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PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GBS SITE SPECIES RICHNESS AND GOOGLE EARTH DERIVED ENVIRONMENTAL DATA

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Abstract: *We report on the possible relationship between an index of species richness and a set of selected environmental or habitat variables derived from Google Earth images for a small set of Garden Bird Survey (GBS) sites. The Garden Bird Survey sites were selected to represent the species richest and species poorest sites of those sites observed in each of the past five years. The habitat variables were an estimate of the proportion of two rectangles imposed on the centre of the GBS sites that represented buildings, roads, trees and grass. A fifth variable, the distance from the GBS sites to the nearest remnant, was also analysed.*

Background

For the last 28 years the Canberra Ornithologists Group (COG) has conducted a survey that assesses the species composition and frequency of birds using Canberra's urban gardens (Hermes 1981; Canberra Ornithologists Group 2000; Veerman 2003, 2006). Birds are recorded if observed within a 100m radius of the centre of a site and the maximum numbers of individual species observed at any one time during a week are enumerated on a chart provided by COG. In any one year there are up to 60 garden bird survey (GBS) sites. Although not enforceable, observers are encouraged to record during those weeks when present for a long enough period to properly assess the weeks' activities.

There are many factors that may influence the species composition and frequency of occurrence or observation at any one site, for instance, suburb age and location of site within the suburb matrix, type of garden and tree and housing density, observer experience and the detectability of the species. The ready availability of landscape images from Google Earth provides an opportunity to attempt to relate biological responses to local and landscape variables. We report on an analysis that examines various attributes measured from Google Earth and from a questionnaire and relate these to a measure of species richness within a small set of garden bird survey sites.

Methods

Sites were selected that had been surveyed for the past five years, that is between July 2003 and June 2008, and ranked by the total number of

species for each year summed over the five year period. During this period the number of gardens that were surveyed in any one year ranged from 60 to 72. Those five sites with the highest species richness score and those five with the lowest rank were selected for analysis. In addition, the senior author's site was added to the list and assigned to the species richest group. Two sets of matching landscape data were derived from Google Earth images for each GBS site using a 16 by 9 grid overlaid on the image. Two scales taken off the Google Earth image were chosen; 60m and 120m. The intersections were 15m apart for the 60m scale and 30m apart for the 120m scale. If one assumes that the grid intersections are the centres of square cells then the area of the two grids are 3.24ha and 12.96ha. The environment at the 144 grid intersections were classified into house, road, grass or tree. In addition, the distance from the centre of the GBS site to the nearest remnant was estimated from the Google Earth image.

The analyses that follow attempt to answer the question 'are there differences between the environments (habitats) of the richest GBS sites and the species poorest sites?' with a view to establishing if there is a case to justify additional data collection. One additional question was asked 'are there differences between the environmental data collected at the 60m scale and that collected at the 120m scale?'.

Observers at each site were contacted to confirm the location of the centre and the boundaries of the GBS sites. In addition, to obtain an impression of the bird-watching experience of the observers, they were asked details of the number of years that they had been interested in bird watching and whether they were or had been involved in any other bird surveys. To assess their commitment to the survey the observers were asked whether observations were recorded immediately, once a day or once a week on the GBS chart. Observers were also asked whether the observations were obtained from the centre of the site or whether the area covered by the 100m radius was regularly or occasionally searched on foot, by bicycle or by car. Although not prompted, some observers volunteered the information that they did not regard themselves as 'experts'. Others made no comment on the issue.

All but one observer were members of COG, two sites were not centred on the address provided by the observer so the centres of the Google Earth photos were adjusted accordingly. The GBS sites were located throughout suburban Canberra from ten different suburbs of known age.

Analysis

In view of the method used to select the GBS sites for analysis, traditional parametric tests were considered inappropriate. We used a randomisation test (Manly 1991) in which the observed data were randomly reordered and the test statistic calculated for the reordered

set. The number of randomisations was set to 4999, and the probability of the observed difference being as large or larger was assessed as the number of randomly generated test statistics that equalled or were more extreme than the observed statistic plus one expressed as a proportion of 5000. This test was applied to each of the four habitat variables. This gave a total of eight analyses, for the two scales of landscape, the 60 metre and 120 metre scales. The objective of each analysis was to establish if there was a difference in the number of gird intersections allocated to the four types of habitat. The additional environmental variable, distance to the nearest remnant, was subjected similarly to a randomisation test.

In addition, an ordination of the environmental data was carried out to see if the rich GBS sites were segregated from the poor sites in the ordination space. The ordination was based on Non-metric Multi-dimensional Scaling (NMDS) using the Bray and Curtis dissimilarity measure and the first two axes were extracted. This ordination was based on the 11 sites characterised by the nine environmental variables.

The differences between the classification of the habitat at the two scales was explored using a similar ordination technique using the data derived from the grids as separate units in the ordination space, that is using 22 'sites' each characterised by the four habitat or environmental variables derived from a single scale image. In addition, the number of intersections assigned to each habitat was subjected to a randomisation test to see if there appeared to be differences in the habitat classification for the two scales of image.

Finally, the questionnaire results were tabulated and compared with the observed bird richness score.

Results

The mean numbers of grid intersections for each environment together with the mean distances to the nearest remnant are given in Table 1 and the results of applying the randomisation test to the data are summarised in Table 1a for the 60m scale data and Table 1b for the 120m data. The only two variables that appear to be strongly correlated with the richness classification are the number or proportion of the landscape occupied by houses and grass. The species poor sites had approximated 60 per cent more space allocated to houses than the species rich sites. Species rich sites had approximately 45 per cent more grass than the species poor sites.

A)

Variable	Species richness		Observed statistic	Probability
	Rich	Poor		
Distance	0.30	1.19	-0.891	0.063
Grass 60m	48.17	33.20	14.97	0.033
House 60m	27.17	44.20	-17.03	0.009
Road 60m	15.50	18.20	-2.70	0.279
Tree 60m	52.83	48.40	4.43	0.178

B)

Variable	Species richness		Observed statistic	Probability
	Rich	Poor		
Grass 120m	54.17	42.60	11.57	0.106
House 120m	28.50	40.40	-11.90	0.042
Road 120m	13.17	15.80	-2.63	0.228
Tree 120m	48.17	45.20	2.97	0.348

Table 1. Mean distance to the nearest remnant (km) and the mean number of intersections per habitat type derived from the 60m (A) and the 120m (B) scale image for the species rich and species poor GBS sites and the test statistic (the difference between the mean number of intersections for species rich and species poor sites). The probability of obtaining a difference of that magnitude or more extreme is based on 4999 randomisations.

Scatter plots of the observed index of species richness and the four habitat variables derived form the 60m scale images are shown in Figure 1. Consistent with the randomisation tests there appears to be a positive relationship between the observed species richness and the area of the local site assigned to grass.

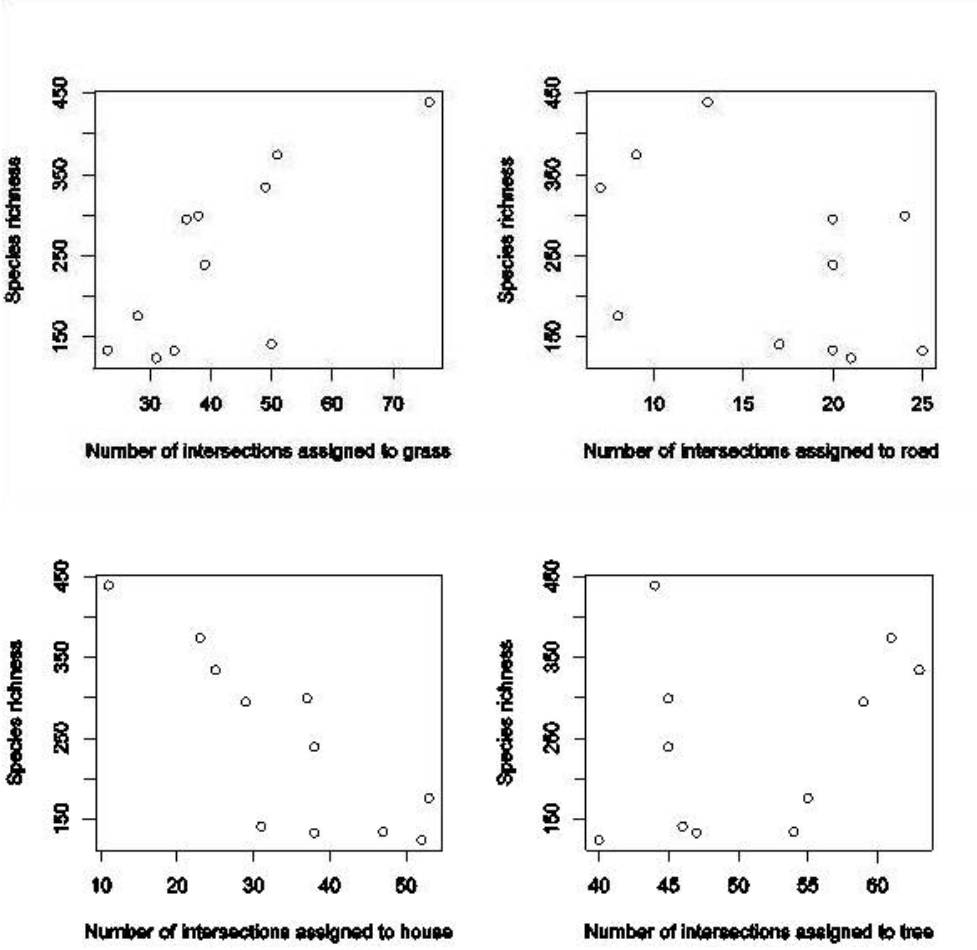

Figure 1. Scatter plots showing the relationship between the observed site species richness index and the four habitat variables, number of grid intersections or area allocated to grass, house, road and tree at the 60m scale.

The NMDS ordination of the eleven GBS sites suggests that there is almost total separation of the species rich and species poor sites in a two dimensional space (Figure 2). Along the first axis the species rich sites are predominantly towards the low score end of the axis with the low species richness sites towards the high end of the axis. Sites 4 and 6 show some overlap with site 8 in terms of a complete separation of the two groups of sites.

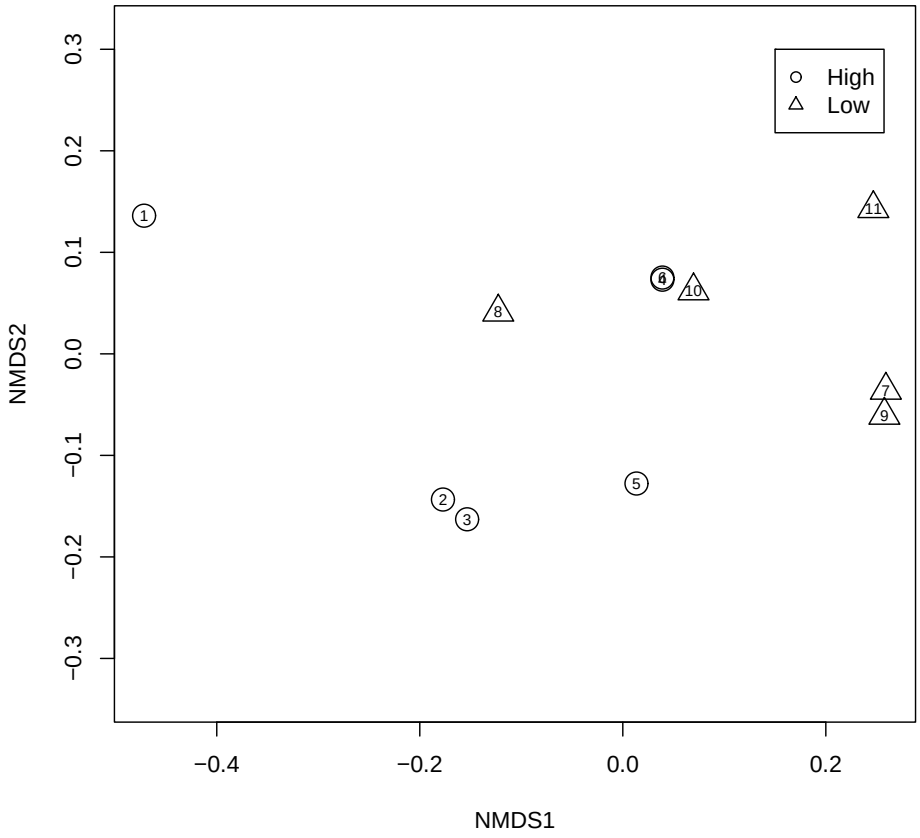

Figure 2. NMDS Ordination of the eleven GBS sites using the environmental variable, distance to nearest remnant, and the number of grid intersections for grass, house and road environments, derived from the 60m and 120 m scale images. The sites numbered 1 to 6 were considered to be species rich sites and those numbered 7 to 11 species poor sites. Note that sites 4 and 6 are very close in the ordination space.

The differences between the apparent local environments estimated at 60m and 120m scales are presented in Table 2. There appear to be no consistent significant differences between the estimates of habitat at the two scales for this set of 11 sites. The NMDS ordination of the two sets of habitat data (not shown here) do not show a strong separation in the ordination space defined by the first two axes and this also suggests that there is little consistent difference between the data collected at the 60m scale compared to that collected at the 120m scale.

