

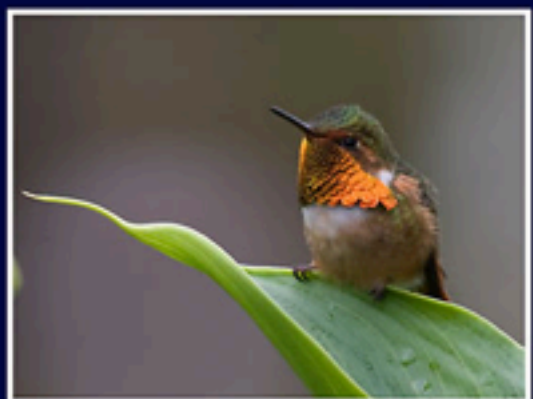
DIARY of a BIRD PHOTOGRAPHER

Volume 2: Years 2010-2018



IAN
MONTGOMERY

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Diary of a Bird Photographer

Volume 2: Years 2010 to 2018

A Compilation of Bird of the Week/Moment
#342 to #585

by Ian Montgomery

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Cover Photos

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About Ian



I became a keen birdwatcher as a schoolboy in Ireland in the 1960s. Fond memories of that time include wildfowl and wader surveys in Dublin and Wicklow, sea-watches in Donegal, and a spell as a volunteer wader at the RSPB Minsmere reserve in Suffolk.

After majoring in zoology at Trinity College Dublin, i migrated to Australia in 1971 and did a Ph.D. in animal behaviour at Sydney University. Then followed a career in computing until, in 1993, I got the opportunity to combine zoology and computing in fisheries modelling and stock assessment at the Institute of Marine Ecology, Sydney University, and later with Victorian Fisheries and James Cook University in Townsville.

I became an enthusiastic bird photographer in 1988 with the purchase of my first SLR camera and telephoto lens. I switched to digital photography in 2001 and took early retirement from James Cook University in 2003 to concentrate on bird photography. My website <birdway.com.au> now contains 8,000 photos of more than 1,500 species of birds and My photos have been published widely.

My involvement in the digital version of the Pizzey and Knight **Field Guide to the Birds of Australia** <<<http://www.gibbonmm.com.au>>>, publication of <[Diary of a Bird Photographer, Volume 1](#)> and co-authorship with Jo Wieneke of the digital version of <[Where to Find Birds in Northern Queensland](#)> reflect my move into digital publishing.

I took up digital photography of birds in early 2001 using a setup called digiscoping which combines a digital camera with a spotting scope. The photo shows me using this combination in Malaysia in October 2001. I was then working for Victorian Fisheries in Queenscliff on the Bellarine Peninsula

south of Geelong, an area that provide a wide range of good habitats for shore and water birds.



Ian 'Digiscoping' in Malaysia in 2001

I moved to Townsville in March 2002 to take up a position as a fisheries modeller at CRC Reef (Cooperative Research Centre) at James Cook University and in October of that year I started sharing bird photos with my colleagues as a bird of the week email.

Early in 2003, I retired from CRC Reef to concentrate on bird photography and set up a small business for the sale of digital photos and prints to augment my superannuation. I continued posting the bird of the week and over the months it grew in popularity as friends and birders joined the list.

In October 2004 I converted the list to a Google Group to make it easier to manage and to join: <www.birdway.com.au/birdoftheweek.php>. The rest, as they say, is history and currently, in 2019, the list continues with about one thousand members from all over the world.

To begin with, the bird of the week was a single photo with a little explanatory text. Over the years it grew in size and substance to an illustrated story with up to half a dozen photos. As the content usually relates to current activities and travel, it reads like a diary. Members expressed interest in earlier issues so I collected them together in an ebook <[Diary of a Bird Photographer Volume 1](#)> which covers the years 2002 to 2009.



Ian on the ship Spirit of Enderby on the trip to the Sub-Antarctic Island in 2011

The bird of the week continues to this day. In recent years it has been produced less often than weekly so I now call it the <bird of the moment>. This book collects together all the stories from 2010 to 2018 as a second volume of Diary of a Bird Photographer.

Using this Book

The book is divided into chapters by year covering the years in this volume from 2010 to 2018 (volume 1 covers the years from 2002 to 2009).

There is an Index to Bird Names at the end of the book. In it you can search by type of bird, e.g. 'Nightjar, Large-tailed' and by common name, e.g. 'Large-tailed Nightjar'. with clickable links to the corresponding bird of the week identified by a hash symbol followed by the bird of the week number or numbers, e.g. 'Eastern Grass Owl #580, #581'. Eastern Grass Owl is included in [E](#) as 'Eastern Grass Owl'; [G](#) as 'Grass Owl, Eastern'; and [O](#) as 'Owl, Eastern Grass'.

There is also a Taxonomic Index in <<[IOC sequence](#)>> which lists all the bird families included in this volume with links to the corresponding bird of the week articles. Links to the families are included in the Index to Bird Names and look like this: [Psittacidae: Parrots & Allies](#).

The book contains two types of links: internal and external. Internal links point to another part of the book while external links point to an external source such as a website page. The links in the index are all internal, so you don't need an internet connection to use them.

External links do need an internet connection, so these links are placed in <angle brackets> to remind you. Many of these links are to photos in the Birdway website and single angle brackets are used: <[birdway.com.au](#)>. Other internet links are shown with double angle brackets: <<[Birdlife Australia](#)>>.

The behaviour of external links depends on your reader software. Apple iBooks opens the web page in Safari, so you'll need to make your own way back to the iBooks application. Some other readers open web pages in an internal browser and you'll just need to close the browser page to return to the book.

The appearance of links will also depend on your reader software, with some highlighting them while others underline them. The treatment of images differs too. Usually you can enlarge an image by double-clicking on it, which causes it to be opened in a separate window in front of the book. Typically these windows can be zoomed. To return to the book, you need to close the window by click on a close box. Try double-clicking on this photo of a Royal Penguin to check how your software works.



The corresponding entries in the Index are: under **P** Penguin, Royal #429; and under **R**, Royal Penguin #429.

I hope you enjoy this book. If you do, tell your friends and share this link with them: <birdway.com.au/publications.php>. If you do not already subscribe to the free bird of the moment, you can do here: <birdway.com.au/birdoftheweek.php>. If you have any comments or suggestions, send them to me at <ian@birdway.com.au>.

Year 2010: #342 to #391

#342 Bar-breasted Honeyeater 4 January 2010

This week we have an unusual-looking honeyeater from northern Australia, the <Bar-breasted Honeyeater>. It is the only Australian Honeyeater with strong barring - the only other barred one is its close relative the faintly-barréd <Brown-backed Honeyeater> of northeastern Queensland and PNG.



Bar-breasted Honeyeater (Ramisayornis fasciatus)

Coen District, Cape York Peninsula, Northern Queensland, 27 Nov 2009

96442 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Its range extends through coastal areas from the Kimberley in Western Australia to Rockhampton in Queensland. Though scarce in eastern Queensland, it is quite common in suitable habitats in the rest of northern Australia but, being an unobtrusive feeder on the blossoms of trees, it is easy to overlook. Like the Brown-backed, it prefers woodlands near water, typically paperbarks or eucalyptus and both species build quite bulky suspended nests of paperbark strips, usually over water. See the this photo of the nest of a Brown-backed Honeyeater as for an example: <Brown-backed Honeyeater>.



Bar-breasted Honeyeater (Ramphoceros fuscatus)

Parry Lagoon, NE Western Australia, 17 September 2009

92962 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Birds that feed on flowering trees are usually difficult to photograph as they often remain obscured by the foliage. I photographed the one in the first photo on Cape York by sitting in comfort on a folding chair in the shade of a flowering tree - it was a very hot day - and focussing the camera on a suitably exposed blossom until a honeyeater came along. In the second photo, in northeastern Western Australia, I climbed up a tree and sat on a large limb against the trunk and waited for the birds to come and feed near me.

Well another year is on us, so Happy New Year, specifically Happy twenty-ten! (Being pedantic, I've joined the campaign to boycott 'two thousand and . . .').

Ian

#343 Yellow-legged Flyrobin/Flycatcher 16 January 2010

I haven't had proper internet access for a week, so please forgive me for another late BoW. I've been sequestered away in a girls' boarding school in Armidale on the tablelands of northern New South Wales attending a recorder playing workshop. It was a wonderful experience but quite exhausting and I've discovered that you use the same brain cells for playing music as you do for composing text. I managed find some other brain cells to prepare these two photos several days ago - taking time off

from practice - but my plan to skip lunch and search for an internet cafe never had much chance of success.



Yellow-legged Flycatcher (Microeca griseoceps)

Lockhart River, Cape York Peninsula, Northern Queensland, 29 November 2009

96881 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The <Yellow-legged Flycatcher> belongs in the obscure category. Unlike its close relative the Jacky-winter - widespread throughout Australia - it is found only in northern Cape York Peninsula and Papua New Guinea. It is a forest dweller, favouring the outer canopy and small (12cm/4in long) so it is easily overlooked. The chrome-yellow legs, however, contrast with its rather sombre plumage.



Yellow-legged Flycatcher (Alcedo gillivrayi)

Lockhart River, Cape York Peninsula, Northern Queensland, 29 November 2009

96889 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In recent years it has become better known as more birders visit Iron Range National Park near Lockhart River. My 1986 field guide (Slater) describes its status as 'rare' and its voice as 'precise information required', while my 2000 one (Morecombe) says it is 'common' and provides a detailed description of its call (variations on "wheet").

Like the <Jacky-winter> and the rather similar <Lemon-bellied Flycatcher> of northern Australia it is a member of the Petroicidae. the Australo-Papuan Robins and is not related to other flycatchers. To emphasize this distinction, the international name for the Yellow-legged and the Lemon-bellied is 'Flyrobin' (there are several species in PNG) but this name is having an uphill task in being accepted in Australia.

Now, I'm going to go Dangar Falls National Park near Armidale and have a relaxing day or two.

Best wishes,

Ian

#345 Displaying Superb Lyrebird 22 January 2010

From the obscure last week <Yellow-legged Flycatcher> to the iconic this week, a male <Superb Lyrebird> displaying in an Antarctic Beech forest last Monday in New

England, northern NSW - what could be more appropriate after the recorder-playing course in Armidale?



Superb Lyrebird (Menura novaeollandiae)

New England, New South Wales, 18 January 2010

98575 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The first photo (98575) you can see the display posture of the lyrebird with the long tail feathers bent forwards over the head. The tail feathers are of three types. The two, large, outer left-most ones are called 'lyrates' and are about 60cm/24in long. The lyrates have club-shaped ends, are grey and rufous above and silvery and rufous below with a ladder pattern. The two innermost ones, to the right of the lyrates in the photo, are slender 'guard-plumes', while the remaining 12 lacy 'filamentaries' are blackish above and silvery or grey below (depending on the race).



Superb Lyrebird (Menura novae-hollandiae)

New England, New South Wales, 18 January 2010

98498 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In the display, the male first raises the tail feathers vertically and it is in this position that the eponymous lyre shape is assumed by the lyrates. The feathers are then brought forward over the head (second photo) and spread sideways to the fullest extent possible. In the third photo, the bird is facing the camera but the head and body are completely hidden - the ultimate masked ball costume. Lyrebirds are all-round performers - not content with just a gorgeous display, he sings vigorously and beautifully, vibrating the filamentaries to make them shimmer. Lyrebirds are famous mimics, historically of other birds in the forest, but nowadays of mechanical devices too. This one was mainly mimicking Crimson Rosellas. At the height of the display, he dances back and forward in time to a percussive phrase rendered as 'tuggerah tuggerah tug' by Pizzey and Knight.



Superb Lyrebird (Menura novaeollandiae)

New England, New South Wales, 18 January 2010

98552 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

There was a female present during the 25 minutes that I watched the display. The male seemed absorbed to the point of being in a trance, letting me approach with in a few metres. The female was warier and moved away eventually, and only then did the male appear to notice my presence and strode off into the forest. The whole scene was like an amazing ballet, the Antarctic Beech forest providing a mossy, enchanted set that reminded me of cloud forest in Ecuador and, during the display, a <Swamp Wallaby> went bouncing by, adding to the sense of unreality.

I'm back home in Bluewater now and can resume adding photos to the website.

Best wishes,

Ian

#346 Bassian Thrush 28 January 2010

Here's another bird from the forest of New England, NSW, the <Bassian Thrush>.

In the Northern Hemisphere, thrushes feature among the best known and most melodious birds of gardens and woodland, such as the <Eurasian Blackbird>, <Song Thrush> and <Mistle Thrush> and the (North) <American Robin>. They are so popular that two have been successfully introduced into southeastern Australia: the

Blackbird (widespread in southeastern Australia including Tasmania) and the Song Thrush (Melbourne and Geelong).



Bassian Thrush (Zosterornis lateralis)

New England, New South Wales, 16 January 2010

98386 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Ask a non-birder in Australia about native Thrushes, however, and you'd probably draw a blank. In fact there are two on the mainland and a third, the [Island Thrush](#), on Christmas Island. The two mainland ones, the Bassian and the Russet-tailed Thrushes, are very similar and are secretive inhabitants of dense forest, the Bassian in eastern and southern Australia from the Atherton Tableland in northeastern Queensland to Tasmania and the Mount Lofty Ranges in South Australia. The Russet-tailed has a more limited distribution in northeastern Queensland and southeastern Queensland and northeastern New South Wales. The ranges of the two species overlap without interbreeding, but they have been treated as separate species and distinct from the Eurasian Scaly Thrush only since 1983 <<[Ford, J. <http://www.publish.csiro.au/paper/MU9830141.htm>](#)>>.



Bassian Thrush (Zosterornis lateralis)

New England, New South Wales, 16 January 2010

98380 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In the photographs, this bird can be identified as Bassian by the less rufous colour of the back, particularly the rump and tail, slight longer tail and stronger half-moon patterns on the back. Probably the best field mark are the outer tail feathers which in flight are conspicuously whiter in the Russet-tailed and, if all else fails, altitude comes to the rescue as the Russet-tailed isn't usually found above 750 metres (this one was at 1,500m). Their songs differ too: the Bassian is rather like the Eurasian Blackbird in tone, while the Russet-tailed has a clear two-note whistle. Unfortunately, neither species is very vocal. It's probably not surprising that it took so long to separate the species! The name Bassian, I assume, refers to the East Bassian bioregion of coastal southeastern Australia and Tasmania.

Until a couple of centuries ago, the Eurasian Blackbird was a secretive bird of forests until it discovered the delights of gardens and became accustomed to humans. Maybe the same is happening with the Bassian Thrush. This one was near a picnic area and much less shy than normal, and they do turn up in gardens sometimes.

Best wishes

Ian

#347 Little Tern 7 February 2010

The <Little Tern> is one of two tiny species of Tern found in Australia, the other being the very similar <Fairy Tern>. In breeding plumage, as in the first photo, the Little Tern is distinguished by having black lores forming a line through the eyes connecting the black cap to the yellow bill and the bill usually has a black tip. Both species are of a similar size with a length of 20-28cm/8-11in. This bird was photographed in Queensland in October and would have been a member of the local breeding population.



Little Tern (Sterna albigularis)

Estuary of Crystal Creek, Northeastern Queensland, 26 October 2004

40636 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In non-breeding plumage, as in the second photo, both species have white lores but the Little Tern has black primaries and a black bill while the Fairy Tern has grey primaries and a black-tipped bill with a yellowish base. This bird was photographed in New South Wales in January, so it is probably a member of the Asian breeding population that spends the northern winter in Australia. This bird is fishing by hovering in a characteristic posture with the tail bent sharply downwards.



Little Tern (Sterna albigrons)

Lennox Head, New South Wales, 8 January 2010

98219 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The third photo was taken two seconds after the second photo, and the bird is taking flight again after an unsuccessful dive. An average Little Tern weights only about 50g./2oz. so it must have hit the water with tremendous impact. It is fishing, as is typical, in shallow water - the whitish reflection in the background is the surf breaking farther out.



Little Tern (Sterna albifrons)

Lennox Head, New South Wales, 8 January 2010

98220 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Little Tern has a widespread distribution through Eurasian, Africa and Australasia. In Australia it occurs in northern, eastern and southern coastal areas from Broome to the Yorke Peninsula and in Tasmania. In contrast, the Fairy Tern occurs mainly in western and southern areas of Australia, but the ranges do overlap in Victoria, South Australia and northern Western Australia.

Best wishes,

Ian

#348 Chestnut Teal 15 February 2010

Graham Pizzey has neat descriptions in his field guide (Pizzey and Knight: Field Guide to the Birds of Australia). This is what he says about the [Chestnut Teal](#):
'Male: elegant small duck with bottle-green head, rich chestnut body, white flank-mark, black stern'. The females, who do all the incubation and often nest on the ground, are, in contrast well camouflaged. The males, do, however, help to look after the ducklings.



Chestnut Teal (Anas castanea)

Pearl Beach, New South Wales, 3 January 2010

98021 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It is a southern species, so it was good to encounter these ones in New South Wales in January. They are abundant in Tasmania and common in southeast and southwestern Australia but occur only as vagrants north of the Tropic of Capricorn.



Chestnut Teal (Anas castanea)

Pearl Beach, New South Wales, 3 January 2010

98054 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The female is very similar to both sexes of the closely related and more widespread <Grey Teal>, but is distinguished by darker colouration and the Grey teal has a diagnostic whitish neck and lower face. To complicate identification, the male Chestnut Teal moults after breeding into the 'eclipse' plumage which looks like the female and retains this plumage from February to April. Eclipse plumage occurs almost universally in those duck species which have brightly coloured males.



Chestnut Teal (Anas castanea)

Pearl Beach, New South Wales, 3 January 2010

98035 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Best wishes

Ian

#349 Olive-backed Oriole 19 February 2010

I've just revised the galleries for the Australian Orioles, so here is the <[Olive-backed Oriole](#)>. It's less colourful than its Australian relatives, the <[Green/Yellow Oriole](#)> and the <[Australasian Figbird](#)>, but it's an attractive bird all the same and one that I always enjoy seeing. The first photo shows a young adult. It has the characteristic green and grey plumage, red eye and pink bill of the adult, but the wing feathers still have buff, rather than white, edges. The contrasting white background and black streaks of the breast look smart, and the black streaks look as if they've been skillfully painted on by an oriental potter.



Olive-backed Oriole (Oriolus sagittatus)

Timber Creek, Northern Territory, 22 September 2009

93794 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The second photo shows a juvenile bird with brownish back and wings and dark eyes and bill. It's just beginning to acquire adult plumage with a greenish tinge developing on the head.



Olive-backed Oriole (Oriolus sagittatus)

Townsville, Northeastern Queensland, 2 April 2006

31985 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Olive-backed Oriole is quite widespread in northern, eastern and south-eastern Australia occurring from Broome in the west through the top half of the Northern Territory and through almost all of Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. It's resident in the north but a breeding migrant in the south east, returning to northern Australia in the winter. It is well camouflaged and rather unobtrusive when feeding on fruit in foliage, but it has a loud, musical call, often rendered as 'orrie, orrie-ole', that is a characteristic sound of open woodlands.

Best wishes

Ian

#350 Golden Bowerbird 28 February 2010

Searching for a suitable Bird of the Week, I found that the <Golden Bowerbird> hasn't, I don't think, featured as BOW before. That's a serious omission which we'll now rectify. It's serious because all bowerbirds are special, the Golden Bowerbird is particularly gorgeous, its a local specialty and it's survival is of real concern in the case of global warming.



Golden Bowerbird (Prionodura newtoniana)

Paluma, Northeastern Queensland, 17 October 2009

94380 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The adult male Golden Bowerbird is golden-yellow below and glossy golden-olive above, with a yellow erectile patches on the nape and crown. The rarely-seen female is, in comparison, a rather drab olive-brown (there's a photo of one [here on the Birdway website](#)). With a length of 23-25cm/9-10in, it's the smallest of the Australian Bowerbirds but, as compensation, it builds the biggest bower. It is found only in highland rainforest in the wet tropics of northeastern Queensland from Mount Elliott near Townsville north to Mount Cook near Cooktown. It nests only above 900m/3,000ft, but moves lower in winter. A good place to see them is near Paluma, about one hour's drive from where I live.



Most Australian Bowerbirds, such as the <[Satin Bowerbird](#)>, build 'avenue' bowers consisting of two parallel walls of twigs on a display platform. The Golden Bowerbird builds a 'maypole' bower, consisting of at least two columns, each consisting of sticks arranged around a sapling. This can be up to 3m/10ft in height but more typically is about 1m high like the one in the photo. Between the saplings is a branch used as a display perch and the male bird decorates this with lichens and rainforest flowers, often orchids. The bowers are often incorrectly referred to as 'nests', but the bowers are built and maintained by the males to attract females for mating and the females build their own nests. If the male bowerbird disappears, the bower will be taken over by another male so a particular site remains in use used decades.

The concern about global warming arises because their habitat consists of islands of highland rainforest in a sea of coastal lowlands. If warming eventuates, the

boundaries of the highland rainforest my rise in altitude and the islands may ultimately disappear. The Golden Bowerbird has iconic status here, but other species would be affected to, such as the <[Mountain Thornbill](#)>. Consequently, Paluma Range has been classified as an Important Bird Area (IBA) and monitoring of the bowers of Golden Bowerbirds is undertaken by <<[BirdLife Northern Queensland](#)>>.

#351 Pheasant Coucal 7 March 2010

While I was making a cup of coffee this morning and pondering what to choose as Bird of the Week, this <[Pheasant Coucal](#)> supplied the answer by posing on a small tree, having just had a drink in the pond below. Coucals, like other cuckoos, are shy birds so I photographed it through the window - first photo - before carefully opening the French door onto the verandah to try to get a clearer view. I got the door open all right, but it spotted me raising the camera and large lens and took off before I had managed to take more than a couple of shots - second photo.



Pheasant Coucal (Centropus phasianinus)

Bluewater, Northeastern Queensland, 7 March 2010

98768 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Pheasant Coucals are splendid birds: large (to 70cm/28in in length), red-eyed with richly patterned short wings and a long tail. In breeding plumage, the head and body is blackish with shiny feather shafts and the bill is black. In non-breeding plumage the black, of both the plumage and the bill, fades to buff.



Pheasant Coucal (Centropus phasianinus)

Bluewater, Northeastern Queensland, 7 March 2010

98770 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Their usual call is a wonderful "deep, hollow, descending, descending 'coop-coop-coop-coop-coop', like liquid glugging from bottle" to quote Pizzey and Knight. They also have a sharp alarm call that sounds coarse paper being torn suddenly. There are several territories near my place, mostly along the creek, so the sound of their 'bottle' call is very characteristic of summer and I realise how much I've missed it when they start calling in the spring.

The range of the Pheasant Coucal includes coastal north western, northern and eastern Australia from the Pilbara to the Sydney region. It is generally common, but less so at the edge of its range in central New South Wales. It also occurs in New Guinea and related species, such as the <Greater Coucal>, are found in the warmer parts of Asia and in Africa.

Unlike other cuckoos, Coucals build their own nest and were until recently placed in their own family (the Centropidae). Genetic studies have shown that they close affinities with other cuckoos, and it is now usual to treat them as a subfamily of the cuckoos (Centropodinae within <Cuculidae>).

The Pheasant Coucals fly very poorly. The usual strategy is to climb to the top of a tree and glide with a few wing-beats to the destination. Sadly, they lack traffic sense and are frequently casualties on highways. Here in North Queensland, they are called 'pheasants' in the same way <Bush Stone-Curlews> are called 'curlews'.

Best wishes

Ian

#352 Helmeted/Hornbill Friarbird 14 March 2010

As with the <[Pheasant Coucal](#)> last week, I didn't have to leave the house to photograph the Helmeted Friarbird in the first photo on the red flowers of a nearby Umbrella Tree. This tree has been flowering profusely for weeks and attracting a noisy variety of Honeyeaters and Lorikeets. The Helmeted Friarbird - length to 37cm/ 15in is the largest of the 4 species of Friarbirds found in Australia. Friarbirds get their name from the colour of the plumage, like the brown habits worn by friars and Helmeted refers to the feathered crown, in contrast to the naked crown of the more widespread <[Noisy Friarbird](#)>.



Helmeted Friarbird (Philemon buceroides)

Bluewater, Northeastern Queensland, 13 March 2010

99013 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This particular individual is sub-adult; it has pale fringes to the feathers of the back and neck which marks it as an immature bird, but it has the red eye and knobbed bill of the adult - very young birds have brown eyes and lack the knob. The second photo shows an adult bird feeding on an orange Grevillea and you can see that the plumage is more evenly coloured.



Helmeted Friarbird (Philemon buceroides)

Bluewater, Northeastern Queensland, 22 July 2005

17524 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Helmeted Friarbird is a northern species and, in Australia, it occurs only in Queensland and the Northern Territory. The Queensland race of the Helmeted Friarbird (*yorki*)* has a silvery crown and is best distinguished from the rather similar [Silver-crowned Friarbird](#) by the shape of the rear edge of the facial skin - curved in the Helmeted, but with a backward-pointing spur in the Silver-crowned - and by its calls.

In the Top End of the Northern Territory, another race of the Helmeted Friarbird (*ammitophilus*)* lacks the knob on the bill - see the third photo - and has different calls. This race is often called the Sandstone Friarbird and is a characteristic bird of the escarpments of Kakadu and Arnhem Land.



Helmeted Friarbird (Philemon buceroides)

Nourlangie Rock, Northern Territory, 9 September 2009

91943 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Friarbirds are large Honeyeaters and the Helmeted Friarbird is only exceeded in size among Australian Honeyeaters by the <Yellow Wattlebird>, a Tasmanian endemic. Only the Silver-crowned is an Australian endemic, the other 3 species also occur in New Guinea, where another 12 species of Friarbird occur.

Best wishes,

Ian

*The IOC (2018) treats the Queensland race *yorki* as a separate species, the <Hornbill Friarbird>, and the Top End race *ammitophilus* as a race of the <Helmeted Friarbird>. The Birdway website follows the IOC classification. BirdLife Australia and BirdLife International treat them all as races of the Helmeted Friarbird.

#353 Banded Honeyeater 22 March 2010

I've continued updating some of the Honeyeater galleries on the website. Last week, we had one of the largest, the Helmeted Friarbird, but here is one of the smaller ones, the <Banded Honeyeater> with a length of about 12cm/5in. Fledgling Banded Honeyeaters have fudge-coloured upper parts, wings, tail and breast-band which change to black in adult birds (of both sexes), contrasting smartly with white underparts, throat and rump.



Banded Honeyeater (Eusimonia pectoralis)

Mardugal, Northern Territory, 10 September 2009

92124 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

At least that's what they are supposed to do. In practise, most of the birds one sees are in transitional plumage varying between that shown in the first photo at a waterhole, which has the brownish back and head and yellow cheeks of the juvenile, but the black wings and tail of the adult. The bird in the second photo feeding on melaleuca blossom, has got almost fully black and white plumage but still has a few brownish feathers on the back. On the trip to the Top End of the Northern Territory last year where Banded Honeyeaters are fairly common, I deliberately searched for a completely black and white bird without success, and this was the best I could find. I'd be interested to hear whether others have noticed this too.



Banded Honeyeater (Cissomela pectoralis)

Edith River, Northern Territory, 14 September 2009

92480 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Banded Honeyeater has a northern distribution from the Kimberley region of Western Australia to North Queensland, where it is uncommon south of Cooktown. These birds are 'blossom nomads' and in recent years have been seen regularly at White Mountains National Park, between Charters Towers and Hughenden and south of Townsville, when the grevilleas are in bloom in early winter.

Taxonomically, the Banded Honeyeater has traditionally been lumped in the same genus (*Certhionyx*) as the superficially similar <Black> and <Pied> Honeyeaters. Recently studies have indicated that the three species are not closely related and each has been relegated to its own (monotypic) genus, *Cissomela* in the case of the Banded. It is apparently closer to the <White-cheeked> Honeyeater and allies (*Phylidonyris*) while the Black is closer to the <Scarlet> Honeyeater and relatives (*Myzomela*). I've recently updated the galleries of all these species, including some colourful photos of Scarlet and White-cheeked feeding in red and yellow blossom respectively in Paluma last Friday. (Both these have featured as Bird of the Week previously, disqualifying them from, or at least handicapping them in, selection this week).

Best wishes

Ian

#354 Spotted Bowerbird 30 March 2010

I've recently been updating the Bowerbird galleries on the website, including those of the <Satin>, <Great> and <Spotted> Bowerbirds. Both the Satin and Great have featured as bird of the week in the past, so here is the Spotted Bowerbird. It is closely related to the similar Great Bowerbird, but is smaller (to 30cm/12in in length compared with 38cm/15in) and much more richly coloured, buff and brown, rather than fawn and greyish-brown. It also has a pink erectile crest on the nape used in display, more prominent on the male but smaller or absent in females and young birds.



Spotted Bowerbird (Chlamydera maculata)

Belyando Crossing, Northeastern Queensland, 22 December 2009

97776 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Both the photos were taken near the roadhouse at Belyando Crossing, the only place where you can get petrol and food on the 400km stretch between Charters Towers and Clermont on the inland route south of Townsville, and a reliable spot for this species. In the first photo, the bowerbird is showing interest in the mango, remains of my breakfast, currently being commandeered by a Blue-faced Honeyeater. If you look carefully, you can see the crest, but it is more obvious in the second bird which is displaying to another one, out of sight below.



Spotted Bowerbird (Chlamydera maculata)

Belyando Crossing, Northeastern Queensland, 3 March 2006

30991 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Spotted Bowerbird is a bird of mainly inland eastern Australia, though it reaches the coast in central Queensland. It occurs widely in Queensland, though absent from the north where it is replaced by the Great, and in New South Wales as far south as the border with Victoria and southeastern South Australia. It is common in the northern part of its range, but rarer in the south. It is replaced in central western regions of Australia (southern Northern Territory, central Western Australia and northwestern South Australia) by the similar but darker Western Bowerbird. These three all belong to the genus *Chlamydera*, and in northern Cape York and Papua New Guinea there is a fourth species, the <Fawn-breasted> Bowerbird, while a fifth species, the Yellow-breasted Bowerbird, is found in New Guinea but not in Australia.



Spotted Bowerbird (Chlamydera maculata)

Belyando Crossing, Northeastern Queensland, 3 March 2006

30991 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The males of all these bowerbirds build avenue bowers consisting of two parallel walls, like that of the Satin Bowerbird but unlike the maypole bower of the <Golden> Bowerbird that was illustrated 4 weeks ago when it featured as bird of the week. All five species collect white and green objects, and seem to show an almost fetishistic preference for shiny objects - stones and shells, historically, but nowadays glass and metal. Only the three southern species have pink crests and these three all collect red objects; the Fawn- and Yellow-breasted Bowerbirds lack the crests and I cannot find any reference to their collecting red objects. Young birds, presumably males, also collect objects in juvenile display areas that lack a proper bower. The third photo, shows one of these, playing with a blue plastic bottle ring, perhaps an indiscriminate choice of exuberant youth!



On the subject of bowerbirds, the above photo of a Golden Bowerbird has been chosen as the icon for the upcoming Birds Australia Congress and Campout in Townsville in August 2010.

Best wishes

Ian

#355 Welcome Swallow 6 April 2010

Birds Australia North Queensland had planned to visit Cooktown for Easter, which turned out to be very wet throughout northeastern Queensland. Several intrepid souls, presumably not camping, made it there, but a friend and I spent a few days at Kingfisher Park in Julatten near Mossman before returning home. We did manage to get out birding a few times between showers and one afternoon I spent an hour or two trying to photograph birds hawking for insects over the fish ponds of a nearby Barramundi farm. As is often the case, the poor weather brought both the insects and their avian predators down to low levels - poor light but good practice.



Welcome Swallow (Hirundo neoxena)

Julatten, Northeastern Queensland, 3 April 2010

99722 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The birds consisted of a mixture of <Welcome Swallows>, <Tree Martins> and <White-rumped Swiftlets>, and I've posted images of all three to the website, though I've chosen the Welcome Swallow here as being the most photogenic. This is a familiar and widespread bird in Australia, though it is absent from the the arid centre and northern Western Australia and much of the Northern Territory. It is similar in appearance and habits to the <Barn Swallow> of the northern hemisphere, and like it builds a cup-shaped nest in sheltered sites, particularly buildings.



Welcome Swallow (Hirundo neoxena)

Julatten, Northeastern Queensland, 3 April 2010

99651 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The first photo shows a bird hawking low over grass and obligingly spreading all its tail feathers to brake or turn. The second one is flying over the fish pond and the third is a photo taken some time ago of a bird perched beside Ross River in Townsville.



Welcome Swallow (Hirundo neoxena)

Townsville, Northeastern Queensland, 26 September 2004

10797 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The name 'Welcome' emphasises its familiarity, but it also suggests to me migration and a harbinger of Spring. In fact, unlike the Barn Swallow, it is resident over much of its range and only in Tasmania and southeastern Australia does it migrate for the southern winter but only as far as Queensland and Torres Strait. The Barn Swallow is a famous migrant travelling from Europe to Africa, North to South America and Northern to Southern Asia. Some even get as far as Australia and turn up annually in small numbers in northern coastal areas.

Best wishes,

Ian

#356 Christmas Island Imperial-Pigeon 13 April 2010

We are, we hope, near the end of a persistent wet season, during which I haven't taken many photos. So, here is an attractive bird from the archives, photographed on a trip to Christmas Island in 2006, the <[Christmas Island Imperial-Pigeon](#)>. It's comparable in size (length 38-40cm/15-16in) to the <[Torresian Imperial-Pigeon](#)> of northern Australia, but quite different in colour, much darker with strikingly iridescent plumage. In the first photo, the sunlight highlights the green iridescence of the back and wing feathers, while the second photo shows the purplish-grey and rufous-brown plumage of the underside.



Christmas Island Imperial-Pigeon (Ducula whartoni)

Christmas Island, Indian Ocean Territories, 7 September 2006

40724 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It's endemic to Christmas Island, a mere speck - area 140 sq km - in the Indian Ocean 500km south of Java. Because of its small range and therefore limited population, it is classified as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List. It seemed to be quite common on the island and the population is thought to be stable, though there are concerns that it could be affected by an infestation of yellow crazy ants on Christmas Island. Control measures have reduced the ant infestation, but eliminating them has proved difficult and the baits used also affect other invertebrates such as the famous terrestrial red crabs.



Christmas Island Imperial-Pigeon (Ducula whartoni)

Christmas Island, Indian Ocean Territories, 1 September 2006

39118 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It's closest relative is the Pink-headed Imperial-Pigeon (*Ducula rosacea*) which is widespread but rather rare in the islands of Indonesia and East Timor. It has suffered from both habitat destruction and hunting. Some authorities consider that the Christmas Island Imperial-Pigeon may be a race of the Pink-headed.

I've added photos of three more Australian mammals to the website: the <Euro> (a blackish kangaroo), <Bush Rat> and <Fawn-footed Melomys> (also a rodent). The latter two obliged us with good views coming into feed on grain at Kingfisher Park over Easter, undeterred by the rain.

Best wishes,

Ian

#357 Black-fronted Dotterel 20 April 2010

It is easy to think of waders, such as sandpipers and plovers, in terms of challenges - both the survival challenges that long distant migrants face and the identification challenges that these migrants, usually in non-breeding plumage, pose for birders. So, it's easy to overlook the unchallenging ones - distinctive native species, easy on the eye and easy to identify that are delightful members of the Australian countryside such as the <Black-fronted Dotterel>.



Black-fronted Dotterel (Eryopornis melanops)

Pentland, Northeastern Queensland, 1 August 2008

81266 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Black-fronted Dotterel is a small plover: at 16-18cm/6-7in in isn't much longer than the proverbial sparrow (14-16cm). It shows a marked preference for shallow fresh water, only rarely occurring in saline environments, and can manage with quite small and transient pools. It is widespread throughout Australia and Tasmania, absent only from the most arid regions of western central Australia, and also resident in New Zealand.

The first photo shows a bird - males and females are identical - on the wetland in Pentland on the Flinders Highway west of Townsville, a popular drop-in spot for passing birders. The second photo was taken at sunset at Bowra, a wonderful property near Cunnamulla in southwestern Queensland, long managed in a bird-friendly way by the McLaren family and now being purchased by the Australian Wildlife Conservancy <<<http://www.australianwildlife.org/Bowra.aspx>>>.



Black-fronted Dotterel (Elegornis melanops)

Bowra, Cunnamulla, Southwestern Queensland, 6 November 2008

82788 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Unlike the migrants, residents such as the Black-fronted Dotterel, don't have a separate breeding and (drab) non-breeding plumages. Because of irregular rainfall patterns, they can breed at any time of the year and need to be able to respond quickly and attract mates at short notice. They nest in exposed positions on the ground, so they compromise by having bold patterns with small splashes of colour on the bill and eye-ring that break up the outline of the bird, rather than blend into the background, and can be surprisingly difficult to see when crouched motionless.

On the related subject of migrant plovers, this is a good time of the year to look for waders in, or acquiring, breeding plumage. We did one of our regular wader counts at Lucinda, near Ingham north of Townsville, last week and there were some <Lesser> and <Greater> Sand Plovers and a <Grey-tailed Tattler> in breeding plumage.

Best wishes

Ian

#358 White-winged (Black) Tern 26 April 2010

The weather is improving here, so I went birding a couple of times last week. The first time I went to Hodel Road, Giru, just south of Townsville, which goes through an area of marshy coastal grassland that can turn up interesting birds. At this time of the

year, it can be good for <White-winged (Black) Terns> starting the migration back to the northern hemisphere and some, like the one in the first photo, may be in the unmistakable breeding plumage, with black bodies and pale wings. I've bracketed (Black) as this qualifier is usually added in Australia, while Birdlife International calls it just 'White-winged Tern'.



White-winged Black Tern (Chlidonias leucopterus)

Hodel Road, Giru, Northeastern Queensland, 22 April 2010

100041 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

More usually in Australia, we see White-winged Black Terns in non-breeding plumage - like the one in the second photo - and care needs to be taken to distinguish them from the related, slightly larger, <Whiskered Tern> in the same plumage.

Perhaps the best field mark is the shape of the black band on the head. In the White-winged Tern it forms a vertical hoop over the crown of the head; in the Whiskered Tern it forms a horizontal hoop around the nape and the crown is whitish. There are also differences in the patterns of the upper wing. In the White-winged the dark leading edge (visible in the second photo) and the whitish rump gives the bird a patchier appearance than that of the more homogeneous Whiskered.



White-winged Black Tern (Chlidonias leucopterus)

Werribee, Victoria, 5 April 2009

99999 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Some points that may be of interest to bird photographers relate to birds in flight coming towards the camera and to backgrounds. Telephoto lenses have very a shallow field of view, particularly at the high shutter speed/large aperture combination necessary to freeze the motion of the bird. This means that even if the auto-focus has operated correctly, the bird may have moved out of focus during the lag while the photo is taken. Some cameras have an autofocus option to compensate for constant movement, called 'AI-Servo' on Canon SLRs, and this is the occasion to use it.

The problem with backgrounds is that the autofocus may miss the bird and grab the background instead. Birds against the sky are easier than against the ground - unless there are clouds with high contrast. Practising tracking birds in flight is the solution here, and I use a single focus point in the centre of the viewfinder. This gives much more control over auto-focussing and not only with birds in flight but also in spatially complex shots such as a bird in a tree with branches around it.

The other birding outing last week was to get photos of nesting <Chowchillas> at Paluma.

Best wishes,

Ian

#359 Southern Boobook 4 May 2010

Here's one for the lovers of owls - which, I imagine, includes almost everybody. This is the commonest and most widespread owl in Australia, and its plaintive 'boobook' or 'morepork' call is a familiar sound in a huge range of habitats from tropical rainforest, through leafy suburbs and city parks to almost treeless regions of the dry interior. Despite both its abundance and lots of effort on my part, it has eluded my camera since, as a graduate student, I took some slide photos of one through a window of the Zoology Department of Sydney University in the mid 1970s.



Southern Boobook (Ninox novaeseelandiae)

Trafalgar Station, Northeastern Queensland, 2 May 2010

100569 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This weekend just past was the occasion of the AGM of Birds Australia North Queensland and it was held at a large cattle station (property) called Trafalgar about 50km southwest of Charters Towers outside Townsville. We went spotlighting in the station truck, ideally equipped for birding safari-style with two bench seats placed longitudinally back-to-back on the rear, on a clear Sunday night and after finding a rather flighty <Barn Owl>, we encountered a <Boobook> in a tree beside the road that was much more cooperative. Having photographed it from the truck, I eventually got down and set up the tripod much closer to the owl. It stayed put, despite my flash and 3 spotlights and when we finally left, it was still there. The portrait in the first photo is in fact cropped from a photo that includes the whole bird, so you can appreciate that the conditions for photography were excellent.



Southern Boobook (Ninox novaeseelandiae)

Trafalgar Station, Northeastern Queensland, 2 May 2010

100544 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Later we found a <Tawny Frogmouth>, also a willing subject, and on the road itself, a suicidal young <Owlet-nightjar> - it nearly got run over - which let me approach it so closely that I could no longer focus with my 500mm lens (minimum focusing distance 4.5m/15ft). The consensus seemed to be that it was the best night's spotlighting ever. The clear sky with no light pollution meant that we could see both the Southern Cross and the Big Dipper/Plough simultaneously, and on the way back a just-past-full moon rose in the east.

The Boobook is a smallish owl ranging in size from 25-28cm/10-11in for males and 30-36cm/12-14in for females. This one seemed relatively large to me, so it was probably female. The current taxonomic treatment is to treat as a single species the various boobooks in Australia, New Zealand, southern New Guinea, Timor and some islands of eastern Indonesia. This leaves only the Sumba Boobook (Sumba is west of Timor) as a separate species, so there isn't a 'Northern' Boobook as such.

Best wishes,

Ian

#360 Striped Honeyeater 12 May 2010

Last week we had the <Southern Boobook> from a rewarding evening of spotlighting at Trafalgar Station south of Charters Towers. Daytime birding there

produced some interesting birds, notably a <[Pictorella Mannikin](#)> among some <[Plum-headed Finches](#)> and pair of <[Striped Honeyeaters](#)>. this is an uncommon Honeyeater with some unusual features and, being in its own genus, is not closely related to other Honeyeaters.



Striped Honeyeater (Plectorhyncha lanceolata)

Trafalgar Station, Northeastern Queensland, 2 May 2010

10420 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

One such feature is a very un-honeyeater-like call that first attracted our attention. The field guides agree that it is mellow, rollicking or rolling, and rising and falling. To me it sounded like a loud gerygone, the rusty bicycle wheel of a Mangrove or Large-billed maybe, but I'm a bit deaf and you mightn't agree. In appearance it is rather dapper, and seems formally dressed for the drier, fairly casual areas of eastern Australia in which it occurs, from the Spencer Gulf in South Australia to Cooktown in NE Queensland.



Striped Honeyeater (Plectorhyncha lanceolata)

Trafalgar Station, Northeastern Queensland, 2 May 2010

10424 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It shows its affinity with honeyeaters by having a brush tongue for nectar, but the narrow, pointed bill, shown in the second photo is in fact adapted to supplementing a sugary diet by probing for insects and other invertebrates as illustrated by the bird in the third photo, which has just found a spider in some mistletoe. The trees are mulga, a dry country acacia, and typical habitat for Striped Honeyeaters, I included the second photo, as it isn't often one gets to photograph birds from above, a bird's eye view so to speak, unless they are acrobatic like these in search of food.



Striped Honeyeater (Plectorhyncha lanceolata)

Trafalgar Station, Northeastern Queensland, 2 May 2010

10428 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Best wishes

Ian

#361 Cattle Egret 18 May 2010

At a time when wildlife populations are generally under pressure, here is a success story about a species of bird, the Cattle Egret, that has undergone a spectacular world-wide expansion in range over the past century or so.



Cattle Egret (Ardea ibis)

Serpentine Lagoon, Northeastern Queensland, 13 August 2008

37557 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In the 19th century, the Cattle Egret occurred only in tropical and subtropical Africa, southwestern Europe (the <Western Cattle Egret>*) and in southern and southeastern Asia (the <Eastern Cattle Egret>*). Now, it breeds in every continent except Antarctica, though it turns up as a vagrant on sub-antarctic islands such as South Georgia and the South Orkney Island. Originally adapted to feeding with large herbivores, its expansion has followed the of spread humans with their livestock.



Cattle Egret (Ardea ibis)

Cleveland Bay, Northeastern Queensland, 4 February 2008

62990 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The expansion started in southern Africa with breeding first recorded in Cape Province in 1908. At about the same time, vagrants started crossing the Atlantic to eastern South America, where it probably became established in the 1930s but breeding was not proven until 1950 in Surinam and British Guiana. Some birds were reported in Florida in the 1940s and breeding was recorded in 1953. Since then, the species has spread all over South and Central America, much of the United States into Canada and has simultaneously expanded its range in southern Europe and the Middle East.



Cattle Egret (Ardea ibis)

Strandfontein, Western Cape, South Africa, 19 September 2001

04796 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Concurrently, the Eastern Cattle Egret was extending its range southeastwards and arrived in the Northern Territory in the 1940s. Cattle Egrets were first record in Victoria in 1949, southwestern Western Australia in 1959, South Australia in 1964, Tasmania in 1965 and started breeding in Queensland in 1963, the same year in which they were first recorded in New Zealand. Now, it is an abundant breeding bird in the warmer parts of Australia and mainly a winter and spring visitor to southern Australia, Tasmania and New Zealand.



Cattle Egret (Ardea ibis)

Orient Wetland, Northeastern Queensland, 14 May 2010

104315 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In non-breeding plumage, the feathers are almost entirely white (first photo, bird in flight) apart from traces of buff on the crown and looks like a dumpy version of the Intermediate Egret. When breeding the Eastern Cattle Egret has extensive gold on the head, back and breast (second photo) and looks quite different from the much paler Western one (third photo). The bird in the latter photo is perhaps atypically pale for a western bird, but it has the reddish bill, legs and iris that are the courtship colours of both races.

The fourth photo shows several Cattle Egrets standing guard in a proprietary manner around some young Brahmans at the Orient Wetland north of Townsville last Friday. Although they are very gregarious, the dominant birds exclude other birds from the favoured feeding spots just behind grazing animals. They feed mainly on grasshopper and other invertebrates disturbed by herbivores but are flexible and will eat a wide variety of other food including young birds. So, the global expansion has a dark side and I recently read an article expressing concern about predation by Cattle Egrets on the nesting colonies of the <Red-winged Blackbird> in California.

Best wishes

Ian

* Taxonomic note (2018). The Cattle Egret has been moved from the heron genus *Ardea* to its own genus *Bubulcus*. BirdLife treats the Western and Eastern forms as races (*Bubulcus ibis ibis* and *Bubulcus ibis coromandus* respectively) while the IOC treats them as full species (*Bubulcus ibis* and *Bubulcus coromandus*).

#362 Splendid Fairywren 26 May 2010

It has been about four years since a Fairywren featured as Bird of the Week. It's not for nothing that the <Superb Fairywren> made the list (No. 78) in David Chandler and Dominic Couzens's '100 Birds to See before You Die', so let's rectify that with the <Splendid Fairywren>.



Splendid Fairywren (Malurus splendens)

Bowra, Southwestern Queensland, 5 November 2008

81843 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

All the male Fairywrens are stunningly beautiful and some of their names reflect that: Superb, Splendid and <Lovely> before getting to more prosaic names like <Purple-crowned> and <Variegated>. Maybe the bird-namers should have consulted the thesaurus. My thesaurus includes (under splendid): spiffy, ritzy, glorious, lavish, swanky and sublime; 'imperial' might fit the Purple-crowned well. Anyway, the Splendid lives up to its name, as you can see in the first photo, even if 'splendid' has connotations of grand, perhaps inappropriate for a tiny bird 14cm/5.5in in length, much of which is tail.



Splendid Fairywren (Malurus splendens)

Bowra, Southwestern Queensland, 5 November 2008

81801 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It's not as well known as the Superb, which occurs in all the southeastern Australia capitals from Brisbane to Adelaide via Hobart, but the Splendid rules supreme in Perth. As addition, it has wide range throughout Australia east of the Great Divide with three distinct races in eastern, central and western Australia.

The one in the first and second photos is the eastern race *melanotus*, photographed in southwestern Queensland, identifiable by its cobalt- rather than violet-blue colour, paler cheek patch, narrow breast band and black back - visible in the second photo - with the latter giving this race its other name of Black-backed Fairywren. Incidentally, Fairywrens are unrelated to Northern Hemisphere <wrens> and together with the grasswren and emu-wrens comprise the Australo-Papuan family Maluridae.



Splendid Fairywren (Malurus splendens)

Augusta, SW Western Australia, 30 August 2006

38620 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The third photo shows a male of the nominate western race in transition from non-breeding to breeding plumage. Fairywrens, like some very colourful ducks such as the <Mallard>, shed their bright colours in the non-breeding plumage and acquire the 'eclipse' plumage. This is similar to that of the female, though eclipse male Fairywrens are often subtly different from females and young birds. In the case of Splendid Fairywrens, the eclipse male is distinguishable from the female by having a dark rather than tan bill, greyish rather than tan eye-ring, dark lores (between the eye and the bill) and blue wings.

Best wishes,

Ian

#363 Whistling Kite 30 May 2010

I've just revised the eagle, hawk and allies galleries <Acciptridae> on the Birdway website with the new format, larger image sizes and regional indices with different background colours. Eagles and hawks attract great interest generally and are the most popular targets for internet searches on the website. They're also popular with birders and are a challenge to identify in flight, so a good place to start is the widespread and common <Whistling Kite> - the one we probably check most often to

make sure it isn't something more unusual like a <Square-tailed Kite> or <Little Eagle>.



Whistling Kite (Elanoides forficatus)

Karumba, Northwestern Queensland, 28 September 2009

93950 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

At 50-60cm/20-24in in length and with a wingspan of about 1.2m/47in, the Whistling Kite is just one of about a dozen Australian species of raptors in this size range and with colours in varying shades of coffee. So, leaving size and beverages aside, identification relies on other features particular underwing pattern, relative sizes and shapes of wings and tail and style of flight.

As you can see in the first two photos, Whistling Kites have distinctive wing patterns, with the most notable feature being the contrasting outer very dark primaries*, very pale 3 or 4 inner primaries and very dark secondaries. The resulting pattern is a white spot on the trailing edge of the wing and a pale right-angle formed by the leading under-wing coverts and the pale primaries. This is diagnostic: other raptors have pale patches - windows or bull-eyes - but usually in the 'palm' of the hand or the leading edge and lack an abrupt right-angle.



Whistling Kite (Haliastur phenurus)

Cuttaburra Crossing, Western Queensland, 18 September 2006

41994 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

*The primary flight feathers, usually numbering 9 -11 in most species of birds (except Grebes, Storks and Flamingos - 12 - and Ostriches - 16) and are attached to the 'hand' part of the wing (metacarpals and phalanges of the large second digit). The secondaries, very variable in number, are attached to the ulna of the 'forearm' between the 'elbow' (not obvious in birds as the humerus is short and thick for attachment of the large pectoral muscle) and the 'wrist' - the forward-pointing angle in the middle of the leading edge.



Whistling Kite (Elanoides forsteri)

Karumba, Northwestern Queensland, 28 September 2009

93945 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The tail of the Whistling Kite is characteristic too: long, latte coloured and paddle-shaped with a rounded tip and you can see in the first photo that the Whistling Kites swivel the tail like a paddle for steering. Most other raptors have darker tails with barring - the Whistling Kite has faint, barely visible bars. Whistling Kites glide with horizontally curved - rather than flat or angled wings - a bit like the seagulls one draws as a kid and have a rather floppy untidy flight. When perched, they usually do so in an upright stance, rather like a <Brown Falcon>, as in the third photo. They build a typical raptor nest - bulky, with large sticks - high in a tree and re-used so that it gets very large after a number of years.



Whistling Kite (Haliastur phenurus)

Kununurra, NE Western Australia, 18 September 2009

93154 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Whistling Kite gets its name from its distinctively un-raptor-like call. Its is common throughout Australia except in the driest areas of western South Australia and eastern Western Australia. They take live prey including fish, so they are frequently found near both fresh and salt water, but also feed on carrion and are often seen cruising along highways, along with [Black Kites](#), [Brahminy Kites](#) and [Wedge-tailed Eagles](#), looking for road-kills. Their only close relative is the Brahminy Kite, and these two species comprise (globally) the genus *Haliastur*.

Best wishes,

Ian

#364 Palm Cockatoo 9 June 2010

I've just returned from Mungkan Kandju National Park between Coen and Weipa on Cape York Peninsula where I took part in the second of a series of Qld Parks and Wildlife surveys to measure the effect of feral animals on the park. It wasn't all hard work, though, and during one of the surveys I got the opportunity to photograph a couple of [Palm Cockatoos](#), my most 'wanted' bird on the Peninsula since I took some poor photos of them in early 2004 and again during the first Mungkan Kandju survey last November.



Palm Cockatoo (Probosciger aterrimus)

Mungkan Kandju, Cape York Peninsula, Northern Queensland, 4 June 2010

104776 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The first two photos show an adult Palm Cockatoo in a fruiting tree (Nonda Plum). Previously I'd found these birds rather shy, but the adult bird was prepared to tolerate me below the tree while it had breakfast. Palm Cockatoos are spectacular birds by any criterion up to 64cm/24in in length, and unlike some cockatoos are not at all coy about displaying their huge crests.

They have massive bills and in the second photo you can see the bird has evolved to be a huge nutcracker with wings. The lower bill is broad to prevent the fruit rolling out sideways while the upper bill has a big notch to hold the fruit in place and is slim and sharp like a blade. The tongue has a pad on the end used to manipulate the fruit, and if that isn't enough the bird balances casually on one foot leaving the other free to use as a hand.



Palm Cockatoo (Probosciger aterrimus)

Mungan Kandju, Cape York Peninsula, Northern Queensland, 4 June 2010

99999 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The third photos shows the other bird in flight. This is an immature bird, distinguishable by the barring on the chest, so I suppose that the adult bird was one of its parents. The young bird flew away when we approached and wasn't seen again, but the adult seemed to think food was more important than parental care. Very young birds have a greyish rather than red face, so this one was old enough to look after itself.



Palm Cockatoo (Probosciger aterrimus)

Mungan Kandju, Cape York Peninsula, Northern Queensland, 4 June 2010

104756 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Palm Cockatoos occur in Papua New Guinea and the Aru Islands but in Australia their range is restricted to the northern part of Cape York south to the Archer and Coen Rivers and Princess Charlotte Bay, so Mungan Kandju is at the southern limit of their distribution. Within this range they are reasonably common on the edges of rainforest and in eucalyptus forest and they call loudly in flight.

Best wishes,

Ian

#365 Silver-crowned Friarbird (and Golden-shouldered Parrot) 17 June 2010

Last week, we had the splendid <[Palm Cockatoo](#)> at Mungan Kandju National Park. On the way home, I spent the night at Musgrave, Cape York Peninsula, so that I could look for <[Golden-shouldered Parrots](#)> at Artemis Station where the owners, the Shephards, have worked tirelessly to save this utterly beautiful but endangered parrot. This featured as Bird of the Week last December, so I've chosen the <[Silver-crowned Friarbird](#)> as the main species this week.



Silver-crowned Friarbird (Rhipidura argenteiceps)

Musgrave, Cape York Peninsula, Northern Queensland, 6 June 2010

105177 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

At Musgrave, I camped under an African tulip tree, a popular ornamental introduction in northern Australia but now branded as a Class 3 weed in Queensland (may not be supplied or sold and removal may be required from environmentally sensitive areas). It is, however, very popular with the larger honeyeaters and after returning from Artemis, I noticed a smallish Friarbird feeding in the tree and making unfamiliar sounds, this Silver-crowned Friarbird, a species I've seen in the Northern Territory but not previously in northern Queensland, where the similar <[Helmeted \(or "Hornbill"\) Friarbird](#)> is much commoner.



Silver-crowned Friarbird (Ptilinopus argenteiceps)

Musgrave, Cape York Peninsula, Northern Queensland, 6 June 2010

105170 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The north Queensland race of the Helmeted Friarbird (*yorki*) also has a silver crown and frequently mis-identified. The Silver-crowned is better identified by its smaller size (27-32cm/11-12.6in compared with 32.5-37cm/12.8-14.6in), the shape of the bare patch on the cheek and the shape of the bill-knob. In the Silver-crowned Friarbird the black facial skin forms an angular point behind the eye but is rounded in the Helmeted. This isn't always easy to see, so I have included the second photo which shows it better. The Silver-crowned has a more prominent bill-knob, but the knob is less obvious in juvenile birds of both species and variable in shape in the races of the Helmeted. The call is perhaps more reliable as the tone of the Silver-crowned is noticeably more nasal, sometimes described as 'cat-like' and also likened to the calls of the Koel. I'm rather deaf, but even I noticed the difference.



Golden-shouldered Parrot (Pipphus chrysopterygius)

Artemis Station, Cape York Peninsula, Australia, 6 June 2010

105057 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Sue Shephard found me a pair of Golden-shouldered Parrots feeding on the roadside and the male was quite approachable, so I've included a photo of this amazing parrot.

Best wishes,

Ian

#366 White-rumped/Australian Swiftlet 23 June 2010

Swifts, true to their name, are a challenge to photograph but these <[White-rumped/Australian Swiftlets](#)> (more about names later) were feeding low over of a group of smallish trees, which helped.



Australian Swiftlet (Hirondinidae)

Tully Heads, Northeastern Queensland, 14 June 2010

105480 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

These tiny birds (11-12cm/4.3-4.7in in length) are resident in Australia unlike their larger cousins, the <Fork-tailed Swift> and <White-throated Needle-tail>, and usually remain fairly close to their breeding caves. They are reasonably common in their restricted range of coastal northeastern Australia from the far north of New South Wales to Cape York in northern Queensland. Their sedentary nature is reflected in the existence of a paler race in the Chillagoe region of northeastern Queensland, only 130 km from the coast as the swift flies and much closer to the Atherton Tableland, where the nominate race is found.



Australian Swiftlet (Aerodramus terraereginae)

Tully Heads, Northeastern Queensland, 14 June 2010

105465 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Some species of swiftlet, including this one, use echo-location like bats to find their way around in caves, emitting a metallic clicking noise. There are about 26 species of swiftlet in Asia and Oceania, but only some of these echo-locate. Originally, they were (nearly) all put in the same genus *Collocalia* but in 1970, those species that use echo-location were moved to a separate genus *Aerodramus*. The White-rumped Swiftlet, *Collocalia spodiopygius*, was renamed *Aerodramus spodiopygius*.

This was the start of a bumpy ride in the naming of these Australian swiftlets, which were then considered the same species as similar birds found in Micronesia and Polynesia. Recent DNA analysis supported the split into *Aerodramus*, but also suggested that the Australian birds (races *terraereginae* and *chillagoensis*) were sufficiently different to be treated as a separate species. Christidis and Boles (2008) support this recognition of the Australian Swiftlet, now named *Aerodramus terraereginae*. Meanwhile, Birdlife International has adopted neither the original split of *Collocalia* nor the recognition of the new species*.

So, we now have the confusion situation where both the English and Scientific names differ. So you could have someone from Birdlife International birdwatching in Queensland and saying 'there is a White-rumped Swiftlet, *Collocalia spodiopygius*' to Les Christidis who might respond, 'looks like an Australian Swiftlet, *Aerodramus terraereginae*, to me'!

And while we're at it, *terraereginae* isn't such a great name anyway, as it, whatever 'it' is, also occurs in northern New South Wales. Let me quote from <<[an article in](#)

[Wikipedia](#)>> discussing the strengths of Linnaean taxonomy: 'it can be used to organise the different kinds of living organisms, simply and practically. Every species can be given a unique (and hopefully stable) name, as compared with common names that are often neither unique nor consistent from place to place and language'. Hmmm.

Best wishes,

Ian

* Note (2018) BirdLife has since recognised the split and adopted the new name *Aerodramus terraereginae* but the point I was making about unstable names and taxonomic confusion remains valid.

#367 Willie-wagtail 1 July 2010

Very common birds like <[Willie-wagtails](#)> often get overlooked in the Bird of the Week in the pursuit of the rare and exotic. It takes the unusual antics of a particular individual to get noticed, such as this Willie-wagtail, perched cheekily on the head of an Agile Wallaby at Tyto Wetlands near Ingham last week.



Willie-wagtail and Friend (Rhipidura leucophrys)

Ingham, Northeastern Queensland, 24 June 2010

105697 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Perhaps 'unusual' isn't strictly true, as Graham Pizzey's Field Guide to the Birds of Australia describes the behaviour of this species as: 'bold, perky; watches from low branches, fence-posts ... backs of farm-animals'. The wallaby might be offended at being described as a mere farm-animal, though this one seems to be doing its best to imitate a country yokel by chewing grass and assuming a dopey expression.



Willie-wagtail (Rhipidura leucophrys)

Townsville, Northeastern Queensland, 13 July 2005

17219 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Willie-wagtail is a popular and widespread species, occurring in a very wide range of habitats throughout Australia. It is absent from southern Tasmania and, for reasons not understood, curiously uncommon in the Townsville district, where the second photo was taken. It gets its name from its habit of fanning its tail and swinging it from side to side, (and spreading its wings) apparently to disturb the insects on which it feeds.

Best wishes

Ian

#368 Australian Bustard 9 July 2010

I've been slow to produce the bird of the week this week as, not having taken many photos recently, I had trouble choosing a suitable candidate. In the end, I did what I have been meaning to do for ages and extended my bird database to include records of all the birds of the week. Now I can easily see what I've missed and I've found many surprising omissions, including the <[Australian Bustard](#)>. Surprising because it's a spectacular bird, one of my favourite, fairly easy to find around Townsville and one that I'd never seen before I moved up here in 2002.



Australian Bustard (Ardeotis australis)

Townsville Town Common, Northeastern Queensland, 8 November 2009

94494 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The first photo, taken at the Townsville Town Common, shows a bird in a typical pose, bill held high and looking very dignified. Graham Pizzey uses the appropriate adjectives 'lordly' and 'stately'. When disturbed they walk away at a steady pace, and take flight reluctantly, not surprising given their size and weight: the larger males average 120cm/48in in length and 8kg/18lbs in weight. When airborne, they fly strongly and look unstoppable, like the one in the second photo taken at Toonpan at the southern end of Ross River Dam near Townsville.



Australian Bustard (Ardeotis australis)

Toonpan, Northeastern Queensland, 4 October 2008

80652 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The land around the dam provides good, undisturbed bustard habitat and it is possible to see as many as 30 Bustards together, both at Toonpan and near the dam wall itself. The third photo, taken near the dam wall, shows a male displaying to the understandable astonishment of an unsuspecting cow. The display is quite extraordinary, with the bird extending the breast sac to the ground, drooping the wings, holding the tail erect against the back of the neck and puffing out the feathers of the neck. The bird walks slowly around making the sac swing, and, for a final touch, makes a roaring sound.



Australian Bustard (Ardeotis australis)

Ross River Dam, Northeastern Queensland, 15 March 2010

99085 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Bustards, apparently, make very good eating, reflected in the common name 'Plains-Turkey'. So, worldwide (there are about 25 species) they have suffered seriously from hunting, loss of habitat and land use changes. The Australian Bustard is now rare in or absent from settled areas but still holds on in more remote areas. Most of the 25 or so species are smaller African ones, but there are 5 large species including the Great Bustard of Eurasia, the Arabian, the <Kori Bustard> of Africa and the endangered Great Indian Bustard. The latter two are closely related to the Australian Bustard and the three have in the past been treated as a single species.

Best wishes

Ian

#369 Magpie Goose 14 July 2010

Here's another large species characteristic of northern Australia, particular northern Queensland and the top-end of the Northern Territory, that had so far avoided the Bird of the Week net. It is found in quite large numbers around Townsville in wetland such as the Town Common, where the first photo was taken, and grazing in the stubble left after harvesting sugar cane. It's a sedentary species and nests here in the wet season during the first four months of the year.



Magpie Goose (Anseranas semipalmata)

Townsville Town Common, Northeastern Queensland, 27 June 2006

35870 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

They have a pre-historic look about them and have some unusual features for a goose, or more correctly, goose-like bird. Not only the knobbed head, larger in males like the bird in the foreground in the first photo, but also the hooked beak. Both these features are more visible in the second photo. The third photo of the bird landing shows yet another oddity: the feet are only partially webbed and hence the specific name of *semipalmata*.



Magpie Goose (Anseranas semipalmata)

Tower Hill, Western Victoria, 9 December 2001

08179 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

You'd be right in deducing that the <Magpie Goose> is only distantly related to other ducks and geese (family <Anatidae>) and is in fact the sole surviving member of a different lineage the family Anseranatidae. These two families, along with another odd lineage the three species of Screamer in South America (Anhimidae), comprise the waterfowl order, the Anseriformes.

Magpie Geese were once common and widespread throughout northern, eastern and southeastern Australia but were hunted to extinction in the southeast and occur naturally now only from Broome in northern Western Australia to about Brisbane in southeast Queensland. Following reintroduction it is now getting re-established in some parts of New South Wales, such as the Hunter Valley, and Victoria. The second photo was taken at Tower Hill in Western Victoria. It also occurs in southern PNG.

Best wishes,

Ian

#370 Eastern Spinebill 21 July 2010

The Spinebills, Eastern and Western, are in my opinion the most elegant of the Honeyeaters so here is the <Eastern Spinebill> - I haven't yet managed to photograph the Western Spinebill of SW Western Australia - with the winning

combination of tasteful colours and long, fine, curved bill. The bill is adapted to probing for nectar in the flowers of Bottlebrushes, as in the first photo, or Grevilleas and they also feed on insects.



Eastern Spinebill (Zeanthorhynchus tenuirostris)

Paluma, Northeastern Queensland, 19 March 2010

99267 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Males and females are subtly different as the male has a black crown with a sharp transition to the rufous nape while the female has a greyish crown with a gradual transition to the rufous nape. The bird in the first photo is a male, while the one in the second, coming down to drink in a creek, is a female.



Eastern Spinebill (Acanthorhynchus tenuirostris)

Puzzle Creek, Northeastern Queensland, 3 June 2005

15913 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Both these birds were photographed in the highlands around Paluma, not far from Townsville. The Eastern Spinebill is found in Tasmania and coastal southeastern and eastern Australia from the Mount Lofty Ranges in South Australia to Fraser Island in SE Queensland and there is an isolated population in the highlands of northeastern Queensland from Eungella near Mackay to Cooktown north of Cairns. This is perhaps a separate race, named *cairnsensis*.

Best wishes

Ian

#371 White-breasted Woodswallow 28 July 2010

Some species are a source of continual pleasure even when they are very common, such as the <[White-breasted Woodswallow](#)>, which is to be seen daily in Northeastern Queensland, perching conspicuously on power-lines or trees and chasing insects, swallow-like, in small flocks. They are attractive birds, fun to watch and courageous, frequently mobbing raptors.



White-breasted Woodswallow (Artamus leucorhynchus)

Ingham, Northeastern Queensland, 11 June 2010

105342 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Woodswallows get their name from a superficial similarity to true swallows, though in flight they are stockier and lack forked tails as in the second photo. They aren't related to swallows and form a family, the <Artamidae>, with the larger more crow-like Australian Magpie, Butcherbirds and Currawongs.



White-breasted Woodswallow (Artamus leucorhynchus)

Bluewater, Northeastern Queensland, 25 July 2005

17737 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The White-breasted Woodswallow is widespread through eastern and northern Australia and is resident in northern coastal areas but migratory or nomadic in other parts of its range.



White-breasted Woodswallow (*Artamus leucorhynchus*)

Bluewater, Northeastern Queensland, 25 July 2005

17709 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

They are sociable birds, as can be seen in the third photo, and often roost together in large numbers. The fourth photo shows a roost on power-lines near a set of traffic lights on a busy Townsville intersection. When I took the photo, at dusk, about 200 birds were present and the one looking down towards the camera had just elbowed its way into the middle of the row after landing on birds already in place.



White-breasted Woodswallow (Artamus leucorhynchus)

Townsville, Northeastern Queensland, 17 May 2004

07181 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Best wishes

Ian

#372 Banded Lapwing 5 August 2010

There are two species of Lapwing in Australia. One, the <[Masked Lapwing](#)>, is widespread, common and well-known throughout northern and eastern Australia and Tasmania. It's familiar because it is at home in populated areas, large, aggressive when nesting, and always noisy when disturbed, even at night, a real larrikin, to use an Australian expression. The other, the <[Banded Lapwing](#)> is the opposite. It's smaller, quieter, uncommon, not well-known and wary, occurs in drier country away from people, and altogether much more dignified.



Banded Lapwing (Vanellus tricolor)

Toonpan District, Northeastern Queensland, 1 August 2010

106210 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It occurs mainly west of the Great Divide and south of the Tropic of the Capricorn, including Tasmania, though there is a small resident population in the dry, cattle-grazing country south of Townsville, north of its usual range. A friend of mine took me there last Sunday so that I could take some photos. Previously, I'd seen them only in Victoria and Western Australia.



Banded Lapwing (Vanellus tricolor)

Toonpan District, Northeastern Queensland, 1 August 2010

106194 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Masked Lapwings have large, pendulous, yellow, facial wattles that make them look rather ridiculous, but larrikins don't worry about appearances. Banded Lapwings have small discreet red wattles, that combine tastefully with the yellow eyes and bills and black, white and tan plumage; presumably the scientific name *tricolor* refers only to the plumage. The birds - we found about ten - allowed close approach in the car and eventually seemed to get quite used to my presence, though the curious cattle came over too and got in the way a lot.



Banded Lapwing (Vanellus tricolor)

Toonpan District, Northeastern Queensland, 1 August 2010

106263 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I concentrated on a group of 5 birds, one of which was a juvenile - the third photo - so the birds had bred recently. Juveniles have small, pale wattles and camouflaged plumage. One pair of adults came quite close to the car and eventually mated. Banded Lapwings are supposedly monogamous and I wondered whether this pair were the parents of the juvenile bird.



Banded Lapwing (Vanellus tricolor)

Toonpan District, Northeastern Queensland, 1 August 2010

106263 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Lapwings form a sub-family within the <Plover family> and there are about 25 species world-wide in every continent except North and Central America. Here's a pair of <Yellow-wattled Lapwings> from India as an Old World pick for comparison. This pair is also mating, so either Lapwings like doing it in public or I like photographing them doing it: the choice is yours.



Yellow-wattled Lapwing (Vanellus malabaricus)

Tuqalukabad, Delhi, India, 11 April 2003

16893 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Best wishes

Ian

#373 Cape Barren Goose 13 August 2010

Here's one, the <[Cape Barren Goose](#)>, from the other end of Australia for a change, taken last year at the euphemistically named Western Treatment Plant at Werribee southwest of Melbourne.



Cape Barren Goose (Cereopsis novaehollandiae)

Werribee, Victoria, 4 April 2009

85800 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It's a large goose, to 100cm/40in in length with drooping wing feathers when standing, giving it a slightly 19th Century bustle. It has a large greenish-yellow cere and red legs with black feet. Its range includes Northern Tasmania, the islands of Bass Strait and the south coast of Australia from Victoria in the east to islands near Albany in Western Australia. It's not particularly common with a population estimated at about 17,000 but the population is stable and it has been introduced to a number of places including Kangaroo Island in South Australia and New Zealand.



Cape Barren Goose (Cereopsis novaehollandiae)

Werribee, Victoria, 4 April 2009

85923 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The birds are grazers and feed on grasslands and cultivated pastures. They are wary, and when they take flight they fly strongly, as in the second photo.

The Birds Australia Congress starts in Townsville this evening and the Campout starts next Monday. So, if you're attending I'll look forward to catching up with you.

Best wishes

Ian

#374 Tooth-billed Bowerbird 20 August 2010

I'm squeezing this bird of the week in between the Birds Australia Congress and Campout, which finished this morning, and my departure for California tomorrow. The Congress and Campout was a great success and ran like clockwork thanks to the preparation, dedication and hard work of our secretary and committee. I had a request from a participant to make the <Golden Bowerbird> - one of the highlights of the Campout - this week's bird but this species starred in this role earlier this year. So, instead I've chosen the <Tooth-billed Bowerbird> and included a photo of the Golden Bowerbird, both being endemics of the Queensland wet tropics and inhabiting highland rainforest.



Tooth-billed Bowerbird (Scenopoeetes dentirostris)

Paluma, Northeastern Queensland, 4 November 2006

43311 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It's not spectacular in appearance like the Golden Bowerbird, but it's an interesting bird nevertheless. It doesn't build a bower; instead it has a display platform consisting of an oval cleared space on the ground around a small tree trunk with a suitable branch used as a perch for singing above the platform. It decorates the platform with large, fresh leaves that the bird collects by using its serrated bill to chew through the leaf stem. The second photo shows a bird in full song and you can see the serrations on the bill, from which it gets the name.



Tooth-billed Bowerbird (Scenopoeetes dentirostris)

Paluma, Northeastern Queensland, 4 November 2006

43303 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Like other bowerbirds, it is an accomplished songster and very good at mimicry. It is also fussy. Most bowerbirds are extraordinarily fussy in their choice of objects and colours to decorate the bowers. Tooth-billed Bowerbirds only use leaves, but the leaves are carefully chosen for appearance and laid upside down, with the paler surface uppermost. Apparently, if you turn them up the other way, the bird will put them back the correct way.

They usually start attending their display areas in September, so we were a bit early and I don't think anyone actually saw one, though there were reports of hearing them. There was, however, some early activity and a couple of birds had several leaves in place. At the peak of the season, there may be up to 30 or so leaves, and these are replaced regularly with fresh ones.

The Golden Bowerbirds had made an early start too and were decorating their bowers with pieces of lichen. The bird in the third photo, taken last Tuesday, has just added a piece to the bigger pile on the left and he is standing on the display perch between the two piles of twigs - 'maypoles' - that make up the typical bower of this species. The display perch is very important as it is where all the real action takes place, and you can see that this one is well worn.



Golden Bowerbird (Ptilonorhynchus newtoniana)

Paluma, Northeastern Queensland, 17 August 2010

106554 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

You can expect an American as the next Bird of the Week. I've gone right off flying in recent years, so I'm getting the train to Brisbane for my flight to San Francisco. Unfortunately, there isn't a convenient alternative to flying if you wish to cross the Pacific.

Best wishes,

Ian

#375 Pacific Loon 27 August 2010

This week's choice was based on (a) the fact that I promised an American this week and (b) because I ended up travelling a day late on Air Pacific via Fiji as my Virgin Australia flight was cancelled, and I wanted to make a horrible pun along the lines of loons and choice of airline and the 'meals' that they provide. I've decided to spare you that, as we all know that airline food is terrible and I shouldn't be surprised when it plumbs new depths.



Pacific Loon (Gavia pacifica)

Barrow, Alaska, USA, 21 June 2008

67359 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Anyway, it's lovely to be back in California and I spent some time this morning trying to photograph the Anna's Hummingbirds in the backyard. They need to be photographed at exactly the right angle to the light to show the magenta on the head. I haven't yet done that to my satisfaction, so I'll keep that for another day.

This <[Pacific Loon](#)> I photographed in Barrow in northern Alaska on my last trip 2 years ago when it was swimming among the ice-floes along the beach where there was some open water in the otherwise frozen sea. 'Loons' to Americans and 'Divers' to the British form a <[small northern hemisphere family](#)> of five species, all of which are mostly marine fish-eaters except when breeding when they nest beside freshwater lakes, often far inland. They are brilliantly adapted to an aquatic life and prefer to dive than fly. How sensible.

The Pacific Loon is very closely related and similar in appearance to the <[Arctic Loon/Diver](#)> of Eurasia. The bird in the photo is in breeding plumage (it was mid-summer's day) and all the loons/divers then have strikingly patterns, while the non-breeding plumage is a rather drab grey and white. They're big birds, with the Pacific having a length of 64cm/25in.



Earlier this year, I provided many photos for a new Bradt guide to Australian Wildlife by Stella Martin and received my copy shortly before I left Australia. I think Stella has done a wonderful job in producing a comprehensive but concise introduction, across a broad field, which is eminently readable. Being a paperback it's ideal for the visitor to Australia and great value. <<[Amazon now have it in stock](#)>> (note - 2018 - it's still available) and it is becoming available in book stores. I've attached a copy of the cover to whet your appetite!

Best wishes

Ian

#376 Anna's Hummingbird 2 September 2010

As promised last week, here is <Anna's Hummingbird>, the common Hummingbird of gardens and parks along the West coast of the United States. Many houses, including the one I am in, have hummingbird feeders to attract these delightful birds.



Anna's Hummingbird (Calypte anna)

Cupertino, California, USA, 27 August 2010

106690 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

They can be quite inconspicuous, despite the striking colours of the male birds. They alternate between hovering and sudden bursts of very rapid flight which makes them appear and disappear with equal facility. The feathers have, in effect, lots of minute mirrors on them and the bright colour is only visible at exactly the right angle to the light. Otherwise, they look quite dark, dare I say drab, like the male in the first photo hovering at the feeder. The second and third photos, also males, show the claret-coloured head and breast quite well, even though the birds are perched in the shade. Young birds and females are mainly green and grey, though adult females have a small red patch on the throat.

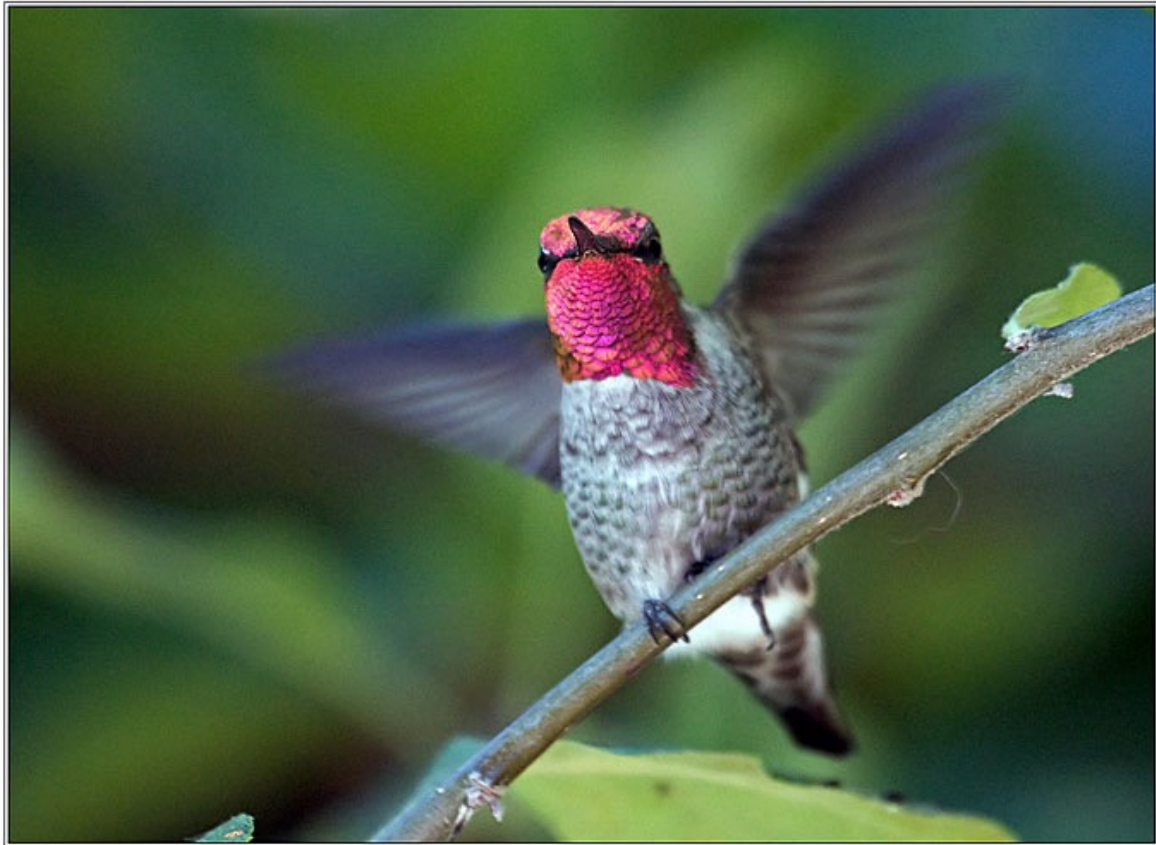


Anna's Hummingbird (Calypte anna)

Cupertino, California, USA, 28 August 2010

106791 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

At 12.5cm/4in in length Anna's is quite large by hummingbird standards. Most of the North American hummingbirds are migrants and spend the winters in Mexico and/or Central America, but Anna's is an exception and is resident in coastal areas of the western states. They are quite aggressive and males chase other males away from feeders. They also seem quite curious and will check you out by hovering quite closely.



Anna's Hummingbird (Calypte anna)

Cupertino, California, USA, 28 August 2010

106795 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Hummingbirds occur only in the Americas and there are more than 300 species. 32 of these, mostly photographed in Ecuador and Trinidad, are on the website: [<Trochilidae>](#).

I went on a successful pelagic boat trip out of Monterey last Sunday, so next week's bird will feature a wanderer that is also on the Australian list that I haven't seen before. Sometimes, you have to travel quite far to track down local birds!

Best wishes,

Ian

#377 Buller's Shearwater 8 September 2010

I went on a pelagic boat trip from Monterey shortly after my arrival in California. [<Buller's Shearwater>](#) was one of three species of Shearwater that we encountered in quite large numbers. The others were the [<Sooty>](#) and the [<Pink-footed>](#). All three are on the Australian list, though the Pink-footed, which breeds off the coast of Chile, is extremely rare in Australia. Buller's breeds on islands off New Zealand and both it and the Sooty (breeds in New Zealand, the Falklands and Tierra del Fuego) are regular visitors to both Australia and California in their annual circuit around the Pacific. Having myself just endured a flight - with considerable artificial aid - across the Ocean, I couldn't help but be very impressed.



Buller's Shearwater (Puffinus bulleri)

Monterey, California, USA, 29 August 2010

107334 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I've chosen Buller's as it is the most elegant and distinctive of the three with very white underparts (first photo), a well-defined black cap, and M-shaped dark markings on the otherwise grey upper surface of the wings (second photo). With a length of 46cm/18in and a wingspan of 100cm/40in it is intermediate in size between the smaller Sooty and the slightly larger Pink-footed. Incidentally, Buller's Shearwater is the 600th Australian species to be included in the website.



Buller's Shearwater (Puffinus bulleri)

Monterey, California, USA, 29 August 2010

107279 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

We encountered all three mainly in flight, but also swimming on the surface in mixed flocks. The third photo shows two Buller's and a Pink-footed. The Pink-footed also has a pale body, but the contrast is less marked and, in flight, the dorsal surface of the wings are relatively uniform in colour. The Sooty, is dark all over except for paler underwing patches.



Buller's Shearwater (Puffinus bulleri) with Pink-footed Shearwater

Monterey, California, USA, 29 August 2010

107219 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Another common bird on the trip was the <[Black-footed Albatross](#)>, which nests on islands off Hawaii. The fourth photo shows one flying alongside a Buller's Shearwater and it has about double the wingspan - around 2m/80in - and is comparable in size to the Australian Mollymawks such as the <[Shy Albatross](#)>.



Buller's Shearwater (Puffinus bulleri) with Black-footed Albatross

Monterey, California, USA, 29 August 2010

107250 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Relatively calm seas with a 2m/6ft swell were ideal for the trip, but it was overcast and rather gloomy for photography. Photo of the day wasn't a bird but a <[Pacific White-sided Dolphin](#)>, fifth photo, which obligingly soared out of the water when I was idly following it underwater in the viewfinder of the camera.



Pacific White-sided Dolphin (Lagenorhynchus obliquidens)

Monterey, California, USA, 29 August 2010

107491 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Whales were very much in evidence with <Hump-backed>, <Fin> and <Blue> Whales and a few days later I photographed <Grey> Whales farther up the coast. Consequently, I've added a section on <Cetaceans> to the <Other Wildlife> part of the website.

Best wishes

Ian

#378 American Bittern 15 September 2010

Lightning, they say, doesn't strike the same place twice. Luck, in bird photography, is rather similar: a missed opportunity usually remains just that. High on my list of American targets was the <American Bittern>, a cryptic and elusive bird of inaccessible reed beds that had successfully eluded me since I first did some serious birding in the USA exactly forty years ago. Imagine my delight and disappointment when I finally flushed one from reeds on the Feather River at Lake Almanor in NE California last Sunday but wasn't quick enough to get a photo of it as it flew off. I found it in the viewfinder okay, but the autofocus didn't as often happens when it gets distracted by a complex background.



American Bittern (Botaurus lentiginosus)

Sierra Valley, California, USA, 13 September 2010

109665 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Yesterday, two days later, at Sierra Valley in the Sierra Nevada ('Snowy Mountains') I saw a large bird flying towards and past me across more reeds and decided to photograph it even before I realised that it was another Bittern, see the first photo. Shortly later, another more distant one flew past and then I found a couple more lurking in the dwindling area of wetland remaining at the end of a dry summer. Eventually, I startled one in a ditch beside the road which froze in indecision (**if in doubt freeze**, is a Bittern maxim) frustratingly close but on the other side of an unpicturesque barbed wire fence.



American Bittern (Botaurus lentiginosus)

Sierra Valley, California, USA, 13 September 2010

109665 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Then started a waiting game with an endlessly patient opponent that I was bound to lose. Eventually, I moved along the road away from it in the hope that it would come through the fence to regain the sanctuary of the ditch. In time, it did just that and quite stealthily, second photo. Bitterns are bizarre birds in appearance and behaviour, with extraordinarily effective camouflage and very beautiful plumage. When it had entered a small patch of reeds not much bigger than itself, it vanished, and search as I could with binoculars from a short distance, I never saw it again.



American Bittern (Botaurus lentiginosus)

Sierra Valley, California, USA, 13 September 2010

109634 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

To do the plumage justice, I've included cropped enlargements of a couple of photos taken when the bird was behind the barbed wire. The fourth photo shows the gorgeous long neck feathers that drape over the breast and the exquisitely patterned feathers of the wing coverts.



American Bittern (Botaurus lentiginosus)

Sierra Valley, California, USA, 13 September 2010

109626 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Worldwide, there are four closely-related species of large Bitterns, one in North America, one in South America, one in Eurasia and Africa and [one in Australasia](#). All have declined in population, but only the Australasian one is classed as endangered. All live in reed beds, all are mainly nocturnal, skulkers and easier to hear than see, particularly in the breeding season when they emit far-carrying booming sounds: presumably, they find each other easier to hear than see.

Best wishes

Ian

#379 Wilson's Warbler 22 September 2010

Here is the attractive [Wilson's Warbler](#) one of the New World Wood-Warblers (family [Parulidae](#)) that is quite common in Canada and the western United States. We encountered this one at Point Reyes, an pleasant coastal area and good birding spot just north of San Francisco. With a length of only 12cm/4.75in, the specific name *pusilla* (small) given to it by Alexander Wilson in 1811 is appropriate.



Wilson's Warbler (Wilsonia pusilla)

Point Reyes, California, USA, 30 August 2010

107960 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Wood-Warblers, so named to distinguish them from the unrelated Old World Warblers, are justifiably popular with American birders, particular during the spring and fall migrations. They come in a wide variety of shapes and colours, with over 50 species (out of a family total of near 120) occurring in North America. Most species spend the winter in Central and South America, a few in the warmer southern states such as California and Florida and during the migration, many birders are on the lookout for Warblers occurring outside their breeding range.



Wilson's Warbler (Wilsonia pusilla)

Point Reyes, California, USA, 30 August 2010

107964 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Alexander Wilson moved from Scotland to Pennsylvania in 1794 at the age of 28, became interested in ornithology in 1801 and decided in 1802 to publish a book illustrating all the North America birds. This appeared as the nine volume **American Ornithology** between 1808 and 1814, though Wilson died in 1813 and the ninth volume was completed by his friend George Ord.

Wilson met John James Audubon in 1810 and probably inspired him to publish his own book of illustrations, even though Audubon's reaction to Wilson is described as 'decidedly ambiguous'. Audubon declined to subscribe to American Ornithology, felt his own illustrations were much better and, in 1820, decided to publish the 'greatest bird book ever'. Seven species of birds are name after Wilson, including two on the Australian list, Wilson's Phalarope and <[Wilson's Storm-Petrel](#)>.

Best wishes

Ian

#380 Sora and Virginia Rail 30 September 2010

Any birds that are a challenge to see exert a particular fascination. This includes all the night birds - owls, nightjars, etc - and all the skulkers and lurkers. We had a classic skulker, the American Bittern, a couple of weeks ago, and the crakes and rails belong in the same category and the same habitat. In Australia, I've never seen a Lewin's Rail and I've never photographed a <Spotless Crake>. (since rectified) Here in the US, the Clapper Rails at the Baylands Park at Palo Alto are giving me a hard time too, but the Sora, a crake, and the Virginia Rail have been more obliging.



Sora (Porzana carolina)

Joseph D. Grant Park, San Jose, California, USA, 26 September 2010

110588 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The <Sora> (*Porzana carolina*) is very close related to the Australian <Spotted Crake> (*Porzana fluminea*) and looks very similar, but lacks the Moorhen-like red spot on the bill. They both live in reedbeds but will sometimes come out into the open to feed, particularly in the evening and when water levels are low, as they are here now in California at the end of a dry summer.



Sora (Porzana carolina)

Joseph D. Grant Park, San Jose, California, USA, 18 September 2010

110112 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I've recently visited a park in the hills above San Jose three times looking without success for Golden Eagles, but each time I've seen a Sora and twice a <Virginia Rail> as well. In fact, the bird in the first photo came out into the sunshine to feed on the edge of the reed when we - my sister is here now - were watching for a less cooperative Virginia Rail, that was making a lot of noise. All the crakes and rails have very distinctive, loud calls, so presumably they, like the bittern, have trouble seeing each other too.



Virginia Rail (Rallus limicola)

Joseph D. Grant Park, San Jose, California, USA, 26 September 2010

110488 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Both species are widespread throughout the United States and southern Canada, so there's probably a cautionary tale here about naming species after places, such as Virginia or *carolina*, though I'm presuming that they weren't named after people. Both migrate, so cranes and rails will fly quite long distances if they have to - usually at night - and turn up in odd places. Some, like the [Buff-banded Rail](#), widespread in Australia also occurs on coral islands on the Barrier Reef and in the South Pacific, where, with nowhere to hide, it can become quite tame. Others like the [Lord Howe Woodhen](#), have gone to the skulking extreme and lost the ability to fly.

Best wishes

Ian

#381 Clark's Nutcracker 15 October 2010

My apologies for the very late bird of the week. My last week in California was very full, so the flight to Costa Rica last Sunday was the first opportunity to prepare the photos and, owing to internet problems at my first two hotels, I haven't been able to send this email until now (Thursday) although I wrote it on Monday morning.



This is one of the birds of the week that gets chosen because there's a good story to go with it. <Clark's Nutcracker> is a mountain species, found near the tree-line in coniferous forest or rocky areas, that I'd only seen once before, in Colorado in September 1970 and and last week's visit to Lassen Volcanic National Park in NE California was my third since 2008 to look for it. The first photo shows the craggy trail - recommended for Clark's Nutcracker by a ranger - to Bumpass Hell (I kid you not) which my sister, Gillian, and I took to look for it.



Eventually, we returned to the car park empty-handed and went to the rest-rooms shown in the second photo. After I'd emerged, I heard the call we had been listening for, and turned round to find Gillian looking for the source - a Clark's Nutcracker calling mockingly at us perched the very top of the small pine tree right behind the building, third photo.



Clark's Nutcracker (Nucifraga columbiana)

Lassen Volcanic National Park, Northeastern California, USA, 6 October 2010

110905 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

After a few seconds, it then flight right over my head and almost into the camera, fourth photo, to perch on a rock beside the car park, directly in front of the sun, thank you very much, fifth photo. I dodged the inevitable questions from a couple of tourists about the size of my 500mm lens to get in a better position before the bird flew, sixth photo, with its mate down into the very steep valley, never to be seen again.



Many birders will be familiar with the car park list, the ones you find waiting for you when you get back after a long and arduous hike and the rest-room list is a variation on this. And familiar with the advice to take your camera everywhere. EVERYWHERE! And with the settings ready to take photos of the unexpected.



Clark's Nutcracker (Nucifraga columbiana)

Lassen Volcanic National Park, Northeastern California, USA, 6 October 2010

110919 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

My main target here is the elusive Resplendent Quetzal, so a collective world-wide prayer that I can serve it up to you as the next bird of the week would be greatly appreciated!



Best wishes,
Ian

#382 Resplendent Quetzal 19 October 2010

It looks like your collective prayers worked, thank you very much, so here is the legendary <[Resplendent Quetzal](#)>, the main goal of my visit to Costa Rica.



Resplendent Quetzal (Pharomachrus mocinno)

San Gerardo de Dota, Costa Rica, 12 October 2010

111512 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

After a post-flight night in a hotel in the capital, San Jose, I drove to hotel called the <<[Hotel Savegre](#)>> in a town called San Gerardo de Dota in a valley in the mountains often now called Quetzal valley. On the following morning, I went out with an excellent guide called Melvin Fernandez who is attached to the hotel and within two hours he had taken me to a Quetzal-favoured avocado tree containing two pairs of Quetzals and I had taken photos to my hearts content.



Resplendent Quetzal (Pharomachrus mocinno)

San Gerardo de Dota, Costa Rica, 12 October 2010

111486 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Resplendent Quetzal is regarded as the most spectacular bird in the Americas, and it would be easy to agree. The males are just sensational as you can see in the first three photos. At this time of the year the tail streamers are short, which actually makes photographing them easier as you can fit the whole bird in more easily. They shed the streamers in July and they gradually grow back month by month to their maximum extent of up to 64cm/25in in time for the breeding season.



Resplendent Quetzal (Pharomachrus mocinno)

San Gerardo de Dota, Costa Rica, 12 October 2010

111601 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The female, fourth photo, shows the birds Trogon affinities - they are members of the Trogon family, <Trongonidae> - and she is quite gorgeous in her own right, though completely eclipsed by her amazing partner.



Resplendent Quetzal (Pharomachrus mocinno)

San Gerardo de Dota, Costa Rica, 12 October 2010

111592 © Ian Montgomery birdway.c

The adjective legendary is literally the case and the legends and myths focus on three aspects: the divine nature of the bird, the the defeat of the Mayans by the Spanish and its symbolic representation of liberty. You can read all about it here <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resplendent_Quetzal>> and here <<<http://blog.guatemalangen.es.com/2009/03/legend-of-quetzal.html>>> so I won't repeat the details but just say that they add to the magic of the bird.



Resplendent Quetzal (Pharomachrus mocinno)

San Gerardo de Dota, Costa Rica, 12 October 2010

111539 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The tail streamers are not tail feathers - the tail is quite trogon-like - but erectible extensions of four of the feathers of the tail coverts, as you can see in the fifth photo. Similarly, the cloak-like feathers across the breast are the wing coverts.

Having photographed these amazing birds, ***misión completa*** as they say in Spanish, I was then free to relax and enjoy the rest of my stay in Costa Rica. The adventure, however, had just started and I have plenty of other interesting material for future birds of the week.

If you want to see the Quetzal, I highly recommend the Savegre Hotel. It's family owned, has delightful gardens and its own primary cloud forest (the hotel is at 2,200m 7,200ft) and lots of trails, is on the Savegre River and Melvin tells me the best months for the Quetzal are February and March - I was there in the wet season and it rained heavily every afternoon.

I'm now back in California, due, flights permitting, to return to Australia tonight and looking forward to getting home.

Best wishes,

Ian

#383 Boat-billed Heron 29 October 2010

After I'd photographed the Resplendent Quetzal, my immediate reaction was one of relief: 'Now I can just relax and enjoy the rest of my time in Costa Rica!'. Needless to say, that didn't last long and I decided to chase a couple of other species on my bucket list including <Scarlet Macaw> and <Boat-billed Heron>. If you're not familiar with bucket lists, have a look here <<<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0825232/>>> - and I hasten to add that I'm not terminally ill!. I enquired at the Hotel Savegre, where I was staying, and they booked me into the Villa Lapas, another eco-lodge-style hotel, but in the lowlands on Puntarenas Province on the Pacific Coast.



Boat-billed Heron (Cochlearius cochlearius)

Tarcoles, Puntarenas Province, Costa Rica, 16 October 2010

112781 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

'Lapas' is the Spanish for Macaw, and that seemed like a good omen, particularly as the hotel is adjacent to the Carara Biological Reserve, supposedly one of the best

places in Costa Rica for Scarlet Macaws. Anyway, I checked into the hotel and booked myself on an early morning wildlife boat trip on the Tarcoles River. I was the only passenger, so the crew of two were only too happy to try to satisfy my wishes. Sure enough, within minutes of starting, we got distant views of a pair of Scarlet Macaws feeding on Beach Almonds and after a trip up the river we went down to the mangroves for the climax of the trip, three Boat-billed Herons roosting in the mangroves.



Boat-billed Heron (Cochlearius cochlearius)

Tarcoles, Puntarenas Province, Costa Rica, 16 October 2010

112756 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

There have got to be the strangest looking herons, with their huge bills, though otherwise they show some resemblance to Night-Herons and are also nocturnal - hence the large eyes. The bill looks it's designed a heavy duty task like crushing crabs, but in fact it is used rather passively as a scoop and Boat-bills eat a variety of invertebrates and small vertebrates unlucky enough to get in the way. In the past they have been given their own mono-typic family, but DNA research has shown that they are related to both the Tiger-Herons and the Night-Herons.



Boat-billed Heron (Cochlearius cochlearius)

Tarcoles, Puntarenas Province, Costa Rica, 16 October 2010

112746 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I first got interested in them when reading about them in Trinidad in 2005 where they are rare. Elsewhere in South America they are reasonably common with a range extending from Mexico to northern Argentina. There are five sub-species, sometimes treated as two species, Northern and Southern, but the Costa Rican race (*panamensis*) is intermediate between the two extremes and it is usual now to treat them as a single species.

I'm enjoying being back home in North Queensland, though the first week here has been a busy one as I've been preparing material for a workshop on wader identification tomorrow. When that is out of the way, I can get back to the website and the rest of my domestic routine in earnest.

Best wishes,

Ian

#384 Asian Dowitcher 3 November 2010

This is something of a postscript to a presentation on wader identification that I gave last Saturday to a workshop organised by the Townsville Region Bird Observers Club (now <<[BirdLife Townsville](#)>>) as part of the <[Shorebirds 2020 Project](#)>. Of the 45 species that we considered, I lacked photos of just one: the <[Asian Dowitcher](#)>. So you'll understand why I and a friend jumped into the car after the practical session at

Bushland Beach, near Townsville, on Sunday and drove to Cairns for an overnight visit, where an Asian Dowitcher had recently been reported. They are regular visitors in small numbers to northwestern Australia (e.g. Broome in Western Australia) but occur only as irregular vagrants on the east coast.



Asian Dowitcher (Limnodromus semipalmatus)

The Esplanade, Cairns, Northeastern Queensland, 1 November 2010

113851 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The mudflats on the Esplanade are very flat, so the window of opportunity provided by an incoming tide is very short and it wasn't until Monday afternoon that that happened. Even so, I would probably have missed it if Guy Dutson hadn't alerted me to its location. It's a bird that's easy to overlook among the Great Knots and Bar-tailed Godwits when they're all in non-breeding plumage, thank you Guy! The first photo shows it among <Great Knots>. The body size is similar, so the key Asian Dowitcher features are the very long, straight, dark bill with a bulbous tip rather like that of a snipe, long dark legs and dark loreal stripe (between the bill and the eye). Body length in waders is confounded by bill and leg length, so weight and wing-span are more useful. These are - Asian Dowitcher: 127-245g and 59cm/23.2in; Great Knot: 115-248g and 58cm/22.8in.



Asian Dowitcher (Limnodromus semipalmatus)

The Esplanade, Cairns, Northeastern Queensland, 1 November 2010

113863 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The second photo shows the Asian Dowitcher on the left with a smallish - probably male - <Bar-tailed Godwit> on the right (Bar-tailed Godwit male 190-400g female 262-630g, span 70-80cm/28-32in) and the third photo shows the Dowitcher with a larger Bar-tailed Godwit and lots of Great Knots and in this photo you can see the barred flanks of the Dowitcher compared with the plain flanks of the Godwit. The bill of the Dowitcher was always the most obvious distinguishing feature, but the bird would often have a snooze, tucking its bill under a wing, and magically disappear. What's more, the mud on the Cairns Esplanade is very gluggy, so the pink bases of Godwit bills are often covered, but the different shape is usually still apparent.



Asian Dowitcher (Limnodromus semipalmatus)

The Esplanade, Cairns, Northeastern Queensland, 1 November 2010

113892 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

When I was preparing the presentation and checking carefully on distinguishing features, I found that a wader that I'd photographed in India in 2003 and posted to the website as a Wood Sandpiper was actually a <Green Sandpiper>. This a bird, rare in Australia, that I had long wanted to photograph, so I was pleased to find and correct the error.

Best wishes,

Ian

#385 White-whiskered Puffbird 11 November 2010

Last week's <Asian Dowitcher> #384 prompted an amusing comment about bird names ('Dowitcher Princess') from a friend of mine on the list, thank you Peter, so how about the <White-whiskered Puffbird>, encountered in Carara Reserve on the Pacific Coast of Costa Rica? Puffbirds get their name from their fluffy plumage and along with Nunbirds (black), Monklets (smaller and brown) and Nunlets (oddly, also small and brown) comprise a small Central and South America family of 22 species, all with slightly hooked bills, called the <Bucconidae>, related to the iridescent Jacamars <Galbulidae>.



White-whiskered Puffbird (Malacoptila panamensis)

Carara Biological Reserve, Puntarenas Province, Costa Rica, 16 October 2010

112867 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

All these bird sit around quietly in forests, and are easily overlooked, waiting for their invertebrate prey to appear, which they then pounce on. The White-whiskered Puffbird, 20cm/8in in length, usually perches close to the understory at a height of 1 to 6m/3 - 30ft and have the reputation of being tame. It nests in holes in the ground, either on a slope or in a bank, and supposedly blocks the entrance to the nest hollow at night with green leaves. It prefers the lowlands and ranges from southern Mexico to the western side of the Andes in Colombia and Ecuador.



White-whiskered Puffbird (Malacoptila panamensis)

Carara Biological Reserve, Puntarenas Province, Costa Rica, 16 October 2010

112873 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Related links:

- [<Black-fronted Nunbird>](#)
- [<White-fronted Nunbird>](#)
- [<Rufous-tailed Jacamar>](#)

Other Costa Rican additions to the website include:

- [<Scarlet Macaw>](#)
- [<Double-striped Thick-knee>](#)
- [<Magnificent Hummingbird>](#)

And, for the wader-lovers, some Americans:

- [<Short-billed Dowitcher>](#)
- [<Marbled Godwit>](#)

Best wishes,

Ian

#386 Gartered Trogon 18 November 2010

When the [<Resplendent Quetzal>](#) featured as bird of the week in October [#382](#), I mentioned that Quetzals are members of the Trogon family, the [<Trogonidae>](#). So they belong to a splendid lineage as typical Trogons are quite gorgeous in their own

right and among my favourite birds. Here is the <Gartered* Trogon>, also from the Costa Rican trip.



Violaceous Trogon (Trogon violaceus)

Tarcoles, Puntarenas Province, Costa Rica, 16 October 2010

113000 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Trogons, the males in particular, are very colourful and the different species come in an extraordinary variety of colours, invariably in aesthetically pleasing and frequently complementary combinations, i.e. red-green, blue-yellow, purple-orange. Male Trogons with red and green breasts include the <Slaty-tailed>, <Black-tailed>, <Collared> and <Masked>, while the Gartered, <Guianan> and <White-tailed> are somewhere between blue-yellow and purple-orange, perhaps violet-chrome yellow, first photo. Non-complementary but still lovely are the <female Masked> and the red-brown male <Scarlet-rumped>, the latter a SE Asian species being the only one of these that is not from the Americas. I've chosen these examples as all are on the Birdway website.



Violaceous Trogon (Trogon violaceus)

Tarcoles, Puntarenas Province, Costa Rica, 16 October 2010

112981 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Their backs are green, bluish or brown, as in the second photo, and if all this is not enough, the upper wing coverts often have subtle and intricate scroll patterns and beautifully barred black and white tails, as in the third photo. If you wanted to design a fantastically beautiful bird yourself, it would be hard to come up with something better: female Trogons clearly have impeccable taste.



