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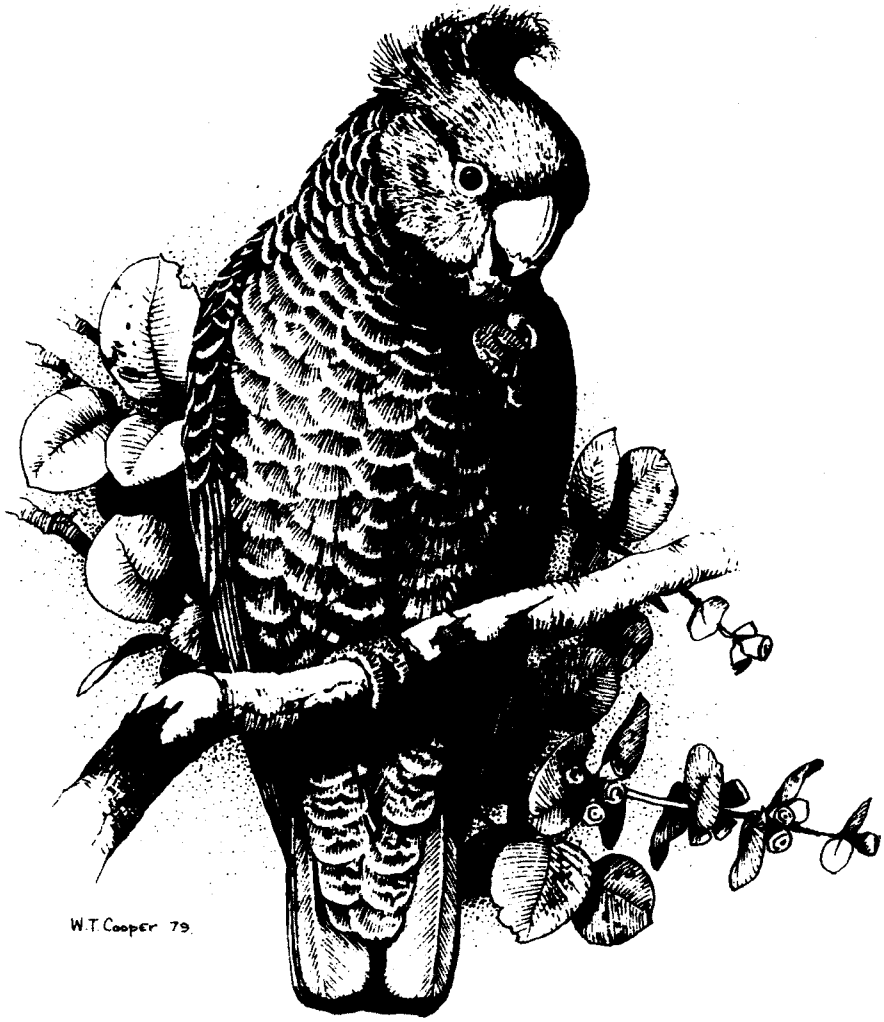

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BREEDING BY PAINTED HONEYEATERS IN THE CANBERRA REGION DURING THE 2002-03 INFLUX

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Introduction

The Painted Honeyeater *Grantiella picta* is described as a rare migrant in the ACT, spending only short periods of summer in the region. According to Wilson (1999), 'Numbers seen in the ACT have declined alarmingly [over recent decades]', a conclusion also made by Bounds (1994) in a more detailed account of the status of the species in the Canberra region. In the 1950s Painted Honeyeaters were recorded breeding in River She-Oaks *Casuarina cunninghamiana* along the Murrumbidgee River. and observations in later years only related to birds passing through the area (Bounds 1994).

From late October 2002 until January 2003 an unprecedented influx of Painted Honeyeaters occurred in the Canberra region. Birds appeared in many sites within the ACT and its wider surroundings. The movement was no doubt drought-induced, although the unusually rich crop of mistletoe berries in late 2002 may have been the final trigger for birds to settle here (Bounds 2003a). Interestingly, the honeyeaters visited only grassy woodlands of various types. Riverine habitat failed to attract the species (Bounds 2003b; reports on COG's email discussion list).

Despite numerous records of single birds, pairs or small groups which were reported on the COG email list and to the COG records officer, only few breeding attempts were observed. We summarise here all available observations on breeding activity by Painted Honeyeaters during the 2002-03 influx to the region, although we believe these observations may have captured only a small portion of breeding events.

Locations and characteristics of breeding territories

In the past, breeding of this species within the ACT was observed only along the Murrumbidgee River. In 2002-03 nesting (or at least attempted nesting) was confined to savannah woodlands. However, there may have been a precedent with the species recorded for several weeks in 1962-63 in woodlands on the eastern slopes of Mt Ainslie (Wilson, in Frith 1969).

Breeding activity in 2002-03 was noted at the following locations:

1. Mt Ainslie, lower eastern slopes around Campbell Park; Yellow Box/Blakely's Red Gum/Apple Box woodland;
2. Mulligans Flat Nature Reserve; the area of Yellow Box/Blakely's Red Gum grassy woodland around posts 5 and 6 (see pamphlet *Birds of Mulligans Flat*, Environment ACT 2000);
3. Mixed eucalypt woodland (mainly Yellow Box/Stringybark) to west of

Sutton Road, adjacent to Travelling Stock Reserve 51.

Chosen territories were in very open woodland or close to the edge of woodland. As common features they had numerous large eucalypts, each host to one or several mistletoe plants. Trees with mistletoes were usually situated in a clump. Sites included mature eucalypts and stands with younger trees and saplings. Spider silk for nest building was often collected among the foliage of younger trees and from the dead branches of trees of various sizes. Larger dead eucalypts or live trees with dead top branches served as vantage points for song and from which to take off for display flights. Dead branches were also searched by one adult for collecting spiders to feed its dependent young.

At Mulligans Flat and at Mt Ainslie many other areas appeared to be suitable as breeding sites for the species. What factors determined the final choices for nest sites remains unknown.

Chronology of breeding events

Mt Ainslie, Campbell Park

Nest 1

- 27 October: up to three Painted Honeyeaters in the main Campbell Park area (M. & C. Gilfedder)
- 12 November: one bird in a tall Yellow Box about 100 m N of the car park
- 13 November: pair builds nest in same tree, about 12 m up, ESE orientation (G. Dabb, M. Lenz), construction would have started a few days earlier; later in day three birds at the nest, but one of them actually removed nest material while the other two tried to prevent that from happening (T. Green)
- 14 - 17 November: several observations of the pair extending the nest or being present near the nest
- 21 November (7.07-7.22 h): one bird sitting on nest, one change over at incubating
- 23 November (12.30 h): one bird on nest
- 24 November (morning hours): no bird on nest, at least one bird still in area including within nest tree; similar observations for several more days
- 8 December: last observation of one bird in this territory **(B.** Whitworth).

Nest 2

- 29 October and subsequent dates: two birds in an area about 1km NW from Nest 1
- 7 November: one bird collecting spider silk
- 9 November: nest discovered in Yellow Box about 12 m up (G. Dabb)
- 15 November: birds incubating
- 17 November (8.07-8.23 h): one bird sitting on nest, one change over at incubating
- 24 November: no sign of birds, nest probably abandoned
- 26 November: one bird some distance from nest, display flight, many calls;
- 8 December: one bird recorded, last observation for this territory (B. Whitworth).

Nest 3

- 12 November: nest located in an area S of Campbell Park; nest in Apple Box, about 10 m up, SE orientation (M. Lenz)
- 14, 15 November: pair extending the nest
- 15 November: birds incubating
- 17 November: birds incubating in morning; several changeovers at 10- to 15-minute intervals
- 21 ─ 26 November: birds incubating
- 6 December: birds feeding young in nest
- 19 December (8.30 h): one young fledges from the nest, led by parents into group of mistletoes some 30 m away from nest
- 22 December: only one adult with the young
- 5 January: last sighting of the young with its sole parent
- 9 January: last sighting of the adult, although young probably still in area (see below).

Mulligan's Flat (all observations by T. Green)

Territory 1

- 9 November: single bird in area from Point 5 of the bird walk south to reserve boundary
- 18 November: two birds in same area, favoring one particular Yellow Box with mistletoes (but also visiting other mistletoe-infested trees)
- 20 November: pair in same area (see also below);
- 24 November pair in same area, but birds very quiet with no sign of nesting

Territory 2 (Nest 1)

- 20 November: one bird calling persistently east of the southern border of Territory I; at one point this bird was vigorously pursued by a bird from Territory 1. Two other Painted Honeyeaters, in all likelihood the partners, appeared and watched the chase, giving a total of four birds, i.e. two pairs with adjoining territories. Some time after the pursuit had finished the bird from Territory 2 called again and began nest construction in a Blakely's Red Gum, pulling leaves together and binding them with spider silk. The nest site was only about 6m up in the tree in the outer foliage of a small branch overhanging the boundary track.
- 24 November: no sign of nest; only one bird located.

Note that many others have also recorded Painted Honeyeaters at Mulligans Flat, however, the observations by T. Green are the only ones that indicate the presence of two pairs occupying a territory and a nesting attempt by at least one of those pairs.

Sutton Road

- 1 December: birds discovered (M. Zwankhuizen)
- 3 December: 1 pair (G. Dabb)
- 9 December: pair building nest in a dense mistletoe 10-12 m up in a Yellow Box at the interface of rich

woodland with good scrub understorey, and pasture with scattered eucalypts
- 19 December: nest abandoned.

Notes on breeding behaviour of Painted Honeyeaters at Nest 3, Campbell Park

This pair was the only one seen that completed the nesting cycle and raised one young to independence. G. Dabb spent a total of 6 hours filming and observing the parents at the nest, mostly during the time of incubation and raising the young to the fledgling stage. M. Lenz checked the nest mostly during morning hours to confirm ongoing presence of the birds and visited the area several times after the young had fledged to monitor its progress.

The nest was suspended from several twigs and leaf-stems. Although lightly constructed in the sense that light showed through the sides, it was strongly woven together and onto the supporting twigs. The nest was composed of flexible dry plant material, stems, rootlets, and bound by finer material, mainly spider silk. Contrary to other reported nests of this species, the cup was not shallow. The depth was approximately as great as the width, and a developed chick, sitting down, .occupied only the bottom half of the cup. The nest-branch would be in strong motion even in a light breeze (5-10 knots). Stronger, but not destructive, winds occurred during the nesting period. The pair continued to bring nest material including small plant material taken from an abandoned nest of a Dusky Woodswallow *Artamus cyanopterus* and improved the camouflage of the nest by binding the overhanging foliage together more tightly with spider silk well after incubation had commenced. Of the three nests from Mt Ainslie, Nest 3 had the best covering foliage, at least when looking at it from the outside. From the inside of the tree, standing close to the tree trunk and looking towards the outer foliage, the nest was more readily detectable.

Both sexes shared in nest-building, brooding and feeding. It was not possible to determine whether more than the one chick hatched. While feeding activity was at times intensive, the chick(s) sat low in the nest, except during the defecation process.

Nest-sitting by the adults was almost continuous at the egg and early-chick stage. Generally, one bird would vacate position only when the other was in or about to enter the nest area. Sometimes both would be at the nest together and frequently both would be in the nest tree at the same time. This would generally be so when other species of bird were in or near the tree.

Due to the abundant mistletoe in the nest tree and nearby, the adults did not need to move far away to gather food, Contact between the pair was sometimes maintained by a soft single two-syllable phrase. From the alertness of the sitting bird to the arrival of the mate, this call might have been used routinely, even when not audible to the observer.

As the breeding cycle progressed the birds became, with a few exceptions, less and less vocal. In the end only brief contact calls were given at changeover

time at the nest or quiet calls to locate the chick (see below). One could spend long periods in the territory without noticing the birds' presence. Similarly, at Mulligans Flat, T. Green noted that birds, once paired, were much quieter.

Response to/interaction with other birds

Conspecifics

Apart from intensive chases between rival Painted Honeyeaters at the early stage of territory establishment (Mulligans Flat, T. Green) only one observation at Mt Ainslie indicated aggressive interactions at the early stage of nesting. On 13 November at Nest 1 three birds were at the nest, but one of them actually removed nest material while the other two tried to prevent that from happening. However, the interference had no lasting impact and two days later the resident pair commenced brooding.

