

Sydney to Adelaide: conference and road-trip birding Ian Reid, Dec 2013



Back-to-back conferences in early December, one in Sydney and the other closer to home in the Barossa Valley, got me exploring what birding opportunities existed between Sydney and Adelaide now that I was living back in Australia as a birder, after 24 years in Oxford.

On 30th Nov I dropped Nikki and the girls at Adelaide airport for their flight to England to spend Christmas with her family (I would join them later) and then boarded my own flight for Sydney, where my main international conference, being held in Australia for the first time ever, would commence on 3rd Dec. I had around 48 hours at my disposal before I had to be back in Sydney, so my immediate destination was the Capertee Valley, about 3 hours north-west of Sydney and famed as one of the top birding destinations in the country.

On arrival into Sydney I picked up my hire car and drove up through the Blue Mountains, stopping only for supplies – water, breakfast cereals, fruit and other snacks – and arriving into Capertee village at around 8pm. The only birds of note on the journey were three **Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoos** on the “home” stretch between Lithgow and Capertee.



Though I arrived while it was still light and a very short sortie into the valley was possible, the temptation of a relaxing beer and meal at the Capertee Royal Hotel to shake the travel out of my system overpowered the pull of my first birding. Although the rustic decor and lack of en suite rooms might put off some, I found this to be a very welcoming and comfortable base for two

nights. Soon after dark I had settled into my room and enjoyed a good night's sleep.

1/12/13

The hotel gets enough birders and other early risers to be used to the requirement for pre-sparrowfart breakfast, and the breakfast room had already been set up the previous night when I staggered down at 5.40. I made a cuppa and helped myself to the continental fare, as well as stashing a couple of bits of fruit for the day, before driving into the valley at 6am.

It is still about 10-15km to get to the valley proper from the hotel in Capteree village. Although arguably not as spectacular as the main section of the Blue Mountains around Katoomba, the scenery is still stunning with dramatic cliffs either side of a low flat valley floor, and it has the added bonus of being much quieter, lacking hordes of tourist buses and Sydney day-trippers. Recognising the importance of bird tourism to the area, locals have produced a useful guide to birding the valley¹ and I stopped at several of the numbered sites throughout the day.

My first few stops were in part to take in the lie of the land and get my eyes and ears in. At Site 1, a roadside pull-in in the forested escarpment the first bird was rather familiar – **Laughing Kookaburra** – before seeing my first of the honeyeaters in flowering gums, a combination for which the valley is justly famous: **Yellow-faced**, **White-naped**, and lifer **Fuscous**.

I was eager to get deeper into the valley for my main target of the day, Regent Honeyeater, which recent gen from Mick Roderick (via birding-aus) had indicated were being seen on Glen Alice Rd north of Bogee near the Tambo Rd. Even so I stopped at various spots between 6.45 and 7.15 (sites 5-7 and sites 7-10), birding along the way and noting common species such as **Black-faced Cuckoo Shrike**, **Black-fronted Dotterel**, **Magpie**, **White-faced Heron**, **Nankeen Kestrel**, **Noisy Miner** and **Galah**. Stunning **White-browed Woodswallows** were also a fairly common sight but as one of my favourite species, not in the slightest bit boring. **Rufous Songlark** was nearly new, since I'd seen my first back in the spring in SA, and they were regular on wires and fence posts around the valley. One of the small farm dams held both **Yellow-billed Spoonbill** and **White-necked Heron**, beautiful in the golden early morning light against the red clay of the dam. The latter is a striking bird that I had only encountered once or twice before. **Red-rumped Parrots** were common, especially around the T-junction where the road into the valley meets the Glen Alice Rd, and I spent time checking these out,

¹ <http://www.keepandshare.com/doc/4974639/captereebirds-webnov2012-pdf-963k?da=y>

hopeful of also finding Turquoise Parrot. Every small, long-tailed green parrot needed to be checked carefully, but ultimately I was out of luck with the Turqs.

By 7.15 I had parked up close to site 18 in the guide which my gen indicated gave best shot at Regents. Various white-box eucalypts were in flower and there was tons of avian activity, mostly from a large mixed flock of **Musk** and (lifer) **Little Lorikeets**. I wandered up and down the road noting more honeyeaters: lots of **White-plumed Honeyeater**, **Noisy Friarbird**, **Red Wattlebird** were taking advantage of the flowers along with the Lorikeets. I kept an ear out for the soft but distinctive call of Regent but heard nothing. Also here I found **White-throated Treecreeper**, **Rufous Whistler**, **Grey Fantail**, **Willie Wagtail**, and **Eastern Yellow Robin**.

