



NEWSLETTER

Issue 1/11 February 2011 - March 2011

Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc

affiliated with Bird Observation and Conservation Australia

The Club aims to:

- encourage and further the study and conservation of Australian birds and their habitat;
- encourage bird observing as a leisure-time activity

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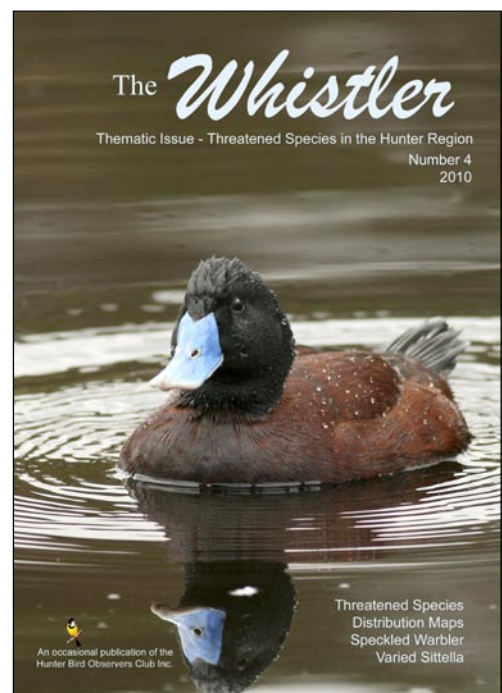
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The Whistler No. 4 is ready for distribution. It is a thematic issue dedicated to Threatened Species in the Hunter Region.



Please send Newsletter articles direct to the Editor at:
chrisliz@tpg.com.au

Deadline for the next edition is 8 April 2011.

HBOC postal address: PO Box 24 New Lambton NSW 2305

Website: www.hboc.org.au

President's Column

At this time of the year it appears that Australia is living up to its reputation as the 'El Nino' continent, a land "where the creeks run dry or ten feet high". The rainfall and the extensive flooding in Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales demonstrate that we live in a land of environmental variability and uncertainty, characteristics which have sadly brought terrible hardship and grief to many people. As I write this column the Category five cyclone Yasi, testament to the massive energy levels of the Pacific Ocean and atmosphere, is about to impact Northern Queensland with unbelievable energy and destructive force. On behalf of the membership of HBOC I extend our warmest thoughts to the birding communities and all others affected by these natural disasters.

This time of year is also a time to reflect on the previous twelve months of activities within the Club. It has been a year of steady progress, the membership base is strong, the financial position is sound, attendance at club activities is comparable with that of other years, and there is a solid core of participation in the Club's survey and volunteer work. A pleasing aspect of 2010 has been the significant growth in the reporting of bird sightings through the use of Atlas record sheets and through the online forum Hunterbirding. A feature, that again becomes evident on review of the year, is the high degree of collaboration that HBOC enjoys with other organisations. The ongoing maintenance of these relationships is vital for HBOC to accomplish its aims. Also evident are the range and depth of members' involvements in producing successful outcomes for the Club. There always appears so much that could be done but *every* contribution is important and assists in making HBOC an effective organisation working to benefit our bird life.

All elected positions in the club will be declared vacant at the 9 February 2010 Annual General Meeting and at

this stage the following members have foreshadowed that they will be unavailable for re-election to the Committee:

Marj Kibby - Marj feels that her work commitments and relocation to the Central Coast make it very difficult for her to continue as Club Secretary but she will maintain her active involvement in the Club;

Tom Clarke - after a long period of commendable service on the Committee Tom will not be available for re-election but will continue to be heavily involved in the coordination and management of the habitat rehabilitation projects;

Ian Martin - at this time Ian feels that it will be difficult for him to maintain his attendance at Committee meetings but he is willing to continue as Membership Secretary and to provide "technological" input to the field studies program;

Grant Brosie - Grant has been a Committee member for many years and a past President of the Club, however, work commitments make it very difficult for Grant to commit to further service on the Committee; however he will remain actively involved in the Club.

On behalf of all members, *thank you* for your service to HBOC.

I wish to thank the Office Bearers, the 2010 Management Committee and the interested members that regularly attend Committee meetings for their commitment to the Club. Thank you also to the coordinators of the various sections of the Club, members of the sub-committees, small groups, survey teams, editors, record officers, technologists, authors, photographers, club night assistants, production and distribution teams, field volunteers.... in fact all members for their goodwill and contribution to the 2010 HBOC birding year.

Paul Baird

HBOC Membership Fees for January - December 2011

Membership Fees for 2011 are \$30.00 Single and Family, \$5.00 Junior

Membership forms can be obtained at Club Night or by downloading from the website: www.hboc.org.au

Please pay at Club Night or send cheque or money order payable to HBOC, PO Box 24, New Lambton 2305.

If you prefer to pay by electronic transfer, please include your name in the transaction to:
Greater Building Society; BSB 637000; Account No. 782260316; Account Name: Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc.

New Members

The Club extends a warm welcome to:

Winsome Lambkin of Floraville
Amanda Lilleyman of Empire Bay
Derek and Andrew McIntosh of Balgowlah
Dennis Neader of Merewether

We hope to meet you at Club outings and meetings

Featured Birdwatching Site: Stockton Sandspit

Stockton Sandspit, located at the eastern end of Stockton Bridge, is famous for its shorebirds and for the fact that shorebirds use it as a high-tide roost. It's no wonder then, that many people believe that high tide is the time to go see shorebirds at Stockton Sandspit (SSS). However, no matter what the tide is doing, high or low, rising or falling, shorebirds are reacting to it or taking advantage of it at SSS. The Sandspit is a dynamic habitat, forever undergoing change, influenced by tides, river currents, weather, seasons and even the time of day. This is the case for many other features of the estuary, of course, but the Sandspit is so accessible that the comings and goings of estuary flora and fauna are easily observed there. Our particular interest, shorebirds, are very much a part of all that.

Mid-rising tide is an exciting time for observers as flocks of shorebirds start to leave the low-tide foraging grounds in Fullerton Cove and the North Arm and head downstream. From the vantage of the Sandspit you can witness these squadrons flying down the river as they make their way to staging points prior to roosting. Lots of these squadrons are seen disappearing over the Kooragang Dykes (on the opposite side of the river) where mud flats will still be exposed and some additional feeding time is available. Others make their way directly to the beach at Stockton Sandspit. About this time it is also fun to watch the Pelicans being slowly forced off the sand bar as the tide rises to their bellies.

Up to an hour before the high tide many other shorebirds can be seen on the beach or coming over the top of the berm to take up some space on the Sandspit proper. If you are attentive you will have already seen the first scouts of each species take a turn or two around the lagoon before flying back to report to their mates. Just about any species of shorebird that is in the estuary can be expected to turn up: curlew, godwit, knot, sandpiper and stint certainly make up the bulk of the numbers. Many assemble in the water of the lagoon, some will stand on open ground, while others will make for the salt marsh areas. This can be a busy time for any proportion of the shorebirds that go looking

for further feeding opportunities around the margins of the lagoon. Also during this transition stage the shorebirds are often disturbed by raptors checking out the growing congregation and sometimes this leads to lots of rearranging between the Sandspit and the Dykes. A nervous time for shorebirds but a real spectacle for observers is quite often the result.

Over the high tide there will be a period when all is settled and most likely this is the least interesting time of all. It is now a good time for observers to go for a walk around to Fern Bay and see what those "grey birds" are doing. Either on the stone bank beside the road or out on the timber structures of the oyster lease you will find Terek Sandpiper and Grey-tailed Tattler.

I don't know why they prefer to roost here, and not with the "brown birds" but it presents a convenient situation for birdwatchers to easily count these birds. Also around at Fern Bay, you can always rely on finding several Whimbrel roosting in the mangroves and by the time you walk back things are starting to change again at the Sandspit.

Two hours past the high tide there begins the movement of birds off the Sandspit and onto the beach. The falling tide also calls birds from the Dykes to join the others and follow the water's edge as it moves slowly off the beach and across the mud flats. The last birds to leave are usually the Eastern Curlew and this is a great relief to the ground-nesting birds that choose to breed at the Sandspit, as they now can relax for five or six hours before the next invasion. Out on the mud all the shorebirds are amassing and while most seem to be roosting still, several are getting an early start on the next session of feeding. Again this is an excellent time for observations and an opportunity to increase your skills at identifying shorebirds in flight.



Bar-tailed Godwits coming into breeding plumage at Stockton Sandspit in March 2010 - Darryl Luck



Red-capped Plover (above) and Lesser Sand Plover (below) at Stockton Sandspit - Darryl Luck



By mid-falling tide, the sand bar is exposed and lots of birds have migrated there. The total number of shorebirds has diminished as half of them have taken off in their squadrons for Fullerton Cove or sandflats in the North Arm. Even at one hour prior to the next low tide there may still be scores of birds loafing; mostly godwit or

Stockton Sandspit cont.

knot but at times hundreds of sandpiper types and stint. We have witnessed these birds “roosting” completely over the low tide after a short mid-tide feed.

At low tide, the shorebirds that have chosen to stay are basically spread out over the mud flats and feverishly feeding. This is a terrific time to get close to some of these birds and the berm can be used as a very convenient screen to watch those feeding along the shoreline near the oyster reef. Usually there is a pretty good representation of the shorebirds seen over the high tide but look out for some extras. This will mean checking out every individual on the mud flats but quite often you’ll get some high quality sightings.

