

The Natural News

Central North Field Naturalists Inc.

No. 76 ~ August 2020



FLAME ROBIN *PETROICA PHOENICEA* ~ HAZEL BRITTON

BIRD OBSERVATIONS AT 'FEATHERTOP', SUMMER 2019-2020 ~ PHILIP MILNER

FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF MICHAEL SHARLAND AND BRIGADIER HUGH
OFFICER TO THE NORTHERN TERRITORY ~ RICHARD DONAGHEY

Male Flame Robin (Image Barry Baker)

Flame Robin *Petroica phoenicea*—Complexity and Knowledge

Hazel Britton

After a request to highlight a bird of the month for the Birdlife Tasmania (BT) e-news in April, BT member Mike Newman and I wrote a note on Flame Robins, and suggested places where it could be seen this winter. This stimulated a lot of debate about winter flocks in different parts of Tasmania and the composition of adult males and ‘brown birds’ i.e. females and immature birds of both sexes.

Whenever I have questions about birds, my first port of call is HANZAB (full reference below). Volume 6 (2002) includes the Flame Robin, and the authors and editors would have perused every published and unpublished reference up until December 2000. Having noted that they cited 290 references for the Flame Robin, and knowing that there must have been more written in the last 20 years, one has to come to the conclusion that this has been an intensely studied species. Much of what has been written will probably relate to the population living on the Australian mainland but there are no currently recognised subspecies.

My second foray into the literature took me to the commonly used books written on Tasmania’s birds and our field guides, where I found much conflicting views on flocking, migration and habitat. The book I found most interesting was the oldest one in my library on Tasmanian birds. ‘A Handbook of the Birds of Tasmania ...’ by Littler published in 1910. The Preface makes delightful reading and I was surprised by how much was known about the Flame Robin 110 years ago before all the subsequent studies.

The other book I consulted was ‘The Robins & Flycatchers of Australia’ a volume of The National Photographic Index of Australia Wildlife series, and lastly I went through the Tasmanian Bird Reports from the first issue for

any particularly interesting, or records relevant to large winter flocks.

The entries in Field Guides are necessarily short and do not represent the complexity of what is known. I hope that the following notes may help to show a more accurate portrayal of its versatility.

Habitat

The impression is that Flame Robins breed in upland forests and woodland and move to lower altitudes in winter. This is certainly true in part, but in Tasmania at least, the situation is far more complex. It is found in a wide range of habitats during the breeding season from almost sea level to alpine regions. It can be found breeding in various types of forest and woodland including temperate rainforest, heathland, shrubland and around homesteads and farm buildings. In winter it is unlikely to be seen above 400m. (see section under movements/migration)

Plumage

Adult males, females and sometimes immatures are pictured in most field guides. Close views by discerning observers can separate females from young birds of both sexes by the whiteness of the wingbar (and other plumage details when in the hand), but this is not always possible, especially in moving flocks. Personally I usually record them as ‘brown’ Flame Robins, which could mean either adult females, or immature males and females. It has been known for well over 100 years that adult male plumage is not obtained until the spring of the second year. However, there are several references to male birds breeding in brown immature plumage, not the brilliant flame colour



Flame Robin in a cavity nest in a small tree near Bakers Beach Road. (Image Sarah Lloyd)



Female Flame Robin brings food to nestlings in a flower pot at Southport. (Image Sarah Lloyd)

of adult male plumage.

Banding studies in Victoria have shown that a proportion of females have an orange wash to the breast or belly. On 26th July this year a bird was seen at West Ridgley (south of Burnie) in brown plumage with a pale pinkish-rusty wash on breast and belly. It was with three other Flame Robins in brown plumage thought to be two females and an immature bird with buffish wing bar. Two birds at the Queen Victoria Museum in Launceston show some rusty plumage (a bird in female-like plumage had a rusty throat, and a male in brown plumage had orange on throat and upper breast). There are other anomalies that have been reported in plumage from intensive banding studies on the mainland.

