

The Natural News

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2018 Year of the bird

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2018 YEAR OF THE BIRD

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Wildlife by kayak

Richard Ashby

On the 14 January 2018 I launched my kayak from the creek a few minutes' walk from my house and paddled the couple of kilometres out to Sisters Island off Rocky Cape National Park for a Birdata 2ha/20min survey, done at least monthly as with many other sites, looking for long-term population trends. Others can hypothesise as to the causes. There are always Pacific Gulls, Sooty Oystercatchers and Black-Faced Cormorants. A couple of pairs of Kelp Gulls, the species only arriving in Tasmania 60 years ago and now the dominant gull in SE Tasmania, have muscled their way onto the island's roosts in the last ten years and may have bred there recently.

I've encountered 25 species of bird on this 250 m long lump of spiky rock whose only serious shelter is provided by 2-3 m deep *Coprosma repans* where winter flocks of thousands of European Starlings flying in to roost providing an evening snack for the alert Peregrine Falcon. Gannets, Crested Terns and Shy Albatrosses skirt its flanks often and a few

years ago I had the great privilege of being investigated by a first year Wandering Albatross, who, with its Royal cousin, is the world's biggest flying bird, certainly in wingspan if not in body mass.

Southern Right and Humpback Whales put in a sporadic appearance, usually on southern migration, but not nearly as often as I would like, and from time to time there are dolphins and a solitary seal, probably an old male ousted from his harem by some young tough.

In transit back to the coast a Fairy Penguin popped up for a breath of air and to say hello. Perched on offshore rocks with a commanding view a White-Bellied Sea Eagle surveyed my sail-assisted, if relatively sedate, progress. Brilliant orange-lichened rocks the size of multi-storey buildings define the lower slopes of the park's forested, north-facing hillsides here before they plunge into the sea. The overall effect is extremely aesthetically-pleasing in the right light and today, as for much of the year, Yellow-Tailed Black Cockatoos



Crested Tern

called each other from seed-laden *Banksias* and *Xanthorrhoeas*.

A cave the size of a church—there are several in the park—has been occupied by Aborigines at various times during the 40,000 years since humans first walked south to Tasmania. They were then the world's most southerly representatives of our species.

This Pre-Cambrian quartzite, the geologists tell us, was laid down 1.5 thousand million years ago. At that time the piece of crust that would become Tasmania was disassociated from what is now mainland Australia and was instead sandwiched between Arizona and East Antarctica deep in the northern hemisphere!

All this is accessible within the space of an hour from my house in Sisters Beach. I could be living in the crazed cacophony of a big city's CBD, with a mortgage I can't afford, grinding my teeth in ridiculous traffic trying to find a non-existent parking space, the nearest wilderness a faded memory.

Or perhaps not.



Black-faced Cormorant



Kelp Gull



Pacific Gull

Year of the Bird - 2018

If you take care of birds, you take care of most of the environmental problems in the world. – Thomas Lovejoy, Biologist and Godfather of Biodiversity

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology in the USA have joined with National Geographic, National Audubon Society, BirdLife International, and more than 100 organizations worldwide to declare 2018 the Year of the Bird. This coincides with the centennial of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act's ratification, a United States federal law, first enacted in 1916 to implement the convention for the protection of migratory birds between the United States and Great Britain (acting on behalf of Canada). The statute makes it unlawful without a waiver to pursue, hunt, take, capture, kill, or sell birds listed therein as migratory birds. The statute does not discriminate between live or dead birds and also grants full protection to any bird parts including feathers, eggs, and nests. Over 800 species are currently on the list. According to the Cornell Lab's website, it's a great moment to pledge to do one thing per month to help birds. To kick off the year, the Cornell Lab suggests six resolutions to help you #BirdYourWorld in 2018.

1. Take a walk. If going birding for you is like visiting new friends who you really like but can't quite remember their names, get help. There are numerous Bird ID apps, field guides and online aids.

2. Keep a daily list—and share it. Now you're out walking, try keeping a list and uploading it to Birdlife Australia's *birddata* <http://birddata.birdlife.org.au/get-started>.

The data you enter will help scientists understand bird populations.

3. Learn Bird Songs. If there's a bird song that has been bugging you, you're not alone. Help with bird songs is the number one subject people search for on Cornell Lab's website.

In Australia, there are plenty of apps and CDs to assist in identification of birds by their calls.

4. Drink great coffee. Coffee isn't just an elixir of early morning life, it is grown in vital habitat for migratory songbirds in the Americas. By choosing shade-grown coffee, or better yet Bird-Friendly certified coffee (which combines organic and Fair Trade credentials with high-quality shade habitat), you can make a direct contribution to maintaining bird habitat in the tropics.

