



## Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc.

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### 1. NOTES FROM OCTOBER MEETING:

a) ATTENDANCE: 39. Apologies from Margaret M<sup>C</sup>Lauchlan and Barbara Kelly.

b) OBSERVATIONS: Ted Felton remarked on some recent sightings at the Stockton Sewerage Ponds including Ruddy Turnstones, about 500 Curlew Sandpipers and a small flock of 9 Caspian Terns. A Black-faced Monarch was seen at Mayfield, a Powerful Owl in Melbourne's Botanical Gardens, and Cape Barren Geese at Wilson's Promontory. Closer to home, a Scarlet Honeyeater at Beresfield and Alan Richardson related how, by imitating its call, he lured a Spotted Pardalote to come down and perch on his hat!

c) BIRD OF THE EVENING - WANDERING ALBATROSS Peter Philipps gave us a scholarly talk on this, the largest of all seabirds, and the largest flying bird. The bird's scientific name, *Diomedea exulans*, is derived from Diomedes, a Trojan war hero and the latin word for wandering. The word Albatross is a contraction of the Portugese for Pelican (Alcatraz) and 'alba' meaning white. This bird belongs to the taxonomic order Procellariiformes, or tube-nosed birds. All birds in this order have tubed nostrils which may give them an enhanced sense of smell, or could be for salt excretion or even for sensing air speed by pressure differences. Other birds in the Procellariiformes include Prions, Petrels and Shearwaters. The Wandering Albatross is one of 14 Albatrosses belonging to the family Diomedidae, which is divided into two genera; the *Phoebastria* (Sooty Albatrosses) with two species and the *Diomedea* with twelve. Of these, the Wandering, Royal and Amsterdam Albatrosses are referred to as Great Albatrosses because of their large size. Four of the species occur in the northern hemisphere with the rest in the southern. Albatross rarely if ever cross the Equator, probably because they need high wind speeds in order to fly and Equatorial waters are too calm.

There are two races of the Wandering Albatross; *D. e. exulans*, the nominate race, which breeds in the Sth Atlantic and NZ regions, and *D. e. chloriptera* which is slightly smaller and breeds further south. Wandering Albatross are solitary ocean wanderers with stocky bodies, very long slender wings, short but strong webbed feet and long hooked bills with short-tubed nostrils which are separated and sunken in horny plates on the bill. They are about 120-135 cm long (~4ft) with a wingspan of 325-340 cm (~11ft) and weigh 8 to 9 kg. The full adult plumage, which is achieved after 7 or 8 years consists of white body, head and underparts with mainly white wings and a white tail with

black outer feathers. The juvenal plumage is largely brown except for a white face and throat. Immatures are similar to the adults but have a greater amount of black on the upper wings. They gradually whiten from the centre outwards with age. All ages have a flesh or yellowish flesh coloured bill, white legs and a dark brown iris. The sexes are largely similar with the main difference being in the slightly smaller size of the female. The Wandering Albatross can be distinguished from most other birds in the field by its great size. To tell it from the Royal Albatross one needs to examine the bill, which is yellower for the Royal and also has a dark cutting edge and more prominent nasal tubes. Peter showed us some slides illustrating this difference. The Wandering Albatross appears to be difficult to tell apart from the Amsterdam Albatross which is very rare (one sighting) in Australian waters.

The Wandering Albatross has eyes which are adapted to filter out the shorter wavelengths at the blue end of the spectrum, which helps it to see other white birds at a distance and may also help it to find its food. This consists mostly of Cephalapods (cuttlefish and squid) up to one metre long but also includes carrion and garbage jettisoned from ships. Feeding is mostly nocturnal and done from a floating position, from which the bird is reported to upend like a duck. It is likely that cuttlefish come to the near surface at night. It has been observed that cuttlefish occur seasonally off the NSW coast at the same time that the Albatross is present in the most numbers. This bird has a mainly circumpolar distribution, primarily between 30 and 60° S and is fairly common off Vic, NSW and Tasmanian coasts, especially from June to November. It is less common off SA, WA and Qld. Their distribution is limited to areas of strong, reliable winds. They breed on isolated islands such as Kerguelen, Macquarie, Heard, Auckland, Campbell, Crozet and South Georgia. Because most sightings are made from ships, little is known about their movements outside the shipping lanes. Banding studies undertaken off Bellambi NSW and coincidentally in South Georgia have indicated that birds travel in a slow easterly drift around the world taking advantage of the prevailing westerly winds.

