

The Drongo

Number 124 December 2012



South Africa

Spring in the
Air

Bird Counts



FROM THE PRESIDENT

I am constantly amazed at just how much this club does for the future of our birds. I seem to always be telling you what a busy time it has been. It is no different this time around. Since the many boxes of The Birds of the Rainforest book have arrived we have been working hard at distributing sets of books to schools throughout our region and delivering classroom presentations to several schools. The feedback from these schools has been very positive. At least four of the schools are using our previous books for 'reading books' as the kids are so interested in them. What a great result! Not only are the kids improving their reading skills but they are learning more and more about birds and the need to look after the environment. Certainly makes the hard work well worthwhile. Thanks to the Townsville City Council for grant to produce the book and develop and deliver the school presentations. Thanks also to The Wet Tropics Management Authority for the grant to produce an extra 2000 copies of the book for distribution to a further 60 schools.

George and Teresa Baker are finally leaving us. We've known for a long time roughly when they would depart Townsville but it seems to have crept up on us in such a hurry. BirdLife Townsville wishes to thank George and Teresa for their marvellous contribution towards ensuring the future of our birds and also for their friendship. We wish them happy travels around Australia for the next couple of years and a wonderful life back in the UK. The really good news is that George finally got to see Little Curlews at long last! It would have been such a shame for Townsville BirdLifers to miss out on that great occasion.

Before we know it the Annual General Meeting will be upon us. Nomination Forms for Committee membership will very soon be posted on the website. To keep a healthy club like ours moving on it is always beneficial to have 'new blood' on the committee. Have a think about it over the holiday period and consider stepping up to make that extra commitment to the club. We are also in need of more Educators to keep up with our school and community presentations. The only requirement to be an educator is to want to do it. No one will be thrown in at the deep end. There are lots of little jobs that can be done to support the presenters while gaining the confidence to do the presentations yourself. It is very rewarding and can be a whole lot of fun.

Unfortunately, family commitments will prevent me from attending the Christmas Party, which will also be George and Teresa's farewell. I hope you all have a great night. I wish you all a Happy Christmas and a Happy and Healthy New Year with lots of great birding experiences.

Janet Robino

YOUR COMMITTEE

President: Janet Robino
Vice-President: Alf Acton
Secretary: Warren Charlton
Treasurer: Norm Rains
Newsletter Editor: Annette Sutton
Conservation Officer: Peter Valentine
Education Officer: Elna Kerswell
Committee Members: Marleen Acton Ian Boyd Pat Charlton



ANNUAL P.I.P. COUNT AT MISSION BEACH

On the weekend of 10th, 11th November, a number of Birders travelled to Mission Beach for the Annual Count of Pied Imperial Pigeons which fly from their feeding grounds to their roosting/nesting places on some of the off-shore Islands.

This important event was organized by Trish Pontynen from Townsville and the counters came from Cooktown, Mareeba, Cairns, Yungaburra, Townsville and locally (Tully, Mission Beach and Innisfail). At 1.30 p.m. Julia Hazel, who is representing BirdLife Northern Queensland, as a researcher doing a Monitoring Project on P.I.P.s presented an educational Slide Show and talk. This was well attended and appreciated by all present. Beth Snewin had taken up 3 of the Tropical Museum's P.I.P. mounts, so everyone could have a very close look at their subtle colouring.



By 4p.m. everyone was stationed at their assigned beaches – Kurrimine, Garner's, Wongaling and South Mission. Julia, Beth and Carol spent their 3 hours wandering around the trees in the parks near the Information Centre, trying to find nests to determine if any birds were actually breeding on-shore. They were unsuccessful. No nests could be found. It was pleasing to note that considerably more birds were seen this year than last year when

the effects of Cyclone Yasi were very evident. I think the total count was approximately 2800, but I haven't checked this with Trish. By 7pm, we were gathering at the Wongaling Resort Hotel for our Christmas Dinner get-together. It was a pleasant surprise to find that a huge Bistro-type, delicious meal of four courses was to be had for \$12.50, if you had a Seniors Card. A great place to dine and we all ate our fill.

On our return trip to Townsville on Sunday, Beth and I called at Lucinda to check on nests there, as in previous years, we had seen many P.I.P.s in that area, right on dusk. We enjoyed our sandwich lunch in one of the many clean, picnic table sheds then walked around the surrounding area for an hour. We found two nests with a parent bird sitting on them and one empty nest from which the young one had just fledged, as it was sitting quietly by a parent's side further over in the branches. Beth has reported these to Julia, so she can add the information to her research. Altogether a very pleasant weekend enjoying the great outdoors, the P.I.P.s and the delightful company of other birders.

There is a website – www.pipwatch.net that is worth checking to help Julia and John Winter (a partner in the research), as they would dearly like everybody who sees any nesting activity at all, whether successful or not, to register it on that website. They have many nesting reports from Cairns, but few from Townsville. If you need any further information please contact Julia by email: Julia.hazel@jcu.edu.au

Elna Kerswell

LONDON PARAKEETS

On a recent visit to London we took the train to Richmond to visit the Deer Park - a wonderful natural park where Red and Fallow Deer roam freely. It was a very enjoyable day out and included a pub lunch, only spoiled by seeing some young men harrassing the deer.



I was really surprised to see a flock of what seemed to be tropical birds flying around. I did not have any binoculars but relied upon a web search on my phone. It seems that they are Ring Necked (or Rose Necked) Parakeets, *Psittacula krameri*, originally from India and descended from released or escaped birds. They looked completely at home and apparently there are flocks not just in Richmond but other parts of London and Surrey.

Goodness knows how they are faring now as it becomes colder and darker - I had to fly home!

