



FAUNA

MONITORING FOR THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

Wayne and Desraé Clarke



WHENEVER we visited our 'block' in Toodyay, purchased in late 1984, we were constantly accompanied by a treasure chest of birds. While digging the driveway, a task that took three years of weekends, it was wonderful to be frequently attended by robins, magpies, weebills and a host of other birds fossicking in the soil in front of the shovel. When the 'Birds on Farms' project commenced we were very keen to become involved, to gain an understanding of the bird diversity.

A notation of birds, including where we had sighted them, was made in our handbooks when we moved to live on the property in 1989. Our involvement with the Toodyay community became rather extensive and it was soon evident that, to keep up with the administration, a computer was needed. It was around that time that the decision was made to undertake the recording of 'daily birds' and a database was set up for this purpose. We have been recording birds on a daily basis ever since.

How we went about it was quite simple. A spreadsheet was designed, and all the birds entered that we have ever recorded on our property and two small neighbouring farms. A daily single sheet with the names of all these birds, the date, weather and comments was developed, leaving a few extra boxes for new species (this has proved to be extremely important), and then

about thirty double-sided sheets were photocopied for future use. As we see or hear birds, on a daily basis, we place a pencil mark next to the particular box. After the sheets have been filled, we enter them into the database, and erase all the pencil marks, dates, etc, to re-use the sheets.

The result is a database that reveals some extremely interesting patterns in bird movement, both seasonal and circumstantial, with over seventy bird species being recorded in the last nineteen years. We have been lucky - we don't work full-time, so we are often around the home. Neither is particularly interested in radio and television, so our home is relatively quiet. We have learnt over the years to 'see birds with our ears', as many of their sounds are easily recognisable. While compiling this article, the sounds of at least six different birds are quite audible. Another area of observing and learning has been deciphering the variety of sounds one species of bird may have on different occasions while fossicking, preening, courting or in alarm.

Monitoring in this way has highlighted some interesting patterns. For instance, when the various species arrive and leave with their migratory patterns, like the Rainbow Bee-eaters and the Pallid Cuckoos, or the effect that drought or excessive rains may have in moving birds from their normal areas of habitat - with the recent

drought conditions, the Toodyay area saw an influx of many White Necked Herons, a bird not seen generally in this Shire. A few years ago, the Splendid Fairy Wrens disappeared from the shrubbery around our home for approximately four years. It was after looking back over our records that we realised that this disappearance coincided with the arrival, and nesting immediately behind the house, of the Grey Butcherbird. Fork-tailed Swifts arrived one afternoon, just prior to a cyclone; these species have been recorded twice on our property since we have lived here. These and other sightings form patterns that may one day be extremely important to science. CSIRO (through Denis Saunders and other scientists) highlight the fact that birds are a critical indicator species of the health of any area, but specifically our fragile wheatbelt district.

Not everyone may have the time to undertake this type of monitoring, but we did want to share the tremendous satisfaction we have gained from compiling our database, the great excitement when we find something new and the tremendous pleasure we gain from being with 'our daily birds'.

Wayne and Desraé would be prepared to send a template of their database to anyone interested. Phone on (08) 9574 5574 or email wccclarke@westnet.com.au