

THE

SUNBIRD



Journal of the Queensland Ornithological Society

Queensland Bird Report (2020-2024)

Channel Country with Simpson Strzelecki Dunefields



THE SUNBIRD

Chief Editor

Richard Noske

Queensland Bird Report Coordinators:

Stephen Prowse, Allison Roberts and Cameron Davidson

The Sunbird is published by the Queensland Ornithological Society Incorporated (Birds Queensland). All issues of *Sunbird* and individual articles are available for download in PDF format to both members and non-members from [the Birds Queensland website](#). They are also available online via the Informit e-Library (<https://search.informit.org>), by agreement with Birds Queensland.

The *2024 Queensland Bird Report* encompasses papers for each of Queensland's 15 bioregions based on all the available data from eBird along with other data sources. The papers will be published as they are completed during 2025 and 2026 as one Volume of *The Sunbird*. When all the papers are published an overview will be written. The project is being managed for Birds Queensland by Stephen Prowse, Allison Roberts and Cameron Davidson with advice from Carly Campbell and Louis Backstrom and copy editing from Rod Gardner. We would like to acknowledge and thank all the authors, editors and the production team who contributed to the previous Queensland Bird Reports. This report builds on their work, adds value to those past contributions and facilitates the continuation of this project.

The aims of Birds Queensland are to promote awareness and appreciation, as well as conservation and scientific study of birds, with particular emphasis on the birds of Queensland. The society holds a general meeting and several field excursions each month. All members receive a monthly newsletter. For enquiries, including membership, please contact us via:

our website <https://birdsqueensland.org.au> or

by email secretary@birdsqueensland.org.au

ISSN 1037-258X

Queensland Ornithological Society Inc.

Front Cover: Yellow Chat. *Photo by:* Graham Donaldson.

Channel Country with Simpson Strzelecki Dunefields

Andrew Ley

andrewley15@gmail.com

Geography

Occupying most of the southwest corner of the State, the Channel Country Bioregion (CHC) (Figure 1) is the second largest bioregion in Queensland and covers 13.5% (232,080 km²) of Queensland. 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. These waterways are part of the Lake Eyre Basin. Gibber plains, low ranges, and dunefields surround the alluvial plains. Mitchell grass (*Astrebla* sp.), gidgee (*Acacia cambagei*), and spinifex (*Triodia* sp.) are the dominant vegetation with slightly taller vegetation found on the low ranges.

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.

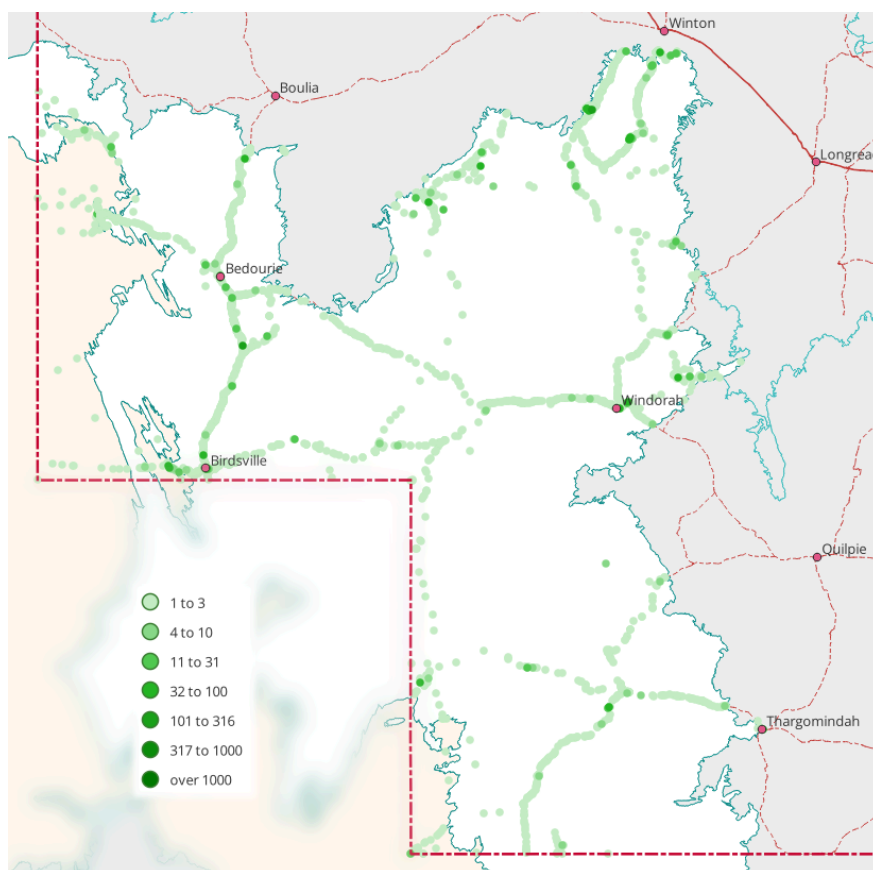


Figure 1 The region map showing eBird surveys from 2020 - 2024. The Channel Country bioregion is shown with a white background and the Simpson Strzelecki Dunefields bioregion is shown with the sandy background. Each point represents an eBird survey location and the intensity is scaled to the number of reported checklists at that location.

