

THE HISTORICAL LIST of BIRDS WITHIN THE MOGGILL CREEK CATCHMENT: 1909 TO 2012

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INTRODUCTION

The bird species living within the Moggill Creek Catchment have been recorded for more than one hundred years. The earliest specific record is dated 1909. This bird list and other lists from the Catchment stretching across the years from 1900 to 2012, are held by Birdlife Australia (previously Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union, RAOU). The RAOU was founded in 1901 in Melbourne to promote the study and conservation of Australian birds. Other bird lists for the Catchment are held by Birds Queensland (previously Queensland Ornithological Society) which was founded in 1969 in Brisbane. Birds Queensland holds records of birds in the Catchment from about 1966 to 2012. Other records are held in the Queensland Museum and other Australian and overseas museums.

From the time of Joseph Banks and James Cook in 1770 through to the middle of the twentieth century the most common way of surveying the birds of an area was to collect birds by shooting them and offering the skins to an Australian or overseas museum or to a private collection. The earliest and most famous scientist who systematically researched the birds of Australia was John Gould. He and his wife Elizabeth, an artist, arrived in Australia in 1838. Elizabeth said this about John's method of research: he proved himself to be "a great enemy to the feathered tribe, having shot a great many beautiful birds and robbed others of their nests and eggs¹."

One hundred years after Gould, the RAOU Journal, Emu, in 1948 reported on the Australian Interstate RAOU Conference held in Perth on 13 September 1948. Part of the activities of the conference was a camp-out at the mouth of the Murchison River to survey the birds in this largely unexplored area. Part of the discussion at the conference concerned the issue of collection (killing) of birds at this new site. On one side it was pointed out that "ornithology largely owed its present high standard to the activities of former collectors" whereas on the other side it was argued that "collecting on a camp under the auspices of the Union would create an unfavourable impression on the general public. Nothing should be done to disabuse the public of its regard for the Union as the upholder of bird protection." In the end, the conference made the decision that "no collecting gear be taken on the camp."

Since 1948, binoculars, spotting scopes and mist nets have steadily replaced rifles as the preferred method of determining the list of bird species that live in a particular area. However, the skins that were submitted to the Queensland Museum in that early era are still important. In 1968, D.P. Vernon, on behalf of the Queensland Museum published the

¹ Nicholas Rothwell, The Weekend Australian Review, 21-22 April 2012, page 20.

book “Birds of Brisbane and Environs” which listed 345 species. The list was based on “specimens in the Queensland Museum collections, published reports and, to a lesser degree, verified sightings.” Note that, in 1966, the non-invasive method of “sightings” with binoculars, was the method least used. In 1977, Vernon and the Museum published another edition of the Birds of Brisbane and added 38 species to the original list, to make the total 383. Three of the species added in 1977 are surprising: Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo; Sulphur-crested Cockatoo and the Cicadabird. The latter two in particular, are very common now in and around Brisbane and illustrate the large changes that can take place in the bird species in an area over a short time.

In 1991 the Queensland Museum produced an atlas of Queensland’s fauna (Ingram & Raven, 1991). The distribution maps for over 600 Queensland birds contained in this book were based on the 18,500 specimens located at the Museum. On average, the Museum holds about 30 skins per species of bird.

Vernon’s 1968 book on the birds of Brisbane is important in the derivation of an Historical Bird List for the Moggill Creek Catchment. It represents the list of bird species that were known to reside in a large area that includes the Moggill Creek Catchment. Vernon’s list is an authoritative snapshot of the known birds in Brisbane 44 years ago. As well as the bird list, Vernon’s book consists of detailed treatments of a subset of the 383 birds. In some of the detailed information mention is made of where certain species are numerous. For example, comparing the situation in 1968 with now the picture is as follows:

Grey Crowned Babbler – “common in Brookfield” in 1968 but may be locally extinct in 2012 in the Moggill Creek Catchment

Jacky Winter - “fairly common in Brookfield” in 1968 but may be locally extinct in 2012, last record 1983

Grey Fantail - “In winter months, very common in Kenmore and Brookfield” in 1968 and still very common in 2012

Satin Bowerbird - “It is fairly common in Kenmore and Brookfield” in 1968 and still fairly common in 2012

Regent Bowerbird “It is fairly common in Kenmore and Brookfield” in 1968 and still fairly common in Upper Brookfield in 2012

These five examples illustrate that the habitat changes which have taken place in the Catchment since 1968, can cause some species to become locally extinct, and not affect other species.

