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NUMBERS OF BREEDING LITTLE EAGLES *HIERAAETUS MORPHNOIDES* IN THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY IN 2008

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Abstract: *In 2008 we surveyed 11 Little Eagle territories in and near the Australian Capital Territory that were occupied in 1990-1992. In addition we solicited reports from COG members and ACT Parks, Conservation and Lands personnel in an effort to find all Little Eagle nesting attempts in the ACT in 2008. Of the 11 active 1990-1992 territories, one, at the Pegasus riding school, was occupied by a breeding pair in 2008. In the new survey, aimed at finding all ACT nests, we re-located the three 'new' territories, near Dunlop, on the Lions Youth Haven agistment paddock near McQuoids Hill, and one near Duntroon (shifted its nest from Fyshwick). Four breeding pairs in the ACT fledged a total of four young. Also, 21 of the 26 ACT Wedge-tailed Eagle territories surveyed in 2002-2003 were surveyed in 2008; 12 of the 21 territories were abandoned. Canberra may lose Wedge-tailed Eagles as a breeding species in the city.*

Introduction

Olsen & Fuentes (2004) found only one Little Eagle nest in the Murrumbidgee and Molonglo River Corridors in 2002-2003. Olsen & Fuentes (2005) and Olsen & Osgood (2006) discussed the collapse of Little Eagle breeding territories, from 11 active nests in the early 1990s to two in 2005-2006 (Taylor and COG 1992, Olsen 1992). Some of this decline was linked to Wedge-tailed Eagles *Aquila audax* displacing Little Eagles, but other pairs disappeared for other reasons, including land development. We made a case for listing the Little Eagle as Vulnerable, and urged the ACT Government to stop urban development in woodlands used by the species **(**Olsen & Fuentes 2005, Olsen & Osgood 2006, Olsen 2007).

Our aims in the current study were to a) search for active nests (defined as having at least one egg or young) in the areas first surveyed in 1990-1992; b) in a new survey find all possible Little Eagle territories in the ACT. We did this by organising three survey teams: 1) J. Olsen & M. Osgood, 2) COG members networked through G. Dabb, Chris Davey and Barbara Allan, 3) ACT Parks, Conservation and Lands rangers networked through M. Maconachie. In addition, MB analysed COG Garden Bird Survey

data for Little Eagle sightings July 1990 to July 2008.

Methods

In 2008 JO and MO searched by foot and car the original 1990-1992 Little Eagle territories, and two sites containing single individuals found in 2005. GD vetted any reports of Little Eagle sightings from COG members and checked these on foot. MM vetted reports from the ACT Parks, Conservation and Lands and checked these on foot with JO to confirm breeding.

Results

All nests from previous surveys (Olsen 1992) were abandoned (Table 1) except one, found by Steve Holliday on Pegasus Riding School in Belconnen, in the same territory as the previous pair on the Molonglo River (Olsen and Fuentes 2004).

The total then, for 2008, was four young fledged from four territories, much lower than the productivity for 11 territories in the early 1990s (see Olsen 1992), but higher than the productivity found in 2006-2007. We believe this increase in productivity from 2006 to 2008 was due primarily to additional efforts by many people searching for active nests, not to any sort of recovery. However, Little Eagle numbers remain low compared to the early 1990s, and we found no occupied nests close to the Molonglo River or Murrumbidgee River.

Discussion

The 2006, 2007 and 2008 Little Eagle survey reports from COG members and ACT Parks, Conservation and Lands personnel were instrumental in confirming successful nests, particularly the reports from Michael Lenz, Chris Davey, Roger Curnow, Graeme Clifton, Nick Webb, Steve Holliday, and John McRae. We hope that COG and ACT Parks, Conservation and Lands personnel will continue to help through 2009.

Myths

Three myths arose during the Little Eagle survey that need to be addressed:

1. ACT Little Eagles declined because of declining rabbits.

No raptor species in the ACT region has shown changes in breeding numbers related to changes in rabbit numbers. When European Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus* numbers decline around the ACT, eagles switch to other prey, like birds, reptiles or macropods. Furthermore, at the same time Little Eagles have decreased in the ACT, rabbit numbers have *increased*, to the point where rabbit control measures are now in place.

2. The Little Eagle decline was first noticed in the annual COG data.

The COG Garden Bird Survey data shows no decline in Little Eagles (Figure 1). Bird atlas methods are

useful for showing trends in many bird species (see Olsen *et al*. 2008) but, compared to surveys of raptor nests, reports by members of the community of occasional sightings of raptors are less accurate in showing trends. Raptors are often misidentified, they roam far from their nests to hunt, can be more difficult to detect than many other birds, or they are over-represented if bird watchers score the same bird or pair of birds a number of times (see Olsen & Fuentes 2005, Sergio *et al*. 2008).

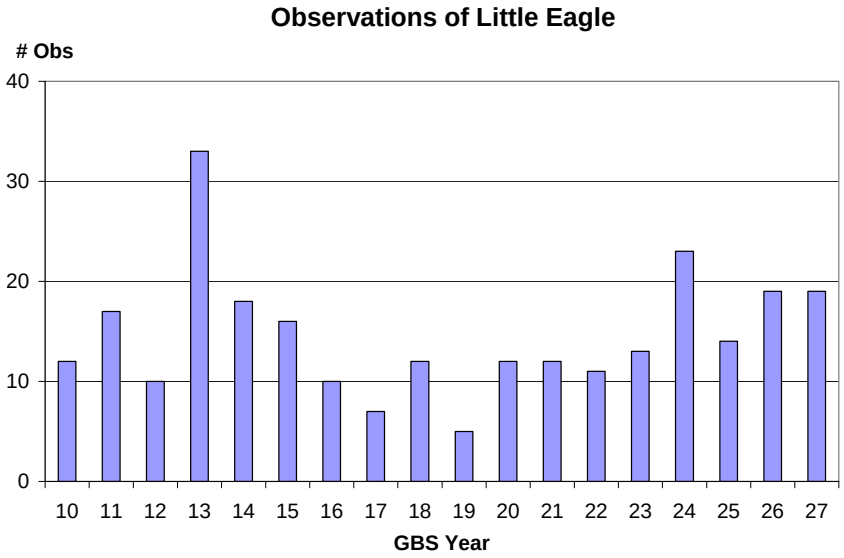

Figure 1. All GBS Little Eagle records from GBS Year 10 (>2 July 1990) to GBS Year 27 (<1 July 2008). This gave 121 records (i.e. sites at which Little Eagle was observed at least once during a year) and 263 observations (i.e. weeks in which at least one Little eagle was recorded at a site); 13 observations (4.9%) reported 2 birds.

3. Raptor territories placed in a protected 'corridor' connected to other reserves will be conserved.

The ‘corridors’ in the ACT, when they increase public access, tend to shear off the top trophic level of birds, in this case, eagles. Eagles disappear as breeding species because the corridors provide too little space for hunting, and corridors or small reserves can increase disturbance from walkers. The three pairs of Wedge-tailed Eagles found along the Molonglo River in 2002 (Olsen & Fuentes 2004) reduced to one breeding pair and one non-breeding pair by 2007-2008, because of the fire, and because of disturbance. (The fire destroyed one nest, a trig point was constructed adjacent to another nest). Wedge-tailed Eagles nest along the length of the Molonglo River in the ACT only in places protected from human disturbance. Even where prey is abundant, they will not breed if disturbed by humans.

In 2008, JO and MO surveyed 21 of the 26 ACT Wedge-tailed Eagle territories surveyed by E. Fuentes and JO in 2002-2003 (Fuentes *et al*. 2007); 12 of the 21 territories checked were abandoned. If the Molonglo River is placed in a 'corridor' connected to reserves that increase public access through walking trails, giving more access to the Molonglo River for fishing and other activities, this last breeding pair of Wedge-tailed Eagles may disappear. It is unclear how this will affect the closest Little Eagle pair breeding at Pegasus Riding School in 2008.

Conclusions

Four Little Eagle territories were located in the ACT in 2008. The territory at Pegasus is probably the one remaining territory from the 11 mentioned in Olsen (1992). It is important to begin radio-tracking studies to determine Little Eagle and Wedge-tailed Eagle home-range sizes and habitat use, and continue to press the ACT government to retain woodland where eagles nest and hunt. Canberra is significant because it is the only city in the world with nesting *Aquila* eagles inside the city limits. Wedge-tailed Eagles will probably be lost as a breeding species inside city limits within the decade.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to COG members, especially Steve Holliday, Chris Davey, Barbara Allan**,** Michael Lenz, Roger Curnow, Graeme Clifton, Nick Webb, and John McRae who passed along Little Eagle and other raptor sightings for the survey. Thanks also to Christie Gould, David Shorthouse, Murray Evans, Bernard Morris, Brett McNamara, Tony Bell, Mark Rodden, Marty Gardner, Trish D'Abrera, Monica Muranyi, Paul Higginbotham, Kate Boyd, Meg Doepel and Darren Roso, and to the New South Wales Parks and Wildlife Service especially Luke Bond and Greg Hayes. Sue Trost and Les Boyd gave invaluable assistance in the field. Stephen Debus and McComas Taylor gave much appreciated advice.

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ROYAL SPOONBILLS BREEDING AT KELLY'S SWAMP

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Abstract: *This article follows on from an initial report (Butterfield 2008) on a breeding attempt by Royal Spoonbills at Kelly's Swamp in the Jerrabomberra Wetlands in Canberra. The events described in that article concluded with an entry for 18 November 2008 describing birds sitting in all three nests. In the breeding event, young birds fledged from all three nests concluding with the chick from the third nest flying from the nest tree on 26 January 2009. This article outlines the second phase of the breeding event and discusses some issues that arose.*

Timing of breeding event stages

As a result of almost daily observations it was possible to note the apparent timing of the major events in this Royal Spoonbill *Platalea regia* breeding event. These are reproduced below as a table, and as a Gantt chart. Discussion of the duration of the various stages follows as a review of the material covered in Marchant and Higgins (1990). This discussion also includes commentary on the measures of success of the event in terms of survival of chicks.

Primarily to offer consistency in identification of nests between this article and its predecessor I have retained the same identifiers for nests. These are based upon the position of the nest as viewed from the Cygnus hide: LH is the lower Left Hand nest, RH the lower Right Hand nest and Upper refers to the higher nest on the LH side of the tree. Some entries in the COG chatline discussion of the event use identifiers of the nests and the individual birds within them defined according to the order in which the nests were started.

It must be noted that the 'first dates' are those on which the stage was first observed, and that some stages are effectively proxies for a biological event. By way of example:

- the date on which a bird was first seen to sit on a nest was taken as a proxy for the date on which eggs were laid; and
- the date on which a chick was first observed was taken as a proxy for the date of hatching.

Event	**Date**					
Birds seen in tree	25/10/2008					
Bird carrying stick to tree	26/10/2008					
	LH Nest		**RH nest**		**Upper nest**	
	First date	**Days**	**First date**	**Days**	**First date**	**Days**
Nest building	28-Oct-08	11	4-Nov-08	6	9-Nov-08	10
Copulation	29-Oct-08	n/a	4-Nov-08	n/a	29-Oct-08	n/a
Bird sitting	8-Nov-08	31	10-Nov-08	34	19-Nov-08	30
Chick(s) seen	9-Dec-08	16	14-Dec-08	16	19-Dec-08	24
Chick on edge/out of nest	25-Dec-08	17	30-Dec-08	11	12-Jan-09	15
Chick flies	10-Jan-09	n/a	9-Jan-08	n/a	26-Jan-09	n/a

Table 1. Dates and durations of stages of development.

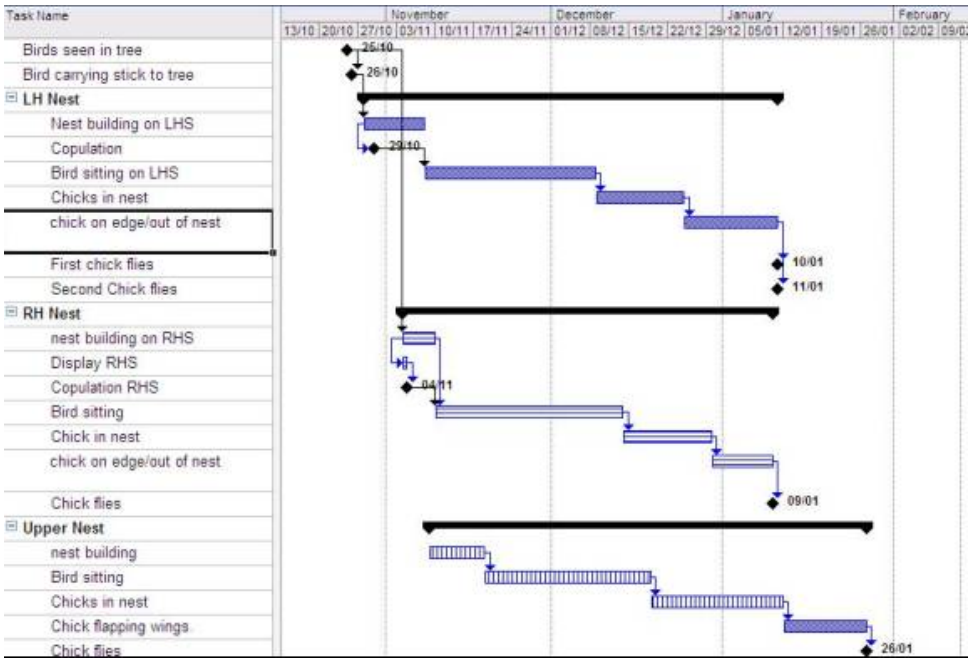

Figure 1. Gantt chart of duration of events.

As a footnote to the event, the author was intrigued, on revisiting the site on 15 February 2009 to find that no trace of the nests remained in the tree. Given that Marchant and Higgins (1990) noted that the nest site is 're-used from year to year' and describes the nest as a 'solid substantial bowl …' this is rather surprising. This may have been due to strong winds, or possibly the activities of Australian White Ibis *Threskiornis molucca* (see below) may have caused the nests to disintegrate.

Discussion of fledging

During the period while the chicks were evident there was some discussion of the definition of fledging in the context of this species.

The range of views on the definition is summarised by the following extract from Wikipedia:

> Fledge is the stage in a young bird's life when the feathers and wing muscles are sufficiently developed for flight … In ornithology, the meaning of fledging is variable, depending on species. Birds are sometimes considered fledged once they leave the nest, even if they still cannot fly. Some definitions of fledge take it to mean the independence of the chick from the adults, as adults will often continue to feed the chick after it has left the nest and is able to fly.

In the case of these Royal Spoonbills the range of dates of fledging could extend (for the LH nest) at least from 25 December 2008 to 10 January 2009. It could be even longer as the chicks were still seen to beg for food from adults some days after their first flight, and after they had been seen to attempt finding food for themselves. The concept of indolent young may apply here as with some humans.

In many tree nesting species there is a very brief (or no) period between the bird first leaving its nest and the first flight and thus definitions of fledging based on the time of leaving the nest and time of first flight are effectively identical. However in this species there was a period of 11 to 17 days between the chicks first leaving the nest and actually taking flight. Obviously during this period they were still completely dependent on the parents for provision of food, giving some support to the first flight as being the determinant of fledging. Further, to the author, the difference between clinging to a twig forming part of the nest, and clinging to a separate twig 6 inches away is entirely arbitrary.

I would prefer to define fledging as the time of first flight. However noting the wide range of possible views I also suggest that the term has reached its use-by date and less subjective measures of development could be preferred.

Review of other material

Success rates

In this event three nests were started and all three produced young which progressed to the point of flying from the nest. By this measure the success rate was 100 per cent. By way of contrast, Marchant and Higgins (1990) cites examples of ‘ ... a single young bird fledged from 21 of 53 nests started ...’ (Phillip Island – 40 per cent success), and ‘ ... five young fledged from three of nine nests started’ (Kerang – 33 per cent success) and ‘five chicks fledged from 37 nests’ (Okarito – less than 14 per cent success).

Assuming that fledging is defined in terms of chicks achieving flight, measuring success as ‘chicks raised to flight stage’/number of nests, the parameters at Kelly’s Swamp were 4/3 or 1.3 chicks per nest (cpn).

Phillip Island was 21/53 or 0.4cpn, Kerang 5/9 or 0.56cpn and Okarito 0.14cpn. Clearly the Kelly's swamp nests were very successful according to these measures.

Mortality rates

In terms of the number of chicks hatched the story is not so positive. The number of chicks seen in the Kelly's Swamp nests as soon as they were large enough to be seen were: LH - 3, RH - 2, Upper - 4. Thus five of the nine chicks died. Since the nests were not physically visited it is not possible to say definitively when these deaths occurred relative to hatching. However the number of chicks observable dropped quite quickly and all chicks alive after a week made it to flight.

