

Book Review

The Action Plan for Australian Birds 2020

Edited by Stephen T. Garnett and G. Barry Baker

CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne, 2021, 816 pp., numerous tables and summaries,
Hardback, A4 format, \$150, ISBN 9781486311903

Can the weight of a book be an indication of its importance? Coming in at 3.2 kg, *The Action Plan for Australian Birds 2020* gives the appearance of being a significant new contribution to Australian ornithology. The volume presents the results of a vast amount of analysis and documentation of information on Australia's threatened species and is probably the most comprehensive review of the threats to the country's avifauna ever produced. Information included is considered essential for the conservation of Australia's avifauna. However, despite its weight and its 816 pages, the objective of the action plan is not clear and neither is the intended audience.

The *2020 Action Plan* is the most recent in a series that have been produced by BirdLife Australia and its predecessors every decade since 1990 (Garnett 1992; Garnett & Crowley 2000; Garnett *et al.* 2011). The plan presents reviews of the conservation status of 316 species and subspecies from Australia and its territories. Of these, 216 taxa are threatened. Each taxon account contains the 2020 conservation status, the justification for assignment of status including the IUCN Red List criteria used, and a comparison with the status assigned in the previous plans. Status certainty is provided with an explanation for any changes. Current status is compared to the IUCN Red List, the EPBC Act and threatened species listings by Australian states and territories. A range map for each taxon is provided together with a summary of abundance, ecology and monitoring activity. A threat assessment for each species or subspecies is presented together with conservation objectives and recovery plans or conservation advice. Research and management actions required for conservation are presented. Much of the information is presented in tables. A bibliography accompanies each review. Each of the reviews was prepared by multiple authors with over 300 experts contributing. The BirdLife Australia Threatened Species Committee vetted the text of each review.

The Introduction to the *2020 Action Plan* describes the methodology used and the three types of accounts; most-detailed accounts being for threatened taxa, and less-detailed accounts for those that are currently considered of Least Concern, and those now considered extinct. The protocols for each section are described including the five IUCN Red List Criteria. A 12-page table is provided in the front of the document listing all Australian avian taxa that meet IUCN Red List Criteria for Critically Endangered, Endangered, Vulnerable and Near Threatened when applied to the region of Australia, Australia's oceanic island territories and Australia's Exclusive Economic Zone. The accounts are of 316 ultrataxa, 31 of which are considered extinct. Of the extant taxa, 184 (15%) are threatened, 21 Critically Endangered, 76 Endangered, 87 Vulnerable and 34 Near Threatened. Additionally, there are accounts for 65 taxa of Least Concern. The table also includes all Australian bird taxa considered threatened, Near Threatened or extinct in the 2010 plan or currently listed as threatened under the EPBC Act 1999 or listed as threatened or Near Threatened on the global IUCN Red List, but which are now considered by the authors to be Least Concern or Vagrant. There are no accounts provided for these taxa. The reason for their inclusion is unclear and their presence is confusing.

The good news in the plan is that the status of 15 taxa have been downlisted as a result of sustained conservation management. The most prominent is the Southern Cassowary which has had its threatened status removed. This is due to the establishment of the Wet Tropics Management Area which ensures management of its habitat. Additionally, 12 taxa that remain at the same status, have had their threat level reduced over the last decade.

With the publication of four plans encompassing 40 years of measured 'action', it should be possible to assess that performance. This has been attempted by Recher (2022) who produced the following table with several qualifications (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Number of taxa and status for Australian birds, including exotic species and vagrants, as listed in the four Action Plans (after Recher 2022).

Year	No. Taxa ^A	Threatened ^B	Extinct	Critically Endangered	Endangered	Vulnerable	Near Threatened	Insufficiently known	Least Concern
1992	1074	127 (11.8%)	23	XX ^C	26	40	32	29	XX ^C
2000	1375	155 (11.3%)	25	32	41	82	81	XX ^C	1114
2010	1266	148 (11.7%)	27	20	60	68	63	XX ^C	1028
2020	1276	184 (14.4%)	31	21	76	87	34	XX ^C	1061

Numbers should be used cautiously, as changes in the definition of what a taxon is and nomenclature, affect the numbers given in the different publications.

^A Includes extinct taxa. Note that the definition of a taxon has changed between reports.

^B Includes Critically Endangered, Endangered, Vulnerable and insufficiently known: excludes extinct taxa.

^C Category was not used this year.

This table shows that the numbers of Extinct, Critically Endangered, Endangered and Vulnerable taxa have increased since the 2010 plan, while the numbers of Near Threatened taxa have declined. In part, the increase is attributed to the recent fires on Kangaroo Island that have resulted in new listings for most of the local sub-species. Conversely, actions to eliminate predators on off-shore islands have decreased threat levels for many taxa, particularly sea birds on Macquarie Island.

