



NEWSLETTER No. 10/90, NOVEMBER 1990.

Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc.

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1. NOTES FROM OCTOBER MEETING:

a) ATTENDANCE: 37. Apologies from Bevan M^CGregor, Rosemary Waymark and James O'Connor.

b) OBSERVATIONS: Black Kite at Speers Point, Antarctic Skua at Seal Rocks, Purple-crowned Pigeon at Jim Perry's place, Noisy Pittas at the Upper Allyn and near The Grandis (tallest tree in NSW) near Myall Lakes, Scarlet Honeyeaters just about everywhere, Red-browed Treecreeper at Barrington House, Brown Bittern on bird camp at Bootawah, Channel-billed Cuckoos throughout the region, Brown Pigeon at Speers Point, 20 Topknot Pigeons at Kotara. Highlight of this month's observations is a report of a pair of Bush Thick-knees which have successfully reared two chicks in the Lemon Tree Passage area.

c) BIRD CALL : Tom Clarke played the taped calls of two birds which can sometimes be difficult to identify by sight in the field. The two have differing calls which can be used to separate one from the other. The birds were the Shining Bronze Cuckoo and the Horsefield's Bronze Cuckoo. The call of the latter bird is a descending trill somewhat reminiscent of a Fan-tailed Cuckoo whilst the former has a sharper call. Care should be taken in using this as a guide, however, as later discussion suggested that all cuckoos sometimes use the descending call.

d) BIRD OF THE EVENING: This month's bird of the evening was the Silvereye (*Zosterops lateralis*), described for us by Ruth Parker. This is one of a minority of native birds that visit Ruth's arden in the City and provide her with a welcome change from parrows and Starlings. Whilst not at all rare, glamorous or even beautifully coloured, this is the first bird call that Ruth hears in the early morning and it gives her a lot of pleasure. The Silvereye is one species of a large monogeneric family of Old World Passerines commonly known as White-eyes, as all but a few aberrant species have a distinctive ring of white feathers around the eye. Pizzey quotes the family as having a world range -- Africa, Asia, parts of Oceania and some sub-Antarctic islands, as well as the Australasian region. Other sources add many islands off Africa and in the Indian Ocean, Indonesia and the

Phillipines. In all there are 79 species, of which Australia has three -- Pale White-eye (*Zosterops citrinella*), Yellow White-eye (*Zosterops lutea*) and the Grey-breasted White-eye or Silvereye. The scientific name comes from the Greek Zoster = belt, ops = face and latus = sided. Neville Cayley's "What Bird is That?" also lists the Western Silvereye and the Pale-bellied Silvereye, now considered subspecies of the Silvereye.

Ruth believes the Silvereye to be the most numerous, commonly seen, widespread bird around most of Australia, New Zealand and all of Tasmania. It is seen in city parks, suburban gardens, urban bushland, farmlands, woods, forests, coastal mangroves, high mountain scrub, edges of rainforests, near beaches and all parts in between.

The whole family of Zosteropidae show remarkable physical similarity. They are all quite small (95 to 120 mm) with slightly decurved, pointed bills with a brush-tipped tongue. Typical plumage colours are dull green to yellow-green upperparts and yellow, grey or white underparts with no prominent pattern, and of course, the white ring around the eye. There is a wide plumage variation in subspecies. The Eastern Australian race (*familiaris*) has a yellow-green head, wings and rump, with some birds being brighter than others, these having slightly rufous or tawny flanks. The northern race is brighter with yellow more evident, and the Tasmanian race has usually, a grey or white throat with yellow near the chin and flanks which vary from deep chestnut to dull chestnut-brown.

Zosterops lateralis, which inhabits Tasmania and the East coast has more common names than you could poke a pair of binoculars at, including Grey-breasted Silvereye, White-eye, Ring-eye, Silvie or Sievie, Blight bird (because of its habit of picking off aphids), Little Grinnel, Rabbit Island White-eye, to name a few.

Characteristically, these birds roam about in small flocks, moving rapidly through bushland and garden, feeding as they go and calling constantly to one another with a soft peeping sound. This is the thing Ruth likes most about Silvereyes, she hears this little sound which sounds so friendly between themselves as they flit from one source of food to another. They also have a sweet, melodious warble, and this fragile thread of song, repeated over and over by one tiny bird perched in her bottlebrush tree is a great delight. It is said they include mimicry in their song but she can't say that she has distinguished this. Ruth played the Silvereye's song for us on the tape player.

