

21st September 2024

## Nature Observations around The Cape

Issue No. 120

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## Cape Chatter

### *Head winds ...*

The winds have remained persistently strong to gale force since my last *Cape Chatter* ... when will it ever end! Despite the windy, cold conditions, spring time heralds a period of change, and nature is in full swing, with evidence of nest building and breeding along our coastline and inland. Several intra-continental bird migrants from other parts of Australia are appearing locally with some interesting and surprising observations. The vanguards of the remarkable long distance migratory bird species from the northern hemisphere have arrived, and with it sadly, the potential for the spread of the deadly **Avian Flu** among our local, indigenous species of birds and mammals.

### *Avian Flu Advice ... a potential problem*



If you find a dead *Hooded Plover* on the beach (or any other bird or mammal for that matter), one that looks sick or has signs of trembling, lethargy or respiratory distress, please refrain from touching them or going near them. Record the time, date, and location of the sighting (if possible, get some photos or a video clip) and report it directly to the:

**24-hour Emergency Animal Disease Hotline on:**

**1800 675 888**

**BirdLife Australia** have advised there is a high probability of the highly pathogenic **Avian Flu** that has wreaked havoc in other parts of the world reaching our shores for the first time with the arrival of migratory shorebirds this spring. *Hooded Plovers* and other beach-nesting birds sometimes mingle with migratory shorebirds where they share the beach habitat for foraging and roosting. So, there's a possibility that some of our *Hoodies* might contract the virus over the next few months. Within **The Cape**, the *Latham's (Japanese) Snipe* have also arrived from northern Japan. These birds roost in our wetland habitats and also have the potential to spread the flu to inland species of birds and mammals.



*Migratory shorebirds such as the critically endangered Curlew Sandpiper (above left) and Red-necked Stint (above) may mingle with Hooded Plovers when foraging and roosting in the coastal habitat.*

## Two new bird species observed ... total up to 139

Resident Joe Spano and I hosted a group of keen birders from **BirdLife Bass Coast** on an outing around **The Cape** last weekend. The conditions were not favourable (you guessed it ... cold and windy) but the group managed to identify 34 bird species in a two hour period. The biggest surprise was the sighting and confirmation photograph of a *Sacred Kingfisher* near the F Break/Wilson Rd wetland in the estate's south west by one of the group, Peter Murphy. Another addition to our bird list.



**Left:** The stunning *Sacred Kingfisher*, pictured left for reference. This photo was taken in central Victoria.

*Sacred Kingfishers* occur year round in northern Australia and are partially migratory. They are breeding summer visitors to southern Australia where they generally nest in tree hollows. I reckon Cape Paterson is as about far south as this bird will go. I have re-visited the area it was seen a couple of times since, with no luck, so it may already have turned around and headed back inland! Who can blame it!



While on the outing, one of the group enquired whether I had seen any *White-naped Honeyeater* at **The Cape**. I hadn't, but I was aware they reside in the nearby Wonthaggi Heathlands. So, I was surprised when a couple of days ago, right on cue, I saw and heard one calling in the Project KOALA revegetation area. Of course I had the wrong lens on my camera as I was recording the progress growth of the mini-forest plots. So here is another reference photo (right) from central Victoria so you know what it looks like. That now makes seven small honeyeater species spotted at **The Cape**, and is a good sign of the benefit the mini forest plots will provide for birds and other living things.

I have updated **The Cape Bird Species List** (Version 6) for those interested and it can be downloaded here:

<https://capechatter.com/the-cape-bird-species-list-and-brochure/>

Also noticeable during the outing where a few female *Flame Robins* (below right), also near the KOALA plots! I am pretty convinced these birds are preparing to return to Tasmania for the summer breeding season given the timings we are seeing them. Later in the day—it was a busy one—and during our first *Latham's Snipe* survey, we heard the distinctive call of the *Little Grassbird* (below left) emanating from the central wetlands—ideal habitat for this bird. Another recent arrival from who knows where!





## Breeding time!

As I am writing this issue of *Cape Chatter* looking out into the garden through my study window, a *Little Wattlebird* is working tirelessly building a nest. It has been at it for a couple days, from dawn to dusk, busily collecting a range of small twigs and stems and diving into a *Coastal Rosemary* (*westringia*) shrub in which the nest is located. Old mate **Darcy**, the *Australian Magpie* is still defending the territory around the mini oval and central wetland while Mrs Darcy is incubating a nest located in a *Swamp Paperbark* tree in the 'Green Beach' kangaroo lay up area. *Hooded Plovers* have started nesting along the coast, but are struggling with weather and changed beach morphology. And recently, Dave Leggett from the estate's landscape team, discovered a *Masked Lapwing* nest with two eggs in a rock swale in the Stage 4 area of the estate. **Warning:** these birds will defend this nest and like some magpies, will swoop continually to warn off any threats!



*Masked Lapwings* usually lay a clutch of 3-4 eggs and both sex share incubation duties and the care of young. The eggs take around 28 days to hatch. The young are cute little bundles (top right). In the very early days, parents will brood the young to help maintain their body heat (right centre) and will aggressively defend the nest and chicks from any perceived threats. There is a common misconception that these birds are *Hooded Plovers* (and what's all the fuss about!) They are not—see picture right of a *Hooded Plover*.





