

# Western Australian Bird Notes

Quarterly Newsletter of the WA Group  
Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union

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## FRANKLIN'S GULL IN PERTH

On Monday 22 February Bev Wilcox and I went to Lake Monger after work, partly to escape the heat and partly to see what was there. On Sunday 21st we had seen 12 Red-necked Avocets and a Banded Stilt, which is unusual at Lake Monger in my experience.

While looking through the telescope at an Australian Crake in its usual spot, Bev drew my attention to an unusual bird on the rocky spit which juts out from the island in the south-west corner of the Lake. I looked and became excited because I was sure it was one of those black-headed or hooded gulls with which I had become acquainted from perusing overseas field guides, but I had no idea of the species. The most obvious features of the gull were a partly blackish head (or half hood) against thick white crescents above and below the eye. Later we identified it as a Franklin's Gull *Larus pipixcan* - an adult in non-breeding plumage.

Franklin's Gull is a North American bird which is unusual in that it inhabits and breeds in the prairies rather than on the coast. However, it migrates south to winter on the coasts of Central America and western South America. The Atlas of Australian Birds records four sightings in Australia since 1951. It is also a rare vagrant to South Africa and Europe.

The bird at Lake Monger was seen amongst Silver Gulls but seemed to remain separate from them. This allowed a very good comparison to be made between the species.

Franklin's Gull is slightly but clearly smaller than the Silver Gull. The stance is more horizontal, the head rounder and the neck thicker and much shorter. The legs too are shorter.

The upper parts are darker than the pale grey of the Silver Gull. I called it mid or mid to dark grey but other people said dark or slate grey. The tips of the blackish bill (both upper and lower mandibles) were scarlet as was the gape.

We also heard the bird call a number of times. Wing patterns are important in identifying gulls and that of the Franklin's Gull was seen on Monday but not very well. However, very good views were obtained by several observers of the underwing and upperwing pattern when the bird took flight on Saturday 27 and Sunday 28 February 1988.



The Franklin's Gull with Silver Gulls — Photo by Roger Jaensch

A more detailed description and a full report are being prepared for submission to the RAOU Records Appraisal Committee (Rarities Committee).

As far as is known the gull was last seen on Wednesday 2 March.

I. Standring

## OBSERVATIONS

collated by Rodney Vervest and Roger Jaensch

The following records have been partly vetted and should receive further scrutiny before publication in RAOU Reports or in technical journals. Observers are encouraged to submit copies of field notes with all accounts of unusual sightings. The Atlas of Australian Birds, Serventy and Whittell's Birds of Western Australia and regional lists (e.g. Kimberley, Pilbara, Gascoyne, Eucla) by the W.A. Museum should be useful guides to records that are unusual with respect to distribution or status.

This series mainly covers the period from January 1988 to April 1988. Shire names or the nearest known locality are given in brackets. Where known, the observer is identified by an abbreviation - abbreviations are listed below.

Observations that appear in other articles in this newsletter may not be repeated here.

Please send details of sightings to 'The Observations Officer' at the W.A. Office of the RAOU.

### DOWN SOUTH

**Great Crested Grebe** — 190, 5/3/88, Lake Clifton North (Murray) - MHB

**Darter** — 3, 12/3/88, including recently-fledged young (first breeding record, Eucla Division), at Nambarup Swamps (Esperance) - RJ, RV

**Great Egret** — 75, 20/3/88, L.Gwelup (Metro) - GS

**Little Egret** — 1, 16/1/88, Herdsman L. (Metro) - MaB\*3, 1/3/88, Joondalup L.(Metro)-NH\*3, 14/4/88, Gwelup L. (Metro)-JH\*1, 29/3/88, Blue Gum L. (Metro) - MC

**Rufous Night Heron** — 20+, Spring 87, Bicton: roosting in pine trees - Anon

**Little Bittern** — 1, 2-9/3/88, Monger Lake (Metro) - BW, IS

**Australasian Bittern** — 2, 23/2/88, Star Swamp (Metro): swamp nearly dry.

**Glossy Ibis** — 20, 25/1/88, Herdsman L. (Metro) - BS

**Royal Spoonbill** — 1, 21/3/88, free-flying at Perth Zoo - NH\*1, March 88, Lake Saide (Denmark) - JB

**Yellow-billed Spoonbill** — 40, 28/1/88, Herdsman L.(Metro) - BS\*4, Mortijinup-Nambarup-Mainbenup Lakes (Esperance): rare in Eucla Division - RJ, RV

