

Castlemaine Naturalist

MARCH 1990 #154



LIFE WITH THE MISTLETOE BIRDS

This incident happened nearly ten years ago, but it is as fresh and interesting as ever. It was contributed by Kaye Turner.

Out on a property belonging to Kit and Don Logan at Yandoit, two tiny mistletoe birds chose a sapling gum at the back door of the house of these rather new Field Naturalists to set up home, and fired their interest in birdwatching to new heights.

This is Kit's story:

"The nest was constructed of cape-weed fluff and spiders web, and was fastened to a thin twig on a gum sapling at eye level. The camouflage was perfect amongst the heat-dried leaves of the gum. It was only by chance that Don noticed the busy little pair while mowing. The job began on Nov. 3rd and the birds allowed us to watch this miracle of architecture from a few yards away. The soft, fluffy ball grew downwards day by day. A small opening, oval shaped, led backwards and down. The outside was decorated with fluff and seeds. The job was finished on Nov. 9th and on Nov. 12th the first egg was seen. Then another on Nov. 14th and the third and last on Nov. 16th.



The female did all the sitting while the male fed her devotedly, and between whiles sat in a tall nearby gum twittering encouragement. Mother bird was often seen carrying away little balls of excreta in her beak.

On Nov. 28th two tiny orange-coloured beaks were seen sticking out of the opening and next day there were three. Both parents did the feeding. We were amazed to see that the combined weight of the family was borne easily by that soft ball of fluff.

Next day tragedy struck! A gale blew up, torrents of rain fell, the heavy soggy nest was blown this way and that. When darkness came the bag was still swinging violently in the gale. The next day the nest was on the ground, the babies still, and the parents nowhere to be seen. Don carefully tied the nest back on its branch. We saw the babies revive, but it was an hour before the parents discovered that their offspring had miraculously returned. Very soon panic subsided and all was well again.

Then came the heatwave. We saw tiny beaks poking through the nest and gasping for air, and three little bouncing rumps breaking the bottom of the nest. I dashed indoors and made a tiny macrame bag of single-strand hand-spun wool (nothing but the best for our babies!). This was placed carefully around the crumbling nest and fastened to the tree again. Then we got the greenhouse mister and gave the babies a fine spray. Once again all was well.

This, surely was the end of the drama, - but no! On the day our babies made their first flight and were sitting happily in low shubs below the nest, a southerly buster blew up and carried the infants high into the sky. The parent birds were twittering hysterically from tree to tree, and Don searched every corner of the garded, finally spotting one tiny object high in a tall gum. Then came the final miracle! The wind died down and after much desperate calling the whole family was once more united in a yellow box tree. We went to bed feeling greatly privileged to be surrogate parents to three mistletoe birds.

We miss the excitement of our involvement in all this drama, but we often hear our family twittering high up in our trees, and we pray that they will return to build again next year."

THE ULTIMATE MOUNTAIN IN SUMMER - KOSCIUSKO

Four of us, in two cars loaded to the Plimsol line, headed off on the 26th January for a week at Charlottes Pass in the Kosciusko National Park with the combined Victorian Nature Photography Group and the Bendigo Field Naturalists. It was the realisation of an ambition for me.

We didn't try to make it in one day, but took our time and the prettiest roads, dodged the Hume Freeway as much as possible, and stayed overnight at Khancoban. We went for a walk down to the dam wall after tea and watched fascinated as a pair of Little Falcons hunted below the wall and fed in the air. Next day we headed off down the Alpine way - after my car was finally persuaded to start with the aid of jumper leads - and we only stopped a couple of times, but the 110km to Jindabyne took three hours. There were many places we could have stopped, and we would have found ourselves looking at the backs of mountains we would be near to over

the next week. It was strange to think that we were only a few kilometres from our destination, and yet it was a 150km trip from Khancoban.

After a stop at Jindabyne we called at the Park Headquarters at Sawpit Creek, took in the displays, bought a couple of booklets, and watched the audiovisual, which was quite informative. We met one of the fellows who'd already spent the first week there and he offered to guide us up to our accommodation, which was just as well because it was nothing like I had pictured. After unloading the cars we settled into the two lodges, myself in the Southern Alps, and the others in the much newer Pygmy Possum. We did all our own cooking and cleaning, which helped make it a very reasonably priced week.