I returned to the car after about 45 of good birding but somewhat dejected at having missed my target, when almost immediately above the car I heard that soft unobtrusive call. I

looked up and could see some black and gold between leaves, then a glimpse of scaled breast, and finally the whole bird came into view – a fantastic and extremely rare **Regent Honeyeater**. This big striking honeyeater is completely dependent on



box-ironbark flowering gums. Forests of this are increasingly rare habitat, and so Regents are now critically endangered, with perhaps fewer than 500 birds in the wild. Comparing notes back at home I realise now that it bears some resemblance to Spangled Honeyeater, one of the key endemics of Huon Peninsula in PNG, and seen (but not photographed) with SMR Young on our 2008 trip. I snapped some record shots of the Regent high in the top of the gum and badly silhouetted against a bright sky, but then spent the next hour or more wandering up and down the road where I had regular sightings of at least 4, and probably as many as 6 birds (two of which were banded). I wondered where they had been for almost the first hour! One particularly confident juvenile clambered over some hanging white-box flowers barely 2m above the ground, unconcerned by my proximity.

After filling my boots I decided to make my way slowly back to Genowlan Bridge. **White-winged Chough**, **White-winged Triller** (site 13) followed by **Nankeen Night Heron** and **Yellow-rumped Thornbill** were new for the day. A grassy area studded with old tree stumps (near site 12) proved to be a great spot to spend some time as the day warmed up. Scores of **Woodswallows**,



both **White-browed** and **Dusky** circled and swooped from dead branches, while a **Brown Treecreeper** worked its way up the trunks and around the stumps. Finches were in abundance and lifer **Plum-headed Finch** headed the cast with two pairs of male and female birds posing well on the

barbed wire. A short way down the road I found a pair of **Double-barred Finch**. A few **Red-browed** and **Diamond Firetail** were in the vicinity too. **Welcome Swallows** skimmed the grass and a female **Hooded Robin** put in a brief appearance, as did a **Grey Shrike-thrush**.

It was much later than anticipated when I finally made it Genowland bridge at 11:40, but the birding had been great so what did it matter! The road here descends to a pretty glade of eucalypts and a bridge over the Capertee River, not much more than a barely-flowing stream even this early in the summer. Hundreds of **Fairy Martins** circled above the bridge, swooped over the stream and tended nests under the bridge. Earlier in the spring this had been *the* place to see Regent's but they move around the valley following the blossom and were no longer in the vicinity as far as I could tell. **Eastern Spinebill** added to the honeyeater tally for the day. A flutey unfamiliar song alerted me to something new and I tracked it down to an **Olive-backed Oriole**. Despite being a relatively common eastern Australian taxon I had just never been in the right place to connect with one, so this too was a lifer.

Mick had reported a Painted Honeyeater in the area beyond Genowlan Bridge along Huntingdon Rd. Sadly no Painted for me, but the honeyeater count still increased further with **White-plumed Honeyeater** conspicuous, and I also added **Rainbow Bee-eater** and **Peaceful Dove**. An **Australian Reed Warbler** chuntered in a small reed bed, and the more open farmland held a similar array of species to the grassy area at site 12, with **Woodswallows**, **Tree Martin**, **Rufous Songlark**, and the finches (minus Red-browed).



Early/mid-afternoon I was back in Glen Alice. The guide suggested Grey-crowned Babbler possible here, and I wandered around the community hall hopefully, finding yet another pair of **Red-rumped Parrots** (that again had me on the lookout for Turqs). A short walk around the quaint chapel across the way and I was delighted when

an inquisitive **Crested Shrike-tit** appeared above my in the gums. Relatively rare in South Australia, I had been on the lookout for one since arrival back to Australia in Sept 2012, but to date had failed to connect with one.

Around the campsite in Glen Davis I found my first **Wedge-tailed Eagle** of the day, and managed some photos of a **Fuscous Honeyeater** but little of further interest until I drove back out and joined the track to the Coorongooaba Campsite.

This scenic track heads up into a narrower gorge and ultimately into Wollemi National Park. After a couple of km I stopped near a ruined farmhouse and explored on foot, initially chasing a couple of **Double-barred Finch** for photos, but finding **Variegated Fairy-wren, Yellow-rumped**



Thornbill, Jacky Winter and a female **Mistletoebird**. My main target in Glen Davis and up this track was New South Wales' only endemic species, **Rock Warbler**. Beyond the ruin the ground was steeper and rockier and promising. Almost immediately a small grey and rufous bird clambered over a large boulder, pecked it way across some mossy covered rock, and then disappeared. I'd squeezed off a couple of record shots without having a chance to adjust the camera settings more suited to the darker forest, but despite searching for some time to get a another crack, I could not relocate it for a better opportunity.

The track left the farmland and entered beautiful eucalypt forest. A **Bell Miner** above the stream crossing was a lifer. The campsite is a wonderful secluded grassy area with dozens of **Western Grey Kangaroos** grazing unconcerned in the evening light. I was disappointed not to be staying here, it was so lovely. A solitary camper had set his tent between the track and the

stream and I could see him photographing something that I took to be another kangaroo, until looking through bins I realized it was a **Common Wombat** (my first). I managed a few photos of my own, and clocked a few more bird species for the day with **Satin Bowerbird**, **Wonga Pigeon**, **Grey Butcherbird** and **Common Bronzewing**.



I began to retrace my steps to the hotel, a long day in the field starting to take its toll on my enthusiasm. A brief stop for a raptor yielded my first **Peregrine** of the trip as well as more **Double-barred Finches** and a **Pied Butcherbird**. At Coco Creek (site 3) I scored two more lifers, **Restless Flycatcher** and final honey eater highlight of the day, **Yellow-tufted Honeyeater**.