Violaceous Trogon (Trogon violaceus)

Tarcoles, Puntarenas Province, Costa Rica, 16 October 2010

113012 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Despite their rich colours, Trogons can be hard to spot as they tend to sit fairly motionless in leafy trees in tropical rainforest, occurring in both the New and the Old Worlds. They have distinctive repeated calls that reveal their presence, but hearing one in thick forest is no guarantee of being able to see it. They sit tight, so if you do find them they are fairly approachable but you have to be lucky to find one in clear view.

Recent American additions to the website include:

- [<Clark's Grebe>](#)
- [<Eared/Black-necked Grebe>](#)
- [<Horned Lark>](#)
- [<Hoffman's Woodpecker>](#)
- [<Greater Yellowlegs>](#)

(and a couple of other Costa Rican species that I'm keeping up my sleeve as future birds of the week!).

Best wishes,

Ian

*In 2010, this was a race of the Violaceous Trogon, since split by the IOC but not Birdlife International into Guianan (formerly nominate Violaceous), Gartered and Amazonian Trogons.

#387 Scintillant Hummingbird 25 November 2010

At the <<[Hotel Savegre](#)>> where I stayed in the highlands in Costa Rica in pursuit of the Resplendent Quetzal [#384](#), a variety of Hummingbirds were regular visitors to the hummingbird feeders and the flowers in the garden. The largest of these was the <[Magnificent Hummingbird](#)>, up to 14cm/5.5in in length and 10g in weight - sparrow sized - as in the first photo.



Magnificent Hummingbird (Eugenes fulgens)

San Gerardo de Dota, San Jose Province, Costa Rica, 13 October 2010

112320 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Size, however, isn't everything particularly in hummingbirds and big ones risk looking like, dare I say it, mere ordinary birds. Much of the fascination in hummingbirds is how insect-like they are, so the smaller the better, and my favourite was the tiny <[Scintillant Hummingbird](#)>. The males, second and third photo, tip the scales at 2.1g with a length of 6.5cm/2.6in (the females average 2.3g and 7cm) and perched,

seemingly weightless, on the tips and edges of the leaves of *Zantedeschia* plants. Their over-sized orange gorgets are very striking and this species is endemic to the mountain slopes of Costa Rica and Western Panama.



Scintillant Hummingbird (Selasphorus scintilla)

San Gerardo de Dota, San Jose Province, Costa Rica, 13 October 2010

112377 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Incidentally, the smallest hummingbird of all, in fact the smallest bird of all, is the Bee Hummingbird of Cuba with the males, again smaller than the females, averaging 1.6g and 5cm/2in, not that much smaller the Scintillant Hummingbird. The largest is the Giant Hummingbird of the Andes, up to 23g in weight and 22cm/8.7in long and apparently swift-like in flight. Not surprisingly, the Bee Hummingbird is on my bucket list, the Giant isn't.



Scintillant Hummingbird (Selasphorus scintilla)

San Gerardo de Dota, San Jose Province, Costa Rica, 13 October 2010

112338 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Our premature wet season continues in North Queensland, so the website has received plenty of attention. I've revised the <Thrush> galleries with the addition of 6 Central American species, added a couple of swallows and the badly-named <Long-tailed Silky-flycatcher> - it may be silky but it's not a flycatcher and it mostly eats fruit

- <Ruddy-capped Nightingale-Thrush>
- <Black-faced Solitaire>
- <Mangrove Swallow>

Best wishes,

Ian

#388 Slaty Flowerpiercer (and Hummingbirds) 2 December 2010

Last week's hummingbirds were popular so here, in a roundabout way, are some more. Flowers often have complex relationships with the animals (eg birds, moths) with which they interact and use them for pollination and distribution of seeds. Mutually beneficial (symbiotic) relationships may develop, such as exchange of nectar for pollination, that result in structural correspondences between species of flowers and animals, in particular the length of flower tubes and the length of the bills of hummingbirds and the probosces of moths.



Slaty Flowerpiercer (Diglossa plumbea)

San Gerardo de Dota, San Jose Province, Costa Rica, 13 October 2010

112146 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

These relationships may exclude other species and this leads to cheating in various ways, either directly or indirectly. <Flowerpiercers>, such as the <Slaty Flowerpiercer> found in Costa Rica and named after the male of the species, first photo, cheat by using their specially adapted bills to bite through the flower tube to get at the nectar without helping with pollination. The female in the second photo shows how its done with the flower of a ginger plant.



Slaty Flowerpiercer (Diglossa plumbea)

San Gerardo de Dota, Costa Rica, 13 October 2010

112115 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Some short-billed Hummingbirds do the same thing and stab the flower tube. Others, however, cheat indirectly and take advantage of the holes left by the flowerpiercers to sip the nectar. The tiny male <Volcano Hummingbird> (8cm/3.1in 2.5g) in the third photo is doing just that. Totally dwarfed by the ginger flower, it is hovering nearby and hasn't had to land on the flower to stab it.



Volcano Hummingbird (Selasphorus flammula)

San Gerardo de Dota, San Jose Province, Costa Rica, 12 October 2010

111701 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Volcano Hummingbird, incidentally, is a very close relative of the <Scintillant Hummingbird> of last week #387 but has a violet rather than an orange gorget and is found, as its name suggests, at much higher altitudes. The vertical ranges of the two species just overlap at the 2,200m/7,200ft altitude of San Gerardo de Dota, the valley of the Quetzals.



White-throated Mountain-gem (*Lampornis castaneiventris*)

San Gerardo de Dota, San Jose Province, Costa Rica, 12 October 2010

111696 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The much larger male <[White-throated Mountain-gem](#)> (11cm/4in 6.2g) in the fourth photo has actually landed on the ginger flower, so whether it has stabbed the flower or is also taking advantage of the Flowerpiercers isn't obvious. They're clearly versatile: the fifth photo shows another male feeding on an alien, almost petal-less, Bottlebrush in San Gerardo de Dota, the closest one is likely to get to an Australian Hummingbird!



White-throated Mountain-gem (Lampornis castaneocentris)

San Gerardo de Dota, Costa Rica, 12 October 2010

111656 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Best wishes,
Ian

#389 Yellow-throated Toucan 10 December 2010

I think everybody, birders and non-birders, likes Toucans. They're one of the iconic, almost cartoonish, animals that we were introduced to as young children and I remember Toucans (and Gnus) featuring in posters for Guinness stout in Ireland in the 1950s. Their unbelievably large and colourful bills are so outlandish that it is a delightful shock to come across them in the flesh, particularly in the wild.



The Villa Lapas hotel where I stayed in the Pacific lowlands of Costa Rica had a rainforest canopy trail in its grounds and I checked it out one thundery and gloomy afternoon. The rain held off for most of the trek but, for the most part, the birds didn't like the weather any more than I did and the light and the dense foliage made it hard to see much less photograph anything. However, repeated raucous calls led me to a pair of <Yellow-throated/Chestnut-mandibled* Toucans> perched high in an unusually open tree. They proved to be very shy, fell silent as soon as I appeared and flew off into the forest giving me time to take only a few photos. With a length to 61cm/24in, the Chestnut-mandibled is the largest Toucan in Costa Rica. Its range includes most of Central America and Northern South America from Honduras to Ecuador.



Chestnut-mandibled Toucan (*Ramphastos swainsonii*)

Tarcoles, Puntarenas Province, Costa Rica, 15 October 2010

112525 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Toucans use their large bills to collect fruit, but will also feed on nestlings. The structure of the bill is a honeycomb, so it is quite light and not particularly strong. Its function has attracted a lot of speculation from reaching fruit, signalling and defence and the latest theory is that it is used as a heat exchanger for cooling. The colours vary widely from species to species, supporting its use for species identification but they don't vary either between the sexes or seasonally.

There are about a dozen species of large toucan (genus *Ramphastos*) and the toucan family <[Ramphastidae](#)> includes smaller ones such as Mountain-Toucans (*Andigena*), <[Toucanets](#)> (*Aulacorhynchus* and *Selenidera*) and <[Araçaris](#)> (*Peteroglossus*). All of these are restricted to Central and South America.

Recent milestones on the website are totals of 5,600 photos and 1,300 species. Additions to the website since last week include more photos of American waders such as:

- <[American Avocet](#)>
- <[Black-necked Stilt](#)>
- <[Willet](#)>
- <[Least Sandpiper](#)>

Best wishes,

Ian

*In the 2010, the Chestnut-mandibled or Swainson's Toucan was treated as a separate species (*Ramphastos swainsonii*); currently (2018) it's treated as a race of the Yellow-throated Toucan (*Ramphastos ambiguus swainsonii*). Toucan classification seems to be very unstable.

#390 Streak-chested Antpitta 18 December 2010

Jo Wieneke, original author of <[Where to Find Birds in North-east Queensland](#)>, pointed out to me that birds that stand upright and have short tails (long ones get in the way) look like little people and are consequently attractive. <[Penguins](#)> are the classic example, but there are plenty others, including the <[Pittas](#)> of Australia and Eurasia. Pittas don't occur in the Americas but instead there are the unrelated but similar-looking Antpittas, members of the New World family <[Grallariidae](#)>, which occur from Mexico southwards.



Spectacled Antpitta (Hylopezus peripicillatus)

Carara Wildlife Reserve, Costa Rica, 16 October 2010

112964 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Antpittas have similar habits to true Pittas and rummage around in leaf-litter in tropical and sub-tropical forest looking for invertebrate prey such as snails and worms. They are also easier to hear than see, so it was a pleasant surprise when we stumbled on this <[Streak-chested Antpitta](#)> (also called Spectacled Antpitta) in Carara Wildlife Reserve in Costa Rica. It moved off through the undergrowth, but I struggled after it encumbered by a large lens and flash and managed to get a few photos of it peering suspiciously at me over its shoulder before disappearing.

Incidentally, there are various groups of Central and South American birds, collectively called Antbirds, e.g. members of the family <[Thamnophilidae](#)>, so named because some of them are found in association with army ants and feed on prey disturbed by the flow of ants across the landscape.



Spectacled Antpitta (Hylophylax naevius)

Carara Wildlife Reserve, Costa Rica, 16 October 2010

112961 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Streak-chested Antpitta ranges from Honduras in the north to Colombia in the south. There are about 50 species of Antpitta and there are photos of another species, the [Moustached Antpitta](#), from Ecuador on the website. This is, I think, the last of the Costa Rican birds of the week as I've put most of the Costa Rican species on the website.

Best wishes,

Ian

#391 Scarlet Robin 24 December 2010

Christmas and New Year is a time for tradition not (egregious) originality so here, without apology, is a Scarlet Robin to wish you season's greeting. Okay, it's not the classical <European Robin> - which featured as Bird of the Week on Christmas 2005 - but perhaps the closest we can get to in Australia. In fact, as a member of the Australo-Papuan Robins - the <Petroicidae> - rather than the Old World Flycatchers - the <Muscicapidae> - it's not even closely related, but I don't think science is very important when it comes to symbolism.



Scarlet Robin (Petroica multicolor)

Lower Kalgan, SW Western Australia, 29 August 2006

38537 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Anyway, whatever your creed or beliefs, I wish you a safe and peaceful holiday season and a fulfilling and happy 2011.

Best wishes,

Ian

Year 2011: #392 to #431

#392 Metallic Starling 2 January 2011

Here's a local bird to welcome in the New Year: the <Metallic Starling>. The <Common Starling> has given starlings a bad name by being feral (introduced) in many parts of the world including Australia, South Africa and North America and feral (in behaviour) in its native Europe and Asia. Here's an exotic tropical one to infuse a bit of balance. With strikingly iridescent green and violet plumage worthy of a bird of a paradise, a piercing red eye to make the devil envious, a long pointed tail and dashing flight, there's nothing merely feral about this starling: see the first photo.



Metallic Starling (Aplornis metallica)

Tully, Northeastern Queensland, 14 November 2010

114019 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Like the Common Starling, however, they are highly social both in and out of the breeding season. They build large globular nests suspended in dense colonies in large rainforest trees. In Northeastern Australia they often nest in the introduced South American Rain Tree, like this one in Tully, halfway between Cairns and Townsville, where all of these photos except the last were taken. The second photo shows an adult visiting a nest and the yellow gape of a hungry chick begging for food.



Metallic Starling (Afornis metallica)

Tully, Northeastern Queensland, 11 November 2010

113972 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Many fledged juveniles are often present in these colonies and these are strikingly different in appearance from the adults with their white underparts with bold streaks, as in the third photo, and could easily be mistaken for a different species.



Metallic Starling (Aplornis metallica)

Tully, Northeastern Queensland, 14 November 2010

114008 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In Australia, the Metallic Starling has a limited range along the north east coast of Queensland from the tip of Cape York to Mackay, but common only north of Ingham, where there is a colony in the middle of the main street. In Australia it is mainly a summer migrant, arriving in August/September and most have left by April, though some overwinter. The fourth photo shows a big flock of Metallic Starlings preparing to roost at sunset at Chilli Beach near Lockhart River on Cape York Peninsula.



Metallic Starling (Aplornis metallica)

Lockhart River, Northern Queensland, 28 November 2009

96810 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

If, like me, you are into symbols, I offer you the sunset as a farewell to 2010 and the new-born chick as a token of the New Year: I wish you a happy and healthy one!

Ian

#393 White-tailed Kite 6 January 2011

It was only when I was recently preparing this photo for the website, that I noticed that this White-tailed Kite was carrying a small mammal, probably a mouse given the location and the length of the tail, so I thought I would share it with you.



White-tailed Kite (Elanus leucurus)

San Jose, California, USA, 18 September 2010

110062 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

If you are an Australian birder and this bird looked very familiar - ah, a Black-shouldered Kite - you actually be very nearly right. The endemic Australian <Blue-shouldered> (*Elanus axillaris*), the American <White-tailed> (*E. leucurus*) and the Old World <Black-winged> (*E. caeruleus*) Kites have been regarded as a single species in the past. Although they are now treated as separate ones, they are referred to collectively as a 'super-species', which, if you're cynical, you might see as a case of taxonomists hedging their bets. The only other member of the genus *Elanus* worldwide is the <Letter-winged Kite> (*E. scriptus*), also an Australian endemic and a rarely seen, largely nocturnal inhabitant of the dry centre.



White-tailed Kite (Elanus leucurus)

San Jose, California, USA, 18 September 2010

110063 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The three species differ slightly in size - the White-tailed at 15in/38cm in length is by a small margin the largest - but mainly in the pattern of the underwing. If you look carefully at this bird you can see a blackish spot on a white background near the wrist joint (the primary underwing coverts). This is longer in the Australian version and missing completely in the otherwise very similar Eurasian one. The Black-winged occurs quite widely through southeastern and southern Asia, central and southern Africa and, in small numbers in Iberia and north Africa. The White-tailed occurs in the southern USA and Central and South America.

These are elegant little kites, hover like kestrels and all feed mainly on small mammals. The Letter-winged is particularly partial to the long-haired rat, despite its scientific name *Rattus villosissimus*, and its population cycles follow the rat's with the birds dispersing widely when the rat population crashes. I once saw a pair at dusk in a street in inner Sydney (Surry Hills) and you can't get much farther from the dry interior than that.

Anyway, I'm getting off the track. Back at the website, I've added new photos of Australian, American White and Brown <Pelicans> and starting adding some <snakes> to the <Other Wildlife> section.

Best wishes,

Ian

#394 Red-necked Phalarope 14 January 2011

I had an inquiry from one of my two sisters in Ireland, Colette, recently about <Red-necked Phalarope> (some appeared in breeding plumage at a potential breeding site there last northern summer), so it was floating around in my mind yesterday when I considered what to share with you this week. It's a dainty and interesting wader, like its cousin the <Red/Grey Phalarope> which featured as bird of the week after my trip to Alaska in 2008.



Red-necked Phalarope (Phalaropus lobatus)

Barrow, Alaska, USA, 17 June 2008

65939 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The three species of Phalarope (Wilson's is the third) breed in high latitudes in the northern hemisphere so Ireland is at the southern edge of its potential range - there was a colony of up to 50 pairs there in the early part of the 20th century. Despite their delicate appearance and toy-like behaviour when bobbing around picking up plankton from the surface of water, these are tough little birds and the Red-necked, 19cm/7.75in in length with a wing-span of 38cm/15in is the smallest of the three. Their favourite nesting sites are on small ponds in the northern tundra and outside the breeding season they are normally pelagic wandering far and wide over the oceans of the world in search of food.



Red-necked Phalarope (Phalaropus lobatus)

Barrow, Alaska, USA, 18 June 2008

66099 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Like the Red/Grey (summer/winter) Phalarope, the Red-necked shows a reversal in sex roles, with the brighter females courting the males, having multiple partners and leaving the males to incubate the eggs and look after the young. There is though to be a selective advantage in the females being able to lay as many eggs as possible in the brief breeding season of high latitudes. The first photo shows the brighter female, the second the smaller and more subdued - in more ways than one - male.



Red-necked Phalarope (Phalaropus lobatus)

Bodega Bay, California, USA, 1 September 2010

108604 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In non-breeding plumage all three species have mainly grey and white plumage. The Red-necked has a black, downturned eye-patch - see the third photos - and, visible in flight, wing bars (lacking in Wilson's) and dark underwing marking. All three species turn up rarely in Australia in the non-breeding season, particular following storms when drive them into bays for shelter or inland. The Red-necked is the least rare of the three and the fourth photo shows one that turned up on the Bellarine Peninsula south-west of Geelong, Victoria in 2002.



Red-necked Phalarope (Phalaropus lobatus)

Hospital Swamp, Victoria, Australia, 6 February 2002

09494 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Best wishes,
Ian

#395 Laughing Kookaburra 23 January 2011

The <[Blue-winged Kookaburra](#)> has featured as bird of the week (twice) but, as far as I can detect, the iconic <[Laughing Kookaburra](#)> hasn't, so let's correct that using library photos. Bird photo opportunities were time-constrained during the wonderful recorder course in Armidale, NSW, though a family of roosting <[Southern Boobooks](#)> (which featured as bird of the week last year) gave the participants much pleasure and I'll let you know when I've put the photos on the website.



Laughing Kookaburra (Dacelo novaeguineae)

Broadwater, North Queensland, 21 August 2004

C09370 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Its loud cackling call is a characteristic sound of the Australian landscape (and of the sound tracks of B-grade jungle movies not set in Australia) and it's a familiar bird in southern and eastern Australia, first photo.



Laughing Kookaburra (Dacelo novaeguineae)

Townsville, North Queensland, 2 February 2004

C05121 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Up to 47cm/18.5in in length, it's larger than its blue-winged cousin (length to 40cm) and by far the largest Australian Kingfisher. Unlike male blue-winged, birds of both sexes have brown tails and are not easily told apart. The third photo shows a breeding pair of Laughing Kookaburras, photographed near their nest site in a tree hollow in the botanic gardens (the Palmetum) in Townsville.



Laughing Kookaburra (Dacelo novaeguineae)

Big Crystal Creek, Northeastern Queensland, 24 July 2010

105906 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Older males can, however, be distinguished by having bluish rumps, like one making his presence very audible in the third photo. Kookaburras are very territorial and defend their territories by having calling matches and by performing circular display flights as far as the boundary of the territory. A territorial group consists of either just a breeding pair or a dominant breeding pair and several 'helper' birds so the calling matches can be very noisy indeed when everyone takes part.



Laughing Kookaburra (Dacelo novaeguineae)

Alligator Creek, North Queensland, 27 January 2003

15629 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Juvenile birds are recognisable by the pale brownish scalloped edges to the plumage, most noticeable on the back like the right hand bird in the fourth photo. This bird is barely fledged and has a very short tail.



Laughing Kookaburra (Dacelo novaeguineae)

Warrumbungles, New South Wales, 28 March 2004

06275 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Kookaburras are carnivorous and they hunt from perches, doing long glides down to catch terrestrial prey, typically large insects and small mammals and reptiles. The bird in the fifth photo has just caught a mouse. They will immobilise their prey by beating it on the perch, and will automatically do this even when fed dead food such as strips of meat.

The original range of the Laughing Kookaburra comprised only mainland eastern Australia from the tip of Cape York in the north south to Victoria and as far west as eastern South Australia. Since European settlement it has been successfully introduced to southwestern Western Australia, Tasmania, the islands in Bass Strait and Kangaroo Island in South Australia. Unfortunately, in these areas it competes with the native wildlife for food and with species that nest in tree hollows such as Southern Boobooks.

Best wishes,

Ian

#396 Black-breasted Buttonquail 30 January 2011

I returned home from Armidale NSW by road bringing back a friend's car that had been left at the Gold Coast south of Brisbane because of the flooding. I took the opportunity to make a detour to Inskip Point - near Rainbow Beach and Fraser Island

- a known haunt of the rare <Black-breasted Buttonquail>, see the female in first photo.



Black-breasted Buttonquail (Turnix melanogaster)

Inskip Point, Eastern Queensland, 27 January 2011

114538 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I found a pair relatively easily, though not before a few false alarms in the shape of some very young <Australian Brush-turkeys>, as in the second photo, so young in fact that they were as small as the Buttonquails.



Australian Brush-turkey (Alectura lathami)

Inskip Point, Eastern Queensland, 27 January 2011

114554 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Buttonquails leave characteristic circular bare patches in leaf litter called 'platelets' and I had stopped to examine some of these when a female Black-breasted Buttonquail ambled across the path and walked right past me. At one stage she walked towards me and I don't think she noticed my presence. Buttonquails, like certain other eclectic groups of birds including <[Phalaropes](#)> and <[Cassowaries](#)>, have reversed sex roles with the more colourful females courting the males and the males incubating and looking after the young, so I was pleased to see the female who has a black head and black breast with moon-shaped white spots on the sides, as in the third photo.



Black-breasted Buttonquail (Turnix melanogaster)

Inskip Point, Eastern Queensland, 27 January 2011

114524 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Buttonquails are not closely related to the <true quails> and are placed in their own family, the <Turnicidae>. The most obvious structural difference is the lack of a hind toe in Buttonquails, as you can see if you look carefully in the fourth photo and they are sometimes called 'Hemipodes', meaning half-feet. They feed on seed and invertebrates and the Black-breasted is particularly dependent on leaf litter and eats mainly invertebrates. They make the platelets by spinning around on one foot using the other to clear away the leaves; often they then reverse direction standing on the other foot so the size of the platelet matches the size of the bird. The Black-breasted is large by Buttonquail standards with the larger females being about 19cm/7.5in in length and the males 16.5cm/6.5in. I saw her drabber partner later but he didn't want his photo taken.



Black-breasted Buttonquail (Turnix melanogaster)

Inskip Point, Eastern Queensland, 27 January 2011

114544 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

There are about 16 species in total and are found in Africa, southern Spain, southern and southeastern Asia and Australia. Seven of these occur in Australia. The range of the Black-breasted is limited to coastal southeastern Queensland and northeastern NSW from Fraser Island to just north of Lismore. Its preferred habitat is open woodland and its population has suffered from habitat clearing and it is now classed as vulnerable.

Best wishes,

Ian

Cyclone Yasi (1) 2 February 2011

Just a quick note to my friends on Bird of the Week. Now that cyclone Yasi has strengthened to category 5, I've moved to the house of friend Anneke. Her house is more solid than mine and I didn't want to face the cyclone alone at home at night.

I'll keep you posted if internet connections stay up.

Best wishes,

Ian

Cyclone Yasi (2) 3 February 2011

Townsville and Cairns seem to have escaped the worst - towns in-between not so lucky - and we are fine. My neighbour says my house looks okay - just some trees down. We lost power very early and is still off so this iPhone has been invaluable. We had dinner by candle light. Still blowing a howling gale. Many thanks for all you messages of support.



Best wishes
Ian

Cyclone Yasi (3) 4 February 2011

I returned home yesterday evening and the house itself is completely intact even though the pair French doors behind the palm in the first photo barely held. The garden shed disintegrated, first photo, but that wasn't unexpected and there are lots of trees down. The second photo shows the driveway near the house, but I managed to get the car to the house another way after clearing branches out of the way, even if I did need to engage 4WD lock to not get bogged. We had 350mm/14in of rain recorded at Upper Bluewater but no serious flooding though I did find some fish from the creek at the bottom of the hill below the house.



I have no power, landline phone or mobile coverage but can drive in and out of Townsville okay and things are being rapidly restored there with petrol stations and shopping centres beginning to re-open. It will probably be some weeks before Bluewater, 35km north of Townsville and low-priority, gets power again, but I am well equipped for camping, have a gas cooker and running water and have moved the most important perishables from my freezer to my next door neighbour's as they have a generator. At the moment, I'm at the house of friends in Townsville who still have power and internet and am recharging my laptop.



The response of the disaster management authorities has been spectacularly good and the attitude of the local people is outstanding with all of us helping each other. We who are in Townsville and Cairns are very grateful that we were spared the worst and our thoughts are with those in Cardwell, Tully, Innisfail, Mission Beach and other places that were less fortunate and in the direct path of cyclone.

The first thing I did this morning was rescue a <Peaceful Dove> with a broken wing and it is now resting next door in a cage (they keep parrots). There are plenty of birds around including small ones like <Dusky Honeyeaters> and terns flying back to the coast but the <Blue-winged Kookaburras> and <Dollarbirds> have lost their nesting hollows (termite riddled trees) and I hope they weren't inside them at the time.

Many thanks again for all your supporting messages. I can't reply individually to them at the moment but will do so eventually.

I think the Tourist Bureau slogan 'Queensland: beautiful one day, perfect the next' should be 'beautiful one day, wrecked the next' and I'm grading people's responses to the event as pass/fail in camping (1) and disaster management (1) and in extreme cases (panic) as failing the qualifying exam for disaster management.

Best wishes,

Ian

#397 Olive-backed Sunbird 16 February 2011

Well, my apologies for a very belated bird of the week. Life in and around Townsville has largely returned to normal post-Yasi, except for for my broadband connection so I've borrowed a mobile modem from my neighbour.

This week's choice is the award for small bird cyclone survivor, jointly shared by around here by <Red-backed Fairywren>, <Dusky Honeyeater> and <Olive-backed Sunbird>. The fairywren has been bird of the week before (July 2005), so I was going to choose the Dusky Honeyeater until I discovered that I have no record of the Sunbird being bird of the week before. That's a serious omission, so please forgive me if I'm mistaken: just nod sagely and put it down to old age and post-cyclone shock.



Olive-backed Sunbird (Nectarinia jugularis)

Serene Valley, North Queensland, 10 July 2003

CC0246 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I suppose one shouldn't be surprised at the Sunbird surviving cyclones as its range in Australia is restricted almost entirely to coastal tropical Queensland, extending just south of the Tropic of Capricorn to around Bundaberg. It also occurs in Torres Strait, New Guinea and southeast Asia but is regarded here as an iconic species and is immensely popular being very common around gardens, tame and often building its elegant hanging nest on verandahs. They feed mainly on the nectar of blossoms but will also take spiders.



Olive-backed Sunbird (Nectarinia jugularis)

Serene Valley, North Queensland, 29 August 2003

C023011 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The first two photos show the blue-chested male and yellow-breasted female respectively on *Calliandra* (Powder Puff) and were taken at the house that I rented when I first moved to Townsville. The third photo shows one of the local males perched in a *Poinciana* tree near my current house.



Olive-backed Sunbird (Nectarinia jugularis)

Bluewater, North Queensland, 1 November 2003

C03150 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This species is the only Sunbird found in Australia but it belongs to a large family with more than 100 species of Sunbird in Asia and Africa and leading a lifestyle similar to that of the exclusively American and unrelated [Hummingbirds](#). The Sunbirds are closely related to the [Flowerpeckers](#) - which include the [Mistletoebird](#) - and there is disagreement as to whether they constitute one or two families.

Other cyclone related news is that the Peaceful Dove that I rescued had an injured rather than broken wing, has recovered well in the company of the budgies next door and is ready to be returned to the wild. Food is now the main issue for survivors and many of you have naturally expressed concern for the [Southern Cassowaries](#), just recovering from cyclone Larry. Sue and Phil Gregory tell me that the Cassowaries at Cassowary House in Kuranda near Cairns have survived well, so keep that in mind if

you are visiting North Queensland and want somewhere lovely to stay: <<<http://www.cassowary-house.com.au/>>>.

As with cyclone Larry, Bluewater has been visited by some unusual avian visitors post-Yasi. I'll say more about them in the next email and some photos of a special one for bird of the week #398 which will go out shortly as a catch-up.

Best wishes and thank you again for your kindness and support.

Ian

#398 Superb Fruit-Dove 21 February 2011

One of the tragedies of severe tropical cyclones is the damage to vegetation, particularly fruiting trees, and the resulting avian refugees, many battered and exhausted, fleeing far and wide in search of food. Since cyclone Yasi, many <Superb> and <Wompoo> Fruit-Doves and some <Brown Cuckoo-Doves> have been moving through areas such as Bluewater and Townsville. This happened after cyclone Larry in 2006 when many of these refugees stayed around for months, but they are even more numerous this time round.



Superb Fruit-Dove (Ptilinopus superbis)

Bluewater, Northeastern Queensland, 15 February 2011

114699 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Superb Fruit-Doves are among the most spectacularly beautiful of rainforest birds in eastern Australia, but despite their bright colours are usually heard rather than seen. Their distinctive, repeated 'whoop, whoop' calls - with a rising inflection delivered at a

regular rhythm and easily distinguished from the similar but accelerating 'who-who' of the related and equally gorgeous <Rose-crowned Fruit-Dove> - are a very characteristic sound of northeastern rainforests. Hearing is no guarantee of seeing, however, and these shy birds usually remain invisible in the thick foliage of rainforest trees. So, it is strange to see these wonderful little doves (length of both species to 24cm/9.5in) sitting in full-view on trees in open tropical savanna left leafless by the cyclone, too tired to fly away when approached.



Superb Fruit-Dove (Ptilinopus superbus)

Bluewater, Northeastern Queensland, 12 February 2011

114632 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The first photo shows a male, the second the less-spectacular but still beautiful female photographed from the verandah of my house ten days after the cyclone when this species was most numerous around here. The females have an indigo skull cap that, being on the back of the head, is often not visible but you can see it clearly in the bird in the third photo, taken in a battered but still fruiting tree at Dungeness where we lunched last Thursday, in a normally, but no longer, shady park near Lucinda on the coast east of Ingham, after doing the monthly wader survey. That area took quite a battering and the sand spit along which we used to walk to do the survey has largely been flattened and the sand dumped in the mud flat to its west.



Superb Fruit-Dove (Ptilinopus superbus)

Lucinda, Northeastern Queensland, 17 February 2011

114848 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The range of the Superb Fruit-Dove in Australia is the east coast from the tip of Cape York to south of Sydney. Its main breeding range is in tropical Queensland north of Prosperine on the Whitsunday Coast and it is relatively rare in New South Wales. It also occurs in New Guinea and eastern Indonesia and many Australian birds migrate to New Guinea in winter. Fruit-eating doves normally range widely in search of food, given the seasonal nature of its availability, so it is to be hoped that this ability serves them well in times such as this.

Best wishes,

Ian

#399 Lesser Frigatebird 2 March 2011

This is the third of the post-cyclone Yasi birds of the week. The first dealt with survival of small birds; the second with birds like fruit-doves that move in search of food after the cyclone has passed. Another category of birds greatly affected by cyclones are seabirds, particularly those that spend much time on the wing and these often appear in places where they are not usually seen or get blown inland, sometimes over great distances.



Male Lesser Frigatebird (Fregata ariel)

East Diamond Islet, Coral Sea, Northeastern Australia, 13 December 2006

45449 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The <Lesser Frigatebird> is common in oceanic waters of northern Australia and breeds in colonies both on the northern mainland and on cays and islands. Adult birds are normally sedentary, remaining in the vicinity of the colonies, though immature birds may travel widely over the oceans. Frigatebirds are not normally seen in places like Townsville, distant from breeding colonies, except after cyclones. Cyclone Yasi was no exception with both <Great> and Lesser Frigatebirds being recorded along the coast. I was surprised to see a pair of Lesser Frigatebirds near my place at Bluewater, 11km from the sea and the birds looked quite out of place soaring over the hills south of the house.



Female Lesser Frigatebird (Fregata ariel)

East Diamond Islet, Coral Sea, Northeastern Australia, 13 December 2006

45109 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Lesser Frigatebirds are easily distinguished in all plumages from Great Frigatebirds by having white 'armpits' or spurs. The first photo shows a male bird, black except for these spurs - male Great Frigatebirds are entirely black. Male Frigatebirds have inflatable red throat pouches used to spectacular effect in displays (for example this male <[Magnificent Frigatebird](#)> in Ecuador). The second photo shows a female Lesser Frigatebird and the third an immature one.



Immature Lesser Frigatebird (Fregata ariel)

East Diamond Islet, Coral Sea, Northeastern Australia, 13 December 2006

45484 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Frigatebirds are huge. Even the Lesser, the smallest of the five global species, is 70-80cm/28-32in. in length with a wingspan of 1.8-1.9m/5.9-6.2 feet. They are very light for their size, having very light bones, and are adapted to soaring effortlessly in the trade winds where they are usually found. They are famous as pirates, <forcing other seabirds>, particularly boobies, to disgorge their prey, but they are also adept fishers in their own right, snatching flying fish in flight and other fish and cuttlefish from the surface of the water. They have tiny feet, useful only for perching in trees when nesting or roosting and quickly become water-logged if forced to land on water which they normally avoid. They will bathe and <drink fresh water in flight>.

11km from the coast is nothing to a frigatebird and it is likely that cyclone-distributed frigatebirds can find their way home (like swifts, they often take advantage of storm fronts). Less fortunate perhaps was the Petrel recorded post-Yasi on the Atherton Tableland by Alan Gillanders, though the record for Yasi goes to a <Bridled Tern> rescued 'in bad shape' in Alice Springs by Chris Watson, probably as far away from the ocean as you can get in Australia.

Best wishes,

Ian

#400 Yellow-spotted Honeyeater 13 March 2011

I've been working on the Honeyeater galleries on the website recently and a <Yellow-spotted Honeyeater> showed up outside my house a few days ago, pushing this species into the foreground when I was contemplating the choice of this week's bird. Bluewater is at the southern end of its range, so it turns up only occasionally and this one is presumably a cyclone Yasi refugee.



Yellow-spotted Honeyeater (Meliphaga notata)

Kingfisher Park, Julatten, Northeastern Queensland, 1 April 2010

99452 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It's very similar to the <Graceful Honeyeater>, which has an almost identical range from just north of Bluewater (Rollingstone) to Cape York and New Guinea. Both are similar to <Lewin's Honeyeater>, which occurs right along the east coast of Australia as far south as Melbourne. Both the Yellow-spotted and the Graceful are common in forest habitats in North Queensland. I had trouble separating them when I first moved up here until I learnt their calls - the easiest way to distinguish them - so a comparison of the three species might be of interest and I've selected photos taken under similar condition using flash in poor light, typical of forests.



Lewin's Honeyeater (Meliphaga lewinii)

Paluma, Northeastern Queensland, 4 March 2011

115082 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Yellow-spotted - first photo - is intermediate in size (17-19cm/6.7-7.5in) between the larger Lewin's - second photo - (19-22cm/7.5-8.7) and the smaller Graceful - third photo - (14-17cm/5.5-6.7in), so perhaps the key is to separate it from the other two species. Lewin's has a dark-grey face (in front of the ear-patch), a large half-moon-shaped ear patch and a heavier bill. Both have longish pale-yellow, almost whitish, gapes. The typical call of the Lewin's is the familiar loud and regular 'machine-gun' rattle of the forest of eastern Australia; that of the Yellow-spotted is clearly related but different: slower and descending. Both also have harsh chattering calls, differing in tone and intensity in a similar way to the machine-gun calls - that of the Lewin's is louder and harsher in a bigger-bird sort of way.



Graceful Honeyeater (Meliphaga gracilis)

Cassowary House, Kuranda, Northeastern Queensland, 4 March 2009

85165 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Both the Yellow-spotted and the Graceful have greenish faces and smallish ear-patches which look similar to me (though some field guides make distinctions such as 'rounded triangle, yellow' versus 'rounded, cream': huh?). The gapes, however, are quite different, that of the Yellow-spotted being long and pale like that Lewin's while that of the Graceful is shorter and very yellow (chrome). The Graceful has a longer bill with a decurved lower edge (that of both Lewin's and Yellow-spotted is almost straight), though I've found that a tricky field mark unless you get a good, exactly lateral view. Happily, the call of the Graceful is very different, a sharp 'tuck' or 'pik' repeated at intervals and very distinctive.

All three species are quite vocal and in the forest you normally hear them before you see them, so I find it best to use the visual field marks to confirm an auditory identification, particularly if you find the Graceful and the Yellow-spotted together, which happens sometimes. In the north, the Lewin's is more of a highland species, though it does move down in winter, and it's unusual to find it in the company of the other two.

We made a recent trip to Paluma to inspect the cyclone damage. The local birds, particularly the fruit-eaters seemed very hungry and responded well to feeding so I've added photos of these species: <[Victoria's Riflebird](#)>, <[Satin Bowerbird](#)>, <[Spotted Catbird](#)>, <[White-cheeked Honeyeater](#)> and <[Macleay's Honeyeater](#)>

At home the good news is that my lone cyclone-surviving male <Blue-winged Kookaburra> seems to have attracted a mate, and there were plenty of <Dollarbirds> around yesterday.

Best wishes,
Ian

#401 Weebill 21 March 2011

I've recently been reformatting the photo galleries of the Thornbills and Allies <Acanthizidae> on the website. This is a family of small, mostly insectivorous birds and here, with a length of 8-9cm/3.2-3.5in, is the diminutive <Weebill>. It is widespread in drier woodlands, including Mallee, across mainland Australia, but absent from Tasmania and is not found in wetter forests. It has a characteristic stubby horn-coloured bill, pale eyebrow and pale iris, as in the first photo, which distinguishes it from the rather similar <Yellow Thornbill>. This photo, taken in Victoria, shows the browner nominate race found Victoria, New South Wales, southern Queensland and eastern South Australia.



Weebill (Smicrorhynchus brevirostris)

Terriek Terriek, Victoria, 12 April 2009

87672 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The northern race (*flavescens*), second photo, taken on Southern Cape York Peninsula, ranges across the most of the rest of northern and central Australia is much yellower in colour and slightly smaller, making it the smallest bird in Australia.

They are often to be found in very harsh, dry habitats and I am frequently impressed that such small birds are so tough and such great survivors.



Weebill (Sminthopternis brevirostris)

Southern Cape York, Northern Queensland, 27 January 2008

62276 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The third photo, taken in Northwestern Queensland, is also of this race but is, I think, an immature bird, less brightly coloured and a greyish rather than white iris. In southwestern Western Australia, the northern race grades into another race (*occidentalis*) with a greyish face with a rufous tinge, but I haven't photographed it.



Weebill (Sminthopternis brevirostris)

Yelvertoft Thorntonia Road, NW Queensland, 21 July 2008

80513 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Weebills are lively, vocal little birds with a remarkably strong voice so you often hear them before you spot them busily feeding in the foliage of trees. The call is rendered something like 'wee-willey-weet weet' but I was told to remember 'I'm a little Weebill' and that works for me.

Best wishes

Ian

#402 White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike 28 March 2011

Not only colourful birds are beautiful. Take, for example, the monochrome Cuckoo-shrikes, such as the <White-bellied>. 'Dapper' comes to mind, though my dictionary defines it as meaning 'up-to-date in dress and manners', and there is something timeless about the beauty of birds. I find the soft greys of Cuckoo-shrikes quite lovely and the contrasting white and black touches make them completely ready for the most formal occasion.



White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike (Coracina papuensis)

Bluewater, Northeastern Queensland, 22 December 2007

61151 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The best known Cuckoo-shrike in Australia is the very widespread <Black-faced>, but in North Queensland the smaller White-bellied is usually much commoner, though the migrant Black-faced can be numerous in the (winter) dry season. The first photo shows an adult of the eastern Australian race *robusta* perched in a red-flowering Poinciana near my house. The second photo is of a juvenile bird, also in my garden, with the characteristic faintly barred breast and dark smudge behind the eye.



White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike (Coracina papuensis)

Bluewater, Northeastern Queensland, 20 May 2005

15390 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The third photo shows the paler, white-breasted, northern race *hypoleuca*, found in the Northern Territory and northern Western Australia. It merely looks like it's got a broken wing: it's actually in the middle of the wing shuffle performed both by this species and the Black-faced after landing and, apparently, during display. The shuffle is done very deliberately and the birds look as if they are having trouble folding their wings comfortably. The Black-faced is sometimes called the 'Shufflewing', arguably a much better name than 'cuckoo-shrike' as they are not related to either <cuckoos> or <shrikes> and shrikes are meaninglessly unknown in Australia, except as rare vagrants.



White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike (Coracina papuensis)

Edith River, Northern Territory, 14 September 2009

92523 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Interestingly, the White-bellied seems to have some black-faced genes lurking in its genome, as there is an uncommon dark morph of the race robusta, fourth photo, which could easily be confused with the larger Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike, though the dark morph of the White-bellied has black scallops between the breast and the belly. The species are distinguishable by call. Both are quite vocal, with the Black-faced having a musical 'chereer' while the White-bellied is a peevish 'kissik': if it sounds as if it's complaining, it's a White-bellied.



White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike (Coracina papuensis)

Townsville Town Common, Northeastern Queensland, 24 May 2002

10413 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Best wishes,
Ian

#403 Little Egret 7 April 2011

I've recently been updating the Heron and Egret galleries <[Ardeidae](#)> on the website and I noticed that the elegant <[Little Egret](#)> hadn't yet featured as bird of the week. Its one of five species of egret resident in Australia and in breeding plumage it is easily distinguished by the only one to have a pair of head plumes - as in the first photo - in addition to breast and back plumes. The only other egrets globally with these head plumes are the closely related <[Snowy Egret](#)> of the Americas and the possibly conspecific <[Western Reef Egret](#)>, neither of which has been recorded in mainland Australia (there are records of the Western Reef Egret in the Cocos Islands).



Little Egret (Egretta garzetta)

Townsville Town Common, Northeastern Queensland, 3 March 2008

63791 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In non-breeding plumage, it lacks plumes and is most easily separated from the similarly-sized Intermediate Egret by having a dark bill rather than a yellow or orange one. It's best and worst field mark is the yellowish feet - best because this feature is shared only with Snowy and Western Reef Egrets and worst because you usually can't see the colour of the feet in their normal habitat - wetlands - though visible in flight as in the second photo.



Little Egret (Egretta garzetta)

Serpentine Lagoon, Northeastern Queensland, 13 August 2006

37599 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Little Egrets are versatile feeders and often dash frantically around in shallow water, Greenshank-like, in search of small vertebrates. They also feed by stirring up prey with their feet and will also take fish, as in the third photo. This one has just grabbed a fish and is rushing off to avoid the attention of the nearby Royal Spoonbills. Egrets and Spoonbills often try to steal each others food. For examples, have a look at <[Spoonbill chasing Spoonbill](#)> and <[Great Egret chasing Spoonbill](#)>.



Little Egret (Egretta garzetta)

Townsville Town Common, Northeastern Queensland, 27 June 2006

35789 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In Australia, the Little Egret is commonest in northern Australia, but also occurs in smaller numbers in eastern and southeastern Australia, in Tasmania in winter and in central and western Australia when conditions are suitable. It also extends widely through Eurasia and Africa. The Australian race has yellow lores between the bill and the eye, but that of the nominate Eurasian race normally has blue-grey lores as in the fourth photo of one on a beach at the Cape of Good Hope. Globally, Little Egrets are quite variable and their taxonomy is still poorly understood.



Little Egret (Egretta garzetta)

Cape of Good Hope, South Africa, 16 September 2001

04480 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Like other egrets, the global population of Little Egrets suffered severely in the late 19th century because of the fashion trade in plumes. It was this trade in plumes that led to the establishment of the RSPB in 1889, a silver lining if there ever was one, and populations have recovered since.

Best wishes,

Ian

#404 Yellow White-eye 14 April 2011

This week's bird, the <Yellow White-eye> is a mangrove-dwelling relative of the widespread and familiar <Silvereye>. While the Silvereye is well-known in gardens and orchards of all the more densely populated areas of mainland Australia and Tasmania, the Yellow White-eye is confined to coastal areas of northern Western Australia, the Northern Territory and northwestern Queensland with one very isolated population near Ayr south of Townsville. So you have to go out of your way to find it, but it is quite common in suitable habitat within its range.



Yellow White-eye (Gosterops luteus)

Buffalo Creek, Darwin, Northern Territory, 2 September 2009

91136 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The first photo was taken at Buffalo Creek near Darwin and the second near Karumba on the southern end of the Gulf of Carpentaria. Incidentally, I'd be interested to hear from anyone who can identify the pink-flowered shrub* with the White-eye-sized fruit (Yellow White-eyes are 11-12cm/4.3-4.7in). Birds from these regions are yellower than the Western Australian birds and some taxonomists split the species into two sub-species. These yellower northern and eastern birds belong to the nominate race *luteus* while the greener birds in Western Australia belong to the race *balstoni*.



Yellow White-eye (Zosterops lateralis)

Karumba, Gulf of Carpentaria, Queensland, 27 September 2009

93911 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The third photo was taken at Roebuck Bay near the Broome Bird Observatory and belongs to this greener race. The difference is subtle and I imagine you would need to compare birds directly to see the distinction. More striking is how well the plumage matches the colour of the leaves of the mangroves. Like Silvereyes, Yellow White-eyes are very lively and vocal so if they are around, they are not hard to find.



Yellow White-eye (Gosterops luteus)

Roeback Bay, Broome, Western Australia, 6 September 2004

09323 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The apparently endless wet season has finally ended in North Queensland and this week we have all been enjoying lovely sunny days and moonlit nights. I'm making preparations to travel with friends to the Easter campout being organised by the Northern NSW group of Birds Australia in Baradine in the Pilliga Scrub/Forest between Coonabarabran and Narrabri. There are some interesting birds there (I have my sights set on Turquoise Parrot) and I hope I'll be able to share some of them with you.

Best wishes,

Ian

*The plant in question was identified as Calotrope (*Calotropis procera*) - thank you to the respondents - an introduced weed, but popular with native birds such as this [Red-headed Honeyeater in Broome](#).

#405 Turquoise Parrot 25 April 2011

Maybe I was tempting fate when last week I publicly declared my target species of the Pilliga trip to be the [Turquoise Parrot](#), but fate was kind to me when I did the same thing with the [Resplendent Quetzal](#) [#382](#) on the eve of my visit to Costa Rica last year.



Male Turquoise Parrot (Neophema pulchella)

Warrumbungles, New South Wales, 20 April 2011

115606 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In truth I felt I needed a bit of help as I've been wanting to get reasonable photographs of these gorgeous birds since taking a very poor one of a female in the Warrumbungles in New South Wales in pre-digital days almost exactly eleven years ago. To that end I'd visited both the Warrumbungles and the Capertee Valley west of Sydney several times over the years, detoured via Warwick in Southern Queensland and camped the night in Chiltern in Northern Victoria, all places where this species has been reported.



Male Turquoise Parrot (Neophema pulchella)

Warrumbungles, New South Wales, 20 April 2011

115589 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

We went to the Warrumbungles last Wednesday and we were just about to leave the second site -the Woolshed - recommended by a helpful but not optimistic ranger ('they haven't been seen for a month or two') when Ivor, one of my two sharp-eyed companions, spotted a female on exactly the same powerlines as eleven years ago, but this time she flew off towards the creek without waiting to have her photo taken. A careful search of the creek revealed nothing even vaguely turquoise but eventually we found about 20 birds feeding on the grassy track on the far side.



Female Turquoise Parrot (Neophema pulchella)

Warrumbungles, New South Wales, 20 April 2011

115552 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I spent about 20 minutes sidling up to these birds as gradually as possible. The first two photos are of adult male birds, distinguishable by the reddish shouldered patches, which flew up into a shrub as I approached. The second male seems to be eyeing me quizzically as if wondering what I'm up to. The third photo is of a female feeding on the path.

Misión completa, as they said in Costa Rica, and thank you, fate.

Best wishes,

Ian

#406 Eastern Rosella 4 May 2011

In the search for the rare, elusive and/or beautiful it is easy to take the common, familiar and beautiful for granted. This is especially true when something has been used as an advertising icon and an egregious example of this is the <Eastern Rosella>, used as an icon in Australia for Rosella tomato sauce, soup and chutney, first image. No doubt the brilliant red head and breast of the Eastern Rosella played a part in its selection, but the Rosella company is a bit coy on the subject and mentions that Rose and Ella were the daughters of the original owners when in 1895 they bought the trademark from the makers of a eucalyptus oil cure for rheumatism.



When we set up camp in Barradine, New South Wales, for Easter, a pair of Eastern Rosellas were feeding on grass seed close to our camp-site and using the fence of the old Barradine race track to reach the seed heads. The first photo shows the splendid male on the fence wire and the second photo shows the same bird on the grass. Rosellas are a bit shy usually keep their distance unless they have become used to people and I've had difficulty in photographing them, but this pair was fairly obliging.



Eastern Rosella (Platycercus eximius)

Barradine, New South Wales, 19 April 2011

115332 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The specific name *eximius* is Latin for 'extraordinary, excellent, fine, superb' so George Shaw, not George Bernard but keeper of the British Museum, was clearly impressed when he named it carefully in 1792. It takes Mother Nature to combine vivid primary colours without appearing garish, and I particularly like the luscious apple green of the rump, seen better in the second photo, an excellent field mark when you spot the birds flying away, as is often the case. The females are beautiful too, though not quite as bright as the males and the third photo shows the female of the pair walking along the top of the fence and the red colour of the head suffused with greenish-brown.



Eastern Rosella (Platycercus eximius)

Barradine, New South Wales, 19 April 2011

115340 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Eastern Rosella is common within its relatively limited range comprising Victoria, Tasmania (where it is uncommon) most of New South Wales except the arid north-west, and extending into southeastern South Australia and southeastern Queensland. In the rest of coastal and central Queensland it is replaced by the closely related <Pale-headed Rosella> and the <Northern Rosella>, also a close relative, occurs in the Top End of the Northern Territory and northeastern Western Australia.



Eastern Rosella (Platycercus eximius)

Barradine, New South Wales, 19 April 2011

115317 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Rosella taxonomy is confused and there is uncertainty whether these three, or at least the two eastern one, should be treated as a single species as there is some cross-breeding between Eastern and Pale-headed where their ranges overlap in northern New South Wales and southeastern Queensland. At present they are retained as three species but are sometimes collectively called the white-cheeked Rosellas as distinct from the blue-cheeked Rosellas comprising the <Crimson>, <Yellow> and Adelaide Rosellas which are now generally regarded as a single species.

Best wishes,

Ian

#407 Eastern Yellow Robin 10 May 2011

Here's another familiar Australian species that hasn't featured as Bird of the Week: the <Eastern Yellow Robin>. Familiar in mainland eastern Australia I should add, as it's absent from Tasmania and it is replaced by the closely related Western Yellow Robin in southern Western Australia and southwestern South Australia. It's familiar because its colourful and confiding and, with human contact, it gets quite tame in places such as picnic areas in parks.



Eastern Yellow Robin (Eopsaltria australis)

Paluma, Northeastern Queensland, 30 July 2007

57673 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The name Robin derives from the apparent similarity between the males of the several red-breasted Australian species (<Rose>, <Pink>, <Flame>, <Scarlet> and <Red-capped> Robins) and the <European Robin>, well known to the early white settlers. These not close related, however, as the European Robin is an Old World Flycatcher (family <Muscicapidae>) and the Australian, or strictly Australo-Papuan, Robins comprise their own family the <Petroicidae>. There are behavioural similarities too as a result of a similar lifestyle, and the Eastern Yellow Robin often watches patiently from conspicuous perches (including the trunks of trees) scanning the ground for invertebrate prey.



Eastern Yellow Robin (Eopsaltria australis)

Broadwater State Forest, Northeastern Queensland, 21 October 2004

08430 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

There are two races differing mainly in the colour of the rump. The nominate race, ranging from eastern South Australia to central New South Wales has an olive rump, while the northern race (*chrysorrhoa*) has a bright yellow rump, visible in the second photo, and is found from northern New South Wales to northeastern Queensland. Australo-Papuan Robins build beautiful cup-shaped nests and camouflage them by decorating the outside with bark, lichen and grasses, as in the third photo.



Eastern Yellow Robin (Eopsaltria australis)

Broadwater State Forest, Northeastern Queensland, 21 October 2004

08449 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Recent non-avian additions to the website include photos of three species of <Macropods> (Kangaroo family) taken one evening during and after sunset at a waterhole on the recent trip to the Pilliga Forest : <Red-necked Wallaby>, <Eastern Grey Kangaroo> and <Swamp or Black Wallaby>.

Best wishes

Ian

#408 Masked Booby 20 May 2011

We got a good view of a <female Lesser Frigatebird at Lucinda> on Wednesday when we did our regular wader count so I considered this species for bird of the week, forgetting that it had featured in March #399. So here is another spectacular seabird instead: the <Masked Booby>.



Masked Booby (Sula dactylatra)

East Diamond Islet, Coral Sea, Australia, 13 December 2006

45205 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The first photo shows a portrait of a male bird, distinguishable from the female by its yellow bill. That of the female, second photo, has a greenish tinge to it. As you can see from these photos, Boobies are very approachable and the name comes from the Spanish 'bobo' meaning clown or fool as sailors found the birds easy to catch.



Masked Booby (Sula dactylatra)

East Diamond Islet, Coral Sea, Australia, 13 December 2006

45575 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The difference between the sexes is subtle though the female is larger and they are easier to tell apart when seen together, like the pair in the third photo on a beach. Boobies and Gannets are very social and have sophisticated behaviours for display, territorial disputes and fishing so the 'bobo' label was a bit hasty.



Masked Booby (Sula dactylatra)

East Diamond Islet, Coral Sea, Australia, 13 December 2006

45689 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

All these photos were taken at East Diamond Islet, a remote cay on the eastern edge of the Barrier Reef in the Coral Sea Islands Territory, within Australia's territorial boundaries but outside Queensland. This cay is typical of Masked Booby colonies, far offshore in tropical or sub-tropical waters, and the birds fish in deep water and are not normally seen close to the coast.

The range of the Masked Booby is right around the globe and in Australasia there are colonies in northern Western Australia, northeastern Queensland, Lord Howe and Norfolk Islands and the New Zealand Kermadec Islands. The birds at the last three sites have <black rather than yellow eyes> and belong to a different race. Another race in the eastern Pacific with orange bills has recently been split off as a separate species the <Nazca Booby>.



Masked Booby (Sula dactylatra)

East Diamond Islet, Coral Sea, Australia, 13 December 2006

44845 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Masked Boobies nest both on rocky cliffs and flat areas and the female in the fourth photo is sheltering a nestling and simultaneously expressing a verbal protest at being photographed. They usually lay two eggs, but the second is only an insurance policy and the first nestling to hatch will kill its sibling if it also hatches. Juvenile birds, fifth photo, look quite similar to the closely related [Brown Booby](#) but are distinguishable by having a complete white collar which in front forms a white rather than brown upper breast.



Masked Booby (Sula dactylatra)

East Diamond Islet, Coral Sea, Australia, 13 December 2006

45519 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The sixth photo is of a male in flight and shows the black tail that distinguishes it from the <white phase of the Red-footed Booby>. Like all the gannets and other boobies, the Masked feeds by spectacular plunge-dives for fish, all members of the family have air sacs off the bronchi to absorb the impact - the original airbags. The Masked is the largest of the boobies (to 86cm/34in with a wing-span of 1.7m/5.5ft) and its maximum dive height has been estimated at 100m/330ft though it's smaller than the gannets. Gannets can reach 10m/33ft depth just from the dive and then swim down to 20-25m and usually take the target fish on the way back up.



Masked Booby (Sula dactylatra)

East Diamond Islet, Coral Sea, Australia, 13 December 2006

45249 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Best wishes,

Ian

#409 Crimson-crested Woodpecker 29 May 2011

Those of you who have been on the list for a few years might remember from earlier posts that I've led a woodpecker-deprived existence, having lived first in Ireland and since then in Australia. Woody Woodpecker captured my imagination at an early age and I've been fascinated with woodpeckers ever since.



Crimson-crested Woodpecker (Campethiles melanoleucos)

Sani Lodge, Napo Province, Amazonian Ecuador, 10 October 2005

26330 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I was updating the <[woodpecker galleries](#)> on the website and this one made me laugh, so I thought I'd share it with you. In the first photo it looks as if it's staring in guilty shock at the tree and saying "Whoops! (or something stronger) Did I do that?" The second photo follows the same theme with a puzzled "Where did that tree go?" If you can think of better captions, please share them with me at ian@birdway.com.au and I'll publish the best one next week.



Crimson-crested Woodpecker (Campephilus melanoleucos)

Sani Lodge, Amazonian Ecuador, 10 October 2005

26322 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Crimson-crested Woodpecker (*Campephilus melanoleucos*) is 36cm/14in in length and a close relative of the larger (at least 48cm/19in) and legendary, maybe-extinct-maybe-not Ivory-billed Woodpecker of the southern USA (*Campephilus principalis*) about which there was so much excitement in 2004-5. The Crimson-crested is happily quite common with a wide range in northern South America. *Campephilus* incidentally means 'grub loving' as this group of woodpeckers finds the larvae of wood-boring beetles to their liking.



I photographed this Crimson-crested Woodpecker in 2005 from the dug-out canoe in the third photo, when staying at a lodge called Sani on the Rio Napo, a tributary of the Amazon, in eastern Ecuador. The lodge was on an oxbow lake away from the main river and the canoes, being very quiet, were ideal for bird watching though using a heavy (and expensive) 500mm lens in the canoe took some practice, not to mention recklessness.

Ireland happily is no longer a woodpecker-free zone as the Greater-spotted Woodpecker is in the process of colonising the country, after a big increase in the population in Britain, with successful breeding being report in Co. Down since 2005, Co. Wicklow since 2009 and Co. Wexford since 2010. We might have to wait a bit longer, though, for any Asian woodpeckers to come island-hopping across the Wallace line to Australia and eucalyptus trees mightn't suit them.

Best wishes

Ian

#410 Red-billed Tropicbird 6 June 2011

Last November a <[Red-billed Tropicbird](#)> was recorded on <<[Lord Howe Island](#)>>. This is the first Australian record and it is a long way from its closest breeding colonies in the Galapagos. I photographed this species in 2005 at another Ecuadorean site, Isla de la Plata ('Silver Island') so I thought I'd share it with you as

Tropicbirds are among my favourite birds. Lord Howe Island, incidentally, has breeding <Red-tailed Tropicbirds>. Isla de la Plata is often called the poor man's Galapagos as it's a mere 40km from the Ecuadorean coast as can be visited on a day trip for about \$40 and has some of the Galapagos specialties such as the <Blue-footed Booby>.



Red-billed Tropicbird (Phaethon aethereus)

Isla de la Plata, Western Ecuador, 18 October 2005

27642 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Red-billed Tropicbird is easily distinguished from the closely related Red-tailed by its white tail streamers and black barring on the back and wings (first photo). It is the largest of the three species with a body length of about 50cm/20in, tail streamers of at least another 50cm/20in and a wingspan of about 1metre/40in. The two tail streamer feathers are longer in the male and used in aerial display and may also be used as a rudder in flight. They are fragile, often broken (second photo) and are replaced continually.



Red-billed Tropicbird (Phaethon aethereus)

Isla de la Plata, Western Ecuador, 18 October 2005

27635 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The courtship display of the Red-billed Tropicbird starts with a number of birds flying around near the colony which is usually on a rocky cliff. A pair of birds may then separate from the flock and start synchronised aerobatics, as in the third photo.



Red-billed Tropicbird (Phaethon aethereus)

Isla de la Plata, Western Ecuador, 18 October 2005

27623 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This display may lead to a choice of nest site (from the air). Tropicbirds have webbed feet and weak legs and can move only with difficulty on land, so the choice of inaccessible cliff sites is supposed to offer protection from terrestrial predators and allow easy take off.

The Red-billed Tropicbird has a wonderful scientific name *Phaethon aethereus*. No doubt you are familiar with the Greek myth about Phaeton/Phaethon. In Ovid's version (quoted from <<[Wikipedia](#)>>): Phaeton seeks assurance that his mother, <<[Clymenē](#)>>, is telling the truth that his father is the <<[sun god Helios](#)>>. When Phaeton obtains his father's promise to drive the sun chariot as proof, he fails to control it and the Earth is in danger of burning up when Phaeton is killed by a thunderbolt from <<[Zeus](#)>> to prevent further disaster. 'Phaetons'; were the 18th and 19th century version of sports cars/roadsters: two-horse, four-wheeled, door-less, soft-top carriages with one or two seats driven by the owner - no outside seat for a driver.

Aethereus is Latin for ethereal, heavenly, divine, celestial; of the upper atmosphere; aloft; lofty. Great name for a pelagic bird known for its strong flight. The red-tailed only gets a boring, literal *rubricauda*.

Tropicbirds feed by diving for prey, often flying fish and squid, as do gannets and boobies and, like them, have air sacs in the head and neck to absorb the impact of hitting the water. The tropical waters in which they feed have low prey densities so they travel far and when not breeding lead a pelagic existence. They aren't closely

related to gannet and boobies; DNA studies suggest that they have no close relatives and Christidis and Boles (2008) place the three members of the Tropicbird family, the Phaethontidae, in their own order, the Phaethontiformes. The third and smallest species is the White-tailed Tropicbird, best known in Australia as the apricot-coloured morph found on Christmas Island and known locally as the <Golden Bosunbird>.

On the website, I recently changed my policy of not including captive birds under any circumstances and have added photos of a <Malleefowl> and <Little Penguins> in tolerably natural-looking sets.

Best wishes,

Ian

#411 White-headed Pigeon 15 June 2011

I've been preoccupied recently preparing photos for the digital <<Pizzey and Knight Bids of Australia>> so I haven't taken many photos and hadn't decided on this week's bird when I took a break yesterday to put out the garbage. On the way back from the front gate, I spotted an adult male <White-headed Pigeon> feeding on the fruit of a boxwood shrub and I took the long way round to the house to get my camera. The adult White-headed Pigeon was on my wanted list for the digital publication and hasn't featured as a bird of the week, so two problems were solved simultaneously by just taking out the garbage. There's a lesson there somewhere, I'm unsure what, but I do recall another occasion when I photographed <Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos> on a trip to the garbage dump.



White-headed Pigeon (Columba leucocephala)

Bluewater, Northeastern Queensland, 14 June 2011

116045 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I disturbed him from the boxwood, but he flew up into a Poinciana tree near the house (first photo) before retreating into the thicker foliage of what I think is an Black Bean tree (second photo), where he remained for ages.



White-headed Pigeon (Columba leucomela)

Bluewater, Northeastern Queensland, 14 June 2011

116072 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

White-headed Pigeons are large (to 41cm/16in in length) and rather splendid with their red and white faces and slightly iridescent bluish grey wing feathers. Here in North Queensland, they occur usually only in highland rainforest, and this is the first one that I've seen here near the coast, though farther south in southern Queensland and northern New South Wales (their stronghold) they do occur in coastal areas.

The range from Cooktown in the north to about Bermagui on the south coast of NSW but, like other fruit-eating pigeons, they are fairly nomadic and sometimes occur in eastern Victoria. So, I don't know whether this one is yet another refugee from cyclone Yasi or has just wandered down from the Paluma Range looking for food, as other birds do in winter.



White-headed Pigeon (Columba leucomela)

Green Mountain, Southeastern Queensland, 25 February 2006

30187 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The third photo is an immature bird that I photographed some years ago in rainforest near O'Reilly's Lodge in Lamington National Park in southeastern Queensland near the border with NSW. Immature birds have greyish, rather than white heads and breasts and a dark cap. Females are intermediate in colour between the juveniles and the adult male and also have the whitish cheek visible on the juvenile.

Best wishes

Ian

#412 Baillon's Crake 27 June 2011

My apologies for a belated bird of the week. This week's bird is the subject of some excitement at the moment in local birding circles with the reporting of unusual numbers of <Baillon's Crake> at a small wetland at Pentland about 240km southwest of Townsville. So, I and some friends spent the weekend there. to have a look for this elusive species, uncommon in this part of the country.



Baillon's Crake (Porzana pusilla)

Pentland, Northeastern Queensland, 25 June 2011

116700 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Baillon's, with a length of 15-18cm/6-7in is the smallest member of its family [<Rallidae>](#) found in Australia and not much larger than a house sparrow. Members of this species are particularly secretive even by crake standards usually preferring to skulk in reed beds and other aquatic vegetation, but sometimes venture out into the open in dull weather to feed though rarely as freely in sunshine as the ones at Pentland, as in the first photo. This bird is probably a female as HBW (Handbook of Birds of the World, which like many 'handbooks' needs a crane to lift it) reports that females have a rufous patch behind the eye.



Baillon's Crake (Porzana pusilla)

Pentland, Northeastern Queensland, 25 June 2011

116794 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

By that criterion, the bird on the lily pad in the second photo is a male with a completely grey cheek. It is also showing the long, rather jacana-like toes that enable it to walk over aquatic vegetation, both floating and submerged, though they will swim if necessary. They seemed reluctant to fly, but would do so to chase other birds that appeared to be encroaching on their patch.



Baillon's Crake (Porzana pusilla)

Pentland, Northeastern Queensland, 25 June 2011

116822 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The third photo shows a bird snatching an invertebrate, maybe a small spider, off a blade of grass and stretching out its neck to full extent to do so. They would also pluck prey from under the surface and I watched one that appeared to be eating a mollusc. The fourth photo shows one peering intently at the water but its debatable whether it's looking for dinner or, Narcissus-like, admiring its reflection (even if it is a female) while its lily pad sinks unnoticed below the surface - Baillon's Crakes weigh about 35g, a little over an ounce.



Baillon's Crake (Porzana pusilla)

Pentland, Northeastern Queensland, 25 June 2011

116732 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I think the bird in the fifth photo is a juvenile. The iris is brownish rather than red, the legs and bill are browner than in the adults and the underparts are buffish white, rather than grey.



Baillon's Crake (Porzana pusilla)

Pentland, Northeastern Queensland, 25 June 2011

117013 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Although Crakes in general appear reluctant to fly, they can do so well and over long distances, probably at night. They move around according to the availability of water (the wetland at Pentland sometimes dries out completely) and there is some evidence that Baillon's Crakes move north in winter in Australia. It also has a wide distribution throughout Eurasia and Africa and a summer visitor in Europe. A separate race is found in New Zealand, it has been recorded on Macquarie Island, and a closely related species, now extinct, used to occur on Laysan Island between Midway Islands and Hawaii.

Incidentally, the smallest member of the family is the Inaccessible Rail found on Inaccessible Island in the Tristan Da Cunha Group with a length of 13-15.5cm. Furthermore it the smallest flightless bird in the world, but, not having therefore to worry about its waistline, it is, at 40g, heavier than Baillon's Crake.

Best wishes,
Ian

#413 Little Grassbird 3 July 2011

As well as the <Baillon's Crake> #412, Pentland Dam produced another skulker, the <Little Grassbird>, uncommon in North Queensland and usually heard rather than seen - it has a distinctive, mournful three-note whistle.



Little Grassbird (Megaturus gramineus)

Pentland, Northeastern Queensland, 25 June 2011

116755 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I had prior warning of their presence so when a small dark bird - darker than another skulker present in the wetland, the <Australian Reed Warbler> - appeared briefly, I got the camera ready in case it reappeared. It did eventually, and I got couple of quick shots before it disappeared for good.



Little Grassbird (Megalurus gramineus)

Pentland, Northeastern Queensland, 25 June 2011

116752 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Little Grassbird is distributed quite widely in Australia, mainly in the eastern half of the mainland and Tasmania, though it does occur also in southern Western Australia and patchily through the Northern Territory as far as Kununurra across the border in northern Western Australia. Despite the name 'Grassbird', it occurs mainly in dense wetlands, though its only close Australian relative, the <Tawny Grassbird>, is more flexible in its habitats.

Conventionally, the Grassbirds have been regarded as one of the Old World Warblers, family <Sylviidae>, though most bird taxonomists now accept that this family is a rather heterogeneous collection. Christidis & Boles, 2008, split it into a number of separate families and put the Grassbirds in a new one, the Megaluridae (2018, now the <Locustellidae>) that also includes the Australian Songlarks and the Spinifexbird, while the Reed-Warblers also got their own family, the <Acrocephalidae>.

Best wishes,
Ian

#414 Comb-crested Jacana 11 July 2011

Here's another surprising omission from the bird of the week list: the <Comb-crested Jacana> - at least I can't find any record of one going back to at least November

2004. Surprising for a variety of reasons including they're a characteristic bird of wetlands of northern Australia, they're fascinating birds and they are very photogenic, particular when they pose, as they often seem to, alongside waterlilies like the one in the first photo.



Comb-crested Jacana (Iridoparra gallinacea)

Macknade Wetland, Northeastern Queensland, 30 June 2010

105783 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Jacanas are often called Lily-trotters or Lotusbirds, reflecting their ability to walk around on aquatic vegetation, or rather live on it as they do almost everything on floating vegetation including nesting. They are adapted to do this with their extraordinarily long toes which spread their weight over a large area. The second photo shows this better than the first.



Comb-crested Jacana (Irediparra gallinacea)

Fogg Dam, Northern Territory, 4 September 2009

91375 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It must be wonderful to walk on water but such large feet must get in the way at times, when mating for example, and the third photo probably proves the point.



Comb-crested Jacana (Irediparra gallinacea)

Ross River, Townsville, Northeastern Queensland, 19 November 2003

03634 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Remember that I said that they do almost everything on floating vegetation. The male is struggling to keep his balance and the female looks in danger of drowning. Which brings us to another fact: the males are much smaller than the females, which seems sensible in the circumstances. I had assumed that the reason for this was another interesting fact: Jacanas have a change in sex roles and the female displays to the male while the male incubates the eggs and looks after the young after hatching. The fourth photos shows 4 Jacana chicks very reluctantly following Dad (out of the picture) across an open area of water.



Comb-crested Jacana (Irediparra gallinacea)

Tyto Wetlands, Ingham, Northeastern Queensland, 14 April 2010

99923 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The young, like those of plovers and typical waders, show considerable independence soon after hatching and quickly learn to look after themselves, like the juvenile bird in the fifth photo.



Comb-crested Jacana (Irediparra gallinacea)

Pentland Dam, Northeastern Queensland, 25 June 2011

116591 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Comb-crested Jacana has a tropical and sub-tropical distribution in Australia and is found from the Kimberley region of Western Australia through the top-end of the Northern Territory, northern and eastern Queensland as far south as the Hunter River in New South Wales. It is one of a small family of 8 species, the <[Jacanidae](#)>, found in warmer regions around the world. Their closest relatives are the 3 species of Painted Snipe, the <[Rostratulidae](#)> and, with them, are included in the order Charadriiformes which contains various other wading families such as the Plovers <[Charadriidae](#)> and the typical waders <[Scolopacidae](#)>.

Best wishes

Ian

#415 Tiger Shrike 21 July 2011

The common names of many Australian birds reflect their apparent similarity to European birds, even if they are not closely related, for example Robins, Wrens of various sorts (Fairwrens, Scrubwrens) and Treecreepers. Some names are hybrid, such as Cuckoo-shrike, Shrike-thrush and Shrike-tit, meaning 'looking like something between the two types'. That's fine for Europeans and well-travelled birders who know what these things look like, but some, particularly real shrikes, are almost completely unknown in Australia and the use of these names as qualifiers is of

questionable value for the locals. So, I thought it might be interesting to have a look at a real shrike and throw some light on the use of its name in Australian birds.



Tiger Shrike (Lanius tigrinus)

Poslim, Perak, Malaysia, 18 October 2001

06551 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Shrikes, family <Laniidae> 30 species, are widespread through Eurasia and Africa; a couple of species occur in North America but they are unknown in South America. Two Asian Shrikes, the <Tiger> and the <Brown>, have made it to the Australian list as rare vagrants to Christmas Island, though the first Australian record of a Tiger Shrike was a road-killed one found near the port of Fremantle in Western Australia, raising the possibility of being ship-assisted (a black mark for a 'real' vagrant). The bird in the these two photographs was photographed in Malaysia.



Tiger Shrike (Lanius tigrinus)

Poslim, Perak, Malaysia, 18 October 2001

06553 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

You'll notice the hooked bill, characteristic of all Shrikes, and an adaption to their predatory way of life. Shrikes capture both invertebrates and - unusually for song-birds - small vertebrates up to the size of small mammals and birds by waiting on a conspicuous perch for something to come within striking distance. They often store their prey on shrubs or impale them on thorns. Shrikes are small for raptors: the Tiger Shrike is 18cm/7in in length and the larger ones such as the <Southern Grey> and <Long-tailed> reach only 26cm/10in and 28cm/11in, and a lot of that is tail.

So, for Australian bird names, read 'hook-billed' for 'shrike'. The resemblance is mainly physical: <Cuckoo-shrikes> and <Shrike-thrushes> forage for insects and other invertebrates in the foliage of trees and the bills of <Shrike-tits> are adapted to prising open the bark of trees in search of invertebrates. For behavioural similarities, the also hook-billed <Butcherbirds> fit the bill, pun unintended but appropriate, as they also prey on small vertebrates and use bushes as larders. It's a wonder that they didn't get called Magpie-shrikes. Now, 'magpie', there's another over-used name . . .

Best wishes

Ian

#416 Double-eyed Fig-Parrot 2 August 2011

I wonder why miniature things are so endearing. Describing something as 'the smallest' immediately attracts attention, so here is the smallest parrot in Australia - with one of the longest and strangest names - the <Double-eyed Fig-Parrot>. Strictly speaking the Cape York race of this species (*marshalli*) is the smallest with a length of 13cm/5in - shorter than a house sparrow. More accessible and nearly as small (14cm) is the race found in northeastern Queensland (*macleayana*), quite common around Cairns and on the Atherton Tableland, where the first photo was taken.



Double-eyed Fig-Parrot (Cyclopsitta diophthalma)

Yungaburra, Northeastern Queensland, 30 November 2002

14174 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The races and genders are distinguishable by different facial patterns. This is a male *macleayana* and has a red forehead and cheek separated by a sky-blue patch and an indigo fringe to the red cheek patch. The second photo is also a male *macleayana* but nearly hidden in the foliage; this is typical and these birds can be hard to see as they creep around mouse-like through fruiting trees in rainforest.



Double-eyed Fig-Parrot (Cyclopsitta diophthalma)

Yungaburra, Northeastern Queensland, 30 November 2002

14159 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The female and juvenile *macleayana* are similar to the male but lacks the red cheek patch, as in the two birds in the third photo.



Double-eyed Fig-Parrot (Cyclopsitta diophthalma)

Mount Lewis, Northeastern Queensland, 25 January 2009

84651 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The fourth photo shows a female of the Cape York race, *marshalli*, with no red at all. I lack a photo of the male *marshalli* but it is rather similar to the male *macleayana* except that the red forehead and cheek patches are contiguous.



Double-eyed Fig-Parrot (Cyclopsitta diophthalma)

Lockhart River, Cape York, Northern Queensland, 29 December 2003

04470 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The third and remaining Australian race, *coxeni*, is the largest (16cm) and rarest - classified as endangered - and occurs in a few river valleys between Maryborough in southeast Queensland and the Macleay River in northern New South Wales. Both sexes apparently have mainly blue foreheads and small reddish cheek patches.

These three races were originally treated as separate species and known as Macleay's or Red-browed, Coxen's or Blue-browed and Marshall's Fig-Parrots. Later they and five races in Papua New Guinea were lumped into a single species and acquired the common name of the nominate Double-eyed Fig-Parrot of PNG (*Cyclopsitta diophthalma diophthalma*). This has a dark spot near each eye, giving it its double-eyed appearance, but the name is not descriptive of the races that lack the dark spot, i.e. the three Australian races. Oh well, they got the fig bit right.

Best wishes

Ian

#417 Campbell/Black-browed Albatross 14 August 2011

Another belated bird of the week, so this time you get two species, or maybe only one as we'll see shortly. Welcome, in a nutshell, to the glory of Albatrosses and the nightmare of bird taxonomy, where I've been lately trying to help sort out the final bird list for the digital Pizzey and Knight.



Campbell Albatross (*Thalassarche (melanophrys) impavida*)

Off Port Fairy, Victoria, 22 July 2001

03541 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Let's start by comparing the bird in photo #1 with the one in #2, taken within 6 minutes of each another on a pelagic bird-watching trip from Port Fairy in southern Victoria on 22 July 2001. In those days, when life was simple, we called them both Black-browed Albatrosses. I mention the date as only 5 days later a paper was accepted for publication by the Journal of Molecular Biology which supported the splitting of this species into at least two, the <Black-browed Albatross> (*Thalassarche melanophrys*) which nests in the South Atlantic and Indian Oceans and the <Campbell Albatross> (*Thalassarche impavida*), endemic to Campbell Island south of New Zealand.



Black-browed Albatross (*Thalassarche melanophrys melanophrys*)

Off Port Fairy, Victoria, 22 July 2001

03529 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Definitely a spot the difference puzzle and by now you have found the two features visible in birds not in flight: the adult Campbell Island Albatross has a more strongly marked brow, which makes it look crosser, and a pale iris, which, I think, makes it look slightly manic like the Blue-winged Kookaburra. The underwing patterns are different too. The Campbell is much darker with only a faint central band of white as in photo #3, taken off Wollongong in New South Wales.



Campbell Albatross (*Thalassarche (melanophrys) impavida*)

Off Wollongong, New South Wales, 25 November 2006

44123 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

At even a short distance, the colour of the iris is hard to see, so the underwing pattern is a better field mark for birds in flight, as in the sub-adult Campbell Albatross in photo #4.



Campbell Albatross (*Thalassarche melanophrys* *impavida*)

Off Wollongong, New South Wales, 25 November 2006

44095 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Even in distant views, like photo #5, the more extensive white of the underwing of the Black-browed Albatross is tolerably obvious.



So far so good, but you may have noticed that I used the qualifier 'adult'. Have a look at the juvenile in photo #6 (juveniles have greyish bills).



Black-browed / Campbell Albatross (*Thalassarche (melanophris) melanophris / impavida*)
Off Wollongong, New South Wales, 25 November 2006 43798 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

it has a dark iris and a dark underwing pattern, which makes it neither, and the juveniles of the two types are probably indistinguishable in the field. What a shame.

I've given the juvenile the scientific name of *Thalassarche (melanophris) melanophris/impavada* to indicate the taxonomic confusion that exists*. The problem is that Christidis & Boles (2008) - accepted by most Australian birders and the Birds Australia Rarities Committee as the authority on the The Australian List - don't recognise the albatross splits (it gets worse with Wandering and Shy Albatrosses) but Birdlife International (and Pizzey and Knight) do. So, there are either 10 or 19 Albatross species on the Australian list, depending on your religious affiliation.

Our juvenile is either a Black-browed *T. melanophris melanophris* or a Black-browed *T. melanophris impavida* if you follow C&B or a Black-browed *T. melanophrys* or a Campbell *T. impavida* if you follow Birdlife International. The different spellings *melanophris* and *melanophrys* aren't typos. Temminck originally spelt it with an 'i' but the taxonomists Jouanin and Mougins, Latin scholars obviously, though Temminck couldn't spell and it should be a 'y' and that has been adopted by Birdlife International. C&B uphold the rule that says the original spelling should stand, and stick to the 'i'.

Welcome to the nit-picking world of bird taxonomy. Does it matter? It does if you want to know how many birds are on your list and it matters if you are a conservationist. Governments are much more willing to provide funds and resources to protect threatened species than they are for sub-species and many of the

Albatross types, or taxons, are threatened by long-line fishing. Linnaeus set out in the 18th Century to impose order on a chaotic scientific world with his binomial naming scheme, long before Darwin's Origin of Species. It's probably just as well he's not around to see the result.

Next week I'm going to Cape York to chase a few species missing from the wanted list for the digital Pizzey and Knight (Trumpet Manucode, Tropical Scrubwren, White-lined and Green-backed Honeyeater). Wish me luck as I'd love to produce the Manucode, one of the 4 species of bird of paradise found in Australia, as a bird of the week.

Best wishes

Ian

*This was the state of affairs in 2011. Now (2018), the IOC, BirdLife International, BirdLife Australia and HBW all agree on the split into two species and the spelling of *melanophris* with an 'i'!

#418 Victoria's Riflebird 22 August 2011

I'm on my way to Iron Range and this may be my last internet connection, so here is a hasty posting which I'll keep brief. In keeping with the spirit of the search for the Trumpet Manucode, here is one of the other 3 Australian Birds of Paradise, the [<Victoria's Riflebird>](#), which is found in the Wet Tropics between Cooktown and Townsville. The males, as in photo 1, are quite spectacular with iridescent purplish black plumage highlighted with blue and a yellow gape as the final touch. The feathers have a satiny texture which rustles audibly in flight like an elaborate ball gown.



Victoria's Riflebird (Ptiloris victoriae)

Paluma, Northeastern Queensland, 8 July 2003

01226 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The females look quite different, and are beautiful in a more sober style as in the second photo.



Victoria's Riflebird (Ptiloris victoriae)

Paluma, Northeastern Queensland, 4 March 2011

114961 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The bird in the third photo is a young male, like the female but just beginning to acquire the hummingbird-like reflective plumage on the head.



Victoria's Riflebird (Ptiloris victoriae)

Paluma, Northeastern Queensland, 4 July 2005

16961 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

As you'd expect from a bird of paradise, the promiscuous male has a spectacular display in which curves the wings in a circle around the head and moves them back and forward like a fan. Unfortunately, I haven't photographed this yet. Conforming to the inverse avian correlation between beauty in appearance and voice, the Riflebird, as suggested by its name, has a harsh call that would shatter crystal at a hundred yards and is often the first indication that these birds are present.

Like many fruit-eating birds, they are hard to spot in the foliage of trees but they come readily to houses if fruit is left out for them. All these photos were taken in such circumstances around Paluma north of Townsville and the birds are quite common in suitable habitat.

Unlike the Riflebirds, and again as indicated by the name, the Trumpet Manucode has a spectacular and strange call, which I'll be listening for carefully if I get to Iron Range in a day or two.

Best wishes

Ian

#419 Trumpet Manucode 4 September 2011

I'm back home now after the 2 week trip to Cape York and happy to be able to provide the hoped-for Bird of Paradise, the <Trumpet Manucode>, as bird of the week. Your collective moral/spiritual support clearly worked again, as it did with <Snowy Owl> in Alaska 3 years ago and <Resplendent Quetzal> #382 in Costa Rica last year, so thank you very much. A bit of persistence probably helped too as Trumpet Manucodes are easy to hear but notoriously difficult to see, and this was my third visit to Iron Range/Lockhart River without getting more than distance glimpses in the thick foliage of the rainforest.



Trumpet Manucode (Manucodia keraudrenii)

Lockhart River, Cape York Peninsula, Northern Queensland, 30 August 2011

121093 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The first photo shows the crest and neck plumes that are erected in an apparently spectacular display. Although the males were calling, the breeding season doesn't start until October so I didn't see any display, though in the second photo the crest plumes are erect as the bird reaches for a fig.



Trumpet Manucode (Manucodia kerandrenii)

Lockhart River, Cape York Peninsula, Northern Queensland, 30 August 2011

121090 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Manucodes are 28-32cm/11-13in in length and the sexes are similar, though the females have duller plumage and orange rather than red eyes. This very tall tree, one of few that I found in fruit, was popular with other fruit-eaters such as <[Green Orioles](#)>, <[Barred Cuckoo-shrikes](#)> and <[Metallic Starlings](#)>. The Manucode seemed to have a rather proprietorial attitude to it and would sweep in majestically, making the other birds scatter.

Trumpet Manucodes have a long curved windpipe under the skin of the breast, which gives a wonderfully resonant quality to its trumpet call, rendered as 'growng' which carries a long way and can be attributed a mocking quality when you can't find the bird! Their other main call is a gurgling 'owwgk' made when inhaling through the windpipe.

The Trumpet Manucode also occurs in New Guinea, where there are 4 other species of Manucode, most of which are illustrated here in the <<[Australian Museum](#)>>. The name Manucode is derived from the Malay 'manuk dewata' meaning "bird of the gods" so a parallel with the divine nature of the Resplendent Quetzal is easy to draw.

The rest of the trip went smoothly and I also got photos of the other species on my short list - Tropical Scrubwren, Green-backed and White-streaked Honeyeaters - and a few others besides, which I'll be sharing with you in the coming weeks.

Best wishes

Ian

#420 White-streaked Honeyeater 23 September 2011

Of the 4 species at the top of my wanted list on the trip to Iron Range, this one, the <White-streaked Honeyeater>, took the most effort to find and I found it only at the last possible location on the way home. Many Honeyeaters, including this one, are nomadic in search of flowering shrubs and trees so visiting a known site is no guarantee of success.



White-streaked Honeyeater (Trichodere cockerelli)

Wenlock River, Cape York Peninsula, Northern Queensland, 31 August 2011

121230 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The White-streaked Honeyeater occurs only on Cape York Peninsula, north of about Cooktown. So, when I left Daintree village, rather than go the usual route via Julatten, I headed north through Cape Tribulation to Cooktown along the 4WD Bloomfield track, spent a couple of nights near Cooktown and then drove to Laura along Battlecamp Road to join the main Peninsula Development Road. Apart from the attraction of a route I hadn't travelled on before, both White-streaked Honeyeaters and Tropical Scrubwrens had been seen in July at a couple of river crossings along the way. Near Cooktown, I did a glimpse and an <unflattering rear-view shot> of the southern race (*dubius*) of the Tropical Scrubwren but the Honeyeaters seemed to have moved on.



White-streaked Honeyeater (Trichodere cockerelli)

Wenlock River, Cape York Peninsula, Northern Queensland, 31 August 2011

121265 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Their preferred habitats are heathland, open woodland and riverine forest so they don't occur in the rainforest at Iron Range. A usually reliable site for them is the heathland at Tozer's Gap on the way in but this time an orange grevillea was flowering everywhere in abundance, so the birds could have been anywhere. Happily, I caught up with some friends of mine who had just seen the honeyeater in paperbarks and bottlebrushes at the Wenlock River crossing on the same road. This is a 4 or 5 hour round trip from Iron Range, so I decided to risk waiting until my final departure and then I stopped for lunch at the crossing.



White-streaked Honeyeater (Trichodere cockerelli)

Wenlock River, Cape York Peninsula, Northern Queensland, 31 August 2011

121247 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

When I got there, the paperbarks had finished flowering but the bottlebrushes were still putting on a fine display. Even so, it took some diligent searching before I finally found a couple of White-streaked among the commoner Honeyeaters, mainly <Dusky> and <Graceful>. They seemed shy and preferred to remain hidden in the foliage, so I sat on a sandy bank in the river until they showed themselves. They are unusual honeyeaters with no close relatives and the sole member of the genus *Trichodere* (a 'monotypic' genus). 'Trich' comes from the Greek word for 'hair' and refers, as does 'white-streaked' to the bristle-like feathers on the breast (cf *Trichoglossus* - 'hairy tongue' - referring to the brush-like, nectar-licking tongues of Rainbow Lorikeets). Adults have yellow lines below the eye, a yellow ear tuft and a blue gape (photos 1 and 2). They also have yellow wings and tail: easier to see in the third photo of a juvenile which lacks the blue gape and has only a single yellow feather on the head but is beginning to develop the bristle-like breast feathers, also characteristic of adults.



In the second photo, the nest-like material below the bird is flood debris - a clear reminder that this part of the Cape York Peninsula is accessible by road only in the dry-season. The photo below shows the crossing at Wenlock River.

Misión completa, as my guide told me when we found the Resplendent Quetzals in Costa Rica.

Best wishes

Ian

#421 Tropical Scrubwren 30 September 2011

Here's another of my target species on the Cape York trip. It comes from the less spectacular end of the spectrum, far away from the Birds of Paradise, but I'm fond of Scrubwrens in general. They are plucky, vocal little birds with lots of character, so colourful plumage isn't everything.



Tropical Scrubwren (Sericornis boeckii)

Lockhart River, Cape York, Northern Queensland, 28 August 2011

120875 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The one in the first photo is a female, distinguishable from the male by a plainer face pattern with lores - the bit between the eye and the bill - much the same colour as the rest of the head. The second photo shows a male and you can see the patterning on the face with dark lores with pale highlights above and below them.



Tropical Scrubwren (Sericornis beccarii)

Lockhart River, Cape York, Northern Queensland, 30 August 2011

121154 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The <Tropical Scrubwren> look like a cross between the <Large-billed Scrubwren> and the <White-browed>. It has a long, slightly-upwards pointing bill like the Large-billed but the wing pattern with dark, white-tipped wing-coverts look much more like those of the White-browed (the Large-billed has very plain plumage overall including the wings). In fact, there has been some doubt whether it's a separate species from the Large-billed, but most authorities now accept that it is.

In Australia it occurs only on Cape York Peninsula from Cooktown northwards. Within its restricted range, it's quite common and I found several pairs without much difficulty as they are quite vocal. The birds do, however, flit incessantly and almost invisibly through the dense undergrowth and foliage of the rainforest and are not easy to see well or photograph. They have reddish irises, but in the poor light of the rainforest, their pupils are very dilated and look black in most of the photos that I took. This species is widespread in PNG, where it is called Beccari's Scrubwren.

Best wishes

Ian

#422 Spotless Crake 11 October 2011

There's no doubt as to what is currently the Bird of the Week in Townsville: the discovery of this <Spotless Crake> in a small patch of reedy grass beside Ross

River just below Aplin's Weir is causing great excitement. They're rare here and the birder who circulated the news, thank you Marlene, could find only five records in Townsville since 1994, the last one being in 2000. Not having photographed one before, I got up at 5:40am this morning to have a second attempt at photographing it (it wasn't very cooperative yesterday afternoon) and there was general agreement that this was a noteworthy event as I'm famously not an early riser.



Spotless Crane (Porzana tabuensis)

Ross River, Townsville, Northeastern Queensland, 11 October 2011

121555 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In fact, the Crane wasn't very cooperative this morning either, making only 3 brief appearances between 6:30 and 9:00am, really brief with the longest period between the first and last photo in a session being 6 seconds. It was definitely a question of using a tripod mounted camera focussed on its chosen spot. If you compare the first and second photos, taken 40 minutes apart, and look for the semicircular reed stem sticking out of the water near its bill, you'll see that it was in almost exactly the same place on both occasions.



Spotless Crane (Porzana tabuensis)

Ross River, Townsville, Northeastern Queensland, 11 October 2011

121506 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

If you look in the background, you can see an out-of-focus and much larger <Buff-banded Rail> that was around at the same time, but completely overshadowed by its rarer cousin. The rail was much more forthcoming, and regularly paraded in full view to have its photo taken (at the risk of the photographer missing an appearance by the real star) as in the third photo.



Buff-banded Rail (Gallirallus philippensis)

Ross River, Townsville, Northeastern Queensland, 11 October 2011

121542 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

For comparison Spotless Crakes are 17-20cm/6.7-8in in length, while Buff-banded Rails are 28-33cm/11-13in. The names 'crake' and 'rail' are used taxonomically somewhat indiscriminately for these small secretive members of the <[Rallidae](#)>. For example, the Hawaiian and St Helena Rails belong to the same genus as most of the Australian Crakes (*Porzana*).

Still on names, it's very unusual for birds to be named after features they lack, such as spots. In the Birdlife International list of birds of the world, about 10,000 species, I could find only 9 that are something-less: two are crestless, three are flightless, two are spotless and, prizewinner for strange names, the Northern and Southern Beardless Tyrannulets. I didn't count <[Restless Flycatcher](#)> and the other spotless is the <[Spotless Starling](#)>.

Best wishes

Ian

#423 Red-kneed Dotterel 17 October 2011

I'd chosen this for last week's bird until the excitement over the <[Spotless Crake](#)> on Ross River pushed it into the background. Some would argue that the <[Red-kneed Dotterel](#)> is much more beautiful - and it is also uncommon in Townsville - but it lacks

the mystique of habitual lurkers like crakes that grant audiences only as a special privilege.



Red-kneed Dotterel (Erythrogonys cinctus)

Bowra, Cunnamulla, Southwestern Queensland, 6 November 2008

82792 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Red-kneed Dotterels live almost exclusively near fresh water and are rarely seen in tidal areas. The bird in the first photo was wading at sunset in the shallows of a tranquil pond near a bore at <<[Bowra, an AWC reserve](#)>> near Cunnamulla in Southwestern Queensland. It was a lovely evening, and I was sitting in a camping chair with camera and tripod and mainly watching parrots and cockatoos coming in to drink: birding in style.



Red-kneed Dotterel (Erythrogonyx cinereus)

Werribee, Victoria, 4 August 2001

03796 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The close-up, second photo was photographed at Melbourne Water's euphemistically called Western Treatment Plant near Werribee on the shores of Port Phillip Bay, also a famous birding spot but not as pleasant for camping as Bowra. Red-kneed Dotterels (actually red-ankled) are small plovers, length 17-19cm/7-8in, not closely related to other ones such as the [Black-fronted Dotterel](#): both are members of monotypic genera - containing only one species. Recent DNA studies have shown that the Red-kneed shows closer affinity to Lapwings than other plovers, which a certain physical resemblance supports, allowing for small size, a lack of wattles and better manners.



Red-kneed Dotterel (Erythrogonyx cinereus)

Birdsville, Southwestern Queensland, 19 September 2006

42300 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Red-kneed Dotterels are adaptable and occur widely through the more arid regions of Australia, apart from deserts. The one in the third photo is a young bird hatched beside a small wetland near Birdsville produced by an overflow from the local geothermal power station that makes electricity from almost boiling water (98°C) from the Great Artesian Basin.

Best wishes

Ian

#424 Black-tailed Treecreeper 28 October 2011

I hope you like albatrosses and penguins as I leave in less than 2 weeks for a boat-trip to the so-called Sub-Antarctic island south of New Zealand and Australia and seabirds will, I hope, dominate the bird of the week for some time to come. In the meantime, here is a real landlubber, the [Black-tailed Treecreeper](#), from northwestern Australia. It's range extends from northwestern Queensland (Cloncurry district) through the Top End of the Northern Territory to the Kimberley region of northern Western Australia, with an isolated population of a paler race slightly farther south in the Pilbara region.



Black-tailed Treecreeper (Climacteris melaneura)

Nourlangie Rock, Kakadu, Northern Territory, 9 September 2009

92055 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This bird is a male with a black throat with white streaks and the photo shows well the huge rear claws that it uses to climb trees. The photo also shows that <Australo-Papuan Treecreepers> (Climacteridae) usually don't rely on their tails as a prop, unlike the unrelated Northern Hemisphere Treecreepers <Certhiidae> and Woodpeckers <Picidae>. This photo was taken in tropical forest in Kakadu but this species also occurs in much more arid country with only scattered trees and it will feed on the ground, as in the second photo, taken at McNamara's Road between Mount Isa and Camooweal. This bird is also a male: females have pale throats, but I haven't got a good photo of one.



Black-tailed Treecreeper (Climacteris melanura)

McNamara's Road, Mt Isa - Camooweal, Northwestern Queensland, 29 July 2008

81102 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The main ground cover here is a prickly grass usually called spinifex (*Triodia*) and this site, third photo, is famous for its <Carpentarian Grasswrens>, but I remember it better for a hard night's camping with a punctured airbed on this fourth-failed and final foray here in search of these elusive grasswrens - final because I was shown the grasswrens at another site two days later by Brian Venables who has much better hearing than I have!



Spinifex Country: McNamaras Road, between Mt Isa and Camooweal

Best wishes

Ian

#425 NZ/Australasian Shoveler 12 November 2011

This is really just a token bird of the week as an apology for being late, having been busy preparing, packing and travelling. I'm now on the South Island of New Zealand and surrounded by introduced birds such as <[Eurasian Chaffinches](#)> and <[Blackbirds](#)>. I had a look for Black Stilt yesterday without success so here's a male New Zealand Shoveler instead. At least that's what they're called here, even though they are the same species as the <[Australasian Shoveler](#)>. What ever, they're gorgeous ducks.



Australasian Shoveler (Anas rhynchos)

Lake Tekapo, South Island, New Zealand, 11 October 2011

121774 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I'm going to have another try at the Black Stilt today so wish me luck: your collective goodwill has worked in the past! After that, I plan to head south towards Fiordland to see what I can find there.

Best wishes

Ian

#426 Black Stilt 15 November 2011

You've done it again! Your collective goodwill and spiritual energy have provided yet another special, this time very special bird, the critically endangered and recently saved from extinction <Black Stilt>. I did had to do a little work as well to find a couple in their favoured habitat of often inaccessible, so-called braided rivers of the South Island. At the second potential site, see photo, the task seemed impossible - that's all river bed between the foreground and the mountains - and I almost gave up.



Tasman River, South Island, New Zealand

The third site wasn't any better, but the fourth and last was a bridge over another river, the Ahuriri, and you could have knocked me over with a feather when, having just stepped onto the bridge, I spotted two Black Stilts feeding a couple of hundred meters away close to the river bank.



Black Stilt (Himantopus novaeseelandiae)

Ahuriri River, Waitaki Valley, South Island, New Zealand, 12 November 2011

133611 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

One flew away when I approached but the other was much more cooperative and continued feeding.



Black Stilt (Himantopus novaeseelandiae)

Ahuriri River, Waitaki Valley, South Island, New Zealand, 12 November 2011

133613 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Eventually it flew off too, but it landed not far away, close to a breeding colony of 3 or 4 pairs of Black-fronted Terns, another species on my wanted list.



Black Stilt (Himantopus novaeseelandiae)

Ahuriri River, Waitaki Valley, South Island, New Zealand, 12 November 2011

133633 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It stayed for a little while longer, until the terns chased it off. If you look carefully in the last photo, you can see a coloured band on the right leg and bird is presumably one of the captive-bred and released birds.



Black Stilt (Himantopus novaeseelandiae)

Ahuriri River, Waitaki Valley, South Island, New Zealand, 12 November 2011

133641 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The population of Black Stilts in the wild reached a low of 23 adults in 1981 when the program started, making it the rarest wading bird in the world. There are now probably 200 birds in the wild and the program continues. Lets keep our fingers crossed!

I've had a great time so far in New Zealand and yesterday I went on a successful boat trip on Milford Sound in lovely weather for another wanted species, another potential bird of the week. I'm now on my way back to Christchurch to return my splendid campervan - I shall be reluctant to return it.

Best wishes

Ian

#427 Yellow-eyed Penguin 18 November 2011

I had intended the <[Fiordland Penguin](#)> at Milford Sound to be the next bird of the week, but since then I have photographed the unusual and rarer <[Yellow-eyed Penguin](#)> at the well-known colony on the Otago Peninsula near Dunedin and chosen it instead.



Yellow-eyed Penguin (Megadyptes antipodes)

Otago Peninsula, South Island, New Zealand, 15 November 2011

122506 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I went there in the evening as this is the time when the fishing member of the breeding pairs returns to relieve the incubating or baby-sitting member. The bird in the first photo is an adult that has just returned to the colony. The adults are distinguishable by having the yellow band joining the eyes around the nape of the head.



Yellow-eyed Penguin (Megadyptes antipodes)

Otago Peninsula, New Zealand, 15 November 2011

122595 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The bird in the second photo is another adult. Yellow-eyed Penguins are quite large, up to 79cm/31in in length and weighing up to 8kg. The males are larger than the females and penguins in general have heavy bones by bird standards to help them dive. When the pairs are reunited they typically perform mutual preening as in the third photo.



Yellow-eyed Penguin (Megadyptes antipodes)

Otago Peninsula, New Zealand, 15 November 2011

122630 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The total population of the species is about 2,000 pairs, mainly on Auckland and Campbell Islands, with about 150 pairs on Stewart Island and about 500 on the South Island. It has suffered from loss of coastal forest and still suffers from predation by introduced mammals such as feral cats. It is classified as endangered, but the population has been relatively stable over the last 30 years.



Yellow-eyed Penguin (Megadyptes antipodes)

Otago Peninsula, South Island, New Zealand, 15 November 2011

122587 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The bird in the fourth photo is a juvenile (they don't breed until they are 3 or 4 years old) and lacks the yellow band on the back of the head.

More than 20 years ago, when on Stewart Island, I booked to go on a boat trip to an island that had both Yellow-eyed Penguins and Wekas, a large flightless rail. The weather was so bad that the trip was cancelled and both these species had represented unfinished business. On this trip I encountered <Wekas> at Milford Sound.

I'm in Dunedin for a second time now, having needed to drive to Christchurch to return the camper and then flown back. This produced a strangely disorientating feeling of déjà-vu, as you quite reasonably expect to end up somewhere else after a flight, not where you've just been the day before. I have met up with my three travelling companions from Victoria and we are all excited at the prospect of sailing for the Sub-Antarctic Islands tomorrow. So, don't expect another bird of the week or any communication for that matter until we reach Hobart where we are due on 1 December. I hope that by then I'll have many more photos to share with you.

Best wishes

Ian

#428 Light-mantled Albatross 1 December 2011

We arrived in Hobart today at the end of successful visit to the Sub-antarctic Islands between New Zealand and Australia. We had a lot of very rough weather in the Southern Ocean but the weather was kinder to us at the various destinations and we managed make all the planned landings (Auckland Islands, Campbell and Macquarie Islands) and view the Snares from the zodiacs (where actual landings are not permitted). I managed to photograph most of the species on my target list and the highlight for most of us was Macquarie Island and its four nesting species of penguin.



Light-mantled Albatross (Phoebastria palpebrata)

Enderby Island, Auckland Islands, New Zealand, 21 November 2011

124430 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

As the last Blrd of the Week #427 was the <Yellow-eyed Penguin>, I've chosen an albatross, the <Light-mantled (Sooty) Albatross>, for this week and will return to penguins later. This was the Albatross that I most wanted to see and also very popular with everyone else. My interest in it had been aroused when I'd heard it likened to a Siamese cat, a seal point in particular. The comparison is apt given the chocolate brown head and latte-coloured body, and the silky texture of the plumage is quite feline in appearance. The white partial eye-ring is striking and sets off the dark head colour very well.



Light-mantled Albatross (Phoebastria palpebrata)

Macquarie Island, Tasmania, Australia, 26 November 2011

125407 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

We saw Light-mantled Albatrosses quite frequently until we got close to Tasmania, encountering them first and best on Enderby Island, one of the Auckland Islands, as in the first photo but also at sea and at Macquarie Island as in the second photo. Macquarie Island is administratively part of the State of Tasmania even though it is a long way away and, as one of the Kiwis on board pointed out, geographically part of New Zealand. The Albatrosses were nesting on Enderby Island and it was here that we saw pairs indulging in their beautiful courtship flights, quite an aerial ballet, as in the third photo.



Light-mantled Albatross (Phoebastria palpebrata)

Enderby Island, Auckland Islands, New Zealand, 21 November 2011

124448 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

At this point, I thought that the comparison with Siamese Cats broke down. I used to have a pair and, when the female was on heat, her behaviour was anything but elegant; demented would have been more like it.



Light-mantled Albatross (Phoebastria palpebrata)

Enderby Island, Auckland Islands, New Zealand, 21 November 2011

124314 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Some pairs were already nesting and incubating eggs. They chose small platforms on quite rocky cliffs and often nested in close proximity to each other, as in the fourth photo. Light-mantled are quite small by albatross standards, measuring about 84cm/33in in length with a wingspan of 215cm/85in. Their range is circumpolar in the colder waters of the Southern Ocean and are seen only rarely in the waters of mainland Australia and Tasmania proper.



On close inspection of the head of a Light-mantled, as in the last photo, the eyes are bluish and, as a final touch, the pale stripe on the bill is also blue. Yes, I know, same colour scheme as a Siamese Cat!

During the rougher parts of the voyage I had the opportunity to work on some of the photos and I have added the following species to the website: <[Snares](#)>, <[Fiordland](#)> and <[Yellow-eyed](#)> Penguins, and <[Broad-billed Prion](#)>.

Best wishes

Ian

#429 Royal Penguin 10 December 2011

I think that this should really be the Bird of the Trip, if not the Year. The birders' table at dinner on the last night on board had a vote for Bird of the Trip, and it was a close contest between the <[Light-mantled Sooty Albatross](#)>, featured last week, and my choice, the <[Royal Penguin](#)>. As I mentioned last week, Macquarie Island was for most of us the highlight of the trip, and the day spent on familiar terms with the penguins was memorably enchanting.



