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ADVENTURES IN NEW GUINEA: A DREAM FULFILLED? - *Richard Donaghey*

LAUNCESTON ENVIRONMENT CENTRE - *Peter Sims*

A CREED FOR NATURALISTS - *Ellis Troughton*

SUGAR GLIDERS - *Sarah Lloyd*

Immature Blue-grey Robin at Camp 12, Huon Peninsula, PNG. (Photos: David Bryden)

## Adventures in New Guinea: a dream fulfilled?

*Richard Donaghey*

I worked in Papua New Guinea as a 'didiman' (agricultural extension officer) for four years from 1966-69 and fell in love with its people and land, especially the birds and high mountains. So when Carol and I began studying the breeding behaviour of Australasian robins at Gluepot, South Australia in 2001 and 2002 I cherished the dream of returning to New Guinea to study robins.

### *Fauna of Papua New Guinea*

Thanks to David Attenborough's movies, mention of New Guinea conjures up images of spectacular birds of paradise with exaggerated plumes and displays, and of bowerbirds that build elaborate huts decorated with brightly coloured display objects. Biologically New

Guinea is part of Australia and was connected by a land bridge across Torres Strait up to 10 000 years ago. New Guinea has a diverse group of mammals, especially marsupials, and is the centre of diversity for tree kangaroos. Today the lowland rainforest of Cape York Peninsula shares some extraordinary bird species with New Guinea such as Southern Cassowary, two species of birds of paradise (Magnificent Riflebird and Trumpet Manucode), Fawn-breasted Bowerbird, Palm Cockatoo, Eclectus Parrot, Red-checked Parrot, Red-bellied Pitta, White-faced Robin, Yellow-legged-Flycatcher and many others. New Guinea and Australia share similar bird families and both landmasses are dominated by parrots, pigeons and aggressive honeyeaters. Compared to Australia, New Guinea has more species of megapodes,



Dining kitchen hut and cabin, Keki Lodge, Adelbert Ranges. (Photo Richard Donaghey)



Banded Yellow Robin at Keki Forest, Adelbert Ranges. (Photo David Bryden)

pigeons, cuckoos, owlet-nightjars, kingfishers, cuckoo-shrikes, fantails, whistlers and robins but slightly fewer species of parrots and honeyeaters. New Guinea also has poisonous pitohuis and the poisonous Blue-capped Ifrit. Three avian families endemic to New Guinea are sarinbirds (split from birds of paradise), berrypeckers and painted berrypeckers. Based on recent molecular studies another four endemic families are the enigmatic Wattled Ploughbill, the Mottled Whistler and the Blue-capped Ifrit each placed in separate monotypic families; and the two *Melampittas* constitute a new family.

### *Mt Hagen*

Even though I'd been thinking about New Guinea robins for many years it wasn't until I recovered from cancer in 2010 that I decided to return as it was now or never. So in October-November 2011 I travelled alone to Papua New

Guinea (PNG) and stayed at Kumul Lodge on the slopes of Mt Hagen at 2800 m above sea level (asl) for seven weeks studying high mountain robins. Throughout the incubation and nestling periods I watched nests of the endemic White-winged Robin *Peneothello nigillata*. This was the first nesting biology study of a New Guinea robin. I discovered that the female alone incubates the single egg but her mate feeds her during the incubation period and also while she broods the young. The dawn song of the male is a rich assemblage of notes far more complex than previously described and is sustained for 20–30 minutes. At one nest I was very fortunate to be in the hide when the egg hatched in the mid-morning. The female removed the two half egg shells, returned to the nest to brood the young and then the male burst forth with his dawn song. Male song functions to advertise territory and attract mates. Birds aren't supposed to have emotions but on this occasion the male song seemed to be a song of

joy. The added bonus of staying at Kumul Lodge was exquisite views of birds of paradise (BOP) including the male Ribbon-tailed *Astrapia* with white ribbon-like tail feathers up to a metre long that undulate in flight and the gorgeous male Crested Satinbird with deep orange upperparts and black underparts that tapped on the window of my room. Another visitor to the Lodge was the legendary Brown Sicklebill that makes an amazing call so like a machine-gun that on the Kokoda Track Japanese soldiers thought they were surrounded by Australian snipers.

