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**Ten Days Observations of the Birds of  
Gove Peninsula**

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INTRODUCTION

In *The Emu*, 47:130-36, C.P. Humphries has a paper entitled "Among the Birds at Melville Bay" in which are recorded the birds he saw during the 15 months he was stationed at Gove Airfield with the RAAF during World War II.

With the discovery of bauxite in the peninsula the Swiss firm, Alusuisse, carried out a feasibility survey and applied for, and obtained a mining concession. They arranged for the formation of Nabalco to develop the mining of bauxite and the production of alumina.

Under the impression that entry into the huge Arnhemland Aboriginal Reserve, stretching right across from the Alligator River system on the west to the eastern shore on the Gulf of Carpentaria, was forbidden to white people, except at missions such as Oenpelli and Yirrkala, I was resigned to being unable to visit the only remaining area of Northern Australia I had not seen.

However a chance remark, overheard, that a motel was established at Nhulunbuy, the only town on the peninsula, some organisation, and the necessary permits found Tim McKellar, Nicolette Hooper, Michael Seyfort and myself flying there on July 24, 1975, for a ten-day visit to discover what we might about Gove Peninsula and the birds living there.

AREA

The area within which white people are permitted to travel extends from Cape Wirrawoi, at the northern end of the peninsula, about 35 km south (almost to Port Bradshaw) and from the coast of the Gulf about 16 km westwards.

Within this area roads are few. The main sealed road runs south from the Nabalco works, past Nhulunbuy, some 17 km to the bauxite workings and Gove Airport, and a further 7 km almost to the Dhupuma Girls Residential High School. This school is in the converted buildings of what was Eldo Tracking Station.

There are further roads of bauxite gravel, but many are fit only for 4-wheel drive vehicles.

We were greatly indebted to Fred Nylund and Colonel Bill Pretty who took us out in their 4-wheel drive vehicles to show us the habitats of importance, informed us of local conditions generally and extended to us their hospitality. Their assistance was invaluable. Further transport being essential we hired a car as well.

The general areas covered were Drimmie Head, Dundas Point and the nearby coastal scrubs, mangroves and sandspit, the sewage treatment works and the nearby large swamp, creeks, rivers, coastal areas and woodlands.

We got close to Port Bradshaw in the north and Latram River in the west.

### HABITAT

We found the habitat quite unusual due to the fact that the bauxite deposit covers all the level country within the concession, there being little, if any, overburden of soil. Both flora and fauna have therefore had to adapt to difficult, and peculiar, ecological conditions.

The predominant timber, Grey Stringybark, *Eucalyptus tetrodonta*, seems seldom to exceed a height of 25m while the straight trunks average some 200mm in diameter. There was no undergrowth of thick scrub, just a few thin bushes, small palms and a limited cover of rough tussocky grass.

Here and there were small areas of what could be called rain forest, with pandanus palms, vines and taller trees, particularly the paperback, *Melaleuca*, and good cover in the lower storey.

Some fine swamps provided ideal habitats for both ducks and herons with large expanses of reeds, fine paperbarks and open water.

The rivers and creeks, sometimes with scrubby banks, sometimes running through high reedy marshes, also provided good conditions for bird-life, while the woodlands were extensive.

There were large areas of mangroves, both along the sea-shore and on the banks of tidal streams. However the mangrove areas, too, have suffered changes from the preponderance of bauxite and the lack of soil for, instead of growing in thick, oozy mud, the ideal habitat for small fish, crabs and many insects, they stand in bauxite gravel and coral sand almost devoid of animal and vegetable life.

We saw no Mangrove Robins, *Peneoentanthe pulverulenta*, no Mangrove Golden Whistlers, *Pachycephala melanura*, no White-breasted Whistlers, *Pachycephala lanioides*, or any of the warblers which frequent mangrove areas. Even after making allowance for the season being winter, it was not the birds we recorded that were most interesting, but the birds we failed to see.

In addition to the birds absent from the mangroves, dealt with above, we recorded no sittellas or treecreepers, except for one call which was possibly that of a treecreeper, but the bird was not sighted. In the well-grassed areas wrens were practically non-existent and finches were very limited both in species and numbers, while fruit-eating species were few.

This is not to say we were disappointed, far from it, for the unusual environment and its effect on both flora and fauna gave a new insight into conditions quite different from those we were accustomed to expect in Australia.

### THE BIRDS

The following birds were recorded between July 24 and August 4, 1975. The Darter, *Anhinga rufa*, together with the Pied Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax varius*, and Little Black Cormorant, *P. sulcirostris*, were usually along the coast and in the swamp areas. The Lesser Frigatebird, *Fregata ariel*, was recorded once at Point Dundas.

The Little Grebe, *Podiceps novaehollandiae*, was seen only once or twice.

