Issue 59 - March 2022

Wombat Forestcare Newsletter

As we move into autumn, Silver Banksias are starting to flower, providing nectar for small mammals, birds and insects. It won't be long before we will be enjoying fungi forays in the Wombat Forest. Autumn is a perfect time to enjoy forest walks. **Gayle Osborne** (editor) and **Angela Halpin** (design)

Australasian Grebes

By Eric Fah

Expected parenthood, even at the best of times can be challenging, and on this occasion this was no exception, with extreme temperatures, unprecedented levels of humidity and thunderstorms experienced in the latter part of January this year in this district.

This was the situation faced by a pair of Australasian Grebes that had taken up residency on my dam, who during the latter part of the exceptional weather conditions successfully produced five little chicks.

I am fortunate to have a dam on my property, comprising of a number of acres that provides ideal habitat for a number of species of water birds, and in particular the Australasian Grebe.

For the past 20 years I have been able to spend countless hours observing the Australasian Grebes as they pair up, often more than one pair, in September/October and raise up to two broods of chicks, as was the case this season.

It is always a great privilege for me to share in the joys of newly hatched chicks; to observe the care, dedication and protection provided by the parents to their young, the development of the chicks, as well as the tragedy of loss of chicks.

The Australasian Grebe *Tachybaptus novaehollandiae* belongs to the Podicipedidae family, which comprises of 19 species, of which three are found in Australia. The other two species are the Great Crested Grebe and the Hoary-headed Grebe.

They are a small water bird commonly found on fresh water lakes, rivers and dams throughout most of Australia, on nearby Pacific Islands and has also self introduced to New Zealand. At 23–27 cm in length and weighing only between 100–230 g, they are one of the smallest members of the grebe family.

The Australasian Grebe is not globally threatened and is regarded as locally common throughout its range with the possibility of population numbers increasing;

An Australasian Grebe in breeding plumage.
Photography © Gayle Osborne

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One of the parents arrives with a small fish for the young grebes.
Photography © Gayle Osborne

however not a great deal of study has been undertaken on population numbers.

Grebes have no close relatives in the bird world but DNA studies indicate that they have evolved from the same ancestors as penguins and pelicans.

Their diet consists mainly of small fish, water insects and crustaceans. During the late spring and into early autumn, the grebes on my dam feed predominately on yabbies that are caught during deep dives of over 3 metres, then eaten on the surface of the water, and on which the young are mainly raised.

The Australasian Grebe is mostly an aquatic water bird and generally dives to escape danger. Despite not being a strong flyer, due to its short wings and its legs being placed far back on its body, it is still capable of long and fast flights, mostly at night to avoid predators, to move to more favourable conditions, including possible migration north from southern Australia during the winter. My observations in the early years were that the grebes left at the end of autumn and returned in spring, however, in more recent times, the adult grebes have stayed all year, managing to survive the long cold winters and limited availability of food.

The Australasian Grebe is a shy bird that does not allow a close approach and on sensing danger it will dive and resurface 10–15 metres away, although over time it will become more tolerant of people.

The Australasian Grebe has two distinct plumage phases: non-breeding and breeding. During the non-breeding phase both adults have similar dark grey-brown above and mostly silver-grey below plumage and a white oval patch of bare skin at base of bill.

During the breeding season the plumage of both sexes changes to dark brown above with a glossy-black head and neck and a striking chestnut facial stripe, extending from behind the eye to the base of the neck. The eyes are yellow, with a prominent pale yellow face spot below. There is little to distinguish the grebes' sexes during either plumage phase, other than the male being slightly larger and also having a longer bill.

The juveniles resemble non-breeding adults, but have black and whitish stripes on both face and neck and the eyes are slightly duller. The chicks have a pale pink bill and dark eyes.

The Australasian Grebes sinking ability is aided by their unusual plumage that is dense and waterproof. The undersides of their feathers are at right angles to the skin allowing the birds to trap large air bubbles for buoyancy. When the grebes press their feathers against their bodies the trapped bubbles are released thereby reducing buoyancy and allowing them to sink.

