

## Geoff Deason

### Loyal enthusiast

*“Helping others, especially beginners, has given much satisfaction.”*

Enthusiasm is the key word in the birding life of BOCA stalwart Geoff Deason. October, 1971 saw Geoff enter the club. 1990 saw him created a Life Member for his dedicated service. Late in 2003 Geoff made the monumental decision to retire from his principal BOCA involvements so he and his wife, Dorothy, could spend more time together and be free to travel when the mood takes them.

His favourite bird? He just ‘likes the lot’ and his main enjoyment comes from simply being out in the bush. Geoff’s birding interest started in childhood when he enjoyed natural history books and kept an aviary of birds where Gouldian Finches took pride of place. Later, his interest was spurred on when he joined a Council of Adult Education (CAE) class headed by the late Jack Hyett, who suggested the club to him. The field outings offered by the club held major appeal for Geoff.

BOCA brought more than one joy to Geoff. He met Dorothy on the 1977 Tagalong tour to the Flinders Ranges. “Dorothy was in the main party and I had arranged to ‘tag along’ in my own vehicle.

“I pulled into Wilpena Pound on a Saturday night in heavy rain, everything dull and overcast, and I saw this girl walking out of her tent and that’s how it happened. There was much matchmaking by certain people.”

He has especially enjoyed the social atmosphere of BOCA. “It’s the getting out and about to different places you might never get to otherwise. The camaraderie between everyone is probably one of the most important things. It doesn’t matter who you are or what your station is in life, you’ve all got that lovely common interest.”

While he says no-one has particularly influenced him, Geoff pays tribute to members like Peter Disher and Joyce Thomas from the Murray area, Reg Johnson and also Frank Stephens, who died in 1989. Their enthusiasm for birding, he says, rubbed off on himself.

Observing birds and helping others, especially beginners, has given Geoff much satisfaction over the years.

His ability and generosity in passing on what he knows are widely appreciated. His knowledge seems to many to be encyclopaedic. With characteristic modesty, he vigorously denies this. “It is broad on the birds down here (ie around Melbourne) but take me up to Queensland or the Northern Territory and I wouldn’t know a lot of the calls there mainly because I am not up there often enough.”

Calls are an important part of bird identification to Geoff. How did he learn all that he knows? “There is only one way and that is being out in the bush; practice makes perfect to a large extent.”

Enthusiasm is more important than large knowledge for leaders, Geoff believes. “You’ve got to enjoy it - even if you are having a ‘rum’ day. You usually do (enjoy it), because there is usually some bird that proves to be a highlight.”

Now retired, Geoff says his past clerical-based work did not always fit in with his then new-found interest. "I often wanted to go birding during the week - or even all the week".

The first BOCA activity he remembers clearly was a camp at Melville Caves in Victoria's north-west, probably on Melbourne Cup weekend in 1971, to which he drove his own vehicle.

He camped next to Peggy Mitchell (for many years BOCA's recorder of unusual sightings and a 600+ birder in her own right) and her husband, Hartley. "We breakfasted with a Gilbert's Whistler. The camp got a pretty good birdlist, but I've remembered that one for 30 years, so it obviously had a pretty big impact."

About 50-50 was the ratio between men and women attendees in those days, he says, with perhaps a slight bias towards women, but whole families were often present. "Bird numbers were considerably more, but the range of species has stayed much the same, we just seem to be seeing fewer of them."

He feels the attitude among most birders has stayed with same, with the accent on enjoyment. "There is more opportunity now because there are more outings." Work commitments have little influence on attendance numbers, Geoff believes. "I feel it (birdwatching) is very much a retired person's activity."

One of the most spectacular sightings he recalls was on the 2000 Tagalong tour under Leslie Feather. "We went down to one waterhole in south-west Queensland and there must have been 10-12,000 Plumed Whistling-Ducks. The earth was just a moving mass, all ducks. I have never seen anything like it.

"A lot of people have done so much for the club over the years. Reg Johnson has been tremendous; Colin Barraclough, Pat Bingham, Barbara Longmuir, Alma Mitchell, all the staff at headquarters, Frank Stephens, are just a few."

