

# THE SUNBIRD



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# THE SUNBIRD

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## DIETARY HABITS OF THE BARN OWL (*TYTO ALBA*) FROM DIAMANTINA LAKES NATIONAL PARK

R.A.Palmer

### ABSTRACT

Dietary information from Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) pellets collected in the arid Diamantina Lakes National Park revealed owls specialised on small rodents as prey in spite of their low abundance. This finding does not support the proposal that Barn Owls are generalist feeders in the Australian arid zone where their preferred small mammal prey are scarce.

### INTRODUCTION

The diet of the Barn Owl, *Tyto alba*, is known in many parts of the species extensive world distribution (Taylor 1994). Taylor (1994) observed that feeding habits of Barn Owls living in wetter environments are more specialised towards small mammals than those living in arid places. Reported diets of Barn Owls in the arid interior of Australia consist almost entirely of one or two species of rodent (*e.g.* Morton and Martin 1979, Valente 1981) and do not appear to follow the observed pattern. Taylor (1994) emphasises that these studies have coincided with periods of high rodent abundance when Barn Owls are more obvious in the Australian arid zone and maintains that they will eat a wider range of prey when rodent populations are low (*i.e.* under normal conditions). Alternatively, Morton and Martin (1979) propose that the diet of the owls in arid Australia always contains mainly rodents.

I tested these hypotheses by collecting Barn Owl pellets from a site on Diamantina Lakes National Park (DLNP) when small mammal populations were in low abundance and other seemingly suitable prey was abundant. DLNP is in the arid Channel Country bioregion of far central western Queensland.

## METHOD

Twenty fresh pellets were collected from a small hollow in a coolibah tree (*Eucalyptus coolabah*) (23°41'28"S, 140°59'53"E) on a side branch of Gum Creek in August 1995. The pellets were identified as those belonging to a Barn Owl by their characteristic glazed, black appearance and size (Fleay 1968). Barn Owls had recently been observed while spotlighting to the south (50 km) and east (15 km) of this site. They were the first sightings of the Barn Owl made in this area since 1993 (R.A. Palmer pers. obs.).

The collection tree was located at the edge of an open coolibah woodland lining the channels of Gum Creek. Mitchell grass (*Astrebla* spp.) tussock grasslands on cracking clay soils and sparsely vegetated claypans dominated the surrounding floodplains. The floodplains were interspersed with sand dunes supporting open *Acacia* spp. shrubland on the lower slopes and sparsely distributed clumps of sandhill canegrass (*Zygochloa paradoxa*-) on the upper slopes.

As part of a larger study (on the prey of feral cats) small terrestrial vertebrate species were trapped at 15 pitfall sites on the sand dunes within a 4 km radius of the roost. Pitfall sites each consisted of a continuous 32 m aluminium fly-wire drift fence positioned over 6 evenly spaced containers (PVC pipe and 20 L plastic buckets pits) buried flush with the ground. Trapping was conducted over 3 consecutive nights at 3-4 monthly intervals from August 1994 to November 1996. Birds were also surveyed at each of the 15 pitfall sites using 10 minute point counts late in the afternoon of each trapping period.

Barn Owls generally hunt in open habitats (Morton and Martin 1979, Taylor 1994). Trapping and survey data indicated the timing and the rates of change in rodent populations at DLNP which could be expected after drought breaking rainfall in the arid zone (Dickman *et al.* 1999). The pitfall traps yielded no small mammals in early 1995 after a succession of dry years (1993-1994). After drought breaking rains in January and May trapping yielded up to 2.8 mammals per 100 pitfall nights in July (all juveniles), before reaching a relatively low peak of 5 mammals per 100 trap nights in October 1995 (most breeding). House mice (*Mus domesticus*) were the most common species caught but single specimens of *Sminthopsis crassicaudata* (July 1995) and *S. macroura* (October 1995) were also captured. Budgerigars *Melopsittacus undulatus*, arrived in thousands, breeding in almost every available hollow in the coolibah trees during late winter and spring 1995. Diurnal reptiles were abundant on the sand dunes, but nocturnal reptiles were rare. Frogs were captured only after rain and locusts increased in

abundance following the rains (Australian Plague Locust Commission database, Canberra 2000).

In the laboratory, individual pellets were soaked in warm water and then shaken vigorously to break them apart. The lighter components (hair, bird bones, invertebrate remains, etc.) were separated by flotation from heavier material (larger mammal bones, skull fragments, etc.) with running water so that individual items could be used to identify prey (see Palmer (2001) for full methodology). Small mammal remains were identified to species level by referring to Watts and Aslin (1981) or known museum specimens. Skulls and exoskeletons were used to identify non-mammalian prey to the lowest taxon. The number of individuals per pellet was estimated by pairing jaw or other distinctive fragments. Biomass of prey species was calculated from live animals captured in the pitfall traps at Gum Creek or at neighbouring sites and the Australian Bird and Bat Banding Scheme (2000). Percentage biomass data for each type of prey was used to calculate Levins' niche (dietary) breadth ( $D_B$ ) (Krebs 1999) for diets recorded both by this study and by Debus *et al.* (1999) in 1998 also at DLNP.

## RESULTS

All pellets contained mammalian remains (Table 1). Among the 108 individual prey items, including birds, frogs and invertebrates, were 4 species of mammal. House mice (*Mus domesticus*) dominated the biomass of prey (74.0%, n=64 from 18 pellets). The skeleton of one young long-haired rat (*Rattus villosissimus*) found in two pellets and other mammalian prey comprised (6.9% and 3.0% of the prey biomass, respectively).

Non-mammalian prey contributed 16.1% of the prey biomass (birds in 4, and frogs in 3 pellets) and grasshoppers (26 spur-throated locusts (*Austracris guttulosa*) found in 11 pellets), the second most common item, but a relatively minor prey in terms of biomass (2.2%). Other less common insects were king crickets (Gryllacridoidea) and a beetle.

Table 1 compares the results of this study with those of Debus *et al.* (1999)

## DISCUSSION

At the DLNP in 1998 *Rattus villosissimus* was the dominant prey of Barn Owls (Debus *et al.* 1999). Because that species is considerably larger than the dominant prey in this study, the total number of individual prey and the diversity of mammalian prey recorded is smaller in the 1998 study (Table 1). The number of

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insects taken by owls also decreased between winter 1995 and winter 1998. Despite declines in the frequencies and range of prey identified, dietary profitability increased from a mean biomass of 57.9 g of prey per pellet (this study) to 96.1 g of prey per pellet (Debus *et al.* 1999).

Debus *et al.* (1999) did not measure prey abundance, but Speed (1998) found *R. villosissimus* in low numbers and quite widespread on DLNP in autumn 1998 at the beginning of the Barn Owl breeding season. Debus *et al.* (1999) did find in one nest three near fledged Barn Owls. Clutch size/fledgling success and prey abundance are correlated in the Barn Owl (Taylor 1994) and a nest containing three successfully fledgling chicks suggests the prey species, *R. villosissimus*, was highly accessible in 1998. Dietary specialisation on small mammals was greater ( $D_B 1.08$ ) in 1998 than in 1995 ( $D_B 1.79$ ) (Table 1), when *R. villosissimus* was extremely rare.

### CONCLUSION

The limited data do not provide convincing support of Taylor's hypothesis (Taylor 1994). Non-mammalian vertebrates and invertebrate prey contributed a significant portion of prey biomass. This represents only slight broadening of the diet of Barn Owls despite conditions with few rodents and a high abundance of non-mammalian prey populations. It does not suggest prey-switching away from small mammals. Barn Owls remained rodent specialists (80.9% of the total prey biomass), which is consistent with the results of two previous arid zone studies (Morton *et al.* 1977, Morton and Martin 1979).

*House mouse* (*M. domesticus*) was recorded as the primary prey of Barn Owls in the southern Lake Eyre Basin (Morton and Martin 1979, Palmer 2001). A shift in the primary prey species of Barn Owls (-from *M. domesticus* to *R. villosissimus*) of this magnitude in the same locality has not been reported previously in Australia. However, optimal foraging theory suggests that when this larger more profitable prey species is available Barn Owls will select it over smaller less profitable small mammals even when these smaller species may be more abundant (see Taylor 1994). Hence, dietary shifts of this nature are likely to be relatively common in regions where *R. villosissimus* populations under extreme fluctuations (i.e. completely absent to plagues (see Dickman *et al.* 1999)).

Debus *et al.* (1999) suggests the lack of other small rodent and dasyurids from Barn Owl pellets in July 1998 at DLNP was due to poor habitat conditions.

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Other explanations for the lack of other small mammal species in the diet are: (1) Barn Owls preferentially hunt rodents over dasyurids (Morton and Martin 1979), and/or (2) when given the option, Barn Owls will selectively prey on the most profitable rodent species available (i.e. *R. villosissimus*). Knowledge of the presence/abundance of a highly sought after prey like *R. villosissimus* is recommended when interpreting information gained from serial collections of Barn Owl pellets from a place like DLNP. Caution should be used if Barn Owl pellets are employed to investigate changes in the diversity of small mammal populations over time, as suggested by Debus *et al.* (1999).

