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EDITORIAL

Summer's definitely here with the arrival of migrants and the promise of rain, and that means that we're nearing the end of yet another year. This is the fourth and final edition of *Lanioturdus* for the year. As many of you are aware, Chris Hines is roaming the globe at the moment and has trustingly left me (Carole Roberts) in charge of getting this edition out. (Hmm, I'm afraid the "Short Notes" are a little short this edition.) After having spent a month "down under" birding in Oz, Chris is now "up North" studying for a couple of months in the Netherlands. However, he hasn't forgotten us or *Lanioturdus* and submitted an article on his trip to Australia which mentions all sorts of winged wonders – frogmouths and friarbirds, parrots and pittas (to mention just a few). I have a feeling, though, that we might expect a much shorter article on his trip to the Netherlands!

There's no excuse for ignoring many of those LBJs in 1999! Peter Kaestner has put together a guide to the larks of Namibia for us. It will be published in two parts, the first of which is in this edition. He has tried to make it easy for us by highlighting the characteristics and range of each species found here, and has provided a field key as well. Peter stresses that the key should be regarded as incomplete because it needs to be put to the test (yes, that's our job), and that he would appreciate any comments to help improve it. So, birders, get out there and hit those larks!

I don't know about the rest of you, but I certainly didn't get out and about as much as I would have liked to this year. In this issue we have published a preliminary list of activities and outings for 1999 so we can all plan our trips early. If anyone has any ideas, requests or queries in this line, they should contact Dieter or Jeremy. See you out there!

That really just leaves me to extend heartfelt thanks to all those who've contributed to the journal over the past year – it can't happen without you – you've been great! Wishing you all a wonderful Christmas and a prosperous, bird-filled New Year!

- 12 Bill medium and thick with yellow base; heavily streaked; far south
..... **Thick(Large)billed Lark**
Bill not as above, i.e. medium and thick with a yellow base 13
- 13 With distinct black pectoral patches; white tipped tail; greyish colour
..... **Bimaculated Lark**
Without black pectoral patches 14
- 14 Medium sized; usually reddish above; inhabit dunes or Karoo ('redbacked'
larks) 15
Small sized; with small bill and relatively short tail (*Spizocorys* and
Ammomanes) 18
- 15 Ventral streaking extends on to lower belly; along South African border in
Karoo **Karoo Lark**
Ventral streaking only on chest 16
- 16 Chest streaking indistinct/lacking; tan above; between Kuiseb and Koichab
Rivers **Dune Lark**
Chest streaking present; redder, not tan above 17
- 17 Chest streaks black; bill medium; south of Koichab River and Aus **Barlow's
Lark**
Chest streaking heavier but less distinct; redder above, bill thicker; on S.A.
border **Red Lark**
- 18 Back unstreaked; overall very pale; tail with broken black bar, white at base
..... **Gray's Lark**
Back streaked brown 19
- 19 Crested; pale brown; in Namib stony desert and grass; common and widespread
..... **Stark's Lark**
No crest; darker above and below 20
- 20 Short, conical, pink bill; very local from Etosha Pan to Keetmanshoop,
pans **Pinkbilled Lark**
Bigger bill, lower mandible upturned; black mark under eye; open Nama
Karoo **Sclater's Lark**
- 21 Wings with chestnut or reddish edgings 22
Wings brown; distinct supercilium gives capped appearance; common .. **Sabota
Lark**

- 22 Underparts richly coloured, with contrasting white throat 23
Belly white, little streaking 25
- 23 No crest; smaller, with short tail; gives flight display with beating wings 24
Crested; large, stocky, and richly coloured; simple song; flaps wings
perched **Rufousnaped Lark**
- 24 Narrow white edge to tail; widespread; wing-flapping flight followed by
whistle **Clapper Lark**
Buff edge to tail; only in far north and Caprivi; flight display lacks whistle
..... **Flappet Lark**
- 25 White near eye; red Kalahari sands; song a series ending in a buzzy note
..... **Fawncoloured Lark**
No white by eye; browner; monotonous "Bangladesh" call; local
nomadic **Monotonous Lark**

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BIRDING DOWN UNDER

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Australia has always been high on my list of birding priorities – home to nearly 300 endemic bird species and filled with all sorts of interesting things like kookaburras, kangaroos and koalas. The problem is where to start! Australia is huge, a continent and a single country with a diversity of birds and habitats to go with this scale of things. I decided that the tropical north-east was the place to start, based on the endemics there and the access to other areas of interest such as the Great Barrier Reef. In October this year I spent a month travelling around this part of the country between Cairns and the northern tip of Cape York.