Nest Sites

Flame Robins show considerable versatility in choosing nest sites for their cup shaped nests, from ground level (actually below

ground level) to over 8 metres. Some of the natural recorded nest sites include: niche/ ledges in hollow tree trunks and stumps, amongst exposed roots, in sheltered cavities in bank and road cuttings, rock clefts, on top of tree ferns and in forks and branches of trees such as Snow Gums. There are also records of nest sites in posts, tins, and ledges in sheds, carports and verandas. One nest was found on a ledge down a mineshaft c.38 cm below ground and they have even nested between bales of hay.

Movements and Migration

This is the subject of many contradictory reports and probably heated discussions over many years. As early as 1910 Littler remarked 'That this species does not entirely leave the State during winter months for parts of the mainland has now been proved beyond dispute'. Yet Green in 'The fauna of Tasmania – Birds' (1995) writes '...it leaves Tasmania in

autumn and is totally absent from the Island until the following spring'. The overwhelming body of current evidence shows that it does not cross Bass Strait but remains in Tasmania throughout the year.

However, it does form flocks in the post breeding season and those birds breeding at higher elevations move to lower ground. There is a lot of anecdotal information regarding the composition of flocks, with records of flocks almost entirely of adult males at coastal sites in the East and South East, and different ratios of the sexes/age groups in other parts of the State. I could find no definitive records regarding the actual numbers of birds in flocks or of the relative numbers of adult males and 'brown' birds in the Tasmanian Bird Reports from Issue 1 (1971) to the present.

A study by Bill and Els Wakefield, north of Hobart between 2009 and 2014, does have definitive numbers and sex ratios but this information has not yet been published.

There are some records of small numbers recorded in NW Tasmania (such as birds recorded at Albatross Island by Brothers and Davis (1985)) that suggest some movement from mainland Tasmania to offshore islands cannot be entirely ruled out.

Status

There is considerable concern from interested people that the population of Flame Robins has been declining in many parts of Tasmania. Analysis of Birddata recording rates shows considerable declines in areas where there are frequent regular surveys over several years.

Summary

Despite being an intensely studied species over most of its range there are still many gaps in our knowledge of Flame Robins in Tasmania. In order to monitor and understand any

decline in the population we urgently need to gather more information and recruit more people to do surveys.

It is with this aim in mind that CNFN has initiated a project requesting members (and others in the community) to participate in gathering definitive records.

References

- Boles, Walter. 1988. *The Robins and Flycatchers of Australia*. National Photographic Index of Australian Wildlife. Angus & Robertson.
- Green, R.H. 1995. *The fauna of Tasmania – Birds*. Potoroo Publishing, Launceston, Tasmania.
- Higgins, P.J., & J.M. Peter. (Eds) 2002. *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds. Volume 6: Pardalotes to Shrike Thrushes*. Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
- Little, F.M. 1910. *A Handbook of the Birds of Tasmania*. Published by Author, Launceston, Tasmania.
- Tasmanian Bird Reports 1971 to 2018 (No.1 to 39)



Female Flame Robin (Image Sarah Lloyd)

Birds at ‘Feathertop’, Summer 2019-2020

Text and photos Philip Milner

My property at Lower Barrington certainly lived up to its name of ‘Feathertop’ during the extended dry spell between November 2019 and March 2020 when we received some rain. The lack of water in the wider landscape was obvious and I was able to observe the diversity and number of bird species that visited my water bowls—there are some positive aspects to extended dry periods!

I have 6 bird baths visible from the kitchen and dining room windows, 3 at ground level and 3 a little raised. They are all large pot plant saucers except for the deeper one, a wide plastic garden bin for the Little and Yellow Wattlebirds that like to fully immerse themselves.

I had a great opportunity to observe the various species, and to compare their different behaviour and activities, particularly their approach to drinking and bathing. Numerous birds came and went throughout the day, but peak time was usually late in the afternoon from 4pm to at least 6pm. At such peak times it could only be described as ‘bird bath

bedlam’, and the queues at these times were somewhat like the entry gate to a rock concert

The bossy birds such as Little Wattlebirds, New Holland Honeyeaters and Grey Shrike-thrush pushed in while the more timid species held back within nearby shrubbery and low tree branches to await their opportunity.