Julie Walder

A BIRDER'S WANDERINGS IN AFRICA¹

Research at the Museum of Tropical Queensland sometimes requires international collaborations and I have had the very good fortune to have ongoing projects with South African colleagues that allow me to make annual visits to this fascinating and spectacular country. An added bonus is that, as in Australia, much of our research takes place in national parks. Weekends are usually 'my time' on these trips; I like to devote the time to 'safari'.

South Africa has a rich and diverse avifauna, with 725 resident and regular migrant species (total 858 species). With a land area of 1.2 Mkm² it is significantly smaller than Queensland (1.85 Mkm²), which has a non-vagrant bird list of 575 species (total 636 species). It is more than the impressive diversity that makes South Africa of great interest and also challenging for an Australian birder. As is always the case for new territory, there are unfamiliar groups of birds that we don't get in Australia that are really great to see, such as the woodpeckers, barbets, turacos, hornbills, shrikes and weavers to name a few. A number of groups also have far higher diversity in South Africa than in Australia, notably sunbirds (15 species), bee-eaters (six species), starlings (15 species). LBJs—the cisticolas (15 species), larks (26 species), and pipits (17 species)—are seriously intimidating. Even with the help of the Sasol 'Guide to the LBJs of South Africa' (book and CD) and a camera the LBJ families are difficult, and many remain a mystery except for the closest sightings. Raptors are another group that achieve great diversity (a whopping 45 species), their diversity partly the result of a significant number of Boreal migrants—



Ground Hornbill

which makes for marvellous raptor watching.

The greatest diversity of birds in South Africa is to be found in the north-eastern part of the country stretching from Kwa-Zulu Natal (KZN) to Limpopo Province bordering with Mozambique and Zimbabwe. KZN has several excellent national parks. In 2011 I travelled from the Drakensberg Mountains, to the mid-altitude parks at Ithala and Hluhluwe–iUmfolozi, then through to lowland open forest and swamps at Mkuze and the extensive wetlands and moist coastal forests at iSimangaliso (to name a few) at St Lucia. All of these parks offer great birding, and Mkuze is noted as a 'must go' destination with more than 450 recorded species. Another essential destination in the extreme northeast is Africa's largest national park, Kruger National Park, a tremendously rewarding place for birds.

Major habitats in southern Africa are the bushveldt (savannah) and grasslands and their associated vleis (shallow wetlands). and the western regions of South Africa are largely arid, eventually bordering on the deserts of Namibia. These open low-rainfall woodlands are superficially similar to the open woodlands around the Townsville area, and the birding is easy as this harsh terrain teems with birds (as well as day-active mammals). Adding to the overall diversity is that much of the inland is



Black-bellied Bustard

a plateau, between 1000 and 2000 metres in altitude with associated high-country species.

There is so much to see that is 'new' and exciting that it is difficult to pick out the highpoints. There is great birding to be had everywhere one goes, from the suburbs that are effectively artificial green forests in the dry country to the parks and reserves. Kruger National Park is a massive park, and one could return repeatedly without running out of new sights. Some of my favourite birds there have been the hornbills, with six species in the park, but most spectacular is the huge and endangered Southern Ground Hornbill. Bustards and Korhaans are also favourites of mine—the Kori Bustard is the largest of all bustards, but I like to see the smaller species such as the Black-bellied Bustard and Northern Black Korhaan. There are several species of *Vanellus* Lapwings (or plovers) such as the White-winged Lapwing, while the Crowned Lapwing and Blacksmith Lapwing occur everywhere—at Mkuze I was delighted to see the Senegal Lapwing. Mousebirds are uniquely African, and for some reason I have always found these entertaining to watch—there is something about the way they "scurry" through thornbush and other vegetation, seemingly indifferent to how scuffed up their feathers become. Kruger is possibly the

¹ Apologies for the title, stolen (and corrupted) from the great naturalist and hunter Frederick Courtney Selous (1851–1917), *A Hunter's Wanderings in Africa*.

premier region for raptors, with a diverse array of both resident and migrant eagles, vultures, *Accipiter* hawks and falcons. My most memorable raptor viewing was at a Suikersbosrand Nature Reserve, a small park close to Johannesburg, where I saw a massed swarm of Amur Falcons, gathering before migrating north—there was more than 100 of these, in the distance appearing like large swallows, a sight we don't see in Australia.

This year I had the opportunity to visit South Africa's newest national park, Mokala, southwest of the diamond town of Kimberley. Mokala birding was not as busy as some of the northeastern parks, with remarkably few raptors other than thrush-sized Pygmy Falcon (one being resident in the camp) and Pale Chanting Goshawk. From my point of view it was interesting because it lies at the start of transition to the Kalahari, and there are more 'dry country' species, such as Burchell's Sandgrouse, Short-toed Rock-thrush, chats, Kalahari Scrub-robin, Namaqua Dove and beautiful finches such as the Violet-eared Waxbill and Green-winged Ptylia, as well giving me the chance to work on the numerous lark species. Swallow-tailed Bee-eater was a particular highlight.

Just on the very edge of Kimberley is the roadside Kampfers Dam, home to South Africa's largest concentration of Lesser Flamingo (with a few Greater Flamingo also present). This is an inspiring sight, massed thousands of these spectacular birds packed tightly together. There is more than the flamingos as the lake had nine duck species, three species of grebe and the immediately adjacent flooded paddocks between the lake and the main road were rich with herons (Grey Heron, Squacco Heron), Glossy Ibis, five species of swallow, three species of swift, fourteen species of shorebird including Pied Avocet and a variety of bush birds.



White-backed Mousebird

A different point of interest to the visitor is the variety of conspicuous nests that can be seen. Weaver birds are so named for their nest building skills. Many species build precisely shaped species-specific nests. Loose 'colonies' may be

built over water and next to habitations; these colonies may be single or mixed species. Others such as the Sociable Weaver build colonial nests of truly impressive proportions.

