

The Drongo

Number 178 May 2025



Annette Sibson

Wunjunga

Emu

Paluma camp
out



FROM THE PRESIDENT

This year has been a year of stops and starts as the weather gods lifted the dome over Townsville, resulting in record-breaking rain. While most of us were developing a bad case of cabin fever with very limited opportunity to get out with the birds, the Committee was still beaver away in the background. Wal Threlfall was kept very busy updating the Activities Page on the Website – cancelling and rescheduling and cancelling again and then rescheduling etc etc.

In early April, a number of members decided to risk heading up to Herveys Range for some birding and, of course, breakfast at the Heritage Tea Rooms. Birding was limited to the road area as the grounds around the Tea Rooms were far too wet and boggy.

Paluma Range Road is still closed with an uncertain opening date, so any outing to Paluma will just have to wait until then. Hopefully the road will be open by early July for the Paluma Citizen Science Campout – “Southern extent of Cassowary” and “Birds with Altitude” Programs. Keep an eye on the Activities Page.

Birdlife Townsville has been asked to keep an eye out for possible Bird 'Flu cases when we're out and about in the bush. If you see a sick or dead bird that does not appear to have been injured, do not touch it, record the GPS and immediately contact the Emergency Animal Disease number on 1800 675 888.

Yellow Crazy Ants have spread along watercourses as a result of the flooding so please report any suspected sightings of Yellow Crazy Ants. If possible, take a photo and post it on iNaturalist App. For more information check the Townsville City Council website or www.invasives.org.au.

Magnetic Island Nature Conservation Association (MINCA) has been successful in obtaining a grant from the Great Barrier Reef Foundation (GBRF) under the Protecting the Great Barrier Reef – Community Stewardship Program for the “*Yunbenun/Magnetic Island and Townsville Coastal Habitat Stewardship Project*”. Birdlife Townsville will train community members to undertake bird surveys at key habitat locations, including Horseshoe Bay Lagoon and Cockle Bay for the Birdlife Australia's Birddata and eBird Global Database. This will help establish a baseline of these habitats along with data on fish nurseries, mangroves, saltmarshes, seagrass and waterway health and deliver the first set of recommendations for collaborative action supported by Traditional Owners, community and managers. Chris Corbett will coordinate Birdlife Townsville's part of this project.

Janet Robino

YOUR 2025 COMMITTEE

President:	Janet Robino	Annette Sibson	Brigid Glass
Secretary:	Wal Threlfall	Mark Horvath	Claire Willard
Treasurer:	Nina Doyle	Warren Charlton	Mick Theobald

Newsletter Editor Annette Sibson annette.sibson@bigpond.com

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

WUNJUNGA TERNS IT ON

Day Trip from Townsville - 8TH April 2025

We decided to pack smoko and lunch for a 300km round trip from Townsville, south to Wunjunga with its extensive wetlands. We just love visiting these wetlands. Every time we visit, it is always a different birding experience. After all the flooding rains we'd recently received, this visit saw plenty of the wetlands still well inundated. The few causeways were under about 20cm of moderately-flowing water. The Little Egrets patrolled and fished these hotspots.



The wetlands themselves were spectacular! Birds teamed everywhere. Most of the birdlife was wetlands oriented. Huge numbers of White-winged Black Terns, many in full breeding plumage, were hover-hunting, carefully picking their prey from the water surface (we under-estimated about 1250), while the many Whiskered Terns preferred to dive from a height to get their food. Australian and Caspian terns seemed content to rest and digest their fill.



There were prolific bushland/grassland birds; Golden-headed Cisticolas, Tawny Grassbirds, Horsfield's Bushlarks, and Australasian Pipits. We even heard a Little

Grassbird singing from the roadside grasses, but it didn't show itself for us.

Glossy Ibis were packed in over the entire five km drive through the wetlands. We estimated 500 plus. Pied Stilts were saturating the entire wetlands. Even using the scope to get a fair indication of numbers, we reckon there were well over 1,500 stilts.



We were lucky to pick up five Australasian Shovelers through the scope, as we counted bird numbers for our survey. Many hundreds of ducks, Pacific Black Ducks, Grey Teals, and Wandering Whistling-Ducks. A few Black Swans, 300 plus Royal Spoonbills, and at least 150 Australian Pelicans. We could only estimate the egrets hidden in the inundated fields, as well as the many Straw-necked and Australian White Ibis.

