

The Drongo

Number 176 November 2024



Mark Horvath

Grasswren
survey

Bladensburg
NP surprise

Larapinta Trail



FROM THE PRESIDENT

At the end of August several members enjoyed the Birders' Breakfast at Herveys Range Heritage Tea Rooms. This is always a well-supported outing. Not just for the great breakfast, but the easy birding and good company.

In September Wal and I were guest speakers at the Townsville Garden Club. There were at least 100 garden enthusiasts in attendance, including a few Birdlife Townsville members. It was a good opportunity to promote the Aussie Bird Count.

The Latham's Snipes National September Count was coordinated by Annette Sibson. Several members checked out wetlands in our region with a few Snipe found.

At the risk of making it sound like our group is obsessed with outings that include a good feed, the outing to Paluma was well attended. After the big drive and some serious birding we were rewarded with a lovely morning tea at the Ivy Cottage.

As usual, October has been a very busy month with several activities to promote the Aussie Bird Count. Displays were installed in the three City Libraries for the month with bird specimens provided by the Museum of Tropical North Queensland. Feedback from Library Staff was excellent. They all said the best thing was that the displays really attracted the young children who were full of questions about all the birds.

Birdlife Townsville and the Townsville City Council (TCC) held guided birdwatching tours at the Sustainability Centre. Birdlife Townsville supported the TCC Tree Planting activity at Lou Lister Park at the end of Summerfield Street in Hermit Park. This is step one in a larger revegetation project of a very barren area of the park. Local residents have undertaken to care for the trees to ensure they survive to maturity.

The first of the Town Common Monthly Surveys, in support of the NQ Dry Tropics Project to control weeds in the Freshwater Lagoon, were conducted at four designated points. This project is set to continue for three years. Several members took part in the Tony Grice Annual Black-throated Finch Waterhole Survey. Despite the very early starts on the Saturday and Sunday, this was once again a pleasant way to spend time birding – especially if you were lucky enough to have the Black-throated Finch visit your waterhole.

We all managed to squeeze some Aussie Bird Counts in between all the above.
A big thank you to all the members who volunteered to participate in these activities.

On behalf of the Committee, I wish you all a Happy Christmas and a Happy and Healthy 2025.

Janet Robino

CANCELLATION

The Paluma Citizen Science Campout – "Southern extent of Cassowary" and "Birds with Altitude" Programs proposed for early November has been cancelled and rescheduled for 4,5,6 July 2025.

YOUR 2024 COMMITTEE		
President:	Janet Robino	Annette Sibson Brigid Glass
Secretary:	Wal Threlfall	Mark Horvath Claire Willard
Treasurer:	Nina Doyle	Warren Charlton Mike Grigg

Newsletter Editor Annette Sibson annette.sibson@bigpond.com

Deadline for next Drongo is January 30 2025. Please send articles as Word documents, photos as attachments.
The views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of Birdlife Townsville.

GRASSWREN SURVEYS MOUNT ISA 2024

Grasswrens are small reclusive birds with restricted distributions in hard-to-reach places in mostly hostile environments. This makes them both a problem and a challenge for birdwatchers. Conservation efforts are made difficult by the logistical problems encountered in monitoring populations on a regular basis.

Carpentarian Grasswrens *Amytornis dorotheae* (Carpies) and Kalkadoon Grasswrens *Amytornis ballarae* (Kalkies) live in Spinifex country around Mount Isa, with some Carpie populations persisting in the Northern Territory. In optimal country they are often found close to each other with Carpies preferring flatter areas criss-crossed by gullies, whereas Kalkies like the slopes and rocky outcrops more.

Birdlife North Queensland has been conducting surveys of these species at several locations on private property north of Mount Isa since 2008, at first coordinated by Graham Harrington and more recently by Kath Shurcliff. Thanks to Mark Horvath who kindly invited me to join him as a volunteer I was able to take part in this year's surveys.



