



NEWSLETTER No. 7/89, AUGUST 1989.

Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc.

President: Peter M^CLauchlan
Secretary: Rosemary Waymark
Correspondence: P.O. Box 24 New Lambton 2305
Telephone enquiries: Alan Stuart 528569
Newsletter Editor: Paul Osborn 781151
P.O. Box 83 Jesmond 2299
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1. NOTES FROM JULY MEETING:

a) ATTENDANCE: 32. Apologies from Graeme O'Connor, Kay and Jim Imrie and Fay Thomson

b) OBSERVATIONS: King Parrots at Toronto & Adamstown Heights; Boobook Owls in Rankin Park; Wompoo Pigeon at Edgeworth; White-headed Pigeon and Grey Goshawk at Garden Suburb; Yellow-nosed Albatross at Seal Rocks; Ospreys mating at Teralba; Flock of Crested Hawks at Cooranbong, one performing display flight; Spangled Drongos at Caves Beach; Sea Eagles displaying; Brahminy Kite nesting in power lines at Darwin, and a Blackbird at Elmore Vale.

c) BIRD CALL: When Dianne Rogers played us this month's bird call, there were guesses from the audience of 'elephant', 'walrus' and 'dog'. The collection of grunts, clicks, growls and whistles did however, belong to one of our familiar avian friends, the Pelican

d) BIRD OF THE EVENING: This meeting's talk was delivered by James O'Connor, who chose for his subject the Boobook Owl (*Ninox novaeselandiae*). The derivation of this bird's scientific name is partially unknown (the 'Ni' part), but 'nox' comes from the Latin for night and the specific name is a Latinised form of New Zealand. The owl is commonly also known as Mopoke, Morepork or Spotted or Marbled Owl.

This fairly large (300-360 mm) bird is distributed Australia wide, including islands. It is partially nomadic and generally common, although sparser in the inland. Population explosions are known to occur in cereal growing areas following mouse plagues. The Boobook Owl has a dark brown facial mask surrounded by pale rimmed goggles, a whitish crown and dark brown cheeks. The bill is grey in adults and a bluish colour in juveniles. Juveniles have green eyes which change to yellow as they get older. The bird's underparts are white with a grey wash in young birds and reddish brown tending to mottled buff in older specimens. The belly is streaked with white. The wings are dark brown with white spots on the flight feathers and the tail is either grey (juveniles) or dark brown (adults). These owls have a dark chocolate coloured rump, spotted with white to buff colours. The Tasmanian form is smaller than those on the mainland. Central and Northern forms have paler coloration with more reddish colours than the Eastern form which is dark brown with white streaks.

The bird lives in open woodland and forest grading to almost treeless areas inland. They are found close to human habitation and can be seen in farms, orchards, parks and gardens. They eat mostly invertebrates and small rodents and birds. They hawk for their prey from perches on exposed limbs, power poles and fence posts. Their flight is delicate with very little gliding. During daylight hours the bird roosts in dense foliage or caves, often only a few metres from the ground. They build their nests in tree hollows, lined with decayed debris and soft grass. The white eggs are roundish and about 42X35 mm in size. Incubation takes about 26 to 33 days and fledging occurs about 34 to 46 days later. These birds are more often heard than seen and have a distinctive 'moepoke' call. More rarely heard is a falsetto 'yo-yo-yo' call and calls made round the nest such as a drawn out catlike 'brrwow' and a monotonous 'mor-mor-mor'.

