

Castlemaine Naturalist



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#170

BIRDING FROM DALBY TO BLACKALL IN MAY

A 24 hour bus trip from Castlemaine to Dalby in south east Queensland was so full of interest there was little time for napping.

New South Wales looked so much healthier than dried-out Victoria, as it was then, and the roads remarkably good considering the serious floods in the new year.

A six day stop over 48 km out of Dalby was no rest with so much to see. On the edge of the rich Darling Downs, the whole area is now devoted to cotton growing. What was once lush green dairying land now looks uninteresting and grubby, with dirty cotton balls scattered along road sides and piled up against fences. But there is a demand for cotton and the price is high, so out with the cows and pay off the farm.

I stayed in a partly restored 136 year old weatherboard house that was once the hub of a vast sheep property, now 50 acres of thick scrub on the Condamine River.

The bird life was prolific with 50 recorded and so many unidentified - how I needed a good birder! The pied and grey butcher birds delighted from dawn to dark with their rich melodious songs - at times they were almost drowned out by the loud wailing of large flocks of Australian Ravens. A pair of pheasant coucal bred near the house in thick undergrowth, and were frequently seen and heard. One day an F.1-11 shot over at tree-top height, stunning us all. It was closely followed by a flock of cockatiel, almost as swift but much more graceful and less threatening. Noisy friarbirds, blue-faced honey-eaters, dollarbirds, and red-winged parrots were common.

The Condamine River at the house had a weir across it. Upstream it was quite deep but not flowing. Downstream it was shallower and it was shocking to see the hundreds of dead fish. It is sad to see the fish die as the result of lack of oxygen, caused by the aerial spraying of the cotton crops every two weeks. Fishermen continue to fish upstream!

Black snakes were numerous and seemed to think they had absolute right of way, and who would argue with that.

The 50 acres had thick undergrowth with many interesting species - how I needed a field naturalist. The days were perfect and the brilliant moon-lit nights were enhanced by the hooting of at least two southern boobook owls.

Another one-night bus trip of 850 km was to Blackall. It was a slow trip on a bumpy road, with many sections under repair. There were many kangaroos, with at least 6 hit (hopefully killed outright), numerous wild pigs, straying stock, wombats, foxes and massive transports. I was quite glad not to be in the drivers seat!

Then from Blackall to a property 78 km along a dirt road, just after sunrise, and the beauty of the vast open plains slowly enveloped one with a feeling of utter peace and tranquillity.

A few facts about the property to get the picture straight. The property of 265 000 acres is 300 odd km south of Longreach and owned by national Mutual. It has 60 000 Merino sheep, 4 000 stud Merino rams, 4 000 Brah-mim Hereford cross cattle, 80 000 kangaroos - estimated by a survey carried out by the University of Brisbane recently. Annual rainfall is 18 in (460 mm), mostly in the summer. Staff is 12 - 14.

There had been good spring and late summer rains in 1990 and in May when I was there, the country looked magnificent. The grasses, mostly Mitchell grass, were knee high and in the well treed areas it was like a vast park land. The trees were acacias, she-oaks, mulga, sandal-wood, blackwoods, redwoods, leopard woods, gidgee, whose pungent smell at dawn and dusk would be almost overpowering. Along the creek beds were scrubby types of eucalypts. In one area there was a colony of koalas.

There were many tiny, interesting things growing in the red sandy areas. There were ranges of rocky outcrops and deep gorges, full of interesting formations and colours - a geologists delight!

The bird life was exciting. I recorded 68 - it could have been many more. Flocks of up to 10 or more brolgas always thrilled and large flocks of red-tailed black cockatoos were quite regular in their evening flight to the special trees where they roosted. Apostle birds and spotted bower birds were plentiful around the houses. Thick growth around a huge dam was the best place to be at dawn and dusk - spiny-cheeked honeyeaters tried to outwarble redthroats, crested bell birds were numerous and easily seen, white winged fairy-wrens just so cute - but no chats anywhere. It was not uncommon to see six wedge-tailed eagles gathered around a carcass.

It was lambing time, and 20 000 lambs had been born that

month. Kangaroos and eagles are considered a menace.

In spite of its appearance, the country was dry, and deep cracks were obvious. Creek beds were almost dry but the artesian bores are the source of water. A walk along the bore drains always provided a variety of wild life -

birds, and brown snakes - who obliged by getting away quick! Billy tea, made from boiling water at the bore head is delicious.

But still, no rain has fallen since last December, and plans are underway for a dry time ahead.

We have the best country in the world!

By M. Oliver [who will be expected to lead a CFNC excursion there in the very new future.]

JUNE AT SANDON

DRINKING AT THE BIRD BATH

Wrens, Thornbills (buff-rumped, brown and striated), Honeyeaters (white-plumed, white-eared, white-naped, and brown-headed), Robins (Eastern yellow, scarlet (2)), silvereyes, White-throated treecreeper.

