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PUBLISHING**

*Emu*  
CSIRO Publishing  
PO Box 1139 (150 Oxford St)  
Collingwood, Vic. 3066, Australia

Telephone: +61 3 9662 7622  
Fax: +61 3 9662 7611  
Email: [publishing.emu@csiro.au](mailto:publishing.emu@csiro.au)



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## CANBERRA BIRDS: A REPORT ON THE FIRST 18 YEARS OF THE GARDEN BIRD SURVEY

By Philip A. Veerman.

2002. Published by P. A. Veerman, 24 Castley Circuit, Kambah, ACT 2902, Australia. 127 pp., many black-and-white figures and maps. Copies available from the author (pveerman@pcuq.org.au)

One of the niggling concerns of some of the organisers of the first Atlas of Australian Birds project was whether all species were being surveyed with the same degree of attention. This was of considerable interest to me at the time because I was using the data to determine the distribution of introduced birds, yet it was not uncommon to hear statements such as: 'Lots of birdwatchers ignore sparrows, starlings and the like; they are looking for real birds'. Such sentiments were not limited to the occasional altaser – anyone attempting to find reliable information about introduced birds in Australia soon discovers that most have been overlooked or ignored in favour of more important or more interesting subjects. And the same could be said about any human-dominated landscapes: ecologists have typically ignored the urban, suburban and rural areas, tending to conduct virtually all of their studies in the wild, as far as possible from the influences of humans and their activities.

More recently, interest in the wildlife that shares the suburbs with us has grown enormously. Not only are there legitimate concerns over the effects of accelerating urbanisation on native species in general, many agencies and organisations are attempting to change the suburban sprawl into an environment a little more wildlife-friendly. There are also management issues associated with urban wildlife, whether it be swooping Magpies, the possible impact of Common Mynas, or even the implications of the super-abundance of natives such as Noisy Miners, Rainbow Lorikeets or Pied Currawongs. The problem for almost all city councils or conservation groups interested in such questions is, again, our ignorance of virtually all aspects of urban ecology. All of those excellent studies of wild Magpies, for example, are of little relevance in the strange, artificial landscapes of the suburbs.

There are a few dramatic exceptions to this international scenario of urban birdlife neglect and most are based on long-term observations by dedicated amateurs keeping a regular eye on the birds visiting their gardens. Possibly the oldest such scheme is the British Trust for Ornithology's *Garden Bird Feeding Survey* which started in 1970. This has now evolved into *Garden BirdWatch*, launched in 1995 and now has more than 11000 volunteers. The North American equivalent, *Project FeederWatch*, has about 13000 regular participants. Not only are these programs wonderful examples of the way that huge numbers of 'ordinary birdwatchers' will participate in carefully designed studies, in both cases

the results are yielding extremely valuable information of long-term population trends.

Canberra's long-running *Garden Bird Survey* is probably little known outside the national capital, and although much smaller in scale than those mentioned above, is no less based on careful design, long duration and the dedication of motivated amateurs. And with the publication of this report, we now have the best picture of the dynamics of suburban bird populations for any Australian city! The information on the changes in many bird species visiting Canberra gardens will also provide invaluable insights into what is happening into cities throughout Australia.

The Canberra Ornithologists Group started the *Garden Bird Survey* in July 1981. In this book, Philip Veerman provides a brief history of its conception and development over the years, and usefully conveys the context of the survey in relation to other garden-based studies from around the world. He also reviews some of the urban bird studies conducted in Australia and compares Australian findings with those of international workers. One of the strengths of this report is the degree of detail and explanation given for the various field and analytical approaches employed. Studies such as this have their critics, but Veerman provides an appropriate theoretical context for the findings: this information is best seen as trends and indicators rather than quantitative measures.

The first 46 pages of the report consist of the details of the survey, its evolution, explanations of the techniques used and valuable summaries of the data and findings. It tends to portray the author as pedantic and overly technical in places, but this is just what such a massive and important dataset needs in the way of a reliable interrogator. The fruit of all that analysis is the wonderfully rich information provided in the rest of the report. Each species included (most of the 220 species recorded during the survey) has text giving an appropriate level of details of its changes and status in Canberra over the 18 years of survey, and, located separately, two graphs (usually) showing monthly abundance and an overall abundance trend for the duration of the survey.

Of course, it is in these accounts of the individual species that most readers will find the trend details of greatest interest. Considered together, these trends paint a picture of continual and continuing change, some of it dramatic, and some alarming. For example, Common Mynas and Crested Pigeons show the most rapid increases in abundance, while, perhaps surprisingly, both Superb Fairy-wrens and Brown Thornbills are also on the rise. On the other hand, a worryingly long list shows that species such as Pallid Cuckoo, Fan-tailed Cuckoo and Laughing Kookaburra are in serious decline. Others, such as the Australian Magpie (the other species seen in every site of the survey), Galah and Pied Currawong, are both stable and extremely abundant. The changes in the latter are especially interesting: monthly abundances show a clear change in Pied Currawongs from

winter-only visitors to a significant number being year-round residents, a finding of real potential impact on other species.

The book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the changing face of urban wildlife in Australia

and can take its place among the major international studies of long-term population trends in birds.

*Darryl Jones*  
Griffith University