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ARTICLES

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NOTES ON A LONG-STAYING VAGRANT WHITE-FRONTED HONEYEATER IN 2007

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Abstract: *In the winter of 2007, a White-fronted Honeyeater (Phylidonyris albifrons) was observed, first at a nature reserve in Canberra and 2 weeks later, at a suburban home and surroundings in Kambah, Canberra. These events are still (19 years later) the only documented occurrences of the species in the COG Area of Interest. The White-fronted Honeyeater normally inhabits a wide and variable range of the semi-dry to arid and mallee inland of Australia. Canberra is a different habitat and far to the east of its normal range.*

They are normally sociable but this bird was alone. The bird resided within a small home range in Kambah for nine weeks. It was very easy to find and was seen by everyone who came to see it. Over these nine weeks, the bird was observed daily and showed some interesting features. Its foraging behaviour was diverse, with nectar, fruit and a wide range of strategies for feeding on insects. It defended and maintained a remarkably consistent attachment to two main food sources and became very predictable in its daily movements between them. Frequent interactions of this bird with other birds are also described. It became very confident around people. It exhibited a restricted range of vocal behaviour, calling a lot but with no song. This article also describes a distinctive plumage feature of a neat, iridescent patch over the ears, which appears not to be sufficiently described in any of the standard references. Lastly, it has been necessary to correct some errors in the way this occurrence and alleged others of this species in the Canberra region have previously been published.

Introduction

On 21 Jun 2007 Steve Holliday found one White-fronted Honeyeater [WFHO] *Phylidonyris (Purnella) albifrons* at Jerrabomberra Wetlands Nature Reserve (JWNR), and reported it to the COG chatline facilitating that others could see it. It was only seen on 21 and 22 Jun 2007. This was the first record of the species for the COG Area of Interest (Holliday 2007).

As with many birds of the semi-arid regions, it is variable in its geographic range and has a tendency to be irruptive, sometimes abundant for a while and absent for long periods (Higgins *et al.* 2001). Available maps show the ACT region as being far to the east of the usual range of even the extremes. Looking at Barrett *et al.* (2003), the closest point to the ACT containing observations of WFHOs is approximately 160 km in a straight line, although its core distribution is much further to the west.

References vary in the genus name given. I have chosen the name format used by Schodde and Mason (1999). It seems odd that a monotypic genus name (*Purnella*) is used in some sources, whilst many combine it with the other *Phylidonyris* species.

The bird was described by Holliday (2007) who provided three photos and stated that, ‘All sightings were within a couple hundred metres of the original observation. It was noted as mainly feeding in eucalypt trees.’ The call was described as ‘a distinctive, single note, metallic call.’ Also: ‘The bird could not be aged, as adults and immatures of this species are apparently not separable in the field. Nor can they be sexed on plumage characters (Higgins *et al.* 2001).’ However, the standard field guides illustrate and describe the juveniles as noticeably different from the adults. The photos taken at the time are sufficient to show that it was an adult. What Holliday meant was that the bird was not a juvenile (as distinct from immature).

On 5 Jul 2007, just 13 days after the bird at JWNR, I heard an unfamiliar bird in my garden, and when I saw it, my first impression was something in the shape of a Crescent Honeyeater (*Phylidonyris pyrrhoptera*) or New Holland Honeyeater (*P. novaehollandiae*). Both these species had in past years been somewhat regular winter occurrences at my Garden Bird Survey (GBS) Site and the latter even had a successful breeding in 1996 (Veerman 2003). But this bird was clearly not these. It was a White-fronted Honeyeater!

This article recounts the observations of this bird in my suburban Canberra Garden.

Observations of the bird at my home.

The most obvious difference from those other species was that it was not mostly black above, but brown and striped, with a rufous coloured rump. It is oddly untidy looking, only slightly yellow on edges of the main wing feathers, with a clear dark throat and strong demarcation from the dark stripes on a whitish breast. It had mostly whitish lores and a very obvious grey oval above the ears. There is a clear red spot behind the eye. I watched it from about 2 metres unobscured but in dull light. I then went back inside, grabbed my video camera and got about 40 seconds of film of it. That was the start of a remarkable occurrence, in that it was observed over a very small area on all but one day for the next nine weeks.

Judging by its plumage, the bird was clearly an adult. Commenting on photos of this WFHO Richard Allan (pers comm.) confirmed the diagnosis: the pointy feathers of the alula are those of an adult bird. The shape of the longest alula feathers varies according to age, in most honeyeaters, including this species (Matthew 1999). It is rounded in juvenile plumage and pointed in adult birds.

On first finding this bird I announced it on the COG chatline: ‘I am serious and flabbergasted...’ Most of what ensued was documented at the time on the COG chatline, so the archive: <http://bioacoustics.cse.unsw.edu.au/archives/html/canberrabirds/2007-07/> has been of great value in compiling this summary.

The location

This part of Kambah in 2007 was a 28-year-old established suburban (garden) habitat. Much of this event occurred at the join of my yard and that of my neighbours, Ian and Hazel Gordon (Fig. 1). They hosted a little *Grevillea rosmarinifolia*, (commonly known as Rosemary Grevillea) bush, about 60 cm high and about 1.8 metres in diameter (that features in this story), along with a quite varied mix of ground cover, shrubs and trees. They have the house directly on the other side of the footpath from my house. My front yard is lawn with a front hedge of *Photinia*, *Hakea* and *Acacia*, with other plants before the house. Both are battleaxe blocks, mine on Castley Circuit, theirs on Boddington Crescent. The footpath goes through the western half of Kambah, linking two quiet roads plus a children’s playground on both sides: It is mid-way between two culs-de-sac, so there is no car traffic. Everard Place on the western side

towards the local IGA shop, and bus stop and Hiles Place on the eastern side, adjoining a 1.3-hectare suburban park of mostly eucalypts. With these features, we have people walking past frequently (about 3 to 8 individuals or groups, each hour).

Being suburban and in normal Canberra style, house properties have side fences but no front fences. Viewing is mostly restricted to a streetscape, front yards and the park area, apart from my home. The very small home range of the WFHO was as shown on Fig. 1. I mainly saw it arrive from the east of my home (along Hiles Place) and usually from the same *Pieris* tree, part hidden behind a fence. I never found where the bird roosted overnight, though I did not actually try. That I often heard it in the early morning suggests it roosted likely in the front garden hedge close to my bedroom (south east side of my house).

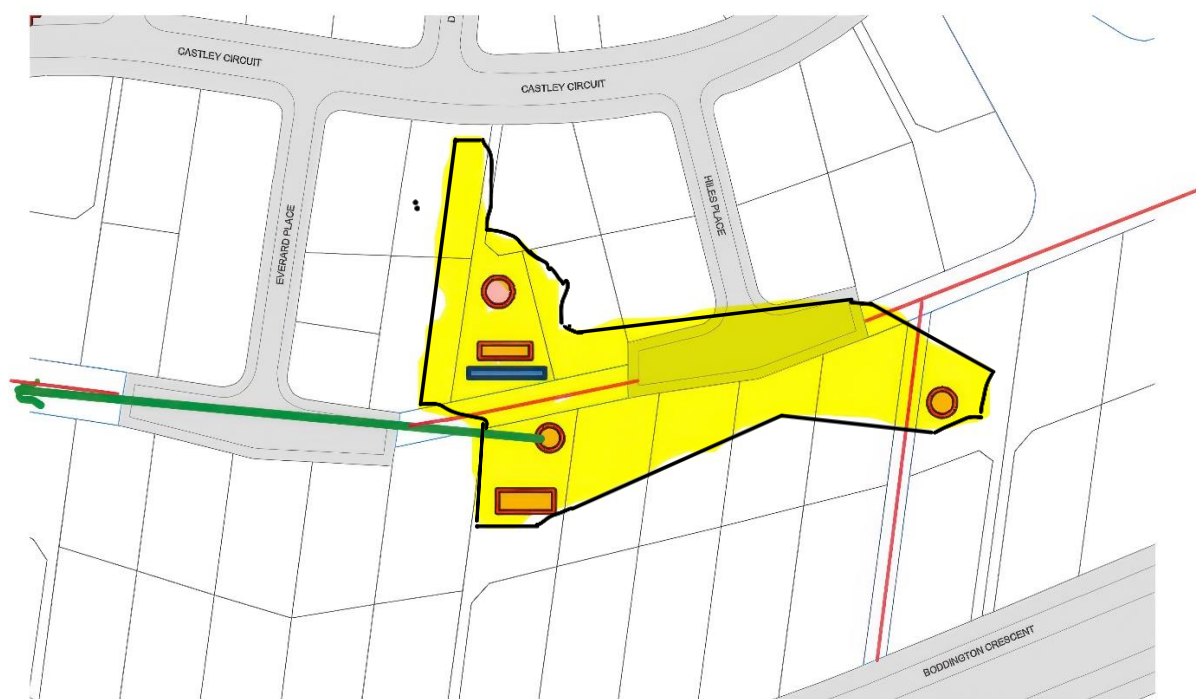


Figure 1. Home range of the White-fronted Honeyeater for the nine weeks.

The enclosed yellow area shows the total area where the bird was observed for the period. The green arrow is the flight path that it departed on the last day it was seen. The orange lines show the pathways linking the 2 culs-de-sac. The red circles show the location of the *Grevillea* bush, the *Pieris* (on the right) and the eucalypt in my yard. The red rectangles are my house (above) and the Gordon house (below). The blue rectangle is the hedge at the front of my home. The top right corner is part of the parkland. Each shape is one residential block. Adapted from ACT cadastral maps.

A bit over two hours after my first sighting, the WFHO flew from the neighbour's yard at the front, over my house and into the backyard of another neighbour at 22 Castley Circuit. This yard, unmaintained and untouched for decades, then had a dense mess of a range of trees and it was not easy to see the bird in there. The next morning Geoffrey Dabb visited. Geoffrey and I walked along Hiles Place and the park and back through my yard, and when we got to the front again, the WFHO appeared in the same trees as yesterday. The bird was mostly in the area along the pathway between my home and this neighbour's house, centred on the profusely flowering *Grevillea*. It is about 5 metres off the path into the Gordons' garden and 17 metres from my bedroom.

The WFHO became very easy to find. Typically, if the bird was not already in the *Grevillea* or flitting or sitting in the deciduous tree immediately above it, it normally arrived along Hiles Place within 5 to 10 minutes. It had a few preferred trees where it stopped along Hiles Place. Several times it was seen to fly into its favoured *Grevillea* when I or a group of people were waiting. Unlike the bird seen at JWNR, this bird ignored the many eucalypt trees in the park area on the eastern side. The only eucalypts I saw it in a few times is the large one that dominates the 'back' garden of my address (believed to be a Blue Gum *E. globulus*), plus the similar one in the adjacent yard at 22 Castley Circuit. There were some periods (including one whole day) when I could not find the bird. I cannot be certain that it was not outside its main range, but there were also times when I did not see it initially, but then found it resting, well hidden in my own front hedge or nearby.

Movements

The WFHO was active, like most honeyeaters, almost constantly moving. Its flight was distinctive, direct, quite fast and jerky. Higgins *et al.* (2001), citing very old references, describe the species as 'wary and shy'. This bird was the total opposite of this. It was mostly unconcerned to have observers as close as about 2 metres, even multiple people with clicking cameras. Several times I set up my video camera (no long lens) on a tripod and the bird virtually filled the screen. When approached closer it flew up high in the deciduous tree or a short distance, then came back a few minutes later. Throughout this period, I went outside many times each day to check where it was or because I had someone come to find it.

On Sunday 8 Jul the bird's behaviour was quite different from all other days. At least five people watched it that day. I heard it call only once or twice, from my bed at 7.30 a.m. It was not in view from about 8.30 till about 10.45. It was quite possible that during the period when others were unsuccessfully looking for it, it was actually in the close vicinity but well hidden. When it was finally found, it spent most of the next few hours sitting very still, on a very exposed perch, about 5 metres up in the deciduous tree above the *Grevillea* as captured in the Fig. 2 photo. Even though there were many thickly foliated trees within a few metres. Its feathers were fluffed out and its head was tucked in over its shoulder (typical sleeping posture for birds), eyes closed and trying to sleep. I thought it looked vulnerable there. It remained easy to approach, not calling at all and gave the impression of being tired and stressed after a particularly inclement, cold, windy and rainy previous day and night. Although that day had turned out clear, calm and sunny. As the sun came out a bit the honeyeater started to fly around, then perched again. Later it interrupted its rest to chase away an Eastern Spinebill. Only briefly it came down to the *Grevillea* for active feeding.

It quickly developed a routine, following a circuit of two main feeding locations. If it went to another feeding spot it would usually return to the *Grevillea* within 10 to 20 minutes. Maybe this was attuned to the rate at which these plants replenished their nectar. Therefore, it rarely required a long wait. Or it could be just tracked down by listening for it.

On 21 Jul I located the *Pieris japonica* tree that was the other main site it occupied. When the WFHO was not visible or audible from my yard, it could usually be found there or coming from there. The tree is in the garden of Julie Taylor, on the corner of a side laneway, which was the eastern limit of the bird's observed movements (Fig. 1).

Feeding

Most nectar feeding was in the low *Grevillea* and it would climb around in the bush, often going well into the foliage. Occasionally it would hover for a few seconds in front of outer flowers. It would even rummage around on the ground to get at the flowers at the bottom. The other main food source was this *Pieris japonica* (commonly known as Lily-of-the-Valley Shrub or Japanese Andromeda). It is an exotic tree and it fed from the small red bell-like flowers.

I was informed (2026) by Julie Taylor, that the WFHO, along with many other birds, was also often feeding on the red berries of a Strawberry tree *Arbutus unedo* in the same garden as the *Pieris*. This is described as a 'versatile, evergreen shrub or small tree (typically 4–9 m), from Europe, producing edible, strawberry-like red berries in autumn, alongside the next year's flowers.'. The fruits were very ripe and the WFHO, fed by pecking holes in the fruits.

Interestingly, the three known main plant food sources of this WFHO were all conspicuously red-coloured.

It also fed frequently on insects. At midday on 1 Aug the WFHO was seen silently feeding, in my *Photinia* and *Hakea* hedge, I think gleaning insects from the foliage. Sometimes it was seen to fly down to the ground, at one stage appearing to pick up an insect. I (and others) also saw it several times hawking for tiny flying insects. On 27 Aug I noted a long fluttering chase of a moth. Then it went into my peach tree and into the big eucalypt in my back yard and was feeding by probing about in the loose hanging bits of bark that this tree always has and at the joins of branches.

A few times I noticed the WFHO foraging in the foliage pressing against my house, I watched (and heard) it searching along the windows and walls of my bedroom and study (south and north sides of my house). Its movements were too quick for me to see exactly but I believe it was picking insects and/or small spiders off the bricks and glass, whilst I was watching inside from < 1 metre away. These events lasted less than a minute. I did not actually see it go close to any other house, apart from the Gordons' house, but there is so much vegetation there that my view was obscured. The only time I have seen this behavior in other birds has been with White-browed Scrubwrens (*Sericornis frontalis*) when they were nesting in my yard.

After about six weeks, in late Aug, the WFHO was using the *Grevillea* less, so it must have been feeding more somewhere else. Hence, the bird became slightly less predictable (at least at my home), including 28 Aug, the only day that it was not seen. This may be partly because fewer people were coming to see it, as by then, most who were interested had already done so and I had less reason to go looking. Maybe due to warmer weather, there were more bees in the *Grevillea*, and they kept it away or removed most of the nectar. By late afternoon the *Grevillea* had been in the shade for a few hours and the bees had gone and so the bird returned. I found it again at about 5.30 pm on 29 Aug, in the *Grevillea*. But it flew straight out and over my house roof and into my big eucalypt and again appeared to be feeding by probing the branches and bark as before. I also watched it feeding on lerp on the eucalypt foliage on three days. Holliday (2007) noted, that this bird 'busily fed at flowers in a variety of eucalypts.' However, the many eucalypts in my area were not in a major flowering at that time.

Variable grey ear patch

The bird has a very obvious, usually grey oval above the ears, which warrants special mention. Most field guides mention this and their illustrations show some of the range of tone. Fig. 2 shows it as almost black, as does Pizzey and Knight (1997). All other guides show it much paler. I suggest all are correct. An impression of this can be obtained from the photos held at https://canberrabirds.org.au/bird_family/honeyeaters/ and also at <http://photogallery.canberrabirds.org.au>. None states that this patch actually changes colour, according to the angle of the light to the observer. It is not a feature that is relevant to distinguish it from other species. It varied from a sort of glittering pale silver grey, maybe a little bit blue, to almost black. This was one of the first things I noticed about it. Only Officer (1964) mentions 'Ear coverts, silver-grey with a patch of white on them'. Higgins *et al.* (2001) hints on page 1058: 'Ear-coverts light grey with silvery iridescent sheen.' No other part of the bird changed colour in the same way. Based on a check of specimens in the Australian National Wildlife Collection, I have been advised that, 'this effect is likely coming from the slight shiny iridescence of this patch of feathers. No other feathers on the birds are shiny, just those on this plumage patch.' Are there any other honeyeater species that show a similar iridescent feature anywhere on their plumage?



Figure 2. The White-fronted Honeyeater perched in the deciduous tree (see text p. 4), 8 Jul 2007 (Geoffrey Dabb).

Calls

The bird was often obvious because most days it called constantly, especially when active and there are no other birds with a similar sound. Several times it would perch fairly high in a tree, resting and sometimes was silent then. Julian Robinson wrote that 'in about an hour of watching it I heard it only twice, a peep and a double chirrup is as well as I can describe them'. On many days it came so close to my house, that I could hear it and often see it from inside the house. I

listened to the recordings of calls of WFHO on the Bird Observers Club of Australia (BOCA) cassette tape. There are also many recordings of their calls on Xeno-canto. <https://xeno-canto.org/explore?query=White-fronted+Honeyeater&pg=1>; also [ebird <https://ebird.org/species/whfhon1>](https://ebird.org/species/whfhon1). These include the calls I heard but also a wide range of song phrases. Higgins *et al.* (2001), and most of the field guides mention these songs. This bird was never heard to make any of them, only the 'toc' and the 'shirp sweep' calls. The almost constant low 'toc' sound resembles a badly functioning clock and is well represented on these recordings. The single rather rasping 'shirp' or double 'shirp sweep' appears to be a component of some of the song phrases heard on these recordings. I can only suggest that the lack of any of the more complex song phrases from this bird over the whole time is connected to the fact that it was isolated from any others of the species, or the time of year (winter), or maybe females don't sing and this was a female. Holliday (2007) also reported calls made by the bird at JWNR as consistent with my observation.

I was curious at this bird's apparently limited repertoire, so Geoffrey and I wondered if the bird would respond to playback of song. On the afternoon of 4 Aug I played the BOCA cassette tape of the WFHO. It was hard to say if there was any response. It flitted around me, chased away a Silvereye (*Zosterops lateralis*) and appeared to look in the direction of the sound (cassette player only about 2 to 4 metres away). It did not call at all whilst I played the tape. After some minutes of many repeats of the segment and then switching it off, it did call a lot, with the 'toc' call. It then stayed sitting quietly for about 15 minutes. That is suggestive of some recognition but is difficult to interpret, as the reaction was not very different from many other periods of observation. I neglected to repeat the experiment.

Interactions with other birds

As is typical of most honeyeaters, it showed and received a lot of aggression, although mostly just chasing. That is likely for the purpose of reducing food competition for an isolated food source. Most of the time, the only other nectar feeders in that *Grevillea* (or indeed within view) were Red Wattlebirds (*Anthochaera carunculata*) and Eastern Spinebills (*Acanthorhynchus tenuirostris*) and sometimes a flock of Silvereyes. One comment was: 'It is remarkably faithful to that *Grevillea* and the large deciduous tree, spending 98% of the time I was there, in one or the other. The remainder of the time was mostly spent chasing other birds out of the *Grevillea* - a Spinebill, several Silvereyes and two White-naped Honeyeaters (*Melithreptus lunatus*).' It was usually successful in chasing away singles of these other birds (especially the spinebill, but not the Red Wattlebird), but less so if there were two or more of them. The WFHO had difficulty chasing out a flock of 10 to 20 Silvereyes. One other person wrote that the WFHO '...then joined some Silvereyes for a few minutes before flying into the *Grevillea* where I had fantastic views.' The Silvereyes were in the *Grevillea* so often that week that they may have reduced that food source.

On 4 Aug I watched it come down to the large fishpond in the other side of the Gordon's yard. It seemed to want to bathe or drink but as it hopped along the edge of the pond, a Satin Bowerbird (*Ptilonorhynchus violaceus*) chased it off and it departed over the roof of their and my house and I found it in my yard. Another time there was a Red Wattlebird in the *Grevillea*. With some encouragement from me, it left. The WFHO had been watching from above and flew into the *Grevillea* about two minutes later. On 15 Aug there were several Satin Bowerbirds sitting in and many Silvereyes foliage-bathing in my *Photinia* from the light rain. The WFHO was also foliage-bathing but mostly chasing the Silvereyes around the tree - a losing endeavour, as it was very outnumbered. On 17 Aug it was sitting in the open tree about a metre from a White-plumed Honeyeater (*Lichenostomus penicillatus*). Both were busy preening and they

took no obvious notice of each other. On 24 Aug it flew over the house and perched in my apple tree. Later it was in the *Grevillea* again and later still it was in the big eucalypt in my back yard, having a bit of a dispute with a White-plumed Honeyeater. One time I watched a Grey Shrike-thrush (*Colluricincla harmonica*) chase the WFHO. The shrike-thrush was singing throughout the period and had just been chased by a male Common Blackbird (*Turdus merula*). There were many Spotted (*Pardalotus punctatus*) and Striated Pardalotes (*P. striatus*) in the vicinity on most days but I saw few if any obvious interactions with them. For example, on 24 Jul whilst feeding on lerp in the eucalypt, the WFHO showed no interest in chasing the nearby Pardalotes (< 1 metre away), in contrast to its aggression towards Spinebills and Silvereyes in the *Grevillea*.

Last sighting

The bird was seen by me (and often others) every day except one, for nine weeks, since 5 Jul. I was mostly at home during that period. I have lost the record of the date of the last sighting but it was certainly the 1st, 2nd or 3rd of Sep. I never previously saw the bird more than about 20 metres to the west of its preferred food plants. It was always to the east or north. The last time I saw the WFHO, it was perched on its favoured deciduous tree above the *Grevillea* and rapidly giving the 'toc' call (maybe a few minutes). As I watched and it seemed, as often, to be aware of me, it flew off to the west, still calling and very obviously, not amongst the vegetation but directly above the middle of Everard Place, 2 to 3 metres above the road, without stopping at any of the gardens, towards the bus stop and disappeared into the distance. It was not seen again that day or later. This departure was notable because it seemed so purposeful and I had not previously seen it go or arrive from that direction, or fly that distance without a pause.

Clarification of other mentions of the species in *Canberra Bird Notes*

Checking is needed to see if there are other records of WFHO in the COG Area of Interest. There were none prior to Jun 2007. The text for the species in the various COG Annual Bird Reports (ABR) needs some comment. The COG (2008) ABR includes: 'General: 5 records, all of the one bird at Jerrabomberra wetlands.' This is the one described by Holliday (2007).

There are, however, problems with later mentions. The one from my home, starting 13 days later, is within the period of the next year's ABR. The COG (2009) ABR repeats mention of the bird at JWNR from Jun 2007 (in the previous year), then states: '4 records, 3 from the one garden in Kambah GrJ14 from 6-8 Jul'. These would be the dates of the written records sent in by different people, about 'my' bird, although this bird was present until early Sep. It also, strangely, suggests another, from somewhere else, by continuing: '1 record further south in Kambah GrJ16 19 Jul (GiM3)'. It would have been notable if that was correct, but it is wrong. After noting that 'GiM3' (Mat Gilfedder) is on my list of those who visited my home, I clarified with him (in 2026) to find that the ABR mention attributed to him of another WFHO at the same time, allegedly two grid cells south of mine, is wrong (but no fault of his). The explanation is, having seen 'my' bird, he also put in a record, quoting the correct grid cell J16. This fourth record is simply another report of the same bird at my home, which is in J16. It is not a separate bird two grid cells to the south. The error occurred because my home (GBS Site 152,) is in Grid J16, not in Grid J14 (J14 is well north of Kambah). It is a mystery to me that my site was taken to be in J14.

Comments in the ABR can be a bit confusing if an unusual bird is mentioned in the general records as well as going into GBS database. The COG (2009) ABR also states for the GBS:

'The single bird reported under General records was recorded in the GBS site in Kambah GrJ14 (VeP1) from 1wk Jul to 4wk Sep'. (Note this repeats the same grid cell error.) That end date is wrong. The GBS chart shows it was the nine weeks (27 to 35), until 4wk Aug, (not 4wk Sep). The 4th week of Aug includes three days of Sep. (The GBS Calendar is explained by Veerman 2003.)

Whether or not a grid site is mentioned (with or without mention of the suburb) for GBS records in any ABR appears to be random. To check this, I found all of the 113 ABR mentions of my observer code (VeP1) for my home GBS site since 2000. In these 21 ABR, the grid site was given wrongly as J14 these two times and another 2 times, once each as K15 and I16. It was correct as J16, 74 times and not given 35 times. By comparison, Veerman (2003) refers to sites only by their GBS Site number (listed in Appendix 3) and suburb and region in Canberra, but does not mention the COG geographic grid cells.

Other COG ABR mentions of WFHO after 2007 also need correction: The ABR of COG (2010), (2011), (2013) and (2014) repeat mention the two 2007 records at JWNR and my home. There was no mention of the species in the ABR of COG (2012) & (2015). The ABR (for 2011/2012) of COG (2013) included: '1 unconfirmed record this year: 4/21 Aug Belconnen Golf Club GrI12.' This was not attributed and appears not to have ever been mentioned elsewhere (such as COG chatline or *Gang-gang*). Four of this species in our area seems highly unlikely and if correct should have received a lot of attention. Then each ABR from COG (2016) to (2020) (the latest) state: 'First recorded in 2007 at JWNR, and sporadic sightings subsequently in 2010, 2011 (all in the ACT) and 2013 at LGeo.' That retrospective text totally ignored the longest (nine weeks) record at my home and was simply copied forward year to year. Presumably (but not stated) the mention of 2011 is the "unconfirmed Belconnen Golf Club" one. However, there is no mention of any of these other alleged 'sporadic sightings' in the relevant ABR. There are no dates, observers, submissions to the COG Rarities Panel (RP) (let alone endorsed records) and no photographs for any of these. Ebird (locally) still has only the two 2007 occurrences described here.

With no endorsement or information, for a locally rare species, these other mentions should not go on the record, (unless someone can come forward). There is no information that would be sufficient to begin any search. I suggest it is very likely that all of these alleged 'reports' are errors in data entry or identification.

To summarise, there was no WFHO in grid J14 and no second bird two grid cells south of mine. The only certain records are the Jun 2007 JWNR one and the Jul to Sep 2007 Kambah one. That remains the most recent confirmed record of the species for our area. Part of the reason for my delay in writing this was to see if we would get any more records. Sadly, I do not recall having noticed any of the above errors and dubious reports at the time of publication. I certainly have not investigated any of them, until preparing this article in 2026.

Even with over 50 people who saw 'my' bird, there is only one submission (mine) of it to the RP. This is acceptable as, having endorsed mine, the RP has no need for additional submissions of the same bird at the same place and time. Both of these 2007 records were endorsed by the RP: the JWNR event (COG 2007A) from reports by Steve Holliday and Geoffrey Dabb, and mine (COG 2007B) (citing the correct grid site J16, although my submission included a list of the people who had seen it), with the suggestion from the RP that it was a 'notable drought-induced inland species'.

Some comparisons

There is no way to know if the bird that appeared at my home is the same bird that appeared at JWNR two weeks earlier. I suspect the bird had not been at my location much before 5 Jul, as I would have found it sooner. By the closeness in time and similarity of the photos and the similar behaviour and calls, I can suggest it is likely to be the same bird. If not, it is reasonable to suggest that the two events are connected. The straight-line distance between Jerrabomberra Wetlands and my home is 15.6 km. A bird could travel that distance in 13 days. It is several hundred kilometres outside its normal range.

Attention the bird received

The bird was the subject of about 70 messages to the COG chatline over that nine-week period, many being my updates. That count does not include some threads on peripheral issues, such as whether vagrant birds actually occur more often and have not been noticed. There was a discussion (subject: 'Honeyeater Poll') about why the species and the Black-chinned Honeyeater (*Melithreptus gularis*) had not previously been recorded in the COG Area of Interest (Have they been overlooked?). Most thought this event was a genuine first-time vagrant. The bird was also mentioned by Holland (2007) and on pages 6, 8 and 9 of the Aug 2007 *Gang-gang* (including the first photo to be issued, plus links to others) and at the Aug 2007 COG meeting, making this one individual among the most discussed birds we have had.

This comment from Julian Robinson on 11 Jul 2007 is fairly typical of the reaction of observers: 'Having watched Philip's bird at 1300 for 20 minutes, then again at 1510 for 45 minutes. It's a champion subject, both times appearing within a few minutes of the start of my vigil at The Bush, and content to carry out a variety of bird activities in front of the observer - mostly preening, feeding and chasing.' Another: 'Have just returned from Kambah. Stood in front of the grevillea for a while - no WFHO. Then Philip came through the photinias and immediately the bird appeared - very lively and seemed to be hawking for small insects above one of the low trees, apart from feeding at the grevillea.'

I kept a list of the 57 'birdo' people who specifically came to see the bird (see Appendix 1). One visitor came from Brisbane (combining with a work trip, took a taxi from the airport to my house and saw the bird immediately on arrival). Two separate pairs of observers came from Sydney and I think someone from Melbourne, but most were Canberra people. One person came in a wheelchair. Of the at least 57 people who came to see it, only one person missed out on their first try. It is certainly unusual for a vagrant bird, especially a small bird to be so easy to find. For a 'twitching' event, such a high success rate is remarkable (and a lot of fun for me).

Due to the location of the pathway, many local residents noticed people with binoculars and cameras and stopped to look. Over time, neighbours came to know what was going on and I would get comments like 'Is the bird still here?'

Acknowledgements

I thank all the people who came to visit me and the bird, many of whom obtained photos and/or wrote messages on the COG chatline: my neighbours Ian and Hazel Gordon, who host the *Grevillea* bush and were obliging to the people standing around on the path and their back garden, the vegetation there being sufficiently dense to screen the view into their windows. Similar for Julie Taylor with her *Pieris*. Plus: Barbara Allan, Richard Allen, Lia Battison, Martin Butterfield, Geoffrey Dabb, Kim Farley, Mat Gilfedder, Tobias Hayashi, Steve Holliday, Anna Kearns, Michael Lenz, David McDonald, Steven Mugford, Harvey Perkins and

Julie Taylor, who all promptly answered my questions to help me construct this article, in some cases, with a gap of many years in my asking. The annotated Fig. 2 photo is from Geoffrey Dabb.

