



CURRENT CHALLENGES

As we all steadily adjust to the many challenges of COVID-19, SERAG's Committee extends to members and friends its best wishes for your good health and wellbeing. Hopefully we will see you somewhere along the Estuary very soon.

Unfortunately, the destructive storms and enormous tidal surges of recent days are likely to have caused erosion along the Estuary's margins - presenting additional threats to the native flora and fauna of the Marine Park and Reserves.

When things settle a little, we will assess the damage to our focus areas and plan new ways to aid in their recovery.

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER GO FISHING

At Alfred Cove one morning our TREEmendous Tuesday team was privileged to see two dolphins - a mother and calf - foraging in the seagrass beds of the Marine Park off Melville Beach Road.

Together the dolphins rounded up their prey, their techniques including forceful and rapid swimming along the surface of the water ('rooster tailing'), creating turbulence and causing fish to panic. The calf was often difficult to see in the mother's wake!

While we cannot be completely sure, the presence of a calf (not a young one, based on size) and the non-distinctive dorsal fin of the mother indicate the dolphins may have been Dunedoo and her calf Marnz. If so, Marnz is about 2.5 years old and named after Marnie Giroud, who helped establish the Dolphin Watch Project.

The Dolphin Watch Project is a partnership between the Parks and Wildlife Service *River Guardians* program (DBCA) and Murdoch and Curtin universities, to learn more about the community of bottlenose dolphins residing in the Swan and Canning rivers.

It publishes the fabulous often updated **FinBook** - *an identification catalogue for dolphins observed in the Swan Canning Riverpark*.



Teaching Marnz to fish Photographs courtesy R & S Napier

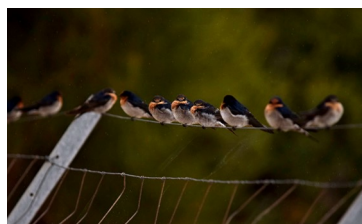
ALFRED COVE BIRD-COUNT

SERAG's monthly Saturday morning bird-count at Alfred Cove invariably reveals many riches, confirming the great importance of the location to a diversity of birdlife. On the March excursion, fifty species were counted - twenty-eight species of water birds and twenty-two species of bush birds - for a total of 801 birds, some of which appear below.

Of the six species of trans-equatorial migratory birds observed that morning there were 13 Grey Plover, 5 Bar-tailed Godwit; 4 Black-tailed Godwit, 3 Common Greenshank, 2 Red-necked Stint and 1 Common Sandpiper.

There was also a high count of some nomadic or local water birds: 56 Musk Duck, 17 Caspian Tern, 11 Fairy Tern and 7 Crested Tern.

Some interesting bush birds were seen, including 1 Quail (briefly glimpsed), 2 Yellow-rumped Thornbill and 3 Weebill.



Welcome Swallows huddled on a fence; Australasian Darters; Black-tailed Godwits & Common Sandpiper; 'Very hungry' Godwits!
Photographs courtesy L Beavis & J Christenson

MIGRATORY SHOREBIRDS AT POINT DUNDAS



Grey-tailed Tattlers, Common Greenshank, & Red-necked Stint at Point Dundas *Photographs courtesy S Altman*

These shorebirds were photographed at Point Dundas, bordering the Marine Park in Applecross. They represent some of many species of migratory birds crossing the globe each year to summer on the Swan River Estuary.

We expect by now they will have returned safely along the East Asian-Australasian Flyway to breed once more: the Tattlers on stony riverbeds in the remote mountains of eastern Siberia; the Greenshank on dry ground near marshlands in sub-arctic areas, and the Red-necked Stint on moist moss-lichen tundra along the Arctic littoral of eastern Eurasia.

Although total numbers of migratory birds seen on the Estuary have plummeted over recent decades, it continues to be used by significant numbers from a diversity of species. The steady loss of habitat and other rising threats along their Flyway increase the imperative to protect these birds and their remaining habitats at this end of their journey.

FOLLOWING THE LEADER



One April morning, volunteers noticed a tightknit group ('gulp' is such an ugly word!) of Little Black Cormorants some distance out in the seagrass shallows off Pelican Point. Not an uncommon scene - no photo was taken.

There the cormorants remained huddled for a rather long time, until a decision must have been made that it was safe enough to venture onto the beach.



Pondering the nature of leadership, we watched the raft of birds stretch into a long thin line as one-by-one beak-to-tail they followed their *numero uno* to shore - to dry their wings and rest.

