



PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2023-24

Canberra Birds reached its 60th anniversary in 2024, and while this has been a low-key affair compared to the major activities for our 50th, we continue to be very proud of what has been achieved over 60 years.

For Canberrans with a passion for birds, a highlight of the year was the news that **Bluett's Block** will be made a Nature Reserve. Canberra Birds and many of our members have had an active interest in achieving this outcome.

During the year, as well as our regular activities which are remarkable in their own right, we've been involved in three significant activities, which I mention briefly here and provide more information on each below.

During the year we have progressively implemented the '**Canberra Birds**' name for general use, while retaining Canberra Ornithologists Group as our legal name. As well as a new name we also adopted a new logo during 2024. This has retained our familiar Gang-gang image but updated the other parts of the logo. Work is ongoing on a new design theme that will be progressively applied to new promotional materials, the Gang-gang newsletter and, in the future, to the website.

An important event for Canberra Birds this year was our hosting of the **Birds Interest Group Network (BIGnet)** meeting in September. Planning commenced early in 2024 for what was a very successful event.

Another project this year has been work on an updated suite of birding brochures to promote Canberra Birds as well as local birding, to residents and visitors to the ACT alike. As well as updating text and photos, the new Canberra Birds design theme will be applied to these materials. In April, the Committee was very pleased to release Canberra Birds' Ethical Birding Guidelines on the website. The Guidelines are intended to help new birders and new bird photographers understand how they can enjoy their hobby without disturbing the natural behaviour of birds or causing them stress. There was much interest in the Guidelines on local Facebook discussion forums after the release.

In late 2023 we partially funded two ANU graduate students to attend the Australasian Ornithological Conference in Brisbane. Their selection was a merit-based process and our funding saw them both of them give presentations at the Conference and later to Canberra Birds. Both are Canberra Birds members.

The Committee

During 2023-24 Canberra Birds has again been fortunate to have a strong and enthusiastic Committee with Zac Flegg, Julie Hotchin and Ben Milbourne having joined during 2023-24.

In 2024 the four executive members were Neil Hermes (President), Kim Farley (Vice-President), Prue Watters (Acting Treasurer) and Margaret Robertson (Secretary).

General members of the Committee were Jenny Bounds, Brittany Brockett, Zac Flegg, Bill Graham, Julie Hotchin, Ben Milbourne and Steve Read.

During 2024 both Brittany and Ben moved on to new challenges, resulting in a Committee of nine.

I would like to acknowledge the strong contribution made by Brittany who joined the Committee in 2019. As well as regular input to Committee discussion and work, Brittany also gave the Committee important guidance during our deliberations on the re-branding of COG to Canberra Birds.

Ben was a Committee member for one year and contributed his interest in data management issues in that time. He also instigated the evening social event at the Public in Manuka.

Steve Read and I are not renominating for a further term on the Committee. Steve made a very significant contribution as Vice-President over eight years until 2023, managing Committee business, developing strategy and policy on various matters and contributing to Conservation issues. During 2024 he served as a general Committee member and was instrumental in creating the Canberra Birds Ethical Birding Guidelines and to the development of the new suite of birding brochures. I would like to publicly acknowledge the personal support Steve has given to me in particular.

Canberra Birds membership

Volatility in membership numbers is something the organisation has experienced over a considerable period. At the end of 2023-24 Canberra Birds had a membership of 370.

From the early 2000s until 2014-15, membership numbers hovered between 240 and 367, after which membership climbed and remained in the 400s until 2022-23 when membership fell to 344.

However, with some long-term members now starting to step back from the more active roles in Canberra Birds, and fewer younger people joining than in the past, the Committee is concerned that the time may be approaching when volunteer walk leaders, surveyors and committee members will be much harder to recruit.

The Committee has therefore worked on a range of strategies over the last year to attract and, importantly, retain members both now and into the future.

Databases and Annual Bird Report

The Committee had hoped to have made significant progress in 2024 on upgrading or replacing our legacy databases and on creating a new Annual Bird Report (ABR). A way forward for an eBird-based ABR was identified and accepted by the Committee in 2022. At the same time, it was re-confirmed

that continued reporting of Garden Bird Survey data in the ABR does not present technical issues. However, other key Canberra Birds datasets present strong challenges. New databases need to be built and our data and supporting metadata uploaded to them, but technical and personnel issues have prevented further progress despite ongoing effort. The Committee is very concerned that lack of any new databases and ABRs is hindering Canberra Birds' ability to support users of BirdInfo on our website, as well as government and other researchers who have come to rely on Canberra Birds data to support decision-making.

