



Birdsville Track, September 2017

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Prologue

In September 2016 I had some time booked for a birding trip to the South Australian outback. Paul Coddington and I planned to do the Strzlecki Track, in the far NE of South Australia, which has an excellent cast of high quality desert specialists, headed by the stunning Letter-winged Kite (for which Strzlecki is probably *the* most reliable place in the whole of Australia). The 2016 winter in Adelaide was one of the wettest in recent memory and the interior of the state also got a dousing, so much so that various of the tracks in the North and East were officially closed meaning our trip was touch and go for a month prior.

In retrospect the sensible thing would have been to plan a completely different itinerary, keeping the powder dry for another run some other time or year. Indeed Paul had done just this, suggesting a couple of fall-backs. Stubbornly – and wrongly as it turned out – I pushed us to head north, wanting to nail Short-tailed Grasswren in the Flinders Ranges once and for all (I had previously dipped on 3 occasions), and harbouring hopes that we would get lucky with the weather and the tracks would be open. On arrival in Lyndhurst I dared to hope – the weather had not been good but the Strzlecki was still officially open. However after another evening of rain, overnight it closed and we had to make our first forced reschedule. Up to Marree we went, again vainly hoping that Birdsville would have fared better. Indeed it had – just – and the track was still officially open. However there were ominous clouds ahead and the forecast suggested these were very widespread. Finally seeing sense, I agree with Paul that the risk of getting stranded was not worth taking. We beat a retreat south, held up for 3 hours a creek crossing south of Leigh Creek (where 5in of rain had fallen in an hour!), and trundled west instead to Lake Gilles, a large, remote stand of mallee off the Eyre Hwy that stretches 1700km from Port Augusta to Norseman in WA, and where a few WA birds find their eastern-most populations (Western Yellow Robin, Blue-breasted Fairywren and Rufous Treecreeper).

In the end we still had an excellent trip in which I picked up a number of SA ticks and even a few lifers (Short-tailed Grasswren and Crimson Chat in the Flinders, Blue-

breasted Fairywren in Lake Gilles), and we dubbed the trip the “Two Grasswren Tour” for our success in locating both the Short-tailed and also Western at both Whyalla Conservation Park and on the Iron Knob road. But I had still to taste what arguably is the *true outback*, off the bitumen, into the desert, where life is on the edge and various very special birds live.

Several weeks before our planned 2017 trip, word came through on the local birding Facebook feed that a pair of Letter-winged Kites had been found on the Adelaide plains north of the city. This is not unprecedented – a small colony established near Port Wakefield in 2014 in response to a local plague of mice – and the plains this year were indeed again in the grip of a mouse plague that resulted in a breeding bonanza for raptors with Spotted Harriers, Black-shouldered Kites, Kestrels and even Little Ravens all cashing in on the glut of food. Even so, LWK more traditionally breed in the arid interior and thus a fantastic opportunity was presented to twitch these stunning and rare birds on a quiet track about 1 hour north of Adelaide.



A couple of days later, Paul too, saw one of the LWKs in appalling conditions with high winds and battering rain. It was devastating to learn that just a few days after that, probably in response to the horrendous weather, both LWK had departed leaving their tiny chicks to starve in the nest.

As a result of this unexpected twitch we turned our attention to the Birdsville Track, which like the Strz links outback SA with far western Qld, but in a more northerly direction. The Birdsville holds a similar array of desert species with the addition of 4 species that are much harder (though not impossible) on the Strzlecki: Flock Bronzewing, Yellow Chat, Grey Grasswren and another rare raptor of the interior, Grey Falcon, known to local birders as the *Grey Ghost*.

Day 1, Adelaide to Lyndhurst

We had planned to leave pre-dawn to get to Port Augusta by 7.30ish, but at the last minute I was needed to drive the kids to school, so it was 8.45 before we could get underway, and 12.30 by the time we got to Port Augusta with the least interesting part of the drive under our belts. We still had plenty of time to reach our first camping spot, Lyndhurst about 600km north of Adelaide, though we now had much less time up our sleeves for birding en route.

We stopped for a spot of lunch at the excellent Arid Lands Botanical Garden just outside Port Augusta. We were checking out a report of Black Honeyeater from a few days before, but in less-than-ideal, cool and blustery conditions we saw very few birds and certainly no BH (which would be a state tick for me). Pick of the bunch was – somewhat bizarrely – a **Buff-banded Rail**.

