

Australia. Part Four - New South Wales.

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I incorporated the Sydney area into my itinerary primarily for a pelagic trip, but this got cancelled the evening before! Regardless, a fantastic trip followed, very much planned on a day-to-day basis, but including localities for Koala and Wombat, the Royal National Park for Superb Lyrebird, the Jervis Bay area for Ground Parrot and the Capertee Valley for a good range of inland species.

DAY LOG 10 August. Tilligary Habitat & Ash Island Arrival in Sydney late the previous night, a couple of circuits of downtown Sydney trying to find a way out, then a drive of a few hours to the north, eventually stopping to sleep in a service station. Dawn at Tilligary Habitat, 600 km south of the morning before, but same basic goal - find a Koala! Did feel pretty optimistic here, the Eucalyptus woodlands moderately compact and, supposedly, a good population of the Koalas. Two hours later I was feeling a little less optimistic, not helped by a couple of dog walkers stopping to say they hadn't seen a Koala for many months! Still, plenty of Rainbow Lorikeets and Eastern Rosellas, the latter a new species for me. Then one gent stopped and suggested I try an area abutting residential housing adjacent to the habitat. Now this was better, piles of Koala poo, some seemingly very fresh …I was close! Pacific Black Ducks on a pool, several Little Wattlebirds assorting with Red Wattlebirds, plus Green Catbirds and a couple of Laughing Kookaburras too. Simply could not find a Koala though! At 10 am, a small visitor centre opened ...time for coffee and perhaps an update on local Koalas. And there was news - indeed a Koala had been in the trees where I had found the piles of poo, not there this day though! And then along strolled a volunteer from the centre, 'Koala?' he enquired. 'Well, yes please' said I. And so I followed him for all of two hundred metres to a clump of Eucalyptus along a small side trail. And there, finally, my first truly wild Koala, a big male snuggled up in a fork ten metres or so up. Superb! After quite some time of admiring this fine animal, sleeping almost nonstop, I then wandered back for my coffee, added a couple of Little Corella to the burgeoning trip list. With success on the Koala, my plan was now to head back towards Sydney to prepare for a planned pelagic the following day. Stopped at wetlands on Ash Island en route, initially having rather mediocre results - two very smart Red-kneed Dotterels, flocks of Chestnut Teal, two Royal Spoonbills, a few Purple Swamphens, but no large concentrations. Then however I stumbled upon a track leading to an amazing series of pools at the far east of the reserve. This was a very pleasant surprise indeed, an impressive flock of 240 Red-necked Avocets topping the billing, with a very good variety of other waders including 35 White-headed Stilts and, another new species for me, seven more very smart Red-kneed Dotterels. My only Australian Shovelers of the trip also here, plus a White-bellied Sea Eagle, a Swamp Harrier and a mix of herons, ibises and egrets. And with that, down to Sydney, staying in a rather plush hotel not far from the waterfront.

