

## **Xenia Dennett**

### **Science, club and fieldwork**

*“A lot can be done if someone (you) does it.”*

Despite her distinguished medical career, life in or around BOCA has been the norm for Dr Xenia Dennett since she first joined the club in 1969.

Her special avian interest has remained the structure and function of birds - and bird banding.

Xenia has acted as council member (1996-2000) and has been a trustee of Australian Bird Environment Foundation (ABEF) serving on its committee of management since 1996 to the time of writing (Nov 2004). As well, she has been convenor of the Western Port survey since 2003.

Brought into BOCA, as many were, by Jack Hyett's Council of Adult Education (CAE) lectures, Xenia counts her ABEF work for conservation as a personal success.

She admires BOCA's range of activities, particularly the opportunities offered of birding in safe (often private) environments, but puts even greater value on the convivial companionship she has enjoyed within the club both in Australia and overseas.

Her aims for BOCA include maintaining the existing activities and capturing the interest of more young people by education and challenge so they can run the club in the future.

Xenia's very first introduction to the world of birdwatching came by way of the late Crosbie Morrison's written articles and radio broadcasts which continued late into the 1950s.

Helen Aston, fellow scientist and BOCA member, has perhaps most influenced her birding activities, she says. “Helen told me about active scientific field work (ie bird-banding) with the Victorian Ornithological Research Group (VORG) which evolved out of the then Bird Observers Club.”

Bird-banding has been her major interest. Another has been communication beginning, she says, with talking and writing about bird activities.

Her first outing with the club (fee payable and bus transport) was probably to the Brisbane Ranges around 1968. She remembers Roy Wheeler, Helen Aston, Reg Johnson, Cecily Allen and Flora McDonald as companions on this trip.

There were more younger people then, she believes, but it was Dusky Woodswallow and Rainbow Bee-eater than caught her interest.

Xenia believes there were more birds about at that time, too. “(There was) Less urban sprawl, breeding Wedge-tailed Eagle, Hooded Robin at Eden Park, close to Melbourne and now adjacent to high density housing.”

Among the differences she sees between birding then and now she cites better equipment - from binoculars, field guides, and Global Positioning Systems (GPS) to superb 'infotainment' by the likes of David Attenborough, the BBC and the ABC both on television and in books. “Birding is more competitive now, but you don't have to join in”, she says.

While not a twitcher, Xenia would like to chalk up the coveted 600 species, but is not 'passionate' about reaching this goal.

White-throated Needletails "screaming at head height between us in a Mt Hotham storm front" is her idea of a memorable birding experience, her most impressive sighting. On a quieter note, she names Flame Robin and Masked Lapwing as favourite birds. Masked Lapwing because it was the first bird she personally identified, Flame Robin because little is still known about Flame Robin and its migration route.

Xenia believes the volunteers who work behind the scenes have contributed much to the BOCA as it is today. She cites Roy Wheeler, Helen Aston, Reg Johnson, Alma Mitchell and Ellen McCulloch as major influences on club activities and function.

In her role as council member Xenia attended many monthly meetings, and sat on sub-committees. Her broad interest in natural history and conservation has informed her BOCA work, she says.

Knowing the internal and external environments relative to the club provided the 'something extra' she felt she could bring to these contributions. "A lot can be done if someone (you) does it".

Assessing grounds of application from individuals has been a large part of her involvement with ABEF, for which her major asset has been experience of scientific information and the ability to evaluate projects and grants. This work, she says, has enabled grants to be made to protect habitat in many areas.

In 1997 she became the inaugural Chair of BOCA's Activities Committee and held the position until 2002. This work, she says, has been part of BOCA's brief of education, conservation and bird observation.

"We initiated additional aspects, for example activity guidelines for all BOCA events and overseas tours. Looming litigation possibilities began the need for written guidelines for both BOCA and its leaders."

Before her retirement Xenia was a neuropathologist, Associate Professor of Pathology and director of the State Neuropathology Service at Melbourne University. Her career was highlighted by her discovery of a new species of pathogenic nematode in human skeletal muscle.

Birding has taken her to places she may not otherwise have seen, often via her career. The Danube delta and several post-conference trips are in the latter category.

She has always sought the role of birds and their place in nature. Earlier tastes for bushwalking and trekking have been taken over by birdwatching. "You can't do both simultaneously, so you stop walking," she says.

In her many talks and articles Xenia makes clear her amazement at nature's complexities, striving to pass on her own wonder with what she calls a 'Why is it so?' approach.

She has been physically involved with many bird-related activities, from the Victorian and Australian Wader Study Groups, the Australian Bird and Bat Banding Scheme, and the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (RAOU, now Birds Australia) to the Australian Conservation Foundation.

As well as producing an impressive volume of medical writing and presentation, Xenia has edited several bird publications, including *'Beautiful Banyule'* (Carol Thorney), *'Birds of Heidelberg and the Yarra Valley'*, with Warringal Conservation Society, and *'Birds of Box Hill'* (Tess Kloot). She has contributed to field guides and the Atlas of Australian Birds and written articles on Madagascar, Antarctica, and Bharatpur.

A special article on birds and the Victorian aborigines appeared in *VORG Notes 1976*; 12: 18-19. Comments on her favourite Flame Robins have appeared in *VORG Notes* and her photography has appeared in various issue of *The Bird Observer*.

She has appeared as invited speaker on many occasions, several times at BOCA's Melbourne-based monthly meetings, and also at Birds Australia, the Australian Bat and Bird Association and many others, including the Australian Institute of Medical Laboratory Scientists.

*Written by Leonie Robbins from answers to questionnaire 28 November 2004*