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Cape Chatter

Beautiful songsters ... skillful hunters

Finally ... we have had some decent rain to break the spell of dry weather and we are into a seasonal change—midway through autumn. Things are fresh, the nights are a bit cooler, the water tanks are topped up, there is a touch of green in the landscape and the wetlands are pumping with water. It is a transitional time for birds—the summer migrants have or are departing for their winter homes, and some species from the higher country will move into lower coastal habitats and co-exist with the permanent, resident species. Around the area, *Hooded Plovers* are flocking, the *New Holland Honeyeaters* have thinned out, the *Silveryeyes* have mainly gone, *Rainbow Lorikeets* have moved in and *Easter Rosella* are moving about in small flocks. It is great to see the return of *Grey Butcherbirds* and *Grey Shrike-thrush* to the home garden, with their lovely calls and skillful hunting.



Above: Male *Grey Butcherbird*, on the lookout in the home garden for its next meal.

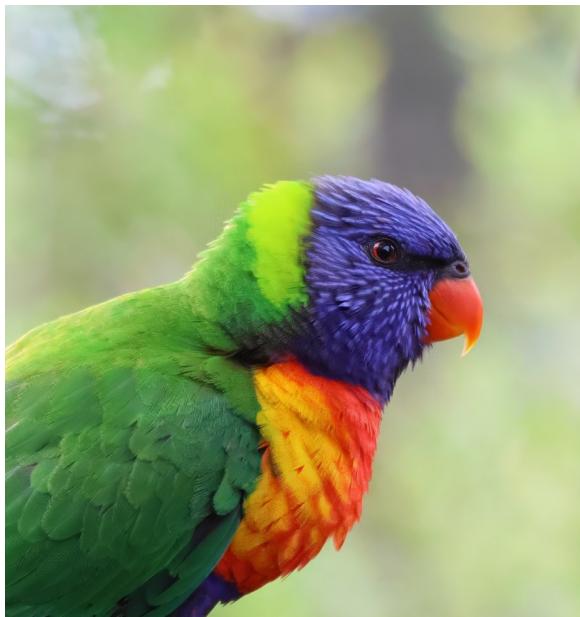


Above: Immature *Grey Shrike-thrush*, sitting on the back fence, alert and ready to pounce.

The *Grey Shrike-thrush* is one of my favourite birds. It has the most beautiful calls, can be confiding, is inquisitive and a very skillful hunter. When I hear its calls, I am immediately on the lookout for its presence in the garden as it goes about foraging for prey, usually arthropods and small vertebrates, but also bird nestlings. They often will come close to you when working in the garden, ready for an invertebrate to be disturbed and ready to pounce. Another pleasing call in our coastal bush and home gardens is that of the *Grey Butcherbird*. We are fortunate to have their calls at the moment from early morning and throughout the day. They are very smart hunters and will seek out meals such as skinks and small birds. They often wedge their prey in crevices or on spikes to dismember—hence their name!

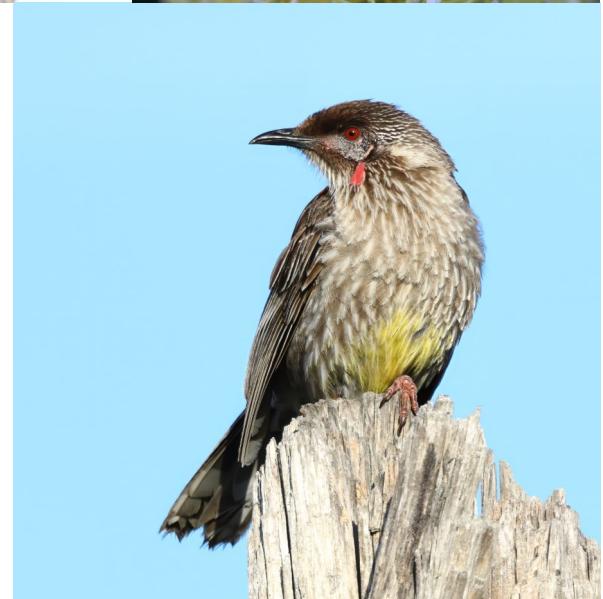
Battle for the Banksia ...

The *Coastal Banksia (Banksia integrifolia)* which line the streets of **The Cape** are growing nicely and producing new flowerheads which provide valuable nectar for our honeyeaters and seeds for the parrots and cockatoos. There is an ongoing battle for dominance of these trees and surrounding territory, causing mayhem, constant action and noise among several bird species.