Other species

Regularly feeding near the nest tree were Dollarbirds *Eurystomus orientalis* and Australian Ravens *Corvus coronoides*, with Pied Currawongs *Strepera graculina*, Australian Magpies *Gymnorhina tibicen* and Laughing Kookaburras *Dacelo novaeguineae* often within 40 to 100 m. Nearby Dusky Woodswallow and Western Gerygone *Gerygone fusca* nests were predated.

Higgins *et al.* (2001) mention that Painted Honeyeaters nest in eucalypts and casuarinas often supporting mistletoe. Many other birds visit flowering and fruiting mistletoes and feed on nectar and insects attracted to the flowers. They include the larger and more pugnacious honeyeaters, in our region, Noisy Friarbird *Philemon corniculatus*, Red Wattlebird *Anthochaera carunculata* and Noisy Miner *Manorina melanophrys* and also the Olive-backed Oriole *Oriolus sagittatus.* All these species could pose a threat in one way or other, including nest robbing, to a breeding pair of Painted Honeyeaters. A few casual observations from Mt Ainslie (M. Lenz) indicate that at least some of those species can interfere with nests of other species. An Olive-backed Oriole was seen some years ago robbing the nest of a Mistletoebird *Dicaeum hirundinaceum* by tearing a hole into the lower part of the nest until it could reach the eggs and swallow them. Leaden Flycatchers *Myiagra rubecula* raise full alarm and swoop when orioles approach the nest tree. A Noisy Friarbird was seen in the 2002-03 season investigating and squatting on a nest of the Olive-backed Oriole. The friarbird returned repeatedly to the nest despite the agitation of the oriole pair. The nest was given up soon after the interference.

Mistletoes are also chosen by many species, including predators, as favoured nesting sites: Pied Currawong, Collared Sparrowhawk *Accipiter cirrhocephalus* and Brown Goshawk *Accipiter fasciatus*, In fact all nests of the latter two birds of prey located by M.Lenz on Mt Ainslie over the years were exclusively in mistletoes. A pair of Brown Goshawks was breeding in 2002-03 within the foraging range of Painted Honeyeater Pair 3. However, the female goshawk made its more aggressive presence (towards humans) only felt in early

January right at the end of the time Painted Honeyeaters were present in the area. However, the presence of hunting Brown Goshawks (and other birds of prey) would have been a daily feature for the Painted Honeyeaters.

Not unexpectedly, the pair of Painted Honeyeaters responded to the presence of potential threats to their nest by staying as quiet and unobtrusive as possible. The incubating bird would not leave the nest even though the partner may have indicated by call that it is coming to relieve it. The partner would stay put and silent and not approach the nest until the threat had passed.

The main inter-species interaction involved Noisy Miners. As the nesting period progressed, a group of miners foraged in the nest tree with increasing frequency. At those times the second (non-brooding) bird would stand guard, occasionally chasing or being chased by a miner. Parents would neither leave nor approach the nest when Noisy Miners were in the nest tree. Higgins *et al.* (2001) report more aggressive interactions, including giving high-intensity alarm calls from the nest, when Spiny-cheeked Honeyeaters *Acanthagenys rufogularis* approached nests of Painted Honeyeaters,

Behaviour of the young bird

At 8:00 h on 19 December a single chick was found to have left the nest, and was clinging to twigs in the same leafy branchlet. The adults fed it at that location, but seemed to become agitated when Noisy Miners approached, At about 8.30 h the chick took flight, following an adult about 20 m to a clump of mistletoe in a small tree, During the next hour, close observations were not attempted, but the chick was seen flying twice more between mistletoe clumps, attended by its parents, At this stage the wings of the young honeyeater appeared well developed but the tail had grown only to about a third of that of an adult.

The family was not located on 20 December over a 25-minute observation period, but from 22 December until 5 January one adult and the young were seen regularly. The last time the adult was recorded was on 9 January, although we suspect the young was present as well.

On all occasions when the young bird was observed it gave no audible calls at all. Initially, after having fledged, it resided inside mistletoe clumps. With its brownish head and upper back and quiet behaviour it blended well into inner parts of the mistletoes. In fact, the single adult looking after the young often 'lost' the chick between bouts of collecting food for it, The parent would then call quietly, The chick responded by moving towards the adult without making calls itself. It was only from the calls the adult gave to locate the young that the human observer could do likewise. Parent and young allowed observers to approach within a few metres without being alarmed. By 5 January the tail of the young bird had reached full length, and the bird was very mobile, frequently moving between trees over greater distances on its own or following the adult, but it still gave no calls. On 9 January the adult called briefly early in the morning, covering even greater distances than in the days before. It proved difficult to pin down the location of the adult. It may have

been looking again for the still silent young. From 7.00 h onwards for 30 minutes and again later in the morning over a period of 35 minutes Painted Honeyeaters were neither seen nor heard in the area. Searches after that date also revealed no sign of the species.

At the early feeding stage, insects were brought to the nest. From a photograph Lindsay Popple has identified one of them as a female of a *Cicadetta* species, Mistletoe berries were the main, perhaps the only, food given to the nestling in its last week. The parent fed the fledgling mainly mistletoe berries as is commonly reported in the literature. However, on several occasions the fledgling was also provided with smaller insects and spiders, including insect remains from spider webs. The parent was seen a couple of times foraging for spiders and insects along dead branches and outer foliage of trees and in dead trees, the same substrates that are also searched for collecting spider silk for nest construction.

It was assumed that the female (the slightly smaller bird of the pair) stayed with the young, however, there is no definite proof that it was the female. Eddy (1961) indicates that in western Victoria the male may become quite attached to one fledgling of the second brood and migrate with it once it is sufficiently developed. This would indicate that a single parent is well able to raise a fledgling to independence, as was the case at Mt Ainslie.

Discussion

The Painted Honeyeater is very vocal and conspicuous with its display flights early during territory establishment, but once pairs start nesting, calls are less frequent and movement is more secretive from sites where nest material is collected to the nest tree. The call frequency declines further once incubation has commenced, although occasionally the species can still be very vocal and conspicuous at any stage of the breeding cycle, But such bouts are, as a rule, only brief. For example, the parent from Nest 3 at Mt Ainslie on 5 January, after feeding its young, gave many 'whiu' calls, then flew to the top of a dead eucalypt and ascended from there to double tree height and flew in wide circles over the territory for about three minutes, and then landed again close to the offspring. It may in part be due to this change in behaviour, i.e. birds becoming more and more quiet, that despite numerous records of the species in and around Canberra, including groups of up to ten birds (Bounds 2003b), so little breeding activity was recorded. It is difficult to believe that with such an abundant mistletoe crop and appearance of birds at many sites, only a single brood was successful.

Painted Honeyeaters are known to abandon half-built nests suddenly and commence nest construction elsewhere (Eddy 1961). The nests at Sutton and Mulligans Flat were abandoned before they were complete and further nesting attempts were not observed elsewhere. However, at Mt Ainslie, all three pairs produced clutches. Two of the nests were abandoned for reasons unknown a few days to more than a week after birds had commenced incubation. In both territories single birds were observed for about a further two weeks after the nests were given up.

There are some indications that Painted Honeyeaters may visit potential breeding areas for two years in a row if the mistletoe crop is exceptional as it appears to be now in the Canberra region. It remains to be seen whether Canberra ornithologists will again be so lucky and have this rare species of honeyeater present in the 2003-04 breeding season. Should this happen we would urge observers to plan repeat visits to any site where the species has been recorded to see whether or not the Painted Honeyeater is at any given site only transient or a breeding resident. During the 2002-03 breeding season the frequency of visits by observers to Campbell Park in search of the Painted Honeyeaters was exceptionally high, really to the neglect of other sites from which the species was recorded. In the end we have learnt very little about the influx of Painted Honeyeaters to our region. We only know how long the birds stayed and whether or not breeding was attempted from very few sites. Should there be a repeat influx of this species, one approach may be for observers (singly or in teams) to indicate to COG whether they would be prepared to check, on a regular basis, locations identified as Painted Honeyeater sites. With only a limited level of organisation it should be possible to achieve a more comprehensive collection of data.

Acknowledgment

We thank Barbara Allan for suggesting and encouraging us to write up our notes on the Painted Honeyeater. Tom Green kindly made his observations on Painted Honeyeaters available to us.

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The Painted Honeyeater chick (above); Adult and nest (below) Photos: G.Dabb

BURNING AND LEARNING: THE AFTERMATH OF THE JANUARY 2003 FIRES IN NAMADGI AND TIDBINBILLA

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Background

On 8 January 2003, following similar strikes in the Victorian Alps and the western face of Kosciuszko National Park, lightning started five simultaneous fires in the Brindabella Range, They were scattered along the ACT's western border from near McIntyre's hut north-west of Mt Coree in Brindabella National Park, south to Mt Morgan in Kosciuszko National Park. In between there were three ignitions, all on the eastern slopes inside the ACT, above Bendora Dam, above Corin Dam on Stockyard Spur and on Mount Gingera.

Over the next eight days the fires increased steadily, but not explosively, to consume 7000 ha — about 20% of the area burnt in the 1983 Gudgenby fires to the south. Then came January 17 and 18.

At the time of writing I do not have the benefit of the detailed analysis which will presumably come out of the enquiries. My interpretation of what happened then and immediately prior to that is based on what I saw myself in Tidbinbilla on 24 January and the Brindabellas on 3 February and 13 March, and from discussions with some of those on the ground at the time. I believe that the fires were in the process of being contained — though no-one claims that that is certain — despite drought conditions which are generally accepted as being the most severe in at least 100 years. In most other years, conditions would have ameliorated, rain would have come. Instead, what came were temperatures in excess of 40°C and winds reputed to be well in excess of 100 kph, What I believe also came was the 'Broken Cart fire' from northern Kosciuszko National Park, roaring up the steep west slopes of the Brindabellas with an intensity that left nothing on the ground at all, and consumed much of the organic content of the soil. It joined with the Namadgi fires; when fires combine like that, there is a huge upsurge of activity, hurling burning material well ahead.

As the roaring furnace swept down into the Cotter valley, up over the Tidbinbillas and into and through the Nature Reserve it hurled brands which started spot-fires up to 12 km ahead. When the main fire 'caught up' the fires again merged explosively and more brands were hurled into the air, so the fire moved in surges. It is common for intense fires to arrive explosively at ridge tops, hurling firebrands across to the next ridge. In these conditions fires effectively move faster than the wind speed. In addition, of course, natural or constructed containment lines become useless.

By the time that rain finally extinguished the last of the fires in southern ACT on about 21 February, 91% of Namadgi National Park, essentially all of Tidbinbilla and the Murrumbidgee River Corridor, and 18% of Canberra Nature

Park had burnt. This represents 88% of the ACT reserve system and two-thirds of the whole territory. This is more than five times the area burnt in any previously recorded ACT fire. Probably not a unique event — but certainly so in the relatively brief European experience here.

Beyond Tidbinbilla of course, none of us will ever need reminding what happened next on 18 January, but that story has been told and will be told many times yet. I have been asked to record some of my observations from my visits and to try to put them into some sort of context. I have attempted to be objective, but such an experience can only ever be very profoundly personal as well and it is not possible — or useful — to pretend otherwise.

Scale and intensity

I am not unfamiliar with fire in forests, but was utterly unprepared for the scale and intensity that I saw, and in particular for the impact on the wet sclerophyll forests of the gullies and sheltered slopes. My first experience of the intensity was in Tidbinbilla, and it shocked me profoundly. Having tried to come to terms with the horror of watching and gagging on the stench of over 600 burnt, dead kangaroos, wallabies, possums and koalas being cut and dumped into a huge trench, I was appalled by the familiar cool green tree-fern gullies of the walking trails. As I noted that night 'it's Mordor'. If you don't know them, they are densely crowded with soft-leaved understorey shrubs — *Pomaderris aspera* and the giant daisies *Olearia argophylla* and *Bedfordia arborescens* - and bursting with big tree ferns *Dicksonia antarctica* under big Ribbon Gums *Eucalyptus viminalis* and Narrow-leaved Peppermints *E. radiata,* with delightful streams rushing over rocks. Or they were. Now stark leafless trunks stand over utterly bare ground and the oozing creek. And nothing else. In the worst burnt areas there was not even ash on the ground.

