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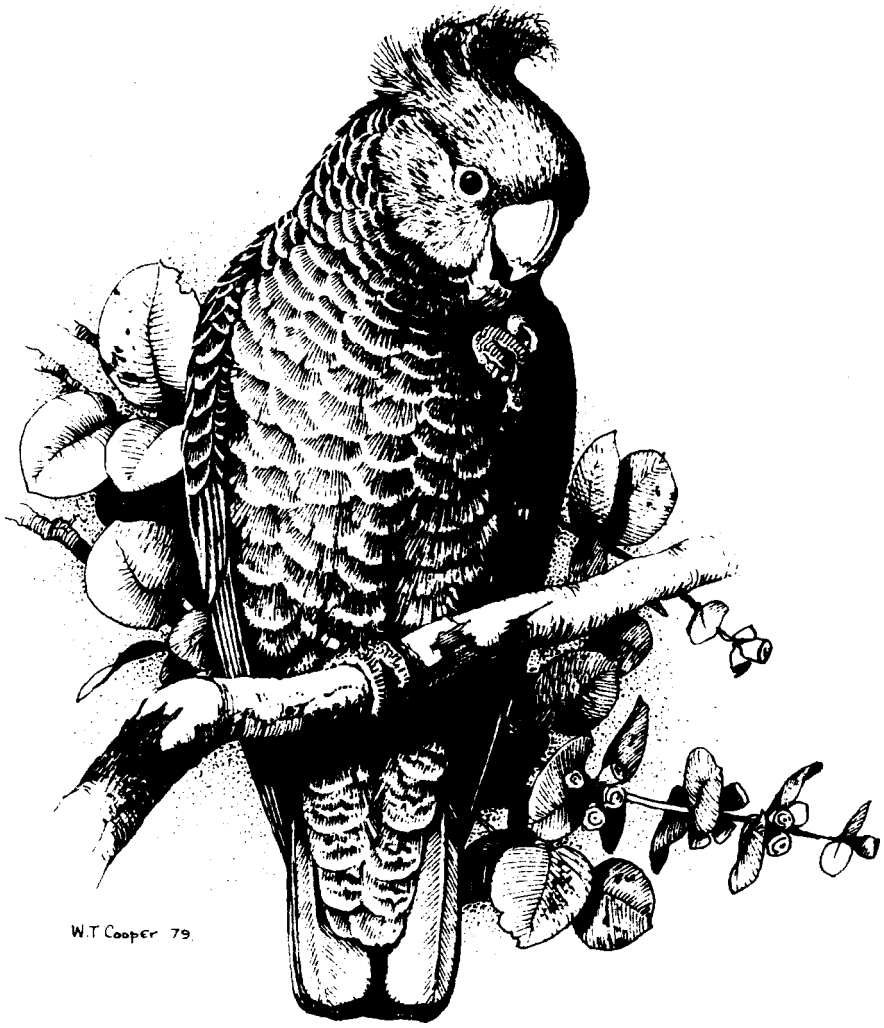

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COLLAPSE IN NUMBERS OF BREEDING LITTLE EAGLES IN THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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Abstract. We surveyed twelve species of breeding raptors in the Australian Capital Territory in 1990-1992, and surveyed the same locations again in 2002-2005. We also searched areas in 2002-2005 that we had not thoroughly searched in the 1990-1992 survey. Most species numbers were stable. Wedge-tailed Eagles Aquila audax had increased, apparently because of increasing numbers of macropods used as food. This was commensurate with Little Eagles Hieraaetus morphnoides decreasing, .from eleven active nests in the early 1990s survey down to one in 2005. In some cases Wedge-tailed Eagles apparently displaced them, however, Little Eagles also disappeared in areas where there were no nesting Wedge-tailed Eagles. Little Eagles may continue to breed in diminished numbers in the ACT, but there is a risk that they may disappear altogether. Suburban development in remaining Little Eagle breeding habitat as proposed by the ACT Government would be extremely detrimental to the species survival in the area. We also identify problems relating to surveying techniques used for assessing raptor populations. The use of sighting records by professional and amateur ornithologists as evidence of raptor abundance can be misleading, as intensive surveys of breeding pairs show opposite trends.

Introduction

Canberra has always been a city of raptors. With eleven species breeding in the city, its Nature Parks and adjoining farmland, another if you add Powerful Owls *Ninox strenua* in Namadgi National Park (Fuentes and Olsen 2005). and at least six more as sporadic visitors, the city is unrivalled by any other major urban centre. The uniqueness of the city has been the topic of international publications (Olsen and Olsen 1990), and has attracted a great deal of scientific interest. Some of the first major studies of Australian raptors took place in the area - Leopold and Wolfe (1970) for Wedge-tailed Eagles *Aquila audax,* Olsen and Olsen (1989) for Peregrine Falcons *Falco peregrinus* and Mallinson *et al. (1990)* for Little Eagles *Hieraaetus morphnoides.*

Taylor and COG (1992) stated that 13 Little Eagle territories had been identified in the ACT, many in reserves and bushland on the perimeter of the city. The highest concentrations were in the Murrumbidgee and Molonglo River Corridors, and especially at Uriarra Crossing. Olsen and Fuentes (2004) warned that some of the richness of species and breeding numbers would be lost if plans for expansion of Canberra's suburbs went ahead, and that Little Eagles were already in decline. They

found only one Little Eagle nest in the Murrumbidgee and Molonglo River Corridors in 2002-2003. Other nests studied by Mallinson *et al.* (1990) and Olsen (1992) had disappeared because of urban development, and an increase in the number of Wedge-tailed Eagles at the edge of the city linked to increasing numbers of macropods (Olsen 1994. D Mallinson pers. comm., Olsen and Fuentes 2004). Debus (2005) argued that a housing development proposed for the Molonglo River Valley would cause a decrease in foraging habitat for Little Eagles and a decline in breeding pairs, but that this would not affect Little Eagles regionally. He agreed with Olsen and Fuentes (2004) that, given the likely responses of raptor species to

encroachment of suburbia, the development would remove the foraging habitat and nest sites of several pairs each of Black-shouldered Kites *Elanus axillaris*, Brown Goshawks *Accipiter fasciatus*, Nankeen Kestrels *Falco cenchroides*, Brown Falcons *Falco berigora*, and Southern Boobooks *Ninox novaeseelandiae*, and one or more pairs of Wedge-tailed Eagles and Little Eagles. However, he argued that these species, including Little Eagles, were common and widespread in the ACT and Southern Highlands citing Barrett *et al.* (2003) and Taylor and COG (1992) as evidence. He cited no breeding studies to support this assertion.

In 1990 to 1992 we searched the ACT for Little Eagles and other raptors, particularly in Canberra Nature Parks and the Murrumbidgee and Molonglo River Corridors to assist the ACT Government with management decisions (Olsen 1992). Our aims for the current study were twofold: I) search in 2002-2005 the same areas searched in 1990-1992 for active nests (at least one egg or young): 2) search for breeding raptors in areas in the ACT not searched in the 1990-1992 survey (see Fuentes and Olsen 2005 for species found in the general Canberra region). Here we report our findings for Wedge-tailed Eagles and Little Eagles.

Methods

In 2002-2005 we searched by foot and car the areas previously searched in 1990-1992 (Olsen 1992) for all breeding raptors, especially Wedge-tailed Eagle territories including those shown in Leopold and Wolf (1970). We followed up reports of raptors, and raptor nests, submitted by the public, and by ACT Parks and Conservation staff. We also searched new areas in the ACT not thoroughly searched in the 1990-1992 survey, including the Orroral Valley in Namadgi National Park, Kowen Forest, Rob Roy Range, the Murrumbidgee River Corridor, Fyshwick, Gungahlin, Tuggeranong, and the northern corner of the ACT.

Results

Active nests found in the old survey, and in the new expanded survey, showed that most raptor species were stable, (see Fuentes and Olsen 2005), but two species showed significant changes.

Wedge-tailed Eagle

Most active Wedge-tailed Eagle nests found in the early 1990s were still active Table 1). We also found 13 new Wedge-tailed Eagle nests in the newly searched areas of the ACT including the

Orroral Valley, Kowen Forest, Rob Roy Range, Gungahlin, and Tuggeranong (these are not included in Table 1). The species appeared to be increasing because of increasing use of macropod prey (Olsen and Fuentes 2004, Fuentes and Olsen *2005).*

Little Eagle

By 2002 Little Eagle Sites #1 and #2 (Table 1) had been replaced by two pairs of Wedge-tailed Eagles. Other Little Eagle territories disappeared for unknown reasons. The last pair near O'Malley studied by Mallinson *et al.* (1990) was displaced by a housing development in 2004. We found one new Little Eagle nest in Gungahlin in 2004, but the nest was abandoned in 2005. On 6 November 2005 we found a single male near a nest in North Canberra, and another male near a nest in upper Molonglo Gorge in late November. On 22 November 2005 we found a pair near an empty nest on Mount Majura/Mount Ainslie (Site #7) but could not confirm breeding. Site #5 on the Molonglo River still had a single egg on 21 November, but by 9 December the egg and eagles had disappeared, so we found no successful Little Eagle nests (fledged at least one young) in the ACT in 2005.

Table 1. Active *Aquila audax* **and** *Hieraaetus morphnoides* **nests in the ACT and *straddling the ACT/NSW border occupied in the 1990s (1990-1992) and in 2002-2005.** Active, ie containing eggs or young (A); pair (P); single adult (S), and abandoned (-). Note: this table does not include new *A. audax* nests located in the 2002-2005 survey that were not usurped *H. morphnoides* nests.

species	Site #	1990s	2002	2003	2004	2005
A. audax	I		A	A	A	A
	2	-	A	A	A	A
	3	A	A	A	A	
	4	A	A	A	A	A
	5	A	A	A	A	A
	6	A	A	A	A	A
	7	A	A	A	A	A
H. morphnoides	1	A	-	-	-	-
	2	A	-	-	-	-
	3	A	A	-	-	-
	4	A	A	A	-	-
	5	A	A	A	A	A
	6	A	S			-
	7	A	P	P	P	P
	8	A	-	-	-	-
	9	A	-	-	-	-
	10	A	-	-	-	-
	I I	A	7	A	A	-

Dead adults

An adult Little Eagle was found dead under a nest near the Molonglo Gorge picnic area (Site #3) in 1989 and this nest was abandoned by 2003. An adult (banded) was found near the Black Mountain nest in 1992. This nest (Site #6) had a single adult in 2002 and was abandoned by 2003 and replaced by Brown Goshawks. There are no breeding Wedge-tailed Eagles near this site.

