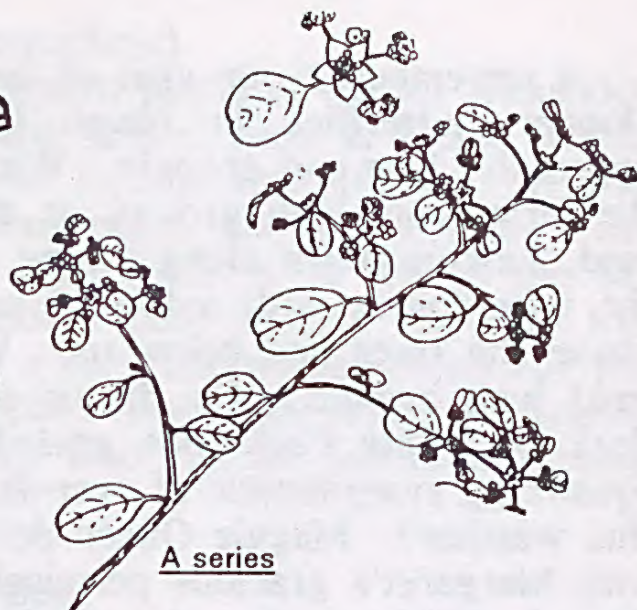


Castlemaine Naturalist

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Uncommon Plants of the Castlemaine District

DUSTY MILLER

The Kalimna Reserve has would probably be the most visited of the local bushland areas, and the best known. I would be surprised if there are any patch of it, whether hilltop, hillside or valley that has not been walked over in the past few years. It was with some surprise, that on a visit during mid-July I found a small patch of Dusty Miller.

In the *Flora of Melbourne* the habitat of Dusty Miller is given as "damp and valley sclerophyll forests". In Kalimna the plants are growing on a rocky hillside. This appears to be the usual habitat in this district. The best patch that I know of is in the Wattle Flat Forest, where a whole hilltop is covered by Dusty Miller - a beautiful sight when it is in flower. Its distribution in this district appears to be centred on Castlemaine. There are occasional plants in the Chewton area, both north and south of the highway, as well at Wattle Flat and Elphinstone.

Dusty Miller, or *Spyridium parvifolium*, is a member of the Rhamnaceae family, which includes Anchor Plant, Pomaderris, Buckthorn and Cryptandra. The leaves of Dusty Miller are similar to those of a small-leaved Pomaderris, hence the name *parvifolium*. The flowers are small and white, and are surrounded by dusty-white floral leaves. From a short distance, the dusty floral leaves look like flowers, and no doubt help to guide bees to the flowers. "Dusty Miller" describes the plant very well. The generic name, *Spyridium*, comes from the Greek *spyridion*, a small basket, in reference to the floral leaves.

The plants in Kalimna were eaten back, and only about 30 cm high. Dusty Miller is usually larger than this, and in the Castlemaine area it grows to about a metre high. In good conditions it can reach two or three metres. It makes an excellent garden plant.

E.P.

Birding at Marg Hunter's

A mere carful of Field Naturalists faced a bleak day of cold, showers and fugitive sunshine in mid-July for our Saturday outing to the farm of Margaret Hunter and her husband, Matt, at Sutton Grange. A preliminary stop in McKittericks Road produced the better part of our bird list (see below); roadside vegetation, of which I recall Blackwoods and gorse in new blossom as standing out to the eye, against neighbouring rough grassland, harboured a variety of small foragers, winter-active. A Golden Whistler excited us most, I think. Then to the farm itself.

I remembered our visit of last summer, when we were looking for Skipper butterflies in rough Ghania sedge by the water-race, in oppressive heat and drought. What a contrast! This time we approached the farm from high ground on the opposite side, wrapped against the cold, looking down along a long slope across brilliant green pasture to the watercourse with a line of eucalypts, far below cockatoos cruising above the trees and below us. We stood on exposed granite boulders amid lush growth. On the other side, on neighbouring land, a great flock of White Cockatoos grazed on onion grass. No fluttering and squawking symptomatic of over-flying raptors. What eagle could soar in this weather? Maggie Oliver decided that the very spot we stood on, with Margaret's gracious permission, was to be the venue for the next dawn breakfast – when the weather gets warmer.

