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Cape Chatter

Little rays of sunshine ...

The weather has been pretty bleak since last *Chatter* (No. 92), but occasionally ‘little ray(s) of sunshine come into our world’ [Axiom, 1970] and brighten up the day. The sun is getting lower in the sky making the golden hours for photography ideal, if and when the sun breaks through. With a few openings in the clouds, I wasn’t disappointed when a pair of *Chestnut Teal* tolerated my persistence in the east-west chain of ponds to get some nice images of their beautiful plumage in some rare, nice light.



Supplementing the nectar ...

Another recent story in *Chatter* (No. 91) looked at the array of small birds feeding on the sap of a local *Coastal Wattle* tree that had a broken branch, supplementing their diet of invertebrates and nectar as the weather cools. There are a few native plants flowering at the moment providing some nectar for the birds (*Coastal Banksia*, *Correa*, *Coastal Rosemary* and *Woolly Bush* to name a few), but *honeyeaters* will feed on insects and spiders to supplement this nectar food source when not readily available. There is a pair of *Eastern Spinebill* who have become daily visitors to our home garden and while the food is about, our little habitat is on their regular flightpath. They also seem to be handling the constant pressure of evading the larger *Wattlebird* honeyeaters which are territorially aggressive. I recently managed to photograph one of them in the process of catching and digesting a fly (I think it is an *Australian Bushfly*).



The *Eastern Spinebill* has a long down curved bill adapted to extracting nectar. It is the most ‘*hummingbird*’ like looking bird in Australia and it will often “hover” at a flower in quick flight extracting nectar by its specialised ‘brush-tipped’ tongue (see picture bottom right). In this instance, it also reminded me of a *Rainbow Bee-eater*, which catches insects on the ‘wing’, returns to a branch and pulverises/removes stings from its prey before ingestion. *The Spinebill* here actually ingested the fly before throwing into the air and re-ingesting it, but maybe it was a case of ensuring it was a tasty morsel! There are hints of yellow pollen on the bill of this bird, so no doubt it has been extracting nectar on emerging flowers of *Coastal Banksia*.

Back on the 'Rail', and other birds about ...

Exciting to see the secretive small waterfowl, the *Buff-banded Rail* (pictured right) return to our home garden yesterday afternoon. They seem to love foraging among the thick shrubbery, sedges and grasses, and among the rocky swales on the road verge. They first appeared late April last year in Stage 1 at Fran and Paul's garden, moving into Stages 2 and 3 around the August/September period and we had them in our garden up until October. So they are a bit earlier this year and obviously happy!

I am still hearing the calls of the elusive *Australian Spotted Crake* and *Spotless Crake* around the wetlands and south-east area, but yet to get any images despite shivering in the cold in the late afternoon and placing a couple of sensor cameras out! (thanks Lawrence W). I will keep trying ...



The tiny *Brown Thornbill* (pictured left) are busy in the bush at the moment. These guys are quick in flight and dart in and out of the dense coastal scrub—occasionally one of a pair may stop still enough for a photo opportunity. Great to have another report again from Fran that she is seeing them in her garden, which is fantastic. I have seen them in the wetlands in mixed flocks along with *Superb Fairy-wren*, but yet to see them in our garden habitat. Dense vegetation is to their liking.

Below: This female immature *Grey-shrike Thrush* took a liking to foraging among the litter of one of the mini-forest plots in the Project KOALA planting area. Not sure what it has in its bill but they are generally after a range of arthropods and small vertebrates.



Above: Male *Superb Fairy-wren* among the Project KOALA mini-forest plots. Small family groups of our only *Fairy-wren* species are very active around **The Cape** presently. The male is distinguished by its navy-blue tail and back bill. The female has a duller blue tail with orange-red markings around the eyes and an orange-red bill. Some males retain their blue-black breeding plumage all year, while others will revert to a brown colour during the non-breeding season. This bird has faint traces of its breeding plumage remaining.

Same place, same time ...

The *Brown Falcon* (dark form) I photographed and had in the last *Chatter* is still about—in exactly the same tree and about the same time as my previous encounter. With few other high vantage points on offer and quite a few rodents about, it is not surprising it is still in this spot surveying the area.



Robin time ...

I haven't spotted too many of the bright red-orange male *Flame Robin* recently, but there are still regular sightings of the female (pictured below), which is dull brown in colour. I have seen them around the sports precinct, the east-west pondages and in the south-east of **The Cape**. To brighten up your day, it is hard to go past the colourful *Eastern Yellow Robin* (left) which is predominantly in the coastal bush and around the south east sector. It is regularly seen and heard around the dog park and along the south east walking track to 2nd Surf Beach.



