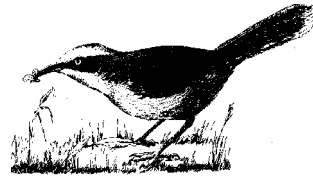


The Babler



An occasional newsletter of the Murray Goulburn Branch of the Bird Observers
Club of Australia

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Special diary dates for our 2007 programme

Our first activity for the New Year is at Chateau Tahbilk Winery just south of Nagambie, on Saturday 10 February. We have booked an exclusive morning boat trip on the wetlands at a cost of \$10 a head. The winery also serves lunches at a café overlooking the water. If the day is mild, we will do a guided walk in the red gum forest after lunch. Make a note in your diary. We would love to fill the boat.

Your Committee has decided to break with tradition and hold next year's AGM in a bushland setting at Campbell's Bend, Murchison East on Saturday 2 June. After lunch we will visit a new (for us) birding area on the eastern edge of Rushworth Forest.

Our weekend at Heathcote in September promises some great birding. Heathcote is surrounded by box ironbark forests. Dargile and Crosbie Forests are both popular with birders, and there are other less well known places we will also visit. We have booked 2 nights at Heathcote Country Lodge which provides very comfortable and affordable accommodation for small groups. Facilities include 7 double or twin rooms, 2 lounges, 2 fully equipped kitchens and a large dining/meeting room. Further details are available from Don Roberts or Kathy Costello.

Report of Murray Goulburn Branch annual meeting, June 2006

The AGM was held on 17 June 2006 at the Billabong Gardens Centre, Wanganui Road, Shepparton. Eighteen people attended and there were 7 apologies. The morning began with morning tea at 10am, and a short discussion while our guest speaker was setting up.

The guest speaker was Tony Kubeil, coordinator of the Broken Boosey Conservation Management Network. His presentation was varied. He spoke of the Brolga, Bush Stone-curlew, Moodies Swamp, Tungamah pipeline and fox control, particularly in areas where stone-curlew still exist. Of particular interest was the detrimental effect the Tungamah pipeline may have on water availability to Moodies Swamp.

We presented Tony with a DVD titled Life in the Undergrowth, as seen on ABC-TV early in 2006. We then had lunch, followed by the AGM. Office bearers elected are President Kathy Costello, Secretary Don Roberts, Conservation Officer Gary Deayton and Committee members Barry McLean, Bob Tate, Kath Tripp and Betty Thornton. After the elections we had an interesting discussion on the future evolutionary path BOCA might take, in particular finances, membership, Birds Australia and BOCA HQ and shop at Nunawading. A motion was passed to send a letter to the CEO in regard to the above matters. The meeting

ended with afternoon tea and a browse around the Billabong Nursery.

Don Roberts

Birding in Borneo

In June this year, I was fortunate to do the BOCA birding tour of Malaysia and Borneo with Chris Doughty's Melbourne-based company Peregrine Bird Tours. A small group of us flew to Kuala Lumpur, spending the night in a luxurious mid-city hotel, before heading next morning into the nearby Gombak Valley for an initial taste of rainforest birding.

We spent an exciting morning birding along a quiet bitumen road which had been bypassed by a tollway. It was soon clear that bulbuls are to Malaysia what honeyeaters are to Australia – there are dozens of them. Many are olive-brown in colour and difficult to distinguish. We saw 9 species on our first day. We also saw 2 species of monkey – Long-tailed Macaque and the larger Pig-tailed Macaque, which turned out to be common throughout the areas we visited during the tour.

Malaysia has a number of blue flycatchers and I was keen to see one, so was pleased to get good views of the beautiful turquoise Verditer Flycatcher on our first day. We also saw the tiny Blue-crowned Hanging Parrot, similar in size to our northern fig parrots, plus many other rainforest birds. On our way back to KL we stopped beside a busy highway to view Malaysia's largest hornbill, the 120cm Great Hornbill and a pair of Simiang, Malaysia's largest gibbon, in the same fruiting tree beside the road, while traffic roared past us a few metres away.

