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ARTCLES

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2023 - MY BIG YEAR FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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Introduction

In late 2022 I decided that I would attempt to see at least 200 different bird species in the ACT in 2023, a feat sometimes referred to as a Big Year. I knew that it would be feasible, albeit with considerable time and effort. One complicating factor was that I was going to be overseas from mid-May to mid-September visiting family and friends in the UK. However, I reasoned, correctly as it turned out, that winter is traditionally a relatively quiet period for birding in the ACT.

I did not set out to see the most species of birds in the ACT, partly because I would be away for four months, but mainly because there are a lot more experienced and dedicated birders than me.

What is the basis of the number 200? Well obviously, it is an arbitrary number but historically quite a number of local birders have set themselves that number as a target. The first recorded Big Year was achieved by Alastair Smith in 2006; he listed 208 species of birds within the geographical boundaries of the ACT that year. Alastair wrote an article in Canberra Bird Notes (2008) documenting the planning and conduct of his "Big Year", which was the inspiration for this article. Another birder, Peter Milburn achieved a staggering total of 233 species in 2014.

Not all birders list in eBird. In fact neither Alastair's nor Peter's achievements are recorded in eBird. These days, however, there are sufficient experienced birders listing in eBird to gain a reasonable approximation of the number of birds observed each year. Over the last ten years prior to 2023 the number of bird species observed each year ranged from 222 to 238. In six of those years the numbers ranged from 230 to 233. So it appeared to me that it was entirely feasible to see at least 200 of those 230 or so species of birds.

Background

Despite, at the time of writing this article being in my late sixties, I am not an experienced birder. I started birding quite late in life, in my mid-sixties. In 2018 I took up outdoor photography as a retirement hobby. I photographed birds and realised that I did not know what they were. I had a chance encounter with a birder in early 2019 who put me onto the eBird website and I was hooked.

Several years on I am improving as a birder but will never be as skilled as those who have birded their entire lifetime. Plus my advancing years mean that my hearing, eyesight and

[1] All photos by the author.

reactions are not as good as they once were. I am reasonably mobile, although climbing gates and fences is increasingly becoming a bit of a challenge.

However, I have one big advantage over many younger birders, that is, time. Being fully retired and having a very understanding wife I can spend as much, or as little, time birding as I want. Plus I have an all-wheel drive car so can access some of the more remote birding hotspots in the ACT.

Planning

There are plenty of resources available to birders these days. eBird has vast amounts of easily accessed data available to help determine what birds have been seen when and where in the ACT.

The COG website is also extremely useful. The monthly *Gang-Gang* newsletter provides lots of background information and the COG chatline provides timely intelligence on birds seen. I often read back issues of *Gang-Gang* for a particular month to determine what rare birds have been observed that month over the years.

The COG Bird Info page is a table listing birds seen in the ACT, including a "Status in ACT" column, which categorises birds as[2]:

a. Very common, common, uncommon or rare.

b. Resident, visitor, summer (or winter) migrant, or vagrant.

c. Breeding, non-breeding.

Vagrants are not assigned as very common, common, uncommon or rare, on the assumption that they are generally rare.

One way of thinking about the 230 or so birds seen in the ACT each year is that they comprise (1) a core set of residents and very common/common visitors and migrants, and (2) a variable set of uncommon or rare visitors, migrants and vagrants. I have included the "Status in ACT" for many of my observations. It should be noted that the "Status in ACT" is a general assessment and is updated as and when new information is obtained.

There are approximately[3] 135 species of birds listed as resident in the ACT, of which approximately 20 are categorised as rare. There are approximately 50 species listed as common/uncommon migrants or visitors to the ACT. There are approximately 45 species listed as rare migrants and visitors and approximately 65 species listed as vagrants. Even if you observe all the resident bird species and all the common/uncommon migrants and visitors, you still need to rely on at least 15 rare migrants, visitors and vagrants to make the 200 target.

Note that eBird can generate a list of rare birds for each hotspot. For this article I have included the COG ACT Status assessment, not what eBird considers to be rare at any given hotspot.

[2] There are some other terms used occasionally, such as "extinct," "accidental" and "escapee" which are not relevant to this article.

[3] I use the term approximately because the numbers might change between writing the article and the article being published or read.

My Big Year strategy was pretty simple:

a. Make a concerted effort early in the year to cover as many birds as possible, especially those summer visitors or migrants that depart in the autumn.

b. Target uncommon and rare residents, usually by visiting known sites or by following up reported sightings.

c. Follow up any reports of rare or uncommon birds, and of vagrants in a timely fashion, using all available sources of information, including: eBird Needs and Rare Bird Alerts; the COG chatline; networking with other birders; and the Canberra Wildlife FaceBook Page.

d. Have fun.

Obviously the more birds you see earlier on in the year the more time you have to focus on the birds you have not yet seen. So the plan was to visit a diverse number of sites with different habitats early on to get the numbers up.

Even though some resident birds are designated uncommon or rare, they are often sedentary, that is they tend to remain in certain habitats/locations. After a while these locations become known. So for example, many local birders know that they have a reasonable chance of seeing a Buff-Banded Rail *Hypotaenidia philippenis* (uncommon resident) at North Watson Wetlands or a Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* (rare non-breeding summer migrant) at the Village Creek silt trap.

As mentioned previously not all birders list in eBird. And not all people who see birds are birders. The COG chatline sometimes has information on birds not listed on eBird, and many contributors to the Canberra Wildlife FaceBook are photographers not birders. However, you need to be careful, as I found out in February when I camped out on Mount Painter the day after seeing some photographs of a Spotted Harrier there on FaceBook, not realising that the photographs had been taken some unspecified time earlier.

The most productive source of information, however, was other birders. I certainly wouldn't have got anywhere near the 200 mark if it had not been for the hard work and generosity of other, more experienced birders.

Having fun is important. Sometimes searching for one particular bird can be quite tedious. It wasn't just about the numbers. I was happy to revisit favourite hotspots even though there was little chance of seeing something new, and I often returned to see particular birds in pursuit of better photographs, or just to watch their behaviour.

I decided to stick to my normal rules concerning whether or not to list a bird in the ACT. I could either see or hear birds that I had seen previously but only visually identify new birds, which had to be positively identified either by a photograph I had taken, or by a photograph taken by somebody else while I was observing the bird.

I am quite cautious about listing birds based on their calls. I do not have a musical ear and have trouble distinguishing between some birds. My non-birding wife finds it very amusing that I cannot distinguish between the Shining Bronze-cuckoo *Chalcites lucidus* and Horsfield's Bronze-cuckoo *Chalcites basalis* calls. I also try to ensure that there is no one around that could be using call-back and also careful that it is not another bird using mimicry. In the UK I use

the Merlin Sound ID mobile app to help me identify birds. It is not infallible but a very helpful aid if used with caution. Unfortunately it doesn't seem to work in Australia; not a big enough data base yet presumably.

January

My first trip of the year was to my favourite birding spot in the ACT, the Warks/Blundells Creek Roads Hotspot up in the Brindabellas. The entrance gate was locked so I walked down to the junction and back. I saw or heard most of the species one would expect in this location at this time of year: Common Cicadabird *Edolisoma tenuirostris* (rare breeding summer migrant), Rufous Fantail *Rhipidura rufifrons* (uncommon breeding summer migrant), Satin Flycatcher *Myiagra cyanoleuca* (uncommon breeding summer migrant), Eastern Shrike-tit *Falcunculus frontatus* (rare breeding resident); Rose Robin *Petroica rosea* (uncommon resident), Bassian Thrush *Zoothera lunulata* (uncommon, breeding resident), Red-browed Treecreeper *Climacteris erythrops* (uncommon resident), and Superb Lyrebird *Menura novaehollandiae* (uncommon resident). I spend a lot of time up in the Brindabellas and have learned the calls of most of the resident birds, so often I hear the birds before I see them.

My second trip was to my second favourite birding spot in the ACT, Yankee Hat carpark and track. I missed out on seeing an expected Swamp Harrier *Circus approximans* (rare breeding resident) but I heard a Lewin's Rail *Lewinia pectoralis* (rare breeding visitor), a Painted Buttonquail *Turnix varius* (uncommon breeding resident), and a Spotless Crake *Zarpornia tabuensis* (uncommon breeding summer migrant). I also saw lots of Fuscous Honeyeaters *Ptilotula fusca* (uncommon resident). Stopping by at Glendale Deport on the way home I saw a pair of Jacky Winters *Microeca fascinans* (uncommon breeding resident). I saw a Swamp Harrier a few days later on a return trip to Yankee Hat, along with the Brown Treecreepers *Climacteris picumnus* (rare resident) at the Naas/Apollo Road junction.

By the end of the first week I had seen over a hundred species, nowhere near the total seen by some more experienced and dedicated birders but I was happy nonetheless.

I followed up eBird Alerts of a Musk Duck *Biziura lobata* (rare resident) at Mulligans Flat and a Blue-billed Duck *Oxyura australis* (rare resident) at Upper Stranger Pond.

I also targeted some specific birds in their known haunts: a Pilotbird *Pycnoptilus floccosus* (rare resident) on the Tidbinbilla Lyrebird Trail, a pair of Olive Whistlers *Pachycephala olivacea* (uncommon resident) on Bendora Road, Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* (rare breeding visitor) at Bracks Hole Road, Indian Peafowl *Pavo cristatus* (rare resident/escapee introduced species) at Rocky Knob Park, Hooded Robin *Melanodryas cucullata* (rare resident) at Naas/Apollo Road, and Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* (rare non-breeding summer migrant) at Village Creek at Athllon Drive.

The Common Sandpiper on 30 January brought up my 140th species for the year.

February

I followed up reports on eBird including an Azure Kingfisher *Ceyx azureus* (non-breeding vagrant) at Cotter Bend.

However, the first real excitement of the year was the Purple-crowned Lorikeet *Glossopsitta porphyrocephala* (non-breeding vagrant) discovered by Shorty Westlin feeding on a flowering

eucalypt at Bowen Park. This was perfectly relaxed birding at its best, sitting on a chair at the back of the On-Lake café sipping a flat white, chatting to fellow birders whilst waiting for the tiny lorikeet to appear alongside the throngs of Rainbow Lorikeets *Trichglossus moluccanus* and the odd Musk Lorikeet *G. consinna.* A lifer for me.

Figure 1. Purple-crowned Lorikeet. Bowen Park.

It was during one of these chats that Sue Beatty mentioned that Pierces Creek Forest – New Pipeline Road was her "go to" site for Spotted Quail-thrushes *Cinclosoma punctatum* (uncommon resident). For my first two or three years birding the Spotted Quail-thrush had been a bogey bird for me. They are uncommon, but not rare, in the ACT, but they are shy and elusive. However, after a bit of research and effort, and some help from Chris Chapman, I had eventually worked out a reliable technique to find them. They are quite sedentary and tend to favour certain areas with leaf litter, rocky outcrops and grass clumps, on fairly steep inclines. I had had reasonable success in the past locating them at Sherwood Forest and Vanitys Crossing Road but not recently so I decided to give the New Pipeline Road a go. On my second visit I heard the faint high pitched '*seeep'* contact call and was delighted to spot a pair of them just off the road. I am always especially pleased when I see a Spotted Quail-thrush probably because it is quite a challenge to find them.

More specific targeting of birds at known haunts included a Pied Butcherbird *Cracticus nigrogularis* (rare breeding visitor) at Sherwood Forest and Crescent Honeyeaters *Phylidonyris pyrrhopterus* (uncommon breeding resident) at Old Mill Road.

Figure 2. Spotted Quail-thrush. New Pipeline Road.

Figure 3. Brush Bronzewing. Bendora Road.

However, a more exciting sighting was that of a Brush Bronzewing *Phaps elegans* (rare resident) feeding on the Bendora Road (Upper) on the way in to Old Mill Road. I had sometimes seen bronzewings feeding by the side of the road but they normally flew off before I could determine whether they were Common Bronzewings *Phaps chalcoptera* (common

resident) or Brush Bronzewings. But fortunately I had stopped the car and managed to photograph the bird. A few days later I went back to Bendora Road and drove very slowly. Once again I saw and photographed a Brush Bronzewing feeding on the road.

The remainder of the month was spent targeting reported birds including Little Egrets *Egretta garzetta* (rare non-breeding visitors) at Fyshwick Sewage Treatment Plant, Little Eagles *Hieraaetus morphnoides* (uncommon resident) at Black Mountain Nature Reserve, and Long-billed Corellas *Cacatua tenuirostris* (uncommon resident) at Diddams Close Park.

The Long-billed Corella on 28 February brought up my 163rd species for the year.

March

I went to the Jerrabomberra Wetlands on the 2 March, and the following day, in the hope of spotting the Tawny Grassbird *Cincloramphus timoriensis* (non-breeding vagrant) reported by Zebedee Muller, but without success. I did however, observe a trio of uncommon visitors: Yellow-billed Spoonbill *Platalea flavipes* (non-breeding visitor), White-necked Heron *Ardea pacifica* (breeding visitor) and a White-bellied Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster* (visitor).

I targeted some birds at known locations, including a Buff-banded Rail *Hypotaenidia philippensis* (uncommon breeding summer migrant) at North Watson Wetlands, and a Peaceful Dove *Geopelia placida* (rare non-breeding resident) at Cotter Road.

On the 6 Mar 23 I did a road trip up to Old Mill Road with Chris Chapman. It was great having a second pair of ears and eyes. Chris was a very observant passenger. I added a Wonga Pigeon *Leucosarcia melanoleuca* (rare breeding resident) and a Grey Currawong *Strepera versicolor* (uncommon breeding resident) to my list en route to Old Mill Road. I would certainly not have seen those two birds had I been on my own. However, in return I was very pleased to successfully demonstrate my Brush Bronzewing spotting technique to Chris along Bendora Road.

The next couple of weeks was largely spent ‘mopping up’ some common species that I had not seen that year.

Then on 22 Mar I saw an eBird Alert for a Spotted Harrier *Circus assimilis* (rare non-breeding visitor) at Molonglo River – Woodland Track. Jack Holland had flushed one near the Riverview cottage ruins. I had always wanted to see a Spotted Harrier, so I made a couple of trips to the Woodland Track and surrounding area but without success. Of course with a single observation there was always the chance that the Spotted Harrier was just passing through. Then on the 24 March Margaret Oorebeek and Ray Turnbull saw a Spotted Harrier whilst driving along John Gorton Drive. So I redoubled my efforts but again without success. And then on 26 Mar, Nik Froelich messaged me to say he had photographed a Spotted Harrier in the Molonglo River Reserve. I dashed over to the reported location but it had gone. However, the third report gave me some confidence that it was staying in the general area. But by the end of the month I had spent some 15 hours searching for the Spotted Harrier without success.

My failure to see the Spotted Harrier was overshadowing my Big Year tally which stood at 176 at the end of March.

April

Success! At last! On 1 Apr I finally got a brief glimpse, and some photographs, of the Spotted Harrier (rare non-breeding visitor) disappearing over a ridge.

On 5 Apr I did a night visit to Mulligans Flat Night Reserve with Chris, Nik and David Dedenczuk, specifically to see the Bush Stone-curlews *Burhinus grallarius* (previously extinct but reintroduced at Mulligans Flat). We eventually heard and then saw two tagged birds, A1 and C9 respectively. C9 had a tracker on its back.

Figure 4. Bush Stone-curlew. Mulligans Flat.

Flushed with success we did another night visit the following week, this time to Ginninderry Conservation Corridor – Shepherds walking Track to see the Barn Owl *Tyto alba* (rare non-breeding visitor) initially reported by Hannah O'Neill. We didn't see the owl but we heard its distinctive screeching call.

Then on 15 April Chris, Nik and I went on an Emu *Dromaius novaehollandiae* (rare breeding resident) hunt. I had recently been in the vicinity of the Pierces Creek Forest – Vanitys Crossing Road hotspot and seen numerous Emu scats. We followed a track to the North without success and were just about to return to the car when I looked back and to see a pair of Emus crossing the track behind us. It was amazing at how quiet two large birds can be and the way they just disappeared into the bush without trace. It is also very satisfying when a plan actually works.

The following week I went to Bluetts Block to follow up on reports of a pair of Chestnut-rumped Heathwrens *Calamanthus pyrrhopygius* (rare breeding resident) initially seen by Victor Braguine. Bluetts Block was my 'go to' place for Chestnut-rumped Heathwrens but they are very elusive and I hadn't seen one for over a couple of years despite numerous visits. So I was very pleased to see one in the company of Chris, Nik and James Churches. I was very

disappointed, however, to miss out on a White-bellied Cuckooshrike *Coracina novaehollandiae* (rare non-breeding autumn migrant) that Nik heard and saw minutes after I had left the Block. Nik was at his car when he heard the distinctives 'squeaky toy' call and had returned to the Block, where he and Sandra Henderson briefly saw the bird. I dashed back to the Block but it had moved on.

I also missed out on the Turquoise Parrot *Neophema pulchella* (non-breeding vagrant) at Ingledene Forest, initially reported by David and seen by several other birders.

But I did finally track down the Blue-faced Honeyeaters *Entomyzon cyanotis* (non-breeding vagrant) that had been sporadically reported in the vicinity of the Australian National University and the northern shores of Lake Burley Griffin over the past few weeks.

My Big Year tally at the end of April stood at 185.

Figure 5. Spangled Drongo. Australian National Botanic Gardens.

May

As might be expected it was getting increasingly difficult to add birds to the list. On 3 May I went to the Australian National Botanic Gardens (ANBG) in the hope of seeing the Spangled Drongo *Dicrurus bracteatus* (non-breeding vagrant) reported the previous day by Kim Farley. Luckily, Chris and James had already located the bird and waited for me before they departed. It became increasingly windy but I stayed on in the hope of getting a decent photograph of the bird. Eventually a ranger turned up. He told me the garden had been closed for the last half hour and asked me to leave, albeit after I had shown him the Spangled Drongo.

A couple of days later I was back at the ANBG searching for the Brown Gerygone *Gerygone mouki* (rare winter visitor) reported in the Sydney Rock Gulley by Brian Grinter. The Brown Gerygone is probably the archetypical Little Brown Job (LBJ) and after a couple of hours unsuccessful searching I was in my car ready to depart when I got a call from Christine D to say that the bird had been spotted near the Rainforest Gully. When I got there I was extremely lucky to see a group of experienced birders looking directly at the bird, otherwise I seriously doubt I would have been able to distinguish it from adjacent brown thornbills and other small birds.

It stands to reason that any birder attempting a Big Year would have one or more bogey birds. One of mine was the White-fronted Chat *Epthianura albifrons* (rare resident) which had been seen numerous times at Coombes Pond, Edgeworth Pond and the National Arboretum. Numerous times by everyone but me that is, despite lots of visits to all three sites. Eventually, however, I saw a pair at the main dam at the Arboretum.

Figure 6. White- fronted Chat. National Arboretum.

My final sighting prior to departing for the UK was the Swift Parrot *Lathamus discolor* (rare non-breeding winter visitor). Chris had been in Watson searching for a flock of swift parrots that had been reported in the area by Kathy Walter and John Goldie, and had located them on a property alongside Anthill Street.

The Swift Parrot was number 189 on my Big Year list.

United Kingdom

I left for the UK on 10 May and returned mid-September.

I did do quite a bit of birding in the UK. The birds I saw are obviously out of scope of this article, suffice to say that just before I returned to Australia I saw my 200th UK lifer. It was a very special bird – a Eurasian Wryneck *Jynx torquilla*, an ant-eating woodpecker.