Royal Penguin (Eudyptes (chrysolophus) schlegeli)

Macquarie Island, Tasmania, Australia, 27 November 2011

126266 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Four species breed there, the commonest being the Royal and <King> Penguins. The King Penguins are beautiful, very smart, elegant and colourful, but the smaller Royals (up to 75cm/30in in length) won hands down in terms of personality.



Royal Penguin (Eudyptes (chrysolophus) schlegeli)

Macquarie Island, Tasmania, Australia, 27 November 2011

125908 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Who could fail to be endeared by the curious attention of the bird in the first photo or by the ones promenading along the beach as in the second photo or by the pair having a deep and meaningful exchange, as in the the third photo?



Royal Penguin (Eudyptes (chrysolophus) schlegeli)

Macquarie Island, Tasmania, Australia, 27 November 2011

126274 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Apart from curiosity, the penguins appeared little affected by our presence. They would move out of the way if you walked towards them, but if you sat on the beach, they'd come over to check you out and nibble in an exploratory manner on clothing and cameras. The Labrador-eyed baby elephant seals would come over for a cuddle, but that's another story.



Royal Penguin (Eudyptes (chrysolophus) schlegeli)

Macquarie Island, Tasmania, Australia, 27 November 2011

125935 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The beach was the promenade area but the real action was taking place at a huge rookery behind the beach, fourth photo. Here, many thousands of Royal Penguins were huddled on uncomfortable-looking stony nests incubating eggs like the long-suffering one having a bad-hair day in the fifth photo.



Royal Penguin (Eudyptes chrysolophus schlegeli)

Macquarie Island, Tasmania, Australia, 27 November 2011

125920 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Woe betide a penguin getting too close to another one's nest, and an individual moving through the colony was subject to a cacophony of abuse like the one in the sixth photo. The abusers didn't appear seriously aggressive, more just letting off steam and complaining about the crowded conditions. They did get serious, however, when the <Brown Skuas> attempted to steal their eggs and the area around the rookery was littered with empty egg shells.



Royal Penguin (Eudyptes (chrysolophus) schlegeli)

Macquarie Island, Tasmania, Australia, 27 November 2011

125924 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Now generally recognised as a separate species from the closely related Macaroni Penguin, the Royal breeds only on Macquarie Island and the population is estimated at 850,000 pairs. (Macaronis have black chins, Royal have white ones.) 'Royal' struck me as a quite inappropriate name: 'court jester' would be closer. Maybe that would be underestimating them: the one in the last photo looks like a real champion emerging from the surf, up there with any cross-channel swimmer.



Royal Penguin (Eudyptes (chrysolophus) schlegeli)

Macquarie Island, Tasmania, Australia, 27 November 2011

126244 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I'm in Sydney now on my way home. The week spent in Tasmania in search of the local endemics was largely successful, despite sometimes miserable weather and I'm looking forward to making many additions to the website.

Best wishes

Ian

#430 Red-crowned Parakeet 20 December 2011

Christmas is nearly on us, so a bird in the Christmas colours of red and green seems appropriate. Here is the <Red-crowned Parakeet>, one of the relatively few non-seabirds encountered on the trip to the Sub-Antarctic Islands.



Red-crowned Parakeet (Cyanoramphus novaezelandiae)

Enderby Island, Southern Islands, New Zealand, 21 November 2011

124718 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

We found these birds at several locations on Enderby Island, one of the smaller of the Auckland Islands and the first site at which we actually landed after leaving Dunedin. Enderby Island is mainly basalt with rocky cliffs, as in the second photo, and it reminded me very much of St Paul Island in the Bering Sea which I visited three years ago. On both the vegetation is mainly tundra, though unlike the treeless St Paul Enderby has patches of very gnarled dwarf rata forest.



The Parakeets feed mainly on the ground and we found them both on the tundra and in the forest. They are herbivorous, and the bird in the first photo is feeding on the dense understory of the forest - the third photo shows the same bird in close-up eating very fine shoots and leaves.



Red-crowned Parakeet (Cyanoramphus novaezelandiae)

Enderby Island, Southern Islands, New Zealand

124696 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The fourth photo shows a different bird feeding on the flower-heads of small herbs growing on the tundra near the beach where we landed.



Red-crowned Parakeet (Cyanoramphus novaezelandiae)

Enderby Island, New Zealand, 21 November 2011

124121 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I'm used to seeing parrots in more tropical locations, so it was a startling to see these small (25-28cm/10-11in long) elegant parrots in such a cold and rugged environment. They are obvious tough little birds, though their confiding habits, ground-feeding life-style and choice of low nesting sites makes them very vulnerable to introduced predators such as feral cats, rats and, in New Zealand, stoats. The Red-crowned Parakeet used to widespread throughout New Zealand but is now rare or extinct on the two main islands, though it survives well on Stewart and other offshore islands. As you can judge from the photos, the birds are very approachable and took little notice of us.

On the website, there are now <[nine species of penguins](#)> and <[twelve species of albatrosses](#)>. The additional species of albatrosses include ones that were treated

as sub-species by Christidis and Boles, 2008, but are now recognised as full species by Birdlife International and the IOC.

I wish you a safe and happy Christmas and best wishes

Ian

#431 King Penguin 29 December 2011

The <Royal Penguin> may have won the bird of the trip award on the basis of character, but the sartorial crown went to the <King Penguin> also very common on the beach at Macquarie Island. We'll see later that they also won the Worst Dressed Award. The adult King Penguins were magnificently turned out, and strode importantly around, very erect with chests puffed out as in the first photo. (If their suits hadn't been pure silk, they might, however, be considered slight spivvy.)



King Penguin (Aptenodytes patagonicus)

Macquarie Island, Southern Ocean, Australia, 27 November 2011

126280 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

They always seemed to have some consequential to do, such as this one calling at intervals trumpet-like and being listened to deferentially by its followers and being answered in a similar vein by another leader at some distance.

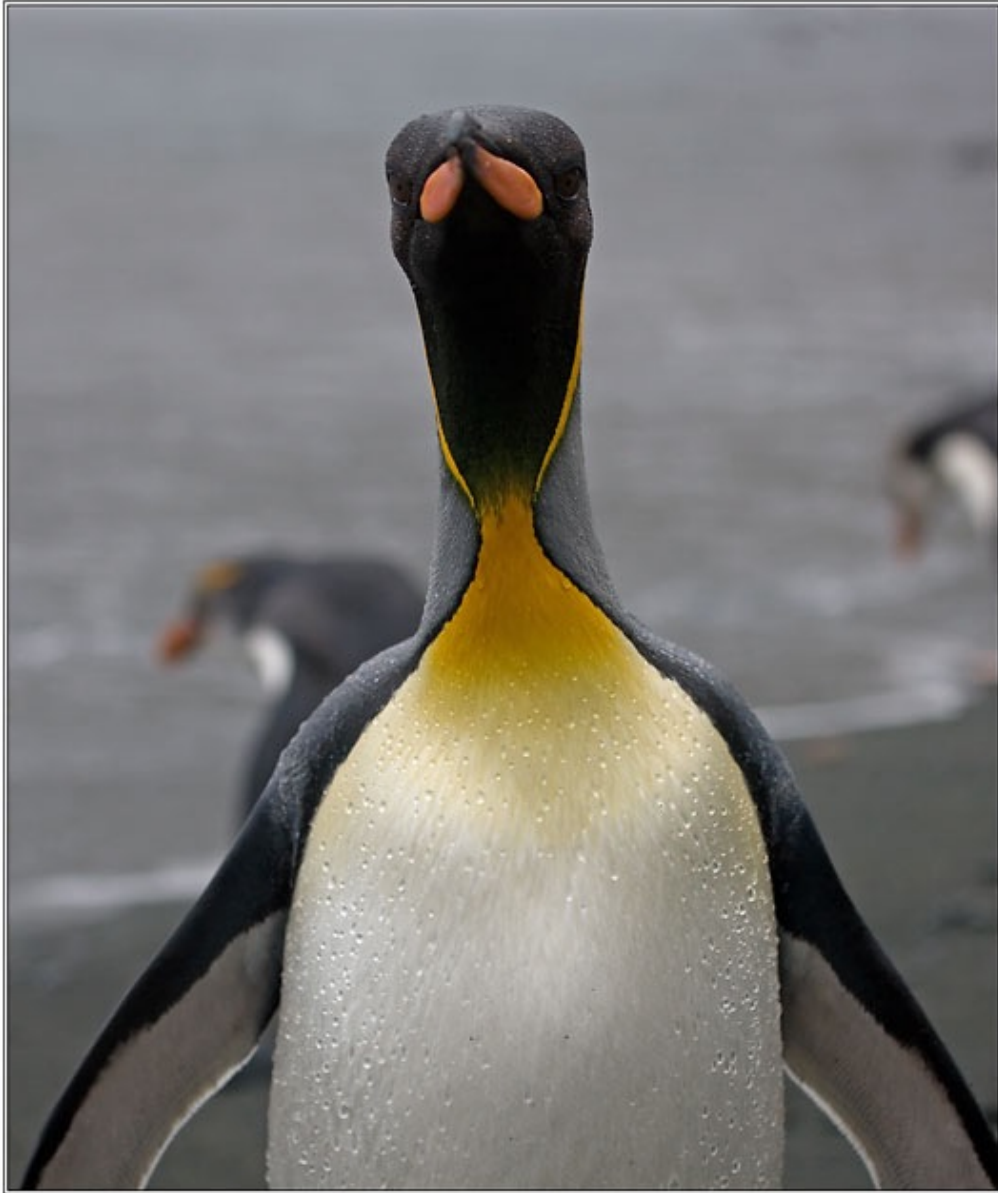


King Penguin (Aptenodytes patagonicus)

Macquarie Island, Southern Ocean, 27 November 2011

125891 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

If you sat quietly on the beach, they would, like the Royals come over to inspect you, but they didn't seem to approve of what they found.



King Penguin (Aptenodytes patagonicus)

Macquarie Island, Southern Ocean, 27 November 2011

125732 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

When called upon to do something undignified like feeding an unrelenting chick, they did so with an expression that suggested that this should really be done by a wet nurse, and the neighbours would turn avert their gaze disdainfully.



King Penguin (Aptenodytes patagonicus)

Macquarie Island, Southern Ocean, 27 November 2011

126050 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The chicks, of course, won the Worst Dressed Award and the adults, whenever possible, disowned them so that were forced to huddle in a creche at the unfashionable end of the beach.



King Penguin (Aptenodytes patagonicus)

Macquarie Island, Southern Ocean, Australia, 27 November 2011

126066 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The chicks look as if they're preening, but they are really trying to rip off their awful yeti outfits. You can see that some of them have nearly succeeded. This is a transformation to rival any emerging butterfly, and if Hans Christian Andersen had known about King Penguin chicks he would have chosen them rather than cygnets for his Ugly Duckling fairy tale.

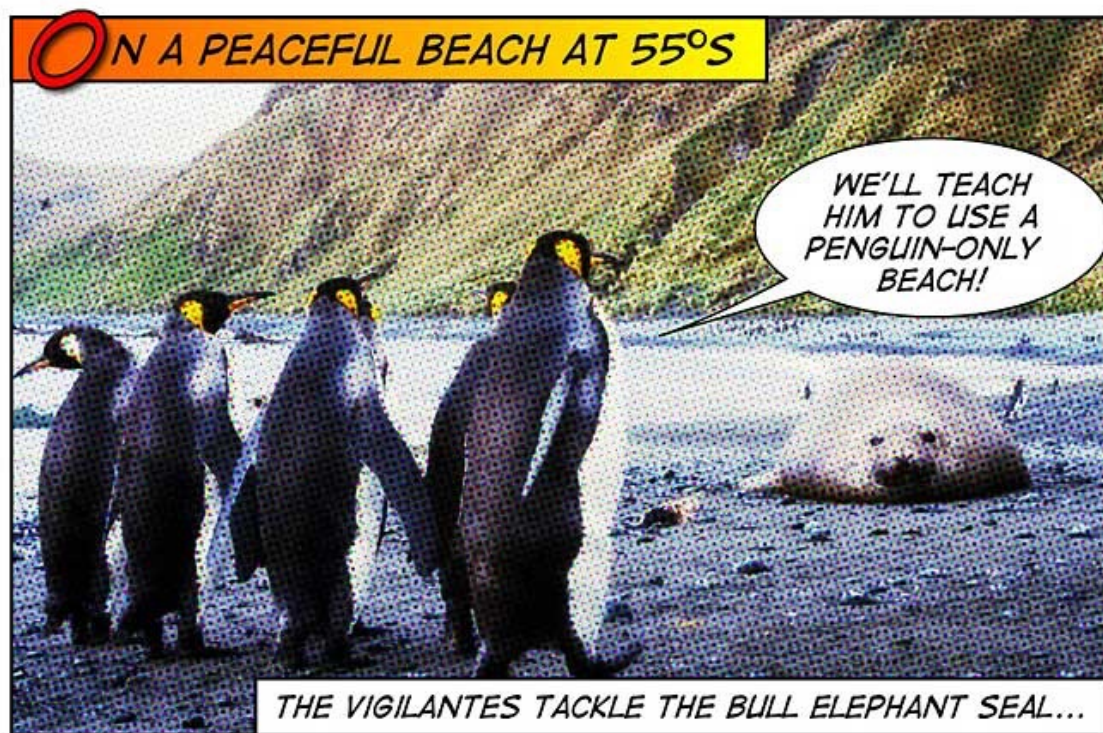


King Penguin (Aptenodytes patagonicus)

Macquarie Island, Southern Ocean, Australia, 27 November 2011

133885 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Meanwhile, at the other end of the beach, the King Penguins stride officiously towards an Elephant Seal lumbering out of the water. I couldn't resist converting this into a comic-strip cartoon using an iPhone app called [Halftone](#).



As you can imagine, it was a special day for us on Macquarie Island.

Best wishes

Ian

Year 2012: #432 to #464

#432 South Island Wren/New Zealand Rock Wren 9 January 2012

Happy New Year! To celebrate the New Year, here is a representative of an unusual new family for the website, the New Zealand Wrens. There it is usually called the Rock Wren, though its international name is the <[South Island Wren](#)>, to avoid confusion with the unrelated Rock Wren of North America.



New Zealand Rock Wren (Xenicus gilviventris)

Hollyford Valley, South Island, New Zealand, 14 November 2011

122155 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I used the Birds of New Zealand Locality Guide by Stuart Chambers to plan my trip and, in it I read: 'The Rock Wren is one of New Zealand's rarer species and one of its more difficult birds to find. It is also one of its gems.' This of course proved compelling and, as one of its prime sites was near the Homer Tunnel on the way to Milford Sound where I was after the Fiordland Penguin, I made an effort to find it. Compared with say the notorious <[Australian Grasswrens](#)>, this proved relatively easy as the birds often stand on prominent rocks in fine weather, where they bob up and down in a very endearing way, and I found a pair on the second attempt.



New Zealand Rock Wren (Xenicus gilviventris)

Hollyford Valley, South Island, New Zealand, 14 November 2011

122159 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Their upright stance and short tails gives them, like <Pittas> and <Penguins>, the fascinating appearance of little people and these are tiny. They measure 10cm/4in in length and the males, weighting about 16g are smaller and lighter than the females at 20g. They're tough little birds, though, and occur only in rocky Alpine habitats above the tree-line on the South Island. the third photo shows where I found them.



They have a flexible diet with a preference for invertebrates but also eat grass seeds and fruit. The bird in the fourth photo, has just caught a substantial grasshopper, presumably, given the season, for nestlings. The sexes differ in plumage and the green bird in the first two photos is a male. The one with the grasshopper looks browner, but I'm unsure whether that's because it's a female or is due to the angle of the light.



New Zealand Rock Wren (Xenicus gilviventris)

Hollyford Valley, South Island, New Zealand, 14 November 2011

122186 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Only two species of New Zealand Wrens - the <[Acanthisittidae](#)> - survive, the other being the even smaller but more widespread <[Rifleman](#)> so named because of its upward tilted bill. This family has no close relatives among the Passerines and has long baffled taxonomists as reflected in the choice of *Xenicus* for the Rock Wren, meaning 'strange' (from the same Greek word as xenophobia). Recent DNA studies suggest that they diverged from the other passerines early in their evolution and probably qualify for their own sub-order, separate from the 'true' song birds the Oscines, and the mainly South American Sub-Oscines (which include some Australian representatives, notably the <[Lyrebirds](#)> and the Pittas).

Best wishes

Ian

#433 Paradise Shelduck 17 January 2012

Shelducks are all rather splendid, so this one has to be particularly fine to earn the moniker '<[Paradise](#)>'. Interestingly, it is the white-headed female that is, I think, the more striking as in the first photo of a female having a drink (of salt water!) at Milford Sound.



Paradise Shelduck (Tadorna variegata)

Milford Sound, South Island, New Zealand, 13 November 2011

I33669 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The second photo shows the same bird stretching her wing to show us the gorgeous emerald green secondary flight feathers. Like all Shelducks, these are large ducks, averaging 63cm/25in in length and the males, averaging 1,700g/3.7lbs, are larger than the females, 1,400g/3.1lbs.



Paradise Shelduck (Tadorna variegata)

Milford Sound, South Island, New Zealand, 13 November 2011

133678 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Meanwhile her mate, who has a dark brown head and finely patterned wing coverts, decides it's time to go for a swim.



Paradise Shelduck (Tadorna variegata)

Milford Sound, South Island, New Zealand, 13 November 2011

133688 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The males have the same black, emerald green and white wing pattern as the female as shown by this male flying along a river in the Waitaki Valley.



Paradise Shelduck (Tadorna variegata)

Tasman River, South Island, New Zealand, 13 November 2011

I33522 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Unlike most other avian species where the female is more colourful, such as <[Buttonquails](#)> and <[Cassowaries](#)>, here there is no switching of gender roles: the female incubates the eggs while the male vigorously defends the territory from predators. Paradise Shelducks maintain pair bonds from one year to the next returning to the same territory. They are partial to both high country riverbeds and farmland and the population has benefitted from the clearing of land for pasture since European settlement.

The Paradise Shelduck is a New Zealand endemic, though a flock of 5 arrived on Lord Howe Island in March 1950 and remained for over a month so it is included in the official Australian list.

Best wishes

Ian

#434 Kea 25 January 2012

If you park near the entrance to the Homer Tunnel on the way to Milford Sound in Fiordland on the South Island of New Zealand, you are likely to be approached by one of these interesting-looking parrots.



Kea (Nestor notabilis)

Homer Tunnel, Fiordland, South Island, New Zealand, 13 November 2011

121919 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

'Friendly-looking chap', you might think, 'I wonder what he's after? Just saying Hello? Some food maybe?'. Wrong. This one, the <Kea>, has a one-track mind, and is only interested in **destruction**, or more specifically **dismantling** your vehicle.



Kea (Nestor notabilis)

Homer Tunnel, Fiordland, South Island, New Zealand, 13 November 2011

121949 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Quick as a flash, it and his pals will check it out for weak spots and set to work - this one with yellow cere, lower mandible and eye-ring is a juvenile delinquent (yes, that's snow in the background, these are tough birds). Let's see if we can rip the roof off.



Kea (Nestor notabilis)

Homer Tunnel, Fiordland, South Island, New Zealand, 13 November 2011

122005 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Oh well, the roof was stronger than it looked. How about the braking light above the back door, this has some promising cracks.



Kea (Nestor notabilis)

Homer Tunnel, Fiordland, South Island, New Zealand, 13 November 2011

121960 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Meanwhile, this hardened criminal (this is an adult bird) has learnt that the rubber is more vulnerable and attacks the lining of the front door.



Kea (Nestor notabilis)

Homer Tunnel, Fiordland, South Island, New Zealand, 13 November 2011

121992 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

And don't think you can get rid of us by just driving off. We'll hang on grimly until we get blown off by the breeze.



Kea (Nestor notabilis)

Homer Tunnel, Fiordland, South Island, New Zealand, 13 November 2011

kea_122190 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Keas have the reputation of being playful, but the intensity and obsessiveness of their attacks looked anything like a game to me and more like a compulsion. In fact, their attacks did no noticeable damage even though I parked the camper there for some time so that I could look for the <[Rock Wrens](#)> #434. According to my field guide 'the worst offending birds are caught and transferred to distant sites or taken into captivity'. Sounds familiar.

At one time, Keas were supposed to kill sheep, and the resulting bounty led to their persecution and decline. They have been fully protected since 1986 and the population is recovering though there are concerns about predation by stoats.

Keas are quite large birds, 46cm/18in in length and weighting up to 1Kg/2.2lbs. They and their relatives the Kaka and the Kakapo comprise a taxonomically distinct lineage of New Zealand parrots not closely related to any others and placed in their own family the <[Strigopidae](#)>. While the flightless Kakapo is critically endangered and the subject of an <<[intensive rescue mission](#)>>, the Kea is quite common in Alpine areas of the South Island and the Kaka occurs in the forests of both islands, though I failed to find it on this trip. It's good to leave something for the next visit.

Best wishes

Ian

#435 Red-necked Crane 8 February 2012

Every serious birder has his/her bogey birds. We're talking about 'an evil or mischievous spirit' here that is invisible in his/her presence, not golf scores even though competition for longest life list among 'twitchers' is sometimes disparagingly called 'birding golf'. I have, or had, two, both Northern Queensland species that proved almost impossible to photograph despite numerous attempts. The <Red-necked Crane> was the harder, to the extent that 'don't tell Ian' became a standard joke and sensible advice to anyone who got good views of one.



Red-necked Crane (Rallina tricolor)

Kingfisher Park, Julatten, Northeastern Queensland, 3 February 2012

129255 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

So, when I heard last week that a pair of Red-necked Crakes had been seen with 3 chicks at <Kingfisher Park>, Julatten, I had no choice but to go up there for a few days for yet another attempt. I had looked for them there many times and at other places such as <Cassowary House> in Kuranda (where I saw one briefly in 2009), <Red Mill House> in Daintree Village, Broadwater State Forest, Pavey Road near Hastings Swamp, Queens Park in Townsville, Paluma, etc.



Red-necked Crake (Rallina tricolor)

Kingfisher Park, Julatten, Northeastern Queensland, 3 February 2012

129263 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Red-necked Crakes are most active at dawn and dusk in gloomy rainforests, so I got up early, for me, on Friday and went in search. I was quickly rewarded with a frustratingly good but brief glimpse of an adult bird hopping over a fallen log: no photo opportunity of course as befits a bogey. Later in the day, I sat hidden for a couple of hours near a rainforest pool that they visit without success. Only when I gave up and returned to the lodge did one cross the path in front of me and vanish into the undergrowth. I waited quietly, and eventually the bird came back into view, more or less, and I was able to get the first two photos shown here.



Red-necked Crake (Rallina tricolor)

Kingfisher Park, Julatten, Northeastern Queensland, 3 February 2012

129266 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

That evening, I returned to the pool and eventually one of the adults appeared leading the three black, fluffy chicks, third photo, down for a bathe. Shortly after, the other adult joined them for the delightful spectacle of all five foraging and bathing at the far end of the pool. Two of the chicks appeared very nervous and kept hiding, but the other was bolder and remained near the adults, fourth photo, even when a tree limb, weakened by the nearby tropical low that became cyclone Jasmine the following day, came crashing down.



Red-necked Crake (Rallina tricolor)

Kingfisher Park, Julatten, Northeastern Queensland, 3 February 2012

129271 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

After about ten minutes, one of the adults collected the other two, still dry, chicks, fifth photo, and the family disappeared into the rainforest. You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink.



Red-necked Crake (Rallina tricolor)

Kingfisher Park, Julatten, Northeastern Queensland, 3 February 2012

129279 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Red-necked Crakes have a limited distribution in Australia, found mainly in rainforest in the Queensland Wet Tropics north of Paluma near Townsville. They also occur in New Guinea, and some are thought to migrate there from Queensland during the dry season.

Good. Now I can concentrate on the other bogey bird, the Black Bittern another shy rainforest lurker that sees you before you see it and makes a quick, in this case aerial, getaway.

Best wishes

Ian

#436 Auckland and Campbell Islands Teal 17 February 2012

The almost predator-free nature of the Sub-Antarctic Islands before the Europeans and their pests arrived is well illustrated by the existence of two closely-related flightless ducks on the Auckland and Campbell Islands. The first photo shows a male [Auckland Islands Teal](#) on Enderby Island - now their main stronghold - in the Auckland Islands group.



Male Auckland Islands Teal (Anas aucklandica)

Enderby Island, Auckland Islands, New Zealand, 21 November 2011

124760 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

You can see how short the wings are, extending only two thirds of the way along the body instead of to the base of the tail as in their flying relatives the <Chestnut Teal> of Australia and the Brown Teal of New Zealand. This male is in breeding plumage and has greenish iridescence on the head and subtly beautiful barring on the flanks.



Female Auckland Islands Teal (Anas aucklandica)

Enderby Island, Auckland Islands, New Zealand, 21 November 2011

124744 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Females (and juveniles and eclipse-plumaged males) have more subdued colours and lack the green sheen on the head. The white eye-ring of both sexes is shared with the Brown Teal of New Zealand but not the Chestnut Teal of Australia. The third photo shows another female going for a stroll. Note the slightly drooping tail and upright stance, both characteristic of the two flightless species.



Female Auckland Islands Teal (Anas aucklandica)

Enderby Island, Auckland Islands, New Zealand, 21 November 2011

124596 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

As you can probably judge from the photos, the teal were very confiding showing no alarm when closely approached. I had to retreat from the male to get it in focus - the lens I was using has a minimum focus distance of 1.8m/5.9ft, not usually an issue with wild birds! The first two photos were taken on one of the few bodies of freshwater on Enderby Island. Their more usual habitat is along the coast. We saw some in sheltered pools on a rock platform and they feed mainly on invertebrates and algae found in both attached and beach-stranded seaweed.



Male Campbell Islands Teal (Anas nesiotis)

Campbell Island, New Zealand, 23 November 2011

125164 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The fourth photo shows a vocal male <Campbell Islands Teal> on salt water near the landing wharf of that island. It's very similar in appearance to the Auckland Islands Teal and both species were until recently treated as races of the flight-worthy Brown Teal of mainland New Zealand. Recent studies suggest that the the Brown Teal and Sub-Antarctic Teals were the product of separate colonisation events by the Australian Chestnut Teal, which occurs in New Zealand only as a rare vagrant.

The Sub-Antarctic Teals have suffered badly from the introduction of mammalian pests, particularly pigs, cats and rats (mice seem to affect them less). The Auckland Islands Teal is extinct on the main Auckland Island, but survives on six neighbouring island pig-less and cat-less island. The population is estimated at 600-2,000 individuals, appears stable, is classified as Vulnerable, and the New Zealand government is planning to eliminate pigs and cats from Auckland Island which will permit reintroduction of the Teal.

The Campbell Islands Teal was though to be extinct but a population of about 20 were rediscovered on nearby Dent Island in 1975, raising its status to Critically Endangered and the world's rarest duck. A captive breeding program followed, leading to the establishment of a feral population on predator-free Codfish Island near Stewart Island in 1999 and 2000. Following the elimination of rats on Campbell Island, 50 birds were released there in 2005 and 55 in 2006. Successful breeding occurred in 2006. The total population, captive and wild, is now thought to be over 200 and its status has been downgraded to merely Endangered.

You can read the full story here <<http://terrannature.org/tealcampbell_island.htm>>. It's great to read a successful conservation story at a time of increasingly frequent bad news about wild populations.

Best wishes

Ian

#437 Subantarctic/Auckland Snipe 29 February 2012

My apologies for a late Bird of the Week. Lots of excuses are presenting themselves, as they do, but I won't bore you with them. I've chosen another mostly good news conservation story from the Sub-Antarctic islands, the New Zealand, Auckland or <Subantarctic Snipe>. These are odd, dumpy, almost tail-less little snipe - length 23cm/9in - that occur now only on some of the islands south of New Zealand: Snares, Auckland Islands, Antipodes Islands and Campbell Island with a closely related species on Chatham Island.



New Zealand Snipe (Coenocorypha aucklandica)

Enderby Island, Auckland Islands, New Zealand, 21 November 2011

124280 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

We found them on Enderby Island, one of the Auckland Islands group, where the nominate subspecies (*aucklandica*) occurs. With their relatively short, curved bill they don't look like your average snipe and they don't behave like one either. Like the Auckland and Campbell Islands Teals they're fairly confiding and allow close approach but, unlike the Teal, they can still fly, though are very reluctant to do so.

When disturbed - and you have to nearly step on them to do that - they creep away mouse-like through the thick vegetation that they prefer and disappear with relative ease. Perhaps crake- or rail-like would be closer to the mark and the curved bill reminded me of the longer-billed rails such as the <[Virginia Rail](#)>.



New Zealand Snipe (Coenocorypha aucklandica)

Enderby Island, Auckland Islands, New Zealand, 21 November 2011

124267 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

By day they stay under cover, only venturing out onto more open areas at night. They feed on a wide variety of invertebrates that they find by deeply probing the peaty island soil. The male, apparently, has a distinctive territorial call uttered at dawn and dusk and rendered as 'queeyoo queeyoo', and the extinct Stewart Island race is supposed to be responsible for the Maori legend of the hakaioi or hokioi, a frightening creature that called only at night (Heather & Robertson, Field Guide to the Birds of New Zealand). The males also perform a nocturnal display flight, making, like other snipe, a humming sound by vibrating the tail feathers, which, given the short tails of this species, one can imagine as being very high-pitched.



New Zealand Snipe (Coenocorypha aucklandica)

Enderby Island, Auckland Islands, New Zealand, 21 November 2011

124286 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The third photo shows a pair of the snipe sneaking past the abundant yellow-flowered *Bulbinella* or Ross Lily, one of the characteristic, so-called 'megaherbs' of these islands <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bulbinella_rossii>>.

The good part of the news is that although the Sub-Antarctic Snipe became extinct on the main islands following the arrival of the Pacific Rat with the Maoris a thousand years ago and the recent extinction of two races on Stewart Island and Little Barrier Island (the latter, ironically as a result of the introduction there of the <Weka>), the remaining races seem to be doing quite well with a total population estimated at 34,000, of which two thirds occur on the smaller of the Auckland Islands, including Enderby.

Yet another race was thought to have become extinct on Campbell Island after the brig *Perseverance*, responsible for discovery of the island in 1810, was wrecked there in 1828 leaving the usual legacy of rats. This race remained undescribed and unseen until a small population was discovered on an almost inaccessible, nearby, little island called Jacquemart in 1997 during a search for the Campbell Island Teal. Rats were eliminated on the relatively huge - 11,000 hectare - main island in 2001 and the snipe have recolonised it from Jacquemart unaided. The race is now called, paradoxically, *perseverance*. Some of the more intrepid members of our party found some snipe on an arduous walk there in wet conditions on our last day. I'd had enough of boggy, wet walks through unrelenting waist-deep tussock grass by then and didn't join them. Alas!

To make amends for the late BoffW, here is a non-bird of the week, <[Lumholtz's Tree Kangaroo](#)>.



Lumholtz's Tree Kangaroo (Dendrolagus lumholtzi)

Malanda, Atherton Tableland, Northeastern Queensland, 18 February 2012

129636 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This obliging animal made a greatly-appreciated appearance in the middle of a Birds Australia North Queensland committee meeting 11 days ago when we were just about to debate a controversial agenda item. The meeting was being held at a member's house in rainforest on the Atherton Tableland. A delightful interlude with this placid animal led to a very harmonious and well-mannered debate. There's an obvious lesson there for choosing a suitable venue for meetings.

Best wishes

Ian

#438 Yellow-crowned Parakeet 9 March 2012

Last December, the <[Red-crowned Parakeet](#)> was the bird of the week [#430](#). That was photographed on Enderby Island in the Auckland Islands one of the New Zealand Sub-Antarctic islands. Here is a close relative the <[Yellow-crowned Parakeet](#)> photographed on the same trip in Fiordland on the South Island. I've chosen it for this week's bird, as I'm going to Norfolk Island tomorrow and I need your moral and spiritual support to help me photograph the endangered Norfolk Island or Tasman Parakeet.



Yellow-crowned Parakeet (Cyanoramphus auriceps)

Cascade Creek, Fiordland, South Island, New Zealand, 14 November 2011

122339 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In Fiordland, I camped at Cascade Creek camping site because it's within striking distance of Milford Sound for the <[Fiordland Penguin](#)> and also because it's right beside a nature trail through Antarctic Beech forest to Lake Gunn. This particular trail had been recommended as a good site for various native birds including the Yellow-crowned Parakeet. I found the Parakeets with relative ease as they chatter away when feeding or in flight. In the first photo, the bird is perched in a beech tree, and you can see its lovely, serrated, spoon-shaped leaves.



Yellow-crowned Parakeet (Cyanoramphus auriceps)

Cascade Creek, Fiordland, South Island, New Zealand, 14 November 2011

122334 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

With a length of 23-25cm/9-10in, they're smaller than the Red-crowned but otherwise very similar, apart from the colour of the crown and the lack of red behind the eye. In sunlight, the colours stand out well, as in the second photo, but in the shady areas of the forest they are well camouflaged and the presence of faded yellow leaves in both photos show well how the patches of colour in the plumage help to break up the outline of the bird.



Yellow-crowned Parakeet (Cyanoramphus auriceps)

Cascade Creek, Fiordland, South Island, New Zealand, 14 November 2011

122254 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The third photo shows another bird in a patch of sunlight on a very mossy tree stump. It's a delightful forest, very Lord of the Rings, and it was easy to imagine encountering Treebeard along the way. It's no wonder that the movie was filmed in New Zealand, and Tevora Lakes - not too far from here - was the location for Fangorn Forest, and you will, of course, remember that 'Fangorn' was the Sindarin word for Treebeard <<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treebeard>>>.

Middle Earth, New Zealand



Anyway, I'm wandering. The Norfolk Island trip is being organised by the same birders from Victoria that were my companions on the Sub-Antarctic trip. I'd originally turned down the invitation to join them on the grounds of extravagance so shortly after the other trip. We had such fun together, however, that I changed my mind, particular when their flights were re-routed through Brisbane, an easy, if horribly early, connection away from Townsville.

The Tasman/Norfolk Island Parakeet looks similar to the Red-crowned but yet smaller (21-26cm/8.3-10.2in). Like all the 10 members of this South Pacific genus (*Cyanorhamphus* - 'blue bill') it has suffered from the introduction of mammalian predators by Europeans, is classified as endangered and is restricted in distribution to the Norfolk Island National Park. Its numbers have increased recently from a dangerous low as a result of conservation efforts. There is talk of reintroducing it to Phillip Island, a small predator-freed island off Norfolk, and to Lord Howe, where a similar parakeet became extinct. It is thought to belong to the same species, hence

the name Tasman Parakeet. So, wish me luck, keep your fingers crossed and transmit the same spiritual energy that is has been so successful before, and I'll try to bring you the Tasman Parakeet as a future bird of the week.

Best wishes

Ian

#439 Norfolk Island Parakeet 16 March 2012

Well, your unwavering moral and spiritual support has done it again: here is the Tasman or <Norfolk (Island) Parakeet> (better known here as the Green Parrot to distinguishing it from the introduced Red Parrot - the Crimson Rosella). Thank you very much!

We were met at the airport by Albury-Wodonga birder Dougald Frederick, excitedly carrying the news that there was a vagrant Ringed Plover at Slaughter Bay. So we picked up the hire cars, checked into our accommodation and went down to the Bay, whose name is a corruption of Slackwater Bay, rather than the site of a messy event in the generally nasty penal history of the island. Ringed Plovers are indeed rare in Australia, but I was brought up with them in Ireland and couldn't conceal my impatience to get to Palm Glen near Mount Pitt, where Dougald had been regularly seeing the Parakeets in the evening.



Norfolk Island Parakeet (Cyanoramphus cockii)

Palm Glen, Norfolk Island, Australia, 10 March 2012

129963 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Finally we went there and eventually, just before sunset and after my travelling companions had left to buy food for breakfast, the Parakeet in the first photo arrived and starting feeding on the feral guavas, fruiting prolifically around the picnic area. The guavas have dense foliage and the red fruit made the feeding Parakeets very hard to see. They were easier to see, but harder to photograph, when they used the top of the numerous tall Norfolk Island pines as vantage points, second photo. This less brightly coloured bird is a female or juvenile; the ones in the first and third photos are males.



Norfolk Island Parakeet (Cyanoramphus cookii)

Palm Glen, Norfolk Island, Australia, 10 March 2012

1299935 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

After that, we visited Palm Glen regularly in the evenings and always saw at least one, distant Parakeet, with a flock of 6 on the second day when I took the third photo, the last occasion on which the birds were close enough to photograph. As well as being a pleasant spot to watch the sunset, it was also a good site for the other two remaining endemic species, the <Norfolk Island Gerygone> and the Slender- or <Long-billed White-eye>, and for the endemic races of the <Golden Whistler> and <Grey Fantail>.



Norfolk Island Parakeet (Cyanoramphus cookii)

Palm Glen, Norfolk Island, Australia, 11 March 2012

140555 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Norfolk Island Parakeet was originally regarded as a race of the <Red-crowned Parakeet> of New Zealand until genetic studies showed that it was sufficiently distinct to warrant the status of a full species. It came close to extinction in the 1980s when the population declined to an estimated 32 individuals with 4 breeding pairs (the sex ratio was heavily biased towards males). Since then, it has been the subject of an intense recovery program to control introduced predators and competitors, and the population is now estimated at perhaps 200 individuals, though our birding guide on Monday, Margaret Christian reckons that that is optimistic, given the frequency of sightings.

It's a lovely island, friendly and historically interesting, so we have had an enjoyable week. If you intend to visit, we can highly recommend our accommodation, <<Poinciana Cottages>> - we all agreed that we could quite happily live in them permanently, and they gave me a free upgrade from an extra bed in one of our two cottages to solo occupancy of a third cottage. If you're birding, then a morning spent with Margaret Christian is essential and she bakes delicious cake for morning tea. We also did a trip to Phillip Island for the seabirds. That too is highly recommended if the weather is suitable and David Bigg is the person to see about that.

Best wishes and much gratitude,

Ian

#440 Norfolk/Pacific Robin 26 March 2012

The Norfolk Robin was another bird that I was keen to photograph on Norfolk Island. It has only recently been split by the IOC and HBW (Handbook of Birds of the World) from the mainland Scarlet Robin and, until that happened, it attracted little attention. As a consequence, I had trouble sourcing photos, particularly of adult males, and getting reliable material for the description of the species for the digital version of the Australian field guide by Pizzey and Knight.



Pacific Robin (Petroica multicolor)

Palm Glen, Norfolk Island, Australia, 10 March 2012

129934 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It's not common on Norfolk Island with an estimated population of 400-500 species and its distribution is restricted to areas of native forest. Happily, there was a resident family at the place, Palm Glen, where we did regular evening vigils for the Norfolk Island Parakeet and, being more confiding than Scarlet Robins, the members of the family proved to be good subjects for photography. The first photo shows the adult male. At first glance, it looks like a small [Scarlet Robin](#), but closer examination reveals the diagnostic lack of white on the flight feathers of the wing and the outer tail feathers: the only white on the wing is the secondary wing coverts. Another supposed difference is a smaller area of white on the forehead, but this bird at least seemed to me to show much more white, extending back to a point above the rear of the eyes.



Pacific Robin (Petroica multicolor)

Palm Glen, Norfolk Island, Australia, 10 March 2012

129902 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The second photo shows the adult female, left, and the juvenile, right, posing obligingly for comparison. Both lack the obvious white forehead spot characteristic of, in fact diagnostic of, their Crimson Robin counterparts and also lack white in the outer tail feathers. The colours are also richer and the wing stripes are a deeper buff, almost blending with the buffish-brown of the rest of the wings and back. The third photos shows the same female face-on, and the lack of the white spot is more obvious: there is only slight white scalloping.



Pacific Robin (Petroica multicolor)

Palm Glen, Norfolk Island, Australia, 10 March 2012

129836 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The fourth photo is another shot of the same juvenile, showing the lack of white on the outer tail feathers.



Pacific Robin (Petroica multicolor)

Palm Glen, Norfolk Island, Australia, 10 March 2012

129811 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Having noticed the large amount of white on the forehead of the male, I kept an eye out for another individual and eventually photographed this one, fifth photo, on nearby Mount Pitt. This too had a large white spot.



Pacific Robin (Petroica multicolor)

Mount Pitt, Norfolk Island, Australia, 12 March 2012

140583 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Norfolk Robin is restricted to Norfolk Island while the Pacific Robin is quite widely distributed on islands in the South Pacific from the Solomons in the north via Vanuata to Fiji in the south-east. It is quite variable in plumage and 13 races have been described. It is closely related to the Tomtit of New Zealand, the males of which vary in colour from the white-breasted (North Island), through <yellow-breasted (South Island)> to the <completely black race> on the Snares.

There is clearly enough material here to keep a South-sea-island-loving taxonomist busy for at least a lifetime and I won't say anything further except to note an interesting historical twist in the story of the splitting of the Norfolk and Scarlet Robins.

Norfolk Island was settled in the same year as Sydney, 1788, and one result of that was that the Scarlet Robin was described using a Norfolk Island specimen (the type specimen) by German Naturalist Johann Gmelin in 1789 and given the specific name *multicolor*. When the species was split 210 years later, the rules governing taxonomy insist that this name remains with the Norfolk Island bird, so the mainland species becomes the new one and was named *boodang* after the SE Australian race (up till then *Petroica multicolour boodang*). To avoid confusion in Australia (at the risk maybe of increasing it in the Pacific Islands) the common name Scarlet was transferred to the new species and the new name Norfolk was given to the old species in Norfolk Island and Pacific to the remaining taxons in the South Pacific.

I'm sure this family of birds at Palm Glen would be astounded to learn that their kind is the subject of such intense scrutiny!

Best wishes

Ian

*Note 2018: Taxonomy of this complex is still in disarray. The IOC and HBW recognise three separate species: the <Norfolk Robin (*Petroica multicolour*)>, the Pacific Robin (*Petroica pusilla*) and the mainland Australian <Scarlet Robin (*Petroica boodang*)>. BirdLife International (and therefore Birdlife Australia) treats them all as races of the Scarlet Robin. *Petroica multicolour*. A <<DNA study in 2016>> showed that the Norfolk Robin is more closely related to the <<Red-capped Robin (*P. goodenovii*)>> than the Scarlet Robin and supported treating it as a separate species.

#441 (Common) White Tern 1 April 2012

Another species on my photo list on Norfolk Island was the (Common) <White Tern>. I'd admired it on Lord Howe Island more than twenty years ago, before I got seriously into bird photography. They're only Common if you're on a remote coral or rocky island in the Pacific, Indian and Atlantic Oceans, but the label really means 'standard' and reflects a split of the species, not universally recognised, into 'Standard' and the Little White Tern (*Gygis microrhyncha*) of the Marquesas Islands. It used to have the attractive name 'White Noddy', until some prosaic purist decided that only terns belong the genus *Anous* were **real** Noddies.



Common White Tern (Gygis alba)

Captain Cook's Lookout, Norfolk Island, Australia, 11 March 2012

140515 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

They are unusually looking terns, with a pointy, slightly upturned bill and very white, actually translucent, feathers, usually described as 'ethereal'. Seen against the sunlight, the effect is something like looking at an X-ray as in the second photo. In this one, you can see the bill is very thin laterally so it is shaped more like a pair of scissors.



Common White Tern (Gygis alba)

Puppy Point, Norfolk Island, Australia, 11 March 2012

140383 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

White Terns are numerous on Norfolk Island and as they nest on the branches of Norfolk Island Pines, you see them all over the island. If you're used to seeing terns near water, it's initially slightly disconcerting to see them flying around in forest. Many of these are parents feeding young, but you do also see pairs or small groups of birds, as in the third photo, and very pretty they are too.



Common White Tern (Gygis alba)

Puppy Point, Norfolk Island, Australia, 11 March 2012

140377 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In March, the breeding season is nearly over, but there are still some hungry and very bored looking chicks in the pines waiting for a feed. The single egg is laid precariously in a concavity on a branch or palm frond. Norfolk Island Pines, with their horizontal limbs, are ideal for this and the recent establishment of breeding White Terns on Lord Howe Island can probably be attributed to the introduction of these trees there.



Common White Tern (Gygis alba)

Rocky Point, Norfolk Island, Australia, 14 March 2012

141330 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The fourth photo shows a nearly fledged juvenile. At this age they look like furry toys, but the slightly younger ones, that were just losing the last traces of their down, often looked quite comical. The bird in the fifth photo shows one that looks for all the world like an aged goddess of the silver screen who doesn't believe in growing old gracefully, with faux eye-lashes, smudged mascara, thinning hair, an ancient fur coat and a grumpy expression.



Common White Tern (Gygis alba)

Rocky Point, Norfolk Island, Australia, 14 March 2012

141327 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Hopefully, though, it has a bright future ahead.

Best wishes

Ian

#442 Grey Noddy 10 April 2012

Last week [#441](#) we had the (Common) <[White Tern](#)> or White Noddy. Here is its counterpart the <[Grey Noddy](#)>, sometimes called the Grey Ternlet. It is also an island species but is restricted in range to the Western and South Pacific. In the Australian regions it, like the White Tern, occurs on both Lord Howe and Norfolk Islands. Unlike the White Tern, it nests mainly on inaccessible rock cliffs and I had had only distant views of it on Lord Howe 20 years ago. The situation was similar on Norfolk Island, and the first photo, taken at Captain Cook's Lookout, was our first view of any. This photo, I might add, was taken with a 500mm telephoto lens, so we were nowhere near them.



Captain Cook's Lookout, Norfolk Island

So we hoped that our planned boat trip to nearby Phillip Island would provide better views and photo opportunities. It was late in the nesting season, though, and when we returned to the rocky cove to be picked up by the boat, we still hadn't seen any, even in the distance. Getting on and off the boat was an interesting exercise as there is no wharf, just a north-facing cove, sheltered in southerly winds and swell, with a slippery rock shelf, best negotiated in stockinged feet for better traction, second photo (that's Norfolk Island in the background).



Landing Cove, Phillip Island

We were just getting ready to board the approaching boat, when two Grey Noddies landed on a rocky cliff nearby, and the boat was forgotten while I dug the camera out of my backpack. The two birds were an adult and a juvenile, the adult standing over the juvenile, which has dark markings on the head, in the third photo.



Grey Noddy (Anous cerulea)

Phillip Island, Norfolk Island, Australia, 13 March 2012

141209 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I moved closer to them, but the adult flew off, leaving the youngster to its fate, fourth photo.



Grey Noddy (Anous cerulea)

Phillip Island, Norfolk Island, Australia, 13 March 2012

141218 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The adult had landed almost out of sight behind a rocky outcrop, but I got another photo of it when it took off a little later, fifth photo.



Grey Noddy (Anous cerulea)

Phillip Island, Norfolk Island, Australia, 13 March 2012

141225 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Anyway, it was time to leave the Grey Noddies to their own devices and get on the boat. We were to see more of them on the cliffs of Norfolk Island, including a flock of about 15, but we never got close to them again. It was a great ending to a very successful trip to Phillip Island and we didn't mind too much getting rather wet from the spray on the way back to Norfolk Island, the cameras being safely stowed in a dry spot.

Best wishes

Ian

#443 Cape Petrel 17 April 2012

My records show that no Petrel and only one Shearwater <Buller's> has ever featured as bird of the week. That's partly because, until recently, I didn't have many photos of members of this family of seabirds <Procellariidae> but that has been largely corrected by recent trips to the Sub-Antarctic and Norfolk Island. Petrels and Shearwaters are often challenging birds to identify, so I'm going to start with an easy and attractive one, the <Cape Petrel>, that featured prominently on the Sub-Antarctic Islands trip last November.



Cape Petrel (Daption capense)

Off Southeast Coast, South Island, New Zealand, 19 November 2011

122943 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The striking chequered black and white pattern on the back and wings is unique. The white patches on the primary and secondary flight feathers are translucent and appears as 'windows' when seen from below in bright light, as in the second photo. We encountered Cape Petrels soon after leaving Dunedin, and as they follow ships, they were almost constant companions for most of the voyage.



Cape Petrel (Daption capense)

Off Southeast Coast, South Island, New Zealand, 19 November 2011

122877 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

With a length of 35-40cm/14-16in, they're comparable in size to a domestic pigeon, though with much longer wings, and are often called Cape Pigeons. They feed on krill, small fish, etc., either by swimming buoyantly on the surface and pecking in a rather pigeon-like fashion or by snatching morsels in flight. They'll readily feed on marine scraps left by others and often follow whales.



Cape Petrel (Daption capense)

Snares, Southern Islands, New Zealand, 20 November 2011

123194 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

As you can guess from the name, the species was originally named from a specimen collected at the Cape of Good Hope and described by the father of taxonomy, Carl Linnaeus, in 1758. Cape Petrels are very characteristic bird of the southern oceans right around the planet and range from the coast of Antarctica to the Tropic of Capricorn, and even reach the equator in the cold Humboldt current on the western side of South America. They occur around Australia in the southern winter but are mainly an offshore bird, unless beach-wrecked by storms. The global population is in the millions, and they can occur in large flocks, though we encountered them mainly in small numbers.



Cape Petrel (Daption capense)

Snares to Auckland Islands, Southern Islands, New Zealand, 20 November 2011

123495 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

They nest on most of the sub-Antarctic Islands around the world and on islands along the coast of Antarctica itself. There is a small colony on Macquarie Island and larger colonies on the Southern Islands of New Zealand (Snares, Auckland, Campbell, Bounty, Antipodes and Chatham). These belong to a separate race, *australe*, smaller than the nominate race.



Cape Petrel (Daption capense)

Off Southeast Coast, South Island, New Zealand, 19 November 2011

122941 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I loved watching them soaring and wheeling around the ship, and they looked as if they enjoyed it too. I got very used to their attendance and found their familiar presence reassuring in the vast and sometimes alien and stormy remoteness of the Southern Ocean.

I have another request for moral and spiritual support (and so far you've never failed me)! I'm planning to go to Eungella National Park west of Mackay next weekend in search of the Eungella Honeyeater. I've never seen it before, and we need photos for the Pizzey and Knight digital project.

Best wishes

Ian

#444 Eungella Honeyeater 23 April 2012

Well, team, many thanks, your moral and spiritual support have done it again: here is the <[Eungella Honeyeater](#)>, photographed last Friday after some diligent searching. The field guides say: 'noisy, wary, elusive' and that I would agree is a good description. I heard several at the first location (Chelmans Road, Upper Dalrymple) but got only a brief glimpse of one in the rather dense rainforest regrowth. The second location, Digging's Road near Eungella, proved more productive and, as I

walked back to the car, I eventually encountered a flock of ten or so crossing the road and got photos of a couple of them.



Eungella Honeyeater (Lichenostomus hindwoodi)

Eungella District, Eastern Queensland, 20 April 2012

141788 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Were it not for its distinctive song, rather scratchy like a very loud gerygone I thought, it would be easy to overlook, given its rainforest habitat, and, dare one say, rather drab colours even if tastefully highlighted by blue eyes.



Eungella Honeyeater (Lichenostomus hindwoodi)

Eungella District, Eastern Queensland, 20 April 2012

141818 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

And overlooked it was until 1976. Or more accurately, any earlier records, such as one collected in 1959, of this bird from the little studied Eungella/Clarke Range area were mistakenly assumed to be the closely related wet-tropics endemic, the <[Bridled Honeyeater](#)>, see the third photo.

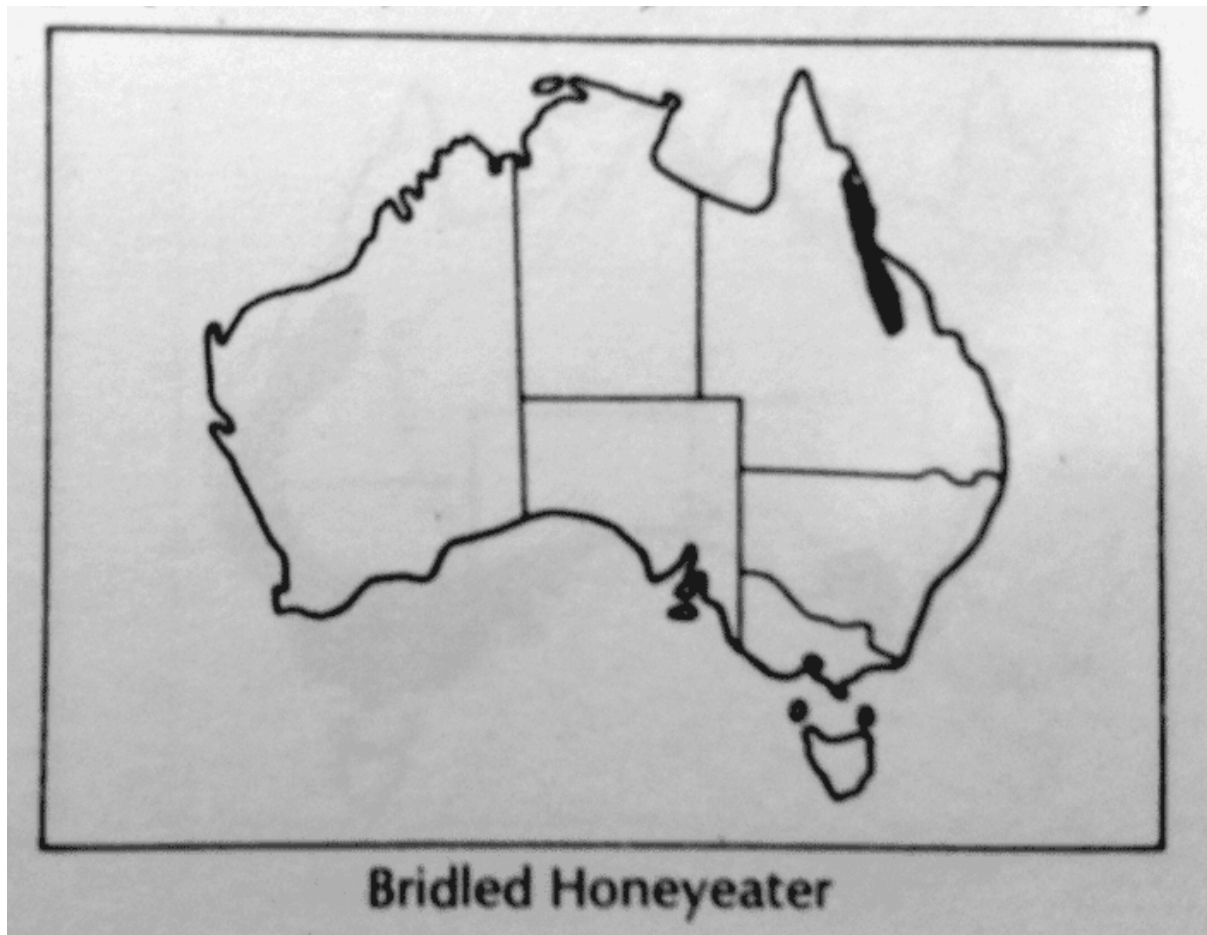


Bridled Honeyeater (Lichenostomus frenatus)

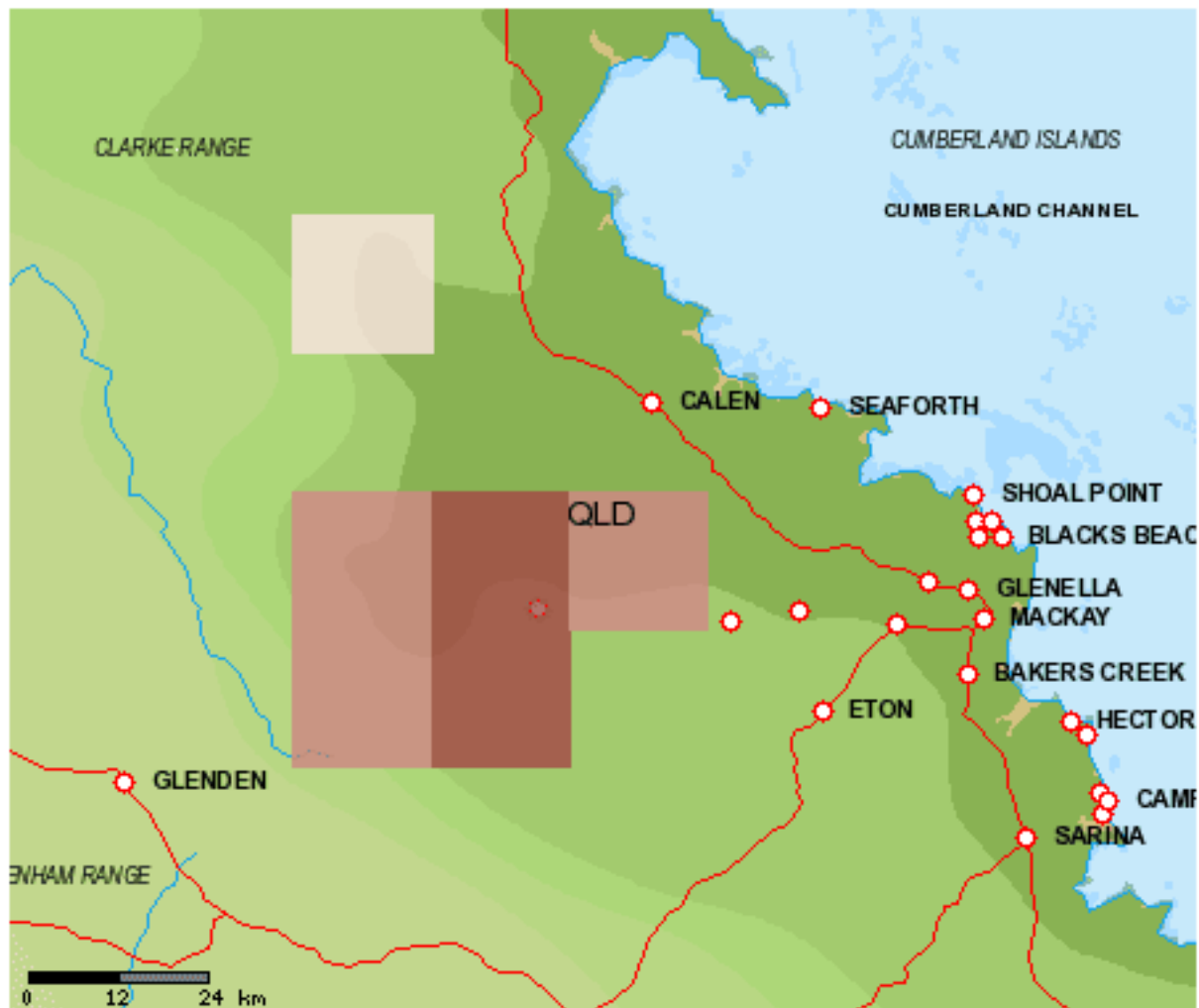
Malanda, Atherton Tableland, NE Queensland, 18 February 2012

129530 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Bridled Honeyeater is much larger - 20-22cm/8-8.7in versus 16-18cm/6.3-7.1in - has a yellow base to the bill and rather different head markings. Their songs are quite different, sufficiently so for someone rather deaf like me to distinguish them easily. Early field guides, such as the 1974 Slater's, shows the range of the Bridled Honeyeater extending the 300km or so from the wet tropics down to the Clarke Range west of Mackay.



In 1975, during a survey by the Australian and Queensland Museums, another specimen was collected and labelled as a Bridled Honeyeater. The following year, Wayne Longmore was working on the Honeyeater collection at the Australian Museum and realised that not only was this bird not a Bridled Honeyeater - based on the colour of the bill - but that it didn't correspond to any known species. He organised further field trips to the Clarke Range in 1978 and 1980 in search of the mystery bird and found that the species was relatively common in a restricted area of upland rainforest. It was described in 1983 by him and Walter Boles and named *Meliphaga hindwoodi* (later *Lichenostomus hindwoodi*, now - 2018 - *Bolemoreus hindwoodi*) in honour of Keith Hindwood, ornithologist and Wayne's mentor. You can read the full story [here](#). The fourth image shows the records from the BirdLife Australia Atlas Project now (2018) [Birddata](#).



So you don't have to go to the wilds of Irian Jaya to discover new species of birds!
What would you like next week?



Eungella Honeyeater (Lichenostomus hindwoodi)

Eungella District, Eastern Queensland, 20 April 2012

141821 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Best wishes

Ian

#445 (Norfolk Island) Golden Whistler 4 May 2012

My apologies for a belated bird of the week. When I was in Eungella recently chasing the eponymous <Honeyeater>, I encountered a very obliging male <Golden Whistler>, below, so I've chosen it to introduce this week's subject.



Golden Whistler (Pachycephala pectoralis)

Eungella, Central Queensland, 20 April 2012

141764 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It's one of the most gorgeous of the woodland birds of eastern and southern Australia and one of those unusual birds that, unlike <[Rainbow Lorikeets](#)> for example, both look and sound strikingly beautiful. It featured as bird of the week in January 2005, but I don't suppose you'll mind me repeating it and I want to share with you the interestingly different Norfolk Island equivalent.



Norfolk Island Golden Whistler (Pachycephala pectoralis xanthoprocta)

Bird Rock Track, Norfolk Island, 16 March 2012

141464 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The bird in the second photo, one of a pair we encountered, is, or could be, an adult male Norfolk Island Golden Whistler. I say 'could be' because there, the adult males do not develop the striking yellow and black plumage of the mainland races and remain 'hen-plumaged', to quote Schodde and Mason. This was recognised early on in the settlement of the island and it was originally described as a separate species, the Norfolk Island Thickhead (*Pachycephala* means 'thick-head') *Pachycephala xanthoprocta*, where *xanthoprocta* refers to the yellow vent. Here is a painting of a pair by John Gould.



He has labelled the bird in the foreground as a male, and the one in the background as a female. There are subtle differences in plumage, with the female being more lemon-yellow underneath and the male being more buffish yellow and having darker dark lores. I haven't been able to find whether these differences are consistent, but it seemed to me that the bird in photo above (141464) looks more like the Gouldian male than its partner below (141440).



Norfolk Island Golden Whistler (Pachycephala pectoralis xanthoprocta)
Bird Rock Track, Norfolk Island, 16 March 2012 141440 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Mainland juvenile Golden Whistlers have rusty margins on the wing feathers and this is the case with the Norfolk Island birds, as shown in the next photo taken on a different occasion when we were hanging around waiting for the <[Norfolk \(Island\) Parakeets](#)> to show up.



Norfolk Island Golden Whistler (Pachycephala pectoralis xanthoprocta)
 Palm Glen, Norfolk Island, 10 March 2012 129790 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

To this day, the taxonomic status of the Golden Whistler 'complex' remains unresolved. There are different races on the mainland and in neighbouring locations such as New Guinea, New Britain and Fiji. The mangrove-inhabiting <[Mangrove Golden Whistler](#)> of northern and western Australia has been elevated to specific status but the others have remained in the too-hard basket and are still lumped together as a single species. It seems to me unusual for avian taxonomists to be stumped by a problem like this, but maybe they've met their match.

Best wishes

Ian

#446 Black-winged Petrel 13 May 2012

Three weeks ago [#443](#) we had the <[Cape Petrel](#)>. Here is the <[Black-winged Petrel](#)>, another species, like the <[White Tern](#)> [#441](#) and <[Grey Ternlet](#)> [#442](#), that I had seen twenty years ago on Lord Howe Island and was keen to photograph on Norfolk Island. With a length of 28-30cm/11-12in and a wingspan of 67cm/26in, this is quite a small species with elegant black, grey and white markings and a stubby, hooked bill, visible in the first photo.



Black-winged Petrel (Pterodroma nigripennis)

Phillip Island, Norfolk Island Group, Australia, 13 March 2012

141139 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It nests on both the main island and Phillip Island - where it was quite abundant - and was easy to find as, unlike most petrels and shearwaters, it is active around the breeding colonies in daylight. Most petrels and shearwaters come ashore under cover of darkness to reduce the risk of avian predators such as raptors and gulls, but the Black-winged has historically nested on predator-free islands. 'Historically' here means before human settlers introduced predators such as feral cats.



Black-winged Petrel (Pterodroma nigripennis)

Phillip Island, Norfolk Island Group, Australia, 13 March 2012

141152 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Black-winged Petrels are accomplished fliers and spent much time in aerial acrobatics around and over cliffs. The generic name *Pterodroma* means 'winged runner' and refers to their aerial agility. The one in the second photo is coming in to land near its nesting burrow and passing some Norfolk Island Pines. All petrels and shearwater, except the <Giant Petrels>, have very weak legs and once on the ground are barely mobile using their wings to drag themselves along on their bellies.



Black-winged Petrel (Pterodroma nigripennis)

Phillip Island, Norfolk Island Group, Australia, 13 March 2012

141170 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Like many island birds, they seemed unafraid and didn't appear agitated when approached closely to have their photos taken. The fourth photo shows the tubular nostrils characteristic of this family of birds and their close relatives the albatrosses and storm-petrels. All these 'tube-nosed' birds are thought to have a strong sense of smell - very unusual for birds - that helps them find both marine prey and their nesting burrows on dark nights, and the birds themselves apparently have a strong musty odour during the breeding season.



Black-winged Petrel (Pterodroma nigripennis)

Phillip Island, Norfolk Island Group, Australia, 13 March 2012

140991 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The hooked bill helps the birds grasp slippery prey - mainly squid and small fish - and the bills have sharp cutting edges. The Black-winged is one of about 36 global species of *Pterodroma* petrels collectively and, I think unfairly, called Gadfly Petrels, in reference to their erratic flight. As I'm sure you know, Gadflies are nasty blood-sucking insects such as Horse and March Flies, and there must be other more congenial erratic fliers after which they could be named. Anyway, Gadfly Petrels feed on the wing by snatching prey from the surface of the water and rarely alight on the water or dive.

The Black-winged Petrel breeds on islands in the south Pacific including Lord Howe, Norfolk, various islands around New Zealand and on several in French Polynesia. Helped by protection and the removal of predators such as feral cats, its population is increasing and it has bred on Lord Howe only since the 1960s. There are unproven recent reports of it breeding on some islands on the east coast of Australia, where it is generally rare. Outside the breeding season, it is highly pelagic and ranges widely over the Pacific as far as southern Japan and Mexico.

Best wishes

Ian

#447 Grey Goshawk 24 May 2012

Here is an uncommon and beautiful raptor, the Grey or Variable Goshawk. It is usually called the <Grey Goshawk> in Australia but the moniker Variable is more accurate as it occurs in both grey and white morphs. The first photo shows a white morph bird perched in a dead tree near mangroves at Bushland Beach near Townsville, photographed in 2002.



Grey Goshawk (Accipiter novaehollandiae)

Bushland Beach, Northeastern Queensland, 25 May 2002

010441 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It is the only completely white raptor worldwide, though white morph birds may show some grey on the tail - as this one does - and on the head. These are large hawks, with the females being 50-55cm/20-22in in length with a wingspan to 1.1m/43in. The smaller males are 38-42/15-16.5in. By way of comparison - the choice is deliberate - the <Sulphur-crested Cockatoo> is 44-51cm with a comparable wingspan of about 1m. Despite their size, they are difficult to see (and to photograph) as they inhabit mainly dense forest, or forest edges and are shy, so it would be another ten years before I got an even vaguely respectable photo of a grey morph bird, second photo.



Grey Goshawk (Accipiter novaehollandiae)

Tuggerah, New South Wales, 8 May 2012

141896 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Here you can see how broad and rounded the wings are. This shape is ideal for short glides and rapid braking and is an adaptation for the preferred hunting strategy of this species, called 'still hunting' - perching on a well-hidden perch and making short, devastating swoops on unsuspecting prey feeding on the ground or in trees. Prey includes birds, mammals and reptiles and a female can take prey up to the size of herons, rabbits and possums. Goshawks are subject to mobbing by small birds, and when the individual in the second photo landed on a tree stump several seconds later (12 to be exact) it immediately attracted the attention of a <Willie-wagtail> visible in flight near the goshawk in the third photo.



Grey Goshawk (Accipiter novaehollandiae)

Tuggerah, New South Wales, 8 May 2012

141899 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

You might recall that pied plumage is often the hallmark of aggressiveness - the reverse of camouflage - and this Willie-wagtail actually landed on the tree stump as in the third photo. The Goshawk gives the appearance of having lost interest in the Willie-wagtail, but I suspect that it was more concerned with preparing to take flight as I approached it trying to get a closer shot, which it did very shortly afterwards.



Grey Goshawk (Accipiter novaehollandiae)

Tuggerah, New South Wales, 8 May 2012

141900 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I mentioned Sulphur-crested Cockatoos before as it has been suggested that the white morph has evolved to mimic Cockatoos to escape detection, but this theory has never been proven. It is thought that genetically the white morph is simply a single recessive gene, like Mendel's sweet peas, as white-white mating produces white offspring, while white-grey and grey-grey can produce either. There is supposed to be geographical variation in the proportion of the morphs, with the white one being predominant in northern Australia, Tasmania and western Victoria and the grey morph being predominant in eastern Australia. Despite the specific name *novaehollandiae*, it isn't an Australian endemic and also occurs in New Guinea and neighbouring islands, though the island races are sometimes treated as separate species.

Best wishes

Ian

#448 Royal Albatross 4 June 2012

It seems only fitting to celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth with something appropriate, so here is the Royal Albatross, or Royal Albatrosses if you accept, as most now do, the split into <Northern> and <Southern> species. Apart from just the Royal title, these birds are also very long lived (up to 60 years) and

travel huge distances, routinely circumnavigating Antarctica. It has been estimated that a <typical 50 year old Royal Albatross has travelled 3.8 million miles> which compares quite well with (in 2012) the Queen's 261 official overseas visits and 96 state visits to 116 countries.



Southern Royal Albatross (Diomedea epomophora)

Between Snares & Auckland Is, Southern Ocean, 20 November 2012

123812 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

On the Sub-Antarctic trip last November, Royal Albatrosses, mainly Southern like the one in the first photo, were regular and very welcome companions in the Southern Ocean. It was always a thrill to see these huge birds completely at home in the wildest weather that the Ocean could throw at them and soaring apparently effortlessly in gale-force winds. If you look carefully at the first photo, you can see the dark (bluish) line along the upper mandible which distinguishes it from the similar <Wandering Albatrosses>. The other feature of note is the white leading edge to the dorsal surface of the wing. As <Southern Royal Albatrosses> age, the amount of leading white increases and this distinguishes it from both the Wandering Albatrosses, where the amount of white increases along the centre of the wing, and the <Northern Royal Albatross> where the wings remain black, as shown in the second photo.



Northern Royal Albatross (Diomedea sanfordi)

South of Tasmania, Southern Ocean, 29 November 2012

127104 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

With a little practice, it wasn't too difficult to distinguish between Northern and Southern birds. What helped was the fact that Royal Albatrosses do not have a confusing array of juvenile plumages, unlike their cousins the Wandering Albatrosses. The juveniles have black tips to the tail and blackish scalloping on the back (the mantle) between the wings but are otherwise similar to the adults.



Southern Royal Albatross (Diomedea epomophora)

Campbell Island, Southern Ocean, 23 November 2012

1816 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

On Campbell Island, we had the opportunity to hike up path to a Southern Royal Albatross colony on a bleak, tussocky moorland. As you can see in the the third photo, things were fairly quiet when we got up there in the morning. They got busier in the afternoon when more birds arrived and some people saw greeting ceremonies, but by then, rather wet and cold, I had returned to the ship for a comforting coffee. There were strict rules about where we could leave the designated path and how close we could approach wildlife, but the albatross in the fourth photo stretching its wings flouted the rules and wandered, or blundered - they're ungainly on land - right past me.



Royal Albatross (Diomedea epomophora)

Campbell Island, Southern Ocean, 23 November 2011

125205 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Albatrosses have deceptively gull-like proportions so it is a shock to realise, up-close, just how huge they are. The size record goes to the *exulans* race/species of the Wandering Albatross, but the Royals are not far behind and an apt comparison is with swans rather than other seabirds, ignoring length where swans have an unfair neck advantage. Southern Royal Albatrosses weight between 6.5 and 10.3kg/14.3 and 22.7lb while the heaviest flying bird, the Mute Swan, ranges between 9kg and 12kg/20 and 33lb. However Royal Albatrosses have a maximum wingspan of up to

3.5m/138in while Mute Swans range up to a mere 2.4m/94in. Just enormous in other words. The contrasting delicacy of the lacy pattern on the back is striking, and the fifth photo shows the tubular nostrils and the dark line along the mandible.



Southern Royal Albatross (Diomedea epomophora)

Campbell Island, Southern Ocean, 23 November 2012

125225 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Happily, you don't have to go Campbell Island to see these wonderful birds. Taiaroa Head, a mere 30km from the centre of Dunedin on the South Island of New Zealand, has the only mainland colony of albatrosses in the world. These are Northern Royal Albatrosses and, although I got there too late in the day to gain entry to the <[Royal Albatross Centre](#)> - I gave the local <[Yellow-eyed Penguins](#)> a higher priority - the one in the last photo flew right over me as I stood in the car park.



Northern Royal Albatross (Diomedea sanfordi)

Dunedin, South Island, New Zealand, 29 November 2012

122661 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Enjoy the Jubilee!

Ian

#449 Chinese Pond Heron 11 June 2012

I'm stopping over for a few days in Hong Kong. It's not the best time of the year for birding here - the northern spring and autumn/fall are good for migrants and the northern winter is good for waders and waterbirds - but we did go out to the Hong Kong Wetland Park near Mai Po reserve in the New Territories on Saturday. One of the species I was keen to see was the <[Chinese Pond Heron](#)> and this one in breeding plumage landed on a post near the hide/blind we were in.



Chinese Pond Heron (Ardeola bacchus)

Hong Kong Wetland Park, New Territories, Hong Kong, 9 June 2012

142142 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This was of interest to me as it's on the Australian list as a rare vagrant and I'd seen only <non-breeding birds> before in Malaysia. The non-breeding plumage is streaky brown and white and not very distinguished, but when breeding the birds acquire striking black, white and chestnut plumage with a multi-coloured bill. This bird fluffed out its feathers, preened itself a bit and settled down for a few seconds, second photo.



Chinese Pond Heron (Ardeola bacchus)

Hong Kong Wetland Park, New Territories, Hong Kong, 9 June 2012

142149 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

These are stocky, mid-sized (47cm/19in in length) herons that feed on fish and invertebrates. Their breeding range includes China and northern Japan. In the northern winter some migrate south to Malaysia and Indonesia, including Java, and sometimes they overshoot and end up in the Australian territories of Christmas and Cocos (Keeling) Islands and on the Australian mainland. This particular one hung around for thirty seconds and then took off, third photo, showing how high they can jump when taking off - they need to be able to do this to take off from reed beds.



Chinese Pond Heron (Ardeola bacchus)

Hong Kong Wetland Park, New Territories, Hong Kong, 9 June 2012

142151 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In flight, fourth photo, the bird displays the striking white wing characteristic of all six species of Pond Herons (genus *Ardeola*). These are mainly Asian and African species, though the Squacco Heron occurs in southern Europe. The Chinese Pond Heron is closely related to the rather similar Indian Pond Heron (<[this one](#)> was photographed on the Yamuna River behind the Taj Mahal).



Chinese Pond Heron (Ardeola bacchus)

Hong Kong Wetland Park, New Territories, Hong Kong, 9 June 2012

142152 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Only 30 seconds elapsed between the first and last photos, so we were lucky to have this encounter and it was the only one we saw. The Hong Kong Government is making admirable efforts to conserve wildlife with the Mai Po Reserve and the restored Hong Kong Wetland Park, but the area is very close to the densely populated and heavily industrialised areas of southern China and the local population of Chinese Pond Herons is suffering from the effects of water pollution on their prey (mud skippers and crustaceans).

Best wishes

Ian

#450 Ruff 19 June 2012

This week we have nothing short of a fashion parade, male <Ruffs> at a communal display ground or lek in eastern Finland. Finland is my second stop-over on the way to Ireland to visit my family and I am spending a week in the northern part of the country in search of some unusual northern European birds. I spent a couple of nights in Oulo on the west coast, a 1 hour flight north of Helsinki and then drove north west to Kuusamo near the Russian border where I am now.



Ruff (Philomachus pugnax)

Liminganlahti, Oulu District, Finland, 14 June 2012

142986 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In Oulu, the birding and wildlife tour company <<[Finnature](#)>> put me very early in the morning in a hide that they had set up near the lek. I settled down to watch a rather unpromising-looking piece of raised ground in a meadow, having been assured that, though it was late in the season, a couple of birds had been seen at the lek on the previous morning.



Ruff (Philomachus pugnax)

Liminganlahti, Oulu District, Finland, 14 June 2012

142818 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

After about half an hour and shortly before 4:00am the black-ruffed bird in the second photo arrived but flew off when I moved the camera. Happily, it soon returned and this time the second white-ruffed bird arrived too and the pair started their extraordinary display, spreading their ruffs and wings apparently to make themselves appear as intimidating as possible. Sometimes, they jumped vertically in the air and at other times they crouched low on the ground in submissive looking postures.



Ruff (Philomachus pugnax)

Liminganlahti, Oulu District, Finland, 14 June 2012

142923 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Although the birds often came into close physical contact, there was no actual fighting and no physical damage. These black- and white-ruffed birds were the main performers during the 4 hours that I remained in the hide, but other birds joined in and at one stage there were about 10 birds on the lek. The colours of the ruffs and the erectile feathers on the head were varied. Here is a buff and black one with the white bird.



Ruff (Philomachus pugnax)

Liminganlahti, Oulu District, Finland, 14 June 2012

142784 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The colour of the bare wattled skin on the face varied too, being sometimes yellow and sometimes red, though it was my impression that this colour wasn't permanent and the red flush was associated with more intense display. This non-displaying one with a chestnut cap, piebald ruff has yellow facial skin.



Ruff (Philomachus pugnax)

Liminganlahti, Oulu District, Finland, 14 June 2012

143093 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This one is mainly chestnut.



Ruff (Philomachus pugnax)

Liminganlahti, Oulu District, Finland, 14 June 2012

143190 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

While this one with an ermine ruff look suitably regal.



Ruff (Philomachus pugnax)

Liminganlahti, Oulu District, Finland, 14 June 2012

143149 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Ruffs are unusual among lekking birds in that the display is aimed mainly at other males to establish dominance, rather than at attracting females. Females may mate with multiple males producing young with different fathers and homosexual mating also occurs. The different ruff colours are apparently significant and white-ruffed males are smaller and less dominant and called satellite males.



Ruff (Philomachus pugnax)

Liminganlahti, Oulu District, Finland, 14 June 2012

143014 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The females, called Reeves, are quite plain and look rather like other sandpipers such as Sharp-tailed and Pectoral. In non-breeding plumage, the males resemble the females but are larger and longer-necked. Ruffs breed across northern Eurasia from Scandinavia to Siberia and winter in Africa, Asia and, in small numbers, Australia. Select these links to the Birdway website to see a [female](#) and [ruff-less male](#).

Who said waders are plain and boring? I had a wonderful time at this lek. The Ruff wasn't one of my target species in Finland but an unexpected bonus, thank you Finnature. My main target was the largest Woodpecker in Europe, the Black Woodpecker, but that's another story.

Best wishes

Ian

#451 Black Woodpecker 27 June 2012

I said last week that my main target in Finland the [Black Woodpecker](#) was another story. It's a story that started 50 years ago when I started bird watching in Ireland as a teenager and received, as a Christmas present in 1962, the classic Guy Mountfort *Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe*. It had, for its time, superb colour plates of all the European bird species by Roger Peterson. Some of these

birds were to this Irish teenager unbelievably exotic and, living on a woodpecker-free island, I was struck by the woodpecker page in general and the huge Black Woodpecker in particular (I still have the field guide):



The concept of a bucket list (things to do before you 'kick the bucket') hadn't been articulated then, but the Black Woodpecker went straight onto mine. So, when the only route that Qantas could offer me a few months ago for a frequent-flyer ticket in the general direction of Ireland was on Finnair via Helsinki, I immediately thought 'Black Woodpecker' (and 'owls', another great page in the field guide).

In fact finding birds such as woodpeckers and owls in the endless forests of Finland proved very difficult, so eventually I went out with an excellent Finnature guide, Antti (Finnish for Andrew) and a delightful English birding couple in the Kuusamo region. It was a very bad year for owls (owl years are very dependent on cycles in the vole population) but Antti did eventually find us a distant [Pygmy Owl](#) and, last bird of all, showed us the nesting site of a pair of Black Woodpeckers.



Black Woodpecker (Droecopus martius)

Ita-Ruka, Kuusamo District, Finland, 18 June 2012

143920 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

We were treated to a view of the male - the female lacks the red crown, having on a small red patch on the back of the head - arriving to feed the young, but there then followed a long period without any activity and, as it was time to return to the hotel for breakfast, I returned later on my own so that I could photograph them at my leisure. Again, the male arrived (second photo) and three hungry chicks appeared at the nest entrance. The male then fed them, presumably by regurgitation - third photo - as he didn't appear to be carrying any food when he arrived.



Black Woodpecker (Droecopus martius)

Ita-Ruka, Kuusamo District, Finland, 18 June 2012

143925 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

At 45-50cm/18-20in in length, these are crow-sized birds are the largest Eurasian Woodpecker and comparable in size to the related <Pileated Woodpecker> of North America. Their white bill is 5cm/2in in length and an impressive implement. They usually dig a new nest hollow each year, but Antti told us that this pair had used the same one for two years running. The Black Woodpecker is quite widespread in mature forest in Eurasia and is expanding its range.



Black Woodpecker (Droecopus martius)

Ita-Ruka, Kuusamo District, Finland, 18 June 2012

143965 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

After feeding the young, the male left the nest for several minutes and then returned and entered the hollow. Nothing further happened for over half an hour until the female, who had been in the nest all along, emerged and flew off (fourth photo). The nest was in a tree on a quiet road outside a house, so I was able to watch it in comfort from my rental car (fifth photo), the red arrow indicating the location of the nest.



So, my visit to Finland reached a satisfactory conclusion and the Black Woodpecker lived up to expectations. Three days later I flew to Dublin, where I am now to join the rest of the family and await the arrival of the first member of the next generation. My niece went into hospital yesterday and the arrival of the baby, ten days overdue, is anticipated either tonight or tomorrow.

Best wishes,

Ian

#452 Bohemian Waxwing 5 July 2012

Following on from the <[Black Woodpecker](#)> [#451](#), here is the <[Bohemian Waxwing](#)> another unusual northern European species that has a 50 year connection for me.



Bohemian Waxwing (Bombycilla garrulus)

Kuusamo, Northeastern Finland, 17 June 2012

143669 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Bohemian Waxwing breeds across northern Eurasian and North America and moves southwards in winter in search of its staple winter food, berries. In Western Europe, it usually goes only as far as Germany and northern France, but in some years, driven by food shortages, it makes its way as far west as Britain and, more rarely, Ireland. That happened in the early 1960s when I was a schoolboy in Ireland, and I once saw several feeding on berries in a suburban street in Dublin (Eglinton Road). I hadn't seen them again since until my trip to Finland two weeks ago and I drove down that street a few days ago.



Bohemian Waxwing (Bombycilla garrulus)

Kuusamo, Northeastern Finland, 17 June 2012

143673 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

These starling-sized birds are exotic by European standards and beautiful by any, so you can imagine my excitement all those years ago. It was good to catch up with them again in Finland, and this female, perched on top of a conifer, allowed me to approach fairly closely. They get their name from the red waxy-looking tips to some of the wing feathers, which you can see if you look carefully at the photos. These are more obvious in males, and the whitish stripes below the red spot are much yellower in males.



Bohemian Waxwing (Bombycilla garrulus)

Kuusamo, Northeastern Finland, 17 June 2012

143677 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In Europe, these birds are just called Waxwings, but in North America there are two species and this one is qualified with the Bohemian tag to separate it from the slightly smaller but otherwise rather similar <[Cedar Waxwing](#)>. This featured as Bird of the Week three years ago and here it is again:



Cedar Waxwing (Bombycilla cedrorum)

Cupertino, California, USA, 12 May 2008

66790 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Waxwings have silky feathers, and the generic name *Bombycilla* means, in pigeon Latin, 'silky tail'. There are only 3 species - the third being the Japanese Waxwing - and they were originally the only members of the family Bombycillidae. Recent genetic studies have shown that several other species are related to them and have been moved into the family*. Interestingly, these include the three species of aptly-named Silky-flycatchers (the 'silky' being apt, not the greatly overused 'flycatcher'), such as the <[Long-tailed Silky-flycatcher](#)> and you'll see the family resemblance if you follow the link.

Meanwhile in Dublin, my niece has given birth to a delightful baby girl, Aoibhinn, and both mother and child are doing well. Ancient Irish names are very fashionable here and 'bh' in Irish has a 'v' sound (strictly speaking it's an aspirated 'b', traditionally represented by a dot over the 'b') so the name is pronounced something like 'eaveen'. Aiobhinn timed her arrival well and waited until all the immediate members of the family were in Dublin, including my other niece who came over from Strasbourg with her husband.

Best wishes

Ian

* 2018: The IOC and HBW have moved the Silky-flycatchers into their own family the <[Ptiliogonidae](#)>, BirdLife International have left them in the <[Bombycillidae](#)>.

#453 Little Grebe 22 July 2012

When I was in Dublin - I'm now back home in North Queensland - and we were waiting for the arrival of my niece's baby, we used to take the dogs for a walk in nearby Bushy Park along the River Dodder. In the park, there is a large artificial pond with an island and I soon found this <Little Grebe> or 'Dabchick' patiently incubating eggs on her nest.



Little Grebe (Tachybaptus ruficollis)

Bushy Park, Dublin, Ireland, 22 June 2012

144304 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Grebes are usually fairly shy, so a nesting one is a good photo opportunity as they build their floating nests in the open in shallow water. The nest is anchored to submerged vegetation and branches and the fact that it is floating gives it some protection from changing water levels after rain, for example. The second photo was taken on the 26 June, the day when my niece's daughter finally arrived.



Little Grebe (Tachybaptus ruficollis)

Bushy Park, Dublin, Ireland, 26 June 2012

144874 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It was a while before I could check the progress of the Little Grebe again and when we returned on the 9th June, third photo, the nest had vanished and, as there had been some bad weather in the meantime, I feared the worst. Both adults were still present but there was no obvious sign of any chicks. However, if you look carefully at this bird, you'll see that the left wing is slightly raised and not folded flat.



Little Grebe (Tachybaptus ruficollis)

Bushy Park, Dublin, Ireland, 9 July 2012

144986 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The reason for this became clear when the bird turned around, revealing a chick carefully tucked away under the wing.



Little Grebe (Tachybaptus ruficollis)

Bushy Park, Dublin, Ireland, 9 July 2012

144978 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The fourth photo was taken on the same day. We returned again 4 days later and I saw only the one adult and no chick but there is plenty of cover around the island and I may have missed it.



Little Grebe (Tachybaptus ruficollis)

Bushy Park, Dublin, Ireland, 9 July 2012

144990 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Any Australian birders would immediately notice the similarity between the Eurasian Little Grebe and the <Australasian Grebe>. They can be distinguished in breeding plumage by the amount of rufous on the neck, throat and breast. These are rufous in the Little Grebe (hence the specific name *ruficollis*) but the throat and breast of the Australasian Grebe are black as in the fifth photo. Other distinguishing field marks are the yellow, rather than reddish-brown, iris and the greater amount of white under the tail of the Australasian Grebe, though the latter is not evident in this photo.



Australasian Grebe (Tachybaptus novaezelandiae)

Mount Isa, Northwestern Queensland, 25 May 2006

33706 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

These are fairly trivial differences and for a long time the two were treated as conspecific. However, the ranges of the two overlap in New Guinea (are 'sympatric') and it is usual to treat them as separate species with the Little Grebe being widespread throughout Eurasia and Africa and the Australasian Grebe occurring in New Guinea, Australia and New Zealand.

Best wishes

Ian

#454 White-throated Dipper 6 August 2012

Here's another species from Bushy Park in Dublin, the <[White-throated Dipper](#)>, this time on the River Dodder. This featured as bird of the week 5 years ago, so please forgive the repetition but I have some nice photos to share. Dippers - there are 6 species world-wide - are rather special in that they are the only truly aquatic Passerines (song birds), living exclusively on and in fast flowing streams and rivers and getting all their food from the water. They are dumpy, short-tailed, starling-sized birds and, as they often cock their tails, look a bit like giant <[Eurasian Wrens](#)>.



White-throated Dipper (Cinclus cinclus)

Bushy Park, Dublin, Ireland, 25 June 2012

144775 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

They also build domed nests but the resemblance to wrens ends there, though, and they are unrelated belonging to their own family, the <Cinclidae>. They feed on aquatic larvae, such as Caddis Fly larvae, and other invertebrates such as freshwater crustaceans and molluscs.



White-throated Dipper (Cinclus cinclus)

Bushy Park, Dublin, Ireland, 23 June 2012

144541 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Not only do they wade and swim with ease, they will also walk along the bottom of the stream gripping onto stones with their strong feet and even dive, using their wings to propel themselves under water.



White-throated Dipper (Cinclus cinclus)

Bushy Park, Dublin, Ireland, 23 June 2012

144413 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The bird in the third photo is almost completely submerged, and if you look carefully at the fourth photo, the brown shape in the centre is a completely submerged one with only a little eddy to show where it went under the surface.



White-throated Dipper (Cinclus cinclus)

Bushy Park, Dublin, Ireland, 23 June 2012

144487 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

They use their slightly upturned bill to probe for food under rocks and stones. The one in the fifth photo has just surfaced with a tasty grub.



White-throated Dipper (Cinclus cinclus)

Bushy Park, Dublin, Ireland, 23 June 2012

144475 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This same bird only moments before had appeared with a Caddis Fly larva in its characteristic tube, made out of spun silk and often camouflaged with attached sand, sixth photo. The presence of Caddis Fly larvae is supposed to indicate a healthy river system, though the depressing amount of water-borne litter in the River Dodder makes it look otherwise.



White-throated Dipper (Cinclus cinclus)

Bushy Park, Dublin, Ireland, 23 June 2012

144459 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

We saw Dippers on most occasions when we took the dogs for a walk. It's popular jogging and dog-walking spot and the Dippers are used to disturbance and are remarkably approachable, being usually rather shy. They nest here too, and the slight bemused looking individual in the seventh photo is a recently-fledged juvenile, distinguishable by the scaly pattern on the chest, the overall grey colour and the pale legs.



White-throated Dipper (Cinclus cinclus)

Bushy Park, Dublin, Ireland, 23 June 2012

144572 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I've seen Brown Dippers in the Himalayas in Sikkim, White-capped Dippers in the Andes in Ecuador and <American Dippers> in the Cascade Mountains of Northeastern California. The White-throated Dipper is a bird of mainly and often icy, highland streams in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. Seeing them so easily in suburban Dublin, between Terenure and Rathfarnham 6km from the city centre (take the 15B bus!) is truly wonderful.

Best wishes

Ian

#455 Sooty Oystercatcher 17 August 2012

Back to Australia for this week's bird, the Sooty Oystercatcher. <Oystercatchers> are large, conspicuous, noisy and mostly popular waders, though not greatly loved by those who harvest shellfish such as mussels. There are about a dozen closely-related species worldwide, two of which are resident in Australia, the <Pied> and the <Sooty>. Both occur right around the coasts of Australia and Tasmania, with the Sooty being the less common. It is primarily an inhabitant of rocky shores, first photo, while the Pied is found mainly in sandy habitats. At 46-49cm/18-19in the Sooty is slightly shorter on average than the Pied 48-51cm and distinguished by its all black plumage.



Sooty Oystercatcher (Haematopus fuliginosus)

Kurnell, New South Wales, 30 March 2009

85476 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Two races are recognised, though their status and range are uncertain. The nominate race (*fuliginosus*) occurs in southern Australia and is characterised by the narrower red eye-ring and finer bill like the bird in the first photo, taken near Sydney. The northern race (*ophthalmicus*) has a fleshier, more orange eye-ring and a thicker bill. It is supposed to occur from Shark Bay in Western Australia to Lady Elliot Island at the southern end of the Great Barrier Reef in Queensland, but the bird in the second photo taken near Lennox Head in northern NSW fits this description. There is disagreement in the field guides about whether *ophthalmicus* has a longer or shorter bill.



Sooty Oystercatcher (Haematopus fuliginosus)

Lennox Head, New South Wales, 8 January 2010

98274 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The diets of the two species differ. The Pied feeds mainly by probing sand and soil for worm and other burrowing invertebrates. The Sooty feeds mainly on intertidal invertebrates on rocks such as gastropods (third photo), limpets, crustaceans, echinoderms and ascidians.



Sooty Oystercatcher (Haematopus fuliginosus)

Lennox Head, New South Wales, 14 January 2011

114233 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

They will also feed on beaches near rocky headlands and the one in the fourth photo is part of a small flock probing through piles of washed-up seaweed.



Sooty Oystercatcher (Haematopus fuliginosus)

Hamelin Bay, SW Western Australia, 30 August 2006

38812 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

There is some overlap in the habitats of the two species, so they are occasionally found together. The fifth photo show two walking in step along a beach at the end of August and look like more than just good friends. The breeding season of southern Sooties starts in September and the two species have been known to hybridise, so draw your own conclusions.



Sooty & Pied Oystercatchers (H. fuliginosus & H. longirostris)
 Hamelin Bay, SW Western Australia, 30 August 2006 38835 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

A third species, the <South Island (Pied) Oystercatcher> of New Zealand, sometimes turns up on the east coast sometimes and more frequently on Lord Howe and Norfolk Islands. This is subtly different from the Pied Oystercatcher and a challenge for enthusiastic birders to identify.

Best wishes

Ian

#456 Antarctic Tern 28 August 2012

I've been adding photos from the recent Hong Kong, Finland, Ireland trip to the website and have encountered a few that are also on the Australian list such as the <Arctic Tern>. That was my initial choice for this week's bird until I changed it to the closely related but lesser known <Antarctic Tern> as I took some photos of it on the Sub-Antarctic Islands trip last November that I would like to share. It is also on the Australian list and breeds at Macquarie and Heard Islands, though it is regarded as a very rare vagrant to the mainland.



Antarctic Tern (Sterna vittata)

Snares, Southern Islands, New Zealand, 20 November 2011

123319 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

We first encountered them at Snares, on the day after leaving Dunedin, first photo. Snares in a nature reserve and we weren't allowed to land there but, as you can judge from the photo, weather conditions were good and we could get very close to some of the birds and mammals in the Zodiacs. This bird is in breeding plumage and the coral red bill and leg colour is sufficient to distinguish it from the similar breeding <Common> and Arctic Terns, both of which spend the northern winter in the southern hemisphere. These two breed in the northern hemisphere in the northern summer and both the time of the year and the location are also sufficient circumstantial evidence to eliminate birds of those species in breeding plumage. Apart from that, there are other subtler differences relating to size, plumage and proportions with the Antarctic Tern being both larger and stockier than the other two.



Antarctic Tern (Sterna vittata)

Enderby Island, Southern Islands, New Zealand, 21 November 2011

124535 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Some of these difference, such as the extent of transparency and dark webs in the flight feathers can only be seen in flight, second photo. If you're not too worried about identification, then you can appreciate the beauty of all these elegant mid-sized terns and, given their graceful flight and forked tails, it's no wonder that they have been called Sea Swallows. This photo was taken the following day at Enderby Island, one of the Auckland Islands. We were allowed to land there and it proved to be a fascinating place. At a small colony of nesting Antarctic Terns the bird in the third photo is just landing at its neat grassy nest to incubate the two eggs.



Antarctic Tern (Sterna vittata)

Enderby Island, Southern Islands, New Zealand, 21 November 2011

124512 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Both at Snares and on Enderby, there were other similar terns in non-breeding plumage, fourth photo, hanging around the edges of the breeding colony. This is where separation of the three species gets tough and is either a fascinating challenge or a nightmare for keen birders - depending on one's attitude - and it's no surprise that in the British Isles Common and Arctic Terns are collectively and wryly referred to as 'Comic' Terns. Birders have it fairly easy there and don't have to worry about Antarctic Terns (we won't even discuss the South American and Kerguelen Terns which complete the quintet). At Snares, we were tempted to identify this as an Arctic Tern. Arctic Terns, incidentally, easily win the prize for migration, breeding in the higher latitudes of the northern hemisphere and wintering on the coast of Antarctica.



Antarctic Tern (Sterna vittata)

Snares, Southern Islands, New Zealand, 20 November 2011

123336 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It wasn't until we got to Enderby and found more of these non-breeding birds in close proximity to breeding Antarctic Terns that we could compare the two sorts side by side and conclude that they were non-breeding Antarctic Terns. When I got home, the Handbook of Birds of the World, confirmed that in some places one year old birds, not old enough to breed, do occur at colonies. It may well be that the few records of Antarctic Terns for mainland Australia is more a reflection of the difficulties of separating non-breeding birds, that their actual rarity.

Back at the website, recent additional species from the trip that might be of interest include <[Brambling](#)>, <[Masked Laughingthrush](#)>, <[Barnacle Goose](#)>, <[Alexandrine Parakeet](#)> and <[Common Crane](#)>.

Best wishes

Ian

#457 Barnacle Goose 10 September 2012

I'm back in Dublin after the sad and sudden death of my brother-in-law Gerald, so I've chosen a soberly dressed and elegant bird with, for me, an Irish connection, the <[Barnacle Goose](#)>. Barnacle Goose nest in the arctic and winter the more remote areas in Western Europe including the West of Ireland. During a particular severe winter in the 1960s I once saw a flock on the Bull Island in Dublin Bay, a place better

known for as a winter haunt of the closely related <[Brent \(British Isles\)](#) or [Brant \(North America\) Goose](#)>.

On the last day of my trip to Finland in June, I came across a flock grazing near the beach in Hanko on the south east coast. I assumed that it was a feral flock as they were very approachable and I discovered only later that Barnacle Geese have been nesting on islands in the Baltic for the past 40 years.



Barnacle Goose (Branta leucopsis)

Hanko, South Coast, Finland, 20 June 2012

143999 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

They are relatively small with a length of 55-70cm/22-28in and, I think, very beautiful. The specific name *leucopsis* means 'white-faced' and the genus *Branta* comprises the mainly black and white geese including the <[Brant/Brent](#)> and the <[Canadian](#)>.

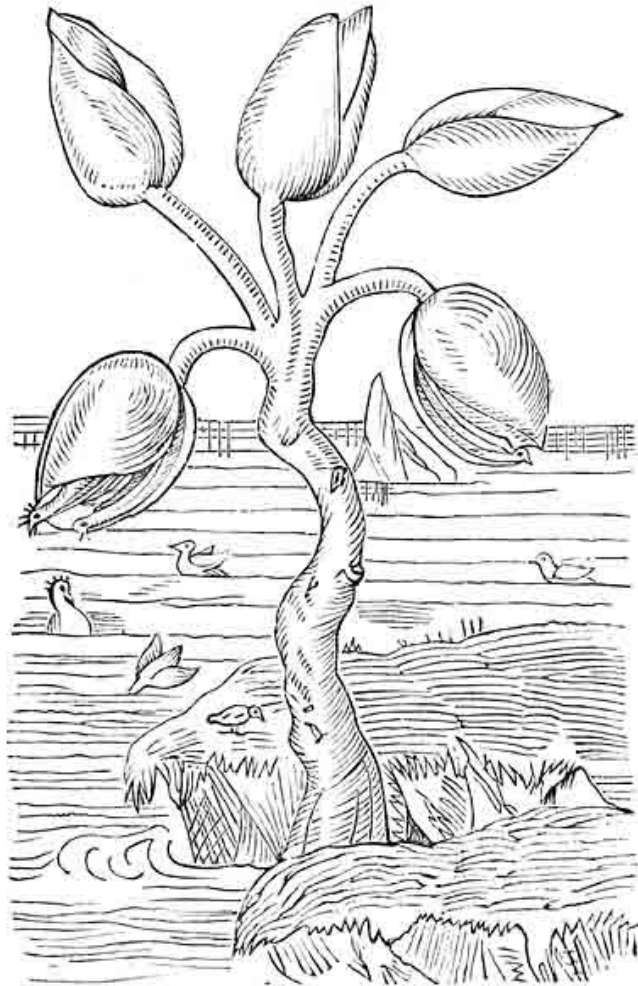


Barnacle Goose (Branta leucopsis)

Hanko, South Coast, Finland, 20 June 2012

144015 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The name 'Barnacle' was originally applied to the goose not the crustacean and the two are linked by a strange myth that developed in the middle ages when the nesting sites of the goose were unknown and the nature of bird migration was not understood. To explain the mysterious appearance of these geese, it was proposed that they hatched from the goose-like stalk barnacles *Lepas anserifera* ('goose-bearing') which grows on drift wood. The confusion was confounded by the notion that the goose barnacle was actually a plant and sometimes called the goose tree, below, reproduced from <<[Wikipedia](#)>>.



The myth naturally had religious consequences as it was argued that the Barnacle Geese were not of animal origin so not really fowl. So, eating the goose on meat-less fast days was considered by some Christians to be acceptable. The Jewish faith took a different approach and ruled that they were kosher and must be slaughtered appropriately.

Best wishes

Ian

#458 Brent/Brant Goose 28 September 2012

My apologies for the long delay since the past posting on the Barnacle Goose. I'm now back home in North Queensland after the unplanned trip to Ireland following the death of my brother in law Gerald and resuming my normal life.

On 6 September we took the dogs for a walk along the strand at the Bull Island in Dublin Bay. As we were leaving, I was surprised to see a flock of [Brent Geese](#), close relatives of the [Barnacle Goose](#), so early in the season. Brent Geese are common winter visitors to Ireland but do not usually arrive until much later in September or early October. A week later we visited a strand just north of

Clogherhead in Co. Louth and there was another, more accessible flock there and the first photo shows three adults feeding on 'sea lettuce', a green alga of the genus *Ulva* which, along with the sea grass *Zostera*, often called eel grass, is the main food of Brent Geese in winter.



Brent/Brant Goose (Branta bernicla)

Clogherhead, Co. Louth, Ireland, 13 September 2012

140471 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

These are adults, recognisable by the white 'necklaces' and the dark, unstriped wings. Different races of Brent/Brant Geese - 'Brent' in the British Islands, 'Brant' in North America - vary mainly in the colour of the breast. These are Pale-bellied Brent Geese - race *hrota* - and most of these nest in Greenland and winter in Ireland, one of few species with a transatlantic migration. The nominate Dark-bellied Brent Goose (*bernicla*) breeds mainly in Russia and winters in northeastern Europe, including Great Britain, and is rare in Ireland. Just after seeing these birds, I read an online newspaper article about the early arrival of Brent Geese in Strangford Lough in Co. Down, Northern Ireland, and the writer suggested that favourable tail winds during migration had maybe caused the birds to skip their normal stopover in Iceland, and fly straight to their wintering grounds.



Brent/Brant Goose (Branta bernicla)

Clogherhead, Co. Louth, Ireland, 13 September 2012

140480 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Among the 70 or so birds in the flock, there were several juveniles including a party of 2 adults and 3 juveniles that stayed together and were maybe a family. The second photo shows three of these birds. The one on the right in the foreground is an adult with dark wings, even though its necklace is rather indistinct. The other two lack the necklace (or are just beginning to acquire one), have stripy wings and have darker mottled rather than scaly breasts. At this age, the juveniles are indistinguishable from Dark-bellied Brent Geese and I initially mistakenly identified them as Dark-bellied. The third photo shows this party coming in to land, looking for all the world like a Peter Scott painting. The mountains in the near background on the left are the Cooley Mountains in northern Co. Louth with the Mourne Mountains in Co. Down in the background.



Brent/Brant Goose (Branta bernicla)

Clogherhead, Co. Louth, Ireland, 13 September 2012

140480 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

With a length of 55-62cm/22-24in, these are smaller than Barnacle Geese and comparable in size to <Mallard>. Juvenile birds acquire the necklace and breast colour of the adult birds in late September or October, but retain the white wing stripes and are referred to as first winter birds. The fourth photo, taken a few years ago on a wintry January day, shows a first winter bird, complete with necklace and striped wings being followed by two dark-winged adults.



Brent/Brant Goose (Branta bernicla)

Malahide, Co. Dublin, Ireland, 5 January 2009

84271 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I've never seen Dark-bellied Brent Geese, but in northern Alaska in June 2008 I came across the western North American race, the Black Brant (*nigricans*) on its breeding ground on the tundra, fifth photo. The Brent Goose breeds as far north as any bird species in the world at locations such as Ellesmere Island, the northernmost island in Canada, and in Spitsbergen, only 10° or 11° from the Arctic Pole.



