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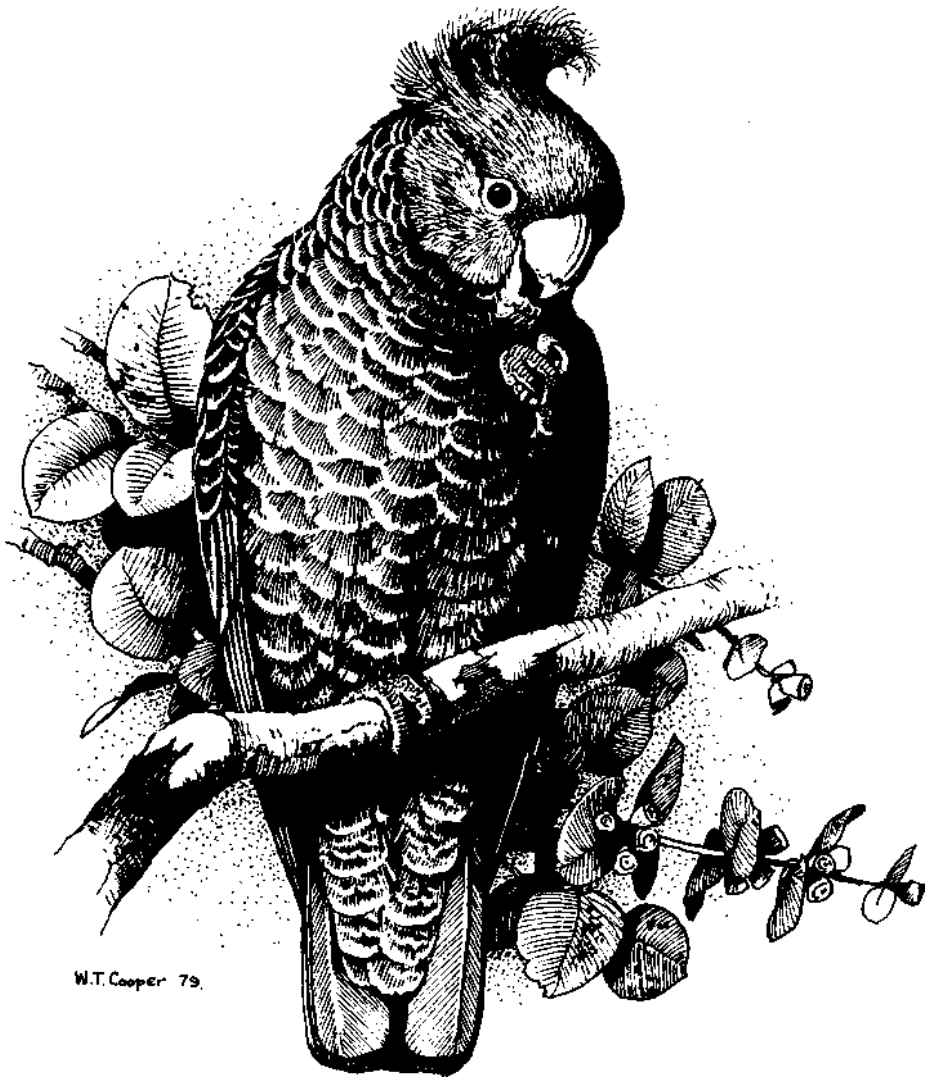


BIRDING IN THE ARID INLAND

John Penhallurick

In late September 1982, a party of five COG members undertook a trip of around 6000 kms through the outback. Our route took us through Tibooburra, in the far north-west of New South Wales, Innamincka on Cooper's Creek and the remote Cordillo Downs Homestead in far north-eastern South Australia to Birdsville and the Simpson Desert in south-east Queensland (see map). From Birdsville we headed north to Coorabulka Homestead, with a later stop in spinifex country south of Winton. Finally there was the long trip home through Longreach, Barcaldine, Charleville and Bourke.

We had planned the trip for some time, and wondered whether to cancel because of the drought. But in mid-September, two four-wheel drives and a Ford wagon (fortified with a sump-guard, light truck tyres and spring lifts) set off from Canberra to meet up in Tibooburra. One party found Inland Dotterels *Peltohyas australis*, Australian Pratincoles *Stiltia Isabella* and Orange Chats *Epthianura aurifrons* near Mossgiel, NSW (a single house, for all the impressive dot on the map). No other Australian Dotterels were seen on the trip. Roadside stops on the way to Tibooburra produced Budgerigars *Melopsittacus undulatus*, White-winged Fairy-wrens *Malurus leucopterus,* Crimson Chats *Epthianura tricolor,* the omnipresent Zebra Finch *Poephila guttata* and several species of Woodswallows *Artamus.* After the plentiful Black Kites *Milvus migrans* of Tibooburra, we headed north through Wonipah Gate into Queensland to look for the rare Grey Grasswren *Amytornis barbatus* in the Bulloo Overflow.

Though the Overflow was dry we found a number of the Grasswrens and despite their imitations of jet-propelled mice, everyone finally managed a reasonable look. Over the stony Grey Range to the red sand country around Santos, that produced the first Australian Bustards *Ardeotis australis* of the trip. We now drove through alternating red sand and gibber plain.