The White-necked Heron, *Ardea pacifica*, White Egret, *Egretta alba* and the Little Egret, *Egretta garzetta* were abundant on swamps. The Reef Heron, *Egretta sacra*, was recorded in both colour phases. The Mangrove Heron, *Butorides striatus*, was scarce, probably due to poor mangrove conditions.

The Jabiru, *Xenorhynchus asiaticus*, was usually present in suitable habitats.

The White Ibis, *Threskiornis molucca*, and the Straw-necked Ibis, *T. spinicollis*, were often seen.

Pied Geese, *Anseranas semipalmata*, were only doubtfully identified from a distance but were reported to be present on the big marshes. Whistling Tree Duck, *Dendrocygna arcuata*, Plumed Tree Duck, *D. eytoni*, Burdekin Duck, *Tadorna radjah*, Black Duck, *Anas superciliosa*, Grey Teal, *A. gibberifrons*, and Green Pigmy Geese, *Nettapus pulchellus*, were always seen feeding on the town swamp.

The Crested Hawk, *Aviceda subcristata*, was only once seen, near Port Bradshaw. The Red-breasted Sea Eagle (Brahminy Kite), *Haliastur indus*, and the White-breasted Sea Eagle, *Haliaeetus leucogaster*, were seen regularly off Point Dundas. The Whistling Eagle (Kite), *Haliastur sphenurus* was not at all common. The Brown Goshawk, *Accipiter fasciatus*, and Collared Sparrowhawk, *A. cirrocephalus*, were regularly recorded in the woodlands where a fleeting sighting of the Grey (White) Goshawk, *A. novaehollandiae*, was also once recorded.

The Nankeen Kestrel, *Falco cenchroides*, was scarce as the habitat was seldom suited to it, but the Brown Hawk, *F. berigora*, was seen regularly.

The Brolga, *Grus rubicundus*, was present on the distant swamps.

The Pied Oystercatcher, *Haematopus ostralegus*, was recorded on tidal flats near Port Bradshaw.

The Masked Plover, *Vanellus miles*, was common but Mongolian Dotterels, *Charadrius mongolus*, together with Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, *Calidris acuminatus*, and Red-necked Stints, *C. ruficollis*, were seen in limited numbers on the sandspit off Point Dundas.

Only one party of Pied Stilts, *Himantopus himantopus*, consisting of both adults and juveniles, was recorded on the bank of one of the sewerage ponds.

The Beach Stone Curlew, *Esacus magnirostris*, occurred on tidal flats near Port Bradshaw.

One Australian Pratincole, *Stiltia isabella*, only was seen on the bank of a sewerage pond but they were reported to be numerous where the bauxite was recovered.

The only gull species seen was the Silver Gull, *Larus novaehollandiae* and it was not common. The Black-naped Tern, *Sterna sumatrana*, Sooty Tern, *S. fuscata*, Little Tern, *S. albifrons*, Crested Tern, *S. bergii*, and Lesser Crested Tern, *S. bengalensis*, were always congregated on the sandspit off Point Dundas. The Little Terns were nesting and were photographed. Good opportunities were had of comparing the two Crested Terns.

The Rose-crowned Pigeon, *Ptilinopus regina*, was seen only once. Peaceful Doves, *Geopelia placida*, and Bar-shouldered Doves, *G. humeralis*, were common. The Emerald Dove or Green-winged Pigeon, *Chalcophaps indica*, was only seen once.

The red-collared form of the Rainbow Lorikeet, *Trichoglossus haematodus*, spent much time feeding on the blossom of the local species of casuarina as well as on the flowering eucalypt, *Eucalyptus miniata*. The Varied Lorikeet, *Psitteuteles versicolor*, was not as common. The Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, *Cacatua galerita*, was not common. Red-winged Parrots, *Aprosmictus erythropterus*, were seen almost daily, but the Northern Rosellas, *Platycercus venustus*, were not numerous.

Both the Brush Cuckoo, *Cacomantis variolosus*, and the Rufous-tailed Bronze Cuckoo, *Chrysococcyx basalis*, were seen, the members of the latter species being immature. The Pheasant Coucal, *Centropus phasianinus*, noted as common by Humphries, was neither seen nor heard.

The Boobook Owl, *Ninox novaeseelandiae*, was heard calling nightly.

The only representative of the Tawny Frogmouth, *Podargus strigoides*, seen was a dead bird picked up on the roadside.

The Blue-winged Kookaburra, *Dacelo leachi*, was a common species, as were both the Forest Kingfisher, *Halcyon macleayi*, and the Sacred Kingfisher, *H. sancta*, but the Mangrove Kingfisher, *H. chloris*, was seldom reported.

