

*OBJECT: To foster an interest in nature*

November 2018  
ISSN: 1836-2761



GPO BOX 249  
CANNBERRA ACT 2601

FIELD NATURALISTS' ASSOCIATION OF CANNBERRA INC.

# FIELD NATTER

## MEETING—Thursday 1 November 2018

7:30 pm Australian National University

Jan Anderson Seminar Room, R.N. Robertson Building, Biology Place, ANU, ACT  
details back page

### **A ground-breaking new initiative to save Australia's threatened wildlife**

**Speaker: Sarah McKenna**

Sarah joined the Australian Wildlife Conservatory (AWC) early last year as a Development Executive based in Sydney. Prior to joining AWC, Sarah worked within the financial sector engaging with corporate finance executives, with a focus on ethical and sustainable investing. Prior to that, she completed her post graduate studies in Environmental Management and worked with the NSW Environmental Defenders Office. Sarah originally hails from across the ditch in New Zealand, but her passion for wildlife conservation - and her appreciation for the cute and cuddly animals that Australia has, inspired her to call Australia home almost 10 years ago.



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# Letter to the Editor

## Feeding wild birds

Recently there have been people advocating feeding wild birds. The following are some observations I have made.

1. Noisy Miners at three el fresco cafes in Canberra. I have observed them on the tables picking crumbs and scraps as soon as people leave their table. One bird was eating sugar out of the bowl through the spoon slot. So I deduce these aggressive birds have probably built a population above what their natural environment can support. (See Field Natter, May 2015: Time to cull.)
2. Observed in Weston Creek; a nesting Currawong with two near-fledged young begging. A parent dropped out of the tree to the dry dog food left for the dog, while the owner was at work. Young feed easily. I observed the same nest being used again (same season) with the chicks again being fed from the same bowl. I presume that was four fledged chicks in one season. I doubt this would be achieved in a natural environment.
3. Also observed in Weston Creek; lots of bread and rolls scattered in a paddock, presumably for birds. The main feeders I observed were Sulphur-crested Cockatoos, Magpies, Currawongs, and Common Mynahs, all of these species are intimidating small birds. Feeding has stopped as the paddock is now new houses. The number of Cockatoo in the vicinity has reduced markedly, with a corresponding drop in

screeching. I am now noticing more small birds in the yard, although it is quite a distance from where the feeding was occurring. Some guesses why.

An American study showed a large proportion of American birds avoided prolonged loud noises. Also in other parts of Australia where Sulphur-crested Cockatoos are less common, I have noticed small birds use the screeches as a warning and become more cautious. If the screeching hurts my ears, what happens to small birds with acute hearing?

4. A secondhand story. A group was asked to come to a tropical island as the silver gull population was increasing very quickly. They were not normally very common. The cause of the population increase was the inappropriate waste disposal (again, feeding wild birds). The waste disposal changed and the problem was reduced.
5. Feeding wild territorial birds, e.g. Magpies, can increase the success of breeding, but what happens when the chicks are evicted by their parents. They join youth gangs and eventually have to find a new territory. This may impact on other species by competing for the same natural food and resources, or the new resident is just not a good neighbour. Some big birds just intimidate smaller birds. I have observed Magpies pursuing small birds that would be easily eaten if caught. These were long chases with the small bird only avoiding the chaser by

very twisty flight, which the Magpies could not match.

On a recent short walk on Narrabundah Hill, I saw two small birds in the young eucalypts, but on the open grass there was a group of 14 Magpies and six Ravens nearby. In the country away from here Magpies aren't fed, their population appear much lower.

6. Maybe feeding Rainbow Parakeets and Rosellas isn't helping other smaller, less aggressive lorikeets and parrots. Feeding birds in other countries might work where a particular bird can be targeted e.g. Hummingbirds, but I have read if you're not careful, larger Hummingbirds chase smaller species away and there are accounts of the smaller species being killed.