There were a number of different walks to choose from, and as many different habitats. I chose to go with one group



of companions on the Sunday on the Waterfall walk, which was reputed to be the best bird walk, but it was windy on the Sunday, so they were all hiding! This walk is in the tall timber on Sawpit Creek, and quite a number of orchids were seen, including the Alpine Greenhood. Bluebells were also a feature of this walk. The next day, with a different group, I went up to the Pass and walked to the Blue Lake,

ALPINE GREENHOOD a beautiful glacial lake. There were many flowers, predominantly of the daisy family, Alpine and Mauve Leek Orchids, numerous snow patches, few birds and millions of March flies. We had lunch at the lookout point, and afterwards decided that we would go down onto the lake, and soon realised it was far bigger than it appeared from above. There was a number of our people down there, 'though we'd only spotted two or three from the Lookout. It was well worth the scramble down as there were quite a few flowers that we hadn't seen before, a lovely little waterfall and stream, and a snowpatch which was easily reached.

On the way back three of us decided to follow the track along the edge of the lake to the outflow, and take the other track up to the lookout, and it was on that track that we saw a White-lipped Snake eating a March fly - we decided we like White-lipped Snakes! The bad thing about that incident was that the two of us with SLR cameras were out of film!

Tuesday was a quiet day with only a short walk up behind the lodges - with different companions again! On Wednesday I went with one of my room mates on the short Snowgum walk, which is a board walk to a high point from the Pass car park. The views from the top are magnificent, and I was able to

try to work out where we would be going the next day. While there we both photographed a Black Skink eating a March fly - I like Black Skinks, too! In the afternoon we drove down to Spencers Creek, which is a popular swimming and fishing spot, and explored around there for a while.

There were a number of popular spots I didn't visit. One was the Ski Tube to Blue Cow. Some just rode the train from Perisher to the top, but others did the whole trip and thoroughly enjoyed the experience, and the views from the top of Blue Cow. Numerous groups went on the Porcupine walk which was noted for its magnificent Snow Gums. A few hardier walkers went out to Mt Twynam, Watsons Crags and Mt Tate - but they were few!

My special day was the Thursday when I did the full 20km Lakes walk circuit, taking in Mt Kosciusko. It is best walked in an anticlockwise direction to avoid the steep 3/4 km pull up from the Snowy at the end of the walk. We left the car park at 8 am, and this time I wasn't with photographers, and I found that the steady climb to the Hedley Tarn lookout was much further than I realised! The first time I kept stopping for photographs, the second time I just stopped to puff and blow!

My companions hadn't been to Blue Lake, so they went down there for an hour while I dawdled on, finding lots to photograph, including a rock wall which fascinated me with its convoluted strata of quartz. There were masses of Silver Daisies, different Billy Buttons (I am told that there are six un-named species in the Park), a very attractive Senecio which is endemic to the Park, Euphrasia in shades from white to purple, Richea, Purslane growing in the most impossible places, and, as I got higher, Heliptrum albicans alpina.

I settled down for morning tea on the saddle between Twynam and Carruthers, overlooking the Sentinel, Watsons Crags, and in the distance, the Victorian Alps. While I was there a backpacker appeared. He'd been out for four days and his "feet were telling him it was high time he went home". The vegetation at that spot was growing in the most impossible shaley ground, but it was here that Geoff Sitch (he and his companions had caught me up again at this spot) found the tiny verbena that he had so much wanted to see.



THE SENTINEL
FROM THE SADDLE

The top of Carruthers provided some breathtaking views, while on the next saddle we had a marvellous view of Club Lake. Not far past here we saw our first gentians, lovely robust specimens in large clumps. It seemed that the higher

we got the better the flowers were.

We stopped on the path above Lake Albina for lunch - it was nice to redistribute some of the load from pack to tummy, and also raincoats to backs as quite a cold wind had started to blow, and the mist started to roll over the ridge below Townsend, making a beautiful play of sunshine and shadow in the deep valley of the lake below us.

