

Notes on Birds Seen at Yowah Opal Field, Queensland

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Introduction

On three occasions spanning little more than four years my wife and I have visited the Yowah Opal Field in south-western Queensland; in August 1977, July 1980 and October 1981.

Yowah is a community of some fifty permanent residents situated 83 km by road north-west from Eulo; coordinates are 27°58'S by 144°38'E. The settlement is strung out for about two km along two drains leading from the artesian bore which flows at a million litres a day with a temperature of 54°C at the borehead. The water is of excellent quality and costs fifty cents a week for each dwelling or party of visitors. The latter are catered for at the camping park near the Yowah Store and at the caravan park at the Tourist Centre. There is neither telephone service nor electric power, and only in late 1981 did the store become an official post office; previous to which a succession of storekeepers had performed this function gratis. The Flying Doctor Outpost Radio is in daily contact with Charleville for telegrams and there is an excellent airstrip.

The topography is flat to undulating with low stony rises and low mesa type hills, notably Yowah Bluff to the east and The Castles to the south. Vegetation is dominated by *acacia* species, principally mulga and gidya with odd napunyas (the famed honey-producing eucalypt of the Paroo drainage) and some bloodwoods on the rises and plateaux. The south-eastern drain from the bore spreads out into a small marsh area of several hectares and this attracts some birds favouring such habitat.

On our 1977 visit following a good season there was good ground cover of tufty grass and small herbage with the taller shrubs and trees in thriving condition. Bird life was abundant and we still remember the sheer joy of sleeping under the stars in brilliant moonlight and awakening at dawn to the beginning of a chorus of bird calls that continued until after sunrise.

In 1980 after two years of drought all grass and small herbage was gone and bird life noticeably depressed in numbers, if to a lesser extent in variety. Raptors, so numerous in 1977 were almost absent.

The 1981 season was only marginally better.

In addition to our own observations some species not seen by us were taken from a typewritten list left by Malcolm Wilson of Dalby at the Tourist Centre, and others from comparison of notes with the miner and gem-cutter couple Errol and Irene Baxter. A copy of the combined list has been forwarded to Ivy Daniels at the Tourist Centre; it is my hope that visiting birdoes will add to it as other species are noted.

List of species:

Emu: uncommon.

Australian Pelican: one exhausted bird at the bore drain.

Little Pied Cormorant: rare.

Pacific Heron: odd single birds fish along the drain and at the marsh area.

White-faced Heron: as for Pacific Heron.

Great Egret: as above.

Straw-necked Ibis: small numbers occasionally at the marsh area.

Black Swan: one exhausted bird at the drain.

Pacific Black Duck: occasional small numbers at marsh area.

Grey Teal: as for Pacific Black Duck.

Wood Duck: as above.

Black Kite: numerous 1977, scarce since.

Square-tailed Kite: one bird with Black Kites 1977.

Whistling Kite: occasional birds at marsh area.

Collared Sparrowhawk: one bird near The Plateau.

Wedge-tailed Eagle: single birds 1977.

Little Eagle: as above.

Black Falcon: one pair 1977

Peregrine Falcon: one bird Yowah Bluff, pair at The Castles 1980.

Brown Falcon: uncommon 1977.

Australian Kestrel: as above.

Black-tailed Native-hen: occasionally at marsh area.

Brolga: as above.

Australian Bustard: one bird near The Plateau.

Masked Lapwing: occasionally at the marsh area.

Banded Lapwing: uncommon, mainly at the airstrip.

Black-fronted Plover: occasionally at the marsh area.

Latham's Snipe: one bird at the marsh area 1981.

Peaceful Dove: uncommon.

Diamond Dove: common westward towards the rubbish tip.

Crested Pigeon: common.

Galah: uncommon; bred 1977.

Little Corella: common 1977, scarce since.

Pink Cockatoo: uncommon.

Red-winged Parrot: flock of about eight birds often seen in 1977, less common since.

