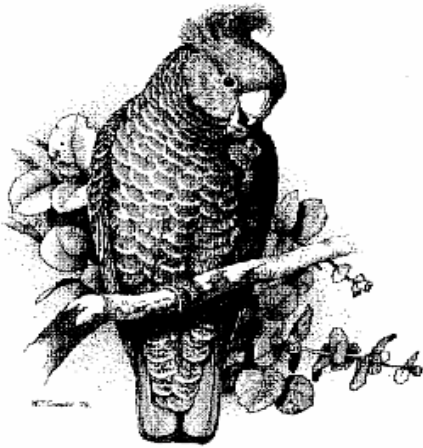




Gang-gang

March 2008

Newsletter of the Canberra Ornithologists Group Inc.

Monthly Meeting

**8 pm Wednesday
12 March 2008**

*Canberra Girls Grammar School
corner Gawler Cres and Melbourne
Ave, Deakin. The meetings are held in
the Multi-media Theatre at the School.
Enter off Gawler Crescent using the
school road signposted as Gabriel
Drive. If that car-park is full, enter
using Chapel Drive.*

The first presentation will be a "Bird of the Month" talk by **Jack Holland** on "**Identification of Local Quail Species**". This will be a reprise and an update of a talk he gave to COG about 20 years ago. Come along to learn about to identify these difficult species and find out whether Jack has found it any easier to be certain of their identification in the field after all these years.

The main presentation will be by **Dr Sandy Berry**, Senior Research Associate, Fenner School of Environment and Society, ANU, on **Habitat Productivity, Connectivity and Bird Conservation**.

Sandy is a vegetation ecologist with a particular interest in the way that the Australian vegetation responds to environmental change through time.

Everyone welcome

What to watch out for this month

Summer has now gone and over the next 6 weeks or so many of the species that visit Canberra for the warmer season to breed etc will have departed. One species that I predicted would have left by the end of January, the **Common Koel**, stayed unusually long this year, still being conspicuous by its calling in at least three suburbs until mid to late February. The **Superb Parrot** also stayed in the Mount Rogers area in small numbers until about the middle of the month. This species is at the SE edge of its distribution in the ACT, but only migrates within NSW up to about the QLD border.

Among the species expected to have departed by the first couple of weeks of March is the **Dollarbird**, with the immature birds tending to stay the longest. Another species, the **Rainbow Bee-eater**, often passes through/over Canberra in late February/early March. Keep an ear out for them as they can be easily heard and seen quite high overhead, with their characteristic "pirr pirr" call and orange underwing making them relatively easy to identify from a distance. They can also migrate at lower levels, such as along a creek line or river. Some have already been observed doing this. The **Sacred Kingfisher** is also likely to be seen briefly in Canberra gardens etc in later February/March on its way to warmer climes.

Continue to keep an eye out for **White-throated Needletails** and the rarer **Fork-tailed Swifts** on passing fronts or local thunderstorms. So far there still have only been sporadic sightings, which seems to be a continuation of the low number of records for these species for the past few years despite the wetter conditions. Other species which are migrants through Canberra during March include those which breed in the mountains such as the **Satin Flycatcher** and the **Rufous Fantail**. These may be seen passing through for a brief period in quite unsuitable habitat during this month and for the first few days of April. Most of the four **cuckoo** species will also have left Canberra by the beginning of April, though some individuals do stay longer and sometimes overwinter. Other species such as the **Grey Fantail** and the **Noisy Friarbird** (there have been very few in my local area this year) also migrate during

Photo by Stuart Harris



Superb Parrot
(*Polytelis swainsonii*)

March but stay a bit longer into April, depending on the season. While the **Dusky Woodswallow** can stay until early May (with small numbers overwintering), from February to April they often flock while feeding or moving together; indeed there have been a few reports of this happening (over 30 together) round Lake Burley Griffin.

The most famous and spectacular migrants are the large flocks of **Yellow-Faced Honeyeaters**. This phenomenon usually begins in the last week or so of March, so keep an ear and eye out for them in your local patch. Last year this migration almost failed, starting early and being seemingly over by the end of March, with the numbers reported the poorest that I can recall in over 30 years of birding in the ACT. So it will be very important that this migration is carefully monitored in 2008. Please do so and report major numbers, or the failure of any to appear when expected (remember the best migration conditions are on a clear still day after a cold night).

