



Hunter Bird Observers Club

NEWSLETTER

Issue 5/06

October/November 2006

Newsletter articles welcome –
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Hunter Bird Observers Club Inc.
Affiliated with the Bird Observers Club of Australia

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Telephone: (02) 4958 5942
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Committee

President: Liz Crawford
Vice-president: Alan Stuart
Secretary: Tom Clarke
Treasurer: Rowley Smith

Committee Members:

Michael Todd
Grant Brosie
Anthony Gooden
Chris Herbert
Ann Lindsey
Robert MacDonald

Conservation Officer

Ann Lindsey

Life Members

Wilma Barden
Sue Hamonet
Ed Hamonet (dec)

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*

NEW MEMBERS

HBOC welcomes the following new members: -

Allen Friis
Jaii Jeffries
Rachael Russell
Richard Nicholas
Suzi & Toni Burgin of Nelson Bay
Karen and Marc Thumm of Hamilton
& a special welcome back to Michael Kearns

HBOC Annual Membership for 2006 remains at \$25 Family or Single and \$3 for Juniors. Fees are now well overdue.

NEWSLETTER DATES for 2006

Edition

Copy Deadline

December 2006/January 2007

3 December 2006

PRESIDENT'S REPORT – OCTOBER 2006

Spring is such an exciting time in the bird world – Koels, Channel-billed Cuckoos, Fan-tailed Cuckoos, bronze-cuckoos, Rainbow Bee-eaters and Dollarbirds are all back from their northward winter migrations and seeking suitable hosts for their offspring or nesting locations. Lots of birds have already raised young and many more are into the swing of courtship and nest building. At our recent club camp near Coolah Tops, over 25 species were seen feeding young, carrying food or nest-building – lots of excitement for both birds and bird watchers!

Migratory shorebirds are now arriving from the northern hemisphere – hundreds of Red Knots, Curlew Sandpipers, Eastern Curlews and Bar-tailed Godwits can now be observed in the Hunter Estuary. Most of the Red Knots will continue south to Victoria, or even on to New Zealand, but we expect about a thousand godwits and a couple of hundred Curlew Sandpipers to stay in the Hunter over summer.

Whenever you're looking at shorebirds, check them for coloured leg flags – note the colour and which leg the flag is on, and pass on your sighting to Ann Lindsay for forwarding to the Australian Wader Studies Group.

A third coal loader to be built in Newcastle by the Newcastle Coal Infrastructure Group (NCIG) will obliterate Big Pond and require a rail loop to be constructed near Deep Pond on the industrial-zoned part of Kooragang Island. HBOC wrote a submission about the Environmental Assessment of this proposed development, seeking compensatory habitat for the wetlands that will be infilled. Threatened species such as the Australasian Bittern, Blue-billed Duck and Black-tailed Godwit have been recorded in those wetlands.

Congratulations to Robert McDonald, one of our young Committee members, who has won a Green Ambassador Award through the Commonwealth Bank, in recognition of his contributions to landcare and conservation. As part of the award, Rob has been given the opportunity to take part in conservation activities in Tasmania. To help fund his travel expenses, a Trivia Night will be held at The Hunter Wetlands Centre on Friday, 24 November 2006, for \$10 per person. Hope you can be there!

Recent rains have made a huge difference to Hexham Swamp. As the surrounding pasture land became a wetland, over 20 Black Swans were sitting on nests and dozens of Whiskered Terns were hunting for prey. In company with White-necked and White-faced Herons, Straw-necked, White and Glossy Ibis and Black-winged Stilts, to name a few of the species revelling in the new foraging area.

The annual Birds Australia Twitchathon will be held on the last weekend of October - a great race to see lots of birds and an excellent opportunity to raise money for Birds Australia's research projects. If twenty-four hours of fast-tracked birding doesn't appeal to you, try the more relaxed champagne team event! Registration forms are available from Ann Lindsay.

We are always looking for new faces for the Committee and help with the many activities of the Club – please talk to a Committee member if you would like to have an active role in any aspect of the Club – you will be most welcome.

Happy birding!

Liz Crawford

MIDWEEK OUTING: AWABA BAY

Tuesday 1 August 2006.

Report from Bev and David Kibble

Monday, gloomy with the occasional shower and an unpleasant breeze, did not bode well for Tuesday's mid-week outing. But Tuesday dawned bright and sunny with a pleasant light breeze to cool us on our stroll through Awaba Bay's State Recreational Area

So it was with pleasure and not a little relief that we met twenty or so HBOC members to explore the birds of Awaba Bay. And what a delightful exploration it was. We set out along the track put in by National Parks a few years ago and quickly became the straggling group that bird outings do.

We had no sooner set out when a lone raptor crossed path, but unfortunately no one could identify it. Not even Sue. But the usual culprits were present and easily identified; Yellow-faced Honeyeaters, Rainbow Lorikeets, Pardalotes, Magpies, the occasional Sulphur Crest, some Kookas, Cormorants, Chestnut Teals and the occasional Pelican, – as might be expected on a lakeside ramble. Like most outings this one had its highlight – three Rose Robins, not together but seen serially by most of us, beautiful birds and wonderful sightings in a stunning setting. The first we had seen in all our ramblings in our "own backyard", so they were very special sightings for us.

However this was an outing marked by those birds we did not see as much as by the birds we saw. Where were the Lewins, the Cuckoo Shrikes, the Hornbills?

However Awaba Bay itself was the highlight of the day, the trail with its steps and bridges winding south towards Bolton Point, the lake sparkling on one side and a forest of tall gums climbing up the hillside to the ridge line on the other providing welcome shade. It was widely agreed that even if we had not seen a single bird the walk would have made the outing worthwhile.

Back along the road to the small park near Marmong Point Sailing Club for morning tea before we set out for one of those magnets for birdwatchers – the Sewage Treatment Works (now closed) where a couple of Black Swans, among other birds, although not the crowd of water birds we've seen there at other times, graced our binoculars.

