

Brian Everingham
Xmas in the Bush
2020



Tuesday 22nd December 2020

With Covid-19 raging, even in the Northern Beaches of Sydney, our decision to self-isolate and celebrate Xmas alone proved to be a masterstroke. There is nothing quite like total isolation from everything except nature to fill the heart with joy.

We departed Engadine at 8.20am, headed west along Heathcote Road and soon we found ourselves on the M7 tollway heading north. The traffic was relatively light for that time of day and soon we were heading to Windsor.

It is this part of Sydney that appears to have changed most rapidly over the last decade. What was once, not so long ago, peri urban, with the emphasis on rural, is now rapidly filling in with distribution centres and housing estates. The Cumberland Plain along the South Creek corridor is being lost under housing estates.

After a brief toilet stop at Windsor we headed over the new bridge towards Wilberforce and the Putty Road. Windsor Commons appeared to be spared, at this stage. The journey to Singleton took us over the Colo River, up through Colo Heights and on through more than 100km of burnt bush. It's been nearly a year since the Gosper Mountain fire that became the gigantic megablaze. It is green again, covered in epicormic shoots, but still clearly a fire-ravaged landscape.

We finally emerged into the Hunter Valley via the Parr SCA and Yengo NP on the east and Wollemi NP on the west, through Howes Valley and the tiny village of Milbrodale where Karskens (*People of the River*, p590) says is an artwork depicting an Aboriginal figure with outstretched wings of an eagle, a mythic Creation figure.

We next entered the tiny, benighted village of Bulga whose very existence is under threat from the rapacious coalmine, its deep open cut pits dominating the landscape¹.

And so we arrived in Singleton, found a park for lunch (James Cook Park) down on its floodplain (so many flood plains have playing fields in our country towns) and drove on via Gresford to Dungog. We came in via Bingleburra Road, which meant that we actually entered Dungog from the north.

I'll leave Dungog for another day. Today our only stop was its IGA, the local supermarket, to get just a handful of supplies, before driving on, north, to our home away from home, the Yeranda Cottages on Skimmings Gap Road. We duly found it after negotiating the potholes along this rural valley road. It's tucked up in one corner of Main Creek on the edge of Chichester State Forest. Our host, Dave Runciman, was cleaning

¹ Glencore thinks it is a good citizen

<https://www.glencore.com.au/operations-and-projects/coal/current-operations/bulga-coal>

But see <https://www.singletonargus.com.au/story/4761206/historic-village-of-bulga-paying-a-high-price-for-prosperity-wastelands/>

what we thought would be our cabin but he had decided to upgrade us to Pindari, a hut with a second bedroom. We are using one for storage.



We are on a ridge, above the office and main home, isolated except for cicadas and mosquitoes, but with a subtle gap through the forest to the mountains beyond. There are two well-placed bowls of water on lawns near the house and already Yellow-faced Honeyeaters and Noisy Friarbirds have visited. Others to make an appearance include Superb Fairywren, Eastern Yellow Robin and Brown Cuckoo-dove. Pleasingly we are also seeing lots of butterflies too, including the Wanderer, Brown Ringlets and a variety of Swallowtails.

One final note to record before I end the day! Many trees have epicormic growth: not as a result of fire but because of the severity of the drought. That's consistent with our earlier trips into the countryside. Drought is insidious.



