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**Subject:** ABSA - Newsletter 138 December 2019  
**Date:** 21 December 2019 at 12:50 AM  
**To:** [steinbod@pnc.com.au](mailto:steinbod@pnc.com.au)

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Newsletter of the Australian Bird Study Association

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## NEWSLETTER 138



Editor: Stein Boddington  
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ISSN 2202-297X (Online)  
December 2019

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This month's image of a European Robin courtesy of Vincent van Zalinge via  
<[unsplash.com](https://unsplash.com)>

### Editorial

In this issue is a discussion paper from the President of ABSA, Tony Hunt. It puts forward an analysis of the Association's journal, Corella, and proposes some radical changes to its publication method. He is intending to put relevant motions to the AGM in March 2020 for resolution by the membership.

In keeping with the intention to involve members fully in this decision, I will endeavour to publish any comments received in the March 2020 Newsletter, so that, prior to the AGM, members can see how others are thinking, and perhaps be stimulated to attend the AGM, or submit their own ideas. I remind members that, if unable to attend the AGM, they can appoint a proxy to vote on their behalf on any resolution put to the meeting.

I apologise for the fact that the lateness of the Newsletter means that there is limited time for the submission of applications for funding from the Fund for Avian Research. These must be received by 31 December 2019.

Another tranche of uploads in the Bird-in-the-Hand series is presented in this issue. I would like to acknowledge the massive effort put in by former ABSA president Jeff Hardy in the preparation of hundreds of pages for publication, giving members, and indeed, any researcher, valuable information on the characteristics of our birds seen in the hand.

We note the increasing number of references to the impact of the drought in particular, and climate change in general, on the Australian birds that we know and love. In the face of tragic loss of human life, of hundreds of properties, and even the

degradation of the very air that we breathe, it is easy to forget that these tribulations impact on our birdlife as well. Reports of inland birds retreating to the coast, of critical habitat being lost to fires, and people taking long trips without seeing more than a handful of birds where previously they were myriad - these all point to a potential disaster in the making. What will it take for the major political parties to wake up to and acknowledge and act on the science that has been put in front of them for over forty years?

*Stein Boddington*  
Newsletter Editor

### **ABSA AGM and Conference 2020**

Notice is hereby given that the Annual General Meeting of the Australian Bird Study Association Inc. will be held on Saturday 21st March 2020 at the CCC Conference Centre in Yarramundi (formerly called Lutanda), 761 Springwood Rd Yarramundi. The AGM will be held in conjunction with the Association's annual conference, which will run from 8:30am to 4:00 pm.

### **Fund for Avian Research - call for grant applications (due 31 December 2019)**

The deadline for applications for funding support from ABSA's Fund for Avian Research (FAR) Grants is fast approaching.

The FAR Grants are intended to support researchers with project-related expenses such as buying equipment and/or travel within Australia. It is anticipated that approximately \$2,500 will be available in the 2019 round of funding. That amount is usually distributed across several applications.

The amount of money isn't large, but the applications don't need to be lengthy, either! If you are running a research project on some aspect of the Australian bird fauna and could use some extra funding, give it a go.

Please read the Assessment Criteria below carefully. Applicants should email their signed applications (as attachments either in .pdf or .doc formats) to:

[info@absa.asn.au](mailto:info@absa.asn.au)  
by 31st December 2019.

#### ***FAR Grants – Assessment criteria***

##### **1. General Criteria**

How well does the proposal relate to ABSA's objective "to support, encourage and promote the study of Australian birds and to contribute to their conservation" and the purpose of the avian research fund to "assist with the publication of information, the provision of education or the carrying on of research into various aspects of the avifauna of Australia"?

##### **2. Scientific and Technical Criteria**

- a) Does the proposal have a clearly stated objective?
- b) Does the proposal include a clearly stated and practical methodology to achieve its objective?
- c) Is the methodology consistent with good scientific design and with good practice (including ethical considerations)?
- d) Is the achievement of the objective able to be measured or quantitatively assessed?
- e) If successful, how significant and/or useful will the outcome be in terms of our knowledge of the Australian avifauna and its conservation?
- f) How likely is the project to result in formal publication of results?

