

# Western Australian Bird Notes

Quarterly Newsletter of the WA Group  
Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union

No 79 September 1996

## Sighting of Purple-backed Starling (*Sturnus sturninus*) on Christmas Island

On 4 June 1996 our family were sitting on the east verandah of House MQ631 at Silver City, Christmas Island, Indian Ocean. Graham saw a bird in the bushes along the fenceline. At first glance it appeared to be a honeyeater approximately the size of a Tawny-crowned Honeyeater (*Phylidonyris melanops*). Graham collected the binoculars (Zeiss 8 x 20 B and Nikon 8 x 32). We ventured closer for a better look at it. It was moving around the small white flowers on a garden fenceline shrub, acting like a honeyeater, but its beak, instead of being long and curved, was quite straight.

It was a light grey bird approximately 18 cm in length. The head and body appeared very sleek with a shortish tail in relation to the rest of the body. The round dark eye was clearly visible and a thin white ring could be seen around the outer edge. A suggestion of a narrow black line extended from the gape.

The bird moved to the south side of the garden where it ate a small red berry, the fruit of a fenceline shrub. A brief glimpse of the inside of the mouth revealed a bright orange/red palate. From this position, we were able to get a better rear view of the bird. There was a distinct white wing bar which extended to form a 'V' shape at the back and some small secondary barring adjacent. The leading primaries appeared glossy black until caught by the sunlight, when they showed an iridescent green (similar to the Emerald Dove common on Christmas Island, only much darker). The underside (belly area) appeared to be a very pale, pale grey with a buff colour around the vent area. I remarked on the possibility of a dark mark at the back of the head but we thought it may have been a shadow. The legs were a grey colour with quite a long tarsus.

It was not a bird we had seen before. As a reference, we had been using the list in the article "Christmas Island" by Tom Smith (*Australian Birding Magazine*, Summer 1995—96). We consulted this and the only unfamiliar bird listed was

a Brown Shrike. We contacted Richard Hill, RAOU Project Officer on Christmas Island, who was fortunately willing and able to come to have a look. He brought two Asian field guides. These were MacKinnon and Phillipps (1993) and King *et al.* (1984).

From our description, Richard indicated the starlings on Plate 82 of MacKinnon and Phillipps, (1993). The male Purple-backed Starling was a distinct likeness.

We looked around the garden and eventually a bird flew from a tree adjacent to the fenceline. It landed in a tall acacia, *Lucaena leucocephala* in the neighbour's yard. Richard and I went to one side of the tree and Graham went to the other. Finally we saw a bird moving around towards the outer edge of the tree. It appeared to be the same bird we had sighted earlier. Richard studied the bird through the binoculars for some time, but a better view could be gained from Graham's position. We moved around and continued to study the bird. From this angle the underbelly appeared much whiter, the buff vent area was again clearly evident and a dark tip to the underside of the tail was seen. The black mark at the nape was also quite visible (it had not been a shadow!). The white wing barring was quite distinct against what still appeared to be glossy black wing feathers. It continued to move around the branches. Richard believed he saw it take an insect.

In MacKinnon and Phillipps (1993) we considered the grey colouring of the head and body, the dark eye with the white ring and the buff vent area to be a very good likeness, although the centre back and wings had appeared as a shiny black except for the iridescent green which had been noted during a brief flash of sunlight. The long tarsus is also evident.

In King *et al.* (1984) the illustration of the wing positioning over the tail and the wing bar forming a V when viewed from the back was a better likeness. The dark mark as a continuation of the gape is evident.

The tail appeared slightly rounder than indicated by either

of the field guides. The dark tip observed on the underside of the tail is not illustrated.

From our observations and the use of the field guides we are confident that the bird was a male Purple-backed Starling (*Sturnus sturninus*).

**Graham and Gwen Goodreid**

#### References:

MacKinnon, J. and Phillipps, K. 1993. *A Field Guide to the Birds of Borneo, Sumatra, Java and Bali*. Oxford University Press, New York

King, B.F., Dickinson, E.C. and Woodcock, H.W. 1984. *A Field Guide to the Birds of South-east Asia*. Collins, London.

**Editor's Note:** The comments in the article above highlight some major differences in field guides and emphasise the need to take detailed notes and drawings when a new bird is encountered. It was fortunate that this bird (from the description) was a male. Most Asian field guides do not illustrate female or young starlings, which can be quite difficult to distinguish. This and some other Asian starling species are migrants and could perhaps turn up on Christmas Island, Cocos-Keeling or even in northern Australia. The need to take detailed notes and sketches cannot be over-emphasised. The Purple-backed (Daurian) Starling breeds in China and migrates to SE Asia and the Greater Sundas for the northern winter. The bird observed on Christmas Island must have got lost!

If you are planning a trip to Christmas Island, don't forget to take with you a copy of Mike Craig's informative article on the birds of the island and where to see them, in WABN 78, 14-16.

## 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.

This issue sees a report of yet another species for the Australian list this time a Purple-backed (Daurian) Starling from Christmas Island. Also recorded on Christmas Island in May was a female flowerpecker (same family as the Mistletoebird). However, there are lots of flowerpeckers, the females are very difficult to distinguish, and it is uncertain which species this bird belonged to. There have also been some exciting records from various parts of WA, including a probable Night Parrot on the Canning Stock Route, a Black Bittern in the south-west, and some seabirds rarely seen in the south-west.

Observers are reminded that, for rarely seen or difficult to identify species, adequate documentation is required for inclusion in WABN. For example, new records, or records of species rarely recorded in the south-west should be accompanied by a description of what was *actually seen* and reasons for the identification. Note that a statement to the effect that what was seen fitted a description in a field guide is a statement about what is in a field guide, and does not tell anyone else what you actually saw. Good notes, and preferably

sketches, are important. Providing extra details also assists the editors to provide extra information to readers.