A little further on we came across a snow patch above the track. Geoff and Ian McFarlane, who had caught us up again at that stage, decided to see if there was anything worthwhile under it. I was reluctant, but that soon changed when they called down that they had found both the Anemone and the endemic buttercups. The endemic one was a particularly beautiful specimen, and I managed my best photo of the trip.

I met the Briggs family a little further on, and directed them up there too, and, as the others were still exploring up there the photographers were directed to the right spot.

As we approached Kosciusko there was a rather long, rough climb up to the road. The others were ahead again, and down on another snowpatch. They gestured towards me, and I took a few seconds to realise they were trying to direct my attention to the scene behind me. The cloud was rolling in over us, but the valley behind was lit up - no wonder I used almost a whole roll of film on that walk!

The view from the top of Kosciusko is probably breathtaking, but I wouldn't know. Except for a couple of brief breaks our view was of mist and rocks.

The walk back was easy, with a stop for afternoon tea at Seaman's Hut. Despite the long day - 8¼ hours - I felt good when I got back, but I was certainly ready for a shower and another cuppa!

Next day was just a short walk up to Mt Stilwell, only a 5 km circuit in fact, but because we got off the beaten track and decided to follow the creek down, we found ourselves committed to a hard, but very interesting, "walk" through the scrub and rockhopping down the creek, taking 6 hours altogether, including an hour near the top chatting over lunch with two other couples we met up there,

The evening programs were a joy - Nancy Stone's delightful stories and recitation "Alec Stone's Hike at the Twins", a slide set on macrophotography, Geoff Christiansen's slides of the Kosciusko area, Cynthia Watkins "what to do and what not to do" set, Ilma Dunne's slides of Courtney Rd., Belgrave - and those magnificent close-ups! - Peter Galvin's slides of a trip to South America, which gave me a different aspect of many places I have read about; Dr Jim Willis' lecture and slide set on the offshore islands, etc, etc!

The week was fine and warm to hot most of the time. In fact the only rain we had was while we were packing the cars to return home. It continued to rain as we set off, our party deciding to head out through Kiandra, detouring through Cabramurra, just to say that we'd been in Australia's highest town. We stayed overnight at Corryong, visiting the grave of the Man from Snowy River next morning before heading for home.

Rita Mills

TULLAROOP BIRD LIST

Fifty two species of birds were identified on the Club's outing to Cairn Curran and Tullaroop on Saturday 10th February. The first stop was Cairn Curran, along the old highway between Newstead and Joyces Creek where a good range of birds could be seen.

At Tullaroop, the Tree Martins put on a display. A flock was active in hunting, and and between times roosted on nearby trees. They seem to prefer trees with twiggy tops, so that it is easy to observe them. The complete list is

Babbler, White-browed	Honeyeater, White plumed
Chat, White-fronted	Ibis, Sacred
Chough, White-winged	Ibis, Straw-necked
Coot	Kingfisher, Sacred
Cormorant, Little Black	Kite, Black-shouldered
Cormorant, Little Pied	Kookaburra
Cuckoo-shrike, Black f'd	Lapwing, Masked
Cuckoo-shrike, Little	Magpie
Darter	Martin, Tree
Duck, Black	Mudlark
Duck, Mountain Shelduck	Parrot, Red-rumped
Duck, Musk	Pelican
Duck, Wood	Pipit
Falcon, Brown	Plover, Black-fronted
Fantail, Grey	Rosella, Eastern
Firetail, Diamond	Shrike-tit, Eastern
Flycatcher, Restless	Spoonbill, Yellow
Galah	Swallow, Welcome
Grebe, Australian	Swan
Grebe, Great Crested	Teal, Grey
Grebe, Hoary Headed	Treecreeper, Brown
Gull, Silver	Wagtail, Willy
Harrier, Swamp	Wattlebird, Red
Heron, White-faced	Winter, Jacky
Heron, White-necked	Woodswallow, Dusky
Honeyeater, Black-chinned	Wren, Supberb Blue

NOTES FOR FEBRUARY

TAWNY FROGMOUTH. Three young have been raised at Vaughan Springs this season. One of these is reported to have become a connoisseur of barbecued sausages.

LITTLE GRASS BIRD was observed at Bells Swamp during February. This is the third record in the Club's bird list.

