



CNFN

the
NATURAL NEWS

Spring 2002

Patton - Derris Morris

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Program and Events

Sept. 8, (Note, 2nd Sunday) Travellyn Reserve.

Meet at the Hoo-hoo hut at 9:30. We will be looking at small mammal habitat (and other things of course) in the Travellyn Reserve. We are currently awaiting permits to survey the small mammals there for the Threatened Species Unit. Be early so we can set off from the hut at 9:30.

Sept. 20-22 Federation Weekend Maydena. See Jim for details. Camping or accommodation available.

Oct. 5 & 6, Winfred Curtis Reserve. Arrive anytime after 12 noon on Saturday to stay in Archers Cabin overnight. Bring bedding and food. Or arrive early on Sunday for a walk in the reserve. The cabin is well equipped, but some sleeping on the floor or in a tent outside will probably be necessary if many people attend.

Please inform Jim on 6368 1313 if you want to stay Sat night. The Reserve should be in its full glory, and many rare plants should be in flower.

Oct 13, AGM meeting and meal at Weejena Hall.

Meeting at 5pm followed by amazing Indian cuisine prepared by Mariama Hunter. Please book with Jim or Sarah so we know numbers

Nov. 9&10 Waterhouse State Reserve. Arrive on Saturday to camp overnight, or arrive Sunday and meet at South Croppies Point at 10:30 am.

Memberships were due March 1, 2002.

Once again we have held the rates at \$15 for individuals, \$20 for families and \$5 for independent young adults under 18 yrs. Send to Sarah Lloyd, 999 Denman's Rd Birralee, 7303. If this box is checked, then your membership has not been paid for 2002.

Autumn on King Island.

By Sarah Lloyd

Ros and I made a second visit to King Island in April this year to survey bush birds at the same sites that we visited in spring. As the transects had been set up during the previous visit, we had more time to visit other bird hot spots around the island.

Islands by their very nature are biologically fascinating, so we were anticipating some interesting observations during our autumn visit. Our first moment of great excitement came with the sighting of two Brown Thornbills in the Pogarrah State forest. The Brown Thornbill on King Island is an endemic subspecies and considered to be extremely rare, the last definite sighting being in the 70's. Unlike Tasmania, where the Tasmanian and Brown Thornbills are equally common, the Tasmanian Thornbill dominates all vegetation types on King Island. The two birds can be extremely difficult to tell apart in the field, with the white underparts of the Tasmanian Thornbills being the key identification feature.

A walk along the Yarra Creek Gorge also turned up some interesting sightings. Dry autumn conditions throughout Tasmania and on King Island have meant that the fungi season has been delayed and so far

disappointing. However, we encountered the vegetable caterpillar (*Corydiceps graminis*) under the tall trees near Yarra Creek.

Corydiceps are a group of fungi that parasites insects. After the fungi ramifies the body of the insect (in this case a caterpillar) the fruiting body appears above the ground. If the exposed section (the same size as a finger) is carefully lifted, the whole organism can be collected intact complete with the attached caterpillar – it really is an amazing sight!

After the excitement of the *Corydiceps*, we continued along the creek. A noisy flapping of wings suggested that we had disturbed a large bird, and we soon saw a magnificent adult Nankeen Night Heron. These are rare birds in Tasmania, but are known to breed on King Island.

Similarly, the Nankeen Kestrel is another rare sighting in Tasmania but often seen on King Island. (The name Nankeen comes from a hard-wearing, buff coloured cotton fabric originating in Nanking, China and refers to the colour of these birds.)

The rocky shores north of Currie and the exposed mudflats at the mouth of the Sea Elephant River are a haven for those birds known as migratory waders. They are only seen in the Southern Hemisphere during our summer when they spend their time feeding to replenish their fat reserves in preparation for their long flight back to their breeding grounds in the Arctic Circle.

The names of these birds refer to the colourful plumage they display during their breeding season, so when observed in the Southern Hemisphere they are usually cryptically coloured. Thus the Ruddy Turnstone is not usually ruddy, the Pacific Golden Plover is not golden nor does the Red-Necked Stint have a red neck! But we were in luck! As it was nearing the end of the non-breeding season, these birds were starting to acquire the magnificent colours they don during their breeding season.

The fact that we often heard the Black Currawong (an endemic subspecies) when in Currie belies the fact that these birds, which used to be seen in flocks numbering hundreds of birds fifty years ago, are becoming very rare on the island. We encountered only a dozen birds during our two week stay.