Marchant and Higgins (1990) suggests starvation as a cause of death together with, in New Zealand, exposure and chicks falling from the nest (with Great Egrets *Ardea alba* being noted as ejecting chicks from nests). That publication notes 'no evidence of predation'. In the Kelly's Swamp case although Great Egrets were present during the breeding event there was no evidence of them interfering with the nest, or of any other predators attacking the nests.

AvianWeb.com suggests, for spoonbill species in general, starvation is the primary cause of brood failure rather than predation.

The author has concluded that starvation was the main factor. This leads to a hypothesis that the LH nest – the first nest to be completed and the first to hatch chicks – was able to feed the young birds without competition for the first few days. By way of contrast the pair from the Upper nest – 3rd cab off the rank – were competing with pairs from two other nests feeding vigorously growing chicks. This led to:

- a high mortality rate with only 25 per cent of chicks surviving; and
- slow development of the survivors (taking 24 days from first being sighted to first leaving the nest compared to 16 days for the other two nests).

Duration of events

The durations of events are noted in Table 1 above. The only comparable data available in Marchant and Higgins (1990) is for incubation which is cited as 20-25 days. By way

of contrast, the birds in this case sat for between 30 and 34 days. This is much closer to the incubation period of 26-31 days shown in Marchant and Higgins (1990) for the Yellow-billed Spoonbill *Platalea flavipes*.

The discrepancy between this case and the data for the study species in Marchant and Higgins (1990) should be interpreted as difficulty in measurement: this is possible at both ends of the phase. It was not possible to see through the nests to determine when the bird was sitting on eggs and it is likely that the chicks were not visible for the first day(s) of their life. Given the growth rates of the chicks (see below) it is felt likely that they may have remained hidden for several days. The difficulty of seeing into the RH nest makes it possible that the chick in that nest was hidden for a day or two longer than for the other two nests. It is thus not possible to say whether most of the discrepancy is considered to have occurred in defining:

- laying, as equal to a bird sitting tightly on the nest; or
- hatching, as equal to a chick being seen.

Marchant and Higgins (1990) states that the period from hatching to first flight was not determined and the age at which young first clamber out of nest was not known. The specific duration of these phases for these nests is shown above. An overall summary follows.

Phase	Average duration (days)	Range of durations (days)
Incubation	31.6	30 - 34
Hatch → Clamber out	18.7	16 - 24
Clamber out → Fly	14.3	11 -17

Table 2. Summary of phase durations

Extreme values in these figures are:

- A very slow 24 days from hatching to clambering out of the nest for the chick in the upper nest, possibly reflecting the pressure on food supply; and
- The rapid 11 days from clambering out to flying for the chick in the Right Hand nest, possibly indicating that it was a little older than thought when it clambered out, as a result of observational difficulties.

By way of comparison Kaufman (1996) notes that the Roseate Spoonbill *Ajaia ajaja* may leave the nest after five to six weeks (or 35-42 days) and young are capable of strong flight at roughly seven to eight weeks (or 49-56 days). Interestingly, these data suggest about 14 days 'clambering about' as observed here.

The WWF Hong Kong website (www.wwf.org.hk/eng/maipo/wildlife/birds/bfs.php) says for Black-faced Spoonbill *Platalea minor* 'eggs normally hatch five weeks later. After a further five weeks fledglings are capable of walking and begin to fly after seven'.

Growth rates

A number of observers commented on the very rapid growth rate shown by these chicks (at least the ones which survived). Marchant and Higgins (1990) offers no information on growth rates for either spoonbill species but does provide information for the closely related Australian White Ibis.

These data show that the ibis chicks do not increase greatly in size for the first week, but then grow very rapidly, reaching 20-30 times their birth weight by 28 days of age. If a similar pattern of growth can be assumed for Royal Spoonbill it might be considered that the chicks were not seen for the first few days after hatching, thus reducing the incubation period towards that quoted in Marchant and Higgins (1990) and extending the post-hatching period towards that cited by Kaufman.

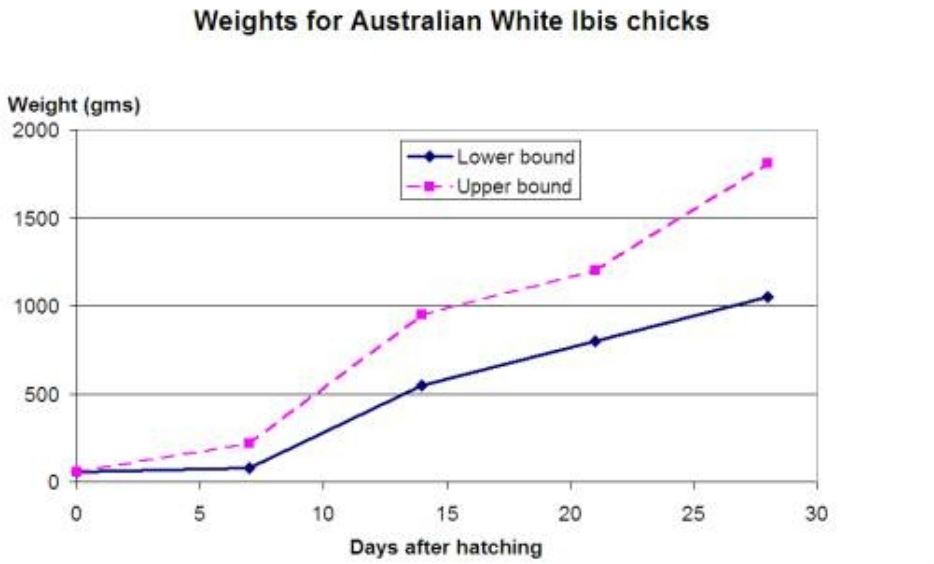

Figure 2. Weights for Australian White Ibis chicks

Relations with Australian White Ibis

It is noted that a failed spoonbill nesting attempt in this general area in 2007 (Rod Mackay pers. comm.) was adjacent to a nest of Australian White Ibis.

Towards the end of the 2008-09 event a large flock (at times well over 100 ibis were in the vicinity of the nest) of Australian White Ibis took to roosting in the nest tree (and elsewhere in Kelly's Swamp). There was no undue aggression between the ibises and the young spoonbills although on occasion the ibises were seen to 'poke' their bills into the feathers of the young spoonbills, causing the spoonbills to move away. The purpose of the interaction was not at all clear.

The ibises also took to standing in the spoonbill nests, at times sharing the nest with a young spoonbill. The ibises seemed to find something to eat in the nest. It was not obvious what this was, with possibilities that occurred to the author including spilt regurgitated food or the corpses of deceased spoonbill chicks. Marchant and Higgins (1990) notes that ibises may feed on carrion.

After the spoonbill chicks flew the ibises continued to stand in the nests sometimes plucking at the sticks in the nest, possibly causing the nests to disintegrate.

Summary

This article completes the recording of a Royal Spoonbill breeding event at Kelly's Swamp. The success rate of the three nests was high compared to other events listed in the literature. Clearly the status of this species shown in the Annual Bird Report published by COG should be revised to incorporate the word 'Breeding'.

It is possible to provide approximate durations for most of the major stages of the event, although observational difficulties prevented precision in determining the end points for egg-laying and hatching.

Acknowledgements

I thank the many members of COG who notified me of their observations of activities at and around the nest. Elizabeth Compston and Frank Antram provided many reports while Geoffrey Dabb not only provided commentary but many excellent photographs, including those that appear in this article. I will also acknowledge my oversight, in my previous article, in not naming the late Delia Johnson as the observer of the 1998 nest on Jerrabomberra Creek.

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THE FIRST BREEDING RECORDS FOR THE EASTERN KOEL *EUDYNAMYS ORIENTALIS* IN CANBERRA

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Abstract: *Since 1986 the Eastern Koel has been recorded more regularly in Canberra. There has been a notable increase in observations, chiefly of calling males, over the last 10 years or so. In late 2008, both a male and female were regularly recorded in a part of Ainslie. Between 21 January and 11 February 2009 a total of five Koel fledglings were found (four in Ainslie, one in Watson, about four kilometres distant from the Ainslie area). This is the first confirmed breeding record for the Eastern Koel in Canberra. In all cases the host species was the Red Wattlebird. In 2008-09 the Red Wattlebird had a very good breeding season with up to three broods per pair, thus providing a relatively high number of potential host nests for the cuckoo. Observations on the behaviour of Koels and host are discussed. Red Wattlebirds with a cuckoo fledgling cannot find sufficient food within their territory and move with the cuckoo well beyond their territorial boundaries. The possibility is discussed that the female Koel may have more success with laying eggs in host nests if it visits areas outside the male territory. This may mean that the search for Koel fledglings has to go well beyond the area occupied by a calling male.*

Introduction

The Eastern Koel *Eudynamys orientalis*, afterwards referred to as Koel, is common to the regions east of Canberra (Higgins 1999). Wilson (1999) described its status in the ACT as a rare non-breeding migrant, although it has been recorded more frequently since 1986. There has been a significant increase in observations, mainly of calling males, in recent years in various parts of Canberra. With a few exceptions, the Koel is restricted to suburban Canberra. It prefers areas with well-developed gardens with fruit trees (Veerman 2006). The change in abundance is well reflected in Figure 1 which gives the A values (mean number of birds/site/week) based on COG's Garden Bird Survey (GBS) data from 1981 to 2007.

The birds are present in Canberra between October and February (Veerman 2006), although in recent years Koels have sometimes arrived earlier (week 41 starting 11 September) and have stayed longer (week 11 starting 12 March). Several males are now holding territories across town on a regular basis, but

females have so far been seen only occasionally. To date, the general COG database holds only two records of females: 22 January 2001, one female at Bluett's Forest Stromlo, Grid J16 (Barbara Allan) and a pair copulating in Turner, Grid K13 (Peter Milburn) (COG 2008). The latter observation was the closest indication that breeding in Canberra was a possibility.

A number of GBS sites have recorded the presence of more than one bird – with a maximum of three Koels in one year at Pearce – although details of the sexes of the multiple birds are not available (Martin Butterfield, pers. comm.). Certainly, there was no confirmed breeding observation despite the increase in records (Veerman 2006).

The 2008-09 spring-summer season again produced a number of records of males calling (various reports on the COG chatline). In Ainslie, a female was also seen by several observers and, towards the end of the season, a total of five young Koels were reported in Ainslie and Watson. We provide an account of those observations in this article.

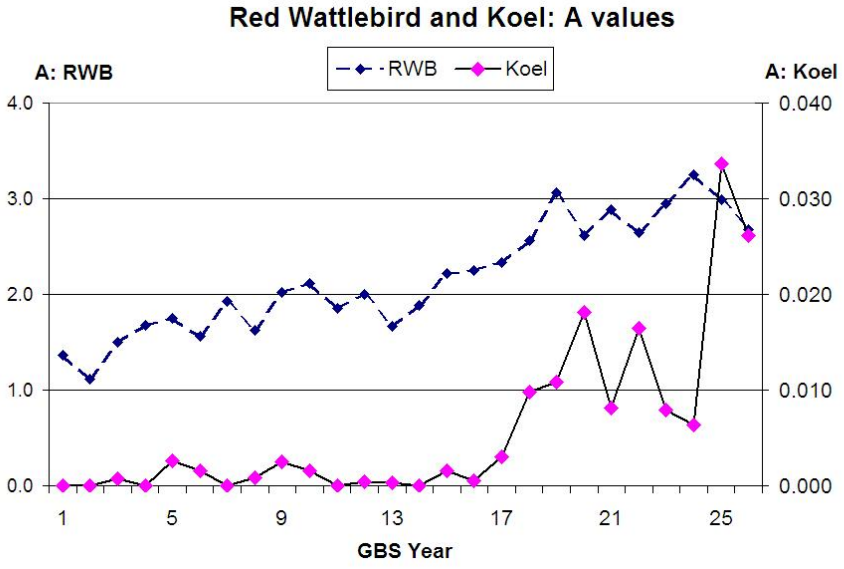

Figure 1. A values (mean number of birds/site/week) for Red Wattlebird and Koel based on COG's Garden Bird Survey (GBS) from 1981 to 2007.

The Koel breeding records of the 2008-2009 season

Observations of adults in Ainslie

The following records originate mainly from messages posted on the COG chatline. All but the first are from the northeast of the Ainslie shops in an area centred on Hoddle Gardens and Herbert Crescent:

- 7 and 17 October, single male calling in the area around Corroboree Park in the southern part of Ainslie (Robin Hide);
- 20 October, in the same area as in the previous year but this time the bird arrived earlier (Coral Dow). Over the following months until the end of February the male ranged – that is, was heard and only sometimes seen – over an area of around 0.5 square kilometres, although it stayed mostly in the core area around Hoddle Gardens and the eastern end of Tyson Street;
- 10 November, one female in Cobb Crescent within the core area of the male (Coral Dow);
- 14 November, a pair noisily at a nest of Red Wattlebirds *Anthochaera carunculata* in Cobb Crescent (Coral Dow). Such noisy behaviour is part of courtship (Higgins 1999);
- 19 November, one female at Tyson Street/Duffy Street, at first swooped by a pair of Red Wattlebirds, but the female stayed quietly for one hour in the same spot, although closely monitored by the Red Wattlebirds (Stephanie Haygarth).

Sightings of a female within the core area and towards the outer limits of the territory of Ainslie were also reported by several other observers (Steve Holliday, Michael Lenz, McComas Taylor) at different times.

Breeding records

It was only when Stephanie Haygarth discovered a juvenile Koel in Ainslie at the end of January, the first confirmed breeding record for Canberra, that we searched more intensely for further confirmations of breeding. Below are individual accounts of the discovery of young Koels (in chronological order).

No. 1 – Ainslie (Stephanie Haygarth)

> On Wednesday 21 January 2009, at about 8.00am, I was walking on Mt Ainslie, by the levee bank that runs around the western side of the reserve just above Duffy Street. When I heard a begging call in a tall eucalypt, I stopped to identify the species and noticed straight away that it was a young Koel, accompanied then by Noisy Miners *Manorina melanocephala*. I didn't see them feed it but they were close to it and clearly paying it some attention.
>
> After watching for a while, I left to get my camera and binoculars from my nearby home. When I returned five minutes later, the bird was still in the tall eucalypt and I was then able to clearly see it begging from and being fed by Red Wattlebirds. It remained fairly stationary in that

spot, above a large mistletoe, occasionally being fed by its Wattlebird foster parents, for about ten minutes. It was in clear view in an open section of the tree and showed no indication of the habitual shyness of adult Koels. I took some photos of it and, although they aren't clear, they're good enough to determine the species.

When feeding tapered off, the bird then flew across to another smaller eucalypt and hopped straight into a rather scrappy nest (possibly borrowed or adapted from that of another species) on a horizontal branch. I looked underneath the nest site but couldn't find anything of interest on the ground. I took several photos of the bird in and on the nest, again of bad quality but useful.

It sat in the nest for another 10 minutes, again being fed occasionally by the Wattlebirds and also begging from and receiving attention from passing Noisy Miners. Again, the Miners didn't feed it but they came close and inspected it on hearing the begging. Its begging call was similar to the begging calls of both species, but not exactly the same as either of them. It seemed to me to be louder and sharper than the Red Wattlebirds' usual begging call and perhaps less persistent. The fact that it was attracting more than one species made me wonder whether Koels use calls that are 'generic' and which encourage feeding from more than just the parasitised foster parents or more than one species.
When feeding appeared to stop at the nest, the bird moved out after a few minutes and sat on the branch briefly, looking around, then flew directly across the track and the levee bank to a low dense plum tree in a backyard adjacent to the reserve, about 30 metres away. It clearly knew where it was going and flew confidently, strongly and quickly. As soon as it landed, it adopted the more usual Koel habit of diving into the middle of the bush-like tree and hiding. I followed it and tried to get a picture with my camera by leaning over the back fence that the tree was growing over, but to no avail. It was aware of me and cautious, but I was able to see it move carefully out the northern side of the tree to pluck one of the small red plums hanging there. It took the plum whole in its beak and disappeared back into the middle of the tree, where I could no longer see it. I had to give up then and go home.

On 30 January, an immature Koel appeared briefly at the bird bath in a garden in Duffy Street, only a few hundred metres to the south (Steve Holliday, pers. comm.), in all likelihood being the Koel Stephanie Haygarth had discovered earlier.

No. 2 – Ainslie (Michael Lenz)

On 24 January, I found one dependent young Koel at 32 Suttor Street, just to the north of the Ainslie shops, fed by a pair of Red Wattlebirds. It stayed in dense shrubs and a wattle. The persistent begging calls gave it away. The calls sounded similar to those of young Noisy Friarbirds, but were sharper and more frequent. Its tail was not yet fully grown. Over the following days the Koel moved around more and perched in street trees (oaks) or in other neighbouring gardens. Alastair Smith, Steve Holliday, Sue Buckley and Stephanie Haygarth also observed this young Koel.

