

NEWSLETTER □

Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc.

P.O. Box 24, New Lambton, N.S.W. 2305

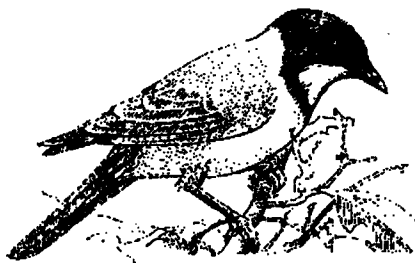
Telephone: (02) 4958 5942

<http://users.hunterlink.net.au/hboc/home.htm>

President: Liz Crawford

Secretary: Tom Clarke

Newsletter Editor: Peter Phillips



The aims of the Club are:

- *To encourage and further the study and conservation of Australian birds and their habitat*
- *To encourage bird observing as a leisure time activity*

The Birds Still Sang

(inspired by and a tribute to those poor fools that attended the field outing
Stanhope Creek – 23rd February 2003)

I think the drought has broken, at least at Stanhope Creek.
It never once stopped raining when we went there last week
Despite the weather forecast we persisted (like the rain)
The HBOC determined to go birding just the same.
Never mind the fogged-up binos or the soggy hat that leaks,
The birds still sang and foraged in the rain at Stanhope Creek.

Now there was a raging torrent racing down through Stanhope Creek
But we just had to go there and have a stickybeak.
So we suffered some discomfort but very little pain
As we observed our feathered friends and then observed again
The obvious of course, and others, that responded to a "squeak"
A sample of the treasures that live at Stanhope Creek

The bird call wasn't that crash hot last week at Stanhope Creek.
But it was agreed that we had seen a tantalizing peek.
My friends and fellow birdos we are not yet insane,
And when it clears, I'll go my dears to Stanhope Creek again
With dry binocs and boots and sox, once more then I will seek
The gems and all the treasures that thrive up Stanhope Creek.

Tom Clarke.

Following a "comprehensive review of issues, plans and studies", a new Concept Proposal for Newcastle Port Environs has been released by Planning NSW. This broad-brush proposal is now open for public comment. Submissions will be received by Planning NSW until 30 June 2003. Potential impacts on bird habitat within the Hunter Estuary include future industrial development impinging on the Kooragang Nature Reserve, and infrastructure development, such as transport corridors, which may further fragment important habitat on Ash Island. Data from our monthly wader surveys will be used in HBOC's submission on this concept proposal. Following public consultation, there will be further investigations by Planning NSW prior to development of a Locality Plan, followed by development of a Plan First Regional Strategy. The Regional Strategy will then be reflected in Local Plans. This is the latest planning strategy from the State Government and it is important that HBOC makes a strong case on behalf of the birds that call the Hunter Estuary home.

The full Concept Proposal is available at the Planning NSW office at 251 Wharf Road, Newcastle, or at www.planning.nsw.gov.au

For many years the Club has been proactive in writing letters to relevant local and state government departments and members of parliament, raising the profile of the importance of habitat for birds in the Hunter Estuary. This is an ongoing role.

In early March, HBOC was invited to share exhibition space at the Newcastle Show with the Kooragang Wetland Rehabilitation Project (KWRP), Hunter Catchment Management Trust and the Society for Frogs and Reptiles. Many thanks to the members who set up and manned the display, helping to raise awareness of bird habitats and the joys of bird watching in the local area.

At the end of March, HBOC participated in a community workshop run by National Parks and Wildlife Service, discussing issues for consideration in drafting a Plan of Management for Pambalong Nature Reserve, Minmi (formerly Cedar Hill Swamp). The draft Plan may be released for comment before the end of the year.

As mentioned in the last Newsletter, two brochures describing birdwatching routes around Lake Macquarie, prepared largely by Chris Herbert for HBOC, have been printed in colour, with the printing costs covered by a grant the club obtained from Lake Macquarie City Council (LMCC). The brochures have

now been advertised in the media and distributed by Council to local tourist and community centres. They are also available on LMCC's website.

KWRP is keen to sponsor similar brochures focussing on birdwatching routes within the Hunter Estuary. Chris has already prepared suitable material for these brochures, which hopefully will be published this year.

At a recent meeting with KWRP, HBOC discussed areas where removal of encroaching mangrove seedlings would benefit wader habitat on Ash Island. The recent expansion of mangroves in the Hunter Estuary and also throughout southeastern Australia has been documented. Although it may be tempting to "let nature take its course", the tidal regime on Ash Island has been manipulated since farming began there in the late 1800s. Consequently it is necessary to continue to manage the environment on Ash Island, to some extent, for particular habitats.

Another exciting project is the proposal to construct a boardwalk and viewing platform at Stockton Sandspit, using funds allocated to HBOC from the Envirofund Grants. Removal of mature mangroves from the beach at Stockton Sandspit last year exposed a perfect roosting site on the beach for migratory waders. Monitoring of these waders can only be done from the northeastern end of the sandspit. A boardwalk through the mangroves leading to a hide or viewing platform at the end of the beach would provide clear views of the beach so that accurate monitoring could be done. It would also provide excellent birdwatching opportunities. KWRP is interested in assisting HBOC to complete this project.

Dr Geoff MacFarlane and Dr Liz Huxtable of Newcastle University have recently established a project to study Black Swans and other waterfowl in Lake Macquarie. HBOC is the community contact for their student, Racheal Peak, who will be using data from HBOC records and the Annual Bird Reports to assist her in establishing the historical population status for Black Swans in the Lake Macquarie region. Racheal's project will include monitoring Black Swan abundance, distribution and breeding/moulting cycles on a monthly basis.

As always, there are lots of activities on the bird-watching front! I hope you have plenty of time to lift the binoculars off the shelf and step out into that totally absorbing world of birdwatching.

Happy Birding

Liz Crawford

On 12 February HBOC held its Annual General Meeting at the Wetland Centre with 47 members in attendance.

The main subjects of the meeting were the election of the new Committee and the 2002 Report of outgoing President Alan Stuart.

“Sunshine, Occasional Rain” was how Alan summed up the year. We had a very successful year – membership is at an all time high, some good conservation outcomes happened and the birding was interesting. On the other hand, the industrial development plans being bandied about for the Hunter estuary continue to trouble the Club.