Only a few birds live in these arid plains, notably the Gibberbird *Ashbyia lovensis*, of which we saw a number. Where a little grass could be found, Emus *Dromaius novaehollandiae* were seen. Creek crossings, whether dry or (less often) with a few waterholes, produced trees and more birds: Pink-eared Ducks *Malacorhynchus membranaceus*, Black-tailed Native Hens *Gallinula ventralis*, Diamond -Doves *Geopelia cuneata,* Red-backed Kingfishers *Halcyon pyrrhopygia,* Rainbow Bee-eaters

Merops ornatus, White-backed Swallows *Cheramoeca leucosternum* and Red-browed Pardalotes *Pardalotus rubricatus.*

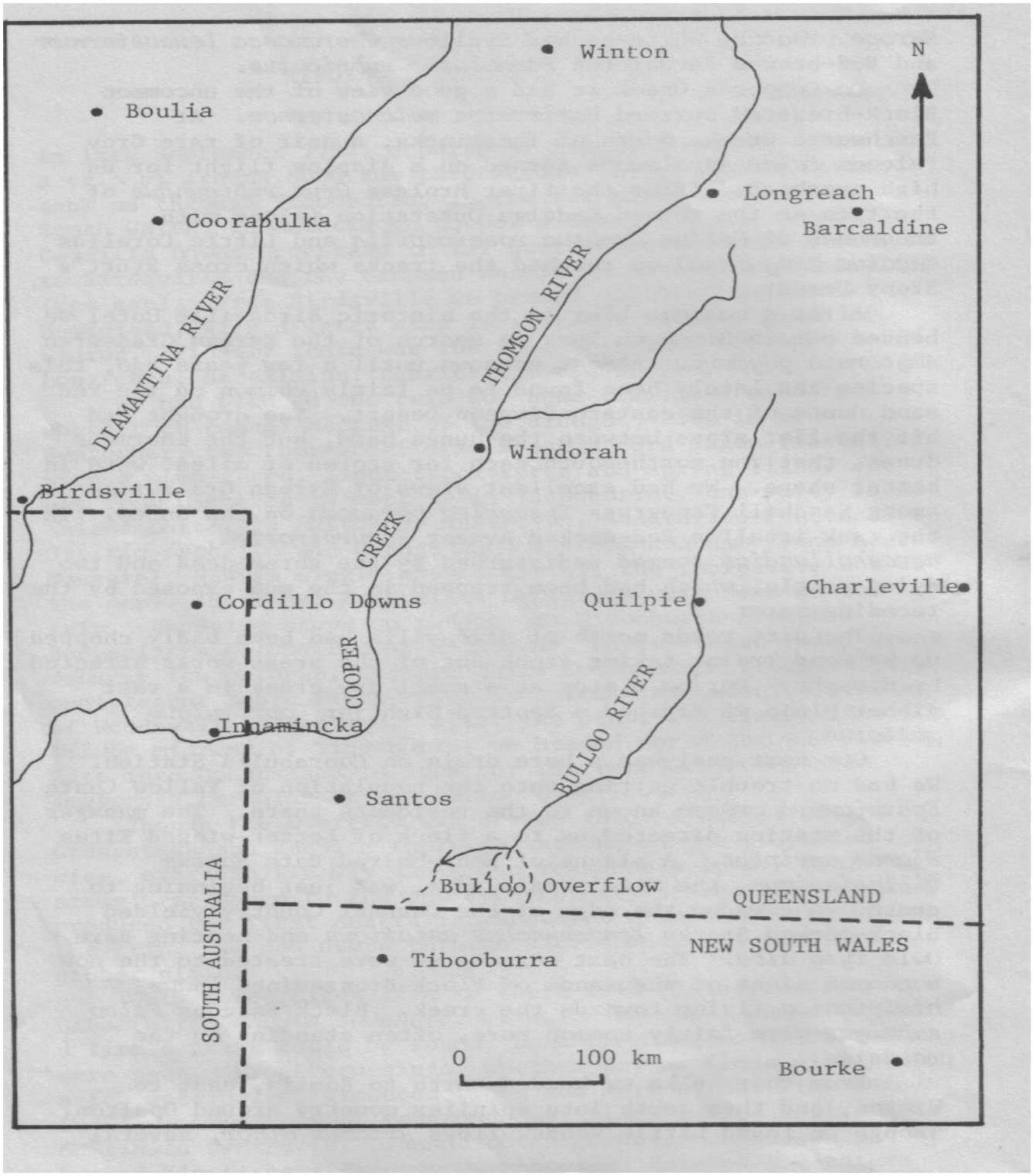
On Cooper's Creek we had a good view of the uncommon Black-breasted Buzzard *Hamirostra melanosternon.* At Patchwarra Creek, north of Innamincka, a pair of rare Grey Falcons *Falco hypoleucos* turned on a display flight for us high overhead. After the first Brolgas *Grus rubicundus* of the trip at the ruined Cadelga Outstation (along with thousands of Galahs *Cacatua Roseicapilla* and Little Corellas *Cacatua sanguinea)* we reached the tracks which cross Sturt's Stony Desert.

After a welcome beer in the historic Birdsville Hotel we headed out to Bluebush Tank in search of the Eyrean Grasswren *Amytornis goyderi.* Almost unknown until a few years ago, this species has lately been found to be fairly common on the red sand dunes of the eastern Simpson Desert. The drought had hit the flat areas between the dunes hard, but the enormous dunes, that run north-south each for scores of miles, were in better shape. We had excellent views of Eyrean Grasswrens among Sandhill Canegrass *Zygoohloa paradoxa* on the dunes. In the tank itself a Red-necked Avocet *Recurvirostra novaehollandiae* seemed undisturbed by the three dead and two dying cattle, which had been trapped in the mud exposed by the receding water.

The dirt roads north of Birdsville had been badly chopped up by road trains taking stock out of the areas worst affected by drought. During a stop at a small dry creek in a vast gibber plain we flushed a Spotted Nightjar *Caprimulgus guttatus.*

Our next goal was a bore drain on Coorabulka Station. We had no trouble getting onto the population of Yellow Chats *Epthianura crocea* known to the residents there. The manager of the station directed us to a flock of Letter-winged Kites *Elanus scriptus.* A plague of Long-haired Rats *Rattus villosissimus*, the Kite's main prey, was just beginning to crash. A camp on the edge of the Channel Country yielded Black-necked Storks *Xenorhynchus asiaticus* and nesting Barn Owls *Tyto alba.* The next morning we were treated to the now uncommon sight of thousands of Flock Bronzewings *Phaps histrionica* flying towards the creek. Black Falcons *Falco subniger* were fairly common here, often standing on the roadside.

