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THE SUNBIRD

Volume 38 No. 2 December 2008

WRITING ABOUT BIRDS AND SHARING

EDITORIAL

Writing about birds can be shared today with larger audiences than ever before. The *Birding-aus* mailing list has about 1000 users and receives over 9000 messages a year! Many birdwatchers maintain or contribute to birding blogs. Ornithological journals are available on line and soon, by agreement between Birds Queensland and RMIT Publishing, *Sunbird* will be freely available to Birds Queensland members at the *Informit* website. But technology itself doesn't write original stories, record bird observations, or support regional publications like *Sunbird*. Writing is done by people like you, the reader. Could you contribute?

In the period 1993 – 2006 publication of the monumental 7 volume series HANZAB (Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) was practically realised by the convictions of few and the contributions of many. It was created from the writings of all of us. It thus contains almost everything published about birds in Australasia (and the Australian Antarctic Territory) up to then. It's a shared resource, a summary of the knowledge of many over several hundred years; *Sunbird* writers included in the last thirty years. Everyone, editors also, relies upon its systematic comprehensiveness and authority on birds.

By design and by default a benefit of this rich legacy is evidence of absent knowledge on many aspects of our birds; knowledge any

observer can discover and report. Anyone who consults HANZAB can see those gaps and is free to add new knowledge by writing.

Social trends make it less likely that public servants, academics and research students will submit articles to publications like *Sunbird* today. Although *Sunbird* is peer-reviewed, employers, careers and other deadlines force scientists to write papers for national or international journals that appeal to scientific audiences, rather than for regional journals. Regardless of trends the task of filling knowledge gaps is too vast not to be shared by all.

All *Sunbird* readers who experience and enjoy birds daily can share birding observations by recording and publishing them here. Observations that illuminate new knowledge of birds will almost certainly be regarded as beneficial or original. Writing about birds and sharing knowledge is fun for anyone. This *Sunbird* issue contains a contribution which shares a personal experience of birds. Can you write a short article for posterity that reflects fun, curiosity and enlightenment relating to bird behaviour?

ABUNDANCE AND DISTRIBUTION OF AUSTRALIAN PELICAN *PELECANUS CONSPICILLATUS* IN COASTAL SOUTH-EAST QUEENSLAND

PETER F. WOODALL

ABSTRACT

Censuses of Australian Pelican *Pelecanus conspicillatus* were conducted by boat on successive trips in Pumicestone Passage (transect length = 68.6 km) and southern Moreton Bay (74.1 km) in south-east Queensland from 1997 to 2001. Means of 0.82 (SE=0.31, n = 7) and 0.70 (SE=0.09, n = 24) birds per km and peak numbers of 2.61 and 1.55 birds per km were recorded in Pumicestone Passage and southern Moreton Bay, respectively. In winter (May-Sept.) pelicans were abundant but they declined in spring/summer (Oct.-Dec.). Their seasonal abundance correlated positively with the tonnage of fish netted commercially in Moreton Bay (r = 0.646 with bream, r = 0.588 with all fish) and at localities surveyed both pelicans and recreational fishers favoured the same reaches.

INTRODUCTION

The Australian Pelican *Pelecanus conspicillatus* is common in freshwater and marine habitats in south-east Queensland (Roberts 1979). Local abundance in non-breeding coastal populations of this species is poorly documented. For example, Blakers *et al.* (1984) and Marchant & Higgins (1990) only give details of abundance at breeding colonies in Lake Eyre Basin, following the well recorded immigration of large numbers after local flooding. This study describes the distribution and abundance of Australian Pelican in its non-breeding range at two coastal locations from 1997 to 2001.

STUDY AREA AND METHODS

I conducted regular, boat-based surveys for raptors in Pumicestone Passage (1997-1998) and southern Moreton Bay (1998-2001) during which I also recorded numbers and locations of Australian Pelicans from 1998. At each locality repeated surveys were conducted using the same routes. In Pumicestone Passage (Fig. 1) surveys began at Sylvan Beach, proceeded north on the eastern side of the passage for a brief stop at Mission Point and then continued north through The Skids to turn around at Blue Hole near Golden Beach, Caloundra. On the return southern journey, the same route was followed except for a branch to the west, just south of Mission Point, to pass near the small townships of Donnybrook and Toorbul before returning to Sylvan Beach. The total length of the route was 68.6km (33.3 km travelling north and 35.3 km travelling south) and birds were counted on both outward and return journeys. The area north of Mission Point was counted on both the northward and southward trips.

