

# Western Australian Bird Notes

Quarterly Newsletter of Birds Australia-WA Group  
(a division of Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union)

No 89 March 1999

## THE DAY I HELD THE SCRUB-BIRD

Editors' note: This article was first published in 1967 in *The Passenger Pigeon* 29(4), 99-106. It is reproduced here with permission of the author and the publishers, the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology. We hope the article will be of historical, ornithological and personal interest to our readers.

Australia — an ancient land. A land of primitive and interesting flora and fauna. Land of the Kangaroo and Platypus and Lyrebird. Land of the Scrub-bird.

The Scrub-bird is unique to Australia and taxonomists classify it as the lowliest and most primitive member of the sub-order *Passeres*. So primitive that some consider it should not be included with the song-birds but placed in the lower sub-order *Menurae* together with the Lyrebird.

We have two species, the Rufous Scrub-bird (*Atrichornis rufescens*), which still survives in the sub-tropical scrub of coastal southern Queensland and northern New South Wales, and the Noisy Scrub-bird (*Atrichornis clamosus*) which tenuously clings to existence with one small colony at Two People Bay in the south-west. It is the latter, virtually extinct, species, that is the subject of this story.

The Noisy Scrub-bird became known to science in 1843 when John Gilbert collected four or five specimens

at Drakes Brook and at King Georges Sound. Two other naturalists, George Masters and William Webb, obtained about 15 specimens at King Georges Sound and the last specimen ever to be collected was obtained at Torbay in October 1889 by A J Campbell, who also recorded that he heard the species calling near Wallcliffe on November 4.

Only 19 or 20 specimens survive in the world's museums and these specimens, together with the notes of the naturalists who collected them, were all that science had. Between 1904 and 1960 intensive searches were conducted in all likely places in the south-west. But all were unsuccessful. The Noisy Scrub-bird had vanished into the obscurity of the Australian bush.

Ornithologists resigned themselves to the belief that it was extinct. Extinct! That eery cessation of existence which is the end of a species life. That grand finale of which William Beebe said, "but when the last individual of a race of living beings breathes no more, another heaven and another earth must pass before such a one can be again".

For 71 years the sun aged south-western Australia. Ornithologists aged, too, but they discovered nothing about Noisy Scrub-birds. Then one day a naturalist laid down his fishing rod on the shore of Two People Bay, situated on the south coast 20 miles east of Albany, and ventured into the tangled



Noisy Scrub-bird, Two People Bay,  
Western Australia, Jan 5, 1964

vegetation lining the beach in an endeavour to identify the bird producing a call which mystified him. The man was Harley Webster, an Albany schoolteacher, and later, after he had seen the bird, he remarked to his wife, "I think I have found the Scrub-bird".

He had! In December 1961 he positively identified a singing male. The Noisy Scrub-bird was re-discovered.

To me, a bird-lover since childhood and an ornithologist from my early teens, the discovery and subsequent reports were of great interest, but it was not until 1964 that this *Atrichornis* actually entered my life. And then only by chance.

I was unemployed at the time and between job-hunting used to employ myself at the local CSIRO Division of Wildlife Research Laboratory under the guidance of Dr Dominic L Serventy, the Principal Research Officer. On these occasions I mostly trapped and banded birds, made observations, recorded data and continued with a project I had started a few years earlier. It was here that Dom introduced me to an eastern states naturalist, Graham Pizzey, who had come to the west to film some of our wildlife for a television production. The same day Dom asked me if I would like to accompany him on an expedition to Two People Bay with the objective of catching a Scrub-bird for Graham to film. I was mentally taking stock of equipment we would need even before I had finished my affirmation.

During the next few days I busied myself repairing nets and packing equipment. I even packed a pair of calipers and a balance for if we caught any Scrub-birds their weight and "vital statistics" would be important additions to our knowledge. We could only guess at what size band fitted a Scrub-bird so I included a range of sizes.

My main concern was the mist nests. This type of net takes a bird quite well, the thin strands entangling the bird and holding it a prisoner without harming it. However it is intended that the bird fly into the net with some force and as Scrub-birds are flightless I wasn't very optimistic. Even less so with the larger meshed nets. I had seen Singing Honeyeaters slip through these without effort and the thought of a Scrub-bird of equal size doing the same didn't thrill me.