Variable	60m scale	120m scale	Observed statistic	Probability
House	34.91	33.91	1.00	0.425
Road	16.73	14.36	2.36	0.176
Tree	50.82	46.82	4.00	0.171
Grass	41.36	48.91	-7.55	0.131

Table 2. The mean number of intersections assigned to each of the four habitat variables derived from the 60m and 120m scale images. The observed statistic (mean 60m value – mean 120m value) is presented together with the probability that a value as extreme or more extreme is likely to have occurred by chance based on a randomisation test using 4999 randomisations.

All observers had been involved with bird watching for more than ten years (see Table 3). Interestingly, in all cases but one those respondents who did not regard themselves as 'experts' were also not currently or had not been involved in any other bird surveys in the past.

Little information was obtained from the question regarding frequency of entering data to the chart. Virtually all agreed that an unusual sighting was recorded immediately whilst the more common species were recorded once a week. Non-'experts' were no more likely to cover the site than were 'experts'.

When ranking the questionnaire results with the species richness index those who did not regard themselves as 'experts' were all placed at the lower end of the richness score. There was no relationship between richness score and suburb age.

Site no.	4	9	10	2	6	11	1	5	3	7	8*
Richness score	439	374	334	299	295	239	176	141	134	133	124
Years birding	M	M	14	M	M	M	M	12	M	M	M
Other surveys?	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N
Recording frequency	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	2
Area covered	3	2	3	2	1	1	1	2	3	3	1
Expert	-	-	-	-	-	-	?	N	N	N	N
Suburb age	1964	1926	1961	1974	1963	1972	1972	1965	1971	1963	1972

Table 3. Questionnaire responses in order of richness score. See text for details of questions. Years bird watching: M= many, recording frequency: 1= once a week, 2= species dependent, 3= immediately, area covered: 1= from centre of site only, 2= occasionally cover the area, 3= regularly cover the area. * non COG member.

Discussion

It is important to acknowledge two caveats before considering the implications of the results. Firstly, the sample of GBS sites presented here are not a random sample of the GBS sites observed in the past five years; secondly, the sample sizes of species rich and species poor sites are small. In addition, there appears to be a great deal of variation in the environmental data within each of the groups of species rich and species poor sites. We consider that these three features limit our ability to be definitive about the importance of the potential relationships between species richness and the local environment of the GBS site.

At the GBS site scale (the 60m image scale) the total observed species richness is most strongly positively correlated with the area of grass and negatively with the area assigned to house. High species richness is associated with high proportions of natural environments and low species sites with high or higher cover of modified environments. The scatter plots clearly indicate that the single habitat variables are not the sole factors that contribute to the observed differences in species richness.

There remains one outstanding source of variation in the observed species richness; the experience and commitment of the observer. Observers who recognise many of the small cryptic species either visually of aurally can be expected to record higher numbers of species in similar environments than less experienced observers. Unless by chance and due to the small sample size those non-‘experts’ live on sites that are surrounded by denser housing then it would appear that the richness score is determined by two factors; site location with respect to housing density and distance from edge, and whether the observer regards themselves as a non-‘expert’.

Stein (1982) conducted bird count transects through Canberra suburbs of various ages with different habitat characteristics and concluded that species richness and diversity were positively correlated with total cover and negatively correlated with areas of paved or built-on surfaces; a conclusion in agreement with the present study. Interestingly, she concluded that the retention of original trees reduced the impact of urban development or hastened the recovery of the bird community. This was not examined during the present study but it would be possible in association with ground-truthing. This would be necessary to profile the original trees from more recent plantings.

The results presented here agree with those found by Munyenyembe *et al.* (1989) who examined the effects of suburb age and distance from remnant native vegetation on species richness and density of bird populations in Canberra between 1982 and 1983, by walk transect and point counts. They determined that both the number and density of bird species increased with age of suburb and that the changes represented a response to changes in habitat conditions over time, not a direct response to suburb age *per se*. The number of all species except exotics decreased with distance from native vegetation. For this small sample there is little evidence that age of suburb contributes directly to the observed species richness index.

This preliminary use of Google Earth images to relate biological responses to local and landscape variables demonstrates the potential value of this technique and so justifies additional data collection to explore more complex questions about the relationship between the environment of the GBS sites and the species recorded at the sites.

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ISSUES IN DEVELOPING A SUCCESSFUL TRAPPING PROGRAM FOR LOW DENSITY COMMON MYNA POPULATIONS IN RURAL AREAS.

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Introduction

The Common Myna (*Sturnus tristis*) was introduced to Australia during the mid 1860s with a subsequent increase in distribution and abundance throughout south-eastern Australia. Individuals were released in Canberra in 1968 and their arrival and subsequent population expansion has been well documented (Gregory-Smith 1985, Davey 1991, 1992, Pell and Tidemann 1994) and summarized by Wilson 1999 and Veerman 2006. Less well documented has been the subsequent spread into the rural areas within the region

The rural village of Murrumbateman (S 34 58 10, E 149 01 49) is situated 23km north by road from the ACT/NSW border. The Barton Highway passes through the village, connecting Canberra to Yass, NSW. The village is experiencing a major expansion program with most of the new development concentrated in areas of open pasture unlikely to presently support Common Mynas.

In April 2006, the Canberra Indian Myna Action Group (CIMAG) began a trapping program to reduce the Common Myna populations within the suburbs of Canberra. Members of the public interested in controlling the Common Myna have been encouraged to build or purchase traps specifically designed to catch the birds. Trapping has been successful in many areas with many of the participants encouraged by the resulting lack of Common Mynas within their trapping area (see www.indianmynaaction.org.au).

The Murrumbateman Landcare Group (MLG) had observed an increase in sightings and flock size of the Common Myna between 2003-2008 particularly along the Barton Highway between Canberra and Murrumbateman and within the rural residential small holdings. The MLG assumed that as the northern Canberra/ACT Common Myna populations were reaching high densities there was a corresponding dispersal from the ACT, possibly through successful breeding and establishment of breeding pairs on rural properties. The Group was concerned about the potential for rapid increases in abundance and broadening distribution into other rural areas and the associated impact they might have on the local native hollow-nesting species. The MLG

wished to highlight public awareness within the rural community of the emerging feral pest bird issue. It wanted to encourage local residents to begin a trapping program to reduce the local population and finally the Group wished to reduce the further expansion of the populations into previously Common Myna free areas.

Initially, the extent and abundance of the Common Myna population within the village and surrounding areas of Murrumbateman was unknown. Therefore, in June 2006, it was decided to initiate a 12 month survey to record the location and abundance of Common Mynas and then initiate a trapping program in the village during the winter months. At this time the population would be at its lowest abundance, possibly flocking and roosting communally rather than scattered individuals, and also consist of birds old enough to breed in the following spring. A second survey period would then provide an assessment of the trapping efficiency and provide data on the intensity of trapping required to reduce the population numbers.

In this article we report on the results of a survey conducted within the village and surrounding rural areas, on the trapping program and the subsequent effect on Common Myna numbers.

Methods

In June 2006, the MLG designed a poster and fliers describing the Common Myna and its emergence in the district. These were put on local notice boards and two articles were written for the local newsletter. Twenty four replies were received between June and December 2006 and respondents were asked for information on Common Myna numbers, dates and frequency of sightings. Respondents were then given a questionnaire which asked if they were prepared to undertake a weekly survey of Common Myna numbers on their property. The questionnaire requested information on the sighting of Common Mynas with details on the location, approximate numbers and when last seen. The area covered by the MLG stretches from approximately the ACT border to the south, the Murrumbidgee River to the west, Yass in the north and towards Gundaroo in the east. All locations were visited by the senior author to confirm the reported sightings.

Between mid-June 2006 and December 2008 a major part of Murrumbateman village (see Figure 1) was covered by the senior author over a two day period each month by bicycle. There were no surveys for August 2007 or August and September 2008. Roads were traversed from two and a half hours before sunset until dark and the number of birds seen and an estimate of the number heard recorded. The number heard at any one time was taken to be the average of the flock size seen during that particular survey. The average distance covered over the two days was 41.3km. On average, 40 per cent of the total distance was covered twice because of the need to retrace parts

of the survey route due to dead ends and road layout. If birds were seen again whilst retracing the bicycle route the numbers were not recorded, likewise if birds were not recorded on the outward trip but were recorded on the return trip again, they were not counted.

To compare numbers of Common Mynas at Murrumbateman with the number in Canberra a similar bicycle survey around the suburbs of Holt, Higgins, Latham and Macgregor was conducted between May and July 2008 and again in October to December 2008, although for these surveys no route was covered twice on the same day.

In the village, trapping started in early June 2007 and continued until January 2008. The traps, trapping and euthanising protocols were undertaken according to CIMAG protocols on animal welfare (see www.indianmynaaction.org.au).

The traps consist of a trapping section and a holding section into which trapped birds could freely move. For the trapping program an additional holding section was used to hold one or usually two decoy birds. Six decoy birds were originally provided by trappers in Canberra. Once wild birds were caught the Canberra decoy birds were removed and replaced by wild-caught decoys. In this way, wild-caught birds could be euthanised without the need to remove the decoy birds first, thus reducing the chances of birds escaping. All trapped birds were euthanised with carbon monoxide taken from an exhaust pipe of a vehicle started when the engine was cold. Food and water was provided *ad. lib.* and the traps inspected daily. On cold nights rugs were placed over the traps. Whenever possible, euthanised birds were retained and frozen for subsequent dissection to determine sex and age. With females, an inspection of the oviduct helped to determine whether the birds had previously laid eggs.

Trapping sites were located on properties and designed to be in areas where wild birds had been observed and close enough to residents to enable observation and monitoring. Difficulties included finding locations where domestic, feral and native animals (such as cats, dogs, foxes and raptors), would not attack decoy birds; ensuring reliable monitoring and provision of food and water for decoy birds; decoys escaping when handling traps and finding respondents willing to undertake trapping for extended periods when capture rates were low.

Results

Questionnaire

There were 14 returns from the surrounding countryside and ten returns from the village. Of the rural responses, Common Mynas were confirmed at nine locations scattered through the area ranging from the south at S 35 06 17, E 149 00 57 to the north at S 34 54 30, E 148 53 51 and between the Murrumbidgee River to the west and adjacent to the Barton Highway in the east. It is

known that Common Mynas occur further north in Yass (B. Handke *pers. comm*.). It was not possible to confirm sightings at an additional site on the Murrumbidgee River (S 35 05 06, E 148 55 33) or at four sites to the east of the Barton Highway. The number of birds confirmed at the various rural sites on visits between late August and October 2006 varied from two to four although at one site up to eight birds were present. Sightings were confirmed as being restricted to around the homestead and neighboring farm buildings. Most respondents indicated that the birds had first been seen between 2001 and 2003. In most cases, birds were known to have bred within the area. The ten returns from the village were scattered throughout the area and Common Mynas were confirmed from all but one of these sites during the subsequent bicycle survey.

Bicycle survey

Birds were regularly observed in small numbers throughout the village. No roosts were located and birds found in a location on the first day of the survey were not usually found in the same place on the following day. Because the bicycle survey could not be completed in one day it is therefore possible that over the two day period some were double counted.

For each survey the route cycled and where birds were observed was noted. A grid of 13 by eight, with each cell 0.5km square was drawn over a map of the village and a reporting rate expressed for each of the resulting cells (see Figure 1). The reporting rate was calculated as the number of times the cell was traversed divided by the number of times birds were observed within the cell and expressed as a percentage. In many instances for any one day a cell could be traversed more than once but irrespective of the number of times, a cell was regarded as having been traversed once only per day. The areas where Common Mynas were most commonly recorded was in C4, where birds were seen on 56 per cent of occasions, and K6 where birds were seen on 50 per cent of occasions (see Figure 1). Birds were recorded breeding in these two cells and in A2 and F6.

Over the 30 months of observations the distribution of numbers was similar with a relatively stable number between June and December each year (see Figure 2). In 2006, over this period there was on average 10.6 birds recorded during each survey, 17 in 2007 and 12 in 2008. A generalised linear model (GLM) was fitted to these data. The analysis suggested that there was a significant difference between years (ANOVA $F=5.25_{2,15}$). There was no difference between 2006 and 2008, p=0.477, but 2007 was different from 2006 and 2008. For both 2007 and 2008 there was a brief increase in abundance after the first sighting of young birds in December 2006 and November 2007, which was then followed by a decline in February 2007 and 2008. This was then followed by an increase in numbers from March, reaching a maximum in May for both 2007 and 2008, followed by a sharp decline.

