

Annual Plains-wanderer Report 2017

Philip Maher, Deniliquin, NSW.

9 January 2018



Two thousand and seventeen was a good year for plains-wanderers. We recorded 178 plains-wanderers although many of these were repeat sightings of the same birds.

We missed finding plains-wanderers on one night out of 46 attempts and on that occasion we had an early start the next morning so didn't persist as long as we might have done. This is in contrast to the previous year when we had 17 misses for the year out of 57 attempts.

We also had some of our highest numbers of plains-wanderers recorded in a night since the late 1990s and early 2000s. We had 12 birds on 20 March, 11 birds on 3 November, nine birds on 27 November, and on some other nights in November, we had eight birds. Many of these multiple sightings were of immature birds, indicating good breeding success.

The resurgence in the plains-wanderer population has been brought about by the rainfall we received in the latter months of 2016 and although the rainfall in 2017 was erratic, there were a couple of periods in the year when there was enough rainfall to allow the plains-wanderers to successfully breed. Again, demonstrating the resilience and opportunism of the plains-wanderer in that they can breed at any time of year when conditions are adequate.

Climatic conditions in 2017

Extreme weather conditions continued in spades in 2017. Four months of the year (January, February, June and September) recorded zero rainfall on the plains-wanderer property, which is remarkable for a year that finished, on the property, with above average rainfall. The only months that recorded useful amounts of rain were March, April, May, August and December. While there were some dramatic thunderstorms producing good rain around the homestead in November, overall November was patchy.

On 1 July there was also a massive frost with —5.6 recorded, making it almost the lowest temperature ever recorded in the district. The erratic rainfall and particularly the dry winter months (historically the most reliable rainfall) didn't support vegetation growth on much of the red plain country favoured by plains-wanderers. This meant that much of the country that the plains-wanderers recolonised in late 2016 was unsuitable for them in 2017. [When rainfall is so variable and there are so many months between rainfall events, the perennial native grasses struggle to survive the long dry periods so have to continually regenerate from seed. This requires favourable conditions of temperature and moisture, which no longer occur on a regular basis]. Nonetheless, there were still some sizeable areas that remained suitable for plains-wanderers.

Breeding and movement of plains-wanderers in 2017

Juvenile or immature birds were recorded in January, February and March, indicating that many plains-wanderers had successfully bred in the spring and summer of 2016/17. Whether these birds were all bred on the plains-wanderer property or moved in from adjoining areas I cannot say.

On 10 April we made a significant discovery. A banded male plains-wanderer was found. We caught the bird and recorded the band number. It had been banded on 13 May 2016 in Terrick Terrick National Park by Mark Antos, who works for Parks

Victoria. This is the greatest movement (124 km) ever recorded for plains-wanderer and the first record of a plains-wanderer moving interstate, that is to say, crossing the Murray River. While we have always suspected that long distance movements can occur with the plains-wanderer, it was great to confirm it.