The long paddle *Photographs courtesy C O'Neill*

NODE vs NATURAL VALUES

The *River Journeys Project* aims to encourage community engagement with the Swan Canning River Park through the development of a network of walking trails featuring 'nodes' or rest points at places of particular interest. Interpretive signage at each node enriches our understanding of the ancient cultural values of the River and its more recent social history. The nodes are beautifully designed structures at which people may pause or congregate.

However, plans to construct a node immediately adjacent to the Marine Park at Pelican Point has caused concern to many in the community, due to its potential impacts on the Estuary's birdlife and other fragile natural heritage values.

By drawing more people onto the Marine Park beach without sufficiently protecting the ecologically important and highly sensitive peninsula, we fear the node will increase already threatening levels of human disturbance for a number of significant species - finally destroying the very environmental conservation values it may wish to celebrate.

SERAG appealed unsuccessfully to both DBCA and the WA Parks Foundation to relocate the node, or to implement proven effective strategies to avoid a tragic outcome for the Point and Estuary biodiversity as a whole. As an interim measure - until a better solution was found - we suggested restoring the original (currently damaged) protective fence.

To hope for the best will not be enough to sustain this special place, where migratory, nomadic and local birds have come to pause or congregate for many thousands of years.

CONSTANT CASUAL DISTURBANCE RISKS FAIRY TERN

'Death by a thousand cuts' is a figure of speech referring to a failure that occurs as a result of many small problems. It is an apt description of what is happening at Pelican Point, where exceptional ecological values are being eroded by many repeated but often individually 'minor' threats.

In the first photograph the young person is probably unaware she is reducing the habitat value of Pelican Point. Enjoying an evening stroll, she scatters birdlife come to roost for the night - at a place that was previously safe for them. The birds put to flight in this case are Australian Fairy Tern (*Sternula nereis*).

The second photo shows paddle-boarders who have tired, abandoned paddling and now carry their boards around the Marine Park beach to Matilda Bay. Again, resting Fairy Tern were among the diversity of birdlife forced to fly off.

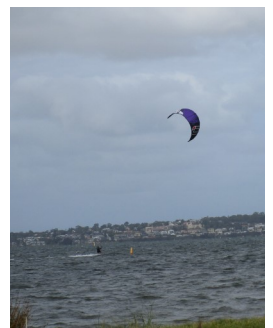
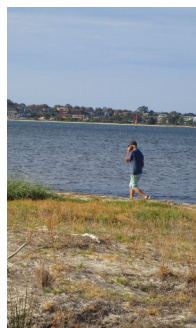
The Australian Fairy Tern is the smallest tern species to nest in south-western Australia. In 2011, with its numbers plummeting as a consequence of human disturbance and coastal development, it was listed as threatened (Vulnerable - Criterion 3), under the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*. It is 'protected' at state and national levels.

To prevent extinction, the 2020 Draft National Recovery Plan for the species emphasises the need to *'Reduce, or eliminate threats at breeding, non-breeding and foraging sites'* and *'Improve understanding of breeding, non-breeding and foraging ecology in order to better target management actions and habitat restoration'*.

Pelican Point is one of the very few places left on the Swan River Estuary for these highly at-risk little birds to forage, rest and nest. If Fairy Tern (and other shorebirds) are to survive for current and future generations to enjoy, action must be taken to protect this site. If repeated 'minor' disturbances continue, the birds will soon disappear from the Estuary - another avoidable loss to our natural heritage.

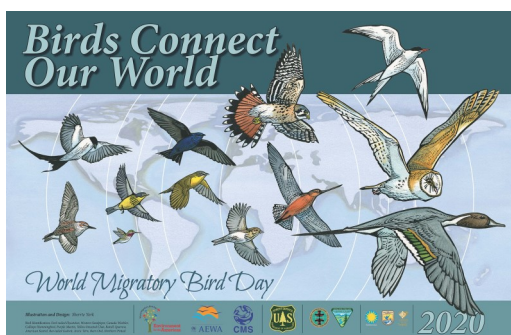
Functioning as they do in sustaining Estuary-wide biodiversity, the outstanding ecological values of Pelican Point have been treasured by the community for decades. For many years the small area now described as Marine Park has been protected for the conservation of native flora and fauna. According to its current Management Plan, public enjoyment of its natural and cultural values is to be 'in a manner compatible with conservation of the environment'.