From Port Augusta the road winds scenically up through the Flinders Ranges, crossing River Redgum lined creek beds and fields of scattered Blue-bush with the occasional lonely ruin a reminder of the harsh lifestyle for the early settlers. Beyond Hawker we stopped at a spot recommended to us by birding mate Chris Steeles. Our late departure meant we had very little time to spare here, but we did get the trip off to a good start with a few **White-winged Fairywrens** and a very smart male **Orange Chat** – only my second ever. Little did we know this would be one of the commonest birds of the trip.

In 2016 the road leading from Parachilna east to the gorge had provided me Paul with some outstanding birding, with several (lifer) Crimson Chats, flocks of Budgies and Black-faced Woodswallows, at least 2 Pied Honeyeaters and ubiquitous White-winged Fairywrens. Today we drove the road slowly hoping for more of the same, looking and listening for any avian activity, but it was much quieter today. A flock of **Zebra Finches** burst from the track-side after a couple of km, and we stopped to investigate, finding not only the Zebbies, but several more **Orange Chat**. In the end we realized there were at least 60 Orange Chat here, as well as a few **Black-faced Woodswallow**.

Pretty soon though, it was time to press on to make Lyndhurst before nightfall. We rolled into the pub car-park at 5.30 with enough time to set camp (me in swag: 2min worth or unclipping and rolling out; Paul in his 1980s rigid-pole tent taking rather more effort. I *may* have mentioned *Swallows and Amazons* at one point...). Back in the Kluger we drove the short distance to the airstrip. A year earlier I drove nervously around the very wet and muddy area, avoided getting bogged, and we found 5 gorgeous Inland Dotterel in the car headlights. We did not, however manage any photos and we were hoping to rectify that tonight. Sadly, we spent 2 hours pre- and post-sunset finding an **Australian Pipit** and not much else.

Back at the pub the publican confirmed that very few people were seeing dotterels at the airstrip this year. It had not been an auspicious start to the trip, and we consoled ourselves with watching the first half of the Qualifying Final between Richmond and Geelong, sucked a few Coopers Pale, and devoured a monster rump steak each.

Day 2, Lyndhurst to Mungerannie

At dawn we packed up as quickly as possible and drove the mere 30km north to the stunning ruined town of Farina where there is a beautiful, rustic campsite, and made some breakfast. Had we not been spotlighting at the airstrip in Lyndhurst the night before we surely would have stayed here instead.

Waiting for the kettle to boil, a familiar repeated single note drew my attention and I looked up to see a gorgeous **Red-backed Kingfisher** had perched in a dead tree

just opposite our picnic table. A few minutes later it was joined by a pair of dainty doves, my first lifers of the trip: **Diamond Dove**.



Farina campground is not only pretty, historic and birdy, it has also been host to a pair of **Black-breasted Buzzards** – another of the special outback raptors we hoped to connect with – for the last few years. We saw no sign as we arrived but with careful scanning Paul noticed a large nest by the creek-line. It appeared unoccupied, but we packed our breakfast things away and drove down to check it out. Peering with bins I was able to make out the barest hint of the head of a bird, and if we walked a bit further away up a small slope we could see unequivocally that there was a **Black-breasted Buzzard** brooding on the nest. This view, while tickable, was reminiscent of my initial, unsatisfactory view of Harpy Eagle in Venezuela. “I guess there’s a good chance the other bird is not far aw...”, I started to say when, mid-sentence, I landed bins on the other bird, less than 50m away on an open branch keeping vigil not far from the nest. I had seen BBB in NT on my brief road-trip to Uluru, but these were my first in SA.



Lots of roadkill, and consequently good numbers of **Black Kites** and **Wedge-tailed Eagles**, punctuated the next 50km to Marree where we refueled before hitting the famous Birdsville Track.

Our first stop, mid-morning, was at Clayton River where with some effort we tracked down my next lifer target, **Red-browed Pardalote** in one of the River Redgums that grow in the now dry, sandy creek bed. A pair of parrots proved elusive and we were unable to pin down an id until a few days later we realized these must’ve been **Bluebonnets**. More **Diamond Doves** and a small flock of **Budgies** in flight rounded out the species list before we were headed north once again.