**Freckled Duck** — 18, 29/1/88, Mortijinup L. (Esperance) - JE\*10, 11/3/88, Namming Lake (Dandaragan) - BBu, ABu\*52, 12/3/88, Barrett-Lennard Lake (Gingin) - BBu, ABu\*20, 12/3/88, Nambarup Sw. (Esperance) - RJ, RV\*1, 26/3/88, lakes at Narrows Interchange (Metro) - DM\*2, 27/3/88, Monger Lake(Metro)-SF, BW, IS\*4, 14/4/88, L.Gwelup (Metro) - JH\*1, 17/4/88, L.Joondalup (Metro) - RAOU excursion

**Osprey** — 1, 2/2/88, Kelmscott (Metro) - GM

**Black Kite** — 1, 13/3/88, Dongara - RS

**Square-tailed Kite** — 1, 7/3/88, Canning Highway, East Fremantle - GS

**White-bellied Sea Eagle** — 1, 5/3/88, Avon River at Northam - JM

**Wedge-tailed Eagle** — 25, 13/2/88, 5 km E. of Naretha (Nullarbor Plain) - WK

**Little Eagle** — 1, 9/3/88, Bentley College (Metro) - EK

**Peregrine Falcon** — 1, 3/4/88, Leach Highway (Melville) - JH

**Malleefowl** — 1, 17/4/88, adjacent Namming Nature Reserve (Dandaragan) - BBu, ABu

**Buff-banded Rail** — 1, 17/3/88, Monger L. (Metro) - BW, IS\*2, 23/1/88, Penguin Island - GS, RD, LD

**Baillon's Crake** — 3, 10/1/88, Forrestdale Lake - RAOU excursion

**Australian Crake** — 1, 21/2/88, Monger L. (Metro) - IS, BW

**Bush Thick-knee** — 3, 3/1/88, Dryandra Forest: 2 adults with one young - SF, AF

**Lesser Golden Plover** — 49, 2/2/88, Rushy Point (Albany) - MN\*200+, 13/3/88, Blackwood Estuary tidal flats - MB

**Hooded Plover** — 350, 13/3/88, Kubitch & Gore Lakes (Esperance): recent unconfirmed report of 750 here - RJ, RV

**Oriental Plover** — 35, 6/1/88, Eyre B.O. - GS

**Black-fronted Plover** — 42, 17/4/88, Namming Lake (Dandaragan) - ABu, BBu\*28, 19/4/88, Blue Gum Lake (Metro) - MC

**Red-necked Avocet** — 1, 12/2/88, L.Bagdad, Rottnest: with two young - MHB\*2750, 2/4/88, Wilson Inlet (Denmark) - MHB

**Eastern Curlew** — 23, 5/3/88, Shell Bay, Lower King River (Albany): probably highest number counted in South by RAOU - DK

**Wood Sandpiper** — 8, 6/3/88, Serpentine River pools near Yalbanerup - PW\*32, 11/3/88, Hurstview L. (Dandaragan) - BBu, ABu\*5, 13/3/88, L.Gwelup (Metro) - GS

**Greenshank** — 62, 11/3/88, Namming Lake (Dandaragan) - BBu, ABu

**Marsh Sandpiper** — 60, 6/2/88, Forrestdale L. (Metro) - DJ\*30+, 10/2/88, Thomsons L. (Metro) - RJ

**Terek Sandpiper** — 2, 5/3/88, Lower King River (Albany) - DK

**Black-tailed Godwit** — 2, 6/3/88, Serpentine River pools near Yalbanerup - PW\*34, 10/3/88, Wilson Inlet (Denmark): probably highest number counted in South by RAOU - LB\*3, 2/4/88, Thomsons L.(Metro) - GMcD

**Great Knot** — 80, 10/3/88, Wilson Inlet - LB

**Pectoral Sandpiper** — 2, 8/3/88, Grasmere L. (Albany) - LB\*1, 14/4/88, Gwelup L. (Metro) - JH

**Long-toed Stint** — 4, 31/1/88, Forrestdale L. (Metro) - DJ\*12, 6/3/88, Serpentine River pools near Yalbanerup - PW\*12, 7/3/88, lake near Marapana Deer Park (Rockingham) - GMcD\*4, 12/3/88, Baylemup L. (Esperance) - RJ, RV\*1, 13/3/88, Thomsons L. (Metro) - GMcD

**Broad-billed Sandpiper** — 1, 23/1/88, Guraga L. (Dandaragan) - BBu, ABu\*1, 8/3/88, Grasmere Lake (Albany) - LB

**Ruff** — 1, 13/3/88, Thomsons L. (Metro) - GMcD

**Arctic Jaeger** — 1, 21/3/88, North Mole, Fremantle - GS\*3, 23/1/88, Penguin Island - GS, RD, LD

**Pomarine Jaeger** — 1, 18/3/88, Cape Naturaliste - GMcD

**Silver Gull** -2040, 6/3/88, Bibra L. (Metro) - DJ

**Kelp Gull** — 1, 5/3/88, Shell Bay, Lower King River (Albany) - DK

**Franklin's Gull** — 1, 22/2-2/3/88, Monger L. (Metro) - IS, BW et al

**Common Tern** — 9, 21/2/88, Ocean Lagoon (near sea wall) at Mandurah - BBa

**Roseate Tern** — 18, 6/3/88, Phillip Point, Rottnest - HF

**Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo** — 200, 16/3/88, near Merredin - RSc

**Regent Parrot** — 18, 6/3/88, Forrest Road, Banjup — DJ  
**Spotted Nightjar** — 1, 12/3/88, Mimegarra Rd. (Dandaragan) — RS