Among the many chatline comments were these two that I chose to conclude with: Graeme Clifton wrote: ‘What are the odds of 1 WFHO coming to Canberra and setting up house on the doorstep of a COG member's house?’ Another, from Dr Stephen Mugford with the subject: ‘Good karma’: ‘...There is a kind of pleasing justice in the fact that someone who has put huge and diligent efforts into the bird survey over the years is now rewarded with his own personal copy of a WFHO in his yard which birdos across the ACT make pilgrimage to see.’ I had the pleasant opportunity to mention that quote when receiving the Steve Wilson medal at the COG Annual General Meeting in November 2025 (Canberra Birds 2025).

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Appendix 1: Other observers of the bird

If there is an asterisk following, that indicates that I believe, that person obtained photographic or video film of the bird. Also ** indicates this person's photo is in the Photo gallery of the COG website. Apologies if I have missed any names and *s. This list does not include casual passers-by who showed an interest.

Frank Antram*, Shaun Bagley, Lia Battison, Evan Beaver, Suzi Bond, Chris Charles*, Graeme Clifton, Elizabeth Compston, William Compston, Roger Curnow*, Geoffrey Dabb*, Geoffrey Duggan, Suzanne Edgar, Muriel Edwards, Matthew Frawley, Mat Gilfedder, Hazel Gordon, Ian Gordon, Bill Handke, Stuart Harris**, Judy Harrison, Tobias Hayashi, Sandra Henderson, Owen Holton, Lloyd Hooper, Julianne Kamprad, Shelagh Kemm, Sue Lashko, Dean Lord, Rod Mackay, Penny Madvig, Peter Madvig, David McDonald, Pat McNicol, Peter McNicol, Dianne Northrop, Lindsay Northrop, Sue Osmond, Harvey Perkins *, Julian Robinson*, David Rosalky, Rosemary Ryan, Alastair Smith, David Stowe*, James Stowe, Julie Taylor, Paul Taylor (not related), Kendall Wheeler, Wendy Whitham, Benj Whitworth, Kevin Windle, Alan Wright, Hazel Wright, Marnix Zwankhuizen, Mauritz Zwankhuizen, Karen ----.

eBIRD HOTSPOT - STONY CREEK NATURE RESERVE

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Introduction

This article covers the Stony Creek Nature Reserve eBird Hotspot <https://ebird.org/hotspot/L2542746>, which is located in the northeast section of the Reserve. At the time of writing the Hotspot is ranked 17th in the ACT with regard to species listed (149) and 44th in terms of the number of checklists (543).

One possible reason for the disparity in ranking between the number of bird species seen and the number of checklists might be that some birders are not aware how to access the Hotspot; eBird uses Google Maps which do not show the extent or boundaries of the Reserve or how to access it.

The article provides a brief description of the Reserve and how to access the Hotspot, and what bird species might be seen and when.

Stony Creek Nature Reserve

The Stony Creek Nature Reserve is a large reserve that straddles the Murrumbidgee River from just north of the Cotter Road bridge to a short distance south of the Uriarra crossing (Fig. 1).

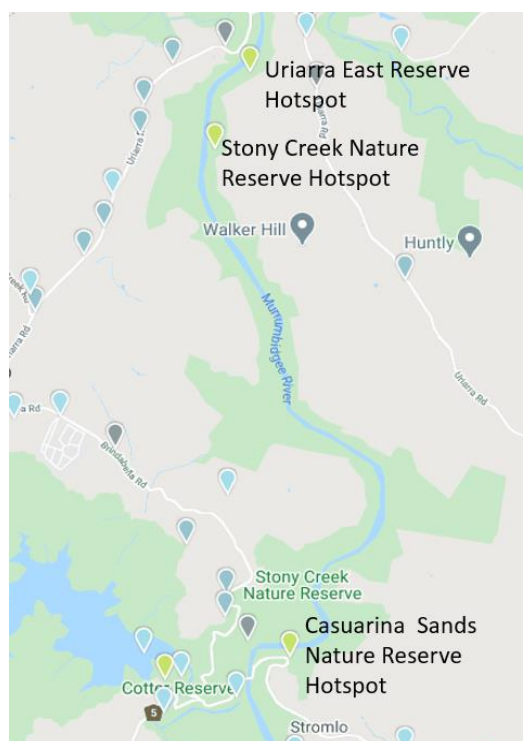
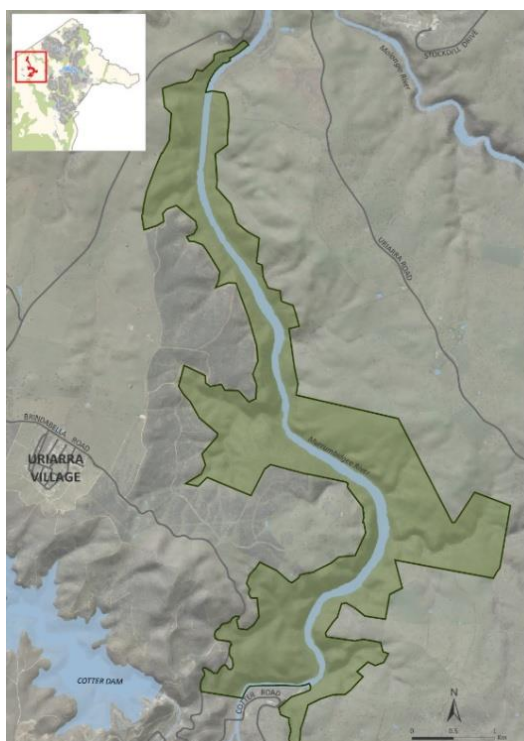


Figure 1. Stony Creek Nature Reserve. Figure 2. Stony Creek NR eBird Hotspot.

¹ All photos taken by the author at the Stony Creek Nature Reserve.

The Reserve provides a riparian land habitat for birds which, whilst not unique for Canberra, provides interest from a birding perspective.

Overall access to and within the reserve is quite limited; only a relatively small portion of the reserve is covered by trails and much of the terrain is steep and rugged. The eBird Hotspot (Fig. 2) covers the Uriarra River Trail, which is in the northern part of the reserve, and follows the eastern bank of the river. It is possible to access the western part the Reserve from the southern end but how to do so is outside the scope of this article.

Access and Habitat

The Hotspot is accessed from the Uriarra East Picnic Area carpark. To get to the carpark, take the Uriarra Road via John Gorton Drive and Opperman Avenue and turn left at the signpost for the picnic area. There are toilets and BBQ facilities available. A short trail to the Reserve is accessed via a locked gate at the southernmost end of the carpark as shown at Fig. 3.



Figure 3. Uriarra East Carpark Gate. **Figure 4. Stony Creek Nature Reserve Sign.**

It is about a ten-minute walk to the entrance to the Reserve, which is signposted (Fig. 4). The trail between the carpark and Reserve is through a grassy and open wooded section. The area was extensively burnt in the 2003 bushfires; there are some surviving eucalypt trees but also scrub, blackberry bushes and regrowth. The trail is generally easy going although there is a one short moderately steep section across a mainly dry creek. When taking the trail it is worthwhile looking eastwards up towards the adjoining hill for raptors, either perched or hunting.

The trail within the Reserve itself continues for approximately three kilometres and then stops. The trail follows the river. It is mainly flat but there is a short moderately steep section at the start of the trail just after the sign. With regard to vegetation, the trail follows mainly mixed grassland and much of the riverbank is lined with casuarina trees. The other side of the trail is generally quite steep and covered with dense tea-tree scrub. The trail is maintained but sometimes the grass gets uncomfortably long. In addition, wombats frequently excavate under the trail and walkers should be careful not to fall into the burrows. The trail is not much frequented, other than by birders and the occasional angler hoping to catch a Murray Cod or the occasional dog owner who decides that the reserve rules prohibiting dogs do not apply to them. Apart from wombats, a patient observer might be rewarded by the sight of a platypus in the river searching for food.

Species

eBird lists the species seen at the Hotspot although it should be noted that some birders include species seen at the nearby Uriarra East Reserve hotspot. As with many Canberra hotspots, late

spring/summer is arguably the most productive time to visit Stony Creek. It is one of the more reliable sites in the ACT to see the following summer migrants: Rainbow Bee-eater (Fig. 5), Dollarbird (Fig. 6) and Mistletoebird (Fig. 7). Rainbow Bee-eaters often nest along the trail – either in the adjoining trail bank or, if the soil is soft enough, under the trail itself. The first bee-eaters usually arrive in October and the last leave in March. Dollarbirds are also usually present throughout the summer.

Mistletoebirds are numerous throughout the summer and a few overwinter. They are sometimes difficult to spot, especially high up amongst the casuarina foliage. Fortunately, they call frequently and are more often heard before they are seen. Learning their calls beforehand can determine their presence and help pinpoint their location.



Figure 5. Rainbow Bee-eaters.



Figure 6. Dollarbird.

Other commonly encountered summer migrants include Horsefield's Bronze-cuckoo, Shining Bronze-cuckoo (Fig. 8), Fan-tailed Cuckoo, Noisy Friarbird, White-throated Gerygone, Olive-backed Oriole, Black-faced Cuckooshrike, Rufous Whistler, Dusky Woodswallow, Grey Fantail and Leaden Flycatcher. Less frequently observed summer migrants include Sacred Kingfisher, Western Gerygone, White-winged Triller, Tree Martin and Sahul Brush Cuckoo.



Figure 7. Mistletoebird.



Figure 8. Shining Bronze Cuckoo.

All year-round residents include Superb Fairywren, Eurasian Blackbird, White-browed Scrubwren, New Holland Honeyeater, Red-browed Finch, Grey Butcherbird, White-winged Chough, Eastern Spinebill, White-throated Treecreeper, Grey Shrikethrush and Brown, Striated and Yellow-rumped Thornbill. A pair of Eastern Whipbirds are sometimes heard calling from the other side of the river. Less frequently seen residents include Eastern Yellow

Robin (Fig. 9) and Speckled Warbler. Varied Sitellas sometimes travel from tree to tree along the trail.

Although currently classified as rare breeding visitors, Pied Butcherbirds have resided in or close by to the reserve for at least the last ten years and are most often seen or heard from the trail leading into the reserve. Fig. 10 shows a Pied Butcherbird with nesting material.



Figure 9. Eastern Yellow Robin.



Figure 10. Pied Butcherbird.

Commonly seen winter visitors include Scarlet Robin, Golden Whistler and White-eared Honeyeater. The Flame Robin is an infrequent winter visitor.

There are almost always water birds feeding or roosting along the river. Most frequently seen are White-faced Heron (Fig. 11), Pacific Black Duck, Maned Duck and Little Pied Cormorant. Masked Lapwings, Great Cormorants, Little Black Cormorants, Black-fronted Dotterels, Australian Pelicans (Fig. 12) and Australasian Grebes are also seen from time to time. Azure Kingfishers are very infrequently seen either flying along the river or hunting from various vantage points like branches or rocks.



Figure 11. White-faced Heron.



Figure 12. Australian Pelican.

Stony Creek is usually a reliable site for raptors, especially for Wedge-tailed Eagles (Fig. 13) and Nankeen Kestrels. Both species sometimes nest in the reserve. Brown Falcons, Brown Goshawks and Collared Sparrowhawks are also seen sufficiently frequently to suggest that they also nest within the reserve, or at least nearby. Peregrine Falcons and Australian Hobbies (Fig. 14) sometimes visit, and White-bellied Sea Eagles are occasionally seen flying along the river corridor. A rare vagrant, the Black Falcon, has been listed at the Hotspot on four separate occasions and in May 2020 a pair of Black Falcons were observed mounting a sustained and

coordinated attack on a flock of starlings on the hill adjoining the trail from the carpark to the Reserve.



Figure 13. Wedge-tailed Eagles.



Figure 14. Australian Hobby.

Stony Creek is not an especially productive site for parrots. Crimson Rosellas, Galahs and Sulphur-crested Cockatoos are frequently seen. Eastern Rosellas, King Parrots, Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos and Red-rumped Parrots are sometimes seen. Gang-gang Cockatoos and Little Corellas are very occasionally seen passing through. Other parrots are rarely, if ever, seen there

Stony Creek can be a productive site for honeyeaters especially when the she-oak mistletoe (*Amyema cambagei*) plants are flowering. Eastern Spinebill and New Holland Honeyeaters are most often seen feeding but are sometimes joined by Crescent Honeyeaters (Fig. 15), Fuscous Honeyeaters, and on rare occasions by Yellow-tufted and Scarlet Honeyeaters (Fig. 16). In addition, there have been some significant honeyeater sightings at Stony Creek. Up to 6 Painted Honeyeaters were observed in the reserve over an extended period from October 2013 until February 2014. Then in October 2021 a single Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater was observed over several days. Both the Painted Honeyeaters and the Spiny Cheeked Honeyeater were observed feeding in casuarinas with flowering she-oak mistletoe.



Figure 15. Crescent Honeyeater.



Figure 16. Scarlet Honeyeater.

The Murrumbidgee River is a natural transit corridor for migrating birds and for birds moving around the local area. Yellow-faced Honeyeaters and White-naped Honeyeaters transit along the river during their migration season, albeit not as many as for some other migration paths. A Restless Flycatcher was observed passing through in October 2020. An Olive Whistler was observed passing through the reserve in August 2020, well outside its normal habitat.

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**SEASONAL CHANGES IN ELEVATION USE
BY FLAME ROBINS (*PETROICA PHOENICEA*)
IN THE ACT (2015–2025)**

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Abstract: Analysis of Flame Robin (*Petroica phoenicea*) data from eBird records in the Australian Capital Territory (2015–2025) reveals a pronounced seasonal shift in elevation use. During the breeding period (mid-spring to late summer), records are concentrated at higher elevations, while in winter, they shift to lower elevations. Mid-elevations serve as transitional zones. Statistical analyses show that monthly elevation differences are highly significant, supporting a structured pattern of altitudinal migration.

Introduction

Seasonal movement is well recognised in Australian robins. Several species show altitudinal migration between breeding and non-breeding periods (Higgins *et al.* 2001; Newton 2008). The Flame Robin (*Petroica phoenicea*) usually breeds at higher elevations and moves to lower areas in the non-breeding season (Higgins *et al.* 2001; Newton 2008; Pizzey and Knight 2012), though some sources report breeding at lower elevations in parts of its range (Taylor and COG 1992; Holland 2014, Cooper *et al.* 2020). However, these works do not clarify whether such cases are anomalies or track their movements after breeding. Furthermore, published accounts tend to describe this species' movements in broad terms, with studies tending to focus on seasonal presence across regions (*e.g.* Higgins *et al.* 2001; Pizzey and Knight 2012), rather than on detailed changes in elevation use over time. This gap highlights the value of community science data, such as eBird, for examining patterns more closely (Johnston *et al.* 2021).

In the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), this movement is widely recognised. During spring and summer, Flame Robins are observed at higher elevations such as the Brindabella Ranges, and their presence is associated with breeding activity (Lamm and Calaby 1950; Lamm and Wilson 1966; Taylor and COG 1992). These landscapes are characterised by dense forests, including montane, wet and dry sclerophyll, and cooler, moister conditions (ACT Government 2023). From mid to late April, large numbers of Flame Robins depart these habitats (Lamm and Wilson 1966; Taylor and COG 1992). By winter, the species is predominantly observed in lower elevation open woodlands, grasslands, and suburban areas (Frith 1984; Wilson 1999; Hermes 2022). However, few formal studies have quantified the timing, structure, and continuity of these movements over many years in the ACT.

This study asks whether Flame Robin elevation use changes abruptly or gradually over the seasons. Do Flame Robins exhibit a consistent annual pattern of seasonal elevation use across the study period? The use of mid-elevation habitats is also assessed to provide a local, data-driven perspective on elevation use.

Methods

Study area

The ACT features a broad elevational gradient, enabling a detailed examination of seasonal elevation use by Flame Robins (Robinson 1990a). Lowland urban and woodland habitats dominate the north and east; higher montane forests and subalpine environments, mainly in the Brindabella Ranges and Bimberi Wilderness to the west and south. Namadgi National Park and nearby uplands exceed 1000 m, whereas the Canberra urban basin lies largely between 550 m and 700 m.

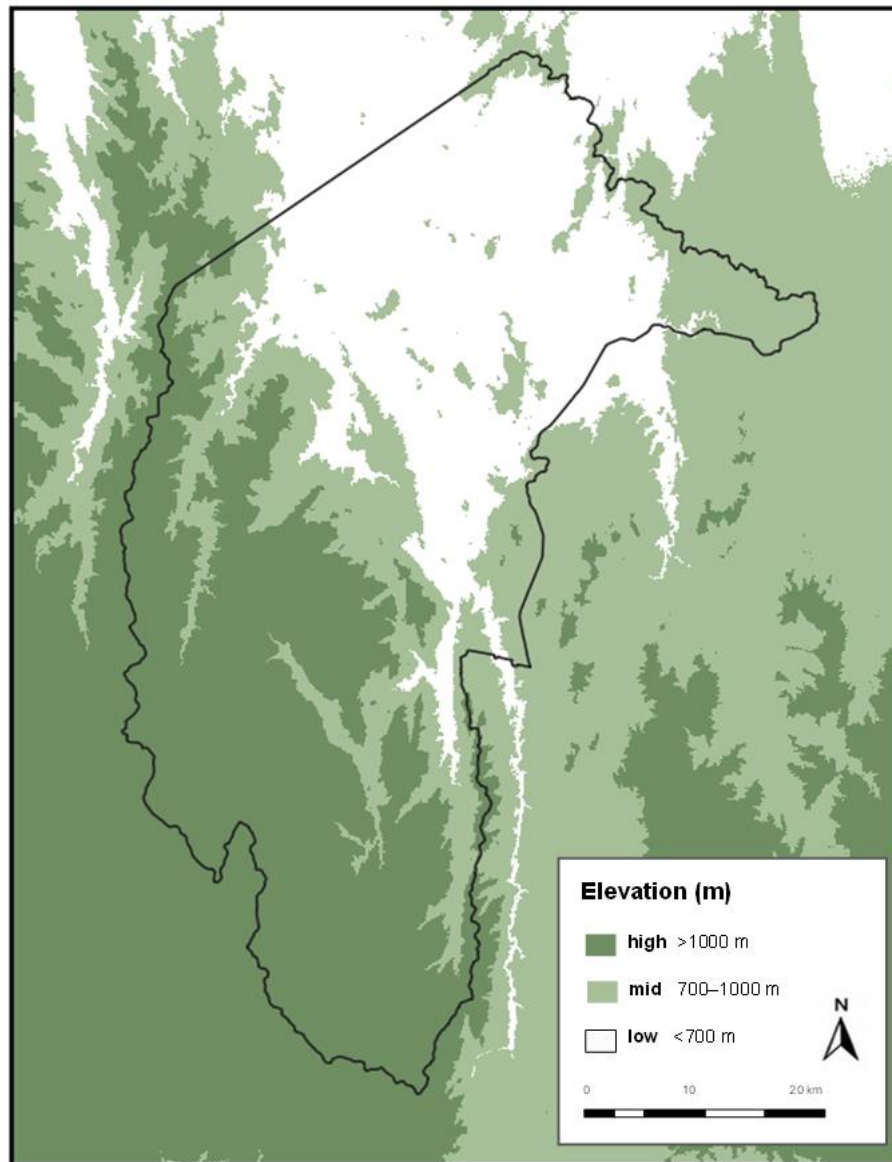


Figure 1. Elevation bands across the ACT region.

Data collection and filtering

All observational data for this study were derived from eBird records (eBird 2026). To ensure adequate temporal coverage, ACT records from 2015 to 2025 were used because earlier years had fewer and less consistent samples (Sullivan *et al.* 2014; Johnston *et al.* 2021; eBird 2026). Notably, 2015 was the first year with more than 150 unique Flame Robin records, providing

sufficient data for comparisons.

All checklists were considered, regardless of start time or duration. This maximised sample size and mitigated potential seasonal variation bias in observer behaviour and detectability, including changes in light, temperature, and bird activity (Johnston *et al.* 2021).

Duplicate stationary and travelling checklists were excluded to avoid multiple sampling of the same observation. Each record corresponds to unique encounters, not true abundance (Johnston *et al.* 2021). Values are descriptive and unadjusted for effort or observer variation.

Incidental eBird observations (131) were also excluded from due to a lack of standardised survey effort. Unlike stationary and travelling checklists, incidentals lack survey parameters such as search duration, survey distance, and observer effort. This makes comparison across time and elevation difficult (Johnston *et al.* 2021).

A total of 2,843 unique records were analysed: 744 (26%) during the breeding period, and 2,099 outside it (non-breeding).

Elevation classification

Each unique record was assigned a GPS-derived elevation calculated via the online GPS Visualiser tool (2026). ACT elevation bands were: low (≤ 700 m), mid (700–1000 m), and high (≥ 1000 m), as shown in Fig. 1.

Breeding period definition

The breeding period was defined as 20 September to 1 March. This window, although broader than many published ranges, is consistent with available accounts (Frith 1984; Taylor and COG 1992; Wilson 1999; Higgins *et al.* 2001; Pizzey and Knight 2012; Hermes 2022). ACT observations show that some breeding may occur as early as August. Low-elevation breeding typically begins in mid-September, while higher elevation breeding starts in December (Frith 1984; Taylor and COG 1992).

In addition to timing, the selected window also aligns with observed patterns of elevation use. High-elevation presence increases from late September, peaks in mid-summer, and drops after late February (Taylor and COG 1992). This broader seasonal framework reflects breeding-related habitat selection (Robinson 1990b), including pre-laying and post-fledging dependence. Because elevation use shifts gradually from early spring to late summer, the chosen range delineates a functional breeding period for analysis. It does not strictly define dates for specific breeding activities such as nest-building, incubation, or post-fledging care.

Statistical analysis

Monthly mean elevations are presented with 95% confidence intervals calculated as: $\bar{x} \pm 1.96 \times (SD / \sqrt{n})$. To test for differences in elevation across months, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used. Welch ANOVA was also applied to confirm robustness to unequal variances across months.

Data strength and limitations

The dataset is suitable for identifying broad seasonal patterns due to its large sample size across many years, and elevations (Sullivan *et al.* 2014), with improved precision enabled by GPS-derived altitudes, rather than relying only on generalised hotspot names and site descriptions.

However, presence-only records lack information regarding non-detections and survey effort. Results should be interpreted as encounter patterns rather than population estimates (Johnston *et al.* 2021). Furthermore, despite the removal of duplicates, the dataset remains opportunistic (Kelling *et al.* 2019). Overall, the dataset is suitable for pattern detection but limited for causal inference (Isaac *et al.* 2014).

Results

Monthly altitude pattern

Table 1 summarises Flame Robin records (2015–2025) by season (month) and altitude.

Building on the data presented in Table 1, the monthly altitude summary shows a clear and consistent seasonal cycle. Specifically, Fig. 2 displays mean elevation trends, while Fig. 3 illustrates the corresponding changes in the proportion of records across elevation bands.

Flame Robin records occurred across a broad elevational range throughout the annual cycle, ranging from 457 m to 1,871 m above sea level. This distribution is further characterised by pronounced seasonal variation in both mean elevation and elevation-band distribution, reinforcing the patterns described above.

Mean altitude is highest from late September to early March, especially December to February, when high-elevation records dominate (Fig. 2). It is lowest from May to July, when over 80% of records occur below 700 m (Fig. 3). From July to September, there is a gradual upslope transition from low- to high-elevations: during this period, mid-elevations are increasingly used, preceding a shift to high-elevation dominance in late spring and summer. In contrast, starting in late February and continuing through March and April, a pronounced downslope shift occurs, culminating in low-elevation dominance from May onwards.

Table 1. Monthly altitude of Flame Robin records in the ACT (2015–2025).

Month	n	Altitude (m)					Proportional Elevation bands (%)		
		Min	Max	Mean	SD	95% CI	Low <700 m	Mid 700–1000 m	High >1000 m
Jan	143	477	1,680	1,183	228	228 ± 37	5	15	80
Feb	91	477	1,847	1,213	261	261 ± 54	7	9	85
Mar	129	457	1,851	1,082	268	268 ± 46	12	21	67
Apr	289	461	1,852	810	275	275 ± 32	57	16	27
May	375	457	1,292	664	131	131 ± 13	84	11	5
Jun	299	461	1,033	649	99	99 ± 11	86	13	1
Jul	318	461	1,343	690	154	154 ± 17	80	14	7
Aug	436	457	1,446	733	184	184 ± 17	63	28	9
Sep	252	461	1,680	828	262	262 ± 32	46	29	25
Oct	255	461	1,871	1,009	281	281 ± 34	21	25	53
Nov	127	457	1,680	1,071	303	303 ± 53	17	23	60
Dec	129	565	1,844	1,287	269	269 ± 46	4	7	89

Note: Values indicate mean altitude and elevation band distribution by unique checklists; confidence intervals are for monthly means.

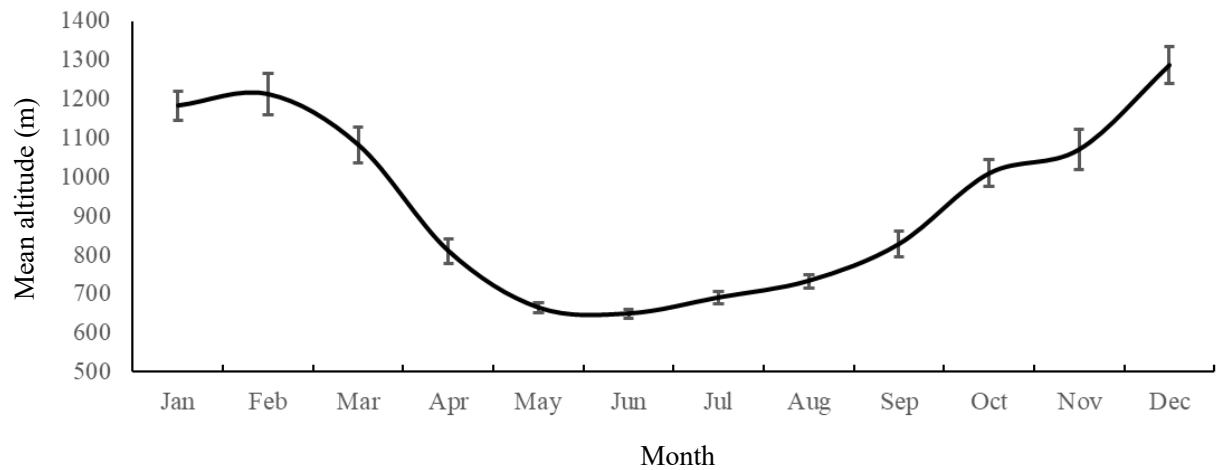


Figure 1. Seasonal variation in monthly elevation use by Flame Robins in the ACT (2015-2025).

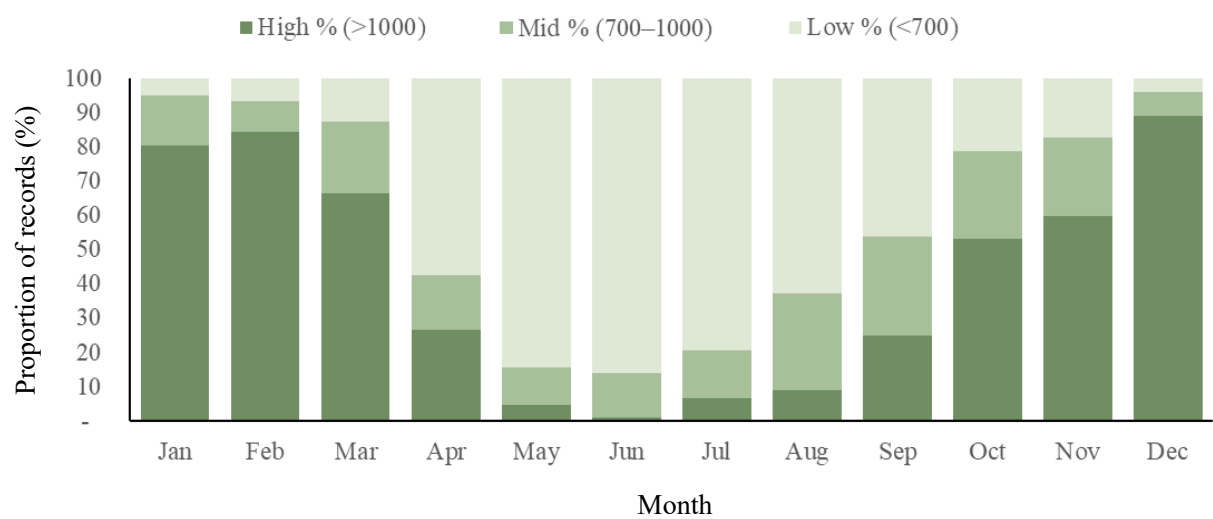


Figure 2. Distribution of Flame Robin records across elevation bands in the ACT.

Distribution by season

Records were distributed across the three elevation bands in the breeding (n = 744) and non-breeding (n = 2099) seasons

Table 2. Distribution of Flame Robin records across elevation bands during breeding and non-breeding periods.

Elevation band	Breeding (n)	Breeding (%)	Non-breeding (n)	Non-breeding (%)
low (<700 m)	94	13	1398	67
mid (700–1000 m)	132	18	394	19
high (>1000 m)	518	70	307	15
Total	744	100	2099	100

Note: Values show the proportion of records per season. As the dataset is presence-only, results reflect relative occurrence, not true abundance or density.

Table 2 shows a strong seasonal shift across the elevation gradient. During the breeding period, records were concentrated at high-elevations, with 70% above 1000 m. Conversely, during the non-breeding period, records were concentrated at low-elevations, with 67% occurring below 700m. Meanwhile, mid-elevations exhibited lower but relatively consistent occurrence across both periods.

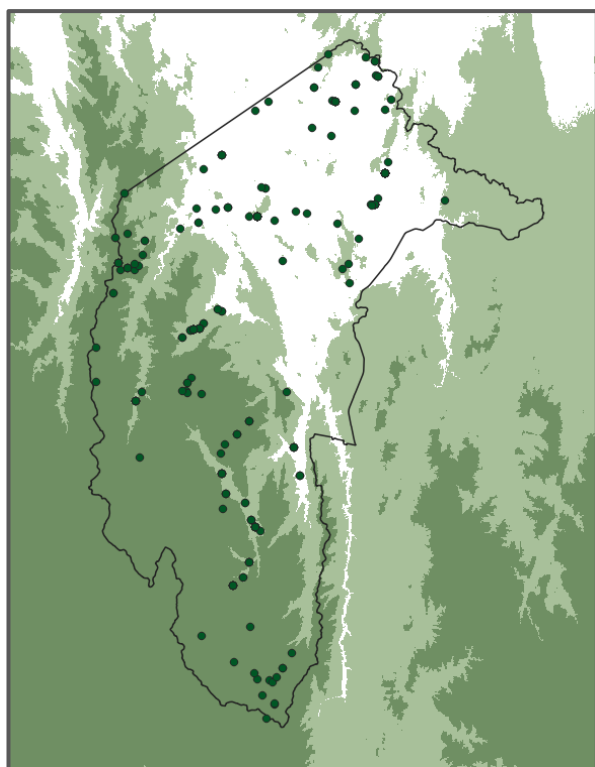
Furthermore, the monthly patterns shown in Table 1 and Figs. 2–3 point to seasonal redistribution across the elevation gradient. Seasonal redistribution across the ACT is also evident in the spatial distribution of records (Fig. 4).