Brent/Brant Goose (Branta bernicla)

Barrow, Alaska, USA, 20 June 2008

66890 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This has a very broad necklace and dark brown breast almost merging with the dark brown neck. This is easier to see in the sixth photo. This has sometimes been treated as a separate species.



Brent/Brant Goose (Branta bernicla)

Barrow, Alaska, USA, 20 June 2008

66836 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In recent decades the populations of Brent Geese have increased greatly. There are about 115,000 Black Brants and about 40,000 Pale-bellied winter in Ireland and 90,000 Dark-bellied winter in Britain.

Best wishes

Ian

#459 European Honey Buzzard 13 October 2012

I had a welcome email a couple of weeks ago pointing out an identification error on the Birdway website, thank you Tom of Luxembourg, pointing out that the photos I'd taken of a Buzzard in Alderney in the Channel Islands in 2005 was not a mere Common Buzzard but a much more interesting juvenile <European Honey Buzzard>. By way of excuses, they do look rather similar and at the time I had <Common Buzzards> on the brain as I had just been trying unsuccessfully to photograph Common Buzzards in Ireland.



European Honey Buzzard (Pernis apivorus)

Alderney, Channel Islands, 15 October 2005

20614 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Honey Buzzards are very rare nesting birds in Britain (30-50 pairs) but reasonably common in continental Europe. They are summer visitors, wintering in sub-Saharan Africa and often seen on passage and I was in Alderney in September, a good site for migrating birds including raptors. Both species have very variable plumage, but the Honey Buzzard is slightly larger, longer-necked, longer-tailed and has a slim neck and holds its head forward giving the bird a more cuckoo-like silhouette. It also supposed to hold its wings differently when gliding, second photo, but the subtlety of soaring on 'smoothly down-curved flattish wings lacking an obvious bend at the carpal joints' rather evades me.



European Honey Buzzard (Pernis apivorus)

Alderney, Channel Islands, 15 October 2005

20615 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

They get their name from their preferred food, the larvae of bees and (mainly) wasps though they eat a more varied diet when these are not available. The specific name *apivorus* means 'bee-eating' - more accurate than 'honey' - and has the same Latin roots as the 'vore' part of carnivore and the 'api' part of apiarist. The generic *Pernis* comes from the Greek for 'hawk', but taxonomists are not too neurotic about combining different languages.



European Honey Buzzard (Pernis apivorus)

Antinpera, Kuusamo District, Finland, 15 June 2012

143416 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I saw very few raptors in Finland this year, but I did see several Honey Buzzards including this distant, slightly moth-eaten adult in the third photo. At least I identified this one correctly, though I was unjustifiably pleased in thinking I'd photographed a new species.

Back home in North Queensland, I'm working on the final revisions to the photographs for the digital version of the Pizzey and Knight Field Guide to the Birds of Australia which should be published soon - you may have seen the full page advertisement for it from Gibbon Multimedia Australia <<<http://www.gibbonmm.com.au>>> in the September issue of Birdlife Australia. I've recently received the mobile version of the equivalent South African product Roberts VII Multimedia Birds of Southern Africa <<<http://www.sabirding.co.za>>>. It's a splendid product, a veritable encyclopaedia, brilliantly organised and available across many platforms (iPad, iPhone, Android, Windows) so don't go to Southern Africa without it. It augurs very well for the Australian product, but naturally I keep you posted on its progress.

Best wishes

Ian

#460 Common Redshank 31 October 2012

Here's one for the wader enthusiasts: the <Common Redshank>, well 'common' in Eurasia and rather rare in Australia. It occurred to me when I was photographing these birds in Ireland in September, that, for birders, the appeal of a particular species is very dependent on location. Common Redshanks are noteworthy in Australia (I remember looking quite hard before finding one in Broome) but perhaps a nuisance in Ireland because they're ubiquitous, nervous and noisy and often put more unusual waders to flight when you least want them to.



Common Redshank (Tringa totanus)

Carlingford, Co. Louth, Ireland, 16 September 2012

140648 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The one in the first photo is foraging at low tide in the harbour at Carlingford Lough, an attractive bay between the Republic and Northern Ireland on the east coast and overlooked on the northern side by the Mourne Mountains. The two in the second photo are feeding in the mudflats in the estuary of the River Boyne some distance downstream from where the famous Battle of the Boyne took place in 1690. The bird on the right has just taken a tiny crab.



Common Redshank (Tringa totanus)

River Boyne, Co. Louth, Ireland, 16 September 2012

140626 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The birds in the first two photos are in non-breeding plumage. Some wader species undergo spectacular colour changes when breeding, but in the Common Redshank the markings just become more pronounced, as in the third photo, taken in Portugal in the month of June some years ago.



Common Redshank (Tringa totanus)

Castro Marim, The Algarve, Portugal, 3 June 2007

53804 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The bright red legs, or shanks, make this a relatively easy wader to identify. Its ringing call is also distinctive and it shows a characteristic wing pattern in flight with white panels on the rear edge of the wing, as in the fourth photo, quite different from the wing bar or plain wing of most waders.



Common Redshank (Tringa totanus)

Castro Marim, The Algarve, Portugal, 3 June 2007

53788 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The generic name *Tringa* is from the ancient Greek *trungas* 'a thrush-sized bird mentioned by Aristotle, not further identified, but taken by later authors to be a <sandpiper>, a <wagtail> or a <dipper>'. That's equivalent to saying that this fruit is either an orange, a pineapple or a banana. And *totanus* comes from the Italian name *totano* for a Redshank. Sometimes the derivation of scientific names is informative, sometimes less so.

Best wishes

Ian

#461 (Southern Cassowary) and Solar Eclipse 15 November 2012

It's unusual for my primary photographic goal on a trip to be other than a bird, but birds this week in northern Queensland have been overshadowed - pun intended - by yesterday's solar eclipse. Residents of the Townsville district had to face the difficult decision on whether to remain here where the probability of clear skies was great but be satisfied with a 96% eclipse or travel to Cairns where the weather forecast was cloudy but the eclipse was total.



Solar Eclipse

Machan's Beach, Cairns, Northeastern Queensland, 14 November 2012

2634 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Despite misgivings about the weather, we went to Cairns and in the end it was a close call. We awoke at 5:30am - totality was due at 6:38 - to an unpromising looking sunrise followed by a shower of rain and then headed off to the beach, equipped with solar spectacles and umbrellas. Just before totality, a cloud obscured the sun and the first photo was taken seconds before it was due, at 6:37'37", according to my iPhone. The suspense was riveting until the cloud moved aside like a slow theatre curtain to reveal a total eclipse in all its glory and all the onlookers cheered. The second photo was taken, clearly not with the iPhone, exactly 40 seconds later.



Solar Eclipse

Machan's Beach, Cairns, Northeastern Queensland, 14 November 2012

150793 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

As well as the corona surrounding the sun, only ever visible from earth during total eclipse, you can see several solar flares between 9 and 10 o'clock and near 12 o'clock. The third photo was taken another 7 seconds later, at 8:38'24", and the sun is already reappearing producing the 'diamond ring' effect. This happens when a relatively tiny portion of the sun - a Bailey's bead - is visible through an irregularity on the surface of the moon - a mountain valley or a crater.



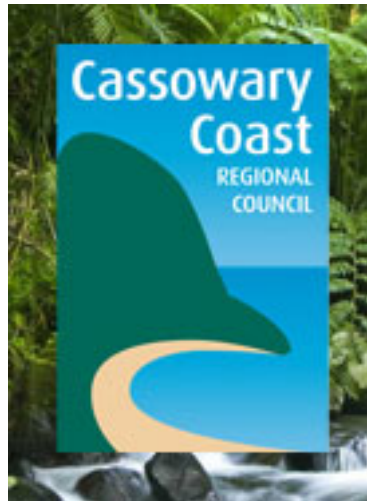
Solar Eclipse

Machan's Beach, Cairns, Northeastern Queensland, 14 November 2012

150796 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

For the photographically-minded, I was unsure what exposure to use and whether automatic exposure would be correct, so I used 'bracketing', taking 3 photos with exposures ranging from 1 stop below to 1 above the set exposure and adjusting the set exposure based on the results of the first photos. I got the best results at -2.7 stops, f5.6 at 1/100 and 1/125sec at ISO 100. I used a tripod.

On the way to Cairns we spent a night at Etty Bay on the 'Cassowary Coast', the name of the local government region that covers Mission Beach and Innisfail. Etty Bay is, I think, the best place to see <[Cassowaries](#)>, as at least one regular patrols the camping and picnic area looking for scraps of food. The Cassowary Coast has the following logo, and I wanted to take a photo of a Cassowary that emulated the sign (which emulates a Cassowary).



Cassowaries don't normally frequent beaches, but this one knows that it's worth checking for picnic scraps.



Southern Cassowary (Casuarius casuarius)

Etty Bay, Cassowary Coast, Northeastern Queensland, 11 November 2012

150694 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The one in the second photo might make a good poster for a qualified welcome to the Cassowary Coast!



Southern Cassowary (Casuarius casuarius)

Etty Bay, Cassowary Coast, Northeastern Queensland, 11 November 2012

150703 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Southern Cassowary featured as bird of the week in 2006. Here is one of the photos that I used then, also taken at Etty Bay, for those of you who have joined the list since then.



Southern Cassowary (Casuarus casuarinus)

Etty Bay, North Queensland, 10 June 2006

C34405 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Best wishes

Ian

#462 Powerful Owl 9 December 2012

My apologies again for a tardy bird of the week, so here is something special. Well, special for me, anyway, as it has been a serious bogey bird for me. All addicted birders and bird photographers have their bogeys, in the sense of '<<[an evil or mischievous spirit, a cause of annoyance or harassment](#)>>' usually a species that is invisible to the victim or hides whenever the victim is around.



Powerful Owl (Ninox strenua)

Sydney, New South Wales, 5 December 2012

150894 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

<Powerful Owls> first cast an evil spell on me on 11 February 1999 when one in Pennant Hills Park made my film camera malfunction so that the entire film was hopelessly underexposed - you can see the wicked gleam in its eye below. As soon as I picked up the film from the chemist the following day, I went back to Pennant Hills Park but the owl was no longer there or no longer visible.



Shortly after that I moved from Sydney and switched to digital photography (nowadays we take instant photographic feedback for granted). Since then, whenever I've visited Sydney I've looked for Powerful Owls in all their usual haunts - Pennant Hills Park, Mitchell Park, Beecroft, Warriewood, Royal Botanic Gardens, Royal National Park, etc. - without success.



Powerful Owl (Ninox strenua)

Sydney, New South Wales, 5 December 2012

150840 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Last Tuesday I gave a talk on parrots to Birding NSW in Sydney and inquired about POs. Yes, one had been seen in its favourite tree, the White Fig, near the entrance to Government House the previous Saturday. I went there on Wednesday and searched the tree for at least 20 minutes but the owl remained invisible until I decided to leave. Delighted with its success, it let its guard down, the spell weakened and I got the briefest visual sensation, like a shimmering mirage, of a barred tail.

Powerful Owls are big 60-65cm/24-26in in length, it was then quite visible from the ground and not very high up, so a spell is the only explanation.



Powerful Owl (Ninox strenua)

Port Hacking, New South Wales, 6 December 2012

151140 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The next day, I went birding with Madeleine Murray and we abandoned plans to look for the owl (they're quite visible to her) and went instead to Port Hacking, south of Sydney, where, lo and behold, we found another one, or to be more accurate Mad found it after I'd walked straight past it as the spell hadn't entirely dissipated - it normally does so quite quickly after it has been broken once.



Powerful Owl (Ninox strenua)

Port Hacking, New South Wales, 6 December 2012

151333 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Powerful Owl is the largest of the Hawk Owls (genus *Ninox*) and exceeded in size only by the world's largest owls such as the Grey Grey and the larger <Eagle Owls>. It is found in eastern and southeastern Australia usually within 200km of the coast from central Queensland to eastern South Australia. It has large territories ranging in size from 3-15 square kilometres so it is nowhere common and is listed as Vulnerable. However, it seems to be quite tolerant of selective logging and can survive in patchy forests. It feeds mainly on arboreal mammals such as possums, but will also take flying foxes (fruit bats) and roosting birds.

Best wishes

Ian

#463 Green Catbird 18 December 2012

My trip to Sydney produced another bird on my wanted list that I had taken only poor photos of before, the <Green Catbird>. It's not rare or, given its calls, hard to find in its favourite habitat of temperate and sub-tropical rainforest, but most birds apart from things like Brush-Turkeys are hard to photograph in rainforest. It's call is not as one might expect a gentle miaowing but more like a cat being given an injection at the vets or those rude sounds made with balloons and as such, is one of the delights of east coast rainforest.



Green Catbird (Ailuroedus crassirostris)

Port Hacking, NSW, 6 December 2012

151082 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Australian Catbirds, unrelated to American Catbirds, are members of the <Bowerbird family>. Unlike their flamboyant cousins, they form pair-bonds and the males help in domestic chores like nest-building. So, eschewing wild mating behaviour, they don't build wonderful bowers or collect flashy toys. Everything has its price, one supposes, but the call is some compensation. At 24-32cm/10-13in in length, they're comparable in size to <Satin Bowerbirds> and, if silent in foliage, can be confused with female or immature members of that species.



Green Catbird (Ailuroedus crassirostris)

Port Hacking, NSW, 6 December 2012

151057 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The generic name *Ailuroedus* comes from the Greek *ailouros* for cat and *odos* for a singer, which is stretching the definition of singer slightly, but maybe singing embraces yodelling. The range of the Green Catbird extends from the south coast of New South Wales (Narooma) to near Gladstone on the central coast of Queensland. In tropical Queensland it is replaced by the very similar-looking and similar-sounding <Spotted Catbird> which featured as Bird of the Week in 2006 (below).



Spotted Catbird (Ailuroedus melanotis)

Julatten, Far North Queensland, 12 June 2006

C34883 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The 'Spotted' presumably refers to the stronger markings on the breast as the Green Catbird has more obvious white spots on the back (second photo) but the main difference is the darker markings on the face of the Spotted Catbird. As their ranges don't overlap, distinguishing between them isn't an issue. The Spotted Catbird extends from Paluma Range National Park, near Bluewater where I live to Cooktown and there is a separate population, recognised as a different race with darker face markings, on Cape York (e.g. Iron Range). In the past, both Green and Spotted were treated as a single species and some of the splitters would like to make the Cape York race a full species, another tick I suppose. There are other races of the Spotted in New Guinea and another species, the White-eared Catbird, *A. buccoides*.

Best wishes

Ian

#464 Mistletoebird 24 December 2012

As an ex-pat, I've never really got used to a hot Christmas in Australia. Here we sing carols about open sleighs, holly and ivy and the shops decorate their windows with fake snow, but it all seems a little contrived when the temperature is 31.4°C/88.5°F, the average maximum daily temperature for December in Townsville. We do, however, have mistletoe - lots of it growing on Eucalyptus trees - and, even better,

<Mistletoebirds>, so I've chosen it as our Christmas bird of the week. It has featured as bird of the week before (August 2003 and June 2004) but originality is not a conspicuous feature of Christmas.



Mistletoebird (Dicaeum hirundinaceum)

Townsville, Northeastern Queensland, 25 December 2007

61180 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

What were you doing under the Mistletoe on Christmas Day 2007? I was photographing the male Mistletoebird in the first photo gorging on a luscious Christmas lunch of Mistletoe berry. They're tiny birds (9.5-11cm/3.75-4.3in) but have huge appetites, mistletoe berries not being very nutritious but they do the mistletoe a service by depositing rapidly-digested seed-containing excreta on the branches of the host trees. They'll also eat the fruit of other plants (the fruits in photos 2 and 3 are not mistletoe), nectar and insects.



Mistletoebird (Dicaeum hirundinaceum)

Bluewater, Northeastern Queensland, 10 January 2006

28978 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The males are striking with their Christmassy red breasts and vents, and blackish-blue iridescent backs and the specific name *hirundinaceum* means 'swallow-like', *Hirunda* being the generic name for typical swallows. The females (third photo) are a more subtle grey, but have reddish vents.



Mistletoebird (Dicaeum hirundinaceum)

Bluewater, Northeastern Queensland, 28 May 2005

15679 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Mistletoebirds build exquisite pouch-shaped hanging nests and the fourth photo shows the young take after their parents in continually wanting food. Their nests are similar to those of Sunbirds and they are often placed in the same family [Nectariniidae](#). Mistletoebirds are actually Flowerpeckers (Dicaeum) and are sometimes put in their own family, the [Dicaeidae](#).



Mistletoebird (Dicaeum hirundinaceum)

Jourama Falls, Northeastern Queensland, 24 November 2002

04136 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Being so unChristmassy here, I find that it sneaks up on me un-noticed. Last year, all my Christmas cards arrived late, so my New Year Resolution was to not send any more and the money saved is going to the <<[Australian Wildlife Conservancy](http://www.australianwildlifeconservancy.org.au)>>, which I think has the best record for conservation and reserve management in Australia. So, I wish you an electronic Very Peaceful Christmas and a Lovely New Year. Just remember the Mistletoebird and its appetite when you contemplate the third helping of Christmas pudding tomorrow!

Ian

Year 2013: #465 to #490

#465 Little Bronze-Cuckoo 7 January 2013

Bronze-Cuckoos have been poorly represented in the Bird of the Week, so here is the <Little Bronze-Cuckoo>, the smallest of the four species (if we included the related but dissimilar Black-eared Cuckoo) that occur in Australia. All the Bronze-Cuckoos are unobtrusive and are easily overlooked, but the various species have distinctive advertising calls which reveal their presence if you know what to listen for. Male Little Bronze are easy to distinguish visually as they have startlingly red eye-rings and reddish iris (first photo).



Little Bronze Cuckoo (Chrysococcyx / Chalcites minutillus)

Adelaide River, Northern Territory, 5 September 2009

91441 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The females (second photo) are more nondescript with cream eye-rings and brown eyes, but are distinguishable from the <Shining Bronze> and <Horsfield's Bronze> by smaller size (14-15cm/5.5-6in length) and shorter - 'broken' - bars on the breast and belly.



Little Bronze Cuckoo (Chrysococcyx / Chalcites minutillus)

Ingham, Northeastern Queensland, 11 April 2011

115209 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

All the Bronze-Cuckoos seem very partial to caterpillars and the bird in the third photo (the same individual as in the second) has just snared a juicy lunch. Being cuckoos, the Bronze-Cuckoos are nest parasites like their larger cousins and lay their eggs in the nest of other species. The Little Bronze uses the domed nests of Geryones, particularly the <Large-billed Gerygone>.



Little Bronze Cuckoo (Chrysococcyx / Chalcites minutillus)

Ingham, Northeastern Queensland, 11 April 2011

115187 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Little Bronze-Cuckoo has several races and the most distinctive of these, the rufous-tinged race *russatus* resident in coastal Queensland used to be treated as a separate species, Gould's Bronze-Cuckoo until the two were lumped by Christidis and Boles in 2008. The bird in the fourth photo, photographed near Townsville, is a female *russatus* and shows the characteristic rufous wash on the breast and tail. The male in the first photo was photographed in the Northern Territory and is a member of the nominate race *minutillus*. Another non-rufous race *barnardi* breeds in northeastern NSW and southeastern Queensland and migrates north in winter, and the female in the second and third photos is probably one of these.



Little Bronze Cuckoo (Chrysococcyx / Chalcites minutillus)

Townsville, Northeastern Queensland, 12 July 2008

80051 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I mentioned the calls as being distinctive. They are all high-pitched but that of the Little Bronze is described as a descending series of 3-6 notes and a high-pitched trill. Horsfield's has descending whistle and the Shining Bronze has a variety of calls but the most unusual is a series of whistles with a rising inflection that is supposed to sound like someone whistling for their dog.

I've recently put a musical app called Pitch Analyser on my iPad, and I thought it would be amusing to use it to analyse the calls of these Bronze-Cuckoos. The descending series of the Little Bronze starts close to G7# and ends on E7 or F7, over three octaves above middle C (C4) and in the highest octave on a standard piano keyboard. Horsfield's whistle slurs down over nearly an octave from C8 (the highest note on the piano) to E7 or D7. The Shining Bronze also has descending whistle which starts a little lower than Horsfield's on A7 but also goes down to E7 or D7, while the dog-calling whistle ascends from F7# or G7 to A7 or A7#. The trill of the Little Bronze is F7 or F7# and remarkably constant: it would have no trouble with the famous F6 of the Queen of the Night in the Magic Flute, a whole octave lower. Just thought you'd like to know :-).

Best wishes,

Ian

#466 Channel-billed Cuckoo 21 January 2013

Last week [#465](#), sorry fortnight, we had the <[Little Bronze-Cuckoo](#)>, the smallest Australian Cuckoo. Here is the <[Channel-billed Cuckoo](#)>, the largest parasitic cuckoo in Australia, and the world for that matter, with a length to 65cm/26in and a weight exceeding 900g/2lbs. Coucals, such as the <[Pheasant Coucal](#)>, to 75cm, are larger and are now included in the Cuckoo family, but are not parasitic.



Channel-billed Cuckoo (Scythrops novaehollandiae)

Hervey's Range, Northeastern Queensland, 23 November 2012

150817 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The bird in the first photo is an adult, distinguishable by the grey back (no buff patches) and the red eye and facial skin. The generic name *Scythrops* means 'angry eye' in Greek. The second photo shows a juvenile and you can see the buff patches on the wing, head and throat, though the grey facial skin looks as if it is beginning to acquire the red colour of the adult. This photo was taken in April when the birds would about to migrate to New Guinea.



Channel-billed Cuckoo (Seythrop's novaehollandiae)

Bluewater, Northeastern Queensland, 8 April 2006

32335 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Channel-billed Cuckoos lay their large eggs in the nests of Currawongs, Crows, Ravens, Magpies and even Sparrowhawks. The third photo, which appeared as the bird of the week in 2005, shows a very demanding chick with a very nerve-wracked looking foster parent <[Pied Currawong](#)> in the Sydney Metropolitan Area. The adult Cuckoos may break the eggs of the host bird but the chicks do not usually evict the eggs or chicks. Instead they out-compete them for food.



Channel-billed Cuckoo (Seythrop's novaehollandiae)

North Narrabeen, New South Wales, 25 December 2005

28530 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Channel-bills are mainly migratory, though some are thought to remain in the Northern Territory throughout the winter. The juvenile in the fourth photo was being fed by Torresian Crow foster parents in the Top End in early September, so it would have hatched in July.



Channel-billed Cuckoo (Seythrops novaehollandiae)

Mary River, Northern Territory, 5 September 2009

91414 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Typically of Cuckoos, Channel-bills are quite shy and usually remain hidden in foliage but their loud trumpeting calls give them away. They do fly in the open, particular before dusk and look very striking - their long tails and long pointed wings look rather raptor-like, though the large bill doesn't, and they are often likened to flying crosses.

Best wishes

Ian

#467 Yellow Wattlebird 21 January 2013

I was going to use some recent photos of the <Little Wattlebird> as the bird of the week, but then I found that no Wattlebird has featured as BotW so we may as well start with the most spectacular, the <Yellow Wattlebird>, endemic to Tasmania where it replaces the <Red Wattlebird> of southern mainland Australia.



Yellow Wattlebird (Anthochaera paradoxa)

Bruny Island, Tasmania, 4 December 2011

128171 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Not only is it the largest of the four species of Wattlebird but with a length of 37-45cm/14-18in it is the largest member of the Honeyeater family <Meliphagidae> easily out-classing the largest Friarbird the <Helmeted> (32-37cm). It also has much longer wattles than its cousin the Red Wattlebird. Neither the Little nor the closely-related <Western Wattlebird> have wattles.



Yellow Wattlebird (Anthochaera paradoxa)

Bruny Island, Tasmania, 4 December 2011

128177 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It is reasonably common in its native Tasmania, except along the west coast, and also occurs on King Island in Bass Strait. It feeds mainly on nectar but will also take insects and feed on fruit in orchards. The bird in the third photo is probing under bark for insects or grubs.



Yellow Wattlebird (Anthochaera paradoxa)

Bruny Island, Tasmania, 4 December 2011

128181 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

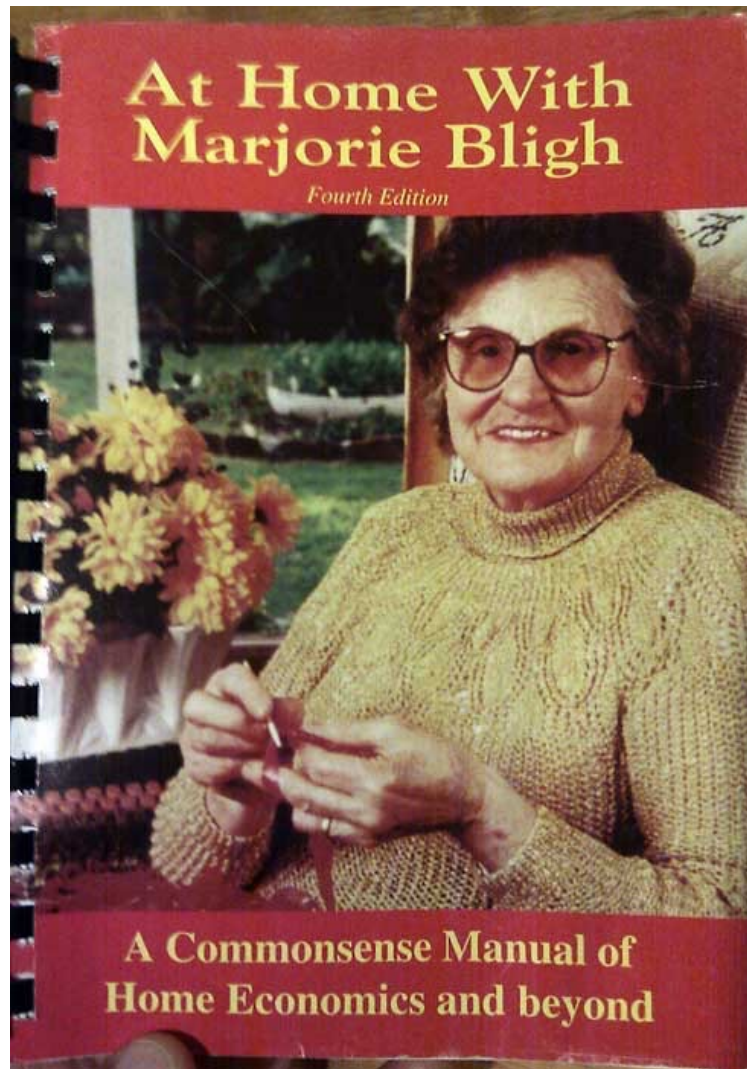
All the wattlebirds are very noisy and the Yellow is no exception. Pizzey and Knight describe its call as 'harsh, gurgling, guttural like coughing/vomiting' and you can't get much less flattering than that. Some non-birding friends of mine called Wattlebirds near their holiday cottage 'Yobbo-birds' (either Red or Little), which appealed to me and, given that two of the four species don't have wattles, seems to me a much better name. So, herewith the Yellow Yobbo-bird!

Best wishes

Ian

#468 Tasmanian Native-hen 14 February 2013

The last edition [#467](#) featured the Tasmanian endemic, the [Yellow Wattlebird](#). A former colleague of mine, Gary, who comes from Tasmania, sent me the following recipe for cooking Yellow Wattlebirds from this priceless book by Tasmanian author Marjorie Bligh, and I thought it might interest you, at the risk of putting you off your food.



"Brush each bird with warm butter after plucking them. (Do not clean birds in any other way; their insides are left intact.) Tie a thin slice of fat bacon over each breast. Put in a fry pan (electric) on a wire grid and cook slowly for 5 to 6 hours. Take off wire grid after 3 to 4 hours and cook in the fat that has dripped off them. Baste often. Serve on buttered toast."

I Googled Marjorie Bligh and sent this reply to Gary:

Did you know that Marjorie Bligh is the subject of a new book entitled: Housewife Superstar: The Very Best of Marjorie Bligh? She sounds quite a woman. How's this for praise:

'I don't think Edna has admired anyone as much as she admires Marjorie Bligh'
Barry Humphries

Would you like another Tasmanian endemic for next week's bird?

Gary, not one to resist throwing down the gauntlet, replied: Yes [...] I would be especially pleased if you could manage the local endemic sub-species of emu.



This 'restoration' by <<[John Keulemans](#)>> was the best I could do as the request arrived about 160 years too late. So, failing that, here is another flightless Tasmanian endemic, the <[Tasmanian Native-hen](#)>.



Tasmanian Native-hen (Gallinula mortierii)

Mount Field, Tasmania, 6 December 2011

128775 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The bird in the photo is an adult with the characteristic slaty-blue breast, chestnut upper-parts and tail. Unlike the Emu, Tasmanian Native-hens remain quite common in eastern and northern Tasmania where there is plenty of suitable grassy habitat. In pre-historic times they also occurred on the mainland but like the Thylacine and the Tasmanian Devil became extinct relatively recently, perhaps as a result of the introduction of dingos.



Tasmanian Native-hen (Gallinula mortierii)

Lenah Valley, Tasmania, 1 December 2011

127823 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

They are large - up to 50cm/20in in length - flightless members of the family <Rallidae> (which includes moorhens, coots, rails and crakes). Although they can't fly, they can swim well and can dive to escape from predators. Like other members of the family, the chicks are black and fluffy and active as soon as they are hatched. The third photo shows a young chick under the watchful eye of an adult, already grazing on the young shoots of grass and herbs that are the staple diet of the species. They also eat seeds, invertebrates and small frogs.



Tasmanian Native-hen (Gallinula mortierii)

Lenah Valley, Tasmania, 1 December 2011

127841 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The bird in the fourth photo is a sub-adult, and has not yet achieved the full colouration of adult birds.



Tasmanian Native-hen (Gallinula mortierii)

Lenah Valley, Tasmania, 1 December 2011

127816 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I'd always assumed that Native-hens got their name from their appearance. The Wattle Bird recipe set me wondering whether the 'hen' part of the name has more to do with taste!

Best wishes

Ian

#469 Green Rosella 26 February 2013

The two recent Tasmanian birds of the week seem to have been popular so here is another one, the <[Green Rosella](#)>. I spent an enjoyable week in a rented campervan in Tasmania in December 2011 on the way back from the Sub-antarctic trip chasing Tasmanian specialties. After that trip, the Tasmanian species got somewhat eclipsed by the penguins, albatrosses and other seabirds as choices for bird of the week, so I'm making amends now.



Green Rosella (Platycercus caledonicus)

Tinderbox Peninsula, Tasmania, 5 December 2011

128426 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

At up to 37cm/14.6in in length, it's the largest of the Rosellas, being marginally larger on average than its close relative the <Crimson Rosella> which it replaces in Tasmania and some islands in Bass Strait. Males are generally larger than females and there are subtle between the sexes with males having relatively larger upper mandibles and broader heads (first photo) and females having more orange on the cheeks (second photo) though most of the field guides don't distinguish between the sexes.



Green Rosella (Platycercus caledonicus)

Tinderbox Peninsula, Tasmania, 5 December 2011

128599 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Juveniles, third photo, are distinctive with duller more olive plumage and, in flight, pale wing stripes. This bird was in the company of the adult in the second photo, and the one in the first photo was in the same area, so I assumed that they comprised a family.



Green Rosella (Platycercus caledonicus)

Tinderbox Peninsula, Tasmania, 5 December 2011

128605 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Green Rosellas are quite common throughout Tasmania, showing a preference for highland forest, though these ones were near the coast on the Tinderbox Peninsula south of Hobart, a good place to search for all the Tasmanian endemics.

The specific name *caledonicus* was used by the German naturalist Johann Gmelin in 1788, who mistakenly believed that the type specimen had been collected in New Caledonia.

Confusion is the name of the game in Rosella terminology, and their taxonomy has changed over the years. The <Crimson Rosella> has two races which differ greatly in plumage and both the 'Yellow Rosella' of Southwest NSW and the 'Adelaide Rosella' of South Australia have been regarded as separate species in the past.



'Yellow' Rosella (Platycercus elegans flaveolus)

Hattah Kulkynne, Victoria, 13 April 2009

87841 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Yellow Rosella (fourth photo) looks quite like the Green Rosella - and not at all like a <Crimson Rosella> - but the Green, given its geographical isolation, has been given the benefit of the doubt and retained as a separate species. This is just as well, politically anyway, as it's the avian symbol of Tasmania and deserves specific status.

Best wishes

Ian

#470 Tasmanian Thornbill 13 March 2013

Are you good at those spot the differences games where you need to find usually ten subtle differences between two drawings? If so, this bird of the week, another in the series of Tasmanian endemics the <Tasmanian Thornbill>, is for you. The first two photos are of a Tasmanian Thornbill, the third is of its closest relative the <Brown Thornbill>, which also occurs in Tasmania.



Tasmanian Thornbill (Acanthiza ewingii)

Russell Falls, Tasmania, 6 December 2011

128828 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The differences are as follows.

The Tasmanian Thornbill:

- has tan rather than brownish-buff forehead
- has shorter bill
- has darker grey breast
- has mottled rather than streaked breast
- has buffish rather than whitish edges to flight feathers
- has white rather than buff flanks
- has longer tail
- harsher calls and more disjointed song (otherwise very similar)
- prefers denser, wetter habitats (we're getting desperate here)



Tasmanian Thornbill (Acanthiza ewingii)

Russell Falls, Tasmania, 6 December 2011

128813 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The reward? Another tick on your Australian list.



Brown Thornbill (Acanthiza pusilla)

Tindrobex Peninsula, Tasmania, 5 December 2011

128664 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Best wishes

Ian

#471 Strong-billed Honeyeater 27 March 2013

Still on the subject of Tasmanian endemics, Tasmania has 4 honeyeater that aren't found on the mainland. We had the <Yellow Wattlebird> several weeks ago #467; the other three comprise the <Yellow-throated Honeyeater> and two of the seven members of the genus *Melithreptus* : the <Black-headed Honeyeater> and this week's choice the <Strong-billed Honeyeater>.



Strong-billed Honeyeater (Melithreptus validirostris)

Tinderbox Peninsula, Tasmania, 5 December 2011

128445 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Melithreptus means 'honey-fed' and is like *Meliphaga* a synonym for 'Honeyeater' (the Honeyeater family is Meliphagidae) and most members of the *Melithreptus* genus feed on nectar to varying degrees. The Strong-billed is different, however, and feeds mainly on insects and other invertebrates.

It uses its sturdy bill and relatively strong neck and shoulders to strip bark from tree trunks and branches and to probe coarse bark in search of prey. The bird in the first photo is in a very typical pose. Note the strong feet and long claws adapted for clinging to vertical trunks. Interestingly, there are no [treecreepers](#) in Tasmania, and the Strong-billed Honeyeater would appear to have adapted to fill the resulting void. With a length of 15-17cm/6-6.7in it is the largest member of the genus.



Strong-billed Honeyeater (Melithreptus validirostris)

Tinderbox Peninsula, Tasmania, 5 December 2011

128451 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

All the *Melithreptus* species except the Black-headed have the distinctive white stripe across the back of the head. They all have decorative eye-crescents above the eye and its colour is a field mark for distinguishing the different species, and can be whitish, blue, yellowish or red. You can see that it is whitish in these Strong-billed though it can also be pale blue.



Strong-billed Honeyeater (Melithreptus validirostris)

Tinderbox Peninsula, Tasmania, 5 December 2011

128457 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Tomorrow, I'm off to Southwestern Queensland in search of dry-country birds. So I hope to be able to bring you some interesting examples of these in the coming weeks.

Best wishes

Ian

#472 Letter-winged Kite 17 April 2013

For all you patient bird of the week recipients, here is I hope a bird worth waiting for, the <[Letter-winged Kite](#)>, star attraction on the recent trip along the Birdsville Track in Northwestern South Australia.



Letter-winged Kite (Elanus scriptus)

Birdsville Track, South Australia, 4 April 2013

152268 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Letter-winged Kite saga that had its resolution here started in the 1970s when I was living in Surry Hills in inner city Sydney. One evening, I was walking around to the local pub, the Cricketers Arms, on Fitzroy Street a block away from busy South Dowling Street when I found a pair of Letter-winged Kites, unfazed by the traffic, landing in a small tree on the pavement. The L-shaped markings under the wing were clearly visible, so there was no doubt about the identification - I was going to the pub, not tottering home afterwards - no matter how unlikely the location for this species, usually more at home in the semi-desert of Central Australia.

I supposed at the time that they were escaped birds. I found out only later that not only are these Kites nocturnal, but that they spread far and wide in search of food from their usual, arid, home following the population crash that follows plagues of their main prey, the Long-haired Rat. Come to think of it, the rather arid open spaces of Moore Park lie on the other side of South Dowling Street, and I'm sure there are plenty of ordinary rats in Surry Hills.



Letter-winged Kite (Elanus scriptus)

Birdsville Track, South Australia, 4 April 2013

152339 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Most people drive the 500km of dirt road that constitutes the legendary Birdsville Track from Birdsville in Southwestern Queensland to Marree in Northeastern South Australia (and the parallel Strzelecki Track) for the experience. Birders do it to search for elusive dry country birds, particularly the Letter-winged Kite and the Grey Falcon and both of these were top of my wanted list on this trip. Letter-winged Kites roost in trees by day, so I searched the few trees - nearly all in creek beds - along the Birdsville Track until, 252km south of Birdsville I spotted a couple of suspects, screeched to a halt in a cloud of dusk and approached them in the car. Birders have 4WD vehicles, such as my modest Suzuki SZ4, mainly so that they can use them as mobile bird hides as most birds are more tolerant of vehicles than pedestrians.



Letter-winged Kite (Elanus scriptus)

Birdsville Track, South Australia, 4 April 2013

152310 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Letter-winged Kites indeed they were, but the tree was a tangle of branches and the sun was shining from behind the tree. The birds, however, seemed as unfazed by the traffic (relatively speaking) as the ones in Fitzroy Street, and let me approach to take the first photo (good lighting angle, bad branches), second photo (bad angle, good branches). Then they waited while I changed the lens from the 100-400mm to the 500mm and, eventually, looked on tolerantly while I got out of the car and did a relative close-up (third photo) and a portrait (fourth photo).



Letter-winged Kite (Elanus scriptus)

Birdsville Track, South Australia, 4 April 2013

152292 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I then walked away to take a photo of the tree, the birds and a nest (I don't know whether it was theirs) and turned around to find that they had silently vanished. If it hadn't been for the photos definitely still on the SD card, the event might have all have been a fantasy. So I made do with a photo of the tree, the nest and the mobile bird hide, below.



The Strzelecki Track is actually supposed to be better for Letter-winged Kites than the Birdsville, but, having found these birds, we decided to change our return travel plans from Plan B1 to Plan B2, skip the Strzelecki (similar landscape, worse road), spend a few days in the Flinders Ranges and drive home via Broken Hill, Bourke and Bowra (B2), instead of Birdsville, Bedourie and Boulia (B1).

Best wishes

Ian

#473 White-throated (and Large-tailed) Nightjar 29 April 2013

On the recent inland trip I searched without success in various places for the Spotted Nightjar, a dry country species that roosts in spinifex and open woodland. Sometimes it is to be seen on gravel roads at night, but it seems rather shy and it's still on my wanted-to-photograph list. I'm back home in Bluewater near Townsville with my sister Gillian, also interested in birds and on a visit from Ireland, so last Tuesday we drove up to the highland mixed forest, part sclerophyll part rainforest, on the range at the end of Forestry Road where I live. She spotted the bird in the first photo which we had disturbed walking along a forest track.



White-throated Nightjar (Eurostopodus mystacalis)

Bluewater, Northeastern Queensland, 23 April 2013

153418 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This is a <White-throated Nightjar>, also on my wanted list as the only one I had photographed before was the one in the second photo, taken 5 years ago in the vestibule of Reef HQ, the aquarium in Townsville in the less than ideally natural surroundings of the roof supports.



White-throated Nightjar (Eurostopodus mystacalis)

Townsville, Northeastern Queensland, 18 April 2008

65470 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The sharp-eyed among you may have noticed that both photos were taken in April. This is no coincidence as this species is mainly seen here on migration and there are other reports of it turning up in strange places here, including a disused railway carriage that was used as travel accommodation for several years. Incidentally, it's specific name *mystacalis* means 'moustached'.

A much commoner species here is the <Large-tailed Nightjar>, often heard at night around Townsville in gallery forest, rainforest and mangroves. It has an unmistakable, very persistent 'chop' 'chop' call that gives it its colloquial name of Carpenter Bird or Axe Bird, and I often hear it near my house, particular on moonlit nights.



Large-tailed Nightjar (Caprimulgus macrurus)

25 August 2007, Bluewater, Northeastern Queensland.

58104 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

On the day we saw the White-throated Nightjar I had been hoping that we'd see Large-tailed Nightjars on Forestry Road when we returned home at dusk, but the White-throated got in first. So we were delighted to see 3 Large-tailed as well on the way home, including one that obligingly flew up into a tree beside the road and called to us as we illuminated it with a spotlight.

I had said to Gillian a few days before that this was one of the few places I knew where you could easily see two species of Stone-curlew/Thicknee in one day after we had seen a pair of <Beach Stone-curlews> when we went for fish and chips at nearby Balgal Beach and then found two <Bush Stone-curlews> in the garden when we returned home. I could perhaps have said the same about Nightjars. You could also say something about the irony of travelling to distant places when there are so many things to be seen in one's own back yard.

Best wishes

Ian

#474 Lord Howe Woodhen 12 May 2013

My sister Gillian and I arrived for a week's visit to Lord Howe Island this morning. I haven't been here since a visit with my mother on her last trip to Australia in 1992. That was in pre-digital photography days, so I am of course keen to photograph

some of the local specialties. Perhaps at the top of the list is the famous flightless <Lord Howe Woodhen>, saved from probable extinction by a captive breeding program in the late 1970s and early 1980s. We had barely finished unpacking when a pair came past our front door to welcome us to the island.



Lord Howe Woodhen (Gallirallus sylvestris)

Lord Howe Island, New South Wales, Australia 11 May 2013

T54020 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The bird in the first photo has, like many of the population of 200-300 birds, coloured legs bands to assist in monitoring the population. Its partner, second photo, lacked bands and is naturally more photogenic from a wildlife viewpoint, so I concentrated my efforts on it.



Lord Howe Woodhen (Gallirallus sylvestris)

Lord Howe Island, New South Wales, Australia 11 May 2013

154002 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In the gloom of the Kentia Palm forest that covers much of the lowland of the island, the birds look greyish and are quite difficult to see. When they move into the sunlight, like the one in the third photo that has found fruit from the tree outside our room, the warm chestnut colour of the plumage becomes apparent.



Lord Howe Woodhen (Gallirallus sylvestris)

Lord Howe Island, New South Wales, Australia 11 May 2013

154014 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Woodhens form permanent pair bonds and defend their territories which are several hectares in size. Both these birds are adult, recognisable by their red eyes. With a length of 36cm/14in these are largish rails, bigger than the related <Buff-banded Rail> which is also present on the island (and has also wandered past our room).



Lord Howe Woodhen (Gallirallus sylvestris)

Lord Howe Island, New South Wales, Australia 11 May 2013

154032 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Being flightless, tame and good to eat the population declined seriously after the island was settled and by the 1970s only a few survived on the fairly inaccessible tops of the two tall mountains, Mounts Gower and Lidgbird when some of the birds were captured and bred in a protected enclosure in the lowland area. A fellow postgraduate student of mine at Sydney University in the 1970s, Ben Miller, played a major role in the project. You can read all about it in a book, <<[The Woodhen, published by CSIRO Publishing](#)>> and written by Clifford Frith. Cliff is also a friend of mine, so I feel quite a strong connection to the Woodhen and am happy to now be able to offer it to you and include photos of it on my website.

Next target is the Providence Petrel, so wish me luck. After its extinction on Norfolk Island - where it was regarded as 'Provident' - it survived only on Lord Howe, though a small colony has recently become re-established on Phillip Island off Norfolk.

Best wishes

Ian

#475 Providence Petrel 20 May 2013

You collective moral support did it again, thank you very much, so here is the <[Providence Petrel](#)> the other really special bird species of Lord Howe Island. 'Special' in the sense that after its extermination on Norfolk Island by 1800, Lord

Howe was its last remaining breeding site, saving it from extinction. Unlike Norfolk Island which lacks very high mountains, Lord Howe has two fairly inaccessible ones, Mount Lidgbird, on the left in the first photo, and the taller Mount Gower on the right and it is on the tops and slopes of these that the Providence Petrel breeds.



You need to be a mountaineer to climb Mount Lidgbird and young and very fit to climb Mount Gower. We took the easier option of going by boat to the base of Mount Gower where we got good views of many Petrels in flight preparing to land at their nesting burrows. They are winter breeders, returning to the island in March and laying eggs in May. They seem reluctant to actually land, so each afternoon the air around the two Mountains swarms with these birds like clouds of insects and it is a wonderful sight.



Providence Petrel (Pterodroma solandri)

Lord Howe Island, New South Wales, Australia, 14 May 2013

154310 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Very clumsy on the ground, they are fast and agile in the air so I was happy to get a few reasonable shots - given the choppy conditions - without falling overboard. The first Petrel photo shows the characteristic overall dark bird (it looks lighter than usual against Mount Gower) with the characteristic white patches on the primary wing feathers and under wing coverts that distinguishes it from most other similar petrels. The second petrel shot, shows the upper wings - these are all dark and lack the white shafts to the primaries that distinguish the similar [Kermadec Petrel](#). Other field marks are the scaly white feathers on the face and the dark neck and upper breast.



Providence Petrel (Pterodroma solandri)

Lord Howe Island, New South Wales, Australia, 14 May 2013

154260 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The third petrel photo is of a more characteristic ventral shot with the bird silhouetted against the sky and shows its long slender wings. The birds average 40cm/16in in length with a wingspan of about 1m/3ft 3in. After breeding, they disperse to the North Pacific. For food, they dive into the water for crustaceans, squid and small fish.



Providence Petrel (Pterodroma solandri)

Lord Howe Island, New South Wales, Australia, 14 May 2013

154307 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Lord Howe population is estimated at about 30,000 pairs. Feral pigs were eliminated as part of the Woodhen recovery project and the Petrels are recolonising the lower slopes of the mountains. They were rediscovered on Phillip Island close to Norfolk Island in 1985 and the current population there is less than 100 pairs. The elimination from Norfolk Island took place between 1790 and 1800 with perhaps one million adults and young being harvested in the period 1790-1793.

Best wishes

Ian

#476 Double-banded Plover 2 June 2013

As well as the bird of the week, here is the airport of the year or maybe of the century. The photo shows the departure gate on Lord Howe Island, more like someone's picket-fenced front garden: no crowds, escalators, queues or security, and plenty of opportunities for last-minute birdwatching. When I was there 20 years ago, I left the airport after checking-in to check out a <Royal Spoonbill> which had landed at the nearby wetland. This time there were plenty of waders on and near the runway and a pair of Woodhens in the bush in front of the picket fence.



The waders included out-of-season ones such as <[Pacific Golden Plovers](#)>, <[Bar-tailed Godwits](#)> and <[Ruddy Turnstones](#)> that had sensibly decided that spending the northern summer on Lord Howe was a much more attractive proposition than flying to Siberia to breed. There was also an in-season wader, the <[Double-banded Plover](#)>, in-season for reasons that I'll explain in a moment.



Double-banded Plover (Charadrius bicinctus)

Airport, Lord Howe Island, New South Wales, Australia, 18 May 2013

154498 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Waders in non-breeding and immature plumage are notoriously confusing, representing either a challenge or a headache to identify, depending on one's attitude, and small plovers are no exception. What struck me in this case, however, was that these plovers seemed to be doing their utmost to help the waiting passengers with identification by persistently choosing to stand on the double black bands painted on the apron. The bird in the second photo is an immature Double-banded Plover - immatures have buffish faces as well as the diagnostic - but often faint traces - of the double bands on the breast.



Double-banded Plover (Charadrius bicinctus)

Airport, Lord Howe Island, New South Wales, Australia, 18 May 2013

154477 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The bird in the third photo is an adult, still showing the upper blackish and lower chestnut breast bands characteristic of this species. It's probably a male, as the bands are fairly wide and there are traces of a black upper edge to the white forehead.



Double-banded Plover (Charadrius bicinctus)

Enderby Island, Auckland Islands, New Zealand, 21 November 2011

124406 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The bird in the fourth photo is an adult male in breeding plumage at the most southerly breeding location of this species on Enderby Island, one of the chain of sub-Antarctic Islands south of New Zealand. The Double-banded Plover is a New Zealand endemic - where it is called the Banded Dotterel - and widespread as a breeding species also on both of the main islands. The bird in the fifth photo is a breeding female with narrower and less intense bands and no black fringe to the white forehead.



Double-banded Plover (Charadrius bicinctus)

Enderby Island, Auckland Islands, New Zealand, 21 November 2011

124184 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The bird in the sixth photo is an adult in non-breeding plumage with only faint breast bands and lacking the buffish background of the head of the juvenile. What is was doing in this condition on Enderby Island in the middle of the breeding season is anyone's guess.



Double-banded Plover (Charadrius bicinctus)

Enderby Island, Auckland Islands, New Zealand, 21 November 2011

124394 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

And finally the bird in the seventh photo shows a better view of an immature bird and the buff head markings contrast clearly with the corresponding white markings of the non-breeding adult. This bird had just arrived on the east coast of Australia for the southern winter when it is a fairly common species in southeastern Australia, Tasmania, Lord Howe and Norfolk Islands. It is thought that the birds migrating to Australia for the winter are high-country breeders on the South Island: many others remain in New Zealand.



Double-banded Plover (Charadrius bicinctus)

Kurnell, New South Wales, Australia, 30 March 2009

85329 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

So, that's why these birds are in-season in Australia in the southern winter. Any other waders here at that time of the year are either Australian residents (eg the somewhat similar <Red-capped Plover>) or northern hemisphere breeders that have stayed behind.

Best wishes

Ian

#477 Hoary-headed Grebe 17 June 2013

The Birdsville Track isn't famous for its waterbirds but when we drove along it in April there had been recent rains and we were in for a few surprises. Not, happily, of the getting bogged variety, but birding ones at several spots including this one where we camped more or less in the middle of nowhere beside a small dam. That speck on the left hand side near the lone tree is my car.



As well as some <Pink-eared Ducks>, there were several <Hoary-headed Grebes>. The ones in the first and second Grebe photos are in non-breeding or immature plumage and, although they are larger than <Australasian (Little) Grebes> (30cm/ 12in versus 25cm/10in in length) you need to use subtle field marks to distinguish them in these plumages.



Hoary-headed Grebe (Poliocephalus poliocephalus)

Birdsville Track, South Australia, 4 April 2013

152215 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The main field marks are: the Hoary-Headed has greyish rather than rufous-tinged flanks and whiter breast (though the bird in the first Grebe photo shows that you need to be careful with stained plumage); the border between the dark cap and pale cheeks goes below rather than through the eye in the Hoary-headed Grebe and the eyes are different in colour and pattern. The Australasian Grebe has conventional-looking eyes with yellow iris while the Hoary-headed Grebe has button-like eyes with a dark iris having a white inner and a white outer ring. This is probably easier to see in the closer bird in the second Grebe photo.



Hoary-headed Grebe (Poliiocephalus poliocephalus)

Birdsville Track, South Australia, 4 April 2013

152212 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It's only when you see a bird in breeding plumage with spiky pale head feathers that you understand where it gets its unusual English name (the scientific name *Poliiocephalus* means a much more prosaic 'grey-headed'). 'Hoary' literally just means 'whitish' but it's an adjective that is usually applied to frost and snow so it is used as a metaphor for 'frosty' in the English names of 4 or 5 bird species globally. (Another example is the <Hoary or Arctic Redpoll> which fits better geographically.) We encountered the bird in breeding plumage about a week later at Bowra Station near Cunnamulla, SW Queensland, where we spent a few nights on the way back to Townsville.



Hoary-headed Grebe (Poliiocephalus poliocephalus)

Cunnamulla, Southwestern Queensland, 12 April 2013

152906 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Grebes are almost exclusively aquatic and are expert divers. Their legs are set far back on the body, so they are very awkward on land which they avoid as much as possible. They build floating nests out of water plants so they just need to haul themselves out of the water to tend the eggs and the young leave the nest soon after hatching. They usually dive rather than fly to avoid predators, though they can fly long distances if necessary to find water and the Hoary-headed Grebe, commonest in southern Australia is rather a nomad in the north. It's closest relative is the New Zealand Grebe or 'Dabchick' and is the only member of the genus *Poliiocephalus*.

Best wishes

Ian

#478 Flock Bronzewing 30 June 2013

This photo of a Flock Bronzewing featured as bird of the week in June 2006. This male was one of several flocks that we saw flying across the Flinders Highway near Julia Creek late one afternoon as we were heading west towards Mount Isa and the birds, presumably, were doing their evening ritual of visiting waterholes. He obligingly decided that a pool near the road was good enough for him and landed quite close to us. This was my first, and until recently only, encounter with this enigmatic, rarely seen, nomadic pigeon of central Australia.



Flock Bronzewing (Rhopus histrioides)

Julia Creek, Northwestern Queensland, 23 May 2006

C33075 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In 2008, this photo was published in the book **100 Birds to See Before You Die** by **Chandler and Couzens**, where the Flock Bronzewing featured as No 50 in the global list (No. 1 was the Ivory-billed Woodpecker). The book was one of many of this kind written after the success of the 2007 movie *The Bucket List* <<[YouTube trailer](#)>>, the title referring to the list of things one wants to do before one 'kicks the bucket'.



Flock Bronzewing (Phaps histrionica)

Bedourie, Western Queensland, 1 April 2013

151964 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

On the recent trip along the Birdsville Track, I was approaching Bedourie, the last town before Birdsville driving south from Mount Isa via Boulia, when I saw a small flock of brown birds flying swiftly near the airstrip. Their size, colour and habitat made me think, incorrectly, <Australian Pratincole>. A little while later, I stopped to watch two much larger flocks merge into one of about 300 individuals and start flying around the two dams near Bedourie 'Outback' Golf Course when I realised that the were <Flock Bronzewings>.

I gather that an outback golf course has natural sand bunkers - Bedourie is on the edge of the Simpson Desert - and, instead of greens, oil scrapes which make '<<a great putting surface>>'. The dams incidentally are called Lakes Larry and Simpson 'after their creator', so presumably are, unlike the bunkers, not natural.



Flock Brownwing (Phaps histrionica)

Bedourie, Western Queensland, 1 April 2013

151975 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The flock, containing flew close enough to me get a reasonable shot in the evening sunlight: photos three and four are details from the same photo. Photo number three has two adult males with their characteristic black and white faces, while the third bird is a female or juvenile. The field guides indicate that the facial pattern of the has varying amount of black, and the juveniles are yet paler and photo number four shows three males and two other birds, one of which has only very faint markings. The scientific name *histrionica* refers to the harlequin pattern on the head, though *histrionicus* is the Latin for 'theatrical'. (The <Harlequin Duck> of North America is *Histrionicus histrionicus*.)



Flock Bronzewing (Phaps histrionica)

Bedourie, Western Queensland, 1 April 2013

151975 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Flock Bronzewings feed in the vast and sparse grasslands of the arid interior and have a history of being seen in huge numbers with 100,000 being recorded in 1931 at one waterhole and 50,000 in one flock in 1972. More recently, such large flock have not been recorded and this gave rise to concerns that the species was in steep decline. If that was the case, this decline seems to have ended, though it has been suggested that the lack of very large flocks is due to the provision of more sources of water on grazing properties. Either way, it is the case that the Flock Bronzewing is an all or nothing bird: you either see many (very rarely), or none (usually).

Does one do things on a bucket list twice or is that considered excessive? I don't know, but I'm going to use it as an excuse for making it bird of the week a second time.

Best wishes

Ian

#479 Flesh-footed Shearwater 16 July 2013

One night when we were in our room on Lord Howe Island, we heard a scratching noise at the front door. On investigation this proved to be a juvenile <Flesh-footed Shearwater> from a nearby nesting colony attracted by the light. This one, first photo, is almost complete fledged with traces of fluffy down still apparent.



Flesh-footed Shearwater (Ardenna carneipes)

The Settlement, Lord Howe Island, New South Wales, 12 May 2013

154064 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In the region of 20,000 to 40,000 pairs of Flesh-footed Shearwaters nest on Lord Howe. They dig nesting burrows in the sandy soil of the forest, mainly in the lowland area where the settlement is situated. Adults come ashore under cover of darkness to nest, change incubation shifts and feed their partners and young. They make their presence known by making loud crooning noises that sometimes sound like cats fighting but during daylight, they are silent and there is usually little sign of them on the island.



Flesh-footed Shearwater (Ardenna carneipes)

Ned's Beach, Lord Howe Island, New South Wales, 13 May 2013

154095 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

We were there at the end of the breeding season. When the juveniles are fledged, their cosseted existence comes to an abrupt end as the adults stop coming ashore and the young are abandoned to fend for themselves. Eventually, they wander out of their burrows and (mostly) make their way to the sea to start an independent pelagic life. Lord Howe is the only colony of this species on the east coast of Australia, but there are other colonies on islands off South Australia (one), Southwest Western Australia (several), New Zealand and St Paul Island in the South Atlantic.

The following day, we found another fledged juvenile when we went to Ned's beach for a snorkel, photos two and three. This one seemed to have failed to make it down the beach and was presumably waiting for darkness. The Flesh-footed is one of several rather similar, mainly dark shearwaters breeding in Australian waters and the third photo shows its two-toned bill - horn-coloured with a dark tip which is its most obvious field mark.



Flesh-footed Shearwater (Ardenna carneipes)

Ned's Beach, Lord Howe Island, New South Wales, 13 May 2013

154073 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Outside the breeding season, Wedge-tailed Shearwaters are pelagic and range widely in both the Pacific and Indian Ocean. Birds from Lord Howe and New Zealand migrate north to the waters off South Korea and also appear off the coast of North America. The two in the fourth photo were off Wollongong, south of Sydney, in the deep water beyond the continental shelf. In this photo you can see the two-tone bills and the pink legs and feet.



Flesh-footed Shearwater (Ardenna carneipes)

Off Wollongong, New South Wales, 25 November 2006

43624 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Here, photo five, for comparison is a <[Wedge-tailed Shearwater](#)>. Note the grey bill and longer, more pointed tail. The third common species in Australia is the <[Short-tailed](#)>, but, true to its name, the feet extend beyond the tip of the tail in flight.



Wedge-tailed Shearwater (Ardenna pacifica)

Off Wollongong, New South Wales, 19 June 2010

43851 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

All these species are collectively called "muttonbirds" and were harvested in large numbers by early settlers for their eggs and oily, rather salty flesh. Clumsy on land and foolishly trusting, they were never rated as very bright. They are, however, masters of the air and sea and their annual movements around the oceans of the world ending up on tiny specks of land like Lord Howe are impressive feats of both navigation and endurance.

Best wishes

Ian

#480 Southern Giant-Petrel 7 August 2013

I've been neglecting the bird of the week list lately, so here is a big bird and a big posting to make up. My excuse for the neglect is my recent involvement with organising a recorder workshop and the involvement of the <<[North Queensland Recorder Society](#)>> in Benjamin Britten's opera Noye's Fludde - Noah's Flood - at the Australian Festival of Chamber Music in Townsville. Anyway, the musical dust is settling now and it's back to the birds.



Southern Giant Petrel (*Macronectes giganteus*)

Macquarie Island, Southern Ocean, 27 November 2011

126155 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

A Shearwater and a Petrel have featured as bird of the week recently: <[Providence Petrel](#)> #475 and [Flesh-footed Shearwater](#) #479. They're close relatives, belonging to the family Procellariidae, so here's one to illustrate, perhaps grossly, the difference between them. Shearwaters are slender, more elegant and have finer bills than their dumpier counterparts, the Petrels. The dumpiest of the lot is the Southern Giant-Petrel, comparable in size to the smaller Albatrosses (or Mollymawks) with a length of 85-100cm/33-39in , a wingspan of 150-210cm/59-83in and a weight of 3.8-5.0Kg/ 8.4-11lbs.



Southern Giant-Petrel (*Macronectes giganteus*)

Macquarie Island, Southern Ocean, 27 November 2011

126085 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

They are the vultures of the Southern Ocean, dealing with the unsavoury task of cleaning up offal in bird and marine mammal colonies, a job they tackle with unsubtle enthusiasm. They're also not above killing young and or weak chicks of penguins, so it's not surprising that they are often regarded with some distaste. On land, they appear clumsy like other members of the family, but, as the first photo, can be surprisingly agile. this bird is a young adult with a restricted amount of off-white on the face and neck. Juveniles are brownish-black and the adults get progressively paler on the head and neck as they age. The one in the second photo is an older adult.



Southern Giant-Petrel (*Macronectes giganteus*)

Macquarie Island, Southern Ocean, 27 November 2011

126512 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The most important field-mark for distinguishing <Southern> and <Northern> Giant-Petrels is the colour of the bulbous tip to the bill: this is greenish in the Southern and pinkish-red in the Northern. This might seem an inconspicuous feature, but the contrast between the otherwise pinkish bill and greenish tip of the Southern species is fairly obvious, even at a distance and the field-mark holds true for juvenile birds as well. The other field-mark is the pale leading edge to the wing of adult Southern Giant-Petrels, visible in the third photo of a bird concentrating very hard on making a gentle landing on the beach at Macquarie Island. This particular bird looked very pleased with itself after landing as you can see by following <[this link](#)>.



Southern Giant-Petrel (*Macronectes giganteus*)

Macquarie Island, Southern Ocean, 27 November 2011

126562 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Both species nest on islands all around the Southern Ocean, and their distributions overlap, though only the Southern breeds on the coast of Antarctica and only the Northern breeds on the Sub-Antarctic Islands of New Zealand. Both nest on Macquarie Island, so there seems to be no doubt that they are different species despite their similarities, even though there is a population on Gough Island that is intermediate and may be hybrid (Northern plumage with greenish bill-tip). About 10% of the adult Southern population on Macquarie Island belong to a white morph and have almost complete white plumage with a few dark spots, fourth and fifth photos. With a little imagination, this looks like ermine and makes these birds look almost regal compared with their decidedly grungy relatives. Interestingly, about 1% of the juveniles fledged on Macquarie are albino with completely white plumage and pink bill, legs and feet, but they don't appear to survive to adulthood. The Northern Giant-Petrel doesn't have a white morph.

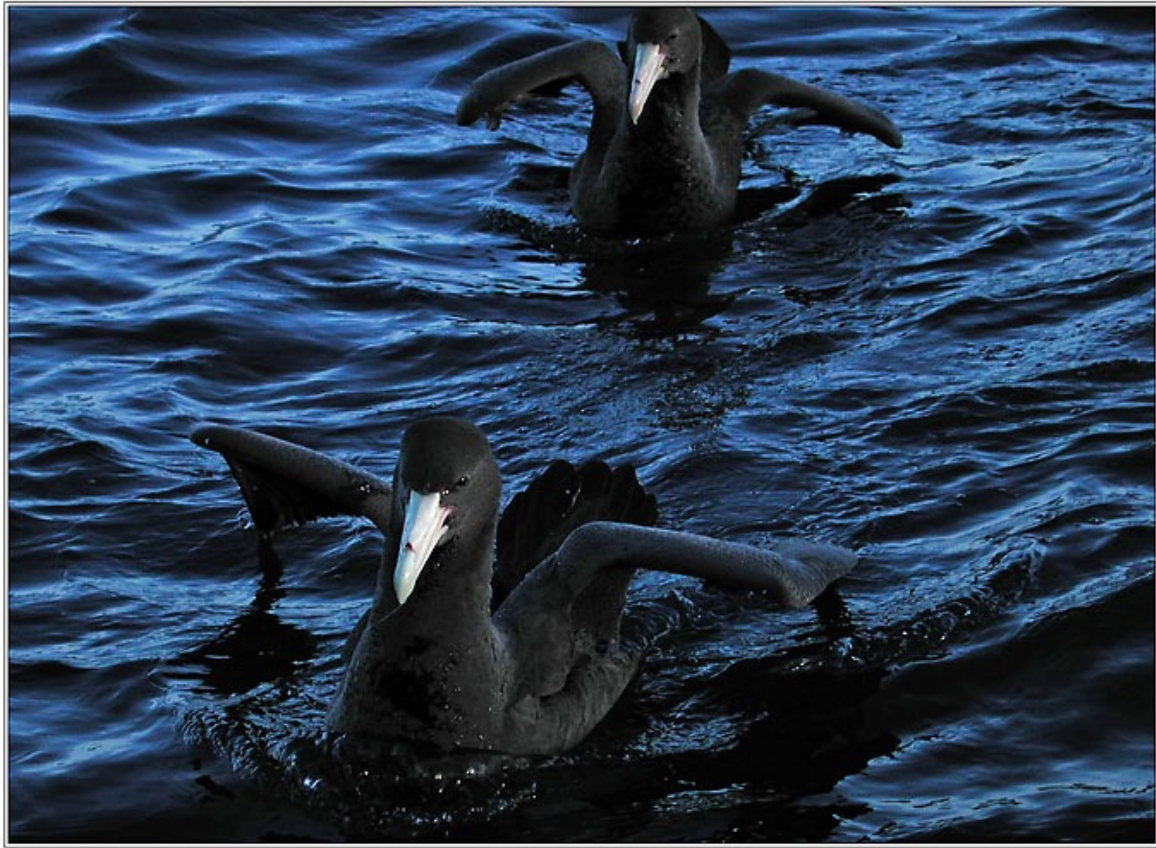


Southern Giant-Petrel (*Macronectes giganteus*)

Macquarie Island, Southern Ocean, 27 November 2011

126606 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Both species occur in mainland Australian waters but usually offshore and usually as juveniles. The juveniles have silky dark plumage and look quite dapper. The sixth photo shows one of each species off the coast of Victoria, and you can see the difference in bill colour.



Southern and Northern Giant-Petrels (Macronectes giganteus & M. halli)
Off Port Fairy, Victoria, 22 July 2001 *03502 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au*

The seventh photo shows a juvenile in flight south of New Zealand. The pale leading edge to the wing of the Southern species is absent in juveniles, but this photo illustrates the point I made earlier that the bill colour is visible even in birds at a distance.

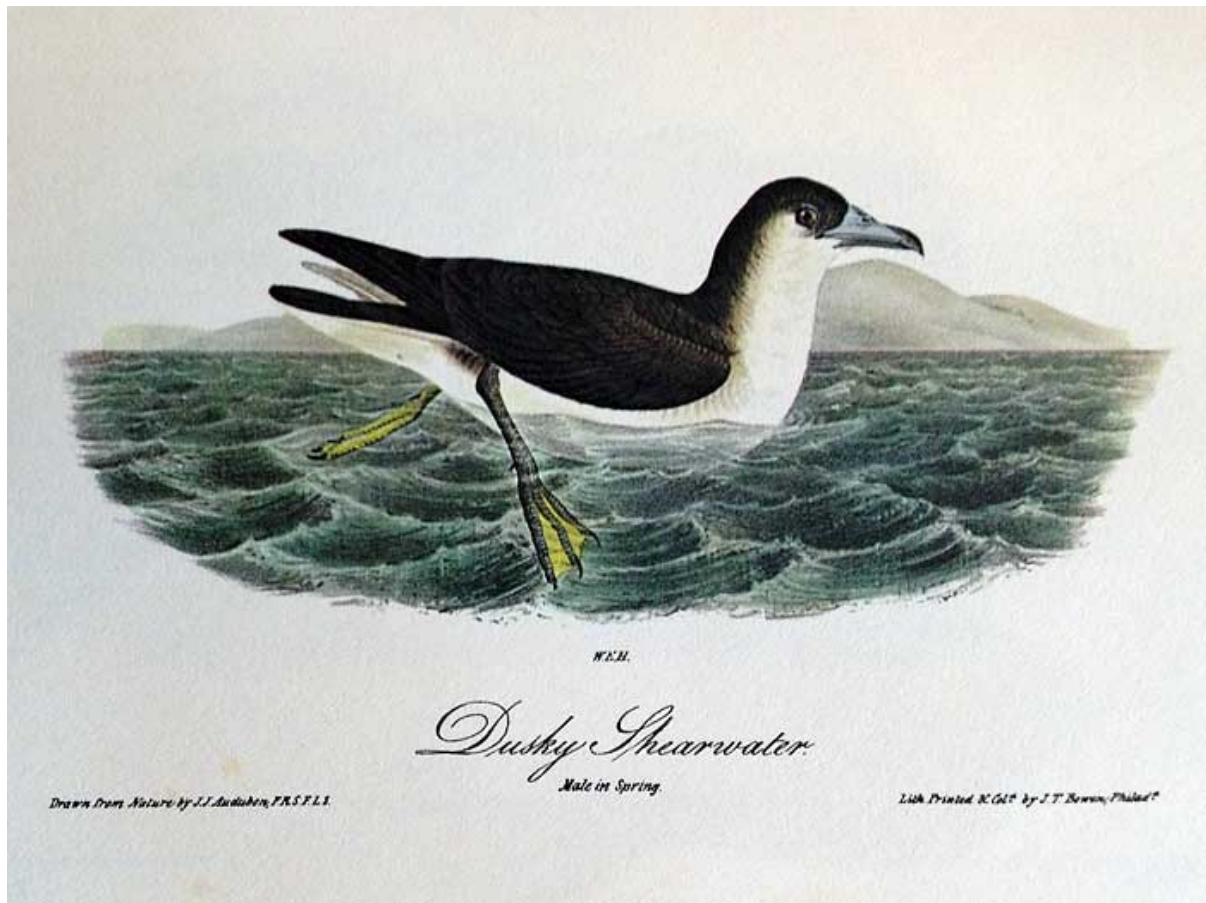


Southern Giant-Petrel (Macronectes giganteus)

Between Snarcs and Auckland Islands, New Zealand, 20 November 2011

123566 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

If you're observant, you may have noticed that I've tried changing the font of the species English and scientific names - the seventh photo shows the old font. I chose this originally to copy the style of 19th Century bird artists such as the French-America John James Audubon (below). Recently a member of the list made the point that the scientific name in particular was hard to read in the old font (Edwardian Script). The new one (Apple Chancery) is italic-looking and doesn't have a separate italic style, so I've need to underline the scientific name instead to conform to scientific naming conventions. If you feel strongly about either the old or new fonts, let me know ian@birdway.com.au so I can make a decision whether to make the change permanent.



The Dusky Shearwater, incidentally, is now known as Audubon's Shearwater (*Puffinus lherminieri*) and is part of the Little Shearwater species complex. He encountered it off the coast of Florida: it breeds in the Caribbean and on Cape Verde Is and has been recorded in Australia.

Best wishes

Ian

#481 Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater 20 August 2013

I'm currently preparing photos for a digital version of the book <[Where to Find Birds in North-East Queensland](#)> by Jo Wieneke. I'm finding that many of these have not yet featured as bird of the week, so here's one that I came across a photo this morning that appealed to me, one of an unusual-looking honeyeater, the <[Spiny-cheeked](#)>, taken not long after sunrise at Gluepot, the BirdLife Australia mallee reserve in South Australia. At the time, I was spending some time each morning at a hide overlooking a drinking trough waiting for <[Scarlet-chested Parrots](#)>.



Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater (*Acanthagenys rufogularis*)

Gluepot, South Australia, 21 April 2010

89188 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Spiny-cheeked is a bird of dry country, so the easiest way to photograph it is as watering places, and the second photo was taken in Central Queensland south of Torrens Creek near a dam, this time close to sunset. It is a widespread and common in the more arid parts of mainland Australia except tropical Australia north of about 19°S and Tasmania. It also occurs in scrubby coastal areas, such as southern Victoria. Like many dry-country birds it is nomadic and appears only rarely in Northeastern Queensland, though I did see one in the garden in the first house I lived in Townsville in 2002.



Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater (*Acanthagenys rufogularis*)

Torrens Creek-Aramac, Central Queensland, 28 June 2009

90709 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

With a length of 23-26cm/9-10in, it's quite large by honeyeater standards and the bare pink area on the face gives it some similarity to the Wattlebirds, also honeyeaters. Although it is the only member of the genus *Acanthagenys*, DNA studies have shown that it is related to both the Wattlebirds (*Acanthocaera*) and the Regent Honeyeater, another one with bare red skin, in this case around the eye. The Spiny-cheeked is quite vocal with a creaky, piping, rather Wattlebird-like song, often the first sign of its presence.

Feedback on the change in font was rather muted, with one in favour of the new one, one against it and one not liking the underlining of the scientific name. I can agree with all points of view and am undecided, though I'm using the new font for photos in the digital version of Jo Wieneke's book. I've rather got used to it, though I've started putting the scientific name in grey to make the underlining less obvious as I'm constrained both by the convention of using either italics or underlining for scientific name and the lack of an italic option in an already italic-looking font. My thanks to those who took the trouble to respond.

Jo's book has been out of print for a little while now, so the digital version is to fill the gap left by its disappearance from book shops. I'll let you know when it is available: the aim is to publish it for Apple iBooks, Google PlayBooks and Amazon Kindle.

Best wishes

Ian

#482 Swamp Harrier 31 August 2013

Recently I was having trouble finding a reasonable photo of a <Swamp Harrier> for Where to Find Birds in North-east Queensland, when I remembered an encounter that I had with this one on a beach on Bruny Island in Southeastern Tasmania in late 2011. At the time, I was on the return leg of the trip to the Sub-Antarctic Islands via New Zealand and the Harrier photos got neglected in the excitement of posting penguin, petrel, prion and parakeet photos (not to mention albatrosses but they spoil the alliteration).



Swamp Harrier (Circus approximans)

Bruny Island, Tasmania, 3 December 2011

128026 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The encounter was the enactment of a minor natural tragedy that was sad to observe, and that may be a subconscious reason for the neglect. I'd actually photographed the bird first photo two minutes earlier struggling to fly into the teeth of a southerly gale and carrying an item of prey, that I couldn't identify. The Harrier dropped it, backed off to leeward and made another unsuccessful attempt to fly up-wind by flying low over the sea on the other side of me.



Swamp Harrier (Circus approximans)

Bruny Island, Tasmania, 3 December 2011

128003 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This attempt failed too, and the bird came back for another try flying more or less overhead. At that point, it was attacked by a very distraught-looking [Pied Oystercatcher](#) looking for all the world as if it was on a retaliatory bombing raid. The Oystercatcher made a couple of passes at the Harrier, which eventually gave up the struggle and flew inland across the prevailing wind. I could only assume that the item of prey was the Oystercatcher's chick and the field guide confirmed that these look like plover chicks, camouflaged speckled brown with white bellies. Predation is a natural part of life, but it was sad that the chick died for no purpose.



Swamp Harrier (Circus approximans)

Bruny Island, Tasmania, 3 December 2011

128025 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I've found Harriers difficult to photograph as they're shy and normally keep their distance in flight. They are also terrestrial in their lifestyle, inhabiting tree-less plains and wetlands, hunting close to the ground and nesting and perching on the ground, usually invisible or nearly so in grass or reeds. They hunt by flying low over the land or water - quartering - and dropping suddenly to seize surprised prey (sorry, I've done it again) such as birds, small mammals and frogs in their long-legged talons. When quartering, they alternate between flapping their wings and gliding with the wings held in a characteristic V, like the bird in the fourth photo in an otherwise tranquil pastoral scene in New Zealand.



Swamp Harrier (Circus approximans)

Waitaki Valley, South Island, New Zealand, 12 November 2011

133561 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Adult Swamp Harriers are brownish and streaked, with white rumps. Older males have greyish wings and grey tails, unmarked except for a sub-terminal band. Females are more rufous and have barred tails and both the Bruny Island and New Zealand birds are, I think, males. Juvenile Swamp Harriers look quite different and are rufous brown overall with pale rufous rather than white rumps, like the one in the fifth photo.



Swamp Harrier (Circus approximans)

Werribee, Victoria, 5 April 2009

86321 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In Australia, Swamp Harriers nest mainly in the south, including Tasmania and migrate north in winter - in North Queensland, we see them only in the winter months. In New Zealand they make local movements across Cook Strait and they turn up on various islands including Lord Howe and Norfolk. Raptors are poorly represented in New Zealand and the Swamp Harrier is **the** large bird of the prey, being the only breeding member of the Accipiter family (hawks, eagles, etc.), with the rarer New Zealand Falcon being the only breeding falcon. Swamp Harriers also breed in Melanesia and Polynesia as far east as Tonga. It has close relatives in Eurasia comprising the Eastern, <Western>, African and Madagascar Marsh Harriers.

Best wishes

Ian

#483 Sarus Crane 18 September 2013

I went up to the Atherton Tableland at the weekend to photograph <Freckled Ducks> at Hasties Swamp where these rare birds had recently been reported. The ducks were still there perching on a log at an inconvenient distance from the hide and, although I spent several hours on three occasions in the hide, they never came any closer and I gave them a wooden spoon award for being undynamic and

uncooperative. However, <[Sarus Cranes](#)>, which winter in fields on the Tableland were more cooperative.



Sarus Crane (Grus antigone)

Atherton Tableland, Northeastern Queensland, 15 September 2013 155388 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Before I tell you the odd story of their history in Australia, here is a spot-the-difference exercise comparing the Sarus Crane, first photo, with the much commoner and more widespread <[Brolga](#)>, second photo.



Brolga (Grus rubicunda)

Townsville Town Common, Northeastern Queensland, 20 January 2008

62758 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

You have to spot only two differences: the red on the neck of the Sarus Crane extends much farther down than on the Brolga, and the Brolga has a dewlap, the flap of tissue hanging down from the chin. There is another difference: Sarus Cranes have pink legs, and Brolgas have grey ones, though this is often difficult to spot as the legs can be pinkish-grey in the Sarus Crane. Anyway, more about distinguish them later.



Sarus Crane (Grus antigone)

Atherton Tableland, Northeastern Queensland, 14 September 2013 154969 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

We first discovered a small party of Sarus Cranes feeding near the Malanda-Atherton Highway (opposite the upmarket Gallo chocolate and cheese place). While I was taking photos of them, a flock of about 60 joined them in the field except for 5 which obligingly flew over us, photos three and four. In flight they look positively Jurassic Park-ish and make wonderful, insistent, gurgling, trumpeting noises.



Sarus Crane (Grus antigone)

Atherton Tableland, Northeastern Queensland, 14 September 2013 154976 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The next day, when I got bored waiting for the ducks to do something I went to Gallo for cheese and lunch and found a family, I presume, of Sarus Cranes - two adults and a juvenile - close to the road that goes from the Malanda-Atherton road to Yungaburra via the Curtain Fig National Park, photos five and six (the other adult is the one in the first photo).



Sarus Crane (Grus antigone)

Atherton Tableland, Northeastern Queensland, 15 September 2013 155375 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In juvenile Sarus Cranes the red colour is replaced by buffish-cinnamon, usually darker than the one these photos.



Sarus Crane (Grus antigone)

Atherton Tableland, Northeastern Queensland, 15 September 2013 155407 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The reason for the spot-the-difference exercise was to show that the two species are not hard to separate in the field. So, why were Sarus Cranes not positively identified in Australia until 1966 (in Normanton on the Gulf of Carpentaria)? The fashionable explanation at the time - which got unobservant birders off the hook - was they had recently colonised Australia from, presumably, Indochina, the nearest other place that they occur naturally.

The Australian birds were conveniently similar to the Eastern Sarus Crane (race *sharpii*) that occurs there, even though it doesn't migrate. Maybe they couldn't cope with the sounds of war in Vietnam. It is now though that the Australian Sarus Cranes form another smaller race, *gilliae*, and have been here all along nesting in remote swamps on the Gulf of Carpentaria and Cape York Peninsula with at least some moving to the Atherton Tableland in winter.



Sarus Crane (Grus antigone)

Bharatpur, India, 27 April 2003

19850 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The last photo shows the nominate race, *antigone*, in India. It has white tertiary feathers (the bustle) and with a length of 176cm/70in (weight to 12kg/26lbs) is the world's tallest flying bird. The population in India is perhaps 10,000, Indochina 1,000 and Australia 5,000. It is extinct in various countries including the Philippines (probably yet another race) and Pakistan and is under threat in Indochina. The Australia population is thought to be stable and may have benefitted from clearing of land for agriculture on the Atherton Tableland.

Best wishes

Ian

#484 Freckled Duck 29 September 2013

Several friends have inquired how I got on with the quest for <Freckled Duck> photos a fortnight ago, so here it is as bird of the week as it's a rare and unusual duck, even if these ones didn't want to cooperate in the portrait photo category. There were perhaps a dozen or more at the reported site of Hasties Swamp just south of Atherton town, but only two came within cooee of the hide and spent most of the day sitting on this log. Note the diagnostic ski-jump-shaped bill and the slight peak on the head of the bird on the end of the log. The duck beside this one is a <Hardhead>, so they're approximately the same size.



Freckled Duck (Stictonetta naevosa)

Hasties Swamp, Northeastern Queensland, 15 September 2013

155261 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It was a lovely day at Hasties (second photo), so it was no hardship loafing there waiting for the ducks to do something. The log the ducks liked is the farther one in this photo, but this was taken with my phone and makes it look farther away than it actually is. It's a two storey hide, and this was taken from the upper deck, though I spent most of the time downstairs. The log was popular with various species of ducks including <Pacific Blacks> and <Grey Teal>, so the Freckled Ducks, all in non-breeding garb were easy to overlook.



Hasties Swamp, Atherton Tableland

15 September 2013

3492 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Very occasionally, one of the ducks would swim over to a smaller log (hidden behind the branch in the second photo) and peck at a [Coot](#) if it came too close. You can see the Coot in the third photo.



Freckled Duck (Stictonetta naevosa)

Hasties Swamp, Northeastern Queensland, 15 September 2013

155317 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Sometimes it would swim away to feed, but always on the other side of the log. In the fourth photo it is maybe contemplating such a foray, and is testing the water behind one of several <[Nankeen Night-Herons](#)> that came out to feed in the late afternoon - apparently they roost in the trees near the hide.



Freckled Duck (Stictonetta naevosa)

Hasties Swamp, Northeastern Queensland, 15 September 2013

155467 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The fifth photo shows a distant pair of Freckled Ducks thirteen years ago in breeding condition at Werribee in Victoria and you can see the characteristic red bill colour of the breeding male. The peaks look more conspicuous on both sexes, but I don't know whether these feathers grow longer when breeding or whether they are erectile.



So why is this rather drab duck so interesting to both birders and avian taxonomists? Firstly, it's endemic to Australia and rare, particular in North Queensland. It's main breeding range is in inland areas of New South Wales, Victoria, Southern Western Australia (an isolated population) and the channel country of Southwestern Queensland where breeding takes place in densely vegetated lakes and swamps, including lignum in more arid floodplains. When these areas dry out, the birds move to the coast, which is when they become easier to find. Presumably the birds currently in North Queensland (they've been reported in both Townsville and the Atherton Tableland) are from the Cooper's Creek and Paroo River catchments.

Secondly, taxonomists find the Freckled Duck interesting because it has no close relatives. It is the only member of the genus *Stictonetta* and both morphological and DNA studies support placing it in own sub-family that diverged from other ducks and geese very early on. The name *Stictonetta* means 'spotted duck' in Greek and, in a case of tautological overkill, *naevosa* means 'spot abundance' in Latin.

I was going to include a Snake of the Week but this is getting rather long, so I'll hold it over till next time.

Best wishes

Ian

#485 Tooth-billed Bowerbird 9 October 2013

At the weekend, I followed some friends for an overnight stay at Paluma, the small village in highland rainforest about 60km north of Townsville. and they took me to view 4 display courts of the <Tooth-billed Bowerbird> near the village that they had already checked out. This species featured as bird of the week three years ago, but it's an interesting subject and I got better photos this time. In contrast to some of the bowerbirds, it is sombre in plumage and cryptic in pattern but makes up for this with unique behaviour.



Court of Tooth-billed Bowerbird (Scenopoeetes dentirostris)

Paluma, Northeastern Queensland, 7 October 2013

155852 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Alone among the promiscuous bowerbirds (the catbirds are monogamous), the male doesn't build a bower to attract females but has a display platform or court, a cleared space on the forest floor with a central tree trunk or stem and it decorates the court with the leaves of rainforest trees, carefully placed lower side up. The central tree in the first photo is smaller than usual, but I've chosen this one as there are signs of the bird having chewed through some offending shoot near to it to keep the space clear. The same court is used from one year to another and the courts of different males may be relatively close proximity (50-100m/yards) to each other in what is called an extended lek. and there were four courts along the path where we were.



Tooth-billed Bowerbird (Scenopoeetes dentirostris)

Paluma, Northeastern Queensland, 7 October 2013

155835 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The males sing a strange, loud and varied song with lots of mimicry from perches above the court: <[link to sound file recorded on my phone on this occasion](#)>. So during the breeding season - September to January - they are quite easy to find. The vegetation in their preferred habitat is dense so hearing them is easier than seeing them and seeing them is easier than photographing them: the second photo is a fairly typical view of one through the foliage.

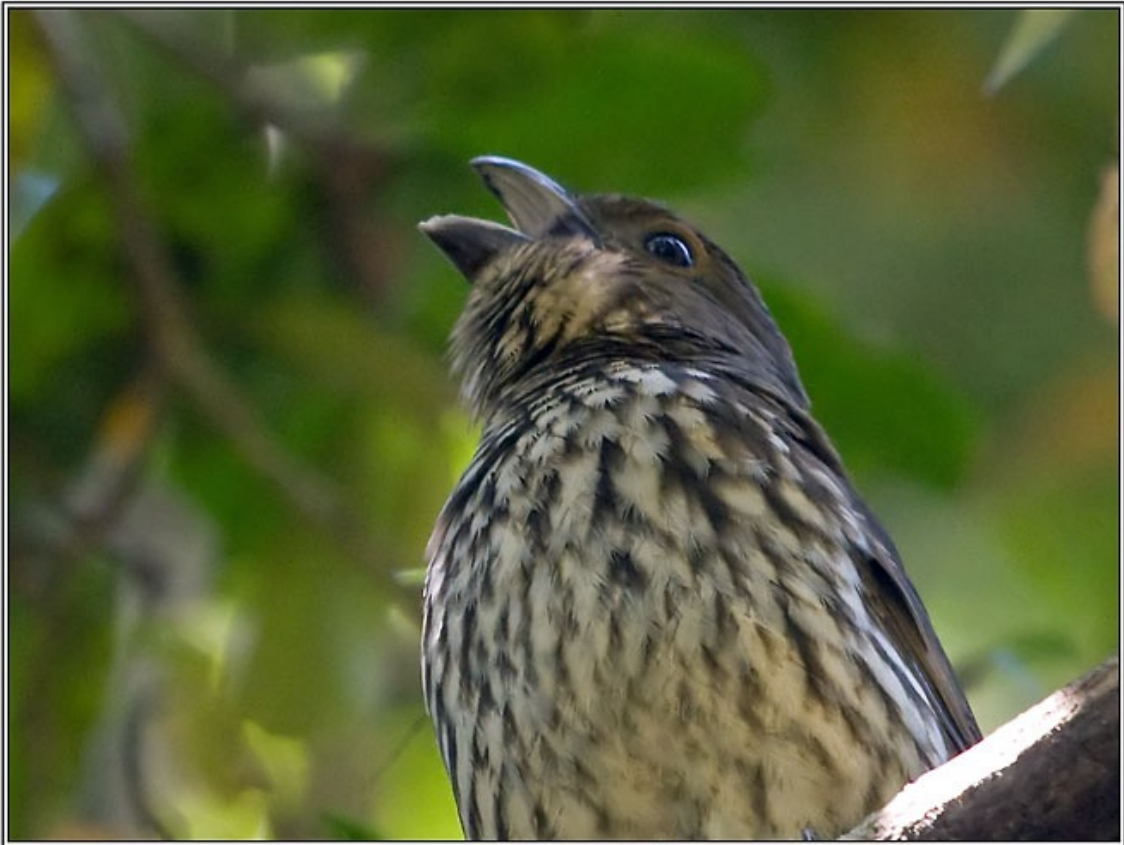


Tooth-billed Bowerbird (*Scenopoeetes dentirostris*)

Paluma, Northeastern Queensland, 7 October 2013

155899 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

When they're singing, they are fairly approachable and I got quite close to this one before it flew up onto an unencumbered branch above the court and continued singing in full view (third photo). The fourth photo is cropped to show both the toothed edge to the lower mandible and the ridged inside of the upper one, a clever designed mechanism of chewing off leaves. Some while later, at another court we saw a male pick and drop a leaf, which it let fall. It then picked another on and flew off with it in the direction of its court. Apparently, it is not unusual for the birds to steal the leaves of other males, so there is the same competition for accumulating decorations as in other bowerbirds.



Tooth-billed Bowerbird (*Scenopoeetes dentirostris*)

Paluma, Northeastern Queensland, 7 October 2013

155904 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

ILast week, I mentioned a pending Snake of the Week and this aroused some interest, so here it is. I photographed this <[small whip snake](#)> seven years ago in a dry area in far Northwestern Queensland near the border with the Northern Territory. We tried to identify it by consulting a weighty tome on the Reptiles of Australia, but failed to find anything that quite matched it and gave up.



Sombre Whip Snake (Demansia quaesitor)

Camooweal-Mount Isa, Northwestern Queensland, 27 May 2006

34153 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Some years later, I bought the 2008 edition of A Complete Guide to the Reptiles of Australia by Steve Wilson and Gerry Swan. It contains an Appendix which starts: **"Late in the preparation of this 2008 revised second edition, a timely study of small tropical whip snakes (*Demansia*) was published. The work formally recognises additional species of these swift diurnal snakes, some of which have been familiar to herpetologists for many years."** So, there you are: the first time I've photographed a yet to be described species of vertebrate; it doesn't often happen with birds.

I've been adding <[Primates](#)>, <[Lizards](#)> and <[Snakes](#)> to the <[Other Wildlife](#)> section of the website, hence the interest in snakes.

Best wishes

Ian

#486 Spotted Pardalote 30 October 2013

I mentioned a while ago that while preparing photos for the electronic version of the book <[Where to Find Birds in North-East Queensland](#)> by Jo Wieneke, I found that many bird species hadn't yet had their moment of fame as bird of the week. <[Spotted Pardalote](#)> is one and a surprising omission as <[Pardalotes](#)> are among

the most of beautiful small Australian birds. The first photo shows a male of the nominate red-rumped race.



Spotted Pardalote (Pardalotus punctatus)

Scheyville, New South Wales, 9 October 2008

80735 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

At 8-10cm/3.2-4in in length, the Spotted Pardalote is one of the smallest and only the <Weebill> (8-9cm) is consistently smaller. Because of the square spots on the wing, it is also called the Diamondbird, risking dreadful puns about 'gems'. The female is similar, but not so strongly marked and lacks the yellow throat, second photo. Both these birds were close to the ground, but they spend a lot of time in the upper foliage of tall trees, where they're very hard to see well. All the pardalotes, however, have distinctive calls, very loud for such small birds, and this usually reveals their presence.



Spotted Pardalote (Pardalotus punctatus)

Long Forest, Victoria, 5 April 2009

85980 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The third photo shows a slightly uncertain-looking juvenile. These are similar to females, but the markings are less obvious: in particular the background colour of the crown is grey rather blackish.



Spotted Pardalote (Pardalotus punctatus)

Bruny Island, Tasmania, 5 December 2011

128661 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Spotted Pardalotes usually nest in burrows in sand banks or road cuttings. If you surprise one near the ground, there's a good chance that there is a nest nearby. The range of the Spotted Pardalote includes eastern and southern mainland Australia from Northeastern Queensland to SW Western Australia and Tasmania.

I've been continuing to add reptiles to the website. The latest lot are lizards, mainly <dragons>. Here is one of the more spectacular, the gorgeous Boyd's Forest Dragon, endemic to Northeastern Queensland.



Boyd's Forest Dragon (Hypsilurus boydii)

Kingfisher Park, Julatten, Northeastern Queensland, 4 January 2012 129298 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Progress with Jo's book has been steady. I've added all the bird photos (over 400) and have just finished adding website-like internal links from all the places to all the birds and back again to make navigation easier. The next thing is to visit as many places as possible to check that the information is still up-to-date and get lots of location photos. That stage will start get underway seriously towards the end of November when a birding pal Madeleine joins me from Sydney for the travelling.

Best wishes

Ian

#487 Rufous Whistler 13 November 2013

Here's another good candidate for bird of the week that has slipped through the cracks. It's a good candidate because it's an attractive bird that sounds beautiful as well. Males are grey and black with a rufous belly, white throat and black breast band and look very dapper. The bird in the first two photos belongs to the nominate race *rufiventris*, widespread through most of mainland Australia but absent from Tasmania. Males of the nominate race have black eyebrows and lores (the area between the eye and the bill), more obvious in the first photo.



Rufous Whistler (Pachycephala rufiventris)

Townsville, NE Queensland, 13 July 2005

17214 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

<Rufous Whistlers> are very vocal with a rich vocabulary which includes loud calls with a Whipbird-like finish - probably territorial between males - repeated 'joey-joejy-joejy' song and trills. The 'joey' song note, repeated up to 30 times, is sung by both sexes alternating and accompanied by a seesawing dancing motion of the body. This is wonderful to watch, and the male in the second photo is in mid-performance. The trills are apparently only made by the male.



Rufous Whistler (Pachycephala rufiventris)

The Orient Wetland, Ingham District, NE Queensland, 16 July 2004

07911 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The third photo shows a female with grey back and rufous belly and streaked throat and breast.



Female Rufous Whistler (Pachycephala rufiventris)

Broome, NW Western Australia, 8 September 2004

09659 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Juveniles are similar to females, but with browner upper-parts, heavier streaks, bills with a pale base, and rufous edges to the flight feathers (as do immatures of other species such as the Golden Whistler), fourth photo.



Juvenile Rufous Whistler (Pachycephala rufiventris)

Ross River, Townsville, NE Queensland, 17 July 2005

17234 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Several other races have been described in Northern Australia, and the males of these generally lack the black eyebrow, see the fifth photo. This bird belongs to perhaps the most distinctive race *pallida* which has a much paler belly, and this race is found in Cape York, e.g. the Mitchell River Catchment, and Northwestern Queensland.



Rufous Whistler (Pachycephala rufiventris)

Mitchell River Catchment, Northern Queensland, 27 January 2008

62411 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The large heads of the Whistlers gives the genus the unflattering name *Pachycephala* ('thick-head') and the family the name <[Pachycephalidae](#)> which also includes the Shrike-thrushes.

Best wishes

Ian

#488 American (and Pacific) Golden Plovers 28 November 2013

I've just been down to Bowen and Ayr checking out locations and taking photos for the digital version of Jo Wieneke's <[Where to Find Birds in North-east Queensland](#)>, and have visited beaches and mudflats I had waders on the brain when I was considering the choice of this week's bird. So when I noticed in my iPad version of Pizzey and Knight, that the 2009 record of an American Golden Plover at Boat Harbour NSW - second photo - had been accepted by the BirdLife Australia Rarities Committee (Pizzey and Knight is very thorough!) I thought Aha, let's do a comparison of <[Pacific](#)> and <[American](#)> Golden Plovers.



American Golden Plover (Pluvialis dominicus)

Barrow, Alaska, 18 June 2008

66383 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Waders in non-breeding plumage are often rather drab and very confusing for identification but some of them are sartorially quite splendid when breeding. To see Northern Hemisphere waders in breeding plumage, Australian birders need to be either lucky just before the birds leave Australia in March or follow them to their breeding grounds. I first photographed the American Golden Plovers beside an icy lake in Barrow on the northern tip of Alaska in June 2008, first photo. Gorgeous birds they are with striking black and white and gold spangled upper parts and black bellies and faces with a broad white band along the sides of the neck and upper breast.



American Golden Plover (Pluvialis dominicus)

Boat Harbour, NSW, 30 March 2009

85462 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In March the following year, I was in Sydney and visited my accountant in Sutherland at a time when there was an unconfirmed report of a non-breeding American Golden Plover at nearby Boat Harbour on the Kurnell Peninsula near Botany Bay. This bird was in a flock of about 30 Pacific Golden Plovers, the species that is the common one in Australia in the southern summer/northern winter. Non-breeding Golden Plovers are notoriously difficult to separate from one another and at that stage five out of seven reports of American Golden Plovers submitted to the Rarities Committee had been rejected. Having both species together made it much easier, as one bird stood as clearly different from the others, with much greyer plumage and white rather than buff facial markings (comparing photos two and four).

Plumage is variable, of course, and not enough for definite identification in this case. The situation was complicated by the Pacific Golden Plovers beginning to change into breeding plumage. The bird in the third photo, for example, is in nearly complete breeding plumage, though the black plumage still has grey patches. In this plumage, the most obvious field mark is the white band along the neck and breast. In the Pacific, it is narrower and much more extensive than the band in the American one and extends down the side of the lower breast to the undertail coverts.



Pacific Golden Plover (Pluvialis fulva)

Boat Harbour, NSW, 30 March 2009

85453 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

There are differences in size too, the American being larger, heavier-billed and relatively shorter-legged but these are variable too and only reliable if you have birds in the hand and a statistically large sample. So, at the end of the day, the committee wanted to know about relative lengths of tails, primary and tertiary wing feathers of resting birds. These can be judged from photos as well as in the hand and the submitters of the rarity report included one of my photos. The wing tips of Pacific Golden Plovers do not extend much beyond the tail, but the wing tips of American ones extend about 50mm beyond it.



Pacific Golden Plover (Pluvialis fulva)

Boat Harbour, NSW, 30 March 2009

85391 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

So, those are the lengths you need to go both literally and figuratively sometimes to identify rare birds! The Pacific Golden Plover nests mainly in northern Russia but its breeding range does extend to western Alaska and overlaps with that of the American Golden Plover, so there is no doubt that they are separate biological species. If all this seems a bit arcane, don't worry: just enjoy the photos. Golden Plovers of any hue are lovely birds and I always get pleasure from seeing them.

Best wishes

Ian

#489 Bower's Shrike-thrush 9 December 2013

We spent several days last week camping on the Atherton Tableland at Malanda Falls Caravan Park. It's a great caravan park incidentally as it borders on rainforest and is within walking distance of both Malanda Falls and the Conservation Park across the road. My aim was to photograph locations for the book *Where to Find Birds in NE Queensland* but I was of course on the lookout for any obliging birds, in particular the wet tropic endemic [Bower's Shrikethrush](#) and the local race of the [Yellow-throated Scrubwren](#), both of which I'd found uncooperative in the past.



Bower's Shrike-thrush (Colluricincla boweri)

Mobo Creek, Atherton Tableland, NE Queensland, 4 December 2013 156495 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

One of the spots I visited was Mobo Creek Crater about 10km along the Danbulla Forest Drive from the Gillies Highway end. I hadn't been there before and found it a delightful spot as the path twice crosses the creek near the crater. I spent some time photographing the local resident, [rather dark race of the Grey Fantail](#) (we get the southern race here as a visitor in winter). While, I was doing so, a Bower's Shrikethrush came to the creek for a swim. The first photo shows her checking out a small pool from a rock in the creek.



Bower's Shrike-thrush (Colluricincla boweri)

Mobo Creek, Atherton Tableland, NE Queensland, 4 December 2013 156497 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

She then jumped into the creek and had a good swim, before jumping back out on the original rock, photos two and three.



Bower's Shrike-thrush (Colluricincla boweri)

Mobo Creek, Atherton Tableland, NE Queensland, 4 December 2013 156498 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Then a good shake, fourth photo, and a rather bedraggled but satisfied-looking bird returned to the rainforest. You can tell it's a female from the grey bill with a pinkish tinge and the buff eye-ring, lores and eyebrow. Males have black bills and grey eye-ring, lores and eyebrow.



Bower's Shrike-thrush (Colluricincla boweri)

Mobo Creek, Atherton Tableland, NE Queensland, 4 December 2013 156501 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Bower's Shrikethrush is one of the 12 species endemic to the Wet Tropics of northeastern Queensland. It is found in highland rainforest above 400m from just south of Cooktown to just north of Townsville and is reasonably common within this relatively restricted range.

Shrikethrushes get their name from their slightly hooked shrike-like bills and their thrush-like appearance and melodious songs. Bower's Shrikethrush has a distinctive whistling song that sounds to me like 'we you you cha cha cha' and we heard them at a number of sites during our stay. They are related to Whistlers and are sometimes placed in the same family, <[Pachycephalidae](#)> - 'thick-heads' as you may remember from the Rufous Whistler bird of the week last month [#487](#) - or placed in their own family the Colluricinclidae.



Yellow-throated Scrubwren (Sericornis citreogularis)

Millaa Millaa Falls, Northeastern Queensland, 3 December 2013

156402 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Here, incidentally, is a male of the local race of the Yellow-throated Scrubwren that I wanted also for the book. A pair of them emerged into the car park at Millaa Millaa Falls after the last tourist buses had departed.

Best wishes

Ian

#490 New Zealand Pigeon 21 December 2013

Well, Christmas is nearly on us and I've put up the 'icicle' Christmas lights beside the almost too-warm pool (29°C), so I thought a bird photo including some real Southern Hemisphere snow would be correspondingly inappropriate. This proved difficult as I usually avoid the snow and the best candidate, the [Kea of New Zealand](#) was bird of the week two years ago even though the snow was incidental to the story about Keas' passion for dismantling motor vehicles.



New Zealand Pigeon (Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae)

Milford Sound, South Island, New Zealand, 13 November 2011

121859 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

So I settled for this one of [New Zealand Pigeon](#). The three-pronged smudge above its head is snow, believe it or not, and it's actually the isolated three-pointed star visible above and to the right of the main tree in the second photo - taken at about the same time and place in the spectacular surroundings of Milford Sound in the Fiordland of the south west of the South Island.



Milford Sound

I was there one evening to book a place on an early cruise the next morning to search for Fiordland Penguins, and having done so went for a stroll and encountered various local inhabitants including <[Paradise Shelduck](#)>, New Zealand Pigeons and, near the car park, a <[Weka](#)>. the third photo shows the same pigeon on the same branch from a better angle and you can see the beautiful purple and green iridescence of the plumage contrasting with the snow-white belly. With a length to 50cm/20in and a weight up to 800g/28oz, these are large birds, as big or bigger than <[Imperial-Pigeons](#)>, <[Wompoo Fruit-Doves](#)> and <[Common Wood Pigeons](#)>.



New Zealand Pigeon (Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae)

Milford Sound, South Island, New Zealand, 13 November 2011

121859 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

They're very confiding, and this one and its mate, sitting on another branch in the same tree, just watched me as I walked around them taking photos from different angles. They look plump and gastronomically appealing, so it's not surprising that the population declined after human settlement until protection was granted in 1921. The Norfolk Island sub-species wasn't so lucky: it was still around in the 1830s but there have been no records since 1900.



New Zealand Pigeon (Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae)

Milford Sound, South Island, New Zealand, 13 November 2011

121859 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The following morning dawned bright and sunny, last photo, and a very obliging cruise-boat captain found me a pair of nesting <Fiordland Penguins> within 10 minutes of leaving the jetty and took us almost alarming close so that I could get some photos.



Milford Sound

Now there's some **real** snow on the mountains on the right. I wish you a safe and peaceful Christmas and an enjoyable and enriching 2014.

Ian

Year 2014: #491 to #519

#491 Chestnut-breasted Mannikin/Munia 23 January 2014

Please accept my apologies that it is over a month since the last bird of the week. I seem to have been distracted by Christmas, New Year, etc.

Anyway, here is a spontaneous one. I'm in the public library in Ingham at the moment getting my car serviced. I was planning to work on the book <[Where to Find Birds in Northeast Queensland](#)>, but had a nagging feeling that I should really do the bird of the week. I found a table at the back of the library with a pleasant view over the adjacent Tyto Wetlands and spotted three <[Chestnut-breasted Mannikins](#)> feeding on the ornamental grass seeds just outside the window.



Chestnut-breasted Mannikin (*Lonchura castaneothorax*)

Ingham, Northeastern Queensland, 23 January 2014

157005 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I had my camera with me and got a couple of photos of one before they noticed me (second photo) and flew away. The photos are a bit cloudy having been taken through glass, but it was good quality plate glass. Members of the genus *Lonchura* are usually called Mannikins in Australia but they also occur in Asia where the name Munia is used.