Both adults share in the arduous construction of a floating nest made of vegetation that is anchored to a branch or other vegetation. My observations seem to indicate that the female is in charge of the nest construction and will reposition material brought by the male and also reject material should it be found unsuitable. She will often call out with a high-pitched trill should the male be taking too long to return with nest building material.

Breeding period in the southern part of their range is generally between September to January and January to April in the north, with slight variation to dates depending on location.

Incubation period is about 23 days. During this time both parents will take shifts sitting on the pale blue eggs, which can stain from the nest material to a brownish colour, with a clutch of 4–5 eggs being normal. However, I have observed on a number of occasions that six chicks can hatch from the one brood.

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Grebe chicks riding on their parents' backs.
Photography © Gayle Osborne

The striped downy chicks are able to swim at birth but may be carried on the parent's back, between their slightly raised wings, and remain on the parent's back even when the parent dives under water.

The first few days of the chicks' lives are spent mostly on the nest with the parents alternating sitting on the nest. By the second week, as the chicks develop, they spend less time on the nest and more time swimming around or resting on a parent's back. There is a noticeable difference in size between the oldest and the youngest chick.

I have observed the parents singling out the youngest chick for extra attention and care and they will often bypass the demands of the older chicks for food, giving preference to the youngest chick. Others have recorded observations of parent Australasian Grebes ignoring the youngest chick.

During breeding season the Australasian Grebe is quite vocal in defending its territory with both adults producing loud, rapid, metallic and slightly wavering trill sounds, and when alarmed this sound becomes higher and harsher. Their alarm call is a sharp 'pit' or 'bik'.

The parents are exceptionally devoted and very protective and will try to drive away any other water birds, including ducks and herons and even other grebes, by confronting them by charging at considerable speed, skimming just along the surface of the water and by flapping their wings to splash water on any intruder accompanied by a loud trill alarm call. Often the second parent will join in the territorial defence. On sensing danger from a water bird, the grebes will often scare the bird away by diving and coming up under it.

Generally chick mortality is quite high, up to 80% at some locations, through predation by other water birds, including herons, Dusky Moorhens and Purple Swamphens, while cormorants are known to eat the eggs but not the chicks.

My observations over the years indicate a very high level of survival rate for the chicks on my dam reaching juvenile stage. This might be due to few predators and an ample supply of food.

However, I recall a few years ago being awoken early morning to the sounds of a considerably loud commotion on my dam. On investigating, I observed the adult parent birds defending their nest against a Wedge-tailed Eagle. The grebes, despite

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Adult grebe with chicks. Photography © Eric Fah.

Juvenile Australasian Grebe. Photography © Gayle Osborne.

being so tiny compared to the eagle, valiantly and fearlessly tried to fight off the eagle but unfortunately to no avail. The eagle ate all the unhatched eggs and destroyed the nest.

The chicks grow quickly and after their first week become more independent and adventurous, and within three weeks the chicks have already developed into proficient divers, successfully catching their own yabbies and the occasional dragonfly.

Over the next few weeks the chicks become progressively more independent of their parents. I have observed a strong sibling bond between the chicks, which often stay together as a group, with the exception of the oldest chick who appears to take on a more independent existence.

By the time the young reach about 10 weeks of age they are fully independent and capable of catching their own food. The parents, having tirelessly devoted their energies to raising them, start to drive them away, forcing the young to move to another location. During breeding season this will allow the parents to prepare for the next brood of chicks. ■

All the photographs accompanying the article were taken at Eric Fah's dam.

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The floating nest constructed of aquatic vegetation. Photography © Eric Fah

Blue-tongued Skinks

By Lynda Wilson

There are over 320 species of the skink family Scincidae in Australia, a number of which are found in the Wombat Forest, including the recently discovered Mountain Skink *Liopholis montana* (ref Issue 57 of this Newsletter September 2021). In this article, we'll look at a few of the larger and more common skinks that can be found in the central region of Victoria, specifically Blue-tongued Skinks of the Australasian genus *Tiliqua*. The large fleshy blue tongue of these charismatic skinks is so distinctive that it lends itself to the common name of these large skinks.

An Eastern Blue-tongued Skink appreciating access to freshwater near Denver. Photography © Lynda Wilson.

