

# CASTLEMAINE NATURALIST

July 1992

No 180

## HONEYEATERS



REGENT HONEYEATER

[Extracts from ROAU Scientific Day papers on Honeyeaters. Part one]

The Honeyeater family (Meliphagidae) is the largest bird family in Australia and New Guinea and its members are adapted to a wide variety of niches which in other continents are filled by species from different families, such as sunbirds, jays and bulbuls. This diversity has led to difficulties in determining the precise composition of, and systematic relationships within the family. Modern biochemical and molecular techniques involving protein and DNA studies are being utilised to establish evolutionary lineage of rare and extinct species. As an example, the Regent Honeyeater has no close relative apparent and it may well be on its own.

The foraging efficiency and nectar uptake by honeyeaters are influenced by a variety of floral characteristics. Flowers pointing up or horizontal are more difficult to harvest, and the length of the corolla affects the rate of nectar extraction. An increase in nectar volume leads to an increase in the rate of nectar extraction but a decrease in extraction efficiency.

The vocal repertoire of six honeyeaters were recorded in South Australia and then analysed for influence of habitat and location on call structure. Vocalisations are emitted in a number of specific contexts, including alarm, distress, begging and contact. Dawn song can again be different for the same species at different locations. Mating and territorial song can be different to flight call and song. Vocalisations produced in states of alarm are very similar across species and appear to be convergent in nature. Narrow frequency alarm calls avoid detection while alerting other birds whereas broad frequency calls are designed to drive away the intruder.

The conservation and regeneration of eucalypt open-forest and woodland, identified as Regent Honeyeater habitat, may be critical to its survival. Associations of White Box, Red Ironbark, Yellow Gum, Red Box and Yellow Box are important sources of nectar in the Bendigo area to the depleted and contracting numbers of the Regent Honeyeater. Only 91 birds

of this species were observed in Victoria during a two year study period and 81% of these sightings were from three locations: Chiltern District, Killawarra State Forest and Reef Hills State Park. Needleleaf Mistletoe in flower was favoured by this bird and loss of the older larger mature trees may be a cause of the bird's decline as these were the trees used exclusively by nesting Regent Honeyeaters in control sites.

Mimicry in ornithology generally refers to vocal mimicry involving the copying of unrelated non-competitive species. Although honeyeaters only rarely mimic, several records suggest that in the absence of members of their own species, Regent Honeyeaters associate with and mimic the calls of several larger species of their wider family - a possibly unique use of deceptive mimicry that may relate to the decline in population of this bird. In mimicking Red Wattlebirds, Little Wattlebirds, Noisy Friarbirds and Little Friarbirds the Regent Honeyeater could be adapting a deceptive ploy in defence of food or promoting protection when associated with larger or more aggressive family species.

The Yellow-faced Honeyeater is a migratory bird endemic to the east coast. Observations using special orientation cages showed directional preferences that corresponded to their northward migratory pathway. During autumn migration the birds showed distinct directional change, from north-east initially to northwest later in the season. This change corresponds to the pattern of eastern Australian coastline and nearby Great Dividing Range. The migratory direction of the species was, from the detailed analysis undertaken, influenced by the geomagnetic field using the inclination of the earth's magnetic field to orientate rather than polarity. In this way they show similar orientation mechanisms to Holarctic species despite the fact that they are only distantly related and in addition experience a rather different ecological environment.

CM.

## **OBSERVATIONS**

**HEADLESS POWERFUL OWL** was reported from a golf course at Mt Martha. The head was also found. What would produce this result? (ED)

**FRYERSTOWN BIRD OBSERVATIONS** include three Wedge-tailed Eagles on Sunday 24 June. On Monday the residents were woken by the screech of a Barking Owl (sometimes called the "Screeching Woman Owl", due to the similarity of the call to that of woman being murdered in a horrible way). On Tuesday night a Tawny Frogmouth was beating against the window, seeking moths. On Wednesday a Boobook Owl was found, glaring out from pines.

**RUFOUS FANTAIL?** A bird seen at Harcourt was described as a fantail with an orange breast and orange on the tail. A Rufous Fantail? A female Leaden or Satin Flycatcher is another possibility (but the orange tail seems to negate this possibility). Does a reader have suggestions?