Survey area, Calton Hills

Participating in the surveys is not straightforward. The location is remote, the terrain is very challenging, and the surveying requires on-going concentration and application to the process. That said, it is also a very rewarding experience with opportunities to see lots of good country and plenty of outback birds. As with any incursion into the outback, teamwork, a bit of bush awareness and some common sense helps to ensure safe and successful birding.

The first day was spent getting to know each of the other participants and learning the survey techniques, before we moved into the main survey area. As mentioned, teamwork was critical, and, given that Mark was charged with reading the GPS and had also volunteered to cook, we were spared the ignominious shame of getting lost and/or starving. I reciprocated with the equally important task of boiling the billy early so that we could enjoy the sunrise with a hot strong coffee.

The next six days were spent walking transects along previously plotted locations collecting and recording our observations. Large-scale fires had burnt many areas since the previous survey and a key focus was to see how populations had fared in burnt areas, and therefore recording the degree of fire damage at each location was important.

At our first campsite we were graced with several flowering Desert Bloodwoods *Corymbia terminalis* which attracted lots of Brown Honeyeaters, White-winged Trillers, Varied Lorikeets and Black-faced Woodswallows. Even though we saw several groups of Grasswrens on our first surveys we were unable to get any decent photos, and this issue was going to persist with us, even though other groups were getting some very nice close-ups on



Varied Lorikeet

cheaper (and lighter) equipment. Such is life!

On the second and third afternoons we had time to visit some water holes for a swim and some patient photography. These deep pools attracted many Grey-fronted Honeyeaters, Painted Finches, Long-tailed Finches, Pictorella Mannikins, Peaceful Doves and Diamond Doves. We also enjoyed a wash in the surprisingly chilly water.



Waterhole

Although the Honeyeaters were ubiquitous, the finches were rarely seen other than at the waterhole, and never well enough for good photos.



Painted Finch

Surveys lasted between 4 to 6 hours depending upon the terrain and the frequency of Grasswrens. We stopped every 200 metres along predetermined transects and used playbacks to attract the birds. If we found any Grasswrens, we would record the exact GPS coordinates, numbers, sex and age where possible, spinifex height and coverage, and also take some habitat photos.

Birds were often found in habitats we considered atypical, such as Carpies living among the boulders on steeper slopes but as with any bird species, habitat selection is flexible based upon opportunity. Lots of habitat had been burnt and the rocky outcrops seemed to provide refuges for all birds, Grasswrens included.



Carpentarian Grasswren



Kalkadoon Grasswren habitat



Carpentarian Grasswren habitat



Kalkadoon Grasswren

The surveys obviously provided us with opportunities for seeing and photographing other local birds. Memorable among these were Black-breasted Buzzard, Black Falcon, Black-tailed Treecreeper, Spinifexbird, Budgerigar and Silver-crowned Friarbird.



Spinifexbird

Most of the other survey volunteers were long-term helpers. Two couples had come from the Brisbane region and one man had come up from Victoria to take part again – such is the attraction of this event. Apart from having the time and the fitness, you need a well-equipped vehicle, with fridge/freezer, solar power, spare tyres and plenty of water. Internet access is restricted, and we found it only on one or two of the higher hills that we scaled as part of our surveys, forgetting an item means a 50km drive in to Mount Isa to search for a replacement. In other words, preparation and motivation are prerequisites but the rewards can be great.

John Lowry



White-plumed Honeyeater



Grey-fronted Honeyeater



Black-breasted Buzzard



Long-tailed Finch

CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH AN AUSTRALIAN OWLET-NIGHTJAR

Camping at Bough Shed Hole campground at Bladensburg National Park, just half an hour's drive south of Winton, in outback Queensland: Early Friday morning, I was sitting on the steps of our caravan, putting on my socks and shoes, when a small bird flew into one of the tree hollows just in front of me. I initially thought it was a Yellow-throated Miner, but a minute later, it popped its head up and I was eyeball to eyeball with a gorgeous Australian Owlet-nightjar. It stayed there for enough time for Len to get some nice photos, while we geared up for our day out. And... It was still watching us as we departed camp for our first day's birding around the NP. When we returned to camp in the afternoon, it was nowhere to be found. For the rest of the four days we were camped here, we did not see our cute little neighbour again. Brief as this encounter was, it is one I'll always remember.

