

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

Monthly Newsletter

April 2007

April will be remembered as the month of ultimate highs and ultimate lows. It has been a rollercoaster of emotions and events. Just a couple weeks ago, I had what probably is the best day I have ever had with a camera and then just a week later I watched my tripod, with camera attached, take a fall and land in the ocean. I wasn't exaggerating when I said it was a month of highs and lows.

I started the month in the Adelaide area where I was focused on trying to find and photograph Slender-billed Thornbills and anything else that would cooperate. I did manage to find a flock of the thornbills and get some good shots of them, but what made that outing even better was a Grey Butcherbird that was totally oblivious to my presence and quite willing to pose for me on a great old fence post.

Eventually, I left Adelaide and headed west across the Nullarbor Plain and into Western Australia. Nullarbor means "no trees" and I must admit, it is quite aptly named. In many places you can look to the horizon in all 360 degrees and not see a plant any higher than about mid thigh. It is quite an amazing landscape. It is also quite a long drive, so after two days of driving I was quite pleased to arrive at the Eyre Bird Observatory.

I had planned to spend two nights at the observatory and during that time photograph the Brush Bronzewings that come in to drink at the bird baths situated around the house. I ended up staying four nights and it took all my self restraint from staying on longer. It really is a fabulous place but what made my stay so great were the caretakers and the other guests. I happened to be there over Easter and they all made me feel quite at home during the holidays.

After I forced myself to leave, I continued on west towards the southwest corner of Western Australia. This corner is well known as a biodiversity hotspot. It is home to more than 1% of all the plant species in the world as well as a bunch of cool mammals and birds. The wildflower displays in spring are supposed to be like none other. I was there in the fall so I can't comment on the spring wildflowers, but the birds were spectacular.

The Southwest is home to three of the most difficult birds to see in Australia. These three are collectively known as the "skulkers" because they prefer low, dense, heathland and spend very little time in the open. I had planned to devote about a week to try and see these three birds. My goal was to see all three species and photograph at least one. I felt like it was a bit ambitious but I figured I would give it my best effort.

My first stop was for the Western Whipbird at Fitzgerald River National Park. I arrived at the park late so had to put off my search until the morning. Sunrise found me at the park entrance where the birds are regularly seen. Within about 15 minutes I found a bird singing in the top of a Mallee tree. Not too hard at all. As the morning progressed I saw several birds and even managed to photograph one of them! I had already accomplished the photography side of my goal and I thought that was going to be the hard part. Very pleased with myself, I headed off to the next site to see if my luck would continue.

I arrived at Waychincup National Park and did a bit of a search for the other two birds, the Noisy Scrub-bird and the Western Bristlebird. I came up totally empty that evening as well as the next morning. I couldn't even hear the birds singing which is supposed to be fairly easy. I decided to try a different part of the park, accessible from Cheyne Beach. This turned out to be a very wise decision. Arriving at the Cheyne Beach Caravan Park, I was given a map with recent bird sightings and lots of tips on finding the birds. That evening I went for a walk and while I didn't see any of the birds, I did hear a couple of scrub-birds. A front was moving through but it was supposed to be clear by the morning. Things were looking good.

The next day proved to be what I consider my best day ever, photographically speaking. I started out before dawn and while I could hear a Noisy Scrub-bird calling just by the caravan park, I bypassed him after a brief search and headed off into the heath. After a short walk, I heard a Western Bristlebird calling off to my right so I headed off the trail into the short, dense heath. Within about fifteen minutes I had located the bird and got decent views. He seemed rather unconcerned about my presence, so I spent the next hour or so following the bird around as he foraged and sang. At one point the bird even sat up on a totally exposed branch and sang his little heart out. Then he preened for a moment and went back to singing. Of course, the light was also perfect and I was only a few meters away so I walked away with some amazing photos of this elusive bird. Better photos than I could have ever imagined possible.

After that experience, I was content for the morning but I decided to keep it up since it was still early and the light was still fantastic. During the rest of the morning I was able to photograph several other endemics to the southwest including Western Spinebill and Red-eared Firetail. I also got some great shots of White-cheeked and New Holland Honeyeaters. It was a morning of a lifetime, but the day was not over.

That evening, I set out again in order to see what else I could find. My goal was to photograph some Southern Emuwrens that I had seen the previous evening but I was open to anything. I found the emuwrens without any difficulty and one of the images of the female turned out to be one of my favorite images of the year to date. From there I continued on up the track and eventually heard the Noisy Scrub-bird I had heard the previous evening. I could tell the bird was quite distant but since everything was going my way that day, I headed off to see if my luck would hold.

The bird turned out to be nearly a kilometer away and over a small ridge. That should give you an idea of how loud they are. Eventually I made it to the small trees from which the bird was singing. To my great surprise, I saw a bird that I didn't recognize and then an instant later realized, it was the Noisy Scrub-bird! I got a decent view for a couple seconds before he dropped back down into the undergrowth. Unfortunately the light was starting to fail, but I did my best to get a photograph of this bird. I even managed to get him in the viewfinder at one point but he was too quick for me. In any event, the light was about gone. I had now seen all three "skulkers" and photographed two of them, not to mention the other birds I had photographed that day. I will even go as far to say that the day was perfect.

Over the next week or so, I continued to explore the Southwest and pick up new birds. I visited Sterling Ranges National Park, Two Peoples Bay National Park, and the magnificent Karri forests. Eventually I made my way to Augusta and Cape Leeuwin where disaster struck. On April 20th, I was photographing the Cape Leeuwin Lighthouse from a nearby beach when I misjudged a wave and I had to step away from the wave in order to stay dry. As the wave retreated, it knocked over my tripod taking my camera and lens into the surf with it. The rig was only in the water for two or three seconds, but everything was fried. Electronics and saltwater just don't mix.