##### **3. Financial Criteria**

- a) Does the proposal provide a clear and itemised account of how the funds will be spent?
- b) Are the allocations in the proposed budget appropriate and do they provide reasonable value for money?

### **Discussion Paper – the future of the journal Corella**

We have made a lot of changes to Corella recently, and it is a much stronger journal as a result. The new colour format looks great, the annual publication has reined in the printing and distribution costs (although these are still substantial) and the new on-line format looks good too. We're still getting enough papers submitted to easily fill each volume. However...! As with so many other things, the internet has changed the world of publishing refereed scientific journals significantly, and the plain truth is that if Corella is to remain competitive it is either going to have to evolve or it will slowly but surely become less and less relevant. The challenges are clear – for a refereed scientific journal to prosper it needs to attract high quality, high impact papers from researchers. Researchers who are producing such papers want to publish them in the best (most widely read, highest impact) journal they can. Readers of journals want to read the most relevant, important and up-to-date papers, especially if they are paying for the privilege of reading them. Increasingly, the readership of such papers in the field of ornithology is found amongst academic circles (professional researchers and graduate research students). These days almost all researchers find and

read journal papers on-line, either by searching the internet (using tools like Google Scholar) or via on-line journal subscriptions held by their institutional library.

Impact is primarily measured by citations – how often a paper is subsequently referenced in other published papers. Despite being a well-respected journal locally, Corella has a very low impact factor, primarily because it does not have a very wide readership. In the medium to long term this is something we need to turn around if Corella is to remain viable.

The size of Corella's readership is constrained by two factors. First is the restriction of access (both on-line and print) to paying members for the most recent three years of content. This effectively limits us to less than 200 readers via direct subscription. The other channel to gain readers, and by far the most important (for impact metrics), is via library subscriptions (primarily university libraries). We only have a small number of these, and each year we lose one or two. This is because libraries have a strict budget for such subscriptions, and they are constantly reviewing how they spend it – if a subscription isn't being used much by their staff and students, they don't renew it and redirect the funds to a subscription with more impact. That word again. Thus, the relationship between impact and readership becomes circular, with each driving the other, either upwards or downwards. These forces all drive publishers of scientific journal inexorably in the same direction – toward on-line publication and/or toward open-access publication. On-line publication removes the cost burden of printing and distribution and makes it easier for readers to find and access content they find interesting or relevant, wherever they are and whenever they like. It also opens up all sorts of possibilities with interactive publishing tools allowing inclusion of colour, large graphs and maps, embedded video and sound files, and animations. Open access means that the potential readership becomes anyone with access to the internet, which in the scientific world effectively means everybody. This is very attractive to authors who want their research to reach the widest possible audience as quickly as possible.

In saying all this, it is important that we also consider that exclusive access to the most recent editions of Corella is one of the primary value points we offer our members, and hence it is an important contributor to our annual revenue, via membership fees. However, printing and distributing Corella is also by far the largest chunk of our recurrent cost structure, so overall its net effect on our budget is approximately neutral. I am very conscious that a lot of our members value the print edition of Corella, and the opinions of our members are very important to us, so before we make any significant changes I am keen to get some feedback from you all on the changes we are considering.

The two options that we are considering are:

1. Conversion of Corella to a 100% online publication.

This initiative would remove the single largest cost from our budget and significantly reduce the workload associated with producing Corella. It would also mean that we could potentially reduce our membership fees. Currently we are a very expensive birding association to be a member of (only Birds Australia membership costs more). If we cut our membership fee we might be a more attractive proposition to a wider audience, particularly younger people such as Uni students.

2. Conversion of Corella to an open-access journal.

This initiative is a logical extension of the one above. It would significantly strengthen the appeal of the journal to authors of high-impact papers. However, it would entirely remove access to Corella as a key part of our value proposition, potentially making retention of existing members and recruiting new members more difficult.

