

The Babbler



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

No. 26, January 2009

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MGBOCA programme for 2009

Our programme for 2009 is included with this newsletter. It has also been loaded on the new MGBOCA website www.vicnet.net.au/~mgboca (see below).

Our first outing is to Reedy Swamp at Shepparton on Saturday 7 February. The birding here has been good in recent months, as the swamp received an environmental flow last year. For those of you who enjoy camping, we will be going to Gluepot in the South Australian mallee for a week in September. Our July outing to private property at Bailieston is a new venue for our branch and should provide a great day of bush birding.

Remember that outings are automatically cancelled on days of total fire ban. Please also note that during daylight savings our outings will start at 9am, then move to a 10am start for the cooler part of the year.

New Babbler logo for new MGBOCA website

We are grateful to Kath, Joan and Graham for their contribution towards our new website and its new logo. Artist and author Joan Semmens from Alexandra has drawn the Grey-crowned Babblers at the top of this page. Her drawing also features in the Murray Goulburn Branch logo on our recently loaded website.

Kath Tripp carried out most of the work in designing the website. Unfortunately for us she has recently moved from the district, so we are pleased that Graham Boast has agreed to

take over the project, loading the website and managing it on our behalf.

Graham is looking for input from members, so if you have any bird photos, stories of favourite birding spots, special bird sightings or any other information of interest, please email Graham at solution@shepparton.net.au.

Our website address is www.vicnet.net.au/~mgboca

TRAVELLING BIRDERS

We have 2 trip reports in this issue of the Babbler. Don and Anita Roberts flew to the Northern Territory for the first time last June, a great boon to Don's growing bird list. And in July Paul Chick drove to Far North Queensland before heading to Cunnamulla in the south west of the state for some wonderful birding.

Darwin and Kakadu June 2008

We arrived in Darwin at midnight, it was a warm 22, it was clear to the taxi driver we were from down south wearing winter clothing. He said "Are you from Sydney or Melbourne?" as we entered his vehicle at the airport.

My first spot of birding was along The Esplanade in Darwin CBD. Bicentennial Park is between this street and the ocean. ORANGE-FOOTED SCRUB FOWL were wandering around the lawns as if they were domestic fowl. They were more wary in natural areas, other birds present were WHITE-GAPED HONEYEATER, Brown Honeyeater, Masked

Plovers, Peaceful Dove, Bar-shouldered Dove, Black Kite, Brahminy Kite, Rainbow Lorikeet, Varied Triller, Figbird of which the male had a beautiful lemon-yellow breast, and dozens of White-breasted Wood-swallows flying over the park and Darwin City, as do Black Kites.

Lee Point and Buffalo Creek

Just on the Northern edge of Darwin suburbia is Lee Point and Buffalo Creek. Not much at Lee Point, a single Little Egret, running every which way after prey, and lots of Black kites sitting on the beach. Buffalo Creek estuary, mangroves and monsoon forest were much more productive. Pelican, Striated Heron and Eastern Reef Egret (grey morph), Whistling Kite, Azure Kingfisher, Mangrove Gerygone were observed at the boat ramp.

Into the mangroves, low down amongst the protruding roots was a pair of SHINING FLYCATCHER, the male's great but the female is even better. Other mangrove species were RED-HEADED HONEYEATER, NORTHERN FANTAIL, GREY WHISTLER and Varied Triller. A short walk into the Monsoon Forest produced a BLACK BUTCHERBIRD, YELLOW ORIOLE, Striated Pardalote, a pair of GREEN-BACKED GERYGONE, and a pair of Yellow-footed Scrubfowl near their mound.

