

Sunbird Inland Tour 8 to 26 September 2009

Leader: Philip Maher

Logistics and food provider: Trisha Maher

Participants: Wim Vader (Norway), Penny McGuire and Alistair Best (UK)

A small birding group on a quite lengthy and sometimes arduous tour can have its own challenges. Penny, Alistair and Wim never looked back. They were charming, considerate and prepared to put in the hard yards where necessary. They were rewarded with 238 bird species; landscapes that dumbfounded; weather patterns that perplexed and experiences in the Australian outback that they hopefully will long relish.

The 2009 inland tour of could be encapsulated in the word 'contrast' and perhaps also 'luck'. Luck is always a component of a birding tour and we at times were blessed.

The contrast in the prevailing climatic condition from one area to next was unprecedented. For instance, in the Cobar to Bourke area there had been good rain over winter, triggering an explosion of woodswallows the like I have not seen in the long history of this tour. Ravenous for nectar, woodswallows dripped from flower-laden emu bushes *Eremophila longifolia*. We witnessed swirling masses of **white-browed** and **masked woodswallows**. **Pied honeyeaters**, often seen with woodswallows, joined their travelling companions in spectacular aerial manoeuvres. Displaying nearby were **black honeyeaters**, **crimson chats**, **white-winged trillers** and scores of **rufous songlarks**.

Compare this to the dire conditions around Tibooburra, the Bulloo Overflow and Cameron Corner where drought continues to grip the country. Even so, we managed decent views of most of our target species including no less than twelve **grey grasswrens** plus **cinnamon quail-thrush**, **banded whiteface** and **gibber chat**.

On any outback trip you pray that you'll get a **grey falcon**, one of our most elusive raptors. Prayers were answered on day two of the tour, virtually in my own back yard! The bird flew over the road and landed in a belah tree *Casuarina christata* before taking off, affording us great views. All Australian falcons were seen but none was as exhilarating as this one. Over one thousand kilometres from our first, we got a second **grey falcon** on the Strzelecki Creek, in the scope, feeding on a **budgerigar**.

It was day twelve before we got a decent sighting of **black falcon** with a pair perched in a coolibar tree *Eucalyptus coolibah* on the Strzelecki Creek. Our falcon set was complete with a pair of **peregrines** over the Murray River at Morgan in South Australia. In all, seventeen species of raptor were seen, with other notable sightings being four **black-breasted buzzards** and four **spotted harriers**.

This inland tour has grasswren written all over it. We got all five of the possible grasswrens, despite, at times, indifferent weather. **Striated**, one of the normally less difficult grasswrens, proved the most contrary. In the eleventh hour (probably quite literally) we located a pair with young in the Victorian mallee. We expected the **short-tailed grasswren** to present a challenge given the cold windy weather in the Flinders Ranges but good views of an adult, intent on feeding young in the nest, were had within minutes.

The mallee had its own trials: brief but heavy rain, cold and windy. (Contrast that with south-west Queensland's above average temperatures). **Red-lored whistler** evaded us before hard work was rewarded with no less than three, including an adult and a sub-adult male sorting out a territorial dispute. **Malleefowl** also eluded us until the final morning when we revisited one of the three already checked active mounds to find a male malleefowl opening up the mound for the female to lay her egg.

We would expect to see **Major Mitchell's cockatoo** between Hillston and the Queensland border but they held out on us until day six when we had a flock of about twenty feeding on the bare stony ground west of Cunnamulla, allowing us close views from the vehicle. We saw more over the following days and then again in the Victorian mallee.

Budgerigars were about in good numbers around Cobar and Bourke and several hundred were seen migrating north along the Strzelecki Creek including the lucked-out budgie that was brunch for the aforementioned **grey falcon**.

A couple of pairs of **Bourke's parrots** feeding young in nest holes in gidgee trees *Acacia cambagei* on Bowra Station in south-west Queensland was memorable; as was a mixed flock of **budgerigars** and **Bourke's parrots** feeding together on the ground in the red sandhills of the Corner Country. **Superb parrots** were in good supply with a flock of about twenty males feeding on the seed heads of blue crowfoot *Erodium crinitum* beside the railway line south of Deniliquin. On the Murray River near Morgan in South Australia we had **regent parrots** feeding young in nest holes and one gorgeous male on the ground feeding on the fruits of satiny bluebush *Maireana georgei*. Also near Morgan we located a handsome **black-eared cuckoo** in belah country after dipping on it in the Flinders. Less than satisfactory views of **crested shrike-tit** were had at Deniliquin but we saw this dapper species well on the Lachlan River north east of Hillston where I have not recorded them previously.

Many of the inland's nomadic and migratory birds were moving south, probably because of the dry conditions in Queensland and northern South Australia, and rain in some areas of the south. We witnessed the big southerly movements of **white-browed** and **masked woodswallows**, **crimson** and **orange chats**, **pieb** and **black honeyeaters**, **rufous songlarks** and the enormous number of **white-**

winged trillers, the latter seen on all but three days of the tour. **Black honeyeater** was a surprise in the Flinders Ranges, as were good numbers of **orange chats** in spinifex country in the Flinders. A massive dust storm was rolling across southern Australia and it's possible that **orange chats** were cognisant of the approaching dust storm and had come into the ranges for protection.

Wim had famously missed **plains-wanderer** with me back in 1990. Day one of this tour was not going to be over until we got him one. Wim's waning patience was finally rewarded with a pair of 'wanderers'.

Our schedule on day one of the tour didn't allow for **inland dotterel** but the prior month's outback trip proved they were very scarce out in the Corner Country so we made sure we got the 'dots' under our belt before we left the Deniliquin district.

Mammal highlights included the three large kangaroos species including some magnificent old **reds** in Sturt National Park. Plenty of **euros** and a group of eight **yellow-footed rock-wallabies**, with one female grooming her baby, were seen in the Flinders Ranges. **Black wallaby** and **echidna** were seen in the foothill forests near Heathcote. A **fat-tailed dunnart** was spotlighted on the plains-wanderer search. None of us will forget the beautiful, golden male **dingo** on the Bulloo River Road, and a female dingo a short time after.

Reptiles included a baby **eastern brown snake** in the South Australian mallee, and many **stumpytails** and **central bearded dragons**. At least eight of the beautiful **painted dragons** were seen in one day in the red sand dunes near Cameron Corner as well as a splendid **sand goanna** on the road.

The tour had set off in two Four-wheel Drives with Trisha driving the second vehicle laden with food. She was delighted that Wim, Alistair and Penny shared her love of good food and wine and she kept them well fed and watered. Lunch was not over until my sister Susan's famous biscuit box had been packed away and the wine bottles drained. We travelled 5,700 km together, traversed four States, shared stories, laughs and beauty tips (Trisha and Penny) and saw much of what is quintessentially Australian, and a few birds ...

Philip Maher