



Southern Australia Through the Eyes of an Aviculturist

Firetails to Gang-gangs — a Southern Australian Experience

by Glen Holland
Masterson, New Zealand

During January my family and I toured through Victoria and some of South Australia. Although primarily a family holiday the inevitable visits were made to various captive institutions, nature reserves, and National Parks. A number of dedicated shopping, beach and fun days ensured the family did not desert me in the bush – fellow bird people will understand this! Despite being a dedicated aviculturist, I'm not one to spend days looking at captive birds – to be honest I was determined to see as many species as possible in the wild.

Our first stop after the airport was Melbourne Zoo but since Ian Smith gave you *Watchbird* readers a tour of the zoo in the last issue, we'll skip over it here.

Next stop was Healesville where we stayed in the Badger Creek Holiday Park. As we arrived at the office a New Holland Honeyeater was taking nectar from some flowers in the garden. Phenomenal to see his striking black and white flecked chest with black and yellow wings – I watched the bird for some time thinking I would probably never see it again (little did I know how many we were to see). As we pulled up towards the cabin we flushed a pair of common Bronzewing Doves and almost immediately we stepped out of the vehicle a pair

of Eastern Spinebills landed in close view. After unpacking, a quick walk around the park produced numerous Fantails, Spotted Pardalote, White Ibis, Maned Geese, Pennant's Rosellas with continually begging chicks, Greater Sulphur-crested Cockatoos, and Rainbow Lorikeets.

An early morning walk the following morning produced a long list of exciting species such as Eastern Whipbirds with their call which builds up and sounds as if the bird is some distance away until the call explodes from within a few meters. Yellow-tailed Black, Gang-gang, and Galah Cockatoos were seen briefly flashing through the eucalyptus trees. Other species such as Pied Currawong (magpie like but with very unusual calls), Yellow Robin, Treecreeper, Misteltoe-bird, and of course the stunning, delicate Superb Fairy Wrens were seen.

The latter, despite their beauty, proved to be one of the most common birds seen on the trip and one soon feels guilty at not lifting binoculars to look at each and every male that one encounters. They live in family groups of about five birds with a predominance of females and juveniles and are literally everywhere there are a few shrubs to hide in. I had my heart set on seeing the Splendid Fairy Wren and have drooled over it many times in the book – more on that one later.

By mid morning we were at the gates of the Healesville Sanctuary – again an institution I had hoped to visit for years. One of my prime objectives was to meet staff involved in breeding their endangered species as we have much to share with some of our New Zealand species. The air was filled with the smell of eucalyptus and the “ping - ping” like calls of Bell Miners busy feeding from the eucalyptus blossoms. As we approached the wetland section the pair of Brolga (cranes) let

rip with their typical loud crane duet – the family nearly jumped out of their skin, but what an introduction.

One of the first walk-through aviaries we entered housed a number of the larger native species already mentioned but what fascinated me was the family of Fairy Wrens squeezing through the wire to steal food from the food tray. Numerous other smaller but very effective walk-throughs housed species such as the Sydney Waxbill (Red-browed Firetail), honeyeaters, Plum-crowned Lorikeet, Azure Kingfishers, etc.

A Lyrebird walk-through allows one a very good view of these forest floor specialists and some of the fruit pigeons as well.

For those keen on reptiles and marsupials, the reptile and the nocturnal houses are an absolute must – I was very impressed by these and the hands on (keeper only) talk with a number of the snakes was well presented. Straight after the reptile talk one enters the raptor free flight show which is one of the most effective but natural and relaxed raptor shows which I have seen.

Starting with the sound of a didgeredoo and a Black Kite flying overhead we soon had a Barking Owl and a Wedge-tailed Eagle swooping over our heads to collect snacks from the staff and returning to the trees behind us. The Wedge-tailed is a very impressive bird, which brought back fond memories of my hand-raised Crowned Eagles, which I used for education in Africa.

Following this I left the family to look at the platypus section (very impressive) and others while I joined a staff member to look at, and talk about, their breeding and release of endangered species. The inevitable discussions on the problems involved with endangered species – captive husbandry, release and monitoring techniques proved very interesting. Their Helmeted Honeyeater program shares many common problems with our Stitchbirds in New Zealand. The past season was very successful for the Orange-bellied Parrot with about 30 reared and a number having been returned to Tasmania for release.

Before leaving Healesville we went

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for a short morning walk at Badger Weir. We had seen the diggings from the Superb Lyrebird and nearly fell over when my daughter (who loves koalas and thinks birds are boring!) calmly announced "Here's a lyrebird" – I thought she was joking but sure enough, it was right next to the path. The bird had a full tail and appears pheasant like – scratching through the leaf litter for insects. The first hint that this one is different is when they grab chunks of bark with their feet and place them to one side. We had about 10 minutes of frantically swopping the two pairs of binoculars between the four of us and of course the video camera was sitting in the car. (I have a bird friend who says that life is made of these memories that are never forgotten and that sure is one that will remain for the rest of my life.)

