



Cape Chatter

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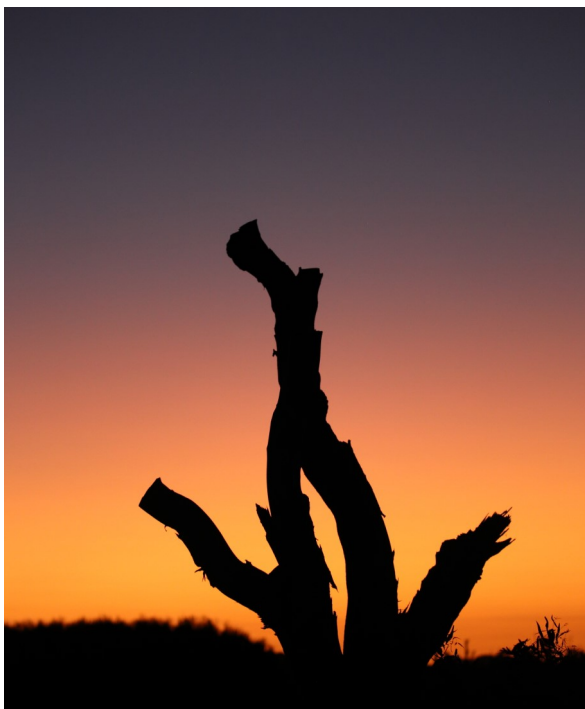
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Beautiful autumn weather with stunning sunset colours have been part of the natural highlights of the past week. Given we are in the middle of autumn, this weeks theme is built around the red, rufous and orange tones of some of our fauna ... and what could be better than a flock of *Flame Robins* to set the scene! Last *Cape Chatter*, I reported the observation of a small flock of nine *Flame Robins*—well they are still about near the central wetland complex and nearby coastal scrub. Thank you to residents Wendy and Brian at the southern end of Sunlight Blvd for giving me the tip they were still about, and I spent nearly an hour watching these insectivores pounce on their prey in the open grasslands from their perches on the fences and shrubs surrounding the wetland. The flock consists of several ‘flame’ coloured males and about six of the more subdued, sandy brown coloured females. A wonderful, bright sight!

And what beautiful sunset skies to help us reflect on, and commemorate our ANZACs over the long weekend just gone by ...



Above: “At the going down of the sun We will remember them”. **Lest We Forget.**



Above: One of the beautifully coloured male *Flame Robins* perched on a *Coastal Banksia* tree ready to pounce on an insect in the nearby grass.

More on the Flame Robins ...



Flame Robin (Petroica phoenicea), is one of three *Robin* species we have observed around **The Cape**—the other two being the *Scarlet Robin* and *Eastern Yellow Robin*. *Flame* and *Scarlets* are migratory, spending time here during the cooler months, while the *Eastern Yellow* is a resident species at **The Cape** throughout the year. I have seen the *Flames* here until around late August in the season.

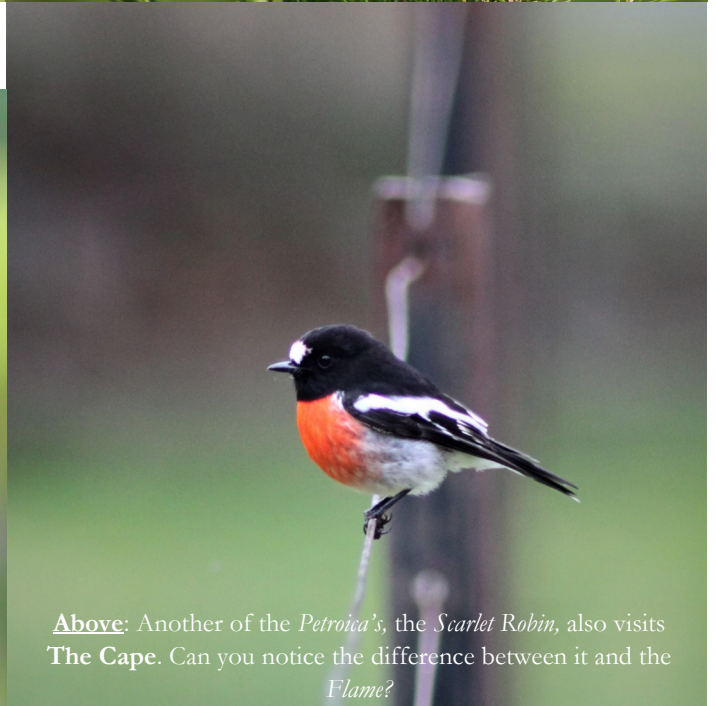
The *Flame* is the only *Robin* of the brightly coloured *Petroica* family to flock and can form groups of up to 20 birds. They weigh in at about 15 grams and have a more slender appearance than the other *Petroica*'s. During summer, they will return to nearby hills and the high country to breed, while others cross Bass Strait to nest in Tasmania. So where this particular flock is from is uncertain—but who knows – they may have done the flight over those treacherous waters, just like the tiny *Silvereye (Zosterops lateralis)* - pictured below—which is about the same size.