#### SOUTH-WEST (Shark Bay to Cape Arid)

**Emu** - adult and 9 young, 3/6/96, Pipidinny Swamp, S of Yanchep NP (Wanneroo)DL

**Hardhead** - 100-150, 12/7/96, Wellard wetlands (Kwinana) - BBa, MCI

**Giant-Petrel** sp. - 4 in juvenile plumage, 23/7/96, at a whale carcass, Cottesloe Beach (Cottesloe) - KL

**Southern Giant-Petrel** - 40-45, including an adult white morph, 22/6/96, at a whale carcass 30 nautical miles off Ledge Point -MS (see article below by Marcus Singor) \* 11 juveniles, 22/7/96, at a whale carcass, Cottesloe Beach (Cottesloe) - MC

**Cape Petrel** - 300+, 22/6/96, at a whale carcass 30 nautical miles off Ledge Point - MS (see article below by Marcus Singor) \* 19, 22/7/96, at a whale carcass, Cottesloe Beach (Cottesloe) - MC \* ca. 15, 23/7/96, at a whale carcass, Cottesloe Beach (Cottesloe) - KL

**Kerguelen Petrel** - small numbers in February and March 1996; higher counts of 20+ over 8 hrs on 13/2/96, 20+ over 6 hrs on 6/3/96, 15+ over 5 hrs on 7/3/96, all at Point Dalling, Dunsborough (Busselton) - RP (apparently unusual at this time of year)

**Great-winged Petrel** - 1, 6/2/96, Point Dalling, Dunsborough (Busselton) - RP

**White-headed Petrel** - small numbers on numerous occasions between 1/2/96 and 13/4/96; higher counts of 20+ over 8 hrs on 13/2/96 and 4/3/96, 20+ over 7 hrs on 5/3/96, 20+ over 5 hrs on 24/3/96 and 5/4/96, all at Point Dalling, Dunsborough (Busselton) - RP (not often recorded; apparently unusual in these numbers at this time of year)

**Blue Petrel** - 1, 16/7/96, North Mole (Fremantle) - JD

**Grey Petrel** - 2 over five hours, 19/2/96 and again on 20/2/96 and 1 in six hours, 2/3/96, Point Dalling, Dunsborough (Busselton) - RP (rarely recorded in WA)

**Streaked Shearwater** - 3 over four hours, 4/3/96, and 1 in seven hours, 5/3/96, Point Dalling, Dunsborough (Busselton) - RP (very southerly records for this species in WA)

**Flesh-footed Shearwater** - 350+ in one hour, 27/3/96, Gull Rock, Cape Naturaliste (Busselton) - RP \* 300+ (50/hour) over 6 hours, 27/3/96 and 1/4/96, Point Dalling, Dunsborough (Busselton) - RP \* 200+ in one hour, 22/4/96, Hopetoun Pier (Ravensthorpe) - RP

**Short-tailed Shearwater** - 2 over six hours, 12/2/96 and 1 in six hours, 26/2/96, both at Point Dalling, Dunsborough (Busselton) - RP

**Wandering Albatross** - 1, 16/7/96, North Mole (Fremantle) - JD

**Grey-headed Albatross** - 1, 30/6/96 and 1, 16/7/96, both immatures, North Mole (Fremantle) - JD

**Wilson's Storm-Petrel** - 1, 30/6/96 and up to 8 at once, 7/7/96, North Mole (Fremantle) - JD \* 3, 7/7/96, North Mole, (Fremantle) - KL

**White-faced Storm-Petrel** - 1, 6/2/96, Point Dalling, Dunsborough (Busselton) - RP

**Australasian Gannet** - regularly at North Mole from mid-January to August, with a maximum of 10/hour on 30/6/96 (Fremantle) - JD \* small numbers on various occasions from 13/2/96 to 12/4/96, with highest counts being 7 over six hours

on 26/2/96 (uncommon at this time of year) and 8 over six hours on 1/4/96, Point Dalling, Dunsborough (Busselton) - RP \* 350+ in one hour, Hopetoun Pier (Ravensthorpe) - RP

**Black Bittern** - 1, 11/4/96, Warren River in Warren National Park (Manjimup) - CB, AH (description supplied; essentially, it was a very dark-coloured bittern with a prominent yellow streak down each side of the neck; the neck and breast were white-streaked; wings back and belly were a uniform dark brown, almost black; size similar to nearby Nankeen Night Herons, alarm call a short grunting noise) (this species is now extremely rare in the south-west)

**Glossy Ibis** - 2, 1/4/96, Big Carine Swamp (Stirling) - CNe \* 13, 6/6/96, Maurice Hamer Park, Herdsman Lake (Stirling) - CB

**Royal Spoonbill** - 1, 8/6/96, near Serpentine River estuary (Murray) - MS \* 1, 14/6/96, Creery wetlands (Murray) - MS

**Banded Stilt** - 3000, 12/6/96, Lake Gore (Esperance) - AC

**Hooded Plover** - 9, 17/4/96, Wellstead Estuary, Bremer Bay (Jerramungup) - RP

**Great Skua** - up to 10, 30/6-13/7/96, North Mole (Fremantle) - JD

**Pomarine Jaeger** - single birds on 21/2/96, 26/2/96, 19/3/96 and 27/3/96, Point Dalling, Dunsborough (Busselton) - RP

**Arctic Jaeger** - 3, 27/3/96, Point Dalling, Dunsborough (Busselton) - RP \* 15 juvenile/immatures, including 5 dark phase, 22/6/96, North Mole (Fremantle) - JD