I have noticed over the last 50 odd years, the number of small birds appear to be declining, but the larger birds that are being fed by humans, directly or indirectly, seem to have increased. It could be some other cause like insecticides and removal of low scrub by control burns. The increase in larger aggressive birds could be impacting on apex predators, which changes population dynamics.

Please let's hear your thoughts on the subject, via the Editor.

**Bill Murphy**

P.S. Just this morning I saw nine magpies attacking a Wedge-tailed Eagle. I have never previously seen so many birds attacking a bird of prey.

# Feeding wild birds

When Bill gave me his Letter to the Editor, he said he hoped it would generate some discussion and further articles for the newsletter. Let me be the first to respond.

I have been feeding the birds in my area for 30 years or so. They are not fed every day and initially I only hung wild bird seed bells on the clothes line for the parrots. The parrots were already in residence at the time.

In the early years I had dozens of Eastern Rosellas, Crimson Rosellas, up to 18 King Parrots, plus Galahs and Sulphur-crested Cockatoos. These birds also raided my apple and plum trees so would have been present even if I didn't feed them. Dozens of Eastern Rosellas roosted in the small park in the street behind mine.

All co-existed happily. No doubt there were also other small birds in residence. I wasn't so interested in bird photography in those days but I did occasionally notice other birds such as Sacred Kingfishers and other birds I probably could not name at the time.

The biggest change I noticed was in 2003 after the Canberra bushfire when the Currawongs came down from the mountains – and stayed. It was then that the Eastern Rosellas all but disappeared, as did the bigger birds such as the King Parrots. One day I watched a Currawong catch a bird mid-air then hang it by its neck in a nearby tree. I make a point of NOT feeding Currawongs and discouraging their presence but that doesn't prevent a population of over 20 birds in my front yard at times.

## Magpies

Bill wrote a lot about Magpies as a 'culprit' rather than Currawongs.

It was only later that I began feeding the local Magpies – again not every day – only when I took my dogs for a walk, typically on a weekend, and as I often took different routes, different magpie families were fed each time. Initially this was partly so that I wouldn't be swooped when out walking, and it also gave me the confidence to not expect to be swooped when walking in an area where I didn't feed the magpies.

However, I came to love magpies and began to study them, even buying books on them, though not a lot seems to be known. I do know that they recognise people and even know when I am heading to the bus stop without the dogs so don't expect to be fed.

From my observations I rarely see Magpies in rural areas when driving through so perhaps they naturally gravitate to urban areas when food is more plentiful, whether through human feeding or just scrounging through human 'garbage'.

Bill talked about 'youth gangs' but through my observation and my research, Magpies can be found in two groupings – families: i.e. breeding groups; and tribes. Tribes consist of any bird that is not part of a territorial nesting family. This includes mature adults as well as the youths.

I have observed tribes in my area of 36 to 90 birds, and definitely not encouraged by human feeding as one of the favourite roosting platforms for these was a satellite dish so the residents were certainly not happy to have so many birds roosting and pooping on their dish. Nevertheless, this tribe was in residence for several years.

Just watching the several local Magpie families I noticed that during the long drought we had about 10 years or so ago, each female would typically produce four chicks each year. (My local family had two females so they would have eight chicks.) Not all survived of course, but as soon as the next breeding season began all juveniles would be sent packing. However, once the drought broke, the number of chicks produced dropped and when the next breeding season began the female chicks were allowed to stay around, often for several years. Therefore I feel that Magpie numbers are more driven by the weather and availability of natural food than by whether they are being fed by humans. I have also never observed Magpies killing smaller birds, though Currawongs certainly do.

## Small birds

In terms of whether large numbers of big birds deter the smaller birds;

a large number of Sulphur-crested Cockatoos visit my birdbath and bird feeder (though I would prefer to feed the smaller parrots). Apposite to Bill's observation, I am noticing an increase in smaller birds in recent years (perhaps in reality or I'm being more observant). Eastern Rosellas and the King Parrots seem to be coming back, though in small numbers.