**Fork-tailed Swift** — 36, 12/3/88, Yanchep N.P. — ID\*20, 13/3/88, Wanneroo Hospital — GS\*22, 13/3/88, Dongara — RS\*70+, 13/3/88, travelling N. over Canning Valley, Roleystone — EK\*15, 12/3/88, Eneminga Pool (Dandaragan) — BBU, ABu\*4, 18/3/88, Carine (Metro) — JH\*2, 19/3/88, Port Gregory (Northampton): twos and threes passing overhead all day — JD\*35, 21/3/88, Salter Point (Metro) — BBU\*4, 21/3/88, Cowaramup (Margaret River) — JH\*20, 21/3/88, North Mole, Fremantle — GS\*50-100, 22/3/88, Lower King & Lake Seppings (Albany) — DC, MCL

**White-backed Swallows** — 2, 16/2/88, Maddington (Metro) — RS\*3, 11/4/88, sandpit, Orange Grove (Metro) — JH\*3, 12/4/88, Queens Park (Metro) — JH

**White-winged Triller** — 1, 7/1/88, Canning Valley, Roleystone — EK

**Tawny-crowned Honeyeater** — 1, 2/4/88, Alfred Cove — ?JH or JD

**Red-eared Firetail** — 1, 26/3/88, Canning Dam picnic area — DJ

#### UP NORTH (also see other articles in this issue)

**Streaked Shearwater** — several dozens, mid March, 50 km S. of Steep Point (Zuytdorp Cliffs)\*flocks of 50-100, 6/4/88, 50 km N. of North Island (Abrolhos) — DB

**Glossy Ibis** — 4000, 3/3/88, Parry Lagoons near Wyndham — JMCL

**Black-breasted Buzzard** — 2-4/3/88: 2 at 125 km W. of Fitzroy Crossing; 1 at 46 km N. of Halls Creek; 2 at 70 km N. of Turkey Creek — JMCL

**White-winged Tern** — many flocks, 27-28/3/88, at flooded plains between Pardoo and Anna Plains — JS, HS

**Flock Bronzewing** — 3, 12/4/88, flew beside highway for 500m, between Goldsworthy turnoff and De Grey River — JS, HS

**Fork-tailed Swift** — 350, 27/3/88, 20 km S. of Wyndham — KO

**Chestnut Quail-thrush** — 1, 26/3/88, just N. of Murchison River, near highway — JS, HS

**Red-headed Honeyeater** — 12 and **Bar-breasted Honeyeater** — 16-1/3/88, Wyndham School grounds in flowering *Melaleuca* — KO

#### KEY TO OBSERVER CODES

ABu	-Anne Buchanan	JM	-Jim Masters
AF	-Austin Fincham	JMCL	-Jock McLaren
BBa	-Bryan Barrett	JS	-John Start
BS	-Bob Smith	KO	-Kimberley Observer
BBu	-Bruce Buchanan	LB	-Lola Broadhurst
DB	-David Barton	LD	-Lyn Draper
DC	-Dan Carter	MaB	-Mandy Bamford
DJ	-David James	MB	-Mairee Bougher
DK	-Dot Kingston	MC	-Margery Clegg
DM	-Dusty Millar	MCL	-Michael Clark
EK	-Elizabeth King	MHB	-Mary Bremner
GM	-Greg Marston	MN	-Margaret Nash
GMcD	-Gordon McDonald	NH	-Neil Hamilton
GS	-Geoff Shannon	PW	-Peter Wilmot
HF	-Helen Fredericksen	RD	-Roger Draper
HS	-Helen Start	RJ	-Roger Jaensch
ID	-Ian Davis	RS	-Rod Smith
IS	-Ian Standring	RSc	-Ray Schulz

