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

NEWSLETTER No.3 MAY 1984

Developing Flower of
Grevillea Robyn Gordon

Dear members,

Greetings, after a series of mishaps a "May" newsletter at last. Welcome to the following people who have joined the group since the last newsletter :

Information Sheet

Our first information sheet is underway and a copy will be included with the September newsletter.

Audio-visual

Slides and ideas are required.

Native Plant / Wildlife Catalogue

As a start a listing of all native plant / wildlife interactions collected over the last year will be included with next newsletter. It would help if you could contribute any observations you may have gathered. Observations should include such things as nature of the interaction as well as location and date where possible. For example :

ACACIA ELATA - Cedar wattle - suburban garden, Blaxland, N.S.W.
Height 2m.

White-eared honeyeater - May, 1984 - licking at glands on the rachis
Brown thornbills - February to May, 1984 - gleaning in foliage
Striated thornbills - as above
Pied currawongs - May 1984 - taking larvae / spiders from within curled leaves

GREVILLEA 'ROBYN GORDON'

This grevillea probably needs no introduction. It's spectacular red blooms which are carried almost continually have made it one of the most widely planted of the grevilleas. It is a hybrid, the parents being G. banksii and G. bipinnatifida. The foliage is fernlike and the growth spreading and bushy. It does well in a sunny well-drained position and grows to a height of about 1m.

Grevillea 'Robyn Gordon' is grown successfully in streets, parks, car parks etc. and it also makes a good container plant if the straggling growth is kept pruned. Propagation is usually done from leaf cuttings. For honeyeaters it is outstanding.

from Margaret Tomalin (Springwood, N.S.W.)

"This is a winner as far as we are concerned. It is seldom without honeybirds of one sort or another: Eastern spinebills, New Hollands, White-eared honeyeaters (all three of these now permanent residents), red wattle birds, noisy friar birds and yellow faced honeyeaters. We have a group of four plants in the centre of the grassy space at the back of the house in a good position for observation from the back verandah. They are never without flowers, except when the crimson rosellas decide to strike and clip off all the red blooms they can find.

Other birds recorded in Grevillea 'Robyn Gordon' include
Black-chinned honeyeater - Shepparton, Vic.
Lewin's honeyeater - Lapstone, N.S.W.
Brown thornbill (in foliage) - Blaxland, N.S.W.
Sparrow (in foliage) - Blaxland, N.S.W.

BANKSIAS

Do you have Banksias growing naturally in your area ?

from Val Maher.... "A request - in some future newsletter would the group provide details of other plants - trees / shrubs / ground covers which occur near banksias in their natural habitat. By following eco system plantings I feel these beautiful banksias may be easier to establish and maintain in healthy long lives. "

Can you contribute ?

THE GREY BUTCHER BIRD (Cracticus torquatus)

from Jenny Rich

When we moved to Eastwood three years ago, we found that we shared our new garden with a male Grey Butcher Bird. He is smaller than a magpie, 25-30cms., (compared to 40 cms.), boldly marked with a black head, white collar, white throat, white in front of the eyes, white rump, grey back and grey wash underneath and he has some little whiskers. His mate is a little smaller and a little browner especially on the crown. They have short little legs and their feet are not very strong. Their bill is dark blue-grey with a little downwards hook at the end and a dark tip.

Grey Butcher Birds (GBB) are found in wooded country and in suburbs, provided there are sufficient trees to provide their habitat. They are fairly common all over southern Australia, but not in drier desert areas or dense rainforest.

The male lives permanently in a territory, but his mate often disappears with the youngsters after the breeding season - probably to an adjacent area. In spring a mate is wooed back to the male's territory. The territory of our male GBB is about half a mile in every direction from the centre (our garden!). There are other GBBs in two adjacent territorries.

Their food is mostly protein - small skinks, insects, mice and occasionally baby birds, plus a little fruit and seeds. Because of weak legs and feet, the GBB can't hold down its prey and often will wedge the food in the fork of a tree's branch or on a thorn, and then tear at it with its beak. The GBB's reputation as a killer of baby birds in my experience is exaggerated. From my observations, the GBBs in our area rarely eat baby birds, preferring small skinks and insects.