### *Arfak Mountains*

In October-November of the following year I decided to go the fabled Arfak Mountains, an isolated range in the Vogelkop (Bird's Head) in the far west of West Papua, Indonesia. New Guinea has 19 endemic species of robins and of these, 16 occur in the Arfaks, including the endemic Smoky Robin *Peneothello cryptoleuca* and the near endemic Green-backed Robin *Pachycephalopsis battamensis*. Rather than stay home and work on the farm Carol decided to come so we, along with Hazel Britton, joined Papuan Expeditions on a bird tour to West Papua Province. In addition to robins another attraction or distraction of the Arfaks was three endemic BOP including the dancing ballerina Western Parotia and the amazing Vogelkop Bowerbird that builds a huge hut bower. Once when we were climbing a ridge searching for Smoky Robins we stopped for lunch near a bower of the Vogelkop Bowerbird and discarded the orange skins of passionfruit. On our return I looked at the bower and there were our passionfruit skins in a neat pile inside the bower hut. What an aesthetic artistic sense, the passionfruit were a prized ornament.

The tour finished in the Arfaks so Carol and I stayed on in the mountains for another 16 days studying robins. Accommodation was pretty

basic, a bush hut with a rough floor, leaky roof and a pit toilet. Our stay was far too short for robin research but I recorded the vocalisations of many robins, described the nest and egg of the Green-backed Robin for the first time and spent many hours watching nests of Black Monarch and Black Fantail.

### *Where next?*

It was by no means certain where to study robins next, but it had to be in 2014 because time was running out and it had to be PNG because I could travel there on a tourist visa and stay up to 60 days unlike West Papua where a visa only lasts for 30 days. A few years ago David Bishop and Professor Jared Diamond suggested a good place to study low-mountain robins might be a village in the remote northern Adelbert Mountains and in the Huon Peninsula for mid-montane robins absent from the Adelberts. They accessed villages by helicopter but without a huge research grant this was well beyond my finances. Clearly to keep the dream alive I had to organise an exploratory trip, walk up into these mountains and then select a study area for future research. Early in 2014 a request was sent via university networks inviting volunteers to join me on an exploratory trip for 6-weeks in July-August. I received over 20 applications from mostly young men and women from Australia and New Zealand. I selected David Bryden, a young New Zealander working around Auckland on Kokako, an endangered wattlebird, and the iconic endangered Kakapo and Black Robin further afield. The initial plan was first to go to the remote Keki Lodge in the foothills of the northern Adelberts and try to ascend the summit of the highest mountain (1600 m asl). The next stage of the journey was to fly from Madang to Lae and then fly with North Coast Aviation (NCA) to the village of Wasu on the north coast of the Huon Peninsula. Then we would fly to Tari, a gateway to Mt Sisa

the only known locality in PNG of the Green-backed Robin.

*'Land of the unexpected'*

Compared to the comforts of Australia, field ornithology in New Guinea, 'the land of the unexpected' is daunting, physically demanding and expensive. During the months of preparation preceding our journey, PNG lived up to its reputation with regard to logistics and communication. Internet and emails are unreliable particularly when trying to book airlines like NCA so you need to contact people directly by cell phone. Fortunately thanks to a local ophthalmologist in the northwest coast who used to live in Madang I was able to contact the Keki lodge owner, Moyang, in this

manner. This was both a blessing and frustration since he wanted thousands of kina in advance to pay for hire of a 4WD vehicle and repair of the road. In reality it was only a wide walking trail and we did get bogged. Wasu is the site where birders go to see BOP<sup>8</sup> endemic to the Huon Peninsula so I booked flights to go there. By great fortune I emailed Lisa Dabeck of the Tree Kangaroo Conservation Program (TKCP) and she said I should go to Sapmunga in the YUS Conservation Area (YUS CA) to access the transect sites established by Bruce Beehler. She also suggested we stay longer than a week since we had to climb up to 2500 m and make many descents of 1000 m. So I phoned/emailed the TKCP in Lae and asked them to book our flights to and from Sapmunga. The Mt Sisa leg of our journey was unknown and a gamble



Male Raggiana Bird-of-paradise, Port Moresby Region, PNG. (Photo David Bryden)

since I knew of no one who had gone there since the Green-backed Robin was collected in PNG in 1985.

