

Western Australian Bird Notes

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Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union

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REMOTE WETLAND EXPEDITION - AUGUST 1986

The R.A.O.U. Remote Wetland Expedition to Lakes Argyle and Gregory in August 1986 saw a blend of professional and amateur ornithologists working closely to produce some unprecedented results. Our team of 13 participants enjoyed some remarkable birding in two unique environments.

Lake Argyle (formed in 1971 by the damming of the Ord River) is a majestic wetland; who of us will forget the sunsets and that silent, glassy water stretching for kilometres towards the Carr Boyd Ranges? Add to this the total of some 180,000 waterbirds of 59 species and one could not help but feel a little 'special' being there.

Parties of observers were organized, in R.J.'s inimitable style, into shore or boat patrols and began counts in areas of bird concentrations spotted earlier by aircraft survey. Some of the more impressive statistics included counts, in excess of 50,000, for both Hardheads and Eurasian Coots. Interesting also were counts achieved for Radjah Shelduck (660) and Comb-crested Jacana (300); results that suggest Lake Argyle is important for these birds. Yellow Chats in surprising numbers (more than 100!) delighted the observers; especially as this count represented an important extension of the known range of this diminutive bird. The presence of a pair of Letter-winged Kites brought solace to a pair of fearless ornithologists stomping the hot mud of the eastern shoreline.



Ranges rising steeply from glassy water, disturbed by birds in boats searching for waterbirds: April '86.
Photo by Peel Howden



Mats of aquatic plants at Lake Argyle support large populations of waterbirds. Radjah Shelducks were often encountered in August 1986.
Photo by Peel Howden

From Lake Argyle the team of participants moved to Lake Gregory on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert. Any apprehension about this wetland (it was little known) matching Lake Argyle's uniqueness was immediately suppressed. The count of 60,000 Little Black Cormorants, including 11 breeding colonies, was staggering and the skies 'blackened' as observers boated slowly through the flooded woodland along the lake margin. To the enjoyment of all, the very same areas were harbouring small flocks of Freckled Ducks which eventually tallied 900 individuals. This figure is a record for Western Australia. For some of the team it was their first encounter with this species and to experience such numbers was a rare privilege.

Also of note at Lake Gregory were colonies of Pied Cormorants, very large numbers of Pink-eared Ducks (33,000) and Great Egrets (355). The presence of 842 Great Crested Grebes, in view of few previous sightings in the far north of W.A. was another valuable result.

The ingredients for success of the expedition lay not only with impressive and important counts in spectacular settings, but also with the ambience created by the participants. After all it's not entirely funny when you fall out of a boat in to a well-known crocodile haunt, nor when every attempt at identification fails and what you have witnessed can only be Cape Barren Geese!

The results are a credit to all who participated in organizing, in offering technical know-how and in contributing to the common good. I will certainly be booking my spot again.

R. Vervest

OBSERVATIONS

collated by Roger Jaensch

The following records have been partly vetted and should receive further scrutiny before publication in RAOU Reports or in technical journals. Observers are encouraged to submit copies of field notes with all accounts of unusual sightings. The *Atlas of Australian Birds*, Serventy & Whittell's *Birds of Western Australia* and regional lists (e.g. Kimberley, Pilbara, Gascoyne) of the W.A. Museum should be useful guides to records that are unusual with respect to distribution or status.

This series mainly covers the spring of 1986. Shire names are given in brackets. Where known, the observer is identified by an abbreviation — abbreviations are listed below.

Observations that appear in other articles in this newsletter may not be repeated here.

Please send details of sightings to 'The Observations Officer' at the W.A. Office of the RAOU.

DOWN SOUTH

Southern Fulmar dead bird, 20/9, Woodman Point (Metro) — TJD

Great Crested Grebe — 2 with young, 20/9, Maitland Swamp SW of Beverley — KS, PC

Little Black Cormorant — more than 200 active nests, 3/11, Namburup Swamps (Esperance) — RV, RJ • 35, 6/11, Katrine-Glen Avon Pools in Avon River (Northam): nests with eggs — JRM

Little Pied Cormorant — 70, 6/9, Gibb Rd Swamp in Forrestdale (Metro): 55 nests active — DJ

Pacific Heron — 2, 28/9, Mears Lake (Brookton): building nest — PC • 6, 5/11, Tyrell's yate swamp (Esperance): two active nests — RV, RJ

Little Egret — 1, 7/6, Bibra Lake (Metro) — DJ • 2, 16/9, Alfred Cove (Metro) — PRH • 1, late September, Narrows interchange lakes (Metro) — RV • 2, 11/10, old Belmont tip (Metro): in pools near Parry Field — RV, FC • 1, 4/11, Gore Lake (Esperance): first for Esperance district — RJ, RV

Australasian Bittern — 1, 20/9, Mettler Lake (Albany) — PL

Straw-necked Ibis — 2 pairs building nests, 14/6, Barraghup Swamp (Murray): nests not continued — AD

