

An important new page, 'Conserving Birds' has been added to the COG website. This page focuses on the conservation of woodland birds and the COG Woodland Bird Monitoring Project, featuring declining woodland birds, Woodland Project reports, and key COG conservation submissions. Recently, Fact Sheets have been developed for four of the woodland project sites, Newline, Red Hill, Callum Brae and Gorooyaroo; two of these are now available on the COG website with two others almost finalised. Jenny Bounds coordinated this work with text contributions for some sites prepared by Jenny, Harvey Perkins, Geoffrey Dabb and Nicki Taws, and layout by Anne Rawson.

COG prepared submissions and/or other input on a range of conservation matters in 2005/06 (including contributing to submissions made by the Conservation Council). These are some highlights:

- the ACT Planning Systems Reform Project: COG provided a submission to a preliminary paper, seeking better and more independent environmental impact assessments given the failures of the existing system to protect important areas of native vegetation and bird habitats from development, eg East O'Malley, Black Mountain Nature Reserve.
- Inquiry into Urban Vegetation and Wildlife Corridors - ACT Legislative Assembly Committee: Amongst other matters, COG advocated for a wider link between the two NE reserves which are joined by a narrow neck of land which may not function as a viable corridor for some species of

birds/animals. COG also advocated for the borders of Mulligan's Flat and Gorooyaroo to be reviewed and brought back to Horse Park Drive to create a better buffer from urban impacts. The Assembly's report agreed and recommended to the ACT Government that this be reviewed. Although not fully accepting the recommendation, the ACT Government has indicated this will be considered at an appropriate time in the future planning for the suburb of Throsby. COG is hopeful that the experimental research being undertaken by the ANU/CRES in the reserves will inform this issue in a positive way.

- Water Skiing in East Basin of Lake Burley Griffin: COG has continued to make representations to the National Capital Authority regarding their decision to allow regular water skiing in East Basin near the Jerrabomberra wetlands, and the process involved in this outcome, especially the lack of consultation with many interest groups regarding the skiing trial; COG made an FOI request for documents regarding the environmental impact assessments and the trial, but were dismayed to learn that this would cost more than \$2000; and we were unable to proceed further on this matter.
- Namadgi National Park Draft Management Plan: While endorsing the broad management objectives of the Plan, COG commented on the lack of a bird species list and fire management issues for wet forest specialists and ground foraging birds, eg Pilotbird, Brush Bronzewing; COG opposed a proposed tourist route including Warks Rd being established, which would mean upgrading roads and vegetation clearance; COG supported a proposal by the ACT National Parks Assoc for re-establishment of native vegetation around Gudgenby Homestead.
- Molonglo Valley Planning Study: COG sent a submission to this preliminary structure plan, outlining concerns about birds of prey habitats and impacts on a Brown Treecreeper population in woodlands near Belconnen; we await the public release of various environmental studies which have since taken place.
- Lower Cotter Catchment Draft Strategic Management Plan: COG sent a submission broadly supporting its objectives to allow the catchment to return to native vegetation and to cease further plantings of exotic pines, as this would provide significant additional habitats for a range of birds.
- Capital Wind Farm (eastern side of Lake George): COG sent a letter to the NSW Government commenting on a flora and fauna assessment which did not adequately address potential impacts on birds; while COG supports renewable energy forms this does not excuse developers from meeting their obligations to undertake proper environmental assessments. Wind farm developments have been quiet in 2006 and the proposal for the Molonglo Ridge near Googong dam is now on hold.

The above is not fully comprehensive but does give a very good picture of the very broad range of conservation issues COG faces, with our views often being actively sought.

### ***Field trips***

We have continued to run a very active program of field trips, which have been extremely well patronised. I have retained overall responsibility for management of the COG Field Trips, and the 2006 program was devised with the assistance of the Field Trips Team (Jenny Bounds, David McDonald and Tom Green). The aim of the program, to offer a wide range of both local and further afield outings opportunities to attract a broad cross-section of the membership, was maintained.

