

Castlemaine Naturalist

April 2007

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Dark/Autumn Midge Orchid
Corunastylis sp. aff. rufa

March Field Trip to Barkers Creek Reservoir (at North Harcourt) – Rita Mills, 10/3/07.

Even though the day was very warm it was really pleasant under the trees on the west side of the reservoir, and there were quite a few birds to be seen, though not in the numbers we have seen before.

George Broadway brought photos taken during the 1982-3 drought when we spent the afternoon on the far side of the reservoir. He found to his surprise that he wouldn't be able to take a photo from the same spot this time, as it was under water.

We had the advantage of Chris Morris' telescope, as well as binoculars, and came away with a total of 27 bird species for the day. One of the highlights was the number of Darters and Great Crested Grebes. When we were finishing our afternoon tea under the shade of a cypress Albert Golden spotted a flock of *Sitellas* flying overhead, and we followed them up to where they had settled to feeding in a Red Gum not far from where we were sitting.

Just before we left someone spotted a raptor on the far bank. We couldn't make up our mind what it was for sure, but three of us headed across the dam wall and confirmed that it was a Little Eagle, which brought a very enjoyable afternoon to a most satisfactory close.

Our bird list for the afternoon –

Great Crested Grebe	Black Swan	Galah
Little Australasian Grebe	Masked Lapwing	Sulphur-cr Cockatoo (h)
Little Pied Cormorant	Black-fronted Dotterel	Welcome Swallow
Little Black Cormorant	White-faced Heron	Noisy Miner (only 1)
Great Black Cormorant	Grey Teal	Crested Pigeon
Darter	Musk Duck	Varied <i>Sitella</i>
White Ibis	Red-rumped Parrot	Australian Raven
Straw-necked Ibis	Crimson Rosella	Magpie
Eurasian Coot	Eastern Rosella	Little Eagle

Local Action on Climate Change – Hans van Gemert

At the March meeting, the guest speaker was Bronwen Machin, Secretary of the Mount Alexander Sustainability Group (MASG). This Group was formed in response to community pressure for action on climate change. It was modelled on similar activities in the UK such as the village of Ashton Hayes in Cheshire. The effects of global warming are now well known and include rising sea levels, threats to species, agricultural impacts, etc. In Australia, we could lose our present alpine ecology as species cannot migrate to escape rising average temperatures. The Group became incorporated in February 2006 and has since employed an executive officer and established an office in Castlemaine at The Hub, 233 Barker Street. It is currently engaging with the four main businesses in town to achieve reductions in carbon dioxide emissions. It therefore complements a Central Victorian Greenhouse Alliance initiative, Castlemaine 500, which is aimed at households. Other local activities include sponsorship of the Al Gore documentary "An Inconvenient Truth", the production of a walking map of Castlemaine and working with the State Festival organisers to make the festival carbon neutral. MASG is also co-ordinating a fleet of free loan bicycles for patrons' usage during the festival. The Shire Council is playing its part by adopting targets for reducing carbon emissions and raising community awareness. Bronwen mentioned that householders can monitor the cost of running individual appliances by the use of a "Powermate" which is available for loan from the Library. A series of questions followed on tree planting, the role of energy companies, the significance of targets and community involvement.

Observations from Maldon

The Baringhup side of Mt. Tarrengower – Rose Watson, 1/3/07

- ◆ Raptors overhead include Wedge-tailed Eagles (sometimes three - Tarrengower pair, plus offspring?), Little eagle, Brown Falcons, Whistling Kite; large flocks of ravens moving around as well as mixed flocks of corellas & cockatoos.
- ◆ Despite the dams being low there are regular visits to our dam & surrounding dams of White-faced Herons as well as a Darter; a pair of Australasian Grebes made a vegetative nest on one dam & have two chicks.
- ◆ Groups of wood ducks sighted & hearing their distinctive call at night.

- ◆ Small group of Varied Sitellas foraging along trunks of Grey Box; mistletoe flowering as well as some Grey Box - flocks of Brown-headed, Yellow-faced, White-plumed Honeyeaters squabbling with groups of New Hollands.
- ◆ Watched one White-eared Honeyeater having a wash in our birdbath.
- ◆ Small groups of Musk Lorikeets as well as Crimson & Eastern Rosellas. Some Red-rumped Parrots along roadsides & in grasslands.
- ◆ **First time ever - sighted small group of approx. 5 - 7 Blue-winged Parrots** feeding on the ground on our property over the course of a few days in October '06
- ◆ Some recent rain has seen Windmill Grass *Chloris truncata* burst into life & now providing green pick for grazing kangaroos, as well as seed for Diamond Firetails & Red-browed Finches.
- ◆ Groups of Yellow-rumped Thornbills & Southern Whitefaces also feeding on the ground.
- ◆ Still enjoying the carolling of whistlers & occasionally Grey Shrike-thrushes - particularly in the mornings around the house dam.
- ◆ Reptiles sighted over the last summer include tree goannas, brown snakes, numerous skinks, dragons, shinglebacks & marbled geckoes attached to the outside of windows on warm sticky nights!
- ◆ During intensely hot & humid conditions observed several "events" of hundreds of swallows/martins swarming above making contact calls & catching insects moving from perhaps 50 metres spiralling up to a hundred metres in the sky - they appeared to be driving the insects at times with directional swarming!!
- ◆ Have also seen a number of Rainbow Bee-eaters mainly around dams. Along gullies of Golden Wattle *Acacia pycnantha* & Varnish Wattle *A verniciflua*, groups of Common Bronzewing seek out seed.
- ◆ A pair of Crested Pigeons made a nest in a large grevillea near the house (Maldon) & produced a chick which unfortunately was taken by something? Rose Watson