At a small dam a bit further north a large flock of several hundred **Zebra Finches** were taking advantage of the bore overflow to drink, and we spent some time trying to get nice photos of these common but stunning outback birds.



At Dulkninna Station a small marsh has formed from another bore overflow and here we found a number of species more familiar from Laratinga Wetlands near Adelaide, such as **Freckled Duck** and at least 3 very tame **Spotted Crake**. A group of birds huddled together on a dead tree over the water proved to be an Australian tick for me, **White-breasted Woodswallow**.



We had, unfortunately, now reached the part of the day when the birding slows down considerably. As we drove north another 100km or so, we wound the windows down and occasionally stopped whenever we saw corvids. Eventually one small party gave the characteristic rapid “Caw caw caw caw” of **Little Crow**, instead of the much commoner and lower, slower drawl of Australian Raven. This was a state tick for both of us.

We took a late lunch on the roadside a few km north of Cooper Crossing. This was a spot we decided might be good for Eyrean Grasswren, but before we had finished eating lunch a car trundled up and a familiar, goateed face leaned out of the window: “I thought we were seeing ya at Farina tonight?”. It was Dave and Sue Harper, with their English friend (and world birder and guide) Andy Walker, on the penultimate day of their trip north along the Stuart Highway and back on the Oodnadatta Track (see [here](#) for their excellent blog about that trip and others from their SA Big Year). Having cleaned up expectedly quickly near Marla and on the Oodnadatta, they had used their extra days to hit the Birdsville Track to get Andy a lifer Grey Falcon. As we chatted, a **Chirruping Wedgebill** pumped out its song and **White-backed Swallows**, one of my favourite birds, swooped over the dunes. After we’d chatted with David, Sue and Andy for 30mins or so – and gratefully noted down some gen – they bombed south and we headed off into the dunes about 100m away in search of our grasswren. As soon as we got to an area of suitable-looking canegrass I tried

some playback and was immediately answered. What a promising start! But we couldn't pin it down and were gradually led over a ridge and eventually had no further audible clues as to its whereabouts. At least we had a bunch of other sites to check out.

As we walked back, we split up somewhat and I looked over to see Paul focusing his camera on something. I raised my bins and was amazed to see an **Eyrean Grasswren** sat in the one on top of a fallen dead bush! I banged off two distant record shots and hustled down to Paul. Turns out, he'd been photographing a Wood-swallow in the tree behind, and had no idea that a grasswren had popped up to taunt him! I knew where this bird was, and with just a few seconds of playback it had popped back up to the same spot. It didn't stay long enough for photos, but circled around us and now showed brilliantly on an exposed branch, tailed cocked and looking around with attitude as we both grabbed as many frames as we could. Though in retrospect the photos are bit disappointing, this was still a much better view than we had dared hope for before the trip.



Well satisfied with our haul so far, we carried on north again. The Harpers and Andy had seen Grey Falcon the night before roosting on a comms tower in the Mungerannie region, and so this became our final target for the day. We made our camp by the creek-line at the Mungerannie Roadhouse and hit the road again at about 5pm. We were aiming to be there by 5.20 when Dave had said the falcons had flown in to roost the previous night, so I was bombing along the track (which is in pretty good condition) at a fair lick when two dark birds shot across the bows. All I'd seen was a pair of dark, dumpy profiles, but these had to be **Flock Bronzewings!!** I stopped as quickly as I could and tried to get Paul onto them but they disappeared over the horizon before he could get identifiable views. Then just as we started driving again another pair bombed past which, once I'd stopped again, we followed in bins until they too dropped out of sight a long way off. Now I picked up yet another pair at much closer range and as I fired off some decidedly poor record shots, we both had our first unequivocal views in good light. Awesome to have these on the list because I am a huge fan of sandgrouse, and Flockies have the same ecological niche in Australia – indeed lovely black-and-white head pattern of the males even hints at Lichtenstein's!

We pulled up at the tower at almost exactly 5.20, but it was gusty and rather overcast. As far as we could see the birds had not arrived, so we walked up to the far side so we'd have the light behind us. From a slightly different angle I looked up again: "Shit – there's a bird there!". I hastily deployed the scope and sure enough, there was a **Grey Falcon**, tucked in behind the large north-facing dish. As we continued to watch we eventually realized that there were two birds present, the



other even more tucked in away from the wind, presumably encouraged to roost earlier by the cool, blustery conditions.