But was the rarest sight of all the stationary propellers of the windmills we saw on Easter Sunday? – It's certainly not something we've experienced before!

Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus funereus*)

(*Calyptorhynchus* – Greek, calyptos = hidden, rhynchus = beak. *Funereus* - Latin = funereal/black.

The Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo is one of the largest resident land birds on King Island. The Cockatoo likes to

nest in hollows high in the eucalypts giving it a relatively small range of options on King Island due to the current lack of nesting hollows. (Eucalypts can take several hundred years to form suitable large hollows.)

Although they usually lay two eggs a year, only one offspring usually survives. On KI it is known to nest in Pegarah State Forest.

Like many birds of the cockatoo family they live long lives of up to fifty years, the presumed longevity of the species may be masking insufficient recruitment of young birds.

Yellow Wattlebird (*Anthochaera paradoxa*)



(*Anthochaera* – Greek word, anthos = flower, chairein = to rejoice. *paradoxa* – Latin, meaning paradoxical)

The Yellow Wattlebird is Australia's largest honeyeater and is found only on King Island and the Tasmanian mainland. Like all other honeyeaters (a group of birds found only in Australia) it has a brush tipped tongue with which it takes nectar from flowers. It supplements its diet with fruit, insects, spiders, honeydew and masts, foraging at every level of the vegetation.

The King Island subspecies was thought to be declining in the 70's, but it seems to have made a recovery and can now be regarded as fairly common throughout the island. The call of the bird is a harsh gurgling, discordant noise, sometimes described as like the sound of a person vomiting.

References:

- Cayley, Neville W. (1968) What Bird is That? Angus and Robertson. Sydney
Garnett, S.T. and Crowley G.M. (2000) The Action Plan for Australian Birds. Environment Australia.

An Odyssey to Nature and Politics

by Jim Nelson

Having now lived over half my life in Australia, I decided it was time I revisited my country of birth, the U.S., to see some places I had missed or in some cases avoided seeing. Bill Bryson is mainly responsible — ever since I read his book *A Walk in the Woods* about the Appalachian trail, I have had this uneasy feeling that the Appalachian Mountains were a natural wonder I needed to see.

I also have a warm appreciation for certain jazz styles, traditional blues music, and even some bluegrass. It is thus difficult to reconcile never having been to the deep South, or to places like New Orleans where these extraordinary musical forms are celebrated close to their birthplace.

So it was that I went to the swamps, the bayous, the cotton and peanut fields, the muddy mouth of the Mississippi River, the cities as well as the people who gave this place a unique voice through music. I needed to see those previously avoided notorious places of the civil rights movement that had so changed my life and feelings for my native country. And of course I tried to see as many reptiles, amphibians, birds, crayfish, plants etc. as possible, so I can bore people with all the photos.

But landing in San Francisco where the National Guards were in battle fatigues, stationed inside the airport with loaded automatic weapons, set the scene of a country suffering paranoia with as much bluff as possible. Once released from the security obsessed airports, the populace evidenced their own fears with a pitiful patriotic frenzy of flying flags in every conceivable place, often accompanied by slogans and lots of grim faces. Thankfully, a few of the grim faces turned out to be a minority of the dubious, who wondered how long their country could continue to bully the world without any kind of self examination.

Shades of the civil rights movement are evident, but where are the leaders to move the country forward from its racist, insular and selfish world view? I immediately thought of the thugs now running Australia (the country I escaped to), who support this evil notion of the 'haves' against the 'have-nots', pledging again to go *all the way* with the U.S.A. and wage war against elusive 'enemies'.

Walt Whitman once wrote a poem addressed to that democratic failure of a president, James Buchanan, (soon to be redeemed by Whitman's

beloved Abraham Lincoln) — reading it 142 years later, what have we learned?

