

# THE FIELD NATURALIST

NEWSLETTER NO. 154: AUTUMN 2025

ALBURY-WODONGA FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB INC.

Reg. No. A0023416K



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and should be emailed to  
Editor as above.



*Yellow-billed Spoonbill. JP*

## **Autumn Issue 2025**

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**AUTUMN REPORTS**

**Kremur Street Boat Ramp, Parkland and Yindyamarra Sculpture Walk**

**9 March 2025**

***Bernie Datson***

We managed to spot 49 species and return for morning tea before the heat set in. Highlights included Rainbow Bee-eaters, Gang-gang Cockatoos, Little Black and Great Cormorants, Little and Noisy Friarbirds, Azure and Sacred Kingfishers, Olive-backed Orioles and White-breasted Woodswallows.

Of particular interest to members were nests of the Australasian Darters where clear views of males, females and their young were had.

We took delight in catching views of the Yellow-bellied Water Skink and a Rakali (Water Rat). Several leaf curling spiders, or at least their abodes, were spotted, as well as the jumping, plant-eating Flea Beetle, a Spider Wasp and European Wasps.

It also became apparent that the Turtle we have frequently watched lazing about and knew as the Eastern Long-necked Turtle could have been, and was on this occasion, actually the Murray River Short-necked Turtle. We need to be more observant!







On a truly beautiful day 8 members and 3 guests participated in this outing.

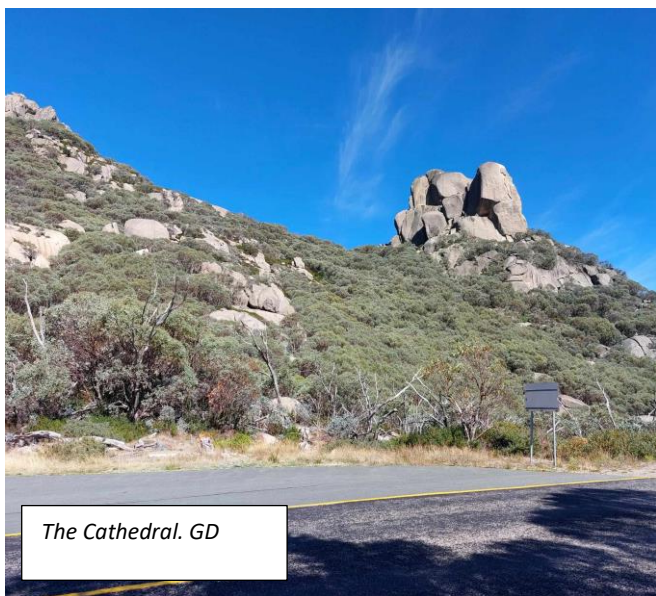
As March is a relatively subdued time for flora and fauna, which have been the focus of previous trips, I decided this trip would look more closely at the geography and geology of the mountain.

It is currently believed that the granite massif was formed 4.2M years ago by an intrusion of magma into the existing sandstone, itself more than 5M years old. This intrusion halted around 15 km below the surface resulting in slow cooling of the magma which in turn resulted in large crystal formation and the granite rock type. The 'bubble shaped' intrusion is now exposed due to erosion of the overlying sandstone over the millions of years although the latter still covers the lower portions.

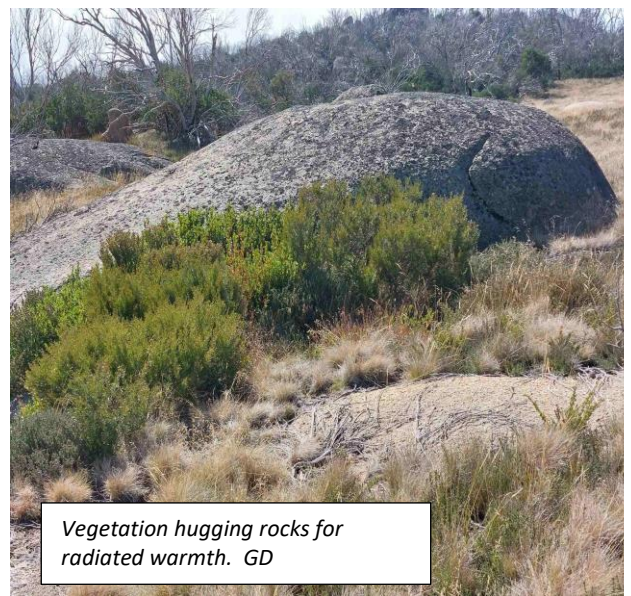
We observed much of this geology and the associated vegetative changes on the drive up to the plateau noting the initial Narrow-leaved Peppermint (*Eucalyptus radiata*) dominant tall forest in the sandstone suddenly being replaced by a sparser Brittle Gum (*Eucalyptus mannifera*) and heath on the granite slopes. At higher altitudes we noted the Alpine Ash (*Eucalyptus delegatensis*) forest followed by Snow Gums (*Eucalyptus pauciflora*) and Mountain Gums (*Eucalyptus dalrympleana*). On reaching the plateau it was noted that the treeless grasslands and heathlands were in the depressions due to cold inversions resulting in these areas being too cold for tree growth.