AIM OF DERIVING AN HISTORICAL BIRD LIST FOR THE MOGGILL CREEK CATCHMENT

The first aim of this exercise is to derive a list of birds that would be expected to be found in the Moggill Creek Catchment over a five year cycle. This five year cycle is chosen to include the large climate patterns associated with El Nino and La Nina which occur on a 3 to 7 year

cycle. The second aim is to determine which bird species have become extinct in the Catchment as a result of increased urbanisation over the last fifty years.

The birds that can be found in the Catchment, over a long period of time can be categorised into six groups:

1. *Resident Birds*: birds that can be found throughout the year in the Catchment. The constant presence of these birds can be predicted from the availability of suitable habitat. Examples: Magpies, Lewin's Honeyeaters, Fairy Wrens, Treecreepers.
2. *Migrant Birds*: birds that come to the Catchment at particular times of the year, usually for the winter period or the summer period. The presence of these birds at particular months of the year can be reliably predicted. Examples: Rose Robin, Cicadabird, Monarchs, Flycatchers, Cuckoos.
3. *Locally Nomadic Birds*: birds that through feeding requirements must travel to distant locations throughout the year; or birds that occupy large territories that may overlap with sections of the Catchment. The presence of these birds cannot be predicted, but they are observed randomly throughout the year at a fairly constant number of times. Examples: Powerful Owls, White-headed Pigeon, Common Bronzewing, Eastern Great Egret.
4. *Climate Nomadic Birds*: birds that have to respond to the consequences of the large El Nino or La Nina weather patterns for the changes to their preferred habitat. For example, the 2009 drought (El Nino) brought some inland birds to the Catchment; and the 2011 floods (La Nina) allowed some birds to leave the Catchment and go to the interior of Australia. Examples: Topknot Pigeons, Musk Lorikeets.
5. *Vagrant Birds*: usually a single bird that is found far from its usual location and habitat, and therefore its presence is anomalous. These birds can be out of place for various reasons. For example, birds get lost during their long migrations and end up in odd places. These observations are usually never repeated. Examples: Sooty Owl, Ground Cuckoo Shrike.
6. *Escapee Birds*: birds do escape from captivity! There are many native bird species held in captivity in places where the wild bird would never be found. When these birds escape into the local Catchment forest they are again anomalous. Example: Major Mitchell's Cockatoos were recently seen in the Catchment.

The aim of this historical study is to derive a list that includes the first four categories of birds, and to exclude the vagrant and escapee birds. The latter two categories are recorded in the historical lists but will not be included here. Therefore, the birds recorded once in the published databases, or birds that are clearly escapees, or unverified sightings of birds are not included in the Historical List.

BIRD DATABASES USED TO DERIVE THE HISTORICAL BIRD LIST

Three independent bird sightings databases were used to derive the Historical List for the Catchment. The three databases are:

1. Birdata: a large database managed by BirdLife Australia in Melbourne (Andrew Silcocks); and Birdline Southern Queensland (Eremaea): sponsored by BirdLife Southern Queensland and managed in Brisbane but duplicated in the

Birdatadatabase

<http://www.birddata.com.au/homecontent.do><http://www.ereamaea.com/BirdlineRecentSightings.aspx?Birdline=7>

2. Sightings Database: managed by Birds Queensland in Brisbane (David Niland)http://birdsqueensland.org.au/sightings_bydate_all.php
3. University of Queensland database: managed by Hugh Possingham and Rich Fuller at The University of Queensland.

Deriving the Historical Bird List for the Catchment from these three sources is not without its complications! The major complication is retrieving sightings that pertain only to the Catchment. The source which can be used with the most confidence in this respect is the one from The University of Queensland. It consists of bird sightings on and around the Gold Creek Reservoir, and alongside the nearby Gold Creek Road. These observations are certainly of birds within the catchment.