**CRACKLE BUSH.** A sample for identification proved to be Daphne Heath, or *Brachyloma daphnoides*. The former name is given because of the noise made when the bush is burned.

**LITTLE EAGLE** was observed circling at Harcourt. (BE)

**BOOBOOK OWL** was heard calling at Buda at 12.30 a.m. (SP)

**MT MORGAN WATTLE** in Stewart Street was in flower on June 12th. (EP)

**EAGLE WITH WHITE NECK** was reported as circling the town for 30 minutes during lunchtime on June 3rd. It was described as being a large bird with a distinct white neck. (IC). What would it be? A White-breasted Sea-eagle? Sea-eagles are recorded for Laanacoorie.

**DUCK NESTING IN DEAD TREE** has been reported at Chewton (PM). The ducks were a grey colour and are probably Wood Duck, which may nest in trees a considerable distance from water.

**SPINEBILLS ABUNDANT.** Eastern Spinebills are seen regularly in some Castlemaine gardens at present. Possibly they are attracted by correas in flower. Yellow-winged Honeyeaters are also present. An Eastern Spinebill has also been visiting B. Perry's garden at Guildford - an unusual visitor for this garden. Spinebills appear to be much more common in town gardens. (BP)

**SANDON OBSERVATIONS** include

A dead Fan-tailed Cuckoo found in front of the house.

Correas in full flower (in mid June).

Mosquito Orchids (*Acianthus exsertus*) in flower, making a fine show.

Orchid rosettes abundant, and subject to digging by the Choughs.

White-throated Treecreeper perching on the house beams each evening.

Processionary Caterpillars, walking nose to tail.

Pied Currawongs have been heard.

**LITTLE WATTLEBIRDS**, heard last month on their migration along the Maldon-Lockwood Road, have been heard on their return journey. They have also been heard at Kangaroo Flat.

**BLACKBIRDS** have been numerous in Campbell Street (KT)

**BLACK DUCK NESTING?** A pair of Black Duck have been frequenting a fixed area near a local dam, and exhibiting "broken-wing" behaviour when approached. Would Black Duck nest in mid-June? (IC) [The Reader's Digest bird book states that in Southern Australia, the Black Duck breeds in July-October, when water areas are at their greatest and aquatic plants are fully grown.]

## SANDON IN MAY

Birds seen at the bird bath were

Crimson Rosellas	Brown Thornbills	Fuscous Honeyeaters
Yellow Robin	Buff-rumped Thornbills	White-naped Honeyeaters
Scarlet Robins (pair)	White-thr'd Treecreeper	Spotted Pardalotes
Grey Shrike-thrush (pr)	Yellow-tufted Honeyeaters	Silvereyes (pair)
Grey Fantail	White-eared Honeyeaters	Diamond Firetail
Wrens	Yellow-faced Honeyeaters	Magpies
Striated Thornbills		

Birds seen on the property were

White-faced Heron	Jacky Winter	Red Wattlebird (pair)
Masked Lapwing (pair)	Crested Shrike-tit (pr)	White-plumed Honeyeaters
Eastern Rosellas	Golden Whistler (imm & m)	Brown-headed Honeyeaters
Galahs	Restless Flycatcher	Striated Pardalotes
Owlet Nightjar (pair)	Willy Wagtail	White-winged Choughs
Welcome Swallows	Speckled Warbler	Grey Currawongs
Bl-faced Cuckoo-shrike	Yellow-rumped Thornbill	Australian Raven
Hooded Robin	Varied Sittellas	

On June 6th there was a moment of colour in the winter sunshine as four yellow birds converged on a low branch - a Crested Shrike-tit, a Yellow-tufted Honeyeater, a White-eared Honeyeater and a Yellow Robin.

Susanna Starr

## LOCAL MAMMALS

[Mr A. Heather has provided the following comments about recollections of mammals in earlier years.]

My father, in his young days, lived at Yarraville, and with his mates, often had campouts on weekends, namely on the outskirts of Melbourne - the main quarry was Bears, (now known as Koala Bears, but not in those days). There were no restrictions on shooting the Bears and Cockatoos, and at that time, there was to be had a good price for the "bear" skins.