We stayed to grab some digiscoped pics and video, then drove more sedately back to Mungerannie, enjoying a stunning sunset along the way.

Once back at our camp we fired up the camp stove, and chilled out after a very successful day. Facebook update from the unexpected Optus signal in Mungerannie:

Not a bad day in the outback up the Birdsville Track. 5 lifers including Grey Falcon, Flock Bronzewing and

Eyrean Grasswren. Now got the swag set, sausages in the pan and glass of red wine. Sweet as a nut.

Day 3, Mungerannie to Pandiburra

At 5am a flock of around 200 **Galahs** descended onto some dead trees above our camp and brought our slumber to an abrupt and somewhat premature halt. I made a cup of tea and then just as we were about to head off I heard a weird honking that just kept getting louder. All of a sudden a pair of **Brolgas** flew almost directly over us and I kicked myself for not recognising the distinctive sound of cranes in flight.

First up on today's agenda was a recce of the Kalamurina Rd that heads north-west about a km north of Mungerannie. Recent ebird reports suggested Banded Whiteface can be found there, and we both needed this for SA.

The track was in pretty good nick and we cruised along it stopping occasionally at good looking gibber and scanning, hoping for Gibberbird, but we were out of luck on that score.

About 13km along, just short of yet another comms tower, I saw some movement just off the road and stopped, thinking I'd just seen a Cinnamon Quail-thrush. One answered our recording from a distance, but we decided it was too far away to chase. However, within seconds at this same spot we had tracked down a cracking **Banded Whiteface** that posed nicely in the cool morning light — only my second ever. We both fired off several shots, though on reviewing his later Paul would make an embarrassing discovery: his settings were all wrong and his pictures completely dark.



Having cracked open the Jelly Snakes for a now customary lifer celebration (we allowed ourselves to stretch the definition to state tick — it was our own tradition after all), we drove back towards Mungerannie, still scanning the roadsides and gibber for chats. Suddenly I spied movement on the left of the track and saw several small-but-stocky brown bodied scuttle off the track: **“Inland Dotterel!”** I announced immediately. We jumped out of the car and skirted around the group of about 14 birds at a safe distance to get the sun behind us for photographs. Sadly they proved too flighty with two 6-foot+ dudes bearing down on them, and each time we got to a sensible range they would scuttle a little further away. Prone on the gibber I eased forward on elbows and knees hoping I could close the gap this way, but rapidly gave up – it was painful and felt like a very low probability option.

Instead we tried something of a pincer movement but only succeeded in driving them across the track. I now sensed an opportunity – a small sandy gully indented in the gibber seemed to provide a modicum of cover and would be much more comfortable to slide long. Once again I prostrated myself on the ground and began to creep forward. This worked for a while but then they got wise and scuttled further out onto some open gibber. They didn't go far though, and by pulling myself up over the lip of the gully I could get a nice view to the birds. In fact they seemed quite settled, and I was able – slowly and painfully – to drag myself forward a metre or so at a time, firing off shots, until I had filled my boots but also ruined my knees and elbows.





We picked up a **White-winged Fairywren** and **Red-capped Robin** at another random stop where we were trying for chats and whiteface (unsuccessfully), a small flock of **Budgies** flew over and Paul spotted another group of around 8 **Inland Dotterel** on the gibber.

Back at Mungerannie by 8.30 we ate breakfast, packed our camp away, refueled, and pointed the Kluger north once more.

At Mirra Mitta bore we saw the steam from the bore-head and pulled off the track to bird by the dam for half an hour or so. Just a few days later a chap on a 4WD

expedition actually fell into the bore. His mates pulled him out but not before he'd incurred 2nd degree burns to 80% of his body from the 85deg bore water. Luckily his mates also had an emergency radio beacon to call the RFDS who airlifted him to Adelaide, lucky to be alive!

It was a less eventful stop for us, thankfully. **Orange Chats** scuttled around on the ground and in the reeds, while **Black-faced Woodswallows** swooped above and seemingly dozens of **Willie Wagtails** scolded us. A group of 4 **Brolgas**, two adults and 2 sub-adults were very confiding, strolling around casually and catching yabbies in the creek below the dam overflow. About 500m on the water trickles steadily out across the Birdsville Track and the pond by the roadside held a **Freckled Duck**, numerous **Grey Teal**, a few **Pink-eared Duck** and a couple of **Red-necked Avocet**.