As we move into autumn, one of the features of the Canberra bird scene is the mixed feeding flock (MFF). These can form anywhere and are often characterised by a number of smaller species, ranging from 3 to over 10, which seem to co-operatively feed in a very busy manner at all levels, such as on the ground, in the shrubs and in the tree canopy. A number of different birds seem to provide the trigger, and one or two species may be most conspicuous, with several species of **thornbills/Weebill** often present. However, keep a watchful eye on all the birds as often there may be one or two uncommon species quietly feeding in amongst them. A feature is how rapidly they can move through an area, with hardly a bird to be seen only an hour later.

Again make sure that these valuable records are not lost but are entered into the COG database. — **Jack Holland**

Field Trip reports

8 to 11 February 2008 — Ulladulla

An outing in two parts. The first was wet, the second fine. But Bob Rusk our fearless leader managed to salvage the expedition and also show us some of the delights of Ulladulla and surrounds. A stroll up Millards Creek, a quick visit to Milton's figtree and a stroll around Wardens Head filled in the first day.

Millards Creek would have been good on a good day but unfortunately the rain kept most of the birds tucked up in bed. The figtree revealed an **Australasian Figbird** and an **Eastern Koel** being fed by an overworked **Red Wattlebird**.

Wardens Head had **Wedge-tailed Shearwaters** and **Australasian Gannets** off the lighthouse point and **White-throated Needle-tails** overhead. **Glossy Black-Cockatoos** were feeding on *Allocasuarina* below one of the lookouts while **Sooty Oystercatchers** patrolled the rock ledges below.

The next day was considerably better and Bob took us to the Yatte Yattah Nature Reserve, a small pocket of rainforest just off the Princes Highway. This was a delight and rainforest birds were in abundance. Some of the highlights were **Topknot Pigeon**, **Green Catbird**, **Brown Cuckoo-Dove**, **Black-faced Monarch**, **Lewin's Honeyeater**, **Large-billed Scrubwren** and **Brown Gerygone**.

This was followed by another trip to the lighthouse at Warden Head, this time in more ideal conditions. The **Wedge-tailed Shearwaters** and **Gannets** were still there and were joined by **Fluttering Shearwaters**, **Sooty Terns**, **Pomarine Jaegers** and **Arctic Jaegers**.

Photo by Sue Lashko



Channel-billed Cuckoo
(*Scythrops novaehollandiae*)

At the caravan park, five **Long-billed Corellas** entertained us and yet another very busy **Red Wattlebird** was feeding a squawking **Eastern Koel**. In the streets of Burrill Lake a very large juvenile **Channel-billed Cuckoo** was keeping a **Pied Currawong** very busy trying to keep the food up to it.

On Monday Bob had a final delight to show us in Lake Merroo. This is a pretty little freshwater lake tucked in behind the sand dunes in Merroo National Park. Upon it were **Musk Ducks** and over it a **Whistling Kite** was chased by **Australian Ravens**. The bush near the lake held more **Glossy Black-Cockatoos**, **Rufous Fantail** and **Red-browed Treecreeper**.

From such a dismal start (weatherwise) the weekend developed into a very enjoyable and sunny occasion. In no small way this was made possible by our genial leader. Thanks again to Bob Rusk for a great weekend. — **Noel Luff**

19 February 2008 — Wednesday Walkers at Kelly's Swamp and the Silt Trap

A very good roll up of birders including some new faces fought their way through appalling traffic to get to the Kelly's Swamp carpark at the appointed time.

The first bird entered on the list was an immature **Little Eagle**, still looking very spiffy. Most of the usual suspects contributed to the total list of 48 species. Less common birds were a **Pied Cormorant** on the silt trap and two **European Greenfinches** just through the gate at the school end of the swamp. Although not uncommon, we had extremely good views of **Golden-headed Cisticolas** on the fence at the end of the water and, as we returned from the silt trap, a **Brown Falcon** being harassed by smaller birds.

Some of the group then visited the Sewage Ponds (being careful to sign in the book). There were relatively few birds on the lagoons; presumably they have dispersed as there is water elsewhere. There were good numbers (approximately 10) of **Blue-billed Duck**, **Australian Shoveller**, **Pacific Black Duck** and **Grey Teal**. It was particularly helpful to be able to get **Australian** and **Hoary-headed Grebes** in one field of view. — **Martin Butterfield**

Future Field Trips

The Guidelines for the conduct and advertising of COG field trips are published on the COG web site. Both trip leaders and members/participants should familiarise themselves with these guidelines. In particular, the Registration Form should be completed for each field trip.