The Birddata sightings are divided into several historical segments, each of which has a different way of identifying the location of a sighting and vetting the sighting before they are entered into the database. The historical segments are as follows:

1901 – 1977: This is historical data compiled by BirdLife Australia. Its surveys are associated with outings undertaken by the RAOU, published in EMU or by individual submissions. The actual assigning of the data to a particular location with great specificity is difficult or impossible. Some of this data was retrieved by Andrew Silcocks and assigned to the Catchment but it is not definitive. This data was also entered without vetting or verification in many cases and so is more problematic. This data has been used in the Historical List for the Catchment and is questionable and needs to be regarded with caution.

1977 – 1981: *The Atlas of Australian Birds* (1984). The data for The Atlas were collected over five years. The location of the bird sightings were specified within a 1° grid, with birders encouraged to survey smaller 10' grids where possible. Unfortunately not one of the surveys for The Atlas fell within the Moggill Creek Catchment (Andrew Silcocks – BirdLife Australia). The Catchment has an area of 57.6 square kilometres, and a 1° grid has an area more than 10,000 square kilometres; which means the Catchment is about 0.5% of a 1° grid and it was missed. None of The Atlas data was used for this Historical List.

1998 – 2002: *The New Atlas of Australian Birds* (2003). The data for this new atlas were collected by 7000 birders who submitted 279,000 survey reports (list of birds sightings at a certain place and time) over five years. The total number of bird species recorded was 750. Expeditions were organised so that every 1° grid across Australia had bird surveys carried out within it. The birders were encouraged to survey as many 10' grids as possible across Australia. The surveys from birders were submitted to a vetting committee which considered every survey report and then sought further evidence when querying a sighting. The birders were encouraged to use Global Positioning Systems to record the location of their surveys so it is much

easier to search for surveys in this database within the Catchment. The data from The New Atlas that could confidently be assigned to the Catchment was used in this Historical List.

2003 – 2012 – 2003 : *The Third Atlas of Australian Birds* (2003). Birders throughout Australia are now constantly submitting surveys from known GPS locations. These surveys are carefully vetted before being stored in the database – Birddata. Recently BirdLife Australia celebrated the 1 millionth survey submission, a major milestone for monitoring the birdlife of Australia and the impact of negative and positive influences on that birdlife. The data from 2003 to the present was used for this Historical List and has strong credibility but is still somewhat questionable because of its reliance on accurate identification by the birders and on their ability to detect the birds at the specified location.

The database managed by Birds Queensland was commenced in 1969 when it was founded in Brisbane. Its database suffers from the birder errors just mentioned, they cannot be avoided, but what makes it difficult to use accurately is the method by which the early lists were derived. The lists were prepared by a group going on an excursion to a significant bird site, but the practice was to record all birds seen on the excursion not just the birds at the site. So even though it is possible to identify excursions that ended in the Catchment, not all birds on the list are relevant. The more recent data on individual species data is vetted and given a specific location; so can be used with confidence. The Historical List for the Catchment has used the Birds Queensland data which has been selected as carefully as possible.

Birds differ in their “detectability”, some are quiet, some are loud; some are secretive, some are brazen; some are numerous, some are rare; some are big, some are small; some are active in the day, some are active at night. For this reason alone, all databases have errors in them. This Historical List has attempted to take these errors into account.

LISTS OF BIRDS SUBMITTED BY MEMBERS OF THE MOGGILL CREEK CATCHMENT GROUP

Fifteen survey lists were submitted in response to the invitation sent out on 12 March 2012 to Members of the Moggill Creek Catchment Group. These submissions were compiled into a single list of birds sighted in the Catchment. The earliest data was from 1993, and the latest 2012. Unfortunately, not many of the sightings of individual species were specifically dated, although the location of the sightings was very explicit, mostly the properties of the members. Therefore, only parts of this data were used in the historical list but all of it is still very important for other reasons.

