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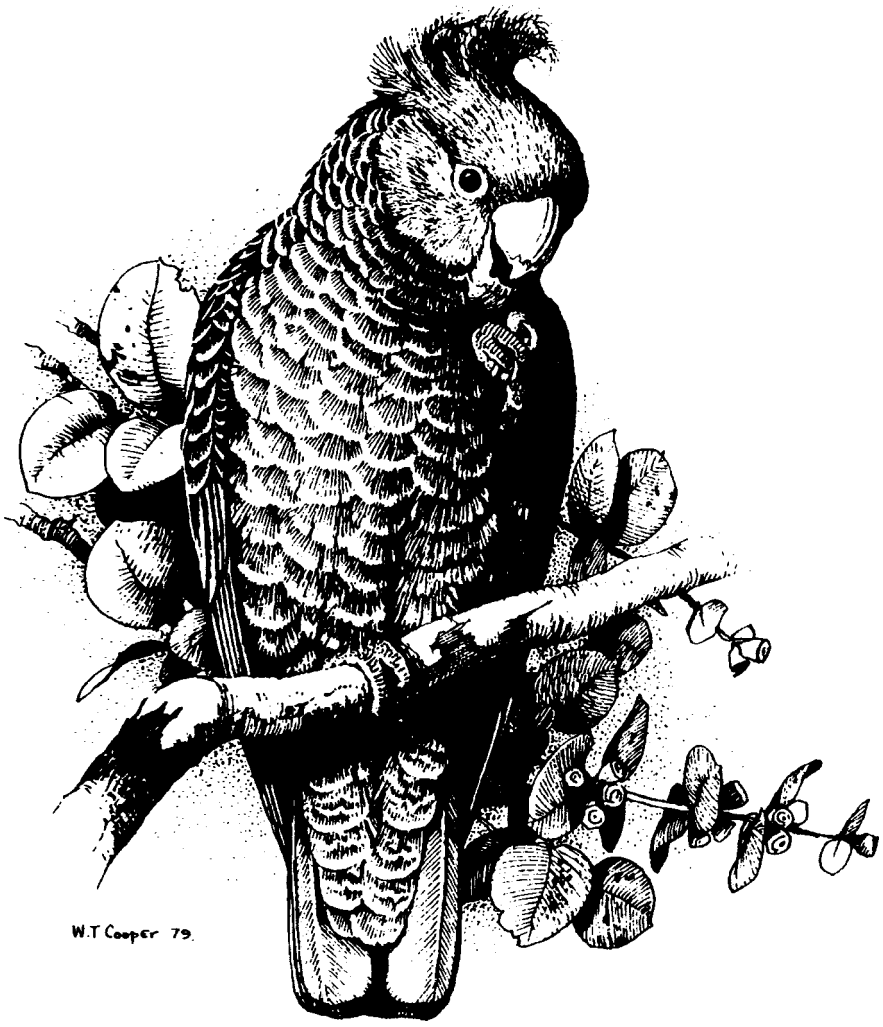

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BREEDING STATUS OF BIRDS OF PREY LIVING IN THE CANBERRA REGION 2002-03

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Abstract *Canberra has always been a city of raptors. With eleven species currently breeding inside the city limits and at least six more as sporadic visitors, the city is a unique major urban centre in the world regarding its diversity and abundance of birds of prey. In 2002, we started a study on the general ecology of the local raptors. We used surveys through suitable habitat, incidental observations, public reports and the knowledge of historical sites to locate as many occupied territories as possible and monitor them. mainly throughout the breeding season. We found 12 species breeding in the Canberra Area, 11 of them inside the city limits. The species with more territories located were the Brown Falcon, Peregrine Falcon, Nankeen Kestrel and Wedge-tailed Eagle. We also present some information on other species of raptors that were observed but not confirmed breeding in the area.*

Introduction

One important limitation of most local and international raptor studies is that most of them take a species-specific approach or they focus on a limited number of species. In Australia there are only three serious studies of communities of birds of prey, two by Baker-Gabb and one by Aumann. Baker-Gabb studied the breeding ecology of twelve species in north-west Victoria (1983a) and the breeding ecology and behaviour of seven species wintering in coastal Victoria (1983b). Aumann worked on the raptor assemblages of the Northern Territory, particularly their habitat use (200la), food habits (2001b), structure (2001c) and breeding biology (2001d).

The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and surrounding areas is home to several species of raptors, even inside the urban limits of the city of Canberra (Olsen & Olsen 1990). The area has attracted a great deal of scientific interest, with some of the first major studies of any raptor in the country (Leopold & Wolfe 1970), and the establishment of a Raptor Research Group in 1980 (Olsen 1981). The general ecology of four of the local species is well known: Wedge-tailed Eagle *Aquila audax* (Leopold & Wolfe 1970), Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus,* (Olsen 1992, Olsen & Tucker 2003, Olsen *et al*. 2004), Nankeen Kestrel *F. cenchroides* (Olsen *et al.* 1979, Bollen 1991) and Southern Boobook *Ninox novaeseelandiae* (Olsen & Trost 1997, Olsen & Taylor 2001, Olsen *et al*. 2002a, 2002b), but information about the other species is very limited.

Though the presence of most of the local raptor species is well known, the same is not true for their breeding status (COG 2003, 2005, B. Allan pers. com.), making unclear which species are breeding locally and which are only visitors or non-breeding residents. In order to remedy this deficiency, the aim of this paper is to report the presence and breeding activity of the raptor community near Canberra.

Methods

Study area

The urban area of the city of Canberra covers most of the northern part of the ACT. Most of the undeveloped hill and ridge areas in and around urban Canberra are protected nature reserves that together cover an area of approximately 5720 hectares. The main vegetation associations here are dry sclerophyll forest, open forest, and woodland. On the outskirts of the city the area is mainly farmland with two protected corridors along the Molonglo and Murrumbidgee rivers, which are up to 4 km wide and along the full length of the ACT section of the rivers. The vegetation here is dominated by River She-oaks *Casuarina cunninghamiana.* The Namadgi National Park covers much of the rest of the territory on the southern end (106 000 ha). The habitat here is mainly wet sclerophyll forest, dry forest with open grassy valleys on the lower elevations and alpine woodland on the higher areas. More details on the study area can be found elsewhere (Taylor & COG 1992, Olsen *et al.* in press).

Survey

In August 2002 we started a long-term study on the general ecology of the raptor community living in the Canberra region (Figure 1). Our goal was to find the maximum number of territories possible in order to estimate aspects such as breeding success, food habits and habitat selection. We performed intensive searches through suitable habitat and also revisited sites located on previous surveys (Leopold & Wolfe 1970, Olsen 1992, Olsen & Rehwinkel 1995, Olsen unpublished data). Surveys were performed in the following locations: Canberra Nature Parks; along the Molonglo and Murrumbidgee Rivers; some areas of Namadgi National Park; Googong and Burrunjuck Dams; around Lake George; some city parks, ovals and golf courses; and several hectares of farmland, both inside and outside Canberra's city limits. Incidental observations of nests or birds (whose nest was located later) were also included. We also received reports from the public and staff of ACT Parks and Conservation, which were then followed up, and checked for occupied territories. The combination of all these sources and methods has been previously recommended in order to maximize the number of raptor territories located (Lehman *et al.* 1998).

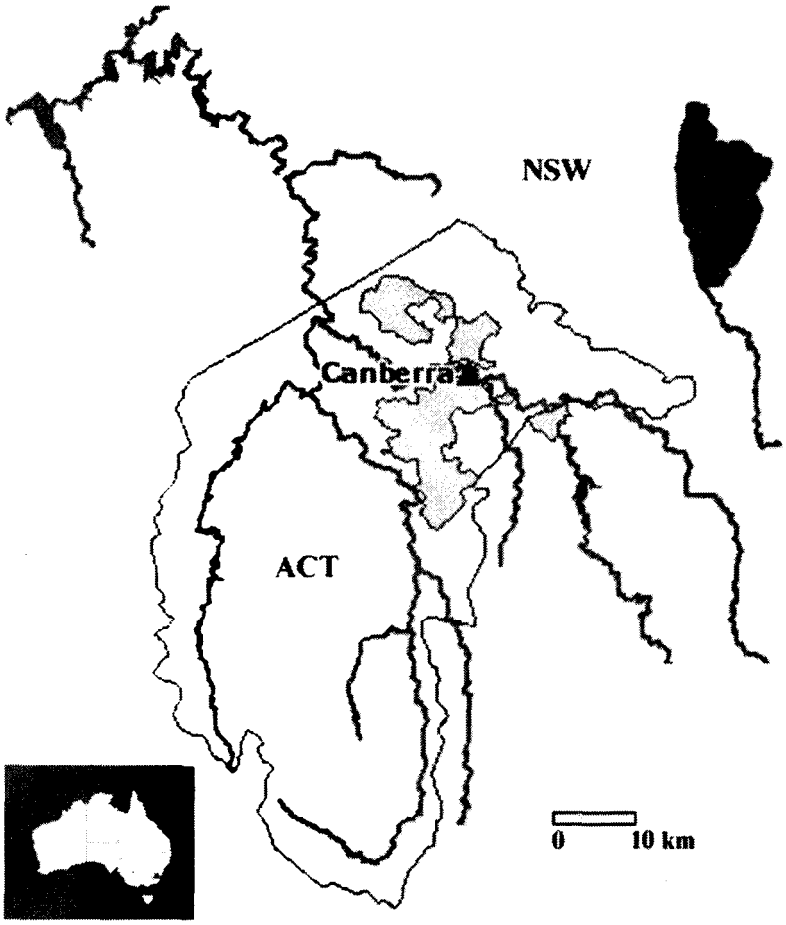

Fig. 1. The Canberra region (34°45'- 35°47' S, 148°40' — 149°50' E).