Coastal birding in the evergreen forests, such as at Tsitsikamma (southeast) and St Lucia (northeast) offers a different experience, with species such as the African Crowned Eagle, Knysna Turaco and Blue-mantled Crested Flycatcher; on the coast itself African Oystercatcher, Giant Kingfisher and Pied Kingfisher. At Cape Town, surely one of the most

spectacular ocean-side cities in the world, one gets southern endemics, there is the special fynbos habitat with Orange-breasted Sunbird and in the hills the stunning Malachite Sunbird; on the coast Grey-headed Gulls are replaced by Hartlaub's Gull. At a few locations one can see African Penguins, and if one has seen enough of the African bush (unlikely!) then there is the Cape Town Pelagics, which being on the Southern Ocean is both challenging (1-metre wave against a 3-metre swell) and rewarding.



Red-billed Hornbill

While I was in Cape Town this year I had the opportunity to visit West Coast National Park Langebaan Lagoon at the Saldanha Estuary, famous for its spring flowers. While the flowers were in full bloom, the weather was dire on the day, but despite that there were many good species seen, such as Grey-backed Sparrow Lark and Cape Long-billed Lark and abundant Cape Spurfowl. The high point of that day was not a bird but a cat, a beautiful Caracal.

I have hugely enjoyed birding in South Africa. Roads are mostly excellent, park accommodation is either excellent, in a great setting or both, the food is good, and ground costs are generally relatively cheap. In many parks one is not allowed out of the vehicle, which can be frustrating and means that getting good photos of small active birds such as finches or sunbirds is near impossible. Parks without large 'risky' mammals (i.e. elephant, lion, buffalo, rhinoceros) often have walking trails, and walking through the bush with megafauna is a wonderful experience—an afternoon run with Wildebeest, Impala and Baboon watching is special. The hospitality of my hosts is always superb and is something in which South Africans take great pride. I am definitely impatient for my next visit and to explore new areas of this great country.

Niel Bruce

Story and Photographs



Crowned Lapwing

SPRINGTIME AT JOLEKA

Our 2 ha property on the banks of the Upper Bohle River is a haven for birds and we have identified 154 species on or flying over Joleka (the latest two additions this year being Black-shouldered Kite and Satin Flycatcher).

We are used to seeing around 30 species most mornings as part of our regular 20 minute surveys for the Atlas and have now seen many species nesting here also. This year the spring nesting has been outstanding although it could be that my semi-retired status has allowed me to see many more nests than in previous years.

By the first day of spring we had already seen nests of Brown Honeyeaters and Yellow Honeyeaters, both species fledging chicks from several nests over most of the spring months. Our resident pair of White-browed Robins began their nesting in August, making a delightful nest in hanging Hoya vines inside my shade house (access was possible due to damage from cyclone Yasi). They laid two eggs and were sitting on these when the nest was predated about the 10th August (presumably by a tree snake but we did not see the event). Within a couple of weeks the pair constructed a new nest (this time in a Longan Tree, low to the ground). By the 4th September they had two eggs and were sitting. By late September the nest was predated also and the pair started building their third nest for the season, this time in a mango tree. By the 13th October they once again had two eggs and were sitting. I was away for two weeks but on return found the entire nest had vanished with no trace (possible predation by goanna or cat?). By the 7th November the pair had built another nest, their fourth attempt this time in a Scolopia tree on the levee bank, and had yet another 2 eggs. Sadly, by the 18th November this nest also predated and empty. No evidence of the causes of loss unfortunately.



Barking Owls

However, not all the nesting stories ended badly. By September the Barking Owls had already started nesting and the female was brooding in their nest hole, well up in a bloodwood tree, while the male stood guard in an adjacent fig tree. He was always alert and occasionally he would summons me to the tree with loud cries. This nearly always meant that

a large goanna was prowling and the male owl was hunting him away. The goanna was about 4 times the length of the Barking Owl but the owl attacked with vigour, raking the goanna's back with its talons and making fierce cries all the time. Occasionally I confess to hunting the goanna away also, which seemed to meet with approval by the



Tawny Frogmouths

male. In any event, by late October the female was now roosting outside the nest hole and by the end of the first week in November three owlets appeared over a week or so. They have continued to roost together in a few different trees into December.

By mid October the Tawny Frogmouth was sitting and in November we saw two chicks emerge from beneath the mother's protective wings. These grew rapidly and by late November they moved away from the nest onto other branches in the ironbark tree. On 30th November the family decamped, just so they could not be found for the Challenge Count! Even at half size the chicks would mimic their parent in sitting stiffly like a branch stump although once they spotted an observer their curiosity got the better of them (as it did with the owlets). Another species having a busy time were a pair of Olive-backed Sunbirds who avoided predation this year (last year, in the same nest, the young were predated, probably by a green tree frog). This time, having refurbished the nest, at least two were fledged. Not far away a pair of Mistletoebirds had built a beautiful tiny nest, a soft purse of plant down and spider web with a narrow vertical slit as an entrance. They are still rearing young.



Olive-backed Sunbird

For the first time a Varied Triller built a nest quite near the house and we had good views of them busy creating their masterpiece and then brooding.

Sadly it was abandoned, perhaps another victim of a tree snake? We had a pair of White-winged Trillers very busy with the male dominating the property with calls and circuits around what I presumed was the nest site but I was unable to locate it. However, the Spangled Drongos, having nicely cleaned all the bark off the trunk of the giant ghost gum, built their nest yet again in the canopy. Much to my surprise a pair of Helmeted Friarbirds made use of the same tree for their nest. They nicely located it on a broken off branch, in amongst the regrowth stems so it is well hidden. They have been active seeing off Koels, Channel-billed



Spangled Drongos

Cuckoos and a young Whistling Kite!