When we think of Blue-tongues colloquially, we tend to think of the Eastern Blue-tongued Skink, also known as the Common Blue-tongue *Tiliqua scincoides*. But did you know that there are seven species of Blue-tongued Skinks, all but one of which occur in Australia, and three of which can be found in central Victoria[1].

The Eastern Blue-tongued Skink, subspecies *Tiliqua scincoides scincoides*, is widespread inhabiting semi-desert, mixed woodlands, and scrubland habitats right across south-eastern Australia and is a common sighting both in the bush and in gardens[2]. You may stumble across a Blotched Blue-tongued Skink *Tiliqua nigrolutea* in wet and dry sclerophyll forests, montane woodlands of the cooler highlands of south-west NSW, Victoria and into Tasmania right down to coastal heathlands. This happens to be the only species of blue-tongued skink that is present in Tasmania. Both the Eastern and Blotched Blue-tongued Skinks have been encountered frequently within and around the Wombat Forest.

In the warmer drier parts west of the Great Dividing Range, the Shingleback *Tiliqua rugosa*, otherwise known as the Bobtail or Stumpy tail lizard can be found. While the Atlas of Living Australia (ALA) does not show any records of the Shingleback specifically within the Wombat Forest itself, there are several records close by including south of Fryerstown and to the north and west of Newstead and Castlemaine. The Shingleback has very distinctive large, dark scales with or without blotches, and, as per its other common name, a short stumpy tail which is not dissimilar to the shape of its head.

The Eastern Blue-tongue and the Blotched Blue-tongue are quite similar to each other in shape and size, but have quite distinctive markings. The Eastern Blue-tongue has its dark bands or stripes with a broad dark temporal streak from the eye to above the ear, while the Blotched has pale blotches rather than stripes on its back and barely an obscure eye stripe. These features are reflected in the Latin nomenclature of the Blotched Blue-tongue *Tiliqua nigrolutea* where *Nigro* and *lutea* mean black and yellow respectively.

The salmon-coloured blotches on a very dark background indicate this specimen observed near Denver is the highlands form of the Blotched Blue-tongued Skink. Photography © Lynda Wilson.

Some herpetologists recognise two distinct forms of Blotched Blue-tongue, one of the lowlands, right down to the coast, and one of the highlands, as the colouration and pattern appear to vary geographically. The lowlands form tends to be shades of grey or brown with paler silvery to tan coloured blotches along the back, that are contrasted by surrounding darker areas. The highlands form is typically darker (often jet black) that provides a strong contrast to much paler cream or more brightly coloured pink, salmon or orange-coloured blotches.

Some of my desktop research suggests that in the ACT, the Eastern Blue-tongue inhabits the warmer climatic zones, while the Blotched Blue-tongue replaces it at higher elevations, and that they tend not to co-occur. I can confidently report that both species are readily found here at Denver as evidenced by the photos included in this article. In fact, I have observed both species within 50 metres of each other within the space of a few hours…one in my chook yard and one in the nearby rose garden.

I'm always pleased to see them in the garden as I hope their omnivorous diet helps reduce the

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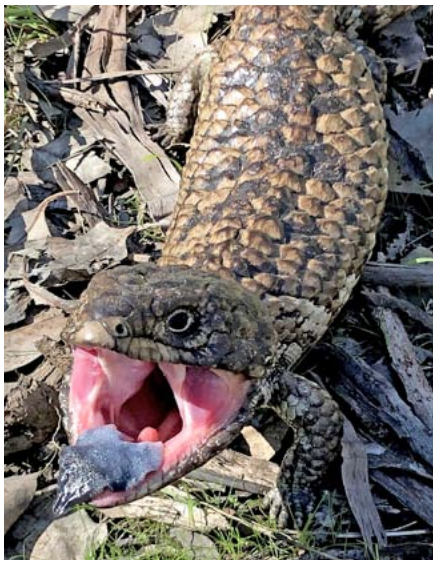
population of snails and slugs and other garden pests. Their diet includes carrion, molluscs, various insects such as beetles, caterpillars and crickets along with flowers and fruits. There are reports that Blue-tongues keep snake numbers down as they may prey on newly-hatched snakes of various species. As it turns out, as the snakes grow older, the roles are reversed and the skinks tend to become the prey.