**Pacific Gull** - 1 immature, 16/7 and 31/7/96, North Mole (Fremantle) - JD (rarely recorded on this part of the coast)



Southern Giant Petrel  
Drawn: Judy Blyth

**Fork-tailed Swift** - 30+, 10/4/96, Frenchman Bay (Albany) - CD, LD

**White-breasted Robin** - 1, 7/5/96, Helena River below CSIRO labs, present one day only (Mundaring) - MBr

**White-winged Triller** - breeding, summer of 1993/94 and 1994/95, 20 km S of Margaret River (Augusta-Margaret River) - GMa (southern limit on west coast)

**European Goldfinch** - 1, 6/7/96, Lake Coogee (Cockburn) - JC, DC *et al.* (presumed to be an escapee)

**White-backed Swallow** - 3, 3/6/96, Thomsons Lake (Cockburn) (not often sighted this far south on the Swan Coastal Plain) - MS, GA

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

**Chestnut Teal** - 1 male with three presumed females, 28/6/96, lake on Great Northern Highway at Wallal Downs (Broome) - CN, WN (rarely recorded this far north)

**Black-breasted Buzzard** - 1, 8/5/96, Nallan Station (Cue) - MC

**Grey Falcon** - 2, 18/5/96, 10 km S of Carranya (Halls Creek) - SN *et al.* \* 3, 24/5/96, 25 km S of Billiluna (Halls Creek) - SN *et al.* \* 22/6/96, 28 km S of Breaden Hills (Halls Creek) - SN *et al.* \* 1, 7/5/96, Jimblebar Ck, 50 km E of Newman (East Pilbara) - GM

**Australian Spotted Crake** - 1, 11/7/96, Dragon Tree Soak (Kiriji Ba Yadula) (Broome) - MBa

**Inland Dotterel** - 1+, 3/2/96, 15 km N of Carnarvon (Carnarvon) - KC \* 5, 25/6/96, Lake Tobin (East Pilbara) (this is a very northerly record for this species) - SN *et al.*

**Major Mitchell's Cockatoo** - 25, Calvert Range (Wiluna) - MC, SS

**Princess Parrot** - 14, 20/5/96, 35 km S of Well 45, plus 5, 22/5/96, 37 km S of Well 45, plus 19, 23/6/96, 36 km S of Well 45, plus 7, 26/6/96, 35-48 km S of Well 45, Canning Stock Route (Halls Creek) - all SN *et al.* \* 12, ca. 30 km S of Joanna Spring (Bikarung) at 20°05', 124°05' (East Pilbara) - MBa

probable **Night Parrot** - 2, 8/6/96, Canning Stock Route (East Pilbara) - MG

**Pheasant Coucal** - 1, 11/7/96, Dragon Tree Soak (Kiriji Ba Yadula) (Broome) - Mba

**White-winged Fairy-wren** - 1, 3/11/95, apparently black, with several "brown" birds, at Peron HS, Shark Bay (Shark Bay) - SM (note: the bases of the blue feathers are black, so birds can appear black under certain lighting conditions, particularly when moulting)

**Striated Grasswren** - 2, 11/7/96, Onslow road near junction with North West Coastal Highway (Ashburton) - CN, WN

**Chestnut-rumped Thornbill** - 3, 21/5/96, Onegunyah Rockhole (Wiluna) - MC (at or near N limit of distribution)

**Slaty-backed Thornbill** - 2, 21/5/96, Onegunyah Rockhole (Wiluna) - MC

**Banded Whiteface** - 5, 14/5/96, Well 9, Canning Stock Route (Wiluna) - MC \* 7, 23/6/96, Well 42, Canning Stock Route (East Pilbara) - SN *et al.*

**Brown Honeyeater** - 6+, 19/5/96, Killagurra Gorge, N of Durba Hills (Wiluna) - MC \* 6+, 20/5/96, Durba Hills (Wiluna) - MC

**Clamorous Reed-Warbler** - 1, 11/7/96, Dragon Tree Soak (Kiriji Ba Yadula) (Broome) - MBa

**Golden-headed Cisticola** - 2, 11/7/96, Dragon Tree Soak (Kiriji Ba Yadula) (Broome) - MBa

## KIMBERLEY

**Black Swan** - 1, 21/5/96, Argyle diamonds mine alluvial tailings dam (Wyndham - East Kimberley) - FO

**Great-billed Heron** - 1, 6/5/96, Talbot Bay, Buccaneer Archipelago (Derby - West Kimberley) - KC \* 1, 23/5/96, Camden Harbour, Kuri Bay area (Wyndham - East Kimberley) - KC \* 1, 24/5/96, Munster Water, Prince Regent River area (Wyndham - East Kimberley) - KC

**Nankeen Night Heron** - 150, 24/6/96, Marlu Billabong, Parry Lagoons (Wyndham - East Kimberley) - CN, WN

**Letter-winged Kite** - 1, 2/6/96, Roebuck Plains (Broome) - SN *et al.* \* 1, 40 km W of Lake Gregory (Halls Creek) - SN *et al.*

**White-bellied Sea-Eagle** - 1, 9/5/96, near Argyle diamond mine tailings dam (Wyndham - East Kimberley) - FO

**Grey Goshawk** - 1 white phase, 11/5/96, near Argyle diamond mine (Wyndham - East Kimberley) - Rob Fairclough per FO

**Red Goshawk** - 2, 10/6/96, Pantijan Station (Derby - West Kimberley) - Frank Harrap per SN \* 1, 11/6 96, Pantijan Station (Derby - West Kimberley) - SN *et al.* \* 1, 16/6/96, Ellenbrae Station (Wyndham - East Kimberley) - SN *et al.*