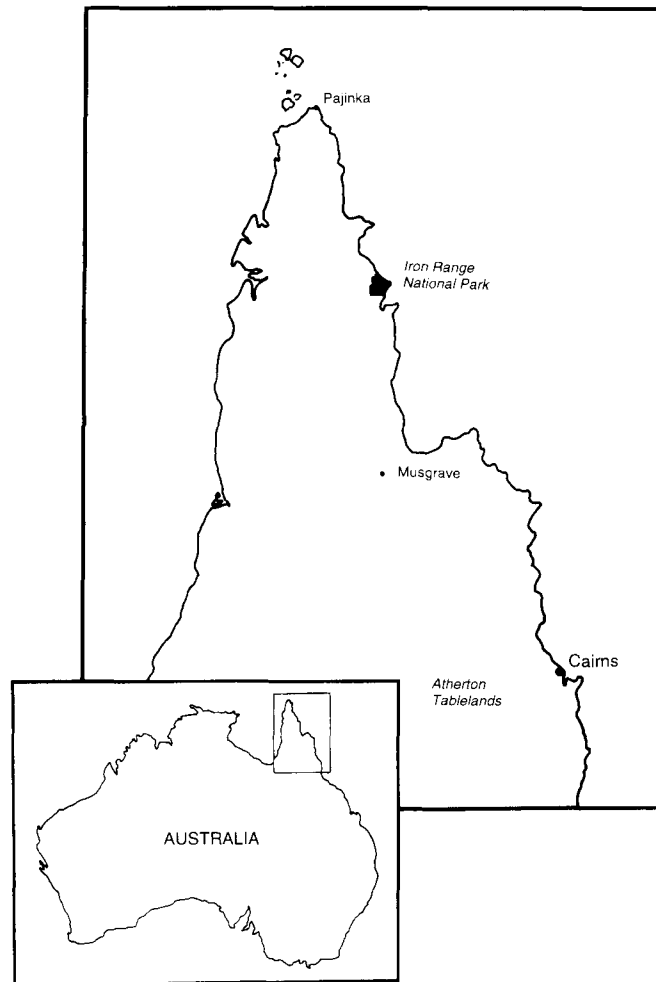
The cheapest airfares I could find, routed me through Singapore where I spent a day on my way to Cairns. I had been able to find good information about birding in Singapore and had decided that I would hit a few of the major sites early and spend the rest of the day checking out the "cheap" shopping. Nothing prepared me for the shock of getting out of the airport into 90% humidity at six in the morning. I was sweating before I had even walked 100 m. The other aspect of life in Singapore is that there is very little open ground anywhere – virtually the whole place has been built up with the exception of a few small nature reserves and some forests conserved as part of the protection of the major water catchments on the island. A convoluted bus trip got me to Bukit Timah in the central part of the island where I immediately got to twitching. Blacknaped Oriole, Olivebacked Sunbird and Phillipine Glossy Starling all reminded me of birds back home, but there were lots of other "things" calling in the dense forest canopy and it was a frustrating experience in some ways. I was able to get excellent views of a Darknecked Tailorbird, Brownchested Flycatcher, Tiger Shrike and several species of bulbul including Strawheaded. There were frustratingly brief glimpses of Greater Racquettailed Drongo, Japanese Sparrowhawk and Bluecrowned Hanging Parrot.

