

Plains-wanderer report for 2019

Philip Maher
enquiries@philipmaher.com
www.philipmaher.com



Climatic conditions

While drought maintained its grip on the Riverina during 2019, it was not quite as bad as 2018.

Rainfall figures for the Deniliquin district in 2019

(Going south to north)

Gulpa	Deniliquin (our house)	Monimail revegetation area Hay Road	Wanganella revegetation area Hay Road	John's house PW property
170 mm	235.5 mm	239.5 mm	248 mm	199 mm

As in 2018, it is hard to fathom the rainfall in this district. Gulpa, the furthest south, registered the lowest reading — historically, it received more rain than the other localities further north. Such is the nature of rainfall in the current climate upheaval.

The plains-wanderer property recorded 199 mm in 2019, which was 18 mm more than it received in 2018 but only slightly more than half the historic average at 350 mm. The revegetation area a few kilometres south of Wanganella township recorded over a 100 mm more in 2019 than 2018 and 49 mm more than John's plains-wanderer property even though it is only about 22 km SSW.

May was the standout month on the plains with 79 mm recorded on John's property. This rainfall was crucial to the plains-wanderers returning to the district. This was followed by 23 mm in July. The late winter/spring was demoralising with zero rainfall recorded in August and October, and very little in September. November saw about 15 mm and early December about 6 mm.



Plains-wanderers 2019

The first two outings of the year, one in February and the other in April, started off badly with no plains-wanderers recorded. We had warned our clients that we had little chance of finding a plains-wanderer given we had not seen them since mid November 2018, and with little rain falling in the interim, there was no incentive for plains-wanderers to return.

We did not go out again until 11 September when Robert went out in the evening to do some reconnaissance. He heard a female plains-wanderer call at dusk and subsequently located a female. This ten-month timeframe is the longest plains-wanderers have not been recorded on the property in near on forty years since we

first found them. My guess is the 23 mm rain in July produced just enough cover for them to return to their favoured breeding grounds. On 19 September Robert recorded another female during the day in a different paddock while doing some sheep work.

We took our first spring clients, a large group from the Illawarra Birders, out on 28 September and had quite the search before we eventually found a male in the paddock where Robert had seen the female during the day on 19 September. We needed to find a better spot and fast as we had dozens of birders booked in for October and November. Robert went out the next evening at dusk to listen and heard a female call in yet a different paddock, a paddock where we had not had them since 2017.

The next night in this paddock some clients and I heard two females call at dusk and located one after a short search. We believe there were at least two females on territories in this area, quite possibly with two males each. On 11 and 12 October in the same paddock, we had a male and female together, indicating that breeding was imminent. We found this female or one or two of the males multiple times during October. On 26 October we found the two females on the one night.

On 3 November there was about 15 mm of rain which was the catalyst for more plains-wanderers to turn up with extra males recorded in the territories of the two females, and on 5 November four males were seen including a male that had a nest with four eggs. We stayed away from this area until we thought the young had hatched. On 19 November I went back to where the nest had been and found the male with three small chicks about 120 metres away.

The females became harder to find here so I tried another paddock where Robert had heard the first female call on 11 September. On 9 November we found three plains-wanderers in this new paddock including an immature female just starting to colour up, making her about two and a half months old. Between 8 November and 27 November quite a few immature birds, all about three months old, were seen in this paddock as well as some adults. On 23 November, five male plains-wanderers were recorded, four of which were immature birds. I believe all these immature birds,

hatched in August, possibly in Victoria or perhaps further east in the Riverina where the drought was not quite as severe. Prior to August, the Hay Plain had been too bare for them. Not so many of these immature birds were seen after 27 November so it seems likely they kept moving. We continued to find adults and the odd immature in this paddock until the year's end.

After the male plains-wanderer with chicks on 19 November, the plains-wanderers showed no real interest in breeding, it being so dry. We did see an adult male and female not too far apart in late December perhaps indicating that they could swing into action if there was a major rainfall event but this had not happened by the close of the year.

Conclusion

During 2019 we had sixty-five sightings of plains-wanderers on thirty-seven excursions. Many of these were the same individuals seen repeatedly. At a guess I would say we saw about thirty individual plains-wanderers in 2019.

We finished up seeing plains-wanderers in four different paddocks in 2019 and I believe there was probably at least six females on territories. How many of these successfully bred we cannot say. We know one clutch was successful but I suspect that some were not. Nevertheless, given the climatic circumstances, a reasonable number of immature birds were seen, indicating that breeding was successful somewhere. This is a much better result than 2018 when no birds bred successfully and all plains-wanderers had left the district by mid November 2018, staying away for nine to ten months.

Acknowledgements

As always, Trisha and I thank the Nevinson family for their generosity and enthusiasm and their commitment to plains-wanderers in these very challenging times. Robert's efforts were key to the 100% success rate we had in the 2019 spring/early summer plains-wanderer season.

Statistics

Plains-wanderer sightings	Number of PW excursions in 2019	Number of PW excursion successes	Excursion successes in the spring/early summer 2019	Number of clients in 2019
65	37 + 3 reconnaissance or incidental records	35/37	35/35	188