Birding has been a major pleasure because it offers so many opportunities to move outside the home, Geoff says. "Getting out in the field, going to meetings, travel, all of that."

He enjoys looking at the whole picture - from wildflowers to birds. "I don't know much about the flowers, I just enjoy being out with nature. When Dorothy and I travel we don't just go for birds. We like historical sites, buildings, anything and everything."

Outside his birding hours Geoff enjoys travel, music and reading, mostly books on nature. Photography has been a consuming interest, especially for Dorothy and the two give 'armchair travel' talks using Dorothy's often magnificent slides. Splendid framed prints of her shots decorate the couple's living room. One Melbourne branch meeting was highlighted by Dorothy's talk on their trip to Africa with mouth-watering slides and hair-raising stories of close encounters with hippopotamus.

## Beginners Outings

Since 1979 Geoff Deason has headed up the BOCA weekend outings for beginners, held on Saturdays.

The late Howard Jarman was instrumental in starting up these outings in the 1960s, followed by Frank Stephens.

Geoff began attending during the early 70s, and on occasion began helping Frank out, so when Frank retired from this activity in 1979, Geoff took over. "Frank just said one day, 'You can take over from now', so it was a kind of natural progression in some ways."

Geoff largely followed Frank's procedures. "Frank had a pretty good way of doing it. He tried to make sure everyone saw the bird and that is still a main priority. We didn't dilly-dally over trying to find one bird, but just tried to keep it flowing."

Geoff also followed Frank's footsteps in choosing venues, pretty well a set programme month by month. Melbourne's Royal Botanical Gardens was June, for example, because of the short winter days and close-to-home distance. Blackburn Lake in the eastern suburbs was also a popular venue in earlier days, often visited in July.

Beginners outings were traditionally half-days, with full days for areas outside Melbourne, like the You Yangs ranges or Werribee's sewerage farm (now Western Treatment Plant), which were too big or too far away for shorter visits.

"I have always aimed to provide an enjoyable half-day outing for people to come out into the bush or the parks to see birds. The idea has been to choose the best spot time-wise, weather-wise and bird-wise.

"I have never done 'reccies' (reconnaissance outings). I found out early on that you can go out on one day and find a lot of birds, then next day when you go again, they'll be somewhere else. "You need to know where you are walking, where paths are, if they will take a party, and if they are safe. Single-file for 50 people isn't great because the ones in front see most and at the back they can miss out. You need to check that the area is big enough to support a reasonable number of birds - and if there is sufficient parking space. It is no good going somewhere that offers great birding and has only room for two cars.

"What I look for in a venue is whether it will offer a chance to see a variety of birds. I go for varied habitat - if you have water plus bush you get more birds.

"We get a range of people attending - I even have what I call my 'professional' beginners, members who have been coming to outings a long time. We get real beginners too, some in their twenties, sometimes young kids - I never mind them coming. It depends on where the outing is, the weather, the venue and what other things people have to do.

"Most come because it suits the time they have available. I think this happens with all the outings.

"People often start birdwatching because they are looking for something to do and decide to try it out. A lot like the idea of getting out into parks and bushland areas, and being able to walk about safely with a group."

Enthusiasm comes first if you want to succeed as a birdwatcher, Geoff believes. "You don't have to be fanatic, just enthusiastic. You've got to want to know what a bird is, not necessarily its every detail."

Leaders need to be able to get on well with people - and to be able to laugh at themselves if occasion arises. "If you make a boo-boo, it's best to laugh it off." Anyone can make a mistake, he says, and this often gives your audience a chance to extend their own confidence and knowledge.

"I think it's OK to yell out, too. If you end up being wrong, you can say so, but you can often start a group discussion this way."

Geoff has sound advice for potential leaders. "It is hard to keep the outing flowing if there are no birds around, but there is always something of interest. Try not to be too 'strict', just enjoy each outing for what it produces and don't try to make it something it is not.

"Over the years you learn to just take it as it comes."

Study meetings are good for encouraging beginners to learn more, says Geoff, especially if they are coupled with a field trip, but for him the main way to learn is to get out in the field.

