



NEWSLETTER No. 6/90, JULY 1990.

## Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc.

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### 1. NOTES FROM JUNE MEETING:

a) ATTENDANCE: 34. Apologies from Charlie Mann

b) OBSERVATIONS: An Australian Hobby (*Falco longipennis*) was seen to take a bat in the early evening near Toronto Wetlands, and another took a Spotted Turtledove (*Streptopelia chinensis*). A Comb-crested Jacana (*Irediparra gallinacea*) was seen on the ribbon swamp at Shortland Wetlands. A party of eight Pacific Baza (*Aviceda subcristata*) have been flying around Floraville. Warners Bay has been the source of many sightings this month, including Figbirds (*Sphecotheres viridis*), Rainbow Lorikeets (*Trichoglossus haemotodus*) and Caspian Terns (*Hydroprogne caspia*). A Striped Honeyeater (*Plectorhyncha lanceolata*) was reported from Waratah Golf Club. It seems many people now have a resident Rose Robin (*Petroica rosea*) in their garden with reports coming from Elernmore Vale, Cooranbong, Rankin Park and Kotara. An Australian Kestrel (*Falco cenchroides*) was seen harassing Common Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) and House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) at the Junction. Currently, as many as fifteen Great Crested Grebes (*Podiceps cristatus*), many in breeding plumage and one pair with a downy chick can be found at the Walka Water Works near Maitland.

c) BIRD OF THE EVENING: Jack Flanagan delivered this month's talk on the Apostlebird (*Struthidea cinerea*), one of the social birds belonging to the Australian mudnester family Corcoracidae, which includes their close relative the White-winged Chough (*Corcorax melanorhamphos*). These communal birds go by the common names of Happy Jack, Lousy Jack, Happy Family and Twelve Apostles. Like the Choughs, they lead a very complex, communal style of life.

These are moderately large birds, measuring around 285mm in length and sometimes more. They are generally an ashy grey colour with brown flight feathers and a black tail. They sport a large, robust, almost Finch-like bill adapted to seed eating. They live in groups of from six or ten up to twenty at times. They are garrulous, restless and aggressive and work in groups, walking, hopping and running around on the ground. When disturbed they fly low to cover with wing beats broken by lengthy glides. In flight their wingtips are turned up. In trees they hop from limb to limb and over branches emitting harsh calls all the while, in the manner of White-browed Babblers (*Pomatostomus superciliosus*). A breeding family consists of a dominant male and

several mature females along with immatures who involve themselves in all aspects of nest building and looking after the young. In these activities the immatures show a lack of experience which often raises the ire of the adults who will scold them frequently.

Their diet consists of grubs, beetles, seeds, herbs and even frogs. They have several calls, which have been described as 'CH-KEW CH-KEW', 'CREECHEW CREECHEW' and in alarm a rasping 'GITOUT'. Jack played some of the calls on tape and gave a creditable imitation of some of the others.

Apostlebirds can be found in semi-arid regions from about the Southern part of Cape York peninsula down through inland NSW and across into South Australia around Adelaide. They rarely venture West of the Queensland and NSW borders with the Northern Territory and South Australia. They are found in scrubland and woodland, often in Cypress, Myall and Brigalow regions, always somewhere near water and, with the clearing of much of their habitat for crops and pasture are increasingly reliant on roadside remnants of the original native vegetation for their survival.

These birds produce two broods a year from eggs laid by several of the adult females in the group. Because of space restrictions in the nest only four of the chicks survive. Incubation takes 18 days with a similar time needed before fledging takes place. The nest is a large mud bowl, lined with grasses and situated on a horizontal limb anywhere from 3 to 20 metres above the ground. All members of the group share in the nest building, incubation, brooding, feeding young and removal of droppings.

Neighbouring groups keep a close eye on the activities of each other and move on to better feeding grounds when they see their neighbours doing likewise. Apostlebirds can be seen taking dust baths at the roadside and are often found around human habitation, becoming tame enough to feed with the chooks. These habits make them tempting prey for farm and feral cats but their alertness and the extra pairs of eyes involved in communal living help them to survive.

Although delivered in his usual entertaining, raconteurial style, Jack's talk finished on a serious note with the warning that cats are one of the biggest dangers to Australian native fauna and although admitting his view might seem a bit extreme to some, suggested that cats will have to be eliminated from this country if we are to ensure the future survival of our remaining birds and animals.

d) DUCK STUDY PART II: This month saw a continuation of the programme on learning how to identify our native ducks, begun at the March meeting. This month three more species were studied, these being the Wood Duck (*Chenonetta jubata*), Mountain Duck or Australian Shelduck (*Tadorna tadornoides*) and the Plumed Whistling-Duck (*Dendrocygna eytoni*). Once again Kay conducted proceedings with Ed explaining the scientific name and its meaning and Sue playing the calls for us. Clues for identification were gained from a very well prepared video pointing out all the salient features of each species, interspersed with tantalisingly short glimpses of the third State of Origin Rugby League game (we wuz robbed!)

