



Baillon's Crake. Photo: Danny Fog.



Male Hardhead. Photo: Danny Fog.



Juvenile Nankeen Night-Heron. Photos: Danny Fog.

Yalukit Willam Nature Reserve bird survey 16 December 2023

Nine bird observers, including 2 skilled juniors, Viv and Sylvie, met by the St Kilda Street bridge at 7.15 am. Conditions were perfect: a sunny 14 C with a slight wind and some cloud. Our December survey had been postponed by one week due to rain on the previous Saturday, resulting in a smaller than usual turnout. As group leader Tania Ireton was travelling, Bob Tammick and Alyson Svenson led the survey in Areas B, C and G, while Sue Forster and Laura Paterson covered Areas D, E and F, with everyone coming together for Area A lake. We were ably assisted by photographers Danny Fog and Fran Pfeiffer.

Our total of 350 birds was the second lowest monthly record of abundance for 2023. (Abundance has varied between 337 in August and 460 in April.) Our wetland and 'terrestrial' species count paralleled that of November but there were slightly fewer feral birds, particularly Noisy Miners. Despite the lower abundance, diversity was good. We recorded 17 wetland species, 12 terrestrial species and 3 pest/feral species—a total of 32. (Our highest species count was 33 in April 2023).

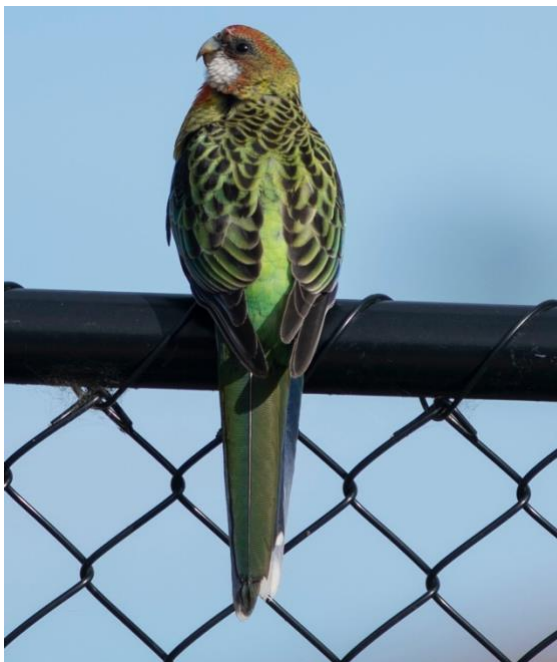
By area, the highest species count was in the Chain of Ponds with 19 recorded in F, followed by 17 in E, and slightly fewer species than usual in A (16). Bird numbers in Areas A and F were 91 and 90, respectively. By comparison, only 12–17 birds were recorded in each of Areas B, C and D, which have poor mid-storey cover, less water and ongoing building activity. These 3 areas all averaged only half their previous lowest 2023 count.

Despite the presence of flowering eucalypts, usually abundant Rainbow Lorikeets were low in number (24), but the total bird count was swelled by a flock of 25 Musk Lorikeets flying over A and around 40 Common Starlings circulating in E and F.

Thanks to Danny's 'eagle eyes', we were thrilled to catch a glimpse of a small, elusive Baillon's Crake picking its way between the reeds in Area F's Billabong 2. This was a first sighting for the survey records, although the Crake and chicks have been previously photographed by Danny and others on YWNA Facebook. Also in Area F (Pond 2), we found a solitary male Hardhead, distinguished from the female by its white eye and mahogany-coloured head and neck.



White-faced Heron. Photo: Danny Fog.



Juvenile Eastern Rosella. Photo: Danny Fog.



Adult Eastern Rosella. Photo: Danny Fog.

Another major highlight was a juvenile Nankeen Night-Heron, startled out into the open from its solitary hideaway by New Street bridge. Chased by 2 Noisy Miners, the Night-Heron circled over Areas C and D for some minutes before disappearing. As Danny's photos illustrate, unlike an adult bird, its head, neck and breast are coarsely streaked, and its upperwing-coverts are spotted white.

