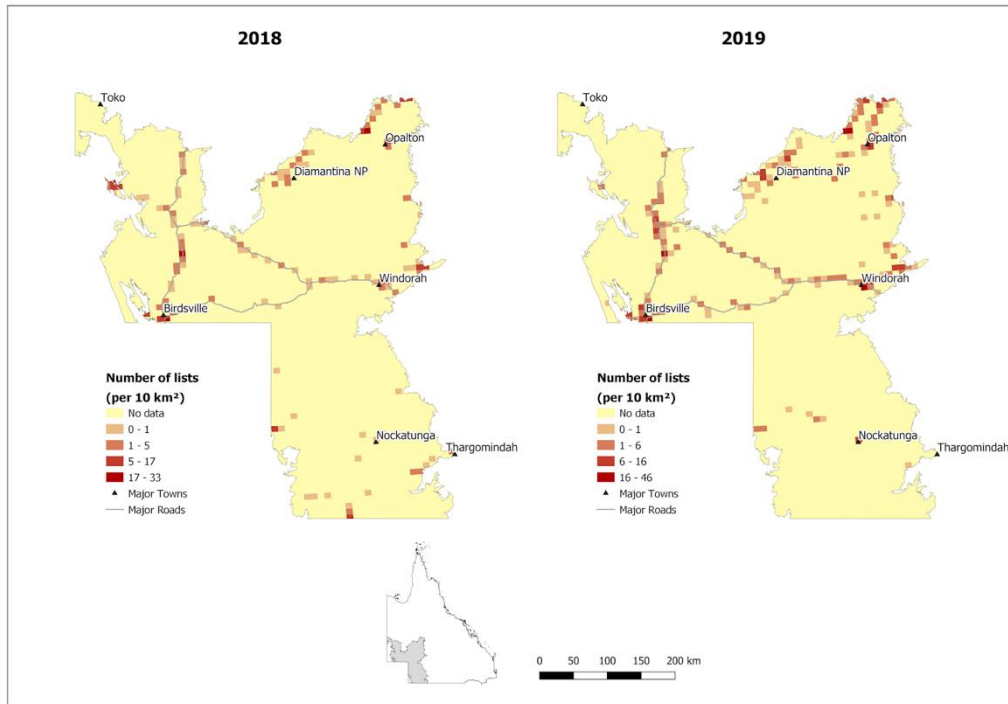
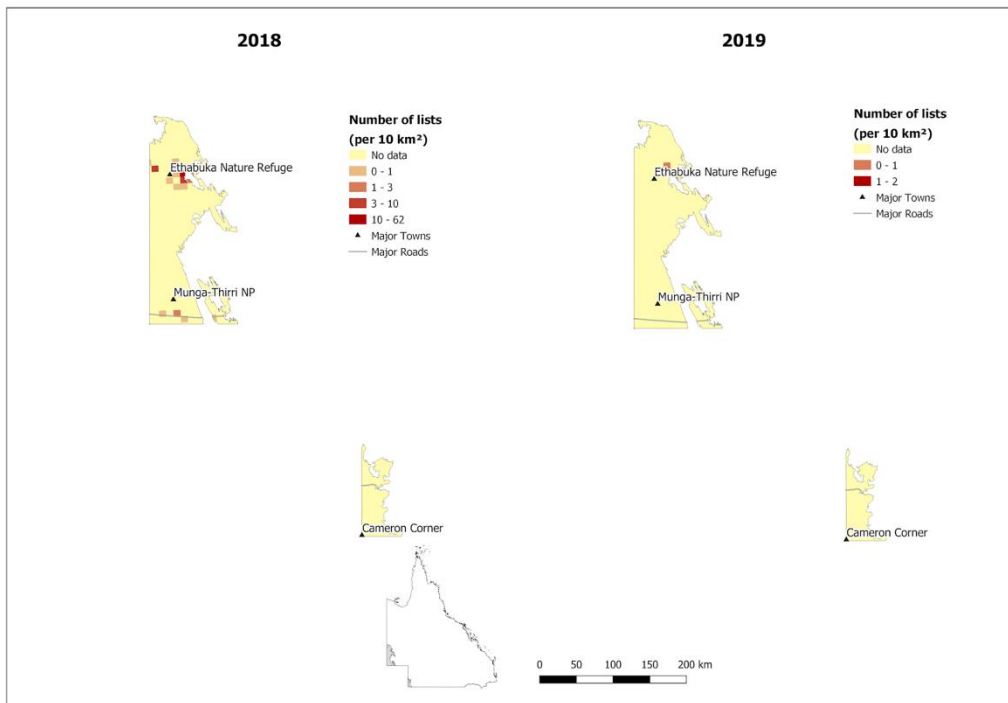


