

The Drongo

Number 170 May2023



Looking Back

Musk Duck

Bits and
Pieces



FROM THE PRESIDENT

There are still members who are experiencing some issues with their membership status with BirdLife Australia. If you have any concerns, contact Birdlife Australia by Email: support@birdlife.org.au or Phone 03 93470757 (ext 4).

Make sure you keep yourself up-to-date with the Activities Page of the website. Please register with the leader for any outings. Outings will be cancelled if there are no registrations. If there has to be last minute cancellations for any reason, the leader can send those who have registered a message.

Townsville City Council (TCC) will introduce hire charges for The Soundshell (our meeting venue) from the new Financial Year. Charges are expected to be \$9 per hour on weekdays and \$10 per hour on weekends. The Committee resolved that That Birdlife Townsville continue monthly and Photography meetings at the TCC Soundshell. Further, as from July 2023 monthly meetings would be a maximum of 3 hours (Committee meeting 1 hour from 1pm to 2pm and General meeting 2 hours from 2pm to 4pm) and Photography Group would be a maximum of 2 hours (from 7pm to 9pm). To off-set the running costs of meetings we ask those attending to invest \$2 in the raffle at each meeting, and a \$1 donation to cover cost of afternoon tea. I'm sure all members and visitors would agree that our usual afternoon teas are well and truly worth \$1. It is also very helpful for the Afternoon Tea Team to have a good idea of how many they need to cater for so please register your intention to attend. These small actions by each of us makes a huge difference to the small handful of people organizing the meetings.

Several people have had difficulty reporting sightings on the Black-throated Finch Recovery Team Website. These sightings are very important for the future of this little bird so that known habitat can be protected. To make it easier to report any sightings, Eric Vanderduys has offered that sighting records can be sent directly to him at eric.vanderduys@csiro.au.

Changes to the Museum Of Tropical Queensland loan processes puts our Community Awareness and School Education Programs in jeopardy. We have been assured that we can continue to use the Perspex display cases containing the Barn Owl and local Kingfishers, and we will be able to access the specimens for our Library Displays in October. The Committee is continuing negotiations with the Museum regarding access to the 'Box of Bits' which have been an important part of our School programs.

Janet Robino

YOUR COMMITTEE

President: Janet Robino	Annette Sibson	Julia Goldsbury
Secretary: Wal Threlfall	Mark Horvath	Kathleen Vowles
Treasurer: Nina Doyle	Brigid Glass	Warren Charlton

Newsletter Editor Annette Sutton 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.

BIRDING IN 1970

After reading some chapters from a book written by Brigadier Hugh R. Officer, called "Recollections of a Bird Watcher", it occurred to me that many of our readers who may have searched in those areas for these more rare species would be interested in comparing Hugh's success with their own. Have our rare dry country birds become more rare in the past 40+ years? Or are they holding their own when good seasons allow them to breed profusely? Are changes in management of our National Parks (removing those wonderful dams and waterholes built by the previous owners and in not having managers on the property), as well as an increase in tourists, degrading the natural environment? However, regardless of that, I will give you a precis of one of his birding trips, which I particularly enjoyed reading. Hugh did not keep a list of all the common birds that they may have sighted, as he was chasing the rarer species in our semi-desert Inland and he did not keep a complete trip list either.

In June, 1970, Hugh paired up with Billie Gill in Townsville and headed to Winton in her sedan (not 4-wheel drive). Conditions were dry, with bare black soil and starving stock. Special species seen were a Red-capped Robin close to Winton and closer to Opalton, Hall's Babblers and an Inland Thornbill. Emu Grasswrens were easily sighted while in camp at Opalton, along with Golden-backed, Grey-headed Honeyeaters and a Spinifex-bird. Heading west, past Old Cork Station, then south along the east bank of the Diamantina, many Spinifex Pigeons, a Red-backed Quail, Cinnamon Quail Thrushes, Gibberbirds, Crimson and Orange Chats and a White-winged Fairy-wren were seen. Through Birdsville, onto a shocking gibber-strewn road eastward towards Durrie, Gibberbirds and those Wrens were often sighted. A recent thunderstorm had filled the dam on Durrie Station, where a lignum swamp provided a Spotted Crake, Black-fronted Dotterels and Diamond Doves with their "Oh Pappa. Oh my Pappa" call. (I like that). A single Letter-winged Kite, was also seen near the dam. Pelicans and Yellow-billed Spoonbills were enjoying the water, while Flock Pigeons were nearby.