Toting up back at the hotel I counted 63 species for the day, including 10 lifers.

2/12/13

I was due back in Sydney this evening in time for my conference starting on 3rd, but could afford to spend the morning birding the valley again. A lazy, slightly later start had me on the road at 7.15. A **Crimson Rosella** at the turn off in Capertee village was first bird of the day. I stopped again at site 1 where there is some higher altitude woodland before the farmland of the valley itself. Here I spent time walking around the trails, building a nice if unspectacular list of woodland birds, especially “white-themed” ones: **White-eared**



Honeyeater, White-naped Honeyeater, White-plumed Honeyeater, White-browed Scrub-wren, White-throated Treecreeper, Grey Shrike-thrush, Mistletoebird (another female), both **Striated** and **Spotted Pardalotes**, **Eastern Spinebill, Brown Thornbill, Silvereye. Eastern Whipbird** and **Yellow-faced Honeyeater** were heard only.



After over an hour here I moved on to site 2 where the white theme continued (**White-browed Wood-swallow, White-plumed Honeyeater**) and then to Coco Creek (site 3). Here I enjoyed **Yellow-tufted Honeyeater** and **Restless Flycatcher** again, and added **New Holland Honeyeater. Superb Fairywren** and a juv **Rufous Whistler**, as well as **Little Eagle** soaring over open ground south-west of Coco Creek were all new for the trip.



Crown Creek (sites 4, 5 and 6) was noted in the pamphlet as another possibility for **Turquoise Parrot**, now my main outstanding target, but was a bit disappointing. At the windmill, several **Red-rumped Parrots** drinking at the pond got the heart racing. Once I had checked them all, ruling out Turqs, I did still enjoy observing these beautiful parrots at fairly close quarters. Hirundines seemed to like this spot too, with **Welcome Swallow, Fairy Martin** and **Tree Martin** chirping and swooping around. A few km down the trail at site 6 the birds of note were **Fuscous Honeyeater** and **White-plumed Honeyeater** as well as a **Crested Shrike-tit**.

The remainder of the morning I made my way slowly back to Genowlan Bridge and Huntingdon Rd, stopping at various spots for birding. Of course new birds for the trip were not being added as quickly but there was still a steady trickle. At site 6 I had another **Yellow Thornbill** and **Brown-headed Honeyeater** was new at site 7. At the intersection of Glen Alice and Glen Davis Rd I had some more **Plum-headed Finches**, and added **Weebill** and **Little Grassbird**. A dam en route held a decent array of waterbirds so I stopped to boost the trip list with **White-eyed Duck, White-necked and White-faced Heron** (more "whities"), **Grey Teal** and **Coot**.

Huntingdon Rd again failed to deliver a Painted Honeyeater, but another **Wedgie** drifted over, and I pinned down a **Horsfield's Bushlark**. The hi-tech highlight here was the chance to FaceTime the family – as I wandered a deserted country road seemingly miles from civilization, I was able to have a video-conference on my phone with the girls in their hotel in Singapore, resting on their way to Oxford – a surreal moment.

It was approaching the time I would have to hit the road back to Sydney so I had one last stop at Genowlan Bridge. An **Azure Kingfisher** was a stunning lifer to round off a superb day and a half birding.

4/12/14

I first birded with fellow computer vision researcher Ryan Farrell in Rio in 2007 when we were both attending ICCV. Since that time we had done a little bit of birding at a number of conferences when we had managed to find a session or two that was of less interest to both of us. A shared interest in the up-and-coming area of fine-grained recognition (especially as applied to automatic bird recognition) meant we could also combine some birding with useful work discussions. On this occasion the 5th emerged as the best date and I was keen to show Ryan some of the avifauna of my country, even if not all of it would be completely familiar.

Though we decided that 5th was expendable, I persuaded Ryan that an early pre-conference twitch on the 4th to the Botanical Gardens was worthwhile also, and would not cost us any work time. I was aware that Powerful Owl is occasionally pinned down in this stunning central Sydney site right next to the Opera House and Harbour Bridge; some recent gen confirmed that I could find it in "*the huge fig at the fork just before Government House*". Ryan and I walked in towards where we expected said fig to be, but 20m before we got there I noticed white stains all over the path. I paused to look up and there staring back at me was a magnificent **Powerful Owl** with a large fruit-bat in its talons. Perhaps my easiest twitch ever! Totally awesome to find this fantastic bird in such urban and tourist-overrun surrounds.



5/12/14

Royal National Park, Australia's oldest NP is a superb coastal area just south of Sydney, with a range of habitats from wet sclerophyll eucalypt forest, to heathland, to beaches. The scenery is stunning and it holds an impressive array of birds, including Ryan's most-wanted, Superb Lyrebird.