We used a global positioning system (mean accuracy 6.1 ± 2.1 m, n=129) to record the location of nests found and to measure some habitat-related features. To minimize the effect of the investigator on productivity, disturbance was minimized in early stages, so nests were only climbed - when possible - after the nestlings had reached a certain age in order to be banded. We made at least two visits to each nest during the season, with the exception of most peregrine sites that often were just visited once, since their location was already known and they are part of an ongoing monitoring program (see Olsen 1992, Olsen & Tucker 2003, Olsen *et al.* 2004 and Olsen *et al.* in press). We assigned the territories to different land uses according to the following categories: a) Urban nature reserves (inside the city limits, mostly Canberra Nature Parks); b) Non-urban reserves (river corridors, Namadgi National Park, Burrunjuck Dam and Googoong Foreshores); c) Farmland; d) Urbanized

(suburbs, ovals, parks golf courses and school campuses inside the city); and e) Other areas (forestry, military-related, industrial).

Here, we report the number of occupied breeding territories, which are defined as areas that contain one or more nest within the home of a pair of mated birds (see Steenhof 1987). These territories are said to be "breeding" or "active" when eggs are laid. Finally, we also include comments on other non-breeding species observed in the area. For the purposes of this paper when we refer to raptors we include both the diurnal (Order Falconiformes) and nocturnal (Order Strigiformes) birds of prey.

Results

We located 148 occupied breeding territories of 12 species (Table 1). All species bred inside the city limits during this period, with the exception of the White-bellied Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster*.

Table 1. Number of occupied raptor territories located and monitored in the Canberra region in the 2002 and 2003 breeding seasons

Species		Number of occupied territories located 2002-2003
Black-shouldered-Kite	*Elanus axilaris*	3
Whistling Kite	*Haliastur sphenurus*	2
White-bellied Sea-Eagle	*Haliaeetus leucogaster*	4
Brown Goshawk	*Accipiter fasciatus*	14
Collared Sparrowhawk	*Accipiter cirrhocephalus*	8
Wedge-tailed Eagle	*Aquila audax*	39
Little Eagle	*Hieraaetus morphnoides*	6
Brown Falcon	*Falco berigora*	20
Australian Hobby	*Falco longipennis*	5
Peregrine Falcon	*Falco pcregrinus*	21
Nankeen Kestrel	*Falco cenchroides*	21
Southern Boobook	*Ninox novaeseelandiae*	7

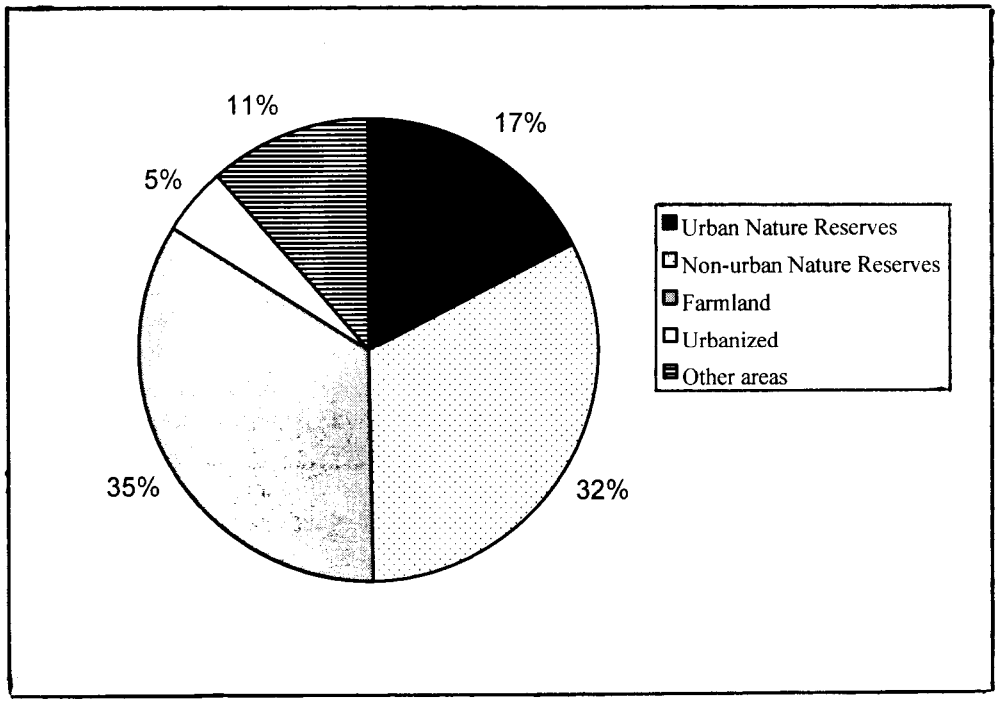

Fig 2. Distribution of the raptor territories found in Canberra across live categories of land

Most of the territories located were on farmland and non-urban reserves (67% of total), with the urban area being the one less represented (Figure 2).

Other species observed but not found breeding during the period of study were Swamp Harrier *Circus approximans*, Barn Owl *Tyto alba*, Black Kite *Milvus migrans* and Black Falcon *Falco subniger*. At least two Swamp Harrier pairs were observed in Namadgi National Park and another at Jerrabomberra wetlands. We suspect these birds are breeding but no nest could be confirmed. Several individual Barn Owls were observed, most of them in the north-east section of Canberra, particularly near Fyshwick and Pialligo. One Black Kite was observed north of Queanbeyan in November 2003; and one Black Falcon lived on farmland in the south-east of the city for at least two weeks in late December 2002.

Discussion

Although our data showed that most nests were located in farmland and non-urban nature reserves, these results should be taken with caution. The main goal of the survey was to locate as many territories as possible, for which we used the variety of methods described above, which produced an unequal sampling effort across areas. For instance, areas at higher elevation in Namadgi National Park were harder to survey, and it is likely that many nests were missed there. Contrastingly, urban territories or nests

located on roadsides are easier to find. It is possible that the large number of territories located in some of these land use areas is an outcome of these biases.

Our results overall coincide with previous surveys (Olsen 1992, Olsen & Rehwinkel 1995), confirming the presence of a diverse community of breeding raptors in the Canberra region. One difference is the lack of confirmed breeding pairs of Swamp Harriers, for which at least one territory was located - in Mitchell - in the early 1990s (Olsen 1992). We also failed to locate breeding territories of another species, the Powerful Owl *Ninox strenua,* which is a common breeding resident on higher elevations in Namadgi National Park (Olsen & Rehwinkel 1995). On the number of times that we checked the historically known nest sites or played calls we didn't get any response. Though no pairs of Barn Owls were located breeding in the present study, it is possible that both Barn Owls and Swamp Harriers will be confirmed as breeding species in future surveys. These two raptors together with the Powerful Owl and the 12 species reported here are thus likely to form the complete breeding community of birds of prey in the Canberra region.

In an urban context, the raptor breeding community is very diverse, represented by 11 species, with only the White-bellied Sea-Eagle missing. This is unlike most urban centres worldwide, where only one or few species are present (see Bird *et al.* 1996). Species such as the Peregrine Falcon, American Kestrel *Falco spaverius* or the Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* are well known for their ability to adapt to urban environments (Cade *et al.* 1988, Palmer 1988). The opposite is true for members of the genera *Accipiter, Aquila,* or *Elanus,* which rarely nest in urban environments (Bloom & McCrary 1996). However, in Canberra, these three "non-urban" genera are represented by four species (Collared Sparrowhawk *Accipiter cirrhocephalus,* Brown Goshawk *Accipiter fasciatus,* Wedge-tailed Eagle, Black-Shouldered-Kite *Elanus axillaris),* plus seven more from which some are known to tolerate some level of human activity (i.e. Peregrine Falcon and Nankeen Kestrel).

We believe that the presence of this diverse community is an outcome of the complex mosaic of habitat and prey available to them. The mixture of suburbs rich in vegetation, several urban nature reserves and large areas of farmland provide the raptors with a large choice of nesting sites, and at the same time provide food and shelter for several species of birds, mammals, reptiles, fish and insects (native and exotic) that the raptors take as prey. Without this complexity the diverse raptor community simply wouldn't be there.

