

## **PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2019-20**

*I love a sunburnt country,  
A land of sweeping plains,  
Of ragged mountain ranges,  
Of droughts and flooding rains.  
I love her far horizons,  
I love her jewel-sea,  
Her beauty and her terror  
The wide brown land for me!*

As I write this report on Remembrance Day November 2020, it is hard to remember we were in the middle of a drought only 12 months ago. Jerrabomberra was a dust bowl or covered in annual weeds. Everywhere, mature trees were dying. Then, in February the city was blanketed in smoke as about 80% of Namadgi burnt, as it did in 2003. Then a massive hailstorm that wrote off thousands of cars through the centre of the city must have also killed birds.

Today, Jerra is full of water, as are all the region's ponds and dams, and the city is choked with long green grass. The forests of the ragged mountain ranges are regrowing and, if it was only the droughts and flooding rains, we would be birding across the wide brown land. But access to the mountains for most of the year has been highly restricted due to the risk-averse policy of ACT PWS in keeping roads closed as a consequence of the February fires.

And then there was COVID-19.

As we all know, meetings at Canberra Girls' Grammar School and the field trips program had to cease. Although the field trips recommenced in July, monthly meetings in person are still not happening. With the 4 m<sup>2</sup> per person rule, the CGGS space can only hold 37 people. If/when this is relaxed it will become easier to have in-person meetings again.

Nevertheless, COG has been active on many fronts - despite the challenges posed by COVID-19.

Last year I reported on the results of the COG members' survey. The committee's ability to respond to the comments received has been affected by COVID-19 but, after the reporting period, we held one planning day and intend to hold another soon. The committee is keen to develop a plan for COG's future that responds to the issues – positive and negative – raised in the survey.

On 17 November 2019, ACT Landcare Winners projects were announced at the Landcare ACT Awards at the historic 'Lambrigg' property beside the Murrumbidgee River, where community Landcarers from across the territory came together to celebrate their impressive achievements. COG was highly commended in the ACT Citizen Science section.

The award was received by Jenny Bounds and myself on behalf of COG. In its entry, COG highlighted the range of citizen science activities we are involved in, from surveys started 40 years ago with the Canberra Garden Bird surveys, our vulnerable woodland birds surveys started in 1995, surveys of Travelling Stock Reserves, Jerrabomberra Wetlands, Latham's Snipe and Lord Howe Island.

This prestigious awards program acknowledges Landcare projects that are focused on sustainable farming, biodiversity and conservation, community and wellbeing, Indigenous land management, Coastcare, youth participation and leadership.

The awards celebrate the incredible efforts of individuals and groups, young and old, to protect the ACT's natural resources, stewarding a more resilient landscape for the future. We were delighted to be recognised amongst such worthy other Landcarers.

Issues concerning the management by ICON of the wetlands to the east of Dairy Flat Road have remained, but discussions had to be put on hold in 2020 due to COVID-19. The Committee looks forward to productive talks with ICON in 2021. Talks will be held in 2021 to ensure that COG's voice is heard in the management of the whole of wetland area at the eastern end of Lake Burley Griffin.

## **The Committee**

In 2019-20, COG has had a strong and enthusiastic committee and I would like to take this opportunity to thank them all for their contributions. We have become familiar with using Zoom for our committee meetings and this has allowed us to continue meeting each month to deal with committee business.

This year the four executive members were Neil Hermes (President), Steve Read (Vice-President), Prue Watters (Treasurer) and Bill Graham (Secretary).

Other members were Jenny Bounds, Nick Nicholls, Chris Davey, Alison Mackerras, Kathy Eyles and Brittany Brockett, a committee of ten. It has been especially good to have Brittany bringing her enthusiasm and ideas for encouraging young people to take up birding (including with Bill in starting work on a *Fledglings* initiative).

## **The Support Team**

As well as Committee members, we have been well served by a number of other members who have provided invaluable service to COG: Jack Holland, COG's Public Officer, is responsible for the members' meetings speakers program, which has been both fascinating and broadly focused over the year; Sandra Henderson manages COG membership and the monthly raffles; Paul Fennell produces the Annual Bird Report; Michael Lenz produces the Canberra Bird Notes with the help of Kevin Windle; Duncan McCaskill manages the Garden Bird Survey; Barbara Allan is responsible for the Bird Blitz (her 15<sup>th</sup>) and the Rarities Panel; Nicki Taws is the COG Records Officer; Kathy Walter and John Goldie manage the sales desk; Julian Robinson continued as Website manager; David McDonald manages the COG chatline; Dianne Davey distributed COG publications; and Bruce Lindenmayer generously volunteered to assist with the tea and coffee we have after meetings. All of these people have generously given their time.