Brown Ringlet

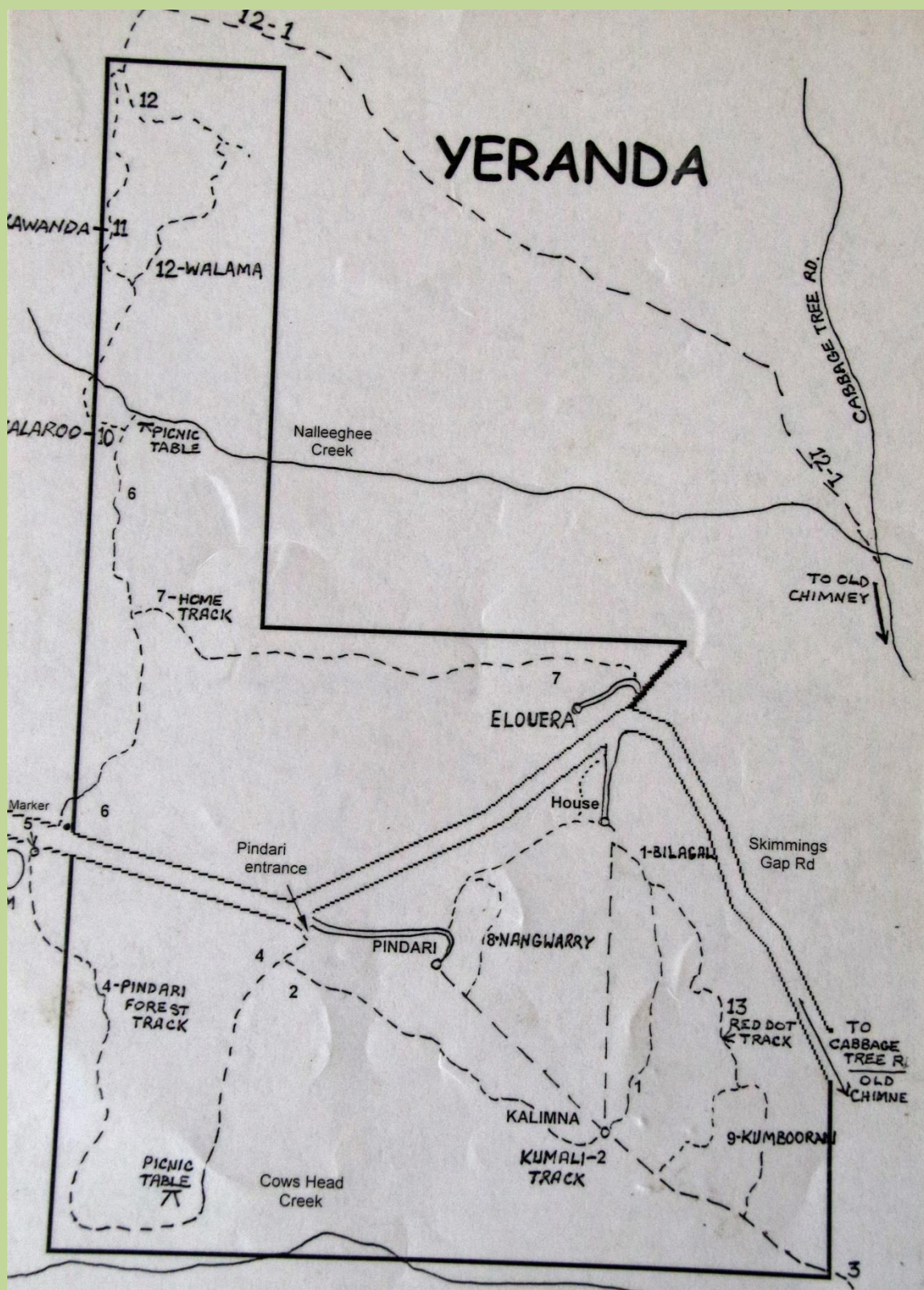


Brown Cuckoo-Dove



And a friendly Huntsman

Wednesday 23rd December 2020



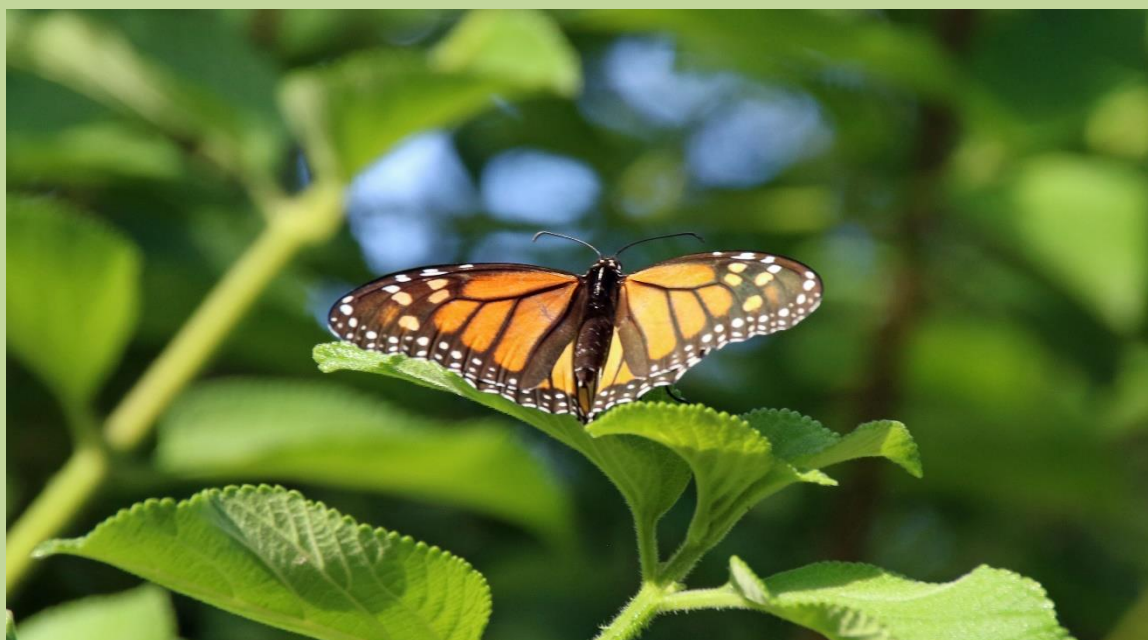
You wake up early when your cottage is enveloped by forest. The bush chorus determines it. Most notably, the Noisy Friarbirds demand it. So, later, did the Olive-backed Orioles and by 7.00am the cicadas were in full throttle.



We left the car in situ today and explored the property. At 8.30am we left Pindari, headed west along the forest road, then north near his boundary and then back along the home track to his third, and largest, cottage. It's called Elouera. From there we walked back up the road to the Kumali track before cutting up through the bush to our cottage and morning tea.

What became very clear early on was how much weed is along the edges. In particular, and in keeping with many areas on the Mid North Coast where forests have been opened up to light, lantana is profuse. Roads and forestry operations are often to blame but fire adds to the mix, as does the habit of rural retreats. All create edge effects.