This diversity shouldn't be taken lightly, since it is a potential indicator of a broader plant and animal community (Newton 1979). Aspects such as urban development and recreational activities on nature reserves are a potential threat to this diversity and need to be evaluated. Future studies should focus on the effect such activities may have on the local raptors, both inside and outside the city.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to all the people that assisted us with reports of observations, nest locations and access to their properties, in particular to Frank Barnes, Tom and Julie Bellas. Mark Clayton, Frank Coonan, Sean Doody, Lynne McWilliams, Phylis and Gibb Moore, Sally Osborne. Mark Osgood, Michael Oxley, Mike Parker, Brad Pillars, Brian Redman and Rachel Sims. Special thanks to Sue Trost and Tony Rose for their work on the owl monitoring and prey analysis respectively. To all the staff of the ACT Parks and Conservation for their support, specially to Tony Bell, Murray Evans, Maree Gilbert, Christie Gould, Paul Higginbotham, Chris Johnson, Brett McNamara, Michael Maconachie, Bernard Morris, David Shorthouse and Keith Smith. EF was supported by graduate scholarships from the National Council of Science and Technology in Mexico (CONACYT) and the University of Canberra.

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COMMON SANDPIPER AT URIARRA CROSSING

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Abstract *The Common Sandpiper is a rare non-breeding migrant to the ACT, records typically being irregular and scattered. However, the presence of a bird at Uriarra Crossing over consecutive seasons recently suggests possible site-fidelity.*

Introduction

The Common Sandpiper *Actitishypoleucos is* a rare non-breeding migrant to the ACT, first recorded in the ACT in January 1966 at Acacia Inlet on Lake Burley Griffin (Wilson 1999). COG records indicate that the species is irregularly recorded in COG's area of interest, but from a variety of sites around lakes and rivers (see Table 1). Only one of these records is from outside the ACT. With the exception of a rash of reports by a number of COG members of presumably the same bird at Lake Ginninderra over an 18-day period in April 1994, records tend to be isolated, and except for two birds at Isabella silt trap, two at Uriarra Crossing in September 1999. and four at Lake Bathurst, all records are of single birds.

On 14 September 2002, a COG member made a special trip to Uriarra Crossing in the "slim hope" of seeing a Common Sandpiper, based on the fact that he had read in an Annual Bird Report that the species had been reported from there in the past at that time of year (presumably the spring 1999 record). He reported his success in this endeavour on the *CanberraBirds* email discussion list. though the sighting never made it into COG's database as a formal record.

Given the apparent irregularity of occurrence of this species, I too found this a surprising and remarkable success. It also made me wonder whether it might be a case of a bird returning to the same location each year, but with insufficient observations or records for any pattern to be evident. With this in mind, I determined to look for a Common Sandpiper at Uriarra Crossing the following season.

Table 1. Common Sandpiper records in the

2 Mar 1986	Pine Island	J17
10 Feb 1987	Casuarina Sands	Gl4
22 Feb 1987	Lake Burley Griffin	K14
18 Feb 1988	Blk Mm Peninsula	K13
13 Nov 1989	Uriarra Crossing	G 12
24 Feb 1991	Isabella silt trap	Jl7
22 Dec 1991	Lake Bathurst	Y08
7 Apr 1994	Lake Ginninderra	J12
10 Apr 1994	Lake Ginninderra	J12
14 Apr 1994	Lake Ginninderra	J12

Notes and observations

The following notes relate to a bird present at Uriarra Crossing in both 2003-04 and 2004-05 seasons. In 2003-04 **I** was simply interested in whether 'the' sandpiper was present or not, but I subsequently became interested in obtaining a better idea of arrival and departure dates — if indeed the bird showed up at all.

2003-04 season

I first went sandpiper-seeking at Uriarra Crossing on 29 December 2003 and, though I had no idea of where to look, found 'the' bird easily within five minutes. It was foraging quietly along the muddy margins of a large sandbar about 250 m downstream of the crossing. After I alerted other birders the sandpiper was seen by at least fifteen people over the following week or two, and a final sighting of the bird was made on 28 January 2004. This placed the bird at the site for at least a month, but by then interest (in 'ticking' the bird) had waned and it is unknown when the bird might have left for its breeding grounds in the northern hemisphere.

Some observers, like me, were fortunate in seeing the sandpiper on their first attempt, but others made a number of pilgrimages before finally catching up with the bird. It is worth noting that from the total of 24 visits by 15 individuals (that I know of) to see this bird, 15 sightings resulted, of which seven are represented as records in COG's database.

In most cases, the bird was located either on or near the sandbar where I had first seen it, but it was also seen on several later occasions foraging along the rocky edges of the river a little upstream and closer to the crossing. I suspect many of the frustrating 'non-sightings' were the result of people looking for the bird on the advertised sandbar when the bird was instead happily pottering among the rocks nearby.

2004-05 season

In mid-October 2004 **I** raised with a few people, and on *CanberraBirds* email discussion list, the issue of attempting to get a better idea of the arrival and departure times of the Uriarra Crossing sandpiper. As a result there was a `negative' record on 20 October, but the bird was seen on the afternoon of 22 October. The bird was subsequently reported by a number of people over the following months — see Table 2.

Table 2. Sightings (yes) and 'non-sightings' (no) of the Common Sandpiper at Uriarra Crossing over the 2004-05 season. (Asterisked entries are my own visits.)

20 Oct 2004	11:00	no	sandbar
22 Oct 2004	15:00	yes	sandbar
22 Oct 2004	17:45	yes	sandbar
15 Nov 2004	AM	yes	sandbar
20 Nov 2004		yes	
*21 Nov 2004	AM	no	
* 8 Jan 2005	AM	yes	sandbar
Jan 2005		yes	
*18 Feb 2005	08:00	yes	sandbar
26 Feb 2005	12:00	no	
28 Feb 2005		no	
28 Feb 2005	PM	no	
* 2 Mar 2005	08:00	no	
* 2 Mar 2005	18:30	yes	rocks
6 Mar 2005	09:30	yes	beach
6 Mar 2005	PM	yes	upstream
*26 Mar 2005	11:00	yes	rocks
* 3 Apr 2005	11:30	no	

From these observations it is clear that the bird was present for at least a little over five months, from 22 October to 26 March. However, as in the previous year, there was, on average, only a somewhat better than 50% chance of seeing the bird on any given visit, so it is impossible to know whether the negative reports from 20 October and 3 April mean the bird hadn't arrived y et / had already departed, or was simply not detected.

Discussion

The earliest seasonal observation of a Common Sandpiper in the ACT is 14 September (at Uriarra Crossing in 2002), and the latest 24 April (at Lake Ginninderra in 1994). These dates are comfortably within the range given in HANZAB (Higgins and Davies 1996), for NSW records. of Aug-Dec arrivals and Mar-Apr departures. The residency of the Uriarra sandpiper in 2004-05 is also snugly within these limits.

Virtually nothing is known about site-fidelity in the non-breeding season for Common Sandpipers. HANZAB cites a single reference (which I could not track down) claiming that 'in s. Asia, tend to return to same non-breeding site year after year'. Though far from conclusive, the presence of a Common Sandpiper at Uriarra Crossing in 1999, 2001, 2002, 2003-04 and 2004-05 tempts speculation that the same bird returns to this site each year. The only way to prove this hypothesis would be to band the bird and await its return, however, regulations make the one-off banding of an individual bird outside of an approved research project virtually impossible. Unfortunate!

If it is the same bird returning each year, what is it about Uriarra Crossing that attracts the bird? Common Sandpipers are fairly catholic in their habitat requirements, and the muddy margins, sandy beaches and rocky edges at Uriarra Crossing were all seen to be used by the sandpiper. It was noted on several occasions that if the sandy areas became overcrowded with picnickers and their dogs on weekends, the sandpiper was perfectly happy to relocate to the rocky stream edges where it was more cryptic and less likely to be disturbed. It is interesting to note that the earlier records (1999, 2001) were from grid cell G13, indicating a location upstream of the crossing, whereas in 2003-04 and 2004-05 all but a single observation were made downstream of the crossing.

Given that southward migration is said to be mostly diurnal and generally follows rivers (HANZAB p 176), I can easily understand why a Common Sandpiper flying up the Murrumbidgee might, on seeing this actitically idyllic setting, stop off at Uriarra Crossing for the austral summer. Until next spring!

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SWIFT PARROT INVASIONS 2004-05

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Abstract *This paper outlines observations of Swift Parrots on both their southern and northern migrations through the ACT in 2004-05. For the first time, the birds were recorded here in spring. They also stayed and foraged over a longer period on both occasions.*

Swift Parrots are regular visitors to Canberra, being recorded in six out of the last 11 years. These records were predominantly of birds that appeared to be passing through the region, as they didn't stay at any of the sites for more than a day or so. Prior to 2004 Swift Parrots were only recorded in autumn during their northward migration from Tasmania. In 2004 Swift Parrots were once again recorded during autumn migration; however they were also recorded on their spring migration southward for the first time. In addition they stayed and foraged for over a week rather than just passing through during their southerly migration. These events however, were only recorded thanks to the experienced observational skills of COG observers who were able to identify the unique calls of the Swift Parrot. Nicki Taws recalls her experience of recording the first observations of Swift Parrots in Canberra on their southerward migration:

> October is not a month I normally expect to be looking out for Swift Parrots in Canberra, so early on 6 October 2004 when I was outside in the carpark at Wybalena Grove, Cook, and heard some distant calls which immediately conjured up images of White Box woodland on the western slopes, I was a little surprised. When the distant calls came rapidly into view in the shape of a tight flock of nine streamlined birds, I said "surely not..." but grabbed my binoculars and chased the flock to the western edge of Wybalena Grove.
>
> The birds alighted first in a young Red Box *Eucalyptus polyanthemos* where I was able to confirm that they were indeed Swift Parrots. The resident Noisy Miners were also fairly excited about this but for different reasons and soon harassed the Swift Parrots until they relocated to the cycleway which runs along the western edge of Wybalena Grove. As I knew that the planted Mugga Ironbarks *E. sideroxylon* along the cycleway were flowering, it didn't take me long to find the parrots in these trees. However they were not left to enjoy the bountiful flowering in peace, and were often chased from the trees by Noisy Miners *Manorina melanocephala,* Eastern Rosellas *Platycercus eximius* and Red Wattlebirds *Anthochaera carunculata.*

After an email was sent to the COG email discussion list, a number of people came that day to confirm the sighting, and over the next few days dozens of

people were able to enjoy good views of the birds. The last reports of the parrots were from late on 11 October. Unfortunately, an article in *The Canberra Times* featuring a stunning picture of a Swift Parrot came out on 13 October, and the many interested birdwatchers (not on the email list) who turned up in Wybalena Grove that day were to be disappointed.

