

The Drongo

Number 167 August 2022



Ray Sutton

Bird Brains
AIMS Road
Fairfield



FROM THE PRESIDENT

Birdlife Townsville has continued to have lots of activities despite the weather and Covid 19.

The Hervey Range Birders' Breakfast was well attended as usual. Unfortunately, the birds were a little hesitant to show themselves. The Winter Shorebird Surveys were enjoyed by those who helped out. A group of volunteers was kept very busy at the Burdekin Shire Council Reef Fest answering many, many questions.

The Birdlife Australia Aussie Back Yard Bird Count is fast approaching – 17-23 October. This is an important Citizen Science Project which gives some valuable information on the state of Australian birds. It's very easy to register with Birdlife Australia and download the user-friendly app.

The Townsville City Council (TCC) will again partner with Birdlife to promote the count. Everyone who registers with TCC will be entered into the draw for some great prizes. BirdlifeTownsville will again use Library Displays and Shopping Centre Information Stands to encourage participation. Displays will be in City and Thuringowa Libraries for the month of September and Aitkenvale Library for October. Information Stands will be in Castletown Shopping Centre on October 12, Kmart Aitkenvale on October 13 and Fairfield Centre on October 14. Volunteers are still needed to fill the roster for these days. If you can do a two-hour shift please phone Janet Robino 0424 226 504.

The Black-throated Finch Waterhole Survey is on 22-23 October. If you can volunteer to take part in this important effort to assist in the recovery of this special little bird, please register your interest with the Black-throated Finch Recovery Team (BTFRT) on their website or text message Secretary Alma Ridep-Morris on 0407 905 501.

There still appears to be a teething issues with Birdlife Australia's new website membership management. If you have experienced any problems, email contact@birdlifetownsville.org.au. Wal Threlfall has been kept busy trying to sort these issues.

BirdLife Townsville's Facebook page is getting lots of 'hits'. The moderators, Karen Doyle and John Lowry, have been kept pretty busy so make sure you check it out and give it a 'like'. Some really lovely photos of birds are posted most days.

Covid 19 and unseasonable wet weather are still impacting on meetings and outings. Fingers crossed, we are back on track but just in case, make sure to check website – Activities Page – the night before any activity.

Janet Robino

YOUR COMMITTEE

| | | |
|--------------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| President: Janet Robino | Annette Sibson | Julia Goldsbury |
| Secretary: Wal Threlfall | Mark Horvath | |
| Treasurer: Nina Doyle | Brigid Glass | |

Newsletter Editor Annette Sutton amsgreat@gmail.com

Deadline for next Drongo is October 31st. Please send articles as Word documents, photos as attachments.

The views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of Birdlife Townsville.

ON GOLDEN POND

For birders, Townsville and surrounds have some wonderful locations that yield a good number of species. For me, this year in particular, a favourite haunt for observation and photography has been the lagoons and tidal flats either side of Cape Cleveland Road, immediately adjacent to the Bruce Highway junction.



Early morning light - marvellous

For those unfamiliar with the area, this site is just five kilometres further south from Alligator Creek. On a clear day, there's something special about the light just on daybreak, the golden hour, the sun bathing the lagoons and tidal water, keeping shadows to a minimum.

The presence of water, its depth and flow changing with the seasons, will determine what bird varieties are observed. The pelicans, ducks and swan enjoy good depth, the herons, storks, egrets and waders content with the shallows.



A Black-fronted Dotterel dodges through stones

Once the water has gone, the flats are still a good place for a visit; birds of prey circle overhead, finches flit in the grass next to the rail-line, pipits scuttle in the short grasses, honeyeaters explore the riparian edge among flowering pioneering shrub species, and pardalotes call across the landscape.

If you draw a blank elsewhere, be encouraged to head out and explore this often-rich environment.