5. Get a good pair of binoculars without breaking the bank—you no longer have to spend thousands of dollars to get special glass and good optical coatings.

6. As the weather gets nicer and the birds more active, invite a friend to go birding with you. Lead a bird watching trip. Join a local or national bird group, or your country's BirdLife International group:

<http://www.birdlife.org.au/>

To find out more:

<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/projects/year-of-the-bird/>



A young Stong-billed Honeyeater, one of Tasmania's endemic bird species.

Masked Lapwings

Sarah Lloyd

'Most of us have been amazed at how Masked Lapwings seem to choose the most vulnerable and ridiculous sites to nest. One of the most common is grassy roundabouts with traffic whizzing by all day. Others nest close to the curb along roads, in school yards etc. However, despite what appears to be fool-hardy behaviour, they are our most successful and common resident shorebird.'
(From *Birds on Our Beaches* Newsletter #4 July 2017, compiled by Hazel Britton)



Masked Lapwing with nest and eggs at the playing field near Don College.

The above quotation sparked some discussion recently and reminded me of my article “Winged Watchdogs” written for the Spring 2001 edition of *The Natural News*. The following is a revised version.

Love them or hate them, Masked Lapwings, (*Vanellus miles*) with their distinctive appearance and penetrating call must be among our best known birds. For me, their call is the most evocative of all our native species and is reminiscent of my childhood in Hobart where flocks would congregate on the playing field opposite my home. It was one of the birds that frequented the city and sparked my interest in ornithology.

I have heard these birds described as “possums of the air”. Perhaps this refers to the number of complaints about the birds receive by Parks and Wildlife, second only apparently to the number of complaints received about possums. Or is it because, like possums, they have thrived in the human-altered environment and are now conspicuous components of our wildlife? Whatever the reason, their presence at close quarters could be regarded as an opportunity rather than an annoyance. In large mainland cities some residents welcome the sight of parent birds with their delightful chicks as a reminder that nature can still exist,

even in areas dominated by concrete, glass, metal and traffic.

The Masked Lapwing was uncommon in Tasmania at the time of European settlement and was restricted to relatively small areas of natural grassland. As the land was cleared for towns and cities and agricultural development rapidly increased areas of suitable habitat there was a corresponding increase in lapwings. The birds find paddocks, playing field, school grounds, airfields, roadside verges and backyards to their liking and these days Tasmania is considered their stronghold. As Hazel wrote: *‘They are our most successful and common resident shorebird.’*

North America has a similar species. The Killdeer is a type of plover that frequents the same sort of habitats as Masked Lapwings, flies in a similar manner, has an equally strident call and a broken wing act that is just as proficient. In the Los Angeles Region it is describe as *‘our most widespread “shorebird”’*.

Birds are remarkable animals that have adapted to survive in every habitat on the planet from the harshest hottest deserts, cold

dry mountain tops, and arctic and antarctic regions. Masked Lapwings and Killdeer favour open spaces, and we have provided them with plenty.

But why do they nest in places that seem exposed and silly to us? For example, there is a nest next to the curb at Bell's Parade in Latrobe where there's a regular flow of traffic and/or people visiting the Australian Axman's Hall of Fame. And, as Hazel wrote, they often nest on roundabouts with traffic whizzing past. But is this exactly the point? Lots of activity during the day could provide protection from diurnal predators (e.g. raptors and cats) that are very unlikely to risk life and limb trying to snaffle a lapwing in such a location. And remember, Masked Lapwings rarely fly by day; they usually move about at night to avoid attack from raptors. If they do take to the wing during the day, chances are that it's because they're trying to deter a hawk, eagle or falcon.

Could their nesting sites also provide

protection from nocturnal predators? Places that are well lit at night (e.g. playgrounds and Bell's Parade), may be a deterrent to cats and foxes; and well-lit places may not be favourite hunting grounds of nocturnal predators such as owls. Also, the Masked Lapwings' strident calls may be off-putting to potential predators who would not venture into open places in such circumstances.

Warmth? - It is quite common to see Masked Lapwings standing on bitumen roads. These are likely to be much warmer on the feet than grassy areas and their proximity to a nest site may provide some additional warmth.

The Masked Lapwing was previously called the Spur-winged Plover (or simply 'plover' to most Tasmanians), but its name was changed to conform to international standards of classification and nomenclature and to better reflect its relationship to northern Hemisphere lapwings.

