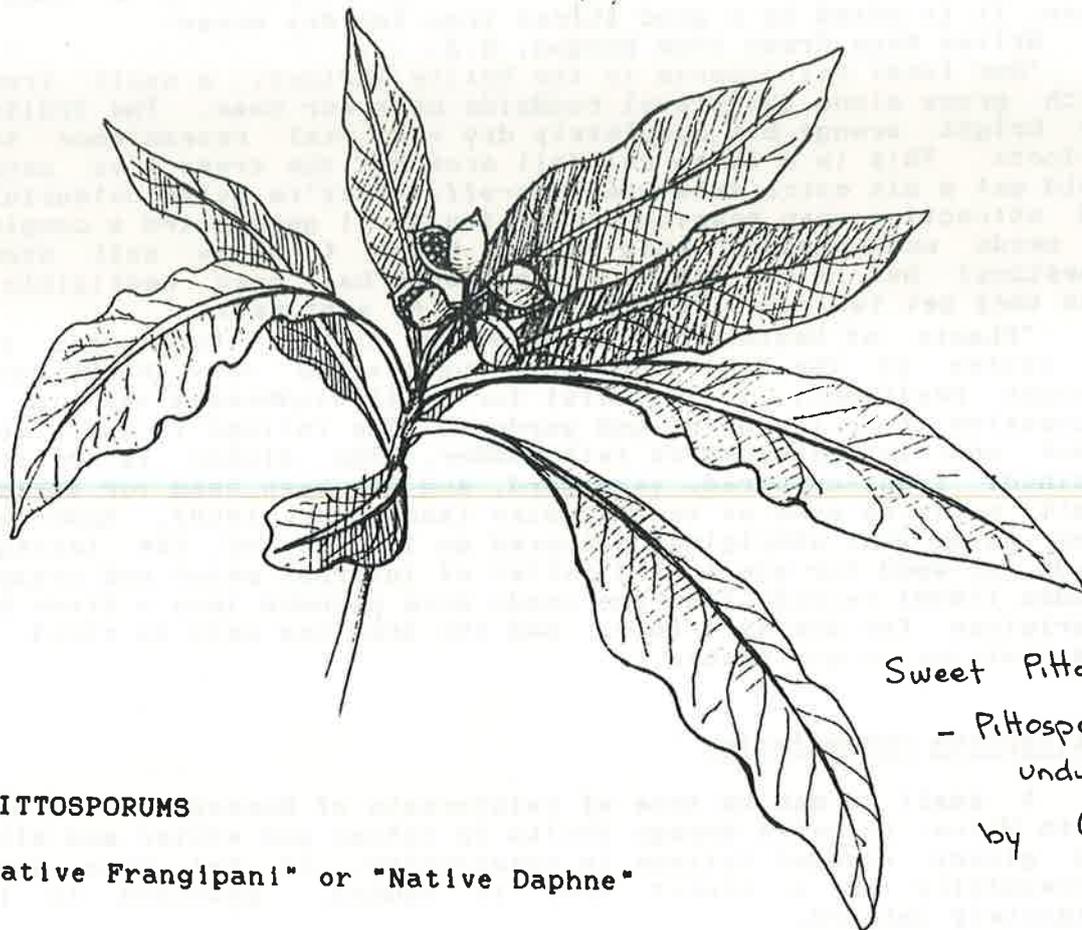


29 SEP 1989

**S.G.A.P. BIRDS AND NATIVE PLANTS
STUDY GROUP**

Newsletter No. 16 January 1989



Sweet Pittosporum
- *Pittosporum undulatum*
by Colleen
Werner

PITTOSPORUMS

- "Native Frangipani" or "Native Daphne"

Nine species of *Pittosporum* occur in Australia, all but *P. ferrugineum* are endemics.

The various species grow in a range of habitats, from the dry inland to coastal rainforest. All nine species are in cultivation. Propagated from seed, they are said to be generally hardy and make good street plantings.

Flowers are small, usually creamy coloured and scented. Their often bright orange fruiting capsules which split open to release sticky red seeds are attractive and popular with birds.

Examples of *Pittosporums* are:

Pittosporum undulatum "Sweet Pittosporum"

"*Pittosporum undulatum* is very widespread in the Wollongong area. It occurs in almost every plant community, from dry sclerophyll to rainforest, where it reaches its best development. In rainforest it may be found up to 10m tall and a with trunk diameter of 300mm. In eucalypt forest *pittosporum* grows to about 6m tall and is a little spreading tree.