In later years we had an uncle who worked as a harvester and cropping member, a little north of Bendigo, and he roamed the area between here and his work. Often, in those days, when he came to stay with us on in-between seasons, he would bring a couple of Native Cat skins. To my memory, most of them were black, or nearly all black, and as he would say, caught not far from here. We dried the skins and used them for floor mats. They had a very big head. One day he brought home a kitten only 6-7 inches [15-17 cm] long, and very wild - but Dad told him to get

it out of here. So my uncle had to go hiking to find a suitable place to return the kitten to the bush.

During my school days (North School), a few of us boys would often walk over to Muckleford Creek, to get some fishing. Blackfish were prevalent there then, and we had no trouble bringing home some for a meal. At that time we would occasionally see a Platypus in the water and moving about on the bank. Not knowing, at first, what they were, we were naturally a bit scared when we saw one, but we were reassured by our elders. Later we were to discover some of these in the Loddon in the Guildford area, (or between Guildford and Vaughan) - of course after a few years the Blackfish and Platypus disappeared from this area.

Speaking of foxes. Actually you will know they are not a novelty in this district. When we started to go shooting rabbits in the Mt Alexander area, we often disturbed a few foxes and hares, and naturally, if they came in our line of fire we knocked them over. We got good prices for fox skins, particularly ones with a "good" tail. Rabbit skins (dried of course) usually only brought 3d a pound [5c/kg]. The carcass, skinned and cleaned was not much better - only 3d to 6d [3c-5c] a pair!!!

A member of our Camera Club, at one time had a tame fox (a small one), and it was a lovely little animal and very friendly, (one of few I guess). They are very destructive to farm animals etc.

We also came across Water Rats, especially at Muckleford Creek and the Loddon. We would often tether an odd fish to keep it while we did a bit more fishing, only to come back to find the Water Rats had ruined it - later we seemed to be free of them to my knowledge. Later on we went further for our fishing, to the Murray and streams nearby, and water rats were really a menace up there, and we lost quite a few nice fish we had tethered before we woke up to them.

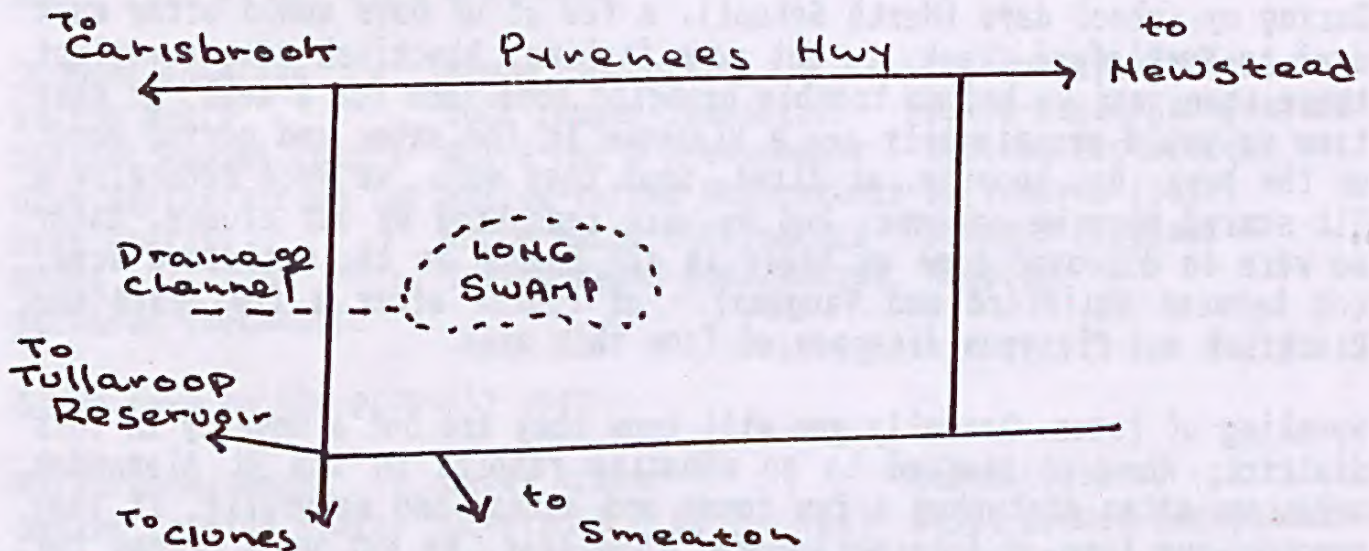
Let me finish by mentioning Goats - really a domestic animal, but, there were plenty about our end of town, some privately owned, but allowed to roam. We boys would round them up and endeavour to have a ride on their backs. Sometimes not for long.

