

# ConTact Call



Birds Australia North Queensland  
Quarterly Newsletter



Issue: Pied Oystercatcher

December 2010

## Pied Oystercatcher

*Haematopus longirostris*

The Pied Oystercatcher is black with a white breast and belly. All oystercatchers have a bright orange-red bill, eye-rings and legs and a red eye. Young birds are similar in appearance to the adults, but lack the intense red-orange colours and are brown rather than black. This species is shy of humans and seldom allows close approach. The white breast and belly distinguish it from the closely related Sooty Oystercatcher, which has all black plumage. The Pied Oystercatcher is found in coastal areas throughout the Australian continent, except for areas of unbroken sea cliffs such as the Great Australian Bight. Their population has probably declined throughout much of their range and the current population may be as low as 10,000. Closely related forms are found in almost every continent in the world. Mudflats, sandbanks and sandy ocean beaches are their preferred habitat and it is much less common along rocky or shingle coastlines. Although rarely recorded far from the coast, the Pied Oystercatcher may occasionally be found in estuarine mudflats and short pasture. Oystercatchers feed on bivalve molluscs, which are prised apart with their specially adapted bills. Food is found by sight, or by probing their long, chisel-shaped bills in the mud/sand. Young Pied Oystercatchers are one of the few waders that are fed by their parents.

### Pied Oystercatcher *Haematopus longirostris*



During breeding season pairs are evenly spread along the beach. Nesting takes place on sand, shell grit or shingle just above high water mark on beaches, sandbars, margins of estuaries and lagoons. The eggs are well camouflaged, being pale brown with darker brown and black blotches and streaks. Both sexes share parenting duties. During non-breeding season, they are sociable and will form small to medium sized flocks.

Information sourced from *Birds in Backyard*—  
[www.birdsinbackyards.net](http://www.birdsinbackyards.net)

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# BANQ Committee

## From the Convenor's Desk

The year of strange weather continues and with it unusual bird sightings and behaviours. Around the world many people are recording early departures, arrivals and breeding of birds. Absences are also worth recording. Do you keep a note book of such things?

I have recently been to the centre with Maria and the country there is very green. As I was mostly in places I had not been before it was difficult to make direct comparisons with previous visits but even in '81 there did not seem to be so much ground cover or well developed shrubbery. Feral animals and plants are spreading becoming more numerous and displacing the locals as in other parts of Australia. Along little travelled desert roads buffle grass is spreading. With it will come hotter more widespread fires. This changes the structure of the vegetation, removing nesting and roosting sites. It is good to see that in some remote areas, conservative, small patch burning is being reintroduced to the country.

In a recent discussion about habitat restoration a friend raised an objection to man-made environments. She did not mean cities or towns. She was referring to the attempts of myself and others to link remnant forests, build new habitats and recreate a semblance of what was there before. Of course she was right to some degree but all our natural environments in Australia bear in imprint of man. We need to learn much more yet about how we best manage our landscape for native biodiversity and to meet our needs. Many of our rivers need less water harvested from them. Everything we are doing is impacting on our birds and there is a need for us to act with foresight so that the loss is not little by little until it is an emergency.

All Queensland councils are required by law to produce a community plan through consultation. Please be involved and keep the birds in mind.

Wishing you pleasant birding surprises and all the best to you and yours for the festive season.



**Alan Gillanders**

## BANQ Committee Members

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# Project News

## Mungkan Kandju Wetland Monitoring

In September, a team of five counters under the leadership of Greg Bortolussi gathered at the Rokeby Ranger base. Induction and orientation to the sites and method occupied the Tuesday. Wednesday to Friday were given over to the monitoring of three sites at each of two lagoons. We were based at the Rokeby Ranger Base with hot showers and electricity so the camping was very tough.

This park is relatively free of invasive plant species but has a population of feral cattle, horses and pigs. One of the lagoons, Pandanus, is to be fenced to exclude these pests. With one year's monitoring before fencing a two year monitoring thereafter there should be enough basic information about the changes to make some comment on the effect of the ferals and the benefits of their removal.

