

CANBERRA ORNITHOLOGISTS GROUP - President's Report for 2004-2005

It is a pleasure to provide my second President's report, this time on COG activities for the period November 2004 to the present.

Though I feel there have been more demands on my time, looking back over the past 11 months there seem to have been fewer notable achievements compared with those for the previous year. The reasons for this are unclear, perhaps it's because I'm now better known both to members and those outside of COG. I have also remained very mindful that, while we are a big organisation, it is very easy to overstretch what is possible to be done with largely volunteer work. Therefore I've continued to be cautious to ensure that before we embark on anything new it is carefully examined, particularly the likelihood whether COG can deliver in a timely and professional way.

So it's best described as having been another year of consolidation. When I became president COG was already a very active club, and as can be seen by this report our commitments remain very high with many members, both on and off the committee, continuing to work hard, selflessly and tirelessly. Our work on conservation matters remains very demanding, and continues to be shared by two committee members, with me personally also taking on some of the load. We need to remain vigilant against proposals that often come out of left field, with very short time frames to respond or take action. There appeared to have been no major campaign losses this, as compared to last year, but only yesterday there was the announcement of the approval of the water skiing trial in East Basin, dressed up as part of an overall "breathing life into the lake" policy, with wide support and diluting our main issue of the potential impact on birds and the Jerrabomberra wetlands.

A definite highlight has been the Woodlands Bird seminar held in early June, which attracted an audience well beyond that normally reached by COG, and was very successful in raising the issues. Another major event in June was the relinquishing of COG's office in the old Griffin Centre. The COG committee deliberated long and hard about this decision, but in the end a combination of the cost and location of the accommodation offered in the new Centre and the fact that the office had not been operating as a shopfront for some years forced the decision.

The Pocket Guide: The Birds of Canberra, published just before last year's AGM as part of a joint initiative between COG and Birds Australia, has been very successful as an introduction and a de facto identification guide for local species for ACT residents (and also in attracting new members to COG). The CD of calls and songs of ACT birds launched at last year's AGM has also been very popular and has sold well. Both of these have been reprinted during the year. The Pocket Guide, with additional text drafted by Tom Green, has also been mounted on the COG website, allowing visitors wanting to do some birding in Canberra to access it by electronic means or in hard copy.

I reported last year on a project of University of Canberra students to enable bird observation data to be entered electronically to our database. Unfortunately we were unable, for technical reasons, to proceed with this data input system. After much deliberation I am pleased to report that the committee is now considering a proposal from a professional consultant. I am optimistic that this will be accepted and I hope operational in the course of the next year, as I'm sure that many members will welcome the opportunity to lodge data in this way.

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 continues not to do. For example, we still have not been able to regularly partake in exhibitions, and it remains a very sad fact that COG continues to do very little specifically to attract younger members, including in the areas of education. This year we have received an increasing number of requests for COG members to talk to interested groups, to lead walks, and to assist students in their bird-related projects – my thanks to Anthony Overs, Chris Davey and Nicki Taws for their assistance in this area. Whether we can increase our profile in these areas in 2005-2006 will depend on whether there is some-one to co-ordinate these activities.

Committee

I have again been very well supported by the Committee over the past year. Most Committee members are standing again, which is very pleasing, though I remain concerned that we continue to fail to attract "new blood" with fresh ideas and new enthusiasm, as most members who joined at the last AGM, were co-opted during the year, or who are joining now being "recycled" in the sense that they have previously spent time on the committee.

I would like to especially thank those members who are retiring from committee. For many years Joan Lipscombe has done an excellent job as Treasurer and our Public Officer, but with her husband Trevor is leaving Canberra. On behalf of everyone I'd like to offer our sincere thanks for all the work they have done for COG, including leading trips and campouts, and to wish them all the best for the future. Tanya Rough, who has been the editor of Gang-gang for the past 3 years, is also stepping down from this role. Again I'd like to give my sincerest thanks to Tanya for the work she has done so diligently.

Membership was 371 at 30 June 2005, 8.5% up from the same time last year.

Again many members not formally on the committee have helped COG in its daily activities, making a huge contribution to the success of the organisation. It is not possible in this report to individually thank all, and I apologise to those I have inadvertently, or for reasons of space, neglected to mention.

Conservation

COG plays an active role in local bird conservation issues, with Jenny Bounds and Julie McGuinness sharing the workload as Conservation Officers. Jenny also contributes to bird conservation issues through the Conservation Council for the SE Region and Canberra. This year, we have continued to focus on impacts on birds from various developments, including wind farms, urban developments in and around woodlands and reserve areas, and also the increasing pressures on birds from human activities, such as like water skiing on Lake Burley Griffin near bird breeding areas and the Jerrabomberra wetlands. An emerging issue is the Molonglo Valley, which has a prolific birds of prey population (13 species/11 species breeding) due the mix of habitats around the river corridor, has been identified by the ACT Government as potentially urban and studies are under way to identify areas for future housing. If housing development is to occur there, the COG committee believes this should be limited to the footprint of the burned pine forest areas and should not occur in the remaining woodlands, grasslands and rural lease areas, as this would minimise the impacts on the raptor population and the large assemblage of other birds which occur in the Valley.

