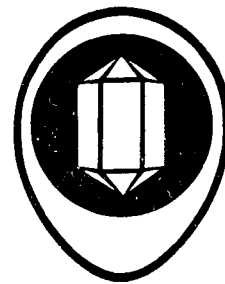


Lanioturdus torquatus  
Drosselwürger

## MITTEILUNGEN

# ORNITHOLOGISCHE ARBEITSGRUPPE



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### REPORT ON CONGRESS JOURNEY TO AUSTRALIA, AUGUST - SEPTEMBER

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#### 1. Pre-Congress Tour: Northern Territory, Australia

Australia, the island continent is about 7 717 000 km<sup>2</sup> in area, with a range of climates and a rather flat topography (highest mountains about 1 800 m). Having been isolated from other major land-masses for about 40 million years, by which time however many modern genera were present, the Australian faunal region (including the Papuan or New Guinean Subregion) contains many remarkable groups not found elsewhere in the world, the most remarkable (but not entirely confined to the Australian Region) being the subclasses of mammals known as monotremes (egg-layers) and marsupials. The bird fauna consists of about 700 species, including several endemic Australo-Papuan families and many endemic lower taxa. In order to familiarise myself with this fauna, both for comparative purposes and as a background for the International Ornithological Congress in Canberra (separate report), I undertook one of the several pre-congress tours offered by the congress organizers. My choice fell on the Northern Territory tour which covered the tropical "semi-wet" northern coast and the progressively drier inland regions south to Alice Springs in the desertic centre of the continent.

The Northern Territory of Australia is some 1 352 800 km<sup>2</sup> (520 300 square miles) in extent - compared to South West Africa's 824 300 km<sup>2</sup>. It is basically very flat, but with a considerable variety of habitats ranging from semi-desert in the south at the Tropic of Capricorn, to semi-wet monsoon tropical woodland and forest along the northern coast. Total population is about 90 000, of which half lives in Darwin, the Territory capital. About 22 000 out of the total are Aborigines, who live mostly in settlements, large reserves, or the few towns.

Darwin is the northernmost Australian city at 12° S, with a hot tropical climate divided sharply into "the Wet" and "the Dry" seasons. The annual rainfall averages about 1 500 mm, falling between November and April, but somewhat variable within those bounds. Winters are warm to hot, while summers

are said to be unbearable, which explains why Darwin has the highest per-capita beer consumption rate in a nation unchallenged as world beer-drinking champions.

I arrived in Darwin after a somewhat nerve-racking journey during which I lost my luggage twice, missed a plane once and was placed under "arrest" in Singapore for several hours (as a visa-less South African). The first three mishaps were rectified by a brilliant series of manoeuvres on the part of efficient airlines staff to whom I am eternally grateful (although I spent several days without my suitcase). The latter experience I rather enjoyed, my two assigned guards being pleasant, young, pretty and female.

On 2 August I joined 35 other ornithologists and birdwatchers from all over the world for the tour, which began under the expert leadership of Dr. Michael Ridpath, chief of the local C.S.I.R.O. Wildlife Research Unit, and his team of young field assistants ("unqualified" but extremely knowledgeable and enthusiastic). Among the distinguished ornithologists and zoologists taking part were Sir A. Landsborough Thomson of "Dictionary of Birds" fame (U.K.), Prof. H. Mendelssohn from Tel Aviv (desert biology), Dr. Jim Flegg, Director of the British Trust for Ornithology (U.K.) and Dr. Herbert Friedmann (U.S.A.) of parasitic birds fame.

Around Darwin bird-life is exceptionally rich and diverse, due to the variety of habitats and the interesting situation that different migrants visit the area at different seasons from both the south and the north. The habitats visited included Coastal Mangrove Monsoon, and the local relict Rain Forests. The latter are small pockets situated in wet depressions and constitute an impoverished version of the Indo-Malayan rainforests, which are more extensive and better developed on the northern Queensland peninsula. The mangroves are characterized by a largely insectivorous avifauna, while fruit-eaters are prominent in the other forest types. Our expert guides (part of a total staff of about 30 in the Wildlife Unit) were able to explain the basic ecology of the various habitats very adequately, besides being able to show us a large number of the local bird specialities including the primitive Pied Goose Anseranas semipalmata.

Besides swamp and open-water habitat represented at Fogg Dam, the other habitat seen around Darwin was the predominant one of most of northern Australia - Tall Eucalyptus Woodland. I was struck by its superficial resemblance to dry Brachystegia Woodland so characteristic of tropical Africa's medium rainfall regions. It, too, has an annual fire cycle.