Probably the most rewarding time to see shorebirds at Stockton Sandspit is from late July through to April. Shorebird numbers and range of species increase dramatically from September but ground-nesting birds have already begun breeding activities 6 weeks earlier. By April most of the migrants have left but winter still has its moments as the lives of the over-wintering birds continue to be controlled by the tides.

For the patient birdwatcher, it does not matter when you go to Stockton Sandspit; matter of fact, I think I’ll go right now. Be sure to check the tides before you do, however, so that your observations carry more meaning and you will gain greater personal satisfaction from your birdwatching.

Tom Clarke



This female Bar-tailed Godwit, photographed by Luke Eberhart-Phillips on 18 June 2010 in Alaska where it was found nesting, was banded by Fred van Gessel at Stockton Sandspit on 2 April 2004, as part of Allan Richardson’s honours project. This is just one of the hundreds of migratory shorebirds that link Stockton Sandspit and the Hunter Estuary with the rest of the countries in the East Asian-Australasian Flyway.

Clean-Up Day at Stockton Sandspit 6 March 2011

Go check your diaries and mark **Sunday 6th March** and more importantly turn up on the day and help out. Stockton Sandspit is located at the Stockton end of Stockton Bridge. After crossing the bridge, turn right at the roundabout into Fullerton Road and look for a sealed road on the right-hand side, about 100m past the roundabout when heading for Stockton. This road will take you to the carpark under Stockton Bridge. As it has been previously pointed out: *“Where else can you do your bit for the environment (pick up rubbish), help maintain valuable habitat (pull weeds) and go birdwatching all at the same time?” “Well don’t just think about it, do it!”*

Come dressed for work (you decide on how hard or how long), stay hydrated, wear a sun hat, gloves and strong shoes. You must register at the car park (under the bridge) and receive further instruction before you start cleaning up or weeding. If you plan to do some weeding, a small pick is sufficient to remove weeds from sand. We won’t be touching anything huge. Also bring your own morning tea/lunch etc but there will be water available for drinking and washing up.

Clean-Up Day officially starts at 9.00am but I will be there from 7.00am watching the waders file in for a mid-morning roost (high tide at approx 10.30am). Hope to see you there.

Tom Clarke 0418 411 785

Club Outing Reports

Midweekers Meander at Dudley and Fernleigh Track

Tuesday 7 December 2010

Dudley Bluff is a favoured place for birdwatchers and native plant people. It is a fine example of wind and salt-pruned heath and has great charm for naturalists. We noted numbers of White-cheeked Honeyeaters, Eastern Spinebills and a New Holland Honeyeater. The seascape was empty of birds except for four Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoos which flew past the bluff. Later a Grey Goshawk flew past.

At Redhead Lagoon on Awabakal Nature Reserve, amid both Red and Little Wattlebirds and Eastern Rosellas, a highlight was a Grey Butcherbird tearing up and feeding a giant green Phasmid to a fledged young. Stick Insects are now rare.

Fernleigh Track is open for use by cyclists and walkers as far south as Redhead. It is an excellent cycleway but not really a good walker's track. Cyclists at speed are a hazard, especially for ambling birdwatchers and the ambience is spoiled by intrusive galvanised fencing. The final section of the concreted Fernleigh Track from the southern end of Kalaroo Road to Belmont is to be opened at a future date.

On Fernleigh Track and a bush loop track at Whitebridge we found Olive-backed Oriole, Variegated Fairy-wren, Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike, both Spotted and Striated Pardalote, Dollarbird and White-browed Scrubwren.

We saw 42 species and heard another six on a pleasant morning in early summer, after which we enjoyed a Christmas lunch and went our separate ways.

Max Blanch

Latham's Snipe Count

12 December 2010

A great morning saw four intrepid counters head into the area surrounding the clubhouse at Pacific Dunes Golf Course in Medowie for the annual Latham's Snipe count. Some nice bird sightings included good views of a Brush Cuckoo and an Olive-backed Oriole that appeared to be feeding its newly fledged cuckoo chick. The one-hour count revealed 10 Latham's Snipe and 36 bird species.

Due to an extensive Alligator Weed infestation, the usual walk-through survey of Pambalong Nature Reserve was cancelled. A walk around the southern margin of the wetland revealed no snipe, although they have been found roosting in this area in previous years. The wetland currently has very high water levels and no muddy margins suitable for foraging snipe.

Surveys of Newcastle Wetlands Reserve and Market Swamp revealed no snipe this December.

Hunter Wetlands Centre Nest Count

20 December 2010

Seven members of HBOC and two staff members, Boyd Carney and Geoff Nicholls, counted nests on 20 December 2010 at the Hunter Wetlands Centre, Shortland. The totals were:

Eastern Great Egret 42, Intermediate Egret 1, Cattle Egret 158, Australian White Ibis 159. No Little Egret nests were found. Many thanks to all who took part. The wind kept the mossies away, the sun shone and we had coffee compliments of Hunter Wetlands. What more does one want?"

Ann Lindsey

Tank Paddock, Minmi

23 January 2011

18 people turned up to visit the well known but usually unavailable Tank Paddock with our leader, Tom Clarke. We had a couple of welcome visitors including a young Steve and his tolerant mum. Our excitement started when we had to climb the gate/fence. Not much fun for the hips after the 3rd over-and-back.

We soon split up into 2 groups and, between us, probably surveyed most of the fenced area. It is a fantastic site with multiple types of habitat – semi-rainforest, wetlands, dry forest and grass/scrub fields. When we eventually finished around lunch time, it was 36 degrees so I think that affected our bird sightings for the day. We got around 55 birds in total.

There were plenty of Bell Miners (a new bird for several people), Superb Fairy-wrens and Variegated Fairy-wrens feeding young, a very cheeky Rufous Fantail, a female Mistletoebird collecting spiderweb for a nest, Channel-billed Cuckoos, a Pheasant Coucal and Red-rumped Parrots. We saw a couple of Sacred Kingfishers and both Rufous and Golden Whistlers as well as flocks of Silvereyes and Red-browed Finches. We also had a juvenile White-bellied Sea-Eagle, a Brown Falcon and some people had a great view of a Grey Goshawk. There was also a thin brown fox and a brush-tailed possum asleep in a tree hollow.

Because of the heat, most people left after a late morning tea but Tom and a hardy few walked along the old railway track to the edge of Hexham Swamp. It was a hot, uneventful walk and we were glad to get back to air-conditioned cars. Despite the hot weather, it was good to visit Tank Paddock and hopefully, sooner than later, it will be available so anyone can see this wonderful area and birds.

Anthony Gooden

The Hunter Big Year 2010

"Big year" - A Big Year is an informal competition among birders to see who can see or hear the largest number of species of birds within a single calendar year and within a specific geographical area.

Type "Big Year" in to Google and the text above is on the second link you see, which is Wikipedia. The first takes you to the Internet Movie Database website and gives a very brief outline of a forthcoming Hollywood movie called "The Big Year" featuring, amongst others, Steve Martin, Jack Black and Anjelica Huston (they're the only 3 actors I recognised!). The movie is set to be released in mid-October, just in time for the NSW Twitchathon...coincidence? Surely not!

As I had written in the February 2010 Newsletter, there was a "Big Year" happening in the Hunter last year, though it was certainly never a competition, except maybe one between the participants and the birds they sought to see. Dan Williams and I conjured the idea of doing a "Hunter Big Year" over a couple of relaxing pints in October 2009, when the region was enjoying the spoils of an inland drought. As we plotted tactics there were birds like Black Honeyeaters and Black-tailed Native-hens in temporary residence in the valley. At the time we mused that 300 in a year would be fairly straightforward, 310 would "take some work", 320 would be "possible" and that 330 would be "nigh impossible".

So we set ourselves the target of 333 – 'nice and round' and above what we thought possible.

We decided to base the year on the same rules as the "Hunter 300 Club" – most importantly that every bird had to be seen within the confines of the defined Hunter Region, thus allowing us to include ocean birds seen on pelagic trips.

The tactics we employed changed slightly from our original plans, due mainly to the fact that a serious setback occurred just before the year began – it started raining. In fact, it started literally 4 days before the start of 2010 and it didn't really stop – and significantly, west of the divide as well. What this meant was that several species that we knew were actually still in the region around Christmas could disappear due to the inland rain – and we were right.

Perhaps fittingly, my Big Year commenced at about midday on the 1st January, when driving back from Gulgong (where I'd spent New Year's Eve) in torrential rain near Ulan. I was hoping to make Emu my first bird, but alas a very wet but frustratingly obvious Magpie got in the way and I had to settle for Emu as #2. With aspirations of adding lots of quality western species on the first day of the year, Emu was the only 'western bird' added – as the rain out west was so strong I couldn't even get out of the car!

The tactics were then clear – we had to make a dash to see the waterbirds that could potentially leave due to the rain. Things like Blue-billed Duck, Red-necked Avocet and Hoary-headed Grebe were added early – and a good thing too, as each was to completely disappear and not be seen again all year (two

of them still haven't been seen). Soon enough, other birds like White-necked Heron, Yellow-billed Spoonbill and even Australasian Shoveler and Hardhead – species you would normally take for granted – started to disappear or become very scarce. Alas, there were several species that had already flown the coup and there was nothing that could be done about it. These included Black-tailed Native-hen, Red-kneed Dotterel, Baillon's Crake and one that hurt particularly badly – Pink-eared Duck.