Above: Top picture is the stunning male *Flame Robin*, and below is the sandy-brown coloured female.



Above: The resident *Eastern Yellow Robin*.



Above: Another of the *Petroica*'s, the *Scarlet Robin*, also visits **The Cape**. Can you notice the difference between it and the *Flame*?

Flashes of red amongst the swamp ...

At the southern end of the central wetland complex, the “filtered” water from the wetlands leaves that system and finds its way into a lovely swamp containing *Swamp Paperback* and a range of herbaceous plants and sedges. This is a thick, permanently wet vegetative area and is largely impenetrable, and therefore we are not privy to what is lurking in there. But, if you sit or wander past quietly, you can hear the calls of many different birds going about their daily business, including freshwater species and lots of bush birds. While photographing the *Flame Robins*, a small flock of beautiful *Red-browed Finch* dropped in for a quick feed and drink in the flowing trickle of water emerging from the wetlands—another flash of red among the green.



The *Red-browed Finch* is another small bird that works in flocks—usually in groups of about 20 birds during the autumn and winter. They are ground foraging birds, which will dart to nearby shrubs if disturbed.

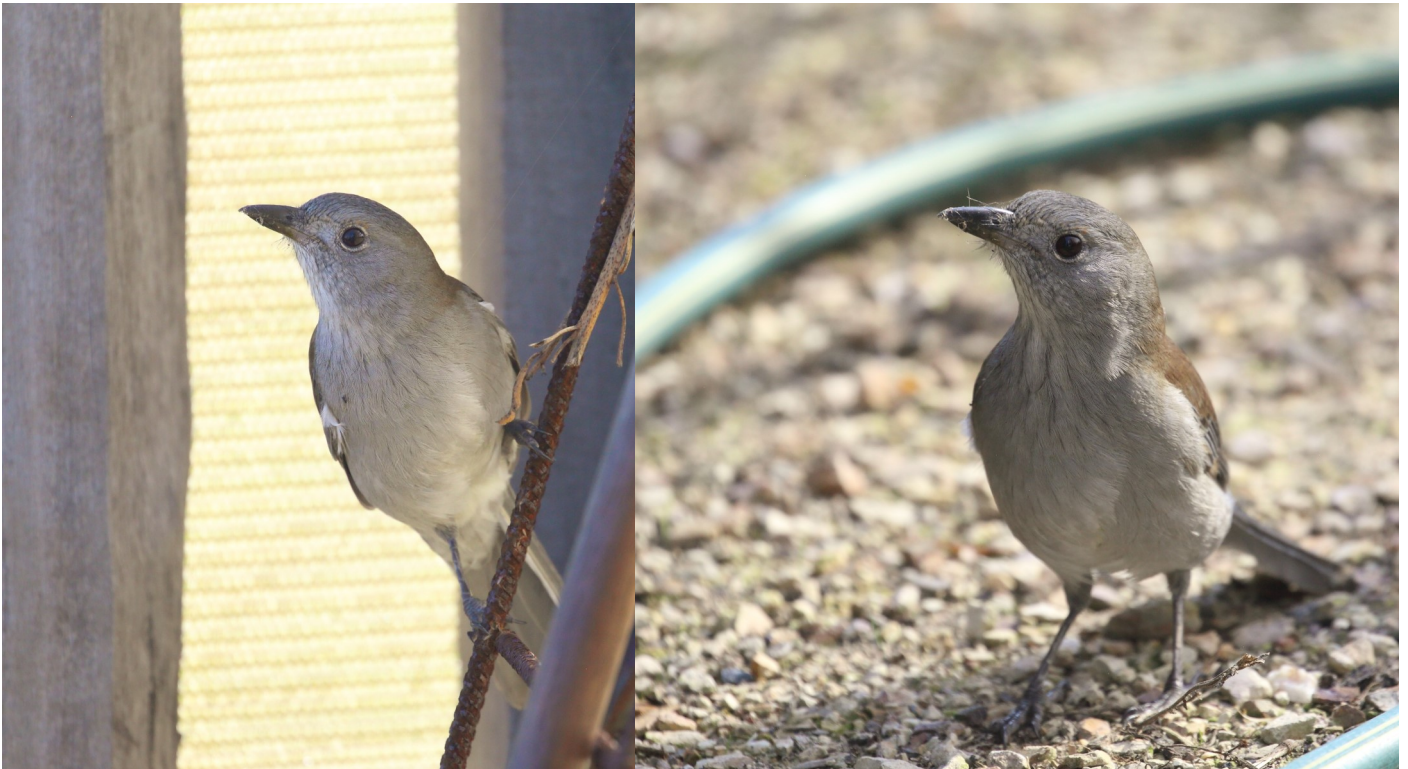
Another common occurrence of birds flocking is the concept of “mixed flocks”. You will often see groups of different small birds feeding on insects and moving through the scrub together. Along with the *Red-browed Finch*, you can often see a few *Superb Fairy-wrens*, as was the case with this observation, as well as *Brown Thornbills* and *White-browed Scrub-wren* together ... and of course, the very inquisitive *Grey Fantail* is usually not too far away and joins in on the action.

