



Cape Chatter

Inside this issue:

More Ladybird action 2

More invertebrate action 3

Movin' up the foodchain 4

Bird chatter 5

Local Echidna and Kangaroos 6

Monitoring Blue-winged Parrots 7

‘*Ladybird, Ladybird, fly away home ...*’

It has been a little while since the last *Cape Chatter* ... apologies. *Chatter* has managed to get away north along the eastern Australian coast to see a few migratory waders before they start their very long journeys back to the northern hemisphere for breeding. Our early autumn weather has been extremely dry, unlike those further north where floods have reeked havoc. The dry has had an impact on animal observations at **The Cape**—especially for our birds which have been quite sparse. A recent walk along some nearby remnant coastal bushland failed to see one honeyeater in three hours—a most unusual occurrence around here. Thankfully, some rain over Easter has settled the dust and in the past few days I have seen a flock of nine beautiful *Flame Robins* and heard the nearby calls of the majestic *Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos*, both cool weather visitors to our region, so the seasons have changed and things will hopefully be on the improve for bird watching.

With the end of summer and the vegetable patch going through a change, I have been captivated by invertebrate action among the ‘fading’ vegetation. In particular, an infestation of black aphid has brought a variety of *ladybirds* in to clean up the pest. In the vegetable plot, I have so far discovered four different species of *ladybirds* at work, and managed to picture one about to take off in flight which I was pretty chuffed with!



Above: *Ladybirds* are insect eating beetles from the family *Coccinellidae*, and feed on aphid and scale. They are wonderful natural pest controllers that act as biological control agents to remove unwanted insects from damaged plants. This yellow and black ladybird is less than a centimetre long and comes from the genus *Illeis* and species *galbula*. Their body is domed shape and their flight wings are concealed beneath a hard, shiny outer covering—such exquisite creatures!

More Ladybird action ...



Above: Ladybird *Harmonia conformis*, aka Common Spotted Ladybird. Orange dome body with black spots, its body measures up to a centimetre. It has been busy both in the aphid infested corn and decaying pumpkin vines.



Above: These three creatures are the larvae of the *Ladybird*—from my research, I think they are the larva of the *Harmonia conformis* pictured above.

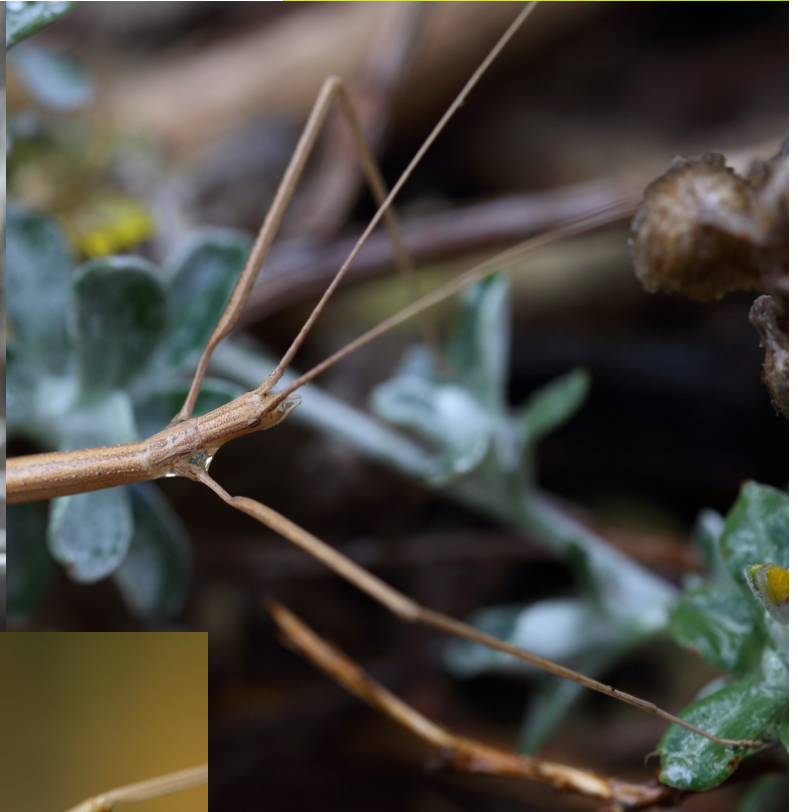


Above: Feeding and mating simultaneously. These ladybirds are *Hippodamia variegata*, and they have distinctive black and white markings on the head. They were busy as well among the corn and pumpkin.

More invertebrate action ...



Left and right: This tiny ladybird is less than 0.5 cm long and was not as common as the larger ladybirds seen in the garden. It is the *Apolinus lividigaster*. The body is more hairy than other ladybirds, predominantly black in colour with yellow neck patches and a red back end.