Rainbow Lorikeets (top) have arrived to add to the noisy interactions between the *Little* (above) and *Red Wattlebird* (bottom right) displacing the small flocks of *New Holland Honeyeaters* (above centre) whose numbers have reduced. The *Little Wattlebird* is by far the most dominant species of the honeyeaters at **The Cape**.

While very colourful, the *Rainbow Lorikeet* is a problem bird in Australia. It has become 'urbanized' in built up environments and is the country's most common bird counted in the *Aussie Backyard Bird Count* ahead of the *Noisy Miner* (not yet recorded at **The Cape** - also a problem bird) and *Australian Magpies*. So will the *Rainbow's* remain in numbers? I hope not! They dominate their habitats against other birds in aggressive territorial fights and are known to dispatch nestlings of other parrot species and takeover nesting hollows. While it might be pleasing to have this colourful bird hanging off a bird feeder in your garden, it would be best to let them feast on seasonal, natural foods, or we may see the small birds moving in to our emerging habitats disappearing completely.



Grey Shrike-thrush ... quick as a flash

The hunting skills of the *Grey Shrike-thrush* were on display in the garden recently. This immature bird is currently spending several hours a day working its way around the garden in search of food. Often it pauses, cocks its head to one side and listens, homing in on what it has 'sensed' is near. Then, quick as a flash, it pinpoints the source and flies in quickly to capture its prey, in this case, what looks like a *katydids*. The whole action was literally over in seconds. Who would want to be an insect in this world!



Brilliant colours ...

It is a delight to see small flocks of the very colourful *Eastern Rosella* coming and going at the moment. These are ground feeding birds that nest in tree hollows. Our attempts at providing nesting boxes for these birds in the creek tree stags, while initially successful, have subsequently failed. The birds investigate the boxes regularly during the breeding season, but unfortunately, their attempts have been thwarted by the introduced *Common (Indian) Myna*, which along with *Common Starling* and *Common Blackbird*, are growing in numbers as the built environment of **The Cape** evolves. Another reason not to feed birds artificially!



Hoodie happenings ...

The breeding season is finished on our local beaches and the birds are starting to move away from their nesting sites and forming small winter flocks along the Bunurong coast. Here is the summary of our season from the seven nesting pairs monitored.



1 fledgling

A poor season result compared to the six juvenile fledglings achieved the previous season.

The one juvenile came from the Pea Creek/Undertow Bay site, remarkable given this is a busy area for beach users.

The young bird was flagged **EZ White** by BirdLife Australia experts, only the sixth bird to fledge here since 2006 and the second in successive seasons.

EZ White came from a clutch of three eggs, the other two chicks not surviving past the 10 and 21 day mark respectively. It was not an 'easy' start for **EZ** as it was discovered to have a wing injury and was not flying strongly. But it managed to recover and move away from its natal territory at about 65 days of age and was last observed doing well 15 km west at the mouth of the Powlett River in a flock of 21 other Hoodies!!



As part of some generous funding from **The Cape** developer, we managed to flag another four *Hoodies* to help us track the birds movements and monitor partner fidelity. One adult, with only a metal band on its leg, and missing its coloured flags, was re-flagged at Harmers Haven as **AP White** (pictured right). Amazingly, this bird was identified as a 17 year old female that fledged from Phillip Island in 2007 and has been breeding at Harmer's since 2011. This season, it was still going strong, managing six nests and 11 eggs, but sadly no chicks. Such is the lot of a *Hooded Plover*!



The smaller things in nature ...

Do you ever just ponder at the little things in life that goes on within the leaf litter and mulch in our gardens and among the plants? These are micro-ecosystems that we often miss with the naked eye. I rarely throw out plant cuttings and pruning's, and place them on the ground around plants to provide nutrition for plants. These layers are broken down by small microorganisms and creatures—the composters—and provide the basis of the food chain in the animal kingdom. Recently while having a closer look at some movement under a native *kennedia* vine in the garden, I noticed what looked like *mosquitoes* and a couple of *skinks* jumping in the air trying to catch them. Turns out the insects are a parasitic wasp, most likely an *Aulacid* or *Ichneumon Wasp*. Stunning little creatures!



Snake reminder ...

The paths and walkways are wonderful avenues to look at **The Cape's** natural world, but just a reminder that the estate's habitat is also a great haven for snakes with plenty of food available for them within the wetlands, creeks and sometimes home garden.