11 August. Royal National Park. Day of the pelagic ... except it wasn't, it got cancelled at the last moment! So instead of a day on the high seas with albatrosses and petrels, I tootled a few kilometres to the Royal National Park instead. Not bad all things considering - in the chilly airs of early morning, a very fine Superb Lyrebird on Lady Carrington Drive. Completing the lyrebird double in Australia and one of my main targets in New South Wales, this cracker was welcome indeed, a single individual scrubbing in the undergrowth about 2 km along the trail. A good selection of added extras also noted here, not least a Wedge-tailed Eagle circling overhead, eight Yellow-faced Black Cockatoos labouring through the skies and a fantastic pair of Crested Shrike-Tits. One of nicest experiences of the day however was at the picnic site at Audley - Little Pied Cormorant and White-faced Heron on the small river, but far more entertaining were the gang of cockatoos hanging out among the picnic tables. A bit of 'accidental' dropping of titbits and instant cockatoo party - 30 or so Sulphur-crested Cockatoos jumping about on the grass at your feet, plus single Little Corella and Long-billed Corella. Almost had to push them away to get photos! Dusky Moorhens and Australian Swamphens strolling up from the river to join the party. From here, decided to head to the coastal heaths for the afternoon - idea was to find a few of the heathland specialties, plus the endemic Rock Warbler. Probably not aided by quite a breeze and the fact that large segments of heath had burnt off, I failed to find any of my targets. Did see however a White-bellied Sea Eagle cruising along the cliff tops and the whole place was alive with New Holland Honeyeaters and Little Wattlebirds, absolute minimums of 150 and 30 of each respectively. Offshore, a taster of what could have been on the pelagic, quite a number of Cape Gannets and Black-browed Albatrosses milling. Evening in Sydney - Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Opera House by city lights, one Brush-tailed Possum and Grey-headed Flying Fox in a small city centre park. **12 August. Barren Grounds, Kiama & Kangaroo Valley.** Barren Grounds sounded pretty impressive, heathland specialties such as Eastern Ground Parrot, Southern Emu-Wren and Eastern Bristlebird all rather appealing. What I had not bargained for however was the blustery wind, a condition almost guaranteed to send heathland birds scurrying into deep cover! And that is exactly what transpired - walked about 10 km of trails, all most pleasant, but birds overall pretty elusive. Sheer perseverance did however produce many of the targets, albeit fleeting or brief views in most cases - one Southern Emu-Wren, one Pilotbird, one Eastern Bristlebird, about 18 Beautiful Firefinches. No Ground Parrot. Other birds here included Little Wattlebirds, a number of New Holland Honeyeaters and Yellow-faced Honeyeaters, a pair of White-naped Honeyeaters and a few Eastern Spinebills. So with windy conditions prevailing, maybe a bit of seawatching would be worthwhile I thought, motoring down to the coast at Kiama. Nope, that didn't work - a mere single Black-browed Albatross the reward for my effort! Time for fish and chips in the quaint Kiama Harbour, a very pleasant way to pass a half hour in the company of a mob of Silver Gulls with eyes on my fish and chips, Australian Pelicans seemingly also pretty keen! So two negatives under the belt, wind on the heath, followed by no seabirds. Scored a third by managing to lose my mobile phone (cleverly leaving on the car roof). In the evening however, major success - with big desires to see Wombat, I had tailored in a visit to Kangaroo Valley, apparently one of the best spots in the world to see Wombats. Was a bit late arriving due to attempts to find my lost phone ...but what a treat awaiting. Sun just setting, I pulled into the

campsite in Kangaroo Valley. In the fading light, lots of small 'boulders' scattered across the grass. Hmm, thought I, almost look like huddled Wombats. And then one boulder started to trundle! Jeepers, it was a Wombat!!! And so too were half the boulders, at least 30 Wombats grazing this single patch of turf. The other half were indeed boulders, Wombat-sized boulders.