Lunch near Lake Macquarie Art Gallery after which a few stalwarts went a little further around the Lake before calling the day to a close with about 48 species of bird on our list

An uncommon Common Sandpiper was also reported from this outing

Blooming Marvellous Awabakal

**Field Outing to Awabakal Nature Reserve
20th August 2006**

Report from Tom Clarke

Every spring they have a wildflower walk over the heath between Redhead and Dudley. Apart from birds, I am also interested in plants and stuff and promised myself that one day I would go look at the wildflowers. How good was it then that an HBOC outing to Awabakal was scheduled just a few weeks before the wildflower walk and just about everything (flannel flowers excluded) was already blooming.

It is absolute heaven to wander about the heath in flower and to soak up the colour and variety of hundreds of native plants. There was even a terrestrial orchid in flower that was new to me and to my camera. I have been able to identify it as *Lyperanthus suaveolens*, a moderately common species in heath and woodland, well of course it would be common but it was new to me.

Now there was some pretty good bird watching going on as well, lets not forget our purpose for being there, but it was a case of enjoying all things of nature and the healthy group of sixteen were keen to have an expansive day. Besides that, it was obvious from the start that the knowledge base amongst our group was exceptionally high with several expert botanists happy to help in identification. So it turned out to be a crawl through the heath with so much to see and enjoy.

Crawling through heath can reap unexpected rewards on the bird watching side of things and our slow pace made it possible to get pretty close to some fabulous sightings. There were plenty of New Holland and Eastern Spinebill moments for everyone to get excited about and those Tawny-

crowned Honeyeaters eventually showed up after some doubt about their whereabouts.

Of greatest fascination to the group was the Dusky Woodswallows that used the dead flower spikes of the xanthorrhoeas to great effect as hunting perches. My lasting image of the day, however, was a magnificently vibrant male Variegated Fairy-wren when it jumped out into the sunlight and for that moment outshone the flowers. This gem drew gasps of joy from all those that saw it.

The outing to Awabakal also impressed me by the high number of young people we had in the group. Young people less than thirty years with tremendous knowledge, skill and passion. I felt it was a privilege to be associated with them on such a great day.

Ellalong Lagoon is for the Birds

Field Outing to Ellalong Lagoon and Millfield 23rd July 2006

Report from Tom Clarke

Ellalong Lagoon has been in the news a bit lately as local residents and others continue to fight against overdevelopment of the Ellalong, Paxton and Millfield area. Hunter Bird Observers Club has lent a hand with submissions to Council objecting to what would be unacceptable impacts on Ellalong Lagoon and the chain of wetlands along Congewai Creek.

Ellalong Lagoon is a significant body of water and attracts many species of waterfowl and wading birds. This well-known wetland has always been a great place for birdwatchers as well and our club outing in July proved to be most enjoyable and rewarding. As a bonus, we were met by the President of Ellalong Residents Wetlands Protection Group, Roger Lewis, and he thanked HBOC for its commitment to saving Ellalong Lagoon.

Ellalong Lagoon is huge and it is impossible to look over the entire place from just one spot. A good place to start is at the Ellalong end where you can drive down a lane to very close to the water. From here it is possible to get good views of water birds as well as hear the calls of forest birds from the heavily timbered areas to the south.

It would be tremendous to be able to walk through that forest and you can only imagine the birdwatching potential of it. Even from across the water we could hear the calls of Brown Cuckoo-dove, Shining Bronze-Cuckoo, White-throated Treecreeper, Golden Whistler and Grey Shrike Thrush. Too bad then, we just had to put up with Red-kneed Dotterel, Black-winged Stilt and a whole heap of ducks.

We did get more excited when one of our members called "emu". Following the instructions the rest of us searched a particular paddock and just in time to see the emu turn sideways and morph into an alpaca! Good one Joan.

The best place to sit down and have morning tea is on the open area at the hillside intersection at the Paxton end. From this vantage point you can see over the largest reaches of the wetland and with the Watagan escarpment producing a dramatic backdrop it is a magnificent scene. Wouldn't you just love to have that view from your back verandah? Well of course but so would 9000 other people if things go against us. Sitting there we all felt like royalty and looking through scopes we could see Musk Duck, Australian Shoveler, Hardhead, grebes, teal, heron, spoonbill, you name it. Three raptor sightings, Collared Sparrowhawk, Brown Falcon and Little Eagle, completed a very satisfying morning.

On then to Millfield where we had nothing planned but thought it was worth a visit. A brilliant couple of hours was spent basically standing about on the Congewai Creek Bridge, walking down Owen's Lane and then back on the bridge again. Well the place was full of birds and our little group accounted for over fifty species, mostly passerines. Honeyeaters were dominating the list and it was easy work to see Blue-faced, White-plumed and Striped Honeyeaters plus thornbills, parrots and finches. A single Jacky Winter and a Restless Flycatcher were specials observed in one particular front yard.

Thanks to the other six members who shared such a pleasurable day of bird watching.

The Minitwitch – August 2006

The second 'Minitwitch' for 2006 was held on Sunday 27th August. This is basically a 5hr version of the 24hr **Twitchathon**. In total, 7 teams took part, with 5 being from the Hunter Region, one from Dubbo and one from Rutherglen, Vic. Other teams from Forbes and Brisbane were late withdrawals. Without the Forbes team, this meant that only 2 "inland" teams took part.

Matt Weeks from Rutherglen managed 112 species, which is a fantastic effort without the luxury of rainforest / coastline etc. Apparently they were on 80 spp. after the first 2 hours, which would probably have had them ahead of the 'coasties' at the same point in the race. The '**Double Dubbo Dippers**' came in with 92 spp., after sleeping in until 20 minutes before the race starting time! The D's have vowed to crack the ton for the next twitch, a sentiment which will be no doubt spurred on by the Rutherglen score.