With early starts and late afternoon finishes the middle of the day is free for long lunches. Greg had planned on three different sites with good birding for these sojourns but exigencies of field work in remote areas often plays havoc with the best laid plans. Each day lunch was in the field somewhere near the Coen River. Most memorable was on the Wednesday when we lunched by the banks of the Coen River where the birding was excellent. Shining Flycatchers worked the edge of the banks, Tawny-breasted Honeyeaters fed in the Melaleuca flowers and a large female White-breasted Sea Eagle flew past while we ate lunch. It was later found with its mate to be feeding a young bird not far upstream. The call of Wompoo Pigeons and Red-crowned Fruit Doves had Greg out of his chair and exploring the creek. He soon returned to tell of Trumpet Manucodes. We returned with him to a fruiting tree but most views were glimpses of retreating birds.

On Thursday Lyle Green and I were left in charge of conducting the Chong Swamp survey as one of the party had fallen ill and Greg's work vehicle needed running repairs. On the way we returned for better looks at the Manucodes. This national park is a

wonderful and diverse birding area with some dry land birds, like Banded and Rufous-banded Honeyeaters and Cape York specials like Palm Cockatoos. Greg has previously advised that each trip tends to turn up a surprise with this years being a non-breeding Australasian Grebe found under the *Barringtonia* at Chong Swamp and a pair of Latham's Snipe seen each day at Pandanus lagoon. The bird list for this trip was 97 species, a bit lower than previous trips tallies of 118 species or more.

Volunteers are welcome to register with Greg Bortolussi but should be aware that this is not a picnic but picnicking is compulsory.

A number of Trumpet Manucodes (4-7) were chasing each other around in the dense foliage of a fruiting fig tree and surrounding rainforest species in a stand of semi-deciduous gallery forest along the Coen River in Mungkan Kandju National Park. Three of these birds alighted on a branch of about 15 mm diameter, 200 to 300 mm apart and five metres off the ground. All turned to be facing the same direction. The centre bird and presumed male called softly but insistently, stretched his neck up and forward, raising the feathers on the back of the neck significantly and those on his throat slightly. This was accompanied by a repeated flicking of the wings forwards and out but not down as illustrated in Frith and Beehler, 'The Birds of Paradise'. The tail was also cocked to near 30 degrees from the horizontal and I think it was in time with the wing flicks but may have remained cocked.

The bird then turned to face the opposite direction and dive over the branch to be hanging upside down, with head and tail held up towards the sky and the wings extended and twisted forwards and upwards. I am not sure if the bird called during this part of the display. The bird then dropped from the branch and flew up and away nearly four metres.

Within two seconds he had been replaced by another presumed male which repeated the display including the upside down, bowl like posture but less wing flicking throughout. The display ended with the male flying away.



Greg Bortolussi and Lyle Green

**Greg Bortolussi**

# Project News

## Black-throated Finch News

The Black-throated finch annual water hole count was conducted on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> October 2010 when 34 gallant observers watched 20 waterholes in the Townsville region for 3 hours each morning and recorded all birds that came into drink.



On behalf of the Black-throated finch Recovery Team (BTFRT), I would like to thank all those who gave up their valuable time over the weekend to support our count. We recognise it is a 'big ask' to get out of bed before day break and sit by a waterhole for 3 hours waiting and hoping to count finches coming in for a drink. For those lucky enough to secure views of Black-throated finches, I am sure you agree it is a very satisfying activity. The Black-throated finch (*cincta*) is listed as endangered under State and Federal law and the data produced by our surveys provides further evidence of the fragile state of these beautiful birds.



The BTFRT would particularly like to thank Kathrin Obnesorge who undertook the role of Waterhole Count Coordinator and had the most difficult task of re-allocating volunteers to new locations when access was denied to three of our key waterholes.