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. 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.

Birds of the Bioregion

Reserves wholly or partly in the bioregion are discussed in the previous Bird Report (Ley *et al.* 2022). To that list must be added the recently established Pullen Pullen Reserve, owned and managed by Bush Heritage to protect and study the little-known Night Parrot (*Pezoporus occidentalis*).

Although all the individual records that are the subject of this summary of the region's avifauna have purportedly been through the process of eBird 'moderation', or vetting, and have been deemed acceptable, the actual details of the vetting process and, in some cases, the information on which the decision has been made, remain obscure. The mere presence of a species' name on a list should not, of itself, be sufficient evidence for the occurrence of a rarity; nor should records be accepted on the basis of the assertion of an observer, however well-credentialed, in the absence of other detail.

Seven species appear on more than one thousand of the approximately 1400 lists included on eBird for the Channel Country Bioregion for the five-year period considered in this report. Not surprisingly, these species are common and widespread in the region, are physically and behaviourally prominent, and are easily identified. The seven are: Crested Pigeon (*Ocyphaps lophotes*) (1319 lists), Black Kite (*Milvus migrans*) (1250), Budgerigar (*Melopsittacus undulatus*) (1078), White-plumed Honeyeater (*Lichenostomus penicillatus*) (1144), Willie Wagtail (*Rhipidura leucophrys*) (1580), Magpie-lark (*Grallina cyanoleuca*) (1249), Australian Raven (*Corvus coronoides*) (1086) and Zebra Finch (*Taeniopygia guttata*) (1384).

Species of interest in the bioregion during 2020-2024.

Sahul Brush Cuckoo (*Cacomantis variolosus*)

Only one record, which lacks any information regarding the circumstances of the sighting. The species is undoubtedly more common than the lack of records would suggest as it is most prominent when calling during the summer when few birdwatchers are in the area.

Shorebirds

Two usually strongly-coastal migratory shorebirds were reported in the region during the period: a Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*) was observed and photographed at Lake Machattie in December 2024 by Lucy Coleman and Daniel Terrington; a Greater Sand-Plover (*Charadrius leschenaultii*) was recorded at Noccundra in May 2021, but unfortunately this sighting lacks supporting documentation.

Yellow Chat (*Epthianura crocea*).

Many individuals and groups of 10-20 along the shoreline of Lake Machattie near Bedourie were recorded by Lucy Coleman and Daniel Terrington in December 2024. This was an unusual level of abundance for this species, and the high numbers, along with the presence of a great variety and numbers of other species, provide a good example of the fecundity of the Channel Country when conditions are favourable. Another Yellow Chat record, in Diamantina National Park in August 2020, is inadequately documented, and the species remains to be confirmed on the bird list of this major national park (Ley *et al.* 2011, Ley & Mitchell 2021).

Oriental Pratincole (*Glareola maldivarum*)

Historically, there have been few reports from the Channel Country; however, the species was reported from several places including Lake Machattie, Brighton Downs near Diamantina National Park, and from the vicinity of Boulia, with numbers at least in the low thousands, in December 2024, by Lucy Coleman and Daniel Terrington. The species was previously considered rare in Australia but is now known to occur from time to time in big flocks, especially in the north-west.

Pied Heron (*Egretta picata*).

The two reports of the species in the area and during the period lack supporting information, although the reports may well be correct given the species' distinctiveness; records of any

species as uncommon in the area as this one would be more convincing if some details of the sightings were supplied

Letter-winged Kite (*Elanus scriptus*).

Most records in the region were, as usual, from in and near Astrebla Downs National Park, a well-documented breeding place for the species. During Birds Queensland's expedition to the region in September 2023 a flock of about 40 birds was well-ensconced in Diamantina National Park, in the vicinity of the ranger base and at nearby locations. This occurrence corresponded with the presence of large numbers of Long-haired Rats (*Rattus villosissimus*), a well-known boom-and-bust relationship in the Channel Country. In spite of Diamantina National Park's proximity to Astrebla Downs, records of Letter-winged Kites there have otherwise been only occasional and of very small numbers in the over 30 years since formal surveys began there (Ley *et al.* 2011, Ley & Mitchell 2021).

Eastern Barn Owl (*Tyto javanica*).