The last time I located this Koel in Suttor Street was on 2 February. It was fully grown but still begging and waiting to be fed by its foster parents. A search for the Koel on 4 February proved negative.

However, on 9 February I briefly heard a Koel begging from a garden with several fruit trees at 26 Tyson Street, about 100 metres from the Suttor Street site. During several repeat visits by Stephanie Haygarth and I to this Tyson Street garden no further begging calls were heard. However, on 10 February one immature Koel flew out of this garden at 7.00pm, and disappeared into a garden on the other side of the street. It is likely to have been the Suttor Street Koel.

No. 3 – Watson (Yarden Oren)

Following up on a report of a friend who said he saw a big brown bird about 1.5–2 times the size of a Wattlebird being fed by Wattlebirds in their front yard, I indeed observed a dependent young Koel at 16 Harding Street, Watson on the morning of 27 January 2009. It perched in dense shrubbery about two metres off the ground, giving out regular, sharp begging notes. Within minutes, it was fed consecutively by two adult Red Wattlebirds. The Wattlebirds were watched returning and feeding the Koel three times each within a span of 10-15 minutes. Each feeding cycle started with one parent arriving, stuffing food down the Koel's bill, and waiting nearby until the second parent arrived and did the same and then both Wattlebirds flew off until the next feeding event. The Koel kept on with its persisting vocalisations while the parents were nearby.

When I walked back towards Cullen Street, I saw a female Koel briefly skulking beneath a plum tree, approximately 100 metres from where the young Koel was seen. It flew out of view within 1-2 minutes.

Throughout December 2008 a Koel was heard calling on about ten occasions (usually in the mornings) but not daily at the western side of Watson. A male Koel was also seen on Simpson Street, Watson on 11 December. This pattern of frequent but irregular calls of Koels in Watson was also noticed during the summers of 2006–07 and 2007–08. This occasion was, however, the first sighting of a female (and of course a dependent young). No further attempts were made to relocate the young Koel.

No. 4 – Ainslie (Michael Lenz)

The by now familiar sound of a begging Koel was noted on 4 February at 31 Cox Street, just to the south of the Ainslie shops. It appeared to have only recently fledged: its tail was quite short and it was similar in size to the Red Wattlebirds feeding it. It was sitting in a tea-tree and was a little easier to observe than others had been. By 10 February the 'family' had moved to other gardens a bit closer to the Ainslie shops and by 14 February they had settled in a garden at the corner of Wakefield Gardens and Suttor Street (just a block away from where Koel No. 2 in Suttor Street was found). The Koel stayed mainly in the backyard where there was denser foliage, but on 17 and 18 February it spent time in the street

oaks and was easily observed. Although having attained full size, it was still begging for food from the Red Wattlebirds and, according to the home owner, was also already feeding on its own on grapes and mulberries in his garden. The last time I heard this Koel was on 20 February, with the calls coming from the direction of a garden in Tyson Street.

No. 5 – Ainslie (Michael Lenz)

En route to a couple of sites to check the presence of Koels, I came across another young Koel at around 67 and 69 Ebden Street. Its tail was less than half the length of an adult's. On the morning of 11 February the Koel was still where it was first discovered but, by noon, the 'family' of two Red Wattlebirds and fledgling Koel had moved to 6 Hassall Street, about 50 metres to the east. The trio was finally, and for the last time, discovered at the corner of Hassall Street and Duffy Street by Steve Holliday on 14 February.

Discussion

Across the range of the Koel the main hosts are species with open nests and a size range (63–118 grams) of about half that of the cuckoo (Brooker & Brooker 1989), such as Magpie-lark (*Grallina cyanoleuca*), Australasian Figbird (*Sphecotheres vieilloti*), Friarbirds (*Philomenon* spp.), Red Wattlebird and Blue-faced Honeyeater (*Entomyzon cyanotis*) (Higgins 1999). Among 196 recorded parasitised nests or feeding of fledglings (in round figures) 40% were Friarbirds, 18% Figbirds and 18% Magpie-larks (Brooker & Brooker 1989). In Canberra three potential hosts are available: Magpie-lark, Red Wattlebird and Noisy Friarbird. However, all 5 fledglings were raised by Red Wattlebirds. Of course, this does not exclude eggs having been laid in nests of the other 2 potential hosts. Within the Ainslie Koel territory only 4 pairs of Noisy Friarbirds were breeding (at least one of those was double-brooded) (M. Lenz). Magpie-larks were more common and can raise several broods in a season, although nest success in Ainslie appeared to have been low in 2008–09 (M. Lenz).

The most common potential host species right across Canberra is the Red Wattlebird (RW) as the steady increase in A values from the GBS data set indicates (Fig. 1). But importantly, the number of RW breeding records within GBS sites has also notably increased over the last 10 years (see Fig. 2). The Koel has become more common in Canberra over the same period (Fig. 1), no doubt a reflection of an increasing offer of suitable host nests, i.e., of improving territory quality for the cuckoo.

The RW is also the most common host in Sydney, although the species extended into that area only at the turn of the century (Brooker & Brooker 1989).

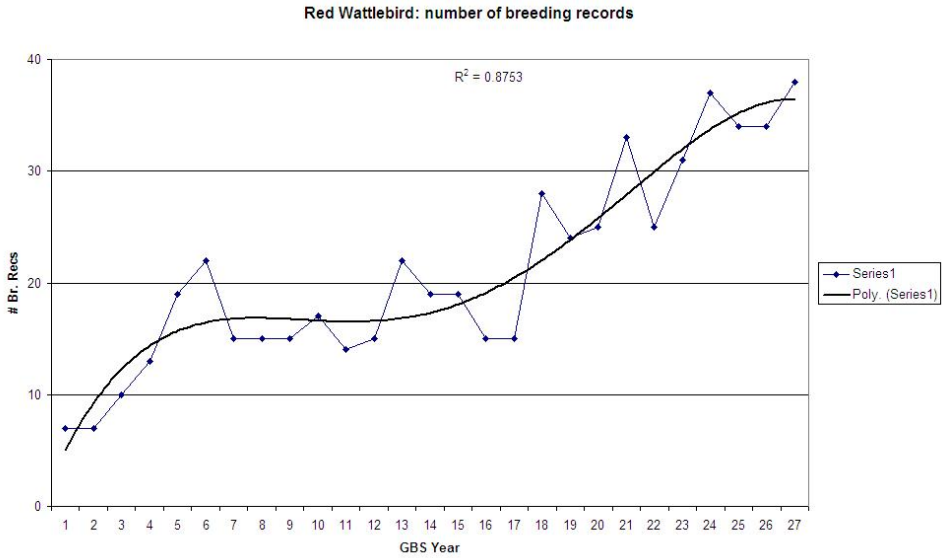

Figure 2. Number of Red Wattlebird breeding records from GBS sites in Canberra.

In 2008, RWs were quite evenly distributed across Ainslie (M. Lenz, unpubl.). Further, here in Canberra a good portion of the suburban RW population may raise three broods in a season. It takes a pair of RW from about 57 to 77 days from nest building to independence of the brood. This includes 15-21 days for incubation, 15 days for the nestling stage and 14-20 days for the fledgling phase (Higgins *et al*. 2001, Longmore 1991). The overall time of the nesting cycle can be shortened to some extent if a pair reuses a nest from a previous brood, or begins to build a new nest before the young of the previous brood have reached full independence.

In fact, the 2008-09 breeding season appeared to have been particularly good for this honeyeater, certainly in Ainslie, and as comments on the chatline indicate, at least in other inner suburbs as well (Peter Milburn). The first almost fully fledged RW young in Ainslie was recorded already on 17 September, i.e., with nesting having commenced in late July, begging RW young (with tail feathers not yet fully grown) were noted within the Koel territory still on 20 February. At a GBS site in Suttor Street, Ainslie (J. & M. Lenz), three RW broods were raised with the following fledging times (weeks according to GBS chart): week 38 (starting 18 September); week 44 (30 October); week 51 (18 December) and much later broods were noticed in the wider neighbourhood.

The arrival of the female Koel in Ainslie (10 November) would have fallen into a period of still high breeding activity by RWs. Nests

with eggs can be found in the ACT from mid-August to mid-December (Higgins 1999), although the peak for nests with eggs would have passed by the time the female Koel arrived. But RWs raising a second or third brood or laying replacement clutches would still have been available for the cuckoo. Young Koels were first seen between 21 January and 11 February. Taking their different development stages at discovery into account and the fact that incubation, nestling and fledgling periods of Koels match more or less those of the host (Higgins 1999) the Ainslie female Koel will have laid eggs (to judge only by the successful outcomes) from late November to the last days of December. The last sighting of a female Koel in this part of Canberra was the bird Yarden Oren noticed on 27 January in Watson (see above), although it remains unclear whether this was also the Ainslie female. The distance between the Watson site and the Ainslie territory is about four kilometres.

Another female Koel was reported on 6 February in Scullin (Paul Fennell), although no earlier sightings of a female from the Belconnen area are available. It may have been a passing bird.

RWs are very territorial during the breeding season and aggressive to conspecifics entering their territory. However, all pairs with a Koel fledgling sooner rather than later moved well beyond normal territory boundaries. Food requirements of the cuckoo must clearly exceed those of a wattlebird set of fledglings and cannot be met within the territory of a pair. However, towards the end of the breeding season, some of the aggressive interactions between neighbours may have ceased, or at least declined in intensity. The pairs with a young cuckoo clearly strayed into other territories, and with an ever-growing cuckoo would in fact have had to pass several RW territories based on territory mapping of breeding birds in Ainslie in 2008-09 (M. Lenz, unpubl.). It may well be that the relatively late timing of laying by the Koel female may ensure better growth and survival of its young, since the hosts could cover a wider area in search of adequate amounts of food without the distractions and energetic cost of too many aggressive encounters with other wattlebirds.

Three of the four young Koels from Ainslie fledged within a very small area around the Ainslie shops with 300-400 metres only between locations. This area was well outside the core area from which the male Koel regularly called. It may be that in this core area potential hosts have higher levels of awareness and may be more vigilant, hence reducing the chances for the female to lay its eggs into host nests. For example, the female Koel was swooped in a garden in Duffy Street in the core area (19 November) by RWs; although the female stayed on the spot for about an hour it was closely monitored by the Wattlebirds, which pursued the female when it finally flew off (S. Haygarth).

A calling male Koel (and also the sight of a female) could certainly provoke a strong response in host species. Terry Bell reported from Turner on the chatline how a male Koel was vigorously chased by an RW, including seizing the cuckoo's tail feathers. When the Ainslie male Koel called on 22 January, only a couple of times about 200 metres from the Ainslie shops, the resident Noisy Friarbird raised persistent alarm and headed halfway in the direction of the calling Koel. It became clear only later that the Noisy Friarbird had a second brood, but with already hatched young (M. Lenz).

If the female Koel moves beyond the regular male territory boundaries where hosts may be more naïve, chances of placing its eggs into host nests may increase. Indeed, walking the core area of the male territory at the time when young were discovered around the Ainslie shops did not yield any positive records. The only exception was the first young that Stephanie Haygarth recorded. It was found within the core area. However, our observations are still far too limited to draw definite conclusions. It could mean that, in the future, wherever a Koel territory in Canberra has both sexes present, the area to be searched for cuckoo fledglings has to be wider than that delineated just by male calls.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Martin Butterfield for providing the two figures based on COG's Garden Bird Survey and to Paul Fennell for making the Koel observations from COG's general database available to us. We thank Terry Bell, Coral Dow, Paul Fennell, Robin Hide, Steve Holliday and Peter Milburn for their contributions to the COG chatline relevant to this article. Geoffrey Dabb and Steve Holliday provided further information that assisted with writing this article.

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Juvenile Eastern Koel (photo by Michael Lenz)

Red Wattlebird feeds juvenile Eastern Koel (photo by Michael Lenz)

SUCCESSIVE NESTING BY THE WHITE-WINGED CHOUGH ON COOLEMAN RIDGE

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Abstract: *This article describes the successful double nesting of a small group of White-winged Choughs on the edge of a Canberra suburb. This is considered unusual for such a small group, particularly in such close succession*

Introduction

Before the January 2003 fires, the White-winged Chough *Corcorax melanorhamphos* was regularly seen in groups in the former Narrabundah Hill pine plantation, and occasionally in the more open country on the NW end of Chapman/Cooleman Ridge, including in my Garden Bird Survey (GBS) site.

However, this species was significantly affected by the fires. I had only two widely-spaced post-fire records in burnt areas, until the morning of 12 August 2007 when I came across a group of five birds building their mud nest on a horizontal branch in a small eucalypt about 25 metres WNW of the dam at the start of the track/horse trail that comes off the end of Kathner Street Chapman (35 21 00 S, 149 01 20 E). On the morning of 25 August there were seven birds on or around the nest, plus a further one on the dam wall, but following this the breeding attempt was abandoned and the nest area quiet.

First successful breeding attempt

Except for a couple of sightings of more than ten birds about 400 metres further up the track in early November 2007, choughs were not seen again until the morning of 2 August 2008 when again there were five birds rebuilding the nest which had substantially survived over the past year. They were still observed building on 9 August, by which time the nest was significantly higher than usual. I was away for the second half of the month but on my return on 30 August there was a bird sitting on the nest and four others flew in to the tree.

On subsequent visits there was always a bird on the nest, but over time it was sitting higher suggestive of brooding chicks rather than eggs. However, it was not until 20 September that I first saw three adults feeding three chicks in the nest. Feeding was observed a number of times over the next three weeks, with the chicks becoming noticeably larger. Fledging was confirmed late in the afternoon of 8 October when five adults (the maximum number seen at any time)

were observed feeding three very noisy and hungry chicks on the dam wall about 30 metres from the nest tree. A bird had still been observed brooding early that morning.

Second successful breeding attempt

While showing the empty nest during a COG beginners outing on 18 October, we were surprised by a single bird appearing to pick up mud from the dam and take it to the nest. The suspicion of a successive breeding attempt was confirmed early in the morning of 25 October, with three birds appearing to be adding mud to the nest, and with the three fledglings observed nearby. A bird was back on the nest at 6.30am on 1 November, and was always on the nest over five visits to 28 November, again sitting much higher towards the end of this period. A maximum of six other birds was seen in the area during this period, usually feeding noisily within 100 metres of the nest. Often the three fledglings were identified among them by their darker eyes and begging behaviour.

The bird was sitting high on the nest at 6.55am on 29 November, when two of the three birds nearby flew in and fed two chicks, with the typical switch of the brooder occurring. Feeding was subsequently observed a number of times until the afternoon of 11 December, when two chicks could be discerned in the empty nest, six birds having flown from or near the nest tree on approach, but they did not return to feed over a ten minute period. Again this was the maximum number of birds seen in the area during this time of feeding the second set of chicks, and included the three fledglings from the earlier clutch.

Fledging of second brood

At 6.35am on 14 December one of the chicks was on the branch out of the nest, with the second much smaller and shorter-tailed chick still in the nest but flexing its wings. Very soon a bird arrived and fed it, whereupon the larger chick flew up and away at least five metres (and three metres high). There were three other birds nearby, including in the nest tree but numbers increased as I walked past and up the ridge, until about 200 metres away there was a great commotion of choughs arguing in a tree. Six of them subsequently flew back in the direction of the nest tree, leaving behind two adults and three immature birds, presumably the older fledglings.

The smaller chick was still in the nest at 5.40pm on 17 December, begging loudly but never leaving the nest, even to climb onto the rim. A rather scruffy adult was in attendance on the branch and sometimes on the rim of the nest, and while it interacted with the chick it never fed it. At first there were three other birds in the nest tree, including what appeared to be one of the birds from the earlier clutch, but these soon flew away to feed and did not return over a ten minute period.

The nest was empty on the next visit, early in the morning of 21 December

and despite several visits over the next couple of hours there was no sign of either of the two most recent chick/fledglings, though up to five other choughs were seen within 30 metres of the nest tree, including two of the first brood. During a brief visit early the next morning, again only large choughs were seen feeding on the ground within 50 metres of the nest trees.

Unfortunately I was away from Canberra for three weeks over the Christmas/New Year period, but on my return on 12 January I was not able to locate White-winged Choughs in the area, despite a number of visits. The fate of the new fledglings is thus unknown.

Discussion

Based on my knowledge of the Australian Magpie *Cracticus tibicen* and the Pied Currawong *Strepera graculina* the successive successful breeding of such a relatively large-sized bird such as the White-winged Chough surprised me. Higgins *et al*. (2006) is surprisingly unhelpful on this issue, but does note that the smallest group for which even single nesting is successful is four, which might be expected to raise only one nestling to fledging. It notes that breeding success is strongly correlated with the number of auxiliaries, and that success increases with each additional helper beyond four. Only groups of seven or more can expect to raise more than one young on average, with only groups of more than ten occasionally raising all four nestlings.