Much of the valley of Lees Creek and Bulls Head Creek along Warks Road in Namadgi — a favourite COG venue and site of the famous long-term Brindabella banding studies — was in similar condition on 3 February.

In terms of scale, I can best express it — apart from the sheer area mentioned above — by saying that on that day we drove (and walked) along Brindabella Road and Mt Franklin Road to the Ginini Gate, down to Ginini Flat, down to Bendora Dam and out along Warks Road. This is a distance of some 70 km and in all that I would not have seen a square metre of unburnt ground. That was also true on 13 March, when we drove south from the Namadgi Visitor Information Centre, along the Ororral Valley to Cotter Hut and up to Leura Gap, then north along the Mt Franklin Road to Mt Gingera. At this point there were a few unburnt sphagnum moss — tea tree seeps. There are also perhaps a few thousand hectares of unburnt wet forest on the lower slopes of Gingera. This is likely to be very significant, as being perhaps the only substantial unburnt Namadgi areas north of the southern tip of the ACT.

In some areas — presumably the result of night burning, both back-burning and wildfires — the canopy was intact and largely green. This includes sections

downslope of the Mt Franklin Road between Bulls Head and Aggie Gap, on both sides of the ridge. This suggests some hope for arboreal animals in these areas. In others leaf fall — the result of leaves killed on the trees — had already begun. In yet others — including the koala enclosure at Tidbinbilla — leaves were burnt off the trees.

One of the worst shocks of the day was the desolation of Ginini Flat. Earlier reports had recorded that the fire had not entered the swamp, but obviously the Broken Cart fire subsequently swept over it and through it. Perhaps 25-30% of the swamp vegetation remains in the sections we visited, and saw from the top of Franklin. Of the rest, up to 30 cm of sphagnum is burnt. This represents centuries, perhaps a millenium or more, of growth (see below).

Impacts on fauna

Higher up the slopes were Red-necked Wallabies *Macropus rufogriseus,* lower were Swamp Wallabies *Wallabia bicolor.* I can't imagine what they'd been living on, though along the lower burnt creeks *Carex* (a sedge) was shooting,

In Namadgi I saw and heard more bird species (in very low numbers) than I'd have expected in the conditions. In particular, a source of amazement to us all was the number of Superb Lyrebirds *Menura novaehollandiae* seen; close to 20 altogether. How the hell (literally,..) did they survive? Intuitively they would seem to be one of the least capable species of escaping a very intense fast-moving fire. At the time I had to assume that somewhere there were gullies that the fire leapt over, though we saw no sign of them. Most of those lyrebirds seen seemed to be foraging in roadside soaks, presumably the only source of ground surface invertebrates. Since then I've found a couple of interesting older references to lyrebird behaviour in fires.

One direct observation of lyrebird behaviour in fire (from LH Smith's *Life of the Lyrebird,* 1988) comes from central Gippsland in 1932, from a miner caught in severe fires.

> When the fire descended, Mitchell took refuge in the river and waited for it to pass. He was, however, not alone; because, from eight o'clock in the morning, three hours before the fire reached him, 'the lyrebirds began to flock from the higher country to take shelter in the river and, moreover, they could not be made to move from the positions taken up immediately on reaching the water'.

Perhaps all the lyrebirds in that part of Namadgi were able to descend to the Cotter (albeit very shallow) or Bendora Dam? Another 1930s account tells of miners sheltering from fire in a mine shaft, and finding themselves sharing it with several lyrebirds. This gives credence to the otherwise extraordinary-sounding proposition that they might shelter in wombat burrows. They certainly do something!

Next most widespread were White-throated Treecreepers *Cormobates leucophaeus;* against the apparent odds, invertebrates must be surviving in bark crevices. There were also more Brown Falcons *Falco berigora* than I've seen in Namadgi; I'm aware of their reputation as fire 'associates'. Also in the high burnt Snow Gums *Eucalyptus pauciflora* were

small numbers (often just one bird) of Gang-gang Cockatoos *Callocephalon fimbiatum*, Crimson Rosellas *Platycercus elegans*, Spotted Quail-thrush *Cinclosoma punctatum*, Flame Robin *Petroica phoenicea*, Striated Pardalote *Pardalotus striatus*, Brush Cuckoo *Cacomantis variolosus*, Nankeen Kestrel *Falco cenchroides*, a pair of Wedge-tailed Eagles *Aquila audax* and White-browed Scrub-wren *Sericornis frontalis;* lower down (including at Bendora) were Pied Currawongs *Strepera graculina*, Sacred Kingfisher *Todiramphus sanctus*, Yellow-faced Honeyeaters *Lichenostomus chrysops*, White-eared Honeyeaters *Lichenostomus leucotis* and a Common Bronzewing *Phaps chalcoptera.* On 3 March I also saw four Brown Goshawks *Accipiter fasciatus*, presumably exploiting the lack of foliage cover, and several groups of Grey Currawongs *Strepera versicolor*, probably preying on phasmids (stick insects) in the unburnt foliage.

The relatively few studies of fire impacts on bird populations in sclerophyll forest — for instance in heavily logged mixed wet and dry sclerophyll forests near Eden, in wet sclerophyll in the Otways and in Jarrah in south-west Western Australia — are not likely to give much help in predicting the long-term impacts on birds of this much more intense and extensive fire event,

Given the lack of vegetation pockets that I saw in both Tidbinbilla and the central Brindabella Range, I am pessimistic about the survival of many birds there. The likelihood of high death tolls is underlined by eye-witness accounts from Tidbinbilla of such powerful flyers as Sulphur-crested Cockatoos *Cacatua galerita* falling dead from the sky, presumably from oxygen deprivation. On the other hand, the southern ranges were less intensively burnt and the southern tip of the territory remained unburnt. This area, and the wet forests on the lower eastern slopes of Mt Gingera, probably contain valuable populations of species for future colonisation.

Furthermore we must take account of the additional impact of the drought. Did the small number of Rufous Fantails *Rhipidura rufifrons* subsequently recorded in Canberra represent fire refugees, or were they fortunate enough to have been pushed out of the ranges by the drought a couple of weeks early to start their migration — and were thus saved by the drought? Did some parts of the population escape to the east, fleeing either drought or fires?

Perhaps the inward migration of passage birds next spring (and even the outward movement starting now) will give us some feeling of the impact, Otherwise it will require long-term monitoring of Namadgi and sites in other areas.

The fate of the major surviving Northern Corroboree Frog *Pseudophryne pengilleyi* population at Ginini Flat is a matter of grave concern. This is a species already seriously Endangered, from uncertain causes. At the time of the fire males were in their nests deep in the sphagnum; while some known territories were destroyed, a few have subsequently been heard calling. The fate of the females and immature males, sheltering under logs in the surrounding woodland, is still unknown. However there may be some hope in the observations, on the

day, of a surprising number of live skinks in all habitats, and invertebrates in moist soil under logs in burnt Snow Gum woodland by Ginini Flat.

Impacts on different vegetation types

There are two fundamental types of plant response to fire, Plants are generally either 'resprouters' or 'reseeders'. The former, after being defoliated, resprout from shoots either under the bark on trunk or branches, or underground at the base of the stem. In reseeders the plant is killed by fire, but the population survives through the germination of seed stores, held either on the plant or in the ground.

- *Casuarina cunninghamiana* riverine communities; Murrumbidgee River Corridor and Paddys River.

These have been almost entirely burnt, in some places intensively. Some of the less fiercely burnt trees will resprout; most I suspect will die and regrow from seed. On 3 March there was no sign of sprouting all along Paddys River.

- *Leptospermum* riverine scrub communities; along the Cotter below Bendora Dam,

These are burnt to the ground and to the water level. The shrubs are most likely to be resprouters and the first shoots have probably appeared by now.

- Dry sclerophyll forests; more exposed mid-slopes and lower slopes of the ranges.

This habitat is generally described as the [illegible]

Rather we should think of it as the one which has adapted to a regime of most frequent fires, In southern Australia dry forests, the current 'serious' fire cycle seems to be from 10-13 years, but it is likely that this is more frequent than previously. It is certainly the habitat of all those affected which is normally likely to recover most rapidly, Dominants in open forests are primarily resprouters; some 65% of species can recover from a fire without needing to seed. This includes all of the eucalypt species. In this case the situation may be complicated by the fact that these forests tend to grow on the exposed western slopes, which are the ones most intensively burnt, especially on the western fall of the Tidbinbillas and Brindabellas, Indeed, on 3 March the dry Brittle Gum *E. mannifera*, Broad-leaved Peppermint *E. dives*, Red Stringybark *E. macrorhynca* forests all along the Cotter from just below Bendora Dam to the park boundary are showing almost no sign of recovery. Although in some side gullies the percentages were a little higher, overall less than 1% of trees show any sign of any shooting at all and there is essentially no ground growth at all. Whether this is simply an indicator of the enormous intensity of the fire, or perhaps of a pronounced rain shadow effect (which ought not to effect epicormic shooting) I cannot yet say.

- Wet sclerophyll forests; along sheltered gullies and higher sheltered south- and east-facing slopes

This is the area which caused me the most concern, though that was probably mostly a result of our inexperience of such fires in an environment where the

natural fire regime cycle is probably in excess of 100 years. Most of the dominant eucalypts are again resprouters but a major exception for us is the very important Alpine Ash *E. delegatensis* forests, which are seeders, being killed by intense fire and regrowing as an even-aged stand from dropped seeds. Many of the familiar Alpine Ash stands below Piccadilly Circus date from the 1939 fires (which incidentally only burnt about a quarter of the ACT land that these latest fires did). Most of the Alpine Ash in the areas I saw will die and seed; some of the stands south of Bulls Head should survive. It will be touch and go whether the 20-year old regrowth to the south will have yet set seed; if not those stands will not survive.

In the fern gullies, Fishbone Ferns *Blechnum nudum* and Shield Ferns *Polystichum proliferum* are already sprouting from rhizomes, while the tree ferns are shooting from burnt trunks — where these still exist. Where they have been destroyed we must wait for spores to re-enter the gullies.

With respect to the most intensively burnt gullies, a long-term study also in Victoria may be pertinent. It tracked changes in plant-species dominance in a wet forest, Bracken and the daisy bush *Cassinia aculeata* dominated initially, lasting longest in drier sites. (Bracken has very extensive and robust rhizome systems.) After about 40 years, *Pomaderris* spp., *Olearia argophylla* and *Bedfordia arborescens* take over and may do so for a century or so, Finally, when the *Pomaderris* dies, tree ferns and ground ferns begin to increase.

- Subalpine systems: the complex of Snow Gum woodlands and associated wet heathlands and sphagnum bogs.

These heaths are generally not as well fire-adapted as others and do not naturally burn as frequently, Many high country species have seeds evolved for long-distance dispersal. In a 'normal' fire Snow Gums will be expected to reshoot from the trunks in older trees and from the base in younger ones; very intense fires may be fatal however, Areas like the summit of Mt Franklin and along the ridge to the south of Aggie Gap were very intensively burnt indeed, and on 3 March there was surprisingly little sign of recovery. There was not a sign of shooting in any mature Snow Gums; a very small percentage of small trees shows growth from the base. Perhaps this species is a slow responder and the subterranean shoots of big trees are deeper.

A key element of alpine and subalpine heathlands is the sphagnum moss bogs. The growing moss is just the top layer of the hummocks. The lower layers of dead moss form peat, which builds up much more slowly. The accumulation rate given for this (in studies cited in the Ginini Flat Management Plan) is 0.7 mm a year, i.e. 7 cm a century, but slows as compaction increases. The Ginini Flat hummocks (mean depth 76 cm) are about 3300 years old. These peat bogs are essential to the hydrology of the heaths, and indeed to lower elevation stream systems which are fed by them,

It is unlikely that we shall see another event of this scale and intensity in the

ACT in our lifetimes, and probably not in that of another generation and beyond. However it is important to recall that in the time scale in which forests, their fauna and flora and their fire regimes have evolved, it is something which must have happened many times before. Recovery will occur; much of it will be back to 'normal' in mere decades. The full cycle of other habitats, such as tall wet sclerophyll forests and sphagnum bogs, are likely to be more at the scale of centuries. We must find a way to use this huge-scale and lifetime-unique event as an opportunity. I believe that the context of such an opportunity will be in learning more about fire recovery cycles and of educating ourselves and the community to the true place of such events as an integral part of El Nino-driven Australian biodiversity.

