

## A Boy's Baffling Bird List from Western Port, Bird Day, October 1912

by Pat Macwhirter



*What on earth is a 'White Shouldered Caterpillar Eater' or a 'Dimond Bird' or a 'Wild Canary'?*

One hundred years ago the Federation of Australia was barely a dozen years old and alongside a growing sense of national identity there was a surge of interest in Australia's natural history. Frank Tate, the Director of the Victorian Education Department, and John Leach, the 'Organising Inspector of Nature Study' decided to promote 'Bird Day' for Victorian school children. Leach had helped to found the Gould League of Bird Lovers in 1909, which boasted over 25,000 members. He was a Council member of the Australasian Ornithologist's Union which had started 1901 and had just published his field guide, *An Australian Bird Book*. It was with Leach's new guide, on October 11<sup>th</sup> 1912, that thirteen year old Harewood Lyall, his younger brother, Gordon and his tutor set off to look for birds around Western Port Bay.

Harewood Lyall's Grandparents, William and Annabella, had come to Australia from Scotland. They had made good on the back of the Victorian gold rush and built their home, also called Harewood, on a sandy tongue of land sandwiched between the Great Koo Wee Rup Swamp and the north shore of Western Port Bay. William was a great reader and had a fine collection of books, many of which he had acquired on a trip back to Britain in 1854. The books remain to this day in the library at Harewood House, along with family letters, diaries and young Harewood Lyall's 1912 Nature Study Note Book, which was rescued from a box in the stables when my family acquired this Heritage listed property in 1991. In his book the young boy wrote down the birds found on their birding excursion.

For his field guide Leach gathered black and white and colour illustrations from multiple sources, including John Gould's earlier works and photographs of specimens in the National Museum in Melbourne and other collections. Compared with later field guides or mobile phone apps now available, *An Australian Bird Book* is very basic and hard to follow, but for its day it was pioneering. In his introduction, Frank Tate noted that people 'bred-elsewhere' perceived a weird melancholy in the Australian bush. Australian-born children, associated native birds with more pleasant memories but charming Australian birds had not found their rightful place in local poetry and literature because of a lack of suitable popular names or knowledge about common birds in the community. It might be hard to shoe horn names like Chestnut-rumped Ground Wren or Carinated Flycatcher into verse and literature but it was quite fallacious that Australian birds could not be as melodious as their European counterparts. Both Leach and Tate looked to *An Australian Bird Book* and the new check list of common names being drawn up by the Ornithologists' Union to help address these deficiencies.

Leach used the text of *An Australian Bird Book* to raise awareness of the devastation that egg collecting, shooting (especially by school boys) and the fashion of using of bird feathers

in women's hats were causing to bird populations worldwide and encouraged Australians to take pride and protect the new nation's unique bird life.

With these pleas in mind young Harewood recorded 43 names on his 1912 bird list which has generated animated discussion from numerous bird watching sleuths visiting Harewood House a century later. What would he have been looking at that he would call a 'Diamond Bird', a 'White Shafted Fantail', a 'Blue Crane' or a 'White Shouldered Caterpillar Eater'?

How many present day common names can you give for the birds in his list? If you score over 38 you've done very well! Some more clues follow.

Did Harewood go on to be an avid bird watcher later in life? It doesn't appear so. For many years he and his brother ran the garage at Tooradin. He died in 1979.