STOP PRESS! The first Swift Parrots for season sighted at home this morning! Debbie Worland (March 28, 2007)

Wanted! Articles for Newsletter!

Send your articles, reports, questions, observations etc to Geraldine Harris, P O Box 703, Castlemaine, 3450. Ph 54742244 or gedharris@castlemaine.net

Scarlet Robins with aberrant plumage on Mt Macedon.



Earlier this month Bruce Donaldson sent me photos of a pair very pale juvenile Scarlet Robins recently seen on Mt Macedon. From the photos they looked to have a blush of colour on their breast and some grey on their heads but for the most part were white instead of the usual black or brown.

Chris Morris referred me to Vol. 6 p. 622 of *The Handbook of Australian New Zealand and Antarctic Birds* where he had found a reference to Scarlet Robins with aberrant plumage and in particular creamy buff plumage with a pink wash – a leucistic bird form of “albino” causing increased or decreased pigmentation and pigment distribution.

I went online and found an article by researcher Hein van Grouw entitled *Not every white bird is an albino: sense and nonsense about colour aberration in birds* which explained various causes of unusual colouring in birds and included the following explanation of Leucism –

Leucism is defined as partial or total lack of eumelanin or pheomelanin in the feathers as the result of a disorder affecting the deposition of these pigments in the feathers. It is probably the most frequently occurring inheritable colour aberration in birds and it is most often – erroneously called albinism or “partial albinism”. In Leucistic birds the production of melanin and its transformation into *colour cells* is normal. However the deposition of melanin into the feather cells does not occur due to an inherited disturbance disorder

of the pigment transfer. As a result more or less colourless (white) feathers can occur at random anywhere in the plumage. Many different forms of Leucism are known and these can vary from a few white feathers to a totally white individual. If colours are present that are produced by carotenoids (ie. colours that are contained in particular food eaten by the birds), those colours will remain visible. Leucistic birds always have coloured eyes and their eyesight is normal, thus they do not have a reduced chance of survival as albinos do, and are observed rather more frequently.

van Grouw, H. 2006. *Dutch Birding -Not every white bird is an albino: sense and nonsense about colour aberration in birds.*(Online accessed 28 March 2007).

Geraldine Harris

'A Kangaroo Story' – Rose Watson, 1/3/07

It was on one of those horrible 36 degree days in early spring, with thick smoke blowing from bushfires, when I noticed a kangaroo lying at the edge of the house dam - a small female with a larger joey "at foot" nearby". She was lying with her feet & tail in the water - trying to cool down perhaps but sensing that something was not right I kept watching & later when she turned her head I could see that her mouth appeared to be ripped & hanging in shreds!!

It was a couple of hours before a wildlife rescue volunteer arrived - the animal was still at the dam edge but had moved around the other side further away from other kangaroos that were now coming down to drink. A closer look by the volunteer, Neil, confirmed that a quick humane death was necessary. She had most probably been attacked at least 36hours earlier, and it was possible that she would have stayed alive for up to a week, before finally succumbing to her injuries. Watching her joey leave with the others I was struck by the amazing tenacity of this small female - she had certainly protected her joey from a horrible attack & was clinging to life for as long as she could - What a magnificent animal !!!!!!! -

(Neil reported that he had been involved with a number of similar attacks around Bendigo & he thought they were fox related).

Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the club.

March Observations

- ❖ 4/3 Geoff Harris saw a something “fall” out of a tree and land heavily on the ground. At first he thought it must have been a branch or piece of bark but on further investigation he discovered it was a Kookaburra that had deliberately dropped to catch something on the ground – it flew off with its prey in its beak.
- ❖ 6/3 Moth outside on brick wall – all black with single thick yellow diagonal stripe on wings. Geraldine Harris
- ❖ 12/3 Margaret Badminton and her niece watched a Grey Butcherbird in the birdbath at Yapeen.
- ❖ 12/3 Groups of lorikeets around the house – 20 –30 birds each flock, all three species, mainly Musk but also Little and Purple-crowned. Rita Mills
- ❖ Hairy caterpillars (Sawfly Larvae?) at Sth Muckleford. Alison Rowe
- ❖ Diamond Firetail inside the house at Sunshine. Richard Piesse.
- ❖ Blue-tongued lizard stretched out on the back doorstep and wanted to come inside when door was opened. George Broadway
- ❖ 24/3 Body of a Boobook Owl found on the side of the Sutton Grange Redesdale Roadway – possibly hit by car. Geoff Harris
- ❖ 25/3 Alerted by strange bird calls outside we looked out to see four large Wedge-tailed Eagles flying very low in front of the house – we watched them for some time as they soared effortlessly backwards and forwards along the Harcourt Valley. Geoff Harris