Rob Heinsohn (pers. comm.) has clarified that White-winged Choughs do often have two broods in the same season in the Canberra region. However, it is unusual for such a small group as observed to try a second time, especially after such high success the first time. Normally it would only be the larger groups, say greater than 9-10 birds, that would try a second time. And to do so immediately after successfully fledging a brood is very unusual.

It is therefore a surprise that the group of five birds successfully raised the first brood of three chicks, and that the second brood of two may have been raised by three adults only. I regularly saw three of the fledglings in amongst the maximum of six birds present, though they were never seen to feed the new brood. There were never more than three adults at a time except, on 14 December, when a total of eight adults was seen. I thought at the time that they were trying to drive the earlier brood away, but this was not successful as on two subsequent occasions I observed several of them near the nest tree.

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ENJOYABLE URBAN CHOUGHS

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Background

There has been a family group of White-winged Choughs *Corcorax melanorhamphos* living in the vicinity of our house in Lyneham since 1987. Numbers in the group have ranged between six and 20 over that time period. This paper records some observations of that group. We fully acknowledge that one cannot attribute the mental processes or emotions of one species (i.e. humans) to another species (i.e. choughs) but nevertheless we have taken some liberties in this regard as a way of describing observed behaviour.

Over the years the choughs have not shown loyalty to any particular tree for nest building but moved from tree to tree (always a eucalypt though) perhaps depending on the availability of mud. The group used a single nest (sometimes requiring repairs or replacement during the season) in each year except 2007 when the group managed two nests simultaneously in trees about 40 metres apart for part of the breeding season. In the drought year of 2006 we doubt that they would have nested at all if we had not made a supply of mud available for them.

The length of their breeding season has varied with the longest noted being about nine months during which four or possibly five (as we were absent for some time) successive broods were reared. One, two or occasionally three, young were successfully reared in each brood.

During the breeding season, the family group seldom moves beyond the half dozen suburban blocks nearest the nest site but in the off season they range much further and weeks can pass without a return visit.

Communal Activity

Choughs are of course very much communal birds. All members of the family group participate in nest building and feeding the young as is well known. We have noticed some variation in devotion to feeding the begging young. Mostly the group, with eyes flaring red and wings drooped ceremoniously, will compulsively continue to stuff food into the beaks of the young birds that have left the nest and are mobile, even when the young has a full stomach and fully capable of picking up food themselves. It is interesting to watch the decision-making process – 'shall I give this beakful to the young one or am I now morally entitled to run off behind a bush and swallow it myself?' Occasionally the adults get tired of their devotion and

seemingly say 'the food is on the ground in front of you, pick it up yourself'.

Other communal activities include dusting, preening, the afternoon siesta and even punishment. We have not been able to work out what action constitutes a 'crime' but when there is a dispute most of the group members will participate in the punishment by chasing and pecking the offender even if they did not actually witness the offence. Punishment does not last long and is not very violent.

On one occasion we captured one of the birds to disentangle a cord that had become tightly wound around its feet. The other birds stood in a circle about two metres away constantly calling encouragement and then after release, three of them sat very close to the freed bird seemingly to provide comfort while it recovered from its ordeal.

Choughs, like many other species, will occasionally practice sunning – lying spread-eagled on the ground in the hot sun for several minutes at a time looking as though they are dead or in a stupor. On just one occasion we witnessed a collective chough 'sunbake' (Figure 1) where 11 or 12 birds participated.

Figure 1. Collective chough 'sunbake'

Interactions with Humans

We have become very fond of the chough family and they readily take food from our hands during the breeding season. They will come running or flying from up to 80 metres away if called but we would not describe them as pets as their loyalty is always to the group. They are less interested in being fed during the off season. Donations of human hair at nest-building time are highly prized though.

I have actually had to step over the top of choughs when crossing the back yard because they would not move out of the way. On those occasions, emboldened by a strong sense of territoriality and confidence in our benevolence, they have been so focused on digging up cockchafer (Scarabidae) larvae in what remained of our drought-stricken lawn, that humans were ignored.

Playtime

During breeding season, the family group has a daily routine which is not rigid but reasonably predictable. Once well-fed and before nap time, there is 'playtime' and that is when they really endear themselves to us. Playtime can break out at other times of the day as well if the mood is right.

Games we have commonly observed include:

- Hurling the pegs out of the peg basket on the clothesline and taking delight in watching the effects of gravity on the pegs.
- Removing the plastic cover from a sprinkler almost every day (that was annoying).
- Chasey, where one would pick up a large leaf and run. The others would chase the initiating bird to try and grab the leaf so they in turn could run with it. The game usually ends in a rolling, tumbling mass of birds wrestling for the leaf.
- Leaf wrestling (Figure 2). A large loquat leaf or piece of bark is selected as 'the enemy' and the bird would hold the leaf with both feet, roll on its back and then peck and writhe as though it was engaged in hand-to-hand combat with an attacker.
- Swinging upside down from a low hanging twig (Figure 3). Some of the other birds would then rush in to gently peck the swinging bird till it fell to the ground whereupon several would deliberately stand on the compliant upside-down fallen bird.

Figure 2. Leaf wrestling.

- Balancing on a round pine cone and being quite free to fall in a sprawling heap if the cone rolled and they tipped off.
- Playing with plastic toys. It appears plastic items such as bottle lids and other small articles were deliberately brought to the playground and left there for pecking, flicking and kicking later when the mood struck them. The largest toy was a child's windsock that would be wrestled with (Figure 4), dragged around and pulled if the wind fluttered it from low branches. We assume that it was flown in to our property as it was later found on our roof. Flying with such a large item would have been quite a feat.

Figure 3. Swinging upside down from a low hanging twig

Figure 4. Wrestling with a child's windsock.

The envy of the neighbourhood birds

Many of the bird species that regularly visit our place have a strong sense of whether they are welcome or not.

Pied Currawongs *Strepera graculina*, Sulphur-crested Cockatoos *Cacatua galerita* and Common Mynas *Sturnus tristis* are not welcome and they know it. Choughs, Gang-gang Cockatoos *Callocephalon fimbriatum*, Australian King-Parrots *Alisterus scapularis*, Australian Magpies *Cracticus tibicen*, Magpie-larks *Grallina cyanoleuca* and Crimson Rosellas *Platycercus elegans* are welcome and they know it. Over the years the choughs have risen from fourth to second place in the local pecking order behind cockatoos and the intense, noisy chough-magpie battles have declined.

The choughs usually tolerate the other birds on 'their territory' but occasionally will decide to harass some species just for the sport of it or to be obnoxious.

The most remarkable example of inter-species competition that we observed was the local currawongs seeming to try and imitate the choughs. We noticed that the currawongs would watch the choughs throw pegs from the peg basket and then try it themselves later. They also started copying the choughs with the leaf wrestling game, a rather un-currawong-like behaviour. We can only guess of course, but it seemed to us that the currawongs were either trying to gain our acceptance by imitating chough behaviour that they knew we liked, or trying to ingratiate themselves with the choughs so they could share in the benefits. Either way, they failed as stealing the chough eggs left a more powerful impression on both us and the choughs.

Dogs and cats

Choughs have a variety of calls, from the tender mutterings to each other as they forage together, through to a shrill alarm whistle to alert the group to danger. We have noted that they have different alarm calls for dogs they know and for dogs that are strangers. We gradually got to recognize the different calls and eventually could say to each other 'that call means the neighbour's dog is in the yard' and would look out the window and sure enough Ruby was.

The choughs' familiarity with the individual threat posed by each of the local dogs and cats surprised us. Some of the dogs are just big bumbling creatures that are not interested in birds and the choughs will merely stand aside or just fly to a low branch. Other dogs are given a very wide berth. One local cat was a very active bird killer in its youth but has now grown old and we have seen the choughs almost walk under its nose apparently rubbing-in their judgement on its present infirmity.

THE CANBERRA BIRD BLITZ 2008

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Abstract: *This paper describes the conduct of Canberra's fourth 'bird blitz' held on 25-26 October 2008, outlines some findings and provides comparisons with the blitzes of 2005, 2006 and 2007.*

Introduction

On Saturday 25 and Sunday 26 October 2008, the Canberra Ornithologists Group (COG) conducted its fourth 'bird blitz', a now-annual event held on the last weekend in October.

Our main aims are to record all species of bird present in the ACT over that weekend in all major habitats, to obtain a broad indication of their abundance, and to record breeding status. To achieve this, we set out to conduct a minimum of one 20-minute two-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). By this exercise, we also hope to encourage more of our members to get out, survey and submit datasheets.

The data collected are entered in the COG Atlas database, and subsequently contributed to the Birds Australia Atlas Database. They are available for scientific purposes and as an input to Canberra land use planning.

Conduct of the blitzes

Participants register for their preferred grid cells, on a first-in, best-dressed basis. In the allocation process, some site preference is given to members who survey given sites on a regular basis. More tardy volunteers are cajoled by the organiser into surveying the remaining sites. Less experienced birders are allocated to accompany those experienced birders who indicate a willingness to take them along. And as a modest inducement to participants, a variety of prizes are on offer, courtesy of our members.

Participants are allowed to choose their preferred methodology from the three Birds Australia Atlas options: a 20-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 remains within a given COG grid cell).

Results and discussion

Operational issues

Our chosen weekend in 2008 was a distinct improvement in terms of the

weather, compared with the previous blitzes. It did not snow! Birding conditions were generally fair throughout the weekend. Most adopters of grid cells managed to conduct their surveys, and quite a few did optional extra surveys, contributing to the satisfactory overall coverage we achieved.

Level of participation

At least 86 COG members took part in the blitz, plus a number of unnamed 'extras' (a list of known participants is at Table 2). This compares with the 83 named participants in 2007, 75 in 2005 and 62 in 2006. The steady increase in participation levels is pleasing. If data gleaned from the 'number surveying' box on the datasheet is taken into consideration, we would have achieved a participation rate of well above 100.

Despite the level of uncertainty about the numbers participating, we achieved our aim of encouraging a few more of our members to survey. There were 21 named members who participated in the blitz for the first time in 2008. Forty hardy souls warmed to the task and blitzed for part or all of the two days, again an increase on previous years.

Coverage

We achieved a reasonable coverage of the ACT in this fourth blitz, with surveys conducted in 118 of the 165 possible grid cells (72%), compared with 132 in 2007, 99 in 2006 and 109 in 2005. Total coverage was never going to be possible with the number of blitzers available, as some of the grid cells in Namadgi National Park require a strenuous bush-bash to reach. However, virtually all major 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

While specific habitat types have not yet been analysed, a broad land use division of datasheets has again been attempted. Last year's figures are provided for comparison, in parentheses. Urban areas were covered in 49 surveys, 15% (42 last year); rural or semi-rural 49, 15% (63); Namadgi National Park 120, 38% (127); Canberra Nature Park or nature reserves 65, 24% (54); the Murrumbidgee River Corridor 13, 4% (15); the Australian National Botanic Gardens 3 (1); sewage ponds 2; Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve 5 (5).

The richest bird areas, notwithstanding the experience of the observers or the time spent surveying, were once again 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. Mulligan's Flat (grids L10, M10, and M11), Callum Brae (L15), The Pinnacle (I13) and Mt Ainslie (L13) were standouts, with between 40 and 60 species recorded by many observers. As usual grid cell L14, which includes a variety of habitats in Jerrabomberra Wetlands NR, Fyshwick sewage ponds, Molonglo Reach and the paleochannels, and which was surveyed in part at least by a number of blitzers, produced the highest number of species recorded – 77.

Datasheets received

Participants returned 316 datasheets for the 2008 blitz weekend, the same number as in 2007 and compared with 242 datasheets for 2006 and 254 for 2005. More datasheets were submitted but some, based on the latitudes and longitudes provided, proved to be just outside the ACT borders. Some 58 were submitted electronically; the remaining 258 were hard-copy.

The percentage contribution of the blitz datasheets to the overall number of datasheets for the COG area of interest will not be known until the full-year figures for data sheets are in for 2008-09. However, it is likely to be in the order of 10%.

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 personal preference and time or other constraints. In the event, most adopted the Birds Australia Atlas recommended option, namely 2-ha 20-minute surveys. Of the datasheets received, 172 (54%) were for 2-ha surveys; 100 (32%) were for surveys within 500 m of a central point; 28 (9%) 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 16 (5%) were for incidental records.

Choice of day

Considerably more surveys were conducted on the Saturday, 198 (63%), compared with 118 (37%) for Sunday. The weather was relatively stable over the whole weekend for our fourth blitz but perhaps blitzers who were soaked on the Sunday in 2007 decided not to trust the weather gods again.

Species recorded

Figure 1 and Table 2 show, a total of 173 species of bird was recorded in the ACT over the two blitz days. This compares with 157 in 2005, 161 in 2006 and 163 in 2007. When the four blitz years are considered, 140 species have been recorded every year, while 190 species have been recorded in any of the four blitz years. The species total for all of the financial year 2007-08 and for the whole of COG's area of concern, as recorded in COG's annual bird report, was 232 (COG 2009).

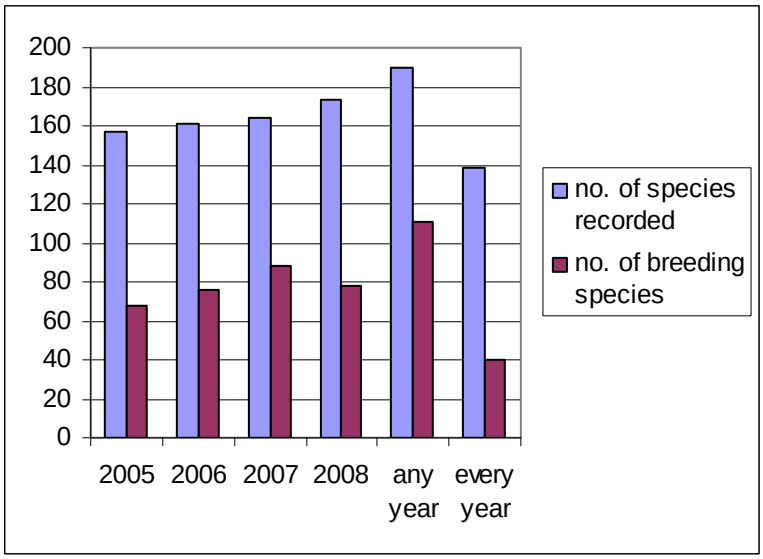

Figure 1. Numbers of species recorded, and recorded breeding

As Table 2 shows, 17 species were recorded in 2008 and not in the previous year. Some of these species such as the Musk Duck were inadvertent omissions in 2007, when their known location was not surveyed. Records of the night birds the Owlet-nightjar and the Southern Boobook resulted from keen blitzers camping overnight in likely locations; while the Intermediate and Little Egret records, along with the Buff-banded Rail, Baillon's Crake, Painted Button-quail and Chestnut-rumped Heathwren were pleasant surprises. The Spotted Dove was, regrettably, not a surprise – but on a more positive note, there was only one record of the species.

Species not recorded in 2008 but which we might have expected to find, based on previous experience, included Pink-eared Duck, White-necked Heron, Glossy Ibis, Australian Spotted Crake, Black-winged Stilt and Red-browed Treecreeper. And a few species, including the bitterns and the White-fronted Chat, continue to elude blitzers.

It was encouraging to see the continued resurgence of several species badly affected by the aftermath of the 2003 fires: Superb Lyrebird, Eastern Whipbird, Spotted Quail-thrush, Bassian Thrush, Wonga Pigeon and Cicadabird.

The expected cuckoo species were all recorded, including the Eastern Koel (3 records), and in encouraging numbers after their poor showing in 2006: Pallid Cuckoo (29 records); Brush Cuckoo (3); Fan-tailed Cuckoo (47); Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo (26) and Shining Bronze-Cuckoo (18). All the usual raptors were again present, though in fairly

low numbers: only the Nankeen Kestrel, with 35 records, could be deemed 'common'.

During the 2008 blitz, 77 species (45% of the 173 species) were recorded as breeding, when the broadest possible indicators of breeding were used. As shown in Figure 1 and Table 2, this compares with 88 breeding species in the 2007 blitz, 76 in the 2006 blitz and 68 in the 2005 blitz. Although not strictly comparable, across all of COG's area of concern in 2007-08, 129 species were recorded as breeding (COG 2009). The 2008 drop in blitz breeding records is hopefully not a cause for concern, however, as several of our top birders with an intimate knowledge of the breeding birds in their special spots were unable to participate.

