



## G'day LFWers and GFWers,

Welcome to the October newsletter, the windy season, and the longest recorded dry spell for Alice Springs (according to the Alice Springs Airport weather station).

This month we take a look at some of the breeding activity that you might be lucky enough to observe in some of our native birds.

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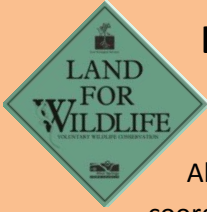
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## LAND FOR WILDLIFE NEWS

All three Land for Wildlife coordinators have been flat out this month with field projects and other tasks that always stack up this time of year. This has meant that we haven't always been on the ball as far as answering some of your emails and requests for advice etc.

We apologise for this, but we will get around to you all eventually!

Our major news this month is the completion of our annual biodiversity survey, beginning on the 13<sup>th</sup> October at Fenn Gap.

The survey involved four days of biodiversity monitoring on this Land for Wildlife property, and involved several volunteer surveyors through ALEC's Biodiversity Matters (BM) project.

We will shortly have a full report available for interested members to read.

In other news, LfW coordinators recently held a workshop for indigenous land management students from Batchelor Institute. The workshop focused on feral animal control with a focus on our rabbit project.

This was a highly successful few hours and we are likely to continue this relationship with Batchelor in the future.

Thank you to Brendan and Carmel Ryan, who allowed us to take the four students (from Santa Teresa and Tennant Creek) to view rabbit damage and control efforts on their property.



## GARDEN FOR WILDLIFE NEWS

Garden for Wildlife efforts this month have concentrated on feral Spotted Turtle Dove control. Several people new to the program have come on board with traps constructed at Eco Fair workshops. For an update on this program, see the Community Notices section in this newsletter.

We've had a slow few months as far as new memberships are concerned, but have managed to make some inroads, particularly with people new to town. If you know anyone who would like to become a GfW member, please put them in touch with us. We'll soon have them started in creating a wildlife diverse garden.

## ARTICLES AND CONTRIBUTIONS

### Nesting Birds Around Alice Springs



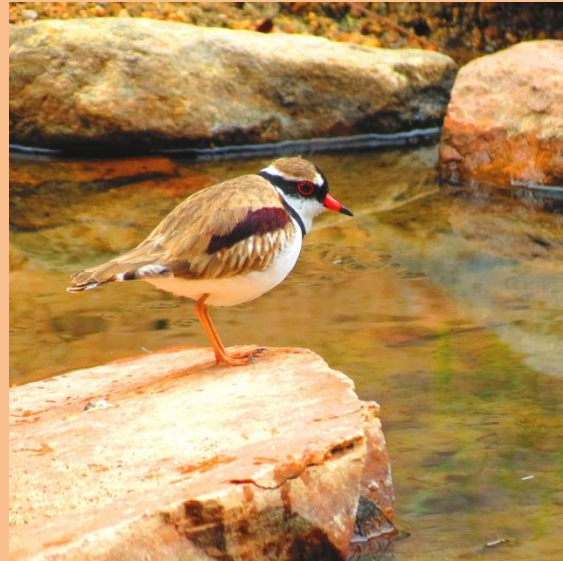
**Figure 1** The nest of a Diamond Dove with a single egg

It's the time of year when a number of species around Alice Springs have already completed their courting and are nest-building and incubating eggs, or busily raising and fledging young birds.

We thought it might be a good time to take a look at some of the different nests that you might find around the centre. When looking

at nesting birds, it's always worth keeping in mind that they are very easily disturbed during this period. You should try to keep a discreet distance at all times if viewing birds on the nest, and if you find a nest with eggs unattended don't disturb them as these eggs are not necessarily abandoned; birds don't have to incubate their eggs 100% of the time so they may just be off foraging or stretching their wings.

Many birds' nests might not even appear like nests at all. Birds in the family Charadriidae (plovers, dotterels, and lapwings) make simple *scrape* nests, if they make any sort of nest at all. The Masked Lapwing *Vanellus miles*, is a famous example of a fiercely defensive species that lays its eggs directly onto the ground and makes little attempt to build any sort of nest. To make this approach more practical, the lapwing lays superbly camouflaged eggs. If you happen to be walking in a park or reserve with a Masked Lapwing making a racket and swooping down on you, there is a good chance that you have strayed into the area where it has laid its eggs and it is now trying to ward you off. Take care, as these eggs can be very difficult to see among even the shortest grass stubble and debris.