In 2002-2004, we found a female Wedge-tailed Eagle, male and female Whistling Kites, and a female Peregrine Falcon dead at their nests (the eagle and falcon were on eggs). In addition, during 2005 the public brought in ten live Barn Owls *Trto alba* to the RSPCA during a two-week period. These had been attacked by corvids, currawongs and magpies. One dead *T. alba* was brought to me (JO) in the same period. I examined (see Olsen 1990) all these diurnal and nocturnal raptors and all were in good condition indicating that some factor other than starvation killed the diurnal species and caused the Barn Owls to weaken and lose their ability to fly. Whether these deaths were natural, due to human activity, or linked in any way to the decline in Little Eagles, could not be determined.

Discussion

The stability of most breeding raptor species in the ACT (Fuentes and Olsen 2005) suggests that the ACT remains an area rich in breeding raptors. The decline of breeding Little Eagles, from 11 active nests in 1992 to a single failed nest in 2005, is of great concern and shows how a breeding species can decline unnoticed by ornithologists. One of the last local pairs was displaced by the development of East O'Malley by the ACT Government, in spite of the fact that Yellow Box *Eucalyptus melliodora* and Blakely's Red Gum *E. blakelyi* woodland there has been nominated for inclusion in the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act, and the Australian Government has signed the Bonn Convention protecting all birds in the families *Accipitridae* (including Little Eagles) and *Falconidae* (DEH 2005).

Debus (2005) argued that the Molonglo Valley population of Little Eagles would likely be reduced commensurate with the area of woodland converted to suburbia; they would retreat from woodland near expanding suburbia and human activity. This is a concern when we found in our 2005 survey only one active Little Eagle nest in that area, and it failed.

Though Veerman (2003), Fennell (2000), and Barrett *et al.* (2003) did not record any decline in this species, they did not rely on surveys of active nests. It is also possible that species like Whistling Kites and even Brown Falcons, and juvenile Wedge-tailed Eagles and White-bellied Sea-Eagles *Haliaeetus leucogaster* may have been misidentified as Little Eagles.

Conclusions

Little Eagles have undergone a severe decline over the past decade. The reasons for the decline need to be determined, and remaining pairs protected.

Wedge-tailed Eagles appear to have increased since the early 1990s, commensurate with Little Eagles

decreasing. but this does not explain the disappearance of some Little Eagle pairs. The last known active nest of urban Little Eagles was displaced when the ACT Government targeted the East O'Malley woodland for housing in 2004.

It is possible that Little Eagles will breed in diminished numbers in the ACT, but they may disappear altogether, especially if housing developments proceed in the hunting and breeding areas of the last known pairs. With the Little Eagle under pressure in the ACT, possibly facing extermination as a breeding species, the ACT Government needs to ensure its survival in reserves and on private land. Little Eagles may need to be listed as Vulnerable in the ACT.

Acknowledgments

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WHITE-BELLIED SEA-EAGLES BREEDING IN THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY?

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Abstract This note reviews the literature on the breeding of White-bellied Sea-Eagles in the ACT and concludes that a previously-reported breeding attempt was probably unsuccessful.

During a raptor survey of the Molonglo Valley in October 2005, I investigated the status of the White-bellied Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster* in the lower Molonglo River and the Murumbidgee River around Uriarra Crossing. This investigation included a reappraisal of literature reports of the sea-eagle breeding in the ACT.

McWilliam and Olsen (2001) detailed a probable breeding attempt by the White-bellied Sea-Eagle on the Murrumbidgee River just downstream from the Molonglo River confluence. Another account of the same episode (Layton 1996), not cited by McWilliam and Olsen, gave a slightly different version of events. Taking these two accounts together, the following facts can be established for what is to date the only documented breeding attempt by the sea-eagle within the ACT:

- an adult pair of sea-eagles occupied a large stick nest in Woodstock Nature Reserve in June 1995, and were seen carrying sticks in July;
- one of them was sitting, apparently incubating, during at least mid- to late August;
- by late September the attempt had failed and the nest was abandoned, as no adults were seen at the nest during regular checks from late September to early summer;
- the adults were seen downstream in October 1995 but a pair was not seen in the area thereafter to September 1996, although a single adult was seen once about 1 km from the nest, which remained deserted;
- there was some conflict between the sea-eagles and other eagles in the area (Wedge-tailed Eagle *Aquila audax* and Little Eagle *Hieraaetus morphnoides)* during the sea-eagles' breeding attempt.

The nest concerned is a long-established, very large one normally occupied by Wedge-tailed Eagles, which have raised young in it since the sea-eagle episode **(J.** Olsen pers. comm.); it is one of the Wedge-tailed Eagle nests documented by Leopold and Wolfe (1970). Evidently the sea-eagles temporarily occupied it in 1995 when the Wedge-tailed Eagles did not use it. One can only speculate about the sea-eagles' failure, either at the egg

or chick stage. and possible causes (river levels and hence aquatic prey populations: conflict with Wedge-tailed Eagles?).

McWilliam and Olsen (2001) reported a 'large. dark-feathered nestling' on the nest on 3 November 1995; however, no adult sea-eagles were seen in the vicinity at that time and nor was the nestling seen on a subsequent visit. Furthermore, Layton (1996) found that the nest had failed by that date. An alternative explanation seems more plausible: that a Wedge-tailed Eagle was investigating the nest after the sea-eagles had failed and deserted. Conflict with wedge-tails can lead to sea-eagles abandoning a nest (Terry 1996; Wiersma 1996).

Layton (1996) assumed that the many rabbit skulls and bones under the roost tree near the nest were the sea-eagles' prey remains, but this assumption is possibly unwarranted. Inland-nesting sea-eagles take mostly fish, turtles and waterbirds, but few rabbits (Olsen *et al.* in press). It is more likely that the rabbit remains were deposited by the usual occupants of the nest, i.e. Wedge-tailed Eagles.

Although no other sea-eagle nest has since been found within the ACT, it is apparent that the lower Molonglo River is important foraging habitat for 'floater' sea-eagles, both adult and immature (J. Olsen pers. comm.), and that the situation on the lower Molonglo and Murrumbidgee confluence could bear monitoring for future nesting attempts.

Thanks to Jerry Olsen for helpful discussion and comments on a draft.

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THE CANBERRA BIRD BLITZ 2005

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Abstract *This paper describes the conduct of Canberra's first "bird blitz" held on 29-30 October 2005, and outlines some preliminary findings.*

Introduction

On Saturday 29 and Sunday 30 October 2005, as a highlight of bird week, COG conducted its first-ever "bird blitz". The group has conducted many specific surveys over the years, such as its 1986-89 Atlas, its targeted quarterly surveys of woodland areas, waterbird surveys of Lakes Bathurst and George, and an ongoing garden bird survey; many of its members have adopted one or more two-hectare sites which they survey regularly; while others provide data on bird abundance and breeding from more ad hoc surveys or field trips. But COG had never attempted a snapshot of the birds of the ACT over a single weekend before. Our members attempted this on 29-30 October 2005.

Our aim was to record all species of bird present in the ACT over that weekend in all habitats, to obtain a broad indication of their abundance, and whether they were breeding. To achieve this, we set out to conduct a minimum of one 20-minute 2-hectare survey within each of the 165 grid cells covering the ACT (a 2.5 minute grid on lines of latitude and longitude, so each cell measures approximately 3.5 km by 4.5 km). Unlike previous highly rigorous "blitzes", such as the ones conducted by the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service at Kosciuszko (Davey 2002; Fyfe 2003) with the assistance of COG members, the intent of our blitz was an exercise in participation (an attempt to encourage more of our members to get out and survey and submit datasheets) as much as a bird survey.

As our chosen weekend fell in bird week, we also welcomed participation by members of the public. Walks led by experienced COG members were advertised at the Australian National Botanic Gardens and at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, the intention being to incorporate records from those walks in the totals for the weekend.

Conduct of the blitz

Participants registered for their preferred grid cells, on a first-in, best-dressed basis. In the allocation process, some site preference was given to members who surveyed given sites on a regular basis. More tardy volunteers were cajoled by the organiser into surveying the remaining sites. Less experienced birders were allocated to accompany those experienced birders who had indicated a willingness to take them along.

As a modest inducement to participants, all were offered a native plant, and various other prizes were promised.

Participants were allowed to choose their preferred methodology from the three Birds Australia Atlas options: a 2-minute 2-ha survey; within 500 m of a central point, for >20 mins; or within 5 km of a central point, for >20 mins **with** the proviso that the survey in all cases remained within a given COG grid cell).

Results and discussion

Operational problems

Not unsurprisingly, in a spring which featured above-average precipitation, our chosen weekend was less than ideal. Saturday was dispiritingly grey and Sunday was wet. A few areas in Namadgi National Park were declared off-limits by Park management, on safety grounds. Notwithstanding the weather, only a few adopters of grid cells were deterred from conducting their surveys.

Level of participation

At least 75 COG members took part in the blitz, plus a number of unnamed "extras" (a list of known participants is at Table **1).** Some 300 of our members live within an hour's drive of Canberra, so it was a little disappointing to attract only one quarter of our membership to participate in this heavily promoted event. Some keen birders were simply unavailable on the appointed weekend; and it may be that some non-participants were not sufficiently confident of their birding skills to join in.

for part or all of the two days and, if subsequent reports to the COG chat line are any indication, they loved every minute of it.

