



NEWSLETTER No. 8/90, SEPTEMBER 1990.

## Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc.

President: Peter M<sup>C</sup>Lauchlan  
Secretary: Peter Phillips  
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 AUGUST MEETING:

a) ATTENDANCE: 28. Apologies from Margaret M<sup>C</sup>Lauchlan, Marta Hamilton, James O'Connor, Barbara Kelly, Judy Smith, Ray Kembury, the Imries and the Beans.

b) OBSERVATIONS: Another ringed Pied Currawong has been reported, probably again one banded at Springwood. White-cheeked Honeyeaters were seen in the City, a flock of ten Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos at Edgeworth, Regent Bowerbirds at Garden Suburb, and a Sooty Oystercatcher on the rocks near Newcastle Baths. Pied Oystercatchers were reported from Coon Island, Pacific Baza again from the University and New Lambton Heights, a Spangled Drongo from New Lambton Heights and a pair of White-faced Herons nesting in the University grounds. A white phase Grey Goshawk with grey wings was seen at Windale and another of this species at Mt. Vincent. Crimson Rosellas have been turning up in unusual places throughout the suburbs, from Mayfield to the Lake. An unusual King Parrot with yellow feathering on the mantle and wings has been seen in the area, a Port Lincoln Parrot (aviary escapee) at Rankin Park, Tawny Frogmouths in a Jacaranda at New Lambton and two Jabiru over Alder Park. Also noted was a newspaper report of a Barn Owl near the Heritage Mall.

c) BIRD CALL: Alan Stuart played the call of a bird which inhabits coastal heath in our region; a good place to see it is the Awabakal Nature Reserve near Dudley-Redhead. As Alan explained before playing the call, this bird sounds much like a warbler, with a very musical whistling song. Sue Hamonet, among others, correctly identified the Tawny-crowned Honeyeater.

d) BIRD OF THE EVENING: Mathew Stephenson chose for his subject the handsome Sooty Tern (*Sterna fuscata*). His notes are reproduced here in full.

In the 19th century, Sooty Terns were known only to sailors, fishermen and adventurous ornithologists, who visited remote islands in tropical seas, where the birds nest and live in huge colonies. John James Audubon described one such colony in the Dry Tortugas off the Florida coast in 1840. Today, Sooty Terns are familiar to thousands of Australians who spend their holidays on tourist resorts such as Heron Island, Lord Howe and Norfolk Islands.

A visit to a colony of Sooty Terns never fails to impress even the most experienced of birdwatchers. The sheer number of the birds and the clamour of their calls is deafening. Audubon wrote "On landing, I felt for a moment as if the birds would raise me from the ground, so thick were they all around and so quick the motion of their wings". He also described the vast mass they formed to attack the intruder "like a huge wave on the beach". Today, Sooty Terns have become remarkably tame, and barely notice the human visitor, industrial activity or building operations.

The Sooty Tern is an oceanic species, widespread in the seas of the Torrid Zone throughout the world. If unmolested, nesting colonies can be colossal, and reports of up to sixty thousand pairs have come in some years from the Dry Tortugas. One small island, Johnston Atoll, some 11,000 kilometres south-west of Honolulu, has up to 300,000 Sooty Terns as well as many other seabirds. (Johnston Atoll is the site of a proposed chemical weapon destruction facility for the U.S. . .ed). Colonies in Australia are much smaller, but the birds nest in their thousands on the Abrolhos Group of islands off the coast of W.A., and in considerable numbers on some small islands in the Great Barrier Reef. The species is essentially confined to the north-east and north-west coasts of the continent, and few Sooty Terns are recorded off the southern States. Birds found in the south have mostly been beachwashed or isolated groups blown ashore by heavy winds.

The breeding behaviour and movements of the Sooty Tern are remarkable and mysterious. Birds begin to visit their breeding colony at night for up to two months before laying commences. There is much evidence to suggest that Sooty Terns are partly nocturnal and often fish at night. In most cases, the breeding ground is shared with Common Noddies, without friction, because the Noddies make their nest, mainly consisting of a single egg, on the top of small bushes, or in trees, whereas the Sooty tern nests on the ground. Usually, only one egg is laid and this takes up to 28 days to hatch.

The young chicks mature slowly, and are fed by their parents for some time after they have fledged, possibly even after the young birds have left the nesting colony for the open sea. It is thought that this is done so that the immatures can acquire the special skills needed for feeding. Sooty Terns do not breed until they are at least four years old, and usually, not until they are eight. Some don't breed until they are ten years of age. This is quite appropriate, as the majority of Sooty Terns live till at least twenty, and specimens have been reported to live up to 35 years of age.

Where Sooty Terns go after breeding is not fully understood, but they probably disperse throughout the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Flocks, often calling loudly "wide-awake, wide-awake" are often encountered far from land in tropical waters, where they are either disturbed by passing ships or attracted by the ship's lights. Tireless flyers, they may spend months on the open sea.

Even their feeding habits are slightly mysterious. For the most part, they feed by skimming the surface of the sea for plankton, small fish or crustaceans, but they have also been seen to dive for fish in the typical tern-like fashion.