Fantastic beasties, not a care did they pay to me as I crouched on the grass alongside, eyeball to eyeball with Wombats, fat trundling lumps of fur with beady eyes. And lumbering alongside, at least 70 Eastern Grey Kangaroos, quite an evening. An excellent end to the day, one Swamp Wallaby the icing on the cake. 13 August. Bomaderry Creek & Jervis Bay. Quite by chance I discovered my random choice of town and motel for the night was right on the doorstep of a locality for Rock Warbler, the only species of bird endemic to New South Wales. As I had missed this on the cliffs of the Royal National Park, I naturally decided to spend my early morning here, at the relatively compact Bomaderry Creek. An hour of searching the boulders that hang over the creek, a reasonable mix of birds in the process, and then bingo, a pair of highly active Rock Warblers. Flitting from boulder to boulder, initially in the stream bed, but then on a crag above, these were pleasing indeed. And with that, I then resumed my planned itinerary for the day, continuing to Jervis Bay, largely on a continued quest to find Ground Parrot. Most picturesque, a mosaic of sparkling blue seas, rocky coastline and vast swathes of heathland running inland dotted by Eucalyptus woodlands. And, somewhere within these heathlands, so elusive Ground Parrots should dwell. Task for the day to locate one of these localised residents, a none-too-easy task given their preference for dense heath and reluctance to either fly or even clamber up off the ground. Tried a couple of areas in vain, then had a stomp around some of the Eucalyptus stands ...a weird crackling and splinting sound caught my ear, twelve Yellow-tailed Black-Cockatoos chomping giant flowerheads and sending a shower of pollen and other detritus groundward, splendid birds. Also in this area, five Satin Bowerbirds, three Bassian Thrushes, a flock of Superb Fairywrens and abundant Little Wattlebirds and Brown Thornbills. More heathland exploration to follow, no Ground Parrots. As everywhere on these heaths, numerous New Holland Honeyeaters however, plus a couple of Southern Emu-Wrens and my only Fulvous Honeyeaters of the trip. A stroll along a beach followed, several smart Sooty Oystercatchers added, another new species, plus a couple of Australian Fur Seals in the sea. With evening approaching and zero sign of the desired parrots, I decided to relocate to a slightly more eastern part of the bay, specifically heathland adjacent to the access road to Hyams Beach. Looked very good here - the Ground Parrots apparently favour heathland at about the ten-year stage of recovery from fire, and this is exactly what it looked like at this point. A huge area, Swamp Harriers quartering. Plotted an approximate route and set off, not in much expectation it has to be admitted. But a half hour in, from barely a few metres in front of me, a whir of wings and a blur of green, a Ground Parrot flushed! Flew all of a hundred metres or so, then dropped back into the heathland. Circled the area trying to get views on the ground - pretty impossible given the thickness of the heath. And indeed it did prove impossible - two times more the bird flushed, each time whizzing across the heath to another patch to disappear into. But I was elated, very nice flight views of this species high on my list of priorities, stumpy face, black speckled body and all. No complaints from me, I decided against further disturbing the bird and retreated from the heath. At Hyam Beach itself, completing a nice set of parrots for the day, about 40 Rainbow Lorikeets, two Little Lorikeets and singles of both Crimson Rosella and Australian King Parrot. And for the seventh species of the day, six Galah flying over. As darkness gathered, took up a vantage point on the cliffs overlooking Bowen Island. Supposed to be 5000 pairs of Fairy Penguins breeding on that island, all coming ashore after dark. Possibly too early in the season for them to be back on the breeding ground, but either way not a sign did I see, carefully scanning the seas till too dark to see anything. Two Eastern Grey Kangaroos having a boxing match quite entertaining however. 14 August. Capertee Valley. My time in Australia was running out, but still I had desires to squeeze in one additional locality, one that could well notch me up a whole bunch of new species. And so it was, I departed Jervis Bay at 5.00 a.m. and drove 300 km to the north-west, arriving in the legendary Capertee Valley by 9.00 am. Beyond the Blue Mountains and effectively a gateway to the Outback, the Capertee supports many species otherwise pretty difficult to find in the more accessible parts of New South Wales ...and for me, it was this fact that would translate in new species! And so it turned out, a stunning day full of splendid species. Within minutes of arriving, stopping at roadside Eucalyptus, I was surrounded by active Yellow-plumed Honeyeaters and White-plumed Honeyeaters, a number of Jacky Winters flycatching from fence lines and a very nice Crested Shrike-Tit. Excellent birding over the next couple of hours, repeatedly stopping at various points further down the road, birds numerous everywhere, a selection of which included and several Brown Treecreepers, both Pied and Grey Butcherbirds and, a true highlight, two family groups of White-winged Choughs. Venturing down a side road, I also added no less than three Hooded Robins, quite a localised species. Further down, a couple of Speckled Warblers, plus four Yellow-rumped Thornbills, a single Yellow Thornbill and quite a number of Superb Fairywrens. Nice parrot action too - four Little Lorikeets, five Eastern Rosellas and a minimum of 25 Red-rumped Parrots, these invariably zooming off at great speed whenever encountered! As the day moved into afternoon, and both a pair of Wedge-tailed Eagle and Peregrine took to the skies, I headed to the valley bottom, babblers on my mind. Checked out a small village, totally deserted it seemed, then wandered a dry river gully just behind ...and the luck of my day continued, not just the hoped-for single species, but two! A mere 50 metres apart, one Grey-crowned Babbler and one White-crowned Babbler, new species both. Also Zebra Finches down here and as the afternoon wore on, quite a gathering of cockatoos - clearly a pre-roost thing, numbers gradually began to rise and a little before dusk I encountered an impressive flock of 180 Sulphur-crested Cockatoos, then separate gatherings of about 20 Galah Cockatoos and 30 Little Corellas, very nice indeed. And as the sun set, so a transformation of meadows began - as if from magic suddenly mammals emerging from everywhere, Eastern Wallaroos abundant, Eastern Grey Kangaroos hopping around, a few Red-necked Wallabies and a Swamp Wallaby too. One Wombat and a European Rabbit for added variety. Exiting the valley as it got dark, truly needed to concentrate to not hit any of the kangaroos, massive bounding things playing suicide games with the car. Managed to avoid hitting anything,