## **Databases and data management**

COG has a long history of strong collection and dissemination of reliable data on birds of our region. This has continued this year. Here is a review of some work in this area.

COG has had an MOU with the Conservation and Research area of ACT Government for around two decades, which enables bird data to be provided for the Government's core responsibilities, strategies and actions for threatened ecological communities and bird species. COG has also provided advice based on its bird surveys for other purposes such as Natural Resource Management-related projects, to target management actions for species.

The preliminary results from the Twenty-Year woodland data analysis were presented to the Ecofocus Forum in September 2019, attended by a range of ACT reserve managers and rangers, NRM staff, ACT Parkcare volunteers and attendees from various environmental

community groups. [A final report with interpretation of results has been in progress and is expected to be published in the first half of 2021.]

The COG woodland bird monitoring protocols/survey methods have been adopted by other projects for bird monitoring/surveys, e.g. Molonglo Valley environmental offsets, and other environmental offsets sites managed by the ACT Government.

COG publishes (using its bird survey data) an annual bird report, a summary of the status of all bird species recorded in COG area of interest (ACT region) which is available on the COG website. This is a major source of data which can be used to document the changes which are occurring in the bird population in the ACT and surrounding area and is also an important source of data for many other studies.

COG also publishes several bird survey project reports, such as the analyses of data, and species trends, from the woodland bird monitoring program. These reports and species trends are published on the COG website.

As was highlighted in last year's report, there are challenges of keeping up with modern information technology (web-based systems, apps etc.), in order to support database systems. COG data underpin lots of our conservation lobbying and governmental credibility. There is a need to employ professional services in information technology to design, manage and update the critical database systems on which bird data are stored and retrieved for the various purposes, including requests for data from external parties and for COG's own analyses of data, as well as the programs for data-entry, particularly on-line data entry systems.

The Committee has been fortunate to have the professional advice of a senior IT systems specialist Colin Pedersen to guide us with our investigations on a new system for COG data management. As a consequence, we have had discussions with commercial database design companies to develop a new database for COG, then to migrate into it all our data across current disparate databases. Discussions have reached an advanced stage on the design of the COG database.

The committee thanks Colin Pedersen for his generous assistance and expertise in helping the committee through this process.

As noted last year, another challenge is funding for professional statistical services to analyse data, particularly to obtain meaningful, accurate long-term trends for bird species over time. Specialist services for advice on habitat related analyses also need to be funded.

### **COG Membership**

At the end of the end of the last financial year we had a membership total of 461. This is very encouraging given the challenges of the year. As we all have had to adjust to changes to meetings, outings, survey etc, the Committee has been keen to try to ensure that members maintain connections with the group. This is best expressed by members voting with their feet and wallets and keeping up their membership.

This support by the general membership is greatly appreciated.

### **Steve Wilson Medal 2019**

The Steve Wilson medal recipients are Sue Lashko and Paul Fennell. Sue has been birding for 56 years and joined COG in 1999. She has been editor of Gang-gang since 2004, field trip organiser since 2009 and served on the committee until 2018.

Sue has led many COG field trips from morning and day trips around Canberra, to 5-day trips to the coast focusing on waders, to extended camping trips to a range of sites in western NSW. As a surveyor Sue has been part of the Mulligans team since 2000, woodland surveys at Newline since 2007 and Superb Parrot surveys at Gungahlin. Sue has been on the Jerrabomberra Wetlands quarterly survey teams for the past 5 years.

Paul became a member of COG in the early nineties. In 1993 he became Vice-President, and President in 1996. In 1997 Paul took over the management of the general bird data base and the Woodland Survey Database, starting an arrangement that went on for over 20 years. Part of this role was to ensure that the required information for each Annual Bird Report was compiled for the authors of the various species reports. In 2007 Paul took over the editorship of the ABR and is currently preparing for the 2018-19 edition. In 1999 he led the group compiling the first edition of the Birds of Canberra Gardens, published in 2000. Paul was editor of the second edition in 2009, which is now out of print.

The Steve Wilson Medal Committee in 2019 was Neil Hermes, Alison Russell-French and Bruce Lindenmayer.

## **Conservation**

Jenny Bounds continues as Conservation Officer, and represents COG in various forums and stakeholder groups, such as ACT Grassy Woodland Stakeholder Group, and the Kosciuszko 2 Coast (K2C) forum. COG has again collaborated with the Conservation Council ACT and other groups to progress conservation matters impacting on birds, particularly those relating to ongoing greenfield development in Gungahlin and the Molonglo Valley, and the implementation of offset arrangements.

