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NEWSLETTER 147



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Photo credit: Darryl McKay

Editorial

Huge thanks to Secretary Jeff Hardy for organising the online 2022 Annual General Meeting. Given the success of this online format, and the opportunity it presents for Australia wide involvement in the meeting, I am sure Committee will consider continuing the practice in future non-COVID years. As reports were emailed to all members prior to the on line meeting, I have not included them in this Newsletter, as has been past practice.

We present in this Newsletter a comprehensive report on the awards given by ABS A to encourage and support the study of Australian birds and their conservation - the key aims of the Association.

Alyson Stobo-Wilson et al's paper, referenced below, takes the guess-work out of computing the toll on Australia birds, reptiles and mammals by those most efficient predators, the fox and the cat. The flourishing of our native fauna in protected reserves free from these predators gives as an inkling of the prevalence of these wondrous animals and birds in pre-predator days.

ABSA Annual General Meeting 14-21 February 2022 [Online]

From the President

Dear Members,

Just a quick note to inform you that 13 members "attended" our virtual AGM with 4 apologies. The meeting was thus quorate (just). All reports were passed and adopted as were the minutes of our 2021 AGM.

The Committee for 2022 is as follows:

Office-Bearers

- President - **John Farrell**
- Vice-President - **Alan Lill**
- Treasurer - **Natasha Webb**
- Secretary - **Jeff Hardy**
- Editor - **Alan Lill**
- Past President - **Tony Hunt**

Ordinary Committee members:

- **Ian Bailey** (Conservation Officer),
- **Stein Boddington** (Newsletter Editor),
- **Michael Franklin**,
- **Alan Leishman** (Production Editor),
- **Darryl McKay**,
- **Amy Tipton** (Manager, Mist net Service)
- **Chris Young**

Gen Kyi and David Smith, former members of our committee, did not seek re-nomination and I would like to thank them for their contribution over the years: Gen as past Treasurer and David for his valued assistance with our website. I also take this opportunity to welcome Chris Young to the committee. Chris resides in South Australia and his input, with a different state perspective, will be of great value to the committee.

Ross Fowler and Co was re-appointed as the Association's auditor.

General Business: Ian Bailey raised the issue of defining the role of the Conservation Officer of the ABSA. This issue will be determined by the Committee and reported to the 2023 AGM.

John Farrell
President

ABSA Awards - 2022

FUND FOR AVIAN RESEARCH GRANT RECIPIENTS FOR 2022

Researcher: Clancy Hall



Award: \$855

Project Title: The prevalence of intersex in five wild Australian bird species.

Aims: Skewed sex ratios occur in many species, especially those under threat. More research is required to fully understand why this occurs. My project aims to investigate the prevalence of intersex individuals to determine if this may be a contributing factor in population decline. Such a contribution will have a significant impact on how we manage avian species both in- and ex-situ.

Researcher: Silvia Colombo



Award: \$1,000

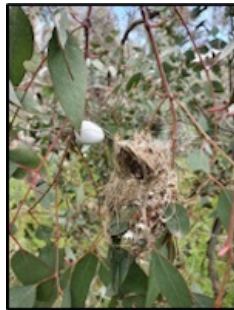
Project Title: Evolutionary drivers & thermal consequences of nest architecture in birds

Aims: Our main research questions are:

Is variation in nest types the result of adaptation to specific environments?
Can nest types be predicted by the climatic variables that species experience?

Do domed and open nests have different thermal properties that provide benefits at different temperature ranges?

Can we predict how the progeny of species, in particular those that build domed nests, will be affected by the rise of temperatures caused by global warming?



Checking temperatures inside and outside nests using specially designed copper eggs.

'BILL' LANE AWARD

Bill' Lane was a founding member of the Association, and contributed enormously to the development of ornithological skills and research in Australia. The S.G. 'Bill' Lane Award in his honour, is presented annually to the student at Charles Sturt University who achieves the highest Grade Point Average in the Graduate Certificate of Ornithology course.

The award consists of \$150 cash and a year's membership of the Association.

2021 Winner - Ross McMillan Congratulations Ross!



AOC POSTER AWARD

The ABSA Poster Award is presented to the best Student Poster at the Australasian Ornithological Conference which is held every two years. This year's AOC was held in New Zealand, and the winners are from there, and were quite surprised to receive an award from an Australian organisation!

2022 Winners - Kamyia Patel, Anne Gaskett and Ariel-Micaiah Heswall

The poster:

SEABIRD PLASTIC INGESTION - A SENSORY ECOLOGY APPROACH

Kamya Patel, Ariel-Micaiah Heswall, Anne Gaskett



Sensory ecology studies how animals perceive and interact with each other and the environment. Seabirds' sophisticated sensory systems evolved with their extreme pelagic and colonial lifestyles but could also make them vulnerable to sensory traps such as bright lights or the scent of fish on fishing vessels^{2,3,4}.