Bird Sighting Highlights. A full account of bird sightings for 2002 will appear in our tenth Annual Bird Report due out later this year however it is possible to single out in advance some exceptional Hunter sightings.

There was the Kentish Plover at Old Bar, Cotton Pygmy Goose and Blue Billed Duck at Minmi, Northern Shoveler and Black Tailed Native Hen at Ash Island, Oriental Plover and Beach Stone Curlew at Stockton Sandspit, Pied Honeyeater at Paxton and Red-backed Kingfisher at Martindale. And wonderful pelagics too –possibly a Pycrofts Petrel!

(incidentally if you want to be notified early of unusual sightings email Alan Stuart at almarosa@bigpond.com and ask to be put on the emailing list.)

Bird Studies. The Club was very actively involved in studies such as the extension of the Bird Australia Atlas Project. Monthly wader surveys in the Hunter and Port Stephens (Swan Bay) generated a wealth of information about the seasonal movements of waders and about their roosting habitat requirements. This information is shared with a host of Governmental and conservation bodies. National surveys on Regent Honeyeaters, Swift Parrots and beach nesting birds were supported and local surveys of

particular sites allowed the Club input into local decision making.

Our massive program of activities was also reported on by Alan. This is covered in a previous edition of this Newsletter.

Conservation Efforts. Our main focus in 2002 was on the Hunter Estuary. At our urging Stockton Sandspit has been rehabilitated as a wader roosting site and a lot of hard work weeding was done by the Club .

Two other positive outcomes have been the conservation of Belmont Wetlands and Shortland Wetlands becoming a Ramsar site.

The Club Committee and its Conservation Coordinator Jenny Powers worked hard on significant conservation campaigns at the Tank Paddock near Minmi and the Tomalpin Forest near Kurri Kurri. Members interested in these or other bird-related conservation concerns should contact Jenny or a Committee member.

Our concerns over various development plans around the Hunter estuary (for instance the Austeel proposal) led to the publication of a report on the Birds of Ash Island which has been widely circulated. The Club also supported Max Maddocks in his thorough and detailed analysis of the threatened species of the Hunter Estuary and our international, national and State obligations to protect them.

Many members contribute to the efficient and friendly running of the Club and Alan in his final report as President mentions most of them. The full Report is available from Tom Clarke and is usually in the library and available at Club nights.

One person Alan does not mention is himself. It is important to state here that in the years of his leadership the Club has gone from strength to strength. The AGM carried with acclamation a vote of thanks to Alan Stuart for his tireless work over five years.

FIELD OUTING 23 MARCH 2003 Kooragang Island

After experiencing being bogged on Ash Island late on a winters day, I had definitely excluded it as a bird watching venue in a small car. So it was with great relief and a certain degree of confidence that I and 12 other keen birdos piled into three 4WD's to head out and face the frontier of Ash Island.

We drove straight down Scotts Point and with great success discovered 34 species. A lone Whimbrel was camouflaged rather well on the muddy bank opposite. Lengthy reeds with full seed heads provided shelter to flighty Cisticolas. Sitting quietly on a palm tree was the first of many Nankeen Kestrels, displaying his lovely tawny shades and dark black tail feathers.

The highlight, however was 40 dark-eyed Golden Plovers sporting various stages of breeding plumage and sitting casually at the very end of the point. Eventually they took flight down the waterway passing over 2 Great Crested Grebes, a nice little surprise.

We headed back to the cars and drove around to where the fishermen were casting their lines out over the muddy bank. One guy had no idea we were really not interested in his rear end but in a Striated Heron just past him.

After a brief stop at the Visitors Centre, where I was impressed with the hygienic toilets, we headed off to Millham Pond. Greenshank and Marsh Sandpipers were busy feeding on the opposite bank and Chats came under scrutiny with telescopes set up.

Along "Wagtail Way" we become rather determined to find the "often seen by others" Yellow Wagtail but to no avail after much peering and calling (an almost cajoling call). But all of a sudden cries of delight could be heard. We looked up to see the huge, almost prehistoric, form of a Jabiru. She (we noticed later) landed in the narrow waterway opposite and we admired the sheen of her green neck.

From the other side along Palm Tree Track we spied Avocets, Sharpies, Red Necked Stints, a Curlew Sandpiper and the first of several Double Banded Plovers. Surprising enough up on Deep Pond, a couple of Masked Lapwings were the only sign of birdlife.

After lunch, 8 of us continued on to Stockton Sandspit and tried to count the huge flock of Avocets. They were accompanied by Eastern Curlews, Red Knots and Bar and Black Tailed Godwits. Before leaving for home, we delighted in seeing Terek Sandpipers and Grey Tailed Tattlers hunkering down along the rocky shore of Fern Bay. It had been a very successful and enjoyable day of bird watching with 62 species on Ash Island and 39 on the Stockton Sandspit

Di Johnson

MUNGHORN GAP DIRECTIONS

The Directions handed out at March Club Night were not entirely correct. If you are going to the Camp and are uncertain as to the route you should contact Activities Officer Di Johnson on 4975 1777 or by email at johnsondj@optus.com.au

JIM COOK

We regret to inform club members that member Jim Cook passed away on the 19th February 2003. Jim and Jude have had an association with the Club since the 1980's when they settled in Dyers Crossing. They attended many Club camps, and continued to do so after they moved to Coonabarabran in 1990. Over the years they camped with us at places such as Gunnedah, Woko, Dyers Crossing, Widden Vale, Wollar and the Pilliga. Jim had a lifelong interest in the bush, and was very knowledgeable about flora and fauna.

We extend our sympathy to Jude and his family

ATLASSING DAY. 22 MARCH 2003

With permission from Wambo Colliery, nine HBOC members atlassed five sites on Wambo land between Bulga and Warkworth in perfect weather. And what a terrific day we had! Seventy-seven species on Wambo plus, at the start of the day, a pair of Peregrines at Bulga. White-backed Swallows were seen easily as they sat on power lines, Diamond Firetails were carrying nesting material to a tall eucalypt, several male and female Hooded Robins, one with an immature bird were seen, Red Capped Robins were common – well reasonably common.