8-10 March 2008 — Canberra Day long weekend campout — Lacmalac/Goobarragandra River

This long weekend campout will be an opportunity to visit a relatively unknown spot not too far to our west. A combination of open forest, riverine and woodland habitats can be explored from here. Or simply sit by the river and relax for a couple of days.

We will camp at Thomas Boyd Trackhead, 23 km SE of Tumut on the Goobarragandra River, on the Hume and Hovell Walking Track and on the edge of Kosciuszko National Park.

From Tumut follow the main street (Wynyard Street) down to the river, cross on the old bridge and follow the signs to Lacmalac. 11km past Lacmalac (don't blink, you may miss it!) watch for a cattle grid; the campground sign is partly obscured by bushes.

Facilities at the campground are good and there is a large grassed area suitable for caravans and trailers. There are no showers, but there is hot water for washing, and free barbecues in a covered area. Take your own drinking water.

Camping fees are \$5.00 per person per night (\$3.50 for groups over 10, so hopefully we will qualify). For more information contact Sandy Sutherland on 62275622 or email sandy.sutherland@bigpond.com.au.



**Australian
Ornithological
Services P/L**

PO Box 385
South Yarra 3141
Victoria
Tel: 03 9820 4223
Mob: 04173 10200

enquiries@philipmaher.com

2008 Birding Tours

12—30 March Thailand

A repeat of our wonderful 2007 trip with over 400 species of birds recorded; fantastic mammals, reptiles, butterflies, flora, scenery and food. Co-led by Uthai Treesucon, Thailand's foremost birding guide See website for checklist & trip report

July New Caledonia incl Lifou & Ouvea islands

10—28 August 2008 Strzelecki Track Outback Tour

**See other 2008 tours on our
website**

www.philipmaher.com

Sunday 16 March — East Basin/Molonglo River — Electric/powerd boat cruise

This will be the last outing/cruise for 2007-2008 on the upper parts of Lake Burley Griffin (East Basin) and the adjacent Molonglo River. This has been done a number of times on different dates, but the experience is that early autumn is the peak time for nesting. While the main objective will be to view breeding activity, with three species of cormorant and Darters known to breed there, the area is also rich in other water birds, and a variety of land birds can be seen on the banks.

The boat trip will last about 2 hours from 8 am and will cost \$20, payable in cash on boarding. Depending on the numbers we will travel either in the electric boat the "E.L. Cygnet" which takes a maximum of 10 passengers, or the MV "Darter" which can carry 16 people and, though it has a motor, is very quiet at slow speeds. The boats allow both a quiet approach as well as access to areas normally difficult to get to. The point of departure will be the little landing adjacent to the car park in Bowen Park opposite the new Landmark Apartments. This car park may be accessed off Bowen Drive (going either way).

At time of writing, there was nearly enough interest to fill the larger boat. Therefore if you are intending to join in this outing, please book your place on the boat with Jack Holland (on 6288 7840 AH or by E-mail on jack.holland@environment.gov.au) as soon as possible.

Wednesday 19 March – Midweek walk

This month's midweek walk will be to Mulligan's Flat. Meet at the main entrance car park at 9:00 am.

21-24 March — Easter Camp — Chiltern

We will camp on private property at Chiltern in northern Victoria, about four hours drive from Canberra. The site is suitable for tents, caravans or campervans. Some tank water is available. We will bird in a variety of habitats in the local area but may go further afield to the Murray (or to local wineries) if it is very hot and/or if fire bans are in place and forests closed. Please contact Sue Lashko at SMLashko@gmail.com to register your interest. Contact Julie McGuiness at julie.mcguiness@bigpond.com if you have ideas on good places to visit in the region.

This trip is fully booked. If you wish to go on the waiting list, or are no longer able to come to Chiltern, please email Sue Lashko at SMLashko@gmail.com.

Saturday 5 April — Lake Burley Griffin — Birding by Bike or the "Tour des Birds de LBG"



Little Bittern
(*Ixobrychus minutus*)

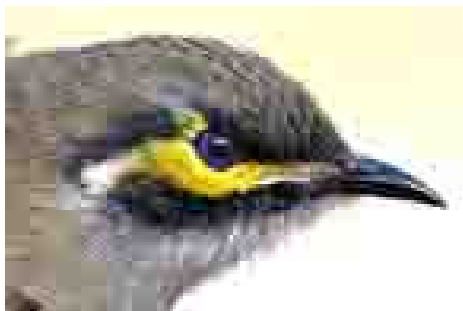
Photo by Sue Lashko

Martin Butterfield will lead a repeat of this bicycle tour of the Central and West Basins of Lake Burley Griffin, intending to visit a number of locations with good chances of seeing some of the less common sights of Canberra (in addition to the birds there is always the possibility of encountering a bagpipe player or a naked jogger). Martin's expectation would be at least 40 bird species including four **cormorants** and **Darter**, including breeding activity, and most of the other usual lake and parkland suspects. In addition the edge of Westbourne Woods can generate some of the less common bush birds, and Acacia Inlet has recently produced many sightings of **Little Bittern**.