I have a large number of resident sparrows (too many) and have regular flocks of Silvereyes and other seasonal small birds including Yellow-faced Honeyeaters, Eastern Spinebills, Superb Fairy Wrens, Spotted Pardalotes, Rufous Whistlers, Sacred Kingfishers, Black-faced Cuckoo Shrikes, various thornbills and Weebills. In fact there is a pair constantly in residence at the moment that I suspect are nesting.

In 2012 a male and juvenile (rare) Black Honeyeater came to visit, with the juvenile staying for a week (obviously not scared off by larger birds). I am also now seeing Red-rumped parrots for the first time. Red Wattlebirds are plentiful and as I walk round the neighbouring streets I see lots of thornbills. All this despite the large number of Sulphur-crested Cockatoos and Crested Pigeons and the recent arrival of a tribe of up to 90 Magpies in the next street (I refuse to feed this tribe so as not to encourage them to stay.)

I've found that the parrots have an established feeding hierarchy. The Crimson and Eastern Rosellas come in early before the Sulphur-crested Cockatoos. Then after the Cockatoos have had their fill the smaller parrots will filter back through again.

My conclusion is that birds in general take advantage of human population wherever possible regardless of whether they are deliberately or indirectly fed.

Anyone else have any comments? Bill and I would love to hear them.

**Alison Milton**

## A turtle treat at Jerrabomberra Wetlands

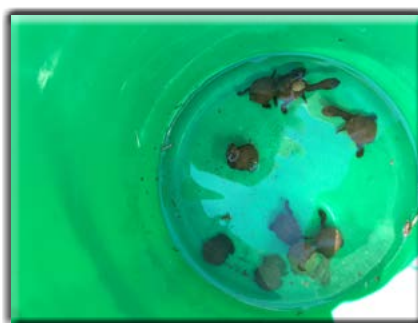
In early October 2018 my granddaughters had a very special experience at Jerrabomberra Wetlands. They were part of a group that helped to uncover and then excavate three turtle nests at the wetlands. The eggs had been laid on a rainy night in October a year ago, had hatched in February this year, and the babies had remained in the nest, under the soil, normally expecting to emerge on another rainy moment in October/November this year.



The problem is that foxes are so prevalent at the wetland that they lie in wait for the females to finish laying the eggs and then dig them up and consume them. To prevent this, volunteers venture out on the rainy October nights, observe the females laying their eggs, and once she has finished, a one foot square mesh is immediately laid over the freshly buried nest, pegged down, and left. These nests then require human intervention at the 'emerging' stage.

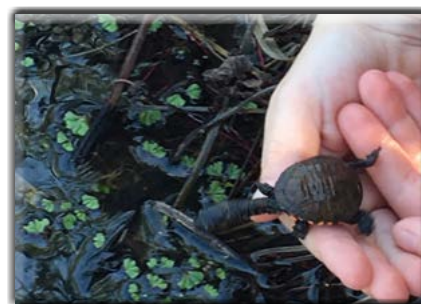


The first step in the turtle release process involved the dedicated turtle watchers removing the 'plug' that the mother turtle had sealed the nest with. The volunteers' gentle digging continued until the baby turtles were uncovered. Further digging proceeded until they reached the bottom of the nest where the empty egg shells were revealed. A total of 30 babies were removed from the three nests. All were put into shallow water in a bucket in preparation for their release.



The next stage was the release of the turtles into part of the wetlands, which was quite a trek away. All the babies were gently and safely released into a quiet corner of the reserve, a reasonable distance away from the pelicans, cormorants and other predators that suddenly seemed to abound!

Next on the program was some volunteer work also down by the wetland, where some grasses and



shrubs had been planted some time back, and were crying out for a drink. Volunteers used buckets to move the water from the water cube to all the new plantings.



A bonus for the kids' curious eyes was a birding scope trained on a threatened bird species, Latham's Snipe, at the edge of the wetland.