This tree is most conspicuous in August-September when the new foliage opens and is brilliant green against the darker green of its old leaves and surrounding foliage. *Pittosporum*, because it is a very adaptable tree and a rainforest pioneer, is often found in regenerating vegetation on hillsides where en masse, the bright green new foliage is quite outstanding. Also in August-September the perfume of the flowers is heavy in the air about these trees."

.....from 'Wollongong's Native Trees' by Leon Fuller.

In the Blue Mountains area King Parrots, Crimson Rosellas, Pied Currawongs, Magpies and Indian Mynas are known to feed at the fruits and Eastern Spinebills and New Holland Honeyeaters at the flowers. Around Bega (south coast NSW) Pied Currawongs, Silvereyes and Lewin's Honeyeaters have been noted at the fruits. Flowers are pollinated by moths as well as birds.

Pittosporum phyllyreoides "Native Apricot" or "Weeping Pittosporum"

The species name is derived from a Mediterranean shrub Phillyrea to which this species bears a resemblance. It grows in the inland in mallee scrub and woodlands, especially in sandy loams. It is noted as a good street tree for dry areas.

Writes Anne Green from Morgan, S.A.

'Our local Pittosporum is the Native Apricot, a small tree which grows along the gravel roadside near our home. The fruits are bright orange but completely dry - no real resemblance to apricots. This is a 250mm rainfall area but the trees I've seen would get a bit extra from road run-off. They're quite colourful and attractive when bearing mature fruit. I germinated a couple of seeds and planted them on our block (shallow soil over limestone) but in six months their growth has been negligible, even they get two hours trickle irrigation most weeks.'

"Plants of Western New South Wales" by G.M. Cunningham et al states of the Native Apricot "The tree is very hardy and drought resistant; it is useful for small windbreaks and is a decorative tree for parks and gardens. The foliage is eaten by stock and is regarded as fair fodder. The timber is close-grained, light-coloured, very hard, and has been used for making small articles such as tool handles (Anderson, 1968). Anderson also notes that aborigines prepared an infusion of the leaves, seeds or wood for use in the relief of internal pains and cramp. Maiden (1889) records that the seeds were pounded into a flour by aborigines for use as a food, and the tree was said to yield a gum similar to gum arabic."

Pittosporum rhombifolium

A small to medium tree of rainforests of Queensland and New South Wales. It bears orange fruits in autumn and winter and with its glossy rounded foliage is spectacular. It has been used successfully as a street tree in Sydney, provided it is adequately watered.

Sweet Pittosporum (Pittosporum undulatum) - A Native Weed?

In the early 1980's two Victorian researchers, R.M. Gleason and D.H. Ashton, noted that Sweet Pittosporum was invading sites to which it is not native. These areas include Messmate and Mountain Ash forests in the Dandenong Ranges, Coast Tea-tree communities on the Mornington Peninsula and remnants of the Eucalyptus radiata- E. macrorrhyncha- E. cephalocarpa forests in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. The pattern of invasion into forests of the last type is patchy, with most Pittosporum seedlings and trees clustering around the butts of established Eucalypts, Sweet Pittosporum and Native Cherry trees.

In these areas the researchers felt that the bright orange seeds of the Sweet Pittosporum were not widely eaten by native birds. Pied Currawongs ate the seeds but were not well established in the area. Silvereyes tended to lick at the seeds rather than devour whole seeds. However, the seeds formed a large part of the diet of the introduced European Blackbird during winter.

The expansion in the distribution of Blackbirds parallels the invasion of Sweet Pittosporum into new areas. Blackbirds tend to defecate while perching and they usually roost near the main trunk of the tree. This correlates with the preferential clumping of seedlings near the butts of established trees and implies that

this pattern is the result of the uneven dispersal of the seed. Additionally, it is difficult for Sweet Pittosporum seeds to germinate in drier, more open areas.

Thus, Sweet Pittosporum may be behaving as a weed in this area since its main agent of dispersal, the Blackbird, has been introduced.

CALOTHAMNUS POSTSCRIPT

Last newsletter, as I wrote of the Calothamnus genus, I inadvertently left out Norm Bone's (Anglesea, and previously Shepparton, Victoria), comments....

'I have had at least one [Calothamnus] in all of my gardens and I have found that as a bird attractor they could almost be regarded as a dead loss and I can only assume that they yield a very small amount of nectar'.