The species most commonly recorded as breeding was once again the Australian Magpie, with 38 breeding records compared with 37 in 2007. This is no surprise, as the maggie is common, easily recognisable, breeds early and the dependent young are particularly vocal. And again in second place, regrettably, was the introduced Common Starling with 32 indications of breeding (25 in 2007). Other relatively common breeding species were the Red Wattlebird (17 records), Magpie-lark (16), Eastern Rosella (15), Crimson Rosella (13), Galah and White-winged Chough (both 11). We can only hope that the relatively few breeding records of small birds was a result of the tyranny of the 2-ha survey methodology, which leaves little time to track them down. Breeding highlights for 2008 included records for two species listed as vulnerable in the ACT: Little Eagle (on) and Brown Treecreeper (cf).

Most frequently recorded species

The ten most frequently recorded species overall in the 2008 blitz, in rank order (with the 2007 blitz ranking in parentheses) were:

Australian Magpie – 184 records (1)
Crimson Rosella – 180 (3)
Red Wattlebird –166 (5)
Yellow-faced Honeyeater – 164 (8)
Grey Fantail – 157 (7)
Pied Currawong – 155 (2)
Superb Fairy-wren – 153 (10)
Australian Raven – 152 (4)
Sulphur-crested Cockatoo – 152
Spotted Pardalote – 137

Comparing the blitz top 10 with the Annual Bird Report top 10 for 2007-08, we find that seven of the species overlap.

Species recorded only once in the 2008 blitz

Indian Peafowl
Magpie Goose
Musk Duck
Chestnut Teal
Blue-billed Duck
Spotted Dove
Peaceful Dove
Wonga Pigeon
Intermediate Egret
Little Egret
White-bellied Sea-Eagle
Buff-banded Rail

Painted Button-quail
Whiskered Tern
Chestnut-rumped Heathwren
Spotted Quail-thrush
Rose Robin
Brown Songlark

Most records were of a single bird; however the peafowl flock numbered 12.

Species not recorded

As indicated above, some of the 2008 omissions included species known to be present in the ACT at the time and which simply proved elusive on the blitz weekend. Others, such as the Pied Butcherbird and Cattle Egret, are species whose presence cannot be relied on in the ACT. Species unrecorded in all four blitzes include bitterns, chats, Olive Whistler, Zebra Finch and Powerful Owl. Nocturnal birds are particularly likely to be under-recorded.

Vulnerable species

No endangered species was recorded in the 2008 blitz, but six species regarded as vulnerable in the ACT were: Little Eagle, Hooded Robin, Superb Parrot, Brown Treecreeper, Varied Sittella and White-winged Triller.

There were seven records of the Hooded Robin, from six grid cells, with abundances ranging from 1-2. No breeding was recorded. Locations in which the birds were recorded were Orroral Valley, Caloola Farm, Fitzs Hill, West Macgregor, Naas, Nursery Swamp and Goorooyaroo NR.

Superb Parrots (12 records, of 1-15 birds) were seen in eight grid cells in their now-usual haunts in the north and north-west of the ACT. No breeding was recorded.

Brown Treecreepers were recorded nine times, with a range of 1-4 birds, from nine grid cells, in Namadgi NP, Castle Hill, Tharwa sandwash, Newline and 'Kama'. There were two breeding records (both cf).

There were only four records of Varied Sittella, compared with six the previous year, from four distinct grid cells, with abundances ranging from 2-4 birds. No breeding was recorded. This reflects the worrying downward trend also noted in the 2007-08 Annual Bird Report (COG 2009).

White-winged Triller records too were down on the 41 in the 2007 blitz. There were only 24 records this time, with a maximum of ten birds, from 19 widespread grid cells from many urban-fringe nature reserves as well as Namadgi NP. There were no breeding records.

Little Eagles (1-2 birds) were recorded five times, from four grid cells. Locations from which they were recorded were Fyshwick sewage ponds, Goorooyaroo NR, Mt Ainslie and West Macgregor. The last-named was the site of a breeding event, with a bird recorded on a nest from which a chick subsequently fledged.

Conclusions and lessons for the future

In terms of our aims, the blitz has increased significantly the amount of available data about Canberra's birds. It is likely that several of the grid cells surveyed would not have been covered other than through the targeted efforts of the blitz. The blitz data will be made available to the managers of the Canberra nature reserves and Namadgi National Park. Over time, we anticipate that the annual blitz will help to establish trends.

A major lesson to be drawn from the four blitzes to date is that, when prompted, more of our members will get out, survey, and submit datasheets. And as in previous years, many blitzers took the opportunity to spend longer than their regular 20 minutes surveying their special spots.

As for the results, there was, inevitably, an element of 'luck of the day' and the final species total is not of huge significance. The blitz breeding observations, however, contribute disproportionately to our overall knowledge of bird breeding in Canberra.

Given the tendency of our vulnerable species to have a patchy distribution, any information about their distribution, numbers and breeding status is valuable, particularly in those areas which are due to have significant land use decisions made in the next decade or so.

The blitz results reinforce the critical importance of the contribution of Canberra's nature parks and reserves to bird conservation.

The cumulative input of 316 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.

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 sometimes less than ideal weather conditions. The assistance of staff at Namadgi National Park in providing advice, and access to areas behind locked gates, is greatly appreciated. And sincere thanks go to all those COG members who donated prizes.

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Table 1. Known blitz participants 2008

Barbara Allan
Mark Allen
Ian Anderson
Frank Antram
Shaun Bagley
Darryl Beaumont
Rosemary Blemings
Suzi Bond
John Brannan
Muriel Brookfield
Prue Buckley
Martin Butterfield
Brian Chauncy
Jon Chey
Grahame Clark
Kay Clayton
Mark Clayton
Bill Compston
Elizabeth Compston
Roger Curnow
Geoffrey Dabb
Chris Davey
Meg Doepel
Paul Fennell
Joe Forshaw
Matthew Frawley
Peter Fullagar
Phyl Goddard
John Goldie
Jeannie Gray
Horst Hahne
Kay Hahne
Owen Halton
Stuart Harris
Tobias Hayashi
Jack Holland
Owen Holton
Jim Hone
Janet Irons
Julienne Kamprad
Simon King
Shirley Kral
David Landon
Matthew Larkin
Sue Lashko
Tony Lawson
John Layton
Michael Lenz
Bruce Lindenmayer
Noel Luff
Catriona MacDonald
Rod Mackay
Alison Mackerras
Jeanetta Main
Beth Mantle
Sue Mathews
David McDonald
Noela McDonald
Martyn Moffat
Nicki Munro
Terry Munro
Gail Neumann
Nick Nicholls
Henry Nix
Anthony Overs
Barrie Pennefather
Harvey Perkins
Bruce Ramsay
Greg Ramsay
David Rees
Michael Robbins
Bill Robertson
Margaret Robertson
Susan Robertson
Julian Robinson
Muriel Story
Nicki Taws
Julian Teh
Alan Thomas
Philip Veerman
Ben Walcott
Ros Walcott
John Waldron
Kathy Walter
Tony Willis
Marnix Zwankhuizen

Table 2. Species recorded during the 2005-2008 blitzes
[X=present;*=breeding]

Common name	Scientific name	2005	2006	2007	2008
Emu	*Dromaius novaehollandiae*	X		X	X
Stubble Quail	*Coturnix pectoralis*		X		
Brown Quail	*Coturnix ypsilophora*		X	X	X
Indian Peafowl	*Pavo cristatus*	X			X
Magpie Goose	*Anseranas semipalmata*				X
Musk Duck	*Biziura lobata*	X	X*		X*
Black Swan	*Cygnus atratus*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Australian Wood Duck	*Chenonetta jubata*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Pink-eared Duck	*Malacorhynchus membranaceus*	X	X	X	
Australasian Shoveler	*Anas rhynchotis*	X	X*	X	X*
Grey Teal	*Anas gracilis*	X*	X	X*	X*
Chestnut Teal	*Anas castanea*	X	X	X*	X
Pacific Black Duck	*Anas superciliosa*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Hardhead	*Aythya australis*	X	X	X*	X
Blue-billed Duck	*Oxyura australis*	X	X		X
Australasian Grebe	*Tachybaptus novaehollandiae*	X*	X	X*	X*
Hoary-headed Grebe	*Poliocephalus poliocephalus*	X	X	X	X
Great Crested Grebe	*Podiceps cristatus*	X			
Rock Dove	*Columba livia*	X	X	X	X
Spotted Dove	*Streptopelia chinensis*				X
Common Bronzewing	*Phaps chalcoptera*	X	X	X	X*
Crested Pigeon	*Ocyphaps lophotes*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Peaceful Dove	*Geopelia striata*	X	X		X
Wonga Pigeon	*Leucosarcia picata*	X			X
Tawny Frogmouth	*Podargus strigoides*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Australian Owlet-nightjar	*Aegotheles cristatus*				X
Australasian Darter	*Anhinga novaehollandiae*	X	X*	X*	X*
Little Pied Cormorant	*Microcarbo melanoleucos*	X	X	X*	X*
Great Cormorant	*Phalacrocorax carbo*	X	X	X	X
Little Black Cormorant	*Phalacrocorax sulcirostris*	X	X	X	X
Pied Cormorant	*Phalacrocorax varius*			X	X
Australian Pelican	*Pelecanus conspicillatus*	X	X	X	X
White-necked Heron	*Ardea pacifica*		X	X	
Eastern Great Egret	*Ardea modesta*		X	X	X
Intermediate Egret	*Ardea intermedia*				X
Cattle Egret	*Ardea ibis*		X		
White-faced Heron	*Egretta novaehollandiae*	X*	X*	X*	X
Little Egret	*Egretta garzetta*				X
Nankeen Night Heron	*Nycticorax caledonicus*	X	X	X	X
Glossy Ibis	*Plegadis falcinellus*		X	X	

Australian White Ibis	*Threskiornis molucca*	X	X	X*	X*
Straw-necked Ibis	*Threskiornis spinicollis*		X	X	X
Royal Spoonbill	*Platalea regia*		X	X	X
Black-shouldered Kite	*Elanus axillaris*	X	X	X	X
White-bellied Sea-Eagle	*Haliaeetus leucogaster*			X	X
Whistling Kite	*Haliastur sphenurus*	X	X	X*	X
Brown Goshawk	*Accipiter fasciatus*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Collared Sparrowhawk	*Accipiter cirrhocephalus*	X	X	X*	X
Swamp Harrier	*Circus approximans*	X	X	X	X
Wedge-tailed Eagle	*Aquila audax*	X	X	X	X
Little Eagle	*Hieraaetus morphnoides*	X	X	X	X*
Nankeen Kestrel	*Falco cenchroides*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Brown Falcon	*Falco berigora*	X	X	X*	X
Australian Hobby	*Falco longipennis*	X	X	X*	X*
Peregrine Falcon	*Falco peregrinus*	X	X	X	X
Purple Swamphen	*Porphyrio porphyrio*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Buff-banded Rail	*Gallirallus philippensis*		X		X
Baillon's Crake	*Porzana pusilla*			X	X
Australian Spotted Crake	*Porzana fluminia*			X	
Dusky Moorhen	*Gallinula tenebrosa*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Eurasian Coot	*Fulica atra*	X*	X	X*	X*
Black-winged Stilt	*Himantopus himantopus*			X	
Black-fronted Dotterel	*Elseyornis melanops*	X	X	X	X
Red-kneed Dotterel	*Erythrogonys cinctus*		X	X	X
Masked Lapwing	*Vanellus miles*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Latham's Snipe	*Gallinago hardwickii*	X	X	X	X
Bar-tailed Godwit	*Limosa lapponica*			X	
Sharp-tailed Sandpiper	*Calidris acuminata*	X		X	
Painted Button-quail	*Turnix varius*	X			X
Whiskered Tern	*Chlidonias hybrida*				X
Silver Gull	*Chroicocephalus novaehollandiae*	X*	X*	X*	X
Glossy Black-Cockatoo	*Calyptorhynchus lathami*	X	X		X
Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo	*Calyptorhynchus funereus*	X	X	X	X*
Gang-gang Cockatoo	*Callocephalon fimbriatum*	X	X	X	X
Major Mitchell's Cockatoo	*Cacatua leadbeateri*			X	
Galah	*Eolophus roseicapillus*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Long-billed Corella	*Cacatua tenuirostris*				X
Little Corella	*Cacatua sanguinea*	X*	X*	X*	X*

Sulphur-crested Cockatoo	*Cacatua galerita*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Rainbow Lorikeet	*Trichoglossus haematodus*	X	X	X	X*
Australian King-Parrot	*Alisterus scapularis*	X	X	X	X*
Superb Parrot	*Polytelis swainsonii*	X	X*	X*	X
Crimson Rosella	*Platycercus elegans*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Eastern Rosella	*Platycercus eximius*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Red-rumped Parrot	*Psephotus haematonotus*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Turquoise Parrot	*Neophema pulchella*	X			
Eastern Koel	*Eudynamys orientalis*			X	X
Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo	*Chalcites basalis*	X	X*	X	X
Shining Bronze-Cuckoo	*Chalcites lucidus*	X*	X*	X	X
Pallid Cuckoo	*Cacomantis pallidus*	X	X*	X	X
Fan-tailed Cuckoo	*Cacomantis flabelliformis*	X	X	X*	X
Brush Cuckoo	*Cacomantis variolosus*	X	X	X	X
Southern Boobook	*Ninox novaeseelandiae*	X	X		X
Laughing Kookaburra	*Dacelo novaeguineae*	X*	X*	X	X
Red-backed Kingfisher	*Todiramphus pyrrhopygius*			X	X
Sacred Kingfisher	*Todiramphus sanctus*	X*	X*	X*	X
Rainbow Bee-eater	*Merops ornatus*	X	X	X*	X*
Dollarbird	*Eurystomus orientalis*	X	X	X*	X
Superb Lyrebird	*Menura novaehollandiae*	X	X	X	X
White-throated Treecreeper	*Cormobates leucophaea*	X	X*	X*	X*
Red-browed Treecreeper	*Climacteris erythrops*	X	X	X	
Brown Treecreeper	*Climacteris picumnus*	X	X	X*	X*
Satin Bowerbird	*Ptilonorhynchus violaceus*	X	X	X	X*
Superb Fairy-wren	*Malurus cyaneus*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Pilotbird	*Pycnoptilus floccosus*	X			
White-browed Scrubwren	*Sericornis frontalis*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Chestnut-rumped Heathwren	*Hylacola pyrrhopygia*				X
Speckled Warbler	*Chthonicola sagittata*	X*	X	X*	X*
Weebill	*Smicrornis brevirostris*	X*	X	X*	X*
Western Gerygone	*Gerygone fusca*	X	X*	X	X
White-throated Gerygone	*Gerygone albogularis*	X*	X	X*	X
Striated Thornbill	*Acanthiza lineata*	X*	X*	X*	X
Yellow Thornbill	*Acanthiza nana*	X	X	X	X
Yellow-rumped Thornbill	*Acanthiza chrysorrhoa*	X*	X*	X*	X*

