

DESTINATION SOUTHWEST AUSTRALIA (July 2006)- UPDATE INFORMATION FOR VISITING BIRDERS AND MAMMALOGISTS

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The following text will provide some update information for independent travelers birding and mammal-watching in SW Australia, from a viewpoint of a fellow traveler who visited the region for 8 days in June-July 2006. The focus is on **Dryandra State Forest, Porongorup, Albany sites, Lake Muir, Cape Leeuwin and Cape Naturaliste**. The information is based on subjective impressions made on a short trip, and should be judged accordingly. There are references to the main target bird and mammal species and subspecies, but no comprehensive species lists.

SW Australia is an interesting destination with several endemic species, scenic coastal habitats and many wonderful places to visit. There are more detailed trip reports available in the Internet and guidebooks, but things do change and updates are needed to supplement the information available, especially in regard to travel practicalities. Traveling in Australia is in general easygoing. In addition to birdwatching information and equipment, you need to rent a car, buy a road atlas and bring some money. There is plenty of accommodation available. Petrol is also very cheap by European standards.

Had some problems with Avis at Perth International Airport. They had added extras into the contract, trying to charge 30% more than agreed at the pick up. I did, however, spot the 'mistakes', which were soon corrected. For example, they tried to charge underage driver extras from a 40+ guy! Nevertheless, Avis Perth managed to get a bit more than originally agreed, claiming that a reservation quote is just an estimate. I wonder how a customer compares prices and services if quotes cannot be trusted? At the moment, Avis appears to be the least reliable international chain in this regard. Their Hyundai Elantra proved, however, to be a very good car, superior to the 2006 Toyota Corolla I rented later in Tasmania, despite its somewhat outdated design.

PERTH - LAKE FORRESTDAL

Lake Forrestdale was completely dry in late June. Nevertheless, saw a pair of **Western Wattlebirds** in the surrounding bush, and a splendid **Death Adder**, the only snake discovered during the trip. Finding the place was easy enough with Perth street directory, supplied with the car.

Port Lincoln Ringnecks were common along roads everywhere, with the exception of Perth and its suburbs. The first ones were seen soon after entering the Albany highway, on the way to Dryandra State Forest.

DRYANDRA STATE FOREST

170 km SE of Perth and the place for rare marsupials and several feathered goodies: a winning combination worth a long stay. From Perth - Albany highway, turn left towards Wandering at North Bannister, and continue south towards Narrogin, crossing Pumpfrey's Bridge. The best option for accommodation is the Lions Dryandra Woodland Village (tel. 08 9884 5231), well signposted from the main road, and the starting point of

several interesting tracks into the forest. Petrol and groceries are available in the nearby (26 km) Narrogin, at the heart of the SW Australia's southern wheat-belt.



Photo 1. Sign to the Lions Dryandra Woodland Village and the State Forest.

At the Lions Dryandra Woodland, the caretakers are both knowledgeable and helpful, providing information on the best locations for a variety of birds and mammals, if requested. There are cottages available, the small Magpie Cottage (on the northern edge of the village) being the most peaceful place to stay. It is only 25 AUD per night, with kitchen and hot shower, but you need to clean the cottage afterwards (includes sweeping the floor). There is firewood available for heating the room (do not place the wood in down in the stove, as I did, but above it!), or having a barbaque by the veranda. Bedding is not included, but will be provided for 12 AUD. Stayed two + one nights here, using the same bedding on both visits (no extra charge). More comfortable motel rooms would have been available at Narrogin, but you probably see more if you stay close to nocturnal and early morning 'hunting grounds'.



Photo 1. Magpie Cottage at Lions Dryandra Woodland.



Photo 3. ...and the Australian Magpie himself.

At night, the best options for mammal and bird spotting (with a 400 000 candela spotlight) were the Gura and Marri Rds, and the village opening. Useful map of the forest roads was available at the caretakers' office for a nominal fee. Gura and Marri roads are often mentioned in guide books and trip reports, but the directions may be difficult to grasp without the cartographic presentation, especially at night. The roads are interconnected, but the connection is not very clear, even though it appears easy on the map. Personally, I drove the Gura Rd up to an open field, and turned back. On Marri Rd, I continued till a gated enclosure for threatened species, or to the next junction, before turning back. The fenced Barna Mia enclosure has many rare species which can be observed by attending a special tour (arranged up to four times a week), which has to be booked beforehand. The admittance is AUD 13 for adults.