When the submissions were collated the members had observed 139(83%) of the bird species in the Current List of 167 birds, which is a very encouraging result. The breakdown of the 28 birds not recorded by the members is as follows:

- Seven large nomadic water birds: Great & Pied Cormorants, Pelican, White-necked Heron, Great Egret, Grey Teal duck & Black Swan. The Members would need to live near or survey at the Reservoir to see these birds.
- One fruit dove (Wompoo) that is very rarely found in the Catchment.
- Four raptors : Whistling Kite, Collared Sparrowhawk, Australian Hobby & Peregrine Falcon that are highly nomadic and therefore rare in the Catchment
- Two waterbirds: Lewin's Rail and Black-fronted Dotterel that are either secretive or small and require a deliberate visit to a very specialised habitat to observe them
- One rosella (Crimson): very rarely in the Catchment which is at the extreme northern edge of the bird's distribution along the east coast
- Three of the rare or less obvious cuckoos: Pallid, Brush, Oriental
- Five woodland birds which are very difficult to detect and rare in the Catchment: Speckled Warbler, Buff-rumped Thornbill, Black-chinned Honeyeater, White-bellied Cuckoo Shrike, Russet-tailed Thrush
- Three uncommon rainforest birds: Noisy Pitta, Brown Gerygone, Barred Cuckoo-Shrike
- Two grassland birds: Golden Headed Cisticola, Tawny Grassbird

So there is a rationale for the absence of these birds from the Members' Bird List for the Catchment.

Almost every Member's survey recorded the big eight "black and white" fully urbanised species: Sulphur-crested Cockatoo, Pied and Grey Butcherbirds, Magpie, Currawong, Crow, Mudlark and Willie Wagtail; and the two large noisy summer migrant cuckoos: Koel and Channel-Billed. But more importantly, the Members strongly recorded (50% to 80%) fifteen woodland, riparian zone and forest birds: White-headed Pigeon, Bar-shouldered Dove, Tawny Frogmouth, Pacific Baza, Southern Boobook, Azure Kingfisher, Sacred Kingfisher, White-browed Scrubwren, Striated Pardalote, Lewin's Honeyeater, Noisy Friarbird, Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike, Figbird, Olive-backed Oriole and Spangled Drongo. This latter result is very encouraging but is also a measure of the detectability of these fifteen species.

LOCALLY EXTINCT BIRDS AND OTHER MATTERS DERIVED FROM THE HISTORY

An examination of the Historical Bird List for the Moggill Creek Catchment leads to the conclusion that probably only two bird species are locally extinct. In other words, these two bird species can be proven to have once been in the Catchment, but are now no longer present. The two bird species are:

Grey Crowned Babbler (Pomatostomus temporalis)

Jacky Winter (Microeca fascinans)

These two bird species are resident woodland birds. The Grey Crowned Babbler feeds on the ground in groups that "babble" to each other as they busily and cheerfully forage in the leaf litter. They also nest together and generally are a bird species that form stable, resident communities. They are wonderful to watch as they feed. On the other hand, the Jacky Winter is a solitary species, and is usually found perched alone on a fence wire or post, or low branch waiting to pounce on an insect. Jacky Winters are inquisitive and will come up

close to observe us as we watch them. Both birds are not shy and when present are easily observed and heard, in other words they have high detectability. In the last 20 years the changes to the structure and composition of the woodlands in the Catchment must have changed in a disadvantageous way for these two beautiful, entertaining and confident birds. These two birds could be lured back by specific habitat programs.

There is some evidence that the Riflebird and Pale Yellow Robin were present in the Catchment at some stage. These two rainforest species do not tolerate disturbance. It is the view of Hugh Possingham that these two birds should be targeted by a process to lure them back, as they would be clear indicators that the rainforest in the Catchment is recovering strongly.

There is some confusion about whether the Glossy Black Cockatoo has been present in the Catchment. Part of the problem is the ever present possibility of confusing them with the Red-tailed Black Cockatoo. Greg Roberts and Doug Dow believe that the Red-tailed Black Cockatoos reported to the bird databases in the Historical List below are probably Glossy Black Cockatoos. And four birders on an excursion reported to the BQ database that the Glossy Black Cockatoo was present at the Reservoir on 19 February 2003. A survey will be undertaken in the future to make a determination about this complex and important matter.

