

X WENS

"To encourage the observation and study
of the birds of the Toowoomba area."

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NEWS-SHEET No. 42 - JUNE, 1979.

It is always pleasant to refresh birding friendships. Bill and Eileen Jolly received a letter from Sue Elmes recently. Then further to this Sue was able to join in the recent Field Day to Ravensbourne. Sue and Phillip have been busy settling into their new surroundings but have kept up with their birding. They attended the Easter camp-out of the Q.O.S. and spoke glowingly of the area in which it took place. This is a site in the Stanthorpe district and it is hoped that our Club may investigate the area on a camp led by Sue and Phillip in the not too distant future.

As advised last issue a permit has not been granted for our Black-shouldered Kite survey. However the Executive understands that John Coman is considering a Club survey involving monthly returns from members who submit a regular checklist. It would probably take the form of a separate return devoted to each individual sighting of the species. Base line information could be built up which would indicate movements of the bird within our local study area. Members will be invited to participate when details are fully developed.

Readers of this journal will be familiar with the request for contributions of items of interest to these pages. While the resulting input could never be described as a flood, each month we achieve what we feel is a satisfying News-sheet. As an example of the sort of item which would be valuable there are currently two questions, posed recently, which should attract interesting answers.

One concerns Blue-faced Honeyeaters (Ann Shore, News-sheet No. 40 - April, 1979) and the other has to do with the flocking of Australian Magpie-larks (Mike and Elizabeth Russell, News-sheet No. 34 - October, 1978). Research by interested members should provide contributions to the News-sheet and generally advance our collective knowledge.

Final details of the Mudjimba camp-out are advised elsewhere in this issue. Hope you will be there.

Ron Hopkinson,
Editor.

DEATH OF A DABCHICK.

On Sunday, May 20th. a solitary Australian Pelican (*Pelecanus conspicillatus*) was swimming on Gatton's Apex Lake amid an assortment of Eurasian Coot (*Fulica atra*),

(cont/d.)

DEATH OF A DABCHICK (cont/d.)

Grey Teal (*Anas gibberifrons*) and Australasian Grebe (*Tachybaptus novaehollandiae*). A Grebe was swimming about three metres in front of the Pelican. The Grebe dived and as it did so the Pelican moved quickly to the spot and plunged its bill, head and neck underwater. It as quickly resurfaced and the gular pouch contained a struggling bulge.

But it was not a fish. It was the Grebe. This was evident as a pointed wing with white under surface and an olive green leg and foot protruded from the side of the Pelican's bill. These withdrew but reappeared several times during the ensuing struggle. There is no doubt that the Pelican, inadvertently or otherwise, had taken a Grebe.

In an apparent effort to swallow the catch the Pelican several times thrust its bill downwards into the water and then arced it upwards vertically in a movement which forced the bulge towards the throat. This action was repeated during the five or six minutes of the struggle and eventually the bulge of the Grebe disappeared from the gular pouch into the throat. One feather (possibly a primary) broke away to settle on the surface of the water but the Grebe was gone.

The Pelican swam for a couple of minutes afterwards then took to the air and landed on the far side of the lake where it squatted to rest and presumably allow its digestive system to deal with feathers instead of scales.

Subsequent research has not disclosed any record of Grebes being part of a Pelican's normal diet, although a record exists of a Heron taking a Little Grebe at a fenland dyke in England in November, 1968. A question arises as to whether the Pelican made a "mistake" and took the Grebe for a fish. In which case would it be capable of realising a "mistake" and releasing the Grebe? Or does a Pelican simply dart at anything moving underwater which is about the size that instinct tells it is food? If this is so then Grebes may be taken more often than we realize. It would also probably happen that a Pelican could take a tortoise. At least take it into the pouch. Swallowing a tortoise would, I should think, be a different proposition to a Grebe. Whether this particular Pelican knew the difference between a fish and bird it did not at any time during the episode open its bill far enough for the Grebe to have any chance to escape.

I would be most interested to hear from other members if they have ever witnessed anything similar or have any thoughts to offer on this.

Ron Hopkinson.

ACTING LIKE A STUNNED MULLET.

A newspaper cutting contributed by the Corbin family tells of a Gatton man playing golf at Buderim recently when he was "dive-bombed" by a live mullet. A one and a half pound mullet grazed his arm as it fell from the sky and made a half inch indentation in the ground.

The fish was still wriggling and bore three talon marks. Other golfers looked up and saw a Sea Eagle overhead. Apparently the fish wriggled free from the Eagle's grip, but unfortunately the golf course is two and a half miles inland - a bit far for a mullet to wriggle, especially a stunned mullet.