Conservation

Jenny Bounds continues as Conservation Officer, represents COG in various forums and stakeholder groups, including the Biodiversity Working Group of the ACT Conservation Council, and the ACT Government Biodiversity Conservation Forum, a regular meeting with the Government for environmental community groups.

Chris Davey represents Canberra Birds on the Ginninderry Bush on the Boundary group, which allows us to comment on activity in the Ginninderry Conservation Corridor and adjacent Murrumbidgee River Corridor

In September we received news that Bluett's Block, an area of high ecological value bushland on the western edge of urban Canberra, will be made a Nature Reserve. There has been a long community campaign to achieve this, however the campaign is not over yet, as there are issues concerning the boundaries, size viability/sustainability and connectivity to the Molonglo River Reserve.

A COG member, the late Jean Casburn, was instrumental in raising community awareness and establishing the case for Bluett's Block to be reserved.

Canberra Birds has a strong commitment to providing responses, expertise and views on a range of matters which impact birds and habitats in the ACT, including urban planning and greenfields development. A list of selected Canberra Birds submissions is on the Canberra Birds website at www.canberrabirds.org.au under the Conservation tab.

In 2023-24 the following submissions and responses were made:

- Comments on ACT Parks: Murrumbidgee River Corridor Management Planning. Sept 2023
- Response to an ACT Government Audit of Nest Boxes on Public Land – including comments on new guidelines for management of nest boxes. December 2023
- Input to ACT Government workshops on developing projects for natural resource management funding, and the Ten Year Review of the ACT Nature Conservation Strategy. November/December 2023
- Objection to a Development Application to construct a large pond along Deep Creek, Whitlam (ACT). This is related to urban edge impacts on the Kama woodland reserve. February 2024
- Comments on a Discussion Paper about the Ten Year Review of the ACT's Nature Conservation Act 2014. June 2024.

- The main issues raised were that the legislation had not been effective in protecting habitats for birds, the need for an effective landscape-scale approach to conservation and connectivity, and changes to the existing policy and systems of environmental offsets (not delivering positive outcomes).
- Submission on Estate Development Plan for Denman Prospect blocks abutting Bluetts Block.
- Input to Conservation Council submission to Common Myna Inquiry.
- Submission on Conservator's Guidelines for Preparation of Conservation Environmental Management Plans.
- Submission in support of EPBC referral of Crematorium Development on Mugga Lane.

Further activities included:

- A meeting with the consultancy firm Purdon to discuss the ACT government's design and construction of the Jerrabomberra Wetlands powerline. This meeting was attended by Steve Read and Jenny Bounds. February 2024.
- A letter of support to NatureMap regarding their bid for ongoing Commonwealth funding. February 2024.
- The invitation to Canberra Birds to attend the public hearing of the ACT Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity's Inquiry into E-Petition 17-23: Indian (Common) Myna Action. As President, Neil Hermes attended and provided views on existing control programs and the need for more evidence-based and targeted control programs. April 2024.

Bird data collection programs

The **Woodland Bird Monitoring Program**, a survey undertaken quarterly at 15 locations/142 sites in the ACT, is now in its 25th year, and continues to be coordinated by Jenny Bounds. Many thanks are due to the team of dedicated site coordinators and their survey helpers. Their commitment over time is a significant factor in the success of this survey and is strongly valued by Canberra Birds.

The Mulligans Flat surveys (part of the woodland program) commenced in 1995 and will reach their 30 year survey milestone in 2025.

The **Garden Bird Survey** also continues, now in its 43rd year.

The annual COG Bird Blitz takes place in late October, covering as much of the ACT as possible. We all thank Nicki Taws for her coordination of the Blitz.

Latham's Snipe surveys (coordinated by the Woodlands and Wetlands Trust) are part of a national and international monitoring program of this species, with Canberra Birds members contributing to this ongoing survey.

The annual **Lyrebird survey** at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve continues under the coordination of Chris Davey with Chris also monitoring birds near the new suburb of Whitlam.

Surveys of waterbirds at **Lakes George and Bathurst** continue, a long-running monitoring project undertaken by Michael Lenz over more than four decades. Lake Bathurst is now a Birdlife Australia Key Biodiversity Area (KBA), with Michael Lenz having been the inaugural KBA Guardian. In 2023 the KBA Guardian role was taken on by Sue Lashko, supported by Luke Downey and Liam Manderson.

Regular surveys at a high-quality Travelling Stock Reserve (TSR) north of Canberra near Gundaroo (**Nelanglo**) inform NSW Local Land Services' management of the TSR.