**Figure 2 Black-fronted Dotterel, commonly found around inland waterholes**

In the same family as the Masked Lapwing is the Black-fronted Dotterel *Euseyonis melanops*. This bird is commonly found around inland waterways and waterholes. Like its rowdy cousin, this bird lays its eggs directly onto coarse sand where it relies on a combination of camouflage and subterfuge for the eggs to avoid disturbance. Any animal that happens upon the eggs (or the equally well camouflaged chicks once they hatch) will immediately be distracted by the parents performing what is known as a "broken-wing display". This is where an adult bird flutters around on the ground nearby, usually with one wing cocked at an awkward angle, in a convincing imitation of an injured bird. A predatory animal is likely to be lured immediately by this ruse, but the "injured" bird gradually flutters a little further away from the eggs/chicks each time the predator advances, and in this fashion draws the marauder away to a safe distance. Once the intruder has been suitably distracted, the apparently injured bird makes an instant recovery and flutters out of harm's reach.

So again, if you are around the waterhole at Trephina or Simpson's Gap and you happen to witness one of these diminutive birds in



apparent distress at your feet, don't be tempted to try to pick them up or rescue them. Have a look around instead; it's likely that you are in danger of crushing eggs and/or chicks with your next step!



**Figure 3 Diamond Dove sitting on the nest.**

Another species which doesn't build a conventional nest is the Red-backed Kingfisher *Todiramphus pyrrhopygius*. This species, along with the Red-browed Pardalote *Pardalotus rubricatus*, and White-backed Swallow *Cheramoeca leucosternon*, is a tunnel or burrow nester. Their preferred technique is to find a river bank or road cutting to allow them to build a tunnel up to 1.25m long. At the end of this tunnel, they will still build a more conventional nest of twigs and grass stems, but all we usually witness is the bird vanishing down the entrance to the tunnel. It is worth keeping an eye out over the road anywhere you pass through a cutting in a sand dune, or pass through a creek bed, as these are excellent places for spotting these species.



**Figure 4 Fairy Martin, the talented builder responsible for those beautiful bottle-shaped mud nests**

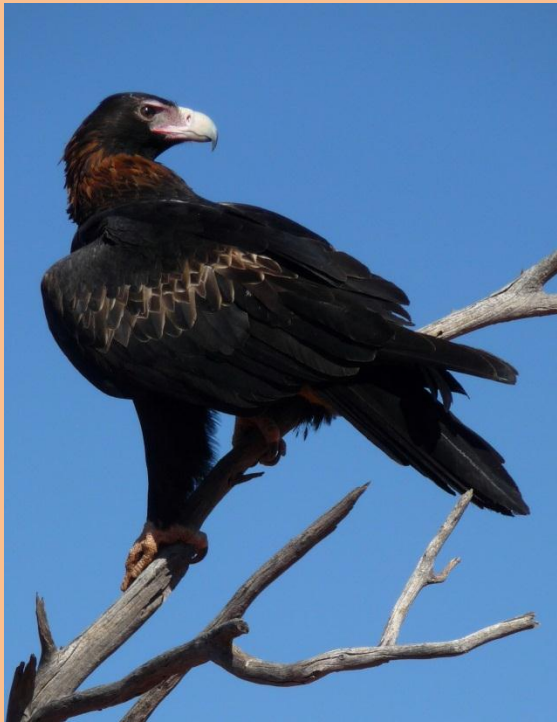
Among the more eye-catching of nests, and probably one that is familiar to most living in Alice Springs is the nest of the Fairy Martin *Petrochelidon ariel*. These tiny birds look superficially like a swallow, but they lack the deeply forked tail. They nest, sometimes in colonies containing over one hundred nests, by building a tidy little bottle-shaped construction of mud. Around town these can often be found adorning the underside of the eaves of houses, and commonly in culverts beneath roads and railways. The mud is formed using local sand mixed with the birds' saliva – if only it was so simple for humans to come by building materials.