We also had a good sighting of a Little Grassbird flitting between reeds in Area A lake but heard no calls on this occasion. All the grebes had departed, but 12 Grey Teal were still present on the lake. Until November, these ducks had only been recorded sporadically and in scattered small numbers throughout the wetland areas.

This month, the group surveying Area G along the canal were luckier with their timing than in November when, due to extreme low tide, no water birds were seen at all! Bob reported that their highlight was 22 Chestnut Teals (including 4 chicks) and 11 Pacific Black Ducks, but the canal was also the only area where Sulphur-crested Cockatoos (4) were recorded. In total 63 birds were recorded on the canal.

Chestnut Teal (49) had the highest species abundance in December, with a further 27 recorded in pondage in the reserve. Black Pacific Ducks (29) were also prominent, recorded in every area except C. And, as usual, Purple Swamphens (17), Eurasian Coots (15) and Dusky Moorhens (8) were found in the 3 wetland areas. Wetland species also included a pair of Masked Lapwings (seen in D and F), a single Little Pied Cormorant in F, single Silver Gulls in F and G, and Welcome Swallows (8) in A and E. A much larger flock of Welcome Swallows was skimming the next-door sports field for insects.

No nestlings or small chicks were seen in the reserve, but many juveniles were present, including Dusky Moorhens, Australian Wood Ducks, an Eastern Rosella, a White-faced Heron and an Australian Magpie. A Rainbow Lorikeet emerged out of a nest box in Area E, but the Magpie-larks nesting in Area D had departed; perhaps their young had fledged?

We observed a small flock of 5 Pied Currawongs in Area E (maybe a family group?) and occasional forays by Red Wattlebirds: only 2 were recorded but a third was seen later. Total Crested Pigeon numbers had increased to 13, recorded over 4 areas. A solitary Grey Butcherbird was heard in B and C, and 2 Eastern Rosellas (an adult and juvenile) were viewed in E along with another adult in D. Just 9



Crested Pigeons. Photo: Danny Fog.

Little Ravens were recorded (across A, C, E, F and G) along with 8 Australian Magpies and 15 Magpie-larks, thinly spread across every area except B.

Three pest/feral species were recorded, with Common Starlings (41) overtaking Noisy Miners (31) in abundance on this occasion. Rock Doves (7) were only recorded on the canal.

Between monthly surveys, Danny Fog posted 2 new species in the reserve: a Black-fronted Dotterel (7 Dec) and an Australian White Ibis (13 Dec).

Report: Sue Forster

Photos: Danny Fog

Description of current vegetation and habitat by survey areas:

A: a large pond with well-established reeds around the edge and on small central islands.

B: grassy slopes with stands of mature eucalypts, including winter-flowering ironbarks.

C: grassy areas with stands of mixed native trees with Elster Creek on its northern side.

D: partly fenced area still undergoing landscaping; scattered mixed native trees with a line of mature eucalypts inside the New Street fence; bounded by Elster Creek to its south.

E: newly opened Chain of Ponds with scattered native trees, widescale planting around ponds (currently still under netting) and mature eucalypts inside the New Street fence.

F: grassy slope with scattered eucalypts fringing area A pond, leading to the Chain of Ponds and new beds of ground cover and shrubs adjoining the northern sports field fence.

G: Elster Canal flanked by grassy slopes, mixed plantings and a few mature eucalypts fronting urban housing and a school.



Bird survey areas excluding Area G, Elster Canal.

To join a monthly bird survey, please contact Bob Tammick: bob_alyson@aapt.net.au The surveys are led by BirdLife Bayside president Tania Ireton. Start times are between 7.15 and 8.00 am, depending on sunrise. Seven sections (including Elster Canal) are surveyed in two groups, for 20 minutes each; both groups complete Area A together around the main pond. The process generally takes one hour and thirty minutes per group.

To view the survey records for all seven sites, go to Birddata website, select the Shared Sites tab and type Elsternwick Park in the filter: <https://birddata.birdlife.org.au>



Pondage in Areas E and F (by Gio Fitzpatrick).