



History of Birdlife in St Lucia

The influence of European development on the species and diversity of birdlife in the local area

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HISTORY OF BIRDLIFE IN ST.LUCIA

The avifauna of Australia was studied from the very first European contacts with the country. The new birds seen by early visitors left the viewers perplexed of what they were and where did they fit into the European scheme of things. The Black Swan was one of the first recorded in 1636 by Dutch navigators. Black Swans were once common in St Lucia, both in the river and in lagoons particularly in the once large lagoon that International House now stands on.

Sir Henry Banks had a great interest in our birds and took several study specimens back to England when he visited with Capt. Cook.

Once Australia was settled in 1788 progress in the knowledge of Australian birds was sharply increased. John Lewin wrote and issued the first Australian bird book in 1808 (20 years after the first settlement) and it was handwritten. The Sydney Gazette newspaper was started in 1813 and now having a printing press in Australia, John Lewin's book was quickly re-issued in 1813 (the same year!), but now printed with some lithograph illustrations that were hand coloured. So an Australian bird book was one of the first books published in Australia. John Lewin has a rail and honeyeater named after him.

Some birds live in two or more different habitat types while others are restricted to a particular habitat type. Habitat often depends on soil types, e.g. rainforests don't grow on dry rocky ridges. By examining the soils types of the St Lucia area we can have a fairly accurate idea of the habitat type and from that, the possibility of knowing which bird species were probably here.

I lived in this area from the mid '30's and at that time there was still a lot of natural bush, often re-growth, but this gave some idea of what many parts of this area were like before European settlement. I was fortunate in having a bird conscious uncle living with us in the early '40s's and giving myself and my brother a copy of "What Bird Is That?" by Neville W Cayley. So my interest in birds started and that meant the birds seen in a large radius from home, as far as I rode on a bicycle. There have been enormous changes in the birdlife of St Lucia over that period. I have gleaned some knowledge from people who lived here in the '20's and sadly now passed on. Most of this knowledge was in reference to habitat types and in some cases to bird families.

A birdlife chronology in the St.Lucia area can be considered in three stages:

1. birdlife before white settlement.
2. birdlife in the early days of white settlement until the 1960's.
3. birdlife from the 1960's until now.

Why put a barrier at 1960? Because up until that time people were trying hard to make St Lucia into a typical European habitat. The advent of the Society for Growing Australian Plants, a growing awareness of ecology and conservation issues, a change in the way some people used recreational time (less sitting out in the lawn all day pulling out weeds and possible aging of the local population and an increase in young students not interested in gardening) and it seems that about that time native bird species started to learn how to deal with the altered habitat that for the previous 100 years, we had forced them on them.

St.Lucia, before European settlement had only a few types of habitat. Rainforest, including araucarias (hoop pine although called Brisbane Pine in some early writings), existed along the river as a part of the riparian habitat. Incidentally, rainforest was described by Cunningham and Oxley as "Brush", a common NSW settlers' colloquialism; while Queenslanders generally used the term "scrub". This strip of rainforest was very narrow and not continuous along the river. Before white settlement, nearly all of St.Lucia was open forest of dominant eucalypts and their allies, mostly ironbarks, grey gums, tallow wood, angophoras with below canopy stands of acacias, jacksonias, etc.

There were no mangroves as salt water never got this far upstream from the mouth of the river until the bar was opened and dredging for river traffic. This allowed saline tidal water to reach St. Lucia. In the 1940's for example there were mangroves up to the mouth of Toowong Creek at Ygosse's (corner of Gailey and Sandford) and into Toowong Creek almost as far as Heroes Avenue and the odd emerging bush along the river as far as Sandy Creek in the then Indooroopilly golf course but they were very scattered.

Before white settlement, there were freshwater lagoons where International House now stands and swamps adjoining that lagoon around where Munro Street now is. There were smaller lagoons and ponds where the University now is. There were small ponds in Guyatt Park although these were ephemeral. Toowong Creek drained swamps in Perrin's Paddock and Heroes Park. Some of these lagoons later became saline after the river was dredged and at the time of king tides in January and early February; thus the mangroves almost to Heroes Avenue as mentioned previously. Carmody Creek was deepened and widened by the Chinese market gardener to tap water from the lower swamps in Munro Street.

The stands of lophostemon (*tristania*) and tea-trees that are now common in St. Lucia uncleared gullies, started after fairly dense settlement and are the result of a raising of the water table due partly, to the overflow of septic tanks before sewerage was connected. Seeds may have been previously dropped from birds and the fur of mammals, in these areas but were not viable due to the former lower water table. Dense development eliminated the larger mammals by 1948.