The farm which Margaret and her husband manage depends largely on Cashmere goats and Merinos raised for fine fleece. Conservation concerns have to be balanced against the need for economic survival, but the conservation side seems to weigh very heavily. The property is fenced against rabbits all round. If a rabbit gets through there is an instant call to arms – and to the farm dogs. A difficult area is where the property descends steeply to a creek and has been effectively cleared of blackberry and other invaders by digging and goat-power, old rabbit warrens have been collapsed and grassed over, and there are continuing measures to protect and revegetate. The "wilderness" which runs by the water-race along the eastern boundary of the property is a continuing concern. This has the potential both as harbour for weeds and vermin and as space for revegetation. The Authority itself has no official brief or funds to do other than keep the race in repair. Listening to the list of projects and concerns which Margaret detailed was quite daunting. But the natural, or potentially natural, areas on and beside the property offer excellent habitat. An interesting area to look at yet again, I should think. Who's coming to the next dawn breakfast?

Thanks yet again to Margaret for kindly hospitality at the day's end. Hot scones, no less!

Bob Webb

Bird List for McKittericks Road, 15/7/95

Little Black Cormorant x2	Yellow-rumped Thornbills
Masked Lapwings x2	Red-browed Finches
Red-rumped Parrots pair	Superb Blue Wrens
Crimson Rosellas	Golden Whistler
Sulphur Crested Cockatoos +++	White-browed Scrub-wren
Long-billed Corellas	Yellow Robin
Galahs	White-plumed,
Magpies	Yellow-tufted and
Welcome Swallows	White-eared Honeyeaters
Willie Wagtail	Blackbirds

Maggie Oliver.

Help Needed

A list of uncommon, rare and endangered plants of the Mt Alexander Shire is being compiled. Although some plants, such as Flame Heath, may be common elsewhere they may be rare in this district. If you know of plants which are rare in this area, please give Ern Perkins a list of the plants and their whereabouts. This list is to go to the Mt Alexander Shire and the local and Bendigo C&E offices. The club will keep one for its own records. This is a very important project for the protection and possible gazetting of areas where these plants are found. For further information see Ern Perkins who has the job of compiling the information.

Working Bee

A Cape Broom pull is to be held in the Gardens at 9am, Wednesday 18 October. Meet at the corner of Mary Street and Froomes Road. The drought has killed the tiny seedlings but there still are a number of bigger plants, and the pull needs to be done before they come into flower. The intention is to be finished by lunchtime.

Sandon Birds, July '95

White-faced Heron	Wren
Australian Shelduck	Speckled Warbler
Pacific Black Duck	Weebill
Wood Duck	Brown,
Wedgetailed Eagle	Buff-rumped,
Brown Falcon	Yellow-rumped and
Masked Lapwing	Striated Thornbills
Galah	White-throated Treecreeper
Long-billed Corella	Brown Treecreeper
Crimson Rosella	Red Wattlebird
Eastern Rosella	Yellow-tufted Honeyeater
Red-rumped Parrot	White-plumed Honeyeater
Kookaburra	Silvereye
Welcome Swallow	Red-browed Finch
Scarlet Robin	Diamond Firetail
Eastern Yellow Robin	White-winged Chough
Jacky Winter	Magpie-lark
Golden Whistler	Magpie
Grey Shrike-thrush	Grey Currawong
Restless Flycatcher	Australian Raven.
White-browed Babbler	

Susanna Starr.

Observations for August

* The Southern Boobooks are still in the same tree in the Botanic Gardens. They're beginning to perch closer together and are eating a

better diet – mammals remains are now included in the pellets – which suggests they are getting ready to nest. (At the business meeting at the end of the month it was reported that they were still showing no real interest in breeding). S.P.

