

QUESTIONABLE BEHAVIOUR

THIS week's Birdwatch is an amalgam of snippets and questions.

Many people have asked me over the years "What is the difference between a heron and an egret?"

These avians seem to be the same, large, long-legged creatures which spend most of their day slowly stalking their prey of invertebrates and all aquatic creatures small enough to fit inside their throats. Most have a tall, elegant persona and conduct themselves with poise.

So what is the difference? Following taxonomy they are both members of the family Ardeidae which dictates that all egrets are herons but not all herons are egrets. An egret is usually a heron whose plumage is entirely the same colour, generally white.

As is often the case with ornithology, there are exceptions to the rule. For example the American great blue heron has a snowy white form while in the Caribbean the reddish egret is an eye-catching grey and rust.

In Australia we seem to conform, with the only argument being the cattle egret which when in breeding sports orange plumes on its head and neck.

■ **SOMEONE** recently mentioned to me that they had been told a budgie does not need to drink, and asked if this is true. No it is not.

The species is indeed one of the most efficient birds at retaining body fluid and such a metabolism is the reason for their success at populating large areas of the arid interior.

Some bright boffin has calculated that budgerigars evaporate and lose water 16 times higher at 45C than when the

BIRDWATCH

By **FRANK HARRISON**

temperature is at 26C. At these times even they have to drink, and plenty. In the wild, wave after wave can be seen at waterholes quaffing down "frog wine" with alacrity.

Over the years I have seen a prolific number of wildlife documentaries portraying this scenario so I am surprised that someone had to ask the question and that some dingbat is out there perpetrating such myths. So please, please put a bowl of water in your budgies' cage.

■ **TALKING** of myths, you may remember a Birdwatch published in November 1999 where I reported that after a severe storm in 1996 a long-tailed cuckoo had been delivered to a Townsville wildlife carer for rehabilitation. I also mentioned that around the same time one had been seen near Julatten.

In March 2000 I visited Cairns and was surprised to read in the *Cairns Post's* weekend feature, "Ranger Diary" that a long-tailed cuckoo had recently been spotted close to Cairns.

It went on to dogmatically proclaim that the bird was the first ever seen on the Australian mainland. Good evidence that if you want to keep accurately informed, read the *Townsville Bulletin*.

■ **FOR** keeping me informed my thanks go to local naturalist Jeremy Billington who furnished me with two coincidental gems recently.

Firstly he conveyed how he had come across a large roost of pied currawongs atop of Mt

Marlow on the Many Peaks Range in mid year.

This species is abundant on Magnetic Island yet curiously rare in Townsville. Jeremy's sighting is similar to the group of 20 odd birds I saw fly from the island near sundown and roost in exactly the same spot during the early 1990s.

On the same walk Jeremy also disturbed a boobook owl which was sitting on the track in a vine thicket.

Astonishingly this also occurred to me in the same area when I first walked the Many Peaks Trail as long ago as 1988 though it took a few more years to find the nest hollow which has alas since been destroyed by fire.

However it is good to know that the birds are still there and hopefully still breeding.

■ **NORTH** Queensland's most famous birder, John Crowhurst shared some special news that in late 2000, near Lakefield National Park, he stood amazed to see massed flocks of spangled drongos migrating south from Papua New Guinea, well in excess of 1000 birds.

Several years ago on the Townsville Town Common, my wife and I watched more than 200 drongos flying north. It is good to know that someone else was lucky enough to be treated to the remarkable spectacle with wave after wave of birds migrating.

Such sightings and exchange of information bonds birdwatchers into a cohesive body and extends the knowledge and natural history of avian species.



A cattle egret

Logic underpins bug collecting

I WAS listening to the radio the other morning, and there was this interesting interview about a forthcoming workshop on butterfly biology and identification.

And then the interviewer said something like "and you don't still collect them?" with an emphasis on still and a tone of moral superiority

We do, and because of a misty-eyed, sentimental position that is around I think I need to explain why.

Overseas opposition to insect collecting has become widespread, and prescriptive rules can be found on the websites and in the journals of many amateur insect societies.

The reasoning behind the rules is almost invariably some combination of a conservation argument, an aesthetic argument and an ethics argument – often hopelessly mixed and really covering for a feeling that it is wrong.