Equally obvious was the impact of the drought. Not only was there a lot of trees with epicormic growth: there were many that had died outright. And that takes me to a third observation. This area is all single stand growth, except for the odd, tall, mature tree. It suggests that this area was once totally cleared, probably for pasture if the lack of stumps is any indication. How long ago I do not know but the trees would not be much older than twenty years in age. Mind you, Pyne claims that some eucalyptus species, such as mountain ash, survive as single age stands, renewing entire forests after catastrophic fire.



Wanderer or Monarch butterfly (and introduced species) on lantana (another introduced species)





I suspect a type of Crane Fly



Common Brown, female

After morning tea we walked down the hill to check out Kalimna. It was open. The bedroom and bathroom were larger but our kitchen and dining and lounge space is nicer and we have that additional curtained bedroom as a storage space. The outlook from Pindari is also superior.



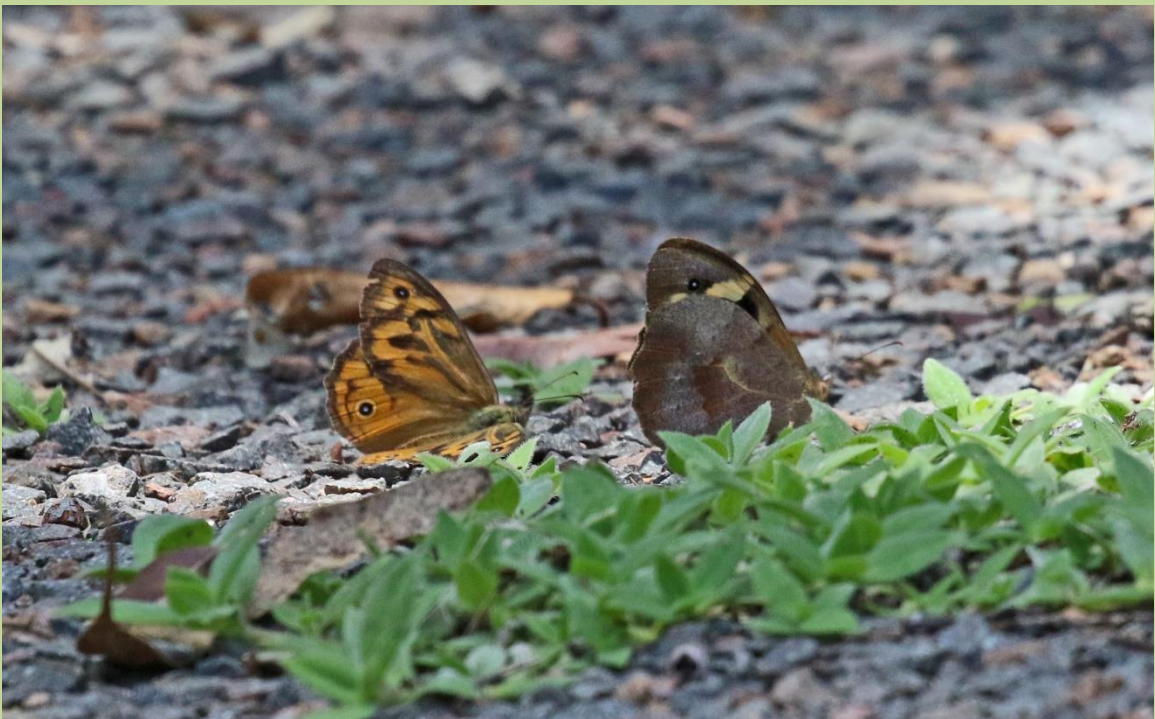
Common Grass Blue

Around our home there are large numbers of butterflies and many species but I'd need to catch them for precise identification. It's been a delight to watch them dance around in the clearing near us.



Vine Moth





Male and female Common Brown

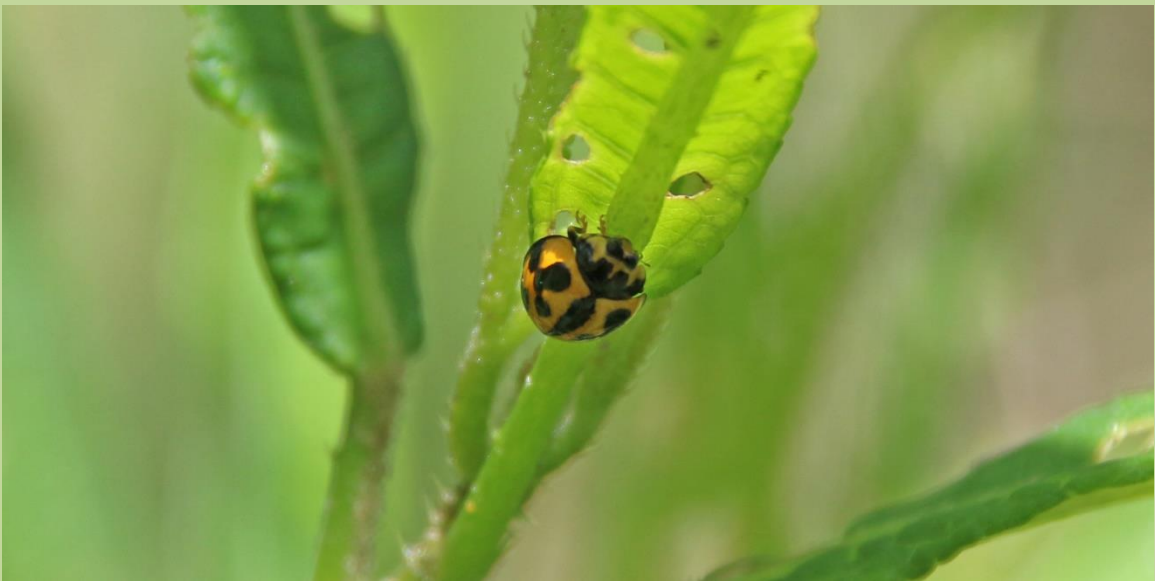
It has been equally delightful seeing the variety of beetles. So far all have been small but this afternoon I did see a jewel beetle that was new to me.