Meet at Mr Spokes bike hire in Acton Park at 8:00 am, and we'll head off clockwise (for those with digital watches, that means towards the Carillon). If anyone is intending to hire a bike from Mr Spokes it would be wise to check their hours of operation as last year they didn't open until 9:00! Martin expects

to have at least nine 'formal' stops with many others possible. We'll cover about 20 km, at a polite pace with no big uphill, in about 3 hours. At least one water bottle per person is advised, and although he doesn't intend to go off road, a spare inner tube each would be good insurance (Martin is hoping to make it through this year without a personal puncture). Wearing a helmet is compulsory. For further information please contact **Martin Butterfield** (Ph 6238 2637 or 0422 753 230, e-mail martinflab@gmail.com).

Sunday 13 April – Honeyeater migration



Yellow-faced Honeyeater
(*Lichenostomus chrysops*)

Photo by Geoffrey Dabb

The autumn movement of thousands of **Yellow-faced** and **White-naped Honeyeaters** (and lesser numbers of other species) from the mountains to warmer climes along the coast and further north is a feature of the Canberra birdwatching calendar. On a good migration day thousands of honeyeaters can be counted passing through the Angle Crossing area. To witness this spectacle, and to help count the honeyeaters, meet Nicki Taws at 8:30 am in the car park on the Tharwa side of the bridge across the Murrumbidgee. As the bridge is closed, travel to Tharwa via Point Hut Crossing. Bring something to sit on, a hat, sunscreen and morning tea. Enquiries to Nicki (6251 0303, ntaws@bigpond.com). As usual, if the weather is not the best for honeyeaters we will visit the Tharwa Sandwash for some general birding.

Sunday 27 April

We are still looking for someone to lead a morning walk to a local nature park. If you would like to show people your favourite patch of bush, please contact Anthony Overs on 6254 0168 or anthony.overs.reps@aph.gov.au

News from the Committee

- Work on the Annual Bird Report is progressing well.
- Tony Lawson is preparing a short report on the differences between the newly released and previous editions of Christidis and Boles (*Systematics and Taxonomy of Australian Birds*). C&D is the basis of the arrangement of records in our data systems, so decisions will need to be made about the changes.
- Planning for the BIGNet meeting is well advanced. The Chief Minister has been invited to attend the walk and breakfast planned for Mulligans Flat on the Sunday morning.
- A volunteer has been found to undertake the role of Sales Desk manager for the next three months. Roy Harvey will keep the desk running for that time, but is overseas for an extended period after that, so we are still looking for someone to manage it from mid-year. A volunteer has not yet been found for the raffle.
- A revised version of the COG data agreement has been approved by the Committee. This agreement covers the use of COG GBS and other records for research purposes.

Lost and Found

An Enamel yellow tray with a picture of a lemon was left behind at the Christmas party and will be available from the President for collection at the March meeting:

Other Surveys/Activities of Interest to COG Members

BIGNet meeting.

COG is hosting the next meeting of the Bird Interest Group Network (BIGNet) on 5-6 April 2008. The business sessions will be held at the Australian National Botanic Gardens. There are a number of ways members can assist. To ensure the success of the meeting, we need volunteers to:

- take and write up minutes of the meeting (summary/outcomes);
- organise morning and afternoon teas, including delivery to the meeting venue;
- organise the food, the setting up, and to act as marshals at the gate for a breakfast at Mulligans Flat on Sunday 6 April; and
- man (or woman) a small scale sales desk on one day, focusing on COG publications and local materials.

If you are willing to assist, please contact Jack Holland on 6288 7840 AH or by E-mail on jack.holland@environment.gov.au, as soon as possible.

