

<i>Dusky Woodswallows</i>	1
<i>Blossom time</i>	2
<i>A Bird haven</i>	3
<i>A little bit of water</i>	4
<i>Home gardens</i>	5
<i>Common Blackbird &amp; 141 bird species</i>	6
<i>Little Corellas &amp; a big cocky</i>	7

Nature Observations around The Cape



Cape Chatter

*The rhythm of life ...*

We really are into the swing of spring. On one warm day in the past week, there must have been an explosion of insects in the air for there was a large flock of *Dusky Woodswallow* feeding on the wing all day. They came, and now they have gone. The coastal bush is in full blossom ... the *melaleuca*, *leucopogon* and *leptospermum* are flowering profusely, and while my eyes won't stop running, the insects and birds are loving it. Right on cue, we are witnessing a changeover of species: the *Little Corella* flock has arrived, the *Galahs* are dispersing and their numbers dwindling, the tiny *Silvereye* from Tasmania are busy among the bush and blossoms. The calls of the *Fan-tailed* and *Shining Bronze Cuckoos* are ringing out in the coastal bush, and down on the beach, the migratory and endangered *Ruddy Turnstone* from the Siberian tundra have been hanging out with our local nesting shorebirds, the vulnerable *Hooded Plover*.

*Dusky Woodswallows* are one of the six species of *Woodswallow* in Australia and should not be confused with the very common *Welcome Swallow* (they are not related) that we see at **The Cape** year round. In fact, they are in the same family as *Butcherbirds* and *Magpies*. The *Dusky* is a summer migrant and is more common year-round further north in Australia. Larger than the *Welcome Swallow*, their flying skills are similar, with a fast wing beat and then a glide ... while changing directions rapidly chasing prey—flying insects.



*Dusky Woodswallow* use thermals and can 'feed on the wing' for many hours. They can be seen singularly or in pairs as well as flocks. The sighting this past week was a flock of at least 30 birds—I have previously only seen a single bird here. Over summer, when frontal systems come through, keep a look out for the migratory *Needletails* and *Swifts* from Asia who can fill our skies with similar activity and aerial skills.



## Blossom time!

It is that time of year, and the bush and gardens are in full swing, and so too are the birds and the insects.



Clockwise from above left: *Melaleuca*, *Leptospermum*, Brown Thornbill, *Leucopogon* and a *Silveryeye* doing it's best to hide from me!



What are all of those **VFLBB (Very Fast Little Brown Birds)** darting in and out of the bush? It is very hard to see them as they are so quick and well camouflaged, which is why photography is a great way to more closely examine their features and behaviours. Nature does it wonderfully and it's fascinating to see how animals evolve to blend into their environments. The little *Silveryeye* (left) looks as though it has been designed to feed among *leptospermum* when it is in flower—a great protective technique against larger predators. You do not know they are there unless you notice some quick movement among the foliage or they pop up for a quick look around.



## Project KOALA area ... a bird haven

I wandered through the Project KOALA mini-forest plots yesterday afternoon and it was 'bird central'—heaps of activity among the flowering vegetation and the emerging *Coastal Manna Gums* hosting a range of species. It was so hectic I didn't know where to look and I was nearly struck by several birds as they were darting in and out of the vegetation at a frenetic pace—it was mayhem!! Further testament to the value this little revegetated area is bringing to the local ecology, not just as *koala* habitat.



**Left:** Last *Chatter*, I mentioned a new bird species seen, the *White-naped Honeyeater*, which I spotted in the Project KOALA area. Well yesterday, I managed to get a couple of images of a pair that were very active in this re-vegetated area. Proof that I wasn't making it up! They were particularly fond of the *leptospermum* (left), but also foraging through the *Coastal Manna Gums*. These honeyeaters do feed on nectar, but they also glean insects, spiders and lerp from eucalypts.

**Below:** This *New Holland Honeyeater* was also gleaning insects from a *leucopogon* bush. While reliant on nectar, it will feed on a range of insects. This one had a nice range secured between its bill.



**Left and right:** *New Holland Honeyeater*, like *Red* and *Little Wattlebirds*, can often be seen launching from a perch into steep flight like a 'rocket' and then gliding back to a perch. I am not sure what this behaviour is about, but it is interesting to watch and photograph!





## *A little bit of water ...*

Water is an essential component of a bird's environment. The strategic placement of a bird bath in a home garden is very useful for birds to drink and bathe and also provides a good opportunity to watch them at close quarters. Small water elements in the bush are also a great spot to observe and photograph birds. This shallow water feature in the south east of the estate is a popular spot for a range of birds—large to small.



The most active and noisy of the small birds currently is the *Silveryeye*, tiny little birds that flash through the scrub in small flocks and barely stay still for a moment. I managed to come across a small flock bathing and preening, refreshing from their busy feeding. It was nice to get a couple of images in a rare moment of 'stillness'!