A SURVEY OF BIRDS FROM THREDBO TO THE SUMMIT: A SECOND VISIT

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The Kosciuszko Blitz was Australia's first 'Biodiversity Blitz' event and was coordinated by New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service (NSW NPWS) to mark the International Year of the Mountains. The goal was to document living organisms, including the bird fauna, using a 27 km^2 area within the Kosciuszko National Park, from Thredbo village to the summit of Mount Kosciuszko. A team of nine members of the Canberra Ornithologists Group (COG) took part, conducting surveys over the weekend of 12-13 January 2002 (Davey 2002).

Following the 2002 event the COG team decided that there would be value in continuing the surveys, possibly on an annual basis. However, the disastrous fires of January 2003, which severely affected a significant part of the study area, prevented any repeat of surveys at that time. But the fire event did create an incentive to revisit the site, since the effect on bird life presented a new perspective for the proposed longer-term study.

And so seven COG members visited Thredbo on 15-16 March 2003 to survey for a second time. The weather was mild with a light breeze and no rain. On the Sunday morning there was early cloud cover which soon cleared to a fine sunny day.

Surveys were again conducted at all of the 35 2-hectare sites set up in 2002 and the survey method was the same, In addition to counting all birds seen or heard within the 2-ha sites the goal was to identify all birds species present in the five habitat zones within the 27 km^2 study area.

Fire damage to the survey sites varied considerably. In the Alpine zone above the tree line, there was no fire damage at all. Within the Tree Line zone damage to the 2-ha survey sites varied from nil to 70% of the site affected. In the Dead Horse Gap Trail section of the Forest zone both sites were partly burnt. **In** the Merritts Nature Trail section, on the other hand, there was no damage, **In** the Riverine zone all sites were affected, damage estimated to range between 50% and 95% of the site. The three sites in the village environs suffered damage ranging from 20% to 90%.

Reports from those conducting the surveys indicated that there was considerable evidence of regrowth. Grass tussocks were sprouting and epicormic shoots were evident on trees, particularly the Snow Gum *Eucalyptus pauciflora.* Although in places the shrub layer had been largely burnt off, for example on the river bank along the Thredbo River Trail, new shoots of a daisy bush *Olearia sp.* were showing through the otherwise bare soil.

The team discovered that birds were again using all areas, despite the fire damage. A comparison of data gathered

during the 2002 and 2003 surveys follows.

- Of the 35 species recorded in the 27 km² survey area in January 2002 only one, Superb Lyrebird *Menura novaehollandiae,* was not recorded during the March 2003 visit.
- In March 2003, on the other hand, the team recorded 20 species not recorded during the first visit (see Appendix).
- Of these 20, five were recorded only below 1500 m, in the Riverine zone - Buff-rumped Thornhill *Acanthiza reguloides* and Rose Robin *Petroica rosea,* or Village zone — Masked Lapwing *Vanellus miles,* Restless Flycatcher *Myiagra inquieta* and House Sparrow *Passer domesticus.*
- Of the 15 recorded above 1500 m, eight were not included in the NSW NPWS Checklist of the bird fauna occurring above 1500 m in Kosciuszko National Park (see Appendix).

In the 2002 survey four species were identified in all five habitat zones — Crimson Rosella *Platycercus elegans,* Brown Thornbill *Acanthiza pusilla,* Pied Currawong *Strepera graculina* and Little Raven *Corvus bennetti.* In 2003 there were also four, although not all the same ones — Crimson Rosella, Brown Thornbill, Yellow-faced Honeyeater *Lichenostomus chrysops* and Flame Robin *Petroica phoenicea.*

The total abundance in 2-ha sites differed, in some instances quite markedly between the two years. In 2002, for example, 76 Brown Thornbills were counted as against 53 in 2003, However, the most notable case was the Little Raven. In 2002 there were 86 birds counted in Alpine zone sites, 16 in the Tree Line, 14 in the Forest, 7 in the Riverine and 15 in the Village — a total of 138, In 2003 the total was just 9 birds counted in the Riverine (8) and Village (1) zones.

In the case of birds recorded during the March 2003 visit that are not listed for the area, the survey team reached the following tentative conclusions.

- It is possible that four species were in the area on this occasion having been displaced from their normal range as a consequence of the fires — Australian King-Parrot *Alisterus scapularis,* Buff-rumped Thornbill, Scarlet Robin *Petroica multicolor* and Eastern Yellow Robin *Eopsaltria australis.* It is likely, however, that normally sedentary populations of these species are to be found within a relatively close distance,
- Three species - Noisy Friarbird *Philemon corniculatus,* Rose Robin *Petroica rosea*and Restless Flycatcher, were possibly on migration through the area. However, this raises the question why they have not been recorded in the area previously.
- The Red-browed Treecreeper *Climacteris erythrops* and the Pilotbird *Pycnoptilus floccosus* were identified in forest habitats fairly typical for these species. In this sometimes-difficult environment it is possible that the birds, both of which are cryptic in their behaviour, are normally present but go unnoticed

and are under-recorded in the area as a consequence.

It was perhaps a little early to expect any significant movement of honeyeaters. Small groups of Yellow-faced Honeyeaters were recorded moving up through the Tree Line zone. In the Alpine zone a party of 16 was observed approaching Rawsons Gap from the north-west. Finding no tree in which to pause they perched briefly atop a large granite boulder before disappearing in a south-easterly direction over the summit of Mount Kosciuszko.

At this very early stage of the surveys at Thredbo, firm conclusions cannot be drawn about the possible impact of the fires in the Kosciuszko National Park on bird movements. It is hoped that as time passes further work in the area will provide a better insight into species that are normally resident and those which pass through the area on migration.

After some discussion about timing the team has concluded that future surveys should be conducted at the same time of year as the original Biodiversity Blitz exercise. That being the case there are plans to survey all sites again in January 2004.

Acknowledgments

Dr Ken Green, NSW NPWS, gave generously of his time to facilitate the work of the survey team. Nicki Taws, Julie McGuiness, Jenny Bounds, Jack Holland, Bruce Lindenmayer and David McDonald scaled great heights, surveyed the birds and together with Chris Davey, commented on a draft of the paper. Heartfelt thanks to all.

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Appendix — Birds recorded within the Kosciuszko Blitz study area in March 2003 that were not recorded during the January 2002 event.

Great Cormorant	*Phalacrocorax carbo*
Black-shouldered Kite	*Elanus axillaris*
Wedge-tailed Eagle	*Aquila audax*
Brown Falcon	*Falco berigora*
Masked Lapwing Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo	*Vanellus miles*
Australian King-Parrot *	*Calyptorhynchus funereus*
Southern Boobook * Red-browed Treecreeper *	*Alisterus scapularis*
Pilotbird *	*Ninox novaeseelandiae*
Buff-rumped Thornbill *	*Climacteris erythrops*
Noisy Friarbird *	*Pycnoptilus floccosus*
Scarlet Robin *	*Acanthiza reguloides*
Rose Robin *	*Philemon corniculatus*
Eastern Yellow Robin *	*Petroica multicolor*
Restless Flycatcher *	*Petroica rosea*
Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike	*Eopsaltria australis*
Grey Currawong	*Mviagra inquieta*
House Sparrow *	*Coracina novaehollandiae*
Tree Martin *	*Strepera versicolor*
	Passer domesticus
	Hirundo nigricans

* Birds not listed in the NSW NPWS Checklist of the bird fauna occurring above 1500 m in Kosciuszko National Park, NSW.

Notes:

- Southern Boobook - recorded during the COG 2002 visit but outside the study area.
- Tree Martin - the Checklist includes a reference only to Martin spp.

ODD OBS

A Barn Owl besieged

At about 7:30 h on 20 September 2002, **I** was in the vicinity of Regatta Point on the northern shore of Lake Burley Griffin when I heard a cacophony of bird calls coming from the carpark. Out from the trees came a mixed flock of about 50 birds comprising Pied Currawongs *Strepera graculina,* Australian Ravens *Corvus coronoides* and Magpie-larks *Grallina cyanoleuca,* all chasing a Barn Owl *Tyto alba.* The Barn Owl flew west and crossed Commonwealth Avenue, with the other birds in pursuit, and landed in a tree on the far side of the road, However, it was mobbed and flew off. As the owl flew it was constantly harassed by the pursuing birds. At least three times, ravens grasped the owl from behind in mid air and carried it in their beaks for a matter of metres before letting it drop to the ground, where the owl was mobbed by other birds. This behaviour seemed very similar to video footage I had seen of frigatebirds pirating food from seabirds by grasping them in mid flight and hanging them upside down. The Barn Owl flew off into another tree by the shore of Lake Burley Griffin where it was surrounded by two ravens which took turns in pecking at it from above and below. In trying to save the owl from its attackers, my actions scared off both the owl and the ravens. It was last seen heading across the lake toward the National Museum of Australia with a sole Pied Currawong in pursuit.

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Darters nesting at Molonglo Reach

Two sightings of Darters *Anhinga melanogaster* with dependent young were made on Wednesday 26 March 2003 between 17:45 and 19:00 h at Molonglo Reach (opposite Duntroon), By paddling a kayak quietly, it was possible to approach the birds to a reasonable distance without causing them distress. Both sightings were on the south, or Jerrrabomberra Wetlands, side of the river, the first being only a short paddling distance from the launching/picnic area, The nest was about 3 m above the water and gave the appearance of being crowded with two white, very fluffy (almost furry looking) chicks half-exposed and clearly visible, There was a male adult bird in attendance, with two nests of Little Pied Cormorants *Phalacrocorax melanoleucos* also in close proximity (about 1 m away).

An estimated 500 m closer to Lake Burley Griffin was a second nest, again containing two chicks and again with an adult bird in attendance. This time the chicks were more advanced and were actually standing in the nest, showing the development of a brown tinge in their feathers but still probably a long way short of successfully leaving the nest.

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A heart-breaking observation

The abundance of animal populations is determined by rates of birth, death, emigration and immigration, yet these

processes are seldom observed in the wild. Death by predation or disease may be observed but in many populations animals disappear and the cause of death is unknown. Because they are observed infrequently, any sightings of natural deaths are therefore of note.

A pair of Australian Magpie *Gymnorhina tibicen* produced three young that fledged close to the Kippax Health Centre on 11 October 2002. By 20 October two young had disappeared. On 22 November the remaining young was observed feeding on the ground. As I stood 20 m away watching the bird it suddenly gave a series of loud distress calls which caused the adults feeding on the ground nearby to fly to the youngster. By the time of their arrival the young was lying on the ground on its left side with legs slowly pedalling. The bird was gasping with mucous coming from the bill. The adults stood over the bird but did not in any way attack it. The attending adults discouraged me from approaching the young but within two minutes it was dead and within five minutes the parents had left the scene.

An autopsy by Dr David Spratt of CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems revealed that there were no items lodged in the trachea or oesophagus but the heart had ruptured with a tear in the left ventricle wall, In all other respects the bird was in good condition.

The apparently healthy bird may have been suffering from a genetic heart defect that for no obvious reason ruptured as I watched the feeding bird. Although three young fledged the fate of the other two that disappeared within nine days of fledging is unknown. The pair subsequently fledged a second brood of two young on 12 January 2003, both of which were still within the parental territory at the end of March 2003.

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Unusual foraging technique of European Goldfinch

On 25 January 2003, at 6:40 h, on the southern shore of Yerrabi Pond, Amaroo, two European Goldfinches *Carduelis carduelis* were seen to come to standing dried *Phalaris* seedheads. Both birds had difficulty perching on the brittle stems, but one eventually gained a firm foothold and commenced climbing up toward the seedhead. When some 10 cm below the seedhead, this bird leant down to bite the stem, causing it to fracture, but not break off. The bird then reached down to grasp the hanging stem below the point of fracture, and pulled the hanging stem up alongside the standing section on which it was perching, immediately grasping the two parallel stems with both feet. While continuing to grasp both stems, the bird carefully sidled down to reach the seedhead, into which it poked its bill in search of seeds. Seeds obviously had been shed much earlier, so after two pecks without result the bird departed, followed by its partner,

On numerous occasions, I have observed parrots and native estrildid finches taking seeds from standing seedheads while perching immediately underneath the seedhead, or by reaching up from the ground to pull down the stem, or by biting off the stem and letting it fall to the ground. However, on no prior

occasion have I seen a bird manoeuvre a fractured stem so that it could be grasped to get at the seedhead. It would be interesting to determine if this intricate technique is used regularly by fringillid finches.