Flying trip to the outback wetlands

In about two months, George Wilson proposes to visit the Coongie Lakes, Innaminka, Nockatunga, Cooper Creek, Birdsville, Bulloo Overflow and Currawinya. The schedule will be to fly over the area in 5 to 7 days as the water recedes to see the waterfowl and waders. Opportunities for boat trips on Cooper Creek. Cost will depend on the size of the group and the itinerary developed but of the order of \$850 per head per day all inclusive. Contact george.wilson@awt.com.au or 0418236575 to discuss.

NSW & ACT Twitchathon 2007 Winners

There were 109 participants in the Twitchathon, the most ever. About \$15,500 was raised for the Birds Australia Discovery Centre at The Armory, Sydney Olympic Park, the new headquarters for the Sydney office of Birds Australia. The money is to be used for the supply of education equipment and new displays at the Centre.

Winners were:

Main Race — Hunter Home Brewers

Champagne Race — Crested Shrike-twits

Dollarbirds (Children 10-16 years) — Sawtell Sea-eagles

Little Curlews (Children under 10 years) — Eagles

Most Funds Raised — **Keith Brandwood** (Grey Toilet Thrushes, \$4,762)

Most Finds Raised by a child — **Ben Furster-Levy** (\$642)

“Lucky Twitchers Prize” — **Peter Higgins** (Complete & Utter Bustards)

“Rarest Bird Prize” — **Greg Clancy** (Black-necked Stalkers) for sighting a **Rufous Scrub-bird** at Gibraltar Range National Park.

Suggestions for the sponsor project for the 2008 Twitchathon are now being canvassed. The project will be decided at the next BIGnet Meeting in Canberra ACT in early April. Money raised could be used to to supplement another grant for a bird conservation/research project that you are involved with, or to start a new project altogether. Please contact Alan Morris, the Twitchathon Organiser, with any ideas

Garden Bird Survey Notes — March 2008

GBS-relevant highlights from the Chatline for late January - February include:

- a **Black Kite** over Holt;
- interactions between **Little Corellas** (winners) and **Sulphur-crested Cockatoos** (losers) in Narrabundah;
- continued records of .. <insert adjective which applies this week/month> .. **Koel** from many areas;
- dependent young records of **Dusky Woodswallow**, **Weebill**, **Leaden Flycatcher**, **Rufous Fantail** and **Yellow-faced Honeyeater** from Hoskintown (I have also recorded DY **Yellow-faced Honeyeater** in Carwoola).

The weather is getting cooler and in the morning of 26 February I saw my first large (26 birds) flock of **Eastern Rosellas** for the year. While it was out of my GBS site, these symptoms that “the times they are a-changing” did cause me to check out dates for migrants. Bill Oddy noted in his *Little Black Bird Book* that it was easier to get his name in his local birding group’s annual report with a “last date”, because they are less recorded than “first dates”.

Conceptually, as the GBS is a continuous recording process it gives a more reliable indicator of the times of departure. However the “last date” is a rather nebulous concept as 17 of the 29 non-rare species described in the ABR as migrants have, over the past 26 years, at least one GBS observation in June and six of the remaining species have very few observations.

Looking at the number of observations for each of the 29 species by week over the 26 years of the GBS shows some more interesting patterns. Space does not permit a full discussion here but:

- observations of **Dollarbirds**, **Sacred Kingfishers**, **Rainbow Bee-eaters**, **White-throated Needletails**, **Horsfield’s** and **Shining Bronze-Cuckoos**, **Rufous Fantails**, **Leaden** and **Satin Flycatchers**, **White-throated** and **Western Gerygones** usually have decreased dramatically by the end of March.
- by early April the passage of **White-naped** and **Yellow-throated Honeyeaters** will have fired up (with higher numbers of observations of both continuing over Winter than in Summer) and observations of **Noisy Friarbirds** will have declined as they “vote with their wings”.

In contrast our only Winter immigrant, the **Rose Robin**, is more frequently observed from early April onwards.

— **Martin Butterfield**

THE COG RARITIES PANEL

(Originally published in the December 2007 Gang-gang. Republished here for the benefit of members who may have missed them)

The COG Rarities Panel was formed in 1984, initially to appraise unusual records for the Atlas of ACT birds. It was based on a similar panel set up to vet records for western New South Wales for the first RAOU Atlas (1977-81). The need to vet records is not new, and is used by all responsible ornithological bodies to check unusual and extralimital records before they can be officially accepted into regional checklists, manuals and atlases. It is a procedure that provides standards for the reliability of such works and for regional ornithological knowledge.

The function of the Panel today is to

- provide informed and impartial appraisal of the records presented to it, and
- maintain a list of rare and unusual species,

the sightings of which will not be published as accepted by COG unless they receive Panel endorsement.

