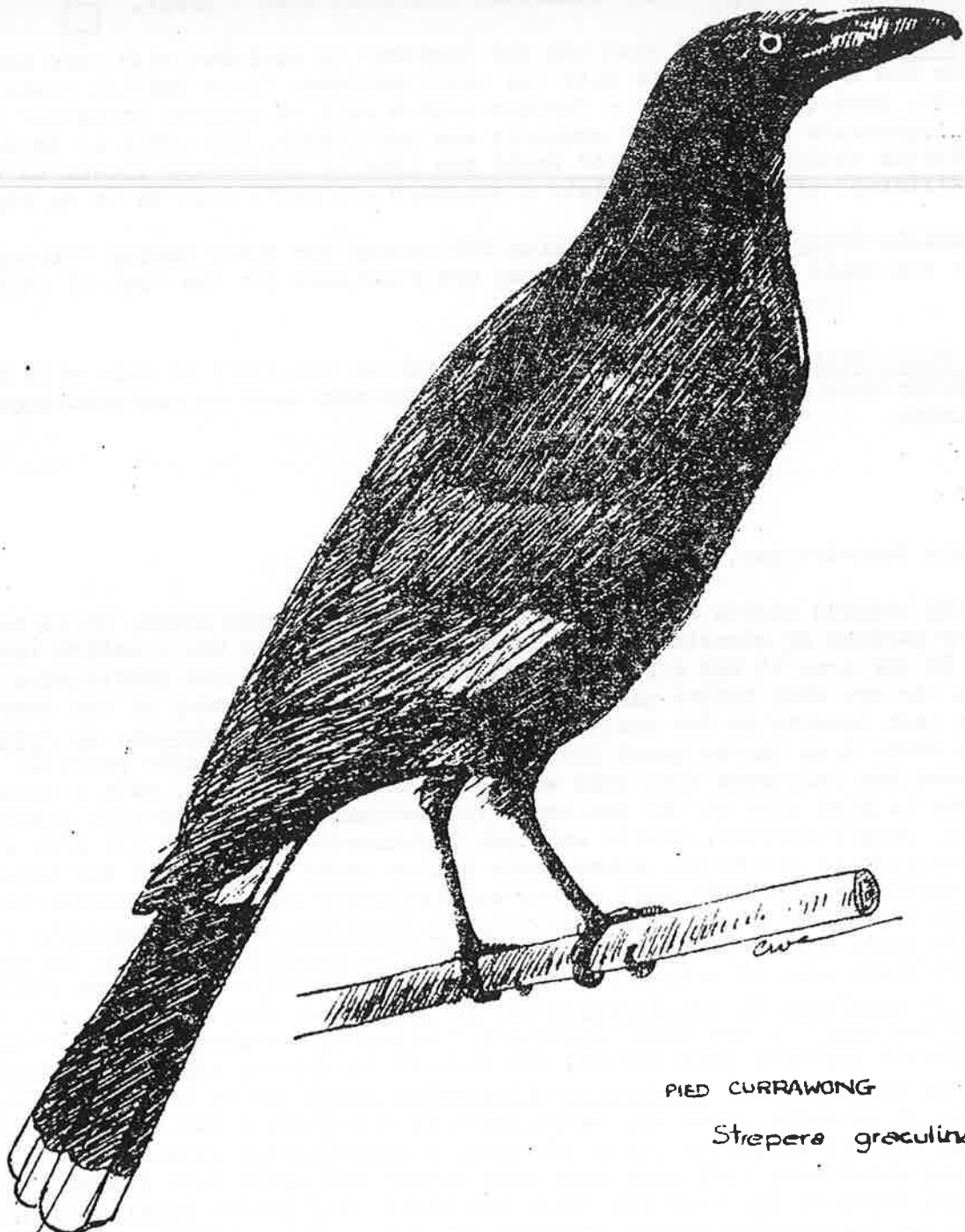


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**S.G.A.P. BIRDS AND NATIVE PLANTS  
STUDY GROUP**

**Newsletter No. 4 September 1984**



PIED CURRAWONG

*Strepera graculina*

Dear Members,

Well, at last the Spring has come! Here, in the Blue Mts., we have had a particularly cold and windy winter. A few summer visitors, including the Noisy Friarbird and the Fantailed Cuckoo have arrived already. The bush about is now quite colourful with the yellow of Bossiaea rhombifolia and the pink of Boronia ledifolia. Now is the timeto start gathering nest records.