Yellow-billed Spoonbill — 60, 14/6, Barraghup Swamp (Murray): 30, possibly 50 nests active (young) on 1/10 — AD • 45, 9/8, shallow swamp SW of Byenup Lagoon (Manjimup) — RV, SS • 4, 4/10, Parry Inlet (Denmark) — SH • 6 active nests, 17/10, Ludlow (McCarley's) Swamp (Capel) — PLa • 5 active nests, 7/11, Yellilup Lake (Jerramungup) — RV, RJ

Black Swan — c. 130 nests active, 27/9, N extension of Wonerup Estuary — BK

Mute Swan — 74, 10/9, Northam Pool — JRM

Freckled Duck — 6, 17/5, Gore Lake (Esperance): first at this lake — JE • 7, 6/9, Gibb Rd Swamp in Forrestdale (Metro) — DJ • 2, 20/9, Forrestdale Lake — DJ • nest with eggs in October, Benger Swamp (Harvey) — DGW • 3, possibly 5, 25/10, a paperbark swamp in Southern River (Metro): also a dead bird caught on a fence — RJ

Chestnut Teal — 2, 10/9, Carryburmup Swamp (Murray) — JS

Australasian Shoveler — 8/11, Manning Lake (Metro): with young — HF

Pink-eared Duck — 19, 1/8, Lake Claremont: with two clutches of young — EM

Hardhead — 4, 13/9, rushy swamp N of intersection of Nicholson Rd and Forrest Rd (Metro): nest with eggs — RJ • 11, 6/10, Mongers Lake: with young — NB • 4, 25/10, paperbark swamp S of Forrestdale Lake (Metro): nest with 3 fresh eggs — RJ • 39, 5/11, Northam Pool: with 5 broods of young — JRM • 38, 6/11, Katrine-Glen Avon Pools in Avon River (Northam): with young — JRM

Blue-billed Duck — 135, 29/4, Cardiminup Lake (Jerramungup) — JJ • 2, 17/5, Gore Lake (Esperance): first here, lake full — JE • 640, 7/6, Yangebup Lake (Metro) — DJ • 6, 13/9, Murchison River Ten Mile Pool — FNR et al. • 7, mid October, Murchison River near Kalbarri: first seen near Kalbarri — FNR

Collared Sparrowhawk — 1, 9/10, swamp in Wungong (Metro): nesting in paperbark above water — RV

Wedge-tailed Eagle — nest with two chicks in yate tree in lake near Munglinup, 6/11 — RV

Marsh Harrier — nestling (2/11) and nest with 2 eggs (5/11) in rushy swamps N of Cape Le Grand (Esperance) — RJ, RV

Peregrine Falcon — 1, 23/8, Pipidinny Swamp (Wanneroo) — BBa, MC, ND

Buff-banded Rail — 1, 13/9, swamp near Canning Vale Prison (Metro) — RJ • 1, 30 & 31/10, Gooseberry Hill (Metro): in yard near creek, confused by Cyclone fence — JB

Baillon's Crake — 1, 2/11, short-rush swamp N of Cape Le Grand (Esperance) — RJ

Australian Crake — nest with eggs, 6/9, Mogumber Swamp Nature Reserve (Gingin) — RV

Masked Lapwing — *Vanellus miles novaehollandiae* — 1, 31/10, Heirsson Island (Metro) — TJD. This is the usual subspecies seen in southern W.A.

Banded Lapwing — 2, 19/10, on oval behind Swanbourne Life Saving Club: not seen here for some years — EM

Lesser Golden Plover — 5, 3/10, Eurardy Station NE of Kalbarri — FNR • 1, 4/11, Alfred Cove (Metro) — PRH

Eastern Curlew — 9, 14/9, Creery Island area (Mandurah) — PW

Greenshank — 55, 26/9, Leschenault Inlet — CN

Marsh Sandpiper — 1, 3/10, Eurardy Station NE of Kalbarri: first for Kalbarri one degree block — FNR

Red-necked Stint — 2 200, Milyu Nature Reserve (Metro): one of the higher counts here for this species — BMH et al.

Red-necked Phalarope — 1: a number of sightings in October on Rottnest Island lakes. Also a report of a female Grey Phalarope at Rottnest on 15/10 by U.S. visitor Betty Gallagher: the bird was "deep red with white face pattern and dark cap....bobbing in the water —; this record has not been verified.

Regent Parrot — 3, 9/9, Gunnadorah Station E of Rawlinna: at a donga 2 km W of homestead — CL. Regent Parrots are rarely seen this far E; they are known to feed on fruiting saltbush (see Atlas).

Barn Owl — 1, August and September, Roe Highway in Midland (Metro) — BBa

Rainbow Bee-eater — 6, 15/10, first arrivals for 1986 near East Fremantle Yacht Club. Other observers reported birds first in the metro area in the second week of October.