The Margined-winged Stick Insect (*Ctenomorpha marginipennis*) is one of the strangest insects around and usually very hard to see as they move very slowly, sit still on twigs and leaves, are well camouflaged among the branches of trees and generally is nocturnal. They usually feed on eucalyptus leaves. This specimen was about 9-10 cms in length but they can grow up to 16 cms long.

There have been quite a few sightings of this amazing looking insect in some of the home gardens recently.

Movin' up the food chain ...

We probably won't see many of these guys about now that the weather has started to cool off. Quite a few *Southern Grass Skinks* have enjoyed the gardens over the summer months. These are small skinks which grow to about 12 cm long and they are very agile, usually appearing late in the day to soak up the last rays of sunshine. They are a cold-tolerant species. The breeding males are distinguished in autumn by reddish colouring in the armpit and along the belly. Grass skinks mate in autumn but the female stores the sperm until ovulation in spring!

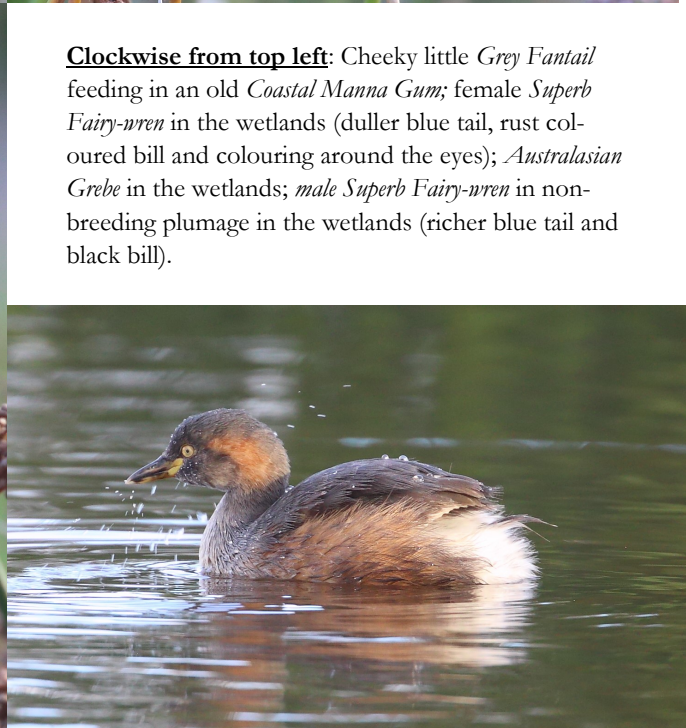


These small skinks, although very agile and usually well hidden, are 'fast food' for our local *Grey Butcherbird*. These birds are skilful hunters and skinks are on the top of the menu. Below is an immature *Grey Butcherbird*, still showing much of its brown colourings which over time will be replaced by white and grey plumage. The bird at bottom left is a bit older (between 1 & 2) and it looks like it is a female by the size of the emerging white loreal spot between the eye and bill.



Bird Chatter ...

Bird sightings have been a little interesting lately—mainly the lack of bird numbers. The very dry autumn conditions may be contributing to this. I have gone back over previous editions of *Chatter* and the observation list and confirm activity is a little down. A recent three hour walk observed not one honeyeater—this includes *Red* and *Little Wattlebirds* and *New Holland Honeyeaters* which are usually in good numbers. *Galah* numbers have been in single digits. The small bird numbers were also down—a couple of *Silvereyes*, one *Brown Thornbill*, one *Eastern Yellow Robin*. Thankfully, the *Superb Fairy-wrens* did not let me down nor the antics of a *Grey Fantail*. In the wetlands, there are increasing numbers of *Dusky Moorhen* with several juvenile birds spotted from a successful breeding season, and *Australasian Swamphen* numbers are on the rise. *Australasian Grebe* are coming and going. The call of the rare and secretive *Lewin's Rail* was also heard a few weeks back. And of course, the *Flame Robin* and *Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos* have arrived right on cue, so keep your eyes out for them.



Clockwise from top left: Cheeky little *Grey Fantail* feeding in an old *Coastal Manna Gum*; female *Superb Fairy-wren* in the wetlands (duller blue tail, rust coloured bill and colouring around the eyes); *Australasian Grebe* in the wetlands; male *Superb Fairy-wren* in non-breeding plumage in the wetlands (richer blue tail and black bill).

Our local Echidna and the prehistoric connection ...

