

The *Whistler* - Editorial

While it is a pleasure to be directed to exactly the right site to see an unusual species, nothing is quite as exhilarating as stumbling upon unexpected birds when not specifically looking for them, or spontaneously experiencing an unexpected avian behaviour. By this we can learn something new, and we can communicate our new-found discoveries to others. Even those who live in the busy urban communities of the lower Hunter Valley are fortunate in having many opportunities to make such discoveries as they go about their daily lives, and as they enjoy activities that have little to do with bird-watching. Around Newcastle there are important pockets of rich habitat, many of them well connected with other areas able to support a variety of avian life: suitable habitat in some cases for breeding, in others for temporary residence, and in others for opportunistic feeding and foraging to break their journey. The idea of wildlife corridors may be relatively new to our deliberations, but the need for them has been felt by many bird species for much longer. *The Whistler* provides an opportunity to inform the community about the remarkable richness of the Hunter Region's bird population.

Golf courses offer green oases in close proximity to the suburbs, and though not the kind of exciting habitat that most of us crave to visit for the sake of seeing birds, they make a relatively easy area to check thoroughly for avian activity and a potential place for the golfer to experience and appreciate wildlife. Golfers have a historic association with birds dating back to 1903, with the names "birdie, eagle and albatross" reflecting the excellence of their play. While the courses they play on may not attract albatross they do provide a regular home for some species, as well as offering occasional foraging opportunities and additional connectivity for many others. This issue of *The Whistler* records the results of regular surveys at Charlestown Golf Course, which offers useful insights into the role a suburban golf course can play in supplementing the avian life of a region. Equally importantly it demonstrates how a bird project can contribute to increased community awareness of birds and the management of a shared environment. There are golf courses throughout Australia. This potential national opportunity was recognised by the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (now BirdLife Australia) during the 1990s in terms of initiating a

'Birds on Golf Courses' project which never eventuated. Congratulations to Grahame Feletti on demonstrating the merits of that proposal 20 years later.

This issue is unusual in having a strong focus on the north of our region, covering three sites, one coastal (Saltwater NP), one estuarial (Cattai Wetlands), and one in the foothills north-west of Gloucester (Curraabundi NP). These articles are all based on regular systematic surveys that provide a comprehensive picture of the site's avifauna over time (with occasional exceptions, such as nocturnal species). Though all these sites are valuable in their own right, it may plausibly be claimed that this is partly because of other nearby conservation areas. They are enhanced by their connectivity with other sites, and they in turn contribute to the well being of those other sites. Tellingly, all three authors discuss the connections of their sites with others in the area. The editors commend such studies of less well known sites, which are of greater scientific use than incidental sightings.

One bird that is observed less now than it once had been is the vulnerable Varied Sittella. Admittedly when one finds them they can be in quite good numbers because they have a collaborative lifestyle, but there is evidence that they have declined and even disappeared from some locations. Given their liking for drier woodland this is not wholly surprising, since many woodland birds are declining worryingly. This is therefore an appropriate time to reflect on the conservation requirements of this species and on how woodland habitat can be managed to support the ecological requirements of its unique life style.

There is also a relatively short article on swifts. Its main focus is the White-throated Needletail, including its Hunter Region distribution, though it is more difficult in this case to confine one's discussion to specific regions, or to specific habitats. Its natural habitat in Australia is the sky, but the insects it feeds on breed in the vegetation below, perhaps the ultimate extension of the concept of connectivity. The swifts visiting the Hunter Region breed elsewhere, further complicating attempts to understand changes in the status of these species. The article contains important information

for those wishing to contribute to a more complete knowledge of these species across the region. BirdLife Australia have recently stated that they consider the sub-species of White-throated Needletail which visits Australia is eligible for listing as Vulnerable under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* based on the decline exceeding 30 percent reported by Professor Tarburton in a paper published in 2014 in *Australian Field Ornithology*. This development highlights the value of community participation in data gathering and the importance of analysing and publishing the results of such studies. Congratulations to Mike and to all the swift watchers in the Hunter Region.

Regrettably, this issue has few short notes. One concerns mixed foraging flocks and is related to the

Varied Sittella paper. Another concerns some unexpected delicacies on the menu of Red-browed Finches. Observations of a Noisy Miner with aberrant plumage are described. We once again urge Hunter Region observers to document unusual sightings and relatively minor contributions to ornithological knowledge by writing them up for possible publication. There is no shortage of people willing to lend a hand in the writing up of such notes, and the process should surely not prove too onerous. With the summer months upon us, and breeding behaviours and family associations to be observed, we urge readers to keep *The Whistler* in mind and to feel that they can contribute something to our knowledge of birds, and especially of birds in the Hunter Region.

Mike Newman and Harold Tarrant
Joint Editors