Crested Shrike-tit — 1, 20/9, Flynn Rd near The Lakes (Mundaring): second record here — BBa, MC, ND

Splendid Fairy-wren — and **Blue-breasted Fairy-wren** — 3/10, Beetalynna Pool on Greenough River E of Geraldton — PM

UP NORTH

Wilson's Storm Petrel — 3, 22-25/9, at sea near Pt. Samson — RS

Plumed Whistling-Duck — 15, October, Lyons River E of Kennedy Range — MG

Radjah Shelduck — 15, 31/8, Ord River below Kununurra Diversion Dam — MH

Chestnut Teal — 1, 16/8, Packsaddle Swamp near Kununurra: first Kimberley record? — RJ

Blue-billed Duck — nest with eggs in lignum bush, 5/9, claypan between Meekatharra and Cue — RJ, RV

Letter-winged Kite — 1, 1-2/6, Le Lievre Swamp near Camballin: underwing markings seen — DK

Pacific Baza — 2, 1/11, Bell Gorge (Kimberley) — BW, GH

Square-tailed Kite — 1, 20/8, Argyle Downs Station — RJ • 2, 30/8, savannah between Ruby Plains and Billiluna (S of Halls Ck) — RJ, RV

Black-breasted Buzzard — 1, late August, Lake Gregory (S of Halls Ck) — RAOU expedition • 1, late September, Errabiddy Station — RHS

Black Falcon — singles seen at NE and E sides of Lake Argyle, late August — PRH • 1, 26/8, between Lake Gregory and Billiluna — PRH, RJ

Peregrine Falcon — 1, 23/9, Yallalong Station (Murchison) — PM • 1, late September, at creek 105 km NW of Meekatharra — RHS • 2, late September, Lake Annean S of Meekatharra — RHS

Spotless Crake — 3, 4/9, Millstream — RJ, RV

Brolga — 13, 26/9, tidal salt flats at Wickham — RS

Painted Snipe — a male, 10/11, Lake Eda E of Broome: rarely seen in W.A. — BW, GH

Lesser Golden Plover — 1, 14/8, tidal mudflats at Derby — FER

Large Sand Plover — 33, 14/8, tidal mudflats at Derby — FER

Ruddy Turnstone — 1, 5/9, Lake Annean S of Meekatharra — RJ, RV

Black-tailed Godwit — 1, 5/9, Lake Annean S of Meekatharra

Long-toed Stint — 2, late August to November, Lake Eda E of Broome — BW, GH • 2, 31/8, Buckshot Bore Swamp near Camballin — RJ, RV

Oriental Pratincole — 19/10, near Broome: first for the season — BW, GH

Torresian Imperial-Pigeon — 1, 30/6, 20 k S of Kalumburu — DK

Flock Bronzewing — c. 150, late August, NE side of Lake Argyle: in grassland and coming to drink — RAOU expedition • up to 30, 26-29/8, Lake Gregory — RAOU expedition • 250, 31/8, Camballin Irrigation Area — RJ, RV • 1, 9/10, Lake Eda E of Broome: not often recorded on Dampier Peninsula — BW, GH

Brush Cuckoo — 1, 31/8, 17 Mile Dam in Fitzroy River floodplain — RJ

Fork-tailed Swift — 1, 19/10, near Broome: [first for season?] — BW, GH

Collared Kingfisher — 23/9, mangroves at Pt. Samson — RS

Barn Swallow — 2, 16/10, Raible Road, (Broome?): first for the season — BW, GH • 130, 10/11, Broome — BW, GH

Yellow Wagtail — 1, 19/10, Lake Eda E of Broome: legs dark, yellowish-buff wash on flanks, sides of chest and vent — BW, GH

Varied Triller — probable female, 23/8, Ord — Bow Rivers junction — JT

Leaden Flycatcher — 1, 8/10, Adcock Gorge 300 k ENE Derby: male on nest — PCoy

Cinnamon Quail-thrush — 2, 23/8, 2 km N Mt. Magnet — NMCK • 2, 23/9, Yallalong Station (Murchison) — PM

Banded Whiteface — 2, 24/8, 86 k N of Meekatharra — NMCK

Yellow Chat — 8 or 10, 14/9, Galileo Precipice SE of Wyndham — MHB

White-browed Woodswallow — common, late August, NE Kimberley: with Masked in flowering trees — RAOU expedition

AD — Austin Daw
BBa — Bryan Barrett
BK — Brad Kneebone
BMH — Barbara Hale
BW — Brice Wells
CL — Cyril Linto
CN — Clive Napier
DGW — Doug Watkins
DJ — David James
DK — Dot Kingston

MC — Margory Clegg
MG — Maree Gallin
MH — Mike Howell
MHB — Mary Bremner
NB — Norah Brockman
ND — Norma Duff
NMCK — Norm McKendrick
PC — Peter Congreve
PCoy — Peter Coyle
PL — Pattie Leighton

EM — Edna Milne
FC — Fred Coles
FER — Florence Robinson
FNR — Norman Robinson
GH — Gail Hooper
HF — Hazel Fermaner
JB — June Butcher
JJ — Jo Jones
JRM — Jim Masters
JS — John Start
JT — Jeremy Talbot
KS — Kath Shadbolt

PLa — Peter Lambert
PM — Peter Mack
PRH — Peel Howden
PW — Peter Wilmot
RHS — Roger Smith
RJ — Roger Jaensch
RS — Rod Smith
RV — Rodney Vestervest
SH — Sheila Hill
SS — Sheryl Stephens
TJD — Tom Delaney

EYE BIRD OBSERVATORY

Warden's Report

Happy Christmas and thank you to all those people who supported and Visited Eyre in 1986.

