

CANBERRA ORNITHOLOGISTS GROUP - President's Report for 2003-2004

It is a pleasure to provide my first President's report on COG activities during the past year. Note that this report covers the period between AGMs; ie November 2003 when I was elected, to the present.

One of my initial aims was to be a much more visible COG president, particularly to the membership, of which I felt chairing our monthly meeting was a very important aspect. As in my view an enthusiastic leadership and membership is the lifeblood of any organisation, I also considered emphasis of the social side of COG (including at meetings) as a very important element.

Even though I was formally on the committee the previous year, and was the COG secretary in the late 80s, I felt that initially I had a number of things to learn about the vast number of matters with which COG is, or potentially can be involved. After a few months when I was better informed, my priority was to ensure that our major projects were running as smoothly as possible. Regarding new initiatives I have been very mindful of the fact that while we are a big organisation it is very easy to overstretch what is possible to be done with largely volunteer work, and I've been keen to ensure that before we embark on anything new it is carefully examined, particularly the likelihood whether COG can deliver in a timely and professional way. This is part of the reason we haven't embarked on a more concerted effort for bushfire recovery monitoring as I had hoped, along with the fact that in the main this would largely give post-fire data, which is of limited value unless good pre-fire information is available.

So it's been a year of learning and consolidation of commitments. As can be seen by this report our commitments are very high and many members, both on and off the committee, work hard, selflessly and tirelessly. Our work on conservation matters has in particular been very wide and demanding, so much so that it has been shared by two committee members. While a number of things have not gone in our preferred direction, but in the interests of the birds of the ACT and our region we have made the best possible cases, mindful of the fact that we're an apolitical organisation.

There have been a number of achievements. With your Canberra Birds Notes this month you all received a copy of the Pocket Guide: The Birds of Canberra, which was put together as part of a joint initiative between COG and Birds Australia through some hard work by Jenny Bounds and Penny Olsen. This is designed both enable a basic identification of local species for ACT residents as an introduction to bird watching (and hopefully to attract new members to COG), as well as to provide information of the best spots for visitors. Already I've found that by providing it to friends and colleagues it serves the former well as it allows positive identification of the birds they have been seeing in their gardens etc.

This evening the first copies of the CD of calls and songs of ACT birds will be available. This has involved a major effort by Peter Fullagar and Ed Slater, and I'd like to thank them both, particularly for their very generous offer to allow COG to market their product. Though the cassette Birds Songs of Canberra has stood the test of time very well since it was first produced in the late 1980s, many members will welcome the opportunity to purchase or update to a product containing much more modern technology and a better quality sound.

COG has also been working on a project through the University of Canberra to enable bird observation data to be entered electronically to our database. This was to be launched tonight but unfortunately a minor hiccup has meant that it will now have to be launched in 2005. Again I'd like to thank all those involved, particularly David McDonald who has supervised and driven the project. I'm sure that many members will embrace the opportunity to lodge data in this way, and I'm expecting it will assist in my plans to give bird atlasing a higher profile in 2004-2005.

Anyone reading this report will have to be impressed by COG's range of activities and the sheer volume of effort expended by our members. Still there are many things that COG does not do. For example, except in a minor way we have not been able to partake in exhibitions for the past few years, and COG for many years has done very little specifically to attract younger members, including in the areas of education. Whether we can increase our profile in these areas is up to you the members, and should include an analysis of whether we have the resources to undertake these in a major way.

Committee

I would like to thank the Committee for all the support they have given me over the past year. Most Committee members have signalled their intention to stand again, which is very pleasing. I would like to especially thank those members who are retiring from committee — David McDonald, who has been a very long serving committee member and has played an important role in many aspects, including being the driving force and maintainer of the chat line; Julie McGuiness, again a longstanding member who has very ably looked after conservation matters and Harvey Perkins, only on the committee for a short period this time, but who will continue to share the very important role of CBN editor.

An organisation can only be effective if it is financially secure and has an active membership. As will be evident from her report, Joan Lipscombe continues to do a great job as Treasurer, and we retain a healthy bank account in spite of some of my attempts and wishes to spend quite a bit more of our surplus. Once again thank you Joan for all your sterling work. And thanks also to Noel Luff, our Honorary Auditor.