In southern Moreton Bay (Fig. 2), the survey started at Victoria Point (in the vessel *Tegwane*) or Cleveland (in the vessel *Mirrigimpa*), travelled east to pass through the Canaipa Passage, east of Russell Island, and continued south through McKenzies Channel and Whalleys Gutter to stop for lunch at The Bedroom on the northern end of South Stradbroke Island. We then travelled west, to the south of Kangaroo Island, and then continued north, past Cabbage Tree Point and into the Main Channel, then through the Karragarra W's, past Redland Bay and Snipe Island and back to Victoria Point/Cleveland. On the *Mirrigimpa* counts did not start until we were east of Coochie Mudlo Island. The total distance for counting was 74.1 km (38.2 km east and south to the Bedroom, 3 km retracing our path out from the Bedroom where no birds were counted, 35.9 km west and north back to Victoria Point).

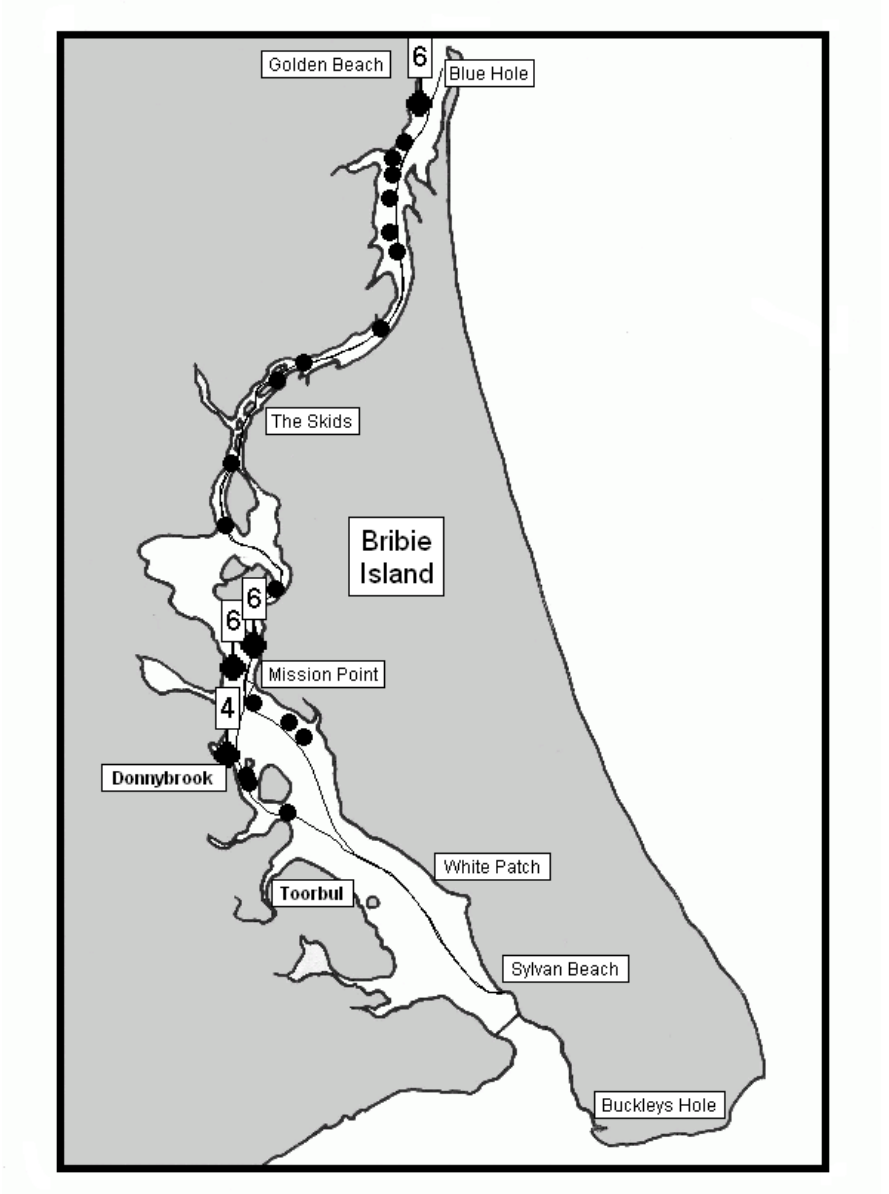

Fig. 1. Pumicestone Passage survey route: Dots are Pelican sighting waypoints. Large dots show multiple waypoints as indicated by the boxed number.