e) MAIN FEATURE - BLACK ROBIN: We were fortunate, this month to have available a video, shown recently on New Zealand television, of the effort to save the Black Robin from extinction. The Chatham Island Black Robin (*Petroica traversi*), as its name suggests, lives on the Chatham Islands, about 800 km east of Christchurch. This group, comprised of about ten islands and some islets, was first colonised around 1100 years ago by Polynesians. The islands were first seen by Europeans in 1791 and soon became a base for sealing and whaling operations. A Maori tribe settled here in 1830 and killed off the Polynesians. Along with man came his attendant assortment of pests, such as rats, cats, goats and pigs which quickly altered the environment of the islands to the detriment of the native species. An estimated thirty species are now extinct, leaving about 43 species of native birds, some seventeen of which are endemic. Most of these are rare, and the rarest of all was the Black Robin. In the mid 70's only seven birds were left, and these occupied a one hectare patch of forest on a small (7 ha) patch of land called Little Mangare Island. Of these birds, only one pair was actively breeding and their future looked bleak. The New Zealand wildlife authorities utilised the expertise of Don Merton to try to save the birds. First attempts relied on catching the Robins and translocating them to a larger island with more suitable habitat. The birds quickly took to this new habitat and began to breed but unfortunately, the breeding success was limited and the population failed to increase significantly. At this juncture, Don decided to try using Chatham Island Grey Warblers (*Gerygone albofrontata*) as foster parents. He did this by taking Robin eggs from their nest and placing them in the nests of the Warblers. This prompted the Robins to lay a second clutch and so seemed to offer even more hope for the species. However, although the Warblers successfully incubated the Robins' eggs, they could not provide sufficient food for the developing chicks who soon perished. This was disappointing, as the Warblers' near relative on the mainland (*Gerygone igata*) had regular success as foster parents for Shining-bronze Cuckoos. It was then decided to try a foster parent more closely related to the Black Robin and the abundant Tomtit (*Petroica macrocephala*) was selected. Not wishing to leave too much to chance, the wildlife team built artificial nest boxes which they provided with barred entrances in order to protect the chicks from predation. The Tomtits turned out to be excellent foster parents for the Robins and the population began to grow. The only problem was that the young Black Robins grew up thinking they were Tomtits and exhibited all the wrong behavioural patterns for Black Robins, showing little inclination to breed with their own species. This was solved by removing the chicks from the Tomtits' nest's at a critical stage of

their development and returning them to nests of their own species. This must have somewhat confused the poor Robins, who left a nest with two freshly laid eggs and returned to find healthy, growing 11 day old chicks. Despite this the plan worked and there are now about seventy of these delightful little birds living in the Islands. There is now a plan to clear Pitt Island, one of the two largest of the group, of potential predators, and to recreate suitable habitat so the Robins can be reestablished on their former stronghold. We wish the New Zealanders further luck with this important project and congratulate them. It is rare these days to watch a wildlife video that doesn't have an unhappy ending. Thanks to Peter M^CLauchlan for obtaining this video and presenting some background as an informative introduction.

2. FIELD OUTING TO KINCUMBER/LISAROW. 23rd JULY.

An early start on a very cold day, and 10 birds meet and begin their outing; and it started with a bang! We had only gone 5Km and were driving through an industrial area on the right and large paddocks of privet on the left, on the outskirts of Gosford, when we saw 6 Regent Bowerbird males and many females. Also present was a male Satin Bowerbird and some females. It was a beautiful sight and so unexpected to see them so close to the Pacific Highway. In the background were Red-whiskered Bulbuls and Noisy Friarbirds. After watching for 15 mins we continued 200m down the road where we found two dead White-headed Pigeons (road killed) and Cattle Egrets feeding on a cleared block with Spur-winged Plovers and Eastern Rosellas.

Our next stop was Kincumber Reserve, overlooking Erina to the west and Kincumber to the east. Situated on Hawkesbury Sandstone with dry sclerophyll and coastal heathland vegetation. Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos were seen as well as what they do to the seed pods of Banksia Serrata. Other birds seen here were Golden Whistler, Eastern Yellow Robin, Variegated Fairy-wren and Large-billed Scrubwren, to name a few.

After morning tea, we drove to Katandra Reserve (aboriginal for 'song of birds') which overlooks Erina to the east and Narara to the west. As we arrived it began to rain so we decided on a short walk along the Guringai Walk. With a cliff of Hawkesbury and Narrabeen Sandstones on our left and beautiful Blackbutt eucalypts and large tree ferns on our right, overlooking rainforest in the valley. We called it a day after finishing this walk as the rain had set in. With a bird count of 58 it was a great day. Diane Rogers.

3. NEW MEMBERS: A warm welcome to new members Tom Clarke from Mayfield, Phillip Tassell from Balmoral and Leon Poi from Lostock.

4. COMING EVENTS

Sunday 20th August

Field Outing Allworth

MEET : 7 AM, M^CDonalds, Hexham

CONTACT : Peter M^CLauchlan 333224

Wednesday 13th September

Clubnight, Shortland Wetlands Cntr.
7.30 PM

Main Feature : Neville Foster, from the Maitland Photography Club.

Sunday 24th September

Field Outing Stanhope Creek

MEET : 6.30 AM, M^CDonalds, Hexham

CONTACT : Sue Hamonet 581023

October Long Weekend

CAMP Wollar (private property)

CONTACT: Sue Hamonet for details.

Fee payable to owner, \$5 per person maximum.

Wednesday 11th October

Clubnight, Shortland Wetlands Cntr.
7.30 PM

Main Feature : Bill Dowling

Sunday 22 October

Field Outing Kooragang Island

MEET: Sign on left of road between
Stockton and Tourle St. bridges.

TIME: 7 AM