Departure day and another welcome delay. When packing up camp to leave the park, a Little Eagle flew in and perched in a nearby River Gum on the bank of Surprise Creek and Len got a couple of OK distant photos. We were then on our way and on approaching Top Crossing at Surprise Creek, we found ourselves stopped again (after only a few hundred meters) for great views of a pair of White-backed Swallows hawking close by us. The camera was unpacked once again and we spent the next 15 minutes watching, and attempting to photograph, this quite unexpected and extraordinary display.

Feeling very happy and satisfied after being wowed by this spectacle, we were finally able to be on the road again.

Christine Ezzy



Australian Owlet-nightjar



Little Eagle



White-backed Swallow

TORRESIAN IMPERIAL-PIGEON WATCH AND COUNT

From Cape York to Gladstone, the count runs all November and December, you choose the venue, what days and number of days you want to participate. All from 4pm to 6pm.

Members, this is another important survey and it only requires a commitment of 2 hours. Your own personal count. All details at: <http://www.pipwatch.net/current-season-piptip-coast-counts>

Contact: Julia Hazel (James Cook University) 0407431382 or Julia.Hazel@jcu.edu.au

RARE 'LOST SPECIES' PHOTOGRAPHED

Earlier this year, wildlife photographer Tom Vierus set out on a World Wildlife Fund (WWF) photography expedition on Papua New Guinea's island New Britain. During his trip, he photographed multiple different bird species but didn't recognize all of them.

One of the birds he didn't recognize had a grey body, orange face and red around their eyes. He uploaded a photo of this mystery bird to iNaturalist, a community-based animal and plant identification platform to try to find out what it was.

At the time of Vierus' photo, the last documentation of the New Britain Goshawk (*Tachyspiza princeps*) was recorded in 1969 and kept at the Museum of Natural History in New York. The bird had never been photographed.

Several iNaturalist commenters confirmed that the bird was, in fact, a New Britain Goshawk, and Vierus was the first ever to photograph one.

Vierus' now-famous photo almost didn't happen — he snapped it on a whim. "The goshawk was very far away, and I only noticed it in a blink of a moment while photographing a different bird nearby," Vierus said. It's important to note that while the New Britain Goshawk was considered "lost," there have been several sightings of the rare bird by Papuans, Austronesians and other indigenous people who live on the island. In local languages, the bird is called keango or kulingapa.

Unfortunately, the elusive bird is classified as a vulnerable species because of habitat loss. Vierus hopes that his photo will inspire increased conservation efforts.

"It is wonderful to see how conservation photography can help in safeguarding areas by documenting the existing biodiversity and also a good reminder of how important visual storytelling is," Vierus said.

By Alana Francis-Crow Published in The Dodo on Sep 28, 2024



FROM 'THE EMU' 110 YEARS AGO

April 1914 issue of 'The Emu', the official organ of the Royal Ornithologists' Union.

Advertised as - A quarterly magazine to popularize the study and protection of Native Birds.

Ed. - These magazines make for very interesting reading, sometimes somewhat long winded in the articles, but over all very interesting. Below is a shortened version of some of the articles that appeared in April 1914. Only a few short months before the start of WWI.

Field Notes on the Spotless Crake by Miss SA Fletcher, Springfield (Tasmania)

Miss Fletcher undertook a careful study of this bird during the 1913 breeding season. She was often accompanied by her sister or her scout (Miss Lowther) and has made a meticulous study of an area of wetland in the vicinity of the local school. They learnt the calls of the birds by listening intently and discovered that the birds have a variety of calls – growling when alarmed, pretty murmuring sounds while feeding, among others.

The study included the types of reeds preferred by the birds for nesting and some of the plants that the birds may have been eating or searching for food in. Much time was spent looking for nesting birds on eggs. The detailed observations of the eggs are very good. (Unfortunately, egg collecting was still a common hobby in those days.) One pair of birds was noticed to be nesting in a swamp that was in the school yard, and very near the school playground. Observations of calls were able to be made during the school day.

