

## BRIEF GUIDE TO BIRD WATCHING TECHNIQUES

I'm not going to go into a great amount of detail about how to observe birds and how to record notes about them here. This is because in the front of Pizzey & Knight's Field Guide to the Birds of Australia (there most likely is in most other good field guides to Australian birds) is an excellent and very comprehensive section in the introduction on bird watching techniques etc.

A summary is provided here to indicate some of the most important points to help you to have great success in what I feel is very useful, satisfying and most rewarding work, or to some of us both a work and a leisure pursuit.

The presence or absence of some bird species can often be a very good indicator of what sort of habitat you're in and its condition. Likewise the habitats type or condition can be indicative of what bird species are likely to occur there. For instance a disturbed, grassy, open woodland with little or no shrub or low tree cover is not likely to be prime habitat for small ground or understorey dwelling bird species such as the Speckled Warbler or White-browed Scrubwren. Conversely a Golden-headed Cisticola is most unlikely to be found in a Eucalypt open forest with a dense shrubby understorey. So in bird watching and bird surveys it is important to be aware of habitat type and its condition and degree of human disturbance.

Always have a good bird field guide with you to refer to such as Pizzey & Knight, either in your pack or at least in your vehicle. If you are without your field guide and you see an unfamiliar bird species very carefully make written notes or at least write it down at the soonest possible time after the sighting. When I'm in the field I'm hardly ever without my micro-cassette tape recorder, which I keep in my shirt or jacket pocket. With this recorder I make all my notes on bird sightings, habitat, vegetation types etc., which I then transcribe to paper or computer spreadsheets later. With unfamiliar bird species it is most important to record as much detail about the bird's appearance, habits or behaviour, habitat, time of day and date. Then as soon as possible confer with your field guide. If you're in Southeast Qld it's no use looking for a bird that only occurs in say Central Australia! So it is crucial to look at the species distribution maps in your field guide or be aware of the species likely to occur in the area that you're bird-watching in.

At least half the effort in identifying various bird species is in knowing the birdcalls or sounds that they make. Excellent tapes and CD's are available for recognising specific birdcalls. However when you are in the field you can build up a repertoire of bird calls in your own memory from what you hear and see by starting with the most familiar bird species and gradually adding to it. It will be more difficult if you are tone deaf or have other forms of hearing impairment, which is almost as unfortunate as being colour blind for birdwatching. If you have any of these afflictions it is indeed most unfortunate and you will find bird watching that much more difficult. However don't give up hope, as I know a couple of keen and competent birdwatchers that manage quite well despite these afflictions.

### Pointers for successful birdwatching

- Binoculars should be centre-focusing 8 x 30, 8 x 42 to 10 x 42 (or 10 x 50 for longer range such as for wading birds etc.) Binoculars should be accurately adjusted re focus for your individual optical needs (see page 13 Pizzey & Knight for focusing procedures). When not in use for any length of time your binoculars should be kept in a dustproof or waterproof bag and they should not be subjected to serious jolting or impacts, which may loosen or damage internal or delicate parts.
- A spotting scope mounted on a sturdy tripod is a useful piece of equipment if you are looking at birds, such as waders, from a considerable distance. This is because scopes usually have a much stronger magnification usually 20 x to 60 x) than most binoculars, and depending on the quality and the opticals show the subject much more clearly in poor light conditions. However because of the stronger magnification it is absolutely essential to have the scope mounted on a sturdy tripod to keep the view of the subject from being unsteady.

- Don't try to find the bird that you're looking for, with your binoculars. Look for it first without using your binoculars and by using only your eyes. Then focus your binoculars on the spot where the bird is. It sometimes pays to have your binoculars pre-focused for roughly the distance you think the bird might be at.
- Clothing worn for birdwatching should be comfortable, relatively loose fitting, with relatively blending colours, non-rustling, and have good big pockets in shirts or jackets for notebooks or micro-cassette recorder etc.
- Go quietly, don't make sudden movements or get excited and chatter. Speak quietly but don't whisper. Human whispering noises can sometimes be more alarming to some bird species than soft talking. Wear comfortable non-noisy footwear and tread carefully. At regular intervals stand perfectly still, listening and looking very carefully.
- Watch for foliage movement. Also shadow movement between you and the direction of the sun. If you sight a bird with the sun behind it, making its silhouetted identification impossible, try to move silently but quickly to a position where the sun is behind you or at a better angle.
- Listen for noises such as scratching or tearing that might give the presence of certain bird species away. Species such as Crested Shrike-tit and the Little Shrike-thrush make considerable noises tearing off bark in efforts to locate food. Ground dwelling species such as quail, lyrebirds or the logrunner spend much of their time scratching around in leaf litter.
- Be aware of migratory movements of birds. Some species such as some cuckoos either leave the country or head further north for the winter months. Other bird species preferring the shelter of rainforests in summer may move out into open forests or woodlands in their non-breeding season in winter. In other words don't waste time and effort looking for or expect to find species that aren't likely to be present at the time.
- Identifying birds by calls can be frustrating due to their many nuances (variations). Be aware that some bird species have calls, which may vary slightly or even markedly from one district to another. Also some particular species calls may vary according to the time of day or even time of year. An example of this variation is the Eastern Yellow Robin, which has a two part strident call, which it gives at dawn and dusk but seldom makes it at other times of the day. Be very wary that some bird species such as butcherbirds, lyrebirds and olive-backed orioles are clever mimics of other bird species calls. So don't be fooled, if you're in any doubt find the actual source of the call by sight.
- Remember that colouration of bird illustrations in a field guide is never as dramatic as it appears when seeing the same bird in the field. A good example of this is that a field guide illustration of a Turquoise parrot never does justice to the stunning colours of the bird when seen in real life in the field. Also remember that a juvenile bird or a bird in moult or eclipse phase may not be as well marked or as colourful as an adult bird in its breeding plumage. Additionally in some species the male markings or colours can be totally different to that of the female of the same species. This is called sexual dimorphism.

Much more could be said to assist you with your bird observation and identification, but its all been said in much more detail in the various and very good Australian bird field guides that are readily available in most good book shops. If you don't already have one it's well worth the expense of purchasing one.

I wish you very rewarding bird-watching

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