The Panel does not “reject” records; it accepts or does not accept them. Failure to accept a record merely indicates that, on the evidence available to the Panel, its identity has not been demonstrated convincingly.

Rarities Panel Guidelines (continued)

In reaching its decision on records, the Panel considers the details provided against its collective knowledge of the species, as much in behaviour and habitat preferences as plumage traits. Observers may be asked to clarify aspects of their reports. If Panel members lack collective expertise in a species, reports are circulated outside for opinion. Reports of birds unusual to Australia as a whole are referred to the Birds Australia Records Appraisal Committee.

The value of the Panel's work can be seen not only in the enhancement of the quality of published COG records but also in the monitoring of the status of the birds of the ACT and surrounding areas over time.

Composition of the Rarities Panel (2007)

Richard Allen, Jenny Bounds, Grahame Clark, Dick Schodde, Nicki Taws, Barbara Allan (Secretary)

Panel members are appointed by the COG Committee. The qualifications for members of the Panel are a banding licence and/or professional qualifications and experience in a relevant field and/or extensive and proven track record of observing and providing records to COG of birds in the Canberra region. The Panel also uses the services of two local consultants, Mark Clayton and Penny Olsen.

Which birds require an unusual bird report?

The Panel is currently revising the list of rare and unusual birds in the Canberra region; and the present list on the COG website will be up-dated shortly. Hard copies of the list will also be available at COG meetings or by mail from the COG secretary. As a very general indication, if the species does not appear on the COG datasheet, the completion of an unusual bird report form is advisable. Please note that these species are not necessarily unusual in the broader Australian context – but they are unusual *in our region*. If you submit a COG datasheet which lists an unusual bird, the records checker will remind you of the need to complete an unusual bird report form.

The Panel always stands ready to assist birders identify what they have seen. Please feel free to submit a report or a photo about any bird species which may have puzzled you, for informal feedback.

What about the problem of multiple reports of the same bird?

Thanks to the excellent alerting service now provided by the COG electronic chat line, the same unusual bird may be seen by many observers. The Rarities Panel suggests that the original finder of the bird should be the one to submit the report or, if that person is reluctant to do so, that he or she ensures that a subsequent observer does so. Any subsequent records of the same species in approximately the same location at roughly the same time will be published by COG as if they had been endorsed. This presupposes that the record submitted is adequate in detail. The Panel secretary will pursue the matter with other known observers until a report is forthcoming.

How to submit an unusual bird report

Unusual bird report forms are available in hard copy at COG meetings, or can be mailed to you by the Rarities Panel secretary or COG secretary. They are also available electronically for downloading from the COG website, at www.canberrabirds.org.au. Once completed, the form may be emailed to rarities@canberrabirds.org.au, mailed to COG Rarities Panel, PO Box 301, Civic Square, ACT 2608, or placed in the red records box at COG meetings. If you have any questions, please contact rarities@canberrabirds.org.au or telephone the Panel secretary.

Please complete forms for records as fully as possible, paying particular attention to the description of the bird and its behaviour. If you were unable to see certain features, say so. For example, if a striated breast is a key characteristic of the species and you only saw the bird from the rear, it is important for the Panel to know this.

What happens to your report?

Electronically submitted forms are acknowledged on receipt. If the form appears to lack relevant detail, the Panel secretary may contact you for further information. The Panel meets approximately quarterly to consider unusual bird reports. Reports will be accepted (endorsed), not accepted, or further information will be sought, either from the observer or an expert. Endorsed records are published in the next available issue of *Canberra Bird Notes*, and in the relevant Annual Bird Report, with commentary if warranted. Observers are informed of the outcome of the Panel's views either by phone or email.

In reaching its decision about a record, the Panel considers the following matters:

- does the record appear to be a faithful account of what the observer saw and did not see? [by all means, consult a field guide, but only after noting the details of what you saw first]
- has the observer had previous experience with the species?
- has the species been observed in that location before? in the ACT before? and if so, recently?
- are the details of the sighting collectively consistent with the species claimed?

The Panel is obviously influenced by matters such as accompanying good-quality photographs (though it acknowledges the possibility of digital tinkering).

