

# The Drongo

Number 158 May 2020



Frogmouths

Woodswallows

Pest Plants

## FROM THE PRESIDENT

There is very little to report this time around as we have cancelled all club activities to comply with Covid 19 restrictions. Most of us in this area are fortunate enough to have a back yard so we can get a bit of fresh air and of course, check out the birds while staying safe in isolation. The main thing is that we all get through this period safe and well. Keep an eye on the website once the Government relaxes restrictions, to check which activities can be resumed. As you would have noticed, Wal will distribute important information via email until we can all meet up again.

The Committee held an 'email meeting' in April. The main issue to be discussed was the situation that Deb Carter and her Birds of Prey Rescue are in in relation to all the restrictions. Deb's usual sources of income have dried up. As you would have seen by the email distributed early in April, Deb was struggling to feed all the birds. Some of the birds which could not be released into the wild were destined to be used for breeding programs by various institutions once they recovered from their injuries. The Committee approved the donation of \$500 to help out with the feed bills. I would also like to acknowledge the members who have made personal donations to Birds Of Prey Rescue. Hopefully, this important service can survive this difficult time.

We can all still be contributing to BirdLife Australia's research by taking part in the Birds in Back Yard program. This shut down period has been a great opportunity to really get familiar with all the birds that use our back yards and fly over.

There has been a great response to the information distributed regarding the Neem Trees that seem to be popping up all over the place (reprinted in this issue). We have had feedback from many members who have all found the trees in their garden or local park areas. I have forwarded the information to family and friends and they have all jumped on board hunting and removing this weed. If you notice the weeds in parks or public areas, let us know by sending an email to [conact@birdlifetownsville.com.au](mailto:conact@birdlifetownsville.com.au) so the information can be passed on to Greg Calvert.

*Janet Robino*

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Early in 2020 the world began hearing of a new dangerous virus that had broken out in Wuhan, China. The World Health Organisation began issuing bulletins. By late January it was reported in South Korea, USA and Taiwan. It was reported the virus could spread from person to person and on January 23<sup>rd</sup> Wuhan went into lockdown, just around Chinese New Year.

Deaths began mounting and by January 25<sup>th</sup>, Australia had its first case, a visitor from China. The virus was spreading rapidly world wide. On March 11<sup>th</sup> the WHO declared a global pandemic. By March 15<sup>th</sup>, Australia decreed that all overseas arrivals must go into fourteen days self isolation and no cruise ships may dock. On March 20<sup>th</sup> Australia closed its borders to all foreign nationals. On March 23<sup>rd</sup> all bars, clubs, restaurants, cinemas, places of worship, casinos and gyms were closed. Soon people were told to stay home and only go out for essentials, work from home if possible. Many retail stores closed. Schools closed. Social distancing and hand cleaning with either soap or sanitiser is practised by everyone. You can't buy a roll of toilet paper anywhere. People react to a major crisis in strange ways.

Everything remained closed until on May 2<sup>nd</sup> Queenslanders were allowed to go 50km for a drive or recreation and a few more small concessions were made.

So far Australia has had around 7,000 cases of Covid 19. Over 6000 have recovered and there have been just under 100 deaths. This is so much better than many other countries, thanks to the early measures that were taken.

Things will slowly open up in the next few months and it remains to be seen what happens. Hopefully a vaccine will be found.

*Just some notes in case someone reads this in the future.*

### **YOUR COMMITTEE**

President: Janet Robino	Janet Cross	Annette Sibson
Secretary: Wal Threlfall	Mark Horvath	Julia Goldsbury
Treasurer: Nina Doyle	Jill Staunton	Peter Staunton

Newsletter Editor Annette Sutton [amsgreat@gmail.com](mailto:amsgreat@gmail.com)

[Deadline for next Drongo is July 31st. Please send articles as Word documents, photos as attachments.](#)

[The views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of Birdlife Townsville.](#)

## PALUMA

I have always wanted to drive up to Paluma in the very early morning, in the dark early. So, I spent the night at our Toomulla beach hut and headed off at 5am, or thereabouts. It was dark so I was happy.

