

Western Australian Bird Notes

Quarterly Newsletter of the WA Group
Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union

No 77 March 1996

Nesting Great Crested Grebes

For several months this summer the south-west corner of Mongers Lake became a centre of nesting activity for many pairs of Great Crested Grebes. The preferred nesting sites were in a row of little clumps of reeds, just a few metres from the edge of the lake, and there was much competition for these. When all were taken as foundations for their semi-floating mounds, some pairs built in bulrushes at the edge of the lake. Others, unable to find space elsewhere, started mounds at the edge of rushes away from the shore. The latter seemed to be an unsuitable site as mounds were usually abandoned within a few days. Only one pair persisted in this region.

In all, more than a dozen pairs built mounds during November-December and others in January when birds who had hatched their chicks moved to other parts of the lake. The birds vigorously defended the area around their nests, though if the non-incubating one of a pair was absent for a while, nearby birds who were still building would make underwater raids to steal material from the base of the mound. The nests usually contained four or five eggs and while one bird incubated, the other regularly added more vegetation to the mound.

The first chicks hatched towards the middle of December and by the second day were having short swims, though mostly travelling on the backs of the parents. I was particularly interested to see that, as well as small fish, tadpoles, etc, the parent birds fed the

chicks small, downy feathers. These were invariably obtained by preening their own plumage and was consistent behaviour with all the pairs. Reference to HANZAB confirmed this as normal feeding procedure but left me still wondering why something virtually indigestible should be part of their diet. The answer came when reading about the Red-necked Grebe, a North American bird. The book stated that, like other grebes, it swallows feathers, probably to strain out fish bones and other undigested remnants which it periodically regurgitates.

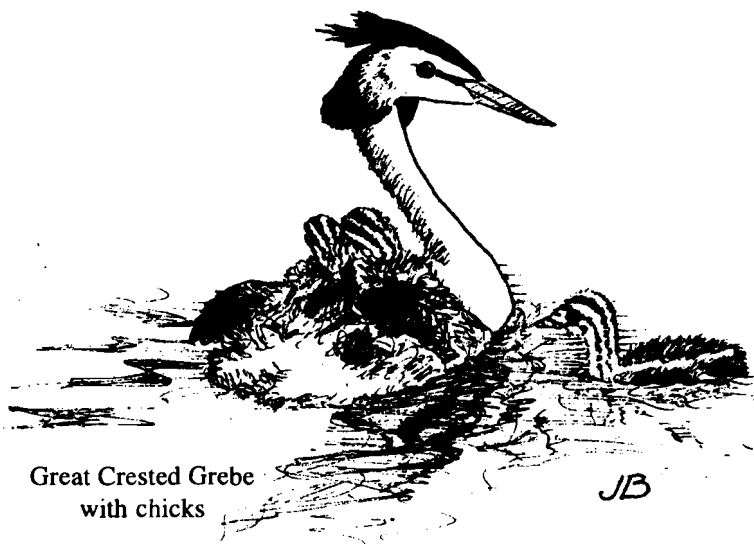
This unique opportunity to see, at close quarters, breeding plumaged grebes going about their courting rituals and nesting activity was not only of interest to dedicated birdwatchers. Many joggers and walkers using the nearby path also stopped to look at them. Who knows – perhaps among those whose curiosity was sparked were some potential future RAOU members.

Mavis Norgard

Reference: Udvardy, M.D.F. (1977) *The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds, Western Region.* A.A. Knoff

Note: Before this year, Great Crested Grebes were not common on Mongers Lake. The *Scopewest* survey recorded an average of 1-5 birds per survey, and no breeding.

Editors



Great Crested Grebe
with chicks

Observations

NEW BIRDS FOR AUSTRALIA

This issue of WABN sees a number of exciting new records including three species new to Australia and its Territories, as well as a number of records of rarely seen species. Readers are reminded that, for rarely seen or difficult to identify species, adequate documentation is required for inclusion in WABN.

For example, records of waders rarely recorded in the south-west should be accompanied by a description of what was observed and reasons for the identification. For the new records listed below, several are supported by specimens or photographs, and each will be written up in more detail elsewhere.

BIRD OBSERVATIONS

Compiled by the Observations Committee. Shires are in brackets.