Which Aotearoa birds eat plastic?

- **Surface feeders⁵** Albatrosses
- **Pursuit divers⁶** Shags
- **Plunge divers⁷** Gannets

Why do seabirds eat plastic?

- Plastic may act a sensory trap?
- Plastic colours could look like prey or biofouling could emit DMS⁸?
- Birds deliberately eat plastics that resemble prey.

Aims

- Test how different types of plastics will change in colour and odour.
- Explore and document the types of plastics ingested by shags, albatrosses and gannets.
- Record important information about sensory features.

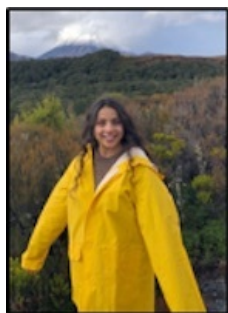
Methods

- Measure plastic colour and odour at monthly intervals using spectrophotometry and mass spectrometry.
- Collect ingested plastic through dissections and faeces.
- Compare ingested plastics with the Sustainable Coastlines database on beachcast plastics.
- Compare characteristics of ingested plastics between species and against existing species' spectral data.
- Measure sizes of sensory features such as eyes, nostrils, optic tecta and olfactory bulbs with a CT scanner.

Project significance

1. First record of how ocean plastics change in odour and colour over time.
2. First multispecies survey of plastics ingested by Aotearoa albatross, gannets and shags.
3. Researching plastic ingestion from a seabird's sensory perspective; a novel view.
4. New data about fundamental features of seabird sensory anatomy.
5. Conservation information for taonga species.

1. Martin & Stevens (2013). Sensory ecology, behaviour and evolution; 2. Rayner et al. (2013). Nature Communications; 3. Anderson et al. (2011). Endangered Species Research; 4. Post et al. (2008). Biology and Society; 5. Weimerskirch et al. (1996). Ibis; 6. Grimmett et al. (2004). Avian Biology; 7. Ripstein-Couffert et al. (2004). Ibis; 8. Day (1988). [Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation] The University of Alaska; 9. Sawicki et al. (2014). Science Advances. Images: https://www.pngwing.com



Kamya Patel



Anne Gaskett and Ariel-Micaiah Heswall

DURNO MURRAY AWARD

The Durno Murray Award was instigated in 2010 and is given to the author(s) for the most outstanding paper published in Corella each year. The Award commemorates the work of Durno Murray who contributed greatly to the founding of the Association, and served in many roles in his extensive involvement in its management. Durno also contributed enormously to the development of ornithological research in Australia - particularly the study of seabirds.

The award consists of \$150 cash and a year's membership of the Association.

2021 Winners - Margaret O'Leary and Alan Stuart



Margaret O'Leary



Alan Stuart

The Winning Paper: Singing behaviour of male Rufous Scrub-birds in the New South Wales Gloucester Tops. **Corella 45:** 23-29.

Monitoring programs for the endangered, cryptic Rufous Scrub-bird, *Atrichornis rufescens* are mainly based upon detecting singing males on their territories, but a problem with this approach is that little is known about singing activity variation during the year and therefore which are the optimal months for monitoring. We attempted to rectify this deficiency by documenting the year-round singing activity of five males (subspecies *ferrieri*) on well-separated territories in the same general area of the New South Wales Gloucester Tops from 2015-2019 using an automated recording unit. We analysed temporal variability in the number of characteristic territorial chipping songs of males. Parameters assessed were the number of songs emitted per day, the percentage of 20-minute periods per day in which singing occurred and the median number of songs per 20-minute period in which singing occurred, the last two being day length independent. Results for all parameters showed that males sang frequently from mid-September to December, with song levels dropping sharply in January and then further in

February. Daily singing activity varied considerably from February to August, but was mostly much lower than in other months. Our study thus indicated that for maximum efficacy Rufous Scrub-bird population monitoring programs in the Gloucester Tops should be conducted between mid-September and December, the only period when scrub-birds sing consistently and can thus reliably be detected.

Sanderling Tracking project

I am contacting you to request assistance with passing the word around about the Sanderling Tracking Project that is up and running on behalf of Gavin Prentice, Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority (GHCMA). The aim of the project is to unravel the mystery of sanderling movement along the coast.

The project is calling for assistance from bird photographers and bird buffs to take images of sanderling with readable leg bands along SE South Australian and Victorian coasts and record them with GHCMA. Participants are also encouraged to record leg bands with Bird Data or Bird Mark. There has been quite a bit of banding work done, with some sanderling also having tracker devices attached.

There is also a prize attached in the hope of sparking plenty of interest.