Clearly, the cumulative impact of recreational activities such as these is detrimental to environmental conservation:



Scenes that are now replicated many times on most days at Pelican Point Photographs courtesy T Graham-Taylor, C O'Neill & M Altman

WORLD MIGRATORY BIRD DAY

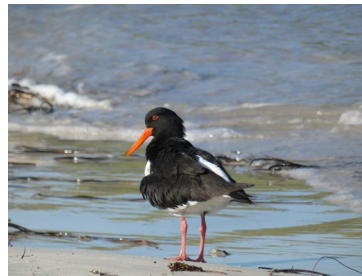


World Migratory Bird Day aims to raise our awareness of migratory birds and the importance of international cooperation to conserve them.

Migration can only be accomplished when birds are able to access the different sites and habitats that they rely upon along their flyways; so this year's theme is *'Birds Connect Our World'* - chosen to stress the importance of protecting and restoring ecological connectivity and ecosystem integrity.

The first of the year's two celebrations was marked with a bird-count at Alfred Cove. The second will be acknowledged through the *Overwintering: Summer on the Swan* print exhibition at Nyisztor Gallery in October.

LITTLE BURSTS OF RED BRIGHTEN THE SEASONS



Photographs courtesy
T Graham-Taylor,
C O'Neill & M Altman

A Mistletoebird perched on a *Casuarina obesa* hosting mistletoe in flower, last summer at Pelican Point; the luscious berries of a *Rhagodia baccata*, announcing 'Djeran' at Alfred Cove; a Pied Oystercatcher on a wintery morning at Milyu.

WORLD WILDLIFE DAY

World Wildlife Day draws attention to the special place of wild plants and animals in the world's biological diversity.

Acknowledging the Day in early March, students from UWA joined SERAG volunteers to remove invasive weeds such as tambookie, Brazilian pepper and fleabane from a recovery plot in Bush Forever Site 402 at Pelican Point.

Weeds are a major threat to natural areas, so their efforts will have improved the survival chances of native species of both flora and fauna.



Photographs courtesy A Mraz & C O'Neill

WEEDING IN THE MARINE PARK



Over past weeks small groups of SERAG volunteers have steadily removed a sea of fleabane, pig-face, pockets of woody starwort, *Atriplex prostrata*, rose pelargonium, sea rocket and evening primrose from a terrestrial section of the Marine Park at Pelican Point.

Aided by a SALP Grant, the site is being prepared for winter plantings of local samphire - propagated for us by APACE - to support its natural recovery there.

There was some considerable discussion about whether or not to remove Jersey cudweed (*Pseudognaphalium luteoalbum*). FloraBase describes its naturalised status as 'Mixed (Native in Part of Range, Naturalised Elsewhere)'. But we were unsure of its native range.

Apparently the annual herb is found in a range of vegetation communities across Australia - on plains, hillsides, riverbanks, wetlands and drainage areas.

Growing to 45 cm high and branching from the base, its stems and leaves are greyish white with a woolly covering. It has many flower-heads, with outer bracts a shiny yellow, and flowers yellow.



THE PROMISE OF WEEDS TO COME!

Good rains in February resulted in the germination of many seeds at Pelican Point. The stunning apparitions (right) are of blue lupin.

Originating in the Mediterranean and widely grown as both a grain legume and stock fodder, this robust annual has escaped farming areas to become a serious weed in bushland. Fortunately at this site it is easily removed by hand.



Various weeds at Pelican Point
Photographs courtesy C O'Neill

HAND-WEEDING *ATRIPLEX PROSTRATA*

The management of *Atriplex prostrata* at recovery sites along the Tompkins Park foreshore is an enormous challenge.

Mainly a weed of wetter and somewhat saline situations, particularly along creek margins and in estuaries, the species is regarded as an environmental weed in Western Australia. Indeed, *Atriplex prostrata* is listed as one of the major weeds of saline areas in south-western Western Australia.

On a morning in mid-May we made a concerted effort to remove it (and other weeds) from a current project site, before its seed fell. Volunteers worked in relay to meet gathering limits, and DBCA provided a trailer for the biomass.

The recovery of this degraded section of foreshore is supported by funding from the Western Australian Government's State NRM Program - assisting in the purchase of replacement native plants and any herbicide treatments required.



natural resource
management program



Atriplex prostrata; piles of weeds ready for the trailer
Photographs courtesy M Matassa & R Napier

WHAT'S IN A NAME? THEY WILL REMAIN AS SWEET!