This Black-necked Stork fishes the northern edges



A Red-capped Plover on the lookout for breakfast



This Striated Heron often frequents the very first culvert



White-faced Herons love this staging post

Peter Hughes

LUCKY PALMETUM

My sister Lynne recently came to stay and, as a relatively new birder and photographer, she was eager to see and photograph some of our local birds. I chose to take her to the Palmetum one afternoon, hoping for an egret or two, perhaps a kingfisher and a sunbird.



Immature male Sunbird

We wandered around the lagoon and chanced upon an Azure Kingfisher that had just caught a fish. The bird wasn't in the ideal position but it was close to us so that made up for that. We watched enthralled and madly photographing as the bird bashed and crashed that fish. It was fabulous to see and a thrill for me as well as for my sister.



Azure Kingfisher with a fish

After that excitement I took her over to the cacti gardens. I knew some of the succulents were in flower and that the Olive-backed Sunbirds were in residence there. We found the sunbirds busily feeding in amongst one particular group of succulents and quietly waited for them to become used to our presence. In the end Lynne found a convenient rock to sit on and was thrilled to be able to sit and photograph the gorgeous yellow birds as they fed. It was birding at it's best. There were 6 birds all up, one female, one adult male and 4 immature males. We went home after that because that experience just couldn't be beaten.

Annette Sibson

THE COMMON MYNA

(Acridotheres tristis)

Other Names: Indian Myna, Calcutta Myna, Myna

First introduced at Melbourne from SE Asia in 1862 to combat pests in Melbourne Market Gardens, the Common Myna quickly established itself.

In 1883 the Common Myna was first brought to Queensland and released at Hamleigh Sugar Plantation, Ingham, in order to help control insect pest (such as locusts and cane beetles) in the cane fields. These insect pests were a serious problem for the Herbert River Sugar Industry to such an extent that in 1884 neither Hamleigh or Victoria Sugar Mills crushed any sugar cane, because their crops had been devastated by a plague of locusts.

The Common Myna however, quickly established itself and spread locally, reaching the Atherton Tablelands and were so highly valued that the Herbert River Sugar Industry made representations to the Queensland Government to place the bird on the list of birds totally protected under the provision of the "Native Birds Protection Act".



Indian Myna

By the 1940s releases in Sydney, Brisbane and Toowoomba metropolitan areas quickly followed. Two releases in Tasmania, one in 1900 and another in 1955 at Launceston, both failed, as had another in Adelaide in the late 1950s. Today Mynas are common in most urban areas along the eastern Australian seaboard and have remained there without spreading far into the rural countryside.

This easily recognised sturdy (23-25cms) cocoa-brown bird with yellow bill, bare yellow skin behind the eyes and yellow legs are scavengers of urban parks, gardens and streets. Eating almost anything, including small fledgling birds and have fast become a nuisance/pest. They forage by day in scattered pairs or small family groups and at night sleep in noisy communal roosts in trees, under bridges, within rooves of buildings etc. They mate for life and aggressively compete with our native birds for nesting space.

Birdlife Townsville have two Myna bird traps for loan and those Members wishing to avail themselves can borrow them free of charge.

Wal Threlfall Secretary

ROSS DAM WETLANDS

TSG SURVEYS

15th May 2022 – A few more members joined us for this outing on a sunny crisp autumn morning, the first seven o'clock start for the year. Maybe it was the later start that got us a total of six surveyors?



Fan-tailed Cuckoo

The view from the levee bank didn't provide us with many wetland species. The first pond held a lonely Black Swan while the second had three Comb-crested Jacanas. That was all that was on the water's surface. There were the usual cormorants and kingfishers about, roosting in the trees, but little else.



Restless Flycatcher

There were however several Red-winged Parrots feeding which is always nice to see. Something we don't often encounter during our surveys at this location is Grey Fantails. However, on this outing there were quite a number, as well as Willie Wagtails. Further along to the north of the levee bank the cattle were accompanied by a large flock of Cattle Egrets, most of which were only visible when they took to the air. With the recent rain the ponds were overflowing and the road to the Townsville Sand and Gravel (TSG) stockpiles had a few pools and rivulets we had to traverse.