It was 3:30 am when I eased myself from bed on 5 January 1964. I noticed the clear sky with its yellow stars as I sat on the front fence waiting for Vin Serventy,

Dom's brother. At Dom's place we met Harry Schugg, an officer of the local Fisheries and Fauna Department. It was 4:30 am when the last of the equipment had been packed into Harry's car. Dom switched off the laboratory lights and we started on the 270-mile drive to Two People Bay.

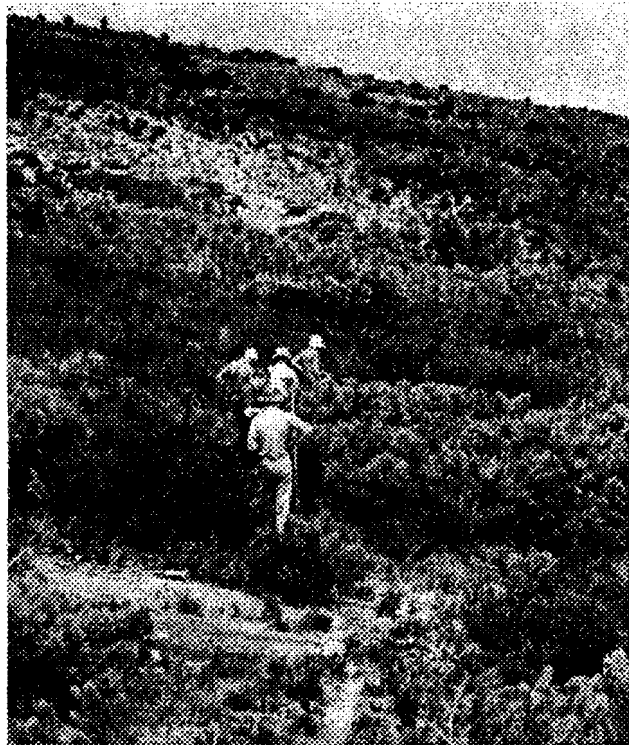
There we met the other members of the venture: Harley Webster, Graham, Mrs Rica Erickson and her husband Sydney. After introductions and the unloading of our sleeping equipment at a small hut, which was to be our camp, we moved off to the trapping site situated on the lower slopes of Mt Gardner some two miles to the south of the hut.

Harley had chosen this particular site and Graham had already cut two paths through the small but dense islands of tangled vegetation. I helped Graham erect the nets, listening all the while to the mingled trilling, chirping and calling of birds far and near. The two-way radios were tested, their antennae noticeably out of place in this ancient environment. I swallowed a few mouthfuls of water from a seepage which had broken cover and was clamouring down a six-inch waterfall.

The first trapping area looked promising. Three mist nets formed a line that divided the stunted but thriving vegetation in two and in places the shadow of the scrub walls alongside rendered the nets almost invisible. Tawny-crowned Honeyeaters flashed around, unfamiliar calls reached my ears. Syd, equipped with a radio, was stationed at one end of the line of nets. Harley positioned himself midway.

The rest of us went downhill from the net and began to drive, beating the bushes as we went and making an awful lot of noise just in forcing our way through the scrub. The joyous notes of the birds turned to harsh calls of consternation and I was looking forward to examining our catch regardless of what we caught. Foolish me, when I eventually extricated myself from the scrub my eyes travelled the whole length of the net, and almost in disbelief, I saw that it was empty. Slowly I walked along the net looking for telltale signs that something had hit and escaped. There was nothing. Not even a loose feather.

Harley and Syd stayed by the net while the rest of us went uphill and drove down. I avoided the denser patches of scrub this time so that I could get to the net quicker. I need not have bothered. The drive was as unsuccessful as the first. Harley pointed out that we could forget this area for a while as we would have frightened any Scrub-bird



*Actual site of the mist-netting area where the bird was caught; Dr Serventy this end of net, author doing something to net, others behind.*

well away. So we turned our attention to the other trapping site.