Future collections of owl pellets (fresh or accumulated deposits from caves) from DLNP, are of interest, especially from periods when *R. villosissimus* are or were largely absent. Such collections are likely to contain smaller rodents, and may help determine the historical and current status of the threatened rodent *Notomys fuscus* in the region which was first discovered in DLNP while spotlighting on a claypan near Gum Creek in August 1995 (QLD Museum specimen JM11125)-.

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Stefanie Pidcock, David Putland and a referee made valuable comments on the manuscript. Laboratory facilities for analysis of pellets were provided by the Australian Plague Locust Commission, Canberra. The field component was funded by Environment Australia as part of a larger study investigating the ecology of feral cats. Steve van Dyck (Queensland Museum) and Sandy Ingleby (Australian Museum) identified the planigales.

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Table 1. Barn Owls diets for winters 1995 (n=20) and 1998 (n=20) from DLNP, expressed as the minimum number of prey, % frequency of prey items (in parentheses), total prey biomass (g) and % biomass of prey.

Prey species	Mean mass (g)	Winter 1995 (This study)			Winter 1998 (Debus et al. 1999)		
		Minimum number of Individuals	Total mass (g)	% Biomass of prey	Minimum number of Individuals	Total mass (g)	% Biomass of prey
<i>Rattus villosissimus</i>	123	1 (10)	80 <sup>a</sup>	6.9	15 (100)	1845	96.0
<i>Mus domesticus</i>	13.4	64 (90)	857.6	74.0	2 (10)	26.8	1.4
<i>Planigale gilesi</i>	6.4	2 (10)	12.8	1.1			
<i>Planigale tenuirostris</i> <sup>b</sup>	5.6	2 (10)	11.2	1.0			
Microchiropteran bat	11	1 (5)	11	0.9			
Quail ( <i>Turnix</i> spp.)	40		40	3.5			
Budgerigar	25	1 (5)	25	2.2	1 (5)	25	1.3
Variegated fairy-wren	7				1 (5)	7	0.4
Zebra finch	12				1 (5)	12	0.6
Honey eater (unident.)	16	1 (5)	16	1.4			
Small bird (unident.)	20	1(10)	20	1.7			
Frog	13.7	4 (15)	54.8	4.7			
Skink	4.1				1 (5)	4.1	0.2
Beetle	1	1 (5)	1	0.1			
Grasshopper	1	26 (55)	26	2.2	2 (10)	2	0.1
King cricket	1	3 (10)	3	0.3			
Total		108	1158.4	100	23	1921.9	100
Mean per pellet		5.4	57.9		1.2	96.1	
Levins' niche breadth				1.79			1.08

<sup>a</sup> Young rat.

<sup>b</sup> Pitfall trapping would suggest it is a *Planigale tenuirostris*, but it is not possible to distinguish between this species and *P. ingrami* using the dentition of the lower jaw.

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- R. A. PALMER, *Department of Zoology and Entomology, University of Queensland, St. Lucia, QLD 4072.*
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## RECENT RECORDS AND THE STATUS OF THE NORTHERN GIANT-PETREL IN QUEENSLAND

David Stewart

### ABSTRACT

A recent sighting of an immature Northern Giant-Petrel *Macronectes halli* made during a pelagic boat trip east of Southport is reported. The status of the species in Queensland is reviewed from the literature and an unusual number of other previously unreported recent records since 1983. Possible explanations are provided to account for an increase in the number of Northern Giant-Petrels reported in Queensland.

### THE SIGHTING

On 12 July 1997 (at 13:22h E.S.T.), during an organised pelagic boat trip from the Gold Coast, south-eastern Queensland, an immature Northern Giant-Petrel *Macronectes halli* was observed flying low over the water towards the boat approximately 29 km east of the Southport Seaway (28° 02' 06"S, 153° 45' 42"E). The bird flew low across the bow of the boat, approaching to a minimum distance of approximately 10 m, providing excellent views of the structure and colour of its bill, before flying away and eventually out of sight. All the observers present saw the bird and supported the identification. Weather conditions during the observation were overcast, although fine, with south-west to south-east winds to 15 knots and moderate seas with a 1.5 to 2 m swell, producing ideal viewing conditions. The QOSI Records Appraisal Committee accepted this sight record, unanimously (case no. 070). The only other species present during the observation period were the Yellow-nosed Albatross *Diomedea chlororhynchos* and the Australasian Gannet *Morus serrator*.

The bird was a large dark petrel of similar size to the Yellow-nosed Albatrosses, with a thickset body and neck, a large pale bill, disproportionately short and narrow wings and a short wedge-shaped tail. The toes projected beyond the tail. The plumage was predominantly sooty black, with slightly paler under surfaces to the primaries, secondaries and the greater underwing coverts. The bill was long and robust with prominent tubular nostrils and bulbous maxillary unguis. It was pale yellow in colour with reddish maxillary and mandibular unguis. The legs and feet were dark coloured.

The bird was distinguished from the Southern Giant-Petrel by the conspicuous

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reddish tip to its unguis (c.f. pale green tip in the Southern Giant-Petrel) and from the two *Phoebastria* albatrosses, which have glossy black bills in all ages, and longer more pointed wings and tails (Marchant & Higgins 1990)

## REVIEW OF THE STATUS OF NORTHERN GIANT-PETREL IN QUEENSLAND

The species ranges widely in the Southern Ocean and is regularly observed along the southern coastline of Australia and northwards into the Tasman Sea to the latitude of Sydney (approx. 34° S.) (Marchant & Higgins 1990). It is recorded less frequently further north in the Tasman Sea (Storr 1984). The status of the Northern Giant-Petrel in Queensland is uncertain because of the smaller number of records and the potential for confusion with the Southern Giant-Petrel. Storr (1984) states that it is a rare visitor to the coastline of south-eastern Queensland, as far north to 23° 15'S (near Rockhampton). Roberts (1979) mentions an unsubstantiated record from Hervey Bay during July (no year) and Blakers *et al.* (1984) includes only one report from Scarness (25°S, 152°E) in October 1975 (with no further details). Other sightings of birds identified without reporting details have been made at Broadbeach (28° 02'S, 153° 26'E) on the 22 August 1972 (Glasman 1977); Emu Park (23° 14'S, 150° 50'E) near Rockhampton (Frauca 1974); Noosa (26° 23'S, 153° 06'E) 23 August 1978 (Anon. 1978); and Hay Point, near Mackay (21° 16'S, 149° 18'E) in 1986.

Smyth & Corben (1984) reported a sighting from Pt Lookout, North Stradbroke Island, (27° 26'S, 153° 33'E) on 17 July 1983 as the "only Queensland record." Since then ten further Northern Giant-Petrels have been recorded in the state, two observed from boats and eight found as beach-washed specimens. The two birds observed from boats include the current report and another observed approximately 7 km east of the Southport Seaway (27° 55' 25"S, 153° 30' 18"E) on 17 July 1999 (Paul Wallbridge, pers. comm). The beach-washed specimens were all single immature birds from; the mouth of Tooloora Creek, Fraser Island (25° 42' 50"S, 153° 04' 40"E), 1 July 1999 (QMO.31191); south of Dilli Village (25° 36'03"S, 153° 05' 26"E), 10 July 1999 (unaccessioned frozen specimen, Qld Museum); north side of Poyungan Rocks; Fraser Island (25° 24' 40"S, 153° 10' 12"E), 13 June 2000 (unaccessioned frozen specimen, Qld Museum); 14 km south of Double Island Point, Cooloola National Park (26° 00'S, 153° 09'E), 1 July 1999 (unaccessioned frozen specimen\*, Qld Museum); Sunshine Coast (26° 40'S, 153° 06'E), July 1997 (unaccessioned frozen specimen, Qld Museum); Deadmans' Beach, North Stradbroke Island (27° 25'S, 153° 32'E), 6 June 1999 (unaccessioned frozen specimen, Qld Museum); Main Beach, North Stradbroke Island (27° 27'

40°S, 153° 31' 26"E), 17 July 1999 (unaccessioned frozen specimen, Qld Museum); and Southport Spit (27° 58'S, 153° 25'E), 5 August 1984 (QMO. 26089). All 17 Southern Giant-Petrel specimens in the Queensland Museum were re-examined and found to have been correctly identified.

Two beach-washed specimens of *Macronectes* spp. found on Fraser Island, near Poyungan Rocks (25° 25'S, 153° 10'E ) on 26 June 1997 and 7 July 1997 were not collected and remain unidentified because their bills were uniformly coloured and lacked the diagnostic red or green coloured unguis, (Rod Hobson pers. comm.). Since juvenile Northern Giant-Petrels may have uniform yellowish bills, without the reddish wash on the unguis (Marchant & Higgins 1990), and some Northern x Southern Giant-Petrel hybrids also have uniform coloured bills (Hunter 1982), the specific identity of these two birds is not known.