During these surveys, a GPS waypoint was recorded for each sighting of Australian Pelicans, whether swimming, perched or flying and the numbers seen were recorded. The program *OziExplorer*™ was used to

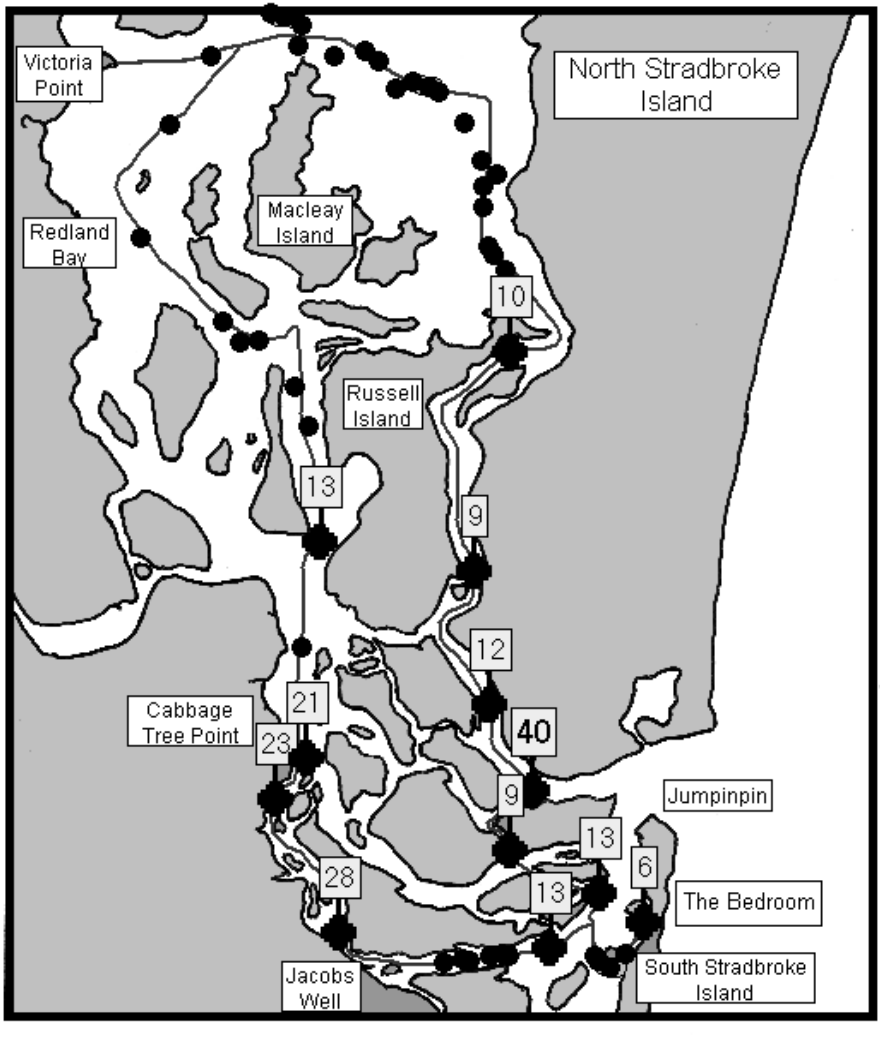

Fig. 2. Southern Moreton Bay survey route: Dots are Pelican sighting waypoints. Large dots are multiple waypoints as indicated by the boxed number.

plot and analyse the waypoints. The surveys were always made on a Sunday, leaving at c. 0800 and returning by c. 1600 hrs and chosen so that the high tide was around midday (this was essential to allow passage through some of the shallower parts of the route). The surveys were cancelled if rain or winds > 20 knots were forecast.

All surveys in Pumicestone Passage and more than half the surveys in southern Moreton Bay were made from a 4.3m, half-cabin boat, *Tegwane* with up to four observers. Nine counts in southern Moreton Bay were made in the Environmental Protection Agency's boat *Mirrigimpa*. This was much larger (15m) and provided a higher and much more stable platform for observation and allowed a greater number of observers. The difference between the two vessels was demonstrated in June 2001 when two counts, a week apart, recorded 66 Australian Pelicans from *Tegwane* and 115 from *Mirrigimpa*. The distribution of birds was similar on both these counts indicating that it was a detectability difference rather than movements of birds within the bay. In Fig. 4 the counts from *Tegwane* have been adjusted (by x1.74) to correct for this.