Researchers have reported that the Blue-tongues' diet also consists of a significant volume and variety of fungi and have recorded observations of Blue-tongues actively digging for fungi, suggesting that fungi may be desirable and actively sought.



This Shingleback Skink was observed in the Spring Plains Nature Conservation Reserve south of Heathcote though there are currently no ALA records of these skinks in this area. Photography Leon Metzeling.

Blue-tongues detect their food by smell but not only by using their nose. They can sense chemicals with a patch of sensory cells located in the main nasal chamber known as the 'Jacobson's Organ'. Once food is located, they use their large rear teeth and a very strong jaw to crush it. The big fleshy blue tongue, which contrasts beautifully with the bright pink mouth to act as a warning to would-be predators, can also produce a thick mucus to assist in catching prey.

Water and nutrients are stored in the tails of Blue-tongues. The Eastern and Blotched Blue-tongues can "drop" their tails or fat reserves if necessary to escape predators but, unlike many smaller skinks which will drop their tails readily, it can take about a year and a lot of energy for the tails of these larger Blue-tongues to regrow. During this time, the skink would have lost its nutrient and water reserves so this tends to be a response only in desperate situations.

The Blue-tongues, as with many lizards, have a photosensory organ known as the parietal eye or a "third eye". It is like a scale with some degree of transparency leading down to part of the pineal gland and is associated with hormone production, melatonin release (depending on daylight), and regulation of body temperature. This "third eye" consists of only rudimentary retina and lens, so while sensitive to changes in light and dark or movement, it does not form distinct images.

Like many lizards, the skinks can perform a behaviour known as brumation (similar to hibernation) in the cooler months. During this time, they still require water, but can go without food as they draw on the fat reserves in their tail.

Reptiles' body temperatures fluctuate with that of their environment (poikilothermy) as they have no internal mechanism to produce heat and maintain an elevated body temperature. Our skinks therefore, tend to live in areas where they can bathe in sunlight and shelter under leaf litter, shrubs, tussocks, rocks and logs as required in order to regulate their body temperature. To remain active, they need to maintain a body temperature between 30–35° C, otherwise they become sluggish or inactive.

Blue-tongues are solitary for most of the year, but males will head off in search for a mate in spring. Mating season can become quite violent with males vying for mates and the mating process itself can be rough resulting in females suffering injuries. The same mating pairs may come together over several years with Shinglebacks reportedly mating for life.

These large skinks are viviparous, normally giving birth in autumn, three to four months after mating, to around six to twelve live young, fewer for the Shingleback. A well-developed mammal-like placenta contains a large yolky egg that provides nutrition for the growing embryos. The placental membrane is then eaten by the newborns at birth.

The young are born self-sufficient, shed their skin and disperse a few days after birth. Blue-tongues are sexually mature when they are around four years old and have been known to live for up to 30 years.

In addition to snakes, larger predatory birds such as Laughing Kookaburras, currawongs and raptors may see blue tongues as a tasty meal, but not surprisingly, the biggest threats to these skinks include dogs and cats, snail baits and machinery such as vehicles and lawn mowers. Perhaps a little surprising is that Blue-tongues, particularly the Shingleback, are amongst the most common victims of the illegal trade in wildlife. And these victims are not necessarily sourced from licenced breeders, but are often taken from the wild.

So the next time you encounter one of these impressive creatures in the bush, in the garden or on the road, appreciate its characteristic features, give it the respect, space and protection it deserves, (perhaps some encouragement to get it off the road or away from the lawn mower) and be grateful it's keeping those pesky snails and slugs at bay. ■

Notes

1. The four Blue-tongued Skinks that are not found in Victoria and are not specifically discussed in this article comprise the Adelaide Pygmy Blue-tongued Skink *Tiliqua adelaidensis*, the Centralian Blue-tongued Skink *Tiliqua multifasciata*, the Western Blue-tongued Skink *Tiliqua occipitalis* and the Indonesian Blue-tongued Skink *Tiliqua gigas*.
2. Two other subspecies of the Eastern Blue-tongued Skink inhabit northern Australia *Tiliqua scincoides intermedia* and Indonesia *Tiliqua scincoides chimaera*.