Below from Left: While the bright blue breeding male *Fairy-wren* normally catches our eyes, the female is a lovely bird with a rich red-brown bill and rufous coloured eye ring. They are gorgeous dainty birds. The *Brown Thornbill* (bottom right) has a rufous forehead and a dark red iris in the eye. These small birds (weigh about 7 grams) are extremely quick at flying in and amongst the scrub after insects!



A surprise visitor in the backyard garden ...

I am increasingly excited by the variety of birds starting to explore our home garden—which just shows if you plant a diverse garden with good layers of protective native plants providing food and shelter, the birds will come. This week, one of my favourite bush songsters, the *Grey Shrike-thrush*, made a surprise brief appearance in our vegetable patch area. These birds are normally seen and heard in the bush where they glean insects and spiders from tree branches, and occasionally they will probe leaf litter for food. This particular bird spent most of its time in our garden on the ground, cocking its head in its distinctive style, listening for prey, much like Magpies do! They have the most wonderful song call. They are grey-brown in colour, with a distinctive rusty-brown saddle on the back and rufous edges to the wings. Based on the black bill colour and streaky patches on the breast, I am thinking this is an immature male, probably in its second year. (**Source:** *The Australian Bird Guide* [CSIRO Publishing])



Splashes of red around the wetlands ...

The *Australasian Swamphens* are settling in at **The Cape** and appear to be enjoying not only the wetlands, but wandering far and wide into the *Latham's Snipe* bog and up the creek line to forage. Apart from their colourful blue and black plumage, they have distinctive red eyes, and a prominent red bill and frontal shield.



Another Ladybird species found in the garden ...

Amazing what you can find if you keep looking. The *ladybirds* are still cleaning up the black aphid in our corn patch. After reporting four species in last *Chatter*, I managed to find another species this week—a reddish-orange and black ladybird which at first I thought was a *Hippodamia variegata*. It is in fact a *Coccinella undecimpunctata*!! Well there you go! That makes five different species seen in the one patch—and I only ever thought there were two - yellow & black and red & black ladybirds—just like the chocolate ones!!



Above: Ladybird #5. *Coccinella undecimpunctata*. It has slightly different white markings on the head and thorax to the *Hippodamia*!

Source: Field Guide to the Insects of Tasmania website. <https://tasmanianinsectfieldguide.com/>

Meanwhile, more rusty/red 'things' in the home garden ...



I have not been able to positively identify these two species pictured above but both are quite striking specimens. On the left is a stunning 'hairy' caterpillar with a golden/yellow streak running down the middle of its body and a rusty coloured head and legs. The water droplets came from my home garden spray—which is how I noticed it when it moved! On the right is a native wasp. I think it is a type of *Ichneumon* Wasp, possibly from the sub-family *Banchinae*. Photos taken handheld with my Canon DSLR 5D Mk3 and 100mm macro lens.

