

AOC 2019

The 2019 Australasian Ornithological Conference (AOC) took place the first week of July on the beautiful Charles Darwin University campus, Darwin, NT, Australia. The conference started off with warm and thoughtful welcomes by the Larrakia people of the land and minister Lauren Moss as well as the stunning Darwin weather. Across three days, the over 300 attendance was offered almost 150 talks on a wide array of topics. With three sessions running parallel, choosing where to go was one of the greatest challenges. The speakers radiated an urge to share their results and passion, and the audience enthusiastically absorbed and came with clever and insightful but always friendly questions. Across the span of topics, the constant underlying feeling was that all this acquiring and sharing of knowledge, will help us preserve our bird diversity for the future, sometimes in very direct and other times in more indirect ways. This was evident not the least during the symposium called “Conservation success among Australia’s threatened birds”, which also was the one that attracted the greatest audience.

It is probably safe to say that the great majority of people attending ACO agrees that knowledge is key to successful bird conservation. However, knowledge comes with a cost, and much time and focus was spent of the delicate balance between getting that ever so valuable information and intervening too much with the birds. Two long symposia titled “Beyond bird surveys: new ways to collect and analyse bird data” and “Advances in ornithology through new technologies and citizen science”, were also among the most visited. Along the same lines, a very popular pre-conference workshop had the title “Best practice methods and advances in tagging birds for research”. In summary, the speakers made is evident that new technology such as smartphones, thermal imagery, 3D printing, remote sensing, artificial intelligence, smart loggers and trackers and better equipment to record video and audio will all have (and is already having) large impacts on how we conduct bird research and monitoring. One area of discussion centered around that these new technologies open both opportunities and needs for method validation. Several talks hence described projects focusing on those important systematic comparisons of methods, for example audio recorders versus two-hectare surveys for species diversity surveys, cameras and recorders versus radio telemetry for kiwi density- and territory mapping, and fecal DNA analyses versus stomach flushing for penguin diet studies. Another eye-opening example was a study using cameras to validate the current best practice for finch surveys, showed that the current methodology has great room, and probably need, for improvement.

One of the words that comes to my mind when thinking back on the conference is definitely *diversity*. There was of course diversity in the talk topics. They were covering the most common to the rarest birds, birds in the deepest wilderness to urban owls and bitterns in rice fields, and sad discoveries of, for example, high levels of anticoagulating rodenticides in raptors to success stories about population declines that has been turned around. There was also great diversity among the speakers, from nervous first-time speaking graduate students to true lecturing veterans. The same was true for the audience which ranged from people just joining the birding world through their studies, to the hard core (yet very friendly) grey eminences that would have had hundreds and hundreds of species on their lists before I was born. The most striking diversity, however, was the species diversity of the northern territory itself! Personally, I increased my lifer list with almost 100 species. One of my favorites was the Tawny frogmouth that, to everyone’s delight, spent two whole days sitting just next to the walking path between the lecture halls and the lunch area. We should not underestimate the role of the location AOC. I am sure that the birding potential of Darwin was a

major contributing factor to that this was the biggest AOC so far, and the more people who are there to share the knowledge and partake in the discussion, the faster are we increasing our chances of a future that continues to be full of amazing birding for generations to come.



Photo 1: The true birder feeling at the Saturday sunrise excursion to the Corroboree billabong; 54 species in 2 hours!



Photo 2: The Tawny frogmouth that spent two entire days showing itself off right next to the conference attendants' path to the delicious morning tea and lunch.