The 2020 plan also reveals that the nature of threats has changed over the past decade and the influence of climate change is starting to overwhelm all others. This is most obvious in Queensland's wet tropical rainforests where the range of 20 taxa has

decreased as they retreat up the mountains. Previously identified threats such as land clearing, invasive species and changes in fire regime remain. Threatened species from the Hunter Region included in the plan are shown in **Table 2**. Our two most prominent threatened species, the Critically Endangered Swift Parrot and Regent Honeyeater head the list. The majority of Endangered, Vulnerable and Near Threatened species are pelagic birds and migratory waders. The Australasian Bittern and the Australian Painted-snipe are included as Endangered. Five of our woodland birds are included in the plan as either Endangered or Vulnerable: Rufous Scrub-bird, Glossy Black-Cockatoo, Gang-gang Cockatoo, Southern Whiteface and Diamond Firetail.

Table 2. Threatened species from the Hunter Region included in the 2020 Action Plan.

Critically Endangered	Endangered	Vulnerable	Near Threatened
Swift Parrot	Antipodean Albatross	White-tailed Tropicbird	Sooty Albatross
Regent Honeyeater	Indian Yellow-nosed Albatross	White-throated Needletail	White-capped Albatross
	Grey-headed Albatross	Wandering Albatross	Flesh-footed Shearwater
	Australasian Bittern	Campbell Albatross	Streaked Shearwater
	Lesser Sand Plover	Sooty Shearwater	Greater Sand Plover
	Australian Painted Snipe	Hutton's Shearwater	Great Knot
	Black-tailed Godwit	Gould's Petrel	Red-necked Stint
	Bar-tailed Godwit	Grey Plover	White-fronted Tern
	Eastern Curlew	Hooded Plover	South-eastern Boobook
	Ruddy Turnstone	Latham's Snipe	
	Curlew Sandpiper	Terek Sandpiper	
	Rufous Scrub-bird	Common Greenshank	
		Asian Dowitcher	
		Red Knot	
		Sharp-tailed Sandpiper	
		Little Tern	
		Glossy Black-Cockatoo	
		Gang-gang Cockatoo	
		Southern Whiteface	
		Diamond Firetail	

Local woodland species that have had their threat level increased from 2010 to 2020, include Swift Parrot (Endangered to Critically Endangered), Southern Rufous Scrub-bird (Near Threatened to Endangered), South-eastern Boobook (Least Concern to Near Threatened), South-eastern Glossy Black-Cockatoo (Near Threatened to Vulnerable) and Gang-Gang Cockatoo (Near Threatened to Vulnerable).

The increase for the South-eastern Boobook has been in response to the widespread use of new-generation anticoagulant rodenticides during the recent mouse plague. The increase for the South-eastern Glossy Black-Cockatoo is in response to the loss of food sources due to the 2019-20 bush fires.

However, this list does not provide a true picture of the extent of threats to species in our region. Many additional species that are under threat in the Hunter Region are included in the schedule of the NSW Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016 which lists 13 Critically Endangered, 22 Endangered and 92 Vulnerable avian species in the state.

Many aspects of the 2020 plan will be difficult to understand for anyone who is not conversant with the detailed taxonomy and ecology of many species and subspecies. The threats to a number of these 'splits' can be highly variable. For example, Little Tern *Sternula albifrons* is split into three populations: Indo-Pacific Little Tern *Sternula albifrons sinensis* which breeds on most of the Australian coastline and is Vulnerable; a non-breeding population of the same subspecies that is Least Concern; and the Tasman Little Tern *Sternula albifrons placens* which breeds on the east Australian coast and is also Vulnerable.

The numerous subspecies listed in the plan have all been assigned their English names. This includes Eastern Siberian Whimbrel, Alaskan Bar-tailed Godwit, Eastern Black-tailed Godwit, Palaeartic Ruddy Turnstone, North-eastern Siberian Red Knot and New Siberian Islands Red Knot. Many of these names will be unfamiliar to most birdwatchers, and although they are listed in the BirdLife Australia Working List of Australian Birds, they are not generally listed in the most common field guides.

The intended audience for the book is not obvious and the editors make no such claims for the document. It is not a book that most bird watchers would refer to. Each Australian State and Territory has its own list of threatened species and action plans such as the NSW Save our Species

programme (NSW Department of Planning and Environment 2023). The Commonwealth, through the EPBC Act provides protection and management of matters of national environmental significance which include nationally threatened avian species and migratory species. It achieves this through the implementation of legislative processes. The inclusion of two conservation statuses for species, both based on the same IUCN criteria, the global IUCN Red list status and that for Australia and Territories, will undoubtedly create some confusion. Conservation managers assessing priorities, when referring to this volume for guidance, will be confronted by as many as four different conservation statuses for some species. Sadly, most of the species' plans are 2-4 dot points of generic actions such as conserve habitat, reduce predation, reduce fires or provide education. In reality, conservation plans need to be much more detailed and they should identify the funding and all other resources required for effective implementation. Ultimately, the volume is more of a conservation status report than a plan. It does however provide a benchmark against which the changing status of Australian avifauna populations can be measured.

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