From Coorabulka we headed north to Boulia, east to Winton, and then south into spinifex country around Opalton. Though we found Little Woodswallows *Artamus minor,* several


Winton
N
Boulia
Longreach
Barcaldine
Coorabulka
DIAMANTINA RIVER
THOMSON RIVER
Windorah
Birdsville
CREEK
Charleville
Cordillo Downs
Quilpie
COOPER
BULLOO RIVER
Innamincka
Santos
Bulloo Overflow
QUEENSLAND
NEW SOUTH WALES
SOUTH AUSTRALIA
Tibooburra
0
100 km
Bourke

parties of Hall's Babblers *Pomatostomus halli* and Spinifex Pigeons *Petrophassa plumifera,* the shortage of food had clearly affected some birds. We were unable to find several species mentioned in Billie Gill's paper (Gill, 1973) on the Opalton area. The long run back to Canberra was uneventful.

The beauty of the inland, even in the midst of drought, stays in the mind. I can't wait to get back. I was also struck by the depopulation of the inland. Many homesteads shown as inhabited on the maps had been abandoned, and we found very few long-term outback residents. Most of the people we met were relative newcomers. Travellers should also be aware that in several areas (such as west of Birdsville, and around Opalton) the roads on the ground bear little relation to those shown on maps, and it is essential to get advice from the locals.

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John Penhallurick, 86 Bingley Crescent, ERASER, ACT, 2615

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

CRESCENT HONEYEATERS IN SUBURBIA

Is mine the only garden full of Crescent Honeyeaters *Phylidonyris pyrrhoptera.* Before this winter, I had only ever seen them in the ACT in the Botanic Gardens and in the Ranges. Sometime in May they appeared here. I must admit that I at first dismissed their calls (confidently) as 'bloody Mynahs have invaded' until my wife saw one and correctly identified it. Since then, their calls are a constant and characteristic feature; anyone who wants to see them is welcome to come and look. They seem to associate with the Eastern Spinebills *Acanthorhynchus tenuirostris,* though that may be only because of their common interest in flowering Grevilleas and Banksias. Has there been an irruption this year? Has anyone else noted unusual numbers?

Alan Cowan, 6A Vancouver Street, RED HILL, ACT, 2603

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BANDED STILT AND RED-NECKED AVOCET AT LAKE BATHURST

Alistair Drake

On 26 February 1983 Graham Barwell (a visitor from Townsville) and I located a juvenile Banded Stilt *(Cladorhynchus leucocephalus* and an adult Red-necked Avocet *Recurvirostra novaehollandiae* at the southern end of the eastern basin of Lake Bathurst. The birds were feeding with about 20 Black-winged Stilts *Himantopus himantopus* and 10 Marsh Sandpipers *Tringa stagnatilis* in a shallow-water inlet with a small mudbank island. Observations were made through a 25x telescope for over an hour, with views in good light at a range of about 50m eventually being obtained. Attention was directed mainly at the Banded Stilt, and a detailed field description was taken; as the identification of the Red-necked Avocet was not in any doubt once such features as the red head and neck and the markedly upturned bill had been seen, and as both observers were familiar with the species, a full description was not considered necessary for this bird. The locality was visited subsequently on 12th March, by Ray Pierce and Mick Clout, and on 20 March, by myself. On both occasions the Red-necked Avocet was present, but the Banded Stilt could not be found.

Red-necked Avocets have not been recorded in the local region since the summer of 1967-8, when a single bird was observed at the Jerrabomberra Wetlands (CBN 1(3):4, CBN 4(7): 19, and subsequent Annual Reports). The next previous record appears to be that of a party of 31 at Lake George in 1951 (Lamm, 1964). There are also specimens from Lake George and Cooma in the Australian Museum, Sydney (W B Hitchcock in Frith, 1976). Banded Stilts have not previously been recorded in the local area. In New South Wales it is a rare and unpredictable visitor, mainly to the far south-west of the state; in the south-east, where it is evidently a vagrant, it has been reported from Lake Blowering and from a number of coastal localities between Newcastle and Wollongong (Morris *et al,* 1981; Pizzey, 1980).

FIELD DESCRIPTION OF THE JUVENILE BANDED STILT

SIZE AND SHAPE: Proportions generally similar to the nearby Black-winged Stilts, but with a very slightly smaller body; noticeably less tall when standing.

PLUMAGE: Head, neck, entire underparts, and back, all pure white. Wings dark slaty grey with some brown flecks, noticeably less dark than those of the Black-winged Stilts.

FLIGHT PATTERN: The dark upperwing showed a broad white bar along the entire length of its rear edge.
BARE PARTS: Eye dark, bill black, noticeably longer than the Black-winged Stilts', and of a distinctly different, less needle-like, shape; on close inspection it was seen that the bill was just perceptibly upturned along its entire length, and this, together with a thickening of the upper mandible towards the forehead, gave it its characteristic shape. The very long legs were dull pinky-grey, darker grey at the knee (tibio-tarsal) joint, brighter and more orange-coloured at the rear of the thigh (tibia).
BEHAVIOUR: The bird fed by wading, typically in thigh-deep water, and dipping its bill and the front of its head into the water, apparently to take food items from the lake bottom. On one occasion it swam a short distance, and it twice made a short flight.

The only species with which the Banded Stilt can be confused is the Black-winged Stilt. However, even the juvenile of the latter species is easily eliminated, as it has a dark back and lacks the white bar along the rear edge of the wing.

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V A Drake, 280 Duffy Street, AINSLIE, ACT, 2602

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ARE SEASONAL CHANGES SUGGESTED BY CENSUS DATA REAL?