In addition to the seasonal elevation patterns, although breeding-season records were concentrated at higher elevations, juvenile and immature birds were recorded at several low-elevation locations within the ACT, specifically at the Campbell Park woodlands at the foothills of Mt Ainslie NR, Mount Mugga Mugga NR, Narrabundah Hill, Sherwood Forest, and Stony Creek NR (Table 3).

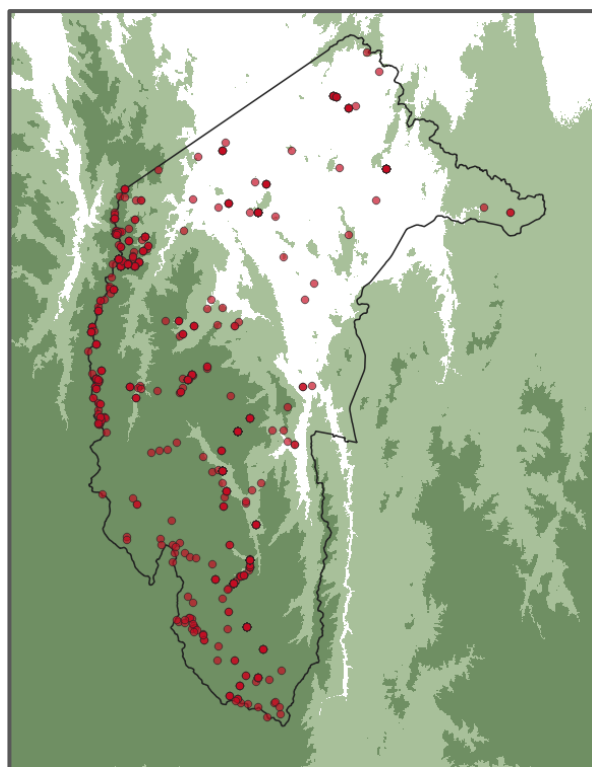
Statistical support

ANOVA showed a strong effect of month on elevation ($F(11, 2831) = 214.26$, $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2 = 0.454$). Welch ANOVA produced a consistent result ($F(11, 820.02) = 218.56$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the seasonal elevation pattern remained robust when allowing for unequal variances among months. A chi-square test of the seasonal distribution of elevation bands also showed a strong association between season and elevation band ($\chi^2(2) = 877.73$, $p < 0.001$).

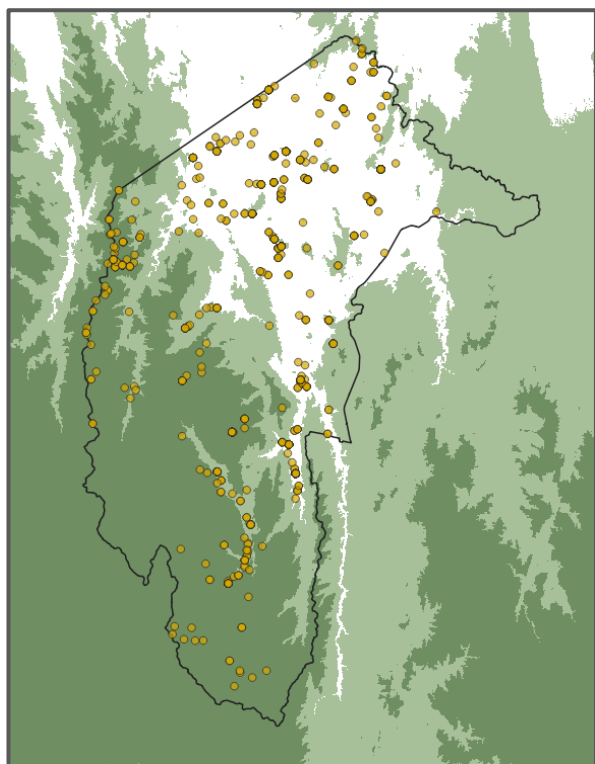
Together, these results point to a strong association between season and elevation use across the annual cycle (Table 1; Figs. 2–3).



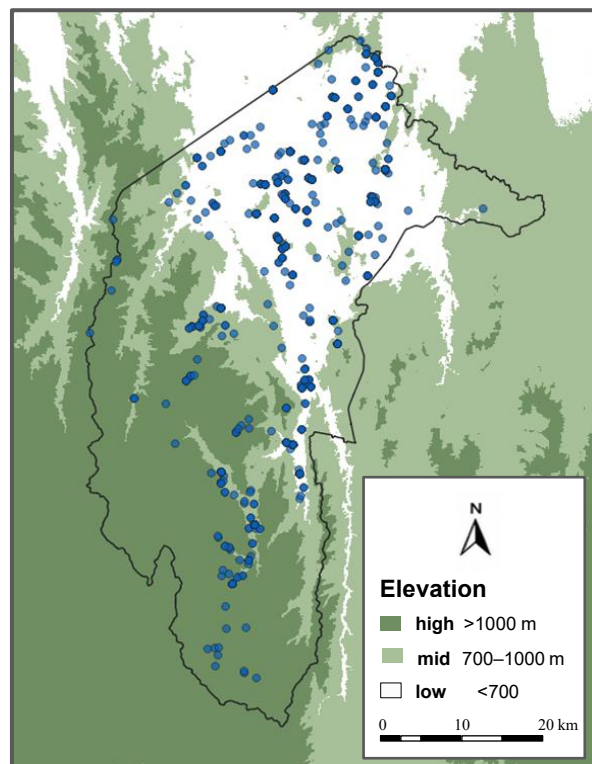
A. Spring



B. Summer



C. Autumn



D. Winter

Figure 4. Seasonal distribution of unique Flame Robin records in the ACT, 2015–2025.

Table 3. Counts of juvenile and immature Flame Robins in eBird records in low-elevation hotspots in the ACT (2015-2025).

Hotspot location	Juvenile		Immature	
	breeding	non-breeding	breeding	non-breeding
Callum Brae NR				1
Cooleman Ridge NR		1		
Mount Mugga Mugga NR	1		1	
Mt. Ainslie NR–Campbell Park	1	2	1	4
Naas Road at Apollo Road		1		
Narrabundah Hill			1	
'Riverview' (restricted access)		1		
Sherwood Forest			1	
Stony Creek NR	1			
The Pinnacle NR				1

Discussion

The results of this study help clarify the seasonal movement patterns of Flame Robins in the ACT. Rather than shifting abruptly, elevation use follows a consistent and structured seasonal pattern, with continuous transitions across the year. The study also reveals a distinct seasonal pattern of elevation use, consistent with altitudinal migration (Higgins *et al.* 2001; Newton 2008). Flame Robins tend to concentrate at higher elevations during the breeding period. Then, as the breeding season concludes, they gradually move to lower elevations. The concentration of breeding activity at higher elevations may be partially attributed to habitat structure, as upland areas in the ACT are generally characterised by denser and more structurally complex forest and woodland habitats compared to adjacent lowland grassland and woodland systems (Frith 1984; ACT Government 2023). These conditions may therefore offer more suitable breeding habitats during spring and summer.

This downslope migration, with increased use of mid- and low-elevation areas, occurs from late summer into autumn. From May to July, the birds remain in these lower areas. Then, from late winter to early spring, they begin an upslope migration, returning to mid- and eventually high-elevations, with a peak period in December to February, coinciding with the breeding window.

Mid-elevation areas may serve as transitional habitats during seasonal redistribution. For instance, colder conditions, snow cover, and frost persisting at higher elevations may delay insect availability, creating a seasonal gradient in foraging conditions across the elevation range. Breeding habitat suitability may also contribute to this pattern, potentially encouraging gradual upslope movement as seasonal conditions become more favourable at higher altitudes. Increased use of mid-elevations before and after the breeding peak further suggests that these areas serve as movement corridors or temporary seasonal habitats during upslope and downslope redistribution. However, records from these areas may reflect observer preference

and increased activity, as spring and autumn generally provide favourable birding conditions and coincide with important migration periods for many other bird species, moving into or out of the ACT.

Future studies would also benefit from complete checklist data, more standardised repeat surveys across elevation bands, and incorporation of ecological variables such as vegetation structure, temperature, rainfall, and seasonal food availability.

Within the study's breeding window, use of high-elevations remains consistent across most of the period, although seasonal movement overlaps with its early and late phases. The gradual altitudinal redistribution pattern indicates that Flame Robins may still be observed, typically at lower concentrations, across a wide range of elevations throughout the year. The prolonged overlap between breeding and non-breeding elevation use may partly reflect variation in breeding timing and the occurrence of multiple broods within a season (Elliott and Elliott 1931; Howe 1932; Higgins *et al.* 2001). This variation is likely to extend the occupancy of breeding habitats as some individuals initiate post-breeding dispersal.

Differences in timing among individual birds may shape this pattern and reflect distinct movements by breeding and non-breeding adults. Robinson (1990a) also suggested that males and females may migrate separately. Because eBird users do not always report age, juvenile and immature birds are likely to be under-represented in the broader dataset. Nevertheless, the strong statistical association between season and elevation use shows a clear population-level pattern. There is seasonal elevational redistribution aligned with the breeding period.

Supporting evidence for occasional low-elevation breeding is also present in the dataset. A small number of juvenile and immature Flame Robin records from the 2015–2025 study period occurred in the low-elevation band during both the breeding (8) and non-breeding periods (10) (Table 3). Holland (2014) also documented a low-elevation breeding event at the Campbell Park woodlands. Together, these records suggest that breeding-related activity may occasionally occur at lower elevations and may sometimes begin earlier than the breeding period defined here, with breeding potentially concluding at the same or a different location and elevation.

Although breeding-period records predominantly occurred at higher elevations, some low-elevation observations may reflect either localised breeding events or post-fledging dispersal into lower altitude habitats. For instance, Robinson (1990a) documented dispersal of young Flame Robins after independence in nearby Nimmitabel shortly after fledging, potentially within three weeks (Robinson 1990b). Taylor and COG (1992) similarly observed that Flame Robins breeding at lower elevations subsequently moved upslope once the young become independent.

Overall, elevation use follows a gradual seasonal transition across the elevation gradient. The relatively consistent use of mid-elevations across both seasons suggests these areas may function as transitional zones during upslope and downslope movement. This transitional structure is generally not emphasised in broad-scale accounts of the species, which often focus on seasonal endpoints rather than the movement dynamics occurring between them.

This observed pattern aligns with field experience in the ACT: Flame Robins are most reliably encountered in spring and summer at higher elevations, such as Namadgi National Park near the Mount Clear campground, Piccadilly Circus, and Gibraltar Fire Trail. In winter, records are

more frequent in lower elevation grasslands, open woodland, and suburban nature reserves, especially around Belconnen and Gungahlin (e.g., Casuarina Sands, Mulligans Flat, and The Pinnacle) and Booth. Mid-elevation reserves seem to serve as seasonal transition zones, mainly in late autumn and early spring (e.g., Tidbinbilla, Mount Ainslie, Red Hill nature reserves).

Future Studies

To improve both quality and scope, future work could examine whether different demographic groups contribute differently to the observed seasonal pattern. For example, breeding adults may undertake more pronounced elevational movement than non-breeding birds, while juveniles and younger immature birds might remain spread across a broader range of elevations following fledging. In addition, gender-based differences in migration timing and extent may occur (Robinson 1990a). Comparative studies involving other robin species within the ACT could further clarify whether the gradual transitional pattern observed is characteristic of robins generally or more specific to the Flame Robin.

Future studies would also benefit from the use of complete checklist data, including non-detections, and more standardised repeat surveys across elevation bands. Incorporating ecological covariates such as vegetation structure, temperature, rainfall, and seasonal food availability may also contribute to clarifying the factors influencing seasonal elevational movement.

Conclusion

The Flame Robin in the ACT shows a clear and consistent seasonal pattern in elevation use. Records are more strongly concentrated at higher elevations during the breeding period. In winter, observations shift toward lower elevations. Overall, the results support a structured pattern of altitudinal migration across the ACT elevation gradient.

Movement appears gradually rather than abruptly, with mid-elevations appearing to function as transitional zones during seasonal upslope and downslope redistribution. The increasing use of mid-elevations before and after the breeding peak suggests that seasonal movement occurs as a continuous process rather than abrupt shifts between discrete seasonal ranges.

Occasional records of juvenile and immature birds at lower elevations further indicate that breeding-related activity is not confined entirely to higher-altitude landscapes. Variation in breeding timing, post-fledging dispersal, and the occurrence of multiple broods may also contribute to the broad transitional elevation patterns observed during late summer and autumn.

Overall, these findings suggest that seasonal elevation use in Flame Robins is more dynamic and ecologically continuous than broad-scale accounts of the species often imply.

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Male Flame Robin (*Harvey Perkins*) [Source: <https://canberrabirds.org.au/family/robins/>]

OBSERVING THE BREEDING SEASON FOR THREE SPECIES AT BLACK RANGE, NEW SOUTH WALES, 2025

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Abstract: *Three species, Tawny Frogmouth (Podargus strigoides), Australian Magpie (Gymnorhina tibicen) and Grey Butcherbird (Cracticus torquatus) were observed for several months during their 2025 breeding season at Black Range. Discovery of the location of nests is described, feeding of chicks is detailed, and eventual fledging and subsequent events are included. Basically, the article is about field observation and bushcraft, and yields useful information about the nesting behaviour of the species described.*

I have written on breeding by Superb Lyrebirds (Higgins 2023) and Tawny Frogmouths (Higgins 2024) in previous issues of *Canberra Bird Notes*. In this article I would like to detail the breeding story for three species during the spring 2025 season. A Tawny Frogmouth pair has nested in our front yard for the last three years, and in 2025 a second pair was discovered less than 100 metres away and I was able to closely observe both. In the same tree as that second frogmouth nest, Australian Magpies had already established a nest. Nearby, Grey Butcherbirds had been nesting for several years and the 2025 nest was found only about 20-30 metres from the frogmouth-magpie tree. So, I was able to stand in the one spot and observe all three species' nests, simply by turning slightly, which was a rare and special experience. And then there was the frogmouth nest in our front yard as well, all of which made for a fulfilling experience of bird-breeding observation over weeks and months.

A Grey Butcherbird pair has been around our block for at least the last four years (*i.e.* since we started living there permanently). My wife Steph first observed the adults flying with food in their beaks in a westerly direction in spring a few years back and we figured that that was where the birds were most likely to be nesting. So, I began exploring that area and by watching for and listening for the calls of the adults I was able to locate the fledglings in a stand of Stringybark perhaps three years ago. The following year I explored the same area a little earlier in the season and found the birds' new nest, with the female at that stage on eggs. I did not make regular observations but we were aware of fledging as the young birds soon started visiting our property begging their parents for food.

I used the same method in September 2025 and soon found the new nest in a young Stringybark, with the female on eggs. This time I spent more time there and was able to acquire more familiarity with the rhythm of the adults' activities. The male sometimes was seen carrying food to the nest-bound female who was making begging calls. Soon both adults' constant flights to the nest (often with insect or reptile prey acquired on our block and elsewhere) were indicative of hatching and over time I was able to get filtered glimpses of the chicks in the nest. Owing to the height of the nest and the presence of intervening branches and foliage it was hard to get an accurate idea of the number of young. But after much patience I was able to definitely get a view of no less than four young birds in the nest (Fig. 1).

The chicks fledged on 2-3 November (Fig. 2) and over several weeks I was able to continue observing the daily round of feeding that the (very!) busy parents conducted to keep all those mouths fed. Prey over the weeks included, skinks and ever larger insects including crickets and

beetles of various species (Figs. 3-5). With the juveniles' flying ability improving, the family were travelling further and visiting our block, where they have since been daily visitors. At the time of writing (February 2026) the family continues to be regular visitors to our block, with the juveniles becoming more adept at hunting for themselves, but not yet fully independent. As far as I can tell, it is highly likely that all four young have survived, testament to the fine parents in this family.



Figure 1. Chicks visible at the butcherbird nest just prior to fledging.



Figure 2. Butcherbird fledglings and parent.



Figure 3. Butcherbird with insect prey.



Figure 4. Butcherbird adult with beetle prey at right and begging juvenile at left.



Figure 5. Butcherbird adult feeding skink to young.



Figure 6. Magpie chicks in the nest.

It was through watching the butcherbirds that I found the nest built by our local magpie pair. The pair formerly consisted of male Morris and female Marjorie, and annually they had built nests in various Forest Red Gums on or close to our block. Following the death of Morris in October 2024, a new male, Mickey, arrived the same day and formed a partnership with Marjorie. This was following the 2024 breeding season (during which, sadly, none of Morris and Marjorie's three chicks survived) so it wasn't until the 2025 season that Marjorie and Mickey bred.



Figure 7. Magpie adult arrives with a skink for the chicks.

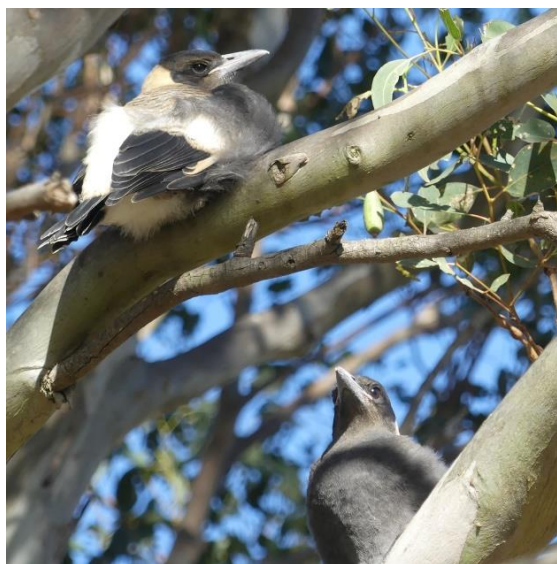


Figure 8. Magpie young the day after fledging.

We and our neighbours (who are also interested in the magpies and whose property has sometimes been the site of the nests) were at a bit of a loss to know whether Mickey and Marjorie had mated and built a nest, as we could not see the birds or a nest in any of what we thought were likely trees. But one afternoon while I was over in the Stringybark stand a Wedge-tailed Eagle (*Aquila audax*) flew over very low, with Mickey in hot pursuit. The magpies always harass Wedge-tailed Eagles (*Aquila audax*) (and other raptors, especially Grey Goshawks (*Accipiter novaehollandiae*)) and the magpies' alarm calls are invariably good warnings to us to look up for eagles. This incident gave me the clue that the magpie pair had nested away from their usual Forest Red Gums and were in the Stringybark.

Sure enough, soon I located the nest, high in a tall Stringybark (Fig. 6). We and our neighbours were pleased that this new magpie partnership had borne fruit. Again, I was able to watch the adults bring food to the chicks (Fig. 7). As with the butcherbirds, the magpies were often wary when approaching the nest, and did not necessarily fly straight to it with their prey, but would wait to check that the 'coast was clear'. Consequently, it was incumbent upon me to watch quietly and remain still when in the nest precinct. With the considerable height of the nest it was difficult to see into it, but the steep slope of the land enabled me to get a good vantage point above and I was able to determine that there were two chicks. As we learned following fledging, both chicks were female; in fact, all of the eggs laid by Marjorie over the last few years, as far as we have been able to tell, have been female.

Fledging took place on about 29 October (Fig. 8). As with the butcherbirds, at the time of writing (early February 2026), the magpie juveniles are still with the parents and have become

adept flyers and are gradually learning to feed themselves. The family bathes together in one of our bird baths, as do the butcherbirds.

The length of dependency of butcherbird and magpie juveniles on their parents is therefore quite long, *i.e.* at least three months. This appears to be in marked contrast to Tawny Frogmouths, and I will now turn to the two separate frogmouth nests of spring 2025.

As mentioned, a pair of frogmouths has nested in our front yard for each of the last three years (2023-25 inclusive), using a nest originally built by magpies Morris and Marjorie. Consequently, the nest is much more robust than the usual very flimsy platform that frogmouths construct, and so it has lasted. During 2025 we observed that the frogmouths had brought some new material to the nest (indicated by twigs with green leaves) so they had done some refurbishment, which no doubt assists the nest's longevity.



Figure 9. Dad Frogmouth with the two chicks in our front yard nest.



Figure 10. Mum Frogmouth on the post just behind our carport, fledging imminent.

I won't say much about the 2023 nesting as that was covered in my earlier *CBN* article (Higgins 2024). That year two chicks were raised and they fledged successfully. In 2024, again two chicks were raised. As is common with the species, the male sits on the nest by day and as fledging approaches the female brings her day-roosting spot closer to the nest. But that year something seemed to spook the female and she suddenly moved to a more distant tree, about three times the distance away. This affected the male's behaviour and three times he was absent from the nest by day, leaving the nestlings exposed, which was incredibly risky for the young. Luckily there were no Square-tailed Kites (*Lophoictinia isura*) (predators of nestlings) about at that time. But the parents did return at night to feed the chicks and the dad spent at least one subsequent day on the nest.

Fledging occurred, though only one fledgling survived; the other disappeared on the night of fledging. The surviving bird spent its first post-nest day perched on a water pipe under our deck and it was only when it plaintively called around midday that we knew it was there. That evening the adults flew from the tree that the female had moved to, fed the fledgling, and the family of three moved off into the bush where I was able to follow them for a time after some days of difficult searching.

So, there were notable differences in the fledging process between the two years. The 2025 fledging was different again. Once more, two chicks were born (Fig. 9). One chick was clearly more advanced than the other, as over three evenings it flew from the nest, landing variously on our roof, on our car, on the carport, and then returning to the nest and its sibling where the parents fed both. Next morning chicks and dad were still on the nest. During this period the female twice spent whole days roosting on a fence post just behind our carport (Fig. 10), in full view of us as we went about our normal activities (we tried to avoid eye contact to reduce her stress, and ours!).

Then the day after the third abortive attempt, on Saturday 15 November when we returned home around 2pm, we were horrified to see that the nest was empty. Frogmouths hate to fly in daytime so something drastic seemed to have occurred. We immediately started searching for the two chicks and dad. Steph soon found that both chicks had fledged - onto our deck! Meanwhile no sign of dad. Thunderstorms were rolling through and both fledglings were soaked. But at 4pm dad flew in from 'somewhere', landed on the deck railing next to one of the young, and the other youngster hopped across the deck furniture and joined them (Fig. 11). The three birds, dad bookended by the fledglings, then proceeded to dry themselves out, preen, and keep each other warm. As evening came on dad flew off to hunt and he and mum fed the chicks. Next morning the family had safely moved to a tree about 80 metres away, so all was well.



Figure 11. Dad Frogmouth and young on the day of fledging, on our deck railing

Most interestingly, after a few days of searching I found the family at the same day-roosting spot (Fig. 12) as I'd found the family the previous year, and in each case, they used that spot for at least two days. My conclusion from this is that while roosting sites during the first days

following fledging are determined by the youngsters' very limited flying ability, as the young improve, the parents take the lead and head for previously known spots.

Having watched the nesting of these birds for three years we have been able to record some useful timeframes for the species. The male has arrived on the nest during the second week of September. The time between then and first sighting of the chicks has been on average 33 days. The period from then until fledging has ranged from 26 to 31 days.

So, we are now left to look at the second or 'new' frogmouth nest that I discovered in spring 2025. When amongst the Stringybark, looking at the butcherbird and magpie nests, on one day I was sure I heard a frogmouth 'oom oom' call. Given that the spot was only about 80 metres from our front yard frogmouth nest I ruled out a second nest being so close. But during the next visit I heard it again. Then on 25 October I heard it for quite a bit longer, traced it to its source, and sure enough there was a frogmouth nest, in the same tree (but lower) as the magpies (Fig. 13). As the nest was so small and flimsy and I couldn't see any sign of chicks I figured that it was a late and recent nesting. But on the evening of the 28th I returned to try to see the female arrive and as she flew in the male moved, revealing three fluffy chicks on the nest.



Figure 12. The 'front yard' family in the bush 29 November 2025, indicating development of juveniles.



Figure 13. First evening view of the whole family at the 'new' frogmouth nest.

So, over the next few weeks I had two frogmouth nests to observe every day, a wonderful experience. As evening grew dark it was not possible to stay long in the Stringybark stand with the newcomers, so most observation there was done by day. The birds in our front yard, though, were in a position where the light lasted longer and it was possible (as in previous years) to stand and watch the adult frogmouths swoop past at shoulder height as they hunted, the very subtle whoosh of their wings often audible in the still night air.

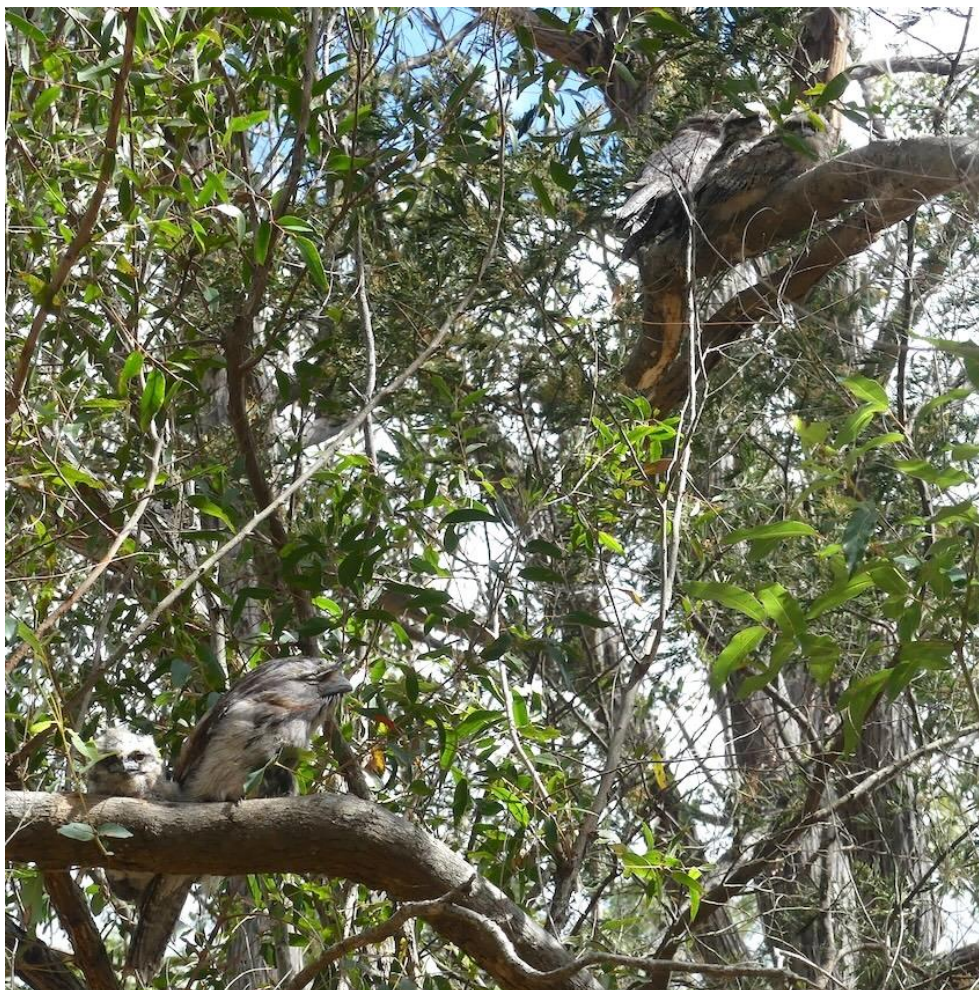


Figure 14. Day after fledging at the new nest, birds seen bottom left and top right.

The chicks on the new nest moved along the branch from the nest on 16 November and then fully fledged on the night of 18 November, 26 days after I had first found the nest. I saw the full family together for the last time 12 days later; one of the three chicks was decidedly smaller than the others so it was good to see that it had survived at least to that point (Fig. 14).

Regarding the time from fledging to independence, these sightings offer some data. After the 2023 fledging, Steph found the family of four still together five weeks later (the juveniles by then being almost indistinguishable from the adults). Following the 2025 fledging of the two nests, I saw the adults seven weeks later without the young. So, assuming the young had survived, they had become independent by then. On the basis of this admittedly extremely small statistical sample, independence for frogmouths occurs between five and seven weeks, a much shorter time frame than for the magpies and butcherbirds.

All in all, a season of valuable and most enjoyable nesting observations close to home at Black Range.

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Other sources

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

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG OF SEVERAL WATERBIRD SPECIES - PHOTOGRAPHIC GUIDES

1. EURASIAN COOT (*Fulica atra australis*)

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Abstract: The development of the young of three broods of Eurasian Coots (*Fulica atra australis*) from the Gungahlin area in Canberra, ACT, is documented in photos from hatching to independence. An information sheet for use in the field is added showing the changes in the young at approximately weekly intervals. In two broods, young as old as 68 and 79 days respectively were still fed sometimes by adults. Young in a brood of four displayed notable size differences. A white mark from below the eye to the gape of the bill is a feature of young Coots from about 4 weeks old and can remain visible up to week 10. This mark is more pronounced in European birds (*Fulica a. atra*), as the literature indicates.

1. Introduction

In recent years a new feature has been added to the Canberra landscape: urban stormwater that used to flow mostly along concrete-lined creeks and drains into lakes and rivers is increasingly directed first into filtration ponds of varying sizes. Such engineered wetlands characterised the development of the Gungahlin suburbs and have since been extended to all new suburbs in Canberra, such as in the Belconnen area, in southern Canberra and elsewhere. In several suburbs such wetlands have been retrofitted, with examples in Dickson, Lyneham and Belconnen. Combined with the construction of ponds, wider grassy green spaces are often created around them, with extensive plantings of mainly native trees and shrubs. A network of footpaths makes these new green belts accessible to the wider population.

A number of waterbird species colonise these ponds, and several species also breed regularly at these sites, once the shoreline vegetation has developed. They include Black Swan (*Cygnus atratus*), Pacific Black Duck (*Anas superciliosa*), Australian Wood Duck (*Chenonetta jubata*), Australasian Grebe (*Tachybaptus novaehollandiae*), a variety of rails and crakes (Clark 2016) and a few passerines (Lenz 2021). These ponds are now on the regular itinerary for visits by birdwatchers.

These days, birdwatchers tend to report their sightings mainly on eBird. Breeding records for waterbird species often include estimates of the age of their nidifugous young. However, eBird has only two age categories: *recently fledged*, probably meaning fledged within a couple of days prior to the observation, but often used also for somewhat older young, and *feeding young*, often used for older birds than ‘recently fledged’ and potentially covering dependent young of any age.