As I write the Dollarbirds are very busy courting and I expect they will be finding some of the previously used hollows for their brood. It is quite amazing how much breeding activity there is on a small peri-urban block in Townsville. The resident Little Shrike-thrushes have also been breeding but I have not located their nest this year, and the Brown-backed Honeyeaters have yet to start. Peaceful Doves have chicks and the Double-barred Finches have raised at least one brood already.

Peter Valentine

Story and Photographs

SEPTEMBER BIRDING IN UK 2012

I had two reasons for visiting UK on a recent overseas trip: one to see visiting and resident family and friends, the other to visit unfamiliar places in Wales and Warwick to find family heritage connections, recently discovered.

Part 1. My sister and brother-in-law joined me in braving the cold, wet autumn weather in Powys to the town of Rhaeadr in the Elan valley. The fact that I had an excellent chance of seeing close-ups of Red Kites was a bonus.

Man first came to the Elan valley 6000 years ago when the hills and valleys were covered with broad-leaved woodlands of oak, hazel and birch. These have been cleared over time for fuel and farming; today only 120 hectares of this rare habitat remain, clinging to steep hillsides with moorland and bogs

on top. Conifers were planted about 200 years ago, spruce, larch and pine.

These are gradually being cleared, but overgrazing by sheep plus invasive bracken have changed the nature of hillsides dominated now by a few trees of Rowan and Hawthorn. Tree Pipits, Whinchat, Cuckoo and Ring Ouzel are birds of these crags and hillsides. It was late in the season, many migrants had moved on. Also the thick mist and gusting rain showers were not conducive to successful birding.

Of the two species of oak, *Quercus sessilis* is the rare one, with acorns born directly on the stems. (*Q. robur* is more common with acorns on long stalks.) It supports an abundance of insects (over 400 species), birds, ferns, mosses and lichens. Among the 50 bird species are woodpeckers, warblers, tits, tree creepers and finches. The list of raptors recorded at Elan includes Red Kite, buzzard (with very white head); Peregrine Falcon and Sparrow Hawk in the valleys, Hobby and Marsh Harrier along the river (white under wings and tail).

Returning to Rhaeadr mid-afternoon we drove along muddy farm tracks to the Red Kite Feeding station farm. Four wooden bird hides have been built forming a semicircle looking out onto a sloping field, with at least 50 circling birds and potential "kite-watchers" already in attendance: plenty of room for photographers though, especially if you were prepared to pay LE 10 for a spot in the up market tower hide.



Buzzard
Ray Sutton

A large tractor came trundling out of a farm gate, the front loader containing cut up beef and trimmings and feeding began. Crows and occasional Ravens gathered for the first feed, and hung around to pick up small scraps after the kites had left. Interestingly, the first attempts at swooping in were not always successful-young birds on a learning curve?-some birds did not feed at all. Food for night visitors and foxes?

Do the same birds come every day? Is this creating an unnatural dependence? Is the rehabilitation program almost too successful when you consider territory needs? In-breeding? We had much to speculate on as we returned to town for tea and Welsh cakes. This farm event is still low key, very reasonably priced and has the personal touch. We hope it stays that way.

P.S. there are four different spellings on maps and road signs, and two local pronunciations for this town, but that's Welsh for you!

Part 11. Somerset and the West Country

It was a fine lovely Autumn morning, with a crispness in the air, the sun beginning to burn off the heavy mist lying in the valleys and water meadows. This was a rare break in a wet and quite cold summer, so Wendy and I (another sister)

decided to go walking in the Somerset levels and find a few birds. The Avalon marshes are one of several Nature reserves in this region, centred around the village of Shapwick. Bridle paths took us through woodlands of alder, ash and oak then fens and wide rhyals (flooded ditches), but with very little bird activity. A few flocks of remnant Starlings wheeled overhead, noisy Jackdaws, Wood Pigeons calling, and small family groups of Robins were feeding on late blackberries...a very short list! Morning tea at the local RSPB Centre, then a browse through the Somerset Craft Centre, before returning home as the clouds had gathered and the first spots of rain on the windscreen meant the end of outdoor activities for the day and a return to the usual English weather!



Wood Pigeon Ray Sutton

Part 111. Somerset Wildlife news 2012.

The Avalon Marshes have welcomed a new species breeding in UK. In June it was announced that the Great White Egret had successfully bred 3 chicks at Shapwick Heath Nature Reserve (the site is being kept under wraps). Normally found in mainland Europe, there have been increased sightings in UK. In May 2009 a female was ringed in France and records show that she visited Wales, Gloucestershire, and North England before visiting the Somerset levels in April 2010. She is still there after 2 very cold winters feeding in the wet grasslands of the Avalon marshes, which provide an ideal mosaic of wetland habitats. Restoration of old worked out peat diggings, reed beds, fens and planned board walks and bird hides will give visitors a chance to see Cetti's Reed Warblers, Water Rail, Bitterns, Bearded Tits and Marsh Harriers.

Ospreys have once again returned to Wildlife Trust Reserves across UK. The Rutland Osprey Project has been radio tracking the birds on their return migration. Osprey No 09 spent the winter of 2011 in Senegal before beginning the eleven day return journey.

Over the years grasslands have been sown with rye grass for silage. This shiny, bright green grass is quick growing, and farmers can often take 3 cuts a year. This is great for providing feed for dairy herds ; it is less hospitable for wildlife. Bumble bees are in serious decline due to loss of forage as are other pollinator insects. The Large Blue Butterfly is one of the world's most threatened species as its only food

plant is the horseshoe vetch (a legume). The Polden Hills with their rich calcareous grass lands , is now the center of action, clearing scrub, and allowing food plants such as wild thyme, ladies bedstraw, and bird's foot trefoil to grow again.