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Australian King-Parrots during the breeding season in Canberra Nature Parks

Recently Davey (2002) reviewed the evidence that might indicate breeding of Australian King-Parrots *Alisterus scapularis* in dry sclerophyll woodlands of the Canberra Nature Parks. COG's Annual Bird Reports provide three earlier records of birds inspecting hollows: 16 October 1994 west of Curtin; 16 December 1998, on The Pinnacle; and 23 September 2001 on Red Hill. There is also Chris Davey's own observation from 2002 of a female entering a tree hollow within the Black Mountain Reserve.

For the last five years or so **I** have regularly encountered during the breeding season at least one pair of king-parrots in various parts of Mt Ainslie. The birds appear to cover great distances, At times they are feeding and moving casually through the reserve, at other times their flight appears highly targeted. In the 2002 breeding season, a group of one male and two females was seen several times, mainly on the eastern side of Mt Ainslie. Again, they appeared to cover great distances, at times coming from suburbia in the south or north from the direction of Mt. Majura.

On 15 November 2002, while on a walk on the eastern side of Mt. Ainslie with Barbara Allan and Geoffrey Dabb, looking for Painted Honeyeaters *Grantiella picta,* we saw two female king-parrots approach from the south and land in a tall Blakely's **Red** Gum *Eucalyptus blakelyi.* The birds were very quiet and appeared wary. After watching the surroundings for some time, at least one of the females (the second female was not always in full view) briefly entered one of two large hollows located close to each other. The birds flew off soon after.

On 17 November I saw the two females again in the same urea, this time arriving from the north (I was too far from the actual site to see whether or not they paid a visit to the same tree and hollows).

Two things are notable about these observations.

- Assuming it was a potential nest site, the birds had selected a part on Mt Ainslie that most closely resembled tall forest.
- The literature (Higgins 1999) mentions only a simple 'single-pair' breeding system for the Australian King-Parrot. The observations from Mt Ainslie give rise to some speculation. Was the second female a helper? Was the male partnered with two females (and if the latter, did they nest close to each other)?

Definite proof for breeding in the open woodlands of Canberra Nature Parks remains to be obtained. This in itself is rewarding enough, but at the same time

we may learn further aspects of king-parrot biology.

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A **White-throated Nightjar breeding record**

At about 7:30 h on 17 November 2002, while bushwalking in Yanununbeyan Crown Reserve, near the Queanbeyan River, some 9 km WNW of Captains Flat, Anthony Scott and **I** disturbed a White-throated Nightjar *Eiirostopodus mystacalis*. The bird flew up from underfoot when we were almost on top of it. It was very dark brown in colour, roughly magpie-size, but with long wings, and with no white obvious on the wings in flight. We didn't move until we had searched the ground from where it had flown, and eventually saw that it had been sitting on a single egg about 4 cm in length, cream in colour with a few dark spots. The egg was just sitting on the litter with no apparent 'nest' scraped in the ground or formed out of the litter.

We returned several hours later to the same location, but failed to observe it more closely as we only found the bird by flushing it. This time we took very careful note of features surrounding the nest site, so that the bird could be located from a distance without disturbance.

On 23 November 2002, **I** returned for a better look with indefatigable cameraman Geoffrey Dabb. We found the right location and by carefully scanning the ground from a distance were eventually able to distinguish this most cryptic of birds amongst the logs and litter on the ground. We had good views with binoculars and Geoffrey's video camera. It was very dark brown-black in colour, with a very fine patterning of white and black on head and wings, providing excellent camouflage. Its eyes were mostly closed, or just opened in a narrow slit. When disturbed, it flew with a silent, graceful, but erratic flight. On one occasion it perched on a branch, positioning itself horizontally and parallel to the branch, and thus resembling part of the tree.

The Yanununbeyan Crown Reserve is mostly dry sclerophyll forest, and in this area is predominantly Broad-leafed Peppermint *Eucalyptus dives* and Brittle Gum *E. mannifera*. While understorey shrubs are sparse, there are many logs and much litter, which is quite suitable habitat for nightjars. Unfortunately **I** did not have the time to return regularly to see if there was any evidence of breeding success.

This species is very rarely reported from COG's area of interest (see Wilson 1999), and is generally rare west of the Great Divide (Blakers et al. 1984), The only previous breeding record from the ACT is of a nest with one egg between Mt Tidbinbilla and Bendora Dam, on 11

November 1992 (Olsen and Hayes 1994). This site was also dry sclerophyll forest of Broad-leafed Peppermint and Brittle Gum with Red Stringybark *E. macrorhyncha* as well.

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A dead White-throated Nightjar

My regular evening walk takes me along the edge of the reserve near Webster and Maygar Streets in Hughes. On my walk on Sunday 19 January 2003, **I** found an unusual, but dead, bird. On closer examination **I** thought it may have been a young owl. Its markings were so beautiful I decided to take my husband Vince back to see it, so I moved it off the ants' dinner plate as it was fast being devoured. We returned armed with flyspray and a plastic bag and on the way home dropped in to see Michael Wright who identified it as a White-throated Nightjar *Eurostopodus mystacalis* and took some photos which were distributed on the COG email list.

It was the first time **I** had seen this beautiful bird and, perhaps not surprisingly, it was the day after the dreadful fires. Although in good condition, I think it may have been hit by a car. It now resides in the CSIRO Australian National Wildlife Collection at Gungahlin.

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The woodswallow influx of 2002

In 2002, White-browed Woodswallows *Artamus superciliosus* were present here in far greater numbers than I reported seeing in 1997 *(Canberra Bird Notes* 24: 29-30), and were much more widespread. My first sighting of large numbers was on 22 October 2002 on 'Woden' rural lease. On that day and the next I estimated that the population on 'Woden', 'Mugga' and 'Callum Brae' was 200-300 White-broweds and up to 20 Masked Woodswallows *Artamus personatus.* On 1 November, Marnix Zwankhuizen reported in the same area 'hundreds' circling overhead with 'more perched' and 'almost 100 Masked'.

Those early observations probably represented birds in transit, as it is difficult to imagine the available food resources being sufficient to sustain such numbers for more than a few days. Most of the feeding I saw was on or near the ground. On 5 November a group of about 60 ground-feeding woodswallows on 'Callum Brae' consisted of the two species in roughly equal numbers.

Thereafter the pattern appeared to be as in 1997 with the large flocks either moving on or breaking up into smaller stationary groups based on selected patches of woodland. Over the next two months I observed multiple breeding attempts at each of 'Callum Brae',

Campbell Park, and the Newline paddock. The first two locations produced at least advanced young in the nest.

There were several other reports of both species from other locations posted on the COG email discussion group.

As in 1997, **I** did not notice any nesting behaviour by Masked Woodswallows, except for a promising site inspection by one pair at Campbell Park where a female actually sat in an old cuckoo-shrike nest for some minutes before the pair moved on. However, with one exception all Masked Woodswallows that were observed appeared to be paired. The exception was a group of 10 Masked Woodswallows at Campbell Park in the first week of November, possibly mainly young birds. They did some hawking but for most of the observation period of about an hour rested quietly in the branches of a eucalypt. Unusually, no White-browed Woodswallows were associated with that group.

Geoffrey Dabb
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Bird watching or bird listening?

Having been bird observing with others occasionally over many years, **I** have realised that many people, including myself, record species by call and often don't bother to use their binoculars to see the birds. This led to my noting the ability of others to identify species correctly.

Long ago **I** realised that the ability to identify species correctly by call related to one's musical ear. Some people have what is known in musical circles as perfect pitch while others are tone deaf and cannot sing even the most simple song in tune, though generally they are unaware of this. There are many variations between the extremes of tone deafness and perfect pitch.

Of course there is another important factor affecting one's ability to recognise calls in the field and that is experience. It is useless having perfect pitch without plenty of field experience to enable one to become familiar with the calls of the local area.

Tone deaf people generally cannot identify the small passerines by call, especially those with high-pitched notes, such as the thornbills, the pardalotes and the Weebill. They do better with the deeper and louder calls, such as the Australian Magpie, the Eastern Whipbird and the Australian Raven. Volume and pitch both seem to be important in the recognition process.

A related matter is the age of the observer. It seems that deafness afflicts most people of advanced years and that it commences with the highest notes. My own hearing was always excellent but, having passed ninety, I find that **I** cannot hear the high-pitched calls. This appears to be normal in this age group. **I** recently watched a group of about a dozen small birds fly into a tree in the garden but could not hear a single call — a frustrating experience.

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A Nankeen Kestrel in suburbia

Both HANZAB and our own Garden Bird Survey assure us that the Nankeen Kestrel *Falco cenchroides is* not uncommon in urban areas. This accords with my experience, as I have frequently seen them hawking over the grasslands bordering major Canberra arteries. But I did not regard them as birds of the suburbs, until recently.

The afternoon of 27 July 2002 was pleasantly sunny, a fact which encouraged me to engage in one of winter's outdoor chores, namely pruning the fruit trees. My aged Santa Rosa plum tree is perfectly positioned overlooking my neighbours' well-stocked bird feeder, which has over the years attracted its fair share of not only parrots, pigeons and sparrows, but also raptors for easy pickings from amongst the feeding birds. On this occasion, my attention was first drawn to my neighbours' yard by a piercing, pitiful scream, which on inspection proved to be emanating from a Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris,* held firmly upside down on the ground in the talons of an adult male Nankeen Kestrel. The starling continued its screaming and struggling for about a minute, during which time the entire bird neighbourhood arrived to see what was going on. Large numbers of Australian Magpies *Gymnorhina tibicen,* Pied Currawongs *Strepera graculina,* and Magpie-larks *Grallina cyanoleuca* joined in the chorus, and all repeatedly swooped the kestrel and its prey. The kestrel repeatedly mantled the starling to keep the attackers off.

Then a cat arrived on the scene, All the birds, including the kestrel, abruptly moved to vantage points on the pergola or the garage, and keenly watched the cat move the by now motionless and silent starling a metre or two, paw and sniff it, then stalk off without it. As soon as the cat was out of sight, the kestrel dropped back down to the starling, fixed it firmly in its talons and flew off, with the black-and-white brigade in noisy pursuit. And, despite its having dined successfully in my neighbourhood, the kestrel has apparently not returned for a second helping.

I would be curious to know how frequently raptors, and which raptors, avail themselves of birds feeding at bird feeders in suburban situations in Canberra. At the above-mentioned feeder, the accipiters are the usual diners. In recent years a Collared Sparrowhawk *Accipiter cirrhocephalus* has attempted to take a Crested Pigeon *Ocyphaps lophotes*, and a Brown Goshawk *A. fasciatus* has successfully done so.

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CANBERRA ORNITHOLOGISTS GROUP
President's Report for 2002

It is a pleasure once again to provide a report on COG and its achievements during the last year. I am particularly pleased to advise that this year we have made substantial progress on two issues which I mentioned last year would be the focus of our activities in the future. These are the implementation of an education strategy and a focus on bird conservation in the ACT.

Education

The business plan recognises that COG has an aging membership, and that steps need to be taken to attract younger members. One way of doing this is to provide education opportunities and materials to schools. Through these mechanisms COG not only encourages the conservation of birds in the Canberra region through knowledge of the problems our birds have to contend with, but it also provides an opportunity to recruit new members.

This year we have been fortunate in having Tanya Rough join the committee. Tanya has done a fantastic job in progressing a number of education initiatives in Canberra schools, and we have received very positive feedback on both the initiative itself and the content of the materials prepared.

As part of National Science Week in the Canberra region in August 2002, COG collaborated with Greening Australia, the Science Educators Association of the ACT and the Australian National Botanic Gardens to produce a *Birds and Habitat* awareness raising kit for schools, The kit was designed to assist teachers to organise a bird watching event, to identify common Canberra region bird species, to compare bird fauna in different habitats, and to run exercises on the connection between birds and their habitats. The kit was distributed to every preschool (90), primary school (90) and high school (23) in the ACT in the Public, Private and Catholic school systems. Copies were also distributed to pre-service science teachers at the Australian Catholic University. As part of COG's education activities for 2003, it is planned to follow up a number of the schools and assist teachers and students in the use of the kit.