On 4 August we departed by coach for the Arnhemland Escarpment, border of a vast Aborigine reserve. Our bird-watching was concentrated in the newly-proclaimed 3 600 ha Kakadu National Park along the base of the escarpment. This was extremely wild country, with virtually no roads - in fact, it was a revelation to see how our large bus managed to negotiate some of the sandy narrow tracks. Predominant vegetation here was Eucalyptus woodland of varying height, density and type, with forest patches at the rugged escarpment base. There are a number of endemic plants and animals in the region, mostly associated with the Pre-Cambrian sandstone escarpment itself. A measure of the lack of biological knowledge about the region (the C.S.I.R.O. has only been working on it for two years) was the fact that one of our herpetologically-oriented guides caught a large new Varanid lizard species on the escarpment cliffs during our excursion.

The climate here is somewhat drier than at Darwin, and as in South West Africa, most of the bird-life was found to concentrate along the rivers in this, the dry season. During this time most of the water in the rivers stands in large pools, and there are numerous other water-holding depressions, called billabongs, scattered through the countryside. Of the endemic birds in the region, we saw two honeyeaters (belonging to the exclusively Australo-Malaysian family Meliphagidae) and a pigeon. In the anthropological line, we were fascinated by the numerous excellent examples of Aboriginal rock art along the cliffs. The paintings I found to be somewhat less artistic and cruder than our Bushman art.

Among the larger animals, I was particularly impressed by the extensive grazing damage created by the immense numbers of feral water buffalo Bubalus bubalis introduced in the N.T. early in the century. Commercial cropping operations are in progress, and an intensive study of the buffalo was begun by the C.S.I.R.O. unit this year.

From Arnhemland we moved on 260 km to the south through progressively drier eucalyptus woods and "bushveld". The rivers or dry riverbeds became progressively more important for bird-life, of which large flocks of parrots and cockatoos were the most striking.

The next morning we flew from Katherine to Alice Springs, centre-point of the Australian continent and 1 200 km south of Darwin. "The Alice" has a population of about 13000, is situated 580 m above sealevel and has a rather extreme continental climate with a highly erratic rainfall averaging 260 mm a year. The countryside had experienced an exceptionally good rainy season in the past year - the parallels in fact were quite astonishing: it looked for all the world like Karibib district, until one noticed that the trees were eucalypts and thornless un-acacia-like (to me) acacias.

At Alice Springs the tour leadership was taken over by Colin Lendon of the C.S.I.R.O.'s Rangelands Research Section, and two assistants from the local office of the N.T. Reserves Board (equivalent basically to our provincial conservation departments). Although the level of leadership was not quite up to the Darwin team's, Mr. Lendon proved very knowledgeable on the local avifauna and their ecology. I had some very fruitful discussions with him on termite-bird relationships, a subject currently of interest to me, and on which he has done some work in Australia. We visited several localities around Alice Springs, and some participants undertook a flight to the world-famous Ayer's Rock.

Among the spectacular geologic features closer to Alice Springs is a series of gaps in the MacDonnell Ranges, a hill series rising up to 300 metres from the flat plains. Rivers run through these gaps from north to south, the chasms being cut straight-sided through the rock to the level of the plain. These spectacular sheer gorges of up to 200 or 250 metres high are thought to have arisen from water action on the ironbearing quartzite which breaks along rather symmetrical vertical fault fissures. The rock weathers to a reddish colour. Rock Wallabies Petrogale lateralis were plentiful here and seemed to occupy a niche similar to that which a hybrid between dassies and klipspringers might occupy. Simpson's Gap is a national (=state) park of some 35 000 ha including one of the more spectacular gorges, with a trickling creek flowing through it. The gap was discovered about 100 years ago, and was a cattle ranch until 1970, although one square mile including the actual gap had been a reserve since 1958. The N.T. Reserves Board creates its own By-laws for the parks under its control, which have full legal standing.

Some examples: no fires, fine R100; proper rubbish disposal, fine R50; no bottle-breaking, fine R50; use toilets, fine R100; no fighting or bad language, fine R50. For being drunk, a fine of R20. There is an attractive booklet on the Park, which has no facilities other than a picnic ground and one road to the Gap itself. Some 130 bird species have been recorded (a much smaller area in similar-looking habitat, and with similar climate in South West Africa has 200 species). Amongst others we saw Peregrine Falcon Falco peregrinus and Australia's largest raptor, the Wedge-tailed Eagle Aquila audax here.

Another very interesting area visited was a huge paddock or camp of about 8 000 ha on which the C.S.I.R.O. Land Research Division is conducting experiments on grazing yield under various managements, including total animal grazing exclusion (i.e. termites also). The country of this paddock was predominantly mulga (*Acacia aneura*) scrub and bush, a dominant plant formation over thousands of square kilometres in the Centre.