**Figure 5 A bank of Fairy Martin nests near Palm Valley**

The raptors, or birds of prey, of The Centre take yet another approach to nesting. The

Wedge-tailed Eagle *Aquila audax*, builds a large platform of sticks in a tree. This platform is often lined with eucalypt leaves and can be massive – up to 2m across and more than capable of supporting the weight of an adult human. This nest may be used for many years and added to, and repaired over time. The Wedge-tailed Eagle, and other related eagles, are known for a rather grisly phenomenon associated with their nesting habitats. Known as “Cainism” or “Cain & Abel Syndrome”, these eagles usually lay two eggs, both of which will usually hatch, but only one of which will survive to adulthood.

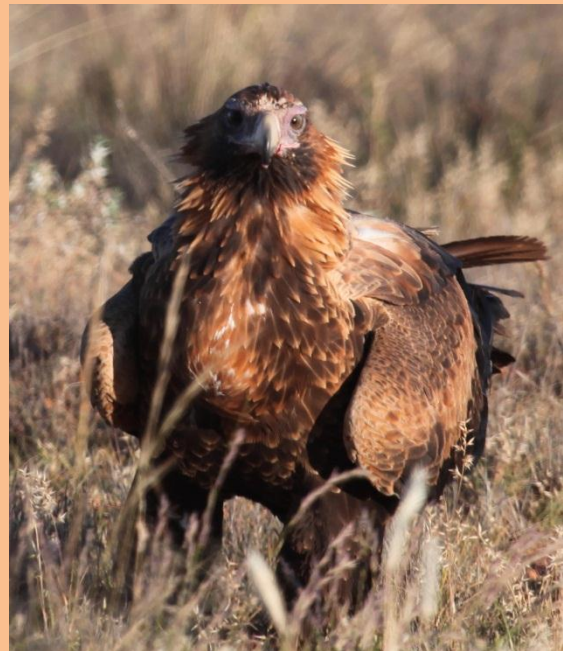


**Figure 6 The Wedge-tailed Eagle, undisputed ruler of the outback skies and with a grisly nesting habit**

The first egg laid, has been shown to possess higher androgen levels, which means the first chick to hatch develops faster, is more aggressive, and therefore has a distinct competitive advantage over the younger chick. When this chick hatches, the larger, older sibling bullies it out of most of the food provided by the parents, starving it, and pecking at it, until it becomes hopelessly weak and dies. At this point it becomes food for the

older chick. There are occasions, usually in exceptional seasons when the supply of food is abundant and easily procured by the parents, when both chicks will survive to adulthood – but these occasions are the exception, rather than the rule.

This may seem harsh, but this siblicide is a successful strategy for helping to ensure that the larger of the two hatchlings has the best possible chance to grow strong and become a healthy, breeding adult, capable of passing on the parents' genes. This strategy of obligate siblicide, with variations in the number of eggs, is also well-known in some species of booby and Cattle Egrets.



**Figure 7 A younger wedgie sporting the blonde mane of youth**

Smaller raptors, like some of the falcons, don't build a nest at all but will take over an old crow's nest or the nest one of the kite species. They may do a bit of renovating to this nest depending on the condition that it is found in.





**Figure 8** A rare nomadic desert dweller, the Grey Falcon sits on a nest in Central Australia. There may be as few as 350 breeding pairs in the wild.

Some of the more impressive examples of avian architecture are built by honeyeaters. The common White-plumed Honeyeater, builds a delicate, pendulous purse of a nest from carefully woven spider silk, grass stalks, and small twigs.