The Pink Cockatoos have worked hard this year to retain their rights to the prestigious position of being Eyre's emblem. One morning in winter we witnessed a most unusual sight when two thirsty Pink Cockatoos visited the frozen bird baths (overnight minimum -5C). They appeared puzzled when unable to obtain a drink from a normally reliable waterhole. All three baths were investigated and one cockatoo stepped on to the ice and went skating. Rob came to the rescue by pouring water on to the ice.

We are often asked the best time to visit Eyre. Winter is very pleasant with lots of blossom and calm sunny days ideal for bird-watching, not to mention the added attractions of the whales. In summer the bird baths are heavily used by many honeyeater species, the waders have arrived and there is the bonus of a swim. Even foul weather has its joys as we discovered when we ventured along Kanidal Beach in a howling wind and a temperature of 36.2C. We sighted a Whiskered Tern and four Crimson Chats (both first sightings this year) and 14 Gull-billed Terns (last seen in 1982).

We hope that all members will support Eyre and the new wardens in 1987. The best way to do this is to visit. We have organized the courses for the whole of 1987 to give you plenty of notice. Book early to avoid disappointment — your place will be confirmed on receipt of \$50 deposit. A discount of \$10 is available if full course fees are received by the wardens not less than one month prior to the course.

If you intend to make a casual visit to Eyre please note that it is closed on some days and that there is a policy of not accepting casual visitors during courses. These steps have been taken to reduce the pressures on the wardens and to give course participants priority.

As Eyre has a limited number of places \$50 is necessary for a confirmed booking. This helps to overcome the losses incurred by late cancellations and the turning away of others.

You can support Eyre in 1987 by joining Friends of Eyre (FOE). Send the wardens an annual subscription of \$10 and you will receive two newsletters each year and support a unique observatory.

Book for 1987 courses soon and/or send in your FOE subscription.

J and R Hill.

Banding in September

While staying at Eyre for a month, I was able to carry out some concentrated mist-netting, the first major banding since Nick Dymond's work. Three hundred and three birds were trapped, including 124 re-traps. Two visits to Twilight Cove led to 34 birds being trapped there and a few hours at Nine-Mile Beach yielded 10 birds. Eucalypt blossom was very patchy, especially near the Observatory, resulting in relatively small catches at any particular trapping site.

Notable re-traps include Singing Honeyeater (031-56404) banded in 1978, now aged at nine plus, a Red Wattlebird (071-36716) banded in 1980, now aged at six plus, a White browed Babbler (050-82423) banded in 1980, now aged at seven plus and a Purple-gaped Honeyeater (022-40113) banded in 1980, now aged at seven plus. One of Steven Ambrose's colour-banded White-browed

Scrubwrens (022-61276) is now a six plus year bird. The most numerous birds trapped were Singing, White-fronted and New Holland Honeyeaters.

There is a lot of data in the detailed Eyre records and it would be an interesting job to work through the figures for some of the species. The banding field sheets are being microfilmed in order to make the raw data available in microfiche and more accessible.

D.Reid

Art Workshop

In September an art workshop was held. The participants consisted of experienced artists and aspiring artists of various ages. They worked individually and together on excursions and at the homestead. Some did finished watercolours and pastel drawings on the spot while others took note sketches and did finished pieces in the comfort of the Observatory verandah.

The week started with a late afternoon walk along the beach soaking up the scenery. Another walk was along the excellently laid out trail, sketching and learning about the wonderful Eyre flora. There was a sketching walk along the east track to the hidden valley and back across the dunes at sunset. A full day was spent on an excursion to Twilight Cove where there was temptation to use the time watching three parent whales with calves close to shore. Although there was a strong on-shore wind blowing, it was quite calm between the dunes and cliffs and some notable paintings and drawings were done of the cliffs. The sedge in its unusual rows was the subject of one interesting ink and stick drawing. Another day was spent at Burnabbie ruins and rockhole, where the masses of yellow everlastings provided background colour for old fences, buildings, rocks and gums.

During the week quick sketches of birds were possible when they were in the hand after being banded.

Many excellent paintings and drawings resulted from the workshop, as well as exchanges of ideas and techniques. All who participated were enthralled with the scenery, especially its changing colour and light. Eyre was a restful and inspiring place to work with tasteful and nourishing food served by the wardens. One day-visitor was heard to comment, "Why would they come all the way out here for an art workshop?" We hadn't noticed that he was blindfold, but he certainly must have been.

D. Reid

BIRDING FOR BEGINNERS COURSE — EYRE IN SEPTEMBER

Ever since being introduced to birding we had heard about Eyre and been intrigued. To have been to Eyre placed one into a special category of Birdo. Our initiation into the mystique of Eyre began when Jan and Rob met five weary but eager travellers at the bus at Cocklebidy. At the microwave tower we picked up three more and our group was then complete.

The programme that Jan and Rob had devised for us was packed with interest. Day one was a wader count along the Nine Mile beach. A particular highlight of this was the sight of ten large humans thundering down the beach in pursuit of one very small, pinionless, fledgling Red-capped Plover "runner" in order to capture and band it.