WHITE'S THRUSH. A White's Thrush (also known as Scaly Thrush) was seen in the bushland south of the Doxa Camp on 25/2/90. It is a large speckled ground-frequenting bird.

ADDITIONS TO BIRD LIST. New area records are Little Raven (p), Aust. Grebe (f), Little Pied and Little Black Cormorant (d), White-faced Heron (d), Sacred Ibis (d), Musk Duck (d), Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike (d), Blackbird (d), Weebill (d), Restless Flycatcher (df), Brown (d) and Yellow-rumped Thornbill (f), Yellow-faced Honeyeater (d), White-plumed Honeyeater (f), Brown-headed Honeyeater (d), Goldfinch (f), Red-browed Firetail (f) and Dusky Woodswallow (f)

STAR-FRUIT has been seen growing at Bells Swamp. This is an aquatic plant with spoon-shaped leaves and fruit arranged in a star-like pattern. It is a new district record for the plant list.

VARIABLE GLYCINE has been identified near the junction of Barkers Creek and Forest Creek. It appears to have narrow, clover-like leaves; close inspection shows that the leaf is actually pinnate. It has pea flowers. This is also a new district record.

Castlemaine Field Naturalists Club Inc
P.O. Box 324, Castlemaine 3450

Committee: Ern Perkins (Pres), Chris Norwood (V. Pres), Maggie Oliver (Vice Pres), Barbara Maund (Sec), Clodagh Norwood (Treas), Kaye Turner, George Broadway, Rita Mills (Newsletter), Ian Higgins.

Subscriptions

Student/Pensioner	\$5	Single	\$8
Family	\$12	Supporting	\$15

Newsletter posted: Subscription plus \$5.

CASTLEMAINE F.N.C. PROGRAM

- Fri 9 - Mon 12 Mar. GEELONG/OCEAN GROVE CAMPOUT. Combined Western Victoria Field Naturalists Clubs Association and Victorian Field Naturalists Clubs Association campout.
- Fri 9 Mar. BUTTERFLIES. Talk by Gary Sobey. 8.00 pm at the High School.
- Sat 10 Mar. HARCOURT NORTH RESERVOIR. Birdwatching with Rita Mills. Meet S.E.C., Mostyn St at 1.30 pm sharp.
- Wed 14 Mar. READING THE LAND BY MAJOR MITCHELL'S PARTY. Bendigo F.N.C. meeting, Dept Agriculture at Epsom. 7.30 pm. Leave 27 Doveton at 7.00 pm sharp.
- Sun 18 Mar. MOUNTAIN PEPPER on Mt Alexander. Excursion with Bendigo F.N.C. to look for Mountain Pepper. S.E.C., Mostyn St at 10.15 or Koala Park at 10.45
- Sun 25 Mar. BIRDING EXCURSION TO MALDON with Bendigo F.N.C. bird group. To be confirmed.
- Fri 13 April - no meeting. Good Friday.
- Sat 14 April. MINERAL SPRINGS TOUR to Lyonville and other springs. 10.00 a.m. at 27 Doveton Street. Take lunch.
- Fri 13 July. Mt KOSCIUSKO. Wildflowers of the Snowy Mountains, with Rita Mills.
- Fri 10 Aug. GROWING AUSTRALIAN NATIVES FOR CUT FLOWERS. Talk by Marilyn Sprague.
- Fri 11 May. LINEAR RESERVES with Keith Watson. High School at 8.00 p.m.
- Fri 31 Aug-Sun 2 Sept. WYPERFIELD CAMPOUT. W.V.F.N.C.A. campout at Wyperfield, organised by Maryborough F.N.C.
- Fri 14 Sept. WALKING IN THE WILDERNESS - SW TASMANIA with Pat Bingham.
- Mon 17 Sept. DARGILE FOREST. Excursion with Bird Observers Club - weekday excursion.
- Oct 26-28 GRAMPIANS. WVFNCA campout at Churches of Christ Centre, Halls Gap

Meetings on the second Friday of each month at Castlemaine High School at 8.00 p.m. Business meetings on the fourth Thursday of each month at 38 Campbell St at 7.30 p.m. All members invited.
Visitors are invited to attend the Club's sessions.