I was hoping (of course) to see an owl or two on the way up, sitting nicely on the road just waiting for me to arrive and photograph it. But I saw no owls, or night birds of any sort. I realised half way up that I hadn't packed a good torch. Any way it was a nice drive up with no oncoming traffic!

I headed out to Grandis Forest first. I got there as dawn broke. It was amazing, the bird song was prolific and thrilling. I even found the entrance easily, due to road signage being prominently placed by the drive way. The banksia trees were in flower so the birds were busy visiting there, so I really didn't have to walk around a lot. But of course I went for a walk down the track, just to check it out, and watched a native mouse (*melomys* sp.?) climb up a tree stump, then sit and peer at me. First time I've seen one of them up there so that was very exciting. The dingos howling were not so thrilling I have to say, being out there on my own was great until I heard them.



After an early breakfast/morning tea there I headed off to try my luck at Birthday Creek but unfortunately I didn't quite make it there. There was a tree down over the road not far from the Birthday Creek. So I had to turn around and make my way back. Luckily I met up with some rangers coming in, so I told them about the tree. I spent a bit of time stopping along the road and watching various birds.

I spent the last part of the morning at McClelland's Lookout and wandering along the Witt's Lookout Track, a track I have wandered down a number of times and one that generally has something interesting along it to look at. This morning there was a Noisy Pitta feeding in the leaf litter. That was exciting. .

After spending a little time back at the main lookout to relax and enjoy the peace I headed

back to the car, I spotted a lovely Red-bellied Black snake sun bathing beside the path. After a photo shoot with the snake I eventually made it back to the car. I was intrigued as to whether the fellow that walked his little dog down the same path only a few minutes prior to me had seen the snake. I heard no indications that he had. The snake was only a few centimetres from the path, quite close and was a large, beautifully shiny and well fed example. Always nice to see a healthy snake.



I was home to Toomulla by lunch time and had a nice afternoon sleep to finish the day. I'm keen to repeat the adventure. There must be some owls up there somewhere.

*Annette Sibson*

## SURPRISE LIFER

In need of a change of scenery but somewhere not too far from home, I grabbed my binoculars and camera and headed out to Ross Dam.

After a quick diversion down Laudham Road which yielded little in the way of the unusual, I moved on, heading up to the Pinnacles and the entrance to Townsville Graded Sands where we usually do our dam surveys.



As I walked along the pathway by the first lagoon, I was disappointed to see that it was bereft of birdlife, despite there being ample water except for the presence of one lone Australasian Darter perched on a branch, wings outstretched in their familiar stance.

Not feeling hopeful, I continued along the path to the next section of water and again there was nothing. It wasn't until I was about to turn around and give up the cause that my eye



caught some movement on the water. It was a bird I didn't immediately recognize. It was almost swan-size but much more slender with a dagger-like bill and prominent white neck. I watched as it moved across the water with a casual elegance.

On looking through my binoculars, I could see in more detail its unique, black double-crest and the chestnut-coloured neck frill which left me in no doubt that it was a Great Crested Grebe. This was a 'lifer' for me so I was suitably excited and began clicking off photos. However, it was frustratingly very near the edge of my camera range and, as it was nearly 6pm, the light was fading. Although the bird seemed aware of my attention, it was unfazed as, now and again, it dipped its head into the water to feed while I took more photos. As I returned to my car, I wondered to myself if it was usual for Great Crested Grebes to be solitary like this or were there others about.

Two days later, I returned to see if it was still there, secretly hoping that it would perhaps come in a bit closer so I could take some decent photos. However, I found it in exactly the same spot as the previous day and again, it was on its own.



When driving back, on a whim, I decided to stop off at the car park and climb the many steps to the dam wall. As I looked across the water, there was the mandatory Little Black Cormorant perched on the stump close to shore but then, as my eye travelled further out, I could see a group of eight pelicans that were surrounded by what looked to be hundreds of smaller, very active birds. However, they were too far out to determine exactly what they were with the naked eye. It wasn't until I took a photo and then zoomed in on it, that I could tell that most of the other birds were, in fact, Great Crested Grebes. In amongst them all was the occasional Cormorant and even a Radjah Shelduck (obviously with some sort of identity crisis going on) but, by far, the majority were Great Crested Grebes. I attempted to count them but gave up at 350. I now know the answer to my questions...yes, there were others about and the original Great Crested Grebe I saw was probably seeking some serenity in its solitude.

