

# CASTLEMAINE NATURALIST

October 1993

#194 Vol 17.9

## A SHORT VOYAGE AROUND N.S.W. DESERT PARKS



Black-eared  
Cuckoo.

I am sure the notes that came with the tour details said that it seldom rained at Lake Mungo in August and yet it was still raining at Wycheproof as we headed north and I began to wonder about the merits of setting up camp in the dark, surrounded by red plains mud. Fortunately by Mildura the message had been heeded and the rain gave away to wind and cloud.

We transferred over to the 20 seater 4-wheel drive bus towing a cooker/baggage trailer and trekked out to Mungo on a far from smooth bush road during the remaining two hours of daylight. This was the true mallee country (nine species that is) with varied understory, interspersed with Belah and other casuarina communities, although much reduced because of their liking for better soil, which was cleared first for settlement.

On the way out, Wilga (*Geijera parviflora*) with its weeping form, said to be over 200 years in some cases, was much in evidence, and White Cypress-pine (*Callitris columellaris*) dominated the sand ridges. Major Mitchell Cockatoos prefer the Belah habitat and two hove in sight.

Mungo, a Scottish not aboriginal name, was a pastoral lease before being purchased as a national park and occupies the bed of an ancient lake, one of a chain of enormous freshwater lakes that dried out with the passing of the last ice age 15,000 years ago. Surprisingly if you go back further still, 45,000 years to be precise, the lakes were dry again and the conditions probably similar to those existing today.

On the sand plains where saltbush and bluebush reign supreme, the Red Kangaroos mix with the Western Greys and Shingleback Lizards and Bearded Dragons are not hard to find. It was worth identifying the following nearer the camp site; Pied and Grey Butcherbirds, a Striped Honeyeater, Apostle Birds querulous and quarrelsome in their family groups and shouldering their way into the camp in search of food but a great source of delight in the outback, Southern Whiteface, White-backed Swallows, fork-tailed Black Kites, and in the plant world, Copper Burr (*Sclerolaena limbata*), Cannon Ball (*Dissocarpus paradoxa*), Rosewood Tree (*Heterodendrum oleifolium*), Desert Broom, Weeping Pittosporum or Butterbush (*Pittosporum phylliraeoides*).

The next day on to Kinchega via Pooncarie. Here the Menindee Lakes and the Darling River are the lifeblood of the community with the River Red Gums and Coolibahs along the river banks and water courses, and Black Box out on the black soil flood plains. Incidentally when you hear Red Box mentioned in the arid country it is *Eucalyptus intertexta* and not *Eucalyptus polyanthemos*, the one we are familiar with on the northern slopes.

The pub at Menindee was the last roof Burke and Wills slept under before taking leave of the depot on their ill-fated expedition. One wonders why they left it but more likely it explains the failure of the support party to make its move to Coopers Creek until too late.

The massive Kinchega woolshed remains a monument to the days when wool was king and the pastoralists pushed the frontiers further and further back. The drier red sand zone suffered heavily from overgrazing by sheep and it is only now as a national park that it is recovering.

Emus with striped chicks and Red Kangaroos with joeys are everywhere at first light on these open plains, but it is the massed waterbirds that catches ones attention, especially Pelicans, Black Swans, Cormorants and Egrets. It is indeed a paradox of nature that this huge expanse of water is in an area with an average rainfall of 216 mm (8.5 in). Worth seeing are the Ringneck Parrots in large numbers, Wedge-tailed Eagles close to, Treecreepers, White Chats, and in the plant world Ruby Saltbush (*Atriplex nummularia*), two or more kinds of Hop-bush, Ruby Saltbush (*Enchylaena tomentosa*), Needlewood (*Hakea leucoptera*), Sandhill Wattle (*Acacia ligulata*), Mallee Daisy (*Olearia*), and the River Cooba (*Acacia stenophylla*).