Birds

Malleefowl: Not in the forest anymore.

Bush Stone-Curlew: Up to 6 roosting next to the row of cottages at Lions village.

Masked Owl: According to John, the caretaker, very rare in DSF; not to be expected. More common in the coastal deciduous forests.

Painted Button-Quail: Platelets and three calling (early morning) next to the Arboretum, between the Weirah Rd and Ochre Trail. Other platelets in the beginning of Marri Rd. Worked hard to see one, but failed.

Redcapped Parrot: A few roaming in the forest.

Western Rosella: Common in the forest; several dozen seen at close range.

Elegant Parrot: Common in the forest, with close views of perched birds especially at the beginning of Ochre Trail.

Shortbilled Black-Cockatoo: A party of 50 birds came to drink at the caretakers' garden in the late afternoon, roosting in the nearby pines, where they could again be seen early next morning. Great close views of this restricted range endemic!

Tawny Frogmouth: Two seen and others heard close to the Lions village.

Rufous Treecreeper: Common, conspicuous and inquisitive in the forest.

Bluebreasted Fairy-Wren: Common along forest roads but very few adult males.

Western Thornbill: Rare in comparison to other thornbills. Saw only two individuals.

Yellow-plumed Honeyeater: Common and seen in almost every part of the forest.

Western Wattlebird: Two at Arboretum.

Western Spinebill: Common in small numbers in semi-open areas with flowering bushes, especially at Weirah Rd and Arboretum.

Scarlet Robin: Race campbelli; few birds wintering in the forest.

Western Yellow Robin: A family party along the access road and two along Marri Rd.

Western Shrike-Tit: One by Marri Rd, on the left in tall wandoos about 500 m beyond the Tomingley Rd junction.

Mammals

Failed with the star species, Numbat, apparently due to cold winter weather. They prefer hot, sunny days, when their prey (termites) are also most active, and are therefore not easy to see in winter. In any case, Numbat are shy animals not easy to approach. Bilbies and other rarities are almost impossible to find on a short visit, but persistence (and luck) may pay off.

Common Brushtail Possum: Very common here; saw 40+ on three night drives. Grey color phase with a white tip of a tail (some lacked the white tip).

Tammar Wallaby: Increasingly common at Dryandra Woodland and nowadays relatively easy to see, especially along Gura Rd and close to the Lions village. Small and often misidentified as **Woylie**. Saw 6 individuals.

Western Brush Wallaby: Only one seen by the Lions village.

Western Grey Kangaroo: Relatively common, especially by the Arboretum and village opening.

Woylie: Rare and difficult to see. Saw one at the end of Marri Rd. Cf. Tammar Wallaby.

Red-tailed Phascogale: Apparently agitated by inspecting Rufous Treecreepers, one individual came out of a hollow tree in an unexpected location, close to the Ochre Trail parking, providing great views at a close distance. This may well have been a nest site, July being the species' breeding season, and the Phascogale defending the hole against the Treecreepers. Normally, they forage in casuarina thickets.

<http://www.australianfauna.com/redtailedphascogale.php>

Yellow-footed Antechinus: One along Marri Rd, late in the morning, frantically inspecting logs, hopping on the road and in general not bothered by my presence at all. These cute fellows become raving sex-maniacs during the mating season, constantly looking for females and not even bothering to eat. The 'lucky' ones normally die from exhaustion in the end of copulation, but even the 'unlucky' ones drop dead soon after the season as a result of fatigue and hormonal changes. Therefore, late June to the end of July is the best time to see this species, sex-crazed males being bold and out in the open. Apparently there is not enough food around, and Mother Nature has decided to reserve it all for females and the young ones, killing the less fortunate sex.

http://www.ecu.edu.au/chs/cem/research/reviews%20&%20articles/articles/L_Broun_art.pdf

Short-beaked Echidna: One next to the village opening at night, digging deep in mud with its surprisingly long beak (the Papua-New Guinean species apparently has an even longer 'snout'). People see them regularly at Dryandra State Forest.