The modest increase in the number of records of the species reported from the coast of Queensland since 1983 may represent, a small expansion of its range, a greater awareness of the species among local observers, or both. The increased reporting of juvenile Northern Giant-Petrels in Queensland could be a result of increased breeding success at some islands (e.g. Iles Crozet) following the recovery of seal populations (Voisin 1988) but other populations (e.g. at Macquarie Island) have almost halved in the past two decades (Gales and Brothers 1998).

**\*Footnote: [A bird in its second year banded as an nestling on Possession Island, Iles Crozet on 17 January 1998 for the French Banding Scheme.]**

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- DAVID STEWART, *Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, Technical Service, P.O. Box 42, Kenmore, Q 4069.*
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## THE BIRDS OF EGRET REEF NORTH QUEENSLAND

J.A McLean

### ABSTRACT

Twenty four bird species are reported from Egret Reef, a submerged tropical coral reef, partly exposed at low tide within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. Bird observations were made from August 1983 to November 2000 during 34 visits incorporating all months of the year. A record of the Australasian Gannet considerably beyond the usual northern limit of this species is included. No information about the avifauna of Egret Reef, nor similar surveys of other North Queensland reefs, has been published previously.

### STUDY AREA AND METHODS

Egret Reef is situated at 15° 29' S, 145° 25' E, 16 km east of Cooktown, North Queensland. The closest reef is Boulder Reef 4km to the north and the nearest coral cay is Hope Islands 28 km south. Egret Reef is contained within the Cairns section of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and classified as a habitat protection zone [*Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority Map BRA Q 155 February 1992*]. The somewhat sickle-shaped reef is approximately 4km long and 2.5km wide with the convex side facing south. A description of its general climate can be found in McLean (1996). The reef periphery is steep, dropping away abruptly to 20m deep, except on its much shallower and sandier northern side where there are numerous partly drying small reefs and coral patches (Gruning 1973).

Tides between 0.1m and 0.6m make it possible to walk a section of this reef from east to west, or vice versa, but on a 1.0m tide only the tops of the highest areas are exposed. A 1.4m tide covers the entire reef. The only structures for roosting birds visible at Egret Reef are two small conical concrete navigation beacons approximately 2m in diameter, 8m and 2.5m high, respectively, lying a few metres apart at the north-western edge of the reef and two small relic posts nearby, 1.5m and 1.0m in height, respectively. Tides below 0.9m expose a small prominent sandbank 60m east of the beacons, as well as other sandy patches scattered about the northern section of the reef.

Every calendar month was included at least once in the total of 34 visits to the reef spanning the period from 26 August 1983 to 18 November 2000. June was

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the least represented month with only one visit between 15-19 in 1992. August and November each received the maximum number of (5) visits per month, overall. In the first nine years visits were brief but during the remaining eight years visits were of longer duration and more frequent. The duration of visits varied from half a day to nine days. The entire southern portion of the reef was walked on two occasions from west to east and back again on 16 June 1992 and 18 September 1993. Walking surveys in the south-west, west and north-west areas of the reef were carried out on 20 May 1986, 24 July 1991, 2 August 1991, 16 January 1992, 31 August 1993, 23 December 1995, 24 May 1997 and 28 March 1998. All the remaining observations were made from a vessel at anchor near the western end of Egret Reef. A list of bird species recorded over all visits is provided in Appendix 1.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Over the 17 years since 1983, 24 bird species were recorded from Egret Reef. All, except the Australasian Gannet, are relatively common throughout the northern section of the Great Barrier Reef (Kikkawa 1976). The literature suggests the Townsville area of North Queensland is the northern limit for Australasian Gannet (Wodziki & Stein 1958). A single sighting of an adult bird roosting with Brown Boobies on the smallest beacon on 8 August 1997 is therefore of some significance.

Ten species of the Family Laridae were represented although only two of these species were common. Crested Terns were recorded during almost all visits and Bridled Terns, on almost all visits during summer. Black-naped Terns and Lesser Crested Terns were less frequent in summer and from summer to winter, respectively. Silver Gull, Roseate Tern, Common Tern, Little Tern, Common Noddy and Black Noddy were the least recorded species. At low tides the sandbank near the beacons attracted groups of up to six species of terns (ie Roseate, Crested, Lesser Crested, Common, Little and Bridled Terns) for resting, preening or bathing.

Only three species of Palearctic waders were seen, two only once (Eastern Curlew and Red Knot). Whimbrels were recorded throughout the year. The maximum count of 15 birds from sand and reef areas was made during one reef walk, west to east and return, on 18 September 1993. The absence of other species of waders (particularly Ruddy Turnstone) probably reflects the irregular and limited exposure of suitable feeding grounds and the lack of suitable high water roosting areas for them. Nevertheless greater coverage of maximum reef areas at low tide could increase the number and variety of waders recorded in future surveys.

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Brown Booby, Pied Cormorant and Eastern Reef Egret were seen regularly on almost all visits. During high tides they roosted mainly on the two beacons and to a lesser extent, the relic posts, often with Crested Terns and, occasionally, other species of tern. The abundance of Brown Booby (up to 40 individuals were counted per visit) was considerably greater than from islands and waters in the Cooktown area (pers. obs.). Despite its name Egret Reef yielded only a maximum count of 15 Eastern Reef Egret at any one time utilising the reef. At least 170 Eastern Reef Egret were recorded from just one of the two isles at Hope Islands in December 1994 (McLean 1996). Most other islands nearby also support more Eastern Reef Egret than does Egret Reef. Pelican, Large Egret, White-faced Heron, Silver Gull and Fork-tailed Swift were rarely seen. Single Ospreys observed during two summer visits were the only raptors recorded.

Pied Imperial-Pigeons were seen migrating regularly over Egret Reef, usually in small flocks. Flocks of up to 8 birds were seen flying south on 10 August 1997. In mid September flocks of up to 25 birds were counted occasionally. After the breeding season, from late January, flocks of this species were seen flying north. By the end of March, flocks of up to 12 birds were still seen migrating northwards, but less frequently. During October, November and December small groups comprising up to 10 birds also flying north were thought to be commuting to mainland feeding grounds from Hope Islands.

One small unidentifiable bird (possibly a *Monarcha spp.*) was seen flying east at dawn during heavy rain on 27 December 1997. It flew low and laboriously and appeared to be waterlogged.

The total of 24 species recorded from Egret Reef compares well with the total of 57 species from the larger vegetated Hope Islands nearby (McLean 1996). Thirty-seven kilometres north of Egret Reef is the smaller vegetated island of Conical Rock (with a reef 1.5km long) that supports 22 bird species (14 of which are shared with Egret Reef, 6 of them in similar numbers) (McLean 2000).

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## APPENDIX 1: SPECIES LIST

### **Australasian Gannet** *Morus serrator*

One adult rested with several Brown Boobies on the smallest beacon on the afternoon of 8 August 1997; a rare vagrant for this latitude.

### **Brown Booby** *Sula leucogaster*

Up to 37 counted at the beacons in April 1999; 40 bathing 1km at sea May 2000, smaller numbers seen from the reef and surrounding waters during the remaining months, resting on beacons and posts.

### **Pied Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax varius*

Small numbers (1-6 individuals) usually seen flying or resting mainly on the tallest beacon, posts, or exposed reef areas on flooding tides.

### **Australian Pelican** *Pelecanus conspicillatus*

One present in shallow water on the northern side of the reef August 1997.

### **White-faced Heron** *Egretta novaehollandiae*

One on exposed reef, western end, 29 August 1993.

### **Great Egret** *Egretta alba*

A single bird flying 26 December 1997 and one bird resting on the smallest beacon then later on one of the posts 29 October 2000.

**Eastern Reef Egret** *Egretta sacra*

Seen on most visits, 1-15 birds on reef areas at low tide, resting on beacons and flying. The ratio of white birds to grey birds varied considerably between visits.

**Osprey** *Pandion haliaetus*

A single flying adult, 28 January 1993 and a single adult perched on the smallest beacon 22 December 1998.

**Eastern Curlew** *Numenius madagascariensis*

One bird flying south 1 November 2000.

**Whimbrel** *Numenius phaeopus*

From 1 to 15 birds seen in most months on exposed reef and sandy areas and flying.

**Red Knot** *Calidris canutus*

A small flock of 4 birds resting at low tide at a sandy area towards the mid-western end of the reef on 31 August 1993.

**Silver Gull** *Larus novaehollandiae*

Only one to two birds seen on four visits during summer and winter.

**Lesser Crested Tern** *Sterna bengalensis*

1-5 birds seen over most of the latter half of the year; flying and resting on the beacon sandbank with other terns.