The Tasmanian Scrubwren always approached discretely through an adjacent clump of reeds (*Juncus* sp.), and the Brown Thornbills and Superb Fairy-wrens, although cocky little birds, usually approached through leafy cover. The wrens and thornbills were quite active bathers and returned a number of times during the day, and a particular Brown Thornbill was observed on more than one occasion doing breast-stroke like laps of the bowl.

Grey Shrike-thrush are vigorous and persistent bathers at any time but particularly during a warm dry summer and topping up the bowls was often necessary after their frequent visits. The other very active bathers were the Yellow-throated and New Holland



Grey Shrike-thrush

Honeyeaters and Eastern Spinebills. The Yellow-throats and Spinebills in particular reminded me of children with their backyard pools as they kept returning many times during the day to jump in!

Other birds had a fairly regular routine and usually appeared once or twice a day. The Black-headed Honeyeaters would usually arrive in a small flock of 4 to 6 around peak afternoon times. They gathered around a bowl to bathe and drink and would remain nearby until they were all satisfied. A pair of Scarlet Robins were regulars and usually arrived together which seems to indicate that they maintain their pair bond year round. They were active bathers, particularly the male, but at times the female would simply perch on the edge of the bowl, lean forward a few times and wet her chest. Currently (July 2020) I have 4 or 5 pairs of Scarlet Robins across the property but I am still trying to confirm that.

The Grey Fantails were always present and seem to have an affinity with water as they often nest in low branchlets overhanging creeks. They do drink and bathe regularly but they spend more time fluttering erratically—as they do—a metre or so above the bowls.

The Beautiful Firetails being seed eaters were regular drinkers but bathed only occasionally. They disappeared from ‘Feathertop’ for about 10 years but returned a few years ago and seem to be breeding residents again

The Dusky Robins and the Yellow-rumped Thornbills have also returned after a similar absence, and both species were occasional visitors to the water baths last summer.

Other species which regularly appeared during the late afternoon included small groups of Silveryeyes, Green Rosellas, Yellow Wattlebirds, Tasmanian Thornbills and Goldfinches. The Green Rosellas enjoyed a good drink but only bathed occasionally.

Some species were observed at the bowls just once or twice during the season including a

female Satin Flycatcher, Crescent Honeyeater (usually a winter resident here), Strong-billed Honeyeater, Olive Whistler, Bassian Thrush, Striated Pardalote and a female Pink Robin. The Pink Robins, Olive Whistler and Bassian Thrush prefer my forest and fern gullies, particularly in the summer, but the single Pink Robin regularly frequents my garden.

Sulphur-crested Cockatoos did not visit my bird baths which is probably fortunate as there are flocks of well over 100 birds in the area. But when we did receive the first autumn rains in March I observed a small flock (10 – 15) of Sulphur Crested Cockatoos in the outer foliage and canopy of one of the bushier Stringybark trees, *Eucalyptus obliqua*. The birds were hanging on with wings outstretched and were tumbling about in the saturated foliage and clearly having a very enjoyable time. The best description of the activity I think is a “flutter bath” and it was great to watch.

The larger birds including the Grey Currawongs, Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos and Forest Ravens tend to water and drink in the horse troughs on the neighbouring property.

What have I learnt?

First and foremost is the importance of providing water for the local birdlife, wherever one lives. It is most important over dry summers but important all year round, and there is little doubt that our birds need all the help we can provide in this time of accelerating and critical habitat loss and climate change.

Bowl Requirements:

– Along with providing the water, birds need to feel safe and secure as they can be vulnerable to predation when they are preoccupied with drinking or bathing. Watering spots can be favourite hunting spots for predators. See habitat requirements.

– Have more than one bird bath so the bossy birds don't restrict access for the more timid species and place them in varying locations to suit different birds or to benefit your observations. I have one bath outside a full length window which provides great opportunities for close observation of the less timid species such as the Grey Shrike-thrush, Yellow-throated Honeyeater and Wrens.