At their Cordillo Station camp, there were multiple Crested Bellbirds, Budgerigars and Orange and Crimson Chats. Near Innaminka, they were pleased to see that the "Dig Tree" was looking quite splendid despite its age. They crossed Cooper Creek, just short of Nappamerry and headed towards Tibooburra, on the most unpleasant gibber track of the whole journey. Much further south, they

saw Chiming Wedgebills, Blue Bonnet and Red-rumped Parrots. Then they came upon a different environment that, after a thunderstorm, had turned into a garden bright with yellow daisies, purple vetch and other wildflowers in full bloom. There, Singing Honeyeaters, Cockatiels, Ground Cuckoo-shrikes and Chestnut-crowned Babblers were added to their list. A Spotted Harrier and a Black Falcon were also seen hunting together. Many days later, near Charleville, they again saw a Black Falcon and a Spotted Harrier hunting together. Interesting? The country continued to be drought affected as they headed to Bourke, but Chestnut Quail-Thrush, more Crested Bellbirds, Redthroats, Wedgebills and Pied Honeyeaters were spotted along the way to Tibooburra. Major Mitchell Cockatoos, Common Bronzings, Crested Bellbirds, Chestnut Quail-Thrush and a Little Eagle were located further along the rocky road to Bourke. One of their targets had been to find different Grass Wrens in various known and suitable areas during the trip, but the searches had been without success, apart from those at Opalton.

Finally their journey through mostly barren lands came to an end as they headed home from Bourke, northwards on the Warrego Highway to Charleville. The country remained dry and no new species were found. Their night in Mitchell called for a Motel room but the bitter cold still necessitated that Hugh slept in his sleeping bag under the scant blankets. From there, they headed further east to the Bunya Mountains, where in the morning, a frost found them with frozen water taps. In spite of the cold they enjoyed the usual splendid birding. After searching for two days in the Yarraman area, they eventually had a fleeting glimpse of a pair of Black-breasted Button-quail. Bell Miners were also heard in the Blackbutt Range before they continued north to Biluela, Mt Morgan and the coastal road back to Townsville. (Quote) "We took the minor road via Ogmoo, St Lawrence, and Carmila where the Bush Stone-curlews serenaded us during the night." Remember when that was the minor road? What a relief it is to avoid that old 'crystal' highway. Burdekin Duck, Painted Quail, Plum-headed Finches, Drongos, Scarlet Honeyeaters and Little Friarbirds were the highlights along the coast. Later, in a search around Paluma they found Fern Wrens, as well as the more common Paluma species.

Their journey ended in Innisfail after travelling 4 850 miles (approx. 7760 kms).

Elna Kerswell

BIRDS ON CLOUDY CREEK WALK

A local resident of Paluma wanted ID on a bird they had never seen before. The description sounded something like a Red-necked Crake. Unfortunately, the bird was sighted at Cloudy Creek! Anne and I made a special trip up to Paluma to see if we could find it. With all the rain this year, the path down to Cloudy Creek was a little slippery under foot. Moss was thick and very wet on all the 'steps'. Not only did we not find the target bird on the way down to the creek, we did not find any bird. As we trudged back up the track, something flew across the path in front of us. They were not co-operative, darting quickly amongst the leaf litter. Finally! One sat still right in the middle of my binocular view for about one second. Even with that brief look it managed to show all the features we needed to make a firm identification. A pair of Fern Wrens!! Made that exhausting trek down and back worthwhile.

We had an early lunch at the Possum and Pumpkin and had the best ever Pumpkin Soup. While eating, we managed to solve the issue of the 'Crake'.

If I am asked by a non-birder to ID a bird, I usually ask some question to clarify what they really saw. 'A medium sized brownish bird with a reddish neck and chest on the ground in the rainforest' is pretty hard to be really sure about. To pin down the real size, I usually ask if it is bigger or smaller than a bird they would be familiar with eg Sparrow, Myna, Magpie and so on. Next thing I try to pin down is the shape and size of bill and legs. What bird was doing eg flying, in tree, digging or scratching on the ground. Last of all I ask about any particular markings eg colour – back, belly, tail, head etc. With this information, it is usually a lot easier to decide. With the use of a field guide, we were able to finally answer the query. It was a Juvenile Victoria's Riflebird which just happened to be taking a little break on the ground.



Janet Robino

GREAT BREEDING EVENTS

Taken from *The Australian* April, 2023

It has been a tumultuous time on the flood plains of the Murray-Darling Basin. The triple La Nina's trail of destruction includes massive fish kills, livestock and crop losses and damage to property. With that important caveat in mind, it's also "A time of ecological celebration," says Matt Herring, an ecologist who specialises in the region.