**Chestnut Rail** - 1, 25/5/96, Prince Regent River (Wyndham - East Kimberley) - KC \* 6, 28/5/96, Hunter River (Wyndham - East Kimberley) - KC

**Bush Stone-curlew** - 1, 12/7/96, Argyle diamond mine (Wyndham - East Kimberley) - Margaret Morrison per FO

**Rufous Owl** - 2, 21/5/96, Sale River (Derby - West Kimberley) - KC

**Barn Owl** - 1, 11/5/96, Argyle diamond mine village (Wyndham - East Kimberley) - FO

**Purple-crowned Fairy-wren** - 8-10, 17/6/96, Miner's Pool, Drysdale River (Wyndham - East Kimberley) - CN, WN

**Black Grasswren** - 4, 21/5/96, Sale River (Derby - West Kimberley) - KC \* 6, 19/6/96, Mitchell Falls campsite (Wyndham - East Kimberley) - CN, WN

**Green-backed Gerygone** - 1, 5/96, Ningbing Ranges (Wyndham - East Kimberley) - NMCK (scarce in the East Kimberley)

**Gouldian Finch** - 6, 20/6/96, Miner's Pool, Drysdale River (Wyndham - East Kimberley) - CN, WN

## CHRISTMAS ISLAND

**Purple-backed Starling** - 1 male, 4/6/96 - G&GG - see lead article in this issue

## COCOS-KEELING ISLANDS

Probable **Green Junglefowl** - 7/12/95, West Island - KC (introduced to West Is last century, but thought to be extinct (HANZAB)) (possibly re-introduced)

## OBSERVERS

AC = Alan Clarke

AH = Alex Hollick

BBa = Bryan Barrett

CB = Craig Boase

ChD = Charlie Davies

CN = Clive Napier

KL = Kim-Chye Lim

LD = Liz Davies

MBa = Mike Bamford

MBr = Mike Brooker

MC = Michael Craig

MCl = Margery Clegg

CNe = Clive Nealon

DC = Dave Crossley

DL = David Lamont

FO = Frank O'Connor

GA = George Agar

G&GG = Gwen & Graham Goodreid

GM = Glenn Moore

GMa = Gabriel Magyar

JC = Jan Crossley

JD = John Darnell

KC = Kevin Coate

MG = Mrs Goldsmith

MS = Marcus Singor

NMcK = Norm McKenzie

PC = Peter Collins

RP = Ross Payton

SM = Sue Milne

SN = Simon Nevill

SS = Steve Strike

TK = Tony Kirkby

WN = Wendy Napier

RAOU Office (WA) Perry House  
71 Oceanic Drive  
Floreat 6014

Telephone (09) 387 7749  
Facsimile (09) 387 8412

Chairman Clive Napier  
69 Dean Road  
Bateman 6150  
Tel. (09) 332 7265

Joint Editors John Blyth  
Tel. (09) 405 5100 (w)  
Tel. (09) 381 6293 (h)  
Fax. (09) 306 1641 (w)  
Email. johnb@wood.calm.wa.gov.au

Allan Burbidge  
Tel. (09) 405 5109 (w)  
Tel/Fax. (09) 306 1642 (h)  
Fax. (09) 306 1641 (w)  
Email. austecol@cygnus.uwa.edu.au

### 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. A style sheet is available from Perry House to guide writers regarding format
- WABN uses RAOU recommended English names
- contributions will be published unless the contributor is informed to the contrary.

**Deadline for the December Issue**  
**1 November 1996**  
**at Perry House**

## WA Group Reports

### RAOU (WA GROUP) COMMITTEE

Meetings of the WA Group Committee are held on the third Wednesday of each month at Perry House.

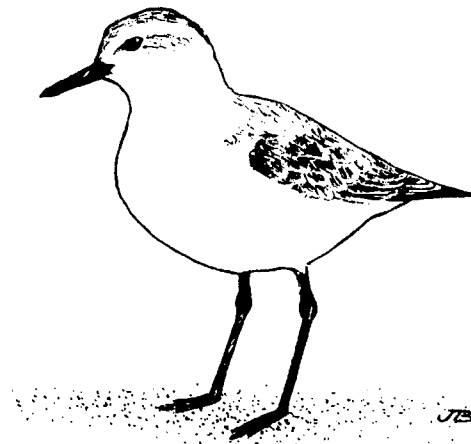
It is through the committee that the business of the RAOU (WA Group) is managed. Matters for consideration by the committee should be communicated to the office with adequate time for distribution to committee members.

Recent committee meetings have dealt with the following:

- Birds on Farms Project – this project is now moving, after the recent visit by Geoff Barrett, the HQ project coordinator. Brenda Newbey has been appointed as the WA Group coordinator and it is hoped that a funding submission to the National Save the Bush Program will be approved. In the meantime, the WA Group has allocated sufficient funds to start the project off.
- Survey of Suburban Birds Project — Clive Nealon is preparing a report for the RAOU HQ Research Committee; 135 sites are now covered, with 20 000 records.
- Hooded Plover Project — this major project has been completed and a report is included as the supplement to this edition of WABN. However, the WA Group will continue to monitor this species in an attempt to increase our knowledge and to protect the bird's major habitats.
- Conservation issues:  
Wellard Wetlands — nesting boxes are being set up and arrangements made for regular surveys for Alcoa;  
City of South Perth — dogs around South Perth wetlands;  
City of Canning — foreshore litter and water quality on the Canning River;  
Roebuck Bay, Broome — concerns expressed about a lack of protection for the bay, with current problems including possible diamond mining, resort development, 4WD access to beaches, and helicopters flying low along beaches;  
awaiting draft or final management plans for Amarillo Pool, Karnup, the Lake Muir wetlands and Bungendore Park.
- Threatened Bird Network — discussions will be held with Michael Fendley of HQ re the formation of a WA Group sub-committee to tackle problems of Regional Threatened Species.
- Eyre and Broome Bird Observatories — the RAOU Council is monitoring the operations of all observatories in an endeavour to make them more financially viable and our Chairman is a member of this HQ sub-committee.
- RAOU Council Representation — Clive Napier has now replaced Brian Wilson as Council Secretary, enabling the WA Group to continue to have a voice on Council.
- Independent Incorporation — the WA Group is seeking Council approval as incorporation in WA would enable applications for grants for more than \$5000 to assist in meeting costs of projects within the state.