ON THE PROPERTY

Maned ducks, white-winged choughs, restless flycatcher, grey shrike-thrush (pair), welcome swallow (pair), grey fantail, crimson rosellas, eastern rosellas, masked lapwing, kookaburra, red wattlebirds, honeyeaters (yellow-tufted (flocks), yellow-faced (pair), spotted pardalote, grey currawong (pair), crested shrike-tit, galahs, magpies, golden whistler (pair), speckled warbler, firetails (red-browed and diamond), varied sittellas.

NEARBY

Hooded robin (pair), willy wagtail (pair), jacky winter, long-billed corellas and red-rumped parrot (pair).

List provided by Suzanna Starr

FROM BARKERS CREEK

During the years that we have lived in Barkers Creek we have, from time to time, heard maned ducks calling as they flew overhead, usually during the evenings or at night,

Over the past week on three occasions a pair has visited us. the first time they perched briefly in the trees near the house, and then went on their way. w

On the second visit, after landing on the roof they flew to the two nest logs that are hung on trees a few metres from our windows, where we watched them preening and examining the holes, reaching about with their long necks, generally inspecting the sites for about 10 minutes.

One of them flew down and cropped the new grass, wandering around quite close to the house from where we could see every detail of the lovely mottled plumage and rich brown head and bars along the back. It seemed to us to be quite a unique experience.

The last time they came only to the roadside trees at the front. They could not have make use of the logs, the entrance holes are too small, and in other ways are unsuitable - maybe they also knew they are already occupied, one by a brushtail, the a ringtail! I guess it is an indication of the scarceness of tree hollows in the area.

Wyn Palmer

Four Days is not Enough

After our four days holiday in Barmah I think Doug must have decided that holidays are nice, and, as he wanted to visit a fellow who lives near Taree sometime, he decided another 2½ weeks were a good idea. I got out my "Where to Find birds in Australia", and decided it was an excellent idea. I felt it would be a good chance to visit the Warrumbungles, too, and so we decided to do a round trip, again deciding details as we travelled.

After 2 nights in Albury with my sister we headed off in pouring rain for our first overnight stop at Mittagong. The sky started to clear as we were having lunch in Yass, and that night when I woke at 3 am the moonlight was brilliant and crystal clear. I felt that I could almost make it "ting" if I flicked my finger.

As it had rained for much of the time we had been travelling we had seen few but the black and white birds - magpies, ravens, mudlarks, willy wagtails, with a couple of whitefaced herons and some wood ducks, a pattern I find is a common one in wet weather.

We skirted Sydney, preferring to use route 77, and stopped in an old Park in Hornsby for morning tea. There were quite a number of old iron barks and other eucalypts, and the most birds I'd seen for days - galahs, rainbow lorikeets, honeyeaters, crimson rosellas, pied currawongs, thornbills - and all the while trains rattled past at the bottom of the park every few minutes.

The scenery along the freeway is quite awe inspiring in places, part of it going through Kuringai Chase. At the lookout on Moonie-Moonie Creek bridge, not far from the Gosford turn off, we saw some lovely specimens of Banksia ericifolia in flower, as well as a rice flower, ploughshare wattle and some other wattles. After we'd been down to Gosford, and found ourselves heading back to Sydney on the freeway, we managed to start heading north again, but on the old highway, and saw numbers of gymea lilies almost in flower, six weeks early so I was told.

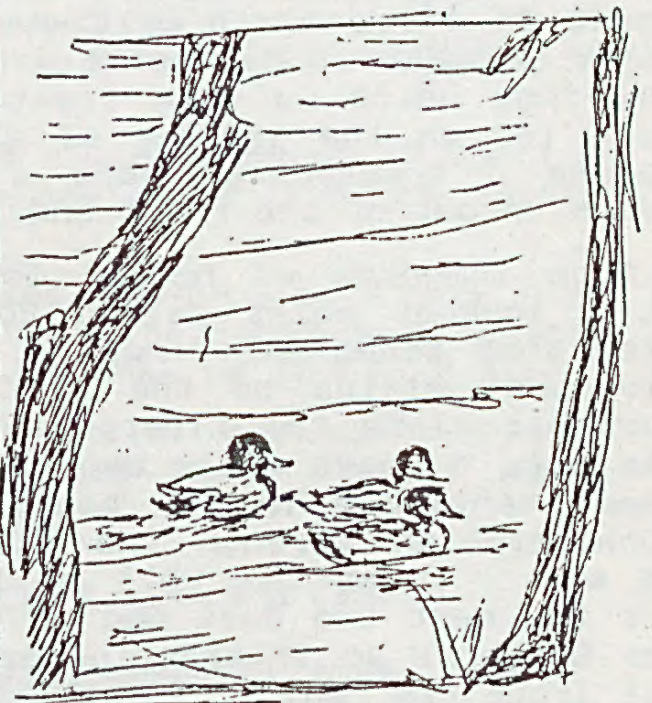
We took the Great Lakes Road to Foster-Tuncurry, where we'd decided to stay. It was well used, narrow, rough, winding and quite hair-raising in places, but it is through quite

beautiful mountain country much of the way, with lots of ferns, including at least a couple of different species of tree fern, and such trees as flooded gum and turpentine, with thick groves of cabbage-tree palm. The rest is between lakes and the sea, with varied plant communities, from rain forest to heath.