*There are two sub-species of Silveryeye at **The Cape**: the Tasmanian one (*lateralis*), shown here, is distinguished by rusty coloured flanks. Weighing in at around 10 grams, can you believe these little birds make the perilous journey across Bass Strait in autumn and head up the east coast of Australia to escape the cold! The other sub species is the *westernensis*, which lack the rusty flanks.*



*Grey Fantail* (above) enjoying a quick bath, and *White-faced Heron* (right) is never far from the water.





## Home gardens ...

I have found four plants in the garden that are really attractive for bird and insects: the *Emu Bush*, *Woolly Bush*, *Westringia* (*Coastal Rosemary*) and *Kennedia* vine. Full of insects and loads of nectar and pollen—a real magnet for the birds. They may not be the prettiest of species, but they sure are well liked by the birds.



**Clockwise from top left:** *Emu Bush* flower, *Woolly Bush* flower, *Little Wattlebird* among the *Woolly Bush*, *Little Wattlebird* among *Kennedia* vine, and the flower of the *Coastal Rosemary*—a magnet for bees and other pollinators. The *Coastal Rosemary* is also a popular plant for birds to nest in. Currently we have a *Little Wattlebird* nesting in one plant and a *Common Blackbird* raising hatchlings in another, literally at the front door and near the bird bath!



## Common Blackbird ...

You may have noticed I am not a great fan of introduced animal species, but you have to admire how they have adapted to Australian conditions. Along with *fox* and *rabbits*, introduced birds such as *Common Starling* and *Common Myna* are rapidly making themselves at home around the estate placing greater strain on our indigenous species as their feeding and breeding territories diminish. A much maligned bird, especially for home gardeners, the *Common Blackbird* is on the rise as well. For the second successive year, a pair has taken to nesting in a *Coastal Rosemary* bush in the garden. You have to admire their energy and tenacity as they raise their hatchlings on a supply of gourmet garden worms, going non-stop from dawn to dusk. They do have a beautiful song!



## Two new bird species observed



The bird species count is now **141**

The **Cape Bird Species List** (Version 7) has been updated for those interested and can be downloaded here:

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



**Above:** We now have the *Brown Quail*, in addition to the *Stubble Quail* to add to the list. The bird 'exploded' out of some thick undergrowth just below the Project KOALA plots in the south east a couple of days back.

**Left:** A few *Ruddy Turnstone* have been observed on our shores recently, and this one was spotted just west of F Break. They are a migratory shorebird from the Siberian tundra and have just started arriving for our summer. They are listed as an endangered bird in Victoria. They have been seen mingling with our local *Hooded Plovers*, who have been trying to move them on! This one, pictured last week, is losing its breeding plumage, and is well camouflaged on the rocks and beaches when littered with seaweed.



## *Little Corellas and a bigger cocky!*



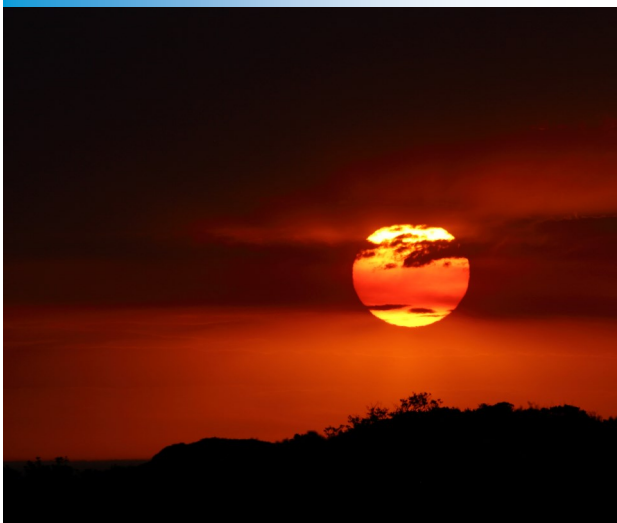
The boisterous and energetic *Little Corella* flock has returned in earnest and is making itself heard around the estate, foraging in the open grassy spaces and lifting off in noisy groups as they relocate, with the occasional formation flight out over the ocean to check out the waves and the surfers!

Interesting sight a couple of days back when a lone *Sulphur-crested Cockatoo* was seen flying along with the *Corellas*. This was unusual, as we rarely see the larger *Sulphur-crested* around the area—most likely due to a lack of mature trees with hollows for nesting. From a distance they may look the same, but there are obvious differences. However, they are both left footed, as are all the *cockatoo* family.



**Above left:** *Little Corella*, and **right,** the larger *Sulphur-crested Cockatoo*.

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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.

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