

# Castlemaine Naturalist

July '94

# 202 Vol 18.6



## A Weekend in the Hamersley Ranges, W.A.

Well, yes, there was more to it than just that! It took in a week at Dampier visiting family plus flying there and back via Perth but the three days they kindly spent driving me to and around the Karinji National Park, 280 kms inland, was the highlight.

This is tropical semi-desert country with sparse sudden summer rainfall and temperatures topping 40°. Broken outcrops and stratified ranges of oxidised iron in banded formations originating over 2,000 million years ago as sediment on an ancient sea-floor dominates everything. The escarpment rising out of the plain is such a rich red with contrasting spinifex neatly overlaid in equidistant clumps that it looks more like a painting than any artist can do justice to.

Horizontal pressure forced the rocks to the surface and over millions of years the drop in sea level and slow erosion caused the rivers to cut away the escarpment in places forming 100 metre deep gorges. To leave the arid plateau and climb down into the gorges is to experience a new world of soft colours, wet woodland vegetation, waterfalls and clear fresh pools. On the high ground it was possible to identify flowering sennas and purple mulla-mullas from the literature, but "the rock piles of the pebble-mound mouse" escaped me. Wittenoom, a town of ill-fame due to the asbestos mine, is dying now as services are withdrawn and the last 50 loyal inhabitants hang on providing a tourist base. But the Red Kangaroos are in town, (or are they Euros?) and Rainbow Bee-eaters are in hundreds on the wires and a Spotted Bower-bird is feeding on wild figs as per the guide book, so it's not without excitement.

What did I note of the birds in the area? Near the coast Ospreys were much in evidence as was the Brahminy Kite; at one point in a tree lined watercourse I even hoped I had found nesting Red Goshawks but finally admitted to Whistling Kites. On the road Wedge-tailed Eagles, Little Eagles and Brown Falcons were often in sight. Singing Honeyeaters were probably the most common of the genus and of course the ubiquitous White-plumed often came into focus unwittingly. Things looked up when I found Grey-headed and Brown Honeyeaters followed by our old inland friend the Spiney-cheeked Honeyeater. Peaceful Doves and Crested Pigeons abounded and later the Diamond Dove together with close and frequent views of the Spinifex Pigeon improved prospects.



Little Wood-swallows could be distinguished from the larger Black-faced Woodswallow.

Zebra Finches buzzed around but disappointingly I never found the Star Finch. In the parrot world Galahs and Little Correllas were often on the menu, but more to my liking were many flocks of budgerigars with close up view of breeding pairs on branches. The Elegant

Parrot flew past once and a flock of Cockatiels hove in sight. The Sacred Kingfisher was the only one of the tribe sighted and the Pied Butcherbird was not as important as the large Cajeput Paperbarks it rested amongst.

What of the flora? My attention was drawn to curly stemmed iron ore plants clinging to the rock face of gorges, having silky hairs on the underside to reflect the heat away. Callitris collumellaris are noticeable in the gorges as a remnant of a wetter age long ago.

On the escarpment and below on the Mulga Plains it wasn't hard to pick out a few of the other abundant tree species - Eucalyptus leucophloia, the Snappy Gum, was everywhere, accompanied by identifiable species such as Ac. trachycarpa (Minirichi) in flower, Grev. pyramidalis, Euc. terminalis (the Inland Bloodwood) in flower, Euc. patellaris (Weeping Box), Ac. pyrofilaolia, also a Capparis shrub and the Tamarind tree (introduced or indigenous I do not know).

On the drive back a stately looking Bustard paced along the road side without alarm and a pair of Hobbys were found nesting in river Red Gums along a creek bed, but it was during a twenty minute stop at the abandoned Tambray homestead - built out of termite earth - that I had my best sightings. A Port Lincoln Parrot, Painted Firetail Finches, the Black Honeyeater, Yellow-fronted Honeyeater, and Grey Honeyeaters. Strange, isn't it? One stop by pure chance will bring you more sightings than a hundred other places.

Millstream, a National Park since 1982, was our main diversion. It is an extensive riverine forest of paperbarks and three species of palm, including the localised Millstream Palm (*Livingstonia alfredii*), along the Fortescue River named in 1861 by the explorer Gregory and the pastoral lease first taken up in 1865. In its heyday the station covered a million acres and ran 55,000 sheep; how stock live off spinifex I can never understand. On the lush spring-fed wetland of Millstream there are wonderful camping areas with swimming and boating pools, well worth a return visit. The water which feeds the Millstream oasis comes from an aquifer estimated to cover an area of 2000 sq. kms and hold 1700 million cubic metres of water, now tapped to supply, in part, the mining towns of Wickham, Dampier and Karratha.