Dozens of Noisy Friarbirds were feeding in tall trees along the creek line, Little Lorikeets flew overhead and Brown-headed honeyeaters sat on dead branches. Several other species of honeyeater fed in the flowering trees: Black-chinned, Scarlet, Striped, White-naped, Yellow-faced, White-plumed, Lewin's, White-eared, Yellow-tufted and Eastern Spinebill. Western and White-throated Gerygones called and hordes of Silvereyes were moving through.

Several members of the party had new birds for their life lists, one as many as fourteen! Lucky him.

We would like to thank Wambo Colliery for their enthusiasm and cooperation in allowing us to visit their land

Ann Lindsey.

Vegetation Maintenance at Stockton Sandspit - from Ann Lindsey

To my utter surprise and joy ten other people attended the HBOC vegetation maintenance hour under the bridge at Stockton. It was low tide at about 12 midday, hot and sticky, but off we slithered into the mud to remove the mangrove seedlings which have shot up since half an acre of mature mangroves were removed in September last year.

As you know, most waders need a clear line of vision when roosting so they can quickly escape predators, hence the HBOC maintenance program. This season up to 4,000 birds have been roosting there at high tide, a huge increase on recent years when numbers had dwindled markedly. Three cheers!

National Parks and Wildlife Service have placed new signs asking people not to disturb the birds, but you can still have a good view from the car park. Yesterday, after our work, a few birds returned with the rising tide and we had excellent views of Sharp-Tailed Sandpipers and Curlew Sandpipers together, one Red Capped Plover chick which has grown into a juvenile, Eastern Curlews, Bar tailed Godwits and many Red-necked Avocets.

I would like to personally thank the 10 people who came, some from as far away as Dungog and Gosford. It certainly proved the point that many hands make light work and much was achieved. And only two people got momentarily bogged. We will have another such hour in about two months after the waders have left for the northern hemisphere. Over the winter, we will need to weed out some of the bitou and other weeds on the sandy areas as well. Well done HBOC.

Working at Stockton Sandspit?

It is important that members weeding or surveying at Stockton Sandspit report their activity to the Club. Details should include number of members working and duration and bird list if a survey is completed.

Not only is this information important to keep track of the birds, but it also goes to justify our funding submission for work on the site. We agreed to supply “in kind” work as our contribution and we won't know you've been there unless you tell us.

Contact. Alan Stuart almarosa@bigpond.com.

MIDWEEK FIELD OUTING

4 February 2003

The midweek program concentrates on relatively local sites and usually goes for half a day only. New people are always welcome. It takes place on the first Tuesday of most months thereby solving the problem of a sensible thing to do on Melbourne Cup Day.

This was our first midweek outing of the year and we had a good roll up. As people started to arrive comments such as "wow, isn't this place great" and "I never know this place existed" were made. Where are we? We are at the car park behind the Forum at Newcastle University overlooking the Warabrook ponds.

While we were waiting for everyone to turn up we saw 30+ Masked Lapwings in the paddock near the car park. As we were heading along the bank of the big pond at Warabrook we glimpsed a Latham's Snipe and for the next half-hour the Snipe gave everyone the chance to have a good look at it.

As the group were watching the Snipe we spotted a small group of Red-rumped Parrots and a couple of minutes later we found a Pale-headed Rosella with a small group of Eastern Rosellas.

As we went on we later saw a Pacific Black Duck with chicks. There also was a Clamorous Reed Warbler with a dependant young. We then returned to the Uni to have morning tea.

Afterwards we walked along the ponds at the Uni. It was a nice walk and there were a few birds but most people were too busy trying to dispose of the mosquitoes buzzing around.

To sum up the outing, a lot of people got to see an area they did not know existed and as a group we identified 62 species of birds – not bad for a morning's birdwatching.

Robert McDonald.

ATLASSING AT MOUNT ROYAL NATIONAL PARK. 22 February 2003

Despite dubious weather conditions, four very keen atlassers drove up to Mount Royal National Park via Olive Mountain and past Lake St. Clair. The main road is narrow and in reasonable condition but we did not attempt to travel the circuit as it was too wet. We made six 500-metre surveys at various points for from 30 minutes to over an hour.

The early morning and damp conditions brought the Wonga Pigeons out onto the road and a White-headed Pigeon drinking in a road puddle blocked our passage for several minutes. This afforded us detailed views of their wonderful plumage which is often so difficult to see properly as Wongas like to scramble around in the thick scrub and White-headed Pigeons hide in the tallest of trees. We had terrific views of a Crested Shrike –tit as she checked out bark hanging from tree limbs for juicy bits and pieces. Several Rufous Fantails were seen feeding low in the scrub and Yellow Robins came to look at us at close range. A Bassian Thrush ran away as soon as it became aware of us – as they do.

Perhaps the best birds of the day were an immature male Flame Robin which highlighted the difficulties of identifying the "red" robins in brown plumage., and about four scarlet robins. At one spot recovering from a bushfire burn, male Scarlet Robins called continuously to each other from high in the trees, but we were lucky enough later to have some excellent views when they fed from low branches. We lunched late at Youngville camping site and then drove slowly home stopping at Lake St Clair for ducks, darters, cormorants and pelicans and at Doughboy Hollow, south of Singleton, to see if the Plumed Whistling Ducks were still there - about 35 were loafing under a tree.

A bonus for two members of the party was up to five new birds for their life lists.

Ann Lindsey

NEW MEMBERS

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The Hunter Bird Observers Club welcomes the following new members:

- The Baird Family of Woodville
- Mike & Liz Fidler of Martinsville
- John Hendriks of Seaham
- Diane Lamb and Family of Milbrodale
- Denis and John Lombard of Cooranbong
- Andrew Morris of Bateau Bay
- Wendy and Andrew Murdoch of Marmong Point
- Rachael Peak of Jesmond

HANZAB VOLUME 6

The sixth volume of the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds is now available in the Club Library. Because of high demand and the cost of the book special lending procedures are in place. If you want to borrow this one you need to talk to Pat Pountney, our Librarian – this is not available on a self-service basis as most books are.

