



# Gang-gang

**MARCH 2021**

Newsletter of the Canberra Ornithologists Group Inc.

## MARCH MEETING

**Wednesday 10 March 2021  
7.30pm**

**normal face-to-face meeting**

*Following the approval of our COVID Safety Plan, COG will hold our 10 February meeting as a face-to-face one at the usual venue, Canberra Girls Grammar School (CGGS) Multi-media centre, corner Gawler Cres and Melbourne Ave, Deakin.*

Attendees will need to sit so that there is only one person per 2 sq m and with 1.5 m distancing, by maintaining 2 spare seats between people except for members of the same family or group of close contacts.

All attendees must practice good hand and respiratory hygiene and stay home if unwell.

As required by the ACT Government for application of the 2 sq m per person rule, the 'Check in CBR' app will be used to collect participants' contact details, using the QR code displayed at the entrance to the venue.

If attendees do not have or cannot share this app, COG will make a paper record of their names and contact details.

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**Everyone welcome**

## Summary/analysis of the past month and what to watch out for this month

Over the four weeks from 27 January covered by this column, the heat wave conditions changed into a very wet conditions with 125 mm of rain at my place in Chapman over the first 12 days. While it then has been drier, it has mainly been cool and often cloudy. My impression was that as a result bird activity within the COG Area of Interest (AoI) seemed to have been a bit more subdued, there has still been lots to report, with just a few species departing a bit earlier than in the past few seasons.

Of the early leaving or occasionally present spring/summer migrants, there have been no further reports of the **Australian Painted-snipe**, **Black-eared Cuckoo**, **Painted Honeyeater**, **White-browed** or **Masked Woodswallows**. The only report of the **Brown Songlark** was by Zebedee Muller at the Jerrabomberra Grasslands NR on 29 January. While the **Horsfield's Bushlark** was still reported from 4 locations, only one of these was in this month, on 13 February by Shorty from the Parkwood area. In contrast the **Rufous Songlark** was still reported from 13 locations, and the **White-winged Triller** from around 15 locations, both up to the time of writing, indicating that they did not leave early.

*Continued Page 3*



*David Cook*

**Eastern Bristlebird** (Shoalhaven trip)

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## MARCH MEETING *continued from Page 1*

**Proposed attendees should make themselves familiar with COG's approved COVID Safety Plan for CGGS, the full details of which are available on COG's website.**

The first presentation will be by **Sandra Henderson** who will provide some information on the "**Great-crested Grebe breeding event on the Cotter Dam**".

The main presentation will be by **Shoshana Rapley**, a Ph D student at the ANU, entitled "**An update on the warabin (Bush Stone-curlew) reintroduction to the ACT**".

Bush Stone-curlews (called *warabin* in Ngunnawal language) are endangered in NSW, Victoria and South Australia. They went extinct in the ACT in the 1970s but have been reintroduced at Mulligans Flat. COG has supported the reintroduction effort since it started in 2014. For this talk, Shoshana is looking forward to updating COG on 1. what has happened in the last seven years of reintroduction efforts, 2. her honours project in 2019-2020, and 3. where to from here.

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## Committee News

The COG committee met on 18 February for its regular monthly meeting.

The committee planning day mentioned last month has been scheduled for 27 February.

On 4 February, Chris Davey showed Rebecca Vassarotti MLA, Minister for the Environment and Jo Clay MLA, Member for Ginninderra around Jerrabomberra Wetlands. This provided an opportunity for COG to raise the problems caused by increased general recreational use of the area which is having negative effects for birds and other wildlife.

As you will know from the reports in Gang-gang every quarter, a dedicated group of surveyors monitor birds in the ACT's woodlands. Twenty years of data have been analysed and a report is almost complete. When it is published it will be an incredibly valuable overview of the status of birds in our local woodland areas. The Committee endorsed an addition to the study that will look at the impacts of **Noisy Miners** on woodland bird diversity.

The committee would like to remind members and friends that visitors are welcome to join field trips, but COG has a long-standing policy to give preference to members when numbers are limited. Potential members are welcome to come along while they decide whether to join COG. However, membership fees pay for COG's insurance so after three trips please encourage your friends to join COG.

The Committee endorsed the appointment of two new members to the Steve Wilson Medal Committee; Jack Holland and Sue Lashko. Congratulations and thank you to Jack and Sue. They replace Bruce Lindenmayer and Alison Russell-French who were inaugural members of the Committee. The committee thanked Bruce and Alison for their deliberations and involvement since 2014.

As could be expected after Jack's presentation about koels at the February member's meeting our secretary, Bill, has received at least 10 emails this year asking for bird identification where the answer was 'a koel, a type of cuckoo'. A notable exception was the photo of two **Grey Butcherbirds** sitting on top of a backyard aviary.

Neil Hermes *President*

Alison Mackerras *Minutes Secretary*

## Summary/analysis of the past month and what to watch out for this month

*continued from Page 1*

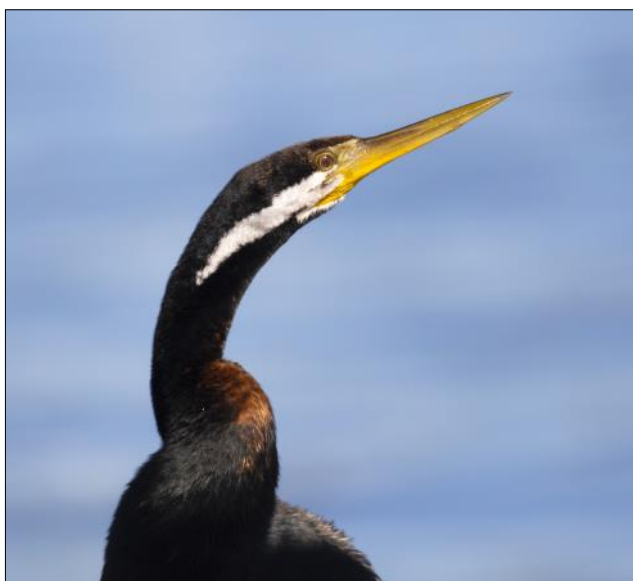
The big surprise is that, despite the wet conditions at the beginning, there still have been no reports of the **White-throated Needletail** this summer, and over the period only two reports of the related **Fork-tailed Swift**, 40 over the Baroona Wetlands south of Michelago on 27 January, and two birds over Symonston on 7 February. There has been some inconclusive discussion on the COG chat line about possible reasons why there have been so few reported, noting they have been observed both from the coast and further inland. So please look out for them during March especially as storm fronts approach, though they can also be seen hawking in clean air.

The **Cicadabird** was still reported from 3 locations, all still in the mountains to the SW of Canberra, and most recently at Warks Road at New Chums Road by Kim Farley on 22 February. The **Brush Cuckoo**, which also often leaves by the end of February, was reported from seven locations during the period, all from the mountains to the SW of Canberra except for the latest two reports, both on 18 February at the Cotter Reserve and Symonston, an indication that this species had started to migrate. There have been 2 reports of the **Channel-billed Cuckoo** over the period, single birds from Fraser on 2 February and Reid on 13 February. Of the more inland cuckoos the **Horsfield's Bronze-cuckoo** was recorded from just five locations, and the **Pallid Cuckoo** from just four locations in the period. Their numbers over summer have been relatively low, despite the promising start in spring.

During March please keep an eye out for the above and other spring/summer migrant species such as the **Dollarbird**, **Rainbow Bee-eater** and **Sacred Kingfisher** which all usually leave, in that order, by mid-March (all three were still widely reported during February, up to the time of writing). Other birds that mostly leave by the end of March/early April include the **Eastern Koel**, **Leaden Flycatcher**, **Latham's Snipe**, **Australian Reed-Warbler** (often very quiet this month), **Tree** and **Fairy Martins**, all of which were still widely reported in February. The passage migrants the **Satin Flycatcher** and **Rufous Fantail**, were both still reported from

*Richard Arculus*

*Australian Darter*



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Good birding, good food

### **Top End birding tour**

10 — 24 May 2021  
Darwin, Kakadu, Katherine,  
Kununurra, Mitchell Plateau

### **Atherton Tablelands & Iron Range NP**

Cairns & Atherton  
31 May — 5 June 2021

### **Julatten to Iron Range NP**

5 June — 13 June 2021

### **The Pilbara birding tours NW WA**

29 June—8 July 2021

12 July—21 July 2021

### **Central Australia**

6 — 16 August 2021  
Alice Springs, West MacDonnell  
Ranges, Glen Helen, Yulara,  
Erdunda, Marla

### **Nullarbor Plain birding tour**

5 - 20 September 2021

### **Plains-wanderer Weekends 2021**

16 & 17 October 2021  
30 & 31 October 2021  
27 & 28 November 2021

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NSW, and all of Victoria.