Another important factor was the continuation of habitat on the opposite side of the river. For example, a narrow band of rainforest might have existed on the St. Lucia side of the river and a more extensive rainforest of the same type might exist opposite St. Lucia, at places like Highgate Hill. So birds feeding at St. Lucia, might fly over the river to also feed in larger forests on the opposite bank. The rainforest on the opposite bank was more extensive and the last vestiges of it only disappeared a couple of years ago when a developer cleared land for a housing estate known locally there as "The Gully". Some of our most interesting and colourful birds were lost from that area as a result. One could find the black and gold Regent Bowerbird and the Paradise Riflebird, our only bird of paradise in this area. Incidentally the Riflebird used to be called the Rifleman and was so called because the first specimen was taken near Sydney in 1828, shot by a member of the NSW Rifleman regiment.

After European settlement, pastures and modified forests and then later urban clearing changed all of this. Such has been the sorry history of native fauna and flora in St. Lucia as for most of Brisbane.

Brisbane has the highest bird diversity of any city in the world that has regular bird counts but this will not last much longer as wonderful opportunities to protect habitats and species are lost. Perhaps one of the most significant factors is the piping and loss of our creeks and swamps. These streams, once with reasonably clean water, acted as natural corridors for a wide range of fauna tracing their way throughout Brisbane towards large forest reserves. What we did was allow septic overflow, polluted storm water drains and toxic flow into our streams. There was then an outcry about smelly creeks with black mud and so councils piped them over thus exacerbating flooding problems in some areas and denying wildlife access during bad times to gain an avenue to food reserves in upstream forests.

Birds in Australia have usually been named by British scientists and collectors with names that reflected what they knew about birds back in Britain. Hence we get names like Cuckoo-shrike, which is neither a cuckoo nor a shrike but does have some physical characteristics of both types. We also have, quail-thrush, Magpie-lark, shrike-thrush, shrike-tit, etc. We share some families with other countries and so we have bee-eater, grebe, kite, lark, etc. In a few cases we have kept the aborigine names of birds like Brolga, Kookaburra, etc. Sometimes we have an onomatopoeic name (a name sounding like the call of the bird) for example, Wompoo Fruit-Dove and Weebill (which also has a small bill as well as saying something like "Weebill"!).

In the first bird age, the St Lucia area would have supported the bird species applicable to the habitats in the area. Thus there would have been bowerbirds, fruit-doves, scrubwrens, etc. along the river in the rainforest areas. The dominant habitat of open forest would have supported the Collared Sparrowhawk, lorikeets, kookaburras, Dollarbird, treecreepers, honeyeaters, pardalotes, etc. The swamplands would have supported the waterfowl, ducks, cormorants, darter, ibis, herons, rails, swamphens, terns, etc.

The ecotones, those areas where different habitats meet, would have supported fairy-wrens, robins, kingfishers, finches, thornbills, etc. This would have been the story in the first part of St Lucia's birdlife history and natural areas around Brisbane without interference still reflect this type of bio-diversity.

In the second stage, St Lucia was cleared for farming, timber getting and housing, etc. and so the natural habitats were altered. Open forest was turned into farmland, rainforest was cleared from the river bank for timber and to "improve the river views". However St. Lucia was famous in the early days of settlement for the lagoon and swamp that used to be where International house now stands. This swamp was habitat to a huge range of birds particularly waterfowl. People used to walk, ride horses and sulkies to picnic beside the swamp while the menfolk, mostly, shot birds that they would then take home for the table. This started not long after free white settlement in Brisbane and continued well into the 1920's and early '30's.

When WW II came, the swamp was used as a dump by the armed forces particularly by the Americans and this degradation made it no longer attractive to waterfowl. So it was later used as a council dump and then filled in for university college use.

The Pacific Black Duck has long been the most common waterfowl in this area and has been a favourite with hunters. You can still see many of them at the University Lagoon. Other duck species, Magpie Goose, Black Swans, grebes, Darters, four species of cormorants, probably Black-necked Stork, pelicans, herons, ibis, spoonbills, probably Brolgas, crakes, rails, coots, moorhens, swamphens, some migratory waders, stilts and avocets, plovers and dotterels and terns would have used this swamp. There would also have been many birds in the rank vegetation surrounding the lagoon and swamp like quail, reed-warblers, fairy-wrens, cisticolas, gerygones, scrubwrens, thornbills, honeyeaters, finches, etc.