Community Barn owl Project. Nest boxes are going up across Somerset in locations ranging from campsites and organic farms to landfill sites and orchards. All landowners involved have agreed to create more rough grassland and hunting habitat. Monitoring will start in April 2013, next year's breeding season. Occupancy will be monitored by volunteers.

Finally a little more information about the latest emergency which will change the British landscape probably even more than the Dutch Elm Disease many years ago.

Chalara fraxinea is the fungus which has apparently blown over from Europe (also may have been introduced with ash cuttings from Holland), causing dieback in ash trees. The lesions have already been detected in mature forest over a wide area, but there is no way to vaccinate the trees and no known cure. Ash trees can live for up to 400 years, and the disease is poised to kill the majority of the country's 80 million trees. (Read your latest *Birdlife Australia*). The only happy note on this sad state of affairs is that a small number of trees in Denmark have shown a genetic resistance to the disease.

Rosemary Payet

DEAD PENGUINS

I didn't know this!

Did you ever wonder why there are no dead penguins on the ice in Antarctica ? Where do they go?

Wonder no more !!!

It is a known fact that the penguin is a very ritualistic bird which lives an extremely ordered and complex life. The penguin is very committed to its family and will mate for life, as well as maintain a form of compassionate contact with its offspring throughout its life. If a penguin is found dead on the ice surface, other members of the family and social circle have been known to dig holes in the ice, using their vestigial wings and beaks, until the hole is deep enough for the dead bird to be rolled into, and buried.

The male penguins then gather in a circle around the fresh grave and sing:

"Freeze a jolly good fellow."

"Freeze a jolly good fellow."

Then, they kick him in the ice hole.

You really didn't believe that I know anything about penguins, did you?

It's so easy to fool OLD people.

I am sorry, an urge came over me that made me do it!!!

I fell for it, too

BIRDLIFE TOWNSVILLE EDUCATION COMMITTEE REPORT FOR 2012

Your Education Committee has had a busy year, in conjunction with GBRMPA and the printing of our latest book, "Rainforest Birds of the Southern Wet Tropics", which was compiled and edited by Marleen Acton.

This book takes our production of educational books to four, with "Coastal Birds of the Burdekin Dry Tropics", "Wetland Birds of the Townsville Region" and "Woodland Birds of the Burdekin Dry Tropics" being the other three.

At Toomulla Beach in July, George and Theresa Baker, Ian Boyd and Norm Rains gave a lesson to Rollingstone State School junior students and in August, George, Theresa, Alf and Elna attended the Toomulla Beach Car Club Festival, with a display of suitable posters and some handout information, along with our brand new edition of "Rainforest Birds". In September, George, Theresa, Janet, Barbara and Elna gave two talks on Wetland birds, their habitat and their food, at the Town Common, to classes of Biology students from Townsville State High, and a week later, to a group from Mornington Peninsula (Vic) who were with some local Conservation Volunteers. The students in the second group were extremely interested in everything we showed them and soon learnt how to focus our binoculars to enjoy seeing a goodly collection of Wetland icons – Brolgas, Black-necked Storks and Magpie Geese.

Two meetings have been held with Carolyn Luder and Sally McPhee from GBRMPA, to discuss the lessons we would present in the Reef Guardian Schools, centred on the new book, but it wasn't until fourth term that Schools started to contact us with requests for a presentation. George started with a practice lesson at Rasmussen State School, then Janet and Alf enjoyed a day at Belgian Gardens, which was followed by lessons at Shalom Christian College the next week. Since then, Janet has been to Nelly Bay School on Magnetic Island, George presented at Vincent State School and Ian Boyd and Elna will visit Stuart State School in December.

Your Club is being active in the education and promotion of conservation and knowledge about birds, thanks to those on the Education Committee who give of their time and enthusiasm. Thank you, team. My thanks to George for all of his work in the planning and preparation that is necessary, to ensure that our Education programme is a success.

*Elna Kerswell - Education Officer Birdlife
Townsville*

From Magnetic Island State School

Hi Janet,

Thank you so much for coming over to our school. The children really enjoyed it. It really helped them to understand what a rainforest is and how lucky we are to have it and all the marvellous birds too. It must have taken a great deal of work to put together such a great presentation.

Thanks and I look forward to meeting you again, next time we will share a proper tea break I hope!

Sharon

TO THE TOWNSVILLE BIRD CLUB.

Greetings from Cambridge !!

Sadly this is 'thank you and farewell', as The Australian branch of our family is moving to Albury.

You gave us some memorable birdwatching – the Ross Dam, the Town Common (with Pat and Warren), Gunnado Road (?), and others.



Robin Ray Sutton

Great to remember—especially in this very wet UK winter. We do have our garden birds - tits, chaffinches and a robin, but have missed the migrations of fieldfares and waxwings. ? Put off by the fox, which we regularly see coming to our compost heap, or more likely by 'climate change'.

Meanwhile we miss our visits to you very much, and want to give you a big 'Thank You'.

You are always welcome in Cambridge (though advised to wait till summertime !).

Best wishes,

Rose and Bill Newsom

Found: Pair of caps for Steiner binoculars on Harvey's Range in the Laroona area.
Contact Joan Wharton 0416 530 313 jwharton@tpg.com.au

TE ANAU BIRDING

In April Norm and I spent a couple of weeks on the South Island of New Zealand, visiting Fiordland for the first time.

This was our fifth trip and the weather was unusually kind with the longest record number of sunny days since 1974. We left Balclutha early and having arrived at our cabin just north of Te Anau before it had been cleaned after the last visitors - we decided to drive towards the Homer Tunnel in the hope of seeing a Kea - a bird that had eluded us on previous trips. The scenery is spectacular, which has its downside: the road was chocker with cars, coaches and campervans and every available pull-in seemed full.