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over 10 locations, all from the mountains to the SW of Canberra, an indication that they had not yet started to move.

Other species move from the mountains but will stay here over winter, so watch out for the first altitudinal migrants, the **Scarlet Robin**, **Golden Whistler** and **White-eared Honeyeater**. Observations of the first of these have been fairly limited over the summer with reports from just 10 locations over the period. Three of these were peri-urban, though encouragingly Julie Clark recorded four **Scarlet Robins** at Mulligans Flat on 8 February. So please watch out for the first arrivals of these as well as the **Grey Shrike-thrush**, which also moves into these areas in autumn. The **Flame Robin** usually moves in a bit later, though Bill Graham recorded a male at Mulligans Flat on 22 February.

Of the “unusual” species that might be expected here over the period, perhaps the most interesting was the **White-throated Nightjar** seen by Timothée Bonnet on the evening of 11 February at Mulligans Flat. The 2018-2019 Annual Bird Report (ABR) notes it as a rare, breeding occasional summer visitor from coastal areas for which there were two records in the previous year. Timothée noted it was hawking and catching insects above the west-most small pond, along the main path, close to the woolshed at around 8:30 pm (at dusk but not dark yet). He thought that nightjars sometimes have evening routines, so maybe there was a chance it will visit this pond (or others in the area) in the coming evenings around the same time. However, it appears from the eBird map no-one else has been able to find it, though I am certain it would have been looked for.

In contrast a species it would not have been worth going out to search for was the (very probably) **Gould’s Petrel** found in Chisholm and brought into care to ACT Wildlife on 31 January. Wildlife carer Susan Wishart held it overnight, and after Marg Peachey had rehydrated it, took it down to Batemans Bay, where she met up with the carers from the Australian Seabirds Rescue and handed it over for specialized care. They thought it was in good condition, particularly the feathers which seem to be one of the major criteria for viability. So it was a likely happy ending for a species that was well off course. This came around the same time of the year as the **White-bellied Storm Petrel**, **White-tailed** and **Red-tailed Tropicbirds** sightings in the COG Aol in 2020, as well as the **Eastern Curlew** in March, though in this case there wasn’t nearly the same extreme weather event to explain it.

A species at an unexpected location was the six **Australian Shelducks** found by Liam Manderson on the upper Cotter Dam on 7 February. This number exceeds those reported during the period from their usual spots around Bungendore, but is dwarfed by the 720 Michael Lenz reported from the eastern shores of Lake George on 28 January. **Freckled Ducks** have been reported only from the Jerrabomberra Wetlands NR area, and were last reported on 14 February, so they may have moved on. A **Blue-billed Duck** was last reported from Upper Stranger Pond on 31 January, although one was reported from the adjacent Isabella Pond on 22 February, and one from North Weston Ponds on 10 February. **Musk Ducks** have been reported from six locations during the period.

As I reported in my February 2021 Gang-gang column the main breeding area for cormorants and **Australian Darters** in the ACT still appears to be along the Molonglo River west of the Tuggeranong Parkway overpass for about a kilometre downstream. On 3 February Jean Casburn informed me that she, Sandra Henderson, Lia Battisson, Ryu Callaway, Prue Watters and Tee Tong Teo had counted 7 **Australian Darter**, 8 **Little Pied Cormorant**, 8 **Great Cormorant** and 8 **Little Black Cormorant** nests there, similar to the numbers at the end of December 2020. Sandra also reported that on 7 February there were still 3 **Little Pied Cormorant** nests at Tuggeranong Marsh, which seemed new and suggested a new round of breeding. While the **Australian Darter** breeding on the Cotter Dam as accessed from Bracks Hole Rd Coree seems to have finished, with Sandra not reporting any breeding there on 8 February, on 25 January Ryu and Zebedee Muller reported nests with young of the **Australian Darter**, **Little Pied Cormorant** and **Great Cormorant** on the dam, when accessed from the Vanitys Crossing Road in Pierces Creek Forest

Reports for the **Stubble Quail** dropped to around 20 locations over the period, very likely an indication of how much we rely on their call for their presence. However, they are still high compared with the **Brown Quail** reported from just eight locations. A **Painted Buttonquail** was reported only from Campbell Park on 27 January, where Jackson Willows was initially alerted by its repeated rapid ‘oomoomoom’ call. On 11 February Philip Veerman posted that he had seen videos from the wildlife care volunteer who mentioned at the COG meeting having had come into possession of a small (she thought baby) quail at the Woden Cemetery. He indicated these were of sufficient good quality to be quite confident it was a full grown adult **Little Button-quail** (no hind toe, tiny size, head and beak shape, plumage pattern). The bird was released back there later. As Philip noted, certainly a very unexpected find.

**Great Crested Grebes** have again been reported only from locations around the Cotter Dam, where the breeding event now



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seems to be over. The **Common Sandpiper** has continued to be reported from the Isabella Pond up to the time of writing this column. A single **Intermediate Egret** was reported from the Jerrabomberra Wetlands NR on 30 January, where there also has been the only record of three **Glossy Ibis** on 9 February. **Azure Kingfishers** have been reported regularly from the Cotter Reserve area where there has been a probable breeding event (see below), with a further report of one at Casuarina Sands. On 20 February Rod MacKay reported one moving around from perch to perch and across the river as he paddled the Queanbeyan River upstream from the bridge. This is a possible new location for this species.

None of the rarer raptors have again been reported over the period, and there have been reports of a **Black-shouldered Kite** only from Ginninderra Creek Nicholls on 9 February and from the Wanniasa Hills NR on 14 February. Most are probably concentrated to the north where the mouse plague areas have been reported. A **Major Mitchells Cockatoo** was reported from Coombs Pond on 24 January and 4 February, in both cases it was noted as very tame and likely to be the same individual as observed in the area in recent years. There have been further reports of **Budgerigars** in natural colours, two from the Tallagandra Lane North near Gundaroo on 18 February, and one from the Gilmore horse paddocks on 22 February.

A single **Singing Honeyeater** was “rediscovered” at the Franklin Pond system on 31 January and recorded by many observers up to 13 February. While it had not been reported from there since the end of September it actually had been there throughout the intervening period, but its presence suppressed while an attempted breeding event was being monitored (see below). A male **Scarlet Honeyeater** was last reported from Campbell Park on 30 January, and up to three birds from the Namadgi NP Visitors Centre to 3 February. A **Blue-faced Honeyeater** was reported from the Curtin Playing Fields on 17 February.

Finally, a small flock of at least 4 **Zebra Finch** was reported from Tuggeranong Hill on 14 February. There were at least two males and one female in the bush on the edge of suburbia. While they were possibly aviary escapees their plumage and behaviour appeared normal, with no bands visible.

Of the special birds I have been asking readers to keep a special lookout for continuing into 2021, a single **Jacky Winter** was reported only from the known location, the Namadgi NP Visitors Centre, last on 1 February. The **Hooded Robin** was also only reported from the Naas Rd at Apollo Rd up to 14 February, with John Hurrell observing three birds, two of which were immatures, there on 30 January. Single **Restless Flycatchers** have also been reported from three locations, one regularly from the known location to the north of Gundaroo, the second from Lada Vale to the north of the COG AoI on 3 February, and the third from the Solong St Parkland in Lawson on 17-18 February. The last represents a rare late summer suburban observation, with most such reports recently having been made in autumn/winter.