Their calls are very distinctive. In the early morning, they give a long rolling unmelodic and scratchy territorial call. This call is also made at other times at an intruder such as a kookaburra, raven or cat. Our GBB makes this call at dusk each evening when some ringtail possums emerge from their nests. There is also a beautiful melodic call : male and female often sing different parts of the call, answering each other. It is interesting to note that this melodic call varies from bird to bird and is quite different in different areas. Presumably a particular call is learnt by the offspring and then slightly varied. Nevertheless, the timbre of a GBB's melodic call is easily recognisable wherever you are.

They are also great mimics, and the mimicry is often done an undertone, together with their melodic call. They mimic the other birds in their own territory - our GBB mimics Eastern rosellas, Currawongs, Noisy miners, Rainbow lorrikeets, Indian mynahs, Magpies and Peewees. Presumably GBBs in the bush would have a much wider repetoire of mimicry.

Finding a mate seems to be done mainly by song initially. Towards the end of winter and early spring, GBBs become much more vocal as the males attempt to woo a female to their territory. The male also begins feeding her tasty morcels. They then explore possible nesting sites, and eventually build a nest out of twigs, sticks and fine roots.

They are very secretive about their nesting siteand it is often hard to find out exactly where it is. They seem to prefer a tall dense tree (e.g. a Bloodwood or a Brush box) fairly high up. The female does most of the incubating, being fed some of the time by the male. In our experience there has been between six and eight weeks between the first sighting of the pair carrying nesting materials away and hearing the first noises of their hatched chicks. It may be a couple of weeks before the eggs are actually laid - usually 2 or 3 eggs are laid.

As soon as the eggs hatch, the parent birds become very aggressive towards any enemy which comes near the nest and this aggression extends some distance away. They make their aggressive call, dive bomb any enemy (including people) coming near and snap their beak as they fly low overhead. Theydo this even to a person they have come to know as a friend previously.

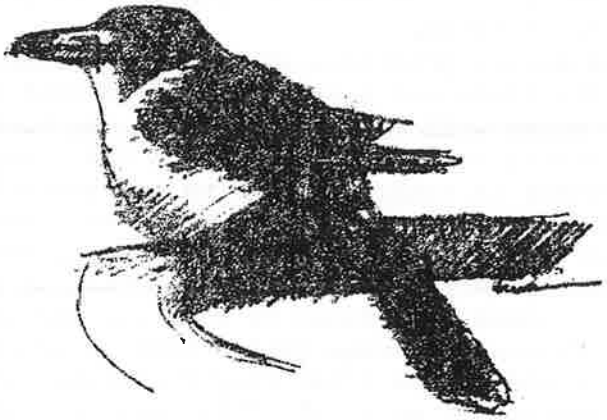
The baby birds make little fluting noises when the parents arrive at the nest with food but remain quiet the rest of the time. Droppings are removed by the parents and dropped some distance away. After 3 - 4 weeks, the young (usually two) leave the nest and sit in adjacent trees. There is usually a lot of encouraging noise from the parents when the young actually leave the nest. The young then beg for food with mewing calls when their parents arrive in nearby trees with food. Male young are distinguishable quite early as their head is darker.

The young gradually fly further and further afield, learn about the surrounding area and learn to sing. They disappear about January with the mother bird. The male remains, mainly on his own, but occasoinally singing duets with another GBB until late winter whem he attracts a mate back to live in his territory by calling loudly and

Their main enemies are people who cut down their trees, destroy their habitat and use deadly pesticides which enter the food chain. Also cats, currawongs, kokkaburras and ravens (the last three frequently raid the GBB's nest).

I have not noticed any particular tree or plant preference, but then in our area, as in many suburbs, there is not much choice, and they must make the most of the few remaining trees and shrubs. Someone observing the GBB in a more natural setting might be able to add to this, particularly re size of territory, food preferences and type of habitat preferred.

The GBB is one of our most beautiful songsters and is a fascinating bird to observe as well to listen to.