The second area consisted of a single standard size net dividing an island of scrub which was only waist high in the centre and which gave way to grass on the edges. Syd, with his two-way radio, was stationed on one end of the net. The rest of us spread out on the uphill side and commenced to drive. My position was on the extreme right but although I was only some 10 yards from the edge, the thickness of the vegetation and the rocky ground prevented rapid movement. Almost immediately Syd's voice burned from Dom's receiver "There is a bird in the net".

Frantically I struggled to the edge of the scrub and in a stumbling gallop tore down to the net. About a foot from the top a small light brown bird was vigorously struggling with the folds of the net which enveloped it. I promptly grabbed it and freed it from the tenuous strands which had worked around its beak, feet and claws, its head, limbs and feathers. As I did so I was hampered by the fine strands of net catching around the winder of my watch and the links of its band.

I didn't know what species of bird it was but was saved from this embarrassment by Dom who unhesitatingly identified it as a Bristlebird, one of our rarest species. Glistening, silvery flecks in the plumage gave this otherwise drab bird an impressive beauty. After a brief examination, during which it struggled continuously, tried to bite and frequently uttered a harsh, angry sounding call, I placed it in a specially padded cage in the shade of a bush. We then resumed our positions uphill. This time I slipped my watch into my pocket and positioned myself on the very edge of the scrub. Someone said "let's go".

We had advanced only a few yards when Syd's voice came over loud and clear with the same message as before. Less hastily this time I ran to the net and looked along it. At the bottom of the net, only five feet from the other end a darkish brown bird was jumping up and down and moving along the net, closer to the end.

I still remember very clearly how that first glimpse made me think of a Scrub-Robin, one of our other ground-dwelling species. And then in that same instant of time I catapulted down the net, flung myself to my knees and grabbing hold of the bird and the net, clutched both to my stomach. Confident now, I slid my hand in between the folds of net and gained a secure grip on the bird. Then, with the net still around it, I held it before me, almost too scared to look at it for fear it wasn't what I thought. In just a few seconds I noted its size, the beak, the legs, the wings and tail, and simultaneously made a snap decision. Then I shouted just one word "Atrichornis!"

I heard Vin repeat my cry as I turned my attention to removing the Scrub-bird from the net. It wasn't difficult. Atrichornis came out of that net as easily as an egg from a tea-towel.

Then Dom was standing over me, checking diagnostic features of the species, and citing them aloud in zoological terms that I had previously only read in books. "Yes, it definitely is" he confirmed "and judging by the plumage, a female, too". The first to ever come before the notice of science as the specimens collected had all been males.

I held the Scrub-bird for everyone to see. That she didn't have a black band across the chest like a male didn't detract from her. She was alive, this "Jeemuluk" of now vanished aboriginals, and that was sufficient. No sound issued from her throat. No flutter of wings or struggle of body. Just a gentle stretching of first one leg then the other as she tried to solve the puzzle of this novel situation. She was the most docile bird I have ever handled. The light reflecting from her prehistorically patterned body began to impress itself in the emulsion of twentieth century film.

As Dom banded her I think I detected in the studious concentration of his face and two dark observant eyes a mixture of triumph and satisfaction.

In between filming I rolled a yellow plastic band on Jeemuluk's left tarsus and sealed it with acetone. There wasn't any real value in this action as it is extremely doubtful that she will ever be heard of again, much less so anyone actually observing the yellow identity. But my bander's blood always runs hot and I couldn't resist the temptation.

Dom and I also recorded the "vital statistics" such as wing length, colour of the iris, and weight. This latter being the first and only in existence. We started to examine the plumage for moult but were interrupted by the photographers wanting to continue filming. Later on I noticed the primary moult of the wing but neglected to show it to Dom and didn't mention it until after the bird had been released. He was most upset and refused to believe me. However, next morning he asked me for my notes, but I don't know to this day if he accepted them as being genuine.

I noticed that our little Jeemuluk was starting to feel the effects of the continual handling and it wasn't long before it was plainly visible to everyone. By now she was disinterested in the happenings around her. Her eyes kept closing, only opening when something startled her. Her wings drooped down, almost as if they were broken, she not caring to control them anymore. When the wind ruffled her feathers she didn't bother to smooth them again. She was almost lifeless in my hand.