Reports of breeding have continued over the period, with the highlights summarised as follows:

- On 31 January Shorty observed an **Azure Kingfisher** catch a fish on the Cotter River, fly upstream and then witnessed it giving the fish to a second bird. At the time he thought it was courtship behaviour, but then realised it was probably a bit late for that and it may have been feeding a young bird. After carefully examining his photos and having some discussions, he concluded it was probably the latter and that there had been two juveniles of the three birds he had photographed. Quite a bit of this was based on the Australian Bird Guide noting the juvenile is duller than the adult, with a larger white tip to the bill, though some adults “have a tiny white tip to the bill”. This adds a probable breeding record to the courtship display on the Molonglo River in July 2020, noting again the BIRD INFO data on the COG web site contains no breeding records for the 35 years to 2017.
- On 1 October Christine D found the **Singing Honeyeater** at the Franklin Pond system appearing to be collecting nesting material. Christine and Michael Lenz then monitored the bird and observed it had attracted a partner. In mid-January Michael indicated they were on their fourth breeding attempt, the longest period of attendance at the nest site, interestingly in the same group of bushes of their first attempt. However, on 27 January Michael noted that this latest breeding attempt had also failed. He wondered if it was because of the wet spring/summer. Whatever the reason the fact that they were so far out of their normal range underlines the improbability of successful breeding. Over the period the nearest record is from Wagga Wagga about 180 km away as the honeyeater flies, apart from a bird reported four times from near Goulburn, 80 km away.
- The **Eastern Koel** has had a bumper breeding season, with a minimum of 185 chicks or fledglings reported (double the previous highest number) by 24 February. These have been from as far south as Tharwa, and with adults being recorded as far south as the Baroona wetlands, 7.5 km south of Michelago. It has also been a very prolonged season, with many reports of new fledglings still coming in, with 124 reported in the past four weeks.
- On 4 February Michael Lenz reported a female **Rufous Songlark** with a fledgling near Gundaroo, a relatively late

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breeding record for this species.

- Despite the very few reports over summer noted above, in mid-February Kym Bradley reported on the COG chat line recent juvenile **Jacky Winters**, **Hooded Robins** and **Restless Flycatchers** at her spot on private property to the south of Canberra.
- Lastly, a summary of the darter/cormorant breeding over the period may be found in my separate report on the COG Boat Trip up Molonglo Reach elsewhere in this issue.

Only a few reports of mixed feeding flocks (MFF) have come to my attention during the period, so please look out for this autumn phenomenon especially for the unexpected species often quietly feeding in amongst all the activity. Watch out too for the signs of species that migrate in flocks. On 6 February Ryu Callaway saw a flock of 10 **Red Wattlebirds** at Pine Island seemingly migrating. He noted it seemed earlier than usual, but the much larger flock of at least 75 seen doing so on the COG Boat trip up Molonglo Reach (see separate report) on 14 February should be noted. On 23 February Jean Casburn reported 26 **Noisy Friarbirds** were seen moving over the Murrumbidgee Golf Course from west to north east. She noted others had reported their movement on previous days in other places, as I had in my local patch of Chapman/Rivett. Watch out especially for first migrating **Yellow-faced Honeyeaters** which movement usually starts in the last week of March.

Finally, the approach of the shorter days of autumn often better allows the observation of roosts and roosts flights. Unusually **Maggie-larks** have been gathering in much larger numbers in my GBS site and surrounds since the beginning of July, with up to seven seen rather than the one or two previously. They have often the most conspicuous bird being around all day rather than just the occasional presence. However, it was not until the evening of 22 February that I first saw 8 circling high over and then land in a tree to roost, nearly 4 years exactly since I last found a roost site in my local area. Up to 35 **Common Mynas** and 20 **Common Starlings** were also around trying to roost, as the former have been for much of the month, though they do not seem to have settled on a favoured site.

March is the middle of the more than 3 months when there is significant bird movement in the COG Aol. So please watch out for the last of the spring/summer migrants mentioned above, as well as those that usually leave by the end of March, in particular for the **White-throated Needletail** and **Fork-tailed Swift**. Please also look out for the first arriving altitudinal migrants in your local patch, for mixed feeding flocks as well as single species flocks, for roost sites and flights, and for any autumn breeding activity. Finally, please continue to keep a special look out for the **Restless Flycatcher**, **Jacky Winter** and **Hooded Robin**. As usual please ensure that all significant sightings are properly reported and end up on the COG database.

Once again my sincere thanks to everyone who has contributed to my two main data sources, posting on the COG e-mail Discussion List ("COG chat line") and the eBird Australia database, as well as direct correspondence with me. As always I am very grateful to all involved for publishing this information without which it would not be possible to put this column together.

*Jack Holland*



COG members on the Shoalhaven trip

*Tee Tong Teo*

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## **A wetland experience at the Jerrabomberra Wetlands**

**Sunday 14 March, 8:00 – 13:00**

This year the annual Wetlands Day will provide a different range of activities and will focus on wetlands to celebrate 50 years of the RAMSAR Convention. Instead of a mid- morning to afternoon range of activities in mid-February with stalls, food and face painting, the event will concentrate on displays, walks and talks during the cooler part of the day.

Bookings will be required as the number of participants for the walks and talks will be limited. For bookings and the program see <https://www.jerrabomberrawetlands.org.au/> Under 'What's on/World Wetland Day'. The program and bookings will be available from 2 March.

Of interest to COG members will be the display on future developments, in particular the proposed Visitors Centre and this will provide an opportunity for members to express their views.

Chris Davey

## **What does An Atlas of the birds of NSW & the ACT tell us about the state of birds within our area of interest?**

By Dick Cooper

The NSWBA area of interest encompasses all of New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory, Lord Howe Island and the Tasman Sea east to Longitude 160°. This area of coverage totals an area of ~1.6 million sq kms. For this area the NSWBA has gathered and stored reports of birds collected by over 1,500 volunteers, added data obtained from other databases and have extracted literature records dating back to 1770. The NSW/ACT Atlas reports on 597 species occurring in this region. Earlier this year the NSWBA downloaded all the eBird records for the region and is working through that additional data. Many of the eBird records are duplicates, others are obvious identification errors. After setting these aside, the NSW Bird Atlas will likely exceed 10 million bird records. The Committee then proposes that a 5 decadal review of the trends identified and reported in the 3 volumes of the NSW/ACT Atlas will be undertaken.

Stephen Debus has previously expressed concern about the serious downward trends evident in the reporting rates of forest, woodland and grassland birds in the 3 Volumes of the NSW/ACT Atlas. In a recent article (Debus, 2000) he noted that almost all of the indigenous/endemic 'bush birds' covered by Volume 3 had declined to varying degrees over the period 1986-2006. In that article and an earlier one, Stephen suggested that several species warrant consideration for listing under the NSW Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016 when one applies the IUCN measure for assessing Vulnerability - a greater than 30% decline in the reporting rate (an index of abundance) over 3 generations. This happens to be the formula applied by the NSW Scientific Committee for birds to qualify as Vulnerable under the NSW legislation.

The list includes: Spotted Nightjar, Australian Owlet-nightjar, Yellow Rosella, Blue Bonnet, Mulga Parrot, Red-backed Kingfisher, Rainbow Bee-eater, Red-browed Treecreeper, Splendid Fairy-wren, Pilotbird, Rockwarbler, Chestnut-rumped Thornbill, Inland Thornbill, Southern Whiteface, Singing Honeyeater, White-eared Honeyeater, Yellow-tufted Honeyeater, Grey-fronted Honeyeater, Tawny-crowned Honeyeater, Crescent Honeyeater, Brown-headed Honeyeater, Spotted Quail-thrush, Ground Cuckoo-shrike, Crested Shrike-tit, Little Shrike-thrush, Crested Bellbird, White-browed Woodswallow, Black-faced Woodswallow, Satin Flycatcher, Restless Flycatcher, Red-capped Robin, White-backed Swallow and Tree Martin. Although a 2008 application to have the White-browed Woodswallow listed as a Vulnerable species was declined, the Atlas data suggests that reconsideration may be warranted.