Grey butcherbird

LES

from Colleen Werner

We have had Les, a grey butcher bird, for two years now, and in that short time he has become an integral part of the family. He came to us as a nestling that had been thrown out of his nest. In the fall his leg was very badly broken, and his ankle was completely shattered, even veterinarian care could not help to reset his leg properly. It was splinted for a while so it is bent rather than hanging.

At this stage he was an adorable little bundle of brown fluff, with a big wide open beak at feed time. At the same time we reared a young magpie. They were both reared on a mixture of minced meat (home minced to avoid preservatives), liver, raw egg, wheatgerm and vitamins. And of course many insects and worms. They both grew into healthy "bright" birds. They gave us hours of fun watching their antics, in particular when they would play hide and seek. "Vince", the magpie, found a favourite hideout in an old airways bag, where he would sit and wait for unsuspecting Les. As soon as he caught sight of Les he would leap out and at times knock him over. Then they would hop around sparring and wrestling, but never hurting one another.

However, as soon as Vince was old enough, he was set free and has adapted well. We are always glad to see him when he visits. But Les has stayed with us. He could not have survived with his leg being the way it is and he has naturally become far too dependent on us. Before we finished his permanent aviary he did get out and was "mobbed" by willy wagtails, which he did not appreciate so he gladly came home. The aviary we built is quite large and airy. At one end we made a nestbox out of a foam fruitbox which was turned upsidedown with a hole in one end as an entry. He will fly inside to sleep in winter but prefers to sleep on its roof in summer. The flooring is of sand and mulch which I change from time to time. Whenever the mulch is replaced he seems to have hours of fun seeking out tasty morcels. We have also provided him with a large terracotta dish for water, he loves to have a splash about in this. Now he has grown into a wonderful looking bird, his plumage has changed from the subtle shades of brown to the striking grey black and white of a mature bird. He is still fed mince which has added vitamins, wheatgerm and grated carrot, but no longer raw egg.

Of a morning I look forward to hearing his call, because without fail he will sing as soon as he hears footsteps. He will even sing when he hears our car pull into the driveway. Sometimes other butcher birds appear and sit besides his cage. They stay a while and seem to "chatter" together. At other times a butcher bird can be heard singing from a nearby tree and Les will reply in turn. They never appear to sing together. During the drought he did have an unexpected visitor, a Goshawk. I suspect that he heard Les and thought that a good meal was in store for him. The bird hung around for a few days, and, as Les made a ruckas every time it appeared I did have a good chance to observe this beautiful bird at close range. Anyway the very puzzled Goshawk gave up eventually and flew away. Les will sing out in distress when another potential predator such as a stray cat enters the yard. I guess he could be classed as a "watchbird".

Anyway, to end, may I recommend a book, that I have found invaluable, which may help someone who finds themselves in the position of being given a young or injured bird or animal to care for. It is called

"THE CARE OF SICK, INJURED AND ORPHANED NATIVE BIRDS AND ANIMALS"

by Jack Wheeler. It can be obtained through the Gould League, Beecroft Public School, Beecroft Road, Beecroft, 2119. Although I must say that this does not make anyone an instant authority. I find it a good guide in cases of emergency and when expert assistance is not close at hand. It has good formulas for anything you could imagine and a lot of good practical advice.

RE-CYCLING

Some ideas from Val Maher include " using old panty-hose for flexible ties, plastic bread/ garbage ties for small plants, margarine and ice-cream containers for plant pots (use hot skewer to make drainage holes), inverted bottles of water,neck buried in the ground near individual plants, milk cartons as plant pots (length gives ample root room without using bulk potting mix)."

Have you any more ideas that you could add ?

WILDLIFE IN THE HOME PADDOCK: Nature Conservation for Australian Farmers

By Roland Breckwoldt. Angus and Robertson. 1983. 348 pages. $24.95

Here in N.S.W. less than five per cent of our land is reserved as national parks. If our native wildlife and vegetation are to remain in existence, we humans must ensure that the other ninety five per cent of our land is managed in such a way that our native animals, birds and plants can continue to exist. Since two thirds of Australia is farmland, the role that farmers can play in conserving our remaining native wildlife and vegetation is crucial.

Roland Breckwoldt, himself a farmer, has written this book as a manual of information for farmers as to how wildlife conservation can be successfully integrated with agricultural production on their properties.