H L Bell

The COG Annual Bird Report (Taylor, 1983) gave data on several species of thornbills, including the Buff-rumped *Acanthiza reguloides* and Striated A. *lineata.* In both cases the data suggest lower numbers in spring than at other times of the year.

In recent studies at Armidale, NSW, I have censused birds of dry sclerophyll woodland, on average four times monthly, from September 1978 to May 1982. Both the Buff-rumped and Striated Thornbills showed great consistency in numbers seen per unit area, except that in spring, values were consistently one quarter to one third of those for the rest of the year. In my study area all birds of both species were colour-banded. During the period (spring) in which the census counts were inordinately low, I could, by subsequent search, account for ail birds in the area. Thus the reduced values in census counts were not because there were fewer birds to count. In fact, apart from fledglings, which were few, because of very low breeding success, numbers were constant year-round.

The reason for the low values in spring is change in behaviour by the two species. My data, to be presented elsewhere, showed that both species occurred in permanent flocks, of about 10-20 birds, which held a flock territory year-round, except during the breeding season. When breeding (in spring) the permanent flocks broke up into breeding groups of 2-4 birds, which divided the flock territory into breeding group territories. Breeding groups re-formed into the permanent flock at the end of each breeding season. Any young produced were added onto the flock and remained with it until the following spring, in marked contrast to non-gregarious species such as Scarlet Robin *Petroica multicolor* and Brown Thornbill *A. pusilla,* whose young were evicted in the autumn following the breeding season.

During the non-breeding period both Buff-rumped and Striated Thornbills were very conspicuous, but in the breeding season were much less so. Quite apart from the absence of sitting females, they occurred, when breeding, in much smaller and thus less noticeable parties than when in their non-breeding flocks. During autumn and winter both species foraged at a more intense rate, and covered more ground, than during spring (unpublished data) and were consequently more easily noticed. Also, both species attracted many others (up to fifteen at one time) into mixed-species flocks,

increasing still further the conspicuousness of flocks. There were few mixed-species flocks during the breeding season (eg. Bell, 1980).

Similar results were obtained for other resident species which form flocks during the non-breeding period. Yet the values for those species which never form flocks, such as Brown Thornbill, Scarlet Robin and White-throated Tree-creeper *Climacteris leucophaea* remained constant throughout the year, and tallied remarkably well with the numbers of colour-banded birds actually known to be present. (The precise data will be presented in a later paper.)

I raise the point, because observed trends which suggest seasonal change in abundance may often mean nothing of the kind, but instead, changes in conspicuousness resulting from seasonal change in behaviour. Such changes in frequency of observation may, for some species, explain the oft-supposed nomadism which I believe to be one of the most over-invoked legends of Australian ornithology.

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H L Bell*, Department of Zoology, University of New England, ARMIDALE, NSW¸ 2352*

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ODD OBS

BOOBOOK OWL IN CIVIC

Alison Rowell

At 0530 on 21 July, I saw a Boobook Owl *Ninox novaehollandiae* flying eastwards down Akuna Street, City. Sunset was at 0513 and the sky was clear, so the light was still good. The owl was flying low, and twice dipped to the level of the peak hour traffic. I followed the bird, and after a search found it perched in one of a group of River Oaks *Casuarina cunninghamiana* between the Boulevard and the CAGA Building. Ten minutes later it was still in this grove of trees.

MAGPIE ENGINEERING

Steve Wilson

Several years ago a pair of Australian Magpies *Gymnorhina tibicen* built a nest in a tall, much branched, densely foliaged, eucalypt in a suburban garden near the northern limit of Curtin.

The drought of the 1982/83 summer caused the tree to die and the remains were removed - no small task as the two major trunks were more than 50cm in diameter.

The nest was used successfully over a period of at least three or four years and while it was difficult to see from the ground while the tree was alive, the impression was gained that it had been added to over the period it was in use.

The nest was built in the outer foliage and the branch which was used was only 3cm in diameter where it branched well before the nest itself. The structure was placed on seven major twigs none more than 1cm in diameter.

Examination showed that while the area, developed about 17 or 18 years ago, abounds in mature trees with lots of suitable twigs for Magpie use, the structure was entirely of man-made materials. Wire was the chief component and the variety was incredible, some being quite heavy fencing wire while much of it was copper wire. Covered electrical wire was also prominent. An old bicycle brake cable was used, as were two broken metal spectacle frames. Children removed these which were well woven in, but otherwise the nest is still intact (as displayed at the June 1983 meeting).

Another important component was plastic and part of a coat hanger, several drink packs and a whole variety of scraps can be seen.

The owner of the property has a large workshop and while none of the family ever saw a bird in there, there is always a variety of the material used available nearby. The workshop is only 12m from the base of the eucalypt.

The thickest part of the nest was 60cm across but because of the use of thick wire that could not be bent by the birds, the outer measurement was 1m across. The greatest depth was 25cms.

There were no twigs whatever in the structure, which weighed 4.25kg (including the branch which would account for very little).

The nest chamber was a deep, broad cup within the mass of wire and plastic and this was quite orthodox, being all

plant fibre. Because of the unyielding nature of the major part of the nest, the amount of lining was much greater than usual.

S J Wilson, 56 Harrington Circuit, KAMBAH, ACT, 2902

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LITTLE CORELLA WITH SUSPECTED LITTLE CORELLA/GALAH HYBRID NEAR KAMBAH

Ross Bennett

At 1230 on Saturday 6 August 1983 while at home at 'Arawang' near Kambah, I noticed two unusual birds feeding with a group of approximately 24 Galahs *Cacatua roseicapilla* in the 'house paddock'. On closer examination one bird proved to be a Little Corella *Cacatua sanguinea.* The other bird, which was rarely more than 1m from the Little Corella, at first glance appeared to be just a very pale Galah. The normal deep pink colour of Galahs had been replaced on this bird by a pale apricot wash with darker cheek patches. However, the area of naked grey skin surrounding the eye was larger than that of the Galahs feeding nearby but not as extensive as the corresponding area of the Little Corella. The bill was also significantly larger than a Galah's, though not quite the dimensions of the Little Corella bill. The grey back was much the same as a Galah's but the tail feathers were off-white. The actual size of the bird was similar to a normal Galah.