David was doing volunteer field research on Kirtland's Warbler in Michigan USA before our trip and I planned to meet him for the first time in Sydney. His luggage was lost in transit but fortunately it turned up the day before I arrived in Sydney. We flew from Sydney direct to Port Moresby and then onto Madang. Our plane skidded on landing at Madang during a stormy evening with lightning flashes illuminating dark skies and this brought back memories of an air crash in October 2011 near Madang in which 28 people died. Next morning Moyang arrived in a 4WD vehicle and after spending hours digging out the bogged vehicle we arrived at his Lodge in the late evening.

Keki Lodge is set in a clearing at 850 m asl looking down on hill forest. For the next 8 days we explored Moyang's forest. Eventually we had good views of the rare, lovely Banded Yellow Robin *Poecilodryas placens*, a new bird for me and the robin I most wanted to observe. It has a very patchy distribution and is only known from six localities in New Guinea. The nest, egg and nesting season hasn't been described but immatures have been seen in June-July in southern PNG. Moyang didn't know when they bred. The only other member of the robin family we saw at Keki was the Yellow-legged Flycatcher, a hill forest bird, also found in lowland rainforest of Cape York Peninsula. One reason for the restricted and patchy distribution of Banded Yellow Robin may be competitive exclusion by other thicker robins such as *Poecilodryas* robins which were absent at Keki. The Adelbert Mountains are the only home of the legendary Fire-maned or Adelbert Bowerbird only discovered in 1928 by American Rollo Beck but its locality remained a mystery. The late Tom Gilliard, former Curator of Birds at the American Museum of Natural History, failed to find it on his first visit to the

Madang hinterland but then managed to track down Beck's widow and she revealed that it was collected in the Adelbert Mountains. Tom and his wife Margaret, an illustrator, rediscovered the species on an expedition to the Adelberts in 1959. The bower, similar to that of the Regent Bowerbird of eastern Australia, was only discovered in September 1986. Moyang searched for, but didn't find any bowers on our visit. A large spreading fig tree with sparse ripe fruit towered over our cabin so we hoped that it would attract the fruit-eating bowerbird. While I was in the forest looking for robins, Moyang's wife Ruth rushed in to tell me that the male Fire-maned Bowerbird was in the fig tree. The gorgeous male drew my breath away but on another occasion we saw three males foraging in the fig tree at the same time as female bowerbirds, Lesser BOP and other fruit-eating birds such as fruit doves, imperial pigeons and mynas. The Fire-maned Bowerbird, whose nest and egg are undescribed, is surely the most exquisite of all the male bowerbirds. While I was sound recording a shrill mob of Grey Crows I heard and then saw a magnificent New Guinea Harpy-Eagle being pursued through the forest by the crows. Wow! Since our stay at Keki was cut short we didn't have time to walk up to the highest mountain.

#### Lae

After an enjoyable productive stay at Keki Lodge we flew to Lae. It rained for two days there so we were unable to fly to Sappmanga until the third morning. Sappmanga (850 m asl) is the gateway to altitudinal transects set up by Bruce Beehler and others to census birds. The YUS CA was established by local YUS communities in conjunction with the TKCP ([www.treekangaroo.org](http://www.treekangaroo.org)) run by Lisa Dabeck, since village elders wanted the endemic Huon Tree Kangaroo protected for their children and grand children. At Sappmanga we organised

guides and porters and planned our trip for the next 12 days. We soon found out that instead of a single transect from 800 to 3000 m up a ridge there are multiple camps with bush huts on different ridges and to access them requires a lot of going up and down on steep, slippery trails. Our focus was mid-mountain robins, mainly found from 1500-2500 m asl so we wanted to visit different camps at varying altitudes. From Sapmanga we climbed down and up to the next village Gomdan then next day walked more than 1000 m up, down and up to camp 12 in a small clearing at the forest edge at an altitude of 2300 m. We camped here in tents for 4 days and explored the trails mostly up to 2600 m but also down to 2200 m. Common robins included Lesser Ground, Slaty or Blue-grey, Ashy (also called Black-capped), Canary Flyrobin and the uncommon Black-throated but not the rarer Garnet Robin. Also at this altitude we found one of two endemic honeyeaters, the Common Spangled, and the endemic Huon *Astrapia* (a BOP). We saw the endemic Emperor BOP lower down. We then walked down to camp 11 for two nights then back up to camp 12. We decided to descend 1000 m to Sombom camp at 1500 m and camp there for 3 nights. Here we saw no new robin species but had good views of both male and female endemic Wahnes's Parotia but it was too early for much court display. We had a flight booked to Tari on 30 July so reluctantly climbed up 1000 m back to camp 12, then descended 1000 m to Gomdan in a single day. As it turned out we couldn't fly to Lae for 3 days so missed our flight to Tari. The YUS trip was special because we got to meet and talk to village community leaders and villagers.