Next we rattled on to Mootwingee via Wilcannia and White Cliffs; a long haul but full of interest as we passed from saltbush plain to mallee, to mulga's rocky ridges, and then the shimmer of the gibber plains. In the course of this we caught up with White-winged and Variegated Wrens, Cockateils, Blue-bonnet Parrots, Singing and Spiny-cheeked Honeyeaters, and Zebra Finches, Nankeen Kestrels and Wedge-tailed Eagles in numbers. The vegetation we took note of included *Cassia sturtii* in flower, the eye-catching Leopardwood Tree (*Flindersia maculosa*), Beefwood (*Grevillea striata*), Mustard Daisy, Desert Nightshade, Harlequin Mistletoe, and *Parmelia* Rice-flower.

There is no need to say anything extra about Mootwingee, it's just a magic place and this must be my fourth time back there. Lying on the margins of the central arid regions and the western plains, it's an upland plateau of ranges and gorges with outcrops of coloured stone and deep rockholes. The aboriginal tribe that inhabited the area and traded north and south left behind a living treasure of cave paintings, rock engravings, artifacts, and other evidence of a culture going back 25,000 years or more. No wonder it is now protected as an historic site, with a supporting richness of bird life. Special mention should be made of

Chestnut Thornbills, Rufous Whistlers, Grey Falcons, Red-capped Robins, Babblers (Halls and White-browed), Brown Songlarks, Peaceful Doves constantly calling, Mulga Parrots and large numbers of Galahs and Little Corellas camped in the trees above ones head. There were still plants to note, such as the Dead Finish Wattle (*Acacia tetragonophylla*), Broad-leaved Hopbush (*Dodonaea viscosa*), Elegant Wattle (*Acacia victoriae*), Weeping Myall (*Acacia pendula*), apart from the ever-present White Cypress Pine and Red Gum.

At this point we turned for home, spending the last night at Lake Mungo Lodge, but not before some of the best sightings of the trip. Along the Middle Camp Road off Silver City Highway where we came upon large clumps of Sturt's Desert pea in flower, flocks of 40 or more Emus, Splendid Wrens, and more Major Mitchells, and a pair of Black-breasted Buzzards feeding on a road kill snake, and then spiralling up on rising heat thermals.

Chris Morris.

## **THE BARMAH CAMPOUT**

On the weekend around Saturday 14th August, the Western Victoria Field Naturalists' Association held a camp-out at the Dharnya Centre in the Barmah Forest, which is on the Murray River not far from Echuca. The weather was gloomy but not bad enough to prevent normal activities, although walking trails were restricted by the current time of high water. Attendance of some 70 people taxed accommodation and catering.

The uniqueness of the Barmah Forest lies in the wide extent and consistency of the red-gum forest type. Survival of other trees, except for sparse examples on slightly higher ground, is rendered impossible by regular flooding. A natural regime of winter flooding and summer drought has been replaced by one of sustained higher water, with lower peak levels, brought about by upstream weirs. This has not apparently reduced the luxuriance of the red-gums, but has been harmful to many animal and plant species which were adapted to the ancient regime, especially to lake-life.

Before white advent the area was permanently and heavily populated by tribes subsisting on abundant fish, vegetables and game. White settlers quickly set about a massive exploitation of forest and fish resources. In what way they settled accounts with the aborigines has not been made clear to this crop of visitors to the Dharnya Centre, but not surprisingly, the original inhabitants became "dispersed", to quote one informant. Today more than one group is pursuing tribal claims. Aboriginal interest in the area is expressed, to a degree, by the employment of a number of aboriginals as tourist and field officers, including our cheery site manager, Shane Walker.

The heavy exploitation of fish, in particular, caused eventually such a

scandal that a government of about the turn of the century declared the area a state forest. Be it understood that this move in no way reflected a devotion to wilderness values, but rather a wish to detach an important resource from the determinations of the market place and preserve it for continued exploitation in a more far-sighted - I was about to write "rational" - manner. Subsequent public management has done nothing very beneficial for the fishing, which has continued to decline under the impact of the unnatural flooding regime and the spread of European Carp, but has presumably preserved the forest as an on-going source of timber. The understory is grazed by cattle on agistment to minimise fire risk, on the grounds that even minor fires are likely to be fatal to the Red Gums. There is accordingly a visible lack of diversity in the vegetation and a total absence of shrubby understory; but we were told that the flooding cycle allows few species to survive in any case. Visible vegetation consisted largely of introduced grasses and clovers, and withered nardoo. The area never has an abundant show of wild flowers.