JB -John Boughey  
JD -Jack Donohoe  
JE -Jack Ewert  
JH -Jack Hunt

RV -Rodney Vervest  
SF -Sandra Fincham  
VP -Vera Patterson  
WK -Wally Klau

## WATER BIRD STUDIES

### THE GREAT DUCK COUNT

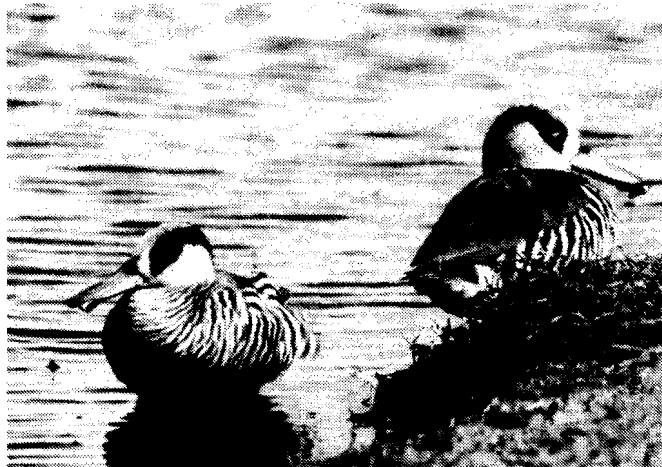
5 - 13 March, 1988

#### PRELIMINARY REPORT

Wetland conditions for the 1988 Count were ideal. Few inland wetlands held water in March 1988 so that waterfowl were concentrated near the coast, close to where most observers live. Dumbleyung Lake was dry (held 40,000 waterfowl last year), as were most other lakes in the Great Southern. There was no widespread rain just prior to the Count, as in 1986, so birds had not dispersed from their summer refuges. Also, few birds would have been lured away from the south-west to other parts of the State because most remote areas received little rain in January-February 1988.

**Participants** — Our thanks are due to the 213 observers who took part in the 1988 Count. We are especially grateful to those who organised groups of observers in their local area, e.g. Williams, Waterloo, Northam, Kalgoorlie.

**Coverage** — Some 1364 wetlands were surveyed in the 1988 Count (increase of 14% from 1987); these included 29 estuaries, 334 lakes and 815+ farm dams. Increases of more than 10% were recorded in the numbers of lower reaches of rivers, river pools and lakes/swamps that were surveyed in 1988 (cf. 1987).



Pink eared duck at Lake Monger — Photo Peel Howden

**Results** — (see table below) The total of 226,500 ducks, swans and coots realised in 1988 was 10% lower than in 1987. There were decreases of more than 15% in numbers counted of each of the Australian Shelduck, Pink-eared Duck, Black Swan and Pacific Black Duck. There was an increase of more than 15% in the number of Maned Duck and smaller increases for the Australasian Shoveler and Grey Teal.

As in previous years, the most abundant species were Grey Teal, Australian Shelduck and Pacific Black Duck (each 30,000+); the least abundant species were Freckled Duck (96), Chestnut Teal (1040) and Hardhead (1350).

Reasons for lower numbers than in 1987 may be the poorer breeding season prior to the 1988 Count, and/or poor survival in the long dry summer of 1987-88. Reasons for higher numbers may include one or more of the following: better coverage in 1988, less dispersal than in 1986 (local rain) or 1987 (inland rain), no official duck shooting season in 1988 or influx from other parts of Australia.

**Key Wetlands** — There were 41 wetlands that each held more than 1000 ducks and swans in the 1988 Count (cf. 40 in 1987); 19 of which were not recognised by this measure of importance in the 1987 or 1986 Counts. Wetlands with highest numbers of ducks and swans in 1988 were Peel-Harvey Estuary (18,000) Gore Lake (8000), S-J Lake near Wannamal (7500), and Wannamal Lake itself (6900). Joondalup and Guraga Lakes held the highest numbers of Eurasian Coots.

**Remote Wetlands** — Most of the 24 remote wetlands surveyed in 1988 were in the Kalgoorlie and Goldfields districts. Grey Teal, Pacific Black Duck, Maned Duck and Eurasian Coot composed most of the total of 6200 waterfowl. The highest numbers of ducks and swans were at Rowles Lagoon (2700) and Swan Lake (2100).

### GOOD BIRDING IN THE 'WET' THE KIMBERLEY WETLANDS, MARCH 1988

Most birdwatchers steer clear of the Kimberley Division during the wet season (December-March), and for good reason! High temperatures and high humidity sap energy by day and there is little relief at night. A few days of monsoonal rain or even a solitary thunder-storm can transform unsealed roads into impassable mud-slides.

There are, however, many rewards for the birdwatcher who is prepared to brave the oppressive climate, to make time during rain periods and to work close to sealed roads. A range of migratory waterbirds and passerines, some of which occur abundantly or only occur in this part of the State, may be encountered in the Kimberley in the Wet. In addition, the spectacular Kimberley landscape is clothed in the green of tall grass and the silver of waterfalls, a lush environment beyond the harsh desert.

I was privileged to visit two of the more accessible parts of the Kimberley on 22-29 March 1988, to assess wetland conditions for a forthcoming expedition. I spent four days at Derby-Camballin, hosted by Jock McLaren, and four days at Kununurra-Wyndham, hosted by Mike and Heather Howell. Despite some heavy rainfall and flooding of the Fitzroy River in December, there had been little monsoonal activity to produce substantial, widespread rain in the south-west Kimberley. Conditions were wetter in the north-east, but rainfall there was also well below average.