**Roseate Tern** *Sterna dougallii*

A pair in breeding plumage recorded on the beacon sandbank with other terns on 30 November 1997.

**Crested Tern** *Sterna bergii*

From 1-65 birds seen almost every visit, flying, on beacons and on most reef areas at low tide.

**Black-naped Tern** *Sterna sumatrana*

One to eight birds observed from October to December, flying, or on beacons and some reef areas at low tide.

**Common Tern** *Sterna hirundo*

One to five birds seen only from the beacon sandbank resting with other terns on 28 November 1997 and again on 6 May 2000 by themselves.

**Little Tern** *Sterna albifrons*

Two to five occasionally seen from September to November; 60 all resting at the beacon sandbank on 20 September 1993. Often seen feeding around the perimeter of the reef.

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**Bridled Tern** *Sterna anaethetus*

Flocks of up to 50 feed more often from the near off-reef waters from September to April, smaller numbers over Egret Reef.

**Common Noddy** *Anous stolidus*

Two summer records of single birds, one flying on 28 January 1992 and the other roosting on a beacon 30 November 1997.

**Black Noddy** *Anous minutus*

One to three birds seen some summer and winter months; 50 in a single flock feeding 3 km west of Egret Reef, 30 November 1997.

**Pied Imperial-Pigeon** *Ducula bicolor*

Regular passage migrant passing over Egret Reef in small flocks. On 10 August 1997 and 17-20 September 1993 about 8 birds per flock were heading south on occasions 25 birds per flock were noted. By late January to early February similar numbered flocks leave their southern breeding islands and migrate north; small numbers were still seen in late March.

**Fork-tailed Swift** *Apus pacificus*

A solitary bird flying south on 3 November 2000.

**Unknown species**

One small species of Passerine briefly observed early morning in poor light and heavy rain struggling to fly eastwards on 27 December 1997.

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## SOUTHERN EMU-WREN AT GIRRAWEE NATIONAL PARK A NEW LOCALITY FOR THE SPECIES IN QUEENSLAND

Michael Mathieson and Llew Rintoul

The Southern Emu-wren *Stipiturus malachurus* is a bird of heathlands throughout its range. Although the nominate race is common in New South Wales and Victoria, it is listed as Vulnerable in Queensland (*Nature Conservation Legislation Amendment Regulation (No. 2) 1997*). While Southern Emu-wrens are most well-known from the extensive coastal sandplains in Cooloolo National Park (McFarland 1994), there are also unconfirmed and historical records for the Great Sandy hinterland, Sunshine Coast (including Bribie Island) and Flinders Peak south of Ipswich (Storr 1984; Higgins *et al.* 2001; D. McFarland *pers. comm.*). A population is also present in the Mt Clunie-Mt Barney area of the Main Range on the NSW border (NatureSearch 2001 Database, EPA). This note documents a sighting of the Southern Emu-wren at Girraween National Park (28° 51' S, 151° 58' E) in the New England Tableland biogeographic region of the state, approximately 45 km south of Stanthorpe.

On May 31, 1999, the authors observed four Southern Emu-wrens, three males and one female, in low shrubs and ferns adjacent to and in a swamp along Racecourse Creek in the south-east corner of the park. The birds were very active, moving through vegetation consisting of Pouched Coral Fern *Gleichenia dicarpa* and various grasses and sedges, including Red-fruit Sawsedge *Gabnia sieberiana*. At the very edge of the swamp, clumps of Green Wattle *Acacia irrorata var. irrorata* were present.

This sighting represents the most westerly sighting of the species in Queensland to date. The location is approximately 300 km from the species' apparent Queensland stronghold in Cooloolo National Park and approximately 80 km from the nearest Queensland sightings in the southern Main Range region. However, the species does occur close by in northern New South Wales. Here, it inhabits swamps and sedgelands to the east and south-east of Bald Rock (A. Morris *et al.* 1981), some 25 km from the Girraween site. Given the presence of suitable habitat in inaccessible Commonwealth land (Military Training Area) in New South Wales immediately adjacent to Girraween NP, the species may indeed be resident only a few kilometres away. It is unknown if the birds observed are part of a resident population within the park or were an itinerant party. Given the secretive nature of the species and relative remoteness and inaccessibility of the site, either scenario is possible.

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### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to David McFarland and Geoffrey Smith for commenting on this note.

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- L. RINTOUL, *PO Box 58, Mt Nebo, Q 4520.*
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## BROOD DISPLACEMENT OF NOISY MINER BY BLUE-FACED HONEYEATER

Robert Lethbridge

While the feeding of other species by Blue-faced Honeyeaters *Entomyzon cyanotus* has been described on several occasions (Higgins et. al. 2001); the unusual behaviour of Blue-faced Honeyeaters described here occurred at my home about 21 km northeast of Meandarra. I first noticed a Noisy Miner *Manorina melanocephala* nest in a creeper *Petrea volubis*, which runs up one of our verandah posts, on 5 December 2000. In the nest were 3 eggs, typically those of the Noisy Miner. The nest was also typically that of a Noisy Miner being a bowl of fine dry grasses and twigs bound with spider's webs and thinly lined with very fine grasses and some mammal hair. It was built in the foliage and woven onto the thicker stems of the creeper. The height of the nest from the floor of the verandah was about 1.75 metres.

The 3 eggs were similar in colour and markings to those photographed in Beruldsen (1980) and illustrated in Slater (1986). They were ovate, creamy-white with a pink tinge and liberally marked with small spots and blotches of bright reddish-brown with lavender markings. The Blue-faced Honeyeater eggs on the other hand are pale pinkish-buff and sparingly marked over the large end with larger reddish-brown spots and blotches and underlying marks of lavender (Beruldsen 1980).

Over the next 4 or 5 days a Blue-faced Honeyeater continually pestered the sitting Noisy Miner until it finally drove the Noisy Miner off the nest. Immediately after the brooding Noisy Miner was driven off the nest the Blue-faced Honeyeater sat on the eggs. The Noisy Miner family did not leave the vicinity of the nest and eggs but stayed nearby mobbing the Blue-faced Honeyeater regularly and attempting to drive it off the nest.

The Blue-faced Honeyeater continued to brood the eggs but did not lay any eggs of its own. The first egg hatched on 15 December and the remaining two hatched the next day. On 17 December I noticed the Noisy Miners feeding the chicks whenever the Blue-faced Honeyeater was away from the nest. The Blue-faced Honeyeater was also noticed feeding the chicks. Later a second Blue-faced Honeyeater was seen feeding the chicks. This was the first definite indication that two Blue-faced Honeyeaters were involved. The adult Noisy Miners

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continued to feed the chicks whenever the Blue-faced Honeyeater was away from the nest.

On 30 December the young birds fledged but only the adult Noisy Miners maintained any interest in them. These adults continued to feed the young birds and to watch their early attempts at flying. The Blue-faced Honeyeaters were not seen again in the vicinity of the nest. Nor were they seen to take any further part in the life of the young Noisy Miners.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Thanks to Ian Venables for commenting on this note.

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## E. A. R. LORD LETTERS

Introduced by Lloyd Nielsen

The letters reproduced below and written to Keith Walker by E.A.R. Lord are historically important. Lord was one of the ornithological pioneers in south-eastern Queensland and these letters emphasise that fact. Even in this selection of six letters, his thoroughness and meticulous attitude and his ability as an observer is obvious. The letters need little other comment and almost thirty of them are held in our library, available to researchers and members who are interested.

I first made contact with E.A.R. Lord in 1957 after joining the RAOU (now Birds Australia) earlier that year as a lad just left school. With no one sharing a similar interest close by and literature almost non-existent (only Neville Cayley's "*What Bird is That?*" and the older Leach's "*Australian Bird Book*" were available), Mr Lord became my mentor during the next five years before his untimely death. I had a continuous stream of questions - he answered them all! When I acquired my own vehicle in 1959, one of the first things I did was to visit him. I often camped overnight with him and his brother-in-law, doing long walks with him through the day into the then wild country about Murphys Creek. He delighted in showing people the nesting site of his pair of Powerful Owls, regarded as an extreme rarity in those days.

E.A.R. Lord moved to Murphys Creek in the early 1900s where he studied the birds of that district for over 50 years. He gained an amazing knowledge of the birds of his area and a remarkable "feel" for which species should occur in nearby areas and habitats. It was a time when an interest in birds was often seen as nothing more than a strange hobby. The word 'environment' was never used. Country birders were quite isolated (Lord was my nearest birding acquaintance - about 100 km away). Even amongst birders, it was difficult for it was an era when some people believed that nothing new would turn up. That Lord gained such a deep understanding and knowledge of birds in these circumstances, is amazing. Yet he got nearly all of it right - a point which emphasises his observational skills.