11. Channel Country including Simpson Strzelecki Dunefields

Andrew Ley, Allison Roberts, and David Niland



Map of Channel Country Bioregion, showing eBird survey effort



Map of Simpson Strzelecki Dunefields, showing eBird survey effort



Opalton Grasswren (Maggie Overend)



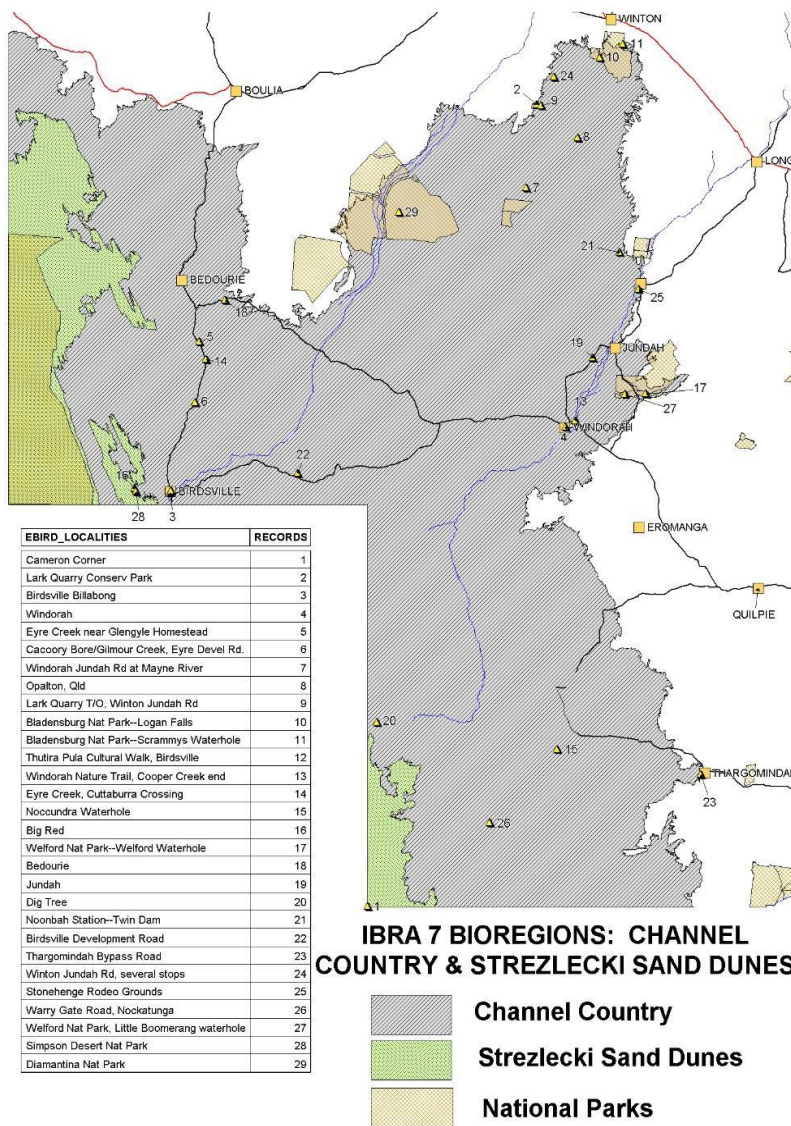
Budgerigar (Graham Donaldson)