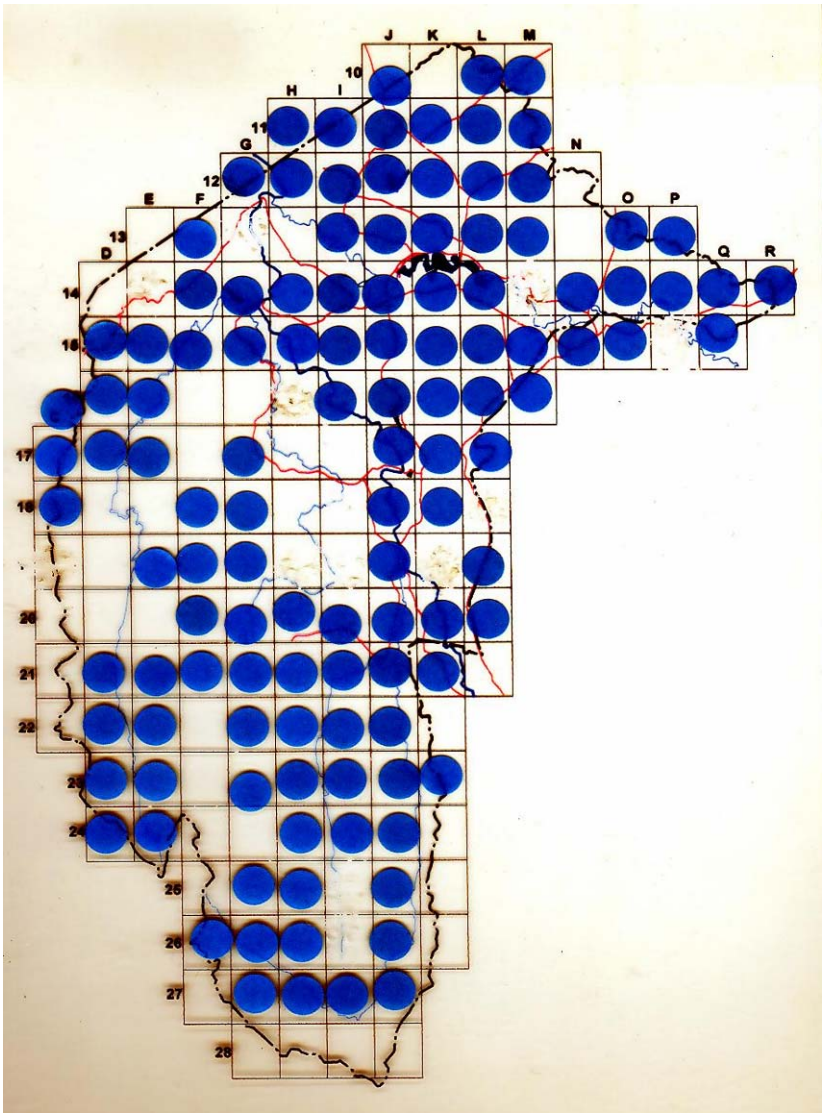
Buff-rumped Thornbill	*Acanthiza reguloides*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Brown Thornbill	*Acanthiza pusilla*	X	X*	X*	X
Southern Whiteface	*Aphelocephala leucopsis*	X	X*	X	X
Spotted Pardalote	*Pardalotus punctatus*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Striated Pardalote	*Pardalotus striatus*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Eastern Spinebill	*Acanthorhynchus tenuirostris*	X*	X*	X	X
Yellow-faced Honeyeater	*Lichenostomus chrysops*	X	X*	X	X*
White-eared Honeyeater	*Lichenostomus leucotis*	X*	X	X*	X*
Fuscous Honeyeater	*Lichenostomus fuscus*	X*	X	X*	X*
White-plumed Honeyeater	*Lichenostomus penicillatus*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Noisy Miner	*Manorina melanocephala*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Red Wattlebird	*Anthochaera carunculata*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Crescent Honeyeater	*Phylidonyris pyrrhopterus*				X
New Holland Honeyeater	*Phylidonyris novaehollandiae*	X	X*	X*	X
Brown-headed Honeyeater	*Melithreptus brevirostris*	X	X	X	X*
White-naped Honeyeater	*Melithreptus lunatus*	X	X	X*	X*
Noisy Friarbird	*Philemon corniculatus*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Spotted Quail-thrush	*Cinclosoma punctatum*	X	X	X	X
Eastern Whipbird	*Psophodes olivaceus*		X	X	X
Varied Sittella	*Daphoenositta chrysoptera*	X*	X*	X*	X
Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike	*Coracina novaehollandiae*	X	X*	X*	X*
Cicadabird	*Coracina tenuirostris*				X
White-winged Triller	*Lalage sueurii*	X*	X*	X*	X
Crested Shrike-tit	*Falcunculus frontatus*	X	X*	X	X
Golden Whistler	*Pachycephala pectoralis*	X	X	X	X
Rufous Whistler	*Pachycephala rufiventris*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Grey Shrike-thrush	*Colluricincla harmonica*	X	X*	X*	X*
Olive-backed Oriole	*Oriolus sagittatus*	X	X	X*	X
Masked Woodswallow	*Artamus personatus*		X	X	X
White-browed Woodswallow	*Artamus superciliosus*		X*	X*	X
Dusky Woodswallow	*Artamus cyanopterus*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Grey Butcherbird	*Cracticus torquatus*	X*	X*	X	X
Pied Butcherbird	*Cracticus nigrogularis*		X		
Australian Magpie	*Cracticus tibicen*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Pied Currawong	*Strepera graculina*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Grey Currawong	*Strepera versicolor*	X	X	X*	X*
Rufous Fantail	*Rhipidura rufifrons*	X		X	X

Grey Fantail	*Rhipidura albiscapa*	X*	X*	X	X*
Willie Wagtail	*Rhipidura leucophrys*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Australian Raven	*Corvus coronoides*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Little Raven	*Corvus mellori*	X*	X	X*	X*
Leaden Flycatcher	*Myiagra rubecula*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Satin Flycatcher	*Myiagra cyanoleuca*	X	X	X	X
Restless Flycatcher	*Myiagra inquieta*	X	X	X	
Magpie-lark	*Grallina cyanoleuca*	X*	X*	X*	X*
White-winged Chough	*Corcorax melanorhamphos*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Jacky Winter	*Microeca fascinans*	X	X*	X	X
Scarlet Robin	*Petroica boodang*	X*	X*	X	X*
Red-capped Robin	*Petroica goodenovii*	X	X*	X*	X
Flame Robin	*Petroica phoenicea*	X	X*	X*	X*
Rose Robin	*Petroica rosea*	X	X	X	X
Hooded Robin	*Melanodryas cucullata*	X*	X*	X*	X
Eastern Yellow Robin	*Eopsaltria australis*	X*	X*	X	X
Eurasian Skylark	*Alauda arvensis*	X	X	X	X*
Golden-headed Cisticola	*Cisticola exilis*	X	X	X	X
Australian Reed-Warbler	*Acrocephalus australis*	X*	X	X	X
Little Grassbird	*Megalurus gramineus*	X	X	X	X
Rufous Songlark	*Cincloramphus mathewsi*	X	X	X	X
Brown Songlark	*Cincloramphus cruralis*	X*	X	X*	X
Silvereye	*Zosterops lateralis*	X	X	X*	X
Welcome Swallow	*Hirundo neoxena*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Fairy Martin	*Petrochelidon ariel*	X	X	X*	X*
Tree Martin	*Petrochelidon nigricans*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Bassian Thrush	*Zoothera lunulata*	X	X		X
Common Blackbird	*Turdus merula*	X*	X	X*	X
Common Starling	*Sturnus vulgaris*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Common Myna	*Sturnus tristis*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Mistletoebird	*Dicaeum hirundinaceum*	X*	X	X	X
Double-barred Finch	*Taeniopygia bichenovii*	X	X*	X*	X*
Red-browed Finch	*Neochmia temporalis*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Diamond Firetail	*Stagonopleura guttata*	X	X	X	X
House Sparrow	*Passer domesticus*	X*	X*	X*	X*
Australasian Pipit	*Anthus novaeseelandiae*	X	X	X*	X*
European Goldfinch	*Carduelis carduelis*	X	X*	X	X
Common Greenfinch	*Chloris chloris*	X			
Mallards, Black Duck-Mallard hybrids and variants		X	X	X	X

Notes

- Domestic ducks and geese, which frequent the lakes, have been recorded in the COG databases but excluded from analysis here, as have domestic chickens even when recorded far from civilisation.
- The peafowl have been included as they appear to be a naturally reproducing 'wild' population, in suburbia.
- The 'mallard' group has been lumped as their exact identity cannot be assured – it probably includes crosses with domestic birds.
- The Emu and Magpie Geese are part of the semi-captive population at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.
- Obvious escapees, such as the Australian Ringneck, have also been excluded, while doubtfuls, such as the Turquoise Parrot, have been left in.
- The above decisions have modestly altered some of the figures published previously.

Map 1. Grid cells surveyed in the 2008 bird blitz



Corrigendum: The map showing grid cells covered in the previous blitz and published in *Canberra Bird Notes* 32: 108 was the map for the previous year's blitz. My apologies.

AVIAN HIGHLIGHTS IN THE PRECINCTS OF A MAJOR SHOPPING CENTRE APRIL 2003 – MAY 2008

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Introduction

During the past five years I often sat in my vehicle at the outdoor car parks of Westfield Shoppingtown, Belconnen (WSB) – commonly called Belconnen Mall – eating lunch or waiting for people to return from appointments and shopping etc. And, as is the wont of inveterate birders, I noted the birds I saw. These casual, sporadic observations revealed 55 species including several highlights. I have not listed here all species seen, rather, I've just mentioned the more memorable highlights. Several species such as Wedge-tailed Eagle *Aquila audax*, Australian White Ibis *Threskiornis molucca*, Australian Pelican *Pelecanus conspicillatus* and Fairy Martin *Petrochelidon nigrecans* were seen overhead. In the main, my list reflected a cross-section of dry woodland species and waterbirds to be expected in the vicinity of a large body of water in Canberra, specifically Lake Ginninderra.

The availability of sustenance (discarded take-out food and open rubbish skips containing food industry waste) as well as warm and sheltered roosting locations on the mall building and in undercover car parks attract birds to this otherwise uninviting area of cars, bitumen, and stone-covered median strips interspersed with smaller Eucalyptus and exotic deciduous trees.

Incidentally, some contemporary writers use the word 'cryptozoic' (which my Macquarie dictionary defines as 'Pre-Cambrian: A geological period, era or system of rocks older than the Cambrian, characterised by almost complete lack of fossils') to describe the way certain animals have adapted to exist alongside civilisation while remaining apart from it. In this context it seems to suggest an inconspicuous, enigmatic fauna. Such behaviour may increase if the open spaces and wildlife corridors of Canberra (one time a sympathetically planned and well managed little city) continue to recede before the rapacious god development and its insidious handmaiden infill. In considering this the words of American anthropologist, environmentalist and poet, Loren Eiseley come to mind: 'In the days of frost seek a minor sun'.

Highlights

House sparrows *Passer domesticus* may appear too mundane to be considered a highlight, however, since their numbers crashed in Britain, and there appears to be a

drop in the local population, I don't discount them as what affects the sparrows may impact on others – I think of the coal miners' canary. Sparrows often feed on dead insects adhered to parked vehicles at WSB during warmer months, but Common Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris* and Common Mynas *S. tristis*, feeding on food scraps nearby, ignore the insect smorgasbord. Although usually common the year round at WSB sparrows are less common at the Kippax Shopping Centre (Holt) and in my Holt backyard. They become conspicuous in the latter for a while during spring and again come March when mainly immature birds appear for about ten days.

When small opportunists arrive to take advantage of society's flotsam and jetsam, those higher up the food chain seek to prey upon them. Accordingly, raptors are not remarkably uncommon around WSB car parks.

On May 29 2003 I was in my vehicle at an outdoor car park when something struck the windshield. Startled, I found I was staring into the eye of a Collared Sparrowhawk *Accipter cirrhoephalus*. The eye put me in mind of a small, citrine gemstone surmounted by a gleaming obsidian disc. The hawk remained propped on spread tail with one foot grasping the arm of a windshield wiper while the other gripped a live distress-calling Common Starling. After a minute it sprang from the bonnet and carried off the still-calling starling, at about 1.5m from the ground. A pair of Magpie-larks *Grallina cyanoleuca* gave chase, until it disappeared among cars 40 metres away in the direction of a thick hedge which I searched without success (Layton 2003).

Near sunset one day I focussed my binoculars on a Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* perched atop the roof of the mall. Side-lit by the westering sun its courtly disposition radiated élan reminiscent of the Spanish Imperial Eagle *Aquila adalberti* displayed on Roman battle standards. A refreshing respite from the mediocrity of a modern shopping mall.

One afternoon while walking along a mall balcony I was surprised to see a pair of Red-rumped Parrots *Psephotus haematonotus* land on the rim of a loudspeaker blaring Bing Crosby recordings – a tactic intended to repel buskers. The parrots sat quietly as Bing belted out *Pistol Packin' Mama*. I scanned the sky and saw an Australian Hobby *Falco longipennis* loitering nearby. Perhaps its presence prompted the red-rumps to seek this rowdy retreat. Five minutes later they left unharmed, albeit with likely hearing impairment.

Those intelligent scavengers, Australian Ravens *Corvus coronoides*, seem omnipresent around WSB. One time my attention was drawn to a raven pecking at something in the corner of an outside ledge on a third-level car park. It was soon joined by three others calling loudly and extending their necks as it gobbled what appeared to be french

fries before being driven off. I wondered if it was an interloper raiding the local ravens' food cache. Minutes later, what appeared to be the raider returned, retrieved a white object from the ledge and deposited it in a rainwater puddle only to be chased away when others arrived and picked the item from the water, placed it on the ground and pecked but appeared not to consume it and soon left. I investigated and found the object was part of a polystyrene hamburger box.

Walking towards the mall on January 15 2006 I looked up and saw small groups and pairs of parrots flying over from north to south. I didn't recognise the species until, recalling recent reports on the COG chatline, I realised I was watching Superb Parrots *Polytelis swainsonii* and began willing them to land in nearby trees. As it turned out they didn't travel too far. That evening, I learnt on the COG chatline Superb Parrots were congregating in trees in the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) car park, about 150 metres away. On January 20 I watched some 50 Superb Parrots with dependent young feeding on psyllid-infested Red Box *Eucalyptus polyanthemos* in the DIMA car parks. Reportedly the summer of 2005/06 saw the largest aggregation of the birds ever recorded in Canberra (Lashko 2006).

Driving into the car park one morning, a pair of Masked Lapwings *Vanellus miles* flew towards my windshield calling stridently before turning away at the last second. They withdrew 25 metres flying close to the ground, and I saw the cause of their angst was a tiny, fuzzy chick they were shepherding to safety, its match stick-like legs a blur as it sprinted across the bitumen. I've long suspected they were nesting in the area, and here, at least, was a strong indication.

Early on a stormy March morning when the rain-washed car park glistened as sunlight shafted momentarily through the overcast, a pair of Pacific Black Ducks *Anas supercilliosa* spiralled down as if to land. Immediately the leading duck's feet touched the bitumen it shot skywards. The second duck arched its wings forward and seemed to hang in mid air before following its mate. Apparently, the birds mistook the expanse of wet bitumen, devoid of cars, for a body of water. At first I was amused by their faux pas, then felt sympathetic because their environment had been altered so dramatically. But, as the sky darkened and rain resumed, I was buoyed by words written on a Wisconsin farm over sixty years ago:

A March morning is only as drab as he who walks in it without a glance skyward, ear cocked for geese.

Aldo Leopold
A Sand County Almanac

Leaving the cinema on a mild October evening I noticed birds hawking back and forth above the mall roof, but, without binoculars I was hard put to identify them until a few landed and turned out to be

Silver Gulls *Chroicephalus novaehollandiae*. As I pulled into my Holt cul-de-sac, I noticed Bogong Moths *Agrotis infusa* congregating around the street lamps. Apparently a migratory stream passed over Belconnen that evening. Perhaps the gulls were preying on the bogong bounty.

Late one May afternoon the raucous chorus of a group of Laughing Kookaburras *Dacelo novaeguineae* carried across the frosty dusk from Lake Ginninderra bringing memories of a bushland boyhood and a reminder our city can still be described as the Bush Capital – long may it remain.

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ODD OBS

Spoonbills and fishing lines

Waterbirds around Canberra are frequently seen entangled by pieces of fishing line. These have included cormorants and pelicans. Such incidents are not surprising given the popularity of carp angling, the amount of gear that must be lost in our shallow tangled waterways, and the feeding methods of some common waterbird species.

Martin Butterfield has reported in this issue on the successful nesting of Royal Spoonbills *Platalea regia* at Jerrabomberra Wetlands. In collecting enough food for their hungry young the adults must have sifted and resifted all the muddy bottoms in the vicinity within reach of their scything bills. The product of this activity was then transferred wholesale to the thrusting bills of the begging juveniles.

One adult dragged around about a metre of fishing line for much of one day, although happily it seemed to be rid of it by the next day. This was not before one of the juveniles managed to get about a half-metre down its own throat. The photo shows the two connected birds.

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Ovicidal choughs

On Sunday 30 November 2008, Bruce Lindenmayer and I were taking part in the regular COG survey at Mulligan's Flat Nature Reserve. At one of the survey sites, I noticed some White-winged Choughs *Corcorax*

melanorhamphos about 30 feet up a nearby tree and wandered a little closer to get a more accurate count. Bruce joined me and we concluded that there were five birds in all, including one sitting on a nest.

Just then, a much larger group of choughs, perhaps ten or 12, flew towards the same tree and drove the nesting group away from the nest. In the ensuing mêlée, while Bruce was busy trying to count the screeching and flapping birds, I focused my binos on the nest just in time to see a chough perched on the edge of the nest, presumably one of the raiders, reach into the nest, pick up an egg and chuck it over the side of the nest. I followed the trajectory of the egg and saw a splash of fluid as it hit the ground and burst.

At about that point, the raiding party was successfully driven off by the nesting group, one of which then settled back down on the nest. Bruce and I went over to the spot where the egg had fallen and found its remains, consisting of one largish and a couple of smaller bits of shell, as well as perhaps a teaspoon of clear egg 'white'. The larger shell fragment had a small smear of blood on the inside.

I am told that choughs are known to 'kidnap' young from other chough groups, but I had never seen or heard of choughs destroying eggs in this way. Nor had anyone else I spoke to in the survey group. However, chough-guru Rob Heinsohn at the Australian National University tells me that he has seen this happen before, albeit rarely, and has published the details (Heinsohn 1988).

This fascinating paper also describes examples of chough nests (with eggs) being destroyed by rival groups. And they always seemed like such a *nice* bird!