- Finances — due to structural changes in banking charges, WA Group banking is now done through Westpac and not ANZ.
- Trading Table — Clive Nealon is arranging for displays/sales of Christmas cards at the Combined Charities Card Shop, a good income earner for the WA Group; stalls are also being set up at *Spring Fling* in Bold Park, *Talk to the Animals Expo* at Ascot and wildflower exhibitions at Mullewa and Busselton. Many country agents continue to service their local card outlets and this results in significant profits for our Group.
- Swan Catchment Centre — Bryan Barrett is liaising with the Swan Working Group regarding RAOU representation at the centre which is partly funded by the National Landcare Program. The centre is based at the old Fisheries building opposite the Hyatt Centre, with the aim of providing a focus for supporting community involvement in integrated management of the Swan-Canning Catchment; the RAOU has been requested to provide information on bird populations and may set up displays.
- Conservation Council Affiliation — Dr Nick Dunlop and Ms Darryl James have been appointed as our delegates to this body.
- Revision of *Birding Sites Around Perth* by Ron van Delft — sponsors are being sought to cover costs of preparing the revision, eg. graphics and mapping and computer work to prepare the text for publication; a suggestion has been made of \$20 per page, with larger amounts to be sought from BankWest (previous sponsor) and Perth local councils.
- Healthway Funding Application — \$1000 received towards education, promotion and walks is to be spent on a telescope for Group use.

**Clive Napier, Chairman**



A Sanderling From Woodman Point, where this species of wader is commonly seen.

Drawn: Judy Blyth

## WADER MOVEMENTS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Further to the request made in the September 1995 issue of *WA Bird Notes*, we report that 14 members took part in recording wader movements. From these reports we had 476 records taken from 34 different wetlands between Esperance in the south to Lake Argyle in the north.

Undoubtedly the best indication of wader usage of the various sites monitored came from members who were able to visit their sites more than four times. Therefore, the best records we received were from six or more visits. A single visit to an area can only record the presence at the time of the visit and gives no indication as to whether birds were resident or passing through the area. Some members reported when their wetlands became dry — this was helpful as it indicated the fact that the birds had had to move on.

We feel sure that some people have records of birds seen during the migratory season but, for various reasons, have not forwarded them to the office. We do urge people to check their notes and let us know what they saw, when and where and, if possible, how many of each species were seen. Forms can be obtained by ringing the RAOU office on 09 383 7749.

The scheme was devised to give members an additional interest throughout the year and has the blessing of both the WA Committee and the Wader Study Group. It is hoped to continue the project for the next two years and in so doing we hope to gain greater knowledge of both our migratory waders and those which are resident within the State.

**Bryan Barrett, Organizer**

## SUBURBAN BIRD SURVEY

The survey has started well and the records coming in have provided a good beginning for the database. My thanks to all those people who have submitted records already. I hope that your observations will continue to arrive and that you will encourage others to respond to the call. Remember that record submission is not restricted to RAOU members. If you know anyone who is interested in birds, and would recognise a Malleefowl if one turned up in the garden, then you have identified a potential recruit.

There is still a lot of the metropolitan area that remains to be covered.

Over the first few months of the survey one main lesson has been learned. I expect that there will be more, but the sooner the lessons learned can be incorporated into the procedures to be followed, the better the results should be for the survey.

So what have we learned so far?

The first lesson has been that the initial instructions for recording observations were too involved. To address that, let me suggest that:

- you should consider the observation period to be a week;
- everybody should record observations from Saturday to Friday (inclusive) each week;
- each bird seen during the week should be indicated on the form with a 'tick';
- the use of 'O' to indicate that the bird was seen on other than the prime observation day should be discontinued;
- you continue to use the 'F' to indicate that the bird was in flight when observed.

I will also answer some other questions that have been raised to try to clarify some areas that perhaps weren't

addressed in the initial instructions.

- Can I put down records of birds that I have heard but not seen?
- Yes, if you are confident with your identification of the sound. We need the records to be reliable, but some birds, for example, the Boobook Owl, are far more often heard than seen.
- Do you really want records from my garden? Hardly any birds come to visit.
- Yes, please send in records of the birds that you do see. What doesn't occur in a given area may be equally as interesting as what does.
- Should I try to distinguish between birds flying over, feeding, like swallows, and those that are clearly going somewhere?
- No, just record birds flying over with the 'F' on the observation sheet. The main thing about these records is that the birds were there.
- If I'm out driving and notice something unusual, should I report it? After all, it's not in an area I'm surveying regularly.
- Yes, report any sightings that you consider noteworthy, wherever they are. These sightings will be registered as 'Incidental' records. If the sighting does take place while you're driving, just make sure you can identify where you are so that the sighting can be registered to the correct location. Also send in the report, preferably on a separate form, marked 'Incidental'.

I promised that I would try to report in each issue of WABN on progress to date.