**Margaret Ning**



## Activities

### 11–18 November: Wild Pollinator Springtime Count 2018

It's almost time for our Spring 2018 Wild Pollinator Count! Connect with us on social media with the official hashtag #OzPollinators. It's really easy to [join in](#), wherever you are in Australia – just pick a warm, sunny day during the official count week, find a flower to watch for 10 minutes, and then submit your observations via our [online form](#). Just follow the instructions on the [How to Count page](#). As usual, the form will stay open for one week after the 18th, to allow you time to get your observations in. Here are some [handy tips for how to tell the difference](#) between bees, flies and wasps visiting flowers. You can download the [Pollinator Guide](#), as well as plenty of [other resources](#) and answers to some [FAQ](#). Happy Spring Counting... And if you miss out this time, we'll be counting again in April 2019! If you're new to Wild Pollinator Count, we are an independent project run by scientists focused on pollinator conservation in Australia.

### 26 November–2 December: Frogs Bush Blitz

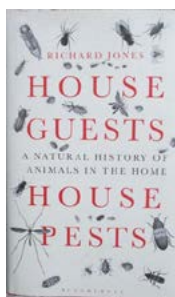
Bush Blitz is Australia's largest nature discovery program. There will be a community day at the Australian National Botanic Gardens on Sunday 2 December from 10 am to 3 pm. This event will give visitors a chance to learn about taxonomy, interact with Bush Blitz scientists, and find out how they can get involved with local community groups to contribute to our knowledge of Australian biodiversity. To all frog-keen people: Jodi Rowley from the Australian Museum will be one of the Bush Blitz scientists on site on 2 December – a great opportunity to pick her Froggie brain!! If you would like to be involved in the activity or need more detail please contact: Paula Banks, Bush Blitz Reporting Officer, phone 02 6250 9467, email [paula.banks@environment.gov.au](mailto:paula.banks@environment.gov.au)

## Two more bibliographic treasures.....

Richard Jones “is a fellow of the Royal Entomological Society and past president of the British Entomological Society. Richard writes about insects, nature and the environment for *BBC Wildlife*, *The Guardian*, *Gardeners' World* and *Countryfile*.”

I found his 2015 *House Guests, House Pests a Natural History of Animals in the Home* in Clouston Hall's Civic outlet where southbound passengers board the 300 series buses. (The bookshop has a few end-of-edition CSIRO nature titles 1/3 price).

The book is written engagingly, informing readers about each of the species described through natural history writing at its best. Delicate illustrations capture the essence of each animal from vertebrates to the smallest invertebrate. The Appendix is a “Rogues gallery and Identification Guide”.



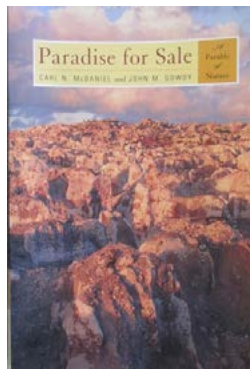
I'm sure you'll be able to overcome any variations between the species of the planet's different hemispheres. Countless animals have migrated to Australia with and without us.

Richard's chapters explain where the animals came from, why they're in our homes, can we live with them, can we get rid of them and should we?

It's a unique reference book delightfully disguised by the magic of story.

*Paradise for Sale: A Parable of Nature* was found at Booklore in Lyneham.

It's an American publication from 2000 that recounts the complex story of Nauru and the Nauruan people. Carl N McDaniel and John M Gowdy visited Nauru experiencing the warmth of the climate and the generosity



of the Nauruans. They explored the tiny nation finding vestiges of the incredible natural history and beauty of the island's geomorphology, flora and fauna. The discovery, mining and sale of guano as phosphate serves as the parable or as Edward O Wilson wrote “Nauru, .....is a microcosm of the rest of the world, swept from its moorings by powerful tidal forces of the global economy and out into dangerous waters...” And Herman E Daly wrote “The development path followed by Nauru--the common one of export-led development based on depleting local natural capital—is the same strategy that the IMF and the World Bank advocate for all countries.”

The exploitation of guano has wrought major changes to the islanders' health and the organisation of their communities. And, of course, the book was written long before the current reasons for Nauru being at the forefront of news bulletins.

