

Stuart Highway, April 2014

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The week before Easter we had arranged a short family break to Uluru, meeting up there with old friends from the UK on their first visit to Australia. I'd never been to this iconic Australian landmark before and felt it would be cheating to fly with Nikki and the girls, but conversely they could not bear the thought of 2 days in the car. We reached a great compromise: I would leave two days earlier than them and drive up Stuart Highway on my own. I could do a bit of desert and arid-lands birding in my new home state of South Australia unencumbered by the family, while we would all have the use of the car while there. As usual, birding-aus subscribers had been fantastically helpful with information about my possible targets, especially Ed Smith and Chris Watson.

I packed Kluger with food, beer and basic camping gear and set off early afternoon on Wed 9th from Adelaide. As I ploughed north on Highway 1 to Port Augusta I cranked up AC/DC on the stereo as straight flat miles of road slipped behind me. Three hours later I pulled into the carpark of the Arid Lands Botanical Garden just north of Port Augusta for a brief break to stretch my legs and do my first birding.

It was cool and overcast and I wandered about for 40min or so, not seeing anything special but enjoying the array of flowers shrubs and trees in the garden, and noting species such as **White-plumed Honeyeater**, **Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater**, **White-fronted Honeyeater**, and **Mulga Parrot**.



Back on the road I cleared the last view of the southern Flinders Ranges to the east and the landscaped changed to an expanse of dry treeless gibber, punctuated by salt lakes. Many of the lakes held some water, the previous week having been quite wet. It began to rain just north of Port Augusta and rained all night.



I planned on avoiding night driving, not recommended in much of the outback because of the risk of collision with roos and cattle. So about 150km north of Port Augusta just after sunset I pulled off the road at a spot where Ed reported Bourke's Parrot to be regular. I had just made myself comfortable in the back of the Kluger when the rain got even heavier and, 4WD notwithstanding, I grew increasingly nervous that my sandy parking spot would turn into a quagmire overnight. I changed my plan and drove some 10km north until I found a truck stop with a firmer base. Much to my surprise I still had good mobile signal here and so spent an hour before sleeping on a conference call with some clients in London, another one of my surreal technology moments.

10/4/14

The rain abated during the evening but it was still fairly cool when I rose with the sun next morning. I drove back to the spot I'd originally parked last night and birded here for as long as I could afford bearing in mind I wanted/needed to get to Coober Pedy by around midday. A **Mulga Parrot** east of the highway was my first and only parrot of the morning – sadly no Bourke's – and I added **Chestnut-rumped Thornbill** and **Black-faced Woodswallow** in a fairly unproductive and almost birdless hour.

At 8.30, somewhat later than I'd hoped, I set out on the road again. John Schuman and Redgum's *Last Frontier* seemed a fitting soundtrack:

*There's a corrugated highway Leading north from
Port Augusta
lined with ratted cars that didn't rate a tow
The Salt plains out of Pimba And your eyes begin to
stream
On to Kingoonya huddled dusty by the road
Romantic notions shattered Like the tyres that didn't
hack it
This has got to be the country's last frontier
Where a sports car's next to useless Running cattle
grids and river beds
We drove a van from 1963*



Fortunately for me the highway is now sealed and my Kluger was 2009. The drive remains as long but not so attritional. I know that the family would have been bored stupid but I loved scenery: the flat salt-plains and gibber-plains with seemingly infinite horizons emphasizing the size of the continent and its stark beauty. From the comparative comfort of my airconditioned SUV, Shuman's lyrics helped evoke what it would have been like doing this in the 70s.

I bypassed Pimba and stopped mid-morning for fuel and refreshments at Glendambo Roadhouse, some 290km north of Port Augusta. By around 12.45 I had finally made it to my next birding stop, the Hutchinson Memorial, 12km south of Coober Pedy. Willie Hutchinson was a 14 year old boy when he found opals in this desolate place in 1915, and the settlement itself – which exists only to support the mining – and the mining practices, still seem better suited to the early 20th rather than 21st century.



Below the memorial is a depressed area of sparse scrub bounded by low ridges. My target here, South Australia's only endemic species (and the symbol of Birds SA), was **Chestnut-breasted Whiteface**. Though the temperature was still mercifully mild, I had very low expectations because the wind had picked up into a strong and gusty breeze. Nevertheless within 20 minutes, barely having seen a bird at all, I heard a squeak and saw a pair of small passerines dive into a bush some 15m away. I trained my bins there to see a small thornbill-sized bird with a grey head, brown wings and chestnut back. Deep chestnut markings on the lower flanks gave cause for optimism and eventually it hopped a bit and turned side-on, revealing its eponymous feature – the lovely chestnut breast-band. Though they were not especially wary, it was tough to get close enough for a photo. They would scratch around at the base of bushes then as I approached, bomb low and fast invariably another 10-15m away. However in spite of the wind, a burst of no more than 5-10sec from my iPhone had one of them immediately fly past me and land on a dead branch only 4m away. I squeezed off some pics and, delighted with the result, I left them in peace.