I am planning to put both of these options forward at the AGM (on 21st March 2020, in Sydney) for a vote. In the meantime, I am very keen to hear what you think about this, whether you support the proposals or oppose them. These are big changes and careful consideration of the pros and cons is essential. Please email me with your thoughts at [president@absa.asn.au](mailto:president@absa.asn.au)

Best wishes

*Tony Hunt*

President - ABSA

### **International Bird Quiz**

If you fancy your international bird identification skills, eBird offers a quiz, presenting 20 birds to ID. This is both entertaining, instructive, and helps them curate their vast collection of photographs, as they ask a couple of questions about the quality etc of each photo.

<https://ebird.org/quiz/>

### **Bird in the Hand Updates**

September 2019

This month I have done sheets for a number of waders and did sheets for two "new" species - Silver-backed Butcherbird was separated from the Grey Butcherbird (a distribution and size issue) and the White-bellied Whipbird which has been split from the Western Whipbird on the basis of mitochondrial DNA comparison. Most of the revisions of old sheets were to add subspecies and additional measurement data which had not been included in the original sheets, or to fix minor errors. Other revisions were to reduce the size of files by reworking the illustrations - there will be a lot illustration revisions over the coming months.

I have also split some website groups of birds to make some species easier to find.

Another issue that has been resolved in the past month has been an anomaly between the numbers of BIH2 bird sheets completed and uploaded to the website and the compound list of species that I (thought) I had maintained in the "Recent Additions" file. In August the compound list showed 551 species sheets - that was slightly understatement as the correct number was 573. So at the end of September, after five years work, a total of 587 species sheets plus six guides and ID keys in the BIH2 series have been completed and uploaded to the website.

So the species sheets that were worked on last month comprised 14 new species field sheets and 22 revisions as follows:

#### **Apostlebird**

Apostlebird *Struthidea cinerea* (Revised)

#### **Bee-eater**

Rainbow Bee-eater *Merops ornatus* (Revised)

#### **Bellbird**

Crested Bellbird *Oreoica gutturalis* (Revised)

#### **Butcherbirds**

Australian Magpie *Cracticus tibicen* (Revised)

Black Butcherbird *Cracticus quoyi* (Revised)

Black-backed Butcherbird *Cracticus mentalis* (Revised)

Grey Butcherbird *Cracticus torquatus* (Revised)

Pied Butcherbird *Cracticus nigrogularis* (Revised)

Silver-backed Butcherbird *Cracticus argenteus*

#### **Chough**

White-winged Chough *Corcorax melanorhamphos* (Revised)

#### **Cockatoos**

Cockatiel *Nymphicus hollandicus* (Revised)

Galah *Eolophus roseicapillus* (Revised)

Major Mitchell's Cockatoo *Lophochroa leadbeateri* (Revised)

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

#### **Currawongs**

Black Currawong *Strepera fuliginosa* (Revised)

Grey Currawong *Strepera versicolour* (Revised)

Pied Currawong *Strepera graculina* (Revised)

#### **Diurnal Raptors**

Pacific Baza *Aviceda subcristata*

Red Goshawk *Erythrotriochis radiates*

#### **Dollarbird**

Dollarbird *Eurystomus orientalis* (Revised)

#### **Parrots**

Scarlet-chested Parrot *Neophema splendida* (Revised)

#### **Waders**

Broad-billed Sandpiper *Limicola falcinellus*

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

Great Knot *Calidris tenuirostris*

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola*

Grey-tailed Tattler *Heteroscelus brevipes*

Pacific Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva*

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus*

Wandering Tattler *Heteroscelus incanus*

#### **Wedgebills**

Chiming Wedgebill *Psophodes occidentalis* (Revised)

Chirruping Wedgebill *Psophodes cristatus* (Revised)

#### **Whimbills**

## Whipbirds

Eastern Whipbird	<i>Psophodes olivaceus</i>	(Revised)
Western Whipbird	<i>Psophodes nigrogularis</i>	(Revised)
White-bellied Whipbird	<i>Psophodes leucogaster</i>	

## October 2019

Species this month – 1 new + 19 revisions.