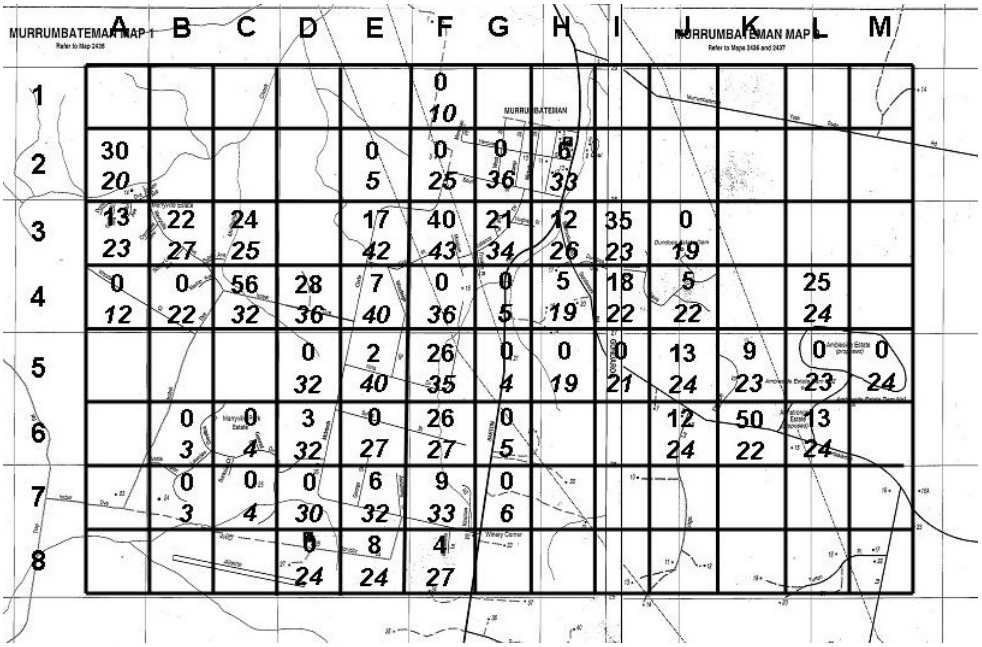

Figure 1. Percentage reporting rate (upper number) and number of surveys (lower number) for each 0.5 km square cell covering the village of Murrumbateman, NSW. Cells A2, C4, F6 and K6 contained breeding sites.

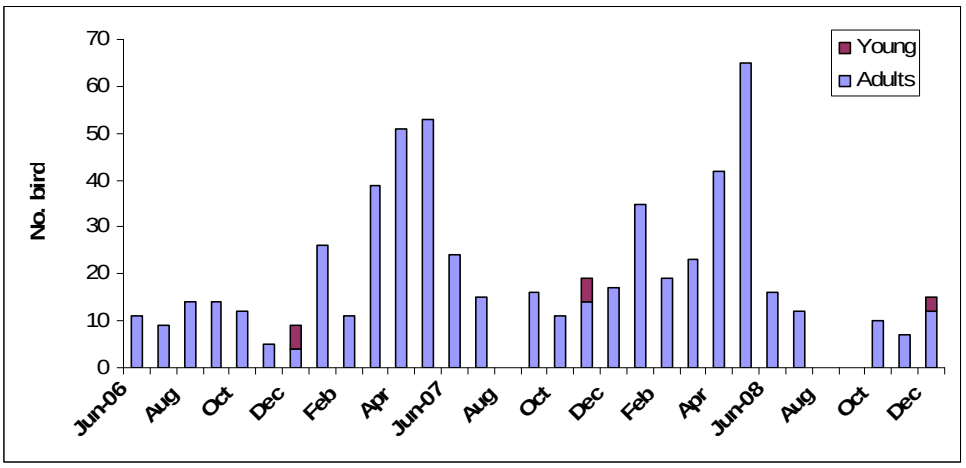

Figure 2. Number of Common Mynas recorded at Murrumbateman during the bicycle survey. Note, there were no surveys in August 2007 or between August and October 2008.

The number of Common Mynas recorded during the bicycle surveys in Murrumbateman was compared with those in Canberra between May and July 2008 and again between October and December 2008 (Table 1). Whilst May was similar in both areas, June and July numbers declined in Murrumbateman) but remained high in Canberra. Between October and December 2008, numbers were lower in both areas but were still higher in Canberra than at the village.

	May Birds per km	June	July	Oct	Nov	Dec
Murrumbateman	2.6	0.6	0.4	0.25	0.2	0.3
Canberra	3.6	3.6	3.5	2.0	1.7	2.1

Table 1. Number of birds recorded per kilometre in Murrumbateman and Canberra during six months of 2008.

Trapping

The trapping program started on 3 June 2007 at two sites where birds were frequently seen. Traps were subsequently moved to a further four sites. Trapping within the village continued until 10 January 2008.

Despite initial enthusiasm, only six people were prepared to set up traps in the village (see Table 2). There were 52 birds caught, but over that period the trapping effort varied considerably with at times no traps being in operation. Two of the traps caught 84.6 per cent of the birds. Two of the trappers soon lost interest in maintaining their traps once they realised the need to maintain decoy birds. The catch per unit effort was low, with an average of 1.5 birds caught every ten trap days. All commented on the frustration of only seeing birds occasionally on the property. A notable feature was that the two trappers with the most success persevered and were often surprised to find birds trapped when none had been observed or heard within 100-500m of the property.

There was an increase in interest especially from the rural, wine growing community when Common Mynas were observed on vines in February and March 2008. At one vineyard situated in grid cell D4 (see Figure 1), trapping occurred between 15 March and 16 August 2008. Assuming that trapping was continual throughout this period and that all birds trapped were Common Mynas, then during this period 90 birds were trapped with a trapping effort of 3.2 birds per ten trap days, double the trapping success when compared with the village. Unfortunately, no specimens were taken and therefore were not available for autopsy. In addition, members of the community became

aware of the CIMAG website and it became impossible to document the number of traps or the number trapped. However anecdotal reports have not suggested that any traps other than those provided by MLG had been utilised.

Trapper	No. trap days	No. caught	Catch/10 trap days	Trapping period
A	64	4	0.63	3 June-9 Aug
B	83	20	2.41	3 June-10 Jan
D	50	2	0.40	24 June-30 Aug
C	135	24	1.78	4 Aug-3 Jan
F	5	1	2.00	11 Aug-17 Aug
E	17	1	0.59	25 Aug-11 Sep
Total	354	52	1.47	3 June-10 Jan

Table 2. Trapping effort and number of Common Mynas caught at Murrumbateman Village between 3 June 2007 and 10 January 2008.

Autopsy results:

Thirty-five of the 52 trapped birds were retained as frozen specimens with sex and breeding condition determined subsequently. Seventeen birds were trapped during the winter months, seven during the spring and 11 during the summer. Of the 15 females caught, three had previously laid eggs whilst the remainder were birds that had never laid. This suggests that either the trapping program was biased to catching birds that had never laid or the majority of birds at Murrumbateman were non-laying, possibly young birds. Particularly interesting was that of the ten females caught during the winter months, only one bird had laid a clutch. If the trapping is not biased then most birds breeding the following spring were doing so for the first time.

Discussion

From the small number of questionnaires returned it would appear that Common Mynas are now scattered in small numbers throughout the rural areas surrounding Murrumbateman, in particular in areas between the Barton Highway and the Murrumbidgee River. In virtually all cases the birds were roosting in thick conifers or in sheds. Horse feed was in abundance suggesting that those rural properties with these attributes are able to support small groups of Common Mynas that may breed. However, young birds must either die or more likely disperse for the numbers do not appear to vary much at each site. All respondents agreed that the birds were first present around 2001-2003. This agrees well with the observations compiled from

the COG Garden Bird Survey that Common Mynas numbers in Canberra increased each year until about 2000 suggesting that birds had dispersed from Canberra around the same time that they were seen in the countryside around Murrumbateman. Although the number of birds resident on any one rural property is small it appears that offspring dispersal may well contribute to the influx observed at Murrumbateman village in the autumn.

Despite an extensive advertising campaign with notices in the local Murrumbateman paper and the Murrumbateman Landcare newsletter, there was little interest shown in the trapping program. Although there was a significant level of interest and awareness in the presence of Common Mynas, it came from the surrounding rural community rather than from the village. Expressions of interest in terms of requests for traps were negligible during the winter, spring and summer months but increased especially from the rural community during the autumn. By questioning those making enquiries there was an indication that the increase in Common Myna numbers on rural properties and in the village contributed to the increase in interest to trap Common Mynas. Although no figures are available from the rural community, it would appear that expressions of interest were received once the index of abundance at the village exceeded 30 birds reported during the bicycle survey.

Despite initial enthusiasm, few individuals came forward to trap birds on their properties. Common Mynas were usually found associating with horses yet it was difficult to set up traps in such a way that domestic stock and household pets did not interfere with the traps. It was not possible to induce wild birds to the traps unless decoy birds were used to 'call in' the wild birds. The low rate of capture and the daily maintenance of the decoy birds resulted in a high mortality rate of the decoy birds with six of the 16 ending up dead. In most cases mortality was due to Goshawk predation or stress. Interestingly, the majority of birds caught were from areas where Common Mynas were seldom seen but where the owners were experienced in dealing with captive birds and were prepared to maintain the trapping effort, despite low returns.

The bicycle survey, though restricted to a part of the village of Murrumbateman, confirmed that Common Mynas were present throughout the year but at low densities and nothing like the densities estimated for Canberra. From a comparison between surveys in Murrumbateman and through suburbs in Canberra between May and July 2008, and again between October and December 2008, the counts indicate that although numbers were similar in May, by June and July there were 6.5 to 8.3 time more birds in Canberra and between October and December 2008, 7.0 to 8.5 times more birds than in Murrumbateman.

Within the village, the distribution of Common Mynas was patchy with birds being most frequently recorded

around the four areas with known nest sites. Any future trapping program should concentrate efforts within these areas. No permanent night roosts have been reported or recorded, possibly due to the low numbers during the winter months. When roosts have been reported, subsequent observations suggest that the birds quickly move elsewhere. From month to month, the resident population was relatively stable outside the breeding season, yet birds were seldom seen in the same area. In addition, it was not unusual for birds to be trapped yet none had been seen the day before. These observations indicate that with small numbers the birds are very mobile from day to day, although this can only be confirmed with a further study involving the marking of individual birds.

The number of birds recorded remained similar throughout the winter to early summer 2006. For the same period the following year, the numbers had increased from an average of 10.6 birds recorded per survey to 17.0 birds, despite the trapping effort within the village. For the same period the following year, numbers on average had decreased to numbers similar to 2006 (12.0). Due to the brevity of the data set it is not possible to estimate the fluctuation in Common Myna numbers from year to year, but there is no reason to believe that resources are limiting and given the much lower numbers than in Canberra it could be argued that the numbers are increasing. If this is the case then it would appear that, although the trapping within the village had little effect on numbers, there was an overall increase. However, it is possible that the removal of 90 birds from a vineyard between mid-March and mid-August did reduce numbers.

Data from the Canberra-based Garden Bird Survey conducted by the Canberra Ornithologists Group (Veerman 2006) does not indicate an increase in numbers during the late autumn months yet this is what appears to happen at Murrumbateman. The reasons for this are unknown but may well be associated with the ripening of grapes. Young birds at Murrumbateman were first observed at the end of November and early December. The majority of young of the year would be expected to be observed from January onwards. This appears to be confirmed by the survey observations, with an increase in numbers seen at this time of the year. The subsequent decline could be due to mortality, dispersal or a combination of both. Interestingly, for both years this was then followed by a subsequent increase. At the time the local vineyards were reporting an increase in Common Myna numbers, the grapes were ripening and increasing their sugar content. The cool country grape vintage occurs around February, depending on grape variety. The dip in numbers within the village appears to occur with an increase in numbers around ripening grape vines.

To maintain the Common Myna population at a low level we recognise the need to incorporate the use of decoy birds to attract the wild birds into the trap. This is not

necessary where the Common Myna abundance is high. We doubt the value of letting traps out to individuals with no experience of looking after captive birds where daily maintenance is required. Instead we recommend that two or three larger, semi-permanent traps are set up around the village that allow for easy weekly maintenance and the feeding of decoy and trapped birds. The traps should be set up on properties where the birds can be maintained by those experienced with captive birds, preferably those who maintain aviaries on their properties. The traps need to be sturdy enough to resist interference by domestic stock and should be so designed that prior to euthanasia there is a simple mechanism to extract a couple of trapped birds that can be used as decoys. Current trap design also means that larger traps, even when secured by pegs against high winds, are still susceptible to damage and loss of birds when weather conditions deteriorate. Given the exposed nature of many of the properties to winds, this will impact on locating suitable sites.

The opportunity of trapping at the wineries during grape ripening and harvest season should be further developed to introduce local residents to the benefits of trapping, i.e. reducing loss of grapes. Given the close community of winery operations 'word of mouth' may be an effective tool in this district. Additionally, trapping rates have been far higher within a shorter period of time so more motivation for trapping may result.

Although the most efficient time to trap is during the late winter months, at which time all birds are likely to survive and subsequently breed the following spring, it would appear that interest from the general public to trap occurs when numbers are highest, that is during the autumn months. We therefore recommend that, in the future, any trapping effort is focused over the period March to May inclusive, however trapping should occur during the winter months at rural properties that do not grow vines.

MLG regards this initial two year exercise as a valuable one for developing experience for trapping at low densities in rural areas and is aiming to develop a self-sustaining core of trapping volunteers that can be ongoing over the long term, without the high level of management of the project required by project organisers.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Australian Government Envirofund for providing some project funding; Murrumbateman residents and members of MLG for their assistance in surveys, trapping and field day displays; Bill Handke (CIMAG) for his generous guidance in making a number of small traps; Chris Tidemann (ANU) for his expert comments in the early stages of the project. We also wish to thanks Dr A.O. Nicholls for his fitting of the GLM to the survey data and for his comments on an early draft.