Mangroves

Day two we were up at 5.15am to try to beat the heat on our only day in the coastal mangroves. At Kuala Selangor we saw our first malkoha, the Chestnut-bellied Malkoha. Malkohas are large members of the cuckoo family, with strong bills, long tails and striking red or green eye markings. We did well with malkohas, seeing all six possible species in the first 9 days of the tour. Small brown flying lizards were a feature of the mangrove

forest. One would land on a trunk and flash a yellow throat flap up and down. Was it a territorial display?

Fraser's Hill

After a brief stop at grasslands for lovely views of a Lesser Coucal and Savanna Nightjar, we climbed to 1300 metres for a 3 day stay at Fraser's Hill in the Central Highlands. This is a peaceful, cool and beautiful part of Malaysia. We walked along quiet roadsides winding through forested hillsides, as mixed feeding parties of birds passed through the rainforest canopy. Here we saw our first minivets, brilliant small birds of the upper canopy, the males scarlet and black, and the females yellow and black. Other species found here but not in Australia include woodpeckers, trogons, broadbills, leafeaters, spiderhunters, barbets, laughingthrushes and forktails, plus of course the original domestic chicken – the Red Junglefowl. There is a lot to interest an Aussie birder. One evening our local bird guide Mano drove us to the local army base to spotlight a beautifully-barred 50cm Brown Wood Owl.

Lowland Rainforest

Next morning we drove north to Kuala Tembilang, to board a motorized longboat for the 2½ hour river trip to Taman Negara, the largest national park in Malaysia. This was our first experience of lowland rainforest – hot and humid, but great birding. I saw my first broadbills that afternoon. A pair of Black and Red Broadbills was seen from a hide overlooking a swamp. The massive pale blue and yellow bill is as wide as a frogmouth's, although that's where the similarity ends. We had brilliant views of this bird later on our trip, beside the balcony of one of our lodges in Borneo.

Other highlights at Taman Negara were a brilliantly-coloured male Banded Pitta, several Crested Firebacks wandering on the lawns of the lodge (they're large glossy blue birds the size of a peacock) and watching a pair of Buff-necked Woodpeckers excavating a nesting hole in a tree trunk near our cabins. One afternoon I birded around camp, while most of the group went on a lengthy walk. Serves me right. I missed the world's largest woodpecker, the Great Slaty

Woodpecker, and the world's smallest kingfisher, the Rufous-backed Kingfisher. We also enjoyed fabulous meals in the large open dining room. By day, the agile Long-tailed Macaques made lightning raids on the bananas in the dining room, and in the evening numerous barking geckos lined the walls as we watched live World Cup Soccer action from Germany on the big screen.

Mt Kinabalu, Borneo

Our next destination was Mt Kinabalu in the Malaysian state of Sabah in northern Borneo. At 4094 metres it is the highest mountain between the Himalayas and New Guinea. Our lodge was on the lower slopes at 1700 metres. Flowerpeckers are common in Asia. The Black-sided Flowerpecker is endemic to the higher mountains of north Borneo and we saw it often, feeding on purple berries in roadside shrubs. I hadn't realized that our Mistletoebird belongs to this family. Another Asian specialty are the Forktails. These shy birds live beside streams and waterfalls. We would get a tantalizing glimpse of a pair disappearing around the next bend of the road or the stream, their black and white tail feathers trailing like a pair of streamers. We had brief glimpses of the White-crowned Forktail from the balcony of our lodge, which overlooked a gurgling mountain stream. The Bornean Laughing Thrush, Short-tailed Magpie (a beautiful pale green bird with a red bill) and Bornean Treepie were also spotted at eye level from the balcony.

On the day we were to climb up the mountain, the light rain at the start of the walk had turned into a steady, torrential downpour by the time we had walked 200 metres. The sensible ones turned straight back, some of us continued for half an hour, by this time soaked to the skin and walking through a small stream gushing down the track, but only Chris and Tony soldiered on. They did see something special for their trouble – a Giant Red Kinabalu Leech. It's endemic to the mountain, is 30cm long and feeds on earthworms. Chris later wrote "...the front end of the leech had small tentacles which it could spread open, revealing what must have been its mouth. It caught up to a hapless earthworm and started to bite 2

inch chunks off it. It was like watching a horror movie."