Birds seen on Bird Day (11th Oct 1912) 18, 10, 12

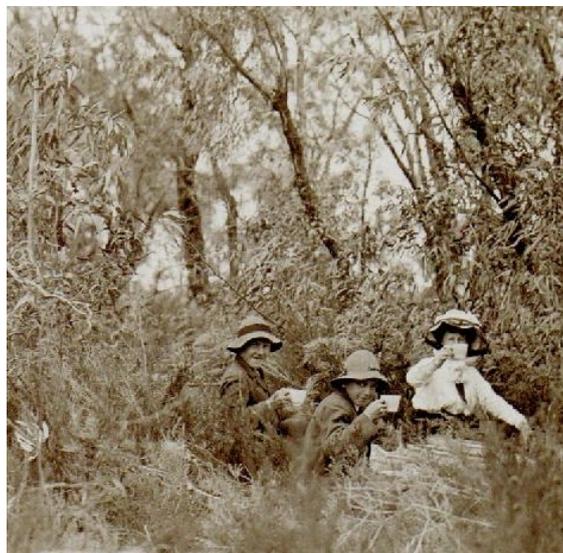
1	Sparrow	20	White fronted Chat
2	Magpie	22	Gold Finch
3	Swamp Hawk	23	Pallid Cuckoo
4	Starling	24	Blue Wren
5	Diamond Bird	25	Swallow (house)
6	Grey Minah	26	Swallow (wood)
7	Hestel (Wankeen)	27	Wild Canary
8	Rosella	28	White Shouldered caterpillar eater
9	Ground Lark	29	Black faced Cuckoo Shrike
10	White Shafted Fantail	30	Hookaburra
11	Water Hen	31	Mudlark
12	Yellow tailed Tit	32	Serwent fackass flutche
13	Green Honey eater	33	Quail
14	Bronze Cuckoo	34	Martin
15	Reed Warbler	35	Thrush
16	Brown Scrub Wren	36	Wattle Bird
17	Blue Crane	37	Shy Lark
18	Comorant	38	Shag
19	Fantail Fly-catcher	39	Brown Finch
40	Tree Creeper	42	Seagull
41	Baldcoot	43	Crow

### Deciphering Harewood Lyall's list

Without having been there a hundred years ago it's impossible to be certain exactly what Harewood saw, best guesses follow.

- House Sparrows, Starlings and Common Mynahs were brought to Victoria by the Acclimatisation Society in the 1860s. In his guide Leach noted that the House Sparrow was already a serious pest and wrote "it was a pity early colonists did not take note of Gould's protests and warnings, for the greatest harm introduced birds do is the displacing of native birds." Tree sparrows were introduced later and were less common.
- Swamp Harriers ('Swamp Hawks') are often seen coasting over the Poa grasslands around Harewood. A 'Derwent Jackass' (Butcher Bird) still chortles outside Harewood's kitchen window most mornings.
- 'Diamond Birds' was the name given by both Gould and Leach to Pardalotes. 'White shafted Fantail' was their name for Grey Fantails.
- Leach noted "The 'Blue Crane' of the country dwellers is the 'White-fronted Heron' of the bird-lover.' They are now called White-faced herons and they still nest in the pines at Harewood. Broglas are the only cranes found in Victoria and they have been reported but are rare around Western Port.
- Shag was listed separately from comorant, suggesting that species of both pied and black comorants were seen .

'White-shouldered Caterpillar-eater' has proven to be the acid test of a good bird watching sleuth. There have been a few visitors that picked this species based the descriptive name and where it was seen as today's White Winged Triller. Most need to trail through Leach's guide. Frank Tate's wish for new popular names that could be used in verse – and of celebrating the melodious voices of Australia's bird life were both fulfilled in the change of common name but, unfortunately, along with many other species it has become more rare. The need to act as good custodians of Australia's natural heritage is just as pressing now as it was 100 years ago. Encouraging school children to observe and make lists on Bird Day could help draw attention to the challenges.



**Harewood Lyall's 1912 Bird List**  
**Best guess at current day names**

1. House Sparrow
2. Australian Magpie
3. Swamp Harrier
4. Common Starling
5. Pardolate (spotted or striated?)
6. Noisy Miner (or Common Mynah?)
7. Australasian Kestrel
8. Eastern (Crimson?) Rosella
9. Australasian Pipit
10. Grey Fantail
11. Purple Swamphen
12. Yellow-rumped Thornbill
13. White-plumed Honeyeater
14. Horsfield's or Shining Bronze-Cuckoo
15. Australian Reed-Warbler
16. White-browed Scrubwren
17. White-faced Heron
- 18.
19. Pied or Little Pied Comorant?
20. Restless Flycatcher?
21. White-fronted Chat
22. European Goldfinch
23. Pallid Cuckoo
24. Superb Fairy-wren
25. Welcome Swallow
26. Dusky Woodswallow
27. Common Greenfinch?
28. White-winged Triller?
29. Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike
30. Laughing Kookaburra
31. Magpie-lark
32. Grey Butcherbird
33. Stubble or Brown Quail
34. Tree or Fairy Martin
35. Song or Bassian Thrush
36. Little or Red Wattlebird
37. Eurasian Skylark
38. Great or Little Black Cormorant
39. Brown Thornbill?
40. White-throated Treecreeper
41. Eurasian Coot
42. Silver Gull
43. Australian or Little Raven