## **WORTH PRESERVING - THREE APPEALS**

Three very worthwhile appeals are at present being conducted, to assist buying back land for conservation purposes. The three areas of land are Long Swamp, One Tree Hill and Wandown

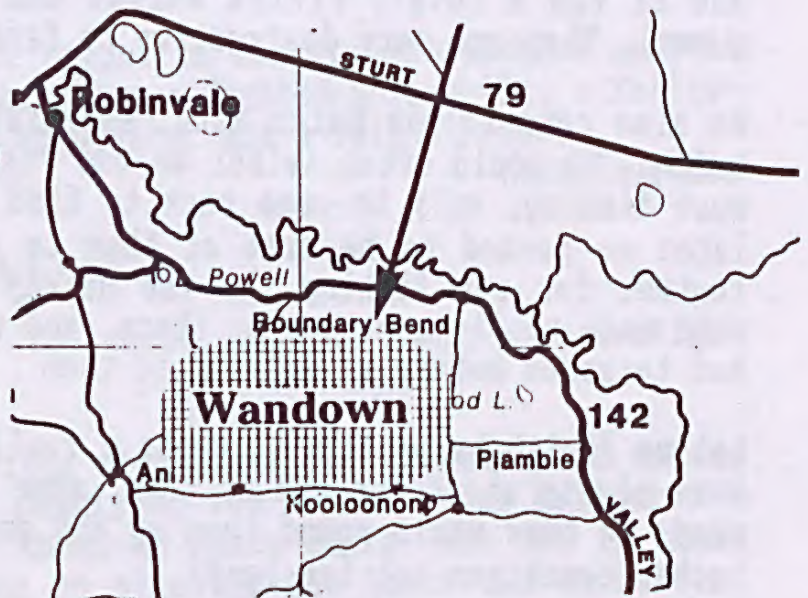
Long Swamp is a drained swamp near Tullaroop Reservoir. It was formerly a breeding area for Brolgas prior to its drainage in the 1960s. The western portion of the swamp, which includes the drainage outlet, is for sale. The Club as made a donation of \$150 from Club funds to the

Victorian Conservation Trust, with the request that the money be used towards the purchase of Long Swamp. Individual club members may also wish to give to the appeal.



Portion of the land on the northern side of One Tree Hill is also for sale. One Tree Hill is located on the southern side of Bendigo. It is an excellent wildflower area, but sale of the bush-covered land and development for housing purposes will reduce the value of the park, in that weed invasion will be increased, and cats and dogs will no doubt be kept by some of the new residents.

The Mid-Murray Field Naturalists Club is conducting an appeal for funds, the purpose of which is to help maintain the Wandown bushland, which is one of the few areas where the Mallee Fowl is surviving fairly well. Donations will help to form an interest-bearing bequest, used to help pay for control of noxious weeds and feral animals such as foxes and cats, and assist with further habitat acquisitions.



## ADDITIONS TO THE PLANT LIST

New records for the Castlemaine Plant List include

Sterile Oat (*\*Avena sterilis*). Maldon area.  
 Delicate Hair-grass (*\*Aira elegatissima*), Fryers Ridge (Violet Gully).  
 Fibrous Spear-grass (*Stipa semibarbata*). Irishtown Road. Most of the records in previous plant lists is of a grass now known as *Stipa mollis*. The flower head of *S. semibarbara* is less dense, and the flowers are less hairy.

Jo Jo (*\*Soliva pterosperma*). Mt Franklin  
Strawberry Clover (*\*Trifolium fragiferum*). Forest Creek  
Swamp-plant (*Selliera radicans*). Sinclair Sanctuary.  
Wiry Dock (*\*Rumex dumosus*). Malmsbury East.