This is the sixth of seventh volumes with the last book coming out in 2004. It is a publication of Birds Australia through Oxford University Press. It, and the other volumes, can be purchased through Birds Australia on 03 9813 5488.

HANZAB is the most authoritative reference available to anyone studying the birds of this Region. Volume 6 provides detailed descriptions (and brilliant artwork) for 126 species including the pardalotes, gerygones and thornbills, the robins, babblers, wedgebills and quail-thrushes in addition to the monarchs, flycatchers and fantails.

(Did you know that the first illustrated book published in Australia was Lewin's Birds of New South Wales with their Natural History) In 1813.

THE WETLANDS CENTRE

The Wetlands Centre is one of our favourite bird watching venues and the homebase of HBOC. Two of our members are Directors of the Board of the Wetland Centre and many others are members and very actively involved in its work.

Over the next few months the Autumn-Winter activity Program will unfold providing regular activities, special events and a supervised School Holiday program for the kids. Some events for April to June are listed .

Breakfast with the Birds. Great for beginners and the experienced. Breakfast and slide show too!

8.30am Sunday May 1 and June 15.

\$20 adults, \$10 kids. Family concessions.

Twilight Trek BYO torch for creatures of the night. Check start time when you book.

April 26, May 24.

\$10 adult, Child \$5. Family concessions

Canoeing Safari

Paddle Ironbark Creek with an experienced Guide, explore the rainforest, return for luncheon at the Café. 9.30am start

April 6, May 4, June 1.

\$25 adults, \$12.50 kids and \$70 per family.

Ironbark Creek Canoe Challenge

Form a team in your Club or community group.

Compete in a fast and furious event.

9-2 May 25 \$35.00 per person

Mothers Day Luncheon

Delicious Buffet Luncheon (BYO Wine) with the family while the kids have fun with an activity leader.

12 Noon start. Sunday May 11.

Cost \$25 adults. Children \$12.

Bookings essential for all programs.

Or why not just turn up for a great coffee and a spot of birding. Admission still only \$4.50.

HELP NEEDED: Water Watch Program

Carolyn Gillard, teacher at the Wetlands Centre is setting up a Water Watch program at the Centre. She is keen to recruit volunteers. The work involves testing various sites around the Wetlands once a month. The testing takes about an hour and should be interesting. She will undertake to teach any volunteers

**Contact : Carolyn Gillard
Phone 4955 8673 (work) or
4957 1392 (home)**

CATTLE EGRETS ON THE MOVE

Project Egret Watch, run by Max Maddocks out of the Wetlands Centre, continues to get reports of birds banded locally and found at far destinations. Cattle Egrets are by far the most dispersive.

An observer from Tasmania reported finding a Cattle Egret at Queechy Pond Launceston on 14 March 2003. The tags identified it as a Hunter bird. Max was able to tell the finder that this bird had been caught by hand and banded as a chick in the nest at the breeding colony at Seaham Swamp Nature Reserve on 20 December 2001. Quite a journey in 15 months!

But wait there's more. Another Cattle Egret tagged in the same session has been reported alive at Kynnumboon NSW (near Murwillumbah) on 30 September 2002 and another, tagged in the same tree as the Tasmanian bird fetched up at McIntyres Lake, Millicent in South Australia on 25 April 2002.

These birds seem to have the reverse of a homing instinct – they spread far and wide - a worldwide expansion that the National Photographic Index of Australian Wildlife describes as “one of the most remarkable avian success stories of this century” Our Project Egret Watch has been part of the documenting of that story.

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BIRDS and HUMANS

There are a number of stories around on the habituation of birds to human presence – and indeed their exploitation of our niche. These two are relayed via Sue Hamonet.

Kestrels and Model Aeroplanes

A gentleman who regularly flies model aeroplanes at the field on Ash Island remarked on the behaviour of Nankeen Kestrels. Until recently a “lean-to” type shelter was at the airfield and Nankeen Kestrels, always on the lookout for an easy meal (who isn't) had grown increasingly bold and would fly in as soon as cars began to arrive each weekend. They would settle themselves on the edge of the roof of the shelter shed and from there launch themselves to pluck off the grasshoppers disturbed by the model planes, their concentration apparently undisturbed by the human comings and goings.

More recently we noticed that the building had been demolished but we also noted the Kestrels taking up positions in the trees bordering the airfield.

Egrets and Fishermen

Len Outram (who recently addressed our Club night) passed on his experience recently while he was out fishing (in the rain!) in his small – 8 foot – boat off Marmong Point. He was quite surprised and bemused when a Great Egret flew in to take up a position on the front of the boat, within easy touching distance of him. The fish weren't biting so Len offered strips of mullet to the Egret who took the offered morsels. The bird declined to take the offerings from his hand, but was quite happy to accept when the strips were placed on a nearby seat. It stayed for some considerable time, until Len eventually decided to bow to weather conditions and call it a day.

THE CRESTED PIGEON

By Colin Goodenough

The Crested Pigeon is a recent arrival to the east coast of Australia. It was originally found in the arid and semi-arid zone but since European settlement it has expanded its range to include most of the continent (Woodall 1985). Locally, by 1962 it was common along the Hunter River, as far east as the western outskirts of West Maitland (Hobbs and Kaveney 1962)

The Crested Pigeon *Ocyphaps lophotes*, is thought to have diverged from some form ancestral to both it and the Spinifex Pigeon, *Petrophassa plumifera*, after the ancestral form had become terrestrial (Goodwin 1967). Subsequently the ancestral *Ocyphaps* took again to the trees and bushes for roosting and nesting, while the ancestral Spinifex Pigeon remained on the ground. The re-acquisition of partly-arboreal habits was, in all probability, a factor which then enabled it to populate successfully more diverse habitats and a much wider geographical area than any one of its terrestrial allies (ie Squatter Pigeon, Partridge Pigeon, Rock Pigeon and Spinifex Pigeon). Another factor is that it shows flexibility in its food selection which allows it to exploit new sources of food (Woodall 1985)

In its historical arid and semi-arid habitat, Crested Pigeons spend only a short period of time foraging on the hot ground. They regularly retreat into the shade of bushes well above ground level to avoid the extreme heat.
(Ambrose and Schleucher 1998).