At another small wetland we found around 100 **Little Corella**, 20 **Pink-eared Duck** and even greater numbers — maybe 200-300 — of **Black-tailed Nativehens** (or *Turbohooks* as they are colloquially known).

The morning had disappeared and we had still not seen a Gibberbird, despite driving through 100s of km of apparently good habitat. The unusual shine on the gibber stones gives them a weird quality that if looking into the sun the landscape appears dark grey, while looking away it takes on a rich red-brown and we decided we needed photos of this interesting phenomenon. At one somewhat random spot Paul suggested we stop for the pictures, and as soon as he opened his door he called to me: "I've just flushed a chat. I'm pretty sure it's a Gibberbird". For a bright yellow bird in a red desert setting, it took some tracking down, but once we'd found it, its upright stance on the gibber was a diagnostic give-away. We followed it for a while trying for photos but it always kept a good distance and we left with decidedly mediocre record shots in the heat-haze of 1.30 in the afternoon.

Now we had seen one, we saw several more easily – though still evading decent photos – as we pressed further north driving more or less continuously for 2 hours to our final birding spots of the day for two of the Birdsville's specialty birds.

Our first stop was 91km south of Birdsville, to one of the few spots on the main track where the fringes of Goyder Lagoon encroach on the route. The old route, or so-called Inside Track, takes a more direct northerly direction and is known as *the* best site for one of Australia's most enigmatic and difficult birds: Grey Grasswren. However the southern turnoff to the Inside Track had an ominous and unmissable

“Road Closed” sign as we passed it so it was just as well we had this backup on the main track. Unlike much of the surrounding gibber, sand, saltbush and canegrass we had passed through, this small area is dominated by lignum that grows in the usually dry, sandy creek-beds and tentacles of the lagoon. It is the favoured habitat of Grey Grasswren.

Our main plan was to try this site early morning tomorrow, but with a bit of time up our sleeves we’d decided to check it out this afternoon on the off chance. Sadly it was devoid of Grasswrens. It was also, seemingly, devoid of all birdlife and we left after 30min not having seen or heard a single bird of any kind!



Instead we bombed south 27km to the turnoff to Pandiburra Bore and made our way 20km along the dunes and across the gibber until we could see steam rising from the borehead. An amazingly rich wetland has formed here from the bore overflow and we spent the final hours of the day (and some of the evening) here enjoying the richest diversity of the trip so far.

We walked along the eastern side noting **Orange Chats** (each of which we scrutinized hoping for the much rarer Yellow), several **Black-fronted Dotterel**, a pair of **Red-necked Avocets**, **Australian Reed Warblers** chuntered from the reedbed and a number of **Purple Swamphen**. A raptor cruising over a distant reedbed seemed to be a **Spotted Harrier** (we debated the ID at the time, and again when we returned, a streaked, not spotted breast confusing us – finally we realised that the dark wingtips are diagnostic of Spotted and this was an immature bird, looking disarmingly like a Swampie). As it disappeared behind the reeds a large flock of birds burst up and we realized there were **Flock Bronzewing**s in the distance. Spooked by the harrier, they flew a long way, disappearing over a dune more than a km away. But then another flock erupted, then another, living up to their name!



The harrier had caught something but was soon hassled out of its feed by an aggressive **Brown Falcon**, and these two were shortly joined by a **Black Falcon** for a veritable raptor-fest.



We walked back towards the bore and tried the western edge. Another chat posed on the reeds and I thought I saw a white iris, so I fired off some “banker” shots to review later. I then promptly forgot all about this bird because all of a sudden we had more **Flockies** – several hundred of them, cruising past in the glorious

evening sunlight. Mostly they were into the sun but I willed a few of them to detour east of us so we could get the light behind us and a few obliged. We were even able to track down a flock on the deck, having their evening drink.

Scanning to the north I was also able to pick up an **Australian Pratincole** elegantly swooping, tern-like on long pointed wings above the marsh, then a **Hobby** put in an appearance, like its bigger cousins cashing in on the density of food here at the bore. A small group of **Sharp-tailed Sandpipers** flew over, and then Paul, in the dimming light, picked out our first unequivocal **Yellow Chat** – a very pale, white looking young male just starting to show the diagnostic black breast crescent. We counted around 4 by the time it was too dark to see any more.







