

BIRDS OF THE BARHAM DISTRICT, NEW SOUTH WALES AND VICTORIA: AN HISTORICAL SUMMARY 1930-1999 by Peter Disher. Barham Landcare Group and Bird Observers Club of Australia. 78 pp., colour plates, soft-cover, 150 mm x 200 mm, \$12 rrp, BOCA members \$11. Available from Barham Landcare Group, Barham, N.S.W. 2732; or BOCA, P.O. Box 185, Nunawading, Vic. 3131, or email <boca@ozemail.com.au>.

The decline of many once-common land-bird species is a matter of increasing concern to bird enthusiasts and conservationists alike. Sound knowledge from the past is vital to monitoring such trends and assisting in trying to plan remedial measures. The Barham district, covering an area of approximately 110 km x 110 km which spans the Murray River between Echuca and Swan Hill, is fortunate that such information has been gathered for at least 70 years by Peter Disher. Other district residents, Evan Thomas of Tullakool and the Lowes of Mystic Park, have helped to gather data. Years ago Barham was demonstrated to be a good area for birds and coverage has been aided by numerous visits from members of the Bird Observers Club of

Australia (BOCA), with campouts often being hosted by the locals. The foreword indicates that BOCA members originally encouraged Peter to become the recorder of bird information for his district. To be of value, books like this must contain information that is accurate and factual. Through Peter's records this is achieved well, any instance where doubt exists being clearly indicated.

Some 265 species are treated with sufficient detail to give a good indication of their status and distribution within the area. All locations mentioned are explained in a list immediately after the bird section, enabling a reader unfamiliar with the area to readily ascertain their whereabouts from the map at the back of the book. Adequate space has been given to species such as the Glossy Ibis, Bush Stone-Curlew, some terns and the Azure Kingfisher where considerable knowledge regarding their breeding and fluctuations has been gathered. Readers with an interest in waders will be impressed by the number of species, including quite a few rarities such as Little Stint, Long-toed Stint, Buff-breasted Sandpiper and phalaropes, recorded at sites which are so far distant from the coast. There are many points of unexpected interest such as how the once-common Whistling Kite has now

become rare, while the White-breasted Sea-eagle is not. Also the Brown Goshawk and Collared Sparrowhawk are seldom seen. Those species reliant on box flat (dominated by black box *Eucalyptus largiflorens*) and sandhill country habitats are shown to have fared worse from habitat destruction than those which could exist in the more riverine river red gums *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*. A 12-page section by Martin Driver on vegetation includes some interesting historical quotes, a few also revealing how abundant were the birds in the days of early settlement. He elucidates just how severely the non-riverine habitats, in particular, have been modified.

Colour photographs, 70 of birds, taken by Peter Disher and Evan Thomas, and 10 of habitat, some by Amy Clay, are included. Many of these are excellent and all have relevance and interest. A special highlight is the depiction of the first Victorian record of the Pied Heron. The text accompanying the photographs points out features of interest in things like plumage, bare skin colour and sexual difference. The discerning reader will find more of these interesting little snippets scattered throughout the text.

A list of the author's writings is included and is followed by a substantial list titled 'General and other references'. These are mainly field guides and other bird identification material. A disappointment here was that a fuller listing of ornithological literature pertinent to the area under review was not attempted. The Lowes, in particular, have contributed a number of articles to the *Australian Bird Watcher* and *Emu* covering a wide variety of the area's birds. Indeed they mention the last-known breeding of the Mulga Parrot within the area many years prior to

1976 (Lowe and Lowe 1976). The species is no longer present. The paper by J.N. Hobbs (1961) also would appear to contain much of relevance to the area under review.

This, though, is but a minor criticism. The book contains a wealth of information and is a pleasure to read. The short section about the author, in which he is able to give a few comments regarding some of the long-gone mammals, the foreword by W.J. McConnell and the short description of the Barham Landcare Group all add to the interest and appeal. Like Belcher's *The birds of the District of Geelong* (1914) and Learmonth's *Birds of Portland* (1966), this book will provide not only a platform from which others can work but a benchmark for monitoring change. Anyone contemplating travel to the area should obtain a copy while those who might never visit but have general interest in birds and their population dynamics will find it of good value. The Barham Landcare Group, with support from BOCA, the Murray Total Catchment Management Committee and Greening Australia are to be congratulated for their initiative in making this information available to those of the public who desire it.

REFERENCES

- Belcher, C.F. 1914. *The birds of the district of Geelong, Australia*. Geelong.
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