Since Calothamnus are one of the "stock" plants recommended for honeyeaters I feel that Norm's observations are particularly valuable. If anyone can add further observations regarding the use, or non-use, of Calothamnus by birds it would be most interesting.

BIRD ATTRACTIVE PLANTS TO RECOMMEND

Thank you to every one who has contributed information on bird attractive plants worthy of recommendation. It is perhaps indicative of the wide geographical spread of members, from tropical north Queensland to the arid interior, that their has been such a diversity of plants recommended.

Next newsletter I plan summarise all this good information in the newsletter.

If you would still like to contribute further information please do - to get together a really good list of attractive plants this needs to be an on going project.

Details of the NAME of the recommended plant together with, if possible, the MATURE PLANT SIZE, PART OF PLANT USED BY BIRDS, FLOWERING/FRUITING TIME, BIRDS ATTRACTED, and CULTIVATION REQUIREMENTS are useful. However, if you know only the name of the plant, then even this is a good start - someone else may well be able to fill the gaps. Also of interest - if you have tried any plants generally considered to be bird-attractive and found them unworthy of recommendation, then this excellent information to add.

ATTRACTING BIRDS TO A GARDEN IN THE ARID INLAND

Anne Green writes of gardening at Morgan, S.A.

'I'd just like to comment on attracting birds to gardens. Obviously those birds only native to an area are going to come to the garden, regardless of what is planted. It seems likely that local birds will be best adapted to use local, indigenous flora species so it's worth finding out what are or were the original plants in the area then selecting the most attractive and/or easily grown or otherwise suitable for the basis of a garden.

Being a basically lazy gardener this also appeals to me as these plants should need minimum attention. Another attraction of my garden seems to be its organic untidyness. The shrike-thrushes explore every nook and cranny of fences, sheds, dog kennels etc. in their quest for insects. The hay mulch is home to dozens of skinks while underfelt and old hessian bag mulch are pulled to bits for nest material by honeyeaters, Southern Whitefaces and Zebra Finches. Last year's bean twine, still hanging, half rotten, is also favoured for nests, and feathers from chook manure are another popular item. There's even some consolation in the patches of barley grass which appear after the autumn rain and shed billions of sharp, barbed seeds in spring - Zebra Finches and Red-rumped Parrots love them.'

BOOK REVIEW - A GARDEN OF BIRDS

A GARDEN OF BIRDS by Graham Pizzey, 1988. Viking O'Neill Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Victoria. Hardcover. Illustrated. RRP \$50.

Graham Pizzey is a well-known writer on Australian wildlife and the environment. He contributed a weekly article to the Melbourne HERALD for nearly twenty years, and is the author of a number of popular books, including the best selling authority for birdwatchers, THE FIELD GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF AUSTRALIA. We are fortunate that Graham is also a member of our study group.

Graham's latest book - A GARDEN OF BIRDS - is delightful. Initially, the features of a good bird-garden, that garden which "cannot be built to a formula", are established. Graham provides sensible advice regarding bird-attractive plantings, artificial foods and water.

To study group members such advice might seem quite familiar. However, Graham then proceeds to give this good bird-garden some perspective. In a highly readable fashion, Graham describes the origins and the evolution of the Australian flora, the basis of our gardens, and then the gardening traditions which the early settlers carried to Australia with them and sought to impose upon the native flora. The efforts of early gardeners, which perhaps were well-meaning, but in their ignorance often had disastrous consequences for the native flora and fauna, are traced. Particularly interesting are the success stories of some fourteen exotic birds, a living reminder of the extensive changes which have been wrought in native habitats.

To provide insight into the workings of the bird-garden Graham then delves into the mechanics of the plants. It is perhaps a measure of Graham's skill with words that he is able to describe, in some detail, processes such as osmosis and photosynthesis, and still keep me enthralled. Similarly, the material presented on woodland birds, honeyeaters and parrots, and their relationships with the Australian flora, is carefully researched, detailed and highly readable.

Graham concludes by writing of his own garden at Mount Martha on the Mornington Peninsula. To this, a wealth of further gardening expertise is added by recounting the experiences of other bird gardeners, a number of whom are SGAP or study group members, from Brisbane to Adelaide.

The text is enhanced by numerous good colour and black and white photographs (Graham's own) and some excellent drawings by Richard Weatherly.

Graham's obvious love of the Australian environment is infectious.

A GARDEN OF BIRDS is to be recommended for the wealth of highly readable information it provides. For those who belong to that growing band of Australians whom Graham believes "clearly feel the need for more intimate contact with the life and soul of this beloved country" A GARDEN OF BIRDS is a must.

