

CAPE CHATTER

Nature Observations around The Cape

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We are building up to a full moon this Friday 29th January. This was a photo of the last one on 29th December 2020.

The Cape is on the traditional land
of the Bunurong people

*"When we tug at a single thing in nature,
we find it attached to the rest of the
world..." John Muir*

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The feelings of an empty nester ...

Well, well, well! I am at a bit of a loss at the moment. I am sad, but probably should be elated! It appears our *Eastern Rosellas* have left the nesting box placed in the most southern tree stag in the creek line.

I am pretty sure if there were any fledglings, it occurred sometime on 24th January, the day after the last sighting of the adults feeding at the box. I am still seeing the adults and one other bird (possibly an offspring from last year) coming and going from the nearby coastal reserve but I am yet to see any juvenile birds in the nearby bush. The appearance of a pair of *Black-shouldered Kite* the other day brought two adult *Rosellas* to the top of some nearby Swamp Paperbark, alarmed, looking out, so I am taking that observation as there are juvenile bird(s) nearby. Read more about this event in the next few pages.

A really good Latham's Snipe survey result ...

A huge thanks to fellow residents Jeannie Hartney, Gabi Tennison and Joe Spano for donning the gumboots and trudging through the wild wetland environments last Saturday for our final survey of the summer ... and what a great result.



For those new to 'Chatter', the *Latham's Snipe* (pictured above) is a migratory bird from northern Japan/NE Russia that flies 10,000 kms to spend summer in southern Australia, some calling **The Cape** home. They are listed as **VULNERABLE** to extinction. The birds are very cryptic, very wary and roost (laying doggo) during the day in grassy, marshy areas, coming out to feed at dusk and dawn.

Each year we survey **The Cape** area and last Saturday got our best result to date – **eleven (11)** birds! Eight (8) birds were flushed out from the natural wetland area in the south east, one (1) in the central wetland and two (2) in the 'bog' just off the south of the creekline. Joe nearly stood on one in the bog and was about a metre away before it flew off! We have also been seeing a couple of birds most nights before dark flying off over the mini-oval from the 'bog' to do their nightly feed.

Birds feeding in 'front of the front'

Monday 25th January was a pretty hot day with some northerly winds with a cool change from the south west in the mid-afternoon. Not surprisingly, I was not disappointed to notice two more special international migratory birds high up in the sky (along with *Welcome Swallow* at the lower levels) feeding on insects being pushed along in 'front of the front'. The birds are part of the *Swift* family: *White-throated Needletail* (**THREATENED** with extinction) and the *Fork-tailed Swift*, both migrants to Australia from NE Asia.



Above: *White-throated Needletail*



Above: *Fork-tailed Swift*

Amazingly, it was once thought the *Needletail* flew from its breeding grounds in NE Asia to southern Australia and back again without touching the ground, but it is now known that they roost at night in Australia en-route!

Sorry the pictures are not in detail as these birds fly high and fast – there is only so much the camera and I can do!!

... double trouble – Black-Shouldered Kites in the area

Over the weekend, a pair of striking, *Black-shouldered Kite* (an adult and a juvenile) were feeding around the south west side of **The Cape** and along the creek with the adult using the stag and also some old dead trees on the sand dune ridge as vantage points. These birds are seen often gliding and hovering in flight over the open spaces in search of prey.



Above: Adult, *Black-shouldered Kite* perched on the tree stag, the previous home to our nesting *Eastern Rosella*.

Below: Perched in some dead branches and perusing the open space for its next feed.



They are a stunning bird and reasonably common along our coast. They eat mostly rodents but also insects and small lizards and mainly hunt in the early morning and late afternoon.

BTW, I am starting to see a few *Field/House Mice* around the garden, and they will be trying to get indoors as well!

'Shedding' some news on our local reptiles ...

Lowland Copperheads are still being seen around the wetlands – one is still resident in the drain under the walking track near the Central Wetland (pictured below); future resident Robyn Shallard reported another about 50m nearby (to the north); and Jeannie H nearly stepped on one in the kangaroo resting area (Green Beach) on the western side of the wetland during the Snipe count. So, keep alert!



