



TOOWOOMBA BIRD OBSERVERS inc.

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'To encourage the observations and study of the birds of the Toowoomba area'

NEWSLETTER No. 218 - MARCH 1994

EDITORIAL:

This month's deluge seems to indicate I know a thing or two about the weather. I know I should be modest about my forecasting ability but really, anyone using a whipper-snipper instead of being out birding should be punished. The grass is now as twice as high and still growing.

In our particular neck of Table Top Estate, we have finally experienced the hatching of young Brush turkeys. Quite independent from birth, I was amazed to see one, still with down on its head, fly into a nearby tree. As well, we still have many Lorikeets, King Parrots, Butcherbirds and a pair of Maned Duck visiting our now full dam.

The piece de resistance, however has been two young Tawny Frogmouths whose insistent wheezy demands to be fed at seemingly any hour of the day and night, has worn a little thin. As these young birds seem to be nearly the size of the parent bird, perhaps peace will once more be found in our neighbourhood.

This newsletter contains Don's continuation of Anne's article on Eyes, Pat's recollections of the Blue-faced Finch and Nicci's recent trip to Jandowae.

TBO FEBRUARY OUTING Murphy's Creek District and Highfields Falls

In the words of John Denver, "Some days are diamonds, some days are stones." The club's outing on the 27 February 1994 won't be remembered as a birding bonanza but rather as a collection of bad luck, mishaps and extremes. After quite a good roll up of new, regular and long-lost members, plus a couple of visitors, we soon struck our first stumbling block: the old change-of-lock-on-the-gate trick! The rigmorale Anne went through to obtain permission to enter the bushland setting of Holmes Railway Station was all to no avail as the key provided by Queensland Railways didn't fit. (Where keys are involved in the future, I will definitely be undertaking a reconnoitre). The long walk into the station was sufficient deterrent (except for Ken and Trent who arrived late and thought we'd gone in) so instead we

headed to the Paradise Creek area north of the Murphy's Creek township where, on previous trips, the likes of Yellow-tufted Honeyeater and Peregrine Falcon were recorded. Outside the Murphy's Creek store, some lucky person scored Eric Dale's binoculars which he accidentally left on the rooftop of his car during a temporary stop to car-pool.

Paradise Creek was a mixture of dearth and death. Birds were few with Lewin's Honeyeater, Spotted Pardalote, White-throated Treecreeper, Leaden Flycatcher and Brown and Buff-rumped Thornbill the only signs of birdlife along the track. A bone-dry creek (despite good recent rain) and many stressed and dead trees bore further testimony to the severity of the drought. Nevertheless, the area boasts beautiful scenery and a good walking track and even Blind Freddy could see its birding potential given favourable circumstances.

Our luck changed at Highfields Falls where there was plenty of activity despite the hour of arrival (10.30am). The area, located at the bottom of Dau Rd which is on the right of the highway as you enter Highfields from Toowoomba, was new to most and we were suitably impressed. A pleasant walk to running water, cascading falls, and plenty of birds along the way - Little lorikeets, Grey Shrike-thrush, Eastern Yellow Robins, Golden Whistlers, Yellow-faced, White-naped, Scarlet and Brown Honeyeaters to name a few of the species that helped swell the species list to 60-odd after such a poor start. Thanks to Dennis Gilbard, a Highfields local and workmate of mine, for showing us this area. There is no doubt those many of those present will be visiting it more often. In fact, if there is anyone interested in surveying the area on a monthly basis, I would be interested in hearing from them.

Michael Atzeni

THE EYES HAVE IT...

In response to Ann's last article regarding birds' eyes, I would like to relate a recent experience of mine concerning the Regent Bowerbird. One morning, on waking to a thick Toowoomba fog and light drizzle, I decided the scene was set for a stroll in Redwood Park. Such days are always great for nature-watching and this day proved no different. Alerted by the bright colours and unusual noises of the male, I was lucky enough find a Regent Bowerbird's bower in open eucalypt scrub with a cover of moderately-thick lantana.

The male was very busy, squeaking and churring, jumping here and there in front of the bower. He was so vivid in his swashbuckling black and gold, his actions so attention-grabbing, that initially I failed to see the drab female sitting quietly in the bower. Delighted at being privy to a genuine courting display, I settled down to watch. For approximately fifteen minutes the male continued his one-man show, dancing in front of the bower, jumping up onto surrounding lantana stalks, circumnavigating the temple, occasionally squeaking and buzzing like a manic wind-up toy. Every now and then he would seize one of his decorations and put it somewhere which, in the heat of the moment, must have seemed more strategic. Several times he ostentatiously placed one of his pretty objects between the motionless female's feet, right on the floor of the bower. Then, with equal ceremony, he'd remove it again. As I watched these proceedings through the spiky branches of the lantana I was conscious that both birds, although apparently unconcerned, were well aware of my close proximity. The ritual seemed to be lasting a very long time, so, afraid that my presence might be a barrier to its natural conclusion, I left them alone.