We encountered a turtle in the middle of the road, and it didn't seem too pleased when one of our party passed in front of it. The ponds along this section were also fairly barren in regard to waterbirds. We were graced with the presence of a Sea-Eagle perched high on a dead stick. It hadn't moved very far from where we saw it last month, on the same dead tree but one branch over. One species got away from us. The only views we got were a yellow underside and grey back of a small bird with a pointy bill. Wasn't a thornbill but couldn't confidently split it from a White-throated or Fairy Gerygone. Needed a more experienced birder with us, or a better view. Central Creek was also barren with only two Great Egrets in view. The above account sounds like we had a miserable time. However we did end up with fifty-five species so that's not a complete failure.



Grey Fantail

19th of June 2022 – Nice crisp morning to be out surveying and I guess that is why nobody showed up. Bron and I had the whole area to ourselves. Having such few observers makes it a little more difficult to count as there are only four eyes available. We trudged along slowly doing the usual routine, however the ponds were a little more productive than last month. We got an Australian Pelican, Black-necked Stork, Green Pygmy-Geese, and the usual cormorants. The Forest Kingfishers also seemed to be on the come-back with eleven spotted. An unusual sighting was that of 36 Little Corellas. Don't often see them out there.

Along the road to the quarry, we were graced with good views of a Fan-tailed Cuckoo, a Little Bronze-Cuckoos and a Restless Flycatcher. The little bird with the yellow underside, grey back and pointy bill was back in the same location but this time we got good views. A White-throated Gerygone. As per last month there was virtually nothing at Central Creek, so we called it a morning. 52 species sighted over a couple of hours on a very enjoyable outing. More observers would have been welcome though.

17th July 2022 – Our number of observers doubled this month. The four of us set off in anticipation. The ponds were much more productive this month with the highlight being 12 Cotton Pygmy-Geese on the first pond along with a couple of Black Swans. We also observed eleven Australian Pelicans which is the highest number we've seen for a little while.

The Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos and Red-backed Fairywrens were both prevalent during the morning's outing. The Blue-winged Kookaburras were also increasing in numbers with eight being sighted by our little group. One down-side to the morning was the sighting of two Common Mynas. All in all, another great morning with 45 species being observed over two- and one-half hours.



Little Bronze Cuckoo

Mark Horvath

NOT A BIRDING TRIP

Our family is visiting from the UK with a ten year old and a six year old so when we went up north for a few days it wasn't for birds. But we snuck a few in.



Metallic Starling

We called in at Tully to show them the Golden Gumboot and let the kids climb to the top. It was also a great chance to see a sugar mill up close and the little cane trains. That gave us time to spot some Metallic Starlings in the trees. A couple were inspecting the remains of last season's nest. We managed to take some photos when something scared the whole flock and off they all flew. Birding is so much up to chance. If we'd come fifteen minutes later we wouldn't have seen a bird.

Sadly there were no Double-eyed Fig-parrots at the caravan park though we have seen them there before. We could hear an Olive-backed Oriole but of course we couldn't see it.

So off to the Atherton Tablelands for the day. First stop, Lake Eacham. Yes! Three new birds for the year while they were having a swim in the ice pond. Way out on the lake was a small flock of Great Crested Grebes. I walked along the lakeside path and heard very loud wing flapping. Some sort of dove or pigeon. I was hoping for a Wompoo, but when I located it, it was a White-headed Pigeon so I was happy with that. There were actually two of them. Ray managed to spot a Pied Monarch but the only other birds I saw were Dusky and Lewin's Honeyeaters. And, of course, Brush Turkeys. On the drive out through the beautiful rainforest tunnel we spotted an Emerald Dove.

We explored the Waterfall Circuit near Millaa Millaa and Ray came across a Catbird in a very brief encounter. We only got a few birds but I could add three to my Quest. Didn't see a Brolga, a Sarus Crane or a Black-shouldered Kite. Completely bypassed Hastie's Swamp. A day goes quickly.