Jenny Bounds, with input from Julie McGuinness, drafted a new Conservation page on the COG website, featuring grassy woodlands and threatened birds conservation, and the COG Woodland Bird Monitoring Project, and includes photos of birds of interest/concern by Helen Fallow. This has already proven to be a useful resource for school projects etc, and we propose to add to this page over time.

During the year, COG provided submissions or other input to the following:

- The ACT Planning and Land Authority - Planning System Reform Project: this is a review of the planning and environmental assessment processes in the ACT. COG commented particularly on the failure of the system to protect important woodland bird habitat, and the need for improved environmental assessments.
- The ACT Assembly Standing Committee on Planning and the Environment - Inquiry into Urban Vegetation and Wildlife Corridors: this included comments on the Draft Variation to the Territory Plan in relation to East Gungahlin and the borders of Goorooyarroo Nature Reserve. A key point of concern is the residential development proposed for a neck of land between Mulligans Flat and Goorooyarroo Reserves (proposed suburb of Throsby) which would intrude into the reserve and create a very long edge effect. COG's view is that this area should not have housing, and if it cannot be incorporated into the reserves, should be used for other purposes as a buffer to the reserves, such as community facilities or a regional botanical garden. COG also recommended that the final planning outcome and reserve boundaries, should be informed by the research project in the reserves which is about to be

commenced by ANU/CRES and the ACT Government. Jenny Bounds for COG, briefed the MLAs on the Committee on an inspection of the area and we are hopeful of a good conservation outcome.

- Water Skiing Trial on Lake Burley Griffin: COG wrote to the National Capital Authority expressing concerns about impacts on birds and wildlife in areas proposed, near Black Mountain and in turn the East Basin near Jerrabomberra wetlands when the proposed venue moved. COG also met with staff at the NCA to discuss this, opposing the 6 months trial without a full and public environmental impact assessment.
- Draft Strategic Bushfire Management Plan: This raised concerns about impacts on birds at the interface between bush and reserves, impacts on threatened birds, and impacts on species which are largely ground dependent for feeding or nesting or which require a complex ground structure. COG put the view that asset protection zones/ fire protection zones should be outside woodland reserves (like Mulligan's Flat and Goorooyaroo), not within them.
- Impacts on Birds from Wind Farms: COG developed a policy to guide responses on proposals/issues relating to wind farms and bird impacts, and also provided some bird data to inform the assessments. In relation to the proposed Molonglo Range wind farm closest to Canberra COG wrote to the proponents, raising the issue of possible land clearance on some ridges and impacts on Wedge-tailed Eagles near the southern end of Googong Dam. COG expects to be able to visit the site when environmental assessments are more advanced.
- COG wrote to the NSW Government in support of the Goulburn Field Naturalists efforts to better protect the woodlands around Kenmore Dam just out of Goulburn, which COG members have visited on field trips.
- COG wrote to the NCA following media reports about possible proposals for development around the shores of Lake Burley Griffin (the Griffin legacy), indicating that environmental values needed to be a theme alongside other themes, and that high quality native grasslands and woodland areas on the lake shore needed to be protected.
- Draft Action Plan No 28 - ACT Lowland Native Grassland Conservation Strategy: COG put in a submission on the Draft Strategy, and although there were few bird issues, COG pointed out the importance of connectivity of grasslands with other ecosystems, some issues for Latham's Snipe which utilises wet grasslands, and the need for cat containment provisions for urban areas abutting new grassland reserves.
- COG communicated with the ACT Parks and Conservation Service regarding their proposals for gradual removal of willows from Jerrabomberra Creek and Kelly's Swamp, to ensure this would be sensitive to bird roosting and breeding.
- Proposal for the Tennant Dam in the Naas Valley: COG met with officials from ACTEW to discuss bird issues in the Naas Valley, and the impact of a new dam on woodlands and woodland birds there. COG also provided bird data from its database. COG is pleased that ACTEW/the Government has implemented other more cost effective and environmentally acceptable measures to secure the ACT's water supply for the foreseeable future.
- Jerrabomberra Valley quarry site wetland: COG provided a letter of support for a grant application to prepare a management and rehabilitation plan for this site. COG also agreed to undertake bird surveys at the site.