For our understanding of the ecology and breeding dynamics of the waterbirds in Canberra it would, however, be advantageous if observers were able to state the age of any broods better than is currently possible. For example, if we want to learn to what extent breeding is linked to

¹ All photos by Julie Clark.

environmental factors, such as rainfall patterns, more definite knowledge of the age of the young allows one to calculate the commencement of breeding with reasonable accuracy by using published information on the breeding phenology of these waterbirds. Under the current system in eBird, a more accurate age would have to be entered under *Details [of the observation]*.

For the Australian waterbird species of interest here the literature (primarily: *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds* [HANZAB] and *Birds of the World*) provides details of the time required for nest-building, laying, clutch size, incubation and the growth of fledglings to independence. However, there are no pictorial guides to identify the young at various stages of development, which would help the observer to estimate more accurately the age of any brood.

Clark and Harris (2016) have set a precedent by documenting the development of young Buff-banded Rails (*Gallirallus philippensis*) with photographs, making use of opportunities at Forde Creek, part of a stormwater wetland in Gungahlin.

On a larger scale, Heinroth and Heinroth (1928) described and photographed the development of most of the breeding species of central Europe from egg or hatchling to independence, and published their findings in four large volumes.

The task of photographing nidifugous young over a period is more challenging than might be supposed. The Heinroths had the advantage of access to captive birds (they were the directors of the Berlin Zoo), but here we are dealing with freely-moving wild birds. A brood may well be spotted first at hatching or soon after, but there is no guarantee that such a brood can be readily followed throughout its developmental stages. The adults may spend only a limited time with their small young in the open, preferring to hide in the shore vegetation, or a brood may suffer partial or total predation. There may be more than one brood of a given species present at the same time. Separating these may not always be easy if hatching is close in time.

There is great variation in the behaviour of species and individuals in the extent to which they can be observed when they have young to rear. Broods of Australasian Grebes, Black Swans and Eurasian Coots (*Fulica atra*) tend to spend much of their time in the open, making it easier to record their phenology. Others, such as ducks and the more secretive rails, may be very difficult to track. For example, one Pacific Black Duck female moved with its brood at the pond system in Franklin over an area of 2.6 ha (Lenz 2021).

Here we present the first of several photographic guides to the development of broods from hatching or near hatching to independence for common waterbirds in the Canberra Region, such as Australasian Grebe, Eurasian Coot, Dusky Moorhen (*Gallinula tenebrosa*) and Australasian Swamphen (*Porphyrio porphyrio*). For these species it was possible for Julie Clark (JC) to follow definite broods consistently over the course of their development to independence.

These days many birdwatchers carry good-quality cameras, as the many photos added to species lists on eBird illustrate. We would encourage other photographers to take up the challenge of documenting the development of broods of additional waterbird species. For example, on some Canberra ponds Blue-billed Ducks (*Oxyura australis*) raise young, and in some years Hardheads (*Aythya australis*) and Pink-eared Ducks (*Malacorhynchus membranaceus*) also breed. These present ideal opportunities for anyone with a camera to

document the development of the young. If visits to such sites have in the past been only sporadic, the presence of broods may encourage more regular visits for as long as a target brood is present.

2. Observations

2.1. Breeding phenology of the Eurasian Coot (*Fulica atra australis*)

Eurasian Coots [hereafter Coots] can be present in large numbers in Canberra. However, breeding has been a much rarer event (Taylor and Canberra Ornithologists Group 1992; Wilson 1999). The first breeding record was in 1980 at the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve (Davey 1987), with further small numbers of records in subsequent years (Lenz 2016). It is only in more recent years, since the construction of many stormwater ponds, that Coots have found more reliable habitat and the breeding population has grown (Wilson 1999; Lenz 2016, 2021).

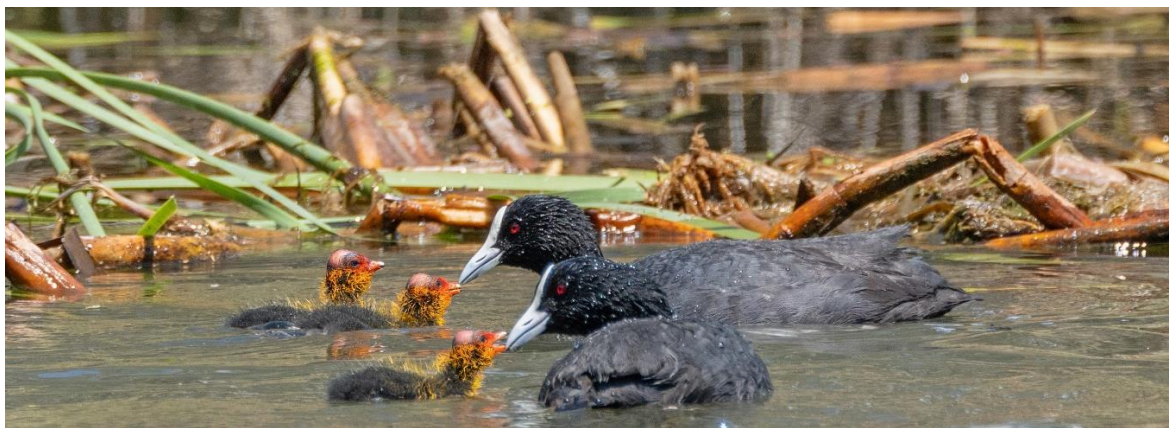


Figure 1. Eurasian Coot family at Casey Wetlands, 19 Oct 2024, young 1 day old.

Table 1. Key breeding data for the Eurasian Coot in Australia (Marchant and Higgins 1993; Taylor *et al.* 2026).

Nesting season	Laying	Clutch size	Incubation	Young	
				Self-feeding	Independent
main: Aug -Feb, (+ at any other month)	early Sep to early Jan	5.8 (1-14)	23-26 days	at 30 days	at 55-60 days (or: max. 8.5 weeks)

Table 1 gives information on the breeding phenology of the Coot in Australia. Eggs are laid at daily intervals, young hatch asynchronously. This can result in size variation between the young (Fig. 2), especially in larger clutches. Hence, we recommend focussing on the larger young when estimating the age of a brood.

JC documented the development of three broods from the Gungahlin area in northern Canberra, ACT, from hatching to independence at approximately weekly intervals (whenever possible) during the 2024/2025 breeding season (see Table 2).



Figure 2. The four 17-day-old young of a Eurasian Coot brood (same brood as in Fig. 1) on 4 Nov 2024 (Casey Wetlands). Such notable size differences within one brood were not observed in the other two broods.

Table 2. Locations in Gungahlin and other details for the three Eurasian Coot broods monitored for this project.

Location	Monitoring period	No. visits	Comments
Casey Wetlands	19.10. 24 – 23.01. 25	14	4 young
Valley Avenue Pond (1)	23 10. 24 – 23.02. 25	16	5 young
Valley Avenue Pond (2)	16.01. 25 – 18.04. 25	12	2 nd brood of pair (1), 4 young, 3 days old when first sighted

The age of independence of the young Coots is given at 55-60 days (max. at 8.5 weeks). JC documented cases in which young at the ages of 68 to 79 days (>9 to > 11 weeks) were still receiving food from adults (see Figs. 3 and 4).



Figure 3. Young Coot at age of 79 days, still fed by adult (Casey Wetl.), one of the later hatched young(?) (see also Fig. 2).



Figure 4. Young Coot at the age of 68 days, still fed by adult (Valley Ave. Ponds, 2nd brood).

2. Documentation of the development of the young of brood (1) at Valley Avenue Ponds

	DAY 1 (WEEK 1) [23 10.2024] Covered in black down; chin and facial mask covered in red, highly modified short and club-like feathers (appears like bare skin from a distance) [see arrows in this and the below image]; bare skin of crown red and blue; crown sparsely covered in black bristles; distal half or more of downy feathers enclosed by wax-like orange, orange-yellow or yellow sheath. These more or less conceal the black bases. As a result, neck, ear coverts and nape appear to be covered by shock of yellow-orange hair-like tips; with age these wear off and fade to pale yellow or white. Bill and shield red, bill white distally and black at tip (description based on Marchant and Higgins 1993).
	DAY 13 (WEEK 2) [04. 11.2024] Top of head fully covered in dark bristles; chin and facial mask still covered in red modified feathers [left arrow]; black band on bill [right arrow], length of hair-like tips greatly reduced, most whitish in colour; body colour still black.
	DAY 17 (WEEK 3) No photo available for the Valley Avenue (1) brood; The photo shows a 17-day-old young from the Casey Wetlands brood: The body colour is grey and few of the red modified feathers of chin and facial mask remain [arrow].

	Day 25 (WEEK 4) [16.11.2024] Chin, throat and neck mottled off-white; whitish mark below eye to bill [arrow; see Note at end of photo series]); overall plumage grey; contour feathers on flanks; bill multi-coloured: shield and base of bill reddish/black band/ yellowish tip. Back still covered in down.
	Day 32 (WEEK 5) [23.11.2024] Upper back covered in feathers with brown tinge, down still on lower back; bill with orange base, a wider black band and a pale tip.
	Day 40 (WEEK 6) [01.12.2024] Pale marks between eye and bill [see arrow], longer feathers on flanks and back with brown tinge, feathers with brown tinge; top of head and front of neck mottled grey/white; bill dark grey with orange around the nostrils and the tip;
	DAY 47 (Week 7) [08.12.2024] Front of neck and head still mottled whitish/grey; tail appearing [right arrow]; pale marks below eye still visible; mantle and wing feathers [left arrow] covering upper half of back; tail appearing [right arrow].
	Day 54 (WEEK 8) [15.12.2024] Definite tail with feathers pointing upwards; lower back not yet fully covered by mantle and wing feathers; pale marks below eyes still visible; front of neck still with some mottling; bill colour greyish/pinkish; shield visible; iris still brown.

	Day 61 (WEEK 9) [22.12.2024] Front of neck still with some greyish/whitish mottling; pale mark from eye to bill still visible; iris reddish; bill and shield greyish; wing feathers have not yet reached tail; still brown tinge on body plumage.
	Day 68 (WEEK 10) [29.12.2024] Full body plumage; front of neck still with some mottling; bill and shield greyish; wing feathers not yet fully extending to tail.
	WEEK 11 (day 75) [5.1.2025] Wing feathers have reached tail; minor mottling left on neck.
	WEEK 12 (day 82) [12.1.2025] Neck no longer mottled; still some brown tinge to feathers on back.
	WEEK 16 (day 110), 9.2.2025 All black; greyish bill and shield; shield small; iris red.

Note: The white mark below the eye to the base of the bill in young Coots is more pronounced and whiter in *Fulica a. atra* as shown in two videos of birds from England (Taylor *et al.* 2026).

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Appendix 1: Development of young of the Casey Wetlands Coot brood in photos.

Appendix 2: Development of young of the 2nd Valley Avenue Ponds Coot brood in photos.

Appendix 3: Field sheet with photos of the development of young of the Eurasian Coot (*Fulica atra atra*). Appendix 3 could be printed out and taken into the field for reference.

APPENDIX 1

Eurasian Coot: Development of young, Valley Ave. Ponds, 2nd brood of pair (1), Jan to April 2025

	
WEEK 1 (day4) 16 Jan 25	WEEK 2 (day 14) 26 Jan 25
	
WEEK 4 (day 26) 07 Feb 25, smaller young	WEEK 4 (day 28) 09 Feb 25, larger young
	
WEEK 5 (day 35) 16 Feb 25	WEEK 6 (day 42) 23 Feb 25
	
WEEK 7 (day 49) 02 Mar 25	WEEK 8 (day 56) 09 Mar 25

	
WEEK 9 (day 63) 16 Mar 25	WEEK 10 (day 68) 21 Mar
	
WEEK 12 (day 84) 6 Apr 25	WEEK 14 (day 96) 18 Apr 25

APPENDIX 2

Eurasian Coot: Development of young, Casey Wetlands, Oct 2024 to Jan 2025

	
WEEK 1 (day 1) 19 Oct 24	WEEK 2 (day 10) 28 Oct 24
	
WEEK 3 (day 17) 04 Nov 24	Week 5 (day 29) 16 Nov 24

	
WEEK 6 (day 36) 23 Nov 24	WEEK 7 (day 44) 01 Dec 24
	
WEEK 8 (day 51) 08 Dec 24	WEEK 9 (day 58) 15 Dec 24
	
WEEK 10 (day 65) 22 Dec 24	WEEK 11 (day 72) 29 Dec 24
	
WEEK 12 (day 79) 5 Jan 25	WEEK 13 (day 90) 16 Jan 25
	
WEEK 14 (day 97) 23 Jan 25	

Appendix 3: Field sheet with photos of the development of young of the Eurasian Coot (*Fulica atra atra*) [Julie Clark and Michael Lenz (2026): *Canberra Bird Notes* 51(1) (2026) pp. 50-51]

	WEEK 1 Body (down) black, red club-like feathers at chin and facial mask; crown red and blue; down of neck; down at ear coverts and nape covered by yellow-orange hair-like tips;
	WEEK 2 Body (down) still black; crown covered in black bristles; hair-like tips reduced; black band on bill.
	WEEK 3 Body (down) colour grey; red club-like feathers at face [arrow] and hair-like tips greatly reduced; black band on bill.
	WEEK 4 Chin, throat, front of neck mottled off-white; whitish mark below eye to bill [arrow]; three-coloured bill (orange/black/yellow); contour feathers on flanks; back still covered in downs.
	WEEK 5 Upper back covered in contour feathers, lower back still downy; bill with orange base, wider black band and a pale tip; pale mark below eye to bill.

	WEEK 6 Top of head and front of neck mottled grey/white; feathers on back and flanks with brown tinge; bill dark grey, orange around nostrils and at tip; pale marks from below eyes to base of bill [arrow].
	WEEK 7 Front of neck and parts of head less mottled white; mantle and wing feathers [left arrow] covering upper half of back; tail appearing [right arrow].
	WEEK 8 Bill mostly greyish; shield visible; tail feathers pointing upward; lower back not yet fully covered by mantle and wing feathers. Iris brown.
	WEEK 9 Front of neck still with some greyish/whitish mottling; pale mark from eye to bill still visible; iris reddish; bill and shield greyish; wing feathers have not yet reached tail; brown tinge on body plumage.
	WEEK 10 Full body plumage; front of neck with little mottling left; bill and shield greyish; wing feathers not yet fully extending to tail; iris reddish.
	WEEK 11 Wing feathers have attained their full length.

THE VARIED PLUMAGES OF THE AUSTRALIAN MAGPIE IN CANBERRA SUBURBS: DISTINGUISHING THE 'INTERMEDIATE' FROM THE 'PURE' (IF ANY)

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Abstract: *Canberra's abundant Australian Magpies have a high degree of variability in the pattern of their back plumages. In the first half of 2026, I photographed a number of magpies in Canberra suburbs to learn more about the back patterns of the current population. The plumage types recorded are summarized here, with the help of photographs. Approaches to classifying and comparing magpie plumage types are discussed. Particular attention is paid to the different approaches in Burton and Martin (1976) and in Hughes et al. (2002). The project confirmed a high degree of variability. I found a higher rate of occurrence of intermediate types, and fewer of all-black-backed types, than is reported in Burton & Martin. Gender differences also contribute to variability. Today's eBird photographers can have a useful role in bringing plumage differences to attention.*

Introduction

In the last annual bird report by Canberra Ornithologists Group, for 2018-2019, the Australian Magpie was easily the most-recorded species in the Canberra area. In addition, it was recorded at 100% of Garden Bird Sites (COG). Making use of density studies by Robert Carrick, McComas Taylor (1992) estimated a remarkable number of magpies in the Australian Capital Territory, about 75,000.

Canberra lies in a zone where the resident Australian Magpies show a range of different plumage types. The term 'hybrid zone' is often used, although there is some variation in the location and extent of the area relevant here that is denoted by the term. It is a relatively small part of the vast 'intergrade' area identified in Black *et al.* (2004). The types at the end points of the plumage range are often referred to as 'black-backed' and 'white-backed'. Those adjectives have a long history. They were once used to refer to two species, by some writers until the late 1970s (Black *et al.* 2024). Today, they are sometimes used as convenient terms for groups of subspecies.

'Pure' black-backed and 'pure' white-backed types correspond in appearance, respectively, to subspecies *Gymnorhina tibicen tibicen* and *G. t. tyrannica* in the AviList classification. Most recent references follow Schodde and Mason (1999) in recognizing an additional nearby black-backed subspecies, *G. tibicen terraereginae*. However, in AviList that subspecies is now included in *tibicen*.

There is an unresolved question about how the subspecies concept should be applied to the Australian Magpie. Some authorities regard the two 'pure' types referred to here not as subspecies but as colour morphs. As this note is concerned only with observed plumage types, the adjectives 'all-black-backed' and 'all-white-backed' will be used except where quotation requires otherwise.

The current world of bird photography, and finding out-of-area plumage types

Cornell Lab of Ornithology, an organisation based in upstate New York, USA, maintains a digital collection of bird observations and images. Today, nearly all of these are gathered through the eBird system. On 21 May 2026, the collection, in its Macaulay Library, contained 33,997 photos of the Australian Magpie. These are relevant here for two reasons. First, if you are interested in magpie plumages, you can scroll through thousands of photos, sorted, if you choose, according to location.

In a way, this can be more informative than looking at field guide illustrations or reading book descriptions. This might not work for species with few photos, but it does for magpies, particularly given their geographical differences. As species identification is rarely an issue with the magpie, there is no incentive for field guides to cover all the many geographic, gender, age and other plumages.

Secondly, among the modest proportion of good back photos of adults, you will find a few where the plumage type is out-of-area or is an intermediate type outside any hybrid zone. This has to do with the genes of the parents, a subject on which I have little to contribute. That kind of unexpected occurrence has been reported occasionally, but is so far not fully explained (Hughes & Mather 1980; Russell and Rowley 2009; Black *et al.* 2024).

A possible explanation for the appearance of a distantly out-of-area plumage type is that some individuals in the relevant magpie population carry genes that in a particular combination can produce an unusual back pattern for a particular area.

The following comment is from Dobson *et al.* (2019): ‘... intermediate colour forms are not true “mixes” or “blends” of black and white phenotypes (*i.e.* grey or similar), but express both white and black phenotypes over varying proportions of their backs ...’. Further discussion of genes is beyond the scope of this note.

Classifying and using patterns of magpie back plumages in south-eastern Australia

In describing plumage types, dorsal patterns have been the main distinguishing feature. The patterns of Canberra magpie backs form a continuum, meaning that, given enough specimens, the proportions of black and white vary between extremes in slight gradations. The difference between ‘all black back’ and ‘all black back with small white spot at base’ is very small. (The latter form is presumably that illustrated by Burton and Martin at 4b (below).) However, for the purpose of discussion, some kind of classification is needed.

Carrick (1969, 1976) wrote of the ‘White-backed Magpie’: ‘This subspecies, and intergrades with varying amounts of black and white, or grey, on the back, occur sparingly in the area’ (referring here to Canberra).

Burton and Martin (1976) is a study of different plumage types across the Victoria-NSW hybrid zone. It made use of the classification shown in Illustration 1.

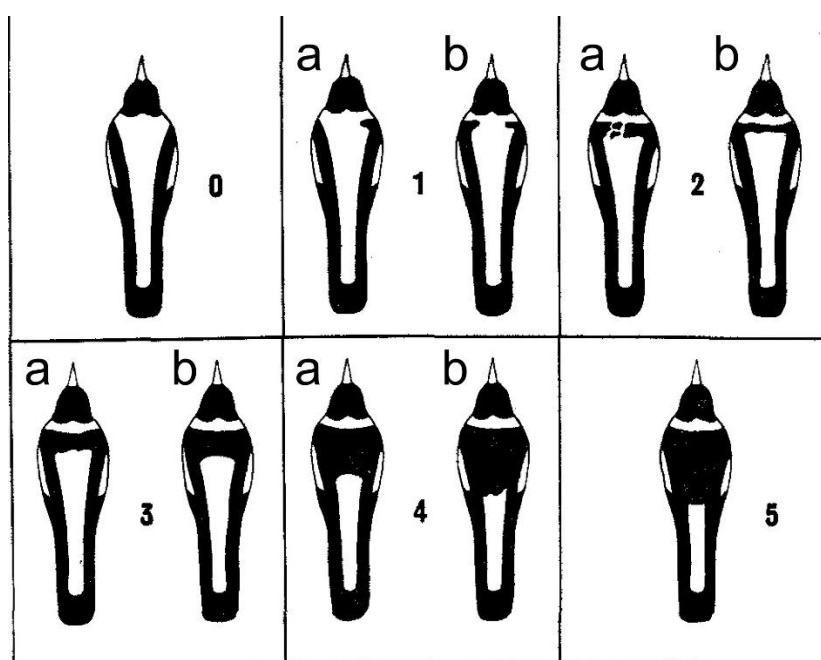


Illustration 1. Pictorial classification of plumage types, from Burton and Martin (1976): ‘Dorsal patterns of Magpies and their corresponding score on the hybrid index. Intermediate examples (scores 1-4) are selected from a virtually continuous range.’
Letters a & b have been added for purpose of discussion.

That classification gave ‘completely white back’ a value of 0 and ‘completely black back’ a value of 5. The range of the scale depended on ‘how many intermediate states of the character [could] be discerned’. Eight intermediate types were shown, being grouped in pairs, presumably to simplify recording in the field. Variation 2b (the letter being added here for identification) could as easily have been shown as a pair with variation 3a.

In addition to their study of skins in collections, Burton and Martin (herein ‘B & M’) recorded adult Australian Magpies at selected sampling stations in south-eastern Australia. The purpose was to assess numbers present against each hybrid index value. The number of the sample recorded for Canberra was 86. A notable proportion of all-white-back types was recorded for Cooma, only 80km south of southern Canberra suburbs in a direct line. The Victorian study area of Seymour, with fewer white-backs, is 390 km from Canberra.

Table 1 – Composition of populations of Magpies at three sampling stations, extracted from Burton and Martin (1976).

HIV	0	1	2	3	4	5
Canberra	0	3	4	4	31	44
Michelago	5	5	5	7	18	15
Cooma	56	3	2	2	2	0
Seymour	18	12	13	31	27	29

Six years later, McComas Taylor (1982) surveyed magpie types in and immediately south of Canberra. He put the southern limit of the area where black-backed types were more common than white-backed at about Michelago. He also mentioned three suburban north Canberra locations where a White-backed Magpie could be seen at that time.

Hughes *et al.* (2002) is a study of survival and success of different plumage types at a site in the hybrid zone (Seymour, Vic.). The back plumage of each individual was classified 'by observing it in a normal standing position, with wings folded'. The categories used were -

- 0 – completely white back;
- 1 – a black band (not necessarily continuous) across the shoulder, but narrower than the area of white below;
- 2 – a black band roughly equal in area to the area of white below;
- 3 – a black band broader in area than the area of white below;
- 4 – a black band with no white below.

The HANZAB species account (Matthew 2006) includes a plumage diagram with six types, four intermediates. The text refers to 49 adult male skins from the ACT in the Australian National Wildlife Collection (ANWC). Of those, 39 were 'pure black-backed', four were 'pure white-backed', and six were intermediate. The latter are stated to be distinguished by 'black band across mantle, 30-55mm down midline of body'.

Hughes *et al.* (2011) is a study of mate choice at the same study site as Hughes *et al.* (2002). It uses the same 5-category classification. A helpful plumage diagram is provided in the paper, simplified but more like what you see in the field than the diagram in B & M, which was based on overhead views of skins.

Dobson *et al.* (2019) is a study of heritability of plumage type variation, conducted at the same study site as Hughes *et al.* (2002). It uses the same 5-category classification. A very simplified diagram is provided of black and white proportions on magpie backs.

Gender differences: the not so simple topography of the female back

Gender, as well as age, influences variation in plumages. 'The areas of the nape and back that are white in males are pale grey in females and immature birds' (Hughes *et al.* 2002). In their hybrid index and related surveys Burton and Martin covered both adult males and females. Their index used 'white' in its descriptions, but began with '0: completely white back (females pale grey)'.

Given their purpose, the studies mentioned did not need to consider the detail of female back plumages, which usually include a grey and white scalloped area, forming, in *tibicen* individuals, a grey band. Those features were described by Jamie Matthew in HANZAB as follows (adult females only, omitting colour guide references).

White-backed subspecies *tyrannica*: 'Mantle, most scapulars, back and rump, light grey with fine white scalloping and fine dark brown streaking when fresh; feathers, light grey with narrow white fringe at tips and dark brown or blackish-brown shafts; fringes reduced or lost, and shafts become paler (light brown) with wear. Uppertail-coverts white.'

Black-backed subspecies *tibicen*: '[lower] mantle, back and scapulars, black as adult male. Rump, light grey with white scalloping and narrow dark-brown streaking when fresh, forming a fairly broad light-greyish band sharply demarcated from black back and white uppertail-coverts'.

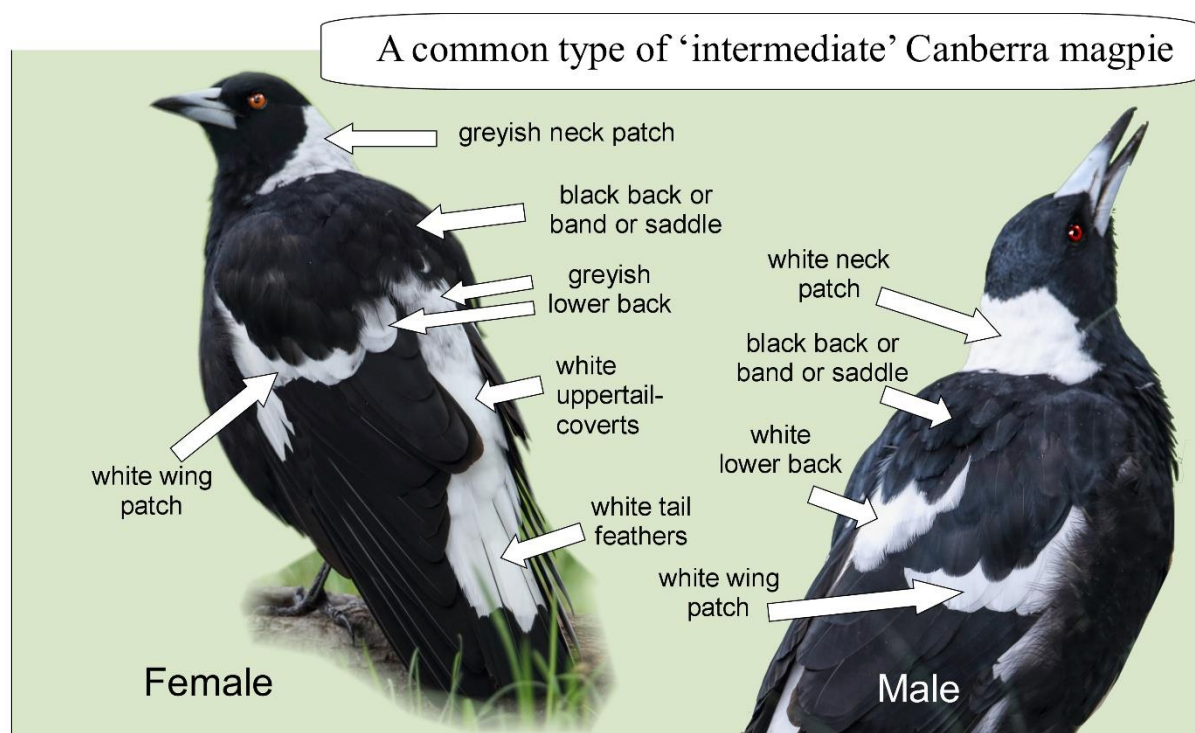


Illustration 2. Two magpies photographed in Canberra, showing plumage areas relevant here. A more precise description of bird plumages may be found in HANZAB <https://hanzab.birdlife.org.au/parts-of-birds/>

The present project

In 2026, I undertook a short project using field photography to obtain information about the back patterns of adult Australian Magpies in Canberra suburbs. The sample acquired consisted of all adult magpies readily able to be photographed on brief visits to each of several sites, between 28 Jan and 17 Mar 2026. At the latter date, my basic sample contained photographs of 132 individuals suitable for my purpose, others being discarded as sub-adult or insufficiently clear or possible duplicates. No attempt was made to seek out and include individuals of an unusual plumage type.

I adopted the simplified categories of back patterns in Hughes *et al.* (2002), designating them as follows:

- H0 or WW - all white back
- H1 or WWB – more white than black on back
- H2 or BW – roughly equal white and black on back
- H3 or BBW – more black than white (the white being sometimes only one or two feathers)
- H4 or BB – a black band with no white below.

‘White’ includes ‘greyish white’, often a more appropriate term with respect to female birds.

The sites were chosen as places expected to have magpies, and convenient to visit, in the following suburban locations, mainly in the central part of Canberra south of or near to Lake Burley Griffin:

Narrabundah, Griffith, Red Hill, Barton, Yarralumla, Forrest, Stirling playing fields (Weston Creek), precincts of National Parliament and Museum of Australian Democracy

(‘old Parliament House’), Weston Park and English Garden, Government House drive, Australian National University, Black Mountain Peninsula, Commonwealth Park.

In early March 2026, having classified most of the birds photographed against the specified designations, I compared those results with those from a separate, smaller survey over two days in another set of Canberra locations, in Tuggeranong, ACT. All the new locations were more than 6km from the previous locations.

As part of the project I sought access to the 49 skins in ANWC referred to in Matthew 2006. This was for the purpose of comparing that sample, particularly the 39 ‘pure black-backed’, with the current Canberra population.

Results

The results are as shown in the attached set of photographs with their annotations. All photos were taken in Canberra. In Figs. 1 to 4 (see p. 62-65) individuals have been numbered for identification. It was apparent that in a magpie in a foraging posture, with folded wings, the lower back is obscured. Sometimes, the lower back feathers will overlap one folded wing, causing an asymmetrical pattern (Fig. 5, see p. 66). However, the plumage above the folded wings is usually sufficiently visible to apply the designations adopted here. A bird photographed with a wholly black back above the folded wings corresponds to ‘black band with no white below’ (Hughes). Whether it corresponds to ‘5, completely black back’ (B & M), is considered under discussion.

In a perched bird, or one on the ground in relaxed posture, or a bird calling, the whole length of the back, showing the white area of the lower back as in the published diagrams, is often visible.

In some BBW individuals, a small amount of white low on the black back might be due to moult of black feathers or the wing position of the bird at the moment of the photograph. Tables 2 and 3 do not take account of those possibilities, treating those individuals as BBW. This issue is considered further in the ‘Discussion’.

Table 2. Allocation to categories of a sample of 132 individuals.