Geography

Occupying most of the southwest corner of the State, the Channel Country Bioregion is the second largest bioregion in Queensland and covers 13.5% (232,080 km²) of Queensland, and small portions extend into the Northern Territory, South Australia, and New South Wales. The bioregion includes the vast flat alluvial and flood plains featuring Cooper Creek and the Georgina, Eyre, and Diamantina Rivers. The waterways all flow south into the Lake Eyre Basin in South Australia. Gibber plains, low ranges, and dunefields surround the alluvial plains. Mitchell grass, gidgee, and spinifex are the dominant vegetation with slightly taller vegetation found on the low ranges (AWA 2008a).

The greater part of the Simpson Strzelecki Dunefields Bioregion occurs in the Northern Territory and South Australia with a small southern portion in New South Wales, and the eastern edge running across the western Queensland border. The bioregion is arid desert with long parallel sand dunes, sand plains, dry watercourses that are not part of the Lake Eyre drainage system, and salt pans. Spinifex hummock grasslands and sparse acacia shrublands make up most of the vegetation. Pastoral grazing occurs in interdunal corridors and drainage areas. Wind erosion, drought-related tree, shrub, and grass death, and increasing rabbit numbers are all environmental concerns in the Queensland section of the bioregion (AWE 2008b). For simplicity, this chapter combines data and discussion of the Channel Country Bioregion and the western edge of the Simson Dunefields Bioregion that occurs in Queensland; the combined bioregions will be abbreviated to CHC.

This is the most arid part of Queensland, where annual rainfall is extremely variable, but averages less than 300 mm. Temperatures are also highly variable with mean maxima varying from 24° to 35°C, and mean minima from 9° to 20°C (BoM 2018). The extreme heat during summer months discourages visitors so there are fewer bird records. The major towns in CHC are Birdsville, Bedourie, Innamincka, Windorah, and Thargomindah, while the main access routes are the Diamantina, Eyre, Birdsville, Cooper and Bulloo Development Roads and the Silver City Highway.



Detailed map of Channel Country bioregion showing localities mentioned in the text



Spotted Harriers (Jon Norling)

Birds of the bioregion and their conservation

The Queensland Government lists 286 native and five introduced bird species in CHC. The 10 species of concern are: Yellow Chat (both subspecies), Painted Honeyeater, Grey Grasswren, Rusty Grasswren, Night Parrot, Major Mitchell's Cockatoo, Curlew Sandpiper, Australian Painted Snipe, Plainswanderer, and Grey Falcon. The five introduced species are: House Sparrow, Common Starling, Rock Dove, Northern Mallard, and Indian Peafowl (DES 2013).

National Parks (NP) wholly or partially in CHC are: Astrebla Downs (inaccessible), Bladensburg, Diamantina, Goneaway, Lochern, Munga-Thirri (formerly Simson Desert), and Welford (DES 2013). Bush Heritage owns and manages Pilungah (formerly Cravens Peak) Reserve which protects Grey Falcon, Painted Finch, Australasian Bustard, and Spinifex Pigeon, and Ethabuka Reserve which protects Australian Bustard, Eyrean Grasswren, Freckled Duck, Grey Falcon, and Painted Honeyeater (BHA 2022). Mulligan River Nature Refuge has been recognised as a nationally important wetland, and Toko Range Nature Refuge protects Grey Falcon habitat. BirdLife Australia (2019) has identified eight Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) in this bioregion: Simpson Desert, Diamantina Floodplain, Lake Yamma Yamma, Cooper Floodplain below Windorah, Diamantina NP, Lakes Muncoonie/ Mumbleberry/ Torquinie, Lake Machattie, and Bulloo Floodplain.

BirdLife Australia (2015) produced a major review of birds in the arid lands of Australia looking at trends between 1999 and 2013. This considered six different ecological categories of birds: aerial insectivores, carnivores, common species, ground nesters, hollow nesters, and those associated with woodland/shrublands. All but common species and aerial insectivores showed a strong downward trend, and some had very large variations in populations. This was especially recognised for the species prone to irruptions such as the Rufous Songlark, Budgerigar, and Brown Quail.