On the plateau we observed the magnificent large granite boulders, 'tors', and how they were in a 'rectangular' shape due to the pattern of fracturing in granite rock and noted the rounding especially at the edges of these boulders due to the pattern of weathering from wind, rain and ice in Granite rock. Also noted was the progression of vegetation on the rock beginning with Lichen followed by Moss. These trap dust and weathered materials allowing plant growth.



*The Cathedral. GD*



*Vegetation hugging rocks for radiated warmth. GD*

Finally we looked at the streams running across the plateau. We followed the drainage creeks running through the peat bogs around Cresta Valley heading towards Dickson Falls, discussing the role of these bogs and the Sphagnum moss in water retention. We also walked along Long Plain noting the creek which is the feeder stream for Lake Catani, enjoyed lunch at the Lake and noted that the discharge of the Lake is the Eurobin Creek whose falls can be visited at the foothills and which runs past the Visitors Centre. Also noted was the creek crossed on entering or leaving the plateau, Crystal Brook, which is the discharge from the Reservoir that runs to and falls into the Gorge. This is the stream that at the foothills forms the Lady Bath Falls and then flows into Eurobin Creek.



*Cresta Valley Peat Bog with The Horn in the middle distance. GD*

Another lovely AWFN outing.



## CSU Wetlands followed by Greenhill Road dam, Chiltern-Mt Pilot Box Ironbark NP

13<sup>th</sup> April 2025

**Bernie Datson**



On entering the wetlands we noticed the first pond/lagoon had dried up! A rare occurrence. However the other lagoons provided good sightings of 30 species with the highlight a Little Eagle. Of value was the opportunity to see both the Hoary-headed and the Australasian Grebes in close proximity and similarly the Great and Little Black Cormorants in the same tree provided handy comparisons. A pleasant morning tea was had under flowering Ironbarks frequented by Lorikeets but absent on that occasion.



L & R: Little Eagle. JP

At Greenhill Road dam (one of just a few areas now with water) we had excellent views of birds arriving down for water. Highlights included immature Olive-backed Orioles, a Scarlet Robin, and Golden Whistler. Though not clearly seen, the calls of the Black-chinned Honeyeaters were plentiful and clear.

## Sandy Creek and Lockharts Gap, 26<sup>th</sup> April

*David Coleman*

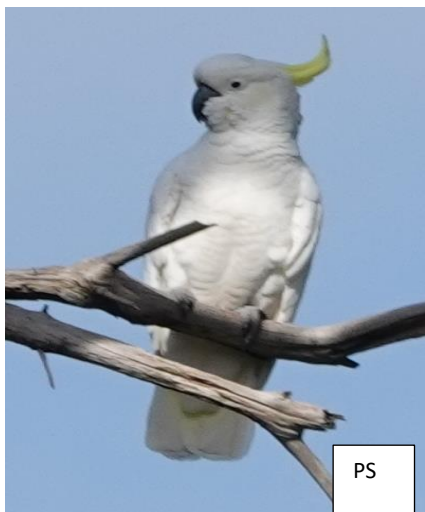
On a warm day club members met at the old Fire Station at Sandy Creek where the Fairy Martins (Bottle Swallows) have expanded their living quarters to now occupy both sides of the building. Next stop was the dead centre of Sandy Creek aka the cemetery where bird sightings were limited to a flock of Striated Thornbills and a lone Sulphur Crested Cockatoo which appeared more grey than white?