* The Masked Lapwings beside the railway line in Kennedy street were on the 20th day of sitting on the day of the general meeting. At the business meeting Barb reported that she had seen the Lapwing baby on the 29th day. B.M.

* Lots of currawongs are at the Junior Campus of the Secondary College. They come scavenging in the rubbish tins after the students have gone after school. The Greys were the worst culprits, though by the end of the month the Pied were in the majority. G.B.

* There seem to be a lot more Grey Currawongs in Gaulton Street, but the ones at Thomas Street disappeared about the same time. M.O., M.W.

* The plum tree at Campbell Street has come into bloom and has been full of Silvereyes. K.T.

* Flame Robins have been seen for the first time this year on Hunters' property on Mt Alexander, M.H., and are also at Little Bendigo. C.M.

* Magpies heard carolling between 11pm and 12 mn at Harcourt and also at night at North Castlemaine. It was moonlight. B.E. and R.M.

* White Cockatoos are still challenging the Galahs for the nest hollow at North Castlemaine. The resident Little Ravens were seen harassing the local Magpies and making them drop the scraps that they had collected and were stealing them. R.M.

* Only one White-plumed and one Yellow-tufted Honeyeater were seen at Fryerstown, but there have been lots of Grey Currawongs. M.&K.D.

* A small flock of Galahs were seen in Wheeler Street near the Senior Campus of the College. R.H.

* A pair of Wood Ducks had been investigating old chimneys in Hunter Street. Later a pair were investigating hollows in the Red Gums at the other side of the creek from the Boobooks. S.P.

* Half a dozen Redbrowed Finches have been in the garden in Thomas Street over the last two months. M.W.

Observations needing confirmation

Can you help?

* Whistling Kite ? on the Sutton Grange/Faraday Road, just north of the South Gap. It has been seen perched in a large dead tree. M.H.

* A possible sighting of a Gilbert's Whistler in Eureka Street Chewton.

* Two ducks were seen on the cricket pitch on the Western Oval by G.B. He wants to know if this is a sign that summer is coming?

Is the Weebill Threatened?

An extract from *VicGroup Newsletter* RAOU (adapted)

Bounded by the Murray and the Golbourn Rivers, the Warby Ranges and the Hume Freeway, the eastern part of the Northern Plains is a mostly rural region of some one million hectares. A mere 8% of the landscape still has tree cover and less than 1% still contains shrubs. Rising groundwater tables are within 2 metres of the surface over some 20% of the region, while more than 60,000 tonnes of salt pour from the Plains into the Murray River every year.

At the north-western end of the region is the 29,000 ha. Barmah Forest. At its eastern end is the Warby Range and Killawarra State Forest, which cover about 10,000 ha. In between these two largish forest areas is a vast plain of cropland and pasture, tenuously traversed by treelines along the Broken, Boosey and Nine Mile Creeks. The creek vegetation occurs as thin strands of box or River Red Gum woodland, usually less than 50m, and rarely more than 200m, wide. This woodland vegetation nonetheless comprises the next largest remnant native vegetation in the Northern Plains after Barmah, the Warbys and Killawarra Forest, altogether consisting of some 4000 ha.

Over the past 6 months the Goulburn Valley Environment Group has surveyed the animals and plants present at about 100 sites along the 400 km of the three creeks. How then does the status of some of the woodland birds along the creeks compare with their documented status as declining species?

Several species such as Emus and Barking Owls were recorded once and only at Barmah. White-bellied Cuckoo-shrikes and White-browed Babblers were only recorded twice – once each at Barmah and once at Killawarra, but not in between. Striated and Buff-rumped Thornbills and White-browed Scrubwrens likewise were restricted to Barmah and Killawarra and were not seen in between. It is known, however, that Barmah Forest is an outlier of suitable habitat for some species of plants and animals otherwise found in damper forests. The restriction of some species of birds to the damper forests at each end of the survey may thus represent nothing more than a response to broad environmental conditions – it does not prove that the species are rare.