In the Hunter, three teams scored 125+, with the '**Square-tailed Quites**' running in with 135 species to take out the '**Bar-breasted Brewing Duck Trophy**'. The '**Young Guns**' came a close second with 132 and the '**Oil Barons**' third with 126. All of these scores were excellent considering they were still technically during winter. In fact, between the top 3 teams, almost 170 different species were recorded in the Hunter in the 5 hours – another testament to the diversity of habitats and birds we have right on our doorstep.

Highlights for the Hunter teams were an easterly Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater near Jerry's Plains (Oil Barons); Blue-billed Duck and Baillon's Crake at Walka Water Works (Oil Barons and Crested Shrike Twits respectively); an early Latham's Snipe on Louth Park Rd (Crested Shrike Twits); White-fronted Tern off Newcastle Baths (Square-tailed Quites), a displaying Pacific Baza at Brunkerville (Choughed Babbling Baza's) and a Wandering Whistling Duck at Shortland (Young Guns). The D's last bird of the twitch was a Regent Honeyeater (at Terramungerie Reserve).

Overall, the feedback from the event has been extremely enthusiastic and many people throughout Australia showed interested in the results. It really is a great way of finding lots of different species in a short period of time (almost a different bird every 2 minutes) and it really makes you appreciate how diverse your local area can be. Many thanks to the HBOC members who took part.

I am travelling overseas from January 2007, so the task of organising the next 'Minitwitch' will probably go to one of the Oil Barons, most likely for summer / autumn 2007 (though I may be tempted to compete from wherever I am!!).

Mick Roderick

Team totals:

Square-tailed Quites (Mick Roderick, Craig Anderson) - **135**

Young Guns (Rob McDonald, Colin Goodenough, Michael Kearns, Rachel Young Gun) - **132**

Oil Barons (Steve Roderick, Allan Richardson) - **126**

Matt Weeks (Rutherglen) - **112**

Choughed Babbling Baza's (Nick and Liz Livanos, Jenny Powers, Liz Huxtable) - **110**

Crested Shrike Twits (Lorna Mee, Jim Smart, Paul Baird) - **108**

Double Dubbo Dippers (Dubbo – Craig Arms, Simone Pye) - **92**

NSW and ACT Twitchathon 2006

Proceeds to go to the Australian Bird Study Associations Research Fund

This year the Australian Bird Study Associations Research Fund will be the recipient of our fund raising conservation efforts. The Research Fund provides grants to students at Australian Universities who are carrying out research on Australian birds. Our aim is to increase the value of the investment fund so that more funds can be granted for research. In recent years the Research Fund has been able to provide small grants to two students per year to assist in their fieldwork and research.

In 2006 the Australian Bird Study Association awarded grants to Grant Palmer and Dean Portelli. Grant has a long term study underway investigating the response of bird communities to alternative land uses in the rural living zone surrounding the large regional centre of Ballarat (Vic). Dean's research is part of his PhD studies at New South Wales University into the social organisation and breeding biology of Hall's Babbler. By increasing the amount of the Investment fund more money will be made available to students like Grant and Dean for important research into the biology and conservation of Australian birds.

This Twitchathon Project aims to increase the Investment Fund from the current \$25,000 to \$40,000 or more!

How to join the Twitchathon 28-29 October 2006

1. Contact Alan Morris for your 2006 Twitchathon Kit
2. Form a team with one or even a dozen friends and family and go birdwatching over this October weekend. You can travel anywhere in NSW and/or the ACT. See how many species of birds your team can find from 3 pm Saturday 28 October to 4 pm Sunday 29 October 2006. Note the new starting and finishing time as trialled in 2004.
3. Get sponsors. In the weeks before this event, persuade family and friends to sponsor you so many cents or even dollars for each species your team sees. You just need either lots of little sponsorships or a few big ones!

There are prizes for the most species seen by three winning teams as well as prizes for the most money raised, the rarest bird seen by an individual, and prizes for children. The prizes include Trophies, a weekend in a motel at Leeton with a personal guided tour of the Ramsar Internationally famous Fivebough Swamp Wetlands (sponsored by the Fivebough & Tuckerbil Wetland Trust), 2 nights for two at Bombah Point Eco Lodge, a pair of Steiner Skyhawk 8x42 binoculars (sponsored by ABSA & Mainstay Optical Pty Ltd), books, book vouchers, champagne, wine, special "T" shirts and other prizes to go to the winners in the various categories of the Twitchathon. Contact me for a full list.

So don't think that you have to be an A class birdwatcher to take part. Whichever method you chose for your Twitchathon – the laid back (ie the Champagne Race), the deadly serious, or the donor only version, remember it is all about educating others into the importance of nature conservation, particularly the conservation of Australian birds.

Last year we raised \$14000, and the two years before & \$10,500 & \$13548 respectively! In the past five years we have raised over \$60,000. This is a great achievement and we have been able to make a significant difference for the birds in the Capertee Valley, the Murray Valley, the Cowra District, Newhaven Station (NT) & the Education Unit at Gluepot Reserve.

I know that you will join me in making a fantastic contribution one way or another. So, do ask me for your Twitchathon Kit **TODAY** or sponsor a Twitchathon team in your bird club or group! I can put you in touch with a team if you do not know of one in your area!

Alan Morris

Twitchathon Co-ordinator

(For Birds Australia, Southern NSW & ACT)

c/- 3 Murray St Bateau Bay NSW 2261

Telephone: 02 43 342776

Fax: 02 9436 0466

Email amorris@ceinternet.com.au

Support Your Local Brewer!

The 2006 Twitchathon is set to be another clanger, with all of the top teams of 2005 revving their engines in preparation for the October 28/29 event. Not least of all, the never-tiring twitching troublemakers – the **Hunter Home Brewers** have primed their eskies, greased their wheels and oiled their oil in preparation for 'the main event'.