Returning several hours later to check on progress, I found the bower deserted. This presented an ideal opportunity to have a closer look at its structure and decorations. Being careful not to damage the surrounding vegetation, and employing the style and technique made famous by Rod Hobson on the mudflats at Thorneside, I crawled on my belly through the lantana. The bower was of similar construction to that of the more familiar Satin, although notably smaller with walls no higher than 8-10

centimetres. Of particular interest were the decorations. As Ann mentioned in her February article, the Satin Bowerbird's penchant for blue decorative items is often thought to be associated with their bright blue eyes. Using this logic, the Regent should show a preference for gold or bright yellow items. This bower, however, was decorated primarily with bright blue items including a lolly wrapper, and several pieces of blue plastic. There was also a single fig, greeny but yellowing.

Maybe it is the colour of the sky, rather than the colour of the eyes, which determines preference for bower decoration colour. After all, what lady wouldn't be impressed by a gent who could offer her a piece of the sky? That's my guess anyway.

Don Gaydon

(date of sighting : 12/02/94)

THE BLUE-FACED FINCH

The Blue-faced Finch *Erythrura trichroa* is a rare species in Australia. It is also found in Indonesia, the Pacific Islands and New Guinea (Blakers *et al.* 1984). The Atlas of Australian Birds in its 20 years of recording showed only 31 records. Most observations in Australia are in rainforest areas around the Atherton Tableland region. In conversations with many bird watchers I was able to find out that, although it has been recorded throughout the year, it seems more easily recorded in February. It is then that it leaves the thick rainforest to feed in open areas of seeding grasses.

Since 1981 I had made five trips to northern Queensland in search of this bird without success. When Michael Atzeni and I were there in the winter of 1981 very little was known of the whereabouts of the Blue-faced Finch. But it was not long after this that they were regularly seen on Mount Lewis near Julatten. Three of my trips since then had also been during winter and the fourth, though in summer, had been virtually rained out. It was early in January this year that Terry Reis and myself once again headed north to try our luck. We would have liked to have gone in February instead, but work commitments prevented this.

We had two sites on Mount Lewis to try and it was on 6 January that we visited the first. Local birders suggested that they were not present at the moment as the grass had not yet started to seed and that there was a lot of difference between January and February when it came to seeing the finches. This certainly was the case at site number one and apart from some Red-browed Firetails no other finches were seen. No grass was seeding and after several hours we left despondent.

Though still feeling a bit depressed, we decided that early the next morning we would give site number two a try. Before dawn on 7 January, we started our trek up Mount Lewis. The wind was blowing a gale and rain was threatening and our spirits dropped even further. However the closer we came to the site the more grass we started to see and much of it was seeding. On our arrival, many Red-browed Firetails were seen and our spirits lifted because often the two finches are seen together. At 6:20 am our prayers were answered as a pair of Blue-faced Finches flew across the track in front of us. For forty minutes we watched these magnificent birds. They often fed close to the ground for half a minute before flying high into the nearby trees and disappearing into the dense rainforest from whence they returned several minutes later. This behaviour was repeated several times before our departure. Their arrival was easy to detect each time because of their distinctive call. It was however impossible to ascertain if it was the same pair of birds we were seeing each time.

This was also a nice species to get as my 600th bird.

References.

Blakers.M., Davies, S.J.J.F. and Reilly, P.N. (1984) The Atlas of Australian Birds. RAOU.

Pat McConnell

LEND ME AN ARTIST

We are currently toying with a funding application for upgrading the Waterbird Habitat information board which the club donated as part of the Bicentenary project. If there is anyone out there who is a good graphic wildlife artist or who knows of one that would be interested in helping with a design then please ring me on 076 392761.

Michael Atzeni

ONLY NINETY MINUTES AWAY

At the end of February I received a call from Terry Pacey. He had, on one of his birding forays to the north of Jandowae, discovered quite a large contingent of Diamond Doves - an unusual sighting in the district. Would I like to come out and see them?

I made the ninety minute trip to Jandowae on a glorious, golden Sunday morning through the crops and pastures made lush by the recent heavy rain in the Dalby area, to join Terry, Mike McGoldrick and Malcolm and Marj Wilson (of Dalby WPSQ) for what turned out to be a very good birding day.

As we left town one of our first sightings was four Ground Cuckoo-shrikes, calling softly as they flew overhead to perch briefly at the top of a tall eucalypt. Later in the day we encountered three of the same species in a fallow cultivation paddock.