For domestic travellers, even those with only a passing interest in Australia's feathered flocks, conditions have produced a birdlife bonanza.



"It's boom time," says Herring, who works on conservation projects through his Murray Wildlife consultancy. "Some of these birds had second and third successful nestings this season, and after that terrible drought it was just what we needed.... some of the colonies of Egrets, Ibis and Herons are in the tens of thousands, and people are starting to see the juveniles that have fledged, dispersing and scattering beyond the Murray-Darling Basin to coastal wetlands." As the flood waters recede and things start drying out, other birds start coming for the mud flats.



The prospects of the critically endangered Australian Bittern, also known as the Bunyip Bird for its eerie booming call, have also been boosted by the floods. "I'm anticipating that its population will go from 1300 to maybe 1500 or 1600 in Australia," says Herring, who has been helping Riverina rice growers to adopt Bittern friendly farming practices since 2012. "When you're an endangered species, numbers like that really matter. All this flooding and the use of environmental water (released by authorities) over the past decade is very positive for bitterns."



For the first time in 20 years Australian Pelicans are breeding in their thousands in the Narran lakes in outback New South Wales. The area where the pelicans are paddling, parenting and gorging is usually cropped farmland, owned by private landholders and inaccessible to the public. Over the next twelve months, the waters will recede and the Pelicans will make their way to coastal colonies or more permanent freshwater such as Lake Brewster in the Lachlan River catchment in central New South Wales

Drying up is a natural part of these systems. They are temporary inland wetland systems. The problem is how long will the next dry last? History has shown us that these dry periods are getting drier and longer.

UNSW's Kate Brandis and her research colleagues have counted 15000 nests in The Colony on the Lakes Southern Shore, one of two in the remote region. A pair will generally raise one chick so there are about 45000 Pelicans in this corner of the lake.

Is there another la Nina on the way? We'll have to wait and see.

JABIRU ON THE HUNT

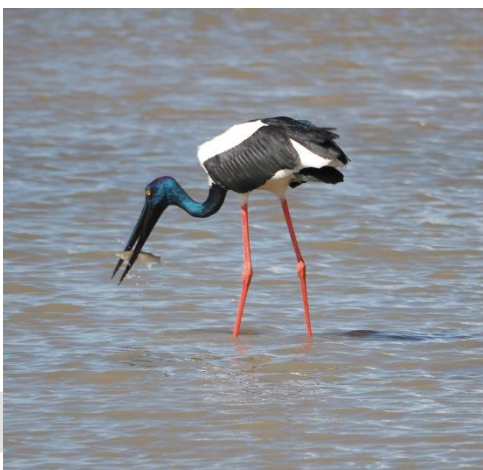
Thanks to wise planning over forty years ago I have the good fortune to live at Alligator Creek, less than a ten minute drive from one of the best wetlands around Townsville in my view, and a birding site that provides heaps of opportunities for those with a passion for bird observation and photography. I am referring to the vast wetlands that form part of the Bowling Green Bay National Park through which Cape Cleveland Road runs, commencing from the railway crossing at the 'T' intersection with the Bruce Highway about 30 km south of Townsville and terminating about 20 km away at the gate of the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS). AIMS is also signposted at this intersection so this place is commonly called 'The AIMS Road Wetlands', or the AIMS Turnoff Wetlands even though AIMS is a lot more distant along Cape Cleveland Road.

This wetland, like many other coastal wetlands, exists as an interface between fresh and salt water, which results in periodic variance in degree of salinity over the whole wetland. This situation is entirely seasonal by nature under the influence of rainfall and ocean tides. Obviously the bird composition of these wetlands at any given time of year is influenced by water conditions, with some species like the Egrets and the Black-necked Stork occupying all levels of salinity while others like Black Swans and Magpie Geese usually occupy sections where fresh or less saline conditions exist. .

Against this background, one never knows what is likely to be seen on a visit to these wetlands. On a recent trip with fellow birder Pete Johnston in early May this year we identified a number of species including lots of Grey Teal, a few Pacific Black Ducks, several Little Black Cormorants, a couple of Australasian Darters, a dozen or so Welcome Swallows, a dozen or so Glossy Ibis, several Royal Spoonbills, a couple of Caspian Terns, a few Little and Great Egrets, a pair of Black-fronted Dotterels and of course the usual Magpie Larks, White breasted Woodswallows and Masked Lapwings. The stand-out sighting, though, was a lone female Jabiru and I must say she put on a most entertaining feeding performance for those privileged to witness it.