A couple of immature White bellied Sea-Eagles kept the waterbirds ever-alert as they continually dived at the stragglers.



We continued eastwards a few kilometres to the coast, for a lunch-break at the first access point and parking area to Wunjunga beach, where we were greeted by a pair of raucous Blue-winged Kookaburras and a Sacred Kingfisher. From here, we walked northwards along the beach a couple of kilometres and scoped the few remaining shorebirds. Most had already coloured-up beautifully for their seasonal return trip to the northern hemisphere where they breed. Standouts were six Grey Plovers, 60 Lesser (Siberian) Sand-Plovers, and similar numbers of Greater Sand-Plovers. A couple of Beach Stone-curlews camouflaged well in the flood debris tide line. There was only a few Great Knots remaining, but we counted 55 Red Knots, about 20 Curlew Sandpipers, and 30 Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, all in beautiful breeding plumage. As the tide receded once again, the coastal

terns made their appearance too. Caspian Terns, Crested and Lesser-crested Terns, Australian Terns, and Little Terns, all at their mid-day sand-bar roosts.



We had a wonderful day's birding, tallying 81 bird species for the wetlands and beach foreshore. A visit to Wunjunga Wetlands is like a mini-Kakadu experience, maybe even better!



How to get there: The signposted turnoff to Wunjunga is to the east, off the Bruce Highway, about 17 kilometres south of the town of Home Hill, or about six kilometres south of Inkerman store. It's called Beachmount Road. The more productive wetlands start at about three kilometres east from the Bruce Highway intersection and continue all the way to the beach. Access is primarily a formed gravel road, with just a few sealed sections at the causeways. Conventional vehicle access is OK, but only if the causeways are safe. Be mindful of where you stop and park, as it is a gazetted public road.



If you have access to a spotting telescope, we recommend you take it and use it. Much of the birdlife on the wetlands is well beyond the reach of birding binoculars.

Len and Chris Ezzy

BAR-BREASTED HONEYEATER, FIRST SIGHTING

We were in Bowen visiting relatives in early November and, as always, I make a point of visiting Mullers Lagoon. I'm lucky in that Mullers Lagoon is walking distance from the relative's home. I managed to get away for an hour of birding and photography on the afternoon that we arrived.

On arrival I made my way over to the waters edge, the spot I chose just happened to have a few melaleuca trees on the left. I was just getting my bearings and seeing what was around when I heard an unusual call and watched as two birds flew into the nearest melaleuca. Up came the camera and to my surprise and delight there were two Bar-breasted Honeyeaters in the tree! I'd been at the Lagoon for less than 5 minutes and had yet to take any photographs. My first photos were pretty ugly, the bird I'd zoomed in on was hiding behind branches and leaves but I could identify it as a Bar-breasted Honeyeater. As I watched and photographed, one bird caught a spider and came out of hiding, the second bird arrived on the scene, looking to share the spider, but that didn't happen. I was able to get some nice shots of the birds, they seemed happy to continue to hunt while I was there.



Prior to arriving in Bowen, I had done some research on both ebird and Birddata to see if any Bar-breasted Honeyeaters had been reported recently. I also spent a little time listening to the call of the bird on my Morcombe app.

I managed to spend a few hours at the Lagoon the following morning and while I saw and photographed some great birds, there was no sign of the Bar-breasted Honeyeaters. In future visits I'll have to keep my eyes and ears peeled.

Annette Sibson

WUNJUNGA HIGHLIGHT

Anne and I were leaving Wunjunga after a really great day with the birds. There was water everywhere and lots and lots of birds. We saw hundreds of White-winged Black Terns - most in full breeding plumage. There was well over a hundred Glossy Ibis and too many Magpie Geese to try keeping count along with many others. The highlight came just as we were heading home.



Light was poor, but we saw a group of just over 20 birds. It was hard to tell if they were swimming or standing in water up to their bellies. We struggled with identification. It was difficult to get a decent photo because of distance and light conditions. All but one bird flew off. We noted the distinctive wing bar and white rump as they disappeared into the distance. Finally, we got it! Black-tailed Godwits in full breeding plumage. They were spectacular!



The photos are very poor. Check them out in a field guide. I'm sure you'll agree they are stunning birds.

Janet Robino and Anne Lawrance



© 2009 Photo by Ómar Runólfsson
<http://www.flickr.com/people/omarrun/>

Black-tailed Godwit
Limosa limosa

EMUS AREN'T AS DUMB AS THEY LOOK

Emus have a reputation for being 'bird-brained.' Despite widespread assumptions about the emus' apparent lack of intelligence, very little is truly known about their cognitive abilities.