Names and order follow Christidis, L. and Boles, W. (1994) *The Taxonomy and Species of Birds of Australia and its Territories*. RAOU Monograph 2.

SOUTH-WEST (Shark Bay to Cape Arid)

Malleefowl - 1, 3/10/95, 35 km N of Beacon in low mallee by the State Barrier Fence (Mt Marshall) - CB * 10, 12/1/96, ca. 20 km NE of Naremben (Naremben) - RS * 1, 11/12/95, Bending NR (25681), 15 km N of Kondinin (Kondinin) - EH * 1, seen three times, 1-6/1/96, mallee-Acacia scrub, NW corner of Lake Gulson Timber Reserve (Lake Grace) - JB, JuB

Freckled Duck - 1, 28/12/95, Lake McLarty (Murray) - MC * 1, 7/1/96, Big Carine Swamp (Stirling) - CN

Southern Giant-Petrel - 1s and 2s, various days between 7/7 and 31/10/95, Point Dalling, Dunsborough (Busselton) - RP

Kerguelen Petrel - frequently reported, 23/6 - 31/10/95; highest numbers 400+ on 14/9/95, 300+ over 2 hours on 17/9/95 and 1000+ in 2 hours on 10/10/95, all at Point Dalling, Dunsborough (Busselton) - RP

Great-winged Petrel - 1, 18/10/95, Point Dalling, Dunsborough (Busselton) - RP (unusual on the west coast)

Soft-plumaged Petrel - recorded on 5 days in Oct 95, with largest number (100+) on 10/10/95, Point Dalling, Dunsborough (Busselton) - RP

Blue Petrel - recorded on 7 occasions in Oct 95 with highest numbers 200+ on 4/10/95 and 40+ over 8 hours on 10/10/95, Point Dalling, Dunsborough (Busselton) - RP

Broad-billed/Salvin's/Antarctic/Slender-billed/Fairy Prions - varying numbers, 22/6/95 to 23/10/95, but highest number at Pt Dalling, Dunsborough, was 200+ on 18/7/95 (Busselton) - RP (see also Observations section in WABN 75)

White-chinned Petrel - frequently reported in small numbers, 20/6 - 31/10/95; highest numbers 16 on 28/6/95, 14 on 11/8/95 and 18 on 17/10/95, all at Point Dalling, Dunsborough (Busselton) - RP

Grey Petrel - seen on 9 days in Oct 95, highest number 8, 21/10/95, Point Dalling, Dunsborough (Busselton) - RP

Flesh-footed Shearwater - 20+, 26/10/95, Gull Rock, Cape Naturaliste (Busselton) - RP

Hutton's Shearwater - 20+, 5/8/95, Point Dalling, Dunsborough (Busselton) - RP

Little Shearwater - 3, 10/10/95, Point Dalling, Dunsborough (Busselton) - RP

Yellow-nosed Albatross - 100+ over 8 hours, 8/10 and 10/10/95, Point Dalling, Dunsborough (Busselton) - RP

Royal Spoonbill - 1 (with Yellow-billed Spoonbills), 26/1/96, Station Lake (Esperance) - JB, JuB and Hooded Plover Group (rarely recorded on the south coast)

Yellow-billed Spoonbill - ca. 20, 26/1/96, Station Lake (Esperance) - JB, JuB and Hooded Plover Group (not often recorded this far east on the south coast)

Black-tailed Godwit - 1, 20/1/96, Alfred Cove (Melville) - MC * 39, 25/1/96, Lake McLarty (Murray) - MC

Bar-tailed Godwit - 200+, 29/12/95, mouth of the Greenough River (Greenough) - CB

Marsh Sandpiper - 49, 25/1/96, Lake McLarty (Murray) - MC (good number for this site)

Sanderling - 30, 7/1/96, Government House Lake, Rottnest Island - FO (not usual in these numbers away from the coast)