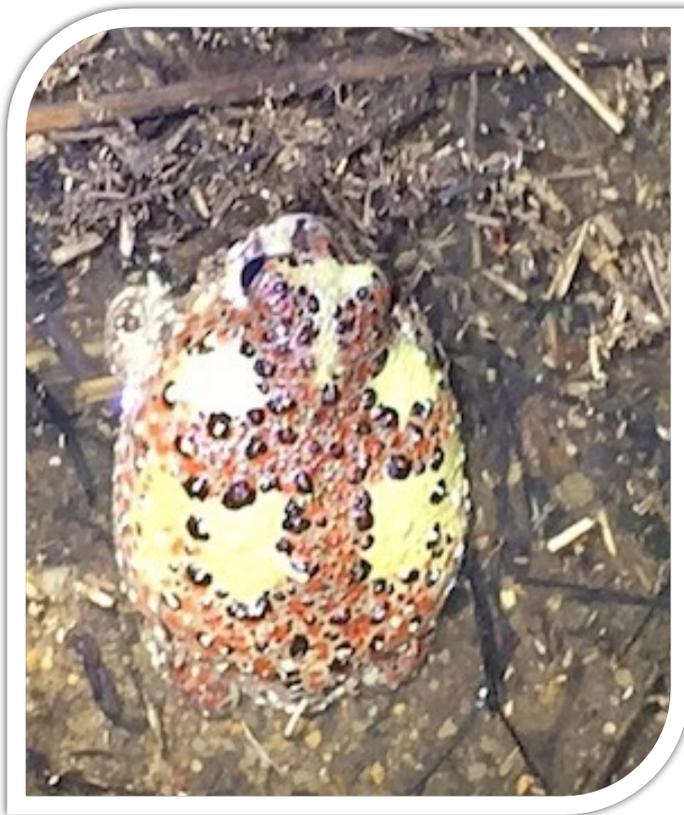
In October, when it was very dry, it was also evident that there was a movement of plains-wanderers going on with different birds being recorded on successive nights in the same area. On one occasion we located four adult females within an area of 200 metres. A couple of nights later there was one left and then a night or two later they had all departed that area. Probably by this stage, with no rain in September over most of the Riverina, they were desperately searching for suitable habitat in which to breed.

There were no searches for plains-wanderers between 14 April and 30 August. When we went out on 31 August, plains-wanderers were definitely in breeding mode as two or three females were calling. Observations in September suggested that breeding was being attempted. However, again with zero rain in September, this breeding event appeared to fail, at least in this particular paddock as no young was seen and the adults vacated the area where breeding had been attempted. We found more birds in another part of the paddock where there was more cover but they did not appear to be breeding. It was in this paddock that we thought there was movement going on during October. On 2 October two immature birds were seen in the paddock, indicating that breeding had occurred somewhere in the area after the rain in August. It stayed very dry in this paddock and by late October plains-wanderers were starting to become decidedly scarce.

On 3 November, we decided to try a different paddock where there had been a little more patchy rain. This proved to be a good move as we had 11 birds for the night. The birds included an adult female, an adult male with four well-grown chicks and the rest of the males were of indeterminate age. This was our first confirmed spring breeding on the property and it was incredible that the male had managed to get four chicks to that stage in such harsh conditions. We continued to see these chicks over the next few weeks and they were largely independent by 10 November. On 27 November, another male with just a single well-grown chick was seen, clearly not having done as well as the male with four large chicks. Also, in late November and early December many immature plains-wanderers were seen. They were just starting

to colour up so were about three months old, indicating they had nested somewhere in the area after the rain in August.

On 1 December the biggest rainfall event of the year occurred, dumping about 80 mm of rain on the plains-wanderer property in 24 hours; and 93 mm all up for the month. This made searching for plains-wanderers taxing as we couldn't drive on the paddock for about a week. Not daunted by the inclement weather, quite a few brave birders ventured forth with us that week, on foot across a sodden paddock. Luckily for us, some birds didn't shift despite their paddock being all but flooded. [A bonus at this time was seeing and hearing the amazing holy-cross frogs breeding in the shallow depressions that had filled with water. Several hooded scalyfoot were also seen after this rain event].



Holy-cross frog *Notaden bennetti* Photo: Philip Maher, December 2017

On 9 December we changed paddocks again as we were getting mainly immature birds in the second paddock. In this third paddock, about three adult pairs were located throughout December and all were in breeding mode, so I expect breeding will be occurring in this paddock now.

Despite the challenging climatic conditions during 2017, plains-wanderers still managed to breed successfully on several occasions and increase their numbers. Nonetheless, as resilient as this tough little species is, the extreme climatic conditions we are now experiencing is the main factor threatening its future, as well as so many other species throughout Australia.

Acknowledgments: For 37 years, the Nevinson family has not only enabled me to search for plains-wanderers on their properties, they have actively assisted me. My gratitude is as vast as the plains.