What, though, of those recorded occasionally along the creeks and at each end? Their intermittent appearance shows that they are able to live in that environment. It might be justified, then, to extrapolate from their relative abundance in this third largest woodland remnant in the Northern Plains to an estimate of their status throughout the region. If we do use this method, however, most species must be classed as rare, as most were recorded at less than 10% of sites. The Common Bronzewing, for instance, was only sighted once at each end of the creeks and at four sites in between, giving an average inter-bird spacing of one bird every 66 kms (lousy if you are thinking of pairing!). For Painted Button-quail, Brown Quail, and Diamond Firetail the inter-bird

spacing was even greater (one bird per 100km) – birds or groups only being seen at two spots along the creeks, and one each at Killawarra and Barmah. Azure Kingfishers were seen only once at the junction of the Broken Creek with the Murray River and only once thereafter. Whistling Kites were seen twice at Barmah and only six times thereafter. Western Gerygones were recorded from most sites at Barmah and Killawarra but at a mere six sites in between. Varied Sitellas were only recorded from five sites. Red-capped Robins were seen at only two sites after leaving Barmah. Jacky Winters were seen at a total of 19 sites – one pair every 21 kms. Weebills were only found at 12 sites between Killawarra and Barmah – one group every 29 kms of tree-lined creek.

Should we be worrying then, about the status of the Weebill and, evidently, most other woodland birds on the Northern Plains? It no longer surprises us that a bird as large as the Emu has become extinct in much of rural Victoria, but when a bird once described by Alex Chisholm as 'scarcely the length of an Emu's toe' also begins to disappear surely there is cause for concern?

Two observations from the creek survey may help to allay some fears. Firstly, Weebills prefer feeding on dryland eucalypts with narrow leaves such as Black Box, Yellow Box and Blakely's Red Gum rather than on the broader-leaved Grey Box. And wouldn't you know it? Black Box only occurred in or near Barmah, Yellow Box and Blakely's Red Gum was most common near Killawarra. In between there was mostly Grey Box, perhaps making much of the creek-line habitat unappetising for Weebills.

The second clear pattern was that, regardless of habitat quality, Weebills, Jacky Winters, Yellow Thornbills, Varied Sitellas and some other species were most often recorded from sites that were more than 200m wide – they needed broad woodland blocks rather than continuous but skimpy strips of habitat. The rarity of Weebills and some other birds along the creeks thus may be related not only to the scarcity of specialised habitat components but also to the narrowness of habitat.

Returning to our former question, then: is there cause for concern over the rarity of 'Emu-toe' birds, Sitellas and other species, along the creeks, given that the birds may simply be rare there because of unsuitable habitat? The answer, I think, is 'yes'. What has been emphasised by this survey is that many species of animal are unable to live along much of the creek system because the habitat is too narrow to support them or does not contain the requisite habitat elements. But where else can they live if the third-largest patch in the region provides little habitat for any of them? 95% of the surrounding landscape is farmland and contains few woodland patches and extremely few patches with understory. The remaining 5% that is public land contains nearly 60% of all remnant vegetation, but most of it is associated with Barmah, Killawarra and the Warby Range. Elsewhere, Weebills and other woodland birds are confined to tiny woodland remnants that are

separated by as much as 20kms or more. The chances of local extinction are accordingly high: young birds dispersing cannot find mates; no new arrivals because of isolation; the remaining birds grow old and die.

I have chosen Weebills to illustrate this tale because they are a relatively easy species to please. Imagine, though, the increasing problems of providing sufficient habitat for larger birds with specialised needs, as Gilbert's Whistler. These are found at Barmah and near Killawarra, but not in between. Presumably they used to occur, but now they are rare - Emus that used to roam the plains are now only recalled by property and place names, such as 'Emu Plains'.

Although it will not be a simple process to conserve the scattered populations of woodland birds let us begin the process now. Otherwise, in time, all that may remain will be landmarks such as 'Weebill Hill' or 'Whistlers Flat'.

Doug Robinson.

WVFNCA & VFNCA
Combined Campout, Bendigo
Oct 6 - 8 1995
at Koolamurt Scout Camp, Sedgewick Road.

