



NEWSLETTER No. 4/90, MAY 1990.

Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc.

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1. NOTES FROM APRIL MEETING:

a) ATTENDANCE: 37. Apologies from Rosemary Waymark, Stan Kon, Eva and Clive Seale.

b) OBSERVATIONS: A flock of 50+ Topknot Pigeons (*Lopholaimus antarcticus*) was seen at West Wallsend and a Scarlet Honeyeater (*Myzomela obscura*) in Tyrell St. in the City. Large numbers of Australian Ravens (*Corvus coronoides*) have been seen throughout the area, flying around in groups and generally drawing attention to themselves. Blue-faced Honeyeaters (*Entomyzon cyanotis*) have been sighted in Rankin Park and our guest speaker for the evening, Fred Van Gessel, reported a Wedge-tailed Eagle (*Aquila audax*) taking a Black Bittern (*Ixobrychus flavicollis*) near Glennies Creek Dam. Fred also saw four different Owls at Gloucester Tops recently, Sooty (*Tyto tenebricosa*), Powerful (*Ninox strenua*), Barking (*N. connivens*) and Boobook (*N. novaeseelandiae*). A question about the migratory habits of the Rufous Fantail (*Rhipidura rufifrons*) led to a general discussion of how little is really known about Australian birds. The general consensus was that this was due to a lack of birdwatchers compared with other countries.

c) BIRD CALL: Jim Perry played us the calls of a Leaden Flycatcher (*Myiagra rubecula*) which has been visiting his place recently, for the first time in about five years. As well as the often heard froglike croaking, Jim played the more musical 'peter peter ...' call of this bird. In the background of his tape could be heard the calling of a Cicadabird (*Coracina tenuirostris*), also reported by Jim as recently arrived after a long absence from his neighbourhood.

d) BIRD OF THE EVENING: White-faced Heron. Graeme O'Connor chose this bird as the subject of his talk this month. The bird's Latin name is *Ardea novaehollandiae*, meaning heron of New Holland. There is a subspecies, *parryi*, after Parry's Creek in NW Australia where it was first collected. Other common names for this bird are Blue Crane, White-fronted Heron and Matuka.

IDENTIFICATION:

This bird is about 66 cm high in Australia and New Zealand and about 58 cm in New Caledonia. The adult is blue/grey with white on the front of the head, chin and around the eye. A patch of pale chestnut or bronze-coloured feathers occur at the base of the neck and upper breast. Plumage ornament the back but do not extend beyond the tail, and are blue/grey in colour. Underparts

are pale grey. From below, the wing feathers have black tips, white/pale centres and a grey base, giving a striped appearance to the underwing. These bars distinguish it from the dark phase of the Eastern Reef Egret (*Egretta sacra*). The bill is normally black but the lower mandible can be pale grey at the base or pale flesh in colour with a yellow tip. The eye varies in colour from grey to greenish yellow. The lores are blue grey to olive yellow. Legs can vary between greenish yellow and a reddish colour. Albinos have been reported. Immature birds are basically the same as adults but lack the bronze on the neck and breast with fewer plumes, their underparts have a brownish tinge.

VOICE:

In flight a croak or grunt is emitted lasting about one second. The alarm call is similar to the flight call but described as a 'wrank' emitted numerous times. At the nest during changeover and other times the call is described as a low 'gow gow gow'.

DISTRIBUTION:

These birds occur throughout Australia but fewer sightings are made in extreme inland areas. Tasmania, New Zealand and offshore islands have also been populated. Around the coastline and at altitudes up to 200m, these birds are seen foraging in swamps, mangroves, along the margins of streams, rivers, ponds on mudflats and rocky shores, be they fresh or salt water. Inland, they are less common because of a lack of water and of tall trees needed during the breeding season. Migration does occur to warmer climates during the colder months, but mostly the birds tend to be resident all year round.

FLIGHT:

This is laboured, with the average wingbeat being one per second. It is described as leisurely and irregular. The neck is usually tucked in but not as much as for other herons and egrets. When courting or bringing nesting material, the neck is usually extended.

BREEDING:

This usually begins in August but may start earlier in some areas. A platform of sticks about 40cm in diameter and around 9cm thick, is built in a fork or on a branch of a tall tree well away from water. Clutch size varies from two to six but is most commonly four or five blue grey to white eggs, taking between 24 and 26 days to incubate, with a further 40 days to fledging. Both parents share the nest duties and feeding of the chicks. Changeover at the nest is carried out with much bill snapping, calling and mutual preening. Chicks are fed about six times a day in the beginning tapering off in the night and morning as they are about to leave the nest. Feeding is done by regurgitation. When chicks are alarmed they adopt a Bittern-like posture in the nest or on a branch.