The golfer was put off his game by the incident and did not return a birdie or an eagle. What the careless Sea Eagle thought about the affair is (perhaps as well) not recorded.

Ron Hopkinson.

AN EASTER INTERLUDE.

It must be left to a bird-watcher to laud the attributes of Nudgee Beach and Cribb Island to anyone visiting Brisbane. You won't find them on a blue arrow tour. These two locales adjoin one another, lying on the northern outskirts of the city and front onto the waters of Moreton Bay. Nundah Creek runs into the western end of Nudgee Beach and Serpentine Creek wends itself onto the extensive mangrove and mud flats that encompass Cribb Island. Nudgee Beach Road and Cribb Island Road lead to their respective destinations from a common junction at the rear of the Nudgee golf links. Old gaffers will tell you that these roads once had macadamised surfaces and even now the attuned eye may discern the occasional "bommies" of a bitumenous type upon the road surface. The route to our destination is the first travail overcome.

Having finally arrived at either locality and with a "view halloo" tottering on your lips, head straightway for the mud. The locals are a cliquish lot, the "Cribbies" being especially xenophobic, so remain completely pukka when regailed by such platitudes as, "hey! get on the dude with the binoculars". (Some hesitation may be spent in pondering the lot of your fellow man, but as in similar situations with marauding hyaenas, it is best to keep moving.) Nimbly dodging broken bottles, skirting the cadavers of derelict cars, and running the gauntlet of the occasional trail bike, eventually a place of quietitude can be arrived at. To stop and birdwatch. Your tribulations will be warranted. Little nooks away from the general stir abound with littorallife and despite the slow decrepitation of the area it is an environ of birdy bliss. Here is my list from a two hour sojourn in the area, this afternoon, April 16, 1979.

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|------------------------|----------------------------|
| Australian Pelican | Feral Pigeon |
| Little Black Cormorant | Spotted Turtle-dove |
| Pied Cormorant | Crested Pigeon |
| Little Pied Cormorant | Scaly-breasted Lorikeet |
| White-faced Heron | Sacred Kingfisher |
| Cattle Egret | Collared Kingfisher |
| Great Egret | Welcome Swallow |
| Sacred Ibis | Fairy Martin |
| Straw-necked Ibis | Magpie-lark |
| Chestnut Teal | Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike |
| Brahminy Kite | Mangrove Warbler |
| Australian Kestrel | Willie Wagtail |
| Buff-banded Rail | Silvereye |
| Masked Lapwing | Brown Honeyeater |
| Mongolian Dotterel | Lewin Honeyeater |
| Eastern Golden Plover | Nutmeg Mannikin |
| Eastern Curlew | House Sparrow |
| Tattler (sp.?) | English Starling |
| Red-necked Stint | Common Mynah |
| Bar-tailed Godwit | Spangled Drongo |
| Black-winged Stilt | White-breasted Woodswallow |
| Silver Gull | Pied Butcherbird |
| Caspian Tern | Australian Magpie |
| Gull-billed Tern | Torresian Crow. |

The Buff-banded Rail had fallen victim to a vehicle along the approaches to Cribb Island. (Apparently it didn't have the presence of mind to throw itself into one of the available pot-holes.) Some of the Mongolian Dotterels displayed the red-brown nape and broad breast band of breeding birds.

Rod Hobson.

* SORTING THEM OUT - WRENS.

The dramatic colours of the breeding males of the three local representatives of the fairy-wren group proclaim their identities to us. The distinctive black and crimson regalia of the Red-backed Fairy-wren (Malurus melanocephalus) renders him unmistakable among the trio, and although the bright blue crown and face, and the deep blue/black breast of the Superb Fairy-wren (M. cyaneus) is shared also by the Variiegated Fairy-wren (M. lamberti) the individuality of the Variiegated is readily confirmed by the bold swathe of chestnut/russett which he bears across his shoulders.

I don't feel that there is any need to detail here the plumages of these easily recognised males. Slater's Passerine Field Guide illustrates them well. It might, however, be of some value to point out that that volume shows as separate species several wrens which are considered in the R.A.O.U. Checklist as geographic variations of the same species. Thus, the Variiegated Fairy-wren is represented in Slater's Guide by Malurus lamberti, M. assimilis, M. amabilis and M. dulcis.

But it is only the breeding male who sports such finery and the sorting-out of wrens becomes much more problematical when we turn to the family parties of more non-descript brownish wrens which comprise adults and young, both male and female.