The first 2 months were a flurry of activity for Dan and me, and soon the concept had raised a few eyebrows – it appeared that a few Hunter birdo's came out of the "Big Year Closet" to see what they could tally. I managed 251 in January and had seen 274 by the end of February. We had some great sightings in these months, with several one-offs like Fork-tailed Swift, Sooty Tern, Pale-yellow Robin as well as the waterbirds previously mentioned and others like Glossy Ibis and Marsh Sandpiper.

But March was surely the month that really built on that early-laid platform and put "Big" into the Big Year. I saw ten species in March that were not seen again – with 3 or 4 them being species I may not ever see again in the Hunter! These were of course from an incredible pelagic weekend at the end of the month and followed on from other niceties like Black Bittern and Beach Stone-curlew.



One of two Streaked Shearwaters seen on the March 27th pelagic - Mick Roderick

By the end of March I'd seen 295 species – and for the first time I took a breath and realised that the target of 333 was now a possibility. But to do so I had to maintain the intensity during April and May before the onset of winter. Not long after heading out to see the recently discovered Singing Honeyeater population north of Ulan I was able to see my 300th bird for the year. This was on the 28th of April in the form of a pair of Barking Owls in Yengo National Park. Another pelagic and a few other additions later, I was sitting on 308 by the end of May. Taking stock, I couldn't help but think about just what could have been achieved had the "deserters" not "deserted" for the "desert"!

But thinking like that was going to get me nowhere and there were several winter birds I needed to target, most notably at sea. Two winter pelagic trips went out and resulted in 7 new

The Hunter Big Year 2010 cont.

birds for the year. Adding to these were Red-winged Parrot, Plum-headed Finch and Tawny-crowned Honeyeater and I was 318 by the end of July. Five months for 15 species – the maths looked good – even better when there were several common species still up my sleeve, including my “blinding bird”, the Spotted Pardalote.

I dubbed the poor pardalote this name as every time I heard it (and that was hundreds of times) I averted my eyes to avoid seeing it. People thought I was crazy (can't imagine why), but I had decided early on that I would take the last “common” bird I hadn't seen and deliberately see how long I could go without seeing one. Originally I had thought Eastern Whipbird would be a good candidate as they're common and easy enough “not-to-see”. But on the February HBOC outing to Seal Rocks there was one 20-foot up a big Old Man Banksia tree and I didn't want to miss seeing that! As the year progressed, Spotted Pardalote simply became the most common bird I hadn't seen and therefore the *bird I didn't want to see*. And I can guarantee you it's a lot harder not seeing a Spotted Pardalote than not seeing a Whipbird!

August was a very lean month with only Swift Parrot added and a cancelled pelagic. I wasn't too concerned as I only really needed to add one or both of the Giant-Petrels to my winter-to-get list and indeed a Northern was seen on the September trip. The first month of spring was also a good enough reason to seek out some of our far-flung residents and on a long weekend away with some likely lads (Dan included) we managed to find Pilotbird, Inland Thornbill and Cockatiels inspecting a nesting hollow, just within the confines of the region (one of four species seen within 10m of the region's boundary). Also on this trip we found a Painted Honeyeater at Medhurst Bridge and this was to prove to be a very timely sighting as it was not recorded there again subsequently.

By this stage, Dan had acquired another round of breeding plumage, which meant that he could not devote as much time as would be needed to find the maximum number of species. He did, however, put in a sterling effort under the circumstances and added 58 species to his Hunter list in the process.

After mopping up Common Sandpiper and Pallid Cuckoo in late September to be perched on 327, October was the month that really broke the back of the Hunter Big Year. Forest Kingfishers had been found by the HBOC long-weekend campers at Cattai Wetlands and this was a stellar bird for the year list. Varied Triller was added whilst up that way. A Black Petrel on the pelagic was another great Hunter bird, followed by Paradise Riflebird a week later. I was now on 331 and

almost with poetic justice I eye-balled a Spotted Pardalote a few days later, pointed out by a visiting English birder (whom I didn't forewarn about my blinkers). But perhaps even more poetically justified, was to be the bird that got me to my target of 333 species, as it was probably the species I'd spent the most time looking for. This was Black Kite and in the end it was kindly placed in my scope by my brother Steve while I was on the phone – I had to keep my composure to the person on the other end of the line who had no idea what was happening as they tried to get a sensible conversation out of me.

Target reached – time to relax? That's not how you think on a Big Year! It then became a case of *just how many species* I could see, which was probably the real target all along.

This was especially the case as I did still have a few resident birds to see. Over the next 7 weeks I managed to see the missing residents, which were Southern Boobook, Bassian Thrush, Rufous Scrub-bird and Olive Whistler along with an uncommon visitor (Little Friarbird) and four species that I considered as “bonus birds” – Whiskered Tern, Spotted Crane, White-browed Woodswallow and Wandering Tattler. The last of these is a genuine rarity in our region so finding it was a true bonus (probably the only non-pelagic bird I could consider a “vagrant” for the year). The first three I had completely written-off as being out

west, with the possible exception of the tern as others had reported seeing them. But I really feel that the White-browed Woodswallow was one of the true highlights of the year as they were known to be breeding inland and no birds had been reported from within hundreds of kilometres of the coast in NSW. The fact that my sighting of the two birds at the Hunter Wetlands Centre came about via a remarkable series of chance events made it even more special.

In the final days of December, with 342 species, and almost the same number of unsuccessful attempts to see Grass Owls and Emerald Doves, I was resolved that this would be my final tally. But wait! A New Year's Eve camp-out at Crowdy Bay was to give me one final chance at Emerald Dove (recently heard in Harrington Rainforest) and Grass Owl (in the heath west of Crowdy Head). Alas I dipped on these two, but fate led me to see one final new species, courtesy of hot-off-the-press info from Al Richardson who had located a Grey Plover at Mudbishops Point. It did take me a little while to find it and being up to my waist in water when I did, it was a fantastic way to end a Big and very fun year.

Mick Roderick



Wandering Tattler - a 'one-day wonder' seen at Newcastle Baths rock platform on 16 November 2010 and not seen again - Lucas Grenadier

The Hunter Big Year 2010 - Some Vital Statistics

- Total number of bird species seen = 343
- Number of species seen, excluding pelagics = 324
- Number of species seen in or from the catchment of the Hunter River = 298 (revised)
- Number of species seen only within 10 metres of the boundary of the Hunter Region = 4 (Cockatiel, Inland Thornbill, Little Friarbird, Plum-headed Finch)
- Number of species seen in 2009 but not in 2010 = 12
- Number of threatened species seen (NSW TSC Act 1995) = 52
- Number of BA / DECCW Atlas forms submitted = approx. 120
- Total number of species recorded in previous 5 years in Hunter Region
 - 2005 = 330
 - 2006 = 355
 - 2007 = 357
 - 2008 = 344
 - 2009 = 350

(Mean # of species = 347.2)

- Time taken to get...
 - First 100 species = < 5 days
 - First 200 species = 22 days
 - First 300 species = 108 days
 - Last 43 species = 257 days
 - Last 30 species = 174 days
- Species seen at 'half-way' mark (June 30th) = 312
- Longest gap without a new bird seen = 37 days; 5th August (Swift Parrot) to 11th September (Rock Warbler)
- Best birds = New Zealand Storm-petrel, Red-footed Booby, Wandering Tattler
- Worst dips (i.e. hurt the most) = White-winged Triller, Pink-eared Duck



The two immature White-browed Woodswallows that turned up unexpectedly at the Hunter Wetlands Centre in mid December 2010 - Mick Roderick

For a Rainy Day – Birds Australia NSW and ACT Library

Whether you want some bedtime reading, need to expand your bird knowledge, or have a specific birding question that needs answering, the Birds Australia Discovery Centre library in Homebush Bay has you covered. There are over 1200 titles ranging from the generalist to the academic, and from local studies to foreign language journals. Most titles are available for loan free of charge to HBOC members, and photocopy services are also available. Best to give a call to the Discovery Centre, on 02 9647 1033 or email basna@birdsaustralia.com.au so we make sure the library is open on your visit.



Congratulations to Allen Friis, runner-up in the **Birds Australia "Best Photo of 2010"** competition, for his delightful photo of Mistletoebirds at the nest.

Other entries may be found on the Birds Australia website

<http://www.birdsaustralia.com.au/homepage-news/2010-ba-photo-comp-winners.html>

Gloucester Birding

Since I moved to Gloucester in September 2002, I have noticed changes in the bird populations, some good, some bad. The most obvious are: Galahs, Spotted Turtledoves, Rainbow Lorikeets, Crested and White-headed Pigeons have increased in numbers, and a pair of Little Corellas first seen in November 2005 are now a flock of 16. These changes could be good or bad! A bad one is the loss of Jacky Winters that used to sing at the end of my street – not seen since 2004, and there is a decline in numbers of Cattle Egret. Recent new drainage work in the old Dairy Wetlands on the Avon River has destroyed habitat for snipe, crakes and rails, and removed the dead trees that Straw-necked Ibis used for roosts. Of concern is the increase in Common Mynas that do very well on the edge of town.

