



Gang-gang

MAY 2013

Newsletter of the Canberra Ornithologists Group Inc.

APRIL MEETING

Wednesday 8 May 2013

7.30 pm.

Canberra Girls Grammar School, Multi-media centre, corner Gawler Cres and Melbourne Ave, Deakin.

Our first speaker will be **Daniel Gowland** from **Priam Psittaculture Centres - Research and Breeding facility**, which is primarily a specialist parrot research & breeding facility located near Bungendore. Daniel will talk about the work of the Centre with the **Orange-bellied Parrot** and other threatened species and also introduce us to Mr Fifty, the **Glossy Black-Cockatoo**.

The main presentation, entitled "**An ecological trap for a moving target: the Swift Parrot, the forest and the introduced predator**", will be given by **Dejan Stojanovic**, a Ph D student at the Fenner School of Environment and Society at the ANU.

The Swift Parrot (*Lathamus discolor*) is endangered but poorly understood. Although the species has a high profile because of its interaction with forestry, agriculture and development, basic information about their life history has not been available. Swift Parrot breeding has not been studied in detail before because the species is difficult to research in its Tasmanian breeding range. Dejan surveyed trees across a broad area of eastern Tasmania to investigate how common tree cavities suitable for Swift Parrots are in Tasmanian forests. His results indicate that tree cavities suitable for wildlife are not common, and that potential Swift Parrot nests are even less common.

(cont' page 3)

What to watch out for this month.

Many thanks to all who posted, I expect partly due to my prompting, information about migrating **Yellow-faced Honeyeaters** on the chat line in the first half of April. Reports seemed to be mixed, with some people indicating they felt there were more moving through their patch, and others less, but my overall impression is that numbers seen migrating this year have been reasonable, despite less than ideal migration conditions prevailing. Perhaps this is the reason flock size has been reasonably small, with a maximum of about 150 reported migrating together. There was a drop off in reporting in the third week of April, possibly as it had become too warm, and I wondered if most of the migration was over for this autumn. This was until 21 April when for the first time in several weeks the temperature dropped to 0°C and the cold, clear, still night and morning lead to some observers reporting the best migration day so far for this year. This included Lindsay Hansch's place at Jerrabomberra, which in recent years has been associated with the largest migration numbers close to Canberra.

What is clear is that the migration pattern continues to change from that which COG closely monitored during the 1980s and 1990s, with the greatest activity now seeming to be to the south of the ACT between Michelago and Bredbo. Certainly the numbers passing through places like Point Hut, which for many years was where you'd go to see the migration at close hand, and where COG had an annual outing, are now only a small fraction of their former levels. The number seen passing over my GBS site in Chapman this year remains a lowly 2, despite my

Everyone welcome

spending much time looking for them. This compares with when we first moved there in the mid-1970s, when honeyeaters kept streaming over our house in late March/April, even on windy afternoons when activity usually stops.

There was some interesting correspondence on the chatline on whether honeyeaters migrate early in the morning while it is still dark, but the consensus was that they were likely to be **Silver-eyes**, well known to do so for those of us who get up early. Certainly during the COG surveys mentioned above all the evidence was that the honeyeaters stopped moving during the late afternoon (or earlier if conditions were unfavourable), and seemed to gather west of the Murrumbidgee overnight. Depending on where you were in the morning their timing was different. I can remember being at Casuarina Sands and watching thousands of them funnelling down a gully, crossing over a narrow ford area and then up a gully on the eastern side from as early as 7 am, with the rate of movement dropping sharply by about 8:30 am. This was the time they seemed to first reach Point Hut, which they seemed to have to travel quite a distance upstream to get to, before they left the river flying south-east towards Mt Rob Roy over the then wide treeless expanse.

There have been reports of increasing numbers of the **White-naped Honeyeater** present in these flocks, a species which should form the majority of the flocks late in April/early May. So please keep an eye and ear out for this species, for which COG's latest Annual Bird Report (ABR, 2011-2012) indicates the reporting rate has dropped to its lowest since 1986.

Small groups of the **Red Wattlebird** have also been reported migrating, but again much lower than the up to 100 which I've seen migrating in the past.

I have not been able to find any reports in April of the **Fuscous Honeyeater** which often migrates with the other smaller honeyeaters, but small numbers of these are easily overlooked in amongst all the movement and noise.

Of the species which largely leave Canberra in April there were still small numbers of the **Noisy Friarbird**, the **Shining Bronze-Cuckoo** and the **White-throated Gerygone** reported up to the third weekend in April, whereas the last **Australian Reed-Warbler**, **Western Gerygone** and **Rufous Fantail** reports were on 3, 7 and 11 April, respectively.

There were also still a number of reports of the **Rufous Whistler** and the **Superb Parrot**, some of which may stay in the ACT over the winter. The latter also applies to the **Grey Fantail** and **Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike**, both of which largely have left the ACT by the end of April. Of the summer migrants, the last to leave are usually the **Dusky Woodswallow** and the **Olive-backed Oriole**, reasonable numbers of which often stay about until the end of the first week in May, but may over-



Olive-backed Oriole (*Oriolus sagittatus*)

Photo: Geoffrey Dabb

winter in varying numbers depending on how warm the winter is. There were reports of the former migrating in flocks of up to 20 during April; the **Dusky Woodswallow** often forms flocks of this size or even bigger post-breeding, whereas the **Olive-backed Oriole** is a much more solitary bird in my experience.