In the first half of 2020, the regular meetings by ACT Government with stakeholder and community groups were suspended due to COVID-19, and some matters of interest to COG have not been progressed. However, there has been continued COG engagement with community environmental groups through digital platforms. Through the Conservation Council's Biodiversity Working Group, the protection of bird habitats was included in policies developed by the Council and promoted in the lead-up to the ACT Government election later in 2020. This included the conservation (reserve status/conservation management) of sites important for birds, such as Bluett's Block, Newline woodland, and land in the Central Molonglo used by Superb Parrots.

Some matters COG has provided views on or written responses to were:

- An ACT Government workshop to discuss guidelines for monitoring the condition of woodlands.
- A new Canberra Nature Park Draft Plan of Management, focussing on bird habitat protection issues.
- Land rezoning by the National Capital Authority, to provide for diplomatic embassies in future years, on the North Curtin Horse Paddocks. A large number of local residents and community organisations raised concerns about this loss of open space and community facility. COG sought engagement in the process, and (if this went ahead), for a reasonably sized conservation corridor including the creek line vegetation and some paddock area, used as a significant green corridor for migrating birds. The COG response was based on bird data from a long-standing GBS site there.
- As the reporting period ended, COG collaborated with other environmental groups and expert individuals in a letter to the Commonwealth (Defence Housing Association), concerning plans to develop the North Lawson grasslands. Although bird issues were not significant, this would involve a loss of endangered

grassland and some woodland community. Most of the land had previously been assessed for nature and heritage conservation.

- Submissions were also done for the redevelopment of Queanbeyan Sewage Works and cockatoo-suitable tree planting in Stirling Park.

### **Bird data collection programs**

COG's long-term Woodland Bird Monitoring Project surveys 15 locations (142 monitoring points). Jenny Bounds coordinates the project's operations. Many thanks are due to the team of COG members and their helpers who survey the sites quarterly. The commitment of the site coordinators over time is a significant factor in the success of this survey and deserves recognition. COG is in the process of interpreting results and producing a report from the latest analysis of data.

The COG Garden Bird Survey also continues, now in its 41<sup>st</sup> year. COG published two editions of the Birds of Canberra Gardens from GBS data, a highly successful coffee-table style book for Canberra residents to identify and encourage birds in their gardens.

The annual Bird Blitz was in late October, covering as much of the ACT as possible. This was Barbara Allan's last Blitz as organiser, and we all thank Barbara for all her efforts. Nicki Taws will take the reins of the Blitz in 2020.

Latham's Snipe surveys (coordinated by the Woodlands and Wetlands Trust) of a migratory wader are part of a national and international monitoring program.

The annual Lyrebird survey at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve continues and monitoring of birds near the new suburb of Whitlam was also coordinated by Chris Davey.

The Lord Howe Island annual bird survey has been conducted for the NSW Parks and Conservation Service; this project is in conjunction with an eradication program of rats and mice on the Island, and will provide baseline data before the eradication program and after the eradication program, to determine impacts on birds on the island. The sixth bird survey and report on the lowland birds of LHI was conducted this year three months after the rodent eradication baiting program

Surveys of waterbirds at Lakes George and Bathurst continued, a long-running monitoring project over more than four decades.

Regular surveys at a high-quality Travelling Stock Reserve north of Canberra near Gundaroo (Nelanglo) inform NSW Local Land Services' management of the TSR. All bird data collected by COG are stored in databases, which can be retrieved for various purposes.

### **Gang-Gang Newsletter**

One of our best resources continues to be our newsletter *Gang-gang*. As has been the practice since July 2018, *Gang-gang* has been available on the COG website as a colour pdf that can be downloaded and printed if you wish.

We thank Sue Lashko for her great job in coordinating *Gang-gang* and thanks to Gail Neumann, who does the layout.

### **The COG website**

Website information is regularly updated by members and thanks go to Sue Lashko, Jack Holland, David McDonald, Martin Butterfield and Julian Robinson for this work.

I would also like to thank Julian Robinson for his ongoing amazing diligence and efforts in managing and maintaining the COG Website.

### **Records Management**

COG database is kept up to date by the Records Management Team and the Rarities Panel. I would like to acknowledge the contributions provided by Nicki Taws as Records Officer, Tony Harding, Helen Mason and many others for data entry.

### **Rarities Panel**

The Panel reviewed its Terms of Reference and updated its list of unusual species for which endorsed reports are required before publication, adding two hitherto “common” species which have apparently all but disappeared from our region in recent times, the Little Lorikeet and the Brush Bronzewing.