We made our way back to the car by torch-light, on a suggestion from Dave Harper hoping for a grass owl. One bird that flew low over the grass on rounded wings had me going until I realised it was a **Masked Lapwing**. I also saw one or two “legit” night-birds in my torchlight but nothing identifiable until we were almost back to the car. A retinal reflection grabbed my attention and I was able to follow a bird flying up above the reed then back down. With Grass Owls on the brain I initially misidentified it, but the more I watched its repeated short up and back flights, the more it dawned on me that this was not owl behaviour — it was in fact a nightjar. By holding the bins and torch together I was able to get a magnified view in the torch-light and see the diagnostic white-wing patches of **Spotted Nightjar**.



Day 4 km91 to Mungerannie

The following morning we returned to the km91. As I exited the car, movement caught my eye as a bird dropped from near the top of a lignum bush to the ground and out of sight. For 20 seconds or so we both heard wren-like squeaking, and then

it went silent. For the next 3 hours we wandered around the lignum, seeing and hearing the occasional **White-winged Fairywren**, but not much else. Not far away from suggesting to Paul we knock it on the head, I found myself in a spot of unpromising dead-looking lignum by a dried-up pond, chasing yet another faint rattling alarm call. This one sounded a bit different from the White-winged Fairywrens, but I assumed Variegated. It seemed to be coming from a lignum about 6m in front of me, but then about 10m away at the base of another lignum I saw movement, swung my optics into action and focused, gloriously, on a pair of stunning **Grey Grasswrens**, the distinctive facial pattern drawing all of my attention for those wonderful, relieving, few seconds.

My first instinct – being the true collegial fellow I am – was to call out and attract Paul. But we had split up and Paul was some 50m away so, my next thought was “grab a record shot while you can”. No sooner had I reached for the camera by my side than they they dashed back into cover and I never saw them again.



I now managed to get Paul's attention and he came rushing over. We could hear at least one bird still in the dead bushes by the pond edge, but it was deep in the lignum and clearly aware of our presence. After 5 mins it went silent and it became apparent that both birds had managed to slink off without us seeing. Me wanting better views, and Paul wanting any view at all, we resumed the search, splitting up and fanning out again. After another hour I was ready to give up again, and mighty relieved when Paul returned with excellent news – he'd had one briefly rushing from one lignum to another. Not the views you dream about, but unequivocally identifiable and therefore tickable!

We were ready to begin the long journey home, but first indulged in a jelly snake each to celebrate the final main lifer target of the trip.

The trip back to Mungerannie was largely uneventful, as we were covering the same ground as the previous day. We saw a few more Gibberbird (now, of course, that we

had nailed one, we were swerving to avoid them every few km on the way back – almost).

At the Warburton Crossing turnoff – basically the entrance to the Simpson Desert Regional Reserve – we considered driving the 7-8km along the track to check it out, but a deteriorating track, lack of sand flag and desert parks permit (both compulsory) discouraged us.

At a site recommended by the Harpers and Andy we stopped hoping to find the Thick-billed Grasswren they'd glimpsed (apparently an isolated population of the *indulkanna* race). We were unsuccessful, but did find 3 Cinnamon Quail-thrush.



Arrival at Mungerannie with no new species at about 16.30 gave us a chance to make camp and then go for an evening drive back up the Kalamurina/Cowarie Rd that had been so productive the day before. We managed to find **Banded Whiteface** again at the same spot as yesterday, about 1km before the tower. It posed nicely and Paul was able to rectify yesterday's mistake and bag some decent photos.

Back at Mungerannie we decided not to cook tonight and grabbed a few beers (actually, Paul may have gone hi-brow and ordered a glass of white wine...) and a schnitty in the pub. I shot the breeze with the publican for a while and he showed us a video from David Gemmell of a Grey Falcon catching a budgie, filmed somewhere up on Cowarie Stn – awesome! (Also nice to see a credit at the end of the video to one Chris Steeles :-)).





After a few cold nights, it was much warmer tonight, and I left the canvas top rolled back on the swag so I could look up at the Milky Way as I dozed off.