References

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CUCKOOS VERSUS HOSTS: A DISPATCH FROM THE TRENCHES

(this article was written by Deborah Smith, Science Writer of the Sydney Morning Herald and appeared in that newspaper on 14 March 2003 under "*Cuckoos warned: don't mess with the superb fairy wren*")

In the war between cuckoos and the birds they trick into raising their young, Australia's superb fairy wrens have turned out to be the smartest of the lot.

The tiny birds are the first to be found with the ability to recognise a cuckoo chick, which puts them a big step ahead of their British counterparts.

Most birds that are plagued by crafty cuckoos sneaking eggs into their nest have become very adept at spotting odd-looking eggs to evict.

The mystery has been why, if a cuckoo chick does hatch out, the host birds are hopeless at identifying the alien baby and start to feed it.

Cuckoo chicks can be up to five times as large as the host birds' own chicks, says Dr. Naomi Langmore of the Australian National University: "The differences are enormous"

Dr Langmore, with British colleagues, discovered superb fairy wrens were the exception to the rule by studying more than 200 of their nests in Canberra's Campbell Park.

About one third of the nests contained an egg laid by a Horsfield's bronze cuckoo. Within two days of hatching, the cuckoo chicks killed the wren's young by tipping them out of the nest.

But then the wrens had the last laugh. About 40 per cent of them afflicted by the intruders abandoned their nests to build new ones, leaving the cuckoo chick to starve to death.

(cont'd over)

Cuckoos (continued)

“Cuckoo chicks are recognised partly because they are alone in the nest and partly because of the different sound of the begging call” Dr Langmore said.

She said the findings, published yesterday in the journal *Nature*, suggested that the ability to recognise alien chicks only evolved after cuckoos had conclusively won the first round.

This is the case with the Horsfield's bronze cuckoo. It has evolved an egg that is almost exactly the same size and colour as the wren's. It is impossible to distinguish it inside the wren's dark, dome-shaped nests.

The fact that the breeding season for wrens in Australia is much longer than for birds troubled by cuckoos in Europe may explain why it is worthwhile for the Australian wrens to re-nest and attempt a second family.

The war is not over. Cuckoo chicks in Canberra have now begun to fight back by imitating fairy wren calls, the researchers have found.

JOHN & MICHAEL SAMUEL

This UK couple were resident in Newcastle for part of last year and have written to thank members of the Club (you know who you are) who helped them in their birdwatching endeavours. They joined us for two outings.

They report that their “score” for Australia was 270 species with about 120 new to them. Their list for birds seen in gardens in Swansea (where they stayed) included Yellow Tailed Black Cockatoos, Koels, Dollarbirds and a Tawny Frogmouth.

COMPUTER BIRD BRAIN

(From New Scientist January 1 2003)

Adding a virtual brain to a computer model of a singing bird has allowed scientists to figure out how birds compose their songs. The feat hints that we might one day be able to map some of the complex circuitry in an animal's brain just by listening to its calls.

When birds sing, they force air from their lungs past folds of tissue in the voice box. Scientists at Rockefeller University and the University of Buenos Aires reported that they had developed a simple computer model that mimics this process to produce sound. By simulating changes in the tension of the vocal folds and in the air pressure from the lungs, the model reproduced the song of a canary.

But the song only sounded right if the lungs and the vocal folds vibrated with particular phase differences. That intrigued two Argentinian scientists, How does the bird's brain give those complex commands? Some clues come from the neurological studies which show that a brain region called the high vocal centre is active when a bird sings. This activity excites neurons in another region called the RA nucleus. Some neurons in this structure excite motor neurons that control muscles in the vocal folds or in the lungs. Others damp down the activity of the nearby neurons.

When they made a simple computer model of the RA neurons, they were surprised to find that it changed a simple constant signal from the high vocal centre into a complex series of bursts with the hallmark phase difference of birds. And when they fed the output signal from the virtual brain into their computer model of the bird's voice box, it once again sang like a bird.

Simply varying the volume of the signal from the high vocal centre produced different song patterns. The model bird can accurately echo the song of a South American Sparrow. You can listen to a real sparrow song and the fake one at www.new-scientist.com.

HOW LONG CAN A WILD BIRD LIVE?

(adapted from an article in Bird Notes March 2003 – a publication of the Birds Australia , Southern NSW and ACT Group)

A Manx Shearwater probably born in 1952 was last year preparing to breed again. First ringed (banded) by ornithologists in 1957, the bird's journeys were made while migrating between Britain and South America,

It was rediscovered on April 4 2002 in a colony of several thousand others on Bardsey, an Island off the Lleyn peninsula in North Wales. It is thought to have clocked up about five million miles in the air (equal to a return trip to the moon)

The shearwater had just returned from its South American wintering grounds and was preparing to breed when it was netted as part of a national bird ringing scheme.

Records revealed that it was the fourth time the bird had been netted and released – the other occasions being May 22 1957, July 8 1961 and April 16 1977.

According to a British Trust for Ornithology spokesman birds don't really have old age! Repeated banding is the only way to tell how old a bird is. As long as they keep going they produce young.

The oldest wild bird ever found is reported to be a Royal Albatross that nested in New Zealand and was named Grandma. It was at least 53 when last caught.

Experts are convinced that there are more venerable individuals still to be identified and some, particularly in the parrot family may date back to the nineteenth century.

Birds Australia and its NSW manifestation SNAG are the nearest thing this country has to a national bird organisation. Many HBOC members are also members of Birds Australia. Most bird Clubs maintain cordial relations with BA through BIGnet and through its various programs

Hooters and Hawks

A seminar on the status of Australian Raptors held on Saturday 12th April at the Caltex Theatre, Macquarie Graduate School of Management , North Ryde.

Great Speakers, reasonable price but you will have to check for vacancies (quickly) at the Birds Australia Office ph.02 9436 0388 or email rosella63@bigpond.com.

Members Day and AGM

31 May 2003. University of Tasmania Sandy Bay .Worth joining BA and going to Tasmania just for the organised outings!

Cowra Woodlands Birds Program

Survey for the remainder of this year June 14-15, September 20-21 and December 6-7.