This fully mature remarkably clean and brightly plumaged bird appeared suddenly shortly after our arrival while we were shooting other species, and dropped into what would be no more than six inches of water on the Eastern side of the causeway. After a few moments she commenced a remarkably measured striding gait about 50 yards or so from

our vantage point, a gait highly reminiscent of the action of 'pacer' horse at the 'Trots'. I thought at the time that she was about to go into feeding mode and I was proven right as I have witnessed this behaviour on previous occasions over the years. After pacing around for a little while the bird very determinedly commenced to chase prey in the shallows with the prey, equally determinedly, avoiding being eaten by rapid dispersal.



The bird reacted to the tactics of the prey by rapidly giving chase, at first randomly with lots of sharp veering, tight spinning, short, focused flights, short rapid leaps, rapid running, all accompanied by a wide range of wing beats. My camera was set for single exposures and I was reluctant to change to 'burst' shooting in case the action moved further away out of range. In spite of this, I managed to capture some reasonable shots of the bird in action.

The hunting behaviour continued for about ten minutes I would say, with pauses now and then between bouts of rapid action. Eventually the bird moved out of camera range so the photo session came to an end.

Although I have witnessed and captured images of this type of action on previous occasions with Jabiru and also with both Little and Intermediate Egrets, this recent outing will live long in my memory as one of the best photographic sessions I have had the pleasure of experiencing at this particular birding site..

As I always say, if you want great shots of birds two things have to happen----you must be out there and you must always have your camera with you.

Norm Rains

TOWN COMMON

7 MAY 2023

The seven members who made it to the Town Common for Birdlife Townsville's monthly survey were treated to a great morning of birding. The water levels are finally dropping a bit and some of the water plants are thinning out a bit. In total we saw 74 species and 711 birds. The Ospreys seem to be in nesting mode. One of them did a fly-over with a fish firmly clasped in its talons. A pair of Swamp Harriers slowly glided by giving everyone a chance to have a good look. One Yellow-billed Spoonbill was spotted among its Royal cousins. The first Hardheads seen this year were there in good numbers. Check out Birddata for the full list.

We disturbed a Carpet Python trying to have a snooze in the early morning sun. By the time seven of us had very carefully walked up into Payets Tower, it begrudgingly slowly moved off the stairs. A little crocodile, probably about a meter and a half long, seemed to be sizing up the seven juvenile Darters sitting in their usual tree at the Concrete Bird Hide. The Darters and a few Little Pied Cormorants watched it closely while hanging on tightly.

Janet Robino

CITIZEN SCIENCE

We can all help collect data which adds to the body of knowledge about our birds. From The Australian, 8th/9th April, 2023.

"Scientists can't be everywhere and people out there collecting information is incredibly valuable," says Deakin University ecologist and conservationist, Euan Ritchie. "When people are on holiday - whether it's on the Cape York Peninsula, in the Kimberley, or south-west Tasmania, or in the middle of the arid zone - taking photos and documenting through the apps is democratising science."

Here is where to share your citizen science findings.

Birddata - Birdlife Australia's app and website. "The scientific value to us of people doing a 2 hectare, 20 minute survey on Birddata is invaluable," says Sean Dooley. "It's the basis of an enormous amount of our analytics of Australian bird populations."

birddata.birdlife.org.au

eBird - a website and app developed and maintained by New York's Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. "I use eBird to record my life list," says Kirsty Costa. "It also opens your eyes to all the different places where birds can be found." Matt Herring says the website is crucial for tracking declining populations. "It's impossible to do our research without the help of citizen scientists."

ebird.org

Pelicans on the move- Kate Brandis, fresh from completing her feather map of Australia, is working on a project banding juvenile Pelicans in the Murray-Darling basin. "Each wetland has its own colour. When they're spotted on the coast, we know where they've come from," she says. "If a member of the public spots a Pelican with a coloured band, they can Google "Peli bands" for instructions on completing their citizen science task."

environment.nsw.gov.au



JULY 1923 EMU

A brief look through a 100 year old magazine

There are some interesting articles in this magazine, one of which is the wing marking of the Black-backed Magpie.

The writer of the article on the Black-backed Magpie fed his wild birds with neck bones from bullocks and several livers so that he could closely observe the markings on the birds. He only performed this feeding regime during winter when food was scarce for the birds. The article is accompanied by two black and white photos showing the birds enjoying the food given. He says that at one sitting forty-five birds turned up to feed.