Data on commercial fishing in Moreton Bay was obtained from the website of the Coastal Habitat Resources Information System (CHRIS, 2006) maintained by the DPI&F (Qld).

RESULTS

Australian Pelicans were recorded in all surveys and numbers ranged from one to 115 birds (recorded in Dec. 1999 and June 2001, respectively) (Figs. 3 and 4). Counts (corrected for the lower observability from *Tegwane*) can be expressed as an average of 0.82 Australian Pelicans per km (SE=0.31, n=7) and a maximum of 2.61 per km for Pumicestone Passage and an average of 0.70 (SE=0.09, n=24) Australian Pelicans per km and a maximum of 1.55 per km for southern Moreton Bay.

Pelican counts (Figs. 3 and 4) varied seasonally, with peaks in winter (May - Sept.) and troughs in spring/summer (Oct. - Dec.). The quantity of fish netted in Moreton Bay by commercial fishers follows a similar pattern (Fig. 5) peaking in June. The data presented in Fig. 5 is a mean of the years, 1998-2001. The total catch of fish varied between years but the seasonal pattern was similar each year. Numbers of Australian Pelican recorded in southern Moreton Bay were positively correlated with the size of the fish catch that month reported by commercial net fishers in Moreton Bay (1998-2001) (CHRIS 2006), (Pearson correlations, All Fish: $r = 0.588$; Bream – unspecified: $r = 0.646$; Mullet – unspecified: $r = 0.534$; Whiting – unspecified: $r = 0.564$, all $P < 0.01$; $n = 24$).

Australian Pelicans were unevenly distributed within both survey areas (Figs. 1 & 2). In Pumicestone passage they were concentrated around Mission Point, Golden Beach and Donnybrook. In southern Moreton

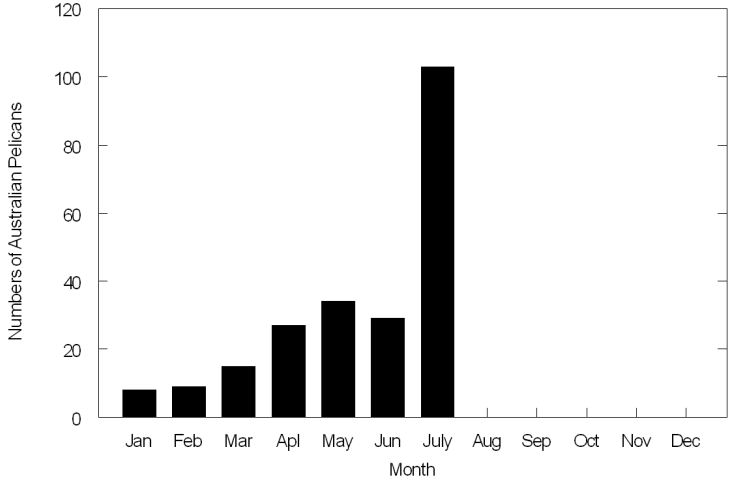

Fig. 3. Pelican abundance in Pumicestone Passage (Jan.-July 1998, uncorrected numbers).

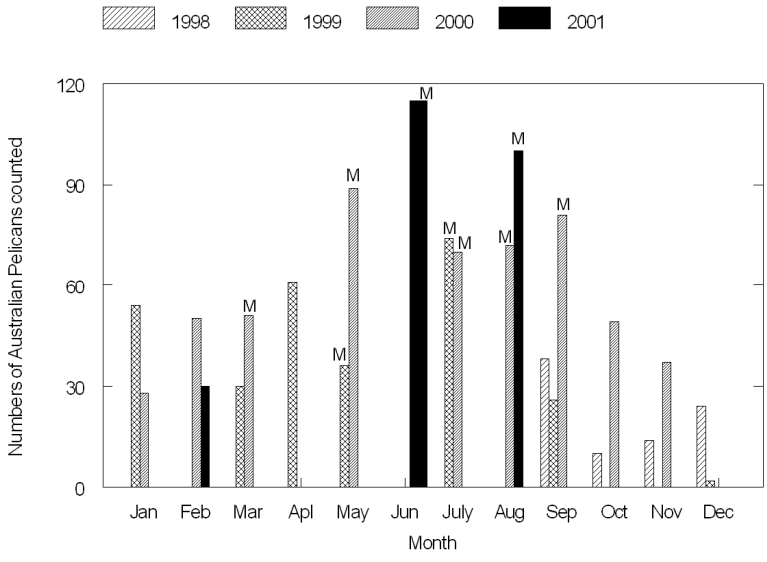

Fig. 4. Pelican abundance in southern Moreton Bay (1998-2001). "M" are counts from *Mirrigimpa.* Other counts are from *Tegwane,* corrected (x1.74) for observability based on trial comparison in June 2001.