To the following new members welcome:-

Mrs. E. Jeffreys, Canterbury, Victoria 3126.  
Martin Bouman, Ermington, N.S.W. 2115.  
Gail Thomas, Eastwood, N.S.W. 2122.  
Mrs. M. Auld, Capalaba, Qld. 4157  
Mrs. W. Evans, Adamstown Heights, N.S.W. 2289.  
Sutherland Group S.G.A.P.  
Foothills Group S.G.A.P.  
S.G.A.P. Canberra Region  
Maroonda Group S.G.A.P.

Subscriptions A red tick in the following box indicates that your annual subscription (\$2.00) is now due. If I do not hear from you I shall assume that you no longer wish to belong to the group - sorry, but our financial resources aren't great.

Information Sheet A copy of what was put together is included with this newsletter. Colleen Werner did an excellent job with the illustrations. These initial copies are printed on thin, poor quality paper - further copies will be printed on better paper.

I would appreciate hearing your comments and criticisms. How could it be improved and what additions could be made to it? Would you like to contribute pieces so that we can make different or larger pamphlets - remember you don't need to be an expert to contribute.

The Foothills Group S.G.A.P. are taking 200 copies for their Spring "Stringybark Festival". If you would like more copies they are available for the cost of printing and postage.

Native Plant/Wildlife Catalogue For space reasons the start of this will have to wait for a later newsletter. Thank you to people who have sent in contributions - any more are welcome.

#### TREES FOR SUBURBIA.

from Bela Bard-Brucker, Hoppers Crossing, Victoria .....

With regards native birds being enticed into suburban areas, it is most necessary for gardens or streets to contain high (greater than 4m. ) native trees preferably. In our area it was a barren plain 15 years ago and our subdivision became developed in the era when native plants were in! Unfortunately many of the trees planted have been unsuitable for small blocks e.g. Eucalyptus globulus, E. robusta etc. and the chain saws can be heard going every weekend. In the more recently developed areas new residents have been wary of planting any trees, with a consequence the difference in bird life in the two areas is remarkable. While we have galahs, swift parrots, purple crowned, little and musk lorrikeets inhabiting our area at times, they are never sighted in the new areas where taller trees are few and far between. I think it is therefore important that we try and influence our local Councils to plant suitable trees to attract birds e.g. Eucalyptus sideroxylon and E. leucoxylon perhaps on sides where there are no power lines and Eucalyptus burdettiana and E. torquata on sides where there are. If median strips exist trees of quite large size could be planted e.g. E. maculata, E. occidentalis and E. astringens etc. To this end, the Werribee SGAP has input to the local Council's "Greening Werribee Committee" and a list of suitable plants has been prepared and the Council is soon to replacement plant a median strip in the area with Eucalyptus sideroxylon rosea and is taking notice of what has been said. If suitable trees are established in the streets and residents plant the more usual shrubby plants on their 1/6 acre, a good habitat should be created.

The galahs which move into this area each autumn and which have stayed longer this year, like open trees to fly into and roost and while they prefer Eucalyptus cladocalyx, they have settled for our Eucalyptus scoparia. They have real difficulty in alighting in Eucalyptus globulus ssp globulus which is too compact and which is the common large tree grown in many yards around here.

## THE PIED CURRAWONG

Walking down to the creek behind our house on a winter's afternoon can be quite eerie. Rustlings in the eucalypt foliage and the fixed stares from dozens of pairs of beady yellow eyes accompany you. The currawongs have once again congregated here for the winter. They are vocal, constantly hungry and endlessly foraging.

The male and female currawongs are alike, striking black and white birds easily identified by their distinctive calls. Young are more brownish. The currawong's lifestyle is not yet fully understood - casual observation suggests that in-group interactions may be quite complex.

In late winter the male and female pair gather sticks and twigs to construct an open, cup-shaped nest, usually in a branch of a tall eucalypt. The female usually takes charge of the building and moulds the nest to the shape of her body. Nest lining consists of bark fibre and fine plant material. Whilst breeding the birds are solitary and probably territorial about their nest.

After breeding it seems that the currawongs form into small nomadic flocks. Their movements are not fully understood. Often they move <sup>from</sup> areas of higher to lower altitude. Flocks often form about areas of human settlement where they take advantage of scraps and waste and introduced fruiting trees including privet, camphor laurel and (as noted by Colleen Werner, Glen Innes, N.S.W.) cotoneasters.