Despite a modest level of uncertainty about the number participating, what is clear is that we achieved our aim of encouraging more of our members to survey, and to submit datasheets. At least 17 new COG observer codes were issued after the event, and in addition, some of the newcomers who participated left the datasheet completion to the COG member who accompanied them and thus have not acquired a code yet.

Coverage

We fell far short of our aim of blanket coverage of the ACT, with surveys conducted in 109 of the 165 possible grid cells (66%). The grid cells surveyed, with the number of datasheets received for each, are shown in Map **1.** Total coverage was never going to be possible, because of the Namadgi National Park exclusions. This was compounded by the fact that some grid cell adopters elected not to venture out in the adverse weather conditions. Or simply "forgot". However, with one minor exception, most habitat types were covered.

The possible total of 165 grid cells in the ACT includes cells which are only partly in the ACT. It has been argued that we could legitimately base our grid cell total on those cells totally within the ACT. Many surveys, however, were conducted in the ACT portion of cells only partly in the ACT, and it would have been unfortunate to discount them on a technicality.

Habitats surveyed

The blitz attempted to survey the full range of habitats across the ACT and, despite the 66% grid coverage, did reasonably well in this respect. While specific habitat types have not yet been analysed, a broad land use division of datasheets has been attempted. Urban areas were covered in 21 surveys; rural or semi-rural in 47; Namadgi National Park 84; Canberra Nature Park or nature reserves, 77; the Murrumbidgee River Corridor, 14; the Australian National Botanic Gardens, 8; and Fyshwick sewage ponds, 3. The richest bird areas, notwithstanding the experience of the observers or the time spent surveying, were undoubtedly the nature parks and reserves. It is possible, and even likely, that this effect is magnified by the familiarity of many participants with the areas they chose to survey.

Datasheets received

Participants have returned to date some 254 datasheets for the blitz weekend. It is unclear if this is the final total as, despite the pleas of the organiser for the sheets to be returned by the end of the week following the blitz, they were still arriving well into December.

While the total of 254 datasheets is a relatively modest response from 300 potentially eligible members for two days, it must be seen in the context of an overall reluctance of members to submit datasheets. The total number of datasheets received for the 2003-04 year, for example, was only 1827 and this total included many for grid cells within COG's area of concern but outside the ACT.

Type of survey

Participants were given the option of choosing their survey type to best fit the grid cell they were surveying, and to allow for time or other constraints. In the event, a majority adopted the Birds Australia Atlas recommended option, namely a 2-ha 20-minute survey. Of the datasheets received, 136 (54%) were for 2-ha surveys; 80 (31%) were for surveys within 500 m of a central point; 21 (8%) were for surveys within 5 km of a central point (though in effect they had to be within a smaller area, to remain within a COG grid cell); and 17 (7%) were for incidental records.

Choice of day

124 datasheets were returned for surveys conducted on Saturday 29 October, and 130 for Sunday 30 October. With the weather forecasts predicting well in advance that rain was likely on the Sunday, it is a little surprising that more surveys were not undertaken on the Saturday. In the event, though this has not been analysed statistically, the results seem remarkably similar for surveys conducted at the same or similar sites on the two days, despite the difference in weather.

Species recorded

As Table 2 shows, a total of 157 species of bird was recorded in the ACT over the two blitz days. This compares with a yearly total for 2003-04 of 222 from COG's broader area of concern. The average number of species recorded during 2-ha surveys was 13; for 500-m surveys, 22; and for 5-km surveys, 35. Self-evidently, the more time

participants spent, and the wider they ranged. the more species they tended to see - at least. in areas known to be rich in birds. These results need to be considered in the context of the wide range of observer experience amongst participants, and the differing habitats surveyed. A future paper may attempt to tease out habitat differences as a factor in the blitz findings.

Highlights included observations of several species badly affected by drought and fire: Superb Lyrebird, Pilotbird, Wonga Pigeon, Red-browed Treecreeper and Spotted Quail-thrush. The "twitch" of the blitz almost certainly goes to Alastair Smith and Michael Wright, who recorded a Turquoise Parrot.

The most widely recorded species, in terms of the number of grid cells in which they were recorded, were:

Crimson Rosella	85 grids
Yellow-faced Honeyeater	82 grids
Pied Currawong	78 grids
Sulphur-crested Cockatoo	70 grids
Australian Magpie	69 grids
Australian Raven	68 grids
White-throated Treecreeper	67 grids
Striated Pardalote	64 grids
Red Wattlebird	63 grids
Superb Fairy-wren	63 grids
Laughing Kookaburra	58 grids
Galah	54 grids

During the blitz 67 species (43% of the 157 species recorded) were recorded as breeding, when the broadest possible indicators of breeding were used (see Table 2). This compares with 102 breeding records in the 222 species recorded in 2003-04 across all of COG's area of concern (46%) (COG 2005).

A further paper on the blitz will consider abundance records, as well as case histories of interesting species such as the cuckoos, which were well represented.

Species not recorded

Species not recorded include quail, egrets, spoonbills, bitterns, Musk Duck, Freckled Duck, White-bellied Sea-Eagle, owlet-nightjar, Olive Whistler, Cicadabird, Zebra Finch and Bassian Thrush. In some cases, known habitats for the species were not surveyed because the nominated surveyor was away or deterred by the adverse weather conditions; in others, the weather may have been a factor, as it undoubtedly was in the paucity of raptor records.

Vulnerable species

No endangered species were recorded, but five species regarded as vulnerable were: Hooded Robin, Superb Parrot, Brown Treecreeper, Varied Sittella and White-winged Triller.

Conclusions and lessons for the future

Perhaps the main lesson to be drawn from our first blitz is that, when prompted, our members will get out and survey. And while many will not willingly always do it systematically, they will for special occasions. Most blitzers had a thoroughly enjoyable time, as the following comments to the electronic chat line attest: "I would like to thank you for introducing me to another part of the ACT"; "Thank you

so much for prompting me to participate — I had a lovely time in an area I hadn't been to before." Others relished the opportunity to spend longer — much longer (up to seven hours) - on a survey in their special spot.

I well recall the initial instructions for Atlas surveying, to the effect that one was simply required to amble around one's 2-ha and record all the birds. Some of our enterprising members have evolved much more elaborate procedures. Who could forget the "ABCDHL" technique, promoted by Geoffrey Dabb; to survey one's grid cell by following four legs in the shape of a dog's hind leg, conjoined in the shape of the ABC logo!

As for the results, there was, inevitably, an element of "luck of the day" and the final species total is not of huge significance. In the grand scheme of things, however, the cumulative input of 254 additional datasheets to the COG database can only be a plus. We managed to survey many rarely surveyed spots and, if we continue to do so, we will be able to build up a more complete picture of the ACT avifauna.

Let the final word rest with blitzer Anthony Overs: "Blitzing was good fun and I'm looking forward to next year's already!" Yes, there will be another blitz, on 28-29 October 2006. Let's try and make it even more successful. Instructions will be included in our monthly newsletter *Gang-gang* and posted regularly on our website www.canberrabirds.org.au.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, thanks must go to all COG members who participated in the blitz, and particularly to those who put in two full days in sometimes challenging areas in less than ideal weather conditions.

Particular thanks go to Henry Nix, Tom Green and Louise Muir, who led the walks for the public in the Australian National Botanic Gardens on both days; and to Peter Fullagar, Chris Davey and Jonette McDonnell who stood ready to do likewise at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve but were rained off.

The assistance of staff at Namadgi National Park in providing advice, and access to areas behind locked gates, is greatly appreciated, as is the publicity given to the event by staff at Tidbinbilla and the ANBG.

Sincere thanks also go to the following, who offered prizes: Henry Nix; Redbrow Garden B&B; the Wine Shed, Belconnen; Vintage Cellars, Manuka; Andrew Isles Natural History Books; the Lindenmayer family; Rod's Gardening; Betty and Don Wood; Wild Cattle Productions; Stocks Native Nursery and I.D.P. Nursery.

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Table 1 Blitz participants

Barbara Allan
Ian Anderson
Shaun Bagley
Joe Barr

Lia Battison
Darryl Beaumont
Rosemary Bell
Wendi Blaauw

Rosemary Blemings
Suzi Bond
Jenny Bounds
Muriel Brookfield

Prue Buckley
Mark Clayton Bill
Compston Elizabeth
Compston

David Cook
Kathy Cook
John Cummings
Geoffrey Dabb
Chris Davey

Matthew Frawley
Peter Fullagar
Malcolm Fyfe
Phyl Goddard
John Goldie
Jeannie Gray
Tom Green

Horst Hahne
Kay Hahne

Anne Hall
Beverley Hammond
Bill Handke
Jenny Handke
Stuart Harris
Jack Holland

David Landon
Sue Lashko

Tony Lawson
Michael Lenz
Joan Lipscombe
Trevor Lipscombe

Bruce Lindenmayer
David Lindenmayer
Nina Lindenmayer
Ryan Lindenmayer
Rod Mackay

David McDonald
Noela McDonald
Jonette McDonnell
Julie McGuiness
Martyn Moffat
Louise Muir

Gail Neumann
Henry Nix

Anthony Overs
Ruth Parker

Harvey Perkins
Stuart Rae

Greg Ramsay
David Rees

Susan Robertson
David Rosalky
Brian Scales

Nancy Smale
Alastair Smith
Milton Smith

Kathy Stapleton
Mieke van den Bergh

Philip Veerman
Kathy Walter
Tony Willis

Michael Wright

Plus a few unnamed accompanying persons.