This list highlights only those birds identified as having declined significantly since 1986. It does not include any of the 130+ species already listed as threatened under the NSW legislation, many of which continue to decline. It also does not include 100+ other species whose decline was identified at a marginally lower level of significance. Apart from all these birds, it does appear that a number of birds may no longer occur in NSW, e.g. the Squatter Pigeon, Black-throated Finch, Star Finch, the



Red Goshawk, the Double-eyed Fig-Parrot and a subspecies of the Thick-billed Grasswren (namely, *Amytornis m. inexpectatus*).

Yes, there have been some winners, with many familiar to us all, including White-headed Pigeon, Spotted Dove, Crested Pigeon, Bar-shouldered Dove, Pied Cormorant, Cattle Egret, Eastern Osprey, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, Little and Long-billed Corellas, Rainbow & Scaly-breasted Lorikeets, Pacific Koel, Channel-billed Cuckoo, Blue-faced Honeyeater, Australasian Figbird, Noisy Miners, Grey & Pied Butcherbirds, Pied Currawongs and Common Myna and others.

The identified trends provide clear evidence that our environmental management record since European settlement is poor. The processes contributing to the decline of birds within the State were outlined in Volume 1, with the key drivers being the ever-expanding human population and our demands to alter or eliminate more and more of the natural environment to meet our personal needs: The outcome has been rapid and permanent loss of, or change, in habitats. Significant land transformation has occurred, often with complete clearing, at other times extensive areas of habitat have been modified, degraded or fragmented in order to accommodate our ever-expanding urbanisation, industry and agricultural needs. Related changes have altered water flows, introduced water management, enabled more hunting (both legal and illegal), introduced feral predators, herbivores and other non-native competitors, caused loss of topsoil, increased salinity, altered fire regimes (both in terms of changed fire frequencies, and severe and chaotic fires), timber harvesting, overfishing and its bycatch, freshwater and marine pollution, waste dumping, road traffic, droughts, short-term heat extremes, the spread of aggressive native and introduced plants and birds which exclude native species. More recently, climate change has shown itself to be an important and all pervasive threat: the last 5 years have, on average, been the hottest ever recorded, imposing severe stress and damage to most habitats and their fauna. It is not known to what extent high temperature days will wipe out many species as the birds reach their metabolic limits to cope with heat stress.

The time-lag in publishing the trends evident in the NSW/ACT Atlas may mean that the war on the environment has worsened through the ensuing 14 years and especially since the recent years of catastrophic drought and the subsequent bushfires. Despite the impact of these events, both the NSW and Federal Governments have used these circumstances as a basis for demonstrating that they are committed to removing 'green tape' and 'watering down' environmental legislation on the basis of assisting economic growth. While this situation remains, the future looks bleak for our birds and their habitats.

Acknowledgement: Parts of this article are based on commentaries by Stephen Debus on trends in the NSW/ACT Atlas that have appeared in past Cumberland BOC newsletter and Birding NSW newsletter.

*This article appeared in BIRDS NSW NEWSLETTER No. 148 – December 2020 and is reprinted here with the permission of NSW Bird Atlassers Inc.*



## Birdwatchers & nature lover's accommodation

Feathers'n'Friends cottage is fully self-contained with extensive facilities to ensure guests can enjoy short or extended stays.

The secluded lodging is surrounded by tropical rainforest and beautiful gardens with varying habitats and a large variety of birds and wildlife.

Activities in the area include birdwatching at nearby Mt Lewis and other birdwatching locations, as well as Daintree River nature tours and other attractions.

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Email: [freddy@feathersnfriends.com.au](mailto:freddy@feathersnfriends.com.au)



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## The Dawdling Ornithologist

When walking in a wild and bosky spot  
and hoping some rare bird will soon be seen  
it's better, far, than moving at fast trot  
to pause a while, concealed among the green  
where stealth, and silence, often prove the best  
as stratagems enabling sight and sound.  
This ploy may yield a robin on her nest  
or fledglings as they flutter to the ground.  
While fit and hearty comrades of the C.O.G.  
press on ahead through crackling twigs and leaves,  
nosing about like any sniffer dog,  
the artful watcher lags but never grieves --  
for she may be rewarded with the sight  
of warblers lurking in the dappled light.

Suzanne Edgar



Sugar Glider (Shoalhaven trip)

Tee Tong Teo

## Hunters shoot ducks in sport but the ducks don't die in sport, they die in earnest

It is disappointing to hear that this year's Victorian duck shooting season is still on Premier Daniel Andrews' agenda, and I've heard that Tasmania may be following the same path.

Although once an ardent hunter of feral pigs, rabbits and foxes I've always eschewed the use of shotguns believing that even in skilled hands they inflict terrible collateral damage, to borrow a term from the handbook of a Pentagon media hack. Too often I've witnessed the tragic carnage left by hunters – ducks and other wetland birds with broken wings, legs and bills shot away.

If people need further dissuasion from duck hunting they should read the essay *Southern Flight* included in the anthology *Old Songs in a New Cafe* by the late Robert James Waller who wrote the highly successful novel *The Bridges of Madison County*, and was a cogent voice on environmental concerns. *Old Songs* is still available from major book retailers. The essay *Southern Flight* is a poignant, harrowing tale but delivers a powerful message to the extent that one American goose hunter told Waller that after reading it he gave up his life-long atavistic pursuit. Perhaps it should be mandatory reading for those who make the decision to declare open seasons on our native waterfowl.

Finally, it seems appropriate to contemplate the opening lines from Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem *Forbearance* viz:

*Hast thou named all the birds without a gun?  
Loved the wood-rose, and left it on its stalk*

John Layton  
Holt. A.C.T.

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## Future Field Trips

### COG Trips

Each participant must sign a COG Field Trip Registration Form at the start of each trip and before proceeding on the trip which acknowledges the participant's responsibilities (wording follows). An Emergency Contact Name and Number are required.

"I declare that I am capable of undertaking the trip having discussed with the Trip Leader any limitations I have (e.g. medications, physical), assessed the risks to myself and my property, and ensured that I am adequately equipped.

I will follow the instructions of the Field Trip Leader, and advise them before moving away from the group."

Changes to trips are notified on the COG chatline <http://canberrabirds.org.au/publications/discussion-email-list/> and trips page of COG website <http://canberrabirds.org.au/category/trips/>.

A reminder that COG has a long-standing policy to give preference to members for field trips that can accommodate only a limited number of people.

#### Be Covid-safe on COG field trips:

Maintain social distancing of 1.5 metres  
Maintain hand hygiene

**DO NOT ATTEND** if you have any cold or flu symptoms

#### Sunday 7 March – Wee Jasper

This outing will include a visit to private property, as well as a walk along part of the Hume and Hovell Track. Meet at Stromlo Forest Park carpark at 7.00 am for carpooling. Bring morning tea and lunch. Snakes should be out and about, so take the usual precautions with footwear and clothing, and carry a snake bandage. **Please register** with Sue Lashko at [smlashko@gmail.com](mailto:smlashko@gmail.com) - please include your mobile and emergency contact name and number.

#### Sunday 14 March - Scott Nature Reserve, Mulloon

**Description:** Scott Nature Reserve is in the Mulloon area, south of the Kings Highway, approximately halfway between Bungendore and Braidwood. It covers an area of 151 ha. NSW NPWS has given permission to COG to visit the Reserve. It is renowned as a stronghold of the threatened **Glossy Black-Cockatoo** as the Black Sheoak is prominent there. The Reserve is rarely visited by birders.

**eBird hotspots:** none yet. I have nominated the Reserve as a hotspot.

**Meeting time and place:** 08:30 am at the car park of Mick Sherd Oval, Gibraltar Street, Bungendore: ☎35.254229, 149.444036

**Walking distance:** 5 km approx.

**Degree of difficulty:** moderate to difficult as it commences and ends with climbing over a gate and 250 m of bush-bashing. The rest is on a good track.