Having been pipped by 2 species last year (whilst breaking the previous record by 5 birds), the boys are literally twitching with anticipation of the 2006 episode. I am particularly excited, as the crippling prospect of not being around for next year's Twitch is starting to sink in.

Whilst the Brewers always make exhaustive efforts to find as many species as we can, we also wish to enlist as many sponsors as we can also, as the event is ultimately a fundraising affair.

Who knows, we may even be open to a little 'brewing prize-giving' to generous sponsors.....

...to pledge a sponsorship, contact Mick Roderick
fred_barney_72@yahoo.com / 0432 356 590

the interests of "Australian values" political correctness, gender equity, intergenerational justice and fair goes all round the Editor feels the need to point out that other Hunter based teams – notably the Hunter Thickheads – will also be soliciting donations for the Twitchathon.

The subtle mention of "prize-giving" to generous sponsors (not Home Brew I hope!) brings the first whiff of professionalism to this most amateur of pastimes. What next? The suspicion that these lads bird on steroids may yet prove correct and God knows what drugs the Thickheads take to get up in the morning.

Compulsory urine testing anyone? (ED)

CONGRATULATIONS TO ROBERT MACDONALD.

Robert has been selected as one of 20 young Australian as Commonwealth Bank Green Ambassadors for 2006.

The program is a partnership between the Commonwealth Bank and Conservation Volunteers Australia (CVA) and it recognises rewards and supports young people who actively assist or protect their local environment.

Robert is involved with three Landcare groups –one at the Hunter Wetlands Centre, one at Stockton Sandspit and one at Newcastle University. He has been involved in these activities for four years. And of course, he is also a keen and knowledgeable member of HBOC serving on our Management Committee.

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE HUNTER WETLAND CENTRE

The Centre has had a win in the National Bank Volunteer Awards (State) – it also won this prize three years ago. A very handy \$7000 will come in useful but mostly this accolade is a terrific acknowledgement of the efforts of volunteers at the Centre and for the Centre's role in training and supporting volunteers.

CONGRATULATIONS TO KAREN & STEVE

Charlize Roderick is our newest birdo. She was born on 8 September and we wish her and her parents all the best.

"I think she's focusing!"

"She's tracking left to right!"

"Do we need a harness for these 7x25's"?

"How many more fluffy birds are we going to get?"

NOTES FROM MEMBERS

Richard Baxter is planning a 7 day boat trip to the islands of the northern Torres Strait departing Horn Island on 7/10/07 in what sounds like a reasonable quality charter boat. The planned route is to depart Horn early on the 7th and after a brief stop at Little Tuesday Island for Pale White-eye, continue north and spend 2.5 days on Boigu, 1 day on Duaun and 2.5 days on Saibai before arriving back on Horn on the afternoon of the last day. Cost \$3500pp – all monies payable to the charter company. If you are interested in this opportunity to add some rarities to your Australian birdlist, contact Richard directly. randrbaxter@yahoo.com.

(This information through Alan Stuart. This is not an official HBOC activity)

Michael Todd writes on Beak and Feather Disease. Following reports of diseased cockatoos in the Buttaba area, Council asked Michael to investigate. It seems Beak and Feather is regarded as a natural and common disease in parrots in Australia. Where it can be bad news is if a population is already struggling for other reasons (low numbers, habitat loss etc) beak and feather disease could push them over the edge. It is caused by a virus, which is very tough and can be transmitted orally or by faeces or feathers – likely at a feeding station. It is considered likely to survive for years in nesting hollows.

The virus has been listed as a threatening process by the Dept of Environment and Conservation in NSW. It is probably not something that we need to be overly concerned about, seeing as it is naturally existing but this might be an opportunity to mention the need for hygiene at bird feeding stations. The disease can also be caught by people – symptoms like flu. This outbreak may reinforce the negative aspects of regularly feeding birds – they should be forced to find their own food as well.

Michael has some links to government sites and information for those interested --

<http://www.threatenedspecies.environment.new.gov/tsprofile/profile.aspx?>

and

<http://www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/tap/beak-feather/index.html>.

Phil Hansbro is again trying to sample migrant waders to see what micro organism they are carrying as part of a study at the University of Newcastle. The project is approved by all the relevant ethics committees and is helping to put facts together on “bird flu risk” to ensure rational responses to the phenomenon.

He would be grateful for timely notification of sightings of migrant waders around Newcastle and the Hunter Valley.

Contact Dr Phil Hansbro

Ph 02 49236819, Fax 02 4923 6814

Email: Philip.Hansbro@newcastle.edu.au

BIRDS AUSTRALIA ATLASSING WORKSHOP

The search goes on. Birds tell us about the state of the environment. Collecting data about birds remains a core project of Birds Australia and we are all able to contribute from our observations. Would you like to do atlassing but you're not sure how? How do you select a site? How do you measure out the area you are meant to cover? How do you find out the coordinates? How do you fill in the forms?

A free workshop run by Alan Morris will help you.

Alan has completed over 5.500 Atlas surveys, so he knows how to do it.

**The Workshop will be held at Wentworth Common at Sydney Olympic Park
Saturday 4 November starting 9.00am.**

Meet at the picnic area at Wentworth Common, Marjorie Jackson Drive. Bring Binoculars and lunch if you wish to spend a little time birding as well.

Please register you interest in attending to:

Pixie at BASNA Office. Ph 02 9436 0388

Email: rosella63@bigpond.com

WETLAND CENTRE PROGRAMS SPRING 2006

WEEKLY ACTIVITIES PROGRAM

11am: Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday.

Tank Feeding Talks.

11.30am :Daily.

Magpie Geese Feeding Talks

12 Noon: Wednesday and Sunday –

Free 30 minutes Guided Tours.