### *Tari*

Tari is the premier location in PNG to see a variety of BOP especially King of Saxony, Blue Bird of Paradise and Black Sicklebill. At

Tari airport I'd arranged to meet Stephen Wari, owner of Warili lodge, so when we arrived I managed to track him down thanks to my cell phone. Stephen said his lodge was being refurbished so he took us to Makara Birdview Lodge up the road from Ambua, the most expensive lodge in the Tari area. We planned to stay 2-3 days at Tari so as to arrange transport to Mt Sisa. One of the staff at Makara said his father was a priest near Sisa and this territory was hostile to the Hula people of Tari. We had a slim chance of getting transport but this evaporated when clan warfare erupted between Stephen Wari's clan and another. Stephen insisted we camp in his forest with his nephew Luke for a few days. Every day we climbed up, down and up to a beautiful forested ridge with tall ancient conifers. Here we had excellent views of special birds of paradise such as Blue BOP, Black Sicklebill and Lawes Parotia. When we emerged from the forest we found out that Stephen's son and sister had been killed and Stephen's mob relocated to Mendi so we decided to camp at Tari Gap for three nights before flying back to Port Moresby. In the forests around Tari Gap at 3000 m we observed the uncommon Black-throated Robin and also the White-winged Robin and Canary Flyrobin. While we were exploring the forests at Tari with Luke he took almost every opportunity to hunt possums and rats and threw sticks at a tiny newly fledged honeyeater. Even though Luke worked at Makara Lodge as a bird guide and in the kitchen his natural instinct and custom was to hunt animals for food. Back at the Lodge we watched a BOP, the Short-tailed Paradigalla, extracting seeds from the long mature inflorescences of *Schefflera*.

### *Port Moresby*

We had a full day at Port Moresby before flying home so we went up to Varirata NP in the foothills behind Moresby. Here we saw



*View from Camp 12, YUS Conservation area, Huon Peninsula, PNG (Photo David Bryden)*





displaying Raggiana BOP, the national bird of PNG, and had good views of many kingfishers including the Brown-headed Paradise, Yellow-billed and Variable Kingfisher but no robins. We also visited the wetlands and fringing savanna woodlands of Pacific Adventist University and the Nature Park which houses birds of paradise and tree kangaroos.

Back home in Tasmania after 6 weeks exploring three mountain ranges and lots of camping and climbing up and down I had to decide whether to return to PNG and if so, where to study robins. Although there were plenty of robins in the Tari forests I decided there was too much human disturbance and it wasn't safe especially for women. The hill

forest around Keki Lodge in the northern Adelberts was a very good site for studying a good population of Banded Yellow Robin but its nesting season was unknown and it would have been difficult studying other robin species up to 1600 m. So I decided the YUS CA was the best place by far to study mid-montane species of robins. The exploratory trip was a dream come true. Not only did I watch birds in three places I had never birded but I got to watch many beautiful birds. All I had to do now was find a volunteer or two who would be willing to spend two months over October to December camping in the bush and studying robins every day.

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## The Launceston Environment Centre

Peter Sims

Recently a small piece in the Launceston *Examiner* (July 22, 2015) marked the closure of the Launceston Environment Centre (LEC) after 41 years of community service. This was a sad reminder of when as President I presented my 6th Annual Report for 2002-03. I recalled the small band of dedicated volunteers, including Secretary Dr John Wilson and Brian O'Byrne as Treasurer, who had been willing to staff the Charles Street office, to manage the many projects, seek funds for new projects, make submissions on State policies and new developments, support local individuals and community groups with heritage and environmental concerns, represent the LEC on numerous committees that dealt with the local environment, heritage and local government planning issues, as well as provided input on the development of the then new Northern Regional Natural Resource Management Association. Helen Jones was for many years volunteer librarian at the LEC and was dedicated to keeping the extensive Library in order.

Funding from the Australian Government Grants to Volunteer Environment and Heritage Organisations (GVEHO), though never secure, enabled the LEC to function with a part-time paid co-ordinator.