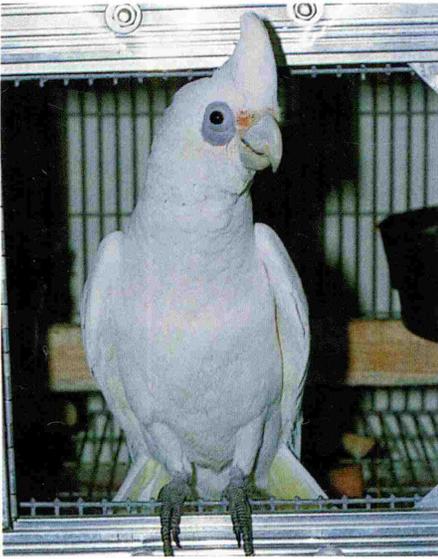
In the picnic site numerous Pennant's Rosellas and King Parrots were landing on a visitors who were holding out handfuls of seed – what a spectacle.

From Healesville we headed inland and then back down towards the coast en-route to Adelaide. Numerous bird species were encountered such as large flocks of Sulphur-crested Cockatoos, Golden Whistlers, King Parrots with fledglings *en trail*, Crested Pigeons, etc.

Walking in the coastal scrub near the twelve apostles at Port Campbell provided a nice view of a Honeyeater feeding a single chick. In order to "lift" the birds from the bush, I often "spish," which in my case involves sucking on the side of my finger to produce a squealing/spishing sound – few species can resist coming to have a look.

"Spishing" in the coastal scrub produced a female Southern Emu-wren, which came within a metre of me. It looked more like a spiky mouse with a very long stiff tail – this was a female and unfortunately her male (with a bright blue throat) kept his distance.

A coastal wetland/pond system near the main beach at Wornambool provided some very exciting early morning birding with Yellow-billed and Royal Spoonbill, Pelican, Chestnut and the Grey Teal (one does not mention Black Swans which are around very corner). I had the best views I ever had of the



The Little Corella can be seen over a vast area of Australian mainland.

Baillon's Crake (I have chased this species around on numerous occasions in Africa) and the Australian Spotted Crake. The reedbeds produce numerous warblers and the very easily identified Golden-headed Cisticola.

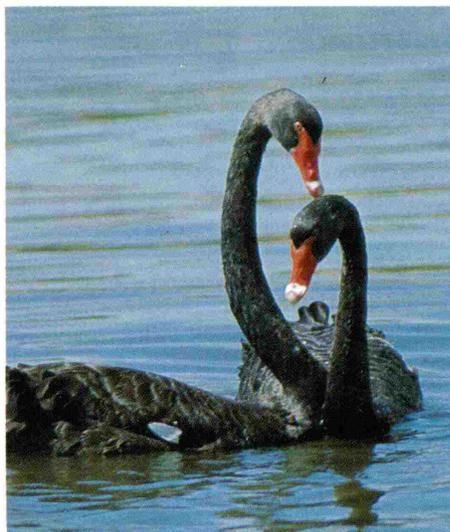
Heading inland towards the Grampian mountain range we stopped for the night at Mt. Eccles National Park. This was to be the place for my daughter (loves all things huggable) – a walk around the volcanic crater lake produced a number of koalas – we even heard them making their pig-like grunts. By the evening we had seen 16 and had three in view from our tent site – as the sun set we watched them move into action (very slowly – not sure if you can call it “action”).

Once dark, we were visited by a family of brush-tailed possums who were clearly used to being fed and soon had us scampering to remove all the groceries we had out on the camp table. One female had a baby almost as large as herself – it had obviously not been told that it could walk and went everywhere on poor mom's back. The birdlife here was very good – not many new species for me but Kookaburras, Fairy Wrens, White-naped and White-eared honeyeaters all around our campsite. The melodious Grey Shrike-thrush was very common here and had me running after it continually as their numerous calls offered the promise of some new species.

Next morning we headed to our bungalow at Halls Gap in the

Grampian mountain range. Again, as we arrived at the office a pair of Rainbow Lorikeets were feeding a youngster in the garden. This was to be the place of cockatoos. On the outskirts of the town we came across flocks of Little Corellas feeding on the roadside and over the next few days we must have seen a few thousand – at times like big white butterflies flying in one direction in the morning and another in the evening (back to roost) – often accompanied by Galahs when feeding on the ground. While there, I read that a local golf course, green keeper had been given permission to shoot “at” the birds as they were damaging the golf course.

