

BIRDS OF WAITE ARBORETUM AND WAITE CONSERVATION RESERVE

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PART 1

The birds of the Waite Arboretum (WA) and the Waite Conservation Reserve (WCR) are typical of those in the open areas of suburban Adelaide and the grazed foothills. Several observers have documented their records: J. Saunders (1983), J. Saunders (1995) and B.C. and B. Crisp (1994). In addition J. Gardner has unpublished records from the WA by herself from May 1986 to October 1986, by R. Pearce from May 1987 to March 1988 and I. R. Falconer dated 1963 and from the WCR by P. Taylor from November 1993 to February 1994.

S. Field (2000) proposes that visitors to the WA and WCR record their bird observations to support the monitoring of long term changes in the avifauna of the Mt Lofty Ranges. Record Sheets and a map of the WA are available from J. Gardner and a brochure, available at Urrbrae House, will assist visitors to the WCR. Visitors should not believe that the recording of currently common species is pointless, as such species may be tomorrow's conservation disasters, eg the Passenger Pigeon in the USA. In this respect, it is important to note that J. Saunders recorded 55 species between 1972 and 1981 in the WA with the total declining to 37 between 1990 and 1995.

This article, in two parts, discusses the bird species in a manner that assists the casual bird-watcher; Part 1 discusses the species commonly recorded and Part 2, the species less likely to be observed. The use of one of the recent field guides, Simpson and Day, Slater or Pizzey is recommended. The more recent field guides have more informative illustrations.

For the serious student there are identification aids in the form of cassette tapes of bird calls and compact disks with descriptive information, illustrations and calls.

I have divided the bird species into communities that have a common habitat use:

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|------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Water and wetland species | 2. Raptors |
| 3. Aerial feeders | 4. Ground |
| 5. Nectar feeders | 6. Warblers |
| 7. Leaf and bark gleaners | 8. Generalists. |

Water and wetland species

The watercourse and one small dam plus its overflow drain in the WA attract a few water birds and wetland species. Most commonly seen are the Pacific Black Duck and the Australian Wood Duck, the former more likely to be on or near water, filtering the shallows for seeds of grasses, sedges and other aquatic plants, occasionally feeding on worms, grubs and other animal matter. The latter, always near water, but ranging more widely over pasture land, feeds on fresh grass and legumes. Both are regular breeders in the WA. Many of the apparent Pacific Black Duck are really hybrids with the European Mallard.

Raptors

Raptors are not commonly observed in the WA or the WCR; they are discussed in Part 2.

Aerial feeders

The only common dedicated aerial feeder in the WA is the Welcome Swallow, which also breeds there and probably in the WCR. The Grey Fantail is another aerial feeder that has the unusual, but effective, feeding mode of flitting erratically around the vegetation (often high in the canopy of tall trees) presumably to disturb the flying insects upon which it preys. This species is not common in the WA but is readily recorded in the WCR.

Other species likely to be observed feeding on flying insects using the hawking mode of capture, are the honeyeaters, mainly the New Holland Honeyeater, although the European Starling has been observed using this feeding mode.

Ground Feeders

Because of the large food source provided on both grassy and apparently bare ground, a large number of species utilise this habitat. Some eleven species of this community are easily observed. Most common in the WA are the: Australian Magpie, Galah, Long-billed Corella, Crested Pigeon, Spotted Turtle-Dove, Feral Pigeon, Adelaide Rosella, Eastern Rosella, Red-rumped Parrot, Masked Lapwing, House Sparrow, Common Blackbird, European Starling and Magpie Lark. The Long-billed Corella, Magpie Lark (often called Peewee or Murray Magpie) and Masked Lapwing are less common in the WCR. The two wetland species mentioned above could also be classed as ground feeders.