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FIFTY YEARS' OBSERVATIONS OF THE COMMON BLACKBIRD

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In February 1959 Buddy Holly, J.P. Richardson AKA the Big Bopper and Richie Valens died in a plane crash. Subsequently, sales of their records soared like ascending skylarks on a spring morning. By this time my friends and I had accumulated a credible knowledge of the birds around Wagga Wagga, but the first we knew of the presence of Common Blackbirds *Turdus merula* was when my father said, "Shoot all the starlings you can, but don't shoot the blackbirds". His warning reminds me of Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mocking Bird* when he told Scout and Jem, "Shoot all the blue jays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin kill a mocking bird".

By 1970, Common Blackbirds had underscored their established presence by nesting in outbuildings and raiding soft fruits. In retaliation, some gardeners set rat traps among their tomato plants. Today blackbirds seem as common in Wagga gardens as they are in Canberra. The first recorded report of a blackbird in Canberra occurred at Yarralumla in August 1949 (Lamm, *et al.* 1963), and anecdotal evidence suggests the sighting was reported by Mrs. Ratcliffe, wife of Francis Ratcliffe, CSIRO scientist and author of *Flying Fox and Desert Sand*.

During the late 1960s and early '70s I lived in Braddon and Reid where I frequently saw blackbirds. Moving to Holt in 1976, I first sighted them in my new garden in 1981, which corresponds with opinion that suburban gardens don't become supportive of blackbirds until established for some five years. Blackbirds seemed to enter a winter hiatus to the extent that I thought they'd left the area until occasional sightings convinced me this wasn't the case, or perhaps they were passing back and forth from nearby areas as local temperatures fluctuated. During warmer weather there appears to be some altitudinal movement, with small numbers recorded in the New Chums road area of the Brindabella Range (Wilson 1999). Blackbirds are partial migrants in England and this instinct may still exist in local populations, perhaps this accounts for sightings in what appears to be unsuitable habitat (ibid).

In the verdant tranquility of a walled garden near Rome, where noise from a nearby autostrada is muted, a Common Blackbird flits from atop the wall to feast on espaliered grapes. On a northern summer morning in 1995 I rested on a ranch house verandah in western Kentucky watching a mobile irrigator send an arc of water stuttering across a

bluegrass sward when my attention was taken by a bird fossicking in the shade of a spreading Cottonwood Tree (*Populus deltoides)*. I was puzzled, its jizz indicated a Common Blackbird, but here in the New World? Surely not. Then it paused in a splotch of dappled sunlight and I glimpsed the russet breast, belly and grey back. It was an American Robin *T. migratorius*. As I approached, it flushed from beneath the Cotton Wood uttering a loud ratcheting alarm call. Competition from this species probably helped thwart establishment of the Common Blackbird in North America.

A few months later, I flushed a bird in my Holt backward. It took wing with a similar alarm call to the American Robin's and landed high in a tall silver birch. It was the same species that raided the Roman's grapes and a congener of the robin I saw in Kentucky. In fact, this particular blackbird was known to me, the local cock of the walk. On mild spring afternoons, an hour before dark, he would land atop the birch and regale the area with his song. Soon, blackbirds in surrounding gardens would strike up and the air became rife with blackbird music. However, none could compete with the birch tree busker as he captivated us with his cavalcade of melodies, clever improvisations and slick riffs. Mind you, many others were very good, while some – probably younger males – varied from mediocre to scratchy and discordant. Bird song in blackbirds is not entirely inherent, much has to be learnt (pers. comm.). Occasionally an intruder landed in the birch and territorial song was replaced by physical deterrence as a vigorous chase ensued and the would-be usurper banished.

During spring, blackbirds often sing during the hours of darkness. Moonlight seems to encourage them as do street lights, and they're often heard as an overnight shower pelts down. Breeding can commence in July and may continue until the first frosts of autumn with human built structures frequently used as nesting sites. During the spring of 2004 blackbirds built a nest in the coat pocket of a scarecrow in the garden. The male was easy to keep track of as his neck and back were heavily marked with white. He was a partial albino, a fairly common condition among blackbirds. Accordingly, he was nicknamed Pinto. Three eggs were in the nest when a gusty wind brought down the scarecrow and the nest was abandoned. A few weeks later I saw Pinto disappear into a thick Photinia (*Photinia serrulata)* carrying worms. Apparently, the pair had commenced a second brood. (Layton 2005)

Female blackbirds maintain a low profile compared to males. I rarely see them except during the breeding season when she constructs the nest while he guards the territory and occasionally assists. However, the male feeds her when she's incubating and I've seen both parents attending the young. I've quietly parted branches where I've known a nest to be and found the hen crouched low in the nest, still as

stone. Once I stroked her back with a finger while she remained motionless but felt blameworthy as I may have subjected her to unnecessary stress. As is the case with many smaller garden birds, blackbirds' nests are often destroyed by Pied Currawongs *Strepera graculina* and nestlings taken.

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ODD OBS

Royal Spoonbills at Kelly's Swamp

Martin Butterfield (CBN Dec 2008, and June 2009) has already written articles about the Royal Spoonbills *Platalea regia* nesting at Kelly's Swamp last summer. Most of the primary data was supplied by me and Geoffrey Dabb. I would like to add a few comments as this was the most exciting bird event of my life.

Geoffrey and I kept an eye on these birds, three pairs, from the time that they arrived, in late October 2008, until they departed, with their four chicks, at the end of January 2009. We would go more often when we thought that it was time for a chick to hatch, time for a chick to leave the nest, or time for one to, at last, fly from the tree.

We saw at least one of the pairs copulate, then we saw tiny balls of down, in two of the nests. Sadly only one out of four chicks survived in the top nest, two out of three in the lower nest. We don't know just how many hatched in the lower right hand nest, but one survived. So, out of a total of possibly ten hatchings, four chicks survived. Apparently this is a good result.

It was surprising how long the chicks stayed in the tree after leaving the nest, balancing precariously on inadequate twigs, flapping and hence exercising and strengthening their wings before finally flying down into the water. It seemed that, as time went by, the parents tried to encourage them to leave the tree. They stood at the outer edge of the foliage, and refused to feed the chicks unless they ventured closer.

When not attending to the chicks, the parents often stood on one leg, with their heads tucked in. At other times they would preen themselves and the chicks. The chicks were very persistent in demanding food.

Sometimes there were up to 30 Straw-necked Ibises *Threskiornis spinicollis* in the tree and we wondered whether they were trying to take over the spoonbills' nests. There were never any real disputes between the birds. If the ibises did take over a nest, they would quickly be displaced by the spoonbill parents.

Occasionally a spoonbill would be seen carrying a long, thin stick to the tree, for what purpose we could not understand. Surely this was not a courtship display as they were still busy raising a family.

We could hardly believe it when we saw a spoonbill perch on the barbed wire that stretches across the swamp; but maybe that wire was not much thinner than the twigs in the tree on which it stood.

The job of feeding the chicks was not finished when the chicks left the tree. Parents were still about, swishing their bills through the water to gather food and responding to the begging of their chicks. They also went further afield than Kelly's to gather food. The chicks were learning to feed themselves, and

each other as soon as they were in the water.

There were always raptors about and Geoffrey said "I hope a raptor does not take a chick, but if it does, I hope that I am there to photograph it". Despite their size, spoonbills are light birds.

When the last spoonbill chick flew down, and we actually saw that happen, the Dabbs and the Compstons celebrated with champagne.

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Selective aggression by Pied Currawongs

For the last two years, Pied Currawongs *Strepera graculina* have nested in a large Yellow Box *Eucaplyptus meliodora* in our lawn. In both years the nest has been approximately six metres above the nest of a pair of Tawny Frogmouths *Podargus strigoides*.

In 2008, the currawongs rarely interacted with the frogmouths, except on the day that the currawong chicks first flew. For that day, the currawongs continually swooped the frogmouth nest in which the male was brooding two small chicks. The currawongs also ignored all human activities in the garden and surrounding areas.

For the 2009 breeding event the currawongs were much more aggressive. They swooped the frogmouth nest a little more than in 2008, with an increased tendency to do so any time more than one large frogmouth was visible. This was first apparent on the infrequent occasions that the female frogmouth visited the nest in daylight. That always generated a swoop. Towards the end of the frogmouth brooding period the appearance of a large chick would also draw some unwelcome attention.

Even more noticeable was the attention the currawong gave to me. As the currawong chicks approached first flight, I would be swooped by one or often both adult birds anytime I appeared on the lawn or the open terrain within about 80m of the nest tree. The swoops also got closer as time progressed, to the extent that the bird's wings brushed my hat on some occasions. I guess I was just lucky as my wife was never swooped. Further, despite having observed swooping Australian Magpies *Cracticus tibicen* often choosing to attack a dog rather than the accompanying human, the currawongs very rarely swooped our small dog, other than when disputing ownership of the dog's food bowl (the bowl was only evident for a short time while the dog ate from it).

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Steve Wilson was right about Yellow-tufted Honeyeaters!

Steve Wilson in his impressive book *Birds of the ACT: Two Centuries of Change* classified the Yellow-tufted Honeyeater *Lichenostomus melanops* as:

Rare visitor, chiefly in the cooler months. Probably breeds not far away outside the ACT.

We have a rough regenerating bush block sloping down to the Queanbeyan River just downstream from Tinderry Crossing, NSW, and within COG's Area of Interest (grid cell Q21). Yellow-tufted Honeyeaters breed there, and are found with dependent young in mid-summer, mainly in the tea-tree/acacia areas bordering the river.

In December 2005, there were two dependent young and 10 adults recorded, and back in February 2000 five dependent young and six adults were seen. In March 2001, six dependent young and 40 adults were recorded in a day's birding. This year in early January, I saw dependent young and adults in the ratio of 4/10, and on 18 February 1/20, which indicates a breeding season of some three or more months.

The adults were seen separately with either one or two dependent young, but on one occasion six young birds were left in one small eucalypt, crèche-like, for at least 20 minutes; about a dozen adults returned and led them down to the tea-tree nearer the river.

While we cannot claim that the Yellow-tufted Honeyeaters seen occasionally in Canberra in winter come from this group, I think we could say that it is possible that some of them do, and that Steve Wilson's theory that they originate not far outside the ACT is correct.

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Flame Robins fly high to avoid Sparrowhawk

The uphill, open slopes of Callum Brae Nature Reserve provide a regular habitat for wintering Flame Robins *Petroica phoenicea*. One day in mid June 2009, when checking for the robins, I saw a large group of small birds on the ground which later turned out to be a mixed flock of seven Flame Robins (two males and five brown birds), plus around 25 Yellow-rumped Thornbills *Acanthiza chrysorrhoa*. I was about 150 metres away when an alarm call from White-plumed Honeyeaters *Lichenostomus penicillatus* rang out and a Collared Sparrowhawk *Accipiter cirrocephalus* flew fast and low past me, straight for the ground feeding flock. The flock took flight in a whirl of birds, I thought most of them must have headed in the direction of a clump of trees downslope.

The Sparrowhawk landed on the ground where the small birds had been but it was too late; the raptor looked around for a short while, then flew to a small

tree nearby for a minute or so and finally flew off. I then looked around for the robins and thornbills but could find nothing, not in the small group of trees nearby and I heard no calls. Finally, I looked upwards to the sky and was amazed to see the Flame Robins high up in the sky, a hundred metres up at least, gliding around like woodswallows. The birds eventually glided down into a large dead tree up the hill, then perched for a while, I guess waiting to make sure that the Sparrowhawk had gone. Finally, the robins flew down to the ground to join several Yellow-rumped Thornbills. It seems that the robins had taken flight up high on the alarm call and were waiting around up there until the coast was clear.

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Thoughts on Mozart's Starling

The ubiquitous Common Starling *Sturnus vulgarus* has attracted my attention since childhood. On colourless, cold winter days when no other birds came, the murmurings of a flock perched in paddock trees often revived the enthusiasm of a jaded nascent birder. With the arrival of spring the starlings' spotted winter plumage had worn away to reveal an attractive glossy black. Thus replete in their iridescent fruit-raiding finery they presented excellent targets for the air rifle of a budding young hunter and, such was the extent of local dislike for them, shooting starlings didn't incur parental wrath.

This disdain appears prevalent in countries wherever the birds have been introduced but is less virulent within their natural ranges of Europe and Asia. Old World anecdote contains numerous references to Common Starlings including the tale of a man who entered an Austrian pet shop on 27 May 1784 and was astounded to hear a caged bird whistling the Allegretto theme from Mozart's G major piano concerto. He bought the bird and named it Vogel-Starhl. This common bird soon became a cherished pet. The owner, however, was not your everyday shopper. His name – Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.

Scholars who study Mozart's life and works, however, put forth various hypotheses concerning the veracity of the story. They are convinced of the purchase of Vogel-Starhl because Mozart duly recorded the transaction and date in his account book. However, the G major concerto is entered in his catalogue of works on 12 April 1784, seven weeks before Mozart bought the bird. So how could the starling in the pet shop have learned the tune? Did the gifted but eccentric composer fudge the entry date?

Mimicry researchers suggest that Mozart was a regular browser in the pet shop, and that during preliminary visits he whistled the finale, later discovering that one of the birds had come to mimic it almost perfectly. In those days, people who raised birds for sale often trained them to whistle a particular tune that might have appealed to a potential customer. The training was done with

the help of a flageolet, a simplified flute-like instrument. As birders know, starlings readily mimic whistles and whistle-like calls.