Table 2 Species recorded during the blitz

Common name	Scientific name	Breeding code
Emu	*Dromaius novaehollandiae*	
Domestic chicken*	*Gallus gallus*	
Indian Peafowl*	*Pavo cristatus*	
Blue billed Duck	*Oxyura australis*	
Musk Duck	*Biziura lobata*	
Black Swan	*Cygnus atratus*	dy
Australian Wood Duck	*Chenonetta jubata*	ih; dy
Pacific Black Duck	*Anas superciliosa*	ne;dy;
Australasian Shoveler	*Anas rhynchotis*	
Grey Teal	*Anas gracilis*	dy
Chestnut Teal	*Anas castanea*	
Pink eared Duck	*Malacorhynchus membranaceus*	
Hardhead	*Aythya australis*	
Domestic duck*		
Australasian Grebe	*Tachybaptus novaehollandiae*	nb
Hoary headed Grebe	*Poliocephalus poliocephalus*	
Great Crested Grebe	*Podiceps cristatus*	
Darter	*Anhinga melanogaster*	
Little Pied Cormorant	*Phalacrocorax melanoleucos*	
Little Black Cormorant	*Phalacrocorax sulcirostris*	
Great Cormorant	*Phalacrocorax carbo*	
Australian Pelican	*Pelecanus conspicillatus*	
White faced Heron	*Egretta novaehollandiae*	nb; on; dy
Nankeen Night Heron	*Nycticorax caledonicus*	
Australian White Ibis	*Threskiornis molucca*	
Black-shouldered Kite	*Elanus axillaris*	
Whistling Kite	*Haliastur sphenurus*	
Swamp Harrier	*Circus approximans*	
Brown Goshawk	*Accipiter fasciatus*	on
Collared Sparrowhawk	*Accipiter cirrhocephalus*	
Wedge tailed Eagle	*Aquila audax*	
Little Eagle	*Hieraaetus morphnoides*	
Brown Falcon	*Falco berigora*	
Australian Hobby	*Falco longipennis*	
Peregrine Falcon	*Falco peregrinus*	
Nankeen Kestrel	*Falco cenchroides*	on
Purple Swamphen	*Porphyrio porphyrio*	dy
Dusky Moorhen	*Gallinula tenebrosa*	dy
Eurasian Coot	*Fulica atra*	dy
Painted Button-quail	*Turnix varia*	
Latham's Snipe	*Gallinago hardwickii*	
Sharp-tailed Sandpiper	*Calidris acuminata*	
Black-fronted Dotterel	*Elseyornis melanops*	
Masked Lapwing	*Vanellus miles*	on

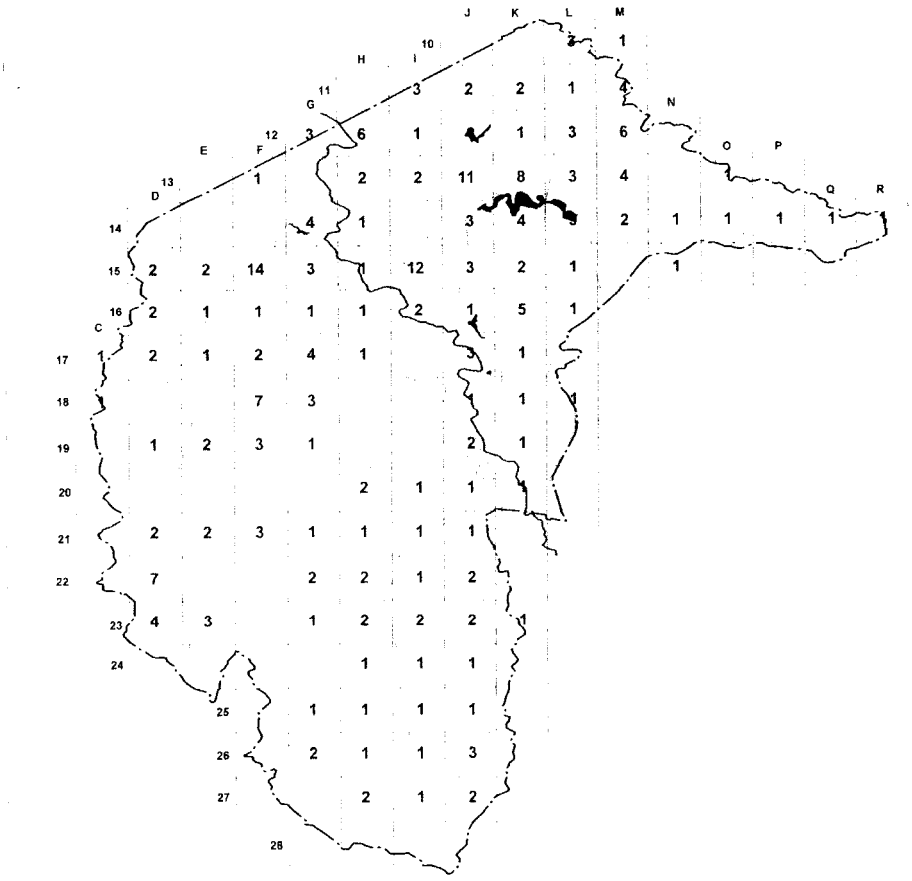
Silver Gull	*Larus novaehollandiae*	on; dy
Rock Dove	*Columba livia*	
Common Bronzewing	*Phaps chalcoptera*	
. Crested Pigeon	*Ocyphaps lophotes*	di; ny; dy
Peaceful Dove	*Geopelia striata*	
Wonga Pigeon	*Leucosarcia melanoleuca*	
Glossy Black Cockatoo	*Calyptorhynchus lathami*	
Yellow tailed Black Cockatoo	*Calyptorhynchus funereus*	
Gang gang Cockatoo	*Callocephalon fimbriatum*	
Galah	*Cacatua roseicapilla*	ih; di; on; dy
Little Corella	*Cacatua sanguinea*	on
Sulphur-crested Cockatoo	*Cacatua galerita*	ih; on
Rainbow Lorikeet	*Trichoglossus haematodus*	
Australian King Parrot	*Alisterus scapularis*	
Superb Parrot	*Polytelis swainsonii*	_
Crimson Rosella	*Platycercus elegans*	ih; on
Eastern Rosella	*Platycercus eximius*	ih; co; on
Australian Ringneck*	*Barndardius zonarius*	
Red rumped Parrot	*Psephotus haematonotus*	ih
Turquoise Parrot	*Neophema pulchella*	
Pallid Cuckoo	*Cuculus pallidus*	
Brush Cuckoo	*Cacomantis variolosus*	
Fan tailed Cuckoo	*Cacomantis flabelliformis*	
Horsfield's Bronze Cuckoo	*Chrysococcyx basalis*	
Shining Bronze Cuckoo	*Chrysococcyx lucidus*	*co*
Southern Boobook	*Ninox novaeseelandiae*	
Tawny Frogmouth	*Podargus strigoides*	on; ne; dy
Laughing Kookaburra	*Dacelo novaeguineae*	dy
Sacred Kingfisher	*Todiramphus sanctus*	ih
Rainbow Bee-eater	*Merops omatus*	
Dollarbird	*Eurystomus orientalis*	
Superb Lyrebird	*Menura novaehollandiae*	
White-throated Treecreeper	*Cormobates leucophaeus*	
Red browed Treecreeper	*Climacteris erythrops*	
Brown Treecreeper	*Climacteris picumnus*	
Superb Fairy-wren	*Malurus cyaneus*	cf; ny; dy
Spotted Pardalote	*Pardalotus punctatus*	ih; nb
Striated Pardalote	*Pardalotus striatus*	ih; di; dy
Pilotbird	*Pycnoptilus floccosus*	
White-browed Scrubwren	*Sericornis frontalis*	*cf;* dy
Speckled Warbler	*Chthonicola sagittata*	cf; dy
Weebill	*Smicrornis brevirostris*	ne; dy
Western Gerygone	*Gerygone fusca*	
White-throated Gerygone	*Gerygone olivacea*	on
Brown Thornbil1	*Acanthiza pusilla*	
Buff-rumped Thornbil1	*Acanthiza reguloides*	cf; ny; dy
Yellow-rumped Thornbil1	*Acanthiza chrysorrhoa*	ny; dy

Yellow Thornbil1	*Acanthiza nana*	
Striated Thornbill	*Acanthiza lineata*	co; dy
Southern Whiteface	*Aphelocephala leucopsis*	
Red Wattlebird	*Anthochaera carunculata*	ny; dy
Noisy Friarbird	*Philemon corniculatus*	on
Noisy Miner	*Manorina melanocephala*	on; dy
Yellow-faced Honeyeater	*Lichenostomus chrysops*	
White-eared Honeyeater	*Lichenostomus leucotis*	on; cf; dy
Fuscous Honeyeater	*Lichenostomus fuscus*	ny
White-plumed Honeyeater	*Lichenostomus penicillatus*	nb; ny; dy
Brown headed Honeyeater	*Melithreptus brevirostris*	
White naped Honeyeater	*Melithreptus lunatus*	
New Holland Honeyeater	*Phylidonyris novaehollandiae*	
Eastern Spinebil1	*Acanthorhynchus tenuirostris*	nb
Jacky Winter	*Microeca fascinans*	
Scarlet Robin	*Petroica multicolor*	dy
Red capped Robin	*Petroica goodenovii*	
Flame Robin	*Petroica phoenicea*	
Rose Robin	*Petroica roses*	
Hooded Robin	*Melanodryas cucullata*	dy
Eastern Yellow Robin	*Eopsaltria australis*	dy
Spotted Quail-thrush	*Cinclosoma punctatum*	
Varied Sittella	*Daphoenositta chrysoptera*	nb
Crested Shrike tit	*Falcunculus frontatus*	
Golden Whistler	*Pachycephala pectoralis*	
Rufous Whistler	*Pachycephala rufiventris*	di; on
Grey Shrike thrush	*Colluricincla harmonica*	
Leaden Flycatcher	*Myiagra rubecula*	nb; on; dy
Satin Flycatcher	*Myiagra cyanoleuca*	
Restless Flycatcher	*Myiagra inquieta*	
Magpie-lark	*Grallina cyanoleuca*	co; nb; on; ny; dy
Rufous Fantail	*Rhipidura rufifrons*	
Grey Fantail	*Rhipidura fuliginosa*	nb; dy
Willie Wagtail	*Rhipidura leucophrys*	ne
Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike	*Coracina novaehollandiae*	
White-winged Triller	*Lalage sueurii*	nb
Olive-backed Oriole	*Oriolus sagittatus*	
Dusky Woodswallow	*Artamus cyanopterus*	nb; on; cf; ny
Grey Butcherbird	*Cracticus torquatus*	on
Australian Magpie	*Gymnorhina tibicen*	on; cf; ny; dy
Pied Currawong	*Strepera graculina*	on; ny; dy
Grey Currawong	*Strepera versicolor*	
Australian Raven	*Corvus coronoides*	on; cf; dy
Little Raven	*Corvus mellori*	ny
White-winged Chough	*Corcorax melanorhamphos*	on; ny
Satin Bowerbird	*Ptilonorhynchus violaceus*	
Skylark	*Alauda arvensis*	