Silvereyes are one of the most successful native birds in adapting to Man's intrusion. Part of this success is due to their diverse feeding habits. With their brush-tipped tongues like honeyeaters, they extract nectar from open-flowered shrubs such as bottlebrush and all sorts of cultivated flowers. Their liking for berries and seeds unfortunately makes them spreaders of privet, lantana, bitou bush and other introduced plant pests. They are unpopular in vineyards and orchards because they peck at soft fruit but balance this by providing a useful service in picking off grubs and aphids.

In Spring, Silvereyes disperse to breed, and they can raise two or even three broods in a season. The nest is a small cup made of grasses, rootlets, cobweb or hair, lined with finer material, sometimes animal fur, and is so finely constructed as to be almost transparent. Ruth remembers as a child keeping watch on a Silvereye's nest in her family's mandarine tree. It was slung (the nest, not the tree!) from small twigs on the outer edge of the tree, about a metre from the ground. Two or three pale blue or blue-green eggs were laid and incubation took 12-14 days. The young fledge in 10-12 days and the parents continue to feed them for a few more days after this.

Towards the end of summer, after breeding, Silvereyes congregate in flocks. Some flocks wander widely and others migrate northwards. The books only mention Tasmanian birds migrating but it is possible that birds from around Sydney and Newcastle also do this. Some banded birds from Tasmania have been recaptured in Southern Queensland, a distance of 1500 kilometres. Those from Tasmania and Southern Victoria move mainly along the heathlands, in company with the numerous species of honeyeaters that depend upon these areas for winter food. They seem to migrate along definite routes. Two Silvereyes of the Tasmanian race, a male and a female, were once caught and banded at the same time in a Sydney garden. The same pair were recaptured in the same garden in two of the next three winters, indicating the birds follow the same route year after year. Banding has also revealed that Silvereyes migrate across to Adelaide, and that these sprightly but rather unobtrusive little birds sometimes live to remarkable ages. One was recaptured ten years after it was banded.

When migrating, hundreds of birds gather together in trees, then, with a blizzard of calls, dash into the air on the next stage of their journey. The movements take place mainly at night with flock members softly calling to each other with a high pitched call note to maintain contact. They can be heard passing overhead on a still evening. Ruth noticed this once, on a holiday on the East coast of Tasmania. Ruth related that she finds the Silvereye such a sweet companionable little bird that she is trying to encourage a pair to nest in her garden, so far without success. In the meantime she will enjoy watching and hearing busy groups of them paying their daily visit.

e) FEES : Inflation and costs have been catching up with the Club's finances and it will be necessary to increase membership fees for next year by a so far unspecified amount. This will help to offset increased mailing costs arising from a policy decision which will mean the mailing of Newsletters next year, probably on a bi-monthly basis.

f) OUTINGS AND CAMPS FOR 1991 : The Club is always on the lookout for new birding locations for outings and camps. Anyone who knows of a good spot should suggest it to the Activities Officer soon.

g) NEST BOXES : Peter M^CLauchlan displayed an example of a nest box which he purchased from Australian Geographic for \$48. If you're not a handyperson but want to encourage birds to nest in your garden, you could well make use of one of these.

2. MAIN FEATURE, ANTARCTICA : We had as our guest speaker this month, Damien Gore, a geographer from the University of Newcastle who has recently spent time in the Antarctic. Damien kindly agreed to address us on the birdlife and other aspects of this fascinating continent. Damien spent two periods in Antarctica, one of six months and the other of four.

He spent most of his time whilst there, researching the actions of glaciers, paying particular attention to the retreating edge of one near one of the Australian bases. Damien accompanied his talk with a set of slides, some of which showed aspects of the layout and equipment on the bases, the peculiarities of the Antarctic geography and the adjustments which personnel have to make in order to survive in this somewhat inhospitable landscape. His shots of waves breaking over the bow of the ship on the trip down may have discouraged some from making this trip, but the rest of his presentation left no doubt of his desire to return. He included in his talk, a short video of Snow Petrels, both in flight and at rest, along with still photographs of these incredibly beautiful birds in their nesting ice caves. Also shown were shots of an Adelie Penguin rookery, and a very inquisitive young Emperor Penguin. Shots of Emperor Penguin chicks with their white fluffy down and their black face masks made a comical sight, not so those of South Polar Skuas feeding on the carcasses of Adelie Penguin chicks which had wandered from the creche. Damien related the plight of the Giant Petrels, of which only five breeding pairs remain on a small island near the base. He concluded his presentation with some slides taken in ice caves and crevasses which portrayed some of the ethereal beauty which has fascinated and enticed Man to this part of the world.

3) LYREBIRDS IN SUBURBIA : The following item appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald's 'Column 8' for October 1st, 1990.