WW - all white back	4
WWB – more white than black on back	11
BW – roughly equal white and black on back	10
BBW – more black than white on back	97
BB – a black band with no white below	10

Table 3. Allocation to categories of a further 31 individuals recorded in Tuggeranong

WW - all white back	1
WWB – more white than black on back	2
BW – roughly equal white and black on back	3
BBW – more black than white on back	23
BB – a black band with no white below	2

Where the full length of the back can be seen, not obscured by wings, any white plumage on the upper back usually merges into the white area of the lower back. With folded wings, small white areas on the back can usually be taken as a guide to the upper edge of the temporarily concealed white area of the lower back, and hence as a guide to the width of the black band. This is evident from photos of the full back with partly open wings.

The gender differences in intermediate types appear to follow the gender differences within subspecies as described in HANZAB. In my count, as in other classifications of magpie plumage types, grey areas of females are treated as white. Some females appear to have a less than full black back accompanied by a wider than usual grey band. Here, as a matter of plumage type, such individuals are counted as 'BBW'.

At the ANWC I examined a set of 72 male magpies collected in Canberra. In identifying six intermediates HANZAB refers to 'black band across mantle, 30-55mm down midline of body'. That is a reference to the upper point of the black band, which is variable but not as variable as the lower point as shown by the B & M diagrams. I was not able to find 39 'pure black-backed' corresponding to a B & M '5'.

I photographed all the available set, but without flash, so images are not as clear as might be expected. In Illustration 3 the measurements refer to width of black band, and the percentages refer to that width in relation to length from base of bill to tail tip.

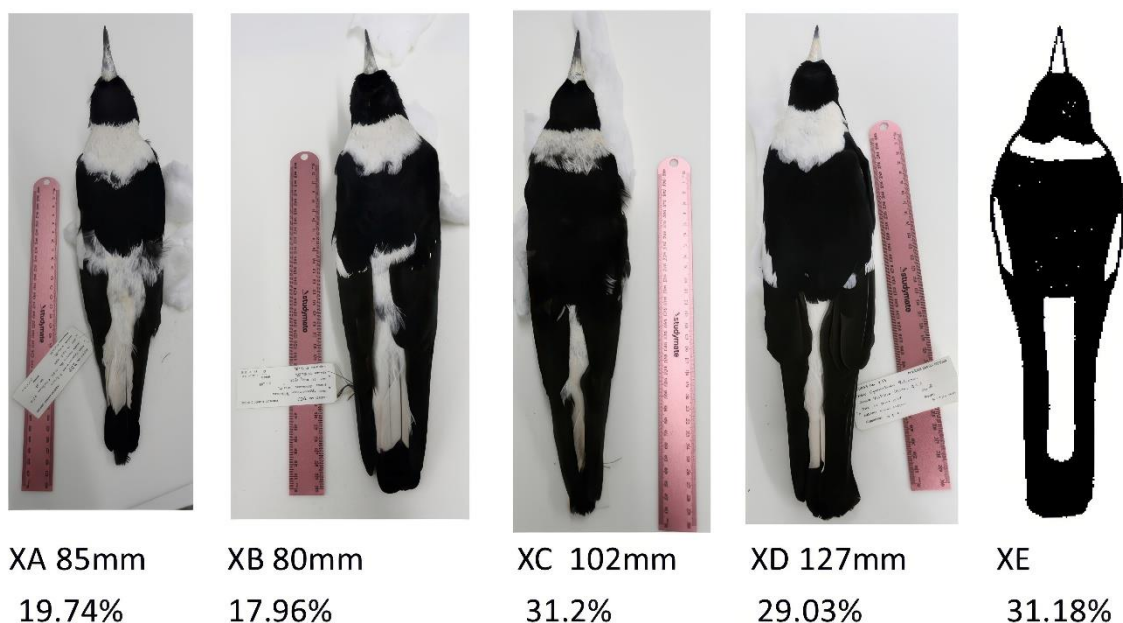


Illustration 3. Four specimens from ANWC with B & M 5.

In addition, I was given a list of all ANWC Australian Magpie specimens collected around Canberra before 2006, the date of the HANZAB volume. That list of 145 specimens included females and immatures. As a matter of incidental interest, 110 of the 145 were collected in the 1950s, presumably the result of the intensive work on magpies of Robert Carrick assisted by Ian Rowley. The main collecting locations were Narrabundah (28) and Crace (20).

Discussion

A basic question to be addressed is how to apply the B & M classification of magpie skins to the different kinds of views obtainable in the field. What is the minimum width of a ‘completely black back’? The width of the black back in the illustrated B & M ‘5’ is about 31% of the distance from bill base to tail tip, similar to the widest black backs noted in Canberra specimens in ANWC. B & M 5 is shown with specimens in Illustration 3. This might seem to attach undue importance to a diagram, but the diagram is all we have to understand the detail of the B & M classification. In specimens XC and XD and in B & M 5 the black back extends below the white wing patches. In B & M 4b the black back ends at about the base of the wing patches.

Some idea of the relationship of a wide black back to the wing patches, as seen in the field, is conveyed by Figure 1. Those photos illustrate that, in some views, whether or not there is a completely black back is unknown because of tightly folded wings. Absence of white areas on the back, definitive of BB in the Hughes classification, is not necessarily a B & M 5.

Burton & Martin identified 51% of their Canberra sample as ‘5’. It seems unlikely that in each case, in the field, a black band extending below white patches could have been recorded.

To focus now on white areas, Illustration 4 shows two birds with small white areas on the back. I take these individuals to fall within BBW and to correspond to B & M 4a or 4b. The black band at mid-back is too narrow for B & M 5.

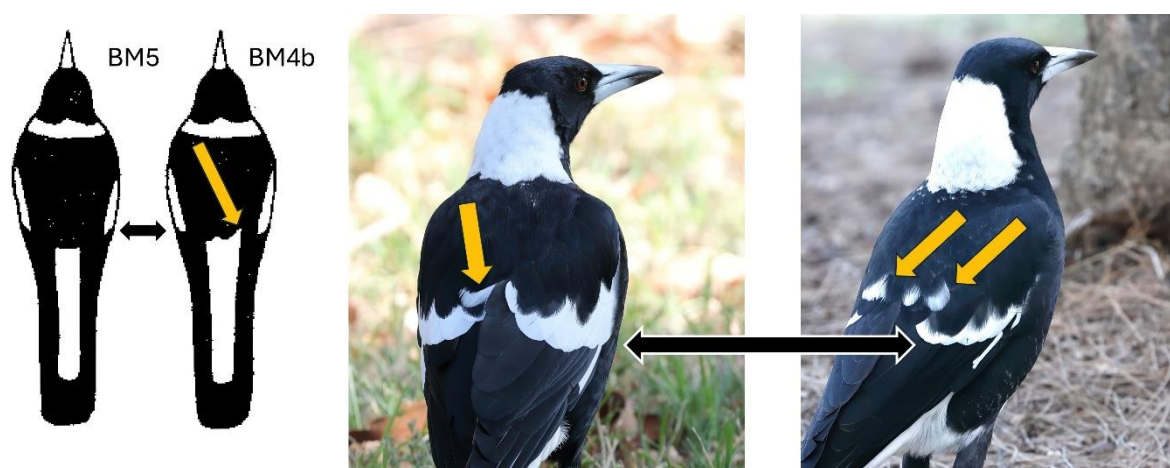


Illustration 4. Comparison of two photographed birds with the B & M diagrams. Black arrows indicate base of white wing patches. Yellow arrows indicate corresponding small white areas of lower back.

Of the eight intermediate back patterns illustrated by B & M, one, in common with Hughes (2002), is half black/half white (‘3b’ – or ‘BW’). B & M illustrates five intermediates that are more white than 3b, and only two that are more black. However, in Canberra most intermediate back patterns lie in a range that is more black than 3b, or BW.

Therefore, in describing the current Canberra magpie population, it seems useful, if only for present purposes, to divide the large BBW segment (73.6%). This is done here by treating separately, with an approximate dividing line, individuals with only a very small amount of white on the black back. These are shown as BBWq in Table 4 (number 31 - 19.0% of total).

Table 4 - Comparison of B & M Canberra records of 1976 with 2026 observations. To assist the comparison, the additional ‘mainly white’ type of B & M is given, and an additional ‘mainly black’ type (BBWq) is added for the 2026 count:

B & M designation	2026 designation	B & M		2026	
		count	%	count	%
0	WW	0	0%	5	3.1%
1	WWBx	3	3.5%	13	8.0%
2	WWBy	4	4.7%		
3	BW	4	4.7%	13	8.0%
4	BBWz	31	36.0%	89	54.6%
4b	BBWq			31	19.0%
5	BB	44	51.2%	12	7.4%
Total		86		163	

What is the proportion of individuals of intermediate plumage type in the Canberra population?

It seems to be only a matter of logic that any individuals classified as 4 to 1, or as BBW to WWB, are necessarily ‘intermediate’ between 5 and 0, or between BB and WW. The proportion of those in the Canberra area is about 49% in the B & M 1976 count and between 70% and 90% in the 2026 count. It is a separate question whether those proportions reflect intermediate (or ‘hybrid’) status in a subspecies or genetic sense.

Despite some differences in method, I regard these results as evidence that, as regards plumage types, the Canberra population is different from 50 years ago when more than 50% were recorded as all-black-backed. My sample contains about 27%, including in BB the marginal category of BBWq.

A local magpie family

In part, my interest in magpie plumages came from observing the family in my local street in Narrabundah. The resident pair raised a brood of two in 2025. All four were photographed at end April 2026. One of the young is all-white-backed (but presumably not ‘pure’) and none of the four is ‘black band with no white below’ (Fig. 6, see p. 67).

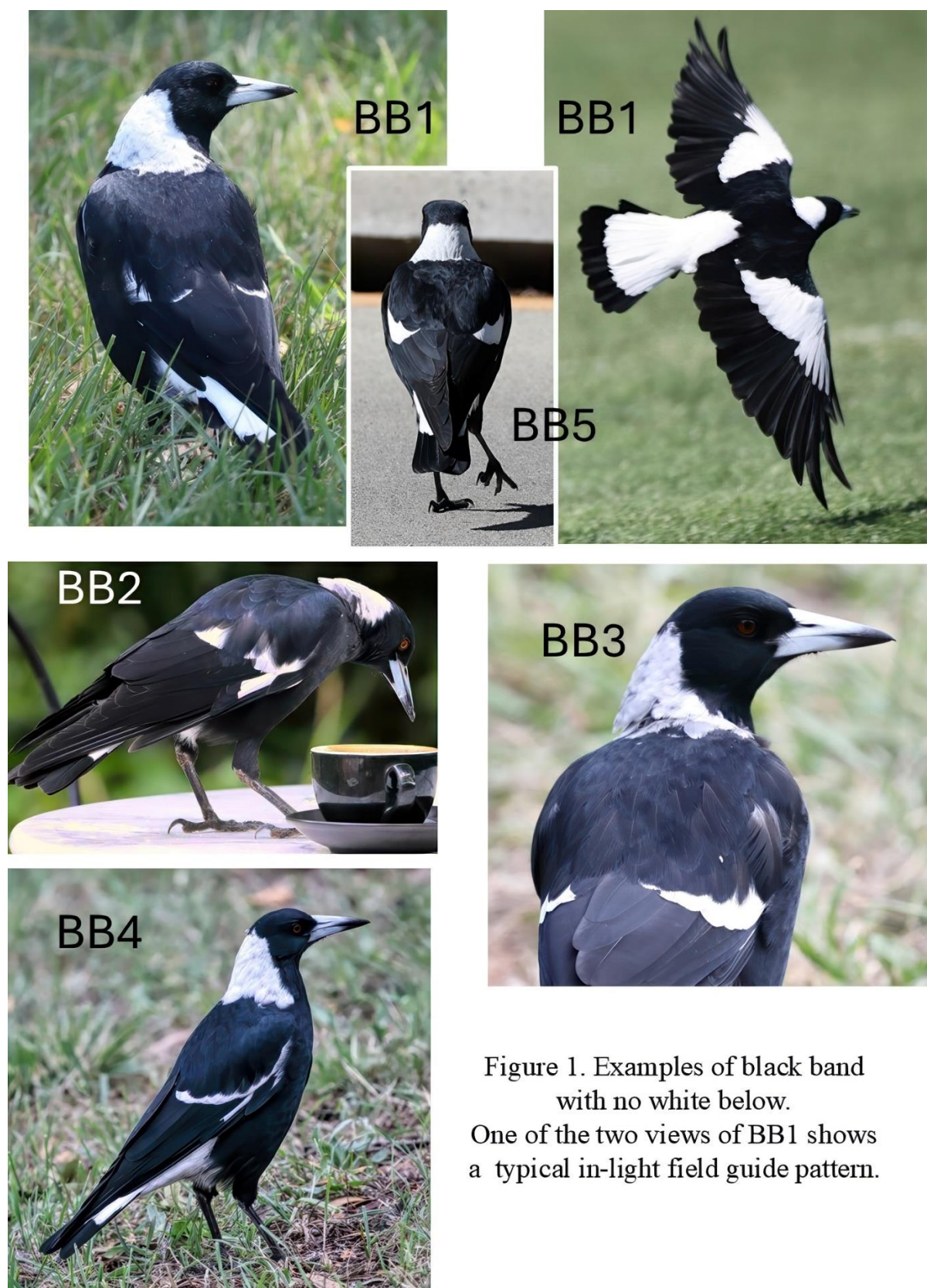


Figure 1. Examples of black band with no white below. One of the two views of BB1 shows a typical in-light field guide pattern.

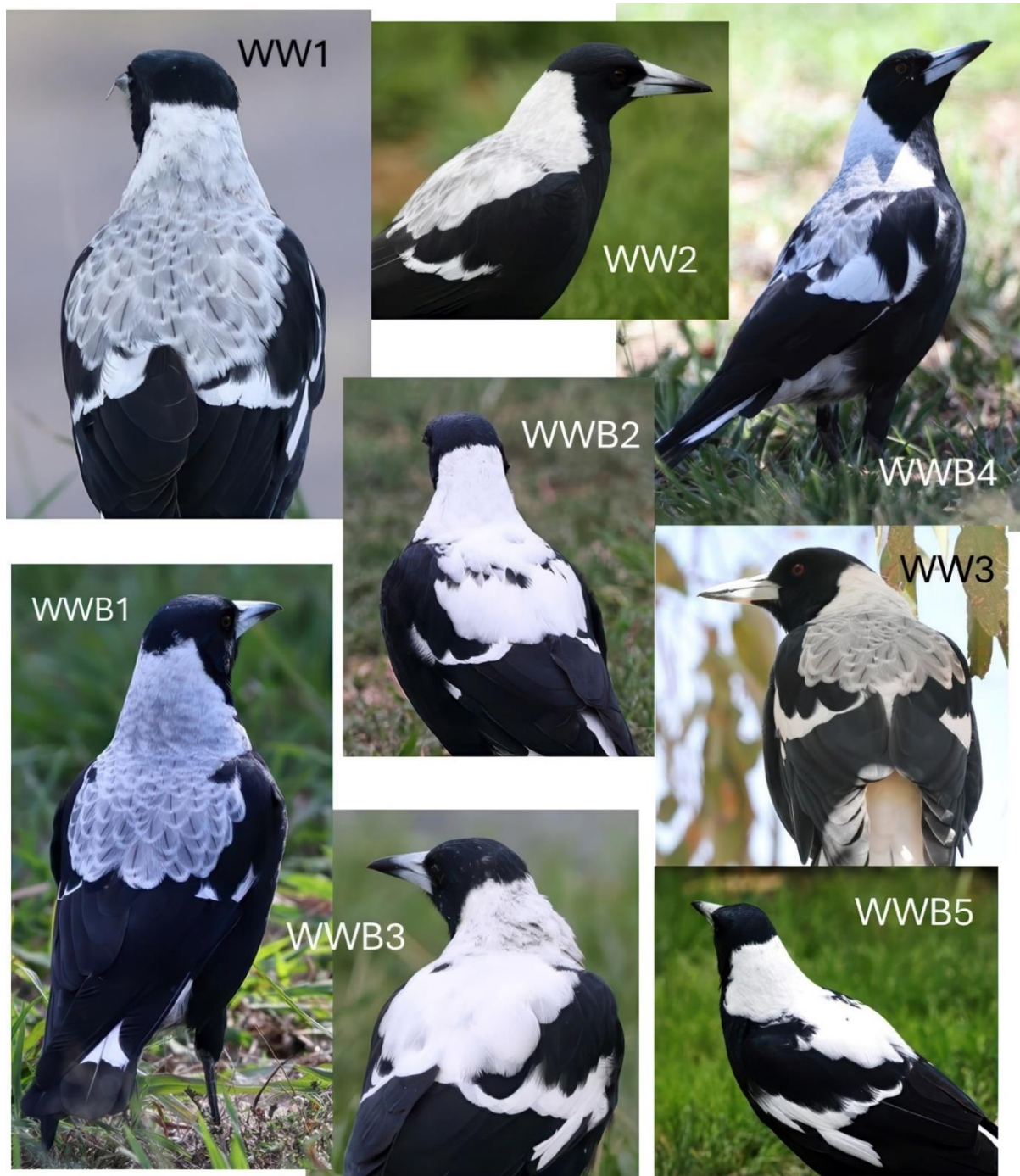


Figure 2. ‘White-backed’ variations. Females usually have scalloped, grey and white backs, with feathers showing dark shafts. The designation WWB rather than WW follows from black patches on the grey/white backs.

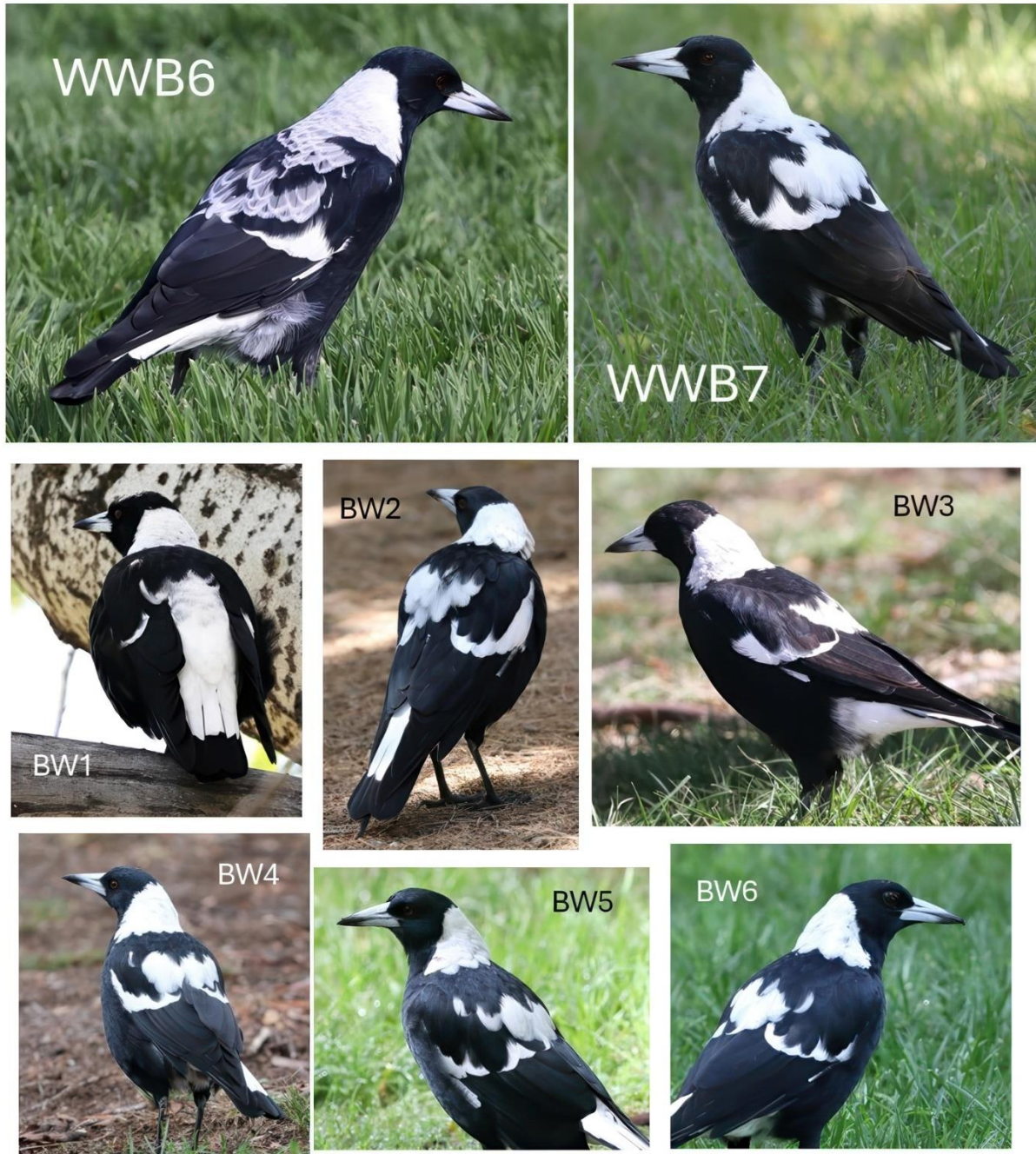
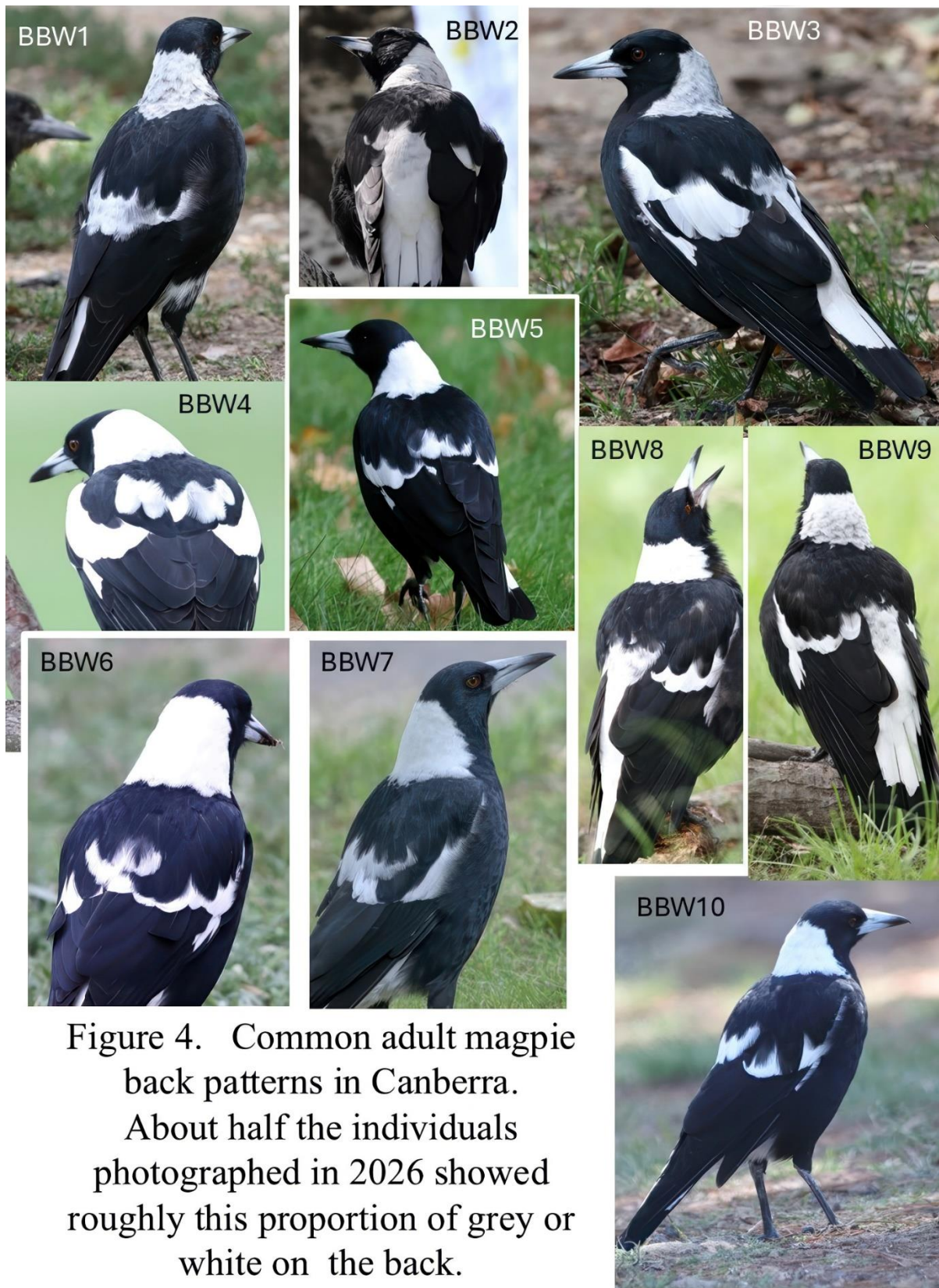


Figure 3 . Two examples of ‘more white than black’ (WWB), and six examples of magpies with roughly the same amount of white as black (BW).



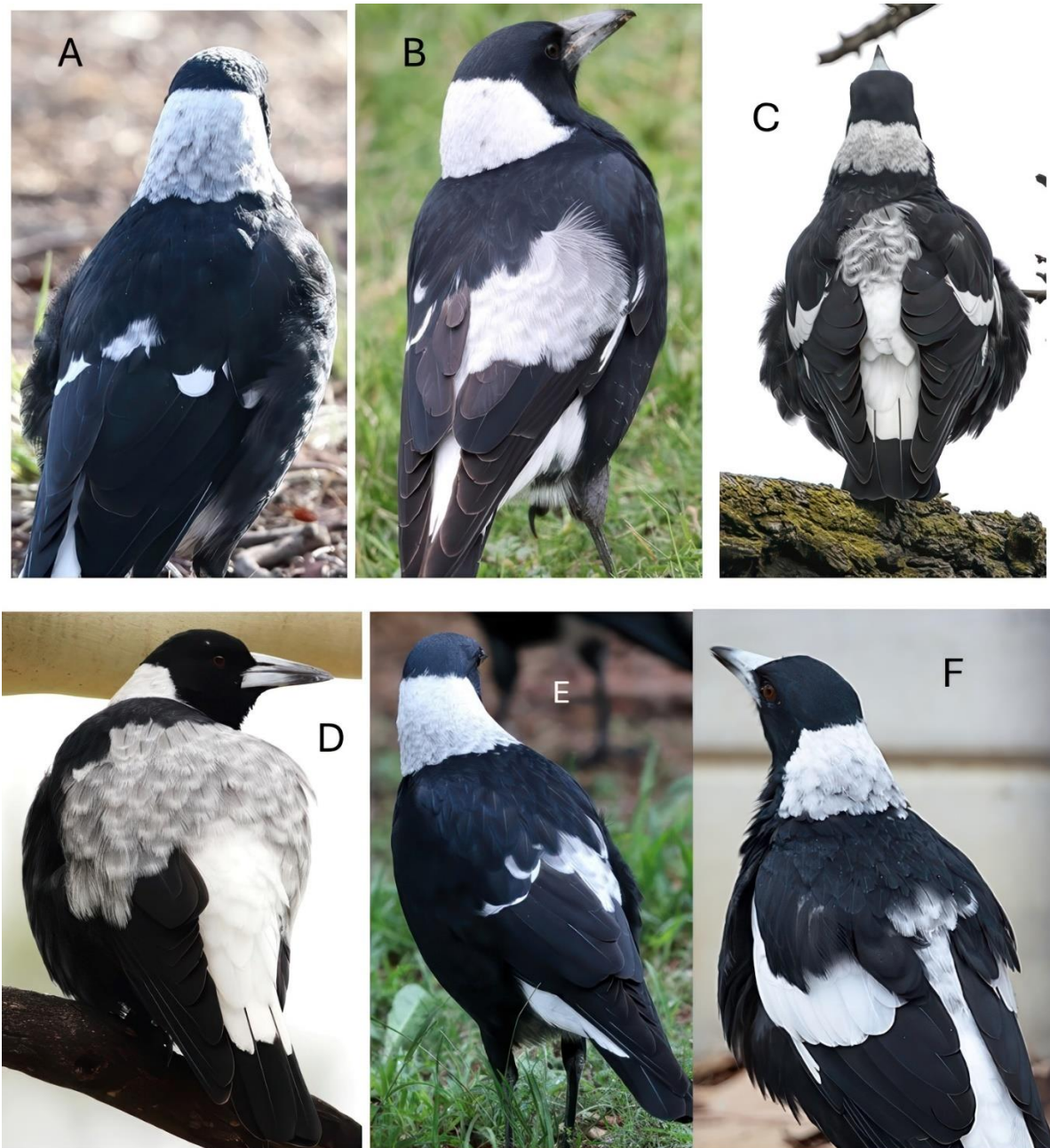


Figure 5 – Examples of variable features. A: Very small patch of white on back. B and E. Asymmetrical wing overlap of lower back. C and D: Grey band on female ‘rump’. The female at F is an example of both a small white patch on back and an only slightly greyish rump.