I have incorporated my own records of sightings within the metropolitan area over the last year and this has provided a large number of the records. I have also received records of regular site visits for some other sites that go back over an extended period. These may prove useful for a comparison over time of these sites. If anybody has similar records for sites or gardens over previous years I would appreciate the opportunity to include them in the database.

Up to the end of July, there are records from 73 different observers. The records cover a total of 145 locations, 35 of which are associated with 'Incidentals'. There are now records for 69 gardens and 41 other sites, for example, reserves and lakes, and so on.

The locations have been plotted against the maps contained in the 'UBD Street Directory, 38th Edition 1996' and we have reports from 76 of the 290 maps that currently constitute the metropolitan area. This means we are covering little more than a quarter of the metropolitan area. We clearly need to extend the coverage a great deal.

So far, the database contains about 20,000 individual bird records spread across 174 species. Twenty-three species are only represented by a single record. The Australian Raven is the most recorded species, with 933 records.

**Clive Nealon**

## BIRDS ON FARMS PROJECT

The Atlas of Australian Birds and the Australian Bird Count were national RAOU projects which have been very successful in documenting the distribution, status and movements of Australian birds. As a result, the RAOU determined to begin a similar, equally challenging national project that involves surveying birds in different habitats on

farms, and funds were raised for a pilot Birds on Farms project.

The broad aims of the project are to:

- examine the degree of success of revegetation programs in bringing birds back into rural areas;
- identify the factors which are responsible for maintaining bird diversity on farms, such as the minimum amount of tree and shrub cover;
- identify bird species which are declining under current land management practices and indicate how these species may be conserved in rural areas.

The project has a national coordinator, Geoff Barrett, working at RAOU headquarters in Hawthorn. The Western Australian coordinator is Brenda Newbey, who will have the assistance of a small steering committee here in Western Australia. The project will use the data sheets developed by Geoff, and he and Brenda have already been into the field together to confirm that the approach can be easily adapted to Western Australian conditions.

Because of Mullewa's excellent record in conservation, the Mullewa Wildflower Show (beginning on Sunday 25 August) was chosen by the RAOU as the place to launch the WA part of this exciting national project.

Birds On Farms will depend on the participation of willing farmers and birdwatchers, and its outcome should be of mutual benefit to farm productivity and local birdlife. There are indications that with careful management of remnant bushland and revegetated areas, at least 80% of Australia's rural bird species can survive in farming areas. Native birds are a key to rural tree health as they harvest leaf-eating insects, probably removing between 50 and 70% of the insects from farm trees. Birds are excellent 'indicator species' of the overall health of farming properties and the success of efforts to make farming ecologically sustainable.

The RAOU's BOF survey aims to look at the degree of success of revegetation programs in bringing birds back into rural areas. Any farm is suitable and useful to the survey. For farmers who would like to offer their farm for the survey but are too busy to record the birds on their property (once each season over a two year period), the RAOU can link them with experienced birdwatchers who are willing to do the survey.

Participants in the BOF survey will be informed of the progress of the project through a regular Birds on Farms Newsletter, Wingspan, and WA Bird Notes. At the end of the study, a final report outlining major findings and recommendations will be published. The project should become a significant contribution to the National Decade of Landcare which has the goal of achieving sustainable land use (continued productivity without the loss of flora and fauna) by the year 2000.

The RAOU invites you to take part in this important project coordinating landcare and conservation. If you know of a farm whose owners may like it to be included in the survey, or if you want to be one of the bird surveyors, fill in the form on the Birds on Farms leaflet enclosed and send it to Birds on Farms — RAOU (WA Group) office. For further information phone Brenda Newbey on 09 337 5673.

**Geoff Barrett and John Blyth**

#### **DATABASE OF WESTERN AUSTRALIAN BIRDS**

The Department of Environment Protection has recently been negotiating with the RAOU over access to data from sites for which we have records in the System 6 area, for use

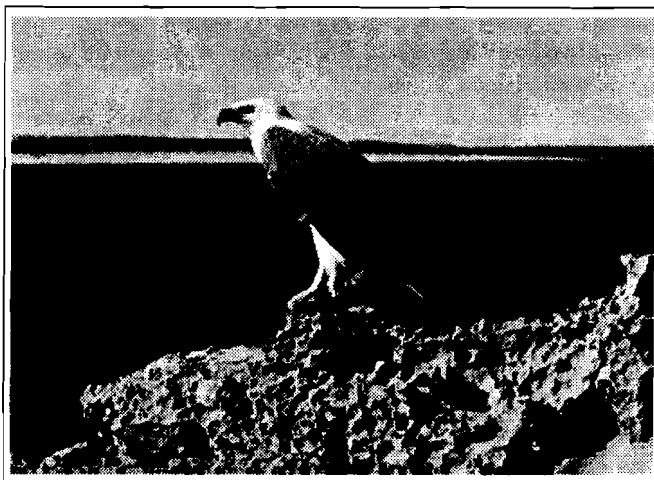
in their review and update of the System 6 proposals. This illustrates the growing importance of the database, so please keep the information rolling in.

New data cards are being printed at present, and will be available shortly. The names and order of species are those in the latest RAOU Checklist. The new cards include all bird species known from Western Australia, with the exception of a few species which sometimes occur as escapees but are not established, and a small number of very rare vagrants. If I have missed something you think I should have included on the list, please let me know!

Production of the cards has been made possible with assistance from the Gordon Reid Foundation for Conservation.