GANG-GANGS AND BANKSIAS

Lola Smith (Mount Riverview, N.S.W.), describes the feeding of a male and a female Gang-gang on seed of Banksia ericifolia in her garden.....

'Birds firstly bit off and dropped foliage at base of the seed cone. The hard seed cases were slightly open and the edge of the seeds extended out beyond the cone. The birds pulled the seed out by their bills then transferred it to a foot. They then delicately discarded the outer case and gently chewed at the seed. The male then flew on to Grevillea banksii (white form) and fed on its green seeds.

CUCKOO-SHRIKES

Generally grey birds with darker barring or markings. The body is "cuckoo" like and the bill "shrike" like. On alighting on a perch they characteristically re-fold or re-arrange their wings, hence their alternative name "Shufflewings".

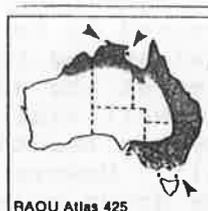
The Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike has an Australia wide distribution. In the RAOU's Atlas program (1984) it was the fourth most widely reported bird. Less widespread and common are the Yellow-eyed Cuckoo-shrike (rainforest and eucalypt forest, including margins and regrowth); White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike (woodlands and urban areas throughout the tropics); and Ground Cuckoo-shrike (drier inland, eucalypt woodland, acacia scrub and spinnifex).



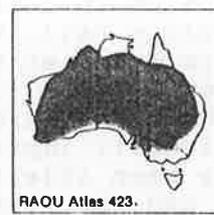
Black - faced



Yellow-eyed



White-bellied



Ground

Distributions of the Cuckoo-shrikes

The cuckoo-shrikes usually live in pairs or small groups, though parties of up to 40 Yellow-eyed Cuckoo-shrikes have been reported.

They feed on insects and fruit, including native figs and introduced mulberries. Apart from the Ground Cuckoo-shrike, which is an agile feeder at ground level, they tend, in forested coastal areas at least, to forage in the canopy or shrubs. Anne Green (Morgan, S.A.), describes the foraging behaviour of Black-faced Cuckoo-shrikes in her area "They move frequently from tree to tree, watching the ground as if looking for food but too impatient to wait for it in one place. N. Caley says they feed in the foliage ("What Bird is That?") so I'm not sure if my interpretation is correct. With our abundance of grasshoppers and small skinks they'd certainly do well off the ground.'

Nests are small open cups placed within the fork of a tree branch. Bound with cobweb and sometimes decorated with lichen, they rely on camouflage for protection.

PIED CURRAWONGS - The Bard's Tale from Margaret Tomalin.

From 1972 to June 1980 we lived in Roseville, Sydney, halfway up a rocky slope with a "cliff" almost directly behind the house, rising about 20ft, and dotted with Epacris longifolia and Woolisia pungens with Acacia terminalis, etc. below. In autumn the pied currawongs used to gather on the top of the rock in groups of about twenty to thirty and "sing" together. At that time, in addition to the normal "currawong" cry a thrilling, throaty call was added, a number of birds calling together. Our rock rose up steeply and levelled out into a shallow basin along the top. The whole basin sloped slightly towards the house and also collected water. It was, therefore, a natural lofty gathering place with water provided and Epacris flowers for snacks (whole flowers were picked off and eaten). For us, it had the added advantage of being visible from the house below and to a human observer it appeared as though each separate performer came to the centre of a natural "stage" to perform his call!

During one of these gatherings we saw a single bird set upon by the others and realized later that he was recovering behind the bushes on the house level below the rock. We fed it for some weeks before it was fit enough to fly away. It would be interesting to know more about these gatherings, the purpose and the meaning of the calls used during the period.

The normal group signal of the currawongs, heard all the time we lived in Roseville was CURRA-WONG. CURRA-WONG! On moving to Springwood in the Lower Blue Mountains, however, we were surprised to find that although the Currawong call is heard frequently, the group call seems to be CURRAWEE! The WEE part of the call is given on a very high, sweet note: "Curra" on two low notes and the "WEE" on a piercing high note. (There is a place called Kirrawee near Penrith which is, perhaps, named after this call?) No one to whom I have spoken, either in Sydney itself or the Blue Mountains seems to have noticed the difference in the calls, nor can I find any reference to different "area" calls in any of the books I have consulted.