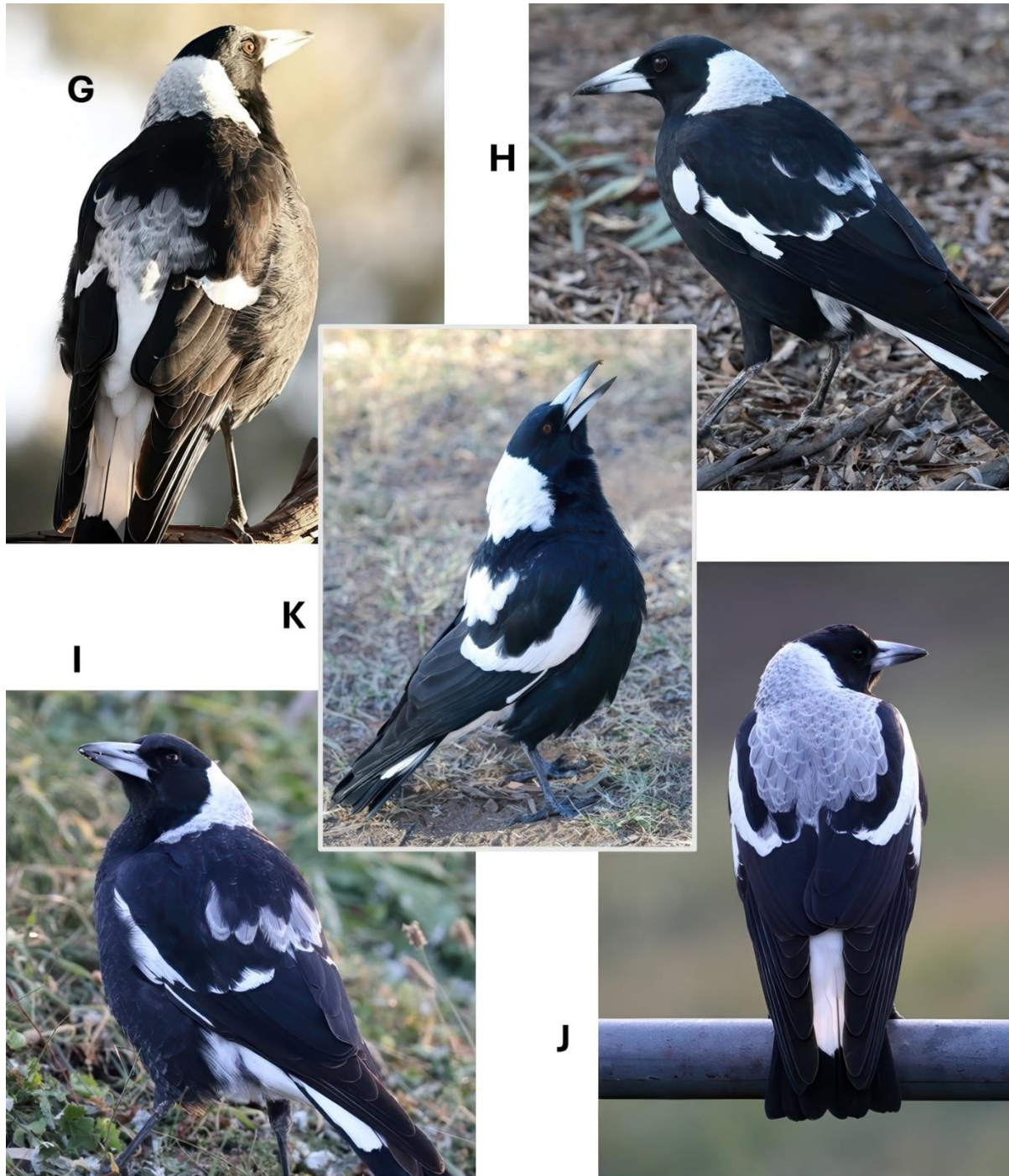


Figure 6. A diverse family. G: Adult female, showing grey rump in early morning light. H: Same bird as G, on ground, different posture. I: Imm. first year, grey rump, distinguishable from G by pale fringes on black body feathers. J: Imm. first year, WW – probable female by plumage and small size. K: adult male (BW). None of the four has an all-black back.

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Andrew Black of South Australia and Leo Joseph (formerly of ANWC) made helpful comments on an early draft and provided appreciated further advice on some points. Andrew and Leo are both members of the AviList Regional Advisory Group for the Australasia Region, which is expected to give early consideration to the matter of magpie subspecies. It was useful to discuss with Steve Wallace the online HANZAB entry, which is under review. Thanks to Tonya Haff and Julian Teh for assistance with respect to ANWC specimens. Michael Lenz drew attention to the 1982 work of McComas Taylor. Rob Parnell shared information about the magpie population of Griffith (ACT).

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STROMLO WOODLANDS: ONE OF THE JEWELS OF CANBERRA'S WESTERN EDGE

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Abstract: *Stromlo Woodlands, an area of approximately 107 hectares, lie at the western boundary of Stromlo Forest Park in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). The Woodlands are contiguous with other areas of woodland, dry forest and grasslands which together form part of Canberra's Western Edge. This 9,800-hectare zone is currently being considered by ACT government for urban development through its Western Edge Investigation initiative. This is opposed by the Conservation Council ACT Region, of which Canberra Birds is a member. 129 bird species have been reported at the Woodlands, including ten ACT Declared Threatened species.*

Introduction

Stromlo Woodlands is a great place to go birding, being rich in woodland species, including the multiple summer migrants which breed on the site. It also has its share of both regular and occasional visiting bird species. Ten of the ACT's Declared Threatened bird species have been reported at the Woodlands, four of which are known to breed there. For those interested in plants, the Woodlands also offer a rich cornucopia of interesting vegetation communities along with many large and beautiful old trees.

This article focuses on the birds of Stromlo Woodlands. All bird sightings cited in this article are sourced from eBird.org.

Stromlo Woodlands location, tenure and size

Named Stromlo Woodlands for convenience by birders and others, the Woodlands lie within Canberra's Western Edge, a zone of 9,800 hectares bordered by the Murrumbidgee River and the urban townships of Weston Creek, Molonglo Valley and Belconnen. The Woodlands form a part of the Stromlo Forest Park leasehold, and are not currently developed for mountain biking, nor are there footpaths or other infrastructure within the Woodlands.

Stromlo Woodlands consists of two fenced blocks: the first being the Uriarra Travelling Stock Reserve (TSR) and the other a slightly larger block adjoining the TSR at its east. Further east again, the edge of Stromlo Woodlands is defined by a fence that lies alongside the signposted Coopers and TSR Firetrails in Stromlo Forest Park. Overall, Stromlo Woodlands cover an area of approximately 107 hectares. Fig. 1 shows the location of the Woodlands and their proximity to Bluetts Block and the broader Molonglo River Reserve.

As a comparison, the ecologically important Bluetts Block, declared a Nature Reserve in early 2026, occupies 342 hectares and lies approximately 300 metres away. Given their close proximity, these two areas help form a connectivity corridor for wildlife between the Murrumbidgee and Molonglo River corridors.

In a direct line, Stromlo Woodlands are less than two kilometres from the Murrumbidgee River. The Woodlands are connected to the River via Deep Creek and then Stony Creek, which flows

into the Murrumbidgee. The value of this connection is shown, for example, by the migrating Honeyeaters which use this route each autumn.

Access

Stromlo Woodlands are open to the public. The easiest point of access is through a latched but unlocked gate by a small car park on Uriarra Road. This car park lies directly across the road from the gates into the signposted Spring Valley Farm. Another point of access is over the locked gate into the old Uriarra TSR. Access here is more difficult and there is no car park.

An old wire fence between the TSR and the rest of Stromlo Woodlands should not deter visitors, as this is a disused agricultural feature, does not relate to private property, and is easily crossed.

Recent fire history

Given the major ACT bushfires in 2003 and 2020, the recent fire history of the Stromlo area is of interest. Stromlo Woodlands appear to have been only lightly burnt in the 2003 bushfires and not burnt in the 2020 fires. Stromlo Forest Park to the east, adjacent to Stromlo Woodlands, was extensively burnt in 2003, and consists now of plantings of mainly *Eucalyptus* species, some native shrub and other understorey regrowth, and self-sown *Pinus radiata*, Blackberry and other common weeds. This adjacent area, while not able to offer the biodiversity or varied age profile of Stromlo Woodlands vegetation, nevertheless provides an extensive buffer zone that, as it grows, is noticeably being used by an increasing number of birds. However, and unsurprisingly, it does not support the larger range of bird species found at Stromlo Woodlands.

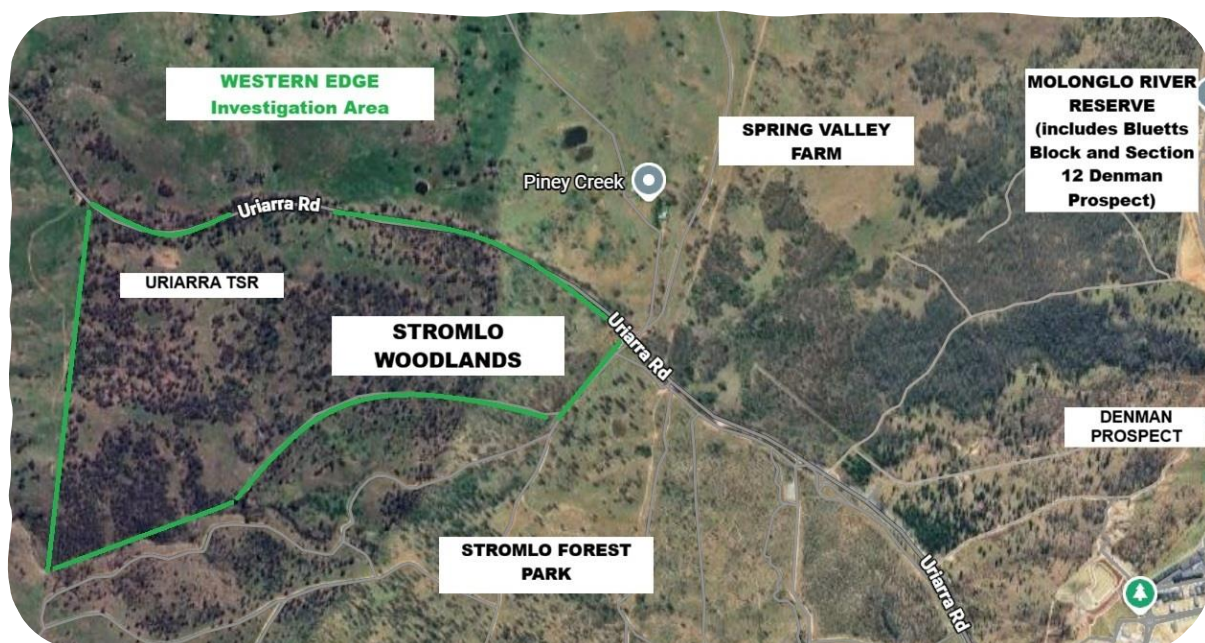


Figure 1. Location of Stromlo Woodlands (Map courtesy of Rainer Rehwinkel).

Vegetation of Stromlo Woodlands

Members of Canberra Birds and Friends of Grasslands have undertaken what will hopefully be ongoing vegetation surveys at Stromlo Woodlands. They report that the Woodland supports a diverse range of vegetation communities. Much of this is the critically endangered Box-Gum Grassy Woodland and Derived Native Grassland, and areas of critically endangered Natural

Temperate Grassland. Stromlo Woodlands include exposed west-facing hills with a Dry Forest community on ridges and steeper rocky slopes. The ground and shrub layers of all these communities are rich in wildflowers. A feature of Stromlo Woodlands is the species diversity of its trees, and importantly, the number of its large mature trees. See for example Fig. 2.

The Woodlands also feature seasonally moist drainage lines that support species such as Pale Sundew (*Drosera hookeri*) and Variable Billy-buttons (*Craspedia variabilis*). See Fig. 3- The Woodlands inevitably host weed species. Blackberry, Wild Rose, St John's Wort and Mullein occur in some areas. African Love Grass occurs mainly near Uriarra Rd, with little or none in other areas. Serrated Tussock is present in several small discrete places.

It is the view of local ecologist Rainer Rehwinkel that Stromlo Woodlands was only lightly cleared for grazing in the past, as evidenced by the number of large mature trees remaining on the site (pers. commun. 2025).



Figure 2. Mature Blakely's Red Gum (*Eucalyptus blakelyi*) with multiple hollows (Rainer Rehwinkel).

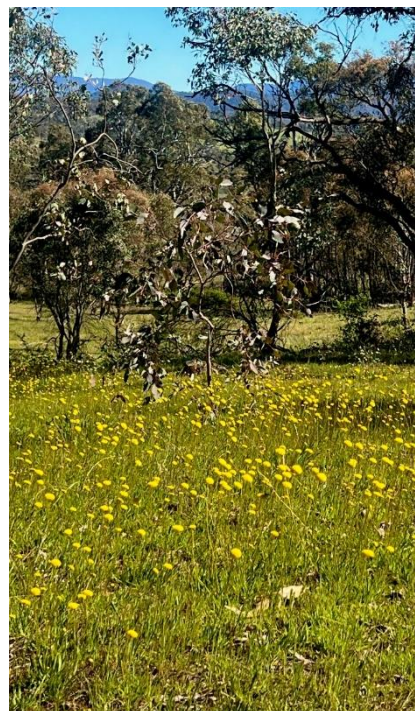


Figure 3. Field of Billy Buttons (*Craspedia variabilis*) at Stromlo Woodlands (Rainer Rehwinkel).

Birds of Stromlo Woodlands

A total of 129 species has been reported at Stromlo Woodlands during the period January 2002 to May 2026. Woodland species are strongly represented. Threatened species, the not (yet) threatened, the easy-to-find and the not-so-easy to find are all represented at the Woodlands.

Birds of Stromlo Woodlands: Threatened Species

Stromlo Woodlands support ten bird species classified as threatened under the ACT's *Nature Conservation Act 2014*. To put this into perspective, 22 bird species have been declared threatened under the *Act*. Fifteen of these are species that may be found in woodlands. Of these, ten have been reported at Stromlo Woodlands, with several known to breed at the site. These

species are listed in Table 1, with photos taken at Stromlo Woodlands of several of these species at Figure 4.

Table 1. Threatened bird species at Stromlo Woodlands.

Species	ACT threatened species status*	Comment
Little Eagle <i>Hieraaetus morphnoides</i>	Vulnerable	First recorded Nov 2025
Gang-gang Cockatoo <i>Callocephalon fimbriatum</i>	Endangered	Seen throughout the year
Superb Parrot <i>Polytelis swainsonii</i>	Vulnerable	Seen throughout the year
Brown Treecreeper <i>Climacteris picumnus</i>	Vulnerable	Reported Apr 2018 (A. Smith)
White-throated Needletail <i>Hirundapis caudacutis</i>	Vulnerable	Occasional visitor
White-winged Triller <i>Lalage tricolor</i>	Vulnerable	Summer visitor. Breeds on site
Varied Sittella <i>Daphoenositta chrysoptera</i>	Vulnerable	Resident. Breeds on site
Scarlet Robin <i>Petroica boodang</i>	Vulnerable	Resident. Breeds on site
Hooded Robin <i>Melanodryas cucullata</i>	Endangered	First report Oct 2025 (Z. Muller)
Diamond Firetail <i>Stagonopleura guttata</i>	Vulnerable	Resident. Has bred on site

* Source. ACT threatened species. <https://www.act.gov.au/environment/animals-and-plants/act-threatened-species>

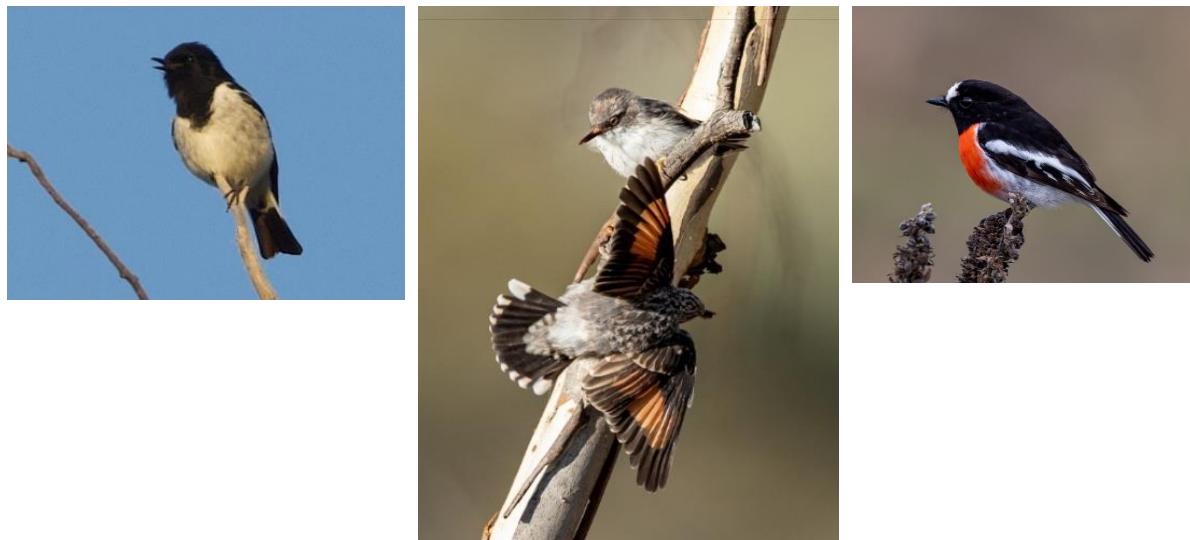


Figure 3. Photos of threatened bird species from Stromlo Woodlands.

Hooded Robin (Zebedee Muller) Varied Sittella (John Hurrell) Scarlet Robin (John Hurrell)

Birds of Stromlo Woodlands: more broadly

The total Stromlo Woodlands bird list of 129 species is shown in this [eBird Observation List](https://ebird.org/barchart?byr=2002&eyr=2026&bmo=1&emo=12&r=L39982223,L2542386) <https://ebird.org/barchart?byr=2002&eyr=2026&bmo=1&emo=12&r=L39982223,L2542386>

The list includes Bar Charts showing when each species has been reported throughout the year. To date, 519 eBird Checklists have been submitted for the Woodlands, with most of these submitted by Canberra Birds members. It is possible that additional species have been observed but not recorded in eBird. Correspondence from observers about additional species would be very welcome as this will further enrich the story of the birds of Stromlo Woodlands.

The most recent species added to the bird list are: two Hooded Robins reported by multiple people from October 2025 onwards (first report Z. Muller), Little Eagle in November 2025 (J. Hotchin and J. McGuinness), and Rose Robin in March 2026 (P. Cox). Hopefully the Hooded Robins will remain at the Woodlands, the Little Eagle may be seen again, but the Rose Robin would have been passing through on migration.

The avifauna of Stromlo Woodlands includes:

Resident species reported all year round include Weebill, Grey Shrikethrush, Grey Currawong and four of the five ACT resident Thornbill species (plus one report of Yellow Thornbill).

Summer visitors include Dollarbird, Rainbow Bee-eater, Sacred Kingfisher, Shining and Horsfield's Bronze-cuckoo, White-throated and Western Gerygone and Dusky Woodswallow. These all breed at the Woodlands.

Occasional visitors and/or birds passing through. These have included Masked and White-browed Woodswallows.

Species worthy of special comment, but not in taxonomic order:
Gang-gang Cockatoo. These visit the Woodlands throughout the year.

Speckled Warbler. This author knows of several breeding pairs at the Woodlands.

Chestnut-rumped Heathwren. Reported from two locations at the Woodlands in October 2019 (K. Farley) and February 2026 (Z. Muller).

Painted Buttonquail. This species had an irruptive period in the ACT between 2020 and 2023. Stromlo Woodlands shared this, with multiple reports of this cryptic species during that time.

Turquoise Parrot. A single bird was reported in a well-documented record from April 2024 (Z. Muller). Interestingly, a Turquoise Parrot was also reported at the nearby Bluetts Block in February 2022 (R. Rehwinkel).

In autumn, groups of migrating Yellow-faced and White-naped Honeyeaters can be seen using Deep Creek, adjacent to the Woodlands, as a route up and over the Woodlands and Bluetts Block and across toward the Molonglo River.



Figure 4. Residents and summer visitors photographed at Stromlo Woodlands.

Clockwise from top right: Dusky Woodswallow, Rainbow Bee-eater, Pied Butcherbird, Grey Currawong, Western Gerygone, Brown-headed Honeyeater, Leaden Flycatcher. (Sue Beatty, John Hurrell, Zebedee Muller).

Conclusion

I hope this article will encourage readers to visit Stromlo Woodlands. As well as interesting birds and plants, including some wonderful large old trees, there are beautiful views across to the Murrumbidgee Corridor and the Brindabellas beyond.

Stromlo Woodlands is one of the areas of significant biodiversity within Canberra's Western Edge, and like so many areas in the ACT and beyond, its flora and fauna is under significant pressure from the effects of a warming and drying climate including events such as El Ninos. The flora and fauna of Canberra's Western Edge also face the added pressure of potential urban development either on, or adjacent to, the places they make their homes. For both these reasons continued close monitoring at the Woodlands, particularly of Threatened species will be valuable in providing data to assist conservation decision making at the Woodlands and across the Western Edge more generally.

For those interested in the ACT Government's investigations and plans for urban development of Canberra's Western Edge, please see the Western Edge Investigation web page linked into the Reference list below. The Conservation Council ACT Region, of which Canberra Birds is a member, opposes this development. Information about this is on the Council's Save our Western Edge web page and is also linked into the Reference list below.

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to Jenny Bounds and Steve Read for their insights into the flora of Stromlo Woodlands, and especially to Rainer Rehwinkel for his ongoing involvement and enthusiastic interest in this special place.

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Appendix.: Species List for Stromlo Woodlands (Source: eBird)

Common Name	Scientific Name
Australian Wood Duck	<i>Chenonetta jubata</i>
Pacific Black Duck	<i>Anas superciliosa</i>
Grey Teal	<i>Anas gracilis</i>
Brown Quail	<i>Synoicus ypsilophorus</i>
Stubble Quail	<i>Coturnix pectoralis</i>
Common Bronzewing	<i>Phaps chalcoptera</i>
Crested Pigeon	<i>Ocyphaps lophotes</i>
Peaceful Dove	<i>Geopelia placida</i>
Pacific Koel	<i>Eudynamys orientalis</i>
Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo	<i>Chalcites basalis</i>
Shining Bronze-Cuckoo	<i>Chalcites lucidus</i>
Pallid Cuckoo	<i>Heteroscenes pallidus</i>
Fan-tailed Cuckoo	<i>Cacomantis flabelliformis</i>

Appendix continued on next page

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Common Name	Scientific Name
Sahul Brush Cuckoo	<i>Cacomantis variolosus</i>
Tawny Frogmouth	<i>Podargus strigoides</i>
Australian Owlet-nightjar	<i>Aegotheles cristatus</i>
White-throated Needletail	<i>Hirundapus caudacutus</i>
Masked Lapwing	<i>Vanellus miles</i>
Painted Button Quail	<i>Turnix varius</i>
Australasian Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus novaehollandiae</i>
Australasian Darter	<i>Anhinga novaehollandiae</i>
Little Pied Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo melanoleucos</i>
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
White-faced Heron	<i>Egretta novaehollandiae</i>
White-necked Heron	<i>Ardea pacifica</i>
Black-shouldered Kite	<i>Elanus axillaris</i>
Little Eagle	<i>Hieraaetus morphnoides</i>
Wedge-tailed Eagle	<i>Aquila audax</i>
Collared Sparrowhawk	<i>Tachyspiza cirrocephala</i>
Brown Goshawk	<i>Tachyspiza fasciata</i>
White-bellied Sea-eagle	<i>Ichthyophaga leucogaster</i>
Australian Boobook	<i>Ninox boobook</i>
Rainbow Bee-eater	<i>Merops ornatus</i>
Laughing Kookaburra	<i>Dacelo novaeguineae</i>
Sacred Kingfisher	<i>Todiramphus sanctus</i>
Dollarbird	<i>Eurystomus orientalis</i>
Nankeen Kestrel	<i>Falco cenchroides</i>
Australian Hobby	<i>Falco longipennis</i>
Brown Falcon	<i>Falco berigora</i>
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo	<i>Zanda funerea</i>
Cockatiel	<i>Nymphicus hollandicus</i>
Gang-gang Cockatoo	<i>Callocephalon fimbriatum</i>
Galah	<i>Eolophus roseicapilla</i>
Little Corella	<i>Cacatua sanguinea</i>
Long-billed Corella	<i>Cacatua tenuirostris</i>

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Common Name	Scientific Name
Sulphur-crested Cockatoo	<i>Cacatua galerita</i>
Superb Parrot	<i>Polytelis swainsonii</i>
Australian King-Parrot	<i>Alisterus scapularis</i>
Turquoise Parrot	<i>Neophema pulchella</i>
Crimson Rosella	<i>Platycercus elegans</i>
Eastern Rosella	<i>Platycercus eximius</i>
Red-rumped Parrot	<i>Psephotus haematonotus</i>
Rainbow Lorikeet	<i>Trichoglossus moluccanus</i>
Superb Lyrebird	<i>Menura novaehollandiae</i>
Satin Bowerbird	<i>Ptilonorhynchus violaceus</i>
White-throated Treecreeper	<i>Cormobates leucophaea</i>
Brown Treecreeper	<i>Climacteris picumnus</i>
Superb Fairywren	<i>Malurus cyaneus</i>
Eastern Spinebill	<i>Acanthorhynchus tenuirostris</i>
Yellow-faced Honeyeater	<i>Caligavis chrysops</i>
Noisy Miner	<i>Manorina melanocephala</i>
Red Wattlebird	<i>Anthochaera carunculata</i>
White-plumed Honeyeater	<i>Ptilotula penicillata</i>
Fuscous Honeyeater	<i>Ptilotula fusca</i>
Crescent Honeyeater	<i>Phylidonyris pyrrhopterus</i>
White-eared Honeyeater	<i>Nesoptilotis leucotis</i>
White-naped Honeyeater	<i>Melithreptus lunatus</i>
Brown-headed Honeyeater	<i>Melithreptus brevirostris</i>
Noisy Friarbird	<i>Philemon corniculatus</i>
Spotted Pardalote	<i>Pardalotus punctatus</i>
Striated Pardalote	<i>Pardalotus striatus</i>
Speckled Warbler	<i>Pyrrholaemus sagittatus</i>
Chestnut-rumped Heathwren	<i>Hylacola pyrrhopygia</i>
Weebill	<i>Smicrornis brevirostris</i>
White-browed Scrubwren	<i>Sericornis frontalis</i>
Southern Whiteface	<i>Aphelocephala leucopsis</i>
Yellow-rumped Thornbill	<i>Acanthiza chrysorrhoa</i>
Yellow Thornbill	<i>Acanthiza nana</i>

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Common Name	Scientific Name
Striated Thornbill	<i>Acanthiza lineata</i>
Brown Thornbill	<i>Acanthiza pusilla</i>
Buff-rumped Thornbill	<i>Acanthiza reguloides</i>
White-throated Gerygone	<i>Gerygone olivacea</i>
Western Gerygone	<i>Gerygone fusca</i>
Black-faced Cuckooshrike	<i>Coracina novaehollandiae</i>
White-winged Triller	<i>Lalage tricolor</i>
Sahul Cicadabird	<i>Edolisoma tenuirostre</i>
Varied Sittella	<i>Daphoenositta chrysoptera</i>
Grey Shrikethrush	<i>Colluricincla harmonica</i>
Golden Whistler	<i>Pachycephala pectoralis</i>
Rufous Whistler	<i>Pachycephala rufiventris</i>
Olive-backed Oriole	<i>Oriolus sagittatus</i>
Masked Woodswallow	<i>Artamus personatus</i>
White-browed Woodswallow	<i>Artamus superciliosus</i>
Dusky Woodswallow	<i>Artamus cyanopterus</i>
Grey Butcherbird	<i>Cracticus torquatus</i>
Pied Butcherbird	<i>Cracticus nigrogularis</i>
Australian Magpie	<i>Gymnorhina tibicen</i>
Pied Currawong	<i>Strepera graculina</i>
Grey Currawong	<i>Strepera versicolor</i>
Willie Wagtail	<i>Rhipidura leucophrys</i>
Australian Rufous Fantail	<i>Rhipidura leucophrys</i>
Grey Fantail	<i>Rhipidura albiscapa</i>
Magpie-lark	<i>Grallina cyanoleuca</i>
Leaden Flycatcher	<i>Myiagra rubecula</i>
Restless Flycatcher	<i>Myiagra inquieta</i>
White-winged Chough	<i>Corcorax melanorhamphos</i>
Australian Raven	<i>Corvus coronoides</i>
Little Raven	<i>Corvus mellori</i>
Red-capped Robin	<i>Petroica goodenovii</i>
Flame Robin	<i>Petroica phoenicea</i>
Scarlet Robin	<i>Petroica boodang</i>

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Hooded Robin	<i>Melanodryas cucullata</i>
Eastern Yellow Robin	<i>Eopsaltria australis</i>
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Rufous Songlark	<i>Cincloramphus mathewsi</i>
Welcome Swallow	<i>Hirundo neoxena</i>
Fairy Martin	<i>Petrochelidon ariel</i>
Tree Martin	<i>Petrochelidon nigricans</i>
Silvereye	<i>Zosterops lateralis</i>
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Mistletoebird	<i>Dicaeum hirundinaceum</i>
Diamond Firetail	<i>Stagonopleura guttata</i>
Red-browed Finch	<i>Neochmia temporalis</i>
Double-barred Finch	<i>Stizoptera bichenovii</i>
Australasian Pipit	<i>Anthus australis</i>
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>

OBSERVATIONS OF EASTERN KOEL STAND-OFFS AND OTHER INTERACTIONS IN THE SPRING/SUMMER OF 2025-2026

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Abstract: This article describes a very long 38 h stand-off between 2 male Eastern Koels (*Eudynamys orientalis*) observed in Chapman on 9-11 Nov 2025. Further observations of stand-offs and similar interactions of females or a mix of male and female Koels in our Garden Bird Survey (GBS) site in the last two months of 2025 are summarised, before attempting, with limited success, to link these with the emergence of Koel fledglings hosted by Red Wattlebirds (*Anthochaera carunculata*,) in the local area. A survey of the literature shows that stand-offs and similar interactions by not only males, but also a mix of males and female Koels, is a common phenomenon, and suggests they are territorial with the purpose of evicting a rival from a high-value potential mating site.

1. Introduction

The 2025-2026 Eastern Koel (*Eudynamys orientalis*) [Koel hereafter] season in Chapman/Rivett started off a bit later than usual, with the first *ko-el* call heard on 13 Oct 2025. However, activity soon picked up, and it turned out to be a very active season for both adult Koels and the number of fledglings found in the area.

While a number of adults, both male and female had been observed soon after they arrived, the number of stand-offs involving males, females, and both sexes was a feature of the season. The first of these occurred on 9 Nov, as detailed in the next section.

All the observations were recorded within, or very close to, my Garden Bird Survey (GBS) site. I was often alerted by unusual calling. This also allowed for a longer time of observations for each event, compared with the relatively brief time allowed when walking my dogs locally.

2. A long-lasting stand-off between two male Koels

Around 14:50 h on Sunday afternoon of 9 Nov I heard a recognisable call (the first part of the *whoa* call). I heard it again at 15:08 h and then at 15:10 h, when there was a combination of the well-known “*whoa*” and the very fast “*wek wek wek*” calls, and I found 2 male Koels facing each other about 3 m apart in our *Eucalyptus crenulata*.

This tree has a quite open canopy and through our front windows I was able to regularly check progress, expecting them to soon leave. However, despite several bursts of short calls as above, they persisted. They mainly sat quietly with just some wing flicking, occasionally moving a bit and gradually getting closer together so that by nightfall they were about a metre apart (for details see Table 1).

Table 1. Details of observation of the male Koel stand-off.