– Have bowls of varying depth to suit different species. Place flattish stones in the bowl to vary the depth and to provide extra footholds.

– Three of my bowls are at ground level and are also used as a water source by pademelons so they need topping up every morning in summer, and cleaning out regularly.

In 35 years I have only observed one snake drinking at a ground level water bowl.

Habitat Requirements:

– A taller open canopied and branched tree above to provide an initial vantage point and lower branches to enable birds to progressively step down securely towards the baths. The lower branches also provide safe spots for birds to dry off and preen. My open canopied *Allocasuarina torulosa* does that job very nicely.

– Fairly clear immediate surrounds of the baths so approaching threats are visible, but with dense cover nearby to retreat to if there is a threat. I have clumps of a reed *Juncus* sp, Matrush *Lomandra longifolia*, Cutting Grass *Gabnia grandis* and the dense mainland form of the shrub *Hibbertia aspera* which the birds of the lower vegetation stratum use regularly.

Providing water for the birds around one's house and garden provides tremendous opportunities for relatively close observations of our local birdlife, wherever one may live. The birds will come to you, rather than you trying to spot and identify them in dense vegetation or in the high canopy of a Eucalypt forest.

I am fortunate to live in the countryside on the edge of wet Eucalypt forest which provides natural habitat for a wide diversity of birds which can be attracted to a water source, particularly in dry seasons, but wherever one lives in Tasmania native birds can be attracted to your garden with water bowls providing the other habitat requirements are addressed.

Growing particular plants in your garden to provide habitat for birds can also increase the diversity of native birds visiting your bird baths but that is a story for another time.



Grey Shrike-thrush and Grey Fantail

Following in the Footsteps of Michael Sharland and Brigadier Hugh Officer to the Northern Territory

Richard Donaghey

When I was nine years old, I first became acquainted with Michael Sharland, the ornithologist and author, when my Cub Leader 'Akela' gave me Michael's book 'Tasmanian Birds'. I was passionate about nature, especially birds, at a very young age. After graduating in Agricultural Science at Sydney University in 1965, I worked in Papua New Guinea as an agricultural extension officer for nearly four years. For the first 18 months I worked on the island of New Britain, but then was transferred to Port Moresby as the Acting Chief Land Settlement Officer. Reading Michael Sharland's book 'A Territory of Birds' published in 1964, instilled the desire to go birding in the Northern Territory. By great fortune, the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (RAOU) was holding its annual Campout in the Northern Territory (NT) for two weeks in July 1967 so

this was the perfect opportunity to go birding there. The Campout began in Darwin, and notable participants included Alan Lendon, Brigadier Hugh Officer, Mark Bonnin, and Ina Watson. Alan was a well-known surgeon from Adelaide, former President of the RAOU, and an extraordinary parrot breeder. As a young boy I bred parrots and finches and was a keen member of a local group, the Junior Parrot and Lovebird Association. It was through this club that I acquired Alan's book 'Australian Parrots in Captivity'. The Brigadier, since retiring from the Army in 1948, spent much time exploring remote areas of Australia, especially the northern half. He wrote several books including 'Australian Honeyeaters' first published in 1964 and 'Australian Flycatchers' published in 1969. This latter book included the robins which were recently assigned to the



Magpie Geese (see page 11 for photo credits)

Australasian robin family (Petroicidae) unrelated to Old World Flycatchers. The Brigadier was a great story-teller so I was fascinated by his birding adventures.

The NT is rich in bird species (nearly 300 species occur in Kakadu NP). A good time to go birding there is in the dry season from May to September. Kakadu NP has 5 bird species endemic to the NT. Some species, restricted largely to the Top End and the Kimberley's, are the Partridge Pigeon, Northern Rosella, Rainbow Pitta, Sandstone Shrike-thrush and the Silver-backed Butcherbird.