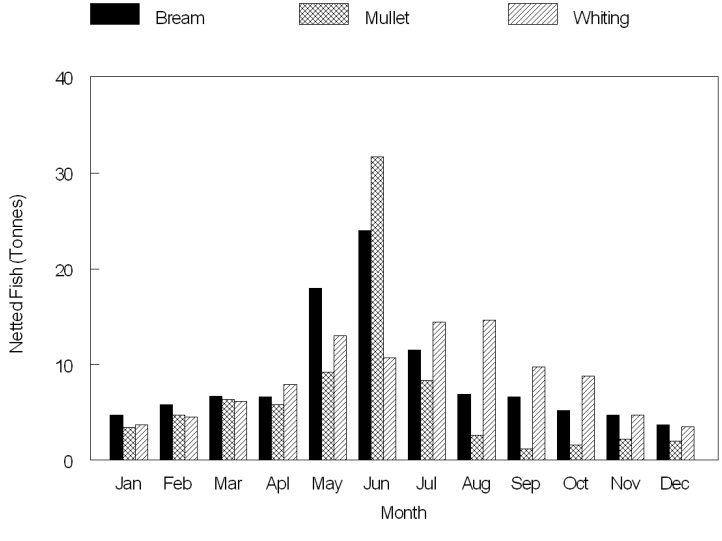

Fig. 5. Mean fish tonnage taken by commercial net fishers in Moreton Bay (1998-2001). (The data for Mullet are $x10^{-1}$)

Bay they aggregated in the south, particularly around Jumpinpin, Jacobs Well and Cabbage Tree Point.

DISCUSSION

It was unfortunate that two boats had to be used in the surveys of southern Moreton Bay, leading to differences between surveys in the observability of the birds. To adjust for this, two sequential trips in June 2001 were used to calculate a correction. It would have been desirable to have more than these two calibrating trips but the availability of the boats and cancellations due to bad weather made this impossible. Nevertheless, seasonal changes in Australian Pelican abundance are clearly shown in the records from Pumicestone Passage (Fig. 3) (where the same boat was used throughout) and verify the seasonal variation.

Australian Pelicans disperse over large distances after breeding. After successfully breeding at Lake Eyre and other inland waters in 1974-1976, some birds dispersed to the coast of Australia and New Guinea with vagrants reported from Fiji, Indonesia and New Zealand (Blakers *et al.* 1984, Woodall 1985). Low annual October counts around Brisbane 1973-1976, (with none counted in 1973) coincided with this inland breeding but were followed by increases to peaks in 1978 and 1981 (Woodall 1985).

In 2000 there was another flooding of Lake Eyre, although to a much smaller scale than the 1974 event (Kotwicki 1999-2006), with reports of large numbers of water birds, including Australian Pelicans, breeding there (60 Minutes report cited by Vella 2000). However, in 2000 there was no marked reduction in the Australian Pelican population in Moreton Bay: their numbers seemed similar to or slightly higher than in 1999 and perhaps slightly less than in 2001 (Fig. 4).

The seasonal changes in numbers of Australian Pelicans counted, with a winter peak from May to September, were demonstrated in two

localities (Pumicestone Passage and southern Moreton Bay) and this pattern was repeated over four years in the latter locality. Similar aggregations are shown by some coastal raptors (Woodall pers. obs.). The most likely explanation for these changes in abundance is that they follow food availability and this was supported by significant correlations between the numbers of Australian Pelicans counted and the commercial fishing catch reported from Moreton Bay (CHRIS 2006). During winter, several species of fish move into Moreton Bay to spawn (Quinn 1992) and this leads to a considerable increase in the commercial catch at this time.