"An encouraging sign for our wildlife as suburbia spreads. A reader from the Hornsby area says that lyrebirds are flourishing in the bush near his home. There are now three groups, all of which have the usual tricks of imitating sounds they hear - motor mowers, kookaburras, and a new one, the ten second siren of a car alarm. The resident, who doesn't want the area identified too closely, says they've been around for ten years or more, but never in such numbers. They dig up his backyard searching for insects, he says, but he can tolerate that."

4) FIELD OUTING TO BARRINGTON : SUNDAY 21 OCTOBER.

Twelve members and one visitor were rewarded for the long drive to Barrington by perfect weather, both for walking and for bird watching.

Kay divided us into two groups, one led by Bill Dowling and the other by Kay. On the way to the track through the rainforest, we sighted a Red-browed Treecreeper and a Black-faced Monarch close to the side of the access road to Barrington House. The rainforest did not reveal many birds but it was a delightful walk with bridges crossing the Williams River. After returning to the cars for morning tea, Kay's group followed the Ridge Track which passes through dry sclerophyll forest. We could hear a Whipbird close to the path and suddenly, there it was, with tail quivering showing the white tips of the tail feathers. It was my first sighting of a Whipbird and that alone made the early rise worthwhile. Further along the track a scuttling through the leaves was followed by an enormous Goanna (estimated length 1.7m) climbing a nearby tree. It froze with neck outstretched and could barely be distinguished from the trunk. We all enjoyed a rest and lunch near the cars, after which a group of 7 set off along the main track again. This time we were rewarded with an excellent view of a Golden Whistler, a bird which we had been hearing all day. Also seen were several Yellow-throated Scrubwrens, with nests hanging near the path.

Except for a Green Catbird and a Cicadabird, both groups saw and heard the same species. A total of fifty species were seen and a further 5 heard. Among those heard was a Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo.

Thank you Kay for being a patient group leader and I hope that on our next outing I will still be able to distinguish between a Brown Warbler and a Brown Thornbill! Barbara Kelly

5) BIRDATHON RESULTS

The inaugural Hunter Region Birdathon was a great success, with participating teams recording a grand total of 211 species for the period. The Birdathon was a competition in which 5 teams of birdwatchers competed to see who could record the most species in a 24 hour period. The winning team of Irene and Paul Osborn, Jim Perry and Alan Stuart spotted 163 species and heard a further ten. Apart from the fun of the competition, the Birdathon provided a snapshot of what birds were to be found in the Hunter on the particular day and the data gathered will form an important part of the Club's records. A post mortem was held after the event and all present thoroughly enjoyed a convivial barbecue on the Stuart's back lawn. Thanks to all who helped with the food preparation and a special vote of thanks to Margaret for all the hard work she put in to this part of the proceedings. There will be an official presentation of trophies at the December Club meeting. It is hoped that the Birdathon will be an annual event, so start planning for next year.

6. NIGHT PARROT REDISCOVERED.

An Australian Museum ornithologist, Mr Walter Bowles, has found a dead Night Parrot at the side of the road near Boulia in south-western Queensland. The last definite record of a Night Parrot was in 1912 when a specimen was collected at Nichol Spring in Western Australia. The discovery of this specimen showed auspicious timing as Dick Smith's Australian Geographic had recently posted a \$50,000 reward for conclusive evidence that this parrot still existed. It also came along just in time to give some extra publicity for Bird Week.

7. COMING EVENTS

Monday 25th November

Field Outing: Anna Bay / Bob's Farm
Meet: Information Sign Kooragang Is. 6 AM
Contact: Kay Imrie 524524

Sunday 9th December

Field Outing: Kooragang Island
Meet: Information Sign Kooragang 11:30 AM
Contact: Kay Imrie 524524

Wednesday 12th December

Clubnight: Shortland Wetlands Cntr. 7.30 PM

Sunday 20th January

Field Outing: Swansea/Belmont
Meet: Coles Carpark, Belmont, 6.30 AM
Contact: Sue Hamonet 581023

Sunday 24th February

Field Outing: Brunkerville
Meet: Freemans Waterholes Garage, 7AM
Contact: Ruth Parker 295569

NAME.....

YEAR.....

ROOM.....

WORD LIST

EMU
 ALULA
 GLAREOLIDAE
 ATRICHORNITHIDAE
 SUPERCILIARY
 GREBE
 PETREL
 PINKEAREDDUCK
 PHOENICOPTERIDAE
 CHUKAR
 REE
 REEVE
 PIGEON
 BLACKBIRD
 FLYCATCHER
 VARIEGATEDFAIRYWREN
 NOISYFRIARBIRD
 HONEYEATERS
 WOODSWALLOW
 CROW
 RAVEN

B O R A W Y B Y Y W H U U I J N N F X Z T P F T O W Q E A A V O G S M P W Y Z
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