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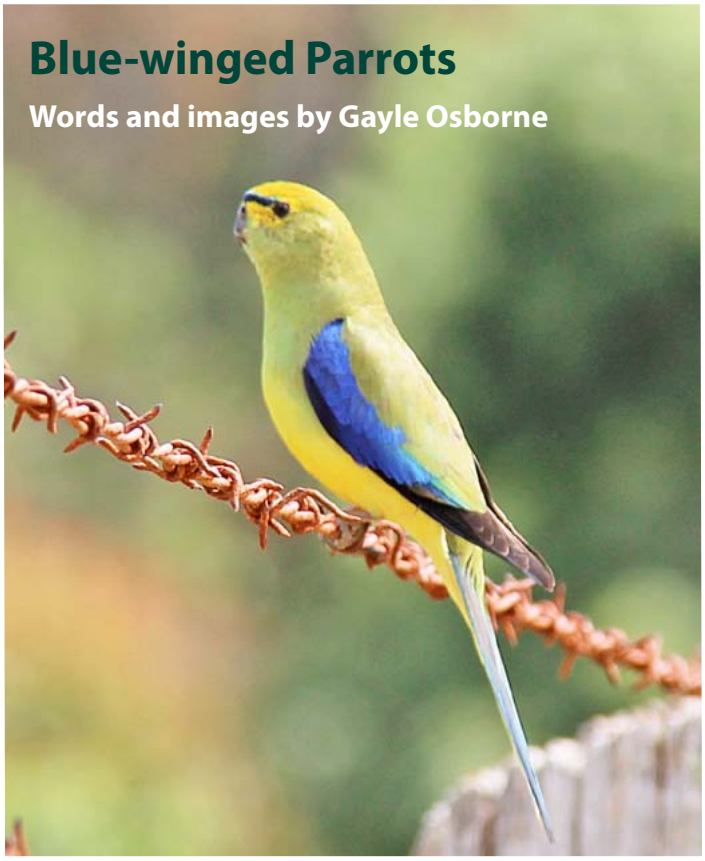
Blue-winged Parrots

Words and images by Gayle Osborne



One of the many Blue-winged Parrots at the paddock in Greenhills Road. Photography © Gayle Osborne.

Adult Blue-winged Parrot feeding the hungry chicks. Photography © Gayle Osborne.

In the last issue of our newsletter we looked at a number of threatened species that are found in the Wombat Forest. Another Wombat Forest species seems likely to be added to the list of species in the Vulnerable category. The Blue-winged Parrot *Neophema chrysostoma* is being assessed by the Threatened Species Scientific Committee to be eligible for listing under the national EPBC Act.

One main factor that appears to make the species eligible for listing in the Vulnerable category is "that the population appears to have declined by 30–50% in three generations (11 years)"[1].

I have observed a decline in sightings of Blue-winged Parrots in the Wombat Forest, and of particular concern is an area of farmland within the forest on Greenhills Road, south of Blackwood. In December 2012 I stopped to photograph Blue-winged Parrots in a paddock with long grass. There seemed to be at least 30 birds. The owner of the paddock told me that for as long as he could remember there had been parrots there all year, with reduced numbers in winter.

In subsequent years, we have frequently stopped at this site and have never again seen the Blue-winged Parrots. It may be that the paddocks are mown to reduce fire risk and therefore do not provide seed for these parrots.

Another place that I used to reliably see these parrots was a spot along the Loddon River Road and for about eight years have not had a sighting. This vegetation has not greatly changed in this time and the grassy verge remains intact.

Blue-winged Parrots are migratory or partially migratory, however their movements are complex and not well understood. Tasmania, southern Victoria and south-eastern South Australia are the main spring/summer breeding regions with the majority of the Tasmanian birds migrating to the mainland following breeding. There is a further autumn migration, as far as southern Queensland by many Blue-winged Parrots, although good numbers remain down south. It's unclear whether this northerly migration is made up of Tasmanian or mainland birds or both.

Although Blue-winged Parrots tend to prefer "grasslands and grassy woodlands and are often found near wetlands both near the coast and in semi-arid zones"[2], they can be found in a variety of forest habitats in the Wombat, from riparian forests to drier open forests.