FOOD:

White-faced Herons feed by foraging. They stand, stalk, walk, stir and run after prey, often with wings extended. They can often be seen following Ibis when they feed. Feeding is during daylight hours and is often abandoned during strong winds and cold weather, especially during winter months. During Autumn and Winter feeding is exclusively terrestrial. Prey includes insects, crustaceans, worms, snails and frogs taken from a vigorously defended territory.

e) ANNOUNCEMENTS: On the fourth of April, our President, Peter McLauchlan, appeared on NBN 3 television as part of their morning chat show. Although 10AM is not exactly prime time, the club did receive one telephone call as a result of the publicity gained. It is hoped that at least some viewers gained an increased awareness of birds and their importance in the environment from the show.

Following the successful campaign to raise funds for feral cat control in National Parks, the National Parks and Wildlife Foundation has

launched a similar campaign to help the Malleefowl (*Leipoa ocellata*). Numbers in NSW are estimated to be down to 750 pairs and experts fear the bird is threatened with imminent extinction. Main threats to the continuance of this remarkable bird are believed to come from feral foxes, although lack of food for newly hatched chicks is also a problem in some areas. If you haven't seen a Malleefowl yet, but would like to, then you can raise the probability of a sighting by making sure there are still some left to see. Send donations to the Foundation at GPO Box 2666, Sydney 2001. Donors of \$100 or more receive a free scarf or tie (state your choice).

f) MAIN FEATURE: - Fred Van Gessel. The Galapagos Islands.

In January of this year, Fred realised a lifetime dream when he joined a group of eighteen on a visit to the Galapagos Islands, arranged by the University of Newcastle Biology Dept. The Galapagos is an archipelago about 900 km off the west coast of Ecuador. The islands are of volcanic origin and form an arc of about 200km in length. The group is made up of six main islands, twelve smaller ones and about 40 islets. Human population is limited to about 6,000 people living on two or three of the main islands, on which some agriculture is practised. Whilst these people may travel freely in the area, tourism is strictly controlled by the Darwin Trust, set up to administer the archipelago with initial funding supplied by a German biologist about 15 years ago. The Trust's name honours that of Charles Darwin whose theory of evolution was largely sparked by a visit to the Galapagos' in the Beagle. Funds for the Trust are now mostly derived by charging each of 40,000 tourists a year a \$40 fee to visit. Each group has to be accompanied by an official guide whose expenses and salary must be paid. When on the islands, all tourists must stick to defined tracks and are limited to short stays (hours) on any island in one day. After filling us in on the above details, Fred showed us some slides of the islands, illustrating the general terrain and the vegetation types present. These included shots of volcanic craters, both live and dormant, and barren lava flows as well as some of the indigenous cactii. He then moved on to display slides of some more mobile lifeforms, including various iguanas, lava lizards and the famous Galapagos tortoises.

This was followed by some good shots of more interesting (for birdwatchers) things like Darwins Finches (Fred said that although the taxonomists at present list thirteen species, and some people claim to be able to distinguish up to 24 varieties, he only recognised four). Apparently hybridisation of these species has been recently proven and this somewhat clouds the issue of just how many different ones there are. These birds (not actually true finches at all) were instrumental in clarifying Darwin's thoughts on the origins of species, he maintaining that they developed from a single species by divergent evolution after isolation on the many islands. The major identifying feature of these birds is their bill which varies in size or shape as a result of adaptation to different foods.

Fred then showed us some of his photographs of other land birds such as the Yellow Warbler and some birds of prey before moving on to the seabirds for which the Galapagos is famous. These included at least three species of Booby, some Frigatebirds, Storm-Petrels, Brown Pelicans, Laughing Gulls and, yes, a Duck. One interesting bird was the Galapagos Cormorant, which, although flightless, still hangs its wings out to dry in the sun like other Cormorants. During his presentation, Fred also played us the calls of some of the birds whose pictures were on the screen. From his enthusiasm, it was clear that the Galapagos Islands lived up to the expectations that Fred had of them and we thank him for sharing with us his impressions of this very biologically interesting part of our world.

2. NEW MEMBERS: Two new members in Ian and Marta Hamilton joined us at the last meeting; we welcome them both to the Club.

OUTING TO SWAN BAY, PORT STEPHENS...Sunday, 22nd April, 1990

With an early start at 7 am from Hexham, we were into bush land soon after leaving the Pacific Highway. Many passerines were seen and two found the elusive Chestnut-rumped Heathwren.