Plains-wanderer stats for 2017

In 2017, Robert and/or I went out spotlighting for plains-wanderers with clients on 46 nights (57 in 2016, 56 in 2015 and 43 in 2014).

The number of clients including Australian and international birding tour leaders totalled 221 birders (304 in 2016, 241 in 2015 & 196 in 2014).

We had 45 successful outings with a total of 219 happy clients (40 successful outings with a total of 222 happy clients in 2016, 50 successful outings and 230 happy clients in 2015).

Only one search in 2017 with a total of two birders failed to find a plains-wanderer (2016: 17 searches with a total of 82 clients failed to find a plains-wanderer. In 2015 & 2014 six searches were unsuccessful, disappointing 11 clients in both 2015 & 2014).

The 2017 failed search occurred in February; however, we had time restraints and had we persisted, we would probably have located a plains-wanderer.

Robert and I did one reconnaissance trip, which was successful in finding two female plains-wanderers and could hear two more females calling. John came upon a plains-wanderer on one occasion while working, as did Robert.

Rainfall for the year on the plains-wanderer property measured 387.9 mm [15.27 inches]

All outings and sightings of plains-wanderers are recorded on the Latest News Page <http://www.philipmaher.com/LatestNews1htm.htm>

2017 rainfall

Deniliquin Airport: 387.9 mm [15.27 inches]

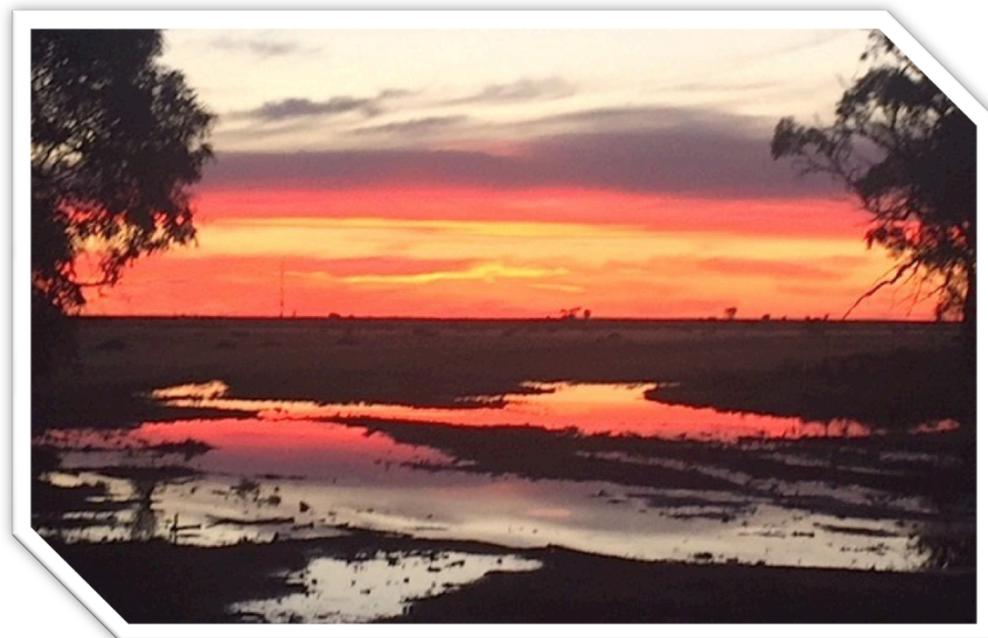
Mean long term average rainfall for Deniliquin 404.1 mm [15.90 in]

Monimail revegetation plot: 347 mm [13.66 in] 25 km north of Deniliquin

Wanganella sandhill revegetation: 383 mm [15.07 in] 38 km north
Plains-wanderer property: 387 mm [15.23 in] 55 km north
Booroorban: 394 mm = [15.51 in] 74 km north



Eastern hooded scalyfoot *Pygopus schraderi* Photo Philip Maher, December 2017



Sunset over a wet plain. Photo Philip Maher, November 2017