Next day, up at 6am to drive to Poring Hot Springs for breakfast. We drove past a busy roadside wholesale market, through fertile countryside where 80 per cent of Sabah's fruit and vegetables are grown. On the canopy boardwalk at the hot springs, we watched a Pale Giant Squirrel, a beautiful 90cm black, white and chestnut animal with a huge bushy tail. We also saw 2 more broadbills – Banded Broadbill and Black and White Broadbill, plus a number of sunbirds, bulbuls and spiderhunters. In the nearby campground we located a mixed feeding flock of about 20 different species, so enjoyed a productive hour of birding before heading back to Mt Kinabalu.

Offshore Islands

Our next destination was the tiny resort island of Mabul on the east coast of Sabah. From here we made a boat trip to nearby Sipadan Island, one of the top dive spots in the world. Here we found Grey Imperial-Pigeon, Pied Imperial-Pigeon, Metallic Pigeon, and Black-naped Fruit Dove. Great and Lesser Frigatebirds soared overhead, and a White-bellied Sea Eagle flew past. Sipadan Island is a protected turtle nesting site, and as we slowly circumnavigated the island in our boat, we saw many turtles in the shallows, as well as recent tracks on the sand. There were also some large monitor lizards on the island, no doubt well-nourished by turtle eggs.

Danum Valley

Although much of east coast Sabah is dominated by oil palm plantations, significant areas of rainforest remain. We were looking forward to spending the next few days in one of the best birding places in Asia – the Danum Valley Conservation Reserve, which protects a large area of rare primary lowland rainforest. After a bone-shaking 2¼ hour drive from the coast, mainly on logging tracks, we arrived at Borneo Rainforest Lodge.

Orang Utans and Gibbons

We were lucky to have a huge fruiting fig tree within 50 metres of our cabins, and it drew wildlife from a radius of several kilometres. We watched 3 Orang Utans

high in the tree, plucking figs by the fistful. Danum Valley is rich in wildlife and the mammal life was stunning. Within walking distance of the lodge we saw Bornean Gibbons, Red Leaf Monkeys, numerous squirrels (17 different squirrel species for the whole trip), Binturong or Bear Cat, Slow Loris, Sambar Deer and Bearded Pig. Some of our group watched a Colugo or Flying Lemur land at the bottom of a tree beside the dining room just on dusk. For 15 minutes it slowly climbed the trunk, before launching itself on an 80 metre glide across the river and into the forest.

A resident pair of Buffy Fish Owls was seen in the spotlight one night, as was a pair of Brown Wood Owls. Also, roosting communally at night were 10 Bushy-crested Hornbills, huddled together on a branch like giant woodswallows. An endangered Lesser Fish Eagle perched across the river from our cabins, while Rhinoceros Hornbills honked loudly as they flew in to the fig tree.

Pittas and Bristleheads

And then there were the pittas. On our first day, about 10 minutes' walk from the lodge, we had fantastic views of a Black-headed Pitta, perched on a log beside the track. This bird was formerly known as the Garnet Pitta, but has been recently renamed as a separate species in Borneo. It is black and red, with iridescent blue wings. Our local guide Wang found us a female Blue-headed Pitta deep in the rainforest. He could imitate all the birds of the forest, and called up the best bird of the trip, a family of Bornean Bristleheads, an endemic species and in a family all its own. They are large scarlet, yellow and black birds, and look much more striking in real life than in bird books.

It was a challenge to identify the many small birds of the forest floor. We saw 24 different babblers on the whole trip, and needed the expert knowledge of Chris and local guides to identify them and other forest skulkers. I was able to identify one for myself at Danum Valley, the Fluffy-backed Tit-Babbler, because it had a distinctive blue eye ring.

Other Danum Valley highlights (and there were many) were the beautiful male Asian Paradise Flycatcher, with 30cm long white

tail plumes, the endemic Diard's Trogon, the huge Helmeted Hornbill, Bornean Blue Flycatcher, Jerdon's Baza and the second smallest kingfisher in the world – the Black-winged Kingfisher – a tiny jewel of a bird.