It is too early to summarise the results of this year's data however I believe few finches were recorded drinking during our surveys. At my waterhole, we had Black-throated finches feeding and nesting locally to the dam but only a few came into drink. Clearly they have adequate water supplies without the need to return to the main waterholes. Let's hope this will result in a very successful breeding season.

Thanks again.

**George Baker**  
BTFRT, Secretary

### *Criteria for IBAs*

- The site regularly holds significant numbers of a **globally** threatened species i.e. Critically Endangered, Endangered, Threatened, Vulnerable or Near-threatened e.g. Morehead River IBA for Golden-Shouldered Parrot.
- The site holds a significant number of at least two species with a restricted range. Restricted Range is defined as less than 50,000km<sup>2</sup> (The Wet Tropics is 10,000km<sup>2</sup> and the endemic birds within it qualify it as an IBA).
- Biome-restricted species. A biome is an area with a common climate type which exhibits a single ecological community of plants and animals e.g. the Wet Tropics, the Australian Arid Zone, Cape York. The IBA would encompass a significant set of components of this biome.
- Globally important areas where birds congregate. It must regularly hold at least 1% of the global population of a species of bird OR at least 20,000 waterbirds OR at least 10,000 seabirds. This is the basis on which the Atherton Tablelands IBA is defined for Sarus Cranes. Alternatively migrating birds may be restricted in a bottleneck, which is the basis of the Lockerbie Scrub IBA at the tip of Cape York. Many birds accumulate there e.g. Spangled Drongos before departing for PNG and S.E. Asia.



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**Keith & Lindsay Fisher**  
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Email: sootyowl@bigpond.com  
Web Page: [www.birdwatchers.com.au](http://www.birdwatchers.com.au)

# Project News

## Important Bird Area ~ Annual Crane Count Report

The Annual Crane Count on the Atherton Tableland was accomplished without a hitch in spite of somewhat adverse weather. Many thanks to all participants, some of whom are long standing from its inception in 1997.

The number of cranes counted was a bit of a surprise as many members had commented in the weeks leading up to the count on how few birds were around. We wondered if the prolonged wet up north meant that there was a lot more feed around and the birds were staying put. But this proved not to be the case as the numbers were, if anything, a bit above average. A direct comparison with past years is not easy as this is only the second year that we have staged the count at the beginning of September in response to a general feeling that by October the migration north had already begun. Also past years counts included different sites.

The first year of the Important Bird Area (IBA) count was 2009 when the six most strategic night roosts were selected. The following table affords some comparison between the two years. Sarus Cranes remain the predominant species at these inner Tableland sites.

	HASTY SWAMP	RIESEN 1	RIESEN 2	CURRY/WILSON	GODFREY FRM	BROMFIELD
2009	183	202	4	10	407	64
2010	186	28	180	12	598	1024
TOTAL	2009	870				
	2010	2028				

The data collected from a wider selection of sites including outer Tableland sites is being written up by Elinor Scambler. It is up to us now to keep the process going for the newly declared IBA which focuses on the inner Tableland. It is more than a responsibility, it is exciting and fun to get together with people who share the same interest and to spread the fun and meet new people. We look forward to catching up with you all—old and new—next September. Put a note in your 2011 calendar.



**Virginia Simmonds**



### *Doing a double take...*

What does a birder do on their Sunday morning after the Annual Crane Count? Go back and count them again! Five keen crane counters went back to Bromfield Swamp to try out an early morning experiment. I had been wondering if it was easier to count the birds as they fly out from the roost rather than count them in the evening and as we already knew how many were there, over 1000, we would be able to see which method worked best.