Our day on Hampton Plains was notable for the splendour of the colour in Tommy Graham's cave, the Richards Pipits flying from the rock face, the Banded Lapwings with young, Mulga Parrots, Crested Bellbirds and Blue Bonnets. Glorious! On the way home a Mallee Fowl plodded across the track in front of our vehicle and began scratching in the underbrush.

Twilight Cove provided an opportunity for us to observe "birds of a different feather", four Southern Right whales each with a calf, frolicking and "singing" fifty metres from the beach.

On a walk down the East Transect we saw a pair of Yellow-rumped Pardalotes bringing food to a nest burrow in the sand by the track. A total of eighty species was seen over the period of the course.

Besides the field trips there were many other attractions for us at the observatory. Watching honeyeaters at the birdbath outside the living room windows was a valuable learning experience in species identification. A dugite was also observed from this same vantage point after our attention was drawn to it by the alarm calls of Blue-breasted Fairy-wrens and White-browed

Scrubwrens. Evenings were spent discussing various aspects of birding, looking at slides (of birds, naturally) and getting pointers to assist us in identifying birds.

In addition to Jan and Rob's guidance in the field, Don and Donna Reid, who were assisting at Eyre, gave us the benefit of their expertise. Through Don's banding activities we were able to have "hands on" experience with some of the birds and his knowledge of geological features of the area was an extra bonus for us.

All too soon our time was over. Eyre more than lived up to our expectations. The beauty of the landscape, the wind sculptured dunes, twisted mallee trunks, the wonderful hospitality and enthusiasm of our hosts; and the birds. Eyre, we shall return.
P. Bentley, C. Comstock and D. Evans

WATERBIRD STUDIES

report by Waterbirds Officer, Roger Jaensch

BREEDING EGRETS

Judy Jenkins of 3 Trinnick Place, Booragoon 6154 is assisting with the RAOU survey of breeding colonies of egrets in WA. If you know of any colony, past or present, please contact Judy in writing or by phoning her on 364 2083. We are pursuing the history of colonies as well as the numbers of pairs breeding at present. Australia has international responsibilities to protect the Great Egret and Cattle Egret and we are also interested in data for the Little Egret.

As reported recently in *The West Australian*, a colony of 30 pairs of Great Egrets was reported to us in October by Ray Nancarrow. As with most egret colonies, Rufous Night Herons were breeding with the Great Egrets. Also, two pairs of Little Egrets appeared to be breeding — the second breeding site in WA. This colony is probably that which was described some years ago 'near Pinjarra'.

Colonies of egrets at Australind and Ludlow are active this year, but colonies at Toolibin Lake (dry) and east of Esperance are not active. Other known colonies are at Chandala Swamp and near Wokalup, i.e. seven colonies known altogether.

AUSTRALASIAN BITTERN

Another RAOU project in WA is concerned with the breeding ecology of the Australasian Bittern. This species was NOT found breeding in 200 nature reserves surveyed by the RAOU from 1981 to 1985. Rodney Vervest is searching for bitterns each month at Byenup Lagoon, near Manjimup and has located two males advertising territory. Rodney and I worked some bittern infested swamps near Cape Le Grand (Esperance) in November but we did not find any active nests.

Any readers knowing the whereabouts of Australasian Bitterns likely to be breeding should give us a call at the RAOU Office.

Egrets and bitterns are known to nest late — sometimes into January and February.

ESPERANCE WETLANDS AND WATERFOWL

The last big 'wet' years in the Esperance district were in 1968 and 1979 (according to the locals), but 1986 has seen water levels in lakes higher than in those years. Paperbark and yate wetlands in the Mortijinup-Nambarup, Gore-Quallilup and Jerdacuttup systems have become deeply flooded (up to 5 metres), mostly with brackish to saline water. This has triggered a great deal of breeding by waterfowl, though numbers of birds have not been spectacular in spring due to dispersion of birds in the district.

Of particular interest (as seen from 2-7 November by Rod Vervest, Jack Ewert and I) were Blue-billed Ducks with eggs at Mortijinup, Australasian Shovelers with young at Gore, and Chestnut Teal and Hardheads with young at Jerdacuttup Lake (single clutches in each instance). Also, ten Freckled Ducks (9 males) were seen in yates at Tyrell's property E of Esperance, four to ten were flushed in paperbarks at Nambarup Swamps, a pair was lurking in thickets at Jerdacuttup and two were in yates at Yellilup Lake (Bremer Bay district). Freckled Ducks have now been seen in three seasons and at eight wetlands in this south-east coastal region, suggesting that this may be an important refuge (and breeding?) area for them.

1987 GREAT DUCK COUNT

Yes folks, the next annual Great Duck Count is not far away! Mark the tentative dates 7 to 15 March 1987 in your diaries NOW so that you don't miss out on this great event. Once again we will be asking you to explore 'new' wetlands in your local area, so it would be wise to visit them soon to get the lay of the land (water). Remember that the onus is on you to obtain permission to enter private property. **Please let me know** if you are interested in joining the 1987 Great Duck Team.

MEMBERS' CONTRIBUTIONS

BOP WATCHINGS

One of the great benefits of BOP Watch for observers is the greater awareness of raptors and their often amazing behaviour.