I concluded that the pale Galah was a Galah/Little Corella hybrid; this has already been documented (Forshaw, 1980) as occasionally occurring in the wild. Little Corellas have been seen around Canberra for some time. Presumably these birds have undertaken drought-induced movements beyond their normal range.

One can only speculate whether or not the breeding of this hybrid took place in the wild, or in captivity, from which the birds have subsequently escaped.

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R Bennett, 'Arawang', via KAMBAH, ACT, 2902

LAKE ILLAWARRA-NOWRA COG TRIP - 26-27 MARCH 1983

Carmen Zanetti

On the weekend of 26 and 27 March a small group of us, led by Mike Doyle, went on the COG trip to the Lake Illawarra/Nowra district. The highlight (and original purpose) of the trip was the variety of waders seen. A special bonus was that a few species (Lesser Golden Plover *Pluvialis dominica,* Mongolian Plover *Charadrius mongolus,* Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica* and Red-necked Stint *Calidris ruficollis)* had some individuals in breeding plumage. The rich colours and striking patterns of their plumage stood in rather dramatic contrast to the greys and browns of the birds in non-breeding plumage. Identification was also made much easier.

We met on the Saturday morning at the entrance to Lake Illawarra and spent the day exploring the area, including the sandflats on the seaward side. The more interesting species seen that day were: Australasian Gannet *Morus serrator,* Pied Cormorant *Phalacrocorax varius,* Eastern Reef Egret *Egretta sacra* (grey phase), Royal Spoonbill *Platalea peg-La,* Sooty Oystercatcher *Haematopus fuliginosus,* Eastern Curlew *Numenius madagascariensis,* Grey-tailed Tattler *Tringa brevipes,* Wandering Tattler *T. incana,* Greenshank *Tringa nebularia,* Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa,* Bar-tailed Godwit, Kelp Gull *Larus dominicanus,* Little Tern *Sterna, albifrons,* Crested Tern *Sterna bergii* and White-fronted Chat *Epthianura albifrons.*

The southernmost locality at which the Wandering Tattler has been recorded in eastern Australia is the Illawarra district and therefore this record has been submitted for consideration by the NSW Rarities Committee.

That evening we had a convivial meal at the Chinese restaurant in Nowra where the deep-fried icecream was declared a fitting end to a very pleasurable day, by both children and adults. At Mike Doyle's suggestion we camped in a clearing about 20 km from Nowra on the Nowra-Braidwood road. The species we saw there next morning included Little Lorikeet *Glossopsitta pusilla,* Scarlet Robin *Petroica multicolor,* Golden Whistler *Pachycephala pectoralis,* Rufous Whistler P. *rufiventris,* Little Wattlebird *Anthochaera chrysoptera,* White-eared Honeyeater *Lichenostomus leucotis,* Red-browed Firetail *Emblema temporalis,* Beautiful Firetail *Emblema bella* and Dusky Woodswallow *Artamus cyanopterus.*

On Sunday morning we birdwatched at Shoalhaven Heads-Comerong Island. The highlights were: Cattle Egret *Ardeola*

ibis (on the way to the Heads), Osprey *Pandion haliaetus,* Lesser Golden Plover, Mongolian Plover, Double-banded Plover *Charadrius bicinctus,* Eastern Curlew, Bar-tailed Godwit, Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida,* Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia,* Crested Tern and Rainbow Lorikeet *Trichoglossus haematodus.*

Carmen Zanetti, 280 Duffy Street, AINSLIE, ACT, 2602

BOOK REVIEW

Alastair Morrison
SHARING A DREAM by Glen Threlfo, published by the author. Price $14.50 (packing and postage included) from Glen Threlfo, PO Box 30, Canungra, Qld, 4275.

Glen Threlfo, who is associated with Peter and Vince O'Reilly in the Lamington National Park, has produced a remarkable book of photographs. They portray a number of species of birds as well as some beautiful fungi and the horror of bushfires.

Threlfo is a photographer of exceptional talent and originality using very modest equipment - a second hand Pentax Spotmatic and an old Tamron telephoto lens. His Jacana *Irediparra gallinacea* studies, which amongst other things show a bird moving eggs through the water to a new nest and picking up and carrying young under its wing, are of the greatest interest and merit. I was also particularly struck by stories of Albert's Lyrebirds *Menura alberti,* Catbirds and Bowerbirds, Paradisaeidae.

The writing unfortunately is less impressive than the photography. Threlfo feels the urge to tell a story even when the photographs very largely speak for themselves. The text will not appeal to everyone. Nevertheless, the book is a worthy addition to the library of anyone interested in nature photography. Although a very different type of book I thought that the quality and interest of the photography bears comparison with that of *Hawks in Focus* by Jack and Lindsay Cupper.

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'FOOT-PADDLING' BY AUSTRALIAN MAGPIE-LARK

H D V Prendergast

At 0845 on 9 June 1983, on the ANU campus, I noticed a male Australian Magpie-lark *Grallina cyanoleuca* in an upturned, partially water-filled, zinc container lid about half a metre square. The bird was rapidly turning round, first one way and then the other, stamping both feed up and down and making frequent pecking movements at the water. It did this for 5-6 minutes, in the last 1-2 minutes of which it made 129 of these pecking movements.

At the same time on two subsequent days I saw repeat performances of this behaviour, both times by an adult male, presumably the same individual. On 10 June I timed 19 pecks in 23 seconds of 'paddling' and on 13 June, 63 pecks in 125 seconds.