However the explanation that appeals to me is that offered by Mozart scholar Eric Blom, "… the G major piano concerto has a Folksong-like theme in the finale. We find the same kind of Austrian folksong flavour in other works in G major". Just as Shakespeare borrowed plots for his plays from historical stories, a classical composer would borrow from folksongs, and these tunes were taught to young birds to make them more saleable; thus, it was not an unlikely coincidence for Mozart and the starling to have derived inspiration from the same popular Austrian folk song. The odds of Mozart hearing this particular starling, however, make for an interesting calculation.

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COLUMNISTS' CORNER

Canberra's birds: retreats and advances

Stentoreus has noticed that bulletins about the state of our bird life are becoming more frequent. While the computer may have lent more precision to the calculations, you don't need a computer to see changes going on. Herewith a selection of notable changes, some from early days, some current.

Bustard – gone

In 1855, John Gale, later founder and editor of the Queanbeyan Age, first saw the site of the future Canberra. Having stayed at 'Parkwood, Ginninderra' he had crossed the Molonglo on horseback and was heading for Queanbeyan. Past Capital Hill, perhaps at the present site of Kingston, he saw a flock – some scores in number – of 'immense birds, the first I had seen of the huge plains turkey or Australian bustard'.

Sadly, to the compilers of the Mathews list in 1943, the bustard was then 'very rare' in the Canberra district, and is now listed as extinct here, being rare in New South Wales. These days, if you see a flock of what Gale had first thought were 'dun-coloured sheep', they are probably dun-coloured sheep.

Brolga – gone

This species shares with the bustard the cover of Steve Wilson's 'Birds of the ACT: Two Centuries of Change'. Steve Wilson notes that it was a common bird in the mid 1800s and regarded as a 'bad pest'. The only relatively recent Canberra records were in 1965 and 1978.

An imported brolga, bred 'near Geelong', was an early guest at the reopened Tidbinbilla 'extravaganza' as Chief Minister Stanhope called it. "If you've never seen a brolga", said Mr Stanhope, proudly opening the new wetland exhibit, "you will today".

Babblers – as good as gone

A few years ago both babbler species were labelled 'presumed extinct' in the ACT, although parts of it had been within their established haunts. 'Several colonies' of the Grey-crowned had existed between Red Hill and Tuggeranong, and Charles Barrett, at Tuggeranong homestead in 1921, described the White-browed as hopping 'from branch to branch of a tree almost within hand's reach'.

In 2004, a female Grey-crowned Babbler made its home at the Duntroon golf course for several weeks. In February 2006 an unsexed White-browed spent some days lurking in the woodland near the Glenloch inter-change. Canberra is no longer babbler country, but those two strays, detached

from their group for some reason, at least make the 'extinct' label inappropriate, technically anyway.

Galah – many more of them

The expansion of this highly successful species is well documented, for example by Joe Forshaw in 'Australian Parrots'. Although mentioned in early Canberra records, it probably arrived in much greater numbers in the 1940s and increased again in the 1950s. In the 1960s and 1970s Galahs spread to the coast, and may now be found dozing with terns and gulls on the sandy expanses of ocean beaches.

The great winter flocks that sprinkle Canberra's median strips and playing fields prompt the visitor's comment "Wow, aren't there a lot of birds in Canberra". Indeed there are, from time to time. From the brownish eye colour, these are mostly young birds.

Crested Pigeon – now here in numbers, and increasing

Perhaps the big success story of recent years. The 1977-81 Birds Australia (BA) atlas shows the species just verging on Canberra from the north and west. By 1982, a few individuals were regulars at the golf course at Holt. Now it is one of our most common species, with foraging aggregations of 50 or more in winter. In the 2007-08 GBS survey the species was recorded at all but one of the 72 sites, and was ranked seventh in abundance. Certainly it is adapted to suburban gardens, and breeds in them.

Corellas – now here, and increasing seasonally

In McComas Taylor's excellent little field guide, both corellas were listed as introductions or aviary escapees. Even then (1993) small numbers of both species could be found in the Narrabundah/Symonston area. The Little now breeds here and is present year-round in small numbers. In winter, much greater numbers arrive and feed on urban grassy patches, often in company with cockatoos.

The BA atlas distribution map suggests a natural broad spread westwards from the semi-arid zone. By contrast, the spotty distribution of the Long-billed suggests a caged-bird origin, rather than arrival from its stronghold in western Victoria.

Pelican – more than pre-Lake Burley Griffin, but comes and goes

Noted as 'very rare, river' in the 1943 Mathews list, the pelican arrived in numbers with the creation of larger bodies of water. According to Steve Wilson, the new water in Kelly's Swamp (permanent 'except for dry summers'), created an attractive roost. Quite large flocks (up to 50) have occurred there from time to time.

Perhaps an odd choice, but a stylised pelican appeared on the masthead of *Canberra Bird Notes* from the first issue in July 1968, the first text mention being in April 1969: 'Regular Molonglo River Flats and occasional on the lake below

Black Mtn until the lake level dropped'. The highest number recorded in that issue was 125.
For 1979, in the first issue after the pelican was replaced by the Gang-gang, a low year was reported: only 13 on Lake Burley Griffin. However Lake George was a different story, with 350 in December. The drying of Lake George does not seem to have caused a diversion of pelicans to Canberra's impoundments. Rather, it might have caused the previous large numbers to have moved away from the district.

Swamphen – more appearing according to opportunity

Unlike the moorhen and coot, this now common species was not recorded at all in the 1943 Mathews list. It has benefited from new wetlands with their associated reeds, tall weeds and typha. A brazen species, it is attracted to picnic areas close to its reedy haunts, and occasionally enters lid-less rubbish bins in search of discarded sandwiches and pie crusts. A ready breeder, it is quick to colonise new artificial wetlands almost as soon as they are created.

Snipe – probably less, and/or getting warier

Stentoreus will be a little daring with this assessment: over the last few years the numbers of Latham's Snipe around Kelly's Swamp have declined. They are also much more wary.

A few years ago, 2002 for example, you could easily count four or five at one time from one of the hides. Moreover, individuals frequently appeared close at hand, foraging at the margins. Now the best you can hope for is a long-range view of one or two, usually quickly retreating even from a distant observer.

Perhaps overall numbers have declined, perhaps not. One possibility is that the increase of aggressive swamphens has made the area less attractive to this retiring species.

Regent Honeyeater – going

Only 20 years ago there was debate about what was happening with the species. In 1990, my predecessor-columnist, *G. tibicen*, noted that the Regent Honeyeater had 'been in the news with conflicting reports about the status of the bird and the number left'.

Then in the golden year 1995, as reported in CBN 21:3, there was a flush of sightings leading to an estimate of at least 15 adult Regents in the Canberra area that spring. Four pairs attempted to breed at a North Watson site, with partial success.

Although the bird is occasionally seen, including in a Belconnen garden this year, nothing like the 1995 influx has occurred again. No longer is it a bird one might expect to come across somewhere in a given year.

This honeyeater is one of two bird species declared as endangered in the ACT.

Those smaller woodland birds – making one scratch one's head

If you are easily depressed do not even look at the long list of vulnerable species prescribed by New South Wales authorities.

Many unanswered questions arise. Are only the less common birds retreating, like the Hooded Robin? Some suspect that a whole range of woodland birds is declining quite sharply, seeing confirmation of this in the recent much-publicised survey in Victoria by a Monash University team. Locally, common birds like the Grey Fantail and Rufous Whistler do seem to be a lot scarcer.

Does the rather gloomy news from COG's own woodland survey (after its tenth year) show the local effects of loss of habitat as Canberra 'develops', or does it reflect a broader trend across eastern Australia – or both?

Is the slide the downturn of a cycle, to be reversed when wetter conditions return? And, perhaps the more crucial question, when will those conditions return, if ever?

Stentoreus

Birding in cyberspace, Canberra-style

The first *Birding in Cyberspace* column was published in September 1999, so this is **the column's ten year anniversary**. If you wish to peruse the first column, visit *CBN*'s online archive cbn.canberrabirds.org.au/documents/cbnvol24no3.pdf.

Much has happened since then in the world of cyberspace, including birders' use of computers and the internet. Over the decade this column has documented some of those changes. The widespread use of broadband and computers with hugely better performance that a decade ago mean that files that would have been considered impossibly large to use then are now routinely accessed from the web, uploaded to it and shared between net denizens. COG's wonderful photo gallery photogallery.canberrabirds.org.au/ illustrates this, as do the various web sites that provide streaming audio and video, or audio and video that you can download, such as those indexed at Surfbirds www.surfbirds.com/video2. Many birding portals, in addition to Surfbirds, now exist on the web, including the prominent Fatbirder www.fatbirder.com. Social networking has become a phenomenon unimaginable a decade ago, and in this issue I discuss birders' use of the Twitter social networking facility. Future columns will explore other uses of web 2.0, i.e. an approach to the internet in which users control the communications, including the creation, organising and sharing of information.

On the software side, the birth and growth of cloud computing remains worth watching and, indeed, participating in. Cloud computing is having your computer programs and/or data stored on distant servers accessed via the internet (the 'cloud'), rather than having them stored on your computer's

hard drive or on other local media. An example is Google Docs www.google.com.au. You can resize image files at www.shrinkpictures.com/resize.php and convert documents into pdf format at www.pdfonline.com/convert-pdf/. Your data files (Word documents, spreadsheets, presentations, etc.) can be stored at Google Docs or the other free online storage repositories covered in the previous issue. What, one wonders, will be the cutting edge in cyberspace birding a decade from now?

Apparently 29 October was **National Bird Day**. Did you know? Did you observe it? Australia Post did by releasing four stamps by Australian artist Christopher Pope featuring Australian native songbirds: Green Catbird 55c, Noisy Scrub-bird $1.10, Mangrove Golden Whistler $1.65 and Scarlet Honeyeather $2.75 www.stamps.com.au/shop/stamps/songbirds. These stamps will be on sale until 31 March 2010.

But it was not just any National Bird Day:

> Australia Post pays tribute to the pioneering Gould League in its centenary year (1909-2009), with the release of the stunning Australian Songbirds stamp issue. John Gould, in whose honour the Gould League was named, first described two of the species shown on the stamps.

Clicking across to **the Gould League** web site www.gould.org.au/centenary/OurHistory.asp confirms this anniversary. Were you a member of the Gould League as a child? I was, and here is the story of its origins:

> The Gould League of Bird Lovers was formed in 1909 with Prime Minister Alfred Deakin as its first President upon a suggestion, and generous donations, from school teacher Jessie McMichael. The Chairman of Australian Natives Association (now Australian Unity) was a close personal friend of Deakin and provided financial support to help grow the organisation. Gould League spread with NSW in 1910, Tasmania in 1920 and Western Australia in 1939.
>
> Named to honour the work of John and Elizabeth Gould, the Gould League was established to address two distinct national concerns:
>
> - the moral improvement of citizens
> - the nation's economic environmental future.
>
> The Patrons of the Organisation at foundation included:
>
> - Hon. John Murray, Premier of Victoria
> - Hon. A.A. Bilson, Minister of Public Instruction
> - Mr. F. Tate, Director of Education
>
> The Gould League's main activities during its formative years was [sic] in community education about the impact on nature of collecting eggs and using birds as a primary food source.
>
> Children were the main egg-collecting culprits so, with the help of the Education Department, the Gould League established education programs in schools. '[Schools are] an efficient way of reaching into nearly every home'

> (Frank Tate, Victorian Director of Education in early 1900s).
>
> The organisation conducted its first community engagement program, National Bird Day, on October 29, 1909 to encourage children and their families to change their behaviours towards native birds. It was then introduced into schools as an educational bird club.
>
> Gould League continued to expand its bird programs into other nature areas over the years, including sustainability areas of water, biodiversity, energy and waste, over the past several decades.

I don't know if the Gould League is active in the Canberra region, but it might be worth popping 29 October into your diary for next year's National Bird Day.

'Killer Magpies' screams the headline on YouTube, the internet site to which people upload videos that you can watch for free: www.youtube.com/watch?v=9wHreVKgOT4. The more sober title is given on screen: *On the diving habits of the Australian Magpie (Cracticus tibicen).* It commences with a headline from the *Canberra Times* 'Magpie causes near fatality' and explains that this is a video report on a study that aimed to 'Test the efficacy of helmet adornments in repelling magpies'. I won't spoil your fun by telling you the results, but it is a fascinating intervention study shared online. Be sure to watch Killer Magpie 2 after viewing the first video, as the report is in two parts.

The Kindle has arrived in Australia! This news was broken in the media on 19 October; I ordered immediately and mine arrived from the USA ten days later. What's the Kindle, and what's it got to do with birding, I heard someone mutter? Well the Kindle is Amazon.com's ebook reader www.amazon.com/dp/B00154JDAI. It is about the size of a small paperback book and really thin. It holds up to 1,500 ebooks: books in digital format. The Kindle has been available for a number of years in the USA and has sold like hotcakes, but could not be released here until Amazon worked out a deal with Telstra to use the latter's Next G wireless data transmission system to allow the Kindle to communicate with Amazon's USA-based servers. Kindle owners download books, magazines, newspapers, etc., from Amazon's bookstore—and it holds about 200,000 Kindle-ready titles at present. It takes about 60 seconds to download a full-length book, and they typically cost around half the price of the printed version. Transmission costs are included in the cost of the book; you pay nothing extra.