- Cockatiel: uncommon; bred 1981.
- Budgerigar: in pairs and small flocks.
- Mallee Ringneck: rare.
- Red-rumped Parrot: uncommon.
- Mulga Parrot: uncommon.
- Blue-bonnet: uncommon, bred 1981.
- Bourke's Parrot: not uncommon, mainly seen at the airstrip and the marsh area.
- Pallid Cuckoo: one bird 1981.
- Black-eared Cuckoo: rare.
- Horsfield's Bronze-Cuckoo: rare.
- Southern Boobook: often heard at night.
- Barn Owl: call heard at night 1981.
- Australian Owlet Nightjar: apparently rare.
- Red-backed Kingfisher: pair breeding 1977, scarce since.
- Sacred Kingfisher: rare near bore drain.
- Rainbow Bee-eater: uncommon.
- White-backed Swallow: always some birds about the mines.
- Welcome Swallow: few birds only.
- Fairy Martin: common about the mines.
- Richard's Pipit: common on open ground.
- Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike: uncommon.
- Ground Cuckoo-shrike: uncommon; bred 1981.
- White-winged Triller: common and breeding 1981.
- Red-capped Robin: common.
- Hooded Robin: uncommon.
- Jacky Winter: uncommon.
- Golden Whistler: uncommon.
- Rufous Whistler: common.
- Grey Shrike-thrush: common.
- Crested Bellbird: common in mulga.
- Grey Fantail: uncommon, mainly in winter.
- Willie Wagtail: common.
- Chirruping Wedgebill: rare (M. Wilson).
- Cinnamon Quail-thrush: sighted Yowah Bluff 1980.
- Grey-crowned Babbler: uncommon, one flock in the settlement.
- White-browed Babbler: uncommon in mulga.

- Hall's Babbler: one flock near the mines and rubbish tip.
- Chestnut-crowned Babbler: the common babbler of the area.
- Clamorous Reed-Warbler: rare, in the marsh area when vegetation is suitable.
- Little Grassbird: as above.
- Splendid Fairy-wren: one party on stony rise; black-backed form.
- Variegated Fairy-wren: the common Fairy-wren of the area; purple-backed form.
- White-winged Fairy-wren: rare.
- Inland Thornbill: rare or uncommon in mulga.
- Chestnut-rumped Thornbill: uncommon.
- Slaty-backed Thornbill: uncommon.
- Buff-rumped Thornbill: uncommon.
- Yellow-rumped Thornbill: common.
- Yellow Thornbill: common.
- Southern Whiteface: rare.
- White-browed Treecreeper: common in mulga.
- Brown Treecreeper: common in gidya.
- Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater: uncommon.
- Striped Honeyeater: uncommon.
- Little Friarbird: scarce, presumably seeking napunya and bloodwood blossom.
- Singing Honeyeater: common.
- White-plumed Honeyeater: uncommon.
- Brown Honeyeater: odd single birds and pairs.
- Black Honeyeater: uncommon, sighted 1981.
- Crimson Chat: common 1981.
- Mistletoebird: common 1977, scarce since.
- Red-browed Pardalote: rare (M. Wilson).
- Striated Pardalote: uncommon.
- Zebra Finch: uncommon.
- Double-barred Finch: rare to uncommon.
- Spotted Bowerbird: two active bowers; one at the mines, and one at Johnny Covack's on the bore drain.
- White-winged Chough: flock near the drain; bred 1977.
- Apostlebird: common and cheeky visitor to dwellings.
- Australian Magpie-lark: common; breeds along the bore drain.
- Masked Woodswallow: common 1981.

Little Woodswallow: uncommon 1981.

White-browed Woodswallow: common 1981.

Grey Butcherbird: uncommon.

Pied Butcherbird: uncommon.

Australian Magpie: uncommon; bred 1981. Black-backed form.

Australian Raven: uncommon.

Torresian Crow: uncommon. ■

Short Note —

Sight Record of an Arctic Tern at Portland, Victoria

On the fisherman's wharf in Portland Harbour on 6 November 1981 at 1100 E.S.T. a medium-sized tern was noticed among a group of Crested Terns *Sterna bergii*, White-fronted Terns *S. striata* and Common Terns *S. hirundo*.

On closer inspection of the bird it was thought to be an Arctic Tern *S. paradisaea* from the following characters:

1. The whole crown was white except for a few black specks and there was a black band from the nape to the eye.
2. The bill was more slender and the tarsus was slightly shorter than in the Common Tern.
3. The rump and tail were white, with dark outer webs on the outer tail feathers.
4. The primaries were translucent. (The secondaries and the trailing edge of the under wing were not observed).
5. The bar on the secondary feathers was inconspicuous.

The bird was subsequently photographed and the slides were forwarded to Mr. Mike Carter who confirmed its identification as an Arctic Tern from the following characters:

1. The very narrow dark line bordering the shafts on the inner webs of the primaries leaving the large remaining areas white is a diagnostic feature in comparison with the Common Tern in which it would be about twice as wide.
2. The whole of the crown was white.
3. The 'spiky' bill was shortish and tapered.
4. The tail streamers were very long.
5. There was a small dark bar on the secondaries.

The only other records of the Arctic Tern in the Portland area are of two birds:

1. Skeleton, Lady Julia Percy Island, 28 December 1964, G. Carr. N.M.V., B.9153.
2. Beach-washed, Discovery Bay, 22 November 1980, D. Stewart.

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