We stopped for lunch at Knobbs Flat - a noted birding spot in the literature - but it was a long way down to the Eglington River and quiet bird-wise so we pushed on for Cascade Creek and the start of the Lake Gunn walkway. The ancient beech forest is eerily spectacular, marred by noisy tourists yodelling and yahooping - as if silence is something unnatural and frightening that has to be broken at all costs. There was also a car load of German tourists intent on throwing rocks at one of the formations until I glared at them with such venom that they made a hurried return to their vehicle.

Yet the birding gods granted me a narrow window along the track where I was temporarily alone and a Yellow-crowned Parakeet flew in obligingly to a nearby branch, and a Yellowhead put in a brief appearance hanging upside down, before disappearing from view. Two lifers in 30 seconds is not to be sniffed at!!!! Then there was the wonderfully curious Tomtit and a NZ Fantail flitting through.

We pressed on to the entrance to the Homer Tunnel where the traffic queued patiently to be allowed through - but there was no sign of a kea or any other bird and we had to be content with the spectacular views. The afternoon was wearing on so we headed south, stopping at Monkey Creek - which was also busy - and I began to wonder what the road was like at the height of the tourist season!!!! At one point you pass the latitude 45 marker - as a geographer I found it interesting to be standing exactly halfway between the equator and South Pole.

Te Anau itself is a pleasant town with around 3000 residents, on the edge of the lake and we found a few good spots around the town, notably Ivan Wilson park which is well worth a visit for its trees alone. The Kepler track was busy with hikers / trampers, but again in a quiet spot I tweaked in a Brown Creeper - my third lifer. Lake Te Anau produced a solitary Great Crested Grebe and good numbers of NZ Scaup, and a new housing subdivision was almost awash with Australasian Pipits

The most productive area was around the sewage farm on Upukerora Road which has good numbers of Shovelers and other water fowl, and around

Upukerora River itself. If you are not in a hire car (which we were) and can find a friendly local to take you scrub bashing (we just missed out) you will probably get much out of the area.

Birding in New Zealand is always challenging as the birds are generally small and like the safety of the foliage, but even among the introduced species there is something of interest if you do your homework. On a previous trip I had ticked "Redpoll" on the east coast of the South Island, not knowing at the time there is also a Lesser Redpoll in New Zealand. The 'Lesser' is a browner bird from the UK whereas the 'Redpoll' is greyer and came from Fennoscandia. This time around I got to see both and appreciate the subtle difference.

Alex Canton

BLACK-THROATED FINCH WATERHOLE COUNTS

The Black-throated Finch is listed as endangered in New South Wales, Queensland and nationally.



It is almost certainly extinct in New South Wales. Since 2004, in late October of each year, the Black-throated Finch Recovery

Team (BTFRT) has co-ordinated efforts to provide some assessment of the abundance of the species, in line with the objectives of the National Recovery Plan for the Black-throated Finch. These efforts have concentrated on the population that persists on the Townsville Coastal Plain but this does not mean that this population is more important than others. The approach is to count birds drinking at selected waterholes around Townsville. The 2012 count was conducted on 28-29 October. So, why waterhole counts, why late October, and for that matter, why count birds at all.

The answer to the last question is that it is important to have some idea of how the population is faring, where the birds are surviving and how regular they are at particular locations. This information is useful for planning conservation measures. The waterhole count approach was originally applied to estimate relative population sizes in Gouldian finches in the Northern Territory. Gouldians, Black-throated and other finch species must drink every day. For most of the year they

must get the water they need from creeks, springs, farm dams and other persistent bodies of surface water. By watching waterholes, we maximise the chances of encountering any birds that are in the area. The count is conducted in late October because, in the Townsville region, as in most of northern Australia, this period is when the landscape is near its driest – drier conditions, fewer waterholes to watch, less effort required.

The count methodology follows a carefully designed protocol. Each waterhole is monitored for two consecutive days, from 6am to 9am, recording the number of each species of seed-eating birds that drink in each 15-minute interval. The species recorded are each of the local grass-finch species (Black-throated, Chestnut-breasted, Crimson, Double-barred, Nutmeg, Pictorella, Plum-headed, Red-browed and Zebra) plus Diamond Dove, Crested and Squatter pigeons. This methodology means that we actually count the numbers of drinking events rather than the number of birds. This gives an index of bird abundance rather than an actual population estimate.



Squatter Pigeon Ray Sutton

So how have numbers changed over the nine years of the count. The graph below summarises the results. (I have deliberately left the numbers off the y-axis of the graph so people are less tempted to think of these as absolute population estimates). It shows that the number of Black-throated Finch "drinking events" recorded has varied from year to year. The maximum, recorded in 2008 corresponds to around 650 "events" (not 650 birds). These fluctuations could reflect inter-year variation in conditions at the time of the count, differences in bird distribution and actual changes to bird abundance.

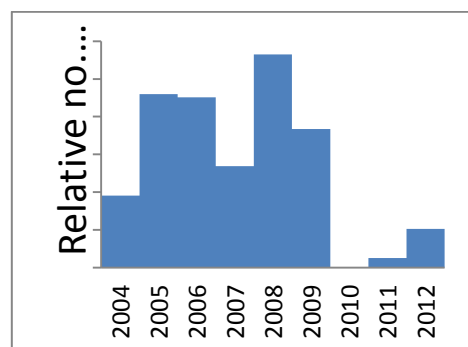
Over the nine years, climatic conditions have varied greatly. Perhaps the most important climatic factor determining how many birds are recorded in any one year is the timing and amount of rain received in the previous wet season. This influences the amount of water in the landscape at the time of the count. When there is a lot of water in the landscape, the birds are likely to be less

concentrated and so less likely to show up at any individual waterhole. The distribution of birds may also vary with other environmental factors. For example, heavy grazing by cattle may suppress seed production by grasses and so reduce local habitat quality. These factors may affect the numbers of birds observed drinking during the count even if the total population remains unchanged. However, climatic factors and seed availability also affect actual abundance. The challenge is to try to unravel these complex interactions to explain the variations in relative abundance that we observe.