All bird data collected by COG are stored in our databases, which can be retrieved for various purposes.

Gang-gang newsletter

One of our best resources is our monthly newsletter Gang-gang. As has been the case since July 2018, Gang-gang is released on the website as a colour pdf that can be downloaded and printed if you wish.

Zac Flegg took over from Sue Lashko as editor in late 2023. Thank you to Sue for her work on Gang-gang over her years as editor with thanks also going to Zac who has managed the transition seamlessly. Gail Neumann, who does the layout has continued in her role, for which we are most appreciative.

Canberra Bird Notes

Michael Lenz and Kevin Windle continue their great work as Editors of the Canberra Bird Notes and I thank them and all those who have contributed to CBN over the past year. CBN is a well-respected and valued source of information about the birds of the Canberra region.

Canberra Birds website

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

Canberra Birds is indebted to Julian Robinson for his ongoing commitment to managing and maintaining the Canberra Birds website.

Records Management

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

Rarities Panel

The Panel continues to review reports of unusual species and publish endorsements in Canberra Bird Notes. Thanks for the efforts of Grahame Clark, Richard Allen, Dick Schodde, Jenny Bounds and Nicki

Taws who are the moderators of our COG rarities records, and Barbara Allan who coordinates the Rarities Panel's work.

Field Trips and other activities

Canberra Birds continues its very active program of field trips for members and visitors. Both a Wednesday Walk and a Saturday or Sunday outing are offered most weeks of the year, as well as several longer trips annually. The annual pelagic trip off Eden is always popular. Over 500 attendees took part in our trips during the year. Thank you to Sue Lashko who continues to coordinate the program, and to the 20 or so members who volunteer their time year after year to lead our trips and who ensure their success. Special thanks go to Sandra Henderson who has led multiple trips in nearly every month in 2023-24 and continues to be the keystone of our popular Wednesday Walks.

Locally, we ran trips to a wide range of locations around the city, as well as to Namadgi National Park and neighbouring areas in NSW. As always, the beginners' walks led by Anthony Overs, and the Campbell Park nest workshops led by Jack Holland were very popular. Further afield, a mixture of longer camping and accommodated trips were held: to Shellharbour in October 2023, the 2024 Easter camp to Bimbimbi River Camp, and to Cowra in April 2024. Our pelagic trips out of Eden are always keenly anticipated, and the June 2024 trip was no less so. It produced an interesting variety of birds for the participants.

In mid-2023 we started a monthly drop-in event called 'Coffee and Chat at the Gardens' at the Australian National Botanic Gardens café. This aimed to fill a social gap between our monthly meeting and our field trips and has been very popular. Less successful was a similar monthly drop-in evening event aimed at younger and working people.

Monthly meetings

During 2023-24 Jack Holland again arranged a stimulating program of both local and interstate speakers for our monthly meetings. I would like to thank Jack for his efforts in bringing to the members engaging and informative presentations throughout the year. This year selected presentations were also loaded to the Canberra Birds Facebook page both extending the reach of our presentations program to a wider audience and promoting the value of attending the meetings in person.

Sandra Henderson again took on the responsibility of providing the raffle prizes and selling the tickets. All of these add to the enjoyment of our meetings and provide an opportunity for members to socialise. Thank you, Sandra.

CanberraBirds email Chatline and Canberra Birds Facebook page

At the end of the year, the CanberraBirds email announcement and discussion list had 362 subscribers, a similar number as at the same time last year. The list, managed by David McDonald, provides a useful forum for people to discuss the birds of the Canberra region, their environments, and Canberra Birds activities. New subscribers, including people new to birding who seek support from more experienced birders, are welcome to subscribe. The list manager has commended subscribers for the way they use the list positively, productively, and politely.

The Canberra Birds Facebook page was re launched in January 2024 and currently has 392 followers, with these including several other Canberra-based conservation groups. The page is currently managed by Kim Farley.

Canberra Birds hosting of BIGnet Meeting

Canberra Birds hosted a very successful meeting of the NSW/ACT Bird Interest Group Network (BIGnet) on 21 September at Wildbark at Mulligans Flat. The event was organised by Committee members Jenny Bounds (Conservation Officer), Kim Farley (Vice-President) and Julie Hotchin, with assistance from Margaret Robertson (managing registrations) and Alison Mackerras (meeting minutes). There was positive feedback about all aspects of the event. The day included a morning business meeting for delegates from NSW bird groups and Canberra Birds and an afternoon Presentations Forum on the theme of 'Community Engagement in Conservation in the ACT'. Representatives from ACT community conservation groups and Canberra Birds members were invited to the Forum.