So keep an eye out for the last of these species in your local patch over the coming weeks. There have also been some reports of species in April that have usually left Canberra before then. This includes a **Sacred Kingfisher** on 1 April, the

posting of a **White-winged Triller** in male eclipse or female plumage by Kym Bradley on 6 April, and several sightings of the **White-thoated Needletail** up to 12 April.

Kym also posted a photo of a **Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater**, a rare vagrant to this area on 8 April, but the prize goes to John Layton who observed over 120 **Tree Martins** at Diddams Close, Lake

Ginninderra on 10 April. While John expected these were migrating together, the birds seemed to be staying put, at least while he was watching them. I can find only 4 reports of this species in March/early April.

Of the species that come to Canberra to spend the winter, the **Flame Robin** has been reported in open areas mainly in the south of the ACT since mid-April, but does not appear to have yet come, or at least been reported, close to Canberra. However, there have been some reports already of the **Rose Robin** in Canberra, a species which often passages through or stays from late April/early May. So watch out for this species and the related **Pink Robin**. The Botanic Gardens is often the best place to find them, as it is for the **Crescent Honeyeater**, a southern species which usually visits Canberra in small numbers from the beginning of May. There has been one report of them already in April, but none of the **Swift Parrot**, suggesting that the good flowering is elsewhere again this year.

Finally the observation of cockatoos and corellas on the lawns and median strips in South Canberra over the past few days tells me winter isn't too far away. May will be the final month of bird movement in Canberra, so keep an eye out for the departing species discussed above, and also for any mixed feeding flocks which will start to break up once breeding commences, as early as July for some species. As always please ensure that all significant observations end up on the COG database, including any late breeding records.

- Jack Holland

(May meeting—continued from page 1)

Using camera traps, Dejan monitored Swift Parrot nests from the point of egg laying to chick fledge. He detected 8 species attempting to prey on nesting Swift Parrots, but due to the small entrance and deep chamber of Swift Parrot nests, most predation attempts failed. However, an introduced predator was small enough to pass the small entrance and deep chamber of a parrot nest, and inflict major breeding failure on Swift Parrots. Most of these predation events involved the mortality of the adult female parrot. As a result of the unusual life history of the Swift Parrot, and the variable distribution of resources across its range, the species may be caught in an ecological trap. The trap is set when Swift Parrots are drawn by abundant food to islands occupied by the introduced predator, while other islands with very low predation risk are ignored.



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2013

20 July – 3 August Gulf of Carpentaria

Cairns to Mt Isa, returning via
Atherton Tablelands

1 – 20 September Strzelecki Outback

Vic, NSW, SW Q'ld, SA. 34th tour

22 – 29 September: NSW Central Coast, Barrington Tops NP, Barren Grounds NR

2 & 3 October Birding for beginners in Murray Valley NP

10 – 18 December: SW Western Australia birding and mammal tour

2013 Plains-wanderer weekends

7 & 8 December
28 & 29 December

2014 tours

2 – 8 Feb: Tasmania
19 – 26 April: Alice Springs
25 May – 8 June: Top End
June: Gulf Country
August: New Caledonia
September: Strzelecki Track
30 Oct – 6 Nov NSW Central Coast,
Barrington Tops NP, Barren Grounds
NR

Please see itineraries, checklists and
latest news on our website

www.philipmaher.com

Field Trip Reports

Thursday 28 March to Monday 1 April – Easter campout at Chiltern

COG last visited Chiltern in 2008 during the drought and it looked as if we would again experience dry conditions as the area had had a very dry start to 2013. Fortunately, though, Chiltern received good rains in the week before Easter and the countryside was already greening when we arrived.

Our hosts, Peter and June Gotham, very kindly gave up a day and a half of their busy lives to guide us round the key birding sites in the area. Highlights included **Black Honeyeaters** hawking for insects from perches in dead shrubs, **Little Lorikeets** feeding on flowering eucalypts, a single **Painted Honeyeater**, numerous **Black-chinned and Yellow-tufted Honeyeaters** and **Little Friarbirds**, and **Crested Shrike-tits** at several sites. At Honeyeater Dam, the flowering eucalypts had attracted hundreds of very **Noisy Friarbirds** and they, along with **Yellow-tufted Honeyeaters**, made life difficult for other species trying to take advantage of all the food.



Photo: David Cook

Diamond Firetail (*Stagonopleura guttata*)

On Sunday, some of the group stayed in camp while others visited the very impressive Yeddonba Aboriginal Cultural Site and then Mt Pilot, and the Cooks went walking from Honeyeater Dam. They managed to locate 5 **Turquoise Parrots** and later led the Mt Pilot group back to the general area where the birds were relocated, with everyone having very good views.

Our campsite was also an excellent spot for birding with 5 **Diamond Firetails** occupying a roosting nest among the tents, **Dusky Woodswallows** in good numbers and **Jacky Winters**. Nocturnal visitors included a pair of **Barking Owls**,

a Sugar Glider and a Ring-tailed Possum. Other interesting mammals for the weekend included several Yellow-footed and one Agile Antechinus, Koalas and Squirrel Gliders.

Our thanks to the Gothams for allowing us to camp on their property, for providing the venue for our communal dinner and for showing us around such a rich birding area. 124 species were recorded for the trip.