Another key initiative was our involvement recently in a 'biodiversity audit' as part of an Eco Snapshot Day at two primary schools (Anglican Burgman School Gungahlin, and Mt Rogers Community School Melba) in the ACT. The Eco Snapshot Day is part of the sustainable schools program devised by SCRAP (School Communities Recycling All Paper Ltd). Over the past two years this pilot program has received much attention for its innovative approach to teaching and learning about sustainability. Based on a hands-on approach for students, the Eco Snapshot Day is a method of auditing schools' environmental performance. In a full day audit of the school grounds, students and their teachers work with the SCRAP team to discover just how their school ticks - environmentally. From this the school is provided with a report of the current status of conservation in their

school. SCRAP follow up the Eco Snap-shot Day by working with the school to implement the final report. Canberra birds could benefit from COG's involvement with this program, assisting to identify key bird areas around schools and conserve and enhance these areas.

Conservation

In August 2002, COG received funding from the ACT Government for the second year of our threatened species woodland bird monitoring project; this project has been running for seven years now. The project's current focus is on using existing data to identify and set up long-term monitoring sites for birds listed as threatened, specifically the Hooded Robin and the Brown Treecreeper and providing recommendations for ongoing management. The grant also includes some funding for a sub-project to consider and nominate additional birds for threatened species status. These submissions are being managed by Nicki Taws. A submission on the Diamond Firetail was lodged in July and we hope to complete submissions on another ten species soon.

Julie McGuiness has proved to be a very able Conservation Officer. She has prepared submissions on a range of environmental issues of concern to COG including the proposed development at O'Malley Ridge, the proposed charcoal plant at Mogo, and is seeking action by the ACT Government on the increase in Spotted Turtle-Dove numbers. Julie has also taken the lead in developing relevant policies, including the policy on introduced birds and COG's policy on Common Mynas.

Other issues

MOU with Environment ACT

I am also pleased to announce that COG has recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Environment ACT (EACT). This agreement looks to formalise the excellent relationship which both EACT and COG have formed in recent years, setting out the roles and responsibilities of both parties which will be followed in collaboration on projects of interest. As many of you are aware, both organisations now readily share knowledge and data relevant to bird conservation in Canberra, and COG's role has been formally recognised in Action Plans for threatened birds in the ACT. I look forward to maintaining the cooperative working arrangements that COG has in place with EACT and continuing our collaboration to achieve good conservation outcomes for the birds of the ACT.

Committee

The Committee has worked effectively and I would like to thank all for the support they have given me over the last year. Most Committee members have signalled their intent to stand for Committee again, and I look forward to their continuing support. I would like to especially thank those members who are retiring from committee, Kathy Walter and John Goldie. Kathy will be continuing as *Gang-gang* Editor. New policies have been developed or are in progress covering field trips, honorary membership, obituaries, introduced birds generally and Common Mynas.

An organisation can only be effective if it is financially secure and has an active membership. As will be evident from her report, Joan Lipscombe continues to do a great job as Treasurer, and we have a healthy bank account. Thank you Joan for all you have done. And thank you also to Noel Luff, our Honorary Auditor.

During the year Michelle Penders resigned from the position of Office Manager, and we subsequently appointed Ann Bray to the position. I would like to record the committee's gratitude for the excellent work that Michelle did whilst working with COG, and for the way in which Ann has quickly picked up the role. This is an important position that manages the increasing amount of administrative work required to keep COG operational and to assist with the day-to-day operation of the group.

Membership increased a little during 2001-02 but a substantial number of members have not renewed their subscription. Regretfully, several long-standing COG members passed away. Among these was Doug Ross, one of our two Honorary Members, and Bryan Fitzgerald, a former President. We currently have 304 financial members. This is broken down as 116 family memberships, 166 individual memberships, 1 life member, and 21 organisation memberships.

Other business

It is a unique feature of COG that much of our business is carried out by keen members and project organisers who are not members of the Committee, but nevertheless make a huge contribution to the success of the organisation. Whilst it is not possible **to thank them all individually,** I **would like to mention some names of those who quietly work away in the background.**

Communications and publications

During the year Kathy Walter did a wonderful job editing and publishing our newsletter, including some new items and regular columns. Thanks also to Rosemary Ryan and Lia Battison and the team of helpers for distributing our publications. Lia has now taken on the role of coordinating the mailing of *Gang-gang* **and** *Canberra Bird Notes,* and we **thank her predecessor Rosemary for her contribution. Harvey Perkins and Barbara Allan continued to do a professional job in editing** *Canberra Bird Notes.*

Mike **O'Shaughnessy maintained COG's web site http://www.canberrabirds.dynamite.com.au. The website presents information about COG presentations and field trips as reported in** *Gang-gang,* together **with other useful information about COG and its activities. Thank you** Mike.

COG's **email discussion list 'Canberrabirds', managed by David McDonald, continued to operate effectively throughout the year. It has over 90 subscribers and averages about ten messages per day, providing a useful forum for members and friends of COG to discuss topical issues relating to birds and birding in the Canberra region. It** was recently **characterised by Topica, the** company **that hosts the list, as being the most useful and informative of the 32 birding lists that Topica hosts.**

After many years of useful service the COG telephone Hotline was discontinued earlier this year. There were difficulties in finding a permanent home for the line, and its declining use meant that we could no longer justify its cost. Thanks to Ian McMahon and his predecessor Ian Fraser for managing the service so ably, and to the Environment Centre who housed the line over a long period.

Outings and field trips

This year, Jack Holland joined the Field Trips team (Alistair Bestow, Jenny Bounds and David McDonald) and has been managing a number of local and weekend events, with assistance and advice from Jenny and Alastair. Once again, COG ran an extensive range of local half- and full-day field trips, providing members with good opportunities to see birds with an experienced guide on hand to assist with identification problems. This year, trips were arranged to two of the Greening Australia revegetation sites which are part of an ongoing bird monitoring program, and several local walks for beginners were on the program. Thank to all those who led field trips during the year.

We always need more volunteers to fill this role and if you are able to assist in this area, please contact Jack. Remember you do not need to be an expert to lead an outing. It does require some preparation beforehand, an ability to lead the group effectively and to draw on the skills and knowledge of other participants on the trip.

Atlas, Woodland Survey, Garden Bird Survey, Waterbird Survey, Databases

COG runs a number of bird monitoring projects, some of which have been operating for many years. Before referring to these projects individually, I would like to thank all those who have contributed data to these projects for a number of years, and continue to do so. The value of these projects relies upon sustained contributions from participants, and the level of support which we receive in this area is remarkable. Thank you to all those who contribute records so diligently.

Although the official four-year Atlas project has ended. COG members are still encouraged to collect records for ongoing monitoring in COG's area of interest, especially at regular 2-hectare sites. It is very important to collect this data over time. Thank you to all members who continue to collect records, and particularly those who have adopted regular 2-hectare sites. It is these sites that form the backbone of much of our environmental monitoring, providing data capable of detecting future changes in bird abundance.

The other important component of COG's environmental monitoring program is the Woodland Monitoring Project. COG's surveys in grassy woodland habitats continued with further support from an ACT Government Environment Grant. Jenny Bounds coordinates this project with Nicki Taws and myself forming the other members of the Management Team. Alison Rowell was contracted to coordinate the

quarterly surveys and data collection. Surveys are now conducted at 11 grassy woodland locations in key areas; in all a total of 113 sub-sites are monitored every three months. Thank you to the people involved in this project, including Jenny Bounds, Paul Fennell, Nicki Taws, David McDonald, Harvey Perkins, Julie McGuinness, Malcolm Fyfe, Kathy Walter, John Goldie and Geoffrey Dabb. Currently, all the data collected since 1995 are being analysed by an expert statistician in biodiversity projects and we expect a report before the end of 2002; this will be important to guide future work on the project.

An element of the Woodland and Atlas monitoring programs is to set up long term monitoring sites for threatened species, the Hooded Robin and Brown Treecreeper, using a selection of existing woodland and 2-hectare sites where these species have been recorded. COG has engaged Nicki Taws to work in consultation with Environment ACT (ACT Wildlife and Monitoring) to coordinate this work. Surveys of these sites are being conducted twice a year, in September and December, using either the Woodland or Atlas methodology as appropriate.

Another element of the Woodland Project is the preparation of submissions to the ACT Flora and Fauna Committee to nominate a further 11 species of birds for listing as threatened under ACT legislation. Nicki Taws is coordinating this work under contract; a submission on the Diamond Firetail has already been made and others are to follow. This year also saw the production of the *Caring for Woodland Birds* pamphlet, to improve awareness of declining woodland bird species, especially in the rural community. This pamphlet has been distributed to rural lessees in the ACT, to Greening Australia and Environment ACT, and to the surrounding Shire Councils. Thanks to Jenny Bounds who came up with the concept and text, and to Kathy Walter who turned this into a very eye-catching design, and to the COG members who provided photographs, particularly Helen Fallow and Graeme Stephinson.

Preliminary planning has also started for a seminar on 22 March 2003 on a woodland birds theme, in conjunction with a meeting of BIGnet, the Bird Interest Groups Network of NSW; this is planned to be a public event as part of the Woodland Project, to improve community awareness, with a range of speakers.

Thanks to Philip Veerman for his continuing work in managing the Garden Bird Survey, and to Kay Hahne for continuing to assist with entering the data. This project has now been in existence for over 20 years and is our longest-running monitoring project. Philip recently published a report on the first 18 years of the survey.

Another long-running project is the waterbird survey. Thanks to Michael Lenz, who not only conceived the idea for this work, but still continues to manage the survey.

Paul Fennell continued to manage COG's databases, ensuring that data are effectively curated and files regularly backed-up. Purchase of new computing equipment and software completed during the year will ensure COG

continues to be able to manage its growing data collections effectively. Special thanks to those members who assisted with data entry during the year, including Tony Harding, Malcolm Fyfe, Alan Ford, Milton Smith, Martyn Moffat, who contributed in getting record sheets into the database.

Annual Bird Reports

Many thanks to Malcolm Fyfe, David Purchase, Grahame Clark, Bob Digan, Brendan Lepschi, Ian McMahon, Harvey Perkins, Nicki Taws and Barbara Allan who have managed to keep the Annual Bird Reports up to date. I would particularly like to acknowledge the sterling efforts of Malcolm Fyfe who has been COG's records officer now for many years. Malcolm has now advised that he would like a rest from this position. It is testament to the excellent job that he has done over the years that finding a replacement has been difficult. Everyone I speak to about taking the job on acknowledges that Malcolm will be a 'hard act to follow'.

Monthly meetings

Barbara Allan has again organised an excellent program of presentations for our monthly meetings. The reports in *Ganggang* and on the COG website every month attest to the quality of our meetings. Special thanks also to Carol Macleay, Ann McKenzie and Louise Muir for running the stall at COG meetings, and to Maria Lukacs and others for their assistance with the monthly raffle. Barbara Allan also organised the refreshments for the meetings.

COG administration & the COG Office

The COG Office is now a focal point for Committee administration and storage of COG equipment, data sheets, the COG computer and database and the COG slide collection. We recently appointed a new Office Manager, Ann Bray, to replace Michelle Penders. This is an important administrative support role in the day-to-day operations of the Group, and frees up Committee members to allow them to concentrate on more specialised tasks, such as the management of COG projects. Thank you Michelle for your work in this role. This year, COG moved its meetings venue to the Canberra Girls Grammar School theatrette after a long search for a new venue. This is a multi-media venue which opens up many opportunities for video and Powerpoint presentations as well as the usual slide shows. COG is very grateful to Sue Lashko for arranging this venue for COG. We are also very grateful to John and Meg Gordon for providing interim accommodation at the Acacia Motor Lodge until a permanent venue was found.

David McDonald, Joan Lipscombe and Geoffrey Dabb were always available to provide quality advice on COG's constitutional and organisational framework.