Birds do not begin breeding until 7 or 8 years old and mate for life, which can be from forty to eighty years. As a result of the long time (11 to 12 mths) taken to rear their young the Wandering Albatross only breeds every second year. Breeding begins with an elaborate courtship dance with much noise and bill clapping, needed to re-establish the pair bond between two birds that have not seen each other for about twelve months. A fairly simple nest is built in the shape of a truncated cone of mud, peat and vegetation about 50cm high. The nest is usually placed near an updraft to allow for easier takeoffs and the same site is used again if breeding has been successful. One white egg is laid in mid-November and incubated for 70-80 days in shifts lasting 2-3 weeks, of which the male does the majority. Hatching is usually guaranteed because of the absence of predators on these isolated islands. This is followed by 4 to 5 weeks of intensive brooding followed by a further six months during which the chick is fed every week or so. The chick is largely abandoned during this period as the parents travel hundreds of kilometres in search of food, but survives on reserves of fat. Although infrequent, the meals are substantial, consisting of a partially digested energy rich liquid which is secreted in the proventricular. This liquid is very much richer in oils and fats than the original prey and is analogous to mammals milk. During its long periods of isolation the young bird keeps busy by refurbishing the nest. Finally, at about 11 or 12 months of age the fledgling sets out for the ocean, where it will stay for at least seven years, meanwhile the parents also head off to moult.

With the aid of overhead transparencies, Peter illustrated the remarkable flying abilities of this bird. By gliding downwind into a wave trough the bird converts potential energy into kinetic energy which allows it to use the updraft off the wave to lift it back to its previous height. By soaring and gliding across the wind in this manner the Wandering Albatross can cover vast distances with very little expenditure of energy; it has been calculated that a 100 km flight in a good wind will cost a 9 kg bird only 1% of its body weight to fuel. Peter finished his talk by relating his recent experience of this bird. He ventured out to sea from Woolongong on the Sandra K at the end of August. This is a commercially run birdwatching trip which cost \$35 for the day and includes seabird experts on board. During this trip he saw many seabirds including the more common Yellow-nosed and Black-browed Albatross and Skuas, White-fronted and Arctic Terns, Prions, Petrels and Shearwaters. The highlight came when the totally unmistakable form of the Wandering Albatross appeared at about 12 miles out, looking like a B52 bomber only more graceful, and made several passes around the rear of the vessel. Although thoroughly recommending the trip, Peter advised potential participants to prepare for wet, windy weather and seasickness.

d) BIRD CALL: Sue Hamonet presented this month's bird call, and appropriately chose the Wandering Albatross. Their 'song' consisted of a series of whistles, grunts & groans interspersed with a loud braying and much clapping of bills. These sounds are made during the courtship ritual, performed at the nesting site. The bird is mostly silent at other times. For comparison, Sue also played the song of the Royal Albatross, which, although similar, is deeper in pitch than that of the Wandering.