Two excellent photographs were included showing the type of swamps the birds used and a nest with eggs in situ.

Search for eggs of Sandstone Shrike-thrush – Harry G Barnard

This fellow was up at Borroloola in the Northern Territory and was out searching in December. His camping equipment consisted of a small tent-fly, mosquito net, and enough flour, tea and sugar for 4 or 5 days. He also took a gun to use to hunt game.

He was looking for nests with eggs, unfortunately (Ed. - fortunately) he was only able to find one nest with 2 eggs. He observed a number of new and old nests and came to the conclusion that he was too early for nesting season so would return in a fortnight or so.

He notes on his return to Borroloola that he walked approximately 70 miles (113kms) and had an average temperature of 105 degrees Fahrenheit (40' C). (Ed. I'd like to insert the 'wow' emoji here.)

Out of interest he does mention seeing White-throated Grasswren (*Amytornis woodwardia*) and a couple of their old nests on a number of occasions. I did a bit of research (Ebird and Birdata) and discovered that no Grasswren species have been reported seen around that area these days.

A visit to Gosford Scrubs – Sidney W Jackson, Chatswood, NSW

The majority of this article is a list of the birds seen and heard on a private property in Gosford. It was nice to read that a nest with eggs of the Yellow-faced Honeyeater was found, but not interfered with. He also notes that nine years ago the Bell-miners were very plentiful in the Gosford area, but since then, their numbers have become considerably less. He states - In the near future these and other of our native birds will be a thing of the past about Gosford and other places, if the 'juvenile pea-rifle bird-killing crusade' is still allowed by the Government authorities to so openly carry on its wanton and ruthless destruction.

His last paragraph is worth repeating. Like many portions of the rich scrubs on the eastern coast, those of the Gosford district are still being rapidly cut down, burnt off, and completely demolished, and the farmers and orchardists are all busily tilling the fertile land and putting in various crops. In time, and before long, the scrub-frequenting birds must move to other parts, where they will probably become more concentrated, provided the pea-rifle fiends and ruthless sportsmen do not slaughter them.

Ed. – I wonder what the author would think of today's birding numbers. Thankfully the pea-rifles have been banned.

THE SANDSTONE SHRIKE-THRUSH

In September, Anne and I did an 'interesting' train ride out to Mt Isa for the start of a Gulf Country Trip with Great Northern Tours. Once getting to Mt Isa – and recovering from the train ride – we spent a couple of days birding and relaxing.

We were picked up by David, the Tour Guide and met the third passenger. It was another Anne from Sydney. She had visited Townsville last year and joined us for the Birders Breakfast at Herveys Range.

I was disappointed that Boodjamulla National Park (Lawn Hill) was still closed as a result of the flooding early in the year. I thought this meant we would not get to see the elusive Sandstone Shrike-thrush as I had always heard this was the best place to find it.

However, David surprised us with a side trip to Hells Gate Roadhouse west of Burketown, almost to the Northern Territory Border. This place was certainly a surprise. After a long dusty drive we arrived at a well-established Caravan/Camping Park with a recently built Hotel –'The Hellton', all surrounded by shade trees and green lawn, and an airstrip.

We were disappointed once again after a fruitless search climbing over a nearby rocky escarpment. After a reviving lunch and coffee, we headed a little further west to another escarpment called Dills Dolls. No clambering over rocks this time. We had hardly arrived when we were rewarded with not one but two Sandstone Shrike-thrushes. They hopped along the top of the escarpment putting on a wonderful show singing their beautiful song.



Janet Robino



BIRDWATCHING ON THE LARAPINTA TRAIL

With some sense of achievement, I recently ticked off a rather challenging item on my bucket list – I walked the full 225kms of the Larapinta Trail, in the West Macdonnell Ranges, near Alice Springs. It was a hard walk. I was the last one standing out of a group of five friends. However, the physical hardship was more than compensated for by the beauty of the place. After a good season with late rains, water, wildflowers and birdlife abounded. I spotted 42 different bird species over the 14 days of walking – my biggest tally yet!