While in the cycleway the Swift Parrots could be found mostly in the ironbarks and in some adjacent Blakely's Redgum *Eucalyptus blakelyi* where they were observed feeding on the lerps which typically infest this species. Mugga Ironbark has been commonly planted around Canberra and has provided foraging for other Threatened species, namely the Regent Honey eater (Bounds *et al,* 1996). Many of these ironbarks flowered well during 2004, but Swift Parrots weren't recorded elsewhere in Canberra during October (the only other record for spring 2004 was of birds recorded by Anthony ON ers in mid September briefly at Campbell Park). They may have stay ed in the Cook cycleway for six days because of the proximity of the ironbarks to the Blakely's Redgum. providing two sources of food in the one location.

Mugga Ironbark is a non-local native species, the nearest natural occurrence being about 100 km away to the northwest of Canberra. but it has been widely planted around streets and carparks. On the other hand, Blakely's Redgum, despite being a widespread and common native species in the Canberra region, is not planted as a street tree. It is slow growing and seemingly chronically infested with lerps lending it a scruffy unkempt appearance. In the urban area it usually only occurs in remnant locations, such as .nature parks, broad cycleways, roadsides etc., and individual trees are constantly under threat of being removed as the dead or dying limbs are perceived to be "dangerous". For wildlife however, it is an important species, and its presence in the Cook cycleway may just have allowed the Swift Parrots to exploit the non-local native food source to a greater extent.

After all the excitement of having Swift Parrots in Canberra late in the 2004 migratory season and so many observers being able to experience seeing and hearing this endangered species up close, the news that they were back in March 2005 caught a lot of birdwatchers by surprise, including Nicki Taws who once again detected their presence:

On 7 March 2005 at home in Wybalena Grove I heard a split-second of the familiar Swift Parrot call, but thought I was just getting a bit excited after last year. The main reason I didn't entirely dismiss the possibility of it being a Swift Parrot was that the mature Red Box around the houses were chock full of Red Wattlebirds and Noisy Friarbirds feeding on lerps. So I kept the doors and windows open and binoculars at hand, then later the same day I heard the calls again and managed to find three Swift Parrots sitting in one of the large Red Box. They didn't stay for long thanks to the wattlebirds and I didn't see or hear any again. Wouldn't it be interesting to know if they were the same birds as last year? Late in the season to leave and early to arrive, maybe they returned to where they knew there last had been food.

> It was entirely a coincidence that five days later I was going for a run around the lower western slopes of Mt Majura when I heard again that now very familiar shriek of Swift Parrot in flight. I had to stop running to be sure that I wasn't mistaking an excited Noisy Miner call. I wasn't, although I did hear enough of them as I watched some miners relentlessly pursue four Swift Parrots from tree to tree. I watched for 15 minutes during which time the Swift Parrots were never allowed to settle, so I couldn't see what they might have been foraging on. The Apple Box *E. bridgesiana* and Brittle Gum *E. mannifera* were in ful1 flower, and the Yellow Box *E. melliodora* had flowered well over summer although it had mostly finished by March

A few days after Nicki's observations, reports came in of more Swift Parrots about 1 km further south around the reservoir on the eastern edge of Hackett in the Mt Majura section of Canberra Nature Park. Over time the number of birds at Mt Majura increased dramatically from the initial few birds sighted. As the numbers of Swift Parrots grew, so too did the number of birdwatchers out looking for them. This flock eventually contained more than triple the size of the previous largest flock of Swift Parrots in Canberra with up to 67 birds counted. As the flock size grew, they became more obvious with loud and highly visible behaviour making them a dominant feature of the bushland. They were observed foraging on nectar and lerps on Bundy *Eucalyptus goniocalyx* and Yellow Box, chewing on acacia as well as drinking from the water running from the leaking reservoir. The Swift Parrots were constantly harassed by some of the resident species such as Currawongs and Noisy Miners however this didn't deter them since they were present at the site until late April.

Although the Swift Parrots foraged at this site every day, they flew in flocks of ten or so birds each afternoon to the north-west to roost. Unfortunately no one was able to locate the roost site/s which can sometimes be communal gathering sites for many different foraging flocks within a region. The regularity of the birds using the same foraging trees each day is fairly typical of Swift Parrots once they find a good foraging site, and enabled a range of interesting observations, including the proportion of juvenile birds present at the site.

In order to gain a better understanding of juvenile survivorship following migration to the mainland, the Swift Parrot recovery team is documenting the proportions of juveniles in flocks on mainland Australia. At Mt Majura about two-thirds of the Swift Parrots were juveniles which is very encouraging for the population. Thankfully excellent images and video footage of the birds in breeding plumage at Cook and juvenile birds at Mt Majura were captured by Geoffrey Dabb and can now be used to educate, as well as entertain, volunteers and community members throughout the Swift Parrot range.

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OBSERVATIONS OF THE SUPERB PARROT ON MT ROGERS, ACT

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Abstract *This paper outlines observations of the Superb Parrot at what has become in recent years a favoured summer gathering point, Mt Rogers, in northern Belconnen, ACT*

Sightings of Superb Parrots *Polytelis swainsonii* between the northern ACT and the Murrumbidgee have become less common in the last 50 years as development and farming practices have reduced the incidence of centuries-old eucalypts with suitable nesting hollows. The extent of their decline is evidenced by the fact that the Superb Parrot was declared a vulnerable species on 19 May 1997. Davey (1997) reviewed their occurrence in our area.

I first noticed Superb Parrots in the Mt Rogers area of North Belconnen on Christmas Eve 1998. They were quietly feeding on the unripe pods of *Acacia vestita* and *A. pravissima,* wattles planted there in the seventies as the area was revegetated following infrastructure development for Flynn. Fraser, Spence and Melba. Much to my delight, this proved not to be a one-off visitation ─ the parrots have returned every summer since then.

Superb Parrots principally nest in hollows of old Blakely's Red Gum *Eucalyptus blakelyi* in the Boorowa, Harden and Vass regions to the north of the ACT. Davey (1997) recorded them breeding just north of the ACT, in COG Grid 110. Some of the parrots arrive in the northern parts of the ACT, generally in December, as part of post-breeding dispersal. In 2002, I first observed the parrots at Mt Rogers on 14 December; in 2003 on 17 December; and in 2004 on 7 December, possibly suggesting a slightly earlier breeding time.

For a brightly coloured, predominantly green bird, Superb Parrots are surprisingly cryptic. Locating them by call-recognition is the surest location method unless the males' yellow head-feathers catch the sun. Identifying females from young parrots by colouring is not easy although the young birds' shorter wing and tail feathers help initially. Superb Parrots seem to delight in flight and their swirling, carefree sorties can make accurate counting difficult. Occasionally a flock of 30 birds may gather. More usually the smaller groups of four to seven birds are those whose in-flight calls capture attention.

The parrots appear to use the Mt Rogers area as a foraging site, mainly in the early mornings, and probably as a roosting site at night, although I have never observed the roost. *Acacia vestita* and *A. pravissima* are favoured food sources, as would be the pods from Cootamundra Wattle *Acacia baileyana* if the Superb Parrots arrived before Sulphur-crested Cockatoos *Cacatua galerita* and rosellas had stripped them.

Yes, Mt Rogers still has some of these controversial plants.

In the vicinity of Avery Place gardens, these sturdy wattles have eucalypts growing above them. Although in declining health, these trees also provided significant shelter as the young parrots are creched there whilst adults fly to forage further afield. Noise increases on the parents' return with begging resulting in regurgitation. Another group of mixed eucalypts near Keene Place is also a congregating place where Eastern Rosellas *Platycercus eximius,* Noisy Miners *Manorina melanocephala* and Red Wattlebirds *Anthochaera carunculata* largely ignore the visitors.

Passing walkers, cyclists and dogs don't seem to faze the Superb Parrots when they are feeding in shrubs close to the paths although they tend to take flight if disturbed whilst seed-gathering on the ground.

In the summer of 2004-05 'creche' situations were less noticeable; the juveniles soon joined adults in foraging flights into adjacent gardens and around the outskirts of Mt Rogers. Small family groups sought out acacia seeds and unharvested apricots, loquat and prunus fruits from gardens. While Mt Rogers appears to be a central point for Superb Parrots in these summer weeks, their gradual spread into all Belconnen suburbs can be observed. It would be interesting to know more of their nocturnal habits and, therefore, if a daily dispersal and return actually occurs.