Perhaps the most surprising record endorsed by the Panel in 2019-20 was that of the Northern Shoveler at Jerrabomberra Wetlands in September 2019, a first for the ACT. Thanks for the efforts of Grahame Clark, Richard Allen, Dick Schodde, Jenny Bounds and Nicki Taws who are the moderators of our COG rarities records

### **Outings**

The 2020 programme was greatly affected by the COVID-19 restrictions from March to May, causing outings to be cancelled. However, by late May we were able to resume most outings with restricted numbers to comply with social distancing requirements. Unfortunately, it was not possible to run the planned pelagics, but we had two highly successful mid-week accommodated trips, one to Lake Burrendong near Wellington and the other to Green Cape. COG's field trips would not be possible without the wonderful leaders, many of whom have volunteered for many years, but it was pleasing to have some new volunteers this year. Our Wednesday walks have once again operated most successfully, with some cancellations and adjustments for COVID-19, and managed to attract a keen group of followers, with outings taking place each month. On behalf of COG members, our thanks to Martin Butterfield and others, particularly Sandra Henderson, for organising these events while Martin has been unable to leave Victoria.

Our special thanks go to Sue Lashko for all her efforts in making our outings program a great success for COG members. This is a vital part of COG's activities and the fact that the planned outings for the year are mostly fully attended is testimony to their popularity.

### **Canberra Bird Notes**

Michael Lenz and Kevin Windle continue their great work as Editors of the Canberra Bird Notes and I thank them and all those who have contributed to CBN over the past year. CBN is a well-respected and valued source of information about the birds of the Canberra region. Appreciation is also due to Paul Fennell, Jaron Bailey and the writing team for their work on the Annual Bird Report.

## **Monthly meetings**

During 2019-2020 Jack Holland again arranged an interesting year of both local and interstate speakers. Due to COVID-19 face-to-face meetings had to be suspended for April and May. However, in June we commenced virtual meetings and presentations, and the first by Alice McGlashan on "Hollow-using species and nest box designs for the Canberra region" set a very high standard and was enjoyed by many members. I would like to thank Jack for his efforts under the difficult circumstances in bringing to the members engaging and informative presentations again this year.

Before COVID-19 hit we held meetings early in the year and Sandra Henderson took on the responsibility of providing the raffle prizes and selling the tickets. All of these add to the enjoyment of the occasions and provide an opportunity for members to socialise. Thanks to Sandra.

The committee is planning to get back to face-to-face general meetings and committee meetings as soon in the new year as possible.

## **CanberraBirds email announcement and discussion list**

At the end of the year, COG's CanberraBirds email announcement and discussion list had 350 subscribers, seven percent more than the same time last year. The list, managed by David McDonald, continues to provide a useful forum for people to discuss the birds of the Canberra region, their environments, and COG's activities. New subscribers, including people new to birding who seek support from more experienced birders, are welcome to subscribe. The list manager has commended subscribers for the way they use the list: positively, productively and politely.

Unfortunately, in recent months the list has not functioned properly, with some subscribers having their accounts disabled, and long delays between posting and delivery of emails. This came about when COG's long-standing internet hosting company was bought out by another, with the new owner not being able to provide a workable mailing list facility. We expect that the list will return to functionality by the end of November 2020.

## **Canberra Birds Conservation Fund (CBCF)**

The Fund, established in the year 2000, is a tax-deductible gift recipient, and members and friends of COG are encouraged to donate to it. During the year, the Fund provided support to two projects that contributed to the achievement of its conservation objectives. The first recipient was Dr Michael Mulvaney/ACT Govt/Little Eagle Research Group. The grant was made to support the Group's analyses of Little Eagle pellets and prey remains collected under nests and roosting/plucking sites in the ACT and nearby NSW. The second recipient was Chris Davey/Dr Laura Rayner. The grant supported their project of monitoring of Gang-gang activity at breeding sites within urban Canberra with the use of cameras placed near possible nesting sites to detail more accurately the breeding behaviours at the sites.

The Committee of Management of the Fund (Dr Penny Olsen, Geoffrey Dabb & David McDonald) invites enquiries from people seeking financial support for projects that are consistent with its environmental objectives. Although most of the projects funded to date have been academic research, the fund can support any projects that encourage interest in, and develop knowledge of, the birds of the Canberra region; that promote and co-ordinate the study of birds; and/or that promote the conservation of native birds and their habitats in the Canberra region. COG members are encouraged to promote the Canberra Birds Conservation Fund, encouraging friends and businesses alike to make tax-deductible donations to it in the interests of the birds of the Canberra region, and their environments.

## **In conclusion**

So, with COVID-19 still a clear and present danger, and still challenging us in 2021, I thank all the COG members who have actively contributed over the year to COG and our many and varied activities.

The work of the committee is only possible by the efforts of a large skilled support team. COG continues its work in conserving our birds as well as providing a great organisation for those who love birds. We have the fulsome results of the membership survey which gives us renewed enthusiasm, direction and purpose.

Neil Hermes  
President  
11 November 2020