e) MAIN FEATURE: Bill Dowling, a naturalist from Dungog presented a talk on his experiences of the birds and other wildlife of the Brandon Grove area. Brandon Grove is near the junction of the Chichester and Williams Rivers, about 20 km south of Barrington. Bill described some of the early history of the area, which rises from about 100 m at Brandon Grove to 1500 m at Barrington Tops. The area was occupied by a tribe of aborigines whose range extended to Port Stephens. Numbering ~250 in 1841 they were completely gone by 1905. Early settlers in the region tried their hand at beef, sheep and tobacco farming as well as timber getting but the area is now mainly a dairying district. Bill compared the present open farmland with that described in the notes of early surveyor, George White, who had to estimate the course of the rivers as the forest was too thick to approach the riverbanks. Now, Whispering Gully, at the head of the Karuah River is the only remaining unlogged patch of forest, and plans are underway to log this soon. The high ranges of the Barrington area are a barrier for many species of bird and animal and constitute the southern limit for some whilst being the northern extremity of others' ranges. Bill showed us some of his slides of forest scenes and wildlife, including many interesting lizards and frogs among the bats, insects and fungi. He completed his talk by indicating some trends derived from over thirty years of bird watching notes. His species list stands at nearly 200 and includes the Wandering Albatross that we heard about earlier. Some of the birds that have declined in numbers over the years in this area included Bush Thick-knees (Stone Curlews) Wompoo Pigeon, Diamond Firetails and Grey-crowned Babbblers. These have been replaced by increasing numbers of Galahs, Crested Pigeons, Cattle Egret and recently Little Corellas. One feature of the bird life is the presence of an estimated 32 Rufous Scrub-birds. Bill has amassed a valuable record of the birdlife of his area over a long period of time

and we thank him for sharing some of it with us.

## 2. FIELD OUTING - STANHOPE CK. 24th September

While the holidaymakers were off chasing grasswrens, six members set off from Hexham at 6.30AM. First stop was near Elderslie, beside the Hunter River, where Sue's keen ear picked up the call of the Rainbow Bee-eater. What a beautiful sight, these birds were sitting on power lines, several still with their two long tail feathers. Zebra Finch were seen sharing their bush with House Sparrows. A Brown Falcon sat on a fence post across a field of recently harvested lucerne. Among other birds seen were Richard's Pipit, Fairy Martins and Bar-shouldered Dove.

Our next quick stop beside a creek yielded Grey-crowned Babblers; then it was on to Stanhope Creek and a hike along the road and over the ridge. What lovely weather for a variety of colourful sightings, Golden and Rufous Whistlers, Brown and White-throated Warblers, Sacred Kingfishers, Satin Bowerbirds, King Parrots, Crimson and Eastern Rosellas, and Superb and Variegated Wrens.

During the lunch break we were continually reaching for our binoculars for Yellow Robins, Kestrel, Silvereye and Leaden Flycatcher. After lunch a walk along the creek brought Black-faced Monarch and a lone Topknot Pigeon into view.

A Practical session on the differences between Yellow, Brown and Buff-rumped Thornbills ended our watch. Thanks Sue for a great day, several new sightings and all the interesting facts. 64 species were seen.

Margaret Piefke

3. NEW MEMBERS: A warm welcome to Ray & Kathleen Kembrey of Beresfield, Allen & Joyce Oliver from Wingham and Judith Wylie of Dungog

## 4. COMING EVENTS

### Weekend 18/19 November

CAMP, Dyer's Crossing  
Details : Kay Imrie 524524

### Sunday 10th December

Field Outing Swansea  
Meet : M<sup>C</sup>Donalds, Belmont, 6.30 AM  
Contact: Jim Perry 432496

### Wednesday 13th December

Clubnight, Shortland Wetlands Cntr.  
7.30 PM

Members slide night & Christmas raffle

### Sunday 21st January

Field Outing Bot'cal Gdns/Motto Farm  
Meet : M<sup>C</sup>Donalds, Hexham 6 AM  
Contact : Rosemary Waymark, 751819

### Wednesday 14th February

Clubnight, Shortland Wetlands Cntr.  
7.30 PM

Annual General Meeting

### Sunday 25th February

Field Outing Morisset  
Meet : Coles Carpark, Toronto 6 AM  
or Morisset P.O. 6.20 AM  
Contact : K Imrie 524524