Membership was 342 at 30 June 2004, 3% up from the same time last year.

Many members not formally on the committee help COG in its day to day activities, often behind the scenes and largely unrecognized, but nevertheless make a huge contribution to the success of the organisation. Through taking on the Presidency it has become even clearer that much of our business is carried out by keen members and project organisers who are not formal members of the Committee. While it is not possible to thank them all individually, many are named below in this report.

Conservation

Jenny Bounds and Julie McGuiness have continued to work as COG's Conservation Officers. Jenny is also vice-President of the Conservation Council for the SE Region and Canberra, and both represent the interests of birds in that forum, participating in campaigns and various working groups of the Council.

The 2003-2004 year had mixed outcomes for our birds. Two bird species nominated by COG, the Varied Sittella and White-winged Triller, were listed as "vulnerable" under the ACT's Nature Conservation Act 1980. Unfortunately our submissions for a number of others were not accepted, though four were put on a watching brief (Diamond Firetail, Crested Shrike-tit, Dusky Woodswallow, Flame Robin). We believe the case for the Diamond Firetail in particular is strong, and COG is undertaking further analysis of its data and intends to re-submit several species for further consideration.

Urban land clearing for housing and road infrastructure continues to be a major threat to bird habitats in the ACT, particularly in woodlands. Despite community opposition, the East O'Malley woodland was sold for prestige housing and sadly has now been cleared; this area was a key breeding habitat for a number of birds, including threatened and declining species of birds. Additionally, the ACT Government proceeded to clear Canberra Nature Park on Bruce Ridge and Black Mountain for the Gungahlin Drive Extension freeway, despite vocal opposition from many environmental groups and academics, and Court action taken by the Save the Ridge Group. Notably, this freeway has fragmented a key woodland complex (hot spot for the vulnerable Varied Sittella), and destroyed a key study site for researchers, including crucial habitat for Boobook Owls which Jerry Olsen has monitored for many years there. On our first outing for 2004 ten lucky members were able to see these birds in their post-breeding dispersal, when we also first heard about their pending plight (see also the April 2004 Gang-Gang for background on the Boobooks).

While COG had no official position on whether a freeway should be built, bird data was provided to inform submissions on the impacts on biodiversity by the Gungahlin Drive Extension. COG has provided views to public consultations over the years on the GDE, outlining potential detrimental effects on bird habitat, and stated its objection to any resumption of land in nature reserves.

Gungahlin continues to grow and woodlands continue to be cleared there, with urban development now on the doorsteps of the important Mulligan's Flat and Goorooyaroo woodland complex.

Some other issues COG has been involved in, including some positive news for birds, are:

- The announcement of cat containment measures for the new suburbs of Forde and Bonner adjacent to the Mulligan's Flat Reserve, a first for the ACT; residents will have to keep their cats confined to their properties. COG provided key input to a Working Group, which submitted proposals to the ACT Government, and wrote a formal letter of support to the ACT Government.
- The publication of the Lowland Woodland Strategy which includes revised Action Plans for several listed (threatened) birds – it is noted, however, that the Action Plans have not yet delivered tangible outcomes for threatened birds which continue to decline in our woodlands

Submissions were prepared and/or other input was made (including contributing to submissions made by the Conservation Council) to the following:

- the Jerrabomberra Wetlands Review of Plan of Management – COG contributed to community consultations and commented on draft plans (there is a proposed urban development in the adjacent East Basin which has impacts for the reserve), the Kingston Foreshores Development and the Mt Jerrabomberra Plan of Management;
- on the East Gungahlin Preliminary Assessment (suburbs of Kenny and Throsby) and representations to the ACT Government with our concerns about the impacts of close urban development on Mulligan's Flat and Goorooyaroo Nature Reserves, especially the impacts on Brown Treecreepers which are possibly no longer occur there now; COG has been advised that future studies are to be done in advance of the housing development;
- to the Draft Variation to the Territory Plan (Mt Mugga Mugga NR); this included COGs opposition to the housing development in the East O'Malley woodlands;
- the Minimising Mynas project being managed by Dr Chris Tidemann (ANU);
- representations to the Manager of Canberra Nature Park about unrestrained dogs in the Mt Majura NP, with concerns about impacts on Glossy Black-Cockatoos coming to drink at the dams there;
- proposals for expanded rural villages in the ACT, the ACT Recreation Strategy and Associated Bushfire Recovery Issues, and Shaping our Territory – Non Urban Land Use (covers use of forestry and other land affected by the January 2003 bushfires); and
- on the ACT Spatial Plan, the key planning document for future urban development in areas such as the Molonglo Valley, and the Kowen Plateau.