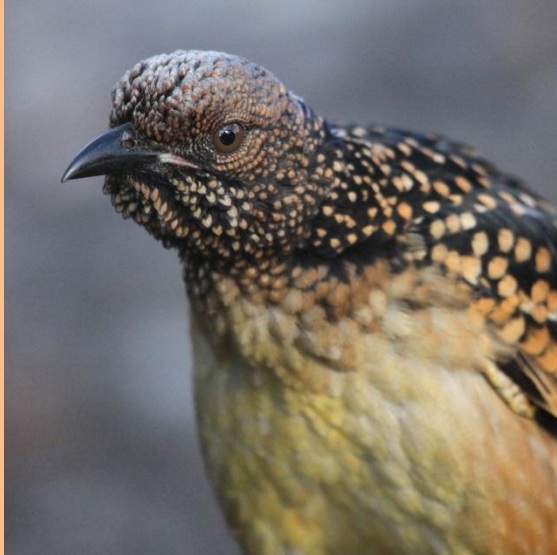
An important group of birds, are those which nest in tree hollows. Many of these species are in decline across Australia due to the clearing of old dead trees to make way for pasture and plantations. Most of these species are what ornithologists refer to as “obligate hollow nesting” species, which means that if they cannot find a suitable tree hollow, they simply will not breed (see the link in the **web watch** section to the nestboxing plans). This category includes most of our large cockatoos, lorikeets, and some owl species. Central Australia still sports a relative abundance of big old River Red Gums in our river systems which means that populations of some of these hollow nesting species are faring slightly better here than their interstate cousins. Bear in mind that the same Red-tailed Black Cockatoos that we are fortunate to see around the edges of Alice

Springs are the subject of major recovery programs in Queensland and Victoria.



**Figure 9** Major Mitchell's Cockatoos tending a nest hollow in the Hugh River

A local bird which is famous as a builder, but not so much as a nest-builder, is the Western Bowerbird *Chlamydera guttatus*. Many visitors mistakenly assume that the bower built by the male is also used as the nest for the laying of eggs. In fact, the female will build her own nest once she has chosen a mate based on her preference for bower construction, dancing, and arrangements of the males' collections of artefacts. The nest built by the female bowerbird looks much like a more typical bird's nest – an arrangement of sticks and twigs in the fork of a tree branch.



**Figure 10** Western Bowerbird, a well-known builder, but have you seen the nest or just the bower (below)?



The Zebra Finch is a bird which is probably familiar to anyone who has spent any time in the inland. This species is memorable not just for its dazzling orange beak and neat markings, but also for its gregarious “nyii-nyiii”, call that is one of the characteristic sounds of a Central Australian waterhole at dusk. These birds are well known to breed at any time of year in response to rainfall. They build a neat little domed nest with a side entrance about the size of a large softball. In the bush, Dead Finish *Acacia tetragonophylla*, seems to be a favourite site for their constructions but in town almost anything goes. Many houses will sport Zebra Finch nests under their eaves, at the top of drain pipes, in carports, and even in disused spare tyres.



**Figure 11** Zebra Finches, prolific nest-builders in the right weather.

Famed Australian ornithologist Richard Zann did much of the early research on this species' breeding response to rainfall, and it seems that around 4 weeks is the magical period; after rain it takes around 4 weeks for the Zebra Finches to assess if the rain was sufficient to support a breeding cycle and commence their nest-building. Mind you, around Alice Springs with so many birdbaths and other artificial water sources and well-tended Gardens For Wildlife, it's possible for finches to breed at almost any time.

Nonetheless, as we're in a prolonged dry spell at the moment, perhaps this would be an easy phenomenon to observe yourself if you have Zebra Finches nearby. As soon as we get some decent rain, mark it on your calendar, and see how long it takes before you start to notice fresh Zebra Finch nests in the shrubs and squawking chicks calling for more tucker.

## **COMMUNITY NOTICES**

### **NB: A Reminder About Feral Baiting Programs**

The programmed side of the LFW rabbit control program has come to a close now, but

some control measures using the bait Pindone, may still continue on where properties continue to be plagued by rabbits.

Please remember if you are conducting any sort of baiting or feral animal control on your property, that it is incumbent upon you to notify your neighbours in case they need to control their pets or livestock.

We received the sad news earlier this month that one of our member's dogs has passed away, and it appears that this may have been caused by the ingestion of a toxin of some sort. While the circumstances of the dog's death do not implicate Pindone, it is possible that the dog had come into contact with a more immediately potent toxin, which may have been used on a neighbouring property.

Please consider your neighbours if you are intending to conduct any sort of baiting or feral animal control on your property, and remember that all chemicals, whether herbicide, pesticide, or poison, needs to be used in accordance with the law, and in accordance with the instructions for its proper use.