Jewel beetle of genus *Diphucrania*, probably *D. leucosticta*.



Chafer of genus *Liparetrus*.



Ladybird, *Coelophora inaequalis*.



Mind you, some of these beetles have been doing extraordinary damage to the foliage. Native hibiscus and Solanum species have been especially hard hit.

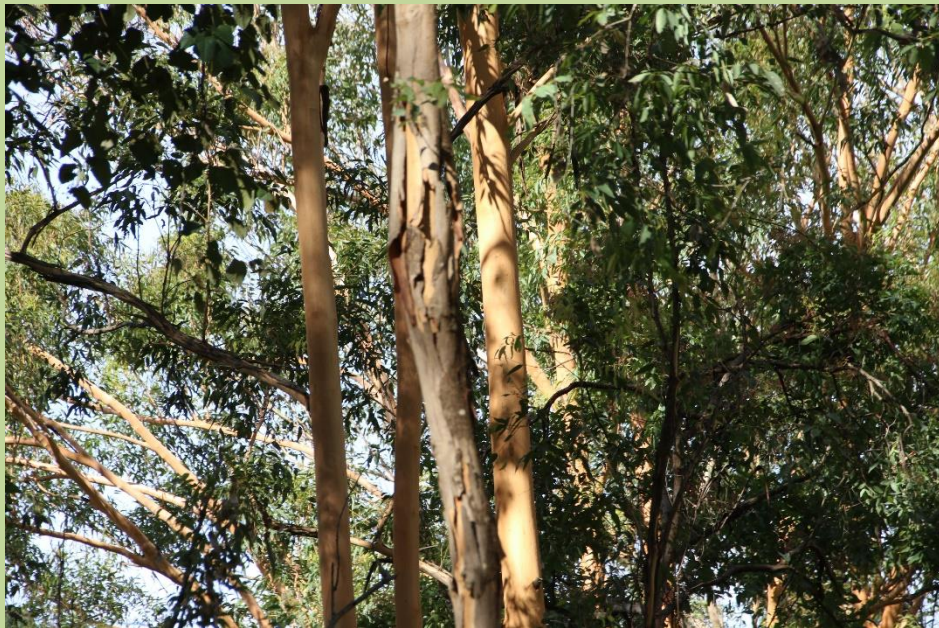


Balanophorus sp. Family Melyrida





Our final walk today took us on what was still navigable of the Pindari Forest Track and then down to Nalleeghee Creek before we returned for a nightcap. Nalleeghee Creek was a delight.





Oh, yes, during the afternoon I discovered a lump in my hair near the nape of my neck. Sure enough I had a tick. I removed it but I fear them more than leeches. They are a feature in the forests and farmlands of the mid north coast over summer.

Thursday 24th December 2020

Last night a Willie Wagtail appeared at the fire pit. This morning an entire family arrived and spent the morning chattering and catching insects, including, much to my chagrin, at least one butterfly I admired, a Blue Triangle. A Satin Bowerbird also made short work of a cicada.



Immature Golden Whistler

After breakfast we then drove up into Chichester SF via Skimming Gap. We turned into Barrington Tops National Park at Jerusalem Creek Falls, left the car and even though we were partially deafened by the sound of cicadas we set off on the 4km return walk down past a cascading waterfall and under riparian rainforest. The canopy, however, is a mix of Grey Gum, Tallowwood and Blue Gum. That fits nicely with my current book. It's called "Burning Bush" by Stephen Pyne.





Yes, it has been logged





Wonder Brown





Faye saw Logrunners on the way back up the hill but my highlights were a colony of native bees that had created their honeycombs on the side of a rock face, the delightful fungi, some very obliging Wonder Brown butterflies and a skink so determined to catch its dinner that it ignored us.



We did drive through the campsites in Chichester SF. They were Telegherry, Frying Pan Flat and the Coachwood camping areas. They were all being claimed by groups for the Xmas/ New Year and they would not be quiet. There would be children, push bikes and the odd trail bike.

Our lunch spot, Telegherry Picnic Area, was delightfully quiet, however. We had it to ourselves except for a Large-billed Scrubwren and an obliging Black Jezebel.



We were conveniently placed to then drive down Wangat Road and visit Chichester Dam. Today it was almost deserted and I fear that would not be the case after Xmas so it was an inspired decision.