Despite being away for over four months, it was fairly quiet birding in Canberra and I only missed a handful of visitors that I would have probably otherwise seen. In particular, I missed the Yellow-tufted Honeyeater *Lichenostomus melanops* (rare resident) that hung around the ANBG for several days in July, and the Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos* (non-breeding vagrant) that lingered in the Jerrabomberra Wetlands paddocks for several days in early September.

September

On my return to Australia, the first addition to my list was a Baillon's Crake *Porzana pusilla* (rare non-breeding summer migrant) at Coombs Pond.

22 Sept was a special day. In the morning I got a call from Chris to say he had seen a Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida* (rare non-breeding visitor) at Fyshwick Sewage Treatment Plant. I went and saw the tern. Later that day I got another call to say there was a Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia* (non-breeding vagrant) at the plant. So back in the car. Happily the obliging tern flew over me shortly after I arrived.

Figure 7. Black-eared Cuckoo. Stockdill Drive.

I also saw several migrants and visitors that I would normally have expected to see earlier in the year but hadn't, presumably due to the wet conditions inland in 2022. They comprised: Rufous Songlark *Cincloramphus mathews*i (common breeding summer migrant), Red-capped

Robin *Petroica goodenovii* (uncommon breeding visitor) at Bluetts Block, and a Brown Songlark *Cincloramphus cruralis* (rare breeding summer migrant) at Parkwood Road.

However, the highlight that month was a Black-eared Cuckoo *Chalcites osculans* (rare non-breeding visitor) at Stockdill Drive that had initially been reported by Ben Milbourne.

At the end of September my Big Year tally was 197. With three months to go, I was pretty confident that I would achieve the 200 mark, especially as we were beginning to get some interesting migrants, visitors and vagrants.

October

The first day of the month saw me at Parkwood Road with several other birders hoping to see a Red-backed Kingfisher *Todiramphus pyrrhopygius* (breeding vagrant) that had first been seen by a very experienced birder who doesn't list on eBird. We didn't see the kingfisher but we did see a large mixed flock of White-browed Woodswallows *Artamus superciliosus* (uncommon breeding summer migrant) and Masked Woodswallows *Artamus personatus* (rare breeding summer migrant). Like the Rufous Songlark and Red-capped Robin, these were birds one would have usually expected to see earlier in the year.

I reached the 200 mark on 10 Oct: a Scarlet Honeyeater *Myzomela sanguinolenta* (rare non-breeding visitor) at the ANBG.

On 14 Oct I got a call from Shorty telling me that he had seen three Pied Cormorants *Phalacrocorax varius* (rare non-breeding visitor) at Eyre Street Wetlands. Although classified rare, this was another of my bogey birds as I had spent numerous visits to their known haunts without success. I was in two minds, having already achieved the 200 mark but I decided to go. Shorty very kindly had waited for me. I parked on Honeysett View and walked over to the Wetlands. On leaving the car I noticed a pair of Australasian Darters resting on the opposite bank of Jerrabomberra Creek. However, I initially went to the wrong spot and missed Shorty. By the time we eventually met up, the cormorants had just departed. I returned to my car and went down to the creek to see whether they would appear. After about twenty minutes I idly trained my birding scope on the 'Darters' only to realise that in the meantime they had been replaced by the Pied Cormorants! How embarrassing.

On 22 Oct I was cooking a Wedding Anniversary dinner when I got a call from Chris saying that he and James were looking at a Red-backed Kingfisher at the top of Bluetts Block. Luckily I had not started cooking the steaks, so I drove to Bluetts Block and walked as fast as I could up the hill without collapsing. Chris and James had kindly waited for me and pointed the bird out to me, which was just as well because it took me ages to actually see it despite their detailed and repeated descriptions of exactly which tree and which branch it was sitting on.

On the last day of the month I got a call from Chris to say an Australian Painted-snipe *Rostratula australis* (rare non-breeding visitor) had just been reported in a small dam by the bush tucker garden in the National Arboretum by Jane Cooksley. It seemed somewhat implausible. I hadn't heard the name before and new birders sometimes misidentify birds. However, the fear of missing out took hold and I decided it would better to be safe than sorry, especially as the Arboretum was a very short drive away. I arrived at the dam to find Chris looking at the snipe through his binoculars. It turned out that Jane was an experienced birder visiting the ACT. As we watched the bird more birders arrived. There was quite a crowd when I left.

Figure 8. Red-backed Kingfisher. Bluetts Block.

Figure 9. Little Friarbird. Mount Majura Nature Reserve – Clancy's Walking Track.

Big Year tally – 203.

November

November was very quiet, especially after a very productive September and October. Naturally the more birds you see the harder it gets to see new birds. However, it still seemed very quiet.

The one highlight was a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper Calidris acuminata (uncommon non-breeding summer migrant) in the Jerrabomberra Wetlands Paddocks, initially found by Shorty.

Big Year tally – 204.

December

On the 10 Dec I got a message from Shorty saying he had located the Little Friarbird *Philemon citreogularis* (rare breeding summer migrant) at Mount Majura Nature Reserve – Clancy's Walking Track. It had been reported the previous day by Amos Robinson and Laurel Fowler. Again Shorty kindly waited until I arrived and showed me the location. He then went back to the parking spot to meet Christine D. I had wandered off, seduced by other birds feeding on native cherry, when I heard a shout. I returned to the spot and Shorty pointed out the bird to me.

My final bird of the year, on 28 Dec, was very special – an Australian Little Bittern *Ixobrychus dubius* (rare breeding visitor) at the Jerrabomberra Wetlands. It had been discovered the day earlier by Shorty. Not only are they rare, they are also very shy and elusive, preferring to hunt in the middle of dense reed beds. I had been very close to one on the wetland boardwalk a couple of years back. I heard its distinctive booming call but couldn't see it through the reeds. Bitterns are very iconic birds, very much sought after, whether in Australia or the UK. Shorty had determined that the bittern was occasionally visible from the Cygnus Hide, flying from one reed bed to another. Chris and I spent several hours in the hide waiting for it to appear, which it eventually did. A great way to end the year.

Big Year tally – 206.

Final Tally

By the end of the year I had observed 206 of the 232 species of birds reported on eBird that year. Some of the 26 species of birds I did not observe were reported during my four-month absence, but the majority were not.

Residents. I observed 132 resident birds. I missed the Yellow-tufted Honeyeater (rare) and the Powerful Owl *Ninox strenua* (rare).

Migrants. I observed 39 migrants, all the common migrants and all but one uncommon migrant. I missed the White-throated Needletail *Hirundapus caudacutus* (uncommon non-breeding summer migrant) and seven rare migrants. I did not observe any Channel-billed Cuckoos *Scythrops novaehoolandiae* and, as mentioned earlier, I just missed out on the White-bellied Cuckooshrike. Chris and I spent a ridiculous amount of time at Parkwood and along the ACT/NSW border west of MacGregor and Dunlop, hoping to see or hear a Singing Bushlark *Mirafra javanica* (rare breeding summer migrant) without success, although we saw several from inside NSW.

Visitors. I observed 30 visitors, comprising all but one of the common and uncommon visitors, and 15 rare visitors. The uncommon visitor I missed was the Pied Stilt.

Vagrants. I observed six vagrants.

ACT Lifers. I started the year with 219 ACT bird species. When you have seen that many species any new bird is likely to be special. I saw 10 ACT lifers during 2023. My favourite bird would have to be the very photogenic Spotted Harrier, which graced us with its presence over several weeks, closely followed by the shy and skulking Australian Little Bittern. The Red-backed Kingfisher, Black-eared Cuckoo and Purple-crowned Lorikeet were also very special birds.

I was one of 13 birders who listed more than 200 bird species on eBird in 2023. Shorty listed 217 species, the most listed on eBird in 2023.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all those birders who helped me achieve the 200 tally, either directly or indirectly, through their own efforts to locate and list birds.

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WILLIE WAGTAILS WITH A TASTE FOR A BONSAI HOME

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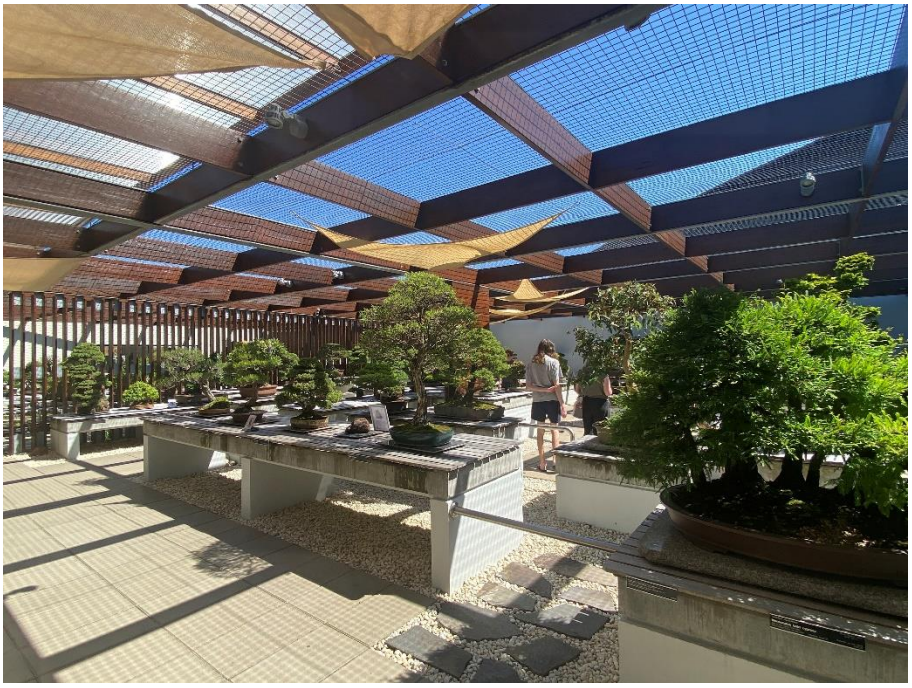
The National Arboretum Canberra is a 250 ha planting of over 44,000 rare and endangered trees nestled on a site once occupied by a Pinus Radiata plantation, and destroyed by the devastating bushfires that entered Canberra on 18 January 2003. The Arboretum is also home to the premier National Bonsai and Penjing Collection, a world-class display of miniature trees and forests, created by some of Australia's leading artists (of bonsai, penjing and beautifully crafted bonsai pots).

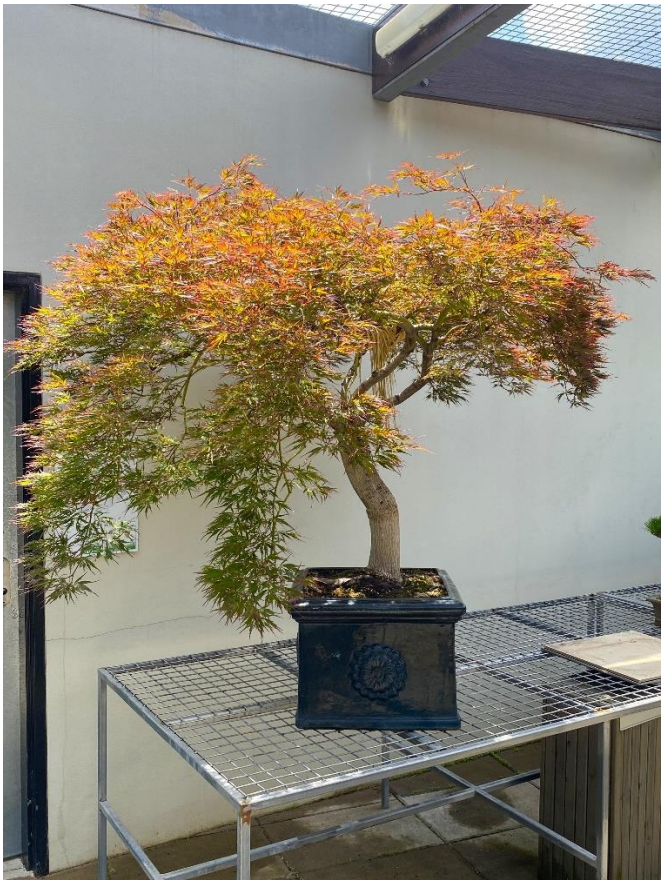
Bonsai (or poon-sah in Chinese) is a very special art form. Individual trees are nurtured and indeed crafted for many years and decades to achieve the appearance of aged and sculpted trees. The pots they are displayed in are often highly prized examples of the potter's art.

The bonsai at the National Bonsai and Penjing Collection have been donated or loaned by bonsai enthusiasts around Australia. They are individually valued in the thousands and tens of thousands of dollars. Understandably, while most of the collection is open to the public each day, it is also securely protected against theft and the weather.



Notwithstanding the choice of natural bushland all around, and the 44,000 introduced trees at the Arboretum, two Willie Wagtails decided in Spring 2023/24 to make the Bonsai collection their nesting site.

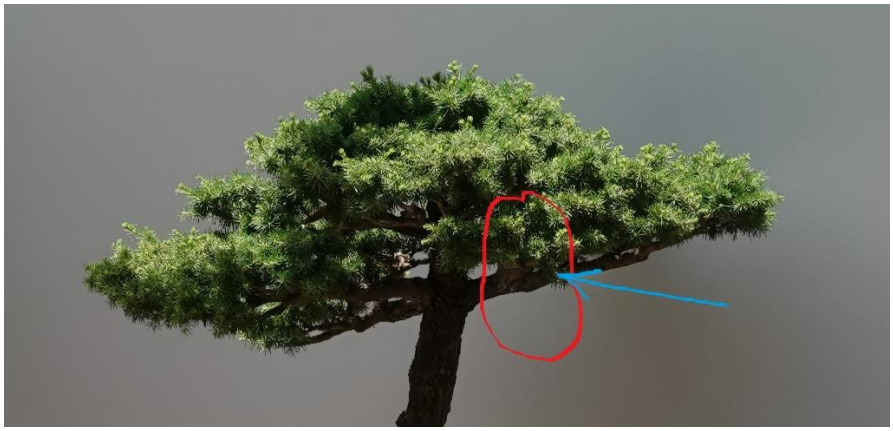
Initially the pair built a nest in an *Acer* in the non-public area of the Collection. There they successfully raised two young. The tree they used is in the following photo.



After the young had flown, one of the staff at the Collection decided, for some reason to adorn the nest site with raffia (just visible at centre right of the photo) to make it look more like a nest! Their handiwork does, nevertheless, show the location of the nest just above it in the foliage. The tree and its pot are about 1m in height.

Seemingly emboldened by their first success, the birds returned to raise a second brood, but this time in a smaller Atlas Cedar tree in the public viewing area of the Collection!

Because this was in the public viewing area, staff at the Collection set up two small red and white metal barriers to stop people standing directly against the tree (at centre in the following photo).



The location of the nest just under the foliage is indicated in the photo above.

While it is clear that a number of members of the public became aware of the presence of the two birds and their nest, the birds seemed unperturbed. Indeed, such is the nature of bonsais that staff had to enter the barriers to hand-water the tree from close quarters twice a day. Again, the birds seemed unperturbed.

I was able to track progress over a period of nearly five weeks by lying on the floor a couple of metres outside the barriers to take photographs by telephoto, as follows.

The two new chicks were successfully raised and left the nest with their parents in the last week of January 2024.

Why the birds chose this location, given so many other options around the Arboretum, is unclear. Perhaps they realised that, despite the constant presence of people, this is a safe environment. Their own access was through the steel mesh security cover over the Collection, the mesh being too fine to admit larger birds. The following image shows one of the parent birds arriving with food.

I gather that on one occasion a Magpie entered the collection during the day through the public entry door, but one of the Wagtails immediately reacted, harassing the Magpie until it left.

Perhaps the Wagtails just felt that Bonsai are somehow special. Best not to relate that Bonsai translates merely as ‘pot plant’!

It will be interesting to see if the pair return to raise future broods.

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SPOTTED HARRIER OBSERVATIONS IN THE MOLONGLO RIVER RESERVE MARCH – MAY 2023

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Introduction

In late March 2023 Jack Holland was walking along the Woodland Track in the Coombs section of the Molonglo River Reserve, when he flushed a Spotted Harrier near the Riverview Homestead ruins. Over the following six weeks the Spotted Harrier was frequently sighted within the Reserve and in adjoining Crown Land designated for housing development to become the new residential suburb of Molonglo.

Following the initial observation I spent considerable time searching for, observing and photographing the Spotted Harrier. During this time, I met numerous birders and wildlife photographers. This article documents my observations about the Spotted Harrier's behaviour, and also the observations of other birders and photographers as recorded on eBird and the Canberra Wildlife FaceBook Group pages.

Figure 1. Spotted Harrier, 15 Apr 2023 (*Angela Booth*).

Description

The Spotted Harrier (*Circus assimilis*) is a medium-sized raptor with chestnut coloured underparts, and long spotted wings. The adult male and female are similar looking, except that the females are larger than the males (Fig. 1).

The Spotted Harrier is found throughout the Australian mainland but is considered to be a rare, non-breeding visitor to the ACT, and has been declared Vulnerable in NSW. It normally breeds in July through to October. Mostly found in grasslands and open woodland, the Spotted Harrier hunts by slow quartering, gliding and buoyant flight, occasionally hovering. It catches prey by diving onto it. Its prey includes terrestrial birds, including quail, larks and pipits, rodents and, reptiles, large insects and (rarely) carrion.

Methodology

I collated all the eBird observations of Spotted Harriers in the ACT over the period of interest. The eBird listings provide temporal and positional data. The accuracy of the positional data varied. A few eBirders created personal locations to indicate where the harrier was seen. However, the vast majority of listings were made using the "Molonglo River – woodland walk" hotspot, which encompassed any observation made along the 1.8 km walk. Some eBirders, myself included, also used a 'Molonglo River Reserve, Molonglo' hotspot to indicate that the harrier was seen within the reserve, but not from the Woodland Walk. Fortunately, however, many birders provided additional comments regarding the location of the harrier. For example, in Jack Holland's initial sighting of the Spotted Harrier, he very helpfully refined the accuracy of the location to 'perched on a fence about 100 metres past the Riverview Cottage ruins'. I also collated observations using Canberra Wildlife FaceBook Group submissions.