The lid, slightly tilted, at first contained *l½ -2cms* of water and fine plant detritus. By 13 June, when some of the water had evaporated, the detritus formed a layer of sludge a few millimetres thick.

To find out what the Magpie-lark was pecking at, I made an attempt to simulate the effect of its movements by stirring the lid contents with a finger. This immediately exposed the red, curled-up larvae of a midge *Chironomus* sp (Chironomidae) (kindly identified by Dr D Colless, Division of Entomology, CSIRO). Many reacted to disturbance by wriggling, thereby rendering themselves even more conspicuous. Despite a careful search I could find nothing else of possible interest to the Magpie-lark, leaving me with the conclusion that it was these larvae that were the target of its pecking as they were brought to the surface, or into view, by the stamping action of its feet. The high rate of pecking on 9 June, more than one per second, and the halving of this rate on 13 June perhaps indicate two things: (1) that the larvae were originally very numerous in the container lid, and (2) that they were rapidly reduced in number.

Since container lids can scarcely be regarded as typical Magpie-lark habitat, where is this 'foot-stamping' or 'paddling' behaviour normally elicited? The Magpie-lark is often associated with water margins but the closest to this behaviour that I have seen described for this species took place on dry land. In his extensive study of Magpie-lark behaviour, Robinson (1947) quoted a correspondent: 'I have frequently seen birds scratching with their claws over earth. They scratch a few times and then move backwards and

in a reverse, circular way, picking up (? insects) uncovered by the scratching.'

Elsewhere, foot movements associated with feeding have been extensively reported. Simmons (1961) described two types: firstly, ′foot-trembling' in which one foot only is used, for example in agitating wet sand. This is apparently confined to the true plovers (Charadriidae). Secondly, 'foot-paddling' or 'foot-trampling' when both legs are involved in stirring the substrate as the bird pecks at the surface. This has been recorded in ducks, geese, swans, flamingos, herons and, above all, in gulls. Tinbergen (1953) reported one colony of Herring Gulls *Larus argentatus* which applied this movement on a large scale in meadows, making earthworms crawl out onto the surface and eating them as they appeared. It is in the intertidal zone that this movement is most commonly observed.

Sparks (1961) saw it as an adaption to exploit the thixotropic properties of silt and sand: 'any activity which serves to agitate the substratus will reduce it to a semifluid consistency. Any organism lying reposed in a thixotropic medium will immediately begin to move to firmer ground as the agitation causes the surrounding area to become unstable. The sudden line of turbulence left by the organism eg. an arthropod or gastropod, reveals it to the bird.

Tinbergen (1962) quoted an instance of 'foot-paddling' behaviour which bears a striking resemblance to that of the Magpie-lark reported here. It concerned an immature Herring Gull on a quayside paddling 'in a pool which was extremely black and opaque from coal dust suspended in it. On the bottom of the puddle were numerous grains spilt during unloading and as these appeared at the surface, whirled up by the bird's trampling, they were neatly picked up.' Tinbergen suggested that 'paddling' is initially an innate response by young birds elicited by a wide array of stimuli. As the bird ages it becomes more selective and eventually restricts the movements to situations where it is rewarded by food.

The Magpie-lark evidently carried over a well-practised technique from its preferred waterside habitat to a container lid. Indeed, seeing how widespread the technique is in other waterside species it would be surprising if the species as a whole had not adopted it. In conclusion I should like to post two questions: (1) have other observers noticed 'foot-paddling' behaviour in the Magpie-lark? and (2) does it occur in other typically Australasian species?

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HDV Prendergast, 17/25 Mackennal Street, LYNEHAM, ACT, 2602

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PECTORAL SANDPIPER AT LAKE BATHURST

Ray Pierce

At Lake Bathurst on 12 March 1983 I found a single Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos* amongst a small group of Sharp-tailed Sandpipers *C. acuminata* and Red-necked Stints *C. ruficollis.* The bird was first noticed by its sleek build compared with a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. On closer examination (at ranges down to 20m and using 8 x 30 binoculars) it displayed heavy vertical streaking on the neck and upper breast, separated by a line of demarcation from the white of the rest of the underparts. At this stage I was confident that the bird was a Pectoral Sandpiper as I have had many years of experience separating this species from Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, mainly in New Zealand. To be certain of this identification, however, I scared the bird (and 3 or 4 Sharp-tailed Sandpipers) into flight and heard the fairly incisive 'kreek’ call (often given by Pectoral Sandpipers), as well as the softer calls of the Sharp-tailed Sandpipers. A week later, on 19 March 1983, I visited Wakool Salt Works with Phil Maher of Deniliquin, NSW, and we found 6 Pectoral Sandpipers amongst 300+ Sharp-tailed Sandpipers and 30+ Curlew Sandpipers.

Ray Pierce, Glenmore Station, Lake Tekapo, South Island, NZ

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR
THOUGHTS (MAINLY NEGATIVE) ON THE GARDEN BIRD CHART, WITH A SUMMARY OF SPECIES TO BE SEEN AND HEARD AT 26 JANSZ CRESCENT, GRIFFITH, ACT

The Garden Bird Chart is somewhat unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. In the first place, some of the commonest birds in our area (eg. Blackbird, Pied Currawong) do not get a mention. In fact, my current chart records no fewer than 18 species in addition to the 27 printed on it. Of course, the designers of the chart left ample room for additions and for that I am duly grateful. Nevertheless, a major revision by way of increasing the number of species originally listed would certainly be in order.

There are further problems in keeping anything like a meaningful record of the total number of individuals of a particular species seen at any one time during the week. In winter, I am not usually back home in the evenings until well after dark, so visual observation is restricted to week-ends and early mornings when one is often busy with other things. Alternatively, flocks of Galahs, Feral Pigeons, Sparrows and Silvereyes etc. are frequently in a hurry even when the observer is not and so difficult to count, as are Spotted Pardalotes and Striated Thornbills feeding in the tops of tall and leafy gum trees. So much is noted by sound rather than by sight. Other sources of hardship are the requirements to distinguish between perching birds and those flying overhead, between birds within 100 metres of the house and those further off.