More red/rusty coloured “things” in the home garden ...

Most of the time, we focus on the big things in nature: big sparring kangaroos, large soaring birds in the skies and forget that there is a whole important tiny ecosystem at work before our eyes, but which we do not pay too much attention because they are such small components of our natural world. But they all have an important role to play in the environment—as pollinators, pest controllers, recyclers and so on ... and some of these creatures have such wonderful structures, appearances and colours ... it's a whole new, marvellous world.

I am fascinated by this tiny (micro) world emerging in our evolving environment at **The Cape**: where do some of these creatures come from; what is their role; what attracts them; how do they find this spot in the world? I do not have any of the answers, but remain amazed and captivated by their beauty. So the macro lens will be coming out a bit more to explore further beauties from the depths of the gardens, wetlands and natural bush.



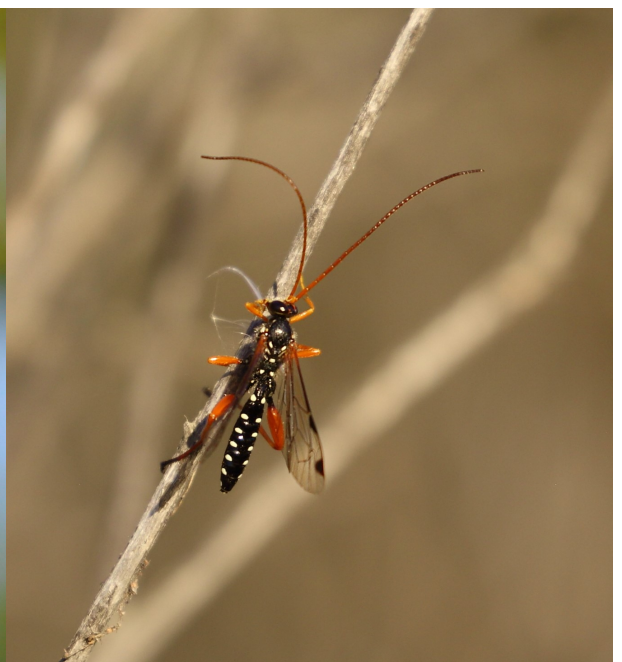
Above: *Jumping Spider*



Above: *Wasp (Cryptinae Stiromesostenus)*



Above: *Damselfly*



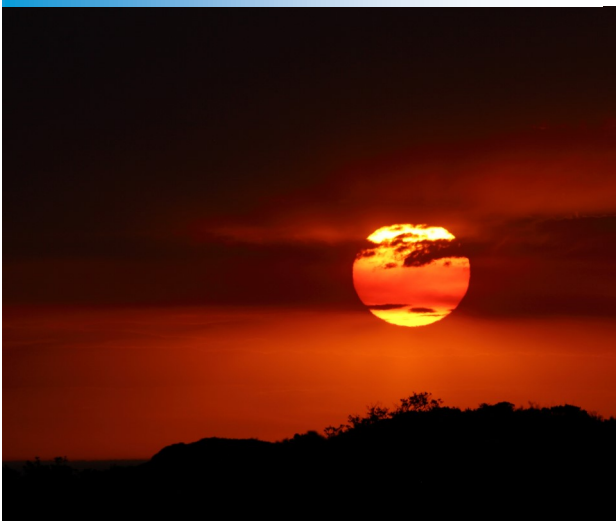
Above: *Cream-spotted Ichneumon Wasp*

And finally, our beloved Hooded Plovers ...

We could not celebrate the colour 'red' without mentioning the wonderful little *Hooded Plover* with its distinctive red eye rings and partial red bill. The season's breeding results for our Bass Coast region (San Remo to Inverloch) are being finalised, but it looks like 11 birds fledged, compared to five last year, which is a good result. Unfortunately, our section of the coast at Cape Paterson failed to have a Hoodie fledge for the second year running—a pair of chicks hatched at 2nd Surf and one suspected near F Break, and at Pea Creek, a breeding pair had seven nesting attempts with 17 eggs and not one hatched. A very sad result for our bit of coastline.



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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