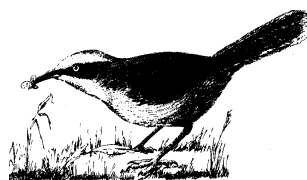


The Babbler



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

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President: Barry McLean
Ph 03 5798 1213
Email: barry_mclean@bigpond.com

Secretary: Don Roberts
Ph 03 5825 2404

Barry's our new President

Congratulations to Barry McLean, who was elected our new President at the Murray Goulburn Branch AGM in June 2007. Barry replaces Kathy Costello who stepped down after 7 years in the job.



(photo Anne Finlay)

We were lucky to have the AGM at the home of Anne and Warwick in Murchison, as it was a cold, wet morning and the fire was very cosy.

Our office bearers for 2007/08 are:

President: Barry McLean
Secretary: Don Roberts
Treasurer: Don Roberts
Conservation Officer: Gary Deayton
Committee: Barry, Don and Gary plus
Kathy Costello, Bob Tate, Kath Tripp and Anne Finlay.

Thanks to all our office bearers and everyone who helps keep the club running.

Notes from the AGM

Don reported that our branch had only \$2.70 in the bank, while we waited for reimbursement of our expenses from BOCA.

Members from Alexandra, who also belong to the Upper Goulburn Field Naturalists' Club, reported that Crown Land adjacent to McKenzie Flora and Fauna Reserve is to be protected by a Trust for Nature covenant, following an eleven year battle by the Field Nats. The land has a significant stand of White Box in an area which has been largely cleared for farming. (Editor's note: Joan Semmens book 'Bush seasons' is a beautiful record of the McKenzie Reserve.)

Gary reported that recent improvements have been made at Kinnairds Wetland in Numurkah, with Moira Council employing workers on drought employment relief to undertake maintenance work including weed control.

Murchison birding

With the AGM completed, and the rain clearing by lunchtime, we set off for an afternoon of birding west of Murchison, managing to lose our new president on the way – not an auspicious beginning.

We visited the site of a WWII Prisoner of War camp, which has grasslands, some large box trees, regenerating woodland and several small dams. Good sightings were Hooded Robin, Southern Whiteface, White-fronted Chat, Brown Treecreeper, White-browed Babbler, Grey Butcherbird, Common Bronzewing, Restless Flycatcher, Scarlet Robin and several flocks of Flame Robins along the roads. Some saw a male Red-capped Robin as we returned to Murchison. The area has some excellent roadside vegetation, is not far from Rushworth Forest and well worth further investigation.

Total species recorded 32

Birding activities for 2008

A copy of our 2008 programme has been included with this newsletter. We have decided to meet at 9am during daylight saving, and 10am in the cooler months. This year daylight saving ends on Sunday 6 April and resumes on Sunday 5 October.

Our first outing is to Benalla, on Saturday 9 February. We plan to walk around Lake Benalla, and if it is a hot day, we can retire to the art gallery café in the botanic gardens for refreshments or relax under a shady tree.

We will be visiting 4 new locations this year. Two of them are on private property, one at Lima East (March outing) and the second in the Strathbogie Ranges (November outing). We also have a trip to Fraser National Park, on the shores of Lake Eildon, in August. Our weekend camp is at Cocoparra National Park in NSW in the springtime. This is a wonderful birdwatching area, with great bush birding in the park, and some world class wetlands at nearby Leeton. And we will be visiting Mt Samaria for the first time in many years in October.

So it promises to be an interesting year of birding activities. We hope you can come along. For day trips, all you need to do is bring binoculars, lunch and a folding chair.

Scotia Wildlife Sanctuary

In September 2007 I was one of about 40 volunteers who drove to Scotia Sanctuary in far western NSW to monitor Black-eared Miners (BEM) and Malleefowl. The monitoring programme ran over 3 successive weeks, with each group of volunteers spending a week at the property.

