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Contents

Editorial
Corella Contents Volume 40(2)
2017 ABSA Conference and AGM
Funding Applications Sought
Subscription Update
Twitchathon
Oral Fistula Research
Kakapo Has a Good Year
Great Western Woodlands
New Spinebill Sub-species
Neurons In Birds' Brains
Atlas of the Birds of NSW & ACT - Vol 2

Editorial

Advance notice is given in this issue of the ABSA Conference and AGM in Canberra next March. An important discussion will be had at the conference on the future of banding, and the future of co-operative banding sites. If you wish to contribute to that discussion, and cannot make it to the day, feel free to write your ideas down and send them to me at <info@absa.asn.au>. I will endeavour to include them in the December newsletter. I am sure many members have ideas on how to address the decline in membership of ABSA, the ageing of the community of banders, the declining opportunities for training of new banders, and the dearth of younger people taking up amateur bird research as an interest. Each obituary we publish sees the loss of a lifetime of knowledge and skills.

A belated congratulations to the Banding Office for abolishing annual fees for banding licences.

Stein Boddington

Newsletter Editor

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Celebrate World Cassowary Day on September 24

www.worldcassowaryday.com

Corella Contents - Sept 2016 Vol 40(3)

Papers:

Monitoring the Rufous Scrub-bird *Atrichornis rufescens* in the New England region
M. Andren

Shadows of change: Square-tailed Kites *Lophoictinia isura* nesting in the Bendigo area of Victoria
J. L. Robinson, B. R. Cooper and D. C. Franklin

Long-term population trends in the vulnerable Lesser Noddy *Anous tenuirostris melanops* at the Houtman Abrolhos, Western Australia
C. A. Surman, A. A. Burbidge and J. Fitzhardinge

Morphological sexing of babbblers: comments on Lambert and Blackmore (Corella 39, 2015)
S. L. Totterman

Morphological sexing of babbblers: a response to Totterman
K. T. A. Lambert and C. Blackmore

Book Reviews

Birds of Darwin. *Reviewed by Peter Kyne*

Obituary:

David Purchase. *Written by Neil Hermes*

Recovery Round-up.

ABSA Conference and AGM 2017

Save the date! Our 2017 Conference will be held on Saturday 11th March; and this year we're going to hold it in the nation's Capital, Canberra, at the Australian National University. The theme of the conference will be *Long-term banding studies for monitoring bushland birds – what we've learned and future directions*.

It's well-known that many of Australia's bush birds are under increasing pressure from a range of challenges – land clearing, feral predators, climate change, increased competition from species like Noisy Miners, the list goes on. It's perhaps less well-known that bird-banding is also under pressure, with increasing regulation, declining participation rates and many of our most experienced banding scheme trainers approaching retirement. Might these two disturbing trends be linked?

Long-term bird banding projects provide a unique and invaluable source of detailed and reliable data to help us understand the way our bushland birds are responding to the many challenges they are now facing. These projects provide a wonderful opportunity for the banding community to work cooperatively toward some big science objectives for the future. They also provide a great vehicle for introducing the next generation of banders to the world of bird banding and training them in the skills they will need to become qualified bird banders in their own right.

We'll have a great line up of speakers, who will review the results from a selection of long-term banding projects and discuss the insights we've obtained from them, as well as talks on data collection, handling and analysis. Following this will be a forum discussion looking at how we can build on this foundation and make sure that we will continue to have a sustainable and scientifically sound program of long-term banding studies to help us answer the many questions we still have about the lives of our bushland birds and provide some of the knowledge we will need to help secure their future.

So if you're interested in what is happening to our bushland birds; and also if you're interested in the future of bird banding; and especially if you'd like to learn more about getting involved in bird banding, please come along and join the discussion. You'll be very welcome! A detailed conference program will be circulated closer to the date.

Funding Applications Sought

The Australian Bird Study Association Inc. operates a fund to provide financial assistance to ornithological researchers, both amateur and professional. This fund, known as the ABSA Fund for Avian Research (FAR), comprises a special deposit account that was established from donations made to the Association to support research on Australian native birds.

The total amount available for grants in any year is limited to the interest earned on the FAR account over the preceding year. The total value of annual grants will not normally exceed \$2,000 and is intended to provide researchers with assistance in the acquisition of research equipment and/or travel within Australia.

In awarding grants, the management Committee of the Australian Bird Study Association will assess:

- a) the quality of the project
- b) the applicant's ability to carry it out
- c) a realistic costing and timetable
- d) the likelihood that successful completion of the

research will lead to publication of the results.