What is encouraging is to see the increase in numbers of native birds using my garden. This had a typical layout - central lawn with exotic trees and flowers around the edges, rose beds and Hills Hoist just below the back deck. These were quickly removed (including eventually 90% of the grass) and replaced with native trees and shrubs, with a pond and several bird baths installed. There is now less use by Magpies, Pee Wees and Common Mynas, and daily use by Yellow and Brown Thornbills, Grey Fantails, Superb Fairy-wrens, White-browed Scrubwrens, various honeyeaters, Figbirds, Silvereyes, Black-faced Cuckoo-shrikes, Rosellas, King Parrots, Willie Wagtails and Red-browed Finches. Several species have nested and my next plan is to install nest boxes when the trees are big enough. It is delightful to see how quickly woodland species reoccupy an area once it is rehabilitated with them in mind.

The big mulberry tree was severely pruned in 2009 but had lots of mulberries this season, all too high for me so the birds did very well. Koels take up residence in my neighbour's edible fig and Channel-billed Cuckoos and smaller cuckoos visit occasionally. Dollarbirds breed in nearby old red gums, park their fledglings in the tallest trees and noisily demonstrate hawking for insects. During winter, the garden is infested with Satin Bowerbirds who leave behind presents – camphor laurel and privet seedlings. Once a Collared Sparrowhawk sat for a few minutes in the pond till saturated - it was a very hot day.

For the last two years I have run short courses on bird watching for the University of the 3rd Age with field trips

to Copeland Reserve and Old Bar, and also act as “bird specialist” on walks our Environment Group organises in the surrounding national parks. I have yet to nurture a full-on twitcher but local people appear to be more aware of native birds and seek advice on bird friendly planting in their gardens. I have carried out ‘guerilla’ gardening on my nature strip and also organised the planting of native garden beds outside the hospital nursing home to show that native plants can make beautiful gardens, attract birds, and with little attention survive Gloucester’s irregular rainfall and occasional extreme summer heat and severe winter frosts.

In early 2010 I set up with our local National Parks office (and with support from HBOC) a project to conduct quarterly surveys on the north-east section of Curracabundi National Park which is not open to the public - large areas are currently being assessed for Wilderness status. This is to run for a further two years with the aim of assessing migratory and permanent bird populations as well as Brush-tailed Rock Wallaby and presence of mammals and reptiles. We’ve achieved three surveys so far but rain cancelled our spring/summer survey and forecasts of more rain are casting a shadow on the next dates we have hopefully set. The area we cover is extremely beautiful, very remote and steep, with creek crossings that are subject to sudden flooding, and supports several endangered or vulnerable species, such as Glossy-black Cockatoos, Speckled Warblers and Brush-tailed Rock Wallabies. Anyone interested in surveying Curracabundi should contact me (email: pennedb@gmail.com or telephone 6558 1845) - but the most important requirement is a driver with a tough 4WD suitable for creek crossings.

Today additions to open-cut coal and new coal-gas mines present a serious threat to local bird populations, particularly the Grey-crowned Babbler, with new mines proposed for either side of town. These will create clouds of dust which can lead to health problems, as is the case around Singleton, and cause subsidence, dry up river beds and pollute underground water tables. Past clearing for mining, grazing and logging and more recently increases in sub-divisions for housing, have reduced habitat considerably, and with irregular rainfall (we are either in a flood or drought situation) the few remaining refuges are under huge stress.

Penny Drake-Brockman

Min Min Light and Barn Owls

Coincidences!

Late last year I was reading *'The Owls of Australia'* by Stephen Debus when I came across an interesting paragraph:

'Barn Owls occasionally acquire a luminescent property to the feathers of the underparts causing them to glow at night. Luminescing owls, hunting at night, might be responsible for the Min Min Light – in Australia a phenomenon mainly for the arid zone. Other Min Mins are an inverted mirage, ('fata morgana'), formed by vehicle headlights refracted over the horizons by a temperature inversion layer in the night air.'

At about the same time a ninety-year-old aunt of mine, Kay Britten (KB) of *'Elsdon'*, Breeza presented me with a copy of her recollections which included stories of her early life on the Breeza plains. She recalled seeing Min Min lights across the Breeza plains. These lights had been low and moved somewhat erratically. Many swaggies and travellers had been tricked into thinking the lights were humans carrying around lanterns. The swaggies went towards the lights then found no one and so became lost.

I remember seeing these lights when I visited the homestead as a school student (a very long time ago!!). At the time I thought they were phosphorescent glows from wet areas.

When I mentioned this to Aunt Kay she told me she had thought that the Min Mins were in fact lights caused by owls swooping low across the ground to catch mice. She remarked the lights had long since disappeared and this may have been to do with land clearing of habitat for crops in the area or that the pace of life prevented people wandering slowly on the plains with the chance of spotting a Min Min therefore minimised. She presented me with correspondence she had had with Fred Silcock (FS) of Salisbury Road, Mt Macedon, Victoria. The letters were written between 1992 and 1999 and were all about Min Mins.

The opening letter, 1992, from FS, who also believed the light came from a bird, commented on a report he had had of Min Min lights at 100 feet which he felt was not correct. He also disbelieved reports of the light travelling half a mile in a few seconds as some other person had suggested. FS felt that the light could quickly reduce its intensity and, as well, the orbit of its glow thus giving the impression of being much further away than it really is. He was interested in KB's report of four or five lights around her dam at one time. FS felt that the Min Mins (?)

owls) would have been there because of mice or insects. One report from Queensland, he quoted for her, was by a man who got within 15 feet of a Min Min and confirmed the light came from a bird (Mr W.M. Wharton). The case of birds being the origin of the lights still had to be proved scientifically. FS felt the culprit could have been a Letter-winged Kite. He obtained two formalin preserved specimens from the Queensland University to be studied. In total 500 reports had accumulated and evidence supporting a bird theory continued to grow.

FS provided KB with an article - 'Lights in the Night Sky' from *Country Life* April 1990 by David Clarke. He referred to the lights as Will O' the Wisp or Jack O' Lantern known to folklore in the British Isles from the nineteenth century. In 1855 one scientist wrote, 'I have very little doubt that the sprite is still to be met in certain districts of Essex or on the Norfolk Broads'. There were many other suggestions about the interesting phenomenon – mostly to do with evil spirits etc. No scientific proof of the cause was elucidated.

In 1994 a letter arrived from Dr P.J. Herring of the Institute of Oceanographic Sciences, Deacon University. Dr Herring felt that the speculation about a bioluminescent bird was fascinating and that there was no fundamental reason why there should not be a self-luminous bird – but none had been reported. If a luminescent system exists it would have to be proven as light emission from *in vitro* tissue extracts from a fresh dead bird!

In August of '94 FS wrote that there was mixed reaction to the bird theory – some people would not have a bar of the theory while others had no trouble with it. FS had travelled the Strezelecki Track and had found a roost of 14 Letter-winged Kites in desert country and apparently saw no Min Mins!

FS sent a copy to KB of an article by W.L. McAtee on 'Luminosity in Birds' published in 1947 in *'The American Midland Naturalist'*. The article quotes luminous bird stories going back to 'The Natural History of Pliny' in A.D. 77. In summary, numerous people had observed luminous Barn Owls and some had reported luminous Herons. It appears probable that birds may be sometimes luminous but probably not intrinsically so and there may be adventitious presence of some light-giving fungi or bacteria – a possible explanation.

FS also noted that Dr Herring had promised to test the dead Letter-winged Kites. Another report had come in from a chap living at Winton in Queensland who had shot down a Min Min and found it to be a bird. On contacting the shooter for an ID, the man reported he

Min Min Light and Barn Owls cont.

could not remember what the dead bird looked like. During January '95 FS forwarded two articles of interest to KB. He commented that although he had proposed the Letter-winged Kite as the luminous bird, (with the Barn Owl always running a clear second), he now felt evidence focused on the Barn Owl. He also noted that a fungus as the cause of the light had been discredited.

The first of the articles forwarded was from *The Zoologist* No. 802 published in April 1908. The article was 'Ornithological Report for Norfolk (1907)' by J.H. Gurney F.Z.S. In the report Gurney commented that most attention - apart from the number of birds recorded on the list for Norfolk being increased to three hundred and seventeen with the addition of the Desert Wheatear - were luminous Barn Owls. He reported that a Frederick Rolfe, retired gamekeeper, had seen a shining bird which he had shot and found it was a Barn Owl. It gave a very bright light when near him and continued to give a slight glow for some hours after it was dead. As long ago as 1866 there had been a report of a luminous owl in Cambridgeshire. Various theories had been put forward including that of fungus (disproved - 1995). Further reports during the year, 1907, were of one owl emitting such brilliancy as to resemble a carriage lamp and one of a pair of these luminous birds - this phenomenon was reported to '*The Times*' by Sir T. Digby Pigott!! In late December 1907 several persons saw the owl even commenting that branches of trees were being lighted up as it flew amongst them! The light did not appear to have the effect of giving warning to 'Rats and Mice' as a Mr Hamond's bailiff saw it drop on one and heard the little animal shriek! Further reports followed in the article with observers commenting that it was much brighter coming towards them and rising than flying away so the conclusion was that little, if any, light came from its back.

The next article forwarded was an extract from the *Irish Naturalist*, 1911, titled 'Luminous Owls' by Mildred Elinor Dobbs with accompanying notes by C.B. Moffat, B.A. She wrote that she had observed them many times - brighter as they flew towards her and disappearing completely as they flew away giving the appearance of lights flashing on and off.