Canberra Birds Conservation Fund

The Canberra Birds Conservation Fund is able to receive tax-deductible donations from COG members and the general public, and uses the donated

money on activities that help to achieve COG's environmental objectives, especially promoting the conservation of the Canberra region's native birds and their habitats. The fund's first grant was given to Mr Adrian Manning of the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, ANU, to assist in a study he is undertaking, entitled 'A multi-scale study of the Superb Parrot'. This project aims to examine the impact agricultural practices are having on the survival of Superb Parrots, leading to the development of related conservation strategies.

Thanks to the proceeds of a raffle of three beautiful framed bird photographs donated by Steve Stephinson and ongoing donations from members there are sufficient funds now available for the next grant to awarded. COG invites all members to make donations to the fund, and to encourage other people to do the same.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone else who has provided with me assistance over the last year when asked to do so, often at short notice. During a period when I was absent from Canberra for many months, I was extremely grateful for the support given by so many of COG's members to ensure our group continued its good work promoting the birds of Canberra and their conservation. I look forward to another successful year for COG in 2003.

Barry Baker
14 November 2002

BOOK REVIEW

Birds of Rottnest Island by Denis Saunders and Perry de Rebeira. Published by the authors, second (revised) edition 1993; 118 pp, 13 colour plates, 6 figures plus a number of black and white drawings.

Why review a ten-year-old book, you might well ask. The explanation is simple. One of the authors (DS) gave a presentation on Rottnest Island to a COG meeting last year, a presentation which so inspired many members that we thought it timely to look again at his published work on the island to assess its continuing place in the literature.

Though I grew up on the outskirts of Perth, I was never a regular visitor to Rottnest Island (Rotto), which lies off the coast 18 km west of Fremantle. Nevertheless it remains one of my favourite places to go and watch birds close to the Perth metropolitan area. Sadly most of my visits to the West these days coincide with the Christmas holiday season when too many people are there for my liking and that of my family.

The book is made up of four chapters. There is a short introduction which briefly describes the geographical location of Rottnest, and emphasises its special appeal to many West Australians as a place to relax and get away from it all, where the wildlife is both varied and relatively tame. Chapter 2 describes in some detail the six major habitats, the coast, the salt-lakes, the freshwater and brackish swamps, the woodlands, the heath and the settlements and disturbed areas, with each habitat well illustrated with two colour photos of typical scenes. There are also maps clearly illustrating where the major places and vegetation types are.

This sets the scene well for the third, and by far the largest, chapter which describes in varied detail the 49 bird species that occur regularly on Rottnest, again broken down into sections covering the habitats where they are most likely to be seen. The species are described with some brief notes in each case aided by some very presentable coloured illustrations to aid with the identifications. However, for me by far the most interesting information is that on the species' status with discussions of the best places to see them, together with the individual species changes over the seasons and over the years. One of the reasons to go to Rotto for bird watching is the ease with which many species not readily seen on the nearby mainland can be observed, and in this respect the sub-sections on the Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*, Australian Shelduck *Tadorna tadornoides*, Banded Stilt *Cladorhynchus leucocephalus*, Rock Parrot *Neophema petrophila*, Fairy Tern *Sterna nereis* and Red-capped Robin *Petroica goodenovii* are particularly detailed, informative and interesting.

The short final chapter summarises the best places to watch birds at Rottnest Island, again aided by a map of the island where these locations and the suggested bird walks are clearly marked.

Finally there is an appendix comprising a list and status of all the birds recorded at

Rottnest Island, as well as a very comprehensive index.

As was clear from the talk given to COG in June 2002, Denis Saunders has been a very regular visitor to the island and regards it as a special place. This self-published and impressively presented book is clearly a labour of love. Due to the relatively small size of the island and the small species list compared with the mainland, it serves both as a field guide and a 'where to see/find birds' book. It is well worth purchasing for the serious bird book collector's library, and is available for $15 at the COG sales desk. For members visiting the west I strongly recommend that you make some time to visit Rotto, both to sample the relaxed lifestyle and to see the bird life on offer. Be sure to take a copy of this very fine book to help you find them most efficiently.

Jack Holland
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COLUMNISTS' CORNER

The views expressed in these columns are those of the authors and do not necessarily represeni the views of COG.

Towards a Canberra bird calendar: distinguishing the bird observer from the tomato grower

I devote this contribution to the matter of seasons, and specifically the seasons of Canberra's birds. A simple introduction to the quest for Australia's true seasons may be found in Alan Reid's delightful little book *Banksias and Bilbies.* Further discussion of various aspects of the true seasons appears in the newsletters of Alan's *Timelines* project.

In brief, the four traditional Europe-derived seasons are not always helpful, in fact sometimes no use at all, in describing the cycle of annual changes and events in the various regions of natural Australia. This deficiency is most apparent in the tropical north but has also been noted by southern nature-watchers. Various alternative approaches have been suggested - in *Banksias and Bilbies* and in the newsletters - generally involving more than four seasons.

My mention of the tropics draws attention to the need to focus on a particular locality in deciding on appropriate alternatives. Seasons in Canberra are not the same as seasons in Darwin - or in Perth or Adelaide - or even in Batemans Bay. We are not speaking, of course, of the so-called 'official' seasons with, for example, Spring beginning on September 1, and Autumn comprising no more and no less than the months from March to May. Those three-month sections of the year are 'seasons' simply because they are declared to be such. They could be called anything and need mean nothing except three-month sections of the year.

Seasonal labels are already used in a different sense from the official one, as in: 'We didn't have a Winter this year', 'Spring is late this year', and 'We're having a second Summer this year'. But are those labels, even in that broad 'non-official' sense, appropriate to describe natural trends and events in the local cycle? Annual natural trends and events and their timing will vary even in different parts of the ACT, so let's consider just the Canberra suburbs and their surrounding woodlands, Here we meet an immediate complication,

An inescapable fact is that the planting of exotic tree species, and particularly deciduous ones, has created a highly visible and specific annual cycle imitating that of Europe or North America (or Japan or China). There is a 'false Autumn' when willow, ash and maple behave as if they were still at home. Is it not often heard, 'I like Canberra because it has distinct seasons'? (Anyone who says that should sample the July tropical heat, the January Arctic cold, and the startling transitions of the north-eastern USA or eastern Canada.)

Not only that, but Canberra gardeners can and do, in sowing and tending their exotic gardens, follow a cycle in which

spring, summer, autumn and winter make some kind of sense as reference points, at least in relation to tulips and tomatoes. Nonetheless, even for that purpose, schedules that refer to months, or weeks of months, rather than seasons, are probably a better guide.

Even when we get to the native birds, the local blooming and fruiting of exotic plants has no doubt influenced the annual movements of some of them, so their observable cycle may not be in that sense always truly natural. Then again, some people might reasonably think that birds should not be considered in isolation and that the notion of a 'season' only has meaning if it is marked by parallel events, quite possibly related to one another, across the whole natural world. These might include the flowering and fruiting of eucalypts and acacias, and emergence of moths, cicadas, and Christmas beetles. Note the precise flowering months given in the publication by Ian Fraser and Margaret Mc Jannett, *Wildflowers of the Biish Capital.*

Taking account of all that, *Stentoreiis* must point out that this publication is called *Canberra Bird Notes,* and will confine himself to proposing a bird calendar. The basic information for this is already available, and more is being accumulated all the time. It may be drawn in particular from the following sources: the published 1986-1989 Atlas (and in due course more recent Atlas work); Garden Bird Survey data, using Philip Veerman 's handy summary (updated in 2003); and postings on the COG chatline, a frequent theme there being the arrival, the activities and the numbers of our annual visitors.

Stentoreiis, as will be clear to any readers of this column, makes no claim to being a practising scientist of any denomination. That has not been, and is not now, an impediment to the offering of his conclusions.

First, it does seem to me that the very broad generalisation involved in the idea of a 'season' makes it permissible to regard as of decisive significance one aspect of a bird's cycle, namely, its presence in the Canberra area.

When I look at the available information, the GBS summaries for example, I find that 'presence' or well-defined peaks of presence, are of three broad kinds:

(a) year-round presence (being of itself, *if uniform,* no guide to seasonality);
(b) presence extending over *either* the warmer months or the colder months; and
(c) presence concentrated in one or two isolated months.

The concentrations represented by (c) are generally due to populations, not being Canberra breeders, moving through or seeking food in the area. Examples are:

Rainbow Bee-eater (March)
White-throated Needletail (March)
Yellow-faced Honeyeater (April)
Satin Flycatcher (October)
Rufous Fantail (November and March)
Little Raven (January)

The concentrations in (c) are notable seasonal events in the annual cycle, and certainly worth plotting on a Timelines chart. However, they do not themselves constitute 'seasons'. They may, but do

not necessarily, indicate end-points of 'seasons'.

Basing my approach on the presence of the birds, I suggest the following as the underlying Canberra bird seasons:

> *(1) 'Breed'*. The warmer months of the year when breeding visitors are present. (approximately mid-September to a time between mid-January and mid-February). Most resident species also breed at this time, of course. Non-breeding visitors will be present at some time (i.e. trans-equatorial migrants).

(2) 'Move'. The period when breeding visitors move *out* of the area, out-of-area breeders move *through* it, and some colder-month visitors might move *into* it (from the end of Breed to about the end of April). This will always include the bulk of the honeyeater migration.

(3) *'Colder'*. The period between *Move* and *Breed* when cold-weather visitors will be present but warm-weather visitors will not.

The dates of those seasons might vary from year to year according to weather patterns or food availability. Refinement is possible; for particular purposes it might be appropriate to refer to 'Early Breed', 'Mid-Breed', or 'Late Breed'. (For example, cuckoos generally do not call in Late Breed.) The next step will be to specify normal (i.e. non-aberrant) definitional events. (Pallid Cuckoo arrivals and magpie swoops can occur in Late Colder. However, no normal *Stentoreus* will concede that the above names for the new seasons are only tentative and might be improved on. However the names used must be distinctive. It is the use of them that will most surely separate the serious bird observer from the tomato grower.

A. stentoreus

Birding in Cyberspace, Canberra Style

The 18 January 2003 firestorm which devastated much of our region has an ongoing impact on both birds and birders. COG was gratified at the positive response it received to requests for donations of birding books to assist those of our members who lost their libraries in the fires. Your columnist has been advised that, among the first to respond, were Perth-based authors and photographers Michael and Irene Morcombe, who donated copies of Michael's *Field guide to Australian birds* (Steve Parish Publishing, Archerfield, Qld, 2000). Presumably most Australian birders will be aware of the unusual format of the guide, with the colour plates containing both illustrations and text highlighting key identification points for each species. Another feature, of special interest to cyberbirders and owners of the *Field guide*, is its accompanying web site <http://www.mmbirds.com>. The site contains lots of interesting material to supplement that found in the book, described by Morcombe as follows:

> As a special service to anyone with access to the Michael Morcombe Field Guide there is an Update information database of bird photos, text, and maps.

This is a supplement to the guide book, cross-referenced, to further assist with some of the more difficult-to-identify species. Also for users of this guide, is a Photography section, with useful tips about wildlife photography. In addition, a Birdfinder database will give users of this guide, information on where to see some of the more interesting bird species, and especially, information on current conditions that might influence plans for birdwatching. This should be useful for those planning to travel around Australia, and wish to be aware of options for seeing natural environment, birds, and wildflowers.

While on the theme of keeping up-to-date by means of the internet, it is interesting to note that birders who subscribe to the Canberra Birds or national Birding-aus email discussion lists were recently appraised of an update to the official Australian bird list; visit the fine Birds Australia web site at <http://www.birdsaustralia.com.au/checklist/index.html>. Dated February 2003, it is a draft list updating the 1994 Christidis and Boles list by including new species accepted by the Birds Australia Rarities Committee since 1994; species splits published in HANZAB up to Volume 5; and a new Albatross taxonomy. People who keep life lists, and those fascinated by taxonomy, will find much of interest in this draft list of the Birds of Australia.