Then to the main site (The Upper Sandy Creek Reserve and Water Catchment) where there were plentiful sightings of wetland birds including Black Swans, Australian Wood Ducks, Australian Shelducks, Grey Teal, Australasian Grebes and on the shore a pair of Black-fronted Dotterels.

Members moved around the shore of the catchment with the hope of seeing a Platypus and were rewarded by a number of good sightings,

The visit to Sandy Creek ended with good viewing of Red-browed Finches and nest and an obliging pair of Gang Gang Cockatoos which landed in a small tree on the bank.

Members then travelled to Lockharts Gap for lunch and exploration of that area.



PS



Wood Ducks.  
PS



Brown-headed Honeyeater. PS



Well, if my car is going to die it may as well do it on a beautiful sunny Autumn day, near one of my favourite villages, on an easily identifiable road - with phone coverage and shade. (Toilets would have been my only improvement). But even more important was the access to friends who could pick me up and even take me home (thank you Glenda!)

I finally joined the group for lunch after they had circumnavigated Cock's Dredge. It was great to see Ruth who was able to join us for the first time in ages. After lunch we took Reid's Walk along Reedy Creek to the Swing Bridge where the small amount of remaining water had enticed quite a few birds, 33 species were observed (see list, page 8).

Flora on this side of the creek at first appears uninteresting and very weedy. A comment was made that the walk provided good examples of NE Victoria's most common, introduced weeds. This is due to the highly disturbed nature of the site due to past dredging activities. However, as we ventured in there were Apple Box, Red Box, Red Gum, Kurrajong, Silver Wattle, Cherry Ballart, Sticky Wattle, Silver Wattle, Hickory, Grey Mistletoe and Box Mistletoe.

I cannot distinguish between introduced and native grasses, so when one 'tussocky' grass near the McCoy Street entrance turned out to be native, I thought I would investigate a little.



*Aristida ramosa*: Purple Wire Grass, Cane Wire Grass, Cane Spear Grass.

A very drought-tolerant, warm season perennial, 50-100 cm high which flowers spring to autumn.

It generally produces very little & very wiry leaf matter. It is distinguished by stiff & wiry stems, narrow rolled leaves and three awns on the seed. It can be distinguished from the similar Spear Grass (*Stipa sp.*) which only has a single awn on the seed.

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## **Eldorado Weeds**

*Glenda Datson*

The numerous weed species spotted included Bridle Creeper, Briar Rose, Large-leaf Privet, St John's Wort, Figs, various Ash species, Blackberry, Fleabane, Pepper Tree and Great Mullein.

One significant weed noted on Reids Walk was an *Opuntia species* otherwise known as Prickly Pear, which displayed an infection of cochineal bug.



A dissected Prickly Pear fruit, seeds of which can be dispersed by birds & other animals. Prickly pear can also spread through fragments carried by animals, vehicles, or wind and water.

While a weed, prickly pear fruits and pads are edible and can be used in various dishes and can be seen for sale at Melbourne's Victoria Market!!

Photos: GD



L: Cochineal infected plant.

R: Squashed Cochineal bugs showing the red secretion carmine, also known as cochineal extract or carminic acid. This natural dye is derived from the carminic acid produced by female cochineal insects.

Prickly pear is a significant environmental weed in Australia, particularly in New South Wales and Queensland. Introduced with the First Fleet in 1788, it became a major problem due to its rapid growth and ability to outcompete native plants. While different biological control agents have been introduced to manage the prickly pear, it continues to be an issue in some areas.

*Opuntia* species were first brought to Australia in an attempt to start a cochineal dye industry in 1788. Captain Arthur Phillip collected a number of cochineal-infested plants from Brazil on his way to establish the first European settlement at Botany Bay. At that time, Spain and Portugal had a worldwide cochineal dye monopoly via their New World colonial sources, and the British desired a source under their own control, as the dye was important to their clothing and garment industries; it was used to colour the British soldiers' red coats, for example. The attempt was a failure in two ways: the Brazilian cochineal insects soon died off, but the cacti thrived, eventually overrunning about 259,000km<sup>2</sup> of eastern Australia. The cacti were eventually brought under control in the 1920s by the deliberate introduction of a South American moth, *Cactoblastis cactorum*, the larvae of which feed on the cactus.