The *Eastern Yellow Robin* is usually seen singularly or in pairs and is a permanent resident species of **The Cape**. The *Flame Robin*, unlike most Australian *Robin* species, can be seen in flocks of 10-20 birds as we saw a few weeks back when the males were more obvious. They are migrant visitors to **The Cape** during the cooler months of the year, and have either flown north across Bass Strait from Tasmania or come down from the high country of south east Australia.



After hours rodent activity ...

With the sighting of several species of rodents around **The Cape**, I placed a remote sensor camera in the south east remnant bush where there were significant small mammal diggings—all in the hope of capturing a glimpse of something really interesting. There were plenty of tunnels and burrows and there was quite a lot of activity at night. Unfortunately, I am really none the wiser of what was caught on camera rodent wise, although it is obvious there were 3 different species identified: what looks to be an introduced *Black Rat* (with the long tail), a native *Swamp Rat* (darker fur with shorter tail) and a *mouse* size creature which was coming and going from the burrows and tunnels (which could possibly be a native *New Holland Mouse*, endangered in Victoria).



Above: Introduced *Black Rat*, longer tail than the body length.

Below: Suspect native *Mouse*, approx. 10 cm in body length, well less than half the size of the rats. It was also pictured entering and leaving the tunnels/burrows, which is why I suspect it could be a native species.



Above: Suspect native *Swamp Rat*, shorter tail than the body length and darker fur colour. It was pictured entering a number of burrow/tunnel areas and digging soil out behind it.

Overall, in a one month period in this particular spot, based on the number of occurrences where the camera fired off to animal activity, *rodents* accounted for 61%, *wombat* 13%, *rabbits* 9.5%, *red fox* 6%, *wallaby* 3.5%, *kangaroos* 3.5% and *birds* 3.5%.

Other curious visitors to the site ...



Fox action around The Cape ...

While there has been action by Bass Coast Landcare eradicating fox along the Bass Coast in support of Hooded Plover conservation, and efforts by **The Cape** to control numbers within the estate, there is still evidence of their presence—more so on the camera where I was checking out rodent action. Another reminder of the extent of destruction these creatures and cats are doing to our small mammals and birds.



Above: Red Fox in broad daylight, checking out the tunnels/burrows used by the *rodents* pictured on the previous page.



At home—feeling relaxed among the Kangaroos ...

Red Fox are estimated to kill 111 million birds and 368 million mammals each year in Australia. Feral cats are far worse, killing over double that amount!!



Magpies are travelling well ...

I haven't written much about 'Darcy' one of the local *Australian Magpies* recently, but I was reminded of his presence recently when he did a couple of half-hearted ceremonial fly passes over my head near the mini-oval! It will not be long, presumably, before he starts the breeding/swooping season again. I feel privileged to now have watched Darcy and his group for 3 years—this year will be my fourth season. Reportedly, only one in four *Magpie* pairs breed successfully each season and of those, only 10% of males will swoop to defend their nest and territory. Darcy is one hell of a lad!



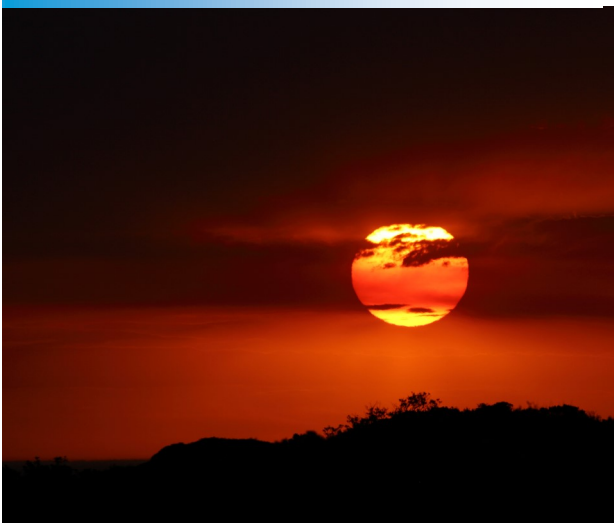
Each year since 2020, Mr & Mrs Darcy, have raised three chicks into fledglings, and I have observed that each year, after raising their young ones to juvenile status, one of the birds stays with the adults for the year and helps raise the next brood. In 2021, we had 'Son of Darcy (SOD)' hanging about helping, in 2022 we had SOD 'jnr' and as we lead into the 2023 breeding season, we have 'Dozey' who has become accustomed to sleeping and resting around our house! That's Dozey (pictured left and below) displaying a beautiful silvery plumage and bill which will darken up as he matures further.



Mr & Mrs and Dozey are starting to display territorial protection behaviours but I have seen no sign of nest building by the adult female just yet. In the meantime, enjoy how the Magpies go about their business—you may come to love them!

I will let you know when the swooping begins!

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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