- **Sue Lashko**

Sunday 7 April - Farrer Ridge

Fourteen members and guests joined me for a walk on a sparkling morning. The planned route was from the Erindale Drive entrance following the path under the pylons, up the steps to the top of the hill, and a wander down one of the tracks through the bushland. As we reached the large grassy areas the first of several mixed flocks was encountered, with numerous **Grey Fantails**, **Buff-rumped Thornbills**, **Yellow-rumped Thornbills**, a **Golden Whistler**, many **Weebills**, **Superb Fairywrens** and a pair of **Scarlet Robins**. On the steep track to the top of the ridge, there were several stops (much needed) to admire a male **Scarlet Robin** sitting high above the group against the sky and calling incessantly, and a similar flock to that already seen further down. The spectacular view from the top was admired by all. The narrow track through the bush was not as birdy as expected, but we were

met at the bottom by another large mixed flock, which this time also included **Striated** and **Brown Thornbills**. The resident **Nankeen Kestrel** and **Grey Butcherbirds** also put in an appearance at this stage, as did a large family of **White-winged Choughs** and some **Black-faced Cuckoo-shrikes**. Throughout the morning groups of up to 20 **Yellow-faced Honeyeaters** were flying over the site, as mentioned by Jean in a separate message - several hundred in total for the morning. Only 30 species were seen in all, but there were large numbers of some of these. - **Sandra Henderson**

Sunday 14 April - K2C bird surveys

The seventh K2C bird survey was held on a fine warm morning, perhaps the last in an extended warm dry autumn period. A general comment from the COG observers was on the absence of the small insectivorous birds at many of the remnant sites. Despite this a total of 81 species was accumulated from the 39 surveyed sites and the properties during the morning. This includes almost all the species expected to be seen at this time of year but fewer incidental records of waterbird species.

The autumn honeyeater migration was in full swing at a couple of sites, with more than 700 Yellow-faced honeyeaters counted in 20 minutes streaming along one creekline. The summer migrants had left and the winter altitudinal migrants such as **Golden Whistler**, **Gang-gang Cockatoo** and **Flame Robin** were recorded at several sites.

Perhaps the most encouraging records were those of **Scarlet Robins**, listed as Vulnerable in NSW, at 12 of the 39 sites. It seems to have been a good year for this species in the local region. There were six records of the **Brown Treecreeper** at sites where they are regularly found. Three **Hooded Robins** were seen, two of those on properties where they've not been recorded before in K2C surveys. At the same time this species was not found at some of its usual sites. **Diamond Firetails** were not seen as frequently as in previous surveys. Two other threatened species, the **Speckled Warbler** and **Varied Sittella** were found at 3 sites each.

A big thank you to the 15 COG volunteers, and to the landholders for ongoing access to the sites. It is very gratifying for the volunteers to see the interest the landholders have in the birds on their properties. Thank you also to Bush Heritage Australia for sponsoring the post survey lunch. - **Nicki Taws**

Wednesday 17 April – Point Hut

Twenty-four members and guests gathered at Pine Island South at 8:30am. By the time we'd walked to Point Hut Crossing and back we had a list of 46 species, the highlight of which was a juvenile **Olive-backed Oriole** of which almost everyone got good views. There were plenty of **Scarlet Robin** and so everyone had good views of these and a couple of the beginners were first to spot some. However, only one **Flame Robin** was seen, a female, and that by only a handful of people. We didn't see more than a dozen **Yellow-faced Honeyeater**, but saw more **Red Wattlebird** and **Brown Thornbill**. **Great Cormorant** were more numerous than **Little Pied** or **Little Black Cormorant**. **Red-browed Finch** were by far the most numerous species seen. - **Michael Robbins**

Sunday 21 April - Square Rock Walking Trail, Corin Road

In perfect autumn weather eleven members spent the morning on a walk from the Square Rock car park (ex Smokers Gap carpark) on Corin Road to Square Rock via the lookout over the Orroral Valley. On arrival the relative easy walk was well worth the view. The short metal ladder up to the Rock was an easy climb but for those with a head for heights reaching the very top of the Rock can be an interesting challenge.

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Photo: Geoffrey Dabb

Flame Robin (*Petroica phoenices*)

All of the 24 species recorded were relatively quiet and to be expected at this time of the year. There were a few **Golden Whistler** about with **Eastern Yellow Robin**, **White-throated Treecreeper**, **Brown Thornbill** and **White-browed Scrub-wren** associated with **Striated Thornbill** feeding flocks. As often happens at this time of the year and into winter there was confusion between the calls of the **Grey Shrike-thrush** and the **White-eared Honeyeater**. The similar call of the **Eastern Spinebill**, **Eastern Yellow Robin** and **White-throated Treecreeper** again caused some confusion to those new members (and some of the older!).

The occasional **Crescent Honeyeater** and three **Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo** was a bonus. A single **Flame Robin** was recorded and it was surprising that no **Superb Lyrebirds** or raptors were reported. The honeyeater migration was in progress with **White-naped Honeyeater** in greater numbers than the **Yellow-faced Honeyeater**.

A walk well worth recommending.

- **Chris Davey**

News from the committee

Jenny Bounds attended a workshop organised by the Conservation Council to discuss the Gungahlin Strategic Environmental Assessment. Jenny, with input from other committee members, worked on a COG submission which has been lodged. The key issue is a wider protection zone from the urban edge for the Superb Parrot breeding site on Throsby Ridge.

Submissions were lodged on:

ACT Draft Action Plan for Glossy Black-Cockatoo: COG supported the broad principles, but urged a greater regional approach be included and specific actions on revegetation and research (otherwise little tends to happen when actions are broad).