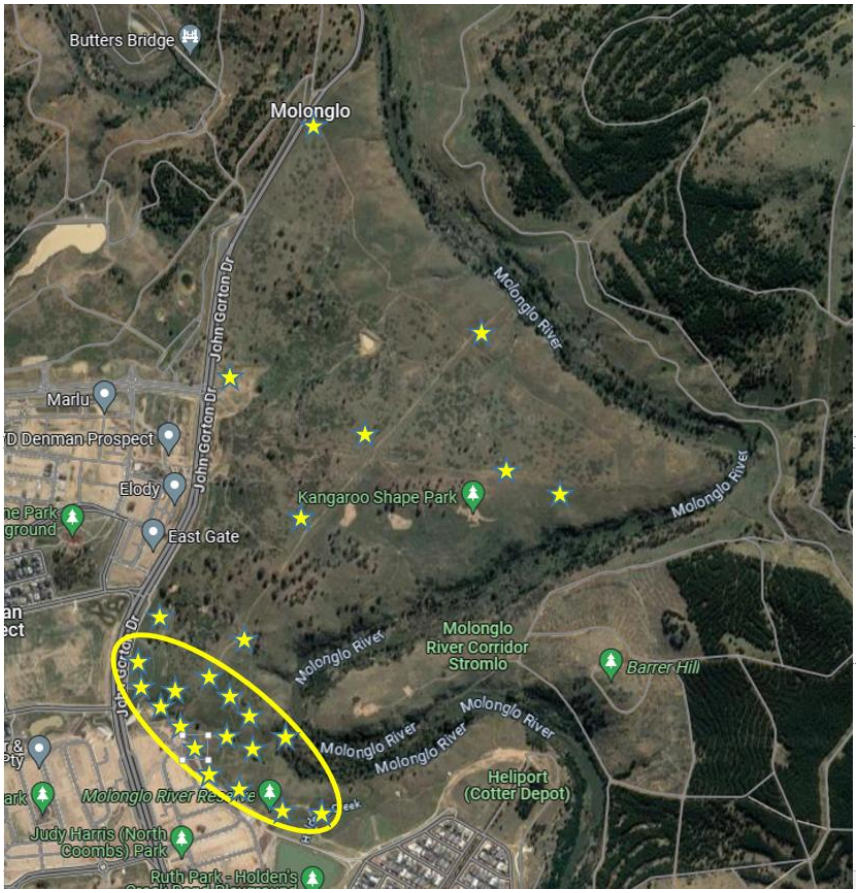

Figure 2. Spotted Harrier Sightings.

Results

Fig 2 shows where the Spotted Harrier was observed during the period 22 Mar 2023 to 4 May 2023. The yellow stars indicate single observations of the bird and the yellow oval line encompasses the area where the harrier was seen multiple times by multiple observers.

Note that there was also an eBird listing of the Spotted Harrier on 30 Apr 2023 at the 'Namarag – Molonglo River Reserve' hotspot. I have not plotted that observation because the hotspot covers too large an area to meaningfully represent a single observation, however, I have covered the observation in the discussion of results below.

Discussion

Number and Gender

Only one bird was observed at any given time. The period of interest was well outside the normal breeding season, and there was no evidence of breeding behaviour. There were no indications to suggest that there was more than one bird in the area of interest. It was not possible to positively identify the harrier's sex.

Area Covered

Note that the Google Maps satellite view at Fig. 2 is quite dated and that most, if not all, of the housing development shown has been completed.

It can be seen from Fig. 2 that the single observations were made within a roughly equilateral triangle bounded on two sides by the Molonglo River and to the west by John Gorton Drive. I spent some 15 hours searching for the harrier within that area before I first saw it. I dubbed the area the 'Spotted Harrier Triangle' in reference to the search for missing aircraft and ships in the Bermuda Triangle.

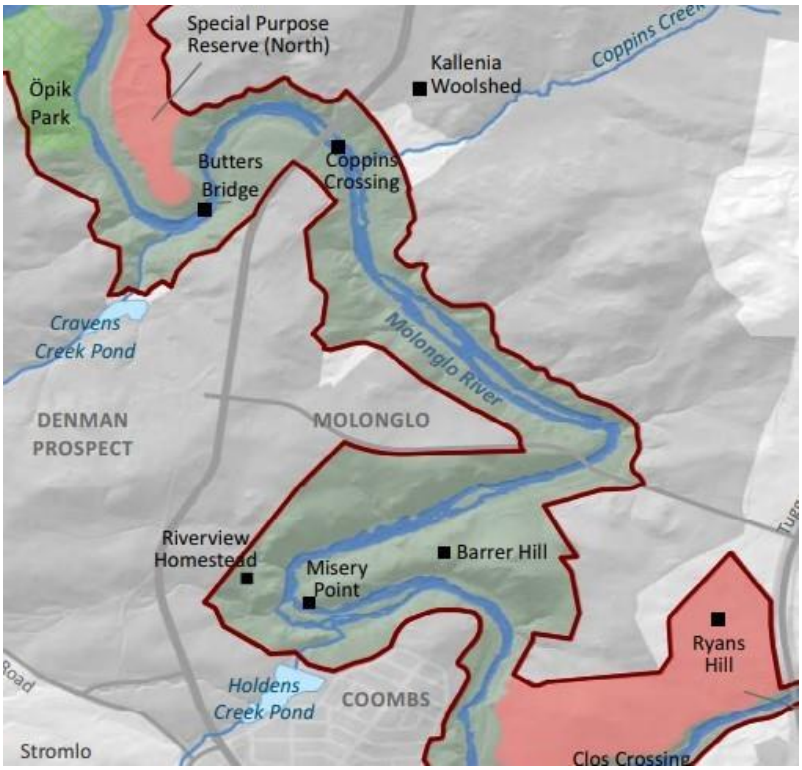

Figure 3. Area of Interest (ACT Government 2019).

The vast majority of observations were made in the smaller sector of the reserve bordering on the suburb of Coombs. It should not be assumed, however, that the Spotted Harrier spent most of its time within the confines of the yellow oval, merely that most observers monitored that particular area.

Fig. 3 provides an alternative view of the area of interest (ACT Government 2019). The section of the Reserve shown is the green shaded corridor of land on either side of the river. The dark grey line running roughly North-South is John Gorton Drive. The light grey shaded area east of John Gorton Drive, labelled Molonglo, is Crown Land designated for urban development into a new suburb called Molonglo. It comprises mainly grazing grassland and grassland overrun with blackberry bushes, with some isolated pockets of trees near the road.

The Crown Land is fenced in and the only effective means of access to the Crown Land is by climbing over padlocked gates. The only easy access to the Reserve west of the river and east of John Gorton Drive was via the Woodland Walk.

The Woodland Walk starts from a point near the junction of Southcott View and Edwin Hicks Way.

Figure 4. Woodland Track Information Board.

There is an information board near the start of the track (Fig. 4) which provides useful information. The Woodland Track is indicated by an orange line. The track is 3.6 km return and is graded as ‘Easy’ by the ACT Parks and Conservation Service. However, it is sometimes overgrown and includes some steep sections, so is not as easily accessed as the ‘Easy’ grading would imply. Walkers are advised that they must stay on the track for their own safety and for the protection of the reserve’s unique flora and fauna. Walkers are also advised that fenced-off areas are designated as high-quality pink-tailed worm-lizard habitat and should not be entered. These areas were fenced-off by metal railings. The photograph shows a small section of railings

behind the information board. Most of the walk is through rocky grassland but approximately halfway along the track it passes through some box gum grassy woodland. The track ends with an observation deck overlooking the river.

I am not suggesting that the Spotted Harrier remained within the observation area for the whole six weeks. Two eBirders on different days observed the Spotted Harrier depart the Coombs section of the Reserve and fly over houses in the direction of Mount Stromlo. Another eBirder observed the harrier flying low over grassland at the end of Roy Corrigan Close. It then flew over John Gorton Drive towards Evelyn Scott primary school. And, as previously mentioned the harrier was observed west of John Gorton Drive in the Namarag section of the Molonglo River Reserve.

However, the Spotted Harrier did spend a considerable period of time within the Reserve and adjoining Crown Land. In particular during the period 10 – 29 Apr it was seen every day except on 18 Apr. As mentioned earlier, most observations were made in the smaller sector of the reserve bordering on the suburb of Coombs. It quickly became apparent that, rather than trekking kilometres and climbing gates and fences searching for the harrier, one could wait for the harrier to come to you. If you positioned yourself along the side of Southcott View looking north towards the Reserve there was a good chance that the raptor would pass by in search of prey. Indeed several people saw the harrier as they were parking their car on the road, and some of the best photographs were taken from the grass verge adjoining the road. It also appeared to me that the harrier was more tolerant of human presence alongside the road and houses than in the triangle, where it would almost invariably see or hear me first and veer away. Most of my photographs were of the rear of the harrier as it disappeared over a ridge.

My guess is that the Spotted Harrier spent most of its time within the triangle which was bordered to the east by pine forests and to the south and much of the west by suburban dwellings – none of which provided suitable hunting grounds.

Figure 5. Southcott View grass verge, looking north towards the Riverview Homestead ruins.

Observation Period

The Spotted Harrier was first recorded in eBird on 22 Mar 2023; the last eBird listing was on 4 May 2023. It is possible, however, that the harrier had been in the area for some time before being observed. Prior to Jack Holland's initial observation the Woodland Track was not a popular birding hotspot, except for regular visits by Jack Holland himself. There had only been two recorded visits made between Jack Holland's last visit in September and his March visit: an observer from Western Australia made two short visits on 18 and 19 Mar 2023 respectively. There was only one eBird entry for the Molonglo River Reserve hotspot in the preceding three months, a visit on 1 Mar 2023. The harrier could have easily been in the area of interest for days or possibly even longer without being observed.

With regard to when the harrier departed, eBird observations peaked in mid-April and tailed off by the end of April. I was the last to record the Spotted Harrier on 4 May 2023, shortly before I travelled to the UK for a four-month stay. At the time there were still a few photographers around hoping to get better shots of the harrier, and several Woodland Track eBird listings were made during May. I think it is likely that the Spotted Harrier departed some time during the first week of May.

Hunting and Sources of Food

The Spotted Harrier was most frequently seen hunting at low level, flying languidly close to the ground. Although generally described as a medium-sized raptor the long wing-span presents a large profile, and given favourable conditions could be seen from a considerable distance. However, much of the Reserve is undulating, with ridges and gullies, and the harrier flew low and was adept at using terrain to mask its presence.

Figure 6. Spotted Harrier, legs extended, homing in on prey, 15 Apr 2023 (*Angela Booth*).

The harrier was also quite often seen and photographed perched on the metal railings. Spotted Harriers are known to perch on fence posts. The metal railings represented, in effect, several kilometres of contiguous fence pole and likely were a very attractive feature to the harrier.

It is self-evident that there was an adequate supply of food, given that the harrier remained in the area for at least six weeks. As mentioned earlier, its prey includes quail, pipits and rodents. I did not see the harrier catch any prey and there are no references in eBird regarding what prey

it caught, but evidence suggest that there was an ample supply of Brown Quail (*Coturnix ypsilophora*), Australian Pipits (*Anthus australis*) and House Mice (*Mus musculus*) within the area of observation. There are 20 separate records of Brown Quail being flushed or seen within the area and time period, with coveys of six, seven, eight or nine birds being encountered from time to time. There were also 11 separate records of Australian Pipits seen albeit in smaller numbers.

Figure 7. Spotted Harrier on metal railings, 17 Apr. 2023 (*John Hurrell*).

Figure 8. Australian Pipit (*John Hurrell*).

With regard to house mice, there was a Black-shouldered Kite (*Elanus axillaris*) nesting site in Crown Land close to a raised circular water tank which roughly equated to the centre of the equilateral triangle. I watched the adult kites hunting both close to the water tank and also within the Reserve close to Southcott View, sometimes perching on lamp-posts adjoining the street. The kites had a very high rate of success, I watched them catch lots of mice.

On several occasions the harrier was observed being chased by magpies, and sometimes by ravens and magpie-larks. On three occasions I watched it fly from Holden Creek to the unnamed ponds at the end of Roy Corrigan Close where it was invariably harassed by magpies

and escaped north along a gully running parallel into John Gorton Drive into the blackberry-infested Crown land.

Figures 9 and 10. Black-shouldered Kites with mice (*John Hurrell*).

Figure 11. Final Sighting just before Dusk, 4 May 2023 (*John Hurrell*).

Conclusion

The extended stay of the Spotted Harrier provided an excellent opportunity for Canberrans to observe and photograph this beautiful and rare visitor to the ACT.

The Spotted Harrier was observed within a roughly equilateral triangle of Reserve and Crown Land, bounded by the Molonglo River and John Gorton Drive, and within a narrow strip of Reserve adjoining the suburb of Coombs.

The area of observation was mainly grassland - both rocky grassland and grazing grassland - but included a small patch of box gum grassy open woodland. The grassland and grassy open woodland provided an ideal hunting ground for the harrier, and there appeared to be an adequate supply of food, including quail, pipits and house mice.
It is assumed that the harrier spent most of its time within the area of observation, not least because much of the land immediately surrounding the area was unsuitable for hunting.

Acknowledgement

Thanks to Angela Booth for her Spotted Harrier photographs, for sharing tips on how to take better photographs of birds in flight, and for timely updates on the harrier's location and behaviour during the observation period.

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AN AUSTRALIAN HOBBY BREEDING ATTEMPT IN CHAPMAN

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Abstract. *In mid-September 2023 a pair of Australian Hobbies* (Falco longipennis*) took over an old Australian Raven's* (Corvus coronoides) *nest in a large blue gum in Darwinia Tce Chapman. Over the next month the two were seen together infrequently, with one bird regularly seen on open sentry and the other presumed to be brooding on eggs. From the changed behaviour, including the observation on 21 Oct of the female feeding herself, and then possibly the presumed nestlings, it appeared hatching may have occurred, in line with the known incubation period. This seemed to be confirmed by the subsequent attention of Pied Currawongs* (Strepera graculina), *with at least 20 around the nest area for over an hour on 27 Oct, some of them very close to the nest, and being chased by the Hobbies, in particular the larger female. The nest continued to attract the Pied Currawongs', attention. On the morning of 6 Nov there was another onslaught for nearly two hours by up to 60 birds, with in this case the Hobbies being chased. While the currawong activity died down after that, both Hobbies continued to be present until the female was last seen perched for over 2 hours on 18 Nov. Examination of the literature suggests that eggs rather than nestlings were being defended; this is based on the similar length of the pre-laying and incubation periods.*

On the morning of 16 Sep 2023, I heard unfamiliar kestrel-type calling and twice a raptor with relatively pointed wings and a long tail could be seen doing a circuit just to the N of my GBS site. Around 07:15 h the next day a clearly identifiable Australian Hobby (*Falco longipennis,* Hobby hereafter) did a loop over our house and back to a large planted blue gum (*Eucalyptus globulus*), where it was joined by another bird that landed near the top.

I suspected and soon confirmed that they had taken over an Australian Raven's (*Corvus coronoides*) nest which the latter had used for the past couple of seasons, but not in 2023. When I checked at 08:35 h one bird was clearly perched about 5 m below this nest. I checked unsuccessfully again later in the morning, but the bird was at this same spot again at 16:45 h.

The blue gum is in a small area of public land, and the nest was about 25 m high right at the top of the tree on the S side, overhanging the driveway of 50 Darwinia Tce. While it was easy to see from below, it was very hard to get any view into it. In fact, the best view was from the lounge-room window of our house about 150 m away. Even then a very leafy drooping branch covered the top of the nest, and it was impossible to actually see the Hobby on it. So, most observations were of a bird flying to or from the nest site, though at 16:50 h on 7 Oct a bird was seen briefly pausing on the edge of the nest.

Over the next month (every day except for six, two of them wet days) I regularly saw one bird acting as sentry on several quite exposed spots near the nest (usually below it). The second bird left the nest from time to time, often to do a short circuit round the tree. On one occasion (at 17:23 h on 25 Sep) both could be seen perched in the tree, one level with and one below the nest. During that month two birds were otherwise only seen on 3 occasions (23 Sep and 3 and

7 Oct). When they were active, I was often alerted by their call, very appropriately described by Debus *et al* (1991) as a rapid, peevish chatter *kee-kee-kee-kee-kee*. Otherwise, the perching bird was usually silent but easily found.

During this time the local birds hardly seemed to be concerned by the raptors' presence. This is very different from the reaction when goshawks or sparrowhawks are around. I also did not observe much attempt at territory protection. It is a favourite stopping spot for Sulphur-crested Cockatoos (*Cacatua galerita*, SCC hereafter) on their way to and from their roost in the nearby Chapman horse paddocks, but only early on 25 Sep did I see a Hobby chase off a SCC.

More importantly as a pointer to what eventuated below, a Hobby was seen in pursuit of a Pied Currawong (*Strepera graculina*, PC hereafter) at 17:36 h on 20 Sep, and on 25 Sep shortly after the SCC incident above, one chased off a couple of PCs before returning to very close to the nest. Also, at 16:39 h on 8 Oct a PC flew to the nest tree and one Hobby was very vocal, doing circuits of the tree before the PC left. At 07:14 h on 11 Oct Noisy Miners (*Manorina melanocephala*) were heard in the nest tree before moving to Rivett, where there is a colony, and one Hobby did a couple of circuits before a PC approached the nest area, when a Hobby was again very vocal but not seen.

From 17 Oct the Hobbies' behaviour seemed to change in that, while I could still hear them calling, it was difficult to find one on sentry, even on close checking, until 20 Oct when one could be seen in a more concealed spot at 09:37 h, but one was very restless in a much more open spot at 17:54 h.

On 21 Oct I checked more closely and at 12:24 h I heard one bird coming in calling, with the other leaving the nest. After a couple of small circuits around the tree, both birds perched about a metre apart. Over 5 minutes the larger bird (the presumed female) proceeded to pluck (with feathers flying) a very small bird, which may have been exchanged during the circuits. Then the female seemed to eat it, while the smaller bird sat quietly slightly lower. The female then moved up a bit and at 12:31 h did a circuit before landing near the nest, calling softly. I could not see it feeding, but it did seem to move quickly onto the nest.

From this behaviour I suspected hatching had occurred, as HANZAB (Marchant and Higgins, 1993) indicates that the larger female does most of the incubation and also the direct feeding of the chicks for the first weeks, while the male provides most or all the food to it. This also matched the incubation period of 28-31 days (Metcalf, 1989), assuming that laying had occurred shortly after I discovered the nest.

For the next five days activity around the nest was much quieter. A bird seen on sentry on 25 Oct flew off silently into Rivett, and on 26 Oct one was on open sentry at 06:33 h, and later heard over our GBS site, but subsequent events seemed to confirm that hatching had indeed occurred.

At 08:23 h on 27 Oct I heard the Hobbies calling and saw up to 6 PCs in and near the tree, at times approaching the nest very closely with constant calling. When I moved under the tree, two PCs were very close, and a Hobby seemed to be calling from the nest. While there was still some calling after I left at 08:33 h, the larger bird (female) was on an open perch at 08:51 h, appearing to be eating something for a couple of minutes. More PCs arrived and over the next hour there was lots of chasing of up to 5 PCs by the larger bird, with at least 8 PCs in the

tree, some getting very close to the nest. In total there were 20 PCs in the immediate area, and 3 PCs still present at 09:51 h.

Both Hobbies were still present after this onslaught, but activity was much quieter over the next 3 days (1-2 PCs were seen pursued on two occasions). However, at 07:18 h on 31 Oct I heard the Hobbies and saw the larger bird chasing a PC from the tree, before returning to the nest. Then the smaller bird chased another PC out of the tree, attacking it physically (the first time I had seen this) and continued on the wing with up to 4 PCs around, and at least 6 nearby. I had to go away briefly but at 07:50 h the tree was quieter, though PCs were still calling in the area. Both birds then circled the tree at 08:27 h, with at least 2 PCs still present.

At 13:37 h the larger bird was seen plucking a larger-size small bird on a branch. The other bird was calling, and the smaller one left the nest area and did some circuits before returning several minutes later and perching under the nest. By this time the other bird had finished feeding and both flew off, doing a circuit and landing at the nest and tree, respectively. There was some calling before the smaller bird flew off at 13:44 h.