As is the case now, duck numbers would have fluctuated depending on western conditions. Most duck food consists of vegetation taken at a particular depth from under water. On the east coast the banks of ponds and lakes are much steeper than those of the flat west and so feeding bands are much narrower. Hence most ducks prefer the western waterholes. As these dry out ducks they then move to more acceptable areas and fly to coastal water or the vast waters of the Murray-Darling system.

Around waterbodies there were always land birds as previously mentioned, and patrols of raptors (hawks and eagles) would have been present to get live prey or dead carrion as opportunities arose. The river has long been a place for White-bellied Sea-Eagles, almost as large as the Wedge-tailed Eagle, coming up river. They used to nest in tall trees, like Eucalyptus tereticornis and the tall Hoop Pines beside the river. The large rusty coloured Brahminy Kite still uses the river as a pathway hunting for water carrion, and used to nest in allo-causarinas opposite MacDonald's Garage in Gailey Road until these were cut down (about 1957), the creek piped and a Shell service station put there. They still fly up the river but now nest further up where tall trees still exist on the river bank and close tributaries.

On the edges of waterholes especially when they were drying up, Black-fronted and Red-kneed Dotterels picked up small athropods from muddy banks. These birds are no longer found in St Lucia because the one large waterbody (University Lagoon) we have, rarely dries off.

The Crested Pigeons that we are so familiar with today, are a western species and unknown east of the Great Dividing Range before the 20th century. They first started to colonise the eastern foothills in the 1930's and I remember seeing them at Riverview in the early 1940's. Noel Jack in his 1963 "Birds Of Brisbane" classed them as "uncommon". Now they are a very common species right to the bayside suburbs. This pigeon is a seed and ground feeding bird but in St Lucia we used to have many fruit and arboreal feeding species of pigeon as well.

These very colourful birds that fed in rainforest patches and particularly in the huge Moreton Bay Figtrees we used to have in Bryce St near "Mobolon", at the corner of Josling Street and Gailey Road (right next to where we are at this moment), in the yard of the large estate on St Lucia Road and running through to Bellevue Terrace and Douglas Street (Audles), in Mitchell's property, etc. The huge figtrees were also food sources for the Barred Cuckoo-shrike (now becoming rare here), figbirds and orioles. While figbirds feed in large numbers and noisily, the colourful fruit-doves feed in fewer numbers and very quietly. Nevertheless, many of them finished up in decorative glass domes, a sideboard fashion statement of the late 19th century and no doubt many were eaten by humans.

In fact, some of what we know about the early birdlife of Brisbane has been gleaned from the stuffed and mounted colourful birds in these glass domes. Until the late 1960's there were a large family of Diamond Doves living in St.Lucia near the corner of Durham Street and Carmody Road. Nowadays, this species is rarely if ever seen east Chinchilla, Mungundi or the lower Moonie. Considering the fact that most of St Lucia was originally open forest, which is not amenable to Diamond Doves, it can be presumed that these birds were originally aviary escapees.

Cockatoos and parrots have always been present. Their numbers fluctuated with the availability of food as these birds were largely nomadic. However the species populations have changed. Galahs, for example were another western species and it wasn't until the late 1960's that they were known in Brisbane. Noel Jack in his "Birds of Brisbane" (1963) did not record them at all. The dominant Lorikeet in the early days was the Scaly-breasted Lorikeet (Greenie) and they used to take nectar and pollen from the flowering native trees particularly tall eucalypts and Grevillea robusta, the Silky Oak. There were huge silky oaks off Dengate Lane, Glenolive Drive, Douglas Street, Carmody Road, etc. that supported hundreds of birds when they flowered in spring. Up until the late 1960's Rainbow Lorikeets were rarely seen. Now they outnumber Scaly-breasted Lorikeets by about 10:1. This has probably happened since people started to feed them in emulation of Currumbin Sanctuary.

The dominant gum-nut eating species used to be the Eastern Rosella with a few Pale-headed Rosellas using a similar feeding strategy.

Rosellas got their name from the early days of white settlement. The original penal settlement was at Sydney Cove. In those days of officers being from the gentry, considered it undesirable for them to be camped near lower ranking guards and convicts. So the officers made their main camp at Parramatta, where old Government House now stands. The officers used to ride into Sydney Cove to do their duties camping there for very short periods. Then they would ride back to Parramatta for rest and sport. As they rode through an area they called Rose Hill (horse racing track there now) because of the red flowering gums. They used to see these colourful parrots they named "Rose Hillers". This corrupted in time to rosella.