Chichester Dam was the first dam on the Hunter. At least, to use language that Ruth Morgan would understand, it was the first for Big Water. It was officially opened in 1926 though water was flowing from 1923. Many years later, when Kim Yeadon was Minister, a small hydro power generator was set up. This coincided with a plan to release environmental water for the Williams River. It can generate power for the equivalent of 70 homes. Today that dam was topping the walls and very picturesque.





We then drove back into Dungog, filled up with fuel, bought some additional supplies and returned to base. Here we were able to sit outside without too many March Flies and check out new avian visitors, including a Leaden Flycatcher.

And at the end of the day Faye used the outdoor shower and discovered she had also attracted a tick. I could ease it out with the edge of a knife but it has caused a lump. Pleasingly I had no more ticks and my leech socks had trapped three frustrated leeches too. All was good.

Friday 25th December 2020



Juvenile Eastern Spinebill



The Yellow-faced Honeyeaters loved to take a bath while the Spinebill waits its turn



Satin Bowerbird – female

At about 5.00am I woke. The cicadas were already in full voice so I held them off for a short time by listening to four back episodes of *Ockham's Razor* before emerging to the pre-dawn crepuscular light of another Christmas Day.

That day began under cool, cloudy conditions and the cloud settled into the valley, bringing a soft gentle mist and showers, on and off, through to about 1.30pm.



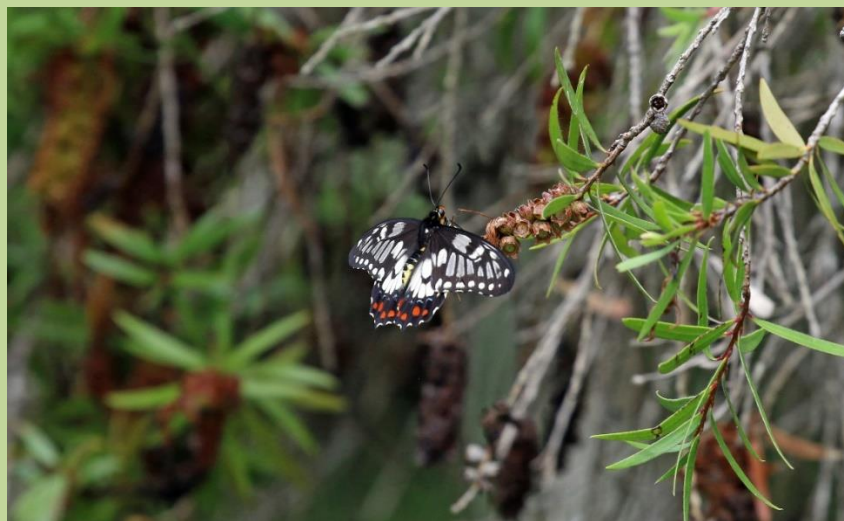
The beginning of the day also brought new sounds. Close by, the persistent calls of a Tawny Frogmouth! Further afield, the slightly manic sounds of a Pheasant Coucal!

Meanwhile we were visited by a Welcome Swallow (overhead) and Silvereyes (bird bath).

Speaking of the bird bath, it is a simple tin dish of about 2" in depth and slightly larger than a large serving plate. It is completed with a stone in its water so small birds can stand safely while bathing or drinking. It is placed under a Melaleuca tree. That tree is a handy perch from which the Yellow-faced Honeyeaters and Silvereyes descend to the pool and to which they retreat. A juvenile Eastern Spinebill used the same modus operandi. Other birds tended to approach it from across the lawn or even further afield. They have included Superb Fairywrens, Noisy Friarbirds, Grey Shrike-thrush, Satin Bowerbirds and Eastern Yellow Robins. It's too early to work out the preferred approach of the Grey Fantail.



Brown Cuckoo-dove, above, and Dainty Swallowtail, below



We had planned a slow day and that was forced on us by the constant showers. Our washing was OK under the eaves but the humidity might not get them dry. That's OK. It was lovely sitting, watching the rain and the birds that visited. In that blissful dripping of raindrops I found time to read articles from the spring edition of *Meanjin*. One article especially caught my attention. It was by Harry Sadler and called "*Connecting Flight*". It focused on a community theatrical production in Broome that celebrated the migratory waders that use Roebuck Bay. "The Shorebird Quest", complete with large puppets, locally composed music and storyline, and brought the community together but for me there is a deep sadness. That mudflat I visited on the western coast of South Korea, Saemangeum, is no more. The 30km sea wall is now complete (in 2010), thereby obliterating a productive mudflat and a key site on the Asian-Australasian Shorebird Flyway. That act alone has wiped out a huge percentage of the Red Knot population. The trip I made to Saemangeum was when I first met the delightful Ami Kang.

Wiping out many of the local butterfly population here right before our eyes is that family of Willie Wagtails. Those two juvenile mouths are very demanding. We saw two Blue Triangles go down as well as countless moths. Those birds are so manoeuvrable. They make our fighter planes look cumbersome.

After our late and lovely Christmas lunch in our own isolated corner of the world we drove along the road along Main Creek. It was a slow drive as we were looking for evidence of the Gam timber mill. In 1910 John Gam established this mill. Several generations later, in the 1970s, it was sold. By then it was producing charcoal. It is now no more but apparently there is still a chimney. We only saw a Gam bridge.