Over the next five days the Hobbies were still recorded calling or doing circuits, with on one occasion the larger bird seen eating. Up to 6 PCs were seen in the area but there seemed to be limited interaction with them. However, on 6 Nov PCs were again very noisy and there were at least 10 in the nest tree at 08:25 h, and on closer investigation there were up to 50 PCs in the area. They were being called in, with up to 25 PCs in the tree, some of them vigorously pursuing one of the Hobbies and others being very close to the nest. The calls suggested that one bird was trying to protect the presumed young while on the nest. It was like a scene from Alfred Hitchcock's movie ‘The Birds’ and the situation seemed hopeless when I left at 08:35 h.

Over the next 90 minutes up to 20 PCs were constantly in (including the nest area) or near the tree, at times being chased by both Hobbies. The PCs slowly seemed to move into Rivett and between 10:03 and 10:05 h at least 60 PCs came up from that direction, flying towards Cooleman Ridge (mainly over our house about 150 m away from the nest). The nest area was then quiet, though some PCs remained in the area (at 12:01 h 2 PCs were very close to the nest; at one stage one seemed to be tumbling down, possibly after being attacked by a Hobby).

I thought the PCs had indicated ‘Mission accomplished’, but surprisingly both Hobbies were still there. The two birds were sitting less than 1 m apart at 18:50 h that evening, the larger bird clearly missing some tail feathers. They continued to be present, either calling, seen flying or perching. Until 11 Nov up to 6 very noisy PCs were still seen close to the nest area, but the defence by the Hobbies was much more muted. After that date the PCs’ interest seemed to drop off.

I had hoped that the (presumed) nestlings had somehow survived, as at 17:01 h on the afternoon of 16 Nov the larger bird was calling while flying towards the nest. She was then seen below it with food (but not eating it) at 17:06 h. Unfortunately, this does not seem to have been the case, as she was only seen once more, sitting quietly in an open perch for well over 2 hours on the evening of 18 November. It is possible that the pair considered a second breeding attempt in the 12 days following the major attack before abandoning after two months’ effort.

Where the Hobbies went is unclear. Interestingly the closest record of an Australian Hobby on eBird during or shortly after this time was on 20 November over 6 km to the N at the Namarag River reserve on the northern side of the Molonglo River.

Discussion

The above describes an attempted breeding event of the Australian Hobby, the first time I can recall them ever trying to do so in my local area in 48 years. Indeed, very few have been seen for the past 10 years or so.

The attempt was foiled by persistent attacks by Pied Currawongs, including a major one on 6 Nov when at least 60 PCs were involved, and to which the presumed chicks finally succumbed. Note that I never was able to see nestlings or a parent in the nest and had assumed from the parents' behaviour that chicks were being defended. However, on closer checking of the literature during the preparation of this article it is more likely that they were defending their eggs, given that the incubation period determined by Metcalf (1989) from 5 nests in the ACT ranged between 3 Nov and 25 Dec, and Debus *et al* (1991) in northern NSW did not observe hatching until 30 Nov for the single nest followed.

In particular Metcalf (1989) reports a 3-4 weeks' pre-laying period, with the female Hobby spending much time on the nest, often shuffling and turning around in the cup for long periods. For their single nest, Debus *et al* (1991) also seemed to have observed a similar pre-laying period. Note that both pre-laying times are about the same length as what I took to be the incubation period.

The literature does not seem to record a similar event of probable nest predation. Metcalf (1989) merely notes the Pied Currawong as one of eight species involved in mutual harassment with the Australian Hobby. While his study was conducted in Canberra, it was during the 1980s when the PC may have been less numerous during the breeding season. However, elsewhere Metcalf (1988) notes that 'Similar harassing behaviour of Currawongs towards the Australian Hobby *Falco longipennis* has been observed, with as many as ten of them bothering the falcons over the three weeks before brooding, this being most pronounced as egg laying proceeds.' This is possibly before the PCs moved away to breed, but strongly suggests that in my case eggs rather than nestlings were being defended.

Also, Debus *et al* (1991) observe that on the morning of 18 October (1990) 'there was much calling by both birds as the female stood on the nest while the male chased Pied Currawongs *Streptera graculina* away and returned to the nest.' Given that hatching occurred on 30 Nov, this was therefore before the incubation period, although it is also noted 'In the nestling period the male Hobby twice chased a Pied Currawong from the nest.'.

Either way, it seems that this particular breeding event attracted many more Pied Currawongs than previously recorded. While two pairs of PCs were known to be breeding within 100 m, as usual there seemed to be very few others nearby, and it is hard to know from where such a large number came. My notes indicate there were at least 18 PCs at a feeding area in mid Ordell St about 400 m away on 14 Jun 2023, where in the past larger groups could sometimes be found outside the winter period.

However, I have witnessed previous instances where PCs seemed to be attracted from long distances away, including on one occasion in late November 2004 after one parent of the PC pair with two fledglings was found dead on the road (Holland 2005). However, the fledglings,

which were about three weeks old at the time, seemed to survive the attention of at least 6 very noisy PCs, which continued for over a week before gradually dying down.

Also, at 08:47 h on 23 Dec 2023 I heard PCs and watched at least 15 fly, mainly singly, from Cooleman Ridge towards 60-62 Darwinia Tce Chapman, about 200 m from the nest tree. I thought maybe there was a goshawk or an owl there but on checking found at least 30 PCs, mainly in hakeas at the edge of these properties. There was not much movement and no clear cause of the ruckus, and it had quietened down by 09:15 h.

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Australian Hobby *(Geoffrey Dabb)*

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TAWNY FROGMOUTH NEST, BLACK RANGE NSW, 2023

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Abstract: *The Tawny Frogmouth (*Podargus strigoides*) is a well known Australian night bird striking for its camouflage. During 2023 I had the opportunity to observe and record a Frogmouth nest in the front yard of our property on the far south coast of New South Wales, Australia. The observation period captured the male sitting on the nest, hatching of chicks, night feeding, development of the chicks, interaction with predatory Goannas, and successful fledging.*

The Tawny Frogmouth (*Podargus strigoides*) is known to many Australians. It is found throughout most parts of the country, inhabiting the bush and living in suburbs as well. The bird's most striking characteristic is its amazing camouflage. Owing to plumage patterns, and posture, Frogmouths just disappear among trees.

Frogmouths are nocturnal. They perch quietly in the daytime, then become active at night when they hunt a diet mainly of small invertebrates, ranging from moths to beetles and snails. Small mammals, reptiles and frogs are eaten too.

Frogmouths mate for life and are very loyal to territory, usually nesting in the same area - sometimes the same tree - year after year. I have had the good fortune to have spent some years watching Tawny Frogmouths. My wife Steph and I observed up to ten pairs go through their annual breeding cycle for about a decade on Mt Ainslie in Canberra. Now living on the NSW far south coast, we see Froggies here too. In fact, a pair nested in our front yard during 2023.

Normally the nest is a flimsy platform of twigs, but in this case the birds adopted an old Australian Magpie (*Gymnorhina tibicen*) nest (Fig. 1), built in 2022 by our local Magpies who in 2023 nested a short distance away in a new tree. Consequently, the nest was deeper and much more sturdy than would normally be expected of Froggies.

Figure 1. Dad Frogmouth in the nest with the two chicks, 23 Oct 2023.

Figure 2. Mum Frogmouth roosting near the nest, 20 Oct 2023

The male sits on the nest in daytime while the female roosts nearby. Nests are built in August, and eggs (from 1 to 3 in number) are laid in September. Chicks are raised during October, and fledge the following month.

Following Steph's first sighting of the male Frogmouth in the Magpie nest on 15 Sep, we were able to follow the birds' behaviour on a daily basis. The nest was above our front gate and could be observed from our lounge room and deck. It took several weeks to find the female (Fig. 2) who was well camouflaged in neighbouring bushland. As we got to know her habits, we often saw her roosting right next to our road and only about 3m above ground level.

Once the chicks hatched it was some time before they became visible above the rim of the nest, but Dad's uncomfortable movement on the nest beforehand indicated that hatching had in fact occurred. It is a wonderful experience to watch the development of the little fluff-balls beside Dad each day. As the youngsters grew, the nest got pretty crowded, perhaps exacerbated by the cup-shape nature of a Magpie nest as compared with the usual flatter Frogmouth platform. While Dad looked inscrutable, the kids - looking like little bandits - goggled at all and everything.

Figure 3. A Frogmouth hunting in our garden at dusk in January 2022. This bird is likely to have been one of the parents in 2023.

As dusk approached, I was able to set up my video camera near the nest and watch what most of us rarely see – the beginning of the nocturnal feeding rhythm. The parents prepared to hunt and the chicks got impatient. Prey is caught on the wing or on the ground and the adults flew back to the nest and the waiting chicks. Soon a continuing pattern of flights was underway. Hungry mouths continually awaited food and made subtle harsh begging calls. Both parents flew in repeatedly with food for the chicks, and also had to feed themselves. The soft light of dusk allowed for filming before complete darkness forbade further camera use. Feeding continued through the hours of darkness.

As morning returned each day, Dad and chicks prepared for another daylight session on the nest, with chicks and parent preening and then settling through the day. The female continued to perch in neighbouring bushland, barely moving but always aware of our presence. Though Froggies look asleep in daytime, they are usually looking out through slit eyes. The father especially went into the customary 'stick pose' when we appeared, to try to fool us that he was not in fact a bird.

Figure 4. Dad Frogmouth shows alarm at the appearance of a Lace Monitor

Native predators include birds of prey, especially Square-tailed Kites (*Lophoictinia isura*), which we have seen in our area repeatedly. In eastern Australia, Lace Monitors (*Varanus varius*), also known as Tree Goannas, prey on Frogmouth chicks. These big reptiles (Australia's second largest Goanna) are adept at climbing to hunt birds, eggs and arboreal mammals.

On two occasions Goannas approached the nest tree. Dad Froggie showed alarm at the Goannas' approach. Though Frogmouths hate to fly in daylight, Dad flew to another tree, possibly to distract the Goanna from the nest. The chicks were left unguarded, as Mum Froggie stayed at her roost site, presumably so as not to draw attention to the nest. Other nesting birds like Butcherbirds, Kookaburras and Magpies harass Goannas mercilessly. In this case Magpies helped to drive away the Goanna. After several anxious hours, the male returned to the nest and the waiting chicks. It's a very risky business. In fact a Square-tailed Kite flew over the nest

while the chicks were unguarded on one of these occasions, and were it not for harassment by a Magpie the Kite might well have taken a chick. It is quite possible that the behaviour of the parent Frogmouths as described above was based solely on fear and self-preservation, and not on the 'nest protection' motives I have suggested.

Figure 5. Dad Frogmouth on the branch at right eyes-off a Lace Monitor on the trunk at left; this tree was closely adjacent to the nest tree.

Figure 6. The morning after fledging: the fledglings are in the centre with Dad beyond and Mum in the foreground.

As October became November the chicks continued to grow and approached fledging. At various times we saw them flapping their young wings. They fledged on the night of November 9/10, flying only a short distance and roosting only a half metre above ground on a fallen tree, with Dad and Mum bookending them on the log. Next night they moved further away and got higher and thus were safer from Goannas and foxes. This increasing distance and height continued for the next several nights until I lost contact with them as they travelled further out into their broad territory.

On 16 December Steph spotted the family, now with the juveniles well developed and the same size as the parents, in the former fledging zone. It was great to see that all was going well.

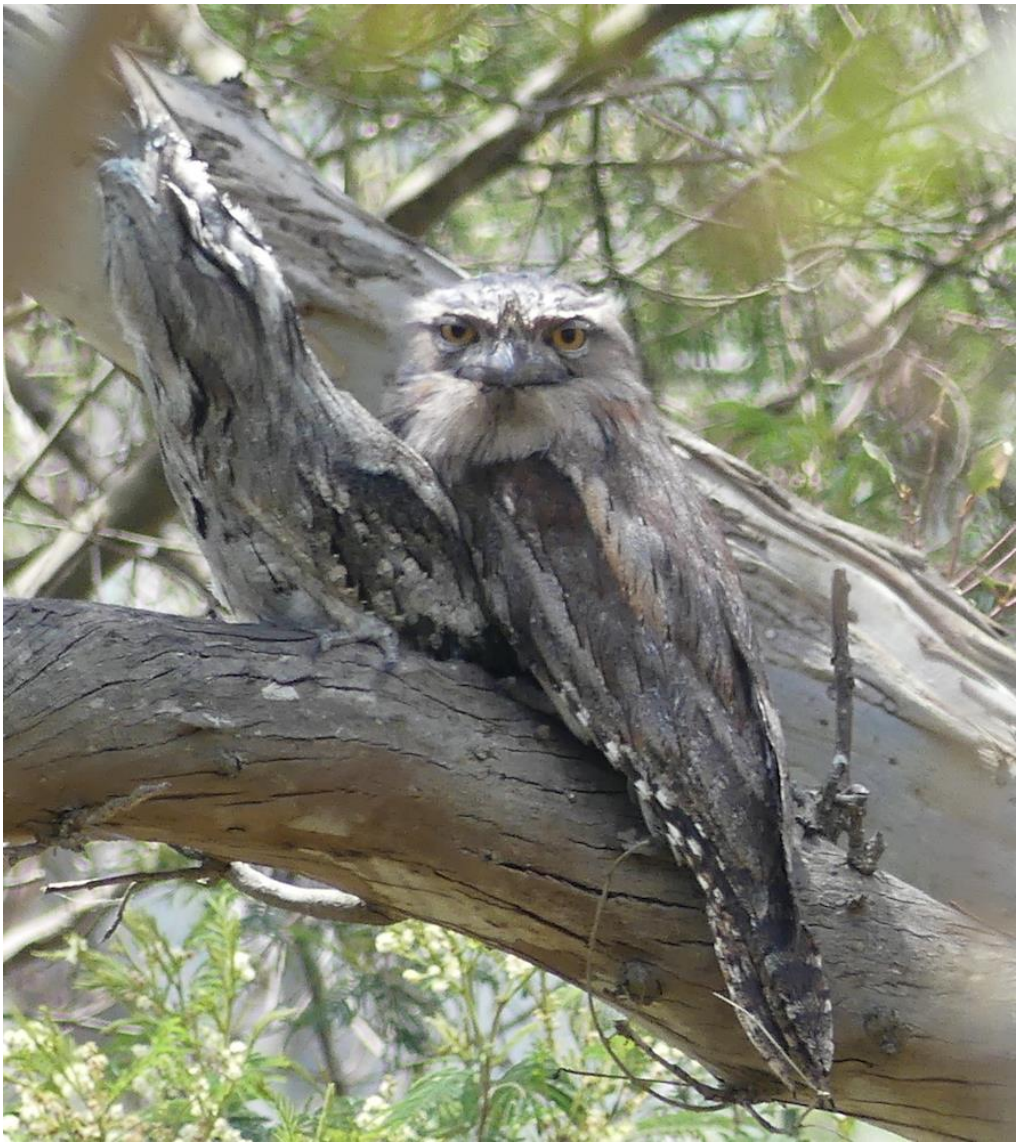

Figure 7. The juveniles when they were spotted in December 2023.

Video shot by me, together with still images, was edited into the short video 'Frogmouths Forever' which I uploaded to YouTube in November 2023 and can be seen at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UHIDA7sd2w0

Sources

I reviewed Gisela Kaplan's book *Tawny Frogmouth* (second edition 2018, CSIRO Publishing) in *Canberra Bird Notes* 43 (2018): 312-314.

Various usual web sources on the species, and field guides, were helpful.

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THE BREEDING SUCCESS AND DIET OF LITTLE EAGLES IN THE ACT AND NEARBY NSW IN 2023

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Abstract: *In 2023, there was an increase in the number of Little Eagle (*Hieraaetus morphnoides*) pairs on territories from the previous year, and the overall breeding success was higher than in all previous years, 0.63 chicks fledged per nesting pair. There was a minimum of five confirmed pairs of Little Eagles with nests in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), two pairs unconfirmed to have nests, and a single female. Two of the ACT pairs raised a chick each. Three nesting pairs were monitored in nearby New South Wales and two of those reared chicks, one of which reared a brood of two. Known causes of failure were wind damage to nests and eggs and breeding adult mortality. Two adult females were possibly killed and eaten by Feral Cats* (Felis catus) *and one male died of unknown cause. Birds formed most of the prey remains (44%) and Crimson Rosella* (Platycercus elegans) *was the most frequently taken species. European Rabbits (Oryctolagus cuniculus) formed (44%) of the prey remains and the other prey (12%) were all Eastern Blue Tongue* (Tiliqua scincoides scincoides).

Introduction

This is the seventh consecutive annual report on the breeding success and diet of the Little Eagle (*Hieraaetus morphnoides*) in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and nearby New South Wales (NSW). The report follows a similar format to the previous reports, for ease of comparison between years (Rae *et al.* 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021a, 2022, 2023). This is part of a long-term study, by the Little Eagle Research Group, a part-time collaborative study group, whose aim is to assess the breeding ecology, diet, and movements of the Little Eagle population in the area. The Little Eagle is listed as vulnerable in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and New South Wales (NSW) and an overall aim of the project is to provide information to guide conservation of the species.

This is primarily an annual update report. However, where applicable, any potential effects on breeding success and food eaten are briefly discussed. More detailed analysis of the birds' behavioural ecology will be presented as and when data allow it.

Methods

To maintain continuity, fieldwork on the Little Eagle followed the same methods as those described in previous years' reports (Rae *et al.* 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021a, 2022, 2023). The main procedures were: checking for occupancy of all nests and territories known in previous years, observations of eagle activity from vantage points, following up any sightings of eagles for potential nesting behaviour, monitoring the progress of each breeding attempt, and

collecting food remains and cast pellets from below nests and perches. Prey remains were identified from diagnostic body parts and pellets were stored for later analysis (Rae *et al.* 2021b).

The activity at each nest was not recorded every day, as observers maintained minimal disturbance, especially during the laying period, when the birds might be sensitive to it. Therefore, it was not always possible to ascertain whether pairs laid eggs or to determine the causes when attempts to nest failed.

All weather records are those recorded at Canberra Airport by the Bureau of Meteorology.

Results

Number of Little Eagle pairs and breeding success

Seven pairs of Little Eagles were observed displaying in August and September in the ACT in 2023, and a female was apparently single as she was not observed with a male. Five of the pairs were confirmed to have active nests and two other pairs potentially had nests. The male of one of these pairs was observed catching prey and flying with it for more than two kilometres before it went out of sight, probably to feed his partner on a nest or chicks, but no nest was found. The other pair were frequently seen in and around a group of trees where there was a suitable nest, but the birds were never seen on it. Both these pairs were in areas where there have been breeding pairs in past years, but none have bred there since 2020 and these may have been new pairs. Two of the nesting pairs in the ACT reared one fledgling each. One was a pair monitored for the three preceding years, and the other was in a densely forested area in the Namadgi Nature Park (Fig. 1), where birds had been observed hunting and displaying in previous years, but no nest located. The nest site was found in 2023 by watching the birds hunt and display over an area of forest.

Figure 1. A Little Eagle nest in dense forest in Namadgi National Park, ACT. The nest is set in a clump of mistletoe 19m from the ground in a Mountain Gum (*Eucalyptus dalrympleana*).

In nearby NSW, there were three nesting pairs in four previously known territories that were monitored. One nest site that had been used for the previous six years was not occupied. That nest was set in a clump of mistletoe that had died, exposing the old nest to weather and predators. Any birds occupying the territory might have nested elsewhere in the surrounding woodland, but none were found. The three other pairs all laid eggs, and two reared young, one of which fledged a brood of two.