The answer came quite quickly as we tried to count very grey birds in a heavy grey mist. Whilst in the evening the cranes mainly flew in from one direction, they leave in a much more haphazard fashion, making short flights in all directions and landing in different parts within the crater which surrounds the swamp. Most interesting to watch was the fact that many did not fly at all, but walked up the slopes in

small groups, dancing and socializing on the way up, collecting in larger groups at the top of the slope before walking into the mist presumably to fly off from the other side. Beautiful to watch but impossible to count. So after a short while we gave up and decided to check out the birding in an area of ecotone forest between rainforest and wet sclerophyll forest near Wongabel.

After a short drive we set off walking in bright sunlight and immediately saw a Spectacled Monarch, some White-naped Honeyeaters and a Rufous Whistler calling and displaying. Further along we saw Little Shrike-thrush, Brown Gerygones and Red-browed Finches moving through the understorey. In a more open part an Eastern Yellow Robin led us to his partner sat on the nest and an Olive-backed Oriole searched for food as a Whistling Kite passed overhead. After turning round and heading back to the cars we saw Yellow-faced Honeyeaters, a Scarlet Honeyeater and White-throated

Treecreepers. We drove a little further to check out a second area and saw a Leaden Flycatcher displaying enthusiastically, White-throated Honeyeaters, Lewin's Honeyeaters and Silvereyes. A distant Forest Kingfisher disappeared as soon as we looked whilst a Topknot Pigeon, a Brown Cuckoo-Dove and a Sulphur-crested Cockatoo flew over to put in an appearance. In addition to the birds, Terry pointed out a Green Ringtail Possum to me and I thought he was pointing to the Tree-Kangaroo sat in the next tree!

We strolled back to the cars, a glorious mornings bird (and mammal) watching, all over and done by 9.30am.

**Alan Gillanders**

# Project News

## New Carpentaria Grasswren Cairn

Few archeological structures have entered into the folklore of birding mythology as much as the famous Cairn on McNamara Road near Mount Isa. Countless thousands of birders have made the pilgrimage up the dusty road to this Cairn, in search of the nearly mythological Carpentaria Grasswren.

This well documented site is perhaps the best place in the country where you have a chance of glimpsing this elusive bird. Despite this, many birders have spent literally days trudging the spinifex without any luck.

No one knows the origin of the original Cairn. It was thought to have been built by Aboriginal people years before white settlement. Geologists have discovered that some of the rocks come from thousands of kilometers away. Some are heavier than could possibly be carried, prompting speculation of alien involvement.

The entrance to the circular Cairn is guarded by a dragon



(see photo if you don't believe this). Inside the Cairn there used to be an old leather bound ledger, thought to have been left by Burke & Wills. This ledger contained details of Grasswren sightings by devoted bird watchers who visited the site over the ages. After your elation on seeing some Grasswrens, or

depression at great energy expended with no success, you were able to read through the ledger and enjoy the experiences of your colleagues.

Unfortunately, a few years ago, the Cairn was completely destroyed by a grader widening the road.

It is with great pleasure that BANQ announce the construction of a new Cairn at the same site. With minimal funding, a small team of engineers, from of course Cairns, have built another circular Cairn, using only locally available materials.

A new ledger has been placed inside the Cairn and we ask that all visitors to the area please record their sightings so we have a chance to track the status of the Carpentaria Grasswren at this site. Please make an entry whether you are successful or not as a non successful result is still useful in tracking their status.

We visited the site in early October and within two hours the three of us encountered perhaps 8-10 Carpentaria Grasswrens within 500m of the Cairn. One was only 50m away. This was a very good result. The spinifex looked to be moderately green and in good condition with a number of grasshoppers present.



We are hopeful that good rains in the last two years have improved the local conditions giving these little birds a chance to bounce back.