With the advent of ACT fire hazard clearance policies, large numbers of wattles have been removed from Mt Rogers in recent times. It remains to be seen what impact this will have on the Superb Parrot. In light of this the conservation intentions of the ACT's Draft Action Plan for the Superb Parrot dated 1998 make poignant reading.

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BRINDABELLA BREEDING OF PAINTED BUTTON-QUAIL

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On 26 December 2004, while driving along Brindabella Road about 2 km east of Piccadilly Circus, **1** (MM) encountered a group of four small chicks huddled in the middle of the road. Another bird presumably the parent, was calling from the cover of the roadside vegetation. When I got out of the car one of the chicks ran off but the other three stayed put. As I took photographs of them, one, then another ran off leaving one behind. In the end, after taking more photographs, I gently encouraged the remaining chick to get off the middle of the road.

Based on photographs of the chicks, after consulting HANZAB, several other references, and CSIRO ornithologist Mark Clayton, the birds were identified as Painted Button-quail *Turnix varia.*

The Painted Button-quail is considered a rare breeding resident in the ACT and surrounding area (Wilson 1999, COG 2005). A handful of records of this species are submitted to COG in most years: database records show that in the 20-year period 1984-2003 there were records for all but two years, with a total of 96 records, averaging 4.8 records per year.

Most records come from lowland areas of eucalypt forest and woodland, however there are seven records from the higher ranges (over 1000 m). Six of these seven records come from 1987-1989, and are likely the result of concerted activity in such areas for the ACT Atlas (1986-1989) (Taylor and COG 1992). These include two records from Mt Franklin Road (15 and 26 Jun 1998, GrC18 and C19), Creamy Flat Track (4 Sep 1998, GrE22), Boboyan area (18 Oct 1987 and 6 Jan 1989, GrH26 and G25) and Clear Range (4 Dec 1988, GrK24). The other record was from 21 January 1994 on the Brindabella Road (GrD14). The current report of the species at 1150 m on Brindabella Road (GrD15) is not unexpected or unprecedented, but is interesting as the first high altitude record of Painted Button-quail for a decade.

The record is also important because it is just the third record of Painted Button-quail breeding in the COG area, and the first from a high altitude location. Previous breeding records were of dependent young on 6 Jan 1988 in the Kowen Forest area (GrO14) and on 5 Feb 1995 at Mulligans Flat (GrL10).

Four chicks is typical for the species (`usually 3-4, rarely five'), with the male feeding and guarding the precocial nidifugous young for the first week or so (HANZAB). Also typical is the tendency for chicks to 'crouch and remain motionless, relying on camouflage to avoid detection'. Fortunately in this case their camouflage let them down!

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ODD OBS

Overwintering Singing Bushlarks near Lake Bathurst

On 13 June 2005 at around 10:30 h I observed up to 20 Singing Bushlarks *Mirafra javanica* near a farm dam beside a rural road approximately 9 km east of Lake Bathurst township, and approximately 7 km north-east of the Main Basin of Lake Bathurst (35:01:43 S 149:44:58 E WGS).

The habitat was ordinary rough grazing; some of the bushlarks were perched on fence wires, others were foraging on the ground, and others still were displaying and engaging in aerial interactions. A small number of Skylarks *Alauda arvensis* were present in the area, but not close to the dam.

Also observed in the immediate vicinity were White-fronted Chat *Epthianura albifrons* (2), Diamond Firetail *Stagonopleura guttata (5),* Southern Whiteface *Aphelocephala leucopsis* (3), Flame Robin *Petroica phoenicea (10,* all female), and Yellow-rumped Thornbill *Acanthiza chrysorrhoa (10).*

The significance of this observation is that it has been widely assumed that Australasian larks are summer visitors in south-eastern Australia. They are known as summer breeders in the Lake Bathurst area, yet this observation suggests that they overwinter in the area too, which, at an elevation of c 690 m asl, must be one of the coldest parts of their range.

Subsequent visits by myself (19 June) and Michael Lenz (weekend of 18-19 June) failed to locate these birds again.

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Australian Hobbies breeding at the ANU

There is a tall and well developed eucalypt on the inner (eastern) side of Ellery Cres on the ANU campus, opposite the T-intersection with East Rd. A raptor nest has been in the upper branches for some years.

In January 2004, a pair of Australian Hobbies *Falco longipennis* was active in the area and alighted frequently in the tree. On occasions they were observed eating prey which consisted of birds of undetermined species. On or close to 20 January, a head of an extra bird appeared over the edge of the nest. On 2 February, two fledged young were seen outside the nest and the adults (nearly always only one at a time) were active in feeding the young or, more commonly, roosting in the tree near the nest. By late February, the young were mobile and active but stayed in the vicinity of the nest tree.

By the remains left outside the rear door of the Chancellery building, I could see that there had been much feeding on the top of the building over a period of at least three weeks.

The birds were frequently harassed by Noisy Miners *Manorina melanocephala* and other birds. After about a month from fledging, the birds dispersed and I have not seen them since, including through the 2004-05 breeding season.

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Piscivorous Magpie-lark

A pair of Magpie-larks *Grallina cyanoleuca* have been resident in our neighbourhood for many years, rearing a good number of youngsters. We have a pond in which multi-coloured goldfish successfully breed every summer. The pond has a three metre by half a metre shallow section over river stones, where the fish, especially the young ones, spend time feeding. The Magpie-larks paddle through the shallows, finding insects among the plants edging the pond, small black water snails on the stones, and sometimes successfully eating the flesh of a ramshorn snail (though more often we find the safely withdrawn ramshorn on the ground around the pond — safe, that is, if we get it back to the water in time).

In March 2004 the male Magpie-lark took a young white goldfish about four centimetres long. I saw him first with the wriggling fish firmly in his beak (fish tail one side, head the other) as he moved out of the water and over several metres of paving to where the female and offspring were fossicking in leaf litter. Unfortunately they were just out of clear view and I could not see what he finally did with the fish. It would have been interesting to know if indeed he ate it as, so far as I am aware, fish are not normally part of the diet of Magpie-larks.

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Robin Hood and his Merry Men

On 18 and 19 April 2004, **I** visited Mulligans Flat Nature Reserve, and was intrigued by the interactions among Yellow-rumped Thornbills *Acanthiza chrysorrhoa*, Southern Whitefaces *Aphelocephala leucopsis* and Hooded Robins *Melanodryas cucullata* on the three occasions I encountered the robins. I had never heard Hooded Robins calling before but at least twice female/immature birds were making very loud simple calls.

On 18 April, **I** saw one female/immature Hooded Robin near Stop 4 of the Mulligan Bird Walk, sporadically calling and moving short distances, perching on scattered, small dead acacias. Five Yellow-rumped Thornbills followed the bird each time it moved. Several times a thornbill sat within about 20 cm of the robin. I watched the behaviour for about 15 minutes, at around 14:30 h. Other than this seemingly involuntary 'tagging' behaviour, there was no other obvious interaction between the birds, not even acknowledgment. This struck me as unusual given the extremely close proximity of another individual, especially given it was a different species. Perhaps both species are used to this behaviour?

On 19 April, in the eastern, open and relatively flat area of Mulligans Flat Nature Reserve, **I** encountered two

Hooded Robins (one male and one female/immature) at around 13.00 h, and soon after three different Hooded Robins (one male and two female/immature birds). On both occasions the female/immature birds were being followed by groups of five or more Southern Whitefaces and/or Yellow-rumped Thornbills.

It was uncanny how the whitefaces and thornbills would instantly and synchronously follow the female/uncoloured Hooded Robin when it flew. When the robin landed, the smaller birds would initially surround it regardless of whether it perched on the ground, a rocky outcrop. a dead branch or in a live sapling. If the robin stayed motionless for a while the whitefaces and thornbills would usually spread out and forage, but there would always be one or two of the smaller birds very close (to within around 15 cm) to the robin, perhaps watching and waiting for the robin's next move?

The male Hooded Robins were not followed. I didn't detect either of the males calling so perhaps it was something to do with the call that motivated the thornbills and whitefaces? Perhaps it was some sort of feeding guild? That is. the robin possibly disturbs insects while it pounces and the smaller birds gather; or perhaps the robin has better eyesight and thereby leads the thornbills/whitefaces to 'thickets' of insects. In return, perhaps the many foraging thornbills and whitefaces help flush insects for the robin — although my observations were invariably of the robin leading and the smaller birds following. While still in Mulligans Flat Nature Reserve, I may have encountered similar behaviour by a group of Yellow-rumped Thornbills giving attention to a male Scarlet Robin *Petroica multicolor,* but so it was far less pronounced. Maybe it is just avian fun and games and I am trying to read too much into it all!