— Barbara Allan, Secretary, Rarities Panel, October 2007

Expressions of Interest sought for COG tasks

Expressions of interest are sought from members to fill the following roles:

Sales Desk Manager

Roy Harvey has kindly offered to mind the position of Sales Desk Manager for the next three months but the position still needs to be filled on a more permanent basis

The Sales Desk provides an opportunity for the membership to purchase books and other items at a discount price and to obtain brochures on items of local and interstate interest. The Desk is a popular venue at monthly meetings and provides a valuable service to members. The duties involve ordering stock, setting up the Desk and selling merchandise at monthly meetings and balancing the accounts

Raffle Organiser

A popular event at each monthly meeting is the Raffle. The job involves coordinating with the Sales Desk to provide a raffle prize, selling tickets at the door before the start of the meeting and to provide the takings to a member of the committee for banking.

Exhibition/Education Officer

An important role of COG is to provide exhibition and educational material at events that help to advance the aims of COG. Duties involve caring for, updating and maintaining the exhibition material and if possible increase the opportunities to educate members of the public on the importance of birds and their conservation.

Please contact **Chris Davey** (Tel:62546324, email chris_davey@aapt.net.au) or any other member of the committee for further details.

MUDBRICK COTTAGE

Mallacoota

Our mudbrick cottage is available for rental for all those nature lovers out there!!

It is set amongst the trees in Mallacoota, Victoria (approximately 4 hours drive from Canberra). It is only 10 minutes walk to the beach, 5 minutes walk to the golf course and about 15 minutes walk to town. It sleeps 4-6 upstairs and there is a sofa bed downstairs.

It is fully self-contained with a kitchen and laundry. Contact Barbara de Bruine

(02) 6258 3531.

PASSIVE SOLAR HOUSE

South Rosedale

Arupingi is a passive solar house situated in a peaceful bushland setting in South Rosedale.

Birdwatching is possible from the comfort of a chair on the front or back deck, while for the more energetic, Guerrilla Bay and Burrewarra Point are within walking distance. The wetlands at Barling's Beach are only a few kilometres away. Rich birding is available in almost any direction.

From 10 November to 10 February contact Georgia Ramsay

0412 910 576

COG SALES

The following items plus various pamphlets (most free) and membership application forms are available from the sales desk at COG meetings.

- **Field Guide to the Birds of the ACT** by Taylor and Day - \$16.00
- **Birds of the ACT: Two Centuries of Change** by Steve Wilson - \$25.00
- **Bird Calls of the ACT** – CD - \$12.00
- **Bird Songs of Canberra** – Cassette - \$10.00
- **COG Car Stickers** - \$2.00
- **COG Badges** – red or grey - \$5.00
- **The Long Paddock: A Directory of Travelling Stock Routes and Reserves in NSW** by Rural Lands Protection Board - \$31.00
- **Wet and Wild: A Field Guide to the Freshwater Animals of the Southern Tablelands and High Country** by M Lintermans and W Osborne - \$28.00
- **Where to Find Birds in NE Queensland** by Jo Wieneke - \$16.00.
- **Grassland Flora: A Field Guide for the Southern Tablelands (NSW and ACT)** by David Eddy et al. - \$13.00
- **Our Patch: A Field Guide to the Flora of the ACT Region** - \$12.50
- **The Nestbox Book** by Gould League - \$12.50
- **Woodlands: A Disappearing Landscape** by David Lindenmayer et al - \$34.00
- **Feather and Brush: Three Centuries of Australian Bird Art** by Penny Olsen - \$50.00

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All these items plus COG T-shirts and Polo shirts are available at the monthly meeting sales desk or by contacting Bruce Ramsay via email at barkeramsay@velocitynet.com.au or telephone 02 6294 5881 (after 6.30 pm please)

Avian Whimsy #61 — The Ancients Creep South

They call her a young country, but they lie —

So wrote the great poet Alec Hope, in his powerful and growlingly sardonic *Australia*. It is this ancient essence of the land that provides a good part of its infinite and passionate fascination for me. And yet even in my adult lifetime – which while it started longer ago than I'd prefer doesn't *quite* go back even to the last glaciation – it was still assumed that Australian birds could only be recent spin-offs of Northern Hemisphere groups. Until the second half of the 20th century virtually every small passerine it seemed was lumped with *Sylviidae*, the Old World warblers. Later they were extracted and stuffed into the even bigger grab-bag of *Muscicapidae*, the Old World flycatchers. They still didn't fit, but the taxonomists of the time were determined and then tried *Timaliidae*, the African and Asian (but not Australian) babblers. The Australian robins and fantails were still regarded as Muscicapids as recently as 1983 in Pizzey's first field guide! It seems strange, given that we had had no trouble in seeing Australian mammals and trees as being 'different'; it took the DNA hybridisation work pioneered by Sibley and Ahlquist to shake the blinkers free.