One notices that most trees are Red Gums of less than, say, 50 years standing. The few large, old trees have almost without exception been ring-barked by axe cuts of some apparent antiquity, and stand grey and dead. It turns out that this has been done by foresters rather than aspiring pastoralists. The idea is that trees too large to yield suitable timber are to be attacked, firstly to encourage seed-fall, and secondly to eliminate root competition against younger trees. The practice has been discontinued in recent decades under pressure from conservationists wishing to preserve nesting sites. One or two hardier giants actually grew cambium over the cuts and live on still.

#### Camp-out activities.

Bruce Osborne was the energetic and amiable President of the W.V.F.N.C.A. and camp-out organiser. Friday evening was devoted to introductory talks by field officers explaining facts such as I have reported, or mis-reported, above. On Saturday one could either take a boat trip on the creeks and lakes, or accompany local identity Mr Howie Marshall on a short walking tour around the centre, or do both in succession. I chose to do the walk twice, but I am told the boat trip is indispensable and I am much the poorer for having avoided it.

The boat is a small, neat, covered barge called the Kingfisher, which carries 31. It has a draught shallow enough to navigate creeks and sneak up on wild life. The tour (I am told) covered creek, river and lake, and passed by such historical landmarks as trees debarked for canoes and coolamons, and marks left by surveyors who actually walked about with a physical measuring chain. In really high water the Dharnya Centre becomes an island and the boat is an instrument of survival, I am told.

Saturday evening was the occasion for the general meeting of the W.V.F.N.C.A. As Susanna and I were the only Castlemaine delegates we

were, so to speak, the Castlemaine delegation and could no doubt have claimed voting rights. However, the only faintly contentious matter discussed was a proposal, in the form of a foreshadowed motion, to regularise the system of appointing president and secretary. I gather that, at present, because of some dearth of eager candidates, there are difficulties in arranging these duties. No decision was made at that time.

The evening's speakers discussed the management of Moira lake (on the N.S.W. side). and the difficulties and uncertain status of the Superb Parrot, which nests in the forest, and may or may not be a threatened species.

On Sunday morning, in blustery weather, before the really big rain came in around lunch time, we all got into a vehicle convoy to tour the district's nearby farmlands under the guidance of Lorraine, the enthusiastic young lady who had spoken on the Superb Parrot. Lorraine and other very energetic local people have been prosecuting the cause of developing forage areas and flight paths for the Superb Parrot, (and otherwise regenerating native plant cover) by appropriate tree-planting. It is the flight-paths which are perhaps the more serious problem, for the parrots are quite ready to feed on the local crops provided that they do not have to cross open fields. Not every farmer is convinced that the parrots are a threatened species, but it says much for the group's persuasiveness that it is being listened to, and has even induced the locals to mix natives with their beloved pepper trees when establishing shelter belts.

We did not see any Superb parrots about, as most avifauna was being blown out of the sky at this time, but did observe at least one Grey-crowned Babbler, another species in difficulties, poking about in the tree-tops.

### **Bird Life**

Although one might attribute some monotony to the plant-life in the Barmah, bird life is certainly varied and abundant, with an established local list of some 200 species. On a short walk one encounters many of the familiar woodland birds of Central Victoria - White-plumed Honeyeaters in numbers, Tree Creepers - Brown and White-throated, and Red-rumped Parrots. Less familiar were the Western Warbler and Noisy Friar Bird. On the water or nearby were two types of spoonbill, a Pelican or two, and the river-loving Whistling Kite. Makers of lists would have recorded many more species on the day.

R.W.

### **SUBSCRIPTIONS 1993**

Subscriptions were due in February.

Single \$12, Family \$18, Student/pensioner \$8, Supporting member \$20  
Newsletter posted: subscription plus \$6.