Recently Gail and I were at Lake Eda with two NSW birdos, when we saw a group of Magpie Larks pursued under a low bush by a Brown Goshawk, which took the rearmost about two feet above the ground. It was immediately assailed by a Brown Falcon that had followed both the pursued and the pursuer under the bush. The Brown Falcon physically crashed into the other bird, giving it what could only be called a heavy "shirtfront" which caused it to drop its prey. This was then seized by the aggressor.

Three Whistling Kites and one Black Kite then entered the melee swooping out of the sky intent on further acts of piracy. Unable or unwilling to fly under the bush they contented themselves with flying tight circles round the shrub and making tentative darts at the scene of the action. The Brown Goshawk's response to all of this was to fly to a small tree about ten feet away and sit there "sulking". The Brown Falcon dragged the Magpie Lark under an even lower bush and mantled until it was satisfied the others couldn't reach it, whereupon it began to pluck its stolen meal.

One of the Whistling Kites was very persistent and flew tighter and tighter circles round the concealed Brown Falcon, finally landing and walking round the bush only about a metre away from it, but unwilling to go closer. As this circular but careful menacing was ignored by the smaller bird the Whistling Kite finally conceded defeat and took to the air, where it continued its circling, even though that proved to be as ineffectual as the Brown Goshawk's motionless watching. We observed the whole drama from our front row seats, only about twenty metres away.

The second incident took place at Lake Le Lievre (pronounced by the locals Le Veer) and was notable not so much for unusual behaviour by the raptors involved as the almost suicidal behaviour of their prospective lunches. A group of Black-tailed Native-hens, numbering about two hundred and fifty had taken up a position on the edge of the lake, acting like 'a la carte meals' for any predator that cared to sample them even though good cover was available a couple of metres away. They were attacked in turn by a Marsh Harrier, a Brown Falcon and two Whistling Kites, taking frantic evasive action only when it was generally too late.

On a subsequent visit with Kevin Coate we found the Whistling Kites on a nest only about seventy metres from the still exposed Black-tailed Native-hens. Expecting to find either eggs or young in the nest Kevin nimbly climbed the tree but found only the legs of Eurasian Coots and BTNhs neatly arranged round the rim of the nest. Altogether we found enough legs to kit out four Coots and seven Black-tailed Native-hens, mostly in the nest but some of them on the ground directly below.

Earlier observations had given us the impression that the BTNhs were wary birds, very quick to use any available cover, but this group seemed impervious to danger in spite of their diminishing numbers. It may be worth observing that the Whistling Kites were very neat eaters or liked red ornamentation dangling round their roosting nest.

G. Hooper — B. Wells.

NORTHERN SAFARI

1986 saw a return to "old fashioned" winters and by early August we were more than ready to head North. We packed our large tent, etc. and took off for the Kimberleys.

A major reason for the six week campout was to join Roger

and the team inspecting Lakes Argyle and Gregory. This was a wonderful experience and is well reported elsewhere in this issue. Our report is about the other four weeks we spent poking about the North looking for birds.

We had decided to reach Broome a.s.a.p. and a highlight of the three day drive was the beautiful wildflowers around Paynes Find. The major 'lowlight' was the interminable road from Goldworthy to Broome. We reached Broome on the third day and it was crowded in early August and this is understandable considering its different culture, tourist features and the weather — clear blue skies, maxima of 28C and pleasantly cool evenings.

Broome's claim to ornithological fame is surely the variety of habitat. Tidal mudflats, rocky coasts, mangroves, grass plains and woodlands produce a wonderful variety of birds. In one brief visit to the main jetty we saw Brahminy Kites, Whistling Kites, White-bellied Sea-eagles and an Osprey on a nest on the light stand on the end of the jetty. The tidal flats of Roebuck Bay were alive with recently arrived waders while the woodland had Red-winged Parrots, Cockatiels, four species of finch, many honeyeaters new to us and the beautiful Red-backed Fairy-wrens.

We were walking through bushland when we saw five Blue-winged Kookaburras in the trees ahead. We approached quietly and discovered perhaps the cause of their interest when Wendy almost trod on two and a half metres of Black-headed Python. Harmless, slow and sleepy it was startling on first acquaintance. We assumed the Kookaburras were eyeing the snake with gastronomic interest in a classic case of "biting off more than they could chew".

Geikie Gorge National Park was our next stop and although it is fairly well developed and popular tourist spot it is relatively unspoiled. Birdlife abounds. Scenery competes with the birds for attention and the long deep pool fringed with majestic cliffs presents an ever changing picture. The Park Rangers produced a checklist of Park birds and were most helpful. Purple-crowned Fairy-wrens had been seen at the Gorge a few days before but we failed to do so. Rose and Allan Jones who were on a similiar safari to us -including the Lakes — did see these beautiful and quite rare birds.

After two peaceful nights at Geikie we drove to Kununurra along the almost completed new highway. Only 18kms remained to be sealed. From the start we had been filling in the BOP Watch sheets and had become considerably better at identifying raptors while we were on the move. The drive from Fitzroy Crossing to Halls Creek gave several sightings of Black-breasted Buzzards, a Black Falcon, Wedge-tailed Eagles, Whistling Kites, Brown Falcons, Australian Kestrels and the ubiquitous Black Kites. During the entire trip we noted 16 different raptor species and dutifully filled in dozens of BOP sheets.

