

AOC 2023 Student Travel Grant – Kamyra Patel

In 2023 I was fortunate enough to be awarded the Birds New Zealand student travel grant to attend the Australasian Ornithological Conference. This grant allowed me to travel to Brisbane/Meeanjin, Australia and present the results of Master's thesis 'Life in plastic, it's not fantastic' exploring the sensory aspects of plastic ingestion in seabirds.

The conference packed three full days of new and interesting findings in the Avian world, the keenest of birders and several birdwatching opportunities. The evening before the official beginning of the conference, the AOC committee had organised a student evening. This was an opportunity for all student attendees of the conference to meet and share their experiences over pizza. The student night was an extremely valuable event, especially for the kiwi students as it allowed for a few familiar and recognisable faces during the conference.

Every morning, before the conferences began, we were provided guided bird walks taking place in the surrounding Brisbane area. It was mesmerising to observe such extreme bird diversity even within the city limits. Our first field trip was to sandy Camp Road Wetland, which was a local hotspot for birders and apparently red-bellied black snakes. During this small wetland trip, we were able to observe over 60 species of birds including comb-crested Jacanas, chestnut-breasted mannikins and Eastern yellow robins. Fortunately, no snakes were encountered during our trip. The following morning, we attended a guided bird walk through the botanic gardens of Brisbane, a very urban spot where we managed to see over 25 species. My favourite birds from the botanic gardens trip included the bush stone-curlew, the channel-billed cuckoo and the blue-faced honey eater. While Brisbane is an incredibly bird-diverse city, I would not have been able to see the vast majority of species I was fortunate enough to encounter without the help of the immensely knowledgeable bird guides. Each guide was truly an expert and I am extremely grateful that they shared their time and knowledge with us.

On day one, the attendees were introduced to the conference with an incredible welcome song by songwoman Maroochy. Each conference day began with plenary talks from individuals that had made tremendous impacts in the avian world, in terms of research, conservation and community engagement. The conference day had four concurrent sessions with a wide array of talks covering topics such as urban birds, migration and of course, seabirds. On day two of the conference, I presented my talk in the seabird session and was followed up by interesting questions about my work. My presentation also prompted opportunity for seabird enthusiasts and researchers to approach me to discuss their interests and queries about the seabird world.

All the presentations were very interesting and informative, which made for great difficulty in selecting talks between concurrent sessions. The selection of talks was truly impressive, and I was particularly intrigued to learn about the Australian species we had encountered during our birding trips. Of course, I also ensured to support my fellow kiwi presenters during their talks, all whom did a wonderful job. The presentation sessions were broken up by morning tea and lunch breaks which proved to be great opportunities for new birders such as myself to meet and learn from birders and researchers with much more experience.

After a very fruitful conference week, we were fortunate enough to attend a birding trip to Mount Tambourine. Again, we were lucky enough to be provided bird guides who were able to help us spot 22 species including green catbirds, wompoo fruit-doves and regent bowerbirds. A trip to Mount Tambourine was certainly the best way to end a bird conference.

I would like to say a very big thank you to Birds New Zealand for awarding me the student travel award and providing me the opportunity to attend AOC 2023. I would also like to appreciate the AOC committee for their efforts in organising an incredibly engaging and productive conference.



Figure 1. Kamya Patel presenting at AOC 2023; *Life in plastic, it's not fantastic*.

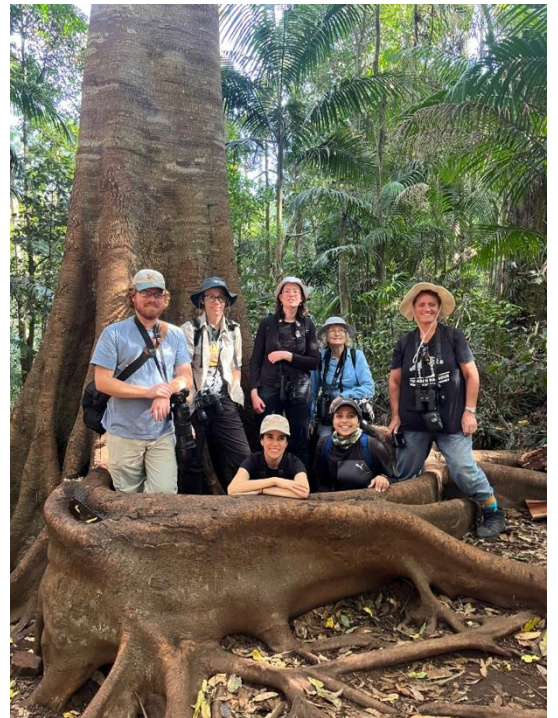


Figure 2. Birders from AOC 2023 at a bird birding trip in Mount Tambourine. Kamya Patel (Bottom right).