Pink Cockatoo

Prior to commencing the walk, my partner and I spent a few days at Newhaven Wildlife Sanctuary, west of Yuendumu. It had also benefited from a good season, with water in all its shallow lakes and an abundance of wildflowers and birdlife.

I'm a bit of a birdwatcher, not a twitcher. I caught the interest from my parents who built the family home on the edge of a 400acre bushland reserve in the middle of the suburbs of what was then the steel and surf city of Newcastle, NSW. The northern and eastern sides of the house were mostly glass, so we could always see what was in the trees just a few metres away. Even their bathroom had a picture window into the bush. Dad was thrilled to be able to tell us that he'd seen a Regent Bowerbird from the shower!

Childhood memories for me include the steady, reliable, dawn call of the Eastern Yellow Robin, the Powerful Owls nesting just ten metres from our glass-walled family room, the ubiquitous magpies nesting in the spotted gum outside my bedroom and at night, the "mopoke" call of the Southern Boobook.

I moved around in my adult life, always observing and taking in the sounds of the local birdlife. Some birds eluded identification, for decades! I could hear their distinctive calls but could never see the bird calling. For example, in 1977, as a young jackeroo on horseback on a

station near Tambo, central Qld, I often heard a couple of distinctive calls. Whenever I hear them now, they take me back to those happy, youthful, times working in the bush. Around 2014, nearly forty years later, I managed to see and identify one of these callers, near Nundle in NSW, the Spiny Cheeked Honeyeater.



Australian Ringneck

Perhaps the greatest aid to me in bird identification has been the Pizzev and Knight Birding app, PK Birds. All those bird song recordings on the app, by Fred Van Gessel, make it so much easier for amateur bird watchers, like me, to identify birds. By using PK Birds, I was able to identify another Tambo district bird I'd heard in 1977 when it made itself known to me at Redbank Gorge, where I started the Larapinta Trail Walk in August this year, the Crested Bellbird. One came and sang to us from a mulga tree as we ate breakfast.

In the 1990's, I lived on a company station just west of Bourke, NSW, on the Darling River. There was a small, rather non-descript, bird that I often heard singing a melodious mixture as it winged its way across the sky from perch to high perch. Fred Van Gessel's recording on PK Birds finally identified it for me on the Larapinta, the Rufous Song Lark.

New birds for me, on the Larapinta, included the Painted Finch, with its bright red face and rump; the Dusky Grasswren hopping across the trail, especially in the low shrubs of the mountain tops and ridgelines; the Grey Headed Honeyeater; Fred van Gessel's recording again helped me identify the Pied Honeyeater with its long, piping call; and the Hooded Robin was another new sighting.

Unfortunately, although none were seen, there was also evidence of feral cats lurking in the undergrowth. The most disturbing sign was this brightly coloured scat, photographed on the trail. No prizes needed for identifying the unfortunate victim, a Splendid Wren. Rufous Whistlers regaled us with their distinctive and varied calls from one end of the Larapinta to the other, some being quite unperturbed by walkers passing close-by. The many gorges along the trail invariably echoed with the beautiful song of the Grey Shrike-thrush, especially on still mornings and evenings.



Cat scat

I was surprised by the number of walkers along the Larapinta. By far, there were more women than men doing the walk, many of them alone or in pairs, mostly young, in their twenties and thirties but some silver gypsies like myself. Some, like me, were doing the whole trail in one go; others were just doing half the trail or just a couple of sections, depending on their available holiday time.



Jay Creek

We had the advantage of a 4wd support crew (non-walking partners) who were happy to drive into the trail heads on nine occasions along the way, so that we never had to carry more than three days' food supplies. On four occasions we were able to complete a stage as a day walk and just carry lunch and emergency rations.