However our cooler NE Victorian climate is not conducive to the introduction of the moth, *Cactoblastis cactorum* but it is more suitable for Cochineal bugs.



Cochineal bugs are soft-bodied, flat, oval-shaped scale insects. The females, wingless and about 5mm long, cluster on cactus pads. They penetrate the cactus with their beak-like mouthparts and feed on its juices, remaining immobile unless alarmed. After mating, the fertilised female increases in size and gives birth to tiny nymphs. The nymphs secrete a waxy white substance over their bodies for protection from water loss and excessive sun. This substance makes the cochineal insect appear white or grey from the outside, though the body of the insect and its nymphs produces the red pigment, which makes the insides of the insect look dark purple. Adult males can be distinguished from females in that males have wings and are much smaller.

The cochineal disperses in the first nymph stage, called the "crawler" stage. The juveniles move to a feeding spot and produce long wax filaments. Later, they move to the edge of the cactus pad, where the wind catches the wax filaments and carries the insects to a new host. These individuals establish feeding sites on the new host and produce a new generation of cochineals. Male nymphs feed on the cactus until they reach sexual maturity. At this time, they can no longer feed at all and live only long enough to fertilise the eggs. They are, therefore, seldom observed. In addition, females typically outnumber males due to environmental factors. Different strains of cochineal bugs are specific to different cactus species, ensuring they target the right host plant. Cochineal has succeeded in controlling Prickly Pear everywhere in the Chiltern-Mt. Pilot NP however the plants eventually come back and the process of the Cochineal reinfestation and control begins again. (*Pers. Comm. Mick Webster.*)

Wheel Cactus is an even worse weed, also prevalent at Eldorado. A different strain of Cochineal has been introduced from Castlemaine to target this particular cactus. Grown up over a winter at the Parks Depot at Beechworth, then transferred to various Wheel Cacti locations, these bugs are moved about by Mick Webster and his Friends of the Park team by cutting infested cacti pads (cladodes) and pinning with BBQ skewers to plants not yet infected. All Wheel Cacti have been GPSd in the NP and are closely monitored.

Well done to Mick (and his team) whom I reckon we can call the "Zealot Cacti Slayers" of Chiltern-Mt Pilot National Park.

## Member Observations

On a recent trip to Deniliquin with the Ovens & Murray Birdlife Club Jan and Jenny spotted the Monarch butterfly and larva:



Photos JP



"Woodswallow" caterpillar



Monarch butterflies aggregated in the paperbark grove at the Australian Botanic Garden at Mount Annan on the outskirts of Sydney. (Ann Jones 2015)

The monarch butterflies' host plant, which it relies upon for food and protection in the caterpillar stages, is a milkweed, a group of plants which exudes a milky, latex-like poison when its external skins are penetrated.

'She'll alight, her feet will be touching the surface, her abdomen will arch, will bend under, and she'll put her egg underneath,' says Professor Myron Zalucki of the University of Queensland.

'And she tastes that leaf with her abdomen—her ovipositor has a whole bunch of chemo-sensory hairs that actually sense what's in the leaf surface-waxes of the plant—and make that final decision to lay or not to lay.'

This is a calculated risk by the butterfly mother. The young caterpillar that will emerge from the egg has a certain tolerance of the plant's own defence mechanism, a milky poison that would kill other insects. In fact, the female aims that her offspring will hitch a ride on the back of the plant's defence mechanism to protect themselves in turn.

'So the plant has these cardiac glycosides—a whole suite of them,' Zalucki says. 'The caterpillar has dealt with them by excreting them to its exoskeleton, so it essentially stores a lot of these in its own skin, so presumably it tastes bitter.' Exuding a bitter taste to birds or other potential predators is a strong defence. The predators soon learn not to eat the brightly coloured caterpillars. +Ref: *Extract from ABCs Off Track.*