East Point

East Point was well worth a visit; many habitats, coastal, mangrove, grassland and monsoon forests. There is a Monsoon Forest Walk. Greeting us at the car-park was a pair of Bush Stone-Curlew. Into the walk a large Friarbird the HELMETED which was being shadowed by a Black Butcherbird. Whilst watching an ARAFURA FANTAIL, a RAINBOW PITTA appeared on the edge of the track, it slowly moved into the scrub allowing great views. The East Point Mangrove boardwalk makes birding easy for this habitat. Present were RUFIOUS-BANDED HONEYEATER, Little Friarbird, Spangled Drongo, LEMON-BELLIED FLYCATCHER, Grey Whistler and the LARGE-BILLED FLYCATCHER.

Fogg Dam

Sixty kilometres east of Darwin is Fogg Dam, a large wetland, plus a monsoon forest and a monsoon forest boardwalk.

At the wetland we observed, Restless Flycatcher, LITTLE BRONZE-CUCKOO, Lemon-bellied Flycatcher, Australian Reed Warbler, Golden-headed Cisticola, Rufous-banded Honeyeater, CRIMSON FINCH, PIED

HERON, Intermediate Egret, Little Pied Cormorant, GREEN PYGMY-GOOSE, Comb-crested Jacana, Wandering Whistling Duck, Broad-billed Flycatcher, Rainbow Bee-eaters, Australian Darter, Forest Kingfisher, RADJAH SHELDUCK, Black-winged Stilt, Little Black Cormorant, Australasian Grebe, BLACK-NECKED STORK, White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike and the jewel in the crown, the WHITE-BROWED CRAKE walking on a lily pad as if it was a Jacana.

The Monsoon boardwalk begins in the forest and then extends into a Paperbark wetland. Birds seen were Shining Flycatcher, White-throated Honeyeater, Dusky Honeyeater, and heard a Rainbow Pitta. The boardwalk section produced Spangled Drongo, Tawny Grassbird and in flowering Paper-barks a single BAR-BREASTED HONEYEATER.

On the roadsides from Darwin to Fogg Dam I observed Willy Wagtail, Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo, Red-backed Kingfisher and Rufous Songlark.

The Arnhem Highway from Humpty Doo to Kakadu National Park has a number of good birding spots. The first stop was the Adelaide River Bridge, a resort where you can have a boat cruise. I was more interested in the MANGROVE GOLDEN WHISTLER. I observed it just near the bridge, a male. Other birds at the resort were, Little Corella, Crimson Finch and Mangrove Gerygone. Next stop was the Mary River Resort where the Buff-sided Robin has been recorded, no luck, but I did see Spangled Drongo, Pallid Cuckoo, Brown Honeyeater, and GREAT BOWERBIRD.

Kakadu

Onto Kakadu and our lodge at South Alligator River. Hundreds of Little Corellas in the grounds, also White-gaped Honeyeater, Red-winged Parrot, Forest Kingfisher, Blue-winged Kookaburra and many Little Friarbirds. The Gungarre Walk, a circuit of 3.6 km beginning from the lodge, passes by a large billabong and then into a monsoon forest. Birds seen were Black-necked Stork, Radjah Shelduck, Green Pygmy-goose, Black Bittern, White-throated Gerygone, Arafura Fantail, Emerald Dove and Brush Cuckoo.

The Yellow Waters boat cruise had many species I had seen at Fogg Dam. New ones were LITTLE WOODSWALLOW, White-bellied Sea Eagle, Nankeen Night-Heron, Plumed Whistling Duck, Black Duck, Glossy Ibis, Brolga, Rufous Whistler and Australian Pratincole.

On the road back to Darwin we visited Howard Springs Park, a reserve on the outskirts of Darwin, a place to see Little Kingfisher and Rainbow Pitta, didn't see either, but was compensated by having wonderful views of a pair of **LARGE-BILLED GERYGONES**. We also saw a File Snake in the water. It was climbing the wall.

The Darwin Botanical Gardens are a well known spot to see the Rufous Owl, not for me. I spent two days without luck, as was the case for a British birdo, and the next day an American birdwatcher. But I did see a single **PIED IMPERIAL-PIGEON**.

In the eight days on the ground I observed 107 species of which 28 were new to me. N.B. The species in bold type were new for me.

Don Roberts.