World Cup Soccer

In true Aussie spirit, I rose at 3am on the last morning at Danum Valley to watch Australia's most crucial soccer match in decades – the Socceroos vs Croatia. Our little group celebrated a hard fought draw, which took us into the last 16 in the World Cup.

Cave Swiftlets

Our second last stop in Borneo was Gomantang Cave, where three species of swiftlets nest. The nests of two of them are harvested and sold at huge expense to the Chinese community for bird nest soup. The main cave is also home to thousands of Wrinkle-lipped Bats and has a 20 metre high mound of guano on the floor; it was a dark, damp, foetid place, crawling with crabs.

Proboscis Monkeys

Sukau Lodge on the Kinabatangan River was our final birding stop. Here all our birding was by boat, a much more comfortable way to travel than along the appalling roads in the area. This region of mangrove forests is home to the Proboscis Monkey, as well as being rich in birdlife. We had close views of family groups of Proboscis Monkeys, as well as Silvered Leaf Monkeys. Birding highlights included Blue-eared Kingfisher, Black Hornbill, Wrinkled Hornbill, Grey-headed Fish Eagle and Green Broadbill. Then we made an interesting 2 hour boat trip to Sandakan on the coast, for a beautiful final lunch, before driving to the airport to head for home.

What a trip – 320 species of birds, 40 mammals, a superb and varied rainforest experience, great accommodation, food, and birding companions. We were also lucky to have Brisbane birders Tony and Judy in our group. As former residents of Malaysia, they could speak Malay, and helped us understand the local culture.

Kathy Costello

From the Conservation Officer

BOCA forum

Lisa and I attended the recent BOCA forum and enjoyed it very much. One of the highlights was hearing about some of the contributions made by BOCA branches to the conservation of birds and their habitats. It was interesting to note that many of the projects began and gained support through bird surveys and the production of lists to demonstrate the diversity of birds and the importance of an area for bird habitat. This is not a new concept but the examples presented reinforced the value of recording our observations and sharing them with other sections of the community whenever possible.

There was also discussion of BOCA's future directions with the main topics being the trading name, national office location, communications and funding options. A diverse range of views were presented without any resolutions. If these matters are of interest to you then I encourage you to share your views and contact Tim Landsberg the BOCA President. Look for more information about this in the Bird Observer.

River Red Gum Forests Investigation

A discussion paper was released in October for the River Red Gum Forests Investigation being conducted by the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council. The discussion paper outlines the features and uses of the areas under investigation. Submissions are being sought up to December 7 on future use and management. If anyone would like more information Kathy, Don and I have copies of the discussion paper.

Urban bird habitat – How important is it?

Recently we had a couple of unusual observations of birds in our garden at Numurkah. The first was a Black-eared Cuckoo, a rare sight at anytime but much more exciting when it was feeding on caterpillars only a few metres from our kitchen window. The other was a juvenile Red-capped Robin that stayed around for a couple of days. This was also very pleasing as it was evidence of breeding

success of a species that seems to be declining in abundance in the areas we visit.

Over the last 10 years we have kept a list of species observed within the immediate vicinity of our suburban block (including flying over) and the count is now 91 species. Some of the more unusual include Black, Spiny-cheeked and White-fronted Honeyeaters, Swift Parrot (on several occasions feeding in a red flowering dwarf Yellow Gum), a Grey-crowned Babbler that stayed in the area for several weeks, Superb Parrot, Plumed Whistling Duck, etc.

A couple of the factors contributing to the diversity of species we have recorded, is the proximity of our house to remnant vegetation along a creek (about 600 metres), the dry seasons we have been having and loss of habitat forcing them into gardens.

While it is wonderful to have seen so many native species, the abundance of introduced birds is very concerning. We have only recorded Indian Mynah and Spotted Turtle Dove in the last few years and in that time their numbers have increased quite noticeably, as have the number of Sparrows.

This is not surprising given the habitat and food supplied by some people in our area. Pencil Willows and Palm Trees for shelter, nest sites under the roofs of houses, a food supply of bread thrown out "for the birds" and dog and cat food left where birds can access it, all encourage introduced species.