**Allan Burbidge**

### **Members' Contributions**



A White-bellied Sea-Eagle photographed in the Monte Bello islands by new WA Group member, Ian Gale

#### **BABBLER BEHAVIOUR**

During August 1995 Margery and I drove north to Darwin and after leaving Kununurra we made an overnight stop at the Mary River crossing. Having set up camp we went for a walk along the river and in so doing passed through the territory of a group of Grey-crowned Babblers busy doing what babblers do best; that is, foraging among the low scrub. I realise that strictly speaking this report comes from the Northern Territory. However, the species is common to both States and their subsequent behaviour was something that I had not previously seen in Australia.

Some time later I returned along the same track to see what, from a distance, appeared to be a group of fighting birds. Closer inspection, however, revealed the babblers enjoying a dust bath. They had found a shallow depression in the bank of the river partially filled with fine dry dust. The hollow was wide enough to allow two or three birds to scabble around in its base at the same time and they were so engrossed in what they were doing that I was able to get to within a dozen paces of them. The birds at the bottom were actually rolling in the dust and making a great effort to get it right through their

feathers. They then hopped out and shook and preened on the bank while others took their place. I was able to note that each bird returned to the dust on more than one occasion.

I have in the past seen the common House Sparrow dusting in the UK but this was the first time I had seen it done in Australia. No doubt other observation have been made. The question is: why do they do it? Is it to rid their feathers of ticks or mites, or is the dust beneficial to their feathers? And do other species have a similar habit?

In conclusion, I recall a series of articles published in the UK some 20 years ago on the subject of 'anting' where birds were seen to place ants in their feathers and under their wings. Do any members know whether this behaviour is common to Australian species and, if so, which?

**Bryan Barrett**

### A TALE OF TWO TEAL

On 8 April 1996 at Wellstead Estuary, Bremer Bay, I saw a flock of 150 male Chestnut Teal, together with at least 120 female Chestnut Teal, roosting on rocks jutting into the estuary. One hundred metres away, there was another flock of 200 ducks, all Grey Teal, roosting on the beach sand. Between these two well-segregated flocks were Australian Shelduck and Pacific Black Ducks.

**Mary Bremner**

### WESTERN BOWERBIRD

On the morning on 24 April 1996 at 8 am while walking upstream along the dry bed of Tabba Tabba Creek located 50 km east of Port Hedland, Glen Carruthers and Chris Hassell saw two Western Bowerbirds (*Chlamydera guttata*) flying away from a low spreading tree. I am familiar with the Great Bowerbird (*Chlamydera nuchalis*) and have seen Spotted Bowerbird (*Chlamydera maculata*) in the Eastern States. Glen Carruthers has filmed Spotted Bowerbirds at a bower.

The birds were a lot smaller than Great Bowerbirds, had dark head and throat, with beautiful golden/buff spotting on the head, throat, mantle and upper wing coverts. On sandy ground under the tree we found a bower. The area in front and to one side of the bower appeared to have been heavily used. The bower was decorated with broken clear and green glass, a silver can ring-pull and some fresh green berries. We lightly rearranged the decorations and sat five metres away from the bower. After five minutes one bird returned to the bower and moved some of the glass and then flew off. It returned a few minutes later and the other bird joined it. The second bird approached much more cautiously; and was possibly the female. Both birds stayed close to the bower for about three minutes but no courtship was observed. Both birds then left and didn't return during the further 30 minutes we waited.

**Chris Hassell**

**Editors Note:** This record is very close to the northern limit of distribution for this species, given by Storr (1984) as the lower De Grey River. The presence of a bower suggests that breeding may occur in this area.

### Reference:

Storr, G.M. 1984. Birds of the Pilbara Region, Western Australia. *Records of the Western Australian Museum Supplement No. 16.*

### COCKATOOS AND RAVENS IN THE GARDEN

On 9 May 1996 at suburban Wembley at 8 am a noisy flock of Short-billed Black-Cockatoos (13) landed on the hard-shelled almond tree but soon registered their disgust as there were only about six nuts left for the picking. They immediately flew across to the Queensland Umbrella Tree (*Brassaia actinophylla*) which is now covered in long spikes of juicy red fruits.

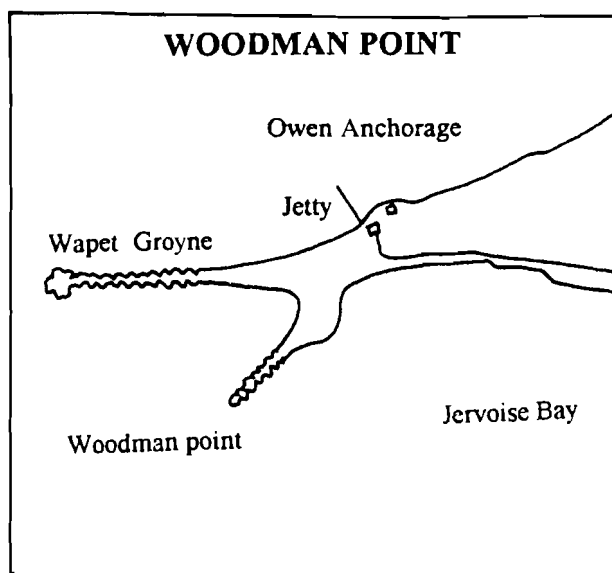
As each cockatoo gained its prize it flew across to the house roof to devour the berry. Immediately three Ravens pursued them onto the roof; the berry was dropped and a Raven devoured the berry. The cockatoos then flew back to the Umbrella Tree then back to the roof until both cockatoos and Ravens had had their fill.

Ravens certainly enjoy the fruits of the backyard garden and are often seen flying off with a juicy orange or sitting on the mulberry tree having a feast. They have never been seen on the Umbrella Tree although they obviously enjoy the berries. Is this because they are unable to balance on the frangible vegetation?