e) BIRDS OF CAPE YORK: Peter M<sup>C</sup>Lauchlan gave us a short presentation on his recent trip to the Cape for a Bird Week. After a brief introduction extolling the virtues of this organised event, which is run from the Cape York Wilderness Lodge every year, in early

January, Peter proceeded to show us some slides of the birds he and Margaret, along with the other twenty four participants, saw during the week. These slides were borrowed from the Bird Observers Club of Australia, based in Melbourne, and included some magnificent shots of such sought after species as the Red-necked Crake (*Rallina tricolor*), Orange-footed Scrubfowl (*Megapodius reinwardt*), Palm Cockatoo (*Probosciger aterrimus*) and most of the Kingfishers (*Alcedinidae*). A group photo of Lesser-crested Terns (*Sterna bengalensis*) with their bright orange beaks and punk hairdos elicited an audible response from the audience and some discussion centred on the nesting habits of the Grey Shrike-thrush (*Colluricincla harmonica*). The slide of this bird showed it at a mud nest, probably that of an Australian Magpie-lark (*Grallina cyanoleuca*). The Grey Shrike-thrush, however, builds its nest of coarse bark and dry leaves, but, as one was seen sitting on a mud nest at Pokolbin recently, it is possible that this species occasionally utilises the Magpie-lark's nest instead of building its own. Further research may throw more light on this subject. Peter continued his presentation, later showing a slide of the bird which impressed him most during the week. This was the Fawn-breasted Bowerbird, whose bower decorating activities Peter was privileged to have witnessed for two mornings. Peter also played the call of this bird.

I'm sure many of us have promised ourselves a trip to Cape York 'oneday'; perhaps Peter's presentation and glowing references will hasten this day for some of us.

## 2. QUEEN'S BIRTHDAY WEEKEND CAMP - MUNGHORN GAP

Despite gloomy weather forecasts for the long weekend, we kept an optimistic frame of mind and were well rewarded with perfect camping weather for the whole weekend. Bright sunny days, coolish nights (no frost) together with an ideal camping area at the back of the area marked by the 'Old Pepper Tree' in Munghorn Gap Nature Reserve. This area is surrounded by quite steep rocky hills - at the bottom, flat areas of old grazing paddocks, creek courses and clumps or strips of trees; such a variety of terrain and vegetation. No wonder the birds are so abundant, the club managed to sight ninety or so species over the weekend.

We arrived at lunchtime on Saturday and most of the others, 16 adults and two children, were already there, having arrived the day before or early that morning. Many had been out composing long lists of birds spotted. These were checked off that night around the fire, by the warmth of the moon. The next night's fire was much warmer, thankfully. We sat there despairing at our small personal count whilst whilst Lyrebirds were talked of, Hooded Robins, Turquoise Parrots and so on... Then it was off to an early bed (as usual on these camps, up at bird squeak the next morning, no sparrows!)

We walked our legs off, up and down rocks, slopes, across paddocks and so many birds to see. Rock Warblers, Rose Robins, Spotted Pardalotes (very numerous), Eastern Spinebills hopped around the rocky outcrops, they came to us, if only we had had our deck chairs up there. Down on the flatter areas, among flowering gums, Yellow-tufted Honeyeaters, Yellow-faced, Lewin's and White-plumed Honeyeaters took no notice of us. Hooded Robins, Tree Martins, Brown Treecreepers, Diamond Firetails, more Spotted Pardalotes - just to mention a few. On the grassy areas were Jacky Winters galore, Richard's Pipits, Wrens (both Superb and Variegated), Double-barred Finches and some (to us) unidentified Quail.

Although we didn't see the nest-sitting Superb Lyrebird or the Turquoise Parrots we enjoyed hearing about them. I feel we have something to look forward to next time - it was not our final camp there and I'm sure we will return. Last club camp here managed to list 100 species, perhaps seasonal changes accounted for our count being a little down this time, but what we did see were in good numbers. At the second night's bird call we felt much more at home, knowing we were not as blind as we had thought. The fire was terrific, James and Graeme displaying the pyromaniacal tendencies.

Our last morning was spent having a quick look for the Lyrebird on the nest but no luck, however, the nest was very interesting - made of a huge number of sticks, bark, bits of fern, twigs and leaves, all shoved into a large hole in a huge boulder about a metre or so above ground level.

Packing up, as usual, seemed to be done by others so much quicker - Jack Flanagan managing to do some painting while he packed! The trip back to Newcastle saw the weather change to black clouds and some showers, what luck to get in such a beaut weekend in fine weather, we certainly enjoyed ourselves- thanks to the others for the nice company and to Graeme and James for the directions and the fires.

Doug and Fay Thomson.

### 3. JUNE 24 OUTING - WETLANDS DAY

An easy 8am start and a sunny day (pity about the wind chill factor!) saw an eager group of 18 bird watchers gathered at the Wetlands Centre - or was it Kakadu? It was hard to tell the difference with all those Magpie Geese flying about! Stories of recently seen Jacanas and Jabirus only added to the confusion.