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For the record: their other names are Egg Bird or Wide-Awake. They measure ~ 460 mm in length, with a wingspan of ~ 900 mm; their tail is ~ 186 mm long and their bill ~ 40 mm. They have a tarsus of ~ 23 mm and a weight around 200 grams. On average, the female is slightly smaller than the male.

Description: Adult - Crown, ear coverts and lores black, forehead, chin, underparts and underwing white. Upperwing, rump and tail black. Legs and bill black, iris brown. No seasonal variation and sexes are similar. Immature - Similar to adult, but dusky below. Juvenile - Mainly sooty brown, upperwing speckled white, undertail white.

Identification: Unmistakeable, except for possible confusion with Bridled Tern, which has distinctly paler, browner upperparts and a white forehead extending as a line through eye.

Voice: Strongly vocal, calls include "ker wacki-wak" (over breeding colonies), a croaking "kraak" or whinnying "kreeaa". Habitat Exclusively pelagic, breeds on oceanic islands. Food mainly squid, fish and crustaceans. Habits Migratory and dispersive. Gregarious in all activity, often found in flocks of thousands, but foraging birds often disperse widely and are frequently encountered alone at sea. Breeding colonies spectacular. Foraging nocturnal or diurnal, swoops to snatch prey from surface. Often associates with Noddies. Almost exclusively aerial, rarely setting on land or water. Flight smooth, direct and effortless. Distribution Widespread in tropical and subtropical seas. In Australia, found mainly off the northern coastline south to about Woolgoolga in the east and Geraldton in the west. Mainly found in islands of the Great Barrier Reef or Abrolhos Group.

e) MAIN FEATURE: Wilderness Survival Exercise. Peter Phillips conducted this activity, in which members were supplied with a sheet of twelve survival related questions. After supplying their personal answers, the members were then arranged, in groups of about half a dozen, for discussion, before coming up with a group answer for each question. These discussions turned out to be quite lively but remained convivial. At the completion of this phase, Peter supplied the 'correct' answers, as proposed by the originators of the questions, a group of American bushwalkers. These lead to more lively discussion, especially as no reasons were supplied with the answers! Alas, some of the questions were not appropriate for Australian conditions (the likelihood of being confronted by a rearing bear is fairly small in this country) but nevertheless, many of us would have gained some piece of knowledge that may assist us during a future crisis. At the least, it made us think about the problems posed and thus heightened our awareness of bush safety. From my observation, all members gained some enjoyment from the exercise, with many commenting that a similar set of questions, designed more for local conditions, would be a desirable thing to have some time in the future.

Outing to Gloucester Tops. - 18/19 August, 1990.

There can't be too many places more pleasant than Sharpe's Creek to spend a week-end. And with fine weather to spur us on, nine club members made the trip on Saturday, to camp overnight at this delightful spot. One hardly needs to move from the camping ground, here the birds seem to come to look at you. Lyrebirds, Scaly Thrush, Brush Turkey, an abundance of Superb Wrens, and of course, the camp scavengers, the Pied Currawongs, overseeing the disposal of scraps.

A late afternoon walk along the circuit trail along Sharpe's Creek produced a respectable list of birds, but it was also interesting to have a Botanist, in the form of Bill Dowling at whom to direct our enquiries about the plant life along the way. A spotlighting walk after tea produced several mammals, including Brush-tailed and Mountain Brush-tailed Possums, both these species being almost a nuisance underfoot while the tea preparations were underway. Also many Pademelons were found grazing on the grass of the camping area. A long-nosed Potoroo, and one other Wallaby species, a Bandicoot, and a Yellow Robin, all fluffed up for the night, and most unconcerned about the intrusion, and a small species of Bat rounded off the list. All night, with hardly a pause, the Boobook Owl was heard calling not far from the camping site.

At a very early hour on Sunday morning the camp was astir. We left here at 6.30 a.m. on a gloriously clear and crisp morning, to drive to several sites along the road to Gloucester Tops, to attempt to see the Rufous Scrub-bird. A thick frost covered the grass near the camp, and along the way the puddles of water on the road were covered with ice, but most found the cold quite invigorating; it certainly adds something to the beauty of the forest and the bird calls all around us seemed to hang magically in the still morning air. A lesser mortal on the road that morning would certainly have wondered at the sanity of the group of well-rugged individuals, binoculars at the ready, standing seemingly aimlessly at various spots along the road. We heard the calls of the elusive Scrub bird at several locations, and at one spot, after a long and patient wait, some were rewarded with a quick sighting of the quarry. However, what we did do was to learn that this rare avian species appears to be doing quite nicely, and can be heard [if not seen] at quite a number of different spots along the way. Now that we all know the area, the call and the technique, I have no doubt that most of us will be back to have another crack at the Scrub bird, without the distractions always present with a group.

It seemed to me a very pleasant way to spend a morning, and I would like to thank Bill Dowling for his time and effort on our behalf, and serve him with notice that we will be back again. The overall bird list for the week-end amounted to 68 species seen, plus 5 heard, and included some nice sightings, including Red-backed Wrens, Olive Whistler, Crescent Honeyeater, Regent Bowerbird, Azure Kingfisher, Crested Hawk.

Sue Hamonet.