



Scarlet Honeyeater. Photo: Terry Evans

# Education

ANNETTE COOK

## UNDERSTANDING BIODIVERSITY - IMPROVING UNDERSTANDING THROUGH BIRDS

“Biodiversity – is that dishwashing liquid?” This was a response to a survey about the meaning of biodiversity that is quoted on the Victoria Naturally Alliance website. It shows a frightening lack of understanding of the term. An Egyptian study, published on *Al-Masry Al-Youm: Today’s News from Egypt*, shows a similar result with understanding ranging from “the science of keeping cows and sheep apart” to “the diversity of plants and stuff”. The same article suggests that because the term is fashionable people are encouraged to use it, but often vaguely so, diluting the message.

In *The Bird Observer* May 2010, biodiversity was defined as the variety of species, the variety of genetic material within a species and ecosystem diversity. Quantifying the diversity of plants and animals in Australia could help further illustrate an understanding of biodiversity. Australia is home to more than 560,000 species. Many of these are found nowhere else on earth and only one quarter has been scientifically documented. The vast majority of these species are relatively small organisms such as invertebrates and fungi. ‘Large’ organisms, such as vascular plants and vertebrates, only make up a small fraction of Australia’s total biodiversity, but they provide an interesting point of reference when considering the unique nature of Australia’s biota. More than 90 per cent of Australia’s 15,500+ native plant species are endemic (found nowhere else in the world), 210 of our 268 native mammal species are endemic, around 360 of our 740+ bird species and 785 of our 1000+ species of reptiles and amphibians are endemic. It’s understandable that Australia is considered to be a biodiversity ‘hotspot’.

Describing the importance of biodiversity could also help improve understanding. The Victoria Naturally Alliance website ([www.victorianaturally.org.au](http://www.victorianaturally.org.au)) summarises this very neatly.

“We rely on clean air, fresh drinking water and healthy soils to grow our crops. Plants renew the Earth’s oxygen, trap sunlight and produce food for humans and other species. Fungi and microorganisms create and maintain the soils of the world. Birds, insects and mammals pollinate plants and maintain nutrient cycles. Biodiversity also provides some insurance

against disease, climate change, fire and drought, ensuring that there are always some more robust species that can survive to rebuild ecosystems. Careful management of biodiversity will maintain the basic building blocks of many industries, including agriculture, tourism and pharmaceuticals.”

Birds and birdwatchers are in a key position to communicate an understanding of biodiversity to the community. Birds themselves have an important role as part of biodiversity. They assist with pollination of plants and in the control of insect pests. Their presence, absence and movements between sites can provide information about flowering plants, predators, land use and insect populations. Birdwatchers (including BOCA members) gather information about birds and their movements, contribute to tourism, educate others about birds and advocate for bird habitat conservation.

According to *Enabling Eco-action*, published by the Humane Society International, WWF Australia and World Conservation Union, it may help people to understand biodiversity better if it is described in different terms. So, although the theme for BOCA Bird Week 2010 is *Biodiversity is BOCA Business*, the words we use in our messages should be simple. For example: “Birds love hollows/blossoms/wetlands/insects” or “Bird habitat is in our own backyard”.

“To engage people in environmental issues such as the biodiversity crisis, one has to inspire a connection with nature.” (M.J. Novacek, 2008, “Engaging the public in biodiversity issues”, [www.pnas.org](http://www.pnas.org)) Birds and bird watching provide the perfect entree to helping people make this connection. BOCA needs to continue to make education a priority and celebrating bird week is a great opportunity.



## ACTIVITIES AROUND MELBOURNE

### 1ST MT WAVERLEY CUBS

Cubs at 1st Mt Waverley held a bird night. This is the second time BOCA has visited this group. The theme this time was birds from far and near. We talked about local birds and compared these with migratory birds, both international and Australian.

The Cubs enjoyed looking at the skins and playing the “Migration Headache” game. The game is played like a board game but rather than moving tokens around a board the Cubs move themselves around the room. They get a feel for the hazards that birds face, moving backwards a few places when bad weather or habitat destruction is indicated, forward when conservation measures are taken.

The night’s activities will help the Cubs to achieve elements of their “Animals and Birds” and “Naturalists” badges.

### 1ST BALNARRING SCOUT GROUP

On Tuesday, 15 June the Hastings Scout Hall was buzzing with excitement as Joeys, Cubs, Scouts, leaders and parents gathered to learn about owls. A PowerPoint presentation was used to show images of Australian owls and to play some of their calls. The call of the Barking Owl and the Sooty Owl created the most interest.

The children then gathered around a long table, in groups of three, to dissect owl pellets. As always with this activity, several snap lock bags containing bones were taken home.

The group braved the cold weather for a short walk in the park surrounding the hall. Although we saw no owls, frogs could be heard calling and some of the older children saw possums.

This group would like to learn more about birds and plan to visit a wetland later in the year.

### STICKYBEAKS AT BLACKBURN LAKE

*Janet Hand*

Sunday, 23 May 2010 was a beautiful day to visit Blackburn Lake. BOCA regularly conducts Stickybeak activities at the Information Centre for children. Students from the local Blackburn Lake Primary School had been set a challenge to visit Blackburn Lake and find about ten birds that they had on their project sheet. This made for a very busy day at the Information Centre.

In the two hours Diane and I were there, we had 22 children and 23 adults enjoy bird craft activities. They painted plaster kookaburras, made and coloured parrot finger puppets, and made bird’s nests from coir hanging-basket lining, wool, string and sticks. All enjoyed themselves. BOCA posters and other information were available so everyone was happy.



Top: 1st Mt Waverley Cubs enjoying the BOCA visit. Middle: A scout from 1st Balnarring Scout Group holding the Tawny Frogmouth. Bottom: 1st Balnarring Cubs and Scouts dissect owl pellets. Photos: Annette Cook