## *Moving foam ... not quite!*

I was wandering around the external perimeter of the house a couple of days ago looking in the garden (it was very cold and windy for the record) and noticed what I thought was a piece of concrete expansion foam which had lifted from the aggregate expansion joint. Then it slithered sideways along the joint! Yes, a young *Lowland Copperhead* (below) was using the joint as a 'highway', and probably chasing some warmth as well from the thermal mass. I am now seeing a range of *copperheads* of varying size in the garden throughout the year, so it pays to be aware of their possible presence as you tend to your 'animal friendly' garden habitat. They are a cold tolerant, shy snake and usually move away as this one did ... disappearing back into the thick vegetation!



*Venomous Lowland Copperheads are the most common snake around **The Cape**. They are cold tolerant, shy snakes, and will normally slither away if not harassed. They are protected species.*





## *Project KOALA ... revegetation three years on*

Back in the midst of COVID 19 (remember when), the first stage plantings of the mini-forest plots for the community led revegetation Project KOALA was completed. It was 13th September 2021, and around 30 residents participated in planting some 600 plants in sessions throughout the day under COVID protocols. I have been photo-documenting the progress of the plots since, and here are some of the latest pictures compared with three years ago. Overall, the plots are now well established and thriving with some variations and despite the exposed location, rabbits and coastal weather conditions. So something is working!

July 2021. Looking south over the unplanted plots towards the 2nd Surf dune.



18 September 2024. Looking south towards the 2nd Surf dune—3 years on!





## *Miyawaki's mini-forest method ...*

The methodology behind the plantings was based on the mini-forest principles of Japanese ecologist Miyawaki, who found that compact, layered plantings of ground covers, shrubs and trees in a small area is more successful than a widespread, monoculture approach. In essence, it is a planting process which mimics nature along with some human help for the first three years of establishment. Twelve plots were established, ten based on the Miyawaki method and two comparison plots which had variations in planting density and plot size. Based on what is happening in these ten plots, the Miyawaki method appears to be a success.



Each Miyawaki mini-forest plot was originally planted with around 50 plants of eight different species, ranging from ground covers, grasses, shrubs to trees. All were sourced as tube stock from local indigenous plant nurseries. The main tree species was the *Coastal Manna Gum*, a key food source for koala.

Of the 42 tube stock manna gums planted, 37 remain extremely healthy and are growing vigorously—minimal plant loss. Given we have only eight mature *Manna Gum* within and near the estate, this potentially creates a significant supplementary food source for the local koala population in the future.

The photo left shows a good example of the compact and layered nature of the plots—a little ecosystem with plants supporting each other in a symbiotic way. The *Manna Gums* have established very well, and are the tallest species in the photo.

### *Plot No. 8 as an example*

Plot No. 8 is a good example of the success of the plantings. The compact, layered nature means the understory has supported the growth of the shrubs and tree species, some which are now at least 3 metres high. The understory of mixed species is also supporting other animal life such as small birds, amphibians, reptiles, invertebrates, microbes and fungi.



**Above:** Plot No.8 at planting, 13th September 2021

Plot No. 8—18th September 2024



I intend 'digging a little deeper' into what has and hasn't worked in these plots and report back, but in the meantime, you can learn more about Project KOALA and it's background at the *Cape Chatter* website, using this link:

<https://capechatter.com/project-koala/>



## Blue-winged Parrot Project

**BirdLife Bass Coast** is running a free, informative session about the threatened *Blue-winged Parrot* at the Outtrim Hall on Saturday **5th October 2024**. Learn about these beautiful birds, their habitat, and what we can do to help protect them. Don't miss out on this chance to expand your knowledge and contribute to the preservation of this special species, which drop in at **The Cape** and surrounding areas periodically. You can book through this link:

<https://www.eventbrite.com.au/e/threatened-blue-winged-parrot-information-session-tickets-1005637929117>



Above: Vulnerable *Blue-winged Parrot* at **The Cape**

## Latham's Snipe Project



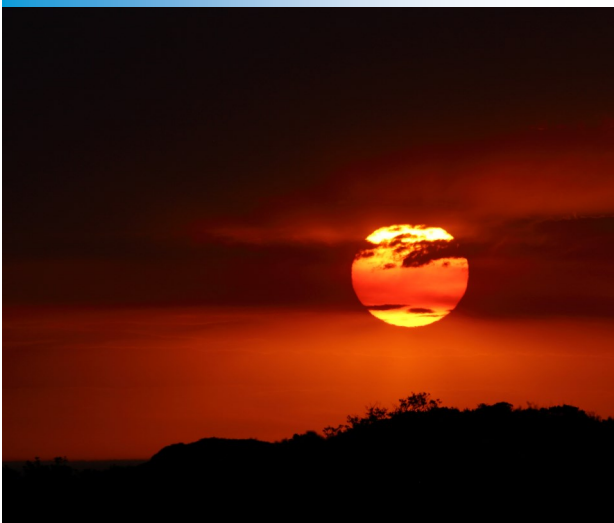
Above: Vulnerable *Latham's Snipe* at **The Cape**

The first *Latham's Snipe* survey for the season was conducted last weekend. The small group of resident volunteer counters battled the elements in windy, cool weather. We managed to 'flush' three birds within **The Cape** estate—one from the central creek line, one from the east west ponds and one from the 'bog'. We then headed back, along with the rubbish collected, into the warmth for a well deserved chat, bubble and nibbles!

September is usually a low count time as the birds are still arriving from their breeding locations in northern Japan, and who could blame them for delaying their arrival from the weather conditions we have been experiencing.

Two more counts are scheduled for November and January where hopefully we will see more birds around. Keep your eye for them—they are remarkable birds but very well camouflaged!

## 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.

Contact David by email or through the website to report interesting nature observations at **The Cape**.

Email: [dmhartney@bigpond.com](mailto:dmhartney@bigpond.com)

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