Additional area records for the Castlemaine Plant List include

Tender Brake (*Pteris tremula*). Coliban Falls.  
Flat-sedge (*Cyperus Ihotskyanus*). Expedition Pass.  
Sedge (*Carex inversa*). Sinclair Sanctuary.  
Water Couch (*\*Paspalum distichum*). Expedition Pass.  
Shrubby Fireweed (*Senecio minimus*). Expedition Pass.  
Scrub Nettle (*\*Urtica incisor*). Turpin's Falls.  
Water Plantain (*Alisma plantago-aquatica*). Kyneton Mineral Springs and  
Campaspe River at Malmsbury.  
White Purslane (*Montia australasica*). Windmill Bridge.  
Goldfield's Grevillea (*Grevillea dryophylla*). Pilcher's Bridge

### **SWAMP-WEED - A NEW PLANT RECORD**

Swamp-weed was found growing at the edge of the dam in Sinclair Sanctuary (next to Castlemaine Technical College) during April. This is the first record for this plant for the Club's plant list.



Swamp-weed (*Selliera radicans*) is a member of the Goodenia family. It is a swamp-plant with pale fan-like flowers and fleshy spoon-shaped leaves. The plant is hairless.

Swamp-weed is a native plant, and occurs also in New Zealand and Chile. It is illustrated in "Flowers and Plants of Victoria" under salt-marsh plants.

---

**MEETINGS:** Second Friday of each month (Jan excepted) at Castlemaine High School at 8.00 p.m. Business meetings on the fourth Thursday (Dec excepted) at 7.30 p.m. All members are invited to attend. Visitors are invited to attend the Club's sessions.

#### **SUBSCRIPTIONS 1992**

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

**COMMITTEE:** Barbara Maund (pres), George Broadway (vp & treas), Brenda Envall (vp), Maggie Oliver (sec), Chris Norwood, Shirley Parnaby, Rita Mills (newsletter & public officer), Kaye Turner (progams), Beris Perry, Chris Morris, Clodagh Norwood and Ern Perkins (asst newsletter).

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

**Fri 10 July. LAMINTON NATIONAL PARK.** Video. 8 pm at High School.

**Sat 11 July. DUNOLLY and INGLEWOOD.** Dunolly and Inglewood via Bell's Swamp. Morning tea at Dunolly nature trail (next to Dunolly School). Lunch at Inglewood Botanic Gardens - search for Yellow-plumed Honeyeaters. Possible return via Laanacoorie Reservoir. Meet 27 Doveton St at 9.30 am sharp or Maldon PO at 9.45 am. Leader: E Perkins.

**Thurs 16 July. THURSDAY EXCURSION.** Joint CFNC/U3A birdwatching excursion. Meet Continuing Education car park, Templeton St at 9.30 am. Leader: M Oliver.

**Thurs 23 July. BUSINESS MEETING** 7.30 pm at 27 Doveton Street.

**Fri 14 Aug. WILDFLOWERS AND BIRDS OF CENTRAL AUSTRALIA** with Chris Morris

**Sat 15 Aug. BIRDWATCHING BEHIND MT TARRENGOWER.** Leader: M Oliver. Meet S.E.C., Mostyn St at 1.30 pm sharp.

**Thurs 20 Aug. THURSDAY EXCURSION.** Joint CFNC/U3A birdwatching excursion to Sandon. Meet Cont Ed. car park, Templeton St at 9.30 am.

**22-23 Aug. KOOLAMURT CAMPOUT** A WVFNC campout on the outskirts of Bendigo, organised by Bendigo FNC. Bunk style accommodation. Self cater. Mattresses supplied. Cost \$6 per head per night. Sunday barbecue - \$5.

**Sat 12 Sept. WHIPSTICK EXCURSION.** Leave 27 Doveton St at 10.00 am sharp.

**Fri 9 Oct. BIRDS OF THE MALLEE.** Speaker is Charlie Silveria.

**Sun 11 Oct. MALDON STEAM TRAIN WILDFLOWERS** with Bendigo Native Plant Group. See the Smith's Reef wildflowers.

**Sat 31 Oct. KALIMNA WALK.** Festival program. 10.00 am and 2.00 pm.

**Wed 4 Nov. KAWEKA TOUR** at 6.30 pm by members of the Kaweka Committee

**Sat 7 Nov. KALIMNA WALK.** Festival program. 10.00 am and 2.00 pm.

**Sun 8 Nov. KAWEKA TOUR** at 4.00 pm by members of the Kaweka Committee

**Fri 13 Nov. FLOWERS, FEATHERS AND FUN.** Ramblings here and abroad. Speaker is Reg Johnson.

-----  
**SUPPER:** Jul: E & F Blake      Aug L Starr & A Van Gemert