Not to be missed : Fri April 13! David Hollands - Sixty Years of Birding

Our guest speaker for April, David Hollands, describes himself as “Pom by birth; Australian by adoption; Doctor by profession; and Naturalist by passion”. He was born and educated in England and trained in medicine at Birmingham University. David came with his wife to Australia in 1961, firstly to a hospital job in Hamilton and then bought the medical practice in Orbost in 1963. The plan was to stay for three years and then go back to UK. Forty-four years later, they are still in Orbost.

David Hollands has been interested in birds and bird photography for as long as he can remember but, for many years, this had to take a back seat to running a medical practice and rearing a family. Then, in the late 1970’s, he decided to try to write a book on Australian birds of prey and this came to fruition in 1984 with “*Eagles Hawks and Falcons of Australia*”.

Owls have long been his greatest love and in 1991, he completed “*Birds of the Night- Owls Frogmouths and Nightjars of Australia*”. This has been followed by “*Kingfishers and Kookaburras*” and “*Owls-Journeys Around the World*”. David is currently working on an expanded and revised version of “*Birds of the Night*” plus a book on Herons Cranes and Storks and, with Clive Minton, one on Australian waders.

Dark/Autumn Midge Orchid – *Corunastylis sp.aff. rufa*



In March I found a small colony of Dark Midge Orchids *Corunastylis sp. aff. rufa* bravely blooming in crunchy drought affected bush paddock alongside the boundary of the freeway construction at Barkers Creek.

These orchids are so tiny they are would often be missed by passers by. They grow to 15 -30mm tall with tiny nodding green and purplish brown flowers arranged in a short crowded spike. The flowers are upside down (with the labellum above the column). The lateral sepals are 4mm long and divergent; the purple labellum has an upturned tip and entire or minutely toothed margins; the dorsal petal sometimes have dark bands. They flower between March and May. They are widespread across Victoria, growing in heath, woodland and dry forest. Yet to be named it displays a great deal of variation. See more drawings on Front Page.

Geraldine Harris

From the Business Meeting 22/3/07

- **Welcome to new member:** Noel Young
- **Roadside Cleanup.** Ten bags of litter were collected. Seven members in all contributed to this effort. Thank you to all concerned.
- **CFNC Future Development Workshop.** A tentative date for this event is July 14. Maximum member participation will ensure the success of this event – keep this date free.

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Programme

April 2007

General meetings - (second Friday of each month, except January) are held in the Uniting Church (UCA) Hall (enter from Lyttleton St.) at 8.00 pm.

Field Trips - (Saturday following the general meeting) leave from the carpark opposite Castle Motel, Duke Street at 1.30pm sharp unless stated otherwise. BYO morning and/or afternoon tea. Outdoor excursions are likely to be cancelled in extreme weather conditions. There are NO excursions on total fire ban days.

Business meetings - fourth Thursday of each month, except December, at 7 Wheeler Street, at 7.30 pm. All members are invited to attend.

VISITORS ARE WELCOME AT CLUB ACTIVITIES

Tue Apr 3. Castlemaine State Festival / CFNC Walk - Habitat of the Box Ironbark Forest - West Botanic Gardens. Eltham Copper Butterfly habitat. Depart 4pm from Botanical Gardens Rose Garden Carpark. Return 5.30pm. Leader: Richard Piesse, Ph 0407 087 319.

Fri Apr 13. Sixty years of Bird Photography with David Hollands. (Author of Owls: journeys around the world and Birds of the Night). UCA Hall, 8pm.

Sat Apr 14. Tipperary Walk. Leader: Chris Morris, Ph 0418 996 289.

Sun May 6. CFNC Heritage Festival Walk – In the Footsteps of the Major. A guided walk from Castlemaine to Expedition Pass along Forest Creek (15km) Return along Great Dividing Trail. Depart from car park opp motel in Duke Street, at 9.30am. BYO lunch and drinks. Cost: free.

Contacts: Ern Perkins Ph 5472 3124, George Broadway Ph 5472 2513.

Fri May 11. Gariwerd – Reflections on the Grampians. Alison Pouliot (Research Scientist and Environmental Photographer). UCA Hall, 8pm.

Sat May 12. Field Trip: Campbells Creek Waterwheel. G. Harris Ph 5474 2244.

Sat and Sun May 19,20. National Swift Parrot and Regent Honeyeater Survey. Contact: Geraldine Harris Ph 54742244.

Sat May 19. Roadside Cleanup.

2007 Committee

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Subscriptions for 2007

Ordinary membership: Single \$22, Family \$30

Pensioner or student: Single \$19, Family \$24

The subscription includes postage of the monthly newsletter, *Castlemaine Naturalist*.

Website: <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~cfnc>

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