Scotia is about 160km northwest of Mildura, and consists of extensive tracts of mallee vegetation. It is named after the scotia bush (*Eremophila scoparia*) which is common in the area. The property is owned by Australian Wildlife Conservancy and is actively managed for wildlife conservation.

Four huge enclosures, each of about 4000 hectares, have been set up. Two of them have feral proof fencing, and following the eradication of all feral animals in one enclosure, a number of endangered marsupials have been introduced and most have prospered in the predator free environment. These include the Greater Bilby, Numbat, Brush-tailed and Burrowing Bettong

(Woylie and Boodie), Rufous Hare Wallaby (Mala), Greater Sticknest Rat and Bridled Nail-tailed Wallaby. The second enclosure was expected to be feral free by early 2008, allowing a lot of animals to be moved from paddock one to relieve population pressure. We saw a lot of bilbies and wallabies on a spotlighting tour, and the Burrowing Bettong has also thrived.

Past surveys indicated that Scotia was home to a small population of the endangered Black-eared Miner, and efforts have been made to introduce more breeding colonies to the property. The continuing dry weather in recent years has limited the success of these activities, and ongoing monitoring is required to assess miner numbers and locations.

We were up at 5am and on the road by 6am, so that surveys could be finished before lunch. Then it was free time in the hot afternoons. We worked in pairs, and were equipped with an MP3 player with BEM calls, a speaker, a GPS loaded with our survey coordinates and survey sheets to complete. It seemed a bit daunting to begin with, but after some initial training, we all managed the equipment and the navigation without difficulty. We walked about 6 - 8km each day, following the route on our GPS.

What a privilege to be walking through the mallee with the place to yourselves, no traffic, miles of open spaces in all directions, knowing that your trusty GPS would lead you precisely to your pick-up point. Some days were birdier than others. We saw and heard lots of Gilbert's Whistlers, although unlike Gluepot, there are no Red-lored Whistlers at Scotia. Other species in good numbers were Red-capped Robin, Chestnut Quailthrush, Splendid Wren, Jacky Winter and Southern Scrub Robin. Yellow-plumed Honeyeaters were everywhere. We heard but didn't see the Shy Heathwren, although others had good views. Major Mitchell Cockatoos were seen in a few different habitats.

As for the Black-eared Miners, I didn't see or hear any miners for the whole 6 days. Most people at least saw a few Yellow-throated Miners or hybrid birds, and a lucky few had good views of Black-eared Miners. One Malleefowl was seen crossing a road, and a few recent Malleefowl tracks were seen by some observers.

Large areas in the south of Scotia had been burnt by bushfires in the previous 12 months and some mallee trees had been reduced to a pile of ashes. Small patches of *Triodia* grass were starting to shoot, as were some trees, but

it will take a long time for the vegetation to recover. Substantial rains would really get things started.

I can recommend the experience. It's a good way to see different places in Australia, maybe see some new birds, to meet other birders, and to put your identification skills to good use.

Kathy Costello

From the Conservation Officer

I found our recent visit to Cussen Park in Tatura most interesting and the number (62) of species observed, very impressive. (See Report of Outings p 6) This reinforced to me the value of habitats resulting from constructed or modified wetlands for birds and other fauna.

Creating bird habitat may not have been an aim or even a consideration when some types of wetlands were established. For example some of the urban lakes in our catchment were more likely to have been established for reasons such as aesthetics, recreation and a source of material to build up low lying areas (possibly former wetlands) for development. However, regardless of their original purposes these areas can provide a range of habitats, especially where native aquatic plants and reed beds have established. In a landscape where natural wetlands have been lost or otherwise adversely affected, constructed wetlands can be very important for bird conservation. In dry times they are often among the few refuges available to birds.

Working to ensure that management of wetlands (constructed or 'natural') is complementary to their importance to birds is something we can often do at our local scale as many of them are managed by local authorities who are usually quite responsive to community interest. Some of our branch members are already involved in the management of various wetlands, successfully working with authorities, raising awareness of bird habitat, providing advice on its conservation and promoting the role of BOCA.