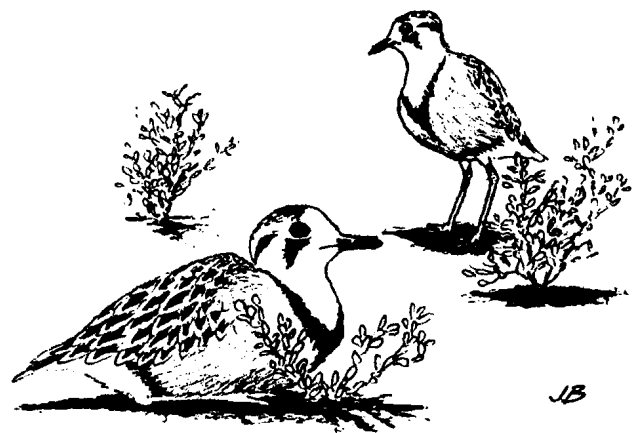
Red-necked Stint - 2164, 25/1/96, Lake McLarty (Murray) - MC (high number for this site)

Broad-billed Sandpiper - 1, 30/10/95, Alfred Cove (Melville) - PS * 1, 27/12/95, Alfred Cove (Melville) - GMo, MC * 2, 4/2/96, Lake McLarty (Murray) - JD

Red-necked Phalarope - 3 (2 males, 1 female), 10/11/95, Pearse Lakes, Rottnest Island - FO * 3, 7/1/96, Government House Lake, Rottnest Island - FO

Black-winged Stilt - 1341, 25/1/96, Lake McLarty (Murray) - MC (high number for this site)

Inland Dotterel - 20+, 5/1/96, in sparse, dry samphire in bed of Lake O'Connor (NW lake of Lake King chain of lakes) (Kondinin) - JB, JuB



Inland Dotterels
at Lake O'Connor

Hooded Plover - 2, with nest with 3 eggs, 21/10/95, Mandalay Beach (Denmark) - MNa * 89, 26/1/96, Station Lake (Esperance) - JB, JuB * 930, 27/1/96, Lake Gore (Esperance) - JB, BN, RAOU Hooded Plover Project team

Common Tern - 43, 8/1/96, Mandurah harbour (Mandurah) - FO

Fairy Tern - estimated 80+ nests containing eggs to large chicks, 27/12/95, Mandurah (Mandurah) - MC
White-winged Black Tern - 80, 25/1/96, Lake McLarty (Murray) - MC * 110, 22/1/96, Lake McLarty (Murray) - TK
Diamond Dove - 2, 3/10/95, Mt Churchman, N of Beacon (Mt Marshall) - CB
Sulphur-crested Cockatoo - 1, 25/1/96, Lake McLarty (Murray) - MC
Regent Parrot - 11, 20/12/95, N end of Thomsons Lake (Cockburn) - RS
Barking Owl - 1, 8/5/94 and 19/5/94, Avon River, West Toodyay (Toodyay) - MH ("screaming woman" call heard)
White-breasted Robin - 2, 29/9/95, Araluen Botanic Park (Armadale) - JS, HS
Crested Bellbird - 1, 11/1/96, Melaleuca Park (Wanneroo) - CB
White-backed Swallow - 50+, 29/12/95, 5 km N of Albany airport (Albany) - LD, ChD (unusual this far south)

ARID ZONE (including the Pilbara, Gascoyne, interior and Nullarbor)

Black Swan - 13, 8/1/96, Goodwin A platform, 138 km off Karratha - TK
Leach's Storm-Petrel - 1, 31/1/96, Goodwin A platform, 130 km off Dampier at 19°39' S, 115°55' E - TK, GME (few previous records from WA)
Black-necked Stork - 1, 8/7/95, flying over the Maitland River crossing, NW Coastal Hwy (Roebourne) - BBa, MCI
Letter-winged Kite - 2, 12/7/95, 10 km N of Sandfire Roadhouse, ie 310 km S of Broome (Broome) - BBa, MCI
Grey Falcon - 4, 15/12/95, 10 km E of Jimblebar Minesite on road to Jigalong (East Pilbara) - RD, RT
Pomarine Jaeger - 1, 9/12/95, Goodwin A platform, 138 km off Karratha - TK (unusual this far north)
Oriental Cuckoo - 1, 7/1/96, Karratha (Roebourne) - TK (rarely recorded in the Pilbara)
Chestnut-breasted Quail-thrush - 1, 2/10/95, in *Acacia* shrubland 5 km SE of Thundelarra HS (Yalgoo) - CB (near S limit)
Brown Songlark - young male, 6/12/95, Goodwin A platform, 138 km off Karratha - TK
Blue-and-white Flycatcher - 1 male, 12/95, Cossack (Roebourne) - G. and C. Morton per REJ (first record for Australia; details will be published in the WA Naturalist)
Narcissus Flycatcher - 2 males, 12/95, photographed on Barrow Island (Roebourne) - WAPET personnel SF, PD (first record for Australia; details will be reported elsewhere)