Anne Lawrance

## Unexpected

I've been doing my daily exercise during the lockdown walking round the Ross River. I've mainly kept to the Federation Circuit.

Apart from the usual stuff, I have come across a few of note, namely Little Kingfisher, Azure Kingfisher, Rufous Fantail, Brown Goshawk and Nankeen Night-Heron. Then one day I saw from the corner of my eye on a branch what looked like something, had a look through my binoculars and there's a White-throated Nightjar sat there. A first for me.



*White-throated Nightjar*

Then another morning I decided to get off the straight and narrow and venture by the river. I hadn't gone far, looked up, and there's a pair of Rufous Owl eyes looking down at me from about twenty feet. Out came the camera and I got some great shots. At least I think so lol. What an experience.



*Rufous Owl*

Brin Crowther

*Of Australia's three Nightjar species, the White-throated Nightjar is the biggest and darkest. Its streaked feathers - black, brown, fawn and grey, with just a small area of white on the throat, enables it to blend in well with leaves and twigs as it rests on the ground during the day. White-throated Nightjars have a black bill, brown eyes and are 30-35 cm in length. Though rarely seen, the White-throated Nightjar is common in the forests and woodlands of eastern Australia's coastal ranges, from central Queensland to Melbourne.*

## ESCAPE TO THE COUNTRY

After being somewhat confined by the regulations around Covid 19, we were very pleased to make an early trip to Woodstock on Saturday, 2<sup>nd</sup> May, the day the rules eased slightly. In the lovely early morning light we drove along Buck Road. It was pretty quiet but just nice to be out. A flock of juvenile Zebra Fiches flew into a bush beside the car, all fluffed up against the cool morning.



*Zebra Finch*

In one of the side roads we found a White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike who posed very nicely. There were White-winged Trillers everywhere. Three Squatted Pigeons were warming up in the sun in Jones Road and a pair of Striated Pardalotes flew down onto the fence. A Bustard went strutting along a fair way off in a paddock

We drove to the park to have our flask of coffee when we passed another birder who said he had seen White-browed Woodswallows down John Road where some millet was hanging on in a paddock. We had missed John Road on our way through. Back we sped and we had only gone about fifty metres up John Road when we came across thirty or so White-brows. Usually we have to go west to see these birds but it was great that they had travelled to see us as we're not allowed out that far. There were a lot of juveniles in the flock in their spotted livery.

Usually you find some Masked Woodswallows mixed up with the White-brows but we couldn't find one. We did see a Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo and a beautiful Red-backed Kingfisher.



*White-browed Woodswallow*

We heard more sightings of Maskeds had been made so we went back on Thursday. Sure enough we found them in John Road and Buck Road. We saw both a White-browed and a



*Juvenile White-browed Woodswallow*

Masked eating insects they had caught. Then just to top it off, about eight Cockatiels flew in. Bonus. Someone else saw one Budgie and a Plumhead but we dipped on those two.



*Masked Woodswallow*

There was a dead wallaby on the road at the John Road corner and Crows and Black and Whistling Kites were having a feast. One of the Whistling Kites flew up into a tree and posed for us. In Buck's Road a Pheasant Coucal obligingly posed as well. They usually scramble up into thick foliage and you can never photograph them.

Now we are waiting until the restrictions lift a little more. On the ABC news there were scenes of acres of Mulla Mulla and other wildflowers out near Longreach and Winton. It is one of the best displays for years and hardly anybody can see it. Next easing won't get us out that far but we'll be able to get as far as Ingham, Home hill and Charters Towers. Patience, patience. It's better than being sick.

