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## Nature Observations around The Cape



## Cape Chatter

### *Snakes, sap and native rodents ...*

This issue of *Cape Chatter* highlights a new snake species identified in **The Cape**, a *Coastal Wattle* that is providing an endless source of energy to our small birds and invertebrates, and the world of local rodents— there have been plenty of sightings of them over recent weeks.

### *The White-lipped Snake*

An addition to our snake population of *Lowland Copperheads* and *Red-bellied Blacks*, a *White-lipped Snake* was observed in the south east of **The Cape** recently. The specimen was spotted in a tussock of grass quietly going about it's business. It is a small species of venomous snake, endemic to south east mainland Australia and Tasmania, and notably Australia's most cold-tolerant snake, even inhabiting areas on Mount Kosciuszko above the snow line. Growing to only about 50 cm in total length, this snake feeds almost exclusively on skinks and skink eggs. They are very shy snakes, so this was a treat to see it out and about and staying out long enough for me to get a couple of quick photos!





## *Like 'bees to a honey pot' ... the attraction of wattle sap!*

This was a birding treat! Just near the Project KOALA mini-forest plots, the branch of a large *Coastal Wattle* has split off and is oozing a bird attracting exudate from the tree where it is damaged. The local *honeyeaters* and *Brown Thornbills* have been queuing to lap up this energy hit along with a few insects (which the birds are ignoring—see pictures below!). I just stood nearby and snapped away with the camera—the birds largely ignoring me. We often think that our *honeyeaters* feed only on nectar, but other food like lerp, insects and exudates form a big part of their diet when the nectar is in limited supply. This one broken branch and it's oozy substance drew in *New Holland*, *White-eared* and *Yellow-faced Honeyeaters*, *Eastern Spinebill* along with many *Brown Thornbill*. I have been watching this procession of birds repeatedly over several days so the sap is still flowing.





## *Native rodent time ... careful what you are trying to get rid of!*

There have been many sightings of native and introduced rodents around **The Cape** over recent weeks with *House Mice* and *Black Rats* reported in gardens, in addition to observations of native *Bush Rat* (thanks to resident Gabi) and *Swamp Rat* in the bush. We also have a newcomer to our species list—a native *Water Rat* spotted near the bottom pond of the central wetland (thanks to resident Jeannie for that observation while keeping an eye on an injured *Kangaroo*). I am no expert in distinguishing *native* rodents from *introduced*, but what I do know is how careful and considered we should be in managing the introduced pests so we are not doing harm to our native species. First though, here is a snapshot of the rat species known to be around **The Cape**.



*Photo for reference by Lizardstomp, Flickr (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0).*

Known by their indigenous name *Rakali*, the *Water Rat* (**pictured left**), is a top freshwater predator, preying on fish, crustaceans, frogs and small land animals.

They are a key indicator of a healthy wetland system along with frogs. *Rakali* are one of Australia's only two amphibious mammals—the *platypus* is the other. They grow to about 60 cm long and being the largest rat in Australia, are useful to have around as they will fight off introduced rats. They live in burrows on the banks of the nearby water source. They are distinguished from introduced rats by their pale belly, mass of whiskers and the white tip on the end of the tail which is what alerted Jeannie. Another indicator of their presence is that they leave piles of shells and small bones where they eat—so keep an out for these along the edge of the creek line and wetlands on your walks.

**Right:** Picture of what is believed to be a dead native *Swamp Rat* found in the south east corner of the estate. The rat is about 10cm long with a tail shorter than its body and with dark legs and feet. *Swamp Rats* are burrowing animals and their handiwork can be seen on the eastern edges of the off-leash dog park—it may also be what has been observed further in the bush where a sensor camera has been placed to see what has been active there.



**Left:** A native *Bush Rat*. These have been seen a few times along the walking path in the estate's south east corner, around and within the dog park. *Bush Rats* are brown and grow up to about 20 cm long with the tail just slightly shorter, and their feet are pinkish—white.



**Pictured left:** In a cage trap is the **introduced** rat, the *Black Rat*. Their fur colour can be black, brown or white, but mainly brown with white underneath. They grow up to 22 cm long with a tail longer than the body/head at about 24 cm.