Lord was a prolific letter writer and note keeper. He contributed many articles to *The Emu*, *The Bird Observer* and *The Darling Downs Naturalist* as well as notes and sightings to the Qld Branch of the RAOU which published a single sheet newsletter and meeting report. His major contribution was a paper entitled "*Murphy's Creek Birds*" published in *The Emu*. Many district lists appeared in *The Emu* during the first 60 years or so of publication but his *Birds of Murphys Creek*

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was one of the best of them, containing a large amount of useful data, documenting many changes over the 50 years and constituting an important standing reference - still a basis for modern day ornithologists working in that area. He made a few surprising records e.g. one of a flock of Purple-crowned Lorikeet well out of known range. He recorded a quail with a bright red rump, a bird I was to see later in large numbers at Inverramsay. He also spoke of a large, strange quail with a black "U" on the breast - a bird which he had shot and handled and like no other known quail. Knowing his ability, I never doubted that the latter existed.

His observations were accurate, as seen in the crow/raven notes contained in his letters. He had the differences correctly worked out (except for the eye colour of the adult crow, but that was a widespread belief at that time), despite identification notes of the two species in Cayley's *"What Bird is That?"* being very wrong. Interestingly, mention is made of George Mack in his letters - then Director of the Queensland Museum. Lord with his keen observational mind had little time for Mack who had an unusual and dogmatic slant on ornithology. Mack was loudly adamant there was only one species of corvid and that it should be known as a "Craven", a situation that upset Lord to quite an extent. Mack was one who firmly believed that all Australian birds had been discovered and that was that!

Lord was keenly interested in distribution and this can be seen in his diplomatic questioning of Keith Walker about the birds Walker had recorded from Oakey and the eastern Darling Downs. (All were correct as revealed in a later reply to Walker's answers).

Through the fifties and early sixties, there were sightings of White-backed Magpies in SE Queensland. In those days, it was considered a distinct species so we needed to prove it to the doubters. I remember two birds suddenly turning up at Jandowae in a flock in the early 1960s. Keith Walker took the issue up, well supported by Lord and finally it was accepted. Lord's theory was that they had followed grasshopper plagues from areas in southern Australia which moved northward - quite a plausible theory (and possibly correct) from the fact that sightings of white-backed birds along the way coincided with the movements of the plagues. He had documented the routes of the grasshoppers as reported in the media. Again, no one believed the Indian Myna was present on the Darling Downs but Lord with the help of Walker was instrumental in establishing the fact.

Looking at his letters today, the formality is fascinating - even though he had met Keith Walker a number of times and corresponded with him for quite a few

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years (and Lord was quite a few years his senior), Walker was always addressed as “Mr Walker” and the letter was always signed “E.A.R. Lord”, never Edward or Earl. In fact I never knew him to use any of his Christian names (Edward Athol Rutland). People close to him called him Earl although rather puzzlingly, to some he was “Ernie” e.g. Noel Jack (Jack 1961) (secretary of the Queensland branch of the RAOU for many years - both knew each other very well).

In summary, E.A.R. Lord was a very competent field ornithologist and a pioneer during his time. I am grateful for what he taught me about birds, that I was able to spend a few years in correspondence with him and to accompany him on rambles into the bush. It is fitting that some of his writings are preserved - I only wished I still retained the large pile of letters he wrote to me over those 5 years.

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### LETTER 1

*Airleas,*

*Murphys Creek,*

*March 15, 1953*

*Dear Mr Walker,*

*I have a letter from A. J. Keast in which he shows appreciation for the Silveryeyes that you procured for him. He said that he had written to you so you will have received it before now.*

*He seems to be doing a considerable amount of work with the Zosterops and your contribution appears to have been a valuable assistance to him.*

*I enjoyed your paper on the several species of birds discussed at your last months meeting. You have studied your birds well. Having the Museum skins would assist members in field identification of the many species.*

*I note Mr Mack's view of the Crow and Raven. The Check List Committee and the authors of our books of reference apparently do not share his views.*

*Regarding the calls of the two birds, the Crow does caw but I have never heard the Raven croak. Its call is a mournful one which may be described as "oh-oh-ob-oh", high pitched and on a descending scale. [p. 2.] The long feathers on the throat and the call are the prominent features of distinguishing the Raven from the Crow. At close range the white eye of the Raven can be seen clearly while that of the Crow is light hazel, except as you say with young birds which have brown eyes. In the hand, as you have said, the under feathers of the two birds are quite different.*

*Now I wonder if you have observed the movement of the Pied Currawong recently. They have been coming in from their breeding grounds in our eastern ranges each morning for the last two weeks and are travelling towards the west. None stay more than a few minutes here and there is no sign of them returning in the evening. This happened during the war when there were military camps near Toowoomba and I was informed that the birds gathered at the camp dumps to feed. I believe there is a camp out Drayton way now and it may be the destination of the birds that pass over here.*

*[p. 3.]*

*Bird life is exceptionally good here just now. The February rain and an abundance of food has made things ideal for both insect and honey-feeding birds. Grasshoppers are a big attraction for many birds as the insects are in numbers and there are numerous young 'hoppers coming from the hatcheries. All the black and white birds are crowding these hopper patches and Plovers and Herons and even Black Ducks are feeding on them.*

*I had a ride out into the Paradise Creek country recently but there is little response in plant life yet. Flannel flowers are making the best recovery. It will take several years for the wattles, hoveas and other plants to come back to their former prolific growth.*

*Bird life too has not recovered to any extent. No doubt the food supply is the reason, as every thing was destroyed by the fires. There was some indication that Swifts had been camping on the cliff faces of Red Rock, and there was also sign of Peregrine Falcons having nested there.*

*[p. 4.]*

*I am interested in the suggestion of an Easter Camp as discussed by the Club. The idea seems a good one as it would give members an opportunity of thoroughly investigating the bird, plant and insect life of the interesting places on the Toowoomba area and beyond.*

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*My one regret is that I am not able to attend these gatherings owing to the difficulty in leaving the farm. These days help is unprocureable or unreliable if one can procure it.*

*The weather just at present does not look too hopeful for the Toowoomba Show. The showers are becoming more frequent and each a little heavier.*

*I wonder if you have had a visit from Mr Noel Jack? In a letter a few days ago he mentioned that he is in Toowoomba and had planned to go out to Oakey to see you.*

*My regards and good wishes to you and Mrs Walker, also Mr Grant if you see him.*

*Yours Sincerely,  
E. A. R. Lord.*

## LETTER 2

*Airleas,  
Murphys Creek,*

*September 12, 1954*

*Dear Mr Walker,*

*I am indeed sorry that I was not able to hear your talk which you presented to the R.A.O.U. at their August meeting.*

*I am greatly impressed with the number, and the variety of species that you have recorded, some of which I had not expected would have been within the range of the area you have covered. I do hope that something can be done in having your valuable record published as such records to my thinking are of extreme value to ornithologists in revealing the range of our birds and the type of country that they occupy. The Emu is the Magazine most suited to the publication of such records, but from what I can learn from Mr Robertson, the Hon. Editor is a much overworked man and has more material than he is capable of handling for some considerable time ahead. I note that it has been suggested that the Downs Naturalists Club may be able to find a place for your records in their Journal, this I agree with, but, it seems probable that the journal could not cope with your records in full, and they would only be read within the Journal's circulation whereas they deserve more than that.*

*[p. 2.]*

*I wonder if the Melbourne B.O.C. could handle your notes? Do you think it would be worth while seeing what Roy Wheeler would have to say about it?*

*There [are] some species that I had not expected to find within the boundaries of the Darling Downs, even though there [is] a considerable variation in the types of country. The owls I am*

*interested in too as they seem to be well represented on your list, and I presume you have had them with you during the winter months. The food on the Downs with its mouse plagues may have a big attraction for owls and hawks, both of which have been particularly scarce here for some months, even the Powerful Owls have deserted their nesting place. It is perhaps that the continued use of the one area for breeding over a period of ten years or more has exhausted the natural food supply and caused them to move to some other part of the district. Where do you find them?*

*Now for a series of questions about your bird[s] which I hope you will have time to answer. Diamond dove. Have these birds always been with you or are they recent arrivals, and how are their numbers? "They do not occur here." What part of the Downs do they inhabit?*

[p. 3.]

*The Crested Grebe you have found at Cooby dam, do you find them elsewhere?*

*Where are the Lotus birds? Do you find them near Oakey or are they only on the Western Downs? I think it was mentioned in the Club's Journal that they occurred on the Broadwater.*

*What about the Water Rail. Where do you find them? I have seen odd birds here but they are very rare.*

*The Jabiru would be I think about the Dalby area. Do you find them elsewhere?*

*Are the Musk and Blue-Billed Duck found on other waters than Cooby Dam?*

*Are the winking Owls plentiful and have you heard their call? Where do you find them?*

*How do you find the Sooty Owl numbers and do they occur generally over the district? Do these and other owls follow the mouse plagues?*

*Are the Musk Lorikeets general in your area or are they casual visitors?*

*Do you see many of the Eastern Rosellas and have you found them crossing with the Pale-bead? If they cross which parent do they most resemble? "I have never seen the Eastern Rosella on this side of the Range."*

[p. 4.]