what a good day it had been - 12 new species for the trip, all but one new species for me ...not bad for a day at the very end of the trip! 15 August. Capertee Valley & Sydney. Final full day, and still had a highly desired species to nail ...Gang Gang Cockatoo. Didn't really expect to find it to be honest, but returned to the Capertee Valley more in hope rather than expectation. But sure enough, within a half hour, Lady Luck struck with two Gang Gangs thoughtfully deciding to fly over! Would have celebrated, but Lady Luck wasn't quite playing ball - I was beneath trees at that moment and views were hardly amazing! But then, a slightly weird calling noise in a Eucalyptus just yonder ...and there, in full glory with punky red quiff, one quite superb Gang Gang Cockatoo all on his own! Amazing! Following this, nipped down to the southern end of the Capertee where I encountered a splendid flock of 30 White-winged Choughs feeding in a garden along with 50 or so Sulphur-crested Cockatoos, but eyeing my watch, I realized I didn't really have huge amounts of time.

Still wanting to add a couple more localities, I reluctantly left the Capertee Valley and headed for Sydney. Had a very pleasant pause at Lake Wallace, adding a couple of Musk Ducks, a few Hoary Grebes and lots of Australian Swampheens, Dusky Moorhens et al, then hit the highways to get to Sydney just in time for the beginning of the evening rush hour. A bit of zigzagging through the city and then I was there, the final locality on my planned itinerary for this trip to Australia, Centennial Park in central Sydney. I had not expected too much, and did not even know where in the park the thing I wanted to see was, this being the massive roost of Grey-headed Flying Foxes. However, what a mindblowing finale to the trip! After pottering around a while - admiring Black Swans and assorted wildfowl on the ponds, loads of Sulphur-crested Cockatoos flying around, I then ventured towards a central lake ...and there, amid all the tourists and city folk, a fantastic flock of mixed corellas plodding around on the ground! What a sight, at least 100 Little Corellas at point blank range, nicely supported by 15 or so 'old man face' Long-billed Corellas! A bit of food provision and the result was even more dramatic ...Little Corellas sitting on your head and shoulders! Well that was good, but still a little matter of some bats. Asked a guy at a coffee stall if he knew where the flying foxes roosted - oh yes, they were all of 250 metres away in Lachlan Swamp, a large wooded grove. And so ended the final day in Australia, gazing up at some 10,000 Grey-headed Flying Foxes, massive-winged giants taking early evening flights, branches crammed with hordes more. And with that, we dropped off the hire car, returned to the airport and checked in for an evening flight to Brisbane, arriving at about 10 pm. Stayed overnight in a hotel near the airport. 16 August. Singapore. Early morning from hotel to Sydney International, final birds of the trip Willie Wagtail, Magpie Lark and Welcome Swallow. Stop over in Singapore, truly an impressive airport complete with outdoor swimming pool and a pretty amazing tropical butterfly garden - a rather pleasant way to pass a little time, oodles of bright and colourful individuals and umpteen species. And then onward to Helsinki and finally Lithuania. Trip over.