Another issue in Numurkah is the removal of indigenous and non-indigenous native trees to make way for development, "risk" management and planting introduced trees. For example between our house and the creek there have been about 40 box trees and at least as many non indigenous native trees removed in the last two years. I suspect that this is not unique to our area. If you have a chance to influence any of the above where you live to help our native birds, please do so.

Gary Deayton

Feathers

The arrangement of scales on reptiles is very similar to that of feathers on birds, and in the evolution of the species of the world, birds are thought to be related to reptiles. There are several different kinds of feathers each fulfilling a different role, these are called, Veined, Down, Semi plume, Filoplume, and Powder Down.

The veined feathers consist of a shaft and 2 webs. The webs consist of millions of barbs and barbules all of which are designed to cling together so the feather remains stiff. If the barbules become separated, the bird will draw the feather through its beak and the little barbs and barbules are put back together again.

Down feathers are short and fluffy as in ducks and some waterfowl. Their purpose is for heat conservation.

Semi plume feathers are intermediate between veined and down feathers and are along the sides and abdomen.

Filoplume feathers are those annoying short feathers left behind when a chook is plucked and serve no known purpose.

Powder down feathers grow continuously and are never moulted. Their tips disintegrate into a fine powder which aids in waterproofing and preserving the feathers.

Some birds have a small gland at the base of their rump called the Uropygial gland and this secretes an oily fluid which is used with the aid of the beak to preen the feathers to restore waterproofing and general feather condition and function. Not all birds contain this gland and some desert birds prefer a dust bath to perform the same function.

Each year the birds moult, and they do this in a set sequence and then gain a new set of feathers in the same sequence. Land birds do this gradually so they can continue to fly. However many water birds moult their feathers very quickly and cannot fly till the new ones are in place. Fortunately they can still feed in the water and hide from enemies by swimming.

Feather colour is due to several pigments; one well known to humans is Melanin

responsible for black colouring, and will produce black feathers when in large amounts, and lighter feathers in small quantities. Some brown Magpies seen around the Alexandra district are due to a lesser amount of Melanin, and they are a brown colour where they should be black. Other colours are due to a number of other pigments, except blue which as a pigment does not exist. Blue colour in feathers is due to the arrangement of the cells of the feather barbs and the reflection of light. Similarly the iridescence of the colours in Pigeons, Peacocks and others is due to the arrangements of the feathers and reflection of light - a subject many of us studied in Physics at school. Squash a blue feather and the blue colour disappears.

by Bob Tate, Alexandra

edited by Joan Edwards

Ref: The life of birds, by Welby

BOCA Forum at Wagga 21 – 24 September 2006

Over 60 BOCA members from Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria attended the BOCA Forum at Wagga in September. Sixteen branches were represented, as well as a number of other groups. Apart from the formal activities, the forum provided a great environment to mix with other birders. Most participants stayed in cottages at Charles Sturt University. On arrival, we were treated to wonderful views of Superb Parrots feeding in flowering Yellow Box trees next to our accommodation.

Speakers included Annette Cook, BOCA Education Coordinator, and Don Saunders, Conservation Coordinator, as well as representatives from five BOCA branches around the country. Graeme Hamilton, CEO of Birds Australia, Richard Hunter, CEO of BOCA, and Tim Landsberg, President of BOCA also addressed the group.

A bus tour of the district took place on a very hot and windy Saturday afternoon. Although the weather was not conducive to birding, we were introduced to some of the serious water management issues in

the region, which relies on the Murrumbidgee River for most of its water.

We visited the Forests, Wetlands and Wildlife Corridor Project at nearby Ganmain, an inspiring story of what can be achieved by a small, but committed community group. A similar story was told by a number of BOCA branches. The common thread was working with local councils, and other government bodies, as well as like-minded conservation organizations to achieve positive outcomes, whether for a wetland project, or to save an osprey nest, or to restore bushland.