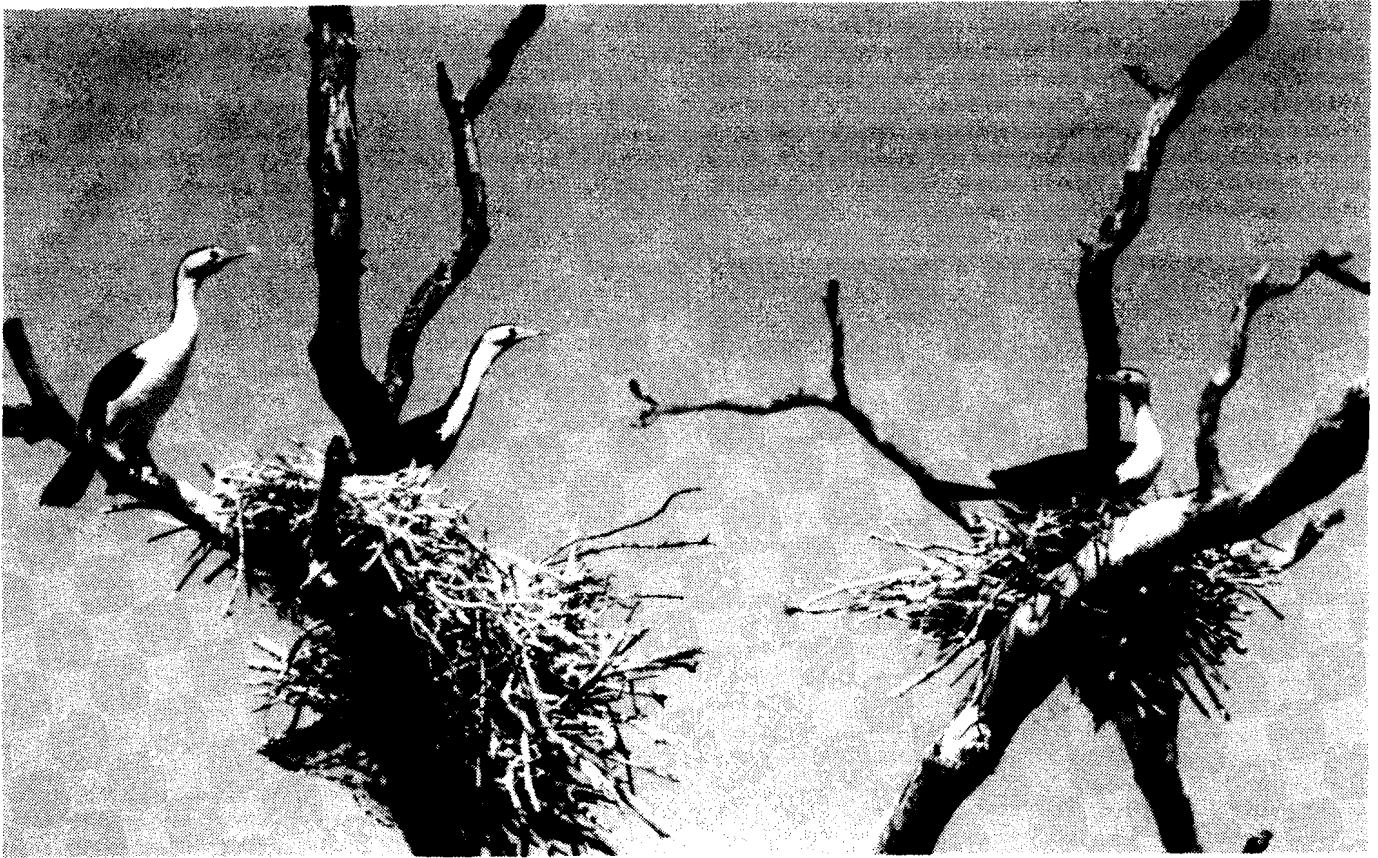
Kona Caravan Park at Kununurra was ideal and we used it as a base while awaiting the arrival of the Team from the South. Our camp-site was on the bank of the Diversion Dam which was home to numerous waterbirds and vast flocks of Little Corellas. It is also the home of crocodiles — freshwater and salty (so they say) but that did not stop us swimming when the temperature reached 38C.

Hidden Valley is a delightful natural park on the outskirts of the town which produced some new birds for us including a Grey Goshawk, the Sandstone Shrike-thrush and White-quilled Rock-Pigeon. Two top bird spots were located nearer to Wyndham. Moochalabra Dam provided a splendend view of Gouldian, Crimson, Masked, Long-tailed, Bouble-barred and Zebra Finches, while Bar-breasted and Rufous-throated Honeyeaters crowded into the same trees.

Marglu Billabong east of the Kununurra-Wyndham road is a spot not to be missed. Situated in a Nature Reserve the narrow ribbon of shallow water stretches for several kilometres and is home for most species of waterbirds found in the North, including Brolgas, Black-necked Storks, Black Swans, Comb-crested Jacanas and numerous waders.