Richard's Pipit	*Anthus novaeseelandiae*	
House Sparrow	*Passer domesticus*	ih
Double-barred Finch	*Taeniopygia bichenovii*	
Red-browed Finch	*Neochmia temporalis*	di; nb
Diamond Firetail	*Stagonopleura guttata*	
European Greenfinch	*Carduelis chloris*	
European Goldfinch	*Carduelis carduelis*	
Mistletoebird	*Dicaeum hirundinaceum*	ny
Welcome Swallow	*Hirundo neoxena*	nb; on
Tree Martin	*Hirundo nigricans*	ih; cf
Fairy Martin	*Hirundo ariel*	
Clamorous Reed-Warbler	*Acrocephalus stentoreus*	on; cf
Little Grassbird	*Megalurus gramineus*	
Rufous Songlark	*Cincloramphus mathewsi*	
Brown Songlark	*Cincloramphus cruralis*	di
Golden-headed Cisticola	*Cisticola exilis*	
Silvereye	*Zosterops lateralis*	
Bassian Thrush	*Zoothera lunulata*	
Common Blackbird	*Turdus merula*	cf
Common Starling	*Sturnus vulgaris*	nb; on; ne; cf; ny; dy
Common Myna	*Acridotheres tristis*	ih; on; ny

**Presumed escapees*

Breeding codes: di—display; co=copulation: ih=inspecting hollow; nb=nest building; on=on nest; cf=carrying food; ny=nest with young: dy—dependent young (includes precocial young).



Map 1. Datasheets per grid cell

ODD OBS

Musk Duck breeding on Yerrabi Pond

For almost three years I have been observing a resident pair of Musk Ducks *Biziura lobata* on Yerrabi Pond, Amaroo, on my regular early morning dog-walks. Yerrabi is a large man-made freshwater lake in the new township of Gungahlin.

In spring 2004, **I** suspected that the Musk Ducks were breeding, a suspicion that was confirmed when I briefly observed two young on 20 October. This year, I was able to record two Musk Duck breeding events. On 5 September 2005, the female Musk Duck was seen with two small, recently hatched ducklings. The adult male was also present but was continually chased off by the female. The two ducklings grew rapidly, and within a couple of weeks were the same size as. and virtually indistinguishable from, the adult female. By this time the male was again displaying around the female. On 12 November 2005, the female was seen again with two recently hatched ducklings, and shortly thereafter all five birds (the female and presumably the young from the two broods) were seen together. The newly-hatched young were only ever seen in the early mornings and not in the afternoons. **I** have only seen one male on the Pond.

Joseph M Forshaw
PO Box 343, Gungahlin, ACT 2912

Raven mad

In mid-August 2005 on a sunny Sunday, my husband David and **I** observed some interesting raven behaviour. A large Australian Raven *Corvus coronoides* walked around our garden pond closely following our goldfish as they enjoyed the warm patches of water in the sun. The raven firstly managed to peck at a fin of one of the fish. Then it succeeded in catching a whole fish about 6 cm long. The bird bashed it about a bit then ate part of the body. It flew to the birdbath a metre away and cleaned the remaining pieces in the water then flew another two metres away and hid a piece of fish under a small shrub and then covered it up with mulch. Some two hours later we saw it fly back to the area and go straight to the hidden morsel and devour it. I cleaned out the birdbath of goldfish remnants and refilled it with clean water. Over the next few days there was evidence of one more fishing expedition. Then while gardening on the following Wednesday **I** saw the raven catch another fish, eat the main body leaving the entrails, fins and head. Ten minutes later it returned to fish again at which point **I** shooed it away. Since then there has been one more fish taken and we have now put some wire across the pond to try to stop this behaviour. Unfortunately this will stop the rosellas going backwards into the shallow parts of the pond and having a splash, but they will just have to use the birdbath!

Lainie Shorthouse

Unusual nest site of Common Blackbirds

During the spring of 2004, we built a scarecrow in the vegetable garden. However, it proved more of a conversation piece than a deterrent to the House Sparrows *Passer domesticus* that shredded our seedlings.

On 28 September, we looked out the kitchen window and saw a male Common Blackbird *Turdus merula* pulling threads from the frayed cuffs of the scarecrow's trousers. This particular male was easily distinguishable from others because he was a partial albino. His crown, neck and mantle were streaked with white, so we named him Pinto.

As we watched, Pinto took flight with his cotton threads and landed on a neighbour's roof. He surveyed the scene for a minute then flew to a tree where he paused for 30 seconds before dropping to the ground and disappearing beneath a trellis of climbing beans, a metre from the scarecrow. Some ten seconds later, he sprang from beneath the beans and disappeared into the scarecrow's coat pocket.

This seemed a rather precarious nest site as it was only a metre above the ground and, except for scant protection provided by the bean trellis, was fairly exposed to the weather. Perhaps Pinto and his mate were young and inexperienced.

On 7 October, curiosity got the better of us. We gingerly peeked into the pocket and saw a female blackbird sitting on the nest. Three days later, I saw a neighbour's cat standing on her hind legs with a paw either side of the pocket. I sneaked up and, gently but firmly, tweaked the tip of her tail. After her rapid departure, I checked and saw the female blackbird crouched low in the nest, still as stone.

On 12 October, a gusty wind blew up and tipped the scarecrow into the onion patch. We hauled it upright and pushed its garden-stake legs into the soil. Suddenly, we were startled witless as the female blackbird burst from the pocket and flew away.

The nest contained three eggs and didn't appear damaged. Nonetheless, we believe the blackbirds never returned to it. In fact, we didn't see Pinto again until three weeks later when I noticed him perched on a fence with earth worms dangling from his bill. A few moments later, he darted into a thick Photinia shrub *Photinia sp* in a neighbouring yard.

Over the ensuing couple of weeks, we caught a few glimpses of Pinto, but then he disappeared. Perhaps he moved to a new territory or, perhaps, his unusual plumage made him the target of Collared Sparrowhawks *Accipter cirrhocephalus* that hunt around the area.

John K. Layton

14 Beach Place, Holt, ACT 2615

A plethora of white-winged ravens

On Wednesday 21 December 2005 as I was returning from an early morning walk on Black Mountain, I happened

upon a pair of Australian Ravens *Corvus coronoides* with three virtually independent young. The three to four outer primaries on the right wing of one of the young were completely white. In all other respects the plumage was normal. The adults and two remaining young were entirely black. This observation was to the north of Rani Road, off Caswell Drive. There was no sign of the bird during a return visit on *7* January 2006.

Out of interest I posted this observation on the COG chat line at canberrabirds@canberrabirds.org.au. The posting prompted a reply from Philip Veerman, who noted that he was aware of one Australian Raven that started nesting (with a partner) in a tree in his yard during 2005. It had. he thought, three inner primaries on the right wing that were completely white. The pair subsequently moved to another tree about 100 m away and built a new nest. Philip found the adult with the white feathers freshly dead under a power pole just over the fence from the nest tree a few weeks later. He thought the pair had eggs or young chicks. During November 2005 Philip paid a visit to the Telstra Tower on Black Mountain and there found another adult Australian Raven with the same strange `defect': two or three inner primaries on the right wing completely white.

Michael Braby reported seeing a white-winged raven on 3 August and again on 19 August 2005 at the Sullivans Creek side of the South Oval, ANU. Geoffrey Dabb confirmed the sighting at the same location on Friday 23 December and managed to photograph the bird (see below). The bird that Geoffrey saw had white outer primaries on the right wing and white inner primaries on the left wing and from the brownish iris, he took it to be a young bird.

These sightings suggest four or possibly five white-winged ravens. It is likely that the bird at the ANU in August was a different bird to the one seen in December, because an August sighting may have been too early for a bird with a brownish iris.

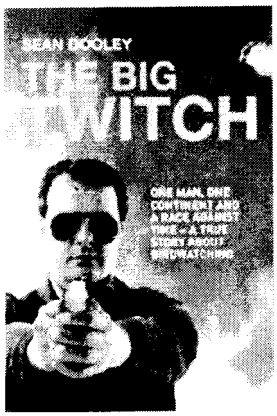
Chris Davey

24 Bardsley Place, Holt, ACT 2615

Photo: Geoffrey Dabb

BOOK REVIEW

***The Big Twitch,* by Sean Dooley**



One Man, One Continent, A Race Against Time - A True Story About Birdwatching

336 pages Publisher: Allen & Unwin
September 2005 ISBN: 1741145287

Reviewed by Alastair Smith

While participating in the COG 'Blitz' weekend in October 2005, Michael Wright and I stumbled upon a female Turquoise Parrot in Namadgi National Park. As the 'Turk' was deemed the most twitchable bird of the weekend, we won a copy of Sean Dooley's book *The Big Twitch*, though not without a catch — I was obliged to write a review of it for *Canberra Bird Notes.*

Using money left to him by his recently deceased parents, thirty-something Sean Dooley, suffering from a liberal dose of Asperger's Syndrome, set out 'to piss an inheritance up against the wall' on what he coined 'The Big Twitch', an effort to see more than 700 species of Australian birds in the 2002 calendar year - a goal many of the country's leading twitchers including Mike Carter had told him was unobtainable. *The Big Twitch* is the story of that year. Possibly to keep himself honest but more likely to ensure that he couldn't back out without humiliation, he informed the wider Australian birding community in an email to the birding discussion group `Birding-aus' before he set out to find his first bird on the stroke of midnight on 1 January 2002 (which for the record was a Sooty Owl).