Date; Time (h)	Observations
9 Nov	
15:27	Only first part <i>whoa</i> call with slightly lower male moving around a bit to 16:17 h.
16:41	They were very close together, one about 0.5 m above the other, the top male staring down and the lower one giving regular short wing flicks. They stayed there with only very slight movement until another short <i>whoa/wek wek</i> at 18:18 h.
18:52	A longer <i>whoa/wek wek</i> and the lower bird had moved about 2 m along, where it stayed, giving a similar call at 19:16 h
19:32	The two birds had moved to around 1 m from each other on same level. They did not move despite mid distant <i>whoas</i> at 19:33 h and close <i>kek keks</i> at 19:39 h.
20:07	Despite the first part of <i>whoa</i> call at 20:06 h, they were still there when it was nearly too dark to see. There was a very brief close <i>whoa</i> at 20:10 h.
10 Nov	
06:19	Both males still there in pretty much the same spots.
06:54	Both birds were still there, with short <i>whoas</i> including at 07:18 h when they came closer (<0.5 m) and stayed there with occasional <i>whoas</i> at 07:24 h and 07:28 h.
07:42	Very close together, with some <i>ko-el</i> calling outside the area at 07:44 h.
08:30	Short <i>whoa</i> and even closer (20 cm). The same at 09:45 h before we went out.
12:30	Even closer with brief call when we got back, seeming to interact a bit more. Then quiet with just some body movement. They had shifted about 1 m each on my return from a short dog walk mid-afternoon. Stayed there with only short <i>whoa/wek wek</i> around 18:41 h (with no other calls) until last seen at 20:01 h.
20:10	Same short <i>whoa/wek wek</i> call and then distant <i>whoas</i> sparked a bigger turn at 20:29 h and with clear close <i>kek keks</i> at 20:33 h.
11 Nov:	
04:42	Very close <i>kek keks</i> in response to distant <i>ko-el</i> calls, then close <i>whoas</i> at 04:44 h, 04:49 h and 04:53 h.
05:04	Again, close <i>kek keks</i> in response to <i>ko-el</i> calls followed by <i>whoas</i> which receded at 05:05 h, and with no more calls except distant <i>ko-el</i> calls at 05:13 h.
06:20	Absence confirmed by both males having gone.

Some similar close early-morning calling suggested they had overnighted there, which I could confirm as they were in nearly the same position when I got up shortly after 6 am. Surprisingly, they stayed there for the whole of Monday, very much quieter (as was other Koel calling) than on Sunday, though they did move around a bit, and at one stage were almost within touching distance (see Table 1).

As it got dark it seemed clear they would overnigh again, which they did, supported by some more close early calls on Tuesday morning from around 04:30 h. The female “*kek kek kek*” call was followed by a series of short “*whoa*” calls (see Table 1). Just after 05:00 h another set of loud *kek kek keks* was followed by *whoas*. The latter then moved away, suggesting they had left, which was confirmed when I got up about an hour later.

So, the two males were in the same tree (my regular checking supports they never left it) for about 38 hours, of which roughly 19 were daylight hours, a remarkable feat. During this time, they moved only over a few metres and appeared not to eat anything.

It appears that the early morning arrival of a female, whose *kek kek kek* call was also heard at 20:33 h the evening before, caused them to finally leave.

3. Further examples of Koel stand-offs/other interactions in Nov-Dec 2025

After this, heightened adult Koel activity continued with birds often seen chasing each other during noisy interactions or perching quite exposed on fences or wires. A feature was the often-scratchy calls, first identified as being given by a female on 26 Oct and continuing until the

end of December. This was often first heard when the female was stationary., and continued when in flight, though often the calls turned into a cackling sound (also given when stationary in trees *etc.*), first heard on 13 Nov and then through until 10 Feb. Another feature during this time was a number of interactions of Red Wattlebirds (*Anthochaera carunculata*) [RWB hereafter] with female Koels, including when RWB young were present (for details see Table 2). As indicated, the scratchy/cackling calls were given during these confrontations.

On the afternoon of Wednesday 3 Dec, I witnessed another Koel stand-off, but this time involving two females.

From around 13:22 h through my study window I could hear strange sharper *kek kek* calls for short periods every 5-10 minutes. Though the direction of the calls seemed to move around a bit, they persisted. I suspected two females (there was also a mix of male calls before and during) and went briefly to look for them several times, but after 3 hours I decided I should try a little harder.

Pinpointing the calling led me across Darwinia Tce, where another call at 16:17 h allowed me to easily find 2 females about 1 m apart in a largish bottlebrush on the side of a driveway, just within my GBS site. I could easily approach to within about 5 m and watch them, and over the next 10 minutes the RHS bird moved to within 20 cm, level with and facing the other bird. The RHS bird was quite agitated with continual wing and tail flicking, while the LHS bird, facing it, was quiet and hardly moved. However, the latter bird gave a short normal *kek kek* call at 16:27 h and very soon after a quiet male Koel flew in low from the LHS to within a metre away, and then quickly flew out again, while both females gave short *kek kek* calls. They then resumed, the RHS one even more agitated and the LHS making somewhat more movement until 16:30 h when I left.

At about 16:50-16:51 h there were more male *whoas* and female *kek keks* from that direction, but the females were still there at 16:52 h, much the same except both briefly *kek kek*ed. Then during my short dog walk circuit there was much male calling (*whoas*, *wow folaus* and some of the much faster *wek wek weks*) from that direction until 17:01 h. I suspected this broke the standoff, and on checking at 17:09 h the females had gone, though one was still in a much denser exotic tree <15 m away. Some more similar female calling followed as described in Table 2.

While this stand-off was observed only for around 45 minutes, I suspect it was occurring pretty much throughout the 3.5 hours that I heard the unusual double *kek kek* calling. However, judging by the varying directions of the calls, spread over around 100 metres of Darwinia Tce, it is likely that there were several different female stand-offs over that period.

This is supported by further observations the next day, 4 Dec. After much activity including calling in the morning and early afternoon there were similar *kek keks* and two different *folaus* from around 16:13 h, which led me to same exotic tree where one female was last seen at 17:09 h the day before. At 16:22 h two females could be seen there in a very similar position and acting much as before, 30 cm apart, but with a male Koel on the same level about 1 m away. Very interestingly, over several minutes all three could be heard and seen *kek kek*ing several times. Within 100 m there were also some answering *folaus* (and some *wek weks*) as well as *kek keks*, and at 16:26 h a male could be seen in our casuarina 100 m away with another bird, likely a female, but both flew before I could get a good look (so at least 5 birds in total were present).

Table 2. Summary/other details of other Koel stand-offs/interactions.

Date; Time (h)	Observations
30 Oct, 08:59-09:05	Smallish female flew into back fence wattle pursued by 2 RWBs, stayed there while being harassed only calling and moving slightly to at least 09:05 h.
16 Nov; 15:50-16:05	Heard scratchy call in same back fence wattle and found an adult RWB with 2 recent fledglings, and a female Koel nearby. I heard the call again at 15:58 h, and found the female in a nearby tea-tree, with an adult RWB dive-bombing her at 16:01 h. Then I heard her again in the tea-tree, before she flew away cackling.
29 Nov; 07:02 -07:09	Scratches heard in the tree on the path at the side of our house (where I had heard RWB fledglings begging), and shortly after a female Koel flew out low cackling with a RWB very close behind.
1 Dec; 07:38	Scratches heard in neighbour's back yard, bird not seen but RWB was harassing it.
1 Dec; 19:54	Female flew over to another neighbour's yard, giving scratchy calls, a RWB in hot pursuit.
3 Dec; 16:17-17:01	Two females standing-off and briefly one male – see text.
17:09-19:56	Quieter until calling near the stand-off area around 19:54 h before a female flew out into a nearby dead wattle and then flew with <i>kek keks</i> .
4 Dec; 16:22-17:02	Two females and one male stand-off with at least 2 others within 100 m – see text.
18:03-19:52	Two males briefly in same tree; lots of adult activity before and after – see text.
6 Dec; 07:11-07:25	A calling female was found in a partly dead wattle on my neighbour's fence. She sat there and calling continued becoming less after 07:14 h and at 07:18 h a male had joined her, initially 1 m below. They then swapped positions, with her moving around below; the male flew off at 07:22 h and female was gone soon after.
8 Dec; 18:17-18:23	Frantic <i>kek kek/wik wik etc.</i> calling across Darwinia Tce was traced to an exotic tree <15 m on other side of the 3 Dec bottlebrush. A male and female were seen there plus a third bird at 18:22 h. The pair flew out and the third bird stayed; though it <i>kek kek</i> its identity (male or female) was not clear.
8 Dec; 20:14-20:17	<i>Kek keks/wek weks</i> were heard and again 2 birds were in the same exotic tree, the female flying out <i>kek kekking</i> while the remaining bird <i>whoaed</i> .
9 Dec; 15:17	I traced <i>ko-el</i> calls to same exotic tree as 8 Dec, but before I could find anything 2 birds burst out, one <i>kek kekking</i> and the other likely a male.
12 Dec; 16:46 -16:55	Loud calling/interactions in my garden from 5 birds, probably 3 males, finally stopped when some birds flew away but pair still present was attacked by a RWB.
14 Dec; 09:32	A cackling female flew past our window, with a RWB very close behind,
20 Dec; 09:00-09:24	A female was seen on the path wires next to our house with a male flying in below her, then she dropped down and he clearly passed food to her, before she dropped to the fence and then flew away cackling around 09:04 h. The male stayed on the fence before dropping into neighbour's garden.

There was further close calling on my approach again for a brief check at 16:51 h and the birds were still there but their positions had changed, one female had basically swapped positions with the male and the third bird was forming an equilateral triangle, with some movement and calling. Again, there was much *kek kek* calling, with *whoas*, when I approached again, but coming from a different part of the tree, and at 17:02 h a female flew out pursued by male about 1 m behind (so the stand-off was again around 40 min). The other female was not in the tree but possibly in bushes nearby as scratches could be heard, also at 17:17 h when I passed by.

After this, frantic close calling drew me outside when I saw 3 males flying through (one with a RWB in hot pursuit), while other calls included at least 1 *folaus* plus one *kek kek* (so likely 4 males and a female). I then checked male calling from the same exotic tree and found 2 males in there, about 1 m apart before both flew off chasing each other at 18:03 h with a female flying and *kek kekking* nearby at 18:04 h. Then there was double *kek kek* from a neighbour's yard around 18:24 h. One female flew to the wires, and another two flew off chasing each other at 18:27 h (so likely 7 adults in total). Some more calling followed until 19:52 h.

After these stand-offs the heightened adult Koel activity continued with birds often seen chasing each other during noisy interactions or perching quite exposed on fences or wires. As summarised in Table 2, there were some shorter stand-offs/more prolonged interactions up to 9 Dec, and a more notable one on 20 Dec when a male was seen to pass food to a female, something I have never witnessed before.² There were also a couple more interactions with RWBs, which in recent years have clearly recognised Koels as a threat.

4. Local Koel fledglings resulting from all this activity

Adult Koel activity continued into January with up to 5 adults recorded early in the month, but with still 6 adults as well as a fledgling recorded on the W corner of Angophora and Pavonia Sts Rivett early on 26 Jan. However, adult activity became very much less in February and my focus early in 2026 was on finding many Koel fledglings.

The first of these was a very young one found on 16 Dec in the front yard about 100 m further SE in Darwinia Tce Rivett than much of the activity described above. However, despite regular checking this fledgling was not seen again until a much larger, long-tailed, loudly begging fledgling (assumed to be the same one) was observed about 100 m away in Burgan Pl late on 31 Dec.

This led to a flurry of sightings within 1 km of where the above stand-offs *etc.* occurred, with at least 17 in Rivett and 5 in Chapman. Many of these fledglings were already quite advanced when first found and due to their mobility, it was a very confusing season for me to be able to estimate how many fledglings/juveniles there actually were. For example, finding fledglings which were already well-grown when first sighted still at the same spot 3 weeks later.

Of the five young found in Chapman all except one were located well (>750 m) to the S/SE, and so are unlikely to have resulted from the above adult activity. The closest one was initially found about 500 m away on the early morning of 4 Jan, and though it did seem to move as close as 200 m away over the next 3 weeks (assuming it was the same one), it can probably be ruled out as it was reasonably advanced. Since a maximum of 31 days had elapsed from the 3-4 Dec events described above, this is not consistent with maximum of 37 days from egg-laying to fledging given by Abernathy and Langmore (2017).

The first Rivett fledgling was not confirmed until early on 8 Jan, and the closest to the above activity (within 50 m) the next morning 9 Jan, though it had been heard nearby twice on 8 Jan. At 36 days, this is closer to Abernathy and Langmore's (2017) maximum of 37 days, but again it was already quite mobile when first confirmed. Another four fledglings were found within 250 m; three were at various stages of mobility while the fourth, a very small, short-tailed fledgling found about 150 m away early on 19 Jan was the most likely to have resulted from the activity described above.

Given the adult Koel's mobility, the possibility cannot be dismissed that fledglings found further away also resulted from the activity described above. One feature was that fledglings were often clumped together, with in several cases three fledglings could be seen or heard in close proximity, or one heard nearby. However, none were first found within my GBS site where the activity occurred, the closest being the 9 Jan bird above, which often crossed Darwinia Tce and spent time in my garden begging and being fed. Interestingly, our local RWB

² However, see report by John Layton at the end of Section 6.2. See also Geoffrey Dabb in Section 6.3 below.

pair did not host a Koel fledgling this season, possibly the result of the frequent harassing *etc.* described in Table 2.

My last new fledglings were found on 15 Feb, the first in the morning, a quite mobile one heard begging loudly in Chapman about a km away from the above action, and the second an advanced long-tailed one in Rivett about 500 m away. These were the only ones first observed in February.

As noted in Holland (2026), my observations above closely follow those for the whole of Canberra. This reference also lists Koel fledging numbers for each season since the last summary (Holland 2021) and mentions some of the new observations made during that period.

5. Summary of Koel stand-offs in the literature/other sources

Stand-offs between male and female adult Koels have been described in the literature. A summary of the incidents I have been able to find follows:

5.1. Literature including the internet

(Higgins, 1999) provides details of two early examples of “threat or advertising display” which describe similar behaviour, both for two males but with other Koels also present in the area. Interestingly, in one, if a female called nearby, both males would call even more loudly and peck at each other. Though the length of observations is not clear, there is no indication of them lasting overnight.

A check of the internet led to the following:

A photo of a male Koel said to have been involved in a ‘Mexican Stand-off’ with another male (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/34655572@N06/6219654719/in/photostream/>) by Chris Ring in Townsville on 7 Oct 2011. They sat, a branch apart, eyeballing each other and wishing that the other would fall to the ground, dead! The photographer was able to get right below them as they were quite distracted.

There is also a nearly 5-minute Youtube video of two male Koels by BMWILD (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dm7scK3lq0o>) in a ‘Mexican Stand-off’ (location unclear) on 23 Nov 2020. After a ‘lengthy battle’ they were stationary about 25 cm apart, with one Koel in a submissive pose whilst the other was in a dominant position. They were in an open small gum and even though BMWILD was very close with cameras and talking and watching them, neither bird ‘was willing to budge an inch for fear of attack from the other.’

There is also a photo taken on 19 Oct 2024 (location unclear) by Steven Zenos of a ‘Mexican stand-off’ (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/847679366105142/posts/1602322147307523/>) of two male Koels in a mulberry tree (no further details).

Most importantly, the search of the Internet also brought up the following not picked up in the discussions below and which appears to be the first published ACT example.

On 26 Nov 2014 Geoffrey Dabb posted the following (slightly edited) on the COG E-mail Discussion List (COG Chat line):

This morning on Rocky Knob (Narrabundah) the *wirras* were loud and frequent with an occasional *kek*. There were 3 birds initially highish in the eucalypts. The female was seen

to fly off in the direction of another calling male, leaving 2 males that engaged in a tense stand-off for more than an hour, sometimes within a metre of one another, and mainly in shrubbery within a metre or so of the ground. One bird, the more aggressive, was smaller, the other being quite sluggish and reluctant to move away. It is possible that the larger (older?) bird had moved into territory claimed by the smaller bird. During the confrontation there was not a single ‘*koel*’ but there was the occasional *wirra*, with some clucking and churring. In the photos included the aggressive (smaller) male was on the right and upper middle and on the left in the interaction shot.



Figure 1. Stand-off between two male Koels in Evatt (Gil Pfitzner).

5.2. Publications in Canberra Bird Notes (CBN)

Fig. 6 in Geoffrey Dabb (2018) includes two photos of a ‘Stationary confrontation’ between two males, one a sub-adult, in Narrabundah on 7 Jan 2018. He notes that it lasted for about one hour and during most of that time the two birds were within one or two metres of each other. However, the photos show that in both cases they were very close together, almost touching in one case (on the pot plants). In response to my posting details of the 9 Nov 2025 stand-off above on the COG chat line, on 13 Nov Geoffrey stated, ‘From Canberra observations I know of, mostly unpublished, this behaviour deserves the adjective ‘frequent’. It can be of varying degrees of duration and intensity.’

Geoffrey also noted: ‘The duration of the display Jack reports, might help rule out courtship. This, and other available information on the behaviour, suggests a (mutual) purpose of evicting a rival from a high-value potential mating site, as marked by female presence. That is, we are seeing contests for possession of such sites.’

More examples below have been taken from my subsequent summaries of the Koel seasons from 2018-2019 to 2020-2021.

The first of these (see 3rd point in Section 3.1 of Holland 2020a) was on 21 Dec 2018 when following some close *whoa* and *kek kek* calls, a female was found crouched in a quite bizarre,

forward-leaning, frozen position in a Melaleuca bush at our rear fence in Chapman, with a male in a tree <10 m away looking down at her. She remained in this position for at least 35 minutes.

Section 4.1 of this same reference (Holland, 2020a) notes three incidents reported by Diana White of stand-offs in or near a 'lookout tree' in Narrabundah, the first on 8 Feb 2019 being of a female peering at two other females from the top of this tree. The other two were between a male (in one case a sub-adult) and a female on 9 and 18 Feb 2019, respectively. In the first case their beaks were touching and in the second the female was lower down the tree.

Section 3.2 of Holland (2020b) notes that on 19 Jan 2019 Jenny Bounds had 4 Koels (2 males and 2 females) in a tree all in the same binocular view in her Weston garden. They were calling together and doing what she described as body twitching or flicking. The same section notes that on 20 Jan Christine D saw a male and two females just outside her Flynn window. The latter were behaving very oddly, making jerky movements of their heads and tails, almost as if one was copying the other, making it look a bit like a dance. Eventually one female slowly moved away, followed by the other.

Section 3.1 of Holland (2020c) notes that on 3 Nov 2019 Geoffrey Dabb found four Koels in a 'frozen tableau' confrontation in one tree, two males and two dark-type females, in Narrabundah. There are no further details except that three other Koels were calling nearby.

The only such report for the 2020-2021 season was on 4 Jan 2021 when Jenny Bounds had five adult male Koels carrying on (calling and posturing) in the deciduous tree in her rear neighbour's yard in Weston (Bounds 2021). However, Section 3.1 of Holland (2021) does contain a report by John Layton of a male presenting a female with a piece of apricot, which she accepted, though she then refused the red berry offered.

5.3. *My personal notes*

More examples, as below, have been taken from my notes for both local and ACT Koels for the 2021-2022 to 2024-2025 seasons.

On 16 Dec 2021 Ian Fraser reported on the COG Chat line that he had found two male Koels sitting in the big paperbark in front of his home in Duffy, unusually oblivious to them. They were mostly silent, other than an occasional single call and one brief '*wirra*', facing each other only 60 cm apart, one slightly higher. They alternately flicked their wings at each other but made no other movement. Ian didn't know how long they'd been doing it before they were found, but they seemed to accept after about 15 minutes that they weren't achieving much and just sat and stared at each other. An hour and a half later they were still doing so.

Steve Wallace first responded on 17 Dec 2021 with a link to a video of the final minute of over 20 minutes of this type of behaviour, taken in Fraser on 3 Jan 2017, (https://macaulaylibrary.org/asset/201635921#_ga=2.14495220.2108599157.1639713982-674719121.1632024287). It shows the birds stationary in a typical stance only about 20 cm apart and largely quiet except for some half calls by one of the birds, before some half lunges by both birds, followed by one rushing at the other, an example of a stand-off ending in an aggressive act. Steve agreed: 'When the koels in a 'frozen stand-off' are not disturbed, it can end in violence'.

On 19 Dec 2021 Geoffrey Dabb responded: 'Unusual, but sufficiently common to be a recorded behaviour. I think I've come across it about 4 times locally, each time 2 males, sometimes a

female in vicinity'. On 20 Dec he rediscovered the following example from 30 Jan 2018 in Narrabundah:

This morning there was another example of that remarkable Koel behaviour that might be described as a 'frozen stand-off' or a 'prolonged stationary confrontation'. The site for this was the neighbour's cactus display, 3 m from the back door. Both aggressors (two males) were immobile for perhaps 15 minutes and only moved when I approached to closer than 5 metres, whereon the older bird (i.e. not the obvious sub-adult) took flight, leaving the younger to assume possession of the pergola and begin (or resume) feeding on the grape crop. (.....) Although the confrontation might be interpreted as a contest for food, it is more likely a sign of the tension generated by at least one female in the area (also feeding on the grapes) and hence as 'breeding behaviour'. The unusual thing about this little tableau was that the birds might have been taken for objects placed by someone with an unusual taste in garden decorations.

Geoffrey then posted a photo of the above stand-off, and also an old snap of a male carrying a live snail as a courtship offering.

Later, on 20 Dec 2021, Steve Wallace posted that he saw another 'stand-off' on the 29 Nov 2021 where a female was also present. This one ended when the female left. The last few seconds were captured on his phone so the video is poor quality but the birds were visible and the calls were audible – https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-jAtEbPATZpKsnmF5PnesqcZ_yVLxVET/view?usp=sharing.

On 23 Dec 2021 I found another example in a silky oak in a small park in Rivett. I had seen a male fly there and found two males very close together (<1 m) facing each other, relatively immobile except when calling. One was in very exaggerated frozen forward-leaning position with tail up, wings down, while the other in a normal position appeared to be a young male still with some light patches. I then found a female calling a few metres away.

At 20:10 h on 21 Dec 2022 two males were found frozen facing each other within 50 cm in a wattle in my garden. As it grew dark, they could be seen giving a range of calls all closely following the others, *whoas*, *wek weks*, *wows* and lots of growls by one bird in particular. At 20:51 h they were still there, *whoa-ing* in unison.

I could not find any examples from 2023-2024 but on the morning of 16 Nov 2024 Alison Milton (personal communication) watched some interesting behaviour between two male Koels:

They were on the roof of a house in Hawker having a stand-off (the photos were posted on CNM). After her first sighting the dominant one lay almost flat on its belly and slowly crept up the roof to where the other was standing. As the aggressor got closer the other one slowly moved further and further down the roof. The more dominant one also began moving down the roof until finally they were almost beak to beak. Alison was expecting an altercation, but the pursued bird then made its way up the adjacent roof incline to the top of the next ridge, once again pursued by the second bird. Eventually it flew into a tree behind the roof and a few minutes later the victor flew off in the other direction. There was no sight or sound of a female. The whole process took around 10 minutes and there was some twitching of feathers or spreading tail feathers by both birds during the pursuit.

Following up some slow *wawk* calls at 12:25 h on 12 Jan 2025, I found 2 males <1 m apart in a neighbour's Chinese Elm. They were in frozen positions except for one twitching. Following

some *whoas/wek weks*, the pair was still there at 12:45 h. Then one flew off and the other slowly *wawked* as well, giving faster calls (more towards *wow*) before flying off at 12:49 h.



Figure 2. Brutal confrontation between two male Koels in Evatt (Gil Pfitzner).

Finally, Gil Pfitzner (personal communication) informed me of a stand-off between two male Koels which occurred at his place in Evatt on 19 Dec 2025. There was a bit of ‘cat and mouse’ sizing each other up over 20 minutes (see Fig 1), before at 16:39 h they attacked each other in a brutal confrontation (see Fig 2, note the closed eye). Gil said the fight was probably the most vicious he had seen between any pair of birds. The lead-up to the fight was a couple of days of constant chases most of the day until the stand-off.

6. Discussion

The above are summarised in order of the date in Table 3 (two males) and Table 4 (other stand-offs involving males and females).

Table 3. Summary of Stand-offs involving two males.

Date	Observer	Comments
1961 and 1970	HANZAB	Interacted with other birds present in the area.
7 Nov 2011	Chris Ring	Photo only, they sat a branch apart, eyeballing each other.
26 Nov 2014	Geoffrey Dabb, Narrabundah	Lasted for more than an hour, sometimes within 1 m of one another, and mainly in shrubbery within 1 m or so of the ground. One bird, the more aggressive, was smaller, there was limited calling.
3 Jan 2017	Steve Wallace, Fraser	Last minute of a 20-minute video showing the birds stationary in a typical stance only about 20 cm apart and largely quiet except for some half calls by one of the birds before some half lunges by both birds, followed by one aggressively rushing at the other.
7 Jan 2018	Geoffrey Dabb, Narrabundah	In the open on pot plants. Lasted for about one hour with the birds within 1 or 2 m of one another, but the photos show that in both cases they were very close together, almost touching in one case.
30 Jan 2018	Geoffrey Dabb, Narrabundah	Low in neighbour's cactus display, 3 m from the back door. Both aggressors were immobile for perhaps 15 min and only moved when approached to closer than 5 m, whereon the older bird took flight, leaving the younger sub-adult to begin (or resume) feeding on the grape crop.
23 Nov 2020	BMWILD, unclear	Nearly 5-minute video 'Mexican Stand-off' on. They were stationary about 25 cm apart with one Koel in a submissive pose and the other in a dominant one.
16 Dec 2021	Ian Fraser, Duffy	For over 1.5 h in a big paperbark. Mostly silent, other than an occasional single call, and one brief 'wirra', facing each other only 60 cm apart, one slightly higher. They alternately flicked their wings at each other but made no other movement.
21 Dec 2022	Jack Holland, Chapman	For at least 40 minutes at nightfall, two birds sat frozen, facing each other within 50 cm in a wattle in our garden, giving a range of calls all closely following the other. Stayed overnight?
16 Nov 2024	Alison Milton, Hawker	Over 10 minutes watched on roofs, the aggressor creeping up behind the other bird (at one time almost beak to beak) which moved slowly away until it flew away, and the first bird flew in a different direction.
12 Jan 2025	Jack Holland, Chapman	Frozen, except for one twitching, in neighbour's tree for at least 20 min before one flew off and the other followed slightly later.
9 Nov 2025	Jack Holland, Chapman	Over 38 h including 2 nights in same tree, occasionally calling and moving, with other Koels sometimes around. Left early morning.
4 Dec 2025	Jack Holland, Rivett	Two males briefly standing off in tree with lots of adult activity before and after.
19 Dec 2025	Gil Pfitzner, Evatt	Sized each other up over 20 minutes before they attacked each other in a brutal confrontation.

Tables 3 and 4 cover a total of 26 stand-offs, with 15 consisting of 2 males, 1 of 2 females, 3 of a male and a female, 2 of 2 females with a male, 2 of 2 males and a female, 1 of 3 females, 2 of 2 males and 2 females, and 1 of 5 males.

Thus, while the majority are of two males, other groupings also occur. While there is only one example of 2 females standing off, there was an unseen male nearby who briefly visited. For males I agree with Geoffrey Dabb's conclusion (see Section 6.1) that available information suggests a (mutual) purpose of evicting a rival from a high-value potential mating site. That is, the stand-offs are contests for possession of such sites.

Table 4. Summary of Stand-offs involving females or more than two birds.

Date	Observer	Comments
Two females		
3 Dec 2025	Jack Holland, Rivett	Lasted >45 min, one female was quite agitated with continual wing and tail flicking; the other bird facing hardly moved and was quiet except for short normal <i>kek kek</i> call. A male briefly visited.
Male and female		
21 Dec 2018	Jack Holland, Chapman	Female frozen on fence for at least 35 minutes during which a male in a tree <10 m away was looking down at her for some of this time.
9 and 18 Feb 2018	Diana White, Narrabundah	Two incidents of male and female in 'lookout tree'; in the first case their beaks touching and in the other the female lower down the tree.
Male and 2 females		
20 Jan 2019	Christine D, Flynn	Females were behaving very oddly, making jerky movements of their heads and tails, almost as if one was copying the other.
4 Dec 2025	Jack Holland, Rivett	Two females 30 cm apart in a very similar position and actions as on 3 Dec, but with a male on the same level about 1 m away. Over several minutes all three could be heard and seen <i>kek kekking</i> several times. Lots of adult activity nearby and their positions changed but after 40 minutes one female flew off, closely followed by the male.
2 Males and a female		
29 Nov 2021	Steve Wallace, Fraser	Last few seconds of a video where the female flew off and 2 males pursued her.
23 Dec 2021	Jack Holland, Rivett	Males very close together (<1 m) facing each other, relatively immobile except when calling. One was in very exaggerated frozen forward-leaning position with tail up, wings down, while the other in a normal position appeared to be a young male still with some light patches. A female was found a few metres away.
3 Females		
6 Feb 2018	Diana White, Narrabundah	Female peering at 2 other females from the top of the "lookout tree".
2 Males and 2 females		
19 Jan 2019	Jenny Bounds, Weston	In a tree all in the same binocular view, calling together and doing what Jenny described as body twitching or flicking.
3 Nov 2019	Geoffrey Dabb	In a 'frozen tableau' confrontation in one tree in Narrabundah.
5 Males		
4 Jan 2021	Jenny Bounds, Weston	Carrying on (calling and posturing) in the deciduous tree in her rear neighbour's yard.

However, the presence of females in 10 of the observations shows stand-offs can also occur between two or more females trying to protect high-value breeding sites. Very interesting is that 4 (3 Jan 2017, 7 Jan 2018, 12 Jan 2025 and 30 Jan 2018) of the two male stand-offs occurred after the New Year³, and 5 of the mixed birds stand-offs were also in the New Year, as late as 18 Feb. This possibly explains the lack of clear correlation between the confrontations I found in December 2025 with later observation of fledglings, as the female owning the territory may have already laid a number of eggs.

As shown by the very late 2020-2021 season (Holland 2021), Koels can have a very long and late breeding season. Carrolle Colbert videoed a pair copulating on 9 Feb 2023, and they certainly call much later than other local cuckoos. The limited further success in 2026 may simply reflect the lack of remaining suitable RWB hosts or the availability of their nests at the right stage after the New Year.

³ This discounts Jenny Bounds' observation of 5 males on 4 Jan 2021.

My observation of the 38-h stand-off between the 2 males from 9-11 Nov 2025 is by far the longest of any, and the only one where it occurred overnight, with the possible exception of my 21 Dec 2022 observation. The next longest was Ian Fraser's at least 1.5-hour observation between 2 males on 21 Dec 2021, followed by Geoffrey Dabb's two of at least 1 h on 24 Nov 2014 and 7 Jan 2018. My stand-offs involving females on 3 and 4 Dec 2025 lasted about 45 minutes each, though the first may have reflected a series lasting over 3 hours. However, the length of time the observer is prepared to keep checking would be a major factor, including the ease of doing so. My 38-h stand-off in Dec 2025 was easily viewed from our house.

Apart from Gil Pfitzner's observation of the "brutal confrontation" of 2 males on 16 Dec 2025, the only other example of a stand-off ending in an aggressive act seems to be Steve Wallace's observation of 3 Jan 2017, where one male rushed at the other. However, in one of the two examples in Higgins (1999), the males pecked at each other when a female called nearby.

