



Education

ANNETTE COOK

Owl pellet dissection at Australian Bird Fair. Photo: Tim Lau

TEACH YOURSELF MORE ABOUT BIRDS

The education pages of *The Bird Observer* normally focus on reporting on education activities and providing information about educating others about birds. In this issue I would like to provide some ideas for ways of improving our own birding knowledge, some without even leaving our desk.

Let's start with some general birding information that can be found online. The Cornell University Lab of Ornithology has a lot of information about birds and its citizen science programs on its website. For beginner birdwatchers it has www.allaboutbirds.org. Although this site, naturally enough, uses North American examples, the advice relating to bird identification, record keeping and choosing binoculars is easily accessible and relevant to Australia too.

In Australia, try the Birds Queensland website www.birdsqueensland.org.au for tips for distinguishing between similar species and information about using binoculars and scopes. The Birds in Backyards website, www.birdsinbackyards.net, features a bird identification tool called Birdfind, as well as having fact sheets about birds, bird gardens and bird research.

Getting to know birds in your area and reporting those of special interest is a great way of learning more about birds, especially their behaviour and the times of year they can be spotted. MELBOCA, BOCA's Melbourne Branch, is keen to hear of sightings of Brown Thornbill, currawongs, corellas, Song Thrush, Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoo and Crested Pigeon. Visit <http://boca.org.au/come-birding/sightings> to find how to make your report.

Becoming a specialist within a particular family or genus of birds can help refine skills. For Australian raptors, try the Australian Raptor Association website www.ausraptor.org.au. The Toowoomba Bird Observers, <http://toowoombabirdobservers.org.au/>, have downloadable PDF documents that show several species of Australian raptors in photographs. The birds are

shown in many different stages of flight, helping to illustrate a variety of ways you may see them when bird watching.

If it is waterfowl you would like to learn more about, try *Googling - A Guide to Australian Waterfowl*. This will take you to the Victorian Department of Sustainability website where you will find information for identifying ducks, geese and swans. It is primarily aimed at hunters but contains images, video and identification tips that are equally useful to birders.

We have mentioned the shorebird 2020 website, www.shorebirds.org.au, in *The Bird Observer* before but it is worth pointing out again. The learning resources section includes printable identification charts and tips for distinguishing shorebirds in the field. There are also PowerPoint presentations. One presentation takes you step by step through the identification of plovers and sandpipers, including a test to track what you have learned. Another presentation covers shorebirds more generally and a third provides training for counting and estimating numbers of shorebirds in the field.

A fun way to learn about bird jargon could be by doing a crossword. Visit Echuca and Region BOCA Branch website http://users.mcmedia.com.au/~stocky/boca_echuca.html, download and print a crossword and give it a try. More serious reading can be had by downloading State of Australia's Birds reports from www.birdsaustralia.com.au.

If you can drag yourself away from the internet, try a visit to the BOCA library. Members can actually check the catalogue online and borrowed items will be sent to them, but nothing compares to browsing the shelves. Books and journals in the library cover a huge range of topics relating to birds, habitat, conservation and birding. You can also borrow DVDs, videos and CDs which are a great tool in learning bird calls.

If learning in a group, where you can talk to others and share ideas, is more to your liking there are plenty to choose from. BOCA has 49 Branches and Affiliated Groups that provide a range of opportunities for learning about birds. A quick look at a guest speaker list for the meetings of any of these groups

reveals a variety of areas of interest, species specialists, trip reports, animals other than birds, conservation, monitoring programs and research are just some of what is offered. Then there are outings and field trips to all manner of habitats with not only the chance to see new birds but to learn from fellow birders. Checkout the BOCA website to find out how to make contact with a group in your local area, www.boca.org.au.

Finally, I would like to mention museums and zoos as being places of learning, both online and through a visit. It could be too, that they would be appealing to a wider audience – not just the birdwatcher in the family.

The Australian Museum, Sydney, www.australianmuseum.net.au, has information online about bird evolution and links to the Birds in Backyards program. It also has images of its skins collection including a Grey Falcon with Mallee Ringneck head in its talons and a King Penguin collected on Mawson's expedition to the Antarctic. Similarly, Museum Victoria, www.museumvictoria.com.au, and Queensland Museum, www.qm.qld.gov.au, have access to images of their skins collections and also fact sheets about birds. At Museum Victoria, Melbourne, a visit to the *Darwin to DNA* exhibition highlights interesting information about the evolution of Australian birds.

Melbourne Zoo, www.zoo.org.au, and Taronga Zoo, Sydney, www.zoo.nsw.gov.au, have extensive bird collections and bird flight shows that include Australian birds. The Melbourne Zoo website contains fact sheets and information for many birds. Taronga Zoo runs wildlife photography courses that would be of interest to some BOCA members.