EVENTS PROGRAM –October and November

Canoeing on Ironbark Creek: Oct 1 & Nov 5

Spotlight Prowl: Oct 21 & Nov 18

Breakfast with the Birds: 12 November

Catchment Day: 22 October

Wind in the Willows: 7 to 14 October
At 10.am and 1pm

Hunter Organic & Natural Living Show 11 November

For more details on Events Program including charges and times contact The Wetland Centre

OCTOBER SCHOOL HOLIDAY PROGRAM

Wetland Turtles (4-7yrs) October 3,6,10 & 13

Arts Alive (7-12yrs) October 4 & 11

Canoeing Adventures (12-16yrs) Oct. 5 & 12

JANUARY SCHOOL HOLIDAY PROGRAM

Wetland Turtles (4-7 yrs) Jan 9,12,16,19,23,26

Arts Alive (7-12 yrs) January 10,17,24

Wet & Wild Canoeing(12-16yrs) Jan 11,18,25

All School Holiday programs are fully supervised run from 9am to 12.30pm and cost \$15 per child

Entry Fees apply except for HWC members.

Ph 02 4951 6466. Web: www.wetlands.org.au.

EVENTS: BIRDS AUSTRALIA

Fivebough & Tuckerbil Wetlands Trust
Murrumbidgee Wetlands Forum 22-24 Nov
Birding and Nature Fair 24-26 November

For more information go to www.fivebough.org.au
or write to Fivebough & Tuckerbil Wetlands Trust
PO Box 357 Leeton NSW 2705. email:
trust@fivebough.org.au.

Australasian Ornithological Conference

The 4th Biennial Australasian Ornithological Conference will be held in Perth on 3rd to 5th December 2007. For further information visit www.birdswa.com.au/aoc2007 or write to S Mather BAWA 167 Perry Lakes Drive Floreat WA 6014 Ph: 08 9389 6416

CHARLES STURT UNIVERSITY

Subject: New Short Course in Ornithology

CSU announces a unique new Short Course "Principles of Ornithology" to be held on 21 – 30 November 2006

An opportunity for birders to update their ornithological skills, learn more about the anatomy and ecology of birds and understand methods for field surveys and specimen based research. The course can be taken as a self-contained short course, or can be used as a stepping stone into CSU's ornithology degree program. Upon completion of this course, participants will be awarded credit towards CSU's Graduate Certificate of Ornithology and Graduate Diploma of Ornithology. Wide range of syllabus topics. Includes field trips with exceptional birding opportunities.

Limited to 20 participants the course costs \$3300 which includes all accommodation, ground transport and most meals

Info

www.csu.edu.au/faculty/sciagr/eis/orn_course.htm
or contact course organiser Kerry Whitworth ph 02 6051 9876 or kwhitworth@csu.edu.au

BIRDING TOURS AUSTRALIA

COCOS and CHRISTMAS ISLAND 2007

Either Richard Baxter or Phil Hansbro will be leading 2 birding tours to the Cocos-Keeling Islands & Christmas Island in 2007.

FEBRUARY 2007 26 Feb to 5 March 2007
MARCH 2007 5th March to 12 March 2007

(Both Tours are in the Wet Season to maximise chances of finding rare vagrants)

MISSION: Find all the endemics and search for rare vagrants on both islands. Phil and Richard have been to Christmas and Cocos-Keeling Islands 3 times previously and in addition to easily finding all the endemic birds have also seen the following awesome species: WATERCOCK, COMMON KINGFISHER, ASIAN KOEL, PIN-TAILED SNIPE, GREY-HEADED WAGTAIL AND CHINESE POND HERON in breeding plumage!

Your package includes:

- **Economy class Airfare Perth to the Cocos-Keeling Is.**
- **3 x Nights accommodation at the "Cocos Beach Motel" on West Island and Cocos car hire.**
- **Fly Cocos Is to Christmas Is. 4 x Nights Accommodation Christmas Island and car hire**
- **Fly Christmas Island to Perth**
- **All Taxes and Ticket Levies.**
Meals not included

COST \$2500. ex Perth
(single supplement \$200) (every effort will be made for people to share if desired)

Contact Richard Baxter on Mob: 0412 450212 or randrbaxter@yahoo.com OR

Lisa Preston (Christmas Island Travel)
Ph. 08 9164 7169 or lisap@cittravel.com.au

RECENT RESEARCH : EVOLUTION IN ACTION?

In an article in a recent New Scientist (No 2561, 22 July 2006 p 20) Bob Holmes has updated what must be one of the most studied avian populations in the wild – the finches of the Galapagos Islands. He cites work by the Grants who have been studying the finches since the early 1970s.

Until recently, one small island, Daphne Major, was occupied only by a medium sized species of ground finch, *Geospiza fortis*. During a drought in 1977, when the seeds they normally ate became scarce, the birds evolved larger beaks that enabled them to crack the larger, rougher seeds that remained. In the early 1980s though, the Grants noticed that a larger ground finch *G. magnirostris* had colonised the island – the only such colonisation seen in the Galapagos during nearly a century of recorded observations.

When another drought hit in 2003/2004 causing the seed crop on Daphne Major to fail again, many finches of both species died of starvation. But *G. magnirostris* with its larger heavier bill was much better than *G. fortis* at cracking and eating the remaining large seeds. As a result *G. fortis* was forced to try to eke out a living from tiny-seeded plants instead, for which a smaller more dextrous bill might have been advantageous. Sure enough, smaller beaked individuals of *G. fortis* proved better able to survive the 2004 drought. By 2005 *G. fortis* had a significantly smaller beak – around 5 per cent on average. Since the major difference between this drought and the one in 1977 is the presence of a second species competing for seeds, the Grants conclude that *G. fortis* evolved a smaller beak in order to escape this competition.

This change to evade competition known as character displacement has been inferred many times when competitors are more different when they co-occur than when they live apart. This is the first time though, that the entire process has been observed from start to finish. However Holmes refers to the work of Andrew Hendry who reports that bill size changes are common in Darwin's finches and that we'd need to see the same changes in similar circumstances to support this evidence of character displacement.

