

## OVERVIEW

Rangers and volunteers have noted increased bird activity in the Park this last month. Recent bird surveys at Belmont Lagoon suggest the 'honeyeater migration' is still happening, perhaps not as 'big' as in previous years. Citizen scientists<sup>1</sup> are observing thousands of woodlands birds moving through key locations in the southern highlands and the Hunter. Waterbird and shorebird species are also re-appearing. Is this their destination?

## WOODLAND BIRDS SEEN AROUND THE PARK

April to May is an exciting time for birdwatchers. Mid-late autumn is when thousands of honeyeaters<sup>2</sup> migrate annually, from as far south as Tasmania. The recent cold snap on the south-eastern highlands is just one natural hazard they face, but many still make it through the Blue Mountains<sup>3</sup>. Coastal woodlands in the Hunter<sup>4</sup> (including this 549 ha Park) allow them to 'rest and refuel' before continuing to destinations as far as Southern Queensland<sup>5</sup>.

At BWSP after sunrise small birds are seen moving through trees along Cold Tea Creek. They go north or east using tree-tops or shrubs<sup>6</sup> to avoid small raptors (eg. Grey Goshawk). Later in the day groups of small birds (mainly Silvereye, Yellow-faced, Lewin's, Scarlet and White-cheeked Honeyeater, Little Wattlebird and Friarbird) are calling, feeding and flitting between flowering shrubs and trees in preparing for their next stage.

An interesting array of other bird-types (*insectivores, granivores, carnivores*<sup>7</sup>) appears at the Park in greater numbers at this time. Like the 'honeyeaters' these species are not grouped by common genetics but by their dietary needs and local abundance of food.

Why do birds migrate?

Some scientists<sup>8</sup> tell us this migratory process has been prompted by climate changes over millions of years. Small ancestors of birds and mammals have migrated to Australasia as it separated from *Gwandana* which steadily started to freeze over<sup>9</sup> as the planet shifted slightly on its rotational axis. See <https://www.nsf.gov/geo/opp/support/gondwana.jsp>.

In the past decade, systematic replanting and maturation of coastal forest trees and shrubs in the Park appear to attract and sustain small bush bird populations (Yellow-faced Honeyeater, White-cheeked Honeyeater, Lewin's Honeyeater, Brown Honeyeater, Scarlet Honeyeater, as well as wattlebirds, spinebills, friarbirds, and silvereyes).

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<sup>1</sup> *Citizen science*. Volunteers collaborating in scientific research to increase scientific knowledge - in this case, counting numbers of bird species passing through key vantage points along an identified flight path.

<sup>2</sup> *Honeyeaters* are a diverse group of Australian birds. One of their features is a brush-tipped tongue so they can extract nectar from flowers. Other species with this feature (Eastern Spinebills) are not *named* honeyeater.

<sup>3</sup><https://www.woollahra.nsw.gov.au/environment/bushland-and-biodiversity/stories-of-local-biodiversity/what-lives-where-in-woollahra>

<sup>4</sup> Great honeyeater migration. <https://www.maitlandmercury.com.au/story/6732539/the-great-honeyeater-migration-flies-in-to-find-winter-food/>

<sup>5</sup> Thousand of honeyeaters migrate. <https://www.lfwseq.org.au/thousands-honeyeaters-migrate/>

<sup>6</sup> This is why vegetation corridors are just as important for protecting birdlife, as much as for land animals.

<sup>7</sup> Bird diet groups <https://www.birdexoticsvet.com.au/factsheets/2020/6/2/feeding-australian-birds-natural-foods>

<sup>8</sup> ABC iview has numerous documentaries on formation of Planet Earth, climate change and its influence on animal evolution. Or Google: *Dinosaurs of the frozen continent*, or read Tim Low's book *Where song began*.

<sup>9</sup> Google *gwandana land* or *Seven worlds, one planet* (David Attenborough's BBC Earth series 2022).

Of interest to birdwatchers is the arrival of other species at this time of year. These are usually local nomadic visits influenced by available food or water, or breeding conditions. The *granivores* (seed-eater) group contains finches and quail.

Small flocks of Double-barred Finch have been seen at the Park since 2019. This small species is typically seen in dry, grassy woodland, open forest or grassy dry scrub. It is unusual at this coastal location but has been reported as resident<sup>10</sup>(up to 20 birds) in the Hunter. Like the more common Red-browed Finch they appear to feed on acacia and various grass seeds.



### SHOREBIRD SIGHTINGS AT 9-MILE BEACH

Sightings of Australasian Pipit *Anthus novaeseelandiae*<sup>11</sup>, originally reported by Park rangers (CS:11/6/21) have continued this year (19/4/23, 11/5/23) and are confirmed (GF/HBOC).



Confirmed sightings of another annual migrant: Red-capped Plover *Charadrius ruficapillus*) were made in May<sup>12</sup>. 2-6 birds were reported by Rangers (CS, GJ) from 17-21/5/23. These attractive little birds (14-16 cm) are seen as busy, gregarious, rushing along water's edge alone or in flocks. In the Hunter, it is an *usual resident* (seen at Ash Island, Hexham Swamp) but somewhat unusual or under-reported around Lake Macquarie. A special note for beach-walkers or those with dogs: it is difficult to see and avoid them on beaches (it will stand still, then walk rapidly).

### AT THE LAGOON

Surveys in the last two months show a dramatic increase in the number of coastal woodland and wetlands species, and their abundance (number of birds of each species). This influx may or may not be linked to longer-distance (honeyeater) or shorebirds migration<sup>13</sup>. Woodlands birds include nest raiders (raven) and small raptors (kestrel, goshawk species).

Many re-appearing wetlands species are known to migrate locally; water birds (eg. lapwing, egret, ibis, darter, grebe, heron, cormorant, gull). This likely indicates the abundance of fishling (small or young fish) and small crustaceans at the Lagoon, which are flushed into Cold Tea Creek and lake by sudden influx of rainwater and from surrounding wetlands.

For those interested, Hunter Bird Observers Club, Birdlife Australia or BWSP rangers may be able to provide field guides for identifying shorebirds, wetlands or woodlands birds.

If you would like to know more, or to report your bird observations in north-east Lake Macquarie consider visiting or joining the Hunter Bird Observers Club<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Double-barred Finch. *Taeniopygia bichenovii*. Hunter Bird Observers Club. ABR 2019, p.145

<sup>11</sup> Australasian Pipit *Anthus novaeseelandiae*. Google Australian Museum or see BWSP Report April 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Images of this and other species observed here are courtesy of Rob Palazzi, HBOC Bird Image Library. Images are offered under strict copyright *protection* on behalf of respective authors.

<sup>13</sup> J. Kerin and M. Formby *A Shorebird Flying Adventure*. CSIRO Publishing. 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Hunter Bird Observers Club members meets every 2<sup>nd</sup> Wednesday night of the month except in January, at Shortland Wetlands Centre. Further details may be found via the website <https://www.hboc.org.au/>