An interesting article in *Australian Geographic* recently about the evolution of the *Short-beaked Echidna* and its origins in Antarctica. The *Echidna* is one of only two surviving monotremes or egg-laying mammals, the other being the *Platypus*. The Cape Paterson coastline is a treasure trove of fossils from the Early Cretaceous period 130 million years ago. One fossil found was the jaw bone of a small monotreme, *Teinolophos trusleri*, which used an electro-sensory beak-like appendage to probe for prey beneath the snow, which scientist now believe was the ancestor of our modern day *Echidna*. So these strange little creatures you see today wandering around our area have sort of gone full circle on quite a journey from their evolutionary origins in the South Pole to Cape Paterson via New Guinea! You can read the full article here: <https://www.australiangeographic.com.au/news/2022/03/stunning-breakthrough-the-platypus-and-echidnas-came-from-the-south-pole/>



The future of our local Kangaroos ...

I often get asked what is the future of our local *Kangaroo* population as the final stages of **The Cape** development take shape with further loss of grazing habitat. The short answer is I do not know, but I am hopeful they will remain and adapt to the conditions.

A sobering article in *Australian Geographic* - see <https://www.australiangeographic.com.au/news/2022/03/landlocked-kangaroos-trapped-by-urban-sprawl-have-nowhere-left-to-go/> looks at the impact urbanisation and development is having on our native animal populations and it is not a pretty picture.

However, at **The Cape**, extensive areas of habitat have been retained for wildlife and the adjoining Yallock-Bulluk Park offers dispersal and feeding areas as well. By my reckoning, there is a core mob of about 60 kangaroos seen regularly within the estate—it has reduced a little over the last couple of years. Their numbers will fluctuate in accordance with feeding and breeding conditions and the impact of the development. Our human interactions and behaviours are also important factors. There are numerous signs around the estate explaining how to interact, and if everyone follows this guidance, we 'hope' the mob will be able to adapt to the changing conditions.



There has also been some local talk around the dry conditions and the impact this has on *Kangaroos*. Some expert advice was sought from Zoos Victoria on this. In summary, the advice was: in harsh conditions, kangaroos will control their breeding. They will generally not eat your garden plants, they are grazers who prefer grass. They may sometimes eat bark for nutrition—but this is not common. Ideally kangaroos should be able to disperse freely in search of food. Young males, as they get older, will often be pushed out of the group and need to be able to disperse also. They need to be able to roam freely!!

Blue-winged Parrot monitoring ...

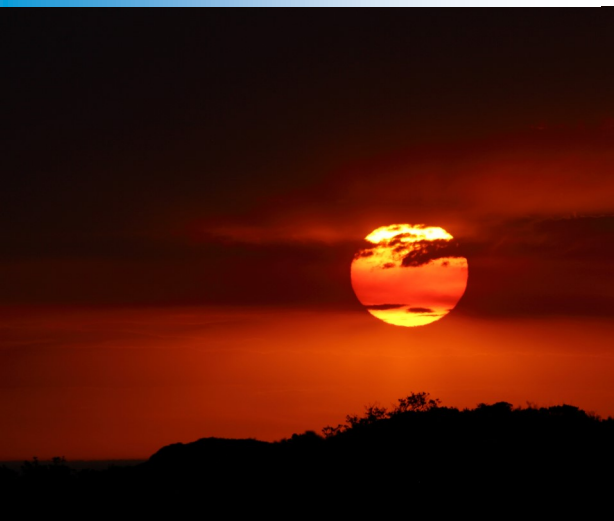
It appears *Blue-winged Parrots* are on a similar path as the more famous, critically endangered, *Orange-bellied Parrot*, to which it looks very similar. Not a lot is known about them and they have now been listed as a vulnerable species. Birdlife Bass Coast is starting a project to monitor these ground feeding parrots in an effort to prevent their demise and habitat loss, as the Bass Coast is one of their favoured habitat areas and they do move through this area particularly during the autumn-winter period. I have volunteered to do a monthly survey plus any other observations as they occur. If you are interested and a keen bird observer, I am happy to receive any observations you may have and send the survey form in on behalf of **The Cape**. They are interested in flock size, date/time, the type of habitat they were seen in, what they were feeding on, and whether they were on the ground, on a fence or in a tree. If you would like any other information, get in touch with me through the *Cape Chatter* website.



These photos of *Blue-winged Parrots* were taken at **The Cape** on 29 August 2020. They are about the size of a *budgerigar*, and mainly ground feeding birds eating seeds from herbaceous and grass-like plants. They travel in flocks—this flock comprised six birds.



Nature Observations around The Cape



The Cape is on the traditional land of the Bunurong people

The ***Cape Chatter*** blog is a periodic newsletter produced by resident of **The Cape**, David Hartney. You can subscribe to receive it automatically by email by visiting <https://capechatter.com> and signing up. The website also contains all sorts of nature information and pictures of the ecology, flora and fauna at **The Cape**.

All photos shown in ***Cape Chatter*** are taken by David Hartney unless otherwise credited.

Feel free to contact David by email or through the website to report any nature observations at **The Cape**.

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