Most birds don't suffer any effects from being handled but a few individuals of some species seem to find the excitement of being caught and handled rather stressing. Cage-bird fanciers, including myself, are familiar with the sometimes violent convulsion of some canaries and I have handled a few other Passerine species which had similar fits, lapsing into a semi-coma with wings and bodies quivering.

And now Jeemuluk was being affected by the same stress. Not reacting violently, just fading away. Her condition was being discussed by the other members of the group. Some wanted to let her go, others wanted to keep her for a while longer.

As a bird-lover I also wanted to let her go, to release her to the sanctuary of freedom. I was thankful for what we had already filmed and learned.

As an ornithologist I didn't like the idea of releasing her before we had recorded the maximum amount of data and completed filming. The naturalist in me won. With a confidence I didn't really feel, I issued assurances that she

would recover after a rest and placed her in the padded cage after having first removed the Bristlebird.

Half an hour of this solitary confinement showed me that she was going to be all right and within three quarters of an hour she had completely recovered. We lost no time in completing the filming and recording of information and then with cameras poised we stood back, our attention on Dom holding her, a foot or so above the rocky ground at a distance of some 10 to 15 feet from the edge of the scrub. Set for slow motion filming the cameras began to record the stage.

Dom let her go. Her wings remained folded by her sides. She hopped on both feet once, twice, a few times more, and was gone. It was a sad moment, suddenly very empty. I closed my notebook and slowly began gathering our equipment.

She wasn't the last Scrub-bird I saw there that weekend. I arose early next morning and in the dim dewy dawn wandered around near the hut. The bush was seeping with the trilling and chirping of Silvereyes and thornbills, honeyeaters and wrens. A pair of beautiful bluish-grey rats were playing chasy around a small bush, their feet making little clicking noises on the carpet of dead gum leaves. Then I heard a "cheep-cheep-cheep-cheep-cheep" followed by a trill, come from the bush to my left.

Suddenly excited, I stood there, senses alert, eyes searching for any movement, ears straining to identify the sounds issuing from the darkness of the undergrowth. The call was repeated and I guessed the caller to be a male Scrub-bird. He was moving parallel to the trail leading from the shack to the beach so I ambled along it, keeping abreast of him and only knowing his approximate position when his call reverberated from the scrub and rushes.

He was coming closer now and seemed to have doubled back a little. I turned around and sat down on the trail facing back towards the hut. I couldn't see more than a few feet into the undergrowth but I could hear him moving around. I waited. He was very close. I could catch vague glimpses of movement, could hear the leaves and bushes rustling. A terrific commotion from the direction of the rats told me that their game of chasy was at an end. I could have believed they were trying to devour one



Shugg, Serventy, Webster

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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 MSWord format; a style sheet is available from Perry House to guide writers regarding format
- WABN uses Birds Australia recommended English names
- except for Observations, contributions will be published unless the contributor is informed to the contrary.
- the full Editorial Policy is stated in WABN 74:10-12

**Deadline for the June 1999 Issue**  
**1 May 1999**  
**at Perry House**

another. But my eyes never left the green and grey obscuring my quarry.

For over a quarter of an hour I sat there, alert and observing every movement and sound. He fluttered, he rustled, he cheeped, he trilled. But not once did I see him. He was so close I could have spat on him, but blurs of movement were all I could see. I began to despair that I would see him, I felt that he would melt into the scrub and vanish.

Then, magically, he was on the path in front of me, no more than 6 feet from the rubber soles of my desert boots. He was too close for me to use my binoculars even had I

dared to move. He paused there, side on, startled, a brown symmetry of stillness, his black eye gleaming into mine. Suddenly the stillness vanished. He turned to his right, skipped some twenty feet down the path, and was gone. And I thought of the Jeemuluk of the day before.

When I held that Scrub-bird in my hands at Two People Bay, I was holding more than just a rare species. I was holding a prehistoric link with antiquity, a messenger now poised on the verge of extinction. It was the point of a triangle whose base once spread across the width of Australia thousands of Scrub-bird generations ago, a point which the hand of man or a quirk of nature could erase forever.