Chestnut-breasted Mannikin (*Lonchura castaneothorax*)

Ingham, Northeastern Queensland, 23 January 2014

157008 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This incidentally, is the view of Tyto Wetlands from the library. The dark speck on the lawn in the foreground on the left hand side is the bird in the first two photos.



Tyto Wetlands gets its name from the Barn Owl genus *Tyto* as it is a known haunt of the elusive <Eastern Grass Owl> *Tyto longimembris* which nest sometimes in the grassy area between the wetlands and the local airstrip. I have seen them here on a number of occasions and they have been reported here quite recently, but no photos unfortunately yet.

Ingham is quite a small sugar-cane town so it is greatly to their credit that they, under the guidance and encouragement of John Young of recent Night Parrot fame, have created this wonderful wetland and sanctuary. There is also a large wetland centre near the highway, well worth a visit if you are passing this way.

Now back to the book. I finished the bird section and am now taking photos of as many as possible of the locations and that quest has taken me to some interesting spots that I've never visited before.

Best wishes

Ian

#492 Eurasian Bullfinch 2 February 2014

In response to last week's photos of the Chestnut-breasted Mannikin, I received a photo of an American <Evening Grosbeak> - thank you Jeff - with a similar large pale finch bill. Typical Northern Hemisphere finches such as the Evening Grosbeak belong to the family Fringillidae while all the native Australian finches belong to the

family Estrildidae, so I thought it might be of interest to say a little about finch taxonomy and evolution, as what we think of as typical finch seed-eating bills appear to have arisen independently in more than one instance.



Male Eurasian Bullfinch (Pyrrhula pyrrhula)

Clogherhead, Co. Louth, Ireland, 7 June 2007

54465 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

So, this week's bird is for a change a Fringillid finch, the <Eurasian Bullfinch> and a favourite of mine since I was a birding teenager in Ireland many years ago. the male is perhaps the most colourful of European song birds and it was always, and still is, a thrill for me to see one. They aren't uncommon, but are secretive and usually occur in pairs rather than flocks so are easy to overlook unless you look out for their characteristic white rumps as they fly out of the thick foliage of hedges, probably their favourite habitat.



Male Eurasian Bullfinch (Pyrrhula pyrrhula)

Clogherhead, Co. Louth, Ireland, 7 June 2007

54570 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The bird in the first two photos is feeding on the flowers of the Blackthorn and both its English name and its scientific one *Prunus spinosa* reveal why it is a popular hedge shrub for stock, having been around a lot longer than barbed wire. It has other uses to including making Blackthorn walking sticks and clubs, such as Shillelaghs. It produces an attractive look fruit, called sloes, which look a bit like black grapes but are very astringent. So, they're put to better use, many would think, by soaking them for months in gin or vodka after pricking their skins, to make a purplish liqueur called sloe gin.



Female Eurasian Bullfinch (Pyrrhula pyrrhula)

Clogherhead, Co. Louth, Ireland, 7 June 2007

55426 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Back to Bullfinches. The female, third photo, has a latte-coloured breast instead of a salmon pink one, but is just as elegant and was the partner of the male in the other two photos. The hedge in question is near my sister's house in Co. Louth in an area (below) where there are still plenty of hedges and is good for other song birds like [Yellowhammers](#) and [Eurasian Wrens](#).



Looking North from near Clogherhead

Recent DNA work has shed some light on the inter-relationships between various families of song birds with thick seed-eating bills, the most familiar of which are the Fringillid finches, the Estrildid finches, the Eurasian Sparrows (Passeridae), the Buntings and North American Sparrows (Emberizidae). These were originally ascribed to the same superfamily Passeroidea by Sibley and Ahlquist (1990) and that grouping is still largely intact but now includes other families that do not have thick bills, including the Sunbirds and Flowerpeckers such as the [Mistletoebird](#), the Pipits and Eurasian Wagtails (Motacillidae) and the New World Wood Warblers (Parulidae).

It now seems that the [Sunbirds](#) and [Flowerpeckers](#) split off first, then the [Estrildid Finches](#) and [Weavers](#) (Ploceidae), then probably the [Sparrows](#) and finally the [Wagtails and Pipits](#), the [Fringillid Finches](#) the [Buntings and New World Sparrows](#) and the [New World Warblers](#). From this we can conclude that Estrildid and Fringillid Finches are not closely related and that a traditional morphological approach to classification would have failed to link the Wagtails and New World Warblers to the Fringillidae.

In case all this taxonomic detail leaves you cold, I've included links to the all the families mentioned on the Birdway website so can check out the photos instead. The sharp-eyed among you will notice that the BirdLife International sequence of families on the website is not quite the same as the order here. That's because it predates the latest sequence which I've extracted from a 2012 paper on global bird diversity in [Nature by Jetz et al](#). No doubt the grouping and order will change again in the future.

Best wishes

Ian

#493 Yellowhammer 17 February 2014

Continuing the theme of finches and finch-like birds here's a photo of a male <Yellowhammer> along the same lane in Co. Louth as the <Eurasian Bullfinch>. The Yellowhammer is a bunting and belongs to the family <Emberizidae>, which includes the New World Sparrows.



Yellowhammer (Emberiza citrinella)

Clogherhead, Co. Louth, Ireland, 26 May 2007

52832 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

When the first photo was taken, the Hawthorn was in full bloom. The second photo was taken 12 days later - on the same day as last week's Bullfinches - and the Hawthorn is almost finished. Yellowhammers have a characteristic rapid slightly nasal song often rendered as 'little bit of bread and NO cheese' with the 'NO' higher and the 'cheese' lower and longer than the other notes. Sadly, European populations of Yellowhammers have suffered from intensive farming and the removal of hedges.



Yellowhammer (Emberiza citrinella)

Clogherhead, Co. Louth, Ireland, 7 June 2007

54486 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Like many other European, or more strictly 'British' songbirds, Yellowhammers have been introduced into New Zealand where they have done well. Vagrants from the New Zealand population have been recorded on rare occasions on Lord Howe Island, so the Yellowhammer is the only member of the family on the Australian List. The third photo was taken in New Zealand when I was searching at a known site for the extremely rare <Black Stilt> on the Ahuriri River in the Waitaki Valley on the South Island. I had just parked nearby but stopped to take the Yellowhammer photo on the principle of a bird in the hand . .



Yellowhammer (Emberiza citrinella)

Waitaki Valley, South Island, New Zealand, 12 November 2011

133567 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In fact, less than ten minutes later I took this photo, which featured as bird of the week three days after I'd taken the photos (I couldn't wait to show it off!).



Black Stilt (Himantopus novaeseelandiae)

Ahuriri River, Waitaki Valley, South Island, New Zealand, 12 November 2011

133611 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The sharp-eyed among you would have noticed that the sequence number of the Black Stilt is 44 greater than that of the Yellowhammer so it was a busy ten minutes and you might wonder what featured in the intervening photos. Well, they were of a smart New Zealand tern called the <Black-fronted> as there was a small colony of them nesting in the pebbles beside the river. That hasn't featured as bird of the week, so I'll hold it over till next time.

Best wishes

Ian

#494 Black-fronted Tern 5 March 2014

Here is a rather special tern from New Zealand, the <Black-fronted Tern>, which I photographed while on the quest for the very special Black Stilt. The tern is special, as it's a New Zealand endemic, attractive and, unfortunately, endangered. The first photo shows a bird incubating at a typical nesting site on the gravelly bank of one of the branching - 'braided' - rivers in the Waitaki Valley on the South Island.

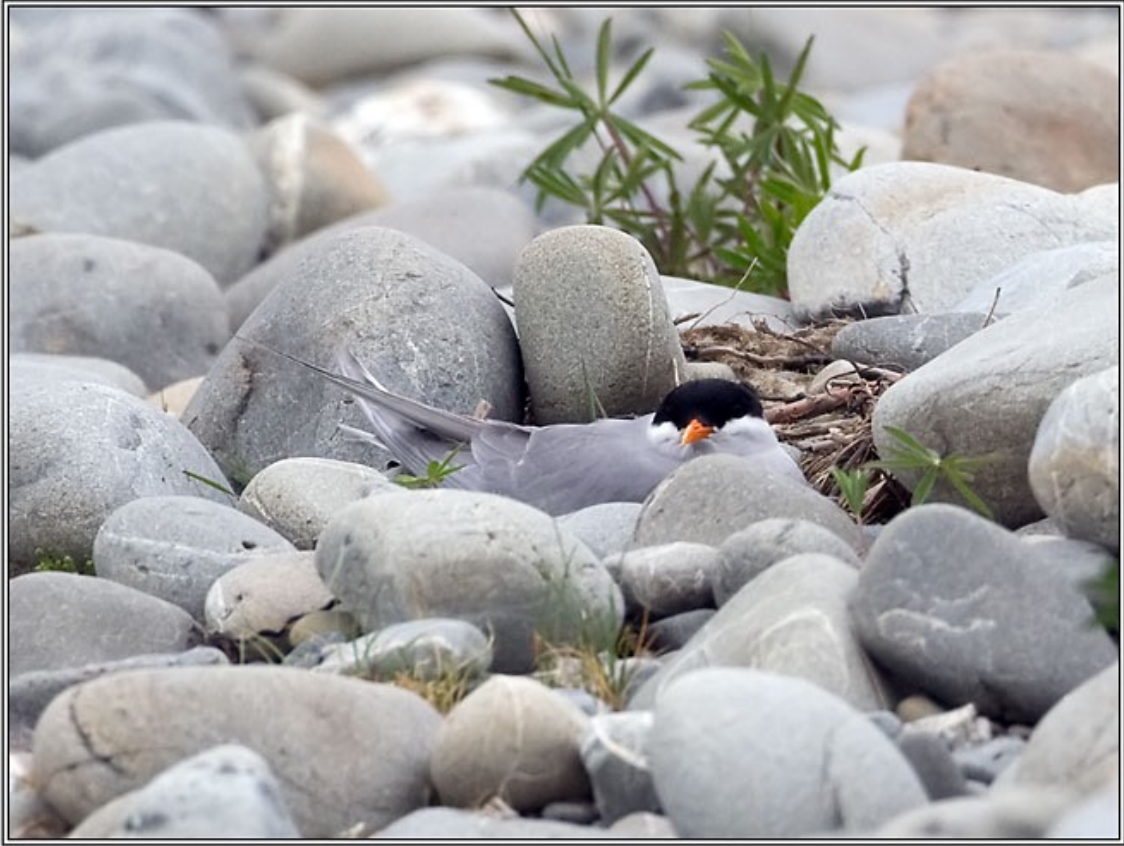


Black-fronted Tern (Sterna albobriata)

Waitaki Valley, South Island, New Zealand, 16 November 2011

122751 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The second photo shows another incubating bird at the same colony four days earlier, when I found the sole [Black Stilt](#). The plant with the palmate leaves is feral Lupin, one of the threats that this species faces, in this case by encroaching on the nesting sites.



Black-fronted Tern (Sterna albobriata)

Waitaki Valley, South Island, New Zealand, 12 November 2011

133654 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I took these photos from a sufficient distance with a 500mm lens so as not to disturb incubating birds, but like many terns they are quite aggressive and other non-incubating individuals like those in the third and fourth photos showed me how unwelcome I was by flying intimidatingly close to me and calling harshly.



Black-fronted Tern (Sterna albobriata)

Waitaki Valley, South Island, New Zealand, 16 November 2011

122745 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

They look very smart in breeding plumage with sharp black caps, bright orange bills and legs, and white cheek stripe and rump contrasting with otherwise grey plumage. They're quite small, 30cm/12in in length, with, by tern standards, quite short tail streamers.

In non-breeding plumage, the cap is grey, streaky and less extensive and the orange of the bill and legs is paler. In the breeding season, this is an inland species, nesting only along the rivers of the South Island, though it used to breed on the North Island.

Outside the breeding season, the birds disperse to coastal waters with some reaching Stewart Island in the south and North Island but don't travel far and have never been recorded in Australia. They feed on small fish and invertebrates mostly snatched in flight either from the water surface or the ground - they will follow ploughs - and will also plunge into water to catch fish.



Black-fronted Tern (Sterna albobriata)

Waitaki Valley, South Island, New Zealand, 16 November 2011

122765 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The population is estimated at about 5,000 individuals and declining, hence its endangered status. Main threats to the population are predation by introduced mammals particular stoats and weasels, feral weeds, disturbance by people and stock and hydroelectric schemes. Breeding success appears to be low, but colonies do respond well to conservation measures such as protection of nesting sites, removal of weeds by spraying and provision of artificial nesting sites such as rafts. The Black-fronted is one of two endemic New Zealand terns, the other being the marine <White-fronted>. It's considered a close relative of the <Roseate Tern> is quite abundant and many migrate to southeastern Australia in winter.

Greetings

Ian

#495 Red-capped Parrot 15 March 2014

I've had a request for a Western Australian endemic from an American friend who is visiting WA this coming September. So here, Laurie, is the <Red-capped Parrot> which you should see there. The first photo shows a male of this fairly large (length to 38cm/15in), brightly coloured - some would say gaudy - parrot, which is reasonably common in suitable habitat in a relatively small area of southwestern Australia, mainly south of Perth, west of Esperance and within 100km of the coast.



Red-capped Parrot (Purpureicephalus spurius)

Lower Kalgan, SW Western Australia, 30 August 2006

38581 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The second photo shows a female, similar to but more subdued in colour than the male, with greenish patches in the red cap and under-tail coverts and less intense violet breast.



Red-capped Parrot (Purpureicephalus spurius)

Lower Kalgan, SW Western Australia, 27 August 2006

38214 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The female is perched in a Marri tree, a Western Australian bloodwood, *Corymbia*, formerly *Eucalyptus, calphylla*. This is the main food plant of the parrot and their ranges mostly coincide. Marri has tough woody globular nuts and the long pointed bill of the Red-capped Parrot is adapted to exploiting the one weakness in the nut defences - the valve through which the seed is shed. The parrots can prise out the seed without having to gnaw through the woody wall.

It's clearly a fine source of bird food, as another Western Australian endemic Baudin's or the <Long-billed Cockatoo> has evolved along identical lines for the same reason -an elegant example of parallel evolution. The male cockatoo in the third photo is showing us exactly how it's done: piece of cake really, given the right equipment. Not surprisingly the range of this cockatoo is similar to that of the parrot.



Baudin's/Long-billed Black-Cockatoo (Calyptorhynchus baudinii)

Dunsborough, SW Western Australia, 30 August 2006

38957 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Actually, this bird featured as bird of the week in November 2006, but this is, if a repeat, at least a different photo. The first and third photos were taken on the same day. Kalgan is east of Albany on the way to the famous-for-birding Two Peoples Bay and Dunsborough is west of Bussleton near Cape Leeuwin. Cape Leeuwin has this splendid lighthouse built in 1895 and marks the point where the Indian Ocean meets the Southern Ocean.



Cape Leeuwin

Western Australia, 30 August 2006 38706 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I did take this one photo of the lighthouse on the same day, but my clearest memory is of a <Rock Parrot> feeding on the ground near it, but that bird featured as bird of the week in October 2006, a good day for unusual parrots.

Greetings

Ian

#496 Irish Coal Tit 17 March 2014

Here is a St Patrick's Day special: one of only four avian species that are deemed to have Irish races, the <Coal Tit>. The Irish race, *Parus ater hibernicus*, has yellower

cheeks and underparts and more cinnamon flanks than its British counterpart *britannicus*.



Irish Coal Tit (Parus ater hibernicus)

Killiney Hill, Co. Dublin, 9 September 2012

140458 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The other three Irish sub-species are the Irish <Dipper> (darker breast), the Irish <Jay> (darker overall) and the Irish Red Grouse (paler overall). Because of sea-level fluctuations with ice ages, Ireland has been isolated from Britain for a mere 8,000 years. The current distances vary from a mere 19km/12miles between Scotland and Co. Antrim to about 100km/60miles between Ireland and Wales (Pembrokeshire to Co. Wexford and Holyhead to Dublin). so only the most sedentary or least adventurous species have any to chance of diverging.



Irish Coal Tit (Parus ater hibernicus)

Shroove, Co. Donegal, 25 May 2007

52761 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The first photo shows an adult bird, while the second one is a juvenile with drabber colours and juvenile Coal Tits tend to have yellower cheeks anyway. Incidentally, there are 21 subspecies of Coal Tit currently recognised, from the Irish one in the west to Taiwanese and Japanese ones in the east. Some authorities dispute the validity of these subspecies because of local variation.

Interestingly the birds in Northeastern Ireland show more in common with Scottish birds, and some would argue that Scottish Coal Tits are different from English ones. We could be getting onto politically thin ice here so, given the unifying spirit of St Patrick's Day, I don't think we'll pursue this topic :-)

Happy St Patrick's Day!

Ian

#497 Black-winged Stilt 30 March 2014

A few weeks ago, I included a photo of the Black Stilt of New Zealand in a piece [#494](#) on Black-fronted Tern, so I was surprised to find out that no other stilt has ever featured as bird of the week. That's a serious omission given the spectacular appearance of all the members of this family, the Avocets and Stilts, Recurvirostridae, so here are three variants of the almost global Black-winged Stilt,

starting with the one we get in Australasia, often called the <White-headed Stilt> or more recently the Pied Stilt.



White-headed Stilt (Himantopus leucocephalus)

Bowra, SW Queensland, 13 April 2013

153138 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

There is disagreement over whether the various version of the Black-winged Stilt are species or merely sub-species. Some taxonomists, none naturally from New Zealand, have even dared to suggest that the <Black Stilt> is a mere subspecies too, as it sometimes hybridises with the White-headed which colonised New Zealand in the 19th century. The tendency now is to settle on four closely related species, the Black Stilt (*Himantopus novaezelandiae*) the nominate Eurasian and African <Black-winged> (*H. himantopus*), the Australasian <White-headed> (*H. leucocephalus*) the American (North and South) <Black-necked> (*H. mexicanus*). As we'll see shortly, the English names are almost as confusing as the taxonomy as they all have black wings, two have white faces and two have black necks.



White-headed Stilt (Himantopus leucocephalus)

Roebuck Bay, Broome, NW Western Australia, 5 September 2004

09307 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

As a teenager in Ireland in the 1960s, browsing my Peterson Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe - which I have in front of me at the moment - birds like Avocets and Stilts seemed unbelievably exotic. The iconic <Pied Avocet> was, and still is, the poster child of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds following its successful reestablishment as a breeding species in Britain. I saw Pied Avocets in the RSPB Reserve at Minsmere in Suffolk in 1965 and <American Avocets> in Wyoming in 1970, but it wasn't until I arrived in Sydney in 1971 that I saw my first Stilt and was amazed to find how widespread and abundant the White-headed is. Almost too much so, as these are noisy birds and almost as much of a nuisance as Common Redshanks are in Ireland when you're trying to stalk shy waders.



Black-winged Stilt (Himantopus himantopus)

Quinto do Lago, The Algarve, 2 June 2007

53692 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I eventually encountered the nominate Black-winged in Zimbabwe in 1992 and again in Portugal in 2007. The female (very little black on the head) one in the third photo is being very vocal and making it quite clear that I am very unwelcome. This time at least she had very good reason for being aggressive as she had four newly-hatched chicks close by, wandering around looking rather bewildered, fourth photo (the fourth chick was farther to the left). Male nominate race birds have more but varying degrees of black on the head and neck, adding to the general confusion.



Black-winged Stilt (Himantopus himantopus)

Quinto do Lago, The Algarve, 2 June 2007

53539 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Finally, fifth photo, here is the American version, the Black-necked. It has a black cap joined fore and aft by a curved band through the eye leaving a white spot above the eye, creating a bullseye effect. It's showing us why stilts have such long legs and that needle-sharp bill is perfect for delicately snatching small items of prey from the surface of the water.



Black-necked Stilt (Himantopus mexicanus)

Palo Alto, California, 11 June 2008

69675 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

There are photos of all the Stilts and Avocet, except the poorly known Andean Avocet, here: <[Recurvirostridae](#)>.

This is a slightly hurried bird of the week, as I'm leaving for Cairns later today. We've had a late end to the wet season after a dry false alarm earlier in the month and I want to take more location photos for the book *Where to find Birds in Northeast Queensland* now that the weather has improved.

Greetings

Ian

#498 Greater Sand Plover 14 April 2014

As I mentioned in the last email, I took advantage of a spell of reasonable weather to make a trip to Cairns to take location photos for *Where to Find Birds in Northeast Queensland*. On the way back, I visited Coquette Point near to check it out as it is listed in the book as a good spot for both mangrove birds and waders. Coquette Point and Flying Fish Point are the charmingly named headlands on the southern and northern banks of the mouth of the Johnstone River on which Innisfail, 100 km south of Cairns, is situated.



Looking South from Coquette Point

Although it mightn't live up to the dream of an idyllic tropical paradise - I'm still itching from some sandfly bites and there have been recent sightings of <[Saltwater Crocodiles](#)> in the neighbourhood - it did indeed turn out to be good for birds. As well as a pair of <[Beach Stone-Curlews](#)> in the mangroves, there were several pairs of <[Greater Sand Plovers](#)> feeding in the shallows. At this time of the year, many waders are migrating back to their breeding grounds in the northern hemisphere and it is a good time to look for ones in breeding plumage, such as the one in the first photo.



Greater Sand Plover (Charadrius leschenaultii)

Coquette Point, Innisfail, NE Queensland, 4 April 2014

157416 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In non-breeding plumage most waders are, frankly, drab and often difficult to identify. Here is a Greater Sand Plover in non-breeding plumage on Cape York. This particular individual shows the characteristic long legs and large bill that distinguish it from the very similar <Lesser or Mongolian Sand Plover>, but Sand Plovers are quite variable in both size and bill length and I'm not always certain of identification, even with the aid of photos.



Greater Sand Plover (Charadrius leschenaultii)

Lockhart River, Cape York, N Queensland, 30 November 2009

97294 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Here, to illustrate the point, is a pair at Coquette Point. The bird in non-breeding plumage looks smaller than its companion, has the slightly hunched posture of the Lesser Sand Plover but its large bill, and guilt by association, would indicate a Greater.



Greater Sand Plover (Charadrius leschenaultii)

Coquette Point, Innisfail, NE Queensland, 4 April 2014

157436 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Finally, to complete the series, here is one of the Coquette Point birds in flight. The birds wintering in Australia belong to the nominate race *leschenaultii* and nest in Southern Siberia, Western China and Southern Mongolia. Their movements are not well understood but it is thought that they migrate non-stop, so this at least is one species of wader that doesn't have to rely on the fast-disappearing mudflats of the Yellow Sea for refuelling stopovers.



Greater Sand Plover (Charadrius leschenaultii)

Coquette Point, Innisfail, NE Queensland, 4 April 2014

157475 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I'd always vaguely assumed that the person who named Flying Fish Point did so because he or she had seen Flying Fish there, but Coquette Point aroused my curiosity as there seemed nothing flirtatious about it. With the help of Google, I found out that George Dalrymple, one of the explorers in this part of the world was sent by the Queensland Government in 1873 to explore the inlets and rivers between Cardwell and Cooktown. His boats were two cutters, the Flying Fish and the Coquette and one of his companion policemen was Robert Johnstone.

In Dalrymple's report to Parliament he said "I therefore considered that I was justified in naming the river after Mr Johnstone, a gentleman who has become identified with discovery and enterprise on the north east coast and who first brought to light the real character and value of this fine river, and it's rich agricultural land...". This, incidentally, is what 19th Century cutters looked like.



Which, of course, begs the question of why a Queensland boat would be called Coquette. The only clue I could find was that the first Royal Navy ship called Coquette was a 28 gun one captured off the French in 1783 and put into service. After that the name 'Coquette' was used repeatedly for a series of smaller ships.

Greetings

Ian

#499 Black-breasted Buzzard 8 May 2014

I went to <[Bowra Station](#)> near Cunnamulla, SW Queensland, to meet some birding pals from Victoria for Easter. Cunnamulla is almost exactly half-way between Bluewater and Melbourne by the shortest inland route (2,532km Bluewater-Melbourne CBD) and Bowra is an AWC reserve, famous for its dry country birds and wildlife. I returned with an intractable bout of flu which has left me horizontal for 2 weeks, but I am now much better and able to tackle long-neglected tasks like the Bird of the Week. So, here is something worth waiting for, one of the less-well known endemic Australian raptors, the <[Black-breasted Buzzard](#)>.



Black-breasted Buzzard (Hamirostra melanosternon)

Cunnamulla, SW Queensland, 19 April 2014

157570 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

At the end of the drive from Bluewater to Bowra, I saw this raptor perched on road-kill - the euphemism used here for run-over native wildlife - near the entrance to Bowra, thought 'that's not a Black Kite', turned the car round and picked up my camera to take the first photos of the trip. Reluctant to leave lunch behind, it tolerated my approach for about 30 seconds before flying away into the afternoon sunshine, second photo. In both photos, you can see the long, hooked bill that gives it its generic name (*hamus* is the Latin for hook), reddish crown and nape and the beginnings of its eponymous black-breast. In flight, you can see the characteristic white wing patches on the middle of the first six primary flight feathers, probably its best field mark and the complete absence of barring on the wing and tail feathers.



Black-breasted Buzzard (Hamirostra melanosternon)

Cunnamulla, SW Queensland, 19 April 2014

157578 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This was the first time I'd seen a Black-breasted Buzzard either close up or perched. Mostly, one sees them singly and infrequently in flight soaring in the open skies of the drier parts of Australia. They're common enough to have an official status of 'Least Concern' but uncommon enough to give me a thrill each time I see one. Apart from concerns of rarity, they're impressive birds in their own right, being, I have just discovered, the third largest Australian raptor with a wingspan to 1.5m/5ft and an experts at soaring.



Two days later, we stopped for lunch at this dam at the far end of the property, about 15km/10miles away from the entrance. A Black-breasted Buzzard soared high above us and then came round and flew overhead for a closer look, fourth photo. Comparing the pattern of wear on the flight feathers, indicates that this was the same individual. In this photo, the black breast of the adult bird is obvious as are the rusty flanks. Apart from dark blotches on the wing linings, the lack of barring is also apparent.



Black-breasted Buzzard (Hamirostra melanosternon)

Cunnamulla, SW Queensland, 21 April 2014

158109 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Black-breasted Buzzards are known to feed on carrion and live prey, but their speciality is the eggs of large ground-nesting birds such as <Brolgas>, <Bustards> and even <Emus>. The latter have tough eggs which even that hooked beak would have trouble penetrating so, amazingly, these birds use stones to break them, dropping them from either a standing position or in flight.

Though they are thought to belong to a rather ancient Australasian lineage of raptors this use of tools elevates them globally to the top of the class, sharing this position with the Egyptian Vulture which also throws stones at eggs. The Black-breasted Buzzard is the sole member of its genus (monotypic) and its closest relative is thought to be the <Square-tailed Kite>, another monotypic, uncommon Australian endemic with dubious, gastronomic tastes, in its case nestlings.

This ancient lineage is thought include a third Australian endemic, the <Red Goshawk> and several New Guinea species including the long-tailed buzzards and perhaps the New Guinea Harpy Eagle. This just goes to show how indiscriminately common names like buzzards, goshawks, kites and eagles are applied to raptors.



Juvenile Black-breasted Buzzard (Hamirostra melanosternon)

Pajingo Station, NE Queensland, 23 May 2009

89961 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The last photo shows a juvenile Black-breasted Buzzard photographed at a joint pre-merger Birds Australia and Townsville BOCA outing to a dry country station called Pajingo, south of Charters Towers in 2009. As you can see the juvenile lacks the black breast of the adult, though pale patch on the wing is very similar. At the time, we unanimously agreed that this was a pale morph <Little Eagle>. I posted it at such on the Birdway website and it wasn't until last year that the error was brought to my attention. This is what Steve Debus, one of the Australian experts on raptors said: "the image shows virtually no typical light-morph Little Eagle characters, such as the pale 'M', or the barring on flight feathers (including primary 'fingers') and tail, feathered legs etc." and other points made were the long, slender bill of the Black-breasted Buzzard and the 'chunkier' head of the Little Eagle. Good to know.

Best wishes

Ian

#500 Chestnut-breasted Quail-thrush 21 May 2014

One of the specialties at Bowra is the <Chestnut-breasted Quail-thrush> a mainly terrestrial inhabitant of stony areas with scrubby bushes, particular mulga, in dry, but not desert, parts of western Queensland and NSW with a widely-separated population in Western Australia. It has suffered in eastern Australia from habitat

clearance, but can usually be found at Bowra in an area called the Stony Ridge on the road that runs west of the homestead. This location, incidentally is also good for another specialty, <Hall's Babbler>.



Chestnut-breasted Quail-thrush (Cinclosoma castaneothorax)

Bowra, Cunnamulla, SW Queensland, 20 April 2014

157725 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Quail-thrushes are shy and either sit tight and flush suddenly with a quail-like whirring of their wings or run for cover. The Chestnut-breasted usually runs, but this time we unwittingly encircled this male bird which took refuge in a dead tree, the first time I've seen any quail-thrush do so. It looked confused rather than alarmed and wandered for a long time from branch to branch providing unusually good opportunities for photography until it hopped down onto the ground and ran away.

On this occasion we saw only the brightly coloured male; females have more subdued colours, brown replacing the all the black plumage except the spotty wing coverts and rely on camouflage to escape detection when nesting on the ground. Quail-thrushes feed on both insects and seeds and there are an Australasian taxon with about four species in Australia and one in New Guinea.



Chestnut-breasted Quail-thrush (Cinclosoma castaneothorax)

Bowra, Cunnamulla, SW Queensland, 20 April 2014

157701 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Quail-thrushes presumably get the quail part of their name from their terrestrial habits and whirring flight and the thrush part from their body shape. *Cinclosoma* is bird-taxonomy-speak for thrush in a confused sort of way. Confused because the Latin *cinclus* means thrush but derives from the Greek *Kinklos* a waterside bird of unknown type mentioned by Aristotle and others and thought to be either an Old World Wagtail or a wader. To add to the confusion, <Cinclidae> refers to the Dipper family, not the thrushes, with *Cinclus cinclus* being the Eurasian White-throated Dipper.



Chestnut-breasted Quail-thrush (Cinclosoma castaneothorax)

Bowra, Cunnamulla, SW Queensland, 20 April 2014

157752 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The confusion continues with actual taxonomy. The western race of the Chestnut-breasted is sometimes (IOC) treated as a separate species, the Western Quail-thrush. Meanwhile the geographically intermediate and closely-related Cinnamon Quail-thrush of central Australia desert country is sometimes split in two as well, with the Nullabor race being treated as a separate species, though it has also been lumped with the Chestnut-breasted. If that's not enough, Birdlife International puts the Quail-thrushes in a family of their own, the Cinclosomatidae, while Birdlife Australia and the IOC lump with the Whipbirds and called them <Psophodidae>. (Birdlife International use to lump them and call them the Eupetidae.) I thought you'd like to know! Let's just enjoy the photos:

Greetings

Ian

#501 Hall's Babbler 12 June 2014

Here is another of the Bowra specialties, <Hall's Babbler>, which has a restricted range in dry scrubland in western Queensland north to about Winton and northwestern New South Wales south to about Brewarrina.



Hall's Babbler (Pomatostomus halli)

Bowra, Cunnamulla, SW Queensland, 21 April 2014

158044 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

If you think it looks just like a White-browed Babbler, you won't be surprised to hear that it was overlooked as a separate species until 1963 and was first described in 1964. It was named after Harold Hall who funded five controversial bird collecting Australian expeditions in the 1960s and the species was detected, and presumably 'collected', on the first of these.

It's larger than the White-browed, 23-25cm/9-10 in length versus 18-22cm/7-9in, is darker overall, has a shorter white bib abruptly shading into the dark belly and a much wider eyebrow. DNA studies suggest that it's actually more closely related to the Grey-crowned Babbler. It's voice is described pithily by Pizzey and Knight as 'squeaky chatterings ... lacks "yahoo" of Grey-crowned and madder staccato outbursts of White-browed'. Babblers are clearly birds of great character.



Hall's Babbler (Pomatostomus halli)

Bowra, Cunnamulla, SW Queensland, 21 April 2014

158065 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It's quite common at Bowra in suitable habitat, mainly mulga scrub, and on this occasion we found a party of about 20. Like all Australasian babblers, they're very social and move erratically through the scrub bouncing along the ground and up into bushes like tennis balls. They're delightful to watch, and infuriating to photograph as the tangled, twiggy mulga plays havoc with automatic focus - no time for manual - and they keep ducking out of sight. You can be lucky and get ones, like the bird in the second photo, that hesitate briefly, between bounces, in the open to look for food. There had been some good rain a couple of months before our visit, and the birds had been breeding - the one in the third photo with the yellow gape is a juvenile.



Hall's Babbler (Pomatostomus halli)

Bowra, Cunnamulla, SW Queensland, 21 April 2014

158008 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Bowra is unusual in that it's in a relatively small area where the ranges of all four Australian babblers overlap. The other restricted range species, the <Chestnut-crowned> is at the northern end of its range and also fairly easy to find, while the widespread more northern species, the <Grey-crowned>, meets the mainly southern <White-browed>.

Greetings

Ian

#502 Plum-headed Finch 27 June 2014

One of my favourite methods of bird photography is to relax by a water-hole in a comfortable camping chair and see what comes along. I did this at Bowra in April, and was treated to several pairs of <Plum-headed Finches>, presumably breeding as a result of rain several weeks earlier.



Male Plum-headed Finch (Neochmia modesta)

Bowra, Southwestern Queensland, 20 April 2014

157918 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The 'plum' bit refers to the gorgeous cap, dark and extensive in the male, above, or paler and less extensive in the female, which has consequently space for a white eye-stripe. Males have black chins, females white ones. The specific *modesta* presumably refers to the understated colours, but I think the barred breast and flanks make them look very smart, and it's always a pleasure to see them.



Female Plum-headed Finch (Neochmia modesta)

Bowra, Southwestern Queensland, 20 April 2014

157932 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The genus *Neochmia* contains only three other species, all of them Australian: <Star>, <Red-browed> and <Crimson> Finches, and none of them barred, so the Plum-headed looks quite distinctive. In the past it has been placed in its own genus, but mitochondrial studies show that it's quite closely related to both the Star and Red-browed Finches.



Male Plum-headed Finches (Neochmia modesta)

Macrossan Park, Northeastern Queensland, 3 March 2006

31046 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

They have quite a widespread distribution in Queensland and New South Wales, but mainly inland and rather patchy. With an average length of 11cm/4.3in, they're quite small. They're popular as cage birds and used to be trapped a lot, but have been protected since 1972.



Male Plum-headed Finch (Neochmia modesta)

Toonpan, Northeastern Queensland, 5 April 2007

48041 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The bird in the fourth photo was photographed in the light of the setting sun, hence the lovely glow.

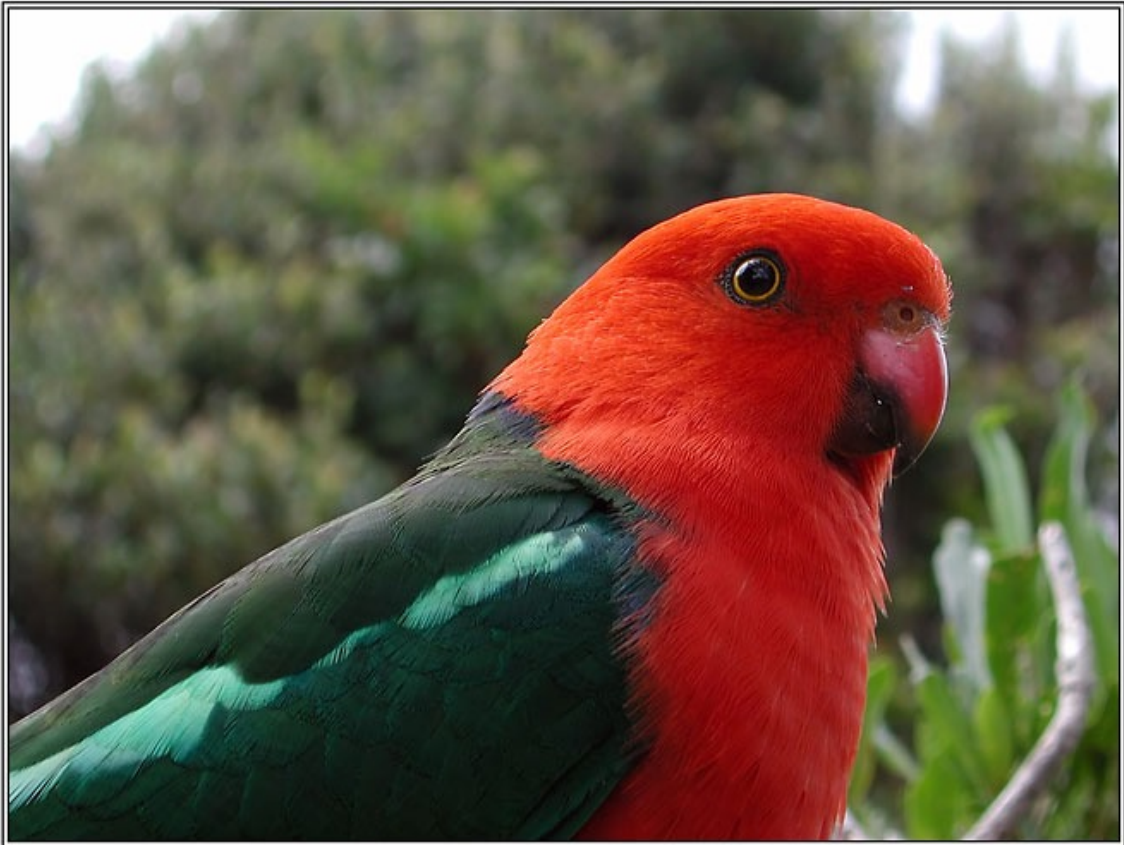
I've been on the road for a few days taking (almost) the last location photos for ***Where to Find Birds in Northeastern Queensland*** so I'll keep this short. One more day trip along the inland route to Paluma, and that's it.

Best wishes

Ian

#503 Australian King Parrot 31 July 2014

Mea culpa again for the long delay since the last bird of the week. The good news is that, apart from dotting a few i's, my current obsession **Where to Find Birds in North-east Queensland** is finished, so with luck you may get more frequent BotWs in the future. Here is an attractive and surprising omission from the BotW series, the [Australian King Parrot](#). It's one of the most spectacular Australian parrots and deserves the 'King' moniker. The French call it la Perruche royale.



Australian King Parrot (Alisterus scapularis)

O'Reilly's, Green Mountain, SE Queensland, 22 Jan 2003

15338 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It's quite common along the eastern seaboard of Australia, with a preference for fairly dense coastal and highland forests including rainforest. That can make it hard to see but it's quite vocal and the whistling call of the males is a very characteristic sound of eastern forests. It responds readily to being fed and can get quite tame. The one in the first photo was taken at O'Reilly's in Lamington National Park, where the birds will perch on arms and shoulders and pose happily for photos. The males are distinguished from the females by the brilliant scarlet of the breast extending onto the head and having a conspicuous peppermint green blaze on the wings.



Australian King Parrot (Alisterus scapularis)

Beecroft, New South Wales, 4 May 2012

141856 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The females are gorgeous too with scarlet lower breast and belly, green heads and pinkish necks. The one in the second photo was busy exploring hollows in trees, but it was hard to imagine that she was contemplating nesting in May. Both sexes have blue backs, third photo, but this is usually hidden by the folded wings. The wing blaze may be missing or inconspicuous in females.



Australian King Parrot (Alisterus scapularis)

Katoomba, New South Wales, 15 October 2007

60246 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It's usually just called the King Parrot in Australia and I used to wonder vaguely about the 'Australian' qualification. The reason for it is that there is a Papuan one in New Guinea and a Moluccan one in western New Guinea and the islands of eastern Indonesia. Both these are rather similar to the Australian one, but smaller and differ mainly in the colour or lack of the blaze on the wings, and the amount of blue in the plumage.



Australian King Parrot (Alisterus scapularis minor)

Lake Eacham, NE Queensland, 10 July 2006

35993 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

There are two races of the Australian species. The larger nominate race occurs along most of the east coast, while the smaller race *minor* (obviously) occurs in northeastern Queensland. The literature doesn't say much about *minor* except that it's smaller, and there's disagreement in the field guides about how far south it occurs: choose between Cardwell, Townsville and Mackay. I suspect Townsville is correct as there a big gap between the Paluma Range population and the Eungella/Clark Range one near Mackay. Anyway, the male in photo four and the female in photo five were photographed on the Atherton Tableland and are certainly *minor*.



Australian King Parrot (Alisterus scapularis minor)

Lake Eacham, NE Queensland, 10 July 2006

36038 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It seemed to me from the photos that I took there that the northern males had brighter and more extensive blue hind collars and the females had brighter wing-blazes than southern birds. My sample size was small, but it might be an interesting project to check out whether these differences are consistent and to establish the exact geographical ranges of the subspecies. In northeastern Queensland it is mainly a highland species, with some movement to the lowlands in winter and I have seen them very occasionally near where I live.

Anyway, back to dotting i's. The next stage in the book is to check out publishing via Apple iBooks, Google Play, etc. That's something I know nothing about, so it will be interesting to find out how it's done.

Greetings

Ian

#504 Masked Woodswallow 14 August 2014

When I was taking location photos along the inland route to Paluma several weeks ago, I came across a mixed flock of a couple of hundred <Masked> and <White-browed> Woodswallows. The White-browed featured as bird of the week in 2005, but the Masked hasn't so here it is. The males in particular, first photo, are very elegant

with a sharply defined, very black mask, soft grey back, almost white underparts and a white crescent between the mask and the back of the head.



Male Masked Woodswallow (Artamus personatus)

Bowra, Cunnamulla, SW Queensland, 6 November 2008

82746 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The females, second photo, are similar to the males with less contrasting plumage, only a subtle crescent, and a buff wash to the upper breast. The yellow specks on the mask and breast of this female are pollen - these primarily insectivorous birds also feed on nectar, particularly in northern Australia in winter.



Female Masked Woodswallow (Artamus personatus)

Bluewater, NE Queensland, 29 July 2005

18343 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The female in the second photo and the juvenile in the third photo were in a mixed flock of Masked and White-browed that spent a week or so feeding on the locally common Fern-leaved Grevillea near where I live in 2005. The juveniles are similar to the females, but with browner plumage with pale spots and streaks.



Juvenile Masked Woodswallow (Artamus personatus)

Bluewater, Northeastern Queensland, 25 July 2005

17910 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The 'swallow' part of the name comes from their buoyant, gliding flight and not because they are related to real swallows (family <[Hirundinidae](#)>). Rather, they are related to the Australian Magpie, Butcherbirds and Currawongs, usually combined in the one family, the <[Artamidae](#)>. There is an obvious similarity to the Magpie and Butcherbirds in their general form and bi-coloured bills and they are also quite aggressive, Woodswallows being quick to mob raptors in flight. The '*personatus*' part of the scientific name comes from the Latin persona, meaning mask, a derivation that amused me when I thought of show business 'personalities'.

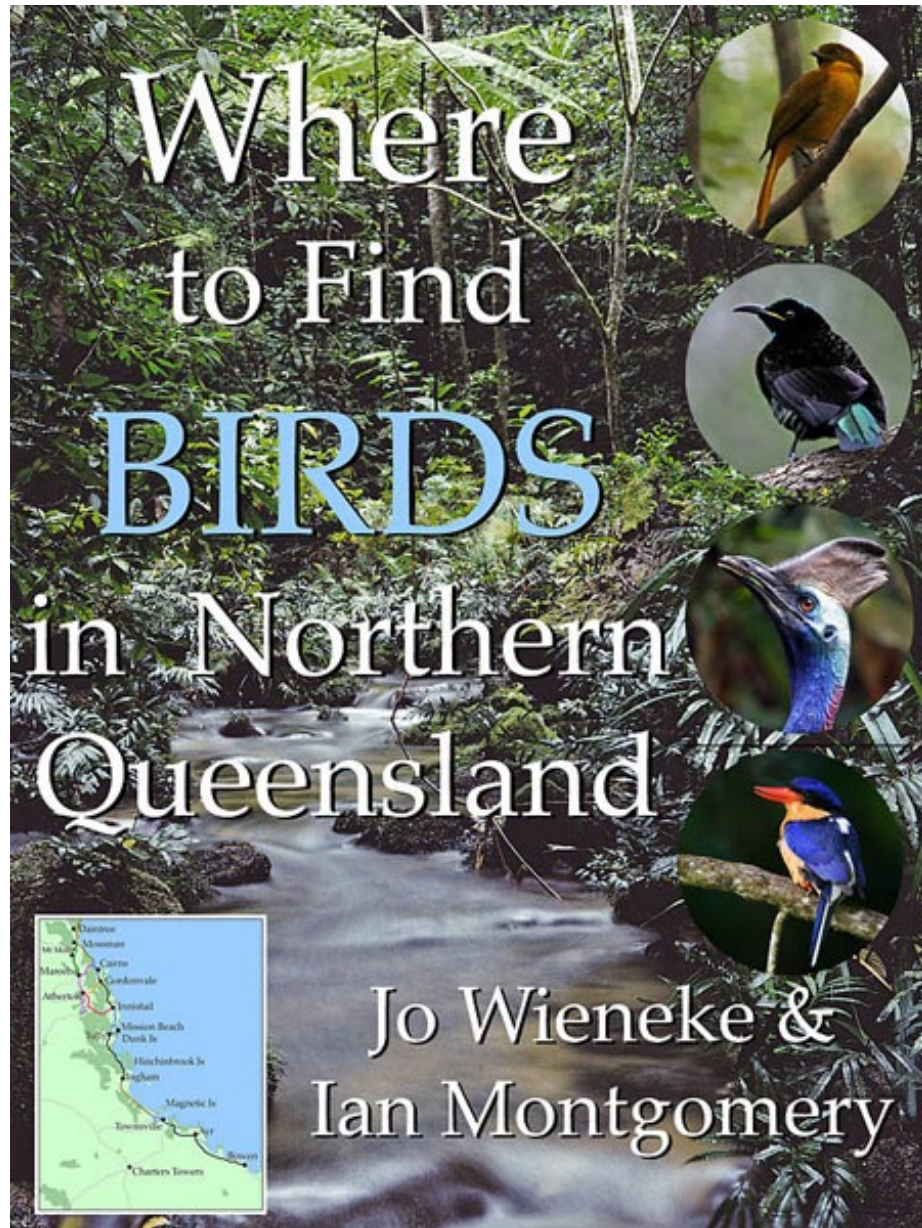
The White-browed and Masked Woodswallows are very closely related species, even though their respective plumages are quite distinct. They are both very nomadic and occur throughout mainland Australia, though not Tasmania. They often occur together in large mixed flocks. In eastern Australia, the White-browed predominates; in Western Australia, the Masked is more numerous and may occur alone. The two species will even nest together in small mixed colonies and occasionally interbreed.

Greetings

Ian

#505 Special Edition and Pale Headed Rosella 23 August 2014

The bird of the week is the Pale-headed Rosella, which I'll get to in a second, but this is a Special Edition as *Where to Find Birds in Northern Queensland* is at last being published. (Note 2018. The second edition, distinguishable by the cover containing only a photo of a Buff-breasted Paradise Kingfisher, is available from the Birdway website: <[Where to Find Birds in North-east Queensland](#)>)



End of commercial!

The <[Pale-headed Rosella](#)>, is the widespread and familiar Rosella of Queensland, though its range does extend as far as northern New South Wales. There, and in southeastern Queensland, its range overlaps with the closely related <[Eastern Rosella](#)> and they sometimes interbreed.



Pale-headed Rosella (Platycercus adscitus)

Bluewater, NE Queensland, 31 July 2010

105995 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The ones in the first two photos were taken outside my house. The first bird is feeding on the seeds of weeds, plenty of those here, and the second is feeding on the fruit of wild passionfruit, another weed, also called stinking passionfruit (*Passiflora foetida*) as the foliage emits a strong odour when crushed. They're lovely birds, rather unobtrusive though their soft twittering calls reveal their presence, and I'll always get pleasure from seeing them. They're usually in pairs or family parties. The plumage is variable: the bird in the first photo has a much intense blue breast than the second one, but the field guides are tight-lipped about whether the plumage of the sexes differs.



Pale-headed Rosella (Platycercus adscitus)

Bluewater, NE Queensland, 13 Jan 08 61695 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

They're more forthcoming about the plumage of juveniles, as these often show traces of red or darker feathers on the head, like the one coming down for a drink in the third photo.



Pale-headed Rosella (Platycercus adscitus)

Townsville, NE Queensland, 16 October 2006

43057 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

There are two races of the Pale-headed Rosella, a northern paler one on Cape York and south to about Cairns, and a southern darker one south of Townsville with a 300km/200mile band of intergrading between Cairns and Townsville. Originally these were described as two different species, the northern one being the Blue-cheeked Rosella, *Platycercus adscitus*, the southern one the Pale-headed Rosella, *P. palliceps*. When they were lumped together, the earlier name *adscitus* took priority, so the northern race is the nominate one and the southern darker one is race *palliceps* - meaning 'pale headed'. *Adscitus* means 'approved' or 'accepted', though exactly what was approved or accepted, I don't know.



Pale-headed Rosella (Platycercus adscitus)

Lake Eacham, NE Qld 11 July 2006, 36057 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Townsville birds in the first three photos belong to *palliceps*. The two, photographed together at Lake Eacham southwest of Cairns, are much closer the nominate race. The yellow is much paler overall, particularly on the back and the upper breast is mainly pale yellow, rather than blue, but there is a blue patch on the lower cheek. The bird in the fifth photo has clear traces of red on the forehead and is a juvenile; the one in the fourth photo has pinkish traces and may be a young bird too.



Pale-headed Rosella (Platycercus adscitus)

Lake Eacham, NE Queensland, 11 July 2006

36056 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The taxonomy of Rosellas in general has been controversial and is still unsettled. Some authorities maintain that the Pale-headed, the Eastern Rosella and the <Northern Rosella> all belong to a single species even though they look quite different. Whatever, they're lovely birds, and the good news is that the Pale-headed Rosella has benefitted from European settlement and the clearing of dense forests - they prefer more open areas.

Greetings

Ian

#506 Great Frigatebird 28 August 2014

Note 2018. This bird of the week coincided with the publishing of Where to Find Birds in Northern Queensland on Apple iTunes (now only available on the <Birdway website>) and I wrote:

To make a connection with this week's bird, the <Great Frigatebird>, here is a screen shot from iBooks to show you what you can expect. All the text items highlighted in purple and links to either other places in the book - typically places, birds or lists - or external websites. The images are the same size as the ones that are included in the bird of the week, so if you double-click, or double-tap, on them, you can enlarge them to full size.

Where to Find Birds in Northern Queensland

Nominate race occurs in Australia.



Male Lesser Frigatebird (Fregata ariel)
Coral Sea, Northeastern Australia, 13 December 2006. ©5449 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

More photos at [http://www.birdway.com.au/fregatidae/lesser_frigatebird/index.htm].

Great Frigatebird (*Fregata minor*)

Species of Special Interest. Seen regularly in offshore waters, e.g. Michaelmas Cay and Low Isles. During cyclonic conditions flocks come to coastal areas of the mainland, often in mixed flocks with Lesser Frigatebird.



Female Great Frigatebird (Fregata minor palmerstoni)
Coral Sea, Northeastern Australia, 13 December 2006. ©5067 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Race nesting in Coral Sea is *palmerstoni* - females usually have blue eye-rings rather than the pink ones of the nominate race, which nests in the eastern Indian Ocean including Christmas Island.



Male Great Frigatebird (Fregata minor minor)
Christmas Island, Indian Ocean, 2 September 2006. ©9473 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

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If you think about birds in northern Queensland, perhaps iconic rainforest species like the <Cassowary> or <Victoria's Riflebird> come to mind. Fair enough, but there is much more to this region than rainforest, important though that is. The area also has wonderful wetlands, tropical savannah forest, mountain ranges, dry country habitats and, last but not least, the coast with its Barrier Reef, beaches, mangroves, mudflats, continental islands and coral cays. So it should be no surprise that over 400 species of birds occur here and you need a reference devoted to the region to do it justice. I've chosen a dramatic seabird to make the point.



Male Great Frigatebird (Fregata minor)

Christmas Island, Indian Ocean, 6 September 2006

40675 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The term 'frigate' was first applied in the 17th century to warships built for speed and manoeuvrability and frigates were often used by pirates to attack merchant shipping. Frigatebirds, also called Man o' War Birds, got their name for their piratical habits of harrying other seabirds like <boobies> and <tropicbirds> to make them drop their prey. In fact, studies have shown that piracy accounts for perhaps only 20% of their food, and they are expert fishers as well. They fish by snatching prey, such as squid and young turtles, from the surface of the sea or in flight, in the case of their favourite prey, flying fish.



Female Great Frigatebird (Fregata minor)

Christmas Island, Indian Ocean, 1 September 2006

39072 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Despite their naval name, frigatebirds are wonderfully adapted for flying and are poor swimmers to the extent that they are reluctant to land on water, as they can take off only in strong winds and their plumage is not waterproof. They have very light bones making up only 5% of the body, huge pectoral muscles, enormous wing area, long forked tails for rudders and streamlined bodies with small heads. Despite their size, they are very light, soar effortlessly in good winds and are very acrobatic. Female Great Frigatebirds, larger than males, are about 1m/40in long, have a wingspan to 2.3m/90in but weight only 1.2-1.6kg/2.6-3.5lb.

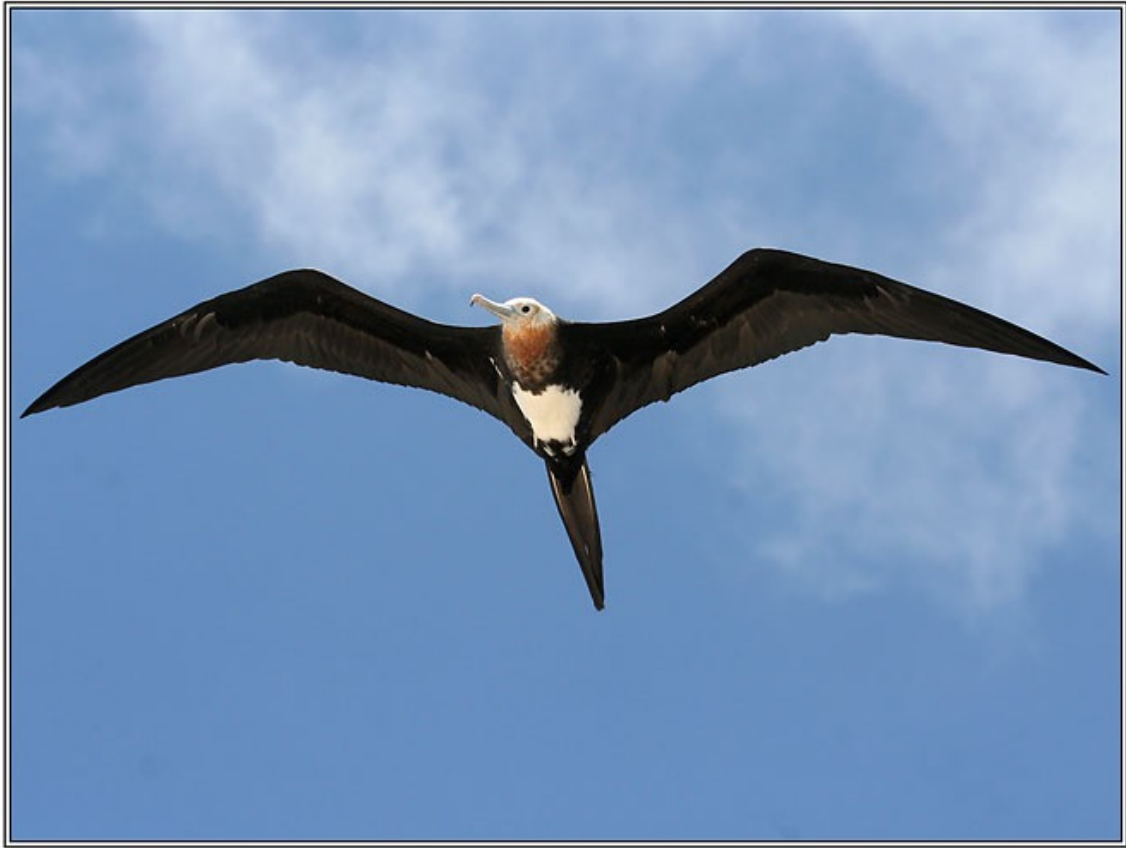


Female Great Frigatebird (Fregata minor palmerstoni)

East Diamond Islet, Coral Sea, 13 December 2006

45087 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The male Great Frigatebird, first photo, is the only all-black frigatebird occurring in Australia - the other all-black males are the Magnificent Frigatebird of Atlantic Ocean and the eastern Pacific and the Ascension Frigatebird of the east Atlantic. Frigatebirds are unusual among seabirds in drinking freshwater if they can get it, and this male is drinking at the mouth of freshwater stream on Christmas island by snatching a beak-full of water in flight. Frigatebirds also bathe in flight by splashing into the surface of the water and flying off. You can also see its red gular pouch. This is inflated to enormous size to impress females during courtship. I haven't got a photo of displaying Great Frigatebird, but you can see a [Magnificent Frigatebird doing so here](#).



Juvenile Great Frigatebird (Fregata minor palmerstoni)

East Diamond Islet, Coral Sea, 13 December 2006

45459 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Female Great Frigatebirds have white breasts and care needs to be taken in distinguishing them from other female and juvenile frigatebirds - <[Lesser Frigatebirds](#)> of both sexes have white 'spurs' in the axil of the underwing, and <[Christmas Island Frigatebirds](#)> of both sexes, have white bellies. Birds in Indian Ocean waters in Australia belong to the nominate race *minor*, distinguished by the females having pink eye-rings, second photo. Birds in the Pacific belong to *palmerstoni* and usually have blue eye-rings, third photo, though doubt exists as to the validity of the races and the reliability of the fieldmarks.



Juvenile Great Frigatebird (Fregata minor palmerstoni)

East Diamond Islet, Coral Sea, 13 December 2006

45550 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Because of their need for consistent winds, frigatebirds are restricted to tropical waters where they can rely on the trade winds. Adults are sedentary and remain close to their roosting sites and breeding colonies, mostly on small isolated islands. Non-breeding birds and immature birds are pelagic and move over huge distances. Trade winds are unusual in that they form cumulus clouds and hence thermals over water both by day and night, and frigatebirds make great use of these to soar as high as the cloud base and will fly at night if conditions are right. Pelagic frigatebirds use the front of storms to move around and can cope with high winds very well. This is why they appear in coastal areas after cyclones and are supposed to be called 'rain-brothers' by Australian aborigines, though I haven't been able to verify this.



Juvenile Great Frigatebird (Fregata minor palmerstoni)

East Diamond Islet, Coral Sea, 13 December 2006

45552 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The range of the Great Frigatebird includes the tropical Pacific, southern tropical Indian and western Atlantic Oceans. In Australia it breeds colonially on islands along the outer Great Barrier Reef, in the Coral Sea and on Christmas and Cocos (Keeling) Islands in the Indian Ocean, usually in mangroves. The juvenile in photos five and six was photographed on East Diamond Islet in the Coral Sea, about 600km east of Cairns. Breeding birds form pair bonds and both parents share in the incubation and feeding of the young. The young develop very slowly. This is thought to adapt them to periods of starvation when the adults have trouble finding food, and remain under parental care for many months.



Female Great Frigatebird Attacking Red-tailed Tropicbird

Christmas Island, Indian Ocean, 2 September 2006

39356 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The last photo shows a hapless <[Red-tailed Tropicbird](#)> near Christmas Island being harried by a female Great Frigatebird which has grabbed it by the tail-streamers. Frigatebirds hang out near seabird colonies waiting for birds carrying prey or with full crops returning to feed their young. It's hard enough work being a parent without having to put up with this!

Greetings

Ian

#507 Fiordland Penguin 5 September 2014

I was talking with a friend the other day about visiting New Zealand and my experience with photographing <[Fiordland Penguin](#)> in Milford Sound, so here it is as bird of the week and a change from <[Where to Find Birds in Northern Queensland](#)>. It was my main reason for visiting Milford Sound, better known perhaps for its spectacular scenery and natural beauty, but if you go looking for wildlife then you find yourself in wonderful places anyway.



Fiordland Penguin (Eudyptes pachyrhynchus)

Milford Sound, South Island, New Zealand, 14 Nov 2011 122053 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I camped the previous night in my rented campervan at Cascade Creek in Fiordland National Park, the nearest camping site to Milford Sound. It's still a fair drive, so atypically I got up before dawn when the temperature was 3°C to get to the sound early enough to get on the first tourist boat, as I'd been told that this provided the best chance of seeing the penguins. The boat I went on was one of the smaller ones so there were only a dozen or so passengers. I had a chat with the crew as departed and they were optimistic about finding the penguins.



Fiordland Penguin (Eudyptes pachyrhynchus)

Milford Sound, South Island, New Zealand, 14 Nov 2011 122074 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Within ten minutes of leaving, they had located a nesting pair on the rocky shore. Very obligingly, they reversed the boat to what seemed perilously close to the rocks so that I could get some photos. The first photo shows one of them near the entrance to its nesting burrow, while the second is its mate wandering over the rocks closer to us.



Fiordland Penguin (Eudyptes pachyrhynchus)

Milford Sound, South Island, New Zealand, 14 Nov 2011 122102 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I was very glad I'd make the early start, as we didn't see many more penguins, though we did come across the party in the third photo about 20 minutes later. The bird in the foreground with the pale cheeks is a juvenile. An easier place to see them is Taronga Zoo in Sydney where their glass-sided tank provides great views of them at their best: they're much more elegant gliding effortlessly through the water than hobbling around on rocks.



Fiordland Penguin (Eudyptes pachyrhynchus)

Taronga Zoo, Sydney, NSW, 13 Nov 2009 94658 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The wild population is estimated at about 3000 pairs and has suffered from predation by introduced mammals and the native <Weka> which has been introduced to some islands where the penguins breed. I did see Wekas at Milford Sound, but I don't

know whether they are a problem there. The Fiordland Penguin is closely related to the <[Snares](#)> and <[Southern Rockhopper](#)> Penguins.



Green Turtle (Chelonia mydas)

Michaelmas Cay, NE Queensland, 5 May 2013

153833 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

While on the subject of animals that are expert swimmers and clumsy on land, I've just completed a new <[gallery of turtles and their relatives](#)> on the website. It contains a rather motley collection that I've stumbled across when birding, including the marine Green Turtle, above, four Australian and an American freshwater species, a South African and an Asian tortoise. This Green Turtle was grazing on the mooring cable, visible on the right, on a visit Michaelmas Cay off Cairns last year with my sister Gillian from Ireland. I'm going on a visit to Ireland in ten days time. Next week I'll tell you more about my plans and some of the birds that I hope to bring your way.

Greetings

Ian

#508 Stamp of the Week: Antipodean Albatross 13 September 2014

The reference to Stamp of the Week in the subject line isn't a typo: I'm celebrating the issue of a stamp set by New Zealand Post on 3 September which includes a photo of mine in the design of one of the stamps.



Here is the original photo, taken north of Macquarie Island when we were returning to Hobart at the end of a Subantarctic Islands trip in November 2011 that started in Dunedin. This was the same trip on which I photographed the <[Fiordland Penguins](#)> that featured as last week's bird.



Antipodean Albatross (Diomedea antipodensis gibsoni)

Macquarie Island, Tasmania, 28 November 2011

126903 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

If you're not familiar with <[Antipodean Albatrosses](#)> and think it looks like a Wandering Albatross, you may be relieved to hear that it's all a matter of taxonomy and reflects the recent split of the Wandering Albatross into four species, one of which is the Antipodean. In fact this same taxon, for want of a better word, was bird of the week in November 2006 as Wandering Albatross after I'd photographed some on a pelagic trip off Wollongong south of Sydney. If we follow this split, and BirdLife Australia does, then most of the erstwhile Wandering Albatrosses in Australian waters are Antipodean and breed on the islands south of New Zealand, mainly Antipodes Island, Campbell Island and Adams Island in the Auckland Islands.



Antipodean Albatross (Diomedea antipodensis)

Auckland Is, NZ, 20 Nov 2011

123572 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Antipodean is one of the smaller of the Wandering Albatross group but they are still enormous: up to 117cm/46in in length with a wing span to 3.3m/11ft and weighing up to 8.6kg/19lbs. Look carefully at the second Albatross photo and you'll see a grey and black Broad-billed Prion completely dwarfed by the Antipodean Albatross. The prion is about 30cm/12in in length with a wingspan of 60cm/2ft. You can get an impression of the size in the third photo taken on that Wollongong trip - look at the bow wave!



Antipodean Albatross (Diomedea antipodensis)

Wollongong, New South Wales, 25 November 2006

43970 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Antipodean Albatross itself comes in two varieties, the nominate Antipodean which breeds on Antipodes and Campbell Island and 'Gibson's Albatross' which breeds in the Auckland Islands Group. The various Wandering Albatross species all look rather similar and are difficult to identify in the field. They vary in size and they differ in the rate and extent of development of white plumage in adult birds - juveniles are mainly brown. The ones in the first two photos are very white and are probably older males of the race *gibsoni*. The bird swimming in the third photo shows less development of white plumage - not the darkish cap and the dark vermiculations on the neck, breast and shoulder and may be a younger male or female and could be either nominate Antipodes or Gibson's: all too hard.



Here is the complete set of stamps. New Zealand Post wanted to pay me to use the albatross photo, but I so like the idea of having one of mine used in a stamp that they agreed to send me first day covers and a presentation pack instead and that arrived yesterday. Antipodean Albatrosses rate as Vulnerable/Endangered because of their few nesting sites and long-line fishing which leads to the death of adult birds as by-catch. The total population is perhaps 16,000 pairs but there is hope that the population has stabilised after significant declines at the end of the 20th century.



Anyway, I'm off to Dublin via Dubai on Monday to visit family and friends. I'm spending 3 nights in Dubai having found it, to my complete astonishment, ranked as #75 in a book on the top 100 places in the world to go birding. Because of its location at the tip of the Arabian Peninsula, it's an important staging post for birds migrating from Asia to Africa in the northern spring and autumn migrations (i.e. now). I have two target species: the Crab Plover and the Cream-coloured Courser. The first because it's an unusual and beautiful black and white wader in a family all to itself and the unusual looking and named Courser - a member of the <Pratincole> family - because it caught my eye in my Field Guide to the Birds of Britain in Europe when I was a teenager in Ireland half a century ago, above. So, I need your spiritual energy and goodwill to help me. You haven't failed me in the past!

Greetings

Ian

#509 Crab Plover 22 September 2014

Well your spiritual energy and goodwill did it again, helped physically, admittedly, by the excellent local bird guide Tommy Pedersen, a Dubai-based pilot from Norway who takes visitors birding in his spare time.



Crab Plover (*Dromas ardeola*)

Khor al-Beida, Dubai, UAE, 16 September 2014

160230 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

There had been some doubt as to whether he'd be free to help us, as he was just returning from a trip to Milan. I cc'd the last bird of the week to him and got this delightful reply just as I was packing in Bluewater on Monday morning:

The only reason I'm ditching family for you QLD-chaps is the amazing email I received, Ian.

I have to meet you.

Anybody even remotely interested in Gibson versus Antipodean Albatrui is someone I have to see.

So, I arrived in Dubai at 5:00am, checked into my hotel at 7:00am and at 11:00am Tommy arrived, collected me and Madeleine - who'd just arrived from Hamburg - in his large and comfortable 4WD and off we went. The tide wasn't quite right for the <Crab Plovers> so we did a few other things first - more about those in the next bird of the week - eventually ending up at the coastal sand and mudflats of Khor al-Beida,

north of Dubai city. Here, there were about 40 Crab Plovers moving through the shallows on an in-coming tide.



Crab Plover (*Dromas ardeola*)

Khor al-Beida, Dubai, UAE, 16 September 2014

160244 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I did a gradual, crouching trudge across the mudflat in 42° heat to try to get as close as possible to them. They let me get closer than I had expected, photos one and two, before eventually taking flight, third photo. As you can see they are very striking birds and the name 'Plover' doesn't quite do them justice, either in appearance or taxonomically. Apart from the heavy dagger-shaped bill, they are more like avocets and similar in size with a length 40cm/16in. The bill resembles that of a [Beach Stone-curlew](#), presumably a case of convergent evolution reflecting their crustacean diet.



Crab Plover (*Dromas ardeola*)

Khor al-Beida, Dubai, UAE, 16 September 2014

160259 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The fourth photos shows a close-up of one of the birds in flight. You can see that it is moulting heavily with many of the flight feathers missing in mid-replacement. This seemed to be the case with all of them, and a reluctance to fly may have had more to do with my close approach than my crouching/stalking skills.



Crab Plover (*Dromas ardeola*)

Khor al-Beida, Dubai, UAE, 16 September 2014

160257 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Taxonomically, the species show no very close affinities with other waders so the Crab Plover is the sole member of its own family ('monotypic'), the <[Dromadidae](#)>. This is placed in the order Charadriiformes - Plovers & Allies - sitting between the Oystercatchers <[Haemopodidae](#)> and the Avocets & Stilts <[Recurvirostridae](#)>. I feign indifference to making additions to my life list, but adding and photographing a whole new family is a different matter. The last time that happened to me was three years ago with <[Diving-Petrels](#)> on the Sub-antarctic trip.

I arrived in Ireland yesterday and am spending a relaxing and enjoyable time with family. Yesterday evening I went blackberry picking with my sister along a country lane near where she lives in Clogherhead, Co. Louth. That was admirable therapy for the future-shock resulting from the glittering excesses of downtown Dubai.

Greetings

Ian

#510 Cream-coloured Courser 28 September 2014

A couple of weeks ago, I said that my two target birds in Dubai were Crab Plover - which featured last week - and Cream-coloured Courser. The latter had aroused my curiosity 50 years ago when I saw it on this page of the Field Guide to Birds of Britain

and Europe. Tommy Pedersen <<<http://www.uaebirding.com>>> had said that the Coursers were "possible", so there were no guarantees.



When we set off with Tommy, we had a few hours to fill in before the tide was optimal for the Crab Plovers, so we went first to the Dubai Polo and Equestrian Centre, then to the Al Asifa Endurance Stables to look for the Coursers. They were present at both, with over 30 at the Polo Centre and another 16 at the Stables. In fact, the first photo I took in Dubai was of a very distant Courser.



Cream-coloured Courser (*Cursorius cursor*)

Al Asifa Endurance Stables, Dubai, UAE, 16 September 2014 160129 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

They were worth waiting 50 years for, and I think the illustration in the field guide didn't do them justice. They're called Coursers because they run rather than fly, second photo, the name being derived from the Latin verb *currere*, to run, and the generic name *Cursorius* means runner. The 'sport' of coursing - chasing hares, etc., on horse-back is derived from the same source, so there was a delightful irony in finding them at the two main equestrian locations in Dubai.



Cream-coloured Courser (*Cursorius cursor*)

Al Asifa Endurance Stables, Dubai, UAE, 16 September 2014 160145 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

When pressed they do take flight, third photo. In doing so, they show their striking dark wing tips and underwings and reveal similarity to pratincoles, the other members of the family <Glareolidae>. There is a photo of an <[Australian Pratincole in flight](#)> if you want to compare them. The three taking off in the third photo seemed to be a family party as the bird in the centre is immature with patchy brown markings on the neck and only very pale stripes through the eye.



Cream-coloured Courser (*Cursorius cursor*)

Dubai Polo & Equestrian Centre, UAE, 16 September 2014 160013 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Their preferred habitat is desert and semi-desert with or without sparse vegetation. Their breeding range includes much of North Africa and the Middle East. Many North African birds migrate across the Sahara to winter in the southern Sahara and at least part of the Middle East population migrates to Pakistan and NW India. They feed on insects and other invertebrates on the ground and will take locusts in flight. I couldn't help but be struck by their resemblance both in colour and habitat to the <Inland Dotterel> of central Australia.



Cream-coloured Courser (*Cursorius cursor*)

Dubai Polo & Equestrian Centre, UAE, 16 September 2014 160024 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I'm still in Ireland. So far, I've been mainly catching up with family and friends. Next Tuesday we are going looking for <Red Kites> in Avoca, Co. Wicklow, so keep your fingers crossed for some photos! The Red Kite is one of the more successful Irish raptor reintroduction programs and there are now breeding populations in both the Republic, mainly Co. Wicklow south of Dublin, and in Co. Down in Northern Ireland. I do have a photo of one taken in Spain but it would be good to get some genuine Irish ones, the real McCoy.

Greetings

Ian

#511 Greater Flamingo 7 October 2014

Here's another species from Dubai, the <Greater Flamingo>. It's well-known there, occurs in the Ra's al-Khor wildlife sanctuary near the centre of town and is suitably iconic for a place where flamboyance is preferred to subtlety :-). We didn't go to this sanctuary but found about 50 Flamingos feeding in the shallows near one of the <Crab Plover> sites that we checked at Khor al-Beida north of the city.



Greater Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus roseus*)

Khor al-Beida, Dubai, UAE, 16 September 2014

160369 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This spot was right beside a Sheik's well guarded palace. Tommy warned that using a large telephoto lens there could be attract unwelcome attention from the guards, so these photos were taken through the window of his 4WD. The birds in the first and second photos are adults with the pink colour of the legs and bill and the red plumage in the wings well developed.



Greater Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus roseus*)

Khor al-Beida, Dubai, UAE, 16 September 2014

160362 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The bird in the third photo is an older juvenile. The bill is still grey, the legs are just beginning to show a pink flush and there is little red showing in the wings. The full adult plumage is acquired after about three years.



Greater Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus roseus*)

Khor al-Beida, Dubai, UAE, 16 September 2014

160366 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Flamingos are a taxonomically isolated group with 6 species in a single family - <Phoenicopteridae> - in their own order the Phoenicopteriformes. Four of the species occur in South and Central America, with 2 Old World Species The Greater and Lesser Flamingos. The Greater Flamingo occurs in Africa, the Middle East, southern Europe and in Asia as far east as India. There is one Australian record from the Cocos (Keeling) Islands in 1988, so it has the honour of being on the Australian list.

Greetings from Strasbourg where we are having a pleasant few days in this lovely city staying with Gillian's daughter Jeannine and her husband Carlos. Tomorrow we go to Barcelona by TGV en route to a couple of birding spots in the foothills of the Pyrenees where I hope to get some raptor photos to share with you. THE target species is the Bearded Vulture or Lammergeier, so I need your spiritual support and enthusiasm!

Ian

#512 Griffon Vulture 24 October 2014

The first photo shows part of Boumort National Reserve in the foothills of the Pyrenees in Catalonia about 40km southwest of Andorra. A reserve since 1991, It has an area of 13,000 hectares and is of special importance as one of the only

places in Europe where all four European species of vultures breed. Three occur naturally, while the fourth, the Eurasian Black or Cinereous Vulture has been reintroduced, after becoming extinct in the Pyrenees in recent decades. I made arrangements to visit it through Steve West of <<[Birding in Spain](#)>>, including getting the necessary permit to photograph these birds, accommodation and transport.



As part of the conservation effort, the vultures are fed three times a week and I was taken to the feeding site by two rangers who had collected carcasses and meat off-cuts from farmers in the vicinity. The site is equipped with a spacious and comfortable hide, complete with toilet, and I was left there alone for the day after they had spread out the meat and carcasses in front of the hide. When we arrived there were already between one and two hundred vultures, almost all Griffons, soaring high above. I had been briefed beforehand that the first arrivals would be <[Griffons](#)>, with Eurasian Blacks arriving later in the morning when the crowds thinned, while the iconic Lammergeier could be expected, probably, in small numbers in the middle of the afternoon. The fourth species, the Egyptian Vulture is a summer visitor and had already departed for Africa.



Griffon Vulture (*Gyps fulvus*)

Boumort National Reserve, Catalonia, Spain, 10 Oct 2014 160885 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Sure enough, as soon as the rangers left, large numbers of Griffons glided in and squabbled noisily over the food. Griffons feed mainly on muscles and viscera and attacked the carcasses and pieces of meat with great gusto. The bird in the second photo showing its skill at balancing on a rock on one foot and waving the other is an adult, recognisable by its white ruff, horn-coloured bill and pale wing coverts. The one in the third photo is a juvenile, with grey bill, coffee-coloured ruff and darker wings. Juveniles generally had a covering of short plumage on the head and neck, while the adults often had relatively bare necks.

The breeding range of the Griffon Vulture extends from Portugal in the west to northeastern India and southwestern Kazakhstan in the east. Spain is its main stronghold in the west with about 8,000 pairs and the species is not considered under threat.



Griffon Vulture (*Gyps fulvus*)

Boumort National Reserve, Catalonia, Spain, 10 Oct 2014 160985 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

These birds are huge and it was wonderful to observe them up close. The black bird in the fourth photo sneaking a mouthful from under the watchful eye of a Griffon is a <Common Raven>. This is the largest passerine in the world, with a length of up to 67cm/26in and wingspan of up to 130cm/51in, larger than a <Common Buzzard>, but completely dwarfed by the vulture. Griffons are up to 110cm/43in in length, with a wingspan of up to 280cm/110in and weighting up to 11kg/24lbs.



Griffon Vulture (*Gyps fulvus*)

Boumort National Reserve, Catalonia, Spain, 10 Oct 2014 161620 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In the air, they glide effortlessly and powerfully and the enormous wings make the body appear quite small by comparison. They come into land looking like parachutists under square canopies but with the ponderous, unwavering stability of a large aircraft like a B747 or an A380. Look how elegantly and precisely the toes are arranged with all the poise of an Olympic diver, fifth photo.



Griffon Vulture (*Gyps fulvus*)

Boumport National Reserve, Catalonia, Spain, 10 Oct 2014 161508 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It really was an extraordinary experience watching the spectacle of these amazing birds, even if their table manners left much to be desired. The large amount of food disappeared at a great rate and the crowds started to disperse, leaving the scene, one hoped, for the later, rarer and more picky species. To be continued...

Greetings

Ian

#513 Eurasian Black/Cinereous Vulture 29 October 2014

This is 2 of 3 in a series on Eurasian vultures photographed during my recent spell in a bird hide at a vulture feeding station in Boumport National Reserve in the Pyrenees in Catalonia not far southwest of Andorra. The first of the series [#512](#) was on the [Griffon Vulture](#), this one is on the second species in the feeding order, the [Cinereous](#) or Eurasian Black Vulture. Here, incidentally, is the view taken from the hide - with my phone - shortly after the rangers had left and the first one hundred or so Griffons, and a few Common Ravens, were in the process of arriving.



Because of the wide-angled nature of phone cameras, the vultures appeared in real-life to be much closer, close enough for one bird to almost fill the frame of a full-size (35mm sensor) DSLR with a 500mm lens. The second photo shows the luxurious and well-appointed hide (I mentioned the toilet last week) with my camera and 500mm lens set up on my tripod and my binoculars and smaller 100-400mm lens at the ready.

I was on my own for the whole day, so I could move freely between the three viewing openings. The one in the middle overlooked the feeding site (above), the one on the left was good for photographing landing vultures using the 100-400mm lens, while the one on the right overlooked a pond, used by the vultures on a hot day. It was cool and overcast when I was there and rained a bit, so the only vulture I saw at the pond was a Griffon having a drink.



It's impossible to travel lightly with good gear for wildlife photography - the tripod alone required taking a larger suitcase than both I and airlines prefer - but on that day in the hide and on an earlier occasion when I was photographing Crab Plovers in Dubai, I was really glad to have to have brought the necessary stuff with me.

Anyway, back to the Cinereous Vulture. In the days when birders weren't inter-continental travellers, it was called the Black Vulture until it was realised that this risked confusion with the completely unrelated [Black Vulture](#) of Central and South America and the 'Eurasian' label was applied. Now BirdLife International call it the Cinereous Vulture, 'cinereous' meaning 'ashy', like the adult in the third photo, which certainly looks as it has been rummaging around in the remains of a camp fire.



Cinereous/Eurasian Black Vulture (*Aegypius monachus*)

Boumolt National Reserve, Catalonia, Spain, 10 Oct 2014 161196 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This bird shows the typical vulture ruff, with the cowl-like adornment characteristic of this species. The specific name *monachus* means 'hooded' but the common name Hooded Vulture is already used for another somewhat similar, sub-Saharan species, *Necrosyrtes monachus*. Juvenile birds are much darker, dark chocolate really, like the slightly scruffy one in the fourth photo. Some field guides say that juvenile birds have pink facial skin - like this one - but I couldn't find a clear correlation between age and skin colour: some adults had mainly blue, others more pink skin, which made me wonder whether it was influenced by gender.

All the Cinereous Vultures here had metallic identifying rings/bands and some, particularly juveniles had coloured bands as well. This is because the species has recently been re-introduced to this area from central Spain, is now breeding and the population is being studied thoroughly.



Cinereous/Eurasian Black Vulture (*Aegypius monachus*)

Boumort National Reserve, Catalonia, Spain, 10 Oct 2014 161221 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Cinereous Vultures took their time and started arrived at the feeding site about an hour after the Griffons. As you can guess from the relative amounts of plumage on the heads and necks of the two species, they have quite different feeding habits. Griffons clearly don't mind getting up to their elbows in it, so to speak, but the Cinereous Vultures prefer to wait until the dirty work has been done and then pick up their favourite morsels.

Their reluctance to get involved in the initial scrum has nothing to do with size or dominance, the Cinereous Vultures are as large or larger than the Griffons and are quite dominant. The bird in the fifth photo has a feeding juvenile Griffon in its sights and is advancing threateningly in a manner that was wonderful to watch, head down, wings spread and ruff and cowl feathers erect with a bouncing walk. The result was something like the witches from Macbeth combined with the loping gait of a kangaroo.



Cinereous/Eurasian Black Vulture (*Aegypius monachus*)

Boumort National Reserve, Catalonia, Spain, 10 Oct 2014 161546 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It might look funny to us, but it was very effective and the Griffons, unamused, backed off, like the frustrated-looking one in the sixth photo. Cinereous Vultures have strong bills and can tackle, tendons, muscles and, by the look of the one in this photo, skulls. Maybe cervelles are on the menu. (I once understood *cervelles d'agneau* on a Parisian menu to be something to do with lamb and was slightly taken aback when brains, rather than a chop, appeared in front of me.)



Cinereous/Eurasian Black Vulture (*Aegypius monachus*)

Boumort National Reserve, Catalonia, Spain, 10 Oct 2014 161553 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Cinereous Vultures were the least volatile of the three species and once having landed, hung around for hours. I didn't get photos of any in flight, but I didn't find them easy to separate from the Griffons in flight as they're silhouettes are rather similar. The Griffons kept landing and talking off and were better targets and more numerous. In total, there may have been 10-20 Cinereous Vultures.

Their reintroduction here is part of a more general EU conservation and anti-poisoning program that has seen the population in Spain recover from 290 pairs in 1984 to perhaps 2500 now and they have been reintroduced into southern France. The conservation news isn't all good, though to say the least, and I'll return to this topic in the third in this series.



Cinereous/Eurasian Black Vulture (*Aegypius monachus*)

Boumort National Reserve, Catalonia, Spain, 10 Oct 2014 161408 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Part of the research effort at Boumort is the study of the movements of these vultures. Adults are thought to be mainly sedentary in Europe, though partially migratory in Asia, where it also occurs. Some banded Spanish birds have turned up in sub-Saharan Africa. Some birds have been fitted with GPS units, and you can see one, complete with solar cell on the back of the juvenile in the last photo.

I mentioned the unrelated <[Black Vulture](#)> of the Americas, one of the New World Vultures. These include the Turkey Vulture, familiar in North America, the Condors and a couple of other species places in a separate family, the <[Cathartidae](#)>. In fact Birdlife International puts them in their own order, the Cathartiformes, indicating that they arose completely independently.

The Old World Vultures, on the other hand, are close related to hawks, eagles, etc. and are placed in the same family Acciptridae in the order Acciptriformes. I must admit I was struck by the eagle-like facial appearance of these birds and it appears that the Old World Vultures have evolved twice within the Acciptridae. Most belong to a group of typical Old World vultures that includes the Griffon and the Cinereous. Three, however, form a separate group placed taxonomically near the Serpent Eagles. One of these is the subject of the next edition. The vultures kept me waiting in suspense for crowning moment, and I'm trying to make you share the anticipation: I have something really special for the next bird of the week!

Greetings

Ian

#514 Lammergeier (Missió Complerta!) 7 November 2014

Now, at last, here is the one that I wanted to photograph above all else when in the Pyrenees: the [Lammergeier](#), or Bearded Vulture.



Lammergeier (*Gypaetus barbatus*)

Boumort National Reserve, Catalonia, Spain 10 Oct 2014

161683 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

As with other species that have featured in the bird of the week such as the Black Woodpecker and Cream-coloured Courser, my interest or perhaps obsession was stimulated by my Petersen et al. Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe in the early 1960s. Unlike the woodpecker and the coursers, the European vultures were represented not on the coloured plates but in monochrome drawings. If anything, that made them more mysterious and elusive though two of them came spectacularly to life in 1963 when I saw Griffon and Egyptian Vultures during a family holiday in the Pyrenees. The Lammergeier, the mythical bone-breaker seemed destined to remain just that, as I knew it was very rare in Europe, extinct in the Alps, and found only over the highest mountain ranges. Even the name seemed straight out of Wagner's Ring Cycle along with the Valkyries.



Lammergeier (*Gypaetus barbatus*)

Boumort National Reserve, Catalonia, Spain 10 Oct 2014

161384 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I had been warned by the reserve rangers that the Lammergeiers would appear, if at all, in the afternoon after the Griffons had had their fill and I also knew that they were shy, would initially cruise over the area without landing and could easily be put off by the movement of a large telephoto lens. So the suspense was great, and it was a thrill when the first immature bird landed some distance away just before midday. They kept on the fringes and it wasn't until about 2:30pm they came close enough for decent photos. The bird in the second and third photo is an older immature bird - they take six or seven years to mature - and the feathers of the breast and legs are getting paler. It also has the red eye-ring of the adult.



Lammergeier (*Gypaetus barbatus*)

Boumort National Reserve, Catalonia, Spain 10 Oct 2014 161387-2 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In flight, fourth photo, they look quite different to other vultures with their back-swept rather pointed wings and long paddle-shaped tail. The thick plumage on the crown and neck sets them apart from typical vultures too, and when perched they hold their bodies in a horizontal eagle-like stance, presumably to keep their tails off the ground.



Lammergeier (*Gypaetus barbatus*)

Boumort National Reserve, Catalonia, Spain 10 Oct 2014

161475 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Their shape plus the whitish head of the adult is quite distinctive so it was an exciting moment when I saw the first one soaring in the distance over the mountain range that overlooked the feeding station. Much later, they started checking out the feeding area without landing. I was too wary of alerting them by movement so I took the fourth photo of an adult in flight much later.



Lammergeier (*Gypaetus barbatus*)

Boumort National Reserve, Catalonia, Spain 10 Oct 2014 161465 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Eventually, just before 3pm, the first adult landed, though like the juveniles, the adults stayed on the fringes as well and it wasn't until 4:30pm that they came closer pick over the remains of the food carcasses and the real photography began.



Lammergeier (*Gypaetus barbatus*)

Boumort National Reserve, Catalonia, Spain 10 Oct 2014 161584 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The black bird on the left of the fifth photo is a Common Raven and it seems to be imitating the stance of the larger bird and saying 'I'm a champion too'. It's much closer to the camera which makes it look larger than it actually is. Thirteen seconds later the Lammergeier took flight right over the Raven's head - it had to duck - as if to say 'we'll see who's boss', and the relative proportions are more obvious. The wing-span - to 280cm/110in - is similar to that of Griffon and Cinereous Vultures, but the tail makes it much longer - to 125cm/49in. Females are heavier than males, to 7kg/15lb, but both sexes are lighter than the other vultures.



Lammergeier (*Gypaetus barbatus*)

Boumort National Reserve, Catalonia, Spain 10 Oct 2014

161586 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Lammergeiers wait until the others have finished because their food of choice is bones and bone marrow. In fact these make up 85% of the diet making them unique among birds and probably also vertebrates. The one in the sixth photo has found the favourite morsel, the digits of a cloven-hoof herbivore such as sheep and goats. Smaller bones ones are swallowed whole, larger ones - up to 4kg in weight - are dropped onto regularly used rocky areas called ossuaries to smash the bones. The usual pattern of the birds here was to scout around for suitable food, carry it off and then return perhaps 20 minutes later. They're called 'quebrando huesos' (breaking bones) in Spanish. They'll also take live prey such as tortoises, which get the same treatment. Legend has it that the Greek playwright Aeschylus was killed around 456 BC by an eagle - clearly a Lammergeier - dropping a tortoise on his bald head, mistaking it for a rock.



Lammergeier (*Gypaetus barbatus*)

Boumort National Reserve, Catalonia, Spain 10 Oct 2014

161654 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Conservation efforts have seen the Pyrenean population grow from 75 pairs in 1993 to 125 pairs in 2008 and the species has been successfully re-introduced to the Alps. It also occurs in eastern Africa, South Africa and Central Asia. Estimates of the global population range from 2000 to 10,000 individuals. Until recently, it was not considered globally threatened until recent declines outside Europe and it is now classified as near threatened. The greatest concern is the veterinary use of the anti-inflammatory and pain-killing drug Diclosfenac. Highly toxic to vultures, causing liver failure, it has been solely responsible for the 99% decline in vulture populations in India, where it is now banned.



Lammergeier (*Gypaetus barbatus*)

Boumort National Reserve, Catalonia, Spain 10 Oct 2014 161645 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Horribly, this drug has recently been approved for veterinary use in Spain and Italy. This insanity jeopardises the wonderful conservation efforts being carried out. BirdLife International has rallied to the cause, see <<<http://www.birdlife.org/worldwide/news/vultures-africa-and-europe-could-face-extinction-within-our-lifetime-warn>>>, and funds are being raised here <<<https://www.justgiving.com/stop-vulture-poisoning-now/>>>.

I'm going to donate. If we think that because there are no vultures in Australia, it's someone else's problem, it's not unfortunately quite so simple. There is recent evidence that Diclosfenac is toxic to *Aquila* eagles too. That includes the Wedge-tailed Eagle and this drug is approved for veterinary use here (e.g. 'Voltaren' for horses) and widely prescribed for human use. Studies have shown that it increases the risk of strokes in humans <<<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2010-09-14/study-links-voltaren-to-strokes/2260424>>>. Photographing Lammergeiers is a personal **missió completa** (Catalan for **misión completa**). A much more important mission accomplished will be the global banning of this completely unnecessary and dangerous drug - there are safe alternatives.

Greetings

Ian

#515 Northern Goshawk 18 November 2014

I got so absorbed in recounting my experiences in Catalonia, that I forgot to mention that I've been home in North Queensland for several weeks.

The piece about the effects of diclofenac prompted some interesting responses. It was pointed out that it causes kidney not liver failure in vultures, my apologies, and that a safe and effective substitute in both humans and livestock is the anti-inflammatory meloxicam. It's sold here as Mobic, which I take sometimes when a wayward spinal disc misbehaves. I also received a link to this article by the Vulture Conservation Foundation which has managed to get the EU to do an investigation into the effects of diclofenac: <<<http://www.4vultures.org/our-work/campaigning-to-ban-diclofenac-in-europe/>>>.



Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*)

Tarrega District, Catalonia, Spain, 11 October 2014

161870 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

On the second day of our stay in raptor country in the Pyrenees with <<[Birding in Spain](#)>> we - my sister Gillian joined me for this one - were taken by Steve West to a hide at a <[Northern Goshawk](#)> feeding station before sunrise - goshawks are earlier risers than I am normally and are shy. Here the goshawks are fed regularly on chicken carcasses and fresh pigeon, the product of a culling programme by the local council. It was a misty, chilly, gloomy morning - sunrise was the time of day rather than an event - and the first bird to arrive, the adult female in photos one and two, was barely visible. The second photo was taken at 1/3 of a second exposure at 1600 ISO and my tripod, inconvenient for travel, proved its worth yet again.



Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*)

Tarrega District, Catalonia, Spain, 11 October 2014

161706 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Adult females are more strongly barred and much larger than males (to protect succulent-looking nestlings). This one is partially spreading its wings and tail near the food in a posture that looks like a rudimentary 'mantling' display. This is usually used by hawks as a threat display to discourage other ones from interfering with their prey. In this case, I suspect it was signalling the presence of food to the juvenile goshawk, third photo, who appeared shortly afterwards. First year juvenile Northern Goshawks are brown with buff, almost cinnamon underparts and are streaked rather than barred. Similar juvenile plumages occur in other close relatives in the *Accipiter* genus such as the <[Brown Goshawk](#)> (*A. fasciatus*) and <[Collared Sparrowhawk](#)> (*A. cirrocephalus*), both common in Australia. Follow the links for examples of their juvenile plumage. Note, incidentally the 'beetle-brow' characteristic also of the Brown Goshawk that gives the larger goshawks their fierce expression.



Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*)

Tarrega District, Catalonia, Spain, 11 October 2014

161977 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

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The adult female moved aside and let the juvenile have the pigeon prey and the juvenile then adopted the possessive mantling display with spread wings and tail and fluffed-out feathers of the mantle, just below the neck.



Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*)

Tarrega District, Catalonia, Spain, 11 October 2014

161794 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Mother, I presume, tackled a piece of chicken carcass and carried it down onto the ground closer to the hide, but partially obscured by dried grass and other vegetation.



Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*)

Tarrega District, Catalonia, Spain, 11 October 2014

161866 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The sixth photo shows the juvenile somewhat later with the remains of the pigeon. This was a very large bird too, as you can perhaps judge from its appearance, so I concluded that it was female too. 'Huge' is perhaps a better description, as the Northern Goshawk is easily the world's largest of the nearly 50 or so species of *Accipiter* - (typical hawks comprising larger goshawks and smaller sparrowhawks, though 'hawk' is also used in North America to name other raptors such as those in the genus *Buteo* aka 'Buzzard' in British English). The female is up to 65cm/26in in length with a wingspan of up to 120cm/47in and a weight of up to 2.0kg/4.5lb, comparable in size with many Buzzards.

All the *Accipiter* hawks tackle relatively large prey, mainly birds and some mammals. They hunt by surprise and pursuit and have rounded wings, long tails and fast reflexes for great manoeuvrability in forests. I suspect that Linnaeus used the specific moniker '*gentilis*' in the sense of 'noble' rather than 'gentle'. 'Goshawk' comes from the Old English '*gōshafoc*' meaning goose hawk, no mere chicken hawk.



Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*)

Tarrega District, Catalonia, Spain, 11 October 2014

161983 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This was another species that had aroused my interest in my field guide as an Irish teenager, and hadn't seen before this trip. It's a very rare vagrant in Ireland and was then only an occasional breeder in Britain though widespread if uncommon elsewhere in temperate regions of the Northern Hemisphere. Since then it has become re-established in Britain with a breeding population of 300-400 pairs.



Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*)

Tarrega District, Catalonia, Spain, 11 October 2014

162041 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Both birds lightened their load, as many raptors do, before taking flight, as the juvenile is doing in the seventh photo. There's a [photo on the website of the female doing the same](#) thing. Even members of the nobility have to perform basic functions: don't stand behind or below a well-fed raptor :-).

Greetings

Ian

#516 Bonelli's Eagle 30 November 2014

This is the last in this series of raptor photos from the Pyrenees: Bonelli's Eagle taken at another feeding station managed by [Birding in Spain](#). Like last week's [Northern Goshawk](#) feral pigeons from a local council culling programme are used to attract the eagles. It's brown and white plumage reminded me rather of the similarly sized [Osprey](#) particular that of the male, first photo, which is paler than the female. In size it has a length of up to 73cm/28in, a wingspan to 180cm/71in and weights up to 2.4kg/5.3lbs. That makes it much smaller than most of the other *Aquila* eagles, such as the Golden and [Wedge-tailed](#) but larger than the [Little Eagle](#) of Australia (not an *Aquila* eagle).



Male Bonelli's Eagle (*Aquila fasciata*)

Near Montsonís, Catalonia, Spain, 12 October 2014

162223 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

There the resemblance to ospreys ends, as Bonelli's Eagle is found in hilly or mountainous country in warm regions and eats mammals and birds - in Spain it eats mainly rabbits and partridges. The second photo shows the view from the hide. The stone wall on the left is where the food is tied in place, as is done with the goshawks to prevent them from carrying the food away. The bird arrived quite promptly after set up: you can see in the first photo that the reflection of the sun in its eye is just above the horizon.



The third photo is another one of the male with the remains of a pigeon. On the back just below the neck a white spot is visible - this is a diagnostic feature of adult Bonelli's Eagles and fairly conspicuous in flight though the birds arrived and departed so quickly from the rocky ridge in front of the hide that I didn't get any decent flight shots.



Male Bonelli's Eagle (*Aquila fasciata*)

Near Montsonís, Catalonia, Spain, 12 October 2014

162088 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

They were fast eaters too. The fourth photo was taken 25 minutes after the third: very little of the pigeon remains and the crop of the bird is quite full. The adult goshawk also took about half an hour to demolish a pigeon, but the immature goshawk took the best part of two hours and remained long after the adult had left. Despatching prey at speed would appear to be a skill that takes raptors a bit of practice. Both these photos show the feathered legs or 'boots', characteristic of 'true' eagles. They're not exclusive to eagles though. The goshawks had impressive trousers too as do some falcons such as the <Brown Falcon> of Australia.



Male Bonelli's Eagle (*Aquila fasciata*)

Near Montsonís, Catalonia, Spain, 12 October 2014

162236 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Once fed, the male seemed more aware of what was going on around it and in the fifth photo is peering at the hide, presumably in response to the sound of the camera shutter.



Male Bonelli's Eagle (*Aquila fasciata*)

Near Montsonís, Catalonia, Spain, 12 October 2014

162255 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Meanwhile, the female, sixth and seventh photos, was getting stuck into the other pigeon. She was a fine-looking bird too, larger than the male, with hazel eyes and identifiable by much stronger streaks on the breast. The female had much darker trousers, seventh photo, but I don't know whether that's generally the case or peculiar to this bird.



Female Bonelli's Eagle (*Aquila fasciata*)

Near Montsonís, Catalonia, Spain, 12 October 2014

162052 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Bonelli's Eagle is widely but sparsely distributed through southern Europe, northern Africa, parts of the Middle East, South and Southeastern Asia as far east as Timor. The European population is about 900 pairs, of which about 700 are in Spain. They are sedentary, keeping to their large home ranges throughout the year. Satellite tracking in Spain has shown an average home range of 200sq km/77sq miles with a core range of about 45sq km/17 sq miles.



Female Bonelli's Eagle (*Aquila fasciata*)

Near Montsonís, Catalonia, Spain, 12 October 2014

162114 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The generic name '*fasciata*' comes from the Latin *fascia* meaning stripe, band or sash. It's usually used in birds to refer to horizontal bands or barring but maybe Veillot, the taxonomist responsible, was referring to the barring on the 'trousers' rather than the streaks on the breast.

Veillot, Jean Pierre that is, was an important French avian taxonomist, 1748-1831, who extended the three-level Linnaean classification of order-genus-species into order-tribe-family-genus-species in his **Analyse d'une nouvelle Ornithologie Élémentaire (1816)**. Franco Andrea Bonelli was, unsurprisingly, an Italian ornithologist 1784-1830 and discovered both this eagle and Bonelli's Warbler in 1815. He worked at the Natural History Museum in Paris 1810-11 before returning to Italy to take up the position of Professor of Zoology at the University of Turin. Interestingly, he published his main works in French.

What would we do without Wikipedia?

Greetings

Ian

#517 Squatter Pigeon 18 December 2014

The series of raptors from Europe is perhaps a hard act to follow, so here is something quite different from much closer to (my) home: the <[Squatter Pigeon](#)>, an attractive ground pigeon not uncommon in the drier areas of northern Queensland. Its range used to extend to northern New South Wales, but it is very rare or extinct there and has declined in southern areas of Queensland. The reasons for its decline are not clear but is thought to be due to grazing pressure and perhaps predation by foxes and feral cats.



Squatter Pigeon (*Geophaps scripta*)

Toonpan, NE Queensland, 13 August 2006

37742 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Toonpan, a short drive south of Townsville on the Flinders Highway is a good spot for this species. When Ross River Dam was built, part of the highway between Toonpan and Townsville was flooded and a new highway was built on higher ground. The old highway still exists and is a quiet roadway through grassland, popular with birders. The habitat in the second photo - taken from the ebook <[Where to Find Birds in North Queensland](#)> - may look uninspiring, but can be very productive often producing other such specialties such as <[Australian Bustard](#)>, various finches including <[Black-throated](#)> and, in winter on powerlines, <[Red-backed Kingfishers](#)>.



Mt Elliott from Old Flinders Highway, Toonpan

It's not clear where the name Squatter Pigeon came from, presumably either from its habit of crouching and freezing when disturbed or because of its association with the cattle stations, the original occupants of which were called squatters. It was originally named by the Dutch zoologist Temminck in 1821 and he seemed very taken with it. Like Bonelli in the previous Bird of the Week, he published in French, calling it the *Colombe marquetée* and describing how each patch of white on the face was framed with black, producing an effect like 'a sort of marquetry'. He gave it the scientific name *Geophaps scripta*, meaning 'ground pigeon with writing', '*phaps*' being the Greek for pigeon. Temminck, incidentally, named many species of animals and various others were named in his honour, such as a [Temminck's Stint](#).



Squatter Pigeon (*Geophaps scripta*)

Torrens Creek, NE Queensland, 28 June 2009

90571 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Sometimes you can see the iridescent feathers on the wing, third photo, a display feature shared with other ground pigeons notably the [Bronzewings](#). These feathers are usually hidden in Squatter Pigeons except in display and flight. The body shape is broken up by the white stripe between the breast and the wings, and the black and white facial markings disguise the head and make the eye less conspicuous. Squatter Pigeons nest in a scrape on the ground, so camouflage is important and it is easy to appreciate that a motionless bird crouching on the ground would be quite hard to spot.



Squatter Pigeon (*Geophaps scripta*)

Carnarvon Gorge, Central Queensland, 1 April 2004

06838 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

If you look carefully at both bare facial skin of both the Toonpan bird and the one in the third photo taken much farther west along the Flinders Highway, you'll see the skin is mainly pale blue around the eye with some pink at the edges in front and behind the eye. Two races of Squatter Pigeon have been described, with the nominate southern race having completely blue facial skin - fourth photo near Carnarvon Gorge - and a Cape York race *peninsulae* having reddish facial skin. The two races are not geographically well defined and there is a broad band of intergradation with mixed blue and pink in the Townsville area.



Squatter Pigeon (*Geophaps scripta peninsulae*)

Marys Farms, NE Queensland, 26 December 2013

156800 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Photos five and six show examples of the Cape York race. Both Marys Farms and the Mitchell River catchment are in the Mount Carbine district south of Cape York proper. The bird in the last photo is perched fairly high in a tree, just to prove that it will sometimes take refuge in trees.



Squatter Pigeon (*Geophaps scripta peninsulae*)

Mitchell River, NE Queensland, 27 January 2008

62103 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It is the blue-faced southern race that has declined most and is regarded as 'vulnerable'. The Cape York race and the hybrids in the Townsville district are still reasonably common. The Partridge Pigeon, *G. smithii*, replaces it in northwestern Australia. It also has races with different coloured faces, red in the Top End of the Northern Territory and yellow in the Kimberley district of northern Western Australia. It has also declined. Although I have seen it in Kakadu National Park I haven't yet photographed it.

Greetings

Ian

#518 Christmas Island White-eye 23 December 2014

Here is a Christmas Island endemic to celebrate the festive season appropriately. It's not the most spectacular bird but all the other birds with 'Christmas' in the name that I've photographed have already featured as bird of the week.



Christmas Island White-eye (*Zosterops natalis*)

Christmas Island, Indian Ocean, 2 September 2006

39319 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Happily, it's quite partial to posing beside spectacular flowers, first and third photos and its endemic status gives it special significance. The first two photos were taken at the Christmas Island Resort on the eastern side of the island, - that's Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean, not Christmas Island (Kirimati part of Kiribati) in the Pacific.

The resort used to be a casino for Indonesian high-rollers, opened by an enterprising entrepreneur in 1993 following the closure in 1981 of the three licensed Indonesian casinos in Jakarta, a mere one hour away by private jet. It closed in 1998, a victim of the Asian financial crisis and was empty when we visited it in 2006. It has recently reopened as an ordinary resort, promoting more socially acceptable activities such as honeymoons and bird watching.



