

Hybridisation and the future of austral ornithology

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Hybridisation is an evolutionary process by which two species combine to generate a different form. Hybrids often capture the most successful traits of each parent, while displaying additional characteristics not found in the original two species. The start of 2012 sees the hybridisation of the two leading ornithological conservation organisations in Australia; Birds Australia and Bird Observation and Conservation Australia (BOCA). In 2011 more than 90% of the voting membership of these organisations voted to merge and create a single organisation: BirdLife Australia.

Both BOCA and Birds Australia have long and illustrious histories. Birds Australia's roots lie in a series of informal meetings of keen ornithologists in Melbourne in 1896. This eventually gave rise to the Australasian Ornithologists Union in 1901, the same year that the first volume of the organisations scientific journal *The Emu* was published. The Union soon became the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (RAOU) and changed its trading name to Birds Australia in 1997. It was the first Australian environmentally orientated organisation to have a national remit and so today, is Australia's oldest national conservation organisation.

For its part, BOCA was formed in 1905, again in Melbourne, to provide opportunities for members to enjoy regular field outings and meetings. BOCA has long been regarded as an organisation with a strong emphasis on recreational birding, but the activities of its branches and members have always extended well beyond the recreational. For decades, BOCA has been heavily involved in long-term field-based observational studies, banding studies (including the first banding studies in Victoria, in 1912) and survey programs. These have all added immeasurably to our understanding of the basic biology and ecology of the whole Australian continent's avifauna.

BOCA and Birds Australia therefore have a long and closely intertwined history, have shared many conservation goals and have made valuable contributions to ornithological publishing. The entire 110-year archive of Birds Australia's journal, now shortened to *Emu* and subtitled *Austral Ornithology*, is available at <http://www.publish.csiro.au/journals/emu>. BOCA launched its journal of field ornithology, *Australian Bird Watcher*, in 1959; renamed *Australian Field Ornithology* in 2003, it fills an important role in publishing data from field studies for amateur and professional ornithologists. Both journals will continue to be published by BirdLife Australia.

What does this merger mean for Australian ornithology and indeed that of the broader Australasian region? The driving force

behind a complicated reorganisation of Australia's top ornithological campaigners is surely the increased efficiency of running one organisation. Removing the duplication of administrative costs will free up additional resources to provide new opportunities in research and education. There is also the benefit of producing one voice that speaks for Australasian birds on the national and international stages. Not only does this potentially increase the organisation's power as the premier campaigner for the identification and conservation of threatened species, but it also makes the flow of information in terms of conservation concerns more efficient and effective. BirdLife Australia now has joint membership of over 10 000, allowing provision of services and educational opportunities that Birds Australia and BOCA could not have provided individually. This greater outreach can only be beneficial for avian conservation.

What does the merger mean for *Emu – Austral Ornithology*? In practice, perhaps very little. On the surface, the journal's cover has been redesigned to reflect the topical and engaging research within; it also features the new BirdLife Australia colour palette and logo. Between its covers *Emu* continues to publish the best ornithological research, which relates to the southern hemisphere and adjacent tropics. The journal's goal is to capture the unique contribution austral research can make to ornithological studies. The two main Australian ornithological journals, *Emu – Austral Ornithology* and *Australian Field Ornithology* are now owned by the same organisation, which can only promote synergies and result in a complementary approach to covering the ornithological research in the southern hemisphere.

Austral research can make a unique and important contribution to our understanding of global ornithological issues. Australasian birds are a unique and diverse group that includes many of the descendants of the first oscine passerines (Christidis and Norman 2010). Australia's birds show the highest rate of cooperative breeding in the world and so lend themselves to study of the evolution of breeding strategies (e.g. Cockburn 2006, Russell *et al.* 2010). Avian biodiversity in the southern hemisphere often exceeds that of the northern hemisphere. Despite such opportunities for knowledge discovery in the southern hemisphere, there are some hotspots sadly lacking attention. The Malay Archipelago, for example, is extraordinarily species-rich in birds, yet seemingly understudied (but see Goodale *et al.* 2012 this issue). But for some scientific issues, such as the study of trans-hemisphere migration, for example, events in one hemisphere affect life-history stages in the other hemisphere. This means that when

considering the potential effects of climate change (Chambers *et al.* 2011) or disease ecology (Klaassen *et al.* 2011), the two hemispheres cannot be considered separately.

The process of hybridisation is often thought to give rise to 'hybrid vigour', whereby the mixing of the parental forms produces offspring that are more successful than either of the parents. We anticipate that the creation of BirdLife Australia will lead to only beneficial effects for avian conservation. With so many bird species in the southern hemisphere threatened or declining this can only be good news. In terms of scientific output, we look forward in this new partnership to continuing to publish the highest-impact avian research across the southern hemisphere.

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