The Centre's grounds are becoming magnificent, and we are lucky to have such an asset at our doorstep. A stroll around produced 57 species, including Striped Honeyeaters and a Leaden Flycatcher. All ponds were checked carefully for the elusive jacana, but without success. Then it was across the road to the Newcastle Wetlands Reserve. This area is less than attractive right now, what with the road works that are going on and the severe water hyacinth infestation in several of the ponds. Nevertheless, more good birds were found, most notably a flock of 100+ Wandering Whistle-ducks.

Next, it was off to the Beresfield/Woodberry and then Cedar Hill Drive (Minmi) swamps. Large numbers of Welcome Swallows were seen at both areas, and also many Pied Stilts at Beresfield. A lunch stop at the Crematorium yielded a White-throated Warbler, calling intermittently.

A total of 77 species were seen in what was a very pleasant day. No signs of a Jacana or a Jabiru anywhere - so, we weren't at Kakadu after all. ....Alan Stuart

#### 4. COMING EVENTS

Sunday 22nd July

Field Outing Australian Museum, Sydney  
Meet: Museum Foyer , 10AM  
Contact: Peter M<sup>C</sup>Lauchlan 333224  
BOOKINGS ESSENTIAL

Wednesday 8th August

Clubnight: Shortland Wetlands Cntr. 7.30 PM  
Wilderness Survival Exercise

18th/19th August

WEEKEND CAMP Gloucester Tops, Sharpe's Creek. One night camp, to allow an early start to find the Rufous Scrub-bird  
Contact: Jeanette Stephenson, 575255

Wednesday 12th September

Clubnight: Shortland Wetlands Cntr. 7.30 PM

Sunday 23rd September

Field Outing Kincumber/Lisarow  
Meet: Charlestown library carpark 6.00 AM  
OR Ourimbah (4 Seasons nursery) 6.45  
Contact: Jim Perry, 432496

#### HUNTER REGION SPRING BIRDATHON

Entries are now open for the inaugural HBOC Hunter Region Spring Birdathon, which is to be held over the weekend of October 27-28, during Bird Week.

The Birdathon is to be a team competition (3 or 4 people per team) to see how many different species can be seen within the Hunter region during a 24 hour period from 3 pm on Saturday October 27 until 3 pm on the Sunday. Teams plan their own itineraries and may start from anywhere within the region, but must be at the finish point on time to qualify.

Full rules and a definition of the Hunter region will be outlined to entrants, but essentially a bird counts for the team only if the majority of team members see or hear it. The team seeing the most species will be the winner, with the number of species heard being used to separate teams in the event of a tie. On a countback, the team with the most interesting bird list, as decided by the organisers, will be the winner.

The entrance fee for the competition is \$5 per person. Entries can be as a entire team, or as individuals or groups of 2 or 3 people; the HBOC will allocate teams from such entries. The competition is open only to HBOC members; membership is an additional \$10 fee (family membership \$12).

Small prizes will be awarded to the members of the winning team, which will be announced shortly after 3pm on the Sunday. Participants and their family and friends and any other HBOC members are invited to attend the Birdathon post-mortem (tea, coffee, light refreshments, BYOG) immediately following the announcement of the winning team. The cost of this is \$5 per person; bookings are essential.

The main purpose of the Birdathon is to have some fun, but it will also provide an instant snapshot of the birds of the region on that weekend. For that reason, we encourage you to enter even if you don't consider yourself the greatest of bird finders: the more participants, the greater will be the coverage and hence the value of the survey.

Further details and application forms are available from Alan Stuart (Ph 52.8569) and Peter Phillips (Ph 51.6223). The closing date for applications is Wednesday October 10.

1990 HUNTER REGION SPRING BIRDATHON

I/We\* wish to enter the 1990 Hunter Bird Observer's Club Birdathon which is to be held from 3pm Saturday October 27 until 3pm Sunday October 28. I/We\* undertake to compete under the rules as defined by the organisers, and accept that their decision in any matter relating to the Birdathon is final. I/We\* are members of the Hunter Bird Observer's Club Inc.

Name (please print)	Address	Telephone	Signature
.....	.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....	.....

Team Entry?                      Yes/No\*

The winning team will be announced at around 3.15pm. Participants and their friends & family are invited to stay for the Birdathon post-mortem (tea, coffee, light refreshments; BYOG) immediately following the announcement of the winning team.

	Cost per person	Total Fee
Number of Entrants: .....	\$5	.....
No. attending post-mortem .....	\$5	.....
Total enclosed: \$.....		

\*Delete that which does not apply

ENTRY FORMS ACCOMPANIED BY THE CORRECT FEES CAN BE DELIVERED TO THE TREASURER OR POSTED TO: HBOC BIRDATHON, P.O. BOX 24, NEW LAMBTON, NSW 2305 AND MUST BE RECEIVED BY OCTOBER 10.