Molonglo River Park - Coombs Riverside Preliminary Design: the main issues of concern are that the plans should define nature reserve and recreation zones (which are too merged), dogs to be excluded from area around conservation zones for pink-worm tailed lizard habitat; also unrealistic aspirational statements/objectives to improve habitat and connectivity for threatened woodland birds, in what will be a heavily used recreational park with inadequate buffers from the urban edge.

Members are reminded that the Sewage Treatment Works at Fyshwick are off-limits until current remedial and construction works are completed later this year. A complaint was received recently from ACTEW Water after a birdwatcher (who may not have been a COG member) was found within the construction site.

- **Sandra Henderson**

Future Field Trips

Before the start of each trip, each participant must sign a COG Field Trip Registration Form which acknowledges the participant's responsibilities. The form reads as follows:

I declare I am capable of undertaking this 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 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 trips page of the COG website <http://canberrabirds.org.au/> and on the COG chat-line at <http://bioacoustics.cse.unsw.edu.au/archives/html/canberrabirds/2012-03/index.html>.

Sunday 5 May – The Pinnacle NR, Hawker – morning

Enjoy an easy morning stroll through the Pinnacle Nature Reserve in Hawker. It commands glorious views to the Brindabellas and we can expect to see several mixed feeding flocks of all the local thorn-bills, **Speckled Warblers**, scrubwren and robins. We'll try and find the resident **Tawny Frogmouths** and hopefully some raptors. We suggest you bring water and something for morning tea.

Meet at 8am at the end of Dungowan Street, Hawker, by the big tree. Registration is not necessary. For further information contact **John Brannan** john.brannan@netspeed.com.au

Saturday 11 May – Australian National Botanic Gardens

This morning walk will be the first for 2013 aimed specifically to help beginners and new members identify birds and to learn about their behaviour and calls. The Botanic Gardens are especially suitable for such an outing, as they allow the opportunity to observe a range of local bush birds in a variety of habitats. Due to the available food supply they are also a relative haven for birds during late autumn/winter. **Anthony Overs** will lead this outing, which will consist of a stroll through this lovely part of Canberra for a couple of hours.

Meet at 9.15am at the ANBG bus shelter. Registration is essential. Please book your place with Anthony: 6254 0168, or anthony.overs@gmail.com who will be happy to discuss whether this outing is suitable for you. Please make sure to bring your binoculars and field guide.

Saturday 18 May to Sunday 19 May – Royal National Park, Bundeena – Camping

This trip focuses on birdwatching in the Royal National Park, south of Sydney. We will camp at the Bonnie Vale camp ground at Bundeena (\$28 per night, all sites unpowered). National Park entry fees also apply (\$11 per vehicle per day). The plan will be to drive down on Friday evening, 17 May (about 4 hours from Canberra). We will explore a couple of parts of the park including the very scenic coastal walk from Bundeena out along the sandstone cliffs and possibly Kangaroo Creek from Audley where we can hire a dinghy and row ourselves up the creek looking for **Rock Warblers**. Possible birding highlights include **Musk Lorikeets**, **Beautiful Firetail**, **Tawny-crowned Honeyeater** and **White-Cheeked Honeyeater**. At night we will spotlight for mammals and owls with a chance of Rusa deer and **Powerful Owl**.

Registration is essential. The trip will be restricted to 20 participants and filled on a first reply basis. Please contact **Kathy Walter** or **John Goldie** on 6241 7639 or email walter.goldie@optusnet.com.au to book. More detailed information will be provided closer to the day.

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.

Friday night — Monday, 7-10 June - Jamberoo Valley/Barren Grounds NR

The accommodation for this trip to a past favourite COG spot will be at Ben Ricketts Environmental Reserve with self-catering cabins about 1 km from Barren Grounds. They are nicely furnished, with the majority of beds being bunks, but very open plan. There are 17 beds available. Be aware that cabins may need to be mixed genders. For those with web access the address is www.benricketts.org.au if you want to look at photos of the cabins.

We will explore several marked walking tracks on the property, which pass through rainforest, very tall eucalypts, creeks and a waterfall, offering opportunities to see the rich variety of native plants and animals. We will hopefully do some spotlighting as **Sooty Owls** are sometimes heard at night.

We will also visit Barren Grounds and neighbouring areas where there are a range of walks from easy to medium difficulty. Barren Grounds Reserve is in the Southern Highlands about 2 – 2.5 hours' drive north of Canberra. It is famous for its specialty birds as well as its flora - flowering heath in spring and summer, and banksias in winter. The reserve is rich in bird life. On the heath, we are most likely to come across various honeyeaters and possibly **Southern Emu-wrens**. If we're lucky, we might even see a **Ground Parrot** or **Eastern Bristlebird**.

Registration is essential. Once your booking is confirmed, payment of approximately \$65 will be required. The trip is open to COG members only. Please contact **Sue Lashko** at smlashko@gmail.com or phone 62524485.

Note: this trip is full, but you can go on the waiting list in case anyone is unable to attend.

Saturday 15 June – Superb Lyrebird survey – Tidbinbilla NR

Since the January 2003 bushfires Peter Fullagar and Chris Davey have been monitoring the return of the Superb Lyrebird to an area of the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve. They wish to get an idea of the present distribution within the Reserve and are asking COG members to join them for a morning survey. They are calling for expressions of interest to join them at 8.00am to walk the trails and to record the location of calling birds. Depending on the trails walked the survey should take about three hours.