While at Bukit Timah, I met a local birder who decided to take me birding for the rest of the day in the mangroves and wetlands of Sungei Buloh on the north-west coast of the island. The mudflats in the mangroves were full of interesting waders, including Common Redshank, Terek Sandpiper, hundreds of Mongolian Plover and Pacific Golden Plover. We were unable to find Broadbilled Sandpiper which I had been hoping to catch up with here. Three species of brightly coloured Asian kingfishers in quick succession made up for that – Blackcapped, Collared and Common (the same species as occurs in Europe, but quite different in colouration). The huge monitor lizards (of the same genus as our leguaans *Varanus*) were a surprise as were the monkeys in the trees at a nearby park. Singapore is a worthwhile birding destination, if only to get a taste of the birds to be found further north in other parts of south-east Asia.

On arriving in Cairns, it became clear that my luggage and I were destined to take mutually exclusive holidays and a frustrating couple of hours were spent trying to get things arranged in case my bags turned up. On stepping out of the airport building, it seemed almost inevitable that the first bird I saw in Australia was a Common (Indian) Mynah. Introduced in the 1950s as a cure-all for sugar cane pests, this species has become a problem throughout the coastal north-east of Australia. Surprisingly they do not seem to intrude very far inland, unlike the mynahs in South Africa which have now spread to most of the country with the exception of the Karoo. A Whitebreasted Wood Swallow and a Willy Wagtail (not a wagtail at all) were the first indigenous species, both of which represented new families for me. Birding in Australia is not difficult – just remember to force yourself to relax on your first day and be satisfied with the common stuff. Rainbow Lorikeets are common everywhere, and no matter how many times you see them, they are absolutely stunning. Within an hour or so I had notched up 26 lifers in the garden of my B&B but jet lag caught up with me and I had to retire.

The north coast of Queensland around Cairns is known as the wet tropics and much of the really interesting birding is in the rainforest habitats. Cairns Botanical Gardens, although not strictly rainforest, is a good introduction to forest birding. Birds here included Double-eyed Fig Parrot, a small brightly coloured parrot smaller than a lovebird, several species of honey-eaters, friarbirds, Forest Kingfisher and much to my surprise a Papuan Frogmouth. Frogmouths are nocturnal birds closely related to nightjars and pottoos, but are considerably larger than any African nightjars. Another good bird was Orangefooted Scrub Fowl, which was tending a nest a little way off one of the paths. These birds build huge nests by scraping leaf-litter and sand into a pile up to three metres high and depend on the heat generated by the decomposition of the leaf-litter to incubate their eggs. Another good area in Cairns is the Esplanade, which is very like the Walvis Bay Esplanade and is an excellent area for waders. New species for me included Royal Spoonbill, Australian Pelican, Greytailed Tattler, Eastern Curlew and Australian Pied Oystercatcher, which look very similar to the European

Oystercatcher. The Esplanade is *the* spot to meet birders – almost every afternoon you can meet at least five or six groups and I found it very useful to chat to people and discuss places to bird. Many of the local birders can be found here and are very willing to help out with information of any sort (birding to car rental).



Inland of Cairns is the Atherton Tableland and it is this area that is the real reason for visiting this part of Australia (from a birding point of view). There are at least 14 species endemic to the Tablelands and a number of others which are very hard to find anywhere else. I was lucky enough to hook up with a local birder, John Crowhurst, who is an acknowledged expert in this area. John took me around the best sites and in no time I had seen my first Bird of Paradise, a stunning Victoria's Riflebird, a pair of Golden Bowerbirds and several species of honeyeaters and scrubwrens. Bowerbirds have an interesting biology with the males making either an incredibly elaborate bower which is decorated (in this case with little white flowers on the left and lichen on the right) or else a "stage" where leaves plucked from certain tree species are carefully laid wrong side up to show the pale under surface. It is around these sites that the males display and attract females. The males do not assist in nest building or in tending the eggs and chicks.