While on this subject I'd like to thank and congratulate Don Roberts for his appointment as BOCA representative to the Kinnairds Wetland Advisory Committee. Don's involvement will be a valuable contribution to the conservation of Kinnairds Wetland.

Wetlands can certainly benefit from better informed and planned management. I have been asked many times how to attract birds to gardens. My usual answer is to provide

suitable habitat and that the greater the habitat diversity the more likely it is to attract a variety of birds, then I explain what that might be and how it can be managed. Wetlands are no different and advocating for the retention or establishment of features that contribute to habitat diversity such as various water levels, native vegetation, logs and shallow banks is something we can do to aid bird conservation, especially for constructed wetlands.

If you can, please get involved in the management of your local wetlands. Some of the things you can do include keeping records of observations. Produce a bird list and distribute it. Find out who manages your local wetlands and let them know that you are interested (and a BOCA member). Ask if there are any opportunities for community involvement and offer yourself as a contact if they have enquiries about birds. If you identify a potential opportunity or threat and need help let someone know.

Just to finish off here are a couple of observations from urban wetlands. In late November we visited Lake Wendouree at Ballarat. Having heard it had been dry for some time we were curious to see if recent rain had made any difference. We were pleasantly surprised to see the lake bed had been transformed into a shallow marsh and good numbers and diversity of bird species, especially waders such as Latham's Snipe using it. Also in November Little Bittern and Little Egret were among 49 species recorded during a survey by a zoologist at Numurkah Lake.

World Wetlands Day is on February 2nd. A good reason if you need one to get out to your local wetland.

Gary Deayton

Reports of outings

Youanmite Nature Conservation Reserve 8 July 2008

Youanmite is not the best known district in the northern plains, and a few of our members had interesting tours of the area before finding the Youanmite Hall. It was the first sunny day after a period of wet cold weather, and for the first time in years I was wishing I'd brought gumboots (Betty did), as we sloshed through the paddocks.

The reserve was once private property, but 3 years ago was donated to the government by the owner to conserve a significant patch of remnant vegetation, dominated by huge Red Gum and Grey Box habitat trees.

When Broken Creek Field Naturalists visited the reserve in October 2006 they found Black-faced Woodswallows, but we had no such luck. We did see Brown Treecreeper, Restless Flycatcher, Golden Whistler, Grey Shrike-thrush, Weebill, a few Flame Robins, plenty of Red-rumped Parrots and a pair of Yellow-rumped Thornbills building a nest.

In the afternoon we visited a creek and wetland one kilometre south of the reserve. The creek for decades has supplied stock and domestic water to local farms, but no longer does so since the recent opening of the Tungamah pipeline. Although the pipeline will save precious water and provide improved water supply to farmers, it means the creek and wetlands will dry up unless there are large rainfall events. We found one pool of water in the dry creek, and no waterbirds. Bush birds seen were Peregrine Falcon, Olive-backed Oriole, Pied Butcherbird, Flame Robin and a family of Kookaburras.

The 18 members who attended enjoyed visiting a new area, and soaking up some sunshine on a mild winter's day.

Total species recorded 27

Killawarra Forest 11 August 2007

Our visit to Killawarra was a joint outing with Ovens Murray Branch, and a total of 21 people attended, including Keith from Echuca.

The weather was a bit windy but good, but birding was very quiet for most of the day except for a half hour or so in a sheltered gully near the car park. Virtually zero flowering observed except for some of the wattles.

In the gully, say 4 acres or so, Robins (Flame, Hooded, Yellow, Scarlet, Red-capped & Jacky Winter), White-browed and Brown Treecreepers, White-browed Babbler, Sittella, Speckled Warbler, Superb Fairy-wren, Crested Shrike-tit, Grey Shrike-thrush, Golden Whistler, Mistletoebird, White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike and White-plumed Honeyeater were seen. Except for about 8 Flame Robins most others were singles or pairs.