A small drama was enacted shortly after we arrived in the Blue Mountains in June 1980. The currawong with the loudest and most melodious call, who appeared to be the group leader (about 5 to 6 birds in his group at the time) seemed to be resident in our garden and called either from tallish trees at the end of our Bush garden or from neighbouring large trees well visible from our windows. We were particularly impressed by his beautiful call (which no other bird has since been able to equal). However, in November 1981 this bird became lame and the rest of the group rejected him and deposed him from office. Normally, when he sounded his currawee call, there was a pause of a few seconds and then the answering currawees would come in from the other birds. The tactic of the group was as follows. When the leader sounded his curra-WEE call, they allowed him get as far as the CURRA- and then blotted out the melodious "WEE!" with a unison CURRAWEE call of their own. This completely baffled and confused the leader, whom I will hereafter call the "Bard". He tried again and again without success to sound his call. Then there would be a silence and he would fly towards the trees in which the group was perching. They immediately flew off. After two or three weeks of this the Bard seemed to accept that he no longer belonged and stumbled around our garden looking very hunched and forlorn. We fed him but he was very nervous and it was difficult to feed him without interference from other birds. The group transferred their "centre" to another group of trees not far away and could be heard calling to each other. The Bard gave up trying to compete; it was then that we realized that his call had been a very special one - very strong and clear and sweet.

During January and early February 1982, one bird, which I presumed to be the new leader, took to silently shadowing the Bard. He did not attack him while I was watching, but would sit in a tree just above him peering down while the Bard was drinking or feeding. This upset the Bard so much that he would hobble off and hide. The feathers about his head were permanently disarranged as though he suffered attacks from other birds.

The Bard disappeared for a few weeks and then reappeared in March and it seemed that his leg had healed somewhat. He became a little bolder and seemed to have adapted himself to a solitary life. He was not heard at the March Currawong gathering nor later at the autumn-winter meetings and was not sighted until January 1983 when he returned to the garden, still very lame, but very fit, well able to balance and food-gather. In June he was seen with a companion (mate? - second anyway in pecking order). He accepted food from us and was gradually trained to take food actually on the verandah table where he was safe from other birds. Over the next few years he became a daily caller, appearing several times a day, 5 times at the most, and perching on the back of a rocking chair, staring expectantly in at the window. He was fed on grated cheese at first but we felt that five meals of cheese might not be good for him and switched to sultanas. He liked these so much that he thereafter rejected the cheese and waited for sultanas.

During the cheese era the Bard one day found that the pieces of cheese were sticking to the small plastic dish put out for him. He salivates while eating and the cheese was adhering to the plate. After unsuccessful efforts to dislodge the cheese the Bard stood back for a moment and then very carefully grasped the rim of the plastic plate in his beak and tossed it off the table. He then turned and stared in at the window. I took the hint and brought out fresh grated cheese on a heavy china plate. This was acceptable.

The pattern of several daily calls was interrupted only by occasional absences at the weekend, when we presumed that he found picnic sites more rewarding.

There was a particularly wet period in November 1987 and the Bard appeared to have pain in his leg. He would appear on the table or rocking chair and sink into a roosting position to take the weight off the leg. The unseasonal wet weather lasted for about three weeks and in the middle of it the Bard disappeared. He last came for food on November 13th, was sighted on the 15th and then vanished. We were certain that he had succumbed to the wet and windy weather, but on the 25th January 1988 he reappeared with a mate and two young chicks. He called for food and has continued to do so ever since.

The Bard has never regained his dominant position, though he calls quite loudly from time to time. He is very wary of competition from other currawongs at feeding time and we have seen him attacked by an Indian Turtle Dove, (apparently nesting nearby). The attack was quite vicious and the Bard was trapped in a leafy tree, unable to fly off and not nimble enough to defend himself. I drove off the dove.

We discovered only last year that our next-door neighbours buy minced beef for "Hoppy" as they call him, but as they are away during the weekdays, his meat meals occur only at weekends.

As the Bard was the dominant member of the group in 1980, we presume that he must have been at least two years old at that time. He must now be at least ten years old.



Hairy Pittosporum

- *Pittosporum revolutum*
by Colleen Werner.

NEXT NEWSLETTER

Next newsletter will be in MAY.

Bird of the newsletter will be the Gang-gang Cockatoo and Plant of the Newsletter Eremophilas.

Any contributions regarding either these or any other matters of interest are most welcome.

STUDY GROUP LEADER

If anyone would like to take on the job of study group leader, or perhaps might like to be a co-leader, then please let me know. I feel that the group could only benefit from some new ideas and the input of a new leader.