This outing will be a repeat of the very successful surveys conducted at this time of the year since 2004. If interested and for further details please contact **Chris Davey** on 62546324 (h), email chris_davey@aapt.net.au

Sunday 23 June — Stromlo Forest Park, morning stroll

Built after the January 2003 fires, the shared public facility at Stromlo Forest Park has inadvertently provided ideal habitat for the **White-fronted Chat**, and this is one of the few places in Canberra where this species can be reliably observed. This is particularly in winter when it often forms loose flocks of over 20 birds. The open areas are also those favoured by **Flame Robins** and the venue is, now that their favoured immediate post-fire habitat has matured, also one of the more reliable places to see this species in Canberra in winter. Other species such as the **Diamond Firetail** sometimes get caught up in these on the ground flocks.

Meet **Jack Holland** (6288 7840) at the car park at 9 am (there is no need to book for this outing). We will spend the morning strolling around looking for these species, and depending on what we find we might venture a little further into regenerating bushland. Bring morning tea.

Friday 5 to Sunday 7 July— Mallacoota

Don't miss this opportunity to visit this unspoilt wilderness area. We will explore with local ornithologist, Bob Semmens, the sewage works, airport (possible **Ground Parrots** and **Australian Hobby**), Gypsy Point (**Nankeen Night-heron**, **Whistling Kites**, **White-bellied Sea-Eagles**) Double Creek (**Wonga Pigeons**, **Lewin's** and **Scarlet Honeyeaters**), our block (**Rainbow Lorikeets**, **Eastern Yellow Robin**, **New Holland honeyeaters**) and of course, the beach and wharf area.

A list of accommodation options will be supplied on application or you can camp at the Foreshore Caravan Park. Please contact **Barbara de Bruine** at barbdebruine@hotmail.com or ring 62583531.

The birds of the Presentations at COG's Meeting—8 May 2013



Orange-bellied Parrot
(*Neophema chrysogaster*)

Photo: Graeme Chapman



Swift Parrot
(*Lathamus discolour*)

Photo: Geoffrey Dabb

Autumn Woodland Survey reports

compiled by Jenny Bounds

Hall/Gold Creek

Alison Rowell and Matthew Mullaney, did the survey on 23 March in fine mild conditions. The vegetation was in fairly good condition, but showing the effects of the recent dry spell. Groups of small birds were seen at several sites. There weren't many honeyeaters, just the occasional **Yellow-faced** and **Eastern Spinebill** which didn't appear to be migrating. A flock of Dusky **Woodswallows** and one of **Brown Thornbills** was a highlight, and it was a good day for raptors with a **Whistling Kite**, **Nankeen Kestrel** and **Collared Sparrowhawk**. The highlight and surprise of the day was a show-off **Rufous Fantail** at a site in open woodland. It was with a mixed flock, but being harassed by several **Grey Fantails**.

Mulligans Flat NR

Jenny Bounds and a team of 12 did the survey on Sun. 24 March, on a mild, calm and sunny morning. There were still some summer migrant species around, **Brown** and **White-throated Gerygones**, **Rufous Whistlers**, **Leaden Flycatchers** and a single **Olive-backed Oriole**. Mixed flocks were evident with several large groups of mixed pardalotes with others like **Grey Fantails** and thornbills. Highlights were: **Scarlet Robins** calling actively, recorded at 7 sites; 2 **Red-capped Robins** (female/immature) at the Woolshed; a **Whistling Kite** at the small dam upstream of the large dam; **Speckled Warblers** and **Brown Thornbills** at several sites; **Varied Sittella**; **Owlet-nightjar** calling at 2 sites; 4 **Australiant.Shoveller** at the large dam; a flock of 12 **Little Ravens** near site 1 not far from the Woolshed; and 1 **Painted Button-quail** at site 10 on the northern end of the western ridge. There was no noticeable honeyeater migration, with only 4 **Yellow-faced Honeyeaters** at one site on the eastern side of the reserve. Total species count was 63, the highest survey count for at least 5 years. Thanks to all those who assisted. Next survey is Sunday 30 June.

Goorooyarroo NR North

Nicki Taws reported on the survey conducted on 3 April, a very crisp but fine and still morning. Birds were very active and 38 species were seen in the sites. Highlights included **Rufous Whistler**, **Noisy Friarbird** and both gerygones, **Eastern Spinebill** and **Brown-headed Honeyeater** were feeding on flowering mistletoe. **Scarlet Robins** were recorded at 3 sites, **Varied Sittella** (1 site), **Owlet-nightjar** heard in one site, and a couple of **Tawny Frogmouths** disturbed at another site - the first time these have been recorded in the woodland surveys here.

Goorooyarroo NR South

Steve Holliday, Prue Buckley and Dave Cook did their survey on Sunday 17 March. Weather conditions were not great; it was sunny but the wind was strong and cold. Despite this they recorded 38 species in the reserve, although a count of 40+ is more usual for the autumn survey. Highlights were a pair of **Diamond Firetails** and 15 **Dusky Woodswallows** at site 1, a **Speckled Warbler** at site 2, and 3 **Wedge-tailed Eagles** visible from site 7. Summer migrants were in low numbers but **Western Gerygone** and **Rufous Whistler** were recorded. A **White-eared Honeyeater** was the only cool weather visitor noted. Mixed flocks of small birds, normally a feature of autumn, proved difficult to find. 30+ ravens were present around site 1 and, although some **Little Raven** calls were heard, the majority were **Australian**, including quite a lot of young birds.

