

Of Emus and Fairy-wrens: Photographing Australia's Endemic Birds

Monthly Newsletter

December 2006

Well it is now nearly the end of January and I am just getting around to sending out the December newsletter. I apologize that it has taken so long but I will try to do better in future months.

December proved to be a fairly productive month as I covered some final bits of New South Wales and entered the state of Victoria. I met a lot of people this month, all of whom were quite generous in their support of me and my project. I must say that my productivity this month was made possible only through their help and guidance. Looking purely at the numbers, it may not look like December was as productive as other months. For example, I only photographed 37 species of birds while my next lowest monthly count was 68 species. However, out of those 37 species, 31 of them were endemic and many were rather difficult to see and some even considered rare.

The month started with me leaving Canberra and heading back into New South Wales on my way to the Riverina and Mallee regions of New South Wales and Victoria. On the way I stopped and spent a couple days with a local photographer in Griffith, Dave Webb. Dave was able to put me onto a number of birds including Australian Pratincoles on the nest, the somewhat elusive Painted Honeyeater, and the common but often difficult to photograph Australian Spotted Crake. While I had limited time with Dave and in the area, it proved to be quite enjoyable and productive.

Moving on, I entered Victoria to see if I could photograph a couple species of honeyeater that so far had proved elusive to me. While I did get to photograph Fuscous, Yellow-tufted, and Brown-headed Honeyeaters, I got my first taste of the bushfires that would burn for the next few months (and still burn today, 1/27/07). Heavy smoke from the fires in Gippsland and other parts of eastern Victoria often made photography difficult as they lowered visibility and light. After photographing my target birds as well as a few others, I headed back into New South Wales to attempt to avoid the smoke and see if I could pick up some other birds that Dave had recently heard about.

On the way I stopped and spent a couple days with Keith Hutton in Leeton. Keith and I were plagued with several extremely hot days but we still did our best to find the nomadic Black Honeyeater. While we came up empty handed, the knowledge that Keith imparted on me that day made it possible for me to find and photograph the honeyeater later in the month. Our disappointment about the lack of Black Honeyeaters was quickly erased by a great evening when I photographed three endemic species: Long-billed Corellas, the glorious Superb Parrot, and a Striped Honeyeater which I had been searching for for some time.

After leaving Keith, I returned to Griffith where Dave directed me to a small dam in Binya State Forest where Turquoise Parrots and Diamond Firetails were coming in to drink. I spent an evening and morning photographing these beautiful birds and gladly added them to the list of endemics I photographed.

Leaving the Riverina Region, I headed west towards the Mallee country of northwest Victoria, but first I had planned a stop at Mungo National Park. I didn't know much about the park but it turned out to be quite fascinating. This ancient lake is one of the most productive archaeological sites in the world with documented habitation reaching back tens of thousands of years. Not only this, but it is a spectacularly beautiful area. I had only planned one night here but could have spent several weeks photographing the beautiful dunes and lakebed.

The birds of the Mallee country beacons though, so I headed on. The Mallee is a landscape of red sand and clay, dense stunted eucalypts, and a sameness that is amazing. The sameness isn't a negative aspect at all; it just means it is amazingly easy to get lost as soon as your vehicle or the track is out of sight. This landscape is home to several species of birds that can be seen nowhere else and

are somewhat difficult to see even here. I had quite a long target list as I visited the various parks of the region and was thrilled to leave the area with photos of the Chestnut Quail-Thrush, Mallee Emu-wren, and Malleefowl, among others. In fact, some of my favorite images I have made so far come from this region.

I left the Mallee country midmonth and worked my way towards Melbourne. December 21st was one of the few firm dates I have this year, the day my girlfriend arrives at Melbourne Airport for three weeks over the holidays. Our original plans called for a Christmas in the alpine country of Gippsland but the aforementioned bushfires that by then had burned well over 500,000 hectares quickly killed that plan. Instead, we departed for Tasmania and spent nearly two weeks exploring the island of Tasmania. During these two weeks, I set aside my camera and took a bit of a vacation from my daily pursuits. That isn't to say I wasn't photographing, but the focus wasn't just birds. After nearly 5 months on my own, it was wonderful to see a familiar face and have a companion for my travels. My vacation will continue through the second week of January but then I will return to the pursuit of photographing birds throughout the rest of Victoria.

I hope everyone had a fantastic holiday season and though it is a bit late, my best wishes to everyone in 2007.

Website Announcements

My weblog is currently up to date, though I took a break from the daily journal during my vacation over the holidays. It will recommence on January 11th. Also, the galleries are fully updated with images up through December 20th. Enjoy.

The Photos



Black Honeyeater – Gama, Victoria

While Keith was unable to show me one of these birds, he taught me enough about their favored habitat that I was eventually able to find one myself a couple weeks later. This has been one of the toughest things for me, learning the plants and habitats well enough to make sure I am in the right habitat in order to find the particular bird I am after.



Australian Spotted Crake – Cambell's Swamp, Griffith, New South Wales

Since crakes and rails are one of my favorite families as I have no doubt mentioned several times before, I have decided to do my best to see, if not photograph, all of the Australian species of this family. The Australian Spotted Crake is one of the more common birds found along the east coast. They are a resident of many freshwater wetlands and while I had seen them once or twice before, I hadn't gotten any good photos. Dave Webb took me to a swamp where I sat in the water and within minutes had over a dozen of the birds running around all around me. I had a wonderful hour or two photographing these birds to my heart's content.