Even though the LEC gained tax deductible status with the Australian Taxation Office, this did not provide any additional donations. However, during the years 2002-03, \$400,000 in grants was matched with in-kind support which enabled the engagement of specialists for the completion of many projects.

Since 1997, the LEC had hosted the Launceston Waterwatch program but this ended when funding ceased and the project officers Ruth Mollison and Duane Richardson became redundant. It was Ruth who discovered

a rogue fish *Gambusia holbrooki* during routine monitoring of water in the Tamar Island Wetlands and Rodney Milner was funded to continue the eradication project. This fish from Mexico has an appetite for eggs of frogs and other aquatic life and had the potential to wipe out many of our native threatened species including the Green and Gold Frog (*Litoria naniformis*).

Project officer Sandy Leighton and volunteers undertook studies of threatened invertebrate species at Cataract Gorge (Plomley Trapdoor spider *Migas plumleyi* and a land snail *Psomaditta jungermanniae*). Subsequent funding enabled this work to be progressed with the engagement of zoologist Simon Fearn. In partnership with the Launceston City Council, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Hydro Tasmania and Department of Primary Industry, Water and Environment (DPIWE) Nature Conservation Branch a management plan was developed.



The introduced fish *Gambusia holbrooki* was discovered at the Tamar Island Wetlands during routine monitoring. It eats the eggs of frogs and other aquatic life and has the potential to wipe out native threatened species including the Green and Gold Frog (*Litoria naniformis*).

In the nearby Trevallyn Reserve a team of local experts (Sandy Leighton, Jim Nelson, Sarah Lloyd, Steve Cronin and Simon Fearn) was engaged to undertake field studies over 2 years. This resulted in a report "Trevallyn State Reserve Management Guidelines of Fauna Species of Conservation Significance" that was completed for the Parks & Wildlife Service.

Another successful project was the education and management for three endemic *Engaewa* Burrowing Crayfish that are nationally listed as threatened species. The project was linked to a species recovery project that had been awarded to DPIWE Nature Conservation Branch. Negotiations with Environment Australia resulted in combining the two projects with the LEC administering the combined grant. Following on from Jim Nelson's work, Joanna Lyall administered the Burnie species and Susannah Kenny administered the Lilydale and Scottsdale species including the management of fire on buttongrass, the prime habitat for this local species. LEC staff were involved

with landholders and the community with on-ground rehabilitation works, workshops, a web page and a video production. During site monitoring Jim located at least one new species (yet to be described) which became a star media event and even made the pages of the Launceston newspaper. Leigh Walters, as Land Covenant Officer with the Tasmanian Farmers and Graziers Association, was contracted to undertake discussions with local landowners for possible Covenants and/or the purchasing of land, a project that ensured the conservation of the critical habitat for the Scottsdale species.

Forestry issues were ever present particularly with community concerns about the quality of Launceston's water supply in the upper catchment with extensive clearance of native vegetation in north-eastern Tasmania for plantations.

Of great concern to community health was the burning of firewood in woodheaters within the Launceston city. Linked to this was the approval of plans by the Launceston Council for



This *Engaewa disjuncticus* was found under a *Gubusia grandis* at Black Sugarloaf. It is one of the many species of burrowing crayfish that occurs in Tasmania (Photo S. Lloyd)

a replacement wood fired boiler for the Gunns timber mills, located at Inveresk. Together with the Tasmanian Conservation Trust (TCT), the LEC was successful with an appeal with a condition introduced by 2004 for the reduced particulate emissions from the Gunns wood-fired boiler to meet a new standard 100 microgram/cubic metre.

The LEC participated in the Air Quality Working Group that had statewide stakeholder representation. This group successfully lobbied for the Launceston City Council to introduce Backyard Burning controls with a federally-funded woodheater buyback scheme, overseen by project officer Rosemary Norwood. This was soon followed by the introduction of the State Air Quality Policy.

Through support from the Tamar Region Natural Resource Management Strategy Reference Group Inc the LEC completed a two year Backyard Biodiversity Program to raised community awareness and identify the state of knowledge on biodiversity in the Tamar Region. A free booklet "Gardening for Native Biodiversity" was published that promoted the growing of native plants found in the region.