*And it does not get any easier  
identifying mice!!*



## *Native Mice versus House Mice ...*

This is a real tricky one! Residents Lesley and Peter recently 'saved' what they believed to be a "bush mouse" in their garden which is close to remnant roadside vegetation. Lesley was pretty sure it wasn't a *House Mouse* by the way it moved. Unfortunately, the mouse was drenched, so its colouring was hard to determine. What did stand out were the very pale feet and the large ears when compared to a *House Mouse* (although the ear size may have been distorted by the drenched fur). So it is hard to tell, but if it was a native mouse, it is possibly a *New Holland Mouse*, which are **endangered** in Victoria and are known to be around the area. Rodents are prey for many birds, especially the larger predatory birds (see photos below taken at **The Cape**). So the message is, 'we need to be careful when trying to get rid of so called pesty rodents, particularly in the garden'.

**Right:** Mouse saved by Lesley and Peter ... a very wet specimen! The good news was it survived and later released ... great work by both Lesley and Peter.



## *Advice for managing introduced rodents ...*

If you wish to be more informed:

1. *Birdlife Australia* has some great advice on how to manage rodent pests to limit the damage to our native wildlife.
2. Resources are at: <https://www.actforbirds.org/ratpoison/safe-home-for-birds#free-downloads>
3. Avoid *Second Generation Anticoagulant Rodenticides (SGAR)*: see this link for recommended ways and what products to use: <https://www.actforbirds.org/what-to-buy-and-avoid>



## Other bird action around The Cape ...

Our local winter birds are settling into the cold wintry weather ... but there is still plenty of colour and movement about. Recent highlights overhead were the sight of an adult *White-bellied Sea Eagle* on the northern edge of the estate, a *Brown Falcon* in the south east, and a pair of juvenile *Peregrine Falcons* getting among some *Common Starlings* (which scattered pretty quick in all directions!) Closer to the ground, the *Flame Robins* are providing plenty of colour and movement, I have been charmed by a flock of *Red-browed Finch*, *Eastern Spinebill* are spending many hours in my garden which is a real treat, and the beautiful call of the *Grey Shrike-thrush* is ringing out in the bush. I also spotted a glimpse of the elusive *Spotless Crane* in the south east area and have put a sensor camera in the area to see if we can get an image of it while out feeding!



**Above:** A pair of stunning *Eastern Spinebill*, along with their distinctive piping call, have become daily visitors to my garden, chasing insects among the *Boobialla* bush hedge, and feeding on nectar among the *Woolly Bush* plants and flowering *Correa*.



**Above:** One of my favourite birds, the native *Grey Shrike-thrush*. A pair were gleaning insects from trees/shrubs among the remnant bush in the south east corner of the estate. They have the most beautiful song and according to my bird book: “*it’s pure rhythmic song is a characteristic sound of the Australian bush*” - I couldn’t agree more!

## *A 'charm' of Finch*

Good numbers of *Red-browed Finch* are about at the moment, foraging among the grassy areas of the estate in a 'charm' of around 20-30 birds. When disturbed, these birds take to flight in unison and quickly, creating a loud fluttering sound as they flee off to the safety of nearby bushes, only to re-appear moments later. The only other finch species observed to date at **The Cape** is the *European Goldfinch* which is mainly a warm weather visitor.



**Above:** *Red-browed Finch*—that is one serious looking bird with a good ol' stare off with me as I manoeuvred to get a clearer shot!

## *What a 'Flame' ...*

The beautiful *Flame Robins* are continuing to put on a wonderful show around **The Cape**, with sightings most days in the south east corner, around the central wetlands and the east-west pondage area. Many people are commenting on their presence and delight at seeing them. The female (below left) is a little more drab than the male (below right), but they are equally delightful birds to watch. They are the only flocking *Robin* (*petroica*) in Australia—and a flock is known as a 'blush'.

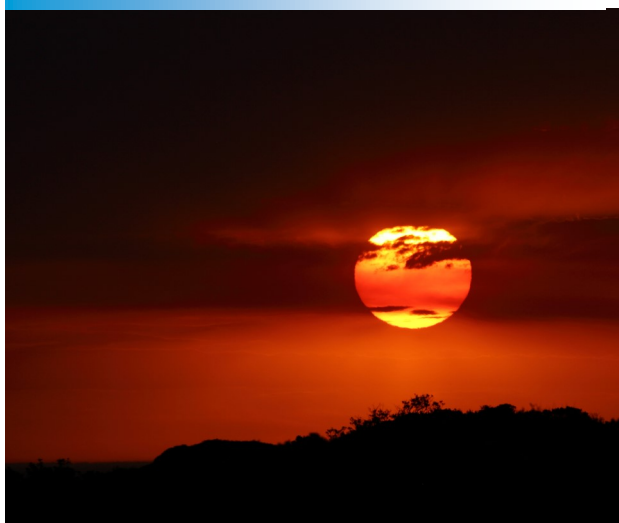




## *Kangaroo antics ... enough said!*



### 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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