Total species profile sheets - 588

## Guides

Guide to Cloacal Sexing (Revised)

## Cuckoos

Channel-billed Cuckoo *Scythrops novaehollandiae* (Revised)

## Grasswrens

Black Grasswren	<i>Amytornis housei</i>	(Revised)
Carpentarian Grasswren	<i>Amytornis dorotheae</i>	(Revised)
Dusky Grasswren	<i>Amytornis purnelli</i>	(Revised)
Eyrean Grasswren	<i>Amytornis goyderi</i>	(Revised)
Grey Grasswren	<i>Amytornis barbatus</i>	(Revised)
Kalkadoon Grasswren	<i>Amytornis ballarae</i>	(Revised)
Striated Grasswren	<i>Amytornis striatus</i>	(Revised)
Short-tailed Grasswren	<i>Amytornis merrotsyi</i>	(Revised)
Thick-billed Grasswren	<i>Amytornis modestus</i>	(Revised)
Western Grasswren	<i>Amytornis textilis</i>	
White-throated Grasswren	<i>Amytornis woodwardi</i>	(Revised)

## Whistlers

Western Whistler *Pachycephala occidentalis* (Revised)

## Woodswallows

Black-faced Woodswallow	<i>Artamus cinereus</i>	(Revised)
Dusky Woodswallow	<i>Artamus cyanopterus</i>	(Revised)
Little Woodswallow	<i>Artamus minor</i>	(Revised)
Masked Woodswallow	<i>Artamus personatus</i>	(Revised)
White-breasted Woodswallow	<i>Artamus leucorhynchus</i>	(Revised)
White-browed Woodswallow	<i>Artamus superciliosus</i>	(Revised)

Jeff Hardy

## Helping Birds after a Bushfire

Birdlife Australia has a webpage with helpful suggestions for helping birds during and after a bushfire - seems a good time to publicize this!

<http://birdlife.org.au/media/after-the-fire/>

## Rainbow Lorikeet Split into Six Species

eBird has released it's annual Taxonomy update, which includes the splitting of the Rainbow Lorikeet into six species.

“Rainbow Lorikeet is split into six species. Of relevance to Australia are Rainbow, Red-collared, and Coconut. These are already dealt with well in field guides such as The Australian Bird Guide, which covers how to separate these 3 former subspecies in the field.

Rainbow Lorikeet *Trichoglossus moluccanus* (Cape York southwards, introduced Perth etc.)  
Red-collared Lorikeet *Trichoglossus rubritorquis* (Kimberley, Top End NT, west Gulf of Carpentaria)  
Coconut Lorikeet *Trichoglossus haematodus* (north Torres Strait)”

<https://ebird.org/australia/news/2019-ebird-annual-taxonomy-update-australia>

## Regent Honeyeater Research

Abstract

Uncovering the population genetic histories of non-model organisms is increasingly possible through advances in next generation

sequencing and DNA sampling of museum specimens. This new information can inform conservation of threatened species, particularly those for which historical and contemporary population data are unavailable or challenging to obtain. The critically endangered, nomadic regent honeyeater *Anthochaera phrygia* was abundant and widespread throughout south-eastern Australia prior to a rapid population decline and range contraction since the 1970s. A current estimated population of 250–400 individuals is distributed sparsely across 600,000 km<sup>2</sup> from northern Victoria to southern Queensland. Using hybridization RAD (hyRAD) techniques, we obtained a SNP dataset from 64 museum specimens (date 1879–1960), 102 ‘recent’ (1989–2012) and 52 ‘current’ (2015–2016) wild birds sampled throughout the historical and contemporary range. We aimed to estimate population genetic structure, genetic diversity and population size of the regent honeyeater prior to its rapid decline. We then assessed the impact of the decline on recent and current population size, structure and genetic diversity. Museum sampling showed population structure in regent honeyeaters was historically low, which remains the case despite a severe fragmentation of the breeding range. Population decline has led to minimal loss of genetic diversity since the 1980’s. Capacity to quantify the overall magnitude of both genetic diversity loss and population decline was limited by the poorer quality of genomic data derived from museum specimens. A rapid population decline, coupled with the regent honeyeater’s high mobility, means a detectable genomic impact of this decline has not yet manifested. Extinction may occur in this nomadic species before a detectable genomic impact of small population size is realised. We discuss the implications for genetic management of endangered mobile species and enhancing the value of museum specimens in population genomic studies.