Iron Range to Bowra July – August 2008

After reading about a BOCA trip to Iron Range about 15 years ago, and keeping all subsequent articles, I decided after a particularly cold spell to head up there in late July this year. This was to be a solo trip as Irene was occupied with carer duties in Melbourne, so I left with a wish list of 18 Cape York endemic birds as well as 6 possible new birds at Bowra Station, and 3 or 4 at Atherton and Julatten.

There had been much rain on the day I arrived at Blackall and all the caravan parks were inundated with water, so I stayed at a pub for the night which was rather Dickensian, but not too bad. Next day I was confronted with the news that all the dirt roads around Hughendon were closed, so I had to detour via Emerald and Charters Towers. There is over 150 km of single lane road between Charters and Mt Garnet, and as there had been 100mm of rain in some places the sides of the roads were soft, and extreme caution and luck was needed in choosing places to give road trains access to the tarmac.

After taking about a week since leaving home, I arrived at Archer River roadhouse about 3.30 pm, and being unimpressed by the tariff and noisy generator, I decided to press on to Wenlock River about 12 km after the turnoff to Iron Range. I found a delightful camp site by the river edge, and shortly after unpacking noticed a small flock of black-colored birds. A

shriek soon emerged from this group, and I had the No 1 bird on my list, the Palm Cockatoo. I set up my chair by the river and noticed some friar birds and honeyeaters in a paperbark tree, and recorded Green-backed Honeyeater. Shortly after a Square-tailed Kite glided past, so I retired that night with great hopes for the next week.

Next morning, a pair of Trumpet Manucodes dropped in whilst I was preparing breakfast, and soaked up sunshine in a tree above my camp for about 15 minutes. Palm Cockatoos were also moving about close to the river. The road into Iron Range has been subject to upgrading in the last 2 years and is a delight, with numerous creek crossings. I saw a Black-backed Butcherbird during this trip.

Iron Range

I set up at the rainforest camp by the Claudie River, and started birding by the roadside. Pretty soon I met Ian Davies from Colac, and he told me of an Electus Parrot nest tree about 500m away. The female was calling, but didn't show. Magnificent Riflebirds were calling everywhere, but elusive. I saw a juvenile Yellow-legged Flycatcher, and Fairy Gerygone, and good views of the truly gorgeous and approachable White-faced Robin, and Frilled Monarch. Clearly this place was living up to its reputation.

In the afternoon I met Ian again and he drove me down to a spot where he'd seen a Yellow-billed Kingfisher. The bird was calling, and we obtained several good sightings of this spectacular species.

In the afternoon I went to Portland Roads and the underwhelming Chillie Beach. Good place to see Palm Cockatoos though. Red-cheeked Parrots were flying about, but I missed out on the Fawn-breasted Bowerbird. Back at the camp I was very fortunate to obtain good views of a Chestnut-breasted Cuckoo, and a nesting Tawny-breasted Honeyeater. A large red flowered capok tree nearby provided sightings of Brown-backed Honeyeaters most afternoons. I had seen 15 endemics by this stage and declared the trip a success and worth the effort. In the following two days I had good sightings of Electus Parrots and male Red-cheeked Parrot as well as Tropical Scrubwren, and an adult Yellow-legged Flycatcher. Northern Scrub-robin was calling by the road, but no sightings unfortunately.

Whilst driving between Archer River and Coen I disturbed a flock of Golden-shouldered Parrots, and went in search of them. I caught glimpses, then another small flock passed by,

all olive green birds. After two days exploring Lakefield NP, I went on to Cooktown for two days and then to Julatten via the narrow, rough, and in places steep Bloomfield track. The day was remarkable in that I saw two Grey Goshawks, one near Rossville and one at Julatten. No luck there, so I back-tracked to Bowra Station at Cunnamulla.