The resident lapwing, with its preference for



The Killdeer of North America occupies similar habitats to Masked Lapwings and it has been just as successful. Photograph: Alan D. Wilson. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0

habitats we have created, allows us the privilege of observing its breeding and complex social system at close quarters. Its nest, a slight depression sometimes lined with grass, twigs, pebbles or dried dung, is usually situated near temporary water. Egg-laying can begin as early as June and after a period of about four weeks, the young are led to the water's edge where they find an abundance of invertebrate food as well as seeds and other vegetable matter.

Both parents share the tasks of incubation and guarding the nest and young. If an intruder is spotted the familiar strident call is uttered and if this fails to deter, it resorts to dive bombing passers-by. While this is undoubtedly disconcerting for those being swooped, I am yet to hear of anyone being wounded by the spur. Instead the spur is probably used to greatest effect when attacking high-flying predators such as Swamp Harriers or Brown Falcons; spectacular aerial combats occur when these species come into conflict.

Two subspecies of Masked Lapwings inhabit Indonesia, New Guinea and Australia; *miles* in areas north of Townsville and *novaehollandiae* in the south.

The birds can move great distances. A pair of the southern subspecies made its way to New Zealand in 1932, where the population has spread throughout the country. Vagrant birds of the southern subspecies have also reached the southwest of Western Australia and are occasionally seen in New Guinea. They have been recent reports of breeding in New Caledonia.

The ability of this bird to expand its range in association with human habitation is fairly unusual in the bird world. One may wonder at the corresponding declines in the birds whose habitat was cleared to provide those conditions so favoured by lapwings. The ability of the lapwing to spread also raises questions about the potential for speciation and possible competition with local endemic species.

Masked Lapwings seem to prefer undertak-

ing their long-distance travels at night. This may be because their characteristic erratic jerky flight, to which its name alludes, is not strong enough to out-fly predatory birds. Now that I live in a place without any lapwing habitat, it is only when they undertake their nocturnal sojourns over our house that I hear their evocative call.



This young Masked Lapwing had been standing on a sealed road which was probably warmer on its feet than wet grass.

'Sponsor a species': your opportunity to be a part of Australian fungal history!

Fungimappers are busy working towards publishing a second edition of Fungimap's field guide to Australian fungi, *Fungi Down Under*. This project involves hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of volunteer time to identify and record the species, convert this data into maps, describe the species, source the images and manage the project.

Please consider donating to the Austral Fungi Fund which will help publish the book.

<https://fungimap.org.au/index.php/get-involved/sponsor-a-species>

Fluffy the ‘brancher’

Sarah Lloyd

In 2014 I was in the gully near home when I noticed a Wedge-tailed Eagle’s nest about 50 meters down the hill from the fallen eucalypt I was monitoring for slime moulds. As is typical in Tasmania, the nest was in the fork of a huge eucalypt located in an east-facing gully sheltered from prevailing westerlies. It probably had a panoramic view over nearby farmland.

We weren’t sure if the nest was being used in the 2017/18 breeding season as we hadn’t seen the adults fly over our house from the west as they had done in 2015 when they bred there. This is possibly because a large swathe of forest to our west had been cleared during the year.

The photo (front cover) was taken on December 4 2017 when the persistent calling of an eagle attracted my attention. (I had also heard it the previous day from lower down the gully –i.e. closer to the nest). I ventured down the hill and saw a young bird at about eye level. On the evening of the same day we watched the youngster, which was still on the blackwood log in the photo, being fed by one of the parents. We didn’t see or hear it the following day but saw it again on the evening of December 6 when it was very close to my regular walking track. I heard it again a few days later and saw two adults flying above the house.

On December 11 2017 I emailed wildlife biologist and raptor expert Nick Mooney to let him know about the young wedge. His immediate reply: ‘Wow, that’s early’, but a more considered response arrived minutes later:

‘Can you give me a date on the photo please? It looks a bit young to have left the nest and I wonder if the nest is ok. It wouldn’t hurt to check in the next few weeks.’

I emailed Nick again to get more infor-



In the late afternoon of December 6 I noticed Fluffy standing on a leaning branch only metres from my regular walking track.

mation as I’ve always thought that young eagles fledge from the nest and was therefore surprised to see it in the gully. His response:

‘Often fledglings (birds on the cusp) kind of fall out and some are adventurous hopping about and being ‘branchers’. At that age (8-9 weeks old) it should be in the nest but all well that ends well.’

I heard it in the gully on December 20 but as I’d not seen any sign of it since, was reassured when Sue Gebicki, who lives several kilometers to our west, told me she’d seen three wedgies on about December 27.