Reference

Heinsohn, R.G. (1988) Intergroup ovicide and nest destruction in cooperatively breeding White-winged Choughs. *Animal Behaviour 36*: 1856-1858.

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Bar-tailed Godwit

On the morning of Thursday 25 October 2007, I received an excited phone call from former Canberran, and now Brisbane-based birder, Matt Gilfedder. Matt informed me that he had been birding at Jerrabomberra Wetlands Nature Reserve (Kelly's Swamp) at 6.15 that morning when he had seen a godwit at the southern end of the swamp. Hesitant of its identity to species without a field guide, Matt emailed me a photograph of the godwit in flight which clearly showed barring on its tail feathers, unambiguously identifying a Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*.

The word went out and not long afterwards a twitch of birders descended on Kelly's Swamp. Despite a thorough search of the swamp and surrounds, however, the bird was not found. With some birders heeding the call to return to work, the group split and moved into

the paddocks to the north of Kelly's Swamp to search the palaeo channels. The godwit was soon found by Peter Milburn, Martin Butterfield, Martyn Moffat and I. We observed the bird in drizzly conditions for about 30 minutes noting its diagnostic features; a large wader with a long slightly upturned bill, pink for about two thirds its length. Without a spotting scope and in poor light, the barred tail was difficult to observe, though buff plumage indicated that it was probably an immature bird. During the time of observation the bird was sharing the palaeo channel with a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper *Calidris acuminata*, though no interaction was noted.

The godwit was seen by others that afternoon in the palaeo channels and also later when it returned to Kelly's Swamp, where it appeared to favour the long grass at the southern end (though it was also observed in shallow water). There appeared to be a pattern of behaviour, indicated by regular movement between the two sites. Many observers commented on the chatline that the godwit appeared 'cooperative' and not at all 'shy' of observers, though it was flushed on a number of occasions by bird watchers. The godwit was also flushed by a passing Whistling Kite *Haliastur sphenurus* and flew almost directly over Cygnus hide before settling back on the far bank at the southern end of the swamp (Marnix Zwankhuizen, pers. comm., 26 October). Steve Holliday observed another interaction with a Whistling Kite and reported that, 'one time it stuck its head under its wing and appeared to go to sleep, however when other birds reacted to a Whistling Kite flying over it was quickly on the alert although it didn't fly' (Steve Holliday, pers. comm., 7 November).

On the morning of Saturday 27 October, Stuart Cooney and I observed the bird for about 90 minutes while it foraged in the same palaeo channel described above. This time in good light, the barred tail was strikingly obvious. The Sharp-tailed Sandpiper was again present and the two birds foraged in loose company. The godwit predominantly remained in the centre of the channel where it probed the muddy substrate in relatively deep water, up to the top of its tibiotarsus. At times it probed to the full extent of its bill, though at all times the front of its head remained clear of the water.

The godwit remained at Jerrabomberra Wetlands for seven days. The last time the bird was seen at 16.35pm on 31 October 2007. It had previously been seen at 2.00pm that afternoon as it flew off from Kelly's Swamp towards the paddocks (Marnix Zwankhuizen, pers. comm., 26 October).

The warm spring weather experienced in the ACT in early October 2007 dried out the wetlands in the weeks prior to the sighting, producing plentiful muddy edges. The palaeo channels were also drying out with muddy fringes becoming more numerous, though rain on 26 October reduced the muddy margins. Subsequent rain possibly made Kelly's Swamp and surrounds less attractive to the godwit.

Prior to this record, the most recent report of a Bar-tailed Godwit in the ACT was some 28 years previous, when a probable single bird was seen around Lake Burley Griffin between 19 November and 2 December 1979 (Wilson 1999). In the COG area of interest a single bird was reported by Michael Lenz at Lake Bathurst on 26 Oct 1996 (COG 1997) and another single bird was observed by the same observer on 7 November 2005 (COG 2007). Wilson (1999) describes the Bar-tailed Godwit as a rare non-breeding migrant.

There are two similar species that could be confused with the Bar-tailed Godwit in Australia. These are the Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* and Hudsonian Godwit *Limosa haemastica*, though the barred tail is the key diagnostic feature as both the latter species have black tails. Other diagnostic features are the wedge shaped white on the rump of the Bar-tail and underwing patterns. That said, neither the Black-tailed nor Hudsonian Godwits have previously been observed in the ACT.

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Large flock of Glossy Black-Cockatoos on Mount Majura

On Monday 23 March 2009, Nicki Taws reported that she had observed ‘a couple of Glossy Black-Cockatoos *Calyptorhynchus lathami* flying south from the lower dam in Majura Nature Park’ the previous evening.

Steve Holliday and I decided to follow up the report and on Friday 27 March 2009 visited the dam with the aim of observing the birds. I was the first to arrive at approximately 5.30pm and was joined by Steve at 6.05pm. We waited for dusk, which from my experience in 2006 was the most likely time for the birds to come in to drink – sunset that Friday was at 7.05pm. While waiting, the only birds we observed drinking from the dam were three Common Bronzewings *Phaps chalcoptera*. The dam was also visited by Eastern Grey Kangaroos, at least four Swamp Wallabies and an Echidna.

At 6.33pm a single cockatoo call was heard, which appeared to have emanated to the north east of the dam. It subsequently turned out to be a male bird calling from the south-west. The bird was observed moving about at the top of a bare eucalypt branch where it

was constantly harassed by a Pied Currawong *Strepera graculina*. A second bird (a female) was also heard calling and eventually the two birds flew together towards the dam and perched in a nearby eucalypt.

For 20 minutes the birds perched about 30 metres apart, one on either side of the tree but were not observed interacting or calling, which led us to be concerned that our presence may have been stopping them from drinking, and so we retired about 50 metres. At this time the male called and the two birds flew together to the south and out of sight. We initially thought that they had left without drinking and surmised they were en route to another dam somewhere in the Mount Ainslie/Majura Nature Park. They were then heard to call again, which indicated to us that they had perched nearby but just out of sight. Within about two minutes a flock of ten Glossy Black-Cockatoos flew to the dam and perched in surrounding trees. In quick succession all birds flew down to the dam and proceeded to drink. Birds were then observed to fly into a tree on the Campbell Park side of the dam, which we deduced may have been a roosting tree. With the constant movement of the flock, it was difficult to determine the sex of birds, but at least three were females.

This sighting was reported on the Canberrabirds chatline and over the following weekend a number of birders were able to observe the wonderful spectacle of a large flock of Glossy-Black-Cockatoos.

In the ACT Wilson (1999) gives the status of the Glossy Black-Cockatoo as 'uncommon non-breeding visitor'. Sightings are irregular and generally if the species is present, birds are seen most frequently in stands of Drooping She-oak *Allocasuarina verticillata* along the Majura Range (Wilson 1999, Holliday 2004).

References:

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Apparent cooperative hunting by Brown Goshawks

At 2.00pm on 31 March 2009 I stood at the boundary fence of vineyards to the south of Stockdill Drive, Holt and focused my binoculars along a row of vines but saw nothing other than a smattering of Silvereyes *Zosterops lateralis*. I understand that a few weeks previously scare guns were operating in the vineyard which may have accounted for the paucity of birds in the area, and apparently caused an influx of Pied Currawongs *Strepera graculina* in nearby suburban gardens.

Suddenly I heard a rushing sound and saw a flock of around 200 Common Starlings *Sturnus vulgaris* approaching rapidly from the south, flying some 20 metres from the ground. As the flock passed overhead it changed from an undulating, cylindrical formation to one resembling a wavering blanket then, as it swung through 180 degrees, reverted to the former shape. Concurrently, a second flock of similar size approached from the north, drew alongside the first, and I witnessed one of those astounding feats of massed avian aerobatics as the groups melded seamlessly to form a single, pitching, weaving helical formation, demonstrating that no matter how ubiquitous or maligned a particular wild creature may be, it is still able to enthral humankind so long as the most advanced form of life is willing to watch and observe.

The speed of the flock, together with its apparent evasive tactics suggested it may have been under threat of predation. No sooner had this occurred to me than I sighted a Brown Goshawk *Accipiter faciatus* that seemed well positioned for an attack, holding station just above and behind the starlings however, it made no move to do so. To employ an anthropomorphism, it may have been indulging in a bit of sport or, in more pragmatic terms, perhaps an immature bird honing its hunting skills.

The flock suddenly swooped to within five metres of the ground and the tight formation disintegrated as starlings dropped into the vines like autumn leaves falling before a dying gust of wind. It was then I noticed a second goshawk that had probably penetrated the flock. And its foray had been successful as it flew away carrying a limp starling. The other hawk executed a long, shallow dive that brought it within a few metres of the vines, a tactic intended, I assume, to flush additional prey. However, despite a groundswell of movement no starling broke cover. The hawk wheeled around, repeated the manoeuvre but again without reaction by the intended prey. It then left the vicinity. Within the next few minutes the starlings began to fly off in groups of around 10.

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Whistling Kites feeding on larvae from a Paper Wasp nest

While the passenger in a vehicle travelling between Bowning and Binalong, NSW on 26 February 2009 I saw a large fallen limb lying between a boundary fence and the road. The limb was hollow and had broken into sections on impact. As we approached I noticed a medium-sized sandy-brown raptor poking its head into one of the broken segments as if trying to extract something. I asked the driver to stop and, using the car as a hide, we crept to within 15 metres of the bird which ignored us but withdrew its head from the cavity and shifted position as if to gain better access to its objective. This afforded an excellent view allowing me to positively identify it as a Whistling Kite *Haliastur sphenurus*. After a

moment the kite retrieved a section of either Paper Wasp *Polistes sp.* or Honey Bee *Apis mellifera* nest, flew to a nearby paddock tree, perched with the insect nest clasped to a branch and, as I watched through binoculars, appeared to winkle out and eat the larvae.

Some two minutes later a second kite landed next to the fallen limb, removed a large section of insect nest, flew to the same paddock tree as the first kite, perched and feasted on its bounty. I approached the fallen limb cautiously, concerned that agitated bees or wasps may have been present. Nonetheless, I was able to examine a section of insect nest that remained on the ground and concluded it belonged to paper wasps *Polistes sp.* rather than honey bees *A. mellifera*

Interestingly, on the slopes of northern New South Wales in March 2006, a Square-tailed Kite *Lophoictinia isura* took a communal nest of paper-wasps *Polistes sp* and ate the larvae at a perch. This behaviour is typical of honey-buzzards *Pernis sp.*, to which *Lophoictinia* is now known to be related (Hobson 2006).

Marchant and Higgins (1993) mention insects among food items for the Whistling Kite but do not specify larvae of bees or wasps.

References

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Magpie-lark fishing

In the early evening of 24 November 2008 I was walking along the Commonwealth Place promenade on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin when I observed some unusual Magpie-lark behaviour.

A Magpie-lark was observed on the promenade adjacent to the lake manipulating a live fish approximately 4-5cm long. The bird flew off with the fish to a nearby nest. The bird then returned to the lake wall and was clearly watching the water. Within a few seconds it swooped down to the water, caught another small fish of a similar size and once again returned to the nest with it.

A quick check of Higgins *et al*. (2006) failed to find any mention of this foraging/hunting behaviour.

Reference

Higgins, P.J., Peter, J.M. & Cowling, S.M. (Eds) (2006) *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds. Volume 7: Boatbill to Starlings; Part A, Boatbill to Larks*. Oxford University Press South Melbourne, p. 775.

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COLUMNISTS' CORNER

What bird is that again? One step forward, two steps sideways

Eight years ago Stentoreus (CBN 26: 2) mused at some length on the curious story of English names for our bird species. Since then, things have got more complicated.

Christidis and Boles, in 2008, produced their updated list of Australian names (C&B2), and this is now standard for purposes of checklists and publications in Australia, including those under the control of COG. If you think that is all that needs to be said on the matter, read no further.

This piece has no comment on the taxonomic issues, only on the approach taken on English names. To advise on these there is something called the 'English Names Committee of Birds Australia'. That committee 'reviewed' the *new* English names for species added to the C&B list in 2008, mainly as a result of splitting of species, e.g. Eastern Barn Owl.

However, in C&B2, whether or not on the advice of the Committee, there was no revision of the English names adopted by C&B1 in 1994. Therefore C&B2 took no account of the 'international standard names' proposed by Gill and Wright 2006 (G&W) for, and now adopted with continuing revisions by, the International Ornithological Congress – these being referred to here as the 'IOC names (*or* list)'. This is surprising given that many changes inflicted on the Australian public in the 1994 list were stated to be for the purpose of conformity with international usage. The IOC committee had been at work since 1994, and had Australian representation on it, so C&B2 could not have been taken by surprise.

For the non-passerines in the main C&B2 list, *90 species have different English names* from those in the IOC list, not counting name differences flowing from taxonomic decisions. Examples: Rock Dove (C&B2) / Common Pigeon (IOC); Orange-footed Scrubfowl (C&B2) / Scrubfowl (IOC) – there being only one 'scrubfowl'; Dollarbird (C&B2) / Oriental Dollarbird (IOC – which lists 2 dollarbirds). 'Maned Duck' and 'Rufous Night Heron' live on in the international list. Happily, the dotterel/plover issue, at least, has settled down, with both lists being in accord on this – with two exceptions. The IOC list gives 'Hooded Dotterel', rather than 'Hooded Plover', and 'Australian Plover' for *Charadrius australis*, differing from 'Inland Dotterel' on two counts.

The main reason for the differences, affecting some 55 names in the non-passerines alone, is the excruciating dilemma of two word compound or hyphened names. C&B1 had adopted an approach that generally favoured the hyphen, thereby calling into existence a whole lot of new hyphened names, with the upper or lower case of the second initial depending on whether the second

word was accurate, taxonomically speaking. That rule produced 'Black-Cockatoo' and 'Fruit-Dove', but 'Cuckoo-shrike' and 'Fairy-wren'. Depending on their individual temperaments, Australian bird-watchers regarded the rule as either logical or pedantic.

Despite having a certain elegance, that approach was always going to cause difficulty, particularly for species ranging beyond Australia, if it was not to be followed by foreign or global prescribing authorities. With hundreds more awkward and invented names to deal with, G&W laid down their own set of rules for dealing with this troublesome issue. The result of the G&W rules is that while both lists agree on e.g. 'Stone-curlew', they disagree on e.g. Black-Cockatoo / Black Cockatoo, Storm-Petrel / Storm Petrel, and Button-quail / Buttonquail.

So far as I am aware there has been no official statement by Birds Australia on how its own list is intended to sit with the IOC list. Presumably each will be followed within the respective area influenced by each authority. This must create confusion and perpetuate inconsistency.

The IOC list has gained a fair degree of recognition. In January 2008 the African Bird Club made several 'preferred English name changes', being mainly adoption of the IOC names where 'supported by all other recent texts'.

An odd situation exists in the United Kingdom. The British Ornithologists' Union (BOU) says it has adopted the IOC names 'for all its activities and publications'. However, it *also* recognises for some purposes relating to *British species* something called 'the current English vernacular name'. It is accepted that such names vary from time to time according to, among other things, usage in field guides. 'Vernacular names' are used, for example, in a list maintained for the purpose of the BOU *Rarities Committee*, and by the RSPB in its popular 'Birdguide'.

On its website, BOU makes available a table showing the current (2007) 'vernacular name' together with the IOC name where it is different. Where different, the vernacular name is usually a short form, inadequate for other than local purposes, thus: 'Avocet' instead of Pied Avocet, 'Crane' instead of Common Crane, 'Greenfinch' instead of European Greenfinch.

A 'vernacular' name in that sense is clearly useful. For local purposes, in Canberra, we frequently use 'Magpie', 'Gang-gang', 'Pipit', 'Black Duck', 'King Parrot', 'Oriole' and so on. None of those is the 'official' name, but each is, in context, apt and unambiguous and not incorrect. Contrary to my suggestion in 2001, I would now hesitate to propose that those convenient short names be put in a list for local purposes, like the UK vernaculars. In the present situation, that would make four Australian lists: (a) 'vernacular', (b) BA/COG official, (c) international official, (d) scientific.

In Australia, 'vernacular' names exist but their use is not encouraged unless they happen to be also the recommended names. In my opinion, the term is a curious one if used for a name invented for the purpose of becoming the 'correct' name.

As a matter of historical interest, the BOU table also gives the vernacular names of British birds as recognised in 1923. These exhibit a liberal helping of hyphens, evidently the fashion of the time and from which there has since been a steady retreat, as reflected in the BOU list of current vernaculars.

Of course the hyphen issue has been simmering for a long time. For example, in 1923 the UK vernacular was 'Reed-Warbler', which was followed in 1926 in the RAOU list. In Australia, through the various editions of Leach and Cayley it was 'Reed-Warbler', 'Reed-warbler' or 'Reedwarbler'. C&B2 stays with 'Reed-Warbler' although both the current BOU vernacular and the IOC have 'Reed Warbler'. In 1923 it was 'Night-Heron' (as in C&B2), the present BOU vernacular is 'Night-heron', and the IOC recommends 'Night Heron'.

