

## 2023 AOC Brisbane (by Katie Gray)

It was May 2023 and I sat at the dining room table and sighed wistfully. The website of the Australasian Ornithological Conference (AOC) was open in front of me. Interesting speakers, morning bird walks, the opportunity to meet, mingle and learn from hundreds of other bird lovers and researchers...it sounded wonderful! But as a student, a ticket to Brisbane was out of my reach. So, I sighed wistfully and thought that is where this story would end.

But over the next couple of months my dreaming turned into a ticket to go! I learned that there were travel grants available for students who would present at the conference. Through BirdsNZ, I applied for, and was thrilled to be awarded, a grant from Faunatech that covered my international flights. Thank you, Faunatech! I would speak at the conference about my MSc research into the movements and habitat use of banded dotterels and black-fronted terns in the Mackenzie Basin during the breeding season.

Fast forward to December 4<sup>th</sup> and I am winging my way home, my mind and heart full of the conference. I look out of the window at the vast ocean below and think once again how astounding it is that some banded dotterels cross this expanse of water under their own steam, between New Zealand and New South Wales. Some of them even do it carrying the small GPS "backpacks" I have attached.

The AOC was just as wonderful as I had anticipated. It was the largest gathering to date, with over 400 attendees and four concurrent streams of oral presentations. On the first day I lapped up a whole day of talks focused on tracking birds, and presented my own research in this symposium in the afternoon. It was exciting and educational to hear what others are doing in this space. On days two and three I attended many interesting talks on shorebirds, sea birds, the impact of windfarms on birds, using ebird data in research, tool use by birds, and the impact of climate change on the body size and shape of shorebirds.

There were early morning bird walks each day at various locations around the city. I joined a group of 40 passionate birders at Sandy Camp Road Wetlands where I got my first real introduction to Australian birds. Highlights for me were the superb fairywren, variegated fairywren, white-throated honeyeater and olive-backed oriole. Another morning I joined a walk in the Brisbane Botanical Gardens where highlights included a male figbird, a blue-faced honeyeater, and an up-close encounter with bush stone-curlews in full voice! I found the morning bird walks a great place to connect with other conference attendees and have meaningful conversations away from the hubbub of the packed conference venue.

Back at the conference I met the founder of Druid Technology Ltd and another staff member from the company. I am using their GPS trackers for my research and it was great to put faces to names and to chat about their products in person. I also enjoyed chatting in more depth about the research that others are undertaking. I have come away with the impression that there are many passionate, intelligent and dedicated people pouring themselves into better understanding and protecting our birds. It is inspiring and it gives me hope.

Following the conference I joined a couple of field trips to Lamington National Park and Mount Glorious, where I made many more connections with other researchers and continued to be awed by the variety and colour of Australian birds! (A few highlights: noisy pitta, paradise riflebird, regent bowerbird, eastern spinebill, wampoo fruit dove and the green catbird with its bizarre call). I also had my first run-in with leeches...not something I wish to repeat. Although I am told I should count myself lucky that it was leeches and not ticks that found their way up my trousers!

I fly home with a sense of deep gratitude, carrying a rich array of insights, ideas and new connections. I am so glad I went! To everyone who contributed to getting me to the AOC in Brisbane, and to the conference organisers, thank you so very much, it has been wonderful!



Speaking in the 'Tracking Birds' symposium on the first afternoon of the conference (Photo: Emma Williams)



Main photo (L-R): Jessica Rooke from Birdlife Australia and I on the Lamington National Park field trip. Insert: Australian king parrot.