*Annette Sutton*

*Post script A third visit yielded a Pallid Cuckoo being savaged by a Willie Wagtail and at last, the elusive Plumheads. A couple of adults and a few juveniles. No budgies and the western Woodswallows and Cockatiels were nowhere to be seen. What a difference a few days make.*



## LUCINDA BEACH SURVEY

We set out at 7am for Lucinda, no stops until we got there. Morning tea was great, even though it was hot and muggy. Australian Swiftlet were seen, along with the ever present Bush Stone-curlew

There was myself, Wal, Ivor, Ian and Steve. We headed out, wandering slowly once we hit the sand. At the back lagoon the very large mudskippers were having a grand time leaping around the shore line. Birds along the way were Welcome Swallows, Silver Gulls and Red-capped Plovers. Once on the sand spit proper we realised there were quite a large number of shore birds there. Among the flocks of Lesser and Greater Crested Terns we found a couple of Common Terns and a few Little Terns, which was very exciting.

Among the flocks there were three Beach Stone-curlews, three Pacific Golden Plovers and three Common Greenshanks.

It was really great to see so many shorebirds. They remained mostly undisturbed even when a beach fisherman drove down to the far end on his quad bike.



*Wal, Steve, Ian and Ivor*

On the way back there was much discussion and long distance photos of a questionable bird. This was stopped by the arrival of a tropical downpour that had us all sopping wet by the time we made it back to the shelter. Scopes, glasses, camera, binos, clothing, phones, backpacks, shoes were all dripping wet. Thank goodness it wasn't cold as well. Steve came to the rescue with a dry towel, which was greatly received by yours truly!! Then shared out amongst the guys.

Lunch was a good time to dry out a bit, as by then the sun had returned. The photo is evidence of the lengths taken by some to get dry clothing.

All in all a great day, even with the rain. Oh, the questionable bird became a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper in the end.

*Annette Sibson*

## LORIKEET VIRUS

From the ABC Sunshine Coast

By [Kathy Sundstrom](#) and [Rob Blackmore](#)

Experts don't know what causes it or why, but a virus that spreads quickly in close contact is causing rainbow lorikeets to "drop out of the sky" across South-East Queensland.

Key points:

The syndrome leaves the bird with a clenched claw, meaning it cannot land and hold on to a branch

It has a similarity to coronavirus in that it spreads quickly when birds are in close contact

If you find a bird on the ground and it appears to be dead or injured, it's still worth taking to a vet

Bird expert Darryl Jones from Griffith University said the condition, known as lorikeet paralysis syndrome or clenched-foot syndrome, was happening "really widely".

"There are lots and lots of cases in Brisbane at the moment. I'm pretty much inundated by things," Professor Jones said.

He said while it was not related to COVID-19, it had an important similarity in that it spread quickly when the birds were in close contact. Scientists are looking to learn more about lorikeet paralysis syndrome. (Supplied: Darryl Jones)

"It is a disease — it gets spread between animals, and the problem is [lorikeets] aren't good at social distancing very much at all."

The severity of the disease can vary between birds but it can lead to them dying "pretty horribly".



"Some of the birds, because they can't fly or walk properly, will fall out of the sky," Professor Jones said. "They have a clenched claw, so they can't land and hold on to a branch: that's the simple problem. They fall to the ground and starve to death or a predator gets them or ants get them. It's a pretty horrible way to go."

## FROGMOUTHS AND KOOKABURRAS

During February, I checked on the roosting places of the resident family of Tawny Frogmouths in the Bush Garden every few days. They seemed to move each day and rarely used the same tree more than once.

Whenever I found them roosting relatively close to the ground, I would grab my camera and tripod and observe them for an hour or two. They seemed to adjust quickly to my presence, and while one could not say that Frogmouths were exactly animated, they quite often shifted their position slightly, looked around, preened, yawned, stretched, made low grunting sounds and sometimes assumed strange postures which I took to be sunbathing. They paid attention to people walking dogs nearby, but a photographer who did not make sudden movements (mosquitos notwithstanding) or come too close did not seem to be considered a threat.



*When the Kookaburra was nearby*

This apparent relaxation contrasted with an incident on one morning. The four birds were all relatively close together in one tree, I had set up the camera and they seemed to be at ease. Suddenly one juvenile made a low grunt and all four Frogmouths moved swiftly and smoothly into noticeably more upright posture, bodies stretched, heads pointing upwards and eyes reduced to slits.