Currawongs are omnivorous - insects, insect larvae, berries, fruits, carrion and food scraps are all readily taken. Nestlings and other birds are also included in their diet making the desirability of attracting them into the garden open to question. I have seen a small group devouring another (dead) adult and they have also been noted taking rats, skinks, crabs and ring-tailed possums.

They do not seem to appreciate scientific studies. In studies near Bombala, N.S.W. nests were marked with coloured surveyors tape. This practice had to be altered when it was found that predators (probably Pied Currawongs and Grey Currawongs) soon learned to associate tapes with nests. In studies near Bega, N.S.W. the Pied Currawongs would, if they found the opportunity, take small birds caught in mist nets and birds flying off following colour banding.

Still, they are not all evil. In the southern highlands of N.S.W. they are thought to be an important predator of the stick insects which can defoliate eucalypt forests.

Currawongs are obvious birds - vocal and foraging everywhere - on open ground, lawns, in foliage, amongst strands of loose or flaky bark, pecking off the bark flakes of bloodwoods, gathering fallen fruits and pecking at fruits still held on the tree.

They will take advantage of a bird bath and, sometimes, immediately after rain, they put on a marvellous show as they dive into the still wet foliage and "bathe", all the while accompanied by their melodious calling.

Some plants in which they have been noted include:-

Melia azedarach var. australasica - White Cedar - Wiseman's Ferry, N.S.W. - 10m. high - 6 Pied Currawongs in a fruiting tree.

Acacia elata - in foliage - Emerald, Vic. and Blaxland, N.S.W.

Acmena smithii - taking fruits both fallen and on tree - Blaxland, N.S.W.

Leucocarpus reticulatus - blueberry ash - taking fruits, Bega, N.S.W.

Eucalyptus gummifera, E. piperita, E. notabilis, E. sieberi, E. punctata and Angophora costata - in foliage and bark - Blaxland, N.S.W.

Pittosporum undulatum - taking fruits and thus spreading plants - Mitcham, Victoria.

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

I have been observing currawongs and noting their calls for some years now and have become very interested in their behaviour patterns and inter-relationships. My observations were made idly at first and also sporadically, since I was working fulltime but over the last 3 1/2 years they have been more regular.

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 20 ft. and dotted with Epacris longifolia and Woolisia pungens with Acacia terminalis, etc. below. In autumn the pied currawongs used to gather on 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 fairly 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

During one of these gatherings we saw a single bird set upon by the others and later realized that the victim 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. I should like very much to know more about these gatherings, their apparent purpose and the nature of the calls used during this 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 Mts., however, we were surprised to find that although the currawong call is heard frequently, the group call is CURRA-WEE! The WEE part of the call is given on a very high, sweet note, that is 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 or in the Blue Mts. 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 June 1980. The currawong with the loudest and most melodious call, who appeared to be the group leader (about 5 to 6 birds at the time) seemed to be resident in our garden and called either from tallish trees at the end of our 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 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 they let him get as far as the curra- and then blotted out the melodious WEE with a unison of currawee of their own. This completely baffled and confused the leader, whom I will call hereafter 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 were 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 in our garden looking very hunched and forlorn. We fed him but he was very nervous. The group transferred their "centre" to a different 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 melodious.

During January and early February 1982, one bird, which I presumed to be the new leader, took to silently shadowing the Bard. He didn't 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 looked as though he had been attacked at some time.

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, and was not sighted again until January 1983 when he returned to the garden, still lame, but very fit, well able to balance and food gather. In June he was seen with a companion (mate? I am unable to identify female birds but the companion seemed to take second place in the pecking order.) He remains an occasional visitor and sometimes accepts food from us.

I don't know whether such observations on behaviour are of interest to members generally. I should certainly be glad to hear to here from anyone who is interested. I realize that it is difficult to observe accurately without banding birds and checking, etc. The Bard was easily recognisable by his voice and then by his lame leg. However, in one's own garden it does seem to be possible to get to know groups quite well and even individual birds.

#### BANKSIAS IN THEIR NATURAL HABITAT

The last newsletter contained a request for information about plants which occur near banksias in their natural habitat. By following eco-system plantings it was thought that these extremely good bird attractive plants might be easier to establish and maintain in healthy long life.

In response from Ida Jackson, Kangaroo Island, S.A., in regards to  
BANKSIA MARGINATA and BANKSIA ORNATA

These banksias grow naturally on Kangaroo Island on a variety of soils though they seem to prefer neutral to acid types. I don't think I have ever seen B. ornata on limestone. It prefers laterite and lateritic sands. It sometimes grows in dense stands that exclude most other species. However, it is commoner in single bushes.