Meanwhile the American Ornithologists' Union, in the ongoing revisions of its own checklist, seems to have set itself against the IOC policy on hyphens. The chair of the AOU committee on names for South American birds has vigorously defended compound names and attacked the reasons given by Gill and Wright for their non-hyphening policy.

Frank Gill himself has commented that 'the IOC list has more traction and momentum outside the Americas than here in the United States, partly because of the very conservative nature and independent styles of American ornithologists'.

In the curious situation that has emerged the AOU will have to decide whether to retain its declared practice of following the English (presumably IOC) name used by the BOU for species of principally Eurasian distribution. We might see some interesting cross-jurisdictional anomalies, the very thing that the IOC exercise was intended to avoid.

The underlying problem is that the IOC list on the one hand and the AOU/Birds Australia lists on the other represent extreme, and apparently entrenched, positions against and for use of hyphens. With the issue governed by doctrine, it is no longer possible to find a middle ground representing something like a 'traditional' (or 'vernacular') approach to hyphens. Moreover, in Australia the prevailing orthodoxy with respect to the 'official' name means that popular usage has no role to play. Thus an author is faced by a stark choice to follow one authority or the other.

In the meantime, you will have to guess where to find Reed Warbler (R or W?), Night Heron (N or H?) and Storm Petrel (S or P?) in the index of the volume you happen to be consulting.

Stentoreus

Birding in cyberspace, Canberra-style

The previous column in this series featured the wonderful online resource The Australian National Dictionary Online www.oup.com.au/and. We turn now to a related source, **the Australian Dictionary of Biography Online** http://adbonline.anu.edu.au/adbonline.htm. It is the internet version of the Australian Dictionary of Biography's print volumes and is provided by Research School of Social Sciences at The Australian National University. The website is a joint production of the Australian Dictionary of Biography and the Australian Science and Technology Heritage Centre, University of Melbourne (Austehc).

Of interest to birders are the biographical entries on prominent people in Australian ornithology in past years. Obviously entries are found on such prominent people as Elizabeth Gould and John Gould, along with one of my heroes, H. L. White. A search on the term 'ornithology' returned 39 hits, including one luminary of whom I had not previously heard who should be better known not least because of his delightful name: Sir Charles Snodgrass Ryan (1853-1926). We are advised that 'He was president (1905-07) of the Australasian Ornithologists' Union and enthusiastically supported bird protection, the introduction of nature study in schools and the holding of an annual Bird Day. This vital, cheerful and sociable man delighted in being a raconteur and enjoyed debate and discussion with his many friends'. The availability of this free, comprehensive and authoritative source adds to the continuing usefulness of the Internet for research purposes, as well as general information.

Over many years COG members have supported the monitoring of birds in the Cowra region, along with efforts at habitat restoration in the locality. Birds Australia has recently established a website dedicated to **Cowra Woodland Birds** http://www.birdsaustralia.com.au/our-projects/cowra-woodland-birds.html. It explains that: Cowra Woodland Birds Program (CWBP), a series of projects aimed at helping to reverse the decline of woodland birds in the Cowra district, is now entering its eigth (*sic*) year. The projects are focused on scientific research and the management of birds in their woodland habitats. The CWBP was launched in July 2001 by members of Birds Australia Southern NSW & ACT Group and local landholders and land managers.

Details are provided on the ongoing bird surveys in the Cowra region and the findings of the recent analysis of data derived from those surveys, undertaken by Julian Reid and Ross Cunningham, *Statistical Analysis of the Cowra Woodland Birds Program's Bird Database - Trends in Individual Bird Species and Composite Indices*, are summarised as well.

At the end of last year the well-known website **Internet Bird Collection (IBC)** moved to a new URL: http://ibc.lynxeds.com/. It is currently

seventh in the global birding internet website rankings. The rapid increase in its contents is highlighted by the following statistics which were current at the time of writing. It contained:

34,215 videos
7,851 photos
756 sounds
5,979 species with videos (60.76%)
3,093 species with photos (31.43%)
451 species with sounds (4.58%)

Among the eight most viewed videos is one Australian species, the Wompoo Fruit Dove. The list of the most recently added species, at the time of writing, included these delights:

- Golden-tailed Sapphire (*Chrysuronia oenone*). A female on a feeder Caracas, Distrito Capital, Venezuela.
- Violet-fronted Brilliant (*Heliodoxa leadbeateri*). A female perched on a branch Caracas, Distrito Capital, Venezuela.
- Wood Warbler (*Phylloscopus sibilatrix*). A bird singing, calling and preening in an oak tree, Scotland, UK.
- Rock Ptarmigan (*Lagopus mutus*). A male walking slowly amongst rocks, Highland, Scotland, UK.
- Coal Tit (*Periparus ater*). A bird at a feeder, Vilanova i la Geltru, Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain.
- Northern Bald Ibis (*Geronticus eremita*). Individuals resting on a cliff, Birecik, Turkey.
- Lemon-bellied White-eye (*Zosterops chloris*). Bird briefly seen in bushes, Wai Island, West Papua (Indonesia), New Guinea.

Considering the increasing use of videos recording in wild birds, we can expect to see this site continue to grow and be of considerable research interest as well as a delight to visit to see and hear the birds from around the world in their natural state.

The *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds* (HANZAB) is described by Birds Australia as the 'multi-award winning seven-volume encyclopedia summarises everything that is known about our birds'. (HANZAB is such a wonderful resource that we can, on this occasion, forgive Birds Australia for misspelling 'encyclopaedia'.) Sometimes, though, users find it difficult to locate just what they are searching for as each separate volume has its own separate index. In response to this, Birds Australia now has available online a comprehensive **alphabetical index to all seven HANZAB volumes**; find it at http://www.birdsaustralia.com.au/images/stories/publications/HANZABEnglish_index.pdf.

What is probably not well known, however, is that the availability of this resource can be credited to Canberra birder Alastair Smith. Having been frustrated by difficulties in finding material across the seven volumes of HANZAB (which is actually nine physical volumes), Alastair contacted its publisher, Oxford University Press Australia, and convinced them to create and make publicly available an index.

This has now been picked up and formatted by Birds Australia as a service to the users of HANZAB. (And yes, the Alastair Smith that I have mentioned is the person well-known for his magnificent achievements in scanning all the past issues of this journal, making them publically available in full text at COG's web site http://cbn.canberrabirds.org.au/.)

Having an index to all the volumes is a great step forward in being able to locate contents, but how much better would it be if HANZAB were available either online or on DVD? Could it be that the size of the market for authoritative, comprehensive information about Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic birds is too small to make this a commercial success? Certainly, decades ago when HANZAB was in the planning stage, submissions were made to Birds Australia and Oxford University Press to produce a digital version but, sadly, this did not eventuate.

Birders use 'LBJs' as a collective term for the sometimes difficult to identify small brown bush birds including weebills, thornbills and scrub wrens ('little brown jobs'). There is a quite different 'LBJ' online, however, **The LBJ: Avian Life, Literary Arts** http://www.literarybirdjournal.org/. The publishers describe the LBJ Project in the following terms:

> *The LBJ* is a biannual publication dedicated to birds and creative writing. Its title is drawn from the acronym for 'little brown job,' used by birders to describe those difficult-to-identify species, such as many sparrows.
>
> While there are popular magazines (Audubon), scientific journals (The Auk), and other newsletters about birds, The LBJ is a uniquely literary venue, publishing creative nonfiction, fiction, poetry, narrative scholarship, and literary journalism of the feathered variety. Additionally, the journal showcases visual art in a full-color insert.
>
> Small, plaintive, and aspiring, The LBJ comes to you in 5.5" x 8.5" format that is just the right size to carry into the field alongside your binoculars.

The issue most recently available at the time of writing ran to approximately 150 pages. A sense of its coverage can be gleaned from the following items that I have selected from its table of contents:

- *Creative non-fiction* includes Maureen Scott Harris 'Regarding the Ovenbird' and Julian Hoffman 'Among Reeds'.
- *Fiction* includes Anthony J. Mohr 'Birdbrains' and Stephen Cooper 'Crow'.
- *Poetry* includes Elizabeth Schultz 'The Birds of Baghdad' and Nicky Beer 'Mummified Canary Found in a Former Brothel in Butte, Montana'.
- Art includes Barry Kent MacKay 'Profile and Paintings'.
- Reviews include Megan Casey Shakow on Barcott's *The Last Flight of the Scarlet Macaw: One Woman's Fight to Save the World's Most Beautiful Bird* and Mark Bousquet on Watkins and Stockland's *Winged Wonders: A Celebration of Birds in Human History*.

The LBJ: Avian Life, Literary Arts is published by the English Department at the University of Nevada, Reno, USA. Subscriptions cost just US$15 per annum. I am sure that, if any readers decide to enter a subscription, our editor would be delighted to receive your review of this most interesting-looking avian literature venture.

Last month I was working with a group of senior researchers assisting them in documenting case studies. Four weeks into the six weeks intensive program the hard disk of one of the scholars' computers crashed. Our local IT experts attempted to retrieve the data from the disk without success, concluding that it would have to be sent away to a specialist laboratory and it was not even sure that that would enable the data to be retrieved. The issue is, of course, that the scholar had failed to back up the documents that they had been creating.

This is an all-too-familiar scenario and one which has probably affected a number of readers. We all know that we should back up our computers regularly but surveys consistently show that most users do not do so. Yes, it is easy to set the automatic backup facility available in your computer's operating system to backup onto a separate partition on your hard drive, or to an external drive. Even USB 'thumb' drives are now so inexpensive, and have such large storage capacity, that they are a viable backup option, along with DVDs and external hard drives. All these options, although far better than not backing up at all, have significant limitations. Backing up to another partition on your computer is of no help if the hard disk crashes or the computer is stolen in a burglary. External drives and DVDs are fine so long as they are stored off-site so they will not be lost in a burglary or house fire. It is a tedious chore, though, to backup to external drives: one has to remember to do so, locate the drive, plug it in, activate the backup software, unplug the drive upon completion, store it away somewhere off-site, etc. Furthermore, using an incremental backup means that at a certain point the drive may become full and then one has to decide whether or not to acquire a new drive or take the risk of deleting the backup data and starting from scratch. It is little wonder, then, that most people's home computers and small business computers do not have a viable, systematically implemented, backup system.

An interesting innovation is **backing up off-site via the Internet**, that is, the online storage of your precious files. Perhaps you keep a database of your bird observations? Perhaps you have a collection of digital bird photographs? Perhaps you maintain a family history on your computer? What about your personal finances? Do you have a file in which you list critical personal information such as the location of your will, bank accounts and credit cards details, etc? How problematic would it be if you no longer had access to your computer and did not have an up-to-date backup of these files? Online storage is an option for managing these precious files.

I will not attempt a review of the many different facilities that are available for this but draw attention to a couple of aspects. For simply backing up a few individual files or photos it is easy enough to send them to yourself as e-mail attachments if you use one of the web-based e-mail programs such as Gmail or Hotmail, as they provide most users with some gigabytes of storage space. Programs are available online to upload directly to your Gmail storage space, but please note that this is in breach of the conditions of the use of Gmail. Excellent photo storage options include Google's Picasa http://picasa.google.com/. Other well-known commercial providers of online file storage include Megaupload http://www.megaupload.com/, DriveHQ http://www.drivehq.com/, Telstra http://my.bigpond.com/hostingandstorage/onlinestorage/default.do Carbonite http://carbonite.com/, IDrive http://www.idrive.com/ and Mozy http://mozy.com/. Note that most of these (and others) provide free storage up to a certain gigabyte limit and then charge a fee for larger volumes stored. If investigating this approach to file backup, you need to look very carefully at the conditions as some companies delete the files if they are not accessed over a given period, others have download limits and yet others operate on the basis of paid advertising. A good one to trial – for free – is DriveHQ's 'Online Storage & Sharing' option: http://www.drivehq.com/. At that site is a useful table comparing the offering of many of the companies in this business: http://www.drivehq.com/about/storagecompare.aspx.

I have been using an online storage facility for backing up my files for some time. It is one of the companies that provides a small program to download to your computer which then automatically backs up your files to the internet. This can take place continuously as you work or you have the option of having synchronisation take place at times you select. (I have set mine to synchronise once every hour. It does so quietly in the background without taking up much computer resources at all.) One of the extremely attractive aspects of some of the storage facilities (including the one I use) is that you can access your files from any internet-connected computer in the world at any time. This can be invaluable for people who travel or who operate from more than one base, for example from a home office and a workplace office, or for students who work from both university and home. Again, some of these have the facility to share files with other people whom you authorise to access them.

The bottom line, though, is that many of us have important files on our computers, covering both birding and other interests, the loss of which would cause huge problems to us. Online backup in this era of relatively high speed and inexpensive broadband is an option that I suggest we all should consider when establishing or reviewing our birding-in-cyberspace backup strategies.

T. javanica

This column is available online at http://cbn.canberrabirds.org.au/cbnInfo.htm

Details on how to subscribe to *Birding-Aus*, the Australian birding email discussion list, are on the web at www.birding-aus.org/. A comprehensive searchable archive of the messages that have been posted to the list is at bioacoustics.cse.unsw.edu.au/archives/html/birding-aus.

To join the *CanberraBirds* email discussion list, send an email message with the word 'subscribe' in the subject line to canberrabirds-subscribe@canberrabirds.org.au. The list's searchable archive is at bioacoustics.cse.unsw.edu.au/archives/html/canberrabirds.

RARITIES PANEL NEWS

At its May meeting, the Panel considered ten unusual bird reports and endorsed nine of them. One of these species (the Black Kite) no longer requires a report before records can be published in official COG publications but the Panel is always happy to consider any records presented to it in good faith.

The highlight of this list is undoubtedly the Beautiful Firetail seen in tea-tree scrub on the Brookfield's rural block on the Queanbeyan River. There has been a previous record of this species in our area. Steve Wilson (1999) reports a single record, without place or date, in Frith's 1969 *Birds in the Australian High Country*. No report of the species has been presented to the Panel since its inception in 1984, but given that it is frequently seen in the upper reaches of the Shoalhaven River, it was probably only a matter of time until one strayed into COG's area of concern. As HANZAB notes, the species is 'Quiet, shy, unobtrusive and easily overlooked'. When seen well, the vivid scarlet uppertail coverts combined with the fine black barring of the underbody are diagnostic. Interestingly, Muriel reports that she believed she saw three Beautiful Firetails in roughly the same locality four years previously but was not sufficiently sure to put in a report.

Tobias's nightjar was the first record of the species since Matthew Frawley's at Jerrabomberra Wetlands in March 2007, while Steve Holliday's button-quail was the first since January 2006 at Goorooyaroo NR by the same observer. The Black-eared Cuckoo record follows several reports of the species in spring 2007, especially at Uriarra East picnic area. The Red-backed Kingfishers were back in their now-usual spot along Ginninderra Creek but one wonders how long they will persist there with the encroaching development. And finally, a much-admired Spangled Drongo has turned up again at Jerrabomberra Wetlands NR after a year's absence.

ENDORSED LIST 74, May 2009

White-throated Nightjar *Eurostopodus mystacalis*
1; 28 Sep 08; Tobias Hayashi; Cooleman Ridge NR GrI15
Black Kite *Milvus migrans*
1; 29 Oct 08; Noel Luff; Yass by-pass GrG2
Little Button-quail *Turnix velox*
1; 10 Oct 08; Steve Holliday; Mountain Creek Rd GrG13
Black-eared Cuckoo *Chalcites osculans*
1; 21 Oct 08; Barbara Allan; Namadgi Visitors' Info Centre GrJ19
Red-backed Kingfisher *Todiramphus pyrrhopygius*
1; 5 Oct 08; John Layton; Stockdill Drive, Holt GrH12
2; 8 Oct 08 +; Roger Curnow; Ginninderra Creek GrsH11,I11
Spangled Drongo *Dicrurus bracteatus*
1;18 Oct 08; Bill Compston; Kelly's Swamp GrL14
1; 4 Nov 08; Martin Butterfield**;** Jerrabomberra Wetlands NR GrL14
Beautiful Firetail *Stagonopleura bella*
1; 2 Nov 08; Muriel Brookfield; Queanbeyan River, Tinderry GrQ21

Canberra Bird Notes is published quarterly by the Canberra Ornithologists Group Inc, and is edited by Anthony Overs. Major articles of up to 5000 words are welcomed 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 in advance. Shorter notes, book reviews or correspondence are also encouraged. All contributions should be sent to cbn@canberrabirds.org.au.

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 *Canberra Bird Notes* articles are always welcomed and will be considered for publication as letters to the editor.

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Articles

Odd Obs

Columnists' Corner

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