Rainbow Bee-eaters, *Merops ornatus*, were abundant.

The Tree-martin, *Petrochelidon nigricans*, was commonly seen hawking in the woodlands.

The Australian Pipit, *Anthus novaeseelandiae*, not listed by Humphries, was observed once or twice.

The Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike, *Coracina novaehollandiae*, and the Papuan Cuckoo Shrike, *C. papuensis*, were seen regularly. The latter was clearly of the race formerly known as the White-breasted Cuckoo Shrike, *C. hypoleuca*, and not the more delicately built *C. robusta*. The Varied Triller, *Lalage leucomela*, was abundant, but few males were in nuptial dress.

The Golden-headed Fantail-warbler, *Cisticola exilis*, was found only in the tall grassy areas.

The only wren recorded was an unsatisfactory sighting of a male Red-backed Wren, *Malurus melanocephalus*. Both the White-throated Warbler, *Gerygone olivacea*, and the Green-backed Warbler, *G. chloronota*, were recorded, the former being numerous and in full song, but no nesting activity was observed. Humphries did not record this species. The Yellow Weebill, *Smicrornis brevirostris*, was regularly seen feeding in eucalypts.

Two members of the party reported what they were convinced was the Brown-tailed Flycatcher, *Microeca brunneicauda*. They are definitely of the opinion that the bird was neither a Lemon-breasted Flycatcher, *Microeca flavigaster*, nor a Brown Whistler, *Pachycephala simplex*, both of which species they saw daily, but answered to the description and size of the Brown-tailed Flycatcher. The question therefore is, if it was not the Brown-tailed Flycatcher, what was the bird they saw? The Lemon-breasted Flycatcher was one of the commonest birds seen.

The Rufous Fantail, *Rhipidura rufifrons*, was seen once or twice only but the Northern Fantail, *R. setosa*, was abundant. Humphries appears not to have seen them.

The Leaden Flycatcher, *Myiagra rubecula*, was another common flycatcher, but the Shining Flycatcher, *M. alecto*, was seen only once, in mangroves.

The Rufous Whistler, *Pachycephala rufiventris*, was another common species in the woodlands while the Brown Whistler was not uncommon in the mangroves. This is another species which Humphries did not record. The rich brown of the Brown Shrike-thrush, *Colluricincla brunnea*, left no doubt of its identity.

The Mistletoe Bird, *Dicaeum hirundinaceum*, was seen regularly in considerable numbers. The only pardalote seen was the Black-headed Pardalote, *Pardalotus melanocephalus*.

Humphries records neither Bar-breasted (White-breasted) Honeyeater, *Ramsayornis fasciatus*, Brown Honeyeater, *Lichmera indistincta*, nor the White-gaped Honeyeater, *Meliphaga unicolor*, but all three were recorded by us in rain-forest patches. The Dusky Honeyeater, *Myzomela obscura*, was often recorded. One pair was observed feeding fledged young.

In one of the best rain-forest patches Red-headed Honeyeaters, *M. erythrocephala*, were active, feeding on the nectar of paperbark blossoms. White-throated Honeyeaters, *Melithreptus*

*albogularis*, were common.

Bananas growing in the local gardens attracted a few Blue-faced Honeyeaters, *Entomyzon cyanotis*, but they were scarce elsewhere. One party of Melville Island Friarbirds, *Philemon gordonii*, were regularly observed feeding on flowering grevillea in a Nhulunbuy garden. Little Friarbirds, *P. citreogularis*, were only seen once or twice but Silver-crowned Friarbirds, *P. argenteiceps*, were both numerous and very vocal.

The Rufous-banded Honeyeater, *Conopophila albogularis*, was present in mangroves while the White-rumped Miner, *Myzantha flavigula*, was a common species in the woodlands.

The environment did not appear to attract finch species. The Crimson Finch, *Neochmia phaeton*, a single pair only, was seen feeding in the marsh grass in Reedy River, below the escarpment. One partly only of Black-ringed (Banded) Finches, *Poephila bichenovii*, was seen on the outskirts of Nhulunbuy.

Both the Olive-backed Oriole, *Oriolus sagittatus*, and the Yellow Oriole, *O. flavocinctus*, were recorded but the latter only once, in the Latram River scrubs.

The Spangled Drongo, *Dicrurus bracteatus*, was generally seen in rain-forest patches.

The Magpie Lark, *Grallina cyanoleuca*, though numerous, showed no signs of flocking as they so often do in winter.

The Pied Butcherbird, *Cracticus nigrogularis*, was seen or heard daily in full voice.

The Great Bowerbird, *Chlamydera nuchalis*, was numerous particularly near habitation where they picked up food. Several bowers were found and photographed.

The Australian Crow, *Corvus orru*, was not observed in any numbers.