



Hunter Bird Observers Club

NEWSLETTER NO. 9/87 OCTOBER 1987.

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1. NOTES FROM SEPTEMBER MEETING 9/9/87.

- a) ATTENDANCE: 54, and apologies from Nigel Walker. A warm welcome was extended to visitors Max and Heather Maddock, Barbara and Max Davis, and Kevin Markwell.
- b) BIRD CALL presented by Norm Mullard. The familiar calls of the Magpie Lark (or Peewit) and the Willie Wagtail are often heard in succession. Indeed, both sound and sight of these friendly black and white birds are very much part of our rural scene. Their association often extends to nesting on the same branch, the Magpie Lark's nest in a fork and the Wagtail's at the end, and their bright, cheeky calls are heard frequently.
- c) BIRD OF THE EVENING presented by Anne-Maree Hunter: Spinifex Pigeon (Petrophassa plumifera). There are 2/3 races of this bird, the main difference being colour of lower breast and under-belly. The slides Anne-Maree showed us were those she had taken in the Pilbara region of Western Australia of the rust-brown bellied race, other races have white bellies. It is a reddish bronzewing with upright crest, yellow eye with prominent facial pattern: skin around eye is red, frons blue-grey, chin and face stripe white, black throat; black and grey scalloped marking on wings. They are adapted to living in arid conditions, and while not confined to spinifex grasslands are most common in stoney spinifex country, particularly where it is hilly and mountainous. Their range is from north-west of W.A. through central Australia to north-west Queensland. They breed throughout the year but breeding is affected by rainfall. The nest is a scrape in the ground lined with a few pieces of grass, often beside a hummock of spinifex. Their voice is a deep guttural 'coo-r-r-r' made in the bowing display, and a low-pitched 'oom' as contact call, although Anne-Maree heard the 'oom' sound while watching and photographing a bowing display.
- d) OBSERVATIONS: As Spring approaches birds are becoming more active and many sightings were reported: Cicadabird at Blackbutt, Channel-billed Cuckoo at Paterson, Fairy Martins at Richardson's Swamp, Marsh Harrier at the Botanical Gardens, a flock of 13 Major Mitchell (Pink) Cockatoos at Wollombi, and Pied Butcherbirds at Warners Bay and Marmong Point. A notable sighting was made by Roger and Fay Heading during their recent visit to Wilsons Promontory of a pair of Orange-bellied Parrots. These rare parrots live in Tasmania but migrate to coastal Victoria in March-July, returning home in September-November.
- e) MAIN FEATURE: EGRETS. The man who had a great deal to do with establishing the Shortland Wetlands Centre is Associate Professor Max Maddock. His interest in wetland birds and Egrets in particular was heightened during the drought of 1981 when 300-600 pairs of Egrets sought refuge in the swamp. Since then

he and others have embarked on an intense study of all four species of Egret, which involves tagging all resident birds, observing their behaviour and mating habits, tracking migratory birds, and recording all this information. Apart from many keen and hardworking local members, there are now 60 observers forming Project Egret Watch, ranging from Cairns to Tasmania. Tonight we were privileged to learn many special points about Egrets and see some fine slides Max has taken here at Shortland. All Egrets congregate at roosting time in trees around the water, and promptly at six minutes after sunset all go to their chosen roosts. Great Egrets always occupy penthouse suites on the topmost branches, with Intermediate, Little, and Cattle Egrets taking the lower roosts. Max gave wonderful descriptions (with sound effects and actions!) of the elaborate greeting and courting rituals each species performs. We saw clearly from slides variations in colour of beaks, eye patches and legs of courting couples. Sibling rivalry and arguments among nestlings has led to several birds being fostered out to humans, these youngsters have thrived and become familiar to observers around the district. The question as to whether their foraging behaviour is innate or learned from other birds is an interesting one.