Finally, and while still on a critical note, looking through the Annual Bird Report for 1981-2 (CBN 8:1), I wonder if the extensive reliance on the Garden Bird Survey has not led to distortions. If the Report is supposed to be a survey of just urban localities, well and good. Even so, there are some puzzling features, eg. the high incidence of Red-rumped Parrots on the ANU campus all the year round is over-looked. But my main criticism of the Report is that it does not represent the incidence and distribution of birds in the ACT and surrounding districts as a whole, with the exception of course of the excellent waterbird component.

Despite these complaints, during the past two years I have found my enlarged version of the Garden Bird Chart to be a useful aid when keeping track of species seen or heard around the house. I simply tick a species for a particular week if I

see or hear it while I am at home or in the garden. Our garden is of modest dimensions; approximately 430 square metres at the front and 620 square metres at the back. It has been established some twenty years; and it contains lawns and a fair number of trees and shrubs, both exotic and native and including ten or twelve fruit trees. Neighbouring premises are similar, though one next door has recently been re-planted chiefly with natives. Behind the houses on our side of the street is an expanse of park and playing-field with trees of varying size and type and behind that again are the grounds of Canberra Grammar School.

The following is a list of birds noted at or in the vicinity of the property over the past twenty-one years:

White-faced Heron +
Masked Lapwing +
Feral Pigeon *
Gang-gang Cockatoo
Galah *
Sulphur-crested Cockatoo *
Rainbow Lorikeet +
Australian King Parrot **
Crimson Rosella
Eastern Rosella
Red-rumped Parrot +
Pallid Cuckoo **
Shining Bronze-Cuckoo **
Southern Boobook
White-throated Needletail +
Laughing Kookaburra
Sacred Kingfisher **
Dollarbird **
Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike
Blackbird *
Golden Whistler
Rufous Whistler **
Leaden Flycatcher +
Grey Fantail ** (early winter)
Willie Wagtail *
Brown Goshawk +
Superb Fairy-wren +
Weebill
White-throated Gerygone +
Brown Thornbill
Yellow-rumped Thornbill *
Striated Thornbill
Red Wattlebird
Noisy Friarbird **
Yellow-faced Honeyeater
White-eared Honeyeater
White-plumed Honeyeater
White-naped Honeyeater
Eastern Spinebill
Spotted Pardalote
Striated Pardalote
Silvereye * European Goldfinch
House Sparrow *
Common Starling *
Common Mynah
White-winged Chough +
Australian Magpie-lark *
Pied Currawong *
Australian Magpie *
Australian Raven *
TOTAL =51 Species

NOTES: 1. * = resident; ** = seasonal visitor; + = vagrant
2. 15-20 years ago before swamp at back was drained: Letter-winged Kite (one bird every winter); Clamorous Reed Warbler (few pairs breeding every summer)

R H P Mason, 26 Jansz Crescent, GRIFFITH, ACT, 2603

NOTE FROM THE RECORDS OFFICER

COG will be reprinting the Garden Bird Chart in the near future as the first print run has almost sold out. The new charts will be slightly different from those currently in use. Most of the species listed in the first edition of the chart are common to the major Eastern Australian cities. This was done with a view to marketing the charts interstate. A whole line devoted to Blackbirds would be wasted in Sydney, as would one for Gang-gangs in Melbourne or Thrushes in Canberra,

It has been proposed that the new charts be printed with no species names at all. Observers will simply add species as they appear throughout the year. This will not affect the marketability of the charts and it will ensure that no irrelevant species are shown.

We can only urge participants in the survey to spend as much time as possible in their observation areas and to be as precise as possible with their records. One of the great strengths of the survey is its quantitative nature. We are attempting to measure how populations change in the course of the year. To enable us to do this, it is essential that the numbers of each species are recorded.

While a single observer's records may appear incomplete and haphazard, the combined records of over sixty observers do provide some indication of how bird populations fluctuate and are therefore 'meaningful'.

The Garden Bird Survey has not distorted the Annual Bird Report - it has simply drawn attention to the great lack of information on habitats outside the city. Until such a time as regular surveys of non-urban habitats can be carried out, ad hoc records and the results of transects are the only sources of information on these areas which are available.

Please make sure to fill out the Observation Book at monthly meetings and do not forget to submit transect results. Remember - any record is potentially valuable.

Ian Taylor

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BIRD OF THE MONTH

FRECKLED DUCK

Chris Davey

(This article is based on the Bird of the Month talk given by the author at the April 1983 Canberra Ornithologists Group Meeting.)

Lake Bathurst and until it dried up, Lake George have, as far as I know, been the only places where one can regularly see Freckled Duck *Stictonetta naevosa* within many hundreds of kilometres of Canberra. They have been seen on every water-bird survey since July 1982, ranging in number from 9 to 166 with an average of 60 birds.

RELATIONSHIP AND BEHAVIOUR: The Freckled Duck must be the most unusual waterfowl within the Canberra region. It is known for its sparse distribution and fluctuating populations. Restricted to the southern half of the Australian Continent, there is still very little known about its biology considering the amount of work done on waterfowl. We know nothing about its breeding, moult or how long it lives for. It is the only Australian waterfowl that has not yet been bred in captivity. Nests and broods are rarely seen. Very little is known about its breeding range or the type of habitat that it prefers to breed in.

The relationship of the Freckled Duck to other waterfowl is not clear. Only by its outward appearances and its feeding methods does it resemble a duck. The courtship behaviour has not yet been described and only when it has will the relationship of the Freckled Duck to other waterfowl become more clear. No breeding behaviour or calls vaguely similar to any of the dabbling ducks have been observed and there are no observations to suggest its behaviour is similar to swans or geese.