(from Birds Qld Newsletter Vol 37/11)

Reconnecting with UK Raptors

from Harold Tarrant

I often ask myself why I enjoy watching UK birds. After all, the species-list for the whole of Europe does not seem extensive compared with that for our fabulous Hunter region. Yet I always find something to enjoy in even the briefest trip to the UK. Part of the answer lies in the difficulty I had in finding any birds of great interest when I was brought up in the South East of England.

To be sure, a few species such as yellowhammers, Chiffchaffs, and yellow wagtails were commoner then, and many of the declines probably have something to do with the unfriendly EC farming procedures that were virtually forced on farmers if they wanted to be competitive. But the feathered world at that time seemed less exciting than as it is today.

I was probably as interested in the butterflies, moths, grasshoppers and dragonflies as the birds, and angling also helped me to connect with nature, usually in a way that was not too damaging, since we habitually returned everything to the water with as much care as possible. But the interest in birds was always there. I remember thumbing through *The Observers Book of Birds*, the kind of diminutive guide that many a family then owned, looking at all kinds of seemingly dramatic species, more or less convinced that I was never likely to see them.

No, I have still not gone off in search of all the species that I should once have loved to see, though many of them, such as the black redstart and the hoopoe, are now familiar from elsewhere in Europe. Others I have seen reasonably frequently when I have been back and looked in the right habitat. The RSPB has achieved some tremendous successes in habitat restoration, and getting out to their sites has often meant seeing something special. In the UK there are not too many species that are simply unpredictable, though crossbills and waxbills are pretty notorious; other species tend to be found where they are expected, and local tourism offices have often publicised the best sites while competing for the ecotourist income.

While it is great to be around in May, when the breeding migrants are all back and sea-birds have colonies on suitable cliffs, there are plenty of species that arrive, at least in England, only in the winter time, generally targeting specific types of foods that will occur in predictable places.

The success of conservation groups is nowhere more obvious than with regard to raptors. The recolonising of Scotland by Ospreys after a long absence is well known. It is likewise well known that beautiful Red Kite, more reminiscent of our Square-Tailed Kite than of the Black Kite, was reduced once to a single breeding pair in central Wales. But the situation has been transformed in a much more radical way than one would guess from that.

Until I came to live in Australia in 1973 I was only conscious of having seen Kestrels and Buzzards, though occasionally I had asked myself whether or not a given bird could have been a Sparrowhawk. On return visits I have now seen sparrowhawks in a wide variety of habitats, circling over towns in east and central England, over southern Dublin, and (even more improbably) hunting in a central London park. Once when staying in Cambridge I watched one ripping up a Starling on the lawn while I was also having breakfast!

While Kestrels may be declining, Buzzards are increasing their range. The Welsh Kites have increased enough for me to have seen about 10 on a four day trip across the border, but thanks to a program of targeted reintroductions I have now stumbled across these birds in Scotland and England too. Any car trip between Oxford and Heathrow can bring one into contact with birds wheeling over the M40 motorway, and, now we are practised in picking kites from buzzards, we can say with some certainty that we have counted up to 26 birds on a single M40 trip this June.

Wales remains the stronghold for a more elusive raptor, the Northern or European Goshawk. While the bird does indeed belong in Britain, DNA suggests that the native population has been replaced by an escaped population from further afield.

I have now seen this bird both east and west of the central ranges, without studying where to go or making any special trips. A bird of the forests, they seem to have adapted well to pine plantations.

The UK has long had three species of Harrier, and by 1998 I was at last able to say that I'd seen them all. The Marsh Harrier is largely a summer visitor, which, like the Kite, had probably been reduced to a single breeding pair in East Anglia. Now the RSPB *Birds* magazine (autumn 2006, p. 85) reports that their numbers have reached a 200-year high, with 360 breeding females in England *and Scotland* last year.

The reference to Scotland was a bit of a surprise even though we had been told of a visiting female at a Galloway reserve only in May, since I had still thought that East Anglia was the only sensible place to try and see them. Our path on this visit took us to none of the sites I was aware of, but we once got close enough to that part of the country to watch one obligingly fly overhead. The success story has not been repeated by the other two harrier species, with hen harriers suffering from the fact that grouse moors are their favourite haunt, and red grouse a favourite meal. No legal protection seems sufficient to deter feral gamekeepers, but the birds can be found breeding in suitable northern habitat, and may also be located wintering in and around more southerly marsh areas. The rarest regular is the Montague's Harrier, whose few breeding locations are much less well publicised. I feel privileged to have seen the bird just once.

A great deal of fuss is made of Peregrines in the UK. Lovers of cliffs and similar structures (natural and unnatural), they are heavily protected, and treated as something really special. Personally I've not been too bothered about a bird I see often enough here (heresy!), but the Hobby is well worth watching where they can be found in the summer months, often hawking for dragonflies above lakes in the south. In the winter months its absence is made up for by the diminutive Merlin, whose smart little male is only the size of a common Blackbird. In northern areas it can be found all the year round, and I have found it to be a bird that one just has to stumble across.

Unlike the kestrel (another motorway dweller!), the other falcons are mostly encountered off the beaten track. I have not got up to the Scottish Highlands for years, so I've not been checking on Golden Eagles, nor on the successfully reintroduced White-Tailed Eagle, in fact a sea-eagle, now found on the west coast north of Glasgow, including the inner islands of Mull and Skye. For the Osprey, though, one doesn't have to go to Scotland now. I watched one in June lugging a fat trout off to its nest in the East Midlands.

I still have not seen either a White-Tailed Eagle or a Honey-Buzzard (in the UK at least), and they will just have to wait. I am not going twitching. To judge by some of the other successes, there may come a day when one can stumble across them with ease. And to me it is so much more satisfying when the birds just choose to show up where you are!

How birds led Jonathan Franzen to care.

