

Ornithology in the Pacific

THE 2nd Southern Hemisphere Ornithological Congress (SHOC II) was held at Griffith University, Brisbane from the 27th of June to the 2nd of July. Ornithological symposia and congresses are frequent events with multiple international and regional meetings held annually in North America and Europe. But for Australasia, and by default the South Pacific, it was a special and long anticipated event.

Since 1967, when I arrived in Australia from the United States, there have only been four ornithological symposia that met expectations of high scientific standard and which lasted more than a day or two; two meetings of the International Ornithological Congress (Canberra in 1974 and Christchurch in 1990), SHOC I (Albany, Western Australia in 1996), SHOC II in 2000. Admittedly, there have been a number of excellent specialist group conferences (e.g., an international owl congress [Canberra, 2000], among others), but hardly what would be expected for a region with a long tradition of ornithological research.

The *Emu*, originally published by the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (RAOU) and now by Birds Australia (BA), is in its 100th year and compares favourably with other leading ornithological journals, such as *Ibis* and *Auk*. Ornithology is a rapidly developing field of scientific study in Australasia. For example, Charles Sturt University (Bathurst) now offers a degree course in ornithology, an Australian first. Against this background, it is not surprising that there has been disquiet among Australian ornithologists about the lack of regular scientific meetings in Australasia where ornithologists could meet to exchange ideas. Many have also been concerned about the inadequate level of support given to *Emu* by BA.

SHOC II was attended by nearly 300 delegates, mainly from Australia and New Zealand, and over 200 papers and posters were presented; testimony to the depth of ornithological research in Australasia. However, the need for meetings and lack of support for *Emu* have not been the only reason for unrest among Australasian ornithologists.

Australia and New Guinea, along with the Pacific Islands, are home to more than 15% of the world's birds, a large proportion of which are threatened by development and the expansion of the region's human population. In a recent review of Australia's terrestrial birds, I concluded that the continent will lose

50% of its avian biodiversity within the next 50 years and that substantial elements of avian biodiversity were already lost from the continent's agricultural and pastoral zones (Recher 1999). The prognosis for the avifauna of Indonesia, the Philippines, Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands is no better, and possibly worse. Land clearing in Queensland alone kills more than 8–10 million birds annually (400 000 + ha/year; 20 + birds/ha — see Recher 1985) while the losses from clearing and post-clearing fires in Indonesia cannot be guessed at.

The growing concern for the conservation of birds throughout Australasia and the Pacific was evident at SHOC II where >40% of papers had a conservation theme. Threats to the survival of birds throughout the Pacific will not lessen in the next 10, 20 or 50 years. They will increase as human populations grow and the expectations of individuals for greater security and material wealth expand. Papers at the Australian Wader Study Group conference concurrent with SHOC II highlighted the threats to migratory waders from the impacts of landfill, the diversion of rivers for agricultural and industrial use, and urban expansion on coastal wetlands used by waders as they migrate between northern breeding and southern wintering grounds.

Combating the threats to the birds of the Pacific and Australasia requires more than individual research efforts. The activities of ornithologists throughout this vast region need to be co-ordinated and directed to changing social and national attitudes to land use and the conservation of natural ecosystems. The conservation activities of BA, while praiseworthy, have not been as effective as hoped. Meeting the avifauna's conservation needs requires a strong sense of identity and commonality of purpose among the region's ornithologists. Unfortunately, this has been lacking. The absence of regular scientific meetings, inadequate support for *Emu*, and the absence of a strong, professional ornithological society in Australasia have not benefited bird conservation in the greater Pacific.

At SHOC II there was considerable discussion on the best way to provide a sense of identity among Australasian ornithologists. For some, the answer was to form a new ornithological society with membership extended to Southeast Asia and the Pacific. The new society

would be responsible for convening of regular scientific meetings and the publication of an ornithological journal of international standing. Others argued that the needs of scientific ornithology could be accommodated within "Birds Australia".

Birds Australia (BA) has responded to the disquiet among Australian ornithologists and is committed to holding an Australasian Ornithological Congress every two years. The first will be held at Charles Sturt University, Bathurst in December 2001. In front of the Council of BA are a set of recommendations from SHOC II. Foremost among these is the recommendation to form a separate committee of BA to manage the scientific activities of Australasian ornithologists and provide the sense of identity that has been missing. This committee would have principal responsibility for convening scientific meeting and overseeing the publication of *Emu*. Omitted are recommendations for funding the committee and guaranteeing adequate financial support for the *Emu*.

A great deal is at stake with the recommendations now in front of the Council of Birds Australia. BA has an enviable scientific reputation, derived from the legacy of the RAOU and the publication of *Emu*. This reputation enables it to attract the support of government through consultancies and the support of the community in its conservation activities, including the acquisition of land for nature conservation. Birds Australia needs to decide whether it is a scientific society or a commercial organization catering primarily to the needs and aspirations of bird watchers or both. If both, it needs to find a way to organize itself so that the professionals who provide the

scientific expertise and reputation essential to BA's vision no longer feel disenfranchised.

The recommendations in front of BA affect more than Australasia's ornithologists. They have important implications for both the science of ornithology within the greater Pacific region and the conservation of the region's avifauna. Despite a 100 year legacy, neither the RAOU nor BA have prevented the decline of the greater Pacific's avifauna. Preventing further losses requires the co-ordinated support of both the scientists and amateurs. The findings of scientific research on the threats to and conservation of birds need to be promoted. Whether this can be done through one organization as Birds Australia, or whether a new professional body of ornithologists needs to be established remains to be seen. Whatever the outcome, the ramifications for conservation biology in the Pacific are enormous.

Birds captivate us. They are an integral part of all human cultures. Their loss can be used to alert all people to the impact of humanity on all the other species we share Earth with and on which our own survival depends. Birds Australia and ornithologists alike need to carefully consider their options.

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