Tree stags, Raven poop and seed germination …

Before anyone tells me this is just a load of “crap” – just let me explain!

Retirees (or anyone for that matter I guess) can get up to some weird and interesting stuff when it comes to hobbies and interests. I am currently reading a lovely book by well known Australian birder Sean Dooley called the The Big Twitch in which he reveals some of the more crazy and interesting antics some serious bird twitchers get up to – a great read if you are interested. (By the way, I do not consider myself a twitcher!). But I must admit, I was a little amused and bemused when I saw fellow resident Graeme McAlpine out with his portable vacuum and brush n’ pan collecting the excretation of our common corvid, the Little Raven. Read on to find out why.

A healthy ecosystem at work …

There has been lots happening in the natural world over the holiday period around The Cape since the last issue of Cape Chatter. With plenty of rain during 2020 and few really hot days to date, the plant life is looking great – the wetlands are wild with flowering rushes and sedges, and the newly planted creek line is already showing signs of emerging growth. On the animal front: there are good numbers of joeys amongst the Kangaroo mob; some stunning ‘murmurations’ of Common Starling, flocking ‘murders’ of Little Raven, and two Hooded Plover chicks have started life on 2nd Surf. There are active reptiles including Garden Skinks, Blue-tongue Lizard and Lowland Copperhead snake around the estate and with the recent rains, the calls of the local frog population are constant. All in all – the signs of a happy and healthy ecosystem at work!

The walking paths around The Cape are proving very popular with residents and visitors alike and I have become particularly attached to one of the beautiful gabion seats beside the mini-oval. It is a great and comfortable spot to observe the animals around the wetlands and creekline with the Bunurong Coastal Reserve as a backgorund. Throw in the usual stunning Cape sunset – what a wonderful place to enjoy watching nature go about its business!
I am sure many of us look at our local corvid the *Little Raven* and say: ‘just another nuisance, scavenging bird’. Well, I am becoming more and more fascinated by these extremely intelligent and beautiful birds. Early one morning last week (well early for me!) I ventured out to *my* gabion seat to check on our *Eastern Rosellas* and the nesting box (more on them later). To my surprise, an immature *Little Raven* was perched on the back of the seat. I slowly approached and was able to get a very close-up look (= photo opportunity) at this interesting bird. It didn’t seem to mind my presence, but it did let out a couple of ‘aark’ calls to one of its nearby parents.

Remarkable to see inside the bill of the bird when it ‘aarked’. Look at those sharp, pointy, bristle-like features at the back of the upper mandible! The immature bird is distinguished by its brown eye and a narrow bare patch on the chin which is coloured pink here by the sunlight.

It was also interesting to see the eye structure of the bird in operation – this blue cover (above) forms over the eye to act as a protective covering against foreign particle intrusions. Sort of evil looking as well!!

The adult *Little Raven* (above) is a stunning bird with black plumage and varying levels of gloss when highlighted by sunlight. The iris is white with an inner blue ring around the pupil.

They are mainly omnivorous and are carrion feeders, but also play a valuable scavenging role and eat insect pests in pastures. The immature above is learning the art of ground feeding from the adult – there is quite a bit of damage to the ground around the mini-oval at the moment from their flock feeding activity.
We have a lovely small indigenous plant around The Cape known as *Coast Beard-heath* (*Leucopogon*). They are near impossible to propagate “by hand”. Fellow resident and experienced indigenous plant nurseryman Graeme McAlpine is experimenting with a new technique based on the theory the *Leucopogon* seed will only germinate after passing through the digestive system of a bird – in our case – the *Little Raven*. Graeme is collecting Raven poop from underneath tree stags where the seed collects and hopes to have some seeds germinate soon.

In our home garden, we have placed several small tree stags for birds to perch. Not surprisingly, a check under some of them has revealed small *Leucopogon* seedlings emerging (pictured below) – lending support to Graeme’s theory!

Small tree stags are just one of the important elements along with logs, rocks and plants providing important habitat structure for our native animals in The Cape home gardens.

Another indigenous plant that has emerged under our stags without any human effort (ie. by bird droppings) is the *Bower Spinach* (*Tetragonia*) pictured above. The seed from droppings has enough fertiliser and moisture around it to germinate naturally.

*Bower Spinach* is high in Vitamin C with edible leaves and roots and was an important food source for our first nations Bunurong people along this coast. The *Leucopogon* (also known as the native current) also has an edible white berry which was a valuable food source for the Bunurong people during summer months.
The beautiful Common Hover Fly

As well as our wonderful bird germinators, we have an array of lovely native pollinators around – it is not just the European Honey Bee that does the work. Last issue on the front page of Cape Chatter, I had a photo (below) of a Common Hover Fly.