**Rosemary Blemings**

# *Mercury (Hobart, Tas. 1860-1954), Saturday 21 June 1941, page 4*

*Quiet-streams with deep pools and tree-lined banks are favoured by the water rat*  
by Peregrine

More than once I have heard envious women make some facetious remark about another woman's fur coat looking like a rat's skin. Now, presumably, we may anticipate having rat-skin fur coats in reality, and probably good ones at that. Publicity has brought the Tasmanian water-rat into prominence. The value of its pelt has been emphasised, and if a projected fur-farming undertaking is brought to completion the water-rat will be one of the animals which will have to part with its skin, on a large scale, for women's clothing and adornment.

How many of us have seen a water-rat in its natural environment? Inhabiting the banks of shady streams and reed beds, and chiefly streams where logs and vegetable debris have been deposited by floods, the water-rat is shy enough and seclusive enough only to be seen by those familiar with its habits, yet it is fairly widely distributed, both in rivers inland and on the coast, and prefers deep, tree-lined pools, where it feeds, largely after dark. It emerges from its hiding places just before dusk and hunts actively for its food. Its captures are taken to the grassy banks to be consumed or in holes and burrows in hollow logs and stumps and among the heaps of stick and leaves and dead branches that one meets with in most streams.

The water-rat is different in many respects from an ordinary rat. It is adapted specially to a water life. It swims swiftly, and mostly on the surface with its hairy snout held high. Its sleek stream-lined body cleaving the water with the smoothness of an eel, its fine long tail, white-tipped, streaming in the wake.



It is one of our few native animals which is not a marsupial; that is to say, it is a rodent, having no pouch, but concealing its young in a nest of grass and leaves which it builds along the river bank or in logs elevated from the surface of the water.

I have watched water-rats playing and hunting in the quiet streams along the East Coast, where they are relatively plentiful. At St. Helens one evening I saw one emerge from beneath the bridge and go rapidly up the centre of the river, leaving a definite "wake" of ripples. Then, after travelling for about 25 yards, it turned and came back, disappearing under the bridge. Presently, as dusk strengthened, it reappeared with a playmate, and both went swimming up the stream, side by side, along the track made by the reflection of a white cloud above the hilltops, and as I strained my eyes into the gathering darkness, I saw them swimming backwards and forwards across the stream, till one climbed out on to a log and ran up one of the dead branches attached to it.

The companion followed a minute later, and they looked as if they were searching for a nesting hollow, but darkness shut their next movements from view, and as I moved I heard a splash as though they had been disturbed and jumped back in the water.

The water-rat frequently has a dining table along the favoured parts of a stream. This may be a flat rock, a log or a tussock on the bank. Here, it takes its prey to eat, and the debris from several meals litters the table as well as the immediate surroundings, so that the presence of the rat is always apparent when the animal itself is not seen.

Extensive openings and holes in the basalt cliffs of Cornelian Bay Pt. reveal large accumulations of crab shells, fish bones, and empty mollusc shells, and I have long been puzzled by the kind of animal that takes them there. They may be the remains of meals of water-rats, or perhaps of the common house rats, and while I suspect the latter, it is possible that these honeycombed cliffs

are inhabited by a few water-rats as well.

Some burrows made by the water-rat are deep and long. Apparently the animal's breeding burrow is longer than its hiding burrow, for observers have commented on the fact that the nests are always more difficult to reach than the obvious nesting chambers in which the rat sleeps by day.

The entrance is generally just above water, and in one recorded instance the breeding burrow was found to extend for 17 ft in a straight line from the opening.

The nesting chamber is about seven by nine inches and is generally hidden by grass. Some excavations are used as pantries, or store-rooms, and these are often packed with bones and shells and other kinds of food. The rats prey upon fishes, frogs, molluscs, and birds, and have been known to kill adult water birds, such as coot and moor hen.