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An autumn group of Shining Bronze-Cuckoos at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve

The undoubted highlight of the Birds Australia Southern New South Wales and the ACT honeyeater migration/fire recovery outing that I lead on 3 April 2005 was seeing at first one and then, 30 minutes later, within a metre or so of each other, three Shining Bronze-Cuckoos *Chrysococcyx lucidus* feeding on caterpillars in regenerating gums within the Tidbinbilla waterfowl enclosure. One of the latter birds was very lightly barred and had a brown stripe through the eye (much more pronounced on one side) with some white above, which raised in my mind the intriguing possibility of there being a Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx basalis* in the group. However, on my return home, I consulted HANZAB (Higgins 1999) and confirmed that it was a juvenile of the former species. A second juvenile may have been present as we observed a fourth bird nearby, also with a much lighter face and partly barred.

The ACT Atlas (Taylor and COG 1992) indicates that the Shining Bronze-Cuckoo may still be present in April, though in its lowest numbers. Three or

four birds is the highest number of this species that I can recall seeing together at any one time. In addition, the presence of a possible family group for this parasitic species, including adults and juveniles, was unexpected. HANZAB indicates this species' social organisation is poorly known, noting that it can be seen "singly, in twos or small groups", with one report of "often in trios", though it is "solitary in (the) non-breeding season". Other literature reports indicate that it usually migrates in small groups of between six and ten birds.

Perhaps the feast of caterpillars in the regrowth was the trigger that brought this pre-migrating group together. No begging or attempt to feed the juveniles was observed.

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Regent Honeyeater at ANU

On 16 April 2005, Michael Lenz noticed a male Regent Honeyeater *Xanthomyza phrygia* on the ANU campus. Several other sightings, presumably of the same (unbanded) bird, were made, the last apparently on 21 April. With several bird enthusiasts working in the area, the bird was well observed during this period. It was found to follow a pattern of movement between particular eucalypts within the ANU over a range of a few hundred metres. A Blakely's Red Gum *Eucalyptus blakelyi* at the entrance to the Research School of Chemistry was particularly favoured. It fed on lerps, sometimes in the company of Red Wattlebirds *Anthochaera carunculata.*

On at least four occasions over four days the bird was seen to pause in its feeding for several minutes to give loud calls from a high perch, seemingly in territorial mode.

This is the sixth reported Regent Honeyeater appearance in Canberra in a period of 18 months. With the exception of one sighting by Henry Nix of possibly two birds **(see** *CBN* 29: 25), all involved single birds.

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A juvenile Olive Whistler at Blundells Creek Road?

On the morning of 20 January 2005, during an excursion to the Brindabellas, Martin Butterfield and I stopped mid-way along Blundells Creek Road to check out the birds. There was much activity, with Flame Robins *Petroica phoenicea* and White-eared Honeyeaters *Lichenostomus leucotis* being particularly in evidence. Our attention was drawn, however, to a "mystery" bird, first glimpsed darting through the

undergrowth. It finally obliged by perching for about 30 seconds on a bare limb, some 20 metres in front of us, and afforded us a good view before it flew off low into the undergrowth again.

What we observed was an upright bird, essentially bright rich rufous in colour. The bird's head, neck, upperparts, wings, breast, belly and flanks were uniformly of this colour; its throat was white, with a mottled effect where the rufous of the neck joined the throat. The bill was a nondescript brown. and of medium size, not fine. The bird was silent. Our initial impression was that the bird was not dissimilar to a Grey Shrike-thrush *Colluricincla harmonica* in size and shape; even though size is notoriously difficult to judge in the field, our bird was at least as big as the nearby White-eared Honeyeaters. We realised we had to be looking at a y oung bird, as no adult bird likely to be present in the Brindabellas had such plumage. A Golden Whistler *Pachycephala pectoralis* was ruled out immediately, as our bird was bigger. and I am familiar with the quite different red-rufous colouring of the juvenile Golden. A Cicadabird *Coracina tenuirostris* was ruled out, as my distant memory of a juvenile being fed was quite unlike our bird. A Pilotbird *Pycnoptilus floccosus* was ruled out as our bird was much lighter in colour, and a quite different shape and jizz. And the familiar Grey Shike-thrush juvenile only has a rufous eyebrow. We were stumped.

Light dawned on the way home, and a search of the literature confirmed the probable identity of our mystery bird as a juvenile Olive Whistler *Pachycephala olivacea.* The relevant HANZAB (vol. 6, p. 1075) opines that the juvenile Olive Whistler is "Poorly known, and plumage held for only a short time after fledging". It goes on to describe the juvenile as follows:

> Much more rufous-brown than adult, with softer and looser texture to plumage. Head, neck and upperbody, rufous-brown, possibly slightly paler on chin and throat ... Upperwings appear largely as adult but with strong rufous tinge to tips of all secondary coverts, and strong rufous tinge to outer webs of greater secondary coverts and tertials, giving overal1 more rufous appearance to folded wing ... Breast, upper belly and flanks appear rather uniform rufous brown.

No juvenile specimens were available to the compilers or illustrator, however, and the plumage description was based on a single skin in post-juvenile moult with a few traces of juvenile plumage remaining, and the photo of another in post-juvenile moult. Subsequent discussion with Steve Wilson ascertained that he had seen juvenile Olive Whistlers and confirmed their colouration.

If we are correct in surmising that our mystery bird was a juvenile Olive Whistler — and we cannot think of any alternative, even though on this occasion we did not see an adult Olive Whistler — then it is encouraging to know that the species is back breeding in the Brindabellas within two years of the fires. We note that HANZAB proffers 'Mystery Bird' as an alternative common name for the Olive Whistler.

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Brown Goshawk attempts to take cat

At 14:00 h on 11 May 2005, **I** was walking along the boundary of a large vineyard adjacent to Stockdill Drive, west of Holt, ACT, when I noticed a raptor flying about a metre above the grapevines some 50 metres from where I stood. I brought my binoculars to bear and saw it was a Brown Goshawk *Accipiter fasciatus.* Judging by its large size, I took it to be a female.

When the goshawk was about five metres from the edge of the vines, a half- grown cat *Fells catus* broke from cover and raced across an access lane between the plantings as the hawk accelerated after it. The goshawk closed on its prey and then, when the cat was about two metres from safety, abandoned its pursuit. A half-second later the cat disappeared beneath the vines. I gained the impression that had the goshawk pressed home the attack, it may well have collided with the grapevines.

The goshawk wheeled around in a circle and landed at the point where the cat had disappeared. It leaned forward and peered beneath the vines, inclining its head from side to side. Then it walked along with the awkward swagger of a pedestrian raptor, stopping momentarily to look beneath the vines. After some 40 seconds, it took off and flew to about fifteen metres where it caught an updraft and soared out of sight in the direction of Shepherds Lookout.

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COLUMNISTS' CORNER

Bird adventures on the bookshelf (1)

Stentoreus enjoy s bird books, especially interesting ones that describe personal experiences with birds. Interesting' is the important word.

On the one hand it is easy to find these days, in journals or newsletters or on the internet, a wealth of bird stories in the form of diaries. travelogues, commercial tour promotions. or 'trip reports'. Often this writing consists of little more than names of birds and places, separated by a predictable selection of adjectives (spare us, please, any more 'excitings' and `wonderfuls) and an even more limited selection of verbs (the most popular forms being 'rewarded by' and 'had great views of). There is often a garnish of comments on the state of the local roads and the weather met with along the way.

On the other hand, the kind of writing to which I refer here stay s in the memory because it is distinctive, perhaps because the experience is of a pioneering nature or unlikely to be repeated, or is described with authority or simply in an informative or engaging way.

I had intended in this column to list a few books — say five to ten - that represented my own favourites in that regard. I found I had soon jotted down more than 20 that might qualify. I was struck by the remarkably wide variety of stories I had listed, as regards their date and setting — and what motivated those who wrote them.

Instead of my list, then, I shall in these columns briefly describe what I think are among the most interesting of these writings, three or four at a time. This is in the belief that there will be others who, like me, find a good bird story as captivating as some people might find a fishing story, a war story or a ghost story.

(i) Dillon Ripley, *Search for the Spiny Babbler: Bird Hunting in Nepal* (1953)

This is an account by the American ornithologist S Dillon Ripley of an expedition he led to Nepal in 1948 to investigate the natural history of that country. At the time Dr Ripley was the Associate Curator of the Peabody Museum of Natural History at Yale. The account is of some historical interest, because at that time Nepal had been long closed to foreign visitors, there was no road into Kathmandu, and the expedition was given freedom to move around the `hitherto forbidden hinterland'.

Ripley's party managed to collect some 1600 bird specimens, representing 331 species and subspecies, with another fifty (`mostly the larger sorts') that escaped collection, merely 'being seen in the field'. The total was considerably short of the 563 species recorded for Nepal by Sir Brian Hodgson, the diplomat/naturalist who represented the East India Company at the court of Nepal from 1821 to 1843.

The expedition failed to find the legendary, if still extant, Mountain Quail and Pink-headed Duck, but did have more luck with the Spiny Babbler. This

is a member of the great babbler grouping of Asia and Africa, which is not closely related to the Australian corvoid 'babblers'. The 'Spiny' had never been seen alive by an ornithologist, the only specimens known having been brought in dead to Sir Brian more than a century before, with a single specimen being obtained later by Captain Stackhouse Pinwill in Kumaon.

Dr Ripley had one brief encounter with the babbler in western Nepal, coming across a flock of seven, of which he was able to collect one. The (American) National Geographic Society was a joint sponsor of the expedition, and a report of it duly appeared in their magazine issue of January 1950 under the title 'Peerless Nepal ─ A Naturalist's Paradise'.