Overall, from the eight pairs of Little Eagles with nests monitored in the ACT and nearby NSW, five chicks fledged, giving 0.63 fledged young per nesting pair, the highest breeding success since 2017 (Table 1).

The greatest observed effect on Little Eagles in 2023 was several periods of high wind in spring, the strongest of which was over a period of five days in the first week of October when gusts reached 76 kph on the 1st (BOM 2023a, 2023b). There were more winds of that speed on the 12th and that day was also the wettest in the month, 20mm (BOM 2023b). These winds and rain occurred when the birds were laying or with eggs. One nest with an egg or eggs was blown out of a tree, and three others failed in their breeding attempts in the same period. The total number of pairs that laid eggs in 2023 was not known because other failures might have occurred prior to being monitored (Table 1).

Table 1. The numbers of pairs of Little Eagles with nests in each year of study, 2017-2023, and measures of breeding success: numbers of pairs that laid eggs, hatched eggs, and the numbers of chicks fledged.

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Pair + nest	11	14	13	12	8	6	8
Eggs	8	11	10	10	8	6	?
Hatched	4	8	7	10	7	6	4
No. Fledged	4	8	6	7	4	3	5
Chicks fledged per pair + nest	0.36	0.57	0.58	0.58	0.50	0.50	0.63

One pair laid an egg or eggs on 29 or 30 Sept, then the nest and an egg were blown out of the tree on 1 Oct. The birds rebuilt the nest and laid another egg and a chick subsequently hatched and fledged from it.

At a neighbouring nest the female was seen incubating on 29 Sep and was last seen in the nest tree next to the nest on 9 Oct. The cause of failure was unknown, and there had been high winds between sightings.

A new pair occupied a previously known territory and built a new nest, which was fully lined with fresh greenery. It is likely that they laid in that nest prior to confirmation by observation as they then moved to build a frustration eyrie at a known nest site 3 km away. They did not finish building that nest and did not lay there.

In another territory, partial remains were found in September of a banded male that had died of unknown causes in grazing land with scattered trees, about 1 km from the nest used in the four previous years. Three birds had previously been seen over the territory together. They were observed on land where access was limited and no nest was proven. The female was then seen with a new male on the 15 Oct at a new nest near the original nest site and she subsequently laid an egg or eggs. However, no egg hatched after a prolonged incubation up to 22 Dec.

A female fitted with a GPS tracker was found dead in early October, in the same area where she had spent the breeding seasons for the past four years. Her body had been partially eaten by a mammal, inferred by bitten-off feathers; the head was missing and the body was eaten from the rear forwards with the breast muscle and intestines missing (Fig. 2). She did not have a mate or a nest and she had made four migrations to Cape York.

Figure 2. The remains of a female Little Eagle that had been banded and fitted with a GPS tracker four years previously. The carcass was lying beneath bracken in a wood. The tail had been bitten off and was lying a few metres away. The body had been chewed from the rear and one foot and the head were missing.

A breeding female at another territory was found dead in her nest wood on 22 Nov (Fig. 3). The scattered remains of bones and feathers were more than two weeks old, dry, and no maggots present. The head and feet had been separated, the ends of the ribs had been chewed, the breast muscles had been removed cleanly, and the large bones had not been broken. Two birds had been seen displaying over the nest wood on 15 Nov. It appeared that the male paired up with another female, but there was no further evidence of breeding.

Figure 3. The remains of a female Little Eagle found in a nest wood. The head, breastbone and bitten-off feathers were scattered on the ground beneath a pine tree. The feet and more feathers were lying several metres away.

A male fitted with a GPS tracker either died or dropped his tracker on his return migration flight. The tracker was last recorded east of Bathurst and it stopped moving on 27 August. The bird was not observed at any of his previous nest sites or hunting areas. He had made three migrations to Cape York.

One fledgling died. This bird fledged late, in February 2024, as it was from a second breeding attempt, after the parents' first attempt failed during the period of high winds in early October. The re-lay was in early November and the fresh remains of the bird were found on 12 Mar. There were only bitten-off flight and body feathers and no carcass.

Diet

The remains of 34 food items and 16 pellets were collected. The number of food items found in 2023 was low compared with previous years 2017-2022: 110, 131, 96, 61, 42 and 47, similar to the low number of pellets: 155, 326, 264, 128, 49 and 26. As in 2022, prey remains and pellets were difficult to find in thick ground vegetation that had grown over recent years of high rainfall, compared with the more open ground in the dry years, 2017-2019.

Birds (15 items, 44.1%) and European Rabbits (*Oryctolagus cuniculus*) (15 items, 44.1%) were the most common prey items, and reptiles were, as in all previous years, the least taken prey (4 items, 11.8%) (Fig. 4). The reptiles eaten were all Eastern Blue Tongue (*Tiliqua scincoides scincoides*). Crimson Rosella (*Platycercus elegans*) was the most frequently taken bird (8), of which four were juveniles. All prey remains found at the Namadgi forest nest site were of birds: two Crimson Rosellas, one Australian King Parrot (*Alisterus scapularis*), one White-eared Honeyeater (*Lichenostomus leucotis*), one Red Wattlebird (*Anthochaera carunculata*) and one Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike (*Coracina novaehollandiae*). The proportions of prey types in all areas except the Namadgi site were: birds, 32.1%, rabbit, 53.6% and reptile, 14.3%.

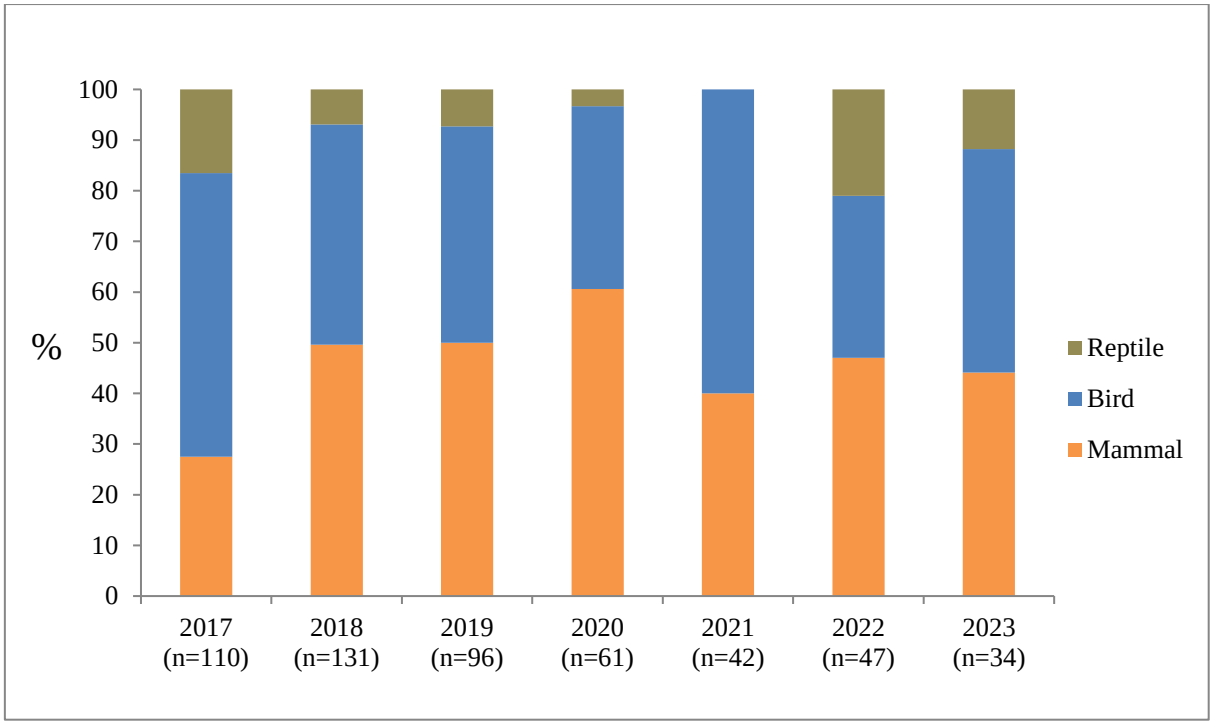

Figure 4. Proportions of food types found in the prey remains of Little Eagles during the breeding seasons in the ACT and nearby NSW in 2017 - 2023.

Discussion

In 2023, there was an increase from the previous year in the number of Little Eagle pairs on territories (Rae *et al.* 2023) and the highest breeding success per pair with a nest since 2017. This was possibly because of higher food availability, greater hunting efficiency by breeding birds, or both (Newton 1979). Despite these increases, weather still had an effect on these factors and in 2023 it impaired the overall breeding success of the study population.

Little Eagles return to their nest sites in the ACT area in late winter after seasonal movements and overwintering in either local or often long-distance interstate areas, such as Cape York in northern Queensland (Rae 2021). Overall, 2023 consisted of above average rainfall, with a wet autumn, followed by a dry winter and early spring, and November was the wettest month with more than 100mm of rain (BOM 2024). Less grass and herb groundcover growth was observed over winter compared with the three previous years, and the ground cover was relatively open in late July - early August, when the breeding season begins. Ground prey, such as rabbits, which were again abundant as in previous years (Rae *et al.* 2022, 2023, pers. obs.), would have been more exposed and available to Little Eagles compared with the previous three wetter-than-average La Niña years, when high grass and herb biomass meant rabbits would have been less accessible (Rae *et al.* 2022, 2023), although there was significant ground layer regrowth in the wetter last two months of 2023 when the eagles had young.

Two new pairs of eagles re-occupied territories on land dominated by grassland that had not been occupied since 2020, the first of three consecutive wet years with tall grass and herb ground cover. These two pairs were possibly attracted by the more open ground due to the drier conditions. However, the number of pairs that successfully bred may have been reduced by direct weather effects, wind damage to nests and eggs. The observed and probable losses due to wind appear to accentuate how the strongest effect on the population size and breeding

success of Little Eagles in recent years has been weather conditions, fitting the findings and discussion in the previous three annual reports (Rae et al. 2021, 2022, 2023).

The confirmation of a new breeding territory in extensive dense forest in Namadgi National Park indicates that Little Eagles do breed there and hunt over continuous canopy, contrary to the statement that they avoid dense forest and do not breed at the highest elevations above ~1000m in the ACT (Olsen 2014, Debus 2017). The Namadgi nest was at 1265m altitude in an area where birds had been observed hunting and displaying in previous years, but where no nest had been found. Birds have been observed hunting over closed canopy woodland and dense forest canopies in other parts of the ACT, and data from GPS-tracked birds support the supposition that this use of dense forest is not unusual (Rae 2021). One satellite-tracked bird from another nest site in the ACT spent much of his time over the dense forest of the Brindabella range, including the higher ridges at approximately 1300m, then moved in the non-breeding season to the coastal forests of southern NSW. Prey remains from that bird during the breeding season indicated that it hunted for birds typical of forest and the prey remains from the Namadgi site in 2023 were only birds, which suggested that they also hunted in the forest habitat.

The deaths of three breeding or potentially breeding adult birds in one breeding season is new to this study. Previously one bird had been found dead during the breeding season, a female in 2020 due to roadkill, and an adult male was also found dead due to roadkill prior to this study in 2010 (pers. obs. Rae). The cause of death cannot be proved for any of the recent incidents. However, the evidence of the heads removed from the carcasses, bitten-off feathers and neat defleshing with few broken bones are similar to that of birds killed or eaten by Feral Cats (*Felis catus*) (Corbet and Southern 1977, O'Donnell *et al*. 2010). In the case of the dead fledgling, the evidence of only bitten-off feathers at the scene and no corpse is indicative of a fox having found the body on the ground and taken it away (Corbet and Southern 1977). If cats ate the adult birds, it is possible that they also killed them. Cats are known to kill Letter-winged Kites (*Elanus scriptus*) in their tree nests (Olsen 1995) and to kill birds up to 3kg on Pacific Islands (Dickman 1996). They frequently kill nocturnal arboreal marsupials up to approximately 2kg, such as Brushtail Possum (*Trichosurus vulpecula*), Greater Gliders (*Petauroides volans*) and Common Ringtail Possum (*Pseudocheirus peregrinus*) (Jones and Coman 1981, Triggs *et al* 1984, Dickman 1996). Female Little Eagles are larger than males and in the current study adults weighed 1.02-1.13 kg (n=3), the males weighed 0.59-0.68 kg (n=7) (unpublished data). Remains of a fledgling Little Eagle were found in 2018 and the evidence in that case also suggested predation by a cat (unpubl. data), and remains of Tawny Frogmouths (*Podargus strigoides*), which nest at a mean height of 9.2m on tree branches (Rae and Rae 2013), have also been found below their nests in the ACT, with evidence that they had been killed by cats (Rae 2012, unpubl. data). From these examples, it would seem that Feral Cats may be capable of climbing trees to reach and kill a bird the size of a Little Eagle, especially at night when any eagle would be less alert. If two of the losses of adult Little Eagles were due to predation by cats, this raises cause for concern.

There is no evidence of how the banded male died, and his immediate replacement by a second male indicates that there was a surplus male in the nearby population, an unpaired bird known as a floater (Brown 1969, Newton 1979). As three birds had been observed at the site, and the replacement was in the same breeding season, this opens to question whether there had been competition between two males and a newcomer killed the original male to take over the territory. Such behaviour is known in other eagle species, for example, Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) (Bowman *et al.* 1995) and Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) (Hunt 1995).

Records of the death of raptor fledglings close to leaving their natal territory are rare, as the standard method of assessing breeding success in raptors is to count the number of chicks reared to fledging. This was the third fledgling that this study has found dead in the post-fledging dependency period, a time when young birds are vulnerable (Weathers and Sullivan 1989, McFadzen and Marzluff 1996, Kouba *et al.* 2023). The other two incidents were of a bird likely killed by a cat while at the roost, as mentioned above, and a bird whose remains were found below powerlines in 2020 (unpubl. data). This study aims to analyse data from GPS-tracked birds to further investigate survival and dispersal of fledgling Little Eagles in relation to surrounding habitat, to help guide conservation of the species in the ACT area and other parts of its range.

Acknowledgements

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Bronze-cuckoo or Bronze-Cuckoo or Bronze Cuckoo?

DIVERGENT POLICIES ON THE FORM OF ENGLISH BIRD NAMES, AND THE PROPOSED INTRODUCTION OF 'INTERNATIONAL NAMES' TO PROMOTE UNIFORMITY

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> 'The construction of English names for bird species around the world is fraught with challenges.' – (Beehler and Pratt 2016), writing about the problem of finding English names for New Guinea birds.

Abstract: *The subject here is the English names we use for birds when we write about them, and what has become confusing variation in those names. The variation is often in the nouns used, some invented or chosen in accordance with a policy that might or might not be explained. The noun might be a compound word, sometimes hyphened or sometimes not, or, in accordance with the policy adopted by the author of the relevant compilation, the noun might be replaced by two words. This note outlines the background to the present state of affairs. It discusses examples of this significant problem in reaching the goal of a uniform international approach to bird names in the English language. A related issue is that, between different authorities, policies vary on whether the English names should reflect the taxonomic status of the species. Some comments on that issue are included in an appendix.*

Introduction

These comments are directed mainly to bird name issues we face in Australia, but they necessarily refer to what is happening at the international level. Today, compared to 20 years ago, many more people use a list of bird names for one reason or other, such as keeping a record of personal observations. The list is quite likely to be of the digital kind, subject to periodic updating by the originator. Many more species lists are now available, some of global scope for the travelling bird-interested person. Apart from some variation in taxonomy, variations in English names are evident, in particular in the noun part of the name. In 2024, the foreshadowing of further revisions of the English names of birds make this an appropriate time to offer this note on the background to the present names.

This contribution draws on several years' involvement with the English Names Committee of BirdLife Australia. It is about a subject that, it must be said, will not interest everyone. However, to understand what has happened it must be accepted that the subject has been, and is, of great interest and importance to some people. For those people, 'passions about bird names run high', as Gill and Wright remarked in 2006. It is only too obvious that viewpoints differ, and will continue to do so. 'It would be impossible to present a list based on a set of principles with which all agree,' observed Stephen Davies, RAOU President, introducing the 1978 recommendations (RAOU 1978).

There is disagreement even on the question of what to call non-scientific names. As recognised in most publications on the subject, the term 'English name', although disliked by BirdLife Australia, is appropriate to describe a bird name in the English language. Sometimes 'common'

or 'vernacular' is used to refer to bird names that are not the scientific names. However, there will be many common (or vernacular) names, written or unwritten, in languages other than English. For some species, those will be more used than the English name.

The issue of name formation discussed here is only one reason for variations in names. Some lists are showing a preference for scientific names as English names, with, for example, 'Myzomela' and 'Melidectes' put forward, as common names, for some honeyeaters. Those who like user-friendly self-explanatory names will have a different preference. The eponymous names battlefield is another area of contention, but one not dealt with further here.

The listed English names of a few bird species are a single word, for example 'Galah', 'Whimbrel', 'Hardhead' and 'Brolga'. However, most names brought into existence for written communication consist of one or more adjectives and a noun. Where the noun is shared by a group of related birds it is sometimes referred to as a 'group name'. The challenging quest for a suitable group name, where there is no obvious one to hand, is the core of the problem outlined in the following narrative.

Milestones along a road: English bird names in Australia: 1926, 1978, 1994, 2014

The story begins with Australian ornithologists knee-deep in hyphens. Odd though it seems now, the 1926 Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union *Checklist* gave, in its uppercase style, 'KING-PENGUIN' and 'STUBBLE-QUAIL'. Those eventually became 'King Penguin' and 'Stubble Quail', following recommendations of a committee about excessive use of hyphens (Condon 1975). The two names mentioned are not group names because they refer to single species. However, they illustrate the continuing issue of appropriate (or inappropriate) use of hyphens in compound names. (Following RAOU 1926, 'Stubble-quail' was used in the hyphen-rich early editions of *What Bird Is That?*, the popular Neville Cayley field guide, along with 'Honey-eater', 'Swamp-harrier', 'Diamond-dove', 'Fig-bird', 'Marsh-sandpiper, etc.)

In 1978, another committee (RAOU 1978) produced revised bird names for the RAOU. The authors thought it would be a good idea to make use of two distinct sets of hyphened names. This recommendation followed the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) (Parkes 1978). In one set a capital initial followed the hyphen, *e.g.* 'Sea-Eagle', because that bird was an eagle. In the other set a small initial followed the hyphen, *e.g.* 'Scrub-robin', because that bird was not a true robin. Some might point out that the species is a true 'Australo-Papuan robin', so specifying a correct relationship creates the opportunity for yet another difference of opinion. A better example might be the long-standing 'Magpie-lark', definitely not a true lark. The 1978 names were adopted in the multi-volume HANZAB, with the following explanation:

> The official attitude of the RAOU to the use of English names is set out in the Supplement to *Emu* 1977, Vol. 77 ('*Recommended English Names for Australian Birds*'). It favours an international rather than a parochial or insular approach to the matter and we have done so throughout (Marchant & Higgins 1990).

The 1978 names came to be followed widely in Australia. Having, with a few exceptions, survived plebiscites within the RAOU membership, they were adopted in the taxonomic lists proposed by Les Christidis and Walter Boles (C&B) in 1994 and 2008. They were the names generally used in field guides and other popular publications. They appear in the 'Working List of Australian Birds' created by BirdLife Australia (WLAB, 2014 – a list based on the BirdLife International taxonomy).