# SANDON IN AUGUST 1993

(N = nesting, and date noticed. Date = when first seen or heard this season.)

At the bird bath were

Scarlet Robin (pair)	Brown Thornbills	White-eared Honeyeaters
Grey Shrike-thrush (pair)	Buff-rumped Thornbills	Brown-headed Honeyeaters
Grey Fantail	Striated Thornbills	Silvereyes
Wrens	Wh-throated Treecreeper (pr)	

Seen on the property

Australasian Grebe (pair)	Richard's Pipit	Fuscous Honeyeaters
White-faced heron (pair)	Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike (25/8)	White-plumed Honeyeaters
Pacific Black Duck (pair)	Hooded Robin (pair)	White-naped Honeyeaters
Maned Duck (pair)	Yellow Robin	Spotted Pardalotes
Little Eagle (pair)	Jacky Winter (pair)	Striated Pardalotes
Brown Falcon (pair)	Crested Shrike-tit	Red-browed Firetails (pr N 23/8)
Masked Lapwing (pair)	Golden Whistler (pr + imm)	Diamond Firetails
Common Bronzewing	Rufous Whistler (pr, 25/8)	Oriole (h 26/8)
Galah	Restless Flycatcher (pair)	Wh-winged Choughs (N 30/8)
Long-billed Corella	Willie Wagtail (pr)	Australian Magpie Larks
Sulphur-crested Cockatoos	White-browed Babblers	Magpies
Crimson Rosellas	Speckled Warbler (pair, N 15/80)	Grey Currawong (pair)
Eastern Rosellas	Weebills	Australian Ravens
Red-rumped Parrots	Yellow-rumped Thornbills	
Horsef'd Bronze Cuckoo (pr)	Varied Sittellas	
Shining Bronze Cuckoo (19/8)	Red Wattlebirds	
Southern Boobook Owl	Yellow-faced Honeyeaters	
Australian Owlet Nightjar	Yellow-tufted Honeyeaters	
Kookaburra (pair)		
Welcome Swallows		

Illustration is of a white-shouldered Hooded Robin (seen with the female on 24/8), giving an impression of a broad black stripe down the back.

Susanna Starr.



## OBSERVATIONS

**BLACK-EARED CUCKOO** has been seen for the first time on the Sandon Block. Call is similar to the Horsefield Bronze Cuckoo. A nearby friend sees it each year (SS).

**WEDGETAILS** have been seen soaring and displaying at Little Bendigo - possibly a courtship display (CM).

**PLATYPUS** was seen in Barkers Creek, north of the gardens. First observation here (PM). A platypus was also seen at Sutton Grange, in a small creek that seemed to small for a platypus habitat (LV).

**WILDFLOWERS** Flowers in bloom include Dusty Miller, Waxflower and Coral Pea (RM). Kaweka is a mass of flowers at present (FB). Many annuals are coming up in the block at Castlemaine Nth (MG). Excellent year for Coral Pea, but not for greenhoods (FD). It has been an excellent year for wattles, particularly along the Maldon and Newstead Roads (EP).

**RAVEN TAKES A RABBIT** A raven was seen eating a rabbit high in a tree, and carrying it off, during the BOC outing to Tarrengower. Most unusual. (KT)

**BLACK AND WHITE BLACKBIRD** is still to be seen along Barkers Creek, near the railway. (MW)

**ORIOLE** has been heard, regularly, from behind St Mary's school (KT).

**YELLOW RUMPED THORNBILLS** have built a nest in a tree in front of the house at Harcourt. (BE)

**PALLID CUCKOO.** First heard for season at 2.00 am on Aug 31st, at castlemaine North (RM). [An early riser, or a very late night?].

**CLAMOROUS REED WARBLER.** First heard for season along Forest Creek on Aug 31st. This seems to be much earlier than usual (LP).