On Sunday afternoon there was an open discussion on management issues facing BOCA. The BOCA Board is looking for ways to promote and grow the club, and sees a greater focus on conservation as one way to do this. Most people were not too concerned about a possible name change for the organization, but the possibility of the sale of headquarters and a move to central Melbourne raised some heartfelt comments. Some members requested more frequent communication from headquarters about issues affecting the club. Conservation Officer Don Saunders was mentioned by a number of people for the strong support he has given to branches on local conservation issues.

As Gary wrote on page 5, BOCA is keen to hear what members have to say about the future direction of the club. Please write if you have an opinion on the matters raised by President, Tim Landsberg, in the *The Bird Observer*, August 2006.

by Kathy Costello

Reports of outings

Kinnairds Wetland and Numurkah Lake 3 June 2006

A beautiful sunny winter's day greeted us at Numurkah. Our guide for the day Gary Deayton led our considerable convoy down the main street of the town to Kinnairds Wetland. Before we set off he

presented us with the history and working of the wetland and a brief overview of what we might observe in the various habitats we would pass through.

We were soon spread out like Browns Cows, mind you there were 32 of us, so some people saw species others didn't. Bird call at lunch time produced a total of 48 species. The highlights were: a group of 12 Brown Quail – they were very obliging – some members even took photos, lovely views of Flame Robins, Golden Whistler male and Crested Shriketits. We met Chris a photographer at the first bird hide. He must have pondered his luck at being disturbed by 32 birdos. It was only his second visit to Kinnairds. We left him in peace photographing the quail.

In the afternoon we moved on to a walk that runs between the Broken Creek and the Numurkah Lake. The lake was covered with birds obviously enjoying the aquatic vegetation and the clean water in the creek. There were hundreds of Coot on the lake. Other species observed were Black Swan, Australasian Shoveler, Hardhead, Grey Teal, Pelican, Dusky Moorhen, Purple Swamphen and three grebe species – many Australasian Grebe, fewer Hoary-headed and the jewel in the crown a single Great-crested Grebe. So the total for the day was 54 species, a great day's birding.

by Don Roberts

Wenhams Reserve, Warby Ranges 8 July 2006

It was a cold and cloudy day at Wenham's, so it was good to do a bracing walk along the Friend's track, starting by a climb to the top of Mt Warby. We divided into groups according to how far people wanted to walk; some did the entire track before lunch, others returned to the picnic area at the half way point of the track.

Bird numbers were lower than expected. A frosty winter with little rain may have sent some birds to the more sheltered, lower slopes of the range. Good numbers of Scarlet Robin were seen and thornbills were well represented – Buff-rumped,

Striated, Yellow, Brown & Yellow-rumped, plus plenty of Weebills. Other species we recorded included Speckled Warbler, Grey Fantail, Varied Sittella, Jacky Winter and Peaceful Dove, and an Owlet Nightjar was heard. Notably absent from our list were Hooded Robin, Flame Robin, Turquoise Parrot, Willie Wagtail and raptors.
Total bird species 37

by Kathy Costello

Reef Hills State Park, Benalla 12 August 2006

We were in for a great day at Reef Hills, as the best flowering of White Box in recent years was attracting lots of nectar-feeding birds to the park. There was plenty of bird activity around the carpark, with Noisy Friarbirds, Red Wattlebirds, Black-chinned, Yellow-tufted, Fuscous and Brown-headed Honeyeaters feeding close by.

Twenty-four birders then drove along Reef Hills Road to the southern area of the park which has significant stands of Grey and White Box. First we stopped to view and photograph a pair of Tawny Frogmouths trying to look invisible in the fork of a tall eucalypt.



Photo by Kath Tripp

Meanwhile, a pair of Gang-gang Cockatoos preened each other, unconcerned about our presence. We then drove to the southern boundary of the park bordering farmland, and walked along a track. There were a few Flame Robins

in the paddock, along with Hooded Robin and Jacky Winter. We disturbed 3 Diamond Firetails feeding on the ground, and only saw them as they flew into a tree. A Black-chinned Honeyeater landed low in a nearby sapling, calling strongly and feeding upside-down, giving us fantastic views of a bird which is often unobtrusive and hard to locate.