Unfortunately, bird photography in remote areas being as difficult as it then was (and sometimes still is) the article is not illustrated by a single live bird photo, although the accompanying NGS professional photographer got some great shots of colleagues, local inhabitants, scenery etc. The bird pics are limited to the following:

a. a photo of Dr Ripley showing a group of villagers a drawing of the lost Mountain Quail. (Unhappily, the villagers were not able to produce an example of this possibly-extinct quail.)

b. a table-top of deceased bird specimens in the course of being processed. This is quite colourful, including as it does 'hill partridge, slaty-headed parakeet, white- throated laughing thrush, bush lark and Darjeeling woodpecker'.

c. a typically dramatic painting by NGS artist Walter A Weber which shows the Spiny Babbler, among other birds, against a majestic background of Himalayan peaks.

Incidentally, consulting the Grimmett field guide for an update on the Spiny Babbler *Turdoides nipalensis*, I find that it is now given as 'frequent' (which is between 'fairly common' and `uncommon'), although it is "very skulking and difficult to observe except early in the breeding season'.

(ii) Hugh Officer, *Recollections of a Birdwatcher* (1978)

A well-known member of the Australian bird-watching community, Brigadier Hugh Officer (1898-1996) published two accounts of his bird-watching experiences. The first of these, *Walkabouts and Birds* (1970), recounts travels throughout Australia. In both books, the bird encounters and other incidents and the down-to-earth expectations and impressions flow so easily that the reader travels along with the writer. This makes pleasant reading.

The second book is rather more autobiographical in tone, although the chapters do not follow chronological sequence. Chapters 8-10 describe episodes in India and adjacent countries during the 30 years that the author served with the Indian army. The remaining chapters concern later periods, with visits to widely-separated locations in Australia, Iceland, the Solomons, New Hebrides, France.

Evidently the Brigadier did not get to the south-west corner of Spain, despite being

eager to do so as a result of reading 'Guy Mountfort's splendid book *Portrait of a Wilderness'*. (Sharing the same view of that book, I shall certainly include it in this little series.) On the matter of books, I note that the Brigadier was during his Indian service more than once at Simla, and wrote.

> I made the fortunate discovery that my tailor there. AE Jones. was one of the great authorities on sub-Himalayan birds. He took me under his wing and so my path was made ease. I still have his pamphlet. The Common Birds of Simla'.

As it happens. Stentoreus. who has never been near Simla but gathers bird miscellania like the Satin Bowerbird collects blue clothes pegs. now possesses that very pamphlet following the break-up of the Brigadier's library His Simla sightings are marked on it in a neat hand.

From the Brigadier's man. exploits, I select one from his chapter 'Searching for the Dorothy Grass Wren'. In 1971, he organised a small party to to to find *Amytornis dorotheae,* at that time not seen since it had been discovered in 1913. The hunt took place in sandstone country near the Gulf of Carpentaria. After crossing the McArthur River from the west, the party camped. and set off early the next morning in their 4-wheel drive truck. From his dead-pan account of the sighting, it is plain that the Brigadier did not belong to the 'heart-in-the-mouth', "could-hardly-breathe' school of first-sighters:

> Within forty minutes we had the great good fortune to hear and then pick up a party of three Dorothy Grass Wrens of which we got satisfying sightings as the birds moved across the sandstone like animated tennis balls before they disappeared in the cover of sandstone boulders and crevices, some of which were over six feet deep and full of spinifex. How lucky can one be? An elusive bird found in less than a hour!

(iii) Bill Oddie, *Follow That Bird!* (1994)

If you are old enough and of broad enough tastes in entertainment, your first memory of Bill Oddie might be associated with *The Goodies,* described on the BBC website as 'farce/sitcom' and a 'landmark in British comedy', which enjoyed its classic period from 1973 to 1976. The site blurb suggests that the *Goodies* characters were `caricature exaggerations of their real selves' and that Bill was 'an aggressive, earthy, hairy individual who eventually tended towards environmentalism, socialism and feminism'.

More relevantly, what Bill Oddie became later was a professional birding celebrity, widely known for his books and television appearances. Whether the persona of a fanatically-driven insider-twitcher is a caricature or the real thing would be difficult to say.

Of his many books, the one with the greatest impact was probably *Bill Oddie's Little Black Bird Book: The truth about bird-watching* (1980). The excesses of competitive twitching offer rich opportunity for humour and anecdote and this book ─ an early one into the field - made the most of it.

Bill Oddie is a fluent and apparently inexhaustible teller of tales about

birdwatching. *Bill Oddie's Gripping Yarns* (2000) contains 60 stories that were originally published in the UK *Birdwatch* magazine. *Follow That Bird!* is about experiences further afield. The title comes from a dramatic incident - at least dramatic in the telling - when a Martial Eagle appeared close to a small aircraft carrying participants through a thunderstorm in the course of the Great Kenyan Bird Race of 1987.

Most of the chapter on India is about the circumstances of the death there of a close friend of Oddie's, David Hunt, who was killed by a tiger. He had left a party he was guiding to try for a picture of a Spotted Owlet. The camera found by his body contained film that was later developed. The first shot was of Spotted Owlet sitting on a branch. Subsequent shots were of a tiger, some distance away in the first one, and then progressively closer, until the final one was 'a frame-filling shot of the tiger's head, eyes blazing and teeth exposed in a snarl'.

It was inferred that this was an example of 'camera blindness' where the photographer, intent on the subject, neither knew nor at the time cared how close it was. This account will fascinate anyone who has experienced similar subject-absorption, and is certain to be endlessly retold.

As 'the definitive story of Hunt's last moments' Bill Oddie's account is reproduced in Stephen Moss's *A Bird in the Bush: a social history of birdwatching* (2004). It is given there as one of several instances of relatively recent bird-watching-related tragedies. In the pursuit of birds, there is still opportunity for adventures of kinds to suit all preferences.

A. stentoreus

Birding in cyberspace, Canberra-style

Technological convergence is occurring everywhere. I no longer know what to call that thing in my bag. Once I called it my mobile phone but now it is also my FM radio, digital camera, web browser, email client, games player, organiser, etc., etc., etc. And for birding? You are probably aware that many spotting scopes now have adapters for digital cameras, and digital cameras have adapters for spotting scopes. I'm intrigued, however, by advertisements for binoculars that have inbuilt digital cameras—or are they advertisements for digital cameras that have inbuilt binoculars? For example, the Trust 580Z Binocular DigiCamera is being advertised with the following specs:

> ...a 1.3 megapixel camera built in and 12MB of internal memory and wil1 accommodate SD cards to increase memory capabilities. The 8x22 binoculars feature a 22mm objective lens with a 2.75 mm exit pupil which gives you a 7° field of view (37.1 metres at a distance of 914.4 metres).

And Trimble, the manufacturer of fine GPS receivers, now boasts the 'Trimble Evolution GPS':

> Carry less while Geocaching [for us read `Birding']. Trimble and Nextel have combined a GPS receiver, digital camera, walkie-talkie and cell phone all in one ultra-light unit. With Nextel's i860 camera phone and Trimble Outdoors service, you can navigate and

> record your cache [bird?] adventure, all while staying in touch.

The ABC Archive & Sound Service includes the terrific **ABC WILDsound** component: a library of online bird calls. Find it at http://www.abc.net.au/archives/av/birds.htm. The last time I checked it had a hundred or so calls available. They are in `.ram' format. This means that, even if you are not much into audio on your computer, clicking on the species name should launch Real Player or Windows Media Player or whatever, and play the birdsong. The calls are brief, but give an idea of some of the most common calls.

Wetlands International is a global non-profit organisation the mission of which is 'To sustain and restore wetlands, their resources and biodiversity for future generations through research, information exchange and conservation activities, worldwide'. The w ebsite of its local arm <http: etlands-oceania.org> contains some particularly interesting information. The link 'Maps Australia' takes us to a page advising:

> Wetlands International has been engaged by Environment Australia to rey iew and update maps of internationally important sites for migratory shorebirds in Australia. This work links to the recent analysis of data throughout the East Asian-Australasian Fly to reassess minimum population estimates and apply this to shorebird count data ... ln this process we have identified 125 sites in Australia of international importance to migratory shorebirds.

The map on that page shows a little circle near the ACT. Clicking on it takes one to information on Lake Bathurst which has, over the years, been an important shorebird site. Hmm, I imagine it will rain again some time, but there are not too many shorebirds there right now!

Your columnist experienced an interesting conjunction some weeks ago as I was preparing this column. While tapping out the following paras about **Bell Miners, lerp and eucalypt dieback** I heard the calls of Noisy Miners outside and, upon inspection—well I did look out the window!—I observed two in my garden, most unusual visitors. Then Bing! went the `email has arrived' alert on the computer. The message was penned by COG's Geoffrey Dabb and sent to members of the CanberraBirds email discussion list <http://canberrabirds.org.au/discuss.htm > and was about lerp and dieback.