Mt Majura NR

Kathy Walter and John Goldie surveyed the Mt Majura sites on Saturday 23 March, a great weather day for birding. A noisy mixed flock was moving through the first site, including 3 (& possibly 4) **Speckled Warblers** as well as a resplendent **Scarlet Robin**. Also present were both pardalotes, **Yellow-rumped**, **Buff-rumped**, **Brown** and **Striated Thornbills**, **Superb Fairy-wrens**, **Grey Fantail** and more. Site 5 was again good with a bonus of **Brown Falcon** which was a welcome and very rare addition to the surveys at Mt Majura. The 4 sites behind Hackett were less inspiring with a couple of **Noisy Miners**, **King Parrots** and **Crimson Rosellas** accounting for most of the sightings.

Majura Field Firing Range (Defence land)

Paul Fennell and Barbara Allan did the survey on Wednesday 20 March, with two of the Range's Environmental Officers, on a perfect autumn day, with not a cloud in the sky and no wind at all. There was a good turnout of species at most sites but, sadly, there was no sign of either **Hooded Robin** or **Brown Treecreeper**, which had been recorded at some sites previously, and no **Noisy Friarbirds**, a species expected there at this time of year. Interestingly enough, over many years there have been few, if any, of the cuckoo species at Majura. There was a nice mixture of species representing the summer and winter membership of the local bird community with **Rufous Whistlers** and **Black-faced Cuckoo-shrikes**, and plenty of **White-eared Honeyeaters**, some **Eastern Spinebill**, and the odd **Yellow-faced Honeyeater**. A **Common Bronzewing** was flushed at one site and **Brown Quail** at another, while **Grey Butcherbirds** were heard at more than one site. **Scarlet Robins** were prevalent in many sites. A pair of **Red-rumped Parrots** were assiduously exploring many hollows in the Yellow-box Gums at the Grenade Range. There were only two species of waterbirds spotted on the site at the northern end of the range that encompasses a reasonably large farm dam: two **Grey Teal** and one female **Musk Duck**.

Campbell Park/Mt Ainslie NR

Michael Lenz reported taking the survey in perfect weather conditions on Sunday 24 March. A total of 40 species was recorded, with 34 of those at sites. A **Little Eagle** was the more noteworthy species. Otherwise the typical range of species for the time of year was encountered: **Rufous** and **Golden Whistler**, both gerygones, 3 **Speckled Warbler**, a **Scarlet Robin**, a **Jacky Winter** singing, hardly any honeyeaters of note (1 **White-eared**, and **Brown-headed** and only the odd **Red Wattlebird**), and mixed feeding flocks at 2 sites.

Newline

Sue Lashko did the survey on 17 March, reporting that a large Angus bull rather protective of his ladies made for a bit of excitement at one site. On a fine and mild morning, the autumn survey produced the usual records with no particular surprises. The only raptor seen was a **Collared Sparrowhawk**. Seven parrot species, including the regular pair of **Rainbow Lorikeets** and 4 **Australian King-Parrots**, made up the bulk of the total birds seen. Smaller woodland species included **Jacky Winter**, **Speckled Warbler**, **White-throated Gerygone** and **Southern Whiteface**. Numbers of **European Starlings** were down, with only juvenile birds seen. A total of 41 species was recorded.

Red Hill NR

Harvey Perkins and Stuart Harris did the survey on Sunday 17 March, in quite cool and windy conditions, logging the lowest survey result for the fourteen and a half years of Red Hill surveys. The total of 22 species is the equal lowest on record (and well below the average of 32 species). **Magpies**, ravens, **King Parrots** and **Noisy Miners** were recorded in expected numbers, but everything else, even obvious residents such as the rosellas, produced lower than normal tallies. Small passerines were either scarce or inconspicuous with just a few **Superb Fairy-wrens**, **Weebills** and pardalotes, and the

odd **Grey Fantail** and **Yellow-rumped Thornbill** recorded. Recent hazard reduction burns at several sites probably didn't help, and one site produced a nil return. A couple of highlights included at least a pair of **Collared Sparrowhawks**, and a pair of **Galahs** checking out a hollow. A single immature **Golden Whistler** was the only evidence of possible autumn movements. Harvey checked his records, and found that **White-throated Treecreepers** and **Red-browed Finches**, both species that used to be regular, have not been recorded for three years on surveys.

Jerrabomberra West NR

In fine and mild conditions before the wind got up, Jenny Bounds and Alison Russell-French did the survey Wednesday 27 March in the woodland behind the grasslands reserve. While bird numbers and species were not abundant, there were a few good sightings, the best being a flock of 17 **Varied Sittellas** moving through the yellow box trees. Sittellas have been recorded there before, but only occasionally and never that many. Other highlights were 3 pairs of **Scarlet Robins**, some males sitting up high and calling, 4 **Gang-gang Cockatoos** feeding in Blakely's Red Gums at site 6 (usually it's a site dominated by **Noisy Miners** and **Gang-gangs** are very uncommon in that reserve), and an **Owlet-nightjar** calling at site 2. **Rufous Whistlers** and both gerygones were still around and there were a few **Dusky Woodswallows** and **Grey Fantails**, and a couple of species of thornbills. There was no honeyeater migration as we did the site counts, but about 9.45am, a couple of flocks of **Yellow-faced Honeyeaters** started moving through (around 50 birds). The total of 37 species was about average for autumn.