Jonathan Franzen is a well-regarded young New York based author – his best-known book being *The Corrections*. His persona is that of a hip intellectual, clever, difficult and a bit elitist. He famously refused to have his book endorsed by the Oprah Winfrey Book Club.

He is also a “birder” and was quoted in a Sydney Morning Herald essay (1/4/06) as follows -

“ Only now, when nature had become the place where birds were, did I finally get what all the fuss was about”

and, later in recording his reaction to an Al Gore speech on climate change, he went on to say

“ Trying to fall asleep that night, mentally replaying Gore's computer images of a desertified North America, I couldn't find a way not to care about the billions of birds and thousands of avian species that were liable to be wiped out worldwide. This was the scenario I'd been at pains to avert for many years: not the world's falling apart in the future but my feeling inconveniently obliged to care about it in the present. This was my bird problem.”

OBSERVATIONS FROM CLUB NIGHTS AUG/SEP 2006.

Jun/Jul	Common Blackbird		1m	Kurri Kurri [garden]	V.Burgess
Jun 19	White-headed Pigeon		1	Cardiff	N.Livanos
Jul 17	Glossy Ibis		4	Lenaghan's Swamp	"
Aug 6	Bush Stone-Curlew		1	Harrington [Caravan Park]	"
Aug 7-9	Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo		2	Cardiff	"
Jul 15	Radjah Shelduck		2	Bombah Point [MLNP}	P.Lightfoot
	Glossy Black Cockatoo		6	"	"
Jul 24	Sulphur-crested Cockatoo		>450	Fordwich Rd. Fordwich	P.Alexander
	Collared Sparrowhawk		1	"	"
Jul 26	Sulphur-crested Cockatoo		>300	"	R.Smith
Jul 26	Eastern Spinebill		2	Fassifern Railway Stn.	P.Durie
Jul 16	Brahminy Kite		2	Stockton Sandspit	T.Clarke
Jul 24	Tawny Frogmouth		2	Floraville [Armstrong property]	"
Jul 25	Barn Owl		1	Waratah West Public School	"
Aug 1	Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo		6	Croker's Creek [Windale]	"
Aug 8	Collared Sparrowhawk		1	Flaggy Creek [Kaleen St. Res]	"
	White-headed Pigeon		1	"	"
Jul 28	Spangled Drongo		1	T.W.C.	J. Jeffries
Jul 31	Noisy Pitta		1	Harrington [Rainforest]	M.Roderick/Richardson
	Double-banded Plover		3	Harrington Estuary	"
Aug 5	Chestnut-rumped Heathwren		2	Awaba	A.Richardson
Jul 15	Spotted Quail-thrush		2	Wattagan Mountains	C.Goodenough
Aug 1	Common Sandpiper		1	Marmong Point	"
Aug 8	Spotted Pardalote		2	Teralba [Quarry]	R.Russell
Jul 28	Brown Cuckoo-dove		1	"	"
Jul 24	Red-rumped Parrot		2	Birmingham Gardens [Park]	"
Jul 28	Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo		7	Teralba [Quarry]	"
Jul 25	Red-browed Finch		2	"	"
Jul/Aug	Olive-backed oriole		2	Raymond Terrace [garden]	F.Humphreys
Jul 20	Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo		4	"	"
Aug 5	Collared Sparrowhawk		1	"	"
Aug 7	White-backed Swallow		1	Bolwarra Lagoon	H.Tarrant
Aug 27	White-bellied Sea-eagle		1	Teralba [Cockle Creek]	C.Mann
	Azure Kingfisher		1	"	"
	Striated Heron		1	"	"
Jul-Sep	Southern Boobook		1	Cundletown [garden]	B. & M. Langdown
	Eastern Rosella	Pr [nesting]		"	"
	Osprey	Pr [nesting]		Cundletown [farm]	"
Sep 3	White-throated Gerygone		1	TWC	W.Barden
Aug 23	Eastern Whipbird		1	"	"
Sep 5	Brown Quail		2	Botanic Gardens	"
	Australian Hobby		1	"	"
Sep 9	Black Swan [aberrant plumage]		1	Woodberry	I.Williams
Sep 1	Reef Egret		2	Merewether Baths rockplatform	J.Thomas
Sep 5	Ruddy Turnstone		2	N'cle Ocean Baths	"
Aug 10	Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo		7	Dudley	J.Powers
Aug 31	Tawny Frogmouth		1 on	"	"
Aug 27	Baillon's Crane		1	Walka Water Works	J.Smart/L.Mee/P.Baird
Aug 29	Red Wattlebird		2ne	Shoal Bay	N.Fraser
Sep 6	Blue-billed Duck		2	Walka Water Works	M.Roderick
	Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater		1	Yarrawa	"
May 12	Inland Thornbill		1	West of Willow Tree	"
Sep 8	Black Falcon		1	Morpeth	T.Tasoulis
Sep 13	Horsfield's Bronze-cuckoo		1	Ash Island	"
Aug	Crescent Honeyeater		3	Gloucester Falls	"
Aug 27	Powerful Owl		1	New Lambton Heights	P.Lightfoot
Sep 6	Southern Emu Wren		1	Awabakal N.R.	"

Sep 10	Ruddy Turnstone	1	Stockton Sandspit	T.Clarke
	Horsfield's Bronze-cuckoo	1	"	"
Aug 18	Powerful Owl	2	Floraville	"
Aug 30	Brown Goshawk	1	Charlestown	"
/sep 10	Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo	3	Stockton Sandspit	"
Aug 19	Black Falcon	2	Whittingham [Doughboy area]	H.Tarrant
Aug 20	Diamond Firetail	1	Martindale [Medhurst Bridge]	"
Aug 12	Restless Flycatcher	1	Bell Trees [Bimbadgen Lookout]	"
	Crested Shrike-tit	Pr	"	"
Sep 2	Brown Goshawk	Pr	"	"
Sep 3	White-throated Gerygone	1	Bolwarra	"
Sep 5	White-winged Triller	1	"	"
Sep 13	Stubble Quail	Heard	"	"
Aug	Satin Bowerbird	Active bower	"	"
Sep	Superb Fairy-wren	Pr nb	"	"
Sep	Common Blackbird	1	Maitland [hospital area]	"
Sep 1	Channel-billed Cuckoo	1	Speers Point	S.Hamonet
Sep 18	Satin Bowerbird	1fy	"	"

Outing to McGregor Park, Jesmond Park & Brickpits Park

Tuesday 16th September 2006.