After an early start from our hotels in Darling Harbour, we arrived at the Lady Carrington Drive picnic area at around 6.30. We had noted a few waterbirds on the lake but set out up a trail leading behind the toilet block. After only about 50m up this trail I became aware of a superbly rich song and realized we were onto our number one target already. We crept forward and peered over a large boulder and there on the other side was a fantastic male **Superb Lyrebird**. As Ryan tried to get on it, it stopped singing and slunk away, never to be seen again. He was able to lock on just in time to see it walk gracefully down a steep incline into denser scrub and out of sight (and reach). At once this was a great moment, but also deeply frustrating that we'd not had a chance to enjoy it further. Other birds of the bushwalk were **Lewin's Honeyeater, Little Wattlebird, New Holland Honeyeater, Brown Thornbill, Eastern Yellow Robin, Grey Butcherbird, Eastern Whipbird Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike**. A **Cicadabird** sang its cricket-like song but we could not track it down.

The highlight back in the picnic area was a pair of **Australian King Parrots**. **Noisy Miners** were common here and we also noted **Little Corella** and **Sulphur-crested Cockatoo**. On the water were **Coot, Australian Grebe, Darter, Pacific Black Duck**, while **Moorhen** and **Purple Swamphen** shuffled around the margins. Top bird on the water was undoubtedly an **Azure Kingfisher** which sped across the lake in a flash of blue and perched on a low-hanging branch, sadly too distant in the still-dim morning light for a photo.

At 9am we decided to try a new habitat, and drove up to the Bass Fire Trail where I had been told we had good chances for Beautiful Firetail, one of the potential lifers on offer for me. The trail started out quite birdy, with lots of activity in low trees and the dense heath either side of the fire-break, but getting decent views of anything proved very difficult. We had brief and rather unsatisfactory glimpses of finches (presumed Beautiful Firetail), but would be able to rectify this with much better views later in the day. After a fair amount of activity but unable to get decent views of anything but very ubiquitous **New Holland Honeyeaters**, the birding regressed and the trail was very quiet for the 1.5km or so that we walked. Some **Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoos** were good, and I was able to tempt a couple of **White-browed Scrubwren** to show themselves to Ryan with my recording. About 800-1000m along the trail I managed to get a response from a **Chestnut-rumped Heathwren** which sang

back to my iPhone, but which stayed put in dense scrub. Fortunately a few hundred metres back along the track in a more open area another one sang spontaneously and eventually showed well enough for half-decent record shots.



Down at Wattamolla Beach we walked to the headland around a stunning inlet with a waterfall: **Silver Gull, Lewin's Honeyeater, Brown-headed Honeyeater, Large-billed Scrubwren, Nankeen Kestrel, Eastern Yellow Robin** and **Variegated Fairywren**.

We returned to Lady Carrington Drive and ate lunch in the café before walking



along the track east of the lake. Because of the time of day I had fairly low expectations but this proved to be a very birdy walk. In particular we managed (unexpectedly) to get great views of **Beautiful Firetail** allowing me to tick this lifer properly now, even if I could not get a decent photo. Other highlights for me included **Brush Cuckoo** and **Brown Cuckoo-Dove**, both Australian ticks but not lifers (seen in PNG in 2008). Birding with Ryan was much more rewarding than birding alone when I can often be too focused on seeing new stuff I fail to appreciate

the more common birds. Here, birding with a friend for whom much was new enriched the experience; I enjoyed his appreciation of the new birds and it forced me to enjoy everything we encountered. For example, **Golden Whistler** is a stunning bird, but one I probably don't pay sufficient attention to these days. Likewise, **Sacred Kingfisher**, even if he did not hang around for photos. Other birds seen on this walk included **Grey Fantail, Willie Wagtail, Kookaburra, Brown Thornbill, Striated Thornbill, Rufous Whistler, Yellow-faced Honeyeater, Lewin's Honeyeater, Varied Sitella**, and **Eastern Spinebill**.



Another of Ryan's targets was White-bellied Sea Eagle, so around 3pm we made our way down to Garie Beach. As we walked north along the beach Ryan glimpsed what he thought was a large raptor that almost immediately drifted behind a cliff not to be seen again. We failed to find it and eventually turned to retrace our steps to the carpark with some rain starting to fall. The wind was blowing the rain directly into us and as I turned to shelter my camera with my body a huge adult **White-bellied Sea Eagle** cruised into view from where we'd be standing for the last half an hour. Vindication and joy for Ryan.



Back near the car-park I set up the scope and digiscoped a **Crested Tern** and **Silver Gulls** on the beach. Viewing out to sea we were able to pick out a few distant **Black-browed Albatross** and hundreds of shearwaters (unidentified). The White-bellied Sea Eagle put in a few appearances.



At 5pm we drove a short way to Garawarra Farm where I was hoping to connect with Red-browed Treecreeper. We spent some time chasing a treecreeper that I eventually got good enough view to identify as **White-throated**. There was limited bird activity in our short walk, but I was able to jag a decent

photo of **Variegated Fairywren** in low light. **Noisy Friarbirds** in the carpark were new for Ryan. On our way back of the park we called in one more time at LCD for another quick crack at the Lyrebird, but we were unable to reconnect. We did add both male and female **Satin Bowerbird**, as our final birds of the day before heading back to the Darling Harbour where a booking error on my part some months ago meant I now had the inconvenience of checking into a new hotel for the final night of the conference.