Our *Blotched Blue-tongue Lizard* (below) has re-appeared in our home garden. It was wandering around on the grass before it got too hot on Monday and ventured off under some vegetation to see out the day!



Interestingly, Alison and Graeme McAlpine found parts of a shed skin of their local 'Bluey' as well which was fascinating to see close up. Lizards shed their skin as they grow (just like snakes). If you look closely at the picture below, you can see the openings for a set of its legs. I wonder how it gets out of its T-shirt??



The main body part of the skin (on the right) appears to have been rolled off – fascinating!

Residents Nathalie and Alec also told me they saw a shed snakeskin near the wetland, but it was gone by the time I got to have a look - probably a *Copperhead*!



I also observed a new species which has been added to our **Cape** fauna list. This tiny skink appears to be a *Southern Water Skink*, pictured in the new creek line near the 'bog'. The new habitat continues to attract!

The Eastern Rosella story so far ...

I am feeling a little deflated that we missed out on witnessing the “possible” first flight of our *Eastern Rosellas*, but at the same time satisfied that we were able to create a habitat situation to assist these beautiful birds.

We have been carefully observing the comings and goings since late October last year, not sure what we were looking for, but happy the box was used with our first attempt. Here is a summary of our observations:



31 Oct 20. The Rosellas began looking for a nesting location in a hollow in a tree stag near the Top Dam.



18 Nov 20. Two nesting boxes are made and placed in tree stags in early Nov and after the pair check both boxes out, the female bird takes up the most southern box closest to the coastal reserve bush.



Dec 20. The birds are seen flying daily between the box and the bush feeding. They are very wary, cautiously returning before the female re-enters the box.



23 Dec 20. Feeding activity begins to increase in intensity and both the male and female are seen entering the box around the same time, indicating there are hatchlings being fed. This activity continues until around 19 Jan 21.



19 Jan 21. Adult birds begin to feed at the opening as well as entering the box. Faint calls are heard from the box and a ‘head’ appeared briefly at the opening.

21 Jan 21. Feeding appears to be happening every 1-1.5 hours both at the opening and inside the box and we see what we believe to be a nestling at the opening.

22 Jan 21. Early morning, three adult looking birds depart the stag (one from the box and two from the stag). Later that day, feeding continues at the box.

24 Jan 21. No activity at the box but two adult birds are observed nearby in the bush and are seen flying back and forth. We are recording this as fledgling day!

I have been researching information about nesting boxes and *Rosellas* but there is not a lot written. Recently, I found a paper by ecologist and great bird photographer **Chris Tzaros** from a study in the Bendigo area in 1991 which may give us some idea of what has, and is, happening now.

Key observations by Chris confirm all our observations to date that we have had a successful take up of the nesting box and breeding. Unfortunately, we have not been able to ascertain how many eggs were laid, how many chicks hatched and how many, if any, have survived.

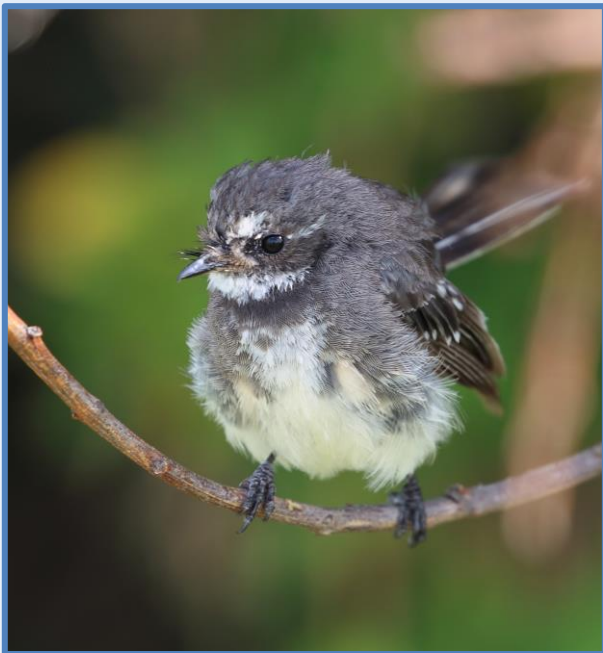
Essentially, we are now looking for evidence of juvenile birds being fed and educated in the nearby coastal scrub over the next few weeks. To date, I have not made any direct observations of that other than the adults still flying into the coastal reserve nearby the stag and their reaction to the *Black-shouldered Kites*. If there is no more contact with the nesting box by the adults, we intend to examine the box by the end of the week to check out the contents.