The cockatoos and parrots mainly feed on grass roots and rhizomes in the wet seasons and fruit, grain and grass seeds in the dry. In recent years, the Long-billed Corella has visited since 1987 in gradually increasing numbers, exploiting the tubers of the nut grass in the WA. Other foods utilised by the cockatoos and parrots are onion grass, corms and bulbs of sedges, rushes and pasture weeds. The Crested Pigeon, House Sparrow, Spotted Turtle-Dove and Feral Pigeon (the latter three being introduced species) are basically seed-eaters, all being also attracted by scraps of food.

The Common Blackbird, introduced from Europe and common in the WA and the WCR, is a ground feeder that is well acclimatised to Australian bushland, probably displacing the, now rare, White's Thrush. The Magpie Lark, a common trusting species in towns and cities has been a taxonomic difficulty until recently when DNA analysis placed it amongst the wagtails. It will become very tame in the presence of humans. It is always near water, feeding in muddy areas or pasture on small insects or scraps of human food.

One ground feeder, common in the WCR and occasionally recorded in the WA is the Yellow-rumped Thornbill. It is a widely distributed species spending most feeding time on the ground, mainly in short grass near Adelaide, but on nearly bare ground in arid areas. It is easily identified by its 'chip-chip' contact call when flying.

Nectar feeders

Although there are a large number of nectar feeding honeyeaters in South Australia, only a few have been observed in the WA and none of those in large numbers. They are the New Holland Honeyeater and the Red Wattlebird (quite common in the WCR, but less so in the WA) and are usually seen feeding on the eucalypt blossom and insect material gleaned from leaves. In contrast, flocks of Rainbow and Musk Lorikeets (the Musk in smaller numbers) are commonly seen feeding on eucalypt blossom, in both the WA and the WCR, using the nectar for energy and the pollen for protein. The two lorikeets will also take fruit when available and, occasionally, insects.

Leaf and/or bark gleaners

Many Australian species feed on insects and leaf-eating grubs as well as insects, spiders, etc. inhabiting both the smooth and rough bark of the eucalypts. Some of these birds are medium sized birds such as the honeyeaters and the whistlers and other are smaller and commonly termed warblers, eg the fairy-wrens, thornbills, scrubwrens and chats. However, this community seems to shun regions well separated from native vegetation, so none are common in the WA. One exception to this rule is the Striated Pardalote, so I am surprised that it is not common in the WA. J. Saunders (1982) remarked that this species was periodically recorded from August to December, but declined in the 1980s.

The species commonly recorded in the WCR are the: Striated Pardalote, Weebill, Superb Fairy-wren and White-browed Scrubwren. The former two usually inhabit the upper canopy of eucalypts while the latter two inhabit low dense shrubs with the Superb Fairy-wren often venturing out onto bare or grassy ground, provided the grass is sparse or low. The White-browed Scrubwren is more secretive, rarely venturing into open shrubbery or onto the ground, so it is difficult to record unless the scolding call is recognised. The Weebill has the interesting and diagnostic habit of gleaning insects or caterpillars while hovering near the leaf canopy and is almost never observed feeding on the ground.

Generalists

Some species of birds can only be classed as 'generalists' in that they exploit a variety of habitats and are catholic in their choice of food. Some of these species have this characteristic in their native habitat being wide ranging and so exploiting a wide range of foods, eg the Little Raven which is commonly observed in the WA and WCR. Note that there are five corvids in Australia almost identical in appearance with the Little Raven which is the common species around south-eastern Australia.

Other species have acquired the 'generalist' character by association with man, eg the Pacific Black Duck, Noisy Miner, House Sparrow and Australian Magpie. Most of these species are very wary away from man, eg the Noisy Miner (taxonomically, a honeyeater) and the Australian Magpie will alarm when man is sighted at a distance of hundreds of metres, but become very tame when continually associating with man, particularly when food scraps are available.

Other species in this community commonly seen in the WA and in adjacent parts of the Waite Campus are the: Crested Pigeon, Spotted Turtle-Dove, House Sparrow and Magpie Lark. The Grey Currawong, only common in the WCR, has not acquired this 'generalist' character there but, if the picnic sites were used, it soon would.

References

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