Meanwhile some of our large group had spread out through the forest. Lisa came back to report Swift Parrots, then led us to a group of 4 birds feeding quietly in Red Box trees. They appeared to be eating buds, or something on the buds. The trees were not flowering. We found several groups of White-browed Babblers in clumps of Hedge Wattle (*Acacia Paradoxa*). These thorny plants provide good cover for ground-feeding birds. We also found White-browed Scrubwrens and Superb Fairy-wrens here.

After lunch we moved a couple of kilometres to the dam in Baines Road. Silvereyes, Brown Thornbills and Eastern Spinebills were feeding in shrubs, while overhead were small flocks of Purple-crowned and Little Lorikeets, and Striated Thornbills. Don found another group of Swift Parrots while Gary found a Red-capped Robin. Other good sightings for the day were White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike, Crested Shrike-tit, Scarlet Robin, Yellow-faced Honeyeater, Brown and White-throated Treecreeper and Common Bronzewing.

In addition to the 55 bird species we recorded, mammals seen included 2 Echidna trains – one with 4 Echidnas, and one with 6 Echidnas, plus a Koala and Black Wallaby. It was a great day for our 6 visitors from Melbourne as well as our local members.

by Kathy Costello

Chiltern weekend 2–3 September 2006

We had a great response to our weekend at Chiltern, with 24 in attendance. Most people stayed at the caravan park, with some at the motel. Over 2 days we visited Honeyeater Picnic area, Frog's Hollow,

Bartley's paddock, Klotz Track, Donchi Hill, Depot Dam and Chiltern Valley no 2 Dam.

Bartley's and Honeyeater Dam were the places to see the smaller birds such as Weebill, Superb Fairy-wren, Mistletoebird and Silvereye. Both places have some grassy areas, with Bartley's sporting many regenerating wattles. At Bartley's we saw the only Western Gerygone, Red-capped Robin, Jacky Winters and Grey Fantails for the weekend. It was here we saw the only thornbills for the weekend – the Yellow-rumped. A number of people have commented that thornbills are missing from areas we have seen them in the past, (not just Chiltern) yet Weebills seem to be holding on well. Why is it so? With insect numbers reduced by the ongoing dry, are Weebills able to use a wider variety of food sources than thornbills? Or are they able to move to new areas more so than thornbills? Or is there some other explanation?

In the heart of the forest, the honeyeaters dominated those areas with flowering box or ironbarks. Fourteen honeyeaters were seen in total, with the highlight being a pair of Regent Honeyeaters in the north-eastern part of the forest. There were also small numbers of Swift Parrots here, and at Donchi Hill. Fuscous, Yellow-tufted and Black-chinned Honeyeaters were recorded at 3 sites.

Turquoise Parrots were present at Frogs Hollow, Depot Dam and Bartley's. We had extended views of a pair feeding quietly on the ground at Depot Dam. Also seen here was a pair of White-bellied Cuckoo-shrikes. The Chiltern caravan park was the only place we recorded Flame Robin, Varied Sittella and the yellow form of the Crimson Rosella.

On Saturday night we joined the Friends of Chiltern for their annual general meeting. We enjoyed a wonderful dinner, followed by Andrew Silcock's illustrated talk on shore birds in Australia. Of particular interest were the photos he took of Painted Snipe in January, just up the road near Rutherglen. The friends group has an excellent website with comprehensive records and pictures of the flora and fauna of Chiltern and Mt Pilot National Park.

Total bird species 96

by Kathy Costello

Ancona **14 October 2006**

The Ancona district is tucked away into the foothills of the Strathbogie Ranges near Merton. While the Murray Goulburn region was rapidly turning brown after the Spring rains failed, Ancona was looking lush and green. Narrow-leafed Peppermints in full flower lined the gravel roads.

We were grateful to the Stanfield's for allowing us to visit their property. We spent the morning birding around a huge dam. Golden-headed Cisticola's and Clamorous Reed Warblers were seen in the long, thick grass and reeds at the southern end. We enjoyed good views of a Horsefield's Bronze-Cuckoo on an overhead powerline, and a Willie Wagtail sitting on a low nest. Smaller birds in the wattle understorey included Red-browed Finch, Superb Fairy-wren, White-browed Scrubwren and Grey Fantail. Nectar feeders recorded were Red Wattlebird, Noisy Friarbird, Yellow-faced and White-plumed Honeyeater.

