

Barbara Garrett **Natural, self-taught leader**

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Barbara Garrett’s contribution to BOCA has been multi-faceted and enduring, but it has been the lifelong friendships, increased feelings of well-being and travel opportunities over most of Australia that have kept her interest at the highest levels.

“Birding has shown me the wonders and natural beauty that exist in our country. It has given me the desire to preserve this for our beautiful birds. It is a wonderful interest.”

Barbara joined the club around 1972, inspired and encouraged by Ellen McCulloch. She pays tribute to Ellen, and to Reg Johnson, as her mentors and for their generous sharing of knowledge, especially of bird calls.

“Ellen has been the most wonderful public relations person (for the club). All the years in the Council of Education, running birdwatching sessions. How many people owe their interest to this lady? Her writings and publications promoting birdwatching have brought thousands to the club and helped to make it the viable club it is today.

“Because of his leadership qualities throughout the years at camps, beginners outings and anywhere he could help, Reg Johnson has been a great club figure - an office bearer and a great participant in environment issues as well as ABEF (the Australian Bird Environment Foundation). He has always been a great encourager of people like myself.”

Always modest, she also acknowledges the ongoing help of her husband, Bill, who encouraged her and made birding possible in the early days by caring for the couple’s young children. “Bill’s main interest is in wildflowers, so we complement each other while walking or travelling.”

Barbara’s respect for her fellows and a natural ability to lead has seen her head up several groups. She led the Weekdays Outings group (then known as Midweek) from 1974-81, encouraged by Alma Mitchell to take over the fledgling group after its first two initial outings, conducted by Alma and Reg Johnson, whose idea this activity had been.

“ My first midweek outing, in May 1974, was to Melbourne’s Botanical Gardens in South Yarra.”

A good variety of bushland and water for venues was a high priority for choosing venues, each of which would involve two visits beforehand. Time would also be spent writing up the Bird Observer calendar listing for the event and planning the day. Later, the leader would speak at the club’s monthly meeting, detailing the outing and sightings, Barbara said.

“People like Joan Airey would accompany me to do a ‘reccie’ (reconnaissance outing). We would often search the area a year before, then again nearer to the time, maybe a few days before the event. We went everywhere by car and there were no fees to pay. If I could walk for an hour and find 20 birds I was happy.”

Barbara reluctantly gave up this important task. “I asked Celia Browne to take over because I went back to work to help educate our children.”

Bunkstyle camps also benefited from Barbara's organisation and leadership, from 1991-98. Her first camp attracted 39 members.

"There was a need and opportunity for such camps. They were extremely popular; we always had a waiting list. My aims were to increase membership and enable those who did not want to camp (in the open) to still enjoy a group activity over a week. (Bunkhouse camps) meant they could get to places they could not visit in a day, enjoy new birds at a cost I hoped they could afford and still make a profit for the club."

The group mostly used school camp sites. "Good birding areas were important. Accommodation must be reasonable but the food must be EXCELLENT," Barbara stressed. "Good home cooking, well presented - 2-3 courses at dinner and a good breakfast, with a nice cut lunch and cake for morning tea, plus fruit was what we aimed for."

This activity took up much of Bill and Barbara's time. "There were two (bunkhouse camps) a year. We would travel to a venue to check it out. We always insisted on a quote and looked at birding possibilities. Six to eight weeks before the specified date we would spend a week in the area deciding what to do and where we would take the group each day.

"As the camps went on, some of the original (participants) kept coming, and there were always new ones. That's what kept it going.

"Reg Johnson, Mavis Jarrett and Judy Oliver took up the task when I left it. It was too hard to continue, (venues were) too far from our new home at Warrnambool and I just couldn't handle leading the group as Bill's health deteriorated."

In 1997 after the couple moved to Warrnambool Barbara established the Sou'West Vic branch of BOCA, after consultation with Ellen McCulloch and Zoe Wilson. Barbara has been president of this branch for five years.

Sou'West now has over 40 members and attracts an average of 20 to outings to local birding sites. Activities do not stop with field walks - Barbara believes a programme of social events, from trivia nights to bistro meals, helps keep the group cohesive.

Two camps are held each year at spots like Gellibrand, Mallacoota, or Ned's Corner.

Barbara has been a BOCA shop volunteer, sitting on a small committee of management during its early days. She indexed early copies of *The Bird Watcher* and wrote various articles for *The Bird Observer*.

In the meantime, she says, she educated herself. "I gained my HSC (Now VCE), by schooling myself at night while working by day and caring for my family, then went on to gain my Library Technician certificate."

An early birding highlight for Barbara was seeing her first Rainbow Bee-eater at the You Yangs reserve, near Geelong (Vic), but it is the Mistletoebird she enjoys seeing most. "It is too small for most people to notice, but I love its call - that's what attracts me at first. Seeing this little handsome blue-black, grey and red male somewhere in the foliage is still a delight."

In earlier times, Barbara recalls, birds were more plentiful, and good habitats could be visited nearer home, with lots of bushland and undergrowth.

Observation and encouraging group activity are what keeps Barbara going. Her highest achievement? "I hope I inspired others to come and enjoy birdwatching".

Written by Leonie Robbins by phone interviews and mail during December 2003.