KIMBERLEY

Black Swan - 7, 29/10/95, Argyle Diamonds tailings dam (Wyndham-East Kimberley) - FO (uncommon in the Kimberley)
Green Pygmy-goose - 1, 26/10/95, Taylor's Lagoon (Broome) - RJ, PC * 3, 26/10/95, Lake Eda (Broome) - RJ, PC
Streaked Shearwater - 1 beachwashed, 4/11/95, near Broome (Broome) - HM, BBO * 7, 19-24/12/95, Broome port (Broome) - HM
Wedge-tailed Shearwater - 12, 19-24/12/95, Broome port (Broome) - HM

Hutton's Shearwater - 1, 24/12/95, Cable Beach (Broome) - HM
Letter-winged Kite - 2, 22/10/95, Roebuck Bay (Broome) - RJ, PC * 19, 29/10/95, Roebuck Bay (Broome) - JF * 1, 16/11/95, Anna Plains (Broome) - BBO * 1, 14/1/96, Broome (Broome) - PC, RJ
Grey Falcon - 3, 26/10/95, Lake Eda (Broome) - RJ, PC * 2, 27/10/95, Anna Plains (Broome) - RJ, MR, PC
Brolga - 520, 26/10/95, Roebuck Plains (Broome) - RJ, PC
Little Curlew - 5000, 19/11/95, Lake Eda (Broome) - BBO * 12 000, 9/1/96, Roebuck Plains (Broome) - PC, RJ
Eastern Curlew - 1100, 9/12/95, Roebuck Bay (Broome) - HM
Common Redshank - 5, 16/11/95, Eighty Mile Beach (Broome) - BBO
Ruff - 2, 28/10/95, Anna Plains (Broome) - RJ, MR, PC * 1, 14/12/95, Broome sewage works (Broome) - PC, RJ
Oriental Plover - 1000, 10/1/96, Roebuck Bay (Broome) - PC, RJ
Oriental Pratincole - 20 000, 17/1/96, Roebuck Plains (Broome) - PC, RJ
Roseate Tern - 10, 18/11/95, Broome area (Broome) - BBO * 50, 20-21/12/95, Broome port (Broome) - PC, RJ
Sooty Tern - 19, 19/12/95, Broome port (Broome) - PC, RJ
Common Noddy - 60, 20-22/12/95, Broome port (Broome) - PC, RJ
Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove - 1, 19/12/95, Cable Beach (Broome) - PC, RJ (third record for Broome)
Channel-billed Cuckoo - 1, 2/11/95, Lombadina (Broome) - RJ, PC (at W limit of distribution)
Blue-winged Pitta - 1 beachwashed, 20/12/95, Coconut Well (Broome) - BD (fourth record for Australia)
Silver-crowned Friarbird - 1, 2/11/95 and 4/11/95, Lombadina (Broome) - RJ, PC (S and W limit of distribution)
Banded Honeyeater - 1, 3/11/95, Gregory Well (Broome) - RJ, PC
Yellow Wagtail - 1, 17/11/95, Anna Plains (Broome) - BBO
Black-backed Wagtail - 2, 30/12/95, Derby (Derby-West Kimberley) - SPC (photographs available; details will be written up elsewhere)
Crimson Finch - 5, 5/11/95, Argyle Diamonds LIA workshop (Wyndham-East Kimberley) - FO (unusual this far south)

CHRISTMAS ISLAND

Eastern Reef Egret - White phase: 6 between Flying Fish Cove and North West Point and 2 at The Blowholes; Dark phase: 2 at Flying Fish Cove and 3 at Waterfall, 1/96 - KC (possibly becoming more common)
Pied Heron - 1, 1/96, Waterfall - KC
White-breasted Waterhen - 5 adults and 2 chicks, 1/96 - KC (first recorded on Christmas Is in 1992 or 1993; apparently increasing in numbers)
Gallinago Snipe - 1, 5/1/96, near North West Point - MC
Pin-tailed Snipe - 1, 1/96, freshly dead, found under a power line near the cricket oval - KC
Common Tern - 1, 9/1/96, Flying Fish Cove - MC, JC
Little Tern - 1, 4-12/1/96, Flying Fish Cove - JC, MC (according to ranger staff, had been present since early November)
Grey Wagtail - 7 over several days, 1/96 - KC

Java Sparrow - 65+, 3/1/96, Poon Saan (part of settlement area) - MC (possibly increasing in numbers?)