In Victoria the water-rat has been observed to feed on mussels. One observer has reported seeing the rat dive under water and return with a mussel in its mouth, and it always had been a mystery how it managed to open the stout valves of the shellfish until the observer threw some light on the subject.

Swimming to a log with a mussel held in its teeth, the animal holds it in its forepaws and inserts its chisel-like incisor teeth gently round the edges, working back from each of the two long ends towards the thick hinge, or umbo region. In a surprisingly short time, with the severing of the creature's adductor muscles, the two halves of the shell gape open, and using its forepaws again to finish the process, the rat eats the exposed shell fish, and dives again to seek another victim.

It is also recorded that baby water-rats have been reared by hand, and become pets, and, when released, will return to the place where they were fed.

At one time water-rats caused concern to the authorities controlling the trout-breeding ponds at Plenty. They got in at night and caused havoc among the young fish, which, no doubt, they found easy and succulent prey. But they were practically eliminated by netting and trapping, though occasionally one still gets in and causes trouble.

The water-rat is also known to take fairly large trout, and anglers have more than once had cause for self-criticism, as well as rat criticism, for having left freshly-caught trout on the river's bank

or lake shore unprotected while they moved a little distance along to cast their lines in another position. The rat has sneaked up and taken them! Sometimes it is bold (or hungry) enough to come up and bite at a string of fish held in an angler's hand. This is vouched for by Mr. E. P. Andrewartha, who saw such an incident on the shores of the Great Lake one evening.

The various species of rats and mice are difficult to distinguish because of their closely allied external features, but there is no mistaking the water-rat, which is from seven to eight inches long, black and buff above, with the sides of the face and body and the entire under surface deep reddish orange. The outer parts of the limbs are brown and the tip and apical half of the tail are white. This white-lipped tail is a hallmark of the species, which is recognised easily, even when only the dark outline of the animal in the water is seen from a bridge or bank. It is a lover of quietness, dusk, night, and dawn, and at daybreak goes to sleep out of reach of enemies underground or in hollow logs, while the stream flows on and brings to the pools food for the next night's hunting.

**Submitted by Kevin McCue**

## *Backyard buddies*

I came across this great website and read the page on frogs. It taught me some things I didn't know and has some great tips. I am particularly interested because I have a pond with Spotted Grass Frogs.

The section starts with 'Frogs are amphibians.'

One tip that resonated with me is the advice to put a thick rope or hessian bag at the end of your pool so a frog that has fallen in can climb out. I rescued just such a frog about four years ago when I made a retreat at St Clement's, Galong. I had jumped in their pool for a swim and to my amazement found a frog floating (alive) in it. I put it on the grass in the shade and it recovered.

After that, a flock of galahs flew overhead while I was still in the pool. I'd done a few laps and was resting my head on my arms at one end. The sun caught their beautiful pink bodies and they were calling to each other. It was all over quickly but it remains a special memory. The sound of their wings was what made me look up into the bright blue sky and next minute they were over me.

Backyard buddies is an initiative of the Australian organisation Foundation for National Parks & Wildlife.

<http://www.backyardbuddies.org.au/fact-sheets/frogs-1>

**Lucy Bastecky**



Field Naturalists' Association of Canberra Inc.

### Who are the Field Naturalists?

The Field Naturalists' Association of Canberra (FNAC) was formed in 1981. Our aim is to foster interest in natural history by means of meetings and regular field outings. Meetings are usually held on the first Thursday of each month. Outings range from weekend rambles to long weekends away. Activities are advertised in our monthly newsletter. We emphasise informality and the enjoyment of nature. New members are always welcome. If you wish to join FNAC, please fill in the member application below and send it in with your subscription to the FNAC Treasurer at the address below.

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**Newsletter Editor:** [editor@fieldnatsact.com](mailto:editor@fieldnatsact.com)



**Monthly meeting venue:** Jan Anderson Seminar Room, R. N. Robertson Building, Biology Place, Australian National University

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MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION OR RENEWAL

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How did you hear about FNAC? Please circle: FRIEND? OTHER? Please specify: