

The birding bounty of South Australia

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The Australasian Ornithological Conference was back across the ditch this year, with birdos from Australia, New Zealand, and further afield descending on Adelaide like galahs on a wheat field. The conference was held at Flinders University, with its lovely park-like grounds complete with resident koala. The organisation committee did a wonderful job of putting together a varied and interesting scientific programme. There was a fantastic array of plenaries, symposia, and talks, with an encouraging contingent of students. Once again the AOC has proved a valuable and friendly forum for academic discussion and learning, particularly for the students.



It was alarmingly clear from the talks that birds in Australia are under fire – both in the figurative and literal sense. A number of papers at the conference presented valuable, long term monitoring data indicating that many woodland species are in decline. One key concern which is (thankfully) absent in New Zealand is the current regime of “controlled” burnoffs, aimed to reduce the risk of large bush fires. Habitats and species are not able to recover sufficiently between fires, placing them under increasing pressure. The impacts of these artificially frequent fire events operate along side other threats that are more familiar to us here in New Zealand, such as habitat loss from land use change and invasive species, as well as the increasingly extreme effects of climate change (e.g. drought). But of all the bird taxa in Australia, it is shore birds that are exhibiting the steepest declines. In an excellent plenary, Judit Szabo presented data indicating shorebirds are in big trouble, identifying threats at northern hemisphere breeding and stopover sites as the main drivers. These, of course, are serious threats to New Zealand’s migratory shorebirds as well. There is ongoing work to investigate the specific threats at stopover and breeding sites, particularly in the Yellow Sea region, which will hopefully lead to positive conservation measures. Although these threats are outside Australia and New Zealand, Judit stressed that it was our responsibility to save shorebirds and push other nations to protect vital habitats.

In addition to the excellent science being presented, there was also plenty of networking and fun to be had among such a great bunch of people. And, most importantly, there was much birding to be done. Field trips to woodland and wetland habitats, including the lower lakes near the Murray River mouth, revealed a great diversity of bird species for the Aussie-bird novices such as myself, but also a few notable species for the local birdos too. A few highlights for me were the owllet nightjar, diamond firetails, freckled duck, and Latham’s snipe. In all, it was a wonderful conference with stimulating discussion and memorable birding experiences. I look forward to the next AOC, in Geelong 2017!