To a President by Walt Whitman

All you are doing and saying is to America dangled mirages,

You have not learn'd of Nature — of the politics of Nature

You have not learn'd the great amplitude, rectitude, impartiality,

You have not seen that only such as they are for these States,

And that what is less than they must sooner or later lift off from these States

If anything could confront the greedy religion of the "latter day consumers" (Bruce Roberts), it might well be contemplation of the Appalachian Mountains. Once as mighty as the Himalayas, these worn down, ancient land forms have much to tell of change, and the wisdom of embracing diversity and richness for survival. They have endured both the cataclysmic events of shifting land masses, and the foolish vandalism/greed of the human species. Today they are beautiful, but unrecognisable from what they were just a short century or two ago, when millions of the mighty American Chestnut ruled as one tree in four, with its huge canopy of shade and its bounty of fruit shaping the order of things. Now they are extinct, brought to the edge of being by human stupidity in introducing disease. So too, the enormous scars of past clear-felling have healed into spectacular forests of immense diversity. Once, not too long ago people even felled giant pecans just to pick the nuts, thus serving to remind us the ugly truth of greed.

Today the Appalachians are treasured and largely protected. The Shenandoah National Park glows with a richness and wonder that is marred only by the vistas to the East, where lies the supreme ugliness of Washington DC, wallowing in filthy sky and a grey, concrete stigma of empire. Further South, the Great Smokey National Park contains an immense amount of the total biodiversity of the entire country, yet sits within view of poverty and degraded countryside.

The Appalachians are a place of joy and tears. They demonstrate the possibilities of healing and endurance, but at the same time give a view of advancing sickness and despair. If we wish, we could learn Whitman's politics of Nature from this place, but 142 years onward it doesn't look very likely.

Back home in Tasmania, I see how lucky we are, and how necessary it is to continue to oppose the forces involved in destroying what is so beautiful and vibrant in the name of greed. A significant journey.

The Robins and Swift Parrots Project.

by Sarah Lloyd

Gone are the days when you could travel along almost any country road in the state and encounter a red-breasted Robin sitting on a fence post. Anecdotal evidence from landowners and birdwatchers suggests that these enduring birds have suffered substantial declines in the past ten years. Over the past three years of the New Atlas project, conducted by Birds Australia, Flame Robins have been seen with less than half the frequency that they were during the first Atlas. (Wingspan Dec 2001) And although not considered as under immediate threat, they are now listed in the Action Plan for Australian Birds. (Gamett and Crowley 2000)

Land clearing and logging, the intensification of farming with increased chemical use, the establishment of plantations on rough pasture, and suburban sprawl on the outskirts of cities and towns may be just some of the reasons for the decline in numbers.

Tasmania is home to four species of Robin. Three species, the Flame, Scarlet and Pink Robins have brightly coloured male birds that are reasonably easy to identify. The plain Dusky Robin is a Tasmanian endemic and with a little practice and ear training can be distinguished from the females of the other species.

Robins, it seems, have complex requirements when it comes to breeding and post breeding habitats. Flame and Scarlet Robins occasionally occur together, but the Flame generally prefers wetter forests than the Scarlet. Pink Robins breed in wet gullies, but like the other two species, move into drier areas after breeding. There is little information about the movements of Dusky Robins. (Blakers et al 1984)

The Swift Parrot, now listed as endangered, (Action Plan 2000) also has complex seasonal

movements. A highly specialised bird, it breeds only in Tasmania where Tasmanian Blue Gums *Eucalyptus globulus* occur, its breeding success being highly dependent on a simultaneously good flowering of this tree. It is the third rarest parrot in Australia and has the longest known migratory movement of any parrot species in the world, travelling 400 km to spend autumn and winter on the mainland. (Wingspan 2002) This season there is widespread flowering of White gum *Eucalyptus viminalis*, and Swift Parrots may be moving into areas where they are not usually seen. Despite their rarity, these birds are opportunistic feeders and so are often seen in the parks and gardens of our cities and towns.

It is envisaged that by involving both experienced and occasional birdwatchers, this project will gather valuable information about the breeding needs, habitat requirements and movements of a group of easily recognised bush birds. As well, it is intended that the project will inform and educate members of the general public about our unique bird life through organisations such as Landcare, Field Naturalists and School for Seniors.

There is already a small network of interested participants covering areas such as Maria Island, the dry eucalypt woodlands near Hobart, Table Cape, Birrallee and the foothills of Mount Roland. If you live in a rural area, regularly visit places frequented by these birds or are interested in contributing one-off sightings to this project,

please contact:

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References:

- Blakers, M. Davies, S.J.J.F. and Reilly, P.N. (1984) The Atlas of Australian Birds. RACU and Melbourne University Press Melbourne.
Gamett, S. T. and Crowley G.M (2000) The Action Plan for Australian Birds. Environment Australia.
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Scarlet Robin