Where better to finish the birding than the Karratha Sewage Farm with White-backed Swallows, Crimson Chats, White-bellied Sea Eagle, Pied Stilts, White-winged Trillers, Red-kneed Dotterels, and of course, the Torresian Crow.

Over the course of the trip there were some special ones I looked for but failed to find:- Whistling Ducks, Spinifexbird, White-winged Wrens, Spotted Harrier, Grey Falcon, Emu-wren, and the Striated Grass Wrens on Mount Nameless at Tom Price, but here a tyre puncture intervened.

Chris Morris

### Sandon in May

Birds seen on the property :-

Australasian Grebe	Buff-rumped,
White-faced Heron	Yellow-rumped, and
Brown Falcon	Striated Thornbills
Masked Lapwing	Varied Sittella
Common Bronzewing	White-throated Tree-creeper
Galah	Red Wattlebird
Crimson Rosella	Yellow-faced,
Red-rumped Parrot	White-eared,
Australian Owlet-nightjar	Yellow-tufted,
Kookaburra	Fuscous,
Welcome Swallow	White-plumed,
Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike	Brown-headed and
Scarlet Robin	White-naped Honeyeaters
Jacky Winter	Spotted Pardalote
Crested Shrike-tit	Striated Pardalote
Golden Whistler	Silvereye
Grey Shrike-thrush	Sparrow
Restless Flycatcher	Red-browed Firetail
Grey Fantail	White-winged Chough
Willy Wagtail	Australian Magpie-lark
Wren	Magpie
Speckled Warbler	Grey Currawong
Weebill	Australian Raven

Brown,

Observations :

\*First sighting of sparrows onn our land and bird #89 on my list - a flock on 29/5, hopefully just passing through.

\*Pterostylus alata - Striped Greenhood - flowering at Sandon 15/6

\* Animal sighting - Yellow-footed Antechinus.

Susanna Starr

**U.3.A./F.N.C Outings** - Not many go, but they are most enjoyable. At the June outing a flock of Swift Parrots was seen near Gower.

## Nest Boxes at Spring Gully

Some members of the Mammal Survey Group of the Bendigo Field Naturalists have put muscle and drive into a nest-box program within the Spring Gully water reserve. Several lines of boxes have been nailed to trees in a program dating back several years now. The plan behind the scheme is partly to explore the needs of nesting animals like the Sugar Glider and Tuan (Brush-tailed Phascogale), partly to search for unusual ones, in particular the Pigmy Possum.

The reserve extends for many hectares surrounding a reservoir. It is fully fenced, but local fishermen, undeterred, regularly cut the fence in convenient places. I counted about half a dozen breaches in a 500m walk beside the fence. Some of the interlopers do not seem to agree with the nest-box program. At any rate, about one third of the boxes along one line had been knocked down. It has been found necessary to mount their successors well above stick height. The tree species are mainly Yellow Box and Red Ironbark, of fairly uniform age, as it seemed to me, of around 50 years, with a varied understory of wattles and other natives. There is also not a little pampas grass in places - an old goldfields favourite to hold water-channel banks, I believe. Almost every nest-box has been nailed either to an Ironbark or Yellowbox; indeed, one is hard-put to find an alternative.

Several styles of nest box have been installed:

Type A: Medium, vertical, about 100x100mm, square section, uprightly about 400mm in height, metal lid, 50mm entrance-hole towards the top. This was perhaps the most common type.

Type B: An upright tube, about 75mm diameter, 400mm in height, 25mm hole, intended for Pigmy Possums. The tube is an innovation, using an industrial discard constructed of heavy cardboard, dipped in beeswax for preservation.

Type C: Large horizontal, about 150x150 mm cross section, with a rectangular entrance occupying the lower third of one end and a flap closing the other; a low light-barrier in the middle. To suit Tuans.

Type D: Small, horizontal with 25mm circular opening. Intended for Pigmy Possum, antechinus or other small mammals, even bats.

Type E: Small upright, square section with landing platform and 25mm bottom slit entrance, to suit bats.

This report deals with the annual examination of boxes, done over two Saturdays, April 24 and May 1.

I do not propose to write the story of every box, since there must have been some 80 of them, and more were being put up as we went around.