We began the 1967 RAOU tour by birding around Darwin. The population of Darwin then was between 20,000 to 30,000 people. Around Darwin we visited the Botanic Gardens, and nearby coasts and bays. Further east we went to Fogg Dam which is renowned for its amazing spectacle of Magpie Goose, other waterfowl and waterbirds such as egrets, herons. In the dry season, hundreds of Magpie Goose and Whistling-Ducks, especially the Wandering, congregate there on the edges of

the shrinking wetlands. The Magpie Goose is a large black and white, primitive, aberrant goose placed in its own family. It breeds in large colonies on inundated floodplains in the wet season. Typically, one male pairs with two genetically related females, all of which incubate the eggs and provide care of the young, such as delivering food, brooding and guarding.

Another highlight in the Top End was my discovery of the gorgeous Rainbow Pitta in monsoon rainforest at East Point. This was my first species of pitta seen in the wild. When I returned to PNG after the Campout, I started to band birds at a rainforest site near Port Moresby and was thrilled to net and band the Hooded Pitta. When I intensively studied bowerbirds in sub-tropical rainforest in north-eastern NSW for three years, I often used to catch Noisy Pittas and find their nests, and later I studied their breeding biology, along with other ground-foraging birds. In the Top End, common gaudy parrots around Darwin included the noisy Red-collared Lorikeet, the brightly coloured Red-winged Parrot and the Varied Lorikeet. The highly-sought after Hooded Parrot, endemic to the NT, and the near-endemic Northern Rosella, were located in the woodlands from Mataranka to Katherine. The Hooded Parrot is one of three 'anthill' parrots, that nest in termite mounds. The other two are the Endangered Golden-shouldered Parrot of Cape York Peninsula, and the extinct Paradise Parrot.

Australian finches seen in the grasslands and fringing wetlands, from the Top End south to Ferguson River, were another highlight. We saw flocks of the lovely Gouldian Finch (both the black-headed and red-headed colour-phases), the Long-tailed Finch, Masked Finch and the Crimson Finch. In the late 1960's these finches were much more common than they are today. Double-barred Finches (race with black rump) were com-



Rainbow Pitta



Double-barred Finch



Red-headed Myzomela

mon. As a young teenager I had the privilege of birding with Alec Chisholm and Keith Hindwood around Doonside west of Sydney and found many Double-barred Finches nesting in Blackthorn *Bursaria spinosa* shrubs in association with wasp nests. In 1955, Hindwood reported that most of these nests were in thorny or prickly shrubs such as Blackthorn (called Prickly Box in Tasmania), and near active nests of paper wasps. Of 51 nests, c. 54% were within 30 cm of wasps' nest, and c. 34% within 33-61 cm.

The brilliant blue adult male Superb Fairy-wren, the only fairy-wren in Tasmania, is a favourite bird for many birdwatchers. In the Top End, the common adult male Red-backed Fairy-wren is black with a red back. In the mangroves around Darwin, we had good views of an elfin gem, the Red-headed Myzomela, a small honeyeater. The only Myzomela species I saw around Sydney on its northward migration, was the beautiful Scarlet Honeyeater with its lovely tinkling song that rises and falls.

Our next destination was the rugged sandstone escarpment of western Arnhem Land. This region was rarely visited by bird watchers, until 1959 when the Brigadier re-discovered three rare bird species, the Banded Fruit-

Dove, the Chestnut-quilled Rock-Pigeon and the White-lined Honeyeater, all endemic to the NT. Michael Sharland, followed by Alan Lendon, visited this area in the early 60s and found these three endemic species in the same gorges as the Brigadier had. The Brigadier and Alan Lendon were participants on the 1967 Campout so we were very fortunate that they could take us to this special place and try to find and observe these rare birds.

We travelled along a rough gravel road past the El Sherana uranium mine site through savanna woodland. The road soon petered out, so to get to the base of the escarpment our young bus driver skilfully weaved the 40-seat bus, backwards and forwards, through open woodland eucalypt saplings. Our quest was to find the above three endemics and the Sandstone Shrike-thrush, all denizens of the 'stone country'. At the base of the escarpment, we waited near a small waterhole and were soon rewarded with views of the Banded Fruit-Dove and the White-lined Honeyeater as they approached the waterhole. We clambered up steep rocky slopes and had good views of the Chestnut-quilled Rock-Pigeon sitting on a ledge, as well as the Sandstone Shrike-thrush.