On Tuesday, the family went to the Aquarium so that meant Ray and I could spend a few hours on the Esplanade. There were half a dozen Whimbrels who had elected to overwinter. One of them had only one leg. I saw one lone Bar-tailed Godwit. A small flock of Pelicans sat up the southern end as usual with some terns and egrets. We could hear Varied Honeyeaters up and down the park and spotted them briefly. It was fun as I was practicing photographing birds in flight. I am pretty hopeless. I snag the occasional one.



On the Esplanade

Wednesday saw us all head off for Green Island. We watched a few species of birds while the family went snorkelling. Two new birds for the Quest. If you have been to Green Island recently you will know that the Buff-banded Rails are like pigeons. They are everywhere, trying to steal food from picnickers.

Along the path under the trees we spotted a white Egret. What sort? We soon identified it as an Eastern Reef. I've rarely seen the white one. We sat down at a picnic table under some tree about fifty metres from the beach. The rails were running around everywhere but some movement under a tree caught my eye. It was an Eastern Reef Egret, grey morph. It appeared to be catching insects and remained in the same spot for the whole time we sat there. The only other species we saw were Silver Gull and Welcome Swallow.

On the way home we called in at Etty Bay. We enjoyed a lovely picnic on the beach but no Cassowary. As we drove out, Elizabeth looked down into the valley to the right and spotted a male Cassowary and a juvenile, walking across a field of cattle. So even though they were a long way off, we got to see them.



Buff-banded Rail

Next stop was Wongaling Beach so the kids could have a break and everyone could soak up the beautiful scenery. A White-bellied Sea-Eagle, two Eastern Ospreys and a Brahminy Kite put on a flyover. A Pied Oystercatcher flew past and landed a hundred metres up the beach. Nice casual birding.



Eastern Reef Egret Grey morph



Eastern Reef Egret

The Cassowary and the Oystercatcher were new for the year. So for a non-birding holiday I added eight to my Quest. Not a bad result.

Annette Sutton

THE GENIUS OF BIRDS

Jennifer Ackerman (ISBN 978-1-4721-1436-5)

I recently finished reading this book, kindly lent to me by Hugh Sweatman. Wow what a great book, full of fabulous information about birds' brains. The old saying about 'bird brained' no longer stands as far as I'm concerned. Okay, some birds are not as clever as others, even within the same species some are more switched on than others, but generally birds are much more 'with it' than they have been given credit for.



Western Scrub Jay South Dakota Birds and Birding

Take the migratory waders, they leave one part of the world and fly for more than 10 thousand kilometers (in some cases) to end up exactly where they were last year. They don't have a map, GPS or access to satellites and still arrive where they set out to be. There is still debate on how the birds achieve this, but achieve it they do.

There is the Western Scrub-Jay in America that stashes food in hundreds of different places, and then remembers where and when it stashed the food. It also remembers what type of food it stashed and when it's best to return to eat that food, before it goes bad.

There is a crow species in New Caledonia that creates a tool to use to dig fat grubs out of trees! How neat is that. The bird actually fashions the tool from a palm frond and young birds can take up to 18 months to learn how to successfully replicate the correct tool.

There is still a lot of research going on to learn about the brains of birds and how they work; the book talks about various experiments, both in the past and ongoing. There is some technical talk but it's not too technical that a non-scientist like myself couldn't understand what I was reading.

As you can see, I thoroughly enjoyed learning more about birds. There are within the book some instances of Australian birds as well, which made it more relevant for me. Well worth a read if you want to learn more about our fabulous birds.

Annette Sibson

THE FAIRFIELD FRESHWATER LAKE

This natural occurring freshwater wetland existed well before the Idalia development and was set aside from the development for its high conservation value as wildlife habitat in our city.

The 1.75 ha Lake Fairfield, so named in the latest 2022/2023 White Pages publication, is connected to ground-water and is surrounded by a vegetation buffer. Obviously the water levels, which are weather dependent, vary each year and within each year in line with rainfall patterns.