Why should scientists (paid or otherwise) wish to collect insects? It is a pain and it is expensive. A real insect collection consists of a set of labels, painstakingly written out in small script on archival card, recording details of where and when the item was collected, and illustrated by the specimen. The specimen then needs to be curated – protected from mould, mites, museum beetle and other things for a long time – decades or centuries.

This isn't cheap. The Queensland Museum recently appraised its collection for insurance purposes. The figure arrived at was (I think) around \$10 per specimen. This was for replacement. We can expect that the cost of a

BUGS WEEKLY

By **RICHARD ROWE**

specimen in any properly prepared collection is about the same. Why should people, amateur or professional, want to invest so much in a lot of bugs on pins?

There are several good scientific reasons. The first is that few insects can be satisfactorily identified from a photo, or even in the hand. So to identify insects, determine their distribution, seasonal occurrence, and habitat we need to have specimens of record.

Even among something as colourful, patterned, variable and as seemingly unmistakable as butterflies there are species which can only be accurately identified by dissecting out and examining the male mating apparatus. Try doing this from a photo or from a note on a piece of paper.

Large scale, long term collections from a single locality allow us to monitor habitat and distribution changes, to look at the frequency of occurrence of forms of polymorphic species (those with alternative body forms, matched to different environmental conditions) and to track the real environment, that which affects the animals, through time.

Very, very few insects are likely to be endangered by scientific, or even fashion-driven amateur collecting.

Cairns birdwing butterflies are protected by law, yet a single Dutchman's pipe vine will kill more of these animals in a season

than any but an obsessed collector could.

Insects are extraordinarily prolific, but are susceptible to environmental change. A subdivision, a land-clearing, fogging for mosquitoes or an inappropriate garden plant will each destroy thousands of insects more than any army of collectors.

The conservation argument is largely empty. Collections actually show the disappearance of species, sometimes in time (if there was the will) to reverse the causative habitat modification. The aesthetic argument is largely associated in Europe with an excess sentimentality, people living like battery hens in a city who wish to turn the countryside into a managed park for their occasional enjoyment.

The ethical argument is tenable only for someone who has never used a mosquito coil or has never benefited from public-health-inspired, community-wide insect destruction programs.

Bambi was the first film I ever saw. My mother tells me that my two-year-old brother stood on the seat and shouted "run, Bambi, run," before announcing the excitement had been too much for him.

I was probably too scared to join in. I can feel the emotional power. But the world isn't a cartoon. To understand the processes in the world, an essential step towards lightening our footsteps, scientists do need to collect insects. The pity is that probably not enough do, in most of the world we have no record of the damage we are doing. A clear, but wilfully uninformed, conscience really isn't worth much.

MINKE and humpback whales have already been sighted in the waters off Townsville and Magnetic Island. These magnificent animals move north each year as the waters of the Antarctic begin to freeze.

Fat with blubber from their summer feast of krill and some of the females pregnant from the previous season's frolics, they move into warmer waters to give birth and to mate.

They also provide a thrill for those tourists and boaties who are lucky enough to encounter them.

However, we need to be careful, in our eagerness to see them, not to harass these animals. For that reason, whales are protected under Commonwealth and Queensland legislation and regulations have been developed to allow people to observe and enjoy the animals while minimising disturbance and risk.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and the Queensland Parks and Wildlife service have policies to protect these species as they move through our coastal waters.

If you go out on the water, it is important that you know the rules.

GO WILD

By **GREG INGLIS**

DO

– Move at a constant slow speed, no faster than the slowest animal when within 300m of a marine mammal.

– Allow motors to idle for a minute before turning off when stopping.

– Abandon contact at any sign of the animals becoming disturbed or alarmed (whales may slap their tails on the water surface) or if the animals appear to be deliberately moving away from you.

– Idle motors for a short period before moving off slowly until at least 300m from the nearest animal before increasing speed.

– Exercise additional caution when observing pods containing calves. It is advisable not to approach within 300m of calves.

– Remain quiet when whales and dolphins are near.

DO NOT

– Approach closer than 100m to whales and 50m to dolphins. If they approach you, except in the case of dolphins wishing to bow ride, place engines in

neutral and let the animals come to you. Otherwise, slow down and continue on course, avoiding potential collisions, or steer a straight course away from them.

– Change direction suddenly or make loud noises.

– Approach marine mammals head-on.



Whales off Magnetic Island