White-winged Fairywrens were common here, but I was unable to find two other species that I had hoped would be here, Cinnamon Quail-thrush and Thick-billed Grasswren (race *modesta*). As I returned to the car a pair of **Wedge-tailed Eagles** cruised by me very close only a few metres off the ground.

William Creek Rd, a few km north of here, had been recommended to me as a possibility for some other desert birds. A sign at the start ominously said "road closed". I drove on nevertheless in the hope that this was because somewhere along its 100km length it was unpassable, but as I ventured 3-4km from Stuart Highway, the unsealed surface was loose and muddy and I decided not to risk it any further. Likewise when I drove down through Coober Pedy to the sewage works, the track to the gibber-plains beyond was skiddy and at one point completely submerged. I beat a retreat from there also having noted **Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike** and not much else.

After a pie and pasty from the local bakery and fuel replenished, I headed north once more. Between Cadney and Marla the light was fading so I pulled in to a picnic area and made myself comfortable in the back of the car again.

11/4/14

A flock of 60 or so **Little Corellas** was the only avian interest as I woke the next morning, and pretty soon I was on my way, still with 6 hours of driving ahead of me to get to Uluru.

I refuelled at Eralunda, the turn-off to Lassiter Highway and Uluru, but carried on north on Stuart a further 21km in search of another Whiteface target. I had no doubt driven through 500km of reasonable Banded Whiteface habitat, but presumably because they were seen here by Richard and Sarah Thomas in the 90s and therefore made it into their site guide, this particular patch of the endless plains marked by two trees has become *the* place to see **Banded Whiteface**. I pulled up and walked towards the fence and immediately a pair of whiteface started singing spontaneously and appeared on the wire. Taken aback by how quickly this had happened I did not get a decent photo and then spent the next 30min chasing them around the paddock hoping for better – which was sadly not to be. This was another site I had hopes for Cinnamon Quail-thrush so I spent a fair amount of time walking around hoping to come across one, but in the end the only other birds of note here were **Singing Honeyeater**, **Zebra Finch** and **Chiming Wedgebill**.



Nikki and the girls were due into Uluru early afternoon so I needed to push on to get the last 250km behind me. On this leg, Lassiter Hwy from Eralunda to Yulara, I was on the lookout for Black-breasted Buzzard and Australian Bustard. Bustards are among my favourite birds, in part because *Otis Tarda*, Great Bustard, was one of *the* highlights of my first ever “foreign” birding, a trip to Spain in March 1999. The Australian species is not, as far as I know, in danger, but they are very thin on the ground in SA. Sadly, I would finish the trip still Bustard-less.

Gradually the miles fell away and I got my first glimpse of *The Rock*. The news from Nikki and the girls, however, was not good – their flight from Alice Springs to Uluru had been cancelled because the plane was due from Cairns, and the arrival of Cyclone Ita mid-morning had grounded the aircraft. For a short moment my heart sank thinking they were going to ask me to drive 5 hours back to Alice to pick them up, adding 10 hours to the 18 I had already driven. No, it was ok – they would come by a coach laid on by Qantas.

I arrived, then, wondering how to spend the afternoon waiting for them, but this was answered instantly as I bumped into Luis and Charlotte and their boys – I would join them on a scenic flight over Uluru and Kata-Tjuta. Not something I would have contemplated on my own ever, this was a breath-taking view of these amazing sights and I’ll forever be grateful to the boys for insisting I come, and Luis for negotiating it with the pilot! Returning to the

ground after an exhilarating 30min, the pilot thought I was somewhat mad when I expressed excitement about the 6-7 birds in the tree outside the terminal building. He clearly thought they were “just cockies”, Pink-and-Grey Galahs, but I knew they were far better – **Major Mitchell’s Cockatoos**. Without camera or bins I made do with a record shot on my phone.



The next couple of days were holiday and had very little birding. We did go on some nice long walks but I saw little in the way of birds, apart from lifer **Grey-headed Honeyeaters** in a beautiful glade at the base of Uluru. I had completely forgotten Chris Watson’s advice to look and listen out for Western Bowerbird, though in the end I could not persuade the family to try the full base walk (12km all the way around the rock) so perhaps this was moot anyway. The scenery

was stunning and in spite of staying close to Uluru I still found myself gasping each time it came into view. On our second (and last) full day we did a long walk through Kata-Tjuta which was breath-taking, though without any new birds for me.