*Red-backed Kingfishers were regular arrivals at the end of August each year for many years and reared one to two broods while with us. Of recent years they have not come to us. Do you have them regularly and at what times do they arrive and depart? Are they plentiful and what type of country do they occupy?*

*Satin Flycatcher.* Are these birds regular visitors or accidental? Are they plentiful and do they breed in your area? I have only one doubtful record for them here.

Of your seven Warblers and Thornbills, what are their species and are they all regular visitors or stationary birds?

*Red-browed Treecreeper.* Where do you find them? Are they stationary or migratory and do they breed in the Oakey district? I have never seen them on this side of the Range. We have the Brown Treecreeper and the White-throated.

What species of Pardalote have you? I see you have 4 or 5 species mentioned.

*Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater.* Are these birds stationary or migratory and do they breed at Oakey. I had them here in numbers in 1936 for several months but have not seen them here since.

*Black-chinned Honeyeater.* Are they always with you or are they spasmodic? I have records of them in 1930-31 but none since.

[p. 5.]

*Bell Miners.* What a surprise to hear that you have them. Where do you find them? I have heard of them having been found near Spring Bluff many years ago but cannot say if the report is authentic.

The Rufous and Brown Songlarks I presume are always in your area. The former was once a common bird here but spasmodic of recent years.

Brown Songlarks are only accidental and I have only one breeding record for them.

Horsfield Busblark would be common and stationary on the Downs I should imagine. I have only seen them twice in this area and once found a nest which I think belonged to one pair that I saw but was not used.

You would probably find your Satin Bowerbirds in the Mt. Mobullen and Ravensbourne scrubs and probably the Regent in the same areas plus the Toowoomba scrub.

Where do you see the Spotted Bowerbird? Cecil Cameron told me that they occasionally came to Biddeston but were only occasionally there. I have met them from Warra westwards but have never seen them this side of Dalby.

I am sorry to ask so much which will I know take some of your valuable time but I am extremely interested in your birds and trust that you will let me have the answers to this sheaf of questions.

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[p. 6.]

*Mr Jack told me that he posted John Gilbert's records, "An Explorer and His Birds" on to you after he had read it. You will have found many items referring to the birds of the Darling Downs from his 1844 records which should be helpful to you in compiling your list of early day birds of the Downs. Gilbert's notes in his diary for the whole trip even to the day he was most unfortunately killed give one a great knowledge of the birds of those days and one can compare them with present day records from the same areas. Many I fear will be found missing now. Paradise Parrots and Squatter Pigeons have gone or almost extinct.*

*How are your migrants showing up? Mine are late this year in spite of the wonderful spring weather that we have had and are still having. The first Pallid Cuckoo appeared on Sept. 4. and a second bird has just been seen. Our Forest Kingfisher traveled from north to south past the house on Sept. 5. but none have been seen or heard since. Sacred Kingfishers are still absent. Two Olive-backed Orioles on Aug. 23 and a few Figbirds are the total migrants seen or heard to date.*

*With regards*

*Yours Sincerely,  
E. A. R. Lord.*

### **LETTER 3**

*Airleas,  
Murphys Creek,*

*Sep. 22, 1954*

*Dear Mr Walker,*

*My thanks for your letter so full of valuable and interesting information concerning the birds I referred to in my letter to you. I will not answer your letter in full just now as I want to get this away to you by today's mail.*

*Mr Jack had told me that you had some interesting information regarding the White-backed Magpie and I note from what you say that you have several records of your own and of others of the presence of the white-backed Magpie on the Downs. I know what you have to face when you attempt to show that some bird not generally known in a certain area does exist there. We had that trouble over the Indian Minah which now has proved to the satisfaction of even the doubters. Personally I have not the slightest doubt that all, or anyhow most of the birds you have quoted are fine white-backs. My bird did not show so much white on the wings as your sketch of the Oakey birds. When you look at the White-backed Magpie in Leach's book you have my bird's marking exactly. My old bird has been missing since 1945 having been in control of the house area for ten years.*



[p. 2.]

*During the dry hot weather of January 1945 when all birds came to the creek and railway line in search of food my old White-back was seen fairly constantly about the railway station where food scraps from train passengers and grain spilled from wagons attracted many magpies. Since then I have not seen him and fear he was shot as he had attracted the notice of a number of local people who remarked on his white back. You ask if I can suggest a reason for the White-backed birds coming here from the south, well at the time that my bird came here there was an invasion of grasshoppers which came from southern N.S.W. and crossed the border at the Mungindi - Goondiwindi area, coming across the downs and moving from here eastwards to the coast. At the time there were several reports of White-backed Magpies in the wake of the grasshopper plague and I feel quite sure that the birds had followed through from the south, and having got so far from home remained, those who could not find White-backed mates having paired with black-backs to breed thus becoming established with us.*

[p. 3.]

*One has not to look back far for examples of certain Birds migrating for some reason from their natural habitat and becoming established in other places. Where could we have a more [missing word] case than the Crested Pigeon. In all my long experience of the Dawson, Downs and Lockyer areas I had never seen the Crested Pigeon before about 1931 when it was reported from many parts of South Queensland and the Central Highlands as well as in coastal areas of New South Wales and Victoria. Since that time they have become the common pigeon in all those areas.*

*I am glad to see you taking so lively an interest in the study of the White-backed Magpie and I sincerely hope that your photos are a success as proof of your claims. You may be sure that I will give you my full support and will endeavour to get what information I can on the subject.*

*Do not worry about Gilbert's book, there is no need to return it. I will be glad to hear of any additional information that you get from the Mitchell Library.*

[p. 4.]

*Noel Jack has told me that you are in agreement with me regarding the Crow-Raven controversy. Even though the two species are recognised by the R.A.O.U. Council there seem to be some who lump them as variations of the one species. Those who take this attitude show very definitely that they have had little experience of the two birds. I had a man from Cooranga*

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*North here a few days ago a Mr de Warren who worked for some years with Neville Cayley and has traveled widely over Australia in his work of surveyor-engineer. I asked his view of the Crow-Raven problem and found that he was well acquainted with those two species and the Little Crow. He told me that he has seen an odd Raven at Cooranga North but the Crow is the common bird there, with an odd record of the Little Crow. He is very definite in classing the Crow and Raven as distinct species and described the general features and call of the Raven just as I know them. Like myself he found that the Crow fades out as you go west from Chinchilla and the Raven is then the dominant species.*

*Please remember me to Mr Grant when you see him. My regards to yourself and Mrs Walker*

*Yours Sincerely,*

*E. Lord.*

#### LETTER 4

*Airleas,*

*Murphys Creek,*

*October 17, 1954*

*Dear Mr Walker,*

*I had intended writing to you soon after your visit to these parts on October 3. but various things have cropped up to delay my plans.*

*It was nice to see you and Mrs Walker and the other Club member, and I thoroughly enjoyed the day out with you all. Birds were I fear far from their usual numbers, but I think the wild flowers were quite good in their variety though perhaps not in quantity, anyhow from the expressions of those who were present I take it that they were well satisfied with what they saw.*

*I think it was quite a nice finish for the day to see those little ducks and their parent and the other adult ducks at the swamp.*

*I saw four Royal Spoonbills and three White-necked Herons with some White-faced Herons and Spur-wing Plovers at the swamp a few days ago. The Spoonbills got on the wing and circled to a great height then went on a glide towards the Cooby Dam. Ducks have increased in their numbers since the rain started and many can be seen at pools on the flats.*

*[p.2.]*

*Now for your letter in reply to my inquiry regarding your birds. The appearance of owls in numbers on the Downs shows definitely that plentiful food supply is the great attraction. The fact that they have been almost totally absent from here during the winter-spring months is*

sufficient indication that their movements are governed by food supply. This is also the case with all other species of birds that periodically move from one habitat to another. It is very unfortunate that so many owls are losing their lives while doing valuable work. In the case of the banks there would be little risk of them being caught by cars while feeding by day. On Thursday I saw a Black-shouldered Kite perched on a corn stalk at Withcott in a field recently harvested. The reason for its being there was very obvious as mice naturally would be feeding on fallen grain.

Regarding the Powerful Owl it seems evident that birds from my area could work over the Range to the Haden-Crows Nest areas where you have heard of their presence, and the birds you saw at Highland Plains would not be so far from our area. [p.3.] The Powerful Owl has a wide range from Victoria to the Rockhampton district and inland from Rockhampton to Duaranga and up the Dawson to Taroom. Possibly they may be known further north. I wonder which [why(?)] such a bird who would have few enemies is not more plentiful in the areas in which it is found.