The non-breeding adult male is in fact for the most part as brown in colouring as the female. (As the immature wrens generally resemble the females I shall not be discussing them separately). If we assume, generously, that approximately one quarter of fledged wrens are adult males, and that perhaps half of these are breeding males, the highest expected incidence of coloured males in a party would be only one bird in eight. That proportion would clearly be lower at this time of year. It is not surprising that we encounter so many brown wrens for every easily recognisable male we meet.

The non-breeding males of all three species may be separated from their own females by their black bills (females have brown) and the presence in females of the Variiegated and Superb Fairy-wrens of a russett or chestnut patch around the eye, and in the female Red-backed of a yellowish patch below the eye. The major question however is "Can we reliably identify the species of a brown wren?"

It is sometimes said that the secret lies in the colour of the tail. But I regret to report that this process will only take us so far. It would be fair to say that a blue/black tail on a brown wren is most likely to belong to a male Superb Fairy-wren, the male 'brown' Variiegated having a dull blue/green tail and the male 'brown' Red-backed Fairy-wren a brown tail. The female 'brown' wrens tend to have brownish tails, although the Readers Digest book suggests a blue tail for the Variiegated. I suggest one should beware Slater's comment on p.124 that the Red-backed female

"differs from all other female wrens in lack of blue in the tail" which is contradicted on p.118 where the tail of the female Superb Blue is simply described as "brown". Macdonald too refers to the tail of the Superb Blue as "drab brown".

Differences in tail colour appear to be more reliable when considering male 'brown' wrens rather than females, which allows me to propose the following simple key as a starting point for members who are not familiar with the fairy-wrens:

<u>Non-br. males.</u>		<u>Females.</u>
tail blue/black	<u>Superb Fairy-wren</u>	} face with reddish patch.
tail dull blue	<u>Variiegated Fairy-wren</u>	
tail brown	<u>Red-backed Fairy-wren</u>	yellow patch below the eye.

The most reliable base from which to resolve questions such as those concerning the colouring of the tails of female wrens is of course that of experience gained through personal observation, and I suggest that we could all advance our understanding simply by looking more carefully and more often at the 'brown' wrens.

Bill Jolly.

References.

FRITH H. (Cons. Ed.), Reader's Digest Complete Book of Australian Birds, Reader's Digest, MACDONALD J.D., Birds of Australia, Reed, Sydney, 1973. Sydney, 1976.
 SLATER P.J., A Field Guide to Australian Birds, Passerines, Rigby, Adelaide 1974.

DAY REPORT - 27.5.79. - RAVENSBOURNE.

For this time of year Pigott's car park was warm, sunny and amazingly without wind. We held high hopes of a windless day at Ravensbourne and departed looking forward to a good days birding. The first stop, a dam on the way to Ravensbourne, yielded sightings of Pacific Black Duck, a Little Pied Cormorant and a group of grebes - (after discussion it was decided that they were Australasian Grebes not Hoary-headed). A large group of Maned Duck (about 60) grazed in the paddock beside the dam while a Pacific Heron circled heavily overhead. On the roadside a Willie Wagtail wagged his tail and Superb Fairy-wrens and Variegated Fairy-wrens were seen.

The Ravensbourne Water and Gravel Reserve yielded most of our sightings for the day. The rainforest on either side of the road was alive with calls. The only difficulty was to find something that sat still long enough to identify. Emerald Doves, Scaly-breasted Lorikeets, a Golden Whistler, Striated Thornbills, Yellow Robins, White-throated Treecreepers, Spotted and Striated Pardalote and Olive-backed Orioles were seen while a Brush Cuckoo called and Tree Martins dived about above the forest canopy. As we were about to move on, we noticed a fruiting Clematis vine hiding a large bird. After prolonged observation the bird revealed itself - a Paradise Rifle Bird! After this sighting the convoy moved off down the road. At a turn-off we had to wait for Bill who had been detained by a group of six Eastern Shrike-tits in the same clump of vine.

A dirt track from the Reserve, which most of the group did not know existed, brought us out at the top of the National Park into the wind. The park was very quiet in the way of birds, not people or motorbikes, and when we had despaired of seeing anything else - more Rifle Birds and an Australian Brush Turkey which walked through the middle of the group.

While we lunched in the sun a lone Wedge-tailed Eagle soared high above the forest and Yellow Robins flitted through the dappled light at the edge of the bottom picnic area. Although we did not see many of the birds one expects to see at Ravensbourne it was a very enjoyable morning's birding.

John Coman.

Species List - Ravensbourne area - 27.5.79.