In general, dabbling ducks moult twice a year, and the males play no part in incubating or in rearing of the young whilst in swans and geese there is only one moult a year and both parents assist in nest building, incubating and rearing the brood.

A study of the moulting patterns of Freckled Ducks is in progress at the moment and behaviour has been observed that could be taken as nest building, by the male.

Also of interest concerning the question of the relationship of the Freckled Duck to other waterbirds have been

recently described fossils that are 60 million years old. These fossil birds (Presbyornis) have a skull similar in every respect to the unique skull of the Freckled Duck, yet it is carried on legs similar to that of Stilts, Recurvirostridae.

Adult birds basically give two types of calls. The first is the most common and heard in all aggressive situations, which is quite often in the case of the Freckled Duck. The second is a call given during what, at this stage, can only be described as a courtship display. Here the males follow a female on the water and after flicking the bill a few times very quickly throws the neck and head forward and back giving a sharp 'creek' call. This display is terminated with a couple of quick tail wags. However, this call is not heard unless very close.

IDENTIFICATION: Ducks are to be found in one of four basic activities. Flying, swimming, walking or loafing. For each of these activities each species will have certain identifying features.

It is clear from many hours of observations of the Freckled Duck that the only activity that needs to concern us is loafing. The way to locate Freckled Ducks is to identify the loafing birds and if they do absolutely nothing for some long period of time they must be Freckled Ducks! During the hours that most bird watchers spend watching birds, Freckled Ducks will be found loafing. This they will do usually on the rocks or logs to be found surrounded by water or forming headlands jutting out into the water. They will be found standing on one leg, bill under scapulars and well apart from each other. Once one has been found others are usually easy to spot.

If they are disturbed and take to the water they are most commonly mistaken for Pacific Black Duck *Anas superciliosa.* The most obvious difference is in the silhouette of the head, caused by the dished spoon shape of the bill and the crest of the Freckled Duck. Usually the Freckled Duck will carry the neck hunched to the body whilst the Pacific Black Duck will hold its neck erect. During the breeding season the base of the male's bill becomes bright glossy red. Observations at Lake Bathurst and of captive birds held in Canberra suggest that this period is between the middle of February until May. Though the base of the bill may be slightly red for much of the year, all traces of colour disappear during the period of wing moult. The females do not have the swollen base to the bill and never show the red, as do the males.

If the birds take-off amongst a flock of other waterfowl, always watch the last birds to arise and not the first. Most ducks have enough power in their wings to be able to take off vertically from the water. This is done by the first downward stroke of the wings hitting the water surface. Freckled Duck do not have this ability and need to paddle across the water with the result that they are not only the last to take off but when they do they will initially fly lower than the remaining flock until they gain height and catch up. The wings are small in proportion to the body, the underwing pattern differs from the Pacific Black Duck in that the Pacific Black Duck has a white underwing with black trailing edge, whilst the Freckled Duck has a completely pale underwing.

When walking, Freckled Duck are inevitably observed 'suzzling' along the water's edge, filtering out plankton. Characteristically the bill is held very flat to the mud surface and because of this the neck is held very close to the ground. The tiny, beady eye is also characteristic of the Freckled Duck.

There are two points that are repeatedly noted in the literature that need to be mentioned. The first is that there is a call usually described as a trumpet-like or a soft flute-like whistle, 'whee-yu’. Having located and heard the original call there is no doubt that this is the description of one of the calls of the Pink-eared Duck *Malacorhynchus membranaceus.*

Secondly, the literature repeatedly mentions that the Freckled Duck is primarily an algal feeder. This is not true, it is in fact a specialised plankton feeder.

C Davey, 24 Bardsley Place, HOLT, ACT, 2615

A LARGE GATHERING OF WEDGE-TAILED EAGLES

Alan Morris

On 19 November 1982 at the south-east corner of the Gammon Ranges National Park, a large gathering of Wedge-tailed Eagles *Aquila audax* was observed on the road between Balcanoona and Yelta, in northern South Australia. The location was about 10km from Balcanoona at the foothills of the Gammon Ranges where the road becomes flat and undulating. At about 0900 my companion, Allan Fox of Queanbeyan, and I were travelling along this road as it dipped across the plain. As there were many birds feeding along and at the edge of the road, we had assumed that our vehicle was the first to travel the road that morning. The day was warming up, probably the temperature was already in excess of 35°C because there was a heat haze on the road, giving a mirage effect.

Ahead of us appeared a moving mass of birds which appeared and disappeared as the road dipped and the mirage effect came into play. It reminded me of the sight of massed vultures at animal kills on the plains in African Game Parks that I had seen when visiting southern Africa in 1968. As we drew closer it was apparent that the birds involved were Wedge-tailed Eagles and Ravens/Crows *Corvus sp.* Altogether there were 18 Wedge-tailed Eagles either on the road feeding on the carcass of a male Red Kangaroo *Megalea rufa* or standing around watching. With the eagles were 10 corvids (some at least appeared to be Australian Ravens *Corvus coronoides)* and one Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes.* When all the birds took off at our approach, it was a very impressive sight. We had never seen so many Wedge-tailed Eagles at the same place at the one time. On the five previous days in the Gammon Ranges, the total number of eagles seen in any one day throughout the whole of the Park, was ten birds. As a result of the drought and weak condition of kangaroos and wallaroos, there were numerous fresh carcasses on the road, why this one was favoured by so many birds, was hard to know.

Alan K Morris, 32 Cliff Street, WATSONS BAY, NSW, 2030

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Editor: Mr P M Davidson, PO Box 301, CIVIC SQUARE, ACT, 2608

Parities Panel: C Bear (583169 H), G Clark, B Baker, R Gregory-Smith

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