A lerp is defined in the OED as 'A sweet secretion, or the scales formed from it, produced by larvae of jumping plant-lice of the family Psyllidae on the leaves of eucalypts and other plants', which seems fair enough. And Bell Miners? When groups come to COG's area of concern most of us are pleased, not concerned, as they are quite unusual here. The other side of the story is documented online, however, at <http://www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/npws.nsf/Content/bell_miner_dieback_strategy>. This is about the 'Bell Miner Associated Dieback (BMAD) Strategy'. (This seems to be another case of 'if you can't work out where to place the hyphens then leave them out'.) This comprehensive and informative Strategy, published just last year by the NSW Department of Environment and

Conservation, Coffs Harbour, is well worth reading. While the focus is on Northern NSW, I wonder if it has implications for the Psyllid associated dieback that we see in eucalypts, especially Blakely's Red Gums, in the Canberra region? Note this description of the outward expression of BMAD:

- trees stressed and dying
- high populations of psyllids and other sapsucking insects contributing to tree stress
- high Bell Miner numbers, with their aggressive territorial behaviour, driving away insectivorous birds that would otherwise help to control insect numbers
- alteration of the forest structure: canopy and midstories depleted with grassy and wet and dry sclerophyll understoreys replaced by dense shrubby vegetation, often associated with lantana invasion

It is certainly the case, in a woodland site **I** survey regularly, that lerp and dieback seem associated, and that the abundance of small Psyllid-eating birds such as thornbills, Weebills and gerygones has declined dramatically apparently in parallel with an increase in lerp density and eucalyptus dieback. Any comments?

Email has revolutionised how some people communicate while others (they probably skip this column) remain uncontaminated. Well, we are told that the next great thing in email is **your email name and account for life.** What's more, you will never need to delete an email ever again and will always be able to recover and re-read a message from ages ago. How do these digital miracles come about? The answer is free web-based email with humungous amounts of free storage space. Yahoo! Mail <http://mail.yahoo.com> has provided this service for some time, and it recently increased the amount of free storage space it provides to each subscriber from 250 Mb to 1,000 Mb (that is, 1 Gb), four times as much. How many email message could be held in 1 Gb? Well, in my account **I** have at present 2,125 emails distributed to COG's discussion list CanberraBirds and that takes up just 32 Mb. So I could have over 66,000 emails stored, for free, in 1 Gb. Google is introducing a similar service, but with more than 2 Gb of storage: <www.gmail.com>. That service is currently in a testing phase.

Readers of Birds Australia's fine magazine *Wingspan* will have seen information in the March 2005 issue about the case studies produced through **Birds Australia's Shorebird Conservation Project.** They document how community organisations can be effective in dealing with threats to shorebirds such as loss of habitat, human disturbance, introduced pests, lack of awareness and conflicting land use. The case studies are on the website of WWF <http://www.wwf.org.au>. From this home page, select 'publications' then, under 'choose type of publication', select 'fact sheets'. There you will find beautifully-presented, brief pdfs covering topics including:

- Protecting Shorebirds from Human Disturbance: The NSW South Coast Shorebird Recovery Program

- Protecting Shorebirds from Introduced Pests: The Corner Inlet Fox Control Project. Victoria

- The Fivebough and Tuckerbil Swamp Wetland Restoration and Management Project. NSW

`He'll Kill for Blue' was the intriguing subject of an email posted recently to the national email-based discussion list, Birding-Aus. Syd Curtis drew attention to the following extract about Satin Bowerbirds from a book written by an overseas non-birder:

> The great ornithologist Alexander Skutch, who died last year in Costa Rica at the age of ninety-nine, believed natural beauty is no mere side effect of evolution. Natural selection, he points out, is essentially destructive. It eliminates those unable to make the grade while offering no special care to those that live on. The constructive art of life is where he sees the glimmer of a final cause: the will of each creature to survive. This need to endure, to live as one must. to sing to fulfill what your genes have given you, is the way evolution feels from the inside. This is why the lyrebird cannot stop in the middle of a courtship dance, and why, if you deprive a satin bowerbird of the blue petals he must collect to decorate its mating bower, he will kill the first blue bird it finds and lay its feathers in front of his lair. He simply MUST have blue.

previously heard of a Satin Bowerbird killing for blue feathers and asked if anyone could throw light on these matters. Hugo Phillipps from Melbourne replied:

> According to Cliff and Dawn Frith *(The Bowerbirds,* OUP, 2004) Satin Bowerbirds `have been known to kil1 small blue fellow captive birds to use as bower decorations' citing Murray in Chaffer 1945 *(Emu* 44: 141-161). They also mention a dead blue-plumaged Superb Fairy-wren found at a bower near Healesville, Victoria, citing Veselovsky 1979 (Acta scientiarum naturalium Academiae scientiarum bohemoslovacae 13: 1-29), and a bower with two Crimson Rosella wings, in Marshal1 1934 *(Emu* 34: 57-61). These do not, of course, prove that Satin Bowerbirds, in the wild, kil1 other birds for bower decorating, but they suggest the possibility and are presumably the source of the quote.

Other correspondents advised that they had seen the bird carrying blue flowers but not using blue petals as bower decoration, None had direct evidence of one bowerbird killing another for the purpose of obtaining blue feathers. I wonder if any *CBN* readers can further illuminate the two issues that Syd has raised?

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. A comprehensive searchable archive of the messages that have been posted to the list is at <http://bioacoustics.cse.unsw.edu.au/archives/html/birding-aus>.

To join the *CanberraBirds* email discussion list, send an empty email message to canberrabirds-subscribe@canberrabirds.org.au. The list's searchable archive is at

RARITIES PANEL ENDORSED LIST 64

Spotted Harrier *Circus assimilis*
1; 13 Jun 05; Steve Holliday; Yass Valley Way GrG3

Grey Goshawk *Accipiter novaehollandiae*
2; 19 Sep 04; Ian Anderson; Burra Creek GrM21

Black Falcon *Falco subniger*
1; 6 Mar 05; Anthony Dyers; Brindabella Rd GrF14

Lewin's Rail *Rallus pectoralis*
1; 27 Mar 05; Alastair Smith; Fyshwick sewage ponds GrL14

Spotless Crake *Porzana tabuensis*
2; 17 Jul 03; Mat Gilfedder; Fyshwick Sewage Ponds GrL14*

Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia*
l; 23 Jan 05; Elizabeth Compston; East Basin, LBG GrL13

White-headed Pigeon *Columba leucomela*
1; 13 Jul 03; Eric Meijaard; Bruce, Gr K12*
1; 16 Jul 03; Harvey Perkins; Bruce, Gr K12*

Diamond Dove *Geopelia cuneata* Probable escapee
1; 8 Mar 05; Richard Allen; North Curtin horse paddocks GrJ; 4

Major Mitchell's Cockatoo *Cacatua leadbeateri* Probable escapee
1; 29 Jan 05; Martin Butterfield; Katthner St Chapman GrI15

Swift Parrot *Lathamus discolor*
3; 7 Mar 05; Nicki Taws; Wybalena Grove, Cook GrJ13
4; 12 Mar 05; Nicki Taws; Mt Majura GrM12
6+; 14 Mar 05; Steve Holliday; Mt Majura GrM12
14; 15 Mar 05; Alastair Smith; Mt Majura GrM12
67; 18 Apr 05; Jenny Bounds; Mt Majura GrM12
1; 12 May 05; Rick Kuhn; ANU
4; 16 May 05; Richard Allen; Peacock Pl, Curtin

Budgerigar *Melopsittacus undulatus*
2; 10 Jun 05; John Layton; Yarramundi GrJ14

Fork-tailed Swift *Apus pacificus*
12; 2 Apr 05; Nicki Taws; Wybalena Grove, Cook GrJ13

Chestnut-rumped Heathwren *Hylacola pyrrhopygia*
l; 13 Feb 05; Alastair Smith & Michael Wright; Rob Roy Nature Reserve GrL18

Little Friarbird *Philemon citreogularis*
l; 12 Mar 05; John Goldie; Irvine St Watson GrLI2

Crimson Chat *Epthianura tricolor*
4; 1 Nov 03; Joe Forshaw; Yerrabi Pond, Amaroo* GrK10

White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike *Coracina papuensis*
1 (dark morph); 2, 12 Oct 03; Richard Allen; Curtin* GrJ14
2 (dark morph); 25 Apr 05; Geoffrey Dabb; Narrabundah GrL15

Plum-headed Finch *Neochmia modesta* Escapee
1; 20 Feb 05; Rosemary Blemings; Mt Rogers GrJ11

* omitted from a previous Endorsed List Note: 5 records still under consideration.

COG has closed its office in the Griffin Centre, Bunda Street, Civic. Office functions are now carried out at the secretary's residence. Access to the library and equipment loans can be arranged by emailing cogoffice@canberrabirds.org.au or by telephoning the secretary on 6254 6520.

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 or via email to cbn@canberrabirds.org.au. Short notes, book reviews and other contributions should be sent to Barbara Allan, 47 Hannaford Street, Page ACT 2614 or *to* the above email address. 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.

Please note that the views expressed in the articles published in *Canberra Bird Notes* are those of the authors they do not necessarily represent the views of the Canberra Ornithologists Group. Responses to the views expressed in *CBN* articles are always welcomed and will be considered for publication as letters to the editors.

Canberra Bird Notes 30 (2) June 2005

Articles

Odd Obs

Columnists' Corner