### **Water Efficiency Audits**

In this prolonged dry spell, there has never been a better time to get a home water efficiency audit. Get in touch with - **Alice Water Smart**



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[homes@alicewatersmart.com.au](mailto:homes@alicewatersmart.com.au)

### **Spotted Turtle Dove Control Program**

A steady trickle of Turtle Dove trapping records continues to make its way to the Land for Wildlife office. It's pleasing to see that the community is continuing to target this avian invader.

Recent figures include 50 for the year thus far from a Garden for Wildlife member in Eastside and 37 in the last three months in LfW coordinator Jesse's backyard in Northside.

The bad news is that these high numbers show that the feral doves are continuing to make Alice Springs a stronghold, displacing



native birds and causing a nuisance as they do so.

Breeding season (now!) is a great time to target feral doves, so if you're not involved in the trapping program and would like to be, or would just like more information on Spotted Turtle Doves, contact Chris, Matt or Jesse at Land for Wildlife. And remember to send us your catch figures so we can update our data to! [lfw@lowecol.com.au](mailto:lfw@lowecol.com.au)

### **Cat Traps**

Recently we've had a number of requests for the loan of cat traps from both Land for Wildlife and Garden for Wildlife members.

While the idea of feral cat control is fantastic and would no doubt contribute to the biodiversity on your property, we are unable to provide this service.

We have a limited number of cage traps suitable for cats and these are often needed for our own survey work.

Don't despair however, as the Alice Springs Town Council loans cat traps for people to use on their properties. Contact the council on 8950 0500.

## **WEBWATCH**

### **Environmental Graffiti**

<http://www.environmentalgraffiti.com/featured/birds-nests-most-bizarre-places/11610>

This is an interesting site with galleries of natural phenomena from around the world. The link provided here is specifically to a gallery containing images of some of the strange places that birds decide to build their nests, but there is much else worth having a look at here.

### **Swimming Echidna?!**

<http://news.ninemsn.com.au/national/8534256/nt-fishermen-find-echidna-swimming-off-shore>

This link needs little explanation. Two fisherman 2 kilometres offshore from Darwin's East Arm Wharf took this extraordinary footage of a Short-beaked Echidna swimming this far offshore.

### **Melbourne Feral Bird Control**

<http://m.theage.com.au/victoria/bird-plague-no-myna-matter-20120922-26dvl.html>

This story appeared in The Age this month. I guess we should think ourselves lucky that the feral Spotted Dove is the only introduced bird we currently have to deal with. Down in Melbourne the Common Myna is proving very destructive and difficult to eradicate.

## **WEBWATCH Cont.**

### **Flat Pack Nest Boxes!**

[http://shop.nestingboxes.com.au/epages/shs\\_h6893.sf/en\\_AU/?ObjectPath=/Shops/shsh6893/Categories/1](http://shop.nestingboxes.com.au/epages/shs_h6893.sf/en_AU/?ObjectPath=/Shops/shsh6893/Categories/1)

Nest Boxes are a great way of providing shelter for wildlife where the landscape may be lacking old trees with natural hollows. This Brisbane based company can post out a flat pack nest box suitable for Microbat's or an Owlet-nightjar, for you to assemble your self!

### **The Watcher – a man on a mission**

<http://www.theage.com.au/lifestyle/the-watcher-20121001-26uab.html>

The one-year twitch... John Weigel hopes to break the Australian "big Year" record for bird watching, and save the Tasmanian Devil in the process.