Quite a few waterbirds were seen on the dam; Black Swan, Little Black and Little Pied Cormorant, Grey Teal, Australian Shelduck, both Musk and Black Duck, plus coots, swamphens and moorhens. The solitary Whiskered Tern over the dam in the morning was joined mid afternoon by 49 of its mates to provide the birding highlight of the day.

A heavy shower drove us into the pump shed for a novel lunch experience. We then visited the superb homestead gardens, lovingly prepared for an open garden fundraiser the next day. Centrepiece was a massive 140 year old oak tree. Rufous Whistler, Yellow-rumped Thornbill and Masked Lapwing were added to our list, for a total of 46 species for the day.

by Kathy Costello

Strathbogie Ranges 4 November 2006

The morning began at Ben and Olwyn's property where we have been conducting six-monthly surveys in an adjacent pine plantation. The area is regularly used as a nesting location for Scarlet Robins, but not this year. Ben advised that Flame Robins also failed to nest on their property this year. Last year one nest was beside their back door.

We recorded 26 species in the pines. The most interesting records were Crescent Honeyeater and the first Rufous Fantail for the Spring. Most numerous were the Brown Thornbills, followed closely by Superb Fairy-wren, Crimson Rosella and Spotted Pardalote.

Following lunch in Olwyn's wonderful shady garden, Ben led us to a 330 acre bush block of towering Southern Blue Gum and Narrow-leaf Peppermint overlooking a fern gully. Conditions were very dry; there was only a trickle of water in the gully. Gang Gang Cockatoos, Satin Bowerbird, Crested Shrike-tit and Eastern Spinebill were some of the birds recorded. We could hear a pair of flycatchers high in the canopy, but couldn't get a glimpse. Don concluded that they were more likely to be Leaden than Satin Flycatchers, but couldn't be certain.

By mid afternoon the day was very hot, the birds were quiet, and it was time to head for home. Thanks again to Ben and Olwyn for their hospitality, and the support they give to our club.

Total bird species 39

by Kathy Costello

Interesting sightings

Gary & Lisa recorded a Black-eared Cuckoo and Red-capped Robin in their garden (see under Gary's conservation report on page 5). They have also found a pair of Purple-crowned Lorikeets nesting along the creek in Numurkah. They watched one evening as a parent bird flew in to a small spout to feed young, then

next day saw the two youngsters emerge from the spout and fly. This is the first time they have found these lorikeets nesting in town.

A lot of of Baillon's Crakes have been recorded in the district in recent months, especially by birders attending the recent BOCA camp at Bunbartha. Baillon's crakes have been seen at two places in Numurkah – beside the lake in the town and at Kinnairds wetland, at Cussen Park in Tatura and from several private wetlands north of Shepparton. They are usually the rarest crane in Victoria.

On a recent visit to Cussen Park in November, Don saw all three crakes; four Spotless and four Baillon's Crakes plus an Australian Spotted Crake and a Buff-banded Rail, all in the same area on the edge of the wetland near the rotunda.

Rainbow Bee-eaters have returned to the region, but in small numbers. A pair was seen building a nesting tunnel at the BOCA camp at Bunbartha. A few pairs have been recorded flying overhead at Nathalia, Benalla and Violet Town, but their numbers have not recovered from the deadly cold snap in February 2005.

Other Branch activities

Betty and Don represented MGBOCA at Landcare information display in the Shepparton Mall on a Saturday morning in October, handing out BOCA magazines and other literature.

A number of activities were held in the region for National Water Week in October. Betty and Don took part in a community day on the Goulburn River at Shepparton, leading locals on a bird walk along the river. A Southern Boobook peered out of a nearby hollow for the duration of the day's activities, and created a lot of interest. Gary led a bird walk at Kinnairds Wetland in Numurkah in association with the CMA.

Don has continued to give community talks when requested.

In July 2006 our branch made a submission to the Reef Hills State Park Draft Management Plan.