As with the previous species, an apparent upsurge in numbers coincided with the presence of large numbers of Long-haired Rats. During Birds Queensland's expedition to Diamantina in September 2023 the species was widespread in the Park and easily seen; up to ten birds at a time were usually visible at the ranger base during the evenings. The species is resident in the vicinity of the ranger base but is usually present in only small numbers and rarely seen (Pers. Obs.).

Australasian Grass Owl (*Tyto longimembris*).

A well-documented record, with photo, by Andy Jensen, Elliot Leach, Gus Daly and Ged Tranter at Farrars Creek in August 2020. A second record, from Diamantina National Park in 2023, is inadequately documented.

Grey-fronted Honeyeater (*Lichenostomus plumulus*)

Possibly sometimes the subject of misidentification, this species was recorded at Bladensburg National Park in March 2024 by Cezary Carmichael and Leo Norman, but the description provided could equally apply to the Grey-headed Honeyeater (*Lichenostomus keartlandi*), which is particularly common in the Channel Country and especially so in Bladensburg National Park.

Banded Honeyeater (*Certhionyx pectoralis*)

Only one sighting in the period, by Bryn Pickering and Luke Enright in November 2022 at Skull Hole in Bladensburg National Park. This is a good example of a well-documented record, given the precise location details and the accompanying photo which shows well the diagnostic features of the species. The presence of this northern species represents a first for the Channel Country list and is an addition to the recently published list for Bladensburg National Park (Ley *et al.* 2025).

Blue-faced Honeyeater (*Entomyzon cyanotis*)

Recorded on ten eBird lists from the Channel Country during the period, although some of these are duplicates and some are of doubtful provenance. Nevertheless, the species may be increasing and expanding its range westward. Prominent though the species tends to be, it was not recorded at Welford National Park during comprehensive surveys between 2012 and 2019, but it was present and breeding at the ranger base in October 2022 (Sophia Levy, pers. comm.).

Southern Whiteface (*Aphelocephala leucopsis*)

In the region this species was largely confined to the far south, but an isolated record south of Winton was reported by Duan Biggs in August 2020 on the Opalton Road.

Torresian Crow (*Corvus orru*)

In a notable change from previous reports, a conspicuous absentee from eBird records for the current period is the Torresian Crow. This follows a reappraisal of the range and occurrence of the species in western Queensland, and an increased rigour in the vetting of the species in eBird submissions from the region (Ley & Debus 2022).

Common Myna (*Acridotheres tristis*)

Although this species has been established at Winton since at least 2018 it appears to have been rapidly encroaching on the wider Channel Country in recent years, as evidenced by the 31 eBird records submitted from the region during the 2020-2024 time period. These included a record at the ranger base at Bladensburg National Park in October 2022 (Ley *et al.* 2025). While this bird was 'controlled', it is unlikely to be the last at that location or elsewhere in the region.

Pictorella Mannikin (*Heteromunia pectoralis*)

Although this species has irrupted into the Channel Country in the recent past, and extended its range during that time south to at least Birdsville (Ley & Tynan 2011), its range seems to have contracted back towards the north since then, and it was only reported from this area three times during the current five-year period.

Listed Species

Sightings of species listed as vulnerable, endangered or critically endangered under the Commonwealth EPBC Act and the Queensland Nature Conservation Act are shown in Table 1.

Conservation

Two Birds Queensland expeditions to the Channel Country were held during the period, following up on a number of excursions to the bioregion over the previous ten years. As usual the aim was to gather bird data on formerly little-surveyed areas. The information gathered has contributed to the various publications that have helped elucidate the avifauna of the bioregion. In June 2021, 30 members

participated in a major expedition to Bladensburg National Park and the Winton district generally. In spite of some adverse weather, 650 bird records were accumulated for our Bladensburg database. In September 2023, 18 participants enjoyed an expedition to Diamantina National Park. The main task was to install and later recover song meters as part of the on-going research into the ecology of the Night Parrot. Participants were rewarded to learn later that at least one Night Parrot was recorded, thus adding to the knowledge of the movements of this elusive species.

Significant publications during the period on the birds of the region included the results of early bird surveys on the newly established Pullen Pullen Reserve (Kutt *et al.* 2021), an update to the earlier bird list from Diamantina National Park (Ley & Mitchell 2021), and the first comprehensive bird list for Welford National Park (Ley *et al.* 2023).

There is a comprehensive conservation program in the Pullen Pullen Reserve managed by Bush Heritage Australia to study and support the Night Parrot (<https://www.bushheritage.org.au/places/pullen-pullen>).

Table 1 Sightings of listed species.

Number: (Number Observed: the cumulative sightings from 2020 - 2024) there will be double counting in this column when there were multiple observers (not in the same group) or bird(s) stayed in the same location for multiple days.