During my visit, monsoonal rain fell on six days but mostly at night and in the early morning. Tracks that had become wet dried quickly, so my travel was not greatly restricted. I did, however, remain watchful for showers emanating from the low, swirling clouds.

At the outflow swamp of the Derby Sewage Ponds we saw ten Yellow Wagtails, one in smart breeding plumage of gold, green and blue-grey. Sometimes on mudflat and sometimes in trees, the wagtails gave piercing calls as they flew, typically vanishing from sight. Parties of sleek Barn Swallows and piebald White-winged Terns swept over the bulrush and mudflats.

On the Yeeda Plain my vehicle flushed chestnut-breasted Oriental Plovers and raised the chestnut-lined wings of numerous Oriental Pratincoles, while flocks of Little Curlews spiralled overhead.

At Camballin, LeLievre Swamp was dry but 20,000 ducks, geese, ibis and other waterbirds were crowded around Moulamen Swamp. As the Grey Teal took flight five smaller, pale-winged ducks flew past them with rapid wingbeats and made a crash-landing among some Black-tailed Godwits: the ducks were Garganey *Anas querquedula*, migrants from Asia. To our further surprise, five Freckled Ducks rose with a bevy of Hardheads. Waders swarmed in front of me on the mud and shallows; there were Long-toed Stints (10), Sharp-tailed Sandpipers (1000+), the ever present Oriental Pratincoles and in the flooded grass, noisy Wood and Marsh Sandpipers (150 and 250). Two hundred outstretched Royal Spoonbills flew past purposefully. A jewel-like Yellow Chat perched daintily on a tussock and Barn Swallows whisked over the water.

We also looked at a claypan near 17 Mile Dam. Ten snipe took flight from where there seemed to be none; they were possibly Swinhoe's Snipe, too long-tailed to be Pin-tailed Snipe. Nearby, a Pectoral Sandpiper stood distinct among a variety of other sandpipers.

On the way to Wyndham, Fork-tailed Swifts swept past high rocky crags and two unhurried Square-tailed Kites.

The Parry floodplain, near Wyndham, was not fully inundated but the major swamps, claypans and surrounds were alive with birds. Red-chested Button-quail erupted from shorter grass as we walked on to the blacksoil and Pictorella Mannikins jostled for position in the tall cane. At the water's edge a throng of 6000 Plumed Whistling Duck was noisy in anticipation of an approaching rainstorm. Companies of Little Curlew rose unhappily from their hiding places between chest-high stands of *Sesbania cannabina*. In the water, Garganey seemed to be everywhere: seven pairs or groups totalling 24 birds were recorded. Ten of the Garganey were males, chocolate-fronted with a blazing white eye-stripe. Within rafts of Pink-eared Duck were 37 Freckled Duck; the first record of this rare species at the Parry wetlands.

Jogalong Billabong, a vast shallow swamp thickly vegetated with grass and short rush, held more than 40 Swinhoe's Snipe, scattered throughout. Individuals or groups leapt from the concealing marsh with loud, hoarse calls and flew swiftly away to eventually plunge back into cover. Pairs of Zitting Cisticola flitted from tuft to tuft fanning their white-tipped tails.

Over the eight days I saw 72 waterbird species, 17 of which are known or thought to be migratory. Apart from the enjoyment, the Kimberley offers a challenge to birdwatchers prepared to visit in the Wet. It is probable that species thought to be occasional visitors, such as the Garganey are regular and widespread and that other visitors from Asia remain to be discovered.

R. Jaensch

(The Atlas of Australian Birds, Blakers, M. et al 1984 categorises Garganey as an Uncommon or Vagrant species, and states it is "Accidental to Australia" p.655. Only 9 sightings are recorded since 1951, so that 29 in two locations is a significant event in Australian waterbird sightings. Ed.)

#### WEEKEND RETREAT FOR SALE

2brm asb./iron house with view over permanent lake and nesting colonies. About 2 acres land, part water. In West Gingin, 110 km from Perth. Has well, rain tanks, gas stove, fridge, F/Furn. Owner will ask \$22,500 private sale.

More details from Diane 381 9035, or Mr. Pollard 419 2198.

# 1988 RAOU GREAT DUCK COUNT SOUTH-WESTERN AUSTRALIA

## SUMMARY OF NUMBERS COUNTED 5 - 13 MARCH 1988

Species	Wetland Type (see list below)									Totals for each Species	Remote Wetlands
	A Esty	B Lowr	C Pool	D Lake	E Rsvr	F Dams	G Sewg	H Irig	I Other		
Black Swan	7662	91	126	7556	40	62	0	0	0	15537	439
Freckled Duck	0	0	0	96	0	0	0	0	0	96	0
Australian Shelduck	15836	247	2217	24381	217	4059	86	18	27	47088	353
Pacific Black Duck	3339	3490	3669	18941	397	2917	157	165	131	33206	293
Grey Teal	18533	1288	6150	40038	310	1970	358	25	0	68672	4717
Chestnut Teal	460	34	55	483	0	5	0	0	0	1037	30
Australasian Shoveler	43	75	137	4266	0	12	1	0	0	4534	24
Pink-eared Duck	0	0	100	5918	0	3	0	0	0	6021	124
Hardhead	0	0	39	1293	0	10	0	9	0	1351	0
Maned Duck	177	248	2378	3831	375	6989	120	37	0	14155	268
Blue-billed Duck	8	0	3	1802	0	2	0	0	0	1815	20
Musk Duck	207	3	37	3884	10	105	0	0	0	4246	0
Eurasian Coot	641	1958	1438	19904	361	1221	7	150	0	25680	1304
<b>Totals for each Wetland Type</b>	<b>46906</b>	<b>7434</b>	<b>16349</b>	<b>132393</b>	<b>1710</b>	<b>17355</b>	<b>729</b>	<b>404</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>223438</b>	<b>7572</b>
Unidentified ducks	1938	761	312	24		20				3055	
<b>Total</b>										<b>226493</b>	

Wetland Type	Number surveyed
A - Estuaries	29
B - Permanent lower reaches	25
C - River pools	117
D - Lakes, swamps and marshes	334
E - Water supply reservoirs	17
F - Farm dams	815
G - Sewage ponds	8
H - Irrigation areas	15
I - Other areas	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>1364</b>
	<b>wetlands surveyed</b>

(identified birds)

Total number of ducks, swans, coots	223438
Total number of swans, ducks	197758
Total number of ducks	182221

## EYRE BIRD OBSERVATORY

### WARDENS WANTED — Chance of a Lifetime

Just imagine: your nearest neighbours an hour and a half's drive away, your historic home marked on the map, meeting lots of friendly people, a hundred kilometres of beach to yourself, over 250 species of birds in your backyard and getting paid for the pleasure. You need only to have an interest in birds and the desire to share your enthusiasm with others.

A warden at Eyre Bird Observatory has these special privileges. Two wardens are required. Direct your applications and enquiries to:

Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union,  
Eyre Bird Observatory Management Committee,  
Jan Hill (warden in 1986),  
84 Buxton Street,  
Mt Hawthorn WA 6016,  
Phone: (09) 444 1323.

### Observatory Report

After just one month at Eyre I feel I could write a book on what I have seen as every day brings its rewards.

In mid March we saw a Whiskered Tern 200 m from the Eyre Highway and then on 5 April we added a new bird to the Eyre list - Regent Parrot. There have been movements of Red Wattlebirds, Fork-tailed Swifts, White-faced Honeyeaters, and before long we should see the first Double-banded Plovers of the winter. A beach-washed Green Turtle was a real find. In July the Southern Right Whales should arrive - we still have places on our whale watching course.

In the September springtime we have a Megatwitch for some of Eyre's rare birds with Steve Keeling. Come down and join in. You could even become Warden!

Ian Ashton

## BROOME BIRD OBSERVATORY

Since our arrival from Eyre on 14 March we have not made the progress we had hoped. As a result we still have few facilities at the Observatory. However, by the time this report is published we may be operational at a basic level. Doug Watkins worked hard over a period of some months to get the chalets to the stage where they provided a good standard of camping. We are grateful and indebted to him for his efforts.

However, there are many credits in spite of the initial frustrations. We learned a great deal from a very competent wader group who wielded shovels (for varying lengths of time and varying degrees of efficiency) to help us dig the massive trenches needed for the septic tanks and leach drain. These gaping cavities proved irresistible to many skinks, geckos, burrowing snakes (over 30 of them) and one Western Chestnut Mouse. Local identities have been helpful or have expressed a willingness to help. Ann and Alistair Cuthbert have been of particular value and Paul Foulkes has also made a big contribution. Others are waiting for us to call on them for assistance.

Already we have had some fine bird sightings. With the help of some very good observers 13 Yellow Wagtail were seen at Fall Point on 17 March and four more in Broome a week later. Based on their good breeding plumage and the availability of Bob Svindley's copy of *Birds of Japan* we identified them as the subspecies *simillima*. We have seen a Great Crested Grebe on the pool at the junction of the Highway and Crab Creek Road (18 March and again 25 March), Black Honeyeaters on Crab Creek Road during the week of 13 to 20 March, and 1 Hooded Robin on coastal heath near the abatoirs on 29 March. A common Noddy was seen by Ann Cuthbert on the Coconut Well Lagoon on 2 April and both Least and Great Frigatebirds were seen along 80 Mile Beach during 28 March to 2 April by the Wader Study group. Finally, and perhaps most surprising of all, one Star Finch at the Observatory on 13 April.