Ley et al. (2011) documented and mapped the distribution of birds in Diamantina NP, based on 15 surveys from 1994 to 2009. Of the 180 species they recorded in the park, 11 are classified as threatened under the Queensland NCA Act 1992 or by Garnett & Crowley (2000). Birds Queensland had continued periodic surveys of Diamantina NP using Ley's survey methods.

Major events in 2018-2019

2018 and 2019 were mostly hot and dry years for CHC. The entire bioregion was drought-declared for all months during both years with some areas further west getting very little annual rainfall although much of the region got above average rainfall in March and November of 2018 and again in March 2019. In 2018 Birdsville recorded only 89.6 mm which is 65% of their average annual rainfall. Ballera Gas Field in the far west experienced an average maximum temperature of 31.5° C, 1.1 degree above average, and recorded only 80 mm of annual rainfall, 44 per cent of the average. In 2019 Bedourie recorded their highest ever temperature of 47.6° C on 24 December.

In June of 2018 Birds Queensland led a 12-day expedition with 17 participants to Bladensburg NP. The group conducted surveys using the same methodology used on Ley's Diamantina NP surveys: surveying birds based on species presence by one minute of latitude/longitude. Although the expedition was forced to end a day and a half early due to rain, 100 species were recorded in the park including Flock Bronzewing, Grey Falcon, Rufous-crowned Emu-wren, Red-browed Pardalote, Chestnut-breasted Quail-thrush, Hall's Babbler, the unusually abundant Red-capped Robin, Spinifexbird and White-backed Swallow (Ley 2018).

In July of 2019 Birds Queensland led a 10-day expedition with 16 participants to Welford NP. Once again surveys were conducted based on species presence by one minute of latitude/longitude. Although the region was drought-declared, the park had received 300 ml of rain in March and birds were abundant. A total of 113 species was recorded with Diamond Dove, Budgerigar, Pallid Cuckoo, White-winged Triller,

Rufous Songlark, and Black Honeyeater seen in exceptionally large numbers throughout the park. Spotted Harriers and Little Buttonquail were also noted in higher-than-expected numbers (Ley & Overend, 2019).

eBird records for 2018 included 190 species from 4,240 records in the Channel Country Bioregion and 73 species from 625 records in the Simpson Strzelecki Dunefields Bioregion; eBird records for 2019 included 196 species from 7,211 records in the Channel Country Bioregion and 10 species from 13 records in the Simpson Strzelecki Dunefields Bioregion. The small number of species recorded in Simpson Strzelecki Dunefields reflects the harsh environmental conditions of the deserts which reduce bird numbers and birdwatcher numbers.

2018 Notable bird records

Australasian Shoveler. Two birds recorded at Welford NP in August.

Australian Bustard. High count of 30 recorded at Diamantina NP in May.

Australian Shelduck. Two records, possibly of the same two birds, observed at Cuttaburra Crossing on Eyre Creek in April.

Baillon's Crake. Two observations recorded from each of Thargomindah and Birdsville.

Banded Stilt. Accidental. One observation recorded from the far west of the region in December.

Black-breasted Buzzard. Four observations recorded.

Black-necked Stork. Near-threatened. Two observations recorded at Diamantina National Park in May.

Caspian Tern. Many observations recorded during the year, especially from the southwest of the region including Cuttaburra Crossing.

Chestnut Teal. One observation recorded from the Simpson Strzelecki Dunefields in October.

Common Starling. Introduced. Two observations recorded at the Burke and Wills Dig Tree and from Windorah in May and September respectively.

Diamond Dove. 87 observations recorded for the year.

Ground Cuckooshrike. Observations recorded at the Winton–Jundah Road, Diamantina NP, and the Lark Quarry Conservation Park vicinity in June and July.

Inland Dotterel. An easterly record of three birds observed near Stonehenge in May.

Intermediate Egret. One observation recorded from Birdsville in May.

Laughing Kookaburra. One record, at Windorah in October, is at the western limit for the species at this latitude.