## Upcoming Winter Outings

|                                 |                                                                                                              |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sunday 1 <sup>st</sup> June:    | Winton Wetlands<br>(combined outing with Ovens & Murray Birdlife to replace cancelled outing to Bright area) |
| Sunday 8 <sup>th</sup> June:    | Wonga Wetlands (to replace Clyde Cameron Reserve/David Winterbottom Park)                                    |
| Saturday 28 June:               | Beechworth area                                                                                              |
| Sunday 13 <sup>th</sup> July:   | Chiltern – Lake Anderson area & Bartley's block                                                              |
| Saturday 26 <sup>th</sup> July: | Pub lunch – to be advised                                                                                    |
| Sunday 10 <sup>th</sup> August: | Galore Hill Scenic Reserve, Lockhart                                                                         |
| Saturday 23 August:             | Kentucky State Forest near Balldale NSW                                                                      |

***Please confirm details via previously emailed program or Ecoportal & contact the leader if you have any questions, need a lift or wish to confirm attendance (useful if weather could lead to cancellation).***



| March 9th '25<br>Kremur Steet | March 22nd '25<br>Mt Buffalo | April 13th '25<br>CSU Wetlands | April 8th '25<br>Greenhill Dam Chiltern | April 26th '25<br>Sandy Creek Reservoir<br>And Lockharts Gap<br>Leader David Coleman | May 10th '25<br>Eldorado |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Leader Bernie Datson          | Leader Neil Blair            | Leader Bernie Datson           | Leader Bernie Datson                    | Leader David Coleman                                                                 | Leader Gail Steed        |
| Bee-eater Rainbow             | Currawong Grey               | Coot Eurasian                  | Cuckoo-shrike Black-faced               |                                                                                      | Blackbird                |
| Cockatoo Gang-gang            | Eagle Wedgetail              | Cormorant Great                | Fantail Grey                            | Cockatoo Gang-Gang                                                                   | Bowerbird Satin          |
| Cockatoo Sulphur-crested      | Fairywren Superb             | Cormorant Little Black         | Finch Red-browed                        | Cockatoo Sulphur-crested                                                             | Chough                   |
| Coot Eurasian                 | Honeyeater White-faced       | Cuckoo-shrike Black-faced      | Flycatcher Restless                     | Coot Eurasian                                                                        | Currawong Pied           |
| Cormorant Great               | Honeyeater Yellow-faced      | Currawong Pied                 | Honeyeater Black-chinned                | Cormorant Little Pied                                                                | Darter Australasian      |
| Cormorant Little Black        | Kookaburra Laughing          | Darter Australasian            | Honey-eater Fuscous                     | Darter Australasian                                                                  | Fairywren Superb         |
| Cormorant Little Pied         | Pardalote Spotted            | Dotterel Black-fronted         | Honey-eater White-plumed                | Dotterel Black-fronted                                                               | Fantail Grey             |
| Cuckoo-shrike Black-faced     | Pardalote Striated           | Duck Maned (Wood)              | Kookaburra                              | Duck Mountain                                                                        | Finch Red-browed         |
| Currawong Pied                | Pipit Australian             | Duck Pacific Black             | Minor Noisy                             | Fairywren Superb                                                                     | Firetail Diamond         |
| Darter Australasian           | Raven Little                 | Eagle Little                   | Oriole Olive-backed                     | Fantail Grey                                                                         | Flycatcher Restless      |
| Duck Australian Wood          | Robin Flame                  | Egret Great                    | Pardalote Spotted                       | Finch Red-browed and nests                                                           | Honeyeater Fuscous       |
| Duck Pacific Black            | Robin Yellow                 | Egret Intermediate             | Pardalote Striated                      | Galah                                                                                | Honeyeater New Holland   |
| Fairywren Superb              | Rosella Crimson              | Friarbird Noisy                | Robin Scarlet                           | Grebe Australasian                                                                   | Honeyeater White-naped   |
| Fantail Grey                  | Scrubwren White-browed       | Galah                          | Rosella Crimson                         | Heron White-faced                                                                    | Honeyeater White-plumed  |
| Finch Red-browed              | Spinebill Eastern            | Grebe Hoary-headed             | Silver-eye                              | Honeyeater Brown-headed                                                              | Honeyeater Yellow-faced  |
| Flycatcher Restless           | Thornbill Brown              | Grebe Australasian             | Treecreeper White-throated              | Honeyeater New Holland                                                               | Honeyeater Yellow-tufted |
| Friarbird Little              | Treecreeper Brown            | Ibis Australian White          | Whistler Golden                         | Honeyeater White-naped                                                               | Magpie Australian        |
| Friarbird Noisy               | Treecreeper White-throated   | Magpie Australian              |                                         | Honeyeater White-plumed                                                              | Magpie-lark              |
| Galah                         | Wattlebird Red               | Magpie-lark                    |                                         | Honeyeater Yellow-faced                                                              | Pardalote Spotted        |
| Heron White-faced             |                              | Minor Noisy                    |                                         | Ibis Straw-necked                                                                    | Pardalote Striated       |
| Honeyeater White-plumed       |                              | Moorhen Dusky                  |                                         | Ibis White                                                                           | Parrot King              |
| Honeyeater Yellow-faced       |                              | Pelican Australian             |                                         | Kookaburra Australian                                                                | Pelican Australian       |
| Ibis Australian White         |                              | Raven Australian               |                                         | Magpie Australian                                                                    | Raven Australia          |
| Kingfisher Azure              |                              | Rosella Crimson                |                                         | Magpie-lark                                                                          | Robin Eastern Yellow     |
| Kingfisher Sacred             |                              | Rosella Eastern                |                                         | Mistletoebird                                                                        | Rosella Crimson          |
| Kite Whistling                |                              | Shrike-thrush Grey             |                                         | Morehen Dusky                                                                        | Silvereye                |
| Kookaburra                    |                              | Spoonbill Yellow-billed        |                                         | Pardalote Spotted                                                                    | Spinebill Eastern        |
| Lapwing Masked                |                              | Starling Common*               |                                         | Pardalote Striated                                                                   | Swallow Welcome          |