Citation: Crates R, Olah G, Adamski M, Aitken N, Banks S, Ingwersen D, et al. (2019) Genomic impact of severe population decline in a nomadic songbird. PLoS ONE 14(10): e0223953. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0223953>

## European Robin

“What’s the big birding buzz in Beijing right now? It’s all about a robin.

A European Robin, only the third one ever recorded in the Chinese capital, is wintering on the landscaped grounds of the Beijing Zoo. It might have been present for weeks, but it didn’t catch the attention of birders until January 8. Since then it has drawn hundreds of admirers and has been featured on China State Television’s international website. The celebrity treatment has helped to highlight the rapidly growing popularity of birding in China.” (See photo above)

More at: <https://www.audubon.org/news/a-vagrant-european-robin-drawing-huge-crowds-china>

## Trip Reports

### *Munghorn Gap*

25-29th October 2019

The savage drought has not relented, Gulgong has only received 42mm in the 5 months from June to October compared to their average of 250mm. Little wonder that the country was looking so poorly. Fortunately, the spring was still flowing although the upper trough was dry. The dams at both the campsite and site 4 still had water although the levels were low.

There was very little blossom anywhere, with occasional flowers on the grey mistletoe.

We had a relatively small team this weekend due to date clashes with other banding sites and other activities. We started out on Friday with only myself, Doug and his grandson, Toby. A new trainee from Canberra, Rhiannon Kiggins arrived about 9:30, her enthusiasm and skills were very handy. Marty had to coach and play cricket but still he drove up on Saturday night so he could help out on Sunday, his efforts were much appreciated. I anticipated that Site 4 would be busy due to the availability of water so I change the site order so that we did Site 4 on Sunday when Marty was available.

Friday 23rd August 2019

We banded at site 1, in very uncomfortable conditions with a hot NW wind blowing. We set up our nets on the usual locations but did not open the spring net until Rhiannon arrived.

Not surprisingly due to the conditions the spring net caught most of the birds with the other 7 nets catching very little. There was a dearth of small insectivorous birds with only 1 brown thornbill, three superb fairywrens and no striated thornbills or yellow robins seen or caught. At the spring we caught predominantly honeyeaters with white-faced, white-naped honeyeaters and yellow-tufted the most common. However, we also caught 6 spotted pardalotes and 2 striated pardalotes at the spring net, the later is not common at Munghorn. However, the highlight of the day was a male leaden flycatcher which was well photographed. Also, Rhiannon discovered the joys of extracting the very beautiful but bitey little lorikeet! We only had 3 retraps for the day, very concerning considering the huge numbers of birds that have been banded at this location and again like the last visit all the retraps were from 2017, what has happened to the 2018 or 2019 birds? I suspect that the honeyeaters are constantly moving around in large flocks trying to find food and water.

Saturday 26th October 2019

Today we banded at site 2, the honeyeater flat campsite. I had 8 nets in the usual locations. Again the weather was not good with strong westerly winds and warm conditions although there was a heavy cloud cover. In contrast to the previous day, this time we mainly caught insectivorous birds probably due to the lack of surface water in the area other than the dam which most birds don’t use. Brown thornbills were the most common bird followed by four eastern spinebills. There was some blossom on the grey

mistletoe but based on the small numbers of honeyeaters present there was probably minimal nectar in the flowers. Overall it was a quite day with only one old retrap, a brown thornbill that was banded seven years earlier.