Highlights included the Cape Conran, Wadbilliga NP, Munghorn Gap NR, and Nangar NP camp-outs, the accommodated trips to Green Cape, the Shoalhaven for shorebirds, the Jamberoo Valley/Barren Grounds and Broulee, and the bus tours to the Molonglo Valley as well as attempting to locate in one day all 11 raptor species that occur in Canberra. Some places were revisited successfully such as the overnight camp-out at Frogs' Hole Creek at Frogmore, the survey for the Taylor's Creek Landcare Group, and the combined FOG visit to Garuwanga near Nimmitabel. We have continued our links with like-minded organisations, holding another outing with the Goulburn Field Naturalists Society with the camp-out at Bungonia. My thanks again to all those who helped lead and organise outings during the year and who wrote up reports of trips for Gang-gang and on the chat line - we look forward to your continued assistance.

My commitment to the program for the past 5 years, including managing it for 4 of these (three of which I have also been President), is testament to my view of the importance of field trips in the spectrum of COG's activities. However, I am pleased to announce that Anthony Overs, who is both an excellent birder and has lead a number of trips, especially for beginners, has offered to take over as field trips organiser for 2006-2007. While I will still maintain a strong interest, it will allow my focus to be towards leading this organisation in what I expect will be my final year as President.

### **Communications and Publications**

Greg Ramsay has taken over the task of editing and publishing our newsletter, Gang-gang, very ably assisted by Sue Lashko, while Judy Collett now co-ordinates the wrapping and mailing with her team of helpers. Thanks to all involved for ensuring that the major vehicle for COG communication was prepared and distributed in such a timely fashion.

Harvey Perkins and Barbara Allan continued to edit *Canberra Bird Notes*, which in 2005-06 included articles on post-fire activity, the decline in Little Eagle numbers, whether Australian King-Parrots breed in Canberra Nature Park, and many other topics. Our thanks go to all contributors to CBN.

David Cook maintained and continued to expand COG's web site, <http://www.canberrabirds.org.au>. The Gang-gang newsletters continue to be available on the website in PDF format, or viewable as Web pages; the online *Birds of Canberra Gardens*, courtesy of Paul Fennell, is now available through the COG website; and indices and abstracts for recent Canberra Bird Notes volumes 28 (2003) to 30 (2005) are available. There are now in excess of 2200 photographs of ACT region birds submitted by COG members on the Photo Gallery - requests for their non-commercial use continue to come in. Thank you David for providing such an excellent service.

COG's email announcement and discussion list CanberraBirds, managed by David McDonald, continued to operate effectively throughout the year. The membership has increased to more than 200 subscribers, providing a very useful forum for members and friends of COG to discuss topical issues relating to birds and birding in the Canberra region. It continues to serve as an excellent way to rapidly disseminate reports of interesting sightings in the local region, as well as a useful medium to help less experienced members improve their birding skills by benefiting from the advice and wisdom of the more senior subscribers. Could I ask everyone to please be patient and helpful in this regard.

### **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. COG members are still encouraged to collect records for COG's area of interest, especially at regular 2-hectare sites as part of Birds Australia's Ongoing Atlas project. This continues despite the Atlas having been published in 2003, and it remains very important to collect this data over time. My thanks go to Tony Harding for the data input; and Nicki Taws, Chris Davey and Harvey Perkins for checking datasheets. The successful blitz during Bird Week in October, aimed at providing a snapshot of the birds present across the whole of the ACT over one weekend, was very helpful in raising the profile of the COG database. While it is being repeated this year, more can be done. Development of a system to allow electronic submission of data should also help in this regard, and I'm pleased that after a long delay following the engagement of a professional consultant the new version is currently being road tested. I'm sure that many members will welcome the opportunity to lodge data in this way.

The COG Woodland Bird Monitoring Project continues to go from strength to strength, and has now been running for over 10 years at some sites, with 14 grassy woodland locations/135 monitoring points being surveyed every three months by a dedicated group of COG members. This project is almost at its maximum capacity in terms of the number of sites we can manage, however, we are adding seven new monitoring points in a new location in the Jerrabomberra Valley, as we believe this will add value to the Project with more sites for Brown Treecreeper and several declining woodland birds.