The Lotus bird is a bit of a problem. I had not known of its presence west of the Dividing Range until Mrs Makin announced in an article to the Wild Life that she had them at Columboola, and then Mr May saw them at Myall Park. I wonder where they crossed to the inland waters? Their southern radius seems to be north of Sydney and it would appear that there was a chance of them crossing to the Barwon in the Moree area and working up to the Condamine.

I would expect to hear of them at Broadwater as that is not so far from the Chinchilla-Columboola area. They are plentiful at Lake Clarendon and I would quite expect them on the swamp near Helidon. I have not seen the Crested Grebe at Lake Clarendon but they should be there as conditions are very suitable and the fact that they are at Cooby brings them near us.

[p.4.]

I wrote that the Water Rail is really accidental to your district as it is here. They require marshy land and well covered swamps I think.

The Jabiru is a bird I would expect to find at Lake Clarendon but have so far not seen there. You have them at Broadwater and I think they occur along the coastal areas though they are not on Noel Jack's list.

It is quite a surprise to hear of the Winking Owl being in the town area of Oakey and most interesting to know that they are there. They are decidedly rare here and are only heard occasionally. Yes their call is very distinctive and could not be mistaken for the call of any other owl.

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*The Sooty Owl seems to be a rare bird with you. I have not seen them here but Mr de Warren, Kooranga North tells me that he has seen them there in moderate numbers.*

*We have Rainbow, Scaly-breast and Little Lorikeet in good numbers but so far I have not seen any Musk Lorikeets. These latter only come occasionally but plentiful when they do appear. I note that you find them in company with Scaly-breasts. W. Barker states that they are very plentiful at Stanthorpe when the fruit season is on in company with Rainbows and Scaly-breasts.*

[p.5.]

*From what you say the Eastern Rosella is confined to the Dividing Range from Ravensborne to Cunninghams Gap. They do not seem to come to this side of the Range except one case at Withcott some years ago which was mentioned by Cecil Cameron. Barker finds them stationary at Stanthorpe and has seen crosses with the Pale-headed Rosella.*

*You, like us seem to have the Red-backed Kingfisher spasmodically. We used to have them regularly for some years and they double bred while here but it is about ten years since they last came to us. The Satin and Leaden Flycatchers, though not plentiful, seem to be regular visitors to your area. Cecil Cameron used to find the Leaden at Gowrie Mountain. We have the Leaden in large numbers through the summer months and they breed freely here but I have only one doubtful record of the Satin.*

*Your group of Thornbills and Warblers are the same as ours. I note that the Little thornbill is west from you. Jondaryan I presume. They come to us periodically but are not stationary as are the other species.*

*Like us you don't seem to have the Striated Thornbill.*

[p.6]

*I am interested to see that you have the Reed Warbler at Cooby Dam. It came as a big surprise to see them reported from Columboola by Mrs Makin. I had imagined they were confined to the coast and semi-coastal areas. I have not seen them at Lake Clarendon, but as my visits there were in winter months it is very probable that they are there during the summer.*

*I note that your Red-browed Treecreepers are confined to the Cooyar area. They do not seem to come over the Range, at least I have not seen them. The Brown and White-throated are, as with you our common species. Of recent years the Brown for some reason has become very much reduced in numbers.*

*Your Pardalotes are an interesting group. The Yellow-tailed I had not expected from your area and it is not here. I think there is little doubt that you are right about the Spotted Pardalote as*

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*they are common here and along the Range and I have seen them in good numbers in the Chinchilla district, also further north on the Dawson at Taroom. You don't mention Ramseys [sic.] Diamond-bird, p. assimilis, its call "pickup pickup" distinguishes it from the Red-tipped and Black-headed.*

[p.7.]

*I am interested in what you say of the Spiney-cheeked Honeyeater. They are apparently stationary in parts of your district. I have only the one record for them here, 1936 when they were plentiful for three months.*

*The Black-chinned seems to be spasmodic in its movements. Your records bring them to the Cunninghams Gap area only. They were quite plentiful here about 1934 to 1937 but have not been seen since. The blue about the eye is a noticeable feature as well as the black of the chin.*

*Your Bell Miners seem to be confined to the Blackbutt area. They were once reported from near Spring Bluff but that was a long time ago.*

*Brown Songlarks you find are regular visitors. I would have expected them to be stationary on the Downs. Odd birds drift over to us but I have only once found them nesting. The Rufous is so far as you find less plentiful with you than with us. Sometimes we have them in considerable numbers and at others just in isolated places, but they are with us each year and are seen from about September to April and breed in our district.*

[p.8.]

*I wrote that the Busblark is common on your plains. I have only one record for them here and that was more than twenty years back.*

*Regarding the Satin Bowerbird I note that you have only seen them at Cunninghams Gap but have heard of them at Ravensbourne. Some years ago they were quite common at the 'Bourne, but as the scrubs are being cleared they may be leaving that area. They used to come over to our area, Mt. Cross but I have not been there for some years so don't know if they still come there.*

*I have seen the Regent here on several occasions, just travelling birds that came to our native figs for a while. I have also heard of them at Essex Evan's old home on the Toll Bar where they were feeding on berries. I think they are found in the scrubs below Toowoomba.*

*Yes, I would expect the Jondaryan area to be the limit of the Spotted Bowerbird. I was rather surprised when the Camerons told me that they were at Biddeston as their type of country is quite different to their natural habitat. The scrub at Jondaryan is more suited to them, but there is not much of it left.*

[p.9.]

*I am very pleased to hear from you that the Squatter Pigeon is still plentiful in the North West. It has become extinct or nearly so in so many of its old haunts where it was at one time so common. W. Barker tells me that they are breeding well in Sid Arthurs [sic.] aviaries.*

*Yes it seems that the beautiful Paradise Parrot has become past a memory. The last record of them was at Blackdown in the Gayndah district as far as I know and that was in 1922.*

*It is interesting to see that you found the Orioles plentiful at Cooyer in show Week. I recorded them for the first time on August 25. The last previous record being May 16. It seems to me that their movements are pest [sic] governed by food requirements and that they do not go far away during the winter months.*

*Mr Robertson called in to see me on Thursday and he seemed very interested in your investigations regarding the White-backed Magpie. I told him, as I did you of the plague of grasshoppers coming over from N.S.W. and white-backed Magpies being reported afterwards along the course taken by the 'hoppers. I have been looking up my records and dates of these occurrences.*

[p.10]

*The grasshopper invasion was first reported in the press in the latter part of 1934, September to be correct. They came across N.S.W., breeding as they travelled reaching the border districts at end of November. Came across the Southern Downs in a fairly wide face, then turned eastwards through the Oakey district, divided in two sections one passing through here and the other through the Perseverance-Ravensbourne area, then on eastwards to the coast.*

*After the 'hoppers had crossed the border in the Mungindi area there were press reports of White-backed Magpies on their trail. My notes show that a white-backed Magpie appeared here on January 12, 1935 just after the last of the 'hoppers had passed through. On January 13, it had mated with a black-backed female a mile distant from their former nesting area about my house. He later moved to Paradise Creek junction, then in 1947 was driven to the Railway Station area in search of food, from that time it has not been seen.*

*My regards to you and Mrs Walker,*

*E. A. R. Lord.*

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**LETTER 5**

*Airleas,  
Murphys Creek,*

*October 31, 1954*

*Dear Mr Walker,*

*I read your letter with much interest and note what you say regarding your search through the Chronicle for information concerning the report of White-backed Magpies and the grasshopper plague. You mention having looked through the papers of 1934, and I am wondering if you saw those for January-February of 1935. I can't just remember whether the reference was made when the plague was in progress or after they had passed through to the coast. I would have expected all papers to have had mention of the White-backed Magpies. I could not say definitely if it was the Chronicle or the Courier-Mail that it was in but think the latter paper would be the most likely as I had not been a regular subscriber to the Chronicle. As you found mention of Ibis and Plain turkey following the 'hoppers one would expect the Magpie to be similarly mentioned.*

*All the time that the 'hoppers were passing through this district there were large flocks of White-browed and Masked Woodswallows and White-winged Trillers following them besides the local birds such as Magpies, Butcherbirds and others. The peculiar thing was that Crows left the 'hopper area until the winged insects has [sic.] passed through.*

[p.2.]

*In my last letter to Mr Barker I replied to his request for information from other members about White-backed Magpie and I have told him what I have told you regarding the appearance of a bird here and of the press reports at the time. These old "birds" take a lot of convincing about things that appear to them to be perhaps doubtful information. We have given satisfactory proof of the Indian Mynah on the Downs and we have still to satisfy them regarding the Crow-Raven problem.*

*I am sorry to hear that your White-backed bird is now missing and sincerely hope that nothing has happened to it. It may, like my bird have moved quarters with a new mate. How have your photos turned out? These old birds will gradually die out and photographs will be the only proof that they had been here. The offspring could easily be mistaken for mere oddities as there are variations in the colour of the many birds of a district, particularly is this so with the females. It will be interesting to see how the cross between your bird and his mate will appear when they vacate the nest. It is fortunate that you still have a White-back at the Radio Station and it is to be hoped he stays with you.*

[p. 3.]