Mallee Emuwren – Hattah-Kulkyne National Park, Victoria

The Mallee Emuwren is a tiny little bird found in the mallee region where they typically live in clumps of spinifex or porcupine grass. I was fortunate to find a pair of these birds along the nature trail there and photograph both the male and female. Notice the long tail feathers that resemble the feathers of an emu, giving them their name.



Malleefowl – Wandown Nature Reserve, Victoria

This is another photograph that I owe to Dave Webb as he gave me great directions to an active mound. Malleefowl are members of the family Megapodidae, the mound builders. Like the Australian Brush-Turkey, these birds build large mounds as nests. The female lays eggs in the mound while the male maintains it to regulate the proper temperature. Early in the season, warmth is created by decaying vegetation inside the mound; while later in the season, the sun provides most of the heat to incubate the eggs. The amazing thing about these birds is that when the chicks hatch they are on their own immediately. After hatching there is absolutely zero parental care.



Great Walls of China – Mungo National Park, New South Wales

The huge sand dunes that formed on one side of the ancient lake at Mungo National Park have been named the Great Walls of China. These spectacular formations are magnificent to behold in the evening when the warm sun helps to bring out the subtle hues in the sand.



Splendid Fairywren – Wyperfield National Park, Victoria

Since my project is named after these beautiful little birds, I can't resist photographing them. I am just getting to the tail end of the breeding season and many of the males are losing their beautiful colors but this one still has most of it. In full breeding plumage, the blue is spectacular, covering most of the body. Despite their small size, it is hard to miss a male hopping around in the low vegetation.



Striped Honeyeater – Yanco, New South Wales

The Striped Honeyeater was a bird I had seen once before but not photographed and as I moved south, I was nearing the limits of their range. Luckily, Keith had several spots where I could likely see them around Leeton, and sure enough I was able to photograph this bird one afternoon. It may look like he is singing, but in fact he is panting as it was an extremely hot day and he was trying to keep his body cool. One characteristic of birds is that they maintain an extremely high body temperature in order to facilitate fast movement, flight, etc. However, this can be a problem on hot days when their body temperature may rise and reach the point where proteins begin to break down. On the flip side, this can also be a problem on cold days when birds must feed nearly continuously to provide enough energy to maintain such a high metabolism and body temperature.



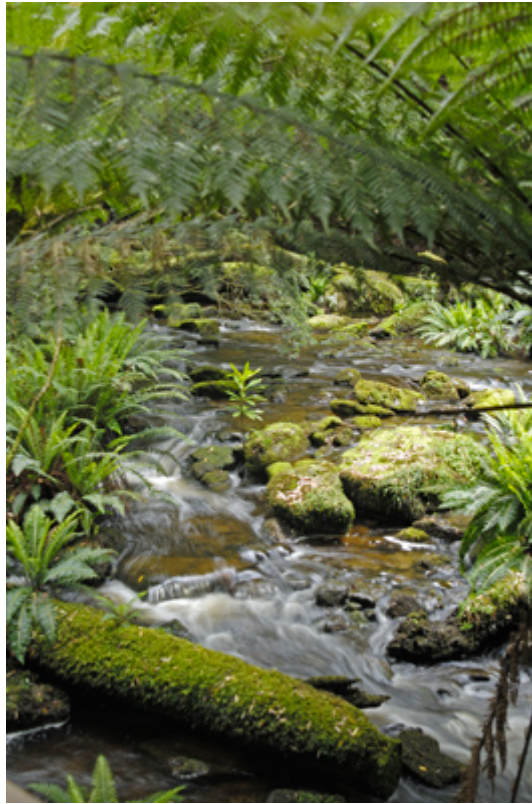
Superb Parrot – Yanco, New South Wales

I was able to photograph this bird within minutes of photographing the above Striped Honeyeater. Again, I was in the same situation having previously seen the bird, not photographed it, and about to leave its range. As you can see, the males are properly named and their striking coloration can really take your breath away. I did not expect to photograph them and was quite pleased when the opportunity arose.



Yellow-tufted Honeyeater – Cyanide Dam, Chiltern National Park, Victoria

I arrived at Chiltern with several targets in mind, this honeyeater being very close to the top of the list. Upon investigating, I found the birds to be quite common though they seemed to never leave the canopy of the forest making photographing them a near impossibility. Fortunately, I hung around long enough to witness the flock come in to drink and bathe in one of the forest dams. It would be my only chance to photograph them in low branches and while it took me two days to get the images, I also got good photographs of Fuscous and Brown-headed Honeyeaters in the same way.



Nelson's River – Lake St. Clair National Park, Tasmania

Most of the photography I did while in Tasmania was centered on the beautiful landscape. Unfortunately, most of our time was under overcast skies so many of the images are rather flat when sky is included. However, overcast conditions are often ideal for photographing in the forest and along streams and waterfalls. This is just one of the many images we took during our time in Tasmania.

Until next month be sure to check out the website as it has just been fully updated!

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