Our evening's entertainment did not end with Max's erudite address. He magically assumed the character and voice of Professor P.O.Q. Hecklethwaite (from a very obscure American university), and held forth on his theory that 'Egrets are superior to Frogs'. This hypothesis was hotly and fulsomely debated by Professor Sidebottom, straight from Oxford and Cambridge, resplendent in academic dress and with a pocketful of green jelly frogs with which he rewarded those who laughed loudest. Prof. Hecklethwaite produced some amazing pictorial evidence to substantiate his claims for the superiority of Egrets. Professor Sidebottom (or was it Kevin Markwell?) dismissed these opinions with even more amazing and un-heard of facts, the coup de grâce being that never in fictional history has an Egret been kissed by a princess and turned into a prince! Dr. Hecklethwaite responded by presenting a delicious Egret-shaped cake for supper, which was much enjoyed by an appreciate audience. Thanks to our two Professors for their hilarious debate.

f) RAFFLE: Two beautiful native plants were raffled to raise money for the Club's recently acquired radio cassette player, first used tonight. \$51.76 was collected and the lucky winners were Peter McLauchlan and Tom Douglas.

2. PROJECTS: There are eight bird surveys being undertaken at present by R.A.O.U., H.B.O.C., S.W.C. and private individuals. They are: 1. Egrets, 2. Old World Warblers, 3. Double Banded Plovers, 4. Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos, 5. The rolling bird survey, 6. Bird of Prey Watch, 7. Nest Records, and 8. Nankeen Night Heron. The first three projects are on birds that have been banded. Anyone seeing these are asked to read bands and record shape, colours and numbers on wing or leg tags. In the fourth survey, the Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo is being banded for the first time 86/87 season with a red wing tag. Anyone wishing to read the third report on this bird please see me on Club night. The rolling Bird Survey, Bird of Prey Watch and Nest Records are all paper surveys wherein an information sheet is filled in. Those wishing to participate please see me. Help is also wanted from anyone sighting Red-breasted Robins during the winter period. Last, but by no means least, information is required about the mortality during nesting of juvenile Nankeen (Rufous) Night Herons.

-- Diane Rogers.

3. FIELD DAY: BUTTAI, EAST MAITLAND, BLACK HILL 23/8/87

The outing started at 7am at the corner of Leneghan Drive and George Booth Drive where 22 members met on a beautiful early Spring day. We walked a short way along the pipeline there before driving to a side road at Buttai where the group split up and followed different tracks through the bush. Here we saw choughs putting the finishing touches to a perfect mud nest; white-throated tree creepers; fuscous and yellow-faced honeyeaters; grey fantails; brown thornbills and king parrots - many spotted after Mars Bars were offered as incentives to the younger members. Amazing what a bit of bribery will do!

After morning tea the group moved down the road and explored a property near Buttai Creek on which we saw sittellas; olive-backed orioles; variegated and superb blue wrens; eastern rosellas and various water birds on the farm dam.

The next stop was Buchanan Gallery where we waited for some members who had become 'disorientated' at the last stop, to catch up, before having lunch and inspecting the Gallery. The highlight here was to see a pair of whistling kites at their nest. The group then drove through Black Hill where we saw a grey goshawk soaring over the trees as well as a wedge-tailed eagle.

The last stop before we scurried home ahead of an afternoon storm, was for a quick look at Hexham and Leneghan Swamps - more like lakes after the recent rain, and for the time being, home to assorted ibises, ducks, (untagged) egrets, herons, moorhens and swamphens.

Full marks to Jim who planned a day of great variety and interest. The total number of birds seen was over 90. As new members we have as much trouble naming the birds as naming the other members so would like to thank the more experienced 'birdos' who took the time to point out and identify the different birds to us. As usual, we had an enjoyable and rewarding day.