Common Wheatear - 1, 12/95 - KC (first record for Australia or its territories: details will be published elsewhere.

COCOS-KEELING ISLANDS

Grey Plover - 4, 7/12/95, North Keeling Island - KC

Oriental Pratincole - 15, 1994, West Island - KC * 1, 7/12/95, West Island - KC

White Tern - breeding (on eggs), 7/12/95, North Keeling Island - KC

Dollarbird - 1, 7/12/95, Home Island - KC (first record for the Cocos-Keeling Islands)

Myna *Acridotheres* sp. (possibly a Jungle Myna, *A. fuscus*) - 1, 7/12/95, Home Island - KC

OBSERVERS

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CN = Clive Nealon

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FO = Frank O'Connor

GME Gail McEwen

GMo = Glenn Moore

HM = Helen McArthur

HS = Helen Start

JB = John Blyth

JuB = Judy Blyth

JC = Jean Craig

JD = John Darnell

JS = John Start

KC = Kevin Coate

LD = Liz Davies

MBa = Mike Bamford

MC = Michael Craig

MCl = Margery Clegg

MH = Max Howard

MNa = Margaret Nash

MR = Mavis Russell

PC = Peter Collins

PD = Peter Doig

PS = Peter Sandilands

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Notes for Contributors

The Editors request contributors to note:

- WABN publishes material of interest to the WA Group
- contributions should be written or typed with **double spacing** - a copy on disk of word processed documents would assist, especially if in WordPerfect or MS Word format
- WABN uses RAOU recommended English names
- contributions will be published unless the contributor is informed to the contrary.

Deadline for the June Issue

1 May 1996

at Perry House

CHANGE OF POSTAL ADDRESS

Kindly note that from 1 March 1996, all mail will be delivered direct to our office at 71 Oceanic Drive, Floreat 6014 and not to the post office box at Belmont.

Please amend your records accordingly.

Members' Contributions

BEE-EATERS EATING CALCITE

On 18 and 19 November 1995, we camped at the Old Congelin Station site and on both evenings visited the dam. A flock of about 12 Rainbow Bee-eaters performed the same ritual on both occasions. Between 1700 and 1800 hours they arrived and landed on trees surrounding the dam before flying down and drinking from the surface. Each bird appeared to make several sorties before its thirst was satisfied.

The Bee-eaters then changed their tactics and started to bathe sometimes swooping low and splashing the surface with

their bellies and wings and on other occasions almost completely submerging and coming to a halt before flapping off the surface and flying to a tree to preen.

After this they flew down to the ground and proceeded to pick up and swallow small pieces of white calcite-like material from the banks. One bird pecked at a dried bone while another picked up a larger piece of dark material, flew onto a branch and tried to swallow it. It proved to be too large and while altering its position in its bill the material fell. Another Bee-eater caught it in mid-air and also tried to swallow it, failed and the material fell to the ground. On picking it up we found it to be a piece of crustacean shell about 2 cm long and 1 cm wide.

John and Helen Start

Editors' note: See also the article below concerning birds eating ash and/or charcoal, possibly as a source of calcium.

BLACK HONEYEATERS AND ASH

In the last issue of WABN (No. 76, p. 9), F. Robinson reported seeing Black Honeyeaters feeding amongst ash on Glenflorrie Station.

Similar behaviour has been reported before, particularly for Black Honeyeaters. Other Australian species recorded eating ash and/or nibbling or eating charcoal include the Short-tailed Shearwater, Bourke Parrot, Tree Martin, Fairy Martin, Dusky Wood-swallow, Double-barred Finch and Zebra Finch (Mollison and Green 1962, Baldwin 1965, Chisholm 1967). However, it appears to have been reported most often for Black Honeyeaters, and within this species, most reports concern female birds.