Note that applications for meals or accommodation at the camp (bunkstyle) has to arrive with Mrs J Cleary, Secretary BFNC, Box 396 Bendigo by Fri Sept 15.

Saturday evening meal is \$15 and BBQ lunch on Sunday is \$5
Supper is \$2.

Registration fee is \$3. Accommodation at the camp is \$8 per night.
(BYO linen or sleeping bag, pillows, towels, torch, breakfast and picnic items, binocs, etc, if you are camping.)

Application forms are available at the September meeting.

Programmes

Fri. evening - Chris Tzaros will report on his work on the endangered Swift Parrot

Sat. evening - Illustrated talk, "Orchids of Bendigo", Rod Orr.

Excursions

- Half-day Options -
1. John Neil on Local Geology
 2. Mammal Survey Grp. Inspect nesting boxes, Spring Gully Reserve.
 3. One tree Hill, birds and flowers.
 4. B'go Waste-water Treatment Plant, waders.
 5. Sat. p.m. - join Whipstick excursion.

Full day - Whipstick and Kamerooka State Parks

CASTLEMAINE F.N.C. PROGRAM

N.B. Excursions leave promptly at times stated.

General Meetings are held at Continuing Education, Templeton Street. .

Fri Sept 8 Conservation of Grassy Woodlands . 8pm Cont. Ed. Speaker is Elvyne Hogan.

Sat Sept. 9 Middletons Creek Track. Porcupine Ridge area. Leave CHIRP, 13 Mostyn St at 1.30pm Leader is E Perkins.

Sun Sept. 10 A Walk in the Spring Forest with Maldon Land Care Group. Bring Thermos and picnic lunch. 11am to 3pm. Cost, Adults \$2, children free. Meet near the Maldon tip entrance on the track along the railway line at Maldon. There will be a talk beforehand. People with a knowledge of the area will be available to answer questions. Bring wet weather gear if necessary.

Thurs Sept 21 U3A/FNC Birdwatching Meet at Cont. Ed car park 9.30am.

Sat. Sept. 23 Excursion to Castlemaine by the Botany Group of Field Naturalists Club of Victoria. Meet at Rose Garden Car Park at 10.30am. First stop corner of Mary St. and Froomes Rd.

Each Wed. in October. "Naturalist Rambler" A ramble in the spring bush close to Castlemaine, from 4 - 5.30 pm, in conjunction with U3A.

Fri - Sun 6-8 Oct WVFNCA/VFNCA Campout at Bendigo Details p. 7.

Fri. Oct 13 "Albatrosses" and "Flora of the Royal Botanic Gardens". Speaker is Dr Phillip Moors.

Sat Oct 14 Excursion with Maryborough F.N.C. to Muckleford and Smiths Reef. Leaving 27 Doveton St., Castlemaine at 11 am. Leader, E. Perkins.

Wed Oct 18 Cape Broom pull. Working Bee details inside.

Sat. Nov. 4 at 10am. Kalimna Walk with the Gardens Festival.

Fri. Nov 10 Pond Life Speaker is Alan Reid.

Sat. Nov. 11 Bells Swamp. Looking at pond life and birds.

Fri. Dec. 8 Members and Visitors Night.

Sat. Dec. 9 North British Mine and back of Tarrengower. Take tea.

Committee: C. Morris (Pres.), G. Broadway (V.P.), M. Willis (Sec.), B. Envall (Treas.), K. Turner (Prog.), R. Mills (P.O. & N/L Ed.), E. Perkins, M. Oliver, S. Parnaby, M. Hunter, S. Bruton, B. Maund.

Meetings:-

General - Second Friday every month (except Jan) at Continuing Education, Templeton St. at 8 pm.

Business - Held on the 4th Thursday every month (except Dec.) at 38 Campbell Street at 7.30pm. All Members are invited to attend.

Subscriptions - 1995

. Ordinary Membership: Single \$14, Family \$20

Pensioner/Student: Single \$10, Family \$16. Supporting: \$25

Newsletter posted: Membership + \$6.

Castlemaine Field Naturalists' Club Inc.
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