Those of us who were subscribed to Birding-aus in 2002 were able to follow the twitch from inception to finish in weekly instalments and I remember eagerly anticipating the post. Indeed for those looking for a read that is more bird-centric and less travelogue, I recommend you search the archives and read these posts.

While I have read one critique where the reviewer just did not get the birdwatching thing, the general birding audience will find the book an immensely readable account of the highs and lows of Sean's crusade to achieve what he calls the 'greatest pathetic achievement in Australian history'. You'll have to read it yourself to see if Sean was successful and whether or not he ticked the Grey Falcon and found a girlfriend (two minor sub-plots to the story).

The Big Twitch joins a number of books in the genre, the majority of which are set in the US; most recently Mark Osmascik's bestseller *The Big Year* (2004), but also *Kingbird Highway* by Kenn Kaufman (1997), *Call Collect ask for Birdman* by James Vardaman (1980) and two by America's number one twitcher Sanford Komito, *Birding 's Indiana Jones: A Chaser's Diary (1990)* and *I Came, I Saw, I Counted (2005).* I know of only one British book. *Arrivals and Rivals* by Adrian Riley (2004).

Having read these accounts. except Komito's books, I was expecting a similar formula, except with Australian locations and Australian birds thrown in. coupled with the names of a few birders whose names are familiar to me. To a limited extent the book does follow a formula, but only inasmuch as all these books are about a quest to observe more birds in a geographical area than anyone else in a 12-month period.

Where Sean has it over all the other writers is that not only is he a twitcher but he's also a lawyer, a comedy writer and a stand-up comic - not surprisingly his one man show was about birdwatching. While I won't hold the first against him, it is his witty, satirical and self-depreciating view of the world and himself that makes the account so readable. I am sure to both birders and 'dudes' alike.

Indeed you know you're in for an amusing read when you notice that the book has two forewords - the first 'for birders' starts, 'White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike, Red-necked Phalarope, Forty-spotted Pardalote. There now that the non-birdwatchers have lost interest ...', whereas the other foreword 'for non-birders' starts, 'Feelings, Relationships. Social Interactions. Now that the birdwatchers have lost interest...'. I read these forewords out aloud to my non-birding wife and even she showed interest in reading a bird book.

For 52 weeks in 2002 Sean spent in excess of $40,000 travelling throughout Australia and its overseas territories (excluding Antarctica) adding birds to his list in an attempt to shatter the previous record of 633. In his attempt Dooley would travel twice around Australia (80,000 km by car and 60,000 km by plane) as well as 2,000 km by boat. Englishman Mike Entwhistle had set the previous record in 1989 - and incredibly his score was achieved only on mainland Australia and not the external territories. Unfortunately Mike went on to show that twitching can also be a dangerous pursuit. While birding in Peru, he was murdered by Shining Path guerrillas who thought he was a CIA operative.

I remember reading on Birding-aus, and later in the book, his revelation in late September that he was near to giving it all away, stating, 'I was over it'. I have not experienced what Sean experienced - his lonely long distance chase, highlighted by a constant fear of dipping and not achieving his publicly stated goal. Sean must have been plagued with the fear of failure as well as exhaustion. I was intrigued why he would consider throwing it all away when many birders would give their eye-teeth to bird solidly for 12 months. I have an inkling that the twitching game requires enormous mental and physical effort and I now applaud his stamina.

While twitching is often a pursuit looked down upon by the general birdwatching fraternity, I wonder how many reading this review have at some stage twitched a bird. I'll admit to Twitch Anon. 'My name is Alastair Smith and I maintain an ACT list and I travel within the ACT to twitch new birds.' There, it's in the public domain. Prior to last year, however, I had never travelled far to twitch a bird — indeed till then the furthest I had travelled was from Civic to Dunlop on the Vespa after a Zebra Finch - I had not experienced the rollercoaster of emotions that come with dipping while attempting to reach a seemingly impossible goal. I wanted to explore this further and was offered an opportunity late last year when the navy asked me to spend three weeks in Darwin.

Unlike previous stints with the navy sailing to exotic locales like Ashmore Reef, this time I was to be a landlubber. This would provide a perfect opportunity to clean up on those pesky NT endemics I needed for my life list while experiencing first hand the trials and tribulations of twitching. In previous visits I had just birded whereas this time the birding was serious - thus for a three-week period I undertook a serious experiment for this review — I lived the life of a twitcher.

Thus with judicious planning, a copy of *Birds of Darwin, Kakadu and the Top End* and armed with local knowledge, November saw me in and around Darwin and the national parks of Kakadu and Litchfield, travelling on the roads that Sean had travelled three years previously, looking for the same birds in those same trusted places. I spent one weekend visiting Kakadu with the aim of seeing 17 species. On the first day things went well and I added Letter-winged Kite near Fogg Dam, Mangrove Golden Whistler and Arafura Fantail at Adelaide River and both Black-tailed Treecreeper and Masked Finch at Bird Billabong.

With an authoritative guidebook to follow, I was beginning to think that the twitching game was easy, until I dipped on the Buff-sided Robin both at the bamboo walk at the Mary River Lodge and the recently burnt vegetation at Mamukala Wetlands —supposedly a certainty in both locations. Undeterred my campaign continued across Kakadu to Bardedjilidji and the Chestnut-quilled Rock-Pigeon (tick), Sandstone Shrike-thrush (tick) and White-lined Honeyeater (dip). Onto my last site at Nourlangie in the oppressive heat and humidity of the build-up, where I found the White-lined Honeyeater but dipped on the Banded Fruit-Dove.

The following weekend it was a 500 km detour back to Bird Billabong for the robin (tick) but in the heat I decided against a further attempt for the fruit-dove. It could wait for my next Darwin trip - whenever that may be. Thinking about my decision I glimpsed the world of Sean Dooley. Sean did not have the luxury of leaving a species unticked and would have stayed to find that pigeon. From that moment I understood and respected his inner strength and stamina. With approximately 830 birds on the Australian list, of which he assessed only 710 to be achievable, Sean could ill afford any dips. Each and every site around this continent needed to reveal

its key species before Sean could move on or risk potential failure.

And if you think that Dools got the twitching bug out of his system, he went birding again on 1 January 2003. Moreover, if you think in the intervening years he may have slowed down, he has just posted a piece on Birding-aus about 'A Big Day' which was his attempt to see more birds in Victoria in a calendar day than... well who knows ... he's not sure if it has been done before.

While there are those birders who don't keep lists and look scornfully at the 'sport' of twitching, I am sure all COG members will find something in this book that they enjoy even if it is the 'feelings, relationships and social interactions'.

As for me, after reading the book and trying it for myself I am attempting my own big year in 2006 within the ACT... stay tuned.

COLUMNISTS' CORNER

Bird behaviour: beyond unusualness

A lot of 'news' about bird activity is about repetitive or predictable activity: arrival of migrants, the first magpie swoops, yet another round of breeding activity, male birds attacking windows, the annual shepherding over urban roads of cute ducklings by officious parents.

On the other hand a fair amount of `news' claims to be about 'unusual' activity: unusually early nesting, unusual numbers of migrants, the first time a pardalote has been noticed attacking a pelican, or a kookaburra eating the dog's breakfast.

`Yesterday I saw a magpie feeding on the Griffith oval'. Now there is a statement you will probably never hear, because such a sight is commonplace. `Yesterday I saw something really unusual - a sparrowhawk caught a silvereye in my driveway'. Such a statement is news of a sort, and as such might qualify for airing on the COG chatline or at a COG meeting, or even appearing in *Canberra Bird Notes* as an `Odd Ob'.

Why should that be so? Sparrowhawks are not all that rare, and each one of them probably (usually) catches a silvereye or similar small bird every day. Part of the reason is the 'in my driveway'. That detail shows how close unexpected bird activity can be to where we live. Moreover, it makes the incident unique. It was probably the first time ever that the exact incident occurred (a sparrowhawk taking a silvereye bang in the middle of the driveway of 17 Acacia Place) and certainly the first time it occurred there in the presence of **B.** Watcher.

Does that really make the behaviour newsworthy? It sounds to me, rather, like one of those 'records' appreciated by cricket followers (eg 'the first time a left-handed batsmen scored one hundred runs in a Test Match at the Adelaide Oval on his birthday and after having a breakfast of grapefruit and muesli'). Narrow any commonplace incident to its own time, place and other circumstances and it will be unique, a 'first'.

Without going into all the things that might prompt — if not justify — use of the adjective 'unusual', may I suggest that the truly interesting reports are of behaviour that is unusual *and significant.* `Significance' is a relative kind of thing, and refers here to value in indicating something — particularly something so far unknown - that might be going on in the natural world.

Consider, as one example of unusual behaviour, an unexpected visiting bird turning up in Canberra. Suppose that the unusual bird is (a) a Regent Honeyeater (b) a White-headed Pigeon (c) a Lesser Frigatebird. On a scale of (1) (not significant) to (10) (extremely significant) I suggest that the honeyeater and pigeon would be perhaps (6) or (7) and the frigatebird perhaps (3).

Why? Well, there is, for good reason, intense interest in the little-known movements of the precarious honeyeater, while the pigeon seems to be increasing its range before our eyes by making use

of exotic fruiting trees, surely a matter of significance in the ebb and swirl of the ecological undercurrents. The first observation of Cattle Egrets in eastern Australia in the 1950s would, similarly, have been unusual and significant. at least a (7). By contrast, the Pal-addicted kookaburra rates about one and a half

As for the frigatebird, one could reasonably attribute its arrival to very strong winds rather than to any new underlying trend for the species. In his little book on the twitching cult. *Birders: Tales of a Tribe* (2001), Mark Cocker is frank about the value of rarity-spotting:

> The truth is neither twitching nor finding rarities is intrinsically important. The birds themselves are disoriented vagrants which have no value in any wider ecological context. They play no part in issues of conservation and are peripheral to environmental politics .... The value of rarities is merely the value that birders pour into them.

