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Cape Chatter

Captain Moonlight ... a real 'bush-ranger'

The warmer months have been tough for many animals, but it appears the *Short-beaked Echidnas* are enjoying the drier conditions with near daily sightings of this remarkable Australian mammal wandering around **The Cape**. One individual in particular has taken to exploring the area around **Moonshadow Ave** and **Sunlight Blvd** (two main thoroughfares within the estate), getting up to all sorts of mischief among the home gardens. I have named this exquisite creature ***Captain Moonlight*** (a well known bushranger in Australian folklore), reflecting its reclusive nature, ability to escape from tight spots, and wide ranging movement among the coastal bush and around the estate. Read on to learn more about these unique creatures which we are so fortunate and privileged to see at close quarters within **The Cape**.



Above: *Captain Moonlight* (a *Short-beaked Echidna*) coming in for a drink in the late afternoon on a warm day in the home garden. Echidna are adapted to dry/arid conditions and get most of their fluid intake from invertebrate prey. They will however supplement water intake using their straw like beak to suck water from shallow water sources like this terracotta dish.

[Information sourced from Dr Peggy Rismeller, a leading authority on echidna]

There is no other mammal quite like *echidna*:

- A solitary animal and not social
- Very secretive and reclusive
- Controls active body temperature using torpor
- Muscle allows it to make contortionist shapes from a round ball to a nearly flat body
- Female, when sexually mature after 7-8 years, lays one egg every 3 years in a temporary pouch
- At 50 days, the young is put in a nursery burrow
- Young is suckled (no external teat) and fed every 5 days for 2 hours—weaned at 7 months
- The young is on its own after weaning, there is no parental guidance, and it has to find its own food and a new home territory after 18 months

A remarkable and unique mammal



A few weeks back, *Captain Moonlight* attempted to drink from a bird bath in the garden but couldn't quite reach the water (**below**). It eventually found a way up, and recently was spotted having a dip and drink (**left**), before ungracefully falling back to the ground! A new water source closer to the ground (**below left**) was installed and it is now a lot easier for *Moonlight* (now that it has worked it out!). Similar climbing behaviour of *echidna* searching for water has been seen by neighbours Jane and Martin.



Left: *Moonlight* drinking water (and blowing bubbles) through its beak. An *echidna*'s beak has both a mouth and nostril at its tip. The beak is also used like a crowbar to seek out prey underground. A long sticky tongue protrudes from the beak mouth to catch ants and termites. It is a 'true' beak, connected to the skull, and if broken, can lead to suffocation of the animal, then death.

A few more echidna facts ...



- Has great digging strength from its strong legs and hind feet (which point backwards)
- The only mammal that can dig straight down
- They are great escape artists—due to digging and contortionist capabilities
- Can live up to 45-50 years of age
- Mating season is usually from May—August
- Female mates only once every 3 years
- Males mate every year
- There are more sexually active males than females in any one mating season, causing the unusual phenomenon of the 'echidna train' (several males following a single female trying to get her attention—only one wins)
- Young *echidnas* can travel up to 40 km to find a new territory.
- *Echidnas* can swim and use their beak like a snorkel

The future for echidna ...

- Population numbers and densities unknown—they are not a prolific species
- Low re-production rates
- Few natural predators
- Predation is mainly from feral animals (fox and cats, particularly against the young)
- Vehicle strike and dog attacks are becoming more common as habitat shrinks in urban and semi-urban development
- As habitat shrinks, need for more vegetation corridors and wildlife friendly gardens to survive



How you can help echidna ...



- Grow a wildlife friendly native garden
- Let them wander peacefully and provide fresh water
- If you find one in the garden, try not to remove it. They are great escape artists. If it found a way in, it will find a way out.
- If you have a dog and it is continually barking, check there is no echidna bailed up (or a snake). Contain the dog until the *echidna* moves on.
- Never attempt to pick up and move an *echidna*. If threatened, they will dig deeper with their beak anchored forward. If you attempt to lift the *echidna* against its will, you may break the beak and cause death..

More bird movements ...



If you are wandering along Weathertop ridge taking in the wonderful views of Bass Strait, keep your eyes out for these small, active birds— female *Flame Robins* (**above** and **right**) which may have flown over from Tasmania or descended from the high country. This is the earliest I have observed them here in five years—they normally arrive early to mid April. They love perching on stakes, branches and fences to pounce on prey on the ground. I am yet to see the colourful males (**below**) but they will not be far away. These couple of birds were being chased away by a resident *Eastern Yellow Robin* (**below right**) which was interesting to see!



The *Flame Robin* is the only one of this species which flock (hang out in small groups) - all other *Robins* hang out singularly or in pairs. So keep your eyes out over the next few weeks when hopefully we will see more of the colourful males arriving to form larger foraging groups. That will keep the *Yellow Robin* very busy looking after its patch! The *Flames* will generally stay around until September.

Last *Cape Chatter*, I highlighted the amazing migratory bird movement underway between the southern and northern hemispheres. Within Australia, there is also intra-continental migration as various bird species change from summer breeding areas to winter hangouts. Some come down from the mountains to the coast, some travel inland, some across the Bass Strait to the mainland.

The exquisite *Flame Robin* ...



The Eastern Spinebill ... winter wanderer

Another bird to the area as the weather cools off is the diminutive *Eastern Spinebill*. This small honeyeater with long curved bill is a most active bird and is very fast and agile—another brown flash among the vegetation! They retreat from the high country to lower areas in winter and even migrate up into southern Queensland. They are adaptable and live in a variety of habitats from open forests, heath, woodlands and urban gardens, especially those with dense shrubs and nectar rich flowers. It's about safety and food!



Spinebill are attracted to nectar rich, native plants such as correa, grevillea, emu bush and kangaroo paw. They will supplement their diet with invertebrates like insects and spiders, or the occasional moth as pictured below among a nectar rich kangaroo paw.



Hooded Plover season still going ...

It has been a long breeding season for the threatened *Hooded Plover* which several residents of **The Cape** are actively involved in monitoring. While breeding season results vary, this season has been another disappointment to date: the birds are nesting well and we are getting good numbers of eggs, but chick numbers remain low and it is very disappointing that we keep losing chicks at good ages in their development, sometimes, just a week or so before fledging. I will provide a more detailed analysis when the season concludes, but here is a summary to date for the local breeding areas that are monitored.

CAPE PATERSON TO HARMERS HAVEN BREEDING SUMMARY 2024-2025

NUMBER OF BREEDING PAIRS	NUMBER OF EGGS	NUMBER OF CHICKS	NUMBER OF FLEDGE
8	31	9	1



Of the eggs (31) laid by the breeding pairs, only 30% (9) have hatched as chicks, and of these chicks, only 3% (1) has fledged

It has been a long season but it is still going, and we have one remaining chick at Harmers Haven, which is **20 days old** with an estimated fledging date of **14th April**. This chick, which is at the same development stage as the one pictured below, is one of two chicks which hatched at Harmers this season from **2 breeding pairs, 9 nests and 19 eggs**. The parents of this chick had **5 nests** and **12 eggs**. The female of this breeding pair, **AP White**, is **18 years old**, and records show she has only ever produced **one fledge** in **13 seasons**. She must be exhausted so fingers crossed we can help get this little one into the air—it would be an achievement.



Cracking sunsets and waves ... it is that time of the year!



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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