Little Eagle. One bird observed at Ethabuka Reserve in May.

Masked Lapwing. One observation recorded from the Simpson Strzelecki Dunefields in October.

Masked Woodswallow. A flock of 1,000 observed at Opalton in July.

Mulga Parrot. Only two observations recorded, both at Welford NP in August.

Opalton Grasswren. All records were from the well-established locations of the Opalton and Lark Quarry Conservation Park vicinities.

Painted Honeyeater. Vulnerable. One observation recorded at Cuttaburra Crossing in July.

Pectoral Sandpiper. Accidental. The identification and exact location of the one record for the region for the year requires clarification before the record is accepted.

Pied Heron. One observation recorded from Cuttaburra Crossing in August.

Rufous-crowned Emu-wren. Many observations recorded with most from the Lark Quarry Conservation Park vicinity which is a well-established location for this species.

Slaty-backed Thornbill. One observation recorded from near Welford NP in August.

Spotless Crake. One observation recorded from Thargomindah in June.

Torresian Crow. This species continues to be reported from the Channel Country but can be confused with Australian Raven.

White-bellied Cuckooshrike. Three observations recorded in the southwest of the region: Cuttaburra Crossing and Bulloo Downs.

White-browed Treecreeper. Two observations recorded, one in August at Jundah which is at the species' western limit at this latitude in Queensland.

White-browed Woodswallow. A flock of 1,000 recorded at Opalton in July.

Yellow Chat. One observation recorded at Diamantina National Park, but the imprecise location and absence of any descriptive information make the record questionable in its present form.

2019 Notable bird records

Bar-shouldered Dove. A single observation recorded from Thargomindah, but the species occurs only erratically this far west.

Black-necked Stork. Near-threatened. One observation recorded from the Birdsville vicinity in August which is unusually far south for this species in the west.

Blue-faced Honeyeater. One observation recorded at Brighton Downs Station in November; observations that far west at that latitude are unusual.

Chestnut Teal. 10 birds observed south of Winton in June; unusual for the Channel Country.

Common Myna. Introduced. Observations recorded at Windorah and Brighton Downs, which is possibly a new, westerly location for this species.

Common Starling. Introduced. Observations recorded from Birdsville and Windorah.

Diamond Dove. Observations abundant across the region with 244 recorded.

Dusky Woodswallow. Total of five observations recorded from the region during the year, but the vetting status of the records is unclear as this species can be easily confused with Little Woodswallow.

Freckled Duck. A count of 20 recorded at Welford NP in December.

Grey Falcon. Vulnerable. Many observations recorded from the vicinity of the Lark Quarry Conservation Park where a pair is known to breed.

Ground Cuckooshrike. One observation recorded from south of Winton in May.

House Sparrow. Introduced. Two observations recorded at Cameron Corner in July and September respectively.

Major Mitchell's Cockatoo. Two observations from the south of the region recorded in July.

Pacific Swift. A single observation of 25 recorded at Brighton Downs in October.

Pallid Cuckoo. A good year with 35 observations recorded from across the region.

Pied Heron. The one record, from Welford NP in July, represents an error in the data.

Plumed Whistling Duck. Several high counts recorded at Cuttaburra Crossing during the year.

Red-chested Buttonquail. One observation recorded from Diamantina NP in November.

Rufous-throated Honeyeater. The one record from Lark Quarry Conservation Park in October is at the southern edge of the species' range.

Slaty-backed Thornbill. Observations recorded once in July and twice in December at Welford NP.

Square-tailed Kite. Two observations of this unusual Channel Country visitor recorded around the Lark Quarry Conservation Park vicinity in April and May respectively.

Torresian Crow. Total of thirteen observations recorded from the region, but vetting status of the records is unclear as species may be confused with Australian Raven.

Western Gerygone. An observation recorded at Lark Quarry Conservation Park is unusual for the Channel Country.

White-backed Swallow. One observation of only 13 records for the year; all species recorded at Cameron Corner in September.

Yellow Chat. One observation recorded from the vicinity of Bedourie in August.

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