The only tenants actually seen in residence were Sugar Gliders, and, in one box only, some Goulds Wattled Bats. Sugar Gliders were rather abundant, and seem so eager for suitable shelter that they had chewed their way into a couple of boxes with holes initially too small for them at

25mm. (they seem to need 30mm or so). They seemed not fussy in their requirements, but showed some preference for entrance holes not above 50 mm. Their response to our approach varied. Sometimes they would pop out, scurry upwards and perhaps glide away before we got there; sometimes they would come out, and go back then make off at the last minute; sometimes they would just stay huddled in place. There might have been up to six in one box. We saw some impressive flights of 10 or 20 metres from tree to tree. We began to feel guilty about disturbing them; but science is science, and they are hardly threatened with extinction.

Although we saw only one Owlet-nightjar there was evidence of occupation in several boxes, and they have been found in the past. It is curious that Owlet-nightjars have facial resemblance to Sugar Gliders, have similar nesting habits - both species drag fresh eucalypt leaves into their boxes, and keep a clean nest - and favour similar types of box, to the point of alternating in occupancy of the same location. (When I noticed such an event on my own land I thought it very newsworthy. At Spring Gully it has become a big yawn.) One point of interest arose in this connection: in some of the boxes occupied by gliders and/or nightjars, small quartz fragments have been occasionally seen. Why are they there? The Owlet-nightjar, though no true owl, is insectivorous, and presumably does not swallow gizzard stones. Or does it?

The larger horizontal boxes, which might suit Tuans and sometimes attract nesting nightjars, were frequently occupied by bees - European honey bees gone feral. So were a few of the smaller boxes. Ian Fenselau, who was with us on the second Saturday, is an experienced bee-keeper. He showed the greatest sang-froid in approaching the occupied boxes, and got some excellent honeycomb. The larger boxes are of just about the critical size which allows a colony to overwinter, he told us. Apparently bees are a regular hazard to nest-boxes; an invading swarm will quickly dispossess nesting birds. He was surprised that I had not had this trouble at Sandon. Bee colonies did die out in the smaller boxes. Some old honeycomb was ejected from the boxes where bees had ceased to be active. So were number of mud wasps nests from various boxes - generally of the heavy lump-of-clay variety of Sceliphron wasps, containing spider fragments and sometimes pupal cases.

Only one or two of the bat-boxes showed signs of bat occupation; one which had yielded 30 Goulds Wattled Bats last year contained two dead and four live bats this time. Bat-man Bill Holdsworth was with us. Lacking a collection bag, he stripped off his singlet and used that to hold them for the obligatory examination and tagging.

One or two boxes had twig-and-bark nests suggesting use by Ringtail Possums

One large horizontal box contained green leaves and fragments of yabbies, including an oolith - part of a balancing organ. This box has had a nightjar in the past, but it is hardly likely to have turned fisher-

man. A Kookaburra or kingfisher was suspected.

Another large box contained a substantial bark and grass nest, possibly of a Tuan.

One or two boxes showed signs of rosella activity, such as an eggshell. If rosellas nest successfully, however, they leave an unmistakable poultry-yard mess behind - and there was no such event.

Neither was there any sign of the intended star of the show, the Pigmy Possum. There was some disappointment about the almost nil occupancy of the small (type D) boxes with the 25mm holes, which has now been confirmed over several years, and some suggestions were made about varying the experiment - say by upending the boxes to see if they were better liked that way.

My congratulations go to the Bendigo Field Naturalists for their energy in pursuing this project. John Burtonclay and Ian Fenselau appeared to be the most active box-makers, Rob Watkins a particularly active erector and examiner, and Bill Holdsworth a truly great record keeper. The boys from Bendigo really work at their nature study.

Bob Webb

#### **May/June at 61 Hunter Street**

A flock of Grey Currawongs are moving around the area, but the usual residents such as Magpies, Sparrows, Galahs, Ravens Kookaburras and Wattlebirds are unperturbed.

However, the smaller birds are more wary and hesitant about splashing around in the bird bath. Yellow-rumped Thornbills and Silver-eyes come in groups to bathe, Weebills, Mistletoe-birds, Spotted Pardalotes and a Scarlet Robin visit as usual, but do not venture in.

A flock of juvenile Crimson Rosellas come regularly to feast on the cotoneaster, while the honeyeaters - Yellow-faced and New Holland - share the banksia and grevillea shrubs with the Eastern Spinebills and young.

#### **Observations at Expedition Pass -**

Brown Goshawk (female)

Pair of Eastern Shrike-tits

A Wedgetailed Eagle causing panic among the resident family of White-winged Choughs.

Shirley Parnaby

**From the Committee** - Because of rising costs it was decided to ask for a minimum of 20c for supper. Up 'til now the cost for supper has been just 20c and the committee was reluctant to arbitrarily put the price up, but that extra little bit would be appreciated!