Most time was spent at the waterfront on the western edge of Port Stephens. We walked along one to two kilometres of shoreline and while it was wet underfoot, the perfect weather after the rain and the numerous birds made for a rewarding morning. Eight wader species were seen. Among these were large numbers of Grey-tailed Tattlers, Eastern Curlews, Turnstones, Red-capped Dotterels and ten Double-banded Dotterels (none in breeding plumage). In the samphire areas were White-fronted Chats and Woodswallows, Dusky and White-breasted. In the Casuarina vegetation were a Spangled Drongo, Striped Honeyeaters and Red Wattlebirds. A young Grey Shrike-thrush was trapped inside a gazebo-type tent with holes in its walls. It was encouraged to leave by one of the openings.

We investigated both the old wader roosting area and in the vicinity of the Mullwee Public School but found little. Two Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos flew over the school at lunchtime. After that, we called it a day. Remarkably, only four species of Parrots were observed. However, it was a successful day with 75 species observed by the 7 members attending the outing.

Jim Imrie

4. COMING EVENTS

Wednesday 9th May

Clubnight, Shortland Wetlands Cntr.
7.30 PM

A speaker from the Native Animal Trust Fund will talk about the rehabilitation of injured wildlife

Sunday 20th May

Field Outing Mulbring area
Meet: Freemans Waterholes Service
Station, near roundabout. 7AM
Contact: Jim Perry 432496

Queen's B'day Weekend
(June 9/10/11)

Camp, Munghorn Gap Nature Reserve
Contact: Graeme O'Connor 531304

Wednesday 13th June

Clubnight, Shortland Wetlands Cntr.
7.30 PM

'Birds of Cape York' with Peter M^CLauchlan and Duck Study Part II

Sunday 24th June

Field Outing Wetlands Day
Meet: Shortland Wetlands, 8AM
Contact: Kay Imrie 524524

Wednesday 11th July

Clubnight, Shortland Wetlands Cntr.
7.30 PM

Sunday 22nd July

Field Outing Australian Museum,
Sydney
Meet: Museum Foyer, 10AM
Contact: Peter M^CLauchlan 333224
BOOKINGS ESSENTIAL

BIRDS OF FRASER ISLAND

with Fred Van Gessel

Fraser Island, the world's largest sand island, hugs the Queensland coast just south of the Tropic of Capricorn. It is part of the Great Sandy Region, the world's greatest coastal sand deposit.

For anyone who has not been to Fraser Island, you have a treat in store or for those who are re-visiting, a different view through the eyes of an expert 'birdo', Fred Van Gessel and Paul Rixon who regularly takes tours to this unique island.

Fred compiled an extensive bird list on his last visit to Fraser Island and we can use this as a basis for the trip. You do not have to be an experienced bird watcher to enjoy this tour. The environment will be a very prominent feature as will relaxation and learning from the things we see. We have kept the cost down as much as possible by using 'lodge style' accommodation which may be twin/share or 3 to a room where suitable. This is however, totally in keeping with the style of tour we are offering and very pleasant. We may need to buy 3 dinners and lunches, all meals on the island are provided.

Accommodation at: Tenterfield
Rainbow Beach
Dilli Village (on Fraser)
Mt Warning Lodge



Travel is with Paul Rixon: aboard an airconditioned 4-wheel drive vehicle designed for off-road driving and comfort so that when we get to Fraser Island we have a suitable vehicle for exploring.

What to bring:

All you need is two or three changes of casual clothing, suitable walking shoes a jacket/pullover, hat, torch, towel, toilet requisites, insect repellent, camera, binoculars and field guide if you have one. Keep your travel bag as small as possible as luggage is carried in a roof locker.

Departure from: Newcastle WEA at 6.30am on Saturday 4 August

Returning to: Newcastle WEA at approx. 9.00pm on Sunday 12 August
Please make appropriate arrangements to get to your own home.

Cost:

The all inclusive cost (excluding some meals en-route) is \$999.

Balance must be paid 28 days before your departure date.

A cancellation fee will apply as WEA pays your booking fee when you enrol.

Travel Insurance: is advisable, see separate travel insurance brochure issued with your receipt.

ENROLMENT FORM

BIRDS OF FRASER ISLAND
CODE 003.BF

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

PHONE (H) _____ (W) _____

I enclose \$ _____ (\$150 deposit or \$999 full fees for each person)

Cheques, money orders etc. made payable to WEA

Please charge my BANKCARD/MASTERCARD/VISA CARD account no:-

WEA



Phone enquires: 049/264066 Newcastle or 043/622304 Central Coast

RETURN TO WEA, P.O. BOX 5170B, NEWCASTLE WEST. 2302 OR
63 UNION STREET, NEWCASTLE WEST. 2302