Mt Sonder at sunset

Overall, although a hard walk, the Larapinta Trail was, for me, a memorable experience. My advice to anyone wishing to walk the Larapinta would be to walk in winter, use a support crew if you can and follow the tips and advice in the very helpful Larapinta Walking Guides available online and from the Alice Springs Tourist Info Centre. Most importantly, give yourself plenty of time, both to walk at a pace suitable to your ability and to enjoy the experience.

Phill Woodgate

IN THE NEWS AUSTRALIAN BRUSH-TURKEY

Did you know that if you harm an Australian Brush-turkey you could be up for a very big fine or jail time? In Queensland and New South Wales, the Australian Brush-turkey is a fully protected species. Under the Nature Conservation Act 1992 it is an offence to harm Brush-turkeys. Fines of up to \$483,900 or two years jail time are handed out if you are caught harming or killing one of the birds. Historically the birds and their eggs were considered excellent eating and hunted/collected extensively.



A.Sibson

Town Common, November

Thirteen Radjah Shelducks making the most of the small puddles of water.



Five Frogs sheltering from the heat in the rafters of Payet's Tower where the Possum or Snake usually hang out.



Janet Robino

LATHAM'S SNIPE PROJECT

The Latham's Snipe project is a collaboration between many organisations and individuals who have the shared purpose of understanding more about this cryptic little migratory bird that we share with Japan to ensure its survival into the future.

Latham's Snipe, *Gallinago hardwickii* or *Ojishigi* in Japanese, is protected as a migratory bird under the EPBC Act, but is being considered for a 'threatened' listing due to declining numbers.

The project has been running for 10 years and was started in response to urban development encroaching on important wetlands in Port Fairy, Victoria. It was expanded to Canberra in 2015.

The birds use the wetlands for roosting during the day, they feed at night in the soft mud around the edges of the wetland and on the damp soil of grasslands.

Latham's Snipe breed in Japan and migrate south during the non-breeding season. Individuals begin to arrive here in Australia in August and September, and begin to leave in February with the last birds leaving in May. Rarely one or two birds are recorded as overwintering.

Townsville Birdlife has only started monitoring the local areas for Latham's Snipe in recent years. Counts are conducted in September, November and January, in line with the southern states. This count this month, November, is on the 16 November or as near to that date as possible. It helps if the birds that are counted are imputed into either Ebird or Birddata programs. That way the exact location, date and time is included. It also makes it easy for the people in charge of the count to see where and when birds were seen.

The areas that we monitor are The Town Common, Ross Dam Wetlands, Masters Road/Orient Road, Tyto Wetlands, The Borrow Pits and Mingela Dam.

This year a count was conducted at The Borrow Pits, adjacent to Ross Dam and birds were found there.

The next count is the 16 November, I'm looking for volunteers to head out to the various areas and look for the snipe, starting at each area at 6.30am.

Below are a couple of links for you to look up for more information, or in the case of the Facebook page, to follow along with the project.

<https://lathamssnipeproject.wordpress.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/345220814765069/posts/530349819585500/>



Latham's Snipe

Both photos by A. Sibson

Quest as at October 31 2024

Name	Quest Number	Date
Mark Hovarth	298	24/10/2024
Pat Charlton	232	19/08/2024
Warren Charlton	219	6/08/2024
Wal Threlfall	229	16/08/2024
Annette Sibson	206	24/07/2024
Jill Staunton	85	25/03/2024
Janet Robino	326	21/11/2024
Annette Sutton	85	25/03/2024
Elna Kerswell	234	21/08/2024
Wendy Kaus	234	21/08/2024
Anne Lawrance	336	1/12/2024
Mike Grigg	308	3/11/2024
Chris Corbett	224	11/08/2024
Barbara Reidy	182	30/06/2024
Brigid Glass	130	9/05/2024
Julie Goldsbury	58	27/02/2024
Ian Leach	172	20/06/2024
Colton Tinkey	80	20/03/2024
Norm Rains	106	15/04/2024
Beth Snewin	253	9/09/2024
Marlene Acton	79	19/03/2024