

## **BirdLife Northern Queensland Branch.**

**Annual General Meeting, Malanda. 14<sup>th</sup> March, 2019.**

### ***Annual Report***

The past 12 months has seen an astonishing amount of bird related activity by our members and our branch. A brief account of these follows. Much of the work is a continuation of projects that are now long-running but there have also been some new areas of activity.

*Grasswren Project.* The nationally significant work on grasswrens, established by Graham Harrington and now led by Kath Shurcliff, continues to produce important results and we have been supported by the Southern Gulf NRM body to the extent of \$10,000 for the 2018 survey. As I write we have just received another \$10,000 to cover some of the 2019 survey costs. We must also acknowledge the support of many volunteers who provide the on-ground efforts to collect the data. In 2018, some 19 volunteers made 75 distinct surveys involving 691 survey points and located 20 Carpentarian Grasswren groups and 5 Kalkadoon Grasswren groups, including one site with both species present! Outcomes include a better appreciation of the current distribution of these elusive birds; collaboration with Southern Gulf NRM and with Station owners and Indigenous Rangers for a fire management plan and the development of new techniques to study the birds (using song-meters) in conjunction with Steve Murphy (who is also on the team along with Ceinwen Edwards).

*Annual Crane Count.* David and Margaret Merrell took over the crane count in 2018 and have very successfully completed the count and analysis. There were over 70 counters, an excellent turn-out, including some volunteers who were visiting from interstate. The outcome showed some contrasts with previous years, especially in the locations where most cranes were seen, but over 2,000 cranes were recorded. Separation of Brolgas from Sarus Cranes was hindered by the high percentage that were not identified (51%).

*Bowerbird Surveys.* The branch is conducting surveys of the bowers of both the Golden Bowerbird and the Tooth-billed Bowerbird, especially in the context of potential adverse effects of climate change on these endemic high altitude species. Dominic Chaplin and Graham Harrington have been leading this project, meant to provide long term data with which to identify future change. The Branch has records going back many years and the intention is to add to these data from time to time. In November 2018 surveys at Kirrama were made by members to add to the information.

*Queensland Gouldian Finch Surveys.* This is a new project being undertaken by branch members Ray Pierce and Patrick De Gueest following the extremely exciting discovery in 2018 of a sizeable breeding population in our region. The work remains sensitive because it is founded on collaboration with station owners and other partners, but has progressed very well during the past 12 months. Further funding applications are likely to assist keep this project going and we might hope to see explanations of what is needed to support the ongoing health of this flock of finches. We look forward to continuing updates from the team.

*Pied Imperial Pigeon Count.* Members participated in the synchronised count in November and also in other counts for this project that is now run by Julia Hazel at James Cook University and WPSQ for the island counts. Sadly, the originator of this longest running bird count in Australia, Margaret Thorsborne, passed away in October.

*Beach Stone-curlew Survey.* Under the leadership of Ceri Pearce, 61 volunteers participated in a survey of Beach Stone-curlews on 38 sites between Tully Heads and Cooktown and recorded 37 individuals on 18 beaches. An attempt was made to replicate a survey previously done by Amanda Freeman in the year 2000 and despite various obstacles most of the earlier survey sites were included. One positive outcome was that slightly more Beach Stone-curlews were found this time but the full comparison remains to be completed.

*Regular Local Bird Surveys.* Two events were held each month throughout the year to enable members to enjoy participating in surveys. The monthly *Hasties Swamp* survey near Atherton, led by Alan Gillanders, Martin Willis, Ron Schweitzer and myself, involves a two-hour survey of both waterbirds and bush birds and numerous members participated over the year. Held on the first Friday of each month, the birds seen varied considerably through the year both in numbers and in species. A monthly two-hour survey was also conducted at Warrina Lakes in Innisfail (led by Ceri Pearce and Sandra Christensen) and that attracted many members also. A range of species associated with the wetlands were identified and all have been entered using Birdata. These surveys were usually on the second Sunday of the month.

*Sticky Beaks Family Activities.* Led by Golo Maurer regular outings target our younger members and a total of 7 activities ranged from wader watching, tree planting, film-making, bird data recording skills, a visit to the Australian Tropical Herbarium in Cairns, the Backyard bird count and a Tablelands outing. This was a success and will continue in 2019.

#### *Occasional Social Birding Events.*

The year began with the annual Wave the Wader Event on the Esplanade in Cairns, organised by Tom Collis. There was an outing to Lake Barrine in June led by Alan Gillanders; a Mt Hypipamee bird walk in July again led by Alan Gillanders; a Springvale Road (Wondecla) September outing led by Peter Valentine and Lloyd Nielsen; a Cathedral Fig outing led by Alan Gillanders in November and a walk through the rainforest led by Cliff and Dawn Frith in December. There was also a campout at Flat Creek Station led by Kath Shurcliff. I acknowledge and thank the leaders for these outings.