Applicants should be members of the Association. All other things being equal, preference in grant applications will be given to members. Individual grants will not normally exceed \$2,000 for members and \$1,000 for non-members.

Grantees are required to make a report to the ABSA no later than January of the year following the bestowing of the grant. This report should outline the results achieved in the project and the acquittal of grant funds. Any funds not utilised in meeting the expenditure proposed in the FAR Grant Application should be repaid by the grantee at the time of making the above report.

Any publication arising from work supported by the ABSA FAR should include an acknowledgement to that effect. Applications must be typed in the format of the FAR Grant Application form which is available on the ABSA website. Applicants should email their signed applications to: info@absa.asn.au

Applications must be received by 31 December 2016.

All applications will be considered and assessed at a meeting of the Committee in February. Applications may be granted in-full, in-part, or be rejected. Applicants will be notified in writing of the success or otherwise of their application. The Committee's decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into.

The successful applicant(s) will be notified on or before the Association's AGM in March.

Subscription Update

A number of members have automatic payments set up with PayPal. Last year, several forgot to go to PayPal and amend the amount in line with the new subscription rates. If you have not done that by now, please do so, as we may not be as forgiving this year! The Regular subscription is now \$65 p.a., and the Concession subscription is \$45 p.a.

We will send everyone a reminder email closer to the renewal time.

Twitchathon Now National

<https://www.docdroid.net/erQLHpJ/twitchathon-national-rules-2016.pdf.html>

This year marks a major change in the way the Twitchathon is being run. After many many years of successful state-based events, it is now a truly national one.

For those who are not aware, the Twitchathon is a fundraising event, in which teams of crazy birdwatchers race to record as many bird species as possible in 24 hours. In NSW, the current record is held by the Hunter Home Brewers, who listed 252 species a few years ago.

Each state will be coordinating their own event and fundraising for their chosen conservation project. NSW is raising money for Gould's Petrel recovery, as the endangered breeding population of this species on Cabbage Tree Island near Newcastle has recently suffered a severe blow, with critical nesting habitat being destroyed by storms, and a fast response will be required to limit the negative impacts on these special Australian seabirds.

The Twitchathon is on the weekend 29/30 October. There will be three race types. The three races cater to all birdwatchers – young, old, new, and experienced alike.

The Birdathon (Race #3) in particular has been designed so that absolutely anybody can compete and raise money for their state, even if they only have a few hours to spare on the Twitchathon weekend. There are exciting prizes to be won for the biggest lists, rarest sightings, best fundraisers, and many more!

Registration forms will be available soon. In the meantime, if you have any questions, contact any of the coordinators listed in the attached rules document.

Joshua Bergmark and Ashwin Rudder
NSW Coordinators (twitchathon.nsw@gmail.com)

Oral Fistula Research

“Investigation of prevalence, distribution, pathology and causes of a ‘rare’ condition in birds.”

For those of us who spend much of our time working with and observing free-living birds, we are used to seeing some birds with obvious abnormalities such as missing toes, feet and even legs, and swellings around the bill caused by diseases such as Avian Pox. However, a condition which we think is far rarer was first described in the ‘Vulnerable’ Stitchbird (*Notiomystis cincta*) in New Zealand by Castro and Taylor (2001). They described a condition called an “oral fistula” in which the skin and muscle of the lower mandible were missing in some birds; the tongue was protruding through the opening and it was often outside the mouth cavity permanently.

Since this first report, the condition has been described in Eurasian Griffon Vultures and in the Sooty Tern and the Masked Booby.

I am now asking for help from people who routinely interact with free-living birds. I am especially appealing to ringers/banders, wildlife photographers and birdwatchers to respond but I am happy to hear from anyone with relevant information. I suspect that there are many more birds living with this condition than we have already detected and the aims of this study are to determine its:

- prevalence within and across species to assess whether some are more predisposed to it than others
- spatial distribution to assess whether birds favouring some habitats are more predisposed to it than others
- pathology to assess whether its onset and progression differ across species
- cause(s).

If you have seen this condition in birds that you have handled, ringed/banded, observed and/or photographed, I am very keen to hear from you. Please contact me via e-mail at: J.Reynolds.2@bham.ac.uk.

I would be very keen to receive photographs of such birds from you too. You will, of course, retain copyright on them and they will not be used to illustrate any written output from the study without me first obtaining consent from you. Each image will of course be credited.

Kakapo has a good year.