7/12/13

The evening of 6th Dec after my conference finished, I picked up a hire car from Kings Cross, crawled my way through Sydney's Friday evening peak hour traffic and sped down the Hume Freeway to the Victorian Border. I arrived at Chiltern around midnight and made my way in the dark to a spot marked on my pdf as bush camping just north of Chiltern. There was no-one else here and I settled down in the back of the vehicle for a night's sleep.

At 4.30am, the first hint of light just invading the dark, a sound from outside penetrated my consciousness. *Woof-woof. Woof-woof.* Bloody hell, there was a Barking Owl outside! I fumbled to find my glasses and a torch, not to mention binoculars and camera, grappled with my trousers and eventually clambered out of the car... by which time, almost inevitably, the calling had stopped. In the cold morning air, feeling like a dude that I had taken so long to get going, I tried to attract it back with some playback but after 15mins gave up and retreated temporarily to the relative warmth of the car.

In my tick and rush road-trip back to Adelaide I had only allocated a single morning to Chiltern, far too little time to do it justice. Once I had resigned myself to a dip on the owl I drove to Greenhill Dam, some 3-4 km away, had some breakfast and from 7.15 kept tabs on comings and goings from the drinking hole. Again my target was Turquoise Parrots and I knew from Anne Collins on F&P that they'd been seen very recently. Again **Red-rumps** were conspicuous, a group of three paying occasional visits and walking down the dam banks for a drink just as I imagined the Turqs would do. My vigil at the dam did not pay dividends in this respect, but did provide two lifers in the form

of **Black-chinned Honeyeater** (another bird that is hanging on at the edge of its range and very scarce in SA) and **White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike**, as well a nice supporting cast that included **Eastern Rosella**, **Fuscous Honeyeater**, **Brown-headed Honeyeater**, **White-winged Chough**, **White-browed babbler**, **Crested Shrike-tit**, **Sacred Kingfisher**, **Diamond Firetail** and **Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike**.



Eventually giving up here I made my way to No1 Dam on Pitt Rd to check out some further gen from Anne. Flowering gums along the track were alive with honeyeaters, mostly Fuscous and White-plumed, but my quarry here was **Black Honeyeater** and I managed to find at least three of this nomadic and potentially tricky species. The dam itself provided habitat for **Hoary-headed Grebe**, **Coot**, **White-necked** and **White-faced Heron**, **Purple Swamphen**, **Great Egret**, **White Ibis** and **Grey Teal**.



A diversion south of the highway to so-called “Honeyeater Picnic Area” but there were very few honeyeaters having a picnic there. **Yellow-tufted Honeyeater** was the only bird of note before I called back in to Greenhill Dam briefly one more time. A **Rufous Whistler** was new for that site, but I had an appointment at 3pm in Deniliquin some 2.5 hours away – I needed to be on my way by noon to be sure of making the rendezvous. Once back in Adelaide I read the F&P report of Owen Lishmund from about the same time, re-read all my sources and directions, and realized that actually a walk around Bartley’s Block very close to my overnight campsite may well have been the most productive use of my time.

The only petrol station in Chiltern is closed on Saturdays, so I had a somewhat nerve-wracking drive the 20km to Rutherglen. Fortunately I trundled in to town despite the gauge reading empty, grabbed some lunch and then hit the long stretch through Riverina and the southern edge of the Hay Plain. The drive was enlivened by ABC Grandstand’s Ashes coverage. It had been a close-run thing, choosing this road-trip versus a day at the new

Adelaide Oval for an Ashes test in my new home city. But the outback vista, dead straight road, the dryness and the heat outside, and the hissing MW transmission transported me back to the 1970s – when a tranny was what you tuned in to listen to the cricket – and I was happy I'd made the right decision. There was something deeply appropriate about an outback road-trip to the strains of Maxwell, Aggers, O'Keefe *et al.* Instead of my boyhood hero Dennis Lillee steaming, this time it was the similarly moustachioed Mitchell Johnson, ripping through the Poms on the flat Adelaide pitch in a spell that – arguably even more-so than anything he did in Brisbane – set the tone for the 5-0 whitewash. I whooped with delight and punched the steering wheel as wicket after wicket fell with Johnson taking 5-12 in only 3 overs.

I rocked into Deniliquin in the nick of time to hook up with Phil Maher and a tour party. Originally when planning the trip I had contacted his wife Patricia, but was told this weekend was fully booked. As a result I'd made plans to go elsewhere, but when (following a final check) Patricia wrote to me on the first day of the Sydney conference to say that they could just squeeze me in, I reverted to Plan A, cutting my stay at Chiltern to half a day and cutting out Terrick Terrick NP altogether.

From the Deniliquin caravan park we headed north out of town on the Cobb Hwy onto the plains and stopped near 35°19'53.3"S 144°50'43.4"E where Phil has a private revegetation/regeneration area. This was a super spot where some patience yielded a cracking array of birds including some lifers.