Symonston - Callum Brae NR

Sandra Henderson reported a sparkling morning on Saturday 23 March, still (at least initially) and lots of birds about. There were three **Scarlet Robins** within survey sites, and five between sites, but no **Flame Robins** about (where they come to winter). A little patch between the third and fourth sites yielded a very nice group, with both **Golden** and **Rufous Whistlers**, a line-up of eight spotty young **Dusky Woodswallows**, a **White-throated Gerygone**, a **Grey Shrike-thrush**, several **Grey Fantails** and **Weebills**. There were lots of noisy small flocks of **Crimson** and **Eastern Rosellas** around the reserve. A **Western Gerygone** was recorded, a not-so-common voice at Callum Brae, and three raptors put in an appearance - a **Nankeen Kestrel**, two **Wedge-tailed Eagles** and a **Brown Gohawk**. A total of 37 species was recorded, with 24 of them in at least one of the six survey plots.

Tuggeranong Hill NR

Lia Battisson surveyed on Saturday 23 March, a still, sunny morning. The most interesting site was site 3, where ten species were recorded including, unfortunately, a **Common Myna** and 10 **Common Starlings**. The only honeyeaters seen were **Red Wattlebirds** and a few **White-eared Honeyeaters**; no migrating honeyeaters at all were observed. Surprisingly a **Common Blackbird** was at site 5, but there were no other unusual sightings. In all 22 species were observed, 17 during the survey counts.

Rural leasehold near Tharwa

David McDonald surveyed on 23 March in perfect weather conditions, cool, sunny, but later the wind rose to moderate/strong, spoiling things somewhat. Both bird numbers and species diversity were fairly low with only 19 species observed within the survey sites and another 7 between them. Just 15 metres outside the first site three **Brown Treecreepers** were recorded. Unexpectedly, an **Eastern Yellow Robin** was recorded in the site, not a species expected in this woodland, perhaps moving from the ranges to its winter quarters? Honeyeater numbers were low: just one **White-plumed** and one **Yellow-faced**, and no sign of the autumn migration. Unfortunately no **Speckled Warblers**, formerly seen on most surveys, were spotted. A mixed flock containing **Red-browed Finches**, **Yellow-rumped** and **Buff-rumped Thornbills**, **Superb Fairy-wrens**, **Weebills**, **Grey Fantail** and **White-plumed Honeyeater** added to the pleasure of the survey.

Avlan Whimsy #99

Zebbie World; little Aussie calculators

By the time you read this (I sometimes fantasise that people *do* read Whimsies) I'll be somewhere in central Australia. Almost without doubt, sometime in the last hour or so I'll have heard the cheerful nasal tooting of Zebra Finches, like little toy trumpets, clustering in bushes round a dam, or feeding on grass seeds on the plains. The Pitjantjatjara people of the Centre hear them in much the same way as I do, and have named them accordingly; to them, the familiar little bird is Nyii Nyii. I love it.



Zebra Finch (*Taeniopygia guttata*)

Photo: Rhonda Hansch

I'm a huge fan of Zebbies, an intrinsic part of the arid inland, superbly evolved to life in a very difficult environment. The difficulty is not just in the aridity, though of course that's tough; in some ways the harder part is the unpredictability. How do you organise a breeding strategy when the rains might not happen for a year or more, and could come at any time of year? What's more, the rains alone won't feed a brood of growing chicks.

The answer took a while to tease out, partly because there are different answers in different parts of the country. In the temperate south – Zebbies live as far south as Victoria – the rains actually are reasonably predictable and they breed seasonally in spring, as the grass seeds develop. Elsewhere their choice of baby-food makes things trickier. Many grass-finches feed their chicks on insects; lots of otherwise generally vegetarian spe-

cies do this, to give their brood a high protein kick-start to life. Zebbies however start their life as they've going to continue it, focussing on grass seeds; the only concession they make to their youngsters is to feed them soft undeveloped seeds. Seeds however, unlike insects, do not appear almost as soon as the rains do, so Zebbies planning to breed have to make some pretty complex calculations. If the weather is cool, grasses take longer to grow and set seed than if it's hot; another influencing factor is the amount of moisture in the soil, which is a function of the time since the previous rains and what the temperatures were in that time. The end result is that the tiny birds must remember how long it is since the rains came and, as a result of what can only be described as complex computations, start to breed anywhere between 4 and 12 weeks later.

But even day to day living for a Zebbie requires careful strategies. Desert birds living on insects or other flesh don't need to drink; with efficient metabolisms they can get all their water needs from their food. That is not an option available to seed-eaters – parrots, pigeons and finches primarily. It's been estimated that a Zebbie needs to eat up to 6,000 tiny grass seeds a day (though if larger seeds are available the number can be greatly reduced); it also needs to drink every day. In the deserts neither

of these things can be guaranteed in one place, and both resources – especially the seeds – are very ephemeral. If the little finch can't find both of these things, on every single day, it will surely die. So, it must be constantly planning, not just where to roost today to be in reach of water and seeds tomorrow, but where it will go for a seamless transition when the pool dries up or the seeds finish.