These data indicate that Australian Pelicans move into Moreton Bay and Pumicestone Passage in winter, probably to exploit the increased fish numbers at this time of year. The source of the pelicans is uncertain and there is no information on how far they might have travelled. Marchant & Higgins (1990) reported that there was no regular seasonal variation in numbers of Australian Pelican in Victoria, based on the reporting rate for the Victorian Atlas, but they cited an unpublished report by Morton *et al.* (1989) indicating that Australian Pelicans had a regular movement to pools in the Alligator River, NT, during the winter, dry season. Barrett *et al.* (2003) reported that, although there was regional variation between the first (Blakers *et al.* 1984) and second Australian bird atlases, there was no significant change in the overall reporting rate.

Australian Pelicans hunt fish and eat discarded fish offal (fish-frames after filleting) and excess bait left by recreational fishers (pers. obs.). Australian Pelicans were often seen aggregated around fishers at their favourite fishing areas in Pumicestone Passage and Moreton Bay and at boat ramps (Figs. 1 & 2) Both the fishers and Australian Pelicans appear to concentrate where the most fish are available, for example, the channels around Jumpinpin in southern Moreton Bay are renowned fishing areas and where most Australian Pelican sightings in southern Moreton Bay were made (Fig. 2) but much more work would be required to prove this association.

This study has provided baseline data on the distribution and abundance of Australian Pelicans using south-east Queensland but there remains much to be learnt about their seasonal ecology and movements.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to the many birdwatchers who accompanied me on these surveys and who helped with observing birds or recording data. The Queensland Environmental Protection Agency allowed us to join the vessel *Mirrigimpa* for some of these surveys while it was on patrol in southern Moreton Bay and aligned their patrol with our survey route, their assistance is gratefully acknowledged. The contributions of all these people were invaluable and I hope that these analyses provide some recognition of the value of their efforts. Financial support was provided by Coastcare Grants for 1997/98, 1998/99 and 1999/2000 in association with the Australasian Raptor Association, Birds Queensland, the Queensland Naturalists Club and the Queensland Environmental Protection Agency. The referee, Dr David McFarland, and the Editor made valuable improvements to the MS.

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MYNAH PLAY?

ANGELA WARD

"Hands up, all those who hate the Common Mynah? Yes!" Then this story's for you. Despite the bad publicity and birdwatchers' general feelings towards the ubiquitous Mynah, *Sturnus tristis*, here is an observation that may bring a smile to your face and perhaps leave you less critical of this unloved bully of the bird world.

One winter's day whilst trying to catch up on correspondence I heard what I thought were stones being thrown on the metal roof of our house. I put up with the intrusion for a while until I was forced to down tools and venture outside to investigate. There were no signs of any children in the street, so I walked down to the back garden to get a better view of the roof to see what was going on. Up on the ridge cap was a pair of Common Mynahs sitting chatting to each other with the usual head-bobbing display. After a couple of minutes the discussion came to an end and one bird hopped down the sloping roof to the gutter, poked about and then came up with a palm seed in its beak. It proceeded back up to the peak of the roof, turned around, bent over, dropped the seed onto the roof and watched it roll back down into the gutter. The pair of birds then started screeching out in delight as if this was a huge joke. Not to be outdone, the other bird then took a turn, demonstrating that it too could pull off this stunt. I watched as this exhibition was performed a few more times, and then left them to their devices. [*This records a pair of Mynahs courting, albeit in very amusing circumstances. 'Seed rolling' is unknown in Mynah courtship display. Play is well reported in some other bird species (e.g. Kaplan, 2005).* Editors note.]

This is not an isolated instance of seed rolling. I've also spotted a single Common Mynah rolling a palm seed down the concrete garden path which is on a slight incline. When the seed came to a halt it would pick up the seed, return to the top of the path and do it again. On another occasion my husband called me outside to witness another

hilarious exhibition. A fairly stiff breeze was blowing on this particular day, and the 'whirlybird' roof vent was rotating at a fair rate of knots. Every time it slowed, one of several Mynahs congregating on the roof would move forward onto the 'whirlybird' and then hang on for grim death until it was either flung off or the rotating vent slowed down to allow the next bird on. "Who said birds don't have fun!!" "To some (people) the myna bird is amusing, to some he is of no concern one way or the other, but to some he is a threat to the mental health of the human race" (Laycock 1966). Incidentally, Higgins & Peters (2006) and Poole (2008) formally describe head-bobbing and other behaviour characteristic of the species but, sadly, not play. Best wishes and good birding.

The taxonomy used here follows Christidis & Boles (2008). Two anonymous referees commented on this note.

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NOTES