June '95 and FS reported that he had written an article for the Australian Raptor Association in which he drew attention to the parallels between the hunting style of the Barn Owl and the behaviour of the Min Min Light. The Barn Owl has a hunting style different to the other species of owls. It takes rats, mice and large insects within six feet of the ground - often very much lower. Its body design, with lightweight torso and broad wings,

enables extremely slow flight and hovering - more so than any other owl species. The bird gently rises and falls (bobbing) while hunting into the wind. The airflow coming from in front helps keep the bird buoyant. Barn Owls fly in this manner to a certain point then they turn quickly downwind and repeat the former process. This makes the Owl much more like the culprit than the Letter-winged Kite.

FS noted that the former scientific name for the Barn Owl was *Strix flammea* - *flammea* means flame or firey. He also felt the ornithological fraternity treated him as a little crazy and scientific assistance was difficult to obtain. FS enclosed a tract from the Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists Society of 1908 in which R.J.W. Purdy pointed out that insinuations had been made about his reporting of luminosity in owls and that the whole story was indeed a practical joke. Purdy listed the names of respectable persons who had witnessed luminosity and reported many incidents where they were positive the light was emitted by an owl.

In '96 FS forwarded two more articles he had researched which were written during 1908 in England. Fungus having been excluded, FS felt the owls must have light-making organs in their skin just as many sea creatures have - he was sure that the origin of the Min Mins was the Barn Owl. Sea creatures had been studied and found to have glands called photophores and FS hoped to get scientists to look for similar glands in owls.

There was a name used by Aborigines around Cooktown for stingrays (which caused phosphorescence in water) and sounded to Europeans like 'Min Min'. Another story from Aborigines is that Min Min was the name of a bird spirit that flew in the night stealing children.

The final correspondence during 1997 found FS reporting that scientists had discovered what they thought were photophores in owl skins but these same scientists found understanding the structure was indeed a surprisingly difficult task. FS stated that he was surrounded by experts, of one kind or another, who were as yet uncertain of what they had located in the skins. Pictures from an electron microscope had been sent to well known marine research laboratories in Britain in the hope of obtaining assistance. The scientists were working towards trying to induce luminosity in living birds by administering small doses of adrenaline hypodermically around suspected photophores. Understandably this was an experiment most difficult to undertake.

In 1999 the *Courier Mail* reported a \$1.4 million project for Boulia, in Queensland, called the 'Min Min

Min Min Light and Barn Owls cont.

Encounter' where Boullia's Mayor, Ron McGlinchey, was counting on the project bringing tourism, economic and employment benefits to the town. Fred Silcock's final comment was 'The Boullia Project might end up as a monument to ignorance'.

Well that ends my summary of this fascinating correspondence. My Aunt Kay, who turns 91 this year, is interested in any further contributions to the debate – Min Min is it a Barn Owl or, if not, then what exactly is it? Are Min Mins fact or fiction?

Paddy Lightfoot

Brown Honeyeater arrives in Gloucester

On 3rd December 2010 I was pottering about the garden and, as usual, aware of the bird calls all around. There was a particularly strident call and not thinking very hard I said to myself "that Yellow-faced Honeyeater is a bit louder than usual" and gave it no more thought. Later that day I noticed a honeyeater feeding in the kangaroo paws outside my front window, which looked a little different so it was out with my binoculars and what a surprise - a Brown Honeyeater! Of course this was the giver of the unusual call! It is a bird I frequently hear when parking my car in the concrete jungle that's the centre of Taree, where you would imagine no sensible bird would care to live. I am ashamed to admit I did not immediately recognise its call in my garden but that could be because I did not expect to see one in Gloucester. Reports of their presence in the area are, I believe, nil.

Since that time, this lonely bird has patrolled up and down my street and the lane at the back, calling and calling. It is never still and usually in thick foliage and so far I have been unable to photograph it. How long

before it gives up and flies back to the coast? Maybe it will have to wait for the annual migration north of the thousands of Yellow-faced Honeyeaters and Noisy Friarbirds that pass through Gloucester.

This brings my garden list (started in September 2002) to 128 species (seen or heard). Of these quite a few are "one offs" such as Barking Owl (1 on 10 October 2003), Swift Parrot (8 on 24 May 2005), Regent Honeyeater (2 on 23 May 2006), Black-eared Cuckoo (1 on 10 December 2009), and Buff-banded Rail, New Holland Honeyeater, Black-faced Monarch and Golden-headed Cisticola. It also includes a couple of sightings of Black-necked Storks flying nearby, but does not include a few species that I've seen out of range of my garden, such as Southern Emu-wrens, Red-backed and Variegated Fairy-wrens, and Gloucester's much loved Grey-crowned Babblers. Some of these birds are common enough but it's an achievement to have them using my garden.

Penny Drake-Brockman

Birds Australia Campout near Bredbo, 6-9 April 2011

The Canberra Ornithologists Group is pleased to be organising the BA Campout to be held from Wednesday 6th to Saturday 9th April 2011. The Campout will be based at the Bush Heritage Australia property '[Scottsdale](#)' located off the Monaro Highway 83 km from Canberra and four km north of the township of Bredbo, NSW. There will be no Birds Australia Congress held in conjunction with the Campout in 2011.

The timing of the autumn campout has been arranged to coincide with the annual honeyeater migration. In addition to the spectacular number of Yellow-faced and White-naped Honeyeaters, many other bird species of interest are involved in the passage out of the Brindabella Ranges. Apart from observing the passage many other activities will be arranged which may include tours of *Scottsdale*, and outings to Namadgi National Park,

Tallaganda State Forest, Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and the Tinderry Nature Reserve. Opportunities will be provided to become involved in bird surveying for the Kosciusko to Coast (K2C) project.

For those intending to spend the weekend in Canberra at the end of the Campout local outings will be provided which may involve visits to the Australian National Botanic Gardens, Jerrabomberra Wetlands, Mulligans Flat Sanctuary and the International Arboretum.

For registration, bird lists and additional information log onto the Canberra Ornithologists Group website (<http://canberrabirds.org.au/>). Follow the link to 'BA Campout' which will be regularly updated with additional information. For further details contact bacampout@canberrabirds.org.au

Hunterbirding

Hunterbirding is an email group set up by HBOC that is run through the Yahoo Groups. It is a great way to keep in touch with the latest goings-on in Hunter Region birding. Members are able to report sightings, post questions to the group and get involved with group discussions on bird-related issues. If you are interested in joining the group then please visit the HBOC website for details on how to sign up: <http://www.hboc.org.au/index.cfm?menukey=27>. You can choose either to receive individual emails or a single daily digest. The following article highlights some of the reports and discussions that have happened on hunterbirding within the last four months.

October

Discussions this month kicked off with an identification problem. An unusual looking wader was observed and photographed at Newcastle Ocean Baths. It seemed to show some characteristics of both Red Knot and Great Knot. Several people offered their opinions and the general opinion was that it was a Red Knot. These identification discussions are useful exercises, aiding both novice and experienced observers alike.

Information was provided for upcoming Rufous Scrub-bird and Australian Painted Snipe Surveys, encouraging members to help out and get involved if possible. The Scrub-bird Survey was organized by HBOC as part of the IBA (Important Bird Area) monitoring program. The Painted Snipe Survey was a Birds Australia event, with some local coordination of survey efforts.

An engaging discussion on the likely next new bird species for the Hunter Region was a particular highlight of the month. A large number of people participated in the debate, offering up an array of likely contenders. It was decided that the most likely source of new birds was undoubtedly pelagic trips, with Grey-headed Albatross being regarded as one of the best hopes for a new species. By far and away the most popular choice however, was Apostlebird, which has been observed only a short distance from the northwest extremity of our region. Only time will tell...

Finally, as the end of the month approached and the mega-event that is the BASNA Twitchathon loomed large, a last-minute request for a crucial third member was put to hunterbirding by one nervous team. Fortunately this request was met with positive response and the team in question was able to fill their void and compete successfully.

November

The turn of the month brought with it an entertaining selection of Twitchathon teams' accounts of the exhilarating event. These post-twitch appraisals really were an excellent read and help bring to life this special

event. Simply reading a list of teams and the scores they achieved doesn't do justice to what is a thoroughly enjoyable and important event. Each team has a story behind their score – the immaculate planning, intense build-up pressure, the dry-runs, the highs and lows and the calm reflections once the dust has settled. The stories that were shared through hunterbirding gave a small glimpse into the lives of some crazy twitchers!

One of the most interesting discussions on hunterbirding so far was on the moral stance of getting a tick vs disturbing the birds. This included actions such as tree-stroking for Owls, Crake-flushing and the use of call playback. There was however a disappointing lack of response. Maybe our fellow birders are all too ashamed of their habits to speak up about them!? Anyway, it was remarked that our impact on the birds as birdwatchers is generally minimal. It was helpfully put that it is better to have a conserved bushland with a few birders 'pishing' in it, than it is to have no bushland there at all.

There was also disturbing news that the Regent Honeyeater had been listed as 'Critically Endangered' in NSW – the final rung on the conservation ladder before 'Extinct in the Wild'. There was reflection on why this species continues to decline, despite the great efforts to prevent this from happening. The difficulties with accurately assessing the condition of a nomadic bird population were also mentioned.

Bird behavior was also a topic of conversation, sparked by an interesting observation of the Eastern Koel and turning to behavior of other cuckoos in general. The specific behavior being discussed was to do with the loud and noisy aggregation of birds, including seven Koels and at least 11 Fan-tailed Cuckoos. You'll often see small groups of Channel-billed Cuckoos flying around too.