Seen elsewhere were Fan-tailed Cuckoo and Grey Butcherbird plus Noisy Miner, Galah and

Crimson and Eastern Rosellas, Kookaburra, White-winged Choughs, Magpies, Weebill, Buff-rumped, Yellow and Striated Thornbills, White-browed and Dusky Woodswallows and Tree Martin.

I reckon that the bush was in surprisingly good condition.

Total species recorded 33

Barry McLean

Heathcote weekend 7 – 9 September 2007

Thirteen MGBOCA members enjoyed a comfortable 2 night stay at Heathcote Country Lodge, others stayed at the caravan park, and we had several day visitors, making a total of 19 participants. Heathcote is a great location for a birding weekend, as it is surrounded by box ironbark forest, and has the Heathcote Greytown National Park on its doorstep.

On previous club visits to the Heathcote area, we have been to Costerfield or Dargile Forest. This time we were fortunate to have local bird expert Tom Smith as our guide each day, and he introduced us to many other birding places around Heathcote. Tom took us to the spot where a pair of Powerful Owls were roosting just south of the town, and another spot to see Diamond Firetails and Red-capped Robins. The firetails nest each year in a small patch of prickly Hakea sericea on the edge of the national park. He showed us a flowering eucalypt in town which was attracting Swift Parrots, and also took us to Mt Ida, Argyle Forest, One-eyed Forest, and Pink Cliffs.

At Argyle Forest and One-eyed Forest we heard Crested Bellbirds, but these birds are notoriously difficult to locate by their calls. We never did find them. We were surprised to find a few Yellow-plumed Honeyeaters at the summit of Mt Ida. For those of interested in plants, there was a moist gully near the base of Mt Ida which had a number of orchids and flowering Rosy Heath Myrtle (Baeckea). We looked everywhere for Speckled Warblers, and finally had success on Sunday afternoon at Dargile Forest. They are often seen on a ridge just east of the town, but not when we visited. It was a lovely shaded spot for a morning walk, with a lot small bush birds – Buff-rumped, Brown, Yellow and Striated Thornbills, Weebill, Sittella, Yellow Robin and White-browed Scrubwren were among those seen.

Tom showed us a small colony of Bell Miners beside a creek just north of Heathcote, where we also saw a Rufous Songlark singing with

gusto as it flew around us. We saw a large number of honeyeaters over the 2 days, but as with many species, they were not plentiful. The countryside is suffering from the continuing dry weather, and few trees were flowering.

Bird list

Wood Duck, Black Duck, White-faced Heron, Brown Goshawk, Collared Sparrowhawk, Masked Lapwing, Common Bronzewing, Crested Pigeon, Galah, Little Corella, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, Musk Lorikeet, Crimson Rosella, Eastern Rosella, Red-rumped Parrot, Swift Parrot, Fan-tailed Cuckoo, Kookaburra, White-throated Treecreeper, Brown Treecreeper, Superb Fairy-wren, Spotted and Striated Pardalote, White-browed Scrubwren, Speckled Warbler, Weebill, Brown Thornbill, Buff-rumped Thornbill, Yellow-rumped Thornbill, Yellow Thornbill, Striated Thornbill, Red Wattlebird, Noisy Miner, Yellow-faced Honeyeater, White-eared Honeyeater, Yellow-tufted Honeyeater, Fuscous Honeyeater, White-plumed Honeyeater, Black-chinned Honeyeater, Brown-headed Honeyeater, New Holland Honeyeater, Eastern Spinebill, Bell Miner, Yellow-plumed Honeyeater, Jacky Winter, Scarlet Robin, Red-capped Robin, Eastern Yellow Robin, Sittella, Golden Whistler, Rufous Whistler, Grey Shrike-thrush, Restless Flycatcher, Magpie-lark, Grey Fantail, Willy Wagtail, Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike, White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike, Olive-backed Oriole, Magpie, White-winged Chough, Little Raven, House Sparrow, Red-browed Finch, Diamond Firetail, Mistletoebird, Welcome Swallow, Rufous Songlark, Silvereye, Blackbird, Starling, Mynah, Crested Bellbird, Powerful Owl