For years we have known the small population of fairy-wren at Pelican Point as 'Variegated Fairy-wren' (*Malurus lamberti*); however, The Fairywren Project and eBird Australia now class them as 'Purple-backed Fairy-wren' (*Malurus assimilis*).

The Fairywren Project enables scientists and bird watchers to collaborate to better understand how fairy-wren species vary across their range, and what this variation may tell about why they are so diverse and how they might change in the future.

Recent work by scientists at the Australian National University has indicated through DNA analyses that the Variegated Fairy-wrens on the east coast of Australia are quite different genetically from those found in the rest of the country. Because of these genetic differences, some organizations have concluded that the east coast populations and the interior/western populations are separate species.

We do not know whether Birdlife Australia has decided to split them yet, but eBird Australia (the organization The Fairy Wren Project uses to collect its data) has split them.



Fairy-wren at Pelican Point
Photographs courtesy T Graham-Taylor

AN EXCITING DISCOVERY AT MILYU

We are also not sure if a population of fairy-wren has been recorded at Milyu before now, but we were thrilled to receive an email from a volunteer, sharing a wonderful experience:

I needed a Restorative Walk a couple of weeks ago, and started at the Hardy Street overpass on a very calm morning, heading south.

The river was glowing.

A few metres along the beach there was a great commotion in the bushes - a mixed flock of LBBs. I wasn't quick enough to ID all of them, but a family of Variegated Fairy-wrens was unmistakable, with the flashy male in the middle of it all.

My photography skills leave much to be desired, but here is the best shot.



Spot the flashy male!
Photograph courtesy S Quartermaine

The Nature Reserve at Milyu is narrow and exposed, but this lovely encounter illustrates the value of maintaining even small pockets of native vegetation as habitat - particularly 'messy' ones that provide little birds with protection.

MINDING MILYU

After a year unable to access Milyu due to freeway-widening works, the MMMilyu team reformed in early March. It felt good doing something positive for the site once again.

We collected well over 40 kg of litter that first clean-up morning, including dozens of plastic water and drink bottles. There was so much rubbish we had to leave a number of bags on site for collection the following day by DBCA.

However, the Nature Reserve looked healthy with the sedges and shrubs we helped plant in previous seasons growing strongly. There were shoals of fish in the shallows and our bird-count included Pied Oystercatchers and Osprey.

In the first two photos, the large 'probes' in the sand indicate Pied Oystercatchers had been feeding at Milyu early in the morning, before our arrival - but we don't know what little bird will have made the tiny needle-like patterns.

Any ideas? Certainly Red-capped Plovers sometimes try to nest on the beach at Milyu - and we saw a lone Common Sandpiper in the distance...



Feeding patterns on the beach; heading home laden with litter; a solitary Common Sandpiper.
Photographs courtesy C O'Neill

PELICAN POINT INUNDATED

Towards the end of May the whole of the State's coastline - including the Swan River Estuary - was impacted by destructive storms and enormous tidal surges. The damage from erosion has been considerable.

As yet we have not been able to properly check Alfred Cove, Milyu and Pelican Point; but we sincerely hope Milyu's young Fairy-wren family survived the battering!

At Pelican Point the inundation was huge.

The formerly enclosed lagoon was widely breached, with most of its eastern embankment under water.

Nevertheless, with nowhere else to go, groups of Little Pied Cormorants and Black Swans were among the birdlife seeking shelter there.

The western end was awash with new lakes.



Pelican Point on 24th & 25th May



Photographs courtesy S Graham-Taylor, T Graham-Taylor & M Matassa



FOR YOUR JUNE CALENDAR

- **TREEmendous Tuesdays** Alfred Cove 7.00am - 9.00am
- **05 World Environment Day**
- **06 @PP** 8.30am - 10.30am
- **08 Monthly Monday** at Milyu 7.30am - 9.30am
- **27 Saturday Morning** at the Cove 8.30am - 10.30am

Please contact SERAG to register your interest in any event.

Please also check our website for any updates or the Calendar for the year.



Swan Estuary Reserves Action Group Inc.

Mail: PO Box 73 North Fremantle WA 6159

Phone: 08 9339 2439

Email: swanestuarygroup@gmail.com

Website: www.swanestuaryreserves.org.au