*Your bird news of your district is interesting. Yes the Rufous Fantail is a pretty and dainty bird. I remember that the Cameron's had a few of them about Anghamore, and I think they said that they were at Gowrie Mountain. The Highlands Plain scrub patch would I should think be a suitable place for them as they usually prefer the scrubby places. They only occur periodically here and then only in the mountain country where there is thick timber.*

*I am interested in your Satin Flycatchers and that they are plentiful in the Highlands Plains area. I have only one doubtful record for here but the Leaden Flycatcher is a regular during the Spring and Summer months. This year they are far below normal numbers for some reason.*

*The Satin Bower-bird is another very interesting record. What a fine sight those birds you saw in the Cooyar area must have made. I note that the Whipbirds also were present.*

*Your Rufous Songlarks seem to be in greater numbers than usual, they have a pretty song. The Brown Song-lark is an attractive bird but its call, though peculiar is not musical but its peculiar sound makes it rather fascinating. The Rufous is still in very limited numbers here but I have not seen the Brown Lark yet. It is several years since their last appearance here.*

[p. 4.]

*Storm Bird is quite a common name for the Channel-bill and the fact that there are native fig trees at Rosalie Plains it is pretty certain that the birds that were reported to you were the Channell-billed Cuckoos.*

*I note that the rain has brought some Ibis and other birds to your district, it did likewise here. Among the recent arrivals were two Australian Snipe, gallinago hardwicki. A grey Teal and some White-eyed Ducks.*

*On the 28th of this month when on the way to Toowoomba I saw my first Swifts of the Season. At the Lockyer School there were at least 300 Spinetails with a sprinkling of Forktails. About 100 Spinetails were seen at Postman's Ridge and at Withcott there were 50 of so Spinetails feeding. Storms had been about during the night and were still in evidence on that day. To date I have not seen any Swifts at Murphys Creek. I was very interested in the 1953-54 Notes in The bird Observer by you and Mr Grant. As all your records are for the Forktailed Swift it would seem that it is the common species on the Downs, while below the Range the Spinetailed is the predominant species. The Forktailed is rather spasmodic here and it usually occurs in the autumn months when it does come to us. During the 1951-52 period all swifts were particularly scarce here, but from B.O.C. records they were very plentiful in the Southern States, food supply was without doubt the controlling factor.*

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[p. 5.]

*There is an article in one of the Emu back numbers about the appearance of the Lotus Bird in New south Wales and I think it was the Moree area. Anyhow it seemed to be a new record for those parts. I must hunt it up and report for you later. It would I should think be from about the Barwon area that they would have crossed over to the inland waters. Possibly their northern movement has not yet brought them as far as Broadwater, but I would suspect that they may be found in the swamp area of Broadwater which you mention has not yet been explored by you.*

*Your Crested Grebe at Broadwater would have been interesting to watch while close enough for good observation.*

*It always seems to me that the nectar of the grasstree has some intoxicating affect on honey-feeding birds, as, like you I have often approached to within a few yards of Lorikeets when they are working the flowers of the grasstree. It is a really pretty sight to see a number of lorikeets on a grasstree flower head feeding on the nectar of the starry white blossoms. Many of the honeyeaters are very partial to the grasstree. I am rather fascinated with the Silverleigh area from what you and Mr May have told me of it and I intend to make a visit to it when the next wild flower period comes along. Besides its wild flowers it seems to be great bird country.*

[p. 6.]

*Highland Plains too seems to be a good hunting ground with a variety of bird species. It is interesting to hear of the Black-chinned Honeyeater being there. I must keep a good watch for them here. They were with us about 20 years ago for quite a while. I had suspected that the clearance of the Jondaryan Scrub would have forced the Spotted Bowerbird further west. I have seen them in the scrub years ago when I used to make frequent trips by road from here to the western districts before the advent of the motor car. The big scrub between Warra and Chinchilla has also gone so they must move back a considerable distance.*

*Noel Jack is a keen naturalist and he seems to specialise in a study of the Whistlers. I would have liked to have heard his talk on those birds at the last meeting of the R.A.O.U. Migrants also interest him.*

*We have all our migrants back again except the Red-backed Kingfisher. Sacredrs are very plentiful but Forests below normal. Channel bills, Koels, Pallid, Brush, Fantailed and Horsfield Cuckoos about normal. Dollar birds, White-winged Trillers, White-browed Wood*

*Swallows, Leaden Flycatcher and Swifts. An odd Rufus Songlark. Some Figbirds and Orioles, Cicada birds. Rainbow-birds, Swallows and Fairy Martins were with us during the winter and are all busy with nests.*

*My regards to you and Mrs Walker and Mr Grant.*

*Yours Sincerely,*

*E. A. R. Lord.*

## LETTER 6

*Airleas,*

*Murphys Creek,*

*January 24, 1955*

*Dear Mr Walker,*

*I have received from Mr Joe de Warren a letter and a colour drawing with reference to his unidentified bird of the Roma district and the Carnarvans. He now states that his bird has been recorded through to the Bunyas in which case they must have quite a wide range and should not be so difficult to locate. I must say that over the many years that I have moved about in the area between the Bunyas and the upper and lower Dawson I have never seen a bird resembling the one depicted in de Warren's drawing. In a letter received from John Flour of Roma he stated that two brothers named Ford who were familiar with the Roma-Carnarvan country had seen a bird answering the description of de Warren's bird. I don't know if de Warren has contacted you about the bird referred to but he does state that you have interested yourself in some new neophemes that he had located at Cooranga North.*

*As he gives a definite locality for these little parrots and refers to the Manager of Maxam Products of Cooranga North who he states drew his attention to the parrots there should be a reasonable chance of your finding them if you can manage to get out to that area. I feel really interested and sincerely hope that any investigation you may make will be successful. [p. 2.] Mr de Warren says that he interviewed Mr Mack in connection with the bird of the Carnarvans but did not have any success in that quarter at which I am not surprised as from past experience I have found that Mr Mack is suspicious about anything that does not come within his own knowledge.*

*Mr Dan O'Brien, Secretary of the Geographical Society has taken a lively interest in the quest for the bird and even though he failed to find it when out at the Carnarvans recently he still hopes for success when he leads the March expedition out there. O'Brien is endeavouring to get a full quota for the March expedition and asked me to join but unfortunately I can't get away. I am wondering if there would be anyone from out your way who would be interested.*

*There is an active movement among the migrants of this area, some have departed and others show strong indications of migrating. Just at the moment Koels are becoming very restless and*

though still plentiful will I think move away at any time. Channell bills seem to be represented, two that live at my fig trees and are particularly restless the last few days, all the others of this species seem to have left. Palid, Brush, Fantailed and Bronze Cuckoos have been missing since December. [p. 3.] Leaden Flycatchers are in much reduced numbers and Cicada birds have not been recorded [since?] December 22. Rufous Songlarks keep up the former numbers and are singing freely. White-winged Trillers have not been seen since January 14. when their broods of young were well on the wing. Dollarbirds are about but in lesser numbers. Sacred and Forest Kingfishers are drifting away, some late nesters remain about their nesting area with the young birds, some out of the nest and some about ready to come from the nest.

Spine-tailed Swifts have been seen yesterday and today but not in large flocks, about 100 yesterday and about 40 today. These birds have not been seen much this summer and mostly in small numbers. The only large flocks that I have seen this summer was on October 28, from Lockyer to Witbott.

I have been moving about the district quite a bit an[d] checking up on the birds of the outside places.

On Saturday week I went across to North Creek via Red Rocks, pretty hill country in which I had to walk and lead my horse in many places. The outstanding features noted were King Parrots in two places. Scarlet Honeyeaters, Red-browed Finches and Red-backed Wrens. Koels and Currawongs in plenty. Many Lorikeets, Three, perhaps four species. [p. 4.] Noisy and Little Friarbirds, Shrike Tits, Grey Thrush, Yellow-faced and Lewin's Honeyeaters and of course the Noisy Miner who gave warnings of the presence of hawks which I could not see. Pale-headed Rosellas were numerous feeding with other birds at the fruit of the lantana.

An eagles nest was seen no doubt that of a Wedgetail, high up in the fork of a blackbut tree, from its size I would say that it is quite a new one used for perhaps the first or second time.

There has been much more rain in the eastern ranges and grass and plants are green and trickling streams are found in the gullies with many ferns and melastoma with much purple bloom growing with their roots in the water.

As the country about the valley of the Murphy is in a very dried up state it is a pleasure to visit these outside places where the scenes are so much brighter.

I had a look over an old gold mine workings on North Creek and gathered some nice samples to replace some of my old ones that have faded by weathering.

My regards to you and Mrs Walker,

Yours Sincerely,

E. A. R. Lord.