Members of the midweek Tuesday group met at McGregor Park on a fine sunny morning for our monthly outing. These three parks, although quite a distance apart by car, are almost adjoining on the map and have quite different environments.

We were lucky to have Michael Kearns with us on this outing as he had been to McGregor Park two weeks beforehand and had spotted two POWERFUL OWLS. We dared not hope to see them still there but sure enough, there they were in exactly the same trees near a running creek and they both had what looked like possums in their claws. Full marks for Michael for finding them as we would have walked straight under them for they were well camouflaged. This walk was rich in birds including Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos feeding in low bushes beside the path, lorikeets, Sulphur-crested Cockatoos, Yellow-faced Honeyeaters, Bell Miners and fairy wrens.

From there we went by car to the other side of John Hunter Hospital to Jesmond Park and walked the Circular Track towards Jesmond. This was extremely dry and not too rewarding for birds. Our best sighting was Spotted Pardalote with nesting material.

After that we made the short trip to Brickpits Park which was a new venue for a lot of members. The lake there provided numerous water birds including ducks, herons, swamphens and coots. The layout of the park and facilities are excellent for visitors and we were impressed with the Council's efforts in presenting and preserving its historical significance.

A total of 67 birds were seen and 7 heard.

Margaret Woods.

September Atlassing Day in Barrington Tops National Park

It was only when we heard the news that Sunday night that we really realised just how dangerous the day had been in terms of wind and fire. Seven of us drove to Barrington Tops National Park west of Gloucester to the end of the Kerrapit Road. This area is famous for its Rufous Scrub-birds and some of us were quite desperate about seeing one.

The trees, a hundred feet tall, swayed and crashed about us we walked along the trail and back for about three kilometres and then down to Munro Hut built for bushwalkers back in the sixties. The area is well-known for its upland species such as Crescent Honeyeater, Red-browed Treecreeper, Olive Whistler and the Rufous Scrub-bird. Crescent Honeyeaters call well but are jolly difficult to pick out especially in such windy conditions, but the young member of the team managed to see one in the car park whilst we others were having morning tea. It took us quite a while to find the Olive Whistler several of which were constantly calling from dense foliage.

We sat around on several logs waiting for the Rufous Scrub-bird to appear to no avail. However, as we walked back along the trail, one called loudly and we saw the empty space it had occupied as it disappeared into the bracken. The Crimson Rosellas were a delight, Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoos screeched about us and Rose Robins called softly from thickets. All in all we saw or heard twenty-eight species and filled in three atlas sheets for the Birds Australia database.

Ann Lindsey 24 September 2006

COMING EVENTS

DATE	ACTIVITY	DETAILS -TIME & PLACE	CONTACT
Saturday October 21	Hunter Wader Survey	7.30am Various Locations as Directed	Chris Herbert 4959 3663 Alan Stuart 49528569
Sunday October 22	Field Outing Bulga	8.00am Bulga Store	Tom Clarke 4951 3872
Sunday October 22	Catchment Day National Water Week	The Hunter Wetlands Centre	Tom Clarke 4951 3872
Saturday –Sunday October 28-29	TWITCHATHON Join a team and/or help raise money	3.00pm Saturday to 4.00pm Sunday. BBQ at Wetland Centre from 4.00pm Sunday	
Wednesday November 1	Management Committee Meeting	6.30pm to 10.00pm Garden Suburb School	All members welcome
Sunday November 5	Stockton Sandspit Volunteer Day	8.00am to Noon (8.49am high tide)	Tom Clarke 4951 3872
Tuesday November 7	Midweek Outing 94 Giles Road Seaham	7.30am Meet at Property 300metres west of Croft Road	Pam & Norel Hill 4984 5270
<u>Wednesday November 8</u>	<u>CLUB NIGHT</u>	<u>7.30pm Wetlands Centre</u>	<u>Guest Speaker Richard Baxter Christmas Island Birding</u>
Saturday November 11	Atlassing Myall Lakes NP	7.00am McDonald, Raymond Terrace	Nick Livanos 4954 5739 Ann Lindsey 4951 2008
Saturday November 18	Hunter Wader Survey	7.30am Various Locations as Directed	Alan Stuart 4952 8569 Chris Herbert 4959 3663
Sunday November 19	Field Outing Bush Haven. Italia Rd	7.30am Jenny Musickas Place	Liz Crawford 4959 3663
Friday November 24	Trivia Night Fund raiser for Robert McDonald's trip to Bruny Island	7.00pm Wetlands Centre \$10/person BYOG & nibbles	Lyn Lambert 4928 2561
Sunday December 3	Stockton Sandspit Volunteer Day	8.00am to Noon (7.40am high tide)	Tom Clarke 4951 3872
Tuesday December 5	Midweek Outing The Wetland Centre	7.30am at the Wetlands Centre	Judy Thomas 4952 2960 Marg Stewart 4963 2029
Wednesday December 6	Management Committee Meeting	7.00pm to 10.00pm Garden Suburb School	All Members Welcome
<u>Wednesday December 13</u>	<u>Xmas Club Night</u>	<u>7.30pm Wetland Centre</u>	<u>Members Night Bring slides,stories,plate</u>
Saturday December 16	Hunter Wader Survey	7.00am Various Locations as Directed	Alan Stuart 4952 8569 Chris Herbert 4959 3663
Sunday December 17	Lathams Snipe Count	8.30am Minmi Pub	Liz Crawford 4959 3663