Day 5 Mungerannie to Farina

The day began with a walk around the Derwent “River”. Apparently this used to be quite a hot-spot, but these days the bore flow is restricted, there is not a lot of water, and so fewer birds. There were still a few nice birds here, though, including a **Yellow-billed Spoonbill** which was new for the trip, and our best views of **White-breasted Woodswallow**, some cracking **White-backed Swallows** and a few **Bluebonnets**.



We walked through the dunes hoping for Eyrean Grasswren but came up blank and didn't pursue it with a lot of vigour — we'd seen it already! A huge variety of fresh tracks in the dunes made us regret not coming out spotlighting the night before. A little further south in the same dune system just after we had departed Mungerannie, we did unequivocally hear an Eyrean Grasswren, but could not locate it.

A few km further south, on a whim I turned off left onto a track that led out into the gibber. We didn't see much on the 2-3km drive to the base of the dunes, but on the way back we scored with our best views yet of **Gibberbird**, as well as a few **Orange Chat**, a **Pipit** and 6 **Inland Dotterel**.



A few more stops yielded very little until we stopped for a spot of lunch at the Cooper Crossing campground. Here a leaky pipe was attracting large numbers of **Zebra Finch**, and we found more **Bluebonnet**, **Black-faced Woodswallow**, a **Red-browed Pardalote** and a **Little Eagle**. We were somewhat half-hearted in our post-prandial birding. I stopped at one or two more dunes hoping for Grasswrens but didn't spend more than 10-15 mins, though at one stop we were rewarded with a fly-by of a **Black Falcon**.



At Marree we refueled, then carried on to Farina for the night. We were fortunate to arrive just at the moment the **Black-breasted Buzzards** decided to swap over brooding duties, and then witnessed a stunning sunset as we cooked up the last of our pasta. I had my best and most comfortable sleep in the swag.



Day 6 Farina to Adelaide

We had a stunning start to our final day. As I made a cup of tea a **Little Eagle** soared over, flushing a flock of **Budgies** from the tree above our camp. A short while later a **Black Kite** drifted in and landed above our tents, then it in turned was spooked by a **Black-breasted Buzzard** that cruised directly overhead. Of course I got no photos of any of this!

Our plan for the day was pretty-much to bird the famous “rusty car site” at Mt Lyndhurst Stn on the Strzlecki Track, and then bomb back to Adelaide. Of course we kept our eyes peeled all day (as they had been for the previous 5) hoping for my final lifer target of the trip, Australian Bustard. It was not to be, and to rub salt into the wounds we now realise that a minor diversion may well have got us one near Hawker, and others have since seen one near Lyndhurst. In fact it seems like every bugger except us is seeing them!



We birded the old mine site on Mt Lyndhurst Stn for a couple of hours. **White-winged Triller** and **Hooded Robin** were new for the trip, we heard a **Rufous Songlark** and a few flocks of **Budgies** screamed past. But the two specialty birds of this site, Thick-billed Grasswren and Chestnut-breasted Whiteface both eluded us (this was consistent with word from the Lyndhurst publican who, in addition to saying Inland Dotterel were not being seen on the airstrip, also said very few had reported CBWF). Neither of us needed these birds, but even so they would have rounded out the trip nicely.



Despite our dip we decided on a “Big Brekkie” at Lyndhurst café, then bombed south, now back on the bitumen, to Parachilna. Here we re-found the flock of **Orange Chats** and had nice views of a **Chirruping Wedgebill**, but it was still pretty quiet here. Afternoon tea at Arid Lands was pleasant, and birdier than 5 days earlier, but there was still no Black Honeyeater for us – a **White-fronted** was the best bird of a 45 min rest-stop, before we carried on to Adelaide, arriving home at about 7pm.

After a promising start at Farina it had been an anti-climactic final day, but once showered and fed I was able to reflect on a trip in which I had bagged 8 lifers (**Grey Falcon, Eyrean Grasswren, Grey Grasswren, Flock Bronzewing, Gibberbird, Yellow Chat, Diamond Dove, Red-browed Pardalote**), one Australian tick (**White-breasted Woodswallow**), and 5 state ticks (**Black-breasted Buzzard, Australian Pratincole, Banded Whiteface, Little Crow, White-necked Heron**), as well as a quality supporting cast that included stunners like **Orange Chat, Brolga, Cinnamon Quail-thrush** and **Inland Dotterel**. And for the first time really, I’d had a proper-job, hardcore taste of the Australian outback.