Total species recorded 75

Molyullah 13 October 2007

Eleven lucky birders attended what turned out to be a special day of bush birding. This location was a new one for our branch, and we will return. In the foothill country of Mollyullah, 30km south of Benalla, the grass was still green and birds and flowers were plentiful.

The undisputed highlight of the day was viewing 3 Turquoise Parrots at close quarters feeding on capeweed for half an hour. This South African weed ran amok in northern Victoria in late spring, so it was good to see it has at least has one redeeming attribute. A female Satin Bowerbird was seen close to our lunchspot, having a vocal interaction with a King Parrot. In the afternoon, Barry and Christine located a bower only a few metres

away, so the unusual behaviour became clearer.

White-throated Gerygones were calling throughout our morning walk, and we had splendid views of these attractive birds. As we walked further up a steepish track, we found more and more orchids in the bush. Paul was first to spot a spider orchid, and from then on we saw lots – as well as greenhoods, waxlips, diuris, caladenias and sun orchids. On the lower slopes, there were plenty of Fuscous Honeyeaters and along a creek Yellow-tufted Honeyeaters, Noisy Friarbird and Brown Thornbill. Higher up the ridge, we came across a few Scarlet Robins. We heard a flycatcher, but couldn't see it in the gully below. Was it a Leaden or a Satin? Brown Treecreepers were found in box trees along the roadside, and White-throated Treecreepers at higher elevations in the stringybark forest.

In the open country along the road, we saw Sittellas, Yellow Robin, Rufous Songlarks, Dusky Woodswallows and a Horsefield's Bronze-Cuckoo perched on a fence. A pair of Jacky Winters was nesting in the forest edge.

Bird list

Wood Duck, Straw-necked Ibis, Common Bronzewing, Galah, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, King Parrot, Crimson Rosella, Eastern Rosella, Turquoise Parrot, Horsefield's Bronze-Cuckoo, Kookaburra, Sacred Kingfisher, Rainbow Bee-eater, White-throated Treecreeper, Brown Treecreeper, Superb Fairy-wren, Striated Pardalote, Spotted Pardalote, Weebill, White-throated Gerygone, Brown Thornbill, Buff-rumped Thornbill, Striated Thornbill, Red Wattlebird, Noisy Friarbird (reported by Christine who saw it at the creek on her way home), Yellow-faced, Yellow-tufted, Fuscous & Brown-headed Honeyeaters, Jacky Winter, Scarlet Robin, Eastern Yellow Robin, Sittella, Crested Shrike-tit, Golden Whistler, Rufous Whistler, Grey Shrike-thrush, Magpie-lark, Grey Fantail, Willy Wagtail, Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike, Dusky Woodswallow, Magpie, Pied Currawong, Australian Raven, White-winged Chough, Satin Bowerbird, Mistletoebird, Welcome Swallow, Tree Martin, Fairy Martin, Rufous Songlark.

Total species recorded 52

Taggerty 11 November 2007

Eight members met at the Taggerty Hall at 9.30am on Sunday 11 Nov 07 in very pleasant conditions. Lots of talk but not much birding occurred at this location but I did see a pair of

Black-faced Cuckoo Shrikes and eight Straw-necked Ibis fly over.

At 9.45 Bob Tate, our leader for the day, led us a few km to the private property where we were met by the owner Anne. While having a cuppa on the bank of the large dam (Wood Duck, a Hardhead and Masked Lapwing and calling, but invisible, Rufous Whistler!) she gave us a short description of the history of the beautiful and largely revegetated grazing property.