At the time of writing, the Kindle store had 856 books with the word 'bird' as one of its keywords. The first on the list was the delightful story of love and twitching by Nicholas Drayson: *A Guide to the Birds of East Africa*, first published in hardcover last year; current Kindle price US$10.99. 621 items had the keyword 'Australia'. I did not see any Australian birding/ornithology books included, but they are probably on the way. And one of the most awesome features of the Kindle is its readability: it uses real ink and, as a result, can be

read in any light, including bright daylight.

A recent contribution to the national birders' email discussion list Birding-Aus has relevance to Canberra region birders at this time of the year when cuckoos are abundant and highly vocal. Peter Kyne reported **a fatal attack on a Common Koel**:

> This morning on Charles Darwin Uni's Casuarina [Darwin] campus we witnessed a female Koel brought to the ground by attacking Little Friarbirds. One friarbird was on its back as they hit the ground and repeatedly pecked the Koel in the head. As the Friarbirds took off a Black Butcherbird flew in and delivered what may very well have been the final blow. I picked up the Koel after this and it was still alive, but it gave a final squawk and died within 10 seconds.

Peter went on to ask 'Has anyone observed this behaviour before where a host/potential host kills an adult cuckoo, or know if this is well documented?'. Disappointingly, no-one responded to Peter's question. Do any readers have any observations of koels being despatched by birds in whose nest they lay their eggs? If so, please post them to the CanberraBirds email list canberrabirds.org.au/Discuss.htm.

During October and November there was a lot of discussion on Birding-Aus about the use of new and emerging internet-based technologies, including (especially) **Twitter** twitter.com. Twitter has become a global phenomenon since it commenced operating in 2006. It describes itself as 'a real-time short messaging service that works over multiple networks and devices [mainly internet-enabled mobile phones, and computers]. In countries all around the world, people follow the sources most relevant to them and access information via Twitter as it happens—from breaking world news to updates from friends'. Messages are limited to 140 characters.

Most users seem to be those who think that the world's population is interested in the minutiae of their lives, but it is increasingly being used by politicians, advocacy groups, and … birders. Birding-Aus is available via Twitter twitter.com/birdingaus as are the contributions to various Australian birding hotlines, such as the Victorian one at twitter.com/birdlinevic.

Twitter was used by Sean Dooley (author of *The Big Twitch* and the new editor of *Wingspan* magazine) to keep people up-to-date on his (and others') exploits during November's Victorian Twitchathon. He continued it during the Australian Birdfair at Leeton australianbirdfair.org.au a week or two later. The thread of tweets is online at twitter.com/Twitchathon. One of Sean's entries from the Birdfair weekend reads 'Looks like I strung the Lewins. It turned out to be a funny looking White-eared. How embarrassing'. To translate: a 'stringer' is 'a birder who attempts to claim a bird that they haven't actually seen, most often by trying to turn a comparatively common bird into something far rarer' (Dooley, S & Clare, M 2007, *Anoraks to zitting cisticola: a*

whole lot of stuff about birdwatching, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, N.S.W., p. 214). The 'Lewins' are Lewin's Honeyeater and the 'White-eared' is the White-eared Honeyeater. So Sean confirms that he had earlier mis-identified a bird and, since he had used twitter to advise all and sundry of the initial (wrong) observation, he felt the need to correct his error. It is good to see that a leader of the Australian birding community is so ready to admit to a mistake, confirming that he is certainly not a stringer!

The **Birds Australia Rarities Committee (BARC)** has an interesting web site www.tonypalliser.com/barc/barc-home.html. Its contents include membership and contact details, indexes of decisions and case summaries, the current review list, rarity photographs, the national Unusual Record Report form, guidance on how to submit a record, Committee rules, references & bibliography, and links to other Committees, though at the time of writing some of those links were not functioning. An impressive feature is that BARC publishes online its decisions on submissions made to it, including quite a bit of information explaining the reasons for its decisions, whether to accept or not accept the rarities report. It also shows the submissions currently being reviewed. A pleasing aspect is that it provides details of the 'Committee Rules', i.e. the processes that the Committee uses to reach its decisions.

An example of an accepted submission is No 556: House Crow *Corvus splendens* reported from Dee Why, NSW 13-14 March 2008. The submission was accompanied by photographs helping the Committee making a unanimous decision to accept it. It is assumed that this bird arrived in Australia on a ship, a 'ship-assisted individual', and is of the Myanmar sub-species of the House Crow. Current policy is to euthanise any House Crows found in Australia.

Unusual bird observations made in the Canberra region should be submitted to COG's Rarities Panel canberrabirds.org.au/Recording%20Birds/RecordingBirds_RaritiesPanel.htm.

Over the years, readers will have heard about—and some fortunate enough to see—the mass breeding of some bird species following rain. Apparently this is what happened with budgerigars in Western Queensland earlier this year, as evidenced by a set of amazing photographs shared on the ABC's web site by Ann Britton, with the caption **A flock of budgerigars swarm across the fields at Boulia in far west Queensland on October 15, 2009**: www.abc.net.au/news/photos/#num=0&id=2725452.

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.

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

It is with pleasure that I present my second President's Report covering the period October 2008 to September 2009.

Forward Plan

As in the past the Committee's activities are guided by the Forward Plan. The plan was revisited in mid-November and published in the March Gang-gang. The plan covers the period 2009 to 2011 and takes into account core COG objectives recognising two categories of tasks; major and minor. Major projects are likely to need more man-power and/or money to come to fruition whilst the minor tasks need only modest resources.

Of the major tasks progress has occurred on various fronts:

1) Republish a revised 'Birds of Canberra Gardens'. A sub-committee comprising Paul Fennell, Kathy Walter, David Cook, Martin Butterfield and Julian Robinson first met in February 2009 to determine the structure and responsibilities for the publication. It was decided that the basic format and layout would remain but with an additional ten years of data. Those authors who contributed to the COG Annual Bird Report were willing to participate in updating the species texts. On receiving quotes from various printers it was decided that it was unnecessary to obtain a grant and the publication would be funded by COG. The publication has progressed steadily and is now up to the stage where a draft will go to printers for a final quote. The draft is now being proof read by Barbara Allan and Harvey Perkins. I would like to acknowledge the enormous amount of work that Paul Fennell has put into this project.

2) COG Database upgrade. The area of the database that needed to be revised was to improve the structure of the Garden Bird Survey and to update the data input system. A tender document was prepared and after receiving quotes and interviewing three possible candidates the contract was awarded to AA Absolute Access. Martin Butterfield as GBS Coordinator was responsible for progressing the contract and interacting with the programmer. With valuable input from Kay Hahne and Anne Hall the contract was completed within budget and on time. The 2008-09 GBS charts have now been entered using the new system. My thanks to Martin, Kay and Anne for a most successful outcome.

3) Production of a new two CD set of Bird Calls of the ACT region. Despite COG purchasing some of the required equipment there has been little progress with this project. A list of 90 species, whose calls are required for the CD, was published in the June 2009 Gang-gang with a request for members to participate in the

project. To date there is one COG member that I am aware of who has taken up the challenge. I urge others to join him.

4) Updating the ACT Bird Atlas. There was no progress made on this project over the previous year. It is still the intention of the Committee to investigate the possibility but it urgently needs someone to take on the challenge of providing a project discussion document before any advance is likely to be made.

5) Provide on-going financial support to the Mulligans Flat/ Goorooyaroo ecological community research project. Due to unforseen circumstances the research project aimed at re-introducing the Brown Treecreeper was delayed but is now back on track with birds due to be introduced in November. The funds provided by COG have now been used to purchase radio tracking and banding equipment for the project. COG is actively involved in bird survey work for the project and is presently involved in discussions concerning future governance of the Mulligans Flat Sanctuary. COG wrote a letter of support endorsing the proposed Greater Goorooyaroo project but an application for funding through the Federal Government's 'Caring for our Country' program was unsuccessful.

6) Develop sets of display material. I am glad to say that Julian Robinson has offered to help with this project. Julian has attended various Committee meetings with ideas and costing. We await Julian's return so that final decisions can be made on funding and the materials required.

Of the minor tasks:

1) Updating the COG pamphlet on bird-attracting garden plants is still required and again I would urge anyone with an interest in this area to come forward to help with this project.

2) Re-ordering copies of existing 'Bird calls of the ACT Region' CD. As stock was running low, a continuing high demand and the two CD replacement set unlikely in the near future, the Committee decided to order an additional 500 copies. This was completed and paid for in March.

3) The first of the Bird Routes brochures was developed last year and is now available at the Sales Desk or on the web. A second brochure covering a route from the Botanic Gardens to Callum Brae Nature Reserve is in draft form and with suggestions from Sue Lashko and Julian Robinson the Committee provided funds for advice from a graphics designer. This has now been completed and the draft is awaiting publication.

4) With an enormous amount of work from Alastair Smith all volumes of *Canberra Bird Notes* (CBN) have been scanned and

can now be found on the COG website. This has been a ten month long task and involved 50 volumes of some 5,100 pages. The purchase of appropriate optical character recognition (OCR) software from funds approved by the Committee greatly improved the speed and accuracy of the scanning process.

5) COG continues to support the initiatives of the Canberra Indian Myna Action Group (CIMAG) to reduce populations of Common Mynas. Of great help to the Group have been the efforts of COG members who participate in the Garden Bird Survey. This has been able to demonstrate CIMAG's success at reducing Myna numbers within urban Canberra. COG members continue to help with the PhD project through regular surveys for Mynas in designated suburbs undergoing various treatment regimes.

Committee

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the 2008-09 Committee. Last year two Executive positions became available. I was delighted that Lyn Rees put her hand up to take on the role of Treasurer but we were unsuccessful in filling the role of Vice-president. Sandra Henderson has completed her second year as Secretary. The other members of the Committee have all been involved in other roles essential to the running of the Group. Jenny Bounds continued as Conservation Officer, Anthony Overs as Field Outings Officer and Editor of CBN, David Cook as Webmaster, Sue Lashko as Editor of Gang-gang and Meeting Room arranger, Beth Mantle on the Sales Desk and finally Tony Lawson who I regard as the Minister without Portfolio and who helps with the many additional jobs that appear to pop up from nowhere. My thanks to them all for their efforts and for making the President's job that much easier.

Anthony Overs and David Cook will be standing down from the Committee this year but I am delighted that David will continue as Webmaster and Anthony as Editor of CBN.

Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between COG and Bird Observation and Conservation Australia (BOCA)

In June COG and BOCA signed an MOU whereby COG would abide by the BOCA Guidelines for Leading Groups, the Code of Birding Ethics and the Code of Birding Ethics to Photography, inform BOCA of three COG committee members who are BOCA members, annually provide to BOCA the total number of COG members and facilitate the distribution of BOCA fundraising material. BOCA will, starting July 2009, provide free of charge cover to COG under the BOCA Insurance Policy. Both organisations will ensure the continued independence of each organisation, collaborate to promote enhanced awareness and understanding of all aspects of bird education and conservation throughout the community, allow

members rates on sale items and provide lists of outings and survey dates.

The MOU between COG and BOCA is now used as the standard between BOCA and any other group or club that wishes to affiliate with BOCA.

Conservation

Conservation concerns within our area continue to increase and during the past year COG has had an input into many of the issues. Jenny Bounds has again been extremely busy in her role as Conservation Officer and also as President of the Conservation Council of the ACT Region. COG has had input into many issues including the following:

- Provided input and comments to the Draft Migration Shorebird Policy set out by the Department of Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts. Many thanks to Michael Lenz for his input.

- Input to the ACT Cat Containment Strategy formulated by the Department of Territories and Municipal Services.

- Comments on the Draft Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve Discussion document.

- Input to discussions on the route of the cycle path through the Jerrabomberra Wetlands

- Letters and discussion with various members of the ACT Legislative Assembly concerning the development of Crace and other proposed Gungahlin suburbs and the planning of the Secondary School in Harrison relating to concerns for breeding habitat for the threatened Superb Parrot.

- Joint submission with National Parks Association on concerns with the lack of resources for Canberra Nature Parks, in particular the lack of signage and policing.

- Input to the National Capital Authority concerning the timing of willow removal below Scrivener Dam.

- Provided written and verbal submissions into the Hawke Review of the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (1999). In addition to the input provided by Jenny Bounds, I would particularly like to thank Michael Robbins for his role in putting the COG submission together.

- Provided comments to the National Trust on their review of the social values of Lake Burley Griffin.

- Ongoing discussions with the ACT Government on the Kingston Foreshore and Eastlake developments and possible impacts on the Jerrabomberra Wetlands.

- Provided input into the reconstruction of the large dam at

Mulligans Flat and on the proposed realignment of the Gundaroo Road along the western boundary of the Reserve.

- Provided comments on the proposed Majura Parkway.

- Submitted nomination to the ACT Flora and Fauna Committee on the listing of the Glossy Black-Cockatoo as a threatened (vulnerable) species.

In addition, Jenny Bounds arranged a most successful half-day workshop on advocacy at the BIGNET meeting held at the Hunter Wetlands, Shortlands in late March. The workshop was very much appreciated by all the member clubs that attended the meeting.