However, on January 4 I again heard the eagle in the gully and also saw an adult flying towards the nest so Sue probably saw another family. I emailed Nick again to find out more about the habits of eagles, e.g. at what age do

they fly? Nick's reply:

'At about 11 weeks but they don't go far for a long time - a month or more before they leave the nest's vicinity and then it's only gradual.'

We observed the young bird fly to the top of a stag on February 8 and thought it may have left the area as it was about two months since we'd first seen it.

On February 17 2018 we decided it was time to investigate the nest site and get location data. This was a bit tricky as although the nest had been visible from my myxo monitoring log, we could no longer see it, and had to make our way down the gully without seeing the tree we were heading for. And the reason we couldn't see the tree was immediately apparent as it had fallen across the gully. Over the decades, possibly centuries, the tree had been damaged by fire and fungi and was mostly rotten.

The gully is steep and has a number of very tall trees, mostly white gum (*Eucalyptus viminalis*) that are at least as tall as the nest tree. But their girth is less than half that of the nest tree and it will no doubt be countless decades before any have the large branches necessary to support the massive stick nest of these magnificent birds of prey.

It was interesting that the parent bird was still in the vicinity of the nest. We saw it fly to a nearby tree just as we discovered the nest tree's demise. And 'Fluffy' was calling from lower down the hill. I emailed Nick again as I was intrigued that Fluffy had survived the fall.

'Once they have some wing feathers they parachute pretty well if they are lucky and don't get pinned by branches. A good rule is if the place is good re food and peace they will try and nest somewhere near. So, the glass may still be half full. Its a success as far as maw n' paw are concerned.'

Jim Nelson - our new co-patron

Ron and I joined the Deloraine Field Naturalists (later to become the Central North Field Naturalists Inc) soon after it was started by Jim and friends. At the time I was counting birds for the Australian Bird Count and learning the names of the local plants was essential to add to the information I was gathering. Thanks to Jim Nelson's extensive knowledge, I not only learnt the names of the plants but also the names of ferns, frogs and of course, all about his beloved *Astacopsis* and *Engaeus*—he identified two species of burrowing crayfish at Black Sugarloaf.

Over the past 30 or so years I have watched Jim teach and inspire others. One of the most memorable occasions was when he introduced Micah Visoiu to ferns. Micah was the youngest member of the field nats at the time. He had a strong interest in animals of all descriptions but had shown little interest in plants. He quickly learnt the names of the ferns, moved on to flowering plants (and numerous other things) and is now among Tasmania's leading botanists.

Jim was newsletter editor for many years, often filling each edition with his own articles. It was when he called for other members to contribute on a regular basis that I started writing small articles, something that eventually lead to my writing 'career'.

Jim has inspired me and many others and it is wonderful to see him as co-patron of the Central North Field Naturalists.

The Jacky Winter

Richard Donaghey

One of my favourite Australian birds is the Jacky Winter *Microeca fascians*, a small (12-14 cm) Australasian robin with brownish upperparts and paler underparts. It occurs in all Australian States and Territories except Tasmania. The diagnostic white outer-tail feathers are conspicuous in flight and when the tail is wagged from side to side. I first observed this confiding and charming bird as a young teenager at Centennial Park, Kensington in the centre of Sydney. Like many Australian robins it mostly forages by pouncing from a low perch to the ground to capture invertebrates but also takes prey aerially by hawking. Carol and I were captivated by the Jacky Winter when we intensively studied their parental care at Gluepot Reserve in the South Australian mallee for nearly three months from mid-August to mid November in 2001. A pair of Jacky Winters maintains a breeding territory, however once we watched a nest attended by a cooperative group of two males and one female. We monitored the outcome of ten nests and watched the behaviour of adults at nests from hides for about 117 hours. During the incubation period we recorded the time that females spent on and off the nest throughout the day and the number of times the male fed the female at the nest. During the nestling period we recorded the time females spent brooding the young and the number of times that the young were fed when adults brought food to the nest.

The Jacky Winter builds a very small, shallow open cup-shaped nest of grass and bark bound with spider-web. Nests at Gluepot were usually placed on an exposed horizontal fork of a dead branch of a eucalypt. In our study female Jacky Winters spent on average 69% of the day incubating the two eggs. In passerine songbirds, such as Australian robins, there is a



Female Jacky Winters spend on average 69% of the day incubating the eggs.

trade-off between sessions spent warming the eggs and absences off the nest to gather food. For our female Jacky Winters, the average length of incubation sessions was 4.6 minutes and the average length of absences from the nest was 2.1 minutes. For a 12-h day the mean number of visits to the nest by incubating females was 108. Compared to all other Australian robins, the most striking feature of Jacky Winter incubation behaviour was their more frequent and shorter bouts on and off the nest, and their much greater number of daily visits to the nest.