Australasian Grebe	Crested Shrike-tit
Little Pied Cormorant	Golden Whistler
Pacific Heron	Grey Fantail
Pacific Black Duck	Willie Wagtail
Maned Duck	Superb Fairy-wren
Wedge-tailed Eagle	Variegated Fairy-wren
Australian Kestrel	White-browed Scrubwren
Australian Brush Turkey	Striated Thornbill
White-headed Pigeon	Varied Sittella
Feral Pigeon	White-throated Treecreeper
Brown Cuckoo-dove	Lewin's Honeyeater
Emerald Dove	Spotted Pardalote
Galah	Striated Pardalote
Scaly-breasted Lorikeet	Common Starling
Crimson Rosella	Olive-backed Oriole
Pale-headed Rosella	Paradise Rifle Bird
Brush Cuckoo	Australian Magpie-lark
Laughing Kookaburra	Grey Butcherbird
Welcome Swallow	Pied Butcherbird
Tree Martin	Pied Currawong
Eastern Yellow Robin	Torresian Crow.

MEMBERS' BIRD NOTES.

Australasian Gannet. 22.5.79. Flinders Reef. RGH.
Rufous Night Heron. 5.4.79. Cooby Creek. DN.
Sacred Ibis. 21.5.79. "Shorelands", Withcott. AHS. JAS.
Black Kite. 13.5.79. Warrego Highway, Withcott. EJ. WJ.
Brown Goshawk. 22/25.5.79. Toowoomba Railway Yards. REH.
Grey Goshawk. 7.5.79. Camel's Hump. RGH.
Little Eagle. 26.5.79. Ocean St. GC. JEC.
Spotted Harrier. 19.5.79. Near Cambooya. KF. BF.
Marsh Sandpiper. 1.5.79. Luggage Point. RGH.
Southern Boobook. 20.5.79. "Shorelands", Withcott. AHS. JAS.
White-backed Swallow. 20.5.79. "Ringmere", Withcott. EJ. WJ.
Rose Robin. 20.5.79. Murphy's Creek. DN.
Tawny Grassbird. 5.4.79. Cooby Creek. DN.
Large-billed Scrubwren. 20.5.79. Murphy's Creek. DN.
Striped Honeyeater. 31.5.79. "Shorelands", Withcott. AHS.
Blue-faced Honeyeater. 19.4.79. Esther St. DN.
New Holland Honeyeater. 13.5.79. Noosa Heads. RGH.
White-cheeked Honeyeater. 13.5.79. Noosa Heads. RGH.
Eastern Spinebill. 23.5.79. Bass St. REH.
Mistletoebird. 26.5.79. Ocean St. JEC. JCC.
Dusky Woodswallow. 19/21.5.79. "Ringmere", Withcott. EJ. WJ.

GC: Graham Corbin. JEC: Jim Corbin. JCC: Jane Corbin. KF: Kath Fowler.
BF: Brian Fowler. RGH: Rod Hobson. REH: Ron Hopkinson. EJ: Eileen Jolly.
WJ: Bill Jolly. DN: David Newlands. AHS: Ann Shore. JAS: John Shore.

JUNE FIELD TRIP TO MUDJIMBA. WEEKEND 15th-18th JUNE, 1979.

Arrangements for our June camp-out at Mudjimba have now been finalised and several members have indicated that they will be attending.

I hope to be setting up camp on the Friday evening at about 8 p.m. so members travelling either on the Saturday morning or afternoon should have no trouble locating us whenever they arrive.

The weekend should be an easygoing mixture of birdwatching and just relaxing at the coast. There are several particularly interesting spots to visit, including the sandbanks of the Maroochy estuary where we should find at least five or six species of tern as well as a wide variety of waders, so I'm proposing just one 'group walk' each day to check out some of these locations, - apart from that we will just take it as it comes.

If you're not familiar with Mangrove Honeyeaters, Mangrove Warblers, Mangrove Kingfishers and Mangrove Herons - now's your chance.

The camp-site is both civilised and amenable from a naturalist's point of view. All modern facilities are available, but we also have a paperbark forest to camp next to, and we're allowed to make our own bonfire!

For those who haven't contacted me yet, or who might be able to come for a day over the weekend, Mudjimba is on the North shore of the Maroochy Estuary and can be reached via Nambour and Bli Bli. An easy drive from Toowoomba via Esk. The campsite is sign-posted. Come if you can!

Bill Jolly.

PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED.

The Bird Observer, May, 1979.

BIRDS (The RSPB Magazine), Spring, 1979.