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

Field trips

We have continued to run a very active program of field trips, which continue to be very well patronised. I have retained overall responsibility for management of the COG Field Trips, and the

2005 program was devised with the assistance of the Field Trips Team (Jenny Bounds, David McDonald and David Rees). The aim of the program, to offer a wide range of opportunities so that there would be at least some trips that appeal to each member, has continued. The policy of having at least two trips per month, usually a shorter local one followed by one further afield later in the month, supplemented by long weekend campouts etc and some more opportunistic trips arranged flexibly as these arise, was also maintained.

Highlights included the Ben Boyd, Goonoo State Forest and Riverina camp-outs, the accommodated trips to Wee Jasper and Jervis Bay, and the bus tour attempting to locate in one day all 7 robin species that occur in Canberra. Some new places were visited such as the overnight camp-out at Frogs' Hole Creek at Frogmore and the local Cuumbeun Nature Reserve. We continued our links with like-minded organisations, holding another outing with the Goulburn Field Naturalists and a very successful joint trip to Brooks Hill Reserve with the Canberra Field Naturalists. We have also continued to run the very important and popular beginners walks. We continue to be very fortunate in that as far as I can recall in my 4 years that I've been involved with the field trips program we have never cancelled due to inclement weather. The closest we came this year was the birding by bike tour of Lake Burley Griffin, which a hardy few completed despite the heavy showers and the leader having to cope with successive punctured tyres.

My commitment to the program for the past 4 years, including managing it for 3 of these (two of which I have also been President), is testament to my view of the importance of field trips in the spectrum of COG's activities. They help members learn about birds, visit places that they otherwise may not get to, and are important social events that also emphasise conservation aspects. My thanks again to all those who helped lead and organise outings during the year and who wrote up reports of trips for Gang-gang and on the chat line - we look forward to your continued assistance,. However, after 4 years I feel it is time for some new blood and fresh ideas to take over this role. I am finding it increasingly hard to wear the two hats, and am strongly of the view that my priorities should be to leading this organisation in what I expect will be my final year as President.

Communications and Publications

Tanya Rough continued to do a wonderful job editing and publishing our newsletter, Gang-gang, and Lia Battisson and her team of helpers continued to wrap and mail it. Thanks to all involved for ensuring that the major vehicle for COG communication was prepared and distributed in such a timely fashion.

Harvey Perkins and Barbara Allan continued to edit our quarterly journal, *Canberra Bird Notes*. This has included some very topical articles about birds in our region, including the Glossy Black-Cockatoos on Mt Majura, the Lewin's Rail in Commonwealth Park, the influx of swift parrots into the ACT and raptor breeding in the Canberra region. Thanks again to all those who contributed to CBN.

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 meetings 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. The electronic *Gang-gang* is no longer emailed to e-subscribers but is instead available for download from the website, or alternatively viewable as web pages. Recent additions include an annotated electronic version of the pocket guide "The Birds of Canberra", and a section on "Caring for Woodland Birds". Further enhancements include a summary of recent bird sightings around Canberra and an online COG records database for entry of sightings and searches. Thank you David for providing such an excellent service.

The Photo-gallery (<http://photogallery.canberrabirds.org.au>), where subscribers can submit and view a range of images of birds from our region, including topical local rarities, continues to expand. We have had over 20 requests from as far afield as the Royal Parks Service in the UK for the use of some of these images. Feedback I've had is that people find these useful as surrogate field guides.

COG's email discussion list 'canberrabirds', managed by David McDonald, continued to operate effectively throughout the year. The subscriber membership has been fairly steady at about 180 subscribers, a 12 per cent increase on last year, and averages about five 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. It continues to serve as an excellent way to rapidly disseminate reports

of interesting sightings in the local region. I must again congratulate all subscribers for keeping the list so free of the personal vitriol that seems to characterise some other similar lists.

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 still encouraged to collect records for COG's area of interest, especially at regular 2-hectare sites. While the effort continues to be lower than when the data was being collected for the Atlas published in 2003, it remains very important to collect this data over time. I hope to raise the profile for atlassing in 2005-2006, including through the introduction of the well publicised blitz during Bird Week this October. Development of a system to allow electronic submission of data should also help in this regard.

Woodland Bird Monitoring Project: COG's Woodland Project which monitors birds in grassy woodlands is now officially in its eighth year, although systematic surveys have occurred at Mulligan's Flat NR for ten. We now have thirteen locations with 126 monitoring points in the three key woodland corridors in the ACT, with another site, Kama in the Molonglo Valley south of Belconnen, recently added to the Project. This is an important site on the western fringe of urban Canberra, with several threatened/of concern bird species. COG has been able to secure ACT Government funding for this Project since its inception in 1998, and was successful in its application for \$13,150 for 2005/06; these funds enable COG to employ specialists such as a statistician and consultant to analyse data and provide reports and for other specialist advice. During the year, COG commissioned an analysis of data for 61 species of birds, and a final report is expected soon from the consultants (Alison Rowell and Ross Cunningham). This long-term Project is starting to provide important data on the state of our woodland birds from common to threatened species. Some material from the current data analysis has been prepared for the Birds Australia State of Australia's Birds series to be published soon on woodland birds. Jenny Bounds (Convenor), Jack Holland and Nicki Taws manage the Project.