I am prepared to say that the arrival of a frigatebird is very unusual. I am not prepared to say it is significant. By contrast, I am sure that back in 1928 when Alexander Fleming. found the mould growing on the laboratory glassware he did not just say. 'That's unusual. They must have forgotten to use the detergent.' He would have said. `That's unusual — and *significant.* I wonder if an antibacterial enzyme could be at work here.'

Now, there is another adjective I sometimes hear used to describe bird behaviour, the word being a bit further up the scale than 'unusual'. The word is `strange', a distinctly stronger word. In the end-of-the-world movie when the alien monsters are at large in the woods or the Earth's magnetic field is out of whack, and the animals (sometimes birds) are hiding under the bed or running/flying/migrating in the wrong direction, the central characters do not say, 'That's unusual'. They say 'That's *strange!'* On second thoughts, at the moment referred to above, Dr Fleming probably said 'strange' rather than `unusual'.

To Stentoreus, a statement that a bird (or birds) is (or are) behaving *strangely* carries the suggestion that some significant but unknown cause is at work. Perhaps the observer has in mind the possibility that the birds have been feeding on genetically modified rapeseed, or that they are responding in their own way to the warming of the planet.

As to the last possibility, people who attribute any sign of extreme weather (dare I say *strange* weather?) to global warming might well think that any unusual bird behaviour is quite probably attributable to the same thing, and hence itself justifiably labelled both strange *and significant.*

While I am cautious about that possibility, I shall not dismiss it out of hand. More evidence needs to be gathered. It might just be that Mr Cocker was prematurely dismissive of the significance of those disoriented windblown vagrants. If so, someone should be stocking a little database with records of all such disorientees, and running a few worrying possibilities through a computer, like the hero-

scientist does (frowning but not panicking: scientists do not panic, especially biologists) about a third of the way into the end-of-the-world movie.

Certainly, if *several* free-flying Lesser Frigatebirds were to arrive in Canberra, separated by reasonable intervals, Stentoreus would be among the first to concede that things had got to the moderately strange stage and that someone should investigate whether there was anything of significance behind the trend.

A. stentoreus

Birding in cyberspace, Canberra-style

Our final internet birding column for 2005 could have been titled **'The Year Twitchers Became Respectable'.** How did this come about? In a word or twenty-two, Sean Dooley's book *The big twitch: one man, one continent and a race against time - a true story about birdwatching*

<http: //www.allenandunwin.com/exports /product.asp?ISBN=1741145287>.
Released on 7 October, it has become (if discussions among birders is any indication) an immediate bestseller. **I** am fascinated by the interest non-birders are showing in the book. Two have said to me, quite independently and after reading the book, something like, 'Now I understand what you are up to, racing around the place with your bins looking for new birds, and keeping lists of what you see. It doesn't seem as weird, now, as I thought previously.'

A correspondent to Birding-Aus, the national birders' email announcement typical birder's comment on the book:

> I too agree with Russell about Sean's book. I requested it for Christmas from my son who gave it to me last Saturday a week before Christmas. Of course I had to read it and finished it in 2 days - couldn't put it down, al1 the while mentally noting where to find special birds on my next trips. I was so glad for the list in the back giving the site where the birds were seen. I've never finished a book so quickly and I wil1 be lucky to get it back in a short while as so many people want to borrow it (Jan England, 24 Dec 05).

Another aspect of Dooley's book is its two-page **`Glossowary'** (his pun not mine). There you can find all sorts of birding (especially twitching) terms, with their definitions. Since one of your columnists' unusual pastimes is making contributions to the Oxford English Dictionary's reading program <http://www.oed.com/about/reading.htm 1>, I submitted the Glossowary and was advised by the OED staff that some of the words therein, that are actually used by Australian birders, are not currently in the Dictionary and will now be considered for inclusion.

Another source of information about the art of twitching comes from one of the internet's most useful resources, the free online encyclopaedia **Wikipedia** <http://www.wikipedia.org/>. A search there on the words 'birdwatcher' or `birding' will return a very interesting article. It commences by clarifying core terminology:

> Birding or birdwatching is a hobby concerned with the observation and study of birds (the study proper is termed

> ornithology). The term 'birding' is of American origin; `birdwatching" is (or more correctly, was) the commonly used word in the United Kingdom and Ireland and by non-birders in the United States. Since visual observation is routinely complemented with auditory observation. the term 'birding' is more accurate. and is growing in usage, particularly among devotees of the hobby.

So, concluding the twitching theme with which I opened this column, Wikipedia points out that, 'In the United Kingdom there exists a particular twitchers' vocabulary which is surprisingly well developed and potentially confusing for the uninitiated. Similar vocabularies have developed in all countries where twitching is popular' and provides a link to that vocabulary: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twitchers%27_vocabulary>. It is broadly consistent with Dooley's Glossowary.

Many birders have been frustrated searching for waiting for—elusive. cryptic crakes and rails. Well, as the words of the old song have it, it ain't necessarily so. This Birding-Aus post from Sydneysider Simon Blanchflower. titled '**Who needs patience**' is an example:

> Well I simply had to write this note. although this may not be of such a surprise to regular visitors to Sydney's botanical gardens How many times have we al1 waited patiently. sometimes for what seemed an eternity. on the edge of vast wetlands, to see that rail or crake - and normally in the very early hours of the morning (Pitt Town lagoon comes to mind).
>
> Earlier this evening I attended a function run by the NSW Government at Government House which is basically inside the botanical gardens. There would have been a few hundred people present in the grounds. Anyway whilst having cocktails with colleagues a Buff-banded Rail rushed between our feet and across the path....shortly after it strolled back into our conversation and started pecking at my shoes. It then proceeded to casually walk among the guests seemingly completely oblivious to the crowd!
>
> There you go so much for those cryptic moments trying to pick out rails among the reeds and weeds!

A few kilometres east of NSW Government House is the sea, the home of pelagic birds and the location of pelagic birding trips for birders with strong stomacher and/or a desperate need to increase the length of their life lists. The journal *Marine Ornithology*, 'an international journal of seabird science and conservation'

<http://www.marineornithology.org>, was recently reviewed in the internet Scout Report:

> Whether one has a love of great seabirds or just an interest in the lives of these magnificent creatures, the website of the journal *Marine Ornithology* is well worth a visit. Started in 1976 by John Cooper, the journal is operated by an editorial board, under the direction of the Pacific Seabird Group, along with other related organizations...Some of the more recent articles in the latest issue deal with such topics as parasites and diseases of the auks and aspects of the breeding biology of the Gentoo penguin. For those looking for back issues, the full-text of every past issue dating back to 1988 is also available on the site (source:
>
> http://scout.wisc.edu/Archives/SPT--FullRecord.php?Resourceld=23781).

This is yet another example of how publishers around the world are making their journals available online, in full text, knowing that there are different markets for their online and paper versions and, what's more, knowing that the online versions actually promote sales of their publications in paper form.

A particularly sad discussion occurred recently on **Birding-Aus** about the rumoured closure of the wonderful magazine **Nature Australia,** published for so many years by the Australian Museum in Sydney. The email list's founder and maintainer, Russell Woodford, was one of the correspondents deploring this proposal, pointing to the extent and quality of fine articles on birds, their habitats and conservation. The rumour, however, has become fact, as the magazine's web site confirms: the Summer 2005-2006 issue will be the last; see <http://www.natureaustralia.net/current.htm>. According to the catalogue of the National Library of Australia, the magazine was published from 1992 to 1995 as *ANH — Australia's Leading Nature Magazine* and continued as *Nature Australia* since that time. What a shame to lose such a wonderful resource.

A different NSW Government instrumentality, though, continues to provide a fine service: the Department of Lands' web site called the **Lands GeoSpatial Portal** <http://www.maps.nsw.gov.au>. If you love maps, or just need to use them a lot, this is a must-visit site! By clicking on the map of NSW you can zoom in or out to find places of interest on their maps. Both topographic and cadastral information are provided. As you move your mouse cursor over the map it shows you the geographic co-ordinates latitude and longitude of that spot. At least in the Canberra region, it appears to zoom in to provide the level of detail found on their 1:25,000 paper maps.

One downside exists, though: some of the features work on the Microsoft Internet Explorer web browser but not on some other browsers such as Mozilla Firefox. And you will have awfully long waits if accessing the maps via a dial-up internet connection.

Birds are smart, as anyone who has attended at all closely to them can attest. On Birding-Aus recently we had two delightful examples of this. The first from David Taylor:

> Birds fascinate me. and who says they aren't smart!
>
> We have a poodle. some years old now who has always protected her turf under the patio from the Common Mynas, Noisy Miners. Butcherbirds and the like! Very recently she went suddenly blind. The other day I was amazed to see the resident Pied Butcherbird fly down on the couch she lies on and bold as you like take some food from right under her nose with no apparent fear or trepidation. Cool as a cucumber! Obviously the bird has very quickly worked out that the dog cannot see her any more and has taken ful1 advantage of the situation!

David's message was quickly followed by this one from Eddie Chapman in Norway:

> I have a friend here in Norway who feeds his cat outside. One day he heard meowing from the porch. Thinking his cat was hungry he put some food in a bowl and placed it outside the door. He

> then went into the living room and low and behold, the cat was curled up on the sofa. He returned to the kitchen and looked out the window only to see a Eurasian Jay eating the cat food. A few days later he heard meowing again. This time he checked, and sure enough the Jay was sat in a tree. It had learned how to mimic the cat, knowing full well that food would be put out. Now I know that some members of the crow family are good mimics, but this is the first time I have heard of one using mirnicry to such an advantage.

Thousands of web sites dedicated to birding are found in cyberspace, one of the better being our very own Canberra Birds site <http:, www.canberrabirds.org.au> skillfully maintained by David Cook. But what are the most popular of the world's birding sites, you may wonder? Your question is answered (to an extent) at the Fat Birder web site discussed in a previous column in this series. Head to <http://www.birdingtop500.com> and you will find the **Fat Birder's Top 500 Birding Website.** Here birding web sites that have been submitted for inclusion are ranked according to the amount of traffic they receive, i.e. how frequently people visit the web sites.

