

Alec Hawtin

A rare bird in club history

“Native plants and birds go hand in glove together.”

Picture busy, bustling, bright Mildura, Sunraysia district’s marvel on the Murray river, eerily quiet - still and without birds except for an occasional Noisy Miner. According to SunBOCA committee man and long-serving president Alec Hawtin, this is how the city was in the 1970s following aerial spraying to control mosquitoes believed to be responsible for the outbreaks of encephalitis that had devastated Victoria.

“The numbers of birds were decimated. We picked up kookaburras, magpies, Tawny Frogmouths and Owlet Nightjars on our small property six kilometres from the river, but a Mr Davis of Merbein picked up four 20-litre buckets of dead birds from Merbein Common.

“Most small birds of this area have never become as numerous as they were previous to this event.” Pesticide use in locust control is another thorny issue for Alec. “I have used an alternative organic solution successfully without side effects to our backyard birds (but) the Plague Locust Committee only uses it in sensitive areas for birds like the habitat of the Plains Wanderer.”

Alec is a ‘rare bird’ in BOCA history: he has joined twice. “I joined first, in 1959 then, due to family commitments, let (my) membership lapse from 1962 until 1982 when I joined again. SunBOCA was formed as a club in 1982 and later became amalgamated with BOCA.”

Passionate about conservation, he served as a committee member for the Sunraysia branch from 1982 and as president for six years as well as being conservation leader.

He ranks the fencing of Hobb’s Patch - a reserve featuring the native shrub Eremophila (the so-called Turkey Bush) near Dareton named for the late ornithologist John Hobbs - as a personal success.

It was a photograph of Pink-eared Duck in a 1959 edition of the ‘Weekly Times’ newspaper with an article by John Warham that spurred him on to join BOCA. He wants to see BOCA continue to help birds and keep pursuing its conservation policies “so we can enjoy them (ie the birds) ourselves and (so they will) be there for our grandchildren.”

While conservation of birds in general is his main involvement Alec is especially interested in the Mallee Fowl Recovery Group and the Black-eared Miner Recovery Team.

As a boy, he was attracted to birdwatching by his grandmother and also by Hallett Thomas and the radio broadcasts of naturalist Crosbie Morrison. “Grandma had a 1916 edition of an Australian bird book by JA Leach, which I now own.” His interest was increased, he says, by looking through this book “on every visit to Grandma.”

He now aspires to become a member of the ‘600 Club’ and is a self-confessed twitcher. His favourite sighting is the powerful stoop of Peregrine Falcon.

Alec’s previous achievements in the world of sport did not blend well with birdwatching. “I was more interested in ducks in cricket then,” he laughs.

To spread the word (about birding and conservation) he has written articles for SunBOCA and BOCA publications and given talks to field naturalist clubs and native plant groups as well as running a beginners course.

A horticulturist before retirement, this keen devotee has acquired a wide knowledge of native plants because “they go hand in glove with each other.”

Written by Leonie Robbins from answers to questionnaire 25 May 2004