With support from the George Town Council as well as support from the Australian Maritime College, University of Tasmania and the Queen Victoria Museum, an Envirofund project enabled the preparation of a photo-inventory to document the marine values of the Tamar estuary in the significant Low Head/George Town area. Ben Brown was engaged to steer this project to identify and promote these values to the local community including schools.

Residents of Trevallyn affected by noise emanating from Gunns Ltd industrial operations at Inveresk, were supported with their appeal to the Resource Management and Appeals Tribunal against Launceston City Council's decision to allow for an extension of Gunns operations. With mediation, the source of noise was located and Gunns agreed

to undertake measures to reduce the noise levels. At that time, the State Government then produced a draft Noise Policy.

Jointly representing both the TCT and the LEC as stakeholders, we attended meetings at Cradle Mountain to maintain a watching brief on the upgrading of infrastructure and planned tourism developments in this iconic area.

Mining and mineral exploration activities applications in sensitive conservation areas attracted our attention when as community stakeholders we joined with the TCT and were involved in mediation that was arranged by Mineral Resources Tasmania. As a result most times special precautions were agreed to so as to safeguard the natural and cultural values of the areas under investigation. We attended meetings with iron ore miners and processors at Savage River and Port Latta. Also gold miners at Henty needed a community environmental organisation for then endorsement of their mine rehabilitation plans for the leach residue dam. Utilising the expertise of Horticulturalist John Dudley, he provided advice free-of-charge, which resulted in an amended plan for the implementation of more appropriate restoration methods.

As a regional community organisation the LEC was invited to attend meetings, workshops and discussion groups, make formal submissions, attend public hearings and to front the media on many environmental issues.

In winding up the Launceston Environment Centre, the Board decided to donate the remaining funds of \$10 000 to the Tasmanian Conservation Trust who plan to expand their operations in the north. However, this organisation is also under severe financial pressures to survive in this current very unhelpful political climate.

## A Creed for Nature Lovers (1936)

*Ellis Troughton*

I believe:

That, because the Australian continent fostered all the fascinating furred animals, birds, and flowers that awaited the coming of civilisation, our land must remain their everlasting sanctuary.

That, because the forests and trees supply food and shelter for the birds, and unique marsupials like the Koala, such forests should not be destroyed without adequate reason and due replacement.

That wild flowers should be gathered only with that appreciative care due to living things of exquisite scent and beauty.

That the nests of birds, built with such patient devotion, should never be destroyed in thoughtless curiosity; that their eggs should be left to bring forth lovely feathered songsters; that the rifling of their homes is no less a crime than is theft from our own.

That enjoyment of living plants and animals will provide a more lasting and universal source of pleasure and education than collecting their remains, save in the cause of science, and for exhibitions which increase knowledge and the love of nature.

That we should not destroy living things that are harmless to us, as we hope to avoid harmful things ourselves; that even harmful creatures should be controlled with due regard for their zoological heritage and right to survive.

That any wholesale sacrificing of native animals for monetary gain, in a country so rich in resources of grain, stock, and minerals, is a confession of incompetence and wasteful greed, unworthy of the Australian Commonwealth.

That, because ancient Australian isolation evolved the gentlest and least harmful host of furred animals the world can ever know, they must be conserved with benevolent care and receive adequate sanctuary for their future survival, subject only to the vital economic needs of man.

Ellis Troughton (1893–1974) F.R.Z.S., C.M.Z.S. was curator of Mammals at the Australian Museum, Sydney; Hon. Secretary, Australian Fauna and Flora Conservation Committee of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science; and Member of the Advisory Panel under the Fauna Protection Act of New South Wales.

His creed for nature lovers, prompted by the evidence of the appalling waste of fauna and flora during the brief period of settlement in Australia, was first published in the Australian Museum Magazine in 1936, two years before the 150th Anniversary of colonisation.

It was reprinted in his book *Furred animals of Australia* (first published in 1941)

*'to epitomise the urgent need for a sympathetic, unselfish and constructive approach to the problem of providing adequate protection, sanctuaries and national parks to avert the approaching extinction of many more of the ancient inhabitants of our adopted land.'*

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## Sugar gliders

Sarah Lloyd

In 2015 researchers using remote camera technology 'captured' Sugar Gliders eating females, eggs and chicks of Swift and Orange-bellied Parrots and filmed one at the nest of a Forty-spotted Pardalote. The small marsupials (20 cm from nose to tip of tail) have also been photographed feeding on other cavity nesters including Blue-winged Parrot, Green Rosella, Tree Martin and Striated Pardalote.