## **MT KOOYOORA STATE PARK**

Four of us went up to the Park, part of which is Melville Caves where we were to check out the North-eastern Track for a walk that the CHIRP Walking Group, the U3A Bushwalkers and Taradale Walking Group were to share on the 15th of September - which was just as well as it took longer than I remembered. The views were worth the trip in themselves, but so were the flowers. Varnish Wattle was well out, and Wallowa was just coming out. There were also Early Nancies, Yellow Stars, Wood Sorrel, Tall Sundews on the north slopes of the rocks, Buttercups, Scented Sundews, a few plants of Daphne Bush-pea, Rock Correa, a lone Leopard Orchid and quite a number of Blue Fairies. There are a number of mistletoes in the area and the Drooping Mistletoe was in flower, too.

It was hard to pick up the bird calls above the harsh cries of the Cockatoos as they warned the whole countryside every time we moved on! However, despite them we did see Choughs, Red Wattle-birds, Willie Wag-tails (a pair were beginning a nest in a Blakeley's Red-gum near the picnic ground), Spotted Pardalotes, Grey Shrike-thrush, Black-faced Cuckoo-shrikes, a Mistletoe-bird, Eastern Spine-bills, White-eared Honey-eaters, Golden Whistler, Kookaburras, White-throated Tree-creepers, Fairy Martins and White-plumed Honeyeaters. We even managed to hear some of them!

Rita Mills

## **CASTLEMAINE F.N.C. PROGRAM**

**Fri 8 Oct. PAT BINGHAM "BIRD HABITAT - HOW YOU KNOW YOU HAVE GOT IT".**  
Lawson Hall, Castlemaine High School at 8.00 pm.

**Sat 9 Oct. FERNIHURST** via Bridgewater and Bear's Lagoon. We will visit the Evans' property. Original remnant vegetation, and wetland sanctuary with water birds along Kingpanial Creek. Leader C Morris. Leave 27 Doveton St at 9.00 am sharp. All day excursion. Take lunch.

**Thurs 14 Oct. and Fri 15 OCT. CAPE BROOM PULL** in the western part of the Botanic Gardens, with Conservation Trust for Volunteers. Aim is to pull out Cape Broom seedlings before they set seed. 9 am start. Meet corner of Mary St and Froomes Road. Try to come for at least one session.

**Fri 15 - Sun 17 Oct. Mt ARAPILES CAMPOUT.** See August newsletter.

**Thurs 21 Oct. BIRDWATCHING.** Joint CFNC/U3A birdwatching outing. Meet Cont Ed carpark at 9.30 am. Leader P Munro.

**Thurs 28 Oct. BUSINESS MEETING.** 7.30 pm at 38 Campbell St.

**Sun 24 Oct. TARNAGULLA WILDFLOWERS.** Excursion with Maryborough FNC. All day trip. Take lunch. Meet SEC, Mostyn Street at 10.15 a.m. or Tarnagulla Toilet Block at 11.00 am.

**Sat 30 Oct. KALIMNA WILDFLOWER WALK.** 9.30 am at the Kalimna walking track. This is a program in the Garden Festival.

**Fri 5 Nov. Stella Bedggood Memorial lecture,** St Cuthbert's Hall, Elliott St, Ballarat (off Sturt St west, opposite Ballarat and Clarendon College) at 7.30 pm. Mr Ian Woodland "Filming Nature in Other Lands".

**Fri 12 Nov. ROB WATKINS "NATURAL HISTORY IN THE EYES OF A PHOTOGRAPHER"**  
High School at 8.00 pm.

**Sat 13 Nov. TERRICK TERRICK.** Leave 27 Doveton St at 9.30 am.

**Thurs 18 Nov. U3A/FNC excursion.** 9.30 am. Leaders B Maund and M Oliver.

**Fri 10 Dec. MEMBERS AND VISITORS NIGHT.**

**Sat 11 Dec. TRENTHAM** all day excursion. Leader S. Bruton.

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**Committee:** B Maund (Pres), B Envall (VP), M Oliver (Sec), G Broadway (Treas), K Turner (Prog), R Mills (PO & asst N/L), E. Perkins (N/L ed), S Parnaby, C Morris and K Meehan.

**Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club inc. P.O. Box 324, Castlemaine 3450.**