**End time (approx.):** 12:30 pm

**What to bring:** water & morning tea

**Numbers limited:** yes

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**Name of leader:** David McDonald

**Registration** is essential at email [14mar21@canberrabirds.org.au](mailto:14mar21@canberrabirds.org.au), or phone/text the leader on 0416 231 890 - please provide your name and mobile phone number, as well as an emergency contact name and number.

### Wednesday 17 March. Molonglo River cormorant/darter breeding sites

This walk will pass close to what is now the major breeding location for cormorants and darters in the ACT. It will be a loop walk starting from the main carpark for North Weston Ponds (drive past the RSPCA on Kirkpatrick St to the carpark beside the pond). We will walk down to the river, along the track towards Scrivener Dam, crossing the river at the low-level causeway, returning on the other side via the (mainly disused) bridge near the ponds.

**Meeting time:** 9am. The walk will cover about 5km. It is possible to see the birds from the track, so an easy walk. The only steep section is the short side track down to river and up to the track on the other side. As usual, wear sturdy shoes, a hat, and have sunscreen and water with you.

**Register** with Sandra at [shirmax2931@gmail.com](mailto:shirmax2931@gmail.com)

### Sunday March 28 – Murrumbidgee corridor, north from Tharwa Bridge

We will walk north along the corridor on the western side of the Murrumbidgee from the Tharwa Bridge. It is not a difficult walk and the round trip is probably about 5 kms. We will meet under the bridge at 8:30am. I won't make any promises about the species that we might see.

As always, ensure that you have comfortable, sturdy footwear, sunscreen, hat and water. We will take our time, so bring something to nibble on as we go, because there is nowhere to sit along the way.

**Bookings** are essential. For enquiries and to book for this outing contact Lia Battisson by email: [liabattisson@grapevine.com.au](mailto:liabattisson@grapevine.com.au). Please supply your name and mobile number and the name and mobile number of an emergency contact person.

### Easter Saturday 3 April - Narrabundah Hill - morning outing

**Description:** Those members who will be staying at home this Easter and/or who will have visiting birder friends are welcome to join this outing to the Narrabundah Hill reserve. It has again been timed for the autumn honeyeater migration season, with the Northern and Western boundaries of the reserve having some of the few currently known local migration routes. We will walk along these two boundaries, depending on conditions and the species seen possibly along most of the western one, and we will either return by the same or a different path. This will be around 4 km on relatively flat ground. We will also look for other autumn birds such as the Scarlet Robin and mixed feeding flocks, or late departing summer migrants such as the gerygones.

**Meeting time:** As it is the last day of Daylight Savings, **this walk will start at 9:00 am** to maximise the opportunity to see the honeyeaters which generally come through late in the morning in early April (we saw over 2500 birds there at a similar timing in 2019).

**Meeting place:** Meet at the parking area and stile at the NE end of the reserve, at the corner of Warragamba Avenue and Eucumbene Drive, Duffy. **Please note that the entry to this parking area is a little tricky, and is in fact about 25 metres past (on the Mount Stromlo side) the T-junction with Warragamba Avenue, and for those driving along Eucumbene Drive from Duffy involves a quite tricky 180 degrees turn, so please take care.** Please take water and morning tea to have on the track.

**Name of leader and contact details:** To participate, please contact Jack Holland by E-mail on [jandaholland@bigpond.com](mailto:jandaholland@bigpond.com) – please include your mobile and emergency contact name and number.

### Friday 2 to Monday 5 April - Wanganella Easter Camp

This camp will be on private property at Wanganella north of Deniliquin. We will be able to access an old shearers' kitchen and bathroom, although facilities are limited. Very basic hot showers, electric kettle, fridges, microwave oven and toaster,

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and a dining room are available. There are a range of places in the Wanganella/Deniliquin/Mathoura areas to bird, and on a previous Easter camp even the area around our camp was rich in birdlife. There is plenty of space for campers. It is expected most participants will arrive Thursday/Friday, and leave Monday. The property is about 60km from Deniliquin, and on one day we will travel to Mathoura about 90km south of the property.

If interested please let me know. **Register** with Sandra at [shirmax2931@gmail.com](mailto:shirmax2931@gmail.com) - please include your mobile and emergency contact name and number, or email me if you have questions.

### Sunday 11 April – K2C surveys Williamsdale - Bredbo

COG will continue with the K2C surveys that have been running since April 2010. The surveyed properties have healthy populations of many of the rarer woodland birds such as **Diamond Firetail**, **Hooded Robin** and **Speckled Warbler**. We will be visiting the same sites to continue the monitoring and see if we can add to the property lists with spring-summer migrants. The surveys will be undertaken in 'blitz' fashion; that is, observers in small groups will visit a number of sites on one or more properties before regrouping for lunch and a sharing of the survey's findings. Less experienced observers are welcome to join in the survey as each team will have at least one experienced observer. Anyone interested in participating is asked to contact Nicki Taws **before Wednesday 7 April**. Email: [ntaws@bigpond.com](mailto:ntaws@bigpond.com) or 0408 210736.

### Sunday 18 April - Goorooyarroo NR

**Description:** Goorooyarroo NR covers 829 hectares and is located in north-east Canberra. It consists mainly of Yellow Box-Red Gum grassy woodland and has a predator-proof fence within part of the reserve. It is a great reserve for finding birds typical of this habitat, such as honeyeaters, pardalotes and thornbills, and we will hopefully see **Superb Parrots**.

eBird hotspots: Goorooyarroo Nature Reserve

**Meeting time and place:** 8.30 am at the carpark off Horse Park Drive near the intersection of Horse Park Drive and the Federal Highway, NOT the entrance near the old Rocks Carpark.

**Walking distance:** 5 km approximately - we will see how far into the reserve we wish to walk on the day.

**Degree of difficulty:** Fairly easy as we will be walking the main undulating track in the reserve.

**End time** (approx.): 12.30 pm

**What to bring:** Water and morning tea.

**Participants must register** with the leader, providing their name and mobile number, and the name and mobile number of an emergency contact

**Numbers limited:** no

**Name of leader and contact details:** Suzi Bond, email [chowchilla29@yahoo.com](mailto:chowchilla29@yahoo.com)

### Saturday 24 to Monday 25 April – Mallacoota – ANZAC Day weekend

This trip is currently full. If you wish to go on a waiting list in case of cancellations, contact [martinflab@gmail.com](mailto:martinflab@gmail.com)



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# Field Trip Reports

## Sunday 31 January – Jerrabomberra Wetlands

This annual outing to celebrate World Wetlands Day (actually on February 2) was attended by 27 members, including several new ones, as well as guests. With such a large group, we split into two and headed in opposite directions. The birds were very obliging, making it very easy to distinguish **Eurasian Coots** from **Dusky Moorhens** and **Purple Swampheens**. The Wetlands continue to be the best place to see a large variety of ducks, with **Pink-eared Ducks** being the favourites, but a male **Freckled Duck**, still with a red base to the bill, showed well, and **Hardhead**, **Australasian Shoveler**, **Pacific Black Duck**, **Australian Wood Duck** and **Grey Teal** rounded out the list.

After the recent rain, the water level was higher, making it harder to see smaller birds but many people enjoyed scope views of **Australian Spotted Crane** and **Latham's Snipe**. **White-faced Herons** showed well both on the ground and in flight, and **Australasian Darters** of both sexes were a constant presence overhead.

On the circuit around the swamp, we added a variety of woodland birds as well as having good views of **Golden-headed Cisticola** and we heard the 'reversing truck' call of **Little Grassbird**. Our species total for the morning was 51, a good effort when birding in a large group.

Thank you to Sandra Henderson, Lia Battisson and Peter Higgins for their assistance.

Sue Lashko

## Warks/Blundells Creek Roads, Namadgi NP, 7 February

20 members enjoyed a stroll in each direction from the intersection at the end of Blundells Creek Road. There were of course several target species, and we were fortunate to find **Red-browed Treecreepers**, **Satin Flycatchers**, **Eastern Whipbirds**, **Rose Robins** and a **Common Cicadabird**. One member managed to photograph a **Crested Shrike-tit**, but this bird was not seen by others. **Grey Fantails** and **White-naped Honeyeaters** were in abundance, and Golden Whistlers were also making themselves known.