The Sugar Glider is widespread on mainland Australia with some debate as to its status in Tasmania. In his book *The Furred animals of Australia* (1957) Ellis Troughton wrote that it was introduced in 1835 but its 'wide distribution [in Tasmania] suggests that it may have been indigenous, and possibly overlooked because of its shy habits'. However, the absence of skeletal remains in subfossil deposits in Tasmania and lack of an Aboriginal name is regarded as further evidence that it was introduced.

Whether indigenous or introduced, the nocturnal Sugar Glider is now widespread in Tasmania. Its common name comes from the abundance of honey, sugar and jam eaten by captive animals and its ability to glide distances of up to 90 meters using the membrane that joins its front and back limbs. In its natural habitat it is omnivorous and opportunistic and has been recorded feeding on invertebrates, acacia gum, the sap of eucalypts, lizards, small birds, nectar, acacia seeds, bird eggs, pollen, fungi and native fruits. Its long front incisors may be for tearing young branches to get at the juicy wood, as suggested by Troughton, or they may be for cutting bark to initiate a sap flow. Wild Sugar Gliders exhibit a 'spit-fire temper' with biting and scratching—certainly not the temperament of the 'excellent pets' they are reputed to be.

Troughton's book (see references p. 14) describes the antics of several pet animals, one with an unusual diet. It rejected insects and honey but favoured cauliflower, chokoes, pumpkin, baked potatoes and arrowroot biscuits dipped in tea – amongst other things. It was often observed killing young mice, 'pouncing with great speed and excitement and nipping them at the back of the head', an aggressive ability he thought enables it to resist attacks from large aggressors in the wild.

Sugar Gliders live in family groups consisting of an adult pair plus several offspring that might stay around for several seasons. They retreat during the day to tree hollows in which they make a nest of leaves. Many generations use the same nest which can develop a strong musky odour.

The Sugar Glider is now implicated in sending threatened species ever closer to the brink of extinction. But should the blame be apportioned instead to those responsible for land management practices that have caused such a reduction in old growth hollow-bearing trees that all cavity nesters are being forced into ever smaller patches of forest?



Sugar Glider (Photo: Lesley Nicholson)

## CNFN Walks and other events

**October 4th – Ulverstone: Goat Island & Reid Street Reserves.** Meet at 10.00 am at the Goat Island Reserve, opposite the Blue Wren Tea Room on the coast road between Ulverstone and Penguin. We will spend the morning observing sea birds and looking at the rock pools and the afternoon in the Reid Street Reserve (see article The Natural News, December 2014).

**November 1 Badger Head.** Philip Milner will lead a walk at one of his favourite places along the Badger Head track. Wildflowers and orchids should be close to their best. Meet at 10.00 at the carpark at the end of Badger Head Road.

**December 6 AGM at John and Lynn Hayward's property at Hawleys' Rd. Weegena.**

Meet at 10.00 for a walk followed by a BBQ lunch at 12.00 (bring food to share). The AGM will start at 1.30. As in previous years we will be voting on an audit exemption.

Hawley's Rd is the 2nd turn to the left after Kelly's Cage Rd. Jim will put tape at the turnoff and at the gate into the property (third turnoff to the right). Drive through the property until you come to the cabin. There is a toilet, running water, cutlery etc at the cabin.

**January 3 Rat's Castle** A great place to see alpine plants, especially cushion plants. Meet at 10.00 at the small carpark at the start of the walking track to Rat's Castle. The turnoff to Rat's Castle is 12 km south of the Pine Lake car park.

### Australian Naturalists' Network Get-together October 2016



The next Australian Naturalists' Network Get-together will be held in Perth, Western Australia from Saturday 1 October until Sunday 9 October 2016. The event will either be held at a venue on the Swan River, 12km south-west of Perth and 7km east of Fremantle or on the Indian Ocean coast 10 km south of Fremantle.



A provisional program for the 2016 event is available but is subject to change. If you are interested in attending please contact the ANN 2016 Committee and the secretary Margaret Larke by email:

ANN16@wanaturalists.org.au and mlarke@inet.net.au

**(This should be done ASAP as expressions of interest were requested by August 1 2015)**

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