At that moment, a blue-winged Kookaburra flew from behind me and perched on a low branch, 3-5 m from the Frogmouths. The Kookaburra looked at me for a bit, then turned and stared down at the ground in front of it. It remained like that for more than 15 minutes, and in that time the Frogmouths maintained their upright stance and stayed absolutely still. When the Kookaburra flew down to the ground to pounce on something in the leaf litter, the Frogmouths relaxed their posture. When it returned to its perch, they discretely resumed their upright immobility. When the Kookaburra flew off, the Frogmouths relaxed, though they did pay close

attention a bit later when three Kookaburras started calling and flying between perches in the tops of trees 50 m away. I was left with the strong impression that the Frogmouths were scared of Kookaburras.



*After the Kookaburra flew off*

Kookaburras are opportunistic carnivores that eat a wide variety of large insects, other invertebrates, and reptiles. They would definitely be a threat to nestling birds, but these Frogmouths were adults and sub-adults. However, at least two studies have recorded Laughing Kookaburras mobbing roosting Powerful Owls in daytime, and there is a somewhat inconclusive [YouTube offering](#) apparently showing a Boobook that was killed by Kookaburras that had been mobbing it.

I also remember Debbie Carter of Fight 4 Flight NQ Birds of Prey saying that she had to fly a Falcon to chase away Kookaburras before she put her owls outdoors in the day. The first reaction of many non-birders on seeing a Frogmouth is, "Look at the owl"; perhaps it is better to minimise the chance of being seen at all than to risk being mistaken for an owl? On the other hand, many birds that are less intimidating than Kookaburras also mob owls, and I have yet to see any of the numerous honey eaters in the bush garden pay any attention to Frogmouths. So I am not very convinced by my owl suggestion, can anyone think of a better one?

*Hugh Sweatman*

*With their nocturnal habit and owl-like appearance, Tawny Frogmouths are often confused with owls, but are actually more closely related to the nightjars. Their feet are weak however, and lack the curved talons of owls.*

*The general plumage of the Tawny Frogmouth is silver-grey, slightly paler below, streaked and mottled with black and rufous. A second plumage phase also occurs, with birds being russet-red. The eye is yellow in both forms, and the wide, heavy bill is olive-grey to blackish. South-eastern birds are larger than birds from the north. Tawny Frogmouths are nocturnal birds. During the day, they perch on tree branches, often low down, camouflaged as part of the tree.*

## BIRDS IN SCHOOLS

Townsville Junior Grammar School 'Birds in School' visit by Wal, Barbara and Annette - 3 March 2020



We met with Shandelle, the STEM teacher of the school. STEM stands for science, technology, engineering and mathematics. The double classroom that is dedicated to STEM is filled with wonders - world animal posters, large figures of spiders, robots in the making, bird nesting boxes - complete and in the making and paint experiments, lego, photographs, live animals (2 very healthy Blue-tongued Lizards), among many other items. I could have spent hours there looking and playing with all the exciting things. (Why didn't we have that when I went to school?)

The children had made cardboard and paper prototype nesting boxes and were about to embark on making wooden nesting boxes to be placed around the school yard.



Barbara and I got the bird bits set up on the tables while Wal got the Adaptations power-point display set up and ready to go. The first class of children arrived and took their place on the floor. We were all introduced and Wal proceeded with the power-point display while Barbara and I played with the bird bits, holding up appropriate parts as requested by Wal.

The power-point display was wonderful and the children were very attentive, and learned new words as well as new bird information. All the questions at the end of the display were answered correctly. So we knew the children had been listening. Then the children were sorted into groups and some allowed to come and check out the bird parts. Of course the Boobook Owl was the most popular. He received much tender patting and touching. One enterprising young student was putting a bird head with a bird leg together and pretending they were walking. One young student was very reluctant to touch the bird parts, which of course is perfectly fine. In the end he managed to pat one of the heads with his finger. Another student asked if the pieces had bacteria on them. Of course a number of students asked how the birds died. Barbara and I repeated the 'hit by car, killed by cat, window strike' mantra a good number of times.

Then there was a second set of students and they were just as well mannered and behaved as the first class. And they got all the questions correct too.

Afterwards we packed up (carefully following Beth's great instructions) and left with our gifts of chocolates and lovely card.

It was a lovely morning and we all learnt new things.

