

Barbara Longmuir

Tireless enthusiast

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Getting up early enough to have 'breakfast with the birds' does not hold any terrors for long-serving BOCA office-bearer Barbara Longmuir. These popular events start at 7.30 am for the public, but very much earlier for the organiser. They entail much prior work, yet have been only one facet of Barbara's work for BOCA. Joining the club in 1974 "to learn about birds and to get the chance to see as many Australian birds as I could", Barbara rates her current (April 2004) tally of 658 birds high on her personal achievement list. But, she says, finding a Black Grasswren for renowned BOCA birdman Fred TH Smith came close to the top.

Her interest in birds began in childhood when she earned 'sixpence' (about five cents) a week for feeding the birds in the five backyard aviaries kept by her father and grandfather. For her tenth birthday, Barbara recalls, her father gave her Leach's bird book.

Barbara has worked hard and long for BOCA - as President from 1988-91 (with Alan Couper, Treasurer and Alma Mitchell, Secretary), as a Council (now Board) member, with the Australian Bird Environment Foundation (ABEF) with Pat Bingham and the late Keith Richards and on the Melbourne Branch committee.

She has led outings, organised dinners and the BOCA 2000 celebrations as well as the highly successful 'Breakfast with the Birds' programmes, most recently held at Banyule Flats wetlands reserve in Heidelberg, a just- east-of-Melbourne suburb, in conjunction with Boroondara Council. "I have always like to be involved and to help run things. Birding has been such a bonus to me, an interest and hobby I hope to be involved with for many more years."

Barbara believes the 1991 change of status, and name, of the then Bird Observers Club and the employment of a club manager to have been of great importance in the club annals and has enjoyed seeing the subsequent increase in branches and membership. "I was able to convince the Council members that the club needed a paid manager and I was in the chair when it (BOC) became 'Bird Observers Club of Australia' (BOCA)."

Prior to joining, Barbara had joined a 1972 Adult Education programme on birdwatching for beginners led by the late Howard Jarman, a BOCA stalwart who encouraged her to join the club.

"I went to monthly meetings in the city (at Chalmer's Hall) sat at the back and left early, but also went to lectures at the (Melbourne) Museum where I was first introduced - by Howard - to Fred TH Smith. Years later, on my first BOCA trip Fred asked me to be 'his shadow' - the start of a never-ending learning curve."

At those early meetings, she says, the late Rex Buckingham presided. "May Dawkins ran the 'sales table' then and always had a friendly smile." The sales table, a popular club revenue producer at many later monthly meetings, eventually became a Longmuir responsibility. From the start Barbara has regarded every new bird seen as "a wonder" but

says fairy wrens remain her favourite, although she says every outing seems to produce a 'highlight' bird. "I like wrens because they are always busy and have interesting lifestyles".

She believes it was easier to see more bush birds in earlier times. "Now you see more ravens, currawongs, butcherbirds and kookaburras - all predators of small birds."

Despite exceeding the sought-after 600 species, her sense of wonder is still keen. "The excitement of seeing a bird new to me nearly makes me drop my binoculars."

On that first trip Fred Smith talked her into keeping her own Australian birdlist. "It has taken me years and hundred of kilometres to reach 658 but hours of purest enjoyment."

Barbara may regret the diminishing numbers of swamps and wetlands around Melbourne, but she retains hope for the future. "Parks are slowly developing into good bird habitat as years pass so more and more birds seem to be returning to the metropolitan areas."

Her work for ABEF began as Secretary, sending out application forms for funding. Her early secretarial training was of much value in her club work. "We sat around for lots of meetings to decide on the recipients for each year's funding and working out the role of ABEF within the club.

This work, she says, was a way of involving communities in the protection of the environment on behalf of birds. "Small grants were often the start of very successful programmes."

Barbara has also played an active part in publicity for BOCA and has been a popular member of the club's Speakers Panel. She has visited many nursing homes, hostels, libraries, service clubs and schools where her knowledge of local birds and smiling enthusiasm attracted audiences.

"Ellen McCulloch used to do most of the early talks, but as she eased off I did more. She has been a public face for the club from before 1974 until 2002. Her knowledge of birds, plants and all nature has been reproduced for the public in her books as well as in the many articles she has written and in her radio programmes. She was also a great help to me if things got difficult."

As a BOCA Council member Barbara made it her business to read all prior committee minutes. "I dealt with other clubs and with joint committees and other groups like Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (RAOU, now Birds Australia), Aviculturists and the Gould League. The monthly meetings of that time were held in the AMP building in the city."

Birding has lead Barbara to travel world-wide. She has visited India, Nepal, Africa and South America as well as many areas within Australia.

Her activity as a guide for Melbourne Zoo has increased her appreciation of birds as well as butterflies and plants. She has played tennis and golf in her 'spare time'. "Birding was good on the golf course. My ball usually ended in the bushes," she laughs.

When asked about the importance of her work for birds and birding, Barbara is characteristically modest. "My only achievement has been interesting many members of the public in the birds that can be found in our environment. Hopefully some of them have become BOCA members.

“BOCA is such a great club to belong to, with many varied activities available for members to choose from, friendly staff and members. It is a club that works for the environment, for birds and for its members.”

Written by Leonie Robbins from questionnaire 23 April 2004.