Coming to the defence of emus and other large, flightless birds, a study has found emus and rheas can innovate – creating new techniques to solve a tricky task to access a food reward.

Emus (*Dromaius novaehollandiae*) and Greater Rheas (*Rhea americana*) are part of the smaller clade of modern birds – Palaeognathae – that evolved flightlessness and gigantism. Palaeognaths, which also includes ostriches, cassowaries, kiwis, and tinamous, have smaller relative brain sizes compared to other birds.



Annette Sibson

The problem-solving abilities of three emus, two greater rheas, and four common ostriches (*Struthio camelus*) have been tested against a new puzzle problem. It required the birds to line up holes in a plastic wheel, held together by a nut and bolt, to obtain a food reward. Each was first shown a solved version of the puzzle with the food freely available. They then were given an unsolved one to complete within half an hour. The three emus solved the puzzle on their first attempt. They could also solve it again once the puzzle was reset, moving the hole in the most efficient direction towards food 90 percent of the time.

The male rhea used this technique but also created a second one, rotating the bolt in the middle of the wheel until the task fell apart.

None of the ostriches were able to solve the task.

This innovation is classed as low level or simplistic – and it is certainly not as complex as the innovation seen in crows and parrots. However, it is still a very important finding. There were no reports of technical innovation in palaeognaths before this study, and there was a

prevailing view that they are 'dumb' birds. Research suggests that is not true and that technical innovation may have evolved far earlier in birds than previously thought.

And because palaeognaths birds are the closest living relatives to dinosaurs, further research might shed light on how they behaved.

A large body of research shows that crows and parrots are effective problem solvers. Scientists have recently taken an interest in other birds like gulls and birds of prey; however, all these birds belong to the same phylogenetic group, Neognathae.

The problem? The more studies are conducted on the same species repeatedly, the more an 'echo chamber' is created of knowledge and that creates a false impression that other species are less 'intelligent.' But they haven't been studied to the same level.

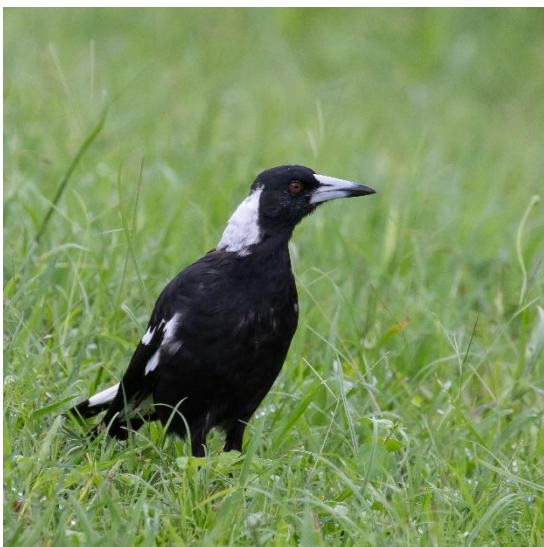
Dr Fay Clark and colleagues of the University of Bristol, UK



WHY MAGPIES SING IN THE MORNING

Darryl Jones, Professor of Ecology at Griffith University has studied the behaviour of Magpies in the Brisbane area over many years. The following quote is from his book 'The Curlews on Vulture Street' which is well worth a read.

The Magpie features prominently in many First Nations stories. Their most celebrated role was bringing light into the world when it was covered in darkness. In the story version from Wathaurong, central Victoria, magpies gathered sticks and slowly pushed the sky up. When it split open, the sun finally shone onto the land for the first time. The Magpies were so overjoyed, they burst out in song, something they repeat each morning at dawn.



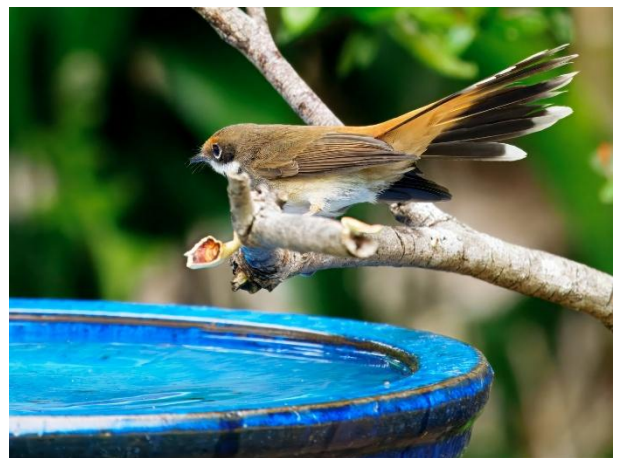
Annette Sibson

Janet Robino

NEW VISITORS TO OUR BACK YARD BIRDBATH

Mount Louisa, Townsville (03/05/2025)