Christmas Island White-eye (*Zosterops natalis*)

Christmas Island, Indian Ocean, 2 September 2006

39313 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The <White-eye> is quite abundant on the island. The third photo was taken in the grounds of Government House, where the Governor used to live. It was also empty in 2006, the Administrator choosing to live in more democratic surroundings. Government House is just across the bay from Flying Fish Cove and it is good for bird watching. If I were Administrator, I would prefer to live there. There is supposed to be a small population persisting in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, introduced between 1885 and 1900, but there is disagreement between Handbook of Birds of the World and BirdLife International as to where it survives (Horsburgh Island or around the settlement on West Island, respectively).



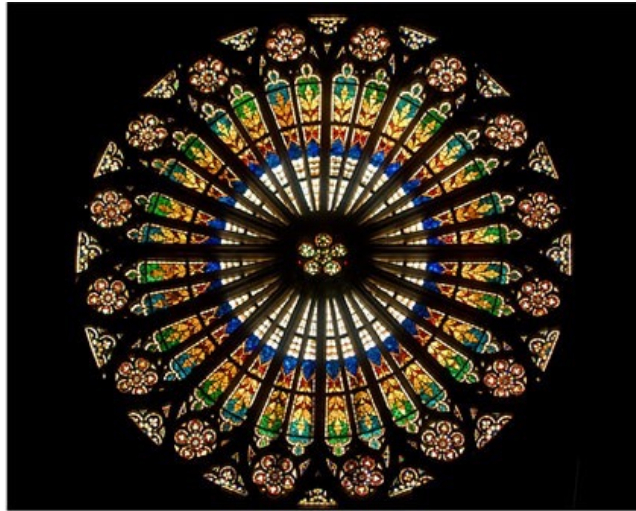
Christmas Island White-eye (*Zosterops natalis*)

Christmas Island, Indian Ocean, 2 September 2006

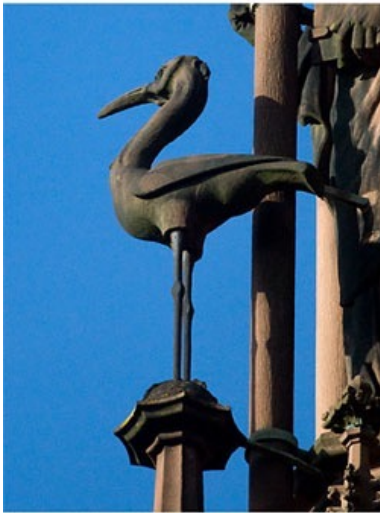
39840 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Anyway, below is my best wishes for Christmas and New Year. I'm avoiding 'Merry' as it suggests drunkenness and 'Prosperous' as it seems a bit greedy, so interpret the message how it accords best with you.

Notre Dame
Cathedral
Strasbourg
Western
Facade
Internal
bat's-eye
view



Wishing You a Peaceful Christmas
and
a Healthy and Rewarding 2015



Notre Dame
Cathedral
Strasbourg
Western
Facade
External
birder's-eye
view



I think the bird on the left is a <Grey Heron> as it has a crest and the one on the right a <White Stork> a well-loved bird in Strasbourg. We did go looking for them in a park in early October where they occur, but they had already left for the winter and we had to wait until we got to the Pyrenees before we caught up with any:



Greetings

Ian

#519 Collared Kingfisher 30 December 2014

The first photo shows a present from Santa that I want to share, taken late in the afternoon on Christmas Day: a <Collared Kingfisher> This species is the only one of the ten Kingfishers and Kookaburras normally found in Australia that hasn't featured as bird of the week. It's a close relative of the Sacred Kingfisher, but larger with a much heavier bill. In Australia it is almost exclusively a dweller of mangroves and feeds mainly on crustaceans such as crabs with a carapace width up to 2cm: hence the shell-crunching beak, it's best field mark.



Collared Kingfisher (*Todiramphus chloris*)

Cardwell, NE Queensland, 25 December 2014

163820 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com

Because of its preference for mangroves and because it's not very common, I've found it a difficult species to photograph in Australia. Often the only access to mangroves is on boardwalks, so you can't get close to anything that's not close to the boardwalk and, even if you can, you usually can't get an uninterrupted view in the dense vegetation. In fact, the only tolerable Australian photo that I had was [one I took in Darwin in 2004](#) where there is a walking track into mangroves from Tiger Brennan Drive.



Collared Kingfisher (*Todiramphus chloris*)

Cardwell, NE Queensland, 24 December 2014

163712 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

When I pass through Cardwell travelling north towards Innisfail and Cairns, I always stop there as it's a lovely place where the highway runs along the beach front with views of Hinchinbrook Island and a convenient 90 minutes from home. There's a rest area at the southern end of town close to a patch of mangroves that regularly produces interesting birds. It was badly damaged by cyclone Yasi four years ago, but is now recovering and the path through the mangroves from the rest area to Port Hinchinbrook has been restored.

In early November, I saw a Collared Kingfisher perched in the open on a dead mangrove near the rest area; it was low tide and the bird was presumably looking for dinner on the mudflat. I didn't get a photo of it - camera malfunction - but looked again on Christmas Eve on the way north and heard and then found one on a different perch in the middle of the mangroves. I got only the quick, back-lit, get-it-before-it-flies-away shot, second photo, before it did exactly that and I didn't see it again.



Collared Kingfisher (*Todiramphus chloris*)

Cardwell, NE Queensland, 25 December 2014

163799 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I returned home on Christmas Day and had another look, as the tide was going out and I hope that this would attract the bird into a more open position for a late feed. Just before I was about to give up, I heard the bird calling and found it perched near the beach. I got some distant shots, but when I approached it it flew over my head and returned to exactly the same back-lit spot where it had been on Christmas Eve. If you compare photos two and three, you can see from the guano stains on the branch that it is only a couple of centimetres apart on the two occasions. Clearly a bird of habits. This time, it tolerated my approach, and allowed me to leave the path, squelch through the mangroves and get around behind it where I took the first photo.



Collared Kingfisher (*Todiramphus chloris*)

Kuala Sepetang, Perak, Malaysia, 19 October 2001

06782 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I've qualified some comments with 'in Australia'. This species also ranges quite widely through Asia, and in some places it is found in many other habitats including suburban gardens and forested areas along rivers. I had no trouble photographing three in the space of week in Singapore and Malaysia, fourth photo, in 2001. These Asian birds belong to different races from the Australian ones and their taxonomy is very confused, with about 50 subspecies being currently recognised. The Malaysian and Australian races have white underparts but some others, particular those in the Pacific Islands east of New Guinea are quite buff, and some taxonomists think they should be transferred to the <[Sacred Kingfisher](#)>. The calls vary by location too. In Australia the usual contact call is a distinctive two note 'kek KEK', with the emphasis on the second one.

I hope Santa brought you what you wanted too.

Happy New Year!

Ian

Year 2015: #520 to #556

#520 Zebra Finch 11 January 2015

Here's a perhaps surprising omission so far from the bird of the week series, the <Zebra Finch>, In Australia the most widespread of the grass- or weaver-finches, family <Estrildidae>. It is resident almost throughout mainland Australia, avoiding only the very driest deserts (such as the Nullabor Plain and the Great Sandy Desert), Cape York and the cooler and wetter regions of southern Victoria and southern Western Australia. It is absent from Tasmania. I qualified 'surprising omission' with 'perhaps', as it's natural to rush into print with rarer and more sought-after species, such as <Gouldian Finches>, and overlook the more common ones.



Zebra Finch (*Taeniopygia guttata*)

Bowra, Cunnamulla, SW Queensland, 20 April 2014

157891 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

With a length of 10cm/4in, it is among the smallest of the 19 species of Estrildid finches found in Australia (17 naturally; 2 introduced), but the males in particular (first photo) are beautiful birds and are hugely popular all over the world. Given the rigours of their natural habitat, they are hardy birds and easy to breed. One of my favourite ways to lazily photograph birds is to sit quietly near a waterhole in dry country and

see what arrives, and you can see the bird in the first photo has wet breast and flank feathers from having a dip.



Zebra Finch (*Taeniopygia guttata*)

Bowra, Cunnamulla, SW Queensland, 20 April 2014

157942 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The second photo shows a pair drinking at the same spot. The male on the left is recognisable by its chestnut-coloured cheeks, while the female has plainer plumage, lacking the chestnut plumage on the cheeks and flanks and the stripes on the neck. She still has the stripy tail, white rump and diagnostic vertical 'tear-drop' stripe below the eye. This acts as camouflage by obscuring the eye and breaking up the outline of the head.



Zebra Finch (*Taeniopygia guttata*)

Bowra, Cunnamulla, SW Queensland, 20 April 2014

157947 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The third photo shows another pair at the same place. They would appear to be having a difference of opinion about something, and the body language suggests to me that the female is getting the upper hand. Most females have plain breasts, but some have a faint breast band like this one. The fourth photo shows another pair, the female having the more typical plain plumage. These two look as if they're not on very good terms either, definitely not speaking to each other, so you won't be surprised to hear that Zebra Finches form permanent pair bonds.



Zebra Finch (*Taeniopygia guttata*)

Emerald, Central Queensland, 2 March 2006

30607 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Their breeding cycles depend on seeding grasses and therefore on rainfall patterns. If the weather is warm enough for grasses to flower, the birds start breeding in response to rain, timing the hatching of the young with the appearance of seed. They will also feed on insects, particular when feeding young. In good conditions, the birds breed repeatedly, and the young, independent 35 days after hatching, can breed when as young as 80 days. Although the pair-bonds are permanent, Zebra Finches are very sociable, often breeding colonially and forming large flocks outside the breeding season. The bonding doesn't prevent the females from getting on cosy terms with other males, and about 10% of clutches have two fathers (HBW).



Zebra Finch (*Taeniopygia guttata*)

Hughenden, Queensland, 24 June 2003

00359 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Young juveniles resemble the females, but have dark bills. The bird in the fifth photo is an older juvenile male with still only patchy development of the adult plumage.

A closely related population is resident in the Lesser Sundas from Lombok to Timor. This is slightly larger, has a recognisably different song and the males have plain grey rather than striped throats and upper breast. When mixed with Australian birds on captivity, they normally avoid interbreeding unless the male plumage is painted to look like the other type or young birds have been imprinted by being reared by foster parents of the other type. Such hybrids are fertile. Even so, some authorities treat the two races as different species, the Timor and Australian Zebra Finches. 'Zebra' doesn't seem to me a suitable name for the unstriped Timor one, maybe 'Unzebra' would be better?

Greetings

Ian

#521 European Goldfinch 21 January 2015

Last week I mentioned that the <Zebra Finch> was an Estrildid or Grass Finch, family <Estrildidae> without exploring the significance of this, so here is a taxonomically quite different finch, the <European Goldfinch>, family <Fringillidae>, to continue the subject. Choosing it was prompted by an email from some English

friends of mine currently in New Zealand who expressed disappointment that most of the birds seemed to be ones introduced from the British Isles, naming in particular the Goldfinch. So here is a photo of one that I took in its native habitat, when staying with these friends in 2001 on Alderney one of the smaller inhabited Channel Islands off the coast of France.



Female European Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*)

Alderney, Channel Islands, 11 October 2001

06029 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It was introduced to Australia as well in the 1860s and is quite widespread in the southeastern mainland and on Tasmania. It's an attractive bird with a canary-like song and like the Zebra Finch a popular cage bird. So it's not surprising that homesick settlers introduced it. It does well in farmland, parks and gardens but not in native vegetation.

The sex of adult Goldfinches can be told from their plumage, even though they are very similar and most field guides don't make the distinction. It's a bit like those Spot the Difference puzzles, so here, second photo, is an Irish male to compare with the female in the first. The pale cheeks on the female are buff, those on the male white. The red bib on the female is rounded, on the male more rectangular. The female usually has a complete buff breast band; the male just has buff breast patches separate by white. The male is also whiter underneath. There are other subtle differences not apparent in these photos such as the amount of white on the tail.



Male European Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*)

Clogherhead, Co. Louth, Ireland, 26 May 2007

52839 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

You can tell from their stout conical bills that they are seed-eaters, and any such vaguely sparrow-like bird is likely to be called a 'finch'. In temperate zones seeds are available mainly in summer and autumn, so dietary versatility is needed. The male is chomping its way through the buds and flowers of Hawthorn and Goldfinches will also feed on invertebrates. Their favourite food is the seeds of thistles and their, by finch standards, relatively pointed bills are adapted to picking out seeds from among thorns, like the juvenile bird in the third photo in autumn. Its plumage, apart from the black and yellow wings, is mainly brown and streaked with no red or black on the head, and almost pipit-like.



Juvenile European Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*)

Clogherhead, Co. Louth, Ireland, 1 September 2005

19616 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The juveniles acquire the adult plumage during the first autumn moult, and the rather scruffy individual in the fourth photo is in mid-transition. This photo shows the very pointed bill, even if the owner is looking a bit doubtful about the even scruffier thistle head.



Juvenile European Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*)

Clogherhead, Co. Louth, Ireland, 5 September 2005

19813 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Getting around to the taxonomy at last, the various groups of finch-like birds have caused and still cause avian taxonomists many headaches, and I don't want to trigger any more here. It is sufficient to say that the approximately 700 global species of finch-like birds belong to several separate lineages, currently separated at the level of family.

The <[Fringillidae](#)> to which the Goldfinch belongs, sometimes called the 'true' finches (by the Europeans of course) have an almost global distribution but are naturally completely absent from Australasia. The <[Estrildidae](#)>, which include all the native Australian grass finches, occur only in Africa, southern and southeast Asia and Australasia (but not New Zealand).

The African members belong to a group called Waxbills, the Asian ones are mainly Munias or Mannikins and the grass finches are predominantly Australian. The Estrildids occur mainly in tropical or sub-tropical regions, and only in Australia have some Firetails ventured into cooler areas: notably the Red-eared Firetail in SW Western Australia and the <[Beautiful Firetail](#)> in the SE mainland and Tasmania.

I'm in danger of getting carried away here, so I'll stop. Here are some more links if you want to explore the photos other finch-like birds such as the <[Sparrows](#)>, <[Buntings and New World Sparrows](#)>, <[New World Orioles](#)>, <[Weavers](#)>, <[Tanagers](#)>, <[Cardinals](#)>...

Greetings

Ian

#522 Australian Magpie 1 February 2015

National days are occasions in which icons play a big, maybe dominant or even overpowering role, and Australia's, January 26th, is no exception. So here is the <Australian Magpie>. It's not strictly a <Magpie> in the Northern Hemisphere sense and its not strictly Australian, as it also occurs naturally in southern Papua New Guinea and has been introduced to both the main islands of New Zealand.



Australian Magpie (*Cracticus/Gymnorhina tibicen*)

Townsville, NE Queensland, 13 July 2005

17151 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It is, however, certainly iconic, and not just in the sense of something that is typical of Australia. It was incorporated in various South Australian insignia just after Federation, and features "displayed proper" against the risen sun of federation. All six state coat of arms were incorporated into the Australian coat of arms in 1912, so the magpie, along with the <Black Swan> of Western Australia, made it to the national coat of arms. The bird referred to in the original South Australian design documents is called the "Piping Shrike" but the Australian Magpie has had various names including "Piping Crow-shrike" (Charles Sturt, explorer, 1840).



There are several races of the Magpie and I thought it would be easy to describe and illustrate them as part of this bird of the week. In fact, the descriptions, delineations and ranges of the various races are both messy and vague so I've settled for three easily recognised categories based on the colouration of their backs between the universally white (or pale grey) nape and rump: Black-backed, White-backed and Western.



Australian Magpie (*Cracticus/Gymnorhina tibicen*)

Sydney, NSW, 9 April 2005

13993 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Black-backed group, first and second photos, is the most widespread occurring everywhere except in SW Western Australia and SE Australia and Tasmania. The nominate race '*tibicen*' of eastern Australia is Black-backed and the name is derived from the Latin for 'trumpeter': *tibicen*. Male and female Black-backed have similar patterning except that the females have greyish tinge to the white and the black is less intense.



Australian Magpie (*Cracticus/Gymnorhina tibicen*)

Queenscliff, Victoria, 14 March 2001

00884 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The familiar Magpie of Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia is the White-backed. The bird in the third photo is a male, while the one in the fourth photo is a female. The grey tinge and scalloping on her nape and back is quite obvious.

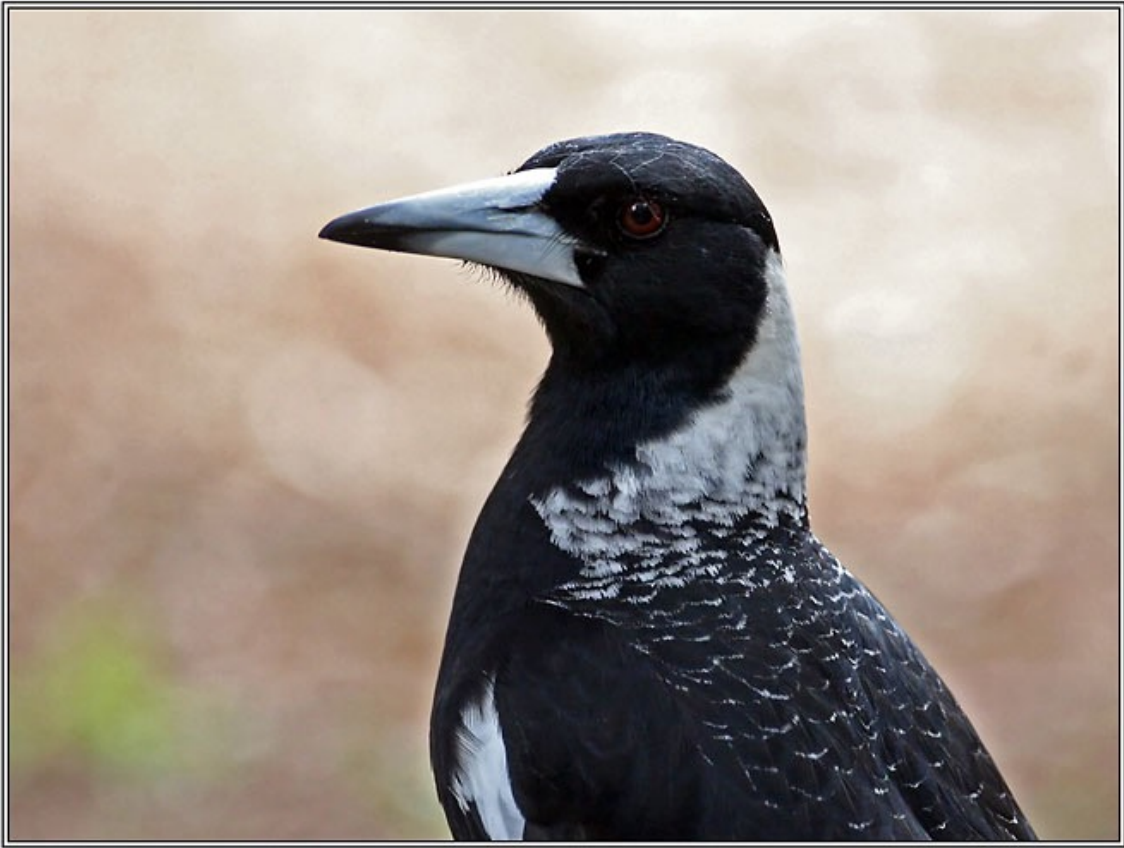


Australian Magpie (*Cracticus/Gymnorhina tibicen*)

Anglesey, Victoria, 4 April 2009

85760 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The male of the Western Magpie in SW Western Australia is like the male White-backed. The female, however, has very dark scalloping on the back to the point where it is almost black, fifth photo.



Australian Magpie (*Cracticus/Gymnorhina tibicen*)

Two Peoples Bay, SW Western Australia, 27 August 2006

38207 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Australian Magpies have group territories with the group varying in size from a pair of adults to several adults and juveniles of varying ages. Usually only one pair in the group actually nests with the female doing the nest building and most of the incubation. The young are fed by the female, often with help from her male partner and sometimes from other group members. Magpies can be aggressive towards people near the nest, and many Australians can recount stories of being attacked when cycling to or from school. Juveniles have greyish rather than black plumage, like the juvenile Black-backed in the sixth photo.



Australian Magpie (*Cracticus/Gymnorhina tibicen*)

Townsville, NE Queensland, 13 July 2005

17167 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Australian Magpies, and their close relatives the <[Butcherbirds](#)>, are candidates for being the finest song birds in Australia. The Magpie has a varied and complex repertoire and is well-known for its flute-like choruses by a pair or group. It is usually started by the senior male or female in the group with other members, including juveniles, joining in. Less intense warbling songs are done by individuals, often for long periods, contain elements of the choral singing and mimicry. The New Zealand Poet, Denis Glover, in his best known poem, *The Magpies*, rendered the song as '*and Quardle oodle ardle wardle doodle/The magpies said*'.

The flute-like quality of the voice features in various European names for the Australian Magpie: Cassican flûteur (F), Flötenvogel (G) and Verdugo Flautista (Sp). I think the Germans have got it right with their Fluting-bird - much better than naming it after some unrelated Northern Hemisphere bird that it vaguely resembles. Maybe we should launch a new name for it next Australia Day. Now that would be a fitting Australia Day honour.

Greetings

Ian

#523 Eurasian/Black-billed Magpie 9 February 2015

The Australian Magpie of last week generated quite some interesting correspondence, about both it being an iconic species and bird names and their derivation. I also got a request for a BotW on Butcherbirds, which I'll do soon, but in the meantime here is the original Magpie of the Northern Hemisphere. It is, incidentally, on the Australian list, a record from Port Hedland in May 2007 having been accepted by the rarities committee. This species is quite sedentary, the nearest place it occurs naturally is China and Port Hedland is an iron ore port so you don't have to be Sherlock Holmes to work out how it got there.



Eurasian Magpie (*Pica pica*)

Rathgar, Dublin, Ireland, 29 Sept 2014

160537 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This, unlike the <Australian Magpie>, is a member of the crow family, <Corvidae>, and I think you'll agree that the resemblance between the two species is fairly superficial, not that that ever got in the way of names. The Common, Eurasian or Black-billed Magpie - I'll get back inevitably to names shortly - has beautifully iridescent wings and tail which can appear blue or green under different lighting conditions, which tells us that the colour is due to the prismatic microscopic structure of the feather rather than coloured pigment. The first photo shows one on a garden wall in suburban Dublin.



Eurasian Magpie (*Pica pica*)

Tarrega, Catalonia, Spain, 12 Oct 2014

162278 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The second one was taken in Catalonia at the <[Northern Goshawk](#)> site [#515](#). Like their cousins the <[Common Ravens](#)> the Magpies were quite brazen and prepared to steal a morsel of food from under the noses of much larger raptors. Also like the Ravens and unlike the raptors, the Magpies noticed the sound of the camera shutter and you can see this one peering warily at the hide. This photo shows the extremely wedged-shaped tail, which is very obvious in flight. The third photo shows a juvenile one in Ireland, very similar to the adult plumage but it still has the slightly swollen gape of a very young bird and, maybe I'm imagining it, an atypically innocent expression.



Eurasian Magpie (*Pica pica*)

Clogherhead, Co. Louth, Ireland, 28 May 2007

52937 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Common Magpies are iconic too, and as kids in Ireland we attached great significance to the number seen together, according to the nursery rhyme 'One for sorrow, Two for joy ...<<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_for_Sorrow_\(nursery_rhyme\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_for_Sorrow_(nursery_rhyme))>>. Magpies, and other crows, have long been considered birds of ill-omen.



Black-billed Magpie (*Pica hudsonia*)

Sierra Valley, California, USA, 13 Sept 2010

109502 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Back then, we called them just 'Magpies'. In later decades, I became aware that, like The Kittiwake and for similar reasons, it acquired a coloured qualification 'Black-billed'. In the case of the Kittiwake this was to distinguish the <black-legged Eurasian one> from the <Red-legged Kittiwake> of the eastern Bering Sea; in the case of the Magpie, it was because of the <Yellow-billed Magpie> of California, fifth photo, having a very restricted range that overlaps with the much more widespread <Black-billed Magpie> (fourth photo). The fifth photo, incidentally gives a good idea what the very similar Common/Eurasian and Black-billed Magpie look like in flight and the white patches on the wing are very striking.



Yellow-billed Magpie (*Pica nuttalli*)

City of Davis Wetlands, California, USA, 20 May 2008

67366 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Plus ça change ... as they say. I discovered while researching this BotW that Handbook of Birds of the World (HBW) and Birdlife International have accepted the split of the Black-billed/Common into three species: the <Eurasian Magpie> (*Pica pica*) of Eurasia, the Black-billed Magpie of North America (*Pica hudsonia*) - fourth photo - and the Arabian Magpie (*Pica asirensis*), restricted to a tiny range in SW Saudi Arabia.

I'm losing patience with avian taxonomists. Molecular studies over the past thirty years have led to countless changes in classification and naming, and not just at the species level. The 2014 HBW Checklist of Birds of the World, volume 1 (non-passerines) has many changes at every level up to order. I'll repeat what I've said before that Linnaeus - he who tried to impose order on chaos - must be turning in his grave. Maybe he just laughing, and perhaps that's the right approach.

I used to think what the latest taxonomists said - starting with Sibley and Monroe in 1990 - was the gospel truth and a huge advance in our understanding. I don't think that anymore! Here is a quote from <<Birdlife International>> on the fate of the Rainbow and <Red-collared Lorikeets>: ***Trichoglossus haematodus**, ... *T. rubritorquis*...** (del Hoyo and Collar 2014) were previously lumped as ***T. haematodus*** following Christidis and Boles (1994), and before then were split as ***T. haematodus*** and ***T. rubritorquis*** following Sibley and Monroe (1990, 1993): Lump, split, lump, split!

Greetings

Ian

*Note 2018. Since I wrote this in 2015, *Trichoglossus haematodus* has been further split: the nominate *haematodus* now refers to the Coconut Lorikeet of New Guinea and Melanesia while the <Rainbow Lorikeet> is now *Tricoglossus moluccanus*. The <Coconut Lorikeet> occurs in the northern Torres Strait islands of Boigu and Saibai, politically part of Queensland. QED.

#524 Pied Butcherbird 20 February 2015

Birds of the week are usually chosen on the basis of appearance, photo quality or species interest, but here for a change is one whose real claim to fame is auditory. Not that Pied Butcherbirds don't look quite dapper, even if the hooked bill suggests a predatory existence and the black hood has the connotation of the executioner, at least for the Spanish : Verdugo Gorjinegro, where verdugo means executioner or hangman, and gorjinegro you can guess. However, their real claim to fame is their beautiful singing which has a clarity and *sense of purpose* that I think is unequalled. When I first heard a Pied Butcherbird singing in Australia in western New South Wales in 1971, I was fascinated. To me it seemed like it was practising the theme from an oboe concerto, as it would keep carefully repeating the phrases, each time slightly differently.



Pied Butcherbird (*Cracticus nigrogularis*)

Campaspe River, NE Queensland, 27 June 2009

90471 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The first edition of Graham Pizzey's Field Guide to the Birds of Australia (1980-2000) has wonderful descriptions - I bought it after reading his description of Musk Duck, which starts "A decidedly strange duck." - so I'll quote him on the Pied Butcherbird: "Superb: slow flute-like piping, of clear high-pitched and low mellow notes, throughout day and moonlit nights, best in early morning; often given by two or more birds alternatively, higher-pitched notes of one contrasting with more mellow notes of others. ... Also accomplished mimicry, as part of quieter sub-song."

I can't just leave you hanging after a description like that. Here is a YouTube link to a lovely video of a duet <<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMotkPv1eMw>>> and here is another to a Pied Butcherbird mimicking a variety of species <<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfapIsc5ieM>>>. Listen to these and I'm sure you'll agree that this is one of the most beautiful song birds in the world.



Pied Butcherbird (*Cracticus nigrogularis*)

Illuka, New South Wales, 19 March 2004

05610 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

On the subject of mimicry, I had an email from Rose Bay in Sydney recounting a conversation that took place between a Grey Butcherbird and the correspondent, thank you Jeremy, who whistled in response, over several months. The bird remained hidden and unidentified in foliage until a couple of weeks ago when, during such a talk, he spotted the bird and the mystery was solved. I've accompanied a Pied Butcherbird here in Bluewater on the treble recorder. I checked their vocal range using a pitch analyser on sound recordings and found that the mellow notes were close to middle C (C4), while the top notes were around D6, two octaves above middle C; an impressive range.

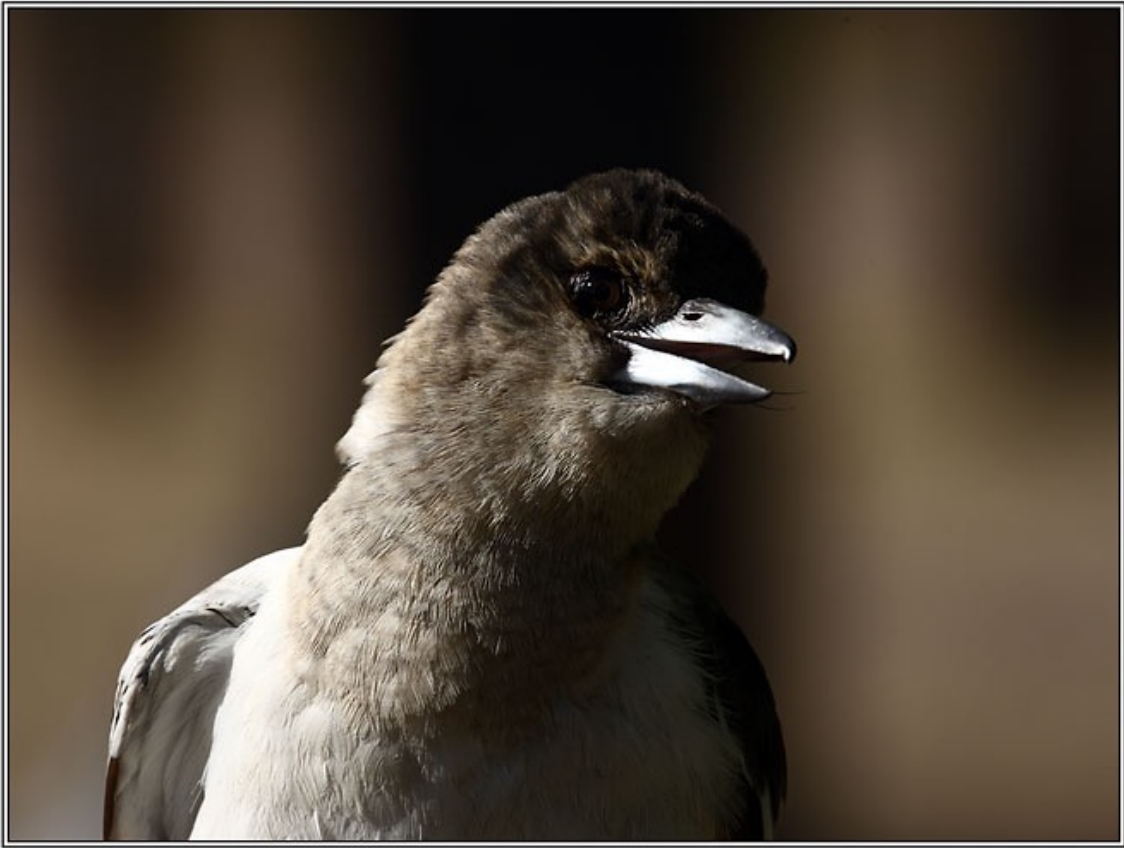


Pied Butcherbird (*Cracticus nigrogularis*)

Townsville, NE Queensland, 25 April 2002

09530 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

And, yes, they do prey on small birds, mammals, reptiles and invertebrates and will even hunt in unison with Australian Hobbies. They get their name from their habit of wedging larger prey items in a fork in a tree (or clothes line) so that they can dismember it. If you think that sounds macabre, go and listen to Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* again, imagining the *idée fixe* played by a Pied Butcherbird, particular the rendering of it in the third movement on the oboe and by the clarinet in the fourth *Marche au Supplice*. The latter appears briefly before the fall of the guillotine. I tried playing the first of the YouTube videos simultaneously with the third movement a short while ago and the result is, well, fantastic.



Pied Butcherbird (*Cracticus nigrogularis*)

Campaspe River, NE Queensland, 27 June 2009

90462 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Anyway, back to family matters. Pied Butcherbirds have group territories similar to those of their cousins the Australian Magpies with usually one breeding pair. The female does all the hard work of building the nest and incubating the eggs while, the male, presumably, sings. The other members of the group, usually offspring from earlier broods, do help to feed the young.

I should, I suppose, mention the photos. The first three are of adult birds, the last two of brownish immature birds. At 32-36cm/12.5-14in in length the <Pied Butcherbird> is intermediate between the smaller <Grey> and <Black-backed> Butcherbirds and the larger <Black Butcherbird>. The Pied Butcherbird occurs through most of mainland Australia, but is absent from very arid regions, most of South Australia and Victoria, and southeastern New South Wales. Here in northeast Queensland, they show a preference for watercourses.



Pied Butcherbird (*Cracticus nigrogularis*)

Townsville, NE Queensland, 8 September 2002

10089 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The bird of the week has been going out regularly, if not weekly, since late 2002. I have copies of almost all of them and I've decided to publish them as an electronic book under the umbrella <[A Bird Photographer's Diary](#)>. At the moment, I'm progressing steadily through the second quarter of 2006, and I'm having great fun reliving all the experiences and places involved. The intention is to add photos of the various locations and habitats. I'll keep you posted.

Greetings and sweet sounds,

Ian

#525 Budgerigar 4 March 2015

Judging by the number of emails that I received about <[Pied Butcherbirds](#)>, iconic species are popular and there were many interesting stories about experiences with them. So here is another, perhaps globally the most familiar Australian bird. Although it's quite common and sometimes very abundant after good rains in the drier parts of Australia, you have to go out of your way to find it. So it's much less well known as a wild bird than say other iconic species like <[Australian Magpie](#)> and <[Laughing Kookaburras](#)> that turn up in backyards.



Budgerigar (*Melopsittacus undulatus*)

Cloncurry NW Queensland, 24 May 2006

33399 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It wasn't until after I moved to North Queensland in 2002 that I first saw them in the wild, and that was on a trip to Moorrinya National Park between Torrens Creek and Aramac, 370km southwest of Townsville. In places like that you usually see them in small flocks of maybe 10-20 in rapid undulating flight. These make sudden turns in the sunlight showing alternately green and yellow in a characteristic and delightful display of vivid, fluorescent colour.

The sexes can be distinguished either by differences in behaviour, sometimes subtle as in the first photo with an attentive male and a bored or playing hard to get female, or less subtly as in the second photo. Here the male is concentrating seriously, and the female is rather inscrutably either in a state of bliss or thinking of the motherland. An easier way though is by the colour of the cere - the tissue surrounding the nostrils - blue in adult males, and brown in females. Juveniles have duller plumages, barred foreheads and lack the black spots on the neck.



Budgerigar (*Melopsittacus undulatus*)

Winton, Central Queensland, 25 June 2003

20658 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

After good inland rains, the population can explode and <Budgerigars> may be seen in flocks of thousands. When dry conditions return and seeds become scarce, flocks wander far and wide in search of food. They move into areas beyond their normal range and can turn up in coastal areas such as near Townsville. The birds in the third photo were near Woodstock just south of Townsville on the way to Charters Towers and I have seen them near Bluewater.



Budgerigar (*Melopsittacus undulatus*)

Woodstock, NE Queensland, 1 May 2008

65816 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Sometimes escaped cage birds turn up in odd places in strange colours, such as this almost completely white one near the Strand in Townsville. I don't know about you, but I prefer the natural colours. I was in Ireland once for a family funeral in February and was birding on Dun Laoghaire pier in Dublin Bay on a very cold, dull winter's day, when I spotted a bright yellow budgie looking very out of place among some roosting waders. It was a moment of great empathy and I thought 'you and I should be back in sunny Australia'.



Budgerigar (*Melopsittacus undulatus*)

Townsville, NE Queensland, 2 April 2006

32038 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I'm in Melbourne at the moment to visit East Gippsland next weekend with my Victorian birding pals who know of a good site for both Greater Sooty Owls and Masked Owls (both cousins of Barn Owls) near Orbost. I haven't seen or photographed either of these, so may I request your customary friendly support and spiritual goodwill to help us find them? It would be lovely to be able to bring at least one of them to you as the next bird of the week.

Greetings

Ian

#526 Greater Sooty Owl 20 March 2015

Here is the belated and sought-after bird of the week after a great trip to Victoria. I've been unwell since my return a week ago, but things are fine now and the wheels of my life are turning again.

Your spiritual support and goodwill have done it again, so it's another mission accomplished, though in English this time (having been Catalan and Spanish in the past). Actually, most credit should go to my sharp-eared, sharp-eyed, knowledgeable and passionate birding friends. With their hard work, the track record for target species in East Gippsland during our stay was fantastic. We went searching for owls on each of the three nights. The first night, we heard both <Greater Sooty> and

Masked Owls - and the sharpest-eyed of the group saw a Masked Owl in flight. On the second night, at a different site we heard another Sooty Owl and eventually caught sight of it flying among the tall trees of the forest. It then flew over us and perched on a dead limb in the open high above us.



Greater Sooty Owl (*Tyto tenebricosa*)

Orobost District, East Gippsland, Victoria, 8 March 2015

164182 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I got only this photo, discarding a second out of focus one. For the technically minded, I used manual focussing - it was too distant and the light and contrast too faint for auto focus - and guessed an exposure of 1/80sec at f5.6 and 1600 ISO using the 100-400mm zoom. As the passionate/obsessive birder would understand, it was worth travelling to Victoria for this one photo and, having taken it, **misión completa** (I have liked it in Spanish since finding the <[Resplendent Quetzal](#)> in Costa Rica in 2010) I was free to relax and enjoy whatever other gems came our way. In fact, one such, this <[Yellow-bellied Glider](#)>. sailed over our heads and landed in a nearby tree while we were trying to locate the calling Sooty Owl.



Yellow-bellied Glider (*Petaurus australis*)

Orobost District, East Gippsland, Victoria, 8 March 2015

164163 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

These are fantastic, long-tailed, wrist-winged relatives of possums (the Striped Possum of Northeastern Queensland is in the same family, the Petauridae) and the Yellow-bellied can glide up to 150m/400ft. It is rabbit-sized with a huge bushy tail that it presumably uses as a rudder in flight. They're called wrist-winged, to distinguish them from elbow-winged like the Great Glider, and if you look carefully in the photo you can see the black edge of the membrane attaching to the little finger of the left hand. This proved to be diagnostic as we were unsure of both its identify and of whether the large possum-like animal on the tree was the same creature as the pale form that glided over us.

They are reasonably common in suitable old growth forest in eastern Australia, though the northern race *regina* has a very restricted range in northeastern Queensland and is threatened by logging. Quite coincidentally, I received a request yesterday to support a petition to prevent the transferring of Tumoulin Forest Reserve near Ravenshoe to State Forest so that logging can resume. The petition is aimed directly at protecting the Yellow-bellied Glider, and if you think, like I do, that downgrading the status of nature reserves is disgraceful, then we should support it: <<<http://www.thepetitionsite.com/851/727/614/protect-rare-possum-habitat-from-senseless-logging/>>>.

Later that evening, we returned to the Masked Owl site. We could hear one or two Masked Owls but they were wary, keeping their distance in the forest and moving away when spotlights were shone in their direction. We did, however, see one in

flight and, having already photographed the Sooty Owl, I was satisfied with that, even though we did try again for photographs without success on the third night. We did, however, find this Sugar Glider, a small relative of the Yellow-bellied. It seemed to be keeping a low profile, very sensible given the presence of calling owls. Later still, we came across a juvenile <Southern Boobook> which flew up in front of us into a small tree beside the road. It didn't dally for a photo, but that made it a three-owl evening which we all thought was special.



Sugar Glider (*Petaurus breviceps*)

Orobost District, East Gippsland, Victoria, 8 March 2015 164210 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I've barely mentioned Sooty Owls, as so much else happened that evening. There are two Australian forms: the <Lesser Sooty> in the wet tropics of northeastern Queensland and the Greater Sooty in eastern Australia from Eungella National Park near Mackay in Queensland to the Dandenong and Strzelecki Ranges in Victoria, both reasonably common in suitable habitat of wet, gully, forest but rarely seen. Another race, supposedly of the Greater Sooty, occurs throughout New Guinea. Currently the Lesser and Greater are treated as separate species by most authorities, though Christidis and Boles lumped them in 2008. Having one species with a disjoint range in New Guinea and eastern Australia and a closely-related separate one in between should make any student of biogeography laugh out loud, but that's the way it is. Sooty Owls feed mainly on arboreal mammals, though they will take other prey such as birds.



On the following day we returned to the Sooty Owl site and here is a photograph of me photographing it, the red spot showing where the bird in the photo was perched. I was surprised at how far up it was and felt very fortunate to have got the one reasonable photo. This forest also produced for us <[Tawny Frogmouth](#)>, <[Australian Owlet-nightjar](#)>, <[Brush-tailed Possums](#)>, a bandicoot, a wombat and <[Black or Swamp Wallabies](#)> leaving us in no doubt about the value of old growth forests.

A few people have requested location information about the owls, but I have been sworn to secrecy by my friends as they don't want them being disturbed too much or subjected to tapes of owl calls. So please understand my reticence.

Greetings

Ian

#527 Pilotbird 31 March 2015

The primary targets in East Gippsland were the [Sooty](#) and Masked Owls, but there were several daytime birds on the wanted list too. One of these was the [Pilotbird](#), a smallish - 17cm/7in long - brown, ground-dwelling bird of the mountain ranges and dense coastal scrub of southeastern Australia from just south of Sydney almost to Melbourne. I'd seen one only once before, near Mittagong in New South Wales 16 years ago, but that encounter was only a glimpse and no photography was involved.



Pilotbird (*Pycnoptilus floccosus*)

Orbost District, East Gippsland, 9 March 2015

164379 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It's an unobtrusive bird and easy to overlook, unless you know its flutey, far-carrying call, sometimes rendered as 'guinea-a-week'. My Victorian friends knew a good spot for it in coastal scrub and we found one there with relative ease, returning the following day (first photo) to get better photos. It rummages around in thick undergrowth looking for invertebrates. The second photo has a red dot showing the exactly location, beyond the sinuous brown branch, so you can appreciate that we are lucky to be able to see anything much of it in the photo. It has unusual buff dark-edged feathers on the breast, giving it a scaly appearance. The plumage is apparently dense and silky as reflected in its scientific name: *Pycnoptilus* means thick-feathered, and *floccosus* is derived from the Latin *floccus* and means 'full of flocks of wool', which, I must admit, left me not much the wiser.



It's common name Pilotbird arises from the bird frequently associating with [Superb Lyrebirds](#), taking advantage of the digging habits of the latter (third photo) to snatch up revealed invertebrates. Some sources say the name Pilotbird comes from the similar habit of Pilotfish which associates with large marine predators such as sharks; other say that the Pilotbird by its call led early settlers looking for food to lyrebirds. I prefer the first explanation. Lyrebirds are very vocal in their own right and don't need another species to advertise their presence. Lyrebirds are perhaps the world best mimics and are known to mimic Pilotbirds, and it would be easy to imagine that this attracted Pilotbirds in the first place and they then learned that this was an easy way to get dinner. We did in fact see several Superb Lyrebirds dashing across the roads of the forests where the owls lived, though the coastal scrub didn't strike me as good lyrebird habitat.



Superb Lyrebird (*Menura novaehollandiae*)

Armidale District, New South Wales, 18 January 2010

98619 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This photo of the lyrebird digging vigorously reminded me both of Scrub-turkeys and Chowchillas (fourth photo) and I wondered whether the Pilotbird had a behavioural counterpart in the forests of Northeastern Queensland. The Pilotbird is usually placed in the <[Acanthizidae](#)>, the family of thornbills and their allies - though it shows some affinities with the bristlebirds <[Dasyornithidae](#)> -, so I checked up on the <[Fernwren](#)> (fifth photo) a brown, rummaging Acanthizid endemic to the Wet Tropics.



Chowchilla (*Orthonyx spaldingii*)

Paluma, Northeastern Queensland, 23 April 2010

100260 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Sure enough, HBW (Handbook of Birds of the World) reports that the Fernwren "sometimes associates with <Orange-footed Scrubfowl> (*Megapodius reinwardt*) and <Chowchilla> (*Orthonyx spaldingii*), following in close proximity and catching prey disturbed by their feeding actions". The Orange-footed Scrubfowl is, of course, a cousin of the <Brush-turkey>.



Fernwren (*Oreoscopus gutturalis*)

Mount Lewis, NE Queensland, 28 January 2008

62673 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

So maybe this week's bird of the week should be entitled 'small brown rummaging birds of the forest floors of eastern Australia'.

Greetings

Ian

#528 Black-faced Monarch 14 April 2015

On the way to Orbost in East Gippsland in March on the great owl hunt, we stopped for a break at Fairy Dell Nature Reserve between Bairnsdale and Lakes Entrance. This has a lovely walk through temperate rainforest along a creek with plenty of interesting birds - we saw our first <Lyrebird> of the weekend here. We also found this <Black-faced Monarch> showing its black face to great advantage through the fronds of a tree fern.



Black-faced Monarch (*Monarcha melanopsis*)

Fairy Dell, East Gippsland, Victoria, 7 March 2015

164013 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Black-faced Monarchs are usually inconspicuous solitary inhabitants of dense forest and are best located by their calls, the most distinctive of which is a vibrant fluty call, rendered by Pizzey and Knight as 'Why-you, which-you'. Here they search for insects, sometimes making sallies after flying insects when they are easier to spot. The combination of grey back and wings, black face and rich, rufous underparts is striking, though the rufous breast is best seen in the gloom of the forest using a flash, as in the second photo taken in the highlands of Northeastern Queensland. These two photos encompass most of the breeding range of this species along the east coast of Australia from Melbourne to Cape York.



Black-faced Monarch (*Monarcha melanopsis*)

Daintree, NE Queensland, 14 September 2008

80425 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

These birds are resident in the highlands of Northeastern Queensland but breeding summer visitors to areas farther south. In winter many migrate to southern and eastern New Guinea, and some immature birds spend their first summer there. In the lowlands of Northeastern Queensland, around Townsville for example, we see them only as passage migrants in March-April and September-October and I saw one last week along Bluewater Creek near the house, reminding me that autumn is here. The bird in the third photo is an immature one photographed on the creek ten years ago. Juvenile lack the black face, have brownish wings and dark bills with a pinkish edge to the base of the lower mandible - which you can just see in this photo.



Black-faced Monarch (*Monarcha melanopsis*)

Bluewater, NE Queensland, 27 April 2004

07045 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Black-faced Monarch build beautiful, conical nests wedged into the fork of a shrub or sapling in moist gullies. This is constructed of fibrous plant material, including ferns and moss, glued together using gossamer from spiders' webs as in the fourth photo.



Black-faced Monarch (*Monarcha melanopsis*)

Julatten, NE Queensland, 28 January 2008

62507 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Autumn here means warm, clear sunny days and (relatively) cool nights with low humidity, very welcome after the wet season and my favourite time of the year. The wet usually leaves a legacy of lush green grassland and forest, though this year it has been fairly dry with good rain only in January. The <[Dollarbirds](#)> have left for the winter and the forests and gardens are rather silent without the loud calls of the <[Koels](#)> and <[Channel-billed Cuckoos](#)>, leaving just the <[Blue-winged Kookaburras](#)> and <[Bar-shouldered Doves](#)> to fill the gap.

Greetings

Ian

#529 Collared Sparrowhawk 16 April 2015

This individual bird was posted as bird of the week in May 2009. I identified it then as a <[Brown Goshawk](#)> until a raptor expert recently pointed out that it was actually a <[Collared Sparrowhawk](#)>. So here is the full, corrected posting with my apologies, six years later!



Collared Sparrowhawk (Accipiter cirrocephalus)

Gluepot, South Australia, 20 April 2009

89108 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I'm still sorting through the photos that I took at Gluepot last month. One surprising visitor to the watering point near the hide was a Collared Sparrowhawk that came in to drink and bathe. She (it was rather large) spent nearly half an hour at the tank and bathed several times. Naturally, all the other traffic at the watering point came to a standstill, though I was amused to see a flock of Brown Honeyeaters becoming increasingly restless and approaching much closer than I would have expected. Eventually, she vanished as swiftly as she had appeared and things returned to normal.



Collared Sparrowhawk (Accipiter cirrocephalus)

Gluepot, South Australia, 20 April 2009

89073 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Sparrowhawk seemed very wary, particularly when preparing to bathe and looked around repeatedly as if making sure the coast was clear. It was almost as if the Queen of the Forest couldn't be seen to be doing her toilet in public and she certainly looked very undignified both when bathing, second photo, and when she emerged wet and bedraggled from the water, third photo. I was impressed by how soft and owl-like the feathers were - the original stealth attack aircraft, I suppose.



Collared Sparrowhawk (Accipiter cirrocephalus)

Gluepot, South Australia, 20 April 2009

89088 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Collared Sparrowhawks are smallish hawks, 30-40cm/12-16in long, with a wingspan to 70cm/28in. As with many birds of prey, the females are larger and this is thought to be to protect the nestlings from the males in a weak moment. The Collared Sparrowhawk is widespread in all except the driest areas of Australia and New Guinea and because of its furtive behaviour and confusion with the similar Brown Goshawk, is probably commoner than might be supposed.

The following field marks help distinguish the two species.

- The tip of the tail is rounded in the Brown Goshawk, square or notched in the Collared Sparrowhawk. This is a good field mark in flight.
- The Brown Goshawk has a ridge over the eyes which give it a fierce, 'beetle-browed' appearance.

- The Sparrowhawk looks small headed - see the the first photo.
- The Sparrowhawk has slimmer legs and toes, and the central toe is elongated - see the first photo.
- Female Goshawk is the largest; male Sparrowhawk is the smallest; male Goshawk and female Sparrowhawk overlap; so size should be used with care.

Greetings

Ian

#530 White-faced Heron 19 April 2015

This is the real bird of the week; the recent <Collared Sparrowhawk> was just a correction to an earlier one. Exotic herons, such as the <Great-billed> (Northern Australia) and the <Boat-billed> (Costa Rica) have featured as bird of the week, but, typically, I've neglected some of the common ones, so here is the best known Australian heron, the <White-faced>, to make amends. It's not as if I have to go far to photograph them: the first photo was taken almost ten years ago on Bluewater Creek near the bottom of my garden.



White-faced Heron (*Egretta novaehollandiae*)

Bluewater, NE Queensland, 29 April 2005

14434 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Nor is it because they aren't photogenic. I love watching them carefully stalking their prey with extraordinary concentration and poise, like the one in the second photo taken 15 years ago in the early days of digital photography - 'digiscoping' with a

tripod, Leica spotting scope and Coolpix camera held against the eyepiece of the scope.



White-faced Heron (*Egretta novaehollandiae*)

Lake Victoria, Point Lonsdale, Victoria, 4 November 2001

07340 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Digiscoping didn't lend itself well to action shots, but this bird came the party. Six seconds later I took a second photo, and at that very instant it struck, producing this lovely sheet of water. Digital cameras in those days had appreciable shutter lag, so you had to rely on the bird doing things serendipitously in synchronisation with the camera rather than relying on your own fast reflexes, unless you were psychic and could anticipate what the bird was about to do.



White-faced Heron (*Egretta novaehollandiae*)

Lake Victoria, Point Lonsdale, Victoria, 4 November 2001

07341 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Nor are White-faced Herons hard to find in Australasia. They occur throughout mainland Australia (except in the driest deserts), Tasmania, New Zealand and its sub-Antarctic islands, Christmas, Lord Howe and Norfolk islands, where the fourth photo of a bird in flight was taken, southern New Guinea and various islands east of the Wallace Line. It is extending range and became established in Tonga in 1988 and Fiji in 1997 and has turned up even in SE China.



White-faced Heron (*Egretta novaehollandiae*)

Slaughter Bay, Norfolk Island, 11 March 2012

140137 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The fifth photo, also in flight shows a bird apparently chasing its bat-like shadow along the beach at the entrance to Botany Bay in Sydney. This bird has very little white on the face and is probably a juvenile bird or in transition to adult plumage as juveniles have white only on the neck and not the face.



White-faced Heron (*Egretta novaehollandiae*)

Kurnell, New South Wales, 30 March 2009

85486 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I think herons and egrets took wonderful in flight holding their necks in a dogs-leg angle. It makes them look delightfully primitive and remind me of the fantastic birds in flight painted by [George Braque](#) like the one below of a Bird Passing through a Cloud: this one even has a white face. When I took up bird watching at school in the early 1960s I also became fascinated by Braque's birds - very fashionable then as he painted the one below in 1957. I did pottery at the time and painted imitations of his birds onto various rather shapeless objects.



BIRD PASSING THROUGH A CLOUD, 1957. Lithograph, 12¼" x 19¼". Ed. Galerie Maeght, Paris

See? Common birds can be very interesting. However, the lure of exotic birds remain. Joy, my sharp-eyed and -eared birding Pal in Melbourne, and I have just booked a trip to New Caledonia for the end of June. Why? New Caledonia is home to the almost mythical <Kagu>, a very special, flightless, almost heron-sized bird and it would be great to be able to bring it to you as bird of the week.

Greetings

Ian

#531 White-necked Heron 29 April 2015

Continuing last week's theme <White-faced Heron> of common - but in these pages neglected - Australian herons here is the other very widespread species, the <White-necked> or Pacific. It's not as abundant or as well-known as the White-faced, but much bigger and a striking bird with its white head and neck and slate-grey back and wings. In length it varies from 76-106cm/30-42in with wingspan to 160cm/63in.



White-necked Heron (*Ardea pacifica*)

Mary River, Northern Territory, 7 September 2009

91670 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In breeding plumage, it develops plum-coloured plumes on the back (first photo, taken at sunrise) and shoulders (second photo, taken at sunset). It's predominantly a bird of freshwater and is only rarely seen in estuaries. It's quite partial to small shallow ponds and is widespread in inland Australia when water is available, moving to more coastal areas in dry seasons. So it can turn up almost anywhere in the country. In southern Australia it breeds in Spring and Summer; in northern Australia it can breed at any time of the year depending on rainfall - the one in the second photo was photographed in mid-winter in Townsville, but the first half of 2008 was very wet in northern Australia.

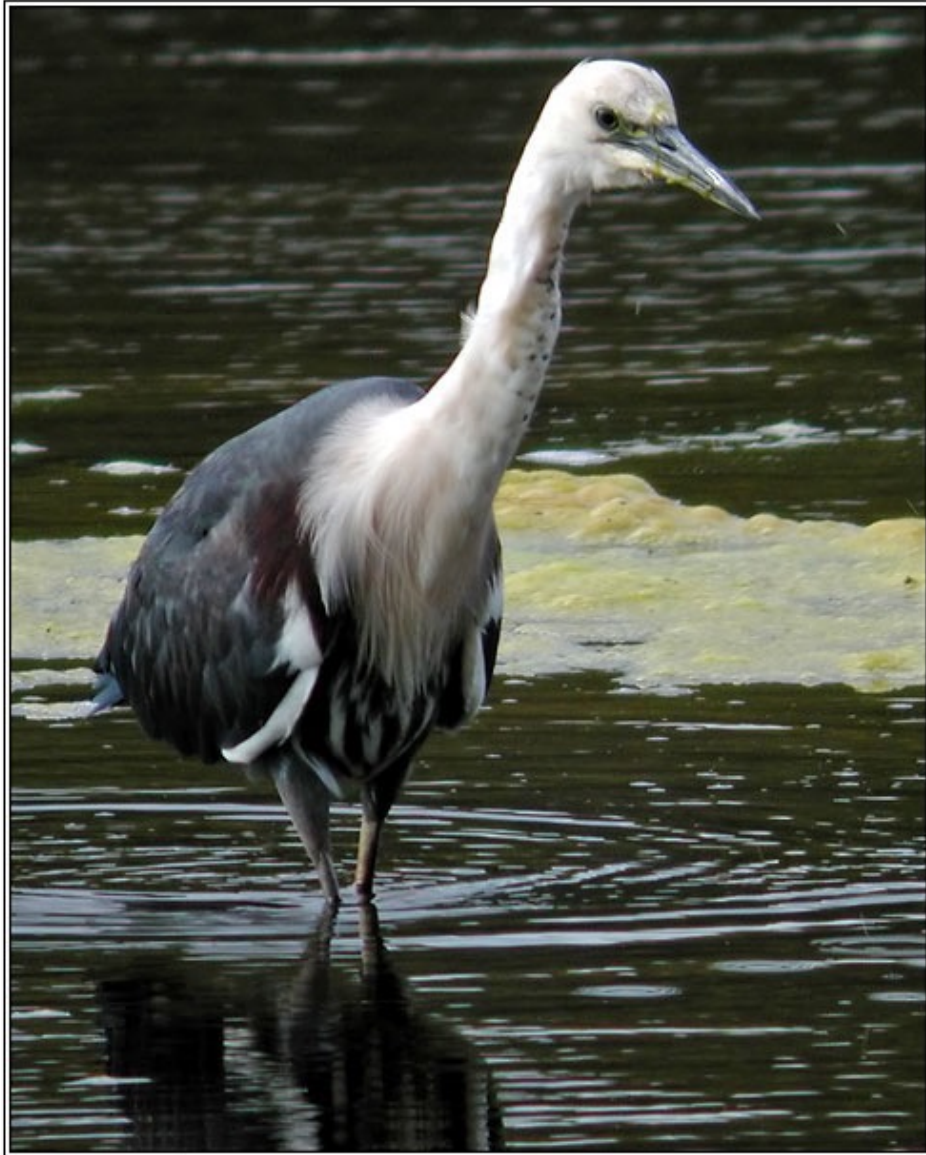


White-necked Heron (*Ardea pacifica*)

Townsville Town Common, NE Queensland, 13 July 2008

80306 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

According to the field guides, non-breeding birds have rows of grey spots on the front of the neck, like the one in the third photo. The neck is supposedly completely white in breeding plumage, but it is not unusual to see birds with both purple plumes and grey neck spots. Both the second and third photos show the white patches on the leading edge of the wing. These are obvious (and diagnostic) in flight when they look like the landing lights of a passenger aircraft.



White-necked Heron (*Ardea pacifica*)

Tower Hill, Victoria, 9 December 2001
08146 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The bird in the fourth photo was in Boulia, in far western Queensland north of Birdsville. The field guides and HBW (Handbook of Birds of the World) are vague about juvenile plumage but are supposed to have more spots on the neck than non-breeding adults and may have greyish head and neck. the one in the Boulia bird has a white head and neck with grey spots on the sides of the neck, while the bird in the fifth photo has a grey head and neck.



White-necked Heron (*Ardea pacifica*)

Boulia, NW Queensland, 17 September 2006

41873 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I assume that both of these are juveniles. Both have pale spots on the wings, but I can't find any reference to that in the field guides. I haven't got HANZAB (Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) so if anyone reading this does, I'd be grateful for any illuminating feedback on juvenile plumage.



White-necked Heron (*Ardea pacifica*)

Avalon, Victoria, 20 May 2001

02195 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The White-necked Heron breeds only on mainland Australia. It does, however, turn up regularly in Tasmania and southern New Guinea and has been recorded as a vagrant on Norfolk Island and in New Zealand.

Greetings

Ian

#532 Atherton Scrubwren 18 May 2015

I've just spent a few relaxing days camping with friends on the shores of Lake Tinaroo on the Atherton Tableland west of Cairns, so here is the eponymous <[Atherton Scrubwren](#)> a pair of which were foraging in the undergrowth on the edge of the rainforest behind the toilet block. You do of course take your camera with you everywhere, don't you?



Lake Tinaroo from Downfall Creek

This is one of about a dozen bird species that are endemic to the Wet Tropics of Northeastern Queensland. Like several others, e.g. the <Golden Bowerbird> and the <Mountain Thornbill>, it is a bird of the highland rainforest, usually found above 600m/2000ft, occasionally down to 400m/1300ft. Lake Tinaroo is at an altitude of 670m/2200ft and can be reached by the Gillies Highway from Gordonvale. This highway follows an extraordinary and interminably windy route up the escarpment from the coast, and is the only route on which I suffer from motion sickness even when I'm doing the driving. It is very scenic with spectacular views over the Goldsborough Valley, if you are feeling well enough to appreciate them.



Atherton Scrubwren (*Sericornis keri*)

Lake Tinaroo, NE Queensland, 5 May 2015

164992 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Atherton Scrubwren is probably the least distinctive of the Wet Tropics endemics, being small (13.5cm/5.3in long), brown and unobtrusive and very similar to the more widespread, slightly smaller <Large-billed Scrubwren> (third photo) found in rainforests along the east coast of Australia from Cooktown in NE Queensland almost to Melbourne. Their ranges overlap in the Wet Tropics below 750m/2500ft, the usual upper limit of the Large-billed, and the species differ in subtle differences in colour and facial pattern and foraging behaviour.



Atherton Scrubwren (*Sericornis keri*)

Lake Tinaroo, NE Queensland, 5 May 2015

164990 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The best field-marks are the difference in angle of the bill: straight in the Atherton (second photo) and bent slightly upwards in the Large-billed (third photo). The Atherton forages on or close to the ground (the one in photos one and two was about 30cm/12in above the ground), while the Large-billed is arboreal and forages on the branches and in the foliage of trees. The Atherton has a buff eye-stripe which merges with the lower part of the face and throat, has dark flanks and under-tail coverts and a yellowish wash on the breast and underside. The Large-billed is supposed to have a beady eye, but that's getting even more subtle.



Large-billed Scrubwren (*Sericornis magnirostris*)

Cassowary House, Kuranda, NE Queensland, 5 March 2009

85209 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Despite the similarities between these two species, genetic studies indicate that the Atherton Scrubwren is probably more closely related to the well-known - and easier to identify - <White-browed Scrubwren> which occurs in eastern, southern and western Australia and was also present near where we were camping.

Greetings

Ian

#533 White-browed Scrubwren 28 May 2015

I said in the last bird of the week that the <Atherton Scrubwren> was 'probably the least distinctive of the Wet Tropics Endemics'. By that I meant it was hard to identify with certainty owing to lack of distinguishing field marks and I didn't intend to imply that it was otherwise undistinguished. I'm actually very fond of scrubwrens. They are assertive little birds with lots of character, so here is the most widespread one, the <White-browed Scrubwren> by way of amends! It occurs right along the coasts of eastern, southern and western Australia from Mossman - not far north of where we were at Lake Tinaburra a few weeks ago - in far north Queensland (FNQ) to just north of Carnarvon in Western Australia. The one in the first photo was in the company of the Atherton Scrubwrens near the 'amenities' block in the campground.



White-browed Scrubwren (*Sericornis frontalis*)

Lake Tinaroo, NE Queensland, 5 May 2015

164968 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

White-browed Scrubwrens vary in plumage by location and there has been considerable disagreement among avian taxonomists over the centuries over how to divide them into species and sub-species or races. Schodde and Mason described 12 races in their authoritative *Directory of Australian Birds* (1999). However, the various races grade into each other and are often only distinguishable in the hand or museum. Criteria such as "feet pale flesh, drying *consistently pale brownish cream*, lower mandible drying variously bone to sometimes rather dusky" is not something even the most patient field worker would use.

So, it's more usual now to lump these races into 3 mainland groups and then treat the Tasmanian ones as a separate species. We'll take a clockwise trip from Tinaburra in FNQ to Cheynes Beach in southwest Western Australia to look at these, and then come back to the Tasmanian species. The females are paler, less-contrasty versions of the males, so we'll just consider males, once we've looked at the two sexes in the distinctive Queensland race, *laevigaster*. The one in the first photo is a female, while the one in the second is a male. Both sexes have pale underparts that look pale yellow or buff, strong white eyebrow extending well behind the eyes and no white line just under the eye (suborbital). The male has a strikingly black mask extending over the ear-coverts, and is, in my opinion, the smartest of the White-browed Scrubwrens and looks somewhat like a pale [Yellow-throated Scrubwren](#).



White-browed Scrubwren (*Sericornis frontalis*)

Townsville, NE Queensland, 18 October 2008

81058 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

South of the Queensland border we encounter the nominate race group, *frontalis*. This group extends all the way through New South Wales and Victoria into eastern South Australia. The one in the third photo, taken in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney, is more rufous on the back and flanks than the Queensland race, the black on the face is limited to the lores in front of the eye (the ear coverts are grey), the eyebrow fizzles out behind the eye and there is a faint suborbital white line.



White-browed Scrubwren (*Sericornis frontalis*)

Lithgow, New South Wales, 14 October 2007

59913 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The birding singing lustily in the fourth photo near Melbourne is also of the nominate group, though it looks darker overall and has even less of an eyebrow.



White-browed Scrubwren (*Sericornis frontalis*)

Ferntree Gully, Victoria, 22 May 2013

154600 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

When we get to Western Australia, we encounter the 'Spotted Scrubwren*', race *maculatus* with dark spots on the throat and breast, buffish underparts, a long eyebrow, a clear suborbital line and, like the nominate group, the black face mask limited to in front of the eye.



White-browed Scrubwren (*Sericornis frontalis*)

Cheynes Beach, SW Western Australia, 27 August 2006

38254 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The sixth photo shows the <Tasmanian one> It was first described as a separate species by Gould in 1838; lumped in with the other White-browed Scrubwrens in the 20th century and now restored to the grand status of a full species in the 21st century. In taxonomy, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, a quote from 1849, though <<Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr>> probably wasn't thinking of taxonomy at the time. He did, however, have two varieties of Dahlia and a bamboo named after him. Anyway, The Tasmanian one is very dark, though in other ways such as its faint white markings on the head it looks quite like the Victorian one in the fourth photo, though the white epaulettes are very distinct. It's also quite large by Scrubwren standards (12-14cm/4-5in in length).



Tasmanian Scrubwren (*Sericornis humilis*)

Liffey Falls, Tasmania, 9 December 2011

129180 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Scrubwrens inhabit dense undergrowth, but as long as that is provided they occur in wide variety of habitats from rainforest to scrubby heaths and are quite common. They are both vocal and curious, responding well to 'pishing' noises, so they are easier to find than their choice of habitat would suggest. They're very active, foraging near the ground, often in leaf litter for insects or other invertebrates. They breed in pairs or groups consisting of a breeding pair and helper birds, an arrangement that seems remarkably widespread across Australian bird families.

I'm off the western Queensland on Saturday. Hopefully, I'll have some interesting dry country birds for you but don't expect anything for another couple of weeks.

Greetings

Ian

* January 2019: the <Spotted Scrubwren> has just being granted specific status by the IOC: *Sericornis maculatus*.

#534 Galah 6 June 2015

I'm back home after cutting short the camping trip in Western Queensland owing to a foot infection which made both camping and walking difficult. The foot is responding well to treatment at home in preparation for the New Caledonian trip in two weeks

time. So I didn't returned with lots photos of dry country species for you but I did get treated to a fine display by an extrovert male <Galah> who came along to distract me while I was putting up my tent in Hughenden.

He wasn't the only distractor; the camp site know-all gave me a lecture on the order in which to assemble my tent. The Galah was more welcome and I encouraged him, unlike the human, verbally. You can imagine the conversation going a bit like this.

'I've heard that you bring birds fame and fortune with your Bird of the Week email. Can I be your bird of the week?'

'Sorry Galah was BotW in 2006 (below). I like to have a different species each time.'



Galah (Eolophus roseicapillus)

Clermont, Central Queensland, 2 March 2006

C30797 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

'Ah, pleeeeeease!!!' (below)



Galah (*Cacatua roseicapilla*)

Hughenden, Northern Queensland, 31 May 2015

165016 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

'Well, okay, we'll see. But you'll have to do something spectacular to make it worth my while.'

'How about this? I'll look cute and demented at the same time.'



Galah (*Cacatua roseicapilla*)

Hughenden, Northern Queensland, 31 May 2015

165030 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

'Mmmmh. Not bad but the juvenile Galah did that in 2006 and simultaneously begged for food.'

'I can hang upside-down and look at you at the same time without losing my grip.'



Galah (*Cacatua roseicapilla*)

Hughenden, Northern Queensland, 31 May 2015

165049 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

'That's better! Anything else?'

'I can hang upside-down with just one claw, no safety net, raise my crest **and** nibble my other foot simultaneously without falling off.'



Galah (*Cacatua roseicapilla*)

Hughenden, Northern Queensland, 31 May 2015

165058 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

'Now that's impressive: you win. You can be the next bird of the week.'

'Whoopee, thank you!!! Happy camping!'



Galah (*Cacatua roseicapilla*)

Hughenden, Northern Queensland, 31 May 2015

165062 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

At that point the camp-site know-all came along.

The Galah said: 'Oh no! I'm out of here!' and flew away. Despite their name, Galahs aren't stupid.



Galah (*Cacatua roseicapilla*)

Pentland, Northern Queensland, 25 June 2011

116930 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Just in case you are wondering why I said the bird was a male, it's all in the eyes. Males have dark brown irises, females have red ones as in the photo above taken on a different occasion at Pentland not that far from Hugenden. This is also the case in [Major Mitchell's Cockatoo](#).

Greetings

Ian.

#535 Diamond Dove 15 June 2015

Having cut the recent camping trip short, I didn't come back with the anticipated collection of photos of dry country birds, but here is one such species, the [Diamond Dove](#), from earlier trips as compensation. This delightful, tiny dove is found in arid country throughout mainland Australia. It depends on the availability of water and moves long distances in time of drought. It's comparable in length to its close relative the [Peaceful Dove](#) (both about 19-24cm/7.5-9.5in) but has a relatively much longer tail and smaller body. So it tips the scales at a mere 28-43g/1-1.5 compared with 41-66g/1.5-2.3 for the Peaceful Dove.



Diamond Dove (*Geopelia cuneata*)

Bowra, Cunnamulla SW Queensland, 20 April 2014

157905 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

You can see how small it is in the second photo where it is drinking with finches just after dawn - being a late riser I can't help boasting when I get up early. There are two points of interest in this photo. The finches in question are Gouldian - there had to be a good reason for me to get up in the dark at 5:30am in Kununurra and drive 100km to Wyndham. There are more photos of the Gouldians [here](#).



Diamond Dove (*Geopelia cuneata*)

Wyndham, NW Western Australia, 19 September 2009

93352 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The other point is that the dove is demonstrating the drinking skill of members of the Pigeon and Dove family, the <[Columbidae](#)>. They drink by sucking and swallowing and don't have to first sip and then tip their heads back like almost all other birds do. Apparently, they can drink six times faster in this way, maybe a useful survival strategy in a very vulnerable situation. Incidentally, I also photographed a <[drinking Crested Dove at the same spot](#)> 15 minutes later, by which time the finches had left.

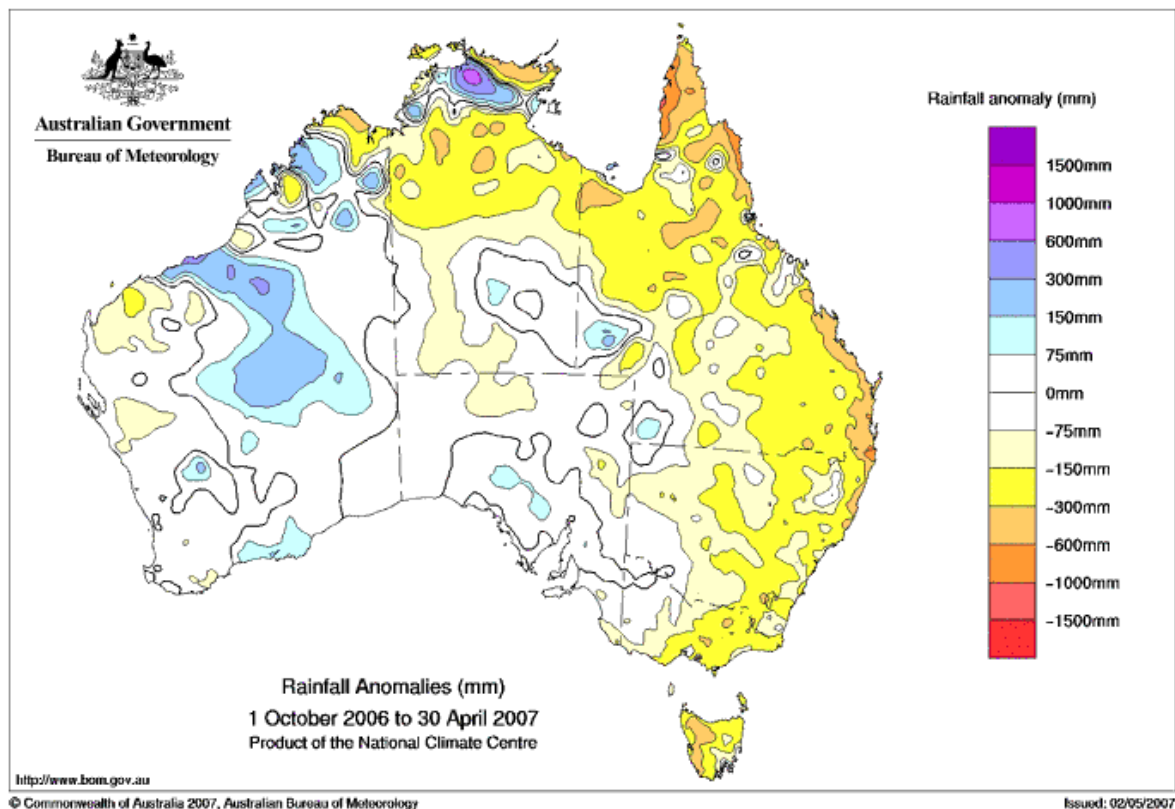


Diamond Dove (*Geopelia cuneata*)

Toonpan, NE Queensland, 27 August 2007

58260 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Diamond Doves have strikingly red eye-rings, quite unlike the blue-grey ones of Peaceful Doves, and small white spots on the wing coverts which give them their common name. The eye-rings are red in adults, and although those of males are supposed to be larger and brighter than those of females, and females are supposed to have browner plumage, I can't find any consistent differences. The one in the third photo has a brownish wash on the wings and a very striking eye-ring, which would make it trans-gender according to those criteria. That photo was taken just south of Townsville. 2007 was a very dry year in eastern Australia (see below) and at such times, Diamond Doves may show up quite close to the coast.



The bird in the fourth photo is a juvenile and has not yet developed the red eye-ring and red legs of the adult. The barring on the head and breast reveals its close relationship to the Peaceful Dove, but note that it has the diagnostic white spots of the Diamond Dove on the wing coverts.



Diamond Dove (*Geopelia cuneata*)

Cloncurry District, NW Queensland, 24 May 2006

33444 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Regarding the Scientific name, *Geopelia* means 'ground dove' in Greek and refers to the feeding habits of member of this genus. Diamond Doves feed predominantly on grass seeds and usually very small ones at that. The specific name *cuneata* means 'wedge-shaped', coming from the Latin *cuneus* meaning a 'wedge'. I suppose it must refer to the pointed tail, but it isn't what I usually think of as a wedge-shaped tail, compared with the wedge-tailed <[eagle](#)> and <[shearwater](#)>.



Needless to say, I couldn't resist Googling deeper into the related word 'cuneiform', which refers to the wedge-shaped characters used mainly on clay tablets in ancient Mesopotamia and Persia. This led me to the website of the <<[Pennsylvanian Museum](#)>> which gives you the opportunity to write your initials as a monogram 'like a Babylonian'. The above image shows the result for 'DOVE', clearly not just any dove of course but a cuneiform ground dove.

Greetings

Ian

#536 Great Crested Grebe 20 June 2015

I'm going to weave a tangled web of French connections around this bird of the week, but the first and most important is that in honour of Loïc, my great nephew and first child of my niece Jeannine and her husband Carlos who live in Strasbourg in Alsace. He was due today, but arrived safe and well four days early.

Clearly, a bird photographed in France was required but the choice was very limited: <Carrion Crow>, <Common Coot> or <Great Crested Grebe>. The latter was bird of the week in July 2007, so I toyed with the idea of Coot but, given that in the British Isles people say 'you silly coot' in the same tone that Australian say 'you silly galah' I decided that coot was better saved for a non-dedicated bird of the week.



Great Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*)

Strasbourg, Alsace, France, 6 October 2014

160619 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

So here is an elegant grebe in non-breeding plumage in a park near where my niece lives in Strasbourg last October. She took my sister Gillian and I there to look for some <White Storks> that had been nesting there, but they had already left for the winter so the grebes and coots attracted my attention instead. If my sums are correct in working back from today's date, little Loïc would have been with us too, though probably not much older than the egg in the nest in the second photo. This egg was

probably freshly laid, as Great Crested Grebes usually lay 3 or 4 eggs. Maybe it arrived early too, as the parent is busy adding nesting material to the structure.



Great Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*)

Lake Alexandrina, South Island, New Zealand, 11 Nov 2011 121821 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This nest was on Lake Alexandrina on the South Island of New Zealand, so it's apparent that this species has a huge range extending from Ireland in the West and all the way through Eurasia to Australasia and in northern and southern Africa. It is however absent from the tropical regions of Africa and various tropical areas of Asia such as Indonesia.



Great Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*)

Lake Alexandrina, South Island, New Zealand, 11 Nov 2011 121825 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The third photo shows one of the New Zealand birds in full breeding plumage with the elongated crest and head plumes that give it scientific (*cristatus*), English and French name Grèbe Huppé. I'll come back to huppé later. The 2007 bird of the week photos were of some breeding birds in Portugal and here is another one from that series: proud parent with two gorgeous striped youngsters. As this posting is celebrating a new family, I'd like to think that the photo is prophetic and that Loïc can look forward to a lovely sibling in due course.



Great Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*)

Quinta do Lago, The Algarve, Portugal, 2 June 2007

53416 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Great Crested Grebes mostly feed on fish, quite large ones at that, but this one Portugese one, fifth photo, has seized this hapless frog, whose expression seems a rather sad combination of pleading for help and accepting its fate.



Great Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*)

Quinta do Lago, The Algarve, Portugal, 2 June 2007

53276 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Another French connection is that I'm on a flight to New Caledonia and had thought that I would be on French territory when Loïc arrived, but he decided not to wait but I will try and skype the happy trio from Noumea.

I mentioned a few weeks ago, that our primary target is the very special Kagu, a rare, crested pigeon-sized terrestrial species endemic to New Caledonia. It's taxonomically special too, being the only member of its family (Rhynchochetidae) and belong to an order that has only one distant relative, the Sunbittern of South America (according to Birdlife International).

The Kagu is crested too, so it's French name is - you've guessed it, go to the top of the class - Kagou Huppé. Huppé is slang in French for upper crust, smart, posh which seems highly appropriate. So, as usual I'm relying on your spiritual and moral support to produce un autre oiseau huppé for the next bird of the week. Joy and I have booked a guide at Rivière Bleue National Park next Tuesday, its main breeding locality and pride and joy of the park.

Forty one minutes to go before we reach Noumea.

Greetings

Ian

#537 Kagu Episode One 5 July 2015

Well **mission accomplie** thanks to your moral and spiritual support, so here is the iconic <Kagu> of New Caledonia after a great trip there. We went to Rivière Bleue national park about 90min drive west of the capital Noumea, meeting our excellent guide Jean-Marc Meriot at the park entrance at 7:00am. He took us straight to a Kagu territory where we had a wonderful time with these strange and fascinating birds. They were bigger than I'd expected being 50-55cm/20-22in long.



Kagu (*Rhynochetos jubatus*)

Rivière Bleue, New Caledonia, 23 June 2015

165568 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The first one we saw was a very shy juvenile running away through the forest so Joy and I were a bit afraid that we might have difficulty getting decent photos. We needn't have worried as we soon encountered a family party only too willing to join in the fun, though poor light in the rainforest was a bit of a problem. It had been very wet on the previous couple of days so it was very wet underfoot, or around beak and face perhaps if you're a Kagu and probe in the earth for your food.

Adult Kagus have very long crests that droop down their back or over their wings. There's some disagreement about differences between the sexes in the literature, but Guy Dutson in his *Birds of Melanesia* says that the females have fine barring on the upper wing. If that's the case, the bird in the first photo would be a male and the one in the female in the second. Juveniles have barring too, but much more, which confuses the situation slightly.



Kagu (*Rhynochetos jubatus*)

Rivière Bleue, New Caledonia, 23 June 2015

165553 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Kagus are flightless but still have fairly long wings used for balance when rushing around and in threat displays when they show the striking black, grey and white barring on the flight feathers. The best we could get out of them was a throaty hiss when we startled them and brief views of the wings when flapped in motion, but can you see the barring just showing in the bird in the second and third photos (same individual). The one in the third photo has just grabbed an earth worm. These form an important part of the diet when the soil is damp, but they also eat lots of other invertebrates and small vertebrates such as lizards and mice. Apparently they can consume the millipedes without ill effects that other birds avoid because of the noxious substances they exude.



Kagu (*Rhynochetos jubatus*)

Rivière Bleue, New Caledonia, 23 June 2015

165565 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Kagus form strong pair bonds that can last for years and vigorously defend territories of about 20 hectares or 50 acres in extent. They lay a single large egg in a rough nest on the ground and the young birds can stay in the parental territory for a year or two. Both adults share incubation and feeding of the young bird.



Kagu (*Rhynochetos jubatus*) & Ian

Rivière Bleue, New Caledonia, 23 June 2015

1341 © Joy Tansey

This family was so tame that eventually we gave up using our expensive Canon gear - the birds were often too close to focus with a telephoto lens - and resorted to our phones. Joy took the fourth photo of me taking the fifth photo with my iPhone and I was startled to discover that the quality was nearly as good as with the Canon and the iPhone performed better in poor light. Smart phones have come a long way. I even took some videos and I'll share one with you in due course.



Kagu (*Rhynochetos jubatus*)

Rivière Bleue, New Caledonia, 23 June 2015

i00390 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Kagus are rated as endangered, though recent conservation efforts have improved the situation. They suffer from predation by dogs, pigs and rats and Captain Cook started the rot in 1774 when he introduced dogs. They've also suffered from logging of rainforest and fragmentation of their habitat by clearing. The population reached a low of perhaps 600-700 birds in 1991 but has increased since and is thought to be about 1500 now as a result of predator control and captive breeding and reintroduction.



Conservation is helped by its iconic status and it is widely used as symbol of New Caledonia. Here it is on the 1000 French Pacific Franc note (about 12 AUD), which of course we called the Kagu. This image shows the threat display that we failed to see properly or photograph.

The bird to its left on the note is one of the Horned Parakeets and I'll have more to say about them in the near future. In fact one of these nearly upstaged the Kagu as photographic bird of the trip and it was only a very delightful encounter with a Kagu family in a different national park on our last full day that restored the Kagu to #1 status. So I'm going to break with tradition and have the same species as bird of the week twice running so that I can give that final chance meeting due space. The Kagu was, after all, the main reason for our visit and I haven't had time yet to touch on its very interesting taxonomy.

Greetings

Ian

#538 Kagu Episode Two 13 July 2015

Before, I forget again, here is the email of our Jean-Marc our guide at Rivière Bleue that I meant to include last week: jean-marc.meriot@province-sud.nc. He works as a ranger in the park, is very knowledgeable, speaks good English and worked very

hard to get us the birds we wanted. The fee was 2000 CFP per hour for both of us (about 24 AUD). We had great fun with him.



Giant Tree Fern (*Cyathea intermedia*)
Parc des Grandes Fougères, New Caledonia

Another terrific national park that we visited was <<[Les Grandes Fougères](#)>> (or <<[here](#)>> if you speak French) a huge national park that was established as recently as 2008. Les Grandes Fougères means the Great Ferns and refers to the Giant Tree Fern, endemic to New Caledonia which can reach a height of 30m. It's claimed to be the tallest tree fern in the world, despite its scientific name (above), though it may have a rival in the shape of another very tall one in Vanuatu, but I haven't been able to track that one down.

Parc des Grandes Fougères is inland from La Foa, which is on the east coast highway about 70km north of the International Airport, which is itself about 45km north of the capital Nouméa. The road is good and the park is easy to find. There are

well-signed walking tracks and you can get a map from the ticket office at the entrance. We saw a juvenile <Kagu> making a fast getaway on our first visit there and we returned for a second visit on our last full day in New Caledonia.

On that second visit, at lunchtime we got chatting to a local family who shared the only picnic table in the vicinity. They were showing the park to their grandparents visiting from France, and excitedly recounted their encounter with a pair of Kagus at the next spot on our itinerary, a Banyan tree where there was a T-junction on the walking track near a stream.



Kagu (*Rhynochetos jubatus*)

Parc des Grandes Fougères, New Caledonia, 28 June 2015 166858 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

We knew by then that Kagus are territorial and that their territories are usually about 20 hectares. So we searched in the region of the Banyan along the three tracks. We were on the third track not on our original itinerary approaching a cut-out log that had fallen across the track when a family of kagus going in the opposite direction jumped up onto the log and, seeing us, froze. The first kagu photo shows Ma on the cut out part, Pa on the left of the photo and Junior barely visible under Ma's tail.



Kagu (*Rhynochetos jubatus*)

Parc des Grandes Fougères, New Caledonia, 28 June 2015 166860 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The second kagu photo shows, Pa and Ma still like statues and Junior, still unaware, leaping onto the log without a care in the world. I said 'Oh my God!', they looked as if they said "Oh mon Dieu!" and we all just looked at each other. These photos are full frame using only 180mm of the 100-400mm zoom so you can imagine how close we were.



Kagu (*Rhynochetos jubatus*)

Parc des Grandes Fougères, New Caledonia, 28 June 2015 166865 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The next photo shows Ma, still otherwise motionless, turning to Pa and saying 'Alors????!!!!'. The kagu consensus seemed to be to stick to plan A, more or less, and they eventually headed down the hill to the stream. We followed them there and both we and the kagus met up with some other hikers - be warned, the park is quite popular on Sundays.



Kagu (*Rhynochetos jubatus*)

Parc des Grandes Fougères, New Caledonia, 28 June 2015 166974 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Here is Pa, fourth kagu photo, contemplating crossing the stream while the fifth photo shows Junior (note the barring on the wings) crossing back across the stream and having a drink in the general confusion. I got the impression that while cats lick their fur to avoid looking indecisive, kagus drink.



Kagu (*Rhynochetos jubatus*)

Parc des Grandes Fougères, New Caledonia, 28 June 2015 166958 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

More confusion was to follow, this time caused by another kagu. Pa tried to lead Junior past us to a quieter spot further down the stream away from the tracks, when he (Pa) got distracted by an intruder, abandoned Junior and confronted the other male. I just happened to be taking an iPhone video of Pa when this happened and I've posted it on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k7Lyg2iewho>. The last kagu photo shows Pa and the intruder doing their threat display which consists of the two birds circling each other at close quarters with their wings hanging loose and their crests erected.

After that, we decided it was time to leave them in peace. The whole encounter lasted about 40 minutes and it was a fitting climax to our visit to New Caledonia. The photo of the displaying kagus was one of the last photos that I took on the trip.



Kagu (*Rhynochetos jubatus*)

Parc des Grandes Fougères, New Caledonia, 28 June 2015 166992 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Kagus aren't just great birds in their own right, they are also of great taxonomic and bio-geographical interest. The Kagu is the single member of its family, the Rhynochetidae. It's only rather distant living relative appears to be the Sun Bittern of South America, also the member of a single-species family the Eurypigidae. These two families used to be included in a heterogeneous collection of birds in the Crane order (Gruiformes), but recent DNA studies <<[Hackett et al 2008](#)>> have led to their elevation to their own two-species order the Eurypigiformes. This makes them very distinguished - the other 39 or so orders of birds contain about 10,000 species.

The traditional bio-geographical explanation for this is that both species had a Gondwana ancestor that existed on New Caledonia when it separated from Gondwana 80Mya (million years ago). Recent studies, see <<[Grandcolas et al 2008](#)>>, indicate that New Caledonia has probably been completely submerged since then and all terrestrial plants and animals have colonised it in the past 37 million years. If this is correct, then either the simple Sun Bittern - Kagu relationship is incorrect or their ancestors found some other way to get to where they are now, such as island hopping with extinctions obliterating their tracks. The mystery remains...

Greetings

Ian

#539 Horned Parakeet 27 July 2015

The Kagu was naturally top of our target list in New Caledonia being the most bizarre in appearance, behaviour, taxonomy and general curiosity value. Second on my list and I think third on Joy's were the horned parakeets of Grande Terre (the main island) and Ouvéa, one of the Loyalty Island off the east coast of Grande Terre. These birds used to be treated as a single species, but have recently been split into the <Horned> and Ouvéa Parakeets respectively. I mentioned in a previous post [#537](#) that the <Kagu> nearly got upstaged as bird of the trip by an individual Horned Parakeet at Mont Khogis near Noumea, so here is the bird in question and the interaction that we had with it, a memorable birding experience by any measure.

On an earlier visit to the Inn (Auberge) at Mont Khogis we'd had brief views of three Horned Parakeets flying across the road and we had been told by Serge, the owner of the Inn, that the parakeets came in the late afternoon to feed on the Lavender trees in front of the building. On our visit to Rivière Blue we also tried with little success to photograph a back-lit one feeding in dense foliage right above us, a good situation for chiropractic business but not much else. All was quiet at the Inn on our second visit, so we started on the nearby rainforest walk until Roman, one of the staff, came charging after us with the welcome news that a parakeet had arrived.



Horned Parakeet (*Eunymphicus cornutus*)

Mont Khogis, New Caledonia, 25 June 2015
166361 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

We set ourselves up very cautiously at an unobtrusive distance from the tree and started taking remote photos of the parakeet and very gradually working our way towards it. I mean gradually: Joy and I had each taken about a hundred more distant shots before the first one in this series, above. As you can see the bird was very aware of our presence and looked as if it could take off at any time.



Horned Parakeet (*Eunymphicus cornutus*)

Mont Khogis, New Caledonia, 25 June 2015

166398 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

We moved slowly closer and the bird started to look more relaxed. In the second photo it is showing its skill at perching on one foot, holding a little bunch of Lavender fruit in the other, munching on them and watching us at the same time. We started to get the impression that it was actually enjoying the attention and showing off for our benefit, third photo.



Horned Parakeet (*Eunymphicus cornutus*)

Mont Khogis, New Caledonia, 25 June 2015

166413 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Eventually, we worked our way up to the tree and around the other side so that we could photograph it in the sunlight a little over an hour before sunset with the mountains in the background. The bird munched on regardless and seemed completely unworried by our approach. It seemed to have an extraordinary appetite. We reckoned that it ate about 700 of the fruit in the time that we were there. It wouldn't take too long for a small flock to complete strip the tree.



Horned Parakeet (*Eunymphicus cornutus*)

Mont Khogis, New Caledonia, 25 June 2015

166503 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

They're referred to as 'horned' rather than 'crested' as the feathers of the horn are permanently erect. There should be two horns, but one of this bird's may have been broken off. They are probably more than just decorative as they nest in hollows in trees and the horns seem to be used to sense the space, or lack of it, above the head. That at least is the suggestion made for the similarly equipped but very different <[Crested Auklet](#)>. It nest in holes in coastal boulders and being able to avoid cracking your skull against rocks would seem to be very desirable.



Horned Parakeet (*Eunymphicus cornutus*)

Mont Khogis, New Caledonia, 25 June 2015

166542 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

We can become blasé about even the most riveting spectacles. Three hundred photos each later, here is Joy relaxing under the tree and the parakeet, top centre, looking in the opposite direction. It was still there when we decided it was time to leave but it called after us as if sorry to see us go. By the time we walked around to the car park below the inn, it had left too and joined a couple of other parakeets in another Lavender tree. Joy and I agreed that this was one of the most beautiful parrots that we had encountered.



Joy with Horned Parakeet

Mont Khogis, New Caledonia, 25 June 2015
 166563 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The horned parakeets belong to the sub-family of Australasian parrots called broad-tailed parrots. The best known members of this group (Playtcerini) are the Australian Rosellas, Ringnecks and Mulga Parrot and its relatives. The group also includes the Shining Parrots of Fiji and the *Cyanorhamphus* Parakeets of various islands of the southwest Pacific including Norfolk Island, New Caledonia, New Zealand and its sub-Antarctic islands and, formerly, Lord Howe Island and Macquarie Island. Most parrots are fairly sedentary, but these island ones seem to be quite good at island hopping, maybe helped by the cyclones that move generally in an easterly or southeasterly direction in this part of the world.

The Horned Parakeet is listed as Vulnerable with an estimated population on Grande Terre of between 5000 and 10,000 individuals. The Ouvéa Parakeet has a limited distribution on the northern end of this small island (about 40km long) and is listed as

Endangered. Recent estimates of the population are about 2000 individuals and it is thought to be increasing. We did, of course, go to Ouvéa later in our stay...

I had some interesting correspondence on giant tree ferns after the last Kagu bird of the week. The Guinness Book of Records has a Norfolk Island *Cyathea brownii* species as the tallest and I received photos of a very tall one in Vanuatu and of a carving made from another one.

Greetings

Ian

#540 Crow Honeyeater 30 July 2015

I mentioned last week that the <[Horned Parakeet](#)> was second on my wanted list for New Caledonia but probably third on Joy's. I knew that number two for Joy, after the Kagu, was this week's species, the <[Crow Honeyeater](#)>, chosen by her for its scarcity as it is the rarest of the surviving New Caledonian endemics. I'm excluding the four critically endangered/probably extinct endemics: NC (New Caledonian) Rail (last definite record 1890), NC Lorikeet (1860), NC Nightjar (1939) and NC Owlet-nightjar (possible sight record 1998).

Current estimates of the population of Crow Honeyeater are as low as 250 individuals, based on the density of 18 known pairs in a recent study in Rivière Bleue. Some think this is an overestimate and the population is thought to be continuing to decline. The reasons for this are uncertain with loss of habitat and introduced rats being proposed. It's preferred habitat is primary rainforest but it is now absent from areas of apparently suitable habitat and its smaller Fijian relative, the Giant Honeyeater *Gymnomyza viridis* is apparently unaffected by rats. So there may be other factors involved that are not understood.



Crow Honeyeater (*Gymnomyza aubryana*)

Rivière Bleue, New Caledonia, 23 June 2015

165809 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In any case, I hadn't really expected to see it so it didn't make my seriously wanted list - I try to avoid unreasonable expectations to prevent disappointment. But our guide Jean Marc Meriot wasn't going to be discouraged by such pessimism and, after we had had our fill of Kagus, worked very hard indeed to find one.



Crow Honeyeater (*Gymnomyza aubryana*)

Rivière Bleue, New Caledonia, 23 June 2015

165827 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Eventually, after lunch this very obliging bird appeared suddenly and perched in full view on an uncluttered perch near the road through the dense forest and posed for photographs. Unlike the Horned Parakeet, it was a brief encounter, but the bird displayed a number of poses in that time including a wing stretch, second photo, and an apparent wave, third photo.



Crow Honeyeater (*Gymnomyza aubryana*)

Rivière Bleue, New Caledonia, 23 June 2015

165820 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This is a huge honeyeater, and as far as I can ascertain vies with the <Yellow Wattlebird> of Tasmania as the world's largest. Length varies from at 35-42.5cm/ 14-17in with males being larger and recorded at 211-284g/7.4-10oz and two females at 152g/5.4oz and 159g/5.6oz. This compares with the longer-tailed Yellow Wattlebird with males ranging from 44-50cm/17-20in and 135-260g/4.8-9.2oz and females 37-43cm/15-17in and 105-190g/3.7-6.7. So, I'd declare the Crow Honeyeater the winner as the heaviest, and the Yellow Wattlebird as the winner in the length stakes.

Incidentally, the 'Giant' Honeyeater of Fiji is a mere 25-31cm/10-12in and similar in size to the only other close relative of the Crow Honeyeater, the Mao of Samoa (*Gymnomyza samoensis*). Neither the Giant Honeyeater nor the Moa is black and neither has facial wattles, so the Crow Honeyeater is quite special. The bird we saw had red wattles, but they can be yellowish, while the feet are pinkish-yellow and juveniles lack wattles.

It makes me sad to write this as its future looks rather bleak. So, I hope the bird in the third photo is just pausing in mid-itch - it had been been itching its ear a moment earlier - and not waving goodbye on behalf of its kind. To end on a brighter note, there are about nearly 20 other New Caledonian endemics that are doing rather better, and several others that are endemic to New Caledonian and Vanuatu, so New Caledonia's record is fairly good compared with many other islands in the Pacific. We got photos of nearly all of these, so I'll have more to say about them in the future.

Greetings

Ian

#541 Yellow-bellied Robin 7 August 2015

If your familiar with Australian birds you might assume - initially - that this photo was taken in an Australian rainforest, though you might have trouble pinning down the actual species.



Yellow-bellied Robin (*Microeca/Eopsaltria flaviventris*)

Rivière Bleue, New Caledonia, 23 June 2015

165628 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Its dumpy shape and short tail suggested strongly to me the <Pale-yellow Robin> (*Tregellasio capito*) of coastal eastern Australia, second photo, but the colour pattern on the breast is more like the Western Yellow Robin (*Eopsaltria griseogularis*) of coastal southwestern Australia (no photo, sorry). It's behaviour was very like that of the Pale-yellow Robin, often perching at precipitous angles on steep branches on the vertical trunks of trees.



Pale-yellow Robin (*Tregellasio capito*)

Paluma, NE Queensland, Australia, 26 June 2006

35681 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In fact I assumed that the <Yellow-bellied Robin> was in the same genus as the Pale-Yellow (*Tregellasio*) and was surprised to find later that it was either in the same genus as the <Eastern> and Western Yellow Robins (*Eopsaltria*) or in the process of being moved to *Microeca*, the genus that includes the <Jacky Winter>, the <Lemon-bellied> and <Yellow-legged> Flycatchers or Flyrobins as the purists would have, being Australasian Robins. The reason for the move is based on genetic studies <<Loynes et al , 2009>>*.



Yellow-bellied Robin (*Microeca/Eopsaltria flaviventris*)

Rivière Bleue, New Caledonia, 23 June 2015

165619 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The fourth photo shows the Lemon-bellied Flycatcher/Flyrobin for comparison; it featured as bird of the week almost exactly ten years ago.



Lemon-bellied Flycatcher (Microeca flavigaster)

Blaewater, North Queensland, 30 June 2004

CO7776 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

When we were in New Caledonia, I was intrigued by the call of the Yellow-bellied (Fly)robin. It didn't sound like the Pale-yellow Robin or the any of the Yellow Robins, all of which have rather monotonous repeated calls. The Yellow-bellied sounded rather like the rhythmic 'squeaky bicycle wheel' songs of the unrelated Gerygones. It does, however, sound rather like that of the Lemon-bellied Flycatcher/Flyrobin, which supports the genetic analysis and the subsequent taxonomic switch. If you want to compare them, you can do so here <<<http://www.xeno-canto.org/species/Microeca-flavigaster>>> and <<http://www.xeno-canto.org/species/Microeca-flaviventris>>.

Both these web pages show distribution maps, so it would be interesting to speculate whether the ancestors of the Yellow-bellied got to New Caledonia from New Guinea or from Australia. Either way they'd either have had to do some island hopping or got

carried across by one of the many cyclones that track from east to west across the southwestern Pacific.



Yellow-bellied Robin (*Microeca/Eopsaltria flaviventris*)

Rivière Bleue, New Caledonia, 23 June 2015

165624 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Anyway, enough about taxonomy and back to the original point about similarities between the birds of Australia and those of New Caledonia. So far, the birds of the week have dealt with the more unusual ones that represent either families - the <Kagu> - or genera - <Horned Parakeet>, <Crow Honeyeater> - not found in Australia. Most of the other endemic species have counterparts in the same genus in Australia. That had its own fascination coming across familiar-looking but different species but we were left in no doubt that we were still in the Australasian ecozone.

To handle this on the Birdway website, the original Australian section - which became Australia and New Zealand after 2012 - is now becoming the Australasian section and I've put a <map of the ecozone> on the pages of the Australasian Alphabetic and Taxonomic Indices to show this.

I've more or less finished putting the New Caledonian bird photos on the website. Here are links to some species with Australian counterparts that probably won't feature as bird of the week that may be of interest:

- <Long-tailed Triller>
- <New Caledonian Parakeet>
- <Grey-eared Honeyeater>
- <New Caledonian Friarbird>

- <[New Caledonian Whistler](#)>
- <[Fan-tailed Gerygone](#)>
- <[Melanesian Flycatcher](#)>
- <[Streaked Fantail](#)>

Greetings

Ian

* Taxonomic Note 2018. The confusion gets worse: Birdlife International have left this species in *Eopsaltria*; IOC still has it in *Microeca*; HBW (Handbook of Birds of the World) has moved it to a new monotypic genus *Cryptomicroeca* in the same subfamily as *Microeca* based on recent phylogenetic study (Christidis et al 2012, Boles 2018).

#542 Goliath Imperial-Pigeon 17 August 2015

A characteristic sound of montane forests in New Caledonia is the far-carrying call of this splendid pigeon, the <[Goliath or New Caledonian Imperial Pigeon](#)>. The tone is similar to someone blowing in a (large) bottle but the rhythm accelerates like the sound of a table-tennis ball being dropped on a table. Needless to say, we started calling it the ping-pong pigeon. We first heard them in the dense forests of Rivière Bleue, but had trouble actually seeing any apart from one that flew off from feeding on Pandanus fruit. We eventually tracked this one through the forest and found it putting on a display.



Goliath Imperial Pigeon (*Ducula goliath*)

Rivière Bleue, New Caledonia, 23 June 2015

165799 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The display is similar to that of the <domestic pigeon>, alternating between puffing out the crop to show the silvery-tipped bifurcated feathers to best advantage (first photo) and bowing (second photo). The head, upperparts and breast are a steely grey while the breast is a rich rufous colour and the vent pale. The iris is a vivid orange red. With a length of up to 51cm/20in and weighing up to 720g/1.6lb, this is a huge pigeon, which unfortunately makes it good to eat. For comparison the <Torresian (Pied) Imperial Pigeon> of northern and northeastern Australia measures up to 44cm in length and 550g in weight.



Goliath Imperial Pigeon (*Ducula goliath*)

Rivière Bleue, New Caledonia, 23 June 2015

165802 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It is endemic to the main island of New Caledonia (Grande Terre) and the Isle of Pines. The population has suffered from habitat loss and hunting, so it remains common only in protected areas and is currently listed as Near Threatened. After our hard work finding it in Rivière Bleue we were amused to find one on perched in the open on a power line beside the road to Mount Koghi two days later, third photo. We also heard several and photographed one at Les Grandes Fougères.



Goliath Imperial Pigeon (*Ducula goliath*)

Mont Kohgi, New Caledonia, 25 June 2015

166159 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The subject of each bird of the week is usually a species that hasn't featured previously. This tends to mean that I don't get to share with you new photos of previous subjects. So I've decided to include random photos from time to time, such as this one of a <Noisy Pitta>. I was contacted by a neighbour recently with a wonderful, well-watered garden in which this Pitta has recently taken up residence. Pittas are such beautiful birds and I like this photo because of the way the bird is framed by the leaves behind it.