*Wal Threlfall, Barbara Reidy and Annette Sibson*

## BIRDBATH PROJECT

As part of the Birds in School program our club gave the Grammar School a terracotta bird bath from Bunnings. The school got the children who were attending school during lock down to decorate the bird bath.



Check out the awesome job they made of the decorating. This is something for them to be very proud of for years to come.

*Wal, Barbara and Annette*



## GARDENING TIPS

Yeah, I'm sure you are all rolling around the floor laughing at the thought that I would be a good source of gardening tips. But please read on.



*Neem tree seedling*

As a lot of you know I have been out of action for a while. When finally able to get out and look at the garden, as expected, the weeds had grown so much better than the proper plants. One weed in particular stood out as being different to anything I'd seen in my garden before. My neighbours noticed I was out and about so we had a chat over the fence – definitely more than 1.5 meters apart! They seem to have a plague of the same weed and were hopeful that I would know what it was. Of course, I had no idea.....but I knew who would!



I sent off an email to Greg Calvert with a couple of pictures. Greg is used to getting very curious inquiries from me, but is always very patient and obliging in sharing his knowledge.

Greg was happy for me to share this information with as many people as possible.

*"It's Neem (Azadirachta indica). This is the new Chinese Apple of our region as it rapidly escapes from people's gardens. It is incredibly prolific and weedy. It's a declared weed in WA, NT and in the Burdekin with hopes that Townsville Council will also declare it a weed soon. I chop, kill and poison this stuff as much as I can but for every one I kill, another hundred come up somewhere else. It's all through people's gardens as birds poop out the seeds and people don't know what they are, so they just let them grow. Eventually those people will realise they develop into a big tree, and fall over during cyclones. A serious environmental weed that already covers thousands of hectares of northern Australia.*

*Neem oil is good, and you can buy it from lots of places. But its insecticidal chemicals are causing massive problems where it grows along rivers, dumps those leaves in the river bed and water and impacts the whole food aquatic food web. The oil is cheap to buy so there's no real value in growing one yourself. The commercial oil is extracted from the seeds so it's not the sort of thing a home gardener can extract.*

*Greg Calvert"*



So this could be something to keep us all busy while we can't get out and about. The good thing is that these baby Neem Trees are really easy to pull out. And while out in the garden you get to see a few birds (probably the same little beggars who are bringing in the Neem seeds!)

*Janet Robino*

## MORE PEST PLANTS

Townsville City Council has a list of pest plants on their web site. Listed at the moment are *Thunbergia fragrans*, a creeping vine with white flowers, *Parthenium* weed, Rubber Vine, Chinese Apple, Prickle Bushes, and Lantana.

*Thunbergia fragrans* is a vine or creeper with slender four-angled stems that are somewhat hairy when young. Its oppositely arranged leaves (4-10 cm long and 3-5 cm wide) have arrow-shaped bases and slightly lobed to almost entire margins. Its white tubular flowers (about 5 cm across) are subtended by two leafy bracts (13-15 mm long). These flowers have a narrow tube and have five broad petal lobes. Its distinctive fruit capsule is topped with a long, thick, beak.

*Parthenium* is a serious weed that will grow anywhere. It is a restricted invasive plant under the *Biosecurity Act 2014* and has been identified as a high priority local pest plant for early detection and eradication under the Townsville Local Government Area Pest Management Plan. There are infestations in the rural areas of Townsville which are currently being surveyed and treated.

## QUEST

Name	Quest Number	Date
Anne Lawrance	251	07-09-20
Elna Kerswell	218	05-08-20
Beth Snewin	213	31-07-20
Barbara Reidy	212	30-07-20
Janet Robino	210	28-07-20
Marleen Acton	208	26-07-20
Wendy Kaus	201	19-07-20
Janet Cross	195	13-07-20
Annette Sibson	184	02-07-20
Beth Snewin	178	26-06-20
Ian Leach	163	11-06-20
Rosemary Payet	162	10-06-20
Annette Sutton	150	29-05-20
Wal Threlfall	137	16-05-20
Brigid Glass	123	02-05-20
Pat Charlton	38	07-02-20
Warren Charlton	34	03-02-20



From the Brisbane Courier Mail