The critically endangered Kakapo *Strigops habroptilus* (Gray, 1845), a large New Zealand terrestrial parrot, has

had a bumper crop of babies this year, lessening the fears that it would go extinct. 33 chicks were hatched. It is estimated that there are only 125 Kakapos in the wild, up from a nadir of 18 known birds in the 1970s. These were all male, and only the discovery of a small population of both sexes on cat-infested Stewart Island allowed the recovery program to proceed.

The birds were translocated to three predator-free islands, Whenua Hou (Codfish) Island, Anchor Island and Hauturu (Little Barrier) Island, and intensive management strategies put in place. Progress has been slow, as the parrot only breeds every 2-4 years, depending on food resources.

Great Western Woodlands

The Birds in the Great Western Woodlands Project has released its first report of findings from the first three years of surveys from an intended 12 year project in South-eastern Western Australia.



Due to its remoteness and size, precious little was known about the wildlife of this 16 million hectare area.

Setting out to rectify this huge gap in our knowledge of this vital area, hundreds of skilled volunteers have submitted 4,374 bird surveys over the past three years from 231 sites across the region. More than 28,000 individual birds of 182 species were recorded in the surveys. Even more impressive was that the surveys showed that for most species, bird populations of the Great Western Woodlands appear to be abundant, resilient and stable.

You can download a 16pp Summary report, or the full report from:

<http://www.birdlife.org.au/projects/great-western-woodlands/gww-report>

New Spinebill Sub-species



In a major announcement, the Australian Mint has released pictures of a newly discovered sub-species of the Eastern

Spinebill. Tentatively dubbed *Acanthorhynchus tenuirostris numismaticus* (see picture above), it has not yet been recorded by the general public, but after an irruption in Canberra recently, it is anticipated that this startlingly coloured bird will soon be ubiquitous in all urban and populated rural environments within Australia. However, bird enthusiasts are warned that illicit reproduction in domestic settings is proscribed and attracts heavy penalties.

Neurons in Birds' Brains

Ref: **Birds have primate-like numbers of neurons in the forebrain.** Sewerny Olkowicz et al, (2016) Proceedings of the National Academy of Science. Vol. 113 no. 26
doi: 10.1073/pnas.1517131113

Significance.

Birds are remarkably intelligent, although their brains are small. Corvids and some parrots are capable of cognitive feats comparable to those of great apes. How do birds achieve impressive cognitive prowess with walnut-sized brains? We investigated the cellular composition of the brains of 28 avian species, uncovering a straightforward solution to the puzzle: brains of songbirds and parrots contain very large numbers of neurons, at neuronal densities considerably exceeding those found in mammals. Because these “extra” neurons are predominantly located in the forebrain, large parrots and corvids have the same or greater forebrain neuron counts as monkeys with much larger brains. Avian brains thus have the potential to provide much higher “cognitive power” per unit mass than do mammalian brains.

Abstract

Some birds achieve primate-like levels of cognition, even though their brains tend to be much smaller in absolute size. This poses a fundamental problem in comparative and computational neuroscience, because small brains are expected to have a lower information-processing capacity. Using the isotropic fractionator to determine numbers of neurons in specific brain regions, here we show that the brains of parrots and songbirds contain on average twice as many neurons as primate brains of the same mass, indicating that avian brains have higher neuron packing densities than mammalian brains. Additionally, corvids and parrots have much higher proportions of brain neurons located in the pallial telencephalon compared with primates or other mammals and birds. Thus, large-brained parrots and corvids have forebrain neuron counts equal to or greater than primates with much larger brains. We suggest that the large numbers of neurons concentrated in high densities in the telencephalon substantially contribute to the neural basis of avian intelligence.

Access the paper at:

www.pnas.org/content/113/26/7255.abstract

Atlas of the Birds of NSW and the ACT - Vol 2 Now Available

This Atlas draws on ~5.6 million records. Volume 2 (May 2016) continues the same style and layout as Volume 1, and deals with the resident and regular migrants from the Comb-crested Jacana to the Striated Pardalote.

Included in this volume is a history of ornithology in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory covering from pre-1770 to the present. For a list of species in Vol. 2 click [here](#).

Vol. 3 will deal with the remaining resident and migrant species, all vagrants, extinct species and those of doubtful provenance, including the birds of the Lord Howe group.

For each bird, details include maps, graphs, tables and text on current distribution, breeding, seasonal and historical change and assessment of current status.

This information aims to provide a better understanding of the status and needs of each species and where to best concentrate conservation management efforts. Order from the website of the NSW Bird Atlassers: <http://www.nswbirdatlassers.org.au>