Bowra Station

I had been here previously five years ago and the whole place had undergone a dramatic change after exceptionally good rain. Brolgas were in the fields beyond the airfield, and a small flock of about ten Ground Cuckoo-Shrike passed by on the entrance road. There were birds everywhere in abundance, a remarkable experience. I visited the stony jumpup that Irene and I spent hours searching in vain the last time. As I stopped the car I noticed a Black Honeyeater calling and within two minutes sighted a female Chestnut-breasted Quail-thrush, and shortly after a male appeared. I received a hot tip from another birder, that the Flock Bronzewing that had been reported on the internet had moved 50 km north of Cunnamulla on the Charleville road. So after obtaining precise details I set out and found the borrow pit beside the road. At exactly the nominated time, 4.30 pm, the first flock came in to drink briefly, followed by larger groups approximately 1000 in total, a once in a lifetime experience.

Back at Bowra I managed to locate several Plum-headed Finches (a bird that had eluded me on the Kimberly trip) in a group of Zebras. Bourke's Parrot, Black Falcon, and Square-tailed Kite were other good birds recorded.

I have briefly mentioned mainly sought after endemics and new birds, but that is only half the story. Raptors were seen in very good numbers, and variety, as were pratincoles, bustards, cockatiels and budgies. The homestead environs at Bowra were particularly impressive, with Crimson Chats, Spotted Bowerbirds, Chestnut-crowned Babblers and the lovely Red-winged Parrots, and Pink Cockatoos.



Pink Cockatoo at Bowra Station (Anne Finlay)

This outback excursion proved to be most rewarding for the opportunity to see birds that are restricted in range, as well as the solitude of remote locations sparsely populated by humans.

Paul Chick

Searching for Bitterns

Birders around Australia have been asked to check their local wetlands for Australasian and Australian Little Bitterns. These are secretive birds, and it is difficult to know how many of them are out there. But with many wetlands drying, and fewer Atlas records in recent times, it is important to get an estimate of their numbers.

A website has been established by Birds Australia to assist people interested in undertaking surveys. Local member Marj Paul recorded the Little Bittern many years ago near Nathalia, and it is her recording that features on the website as well as on the BOCA tapes and CDs. The address is: www.birdsaustralia.com.au/our-projects/bittern-survey.html

The Birds Australia contact is Andrew Silcocks Ph 03 9347 0757. Our branch secretary Don Roberts can also provide further information, as he has been sent an information pack on the project.

News and Activities

A number of our members from **Alexandra** have been involved in a 12 year campaign to protect an area of council land adjacent to Alexandra's McKenzie Flora and Fauna

Reserve. Working as members of the Upper Goulburn Field Naturalists Club, they finally achieved success, when the local council agreed to place a Trust for Nature covenant on the land. In November 2008 an open day was celebrated to proclaim the new reserve.

Earlston Woodland

In October, six of our members conducted a bird survey on a Trust for Nature property at Earlston, on the Dookie - Violet Town Road. Our next survey there will be in May, as part of a branch outing to the property. Participants were impressed with the number and variety of birds recorded, given that 60% of the 146 hectare property is cleared. The Trust has an ongoing management plan to protect and enhance the conservation values of the property.

Robins in the Strathbogies

In November three of our members carried out another survey adjacent to Ben and Olwyn Brook's property in the Strathbogies. The area supports a number of woodland birds, including breeding Scarlet Robins, at the edge of a pine plantation. Ben has been working for some time with the plantation managers to preserve this land which has a substantial native understorey. One highlight was the sight of a Copperhead Snake curled up on the forest floor.

Brolgas near Murchison



Anne Finlay took this photo of a pair of Brolgas with 2 small chicks near Murchison in November 2008.

Otways getaway

For those who would enjoy a quiet few days exploring the Otway Ranges, Benalla members Christine and Peter Holmes have a little cottage (Banleuca Cottage) at Kawarren, 15 km south of Colac. Many lovely birds can be seen from the lounge-room window, as the cottage is located on a three acre bush block.