Sandra Henderson

**Eastern Yellow Robin,**  
**Satin Flycatcher (male),**  
**Satin Flycatcher (female),**  
**Red-browed Treecreeper**

*Peter Higgins*



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## Tuesday 9-Friday 12 February – Shoalhaven

Fourteen COG members spent four very pleasant days exploring around Shoalhaven Heads, Nowra, Currarong and Culburra. A total of 120 bird species was recorded, along with 6 mammals, 16 butterflies, 4 reptiles and 1 frog species. Tuesday afternoon was spent around Shoalhaven Heads and Seven Mile Beach NP with **Striated Heron** and distant **Lesser Sand-plovers** being the highlights.

One of the target locations for the trip was Lake Wollumboola where there had been a number of rare wader sightings over the summer. The group spent Wednesday morning there and found plenty to keep us occupied with highlights being **Pectoral Sandpiper**, 150 **Little Tern**, 2 **White-winged Black Terns**, 100s of **Sharp-tailed Sandpipers** and **Red-necked Stints**, **Lesser Sand-plovers**, and **Red-capped Plovers** with numerous cute little runners. Nice views of an **Australian Hobby** and a single **White-fronted Chat** topped off the morning. After all that serious scanning of hundreds of waders some of the group refuelled with fish and chips at a local café. The afternoon yielded a few more species such as **Red-whiskered Bulbul** and **Pacific Golden Plover** around Crookhaven Heads. After dinner we headed to Seven Mile Beach picnic area in the hopes of spotlighting a Masked Owl. Unfortunately we didn't find any owls, but did spot a **Sugar Glider** and a number of **Brush-tailed Possums**.

We spent Thursday doing a couple of the walks around Nowra. In the morning we headed off to Bangalee Nature Reserve and walked the Forest Glen and River Trails. Spectacular views out over the forest and a fabulous fern grove were a highlight, prior to some athletic mountain goat skills over a rocky downhill trail back to the road. **Brown Cuckoo-doves**, **Brown Gerygone**, **Black-faced Monarchs** and a **Brown Antechinus** were highlights of the riparian and rainforest vegetation. Five **Green Catbirds** spotted by Ryu in the carpark topped off the morning. The afternoon was spent doing Bens Walk in Nowra, with assurances from Ryu and Sandra that a **Rockwarbler** was 'guaranteed'! Unfortunately that was not to be, but the walk itself is spectacular and we found a **Hairy Line-blue** butterfly which turned out to be fairly unusual that far south.

On the last day the group split into two with the majority going to Abrahams Bosom, while a few hardy souls (ourselves included) went back to Lake Wollumboola to search for the **Buff-breasted Sandpiper** and **Long-toed Stint**. Those at Abrahams Bosom had success with **Eastern Reef Egrets**, **Varied Sitella**, **White-cheeked Honeyeater** and a surprise find of an **Arctic Jaeger**. Muriel had the luck by spotting an **Eastern Bristlebird** on her way to the car park. Those that ventured to Lake Wollumboola ended on a high even though we missed the **Long-toed Stint**, with great views of the **Buff-breasted Sandpiper**, **Pectoral Sandpiper** and **Red Knots**.

Thanks to Sue Lashko (who unexpectedly had to pull out from leading the trip) for detailed notes on locations to find some fabulous species.

John Goldie and Kathy Walter



COG members at Shoalhaven

*Tee Tong Teo*





Photos (clockwise)

**Buff-breasted Sandpiper**

*Kathy Walter*

**Eastern Curlew, Green Catbird, Striated Heron, Pectoral Sandpiper,  
Lesser Sand Plover, Little Tern**

*David Cook*

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## East Basin/Molonglo Reach; Sunday 14 February 2021 – Electric boat cruise

Under perfect sunny and cool conditions, with just a light SE breeze, 19 members and guests joined me on what was my twenty second time on this now annual trip to view the water and land birds of this area. As usual we left from Kingston Harbour on the electric boat, the EL Gull, and first ventured a few hundred metres up Jerrabomberra Creek, before moving along the E bank of East Basin into Molonglo Reach and along the S bank to the far bridge, and then tracing our route back.

A couple of **Australian Darters** were already seen in Jerrabomberra Creek, including in the water, illustrating why they are sometimes known as snake birds, but there were more resting in the trees around the paleo-channels of the E bank of East Basin. The early ones appeared to be mainly females as opposed to the 7 which were spread along Molonglo Reach mostly being males with still some red on their necks but not in full breeding plumage. However, no immatures were clearly identified and for the third year in a row no older nests could be seen in previously favoured spots despite the water levels expected to have been more conducive to breeding this season.

Only a couple each of **Little Black** and **Little Pied Cormorants** were seen in the Reach, but there was no sign of the **Pied Cormorant** which often is found sitting at one of its favourite spots at the entrance to Jerrabomberra Creek. This is now the sixth year that no darter/cormorant breeding could be observed, confirming that the breeding of these species in the area, first discovered in 2003, is well and truly over.



Australian Darter

*Richard Arculus*

Probably due to the much wetter season allowing them to spread more widely, numbers of waterbirds were also low, with no congregation of species as sometimes occurs. Other than the **Black Swan**, the three larger Rallidae species, and the two most common species of duck, only one other duck species was sighted, a pair of **Pink-eared Ducks**. These were flushed from the shore and then landed in the water close by allowing everyone very good views, including of their very long, specialised feeder filter bills. This species was a surprise as it usually prefers shallower water, and is only the second sighting in these trips, the previous one being several loafing on the East Basin shore in May 2004. The **Greylag Geese** usually seen around the canoe club house were missing for the second year in a row, checking the eBird map indicates they were not recorded there in 2020 or so far this year, though they have been at 11 other locations.

Most of the land birds were also well-known species, with the highlight being a **Whistling Kite** circling over East Basin as we returned to the harbour. This needed some careful checking, firstly to ensure it was not an **Australian Darter** which is also often seen very high on the thermals, and at first mistaken for a raptor, and then not a **Little Eagle** as it appeared to have a clear M pattern underwing. However, a closer check of the pattern, as well as the long tail and slightly bowed wings allowed the correct identification. This species had not been recorded on one of these trips since December 2004.

Also quite spectacular were the at least 75 **Red Wattlebirds** clearly migrating E along the southern shore of Molonglo Reach, almost a pure flock except for around 5 **Noisy Friarbirds** caught up with them. We also heard a clearly begging Koel fledgling at two well-separated spots along the Reach, with a male heard calling around the Kingston Harbour. Other land birds of interest were a lone immature **Dollarbird** still sitting at the same spot on our return, several **Dusky Woodswallows** scattered along the route, and several of **White-plumed Honeyeaters** not often recorded on these trips.

At 39 the total number of species was much the same as last year and well down compared with the 51 for the previous two years. Despite this the participants again enjoyed the trip which remains a popular and very pleasant late summer outing.

Many thanks to Sandra Henderson for having done the very tricky task of keeping the eBird list. Being on a moving boat and having up to 19 people calling out the birds they see makes the job doubly difficult. Many thanks also to Jim Paterson for again skippering the boat.

*Jack Holland*



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### Red Hill Nature Reserve, Wednesday 17 February

Alison Mackerras led this walk, which was attended by 20 members and guests. We started at the Scout Hall on Kitchener St, between Hughes and Garrahan, following tracks which skirted the golf course. We had only travelled a short way before encountering the first **Superb Parrots** and **Gang-gangs**, the first of nine parrot species seen on a very overcast morning, with a little light rain at times. It was somewhat surprising that we did not encounter any small birds, although locals suggest they are elsewhere in the reserve.

Sandra Henderson

### Uriarra Travelling Stock Reserve, Sunday February 21

A dozen members and guests took the opportunity to visit this well-hidden TSR. Although small, the reserve provides some woodland area, grassland, and rocky slopes. Almost 30 species were seen, with highlights being **Leaden Flycatchers**, **Grey Butcherbirds** and a **Speckled Warbler**.