| March 9th '25<br>Kremur Steet | March 22nd '25<br>Mt Buffalo | April 13th '25<br>CSU Wetlands | April 8th '25<br>Greenhill Dam Chiltern | April 26th '25<br>Sandy Creek Reservoir<br>And Lockharts Gap<br>Leader David Coleman | May 10th '25<br>Eldorado   |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Leader Bernie Datson          | Leader Neil Blair            | Leader Bernie Datson           | Leader Bernie Datson                    | Leader David Coleman                                                                 | Leader Gail Steed          |
| Magpie Australian             |                              | Swamphen Australasian          |                                         | Raven Australian                                                                     | Swamphen Australasian      |
| Martin Tree                   |                              | Teal Grey                      |                                         | Raven Australian                                                                     | Thornbill Brown            |
| Moorhen Dusky                 |                              |                                |                                         | Robin Eastern Yellow                                                                 | Treecreeper White-throated |
| Oriole Olive-backed           |                              |                                |                                         | Rosella Crimson                                                                      | Wattlebird Red             |
| Pardalote Striated            |                              |                                |                                         | Shrike-thrush Grey                                                                   | Whistler Golden            |
| Parrot Red-rumped             |                              |                                |                                         | Silvereye                                                                            |                            |
| Pelican Australian            |                              |                                |                                         | Spinebill Eastern                                                                    |                            |
| Pigeon Crested                |                              |                                |                                         | Starling Common                                                                      |                            |
| Raven Australian              |                              |                                |                                         | Swamphen Australasian                                                                |                            |
| Rosella Crimson               |                              |                                |                                         | Swan                                                                                 |                            |
| Rosella Yellow ssp            |                              |                                |                                         | Thornbill Striated                                                                   |                            |
| Shrike-thrush Grey            |                              |                                |                                         | Treecreeper White-throated                                                           |                            |
| Silvereye                     |                              |                                |                                         | Wagtail Willy                                                                        |                            |
| Starling Common*              |                              |                                |                                         | Wattlebird Red                                                                       |                            |
| Swallow Welcome               |                              |                                |                                         | Whistler Golden                                                                      |                            |
| Swamphen Australasian         |                              |                                |                                         |                                                                                      |                            |
| Teal Grey                     |                              |                                |                                         |                                                                                      |                            |
| Thornbill Brown               |                              |                                |                                         |                                                                                      |                            |
| Treecreeper White-throated    |                              |                                |                                         |                                                                                      |                            |
| Wattlebird Red                |                              |                                |                                         |                                                                                      |                            |
| Woodswallow White -breasted   |                              |                                |                                         |                                                                                      |                            |
|                               |                              |                                |                                         |                                                                                      |                            |
| <b>49</b>                     | <b>19</b>                    | <b>30</b>                      | <b>17</b>                               | <b>42</b>                                                                            |                            |