Field trips

We have continued to run a very active program of field trips. Jack Holland has maintained overall responsibility for management of the COG Field Trips program, and the 2004 program was devised with assistance of the Field Trips Team (Alistair Bestow, Jenny Bounds and David McDonald). David Rees joined this team later. A new policy was adopted of having at least two trips per month, usually a shorter local one followed by one further afield later in the month. These ranged from local half-day trips, including for beginners, to full day outings for the more experienced bird watchers, through to weekend and longer camp-outs. This was a more stable program than the previous year, which was severely affected by the 18 January bushfires, but was supplemented some more opportunistic trips arranged flexibly as these arose and resulted in the offering of weekly opportunities for members to participate in trips at the peak of the season (spring and early summer). Unfortunately there was insufficient interest in the one longer commercial trip that was offered, which had to be cancelled.

The aim of the program was to arrange a wide range of opportunities, so that there would be at least some trips that appealed to each member. Highlights included the Croajingalong, Yathong and Buddigower camp-outs, the latter providing an opportunity for members to witness bird banding, the Green Cape trip affording armchair views of Ground Parrots feeding, the all found stay at Thredbo offering good food, Olive Whistlers and Pink Robins, and the Pejar Dam bus trip for Great Crested Grebes, Musk Ducks and which helped forge links with the Goulburn Field Naturalists. There were also

very successful outings watching Glossy Black-Cockatoos come in to drink at the Mt Majura dams, to Tidbinbilla to look at how this favourite spot is re-generating and a nest workshop at Campbell Park. We also had further trips in the electric boat up the Molonglo River to see the nesting darters and cormorants, and a repeat the swift parrot search around Boorowa/Cowra. Some of the places we visited became hot spots on the COG E-mail chat line, such as Bibaringa for observing Diamond Doves. On our two most recent trips walks Painted and Regent Honeyeaters, as well as Red-backed Kingfishers were seen – some would call this luck but we like to think it was good planning.

I cannot overemphasise the importance of field trips in the spectrum of COG's activities. Not only do they help members learn about birds and visit places that are other wise hard to get to, but also there are important social and conservation aspects. Thanks to all those who helped lead and organise outings during the year, and we look forward to your continued assistance. Thanks also to those who wrote up such glowing reports of trips for *Gang-gang* and on the chat line. This is a very important but sometimes overlooked aspect of field trips, as it whets the appetites for participating in the next trip.

We have drafted a similar program for 2005, including the opportunity for a commercial trip and trust that our field trips will continue to be well patronised and will be as successful as this year has been.

Communications and Publications

During the year Tanya Rough continued to do a wonderful job editing and publishing our newsletter, *Gang-gang*. Lia Battison and the team of helpers continued to wrap and mail it. Thanks to all involved in ensuring that the major vehicle for COG communication was prepared and distributed in such a timely fashion. Thanks also to those who made regular contribution of articles, ensuring that it was always eagerly read when it landed in letter or E-mail boxes.

Harvey Perkins and Barbara Allan continued to do a very professional job in editing *Canberra Bird Notes*. This has continued to be published on time and also to include some very up to date and topical articles about birds in our region such as those occurring at East O'Malley, or on the site of the Gunghalin Drive Extension, the post-fire honeyeater migration pattern and Silver Gulls breeding on Lake Burley Griffin. Thanks also to those who contributed these very interesting articles.

David Cook maintained, updated and considerably expanded COG's web site which is now <http://www.canberrabirds.org.au>. The website presents information about COG presentations and field trips as reported in *Gang-gang*, together with other useful information about COG and its activities such as maps of some of our most visited places. Thank you David for providing such an excellent service. One of the features now is the Photo-gallery, where subscribers can submit and view a range of images of birds from our region, including topical local rarities.