We have had good press from the Broome News, the North West Telegraph and also from the ABC reporter Jodi Rogers. The Observatory is becoming known among the locals and we confidently expect good support from the Broome community once they become convinced of the value and role of the strange establishment in the Pindan near Crab Creek.

Nobody will be surprised to know we need help. This has been alluded to in the RAOU Newsletter. We hope the WA group will be to the forefront. We have no desire to weaken the support Eyre Observatory receives from its friends in the West which we would wish to see strengthened and extend. There are enough Sandgropers to supply a strong contingent of Friends for both Observatories.

Our address is: Broome Bird Observatory, Crab Creek Road, Box 1313, Broome WA 6725. We don't expect to be on the telephone for some long time, but we do answer letters. If you are in Broome drive out to see us.

Gail Hooper  
Brice Wells

### BROOME BIRD OBSERVATORY IS NOW 'OPEN FOR BUSINESS'

There are limited facilities but there are beds,  
electricity and food

Contact: Brice Wells,  
Broome Bird Observatory,  
PO Box 1313,  
BROOME WA 6725

or, if urgent, Alastair and Ann Cuthbert (091) 921476

## NOTICES

### APOLOGY

The Editor apologises for the omissions and typing errors in No.45 WA Bird Notes, March 1988. These were a result of computer mishaps outside the control of the Editor.

### CORRECTION

The following corrections should be made to the species recorded in the Twelve Hour Count in November 1987 and printed on page 10 of No.45 of WA Bird Notes, March 1988:

Grey Plover	W (not H)
Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike	H and V (not W)
Scarlet Robin	V (not H)
Grey Shrike-thrush	V (not H)
Variegated Fairy-wren	V (not H)
Red-winged Fairy-wren	V (not H)
Dusky Woodswallow	V (not W)

There was no vetting of species identified during the Twitchathon. It can be seen that both Variegated and Red-winged Fairy-wrens were reported at Helena Valley. This must be regarded as unlikely. Serventy, D.M. and Whittell, H.M. in *Birds of Australia* (1976) state "the two species never mingle, or occur close together" (p.351) and *The Atlas of Australian Birds*, Blakers, M. et al 1984 shows the two species in distinct locations.

### NEW BOOK

The Governor of Western Australia, Professor Gordon Reid, officially launched a new bird book *Birding Sites Around Perth* on 28 April 1988. The book is the outcome of the Metropolitan Bird Survey and is written by Ron Van

## PALLID CUCKOO PROJECT (PCP)

In the March 1988 edition of WA Bird Notes (No. 45) I asked for reports of sightings/calls of Pallid Cuckoo to be sent in. I have already had reports for this year, so it is apparent the Pallid Cuckoo is among us, possibly not in great numbers and not yet calling.

I would remind you therefore to keep a watch for Pallid Cuckoo and to let me know of dates and places of hearings/sightings. Only one report is requested of you from any given locality - the first you see/hear. If birdwatching elsewhere and you again see/hear a Pallid Cuckoo another date/place report would be appreciated.

Please help throw some light on the movement of Pallid Cuckoos in WA by sending your date/place/hearings/sightings to the RAOU Office, my home address (see front of WABN) or telephone my office (09) 350 7060.

B. Buchanan

## MEMBERS CONTRIBUTIONS

### MY GREAT DUCK COUNT — A significant Non-Event

One of the advantages of having a father-in-law who needs a plane to efficiently run his crop harvesting contract operations and enjoys flying is that he is easily convinced that a flight to count ducks is worthwhile.

Last year we flew over 17 lakes marked on the map and discovered only three had water and ducks. Flying at low altitude enabled me to count the birds, but trying to be scribe and observer was too much.

This year I was in luck; we had a visitor from England who happily volunteered to be scribe. Tim Hay is not a birdwatcher, so we spent time preparing our note pads with understandable abbreviations of the duck names I would call out amid the noise of a single engine four seater plane.

Strong winds and thick dust storms the day before we were to take off cast some doubt as to whether or not we could go. Our flight plan involved inspecting over 70 km of river and two major lake systems.

During spring 1987 the lake systems at Moora and on the Coondoroo River supported thousands of birds. We had waded through water 1.2 m deep at Moora to see hundreds of birds with most duck species present. On the Coondoroo River birds were so numerous and the lake system so extensive that we gave up counting as birds in their thousands moved from lake to lake. (Next spring I hope to lead an excursion to do simultaneous counts of the lake system when the birds have settled down.)