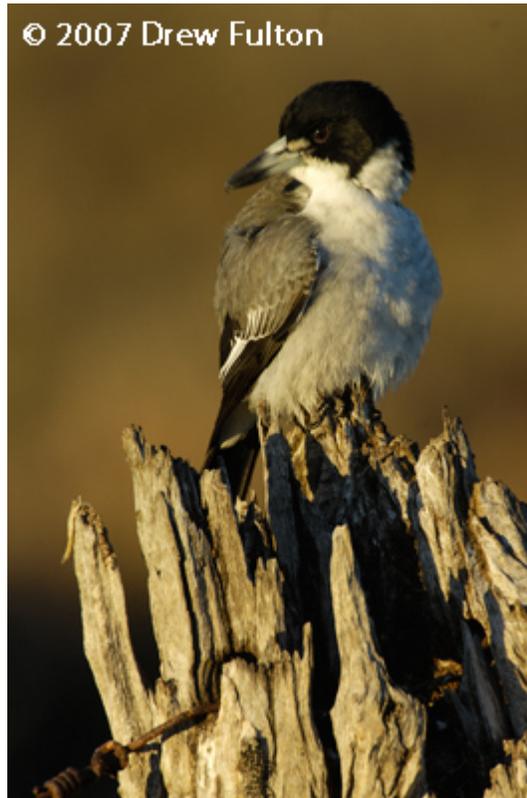
It has taken a week or so to get things figured out with the insurance company but I now have a replacement camera on the way and it should be arriving on May 2nd. Until then, I am spending my time continuing to explore as well as get some chores out of the way. I must admit, this hasn't been the most exciting time of my fellowship but I feel like I have done a fairly decent job of remaining calm. In any case, I only have to wait a few more days until I can get back at it.

Once I am able to get back on the road, I will be headed north for an exciting month of exploring the northern half of Western Australia. I will be spending time in the Pilbarra and the remote Kimberleys before I head into the Northern Territory and on to Darwin. I should have lots to report about next month.

Website Announcements

The website has been updated once again. My weblogs are up to date though many of the images are from the archives for the last couple weeks since my camera disaster. The galleries are also updated as well. Hopefully there will be lots more as May progresses.

The Photos



Grey Butcherbird – Port Gawler Conservation Park, Port Gawler, South Australia

This bird was one of the more common birds that I had not photographed before this month. I have seen them on countless occasions but have never had a chance to photograph one until this bird nearly landed on my tripod one morning.



Brush Bronzewing – Eyre Bird Observatory, Nuytsland Nature Reserve, Western Australia

During my time at Eyre Bird Observatory, my goal was to photograph this beautiful pigeon. Bronzewings are typically very shy birds and I have found the Brush to be even shy than the Commons. In any case, I had only seen the Brush on one other occasion and didn't have a chance to photograph him. Therefore, when I heard they were relatively acclimated to people and regular visitors to the bird baths at Eyre Bird Observatory, I jumped at the chance. This was one of my favorite images from my time there.



New Holland Honeyeater – Cheyne Beach, Waychinicup National Park, Western Australia

This was one of the images from that perfect day. New Holland Honeyeaters are quite common throughout most of Australia and I have photographed them on a couple of occasions but I simply couldn't pass up these birds feeding on the huge banksia blooms.

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Red-eared Firetail – Cheyne Beach, Waychincup National Park, Western Australia

On my way back to my campsite on that magical morning, I found a pair of these beautiful little finches building a nest. Without too much trouble I was able to position myself to capture an image while they were collecting material. These birds are one of the Southwest's endemics.

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Southern Emuwren – Cheyne Beach, Waychincup National Park, Western Australia

While I was thrilled with a number of the images I took on that day, this just might be my favorite. This image clearly shows the distinctive tail of the emuwren, is in perfect evening light, and the background is even complimentary. I can't ask for much more than that!



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Welcome Swallow – Waychincup National Park, Western Australia

One of my joys is making pleasing and interesting images of rather common birds. I see Welcome Swallows nearly everyday yet I didn't have any good images of them. Therefore, when I found a flock that kept returning to these dead trees to rest, I decided to see what I could make of the situation. I didn't get much as the birds were surprisingly wary, but I did manage to capture this image as the bird was taking off.



Western Bristlebird – Cheyne Beach, Waychinicup National Park, Western Australia

The second of the “skulkers” and quite the opposite of the above image. This time I was after a rather rare bird and I can barely describe my euphoria at capturing this bird in the relative open. I never thought an image like this would be possible and then the opportunity presented itself and I came away with this.



Western Spinebill – Cheyne Beach, Waychinicup National Park, Western Australia

This is yet another image from that perfect day and another endemic of the Southwest. These beautiful little honeyeaters were quite common in the heathlands of Waychinicup National Park and I found them quite willing to be photographed. I was able to photograph both males and females and this turned out to be my favorite image. The large banksia flower and the complimentary colors of the male’s plumage, background, and foliage make the image for me.

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White-cheeked Honeyeater – Cheyne Beach, Waychinicup National Park, Western Australia

I had photographed a White-cheeked Honeyeater in Far North Queensland but I wasn't totally pleased with the image. When I saw the numerous birds feeding in the heath at Waychinicup, I was quite pleased and even happier when I got photos of this bird. I couldn't get real close, but I rather like the way the bird and the banksia make up the image.

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Short-billed Black-Cockatoo – Baladonia Track, Western Australia

I came across a flock of these birds feeding in some banksias as I was making my way south towards Cape Le Grande National Park. It was raining softly but I still managed to fire off a few frames of these birds before the rain increased past the point where photography was possible. This preening shot was one of my favorites.

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

Drew Fulton

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