

2023 AOC Experience – Katie Vanderstok

I was awarded a Student Travel Grant by Birds New Zealand to travel to Brisbane/Meeanjin for the 2023 Australasian Ornithological Conference (AOC). This was an incredible opportunity to learn from Australian birders and bird researchers, present my research to an international audience, and see many wonderful bird species for the first time.

I got a head start on meeting some of the other students attending the conference at the Student Meet and Greet at St Lucia Bowling Club. It was very exciting seeing flying foxes and a ringtail possum on the walk across the University of Queensland campus to the Bowling Club. Once there, I enjoyed good conversation and pizza, and the soggy trip back to my accommodation in the warm Queensland rain was all part of the experience.

The conference opened with a wonderful Welcome to Country by Songwoman Maroochy and two engaging plenaries. I was particularly charmed by the musical exploits of the palm cockatoos and was mentally planning a future trip to Cape York to see them in action. Throughout the rest of the day, I attended excellent talks on mitigating the effects of climate change on birds and their behaviour in urban environments. It was also lovely to catch up with a few New Zealand attendees from previous Birds New Zealand conferences.

Very soon, it was time for me to present my Master's research to the conference. My project explored the relationships between the antipredator behaviour of Eurasian blackbirds and song thrushes and their sex, colouration, and breeding status. I greatly appreciated the opportunity to present and the many thought-provoking questions from my audience.

The next morning was perhaps my highlight of the conference: the trip to Sandy Camp Road wetlands. The sheer diversity of birds so close to the city was staggering, particularly for a New Zealander! In total we observed over 50 species, including a family of variegated fairy-wrens, a beautiful eastern yellow robin, and a Baillon's/marsh crake. I was also delighted to make it back to the conference just in time to catch the amazing plenary talk on song in female birds given by Professor Naomi Langmore. Another great day of talks followed, giving me the opportunity to learn more about Australia's threatened birdlife. I finished off the day with a walk around the nearby waterfront boardwalk and the tasty buffet-style conference dinner.

Before the final day of the conference, I attended another morning bird walk to the Brisbane Botanic Gardens. We were treated to a brief glimpse of a channel-billed cuckoo flying over, as well as some up-close and noisy bush stone-curlews, prompting a discussion of which Australian bird is the goofiest looking. Once we returned, I settled in for a great session on educating communities about their local birds. I was also captivated by the mystery of the Gooniyandi grasswren, which is only known from a single photograph and egg! Finally, it was a great honour to meet and attend the talk by Dr. Alexandra McQueen, as my Master's project was inspired by some of her research on fairy-wrens. The conference ended with a fun screening of the Flyways documentary about the incredible journeys made by migratory birds. I then had a lovely dinner and trip to Gelato Messina with some of the other students I'd met at the conference.

On the Friday, I was lucky enough to attend the post-conference field trip to Mount Tamborine rainforest. This was an incredible experience, with knowledgeable guides and a wide variety of tropical birdlife. In particular, I saw my first ever wild bowerbirds (a female satin and a male regent), fulfilling a dream borne out of a childhood watching David Attenborough documentaries. I was also very glad that no leeches made an appearance!

Overall, I will look back on my experience at the 2023 AOC with great fondness. I am very grateful for the knowledge I gained, the people I met, and the incredible wildlife I saw. I would therefore like to extend my

heartfelt thanks to Birds New Zealand for the Travel Grant which allowed me to attend and the conference organisers for making this such a wonderful event.



Presenting the results of my Master's research to the conference (Photo: Kamyia Patel)



A female satin bowerbird at Mount Tamborine rainforest (Photo: Katherine Clark)