Aus shows the conservation status under the Australian Commonwealth EPBC Act

Qld shows the conservation status under the Qld Nature Conservation Act

V = vulnerable, E = endangered, CE = critically endangered.

Species		Aus	Qld	Number
Scientific Name	Common Name			
<i>Aphelocephala leucopsis</i>	Southern Whiteface	V	V	5
<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	Ruddy Turnstone	V	V	1
<i>Calidris acuminata</i>	Sharp-tailed Sandpiper	V	V	18
<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>	Curlew Sandpiper	CE	CE	2
<i>Charadrius leschenaultii</i>	Greater Sand Plover	V	V	1
<i>Falco hypoleucos</i>	Grey falcon		V	180
<i>Gallinago hardwickii</i>	Latham's Snipe	V	V	2
<i>Grantiella picta</i>	Painted Honeyeater	V	V	13
<i>Hirundapus caudacutus</i>	White-throated Needletail	V	V	1
<i>Limosa limosa</i>	Black-tailed Godwit			1
<i>Lophochroa leadbeateri leadbeateri</i>	Major Mitchell's Cockatoo (eastern)	E		33
<i>Neophema chrysostoma</i>	Blue-winged Parrot	V	V	1
<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	Common Greenshank	E		1



Plate 1. A satellite image of Eyre Creek north of Bedourie in January 2023 (NASA Earth Observatory).

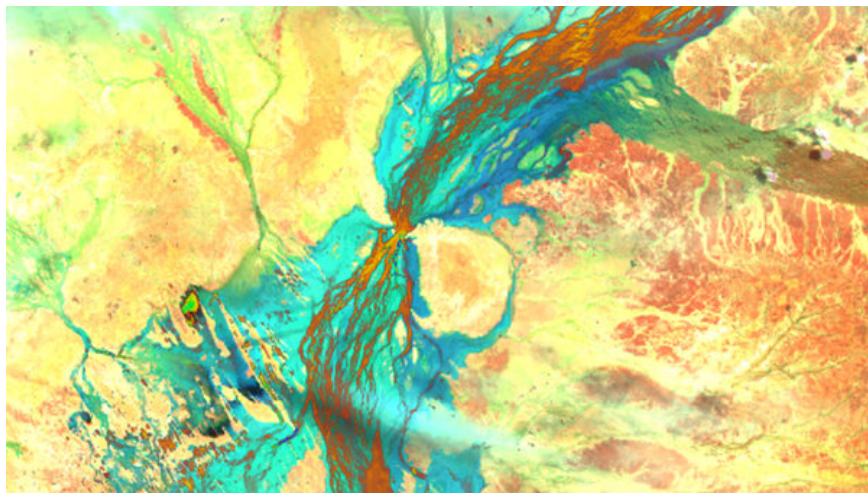


Plate 2. A satellite image of the Diamantina River in the Diamantina National Park, 2024 (<https://maps.dea.ga.gov.au/>)

Major Events

The Channel Country is characterised by highly variable rainfall and water flow in the catchment which is subject to above average rainfall events. The summers of 2022-23 and 2024-25 saw heavy rainfall that resulted in substantial water flows southwards through the Channel Country. Examples of this can be seen in Plates 1 and 2.

References

- Higgins, P.J. & Peter, J.M. (Eds). 2002. *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds* Vol 6. Oxford, Melbourne.
- Kutt, A.S, Kearney, S.G. & Kern, P.L. 2021. More than just Night Parrots: A baseline bird survey of Pullen Pullen Reserve, south-western Queensland. *Australian Field Ornithology* 38: 1-12.
- Ley, A.J. & Debus, S.J.S. 2022. A critical examination of the occurrence of Torresian Crows *Corvus orru* in the Channel Country, south-western Queensland. *Corella* 46: 76-79.
- Ley, A.J., Hume, S. & Tynan, B. 2023. Birds in Welford National Park, Queensland: an annotated list. *The Sunbird* 50: Supplement 1-93.
- Ley, A.J., Lowry, R.J. & Tynan, B. 2025. Birds in Bladensburg National Park, Queensland: an annotated list. *The Sunbird* 52: Supp. 1, 1-30.
- Ley, A.J. & Mitchell, C. 2021. Additions to the avifauna of Diamantina National Park, Queensland. *The Sunbird* 49: 40-47.
- Ley, A.J., Roberts, A. & Niland D. 2022. Channel Country including Simpson Strzelecki Dunefields in Queensland Bird Report 2018-2019. *The Sunbird* 49: 96-103.
- Ley, A.J. & Tynan, B. 2011. An irruption of *Pictorella* Mannikins. *Australian Field Ornithology* 28: 114-119.
- Ley, A.J., Tynan, B. & Cameron, M. 2011. Birds in Diamantina National Park, Queensland. *Australian Field Ornithology* 28: supplement.