Sunday 27th October 2019

Today we banded at Site 4, Marty had driven up overnight and slept in his car ready for action when we arrived! We had 8 nets up with 6 on the southern side and two nets in the woodland to the north. Compared to the previous 2 days, today's weather was cool in the morning and relatively mild in the middle of the day, southerly winds blew from late morning.

We had a good day with 65 birds caught of which 15 were retraps. Most of the birds were honeyeaters, caught at the dam net, with white-plumes the most common (32) followed by yellow-faced (5). We also caught 8 red-browed finches which is more than we have caught for some time and nine superb fairywrens. However, the highlight was a pair of red-capped robins, only the 14th and 15th caught at Munghorn and as the female had an active brood patch we will hopefully catch more in the future. We also caught a diamond firetail and saw brown treecreepers and white-browed babblers but didn't get in a net. Overall a good day and very thankful we had Marty as it was very busy.

We had a good number of retraps with the oldest being a white-plumed honeyeater which was banded in 2009.

### Summary

Other than the weather particularly on the first two days it was a good weekend. Rhiannon had the opportunity to handle and band a number of new species for her. Whilst I was concerned about the lack of insectivorous birds at site 1, it was made up by brown thornbills at site 2 and superb fairywrens at site 4. However, I don't think we have gone through a weekend and not caught a yellow robin. So, the drought is still having severe impact on our bird populations. Some birds were in breeding condition but we also observed adult birds already going into primary moult which suggests that some species have already given up on breeding presumably due to the lack of food and water. Normally at Munghorn primary moult doesn't start until late December or January.

I would very much like to thank Doug, Rhiannon, Marty and Toby who all worked hard in very trying conditions over the weekend.

Hopefully, the weather pattern improves over the coming months and the area finally gets some decent rain, otherwise things will be very grim over summer. Therefore, I am very reluctant to have a summer banding session unless there is good rain in the next few months. I will keep you informed of our plans.

I have attached a spreadsheet showing the results from the weekend.

Graham Fry

8 November 2019

DATE		TOTALS			25-Oct-19			26-Oct-19			27-Oct-19		
Bander					G.Fry,R.Kiggins,D.Moffat,Toby			G.Fry,R.Kiggins,D.Moffat			G.Fry,R.Kiggins,D.Moffat,MartyF		
Nethours		103.35			35.2			38.75			29.4		
Site		1			2			4					
Code	Species	New	Ret	Total	New	Ret	Total	New	Ret	Total	New	Ret	Total
260	Little Lorikeet	1		1	1		1						
322	Kookaburra	3		3							3		3
365	Leadon Flycatcher	1		1	1		1						
381	Red-capped Robin	2		2							2		2
401	Rufous Whistler	1		1	1		1						
408	Grey Shrike Thrush	1		1							1		1
470	Striated Thornbill	0	1	1								1	1
471	Yellow Thornbill	2		2				1		1	1		1
475	Brown Thornbill	5	4	9		1	1	5	3	8			
529	Superb Fairywren	6	7	13	1	2	3		1	1	5	4	9
558	White-throated Treecreeper	1		1	1		1						
564	Mistletoebird	2		2				2		2			
565	Spotted Pardalote	6		6	6		6						
578	White-naped Honeyeater	4		4	4		4						
583	Brown headed Honeyeater	0	1	1								1	1
591	Eastern Spinebill	4		4				4		4			
614	Yellow-faced Honeyeater	9		9	4		4				5		5
617	White-eared Honeyeater	1		1	1		1						
619	Yellow-tufted Honeyeater	3		3	2		2				1		1
625	White-plumed Honeyeater	27	5	32							27	5	32
652	Diamond Firetail	1		1							1		1
662	Red-browed Firetail	4	4	8							4	4	8
976	Striated Pardalote	2		2			2						
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>86</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>CATCHRATE</b>				<b>1.04</b>			<b>0.77</b>			<b>0.41</b>			<b>2.21</b>
<b>Retrap Ratio</b>				<b>20%</b>			<b>11%</b>			<b>25%</b>			<b>23%</b>
<b>No. of Species</b>				<b>22</b>			<b>11</b>			<b>5</b>			<b>12</b>

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