Mind you, we added an additional eight birds to the list for the locality. That included a pair of Green-winged Pigeons (once called Emerald Dove), a Bar-shouldered Dove and

two Dollarbirds chasing an Australasian Kestrel. But I have to say that I was delighted with the Eastern Rosellas. They remain my all-time favourite bird.



Straw-necked Ibis

Faye might have another favourite. She went for a late walk and flushed a bird that was on the track. Later, I heard a distinct call. It was a White-throated Nightjar. Sure enough the description of its silhouette and shape and size better fitted Faye's earlier sighting. That is now confirmed.

Saturday 26th December 2020



While we were enjoying our breakfast I happened to look up into the sky and saw a small flock of White-throated Needletails soaring overhead.



Later, as I began my third cup of morning coffee, a male King Parrot made its appearance. Before we headed out for the day I also found a Cicadabird. The bird list for the Yeranda property is now quite impressive.



Cicadabird



Rufous Fantail



Eastern Yellow Robin



Rufous Whistler



The fate of a cicada is to be part of the food chain

Our target today was Monkerai Nature Reserve. It proved to be a wild, rugged, forested area along a series of ridges and gullies that had clearly once been heavily logged. I don't know for sure but a quick guess would be that these lands came over as part of the Regional Forest Agreements. We walked in the reserve along one old logging track but because of the logging history this area had lots of light and lots of lantana.





*Hybanthus stellarioides*²

² <https://plantnet.rbgsyd.nsw.gov.au/cgi-bin/NSWfl.pl?page=nswfl&lvl=sp&name=Hybanthus~stellarioides>



Jewel beetle, *Temognatha variabilis*



As most of the Nature Reserve was either inaccessible or only reached off a badly maintained Trevor Tops Road that meant we merely admired the rest of Monkerai and the Black Bulga SCA from a distance. I must find out why Black Bulga is a SCA.

For the rest of the morning we completed a loop drive along Moore's Road to Upper Monkerai Road, down along Reltons Deviation to Monkerai Bridge and then out through Sugarloaf Creek to the Bucketts Way where we turned south, through Stroud Road, to then come back along Stroud Hill Road to home and lunch.





Karuah River



Now this is quite beautiful hillside grazing country. It crosses the Karuah River on a number of occasions and the Monkerai Bridge is a real highlight. It has been resurrected but it was first built as a truss bridge in 1882. No wonder it is listed as historic.





Male Superb Fairywren

After a lunch amidst the March Flies and a quiet reading period (in my case a chapter from “*Burning Bush*” from Stephen J Pyne) I walked slowly around paths near our cottage and found a few more insects to photograph. One was a skipper and almost certainly a Splendid Ochre.



A Click Beetle





Leaf beetle, *Phyllocharis cyanicornis*

Meanwhile our killer parents have been at it again. This time one took out a female Common Brown, much to Faye's consternation.



Willie Wagtails don't always get their way. A male Leaden Flycatcher outlasted the aerial attack and stayed put until it wanted to move on.





This male Satin Bowerbird has found a new decoration for his bower. He returned and plucked more later

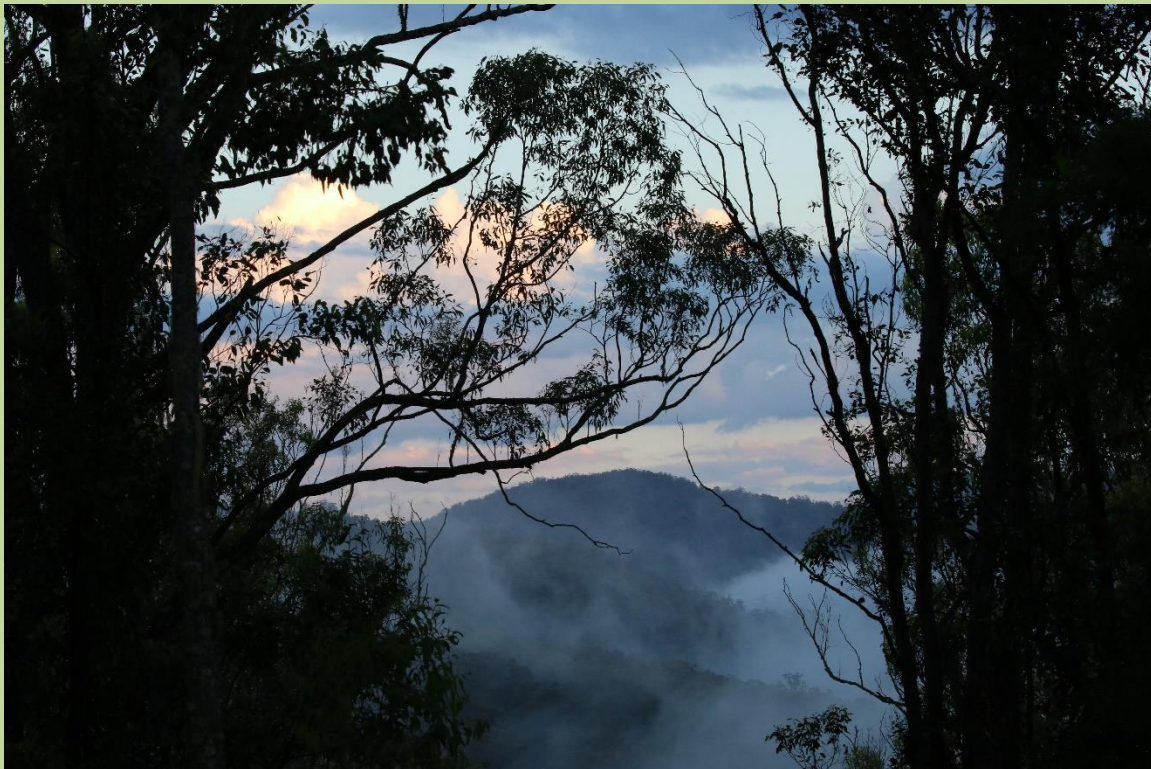
Our final short walk failed to flush the Nightjar but we did see a traditional Christmas beetle, one of the *Anoplognathus* genus.