In Western Australia, Seyfort (1984) reported female Black Honeyeaters swallowing "small white lumps of potash" picked up from the ash of old campfires at several places in the Murchison region. One local RAOU member, Kevin Coate, has reported female, but not male, Black Honeyeaters feeding on ash at the time of commencement of breeding in the Pilbara and Murchison. Analysis of a sample of the ash showed that it was very high in calcium, suggesting that the females may have been building up their calcium levels prior to nesting and egg-laying (Coate 1985).

"birds feed calcareous material ... to
their nestlings"

Elsewhere, Pescott (1985) observed Black Honeyeaters carrying pieces of charcoal in north-western Victoria, and cited an observation by L. Conole of Black Honeyeaters eating charcoal in this same area. In South Australia, Black Honeyeaters have also been seen feeding amongst charcoal and ash (Hutchins 1988) but in this case, both male and female birds were involved. Although these observations were also at a time of breeding, they suggest an explanation different to, or more complex than, that offered by Kevin Coate.

It is known that some birds feed calcareous material (grit, shells of molluscs) to their nestlings, presumably to supply the calcium needed when forming the skeleton (Campbell and Lack 1985, p. 256). If Black Honeyeaters did this, it may provide the explanation for male and female birds picking up bits of charcoal, although it does not seem to provide an

explanation for actually eating charcoal or ash, because they would simply carry it to the young. Obviously, further careful observations would be of interest, and if any RAOU member notices such behaviour, it would be interesting to obtain chemical analyses of the ash as well as charcoal, along with observations on the stage of breeding.

Allan Burbidge

References:

- Baldwin, M. 1965. Birds eating charcoal. *Emu* 64: 208.
Campbell, B. and Lack, E. 1985. *A Dictionary of Birds*. T. and A.D. Poyser, Calton, Staffordshire.
Chisholm, A.H. 1967. Some ornithological oddities: concerning gizzard-stones. *Emu* 66: 374-375.
Coate, K. 1985. Black Honeyeaters feeding on ash. *Western Australian Naturalist* 16: 51-52.
Hutchins, B.R. 1988. Black Honeyeaters feeding amongst charcoal and ash. *South Australian Ornithologist* 30: 160.
Mollison, B.C. and Green, R.H. 1962. Mist-netting Tree Martins on charcoal patches. *Emu* 61: 277-280.
Pescott, T. 1988. Black Honeyeaters and charcoal. *Geelong Naturalist* 22: 37-39.
Seyfort, M. 1984. B.O.C. Western Australia Tour, 1-23 September, 1984. *Bird Observer* 635: 124.

NESTING BLACK-FRONTED DOTTERELS

In December, after being given information by Peter Sandilands regarding a Black-fronted Dotterel he had found nesting at the entrance to Herdsman Wildlife Centre, I went to check it out. I couldn't see the bird when I parked by the gate, but had only taken a few steps before it flew up from the nest and went into its broken wing act, which enabled me to pinpoint the spot. The nest was a small depression in the ground containing three eggs, and was only a few metres from the edge of the road—Flynn Street. There was plenty of passing traffic along the road, but probably no pedestrians used that area, which was on the eastern side of the entrance to the Centre. Amongst the dead grass and leaves, the nest was almost invisible. The location was probably chosen because the surrounding vegetation effectively camouflaged the nest, and perhaps the proximity to human activity may have provided a measure of protection from predators.

Two days later I revisited the site and found three tiny newly hatched chicks. The colours and markings of their down merged so perfectly with their surroundings that I could see them only because I knew exactly where the nest was located. As I was about to leave Perth for a few days, I did not see them again, but hopefully, they have become active little runners and blended in with all the other wildlife at Herdsman.

Mavis Norgard

MASKED WOODSWALLOWS DOWN SOUTH

On 7 November 1995, at 0900 hours, a large flock of approximately 500 Woodswallows was seen flying from east to west high above our house in Cape Le Grand National Park. Even with binoculars the majority of Woodswallows were too high to identify, but those that were flying lower could be identified as Masked Woodswallows and I assume that the remainder were of the same species. A constant chat-chat-chat could be heard from them as they moved across the sky.

Sandy Rose



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LITTLE BITTERN AT PERRY LAKES

On 15 November 1995 at approximately 4.45pm I was walking around the western side of the east lake at Perry Lakes. I glimpsed a small heron-like bird flying low over the water before disappearing into the reed bed opposite the scout memorial.