After the birding experience of our lives with the Team from the South, we started home. At Derby we met up with Rose and Allan Jones and enjoyed the hospitality of the areas premier birdo Dot Kingston.

Windjana Gorge on the Gibb River Road is another unspoiled spot which provided excellent birding and spectacular scenery. Sandstone Shrike-thrushes abounded, Figbirds noisily advertised their presence and we sighted a Green-backed Gerygone. This



*Colonies of the Pied Cormorant, mainly a marine species, numbered 250 pairs at Lake Argyle and 1000 pairs at Lake Gregory.
Photo by Roger Jaensch*

little bird looks very ordinary in every way but its song is like that of a Fairy-wren which hasn't quite learnt to trill properly.

On the way south we stayed overnight at Eighty Mile Beach and had the interesting experience of following the waders which were following the tide — seemingly to Africa.

Our last stop of note was at Onslow where we saw a flock of 30 Brolgas at Five Mile Pool near the mouth of the Ashburton. The area also produced two more species of finch — Painted Firetail and Star — to add to our list. In all 220 bird species were seen during our trip.

W. & C. Napier

EAST KIMBERLEY VISIT

In September 1986 a trip to the East Kimberley showed a marked contrast in birdlife from that seen three years previously in July. Climatically there had also been a marked contrast in the "wet" seasons experienced in each of the years.

In the latter half of July 1983, with maximum temperatures around 30C and a record "wet" the whole landscape was ablaze with flowers and young immature birds were everywhere: young White-bellied Sea-eagles even scavenging on the roads in early morning and numerous young Pied Butcherbirds filled the air with their flute-like melodies. In early mornings as Wyndham, Brolgas danced in the main street.

However, in the latter half of September 1986 with temperatures 10 degrees higher (38C to 40C) and after an almost non-existent "wet" season, there was very little water around except in the deep gorges around Wyndham such as Emma and Chamberlain gorges and Galileo Precipice and the man-made dams and channels at Kununurra and Argyle around the Ord River. Apart from the Magpie Goose, water bird numbers were down as were the number of honeyeaters probably because of the lack of flowers on trees and shrubs. White-gaped Honeyeaters were seen with only occasional Singing, Grey-fronted and Brown Honeyeaters.

Moochalabra Dam The pools on the approach to this dam on the King River were almost dried up. However, on the one remaining pool were 13 Brolgas, 2 Black-necked Stork, 3 White-faced Herons, 2 Pacific Herons, 2 Great Egrets, 3 Little Egrets, 4 Little Pied Cormorants and 3 Little Black Cormorants. A Brahminy Kite flew overhead. Only 20 species of land birds were seen in contrast to 30 species in 1983.

Marglu Billabong In July 1983 this was a luscious area with 20 species of waterbirds including 50 Great Egrets and 20 Royal Spoonbills. In September 1986 there was only a very small pool remaining with 12 species of water birds: 6 Brolgas, 2 Yellow-billed Spoonbills, 2 Greenshanks, 12 Wandering Whistling Ducks, 9 Grey Teal, 6 Hardhead, two each of Little Egret, Little Pied Cormorant and Little Black Cormorant and one Pacific Heron and one Australian Pratincole.

Galileo Precipice The two large pools here were still quite deep. There were 5 Night Herons there. Between the pools 8 Yellow Chats were seen.

Wyndham Thirty species of birds were seen including the Silver-crowned Friarbird. At Wyndham Port there were 10 Curlew Sandpipers, 5 Silver Gulls, 4 Greenshanks, 4 White-faced Herons, 5 Sacred Ibis, 2 Straw-necked Ibis, 2 Pacific Heron, 2 Brahminy Kites and one each of Eastern Curlew and Beach Stone-curlew.

Cockburn Range West of Wyndham around the Cockburn Range there were large expanses of water in deep gorges: Emma Gorge, Chamberlain Gorge and the Pentecost River. Emma Gorge is a 45 minute walk, the last half kilometre through vine forest to a large ice-cold pool surrounded on three sides by a 10 metre rock face overhung with ferns and ripping water. The pool has its resident python and numerous aquatic plants. The bower of a Great Bower-bird contained bones only, both long bones and jaw bones. Chamberlain Gorge contained 3 kms of deep water — ideal for swimming or boating. Darters, Straw-necked Ibis, White-faced Heron, Rufous Night Heron, Magpie Goose and a Spotted Harrier were seen. Pentecost River crossing on the Gibb River Road still contained water with 6 Sacred Ibis, 12 Silver Gull, 2 Greenshank and 2 Gull-billed terns.

Oombulgurri on the tidal Forrest River Twenty five species of land birds were seen and 5 Brolgas, 3 White-faced Herons, 2 Greenshanks, 8 Curlew Sandpipers, 2 Common Sandpipers, 5 Little Black Cormorant and 3 Little Pied Cormorant.

Kununurra Diversion Dam — Packsaddle area Each morning we were entertained by the male Pheasant Coucal with his continuous melancholy 'Hoop-hoo-hoo' whilst 100 metres in the other direction Yellow Oriole sounded more cheerful with 'cholonk-cholonk'. Forty two species of birds were seen including mixed finch flocks but it was a surprise to see flocks of Crimson