More recently, the logic behind the 1978 spelling rule called for an overdue change of 'Painted Snipe', a species in a different family from 'true' snipes. This became 'Australian Painted-snipe', a spelling now generally followed by informed writers. 'Painted-snipe' was prompted by the recognition of a new Australian species. However, apart from new species, the C&B/WLAB group names considered here have been relatively stable for about 30 years. The terms of reference adopted by BirdLife Australia and its predecessors contained an express requirement for a conservative approach.

Enter 'IOC'

The 1990s saw international developments that were to create complications for the form of names used in Australia. The introduction to that ground-breaking species catalogue, Sibley and Monroe (1990), described the principles and procedures used for selection of English names. It noted, ominously, that 'Hyphenation of compound group-names has caused some concern'. In a preface, Charles Sibley commented wryly on the problem of English names, for which co-author Burt Monroe 'had organised a world-wide correspondence group': 'Since this may turn out to be one of the most controversial features I refer critics to Burt.'

The first of the 17 volumes of the Lynx Edicions *Handbook* appeared in 1992. This said, optimistically, as we can see now:

> Vernacular English names have been based on those selected, on the basis of extensive international correspondence, by B. L. Monroe, and published in Sibley & Monroe (1990); these have already been chosen to act as the basis for the standardization of English nomenclature planned for the 1994 International Ornithological Congress, and in future volumes the intention is to follow the official list adopted by the congress.

Due to disagreements on basic issues, the Monroe project made little progress. In 1994 the IOC commissioned another, enlarged committee, chaired by Frank Gill, to continue work on standard English names. (The IOC was a series of meetings of ornithologists held every four years. The initials were sometimes used to refer to the organising group as it existed from time to time.) The work of the Gill committee was to take more than 15 years. The complete list was published in 2006 (Gill 2006). Group names were again a contentious issue.

At the time of publication of the second C&B list (2008) a controversy about naming conventions was bubbling in North America. The guidelines proposed by the IOC group (Gill committee) were not accepted by the AOU (AOU 2007, Gill 2008, 2009). Despite the opposition from AOU, the IOC group gained international support. It set up the online 'IOC' taxonomic and English names list in 2008. The 'IOC' label is still used, even though the former IOC was later reorganised as the International Ornithologists' Union (IOU). The later 'IOC' is sometimes explained as referring to the 'International Ornithological Community'. The 'IOC' list has been endorsed by the IOU, pending the outcome of work it is sponsoring towards a unified world taxonomy – the Working Group Avian Checklists project.

The IOC, to use that label in its new sense, gave much thought to the form of names. There were different views on how to deal with compound names and hyphens, 'the single most contentious point in the entire project' (Gill 2006 p.8). IOC aimed to minimise use of hyphens, so, departing from the approach taken in Australia, preferred 'Fairywren' and 'Black Cockatoo'. However, sowing the seeds of future confusion, a hyphen was to be used in bird-bird names, *e.g.* 'Quail-thrush'. That was a partial acceptance of the Australian (and AOU) hyphening approach https://www.worldbirdnames.org/new/english-names/spelling-rules/

Except for bird-bird names, hyphens were not to be used 'to highlight possible relationships'. 'Storm-Petrel' was criticised on the ground that relationships within the group were unsettled, and it was best to use 'Petrel' as a broad term (Gill 2009).

This has become a complex subject from a world-wide viewpoint. To avoid loading this narrative with too much detail, some discussion of the bird-bird rule, and of taxonomic issues illustrated by use of the word 'babbler', has been placed in an appendix to this note.

The IOC list has gained some popularity in Australia, at the expense of WLAB. One State-based association, Birds Queensland, has adopted the IOC taxonomy and English names. The tendency that has emerged among State bird societies to go their own way with their policy on bird names recalls the unhappy situation at the time of federation when each State had adopted its own standard for the width of its rail lines. The useful book on Australian bird names, Fraser and Gray (2019), uses the IOC list, rather than WLAB, as its base list. Incidentally, those authors offer their own view of the hyphens issue (p.xiv).

Enter BirdLife International

The Cambridge-based BirdLife International (BLI) published its 2-volume checklist in 2014 and 2016, in partnership with the Barcelona-based *Handbook of the Birds of the World*. BirdLife Australia's WLAB follows the BLI taxonomy, but not necessarily the English names. BLI now maintains an online checklist.

The BLI policy that is relevant here has been expressed as follows –

> Irrespective of relationships we hyphenate compound generic names with the second element of the name in lower case, thus preferring to resist the situation, as advocated by Gill & Wright (2006) (whose comprehensive and thoughtful overall review of name formation we respectfully acknowledge), in which it is possible to have three variant combinations (e.g. 'Fruit Dove', 'Eagle-Owl' and 'Flycatcher-shrike'). (del Hoyo & Collar 2014).

BLI has some influence internationally, being an assessor for bird conservation status for the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which maintains the 'Red List' of threatened species. IUCN follows the BLI taxonomy and English name policy for birds.

Clements/Cornell Lab/eBird

Because of eBird, a taxonomic arrangement much used in Australia is the one that still bears the name of James Clements (1927-2005). His Ph D thesis in 1975 was the first version of his checklist, which became an important tool for bird-ticking North Americans. It is now updated regularly by Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and is followed in Cornell Lab's online Birds of the World, as well as eBird. With respect to common names, users of eBird have a choice. If you select 'English (Australia)' you will see names of Australian birds that generally, but not entirely, follow WLAB, and names for some other birds that follow Australian conventions and spellings. In the table below, the names under 'Cornell BoW and Clements' are the names in the primary checklist given on the Cornell Lab website.

South Australia

In South Australia, the removal of hyphens has been taken further than the IOC list managed to achieve. The IOC had made concessions on use of the hyphen. Apart from the bird-bird exception, it departed from its general rule against hyphens 'if otherwise the name would be hard to pronounce or would look odd'.

The South Australians have done away with several more hyphens, either by adopting a single unhyphened word or returning to two-word group names. That was seen as a logical extension of the IOC/Gill guidelines. The policy adopted is explained in Horton *et al.* (2020).

Examples

Here are some examples of variations in the group name part of names in use now.

C & B 1994, 2008 and WLAB	BLI/HBW 2014/16 and BLI v8.1	G&W 2006 and IOC v14.1	Cornell BoW and Clements	South Australia Checklist	Aust. Faunal Directory
Button-quail	Buttonquail	Buttonquail	Buttonquail	Buttonquail	Buttonquail
Bronze-Cuckoo	Bronze-cuckoo	Bronze Cuckoo	Bronze-Cuckoo	Bronze Cuckoo	Bronze-cuckoo
Cuckoo-Dove	Cuckoo-dove	Cuckoo-Dove	Cuckoo-Dove		Cuckoo-dove
Fairy-wren	Fairy-wren	Fairywren	Fairywren	Fairywren	Fairy-wren
Emu-wren	Emu-wren	Emu-wren	Emuwren	Emuwren	Emu-wren
Scrub-robin	Scrub-robin	Scrub Robin	Scrub-Robin	Scrub Robin	Scrub-robin
Shrike-thrush	Shrike-thrush	Shrikethrush	Shrikethrush	Shrikethrush	Shrike-thrush
Shrike-tit	Shrike-tit	Shriketit	Shrike-tit	Shriketit	Shrike-tit
King-Parrot	King-parrot	King Parrot	King-Parrot		King-parrot
Black-Cockatoo	Black-cockatoo	Black Cockatoo	Black-Cockatoo	Black Cockatoo	Black-cockatoo
Storm-Petrel	Storm-petrel	Storm Petrel	Storm-Petrel	Storm Petrel	Storm-Petrel
Stone-curlew	Thick-knee	Stone-curlew	Thick-knee	Stonecurlew	Stone-curlew
Sand Plover	Sandplover	Sand Plover	Sand-Plover	Sand Plover	Sand Plover

'Button-quail': It might be noted that 'Button-quail' was not from the 1926 Checklist but did not get its first use in the 1978 recommendations. Presumably having some earlier currency, it was used as a replacement for the 1926 'Quail' in the 1963 *Australian Encyclopedia* (editor, Alec Chisholm) and in Condon (1975). Curiously, *Macquarie Dictionary* 4th ed. gives 'button quail'. However, the hyphened name in WLAB now looks very lonely. It would be open to BirdLife Australia to change to 'Buttonquail' by reason of the general preference for that form both within and outside Australia. That change could be stated as not disturbing the 1978 policy with respect to other names, if that was the decision.

'Bronze-Cuckoo': All three possible formulations are shown in the table. 'Bronze-cuckoo' is an example of the BirdLife International English name policy noted above. The Australian Faunal Directory might be influenced by that approach in using 'Bronze-cuckoo', and 'Black-

cockatoo'. In a public exhibition on the cuckoo family, the Australian Museum, Sydney, used 'BRONZE CUCKOO' (viewed December 2023).

'Cuckoo-Dove': IOC permits a hyphen followed by 'D' under its rule for 'bird-bird' names. The only other examples in WLAB of the second bird beginning with uppercase are 'Parrot-Finch' and 'Hawk-Cuckoo' (a vagrant, while another candidate, 'Drongo-cuckoo', is awaiting editorial rectification).

'Fairy-wren': Subject to organisation or editorial policy, the form used must now be regarded as optional. If policy requires conformity with WLAB, the hyphen will be used. Otherwise, South Australians and Queenslanders, and others averse to hyphens, will leave it out.

'Emu-wren': For IOC, this is in a different position from 'Fairywren' because it requires application of the bird-bird rule (see Appendix), and hence insertion of a hyphen. IOC and BirdLife International arrive at 'Emu-wren' by different routes. It is not clear why Cornell/Clements prefers 'Emuwren'. In Clements 1st ed. (1974) it was 'Emu Wren'.

'Scrub-robin': For some authorities the spelling depends on whether this is seen as a 'Robin'. The Atlas of Living Australia, which generally follows AFD, differs here, giving 'Scrub-Robin'. The IOC form duplicates the IOC name for the not-closely-related 'Scrub Robins' of Africa.

'Shrike-thrush' and 'Shrike-tit': The relatively new forms 'Shrikethrush' and 'Shriketit' seem to have been introduced by Gill and Wright (2006), inconsistently with the bird-bird rule. See Appendix. It might be noted that Cornell Lab uses 'Shrikethrush' and 'Shrike-tit'.

'King-Parrot': This name is an oddity, evidently being brought into existence in 1978 in the belief that 'King' was a royal title, rather than a reference to Governor King of New South Wales. Nonetheless, the compound word has been given the same treatment as 'Bronze-Cuckoo', leading to the three versions. As an eponym, the name is due for review under a different set of renaming principles.

'Black-Cockatoo': The table shows that the same policies are followed as for 'Bronze-Cuckoo'.

'Storm-Petrel': Again, we see three versions in the table. However, in this case the Australian Faunal Directory has not used the BLI 'Storm-petrel' but followed the WLAB 'Storm-Petrel'. (There are Commonwealth government examples of the former approach e.g. *Wildlife Conservation Plan for Seabirds 2020*, Wilson's Storm-petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*.)

'Stone-curlew': 'Stonecurlew' is another example of South Australia departing from IOC.

'Thick-knee', which had been proposed unsuccessfully by RAOU 1978, remains the main rival of 'Stone-curlew' as a group name.

'Sand Plover': Here WLAB has not used a hyphen. BLI avoids 'Sand-plover' by using a single word. Cornell Lab is alone in the table in using a hyphen, the same authority preferring 'Golden-Plover', which must be regarded as an Americanism.

A problem

Many people will see a problem when, without explanation, different names are used for the same species, sometimes by the one author in a single piece of writing. Some might not. However, variations in names can create difficulty in finding a species in an index, or in a digital list where the exact spelling needs to be given.

Moreover, there have been complaints from those who process data. Analysis of data is usually undertaken using a computer package, typically either spreadsheet or database applications. It is quite common for this to involve matching data from two sources (or the same source for different periods) which may use different names for some species. While a human would usually recognise that Bronze-Cuckoo and Bronze Cuckoo (or Grey Butcherbird and Gray Butcherbird) were referring to the same bird group or species, most computer packages would regard them as different. If the problem is recognised by the analyst, an index must be compiled to ensure the names are in concordance: this is merely tiresome. However, if the analyst does not recognise the problem – or has not checked that the index is up to date – a range of serious consequences could arise. For example, data from one of the sources will be omitted from the analysis thus rendering it invalid (Martin Butterfield, pers. comm.)

The future?

It is difficult to be confident that uniformity on this issue will be achieved in the foreseeable future. Positions have become entrenched as one principle is set against another, and importance is attached by different authorities to different considerations. With respect to common names, stability is often cited as an important consideration. People who are familiar with a particular set of names will not welcome changes to the form of a large number of names where there is no apparent scientific purpose or convincing justification. 'Why don't they direct their time and resources to things that really matter?' many will ask.

However, as in 1990 and 1994, there is still, in some places, a goal of a standard international English name for 'academic communication'. It has been suggested that such a list of international names might exist alongside lists of different English names for local or national or regional purposes. See the website of the IOU's Working Group Avian Checklists (WGAC). https://www.internationalornithology.org/working-group-avian-checklists

In Australia, there is certainly confusion in the use of English bird names at the present time. It is unlikely that a two-tier system of names could be adopted in Australia without causing even greater confusion. Surely there is no room for both 'Black-Cockatoo' and 'Black Cockatoo'.

The first draft of a global list from WGAC, expected in 2025, will probably be accompanied by IOC English names. No doubt that will have some influence on names used by other organisations, and publishers. It might also be the occasion for renewal of old arguments, so whether we shall see a final, definitive list is another matter. There are serious obstacles in the way of complete agreement. Obstacles include the policy to be adopted on form of names; which misdescriptions are serious enough to require correction; when is usage the overriding consideration; use of scientific names as English names, and the colonial names issue (including eponyms).

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to all those authors who thought English bird names were a subject worth writing about, or who felt obliged to explain their position on the subject. There is no single policy on common names that will be universally agreed. That was brought home to me by the range of views I heard expressed during several years on the BLA English Names Committee, in fact over a much longer period of being interested in the subject. I am grateful for the useful conversations I have had with other members of that committee, particularly with Andrew Black of South Australia. In preparing this note I also had the benefit of advice or information

from many people including Martin Butterfield, Les Christidis, David Donsker, Stephen Garnett, Dominique Homberger, Leo Joseph, and Dick Schodde. Of course, those mentioned do not necessarily share all the views expressed here.

APPENDIX

English names and phylogeny. The convention relating to bird-bird names. The word 'babbler' as an example of a group name with more than one application

Sometimes taxonomy determines a name choice, although sometimes a taxonomic misnomer is acceptable by reason of established usage. The 1978 recommendations revised a small number of names to better reflect the 'taxonomic affinities' of a few species, for example adopting 'Masked Lapwing', instead of 'Spur-winged Plover'.

The species that had been generally known as 'Hooded Dotterel' was changed to 'Hooded Plover' because 'Plover' was the 'international group-name for the species of *Charadrius*'. However, later, Gill (2006) chose 'Hooded Dotterel', placing the species in a different genus from *Charadrius*. Happily, in version 14.1 IOC has now located the species in *Charadrius*, and adopted 'Hooded Plover', 'with the revision of the genus and to align with other major world bird lists'. The difference in name had raised concern for the BLA 'Hooded Plover' recovery program, given the need for a single unconfusing label.

Some list compilers have gone further in pursuing taxonomic accuracy. In a guide to Indonesian birds, the authors have changed several established names, rejecting the view that 'the misleading nature of an old name is worth maintaining for the sake of stability'. 'Our hope is for these new, phylogenetically consistent names to simplify English name usage and to facilitate an easy intuitive understanding of the bird's actual affinities.' (Eaton *et al.* 2016). That policy led to the proposing of 'Willie Fantail', unexpected, but admittedly not a 'wagtail' as many non-Australians might understand the term. With a different viewpoint, the BirdLife International policy has been less concerned about taxonomic correctness in common names.

In their second list Christidis and Boles took the view that 'It is not deemed necessary to alter all group names to reflect … taxonomic changes.' They retained 'Regent Honeyeater' rather than adopt 'Regent Wattlebird'.

> English group names, such as wattlebird, do not have a one-to-one correspondence with generic names – that is not their role. Neither is it necessary to make every group name unique. Terms such as warbler, robin, wren and thrush are ecological groupings as much as taxonomic ones, and carry information about general appearance and behaviour of the birds – even between unrelated groups (C&B 2008).

However, a separate consideration has been the 1978 approach to hyphened names, as partially adopted by IOU. This makes it necessary to have regard to correct family relationships, so as to arrive at 'Black-Cockatoo' and 'Emu-wren'. The judgments made about relationships in 1978 have determined the form of names used in the BLA Working List, except for Pygmy-Goose, a notoriously variable formulation.

The IOC has struggled with the need to balance 'the importance of retaining a long-used name and the need to correct a misdescription'.
https://www.worldbirdnames.org/new/english-names/principles/

As the IOC list of English names is likely to be put forward as the basis for a list of 'international English names', the background to the choices made by IOC deserves further consideration.

These are the conventions for compound names given on the IOC website (wording slightly rearranged). They express what is called here 'the bird-bird rule' -

> Hyphens are used in compound names only to connect two names that are birds or bird families (*e.g.* Eagle-Owl, Flycatcher-shrike) or when the name would be otherwise difficult to read (*e.g.* Silky-flycatcher, White-eye).
>
> Where both names are the names of birds or bird families a hyphen should be inserted to signify that the taxon belongs to the family of the second word, not the first. If a name is of a taxon that is not a member of the stated bird family, the letter after the hyphen should be lowercase to signify that status (*e.g.* Flycatcher-shrike).

Eight bird-bird names had been put forward as compounds in RAOU 1978. Although widely used in Australia, three of those have not survived in the IOC list. Cuckooshrike, Shriketit and Shrikethrush are given as single words in Gill and Wright (2006), apparently for the first time in an influential publication. Unfortunately, this, with no satisfactory explanation, has introduced unwanted variation in how those names are spelt now.

In those names the IOC's 'single word' approach seems inconsistent with its own bird-bird rule and with its principle that existing usage would be a predominant guideline https://www.worldbirdnames.org/new/english-names/principles/ In Australia, all three hyphened names were of long standing, appearing in the 1926 Checklist. Moreover, C&B 1994 had affirmed the three hyphened group names for Australian use, as had American ornithologists for New Guinea species (Beehler 1986, but see Beehler 2016).

'Parrot-Finch is another bird-bird name that has appeared in WLAB, being a form consistent with the 1978 guidelines and the IOC bird-bird rule. The group is represented by one species in Australia but others are found in nearby regions. However, IOC gives 'Parrotfinch'. Howard and Moore, a main basis for the IOC list, had used 'Parrot Finch'. Choice of 'Parrotfinch' might have been influenced by aviary terminology, but there is no uniformity even in that field.

Variable use of the word 'babbler' in names in the IOC list

This is a word that is used in the IOC list in two different senses. On the one hand it is a widely used non-technical noun, like 'warbler' or 'robin', applied to species in distantly-related families by reason of popular usage, reflecting a broad similarity in one respect or other among species sharing the name. However, 'babbler' is also used in a more technical sense to describe those species, whether or not with 'babbler' in the species name, that fall within a set of specified families. Whether the word in the second sense is appropriate in the name of a species depends on the phylogenetic theory followed. This is illustrated by the IOC explanatory comments cited below.