Chapters deal with tree regeneration and planting, wildlife corridors, farm dams, pest control and there is an excellent section on artificial nesting sites for birds and possums.

It is an excellent book. One of the best things we could all do is to give a copy of this book to a farmer we know, in thehope that gradually the management of our rural areas will change to ensure that our natural heritage is allowed a continuing existence. Extinction is forever.

—Jenny Rich

YELLOW-TAILED BLACK COCKATOOS

from Val McConchie (Emerald, Vic.)

I have noticed that they strip bark from a large Acacia elata presumably in search of larvae etc.. When feeding from the Hakeas (Hakea teretifolia) they perch on the branches and break off a twig with seed cases which they hold with one foot whilst using their beaks to extract the seed - the twig or empty nut case is then discarded as they move on to the next. Sometimes, one or two birds forage at the base of the bushes - one way of getting an easy meal perhaps? The cockatoos certainly leave a trail of litter behind, however the Hakeas are large mature shrubs and soon recover from the onslaught.

SULPHUR-CRESTED COCKATOOS

from Brian Roach (Westleigh, N.S.W.)

One aspect of artificial feeding in which we are fairly regular is in providing "sao" biscuits to the sulphur-crested cockatoos. Each morning anything between one and half a dozen arrive on the railing of our balcony overlooking Elouera Reserve. They strut up and down and if we ignore them (such as by being asleep) they bang their beak against the glass of our door leading from the bedroom to the balcony. Very subtle they are. We do get a great deal of enjoyment from them and our 3 year old daughter has a particular rapport with them while dealing out the goodies. It has been suggested that on the next occasion we go on holidays we mayreturn to find half the balcony devoured. From my observations of them however, particularly when no saos are immediately produced, they dont seem interested in our woodwork.

SULPHUR-CRESTED COCKATOOS

in Blaxland, N.S.W.

During April groups of up to 6 sulphur-crested cockatoos have been feeding in a crested wattle (Albizia lophantha) approxiamately 2 m. high. The feeding birds weigh down the slender branches as they pick off the ripened seed pods and devour the seed. They feed in a manner similiar to the yellow-tailed black cockatoos of above and again one or two birds generally scour the ground beneath the tree for whatever is dropped from above. Their feeding is a noisy business.

YELLOW-TAILED BLACK COCKATOO DAMAGE IN EUCALYPT PLANTATIONS

from "Wildlife in the Home Paddock" by Roland Breckwoldt

The yellow-tailed black cockatoo (Calyptorhynchus funereus) eats insect larvae and seeds in forests and woodlands and i s not usually regarded as a pest. In native vegetation it may even play a useful role in removing insect-damaged saplings. This species only rarely kills young trees directly but leaves them mechanically weakened after removing insect larvae near their base. The tree is then prone to breaking off by strong winds.

The larvae of cerambycid beetles, wood-boring cossids (Xyleutes spp.) and a hepialid moth (Aenetus paradiseus) are preferred by the yellow-tailed black cockatoo. The larvae of the cossid X. boisduvali and the cerambycid Tryphocaria acanthocera are common in the young flooded gum (E. grandis) plantations around Coffs Harbour in north-eastern New South Wales.

The galleries of cerambycid larvae are close to the surface so the cockatoos do not weaken the tree when foraging for this species. But the cossid larvae are much deeper and thetrees are so weakened that losses of 40 per cent of young plantation trees are common.

Research by the CSIRO has established that the cockatoo alights near the base of a tree and moves down down the trunk searching for the cossid larvae holes. When a hole is found the bird tests the size of the larva by inserting its beak in the hole. If the larva is fully grown the hole is approxiamately 1cm. in diameter and the bird's beak is able to penetrate deeply and excavation will proceed. If the hole is narrower the bird will explore elsewhere.

The yellow-tailed black cockatoo has an ingenious method for gouging out the larvae. It tears a strip of bark, 2-3 cms wide, starting about 18cms above the frass hole and continuing to just below the hole. The bird then bends the strip of bark out to an angle of about 50 degrees from the trunk and uses it as a platform on which to stand, in much the same way that axemen once used planks on which to stand while felling large trees. Once the cockatoo has constructed a platform it gouges out the larva with its powerful beak. The entire process takes an average of 29 minutes.