Australia has a number of odd omissions in its list of bird families, the most obvious to me being the absence of woodpeckers. These are replaced by Australian treecreepers which are quite common in wooded habitats. A group of birds which is really well represented in Australia, is the pigeons and doves. In the forest habitats the Superb and Rosecrowned Fruit-Doves together with the stunning Wompoo Pigeon out compete our Green Pigeon in terms of bright colours. Doves and pigeons are particularly abundant in the drier areas of the continent, but I was not able to catch up with many of these. It is, however, the parrots which are the particular attraction in Australia. Nothing prepared me for the sheer numbers of some of the species you see. Rainbow Lorikeets are abundant and can form large flocks, but it was the huge flocks of several hundred Galahs (a species of cockatoo) which form the most lasting memories. Galahs are a beautiful dove grey and pink and are fairly large (about twice the size of Rüppels Parrot) and seeing them wheeling around waterholes in the late afternoon was a superb sight. The first Redtailed Black Cockatoos I saw, I mistook for raptors. They are as big as a Pied Crow and fly with very gentle wing beats, much like a *Milvus* kite.

The main reason for my visiting Australia was to look at the tourism operations designed to attract birders to some of their more remote areas. Things did not quite work out as planned and I only spent about a week in the area around Musgrave. While there I was lucky enough to see Goldenshouldered Parrot which is exceedingly rare. From Musgrave I travelled north into the Iron Range National Park, a site famous for it's population of Eclectus Parrots. In this species the male is bright green and blue with a pinkish bill and the female a lurid scarlet with blue wings – a have-to-see on any birders list. In the Iron Range this species is quite abundant as are other species normally associated with the forests of New Guinea. This area was the highlight of my Australian trip as I saw all the rarities of the region (including the magnificent Palm Cockatoo) and I was accompanied by a local guide, Ben Blewitt, who was very knowledgeable about rainforest fauna and flora. Spotlighting at night is allowed within parks in Australia and we were able to see several unusual nocturnal mammals and best of all, a bright yellow python of the genus *Condropython*. The climatic conditions in the Iron Range are not for anyone who dislikes humidity. Most days were around 30° to 35° C and the humidity must have been close to 95% and above most of the time. Night-time temperatures were hardly any lower, but the birding made up for any discomfort.

After a week in the Iron Range we decided to make a mad dash for the "Tip" and drove to Pajinka, the northern most point of Australia. Birding was difficult for the most part but there were certainly some highlights including Whitestreaked Honeyeater, Wedgetailed Eagle, Noisy Pitta, Eastern Reef Heron and a Grey Goshawk at the nest.

The long drive back to Cairns was dull and dusty, but this was all quickly forgotten on a trip out to the Great Barrier Reef for a day of birding and diving. I had been advised to take a boat called the Sea Star II whose captain is a birder and it proved to be a good choice. The boat leaves Cairns early in the morning and heads for Michaelmas Cay a sandy spit about three hours from the harbour. About 40 000 Common Noddies, Sooty Terns, Lesser Crested Terns and a handful of Bridled Terns and

Black Noddies breed here. The sight of all these birds close at hand was incredible and with the predatory frigatebirds hanging in the air above the colonies, the birding could not be beaten. The price of the trip includes the use of snorkelling gear and I spent most of the day underwater rather than above it. The colours, textures and diversity of species on these reefs is something to behold and I would recommend a day on the reef to anyone, no matter the level of interest.

A month in Australia is all too short and my time there was over in a flash. I was able to see about 300 species in a range of habitats, but only covered a small part of the country. A trip there needs to be well planned if you are going to get the most out of it and fortunately there is a wealth of information available on birds and birding around the country. There are several good bird books of which I recommend the *Slater Guide to Australian Birds* – this book is very well illustrated and is a very handy pocket size, the amount of information for each species being the main short fall. *Pizzey & Knight* is a larger format book which is well illustrated and has more information. It is heavy (about three times the weight of Slater) and some of the plates are not as good. I used both while there but would opt for Slater if I had to worry about weight. There is a good site guide for birding in Australia by Thomas & Thomas *A guide to finding birds in Australia* and this will give you an idea of where to go to find most of the species. My only comment about this book is that it is only about birds and if you are a twitcher and have little interest in anything other than birds then this book is okay, otherwise it will leave you a little frustrated and wanting more information. There is a considerable amount of information available on the InterNet and I found several good trip reports which helped me plan the trip.