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks go to Gil Pfitzner for alerting me to his observation and allowing me to include some of his photographs in this article. My thanks also go to Alison Milton for providing details of her very interesting interaction, to Geoffrey Dabb and Steve Wallace for their contributions on the COG chat line in relation to Koel stand-offs, and to all the others named in this article for their postings on the COG chat line. Without these it would not have been possible to put this summary together. My thanks also go to Michael Lenz and Kevin Windle for their editing of my draft manuscripts, including the related note on Koel fledglings.

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NOTES

Canberra Bird Notes 51(1) (2026): 93-94

NUMBERS OF EASTERN KOEL FLEDGLINGS IN THE COG AREA OF INTEREST FOR THE 2021-2022 TO 2025-2026 BREEDING SEASONS

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My observations of Eastern Koel (*Eudynamys orientalis*) [Koel hereafter] fledglings between mid-December and mid-February reported in Holland (2026) for the 2025-2026 season correspond very well with the observations across the COG Area of Interest, with only one before and very few after this period, and the bulk of them reported in January. At 200 fledglings this is the highest number reported since the bumper 2020-2021 year, in which many fledglings were reported much later in the season (Holland 2021). For comparison, numbers for the seasons after that are also summarised in Table 1 below. These have been compiled using the same methods as previously.

Table 1. Numbers of Koel fledglings reported in past six Seasons.

Season	Number	Comments
2021-2022	177	Also extended, last reported 10 Apr.
2020-2021	325 (37*)	Very late finish with fledglings reported to 24 Apr.
2022-2023	164	Also extended, last reported 17 Apr.
2023-2024	69	Last reported 3 April, about a month after the latest previous report.
2024-2025	168	Abrupt early finish, last report 18 Mar.
2025-2026	200	Early finish, very few adults after mid-February, last reported 24 Mar.

*Possibly additional ones.

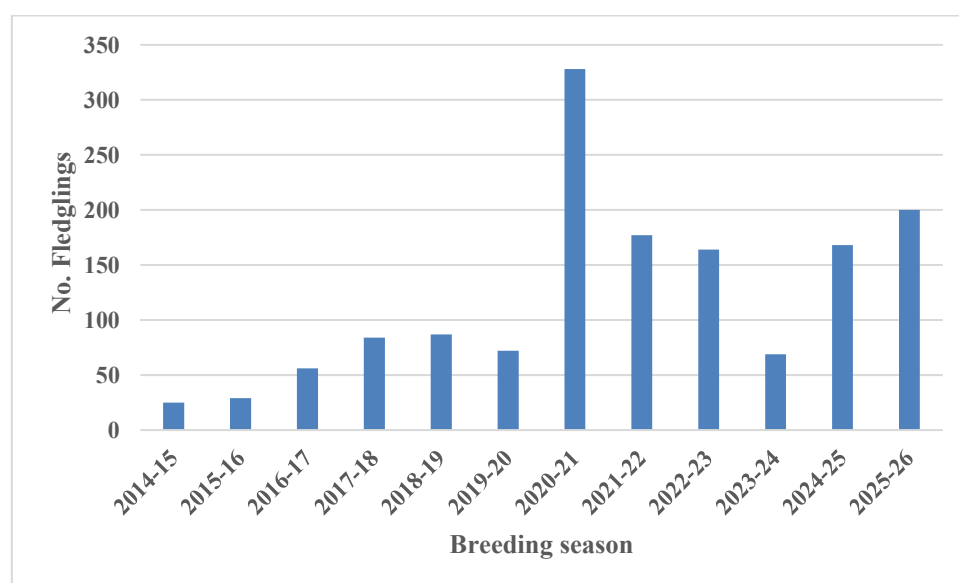


Figure 1. Number of Koel fledglings reported between 2014-2015 to 2025-2026.

Table 1 shows that the numbers over the past 5 years have been very similar, except for the much lower numbers in 2023-2024, which was attributed to a very wet summer. The other main difference has been the much earlier finish in the final two years, perhaps due to much drier summers than the previous four. Fig. 1 illustrates the number of reported Koel fledglings since I started collecting these data.

Highlights of the 2022-2023 to 2025-2026 seasons were reported in my monthly columns in the February to April issues of *Gang-gang*. These include the first reports on eBird of fledglings in Yass, Goulburn, Sutton, Bungendore and Murrumbateman within the COG area of Interest.

New Koel breeding observations include Terry Munro observing a female Koel attacking and shaking a featherless Red Wattlebird-(*Anthochaera carunculata*) [RWB hereafter] chick which was then found dead on the ground. The RWBs then built another nest nearby and were later observed feeding a Koel fledgling (Holland 2023).

Also, there was the first observation of which I am aware of a pair of RWBs raising successive Koel fledglings by Julie Clark, which has been published separately (Clark 2024).

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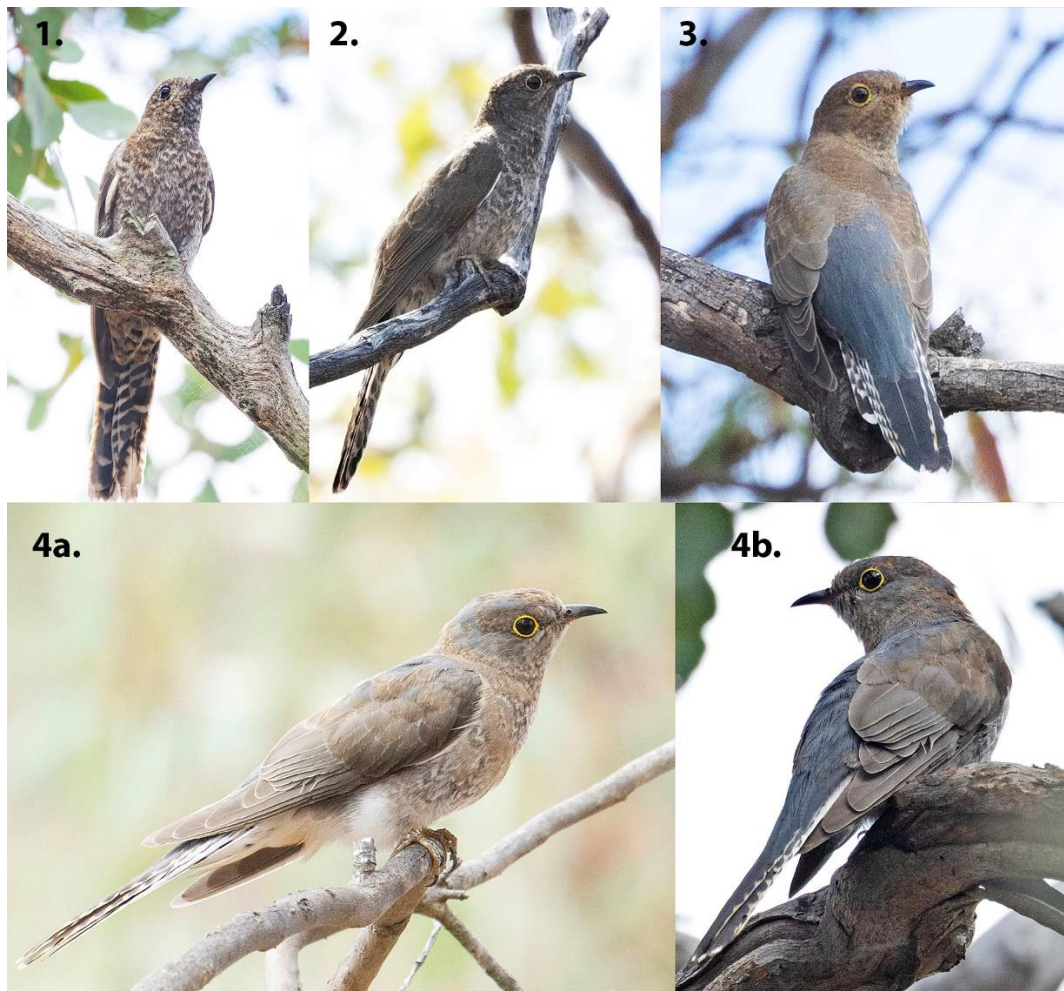
A GROUP OF YOUNG INDEPENDENT FAN-TAILED CUCKOOS UTILIZING THE SAME MICRO-HABITAT – AN ACCIDENTAL DISCOVERY OF A HIDDEN POPULATION LAYER?

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Observation: On 9 Feb 2026 at Callum Brae Nature Reserve I observed what initially appeared to be a single recently fledged Fan-tailed Cuckoo (*Cacomantis flabelliformis*) foraging and perching in a small area where I had paused to rest. The bird remained in the vicinity for an extended period, prompting closer attention. A different individual soon became apparent, and I photographed both intermittently over approximately 15 minutes.

Subsequent examination of the photographs revealed that at least four distinct individuals were present during this period. At no time were more than one or two birds visible simultaneously. Had I not been stationary for an extended period, and without photographic confirmation, the observation would almost certainly have been recorded as a single juvenile.



Behaviour and plumage: The birds ranged from a very recently fledged juvenile with a conspicuous gape to a more advanced immature showing partial grey in the upperparts.

Photographs (arranged by degree of eye-ring development) demonstrate clear differences between individuals. While they occupied the same immediate patch of woodland to feed, they always remained physically separate and showed no direct social interaction.

Context: Although post-fledging behaviour in Australian cuckoos is often speculated upon, it is poorly documented and supported by very few published observations. The baseline evidence suggests that juvenile Australian cuckoos are solitary after reaching independence and that they actively avoid conspecifics, including birds of the same age. The only recorded exceptions are aggregations occurring at particularly rich food sources, often involving mixed flocks of various ages and species. A report by Possingham (1989) describes a large Mixed Feeding Flock near Mt Mugga that included an exotic collection of cuckoos: “3 Fan-tailed Cuckoos *Cuculus pyrrhophanus* [now *Cacomantis flabelliformis*], 2 Shining Bronze-Cuckoos *Chrysococcyx lucidus*, 1 Black-eared Cuckoo *C. osculans*, 2 Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoos *C. basalis*.” A few similar reports exist but, apart from migratory choke points, they are always related to super-abundant food sources.

There are no published reports of multiple young, independent Fan-tailed Cuckoos keeping close company. However, it is possible to reconcile this observation with generally accepted behaviour if we view the observed grouping as a passive environmental overlap rather than an active social flock. That is, the birds were not "teaming up" for mutual protection or social bonding. Instead, localized environmental factors likely overrode the birds' natural solitary instincts. Callum Brae supports a high density of Fan-tailed Cuckoo hosts, including Superb Fairy-wrens and various thornbills, and these young cuckoos may have aggregated simply because they were all raised nearby. The location provided excellent structural cover and protection. I observed one bird feeding on a grub or caterpillar which also lends support to the possibility that the area held a high concentration of late-summer canopy larvae (such as hairy caterpillars) to satisfy the necessary super-abundant food condition.

While this sighting is exceptionally uncommon, it suggests that passive post-fledging aggregations may be more common than current records indicate. They are easily overlooked because observers rarely remain stationary long enough to differentiate multiple individuals from what appears to be a single, intermittently reappearing bird.

Reference

Possingham, H. (1989) Cuckoos in a mixed feeding flock. *Canberra Bird Notes* 14: 94-95.

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COMMUNICATING IBISES: AN AERIAL INTERSECTION

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Observation

On 17 Oct 2024, a lone Australian White Ibis (*Threskiornis molucca*) was observed circling tightly at an estimated 500 ft above Callum Brae Nature Reserve. The bird maintained this position for six to seven minutes without gaining noticeable altitude. Its persistent circling suggested it was holding station rather than searching for a thermal or ascending.

Eventually, a V-formation of 21 ibises appeared on the northern horizon, flying directly toward the lone bird (LB). The flock made no course adjustments and appeared to have known the LB's location from beyond visual range. Given the timing, the flock cannot simply have been following LB, as it must have been out of sight when LB was first observed in position.

On arrival, the formation dissolved and the birds merged with LB in a swirling, apparently chaotic interaction lasting about 20 seconds. After reforming into a tighter flock, they circled twice and then, as if on a signal, split into two. Five birds headed off ESE while the remainder went southwards, gradually forming into another 'V'.

Because LB did not ascend during its extended circling, and the arriving flock completed only two rotations before dividing, this interaction appears to represent a deliberate rendezvous or navigational exchange rather than a thermal-soaring event. The angle between the two departing flight paths was approximately 70°, indicating that the groups were clearly going to different locations and not just taking different routes to the same place.

Discussion

This event raises several questions about ibis navigation and communication:

Long-distance coordination: How did the approaching flock locate LB's precise position from beyond line of sight? Was this meeting pre-arranged, and if so, how was the information shared and retained?

Information transfer: What took place during those 20 seconds of mingling? How and why did a cruising flock rapidly decelerate, absorb LB, and immediately communicate a complex decision to split into two distinct cohorts heading in different directions?

Role of the lone bird: Was LB acting in the role of hierarchical leader, a scout, a waypoint marker, or simply a bird temporarily assigned a navigational role within a larger social structure?

The behaviour observed here may suggest a level of coordination not commonly documented in Australian White Ibis.

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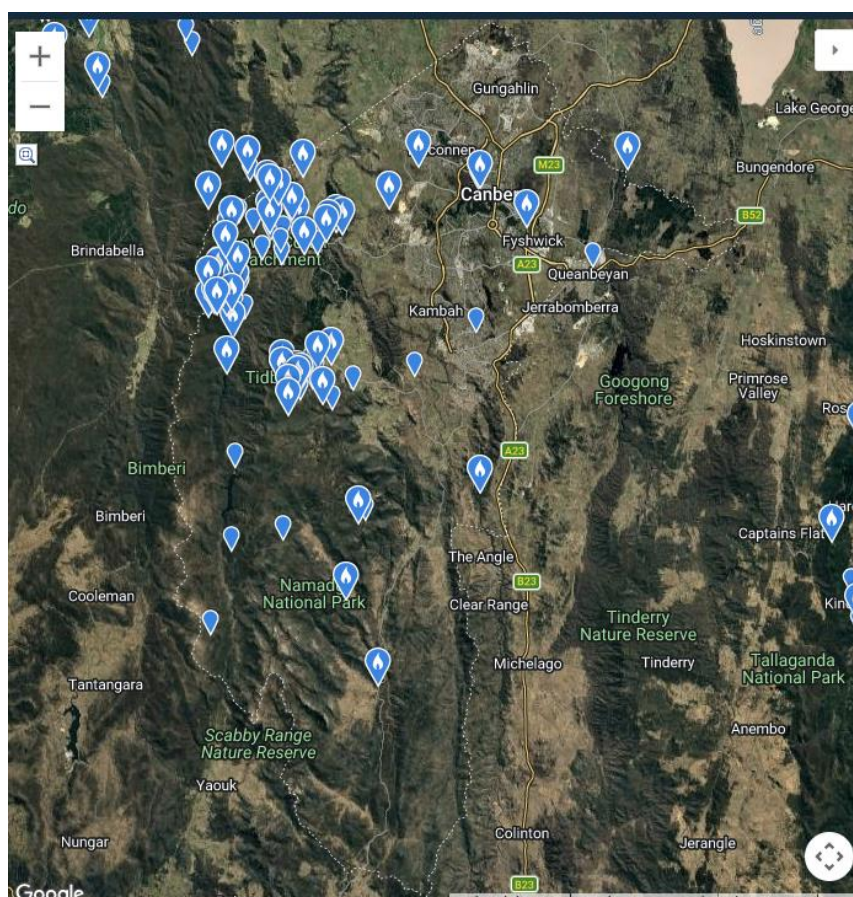
FIRST RECORD OF RUFOUS FANTAILS BREEDING IN URBAN CANBERRA SINCE THE 1980's

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The status of the Rufous Fantail (*Rhipidura rufifrons*) in the ACT is 'uncommon, breeding summer migrant'. It inhabits the lower levels of dense vegetation in and around damp forest gullies and is both a north-south and altitudinal migrant. It comes to the region for the summer, but generally occurs in the suburbs only briefly in transit to and from the higher forested ranges. This leads to a pronounced annual pattern with very conspicuous peaks in November and March (<https://canberrabirds.org.au/our-birds/canberra-garden-birds/fantails/rufous-fantail/>).

January eBird records for all years show Rufous Fantails are mostly recorded in the ranges to the west of Canberra, with only 2 records at the Australian National Botanic Gardens – in 1995 and 2011.



Map 1. January eBird records for the Rufous Fantail from the ACT.

In 2026 there were 13 records at the Gardens in January. I work in an office at the Gardens and around lunchtime on 8 Jan I was walking in the Rainforest Gully of the Gardens when I heard alarm calls of small birds and looked up to see two adult Rufous Fantails harassing a Kookaburra and a Pied Currawong (video of adults calling and harassing kookaburra: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/ST2hP414cpgbf4DH6>). I watched them for around 10 minutes, and

they seemed to be defending the same area during that time so I surmised it could be a breeding area.



I added a record with images to Canberra Nature Map: (<https://canberra.naturemapr.org/sightings/4717878>).

I visited the area a few more times and on 14 Jan spotted their nest with 2 nestlings.



On 16 Jan they were still in the nest at 9am, and then at 1.15pm I saw 2 fledged chicks flying around the area and being fed by the adults (video of fledged chicks and being fed by adults: (<https://photos.app.goo.gl/f51LwPUWfr2k17Eq9>)).



On 21 Jan Carlos Otávio Gussoni recorded an adult and a recently fledged young with a great photo of the juvenile: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S295440758>

Up until this record there were no eBird records of breeding in suburban Canberra. Jack Holland did some further research for me and found:

‘...on checking Taylor and COG’s *Birds of the Australian Capital Territory: An Atlas*¹, covering August 1986 to July 1989... I noted at the end of the description for the Rufous Fantail (p121) ‘...and have also nested successfully in the rainforest gully at the Botanic Gardens (K Thaler)’. This is a personal communication from Kurt Thaler who I recall worked there at the time. So, there would appear to be at least some historic ... Rufous Fantail 1980s urban Canberra breeding records.’

Accepted 26 May 2026

¹ Taylor, McC. And Canberra Ornithologists Group (1992) *Birds of the Australian Capital Territory – an atlas*. Canberra Ornithologists Group and National Capital Planning Authority.

A NAME CORRECTION AND APOLOGY

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I submit this correction, apology and explanation for a naming error that has spread into COG-related publications about the Garden Bird Survey (GBS). It has taken 24 years and a strange story to find the first error of consequence in my publications (Veerman 2002, 2003, 2006), that I abbreviate as “The GBS Report”. It provides a history of the GBS (pages 9 to 21).

In February 2026 I had a chance dinner meeting with someone who initially suggested that he remembered me but did not know why and I did not recognise him. Our conversation led me to discover an error involving the published history of COG’s Garden Bird Survey (GBS). The story is, from 1983 Ian (then, but later) McComas Taylor had created a system to achieve the simple statistical output that was used from years three to ten of the GBS for the COG Annual Bird Reports. Ian Baird made enhancements. This annual process was difficult and slow, input only one line at a time and output done separately for each species. It was stored only on one 5.25” floppy disk for each year. (Just bird count data, no breeding data or observer data was kept, until years later.) There were also occasional systemic handling errors, such as one reported on page 48 of Veerman *et al.* (1989). There was no other record kept, no way to get a list of sites surveyed or species recorded by site or in total, or to compare or compile years in sequence. In 1988, I started thinking about doing something better with the GBS and in 1989 I publicly announced my intention to prepare a book about the GBS (as told on the back cover). My first step was building a database of observers. Ian Baird and I built this with DBase and I invented the GBS Site Number, as permanently set for observer and site. It took more years of exploration to establish how to include any bird data. In 1993/94 I learned MS Access (database program) at my work. From that I decided that MS Access had the capacity and ease of use to do what was needed. But my knowledge then was beginner level and I needed some help.

In about 1996, I obtained the name Graham Fry, from the help directory, published in the monthly magazine of the PCUG (Personal Computer Users Group - ACT) for someone who was available to assist members with MS Access. I asked Graham could he help me build a database for a local bird study. I visited Graham in Deakin, 3 or 4 times, over several weeks, to discuss the task. Graham built the skeleton of a functioning database, with a nice input system and then left it all with me. That was the last I saw of him, until this chance meeting. The database was entirely my idea, and Graham’s contribution facilitated the project to have a future, because at last we had the start of a system to store, investigate and manipulate the information. Although his input was certainly pivotal, it was limited to hours of work over a few weeks. I then learned how to build the connections between components and construct tables, queries and reports. It took years for me to input the first two years, that had never been typed, and to transfer in eight years (3 to 10) of old count data, line by line, from the floppy disks, proof read it and then (with help) input the weeks used, breeding and ongoing count data. Then devise the analysis and write it for publication.

In this chance meeting with Graham Fry in 2026, he recalled having worked with someone (me) to build a database for a bird study 30 years ago. The details matched but I was confused

about his name. The acknowledgements in The GBS Report (page 10 in the first edition, page 9 in the second and third editions) correctly include Graham Fry but do not specify why.

The error is that all three editions of The GBS Report (on page 16), state:

In 1995 with newly available technology, Graeme Deaker answered the call to build the framework of a relational database system for the bird data. This Microsoft Access system now houses the data. This was built around the database of GBS sites and observers and used features of the emerging COG database. It has input screens that resemble the charts, making it easy to use. The system links all the bird count, bird breeding and weeks used data to related tables of: Year, GBS Site and Bird number from the RAOU codes. After compilation of one year's data (Year 11), Andrew Newbery with Chris Davey built a system to produce statistical output for the ABR. The statistics remained the same annual values of A, F, W, R & G and graphs of monthly abundance (A) for each species. I substantially enhanced this basic framework by Graeme Deaker and Andrew Newbery into a system that provides detailed summary information and graphs.

If Graeme Deaker was the correct name, it is nonsensical that the acknowledgements do not mention him. Fortunately, the acknowledgements mention Graham Fry. I now suspect that Graeme Deaker does not exist, in the context of the GBS. Any mention of 'Graeme Deaker' in this context should instead state 'Graham Fry'. Hence this apology. Strangely, I did not notice the mismatch until meeting Graham this year and it appears that no one else did either. Apology also that the original text (here corrected) had wrong spelling 'Newberry' who should also have been in the acknowledgements. Also, the '1995', should be '1996'.

The only likely explanation I can offer is that I lost contact with Graham Fry when the database structure was commenced, I forgot his name and over time I confused 'Graham Fry from Deakin' into 'Graeme Deaker'. This is in the context of the gap of years of work, between the origin of the database and completion of the book.

There is another possibly relevant aspect that may have contributed to the error. COG office bearers have long been listed inside the covers of *Canberra Bird Notes* and from Volume 20(1), Mar 1995 until Volume 22(1) Mar 1997 this included: 'Computer Management Subcommittee: David McDonald (Convenor), Grahame Clark, Graeme Deaker, Tony Harding, Reid McLachlan, Ian McMahon, Andrew Newbery.' This listing appeared only in that time period. David McDonald says he remembers the name but not the person. I was not connected to this Subcommittee and I am not familiar with the Graeme Deaker who appears in that context.

I suspect I have also typed the name 'Graeme Deaker' into other documents. This error has been carried over into the following three other publications and very likely others. The error to credit Graeme Deaker appears twice in Fennell (2000), on pages iv and 100. Graham Fry was not mentioned. That text, as with much of this book, was derived from early drafts of The GBS Report, before the two diverged. There is no mention of either name in the second (2009) edition of that book, which had a limited coverage of the GBS history.

Ikin *et al.* (2013), writing about the Garden Bird Survey concluded:

We thank all COG members who have been actively involved in the Garden Bird Survey. We also thank the coordinators for their vital commitment to maintaining the GBS over the last 30 years, including McComas Taylor, Grahame Elliott, Ian Baird, Philip Veerman and Graeme Deaker.

This last mention is strange and goes far beyond repeating my mistake; it would appear to come from a misreading of my text. Because (a non-existent) Graeme Deaker was never a coordinator of the GBS. Neither was Graham Fry, who does not have a birding background.

Hermes and Veerman (2014) wrote:

The management of the data is and has always been a major enterprise. Data input and calculation of output for the ABR is now vastly quicker than it was in the early years. It is currently held in a custom-built Microsoft Access data base with custom-built input interfaces. This was developed by Graeme Deaker to suit the framework plan from Veerman.

In summary, Graham Fry, not Graeme Deaker, deserves credit for early work towards building the GBS database. He has not seen these publications and was unaware of these errors. However, my having got it wrong, I hereby correct it. Graham is modest about his contribution, writing: “I see my contribution as a very small support for a very worthwhile project, and I was delighted to be acknowledged at all and did not expect a mention.”

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COLUMNIST'S CORNER

Canberra Bird Notes 51(1) (2026): 104-105

Birding in Cyberspace, Canberra Style

What do you do when visiting a new place and you want to find out about the local birds and birding localities? Perhaps you turn to one of the many national or regional 'Finding birds at ...' books? Or check out the local visitor information centre, or its website, for any 'bird trail' brochures? I imagine that many birders would go straight to eBird to review its information on local hotspots. After all, eBird is the leading global source of such information.

Other options exist, however, one of which is **Birding Places: the free online guide to birding** <https://birdingplaces.eu/en>. Birding Places was established in Europe in 2020 and has subsequently expanded to most regions of the world. In March this year users registered the 10,000th described birdwatching area (their term). Opening the 'Find a birding place' tab and selecting Australia shows many birding places, mostly around the periphery of our continent. Fourteen are found in the ACT, but no others in Canberra Bird's area of interest. The sites are colour coded into the categories of 'Not to be missed', 'Worth a detour', and 'Nice if you are in the area'. Just one of the ACT places is 'Not to be missed': yes, you guessed it, Jerrabomberra Wetlands! Comprehensive information on each of the birding places in the database is included. I suspect that the site will be of most use to birders visiting Europe owing to the density of sites registered from there.

Still on the theme of alternatives to eBird, on Bird Forum <https://www.birdforum.net/> earlier this year someone wrote, 'Another vote for Scythebill. Everyone should be using it.' **Scythebill** <https://www.scythebill.com/> is a free, mature, well-respected downloadable tool for managing birding, and other wildlife, observations. It is available for the Windows, iOS, Linux, and other operating systems. Unlike eBird, though, it is not a tool for entering data in the field; there is no mobile version. Some of the features that its website highlights are as follows:

- Full eBird/Clements checklist, including all subspecies and groups
- IOC World Bird List support, including subspecies and names in 40 languages!
- Extended taxonomies - keep track of your mammals, butterflies, reptiles, amphibians, or anything else!
- Flip between the taxonomies instantly - no need to choose just one
- Fast species entry ("choose your own abbreviation"), including over 7000 alternate names
- Fast reports - instant processing of hundreds of thousands of records
- Hundreds of checklists - nearly all of the world's countries; all US, Canadian, and Australian states
- Simple, clean UI [user interface]
- Export to eBird, iNaturalist, or BirdTrack and import from Avisys, BirdBase, eBird, Birder's Diary, BirdLasser, observation.org, Flickr, HBW Live, and more
- Special reports, like trip reports, family reports, Total Ticks, and more
- As much location detail as you want
- Support for multiple observers
- Built-in "geocoding" - Scythebill finds the latitude and longitude for you around the world
- Enter hybrids and "spuhs" (Willow/Alder Flycatcher, for example).

Well worth checking out if you are not already familiar with it.

In January this year the Cornell Lab of Ornithology announced the **Birds of the World Phylogeny Explorer** <https://birdsoftheworld.org/bow/phylogeny>. They pointed out that it is ‘Illustrating Evolutionary Relationships of All 11,000+ Bird Species ... Understanding avian ancestry, called phylogeny by scientists, is a fundamental aspect that underpins most ornithology research. But with more than 11,000 bird species in the world, organizing the available phylogenetic trees into a single synthetic depiction, and keeping it current, has long challenged ornithologists. The Birds of the World Phylogeny Explorer uniquely addresses these challenges by staying current with the latest research.’

The resource was free for a period upon its launch, but to access it now we need a subscription to Birds of the World. At US\$49 p.a., a subscription provides access to a host of wonderful resources from the Cornell Lab, in addition to the Phylogeny Explorer. Highly recommended.

Earlier Birding in Cyberspace columns have highlighted the huge advance in promulgating top-quality scientific information on the birds of our region through Birdlife Australia making the **Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds, HANZAB**, available online, at no charge to the user: <https://hanzab.birdlife.org.au/>. Prefer the printed version? No probs, all seven volumes (confusingly, nine physical volumes!) are available on the secondhand market for around \$2,500 (e.g. <https://www.andrewisles.com/>)!

Prominent Canberra Birds member, Steve Wallace, has an important role in turning this endeavour into reality. It is hard to overstate its significance for the birding and ornithological community. In January this year Steve wrote, on the CanberraBirds email distribution list, about the latest release of HANZAB online: ‘In the recent release of HANZAB (released 19 Jan 2026), the January 2026 news item states that the online version of HANZAB has clocked up over 20,000 users since its release. This shows a high level of interest in the online publication, and I do hope people are finding it useful. One of the things the online version of HANZAB enables is the ability to search for publications mentioned in the entries. This can be used to assess the contribution of these publications to HANZAB. For instance, a search for “Canberra Bird Notes” shows that it is referenced in 172 HANZAB entries. I am sure Canberra Bird Notes will continue to be an important source of information as the HANZAB entries are revised. The same approach can be used to find authors of articles.’

Many thanks to Steve and the whole team responsible for this fine resource, as well as to its key benefactor, Margaret Ross AM.

T. alba

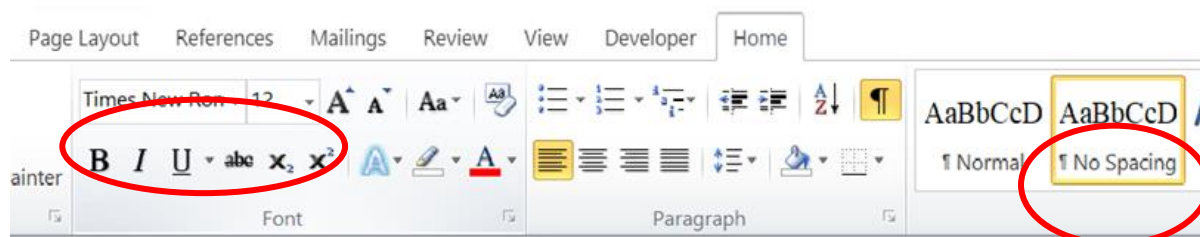
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The CanberraBirds list’s searchable archive is at <http://bioacoustics.cse.unsw.edu.au/archives/html/canberrabirds>

Canberra Bird Notes

Canberra Bird Notes is published two times a year by the Canberra Ornithologists Group Inc. and is edited by Michael Lenz and Kevin Windle. Major articles of up to 5000 words are welcome on matters relating to the biology, status, distribution, behaviour or identification of birds in the Australian Capital Territory and surrounding region. Please discuss any proposed major contribution in advance. Shorter notes, book reviews and other contributions are also encouraged. All contributions should be sent to one of those email addresses: CBN@canberrabirds.org.au or michael.lenz.birds@gmail.com

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



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