Apparently 'Tit-Babbler', 'Wren-Babbler' and 'Thrush-Babbler' are regarded as appropriate because 'Babbler', in the second sense, is a correct name for members of the relevant families. On the other hand, 'Shrike-babbler' and 'Rail-babbler' (lowercase 'b') indicate that the relevant families do not contain 'babblers' in the second sense. 'Shrike-Babbler' (Gill and Wright 2006) became 'Shrike-babbler' when the genus was moved to the Vireonidae, a non-babbler family. However, it seems phylogeny is less important where 'babbler' is not part of a

compound (hyphened) word. 'Babbler' for the Australo-Papuan babblers is allowed in the first (non-technical or traditional) sense. In the second sense, the only 'babblers' on the Australian list are the six species of white-eyes.

In the list below the IOC family designation is given in **bold**, followed by (>>) and the noun used in the list for one or more species in that family. Families that contain babblers in the second sense are indicated by *.

Pomastomidae (Australasian Babblers) >> Babbler

Cinclosomatidae (Jewel-babblers, Quail-thrushes) >> Jewel-babbler

Vireonidae (Shrike-babblers) >> Shrike-babbler

Eupetidae (Rail-babbler) >> Rail-babbler (single species)

Cisticolidae (Cisticolas and allies) >> Miniature Babbler (moved from Timaliidae, tentatively)

*** Sylviidae (Sylviid Babblers)** >> Hill Babbler ('The African hill-babblers belong in *Sylvia* …')

*** Paradoxornithidae (Parrotbills and Allies)** >> Babbler

*** Zosteropidae (White-eyes)** >> Babbler, Pygmy Babbler, Striped Babbler

*** Timaliidae (Babblers, Scimitar Babblers)** >> Babbler, Tit-Babbler, Wren-Babbler, Scimitar Babbler

*** Pellorneidae (Ground Babblers) –** 'major clade of babblers' 'new babbler family' >> Wren-Babbler, Babbler, Grass Babbler, Thrush-Babbler, Limestone Babbler, Scimitar Babbler

*** Leiothrichidae (Laughingthrushes and Allies) –** a 'new babbler family' >> Babbler

Modulatricidae (Dapplethoat and Allies) >> Babbler (single species)

Muscicapidae (Chats, Old World Flycatchers) >> Babbler (single transferred species *Leonardina woodi,*)

Illustrating the second sense of 'babbler', the following explanatory comments accompany the IOC list v.14.1 (numerals refer to line numbers) -

17899 'Crossley's Babbler is a vanga' (calling for name change to Crossley's Vanga)

22235 'Pnoepyga wren-babblers are not babblers …'

22904 '*Robsonius* is … not a babbler'

*23755 'Sylviidae and Paradoxornithidae form a major clade which is deeply diverged from the remaining families in the babbler radiation …'

*23877 Reference to Paradoxornithidae and 'other families in the babbler radiation'

*24011 'White-eyes constitute a major clade of babblers …'

*25064 'Genus *Argya* subsumes a clade of babblers ….'

25302 '*Kakamega* is not a babbler …' (Although called 'Grey-chested Babbler')

25360 '*Elachura formosa* is a relict lineage of passerine birds not related to babblers …'

25362 'Change English name from Spotted Wren-Babbler to Spotted Elachura with change of family and genus.'

26716 '*Geomalia heinrichi* is confirmed to be a thrush, not a babbler'

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NOTES

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PACIFIC KOEL - AN UNPRECEDENTED BREEDING EVENT

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A pair of Red Wattlebirds (*Anthochaera carunculata*, hereafter RWBs) regularly visits our garden, and has raised multiple broods in recent years. We believe that we have had the same pair of RWBs visiting our garden for a number of years. The male is very approachable, but the female is a smaller bird and more wary. While the male feeds in our garden most days, we tend to only notice the female during the breeding season. The male also likes to perch on or under our outdoor table on numerous occasions throughout the day and usually appears if the resident Australian Magpies (*Gymnorhina tibicen*) are being fed.

In July or August 2022, the RWBs raised one chick. On 8 Jan 2023 a Pacific Koel fledgling (*Eudynamys orientalis*) appeared in our garden (Fig. 1A), perched in a Hakea. We had heard its calls from nearby trees a day or two prior to this. The bird was being fed by a RWB. The behaviour of this bird was very similar to that of the juvenile Koel, raised by the same RWBs, three years previously (see Clark 2020). The fledgling tended to remain well hidden in the dense foliage of a pair of Hakeas or a Photinia, calling regularly and begging to be fed by the pair of Wattlebirds. The RWBs were carrying mince, intended for the Magpies, and feeding it to the juvenile. They had been carrying mince for some time prior to the juvenile's appearance, always an indication that nesting was in progress.

We observed the juvenile for 35 days prior to its apparent departure on 11 Feb. During that time both adults initially fed the bird, but at some point, the female was no longer present and the last time we observed the juvenile being fed was on 24 Jan. We offered the juvenile food in the form of chopped fruit a couple of times a day, but we frequently observed it foraging on the ground and in Grevilleas. My photos indicate that it was foraging on the ground as early as 14 Jan.

The Koel was pretty confident and happy to land on the grass, tiled pergola floor, outdoor table and shed roof, and all the other birds were very wary of it. The juvenile chased away other garden visitors including the Magpies, Currawongs and Cockatoos. When comparing the plumage changes in this bird with that of a male juvenile that we observed three years earlier, we were fairly confident that this juvenile was a female. Geoffrey Dabb was able to confirm this.

Photos can be accessed through the following links:
https://www.flickr.com/photos/140414659@N08/albums/72177720305459224/ (2023)
https://www.flickr.com/photos/140414659@N08/albums/72157713548103011/ (2020)

Around 25 Feb I heard and then saw a Koel fledgling in the tree overhanging our garden. It disappeared into the next-door garden before I could take any photos. On 27 Feb we flew to

WA and were interstate for 10 days. During our trip we were told by our next-door neighbours that ‘our RWBs’ were in their garden feeding a Koel fledgling.

Figure 1. (a) First Pacific Koel fledgling, 3 Feb 2023, 26 days after first sighted; (B) Second Pacific Koel fledgling, 13 Mar 2023, 16 days after first sighted (see text for details).

On 12 Mar, a juvenile Koel landed on our shed roof, begging incessantly. It was fed by the male RWB. We saw the bird again the next day. Unlike the first juvenile that was observed for 35 days and the juvenile of the 2020 season that remained for over 70 days, we did not see the second juvenile after 13 Mar. I suspect that our 10-day absence so soon after the bird fledged meant that the RWBs relied on food sources outside our garden and the juvenile became accustomed to feeding elsewhere.

It certainly appears that this pair of RWBs raised two Koel juveniles, one after the other, in the 2023 breeding season. The exact fledging date for each juvenile is not known and nor is the date when the female RWB stopped appearing in our garden. We also are not aware of the actual nesting site of the RWBs, but assume it is always in close proximity to our garden. We do know that the RWBs produced only one brood of their own several months prior to the appearance of the January Koel, and in the past this pair has had up to three broods of its own in a season.

The first Koel chick probably fledged on or before 6 January and was fed by one or both RWBs until 24 Jan. The female RWB was absent prior to this time, so she may have started nesting again as early as 20 Jan, possibly using the same nest. This would give a time frame of around 36 days for egg-laying, incubation and rearing to fledging. This fits in very well with the known period of 32-37 days between laying and fledging (Abernathy and Langmore 2017).

If I had been aware of the significance of the two breeding events at the time, I no doubt would have been far more diligent in keeping a detailed record of our observations. As it is, my photos are my only record. Jack Holland (personal communication) has indicated that from almost 1000 Koel fledgling records he has collected, he is not aware of RWBs raising successive Koel chicks in the same season, although there is reasonable evidence that RWBs can have up to 4 broods per season.

As our RWBs had only one brood of their own this season, the two Koel-raising events make only three, and there was a very long gap between their own brood and the first Koel. So, they may not have been too exhausted. Another aspect is that food is plentiful in our garden, including the supplementary food provided.

Acknowledgements

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HOARY-HEADED GREBE NESTS ON DRY LAND

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The Hoary-headed Grebe (*Poliocephalus poliocephalus*) builds nests 'usually well offshore' (Marchant and Higgins1990), 'attached to floating, emergent or submerged vegetation' (Cooper *et al.* 2014). In the Canberra Region it usually breeds in single pairs, but at Lake Bathurst at the NW corner of COG's Area of Interest large colonies have been reported in some years, with a maximum of close to 1000 nests (Lenz 2019). One precondition for breeding on Lake Bathurst and the neighbouring wetland, the Morass, is that islands are present. Due to wide fluctuations in water level, islands form only in some years, depending on rainfall and the topography of the lake bed. The grebes build their nests using submerged vegetation in water close to the edges of islands. Breeding success of Hoary-headed Grebes at Lake Bathurst and the Morass is highly variable. Rain and water surges due to strong winds can flood nests, or rapidly falling water levels in drought years may force abandonment of nests (Lenz 2019).

In 2021 one larger island in the Southern Morass was used by Silver Gulls (*Chroicocephalus novaehollandiae*) for nesting, and a number of Hoary-headed Grebe pairs built their floating nests along the edge of the island. On 21 Oct 2021 I counted 46 nests. However, due to the falling water level, at least 35 nests were now on the dry land of the expanding island and the grebes had to walk short distances to the water. By 17 Nov 21, following heavier rain, all nests were flooded. Only one pair had managed to hatch two young before the rains set in.

In the above example the grebes had initially built their nests in the water, and only due to falling water levels did they end up with a nest on land.

Figure 1. Farm dam at Lake Road. (Image Google Earth, 21 Sep 2023). Circle indicates nest site.

But on a recent visit to a larger farm dam along Lake Road (Fig. 1) on the SW side of Lake George I discovered a Hoary-headed Grebe sitting on a nest that was actually built on a narrow land barrier between the two sections of the dam. An old fence line runs along that barrier.

In the past when water levels were higher and the land barrier was under water, Hoary-headed Grebes built their nests against some of the fence posts and the wires. On 20 Jan 2022 six nests were in such a position (and a couple of nests elsewhere in the shallower part of the pond). On 16 Feb 2022 two of the nests were still occupied, and five families were present.

But during a visit to the dam on 21 Feb 2024 a Hoary-headed Grebe was sitting on a shallow nest, built on the strip of land between the two sections of the pond. The nest was constructed with limited material. I assume it was gathered from the immediate surroundings and seemed to consist of grass and stems of weeds. When the adult stood up, I could not see any eggs (viewed through telescope with 40x magnification), hence I assumed the nest was located in a small depression in the ground. The brood patch was very notable on the standing bird. Three other grebes were also resting nearby on the land strip, a sight not too common either.

Figure 2. Location where the Hoary-headed Grebes had built their nest (circle)**.**

My next visit to the site was on 13 Mar 2024. The nest was no longer there, nor were any young grebes present. I had not expected otherwise. A Little Raven (*Corvus mellori*) was patrolling the strip. In the past, I have seen a Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) sneaking along one side of the land strip and grabbing one of the Freckled Ducks (*Strictonetta naevosa*) resting on the other side of the strip. The other ducks did not even notice that one of their own had gone! During a visit to the dam on 29 Mar 2024 a pair of Red Foxes were patrolling parts of the dam. One or another predator will have predated the rather accessible grebe nest.

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REPORT OF A BUSH STONE-CURLEW (*BURHINUS GRALLARIUS*) IN WAMBOIN, NSW

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On the morning of 27 Feb 2024, Frank Watson, the owner of the 'Old Kowen' farm at 508 Norton Road, Wamboin NSW, drove through his entrance gate and, about 100 m in, at approximately -35.24944°, 149.31703° (WGS 84 co-ordinates), altitude 524 m, saw a bird on the road before him. It was a species he had not seen before. He made careful mental notes of its appearance. He described it to an experienced bird observer who said that his description fitted the bush stone-curlew (*Burhinus grallarius*). He then consulted his birding field guide and confirmed the species' identification. He saw what appeared to be the same bird again at roughly the same location on 24 Mar. His tenant at 'Old Kowen' also reported seeing the bird there on 8 Apr.

Owing to the nature of the reports—no photograph, etc.—it has not been submitted for review by Canberra Birds' Rarities Panel.

John Gale, the famous Queanbeyan publisher, wrote that, prior to European colonisation of the Canberra region '... its forests were the habitat of bronze-wing and other pigeons, the curlew and other food supplying birds' (1927, p. 3). However, by the late 20th century, Wilson (1999) classified the species as 'extinct in the ACT'. Wilson cited the early Canberra bird lists, from 1929 and 1943, that recorded the species as 'very rare—country', and refers to records of the curlews in the ACT in 1949-50, 1965, 1967, and two birds at O'Connor on 7 August 1970 – these two were recorded by Mark Clayton. On 17 Mar 2024 Lindsay Nothrop wrote, on the CanberraBirds email list, 'I grew up on a farm with curlews aplenty so I am most familiar with them. My reason for writing is to advise that there were curlews on the CSIRO farm at Spence in 1975 well after Mark's sightings.'

The exact date of extirpation from the ACT is unknown but likely to be the late 1970s. Formerly occurring across the Australian continent, the species was extirpated from the Melbourne plains in the 1910s, followed by Geelong (1920s), Cumberland plain in the Sydney basin (1950s), You Yangs (1960s), Perth and surrounds (1980s), and central Victoria (2000s) (Marchant and Higgins 1993). The species is now endangered in NSW (*Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*) and critically endangered in Victoria (*Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988*).

The bush stone-curlew sighted at Wamboin is potentially a dispersing individual from the reintroduced population at Mulligans Flat Woodland Sanctuary. The reintroduction project commenced in 2014, as a collaboration between the Woodlands and Wetlands Trust, the ANU, the ACT Parks and Conservation Service, with support from Canberra Birds. A decade on, there are now 3+ generations of bush stone-curlews living in the Sanctuary. It has been the most successful reintroduction project for the species in terms of post-release survival of

founding individuals and overall population persistence (Rapley 2020). Some pairs have immigrated to the neighboring Goorooyarroo Sanctuary (fenced in 2018) and have successfully fledged young. Sightings are regularly made of individuals foraging in nearby Forde and Bonner, and more rarely in Taylor, Watson and one record (of a road-killed individual) in Red Hill.

GPS-tracked individuals spend half of their nights outside the Sanctuary, foraging in urban parks and gardens as well as agricultural areas of adjacent NSW (Rapley 2020). GPS tracking also revealed post-natal dispersal in young bush stone-curlews, with individuals taking round trips as far as Bungendore and Tidbinbilla before returning to Mulligans Flat (Rapley 2020). However, bush stone-curlews can disperse over long distances (600+ km; Rapley *unpublished data*), so we cannot rule out an alternative provenance for the Wamboin sightings.

Bush stone-curlew at Mulligans Flat incubating a nest (photo taken during scientific research (while changing batteries on the remote camera)), wearing a GPS tracking device and showing their typical 'log' camouflage pose (*Marc Layton*).

Reintroduction not only returns species to their former range but also returns them to Country,[1] even when the primary aim of a project is ecological restoration. The Dhawura Ngunnawal Committee advised that the bush stone-curlew has two names in Ngunnawal language, for each of their subtle colour morphs: *warabin* for the rufous and *mulyara* for the grey (Mulligans Flat Strategic Plan 2022). The Wiradjuri name for the bush stone-curlew is *guriban* (Grant and Rudder 2010). Clarke (2023, p. 70) points out that the bush stone-curlew '… was an omen of death across much of Aboriginal Australia', and that 'The mournful call of the bush stonecurlew (*sic*), often associated by Aboriginal peoples with a lost child, is a central theme for many of the recorded mythological accounts of this bird.' The bush stone-curlew remains culturally sensitive for many Australian First Nations people.

[1] 'Country' is a term often used by Indigenous people to describe place as not only a physical, geographic location, but also an interconnected ecological and spiritual network. Country is important to identity and includes complex cultural responsibilities for caring for Country.

Members of the public are encouraged to report sightings of bush stone-curlews to Shoshana Rapley (current PhD candidate researching the population) at shoshana.rapley@anu.edu.au

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COLUMNIST'S CORNER

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The simmering controversy about birds named for people

Eponyms, meaning here bird names in English that commemorate persons (for example 'Lewin's Honeyeater'), have become a contentious issue. There are current moves to replace them, for which a critical stage has been reached in both Australia and North America. At the time of writing, it is not possible to predict which names might be changed. A counter-movement to resist wholesale changes proposed by the American Ornithological Society is described at this website http://birdnamesforstability.org

A complicated discussion that has occurred within BirdLife Australia (BLA) is shown in simplified form in the graphic page that accompanies this column. However, at the time of writing there has been no official BLA statement about the name-changing process that lies ahead, or about the first names that will be chosen for change. This column will mention a few thoughts about practical issues.

First, the replacement process we might see in Australia would only affect directly use of names by BLA. It cannot be assumed that other lists or publications or government agencies will use the new name specified by BLA. Therefore, we are likely to see more than one name for a species. Commonwealth and State agencies responsible for conservation measures are likely to give all the common names by which a species is known (appropriate or not) so as to promote the widest possible understanding of which species is the subject of relevant measures.

It has been indicated that the species affected by BLA changes will be those under Australian jurisdiction, so to speak. They will be species with their main breeding area in Australia. About 30 species on the Australian list with eponymous names are migratory or oceanic species that nest outside Australia. Thus, Latham's Snipe and Cook's Petrel, for example, will not be included in the list to be changed, unless BLA makes a new decision to include them. There is also a handful of non-breeding vagrants that would be left to other jurisdictions to attend to.

That leaves about 20 names of Australian species to be considered for change if the proposed action extends beyond the pilot project. Those include eponyms that refer obliquely to a particular person, such as 'Princess Parrot' and 'Regent Honeyeater'. However, BLA has also assigned English names to subspecies, which means that a few subspecies will need consequential name changes.

Several bird names are based on a location, so sometimes make use of a geographic eponym, such as 'Atherton Scrubwren' or 'Kimberley Flycatcher' or 'McIlwraith Range Lewin's Honeyeater' (a subspecies, known by a double eponym). It seems that, as in North America, geographic eponyms are not to be replaced in the first stage of the change process, although it has been suggested that they be replaced in due course.

Finding suitable replacement names might not be a simple matter. With respect to subspecies names in particular, the name of a region is often used to convey range information that defines the subspecies. In an early set of subspecies names the information was conveyed by giving the area of occurrence in brackets after the species name. Eponymous location-indicators in existing names include 'Cape York', 'Tasmanian', 'Torresian' and 'Lord Howe'.

It will not be easy to find useful descriptive species names. Some current adjectives, like 'Superb', 'Beautiful' and 'Dusky' are not very useful as descriptions. Some current descriptive names refer to features only obvious with a specimen on a table. Many names now in use refer to the appearance of only the male, which some will see as inappropriate. There are going to be disagreements ahead. Apart from opposition in principle to the making of a large number of changes, there is likely to be dissatisfaction with particular choices for new names. When it comes to a new name for a bird species, everyone has a view on what it should be (or should not be).

Stentorius

An eponymous honeyeater. In *The Birds of Australia* (1848) John Gould gave this bird (left) as 'Yellow-eared Honey-eater'. However, he adopted 'Lewin's Honey-eater' in the *Handbook* in 1865, referring to the 'beautifully figured' bird in John Lewin's *Birds of New Holland* (1808).

