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## Nature Observations around The Cape



## Cape Chatter

*The 'state of nature' @ The Cape ...*

*Cape Chatter* is back after a winter break, spent mainly looking for endangered *Southern Right Whales* at calving and nursery areas of the southern coastline of Australia along the Great Australian Bight. Normally home to many whales this time of year, this season has not been as expected, with few adult females arriving to give birth to calves. No-one seems to have an answer yet! Strange times indeed! There is a hint of seasonal change in the air at **The Cape** and the animals are responding: 'Darcy' the local *Magpie* has started swooping me; there are reports of 'territorial' *Masked Lapwings*; *Echidnas* have been seen on the prowl; *Hooded Plovers* are sizing each other up on the beach readying for the coming breeding season; and *Eastern Rosellas* are checking out the creek line nesting boxes.

The beginning of August each year marks the time when the yearly list of fauna species seen within **The Cape's** observation area is tallied up and we reflect on the past year. We now have now four years worth of records and photos of the local natural world. We are starting to see the impacts infrastructure development and human activity is having on the wildlife around the estate and how it is being offset by the extensive ecological restoration efforts undertaken through the various wetlands, creek line, pondages, retained natural habitat areas, and some fantastic emerging home gardens. There are some real positives but still lots to do to support our local environment. So, in this *Cape Chatter* Issue No. 96, we look at the key highlights of what has happened and what may lay ahead for the natural world @ **The Cape**.



*The numbers—as at 1st August 23*

**Birds: 130 species**

**Mammals: 21 species**

**Reptiles: 7 species**

**Amphibians: 8 species**

**Turtle: 1 species**

*One of the highlights of the past 12 months was the very successful Hooded Plover breeding season we had along Cape Paterson beaches with four fledglings from four different nest sites—a monumental achievement!*



## Birds in our 'backyard' - a total of 130 species (up from 119)

Eleven (11) new bird species were observed over the past 12 months. Of the 130, **17** species are under threat of extinction—that's around **13%** or **one in nearly every eight** bird species. Here is a breakdown of the **four categories\*** of birds recorded.

### Coastal & Marine bird species

While a lot of attention was focussed on the *Hooded Plover* conservation effort, there was plenty of other interesting bird activity along the stretch of coast abutting **The Cape**. Highlights included the migratory shorebird from southern New Zealand, the *Double-banded Plover*, seen along 2nd Surf, which spends winters in our region and the tiny small migratory wader, the *Red-necked Stint*, a summer visitor all the way from Siberia, which keep the territorial, local *Hoodies* on their toes!



**Above.** Our Kiwi visitor, the *Double-banded Plover*, could easily be mistaken for a young *Hooded Plover*, and right, the smallest migratory wader from Siberia, the *Red-necked Stint*.



**Above:** The *Pacific Golden Plover* is another threatened migratory wader which travels all the way from Alaska to spend the warmer months in places along our coast.

*Shorebirds are particularly threatened by human activity, and disturbances disrupt breeding activities and reduces the chances of sustaining their dwindling populations. Please tread lightly on our beaches!*

### Species count is now 26—up from 23

Sadly, this group comprises the highest percentage of threatened birds with **8** of the **26 (nearly one in every three bird species)** facing survival challenges.



**Above:** The *Sooty Oystercatcher* is an Australian beach nesting shorebird. Also threatened, there is no indication they nest along the local coast, but can be seen many months of the year foraging on the coastal rock platforms.

\* Four species categories: Marine & Coastal, Freshwater, Land & Introduced, based on *The Australian Bird Guide*.

## Freshwater bird species ...

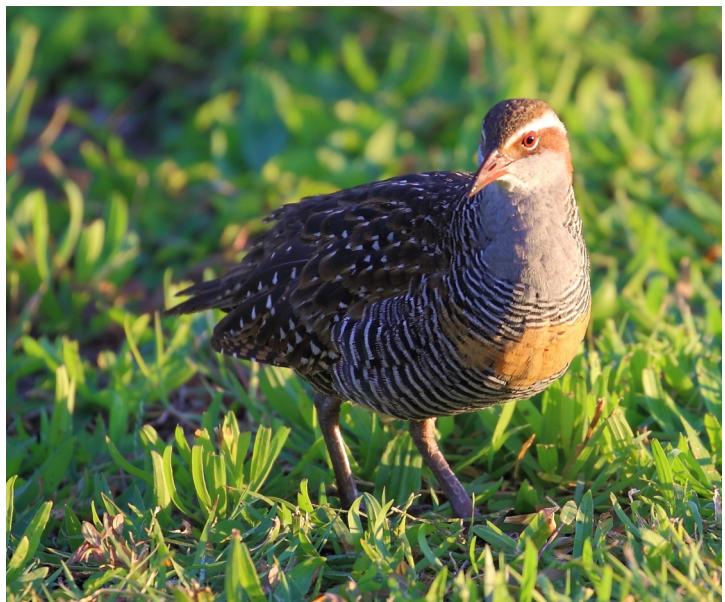
Australia's inland has been inundated with water over the past year and this has meant many wetland species have temporarily migrated to better breeding conditions in natural wetlands and lakes. While our local species count has risen, the numbers of birds, particularly duck numbers, appear to be lower. Especially pleasing, and a testament to the developing wetlands of **The Cape**, is the recording of several new species of secretive waterfowl such as *Australian Spotted Crake* and *Spotless Crake*, along with continuing records of the vulnerable *Lewin's Rail* and the less secretive *Buff-banded Rail*. A vulnerable *Great Egret* has also been observed around the wetlands on a couple of occasions. We observed record numbers of *Latham's Snipe* over 3 surveys.