**Dominic Chaplin**

### McNamara's Road (Carpentarian Grasswren Site) North West Qld

(20 16 37/139 08 53, 61.3km 144deg to  
(or 324deg from) Mount Isa

#### Directions:

0.0 At the junction of Barkly Highway and the Lake Moondarra Road drive north along the Highway towards Camooweal.

1.7 Continue north past the Airport entrance on the left.

30.3 Road on R (to Microwave Tower) (Dusky Grasswrens found on top of hill)

39.0 Gunpowder (85km) t/o on R (No access to most areas now)

57.1 100km/hour sign

57.7 Road narrows

61.4 Turn Right (Signposted McNamara's Rd + Lady Loretta Project)

61.6 Gate

69.1 Gully

69.4 Cairn, visitors book and track on Rt

A good area for Spinifex Birds, Black-tailed Treecreepers and if you are lucky the Carpentarian Grasswren.



Carpentarian Grasswren

Kevin Bartram

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## Unpublished Feeding Behaviour of Mountain Thornbill *Acanthiza katherina*

In October 2010 I was atlasing a section of Mt Lewis along a track to an old tin mining dam at an altitude of 960m when I heard a Mountain Thornbill call low down in the vegetation. It was subsequently seen foraging 2m from the ground. It then pounced onto the ground and grabbed a small worm which it ate.

The Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds Vol 6, 2002 (HANZAB) states that Mountain Thornbill are insectivorous, arboreal and usually forage in the outer edge of the rainforest canopy. It lists their diet as spiders and various insects. This foraging information is taken from Keast (1978) who, after looking at 450 individual feeding actions, found the bulk of the feeding (62%) was done at heights of 6.5 -13m. Only 7.5% of feeding actions were below 6.5m, down to a minimum of 3m.

Whilst 450 feeding actions is a relatively small number, it does show that this species prefers to forage higher up in the mid to high levels of the rainforest canopy which is what I have observed. The weather at the time of my observation was heavy rain,

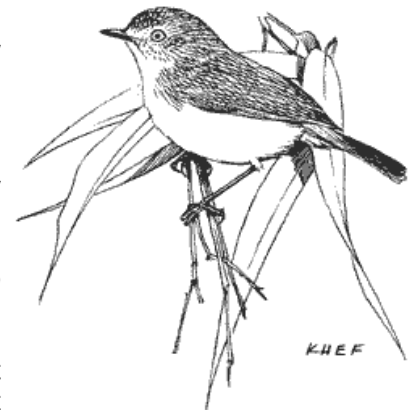
which might have caused the birds to come down to a lower level. Most birds are opportunistic feeders and will switch diets when the situation arises as this one did by eating a worm which is an Anthropod, not their recorded diet of insects.

This observation illustrates the lack of reporting and knowledge about birds in the "Wet Tropics" with a species which is regularly encountered by observers. Keasts foraging observations remain the only ones conducted on this species and published I've found. Other experienced observers and rainforest scientists consulted about this behaviour have also not recorded this activity.

### References

Keast, A. 1978. *Emu* 78: 7-10.

Higgins, P.J., & J.M. Peter (Eds) 2002. *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds. Volume 6: Pardalotes to Shrike-thrushes*. Oxford University Press, Melbourne.



Mountain Thornbill Kim Franklin

© Birds Australia

**Keith Fisher**

Kingfisher Park Birdwatchers Lodge  
RN 6 Mt. Kooyong Road, Julatten QLD 4871

## Members Corner

### Birds in the Green Heart of Australia

Out in the Great Victoria Desert of South Australia the birds are breeding like crazy. Every River Red Gum with a hollow or two has Budgies, sometimes Cockatiels and perhaps other parrots nesting. At one stage I was about to photograph a Crimson Chat and Black Honeyeater sitting on the same branch when a young Chiming Wedgebill popped up between them and scared them off.

Maria had a conference in Alice Springs and I had been invited to visit the school at Murputja. Some of the kids there have been really turned on to birding by their teacher, David Hartland. With their keen young eyes it was a wonderful experience to wander in the mallee, along the red sand dunes and through the Desert Oak Forests where David had recently observed Princess Parrots. None of this species for us though.

The children do 20 minute one hectare atlas records and submit them to the atlas after David's vetting. It is great to see how they support each other.

"Black Honeyeater."