Recently, I was inspecting our pumpkin patch in the back yard and managed to spot a Common Hover Fly that was so laden with pollen that it was having difficulty climbing out of a pumpkin flower. On closer examination of photos from the macro lens, I was astonished at the stunning spectacle of the fly covered in what looked like golden jewels – it was such an amazing scene. Here’s hoping we get some decent pumpkins so we can thank this great little pollinator for its hard work.

PS. I positioned the flower horizontally so the fly could get out!
Life in the home gardens

While talking about home gardens, it is promising to see some of the local smaller birds venturing into the house gardens of Stage 2 far away from ‘established’ Cape Paterson and the Coastal Reserve. Recently, *House Sparrows* have been seen for the first time cleaning up all types of bugs and caterpillars in our garden and we are getting frequent visits from *Willie Wagtail*. Resident Helen Temple is reporting continued sightings of *Grey Fantail* at her home – all good signs we are on the right track with the re-creation of important habitat in our gardens.

Residents Alison McAlpine and Chris Downie have shared some lovely pictures on Facebook of their resident *Blotched Blue-tongue Lizard* in Periwinkle Crt. Graeme McAlpine tells me he has been feeding them garden snails (there are plenty of them about at the moment) and is amazed how the ‘Bluey’ can extract the snail body from the shell without breaking the shell! He has also provided some wonderful habitat structures for the lizards to protect themselves from the heat and predators and dishes of fresh water! Great stuff.

‘Echy’, the resident Stage 1 *Short-beaked Echidna* is still highly active about the home gardens as well.

REMEMBER: PLEASE DRIVE SLOWLY WITHIN THE CAPE TO HELP PROTECT THESE BEAUTIFUL ANIMALS AS THEY GO ABOUT THEIR DAILY LIVES
Excitement is building …

The excitement is building as we approach ‘fledgling day’ with our Eastern Rosella nesting box.

Since the placement of a nesting box in the most southern stag in the creek line early November last year, we have been tracking the breeding progress. On the 23rd December, we saw evidence things were going well when both the male and female entered the box on separate occasions. In the last week, the pair have been seen regularly entering about the same time, indicating there definitely are chicks being fed.

My Australian Parrots reference book by Joseph M Forshaw, states: “Newly hatched chicks are fed by the female, who in turn is fed by the male, but from about the tenth day after hatching, the chicks are fed by both parents. Approximately thirty-five days after hatching, the chicks leave the nest …”

By my calculations, the chicks would have hatched around 1st January and they should fledge around the 4th February. Hopefully, we may hear some squawking noises from the chicks before then and see some little heads popping out waiting for mum and dad to return with food.

The birds are very cautious when on the stag near the nest. They take their time to enter the box and will fly away when people walk past or when predatory birds are in the vicinity. A good spot to watch them with binoculars is from the gabion seat on the eastern side of the oval – you will often see me and Graeme McAlpine there recording their movements.

Big thanks to Graeme for his observations and also Paul Oakley for dropping by with an update. We welcome other observations as well if you see/hear anything while passing.

Above: The proud parents at the nesting box

At this stage we have no idea how many chicks there are – but on average, five eggs are laid but could be anywhere between 4 to 9.

The Fascinating Toes of the Little Grassbird

I have donned the gumboots and pocketed my snake bandage to try and get some closer pictures of the Little Grassbird which are now happy residents in the central wetland complex. Breeding appears to have been successful as there are several birds about, and you can still hear the occasional call.

A photo from the other day highlighted the way the toes of the bird have evolved to hang on to the rushes and sedges, which is their prime habitat – with the rear toe wrapped around the circular stem.
I recently took this photo of a Two-headed Three-legged Crested Pigeon ... only kidding.

But I did recently see the mating ritual of a pair which was fascinating. The female adopted a yoga style “downward dog facing pose” while the male walked around her in a circle a couple of times, he mounted her, did their thing ... and they resumed foraging! Sadly, I did not have the camera, but I got a photo of the pair not long after. Could be the same pair as above?

Wildlife Rescue Protocols Worked

Pat on the back to resident Jeannie, who rescued a young and badly exposed Ringtail Possum at the base of the cliffs near the channel beach last Thursday morning.

For all The Cape residents, just to let you know that the ‘Injured Wildlife Rescue’ protocols (in the form of flowcharts with contact numbers which you all should have), were followed and worked. The baby possum was taken to the Wonthaggi Vet Clinic and was treated before being sent to a wildlife shelter for further care and recovery.