Jenny Bounds is Convenor of the Management Committee which coordinates this project and organises much of the operational work, with Nicki Taws and Jack Holland forming the other members of the Management Team. Alison Rowell, Environmental Consultant, continues to have a key role as

consultant to the project, coordinating the quarterly surveys and data collection at sites, as well as providing a voluntary input.

In 2006, an analysis of data from the Project for the years 1998 to 2004 at all locations was finalised and a report published in the June 2006 edition of Canberra Bird Notes, and on the COG website. This analysis showed that a number of bird species have declined in grassy woodland habitats over that period, particularly ground feeders. It also informed the ACT contribution to the 'State of Australia's Birds 2005 - woodlands and birds' report published by Birds Australia as a supplement to Wingspan in December 2005. A further data analysis is underway including data to the end of 2005 for all sites, as well as separate analyses for Mulligan's Flat and Gorooyarroo north sites.

Thank you to the members involved in this important, long-term project for COG, which include Jenny Bounds, Geoffrey Dabb, Paul Fennell, John Goldie, Steve Holliday, David Cook, Michael Lenz, David McDonald, Julie McGuinness, Harvey Perkins, Alison Rowell, Nicki Taws, Chris Davey and Kathy Walter, and others who assist the site coordinators with surveys at some sites.

I'd like to thank David Rosalky who has managed the Garden Bird Survey (GBS). Also my warm thanks go to Kay Hahne for continuing to enter the data, a huge task, especially as the number of chartists increases. This major project has now completed 25 years and is our longest running monitoring project. It is used increasingly by researchers and its results used to support policy submissions. Over 70 charts have been distributed for year 26, 2006-07. With the "Silver Jubilee" year completed, a Review of the Survey, aimed at ensuring that it remains a members' survey whilst keeping up with developments in technology and science, is underway, with Chris Davey convening a team of experts who have long histories with the GBS.

COG's Rarities Panel, comprising Richard Allen, Jenny Bounds, Grahame Clark, Mark Clayton and Nicki Taws, continued to meet quarterly to consider, and endorse where appropriate, records of unusual species seen in COG's area of concern, and to continuously review the status of birds in our area. My thanks go to the Panel for their work.

### ***Annual Bird Reports***

Thanks go to Paul Fennell and David Rosalky who continue to manage COG's databases. Paul and David extracted and collated the data for the 2004-05 annual bird report, which was compiled by a dedicated team of writers, Barbara Allan, Grahame Clark, Michael Lenz, David McDonald, Ian McMahon, Harvey Perkins, David Purchase and Nicki Taws, who produced the species reports. Thanks to all those involved, for their work in getting the report out in a timely fashion.

### ***Monthly Meetings***

We again enjoyed a varied program of speakers at our monthly meetings, including good numbers of entertaining and inspiring higher degree students and post-doctoral fellows on topics as diverse as the the Grey-crowned Babbler, vocal recognition in the White-browed Scrub-wren and the ecology of the Brown Treecreeper, as well as the adverse effects of the Common Mynah. A very special event was the memorable Quiz night organised and presented by Ian Fraser for our January meeting. Our thanks to Sue Lashko for continuing to facilitate our use of the Canberra Girls Grammar School venue; and to Carol Macleay for her long-term commitment to the sales table.

### ***COG Administration & the COG Office***

As I indicated in my last report, COG decided against maintaining an office in the Griffin Centre. For the time being, our records and library are housed in a separately accessible room in our secretary's home. Access is by arrangement with the secretary or, in her absence, with any member of the COG executive. Our camping and display equipment and archival records continue to be held in storage in Belconnen and again may be accessed by arrangement with any of the executive.

## ***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 give generously to this fund and are encouraged to continue to do so.

The Fund's third grantee, Dr Janet Gardner, used the funds provided to undertake a scholarly analysis of breeding plumage of the Speckled Warbler in the Canberra region, a woodland bird species considered by many to be threatened in this region. The fourth grantee, Mr Chris Davey, in conjunction with Dr Peter Fullagar and volunteer bird surveyors, has used the funds provided to help implement a particularly important study into the response of the Superb Lyrebird to the 2003 wildfires in the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.

## ***Conclusion***

I would like to thank everyone else who has provided with me assistance over the past year and look forward to one final and active year guiding this very worthy organisation.

Jack Holland

11 October 2006