'A prophet has no honour in his own country', observed Canberra birder John Penhallurick in a recent message to Birding-aus. He was commenting on the response to his new internet-based Bird Data Project, online at <http://worldbirdinfo.net>. 'I have been inundated with emails from the rest of the world', he continued, 'thanking me for making available such a valuable resource. I think I have got all of two emails from Australia. Hence the subject line.' Well John, add this columnist's name to the inundation; the Project is a wonderful endeavour and we are grateful that you have initiated it. John explains that he is developing what he expects to be 'the most comprehensive database about the birds of the world, both extant and extinct since 1600'. Whilst not all of the world's species are yet covered, many are. They are searchable by species name and by family/subfamily, and the searches return information in the following fields: English name; scientific name; French name; German name; Spanish name; Peters family name; Sibley-Monroe family name; Gill (2nd ed.) family name; habitat; distribution; subspecies; red book status; threat criteria; English synonyms; scientific synonyms; generic/subgeneric name; and generic/subgeneric synonym, A magnificent resource for cyberbirders!

Do you enjoy on-line magazines? One of the most popular among lexicophiles is the *Oxford English Dictionary News* <http://www.oed.com/public/news/>; read it online or download it in pdf format. The March 2003 issue contains a feature article on 'Muffles, moreporks, and ooaas: a foray into the world of bird names'. I won't spoil your enjoyment of the article by summarising it, but if you love both birds and words, run don't walk to this issue!

And while we are at the Oxford English Dictionary, let's see if this grand resource can help out with the ever-present questions about the collective names for birds. At the Ask-Oxford

website <http: //www .askoxford. com> click on 'Ask the experts' and then on 'Collective terms for animals'. There you select the bird of interest from the alphabetical list provided. One entry I particularly liked was lapwing: apparently the collective noun is 'desert' or 'dessert': a desert or dessert of lapwings!

Let's close with ducks, domestic ducks, those big, ugly often white birds that sometimes spoil the look of our waterways. A subscriber to the national email discussion list Birding-aus mentioned 'the recent worrying dumping of two domestic Muscovy ducks' in Lake Illawarra. He pointed out that 'There is a healthy population of Pacific Black Ducks and quite a few Hardheads and Teals residing on this wetland so I was wondering if there is a chance of interbreeding like what happens with Pacific Blacks and Mallards?'. Anthea Fleming replied with some reassuring information:

> Muscovy Ducks belong to a quite different genus (Cairina I think) to the dappling ducks Anas to which our native Black Ducks, Teal, etc. belong. Muscovies can hybridize with Anas species (wild and domestic) but their offspring will be sterile. Domestic mallard X Muscovies are called Mules, and are a good large eating duck. (A domestic Muscovy drake I once knew caused great annoyance to a neighbour whose aim was to breed pedigree Khaki Campbell ducks...). If the Muscovies are a mixed pair they may of course their own ducklings. Their presence is undesirable, but they are not nearly such a threat as wild-type Mallards, which can and do hybridize with Black Ducks, as has happened in New Zealand.

K, K and E Lindsay pointed to potential problems of predation:

> Muscovy ducks are a big threat to native ducks, as they are much bigger they have been notorious for the eating of other waterfowl young. And as they breed the more Muscovy around the less natives.

Anthea had the final word in this brief exchange, commenting:

> Good point, Lindsays. I agree that feral Muscovies are quite big enough to predate native ducklings - but so are native Musk Ducks (particularly the male), Cormorants, and large eels. The world is not a safe place for ducklings. If the Lake Illawarra Muscovies are newly-released tame birds, it should not be too difficult to trap them with a suitable bait, and convert them into a satisfactory meal for humans.

Remember this column's motto: while birding in cyberspace abounds with variety and interest, collecting, cooking and consuming those dastardly domestic ducks is an environmentally beneficial endeavour. Good Winter's birding and eating to all!

T. alba

Details on how to subscribe to *BirdingAus*, the Australian birding email discussion list, are on the web at http://www.shc.melb.catholic.edu.au/home/birding/index.html.
To join the *Canberra Birding* email discussion list, send a blank email message to canberrabirds-subscribe@topica.com, or join online at http:// www.topica. com/lists /canberrabirds.

RARITIES PANEL NEWS

This report covers the summer of 2002-2003, a period in which COG's region and much of the inland was severely affected by drought. In addition, there were severe January bushfires in the surrounding ranges, fires which reached the outer perimeter of south-western Canberra on 18 January 2003. The presence of many of the species on this list can be attributed to one or other of these events. The drought is probably responsible for the visits of the Black Falcon, the native-hen, the two calidrid species and the Pied and Painted Honeyeaters, while the aftermath of the fires may have attracted the Black Kite.

The influx of the Painted Honeyeater will be covered in more detail in this and subsequent issues of *Canberra Bird Notes.* Kellys Swamp as the mud receded again provided excellent viewing of unusual species, including another Black-tailed Native-hen, but also a single Pectoral Sandpiper, the first confirmed sighting since 1972, and apparently the first ever Long-toed Stint for the ACT.

The White-throated Nightjar breeding record, as outlined in Odd Obs, was quite remarkable and mirrors closely a November 1992 record of a nest with an egg west of Mt Tidbinbilla. Perhaps COG needs more orienteers to scour out-of-the-way places!

A few unusual bird reports are still under consideration by the Panel and, if endorsed, will be published in the June issue of *Canberra Bird Notes.*

The Panel takes this opportunity to encourage COG members to submit an unusual bird report whenever they believe they may have seen an unusual bird. The list of 'unusuals' and the report form are both available on the COG website www.canberrabirds.dynamite.com.au, from the COG Office or at meetings. If the Panel does not endorse the record, it is generally because the record lacks sufficient detail, and not necessarily because the species has been misidentified. Thus unendorsed records remain a valuable addition to our knowledge of birds of the Canberra region.

ENDORSED LIST 57, MARCH 2003

Freckled Duck *Stictonetta naevosa*
2; 29 Sep, 10 Nov 02; Jenny Bounds; Kellys Swamp (GrL14)
2; 2 Nov 02; Julie McGuiness; Kellys Swamp (GrL14)
Pied Cormorant *Phalacrocorax variiis*
2; 12 Jun 02; Don Wood; Mayo St, Weetangera (GrJ12)
I; 19 Oct 02; Mat Gilfedder; Lake Ginninderra **(GrJ12)**
Australasian Bittern *Botaurus poiciloptilus*
1; 23 Feb 02; Lee Halasz; Rose Lagoon (GrU4)

Black Kite *Milvus migrans*
1; 21 Jan 03; Dick Schodde; W of Coolamon Court, Weston (GrJ15)
1; 13 Feb 03; Brendan Lepschi; junction Cotter Rd/Lady Denman Drive (GrJ14)

Spotted Harrier *Circus assimilis*
1; 24 Aug 02; Peter Ormay; 3 km S of Bredbo (GrL30)
1; 1 Sep 02; Jack Holland; Monkman St, Chapman (GrI15)
1; 2 Mar 03; Steve Holliday; Kellys Swamp (GrL14)

Grey Goshawk *Accipiter novaehollandiae*
1; 16 Mar 03; Brendan Lepschi; Hackett (GrL13)

Black Falcon *Falco subniger*
1; 20 Nov 02; Richard Allen; Peacock Pl, Curtin (GrJ
14) 1; Dec 02; Philip Veerman; Campbell Park (GrM13)
1; 28-29 Dec 02; Bob Rusk; Campbell Park (GrM13)

Black-tailed Native-hen *Gallinula yentralis*
1; 6 Nov 02; David McDonald; Kellys Swamp (GrL 14)
1; 11 Nov 02; Julie McGuiness; Kellys Swamp (GrL14)

Long-toed Stint *Calidris subminuta*
1; 6,7 Dec 02; Bob Rusk; Kellys Swamp (GrL14)
1; 7 Dec 02; Cathy Robinson and Mat Gilfedder; Kellys Swamp (GrL14)
1; 7 Dec 02; Sue Lashko et al.; Kellys Swamp (GrL14)
1; 7 Dec 02; Richard Allen; Kellys Swamp (GrL 14)
1; 11 Dec 02; Julie McGuiness; Kellys Swamp (GrL 14)

Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos*
1; 17, 24 Nov 02; Peter Marsack; Kellys Swamp (Gr L14)
1; 17, 21 Nov 02; David McDonald et al.; Kellys Swamp (GrL14)
1; 24 Nov, 15 Dec 02; Jenny Bounds; Kellys Swamp (GrL14)
1; 26 Nov 02; Philip Veerman; Kellys Swamp (GrL14)

White-headed Pigeon *Columba leucomela*
1; 2 Jan 03; Michael Lenz; Suttor St, Ainslie (GrL13)

Long-billed Corella *Cacatua tenuirostris*
1; 13 Oct 02; Jack Holland; Chuavel Circle, Chapman (GrI15)
1 hybrid Long-billed Corella/Sulphur-crested Cockatoo; 20 Jan 03 onwards; Michael and Linda Milne; Streeton Drive, Stirling (Gr 115) Escapee

Major Mitchell's Cockatoo *Cacatua leadbeateri* Escapee
1; 29 Mar 03; Steve Wilson; Harrington Cct, Kambah (GrJ16)

Cockatiel *Nymphicus hollandicus* Escapee
1; 24 Feb 03; Barbara Allan; Hannaford St, Page (GrJ12)

Musk Lorikeet *Glossopsitta concinna*
2; 24 Nov 02; Mat Gilfedder; Tuggeranong Town Centre carpark (GrJ17)

Swift Parrot *Lathamus discolor*
2; 24 Mar 03; Alex McLachlan; Pennefather St, Higgins (GrI12)

Channel-billed Cuckoo *Scythrops novaehollandiae*
5-7; 20 Nov 02; Caroline Blackmore; junction Queanbeyan/Molonglo Rivers (GrN15)

White-throated Nightjar *Eurostopodiis mystacalis*
1; 17, 23 Nov 02; Nicki Taws; Yanununbeyan Crown Reserve (GrQ20)
Fork-tailed **Swift** *Apus pacificus*
2+; 9 Dec 02; Richard Allen; Woden - Lyons (G615)
1; 8 Mar 03; Noel Luff; Tuggeranong Parkway, near aquarium (GrJ14)
Little Friarbird *Philemon citreogularis*
2; 2 Feb 03; David and Shirley Purchase; Orchard Place, Melba (GrJ12) Painted **Honeyeater** *Grantiella picta*
2-3; 26 Oct 02; Marnix Zwankhuizen; N of Hall Showground (GrJ11)
1; 27 Oct 02; Lee Halasz; Campbell Park (Gr M13)
2; 28 Oct 02; David McDonald et al.; Campbell Park (GrM 13) 1; 2 Nov 02; Julie McGuiness; Campbell Park (GrL13) 1; 6 Nov 02; Rosemary Bell; Campbell Park (GrL13) 3; 10 Nov 02; Jenny Bounds; Campbell Park (GrL13) 3; 24 Nov 02; Jenny Bounds; Mulligans Flat (GrM11) 20; 30 Nov 02; Jenny Bounds; various sites Sutton Rd Gunning/Gundaroo
(Grs N3-5)
1; 11 Jan 03; Marnix Zwankhuizen; Mt Taylor (GrJ15)
1; 11 Jan 03; Marnix Zwankhuizen; E of Tidbinbilla Visitors Centre (GrG17)
Pied Honeyeater *Certhionyx variegates*
1 m; 16 Oct 02; Julienne Kamprad; Sheehan Rd, Hoskinstown (GrS 17)
Scarlet Honeyeater *Myzomela sanguinolenta*
1; 2 Feb 03; Steve Holliday; Duffy St, Ainslie (GrL13)
White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike *Coracina papuensis*
1 (dark phase); 6 Jul 02; Alastair Smith; Henderson St, Garran (GrK15)

The COG office is located at Room 5, Griffin Centre, Bunda Street, Civic. Opening hours depend on the availability of volunteers. Please call the office on 6247 4996 to confirm that it is open.

Canberra Bird Notes is published by the Canberra Ornithologists Group Inc and is edited by Harvey Perkins and Barbara Allan. Major articles of up to 5000 words are welcome on matters of the distribution, identification or behaviour of birds occurring in the Australian Capital Territory and surrounding area. Contributions on these topics should be sent to Harvey Perkins, 42 Summerland Circuit, Kambah ACT 2902, or via email to harvey.perkins@anu.edu.au. Short notes, book reviews and other contributions should be sent to Barbara Allan, 47 Hannaford Street, Page ACT 2614 or via email to allanbm@ozemail.com.au. If you would like to discuss your proposed article in advance, please feel free to contact Harvey on 6231 8209 or Barbara on 6254 6520.

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