Fortunately the wind subsided to tolerable levels and at 7.15 am on Saturday 12th March we took off. Heading downstream (west) from Miling we watched as the broad flat valley that is the Moore River narrowed to a distinct stream bed that cuts its way through the Darling Fault.

Towards Moora river pools were numerous, but no birds! We flew at low altitude to make any ducks that were present move, but they were not there. The most likely reason is salt. With enormous salinity problems upstream and along the Moore River the pools were probably too salty to support ducks.

The next point of interest was the Moora Lakes. They were dry! Where we had waded waist deep in water there was nothing but dry cracked mud.

We kept going up the Coondoroo River to the lakes where the birds were too numerous to count in September 1987. Dry, and no birds. The lake system was more extensive than I had imagined, covering an area at least 4 km in length and 2 km wide, with the whole area dotted with circular lakes of varying diameter. We then turned back across the sandplain country to Miling.

The stories of encroaching desert seemed hellishly true from the air. Paddocks without stubble cover had blown over 100 m into the next paddock, leaving bare subsoil over large areas. It seems impossible for such land to support economic crops—or perhaps it doesn't.

I had enjoyed the flight immensely, but my travelling companion had gone a bit green and was rather disappointed at not seeing a single duck. However, the beauty of birdwatching is that even a nil result is significant. As the ducks were not on the River and lake systems we surveyed, they must have been somewhere else! I hope you found some of them!

I would like to take this opportunity to thank John Lewis for his generous donation of flying time.

R. Van Delft

### BONUS FROM GREAT DUCK COUNT 1988

Near the end of my combined Great Duck Count/Waterbird Survey of Lake Grasmere (Powell) located some 10 km west of Albany, on 8 March 1988 I saw several Red-capped Plovers and Red-necked Stints sheltering behind rocks from the chilly S.E. breeze. I cautiously approached a rock-strewn, exposed sand/mud bar at the western end of the lake to count. Noticing sudden movement about eight metres ahead of me I spotted a stint sized bird standing among the rocks. It was slightly larger than the Red-necked Stints nearby, with a longish black bill slightly down curved at the tip. With total cloud cover preventing the sun shining the legs looked grey. Prominent dark stripes on the crown identified the bird as a Broad-billed Sandpiper. I had seen one of this species in summer 1987 at Wilson Inlet (Denmark) with a flock of Red-necked Stints.

Not wanting to lose sight of the Broad-billed Sandpiper, as I approached carefully I flushed two larger waders that immediately caused me great excitement. With their cryptic colouring they had been well hidden but when flushed they settled only about five metres away enabling me to obtain a good look at their fairly long straight bills, black at the tip with a yellow base. Clearly visible was a heavily streaked breast and yellow/orange legs. Larger than Sharp-tailed Sandpipers they lacked the rufous crown but rich brown feathers could be clearly seen on the face and behind the eye. Eventually they flew off in snipe-like fashion calling as they flew and showing a faint white wing bar. I lost them while retracing my steps but some five minutes later I saw them again, two Pectoral Sandpipers standing in shallow water beside a rock and spasmodically feeding. On the other side of the rock stood a Broad-billed Sandpiper, no doubt the same bird as was seen previously.

Most of the reference books I consulted state that Pectoral Sandpipers favour grassy margins to shallow freshwater. No grass was evident near the Pectoral Sandpipers and it appeared possible that the Broad-billed Sandpiper was accompanying them rather than the Red-necked Stints.

It was an exciting end to an interesting morning's observations. Among numerous other sightings, there were approximately 1800 Grey Teal, 105 Pink-eared Duck, 350 Australian Shelduck, 500 Australasian Shovelers, 18 Yellow-billed Spoonbills, several Spotless Crakes feeding in the open on the exposed margins of clumps of *Typha*, dozens of White-fronted Chats feeding on the drying mud, 725 Red-necked Avocets and 147 Banded Stilts.

The water level in Lake Grasmere was unusually low thus creating suitable conditions for many of my observations, presumably as the result of a very dry Summer.

L.M. Broadhurst

### NOTES FROM DERBY — November/December 1987

With the Wet approaching both flora and fauna are responding to raised humidity. Boabs and coolabahs have fresh growth on bare limbs and baumias sport new tan and lettuce green foliage — a visual, cool relief to the yellow grasses and dust.

The Dollarbird arrived at Derby several weeks ago and also at Christmas Creek, while areas north of Kununurra were a few weeks earlier. The Common Koel started calling on November 24. Two Barn Swallows were sighted on November 21-22 at Derby town and eight at the entrance to Broome on the power lines. Red-collared and Varied Lorikeets screech and eat their way through the mango season, while mainly roosting at Derby Caravan Park. Willie Wagtails are rarely seen now, but many Australian Magpie-larks. The Little Whimbrels have come and gone, and the Little Corella is moving on. The small bush birds are becoming more evident in town gardens, probably