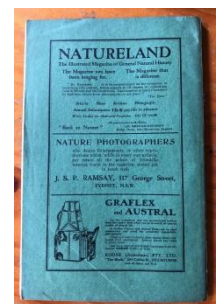
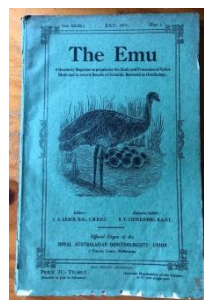
Another article is about the nest of the White-eared Honeyeater. The writers were the first to collect and hand to Queensland Museum a White-eared Honeyeater nest. The writers were able to watch the adult birds build the nest. Later the writers went back to the area where the nest was and found it abandoned, so they collected it for the Museum.

There is one article about the difficulties of identifying Crows from Ravens - a problem that birders still have today.

In the section named 'Camera Craft' there are three articles and three accompanying black and white photographs. The first article deals with the visit of a photographer to a White-faced Heron nesting site. Well, let us just say that modern day photographers would be in a great deal of trouble if they did what the photographer did to get his photograph.

Needless to say, there are many differences between birding one hundred years ago and today, some good and some not so good. All have helped in some way to add to the knowledge we have now about our birds.

Annette Sibson



MUSK DUCK

[ABC Alice Springs](#) By [Alex Barwick](#)

Posted Sat 4 Mar

A species of duck that has not been seen in Central Australia for more than 120 years has turned up at the Alice Springs sewage ponds. The bulky Musk Duck is often found in Australia's south-east and south-west, but there are no official records of the bird in the Northern Territory.

Mark Carter, a former bird guide and local zoologist, said the duck's arrival had made his birding year.

"In terms of birdwatching, this is like Beyonce and Prince and Elvis have all turned up at once," he said.

Mr Carter received a notification on a birdwatching app that someone had spotted the duck and he assumed it was an error.

"I saw this thing saying, 'Musk duck in Alice Springs', and I thought, 'Yeah right, rubbish — that's got to be a mistake'."

But it wasn't. Mr Carter drove straight to the sewage ponds and was delighted to discover the lone female musk duck was still there.

How did the duck get to Alice Springs? Sean Dooley from Birdlife Australia said the Musk Duck, like many water birds, had likely taken advantage of the boom-and-bust conditions of the outback. But he said the duck's arrival was all the more remarkable given the species loved deep water — not found in Alice Springs — and generally only flew at night.

"They're quite stubby-winged ... they're not known to be great long-distance flyers," Mr Dooley said.

"They look like sort of little grey mini submarines; they're very low in the water."

However, the duck's arrival in the town's sewage ponds is bittersweet.

"It's always tinged with a bit of sadness. A lot of these vagrant birds are quite lost," Mr Dooley said.

"We never know whether they actually ever make it back to their home territory."

19th-century record shrouded in mystery

There are claims a musk duck specimen was shot in the West MacDonnell Ranges of Central Australia in the 1890s.

"We're not quite sure when; it could be as late as about 1894, possibly on one of the Victorian expeditions, but it's all word of mouth," Mr Carter said.

In recent official records, the closest a Musk Duck has been seen to Alice Springs is still more than 600 kilometres away in western Queensland.

"If they're coming from there, they're having to fly across the Simpson Desert, which is a daunting

prospect for even the most accomplished flyers," Mr Dooley said



Female Musk Duck Courtesy ebird

Key points:

Musk Ducks are usually found in the south-east and south-west of Australia

A zoologist says it is extraordinary to see one in the outback as they are not known long-distance flyers

It is possible the bird has become lost and may never make it back to its home territory

Thanks to Beth Snewin

VAGRANCY

Vagrancy is a phenomenon in biology whereby an individual animal (usually a bird) appears well outside its normal range; they are known as vagrants. The term accidental is sometimes also used. There are a number of poorly understood factors which might cause an animal to become a vagrant, including internal causes such as navigatory errors (endogenous vagrancy) and external causes such as severe weather (exogenous vagrancy). Vagrancy events may lead to colonisation and eventually to speciation.

Some birds are sent off course by storms, such as some North American birds blown across the Atlantic Ocean to Europe. Birds can also be blown out to sea, become physically exhausted, land on a ship and end up being carried to the ship's destination.

While many vagrant birds do not survive, if sufficient numbers wander to a new area they can establish new populations. Many isolated oceanic islands are home to species that are descended from landbirds blown out to sea, Hawaiian honeycreepers and Darwin's finches being prominent examples.