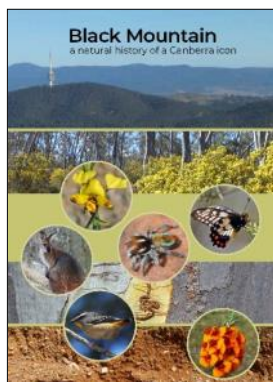
Many thanks to ranger Brian S who visited ahead of time to ensure we were able to access the reserve without scaling the gate or the barbed wire fencing.

Sandra Henderson

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## Publications for Sale

COG provides a range of birdwatching related publications for sale to members at discounted prices (around 10-30% off RRP). Contact Kathy on [sales@canberrabirds.org.au](mailto:sales@canberrabirds.org.au) if you would like to purchase a publication.



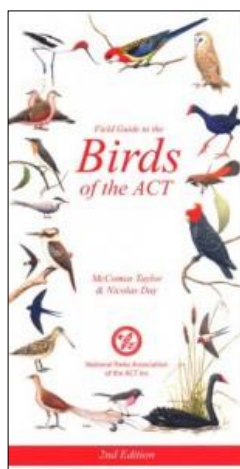
#### **Black Mountain: a natural history of a Canberra icon**

*Ian Fraser and Rosemary Purdie with Friends of Black Mountain*

This book takes us to the ecological heart of Black Mountain, in the heart of Canberra, a conservation reserve since 1970. Find out about the area's geological evolution, its native plants and animals and their habitats, how the biodiversity has changed over the last three decades, and how species survive fires and storms and are affected by invaders. Meet the enthusiastic professional and citizen scientists who have been keenly documenting and studying more than 640 plant species and thousands of insects and other animals living on the mountain, and learn about the challenges for maintaining the area's natural values in the coming decades.

This attractive and richly illustrated book is published to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Black Mountain Nature Reserve. It is a good read for the general public as well as ecologists, conservationists, and senior secondary and tertiary students, with clues to explore and protect this special place, now and into the future.

**Members' Price: \$30**



#### **Field Guide to the Birds of the ACT**

*McComas Taylor & Nicolas Day*

This revised second edition illustrates in colour the 217 birds likely to be seen in and around the ACT. It has easy-to-follow descriptions in a compact format. Only local birds are shown making this Field Guide much simpler to use than comprehensive national guides. McComas Taylor has been watching birds in Canberra for over 30 years and has written, broadcast and lectured on the subject. Nicholas Day is widely recognised as one of Australia's foremost wildlife artists.

**Members' price: \$20.**

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# New Places: February 2021

Sandra Henderson

## Hackett horse paddocks

Where: the entry is on Antill St, directly across from Justice Robert Hope Park.

At first glance these look to be very attractive agistment spaces, with many large trees scattered through the paddocks. I visited on a cool and overcast day, and covered 1.5km. Both species of rosella were plentiful, but apart from a single **Striated Pardalote**, small birds were completely absent. A pleasant enough place to walk, but not a great birding location.

## Horse Park Drive pond - Everist St, Jacka

This is a new, large pond, with a lot of reeds around the edge. There are a number of **Fairy Martin** nests under the road bridge, which were in use when I visited. As I wandered back up from under that bridge a dark crane disappeared into the reeds on the Horse Park Drive side of the pond, too far away and too quick for me to identify. There were half a dozen **Hoary-headed Grebes** on the pond, as well as **Grey Teal**, **Pacific Black Ducks**, and **Australian Wood Ducks**, as well as a pair of **Black-fronted Dotterels** in the drainage line at one end of the pond. This is yet another pond along Horse Park Drive that is worth further visits.

## Bangalee Reserve, Nowra - Forest Glen loop

Only a couple of months ago I wrote about this reserve, specifically about the river track. On COG's recent Shoalhaven Heads trip, we also walked the Forest Glen Loop. This is on the other side of the road, wandering through some rather nice woodland areas, and with a lookout over the forest. From the lookout we saw numerous **Satin Bowerbirds** and heard a **Green Catbird**. A **Little Eagle** made an all-too-quick flyover. There is a rock-scramble involved on the downward track - rather tricky for the short-legged of us, especially in damp conditions. At the time of writing I have the bruises to remind me to not try this one again!

## Abrahams Bosom Reserve, Currarong

This oddly named reserve was visited by a small group on the final day of the COG trip to the Shoalhaven Heads area. The very first surprise was a couple of **Eastern Reef Herons** sheltering under a rock ledge near the start of the walking tracks. We had some good views of some **White-cheeked Honeyeaters** on the first part of the track, and made our way down to a number of small beaches as we made our way around the reserve. At one beach a pair of **Sooty Oystercatchers** were very relaxed about our presence. An unfamiliar seabird was photographed as it flew past and rested on the water - some later detective work by Ryu identified it as an **Arctic Jaeger**. Muriel had left to return to the carpark, and on her way back was the only one of us to spot an **Eastern Bristlebird**. Once we got back to the main track intersection, a small party of **Varied Sittellas** spent some time exploring the trees just metres away. The name Abrahams Bosom dates from the early days of ships passing this headland, referring to it as a safe haven. Rather odd, since one of the side tracks leads to a view of some of the remains of the *SS Merimbula*, wrecked on the rocks in 1928.



Eastern Reef Heron

Sandra Henderson

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## Tom Oliver Award 2019 - Birdlife Photography

At the January 2021 COG meeting, Con Boekel gave a short talk about the bird-related things he has done since retirement. One of the things he has done is write a photo essay for which he won the Tom Oliver Award in 2019. The 28 page essay will be published in Gang-gang over three issues. This first part was published in the February issue. The second part follows here.

# Bird photography for what?

*If the eye is a window to the world as well as a mirror to the soul, what is a camera?*



Grey Butcherbird

*Image taken on 31 August 2017 at Kingscliff, NSW<sup>1</sup>f/7.1,  
1/400sec, ISO 1600, 500mm<sup>2</sup>*

In this image the author is reflected in the eye of a Grey Butcherbird.

1. All images were captured by the author using Canon equipment, generally a combination of a Canon 5D Mk IV camera and a Canon EF 500mm 1:4 L series lens.
2. Each image is annotated with a basic set of technical details. These relate to capture only but are intended to show that there is virtually an infinity of technical choices available to bird photographers when capturing, processing and presenting an image. Images have generally been processed using DPP4, PSE 13 and NeatImage.

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## 4. Avoidance



Blue-faced Honeyeater

*Image captured on 25 April 2019 at Lightning Ridge, NSW  
f/6.3, 1/500sec. ISO 800, 500mm*

Bird photographers could try to ignore all context and all consequences and simply focus on an output of bird images shorn of all meaning except that a beautiful bird existed at the moment of capture. In a broader sense we might try to ignore global warming. But global warming will not ignore us.

I have chosen this image because it makes the point that, even were we to want to, we cannot really ignore the cultural and environmental context.



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In this case the Blue-faced Honeyeater was available for photography only because of a leaking tap. The photographer was present only because of campground amenities in the town.

An alternative version of this image might have been of the same 'natural' bird sitting on a 'natural' branch of a nearby 'natural' eucalypt.

When publishing this image, I provided the following commentary:

*There is nothing 'natural' about this image. The bokeh is supplied by Bougainvillea. The fence is entirely constructed. The bird was present in this location only because there was a leaking tap nearby and it was hot and dry during the record drought afflicting Lightning Ridge. The composition has been arranged to allow the fence to dominate the foreground and the bougainvillea to dominate the background. The aim was to project the displacement of the bird. While there was enough information in the capture to allow for a much tighter crop, the bird has been left small in the image to add to the image of the bird existing at all only at the gift of humanity. The bird has a hunched position, appears to be clutching hard at the fence, and is fully engaging the viewer.*

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## 5. Fake news?