It was three years ago this summer that I held that *Atrichornis*, felt the softness of its feathers, the warmth of its body, saw the gleam in its eye, the life in its limbs, removed stray feathers from the sweat of my hand. I wonder if I ever will again. Or will the species disappear into that nothingness which is beyond the hands of man for all time, or until the earth is created again?

**Robert H Stranger**

**Editors' Note** When rediscovered in 1961, the Noisy Scrub-bird was restricted to one small area on the slopes of Mount Gardner, in what is now Two People Bay Nature Reserve. At the time that Robert wrote his story, total numbers were thought to be under 100. With the exclusion of fire from its habitat and translocations of birds to new sites, it is now established at eight separate locations between Albany and Bald Island, with total numbers probably around 2000 and still growing. It has recently been downgraded from Endangered to Vulnerable, and if the current program to re-establish it in the Darling Range between Waroona and Harvey is successful its future will be secure.

## 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.

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 the editors what you actually saw. Providing extra details also assists the editors to provide extra information to readers.

Criteria for inclusion of observations are set out in WABN 88: 2-3 (December 1998).

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

**Pacific Black Duck** – 4044, 27/12/98, Lake McLarty (Murray) – MC (high number for this site)

**Grey-tailed Tattler** – 9+, 3/2/99, Lake McLarty (Murray) – MC

**Sanderling** – 1, with Sharp-tailed Sandpipers and Red-necked Stints, 3/2/99, Lake McLarty (Murray) – MC (unusual away from ocean beaches)

**Little Stint** – 1 richly coloured bird, 3-31/1/99, Lake McLarty (Murray) – TK, JD, HD (and seen by a number of other observers over several weeks) (details next issue)

**Red-necked Stint** – 11 000, 3/2/99, Lake McLarty (Murray) – MC (high number for SW Australia)

**Sharp-tailed Sandpiper** – 4030, 3/2/99, Lake McLarty (Murray) – MC (high number for SW Australia)

**Black-winged Stilt** – 1844, 27/12/98, Lake McLarty (Murray) – MC (high number for this site)

**Little Ringed Plover** – 1, 30-31/12/98, Bibra Lake (Cockburn) – MBa \* 1 (presumably the bird from Bibra Lake), 10-14/1/99, Yangebup Lake (Cockburn) – BA excursion (see details elsewhere in this issue)

**Red-capped Plover** – c. 1300, late Jan 99, Lake McLarty (Murray) – TK (high number for SW Australia) – 896, 3/2/99, Lake McLarty (Murray) – MC

**Lesser Sand Plover** – 1, 3/2/99, Lake McLarty (Murray) – MC (unusual away from the coast)

**Greater Sand Plover** – 1, 1/99, Lake McLarty (Murray) – TK (unusual away from the coast)

**Great Skua** – 2 in 2 hours, 11/12/98, Point Dalling, Dunsborough (Busselton) – RP (unusual at this time of year)

**Western Corella** - c. 80, 12/98, near Beverley (Beverley) - JB, JuB

**Mulga Parrot** – 2 pairs, 16-17/1/99, near Kokeby (Beverley) – RD

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

**Black Bittern** – 1, 27/10/98, Popes Nose Creek, c. 2 km W of Port Samson in mangroves (Roebourne) – MC (description provided; Striated Heron also present)

**Banded Lapwing** – 5, 27/10/98, 5 km SE of Karratha (Roebourne) – MC (near usual northern limit)

**Common Tern** – 1250, 29/10/98, point Samson (Roebourne) – MC

**Splendid Fairy-wren** – 2 (including a male in breeding plumage), 22/10/98, c. 130 km NW of Newman by road (East Pilbara) – MC \* 2 (including a male in breeding plumage), 22/10/98, c. 140 km NW of Newman by road (East Pilbara) – MC (unusual this far north)

**Redthroat** – 2, 21/10/98, c. 110 km NW of Newman by road (East Pilbara) – RT \* 2, 22/10/98, c. 130 km NW of Newman by road (East Pilbara) – MC (at or near northern limit)