Associated with it one finds :-

Tetratheca halmaturina, T. insularis, Lhotzkya glaberrima, Calytrix tetragona,  
Leucopogon costatus, L. concurvus, Epacris impressa, Grevillea quinquenervis

Banksia marginata often grows in association with B. ornata in above associations. One also finds it on more alkaline soils with

Lasioptalums, Hibbertia stricta, H. glabriuscula, Eucalyptus diversifolia, Casuarina stricta, Eucalyptus rugosa, E. sneorifolia, Boronia caerulescens, B. filifolia, Baeckea crassifolia, Leucopogon woodii, Styphelia exarrena, Acacia leiphylla, A. paradoxa, Frostanthera aspalathoides, P. spinosa, Hakea muellerana.

Actually there are many more. I suppose one can say that both banksias are very adaptable.

The rainfall here ranges from over 30 inches per annum at the western end of the Island to under 20 inches at the eastern end and you find banksias everywhere.

More about banksias in the next newsletter.

### PROPAGATING BANKSIAS

Do any members grow banksias from seed? If so, Could you tell us how to persuade them to germinate?

### ESTABLISHING A BIRD-ATTRACTIVE GARDEN (or a lot of effort for very few birds!)

some thoughts from Gail Thomas, Eastwood, N.S.W.

THE GARDEN: a new housing block when we began, with only kikuyu (now almost completely removed) and decaying poplars (removed). The garden has been progressively established over the last five years, particularly over the last three years. Soil - clay subsoil, not especially heavy.

#### GENERAL AIMS:

1. To provide a supply of food, especially for honeyeaters, in all seasons. Plants flowering in different seasons were chosen, and a few plants which flower all year round were included as backups. I did not want to employ artificial feeding.
2. To provide plants of varying heights in close proximity to encourage different bird varieties into the garden.
3. To attract people as well!

METHOD: Plants attracting birds were chosen after consulting relevant chapters gardening books. Particularly useful was "Australian Birds and Native Gardens" by Barbara Salter, Ure Smith, Summit Series, Sydney 1977. I am also (too) easily persuaded by promises of "bird attracting" on plant labels in nurseries.

As yet, many of the plants are still too immature to determine whether they will be successful in attracting birds.

RESULTS: The main birds in our garden when we began were Indian mynahs, starlings and sparrows. We lovingly fed these until we discovered this was inadvisable if native birds were desired.

We now have natural ground cover and quite a variety of native plants. Far fewer exotic birds visit the garden. Six or so noisy miners appear several times daily in a group, and a solitary wattle bird generally comes every day as well. We have also seen two other species briefly (I cannot identify them as I am a novice at bird watching).

Greatest successes so far in attracting noisy miners and wattlebirds have been with Grevillea "Robyn Gordon", and Banksia ericifolia; Grevillea "Poorinda Peter", Grevillea rivularis and Anigozanthus "Red Cross" also seem popular.