There was yet another camera technical workshop (I think the third such thread on hunterbirding), which discussed the merits of different camera bodies, particularly on full frame vs crop sensor models, the former being heavier and more expensive than the latter. It was also recommended that better results will be obtained by investing in a decent lens and tripod, as these will have a more noticeable impact on your images than an upgrade in camera body.

The undoubted highlight as far as bird sightings were concerned was the report of a Wandering Tattler at Newcastle Ocean Baths. Several birders were able to use this news to get down to the baths and see the bird for themselves – myself included. This was the third bird of the year that I had managed to add to my list thanks to hunterbirding – the others being Sooty Tern and Bush Stone-Curlew, which were both incidentally in the same vicinity. Nobbys Head and the Ocean Baths seem to be a bit of a magnet for Hunter rarities.

Hunterbirding cont.

December

It was technology of another form which was scrutinized on hunterbirding this month. This time the use of hearing aids was discussed. It sounds like they are incredibly expensive, but the results may be worth it, with those that are hard of hearing reporting to have heard many more species when trialing a pair. I think we're still waiting on the final review and the decision of whether to purchase or not though...

Of concern to hunterbirders this month was the potential future access arrangements to the Wagtail Way area of Ash Island. It came to light that there could possibly be a locked gate access arrangement in the future, requiring a key to enter the site. This was not viewed favourably by many, as it would discourage birders from visiting and providing important bird records.

There was quite a lot of discussion on the occurrence of fruit-eating doves in the Hunter Region. This included the 'explosions' of bird populations, that result in species such as Superb and Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove turning up in the Hunter – often in very small patches of habitat such as Harrington and Seal Rocks. The abundance of Australasian Figbirds was also suggested as a possible reason for a lack of small fruit-eating doves in some locations.

Another behavioural observation was made in December, with regards to an unusual observation of a pair of ground-nesting Australian King-Parrots. Similar observations, albeit rarely, have been made of Sulphur-crested Cockatoo and Cockatiel and so it was viewed to be not out of the question for King-Parrots to do the same. Unfortunately the nest was later abandoned, with no sign of the eggs. Perhaps that's why they don't make a habit of nesting on the ground.

As the year approached its conclusion there was a spate of interesting sightings reported on hunterbirding. Every man, woman and their dog (or similar domesticated animal) it appeared was observing Black-necked Stork in the Hunter. I grew sick of reading of people's Stork sightings as I'm yet to see one myself – so I've given up even trying to see one now! There were also reports of Little Bittern at Tomago Wetlands, Grey Plover at Old Bar and most unusually four White-browed Woodswallows at the Hunter Wetlands Centre. With the inland rains this species has remained firmly west of the divide and it seemed extremely unlikely that any would visit the Hunter this year, especially so close to the coast.

January

And so to a New Year, heralding the end of the 'Hunter Big Year': 343 was the final tally, which was met with much congratulation. The first unusual sighting of the year was a possible Satin/Regent Bowerbird hybrid, or so-called 'Rawnsley's Bowerbird' at Tuncurry. This was

soon followed by a report of a White-winged Black Tern (WWBT) at (you've guessed it) Newcastle Ocean Baths. Again, the quick relaying of news through hunterbirding enabled many birders to see this individual. However, one observer was notable by his absence – one who had bombarded hunterbirding all year with requests for information (RFIs) regarding WWBT. Apparently he was in New Zealand...

The featured technology this month was the birder's 'scope'. A RFI regarding a potential telescope purchase was met with advice from a few people and included links to some useful articles elsewhere on the net that covered items such as what to look for when buying a telescope and reviews of several leading models. Motion-activated cameras also featured in discussion and seemed rather modestly priced too.

An observation was made as to a current lack of small raptors in the Lower Hunter, including Nankeen Kestrel and Black-shouldered Kite, perhaps linked to the inland rains. It seems most things prefer to be out west. Urban populations of Red-rumped Parrots were a topic of conversation too, including residents at Broadmeadow, Warrabrook and Shortland.

The sighting of a juvenile Noisy Pitta at Harrington and recent reports of birds in the Watagans sparked a debate on the status of this species in the Hunter Region. An informative response stated that they are altitudinal migrants, preferring to breed at a higher elevation and moving down to warmer climes post-breeding. This seasonal movement is likely linked to the birds' preferred rainforest-snail food. The Noisy Pitta shows similar seasonal movements to those exhibited by robins, whistlers and thrushes.

Finally, an unusual observation was made of what appears to be a melanistic (dark plumaged) White-faced Heron in Medowie.

Dan Williams

Clean Up Australia - 5 March 2010

I have registered a site on Italia Road, Wallaroo State Forest, as I do regular bird surveys in the forest and there is much rubbish dumping here. A big dumpster will be at the gateway to the site. To try to avoid the heat, I propose to be there early at 6.30am on **Saturday 5 March 2010** (due to a pelagic commitment on Sunday). Local people will also be cleaning up on Sunday 6 March, the prescribed date of the "Clean Up Australia Campaign". These people have attended mainly to the roadsides at this site for many years. Anyone that is willing to help is most welcome to come along.

Lorna Mee

Research News

Hipster bird species evolving to tune out urban sounds

07 January 2011 by [Wendy Zukerman](#)

Call them the urban new breed. We know birds raise their voices to make themselves heard in the [noisy big city](#), but for the first time there is evidence that they may even be evolving as a result of city living. “Urban birds might be becoming genetically distinct, which is the first step towards becoming a new ‘urban’ species,” says [Dominique Potvin](#) of the University of Melbourne, Australia. Unlike rural areas, towns have constant background noise, as well as buildings that reflect and distort sound. Since male birds use songs to defend their territories as well as to attract females, the urban din can cramp their style. “Whether a species can survive in urban habitats depends on whether or not it can adapt acoustically,” says Potvin.

Last year, researchers found that great tits (*Parus major*) [spontaneously change their tune depending on background noise levels](#). Potvin and colleagues wondered if urban birds might be evolving, not just learning.

Jamming songs

To test their idea, the team recorded 14 Silvereye (*Zosterops lateralis*) populations over 1 million square kilometres of east-coast Australia, making this the largest study, in terms of area, of its kind.

Silvereyes are common native Australian songbirds found in both town and country. “Their natural sounds would be masked by urban noise,” says Potvin. Such noise, generated mostly by road and air traffic, is at pitches between 1 and 4 kilohertz – bad news for Silvereyes, which sing in the 2 to 6-kilohertz range.

Potvin recorded male birds in seven Australian cities and corresponding rural areas: for example, in cosmopolitan Melbourne and the nearby Lerderderg State Park. In total, 81 birds were recorded, and each one tagged to ensure it was not sampled twice. She analysed both songs and contact calls. Contact calls mark danger or food, are shorter than songs, and are innate – unlike songs, which birds learn from their fathers. “If you raise a baby bird in a box it wouldn’t know to sing, but it would know how to contact call,” Potvin says.

High and slow

At all sites, on average, urban birds sang and called at higher frequencies than their country cousins, with city hipster birds singing 195 hertz higher and calling 90 hertz higher. “It’s a bit of a shock,” says Potvin. “The city is pushing these birds to evolve.” The city birds also sang slower songs, singing fewer syllables per second. According to Potvin, this could be because sound-reflecting buildings make songs less clear and longer pauses between syllables make them easier to understand. Potvin speculates that birds who don’t adapt cannot be heard by prospective mates and therefore cannot breed. It’s also possible, she says, that these birds have difficulty protecting their young, or surviving up to a reproductive age.

“We cannot exclude adaptation,” says [Hans Slabbekoorn](#), a behavioural biologist at Leiden University, Netherlands, who specialises in birdsong. But it is also possible, he says, that bird calls are more flexible than previously thought: Silvereyes might be just calling louder under noisier conditions.

Journal reference: [Proceedings of the Royal Society B, DOI: 10.1098/rspb.2010.2296](#)

From New Scientist

Ruddy Hell: Turnstone Flies 27,000 km – Twice !!

Wader researchers from the Victorian Wader Study Group, Australia, have just recaptured a Ruddy Turnstone which has completed a **27,000 km** round trip migration for the second time. This is the first time a wader has been tracked with a geolocator on its complete migration in successive years.

The bird had a one gram light-sensor data logger (geolocator) attached to its leg. This device recorded where the bird was each morning and evening. In each year the device was attached to the bird in mid April on a beach at Flinders, Victoria, in southeast Australia.

Ruddy Turnstones are a small wader weighing less than 100 grams and spend the (austral) summer months on many of the beaches around Australia. They are one of the family of waders that migrate huge distances to Siberia in Russia to breed. Researchers have used these data-logging devices over the last two years to find out the key stopover locations which are so important for the birds to refuel on their long journey. Members of the study group include Dr Clive Minton, Ken Gosbell, Penny Johns and Prof Marcel Klaassen (of Deakin University).

Ruddy Hell: Turnstone Flies 27,000 km Twice cont.