Anne then led us on a walk beside the dam and into a large area of remnant red box and stringybark woodland. Here we learned how invasive the Pines spreading from a plantation (about a km away but not seen) were - and that they could be killed by 'pulling' or cutting them off below the lowest green shoot. A pair of Olive-backed Orioles were calling nearby and then gave us all good views, moving around above us in the top branches of the trees. The Leaden Flycatcher that Kathy could hear in the distance also approached and came into view. Large numbers of several species of orchids were also found in the woodland.

We completed a loop back to the cars, were joined by Lorraine and enjoyed lunch and discussion in the shade beside the dam - most of us finally saw a Rufous Whistler too!

After lunch we left Anne to get some work done and followed Bob to Acheron, for a walk along the bank of the Acheron River to where it joins the Goulburn (I think). Anyway it was a lovely spot with great old trees along the remains of the old highway. Here we found an active Yellow-rumped Thornbill nest, another pair of Leaden Flycatchers, several Clamorous Reed-Warblers, a cluster of Grey Fantails and a Blackbird and House Sparrow. We also had afternoon tea on the grass outside the (renovated) Hall, where during Bird Call we were entertained by a tiny bat which flew around near us, before hiding behind the architrave of the door of the hall.

Finally most of us again followed Bob towards Alexandra for a quick look at The Breakaway, where the river changed its course early last century.

Bird List

Aust Wood Duck, Black Duck, Chestnut Teal, Hardhead, Wedge-tailed Eagle, Masked Lapwing, Crested Pigeon, Galah, Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, Crimson Rosella, Shining Bronze-Cuckoo, Laughing Kookaburra, Sacred Kingfisher, White-throated Tree-creeper, Superb Fairy-wren, Spotted Pardalote

Striated Pardalote, White-throated Gerygone, Brown Thornbill, Buff-rumped Thornbill, Yellow Thornbill, Red Wattlebird, Yellow-faced Honeyeater, New Holland Honeyeater, Eastern Yellow Robin, Rufous Whistler, Grey Shrike-thrush, Leaden Flycatcher, Grey Fantail, Olive-backed Oriole, Magpie, Pied Currawong, Satin Bowerbird, House Sparrow, Red-browed Finch, Mistletoebird, Welcome Swallow, Clamorous Reed-Warbler, Silvereye, Common Blackbird, Common Starling

Total species recorded 41

Barry McLean

Cussen Park, Tatura 8 December 2007

Our 9am start proved to be a great idea, as we completed our walks in the cool of the morning. There were 21 people at our final outing for the year, including Eric from Yarra Valley Branch, and Bruce, an American vet who is working in Shepparton for a few months, and who came with his wife Melissa and young son Parker.

As Gary's conservation report on p3 mentioned, wetlands are great bird refuges in dry weather, and you never know what species may turn up. It was lovely to see 2 Glossy Ibis feeding in the shallows, their plumage a stunning bronze-green in the bright sunlight. The early arrivals had close views of an Australian Spotted Crake feeding in the shallows close to the rotunda. Later on we had more distant views of a Spotless Crake in the eastern area of the wetland, where a Marsh Sandpiper was feeding close to shore, and we flushed several Latham's Snipe from the reed bed. Paul glimpsed a godwit which flew off and wasn't seen again. Three young Willie Wagtails were almost bursting out of their nest in a sapling beside the track. There were a few Musk Lorikeets and Little Lorikeets feeding in flowering eucalypts, as well as Red Wattlebirds, Blue-faced Honeyeaters and the ever present Noisy Miners. We recorded a pair of Cockatiels flying overhead, a new species for the Cussen Park bird list.

On a sad note, we were appalled to learn that Bruce's car window had been smashed while we were away birding, and his family lost valuables such as passports, credit cards, a camera and MP3 player. As a club, we've never had any trouble on our many visits to Cussen Park, and it was an awful experience for our American visitors.

Total species recorded 62