Eastern Rosellas which we also knew from the trade mark on Rosella brand jams were unable to exist with dense populations of humans and the last group of them in Brisbane maintained a home-range in Sherwood Arboretum until about 1980. They have now all retreated to the western side of the Range. As an aside, the Arnott's trademark is not a rosella but a Western Australian species, the Red-capped Parrot.

Cuckoos (an onomatopoeic name from Europe) have long used St.Lucia as a temporary home as most are regular migrants. Who among us have not taken a broil out when we have heard a Common

Koel (Rain-bird, Storm-bird) calling in the summer months thinking that it was predicting rain. Of course these Koels are migratory and are only in Brisbane during the summer months and that is the time when we get most of our rain.

There is some belief that our neighbouring suburb Toowong, is named from the aboriginal word for the Koel. This is debatable as it is also thought that Toowong was the aboriginal word for the White-tailed Nightjar (Goat-sucker). In fact there is a copy (1915) of the railway's station name places and their origins in the Qld. Museum collection (Ipswich campus) that states it to be the goat-sucker as do several other early references. The Handbook of Australian New Zealand and Antarctic Birds, Volume 4 (1999) also gives this impression.

St Lucia, like most of Brisbane has plenty of dry-ridge-top open eucalypt forest. On these ridges the common species are Laughing Kookaburra, Grey Butcherbird and Noisy Miner. Although oddly, when I was a child in the 1940's the only population of Noisy Miners in this area were at the No.3 tee of the Indooroopilly Golf course (now St Lucia). Noisy Miners, a honeyeater, are now one of the most common birds in Brisbane and probably evidence of the effect that planting of native floral has.

In the rank grasses (more prolific after tree clearing) existing besides streams, open paddocks and road verges, finch used to abound. Common were Zebra Finch, Double-barred Finch, Chestnut-breasted Mannikin and the introduced Nutmeg Mannikin (from southeast Asia).

Another finch, the House Sparrow used to be a problem with bird lice in ceilings throughout St.Lucia. When Sparrows were introduced in the 1850's by the Acclimatisation Society and others, they managed to convince governments throughout eastern Australia to put heavy fines on people killing sparrows, upsetting their eggs or interfering with their nests. These fines were often more than several months wages in those days. When I was growing up in St Lucia things had changed and we used to get threepence for every ten heads we could take into the BCC. Nowadays sparrows are dying out probably as Butcherbirds, Currawongs and Crows have learnt to eat them and houses have been made more sparrow-proof, denying these birds nesting habitat.

Another common finch in my childhood days was the European Goldfinch of which were in thousands in St.Lucia. These are only reported rarely in Brisbane now and usually from either side of the River mouth.

Another introduced pest species is the Common Starling. They also had a price on their head at sixpence per 10 heads. In the 1970's they were the most numerous bird in the Brisbane area, always coming on top in the annual Queensland Ornithological Society annual bird count. Now they have dropped off in number and some of this can be attributed to an even more undesirable pest, the introduced Common Myna (from India) which uses the same breeding hollows.

Specimens of sixteen species from St.Lucia are held in the Queensland Museum collection, not many, but nevertheless this small collection gives us some idea of what we have lost. About a third of these are unlikely to ever be seen again in St.Lucia. This includes the magnificently coloured Regent Bowerbird.

All over Brisbane we are quickly losing our small birds. Habitat changes have favoured large to medium sized birds like Noisy Miner, Pied Currawong and Torresian Crow and the increase in their numbers have eliminated colourful fairy-wrens, warblers, thornbills, robins, finches, etc. The previously mentioned creek piping and degradation has exacerbated this problem, as have too many cats, too many dogs, habitat fragmentation, and the increase in concrete covered areas for backyard BBQ's and swimming pools, the failure of our electricity authorities to put distribution underground and the subsequent loss of street trees, fear of litigation from falling branches, the readiness for governments to use parkland for sport and to erect man-made objects that often have no real purpose, the loss of riverside thick vegetation and tall trees and councils cutting grass right down to creek banks rather than leaving bands of wild vegetation.

There are 167 species of Australia's 800 odd species in real difficulties and not expected to be still surviving by 2050. A 24 hour spring bird count in St.Lucia in our first period would have been expected to reveal about 150 species, In our second period about 90 species and now about 40 species and that's including the University Lagoon. Development was perhaps a necessity for St. Lucia and thus we could expect a lowering of bio-diversity. Good planning may have minimized the effect and the suburb may have been richer for it.

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