If I have correctly interpreted the information provided, the most frequently visited site is Birdpix...a thriving birds of the world photo site: hundreds added daily to huge database' at <http://www.birdpix.nl>. Only two Australian sites are listed. Ian Montgomery's beaut image gallery <http: 'birdway.com.au> and Michael Morcombe's field guide site <http://www.michaelmorcombe.com.au> . Perhaps Canberra Birding will be added before too long? I bet it gets more hits than Birdpix!

Many *Canberra Bird Notes* readers participate in bird surveys, producing invaluable data for conservation cum land management purposes. In December I was surprised to see a notice, on Birding-Aus, of the annual NSW White Ibis Survey. Nobody had told me it was on! On 1 December, the survey managers sent this note to the email list:

> The managemnent of Australian White Ibis on a regional basis requires good knowledge of the NSW population. To help us obtain this 'snap-shot' the Parks and Wildlife Division of the Department of Environment and Conservation (NSW) are organising a state-wide count. This will aid with research involving movements and abundance of ibis and assist with the conservation practices to be put in place.
>
> The Parks and Wildlife Division of the Department of Environment and Conservation (NSW) requests your participation in this event. You can help provide valuable information on this misunderstood species. Your counts (along with location and time of day) can be faxed, emailed, input straight to the online database, or 'snail-mailed' to us.

Further details are online at <http://www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au/npws.nsf/Content/white_ibis_survey>. There you will find a report on the December 2004 survey. It advises that 86 records were submitted from that survey. I bet if they included Canberra birders in the project, we'd dash across the border and submit lots of additional data. After all, in the ACT the Australian White Ibis is classified as a 'common breeding visitor in varying numbers'

<http://canberrabirds.org.au/chklist.htm>, implying that they come from NSW and/or further afield.

Let's conclude where we began, with twitching. One of the results of the popularity of Sean Dooley's *Big Twitch* is that the identity of Australia's top birders has become better known, and those of us who have not met them personally now have some additional insights into their personalities. Tony Palliser, one of the leaders of the pelagic bird observation movement in Australia, has a web site at which **people who have observed over 500 wild birds in Australia** may have their totals listed: <http://users.bigpond.net.au/palliser/pelagic/totals.html>.

In December 2005 Mike Carter (mentioned a number of times in Dooley's book) heads the list with 780 species, followed by Fred Smith at 760. Sean Dooley has 731. Current or former Canberra birders whose names I recognise include Phil Hansbro 723, Peter Milburn 721, John Penhallurick 684, Hazel Wright 631, Alan Wright 631, John Leonard 626, Ian Fraser 601, David McDonald 518 and Alastair Smith 514. Clearly some gun Canberra birders have not listed their totals, choosing to hide their lights under buckets.

A corresponding list exists for people who have observed more than 150 species in the ACT: <http://www.actlisters.canberrabirds.org.au/totals.htm>. Peter Milburn leads, with 243, followed by David McDonald & Anthony Overs on 222, Harvey Perkins on 220 and Ian Fraser on 218, to list the top five. As with the national list, if you have observed the requisite number of species you are welcome to contact the list maintainers to have your details added.

T *alba*

Details on how to subscribe to *Birding-Aus*, the Australian birding email discussion list, are on the web at http://www.birding-aus.org/. 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 NEWS

The Panel considered whether certain species should remain on the COG 'unusuals' list, and determined to make the following changes:

- **Long-billed Corella** to be removed from the list;
- **Pied Cormorant** - no unusual bird report required for the birds at Aspen Island; reports required for the species elsewhere, however;
- **Regent Honeyeater** to be reinstated on the list (it was removed in 1998 only because it is so easy to identify; it is reinstated in the hopes of obtaining more quality information on this important threatened species);
- **Turquoise Parrot** and **White-headed Pigeon** to be added to the list (they were always reportable by virtue of the fact they were not on COG's datasheet).

And please note:

- **Little Friarbird** - no unusual bird report required for the birds at Mulligans Flat; reports required for the species elsewhere, however.
- **Common Sandpiper** - no unusual bird report required for the bird at Uriarra Crossing: reports required for the species elsewhere, however.
- **Grey-crowned Babbler** — no unusual bird report required for the bird at Duntroon.

One of the more interesting species to be recorded in recent times was the Little Button-quail in January at Goorooyarroo Nature Reserve. They are smaller than Painted Button-quail, rusty-sandy coloured on top and with obvious white undersides. When flushed they fly very rapidly, usually for some distance, before they appear to drop "bum first" into cover. Once they hit the ground they are usually impossible to find and flush again. Around Canberra they could be in any suitable longish grass, weed infestations and very scattered low shrub cover, generally with "open" areas. In Mark Clayton's view, locally they are an occasional irruptive species.

Another Goorooyarroo special find, again by Steve Holliday, was a White-throated Nightjar. Steve actually flushed the bird, followed it and saw it again. This confirms the suspicions of the Panel that the species can be seen in our region, with diligence and good luck. The most recent previous reported and endorsed sighting (as opposed to records based on calls) was by Nicki Taws at Yanununbeyan Crown Reserve, some 9 km WNW of Captains Flat, in November 2002 (Taws 2003). Its most distinguishing feature is that, when flushed, the nightjar flies erratically.

The two independent records of Turquoise Parrots confirm that this is a species which can turn up in our region from time to time. They are kept as caged birds, however, and urban records are highly likely to be of aviary escapees. They are small parrots, about 20 cm only. Characteristic features are

the really bright yellow of the underparts; the two-toned blue wings, the male only with a bright red shoulder patch; and a blue face.

Grahame Clark provided the most recent meeting of the Rarities Panel with a copy of Endorsed List 11, covering records from 1986-87. Interestingly, it featured Pied Cormorant, Intermediate Egret, Black Kite and White-throated Nightjar — all species featured below. Plus ca change ...

ENDORSED LIST 66

[note that 2006 records endorsed at the Rarities Panel meeting on 13 February 2006 have been included in this list]

Pied Cormorant *Phalacrocorax varius*

2; 10 Sep 05; Ian Anderson & Tony Willis; Lake Ginninderra GrJ12

1; 30 Jan 06; Steve Holliday; Aspen Island GrL 14

Intermediate Egret *Ardea intermedia*

I; 3 Jan 06; Ian Fraser; Kellys Swamp GrL14

Black Kite *Milvus migrans*

1; 2 Jan 06; Ian Fraser; Kellys Swamp GrL14

Grey Goshawk *Accipiter novaehollandiae*

I; 26 Aug 05; Mark Clayton; Kaleen GrK12

1; 11 Mar 04; Steve Holliday; Jerrabomberra Wetlands Nature Reserve GrL14

Little Button-quail *Turnix velox*

1; 10 Jan 06; Steve Holliday; Goorooyarroo Nature Reserve GrM11

White-headed Pigeon *Columba leocomela*

1; 13 Oct 05; Rob Flynn; Queanbeyan GrN15

Long-billed Corella *Cacatua tenuirostris*

1; 26 Nov 05; Brendan Lepschi; Griffith GrL14

Turquoise Parrot *Neophema pulchella*

1; 29 Oct 05; Alastair Smith & Michael Wright; Orroral Valley GrG22

2; 6 Feb 06; Chris Davey; "Kama" GrI13.

Channel-billed Cuckoo *Scythrops novaehollandiae*

1; 13 Jan 06; Mark Clayton; Kaleen GrK12

White-throated Nightjar *Eurostopodus mystacalis*

LIST OF 'UNUSUAL' BIRDS IN THE CANBERRA REGION
(as amended February 2006 by COG's Rarities Panel)

This list is made up of unusually occurring or "rare" species for which there have been confirmed sightings within the last 35 years. The list does not include species which have been classified purely as escapees. Any other species which is not listed on COG 's datasheet is also classed as "unusual". Records of these species would be appreciated by COG 's Rarities Panel. The appropriate form can be downloaded from the COG website, picked up at COG meetings or requested from the secretary.

Magpie Goose
Plumed Whistling Duck
Freckled Duck
Pied Cormorant (excluding Aspen Island sightings)
Intermediate Egret
Australasian Bittern
Black-necked Stork
Osprey
Letter-winged Kite Square-tailed Kite Black Kite
Spotted Harrier
Grey Goshawk
Grey Falcon
Black Falcon
Brolga
Lewin's Rail
Spotless Crake (under consideration)
Black-tailed Native—hen
Little Button-quail
Red-chested Button-quail
Bar-tailed Godwit
Little Curlew
Eastern Curlew
Marsh Sandpiper
Wood Sandpiper
Common Sandpiper (excluding Uriarra Crossing sightings)
Ruddy Turnstone
Pectoral Sandpiper
Painted Snipe
Bush Stone-curlew
Grey Plover
Banded Lapwing
Gull-billed Tern
Caspian Tern

List of "unusual" birds in the Canberra region, continued

White-winged Black Tern
White-headed Pigeon
Diamond Dove
Bar-shouldered Dove
Musk Lorikeet
Swift Parrot
Blue Bonnet
Blue-winged Parrot
Turquoise Parrot
Black-eared Cuckoo
Channel-billed Cuckoo
Barking Owl
Sooty Owl
Masked Owl
Grass Owl
White-throated Nightjar
Fork-tailed Swift
Azure Kingfisher
Red-backed Kingfisher
Variegated Fairy-wren
Chestnut-rumped Heathwren
Brown Gerygone
Little Wattlebird
Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater
Little Friarbird (excluding records from Mulligans Flat and environs)
Regent Honeyeater
Lewin's Honeyeater
Painted Honeyeater
Tawny-crowned Honeyeater
Black Honeyeater
Scarlet Honeyeater
Crimson Chat
Pink Robin
Grey-crowned Babbler (excluding the Duntroon bird)
White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike
Pied Butcherbird
Singing Bushlark
White-backed Swallow

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 relating to the distribution, identification or behaviour of birds in the Australian Capital Territory and surrounding region. Please discuss any proposed major contribution with Harvey Perkins on 6231 8209 or email cbn@canberrabirds.org.au. Short notes, book reviews and other contributions should be sent to the above email address or discussed with Barbara Allan 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.

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