Radjah Shelduck

Fortunately for us birders, the lake normally carries some water for most of the year resulting in a good diversity of water-birds such as several Cormorant species, Pacific Black and Plumed Whistling-Ducks, Australasian Darters, Spoonbills, Magpie Geese, Great, Intermediate, Little and Cattle Egrets as well as Australian Pelicans to name a few. Towards the end of the year, Black-necked Storks take advantage of low water levels to catch easy meals.

Together with bush birds, such as several honeyeater species, Rainbow Bee-eaters, several cuckoo species, Little Corellas and flycatchers/wagtails, the Fairfield Freshwater lake is an easily accessible suburban birding site well worth a visit. One hundred and thirty eight species are recorded for this location on the e-bird hotspot site named as 'Fairfield Waters Wetland'. Thankfully this site relieves me of the onerous task of listing all species here.

Like other local birders, I try to visit the lake a few times each year to take in the spectacle of lots of waterfowl species being present at the same time. In fact, Lake Fairfield is one of the few spots around Townsville where photographers are able to capture good shots of Wandering Whistling-Ducks for most, if not all, of the year.

Apart from these birds, there are three others that I always enjoy photographing at this location: the beautiful white and chestnut Radjah Shelduck (four seen here in mid-August this year); the Australian Wood Duck (three recently (2 males and 1 female), again in mid-August this year, and also the spectacular black and blue bird with the prominent

red/orange beak and facial shield, the Australasian Swamphen, formerly the Purple Swamphen, which I also enjoyed watching intently in mid-August this year.

While I have confidence that the Wood Ducks and Shelducks will continue to visit this location from time to time, I must say that I am a little concerned



Australian Wood Duck

for the future of the Australasian Swamphen as a resident bird of the Fairfield Freshwater Lake because of habitat destruction through removal of large areas of shoreline water plants that would normally provide the necessary cover, source of food and as a breeding refuge for these birds that require quite specific habitat conditions. Over the last several years I have only ever seen two adult birds on a single occasion at this location, but having said this, I note from e-bird records that four birds of this species were once recorded at this site.



Australasian Swamphen

I would like to know the 'science' behind the recent destructive treatment of shoreline vegetation on Fairfield Freshwater Lake which leaves the swamphen with a degraded habitat not conducive to permanent residency. It seems to me that the authority responsible for the ecological management of this important urban wetland would be well advised to follow the thrust of the Townsville City Council's Media Release '*Idalia wetland management focuses on plants, wildlife*' (Google Idalia Wetland Management), in order to do what is right for this delightful bird.

Norm Rains

QUEST

| Name | Quest Number | Date |
|-----------------|--------------|------------|
| Anne Lawrance | 329 | 25/11/2022 |
| Janet Robino | 322 | 18/11/2022 |
| Annette Sibson | 247 | 4/09/2022 |
| Wendy Kaus | 239 | 27/08/2022 |
| Pat Charlton | 239 | 27/08/2022 |
| Warren Charlton | 236 | 24/08/2022 |
| Barbara Reidy | 229 | 17/08/2022 |
| Beth Snewin | 228 | 16/08/2022 |
| Chris Corbett | 228 | 16/08/2022 |
| Elna Kerswell | 227 | 15/08/2022 |
| Rosemary Payet | 209 | 28/07/2022 |
| Ian Leach | 200 | 19/07/2022 |
| Marleen Acton | 178 | 27/06/2022 |
| Jill Staunton | 163 | 12/06/2022 |
| Malcolm Turner | 158 | 7/06/2022 |
| Annette Sutton | 157 | 6/06/2022 |
| Brigid Glass | 152 | 1/06/2022 |
| Julie Goldsbury | 96 | 6/04/2022 |

- **Thursday 1 September** 6.30am Wongaloo, Contact Norm Rains 0458788107
- **Sunday 4 September** 6.30am Town Common, Contact Janet Robino 0424226504
- **Tuesday 6 September** 7pm Photography Group Contact Mark Horvath 0409332633
- **Saturday 10 September** 2pm Monthly Meeting, Contact Wal Threlfall 0429111055