Outings

Once again COG has been able to run a very comprehensive outings program. Many thanks to all the leaders and to Anthony Overs in his role as Outings Officer. Unfortunately, Anthony will step down from this position but I am delighted to say that Matthew Frawley has agreed to take on the job and I note the enthusiasm that he brings to the position. In addition, to the scheduled outings the *ad hoc* group of Wednesday Walkers has once again operated most successfully and has managed to attract a most enthusiastic group of followers. Not including the Wednesday outings, there have been 29 outings this last year. Of these eight have been outside the local region ranging from Round Hill Nature Reserve, Bungonia, South Durras, Monga National Park, Bumbalong Valley, Weddin Mountains, Oolambeyan National Park and to the Holbrook/Wagga area. Six specific purpose outings including the Blitz, Nest workshop, Bush Birds for beginners, Waterbirds for Beginners and the Robin and Raptor twitchathons have again been run. There have been outings to eight of the local nature reserves with the remainder of the outings to local hot spots. I would like to thank the many organisers and leaders and those who write up the trip reports for Gang-gang.

Communications and Publications

Gang-gang

Greg Ramsey and Sue Lashko have continued with editing and publishing our newsletter. On occasion, Tanya Rough has stood in for Greg when he was away. I would also like to thank Judy Collett and helpers for the preparation and mailing of the newsletter. I would particularly like to thank Jack Holland, Ian Fraser and Martin Butterfield for their regular contributions.

Canberra Bird Notes

This year there have been three editions of CBN produced by Anthony Overs as Editor and I am delighted that Anthony is prepared to continue in this role. Major publication items include the 2007-08 Annual Bird Report and articles on Alastair Smith's 'Big Year', Royal Spoonbills, Little Eagles, Eastern Koels, White-winged Choughs, the 2008 Blitz, avian highlights around a major shopping mall and impacts on

the spatial distribution of GBS sites. A revised list of species requiring endorsement by the Rarities Panel was published in CBN Vol 33, Number 3, December 2008. I would again like to thank *T. javanica* and *Stentoreus* for their regular contributions over the past year.

Annual Bird Report

Paul Fennell was responsible for the 2007-08 ABR published in Volume 34, March 2009 Canberra Bird Notes. Thanks to the ABR compilers Barbara Allan, Steve Holliday, Graeme Clark, David McDonald, Ian McMahon, Harvey Perkins, David Purchase and Nicki Taws, with each contributor, as usual, responsible for a group or groups of species. Note that the 2007-08 ABR reflects the name changes that have resulted in COG's adoption of the Birds Australia recommended names. The increased use of photos in the ABR has greatly enhanced the publication.

Website

David Cook continues to provide an excellent website. Over the year there have been 148,331 visits to the site, a reduction of 12% over the previous year, with 75,438 visits to the very popular photo gallery. A break down of visits is provided in Figure 1 below. COG continues to support the Canberra Indian Myna Action Group website. There have been 17,529 visits to date, a 60% increase over the past year.

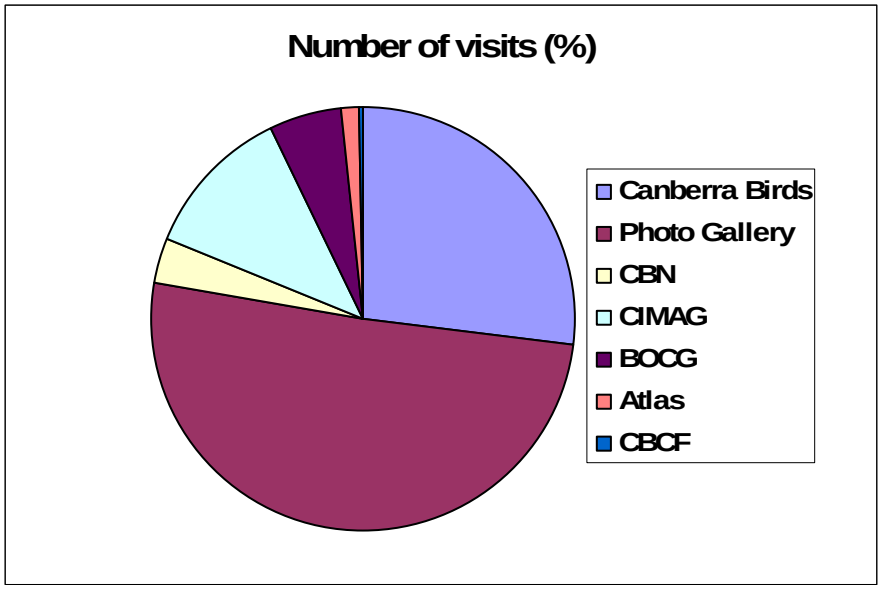

Figure 1. Number of visits to COG website.

Discussion list and email announcements

COG's Email Discussion Forum 'Canberrabirds' continues to be managed by David McDonald. List membership stands at 242, an increase of ten from the previous year. The Discussion Forum or 'chatline' is an excellent forum for the latest sightings and points of interest, and provides an invaluable starting point for those wishing to discuss their unusual sightings. Unfortunately, a down-side of the Forum is the large number of bird sightings reported that do not get entered to the COG database.

Other communication

During October, with Adrian Manning and Sean Dooley, COG was invited to provide a verbal presentation to a display of art titled 'Bird Cry – Call from the Grassy Box Woodland' at the Goulburn Regional Art Gallery. The President spoke on the role that COG plays in providing for the better management of this threatened habitat. Remuneration for the presentation was donated to the Canberra Birds Conservation Fund.

In the New Year an item on Superb Parrots was provided by the President and published in the local Gungahlin Community Newsletter 'Gunsmoke'.

Surveys and record management

Surveys undertaken by COG members over the past 12 months include the continuation of the woodland surveys at 15 sites across the ACT, documenting the species in the threatened Yellow Box/Red Gum Grassy Woodlands. Ross Cunningham of Statwise Pty Ltd was contracted to analyse the data which now includes records for over ten years from most sites. Jenny Bounds and Nicki Taws, with input from Alison Rowell, are presently writing up a report for the ACT Government. The project continues to be run by a management group comprising, Jenny Bounds, Nicki Taws and myself with data entry by Helen Mason.

Members have also been involved with a survey of the White-fronted Chat at Stromlo Forest Park and a survey of the birds of the International Arboretum. A survey of possible breeding habitat for the threatened Superb Parrot in the proposed Gungahlin suburbs of Kenny, Jacka, Moncrieff, Throsby and Kinlyside is being run over the 2009-10 breeding season. The Superb Lyrebird survey at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve was run for the sixth year, as usual on the third weekend in June.

The GBS is now in its 29th year. Martin Butterfield continues to manage the project providing feedback through regular items of interest in Gang-gang. Kay Hahne and Anne Hall continue to enter the GBS data, now via the new data input program. Many thanks to all. Over the past 12 months there were ten requests for data.

The Blitz was run again for the fourth year in late October. Many thanks to Barbara Allan for all the hard work she puts into this project and to the many surveyors.

The COG database continues to expand with 488,579 observations from 32,129 datasheets in the General Observations database with 1308 sheets added during the year; 60% entered on-line. The databases continue to be managed by Paul Fennell and Martin Butterfield. Essential support for the COG database is provided through the Records Management Team and the Rarities Panel. I would like to acknowledge the contributions provided by Nicki Taws as Records Officer, Tony Harding and many others for data entry and to the members of the Rarities Panel consisting of Richard Allan, Jenny Bounds, Graeme Clark, Dick Schodde, Nicki Taws and Barbara Allan (Secretary), all who have offered to continue in their various roles. Over the past 12 months there were ten requests for data.

Records of observations collected since February 1985 from the ANU Women's Club are in the process of being integrated to the COG database. The data collected over 23 years consists of species recorded in 15 hand-written diaries during monthly visits to many spots throughout the ACT and local region.

Monthly meetings

In April, after requests from members, the committee decided to start the meetings at 7.30pm rather than half an hour later, as a trail over the winter period. A show of hands at the September meeting indicated that the majority wished the earlier start time to continue over the summer months. The meetings will therefore now start at the earlier time throughout the year.

Jack Holland has again been responsible for a most successful and varied program of speakers. A decision was made by the committee to increase spending on presentations to include travel, accommodation, taxi and meal allowance for those speakers that travel to Canberra.

Presentations have varied from short talks on the identification of local cuckoos, and how to tell the difference between the Fuscous and Brown-headed Honeyeaters, to the Common Myna removal project. Other short presentations provided us with information on the Bar-tailed Godwit tracking program, development of the International Arboretum, seabirds along the north-west shelf, birding in the Gobi Desert and updates on the Garden Bird Survey and four years of the Blitz.

Main talks provided us with details on studies of the Speckled Warbler, Purple-crowned Fairy-wren, large forest owls, Superb Lyrebirds, Glossy Black-Cockatoos, Superb Parrots and Tawny Frogmouths whilst results were presented on the Cowra Woodland project, revisiting the Western Australian wheat belt and on revegetation for birds.

A feature of the monthly meeting continues to be the Sales Desk. The desk this year has been managed by Beth Mantle with much help from Dan Mantle. Many thanks to them both for providing such a valuable service to COG members.

I would once again like to thank Julienne Kampad with occasional assistance from Lia Battison who have worked quietly behind the scenes to provide the refreshments after the monthly meetings, and to Sandra Henderson for taking on the responsibility of providing the raffle prizes and selling the tickets.

Canberra Birds Conservation Fund (CBCF)

There have been 571 visits to the CBCF web page since it was linked to the COG website. In addition, the Fund is now promoted by the Friends of Grasslands Inc., the University of Canberra and the Australian National University. During the year a grant of $2000 for research into Rainbow Bee-eaters migration patterns was approved whilst $1500 was awarded to support a project assessing the role of kangaroo grazing and the conservation of grassy-box woodland fauna in the Canberra region. The Fund continues to be managed by David McDonald with a Committee of Management consisting of David, Geoffrey Dabb and Penny Olsen.

So, where are we heading in the forthcoming year?

- Those aspects of the Forward Plan not being worked on will be progressed once resources become available.

- This coming year David Cook and Beth Mantle will have a look at the most successful COG website with a view to updating and improving where necessary.

- We envisage that the Second Edition of the Birds of Canberra Gardens will be published shortly.

- A Sub-committee will be set up to plan for the 2011 Birds Australia Campout.

- Discussions will proceed on the long-term role of COG and the Mulligans Flat sanctuary.

- I believe it is becoming necessary for COG to help in the formation of a 'Friends of the Jerrabomberra Wetlands'. We need to decide on a role for such a group for it is becoming increasing obvious that the area needs as much help as it can get.

- The committee needs to survey membership preferences for the scanning and website publishing of Canberra Bird Notes, rather than costly publication and distribution of the hard copy.

- Finally, we will continue to provide support to those activities that are important to the membership.

Conclusion

I would once again like to thank the 2008-09 Committee for all their hard work. I look forward to my third term as President and finally I would like to thank you all for your support over the past year.

Chris Davey
14 October 2009

RARITIES PANEL NEWS

A short list this time, reflecting perhaps the 2008 pruning of the list of species for which endorsed reports are required before publication to those species with fewer than ten endorsed records since the inception of the Rarities Panel in 1984. Seven reports were received and five were endorsed. As is its practice, the Rarities Panel always considers reports presented to it, whether or not the species is actually on the 'unusuals' list and hence the presence of the Turquoise Parrot in this list. 'Turqs' are uncommon in the COG area, it is true, but they have been seen in most recent years and hence no longer qualify for the list.

As always, Kelly's Swamp threw up one of its many surprises, in this instance a Common Greenshank. Greenshanks have been recorded at Kelly's before and, according to Wilson (1999) and COG records, in good numbers. In recent years, however, records have largely been confined to the eastern lakes and, occasionally, Mulligans Flat. It is possible that the species has been overlooked. Helpful identification features of this species are the long thin and slightly upturned dark bill; the white on the bird's rump extends upwards in a wedge shape, seen in flight; and a white forehead. As tringas go, it is a relatively large and long-legged bird, more commonly seen in coastal regions.

Both Little and Red-chested Button-quail are considered genuinely rare in COG's area, and rarely afford a good view of themselves. They are seriously tiny (sparrow-sized). In this instance the white flanks and underparts marked the two birds seen as Little Button-quail. The more common Painted Button-quail is considerably larger.

Black-eared Cuckoos are now appearing almost annually in the ACT and, again, may be overlooked. This is an unusual suburban record – the species has been seen in recent years at locations such as Uriarra Crossing and Namadgi Visitors Centre. The Panel considers that the dark sash through the eye, the barred undertail, the white tail tip and a plain buff breast, taken together, are the key identification features for this species.

The Little Wattlebird will be removed from the unusuals list at its next revision, having been reported with increasing frequency recently. The chief distinguishing feature of the Little, as opposed to the common Red, Wattlebird is the large chestnut wingpatch seen in flight.

The Panel notes that there have been numerous reports on the COG chatline of observations of Black-tailed Native-hens. This species is still on the 'unusuals' list, as it is irruptive in the Canberra region and, in the past at least, years have gone by between visits. So, please, would the first or at least an early observer of one of this year's influx submit an unusual bird report for it/them. A good clear

photograph would suffice, as the bantam-like species is not difficult to identify. On the other hand, the Curlew Sandpiper, though arguably more difficult to identify, does not require an unusual bird report as the species has been seen with a degree of frequency at our eastern lakes and, in the 1970s and 80s, at Jerrabomberra Wetlands (Wilson 1999).

Reference

Wilson, S.J. (1999) *Birds of the ACT – Two Centuries of Change*. COG, Canberra.