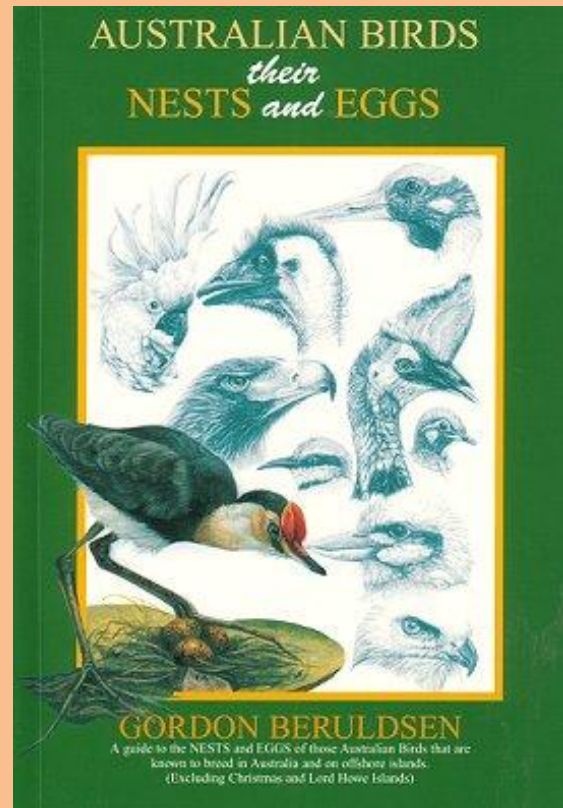
## Free Nestbox Plans for Boobooks

<http://www.birdsinbackyards.net/sites/www.birdsinbackyards.net/files/page/attachments/Southern%20Boobook.pdf>

Birdlife Australia has just put up this great page with plans to help you build your own nest box for a range of struggling native species that can be found around our suburbs. The idea of nestboxing is to provide an alternative for animals that can ONLY nest in tree hollows. As it takes many tree species a long time to develop to a point where they have suitable hollows for these animals, nestboxing in developed areas can provide crucial habitat in new planted revegetation areas and housing developments. So if the trees on your block are just a bit too young to provide hollows, perhaps you should consider building a nestbox – go on, it's easier than you think.

## ON THE BOOKSHELF

With Red Centre Bird Festival Kicking off this month, we have a selection of topical bird books to help you with your bird identification and knowledge.



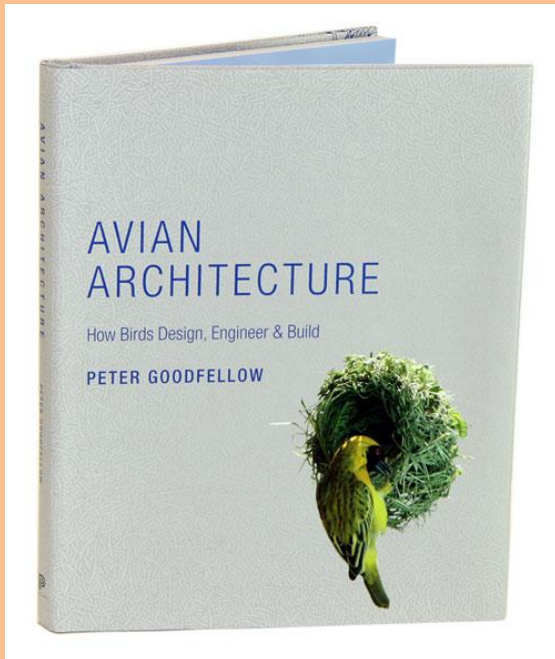
### Australian Birds; Their Nests and Eggs

By Gordon Beruldsen

In keeping with the theme of the articles this month, this book is the answer to any questions about birds' eggs and nests in Australia.

This is a useful reference for any keen naturalist who is likely to come home with a swag of pictures of eggs and nests at this time of year. When you start to pore through the plates of all the eggs of our birds in this book, you will begin to realise what a difficult task the accurate identification of eggs can be.

Perhaps this is not a glove-box book that you will use on every trip, but a handy book to have on the shelf nonetheless.



## **Avian Architecture: How Birds Design, Engineer & Build**

By Peter Goodfellow

It's all in the title; this book is not so much a field guide to birds' nests, but a general survey of the entire spectrum of avian constructions, including the bower constructions of the bowerbirds.

It's a large format, hardcover book, with large clear diagrams and illustrations elucidating every aspect of the way birds go about building their varied forms of nests.

This is another great book for kids to start learning about birds and nature, due to the picture-heavy, text-light approach. Despite this, it is still a useful reference for the adult reader, with plenty to learn within.

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Thanks for all the emails and photographs this month everyone. Please keep them coming for the next edition.

Cheers,

Jesse, Chris, Matt and Bill