My initial impression was that of a bird with a very dark back, large light patches on the wing covert area, and underneath, grading from a tawny colour at the front to a very pale, whitish belly and vent area. I could not locate the bird where it had entered the reeds but kept looking in the hope that it would reappear. After some minutes I was rewarded. The bird appeared about 2 metres from where I had last seen it and walked slowly along the edge of the reeds.

It was small (for a heron) with a yellow beak, which appeared to be 'outlined' on the upper mandible, and the legs

were greenish yellow. The back was black with a greenish gloss, the head and rear neck were a rich dark chestnut colour, and the folded wings provided large pale patches of buff on the sides of the bird. Underneath the colour graded from reddish buff at the throat to white at the lower belly.

The bird remained in good view for perhaps two minutes, sometimes stretching out the neck and at others crouching and looking even smaller. It finally flew across the water some 100 metres and disappeared into more reeds. In flight, going away from my position, the bird was dark backed and dark winged with distinctive large and pale scapular patches.

Overall, a very good sighting of a Little Bittern.

Clive Nealon

RED-TAILED BLACK-COCKATOOS

At Piesse Brook over a three-week period from 16 September to 7 October 1995, a flock of 15 birds were resident enjoying the seeds of the green gum-nuts (honky nuts) of marri *Eucalyptus calophylla*. These Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos are much more destructive of the actual honky nut than the Red-capped Parrots which enjoy the seeds at a later stage and chew at the base of the nut only, before dropping them to the ground. The Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos chew the nut longitudinally leaving a half nut on the ground.

Mary Bremner

SHORT-BILLED BLACK-COCKATOOS IN SUBURBAN WEMBLEY

On the morning of 6 November 1995 between 5.30 am and 6.30 am, a flock of 37 birds descended on the almond tree and stripped the tree of the almonds, throwing them to the ground. Other years it has always been the Australian Ringnecks that try to crack these hard-shelled almonds. The Australian Ringnecks are unable to crack the nuts and throw them down leaving easy pickings for the humans. The Short-billed Black-Cockatoos however managed to crack open most of the nuts leaving shell remnants only on the ground.

Mary Bremner

BLACK-COCKATOOS ON THE GOLF COURSE

Keen golfer, Mr John Collins of Booragoon, has been observing White-tailed Black-Cockatoos on the Royal Perth Golf Course for some years, and believes that the numbers are higher this summer than he has ever seen before. During January he has been seeing 150 to 200 birds regularly.

Of even more note than the numbers is the feeding behaviour observed by Mr Collins. The cockatoos (probably mainly Short-billed Black-Cockatoos) feed largely on several species of introduced conifers growing on the course. Apparently the cockatoos spend little time attempting to open the very hard cones while they are on the trees. However, most of the cones, when mature and broken off the tree, open and release their seeds as they dry out, usually within one to two weeks. The black-cockatoos appear to time their visits so that mature cones knocked off the trees on one visit have opened to release their seeds by the next. Thus, during the first visit of the summer the birds are mainly in the trees, chewing off mature cones, and on the second and subsequent visits, usually one to two weeks apart, much time is spent on the ground, feeding on seeds recently released from the drying cones.

While I have not searched the literature, I am not aware

of any similar reports of such behaviour in relation to black-cockatoos and very hard fruited native plants, such as hakeas and banksias, upon which they (especially Short-billed Black-Cockatoos) have traditionally fed. It would be interesting to know how common the reported behaviour is and whether it is long-established or has been learned to take advantage of the new resource provided by widespread planting of introduced conifers.

John Blyth

GIRALIA STATION

Giralia (pronounced to rhyme with dahlia) is a sheep station to the south of Exmouth Gulf. I visited the Station to make a species survey during the last six days of July 1995. Accommodation is available at the Station. It was not possible to cover the whole area for it is some 265 000 hectares or 1000 square miles in size.

It became quickly apparent that the most rewarding birding area was west of the main road which runs through the Station, for this area abuts the Giralia Range (maximum height 97 metres) and results in a number of small creek lines. It was about these lesser creeks and floodways that most birds were to be found. Generally speaking, a fine line of River Red Gums was only sparsely populated with birds for the intermittent flood waters leave a creek bed of rock and gravelly sand with all adjacent understorey swept away. By contrast the lesser creek lines have a good coverage of shrubs and variety of plant species.