13/4/14

While the families finished off their breakfast, I struck out for Adelaide at 8.30, somewhat later than planned, but only 20km from Uluru an interesting raptor grabbed my attention. The closer I got the clearer it became that this was not another Wedgie -- holy s**t, it’s a **Black-breasted Buzzard**. This beautiful raptor cruised over my head at remarkably close range and settled on roadkill some 25m back down the highway. Just as I was lining up a cracking shot, another car came along and he cruised off. Damn!



Over the next few hours I would have 2 more, one about 100km along Lassiter Hwy and a third on Stuart Hwy. This last bird was (mildly irritatingly) just inside the NT border so I cannot add BBB to my SA list.

Wedge-tailed Eagles were quite common as well and I had some of my best ever views. I spied a couple in a dead tree by the side of the road and started to slow down, but from a starting speed of 130kmh I couldn’t safely halt completely until I’d overshot by some margin. I feared they would scatter, but even as I turned the car I realised there were more – as many as 6 or 7. Indeed one young-looking bird was stationed on a road-kill carcass and stayed there even as I pulled the car up within 10m. The sight of its blood covered head diving in and out of the abdomen of the dead Kangaroo was gruesome but impressive.



Some 50km north of Port Augusta I pulled up again to view a small dam that held waterfowl. This proved to be a fortuitous stop. Although the birds on the water were just **Grey Teal** (a hundred or more) on the other side of the road an unfamiliar call lured me in and helped me find a small group of **Pied Honeyeaters**, another of the lifer targets I had hoped to run into but which are nomadic and for which I had no solid gen.

I arrived into Coober Pedy early evening and tried my luck on the tracks beyond the sewage works. Although the tracks were firmer than 4 days earlier, the main track I wanted was still waterlogged so I instead drove a short way along the Oodnadatta Track parallel to the north, seeing a few **Australian Pipit** but not the hoped-for Gibberbird or Chats. A **Black-fronted Dotterel** posed nicely in the golden evening sunshine, then as the sun set I grabbed some supplies at a supermarket in Coober Pedy and headed south to camp at the Hutchinson Memorial.



14/4/14

This morning I was hoping to rectify the Quail-thrush and Grasswren dips from the north-bound leg a few days earlier. I returned the basin below the memorial and walked the dry creek beds and up along the ridge listening carefully and occasionally playing the Grasswren song on my phone. Some unusual calling piqued my interest and I tracked it down to a small group of **White-backed Swallow**, fabulous hirundines and only my second ever sighting. Following the swallows had taken me some distance over the ridge when I heard a thin peeping call and realised a Cinnamon Quail-thrush was calling. It sounded close, and I scanned every bit of ground for movement but I just couldn't pin it down. Then it went silent and did not respond to my phone.

I'd begun to walk back towards the car when the call started again, but now from a different place. I followed the direction and in the end realised it was coming from the other side of the highway. Peering across the road I thought I saw something scuttle across an open patch of the plain but too far away and quickly for me to get anything on it. I strode over to the patch I thought it had been and saw and heard nothing.

But now my luck changed – suddenly from behind me a scratchy wren song piped up and I turned in time to land my bins on what was clearly a Grasswren. It bombed off some 50m but I was able to follow where it went and stalked slowly up. Here, two or three **Thick-billed Grasswren** were playing about in the low scrub. Not my Quail-thrush I'd been trailing, but still a great find and one of the two species I'd hoped for.



One obliged by sitting up beautifully behind me for a photo, but in one of my stupider episodes I had knocked the mode dial onto fully manual, and the photos ended up being taken with a slow shutter speed, high ISO and big aperture – almost completely washed out. Major tweaking with Lightroom after the fact brought a bit of colour and contrast back but there were some fully saturated areas that I could do nothing about.

Back at the open patch a **Cinnamon Quail-thrush** had started singing again and now with careful scanning I was able to pick up two birds, both male and female. As I tracked them trying for photos I found another Grasswren, and then as I tracked one of the Quail-thrush walking slowly behind a bush a bright yellowy-orange out-of-focus blob on the top of the bush grabbed my attention. As I excitedly twirled the focus knob of my bins a gorgeous male **Orange Chat** materialised.



By 9am I had still not got the ideal photos I wanted, but it was clear I would have to spend a *lot* more time and be a lot more patient if that was to happen. I needed to be back in Adelaide late afternoon, so somewhat reluctantly I tore myself away from this excellent birding (and zillions of flies) and bombed southwards. Stopping only for fuel, food, red bull and few power-naps, I cruised into Adelaide around 7pm.