"Where?"

"There, you look that little bush, three o'clock."

"Nah, you lie. Look the eye; him blue. Pied Honeyeater."

By this time I had found the bird and was focusing the binoculars.

We were fortunate enough to be taken to some important cultural places and told the stories. One of the elders had told David that because we had been so good to the kids when they were in Cairns, he wanted to take us to a sacred site and perform ceremony. He had forgotten that he was flying to Holland for the opening of a new art gallery. Such is the life of a desert artist.

During Maria's conference I spent time at the poo ponds, highly recommended, and the surrounds of the Alice. Nowhere else in Australia have I seen so many Wood Sandpipers. The furthest afield I ventured was Knoth Bore on the Tanami Road. On that morning I saw

lots of raptor species including Little Eagle, Hobby and Black-breasted Buzzard. Masked Woodswallows were in most areas in large numbers and breeding well.

In the Botanic Gardens is a very approachable Western Bowerbird. At Murputja one was raiding the mulberry tree but he could not have the impact on it we did.

There had been rain before we arrived and on two of our nights at Murputja. The night before we left it bucketed down and we were worried about not getting out without a large detour. Fortunately the area where the road was subject to flooding missed out on the heavy stuff but there was plenty of water about.

The ninety five species seen in the eight days included seven species of parrot. Bourke's Parrots have a different jizz at different angles. Sitting still they look like doves, flying at you they look like snipe and flying past they look like very small falcons. I could tell you I saw heaps of them but then, that would be bragging ...



Alan Gillanders

## Members Corner

### Papuan Frogmouth

I was recently told about a Papuan Frogmouth and its chick roosting above a pathway in Cairns, between Quarry Street in Aeroglen and Saltwater Creek. The riparian/mangrove vegetation along the path provides an ideal habitat. The Papuan Frogmouth can only be seen in Australia in Far North Queensland, so I grabbed my camera and headed off to find them.

I located them in a melaleuca tree approximately 120m north from the point where Saltwater Creek leaves the pathway. The tell tale white droppings on the ground gave me their exact location! I was delighted to see the parent bird (the mother, judging by the russet plumage) and her fluffy white chick nestled in against her—spilling out over a very meagre nest!

The 85mm lens on my DSLR wasn't quite up to the task of photographing these birds, but I did manage to take a few photos which I later magnified on the computer to see the striking red eye, confirming that these were indeed Papuan

**Mark Price**



#### **BIRDLINE**

for details of interesting sightings,  
go to Birdline North Queensland at [www.eremaea.com](http://www.eremaea.com)  
and search archives.



# NOTICE BOARD



Bird lists and brochures for  
North Queensland  
can be found on BANQ website  
[www.birdsaustralianq.org](http://www.birdsaustralianq.org)

## NEW MEMBERS

*Tony Neilson, Kristy Philliskirk, Andre Guernier  
James Cook University, Christina Zndek,  
Villamarine Holiday Apartments,*

## CALENDAR OF EVENTS

### January 2011

- **22-24 January ~ Annual Campout Kingfisher Park**  
~ contact Lindsay & Keith Fisher phone 4094 1263  
or email [sootyowl@bigpond.com](mailto:sootyowl@bigpond.com)

### March 2011

- **Date tba—Wave the Waders goodbye**

### April 2011

- **22-26 April ~ tba** watch website and e-news for updates

*The BANQ website is regularly updated  
~ please check back regularly  
for information, bird lists and events*

## THANK YOU

## FROM THE EDITOR

It's always exciting to receive your contribution  
to Contact Call;  
and such a privilege to be able to  
share your birding stories with our readers  
I wish you successful birding.

**April newsletter deadline  
~ 22 March 2011**

Please send articles, updates to:  
The Editor — [banq@birdsaustralia.com.au](mailto:banq@birdsaustralia.com.au)  
or c/- The Secretary, PO Box 37,  
Belgian Gardens Q 4810

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