**Grey Honeyeater** – 2, 21/10/98, c. 150 km NW of Newman by road (East Pilbara) – MC

## KIMBERLEY

**Streaked Shearwater** – 1, 14/1/99, beachwashed near Broome (Broome) - BBO

**Short-tailed Shearwater** – 1, 26/12/98, found beachwashed on Cable Beach (Broome) – BBO (specimen now in WA Museum)

**Grey Goshawk** – 1, 16/10/98, Mitchell Plateau (Wyndham – East Kimberley) - JS

**Grey Falcon** – 1, 13/10/98, Manning Gorge (Derby – West Kimberley) - JS

**Black Falcon** – 1, 20/10/98, Ord River Irrigation Area, Kununurra (Wyndham – East Kimberley) - JS

**Ruff** – 2, 16/10/98, freshwater swamp on Drysdale River Station (Wyndham – East Kimberley) - JS \* 2, 18/10/98, Parry Lagoons NR (Wyndham – East Kimberley) - JS

**Arctic Jaeger** – 1, 19/12/98, found exhausted on Cable Beach (released 29/12/98) (Broome) – BBO

**Bridled Tern** – 1, 22/9/98, Gantheaume Point (Broome) – JS

**Yellow Wagtail** – 45, 22/1/99, Roebuck Plains (Broome) – BBO (high number for this species)

## OBSERVERS

BBO = Broome Bird Observatory	MBa = Mike Bamford
HD = Hazel Darnell	MC = Michael Craig
JB = John Blyth	RD = Rob Davis
JuB = Judy Blyth	RP = Ross Payton
JD = John Darnell	RT = Roy Teale
JS = Jonny Schoenjahn	TK = Tony Kirkby

## BIRDS AUSTRALIA RARITIES COMMITTEE (BARC)

BARC, chaired by Tony Palliser, assesses reports of national rarities. For example, the Purple-backed Starling reported from Christmas Island by Graham and Gwen Goodreid (WABN 79:2-3) was an Australian first, was submitted to the Rarities Committee and subsequently accepted in 1998. In the last few months, a number of other Western Australian and Christmas Island cases have been accepted, and these are listed below for the information of local members. The format is case number, common name, scientific name, location, date. The majority of these records have appeared in the 'Observations' section of WABN.

Welcome to our 1999 Committee  
and Chairman, Clive Nealon.

187 Savanna Nightjar *Caprimulgus affinis*: Christmas Island 30/05/94

200 Black-backed Wagtail *Motacilla lugens*: Derby, WA 30/12/95

213 Purple-backed Starling *Sturnus sturninus*: Christmas Island 4/6/96

223 Matsudaira's Storm-Petrel *Oceanodroma matsudairae*: NW of Dampier, WA 26/09/68

225 Matsudaira's Storm-Petrel *Oceanodroma matsudairae*: off NW WA 14/10/96

235 House Swift *Apus affinis*: Broome, WA 08/02/98

241 Blue-winged Pitta *Pitta moluccensis*: Karratha, WA 06/11/94

242 Blue and White Flycatcher *Ficedula cyanomelana*: Cossack, WA 05/12/95

243 Arctic Warbler *Phylloscopus borealis*: Lacepede Islands, WA 17/12/97

244 Franklin's Gull *Larus pipixcan*: Broome, WA 29/12/96

## WA Group Reports

### BIRDS AUSTRALIA-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 Birds Australia-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:

Proposal to incorporate — following unanimous approval of the proposal at the extraordinary general meeting held 18 January, the matter is being referred to the Birds Australia Council for ratification; if this is obtained, a notice will be published advising of this intention, with subsequent submission to the Ministry of Fair Trading for final approval; so there's still quite a way to go before we are actually incorporated.

Atlas of Australian Birds #2 Project — see separate supplement for report from the WA coordinator, Cheryl Gole.

Remote area excursions — keen interest is being shown in the survey planned for spring 1999 along the Canning Stock Route with priority to be given to finding some real information about the distribution of Princess Parrots, as well as being an Atlassing survey.

Public liability insurance — following discussions with the National Office and examination of the insurance policy, it has been ascertained that members between the ages of 16-69 years are covered by the national insurance policy when taking part in officially organised excursions/trips, and that vehicles are not covered; it therefore follows that privately undertaken atlassing is not covered by Birds Australia.