Bluebonnet was new for the trip, a pair located at some distance in the crown of a stumpy tree. Initially we walked outside the fenced off regeneration area and concentrated on **White-winged Fairywren**. Though good views of males singing atop low bushes were obtained by all, they were too distant for decent photos. While stalking yet another WWFW Phil suddenly called out he had a honeyeater flying over and I locked on to a chunky bird already flying away and silhouetted against the bright sky. I'd got very little on it but Phil swore this was a Painted Honeyeater and tried hard to get it to return by playing his recording. I hoped it would not remain BVD or worse, UTV², but there was no immediate response to the playback.

² Better Views Desired; Un-Tickable Views

Raptors here included **Wedge-tailed Eagle**, **Black Kite**, **Brown Falcon** and **Nankeen Kestrel**. At one point a group of 6 **Regent Parrots** flew over, lifers for some in the group. Suddenly a chunky black, white and gold bird flew back towards us from the distant trees and, pulse



racing, I managed enough on it in flight for tickable views of **Painted Honeyeater**. A short set of playback from Phil kept it interested and we now walked into the fenced area for great views of the stonker, even if it was constantly mobile and hard to photograph. After my dip in the Capertee Valley, bagging another handsome but nomadic and hard-to-see honeyeater was one of the stand-out moments of a day that was one of my best ever.

As we made our way back to the 4WDs Phil found a **Black Honeyeater** – a lifer for me this morning at Chiltern. We found another male and a female, but they were hard to pin down, constantly on the move and being chased off by much bigger **Spiny-cheeked Honeyeaters**.

Further north we visited another area that Phil goes to and helps tend regularly, keeping out non-natives. At the gate to the property 3-4 large sinister feral cat carcasses hung. The main highlight for me here was another lifer, **White-backed Swallow**. As we drove out we found a pair of **Singing Honeyeaters** going berserk. Closer inspection revealed a large tiger snake devouring their half-grown chick!

Next destination was a series of roads and track east of Cobb Hwy through expanses of flat, arid, low density agricultural land, reminiscent in some ways of steppes of Extremadura. We stopped briefly at one of the few copses of trees for a small family group of **Southern Boobook** that Phil and Robert clearly knew would be there waiting. From there it was out into open plains for some superb arid-lands birding. **Brown Songlark** was my first lifer of this part of the day, and I was blown away by the size difference between male and female, the smaller paler female sparrow-sized dwarfed by the dark brown chunky, almost blackbird-sized male.



A few **White-fronted Chat** flew up from roadside puddles to fences and posts as we passed in the cars, then at one of several stops Phil announced he had **Australian Pratincole**. I rushed to set my scope for a stunning adult male in summer plumage. Though not a lifer (I'd had a number of winter plumaged birds at Jacksons Airport in Port Moresby in 2008) seeing one in this more "natural" habitat with its summer bright red bill and deep chestnut belly was another highlight. In fact they were quite common here and we enjoyed numbers all along the tracks leading on Robert's property and adjacent land.



It was now late afternoon, the shadows were lengthening and the light turning a warm golden colour. **Banded Lapwing** ran about, very smart and showing well, but before I could get a decent photo Phil announced he was onto a pair of **Inland Dotterel**.



I swiftly turned my attention to the dotterels which needed a scope for decent, although somewhat distant views. To get the Pratincole and Dotterel – two of the best waders in Australia and maybe even the world – within half an hour of each other was truly fantastic. Phil had more in store – for the last few days he had been seeing a **Little Curlew** in the same area, and sure enough we were able to pick it out with scopes a few hundred metres to the west.

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had already enjoyed? Robert's farm is world famous as *the* place to see the rare and enigmatic Plains Wanderer, a bird that sits in its own family, neither Quail, nor Button-quail, nor Wader, is small, endangered and is totally dependent on having low, flat, dry plains with just the right amount of low grass and grassy tufts. Too



much and it can't breed (the inland rains of 2010 and 2011 had been the cause of a huge decline in numbers), not enough and it has no shelter from predators. This iconic species was the reason we were all on this trip. With a bottle of James Squires' 150 Lashes Pale Ale in one hand, and camera in the other, I took my first ever selfie and mused on facebook: "*Poms pummelled by Johnson and Warner, and Painted Honeyeater, Inland Dotterel and Australian Pratincole UTB. 150 Lashes in hand as the sun sets over riverina plains. Could my day get any better? It just might...*".

Although PW is not nocturnal, and lives in very sparsely grassed plains, it is cryptically plumaged and almost impossible to see in the daytime when it will sit low in such vegetation there is at the slightest sign of danger. Phil worked out some years ago that the best way to see them was at night when they are less wary and much more easily picked out by spotlight, and it is using this technique that probably 99% of the birders lucky enough to have seen one have succeeded. Once it was dark, then, we set out again in the cars to a field where two weeks previous Jonno Newman had bagged



PW as his 7001st world species. Phil's technique is to drive around with a bright spotlight in hand and hope. Though it seems rather haphazard, it is apparently remarkably effective – within 10 mins the car ground to a halt and he excitedly announced he had a male **Plains Wanderer** and two chicks. Instantly I was onto them with bins but almost as quickly the chicks melted into the night, presumably hunkering down under the tiny bits of vegetation there. The male stood still in the spotlight and we had crippling views of his intricately patterned feathers as he called softly, keeping tabs on the chicks. We did not spend too long to avoid distress to the chicks but I was able to squeeze off some decent pics nonetheless. As he stared down the barrel of my 100-400L, his puffy cheeks made me think of Chicken Little.