**NOTE THAT FROM THIS MONTH THE GENERAL MEETING WILL BE HELD IN THE CONTINUING EDUCATION CENTRE.**

## Observations for June

- \*At Little Bendigo a bat was found in a painting cloth. It was carefully hung up in a shrub and had disappeared later. C.M.
- \*Yellow-faced Honeyeater, same area. C.M.
- \*A Golden Whistler in a garden at Wheeler St. G.B.
- \*Kath Meehan went round some animal traps with Albert Golden at Macedon. Four bush rats and an antichinus were caught. A survey is being carried out and Albert is involved.
- \*A flock of 300 Long-billed Corellas and 100 Sulphur-crested Cockatoos was seen at Walmer. S.B.
- \*Ivan Pellas brought a very late flowering Hakea laurina from his own garden at McKenzies Hill.
- \*Kath Meehan brought some Longicorn beetle specimens, the larvae of which have severely damaged one of her eucalypts.
- \*The Bird Observer has reported Plains Wanderers on the edge of Terrick Terrick Reserve, and Chestnut-crowned Babblers in the Reserve. It was suggested that we plan another outing there.
- \*Ironbarks are flowering well this year. E.P. A large flock of Musk Lorrikeets was seen in the Ironbarks at Wesley Hill Market. G.B.
- \*Grey Currawongs have been seen in various parts of the town area. G.B., M.O., S.P.
- \*White-faced Heron on the nature-strip in Doveton Street! E.P.
- \*Large flocks of Long-billed Corellas seen at North Castlemaine. R.M.
- \*A flock of 13 or 14 Hooded Plovers, including 2 juveniles sheltering on the beach at Bridgewater Bay near Portland at the end of May. R.M.

A little bit of information from "Along the Track with Crosby Morrison," published in 1961 by Wilke and Company Limited -

### Solitary Bees

"Some of the solitary bees live in burrows in the ground - the so-called fossorial, or digging bees; others lay their eggs in crevices in stems, or in hollow stalks. Some of them, called mason bees, actually make cement and stone houses - little pebbles cemented together with dust and a sticky saliva that the bees secrete for the purpose. The largest of the world bees are solitary carpenter bees, which actually burrow their own nests in dry wood, dead trees, and the like.

"We have in Australia some very interesting representatives of the leaf-cutter bees. They make nests in hollows of all sorts - little holes in bark, hollow stems and the like - and then they line them with small circular wads cut from the leaves of various plants. Plastered, these holes make very neat little boxes, in which some food is placed, together with one egg to each box, and the whole thing is then sealed up with some more little circular wads. You sometimes find these leaf-cutter cells under bark or in the firewood."

## CASTLEMAINE F.N.C. PROGRAM

N.B. Excursions leave promptly at times stated.

Note that the general meetings are now held at the Continuing Education Centre, Templeton Street.

Fri July 8 Four Seasons in Hampshire, plus Timber for Poles – short talk by Ivan Pellas. 8pm, Cont. Education Centre.

Sat July 9 Pilchers Bridge Forest Reserve. Leader, E. Perkins. Leave 13 Mostyn St. (ex. SEC) at 1.30pm

Thur July 21 U3A/FNC Birdwatching. Meet Cont. Ed. car park 9.30am. Leader, M. Oliver

Fri Aug 12 Western Australia. Winston Huggins

Sat Aug 13 Tennyson for Birds. Excursion to the north. Leader, R. Mills. 11am start.

Thur Aug 18 U3A/FNC Birdwatching. Meet Cont. Ed. car park at 9.30am.

Sun Sept 4 Little Whipstick. All day excursion to Mt Edgerton area with Ballarat F.N.C. Meet 13 Mostyn St (old SEC) at 9.30 am, or corner of Daylesford/Geelong Rd, and old Western H'way at 10.30 am.

Fri Sept 9 Northern Australia. Pat Bingham.

Sat Sept 10 Norwood Hill using the F.N.C. Booklet for the area. Leader, E. Perkins.

Sun Oct 2 Victorian F.N.C. outing to Castlemaine, taking in Kalimna, the Botanical Gardens and Kaweka. Meet at ¼ to 11 at the Market.

Sat Nov 19 Peacock Track. All day excursion to Talbot/Almherst area with Maryborough F.N.C.

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

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.**

**Subscriptions** – Ordinary Membership: Single \$14, Family \$20

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

Newsletter posted: Membership + \$6.

Castlemaine Field Naturalists' Club Inc.

P.O. Box 324, Castlemaine, 3450.