**Right:** The *Buff-banded Rail* is a beautiful little waterfowl and it appears to be coming a feature of **The Cape** landscape, at home among the wetlands and their edges, and also among thickly vegetated home gardens. They can be seen mainly around dusk and dawn and on vegetation edges.

**Below:** Listed as vulnerable in Victoria, the *Great Egret* is an uncommon visitor to **The Cape**, but it has certainly shown an interest in the wetlands on a couple of occasions. Photo taken as it took off from **The Cape's** large central wetland complex.

## Species count is now 25—up from 22

This group is reaping the benefits of the extensive ecological restoration efforts at **The Cape** in wetland and creek line development. Despite this, there remains **16%** of bird species in this category which are threatened (**4 out of the 25 recorded**).



## Land bird species ...

New species recorded in the past year include *Satin Flycatcher*, *Southern Boobook*, the endangered *Grey Goshawk*, and *Dusky Woodswallow*. A real treat was the few weeks in August-September 2022 of consistent sightings of the vulnerable *Blue-winged Parrot*, the influx of *Flame Robins* and a massing of hundreds of *Grey Fantails* in April. Based on these observations, I suspect the *Grey Fantails* and *Blue-winged Parrot* sightings have a connection to their possible migration to and from Tasmania, and that **The Cape** provides an important stopover spot before crossing the Bass Strait.



## Species count is now 71—up from 66

This group of birds is less threatened than other bird categories, with **5** species (7%) under threat. However, land based birds are likely to be more exposed to the expanding development of the estate as open space and grassland habitat is replaced by new house construction. This will particularly impact on ground foraging birds relying on grass seeds, flowers and roots.



**Clockwise from Top Left:** The vulnerable *Blue-winged Parrot*, the magnificent male *Flame Robin*, one of many *Grey Fantail* and the very stunning *Satin Flycatcher*, a real treat and the first time recorded at **The Cape**.

## The 'invasion' of the Introduced birds

It was only a matter of time, but as the development has expanded, so has the numbers of introduced birds, which creates a real problem for some of our native species. These birds adapt to built infrastructure and environments quickly, are very opportunistic and there is probably little we can do about it. It could put some of our native birds at risk.

**Right:** Nesting boxes placed in the central creek line tree stags were designed specifically for *Eastern Rosella* breeding given the lack of mature tree hollows in the area. While the *Rosellas* continue to investigate the boxes as potential nest sites, they face the battle of fending off armies of *Starlings* and *Mynas* which take over the boxes. It is known that these aggressive birds will kill *rosella* nestlings in the boxes. After the initial success with breeding in 2020, I have not seen any success despite the *rosellas* trying again and again!



**Right:** The *Eurasian Skylark*, which looks very similar to the *Australasian Pipit*, is a lovely introduced bird that is likely to lose out with the loss of open grassy habitat within **The Cape**. They are most noticeable from Spring when they fly overhead and sing loudly (song-flight) while hovering, often for some length of time. Other than that, it is usually on the ground foraging.

I am not a fan of artificially feeding birds. Introduced birds such as *pigeons* and *sparrows* just love free food, as do some of our native troublesome species like *Rainbow Lorikeets* and *Noisy Miner*, taking over territory and spreading disease to the detriment of other native species. If there is one thing we can do to try and keep a lid on the number of troublesome birds, do not artificially feed them! Better to provide food (nectar, seeds and invertebrates) through a natural garden setting.

## Species count remains at 8

It is a good thing the species number remains stable, but three of the recorded introduced bird species are expanding numbers rapidly: the *Common Starling*, the *Common Myna* and to a lesser extent the *Common Blackbird*.