#### LIMITATIONS:

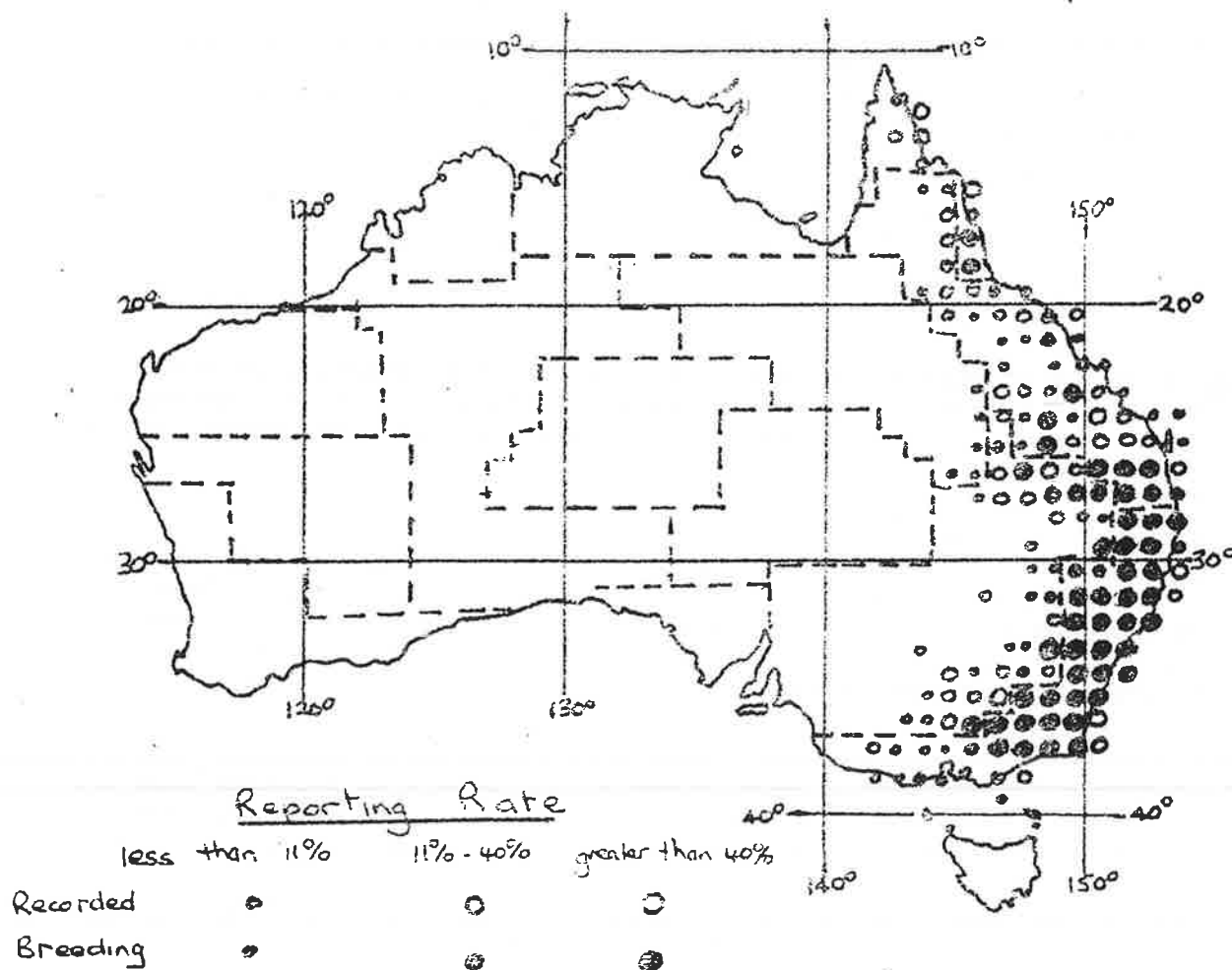
1. Inability to plant many large trees (2 sewers and an easement on the block).
2. Personal lack of knowledge of local bird/plant ecosystems. If I had been aware of local conditions (and the idea had occurred to me earlier) I would have planted more local plants. (Mr. Phil Ergan of the Forestry Commission addressed the Harbourside Group on 22nd June, 1984. He mentioned the dangers of attracting generalist feeders into the area of a species dependent on a particular food supply, and how this

THE ATLAS OF AUSTRALIAN BIRDS

M. Blakers, S.J.J.F. Davies, P.N. Reilly, Royal Australian Ornithologists Union, Melbourne University Press 1984.

This first Atlas of Australian Birds is a magnificent achievement, the culmination of the labours of many amateurs and professionals. The Atlas maps the distribution and breeding distribution of birds in Australia from 1977 to 1981. It includes also what is known of bird distribution from the time of European settlement. Maps of the distribution of over 600 species of birds are contained in the Atlas. Each map is explained and complemented by a short text and a vignette. The Atlas is truly packed with information and well worth perusing.

The following map taken from the Atlas shows the distribution of the PIED CURRAWONG:



NEXT NEWSLETTER

The next newsletter will be in JANUARY 1985.

The plant for the next newsletter will be (hopefully) MELALEUCA HYPERICIFOLIA.

The bird of the January newsletter will be the PEACEFUL DOVE. Robert Wade is currently doing post-graduate studies on the peaceful dove and he has been co-erced into writing about this bird for us. As a part of his studies Rob is investigating food preferences of these birds and is looking at birds both in an aviary situation and in the field.

Any observations that you might have of your own would be most welcome.

Any contributions by January 15 please.

A New Leader..... Would you like to take on the job of "leader" of the study group? I feel that the group would benefit from a change of leader (and ideas), to do the job do not feel that you need to be an expert (I certainly am not). If you are interested in taking it on please let me know