Lewin himself had labelled the bird (right) 'Yellow-eared Honeysucker'.

An outline of the steps leading to the BirdLife Australia (BLA) decision to replace eponymous names for Australian birds.

Major Mitchell and cockatoo

Mid 2020 - A continuing concern of some people was that naming of birds for unworthy persons had created some hurtful names.

A committee was appointed to set the principles for identifying unacceptable names.

Late 2022 - However, the moral judging of individuals so long after their time was found not to be feasible. Therefore, it was recommended to replace ALL eponymous names (as it happens, the same approach as adopted in North America, although one opposed by the BLA Names Committee).

Late 2023 - BLA council decided to begin the replacement process with a consultative pilot project addressing selected names. The announcement of further steps is awaited (May 2024)

Some people put forward further arguments for replacing ALL eponymous names -

(a) Many commemorated persons had little or no contact with Australia and were not appropriate or deserving.

(b) There are better names. The use of *descriptive* names would be more useful.

(c) BLA would appear to be socially progressive.

Governor King's Parrot

Elizabeth Gould and finch

Dr Horsfield with cuckoo and bushlark

Canberra Bird Notes 49(1) (2024): 74-75

Birding in Cyberspace, Canberra Style

Over the years, this column has drawn attention to a number of birding podcast series. Earlier this year, Canberra Birds executive member Steve Read drew attention to another valuable one, writing 'For those who haven't yet discovered it, the **Birds of the World YouTube channel** hosts a slowly growing set of recorded webinars. The most recent is Australia's own Steve Debus on the Black Falcon.' See https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLgSpqOFj1Ta7bnCNBAlWcN76UbnLthyO1

Interestingly, the extensive *Birds of the World* entry on the Black Falcon, edited by Dr Steve Debus in March 2023, was made available to the public, free of charge, for one week after the webinar was broadcast live.

At the time of writing, May 2024, 12 of these webinars had been published. In addition to Steve Debus' on the 'Life history of the Black Falcon', which has so far garnered 3,400 views, the topics covered included 'Unravelling the mysteries of storm-petrels, smallest seabirds in the world', 'Birds of the World discovery webinar: 2023 eBird/Clements taxonomy update', and 'Avian Phylogeny: a complete and dynamic tree of birds'. Most of the webinars run for approximately 90 minutes, giving ample time for the presenters to deal with their topics in depth.

Most of us have probably heard it said that the birders of yore deplored the advent of binoculars and then of birding field guides on the grounds that it made birding too easy: anybody could do it, not only the experts! Well, it is not hard to imagine what they would have said about the advent, a few months ago, of the **Swarovski AX Visio 10X32 Binocular** https://www.swarovskioptik.com/int/en/birding/products/binoculars/ax-visio/ax-visio-binoculars/ax-visio.

These optics have been characterised as 'The world's first Smart Binoculars'. Why? As Swarovski Optik explains:

> The AX Visio 10x32 are AI-supported binoculars and combine outstanding SWAROVISION quality with digital intelligence. The identification function helps you to identify birds and other animal species at the touch of a button. Thanks to the revolutionary 'share discoveries' function, you can immediately show your companion where you have seen an animal. Easily create photos or videos and share them with your community. The experience is complete with the accompanying SWAROVSKI OPTIK Outdoor App: customize your AX Visio to suit your individual needs.

Yes, it uses artificial intelligence to identify, for the user, the species of bird or animal that one is looking at and photographing! It has auto-focus and built-in still and video camera facilities, and downloads the images and videos to an app. Although I have not used the AX Visio myself, the specifications indicate that the Cornell Lab's Merlin Bird ID is used to identify the species being viewed and, of course, this now has packs covering the whole of Australia: 700 Australian species; 10,000 species worldwide. The mammals in its database cover Europe and North America, some 300 species, though not Australia. It uses the Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) to find your location and thereby the correct Merlin ID database. Details are available online in a fascinating 25-minute YouTube video at

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SlGyUpnocko. Unsurprisingly, the price of this amazing piece of optics is at the top of the range: AU $6,540.

I imagine that most Australian birders are now aware of the wonderful initiative of Birdlife Australia (BLA) and volunteers to place the **Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds (HANZAB) online** in free full text format: it went live in November 2023 at https://hanzab.birdlife.org.au/. BLA explains that 'HANZAB Online brings the invaluable *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic* Birds into a modern digital form, extending reach beyond what could be achieved with the original publication. Our aim is to provide a single source of foundational, scientific knowledge on all birds in our region to develop recommendations and strategies for effective conservation of the Australasian and Antarctic environments. While a login is required, access is free.'

What I find really impressive is that it goes beyond simply digitising the seven volumes of HANZAB:

> The HANZAB online website has made a significant stride in bringing this information into the digital age. The initial step involved digitizing the original HANZAB content, and we're thrilled about this transformation. It's important to note that while some of the content may reflect older knowledge, we've taken proactive steps to align the taxonomy with the latest BirdLife Working List 4.1, the New Zealand checklist 2023 and BirdLife International Datazone website. It's worth noting that the threat status for all species is current as of May 2023, which is a testament to our commitment to keeping the information relevant.
>
> Furthermore, it's worth mentioning that in cases where newly recognised species have emerged post-publication, they will be featured on the website, though some details may still be in the process of being added. Looking ahead, BirdLife Australia envisions a dynamic future where the volumes are continually updated, offering real-time insights into the ecology and conservation of the birds within the HANZAB footprint. This ongoing effort reflects our commitment to providing you with the most accurate and up-to-date information possible.

Both the birding community and professional ornithologists owe a huge debt of gratitude to all those responsible for this fine achievement.

T. alba

This column is available online at http://canberrabirds.org.au/publications/canberra-bird-notes/. There you can access the web sites mentioned here by clicking on the hyperlinks.

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The CanberraBirds list's searchable archive is at http://bioacoustics.cse.unsw.edu.au/archives/html/canberrabirds

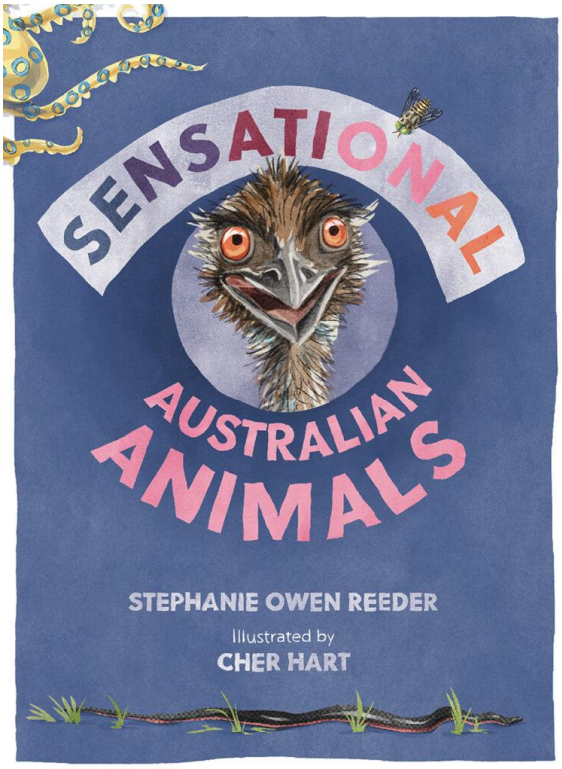
BOOK REVIEW

Canberra Bird Notes 49(1) (2024): 76

CSIRO Publishing has released another book aimed at primary school children.

***Sensational Australian Animals*. By Stephanie Owen Reeder, illustrated by Cher Hart.** CSIRO Publishing February 2024. ISBN: 9781486316892. Hardback, 280 x 215 mm size, 64pp Au$29.99.

Reviewed by *JANETTE LENZ*, Lyneham, ACT 2602 (*lenz.michael.janette@gmail.com*)



Stephanie Owen Reeder is an accomplished writer. In this book she is making a clever connection between 'sensational' in its common meaning of astonishing/extraordinary and 'of the senses'.

This beautifully illustrated hardcover book explores the fascinating world of native Australian animals through the basic five senses – sight, sound, smell, taste and touch.

The artwork and diagrams cover more than 145 'marvellous mammals, boisterous birds, rad reptiles, biting bugs, awesome arachnids and fussy feeders'.

'The eyes have it' explains sight simply with an illustration of the human eye. The text then refers to the differences between human and animal biology, such as those in the eyes of the kangaroo, frog, crocodile and cuttlefish.

The following pages deal with sight in greater depth with 'Magnificent marsupials', 'Bright-eyed birds', 'Amazing arthropods', 'Sea-side show-offs' and 'Rad reptiles'.

Further sections cover the other senses similarly: 'Did you hear that?', 'Follow your nose', 'That's tasty', and 'What a feeling'. The text gives examples of unique differences in some animals and explains that they evolved to make the best use of their particular sensory ability.

In each section a separate box highlights a 'Sensational Fact' for one animal's exceptional quality: 'perfect' odd bits of knowledge about some of Australia's unusual animals to tempt the reader to explore more.

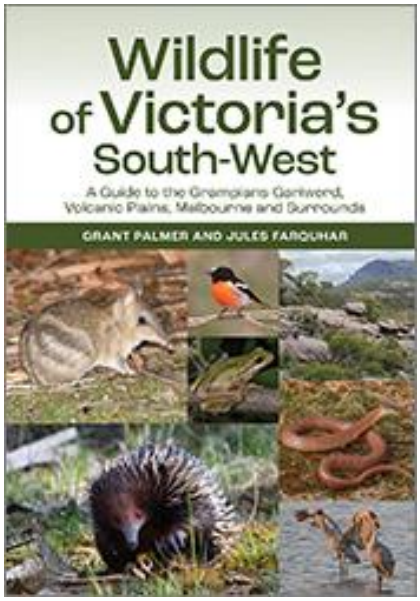
Each new term and name is highlighted in bold, referring the reader to an excellent Glossary. A good Animal Index appears on the last page.

I thoroughly enjoyed browsing this book. It is designed for readers aged 8-12, but would be a delight for teachers, parents (and grandparents) to read and explore. Teacher's notes can be obtained free from the CSIRO Publishing website: publish.csiro.au/book/8094/#forteachers

Canberra Bird Notes 49(1) (2024): 77

***Wildlife of Victoria's South-West. A guide to the Grampians-Gariwerd, Volcanic Plains, Melbourne and Surrounds*. By Grant Palmer and Jules Farquhar.** CSIRO Publishing, February 2024. ISBN 978486313051, Paperback, 416pp., RRP $49.99.

Reviewed by *MICHAEL LENZ, Lyneham ACT 2602 (michael.lenz.birds@gmail.com)*



This book describes the mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians of an area comprising a fifth of the state of Victoria. In general sections the wildlife of the region is characterised first (Chapter 1), followed by descriptions of the vegetation communities of the varied landscapes of Victoria's South-West (Chapter 2). Conservation and management of habitats and wildlife are addressed in Chapter 3.

The bulk of the book covers the 432 species of tetrapod animals (all vertebrates except fish). Each account includes a distribution map, colour photograph, description, range and status, habitat, ecology and potential locations. The distribution maps are rather small (and can include historical records, while current distributions may be more restricted), and it may be difficult to use them to find sites where rarer species occur. But the list of potential sites will certainly help observers reach likely areas.

The final Chapter 5 gives descriptions of 'Key wildlife viewing spots' of the region. The book concludes with an annotated list of other wildlife, *i.e*. occasional visitors and extinct species, advice on 'submitting records of wildlife' and a checklist of the species covered.

This book complements two books in a similar format for other parts of Victoria (G. Palmer (2019) *Wildlife of the Otways and Shipwreck Coast.* CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne; C. Tzaros (20121) *Wildlife of the Box-Ironbark Country.* 2nd. ed., CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne).

With such a wealth of information, visitors to these parts of Victoria will be well equipped to explore the wildlife. The book is highly recommended.

Canberra Bird Notes 49(1) (2024): 78

THE 2022 RECIPIENT OF THE STEVE WILSON MEDAL – *NICKI TAWS*

At the general meeting on 14 February 2024 Nicki Taws was awarded the Steve Wilson Medal, following assessment by the Steve Wilson Medal Committee (Neil Hermes, Sue Lashko, Jack Holland).

NICKI TAWS

Nicki grew up in Melbourne and after studying Forestry came to Canberra in 1992. She joined COG soon after arriving as a way of learning about the local birds and meeting other like-minded people. With a particular interest in collecting data to help understand the local bird populations, she became involved in helping with COG's survey efforts, firstly with Honeyeater Migration surveys, then Mulligans Flat surveys, and the Woodland Bird Monitoring program. An opportunity arose with Greening Australia to combine her interest in conserving and restoring habitat with an understanding of how birds respond to this, and she was able to involve COG in data collection from 100 revegetated sites across the ACT and surrounding NSW in the *Birdwatch* project. The information collected has helped inform revegetation guidelines to benefit woodland birds in the region. A similar program was started with Bush Heritage Australia and COG in the K2C region to the south of the ACT and is coordinated biannually by Nicki. She is also a current member of the Rarities Panel and has recently taken over the running of COG's annual Blitz.

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THE 2023 RECIPIENTS OF THE STEVE WILSON MEDAL – *ANTHONY OVERS*

At the general meeting on 14 February 2024 Anthony Overs was awarded the Steve Wilson Medal, following assessment by the Steve Wilson Medal Committee (Neil Hermes, Sue Lashko, Jack Holland).

ANTHONY OVERS

Anthony was a COG Committee member between 1996-1997 and again in 2004-2009. He was Editor of *Canberra Bird Notes* and COG representative on the Conservation Council (1996-1997). He held roles as Conservation Group Coordinator and was Woodland bird survey coordinator and Mt Majura site surveyor from 1998-2001. Anthony was field trips coordinator, 2007-2009. He has given short talks at monthly meetings, including on Australian babblers, carried out COG woodland surveys, pelagic birding and bird banding at Gluepot.

Anthony may be best known to new members as a trips and outings leader, having run Birding for Beginners courses twice yearly since 2006 and 18 pelagic boat trips from Eden. Anthony assisted Ian Fraser in the upkeep of the telephone hotline (1996-1998), which was a predecessor to the current Chatline.

Canberra Bird Notes 49(1) (2024): 80-82

RARITIES PANEL NEWS

The undoubted highlight of this report is the endorsement by the Birds Australia Rarities Committee of a record referred to it of a Pin-tailed Snipe observed at Jerrabomberra Wetlands NR in February 2022 (BARC submission 1257). This constitutes a first, not only for the ACT but for the entire eastern seaboard of Australia. Understandably with any snipe, the observers did not get a particularly good view but had the foresight to make a sound recording on an iPhone. That was referred by BARC to a snipe expert in the Philippines, Rob Hutchinson, who confirmed the identity of the snipe, describing the Pin-tailed call as being 'clear, higher-pitched and squeaky'. The Panel has a policy of forwarding to BARC records of all species on the national rarities list and that will include any future reports of this species.

The Black-faced Monarch is a very occasional visitor from the coast. Photos of this bird, a juvenile, can be seen at https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/616847553.

The White-throated Nightjars seen and heard in over an hour's walk at Pierces Creek on 22 Feb and for a few days thereafter are again occasionally observed, mostly on migration north in autumn. While they are not easy to see in the daytime, their call is highly distinctive, described in *The Australian Bird Guide* as "a weird, rich, accelerating and ascending staccato, ending as wild bubbling laughter". Hear at https://ebird.org/checklist/S162530161.

The Black-tailed Native-hen was photographed at Mulligans Flat and reported to Canberra Nature Maps canberranaturemapr.org/sightings/4564761. Being a dispersive and irruptive species it can and does turn up in our area from time to time.

Spiny-cheeked Honeyeaters are an inland species that do stray our way every now and then. This relatively large honeyeater is highly distinctive with its pale apricot breast and red bill, tipped black. See ebird/S157668914. The unusual feature of the many reports from Rock Valley till the end of January was that the birds were feeding young. This appears to be the first documented breeding record for the species in the ACT.

ENDORSED LIST 104, JUNE 2024

White-throated Nightjar (*Eurostopodus mystacalis*)
Up to 7, 22 Feb 2024, Zebedee Muller and Luke Downey, Pierces Creek (see also p. 81)

Pin-tailed Snipe (*Gallinago stenua*)
1, 6 Feb 2022, Alastair Smith and Peter Milburn, Jerrabomberra Wetlands NR

Black-tailed Native-hen (*Tribonyx ventralis*)
1, 21 Feb 2024, Ben Harvey, Mulligans Flat NR

Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater (*Acanthagenys rufogularis*)
1-3, Jan 2024, Luke Downey et al, Rock Valley, Tidbinbilla NR

Black-faced Monarch (*Monarcha melanopsis*)
1, 2 Apr 2024, Craig Doolan, Jerrabomberra Wetlands NR

Pink Robin (*Petroica rodinogaster*)
1, 25 May 2024, John Brannan, The Pinnacle NR Hawker (see also p. 82)

Barbara Allan (*allanbm@bigpond.net.au*)

Pin-tailed Snipe, Singapore[1]

Tails of *Gallinago* snipe that are known to occur in Australia[2]

[1] https://au.images.search.yahoo.com/search/images?p=Pin-tailed+Snipe&type=E210US0G0&imgurl=https%3A%2F%2Fi0.wp.com%2Fsingaporebirds.com%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2018%2F03%2Fpin-tailed-snipe-140402-114eos1d-fyap2270.jpg%3Fw%3D920%26h%3D613%26ssl%3D1#id=3&iurl=https%3A%2F%2Fi0.wp.com%2Fsingaporebirds.com%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2018%2F03%2Fpin-tailed-snipe-140402-114eos1d-fya p2270.jpg%3Fw%3D920%26h%3D613%26ssl%3D1&action=click

[2] Australian Bird Study Association Inc. – Bird in the Hand (Second Edition), published on www.absa.asn.au; References: HANZAB 3; Drawings: J.N. Davies in HANZAB 3- © BirdLife Australia Compiled by J.W. Hardy for the Australian Bird Study Association Inc. and reproduced with permission of BirdLife Australia

Pink Robin, The Pinnacle, 30 May 2024 (*Ben Milbourne*).

Canberra Bird Notes

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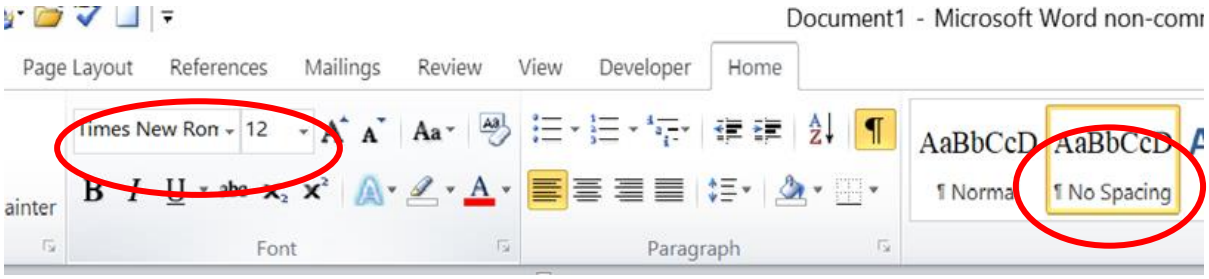
Please submit contributions in *Times New Roman, with 12-point Font Size and 'No Spacing'* (see illustration below):



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