As I was finishing getting some images together for a Drongo article, a new bird for our back yard birdbath showed itself, a beautiful Rufous Fantail. From the kitchen window we watched it arrive and join a couple of Brown Honeyeaters, which we were watching have a bath. Right there in front of our eyes, this Rufous Fantail jumped in for a bath also. We had never seen this before.



"Get a photo," my mind was racing. I ran through the house to get my camera, then ran down the internal stairs only to find the back laundry doors locked! I ever so quietly opened the security door, and then the solid door, and then quietly pointed the camera lens out towards the

bird bath. IT WAS STILL THERE! But perched! I got a few shots away before it departed into the garden and over the back fence. I can only assume it felt somewhat secure at the birdbath while in the company of our resident, and confident, Brown Honeyeaters. When they left, it left also.



Ten minutes later, I could still hear the Rufous Fantail calling from the back neighbour's yard. So, could it hang around the neighbourhood? That would be quite unusual for this passage migrant on the move. Excited? YES! This Rufous Fantail took us totally by surprise, and we reckon it is by far the best back yard bird we've had this year. Incidentally, we haven't seen a Rufous Fantail in our home yard gardens for at least four years so, this one bathing at our bird bath was an immediate birding high. WooHoo!



Another Birdbath Newbie: Just a few days earlier, we had yet another new visitor to our back yard birdbath. A gorgeous Sacred Kingfisher. We do have lots of big, yummy skinks in our garden, so we commonly see Sacred Kingfishers hunting for them. They perch on our hills rotary clothesline, our fences, as well as the powerlines out the front. This, however, is the first time we have seen one come into our back yard birdbath.

Before this, our third latest birdbath newbies (late 2024) were a pair of Pale-headed Rosellas, and a male Eastern Koel on the same day, which coincidentally, was also the

same day that we installed our bird bath access and perching sticks, supported by an adjacent star picket.



This little birdbath renovation has made a world of difference to the birds we now encounter at our birdbath, with most of our local yard species using it extensively.

Len and Chris Ezzy

PALUMA CITIZEN SCIENCE CAMPOUT Oct 31 – Nov 2

"Southern extent of Cassowary" and "Birds with Altitude" Programs – Join researchers, locals, Birdlife Townsville and Bushwalkers to help contribute to our knowledge of

- the endangered Cassowary at the southern extent of its global distribution
- high-altitude birds vulnerable to the effect of climate change in the Paluma Range NP

Participants must be self-sufficient. Free camping at Lake Paluma (Magar Yamba group camping area or self – arranged B&B accommodation at Paluma Village – Friday 31st October at 1pm Lake Paluma campsite open, 5pm Paluma Community Centre Welcome to Country – Catered Dinner (by donation) – 7pm Presentation and organise survey teams. Saturday 1st November, survey designated routes. Sunday 2nd November, survey designated routes.

Participants must register [HERE](#) and for further details contact: Secretary Wal Threlfall 0429111055



Annette Sibson

Quest as at May 10 2025

Marlene Acton	150	30/05/2025
Warren Charlton	173	22/06/2025
Wal Threlfall	165	14/06/2025
Annette Sibson	220	8/08/2025
Jill Staunton	156	5/06/2025
Norm Rains	115	25/04/2025
Colton Tinkey	62	3/03/2025
Janet Robino	257	14/09/2025
Wendy Kaus	217	5/08/2025
Elna Kerswell	187	6/07/2025
Beth Snewin	192	11/07/2025
Pat Charlton	175	24/06/2025
Julie Goldsbury	75	16/03/2025
Anne Lawrance	164	13/06/2025
Mick Theobald	215	3/08/2025
Brigid Glass	134	14/05/2025
Chris Corbett	149	29/05/2025
Kathleen Vowles	60	1/03/2025
Claire Willard	220	8/08/2025
Melissa Baker	150	30/05/2025
Geoffrey Morice	126	6/05/2025



Australian Tern

Len Ezzy



Whiskered Tern

Len Ezzy