So there is no excuse – get out there and learn more about Australian birds so you too can contribute to their conservation and improve Australia's biodiversity.

BOCA BIRD WEEK 2010 – BIODIVERSITY IS BOCA BUSINESS

Each year, BOCA Bird Week provides an opportunity to promote Australian birds. The theme *Biodiversity is BOCA Business* has allowed exploration of the big picture that surrounds the importance of birds, biodiversity and the important work that BOCA members do for bird conservation.

Library displays were still the most popular way for Branches to get the message out to the public. Thirteen display kits were sent out for Branches from as far north as Townsville to southern Victoria.

Several events involving the public were held in and around Bird Week. Ballarat Branch ran a walk at Lake Wendouree – this year with water. PENBOC, on the Mornington Peninsula, held their annual *What Bird is That?* at The Briars, Mt Martha. MELBOCA, along with the City of Banyule, held the 12th *Breakfast with the Birds*.

BOCA was also represented at the Melbourne Water Maribyrnong Family Festival and South Metro Scouts Environment Day, for Cub and Joey scouts, at Braeside Park.

AUSTRALIAN BIRDFAIR SCHOOLS DAY

The Friday before the Birdfair really got underway was once again Schools Day. BOCA, along with Birds Australia Murrumbidgee Catchment Management Authority, Murrumbidgee Irrigation, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and Rice Growers Association Australia, provided workshops for local school children. Several schools attended and the classes, once broken into smaller groups, attended three of the eleven workshops offered during the day.

Apart from birds, the children were able to explore soils, water and macro-invertebrates, Aboriginal culture, River Red Gum Forests and the rice growing industry. Birds Australia invited students to "A Big Nest" and BOCA offered owls – nocturnal birds of prey.

The paper kites, owl pellet dissection and owl skins were well received by yet another group of enthusiastic students and teachers.



Top: Bird watching at Melbourne Zoo. Bottom: Dusky Moorhen seen by Joey Scouts and Cubs at Braeside Park. Photos: Annette Cook

Point Cook College P-9

Robyn Cairns

Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. Rachel Carlson

As environmental educators we have a responsibility to engage our students in their local natural environment, exposing them to experiences of sensory awareness which ignite curiosity and encourage self-reflection. We need to provide students opportunities for moments in nature of joy and pleasure and opportunities to “make a positive difference” to their local environment.

Many students lead very active lives, so walks to their local nature reserve may be infrequent during their busy week.

It was a great opportunity for the Year 6 team at Point Cook College P-9: David Simpson, Michelle Gillespie, Danielle Stewart and I to take students for weekly walks to our local wetlands at Jamieson Way, Point Cook. We incorporated our wetlands bird watching and litter surveys into the Year 6 inquiry unit; ‘Living a healthy and balanced Life’ and the focus was not only data collection on birds and the weekly rubbish survey but also the emotional connectedness students felt with nature.

Students kept a feelings or reflection journal in which they recorded their emotions following the walks to the wetlands. Children’s feelings of emotional connectedness have been very evident, thus highlighting the absolute importance for these kinds of excursions in nature. Being local, we didn’t need to jump on a bus!

FOLLOWING ARE A SELECTION OF QUOTES FROM THE STUDENTS’ JOURNALS

Many students described their experience in the wetland as exciting:

“I was excited to see some Australian Pelicans down by the wetlands today. I also loved the feel of the wind blowing through.” *Charlotte*

“I felt excited to see the birds because I’ve never been up close to birds, pelicans or swans.” *Racy*

“I was excited to see pelicans at Jamieson Way but I’m wondering what they eat there.” *Tablia*

Others showed concern or anger:

“I felt angry because there was lots of rubbish people had thrown on the ground but happy I saw a baby swan.” *Maddy*

“Lately, we have been walking to the wetlands and it has been a great experience. We have had majestic birds fly right over our heads and birds waddle right up to us. We have found 13 different species of birds, all different sizes. If it wasn’t for the rubbish we are finding each week it would be a beautiful wetland.” *Georgia*



Top: Black Swan. Middle: “Today was very exciting because I saw 30 birds in total and we collected 230 pieces of rubbish”. *Sal*. Bottom: “I liked the binoculars, especially the orange- red glass at the ends”. *Darcy*. Photos: Robyn Cairns

The dichotomous key produced jointly by BOCA and Melbourne Water was a hit with students:

“The dichotomous keys are a great tool to use if you don’t know what a bird is called. The dichotomous key has a load of different wetland birds in it. It is really easy to use, a quick flick through it and you are done. My favourite bird in the dichotomous key is the Cattle Egret. I like the bird as it has spiky feathers and looks really cool. I would recommend the dichotomous key to all bird watchers.” *Caleb*

Editor’s note: Point Cook College have now been successful in obtaining an ABEF grant to continue their work in educating students about the importance of birds and their habitat.