Cabbage-tree palms were growing naturally in the Smugglers Cove Caravan Park (highly recommended!) where we stayed in Forster. It backed on to the arm of a lake, and one morning we watched and photographed (hopefully!) several whistling kites fishing, and eating their catch in mid-air. An intermediate egret was standing in the water near the opposite bank, magnificently reflected in the water. Further along we spotted an eel and a little fish rather like a gurnard in the clear water. After lunch we set out to do some of the Bicentennial walk, and watched Australian gannets fishing, and a white-breasted sea-eagle.

Some of my best bird-watching was done in the Caravan Park. There was a resident flock of wood duck which looked hopefully for scraps, a large flock of scaly-breasted lorikeets, crested pigeons, noisy miners, a white faced heron wandering around the pond and surrounds, a crow (or was it a forest raven?) which was often there, and a grey butcher-bird among the 21 species I identified. One morning there was a flock of yellow-tailed black cockatoos feeding in the swamp she-oaks, some of which must have been 50 feet high.

On one occasion we decided to go back to a picturesque picnic spot at Booti-Booti recreation reserve. It was alongside the lake, with mountains rising behind. While we had our lunch we were joined by 2 noisy miners, 3 magpies, a butcher bird, and then 2 ravens which lorded it over the rest of them, even the butcher bird which had had the others all bluffed. Out on the water's edge, not far from where we were sitting, there were several Chestnut teal feeding. On the way back we took a couple of short walks through the tittree and banksia scrub to the beach.



The next day we did the rest of the Bi-centennial walk from the other direction. Most of the walk turned out to be along a beach of soft, squeaky sand, but we managed to reach the other end, and, before we wound our way up the path to the top of the dune, we decided to have a look at the cliff and rock pools. There was very little in the pools, but I was surprised to find that quite a lot of the rock was actually coal. We trudged up the track (still much better than climb-

ing the dune like the children were!) and followed the cliff-top walk to where we'd stopped a couple of days before. I'd heard a strange bird calling in the scrub, but couldn't locate it at all. When we got down back to the road we were watching scaley-breasted lorikeets feeding in the banksias when a local came along and chatted for a few minutes, asking if we'd seen or heard the eastern whipbird in the scrub by the path on top of the cliff. His description of the call convinced me that that was the bird I had heard. The location was right, too. I also at last identified the brown pigeon which we has seen on several occasions.

After six mainly sunny, often quite warm, days at Forster we set off for Coonabarabran, again sighting cattle egrets with the cattle just north of Tuncurry. After wide valleys with mountains in the background we eventually drove into the mountains between Wauchope and Walcha, and twice we heard the chiming of bell miners. The second time we were able to stop, and Doug tried video-tape them, but green birds among green leaves are a bit hard to capture on tape, but at least we've got the calls recorded.

The scenery on this day was quite breath-taking at times. At one spot there were three grass trees high above the bend and against the sky. One had four flowering spikes - and there was nowhere to stop!

We stayed that night at Beendemeer, a small settlement about 24 miles north of Tamworth. What we didn't hear 'til later is that it has quite a reputation for it's sever frosts and fogs which we were treated to next morning. There was even ice on the insides of the windows of the cabin. Just before a spectacular pass a few miles before Tamworth we drove up out of the frost and fog into glorious clear sunshine.

From Tamworth we headed for Gunnedah, and had our lunch at a lookout point called Porcupine Hill. It was lovely, with some beautiful views of mountains to the east, and the Liverpool plains to the west. From there we drove up to Narrabri along the Liverpool plains (I'd been reading about the area a short while ago, so was interested to come across names mentioned in the book), then we turned back down to Coonabarabran through the Pilliga scrub, which I was keen to see. It was as well we took this detour, as it rained for the next two days and we weren't able to get back there. The Scrub is an interesting area, with a wide range of trees, but ironbarks, white cyprus pine and Belah seem to dominate.

We just rested for the next couple of days, and wandered around in the bush nearby when it wasn't raining, and visited the Crystal Kingdom, which has a good run-down of the geology, and examples of the minerals of the Warrumbungles. In our wandering in the bush I found one bush in flower that quite fascinated me. It proved to be five-corners. Another find in the rain was a blue-bonnet, whose feathers were so wet I wasn't too sure of his colours, but I finally was able to see that it was a distinct olivey-brown on the back, with the blue face. We watched it for quite a while, but had to continually dry the lens of the binoculars - not good

bird-watching weather!