Diamond Firetail

*Image captured on 23 April 2019 at Back Yamma State Forest, NSW  
f/8, 1/3200 sec, ISO 1000, 700mm*

Perhaps presenting interesting or beautiful bird images will encourage interest in, and support for, conservation efforts? On the current evidence, this does not seem to be working very well. Never before have so many wonderful bird images been created and never before have so many species been threatened with extinction. Perhaps a better balance is needed? David Attenborough's wildlife documentaries were criticised for lulling viewers into a false sense of security about the state of our biodiversity. They presented the wonders of nature as if there were no human threats. David Attenborough responded to the criticism in his recent documentary on the Great Barrier Reef by showing the threats that were endangering its continued existence.

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The image of the Diamond Firetail is a classic in the ‘beautiful bird-on-a-stick’ genre. But is this image fake news?

At first glance, everything in the image is natural. Yet the bird is visiting an artificial dam in the heavily-managed Back Yamma State Forest in order to drink during a record drought that, at the time of writing, continues. The nearest remaining natural water is many kilometres away from where the image was captured. The surrounding White Cypress forest has been heavily logged and the regrowth has been heavily thinned. The result is a uniform age class forest with little variation in structure or species composition. Feral pigs abound. In the broader environment, a million fish have died in the Darling River. Rivers have run dry. Bird numbers have been smashed. Unlike previous large droughts, this drought has yet to be named. Perhaps it should be called the First Great Global Warming Drought?

What implicit or explicit choices might bird photographers make in this context? What choices could we make about how this image might be used to promote conservation? Should we make climate change worse by driving long distances in order to capture such bird images? When we present a beautiful bird-on-a-stick image, are we misrepresenting reality and/or mis-educating the public? Do we try to make viewers aware that this bird is so far surviving a massive drought, feral goats, and feral pigs but that its conservation status is already rated as ‘vulnerable’?

Truth to tell, when capturing this particular image I was, quite simply, enjoying the thrill of the chase. My previous attempts at capturing quality Diamond Firetail images had failed. I made no attempt to capture context in the image itself other than the aesthetically pleasing background soil colour in the bokeh. I chose to present the image as an entry (ID 35150) in the Birdlife Photography libraries with the following commentary:

*This is one of a series of images captured at a drying dam in Back Yamma State Forest. The forest was in peak drought at the time. Most of the birds coming in to drink were seed eaters. Honeyeaters came in to drink as well as to bathe. Once beyond the vicinity of the dam, and the small cleared area around it, the White Cypress forest was largely devoid of birds. This Sate Forest is open to hunters, by permission.*

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## 6. Death



Australian Magpie

*Image taken on 4 July 2019 at Turner, ACT F9,  
1/1000sec, ISO 1250, 500mm*

From *The Death of a Bird*, by AD Hope:

*The invisible thread is broken as she flies.  
Suddenly, without warning, without reason, The  
guiding spark of instinct winks and dies.*



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Extinguishing a species basically involves two processes. The first is speeding up the death rate. The second is slowing down the breeding success rate.

By far and away the most common type of bird image is of the bird-on-a-stick genre. The bird is more likely to be a male than a female. It is perching. It is doing nothing other than maybe watching the photographer or perhaps watching for prey and for predators. Perhaps it is preening. The plumage will probably be in good order. The weather will probably be dry and calm. The image will probably be of a bird that is not singing.

The bird will also be alive.

Each of these image attributes reflects choices made by the photographer. There are practical reasons as well as preferences involved. A bird that is sitting still is easier to photograph than a bird that is feeding, clambering through foliage, or flying. Similarly, singing tends to cause birds to move parts of their bodies and the birds are thus harder to photograph. Males are more likely to be colourful than females. It is easier to photograph an individual bird than a flock of birds. Bird photography in windy or rainy conditions is more difficult.

Bird photographers make these sorts of routine decisions every time they capture an image. But if the Anthropocene Extinction Event is about the resolution of tensions between extinction and the survival of around 10,000 bird species, and thus between life and death, then there is one choice avoided by many of us: that of taking and presenting images of dead birds.

Some choices that we might make include capturing images of birds killed on the roads, tangled in fishing line, mired in an oil slick, or choked on plastic.

I have chosen this image of a dead Australian Magpie to help demonstrate this point. The provenance of the bird is unknown but it is quite likely to have been a bird that tangled its foot in some string brought to a nest. It would have lost its balance, fallen, and swung by the string, unable to free itself, until it died. The string in the image ties the dead bird to humanity. Do we have nature on a string or is it the other way around?

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## 7. Endangered species



Swift Parrot

*Image captured on 23 March 2018 at Mount Majura, ACT  
F/5.6, 1/4000, ISO 2000, 500mm*

Endangered species are often rather invisible. Being aware of the absence of presence is a challenge. But it might be the birds we don't see and don't record that matter most.

Is an image of an endangered species the same value as an image of a common species? How do we capture images of threatening processes? We might choose to donate images to endangered species recovery programs or for conservation campaigns. When publishing images we might provide commentary that helps inform the viewer's reaction to the image.

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The Swift Parrot has recently been rated as ‘critically endangered’ in the ACT. It is threatened by forest clearing, flying into windows, and by the predation of eggs, nestlings and nesting females by the Sugar Glider. A major project is under way to install artificial nest hollows that are Sugar Glider-proof. Early results are promising. But felling of habitat forests for wood production continues.

The image above is in the Birdlife Photography library (ID 29988). I chose to try and capture a technically difficult image – of a Swift Parrot in flight. I have chosen to make the image available for scientific and conservation purposes without charge. I provided the following commentary to help inform viewers of the image:

*The Australian Capital Territory sometimes hosts Swift Parrots. This is one of five I counted this morning. (Someone else counted fifteen in the same area yesterday.) This bird is special because it is a juvenile (note the pale wing bar). When I saw it, I wondered whether it was a beneficiary of the Sugar Glider-proof nest boxes being put up in hundreds in order to save this beautiful species.*

I have other images of this species that are superior in terms of technical parameters. But I chose this image because it helps to tell an important story.

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## 8. Threats



Barn Owl

*Image captured on 3 July 2018 at Turner, ACT  
f/3.2, 1/1000 sec, ISO 400, 24 mm*

While there are enough out-of-control human threats to birds to fill many volumes, I have chosen to focus on just one: chemicals. Each year thousands of new chemicals are introduced and artificial chemicals are found everywhere.

Birds pick up artificial chemicals through the air they breathe, through their food, and from water.

‘The Silent Spring’ was but a harbinger of the role of chemicals in speeding up the arrival of the Anthropocene Extinction Event. Chemical-driven bird population crashes are occurring right now.

What role has the bird photographer in relation to chemicals? At first glance, this question almost seems outlandish.



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Around the world we are capturing hundreds of thousands of beautiful images of species that will probably become extinct as a result of chemical pollution, including that of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>. Does such beauty mask an ugly reality from viewers? Does such beauty dull the need for action? Would it be better to search for birds killed by chemicals (or through other threats) and capture and publish images of these dead birds and/or of the threats?

I have chosen an image of a dead owl to reflect some of these issues. Rodent baits are thought to be implicated in owl mortality. The rodents eat the poison and then, perhaps weakened, are easy prey for the owls, which accumulate the poisons by eating the rodents. How do we portray owl images in urban areas that are silent at night because the Barn Owl and the Southern Boobook are no longer there to make their calls? What stories do we tell to go with our images? Do we prioritize the capture of images of live owls or of dead owls? How do we frame or crop or re-arrange dead owls to make a point about chemicals?

(It is illegal to be in possession of dead birds. This specimen was taken to the CSIRO National Wildlife Collection.)

In this case I have made two cultural references: one is in the cruciform shape of the bird. The second is the black background. I have also sought to portray the eyes as sightless. This contrasts with images of living birds in which a clear eye often forms a critical feature of successful images.

This image of a Barn Owl is what extinction might look like

## 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 membership

2020-2021 memberships:

- Individual: \$50
- Family: \$55
- Institution: \$50
- School student (under 18) \$20

## New members

COG welcomes the following new members:

J Barney  
O Torresan  
V Braguine  
T Reynolds  
L Forster

## NEXT NEWSLETTER

**Deadline for April 2021 edition:**

**Wednesday 31 March 2021**

**Please send articles, advertisements, updates etc. to the Editors at:**

[gang-gang@canberrabirds.org.au](mailto: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.

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