At this juncture let me explain that birding in the Jandowae district on a Sunday morning is very different to birding in suburbia or the rural areas, close to Toowoomba. In six hours of birding along the highways and byways of the area we only once encountered another mechanical vehicle - a four-wheeled ag bike driven by an engaging adolescent female. Most of our birding was done along the roadside, where the remanent brigalow and belah scrub was alive with birds, and the grassy verges were host to an astonishing variety of butterfly species.

It was fun - with no intrusion from the outside world into the serious pursuit of each species for identification and admiration; and we did locate quite a number of species, the most prolific being, Singing, Striped and Spiny-cheeked Honeyeaters and Fairy-wrens, whole families of which inhabit territories every few hundred metres.

Just before mid-day we drove along the stretch of road inhabited by the Diamond Doves and ate our lunch in the shade of the belahs, as we listened to their slightly metallic cooing. As we strolled along the road after lunch, the diminutive Doves rose from the edges where they were feeding (mainly in pairs) to perch on nearby dead branches only a few metres from us, thus affording brilliant views of their soft grey plumage, scattered with "diamonds" and their red eye ring. We also paused to watch much paired synchronised flying in and out of the bushes - pre-nuptial flight? We thought it might be, though we didn't observe any nesting activity. Our attention was diverted from the Doves by the flight of a pair of Blue Bonnets from the grass to a refuge in a brigalow clump.

Having reached the point where the frrrr of speeding wings elicited the response "just another Diamond Dove", we moved on to the Town Dam and an hour of bird watching that was pure magic.

The dam is quite low now and is surrounded by a vast expanse of tall grass, reeds and herbage, which is home to flocks of Finches, Fairy-wrens and Thornbills. At one stage we stood motionless on the path to watch a male Plum-headed Finch gorge on a swaying seed-head, so close that binoculars were superfluous. Confusion reigned as we focused our binoculars on the trees edging the dam wall. So many birds were present in each small shrub that it was difficult to be sure we were discussing the salient features of the same bird.

I have not tallied our species count but it was in excess of sixty, even after starting at the ultra-civilised hour of 9:00am. Thanks, Terry. Your generosity in sharing and the co-operation of the birds of Jandowae ensured we had a memorable day.

Nicci Thompson

MONITORING REDWOOD PARK THE SCIENTIFIC WAY

The TBO has been approached by Karen Smith of the Department of Environment and Heritage (DEH) regarding possible involvement in a survey of the avian species composition before, during and after the clearing of privet and lantana from areas within the escarpment parks. The clearing is being undertaken by the Friends of the Escarpment Parks and it was they who initiated the proposal. The survey would probably need to run for 3-5 years at this stage before any scientific analysis would be worthwhile.

Our club has regularly recorded the presence/absence (but not abundance) of bird species in Redwood Park but has not done so for the other escarpment parks such as Jubilee and Picnic Point as they are less interesting from our perspective. Given the many species including rarities such as the Black-breasted Button-quail, Masked Owl and Powerful Owl recorded in Redwood and our reluctance to visit the other parks the Executive felt the proposal should be considered for Redwood alone.

After a meeting with the interested parties, the club has agreed in principal to assist. The survey will involve counts along transects in various areas of the park where clearing is proposed. DEH will provide the technical support to ensure scientific rigour is maintained. They are currently awaiting some literature on survey techniques. Further discussion on how we will approach the survey is pending the receipt of this information.

Anyone interested in contributing to this survey can contact me. The survey provides the opportunity for TBO members to provide useful data and, in doing so, the results will hopefully enlighten the community with respect to the somewhat controversial clearing of privet and lantana, particularly the latter.

Michael Atzeni

NEW MEMBER

A friendly TBO welcome to Mark Weaver, 8 Merrol St, Highfields, 4350

**** COMING EVENTS ****

March 1994 Outing :

Location: Coastal Wader Outing, Brisbane
Assembly: Lytton Rd, opp. Sewage Treatment Plant
Date: 27/03/94 8:30 am
Leader: Rod Hobson (074) 627 364

Info: This month's outing, in line with previous years, will be held around the foreshores of Moreton Bay, looking for waders. So if you're not so hot on wader identification or that section of your field guide is the forgotten part or sadly lacking in ticks then here's a perfect opportunity to rectify the situation. You will have access to a telescope and will see many individuals sporting spectacular breeding plumage as they prepare to depart for the likes of Mongolia and Siberia to breed.

April Outing :

Location: Lake Broadwater, Dalby
Date: 24/04/94
Leader: Michael Atzeni (076) 392761

Info: Given the recent rain and Nicci's account of her February trip to nearby Jandowae (in this newsletter) this should prove to be an interesting and worthwhile outing. More in the next newsletter after I've consulted with our man-on-the-spot, Terry Pacey, closer to the date.

Theatre Night:

Info: To be advised. This a very good fund raiser for the club so come along and have a great night all you closet thespians.

*** NOTICE ***

Please remember that **SUBSCRIPTIONS** are due on 01 November at the rates shown on the front page.

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