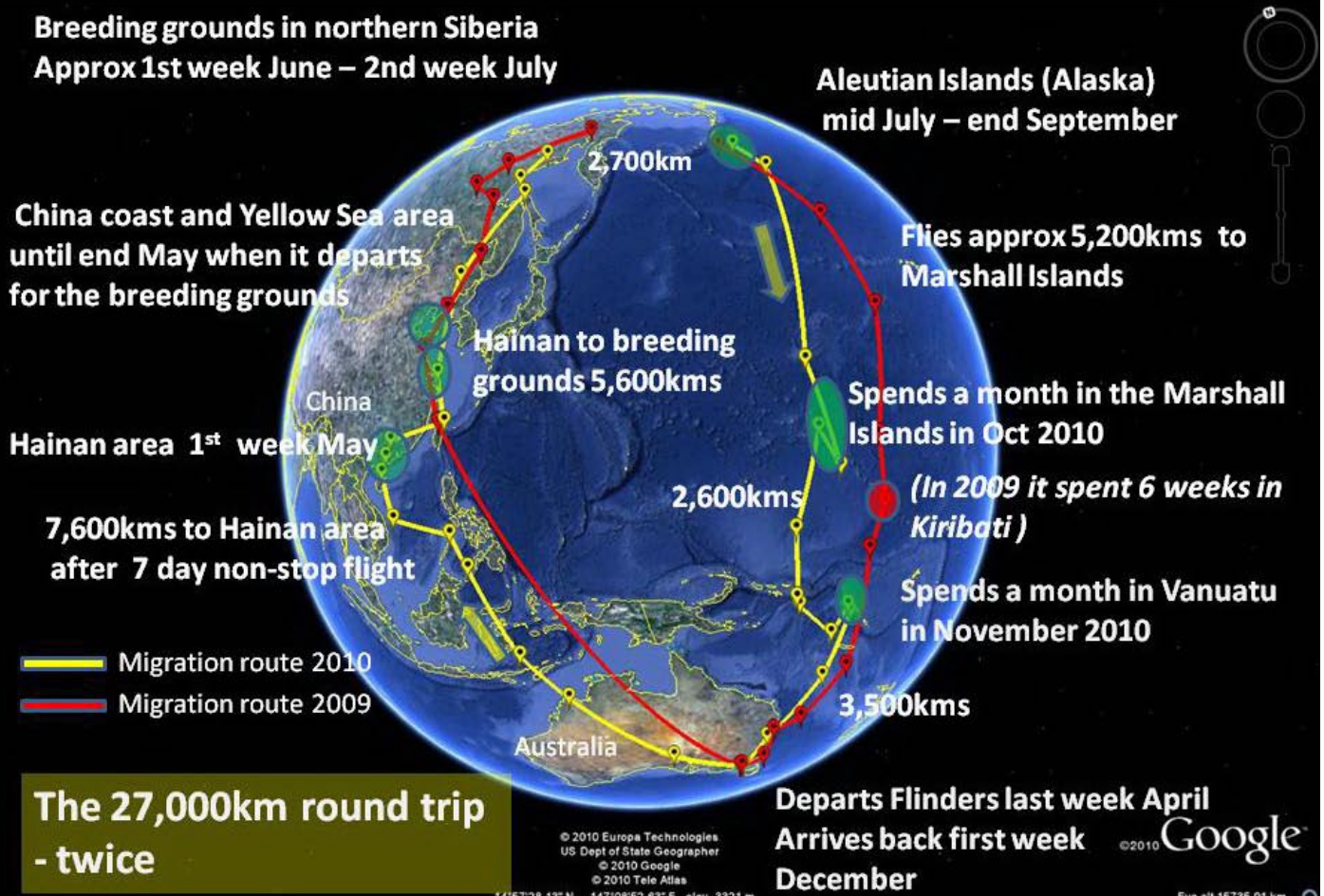
“This is a fantastic result for our study group, which is also supported by a fantastic group of volunteers,” Dr Minton said. “The data retrieved so far shows that the birds generally start their northward migration with an initial nonstop flight of around 7,600km in six days to Taiwan or adjacent regions. There they refuel on the tidal flats before moving north to the Yellow Sea and northern China. They then make a flight of over 5,000km to the breeding grounds in northern Siberia, arriving in the first week of June.”

“One of the interesting findings is that after breeding, the return journey shows considerable variation, no two birds following the same route. Some return through Asia while an amazing alternate route has been demonstrated by these new results. This is a trans-Pacific route where the bird moves east to the Aleutian Islands off southwest Alaska before making the huge journey across the Pacific, stopping only once or twice before reaching Australia in early December.”

The first record of this flight was in 2009 when the bird spent nearly two months in the Aleutians before setting off southward over the Pacific Ocean and making a nonstop flight of 7,800km to Kirabati (formerly Gilbert Islands), where it stayed for six weeks before making the 5,000km trip back to Flinders, Victoria. In 2010 the same bird undertook a similar incredible journey, this time stopping off in the Marshall Islands and Vanuatu in the Pacific before returning to Australia.

Turnstones live up to 20 years and such a bird following this 27,000 km trans-Pacific route would have flown over 500,000 km in its lifetime.

Scientists from the Australasian Wader Studies Group of Birds Australia and Deakin University are still puzzling over why individual Ruddy Turnstones from the same breeding and non-breeding population should use such widely differing routes for their annual migrations. The study shows the importance of key regions within the flyway. Scientists are concerned about the ability of these and similar birds to cope with the massive habitat changes occurring as a result of large reclamation and urban development projects.



Club Night Observations October 2010 - January 2011

Please note that all sighting reports published in HBOC's newsletter or its on-line forum (Hunterbirding) are unofficial and have not been confirmed by the club. Such reports are publicised in order that others can be made aware of the sighting(s) reported and have the chance to help verify them. Official records of bird sightings in the Hunter Region appear in the Annual Bird Report, for which written submissions supported by field notes and photographs are a vital part of the process for acceptance of locally uncommon/rare species.

Species	Number	Date	Location	Observer
Australian White Ibis	300+ br	11/12/10	Hunter Wetlands Centre	P. Lightfoot
Australian White Ibis	>300+br	12/01/11	Hunter Wetlands Centre	P. Lightfoot
Barbary Dove	1	15/12/10	Hamilton	G. Beering
Bar-tailed Godwit	5	28/10/10	Belmont Lagoon	M. Samuel
Bassian Thrush	2	16/11/10	Copeland [Mine Loop]	A. Richardson
Beach Stone-Curlew	Pr	20/01/11	Dowadee Is, Port Stephens	L. Wooding <i>et al.</i>
Black Falcon	1	27/11/10	Merriwa	A. Lindsey
Black-faced Monarch	1	14/10/10	Flaggy Ck [Glenrock SRA]	T. Clarke
Brown Goshawk	Pr+2dy	9/10/10	Bobs Farm	D. Hatfield
Buff-banded Rail	1	11/12/10	Hunter Wetlands Centre	P. Lightfoot
Cattle Egret	>100+br	11/12/10	Hunter Wetlands Centre	P. Lightfoot
Cattle Egret	>100+Br	12/01/11	Hunter Wetlands Centre	P. Lightfoot
Chestnut Teal	42	12/01/11	Hunter Wetlands Centre	P. Lightfoot
Chestnut-breasted Mannikin	2	12/01/11	Hunter Wetlands Centre	P. Lightfoot
Collared Sparrowhawk	Pr+ndy	16/12/10	Jilliby	per P. Ridgeway
Common Tern	70	11/12/10	Newcastle Ocean Baths	M. Roderick
Eastern Great Egret	13br	11/12/10	Hunter Wetlands Centre	P. Lightfoot
Eastern Great Egret	21+Br	12/01/11	Hunter Wetlands Centre	P. Lightfoot
Emerald Dove	1	16/11/10	Copeland [Mine Loop]	A. Richardson
Emerald Dove	1	8/11/10	Bobs Farm	D. Hatfield
Glossy Black-Cockatoo	3	29/11/10	Ferleigh Track	P. Woods [Landcare]
Glossy Black-Cockatoo	3	11-16/10/10	Wyee Point	V. Moon
Grey Goshawk	1	16/11/10	Copeland [Mine Loop]	A. Richardson
Grey Goshawk	Pr+1dy	30/8/10	Blackbutt [Rainforest]	J. Nicholls
Grey Goshawk	1	28/10/10	Belmont Lagoon	M. Samuel
Grey Goshawk	1	30/10/10	Glendale Heights	M. Samuel
Grey Goshawk	1	12/01/11	Hunter Wetlands Centre	P. Lightfoot
Grey Teal	10	12/01/11	Hunter Wetlands Centre	P. Lightfoot
Intermediate Egret	2	11/12/10	Hunter Wetlands Centre	P. Lightfoot
Little Eagle	1	4/12/10	Ash Island	H. Tarrant
Little Eagle	1	7/12/10	Bolwarra	H. Tarrant
Little Eagle	1	8/12/10	Tea Gardens	T. Clarke
Little Penguin beach washed	1	14/1/11	Merewether Baths	I. Berthold
Magpie Goose	Pr+3dy	12/01/11	Hunter Wetlands Centre	P. Lightfoot
Magpie Goose	Pr+nest	12/01/11	Hunter Wetlands Centre	P. Lightfoot
Musk Duck	1m	29/10/10	Hunter Valley Gardens	M. Samuel
Pacific Black Duck	48+dy	11/12/10	Hunter Wetlands Centre	P. Lightfoot
Pacific Golden Plover	43	5/12/10	Stockton Sandspit	T. Clarke
Paradise Riflebird	1	16/11/10	Copeland [Walk]	A. Richardson
Pheasant Coucal	2	11/12/10	Hunter Wetlands Centre	P. Lightfoot
Pheasant Coucal	2	12/01/11	Hunter Wetlands Centre	P. Lightfoot
Pied Butcherbird	2+2dy	6/12/10	Wyee Point	V. Moon
Powerful Owl	Pr+juv	31/01/11	Blackbutt	P. Lightfoot
Radjah Shelduck	1	10/12/10	Bulahdelah	C. Fleet
Red Wattlebird [feeding Koel]	1	30/11/10	Bolwarra	H. Tarrant
Regent Bowerbird	1	16/11/10	Copeland [Mine Loop]	A. Richardson
Regent Bowerbird	1m	15/11/10	Highfields	M. Jackson
Regent Bowerbird	1m	20/11/10	Highfields	M. Jackson
Regent Bowerbird	1	12/11/10	Flaggy Ck [Glenrock SRA]	T. Clarke

