

## **AOC 2025 Student Travel Grant - Cara Thomson**

Honestly, I feel like I could write a book about my experience at the 2025 AOC conference held in Perth, Western Australia (WA) this year. I was fortunate enough to be awarded a Birds New Zealand travel grant that enabled me to make the trip to WA that I otherwise may not have embarked on otherwise to present the initial results and future plans I had for my Master's thesis, 'Deterrence and Diversion: Investigating New Methods of Kāhu (Australasian Swamp Harrier) Management Near Sensitive Breeding Birds'. I felt like a REAL professional boarding that first Air New Zealand flight, carry-on luggage only, and clutching my laptop tightly.

While I have been to the eastern states in Australia before but never to WA, and wow! What a change in vegetation! The bird calls were so different to ours back home in New Zealand. It was harsher there... stark. It was like stepping out onto a new planet! Spring had only just sprung, bottle brush and smaller, more delicate flowers were well into their bloom. There was fresh, alien growth everywhere, so of course – the wattlebirds were out in force – I'm sure my phone is crashing because of all of the blurry photos I took of every bird I saw!

Every morning there was a guided morning walk where conference attendees could ask local bird enthusiasts and experts who were attending how best to identify the local avians. My friend and I had been holding out to see a red-tailed black cockatoo and finally on the third morning we saw three! On top of that we saw mobs of Galahs and Corellas, and plenty of lorikeets, kookaburras, kingfishers, honeyeaters, finches, wattlebirds, fan-tails – gosh the list goes on! It was a thrill to see so many large parrots so close to the city.

The conference itself was held at the University of WA, in the lecture rooms of the business school. On the first day of the conference, we were welcomed onto Country by Simon Forrest, Wadjuk Nyoongar Elder and a traditional performance by several young people of the Noongar nation of WA country. Their group shared three traditional dance performances that showcased the connection of the Wadjuk Nyoongar people to the fauna (particularly avian) of their land. Emphasis was placed on the emu and the kangaroo, showcasing movement and personality carefully observed and shared through dance. I felt beyond privileged to witness that cultural pride, to observe the generations old story telling of the Wadjuk Nyoongar people, and to be welcomed in such an appropriate way.

Over those three days of the conference, I attended dozens of interesting and informative talks both on topics similar to my own, and ones that were completely unrelated to my current work, but which were equally intriguing – I had no idea that pied geese were a problem for mango farms!

Following my talk, I had several people approach me to introduce themselves and ask follow-up questions about my methods and present findings. Presenting at the conference was incredibly worthwhile as it opened avenues to meet more people in the field I am researching and get feedback and having brainstorming sessions for new ideas I hadn't thought of both for the remainder of my project and for future projects I intend to pursue!

On the last day of the conference, I stayed late with a handful of others to watch the Night calling documentary, by Owl Friendly Margaret River & Capes Foundation, which followed Dr. Boyd Wykes in his work to protect the owls of the Margaret River area, and shared the highs and lows of protecting wildlife. It was honestly one of the best parts of the conference, really highlighting the amazing work people are doing and identifying to me, what I too, will do one day.

At the end of the conference there were several amazing field trips to choose from (or to go to all of them if you wanted) including a trip to Rottneest Island, Victoria Dam, a tour of the Kaarakin Black Cockatoo Conservation Centre, and several more... I went on the Victoria Dam walk, where we not only saw falcons on the horizon, but also robins, wattlebirds, butcherbirds, and Australian ringnecks.

I would like to extend my heart-felt thanks to Birds New Zealand and Birds Australia for the travel grant, and the organisers for hosting an amazing event – I loved every minute!