A pair was seen feeding chicks in a breeding hollow, in January 2018, in a gully near Trentham. They inhabited a stag that had been used for breeding by Red-browed Treecreepers the previous year.

As with so many threatened species, habitat loss, degradation and fragmentation are considered a threat to their ability to survive. The protection of Blue-winged Parrots and their breeding sites is another reason the state government should hurry up and legislate the promised parks. ■

Notes

1 & 2. Consultation Document on Listing Eligibility and Conservation Actions *Neophema chrysostoma* (Blue-winged Parrot).

Reference

www.awe.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/consultation-document-neophema-chrysostoma.pdf

Collared Sparrowhawk the bird catcher

By Trevor Speirs

As the summer days grow longer and warmer in the Wombat, the birds in the forest become quieter and quieter. With the bulk of spring breeding completed, maybe there is no need for the many songsters to announce their presence and intentions, and by early February many of our breeding migrants seem to have packed up and headed back north. There is one bird that can sometimes get particularly vocal at this time of year however, and that is the Collared Sparrowhawk *Accipiter cirrocephalus*. The Collared Sparrowhawk's breeding season begins in spring/summer and it is at this time that their constant calling can reveal the whereabouts of an otherwise secretive raptor. When chicks are born there will be a need for an increase in prey items for their hungry mouths and studies have shown small passerines; pardalotes, thornbills and honeyeaters etc., make up the bulk of a chick's diet.

Adult Collared Sparrowhawk showing square-tipped tail and staring eyes. Photography © Lynda Wilson.

Adult Brown Goshawk identified by rounder tail and beetle brow. Photography © Trevor Speirs.

Typically three eggs are laid and the time taken from an egg hatching to a juvenile reaching independence from its parents is thought to be around 10 weeks for the Collared Sparrowhawk. Depending on the number of surviving young (on average 1–2 per clutch) there could well be an adverse impact on the local small bird population. This occurred to me recently when checking on the progress of a juvenile Barking Owl which had successfully reached independence, about four months after fledging, which is a great deal longer than the six weeks taken by a juvenile sparrowhawk. In the near vicinity to where the owl was reared, on private property, noisy Collared Sparrowhawks could be heard calling constantly, a high pitched Keer-Keer-Keer, a sure sign of breeding. Barking Owls do take birds as small as honeyeaters but the vast majority of their prey, both bird and mammal, is much larger and well beyond the capabilities of the Collared Sparrowhawk and it can be assumed a balance of sorts occurs.

The Collared Sparrowhawk *Accipiter cirrocephalus*, like all Australian members of the Accipiter family, is a good example of reversed sexual dimorphism; the female being larger than the male. Where this occurs in other bird species the size difference can be small and less evident but in Australia's Accipiters (from the Latin *accipere* to seize or capture) the difference is quite noticeable. The female adult Collared Sparrowhawk is nearly double in weight to the male and this is reflected in the prey size taken by each sex. Like most raptors the

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Collared Sparrowhawk is capable of killing birds heavier than themselves, but as most prey is caught on the wing it then has to be taken to an eating perch. The upper carrying weight for a Collared Sparrowhawk is generally thought to be less than half its weight, and while some arthropods and reptiles are taken it is mainly small birds making up the majority of prey. The male takes prey usually weighing less than 50 grams and the larger female's prey can weigh up to 80 grams, however there is a record of a rock dove (feral pigeon) being taken by an apparently starving female Collared Sparrowhawk. Although both birds weigh around the same, rock doves succumb meekly when attacked and presumably this kill would most likely have been made on the ground. Collared Sparrowhawks kill their prey by applying sustained pressure with their feet to the captured bird and this process is another factor which limits the size of their prey. Attempting to take medium sized birds that show some resistance; small parrots and the like, could result in serious damage to the sparrowhawk's long thin toes and claws, a potentially disastrous outcome.