Brown Treecreeper
(*Climacteris picumnus*)

Photo by Ian Fraser

The other day I was watching **Brown Treecreepers** (regionally a threatened sub-species) doing their oblivious best to scuttle a developer's hopes in woodland near Canberra. Yet again I shook my head at the long-lasting orthodoxy that these too were but birdy-come-latelines, outlying members of the family *Certhiidae*, the Northern Hemisphere creepers. Sure they both make a living extracting arthropods from bark crevices, but it's a pretty obvious and ubiquitous niche for species to exploit, and if you're going to be good at it there are some basic requirements, such as long strong toes and a slender down-curved bill. It's not surprising then that northern creepers and Australian treecreepers look somewhat similar, but that's no reason to suppose they are closely related.

In fact, far from being recent arrivals here, it seems that the treecreepers could actually be the most ancient of living Australian passerines; maybe their ancestors even peered down on the development of those most quintessentially venerable Australian passerines, the lyrebirds and scrub-birds. Further, it seems that the lyrebirds are related to the treecreepers. Though it seems counter-

intuitive, given their striking dissimilarities, they have had plenty of time – perhaps as much as 48 million years – to evolve in different directions, deep into very different

specialised lifestyles. This age means for instance that treecreepers long predated the eucalypts on which they now rely. Further, the two genera of treecreepers – *Cormobates*, the White-throated and Papuan Treecreepers, and *Climacteris*, the other five species – also parted company a startlingly long time ago, after just half of their journey through time to the present day. (And half of a number as big as 48 million years still represents a very long time.)

There is one physical suggestion of their great antiquity however, in the unique structure of muscles associated with the syrinx, which is a bird's analogue to a mammal's larynx and vibrating vocal cords, though of course it evolved entirely separately. Located at the bottom of the trachea (the larynx is at the top) where it branches into the two bronchi to the lungs, it relies on air flow to vibrate membranes around a bony sounding box. Because these membranes are at the top of each bronchus, a bird can utilise either one, or both sides simultaneously, producing some extraordinarily subtle variations. It could be of course that the treecreepers more recently developed their distinctive syringeal musculature if they were using it for a particularly tricky vibrato for instance, but it's fair to say that to the (admittedly quite irrelevant) human ear, treecreeper song is actually a bit lacking in creativity. The suggestion is then that the unusual system has simply been around for a very long time.

The long hind toe, or *hallux*, also differs from that of all other passerines, in that it lacks a ligament tying its movement to that of the other toes. This means that it can move independently, seeking the best possible vantage point on the tree trunk or branch, which would be impossible if it could only move in opposition to the front three toes. There is no reason to suppose this is also an ancient trait, but perhaps a vast time enabled its evolution.

There is so much more to these wonderful ancient Australians. Was Edmund Burke thinking of them when he wrote "Well is it known that ambition can creep as well as soar"? And if not, why not? That question, and others, must be held over to another day. — Ian Fraser ianf@pcug.org.au



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COG welcomes the following new members:

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G Shaw, Curtin

N Dyer, Campbell

M Callaghan, Gungahlin

S Tridico, Weston

Next newsletter

April deadline

Wednesday 26 March 2008

Please send, articles, advertisements, updates etcetera to the Editors at
gang-gang@canberrabirds.org.au
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Articles should be less than 500 words (300 for reports of 1-day field trips; except by prior arrangement with the editor.

Photographs (prints or electronic) with or without articles are encouraged and welcomed.

COG info

President

Chris Davey, ph 6254 6324
Email: chris_davey@aapt.net.au

Vice President

Jack Holland, ph 6288 7840 (home)

Treasurer

Lia Battisson ph 6231 0147

Secretary

Sandra Henderson ph 6231 0303
cogoffice@canberrabirds.org.au

Address for correspondence

The Secretary
COG, PO Box 301
Civic Square, ACT 2608

Newsletter distribution
Judy Collett and helpers

Membership inquiries

Sandra Henderson ph 6262 1481 (w)
membership@canberrabirds.org.au
for changed address or other details

Gang-gang editors

Sue Lashko and Greg Ramsay
ph 6286 1564
Email: gang-gang@canberrabirds.org.au

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Editor Canberra Bird Notes

CBN@canberrabirds.org.au



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Canberra Ornithologists Group, Inc.
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