ENDORSED LIST 75, November 2009

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*
1; 4 Oct 2009; Harvey Perkins; Kellys Swamp GrL14

Little Button-quail *Turnix velox*
2; 29 Dec 2008; Michael Lenz; TSR 48 GrO5

Black-eared Cuckoo *Chalcites osculans*
1; 2 Oct 2009; Jean Finnegan & Julian Reid; Hemmant St, O'Connor GrK13

Little Wattlebird *Anthochaera chrysoptera*
1; 31 May 2009; Steve Holliday; Duffy St, Ainslie GrL13

Also:

Turquoise Parrot *Neophema pulchella*
1; 8 Oct 2009; Peter Robertson; Old Cooma Rd Googong – probable escapee

OBITUARY

Stephen James (Steve) Wilson OAM

Prepared by David Purchase

Steve Wilson was born on 10 June 1912 in Richmond, Victoria, the son and grandson of blacksmiths. At an early age he was attracted to gardening and grew vegetables for his family. He also had a keen interest in natural history. Steve was educated at St Patrick's College in Ballarat and after completing his schooling he joined the Commonwealth Public Service as a telegraph messenger with the Postmaster-General's Department. He remained with the Postmaster-General's Department until the outbreak of World War II when he joined the RAAF, but because of colour blindness he was restricted to ground duties and, as he said of his war duties, he 'drove a desk'.

In 1938, he married his sweetheart of many years, Hanora Veronica (Nonie) Ryan. They had four sons, Kevin, Brian, Brendan and Denis. Steve had many assistants in his various activities but none were more important than Nonie. She was also a superb cook and many of us involved in bird banding in the 1960s and 1970s will remember the great feasts of delight which Nonie prepared for us to partake after meetings and other gatherings in the Wilson home.

In 1945, Steve joined the Department of the Navy and remained with that department until his retirement from the Commonwealth Public Service in 1971. He was head of the naval personnel branch in February 1964 and had to perform the sad role as contact officer for families asking about the sailors who lost their lives when HMAS Voyager and HMAS Melbourne collided.

Steve and his family moved to Canberra in 1959 with the Department of the Navy.

Before coming to Canberra, Steve, together with two of his sons, had began to get seriously involved in bird watching. This interest continued in Canberra where he soon got to know the few bird watchers that were in the city in those days. Among these were Don Lamm and Bill Belton from the American embassy, and John Calaby from the CSIRO Wildlife Survey Section. He soon became interested in bird banding and enrolled in the Australian Bird Banding Scheme in September 1960. He took to this activity with great enthusiasm and started experimenting with the use of mist nets which at that time were largely unknown in Australia. He soon became competent in their use.

In 1962, he became a foundation member of the Bird Banders'

Association of Australia (now the Australian Bird Study Association) and, as well as being a long-serving committee member, was its president from January 1965 through to January 1966.

With the rapid development of the Australian Bird Banding Scheme there was an increasing demand for mist nets. Because they were so effective and easily secreted they were also being used to illegally capture birds for sale in Australia and overseas. As a result their importation and use in Australia became strictly controlled by the government which made it difficult for bird banders to obtain them. Mist nets were manufactured, mainly in Japan, from cotton, silk or nylon. An English firm, Gundrys of Bridport, then started manufacturing these nets from Terylene which proved to be a superior material. In 1962, following negotiations with the Department of Customs and Excise, Gundrys, the State and Territory fauna authorities and the Australian Bird Banding Scheme, Steve became the sole agent for the sale and distribution of mist nets in Australia. This brought some measure of control over their use and enabled banders to buy them free of import duty from what was then called the Central Bird-Banding Association (now the Mist Net Service). This new activity kept Steve busy taking orders for nets from banders, buying mist nets from Gundrys, clearing them through Customs, unpacking and then repacking and posting them to banders in Australia. This was an activity which frequently involved other members of the family and the floor of their home was often awash with mist nets, brown paper and string. It also made a healthy profit which went to the Bird Banders' Association of Australia and helped maintain the production of their journal.

Steve had a good working relationship with Gundrys but was exasperated by the slowness in which they sometimes fulfilled orders and on a visit to England he travelled to Bridport to personally admonish the firm. To explain the reason for the delays he was taken to the factory where he was shown the looms working to produce many kilometres of netting for the capture of herrings. This clearly demonstrated to Steve that the manufacture of fishing nets was Gundrys main business and to produce a few metres of mist netting meant looms had to be withdrawn from this activity and reset. This was time-consuming and done at a financial loss and against the advice of their accountants, but the firm's owners considered it to be a contribution to conservation. This visit made a lasting impression on Steve. Unfortunately, a few years later, the accountants finally won the day and Gundrys stopped making mist nets.

The demand for mist nets was increasing at a great rate, and people were clamouring for advice on their use in Australia. Other than a brief document produced by the CSIRO (Hitchcock 1961), there was little literature available. This lack was

rectified in 1965 when Steve, together with Bill Lane and John McKean, published *The Use of Mist Nets in Australia* (Wilson et al. 1965). This guide relied heavily on the experience of Steve and for many years was the standard for mist-netting in Australia.

Steve is one of the founding fathers of the Canberra Ornithologists Group (COG). As the population of Canberra increased in the early 1960s so did the number of people with an interest in ornithology. The move to form a local group to cater for their interests appeared to be led primarily by three people – Stephen Marchant (who had recently arrived in Canberra), Don Lamm and Steve Wilson. In May 1964, as a response to this, about eight local bird watchers attended a meeting at Steve and Nonie's home at Narrabundah. As a result of this meeting a formal gathering attended by 27 Royal Australian Ornithologists Union members and visitors was held on 3 June 1964 in the CSIRO conference room at Black Mountain. At this gathering it was agreed a letter should be forwarded to the Council of the RAOU recommending the formation of an official branch in the ACT. This was accepted by the RAOU and the ACT Branch of the RAOU was formed. This was the forerunner of COG which came into existence when the Branch was discontinued and replaced by COG on 15 April 1970.

Up until recent years Steve has always played an active and leading role in the activities of both COG and its predecessor the local branch of the RAOU. Although he was never officially president or chairman he served in these roles on one or two occasions. He was also on the committees of both groups and was editor of *Canberra Bird Notes* from April 1975 through to January 1981. In January 1980, in this latter role, he was largely responsible for changing the format of the publication to that we know today.

Although Steve established banding sites at a number of locations in the ACT and NSW his major project was a banding study of the birds of New Chums Road in the Brindabella Range. Together with a small group of other local ornithologists he began this study in April 1961. Steve's work at New Chums Road set the standard for other studies of this type in Australia. Although he had to give up active participation in the study in about 1974, work at this site continues to this day. The principle of sampling a bird population by the use of nets erected in the same sites on each visit is commonly used today and has replaced the earlier large-scale and random banding that in Australia yielded so few results.

I first met Steve in about 1961 when he and Dom Lamm visited the CSIRO Wildlife Survey Section. They were seeking the loan of a mouse which could be used as a decoy in a bal-chatri trap for catching hawks. The mouse was returned unharmed some days later. I can't recall if they caught any hawks. These were brief encounters

and it was not until July 1966, after I had spent several years away from Canberra, that I again met Steve and got to know him more fully. At this time I had rejoined CSIRO and had been given responsibility for the operation of the Australian Bird Banding and Bat Banding Schemes. At the time my banding experience was limited to bats and Antarctic birds. To rectify my shortcomings, Steve took on the role of educating me in the use of mist nets and the handling and banding of small birds. We made many trips together to New Chums Road and Lees Creek Road with other members of his team. We would leave Canberra long before sunrise so as to erect the nets and have them opened at first light. We were usually accompanied in the car by Snowball a small black dog of somewhat dubious ancestry belonging to the Wilsons. Snowball, who had chronic flatulence, liked to see out of the car window so chose to sit on the lap of the unfortunate person occupying the front passenger seat. This was usually me. As we drove through the forest he would get increasingly excited, particularly if he saw a kangaroo or wallaby, and start to jump and bark and the level of flatulence increased markedly. Although tiring, these excursions were memorable and I will forever be grateful to Steve for what he taught me.

On two occasions Steve has been joined on bird banding outings by members of the Royal Family. The first was on 12 March 1963 when Prince Philip joined Steve and members of his family on an early morning outing to Lake George. The Prince was with Steve from 0445 hrs to 0745 hrs when he had to leave to perform official duties (Anon. 1963). The second occasion was in 1966 when Prince Charles joined Steve and his family in an early morning visit to the Australian National Botanic Gardens (Anon. 1966). It is worth noting that Steve could get Royalty out of bed at almost the same unseemly hour as his assistants! I wonder what time Prince Philip had to rise in Government House, Canberra in order to get to the banding site on Lake Road at Lake George at 0445 hrs?

As well as his involvement in writing the guide to the use of mist nets, Steve contributed, either as sole author or co-author, 68 papers and short notes to *Canberra Bird Notes*. He was also a contributor to the *Australian Bird Bander* (now called *Corella*), *Emu* and various other journals and publications. He also made important contributions to a number of books. The idea of a handbook on the birds of the ACT was conceived in the late 1950s but did not reach fruition until the project was taken in hand in late 1968 by Dr Harry Frith who was then Chief of the CSIRO Division of Wildlife Research. Although the writing and publication of this book became an official project of the Division the professional zoologists employed there had a limited knowledge of the local passerines and Steve was asked if he would fill this gap and contribute to the book. The result was that Steve wrote the

majority of the accounts of passerine species plus some of the cuckoos – an impressive total of 70 species. The book was published in 1969 with the title *Birds in the Australian High Country*. For many years it was the definitive work on the birds of our region. Revised editions were produced in 1976 and 1984. The history of the project is discussed by Temple Watts (1979) and Wilson (2002). The year 1976 saw the publication of another important addition to the literature of Australian birds – this was the *Reader's Digest Complete Book of Australian Birds* produced by the Reader's Digest Services and edited by Harry Frith. Again, Steve was asked to make a contribution and he wrote the texts for 13 passerine species. This book quickly gained acceptance as being the *de facto* handbook to the birds of Australia and was revised and reprinted many times. Steve also provided information on the local birds for inclusion in various publications produced by various ACT government departments. In later years, he and Nonie often used to drive north from Canberra during the winter months. During these trips he would spend time bird-watching at Tumbi Umbi. This became known to the local tourist centre and he showed me a pamphlet on the birds of Tumbi Umbi which they had prepared using information he had provided.

The publication which gave Steve and his family the greatest pride was *Birds of the ACT – Two Centuries of Change* published by COG in 1999. This book had its origins in Steve's frustration in the lack of information on when particular species were first recorded in the ACT. Steve and I often discussed this. He decided that as no one else was going to do anything about this lack of information he would do something about it himself. This involved many months of research and resulted in lots of paper covered in, what Steve acknowledges, as his 'poor handwriting'. It was realised that to turn what was written on this paper into a manuscript would require a computer. Steve had never had any previous experience with using a computer, but nonetheless with the aid of some grandchildren one was acquired and he and Nonie, who was a trained typist, learnt how to use it. Nonie typed while Steve manipulated the mouse. What was notable about this project was that it achieved when Steve was aged 87 and Nonie 83. As it progressed, the manuscript grew from being simply a list of first known recordings, to a document which also contained information on the history of our knowledge of the birds of the ACT, the distribution of birds and the need for habitat conservation.

Steve made many important contributions to Australian ornithology. One of the greatest was the encouragement which he gave to young people who wanted to become involved in his bird banding studies. Providing they were willing to rise early, so that the nets could be erected before dawn, and to learn, they were welcome to join him on his trips. He was immensely proud

that six of these assistants went on to become professional zoologists.

Shortly after Steve retired from the Department of the Navy in 1971 he renewed an earlier passion for philately which he combined with his interest in birds. He collected stamps with birds on them from all over the world and won a number of medals at international competitions. He was at one time president of the Canberra Philatelic Society and also judged thematic collections at international competitions.

Retirement also saw Steve renew an early interest in growing cacti and succulents. He was a judge at a number of shows along the east coast as far south as Tasmania and also president of the ACT Cactus and Succulent Society.

When Steve and Nonie moved from Narrabundah to Kambah in 1981 he became involved in propagating and selling plants to raise money for the then young Catholic parish of St Thomas the Apostle. He was assisted in this work by family and parishioners who helped to make about 20 cubic metres of compost a year. At times the number of plants was so great that stocks were kept at 11 other houses around Canberra. These plants were sold for $1or $2 from his house and at the church fete and over the years about $120,000 was contributed to the parish and school. They became well known in Tuggeranong and many gardens in the new suburbs contained plants from this source. A plaque outside the church acknowledges the efforts of Steve and Nonie.

In 1981 he was made a Life Member of COG for his contribution to Canberra ornithology (Hermes 1981) and in 1998 was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for his services to ornithology and the community.

Steve died peacefully at the Brindabella Gardens aged care hostel on 12 September 2009 at the age of 97. His wife Nonie died on 19 March 2006. He leaves a family of four sons, 18 grandchildren and 36 great-grandchildren.

And so we say farewell to someone about whom we can truly say ‘Thou wert my guide, philosopher, and friend’.

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Steve Wilson, Nonie Wilson and Charles, Prince of Wales.
Photo taken by Sir David Checketts, at the
Australian National Botanic Gardens, April 1966.
(Photo courtesy of Denis Wilson)

Canberra Bird Notes is published three times a year 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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Odd Obs

Columnists' Corner

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