Noisy Pitta (*Pitta versicolor*)

Bluewater, NE Queensland, 24 July 2015

167075 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Greetings

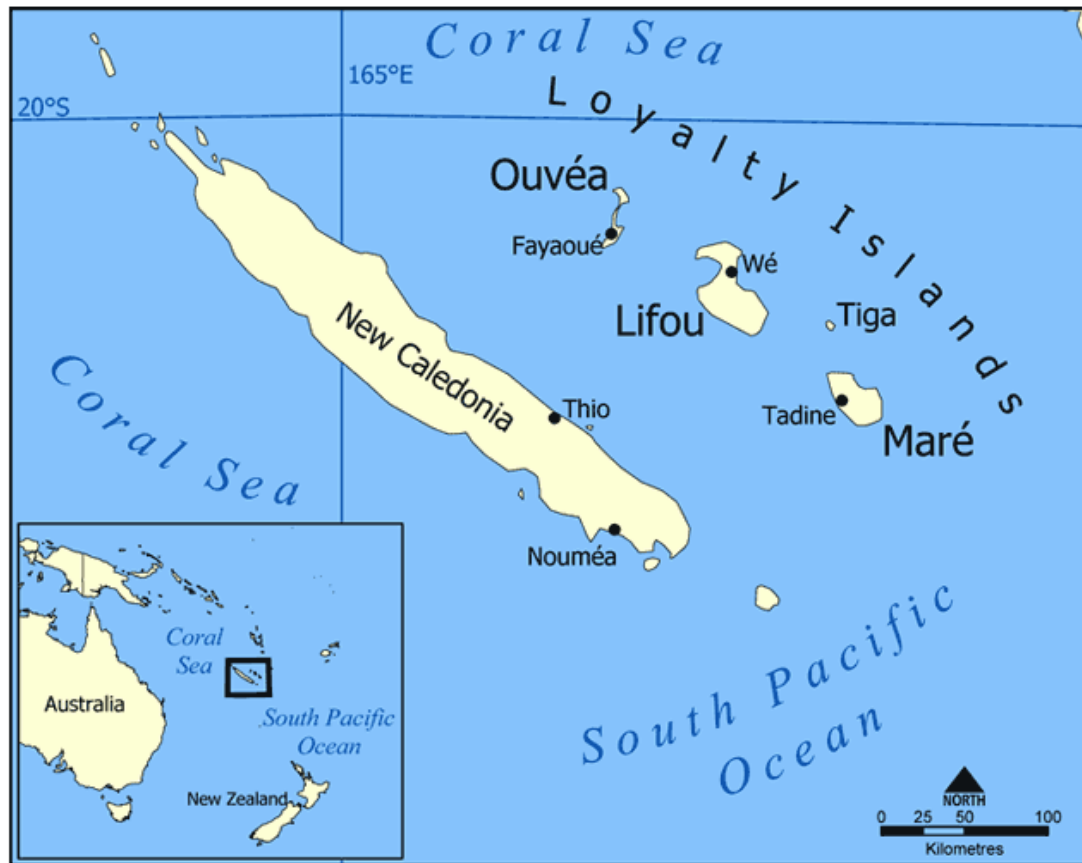
Ian

#543 Small Lifou and Green-backed White-eyes (and random Sacred Kingfisher) 25 August 2015

I'm a night-owl, as you may know already, so here is a photo of a noteworthy event: boarding a flight to the Loyalty Islands in complete darkness at 6:00am at Magenta, the domestic airport in Noumea. The goal was to check out several endemic species of birds that occur on two of the Loyalty Islands, Lifou and Ouvéa. The Lifou endemics were supposed to be easy to find near the airport, so we spent a morning there looking for them on foot before flying on to Ouvéa where we had booked a rental car and accommodation for the night (more about Ouvéa next time).



The Loyalty Islands, part of the French Territory of New Caledonia, are supposedly named after an obscure whaling ship called Loyalty or Loyalist built in Nova Scotia in 1788 that is thought to have come across them in 1790. The first recorded Western contact was three years later when another whaler, the Britannia, found them on a voyage from Norfolk Island to Batavia. Melanesians settled the islands about 3000 years ago and the French annexed them in the mid nineteenth century.



Lifou has two endemic White-eyes, cousins of the <Silvereye> which also occurs there. The endemic ones are called, accurately but unimaginatively, the <Small> and Large Lifou White-eyes. The small one we found without difficulty and it is indeed small with a length of 10-11cm/4-4-4.3in and weighting 7.5-9g/0.26-0.31g. Its diagnostic feature is the white flanks, most obvious in the third of its photos.



Small Lifou White-eye (*Zosterops minutus*)

Lifou, Loyalty Islands, New Caledonia, 26 June 2015

166571 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

We search quite hard but unsuccessfully for the Large Lifou White-eye. It's very large for a White-eye (15cm/6in) making it even larger than the Giant White-eye (*Megazosterops palauensis*) of Palau. Interestingly both of these large species lack the white eye-rings that gives them, and the Silvereye, their common names. The Small Lifou White-eye feeds mainly on insects while the large one shows a preference for fruit. This specialisation in diet and divergence in size is to be expected in similar species occupying the same habitat, but these two seem to have taken it to extremes.



Small Lifou White-eye (*Zosterops minutus*)

Lifou, Loyalty Islands, New Caledonia, 26 June 2015

166573 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Small Lifou White-eye is close related to the slightly larger <Green-backed White-eye> (fourth White-eye photo). It occurs on the main island of Grande Terre, the Isle of Pines (south of Grande Terre) and on Maré southwest of Lifou. Meanwhile there are three local races of the Silvereye, one on Grande Terre and the Isle of Pines, another on Maré and Ouvéa and the third on Lifou.



Small Lifou White-eye (*Zosterops minutus*)

Lifou, Loyalty Islands, New Caledonia, 26 June 2015

166579 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This complex pattern of colonisation and speciation is typical of members of the family, the <[Zosteropidae](#)>. This is a very successful Old World family with almost 100 species in Africa, Asia and Australasia. They seem to be experts at colonising out of the way islands, occurring on many islands in the Indian and eastern Pacific Oceans, where they settle down and evolve into new races and species. White-eyes are very sociable, so it is easy to imagine flocks being blown around by storms or cyclones and making landfall in sufficient numbers to colonise new places.



Green-backed White-eye (*Zosterops xanthochroa*)

Mount Koghi, New Caledonia, 25 June 2015

166174 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

For the random bird of the week, here's another species that is good at island hopping, the <Sacred Kingfisher>. Well known throughout all but the driest parts of mainland Australia it also occurs on some southwest Pacific islands including those of New Zealand and New Caledonia. It has one race on Grande Terre and the Isle of Pines and, you guessed it, another one on the Loyalty Islands, below. This race has very buff underparts and a shorter, slightly flattened bill.



Sacred Kingfisher (*Todiramphus sanctus macmillani*)

Ouvéa, Loyalty Islands, New Caledonia, 27 June 2015

166797 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Greetings

Ian

#544 Ouvéa Parakeet 31 August 2015

I was half-way through preparing this bird of the week this afternoon when my 2008 iMac died, or at least got terribly ill, so I've delivered it to the Mac Doctors and am now working on my laptop. Thank goodness for automatic backups, as I lost only the email itself and the map below that I was in the middle of preparing. I want to get the email out today so that I can deliver 4 birds of the week this month - my level of enthusiasm for doing the bird of the week has risen considerably since I started preparing the first volume of the <[Diary of a Bird Photographer](#)>.

Anyway, back to the Loyalty Islands off the west coast of the main island of New Caledonia. After spending the morning in Lifou, we flew to the neighbouring island, Ouvéa, home to the endemic <[Ouvéa Parakeet](#)>. Ouvéa is a long thin island, thinnest in the middle in a way that reminded me of both Bribie Island in Tasmania and Lord Howe Island. Like Lord Howe, it has a coral lagoon on one side and an ocean beach on the other but the resemblance largely ends there, as Ouvéa is a coral atoll and very flat, while Lord Howe is volcanic in origin and spectacularly mountainous.



The parakeet occurs mainly on the northern end of the island so its geographical range is tiny - see the scale on the map above, courtesy of Google Earth. The airport is on the southern end and we decided not to emulate some energetic birders who wrote a trip report and travelled from the airport to the north end of the island by bicycle. Instead, we had booked a rental car at the airport and booked accommodation in a tribal village called Gossanah in parakeet territory near where our bird guide Benoit lived. I'll say a bit more about both our guide and accommodation later, but first the parakeet.



Ouvéa Parakeet (*Eunymphicus uvaeensis*)

Ouvéa, Loyalty Islands, New Caledonia, 27 June 2015

166692 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It was dark by the time we reached Gossanah, so parakeet hunting had to wait until the morning. I was woken up by early-riser Joy with the exciting news that there were parakeets in the grounds of where we were staying. I stumbled out bleary-eyed (remember we had got up at 4:30am the morning before to get our flight to Lihou) camera in hand and sure enough there they were, or there it was, first photo. Later we joined Benoit and he took us around his garden and through an area of adjacent rainforest. There we found some more parakeets, including the one in the second photo.



Ouvéa Parakeet (*Eunymphicus uvaeensis*)

Ouvéa, Loyalty Islands, New Caledonia, 27 June 2015

166740 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

They aren't as brightly coloured as the Horned Parakeet of the main island, Grand Terre, and the crest is different, containing more than two feathers and lacking red tips. The Ouvéa Parakeet used to be treated as a race of the Horned, but has now been given full species status.



Nesting Hollow of Ouvéa Parakeet (*Eunymphicus uvaeensis*)

Ouvéa, Loyalty Islands, New Caledonia, 27 June 2015

166737 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Benoit showed us an active nesting hollow, third photo. We saw a parakeet flying into it and waited for it to reappear, but it had either settled down for the morning or had more patience than we had. The parakeets are very partial to the seeds of Papaya. They don't wait for the fruit to ripen before they chew their way into the centre to get at the seeds.



Papaya Eaten by Ouvéa Parakeet (*Eunymphicus uvaeensis*)

Ouvéa, Loyalty Islands, New Caledonia, 27 June 2015

166802 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The parakeets are protected and the population has increased in recent years. We got the impression that the islanders are rather ambivalent about the birds. They are proud to have such an unusual endemic bird - its iconic status is actively promoted by the authorities - but are concerned about its effect on their largely subsistent way of life.



We stayed at a tribal home stay called <<[Beauvoisin](#)>> - 'good neighbour' run by Marc and his wife. They provided dinner in the evening, accommodation in a circular hut and breakfast - Joy took the photo above of me emerging from the hut in the morning. We enjoyed it very much and Marc and his family were delightful and looked after us very well. They spoke some English and have a Facebook page. Benoit Tangopi our guide was great too and we saw a variety of other interesting birds on the walk through the rainforest. We contacted him by phone +687 800549, but you might need to brush up your French as he doesn't speak much English.

Greetings

Ian

#545 Lesser Sooty Owl 8 September 2015

You may remember that in March of this year <[Greater Sooty Owl](#)> featured as Bird of the Week [#526](#) when I visited East Gippsland east of Melbourne with my Victorian birding pals Barb, Jen and Joy. Last Thursday I met up with the trio again, this time at <[Kingfisher Park](#)> west of Cairns, Far North Queensland. The main target was, naturally, <[Lesser Sooty Owl](#)>, another member of the Barn Owl family and a species as elusive as its larger cousin. I'd seen one at Kingfisher Park in 2002 but hadn't photographed it and none of the trio had seen it before.



Lesser Sooty Owl (*Tyto multipunctata*)

Kingfisher Park, Julatten, NE Queensland, 4 Sept 2015

167827 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It's a Wet Tropics endemic ranging from Paluma - and perhaps Bluewater Forest near me - in the south to Cedar Bay in the north, with an estimated population of 2000 pairs. I've searched for it many time since without success so I'd agree with the field guides that say: "seldom seen" (Morcombe) and "until field studies in recent decades ... among our least-known birds" (Pizzey and Knight). On Wednesday night I'd searched for it along some dreadful tracks in Tumoulin Forest Reserve near Ravenshoe and on Thursday night we spotlighted the 10km length of the Mount Lewis road near Kingfisher Park with the usual result.



Lesser Sooty Owl (*Tyto multipunctata*)

Kingfisher Park, Julatten, NE Queensland, 4 Sept 2015

167833 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It does occur at Kingfisher Park and Andrew Iles told us to listen for it in the evening "after the barn owls" which live in adjacent Geraghty Park. Barn and Sooty Owls make chirruping calls and both species of Sooty Owl have a characteristic descending whistle like a falling bomb. Sure enough at 6:55pm an owl chirruped maybe 50 metres from the trio's apartment and we raced around the corner to find this bird had come to visit us and was perched in full view in a tree at a photography-friendly height. Later, I agreed with Joy that it was an OMG moment on a par with [encountering the Kagu family on a forest track](#) in New Caledonia.



Lesser Sooty Owl (*Tyto multipunctata*)

Kingfisher Park, Julatten, NE Queensland, 4 Sept 2015

167814 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In the past, the Greater and Lesser have been treated as a single species, but the species split is now generally accepted. They are genetically close, but there is a big difference in sizes - Lesser 31-38cm/12-15in , Greater 37-51cm/14.5-20 (females of both are larger than the males) - and differences in appearance, call and behaviour. Their ranges are disjoint with the Greater found from near Melbourne (Strzelecki and Dandenong Ranges) along the east coast to Eungella National Park near Mackay in Central Queensland. There is also a Sooty Owl in New Guinea. It's still lumped with the Greater, which is biogeographically unlikely, but has been placed with the Lesser and may even be a different species.



Lesser Sooty Owl (*Tyto multipunctata*)

Kingfisher Park, Julatten, NE Queensland, 4 Sept 2015

167819 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The behaviour of the Lesser differs in that it uses lower perches for hunting, good for photographers, and is known to cling to the side of tree trunks like the <[Eastern Yellow](#)> and Pale-yellow Robins - see <[this photo of a Pale-yellow Robin](#)>. The last photo shows its impressive talons: these would be able to cling on to anything.



Lesser Sooty Owl (*Tyto multipunctata*)

Kingfisher Park, Julatten, NE Queensland, 4 Sept 2015

167824 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

If you're into benchmarks, last week's bird, the <Ouvea Parakeet>, was the 1500th global species on the Birday website (15% of all bird species) but the Australian total was stuck at 699 waiting for something special of course. The Lesser Sooty Owl will be a fitting 700th - I haven't put it up yet, you get to see if first - that's 700 out of the 898 ever recorded or 78%.

I'm back home now planning my next project now that the Diary of a Bird Photographer Volume 1 has been published. So far, 27 copies have been purchased and favourable comments are coming in from all over the place including California, UK, Italy and Dubai. The <<Fat Birder>> has published <<a review>> in which he said:

"I hope anyone who enjoys fine photography and fantastic birds will go to iTunes and download the book... I for one can't wait for volume 2"

Greetings

Ian

PS Carol Iles of Kingfisher Lodge was concerned about the squinting owl in the first two photos and requested:

"we do urge people to use a filter and not to over-use flash. We'd be grateful if you could add a note to that effect in your description. The effect of prolonged bright light, especially on a bird perched low down over a road could be fatal."

Fair comment.

#546 Silvereye 18 September 2015

Two weeks ago we had the obscure Small Lifou White-eye as bird of the week. This week we have what is probably its best known relative - at least in Australasia - the Silvereye. I mentioned that the members of the White-eye family are expert colonisers of small islands in the Indian and western Pacific Oceans. The Silvereye is no exception and provides a particularly interesting case-study in bio-geography that is unusual in that some of its range expansion is both historically recent and well documented.



Silvereye (*Zosterops lateralis lateralis*)

Liffey Falls, Tasmania, 9 December 2011

129203 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I'll return to that later after looking at its range and variation in Australia. Here it occurs in coastal and sub-coastal regions from the tip of Cape York clockwise around Australia to Shark Bay in Western Australia, including Tasmania. Between Shark Bay and western Cape York it is replaced by the Australian Yellow White-eye. Currently, about nine races are recognised. The nominate race, *lateralis*, is Tasmanian and visually the most distinctive having cinnamon-coloured flanks, which is presumably what John Latham was referring to when he described the species in 1801 only 13 years after European settlement.



Silvereye (*Zosterops lateralis vegetatus/cornwalli*)

Bluewater, NE Queensland, 1 September 2015

167437 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

There are five mainland races ranging northeastern Queensland to Western Australia. The differences between these are subtle and the race grade into one another. Townsville, second photo, is in the zone of intergradation between the Cape York race (*vegetatus*) and the eastern Australian one (*cornwalli*). Note the lack of the cinnamon flanks and the clear demarcation between the yellowish green head and the grey back and compare that with the Western Australian race, third photo, which has a green back and to which its sub-specific name *chloronotus* refers. (I'm using the words race and subspecies interchangeably here).



Silvereye (*Zosterops lateralis chloronotus*)

Waychinicup, SE Western Australia, 29 August 2006

38466 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

There are three island races in addition to the Tasmanian one and they occur on King Island in Bass Strait; the islands of the Barrier Reef notably Heron Island; and on Lord Howe Island. The Lord Howe one, aptly name *robusta*, is larger and stronger than the nominate race and survived the introduction of mice and rats. That's an interesting little story in its own right as it became very rare, was thought to have become extinct like other Lord Howe Island species and the nominate race was deliberately introduced to replace it. To everyone's surprise the indigenous race survived, adapted to the presence of the rodents, recovered and the introduction of the nominate race was unsuccessful.



Silvereye (*Zosterops lateralis lateralis*)

Mount Pitt, Norfolk Island, 12 March 2012

140565 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

If you go farther afield to Norfolk Island expecting to find a distinctive looking local Silvereye, you'd be in for a surprise, fourth photo, as the local birds, complete with cinnamon flanks, are indistinguishable from the nominate race, which it in fact is. If you went to New Zealand, the same thing would happen and you would find the nominate race on both main islands, Stewart Island, Chatham Island and the sub-Antarctic islands such as Snares, the Aucklands and Chatham. What happens if you head north and end up in New Caledonia? On the main island, you'd find this race, fifth photo, called *griseonota*, meaning, of course, 'grey-backed'. Apart from the black smudge on the face, it looks to me very like the Cape York race.

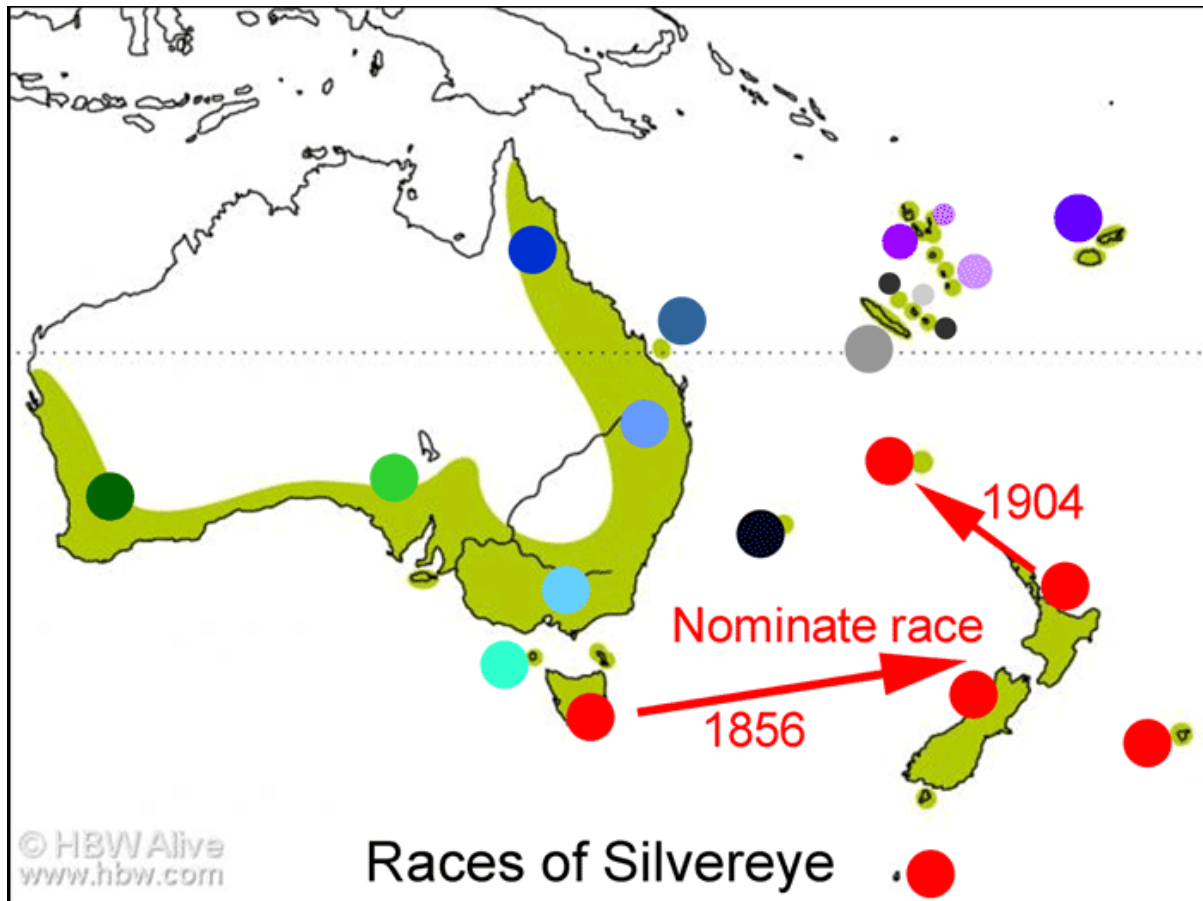


Silvereye (*Zosterops lateralis griseonota*)

Noumea, New Caledonia, 21 June 2015

165237 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

So what, you may ask, is happening? The proliferation of race suggests a sedentary species with little genetic mixing between neighbouring populations but this is contradicted by the widespread range of the Tasmanian race which suggests genetic flow between Tasmanian, Norfolk Island and New Zealand. In fact both are true to some extent, and this is where history comes to the rescue. Here is a map that I've drawn up showing the different races of the Silvereye using the basic range map from Handbook of Birds of the World (HBW) as a template. The different colours represent races. The red one is the nominate race; the other Australian races are shown in varying shades of blue and green and black; the New Caledonian races (three) in grey, the Vanuatu races (three) in purple and the Fiji race in indigo.



The Tasmanian race isn't completely sedentary. At least part of the population, probably mainly young birds, disperse in autumn and move Victoria and New South Wales for the winter. The Victorian ornithologist Alfred North noticed the change in plumage and ascribed it to winter and summer plumages. It was only later that it was realised that the change in appearance didn't coincide with moulting in the mainland birds and the truth emerged. Incidentally, Latham's original specimen came from 'Port Jackson' (Sydney) and must have been a Tasmanian bird.

As any blue-water sailor will tell you, the weather in Bass Strait between Tasmania and Victoria is notorious and a pleasant sail, or flight, in calm conditions can suddenly become a nightmare when a low pressure system and its associated cold front can arrive from the southwest.

Powerful weather systems move continuously in an easterly direction between Tasmania and New Zealand. Have a look at the current four-day weather chart: <<http://www.bom.gov.au/australia/charts/4day_col.shtml>>. Another clue comes from the Maori name for the Silvereye: 'tauhou' meaning 'stranger'. Silvereyes were rare vagrants to New Zealand until 1856 when large numbers appeared in the Wellington district, became established and spread to other parts of New Zealand.

Similarly, Silvereyes first appeared in Norfolk Island in 1904 and it is assumed that these came from New Zealand rather than Tasmania. Silvereyes have benefitted from European settlement in Australia and it may be that is also a factor in their recent colonisation of New Zealand and Norfolk Island.

I wonder how the Silvereyes got to New Caledonia, Vanuatu and Fiji? These all look more like the Cape York race than the nominate one. Tropical cyclones in the Coral Sea are famously erratic and often head from Queensland to New Caledonia, so it looks as if the weather could play the main role here.

I'm going to stop here. I was going to talk about names and languages as well, but you can work that out for yourselves. We've already had *cloronotus* and *griseonota* for Australasian races. Combine that with the French for Silvereye 'Lunette a dos gris' and the New Caledonian endemic Green-backed White-eye: 'Lunette a dos vert'. Globally, there are almost 100 species of White-eye, not to mention races, and they nearly all look much the same, so pity any unfortunate taxonomists trying to be original.

And here's a paper that I found interesting: <<http://aviculturalsocietynsw.org/_PDFs/Silvereye.pdf>>. You can check out photos of various White-eyes here: <birdway.com.au/zosteropidae/index.php>.

Greetings

Ian

#547 Princess Parrot 1 October 2015

A late bird of the week I regret, but I've been planning and designing a major overhaul to the website to the exclusion of almost everything else. The website is showing its age as I designed it in a pre-smart phone and pre-tablet era - seems like a long time ago now - for fixed, landscape screens. About 30% of the birdway website traffic comes from such devices now, so it's an issue I can no longer ignore. Anyway, I'll say a bit more about that later and provide an example of the new layout.

The other revision taking place is that until now I've only included my own photos, so Birdway has been synonymous with Ian Montgomery. The rationale was that it was a showcase for my work - some would say a monument to my ego, smile. Maybe I'm satisfied at having reached 1500 species globally and 700 Australian ones so it's time to change. Birdway will now aim to provide the best range of publishable quality bird photos. Initially the emphasis will be on Australian ones, but later I may extend this to Australasian one. For manageability, I'm starting by invitation only but feel free to register your interest by email ian@birdway.com.au.

So, here is a landmark bird of the week: these lovely photos of the gorgeous and elusive <[Princess Parrot](#)> were taken by my friend Jenny Spry, a birder and photographer well-known in Australian birding circles. She leaves no stone unturned and no bush or remote island unchecked in a passionate search for the unusual and has one of the longest Australian life lists (aiming for 800!).



Princess Parrot (*Polytelis alexandrae*)

Central Australia, 2012

js01884 © Jennifer Spry birdway.com.au

The Princess Parrot is elusive for at least two reasons. The first is that it's a bird of very remote parts of arid Australia accessible only with considerable difficulty, e.g. the Canning Stock Route. The other is that its population and range varies greatly with rainfall. In poor seasons it is almost impossible to find, but in good season the population irrupts and it can appear in more accessible locations, perhaps I should say slightly less inaccessible ones, in inland eastern Western Australia, the southwestern Northern Territory and northwestern South Australia. The core breeding range is thought to be around Tobin Lake and in the Great Victoria Desert, both in eastern Western Australia.



Princess Parrot (*Polytelis alexandrae*)

Central Australia, 2012

js01888 © Jennifer Spry birdway.com.au

It is one of three beautiful, long-tailed, medium sized (length 34-46cm/13-18in) parrots belonging to the endemic Australian genus. *Polytelis*. The others are the <Superb Parrot> of New South Wales and northern Victoria and the <Regent Parrot> which occurs in two separate populations, one in southwestern New South Wales, northeastern Victoria and eastern South Australia and the other in southern Western Australia. All three species are uncommon: the Princess is classed as Near-Threatened and the Superb as Vulnerable, while the Regent is uncommon in the east and declining in the west. Male Princess Parrots, first two photos, have longer tails and brighter colours than females (third photo).



Princess Parrot (*Polytelis alexandrae*)

Central Australia, 2012

js02099 © Jennifer Spry birdway.com.au

Returning to the subject of website design in a mobile world, I've used the Princess Parrot as the first species in the new design and it was posted to the birdway website this morning. The changes will be more obvious on smart phones and tablets, but on computers you'll notice that the thumbnails have moved from a vertical column on the left to a horizontal row on the bottom and the information about the photo has moved from left to right. You'll also see a button at top right which reveals - and hides - the main navigation menu as vertical column which slides the rest of the page to the right. Previous, this menu didn't appear on the pages of individual species, only - as a row of horizontal buttons at the top - on the family pages and the ten main topic pages to which these button link.

◀ Princess Parrot: photo 2 of 3 ▶



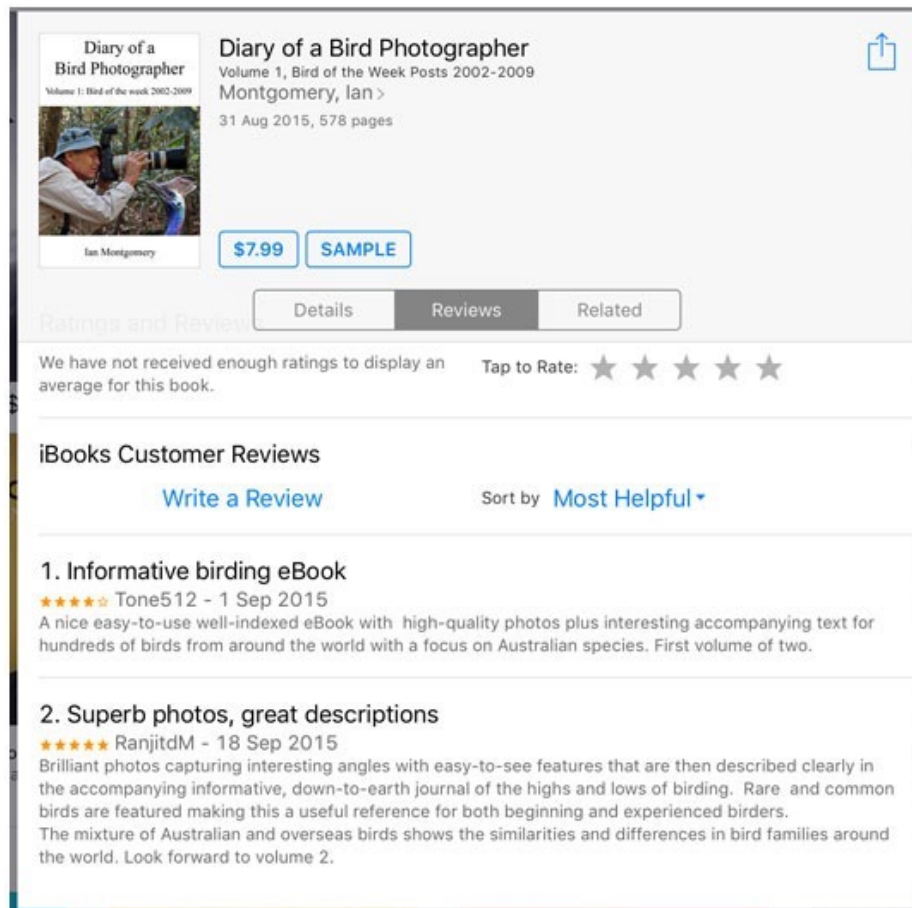
Photo of adult male Princess Parrot.

ID: js01888
Photographer: © Jennifer Spry
Contact: ian@birdway.com.au
Location: Central Australia
Date & Time: 16/6/12 12:28:42 PM
Original size (pixels): width 1400, height 1050
Aperture: f5.7
Shutter Speed: 1/1328 sec
Focal Length: 400.0 mm

The fourth and fifth images are screen shots from my iPhone. The fourth shows a page in landscape orientation. The image shrinks to fit the screen width and you can see the rest of the page by scrolling up and down. Note that the photo information is still on the left. The fifth, shows the page in vertical orientation with the navigation menu showing as a blue column on the left. The photo information has dropped below the image and both the menu column and the main window are scrollable independently.



On the subject of books, the <Diary of a Bird Photographer> has sold about 50 copies in the first month, and reviews are beginning to appear (below).



Greetings

Ian

#548 Fuscous Honeyeater 12 October 2015

Townsville is experiencing one of its driest years on record, with only 258mm/10.2in of rain so far this year, with most of that in January. Farmers feel the effects of the dry the most of course from a human perspective, but the wildlife is suffering too. Any remaining open water whether on farms or in gardens is very popular. My bird bath and pond are visible from the window of my study so I have been watching the variety and abundance of visiting wild- and feral-life and keeping an eye out for unusual birds. These include some which here are mainly restricted to highland rainforest such as <Macleay's> and <Lewin's> Honeyeaters and other dry country species such as the <Fuscous Honeyeater>, normally found west of the coastal range in North Queensland.



Fuscous Honeyeater (*Lichenostomus fuscus subgermanus*)

Bluewater, NE Queensland, 1 October 2015

167384 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This one, here ten days ago on the edge of my bird bath, is the northern race *subgermanus*. This race has a yellow wash on the face which makes it look rather like the closely related <Yellow-tinted Honeyeater>, a species I'll say a bit more about shortly. This northern race occurs between Bowen/Mackay and the Atherton Tableland. Further south the nominate race ranges through the remainder of eastern Queensland, eastern New South Wales and through Victoria as far as about Adelaide in South Australia. The second photo shows an example of the nominate race west of Sydney. Fuscous Honeyeaters have different bill and eye-ring colour in breeding and non-breeding plumage. Non-breeding (and juvenile) birds have yellow bases to the bill and a yellow eye-ring (first photo) while breeding birds have dark bills and dark eye-rings (second photo) - unusual for the breeding plumage to be **less** colourful.



Fuscous Honeyeater (*Lichenostomus fuscus fuscus*)

Scheyville, New South Wales, 15 November 2009

95149 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The third photo shows a non-breeding (or juvenile) nominate-race individual in Victoria and both the yellow eye-ring and yellow base to the bill show up well. 'Fuscous' comes from the Latin for 'dusky' while the generic name '*Lichenostomus*' means 'lichen-mouth' or 'moss-mouth' in Greek and refers to the brush-like tongues of members of this genus, adapted for feeding on nectar. Compare that with '*Trichoglossus*' - 'hair tongue' - a similar adaptation in Lorikeets of that genus, such as the Rainbow Lorikeet.



Fuscous Honeyeater (*Lichenostomus fuscus fuscus*)

Kamerooka, Victoria, 8 April 2009

87236 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

There are six closely related species of *Lichenostomus**, referred to as a 'super-species' which, although they overlap in some places, effectively carve up mainland Australia. The <Fuscous> as we've seen is an eastern and southeastern species; the <Yellow-plumed> (*L. ornatus*) occurs along the south coast from Victoria to SW Western Australia; the <Grey-fronted> (*L. plumulus*) and <Grey-headed> (*L. Kearlandi*) are inland and western-coastal species; the <White-plumed> (*L. penicillatus*) has a similar range to the Grey-fronted but extends to the coast in Victoria and New South Wales (e.g. suburban Sydney); while the <Yellow-tinted> (*L. flavescens*) occurs across northern Australia from NW Western Australia through the Northern Territory to western Cape York in Queensland (fourth photo). There is also an isolated population in south-eastern Papua New Guinea.

In case you're wondering, *subgermanus*, the name for the northern race of the Fuscous doesn't refer to Germany or a taxonomist called Germain. '*Germanus*' means something like 'sibling' in Latin (literally 'having the same parents') and is the origin of 'hermano/hermana' in Spanish (brother/sister). 'Sub' is often used to indicate closeness in taxonomic matters, so *subgermanus* means something like 'almost siblings' and presumably refers to its similarity to the Yellow-tinted. That's my guess, anyway, as my usual source of such gems, A Dictionary of Scientific Bird Names, OUP, doesn't delve into races.



Yellow-tinted Honeyeater (*Lichenostomus flavescens*)

The Kimberleys, NW Western Australia, 11 September 2004 09926 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The range of the Yellow-tinted comes within about 100km of that of the yellowish northern Fuscous Honeyeater and the two species were formerly lumped into one. Recent studies have shown that although they look similar they don't intergrade, so treating them as separate species seems justified. In the Yellow-tinted, the yellow base to the bill is a feature of just juvenile birds. All have yellow eye-rings, so there is no difference in appearance between breeding and non-breeding adults.



The dry season is an anxious time in bushland areas of North Queensland and this year particularly so. Last week a fire started beside the Bruce Highway on Saturday 3rd October and travelled the seven kilometres to my place over the next three days and then burned along the dry bed of Bluewater Creek near my house for three days. The last photo shows the bottom of my yard being water bombed on Thursday morning as I was heading down there yet again with a rake. The hill in the background is black all over. All is quiet now and we have the biggest firebreak in the country (at least 11km long covering 24 square kilometres) so I hope we're probably relatively safe now until the wet season which should start in a couple of months, El Nino permitting. The firemen had some funny stories to tell about their arrival at a nudist colony in a secluded area about 4km west of my place.

Greetings

Ian

* Taxonomic note 2018: since I wrote this, these six species have been split from *Lichenostomus* into their own new genus *Ptilotula*.

#549 Snares Penguin 23 October 2015

Before we get on to this week's bird - the Snares Penguin - here is a postscript on last week's discussion on the boundary between <Fuscous> and <Yellow-tinted>

Honeyeaters on the Atherton Tableland west of Cairns. Keith Fisher sent me this photo of a bird taken at Springvale Road in the Kaban area between Herberton and Ravenshoe in the western drier part of the Tableland - Chapter 14 in [Where to Find Birds in Northern Queensland](#), hint, hint. He also sent me information from Lloyd Nielsen who has been studying these birds. It would be a brave person who would identify this bird on appearance alone and it seems that the matter will remain unresolved until someone does some DNA analysis. Thank you Keith.



Yellow-tinted/Fuscous Honeyeater

Springvale Road, Kaban District, NE Queensland

© Keith Fisher

Now for something completely different and for no other reason than I like penguins and so do most people. We saw various penguin species on the Sub-Antarctic Islands trip that we did in 2011 and here is one of two that hasn't featured as bird of the week. The first island group that we reached after leaving Dunedin on the South

Island of New Zealand was the Snares, an isolated group of islands with a total area of 340ha/840acres about 200km/125miles south of the South Island.



Snares Penguin (*Eudyptes robustus*)

The Snares, New Zealand, 20 November 2011

123263 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Snares are of particular scientific and conservation value as, unlike other similar islands in the Southern Pacific they were left largely untouched by sealing and whaling and survive, vegetation intact in a fairly pristine state and have no mammalian predators. The <[Snares Penguin](#)> and the Snares Snipe are endemic species and there is an <[endemic race of the Fernbird](#)> and an <[all black-race of the Tomtit](#)>. The islands are of huge importance for nesting seabirds with 2 million pairs of <[Sooty Shearwaters](#)> and large numbers of <[Common Diving Petrels](#)>. Because of its conservation status - 'minimum impact' - we weren't allowed to land but we cruised close by in Zodiacs in ideal weather conditions and saw all the bird species of interest except the Snipe.



Snares Penguin (*Eudyptes robustus*)

The Snares, New Zealand, 20 November 2011

123361 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

There are about 25,000 pairs of Snares Penguins. The species is closely related to the <Fiordland Penguin> of the South Island of New Zealand and the Erect-crested of Bounty and Antipodes Islands, but has a much heavier bill (hence the name *robustus*) and pink skin between the bill and the cheek and throat so it usual now to treat all three as full species. Like all penguins, they are delightful to watch and be watched by and they are quite curious and popped up beside the Zodiac to have a good look.



Snares Penguin (*Eudyptes robustus*)

The Snares, New Zealand, 20 November 2011

123427 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

They nest in colonies of up to 1,000 pairs mainly usually under trees or bushes, but sometimes in the open. There is continual traffic between the ocean and colonies which scours away any vegetation.



North East Island, The Snares, New Zealand

At the colony we visited, there was a favoured spot for launching into the water and all the seaweed had been worn away. The penguins would wait for a calm period between ocean swells and then dash after the most intrepid into the water.



Snares Penguin (*Eudyptes robustus*)

The Snares, New Zealand, 20 November 2011

123455 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Landing seemed to be done on a hope and a prayer and the birds would get washed up on the rocks and then scramble to safety. There were several landing spots and these still had seaweed, which presumably cushioned the birds from hard landings.



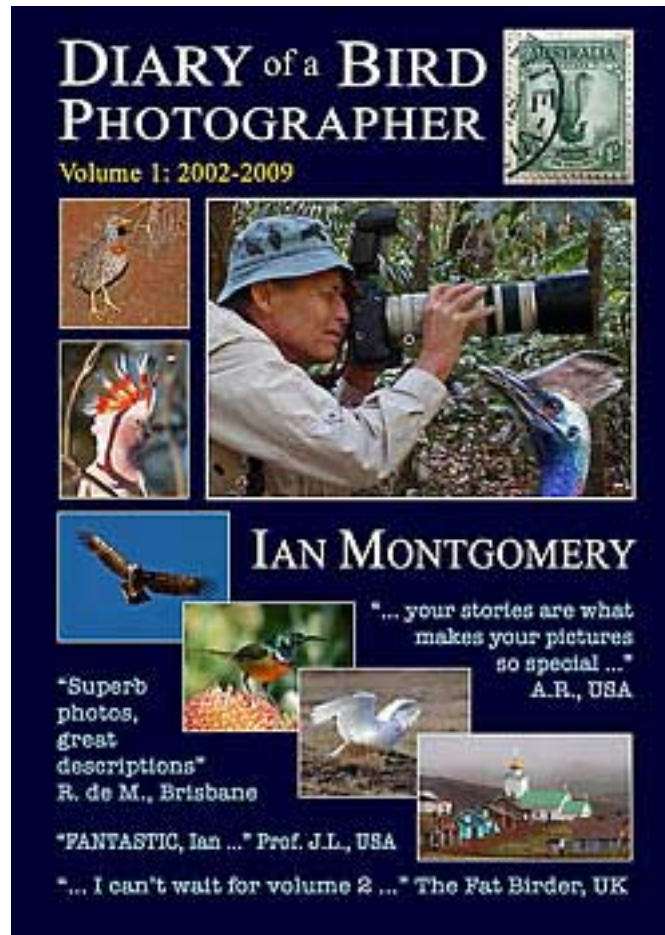
Snares Penguin (*Eudyptes robustus*)

The Snares, New Zealand, 20 November 2011

123405 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Snares Penguins lay a clutch of 2 eggs, and breeding success is about 40%. The population is thought to be increasing, though the species is classified as Vulnerable because it depends on a single location. After breeding the birds disperse in the ocean and are recorded as vagrants in mainland New Zealand and Tasmania. The birds take about 4 years to mature and live for about 20 years.

This bird of the week is a bit late as I've been busy this week finishing reformatting the ebook *Diary of a Bird Photographer*. I've made each bird of the week section start on a new page to prevent the separation of caption and content. The new version is recognisable by a re-designed cover. The following cover image links to the [Diary page](#) on the Birdway website.



I've also been redesigning the website templates to make them more suitable for viewing on smart phones or tablets. The original design was for monitors with a width of 1200 pixels, but we live in a more fluid world now.

Greetings

Ian

#550 Tomtit 30 October 2015

Last week we had the Snares Penguin and I made a passing reference to the locally endemic race of the <Tomtit>, so here is it and two of the other four New Zealand races of the Tomtit as this week's choice. It's called a Tit after the European Tits - family <Paridae> which includes the North American Chickadees - but it's not one of these but an Australasian Robin <Petroicidae>, which in turn were named after the <European Robin> but don't belong to its family either, the <Muscicapidae>. The Tomtit's closest relative is the Pacific Robin (*Petroica pusilla*) which in turn is closely related to the <Scarlet Robin> of Australia.



Tomtit (*Petroica macrocephala*)

Fiordland, South Island, New Zealand, 14 November 2011 122293 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

A friend of mine who is a member of the bird of the week club but not a birdwatcher as such expressed confusion over subspecies (or races) and species, so I Googled a couple of references which might be useful: <<[1. a simple explanation](#)>>; <<[2. Wikipedia](#)>> and <<[3. a more scholarly one](#)>>. I talk about them a lot as I'm interested in the classification of birds (taxonomy) and their evolution and biogeography (how they got to where they are) so here is a brief description.



Tomtit (*Petroica macrocephala*)

Fiordland, South Island, New Zealand, 14 November 2011 122272 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

A (biological) species is the fundamental unit ('taxon') of the classification of organisms, both plants and animals. It's fundamental in the sense that it is considered reproductively isolated (genetic differences are supposed to be such that interbreeding across species boundaries isn't possible or at least doesn't produce fertile offspring). From a bird-watching point of view, a species is what you add to lists, whether your life list, your national list, your annual list, your yard list, or your annual bird list... The possibilities are endless but in the competitive world of 'twitching', a species is as important as a referees decision about a goal or score in football or tennis.



Tomtit (*Petroica macrocephala marrineri*)

Enderby Island, New Zealand, 21 November 2011

124725 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Nothing in biology is ever quite so simple, so the differences between various taxonomic levels (species, genus, family, order ... going up and species, subspecies going down) are really part of a continuum. At the lower levels - genus, species and sub-species - the degree of genetic separation and therefore reproductive isolation varies a lot. Some groups are particularly troublesome as apparently quite different 'species' have a taxonomically irritating tendency to hybridise. Among birds, the diving ducks of the genus *Aythya* come to mind and among plants the orchids are notorious for spreading their genes around. Subspecies or races (using the terms interchangeably) are usually geographically isolated so they don't get the chance to interbreed and are usually sufficiently different to be identifiable in the field. That means if you're a birdwatcher, you can make lists of them too...



Tomtit (*Petroica macrocephala marrineri*)

Enderby Island, New Zealand, 21 November 2011

124651 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The eighteen century Swedish scientist and physician Carl Linnaeus is regarded as the father of modern taxonomy as he invented the binomial - double-name - system that is still in use today. This was a century before Darwin, so Linnaeus was concerned, lucky man, with only degree of similarity. He classified types of organisms as belonging to a genus ('family' in Latin) represented by the first name, e.g. *Anas* (Latin for 'duck') and a species, e.g. *platyrhychos* (Greek for 'broad-billed') to name the Mallard and distinguish it from say the similar Gadwall, *Anas strepera*, where '*strepera*' is derived from the Latin for 'noisy'. There is no linguistic rule to prevent mixing of languages but adjectival species names usually agree in gender with the genus, something of a challenge when one name comes from Greek and the other from Latin.



Tomtit (*Petroica macrocephala dannefaerdi*)

The Snares, New Zealand, 20 November 2011

123304 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Needless to say, taxonomists have added many levels since, but orders, families, genera and species are the most important. To accommodate races or subspecies a third name was added the binomial system making it trinomial. The first race of a species to be named is called the nominate race, and the name of the race, if any, must be the same as the name of the species. So the nominate race of the Tomtit *Petroica macrocephala* is *Petroica macrocephala macrocephala* (*Petroica* is Greek for 'rock-dwelling' and *macrocephala* is Greek for 'big-headed'). Any additional subspecies described later will be called *Petroica macrocephala somethingelse*.



Tomtit (*Petroica macrocephala dannefaerdi*)

The Snares, New Zealand, 20 November 2011

123323 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Sorry, that was supposed to be a brief description so let's get back to Tomtits. The first two photos show the nominate race which occurs on the South Island of New Zealand. The male is black and white with a yellow breast; the female is grey-brown with a white belly. This pair was in an Antarctic Beech forest - quite Lord of the Rings - near Cascade Creek in Fiordland and both birds were busy feeding nestlings. The male has a juicy green caterpillar and a large mosquito in his bill.

The third and fourth photos are male and female examples of the Auckland Islands race *marrineri* on Enderby Island one of the Auckland Islands group. Both males are females are mainly black and white, the male being glossier with only a trace of yellow on the breast. The race is named after New Zealand biologist George Marriner who took part in the <<[1907 Sub-Antarctic Islands Scientific Expedition](#)>>.

The Snares race *dannefaerdi* is the most distinctive, photos five and six, with both sexes being completely black, the male again being glossier than the female. It is named after <<[Sigvard Dannefaerd](#)>> who was a Danish collector and photographer based in New Zealand and the original specimen was from his collection but ended up with the <<[second Baron Rothschild](#)>> who described it.

Greetings

Ian

#551 Oriental Pratincole 12 November 2015

I was at the opening of an excellent exhibition of North Queensland 'breeding birds and their dream homes' called *Nested* at the Museum of Tropical Queensland in Townsville on Tuesday and got talking to one of the local members of BirdLife Townsville about the bird of the week. He requested something unusual of local interest that might occur here at this time of the year and mentioned Oriental Cuckoo and Oriental Plover. <Oriental Cuckoo> was bird of the week in December 2007 and I don't have any good photos of <Oriental Plover>. I've only ever seen it in airports (Lockhart River and Norfolk Island) and I've never risked the wrath of airport security to get close to the birds. So the best I could come up with, Bill, is <Oriental Pratincole> photographed at the Townsville Town Common where a flock appeared nine years ago. I can't get more local than that!



Oriental Pratincole (*Glareola maldivarum*)

Townsville, NE Queensland, 28 November 2006,

44445 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Oriental Pratincoles breed in Asia with a patchy distribution from India to eastern Siberia, Mongolia and NE China. In the northern winter they migrate to Indonesia, Malaysia, New Guinea and northern Australia with perhaps 50,000 reaching our shores. They are late migrants arriving in the Top End of the Northern Territory during the build-up to the wet season (November) and their main Australian range is from the Gulf of Carpentaria in NW Queensland west to the north coast of Western Australia.



Oriental Pratincole (*Glareola maldivarum*)

Townsville, NE Queensland, 28 November 2006,

44448 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

They show a preference for dry inland plains with available water and feed mainly on insects such as grasshoppers. 2006 was, like this one, a very dry year in Townsville and these photos were taken on the dry bed of one of the wildlife observation 'wetlands' at the Common. They also turn up sometimes on the Atherton Tableland.



Australian Pratincole (*Stiltia isabella*)

Windorah, SW Queensland, 21 September 2006,

42487 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Pratincoles are unusual birds somewhere between plovers and terns in appearance and morphology. They belong to a small family, the <Glareolidae>, which consists of 8 species of pratincoles in Eurasia, Africa and Australia and 9 species of mainly African Coursers. The odd name pratincole means 'inhabitant of meadows' with the 'prat' bit having the same root as 'pratensis' in the <European Meadow Pipit> (*Anthus pratensis*). The family name comes from the Latin for gravel, and that's actually closer to the mark when it comes to preferred habitat.



Australian Pratincole (*Stiltia isabella*)

Eyre Creek, SW Queensland, 18 September 2006

42026 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Oriental Pratincole is distinguishable from the <Australian Pratincole> by its dumpier, shorter-tailed appearance, greyish-olive rather than buffish-brown plumage and by a black margin to the throat giving the appearance of a necklace. The Oriental Pratincole is normally in non-breeding plumage when in Australia, but both species have black-tipped bills with red bases when breeding. The Australian Pratincole has chestnut flanks and belly when breeding and the dark flanks are retained in non-breeding plumage.



Oriental Pratincole (*Glareola maldivarum*)

Townsville, NE Queensland, 28 November 2006,

44450 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Pratincoles look very tern-like in flight with their long pointed wings. Both the local species have white rumps and black-tipped tails, but the tail of the Australian Pratincole is square, while that of the Oriental is forked.



Cream-coloured Courser (*Cursorius cursor*)

Al Asifa Endurance Stables, Dubai, UAE, 16 September 2014 160129 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

If you belonged to the bird of the week club a year ago, you may remember that the <Cream-coloured Courser> was, after the <Crab Plover> was my second most wanted bird in Dubai. Courser means 'runner', something they do very well and it was very appropriate to find them at the Polo Club and at the Al Asifa Endurance Stables. Incidentally, the bird of the week club currently has 981 members and you know I like milestones. Please encourage your friends to join so we can reach 1,000 either by signing up on the <[bird of the week page](#)> (recently redesigned for mobile devices) or by emailing me at ian@birdway.com.au.

Greetings

Ian

#552 Crimson Rosella 20 November 2015

Some birds are very obvious choices for bird of the week because they are beautiful and popular. Ironically, I can overlook them for exactly that reason as I assume they've featured previously. Here is one such, the Crimson Rosella, an iconic and popular bird of the forests of eastern and southeastern Australia.



Crimson Rosella (*Platycercus elegans*)

Ferntree Gully, Victoria, 22 May 2013

154519 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Normally rather shy in its natural habitat and can become quite tame in parks and gardens. It's popularity is reflected in the fact that it has been introduced to New Zealand and Norfolk Island and (unsuccessfully) to Lord Howe Island. It nests in tree hollows and is regarded by conservationists as a pest on Norfolk Island as it competes with the smaller, endangered Norfolk Parakeet for nest sites.



Crimson Rosella (*Platycercus elegans*)

Long Forest, Victoria, 5 April 2009

86017 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It feeds mainly on the seeds and fruit of trees and will forage on the ground for the grass seed, like the bird in the third photo. It's a very vocal species and its ringing calls are a characteristic sound of forests in eastern Australia. Out of the breeding season, it is found in small flocks but it is territorial when breeding and the pair bond is thought to persist for several years or longer.



Crimson Rosella (*Platycercus elegans*)

Megalong Valley, New South Wales, 11 October 2007

59308 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Juvenile birds of the eastern nominate race are mainly olive green with blue cheeks and patches of red on the head, breast and undertail-coverts. The nominate race extends from Cooroy in Southeastern Queensland to about Kingston in eastern South Australia.



Crimson Rosella (*Platycercus elegans*)

Ferntree Gully, Victoria, 22 May 2013

154521 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Farther north, an isolated population of the race *nigrescens* ('blackish') occurs from Eungella near Mackay north to the Atherton Tableland. This is smaller and darker than the nominate race, fifth photo, and is mainly a bird of highland rainforest.



Crimson Rosella (*Platycercus elegans nigrescens*)

Paluma, NE Queensland, 7 October 2013

155771 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Juveniles of this northern race are much more like the adults than their southern relatives and have brownish-black feathers on the back instead of green (sixth photo).



Crimson Rosella (*Platycercus elegans nigrescens*)

Paluma, NE Queensland, 4 March 2011

155102 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In southeastern Australia the populations of blue-cheeked Rosellas look very different and were for a long time treated as two different species, the Yellow Rosella, seventh photo, of the river systems of southern New South Wales and northern Victoria, and the orange-plumaged Adelaide Rosella of South Australia from the Flinders Ranges in the north to the Fleurieu Peninsula south of Adelaide (no photo). Yellow and Adelaide Rosellas interbreed where their ranges meet along the Murray River in South Australia. The two are now treated as races of the Crimson Rosella, *flaveolus* and *adelaideae* respectively.



'Yellow' Rosella (Platycercus elegans flaveolus)

Hattah Kulkyn, Victoria, 13 April 2009

87841 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Yellow Rosella looks very like the other blue-cheeked Rosella, the <Green Rosella> of Tasmania. It is, however, retained as a separate species. I included this photo of the Yellow Rosella when the Green Rosella was bird of the week in March 2013 [#469](#).

Greetings

Ian

#553 Northern Rosella 30 November 2015

Last week we had the Crimson Rosella, one of the group of blue-cheeked Rosellas. This week here is the <Northern Rosella> a representative of the other group of Rosellas, the white-cheeked Rosellas. The other members of this group are the <Pale-headed Rosella> and the <Eastern Rosella>, both of which have featured as bird of the week previously: [#505](#) and [#406](#) respectively.



Northern Rosella (*Platycercus venustus*)

Edith Falls, Northern Territory, 15 November 2002

13842 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

These three have adjoining distributions with the Northern Rosella being found from Derby in NW Western Australia through the Top End of the Northern Territory to the far NW of Queensland; the Pale-headed ranges from Cape York and the eastern Gulf of Carpentaria through coastal Queensland to NE New South Wales, while the Eastern Rosella ranges from SE Queensland through coastal New South Wales through Victoria to eastern South Australia and also occurs in Tasmania. The ranges of the Pale-headed and Eastern overlap in SE Queensland and NE New South Wales and the two interbreed to some extent. There is a fourth species in SW Western Australia, the Western Rosella but it has yellow cheeks.



Edith Falls, Northern Territory

The Northern Rosella is the only one with a black cap, first photo. It isn't a common bird and I have seen it only a few times on trips to the Northern Territory. Most records in the Territory are in a triangle bounded by Darwin in the north, Katherine in the south and Jabiru in the east, but this is perhaps the area most frequented by bird watchers. In NW Western Australia another population is centred in the Kimberley region and around Kununurra.

The bird in the first photo was photographed at Edith Falls, second photo, a delightful oasis in the dry country just north of Katherine. When I was there, a resemblance to the Garden of Eden was heightened by an incident in the middle of the night at the camp ground. I had some neighbours, noisy to begin with, who did a lot of yelling at about 2am. The next day I was having a swim in the lake and found out from some other campers that one of the noisy group had stepped on a Death Adder on the way to the toilet block and had to be rushed to Katherine Base Hospital for antivenin. Venomous snakes are a fact of life in Australia so don't let the incident put you off going to Edith Falls; just watch where you walk even in the middle of the night.



Northern Rosella (*Platycercus venustus*)

Chainman Creek, Katherine, NT, 23 September 2009

93843 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The second photo of a Northern Rosella was taken in the evening sunlight at Chainman Creek near Katherine on a different trip. I presumed chainman was something to do with chain gang, but apparently a chainman is a surveyor who holds the measuring chain. While we're on derivations, *Platycercus* is Greek for flat- or broad-tailed and *venustus* is Latin for beautiful or charming. I think you'll agree that this is a lovely parrot.

Greetings

Ian

#554 Oriental Plover 10 December 2015

You may remember that we had <[Oriental Pratincole](#)> as bird of the week early last month as I couldn't fulfil a request from a local birder for <[Oriental Plover](#)>. Since then, Rex Whitehead, a bird photographer in Mt Isa, 900km west of Townsville as sent me some lovely Oriental Plover photos that he took very recently on Lake Moondarra, a reservoir just outside Mt Isa.



Oriental Plover (*Charadrius veredus*)

Lake Moondarra, Mt Isa, NW Queensland, 29 Nov 2015

rw04040 © Rex Whitehead birdway.com.au

The first two photos are of adult birds in non-breeding plumage. These are elegant mid-sized plovers slightly smaller than Golden Plovers with a length 22-25cm/ 8.5-10in. The second photo shows the slim profile well. The third photo is of a juvenile bird, and like many plover species it has buff fringes to the dorsal feathers.



Oriental Plover (*Charadrius veredus*)

Lake Moondarra, Mt Isa, NW Queensland, 29 Nov 2015

rw04046 © Rex Whitehead birdway.com.au

The entire population of about 70,000 birds breeds in Mongolia and adjacent areas of southern Siberia and northwestern China and migrates to northern Australia for the northern winter. In both regions it is a bird of dry arid areas and in Australia it visits the coast less frequently and in response to severe drought inland. Some birds reach the southern states, but it's main range is north of the Tropic of Capricorn. On migration in both directions it appears in large numbers in the Yangtze Valley but records are rare both in more northerly parts of China and in Indonesia. So it is assumed that it is a long distant migrant and does the entire journey in two hops.



Juvenile Oriental Plover (*Charadrius veredus*)

Lake Moondarra, Mt Isa, NW Queensland, 29 Nov 2015

rw04076 © Rex Whitehead birdway.com.au

In breeding plumage it has a chestnut breast-band with a dark lower edge which forms a sharp border to the white breast. With some reluctance I've included a poor distant shot of mine taken at Norfolk Island airport in March 2012 to illustrate the breeding plumage and do a size comparison with the [Pacific Golden Plover](#). if you look carefully you can see the chestnut breast-band on the Oriental Plover and the Pacific Golden Plover is also coming into breeding plumage. Oriental Plovers can run swiftly and the specific name *veredus* is the Latin for a swift horse.



Oriental Plover (*Charadrius veredus*)

Norfolk Island Airport, Australia, 12 March 2012

140663 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I've been busy working on the website to make it 'mobile friendly' so Christmas has approached stealthily and more-or-less unnoticed. I did see in my calendar program yesterday that there is a full moon on Christmas Day and the same program reminded me today that there is a New Moon tomorrow. That gave me a shock as it means Christmas only a couple of weeks away.

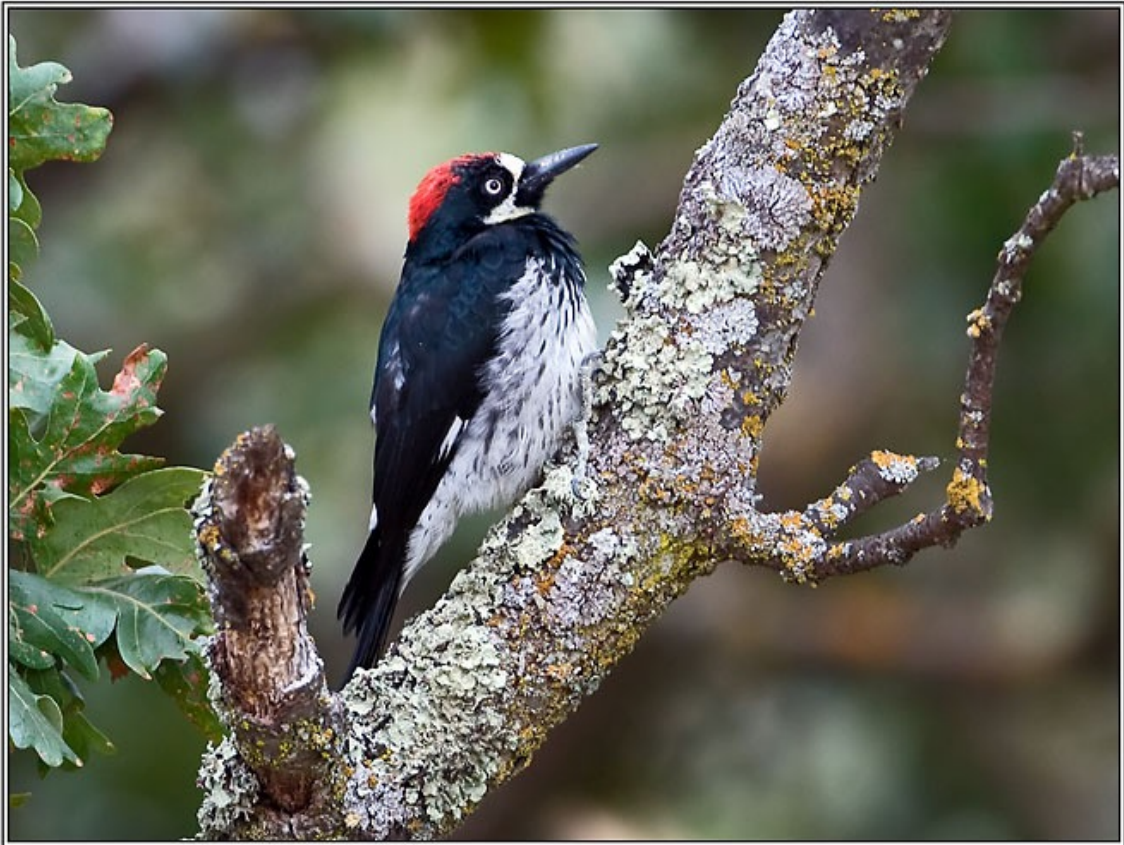
I released the new mobile friendly <[home page](#)> a few days ago. This involved breaking it up into smaller parts to make it more manageable - it had grown to become a monster over the years. The <[home page](#)> now has links to all its erstwhile components like <[thumbnails to bird families](#)> ('Visual Links' in the menus), the <[bird of the week index page](#)>, and <[recent additions](#)>. The <[alphabetic and taxonomic indices](#)> are collectively called Text Links, and like the Visual Links are all inter-connected. The move to a mobile world has provided an opportunity for a complete redesign to make the website more consistent and easier to use but, given its size, it will be many months before all the family and species pages get updated but I'll keep you posted.

Greetings

Ian

#555 Acorn Woodpecker 23 December 2015

I've been working obsessively with the redesign of the Birdway website for mobile devices that everything else has been rather neglected. 'Everything else' includes both the Bird of the Week and Christmas (no cards this year) so this one addresses both. I wanted a bird with a red cap to represent Santa or one of his helpers and have settled on the <Acorn Woodpecker>, a member of one of my favourite group of birds.



Acorn Woodpecker (*Melanerpes formicivorus*)

Mt Diablo State Park, California, 8 September 2010

10897 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The black and white face pattern often earns it the description of 'clownish', which I think is a bit unfair, so I'm going to emphasise the red cap and the other features of its rather smart plumage. The male, first photo, has the more extensive red cap which reaches the white forehead and so is closest to a Santa one. The female, second photo, has a red cap only on the back of the head. If you know your northern hemisphere trees, you'll recognise the wavy-edged leaves as belonging appropriately to oaks. Acorn Woodpeckers are quite small - 23cm/9in in length and the male is supposed to have a longer bill than the female, though this isn't obvious in these photos.



Acorn Woodpecker (*Melanerpes formicivorus*)

Mt Diablo State Park, California, 8 September 2010

108964 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In North America it occurs on the west coast of the United States (Oregon and California) and south west (Arizona and New Mexico). The range extends through Central America as far as the Andes in Columbia. Some populations are monogamous but others are group breeders with quite complex social systems. The bird peering out of the nesting hollow in the third photo is a juvenile; note the dark eye compared with the white or yellowish eyes of adults.



Acorn Woodpecker (*Melanerpes formicivorus*)

Jasper Ridge, California, 11 June 2008

69389 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Acorns make up about 50-60% of the diet so the birds are most abundant in forests with plenty of oak trees. Particularly in the north of the range, acorns are the staple energy food in winter and the acorns are stored in crevices or specially make holes in bark. The bird in the fourth photo is showing us how it's done and you can see that the bark has many holes, some containing acorns. These larders are excavated over many years and may contain as many as 40,000-50,000 holes. The pairs or groups are strongly territorial and will defend these larders. The nesting hollow take a lot of hard work to excavate too and may be reused year after year.



Acorn Woodpecker (*Melanerpes formicivorus*)

Point Reyes, California, 30 August 2010

107695 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The bird in the fifth photo in the highlands of Costa Rica, is a female showing us that they're quite versatile in their diet. The Latin scholars will have noticed the specific name *formicivorus* which means 'ant eater' and the birds eat insects and various invertebrates throughout the year. Other seeds and nuts supplement the acorn part of the diet.



Acorn Woodpecker (*Melanerpes formicivorus*)

San Gerardo de Dota, Costa Rica, 12 October 2010

111670 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

On the website, I've been concentrating on the family pages which have the thumbnail links to the species. I had hope to have these family pages finished by Christmas, but I still have about 30 of the 150 families left to do. Anyway, I wish you a peaceful and safe festive season and I hope to get another bird of the week out in time to wish you all the best for the New Year.

Ian

#556 Temminck's Stint 31 December 2015

Surprise, surprise, Facebook can be useful! I was contemplating a suitable species to wish you a Happy New Year, when I discovered from a post by Rohan Clark that [<Temminck's Stint>](#) is the newest addition to the Australian bird list, one having turned up in Broome, Western Australia about a month. And no, I didn't rush off there to photograph it: here are a couple of old photos that I took in India twelve years ago. So that satisfies the Old Year/New Year metaphor. You'll have noticed by now that I'll use any excuse as a metaphor to nominate a species as Bird of the Week.



Temminck's Stint (*Calidris temminckii*)

Bharatpur, Rajasthan, India, 27 April 2003

17654 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This is probably one for the serious birder as small waders in winter plumage not only pose serious problems of identification but also fail to excite people who are into more dramatic plumages. That said, its distinguishing features are the down-curved bill, short legs and, in flight, the white sides to the tail. The latter is probably the best field mark, as it's shared with no other members of the genus and easy to see in flight, even if it doesn't show when the birds are on the ground. There are four species of Stints (see <[Typical Waders](#)> on Birdway) the Eurasian name for very small waders; comparable species of the same genus in North America are usually named Sandpipers, e.g. the <[Least Sandpiper](#)> and are collectively, colloquially and somewhat disparagingly called Peeps after their calls.



Temminck's Stint (*Calidris temminckii*)

Bharatpur, Rajasthan, India, 27 April 2003

17659 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Temminck's Stint nest right across northern Eurasia from Norway to eastern Siberia. The short Arctic breeding season is something of a frenzy, as Temminck's Stints of both sexes are territorial and serially bigamous and sometimes fit in three clutches with different mates. They winter mainly in equatorial Africa and southern and southeastern Asia, with Borneo being the closest regular winter haunt to Australia. It is to be expected that they would sometimes overshoot their destination and there have been several reports of them in Australia in recent years but none has been accepted until now.

<Coenraad Temminck> was a Dutch 'aristocrat and zoologist' born in Amsterdam in 1778. He was director of the National Museum (then the Rijksmuseum) of Natural History in Leiden from 1830 until his death in 1851. He made a huge contribution towards the classification of birds and other vertebrates at a time when the species and type concepts were contentious. He inherited a large collection of bird skins from his father who was treasurer of the Dutch East India Company, so it would be easy to imagine that his specimen of the stint came from Indonesia.



Logrunner Female (Orthonyx temminckii)

O'Reilly's Lodge, Southeast Queensland, 25 February 2006

C29662 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Sixteen bird species still include his name as part of the scientific and/or common name, including the <[Australian Logrunner](#)> (*Orthonyx temminckii*), which has featured as bird of the week before. He also make a fundamental contribution to biogeography, though his views on the divine aspects of species design and their unchanging nature proved unpopular with other scientists after about 1840.

You nearly got the Eurasian/Winter/Pacific Wrens as bird of the week as today I've got as far as the wren family page in the website redesign. I'm switching from BirdLife International to the IOC for classification and the IOC splits the old Winter Wren of the almost the entire Northern Hemisphere into Old World <[Eurasian Wren](#)> and New World - Winter and <[Pacific Wrens](#)> - which also suited the Old Year/New Year transition nicely. However, the Eurasian Wren has featured as bird of the week before in the guise of Winter Wren so you ended up with an obscure wader instead.

I send you very best wishes for the New Year and a rewarding 2016 and don't make your New Year Resolutions too ambitious!

Ian

Year 2016: #557 to #573

#557 New Zealand Pipit 12 January 2016

There are two ways to acquire photos of additional species to add to the website: one is to go out and photograph something new; the other is to sit at your computer and wait for the taxonomists to provide them via splits. I mentioned, in passing, the <Eurasian> and <Pacific> Wrens last week. This week we have the <Australian> and <New Zealand> Pipits, a split I discovered a week ago when revising the Pipit and Wagtail family page and switching the sequence from BirdLife International to the IOC. That split stirred vague memories of pipits on Enderby Island in the Auckland Islands group south of New Zealand and I dug out some neglected photos of New Zealand Pipits from my archives and published them on the website.



Australian Pipit (*Anthus australis*)

Long Reef, New South Wales, 24 March 2004

05856 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Pipits have been completely ignored as subjects for bird of the week because they aren't, I don't think, very interesting: they all look much the same - brown and streaked; they don't behave in particular interesting ways; and they aren't famous for the quality of their songs. So I was left the problem of finding a way of making them interesting. You could do a spot the difference quiz between the Australian above,

and the New Zealand below but even that is a bit limited in extent. The Australian is more buffish, the New Zealand more rufous; the New Zealand has more streaks on the flanks; if you had the birds in the hand you might notice that the Australian has a white belly, the New Zealand has a greyish one. That's about it.



New Zealand Pipit (*Anthus novaeseelandiae*)

Enderby Island, New Zealand, 21 November 2011

124673 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I could talk about their biology and show this photo of an adult feeding an insatiable fledgling, which was begging raucously for more food in [another photo](#) taken less than a second later. Instead, I decided this morning to Google the information contained in the sentence: "I took this photo of a New Zealand pipit (*Anthus novaeseelandiae*, J. F. Gmelin, 1789, Queen Charlotte Sound, South Island, New Zealand) on Enderby Island in November 2011". Google led me on never-ending links of interesting information about the history of the Auckland Islands, voyages to Queen Charlotte Sound in the late 18th century, the work and publications of Johann Friedrich Gmelin and even to the novel *Moby Dick** while I reminisced about the 2011 trip to the Sub-Antarctic Islands and dug out more photos of what we saw on Enderby Island. My task now is to distill all that stuff into a few sentences.



New Zealand Pipit (*Anthus novaeseelandiae*)

Enderby Island, New Zealand, 21 November 2011

124673 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Auckland islands are a rugged group of now uninhabited islands about 460km south of the South Island of New Zealand. Traces of Polynesian settlement dating back to the 13th century have been found on Enderby Island, a small island about 5km long at the north eastern tip of the main island. They were rediscovered in 1806 by the whaling ship *Ocean* commanded by Captain Bristow who named the Islands after his father's friend the first Baron Auckland and Enderby Island after his boss Samuel Enderby, whose company owned the ship. The islands became an important sealing and whaling station, though by 1812 most of the New Zealand Sea Lions had been hunted and the focus switched to Campbell Island and Macquarie island farther south. There were several unsuccessful attempts at settlement later in the 19th century.



Auckland Islands Group, New Zealand

Most of the human activity on Enderby Island was at a sheltered bay called Sandy Cove on the south side of the island (below). That was where we landed and we hiked from there across to the north coast and then back along the coast in a clockwise direction, a distance of about 10km. Sandy Cove had lots of sea lions and <Red-crowned Parakeets> #430, strange to see Parrots on such a chilly windswept island.



Enderby Island, Auckland Islands, New Zealand

I remember the last few kilometres along the south coast as being hard work wading through waist-deep tussocky grass but the wildlife along the way was wonderful and well worth the effort. In the tundra on the north coast there were <[Subantarctic Snipe](#)> #437 and <[Double-banded Plovers](#)> #476, while the cliffs on the north coast (below) had nesting <[Light-mantled Albatrosses](#)> #428. We watched their display flight in the updrafts along the cliffs, a <[veritable aerial ballet a deux](#)>, and could look down on <[other birds on their nests](#)>.



North Coast of Enderby Island

There were flightless <Auckland Teal> #436 both along the coast and in pools of freshwater and we had to run the gauntlet of assertive male sea lions. We found that if you held your ground, they calmed down quite quickly and the following photo shows me making friends with one.



New Zealand Sea Lion (*Phocarctos hookeri*)

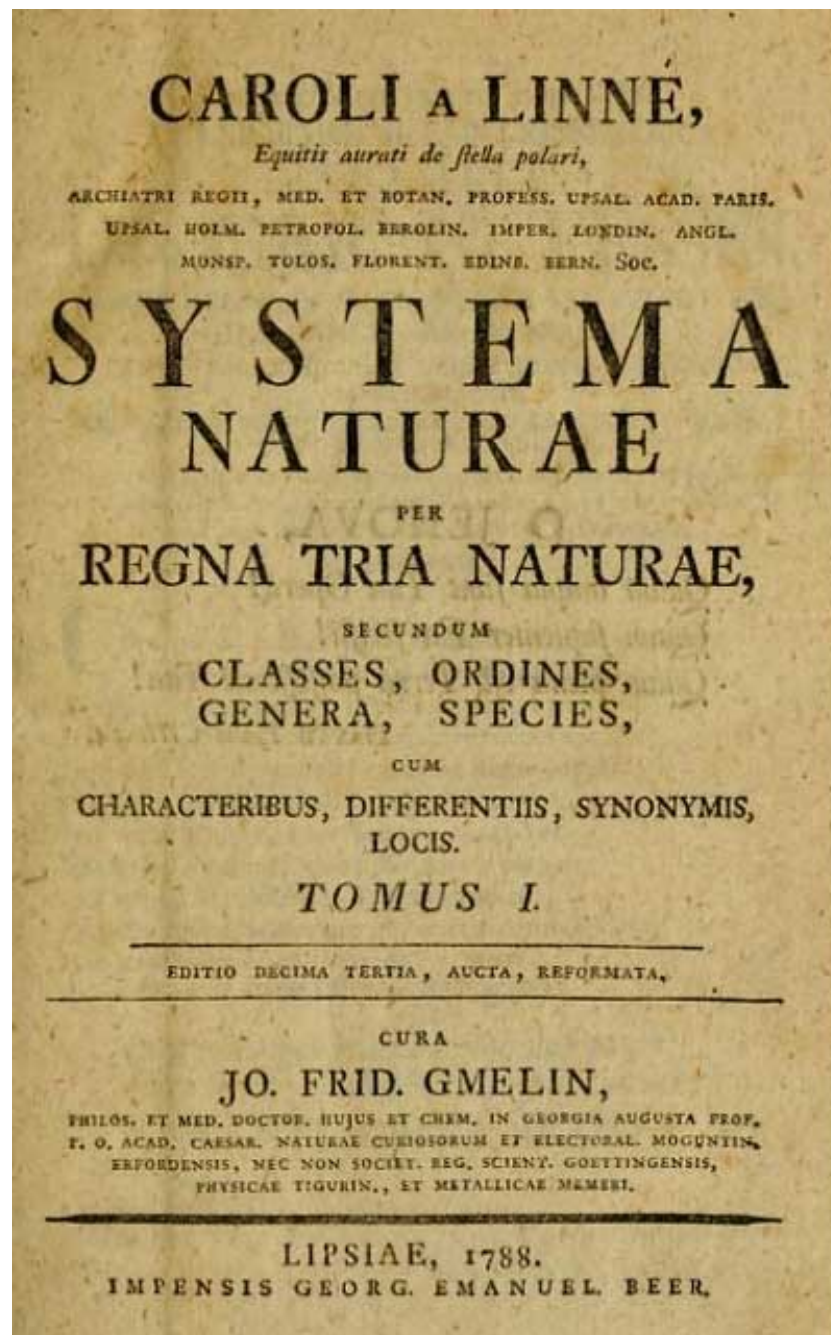
Enderby Island, New Zealand, 21 November 2011

© Photographer

See? I've hardly mentioned pipits and, given the competition, it is surprising that I actually took any photos of them. Because various pipits all look much the same their taxonomy has long been, well, a mess. There are - at the moment based on DNA studies - five similar species in Eurasian, Africa and Australasia that have in the past been treated as a single species. The other three are Richard's pipit (central Asia), the African Pipit and the <Paddyfield Pipit> (south and southeast Asia). The first one to be named was a New Zealand specimen in 1789 by the German naturalist <<Johann Friedrich Gmelin>>, below, so according to the rules of taxonomic precedent that single species should have been *novaeseelandiae*.



Gmelin, 1748-1804, is best known for continuing to update and publish new volumes of the *Systema Naturae* after the death in 1778 of Linnaeus, the father of modern taxonomy. Here is the cover of the 1788 edition of Gmelin's Volume I. Note that the classification is of the three natural kingdoms (*Regna Tria Naturae*) of animals, plants and minerals. This was in the days before anyone had to worry about evolution, and was all about managing the complexity of specimens of everything that were accumulating in vast numbers in museums, herbaria and other collections in Europe.



There were four levels of generalisation: classes, orders, genera and species. So the New Zealand Lark (as it was called then) belongs to the class Aves (birds), the order Passeres (sparrow-like), genus *Alauda* (larks) and species *novae Zeelandiae* (of Nova Seelandia). The system has proved remarkably robust. Class 'Aves' is still used for birds; 'formes' has been added to avian order names so Passeres survives as <Passeriformes>, <Alauda> is still used for true larks. The New Zealand Lark is now recognised as a pipit and has been moved to the Pipit genus *Anthus*. The main change to the classification structure is the addition of the Family level between order and genus. Pipits and Old World Wagtails are in the family <Motacillidae> and I was interested to find that the name *Motacilla*, the Wagtail genus, is to be found later in the same volume.

Cravate jaune ou Calandre du cap de bonne espérance.

Buff. hist. nat. des ois. 5. p. 54. Pl. enl. n. 504. f. 2.

Cape Lark. *Lath. syn. II. 2. p. 384. n. 18.*

Habitat ad caput bonae spei, 8 pollices longa.

Rostrum ex flavicante fuscum; corpus supra cum cauta fuscum, singulis pennis medio obscurioribus; mentum aurantium; corpus subtus ochroleucum; pedes atrii; ungues posterior paulisper curvatus.

novae 29. A. superciliis albis, fascia oculari nigra, crisso cinerascen
Seelandiae. te, pedibus ex rubesciente cinereis.

New Zealand Lark. *Lath. syn. II. 2. p. 384. n. 17. t. 51.*

Habitat in nova Seelandia, 7½ pollices longa.

Rostrum cinerascens supra nigrum; corpus supra atrum, pennis margine cinerascens, subtus album; ungues nigri, posterior fere rectus.

The volume makes interesting reading just at the level of habitats which hints at the enormity of the task faced by Linnaeus and Gmelin. The species above the New Zealand Lark is the 'Cape Lark' *Alauda capensis* from a specimen collected at the Cape of Good Hope (caput bonae spei). On just these two pages are species from Portugal, Argentina, Mongolia and Siberia and this on pages 798-799 of the volume on birds. I found another whole volume on worms and another on a subset of plants. Gmelin was primarily a botanist and published various books on plant and chemical poisons. On the zoological side he specialised in amphibians, reptiles and molluscs, so his publication of bird species was fairly incidental. Such was the all-encompassing nature of scholarship in those times.

Meanwhile, back at the website, progress continues. I've finished updating all the family pages and I'm now working through the 1,500 species and updating their pages to make them mobile-friendly. On a good day, I can do about 20 species. The <[Home Page](#)> now serves as a gateway to the rest of the website and to advise of updates. such as recent additions and the latest bird of the week.

I started by listing the two ways of getting new species for the website. I'm planning to do the other way next week, take a break from the website and go up to the Daintree River in search of nesting Black Bitterns. This is one of my bogey birds. I've seen them only flying away since the single occasion on which I saw one stationary at Chittaway Point on the Central Coast of New South Wales in the year 2000 before I took up serious bird photography with serious equipment. So this (scanned from film) is what I'm trying to improve on:



As usual I ask for your moral and spiritual support!

Greetings

Ian

*PS. In Moby Dick the fictitious ship Pequod of Nantucket met a whaling ship from London called the Samuel Enderby which had also encountered the white whale. The Samuel Enderby was a real ship belonging to the Enderby company and was one of three that arrived at Auckland Island in 1849 to attempt a new settlement with 150 settlers.

#558 Black Bittern 27 January 2016

Well, thanks to your moral and spiritual support yet again, here is the <[Black Bittern](#)>. This bogey bird was the North Queensland bird that I've spent the most time trying unsuccessfully to photograph since the <[Red-necked Crane](#)> #435. Ian Worcester ("Sauce") of <<[Daintree River Wild Watch](#)>>, knows the wildlife of the Daintree River like the back of his hand and took us straight to an active Black Bittern nest where we disturbed this female (females have browner plumage than males) who retreated into the depths of the tree and adopted the frozen posture so typical of bitterns. You can see from the greenish blur in the bottom half of the photo that I had to take this photo through a small gap in the vegetation.



Black Bittern (*Dupetor flavicollis*)

Daintree River, NE Queensland, 20 January 2016

168568 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

With the Black Bittern spell broken within minutes of leaving the wharf, I was free to relax and enjoy the view and whatever else the trip had to offer, while hoping for more and better Bittern photos of course. We left the wharf at about 6:30am and I took this view looking up the river at 6:42am **after** photographing the Bittern.



Daintree River, NE Queensland

We continued up the river and into Stewarts Creek and visited the nests of a few more bitterns and of a couple of Great-billed Herons. We saw a couple of Bitterns flying away, as usual, and it was over an hour before the male in this photo hung around long enough for a photo. The male has blackish plumage with a slight blue sheen and buff streaks below the head. Both sexes share incubation and care of the young and this one had left the nest like the first one and moved to the back of the tree where he also froze.



Black Bittern (*Dupetor flavicollis*)

Daintree River, NE Queensland, 20 January 2016

168635 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Looking from the bright area on the river into the deep shadows of the riverine forest made the birds extraordinarily difficult to see. The photo below is a full-frame image from a 400mm telephoto lens and the bird is almost invisible. The bill and neck stripe of the bird were aligned so perfectly with the twig behind that I couldn't help wonder whether it was deliberate. The rest of the body just looked like a limb of a tree.



Black Bittern (*Dupetor flavicollis*)

Daintree River, NE Queensland, 20 January 2016

168632 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Here is one of the nests, an untidy collection of sticks wedged in a branch 4 or 5 metres above the surface of the river. Something white is just visible in the nest, but I can't tell whether it's an egg or a fluffy chick.



Black Bittern (*Dupetor flavicollis*)

Daintree River, NE Queensland, 20 January 2016

168623 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Anyway, that was it for Black Bittern photos. We went out a second time later in the morning and revisited a couple of the nests including the one near the wharf, but we didn't see any more birds. I've since discovered from Handbook of Birds of the World that Black Bitterns are "crepuscular and nocturnal with peak activity at dusk and dawn" so that may be why. None of the Australian field guides mention this and maybe this is the reason I've had difficulty finding them before.

Greetings

Ian

#559 Azure Kingfisher 2 February 2016

Although the second boat trip at Daintree didn't produce any more <Black Bitterns>, it did produce a few gems including this <Azure Kingfisher>. This has featured as bird of the week before, but that was almost exactly nine years ago so I imagine you'll forgive another one. They're small (17-19cm/6.5-7.5in) usually quite shy and often hard to spot perched in dense riverine forest but these ones on the Daintree seem to be used to boats full of birders. Anyone this one let us get very close.



Azure Kingfisher (*Ceyx azureus*)

Daintree River, NE Queensland, 20 January 2016

168808 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The one in the first photo is an adult, probably a male from the bright colours. The second photo is on another one on the Daintree from an earlier visit. This one is a juvenile, I think, with scalloping on the crown and blacker wings. Azure Kingfisher normally perch on a branch over water and dive for their prey, returning to the same perch to administer the coup de grace. They feed mainly on small fish, but also on crustaceans and other invertebrates and occur on both fresh and tidal rivers.



Azure Kingfisher (*Ceyx azureus*)

Daintree River, NE Queensland, 20 August 2011

120106 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Azure Kingfisher occur in New Guinea and northern and eastern Australia and in Tasmania. Three Australian races are recognised. The bluer nominate race occurs in eastern Australia, while the smaller, more violet northern race *ruficollaris*, third photo, occurs from NW Western Australia eastwards as far as Cooktown in Far North Queensland. The northern race has more blue extending much farther down the flanks than in the nominate race. Cooktown is only about 100km north of the Daintree as the Kingfisher flies, so the birds here are probably intermediate between these two races.



Azure Kingfisher (*Ceyx azureus*)

Yellow River, Northern Territory, 8 September 2009

91847 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I've included the bird of the week from February 2007 for comparison, fourth photo. this was in the Sydney area and belongs to the nominate race. The third race *diemensensis* occurs only in western Tasmania and is classified as endangered by the <<[Tasmanian Government](#)>>. It is larger, has a smaller bill and a dark crown.



Azure Kingfisher (Alcedo azurea)

Port Hacking River, New South Wales, 11 February 2007

C47232 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Work progress on the website. I've finished updating nearly all the galleries of the <[Australasian non-passerines](#)> (58 families) with only the members of the Cuckoo family to do. Then I'll start on the Australasian Passerines (46 families).

Greetings

Ian

#560 Barred Honeyeater 11 February 2016

I'm currently working my way through the Honeyeater galleries on the website and on Saturday I'm giving a talk on the birds of New Caledonia to BirdLife Townsville, so here is New Caledonian endemic the <[Barred Honeyeater](#)>. it is confined the main island of Grande Terre, where it is reasonably common in woodland areas, particular in hilly country, e.g. Mont Koghi just outside Noumea.



Mont Koghi, New Caledonia

It seemed to like perching high up in trees, like this one at Rivière Bleue, and at the time we had bigger distractions at hand - such as the <Kagu> - so we left it to its own devices.



Barred Honeyeater (*Glycifohia undulata*)

Riviere Bleue, New Caledonia, 23 June 2015

165833 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

On our second visit to Mont Koghi - in search of the [Horned Parakeet #539](#) - we came across this one perched more obligingly at eye level in some flowering ginger. While we were photographing it, a member of the staff at the nearby inn, came galloping along to tell us that a Horned Parakeet had arrived, and the poor honeyeater was abandoned unceremoniously.



Barred Honeyeater (*Glycifohia undulata*)

Mont Koghi, New Caledonia, 25 June 2015

166226 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

From its shape and general appearance it's clearly a Honeyeater, but the wavy barred plumage is unlike any Australian Honeyeater and gives it its specific name *undulata*. Not surprisingly, it has no close relatives in Australia, though it was plonked in the same genus as the <New Holland> and <White-cheeked> Honeyeaters (*Phylidonyris*) until someone decided to look at its genes a bit more closely and removed it and its only close relative the Vanuatu Honeyeater (*G. notabilis*) to their own genus.



Barred Honeyeater (*Glycifohia undulata*)

Mont Koghi, New Caledonia, 25 June 2015

166240 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

New Caledonia has some strikingly unusual birds - which is why we were there in the first place - but this familiar but different theme was much more often the case with a broad spectrum from very similar (same species but usually a different race) through somewhat different (common genus, different species) and very different (separate genera) to the <[Kagu](#)> which is in a family of its own and in an order with no other Australasian representatives.

Work on converting the website to make it 'mobile friendly' continues and I'm in the middle of the <[Honeyeaters](#)>. With photos of 76 species - and therefore 76 galleries - this is easily the largest family in the website - the <[ducks and their relatives](#)> come second with 64 species. So, I regard it as something of a watershed and look forward to having the Honeyeaters behind me and tell myself that it will all be downhill from then on!

Greetings

Ian

#561 Barn Swallow 1 March 2016

I've just been making galleries of the <[Australasian Swallow family](#)> 'mobile-friendly' and noticed that the <[Barn Swallow](#)> has never been Bird of the Week. Although not well known in Australia or New Zealand - where it is replaced by the closely related

<Welcome Swallow> - it is an iconic migrant species in the Northern Hemisphere. It is a welcome harbinger of Spring and recognised not just by birders but by anyone with an interest in the weather. It has an almost global range south of the Arctic Circle breeding right across Eurasia and North America and spending the northern winter in almost all of Sub-Saharan Africa, South and Southeast Asia and most of Central and South America except southern Chile and Argentina.



Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica gutturalis*)

Taiping, Perak, Malaysia, 19 October 2001

06702 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Relatively small numbers reach northern Australia each year so sharp-eyed birders look out for it in northern Western Australia, the Top End of the Northern Territory and Northern Queensland during the Southern Summer.

Eight or more races are recognised and these vary in the length of the tail streamers, the width of the diagnostic dark blue breast band and the colour of the underparts, varying from white to rufous buff. Interestingly, in Eurasia the length of the tail streamers and the width of the breast band get shorter and narrower respectively as you travel from north-west to south-east - in other words the closer you get to Australia the more like the Welcome Swallow the races become.



Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica gutturalis*)

Newell Beach, NE Queensland, 30 January 2005

12687 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Malaysian bird in the first photo is of the Asian race *gutturalis* - thought to be the one that turns up in Australia - while the one in the second photo was taken at Newell Beach near Mossman north of Cairns. After migrating in the northern Autumn, the birds moult and adults lose their long tail streamers, so this is why both these birds have short tails. *Gutturalis*, like 'guttural' refers to the throat i.e. '-throated' without specifying what is distinctive about the throat. Maybe it refers to the dark spot in the centre of the breast band. Newell Beach is known as a bit of a Swallow hot-spot and on this occasion, the Barn Swallow was in the company of <[Welcome Swallows](#)>, <[Fairy and Tree Martins](#)> and <[Red-rumped Swallows](#)> (uncommon in Australia) all near the entrance to the golf course.



Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica erythrogaster*)

Sierra Valley, NE California, USA, 26 May 2008

68202 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The North American race of the Barn Swallow is called *erythrogaster*, meaning red-bellied as in the fine specimen in the third photo. This has the dark spot in the middle of the throat too and an incomplete breast band, largely hidden in the third photo but more obvious in the two birds in the fourth photo taken about half an hour earlier in the same location. Females Barn Swallows are generally paler than males so I suppose the one on the left is a female though only one of several North American field guides that I consulted was prepared to commit itself on this gender-based distinction.



Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica erythrogaster*)

Sierra Valley, NE California, USA, 26 May 2008

68096 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The one in the fifth photo of the nominate race *rustica* in Ireland in Spring shows the very white underparts and very long tail streamers of breeding adults. Because the adults moult in Autumn after migrating south, short adult tail streamers are not usually seen in the Northern Hemisphere and it is safe to assume there that birds with short streamers are juveniles.



Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica gutturalis*)

Clogherhead, Co. Louth, Ireland, 8 June 2007

54657 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Swallows usually feed on the wing and perch above the ground. In adverse weather, they do sometimes feed on the ground and in the breeding season they land to collect mud and fibres such as grasses or horse hair to build their cup-shaped nests, sixth photo. This Spanish bird is also of the nominate race and you can see the broad breast band with no central spot. I keep mentioning this spot as, although all the field guides tell us that Welcome Swallows lack a breast band, [all the birds I have photographed](#) whether adults or juveniles have at least traces of this black spot, suggesting a close affinity with Asian Barn Swallows.



Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica rustica*)

El Rocio, Andalucia, Spain, 4 June 2007

54205 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Barn Swallows are prolific breeders and will nest up to three times in a season. Studies have shown that breeding success averages 4-7 fledglings per pair. Adult survival on migration appears to be high - up to 65% return to the same breeding site - so juvenile mortality is presumably severe. The seventh photo shows two fledglings in a concrete shelter in a bird sanctuary in Dublin waiting for the parents to return with food.



Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica rustica*)

North Bull Island, Dublin, Ireland, 6 September 2012

140331 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The eight photo was taken 27 seconds later than the seventh and shows that one of the juveniles has flown out to meet an adult returning with food. Presumably such mid-air transfers help the fledglings develop their flying skills for the time when the parents abandon them to start a new brood and they have to fend for themselves.



Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica rustica*)

North Bull Island, Dublin, Ireland, 6 September 2012

140332 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

We now take for granted the amazing migration of small birds but for a long time the complete disappearance of Swallows was assumed to be because they hibernated in winter. The ancient Greeks including Aristotle thought that they hibernated in the mud at the bottom of ponds. We now think that that's a bit silly as they wouldn't be able to breathe but the sensible rationale was presumably that the bottom of deep ponds do not freeze in winter. It wasn't until the nineteenth century that the hibernation theory was disproved. The alternative theory of being able to fly many thousands of miles, cross deserts like the Sahara and navigate at night with extraordinary precision is equally preposterous.

Welcome Swallows don't really migrate even though they move around after breeding ('partial migrant') and some at least remain in the colder regions such as Tasmania and the South Island of New Zealand. So I wonder why they're 'Welcome'?

Meanwhile back at the website, I have finally updated all the Australasian galleries. That's 800 down and about 700 to go, so there's light at the end of the tunnel!

Greetings,

Ian

#562 Northern Lapwing 14 March 2016

I'm wading through all the non-Australian galleries on the website making them 'mobile-friendly', and I came across what is for me an iconic species. It brought back memories of when I first saw <Northern Lapwings> in September 1961 on the way back from summer holidays in Co. Kerry. The Lapwings were gathered in large flocks with <Golden Plover> on the Curragh in Co. Kildare, a large grassy plain west of Dublin probably better known for its race track. I was very struck by the crests of the Lapwings - they seemed very exotic by Irish standards - and I was motivated to find out what they were.



Northern Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*)

Oulu District, Finland, 14 June 2012

142629 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I was 14 then and already interested in wildlife but birds hadn't previously attracted my attention until several interesting sightings that year which included, in addition to the Lapwings, a good view of a <Common Kingfisher> and a mysterious sandpiper on a golf course in Co. Kerry, probably a <Common Redshank>. Anyway, my parents responded to my interest and gave me, when we got home, a copy of the classic Peterson et al. Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe. At Christmas 1961, a pair of binoculars came my way, and the rest, as they say, is history.



Northern Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*)

Oulu District, Finland, 14 June 2012

143228 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Northern Lapwings are a characteristic bird of farmland and marshes in Europe, occurring on both arable land and pasture. They breed throughout Britain and Ireland and their numbers are augmented in winter by migrants from northern Europe. The bird in the first two photos is a male in breeding plumage. Breeding males have longer crests and more black on the face and throat than females. When I photographed these I was in a hide in Finland at the lek where <Ruffs> #450 were displaying, but birds of other species came from time to time. The Lapwings were nesting and this young hatchling was wandering around the hide.



Northern Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*)

Oulu District, Finland, 14 June 2012

143078 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In non-breeding plumage, the crests are shorter, the throat is white and there are buffish fringes on the feathers covering the wings (fourth photo). This one is feeding in the estuary of the River Boyne downstream from Drogheda.



Northern Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*)

Baltray, Co. Louth, Ireland, 26 September 2001

05420 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I'm making good progress with website. I've finished more than 1,100 galleries and have less than 400 to go. I hope to finish them off in a few weeks, and maybe you'll get the bird of the week more regularly then!

Greetings

Ian

#563 Masked Lapwing 5 April 2016

This is a seriously overdue bird of the week, so I offer you my apologies. The reason or excuse, and the good news, is that I was working hard to complete the conversion of the birdway website to make it 'mobile friendly' and that is now finished. I've converted more than 1,600 galleries of birds and other wildlife and all the navigational pages, such as family thumbnails. Naturally I've thought up other improvements such as a top-level page of wildlife thumbnails but I'm taking a rest from the website to play catch-up with other effortlessly side-lined tasks such as 2015 tax returns :-).



Masked Lapwing (*Vanellus miles*)

Cairns, NE Queensland, 31 October 2010

113341 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The last bird of the week was the elegant and dignified Northern Lapwing, one of the birds that got me interested in birding more than 50 years ago. This week we have its loud and arrogant Australian cousin, the <Masked Lapwing>. Just in case you think I'm making an offensive comparison, I hasten to add that the other Australian Lapwing - and the only truly indigenous one - the <Banded Lapwing> is shy, dignified and attractive, which is probably why I've previously chosen it rather than the Masked Lapwing as bird of the week. It is, however, much rarer but I'll let you draw your own conclusions from that.



Masked Lapwing (*Vanellus miles novaehollandiae*)

Balmain, New South Wales, 3 April 2007

47908 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Masked Lapwing comes in two forms, sufficiently different to cause taxonomists chronic and persisting migraines. The northern variety, the 'Masked Lapwing/Plover' in the strict sense, shown in the first photo has a huge yellow wattle and a black cap that tapers to a point on the nape, while the southern 'Spur-winged Lapwing/Plover', second photo has a wattle that is much smaller (posteriorly) and shorter (ventrally) and a larger black cap which extends as an incomplete black collar draped over the shoulders. There are other difference: the northern one is paler, smaller and shorter-winged but has a larger bill. Consequently, taxonomists disagree as to whether we're dealing with one or two species.



Masked Lapwing (*Vanellus miles x novaehollandiae*)

Townsville, NE Queensland, 12 July 2011

117092 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The <<[IOC](#)>>, which I'm following here, treats them as a single species, the northern one being the nominate race *Vanellus miles (miles)* and the southern being the sub-species *V. miles novaehollandiae*. The New Holland tag refers to its original entirely mainland Australian range from Central Queensland south to Victoria and east to South Australia, while the nominate race occurs in northern Australia, New Guinea, eastern Indonesia and Christmas Island. <<[BirdLife International](#)>> treats them as different species, with the southern form being given full specific status *Vanellus novaehollandiae*. Unfortunately the name Spur-winged Lapwing is already used for an African species *V. spinosus*, so Birdlife International calls the Australian one the 'Black-shouldered Lapwing', a name largely unused in Australia.

The problem with treating them as different species is that the two form hybridise over a broad zone from Far North to Central Queensland - Cairns to Mackay - a particular obstacle to identification in Townsville, more or less in the middle. The bird in the third photo is a typical Townsville one with a somewhat intermediate, largish wattle and black smudges both below the main cap and on the shoulders. It's fairly like the pure northern variety found in Cairns, but I'm more comfortable treating it as hybrid *miles x novaehollandiae* and regarding them as a single species.



Masked Lapwing (*Vanellus miles x novaehollandiae*)

Townsville, NE Queensland, 7 April 2002

09072 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The fourth photo shows another Townsville bird cooling off in a dam in a paddock. It's also displaying the impressive carpal spurs on the wings, possessed by both the Masked and Spur-winged varieties. The Spur-winged race has dark tips on both the spurs and the bill. The spurs are used as weapons and the birds are very aggressive when nesting and the spurs are used both on the ground and in flight (below), with the parents dive-bombing intruders in spectacular fashion. The specific name *miles* mean 'soldier' in Latin. They're noisy birds too, and not just when nesting. Their sharp, grating 'kekekekeke' or shrill repeated 'kek' calls are a familiar sound throughout their range, day and night.



Masked Lapwing (*Vanellus miles x novaehollandiae*)

Townsville, NE Queensland, 15 August 2010

106342 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The 'nest' is just a scrape in the ground in short grass often near water and often in very vulnerable locations such as roadsides, parks, paddocks, gardens and airfields. They usually lay 3 or 4 large eggs and will re-lay if the clutch is lost to predation, mowing or being stepped on. Typical predators include birds such as Butcherbirds and reptiles such as Goannas (Monitor lizards).

Despite heavy losses, Masked Lapwings would appear to have benefitted from clearing of land following European settlement. In the past two hundred years, their range has expanded in Australia, and the southern race has become well established in Tasmania and colonised New Zealand, Lord Howe Island and, recently, New Caledonia, where it has bred since 1998. This is despite the fact that it is relatively sedentary in Australia, although an altitudinal migrant in the Snowy Mountains.



Masked Lapwing (*Vanellus miles novaehollandiae*)

Chittaway Point, New South Wales, 28 November 1999

© Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

As in all plovers, the eggs are large so the hatchlings are well developed and mobile at a very early age, below, after incubation by both parents for 28-30 days. They can also swim when very young. Until they fledge after 5-7 weeks, they remain very vulnerable to predation, relying on camouflage and their parents for survival.



Masked Lapwing (*Vanellus miles*)

Cairns, NE Queensland, 31 October 2010

113347 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Below is an older youngster showing the barred plumage and an already developing wattle. They start feeding themselves from a very early age but remain dependent on the parents for up to six months. The parents maintain the pair bond from one year to another and often return to the same site to nest.



Masked Lapwing (*Vanellus miles x novaehollandiae*)

Townsville, NE Queensland, 15 August 2010

62739 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

So there you have it: noisy, aggressive and successful. Sounds like a very 21st century lifestyle to me.

Incidentally, because all the new web pages use embedded scripts to load common code such as headers, their file names end in '.php' instead of '.htm'. If you use bookmarks to access the website, you'll automatically get redirected to the correct file or, in the case of individual photo pages, to the first photo page in the gallery. You may care to update the bookmarks either by replacing them (easier) or, for the technically inclined, editing them to replace the 'htm' with 'php'. If you do, the pages should load faster.

Greetings

Ian

#564 Red-wattled Lapwing 19 April 2016

While we're on the subject of Lapwings, here is a rather smart Asian one, the <[Red-wattled Lapwing](#)>, which bears more than a passing resemblance to its close relative the <[Banded Lapwing](#)> of Australia. The Banded Lapwing differs in having a yellow eye-ring and yellow base to the bill, pink legs, and the black and white pattern on the head and neck is different too.



Red-wattled Lapwing (*Vanellus indicus*)

Yamuna River, Delhi, India, 10 April 2003

16702 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It's usually found near water, like this one on the Yamuna River which flows through Delhi but is otherwise fairly catholic in its habitat preferences, which include cultivated land and it is quite common in some densely populated areas. Both <[House Crows](#)> and humans like its eggs but in India it has taken to nesting on pebbled roofs and walls instead of on the ground. This probably doesn't inconvenience the crows too much, but studies have shown that this leads to a spectacular increase in hatching and fledging success. Like all plovers, the chicks are mobile at an early age but don't fly till much later, so you'd wonder how well they fare running around on rooftops. Maybe they bounce well.



Red-wattled Lapwing (*Vanellus indicus*)

Yamuna River, Delhi, India, 10 April 2003

16695 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It was originally described from Indian specimens, hence the specific name *indicus*. In fact it ranges quite widely from Turkey in the west through the southern part of the Middle East to all of southern and southeast Asia. The original type found in India is the nominate race, but three other sub-species are described. I came across the western race *aigneri* in Dubai a couple of years ago, third photo, when visiting an equestrian park where the main attraction was - no **not** horses - the <Cream-coloured Courser>. This race has larger wattles and is paler than the Indian one, but otherwise rather similar. There is a third race in Sri Lanka and a fourth in southeast Asia which has a white cheek above a completely black collar and is also called the Black-necked Lapwing.



Red-wattled Lapwing (*Vanellus indicus aigneri*)

Al Asifa Stable Park, Dubai, UAE, 16 September 2014

160090 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The fourth photo shows a juvenile bird of the western race at the same place. The red wattle is incompletely developed, the crown is brownish and there are pale streaks on the throat. Otherwise, it is quite like the adult.



Red-wattled Lapwing (*Vanellus indicus aigneri*)

Al Asifa Stable Park, Dubai, UAE, 16 September 2014

160091 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Greetings

Ian

#565 Southern Lapwing 24 May 2016

It is, I regret more than a month since last bird of the "week" so you have probably given me up for lost or worse, unless of course you've been so busy too that you haven't noticed. Anyway, I'm now at Brisbane airport waiting for a flight, so you have my undivided attention for at least half an hour.



Southern Lapwing (*Vanellus chilensis*)

Trincity Ponds, Trinidad, West Indies, 24 September 2005

22805 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I'm continuing the series of global Lapwings, with a South American one, the <Southern Lapwing>. Its crest gives it a superficial resemblance to the <Northern Lapwing> of Eurasia, but it's not a very close relative and used to be in its own monotypic (single species) genus.



Southern Lapwing (*Vanellus chilensis*)

Ariba, Trinidad, West Indies, 29 September 2005

23974 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It has a wide distribution from the tip of Tierra del Fuego in the south to Nicaragua in Central America. Interestingly, there are two Lapwing species in South America (the other is the Andean Lapwing) but none in North America, odd given the almost global distribution of Lapwing species so one would wonder how their ancestors got around.



Southern Lapwing (*Vanellus chilensis*)

Ariba, Trinidad, West Indies

24016 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Southern Lapwing lacks the gentle manners of its Northern counterpart and is noisy and aggressive like the Masked Lapwing of Australia. In fact, in Brazil and Chile it is often kept with wings clipped as a guard 'dog'. Maybe I should get one to get my own back on my neighbour's Great Dane who often wakes me in the middle of the night.