Photo 4. Marri Rd at Dryandra State Forest.

MT. BARKER - PORONGORUP NATIONAL PARK

As already estimated before the visit, no need to visit Stirling Range N. P. as all the target species had already been seen at Dryandra State Forest, or would be seen in other sites later on. Instead, drove south to Mt. Barker. The old Great Southern Highway 120 has real character and many interesting sights, unlike the rather the dull Albany highway. It is a great region for rural tourism. Between Narrogin and Mt. Barker, thousands of waterfowl were seen at water reservoirs around Wagin and Cranbrook.

Mt. Barker is a convenient base for visiting the Porongorup National Park, with a close proximity to the park, good birding on the way, and its services: economical accommodations, take-aways and supermarkets. There is accommodation available right next to the Porongorup N. P., but it is expensive, and services are limited. Stayed at Motel Valley View (AUD 65) in Mt. Barker, by the Albany highway, and can warmly recommend the place. Private motels are usually well worth the money in Australia. The drive to the Tree of the Rock campsite was less than 30 minutes from Mt. Barker.



Photo 5. Along the Great Southern Highway.

A party of 60 **Baudin's Black Cockatoos** were encountered on the Mt. Barker Porongorup Road first thing in the morning, approximately half way to the park. Drive slowly and keep your windows open to hear their raucous calls. At Porongorup N.P., saw all three target species in five minutes after entering the empty Tree of the Rock campsite. **Red-winged Fairy-Wrens** were common in the forest undergrowth. **Whitebreasted Robins** were seen by the toilet and along a close-by track (50 m uphill and to the right). **Redeared Firetail** was feeding on open ground, on the Tree in the Rock trail next to the toilet block, looking much like an African twinspot. **Elegant Parrots, Purplecrowned Lorikeets** and **Scarlet Robins** common, as well as several other widespread species. Great karri forest, as well. Be sure to be here early in the morning!

In regard to mammals, only one **Western Grey Kangaroo** was seen by the Tree of the Rock campsite.



Photo 6. Tree of the rock campsite with its tall karri forest.

ALBANY - LAKE POWELL, LAKE SEPPINGS, THE GAP, TWO PEOPLE'S BAY

Stayed in Albany, making visits to the birdwatching sites around this historical city. Albany Apartments was a great locally operated accommodation choice, on the left along the Albany highway access road to the center, right next to the often mentioned Ace Motor Inn with smaller rooms for a higher rate. Coraki Holiday Cottages, close to Two People's Bay, is an expensive option. Albany Apartments charged AUD 69 for a fully equipped three room apartment, with kitchen and wide screen television. There were detailed maps of Albany and surrounding region (Albany Street Guide) available free of charge, very useful for finding one's way to the birding sites. This is how information should be presented to visiting tourists; congratulations to Andimaps!

Along the Denmark Rd, **Lake Powell** (so called Grasmere Lake in some reports and guide books) finally produced my long time nemesis species, the **Australian Bluebill**. Having searched for it extensively both in SE and SW Australia, it was a relief to see a small party of these stiff-tails. There were many other wetland species at Lake Powell, as well, **Australasian Grebes** and **Musk Ducks** being particularly common. There is a signposted parking place along the Denmark Rd, hidden away from the road, and a track which follows a channel to the lakeshore. At the end of the track, take a right hand trail to an observation hide for the best views. A **Western Fieldwren** and **Southern Emu-Wrens** were seen in dry bush close to Lake Powell, along the Denmark Rd.



Photo 7. Pacific Black Ducks.

Lake Seppings is another nice reserve right in the city of Albany, next to the Albany Golf Course, along Links Rd, from where observation platforms can be reached via the Bird Walk parking place. Did not see much here, but enjoyed the well-organized site anyway. No **Rock Parrots** at the Golf Course across the road.



Photo 8. Lake Seppings.