And to end our wildlife for one day the Wonga Pigeon walked by. It flew when I presumed to pick up a camera.



Sunday 27th December 2020

Thunderstorms rolled in from about 2.00am and were still bouncing around the Black Bulga ridge to our east while we breakfasted. The view from the front porch was ever changeable, as mist rose, shifted and responded to the light and morning warmth. I wonder how the many photos I have taken of just this scene might transfer into an art project. In my case, perhaps a series of prints. I might begin with a specific Flickr album and then decide. The album should be called “Variations on a Scene”, akin to a Van Gogh series on haystacks.





After breakfast we drove to Dungog and found its Commons. This is almost anachronistic but it is so good it survives. The area is over 600 hectares of woodland and it appears to be loved by locals. It had mountain biking circuits, walking tracks and you can also go horse riding. Quite a few locals were there for the mountain biking when we arrived at 9.00.





We completed a 2km walking circuit but as we were there because it was mentioned as part of the bird circuit for the Dungog area I should note in that respect it was a failure. That is probably because we were here on a hot summer morning and in spring it would be very attractive to woodland birds. Despite that the walk had multiple charms.



One was not the multiple attack on my body by meat ants. Somehow I must have inadvertently stood on a nest and they infiltrated my shoes and socks and even up my trousers all the way to my waist. When there they decided to take chunks out of me and the bites were exquisite torture. I had to strip off and rid myself of these vicious, unwanted passengers.

Once free of their attention I settled down to enjoy a delightful circuit that included many highlights including a Hyacinth Orchid.

After morning tea we then drove through the backstreets of Dungog, taking a few photos of the town en route. Many we took today were of the civic buildings, including the Court House, the Town Hall and the hospital.





The courthouse

And that then had us back “home” for a late lunch, our main meal. It was inside, away from flies and in the coolest part we could find. The afternoon was hot and humid and

filled with the sounds of cicadas. The birdbath was in demand too and it had a new visitor in the shape of a White-naped Honeyeater.



As is my want I also went for an afternoon walk. I found the link to the Pindari Forest Track but there was no clear track taking me over to the dam. Instead it morphed into a clear ridge track that took me into another property and past another home tucked into the bush some 0.5km west along Skimmings Gap Road.

Just near where the track should have emerged and as I was heading home I saw a small butterfly hovering around an acacia shrub. Atheist that I am, I swear that I prayed for it to land. My somewhat dishonest prayers were answered and in another miracle I managed to get a series of photos of a female Imperial Hairstreak laying eggs while attendant ants moved in to do their duty. It is the first ever time I have witnessed that event even though I was aware of the behaviour. Of all the nature study events of 2020, and there were many, that might just be the highlight.³



³ <https://southernforestlife.net/happenings/2017/6/26/the-life-of-the-imperial-hairstreak>



Hot days make that birdbath popular. There is even a waiting list

Monday 28th December 2020



After a hot night and a deafening awakening we chose to drive into Dungog via the Fosterton loop road. It was almost as scenic as Upper Monkerai and we found an old colonial mansion called Figtree that impressed. Apparently quite a bit of money has been spent on its upkeep recently⁴. It's an old two-storey farmhouse with a gabled corrugated iron roof, a skillion and a verandah supported on iron posts with lace balcony balustrading. It was assessed for its heritage value in 1986 and apparently modelled on a home in Cornwall.



4

<https://www.dungog.nsw.gov.au/sites/dungog/files/public/images/documents/dungog/History/Heritage%20Study%201988/Rural/3f.%20rural%20combined%20r%2016.pdf>



Dollarbirds

We next stopped at a causeway over the Williams River in the hope of seeing more birds but while we were there all I found was a female Leaden Flycatcher and some ravens. While we were there, however, two cars arrived to deliver canoeists for a white-water

cruise (and, incidentally, a chance to fish for Australian Bass) along a stretch of water that looked ideal for platypus.



Leaden Flycatcher – female





The road into town then took us past a large property called Wycombe Park. One of its many dams boasted a pair of Australian Pelican. The owners are apparently a Jon and Chris and they bought the land in 1981, built their home in 1988 and run it for cattle grazing. I note, however, that Jon's main occupation is as architect⁵!



⁵ <https://pagardengroup899706437.files.wordpress.com/2019/10/september-minutes-2019.pdf>

But this morning was mostly to photograph the Main Street of Dungog in all its past glory and, given the state of its roads, I do suspect past glory also refers to the Council income. Dungog Shire Council clearly lacks a healthy rateable population.







257 Dowling Street – 1884
Originally the Commercial Banking Company of Sydney













Coolalie, 1895 – originally the home of the Dark family



On our return for morning tea we had a visitor; a Lace Monitor. It did not want to stay so we were then alone during the heat of the morning and afternoon except for pesky March Flies and occasional avian visits to the birdbath.





Red-browed Finches



White-throated Treecreeper - female

Late this afternoon we drove back down the hill, parked the car and walked along Cabbage Tree road. It's rainforest here. It's a delightful riparian corridor under massive Blue Gums with vine thickets along the edge. We walked that corridor until we entered Black Bulga SCA. It's that section, about a 3km return walk, that the "Dungog Area Birding Route" pamphlet prepared by the Hunter Bird Observers Club praised. It promised much but today it did not deliver. The most notable sighting and photo opportunity was of a Black-faced Monarch and gaping chick.







After an intensely hot and humid afternoon it was not surprising to see mist roll in and by 8.00pm the mountains were again reverberating to thunderstorms and providing the odd flash of sheet lighting. At least it was bringing cooling relief along with the rain.





Our “home”

Tuesday 29th December 2020

And so we left our “quiet corner” for our isolated Christmas away from the world, heading home via Clarencetown and Seaham.



It was a misty farewell.



Seaham Swamp Nature Reserve

Very few birds today!



The Williams River at Raymond Terrace
And a fitting end to the trip before we head back to Sydney



Bird List

Number	Bird Species (after Menkhorst et al)	Yeranda	Locality
1	Australian Pelican		X
2	Little Black Cormorant		X
3	Little Pied Cormorant		X
4	Silver Gull		X
5	Masked Lapwing		X
6	Black Swan		X
7	Australian Wood Duck		X
8	Grey Teal		X
9	Pacific Black Duck		X
10	Australasian Grebe		X
11	White-faced Heron		X
12	Australian White Ibis		X
13	Straw-necked Ibis		X
14	Australasian Swamphen		X
15	Eurasian Coot		X
16	Dusky Moorhen		X
17	Brown Quail	X	
18	Nankeen Kestrel		X
19	Tawny Frogmouth	X	
20	White-throated Nightjar	X	
21	Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo		X
22	Galah		X
23	Little Corella		X
24	Sulphur-crested Cockatoo		X
25	Rainbow Lorikeet		X
26	Australian King Parrot	X	X
27	Crimson Rosella	X	X
28	Eastern Rosella		X
29	White-headed Pigeon		X
30	Brown Cuckoo-Dove	X	X
31	Pacific Emerald Dove		X
32	Bar-shouldered Dove		X
33	Crested Pigeon		X
34	Wonga Pigeon	X	
35	Topknot Pigeon	X	
36	Pheasant Coucal	X	X
37	Eastern Koel	X	X
38	Channel-billed Cuckoo	X	X
39	Laughing Kookaburra	X	X
40	Sacred Kingfisher		X

Bird List

Number	Bird Species (after Menkhorst et al)	Yeranda	Locality
41	Dollarbird	X	X
42	White-throated Needle-tail	X	
43	Welcome Swallow	X	X
44	Australian Logrunner		X
45	Yellow-throated Scrubwren	X	X
46	White-browed Scrubwren	X	
47	Large-billed Scrubwren		X
48	Little Thornbill	X	
49	Striated Thornbill	X	X
50	Yellow-rumped Thornbill		X
51	Buff-rumped Thornbill		X
52	Brown Gerygone	X	
53	Superb Fairywren	X	X
54	White-naped Honeyeater	X	
55	Lewin's Honeyeater	X	X
56	Yellow-faced Honeyeater	X	X
57	Eastern Spinebill	X	X
58	Noisy Miner		X
59	Bell Miner		X
60	Red Wattlebird		X
61	Noisy Friarbird	X	X
62	Eastern Whipbird	X	X
63	White-throated Treecreeper	X	X
64	Cicadabird	X	
65	Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike	X	X
66	Pied Currawong	X	X
67	Pied Butcherbird		X
68	Grey Butcherbird	X	X
69	Australian Magpie	X	X
70	White-winged Chough		X
71	Australian Raven	X	X
72	Torresian Crow		X
73	Satin Bowerbird	X	X
74	Australasian Figbird		X
75	Olive-backed Oriole	X	X
76	Magpie-lark		X
77	Leaden Flycatcher	X	X
78	Black-faced Monarch	X	X
79	Grey Fantail	X	X
80	Rufous Fantail	X	X

Bird List

Number	Bird Species (after Menkhorst et al)	Yeranda	Locality
81	Willie Wagtail	X	X
82	Eastern Yellow Robin	X	X
83	Rufous Whistler	X	X
84	Golden Whistler	X	
85	Grey Shrike-thrush	X	
86	Silvereye	X	
87	Australian Reed-warbler		X
88	Common Myna		X
89	Red-browed Finch	X	X
90	House Sparrow		X