**Left:** The *Common Blackbird* is fortunately less in number, but they just love a freshly sown vegie garden to the dismay of keen gardeners! Believe it or not, this is the first time in four years a *Blackbird* has taken up residence in my garden. On the positive side, it has a most beautiful song call, and this one has taken up to singing outside our house both very early in the morning and as the sun goes down. Fortunately it doesn't sing "*in the dead of the night*" and I am sure it was "*only waiting for this moment to arrive*" to take over our patch! (apologies to The Beatles).



## Mammals ... land and water

Great news about the local *Koala* population being identified as pure *Strzelecki Koala*, the only remaining ‘pure’ koala strain in Victoria. Makes projects like the rewilding *Koala Project* within the estate to provide more habitat even more worthwhile and hope it continues to be expanded throughout the development.

**Right:** *Strzelecki Koala* pictured in one of the few remaining mature *Manna Gums* near **The Cape’s Koala Project** plots which are growing very nicely.

### *Mange continues to be a serious problem in the local Wombat population ...*

It is becoming a constant battle treating wombats with the horrific condition—mange, and it is going to be a difficult one to win with no known preventative strategies at this stage other than treatment when the condition is identified in affected animals. We are seeing more and more cases. If you see a wombat feeding in daylight, it is highly possible it has mange which leads to a cruel death if not treated. You can do your bit to help by reporting it to Mange Management on 0431 600 125 so a volunteer can attempt to apply treatment.



The frog count remains at 8 species, although some interesting calls have been heard in recent months suggesting the endangered *Southern Toadlet* could be in the area. A few “frog enthusiast” residents are on to this so hopefully it can be confirmed. Their calls are similar to the *Common Eastern Froglet*! One great thing though ... there is no shortage of frog calling, another testament to a healthy wetland environment.



## Species count stands at 21

Some nice observations with new rodent species recorded in the wetlands—a native *Water Rat (Rakali)* along with a query around a potential *New Holland Mouse* (a small endangered mouse known to be in the region).



## *Amphibians & Reptiles ...*



It is not all about *Lowland Copperhead*—although there are plenty of them! The discovery of a new snake species was made a few months back with a *White-lipped Snake* (see above) discovered and photographed in the south east of the estate. The reptile count stands at 7 species, with 3 snakes and 4 skink species.

## The last of the wetlands is ready to go ...

During the last year, we have seen the east-west pondages system grow and it is now starting to attract some nice species of birds. The final piece of the jigsaw, the wetland habitat in the south west of the estate has been finished and is scheduled to be planted out this spring. Designed by renowned wetland ecologist *Damian Cook* and the landscape architects from *The Sustainable Landscape Company*, the primary purpose of this wetland is to provide habitat for the critically endangered *Australasian Bittern*, the near threatened *Latham's Snipe* and the vulnerable *Blue-winged Parrot*. Great work by The Cape's Landscape & Maintenance Team!!



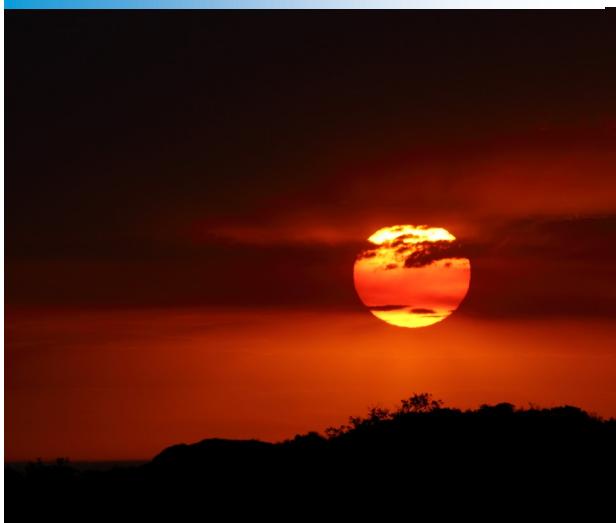
**Left:** The south west 'Bittern' wetland full up with water. It will be transformed with plants to attract various bird species and provide food, along with protective cover to roost. The design includes a central island (covered in a thin layer of water most of the year) surrounded by a moat. We keep the fingers crossed it will prove to be a success!!

### So what is a Bittern?

The *Australasian Bittern* is probably Australia's most secretive bird and is **critically endangered** in Victoria. They have been recorded at the nearby Wonthaggi Desalination Plant and Mouth of the Powlett River. They are rarely seen and more likely to be heard with a distinctive, deep resonant booming call that can be heard some distance away. They stand frozen among reeds and rushes when alarmed and are impossible to distinguish from this type of vegetation,

**Left:** I recently had the privilege of photographing one on my trip to South Australia and it is the first time I have ever observed one. Pure chance that I had the camera ready and managed a few shots despite difficult light conditions and it appearing unexpectedly. Let's hope that we get to see these mysterious birds in the new wetland in the coming years!

### 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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