It is an half an hour drive from Albany along the Frenchmans Bay Rd towards the Torndirrup National Park and to the Gap (no entrance fee), if you follow speed limits. Turn right at the well signed junction, and continue along the tarmac road down to the parking area. From there, it is an easy short walk to the cliffs, where seabird observation is possible, with the bonus of whale sightings. Plenty of seabirds at a close range, with 1000+ **Pacific Yellow-nosed** and 3 **Shy Albatrosses**, 1 **Southern Giant Petrel**, 1 **Sooty Shearwater** (a surprising sight in early July, but typical with long bill and white flashed on underwing; close views), 2 **Antarctic Skuas** and hundreds of **Australian Gannets** and **Swift Terns**, plus 7 **Humpbacks** and 1 **Sperm Whale** (good looks of its bulky head). Out of my two visits here, the first one proved to be much more productive than the second one. As usual, bird traffic depends on weather and visibility.



Photo 9. The Gap observation point.

Little Beach, at the well known Two People's Bay reserve, is the place for three SW Australian specialities: **Noisy Scrub-bird**, **Western Bristlebird** and **Western Whipbird**. Therefore, much time was spent here on two occasions, until all the target species were seen. Little Beach can be reached by turning right, uphill on a gravel road, at the Two People's Bay information center parking.

The **Scrub-bird** was relatively easy. I walked down the trail from Little Beach parking, continued down to the cliffs, and left along the nature trail, turned left uphill and continued until reaching a singing male (several heard in the general area). The bird sang on the left, 5-10 meters from the trail. I walked just past it, and sat quietly down on the trail, facing back, and making few whistled imitations. As anticipated, the bird arrived

to check out the intruder, walking briefly on the trail, and allowing nice views for the well prepared observer. After seeing me well, it did not return, but continued singing in a thicket next to the trail.

The second target species, the **Bristlebird**, proved to be too difficult to see well. There was no sign of the much publicized tame parking lot y-junction bird. Instead, several singing & poor views of birds scurrying between bushes. Very frustrating, indeed. With the **Whipbird**, I got lucky. After already given up, late in the afternoon, I scanned the hillside bushes with a scope for other birds and animals, listening for the occasional **Whipbird** song from the same direction, when one suddenly came out in the open, sitting on a low branch in a bush for a minute or so. I watched it from the car park.



Photo 10. Little Beach at Two People's Bay.

About 50 **Pacific Yellow-nosed Albatrosses**, **Pacific Gulls** and other seabirds were observed from Little Beach. **White-bellied Sea-eagles**, **Little Eagle** and **Peregrine Falcon** gave great flight views especially in the afternoon. A single **Rock Parrot** was seen briefly by the beach, and **Southern Emu-Wren** were heard calling in the bush. No sign of **Red-eared Firetails**.

Little Beach was also good for mammals. Out of 4 **Humpbacks**, two passed so close to the cliffs that their spray reached me, breathing making quite a sound. A **False Killer Whale** was a nice find, as well as a **Bush Rat**, and the two wallabies tentatively identified as **West Australian Brush Wallabies**. Otherwise, **Western Grey Kangaroos** and **European Rabbits**.

On the way to Little Beach, Kalgan River estuary had **Pied Oystercatchers** and other common species, plus **Western Thornbills** in trees on the east side. **Sooty Oystercatchers** both at Little Beach and the Gap.

MUIR HIGHWAY - LAKE MUIR

Little traffic along this minor highway with **Emus**, **Wedge-tailed Eagles** and other outback species. Searched a gravel farm road to the left just (couple of kilometers) before the dry and barren Lake Muir (great observation hide & picnic site). The nominate subspecies of **Western Corella** proved to be elusive, but patience paid off: a large farm opening close to the highway, along the dirt road, provided three pairs. They spend long periods in silence, hiding in trees, and fly only occasionally, calling loudly. The pasture also had many other farmland species. Other side road stops along the Muir Highway were much less productive.



Photo 11. The barren Lake Muir.

AUGUSTA - CAPE LEEUWIN

Augusta was a bit more touristic and less easygoing than Albany, despite its small size and peripheral location. Cape Leeuwin lighthouse, 15 minutes south of Augusta, was fenced and could only be visited during opening hours, which had fortunately been extended from 9.00 to 17.00, allowing me a two hour seawatch in the arrival afternoon. In the morning, a rather frustrating wait till the gate opened (got in 15 minutes earlier, with a special permission). Observed seabirds from the cape, behind the lighthouse, for 6 hours, facing south.

Did not find the **Rock Parrots** on first two searches, but got lucky on the third and final one, discovering a tame party of three between the empty houses. According to the caretaker, they favor the lush back lawns on the northern side of the cape. In the morning, plenty of **Australian Pipits** on the lawns before the arrival of the visitors. **Southern Emu-Wrens** were heard close to the Waterwheel. Stayed at the Georgina Molloy Motel (AUD 70), which was very comfortable with huge, fully equipped rooms. Unfortunately, reservations are difficult to make because they do not have Internet service.

Other birds

Only a few dozen **Pacific Yellow-nosed Albatrosses** and 250 **Australian Gannets**, and the usual cormorants, gulls and terns, including 4 **Pacific Gulls**, plus **Pacific Reef Egrets**.

Antarctic Skua: Two individuals.

Broadbilled Prion: A single prion with *vittata* rather than *salvini* characteristics was seen flying west early in the morning. Large prion, with a bulky head and extensively dark forehead & lores, and an oversized black bill. Close views.

Greatwinged Petrel: One seen in the morning.

Mammals

Australian Sea Lion: One male on rocks off Cape Leeuwin, at sunrise.

Humpback Whale: At least 16 at Cape Leeuwin, one breaching.



Photo 12. The fenced lawns of Cape Leeuwin.



Photo 13. Cape Leeuwin, early in the morning.



Photo 14. Rock Parrots.

CAPE NATURALISTE - DUNSBOROUGH, BUSSELTON

Nice, rewarding seawatch at the observation point to the left from the Cape Naturaliste lighthouse, infested by yuppies looking for wine-sipping at sunset. Turn left before the lighthouse parking, on a downhill gravel road (in fair condition in July 2006). Follow the road till km 1,6, where parking is possible at the start of a walking track to the right, along the cliffs and the seashore. Walk 50 meters and find your way down towards the cliff edge. From any sandy spot in-between vegetation, great scope (I have a Swarovski ATS 80 HD) views of the coastal waters can be had, weather permitting. Spend more than 10 hours here, on two occasions (morning & late afternoon-evening).

In Dunsborough, the only motel option is Best Western, with its overpriced rooms and doubtful chain operation character. Personally, I prefer to support local, independent businesses. The whole coast from Dunsborough to Geographe Bay has sadly been spoiled by generic second home production for well-to-do people from Perth, with almost complete loss of local character and a plenitude of 'posh' activities for the upper middle class: wine sipping (one needs to be a bit intoxicated to survive the weekends?), lodges, SUVs, golf, cafés, and trinket shopping. It is a replica of Perth suburbs and you could easily bore yourself to death. For a decent motel accommodation, you need to drive to Busselton, a few km towards Perth from Dunsborough. I stayed in a place with character, Motel Restawhile, for AUD 65. At Geographe Bay, there are still wetlands with abundant birdlife, but as the second home development project advances, these may soon become disturbed.



Photo 15. Cape Naturaliste coast, with Sugarloaf Rock in the background.

Birds

Shy Albatross: One *cauta* seen.

Pacific Yellownosed Albatross: Less than 30 individuals.

Southern Giant Petrel: One juvenile to S.

Antarctic Skua: Two.

Whiteheaded Petrel: One to N at close range 40 minutes before leaving the place!
(The species I had hoped to see either at Cape Leeuwin or here).

Hutton's Shearwater: 3 to S.

Baudin's Black Cockatoo: A party of 6 feeding in trees between Dunsborough and the lighthouse.

Southern Emu-Wren: 2 by the car park.

Many thanks to the authors of Internet reports I used to plan my personal trip, especially to Frank O'Connor!



Photo 16. Welcome to Dunsborough?!