Most cossid larvae occur in the first 1-2 m of the trunk but if understorey shrubs are present, they will prevent the cockatoos from flying to the base of the tree, greatly reducing their ability to find larvae. It was also found that larvae are more common in trees that had experienced checks to their early growth from grass competition.

GARDEN PLANTS ATTRACTIVE TO BIRDS

In "Australian Birds", Journal of the N.S.W. field Ornithologists Club, March 1984 is an article "Garden Plants Attractive to Birds", L.Smith, D.Larkins and J.Pegler. The article gives the results of a survey initiated in January 1980 by the N.S.W. Field Ornithologists Club to find out which garden plants are most attractive to birds in N.S.W.. Members were asked to answer questions detailing locality, plant and bird species and nature of the interaction. This particular survey indicated the following garden plants as the most attractive to birds in the Sydney region :

Albizia lophantha - Crested wattle
Banksia ericifolia - Heath Banksia
Banksia serrata - Old Man Banksia
Callistemon viminalis - Drooping Bottlebrush
Eucalyptus caesia - Gungurru
Grevillea banksii - Bank's Grevillea (both red and white flowered forms)
Grevillea bipinnatifida hybrid banksii - "Robyn Gordon"
Melaleuca hypericifolia - Red-flowering Paperback
Cotoneaster and Crataegus spp.
Eyrthrina indica Indian Coral Tree

NATIVE AND EXOTIC BIRDS IN A SUBURBAN HABITAT

Between 1974 and 1977 Ronda Green of the Department of Zoology, Monash University, studied the exotic and native birds in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. (the details of this study are published in "Australian Wildlife Research", Volume 11 Number1 1984).

The study found that the proportion of exotic to native birds was far greater in suburban gardens than in areas of native habitat. "Total native plants" present in the area emerged as the most important factor affecting the relative numbers of exotic and native birds. As theproportion of native vegetation increased numbers of native birds also increased but exotic birds declined. Where native and exotic birds occurred together native birds made greater use of native plants than did exotic birds and exotic birds made greater use of artificial structures e.g. fences, telegraph poles. Conclusions of this study are (from "Australian Wildlife Research") .....

"Suburban residents are increasingly interested in enticing native birds to public and private gardens. The results of this study suggest some guidelines for increasing the ratio of native to exotic birds in suburban areas to which native birds have reasonable access. A park or garden in which a high proportion of native birds is desired should include :

(1) a high ratio of native to exotic plants, including both eucalypts and non-eucalypts;

(2) a high ratio of low shrub cover to lawn;

(3) a high ratio of leafy trees to dead or deciduous trees and artificial structures (though a few dead trees may be valuable to some natives for nesting or as watchposts) ;

(4) a number of trees higher than 5m."

. . . . . .

The importance of native plants in attracting native birds to an area is something which I feel that we, as a group, could investigate further.

One way of doing this would be if we each selected a number of areas in our own district which have varying proportions of native and exotic vegetation. In some districts it may be possible to find a whole range of areas from totally native to totally exotic. In other districts the native vegetation will be more difficult to find but there will still be variations in the amounts of shrub cover and lawn present. Having selected a number of different areas regular surveys should then be made throughout the year of the birds present in each area. If your time is limited a comparison of even two different areas would be interesting and worthwhile. Eventually results from different districts could be pooled.

If you are interested in participating in such a study would you let me know.

NEXT NEWSLETTER - SEPTEMBER

The bird for the next newsletter is the PIED CURRAWONG. Can you supply information regarding such things as.....which trees / shrubs does the Pied Currawong forage in, nest, sing in etc., does the Currawong show particular plant preferences, at what height does the Currawong generally feed, at what times of the year are they present in your district, do the numbers of Currawongs present fluctuate, what is their song like, do they generally sing alone or in unison and how do their calls vary, do you feed them artificially ???

The plant selected is MELALEUCA HYPERICIFOLIA.

ALL contributions are most welcome, by August 20 please.

Would you please note that subscriptions are due in September. Subscriptions are $2.

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