The Grampians is a great place to walk with a mixed bag of long, short, difficult, and easy walks. We picked a two hour walk one morning and in the bottom of a valley I heard the corkscrew-like call of a pair of Gang-gang Cockatoos – the pair flew over my head and landed in a large gum tree a few meters away but pretty high. I took video of them with my heart in my throat and noticed the male disappear into a hole – sure enough it was a nest site with both birds going in and out of the hole continually until I had to leave (or get divorced!). I heard them on a number of other occasions in the range and also saw Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos flying overhead in the evenings. Other memorable birds in ranges were the beautiful Yel-



The Black Swans in southern Australia were almost too common to mention.

low-tufted Honeyeater, Flame Robins feeding chicks, Brown Falcons, Yellow-rumped Thornbills and White-browed Scrubwrens – the latter very common everywhere we had been.

After the Grampians we headed further inland to the town of Nhill which is close to Little Dessert National Park.

On the journey I stopped to look at some flocks of small birds – I was after some of the small seedeaters. They turned out to be White-fronted Chats and I was soon distracted from their stunning colors by a Peregrine Falcon which had obviously also seen the flock which I had disturbed. He made two very swift passes and failing to catch one landed on a fence pole about 100 meters away – what a view.

En-route we also had a brief view of a pair of Elegant Parakeets. The town (Nhill) was alive with birds and within minutes of arriving at our motel we had seen Plum-crowned Lorikeets feeding on flowers in a gum tree. Crested Pigeons, Noisy Miners and Red-rumped Parakeets were everywhere – on the road verges, power lines etc.

Not wanting to waste the little time we had, we headed in the Little Dessert National Park. This is bordering on mallee country and the area is one of the strongholds of the Malleefowl. We decided to do an hour walk and I was a little despondent having traveled so far and there was no sign of birds or bird song. About 20 minutes into the walk I found a pair of Hooded Robins, which cheered me up, and shortly thereafter a family of Emu went tearing past – now this was better.

Soon we had seen numerous Yellow-plumed Honeyeaters; three species of woodswallows - including a Masked, which my son spotted and casually announced that he had seen it in the book – left dad scrambling to locate it. Other highlights were White-browed Babblers, Rainbow Bee-eaters with fledglings and a Diamond Firetail (sparrow) – I had bred the firetails as a youngster in aviculture and it had been a boyhood dream to see them in the wild – they are stunning!

The malleefowl, which we never saw, was soon forgotten with all we

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had seen that memorable evening. The Galahs in the town of Nhill provide quite a spectacle as there are thousands and they all appear to roost in the gum trees over a boardwalk situated over a wetland in the town. The numbers, colour and noise made the evening quite a spectacle.

Having seen me so worked up, my wife prompted me to drive to take the long route to Adelaide via the Big Desert National Park. Off we set and within 15 minutes the car had stopped (my daughter now bored and sighing in the back!) – a pair of Australian Hobby Falcons were sharing a meal on the road verge.

Driving on, the Galahs became a real problem and we had several near misses – could you imagine having to report back to fellow aviculturists that you went to Australia and killed a Galah! Big dessert is not a place I would rush to as I believe one would do better heading even further inland but just by stopping every now and then we found numerous new honeyeater species – particularly Spiny-cheeked and Tawny-crowned. Yellow-rumped Pardalote seemed very common here but the highlight was a ten-minute walk of the road where I proceeded to “spish” – out popped a family of Splendid Fairy Wrens. I have wanted to see them for years – my third fairy wren species. With their metallic blue sheen (surely one of the worlds most beautiful birds) right up there with birds of paradise. The group included two mails in full colour – anybody watching my son and I creep around the shrubs with ooh and aah, would have thought it was the cuckoo's nest. The shy Hylacola was also seen twice – not as shy as its name suggests!

From there we headed to Adelaide, all a little tired and me feeling I had seen my fare share and should not push my luck. I decided to give my binoculars a rest. We did however pay a visit to Adelaide Zoo – the excuse was lots of huggable type things for my daughter. At the zoo I met with the curator of birds to discuss and rearing honeyeaters from the egg. They have perfected a technique for the endangered Regent Honeyeater and success-

fully did five last season.

A short walk with the curator and more on my own gave me the impression of a very professionally managed bird section – lots of breeding and care for the fine details, well landscaped enclosures, compatible species, everything in pairs, even the African estrildids, for example.



Photo by Dale R. Thompson/George D. Dodge

The Gang Gang Cockatoo is the smallest cockatoo found in Australia. They are sexually dimorphic with the male having the red face and crest. They are found in the mountainous forests and valleys of southern New South Wales.

A couple of big walk-through aviaries provided excellent views of many of the native species – I watched a White-headed Pigeon about two meters away feeding a chick. They have 1200 birds in the collection and many of them are rare (many of the exotics taken for granted elsewhere in the world, e.g. pheasants, are not present in any numbers in Australia). I saw three new species – White-fronted Ground Dove, Golden-shouldered Parrot and Varied Lorikeet, perhaps the most beautiful of all lorikeets.

Overall, we had a great trip and, fortunately, there is lots more to go back and see for those who like birds. 