A 10% discount is available to MGBOCA members. All the details can be viewed at www.otwaysaccommodation.com.au, click Gellibrand, click Banleuca Cottage. Or you can ring Christine or Peter on 5768 2379 for further information.

Reports of outings

Our president Barry McLean is continuing to load reports and bird lists for branch outings on the Eremaea website at www.eremaea.com. Click on our branch link to access the different locations visited and to see a complete bird list for each outing.

Wyuna Sun 6 July 2008

This was a joint outing with Echuca Branch, with over 20 people attending. The morning was spent birding along roadsides in the Wyuna district. We spent time at a well-established roadside revegetation planting, and looking over the fence at a large farm dam and associated earthworks. There were 6 different duck species on the dam, including shoveler, plus Black-fronted and Red-kneed Dotterels. Other species of note were Golden-headed Cisticola, Wedge-tailed Eagle, and 300 Sulphur-crested Cockatoos in a paddock. Total species recorded: 31.

We lunched at Wyuna Bushland Reserve on the banks of the Goulburn River, then enjoyed an afternoon walk through the reserve. Red Gum and Silver Wattle along the river and Grey Box in the adjacent woodland support a significant number of bush birds. 37 species were recorded here, including Red-capped Robin, Varied Sittella, Diamond Firetail, Brown and White-throated Treecreeper and Jacky Winter.

Alexandra & Lake Eildon Sat 16 August 2008

On a cold, showery day, Bob Tait took us to Chinaman's Ford Road, just out of Alexandra, where we looked down from the road on an

extensive wetland area. Not many waterbirds, although we did see a few Chestnut Teal. The bushland along the roadside was quite productive, with Grey Butcherbird, Eastern Yellow Robin, Grey Shrike-thrush, Golden Whistler, Spotted and Striated Pardalotes, Bell Miner and White-throated Treecreeper. Total species recorded: 37.

We then visited Eildon Reservoir, approaching from Fraser Park Road. I had not been to this part of Eildon since the mid 1970's when the reservoir was full, and the contrast with the dam now at only 20 per cent was sobering. You can't see the water from the car park, because so many wattles have sprouted where water once covered the sloping gravel. We spent time looking at an old homestead exposed by the falling water level. We shivered in the cold wind while watching some stunning Flame Robins feeding with Yellow-rumped Thornbills in the open grasslands. There were few birds along the bushland walk back to the cars - a few Brown and Striated Thornbills, Yellow Robin and Crimson Rosellas. Total species recorded: 20

Kathy Costello

Cocoparra National Park, NSW Fri 12 to Sun 14 September 2008

Some of our members had camped at Cocoparra before, but for many it was a new experience. You could tell by the way people straggled into camp as Friday afternoon progressed, after touring the area trying to find the road into the park. The signage is not good. For future reference, the easiest approach is via Yenda, just east of Griffith, but don't travel up the Whitton Stock Route as it is very rough.

Cocoparra National Park comprises a rugged range of hills and gorges surrounded by farmland. The large campground at Woolshed Flat in the north of the park has 2 hybrid toilets, and a large picnic shelter with tables, free gas BBQ's and a water tank.

Springtime is a great time to visit, as many of the plants are flowering, migrating birds have arrived from further north and the weather (in theory) should be comfortable for camping and walking. However, we had a thunderstorm on Saturday afternoon and those who were able to stay on until Tuesday hunkered down during a wild dust storm which lasted all afternoon.

But the birding was worth it all. We enjoyed several walks from camp. Tom found us a Crested Bellbird beside the track as we were

driving to Jack's Creek picnic area. We also visited Store Creek and Mt Bingar. Anne found a few Black Honeyeaters in a patch of flowering tea tree only 100 metres from the campground. Spiny-cheeked and Striped Honeyeaters, Mulga Parrots and Black-eared Cuckoo were also seen close to camp.

Over the weekend we saw a number of Red-capped Robins, Speckled Warblers, Splendid and Variegated Wrens, White-browed Babblers, Western Gerygones and White-winged Trillers. At Mt Bingar some of our group managed to find the elusive Shy Heathwren, and Double-barred Finch was spotted in one of the gorges.