In June 2005, COG in collaboration with the ACT Government's Wildlife Research and Monitoring Unit and the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies (CRES) ANU, hosted a public seminar, funded through the Woodland project grant, entitled 'Woodlands for Wildlife - Recovery for our Birds' at the CSIRO Discovery Centre, Black Mountain. Jenny Bounds coordinated this very successful event in celebration of World Environment Day, attracting around 190 attendees, to promote awareness of ACT and regional woodland birds issues and current research. We received very good publicity for the event and woodland birds issues in the Canberra Times. COG's Woodland Bird Monitoring Project featured amongst the presentations, as well as speakers from CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems, Birds Australia, and ANU/CRES. One of Australia's leading ornithologists and COG member, Dr Richard Schodde, chaired the Seminar, with the Panel Discussion chaired by the ACT Commissioner for the Environment, Dr Rosemary Purdie.

I'd like to thank David Rosalky who has taken on the task of managing the Garden Bird Survey with Martin Butterfield's departure. Also my warm thanks go to Kay Hahne for continuing to enter the data, a huge task, especially as the number of chartists increases. This major project is now in its 25th year and is our longest running monitoring project. It is used increasingly by researchers and its results used to support policy submissions. Charts for 2005-06 have been distributed, mainly at COG monthly meetings, and last year's collected. The numbers and coverage of the charts is expanding slowly. The Review of the Survey foreshadowed last year, and which is aimed at ensuring that it keeps up with developments in technology and science, is expected to get underway in the coming year once David has worked his way through his first GBS input for the Annual Report.

Thanks go to Paul Fennell and David Rosalky who continue to manage COG's databases, as well as those members who assisted with data checking during the year.

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. This year the Panel appointed two consultants, Dick Schodde and Penny Olsen, while Nicki Taws was appointed to fill a vacancy on the Panel.

Annual Bird Reports

Many thanks to Barbara Allan, Martin Butterfield, Grahame Clark, Malcolm Fyfe, Ian McMahon, Harvey Perkins, David Purchase and Nicki Taws and others who produced the 2003-04 Annual Bird Report in time for publication in the March issue of CBN.. Many thanks are also due to Martin Butterfield and Paul Fennell who retrieve and collate the data for the authors. I would like to congratulate the team for putting it all together despite one potentially major hiccup. 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 to provide the earliest indication of any trends or changes in the ACTs bird populations.

Monthly Meetings

Barbara Allan has again organised an excellent program of presentations for our monthly meetings. These included well attended presentations on raptor breeding in the ACT, on owls of the world and on research into the eccentricities of the Pheasant Coucal. My thanks again go to all speakers. The reports in *Gang-gang* and on the COG website written by Sue Lashko every month attest to the quality of our presentations at meetings. Special thanks also to Carol Macleay and her numerous helpers for running the monthly stall and raffle at COG meetings, and to Barbara Allan for organising the refreshments.

COG Administration & the COG Office

COG relinquished its office in the old Griffin Centre in June. It had served a useful purpose, particularly as a repository for our records and equipment, but was no longer being used as a drop-in centre, and a move to the new Griffin Centre was beyond our reach, financially. Our office now operates from a separately-accessible room in our secretary's home, where our records, library and some equipment are stored. Access is by arrangement with the secretary, or any of the COG executive in her absence. Our camping and display equipment and archival records are held in storage in Belconnen and again, may be accessed by arrangement with any of the executive. Many thanks to the many COG members who assisted in cleaning out the office and relocating it on a very wet Sunday in June

Canberra Birds Conservation Fund

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

Ms Suzi Bond was the Fund's second grantee. Her study has been completed and some of its findings were presented to COG's 2004 'Woodlands for Wildlife: Recovery for our Birds' seminar. Her presentation was titled 'Bringing breeding birds back: a study of birds breeding in re-vegetation sites' and she is also making a presentation to this COG monthly meeting on her findings. She has also given seminar presentations on this work at ANU's School of Resources, Environment and Society and CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems and is currently preparing a paper for publication, based on her Fund-supported project.

The Fund's Committee of management is currently assessing two new applications and developing a strategy to more actively solicit donations from members of the public.

Conclusion

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

Jack Holland

12 October 2005