Judith and Rowley Smith
and the 'Alphabet Kids'

4. FIELD DAY TO BOB'S FARM, ANNA BAY, TAYLORS BEACH 20/9/87.

A small party met near Stockton Bridge for a quick look at the incumbent waders on the mud flats before going on to Bob's Farm. Here we had no sooner stopped by the roadside and were deciding that yes, it was a *Cisticola* we were looking at, than we were invited by the nearby resident to 'Come into my garden and see my passing bird parade'. What a pleasure, not only to meet friendly and interested people, but it was bird watching in comfort as honey-eaters, finches and wrens flitted and twitted around the garden. We even had a flock of Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos pass overhead. The day continued with another pleasant garden at Anna Bay, and the best of both worlds with shore and bush nearby. When out with H.B.O.C. one gets to places out of the ordinary, and our next port of call was one I had never heard of - Fenningham's Island. Well, not an island really, but a thickly wooded peninsula through which we tramped. Despite some groans among the troops it was a good walk, with White-breasted Sea Eagles floating majestically above, Spring wild flowers to admire, and birdsong all around. On to Taylor's Beach for well-earned lunch, and a reconnoitre of the area before calling it a day. The score was 71 bird species seen.

-- Ruth Parker.

5. EXCERPT FROM "101 USES FOR A DEAD" by Ian McCallan
(N.S.W. F.O.C. Newsletter October 1986).

".....Many birdos found dead birds, sometimes extremely interesting species, and either didn't pick them up or threw them away.

Many of you are saying "Who on earth would want a smelly dead bird?" Firstly, biologists collecting distribution and abundance records, taxonomic and physiological information, or evidence of parasites or chemicals which may have contributed to the bird's death; secondly, bird banders seeking records of movement, longevity, age variation, weight and other statistics; thirdly, artists or people needing to know, for example, how far apart wires must be in order for them not to be short circuited by a Raven; or even birdos needing to view skins for identification purposes. In Australia all collections of dead birds - whether study skins, mounted birds, skeletons or alcohol specimens - are kept in State museums, at the C.S.I.R.O. Wildlife Collection or in tertiary institutions. Collection of material at the Aust. Museum is basically by public donation. Very little active collecting is done. It should be stressed that every dead bird could be useful, even common birds can be used in exchange with overseas or interstate collections. Museum staff would always like the option of keeping or throwing away a dead bird after they have seen it. Birds should be taken to the nearest N.P.W.S. office which generally has a freezer. Material collected is sent periodically to Sydney. When a bird is collected, a label stating where, when, and by whom the bird was collected should always be attached, but remember, dead birds found interstate must be taken to the local State museum, otherwise you may get into some legal problems."

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NOTE: FUTURE NEWSLETTER DISTRIBUTION.

The newsletter will only be given out at Clubnight. If you are not there, it is NOW your responsibility to get back copies from Jim Imrie.

6. COMING EVENTS:

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| SUNDAY 25th OCTOBER | FIELD DAY to Wangi Eraring.
MEET: Toronto Coles Car Park.
TIME: 7 a.m. Carry lunch.
CONTACT: Bevan McGregor 59 4141. |
| WEEKEND CAMP
21-22ND NOVEMBER | DYERS CROSSING, TAREE AREA.
CONTACT: Kay Imrie 52 4524. |
| WEEKEND 6-8TH NOVEMBER | BARREN GROUNDS EXPEDITION.
Details: Kay Imrie 52 4524 |
| SUNDAY 29TH NOVEMBER | TWILIGHT WALK at ASKANIA PARK near Ourimbah. Bar-B-Q tea and spot-lighting
MEET: At carpark, Askania Park.
TIME: 4 p.m.
CONTACT: Rosemary Waymark
ENTRANCE FEE: \$3.50. This reduces to \$2.50 if we get 20 starters. |
| SUNDAY 6TH DECEMBER | FIELD DAY to Warkworth.
MEET: McDonalds, Hexham.
TIME: 6 a.m.
CONTACT: Kay Imrie 52 4524 |
| WEDNESDAY 11th NOVEMBER | CLUBNIGHT. Feature: Greg Little, local bird photographer. |
| WEDNESDAY 9th DECEMBER | CLUBNIGHT and Christmas Party, members' slides, etc. |
| WEEKDAY OUTINGS:
26th OCTOBER
16th NOVEMBER | SWANSEA SOUTH. Meet 7.30 a.m. Swansea BLACKBUTT RESERVE. " " (Park. Top aviary. |
| COMMITTEE MEETING | Wednesday 4th November 5.30 p.m. |