#### *Occasional Bird Talks and Presentations.*

The March AGM was held in Cairns and the guest speaker was Tom Collis who spoke about seabirds. In April there was a presentation at the Malanda Hotel on the birds of Tasmania by Martin Willis. At Cairns in May, there was a presentation from various speakers on the need for much better laws to protect our birdlife, facilitated by BirdLife Australia National Office. In July a planned talk at Cairns was cancelled due to a visa issue and at short notice Andy Anderson filled in. Also in July over 100 members and visitors filled the Malanda Hotel for a showing of Stanley Breeden's award winning film on the Birds of the Indian Monsoon, introduced by Stanley himself.

In August a talk by Renee Cassells on her research on Pale Yellow Robins was warmly received at the Malanda Hotel, as was the presentation from Del Richards on his invention of a stock water trough “bird island” now being deployed across the country. In September Cliff Frith provided a memorable talk to a full house at the Malanda Hotel on Bowerbirds (and David Attenborough). In November there was a joint presentation by Mike Fiddler (from Save the Gouldian Fund) and Martin Willis focussed on Gouldian and other tropical finches. This was also held in Malanda (at the RSL hall).

#### *Conservation Action*

Branch members contributed to a submission to the Senate Inquiry into the faunal extinction crisis (ongoing) and Paul Fisk led a team working on a solution to the sand problem (and habitat change) of the Cairns Esplanade. Ray Pierce also put together concerns about the proposed Kur-world Development at Kuranda and there is ongoing concern about the integrity of our Queensland National Park system with reduced funding and inadequate legislative protection threatening, for example, habitat of Black-throated Finches and coastal wilderness at Hinchinbrook Island. A workshop was held at Mission Beach to develop KBA health assessment techniques, conducted by Golo Maurer and attended by several Cassowary Coast members.

#### *Communication and Outreach.*

Members are able to keep aware of the Branch activities by reading the newsletter (*Contact Call*) so well produced by our Editor, Ceri Pearce and I offer thanks to Ceri for the extremely high quality outcome. I also acknowledge and thank the many members who have contributed to the four editions produced each year. Similarly, the website helps keep everyone aware of our happenings and I thank Mikey Kudo for his work on that. The Facebook page managed by Doug Herrington has proved very popular and is providing identification and information services as well as terrific images of our birds, posted by members and others. The growth of this FB group has been amazing and now has 1122 members (as at 12<sup>th</sup> March, 2019). A great credit to Doug. The Committee decided to also develop a suitable BLNQ logo for use on shirts and we now have arranged for these to be available to members. Big thanks to David Anthony, the Editor of the Tablelander for excellent coverage of our activities, and to Sharon Graham for use of the Malanda Hotel.

#### *A Graham Harrington Student Research Initiative.*

The Committee decided that we would like to support and encourage relevant research on our birds and to that end we are able to announce tonight the launch of a new competitive scholarship for research students. This will be known as the BLNQ Graham Harrington Student Research Scholarship and we will offer one per year at this stage. It is worth \$1,000 to support a student’s research project and we hope to see applications for these funds to support research in 2019. Thanks to Renee Cassells for the logo design.

Thanks to all the Committee members who have helped progress our Branch in the past 12 months. I particularly thank Renee Cassells who took on the role of Secretary and keeps us on track with our various activities. The three area coordinators, Martin Willis, Ceri Pearce and Tom Collis have put a great program together for 2019 already and there will be opportunities for members to participate. I also want to say a special thankyou to Wendy Cooper who has given great service as Treasurer but who is stepping down tonight.

I wish to acknowledge our 235 current members. This is an excellent membership base for our Branch and is the reason we seem to be able to accomplish so much. There is always scope for playing a more active role and I encourage any member with the capacity to take on a task to do so. It is impossible for a few office bearers to do everything that is needed and task-based participation is warmly welcomed. For example, Mike Grigg has put up his hand to work with Bush Heritage to develop an appropriate bird survey activity at Yourka. Similarly, Keith and Lindsay Fisher have volunteered to organise a campout later this year. As you look through the splendid program for 2019 you can appreciate that many members are offering their time to undertake a role supporting our work on conservation of the birds or to help us enjoy the birds. Another example is Pippi Cannon who is leading the Cairns engagement with the national BirdLife program of Birds in Schools.

In conclusion, I want to refer to the plight facing our planet, the likely impacts of climate change in causing extinctions of much of our wildlife and changing so much that we have taken for granted for many generations. Already the predicted increase in extreme weather events has now become a regular experience and this should help focus the attention of all our citizens on the need to act. Tomorrow morning hundreds of thousands of schoolchildren all over the world will be engaged in a school strike for climate change action. There will be a significant march in Cairns, trying to attract the attention of reluctant politicians whose focus is elsewhere. It does seem to me a very sad day when the adults in our society fail their communities and we have to rely on children to take up the cause. I know that many of our members will be supporting these schoolchildren by their presence. All of us can be stronger in our advocacy, especially when we know so many of our special species of birds are endangered. We will have a chance to learn more about these threats to our Wet Tropics species on the 4<sup>th</sup> April when Professor Steve Williams of JCU will be making a presentation on this topic here in the Malanda Hotel. This will be a combined event with TKMG.

Thanks for your attention and I commend this annual report to the membership.

Peter Valentine, Convenor.