Contact Jean Clarke & Jack Baker

02 42845740 or email bakerclarkes@bigpond.com.

NEWSLETTER DEADLINES

Newsletter Articles are always welcomed

Closing Date for the next (June/July) edition is 30 May 2003.

Deadlines for future editions:

August/September : 1 August

October/November: 27 September

Dec03/January04: 30 January 2004

PETER PHILLIPS. EDITOR

34 McIntyre Street Cardiff NSW 2285

Tel: 02 49569090, Fax 02 49547118

email juniper@hunterlink.net.au

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Older members will remember the controversy over changes to bird names in the past but newer chums may be confused as to why birds have various names and why there are attempts to harmonise usage. Hugo Phillipps Communication Coordinator of Birds Australia addresses this issue and its recent history in an article found in the Far South Coast Birdwatchers Newsletter

A misconception is that birds generally have two principal name categories – the scientific and the “common”. The reality is (at least with English language speakers) that there are THREE categories, the scientific, the standard (or recommended) English name and the vernacular or local name (of which there may be many). Sometimes the standard and the vernacular are the same, sometimes not. The functions of these categories are different.

Scientific names reflect current taxonomy and may change with taxonomic re-examination. Despite some people believing that they are the most fundamental or “official” names, they are mutable and likely to continue so.

Recommended English Names (RENs – with regard to Australian birds those published in Christides and Boles, *The Taxonomy and Species of Birds of Australia and its territories 1994 (C&B)* are intended to confer stability and to provide a standard that is recognised internationally – so, for example, a birder from Canada, a zoologist from South Africa, a town planner from Tasmania and a conservation activist from Kalgoorlie can talk to one another about birds and not be confused. I don't know if there are the equivalents of RENs in other languages but there probably should be for the main international languages at least. The main requirements of a REN are stability and commonality of usage. I personally dislike many RENs for aesthetic or sentimental reasons but my prejudices are utterly irrelevant to their function.

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Vernacular Names. Yes, call the birds whatever you like. You DON'T have to conform. If you are with people who understand those particular pet, local or historical names there is no problem. However vernaculars are not set in stone; many Aboriginal names have disappeared from popular usage – and so have many which were used by European settlers last century. Vernaculars with restricted usage are great for local newsletters, poetry, word games, historical research and many other purposes. They are not so good for national and international journals and listservers.

Much prejudice about what names we should use seems to stem from, firstly, confusion about the different functions of RENs and vernaculars e.g. by lumping them as “common” names and secondly, from sentiment that the names WE grew up with and feel warm and fuzzy about, should be the ones that EVERYBODY should use. Since RENs were derived from vernacular names we want OUR vernacular names to have been the ones chosen. In the same way you can get birders in a particular state feeling that they “own” the birds in that state (especially the endemics) and resent ‘outsiders’ calling the birds by different names.

A lot of work was done to arrive at the current list of RENs in C&B, including getting members of bird clubs to vote on many of them. The process was transparent and about as democratic as possible in the circumstances. The introduction to C&B covers the reason behind the decisions and is essential reading for anyone wishing to explore the arguments further.

That the issue continues to generate such heat says something about human psychology – and maybe sometimes about birding politics – but the birds don't care!

OBSERVATIONS FROM CLUB NIGHTS – FEBRUARY/MARCH 2003

2002				
Jun 26	Blue-billed Duck	1	Walka Water Works	G.Brosie
Nov 16	Blue-billed Duck	1	“ “ “	“
Sep 24-30	Noisy Pitta	1	Bow Wow Gorge, Mt. Vincent	P.Fitasimons
Apr 23	Gang Gang Cockatoo	12	Mt. Vincent	“
Jul 7	Gang Gang Cockatoo	20	“	“
Jul 23	Crested Shrike-tit	3	“	“
Nov	Eastern Spinebill	1	Merewether Heights	K. Woods
Dec 12	Shining Bronze-cuckoo	1	Jesmond	G.Brosie
Dec 15	Dollarbird	2	Morpeth Manor	“
Dec 22	White-winged Triller	1	Jesmond	“
Dec 8	Buff-banded Rail	3	Blackhill	M. & P. McLaughlan
Dec 2	Y.-tailed Black Cockatoo	3	Newcastle University	P.McLaughlan
Dec 5-9	Latham's Snipe	1 – 5	Glen Oak	Max Maddock
Dec 7	Dollarbird	1	Valentine	B.Tait
	Nankeen Kestrel	1+ 4dy	“	“
Nov 28	Common Koel	1	Belmont	“
Nov 16	Eastern Whipbird	1	One Mile Beach	“
Dec 14	Spectacled Monarch	2	Main Creek, Dungog	D.Jenkin
	Spectacled Monarch	2	Frying Pan Ck. Dungog	“
	Logrunner	2m	“	“
	Regent Bowerbird	2	Barrington Guest House	“
Dec 12	Torresian Crow		Bolwarra	H.Tarrant
Dec 27	Common Tern	15	Stockton Sandspit	“
Dec 28	Diamond Firetail	1	Jerrys Plains	“
Dec 28	Australian Hobby	Pr	Yarrawa	“
Dec 31	Sanderling	9	Mudbishops Pt. Old Bar	A.Stuart
	Red-capped Plover	22	“	“
	Red-necked Stint	11	“	“
	Little Tern	>50	“	“
	Common Tern	>300	“	“
	Crested Tern	>30	“	“
	Osprey	1	“	“
Dec 30	Little Tern	>20	Harrington	“
	Common Tern	30	“	“
	Sanderling	4	“	“
	Grass Owl	1	Crowdy Bay N.P.	“
	Varied Triller	1	Harrington	“
	Forest Raven	4	“	“
Dec 31	Spectacled Monarch	4	“	“
Oct 11	Whiskered Tern	2	Denman	
	Brown Songlark	1	Arrowfield Stud	
	Barn Owl	1	Denman to Muswellbrook	
2003				
Jan 2	Black-necked Stork	1	Woodberry	A.Hamer
Jan 5	“	2	Grahamstown Dam	A.Stuart
	Freckled Duck	2	S.W.C.	W. Barden
Jan 6	“	2	Walka Water Works	D.Jenkin

	Spotless Crake	1	"	"
	Australian Spotted Crake	1	"	"
Jan 6	Pink-eared Duck	340	"	"
	Australian Spotted Crake	1	S.W.C.	"
	Stubble Quail	1f	"	"
Jan 7	Gull-billed Tern	60	Stockton Sandspit	T.Clarke
	Pacific Golden Plover	14	"	T.Clarke
	Common Greenshank	1	"	"
Jan 20	Baillon's Crake	1	Walka Water Works	D.Jenkin
	Pink-eared Duck	300-400	"	"
	Hoary-headed Grebe	2	"	"
	Great Crested Grebe	10	"	"
	Musk Duck	2	"	"
	Latham's Snipe	2	"	"
	Glossy Ibis	40	S.W.C.	"
	Australasian Shoveler	12	"	"
	Sharp-tailed Sandpiper	70	"	"
	Australian Spotted Crake	2	Ash Island	"
	Red-capped Plover	2+2dy	"	"
Jan 26	Red-necked Avocet	2,000	Stockton Sandspit	D.Goldrick
	Eastern Curlew	100	"	"
	Red Knot	20	"	"
	Great Knot	10	"	"
	Curlew Sandpiper	50	"	"
Jan 6	Nankeen Night Heron	1	Bayswater Colliery	G.Newling
Jan 14	Brown Goshawk	1m	Wingen Village	"
Jan 16	Black-fronted Dotterel	2	Bayswater Colliery	"
Jan 11	Singing Bushlark	1	Mt. Arthur North	"
Jan 20	Brown Songlark	3m + 2f	"	"
Jan 22	Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike	1	Muswellbrook	"
Jan 13	Whistling Kite	3	Scone	"
Jan 14	Yellow-billed Spoonbill	2	Parkville	"
	White-necked Heron	3	"	"
Jan 13	Latham's Snipe	5	Irrawang Swamp	M.Maddock
Jan 17	Sharp-tailed Sandpiper	>80	"	"
Jan 22	Latham's Snipe	3	Irrawang Swamp	"
	Sharp-tailed Sandpiper	>60	"	"
Jan 24	Sharp-tailed Sandpiper	>80	"	"
	Red-kneed Dotterel	2	"	"
Jan 27	Latham's Snipe	2	"	"
Feb 1	Australian Hobby	1	"	"
	Sharp-tailed Sandpiper	130	"	"
	Black-winged Stilt	80	"	"
	Red-kneed Dotterel	6	"	"
Jan 24	Black-necked Stork	1	Sunshne Park NewlineRd	"
Jan 8	Australian Hobby	2+1imm	Dungog Golf Course	D.Jenkin
Jan 12	Pale Yellow Robin	2	Frying Pan Creek, Dungog	"
Jan 20	Glossy Ibis	40	S.W.C.	"
	Australasian Shoveler	12	"	"
Feb 1	Brown Honeyeater	7	Islington	M.Roderick
Feb 9	Wedge-tailed Eagle	1	Market Town Shopg Mall	"
Feb 10	Black-necked Stork	3	Thornton Railway Stn	S.Roderick

Jan 8	Grey Plover	3	Corrie Is. [Port Stephen]	“
Feb 1	Square-tailed Kite	1	Plattsburg	T. Clarke
Feb 7	Grey Goshawk	1	Gateshead	“
Jan	Glossy Black Cockatoo	3	Brandy Hill, Seaham	G. Mee
	Bar-shouldered Dove	1+3dy	“	“
Jan 4	White-winged Chough	16	“	“
Jan 30	Brown Quail	4	S.W.C.	P.Lightfoot
	Red-rumped Parrot	2	“	“
Jan 21	Skylark	1	Ash Island	“
Feb 3	Pacific Baza	1	6k SE Muswellbrook	G.Newling
Feb 9	Stubble Quail	1	Mt. Arthur North	G.Newling
	Spotted Harrier	1	“	“
Jan	Channel-billed Cuckoo	1imm	Wingen Village	“
Feb 10	Southern Boobook	1	East Maitland	J.Smart
Jan 7	Australian Hobby	Pr	Bolwarra	H.Tarrant
Feb 1	Curlew Sandpiper	1	“	“
Feb 1	Osprey	1	Walka Water Works	“
Jan 12	Brown Treecreeper	1	Vaxy	“
Jan 20	Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo	2+1dy	Whitebridge	C.Goodenough
Jan 15	Black-necked Stork	1	Telarah	F.Humphreys
Jan	Black-necked Stork nest	2+2dy	Bulahdelah	“
Jan 1	Latham's Snipe	1	“	“
Feb 12	Figbird	1 + 1dy	Belmont	C.Goodenough
Feb 18	Lewin's Honeyeater	1	Bulga	D.Lamb
	Blue-faced Honeyeater	5-8	“	“
Feb 3	Azure Kingfisher	1	Cobark	F.Humphreys
Feb 5	Emerald Dove	1	Barrington Guest House	F.Humphreys
	Wonga Pigeon	3	“	“
Mar 3	Pied Honeyeater	1	Wingen Stock Route	G.Newling
Jan 18	Peaceful Dove	1	Martindale	G.Brosie
	Grey-crowned Babbler nest	4	Broke	“
Jan 21	New-Holland Honeyeater	1	S.W.C.	“
Jan 23	Pied Oystercatcher	17	Stockton Sandspit	“
Feb 24	Little Penguin	1	Off Nobby's breakwall	S.Roderick
Feb 8	Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo	30	Somersby	M. & P. McLaughlan
Jan 6	Powerful Owl	2	Fennell Bay	M.McLaughlan
Feb 27	Spotted Harrier	1	Millers Forest	C. Bell
Feb 28	Channel-billed Cuckoo	1	Whitebidge	C.Goodenough
	Dollarbird	3	“	“
Mar 11	White-throated Needletail	20	Awaba	“
Feb 16	Glossy Ibis	30	Pambalong N.R.	G.Brosie
	Masked Lapwing	55	Lenaghan's Drive	“
Mar 2	Satin Flycatcher	1	Awabakal N.R.	“
Mar 5	Black Kite	1	Walka Water Works	“
	Spotless Crake	1	“	“
Mar 10	Black-necked Stork	1	New England Hwy Tarro	“
Mar11	Grey Goshawk	1	Jesmond	“
Feb 26	Blue-faced Honeyeater	6	Adamstown Heights	G.Anderson
Mar 8	European Goldfinch	4	Ash Island	“
Mar 10	Little Bittern	1	Walka Water Works	D.Jenkin
	Wedge-tailed Eagle	3	Fosterton Loop Rd. Dngog	“
	White-throated Needletail	30	“	“
Mar 8	Glossy Black Cockatoo	3	Swansea South	R.Smith

Feb 9	Spotted Harrier	1	Bolwarra	H.Tarrant
Feb 13	Square-tailed Kite	1	Thornton	"
Feb 22	Square-tailed Kite	1	Kurri Kurri	"
Mar 8	Glossy Black Cockatoo	3	Doyle's Creek	"
Feb 16	Dusky Woodswallow	Pr + 1dy	"	"
Feb 16	Buff-rumped Thornbill		Jerrys Plains Pinegrove Rd	"
	Chestnut-rumped Hylacola	1	" "	"
	Diamond Firetail	2	Martindale	"
	Spotted Harrier	1	Bureen	"
	White-throated Needletail	20	"	"
Mar 11	Little Black Cormorant	>600	Wye Pt to Morisset	V.Moon
Mar 3-12	Rainbow Bee-eater	10	Wye Point	"
Jan 19	Pacific Baza	1 + 2dy	"	"
Mar 6	Glossy Black Cockatoo	2 + 1dy	"	"
Mar 4	Glossy Ibis	14	Pambalong N.R.	V.Moon
Mar 3	Little Tern	4	Kooragang [Dykes]	S.Roderick
	White-winged Black Tern	3	"	"
	Common Tern	>50	"	"
Mar 8	Arctic Jaeger	~20	1km off Newcastle	"
Mar 1	Red-necked Avocet	4	Rutherford 32.44/151.30	M.Newman
	Yellow-billed Spoonbill	7	"	"
Mar 3	Singing Bushlark	1	Jones Res. Rd. 32.27/150.43	"
	Plum-headed Finch	1 + 1imm	"	"
Feb 20	Square-tailed Kite	1	East Maitland	"
Mar 3	Diamond Firetail	3	Baerami Ck. 32.32/150.27	"
	Restless Flycatcher	1	"	"
	Red-capped Robin	1m	Baerami Ck. 32.29/150.27	"
	Speckled Warbler	2	"	"
Mar 2	Little Eagle	1	Irrawang Swamp	M.Maddock
Feb 5	Glossy Ibis	5	Bedminster Rehab Swamp	"
Mar 2	Hardhead	150	Grahamstown Dam	"

Project Funding – 2003 Twitchathon

The SNAG Committee is seeking applications for the Twitchathon 2003 funds. Projects submitted should have a strong conservation bias.

APPLICATION GUIDELINES

For applications to be accepted, they must consist of:

- A well defined project, with clear goals, objectives, outcomes and performance indicators. For research projects this should include methodology.
- Brief Curriculum Vitae of project manager(s).
- Timetable with anticipated key dates or milestones.
- Project budget (high level).
- A clear plan for project evaluation.
- Photographs suitable for a fundraising campaign should also be included if possible.

All submissions will be peer reviewed before recommendation to the SNAG Committee with special consideration given to conservation outcomes.

APPLICATIONS MUST BE RECEIVED BY MAY 2, 2003

Please send to:

**The secretary,
Southern NSW and ACT Group
Birds Australia
PO Box 1322
Crows Nest NSW 1585
Email: rosella63@bigpond.com**

The successful project will be announced by mail and in the first edition of Bird Notes following the SNAG Committee's decision.

This decision will be final.

Coming Events

Please check with contact person for each outing, in case of changed details or suitability of site for the camp or field day

Date	Event	Meeting place	Leader/contact
Saturday April 19	Hunter Wader Survey	10.00am. Various locations as directed	Chris Herbert 4959 3663 Alan Stuart 4952 8569 You must ring to confirm
EASTER. Friday –Monday April 18-21	Camp Wollar Munghorn Gap		Ann Lindsey 4951 2008
ANZAC DAY WEEKEND Friday –Monday 25 April to 27 April	Camp Craven State Forest		Alan Stuart 4952 8569
Tuesday May 6	Midweek Outing Mt Sugarloaf	8.000am Top Car Park	Leader: Robert Stewart 4963 2029
Wednesday May 14	Club Meeting	7.30pm Shortland Wetlands Centre	Speaker: Chris Herbert Digiscoping birds
Saturday May 17	Hunter Wader Survey	9.00am Various locations as directed	Chris Herbert 4959 3663 Alan Stuart 4952 8569 You must ring to confirm
Saturday May 24	Atlassing Denman/Sandy Hollow	6:30am Maitland Railway Station	Ann Lindsey 4951 2008 you must ring to confirm
Sunday May 25	Field outing East Seaham (private property)	8:00am Macdonalds car park at Raymond Terrace	Leader: Ray Walker
Tuesday June 3	Midweek Outing Woods Point Morisset	8.00am Cnr MacQuarie and Fisher Pt Rd Morisset	Leader Val Moon 43591670
Queens Birthday W'End Saturday-Monday June 7-9	Camp "Waitui" Johns River		Contact: Di Johnson 4975 1777
Wednesday June 11	Club Meeting	7.30pm Shortland Wetlands Centre	Speaker: Phil Hansbro Sea Birds of the Indian Ocean
Saturday June 14	Hunter Wader Survey	8.00am Various locations as directed	Chris Herbert 4959 3663 Alan Stuart 4952 8569 You must ring to confirm
Saturday June 21	Atlassing TBA		Ann Lindsey 4951 2008 you must ring to confirm
Sunday June 22	Wetlands Day plus New Members BBQ	10:00am Wetlands Centre	Contact: Tom Clarke 4951 3872