For further information please contact Gavin Prentice (g.prentice@ghcma.vic.gov.au) or myself.

Your assistance in spreading the word for this exciting project is greatly appreciated

Toni Ryan
0478 229 058
Project Assistant

<https://www.ghcma.vic.gov.au/2022/01/snap-a-sanderling-this-summer-and-win/>

Australian Magpies *Gymnorhina tibicen* cooperate to remove tracking devices

Australian Field Ornithology 2022, 39, 7-11

by Joel Crampton, Celine H. Frère, Dominique A. Potvin

Abstract

Recent advances in tracking technology have enabled devices such as Global Positioning Systems (GPS) loggers to be used on a wide variety of birds. Although there are established ethical considerations to these processes, different species may react differently to particular devices and attachments. Thus, pilot studies are still of utmost importance in this field.

Here, we describe one such study trialling a novel harness design for GPS tracking devices on Australian Magpies *Gymnorhina tibicen*. Despite previous testing demonstrating the strength and durability of the harness, devices were removed within minutes to hours of initial fitting. Notably, removal was observed to involve one bird snapping another bird's harness at the only weak point, such that the tracker was released.

This behaviour demonstrates both cooperation and a moderate level of problem solving, providing potential further evidence of the cognitive abilities of this species. To our knowledge, this is the first study to report the conspecific removal of GPS trackers, and should be considered when planning future tracking studies especially on highly social species.

Reference: <http://dx.doi.org/10.20938/af039007011>

Counting the bodies: Estimating the numbers and spatial variation of Australian reptiles, birds and mammals killed by two invasive mesopredators

Alyson M. Stobo-Wilson *et al*

Published in "Diversity and Distributions" - A Journal of Conservation Biogeography

Abstract (Results)

Foxes kill more reptiles, birds and mammals (peaking at 1071 km⁻² year⁻¹) than cats (55 km⁻² year⁻¹) across most of the unmodified temperate and forested areas of mainland Australia, reflecting the generally higher density of foxes than cats in these environments. However, across most of the continent - mainly the arid central and tropical northern regions (and on most Australian islands) - cats kill more animals than foxes. We estimate that foxes and cats together kill 697 million reptiles annually in Australia, 510 million

birds and 1435 million mammals.

Reference: <https://doi.org/10.1111/ddi.13497>

Do Flocking Birds Ever Get It Wrong?

<https://www.gizmodo.com.au/2022/02/disturbing-video-of-hundreds-of-blackbirds-crashing-into-the-ground-not-as-weird-as-you-think/>

This video shows a street scene in Ciudad Cuauhtemoc, Mexico, where a huge flock of Yellow-headed Blackbirds (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*) flew into the ground. Many hundreds of birds crashed into the ground and buildings, most of which flew off, leaving a couple of hundred of their companions dead or seriously injured. The article presents a possible explanation for this behaviour.

Birds of the Cumberland Plain book

The Birds of the Cumberland Plain, a publication summarising research into the birds of the Cumberland Plain - the plain upon which Sydney is situated - is nearing completion and all members will be notified as soon as it rolls off the printing press.

John Farrell

Trip Reports

LOWER BLUE MOUNTAINS PROJECT

BLUE GUM SWAMP CREEK, near Winmalee, NSW
20th February 2022

We got to go banding at Blue Gum Swamp Creek on Sunday in between heavy rain periods a day before and after our visit. It was very wet underfoot but we only encountered a couple of leeches.

Banding was fairly consistent over the morning with 19 birds being caught which included 6 retraps. All up we captured 9 different species: Eastern Yellow Robin, New Holland Honeyeater, White-browed Scrubwren, Eastern Spinebill, Red-browed Finch, Black-faced Monarch, Golden Whistler, Eastern Whipbird and Yellow-faced Honeyeater.

The highlight was capturing the Black-faced Monarch which we'd heard on our previous visit and earlier on during the morning.

John Farrell



Brown Thornbill from Blue Gum Swamp Creek area. Photo by Darryl McKay

LOWER BLUE MOUNTAINS PROJECT

Frasers Creek, Lower Blue Mountains, NSW
Sunday 6th February 2022

Well we finally made it to Frasers Creek, after several large trees that had blocked the track for months were finally cut up and removed. The track was very wet and we had to plough through one rather large pool - at least the mud from last Sunday's trip to Fitzgerald Creek was washed off.

As our net lanes were overgrown we had to spend some time clearing them. Things were very quiet and we only scored 15 birds all up, but this included 8 different species: Brown and Striated Thornbill, New Holland Honeyeater, Eastern Whipbird, Superb and Variegated Fairy-wren, Red-browed Finch and Eastern Spinebill. The highlight was a feisty, juvenile Eastern Whipbird which scored a few fingers before being released.

John Farrell

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