I will update this story in the next ‘*Chatter*’.

Our local Fantails ...

There are six species of *Fantail* (*Rhipidura*) in Australia, of which only three (*Grey*, *Rufous* and *Willie Wagtail*) reside in our area, and of those three, I have only seen the *Grey* and *Willie Wagtail* in **The Cape** AO.

Last week, I spent about an hour or so photographing a very accommodating *Grey Fantail* (ssp *Rhipidura alisteri*) on the edge of the coastal reserve. These birds can be quite inquisitive and get remarkably close to you if you sit quietly and watch them flitting back and forth, dancing in a looping flight pattern, and catching the occasional insect meal.



The *Grey Fantail* is a summer migrant to our area, breeding, and then moving north and west in the cooler months. The bird pictured left does not appear to be fully mature. Juveniles (pictured below) have russet-brown and buff plumage.



Our other fantail species, the *Willie Wagtail* (*Rhipidura leucophrys*), pictured below, is also growing in numbers within **The Cape**, and is currently being seen in the southern area of the creek line with occasional forays into some nearby Stage 2 home gardens.



The third species of Fantail is the *Rufous Fantail*, which is a stunning bird we are unlikely to see here at **The Cape**, as it is more at home in moist, shaded understorey. But you never know your luck, as it occasionally may passage through our area. I happened to see one recently for the first-time near Mirboo North along the Lyrebird Forest Walk. It is a stunning bird. See a photo on the next page.

The remaining three species will only be seen in northern Australia – the *Mangrove Grey*, *Northern* and *Arafura Fantail*.

Not quite at The Cape ... but ...



Above: *Rufous Fantail* at Mirboo North. I do not make a habit of photographing birds on natural nests but was captivated when this bird landed on a beautifully made nest which I had not noticed suspended 2 meters above a running creek. I could not let the opportunity go!!

Hooded Plover Update – Sad News

Despite a reported four attempts by an adult pair of VULNERABLE *Hooded Plovers* to raise chicks along 2nd Surf Beach, we have received news that the two chicks previously reported on, have not been seen for a week or so and are presumed dead. At this stage, that means no chicks at all this year and it is unlikely the adult birds will attempt another nest. Last breeding season, one chick (pictured below in February 2020) survived and has grown into a healthy looking juvenile (pictured above right in August 2020 behind an adult bird in front).



PLEASE NOTE: I DO HAVE A TELESCOPIC LENS AND DO NOT GET TOO CLOSE TO THESE BIRDS TO DISTURB THEM.

Although there are natural threats to the chicks (including predatory birds/animals), human interference and dogs off leash are the biggest causes of death, despite the signage displayed and efforts by volunteer monitors. It is sometimes a thankless task for these wonderful people.



We can only hope for a better result next year. Unfortunately, their breeding season coincides with the busiest months on our beaches.

‘Knee-deep’ in Frog stuff ...

We have identified seven (7) different frog species to date at **The Cape** and they have been a bit vocal recently. Last Monday evening, family members of resident Robyn Walter went out with torches and managed to see around 27 different frogs along the walking path near the Dog Park and managed to photograph several different species. Robyn, a keen “frogger”, is going to examine the photos to see if there are any new species we haven’t seen before and let us know so we can add them to the list.

Meanwhile, resident Joe Spano recently photographed what he believes to be a *Verreaux’s Frog* (AKA *Whistling Tree Frog*) in his garden on Sunlight Blvd in Stage 1. Thanks Joe!



‘Cape Chatter’ goes to the CPRRA

I was invited to speak to members of the Cape Paterson Residents & Ratepayers Association (CPRRA) AGM last Saturday about the ecological restoration efforts and nature observations around **The Cape**. There is a lot of interest in what is happening and there was very positive feedback about the habitat re-creation efforts and infrastructure. Thank you to Pete Muskens (CPRRA President) for the opportunity to present and share **The Cape’s** nature observations.