

Helen Aston

Botanist and born birder

"It never entered my head that adults watched birds, or that there might be some essential purpose in it."

Helen Aston cannot remember a time when she did not watch birds. What brought her to the Bird Observers Club was not her consuming passion for natural history or conservation - she joined because she contracted chicken pox. Until age 13 she lived on her parents' farm near Narrandera, NSW, among tall trees - Box and Callitris species - where one or two very special paddocks were spared the vigorous land-clearing of those days. Here, native shrubs grew under trees and wildflowers blossomed in spring, while the nearby forest reserves and the Murrumbidgee River provided good backup habitat for local birds. This scene sparked Helen's ongoing interest in birds.

"I was naturally drawn to these entrancing creatures and I had plenty of childhood time in which to roam the paddocks and see birds in action. White-winged Chough, Grey-crowned Babbler and the Apostlebird were never-endingly absorbing, as were the Magpie-lark and Welcome Swallow. Of course, I didn't know those species by those names then; to me they were Black Jay, Happy Family, Apostles, Peewee and just Swallow. My father recognised my interest and told me names which locals used. Many similar species simply got lumped together. Blue Martin applied to all woodswallows, even though we recognised that sometimes we had some around which didn't look the same as the ones usually present. Tomtit embraced all the thornbills."

The young Helen watched birds alone - and collected birds' eggs with other children.

"We deemed some species 'bad', such as miners which ate (our) grapes, or butcherbirds which ate other birds. These were 'punished' by having eggs taken, young killed and nests destroyed."

She remembers smashing in less than one hour, sixty eggs of House Sparrows which did considerable damage to the farm's thatch-roofed sheds. There were rules however: 'good' or 'not bad' species had only one egg taken from their nests, and once you had a couple of eggs of a particular species you never took more.

Helen was on special terms with a family of Apostlebirds (deemed 'good' and therefore remaining safe) which nested each season in the Callitris trees, climbing up to watch and talk to them.

Still a teenager, Helen left the farm as her family moved to Melbourne. As a farewell, she was given two bird books by the district schoolteacher: *'Bird Wonders of Australia'* by A.Chisholm and JA Leach's *'An Australian Bird Book'*. These she read avidly, itching to learn more. Luckily, as it turned out, around this time she contracted chicken pox.

"As I lay at home in quarantine, bored, my mother chanced upon a copy of a magazine called *'Wild Life'* and bought it for me. Little did she know it was edited by a famous naturalist in the person of Crosbie Morrison, whom I would one day meet.

"The magazine listed natural history organisations and their meetings, so, when schooldays were behind me, I went rather timidly to my first BOC meeting - in 1952. I had thought that only children watched birds, but after joining BOC birdwatching with adults began. It had

never entered my head that adults might watch birds, or that there might be some essential purpose besides enjoyment in it. Words and concepts like 'environment' and 'biodiversity' had never come my way."

A professional taxonomic botanist before her retirement in 1991, Helen graduated Bachelor of Science from the University of Melbourne in 1957, with majors in botany and zoology. She was awarded the Australian Natural History Medallion in 1979 'for special study and for increasing knowledge and appreciation of natural history in Australia'. A tireless worker, she joined many organisations and societies, including the Australian Conservation Foundation and The Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (now Birds Australia), of which she was made an Honorary Life Member in 2002.

Her very active life within BOCA began in 1956 when she served on the committee and became Assistant Secretary. Club President from 1971-73. She later became a trustee for the Australian Bird Environment Foundation (ABEF), only resigning from the Committee in February 2004. She played her part on the Speakers Committee and, from 1975-76 joined the Headquarters Committee whose work culminated in the acquisition of the present club headquarters in Nunawading.

In April 1991 Helen retired voluntarily from the National Herbarium of Victoria after 34 years with this institution. Beginning as temporary technical assistant in January, 1957, she worked as Senior Botanist (Class SO-4) from 1971-82 and became Curator of Herbarium collections in May 1982. Forty-four botanical papers make an impressive body of work, but one piece, perhaps the earliest of her publications, was untitled: her childhood account of an observation on the Banded Lapwing appeared in 'The Outpost' 13:28 (the magazine of Blackfriars Correspondence School, Sydney) in 1947.

Helen's many articles for *The Bird Observer*, date from 1953 and range from trip descriptions, observations on feeding habits and bird migration to her presidential addresses.

In 1972 Helen's article on the Bird Observers Club was published in the RAOU Newsletter no 11:3.

On completion of her degree, Helen found herself excluded from a career in zoology by the times conservative attitudes which deemed women unsuitable to work beside men in the field. The Herbarium, however, offered other avenues to explore.

"During my employment (at the Herbarium) my duties changed in stages from the initial mounting and incorporation of specimens through routine plant identification and enquiry work to the research, editorial, curatorial, supervisory role of my final position." She now attends as Honorary Research Associate.

Helen commenced an active research programme in plant taxonomy in 1963, with special emphasis on Australian aquatic flowering plants which resulted in a book, '*Aquatic Plants of Australia*', published by Melbourne University Press in 1973. This is a guide to identifying aquatic ferns and flowering plants, both native and naturalised.

Ongoing research and bird-related quests have taken her travelling and camping all over Victoria, and also to north Western Australia, Northern Territory, Cape York, southeast Queensland, eastern New South Wales and south-eastern South Australia. She has also travelled overseas from Africa to Iceland, Europe to SE Asia.

“My strong interest in ornithology, travel and photography have combined well with my botanical career and have led me to enthusiastically undertake many expeditions beyond those related to my work”.

“Since 1957 I have undertaken field work throughout Victoria, at first making general collections and observations of plants. The total number of collections to date is 2900. The emphasis of my collection is on quality rather than quantity. The major specimens of each collection is housed at the Herbarium”.

Her Herbarium-based activities, as well as her wide involvement in botanical, ornithological societies, have seen her delivering specialist lectures to tertiary students and department staff and special interest organisations like nature, camera and service clubs throughout Victoria.

A major work was undertaken when the Herbarium building in Melbourne’s Royal Botanic Gardens underwent extensive renovation: she organised the removal of more than one million specimens into storage. In the same process the vascular plant collections were reorganised from alphabetic to systematic sequence. According to Herbarium sources, the operation was so meticulous and well-planned that ‘location of any specimen was always known and none was mislaid’.

Many of Helen’s activities have been voluntary and have included working with natural history organisations on bird study projects or other ornithological work. “Most recently I have been a field participant for the ‘New Atlas of Australian Birds’ (RAOU/Birds Australia) and both a field recorder and sub-committee member for the recording and publishing of the ‘Birds of Box Hill’, for the Victorian Ornithological Research Group (VORG). This Organisation (VORG) awarded her life membership in 2002 (see VORG Notes 37 (3)).

When not engaged in botany Helen spends most of her time in some kind of bird-related activity - from mapping Fairy Penguin rookeries, to bird-banding and studying ‘mudlarks’ (Magpie-larks) nesting beside Melbourne’s Yarra River.

Written by Leonie Robbins 21 April 2004 from notes supplied through BOCA