In our study at Gluepot, a pair of Jacky Winters provisioned their two young at an average rate of 14.6 feeding trips per hour over the entire 19 day nestling period. Feeding rates were much higher in the Jacky Winter than other Australian robins. Of the ten nests we monitored, only two nests fledged young, a nest success of 22.2%. Nest predation is the primary cause of nest failure in Australian birds, so presumably eight nests failed due to predation. Jacky Winters darted off the nest



Jacky Winter nestlings have mottled plumage and adopt an upright cryptic posture.

in response to a nearby Collared Sparrowhawk or Grey Currawong and didn't return to the nest until the predator departed. Other potential nest-predators of Jacky Winter nests at Gluepot included the Australian Raven, Grey Shrike-thrush and Grey Butcherbird. We observed nesting Jacky Winters expelling Yellow-plumed Honeyeaters from their nest area. Yellow-plumed Honeyeaters steal nest material from active robin nests so Jacky Winters defended their nests from these honeyeaters. Nestling Jacky Winters have mottled plumage and adopt a motionless upright cryptic posture with bills pointing upward (see photo) suggesting these traits have evolved as camouflage against diurnal avian predators. The Jacky Winter has a low clutch-size and high nest-predation. Nest predation theory predicts that in response to high nest-predation, birds should evolve long incubation sessions and short absences off the nest so as to reduce activity at the nest. The more frequent and short bouts on and off the nest and high nest visitation in the Jacky Winter contradict this

theory so these traits may have evolved to meet the energy needs of the female in response to food availability. The Jacky Winter builds a replacement nest after nest failure and has been known to produce two broods in a season. Annual productivity in the Jacky Winter is low due to high nest-predation but is counteracted by an extended breeding season, *frequent replacement nests and multiple broods*.

Carol and I were very fortunate that we could spend time at Gluepot unravelling the fascinating life history of the Jacky Winter.

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A pair of Jacky Winters at Gluepot Reserve fed their two young at an average rate of 14.6 feeding trips per hour over the entire 19 day nestling period.

Walks and other events

May 6, Hagley: Wedge-tailed Eagle workshop and field trip: Dr Clare Hawkins is organising a state-wide citizen science survey of Wedge-tailed Eagles at the end of May. (See www.naturetrackers.com.au.) Clare will present a workshop at Hagley Primary School starting at 10.00 a.m. After lunch, there will be a field trip on private property on the Meander River at Westbury, details will be provided at the workshop. Please bring a plate to share at morning tea, tea and coffee will be provided. For further information, contact Sue Gebicki. (details below) Please let Sue know if you will be attending to allow for catering.

June 3, Lower Barrington: Fungi at the property of Philip Milner. Meet at 10.00 a.m. at Philip's property at the end of Allisons Road, Lower Barrington. Allisons Road is 1 km south of the Lower Barrington township on Sheffield Main Road.

July 1, Reedy Marsh Reserve and Brushy Lagoon: A walk through the reserve to record species, followed by bird-watching on Brushy Lagoon. If travelling from north west coast, follow Frankford Rd through Frankford, turn right into Priestleys Lane, turn right onto Brushy Rd. For travellers from Westbury, follow Birrallee Rd to turnoff onto Priestleys Lane, then left at Brushy Rd. For everyone, take left fork in Brushy Road to boat ramp. Leader Sue Gebicki 0400860651

August 5, Annual General Meeting and winter social at Jim Nelson's place, 68 Dynan's Bridge Rd, Weegena. The AGM will start at 10.30 a.m. and will be followed by lunch – please bring a plate to share.

September 2, Narawntapu: Two walks are offered: a relatively easy one led by Philip Milner, and a more strenuous walk led by Ian Ferris. More details will be available at a later date in the e-news. Meet at 10.00 a.m. at the car park near the visitors' centre.

October 7, Badger Range: Meet at Sheffield IGA supermarket car park at 10.00 a.m. To reach Kimberley's Lookout involves a climb of about 200 metres, including a few steep sections. Overall the climb is rated easy to moderate. Expect frogs and orchids. Leaders Martha and Rod McQueen 6393 2121.

April - PIXELS (Deloraine Digital Art Gallery) presents Sarah Lloyd's SLIME MOULDS: NATURE'S MINIATURE JEWELS at Deloraine Online Access Centre, 21 West Parade, Deloraine. Open: Mon to Fri 10 – 4, Sat 10 – 3, Sun 10 – 1, closed public holidays. A printed display of SLIME MOULDS: NATURE'S MINIATURE JEWELS will be at the Meander Valley Council Chambers, 26 Lyall St., Westbury, in June.

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