Next day the sky cleared at last, and we headed out to the Warrumbungles, driving through water in three of the fords on the way. We stopped at the well set out visitors centre for information, and took the short nature walk around the centre, sighting dozens of eastern grey kangaroos. At 11.30 we drove to the Belougerie Split Rock car park, and walked along the newly graded track (the reason for not going any further in the car!) to Burbie Canyon walk, which is an easy walk following the creek. We had our lunch at the end of the walk before joining the Burbie 4WD track and following it back to the end of the Belougerie Split Rock track, taking it from that direction as we'd been advised at the centre. The fact that it is only 4.6 km and takes 3 hours should have warned us, but I was determined to go anyway. It was beautiful but rough and a bit dangerous in places. I saw a lovely red heath with small flowers crowded along the stems, five corners, a white brachycombe, a tiny purple daisy, a daintly white heath, and tall greenhoods, as well as a yellow and a green phebalium and twiggy daisy-bush. We saw very few birds on this part of the walk, tho'. My comment in my diary that night (with a few asides) reads "...Highlights - the steepness (and roughness!) of the track; the saddle(4 feet wide) where we could look out over the plains on one side and to the mountains the other; the rock we had to scramble across (using toe holds cut into it) with a nice sloping drop below; the views; and the first sight of the car!" We took 2¼ hours, but didn't climb the chain and ladder to the top. I don't think that is included in the time anyhow.

Highlight of the trip home was a flock of about 30 apostle birds just north of Gilgandra (we saw other flocks later, but never so many birds):

Altogether we identified 109 species, which was a bit disappointing, but the bell miners, the kingfisher and apostle birds, always among my favourites, did make up for it a bit.

I certainly would love to go back again, perhaps a little later in the year, and I could happily spend several weeks around the Forster-Tuncurry area.

Bob Mills

BOOBOK REDUCES BLACKBIRD POPULATION

On the morning of July 13th, the boobook owl that resides in the Campbell Street peppercorn tree was seen to be holding a male blackbird under its claws. The boobook sat quietly, making no apparent attempt to eat it.

That evening, at about 5 p.m., we went to have another look. While watching the boobook began to tear at the blackbird. The beak dropped down, and there was a shower of feathers.

On the following Wednesday it has another male blackbird. Bird books state that boobooks eat birds up to sparrow size. Perhaps this boobook will make the record books as having caught the largest boobook-meal.

CASTLEMAINE F.N.C. PROGRAM

Fri 9 Aug. Jane Calder. A slide tour of Victorias National Parks. High School at 8.00 p.m.

Sat 10 Aug. GUILDFORD AREA. Leader is Beris Perry. Meet SEC, Mostyn St at 1.30 p.m. or Guildford P.O. at 1.45.

Fri 30 Aug - Sun 1 Sept. HATTAH. WVFNCA campout organised by Sunraysia Club

Tues 3 Sept-Fri 6 Sept. CAPE BROOM WEED PULL at Botanic Gardens with Australian Trust for Volunteers. We will make a roster to provide assistance.

Fri 13 Sept. BRITISH ISLES REVISITED. Nicolette Hooper

Sat 14 Sept. THE MONK/SRPING GULLY. 1.30 at SEC.

4-6th Oct. CAPE BRIDGEWATER. WVFNCA campout organised by Portland CFNC.

Sun 6 Oct. MUCKLEFORD FOREST with Ballarat F.N.C.

Fri 11 Oct. NOCTURNAL with Rob Watkins.

Sat 12 Oct. LAURISTON WILDFLOWERS. 1.30 p.m. at SEC.

Fri 8 Nov. BONY-BIG FELLA BIRDO - an examination to references in birds in the Arthur Upfield novels about the Aboriginal detective, Napoleon Bonaparte. Talk by Pat Bingham

Sun 20 Oct. MALDON STEAM TRAIN WILDFLOWER TRIP. Date of Bendigo Native Plant Group outing. 1 p.m. at Maldon RS. Later trains at 2,3 and 4 p.m. so choice of several for return. Cost \$4 adults, \$2 children

Sat 9 Nov. TIPPERARY SPRINGS. Walk from the springs to Twin Bridges. Leader R. Mills. 1.30 pm at SEC, Mostyn Street. Leader R. Mills.

SUPPER: Aug 9 B Perry, C Norwood: Sept 13 F & E Blake

Meetings on the second Friday of each month (Jan excepted) at Castlemaine High School at 8.00 p.m. Business meetings on the fourth Thursday at 38 Campbell St at 7.30 p.m. All members are invited to attend.

Visitors are invited to attend the Club's sessions.

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