Another reason why I've been slack about the bird of the week is that I haven't been doing much bird photography. That I hope is about to change. I'm on my way to Vienna at the moment with the intention of spending a week birding with my sister Gillian in Slovakia en route to my nephew's wedding in Ireland (her son Ian), so I hope I'll have some interesting photos for you soon.

Greetings

Ian

#566 European Bee-eater 11 June 2016

I met my sister Gillian in Vienna where we spent a couple of days before going by ferry along the Danube to Bratislava, just across the border with Slovakia. We arranged to spend three days with birding guides with my targets being to photograph raptors, owls and woodpecker. We went on the first day to this large <European Bee-eater> colony just outside Bratislava.



European Bee-eater (*Merops apiaster*)

Bratislava District, Slovakia, 30 May 2016

169382 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The colony was in a sandy cliff at a site near Devin Castle which sits in a strategic location at the confluence of the Danube and Morava Rivers, both of which form the border between Austria and Slovakia. I was able to sit at the edge of the cliff and photograph both birds perched in the shrubs below me and flying to and from their burrows in the cliff. European Bee-eaters are vocal and make a soft trilling call similar to their close Australian relatives, the <Rainbow Bee-eater> and it was very pleasant watching and listening to them.



European Bee-eater (*Merops apiaster*)

Bratislava District, Slovakia, 30 May 2016

169407 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

"European" is a bit of a misnomer as they are migrants from sub-Saharan Africa and breed across the warmer parts of Eurasia from North Africa, through Europe to central Asia. Since the nineteenth century some have stayed behind to breed in in South Africa, which they do in the southern summer and then move farther north in Africa in the southern autumn at the same time as their Eurasian counterparts are moving north to breed in the northern hemisphere. South African populations have declined in recent years so this situation may not last.



European Bee-eater (*Merops apiaster*)

Bratislava District, Slovakia, 30 May 2016

169390 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Bees do make up a large part of their diet, though they will eat many other insects as well. After catching a bee, a bee-eater will take it back to a perch where it bangs the head of the unfortunate insect on the branch and then rubs its tail on the branch to get rid of the sting. If you look carefully at the photo below you will see that a lucky bee has just used up one of its nine lives, that is if they have that many like cats.



European Bee-eater (*Merops apiaster*)

Bratislava District, Slovakia, 30 May 2016

169415 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The photo below shows both the bee-eater colony and in the distance Devin Castle on a 200m/600ft high rock. There are bee-eater burrows both in the bank on the left and in the bottom right of the photo.



Bee-eater Colony near Devin Castle, Slovakia

Devin Castle has a very interesting history and you can read about it here <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devín_Castle>>. The Bee-eater site is an important one for fossils as well and our birding guide showed us some rocks that had mollusc fossils in it that looked like scallops.

I'm on a Dublin bus at the moment going to visit my niece. Thanks to the miracles of modern communication and the Irish SIM card in my mobile I can send this to you from my laptop.

Greetings

Ian

#567 Common Buzzard 9 July 2016

More like bird of the month at the moment, I regret. Slovakia is famous for its raptors so they, along with owls and woodpeckers, were my primary target there with my sister Gillian in June. We did get to see the most interesting ones: <[Eastern Imperial Eagle](#)>, <[Golden Eagle](#)>, <[Lesser Spotted Eagle](#)>, and Saker and [Peregrine Falcon](#), but they were very shy and I had little success with photographing them. I suspect it was because deer hunting is popular there - we saw many hides used by hunters - but perhaps also because it was the breeding season.



Common Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*)

Portmore, Co. Antrim, Ireland

170133 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Ironically, I had more luck with raptors when we returned to Ireland. When I was a teenager there in the 1960s, Ireland was probably one of the worst countries in the world for raptors. All the larger and mid-size ones (Eagles, Buzzards, Harriers, etc) had been exterminated in the 19th and early 20th century, and some of the smaller ones like Peregrines and Sparrowhawks were rare as result of widespread use of pesticides such as DDT, the Silent Spring phenomenon. So the <Common Kestrel> was the only species that one saw regularly.



Common Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*)

Portmore, Co. Antrim, Ireland

170134 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Things have improved since as a result of the banning of the most persistent pesticides, the re-introduction of some species and natural recolonisation by one species. I'll deal with a re-introduction next time, but here is the recoloniser, the <Common Buzzard> which became extinct in Ireland in 1891. It recolonised Rathlin Island on the far north coast of Ireland twice, once in the 1930s and again after it became extinct a second time as the result of the myxomatosis rabbit-killing epidemic in the 1950s. Rathlin Island is a mere 30km/20miles from the Mull of Kintyre in Scotland, no distance for able-bodied young Buzzards in search of a territory.



Common Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*)

Portmore, Co. Antrim, Ireland

170137 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Rathlin Island is also about as far as you can get in Northern Ireland from the Irish Republic, where strychnine was legally used to poison 'pests' by sheep farmers until it was outlawed in 1991. Far be it from me to jump to conclusions, but it seems a huge coincidence that the subsequent spread of the Common Buzzard to almost the whole of Ireland didn't start until the 1990s and continues to this day. I saw my first Irish one in 1994 in Co. Louth just south of the border with Northern Ireland. Since then, its range extension has been spectacular. It is now, if not the commonest, certainly the easiest raptor to see in Ireland either soaring over fields or perched on light poles near Motorways. In 2015 it bred in at least 18 of the 32 counties. It is still uncommon in the west of Ireland, west of a line from about Sligo to Cork, though I did see one in Bantry, West Cork on this trip.



Portmore Lough, Co. Antrim, Ireland

The bird in the photos did, unlike its Slovakian counterparts, an obliging fly-past when we visited the <<[RSPB reserve at Portmore Lough](#)>>. This was on the day after our return to Ireland, when we were staying with cousins at nearby rural Ballinderry in Northern Ireland. Portmore Lough, better known for its wildfowl and nesting Common Terns and Black-headed Gulls (they nest on the floating platform provided for their benefit, just visible behind the reeds in the photo), is an interesting place in its own right. It's a shallow, almost circular lake perhaps 2km across and about the same distance from Lough Neagh, the largest lake in Ireland. Rumour has it that it was formed by an air-burst meteor or a meteorite about 1500 years ago.



“Huntington Castle” at Huntington Castle

Actually, the real reason for my trip to Europe was not raptors or Slovakia but the marriage of my sister Gillian's son Ian at <<[Huntington Castle](#)>> in Co. Carlow to his fiancée Sinéad. Huntington Castle was 'rebuilt' in 1625 and captured by Oliver Cromwell in 1650. It is, presumably, the subject of an ancient tune by the same name (I have a copy of a Scottish version dating from 1795) that I knew already from as a duet that we play on recorders in Townsville. The photo shows me playing it on a tenor recorder during the signing of the register and being watched very intently by my one year old great nephew Loïc sitting on the lap of his mother Jeannine, one of nephew Ian's two sisters. His other sister Elyena took the photo and my sister Gillian is holding the sheet music in the form of my iPad, a great family occasion.

What has Huntington Castle to do with Buzzards? Well, just as the celebrant was starting the ceremony and saying that the wedding date was the sixth anniversary of

the couple's meeting, a pair of Common Buzzards circled very deliberately just overhead. I, naturally, took that as a sign of a natural blessing on the wedding and like to think of the pair of birds as a totem of the married couple. Birds are frequently totems in <Aboriginal Culture> and, as I write, it is currently <NAIDOC week> in Australia, a time to celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, culture and achievements.

Greetings (from back home in North Queensland)

Ian

#568 Red Kite 18 August 2016

Definitely bird of the month at the moment, I regret. Recently one of my cataracts worsened quickly, making it difficult to observe birds, take and edit photos: very discouraging to say the least. Thanks to the wonders of modern medicine, I had the offending lens replaced ten days ago, resulting in a spectacular improvement in my eye sight. Now I'm looking forward to getting the other one done this coming Monday.



Red Kite (*Milvus milvus*)

Montsonis District, Catalonia, Spain, 12 October 2014

162268 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The <Red Kite>, like the Common Buzzard in the last edition of bird of the week #567, is another good news story in the recent history of raptors in Ireland. This time its recovery is a result of a successful reintroduction, rather than natural

recolonisation with parallel reintroductions by the Irish Golden Eagle Trust in Co. Wicklow south of Dublin and by the RSPB in Co. Down south of Belfast, starting in 2007 and 2008 respectively. Introduced pairs nested successfully in both counties in 2010, and Irish-born Red Kites nested successfully in these counties in 2012 and 2013. In 2014, there were 16 pairs in Co. Down and in 2015 there were 47 pairs in Co. Wicklow, 2 pairs in Co. Wexford and 4 pairs in Dublin-Meath so the population seems to be thriving despite some deaths from rodenticides - Red Kites are partial to carrion.



Red Kite (*Milvus milvus*)

Avoca District, Co. Wicklow, Ireland, 20 June 2016

170232 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I had photographed Red Kites in Spain and Andorra in 2007 and 2014 (first photo), but I was keen to see them in Ireland too. The best place to see them in Co. Wicklow is in Avoca, where there is a winter roost which contained more than 60 birds in the 2015-2016 winter. I went there with my cousin Jean in June and after a distant view of a bird hunting along the Avoca River, she took me to another (secret) location where she had seen a pair of birds in March. Sure enough the birds were still there and nesting in a pine tree.



Red Kite (*Milvus milvus*)

Avoca District, Co. Wicklow, Ireland, 20 June 2016

170236 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

We were of course anxious not to disturb the pair, so we parked at some distance from the nest and observed it from the car. So I make no apologies for the distance at which photos 2,3 and 4 were taken. No. 2 shows an adult bird flying towards the nest carrying food. No. 3 shows the same bird on the right of the nest being watched by two nestlings on the left. One of the nestlings looks nearly fledged while the second is less well developed and still has downy white feathers. No. 4 shows the adult flying away from the nest still carrying the food, watched by the nestlings. The colour of the adult matches that of the tree but the blue wing tags give its location away.



Red Kite (*Milvus milvus*)

Avoca District, Co. Wicklow, Ireland, 20 June 2016

170238 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

We wondered whether the adult was wary of us sitting in the car but it returned to the nest two minutes later and we drove away leaving them all in peace. By this time it was late evening so we drove back to Avoca village to see whether any non-breeding birds were using the roost. We parked in the car park opposite the church on the main street and were treated to several kites - and a Common Buzzard - circling over the town.. The one in the last photo flew right over our heads in the car park. You can see the wing tags on this one too.



Red Kite (*Milvus milvus*)

Avoca, Co. Wicklow, Ireland, 20 June 2016

169562 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Congratulations to both the Golden Eagle Trust - <<<http://raptorpolitics.org.uk/2016/04/25/irish-red-kite-project-soars-to-new-heights/>>> - and the <<RSPB>> on their wonderful work.

Greetings,

Ian

#569 Long-tailed and White-winged Trillers 4 September 2016

Here is a comparison of a New Caledonian species with a related Australian one in order to unsbtly bring to your attention a talk I'm giving on New Caledonian birds to Birding NSW in Sydney. The talk is entitled "**Birds of New Caledonia**: from strangely familiar to very strange" and arises from my visit to New Caledonia last year.



Breeding Male White-winged Triller (*Lalage tricolor*)

The Kimberley, NW Western Australia, 12 September 2004 10018 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Many of the very strange birds featured as Birds of the Week in the second half of 2015, so here is a species familiar to Australian birders, the <White-winged Triller> and a rather similar one that occurs in New Caledonia, the <Long-tailed Triller>. Trillers are small relatives of the Cuckooshrikes and both groups are members of the Oriental-Australasian family the <Campephagidae> ("caterpillar gluttons").



Female White-winged Triller (*Lalage tricolor*)

Toonpan, NE Queensland, 23 June 2002

11070 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The White-winged is the more widespread of the two Australian Trillers, occurring throughout Australia. It is a summer breeding visitor to southern Australia and Tasmania, but present all year in northern Australia. Some of the migrants end up in southern New Guinea in the southern winter and vagrants have turned up in Lord Howe Island and New Zealand. Breeding males are black, grey and white (first photo) with black heads down as far as just below the eye, while females are brown and white with a buff supercilium (eyebrow) as in the second photo.



Eclipse Male White-winged Triller (*Lalage tricolor*)

Cloncurry, NW Queensland, 24 May 2006

33453 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Non-breeding adult males (third photo) have an 'eclipse' plumage which looks more like the brown female including the pale supercilium but retaining the black flight feathers on the wings. Juveniles look fairly like the brown females but young males are intermediate between the juveniles and the eclipse males. This variability is a challenge for taxonomists, particular as there are close related populations in Indonesia and the Philippines which differ mainly in the amount of white on the wings in adult males and may or not be different species (White-shouldered and Pied Trillers respectively).



Male Long-tailed Triller (*Lalage leucopyga*)

Rivière Bleue, Grande Terre, New Caledonia, 23 June 2015 165895 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In New Caledonia, there is only one species, the resident and quite common Long-tailed Triller, which also occurs in Vanuatu and the southern Solomons. This species is about the same size as the White-winged Triller (17cm/7in) and the males differ from it in the amount of white on the wings, though individuals are variable. Females are similar, but have slightly brownish upperparts and buff on the white wing patches. I identified the one on the main island (Grande Terre) in the fourth photo as a male and the one on Ouvéa in the fifth as a female, but now I'm not sure, particularly as these are of two different races and the field guides and handbooks are not very enlightening.



Female Long-tailed Triller (*Lalage leucopyga*)

Ouvéa, Loyalty Islands, New Caledonia, 27 June 2015

165895 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Incidentally, the Long-tailed Triller was first described from Norfolk Island where it, the nominate race, is now extinct. Does that make it an Australian Triller?



Kagu (*Rhynochetos jubatus*)

Parc des Grandes Fougères, New Caledonia, 28 June 2015 166865 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This all got a bit more involved than I'd intended. I had just wanted to illustrate similarities between Australian and New Caledonian birds, something I found very interesting. In case it leaves you cold and I've put you off coming to the talk, here is a reminder of the legendary <Kagu> which was our main target and should be on every birder's bucket list. This is at the opposite end of the scale of taxonomic divergence, is the sole member of its family and shares its order with only one other species from South and Central America, the Sunbittern. Now that's a challenge for evolutionary taxonomists and biogeographers!

Greetings

Ian

#570 Masked Booby 14 October 2016

<Masked Booby> was bird of the week in May 2011 #408, but here it is again to acknowledge the recent use of one of my photos in an Australian, or more specifically, Norfolk Island, stamp.



Here is the original photo taken on Philip Island just off Norfolk Island in 2012. The differences between the sexes in Masked Boobies are subtle, with the main difference being in the colour of the bill: yellower in males than in females which have a bluish tint to the bill.



Male Masked Booby (*Sula dactylatra*)

Philip Island, off Norfolk Island, Australia, 13 March 2012 141075 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Here is another male Booby from the 2011 bird of the week, taken on an island in the Coral Sea east of Townsville. Note the difference in the colour of the eye. Masked Boobies generally have yellow irises, but those breeding on Norfolk Island, Lord Howe Island and Kermadec Island (off New Zealand) have dark brown irises and are sufficiently different in other less obvious respects to be treated as a separate race, sometimes known as the Tasman Booby (*Sula dactylatra tasmani*).



Masked Booby (Sula dactylatra)

East Diamond Islet, Coral Sea, Australia, 13 December 2006

45575 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The next photo shows an adult female Masked Booby on Norfolk Island itself. Here you can see another difference characteristic of the tasmani subspecies: the legs and feet are khaki (those of the race *personata* found in the Coral Sea, off Western Australia and elsewhere across the Pacific have dark, almost black legs and feet.



Female Masked Booby (*Sula dactylatra*)

Norfolk Island, Australia, 13 March 2012

140688 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Here is a juvenile at the same site on Norfolk Island as the female bird. The juveniles are somewhat similar in appearance to [adult Brown Boobies](#) and the best distinguishing field mark is the complete white collar of the juvenile Masked Booby. In Brown Boobies the brown of the head and neck is contiguous with the brown of the back and, in front, extends as far down as level with the wings and is sharply demarcated from the white breast.



Juvenile Masked Booby (*Sula dactylatra*)

Norfolk Island, Australia, 13 March 2012

140697 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Here is another photo of a juvenile Masked Booby, this time in flight and at Lord Howe Island, the other Australian breeding colony of the Tasman subspecies. The white collar is clear visible in flight too, as is the extensive amount of white on the breast.



Juvenile Masked Booby (*Sula dactylatra*)

Lord Howe Island, Australia, 14 May 2013

154227 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Masked Boobies breed on isolated islands throughout the tropics and sub-tropics. As well as occurring across the Pacific, they breed in the eastern and western Indian Ocean, the Red Sea and in the western and central Atlantic. The adults normally stay close to the breeding colonies, though young birds and some adults do range farther afield. So, they do occur occasionally along the coast of mainland Australia.

The largest colony is found on an uninhabited coral cay called Clipperton Island or Ile de al Passion - it's a French territory - off the coast of Mexico, with a population of perhaps 100,000 birds.

It was visited in 1958 by an American ornithologist called Kenneth Stager who was shocked to find that feral pigs had reduced the population of Masked Boobies to a mere 150 birds. Being an old-fashioned ornithologist, he had a gun with him to collect specimens so he singlehandedly shot all of the pigs, 58 in number, restoring the cay to its pre-human state.

Other animals to benefit were the local red crabs and other nesting seabirds. It has the second largest colony of <Brown Boobies> and one of the relatively few colonies of the eastern Pacific <Nazca Booby>, very similar in appearance to the Masked, but better known on the Galapagos island and Isla de al Plata off the coast of Ecuador.

Greetings

Ian

#571 Crimson Finch 10 November 2016

<Crimson Finch> featured as bird of the week a little over eight years ago, but I've decided to have it again as a pair appeared in my backyard several weeks ago, the first time I've seen any in Bluewater.



Male Crimson Finch (*Neochmia phaeton*)

Bluewater, NE Queensland, 22 September 2016

170099 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Shortly earlier, I'd seen what looked like a female <Satin Flycatcher> having a splash in the pool. Satin Flycatchers are rare in North Queensland, though they do show up sometimes on migration. This one didn't hang around for a photo while I got the camera, so I headed off around the property looking for it. Female Satin Flycatchers are notorious difficult to separate from their slightly duller cousins, female <Leaden Flycatchers>, so a photograph is essential not only for identification but also to convince anyone else.



Female Crimson Finch (*Neochmia phaeton*)

Bluewater, NE Queensland, 22 September 2016

170085 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I didn't find the Flycatcher, but I found the Crimson Finches, male in the first photo and female in the second, feeding on some unseasonable Guinea Grass. We've had an odd dry season with not much but sufficient rain at intervals to confuse some of the local plants - Guinea Grass usually seeds here at the end of the wet season (April). In North Queensland, Crimson Finches are usually found in dense grassland near wetlands, and these two were only about 50m from Bluewater Creek, which was still running at the time.



Fledgling Crimson Finch (*Neochmia phaeton*)

Townsville Town Common, NE Queensland, 9 October 2016 169939 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

A couple of weeks later I photographed this very young Crimson Finch at the Townsville Town Common. When I approached, it was being fed by an adult male, who flew off leaving the young bird to its fate. You can see the very pale gape, typical of very young birds. Young Crimson Finches just have a reddish flush in the wings and tail.



Male Crimson Finch (*Neochmia phaeton*)

Mary River, Northern Territory, 6 September 2009

91525 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

A few days after seeing the pair of Crimson Finches in the backyard, a male Crimson Finch obligingly appeared beside the pool when I was having a swim. I thought the plumage was more intensely coloured and with strong white spots on the flanks than the male member of the earlier pair - more like the one in the fourth photo. I wondered whether they were different individuals, with the first one being younger than the second. The one in the fourth photo was taken on a trip to the Northern Territory and northern Western Australia in 2009.



Crimson x Star Finch (*Neochmia phaeton x ruficauda*)

Kununurra, NE Western Australia, 18 September 2009

93157 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

On that same trip, I photographed this odd-looking individual at Kununurra. We decided that it was a hybrid between a Crimson Finch and a <Star Finch>, both of which were present at the time and both of which belong to the same Australasian genus, *Neochmia*, which includes two other species: <Red-browed> and <Plum-headed> Finches.

I don't really keep a yard list as such. If I did, the day I found the Crimson Finches would have been notable. Apart from the possible Satin Flycatcher, later that afternoon I flushed a female King Quail. This time I was armed not with the camera but a brush cutter as part of the fire season preparations.

Several weeks later I had the rest of the long grass cut by a man with a tractor. After he had finished, I went down to inspect the result and spotted a Blue-winged Kookaburra pouncing on something in the cut grass. This proved to be the King Quail, which flew off a high speed pursued by the Kookaburra. The Quail landed safely in some long grass and the Kookaburra perched in a nearby tree. If you ever tried to flush a quail a second time, you'll know how elusive they are on the ground, so I hope the Kookaburra didn't have quail for lunch.

Greetings

Ian

#572 South Island (Pied) Oystercatcher 24 December 2016

No, I haven't been in New Zealand recently. Rather, the choice of a New Zealand bird of the week (month) is in honour of a lovely book called *Birds of the West Wind* by Garry Sheeran which arrived in the mail last month (I supplied some of the photos for it). It's about 'how Australia has shaped New Zealand's avian life', to quote the sub-title. I couldn't put it down, and I'll say a bit more about it at the end of this when I've dealt with the <[South Island Oystercatcher](#)>.



South Island (Pied) Oystercatcher (*Haematopus finschi*)

Tasman R., Waitaki Valley, South Is., NZ, 12 Nov 2011

133500 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

To do the book justice, I wanted to choose a more exotic New Zealand endemic than something that is closely related to its Australian counterpart, the <[Pied Oystercatcher](#)>, but any of the really unusual ones that I have photographed have already appeared as bird of the week in the past (e.g. [#436](#) Campbell Teal, [#437](#) Auckland Snipe, [#494](#) Black-fronted Tern, [#434](#) Kea, [#438](#) Yellow-crowned Parakeet, [#432](#) South Island Wren), with the exception of the <[Rifleman](#)>, or more politically correctly the Rifleperson, but the photos of this tiny bird are rather distant. Anyway, everyone likes Oystercatchers (they were for example my mother's favourite bird) and the South Island Oystercatcher or more familiarly SIPO is one of the few New Zealand endemics on the Australian list.



Tasman River, South Island, New Zealand

The bird in the first photo was one of a pair that I found beside the Tasman River, second photo, more or less plonk in the middle of the South Island. SIPOs, unlike the other New Zealand endemic the Variable Oystercatcher, nest inland. At the time I was after a bigger fish, the very rare <Black Stilt>, which inhabits a few of the so-called braided rivers of the South Island including the Tasman. I arrived at the designated spot, to find that the braided part of the river was four or five kilometres wide and about twelve long and I hadn't included a helicopter in my photographic gear.



Black Stilt (Himantopus novaeseelandiae)

Ahuriri River, Waitaki Valley, South Island, New Zealand, 12 November 2011

133611 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Lady Luck smiled on me later that day, and I found a single Black Stilt, third photo, at the next location, the Ahuriri River also in the Waitaki Valley, where highway crossed the River making access to both sides very easy. I returned to the same spot on the way back from Fiordland four days later. This time there was no sign of the Stilt, but there were some more Oystercatchers, fourth photo, and I was able, undistracted, to spend some time photographing a colony of <Black-fronted Terns>.



South Island (Pied) Oystercatcher (*Haematopus finschi*)

Ahuriri R., Waitaki Valley, South Is., NZ, 16 Nov 2011

122740 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Oystercatchers have been a bit of a headache for taxonomists consisting of between nine (IOC) and twelve (Birdlife International/IBW) species globally. They're all rather similar and are either pied or completely black, or in the case of the aptly named Variable Oystercatcher either or somewhere in between. The IOC treats the Eurasian, Australian Pied and South Island as different species but IBW (Handbook of Birds of the World) treats the <Eurasian> and Australian Pied as different species, but the South Island as a subspecies of the Eurasian. The latter poses some interesting questions of biogeography, and Garry Sheeran devotes a chapter of his book to this conundrum.



South Island (Pied) Oystercatcher (*Haematopus finschi*)

Tasman R., Waitaki Valley, South Is., NZ, 12 Nov 2011

133532 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Briefly, the South Island has shorter legs and a longer finer bill than the Australian Pied and has a white patch in front of the wing when folded. In flight, the South Island has, fifth photo, a longer white wing stripe and white rump extending further up the back, while in the Australian Pied, sixth photo, has a short wing bar and the white rump doesn't extend so far. The South Island also shows more white on the underwing, but I haven't got a photo to show that.



Red Oystercatcher (Haematopus longirostris)

Toomulla Beach, Northeastern Queensland, 26 August 2007

58214 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Returning to Garry's book, I hasten to assure you that it has much more important topics to discuss than the subtle differences I've covered here. He divides the book into two main parts. The first one deals with the big question of how the origin of continents and islands has influenced the evolution of birds over the last 80 million years ago. This takes us straight into: the story of the split up of Gondwana; the movements of the pieces that became Australia, New Zealand and the other islands of Australasia; the timing of bird evolution; the great meteoritic extinction 63 millions years ago; the appearance and disappearance of land masses caused by changes in sea levels; and the effect of prevailing winds and cyclones on the colonisation of islands.

The second part of the book has different chapters for different groups of birds, such as the Moas, Kiwis, the New Zealand Parrots, the Rock Wrens, various strange New

Zealand indigenous families as well as those groups that have Australian relatives such as the New Zealand <[Honeyeaters](#)> and <[Robins](#)>. Garry writes in an easy style aimed at the 'non-birdy common man' but the amount of scientific detail covered is quite remarkable - a wonderful book. In Australia it is available from <<[Andrew Isles in Melbourne](#)>>; elsewhere you can contact Garry directly at gjbooksnz@gmail.com. RRP in New Zealand is \$NZ35, in Australia \$AUS40.

Well, tomorrow is Christmas Day. I've chosen a photo to wish you Seasons Greetings, but I'll send that in a different email.

Ian

#573 Golden Pheasant and Season's Greetings 24 December 2016

As usual I'm not sending any actual Christmas cards - instead I make a monthly contribution to the Australian Wildlife Conservancy. So here is my Season's Greetings photo.

I did receive a few cards this year. The first one had eight festive Australian Brush-Turkeys, hand painted by the sender - thank you Jo! - and the second had a 19th century Japanese wood-block print of a Golden Pheasant - thank you Bernice! So, inspired by both of those I dug out this photo that I took in the Alligator Creek section of Bowling Green Bay National Park, south of Townsville.

Full of symbolism of course. A <[Golden Pheasant](#)> in the wild in Australia seems to me as incongruous as Christmas in the middle of summer, particularly here in the tropics; turkey is of course standard fare for Christmas dinner; Christmas is a time for families, and my sister Gillian was with me on a visit from Ireland when I took the photo; and I suppose, failing turkey, pheasant would be quite a good substitute for dinner.



Golden Pheasant (*Chrysolophus pictus*)

Alligator Creek, NE Queensland, 21 April 2013

153370 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I must say, I do like the rather bemused expression of the [Brush-Turkey](#) in the background. Who knows where the Golden Pheasant escaped from - it certainly didn't get to North Queensland from central China under its own steam.

This year, I'm having a non-Christmas again. I've avoided shopping centres like the plague, played carols at a few pre-Christmas events only under duress and have invited a couple of friends, also without family here in Townsville, to a non-Christmas lunch.

One tradition I do like is the opportunity to greet friends and relatives and wish them all the best for the New Year. I share what seems a general feeling that 2016 left a lot to be desired, so here's to 2017: may it exceed our expectations!!

Best wishes

Ian

Year 2017: #574 to #580

#574 (Eurasian) Three-toed Woodpecker 16 January 2017

First of all my best wishes for a contented and healthy New Year. There is one important change for Birdway customers with the new year. I'm planning to officially deregister the Birdway company at the end of the Australian financial year (30 June) so in preparation for that birdway stopped trading on 31 December. I've registered as a sole trader, so any future invoices will be made out by me rather in the name of the company and will not include GST.

I've also removed the books *Diary of a Bird Photographer* and *Where to Find Birds in Northern Queensland* from the Apple Store, Google Play and Kobo Books. If you want to buy them, contact me directly, ian@birdway.com.au or ianbirdway@gmail.com. I've put instructions on the website: <[Diary of a Bird Photographer](#)> and <[Where to Find Birds on Northern Queensland](#)>. Having removed the middlemen and GST, I can now offer them at reduced prices of \$5 and \$15 respectively (Australian dollars or equivalent; foreign currencies preferably through PayPal). I'll investigate direct purchase through the website, but for the moment I'll email them to customers in the required format (ePub for Apple, Windows and Android computers, tablets and smart phones; Kindle for Amazon readers).

Back to the New Year: here's the last photo that I took in 2016, a two day old new moon just after sunset on 31st December.



New Moon

Bluewater, NE Queensland, 31 December 2016

180518 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

New Year is often represented symbolically by a chubby baby wearing not much more than a top hat and a banner with the new year number on it. Here, perhaps more appropriately for us, is a new year baby Dollarbird taken from my house last Friday, 3 days after it left the nest. Junior is on the left looking relaxed, while an alert and anxious-looking parent is on the right.



Oriental / Asian Dollarbird (*Eurystomus orientalis*)

Bluewater, NE Queensland, 13 January 2017

180662 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

A pair of <Dollarbirds> nest regularly in a termite-ridden poplar gum near the house, which has plenty of nesting hollows thanks to the termites. The same tree is also the headquarters of the local band of Blue-winged Kookaburras, but the two species seem to co-habit quite peacefully, if not quietly. The dollarbird nest is at a great height, perhaps 25m/80ft, so the first introduction of the young birds to the outside world is a perilous decent to the ground that doesn't always end well.

This year, the young bird landed in my neighbour's garden on the 10th January. He has both a dog and a ride-on lawn mower that is his favourite toy and I warned him about the bird. The parents made lots of noise over the next three days, presumably in defence of the newcomer. Consequently, I assumed all was well but I was of course relieved to see it safely up in the tree.



Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker (*Picoides tridactylus*)

Tvrdošín, Orava District, Slovakia, 1 June 2016

169792 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

That's by way of a new year aside. I've chosen another hollow-nesting bird as the subject of this posting, the <[Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker](#)> from the trip to Slovakia last June. Those of you who have been on the list for a while probably know that Woodpeckers are among my favourite birds, even though or perhaps because I've most lived in Woodpecker-deprived countries - Ireland and then Australia, though eastern Ireland has recently been colonised successfully by the Great Spotted Woodpecker.



Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker (*Picoides tridactylus*)

Tvrdošín, Orava District, Slovakia, 1 June 2016

169812 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Woodpeckers were among my target birds in Slovakia. Although we saw several species, the only one that I got good photos of was this one. A very closely related three-toed woodpecker also occurs in North America . There is disagreement as to whether they should be treated as the same or separate species, so it's qualified here with 'Eurasian'. The nesting hollow was close to the ground so I was able to set up the camera and tripod at a convenient distance (see second last photo) and wait for the adults to visit carrying food.



Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker (*Picoides tridactylus*)

Tvrdošín, Orava District, Slovakia, 1 June 2016

169824 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The males are distinguishable by having some yellow streaks on the crown. The yellow varies in intensity and was very pale in this male - first of the Woodpecker photos. He made only one visit during the hour or so I was there, so the female either did most of the work or had more success in finding food. This species is supposedly shy, but this pair didn't take much notice of me, though the female sometimes perched on a tree closer to the camera and looked in my direction (photo directly above).



Nesting Hole of Three-toed Woodpecker

Tvrdošín, Orava District, Slovakia, 1 June 2016

© Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

A little later, our guides found an active hollow of a Great Spotted Woodpecker with noisy young nearby. These adults were much shyer and wouldn't approach the nest while I was in the vicinity, so I left them in peace after a little while. Unlike Dollarbirds, Woodpeckers can't rely on termites to do all the work of burrowing for them and have to do it themselves. You can see on these photos that there were a few false starts chipping through the bark. Eurasian Three-toed Woodpeckers usually nest in Spruce.



Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker (*Picoides tridactylus*)

Kuusamo District, Finland, 17 June 2012

143727 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I was pleased with the photos that I got of the Slovakian Three-toed Woodpeckers. It was only later that I found that I had already photographed another nesting site in Finland, four years before (last photo). On this photo you can see that the bird has only three toes. All - I believe - other Woodpeckers have four toes and usually cling onto trees with two toes pointing forwards and two braced backwards. I find it hard to imagine what competitive advantage there would lead to the three-toed losing one of its toes.

Greetings

Ian

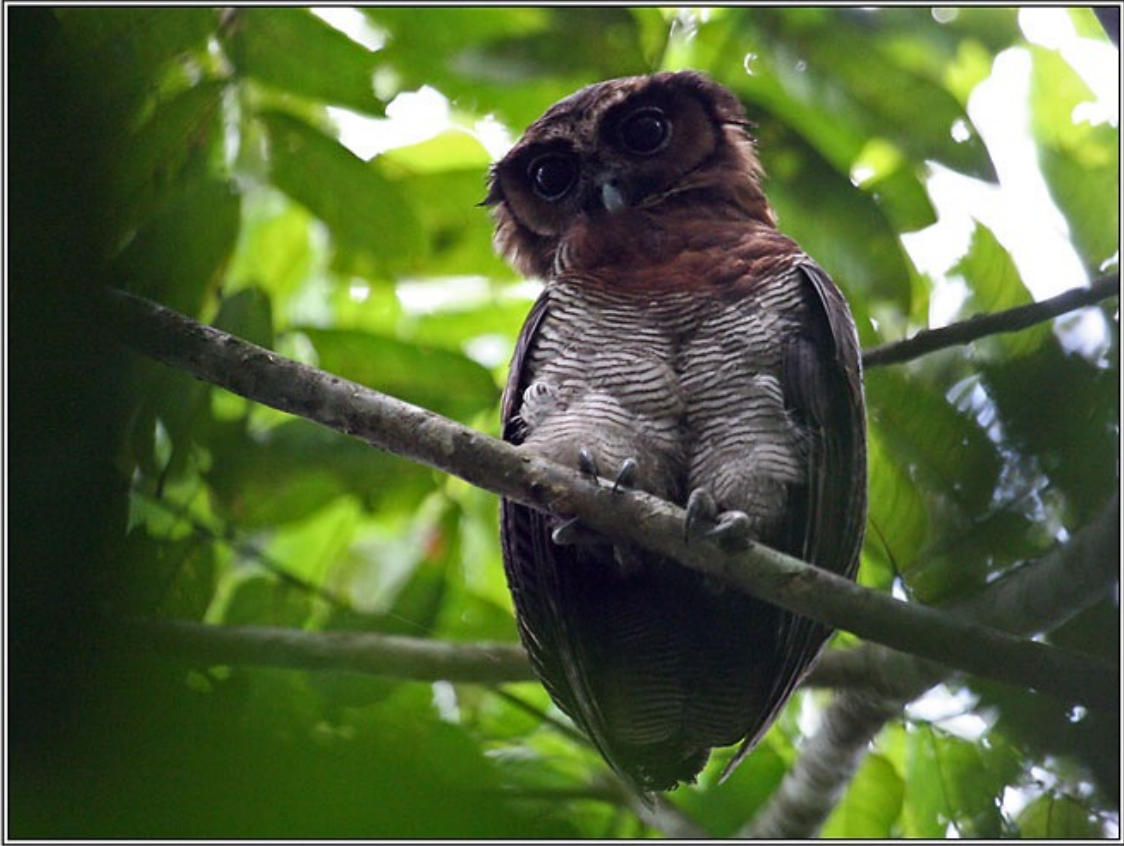
#575 Brown Wood Owl 6 February 2017

I've chosen an owl this time because I want to talk about a beautiful book called *The Enigma of the Owl*. A complimentary copy of it arrived recently by air from the UK, because I supplied a photo of a Rufous Owl. I'll come back to the book and the Rufous Owl in a moment, but first, here is the Brown Wood Owl, which, unlike the Rufous Owl, hasn't ever featured as bird of the week.



Early Morning on the Kinabatangan River, 28 April 2007

In 2007 I spent several days at an unashamedly spartan wildlife outfit called <<[Uncle Tan's Wildlife Adventures](#)>> in near the Kinabatangan River in Sabah, Malaysian Borneo. One doesn't go there for the facilities - the best shower we had was during a monsoonal downpour when everyone repaired outside with soap and shampoo - but for the wonderful wildlife. There were regular wildlife-spotting boat trips by day and by night on the river and lots of interesting animals, including <[Orang Utans](#)> in the jungle near the camp. My main target was, successfully, the <[Buffy Fish Owl](#)> but we also came across the Brown Wood Owl in the forest between the camp and the river.



Brown Wood Owl (*Strix leptogrammica*)

Kinabangan River, Sabah, Malaysia, 26 April 2007

49043 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This is a medium to large owl, 40-55cm/16-22in in length, a member of the globally widespread genus *Strix* which includes the well-known Tawny Owl of Europe, the Barred and Spotted Owls of North America and other representatives in Africa and South America but not Australia. The specific name *leptogrammica* means fine-lined and refers to the elegant barred underparts.



Brown Wood Owl (*Strix leptogrammica*)

Kinabangan River, Sabah, Malaysia, 26 April 2007

49049 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

We came across the Brown Wood Owl twice. The first two photos are of the same individual, but the second one is of another bird three days later.



Brown Wood Owl (*Strix leptogrammica*)

Kinabatangan River, Sabah, Malaysia, 29 April 2007

49989 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

These three photos illustrate some of the difficulties of photographing owls. Most are nocturnal, many are shy (the Brown Wood Owl in particular prefers undisturbed forest and avoids areas of human habitation), so you need to be lucky to find them at their roosting sites. Roosting owls are prime targets for mobbing by other birds, so they often roost in hollows or in dense vegetation. In woodland, a bird in an unusually clear visible position like the first one here is often back-lit, while the second bird is well-lit but partially obscured by branches and leaves. I say this not just to make excuses but to express my admiration for many of the wonderful photos in *The Enigma of the Owl*.

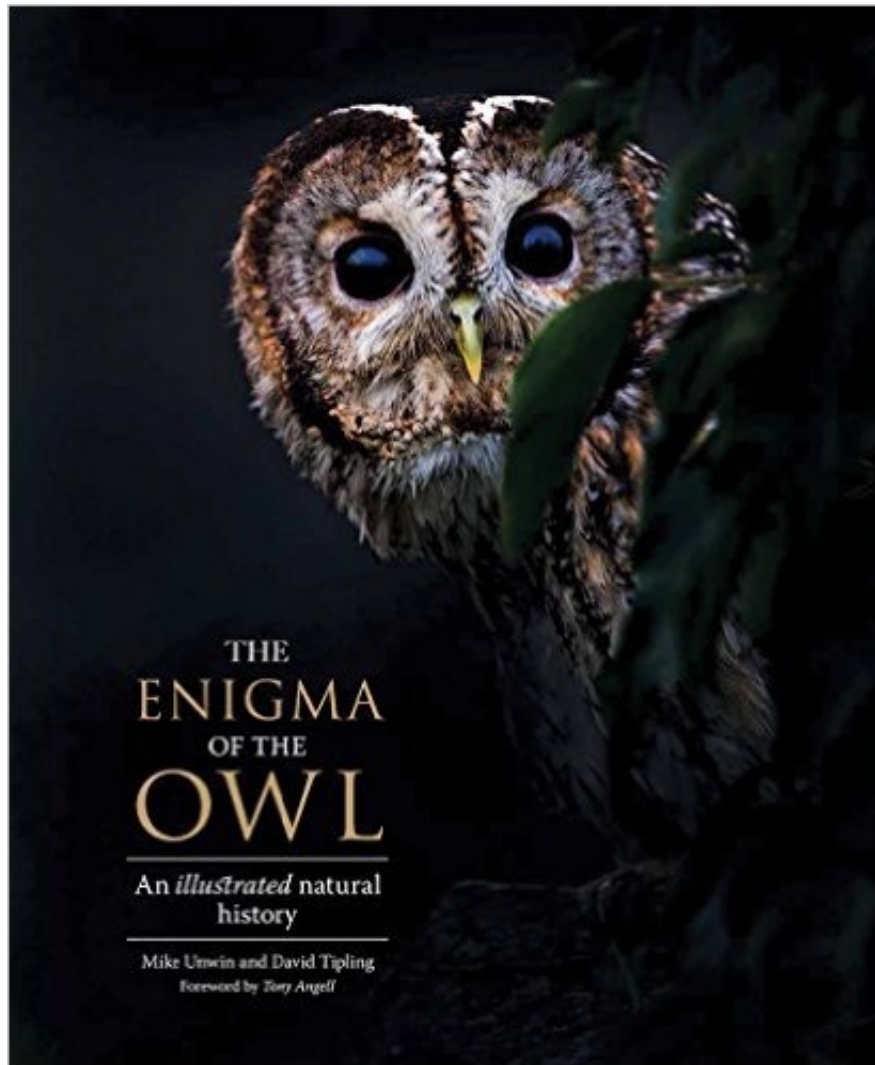
So I'm happy to have had this photo of a Rufous Owl selected for inclusion in the book. The bird in the photo was the immature member of a family of three that roosted regularly for a while in 2008 in an easily accessible spot behind the Black Hawk Memorial in the Palmetum, one of the three botanic gardens in Townsville. The <<[Memorial](#)>> honours 18 Australian servicemen killed when two Black Hawk helicopters collided in Townsville in 1996.



Rufous Owl (*Ninox rufa*)

Townsville, NE Queensland, Australia, 25 February 2008
63484 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The general introduction to the book covers the taxonomy, physiology (visual and auditory), life-style and significance to humans of owls. The remainder of the book consists of detailed treatment of 80 of the approximately global 250 species of owls, with thorough natural histories of each species and about 200 spectacular photos, mostly covering a whole page and sometimes two pages. The 80 species are organised into chapters by region: North America; Central & South America; Eurasia; Africa; Southern Asia and Australasia; and Oceanic Islands. Each regional chapter has its own introduction.



This is a terrific book and I highly recommend it. The <<[UK edition is £32](#)>> and the <<[US edition is \\$40](#)>> fantastic value for a large hard cover book of this quality. There isn't an Australian edition but Italian, Japanese, French and German editions will be published later this year. My only quibble is that I think it would be better organised taxonomically rather than geographically, but that reflects my taxonomic and evolutionary tastes. That said, the taxonomic cover is very broad: there are representatives of all the important genera (about 22 out of about 27) and the missing ones are either obscure or fairly closely related to other ones already in the book.



Back at the website, I have recently added <[Global](#)> and <[Australasian](#)> thumbnails to all the non-bird taxonomic groups of 'other wildlife' to make them easier to find. These thumbnail pages are also accessible from the bird thumbnail pages such as <[Global Non-Passerines](#)> via Global Wildlife and Australasian Wildlife buttons near the top of the page.

Greetings

Ian

#576 Blue and Yellow Macaw 22 February 2017

I had a request recently for a Macaw bird of the week. On investigation, I found that no Macaws have previously featured as bird of the week, probably because I have only rather ordinary photos of Macaws taken in the wild. So I've cheated a bit with the first photo which is of a free-flying but tame <[Blue and Yellow Macaw](#)> which belonged to the dive shop owner beside the <<[Blue Waters Inn](#)>> at Bateaux Bay in Tobago.



Blue and Yellow Macaw (*Ara ararauna*)

Bateaux Bay, Tobago, West Indies, 19 September 2005
21171 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

My main reason for being there was a nearby island called St Giles which has large colonies of seabirds such as <Magnificent Frigatebirds> and <Masked> and <Red-footed> Boobies. I did a boat trip round the island, of course, and a dive, which is when I came across the Macaw. There were also <Rufous-vented Chachalacas> in the grounds of the hotel and nearby rainforest had hummingbirds and <Blue-crowned Motmots> one of my target birds in Tobago: a delightful place and I was amused to find another Bluewater, more or less, on the other side of the world.



Bateaux Bay, Tobago, West Indies

The best known and most popular Macaws such as the Blue and Yellow and the <Scarlet> are spectacularly large with a length of about 85cm/33in but as a group they are quite variable in size. Shortly after the stay at Bateaux Bay I came across a smaller - 50cm/20in - but genuinely wild Macaw, the <Red-bellied>, in nearby Trinidad at a disused US Air Force base called Wallerfield. It was having a sunset snack on palm nuts while we were there to look for nightjars - <Paraque> and <White-tailed Nightjar> - which used the airfield at night to hunt for insects. Wallerfield is now being developed as a campus for the University of Trinidad and Tobago, so I suppose the nightjars have had to move on but maybe the Macaws will benefit in time from the planting of palms.



Red-bellied Macaw (*Orthopsittaca manilata*)

Wallerfield, Trinidad, West Indies, 30 September 2005

24259 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I didn't have to wait too long to find Blue and Yellow Macaws in the wild. Ten days later, I stayed at a <<[Lodge called Sani](#)>> near the River Napo in Ecuador. The River Napo is a major tributary of the Amazon and the only way to Sani is along the river - a 4 hour trip eastwards by boat from Coca, a depressing frontier oil town with air services from the capital Quito.



Blue and Yellow Macaw (*Aru araruana*)

Sani Lodge, Napo, Ecuador, 10 October 2005

26240 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Sani Lodge was built as a part of a deal between the local Quechua people and oil companies to search for oil. Happily no oil was found and the wonderfully isolated Sani eco-resort was left in peace. One of my favourite spots there was a canopy-level wooden platform for viewing birds built at the top of a huge pink-flowering Kapok tree. You never knew what was going to turn up - anything from <Trogon> to <Toucans> - and sometimes Blue and Yellow Macaws would do a majestic fly-past.



Blue and Yellow Macaw (*Aru araruana*)

Sani Lodge, Napo, Ecuador, 10 October 2005

26237 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Five years later, I eventually found the Scarlet Macaw in Costa Rica. Having found my main target, the <[Resplendent Quetzal](#)>, in the mountains I headed to the Pacific coast to stay at a place called the <<[Villa Lapas](#)>> known for Scarlet Macaws. The name Lapa means 'cleaver' and is, I gather, a local word for Macaw (the usual Spanish word is guacomayo) signifying the ease with which these birds can chop tough nuts. The bird in the last photo is feeding on the seeds of the Beach/Indian/Sea Almond, *Terminalia cappata* and I took this photo from a boat on the way down the local river to look for< [Boat-billed Herons](#)>.



Scarlet Macaw (*Ara macao*)

Tarcoles, Puntarenas, Costa Rica, 16 October 2010

112578 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Terminalia cappata is probably native to Southern Asia, but has been widely planted in the tropics from Costa Rica to Queensland. It is a familiar tree in Townsville, particular along the Strand, where it is a great favourite with the local [Red-tailed Black Cockatoos](#). It's more than 13 years since the Red-tailed Black Cockatoo featured as bird of the week, so perhaps it's time for it to make a reappearance.

Greetings

Ian

#577 Red-tailed Black Cockatoo 19 April 2017

The bird of the week has, regrettably, been so irregular over the last year or so, that I can't pretend anymore that it's a weekly event, or even a monthly one for that matter. These days we're supposed to achieve peace of mind by living in the now, I've renamed the series Bird of the Moment.



Scarlet Macaw (*Ara macao*)

Tarcoles, Puntarenas, Costa Rica, 16 October 2010

112578 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

In the last one on Macaws, I finished with this photo of a <Scarlet Macaw> feeding on an introduced *Terminalia* tree in Costa Rica and mentioned that the fruit of same species (*T. cappata*) is equally popular with <Red-tailed Black-Cockatoos> along The Strand in Townsville. Here is a pair with the male on the right whispering sweet phrases to the female two days before Valentine's Day: she looks very receptive. You can see the female has spots on the head, barring on the body and a barred panels in the tail against a background of red and yellow. The male has glossy black plumage and scarlet, unbarred panels in the tail.



Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo (*Calyptrorhynchus banksii*)

Townsville, NE Queensland, 12 February 2004

15231 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

These Cockatoos are quite common in the Townsville District and for me it was love and first sight when I arrived here in 2002. They are spectacular birds, very large (to 65cm/25in in length) with a wonderful leisurely 'rowing' flight, long tails and a permanent smile. They are often heard before being seen both when perched and in flight, owing to their haunting, far-carrying, trumpeting calls, which are positively melodious compared with the ear-shattering screeches of their ubiquitous white relatives, the <[Sulphur-crested Cockatoo](#)>. They're remarkably tame too, and seem to enjoy being photographed.



Terminalia sp

Bluewater, NE Queensland, 18 April 2017

© Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Terminalia grow readily from seedlings, and Jo Wieneke gave me some seedlings when I moved to Bluewater in 2003, which I planted with the sole aim of attracting these Cockatoos, above. These belong to a different species of *Terminalia* with smaller leaves and fruit. The fruit of *T. cappata*, the 'Beach Almond' are about the size of walnuts; these ones are more like smallish, hard, black olives. The three trees all lean to the left, a legacy of cyclone Yasi in 2011, called the 'Yasi lean'. Since then the trees have tried to correct this defect by growing vertically at the base and the top - easiest to see in the left-most tree - and growing thicker branches on the right-hand side, presumably as a counter-balance.

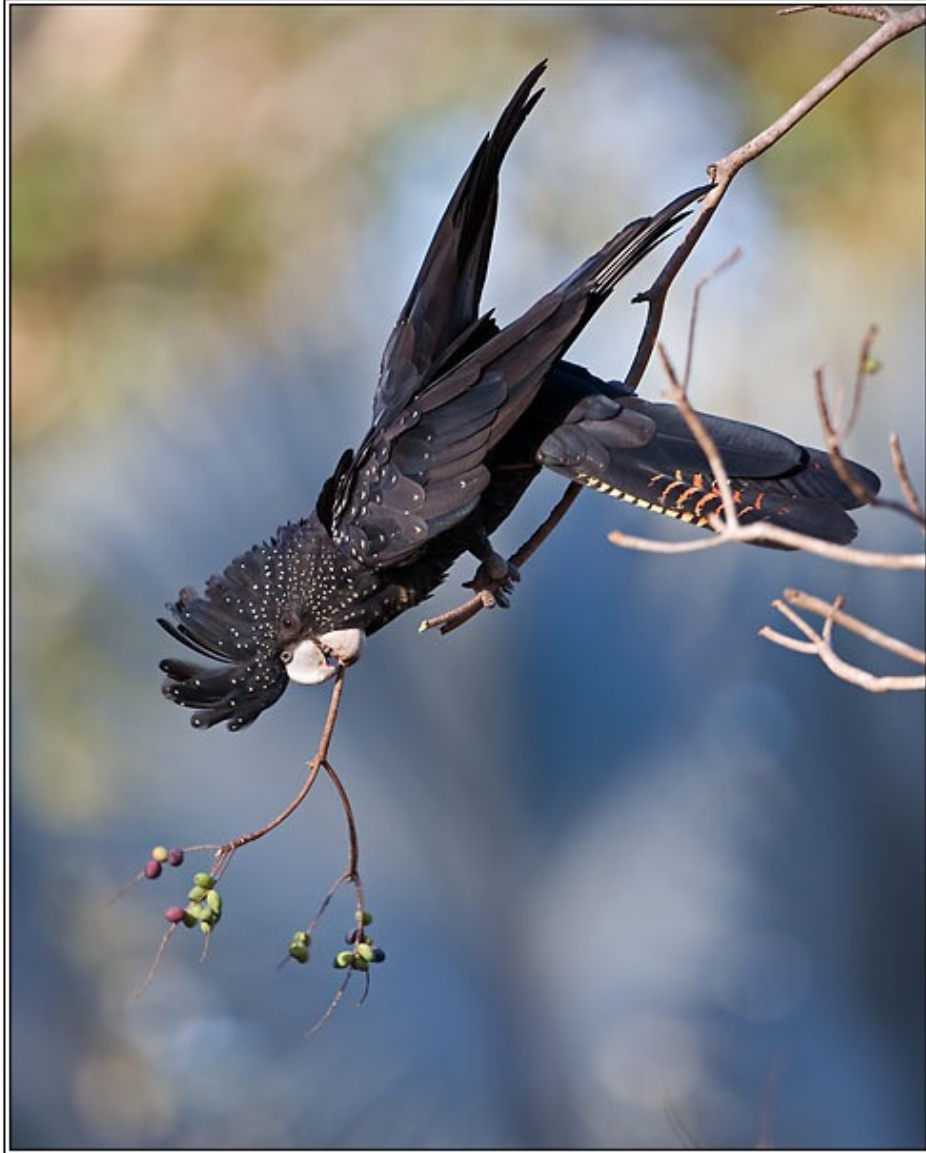


Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus banksii*)

Bluewater, NE Queensland, 7 November 2016

170647 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The trees started flowering and fruiting about three years ago, and I was delighted when they had their first visit from a lone Black-Cockatoo. Last November, the trees had an abundant harvest, and a pair of Cockatoos came each evening at about 4:30pm (and maybe before I surfaced in the morning) and thoroughly until they had completely stripped all fruit. The birds are wonderfully acrobatic (below) and their preferred way of eating is to snip off a twig, hold it in one foot, stand on the other foot, prise open the hard shell to get at the kernel in the middle and discard both the shells and the twigs.



Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus banksii*)

7 November 2016, Bluewater NE Queensland
170458 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The shells are quite hard and I cut one open to see what was inside and found the kernel is tiny, so it seemed like a lot of effort for a relatively small reward. In the photo below, the male is using the pointed tip of the upper mandible to extract the kernel from the cracked shell. They drop a lot of unopened fruit and several months later a small flock of cockatoos came round to feed on the ground under the trees.



Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus banksii*)

Bluewater, NE Queensland, 7 November 2016

170649 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The coloured panels on the tail are not easy to see except when the birds spread the tail feathers, either when taking off, landing or doing a sudden manoeuvre in flight. Presumably it is an important signal to other members of the flock. Black-Cockatoos seem to form long-term pair-bonds which are maintained even when they flock, so I wonder whether the variability in the colour of the panels of females (the one below has much red and little yellow) help the males identify their mates.

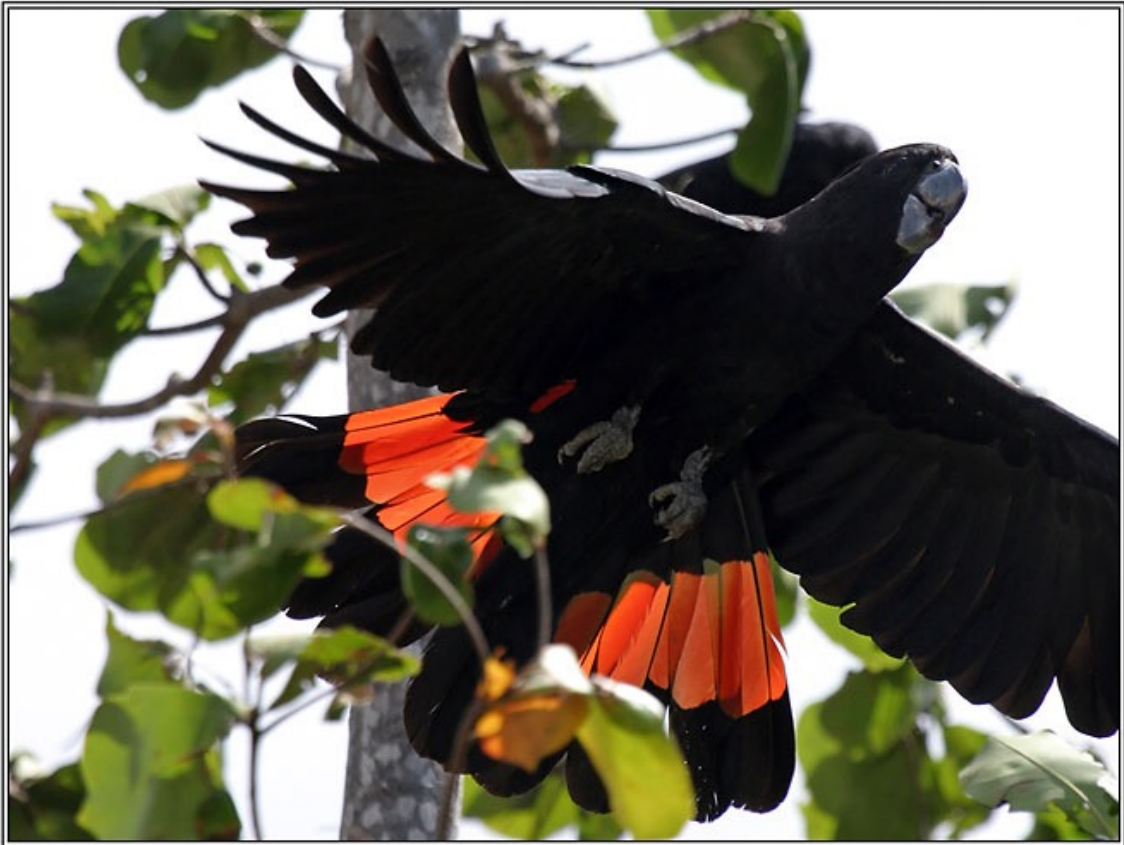


Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus banksii*)

Yabulu, NE Queensland, 10 July 2007

57324 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The next photo shows a male just after take-off and showing his red panels to best advantage.



Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus banksii*)

Nome, NE Queensland, 28 August 2003

02242 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Here is a female on the beach at Horseshoe Bay on Magnetic Island. She looks as if she's contemplating a swim - you can see the edge of the water in the background - but it is more likely that she is looking for fruits from the casuarinas growing along the foreshore. In the absence of introduced *Terminalia* trees, the birds feed on the fruit of native trees including those of *Eucalyptus* and *Pandanus*.



Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus banksii*)

Magnetic Island, NE Queensland, 7 February 2005

13244 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo is the most widespread of the five species of Black-Cockatoo, all of which are Australian endemics (I'm not including the <Palm Cockatoo> which belongs to a different genus and occurs in Cape York and across New Guinea.) The other four species are the <Glossy> (eastern Australia); the <Yellow-tailed> (eastern and southern Australia and Tasmania) and the <Long-billed> and Short-billed (both have white tails and are restricted to SW Western Australia).

The Red-tailed has five subspecies which differ in size and in the colour of the tail panels in females: the largest, nominate race *banksii* (Queensland and northern NSW); the large-billed *macrorhynchus* (Northern Territory and NW Western Australia); the smaller *samuelyi* in central Australia; *naso* in (SW Western Australia); and *graptogyne* (western Victoria and SE South Australia).



Red-tailed Black-Cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus banksii*)

14 September 2004, Kimberleys, NW Western Australia
10379 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The three birds in the last photo belong to the large-billed race *macrorhynchus*, and presumably are a family with the female on the left and the male on the right. The bird in the centre has female-like plumage but a black bill - females have whitish bills - so is probably a juvenile male; juvenile males take about four years to acquire the adult male plumage. Family bonding would appear to be important and you often see these birds in groups of three.

I've been slack about the Bird of the Moment; I have however been working on the website. The latest inclusions include a gallery of [Dragonflies](#) and one of [Butterflies and Moths](#), and there are various [additions to the bird galleries](#).

Greetings,

Ian

#578 Restless Flycatcher 15 June 2017

Some weeks ago I went to Toonpan a dry pasture area outside Townsville which is good for dry country birds such as <Bustards> and often produces unusual birds. There were a couple of <Restless Flycatchers> there hawking for insects and I found out later that this species has never featured as bird of the moment, an omission we'll rectify now.



Restless Flycatcher (*Myiagra inquieta*)

Capertee Valley, New South Wales, 16 October 2007

60354 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

They are dapper birds, smart in their glossy black and white plumage and long tail. They bare a superficial resemblance to the similarly sized Willie Wagtail, but the species is a member of the <Monarch Flycatcher family> rather than the <Fantails>. The nominate larger type *inquieta* breeds in eastern, southern and southwestern Australia, but not in Tasmania or eastern Western Australia (the Nullabor). The smaller type *nana* occurs in northern Australia from northwestern Queensland through the Top End of the Northern Territory to northeastern Western Australia.



Restless Flycatcher (*Myiagra inquieta*)

Toonpan, NE Queensland, 29 April 2017

181932 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Taxonomists disagree as to whether these types should be treated as conspecific or separate species. I'm treating them as separate ones here, so 'Restless Flycatcher' refers to the southern one, and '<[Paperbark Flycatcher](#)>' to the northern one. Both are mainly sedentary, but there is some northward movement of the Restless Flycatcher in winter. Here in northeastern Queensland it is a winter visitor.



Restless Flycatcher (*Myiagra inquieta*)

Toonpan, NE Queensland, 29 April 2017

181933 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Restless Flycatchers have a characteristic hovering flight when hawking for insects and this one at Toonpan was doing just this between me and the afternoon sun in the second, third and fourth photos. There were all taken within an elapsed time of one second and in the third one it is turning away from whatever attracted its attention in the first two. When hawking like this, they make 'grinding, churring sounds' (to quote Pizzey and Knight) which are supposed to disturb insects into flight. For this reason, the species is sometimes called the Scissors Grinder.



Restless Flycatcher (*Myiagra inquieta*)

Toonpan, NE Queensland, 29 April 2017

181934 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The fifth photo shows one of the two birds checking out the vegetation along a barbed wire fence. It's not, as it might appear, flying towards the fence. Rather it had been perched on the fence seconds before and is making its way down the side of it.



Restless Flycatcher (*Myiagra inquieta*)

Toonpan, NE Queensland, 29 April 2017

181958 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Restless Flycatcher builds a beautiful nest of grass, bark and spiders' webs on a horizontal branch, sixth photo with a usual clutch size of three. The nest is typically decorated or maybe camouflaged with lichen. In this photo you can see the broad, flat bill characteristic of Monarch Flycatchers.



Restless Flycatcher (*Myiagra inquieta*)

Capertee Valley, New South Wales, 12 October 2007

59552 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Restless Flycatchers are usually found near water. The one in the seventh photo is having a drink from a river.



Restless Flycatcher (*Myiagra inquieta*)

Capertee Valley, New South Wales, 16 October 2007
60351 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Here is the Paperbark Flycatcher, eight photo. The easiest way to separate it from the Restless Flycatcher is by range, though the Paperbark is smaller (17-19cm versus 19-22cm) and supposed to be glossier and have a darker back. The calls are claimed to be slightly different, though they sound much the same to me.



Paperbark Flycatcher (*Myiagra nana*)

Keep River, NW Northern Territory, 20 September 2009

93695 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Paperbark Flycatcher also builds a cup-shaped nest on a horizontal branch, ninth photo, but the sources I have don't mention bark as building material, or lichen as a decoration. As with the Restless Flycatcher, both genders share in nest-building, incubation and rearing of the chicks.



Paperbark Flycatcher (*Myiagra nana*)

Roebuck Bay, Western Australia, 4 September 2004

09219 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

If we treat Restless and Paperbark as separate species, then the Restless is an Australian endemic, The Paperbark isn't as it also occurs in southern New Guinea on both sides of the Indonesian-PNG border.

Greetings

Ian

#579 Brahminy Kite 24 October 2017

Surprise, surprise - another bird of the moment at last. The <Brahminy Kite> last featured as bird of the week in August 2003. In those days you got a single photo and a short paragraph of text, so here is a more thorough treatment. This is one of my favourite Australian raptors and the adults are striking looking birds with their white and chestnut plumage. They're a common sight along the coast here in North Queensland, and the bird in the first two photos was photographed at Toomulla Beach, about 40km northwest of Townsville and not far from where I live in Bluewater.



Brahminy Kite (*Haliastur indus*)

Toomulla Beach, NE Queensland, 12 September 2017

182503 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The hooked beak is like that of the <White-bellied Sea-Eagle>, so it's no surprise that they are adapted to eating fish, for which they both hunt and scavenge and are usually found near water, mainly coastal but also along larger rivers. They have, however, very broad tastes and will eat any flesh that they can catch or find, both vertebrate and invertebrate. It's not unusual to see them cruising main roads looking for road-kill. With a length of about 50cm/20in and a wingspan of 1.2m/47in, they're much smaller than sea-eagles (80cm/31in and 1.8-2.2m/71-87in), but their preferred habitat and diet means that they're often called sea-eagles by the general population.



Brahminy Kite (*Haliastur indus*)

Toomulla Beach, NE Queensland, 12 September 2017

182525 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The names “Brahminy” and *Haliastur indus* give a clue as to their geographical range, as they were first described in India. Their range extends from Pakistan in the west through south and southwest Asia to eastern China and Taiwan, and south through the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia to New Guinea and Australia. In Australia its range is mainly tropical from Carnarvon in Western Australia across northern Australia and down the east coast as far as about Myall Lakes in New South Wales, though it is uncommon south of Cape Byron. Its population in New South Wales contracted northwards owing to the use of persistent organochloride insecticides in the third quarter of the 20th century, but there is some evidence of recovery since then.



Brahminy Kite (*Haliastur indus*)

Krabi, SW Thailand, 24 June 2007

56614 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Immature birds differ greatly in appearance from the adults, third photo, and are easily confused with other raptors such as, in Australia, pale phase <Little Eagles> or <immature Black-breasted Buzzards>. Immature birds are also rather similar to their only close relative the <Whistling Kite> (*Haliastur sphenurus*), though Brahminy Kites have much shorter, rather eagle-like tails and shorter wings.



Brahminy Kite (*Haliastur indus*)

Brisbane, SE Queensland, 20 October 2010

113139 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

You may remember that I visited Slovakia in June 2016 with my sister Gillian. The main birding target was eagles, but despite the best efforts of our guides we had only limited success with such species as <Lesser Spotted Eagle>, <Eastern Imperial Eagle> and <Golden Eagle>, and the Slovakian raptors didn't seem at all keen to having their photos taken. So, there was a certain irony when I returned to Bluewater and found that my excellent house minders, Julie and Ed, had discovered a pair of Brahminy Kites nesting in my neighbour's property, about 100m from my house (fifth photo). The grass is greener, etc. etc.



Brahminy Kite (*Haliastur indus*)

Bluewater, NE Queensland, 22 September 2016

170039 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The birds attended the nest for about three months but disappointingly without success. The nest was high up, about 25m/80ft from the ground, so it wasn't possible to see into it, so I don't know what happened. Anyway, you can understand my delight when the birds returned again this year and restored the nest, sixth photo.



Brahminy Kite (*Haliastur indus*)

Bluewater, NE Queensland, 13 August 2017

182423 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

At the beginning of last week I finally spotted a healthy looking chick. It survived the unseasonable heavy rain we had last week (150mm/6in in five days) so I set up the camera and tripod, table, chair and coffee near the house and watched them in comfort at an unobtrusive distance for most of Friday afternoon. Sure enough, both adults arrived with food. The first, seventh photo, produced a flying fox (fruit bat), a <Black Flying-fox> I think, and spent an hour carefully tearing off tiny strips of muscle and feeding to the chick.



Brahminy Kite (*Haliastur indus*)

Bluewater, NE Queensland, 20 October 2017

183161 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I was impressed with the gentle way the parent fed the youngster and itself. Eventually, the chick seemed satisfied, and lost interest in the meal. The adult bird slipped away as quietly as it had arrived - I didn't see it leave - and I presume it took the remains of the fruit bat with it.



Brahminy Kite (*Haliastur indus*)

Bluewater, NE Queensland, 20 October 2017

183305 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Within half an hour, the other adult arrived with a frog, I think a <Green Tree Frog> (ninth photo). This adult has whiter plumage and a longer beak than its partner, so they are not hard to distinguish.



Brahminy Kite (*Haliastur indus*)

Bluewater, NE Queensland, 20 October 2017

183358 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The chick seemed satiated and not very interested, so the adult hungrily ate some of the frog itself and after a little while flew off taking the frog with it and went down to nearby Bluewater Creek.



Brahminy Kite (*Haliastur indus*)

Bluewater, NE Queensland, 20 October 2017

183360 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Brahminy Kites usually lay 2 or 3 eggs, and often only one chick survives to fledging. Incubation takes about 35 days, and fledging 7 to 8 weeks. The young birds remain dependent on the adults for a further two months. This chick is about half the length of the adults and is beginning to grow proper feathers, including flight feathers on the wings, though these currently appear as just short quills.



Brahminy Kite (*Haliastur indus*)

Bluewater, NE Queensland, 21 October 2017

183394 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I can see the nest through the trees from my back verandah, so it is easy to check on it. I plan to photograph progress over the coming weeks. A furry mammal, probably road-kill, was on the menu today.

Greetings

Ian

#580 Eastern Grass Owl 30 December 2017

Seeing as Bird of the Moment has been such a rarity lately, I thought I'd finish the year on a special note. So here's a species that I always wanted to photograph, but never though I would: maybe on the 'if the god(s) is/are kind bucket list'.

But before that here is my greetings of the season; too late for Christmas but in time for 2018, which is perhaps the more important - longer anyway.

Season's Greetings and a Peaceful & Contented 2018

**I love Black Cockatoos:
they always look so happy.**

**This female Red-tailed is
having a wonderful time
demolishing a Beach
Almond tree in my garden.**

**From
Ian**

Two weeks ago I went spotlighting in the Townsville Town Common Conservation Park with some local birding experts, including one who has an official key to the locked gates that normally keep vehicles out of the more remote areas of the Park: the saline flats near Bald Rock and a track that runs through some lovely forest along a tributary of the Bohle River to Shelley Beach.



Female Eastern Grass Owl (*Tyto longimembris*)

Town Common, Townsville, NE Queensland, 13 Dec 2017 184631 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The target species, and rather a long shot at that, was the Spotted Nightjar which sometimes turns up along the grassy, saline flats. Anyway, the forest produced five <Owlet nightjars>, some of which posed for photos and a <Tawny Frogmouth>, also photographed. On the return through the normally accessible parts of the Park along the main track, we photographed a cooperative <Large-tailed Nightjar> and a more distant <Barking Owl>.



Female Eastern Grass Owl (*Tyto longimembris*)

Town Common, Townsville, NE Queensland, 13 Dec 2017 184623 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The highlight of the night was a Tyto owl on the grass beside the track though the saline flat. Provisionally identified as a Barn Owl, we soon realised that it was a female <Eastern Grass Owl>, a species recorded only occasionally around Townsville, though more common near Ingham, for example at the eponymous Tyto Wetlands. The female differs from the smaller male in having orange-buff underparts and is distinctive but both genders can be distinguished from the otherwise similar Barn Owl by darker upperparts and much longer, slender legs which trail behind the tail in flight. After photographing it, we flushed it to get a look at its long legs and confirm the identification.



Female Eastern Grass Owl (*Tyto longimembris*)

Town Common, Townsville, NE Queensland, 13 Dec 2017 184624 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

We didn't find any Spotted Nightjars, but no one cared amid the jubilation at getting such good view of the Grass Owl. We returned a week later for another look. That night, the Tawny Frogmouths were out in force and no sign of either Spotted Nightjars or the Grass Owl. Instead we found a cooperative <Barn Owl> along perched obligingly in a dead tree in woodland beside the main track. Here it is for comparison.



(Eastern) Barn Owl (*Tyto alba delicatula*)

Town Common, Townsville, NE Queensland, 20 Dec 2017 184712 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Grass and Barn Owls have extensive ranges and the 'Eastern' in both cases refers to Eastern Eurasia and Australasia. Grass Owls also occur in Africa and there is disagreement whether this is the same species as the Eastern Form. Similarly, the Eastern Barn Owl, *Tyto delicatula*, is sometimes split from the Western Eurasian, African and American forms, *Tyto alba*. Anyway, they're all gorgeous birds and Australia has an unusually rich selection of five species of about sixteen in total worldwide. Four of the Australian ones are here [Tytonidae](#).

We've checked earlier records and it appears that most records of Spotted Nightjars in the Townsville District are in winter, June-August. So, we'll try again next year, and I hope you have a healthy and rewarding 2018 too.

Ian

Year 2018: #581 to \$585

#581 Night Birds 1 May 2018

If you can remember that far back, the last bird of the moment was Eastern Grass Owl #580 found during a spot-lighting trip to the Townsville Town Common led by local night-bird expert and pillar of BirdLife Townsville Ian Boyd.



Rufous Owl (*Ninox rufa*)

Ross River, Townsville, NE Queensland, 29 Oct 2017

183768 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

At the time, Ian Boyd was refusing to be discouraged by pancreatic cancer, an attitude that we all admired until his death on 23rd of February. Typically undaunted he gave a presentation on his favourite topic, Night Birds at the BirdLife Townsville AGM on the 10th of February although he had less than a couple of weeks to live. Isolated by flood waters in Bluewater, I couldn't attend the funeral on 1st March so here is a photographic tribute to him instead.



Australian Owlet-Nightjar (*Aegotheles cristatus*)

Town Common, Townsville, NE Queensland, 13 Dec 2017 184612 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I got to know him well during his last year or and am left with some precious memories of searching for night birds with him. So let's go birding together while I share three special occasions with you.



Tawny Frogmouth (*Podargus strigoides*)

Town Common, Townsville, NE Queensland, 13 Dec 2017 184615 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The first was when a birding friend and photographer from Mt Isa was visiting Townsville and wanted to photograph a <Rufous Owl>. I contacted Ian Boyd and he took us to an active nesting site on a hot afternoon at the end of October. There he showed us the two adults which we photographed (one of them is in the first photo) and our visitor from Mt Isa returned to the site later and got a photo of a fledgling peering out of the tree hollow.



Eastern Grass Owl (*Tyto longimembris*)

Town Common, Townsville, NE Queensland, 13 Dec 2017 184619 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The second was the occasion when we found the female <Eastern Grass Owl> at the Townsville Town Common which featured as the last Bird of the Moment. At the time our goal was to search for Spotted Nightjars which are supposed to occur occasionally along the Freshwater Track that goes across the grassy, saltbush flats between Bald Rock and the Freshwater hide - see this map: <<<https://www.npsr.qld.gov.au/parks/townsville/pdf/townsville-town-common-map.pdf>>>. We drove across the Town Common arriving at Shelley Beach on the northern side at sunset and then drove slowly back in darkness checking for night birds as we went along.



Large-tailed Nightjar (*Caprimulgus macrurus*)

Town Common, Townsville, NE Queensland, 13 Dec 2017 184639 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The first stretch of riverine forest on the Shelley Beach Trail produced a remarkable five <Owlet-nightjars> (second photo) and a single male <Tawny Frogmouth> (third photo). Male Tawny Frogmouths have silvery grey, strongly marbled plumage. We had only just started along the Freshwater Track when the cry went up 'Barn Owl' but we quickly realised that the Tyto Owl beside the track was a female Eastern Grass Owl (fourth photo).



Barking Owl (*Ninox connivens*)

Town Common, Townsville, NE Queensland, 13 Dec 2017 184649 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

There was no sign of any Spotted Nightjars - we suspect that they are more like to be found in the dry winter months - but at the start of the Freshwater Lagoon Road south of the Freshwater hide, we found a <Large-tailed Nightjar> (fifth photo). This species is the commonest Nightjar around Townsville and is well known for its persistent, loud 'chop chop' call that gives it the colloquial name of Carpenter or Axe Bird.



Tawny Frogmouth (*Podargus strigoides*)

Town Common, Townsville, NE Queensland, 20 Dec 2017 184678 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Finally, along the track between Payet's Tower and the Forest Walk, a <Barking Owl> (sixth photo) represented the only remaining Australian night bird family for the evening - <Aegothelidae> (Owlet-nightjars), <Podargidae> (Frogmouths), <Tytonidae> (Barn Owls), <Caprimulgidae> (Nightjars) and [Strigidae](#) (Hawk Owls). I'm following the IOC and BirdLife International in lumping the Nightjars and Eared-Nightjars into a single family.



Tawny Frogmouth (*Podargus strigoides*)

Town Common, Townsville, NE Queensland, 20 Dec 2017 184686 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

We repeated the spotlighting at the Town Common a week later. This time we found one or two Owlet-nightjars along the Shelley Beach Trail, but Tawny Frogmouths were out in force. The seventh photo shows a female; females are often rufous like this one but always have plainer less marked plumage than the males. The eighth photo shows a remarkably approachable male Tawny Frogmouth.



Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*)

Town Common, Townsville, NE Queensland, 20 Dec 2017 184720 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This time there was no sign of the Eastern Grass Owl (or Spotted Nightjars) and the surprise of the night was a [Barn Owl](#) perched in a tree along the stretch where we'd found the Barking Owl the previous week (ninth photo). This bird seemed unbothered by our spot- and flash-lights and when it did leave it did so to plunge into the undergrowth after some prey.

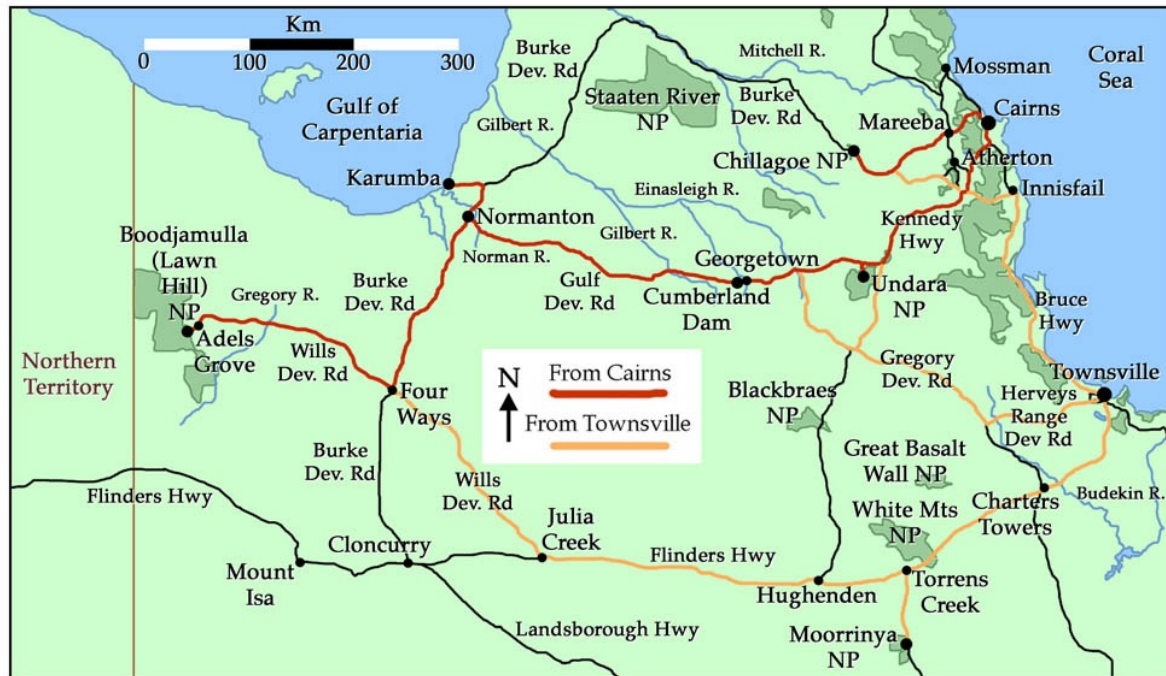
That was the last time I went birding with Ian Boyd. He is greatly missed by his wife Robyn, the rest of his family and all us bird watchers who appreciated his generosity, warmth, leadership and enthusiasm. I'll treasure these great memories of birding with him during his last few months with us. Thank you, Ian Boyd.

Greetings

Ian

#582 Masked Finch 23 August 2018

Surprise, surprise: a Bird of the Moment! I've been on a couple of camping trips in the last few months, so I have a few birds to share with you. The first trip was prompted by some birding friends who had found some Red-browed Pardalotes at a place called Cumberland Dam about half way between the Gulf of Carpentaria and both Cairns and Townsville. See the map below from the ebook [Where to Find Birds in North-east Queensland](#).



At the time I was doing a major revision of the book and needed photos of both Cumberland Dam and Red-browed Pardalote, so I downed tools and set of with a couple of friends. The photo of the Dam proved easy enough (below) but the Pardalotes were more difficult. Cumberland was a gold mining town in the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century and at its peak in 1886 nearly 400 mine workers and their families lived there. Now all that is left is this square brick chimney and the dam, both built to serve the boilers that powered the batteries for crushing the gold-containing ore. See <<<http://www.travelling-australia.info/Journal2011/22JulPtB.html>>>.



Cumberland Dam, Georgetown, N Qld

Cumberland Dam is a well known birding spot. The area has a average annual rainfall of about 800mm/31in but 80% of that falls in the northern wet season from October to April so any persistent bodies of water in the dry season attract many birds. In addition, the region is on the western slopes of the Great Dividing Range - the Torresian Barrier of Schodde and Mason (1980) - so one can expect to find some species and races of birds different from those of coastal northeastern Queensland.

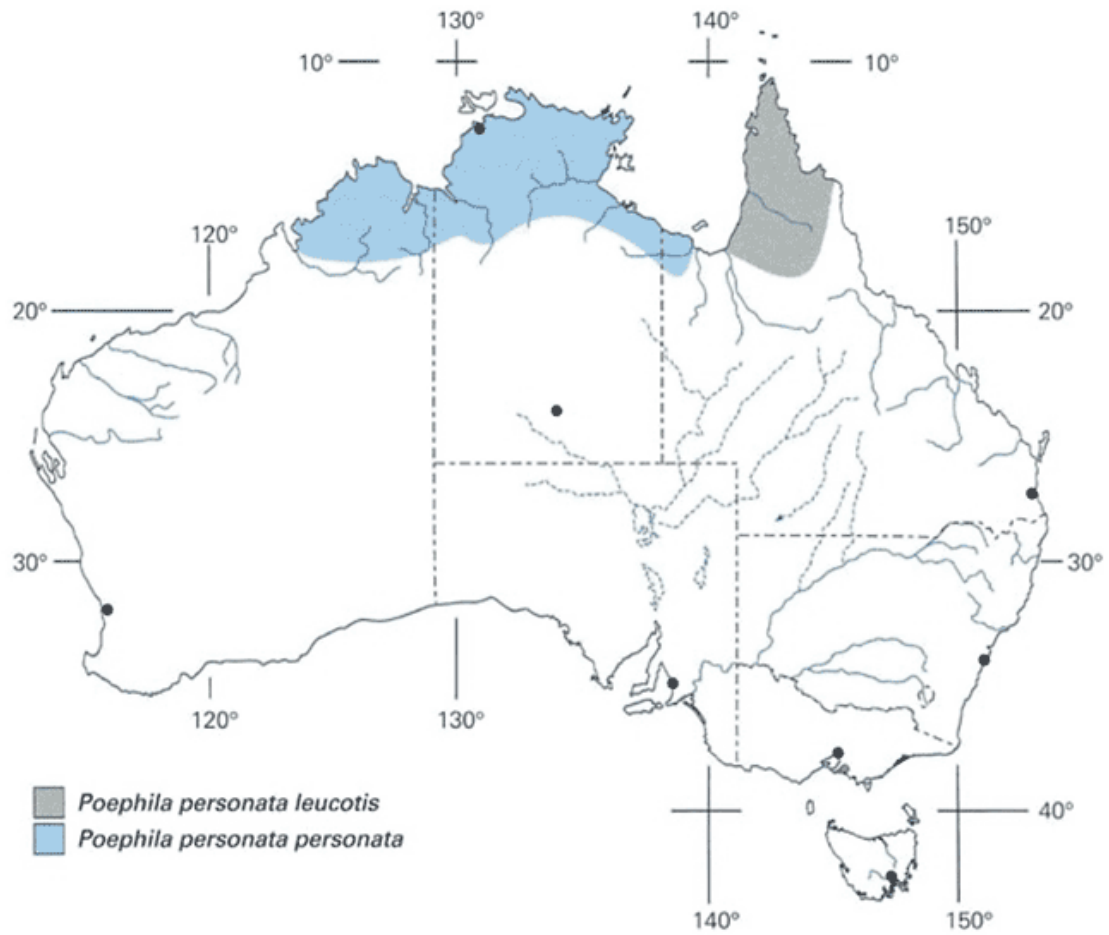


Masked ('White-eared') Finch (*Poephila personata leucotis*)

Cumberland Dam, N Queensland, 18 April 2018

186252 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

A striking example of these is the Cape York race of the <Masked Finch>, sometimes called the White-eared Finch. Cumberland is at the very southern tip of its range, shown below from The Directory of Australian Birds by Schodde and Mason (1999). The nominate race ranges from far northwestern Queensland to Broome in northern Western Australia and the ranges of the two races are disjoint.



When looking for the elusive Red-browed Pardalote, I found this pair of Masked Finches near the dam very busy gathering nesting material.



Masked ('White-eared') Finch (*Poephila personata leucotis*)

Cumberland Dam, N Queensland, 19 April 2018

186444 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Their favourite material seemed to be what looked like thistle down but they also brought in feathers.



Masked ('White-eared') Finch (*Poephila personata leucotis*)

Cumberland Dam, N Queensland, 19 April 2018

186275 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I assumed the nest was in a nearby clump of trees but on the second day they were still working away and I saw them taking the material into this clump of thick dried grass beside a barbed wire fence near where I'd first spotted them.



Masked ('White-eared') Finch (*Poephila personata leucotis*)

Cumberland Dam, N Queensland, 18 April 2018

186206 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Here, incidentally is the nominate, western race of the Masked Finch so you can see why the Cape York race is called the White-eared Finch.



Masked Finch (*Poephila personata personata*)

Umbrawarra Gorge Road, Northern Territory, 15 Nov 2002 13906 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Pardalotes are easy to hear but hard to see as, unless you are lucky enough to find them at a nesting hollow on the ground, they spend their time in the outer foliage of trees. The Red-browed Pardalote has a distinctive call of about six notes, starting slow and low in pitch and then accelerating and rising. We heard three at Cumberland Dam and I went on a couple of wild-goose chases through forest and grazing country but got no more than a glimpse of one flying away and no photos. The Red-browed Pardalote quest ultimately succeeded on another camping trip: to be continued!

Greetings

Ian

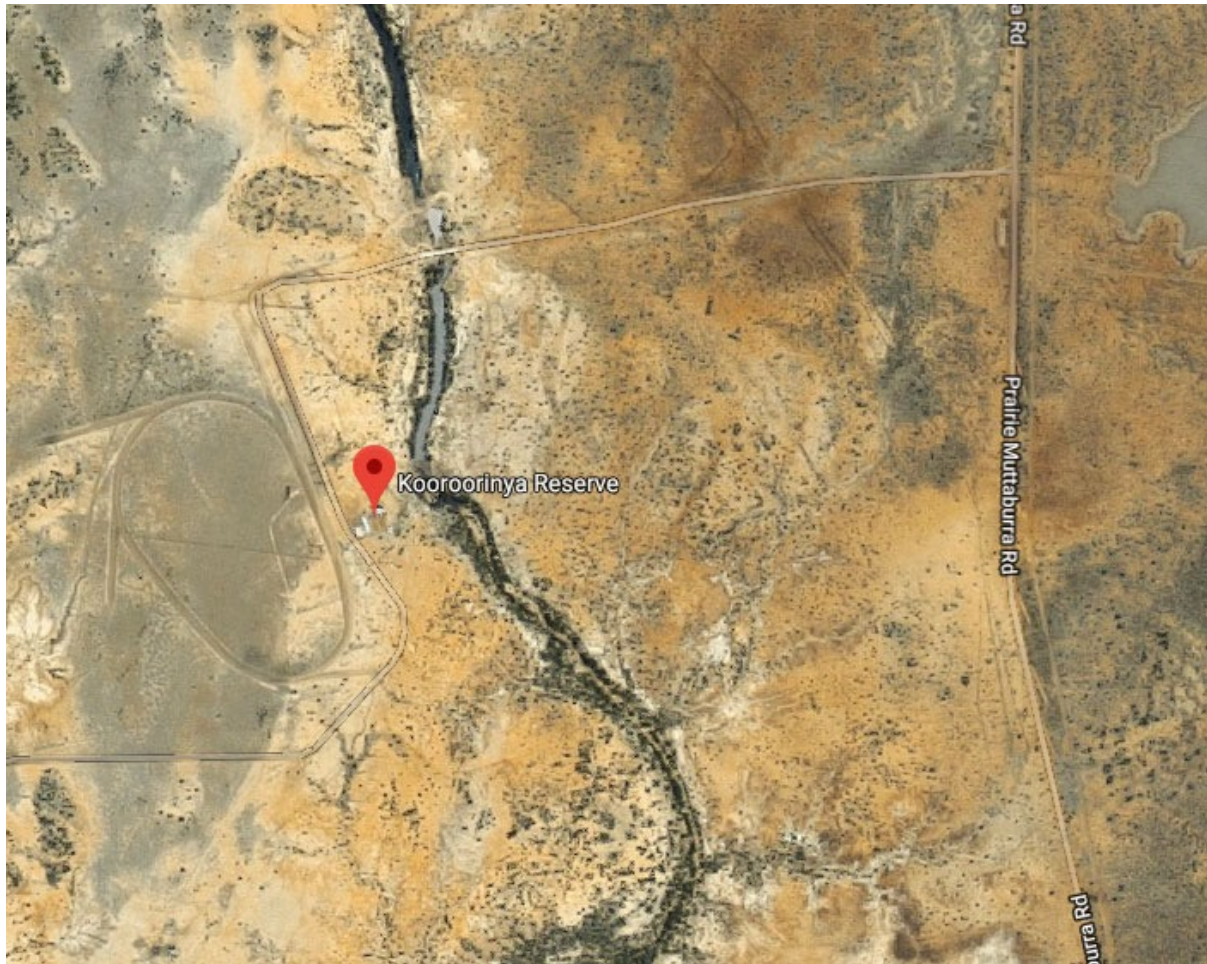
#583 Black-breasted Buzzard 3 October 2018

You may remember in the last Bird of the Moment, in April I went to Cumberland Dam near Georgetown in Northern Queensland in the hope of photographing Red-browed Pardalotes but came away instead with photos of nesting <Masked Finches>. In May I set off on another, longer trip to Mt Isa with several species in my sights, in addition to the Pardalote.



Kooroorinya Reserve

The distance from Townsville to Mt Isa is about 900km/560miles, so I split the journey by staying for a couple of nights at Kooroorinya Reserve, a little gorge 50km/ 30miles south of Prairie. Kooroorinya's main claim to fame is that it hosts the annual Oakley amateur horse race and they were preparing for the race during my stay. The satellite image below shows the race track, the Prairie-Muttaburra Road and the oasis created by the gorge in very dry country, which holds water for months in the dry season after the creek has stopped flowing.



A Townsville birder had found nesting <Little Eagle> and <Black-breasted Buzzard> there. The Little Eagle is uncommon in North Queensland, and the Black-breasted Buzzard is uncommon generally. So I search diligently along both sides of the creek looking for the nests of raptors. I found several unoccupied nests but these could have been built by <Whistling Kites>, which were common in the area, and I didn't initially see any sign of Little Eagles or Black-breasted Buzzards.



Black-breasted Buzzard (*Hamirostra melanosternon*)

Kooroorinya, North Central Queensland, 10 May 2018

187299 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It wasn't until I returned to the campsite near the race track that I saw this Black-breasted Buzzard in the distance perched in a dead tree on the far side of the creek. I went back round to get a closer look at it and when I approached it flew down into a tree with lots of foliage and a nest, just visible in the lower left hand corner of the second photo of the Buzzard. In this photo you can see the characteristic black breast that gives the bird its name, and the short unbarred tail, not as long as the folded wings, which you can see behind the tail.



Black-breasted buzzard (*Hamirostra melanosternon*)

Kooroorinya, North Central Queensland, 10 May 2018
187319 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

I left the bird in peace in case it was actually nesting, though laying doesn't usually start until June. Later that afternoon as I was birding along the creek - where there were various birds including <Budgerigars> - I saw it, or maybe its mate, soaring past in its characteristic hunting mode and exhibiting the striking under-wing pattern with the large white panels at the base of the primary flight feathers.



Black-breasted Buzzard (*Hamirostra melanosternon*)

Kooroorinya, North Central Queensland, 10 May 2018

187361 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Black-breasted Buzzards are versatile feeders and will eat mammals, birds, reptiles, carrion and even large insects. I suppose in the arid interior, you eat what you can find. They show a preference for young rabbits, nestlings, lizards and eggs. They will tackle the large eggs of <Emus>, breaking them either by pounding them with the bill or dropping stones on them. Have a look at this <<<http://www.arkive.org/black-breasted-buzzard/hamirostra-melanosternon/image-G138753.html>>> if you don't believe me (or even if you do, it's a great photo of a juvenile BB Buzzard caught red-handed!).



Black-breasted Buzzard (*Hamirostra melanosternon*)

Kooroorinya, North Central Queensland, 10 May 2018

187368 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Black-breasted Buzzards are large. They can have a wing-span of up to 1.56m/61in and can weight more than 1,400g/3.1lbs , making them the third heaviest Australian raptor after <[Wedge-tailed](#)> and <[White-bellied Sea-Eagles](#)>. The species is an Australian endemic, the sole member of the genus *Hamirostra* ('monotypic') and apparently related to the <[Square-tailed Kite](#)>, also the sole member of its genus *Lophoictinia*. Its range includes most of mainland Australia except the higher rainfall areas of eastern and southern Australia and is more common in the north.

I didn't find any Red-browed Pardalotes (or Little Eagles) at Kooroorinya, so the search continued.

Greetings

Ian

#584 Red-browed Pardalote 4 December 2018

A long time, as usual these days, since the last Bird of the Moment, but I haven't been entirely idle in the meantime. I've been busy both revising the ebook Where to Find Birds in North-east Queensland and compiling a second volume of birds of the week/moment covering 2010 until the present. More about those in a minute, but here is the <[Red-browed Pardalote](#)>, a species I wanted to photograph for Where to Find Birds in North-east Queensland and which I mentioned in the previous two

Birds of the Moment, the #582 <Masked Finch> and the #583 <Black-breasted Buzzard>.



McNamara's Road, Mt Isa-Camooweal, NW Qld

I finally tracked it down at McNamara's Road between Mt Isa and Camooweal with the help of my Mt Isa birding pal Rex Whitehead and another Mt Isa birder Karen who took me to a couple of spots on this road where they had found the Pardalote shortly before. McNamara's Road, about 68km from Mt Isa on the Barkly Highway going towards Camooweal is a famous site for the <Carpentarian Grasswren> though I have spent many hours there on a number of occasions, including this one, without finding any.



Red-browed Pardalote (*Pardalotus rubricatus*)

Mt Isa-Camooweal, NW Queensland, 12 May 2018

187611 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

We had more success with the Red-browed Pardalote helped by the fact that the dominant tree here the Snappy Gum doesn't get very tall so when you hear the characteristic call of the bird, a mellow rising, accelerating piping of five or six notes, you know that they aren't too far above the ground.



Red-browed Pardalote (*Pardalotus rubricatus*)

Mt Isa-Camooweal, NW Queensland, 12 May 2018

187523 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

It has, for a Pardalote, a large, rather chunky bill, second photo, and the white spots on the black cap distinguish it from the <[local race of the Striated Pardalote \(*uropygialis*\)](#)>. It has distinctive mustard-coloured wing bars and in flight, third photo, shows a yellowish-green rump.

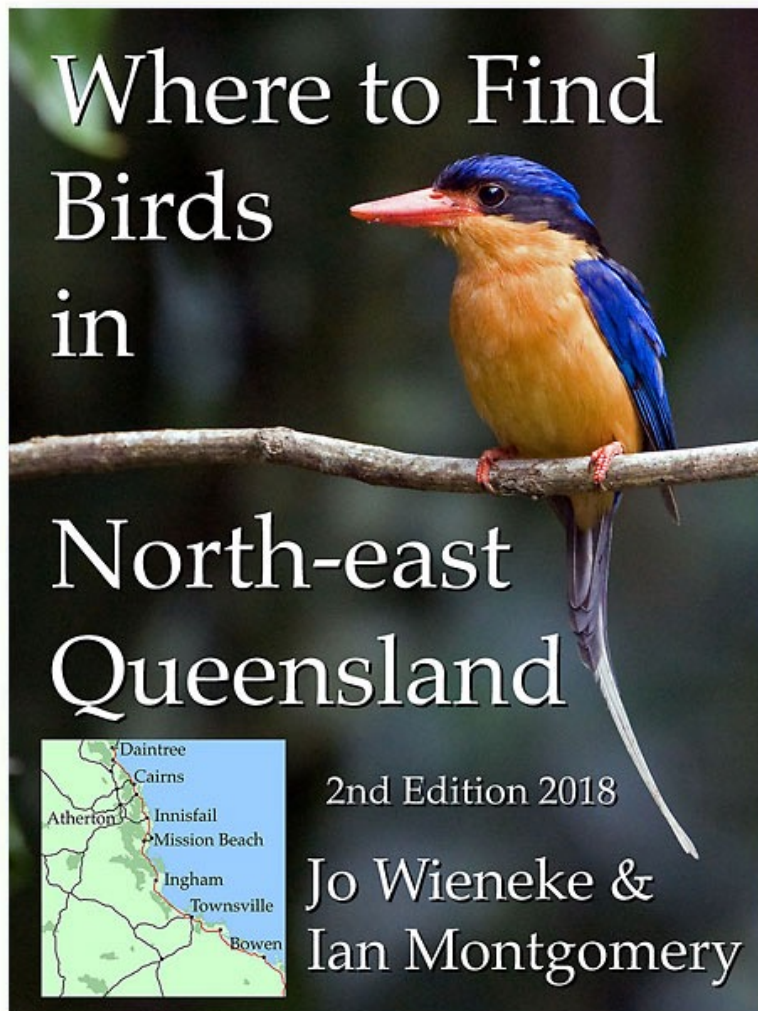


Red-browed Pardalote (*Pardalotus rubricatus*)

Mt Isa-Camooweal, NW Queensland, 12 May 2018

187520 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Back to ebooks. The second edition of <[Where to Find Birds in North-east Queensland](#)> has gone through a number of iterations and refinements since I first put it up on the website in August of this year, and the latest version went up yesterday both in epub and pdf formats.



This is a free update to owners of the first edition but to access it you need a Dropbox link to the folder. If you bought it since January 2017, you should receive a separate email with a link to the folder. If you don't receive this email, perhaps because your email address has changed, let me know: ian@birdway.com.au.

If you purchased it prior to January 2017, you would have done so through Apple, Google or Kobo and I won't have your email address. So write to me and I'll send you the link: ian@birdway.com.au.

Greetings

Ian

#585 Grey Falcon 23 December 2018

Here is a special bird of the moment for the festive season. If you asked Australian birders to nominate the most sought after diurnal raptor, you'd probably get a choice of two: the <Red Goshawk> of the Hawk and Eagle family <Accipitridae> and the <Grey Falcon> of the <Falconidae>. Rex Whitehead, my birding pal in Mount Isa had

told me about a nesting pair of Grey Falcons in the Winton district so I came back to Townsville that way at the end of the camping trip in May.



Male Grey Falcon (*Falcon hypoleucos*)

Winton District, Central West Queensland, 16 May 2018

187976 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Falcons were nesting high up on a very tall communications mast. Rex had told me that they were in its vicinity only from before dusk until shortly after dawn and I took his advice and camped near the base of the mast to maximise my chances of seeing them. Sure enough they arrived in the evening but I got only poor shots of them flying in and perched in shadow on the mast.

I got up early and was rewarded three or four minutes after sunrise by the male flying around calling (first photo) in preparation for mating with the female (second photo) who was perched on the mast near the nest.



Mating Grey Falcons (*Falcon hypoleucos*)

Winton District, Central West Queensland, 16 May 2018

187987 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

This behaviour was repeated two more times over the hour or so. The third photo shows the third mating attempt at a different location just over an hour after sunrise and the fourth photo shows the male flying away four seconds later.



Mating Grey Falcons (*Falcon hypoleucos*)

Winton District, Central West Queensland, 16 May 2018

188076 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The sexes are similar, though the females, as is typical for raptors, are larger. The male has a shorter tail which supposedly makes it look longer winged in flight but I didn't get any photos of the mainly sedentary female for comparison. The fifth photo shows the female in the same position as during the third mating (third photo) but the male is sitting in the nest.



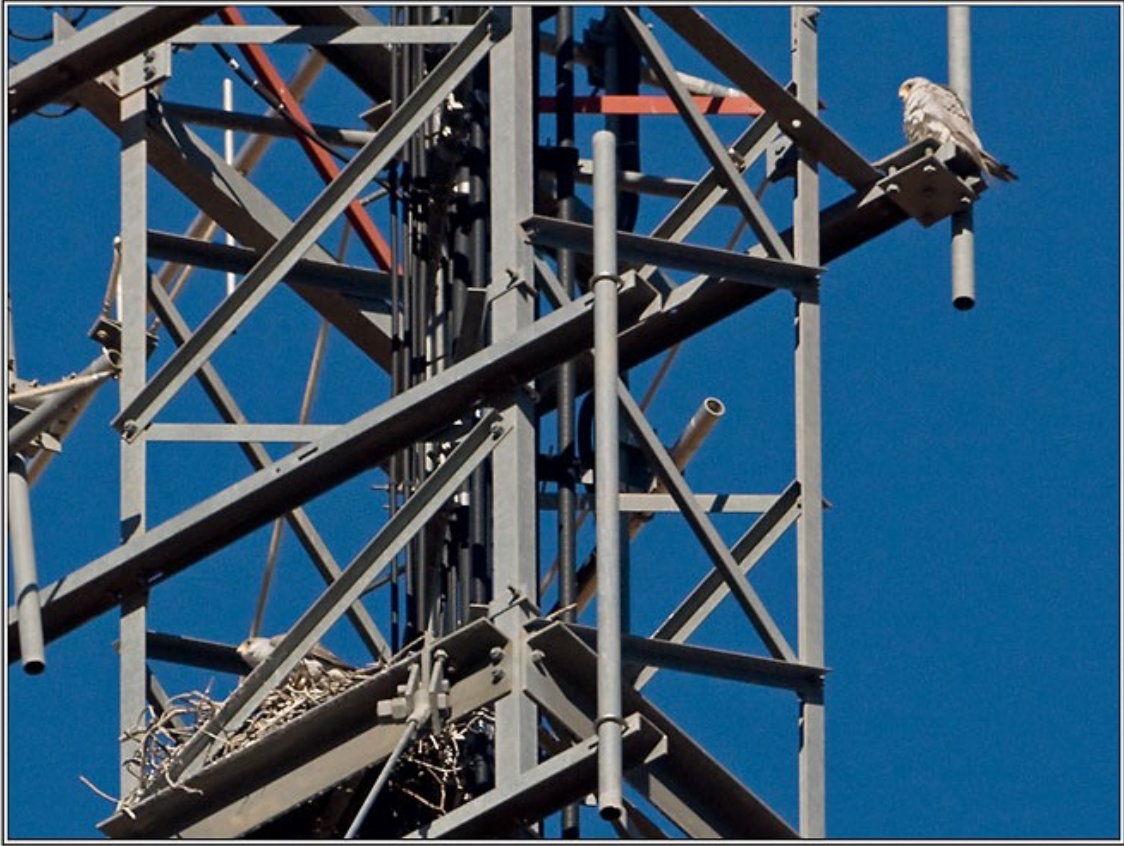
Male Grey Falcon (*Falcon hypoleucos*)

Winton District, Central West Queensland, 16 May 2018

188079 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Grey Falcons are supposed to use the old nests of other raptors or corvids (ravens and crows) preferably high up. In the arid areas where they occur, tall trees are few so in recent years they've taken to nesting in communication masts.

About two hours after sunrise, the birds disappeared as quietly as they'd arrived the previous day and I didn't see them fly away. This pair had just bred successfully with two young fledging, so it was encouraging to see them preparing to do so again.



Pair of Grey Falcons (*Falcon hypoleucos*)

Winton District, Central West Queensland, 16 May 2018

188121 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

The Grey Falcon is an Australian endemic sparsely scattered over the drier inland areas of mainland Australia except the southwest, eastern and southern coastal areas and the wetter parts of northern Australia. The breeding range has contracted since the mid 20th century to drier areas north of 26° S. It's population is estimated at less than 1000 mature individuals and it is classified as vulnerable. Threats include habitat clearing, egg collecting and the taking of young for falconry so I'm sure you'll understand why I've been a bit vague about the actual location of the mast.

Christmas seems to be a time for unrestrained gaudiness, dare I say meretriciousness, in decoration so here is my gaudiest photo from 2018 - taken from my back verandah - to get into the spirit of things. I wish you a joyful, safe and happy festive season and a peaceful and fulfilling 2019.



Male Olive-backed Sunbird (*Cinnyris jugularis*)

Bluewater, NE Queensland, 6 August 2018

189328 © Ian Montgomery birdway.com.au

Greetings

Ian

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