As gorgeous as the diminutive male was, Phil was determined to find a female for us. We spent the next two hours zig-zagging the field. A **Fat-tailed Dunnart**, a strange looking mouse-like marsupial with, funnily enough, a stumpy fat tail, scampered around barely stopping for a second and never still enough for a photo. Even my record shots are horribly blurred by the combination of low light and moving target from a moving vehicle. Burning the candle at both ends now started to catch up with me: a late night into Chiltern and early start for my Barking Owl dip, not to mention 800km behind the wheel, and I was starting to fade. As Phil carried on quartering the paddock, sweeping back and forth with his torch, my head rocked and rolled, and occasionally jerked back to life. Then my head jerked forward once again as Phil came to an abrupt halt and announced the jackpot! – a female and a male together. Although the male slunk away, Phil kept the torch on the female and she stayed put. You f*@\$ing beauty!

We now basked in point-blank views of her: slightly larger, chunkier and more strikingly coloured than the male. She is plain on the back but sports a black and white “choker necklace” above a chestnut cravat, speckled white belly and bright yellow legs. I filled my boots with pictures, bumping up the ISO to compensate for the sensible no-flash rule.



Once Phil decided that she'd been disturbed enough we all piled back into the 4WDs and headed off. Barely a few minutes later as we headed for the gate Phil stopped again – he had another two males in his spotlight by the side of the car. Wow! In all seven Plains Wanderers, the most Phil had had in a few years.

I thought at this point it would be the end of the evening, but Phil and Robert had other ideas. We drove back a few km to the paddocks we'd been in late afternoon and now spotlighted the waders. Like the Plains Wanderers they were much more approachable in the dark and we bagged fantastic views and half decent photos of both of the star birds of the late afternoon, **Australian Pratincole** and **Inland Dotterel**.



Now it really was time to head for “home” and some time after midnight we finally pulled into the reception car park of the Deniliquin Riverside Caravan Park.

8/12/13

Our “Plains Wanderer Weekend” tour continued the following morning. Phil and Robert picked us up from the caravan park and drove a short distance to a small pond in the centre of Deniliquin. It was hard to believe looking at the bare reeds in thin patches on fringes of the lake (apparently badly damaged by poorly thought through mosquito control by the local council) but apparently a **Little Bittern** was being seen here. We scanned across the lake for about 15-20min before Robert picked it up moving slowly to the top of one small patch of reeds. Overall plain brown plumage indicated this was a female. Too distant for my 100-400L I switched to digiscoping as she showed brilliantly. After a few minutes she moved to a new patch and in trying relocate her we ended up finding both her and a male! His pink lores suggested he was coming into breeding and we hoped it would work out for them in spite of the sorry state of the reed-bed.



Next stop was another small wetland. In this tiny disused dam a much denser reed-bed apparently was home to all three species of crane. With patience we had both **Spotted** and **Baillon's** but Spotless would go down as heard only, calling back to Phil's recording from dense reeds.

As we left the site Phil had one more lifer in store for me: a party of **Grey-crowned Babblers** were doing their babbler thing, busily jumping about on the ground and chasing each other through bushes and low eucalypts. Phil and the group were now bound for one or two more distant sites, but with none of their targets being key birds for me, I got them to drop me off in Deniliquin. I was anxious to get going on the long drive to my next destination, Hattah-Kulkyne NP, about 5 hours away.

First I grabbed some late breakfast at the famous Deniliquin Bakery (and verified that its reputation is deserved), and replenished my supplies of UHT milk, muesli bars and fruit and other stuff. The overnight news on the cricket was that Clarke had unexpectedly declared, setting England an unlikely target of 531 in two days. Before I had even left Deniliquin it became even less likely as Cook was out in the second over of the day to guess who, Mitchell Johnson.

Other than a few **Wedgies**, the 300km drive west was not particularly interesting and I stopped only for petrol and refreshments. I arrived into Hattah-Kulkyne in time for some initial exploration.

I found my way to the Nowingi Track and almost immediately had a **Chestnut Quail-thrush** walking along the track ahead of me, but I couldn't get a decent picture of it. A **Crested Bellbird** called incessantly and evenly yielded decent views, and **Yellow-Plumed Honeyeaters** were quite common. I decided to drive to Ouyen and find some nosh in the pub. This drive was worthwhile for the presence of a flock of stunning **Regent Parrots**. While stopped watching them I also picked up a couple of **Mulga Parrot**, a **White-winged Triller**, and both **Black-masked** and **White-browed Woodswallow**.

Over my pub meal I quizzed a couple of locals about the latest gen on Mallefowl, but the best they could offer was the suggestion to drive the Patchewellock Rd. I feared this may be very old gen but with nothing better to go on I drove it nevertheless, hoping for a repeat (or the dregs) of last year's unprecedented Mallefowl showing along the



verges. Sadly but not unsurprisingly I saw nothing, and as the sun set I headed back to Hattah-Kulkyne and settled down in the back of the Outback once more. Both **Tawny Frogmouth** and **Southern Boobook** called not far afield during the night but I was too lazy to chase after either.