**Mary Bremner**

### WADERS AT WOODMAN POINT

The RAOU conducted several wader counts between 1981 and 1990. These were the Wader Study Project from 1981 to 1985 and the Australasian Wader Studies Group Regular Counts Project, 1986 to 1990. A range of different wader habitats around Australia were selected and these sites were counted on a regular basis to determine migratory movements. The findings were published in the final report of the regular counts project 1981-1990, titled "Wader Movements in Australia" (Alcorn *et al.*, 1994).



**Figure 1:** Location of wader counts at Woodman Point

One of the sites selected was Woodman Point, classified as a sandy beach wader site. Monthly counts were held at Woodman Point from July 1983 to June 1984 (excluding August) and further in January 1986, November/December 1988 and February 1989. The findings for 1983-89 are summarised in Table 1.



Species	Relative Abundance
Pied Oystercatcher	common
Sooty Oystercatcher	vagrant
Grey Plover	common
Red-kneed Dotterel	uncommon
Lesser Sand Plover	rare
Greater Sand Plover	vagrant
Red-capped Plover	common
Black-winged Stilt	absent
Banded Stilt	rare
Red-necked Avocet	uncommon
Ruddy Turnstone	common
Whimbrel	vagrant
Grey-tailed Tattler	rare
Common Sandpiper	rare
Common Greenshank	absent
Terek Sandpiper	rare
Bar-tailed Godwit	rare
Red Knot	uncommon
Great Knot	common
Red-necked Stint	uncommon
Curlew Sandpiper	vagrant
Sanderling	common
Broad-billed Sandpiper	vagrant

**Table 1:** Relative abundance of waders at Woodman Point from RAOU counts in 1983/84.

Some twelve years after the initial counts, I conducted a comparative survey of waders at Woodman Point. The intention was to see if any substantial changes had taken place and to compare data. Counts commenced in May 1995 and ceased in May 1996. All counts were conducted in the morning, just after sunrise and made at least twice a month. Early visits facilitated accurate counts and avoided unwanted wader movement due to disturbances.

In total, 36 counts were conducted. Counting was commenced at the Cockburn Cement works at the end of Woodman Point View and followed the beach along Owen Anchorage out to the small plateau at the end of Wapet Groyne, then back along the seaweed covered beach to Woodman Point (Fig. 1). The survey continued along the rocky shoreline facing Jervoise Bay and finished opposite the Cement works. Generally this took about an hour to an hour and a half.

### Woodman Point

Woodman Point is located on the coast 10 kilometres south of Fremantle at Latitude 32° 08' S and Longitude 115° 44' E. The Woodman Point Nature Reserve and recreational reserve are both regular RAOU excursion sites and well known to members.

Considerable changes have taken place since the first surveys were conducted. The coastal strip behind Woodman Point now contains new residential areas that front onto the recreational reserve. Around Jervoise Bay the expansion of the ship building and ship servicing industry has turned Cockburn Sound into an important industrial area. Recreational pressures have increased during the last decade. Four-wheel drive vehicles in particular are causing considerable damage to Woodman Point.

### Comparison of counts

The present survey registered 17 species compared with the results of the 1983-1989 wader counts which identified 21 species. This does not indicate a reduction in the number of species, however, because the earlier survey was much longer and we would expect more species to have been seen over the longer period. Wader sightings for the period 1983-1989 were given abundance ratings from vagrant to common (Table 1). Most species maintained their status in 1995-96, although the Red Knot and Red-kneed Dotterel, previously rated as uncommon, were conspicuous by their absence from the 1995-96 counts. Waders sighted rarely or as vagrants in 1983-1989 but absent in 1995-1996 were Lesser Sand Plover, Banded Stilt, Whimbrel and Broad-billed Sandpiper. The Common Greenshank and Black-winged Stilt were present in 1995-1996 but absent in the previous counts.

Two wader species have been reported from Woodman Point but did not show up in either of the surveys. The Hooded Plover is mentioned in historical records (Newbey 1996) and one Asian Dowitcher was reported for 25 November 1995 by Peter Sandilands (Sandilands 1996). The Double-banded Plover has also been reported, but this record is considered doubtful (see WABN 69, 4).

### Species accounts

The highest numbers of species were recorded in November and December, and the lowest in June (Fig. 2). Highest numbers of individuals were in November-December and April (Figure 3). The high April count was due to an influx of Great Knots (see below and Fig. 4). The following comments should be read in the context of the 1995-1996 observations. Bar graphs showing the pattern of occurrence are shown for several species (Fig. 4).

**Pied Oystercatcher:** Present all year round. Numbers peaked in August and April. Often found foraging along the Jervoise Bay beach. This is a quiet beach outside the area counted. Pied Oystercatchers were seen feeding on a sandbank, rich in cockles, north of Wapet Groyne. The sandbank was visible at low tides. (maximum number: 7) (maximum number at Jervoise Bay: 11)

**Sooty Oystercatcher:** Sighted mainly in winter. (maximum number: 1)

**Grey Plover:** The Grey Plover remained on site throughout the year with a couple of birds over-wintering. They liked to shelter among the dunes during inclement weather. The first migratory Grey Plovers appeared at Woodman Point in early September still showing parts of their black breeding plumage. They were easily recognised as the new arrivals. (maximum number: 13)

**Greater Sand Plover:** This species visited Woodman Point from late September till December. It was usually found in the presence of Red-capped Plovers. It favoured the open sandy beach areas well above the high tide line. (maximum number: 3)

**Red-capped Plover:** One of the residential waders. Numbers started to increase from October and peaked during December and January. Red-capped Plovers were often seen roosting high up on the beach where some vegetation was present. They have been sheltering in tire track impressions. (maximum number: 18)