In the 1960s this area was being opened up

to mining and hunting, but is now protected in the Kakadu NP, thanks to the vision of the late Bob Hawke, Prime Minister from 1983 to 1993. The 1990-91 Cabinet Papers revealed that Bob Hawke, almost single-handedly forced his Cabinet, many of whom wanted to mine the area, to protect the Jawoyn country known as Coronation Hill. This region, Stage 3 of the Kakadu NP was inscribed as World Heritage in 1992.

After the highlight of the escarpment birds, we went to 'Goose Camp' situated near Noulangie. This Camp was a safari camp for hunters of waterfowl. On the Campout, I was astounded by the many thousands

of Magpie Goose resting on the lake-edge, and the gorgeous fly-over of 200 Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos. Fifty years later there are far fewer Magpie Goose, but it is heartening to know that CSIRO and Indigenous people are working together to eliminate the invasive para grass that is displacing the high-energy Wild Rice and Water Chestnut favoured by the Magpie Goose (<https://blog.csiro.au/magpie-geese-return-ethical-ai-indigenous-knowledge/>). After Goose Camp, we travelled south to Alice Springs. On the tour I saw nearly 300 bird species in less than two weeks.

[Ed: the second part of this article with references will appear in TNN #77]



Sandstone Shrike-thrush (below) with White-throated Grasswren



Banded Fruit-Dove

Photo Credits:

Magpie Goose, Rainbow Pita and Double-Barred Finch - JJ Harrison (<https://www.jjharrison.com.au/>) CC BY-SA 4.0

Red-headed Myzomela - MDK572 CC BY-SA 3.0

Sandstone Shrike-thrush - John Gerrard Keulemans - *Novitates Zoologicae*, vol. 13, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=63412795>

Banded Fruit-Dove - Joseph Wolf - *Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London* 1863

Walks and other events

Bring food, water, clothes for all weather, hand lens, binoculars, note book and curiosity
Please note that COVID-19 has delayed organising the full program of walks for the year.
The details will be in the e-news. If you are unable to access the e-news could you please ring
Martha McQueen (63932121) or June Hilder (0424350183) for the details.

Sunday 6 September, Westbury Reserve Meet at the Egmont Reserve Rest Area on the Meander River 4 km north of Westbury on the Birralea Road. (The toilets are in a state of disrepair apparently.) Before we drive to the reserve, Sarah will briefly describe the government's decision to build the Northern Prison on the crown land locally known as the Westbury Reserve. Parking near the reserve is limited and it's a dangerous section of the road so please car pool and take care. One of the reasons for the reservation of the crown land is the presence of the rare blue pincushion *Brunonia australis*. We will be keeping an eye out for this and other species so we can update our species lists. Leader Sarah Lloyd 6396 1380

Sunday 4 October Copper Cove, Narawntapu National Park We will follow the coastal track to the Archers Knob junction (about 2km) and continue along to the eastern end of Bakers Beach (about 1.2km) then follow the coastal track over Little Badgers Head to Copper Cove, a further 1.8km. Meet at the visitor car park. Leader Philip Milner (0417052605) plus one other. Don't forget your parks pass!

Sunday 1 November Forth Valley Bush Nursery, Wilmot Rd, Forth (morning and lunch)
Reid St Reserve, Ulverstone (afternoon). Leaders Shaks Johnson and Hazel Britton. More details in the e-News.



Blue Pincushion *Brunonia australis* flowers in November or December. (Image Philip Milner)

President Bob Read / **Vice-President** Ian Ferris / **Secretary** Peter Lawrence
Treasurer Martha Howell / **Walks coordinator** Martha McQueen
Committee member Philip Milner
Natural News editor Sarah Lloyd / **e-news editor** Rod McQueen
Patrons Dr Peter McQuillan and Jim Nelson