The question arises concerning the representativeness of the sites at which the bird surveys underpinning the Historical Bird List have been conducted in the Catchment. Are the sites sampling the whole of the Catchment? To look at this question the GPS sites from which bird lists have been submitted to the Birddata database since 1998 were plotted on a Google Earth map. The broad conclusions are as follows:

- 40% were conducted in the Gap Creek Valley, some on private properties
- 40% were conducted in the Gold Creek Valley including the Reservoir, some on private properties
- 18% were conducted on the lower floodplains of the Brookfield/Upper Brookfield valley, and the southern slopes, much of it on private property
- 1% were conducted in the Savages Road Valley
- 1% were conducted in the Western half of the Upper Brookfield Valley

The entire dataset from the University of Queensland was submitted from sites at, on or close to the Gold Creek Reservoir. And the data from Birds Queensland is most probably from public sites accessible by road.

From this brief analysis it is clear that the published data which forms the basis of this Historical List is not completely representative. In particular, the birds associated with the foliage structures and landforms that form the most western parts of the Catchment have not been surveyed. Projects will be conducted in the future to remedy this situation. In the interim it would be very useful if the Members of the MCGG in the Upper Brookfield Valley and the Savages Rd Valley commenced careful observations and surveys of their properties and filed the results.

The number of reported sightings in the Historical Bird list matrix gives an indication of how “detectable” each bird species is in the Catchment. This calculation will be done using the surveys submitted to Birddata and by the UQ group at the Reservoir: total surveys 353 (BQ data is excluded as it contains some survey reports but many reports of individual sightings). On this basis, the Lewin’s Honeyeater was the most detectable species, it was found on 81% of surveys in the Catchment. Other species are also very findable: the Whipbird was reported as present on 75% of surveys; the Eastern Yellow Robin was reported in 60% of surveys; the Scarlet Honeyeater, White-throated Treecreeper and Striated Pardalote were reported in more than 50% of surveys. All of these birds are lovely to watch and well worth the small effort it takes to see them foraging, feeding and breeding. At the very low end of the “detectability” scale there are the “1%’ers”: White-throated Nightjar, Australian Hobby, Crimson Rosella and Pallid Cuckoo. These birds require a big effort! But again, very rewarding and detectability can be greatly increased by going to their preferred habitats at the time of the day or night when they are most active.

Australia and other countries have been researching the use of populations of specific bird species as indicators of the state of the environment and as harbingers of environmental change. Birds are useful as indicators because they occupy a wide range of habitats that are of great ecological significance; they tend to be near the top or at the top of the food chain; they have a high public profile; and their ecology is well understood. In Britain, the UK Farmland Bird Indicator is made up of 19 species that are dependent on farmland, and not able to thrive in other habitats. The UK Woodland Bird Indicator combines 38 species. The UK Farmland Indicator declined by 40% since 1970. In the Catchment it may be possible to develop such an indicator for our five natural habitats (Open Eucalypt, Lowland Rainforest, Riparian Zone, Woodlands, Open Water & Wetlands) and in the long-term make extensive use of the data we collect on bird richness (number of bird species) and bird abundance (number of birds of each species) to monitor the state of the Catchment environment.

GENERAL INFORMATION ON BIRDS AND OTHER FAUNA

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Backyard Buddies. Website provided by the Foundation for National Parks and Wildlife. www.backyardbuddies.net.au This website is for everyone who enjoys their backyard animals, wants to learn more about them, find out how to attract them and how to live with little troublemakers. The Backyard Buddies Facebook page is for all to share their stories and ideas, tips and tricks and most of all the joy of having native plants and animals at our doorsteps

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Birds of the Teralba Park & Kedron Brook. David McKay. In Brisbane Council Libraries, and has excellent photos, descriptions, and advice on where to find 65 birds in the Park and Brook All of these birds are also in the Moggill Creek Catchment.

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Wildlife Queensland. This website aims to provide understanding and effective management options for suburban wildlife. Our goal is to equip everyday people with the means to live side by side with frequently encountered backyard fauna without frustration or fear. <http://www.wildlifeqld.com.au/index.html>

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