Perhaps the most intriguing question arising from the graph is why the last three years of the count (2010-2012) have yielded such low relative abundance. There are at least three possible explanations:

1. Recent wet years may have meant that there were still many water sources in the landscape at the time of the count. The birds may have been out there but they didn't drink at the waters we watched.
2. Recent wet years may not have been favourable for Black-throated Finches. This could be because a lot of grass seed germinated and so was lost to the bird's feed supply or because heavy plant growth made it more difficult for birds to find food.
3. Other changes on the Townsville coastal plain may have meant that habitat has been lost or habitat quality has declined so populations have actually fallen.

Even though it may be difficult to clearly interpret all aspects of the data collected, it is important that we continue to do our best to monitor the Black-throated Finch populations, in Townsville and elsewhere. The Townsville population is under threat from urban expansion and other land-use changes. Important populations in central Queensland are under threat from proposed coal mines. Watch for announcements about next year's count and consider joining in to help build our understanding of Black-throated Finch and other seed-eaters.



BIRDLIFE TOWNSVILLE CONSERVATION COLUMN

Members are probably aware that concerns about poorly planned and managed developments along the Queensland coast have been the subject of a UNESCO mission earlier this year because of possible adverse effects on the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area.

The disaster that is Gladstone has reverberated widely and continuing expansion of port facilities along the coast leaves many people concerned about environmental consequences.

In anticipation of the need for port expansion, the Queensland Government approved Abbott Point Port development (near Bowen) in 1981. The Port commenced operations in 1984. The idea was to select a site that had relatively deep water close in shore and was better able to be developed and expanded without impacting directly on the Great Barrier Reef. Such forward thinking was unusual in Queensland and placed the future expansion of mining and related shipping on a sound basis, assuming of course that the Port was well managed.



Australian Painted Snipe Peter Valentine

One of the costs of expansion at Abbott Point will be a loss of some of the Cayley Wetlands that occur within the Port boundary. It is estimated that some 350 ha of the wetlands will be adversely affected by the development. These wetlands are extremely important and surveys have shown the presence of significant numbers of Australian Painted Snipe as well as Latham's Snipe and many other wetland birds. In the recent Cumulative Impact Assessment conducted by the companies proposing the expansion, this loss is recognised as significant and it is proposed that as well as careful management to minimize the adverse effects, other wetlands be purchased as part of an offset program. Wetland destruction has been high in the north Queensland coastal environment and all remaining wetlands will need protection and management to ensure our wetland bird species have adequate habitat for their needs.

The presence of such an important Australian Painted Snipe habitat in our region is good news, but only if both Cayley Wetlands and any other purchased wetlands are properly protected, managed and monitored. In addition to the wetland birds, some excellent coastal habitat occurs within the Abbott Point boundary and this may prove to be valuable for waders over time, especially if access is denied to the hoon, irresponsible dog owner and quad bike community who inflict so much damage on our wader populations.

Opportunities to improve the environmental outcomes from development only become available when new permits are sought by companies. It is important that such new permits raise the standards, especially in the context of World Heritage sites. In reality, most state governments are very limited in their interest in environmental outcomes (versus development outcomes). The fact that areas of international significance as well as migratory bird species and threatened species are considered "matters of national significance" is critical as that allows the National Government to become involved. Without that it is likely that state governments would fail the environment (as they have already at Gladstone for example). Unfortunately the recent Council of Australian Governments' decision to hand back some environmental powers under the present arrangement poses a serious threat to the long term protection of our Australian environment including issues surrounding bird conservation.

Peter Valentine, Conservation Officer.

CONSERVATION ACTIVITIES

The lessons learned in the last 6 years of working in the Townsville region.

There are 4:

always **Respond**.

BirdLife must participate in the public comment process incorporated into many development application and approval procedures conducted at city, state and federal levels. There is a legal requirement for the proponent to respond to public comments in his application. The submission must be very positive; it must question and criticise but not whinge. Do not rely on politicians or public representatives to fight your corner for you.

retain your **Reputation**.

BirdLife Townsville is a regional branch of a national organisation comprised of bird watchers with detailed records of bird behaviour in the region. They have no authority, little money but do have a fine reputation built up over many years. Remember the quote by Publilius Syrus 'a good reputation is more valuable than money'.

Developers and their paid consultants have one objective: that is to maximise profits for the

shareholders. Birds and other such 'issues' are classified as inconvenient costs. Politicians and public servants have their own objectives.

Many of the developers, consultants, politicians and public servants in Queensland have lost their reputation for environmental protection. BirdLife must not lose theirs.

Repetition is essential.

There is a constant turn-over of staff in the government and natural resource management organisations at all levels. The bird and habitat protection messages are always the same but have to be often repeated; initially to get the office holder to take notice and then to the new office holder, etc, etc.

Records are gold dust.

A good set of records for a particular site or bird species carry a lot of weight in the assessment process and are difficult for project assessor's to challenge or ignore. This is where all BirdLife members can make a major contribution to the protection of our birds and their habitat. All survey records must be recorded preferably in recognised databases such as Eremaea and BirdLife's Atlas.

In summary, the lessons learned are:

always Respond.

retain your Reputation.

Repetition is essential.

Records are gold dust.

Let's call them the:

The 4 Rs in Conserrrrvation.

George Baker

A BONUS FROM THE CHALLENGE COUNT

It is always interesting to be part of the Challenge Count and this year was no exception. I spent most of my time at home finding as many as possible of my locals and had some excellent luck also including a single Oriental Cuckoo and a Large-tailed Nightjar. But I missed on the Tawny Frogmouths who chose to decamp the day before our count after being 4-5 weeks on their nest and rearing two chicks. Luckily the family of five Barking Owls stayed in their usual roosting trees so I was able to find them easily.

The Challenge Coordinator (this year Pat Charlton) also assigned me Oak Valley with the expectation that I might find Black-throated Finch and Squatter Pigeon. Well, no luck on these two but I did find several Lemon-bellied Flycatchers including a pair on the nest with an advanced juvenile. This was the first time I had seen the nest of this species and I was delighted as it is the smallest nest of any bird in Australia (something I had not known). Having

now seen one I can easily accept that. The nest is tiny and added to this the fact that the bird only lays a single egg makes the Lemon-bellied Flycatcher especially interesting. Although the nest was high in a Poplar Gum (*Eucalyptus platyphylla*) I was able to get good views of the parents coming and going feeding the chick. The chick looked very different with its brown and white spotted and marbled coloration. I wondered at first whether it may have been a cuckoo, but no, this is the normal colour for the species.

The chick overflowed from the tiny nest at this stage and there would never be room for two! I took some photos and these show the tiny nest and the interesting chick colours, as well as the parent feeding the juvenile.

Peter Valentine



BIRDLIFE TOWNSVILLE NOTICE OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Annual General Meeting of BirdLife Townsville is to be held on Saturday 9th February 2013 at the Soundshell Building, Townsville City Council Complex, Hinchinbrook Drive Kirwan, commencing at 2pm.

The prime items of Agenda are:

- to receive the Reports of the Executive Committee for 2012, including the President's Report on the Activities of the Branch in 2012 and the Financial Report up to the 31st December 2012, and
- to elect Office Bearers and an Executive Committee for 2013 .

OTHER AGENDA ITEMS:

Members wishing to place other matters on the meeting Agenda are to advise the Secretary on or before the 11th January 2013, such advice to include appropriate notes regarding the item. A complete Agenda will be circulated on or before the 18th January 2013.

NOMINATIONS FOR THE 2013 EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE and OFFICE BEARERS

This Notice is also a call for nominations for the Office Bearer positions of President, Secretary and Treasurer as well as 6 other positions for the 2013 Executive Committee. The Nomination Form to be used may be found on BirdLife Townsville Website. Nominations for all positions are to be in the hands of the Secretary by no later than 11th January 2013. Completed Nomination Forms may be returned either by email to contact@birdlifetownsville.org.au or to the Secretary, BirdLife Townsville, PO Box 1168 Aitkenvale Qld 4814.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For further information regarding the nomination process and/or proxy voting please contact Norm Rains, the Acting Secretary until mid January 2013, telephone 4778 8107.

W.Charlton

Secretary
7th December 2012



Contributions for the February Drongo are due in by 31st January 2013. Email to amsgrat@gmail.com

INTERESTING SIGHTINGS

Birds	Date	Place	Observer
Black-faced Monarch	3/10/12	Palomino Place, Kelso	Peter Valentine
Satin Flycatcher	8/10/12	Palomino Place, Kelso	Peter Valentine
Spotted Harrier & Cicadabird	27/10/12	Townsville Town Common	Ed Pearce
Cotton Pygmy Goose & Bush-hen	28/10/12	Townsville Town Common	Ed Pearce
Red-kneed Dotterel	4/11/12	Townsville Town Common	Cheryl Robertson
Little Curlew	7/11/12	Mungalla, Via Ingham	Ian Boyd (et-al)
Brown Songlark	15/11/12	Reid River	Ivor Preston/Bill Holmes
Oriental and Australian Pratincole, Grass Owl, Stubble Quail, Oriental Cuckoo, Little Curlew, Red-kneed Dotterel	23-25/11/12	Mungalla, Via Ingham	BirdLife TVL outing
Oriental Cuckoo	26/11/12	Palomino Place, Kelso	Peter Valentine
Black-chinned Honeyeater	27/11/12	Condon	Ivor Preston
Sooty Oystercatcher	29/11/12	Rowes Bay	Alexandra Canton
Australian Little Bittern	30/11/12	Tyto Wetlands	Tony Ashton
Oriental Cuckoo (4)	2/12/12	Palmetum	Ed Pearce

If you haven't reported you're interesting sightings on Birdline North Queensland please report them to Ian Boyd at ninox45@bigpond.com . Other members like to know what birds are about.

Congratulations to everyone in the Quest.

Name	Quest Number	Date
Janet Robino	366	31/12/2012
Chris Ezzy	366	31/12/2012
Len Ezzy	366	31/12/2012
Marleen Acton	337	2/12/2012
Peter Valentine	330	25/11/2012
Barbara Reidy	323	18/11/2012
Pat Charlton	321	16/11/2012
Ian Boyd	318	13/11/2012
Malcolm Calvert	314	9/11/2012
Lenore Calvert	313	8/11/2012
Ian Leach	310	5/11/2012
Warren Charlton	310	5/11/2012
Elna Kerswell	288	14/10/2012
Cecily Messer	283	9/10/2012
Joan Wharton	271	27/09/2012
Beth Snewin	262	18/09/2012
Rosemary Payet	234	21/08/2012
George Baker	234	21/08/2012
Janet Cross	229	16/08/2012
Teresa Baker	226	13/08/2012
Alex Canton	219	6/08/2012
Annette Sutton	209	27/07/2012
Wendy Kaus	179	27/06/2012