Just because the weather is cooling off, doesn't mean the snakes are no longer around and you are less likely to come across them. I was reminded of this a couple of days ago when I came across a pair of *Lowland Copperhead* basking in the sun on some *pigface* near the wetlands. One moved away fairly quickly but this one (pictured right) was quite happy to remain in situ, despite people walking past and cycling within a meter or so.

Lowland Copperheads tolerate cooler weather, and I have seen them basking in winter sun in the middle of July, so be aware of their whereabouts when walking these areas. Fortunately, they are shy snakes and should not bother you unless provoked or startled ... and they are a protected species.



The 'circle of life' ...

We are fortunate to be able to live at close quarters with nature at **The Cape**. It is not a zoo or wildlife sanctuary, the animals are wild, and the habitat areas and open parks provide beneficial, safe refuge for a variety of species which roam between the protection of the Yallock-Bulluk Coastal Park and the estate. This allows us to observe at close quarters the comings and goings of the natural world. Death is a part of the life cycle, and while at times it may be confronting to us, it is a natural conclusion to all living things. The breakdown and decay of a carcass (while maybe a little smelly to us) feeds the earth and many species benefit on this process—closing the loop so to speak.



Recently, an old male *Kangaroo* (above) died in the estate's creek line (close to walking paths). It is normal for old males 'fading away' to remove themselves from the mob and lie in the bush and die slowly, but this guy didn't quite make it that far. For several weeks, he was observed laying about munching grass, sometimes in our garden and other times near the creek, with no obvious injury and seemingly at peace until he passed away just prior to Easter. His passing allowed us to observe how the process of decomposition works and how quickly it occurs. Apart from maggots, flies, worms, birds and larger creatures, the most surprising observation by resident Jeannie, was a pair of secretive waterfowl, *Buff-banded Rails* (below), atop the carcass cleaning up invertebrates! Now that wasn't expected.

Thank you to young visitor to **The Cape**, Ollie, for giving me the 'title' of this story. I noticed many younger people on their school holidays taking a keen interest in this whole process of nature at work and the 'circle of life' ... educative.



The Cape utilizes several portable wildlife signs which are deployed when dead or injured animals are observed within the estate to keep everyone informed of the circumstances, along with Facebook posts, both which were done in this instance. Thanks to the residents who reported this incident to Wildlife Victoria for investigation and for those communicating the kangaroo's situation.

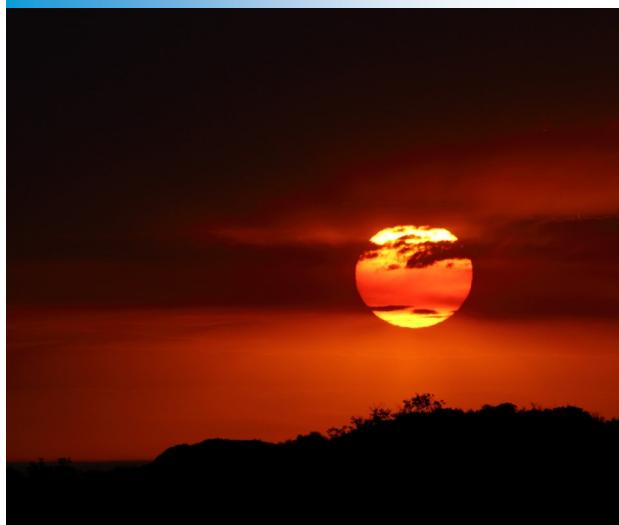
Koala Project Phase 2 kicks off ... and a thousand Terns!

The 2nd phase of the community plantings for Project KOALA was successfully started with about 25 residents taking part in the planting of two mini-forest plots of *Manna Gum* and other plant species. The *Manna* were propagated by Community Farmer AJ in the farm's hothouse and Dave Leggett from the maintenance team supported the day and gave advice on planting. Great community effort all round. Fantastic work by all and big hand to John Godfrey and Kim Hauser for pulling it together with support from the Development. Next planting is on 13th April—details TBA. Images below by John Godfrey.



Hooded Plover monitor and keen local birder, Mike Tesch, sent me this photo (above) of a mass colony of around a thousand juvenile and adult *Crested Terns*, in 3 large flocks on a very low tide at 2nd Surf beach last week. Mike says the mobile phone photo he took doesn't do justice to the scene he witnessed, but he has never seen anything like it in his many years of bird observing at Cape Patterson. There were similar reports of smaller flocks of a couple of hundred birds further west toward the Powlett River.

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**.

Email: dwhartney@bigpond.com

capechatter.com