He does not believe a good birdwatcher ever stops being a beginner. "There is always something to learn and that is partly why we do it."

In 1997 a new BOCA initiative started up - midweek outings for beginners. These were headed by Jill Plowright and her husband, Howard. "I felt there was a need for something similar to Geoff's outings for those wanting to go out midweek. Originally I thought of asking people to book to keep numbers down, but I now have more confidence," Jill says.

"We get the same mix attending as Geoff does, some old hands and some new. A lot depends on where we go. We get fewer on the west side of town - I guess people don't like rush hour traffic."

Jill believes most people come to birdwatching as a retirement activity. "Bushwalking and an interest in the environment sparks an interest. Birding is non-competitive and doesn't have to be done regularly like sport. All you need is patience and a willingness to do some homework."

A good leader needs patience and should ensure everyone sees the bird. "You need to be able to communicate to pass on your knowledge and you need to do homework on the area too. Having a dedicated leader at the rear of the walk as well as up front helps make sure real beginners are not intimidated by 'know-alls'.

Jill sees continued club education programmes as a major way of helping beginners learn more about birds.

Note: Midweek beginners' outings were discontinued from Dec, 2003

## Slide Library

Frank Stephens started the BOCA slide library, probably in the 1970s the slide collection numbered only about 200. Geoff Deason stood in when Frank went on holidays, so when Frank died in 1989, Geoff took it over on a permanent basis.

He had no training to help him, but simply continued with Frank's methods. One early (and mammoth) task, however, was to convert the slide numbering system to follow that of Simpson and Day's earliest edition.

Some requests arrive via telephone calls, but most come through the mail. By late 2003 he found fewer requests coming in, largely because many BOCA branches have amassed their own slide collections, as have many guest speakers. Geoff believes the decrease is also accounted for by the increasing use by speakers of computerised power point presentation.

The only time Geoff asks for help is when he may be absent for weeks at a time usually on bird-related travels.

Most people tell him what birds they require. Occasionally, however, the choice is left to him. Geoff spends some time checking slides with his own viewer, choosing the best slide for each individual request.

Although the club now has a collection of around 12,000 slides, more good ones are always required, especially of rarer birds, like Green-backed and White-streaked Honeyeaters and the various grasswrens, always birds difficult to photograph in the wild. "There are about eleven birds we have no slides of, and of course it is not as easy as you think to get good shots."

One reliable source, Geoff says, claims photographers need to be within seven metres of their subjects, with a 500 mm lens and a two-times adaptor. "Otherwise, you get what looks like a speck in the middle of the slide."

Many photographers, he says, are often averse to giving away what they consider their best slides, hoping to have these published in professional and other media. This was a major problem when the slide library was first established and has continued. "We get a lot of 'second choice' slides and although these are good for many purposes they are not always top quality shots."

The housing for the slides has improved dramatically from early days. The late Harry Airey hand-built a handsome multi-drawer wooden box cabinet (picture in club files) which is still in use and which holds thousands. Additional slides are housed in other wooden containers.

Slides go out to members for use in talks given for education or entertainment purposes - to community groups, BOCA branches, garden clubs and the like. The biggest list Geoff has got out for anyone was 218 slides (for a talk on Africa). The usual number is around 25-30.

The monthly Melbourne branch meeting feature 'Bird of the Evening' and identification quizzes by Howard Plowright were sourced from the slide library, as are many of the pictures published in the BOCA magazine, *The Bird Observer*.

Sharpness and definition that shows the bird very well are the main requirements in a good slide, Geoff says.

“Sometimes I like a slide that shows the bird in its natural habitat, rather than in big closeup, because then you get an idea of size. This is particularly good if the talk is for, say, a garden club and you can show bottlebrush or grevillea flowers. Then too, if you get a big closeup of a Brown Thornbill it can look huge and give the wrong impression.”

**Note:** At the time of this interview, Geoff was planning to retire from both his long-term involvements, so he and Dorothy could spend more time in travel. Arrangements were in progress to move the slides to the library at BOCA headquarters in Nunawading (Vic).

*Written by Leonie Robbins from interview 29 October 2003 and notes from Jill Plowright.*