

Plain-wanderer report 2021

Climatic Conditions in 2021.

The annual rainfall was recorded at six localities around Deniliquin in 2021. They are Gulpa revegetation area, our home in Deniliquin township, the Monimail revegetation area, the Wanganella sandhill revegetation area, John's house on the plains-wanderer property and Parkview near Booroorban

Of those six, only Booroorban and Deniliquin recorded average rainfall. The other four localities recorded below or well below average rainfall. Although the plains-wanderer country was in the well-below average category, it was saved by some good rainfall in the late winter/spring period. Also, the above average rainfall in 2020 had the plains-wanderer country in reasonable condition at the start of 2021, so it was not starting from a low base as it had in previous years.

Rainfall figures for the Deniliquin district in 2021 from south to north.

Gulpa revegetation area: 324 mm (442 mm, long-term average for Mathoura, 13 km south of Gulpa).

Deniliquin (our house): 414 mm (412 mm long-term average for Deniliquin)

Monimail revegetation area: 317 mm (roughly 375 mm long-term average)

Wanganella revegetation area: 344 mm (366 mm long term average for Zara station — 12 km WNW).

John's house on the plains-wanderer property: 274.5 mm (350 mm long-term average).

Parkview (near Booroorban): 351 mm (350 mm long term-average for Booroorban).

Rainfall in the first half of the year, notably, in February, April or May was poor. The second half of the year was fortunately more productive, particularly out in the plains-wanderer country, with good rains at John's house in June (50mm), July (35 mm), August (16.5mm),

September (38.5mm) and October (22.5 mm). November and December both recorded less than 10 mm out on the plains although my revegetation area just south of Wanganella (23 km SSW of John's house) recorded 38 mm in November and 42.5 mm in December.

The rainfall in the latter half of the year was reminiscent of the historic pattern of good rainfall in the winter and spring that we mostly had prior to the crippling droughts and dry years from 2002 — 2020.

Although we predominately received below average rainfall in the district, the vegetation and birdlife responded to the winter/spring rains with gusto. It has been an all too rare event to get good, reliable rainfall in the winter/spring period, particularly in the months of September and October over the past twenty years — right when the birds need it.

Plains-wanderers in 2021.

Due to the COVID 19 pandemic, there were fewer plains-wanderer excursions than in any year in the last forty, including 2020.

We ventured out on a total of twenty-one occasions to search for plains-wanderers in 2021. We did not go out at all from 17 April to 26 October. However, we did enjoy a 100% success rate in 2021 with not a single miss for the year. This was no doubt due to above average rainfall in 2020 and good rainfall in the winter and spring of 2021. The only other occasion in the past twenty years when we had consecutive good seasons was 2010/2011. However, on that occasion we had massive rains at times and the vegetation became too thick and the plains wanderers, for the most part, departed the district.

Although we did not go out from April to October, I am confident that plains-wanderers would have been present during that period as there was still suitable cover for them in places. I suspect that 2021 would have been the first time in many years that plains-wanderers have not had to vacate the district due to a lack of cover in the late summer through to the early spring period. Also, they had recovered their numbers somewhat in 2020.

In 2021 we bought a thermal imaging camera that has proved reliable in helping to find plains-wanderers. As we are using it primarily on foot, it is gentler on the habitat and less disturbing for the birds than driving around. It is particularly useful when the females are on their territories in the spring and are in a relatively small area.

In total, we had fifty-eight sightings of plains-wanderers in 2021 from twenty-one outings. Many of these were the same birds seen repeatedly. On two separate occasions, a plains-

wanderer was seen by Robert during the day while Robert was moving sheep. Overall, in 2021, we probably had at least six trios of plains-wanderers (one female mates with two males) breeding in the two main paddocks. We also recorded them in two additional paddocks. The female that Robert recorded during the day was probably also a breeding bird.

The other paddock where we recorded males at night was marginal habitat. These birds were most likely on the move, searching for breeding habitat.

In January 2022, we also recorded an adult female in this paddock, so there are probably breeding birds in this paddock now (March 2022) as it has thickened up since rain in January. We had sightings of around twenty to thirty individual birds plus chicks in 2021.

Grazing by kangaroos

In my 2020 plains-wanderer report I wrote that red kangaroos were overgrazing the one paddock that John and Robert had kept the sheep out of for some years to save the ground cover for the plains-wanderers. This has proved to be not such a problem this year as the red kangaroos seem to have finally dispersed with the reasonable rainfall over a big area (particularly to the north) and for the moment at least are not exerting grazing pressure on the paddock. It is possible that with the good rains, some of the red kangaroos have returned to the inland as the species is known to migrate long distances. Plains-wanderers have returned to the paddock and the diversity of vegetation has improved with the lower numbers of red kangaroos.

Breeding in 2021

An immature plains-wanderer was seen on 17 April that was probably around three months old as it still had pale legs (adult plumage attained at around three months). This bird was probably bred in the area in December 2020 or January 2021.

When we did our first reconnaissance for plains-wanderers on 26 October 2021 we could only locate two adult females. We suspected that the males were already on nests. This was subsequently proved to be correct when a male plains-wanderer with four small chicks was located not far from where one of the females was located nineteen days later (incubation period is about twenty-six days).

On 16 November another courting pair of plains-wanderers were seen and on 24 November the first independent juvenile bird of the season was recorded. On 27 November, another courting pair of adults was seen. During December, with little rain in November or

December, we located only single males, which probably indicated that breeding was on hold at that time.

Due to the good seasonal conditions for plains-wanderers in the spring and summer of 2021, I believe they have had a good breeding season and should be regaining their numbers.

Although there is quite a bit of suitable habitat out there at present, there is still some big areas of suitable soil type that doesn't have sufficient ground cover on it for plains-wanderers. More good rain is required to really recover the habitat and get it back to what it was in the 1980s and 1990s.

March 2022 has kicked off with a great deal of promise. If autumn continues the way it started, plains-wanderer habitat will continue to improve.

Thanks go, as always, to the most generous and tolerant people in the world, the Nevinson Family.

| Plains-wanderer sightings 2021 | Number of PW excursions in 2021 | Percentage of PW successful excursions with clients in 2021 | Percentage of PW successful excursions with clients in spring/early summer 2021 | Number of clients in 2021 |
|--|---------------------------------|---|---|---------------------------|
| 60 including 2 incidental sightings by Robert while working | 21 | 100% | 100% | 50 |