The rainfall averages 260 mm, the soil is sandy (and in places a magnificent terracotta colour) and the predominant cover is *Triodia spinifex*. The major creek lines are lined with River Red Gums (*E. camaldulensis*) while the banks of the lesser creeks and floodways are covered with bluebush, acacia and cassia shrubs. Many of these were in flower, predominantly yellow in colour. No creek was running at the time of my visit; only two held some shallow water and no birds were seen.

The area to the east of the main road largely comprises sandy spinifex plains interspersed with sand ridges some 20 metres high, usually greater than a kilometre apart and with few creek lines. Mature spinifex areas were unrewarding from a birding viewpoint.

Sixty-three species were seen in all. Eight of these were sea/shore/mangrove birds for I took the eighty kilometre track to the Exmouth Gulf. Giralia has the only section of coast that may be reached between Exmouth and Onslow and frequent trespass, mainly for fishing, has resulted in a very poor track. However the sighting of a Collared Kingfisher in the mangroves resulted – a species not recorded in the Atlas block (Blakers *et al.* 1984). The other 'shore' species were Australian Pelican, White-bellied Sea-Eagle, Pied and Sooty Oystercatcher, Silver Gull, Caspian and Crested Tern and Yellow White-eye, these last being in acacia shrubs some four kilometres from the mangroves, though near a shore line. Arrival at the Gulf was near high tide and the mangroves were silent and apparently without birds, despite much walking. Bush species sighted elsewhere are listed below (species marked with an asterisk were not recorded in this Atlas block by Blakers *et al.* 1984):

Emu – quite common; one chick was sighted.

Stubble Quail* – one bird seen on two days in different locations, along creek lines.

Black-shouldered Kite – one only seen hovering.

Spotted Harrier – two birds seen on the same day. These were possibly the same bird for both were seen just over River Red Gums along the same major creek line, although 25 kilometres and seven hours apart.

Brown Goshawk – single bird seen on four days, usually circling at height.

Collared Sparrowhawk – one sighting only; seen very low over spinifex and shrubs.

Wedge-tailed Eagle – one bird seen on four days, at height. A nest (not in current use) was found on a lesser creek line.

Little Eagle – one bird, circling high.

Brown Falcon – one seen, perched near a creek line, with many other birds present.

Nankeen Kestrel – frequently seen every day; maximum three at one time; two were mating near a nest hole. All swooped and glided, none was seen to hover at any time.

Australian Bustard – two pairs seen on two days.

Little Button-quail* – seen once on small creek line.

Banded Lapwing – a pair, in an area made bare by sheep near a water tank.

Common Bronzewing – one bird at a water trough.

Crested Pigeon – very common. Largest group near water trough about 50. With water troughs in each paddock, Crested Pigeons arrive at them at all hours of the day.

Diamond Dove – two small flocks in an area of recently burned spinifex.

Galah – small flocks seen every day. Markedly less raucous when disturbed than is the case near the Wheatbelt. One pair lining a nest hole.

Little Corella – a group roosted near the Homestead for three nights and were seen once further afield.

Cockatiel – small flocks seen (up to eight) on three days.

Australian Ringneck – seen on three days, four maximum, always near River Red Gums. One pair lining a nest hole.

Budgerigar – seen on three days, usually small flocks, one large, usually near recently burned spinifex.

Pallid Cuckoo – up to three seen together; seen on three days along the same creek line.

Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo – one seen and calling on two days on the same creek line as the Pallid Cuckoo.

Australian Owlet-nightjar – one recently dead found in dry creek bed.

Red-backed Kingfisher – single bird seen in widely different locations on two days.

Rainbow Bee-eater – two pairs at one creek line, 20+ at another.

Variegated Fairy-wren – seen on four days, several times each day.

White-winged Fairy-wren – seen on five days, several times each day, appears more common than Variegated.

Red-browed Pardalote – two single sightings only, in dry, bare areas.

Redthroat – seen once near Exmouth Gulf. Storr (1984) comments that this is an isolated population.

Yellow-throated Miner – small flocks readily seen, usually associated with River Red Gums.

Singing Honeyeater – common, single or pairs.

White-plumed Honeyeater – common, single to small flocks, mainly associated with River Red Gums. Nesting at Homestead.

Pied Honeyeater* – one pair calling, seen once only.