COG's email discussion list 'canberrabirds', managed by David McDonald, continued to operate effectively throughout the year. It was moved from our former hosting service, Topica.com, to the web hosting service COG now uses, Quadra Hosting, without difficulty. The new facility enables subscribers to manage their own subscriptions. The list has over 160 subscribers, a 14 per cent increase on last year, and averages about four messages per day, providing a very useful forum for members and friends of COG to discuss topical issues relating to birds and birding in the Canberra region. Although it fills a number of roles, a significant one this year has been that of an unusual bird alerting service, facilitating the rapid spread of information about interested bird sightings in COG's area of concern and beyond. I have been particularly impressed with the speed at which this allows members to observe and confirm unusual sightings for our region. In a recent example all doubts about the accuracy of a report of a Grey-crowned Babbler were erased when follow-up observers were able to provide confirmatory reports to the chat line, including photos within 24 hours! I do regret that not all members are able to use this service, whether it is due to a dislike of the sheer volume of correspondence clogging up the E-mail, or lack of access to the web. I must again congratulate all subscribers for keeping the list so free of the personal vitriol that seems to characterise similar lists.

Unfortunately our publication *Birds of Canberra Gardens* is just about out of stock and costs for a reprint are prohibitive. As an interim measure this is being loaded onto a web site by Paul Fennell. It is anticipated this move will facilitate the future publication of a better, revised version incorporating 25 years data from this very important project.

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

COG runs a number of bird monitoring projects, some of which have been operating for many years. I would like to thank all those who have continued to contribute data to these projects.

As part of Birds Australia's Ongoing Atlas project, COG members are encouraged to collect records for COG's area of interest, especially at regular 2-hectare sites. While the effort has been lower than when the data was being collected for the Atlas published in 2003, it remains very important to collect this data over time. Thank you to all members who continue to collect records, and particularly those who still regularly revisit adopted 2-hectare sites. It is these sites that form the backbone of much of our environmental monitoring, providing data capable of detecting future changes in bird abundance. I hope to raise the profile for atlassing in 2005, including through the introduction of a well publicised blitz during Bird Week in October, as well as a repeat of the very successful Taylors Creek Landcare trip recently organised by Nicki Taws.

Another important component of COG's environmental monitoring program is the Woodland Monitoring Project. COG's surveys in grassy woodland habitats continued with further support from an ACT Government Environment Grant. There is now ten years of data for some sites (Mulligan's Flat NR). Jenny Bounds is Convenor of the Management Committee, which coordinates this project, with Nicki Taws and Jack Holland forming the other members of the Management Team. Alison Rowell continues to have a key role as paid consultant to the project, coordinating the quarterly surveys and data collection at sites, as well as providing a voluntary input. Steve Holliday has played a key role in ensuing timely and accurate data entry for 2003-2004.

In April 2004, COG received Alison's Progress Report on the Woodland Bird Survey (2000-2003) that was subsequently published in Canberra Bird Notes (Volume 29 No 2, June 2004). This is a key report that provided some qualitative analysis of bird species of interest and recommendations for the future. Additional locations have been added to the project with Gooroo South (in Goorooyaroo Nature Reserve) and a site in the Naas Valley. Surveys are now conducted at 13 Grassy Woodland locations in key areas, in all a total of 129 sub-sites are monitored every three months. Thank you to the people involved in this project, which include Jenny Bounds, Isobel Crawford, Geoffrey Dabb, Paul Fennell, John Goldie, Steve Holliday, Dave Cook, Michael Lenz, David McDonald, Julie McGuinness, Harvey Perkins, Alison Rowell, Nicki Taws and Kathy Walter, and others who assist the site coordinators with surveys, especially at Mulligan's Flat Reserve which has the largest number of sub-sites.

Most recently, a brief has been prepared to undertake a statistical analysis of a number of species of interest as well as common species including an analysis of habitat variables, to determine trends; this should be finalised at the end of March 2005. A second Woodland Birds Seminar (following on from the successful seminar in 2003), on a theme to be determined, is planned for the second half of 2005.