In the Alice Springs area there were far fewer birds than around Darwin - I recorded 66 species compared to 107 over a similar number of days. The fact that there are fewer species than in comparable parts of South West Africa may probably be ascribed to the more erratic climate; in terms of bird biomass for a given season with equal rainfalls, the two regions might well have much the same figures. Among the interesting endemics seen around Alice might be mentioned the Owlet-nightjar Aegotheles cristatus and Crested and Plumed Pigeons; all belonging to strictly Australo-Papuan groups. Always a prominent feature of the Australian avifauna, parrots were here represented mostly by different species than in the north, including large swarms of Budgerigars Melopsittacus undulatus. The highlights for me however were undoubtedly the remarkable blue wrens-tiny warblers of the sub-family Malurinae, an Australo-Papuan endemic group. The dazzling brilliance of the males is breath-taking, well complemented by their musical voices, a rare combination in the bird world, and what a contrast to our own drab insect-voiced tinktinkies. A bird we looked for in vain was the Australian Night Parrot Geopsittacus occidentalis, believed along with one other Australian parrot to have become extinct; there are no reliable records of either species in the last fifty years.

Due to the crippling strikes by various air personnel, we were delayed for two additional nights in Alice Springs. This enabled us to see more of the area, but we arrived in Canberra only on the evening of the first congress day. Much to our relief, however, it turned out that 90% of the arriving congress members had been similarly affected in various parts of Australia, resulting in the postponement of the first day's proceedings.

## 2. Mid-Congress Excursion: Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, A.C.T.

Only two venue choices being available, I found myself with about 200 others headed for Tidbinbilla in the pre-dawn hours of 14 August. This reserve of about 4 600 ha lies 40 km southwest of Canberra and has a somewhat higher rainfall than the city (700 vs. 500 mm). The altitude is similar, although the range is greater (800 to 1 600 m) since the reserve lies along a mountain valley. The original vegetation type was Wet and Dry Sclerophyll (mostly eucalypts) Forest, of impressive height, but it is now rather

patchy since the habitat was much disturbed prior to the reserve's full establishment in 1964. Tidbinbilla is a recreation-zoo park type, that is, animals and birds are found in enclosures as well as wild. The weather could not have been worse during our visit - bitterly cold gale force gusts of wind and intermittent sleet. Nevertheless, most of the "birdos" enthusiastically plunged into the forests along the several walking trails, and were duly rewarded with glimpses of bedraggled Koala Bears (re-introduced), Lyrebirds Menura novaehollandiae and others. In the afternoon birds were fed at a group of bird tables near the picnic grounds, presenting an incredible show of colour. The gaudy rosella parrots (Platycercus) and the magnificent Satin Bowerbird Ptilonorhynchus violaceus in particular impressed me - we were also shown a part-built display bower (where the male courts the female) belonging to this species. Total bird species known from the reserve: 115 (Daan Viljoen Park with slightly smaller area, higher temperatures and half the rainfall has 197).

### 3. Canberra and its Botanic Garden.

The Canberra Botanic Gardens are located next to the university campus, barely a kilometre from the residence where I stayed. They occupy some 50 ha on the slopes of Black Mountain (a small hill: the Australians with their flat continent must be the original proverbial makers of mountains out of molehills). The Gardens were planned by Canberra's famous architect, Walter Burley Griffin, who envisaged them as being exclusively planted with Australian flora. The first plantings, in essentially virgin bushveld, were begun in 1950, but only in 1970 were the Gardens officially opened to the public. Research on horticulture of native plants is carried out, and a series of booklets on growing native plants is being produced for the public. At the time of my visit, there was a fascinating exhibit on plant use by the Aborigines - I formed the impression that they were far more ingenious and versatile in this "technology" than South African native tribes. Other particularly interesting Gardens sections were those on proteas (different from ours, and very ornamental too) and acacias. The latter genus is represented by over 500 species in Australia, compared to nearly 300 in Africa, and the acacias there (many called "wattles" locally, to a South African's utter confusion) are almost all entirely thornless and quite different in appearance from our familiar types. An ingenious "rain forest" has been created in a small gully (kloof) by using "mistlers" to spray a fine mist into the air at regular intervals, thereby maintaining a high relative humidity and constantly wet substrate. Needless to say, birds find the Gardens very attractive, visiting them to feed and breed. 115 species have been recorded there so far, listed in an attractive small brochure.

It may be of some interest here to mention a few points regarding Canberra's history. It is an "artificial" capital, like Brasilia, having been specially created for this purpose. Land was ceded by New South Wales state, following constitutional promulgation in 1900. Thus Australian Central Territory (A.C.T.) came into being (910 square miles). The design of the city was thrown open to international competition, and in 1913 work on site began under direction of the winning architect, Walter Burley Griffin of Chicago. The first World War impeded progress until 1920, but by 1927 parliament convened in the capital for the first time ("temporary" headquarters since 1901 had been in Melbourne).

(To be continued)

Inhalt: R.A.C. Jensen: Report on Congress Journey to Australia, August-September 1974 (To be continued)

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