Club Night Observations October 2010 - January 2011

Species	Number	Date	Location	Observer
Rockwarbler	1	30/11/10	Wollombi	R. Greig
Royal Spoonbill	2+2dy	12/01/11	Hunter Wetlands Centre	P. Lightfoot
Ruddy Turnstone	18	11/12/10	Newcastle Ocean Baths	M. Roderick
Rufous Fantail	1	12/11/10	Flaggy Ck [Glenrock SRA]	T. Clarke
Rufous Songlark	2	5/12/10	Martindale	H. Tarrant
Silver Gull	100's	10/11/10	Broughton Island	T. Clarke
Southern Boobook	2	23/10/10	Clarencetown	D. Hatfield
Spectacled Monarch	2	16/11/10	Copeland [Mine Loop]	A. Richardson
Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater	1	27/10/10	Botanic Gardens	M. Samuel
Swamp Harrier	1	27/10/10	Botanic Gardens	M. Samuel
Tawny Frogmouth	1+n2dy	4/12/10	Dudley	J. Powers
Tawny Frogmouth	1	2/12/10	Highfields	M. Jackson
Tawny Grassbird	1	18/11/10	Ash Island	M. Samuel
Wandering Albatross	1	30/11/10	Off Newcastle Baths [100m]	A. Richardson
Wandering Whistling-Duck	14	11/12/10	Hunter Wetlands Centre	P. Lightfoot
Wandering Whistling-Duck	5	12/01/11	Hunter Wetlands Centre	P. Lightfoot
Wedge-tailed Eagle	1	10/01/11	Warners Bay	R. Walker
Whimbrel	1	11/12/10	Newcastle Ocean Baths	M. Roderick
White-bellied Sea-Eagle	1+3imm	8/01/11	Merewether to Burwood	R. & M. Stewart
White-browed Woodswallow	2	18/12/10	Hunter Wetlands Centre	M. & R. Stewart
White-throated Gerygone	Pr nb	3/10/10	Seaham Swamp N.R.	M. Maddock
White-throated Needletail	100's	15/01/11	Warners Bay	J. Walker [per R. Walker]
White-throated Needletail	~200	15/01/11	Speers Point	S. Hamonet
Wompoo Pigeon	1	16/11/10	Copeland [Walk]	A. Richardson
Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo	7	7/11/10	Highfields	M. Jackson
Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo	1	17/01/11	Speers Point	S. Hamonet

HBOC Easter Camp 22 - 25 April 2010 and Great Migration

This year the Easter Camp is at “*Binalong*”, a private property in the Capertee Valley, an iconic site for Regent Honeyeater and other great western birds. We plan to migrate to Grenfell on Monday 25 April 2010 and possibly stay in the Weddin Mountains National Park. More on this in the next Newsletter.

Binalong, owned by April Mills (phone 02 6379 7326), has plenty of room for camping and also has hard-roof accommodation for 5 people (1 double, 4 single beds) at \$40 per person per night. The camping has been booked but if you require hard-roof accommodation, please book this yourself. Camping fees (\$10 per person for the weekend) will be used to continue tree planting on the property. Free showers and water for campers are available at Glen Davis camping ground, approximately 8km from *Binalong*. Please drive only on tracks while on *Binalong*.

Directions

Binalong property is located 46.31km from Rylstone on Glen Alice Road in the Capertee Valley. You might stop at Rylstone and have a coffee and cake and if you are there at lunch time, there is a very nice Yum Cha in the Chinese restaurant.

At the hospital corner in Rylstone set your odometer to zero and turn left along Narrango Road, directing you to Glen Alice. Some distance along Narrango Road take the right fork of a Y-intersection and follow the Glen Alice Road. The property number is 4631, which means it is 46.31km from the hospital corner in Rylstone.

You will go through Little Glen Alice which comprises a Post Box, a little white church and a community hall; you will go over a little bridge and around the base of a cliff. The property is on the left, marked by lots of trees - the other properties are well-grazed and cleared cattle farms. The property is 6-8 km past Glen Alice. If you come to a T-intersection that directs you to Glen Davis and Capertee you have gone too far.

Lorna Mee

HBOC Activities February to April 2011

FEBRUARY 2011

Wednesday 9 February	AGM & Club Night	7.30pm The Wetlands Centre, Shortland	Guest Speaker: Adam Fawcett – Feral animal control in National Parks
Friday 11 February	Volunteer Day at Ash Island – mangrove seedling removal	7.00am Swan & Wader Ponds, Ash Island	Tom Clarke 0418 411 785
Tuesday 15 February	Tomago Wetland Survey	7.30am Entry to Tomago House	Neville McNaughton 4951 1265 Please ring to confirm
Friday 18 February	Port Stephens Wader Survey	Various locations as directed	Alan Stuart 4952 8569 Please ring to confirm - limited spaces available
Saturday 19 February	Hunter Wader Survey	9.00 am Ash Island 9.30 am Other locations as directed	Alan Stuart 4952 8569 – Ash Island Chris Herbert 4959 3663 – Kooragang Jack Adams 4971 5334 – Swansea Jenny Powers 4944 7274 – Stockton
Sunday 20 February	Field Outing – Watagan Mountains	7.30am Freemans Waterhole Shell Service Station carpark	Allan Richardson – 0403 942196

MARCH

Tuesday 1 March	Mid-week Outing - Stockton Sandspit	7.30am Car park under the bridge at Stockton Sandspit	Judi Thomas 4952 2960
Wednesday 2 March	Management Committee Meeting	6.30pm – 9.30pm Garden Suburbs School	All members welcome
Saturday 5 March	Clean Up Australia Day (Early)	6.30am Wallaroo State Forest	Lorna Mee 4988 6579
Sunday 6 March	Clean Up Australia Day	8am -12noon Stockton Sandspit 9am – 1pm Kooragang Dykes Boat Ramp	Tom Clarke 0418 411 785 for Stockton Sandspit Liz Crawford 0412 722 644 for Kooragang Dykes
Wednesday 9 March	Club Meeting	7.30pm The Wetlands Centre, Shortland	Guest Speakers: Toni Marsh and Peter Struik - Broome Bird Observatory
Friday 11 March	Volunteer Day at Ash Island – mangrove seedling removal	7.00am Swan & Wader Ponds, Ash Island	Tom Clarke 0418 411 785
Tuesday 15 March	Tomago Wetlands Survey	7.30am Entry to Tomago House	Neville McNaughton 4951 1265 Please ring to confirm
Saturday 19 March	Hunter Wader Survey	8.00am Ash Island 8.30am Various locations as directed	Alan Stuart 4952 8569 – Ash Island Chris Herbert 4959 3663 – Kooragang Jack Adams 4971 5334 – Swansea Jenny Powers 4944 7274 – Stockton
Sunday 20 March	Field Outing to: Kooragang Island	8am Ash Island car park, just over bridge	Ann Lindsey 4951 2008
Friday 25 March	Volunteer Day at Ash Island – mangrove seedling removal	7.00am Swan & Wader Ponds, Ash Island	Tom Clarke 0418 411 785
Sunday 27 March	Hunter Wildlife Festival	10am Hunter Wetlands Centre	Lorna Mee 4988 6579

APRIL

Saturday/ Sunday 2/3 April	BIGnet	Lake Parramatta Training Facility, Bourke Street, Parramatta	Cumberland Bird Observers Club
Tuesday 5 April	Mid-week Outing – Oyster Cove and Lemon Tree Passage	8.00am Corner Lemon Tree Passage Road and Oyster Cove Road	Max Blanch 4961 1655
Wednesday 6 April	Management Committee Meeting	6.30pm – 9.30pm Garden Suburbs School	All members welcome
Sunday 10 April	Volunteer Day at Stockton Sandspit – weeding and birdwatching	7.00am at Stockton Sandspit carpark	Tom Clarke 0418 411 785
Monday 11 April	Volunteer Day at Ash Island – mangrove seedling removal	7.00am Swan & Wader Ponds, Ash Island	Tom Clarke 0418 411 785
Wednesday 13 April	Club Meeting	7.30pm The Wetlands Centre	Speaker: Chris Herbert – Western Australia Part II – Cape Range to the Nullarbor
Saturday 16 April	Hunter Wader Survey	7.00am Ash Island 7.30am Various locations as directed	Alan Stuart 4952 8569 – Ash Island Chris Herbert 4959 3663 – Kooragang Jack Adams 4971 5334 – Swansea Jenny Powers 4944 7274 – Stockton
Tuesday 19 April	Tomago Wetlands Survey	7.30am Entry to Tomago House	Neville McNaughton 4951 1265 Please ring to confirm
EASTER/ ANZAC CAMP 22 – 25 April	Capertee Valley plus Migration to Grenfell Region	"Binalong", private property in Capertee Valley, 46.31km from Rylstone along Glen Alice Road	Lorna Mee 4988 6579