Thanks to Mark Clayton and his successor Martin Butterfield, for their work in managing the Garden Bird Survey, and, in particular to Kay Hahne for continuing to enter the data. This major project has now been in existence for over 23 years and is our longest running monitoring project. Martin has taken up this role with great enthusiasm and is providing a personal service delivering charts etc. It is a particular achievement that, of the 58 sites currently active in year 24 of the Survey, 11 first reported data in years 1 or 2 of the Survey. We also have a few sites in the newer suburbs and more would be welcome, especially in Gunghalin. Looking forward we are starting on a Review of the Survey to ensure that it keeps up with developments in technology and science.

Paul Fennell continued to manage COG's databases, except for the Garden Bird Survey, which is now ably managed by Martin Butterfield. They ensure that data are effectively curated and files regularly backed-up. Special thanks to those members who assisted with data checking during the year, including Chris Davey, Harvey Perkins and Nicki Taws. Tony Harding, who left the ACT some time ago now, continues to be the single support for our main survey data entry. Many thanks to Tony for keeping up his excellent work from afar.

The Rarities Panel continued to meet quarterly to consider, and endorse for publication where appropriate, records of unusual species seen in COG's area of concern. It also continuously reviews the status of birds in our area and periodically issues a revised list of 'unusual' species. The Panel farewelled long-time member Barry Baker during the year; Richard Allen was appointed to fill the vacancy.

Annual Bird Reports

Many thanks to Barbara Allan, Martin Butterfield, Grahame Clark, Bob Digan, Malcolm Fyfe, Ian McMahon, Harvey Perkins, David Purchase and Nicki Taws and others who have managed to keep the Annual Bird Reports (ABR) up to date. Many thanks are also due to Martin Butterfield and Paul Fennell who retrieve and collate the data for the authors. I found the 2002-2003 Annual Bird Report published in March very interesting reading, and I would like to congratulate the team for putting it all together so quickly in just a couple of months from the very raw state I saw it just before Xmas. It is very important that the ABR is published as soon as possible after the reporting year has finished, in order to allow feedback to contributors and the earliest indication of any trends or changes.

Monthly Meetings

Barbara Allan has again organised an excellent program of presentations for our monthly meetings. These included well attended presentations on the Wedge-tailed Eagle in our area, Glossy Black-cockatoos, the Regent Honeyeater and White-browed Scrub-wrens. My thanks again go to all speakers. Thanks also to Mark Clayton for organising and running the Bird Quiz Night in January; not to be missed next time he does one. The reports in *Gang-gang* and on the COG website every month attest to the quality of our meetings. Special thanks also to Carol Macleay and her numerous helpers for running the monthly stall and raffle at COG meetings. Barbara Allan also organised the refreshments for the meetings to ensure members stay after and enjoy some of the very important social aspects of COG.

COG Administration & the COG Office

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

The COG Office in the Griffin Centre continues to house COG's equipment, data sheets, the COG library, computer and database and the COG slide collection. Barbara Allan and Tom Green run the office, which is currently open on Tuesday mornings. There have been discussions about a possible move when the new Griffin Centre is built, but these have been inconclusive to date.

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

Canberra Birds Conservation Fund

The Canberra Birds Conservation Fund is able to receive tax-deductible donations from COG members and the general public, and uses the donated money on activities that help to achieve COG's environmental objectives, especially promoting the conservation of the Canberra region's native birds and their habitats. Members continue to give generously to this fund.

The Fund's first grant was made in 2001 to Adrian Manning of the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, ANU, to assist in a study he has now completed: "A multi-scale study of the Superb Parrot". He reported on this study to COG's April meeting. During the year under review, the Fund's Management Committee provided a grant to Ms Suzi Bond to support a study 'Do woodland birds breed in revegetated sites'. The findings of this study should be available soon.

Conclusion

I would like to thank everyone else who has provided with me assistance over the past year to make my first year as COG President both enjoyable and relatively smooth. I am extremely grateful for the support given by so many of COG's members to ensure our good work promoting the birds of Canberra and their conservation has continued. As departing President Barry Baker said last year, COG is a great organisation, and it has been an honour to serve as President during 2003-2004. I look forward to another active year guiding this very impressive organisation.

Jack Holland

10 November 2004