

Article by PhD candidate Daria Erastova, University of Auckland

A marvellous thing happened to me recently. I was one of almost three hundred of the luckiest people in the world! We were lucky enough to go to the Australasian Ornithological Conference, held in June 2019 in Darwin at Casuarina campus at Charles Darwin University. I had never been to Australia before, so I'm sure you could imagine how excited I was to go to the Northern Territory! Thanks to the Birds New Zealand "AOC 2019 Student Travel Grant", which helped me to get there!

Nice and sunny dry season in Darwin welcomed not only Australasian delegates from Australia, Tasmania, New Zealand, and China, but also attendees and speakers from South Africa, USA and Lithuania. Before the conference started, my colleagues and I had a chance to engage in a series of pre-conference activities. I found the workshop on best practice methods and advances in tagging birds for research run by Grace Maglio and Amanda Lilleyman the most useful. The talks started on Wednesday, the 3rd of July and continued for three days, intermixed with poster sessions, brainstorming meetings over lunch time and on-campus birdwatching during tea breaks.

It was really challenging to choose between sessions as the number of interesting talks was more than one could possibly handle! Unfortunately, I can only mention a few of my favourite talks. Helen Taylor, alumni of the University of Otago gave a great talk on the genetics of threatened birds and highlighted the importance of popularisation of genetics among non-DNA scientists for better interdisciplinary cooperation. Kristal Cain from the University of Auckland gave a stunning talk on female ornamentation; it was amazing to learn that conspicuous plumage does not increase predation risk. Clancy Hall from the University of the Sunshine Coast fascinated the auditorium with her talk on sex reversal in birds and its implications for conservation. And... number one on my list was the absolutely fabulous and humorous talk on avian invasion risk from the pet trade in New Zealand given by Josie Galbraith from the Auckland War Memorial Museum.

I was very proud to represent the University of Auckland and share some findings from my PhD project. I presented a poster (for the first time in my life!) and was pleasantly surprised by the number of people who were keen to talk to me about my research. My study is about the effect of sugar-water feeding on health and behaviour of native New Zealand birds. My poster focused on the on-line survey of popular sugar-water feeding practices among urban New Zealanders and which bird species benefit from this.

However, it would be a lie to say I was only interested in talks and posters. In fact, I was looking forward to the after-conference bird watching field trips. I am a keen twitcher and nothing fills my heart with joy more than adding bird species to my list. The first trip required a brutal 4:30 am wakeup and even though I am not the morning person, I had no regrets. We went on the Corroboree Billabong Sunrise Birding Cruise in Mary River National Park. I saw the most stunning birds there, including the black-necked stork, white-bellied sea eagle, azure kingfisher, crested jacana, brown goshawk, nankeen night heron as well as many others. The second trip was to Darwin Harbour that afternoon. Our best sightings there were probably the beach stone curlew and the chestnut rail. By the end of my Darwin trip I had 100 species on my list!

The next Australasian Ornithological Conference will be held in Auckland in 2021. It will be so exciting to host all the visitors and share the latest results! I can't wait to contribute to the conference organisation and see you at the next AOC!



Fig.1 Auckland representatives at AOC2019. Photo by Yen Loo.



Fig. 2 A hunting nankeen night-heron at Mary River National Park. Photo by Daria Erastova.