Lookout at Cocoparra (Warwick Finlay)

En route to Cocoparra, a few people stopped briefly north of Jerilderie to see a pair of Painted Finches which were nesting at a roadside stop – a species well outside its usual range, and a new bird for most.

Total species recorded at Cocoparra: 80

Mt Samaria State Park Sat 4 October 2008

Thirteen members and 5 visitors made our first branch visit to Mt Samaria for some years. We approached the park from Swanpool, stopping first at the camping area at the base of the mountain to look around. It was a lovely spot for spring wildflowers and for birds. There were plenty of flowering bush peas, wattles, pink bells and rice flowers. Two male Rufous Whistlers bowed and bobbed, competing for the attention of a female whistler within feet of our group. A Black-chinned Honeyeater was seen low in the canopy. Scarlet Robin, White-eared Honeyeater, Buff-rumped Thornbill and Shining Bronze-cuckoo were other species recorded here.

Half-way up the steep track to the summit, we stopped to look for Spotted Quail-thrush without success, but we had great views of a

pair of Gang Gang Cockatoos feeding quietly in a eucalypt. The dry tussocky hillside changed to lush mountain forest as we reached the plateau, with its massive eucalypts and in places a ferny understorey. We lunched at The Kilns and enjoyed a short walk. Not many birds - a few Yellow-faced Honeyeaters, Eastern Spinebill and Brown Thornbills, and a Lyrebird called not far away. At our next stop, some of our group walked a track to the summit for spectacular views of the region.

An enjoyable day in a lovely setting.
Total species 35

Strathbogie Ranges Sun 9 November 2008

This private property in the hills south of Violet Town was a new venue for our branch. There was a pleasing display of late spring wildflowers in the bushland surrounding Helen Ogilbee's property. A pair of Leaden Flycatchers was located high in the canopy, and were seen feeding young in the nest. We could hear White-throated Gerygones and Sacred Kingfishers calling nearby, and an Olive-backed Oriole was seen working through the trees. A challenging downhill track had several smaller 4WD's on 3 wheels over a large drainage hump as we negotiated our way to Helen's property.

A small creek meandered through open farmland, providing habitat for Superb Fairy-wrens, White-browed Scrubwren, Brown Thornbills and Silvereyes. One area of the property is forested, but the day was warming up, and the steep hill to get there proved too much. Instead, after walking through a well-established eucalypt plantation we returned to the cars and enjoyed a leisurely lunch in the shade while watching Brown Goshawk, Wedge-tailed Eagle, Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike and Crimson Rosellas flying over.

Many thanks to Helen and her sister Marcia for allowing us to visit.
Total species: 35

Cussen Park, Tatura Sat 6 December 2008

Cussen Park is becoming our usual end of year meeting point, with its reliable wetlands, large rotunda and central location for our widely-scattered members. Fifteen of us walked around the wetlands in the morning. Water levels were fairly high, so no migratory waders this visit.

Over 20 Latham's Snipe were seen, mainly flying past us in small groups. A solitary Royal Spoonbill and 2 Black-tailed Native Hens were seen in the middle of the water. It was difficult to tell if the hens were wading or swimming. Pacific Black-duck, Grey Teal, a few Black-winged Stilts, Black-fronted and Red-kneed Dotterels were also present.

Bushland birds added to our list: White-winged Choughs, Musk and Little Lorikeets, Red-rumped Parrots, Blue-faced Honeyeaters and the ever present Noisy Miners. A Striated Pardalote was seen entering a small hollow in a dead tree. A Horsefield's Bronze-cuckoo was heard, and a small flock of White-browed Woodswallows appeared briefly, high overhead.

After lunch in the rotunda, we worked on our programme for 2009, and the keen ones then walked back to find the crane Don had heard during the morning walk. Australian Spotted Crane was found and added to our bird list which reached 59 species by the end of the day.