The grass finches arose in Africa, in the vast grassy plains. Eventually they spread east through Asia and ultimately, as Australia came within reach, they island-hopped to here in just the last few million years. Their arrival coincided with the great drying, as the rainforests were retreating and being replaced with drier habitats including grasslands. There were probably three waves of arrivals, with the firetails arriving first, and the ancestor of Zebbies and Double-bars a bit later. The last to arrive were the ancestors of the others (Long-tailed Finches, Red-broweds, Gouldians for instance), which mostly remain as tropical dwellers. Of all these, only the Zebbies have taken on the arid vastnesses of the land and become dryland specialists. Painted Finches also live in the heart of the country, but restrict themselves to rocky ranges where there is permanent water. The closely-related Timor Zebra Finch presumably results from a recent reverse flow back into nearby Indonesia and Timor. Every inland homestead has Zebbies in the garden and around the home dam; they would have been familiar and probably affectionately regarded by bush dwellers throughout the country, so it amazes me that there are almost no folk names associated with them. Even 'Zebra Finch' doesn't appear in the literature until 1911, when John Leach in *An Australian Bird Book* used it as an alternative to Gould's Chestnut-eared Finch. I really don't believe that all bush-dwellers knew and used this rather mundane name, but that part of our heritage seems to have disappeared at least from the written record.

I find this a bit sad, but perhaps also appropriate, given the other mysteries surrounding this archetypal little Australian. I'll pass on your best wishes.

(An excellent account of many of the ecological aspects of Zeb-life is that of Steve Morton in the recent *Boom and Bust; bird stories for a dry country*, edited by Robin et al.)

Ian Fraser calochilus51@internode.on.net

PASSIVE SOLAR HOUSE

South Rosedale

Arupingi is a passive solar house situated in a peaceful bushland setting in South Rosedale.

Bird watching is possible from the comfort of a chair on the front or back deck, while for the more energetic, Guerrilla Bay and Burrewarra Point are within walking distance. The wetlands at Barling's Beach are only a few kilometres away. Rich birding is available in almost any direction.

Contact: Greg or Sallie Ramsay
6286 1564 or
gramsay@grapevine.com.au

MUDBRICK COTTAGE

Mallacoota

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

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

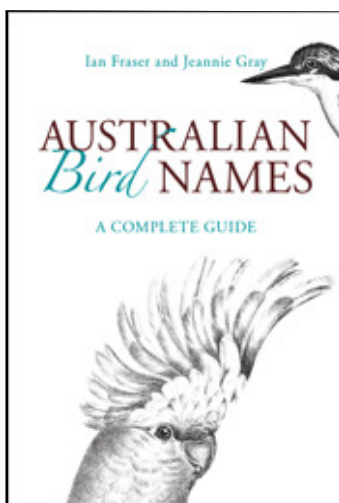
It is fully self-contained with a kitchen and laundry.

Contact: Barbara de Bruine
(02) 6258 3531, or
barbdebruine@hotmail.com

COG Sales Desk

Chris Davey has very kindly offered to run the Sales Desk at the May COG meeting. If there is anyone who would be willing to assist or replace Chris, please talk to him at the meeting.

He will be taking orders for the following books:



Australian Bird Names—A Complete Guide

Ian Fraser and Jeannie Gray

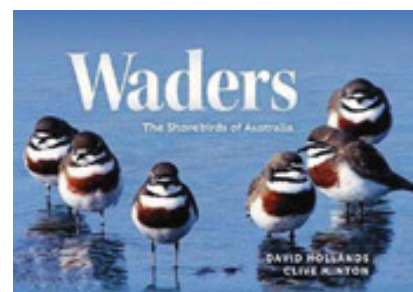
Available May 2013 - Price to be announced

For more detail see <http://www.publish.csiro.au/nid/21/pid/6833.htm>

Waders

The Shorebirds of Australia

David Hollands & Clive Minton



Available May 2013 - Price to be announced

For more detail see <http://www.publish.csiro.au/nid/21/pid/7117.htm>

Readers may remember that our previous dedicated lay-out editor, Greg Ramsay, used to give occasional updates on fascinating items. He has just sent this one in :

'Oldest breeding osprey' Lady returns to Loch of the Lowes

Lady has returned to the Dunkeld reserve for 22 consecutive years

An osprey which is thought to be the UK's oldest breeding female has returned to a Scottish nature reserve for the 23rd year.

Lady arrived at Loch of the Lowes in Dunkeld on Saturday from her winter home in West Africa.

She is believed to be about 27 years old and has laid more than 60 eggs in her lifetime.

In previous years, thousands of people have watched her progress on the reserve's webcam.



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

New members

COG welcomes the following new members:

D Ansell, Cook
R Soroka, Chisholm
J Brown, Canberra

NEXT NEWSLETTER

Deadline for the June 2013
edition

Wednesday 29 May 2013

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

gang-gang@canberrabirds.org.au

or

c/- The Secretary COG, PO Box
301 Civic Square, ACT 2608

Articles should be less than 500 words (300 for reports of 1-day field trips) except by prior arrangement with the editor.

Photographs (prints or electronic) with or without articles are encouraged

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COG library

For all enquiries or access to COG's library phone Barbara Allan on 6254 6520

COG membership

2012-2013 memberships:

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

Membership inquiries—

Sandra Henderson
6231 0303
membership@canberrabirds.org.au
for changed address or other details

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 E-mail Discussion List

COG has an email discussion list for members and friends: 'Canberra Birds'.

Join the list by following the links on the COG website or by sending an empty email message to;

canberrabirds-subscribe@canberrabirds.org.au

The subject is 'subscribe' (without the quotation marks).

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