9/12/13

My most-wanted for Hattah was the almost-critically endangered Mallee Emu-wren. Range restricted, concentrated in a few areas in SA and Vic and desperately vulnerable to bushfires (lightning strikes and subsequent fires had ripped through two of its SA strongholds earlier in the spring), including poorly thought through burn-offs by the Victorian Parks Dept. Jonno Newman had had them on the Nowingi Track here a couple of week previous and had kindly sent me GPS coords via facebook. I spent over an hour in the general area of the coordinates where there was a promising area of spinifex, and once or twice heard snatches of the thin, high-pitched warble. I saw nothing though, other than fairly common **Yellow-plumed Honeyeaters** and a few **Brown-headed Honeyeaters**. A **Rufous Whistler** sang but I decided not to bother tracking it down.

Eventually I decided to start walking back the car which I had left at the corner of the Nowingi track and the Old Calder Hwy. As I made my way back another of the thin warbles caught my attention and focusing in on the spinifex I caught a glimpse of some movement. Next moment a feathery tail drifted out behind the spinifex then back in and, heart racing, I realized I was now onto a **Mallee Emu-wren**. I pished a bit and managed the briefest view of the whole bird before he dived back into cover, then further movement alerted me to the presence of a second bird. They showed a bit of interest in a short burst of song from my phone but were very wary. Gradually I managed some decent views, the birds would pop up for a quick look view, then drop back down into the spinifex. I would never get the cracking photo I craved but was delighted nevertheless to connect with this delightful and characterful little bird.



An American couple I had bumped into the previous evening showed up and I managed to get them onto the little stonkers too, but was gripped to hear they'd lucked onto a Striped Honeyeater on their way here. Following their vague directions I ended up parked at GPS 34 42'43"S 142 16'57"E where I wandered into the scrub a little way following more high-pitched song. No Striped Honeyeater here (or elsewhere) but I did find another small party of **Mallee Emu-wren**, these all the better for effectively being self-found. I was also delighted to be able to share the gen with Asian birding pals Robert Hutchinson and Irene Dy who two weeks later took some stunning photos at exactly this spot having dipped on the Nowingi Track birds.

From 11.15 onwards I drove up and down the Old Calder Hwy and other back roads, finding **Bluebonnet**, **Yellow-throated Miner** and more **Regent Parrots**. At one point a couple of farmers, presumably suspicious of what I was up to pulled over as they passed to quiz me. This proved to be very fortuitous, because though initially somewhat aggressive and intimidating in their attitude, when they worked out I was birding (however strange a pastime they thought that to be), they proceeded to give me excellent gen about Mallefowl.

Although there were none on the Patchewellock Rd this year, a similar (if less spectacular) event was happening on the Old Calder Hwy and other roads nearby, with Mallefowl coming out from their usual habitat deep in the mallee to feed on fallen grain in the newly harvested fields. They reckoned that I'd have very good chances by driving these same roads from 4/5pm onwards. I realized that yesterday evening I'd wasted my best chance driving to the pub and along the Patchie Rd. I needed to get back to Adelaide this evening, still 5 hours drive away, so my only chance would be now, in the middle of the day

hoping that the cool, overcast and even slightly rainy weather would encourage them out sooner.

I drove NE onto River Rd from the Old Calder Hwy and stopped by a gate with a view over a field at GPS 34 49'46"S 142 23'36"E. As I got out of the car something moved to my left. Before I could go for bins or camera, a stonking **Malleefowl** burst from the cover of the buffer vegetation between the field and the road, and swiftly crossed the road and disappeared into dense mallee on the other side. Result!



A few km on at GPS 34 48'30"S 142 25'08"E it got better. From the corner of my eye I spied something interesting in the field and as I passed the next gap in the verge-side mallee I got a clear view of a **Malleefowl** feeding quietly on the edge of a newly harvested field. I would be gripped off a few weeks later when Rob and Irene scored fantastic photos, but I am sure there will be future opportunities in SA for more photography.

I carried on until I reached the bitumen of the Hattah-Robinvale Rd and began the short drive back to the National Park as it started to drizzle. Within a km I came to a screeching halt as the sight of two big pink cocks had me reaching for the camera again: **Major Mitchell's Cockatoo!** These lifers were



feeding on the ground and I was able to approach very close in the car.

I paid one last visit to the information centre in Hattah-Kulkyne where a small group of **Apostlebirds** was drinking and playing and fighting in a puddle on the road. After a few snaps of the action I turned the car south for Ouyen. Unable to resist one last chance of Malleefowl I took the Old Calder Hwy again. There were no Malleefowl but my final birding and photography came with a group of 3 **Bluebonnets** feeding in the middle of the road. In Ouyen I turned west onto the B12 for 280km before heading up the Princes Hwy to Adelaide. Though it was a shame not to be doing the trip at a more leisurely pace, it had still been a fantastic few days and certainly among my most memorable and exciting Australian birding ever.