As BIGnet coincided with our 60th anniversary year, it was an opportunity to show the new Canberra Birds logo (launched at the September members' meeting) as the centrepiece of a birthday cake at afternoon tea, as well as our new banner.

New Canberra Birds logo, brochures and promotional materials

This has been a major project during 2024 with a Working Group delivering a new Canberra Birds logo and making substantial progress in developing a new range of birding brochures for a range of audiences, including visitors to the ACT. Thanks are due to Julie Hotchin, Steve Read, Jenny Bounds and Alison Mackerras.

We are currently finalising the first group of a suite of new brochures on birding in Canberra, including brochures on birding sites in ACT South, ACT North and the Ranges. While a few members resisted this, seeing online resources such as eBird as replacing the need for hard copy, the Committee considers attractive hard-copy materials to be both informative and a good way to promote both Canberra Birds and local birding. An initial brochure titled Canberra Birds, highlighted our activities and aimed at new birders, was printed and distributed widely, including in the Jerrabomberra Wetlands hides. It has proved so popular that a second printing was needed.

Canberra Birds Conservation Fund (CBCF)

The Fund, established in 2000, is a tax-deductible gift recipient, and members and friends of Canberra Birds are encouraged to donate to it. I warmly thank the Canberra Birds members who donated during the year.

No grants were made during 2023-24, owing to a lack of applications. However, one application was processed during the year, and the funds transferred early in the 2024-25 year. It was a grant of \$5,000 to Samuele Ramellini, PhD student at the ANU's Division of Ecology and Evolution, Research School of Biology, to support his doctoral research into 'Social behaviour in winter: the multilevel society of an iconic Australian songbird, the superb fairy-wren'. The field work will be conducted at the ANBG. His academic supervisor is Associate Professor Damien Farine.

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

Conclusion

After over 50 years as a member of COG/Canberra Birds and having first served on the Committee 50 years ago in 1974 as Excursions Officer, I am stepping back from the Committee next year. Over those years I have served the group in many capacities including as President twice, most recently for eight years.

I reflect on the words spoken by the late Bruce Lindenmayer, a long serving member of the COG/Canberra Birds on the night in 2020 when he was awarded the Steve Wilson Medal. Bruce commented that COG was the most important organisation that he was involved with during his time in Canberra. Many others of us might hold a similar view.

COG is a remarkable organisation. In the early years it grew from the enthusiasm and guidance of the professional wildlife researchers then coming to Canberra to work in the Wildlife Division and other parts of CSIRO. It was my privilege to have been encouraged and guided by many of them. COG has broadened and grown over the years. It has a strong and trusted voice and has developed a reputation for giving independent, sound and accurate advice to Governments on bird conservation issues in the region. It has had a strong interest in education through talks, publications, events, excursions and regular monthly meetings. It engaged in programs of citizen science before the word was coined. I am particularly proud of my role in starting, with Henry Nix, the Garden Bird Survey over 40 years ago. This data set has already given amazing insights in the changes that have occurred in our birds as the city has developed.

Canberra Birds is not just about the birds we so enjoy. It is also a community of people who share a common and important interest. Whilst members have the opportunity to share their passion and help others to develop skills and knowledge, Canberra Birds, the organisation, also depends on all the other non-birding skills that members bring to the table. Canberra Birds could not do its job for birds without the administrative, management, educational skills and contribution brought by dozens of volunteers, both in official roles and not.

Going back to comments by Bruce Lindenmayer. He said his COG journey started with helping out the tea lady at our monthly meetings. He went on to be President of COG, where he was influential with others in having Mulligans Flat declared a nature reserve. Bruce then finished his days in COG as the tea lady. Everyone can contribute in their own ways.

I acknowledge those in COG /CanberraBirds who inspire young people in a passion for birds and their environment, in my case it included early COG leaders Steve Wilson and Dick Schodde.

Much of the early history of COG was recorded ten years ago in the special edition of Canberra Bird Notes published in our 50th year. We have always been a professional and independent organisation and I have confidence that Canberra Birds is in good hands and maintain that professionalism and independence and will continue to build and evolve under the new 2025 leadership team.

Whilst stepping back from a formal role, I will continue to work on various Canberra Birds projects, notably our databases and ABR, will continue to keep me strongly connected to Canberra Birds and our membership.

Finally, it has been a privilege to be part of the talented team that supports Canberra Birds through the Committee and the wider group of dedicated people who support the whole organisation. I also thank the membership for its continued enthusiastic support.

Neil Hermes
President
Canberra Birds
13 November 2024