An expert aerialist in woodland habitats, the Collared Sparrowhawk is more likely to be found on the edges of the Wombat Forest rather than the more densely timbered parts. The near identical species, the Brown Goshawk *Accipiter fasciatus*, seems to be equally at home deep in the forest as well as in more open woodland. The adult or juvenile of either species can often be difficult to identify with certainty in the field. Being of similar size, about 400 mm in length, the female sparrowhawk can easily be confused with the male goshawk. While both species calls are similar there is a subtle difference, and this is generally most evident during breeding. The squared tipped tail of the Collared Sparrowhawk compared to the rounder tail of the Brown Goshawk is probably the clearest and most obvious difference to look for. The bird guides write of the beetle brow of the goshawk compared to the more open-eyed look of the sparrowhawk as a main diagnostic difference but without the assistance of photos it can be hard to determine. ■

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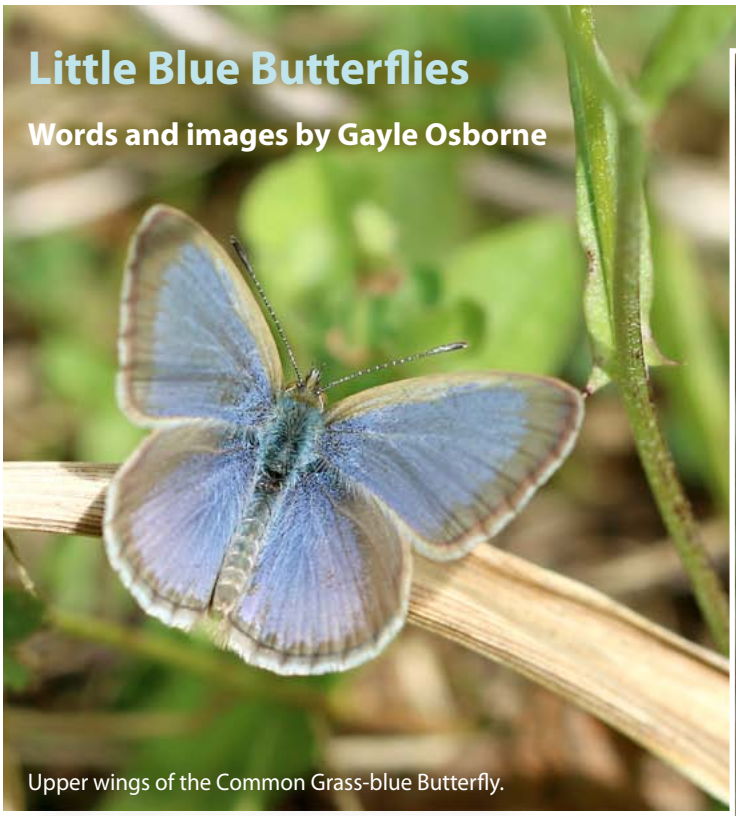
Little Blue Butterflies

Words and images by Gayle Osborne



Upper wings of the Common Grass-blue Butterfly.

Common Grass-blue Butterflies mating.

The small blue butterflies that emerge in summer are a favourite of mine with their beautiful intricate patterns on the underside of their wings. These butterflies can usually only be identified by the markings on the underwings.

The wings of the Common Grass-blue *Zizina otis* subsp. *labradus* are bluish lilac above. The wingspan is about 23 mm. Their larval food includes low-growing legumes, both indigenous and introduced, so they are also found in gardens and farmland. Due to the wide range of plants that this butterfly uses for breeding, it is quite common.

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Little Blue Butterflies

The Two-spotted Line-blue *Nacaduba biocellata* is tiny, with a wingspan of only 17 mm. The upper wings are lilac or dark brown with a dark blue base. Their larva feed on the flower buds of wattles.

In our district, the main food plant of the Blotched Dusky-blue *Candalides acasta* is the flower buds of the Slender Dodder-laurel, *Cassytha glabella*. This butterfly has a wingspan of 22 mm. Their blotched pattern provides camouflage when the wings are closed.

The tiny Two-spotted Line-blue Butterfly.

The larvae of the Blotched Dusky-blue Butterflies only eat the small white flowers of the Slender Dodder-laurel.

Blotched Dusky-blue Butterfly on a Fairy Wax Flower.

The food plants of the Saltbush Blue *Theclinesthes serpentata* include Berry Saltbush *Einadia hastata* and Nodding Saltbush *Einadia nutans*, both of which occur locally in the Upper Loddon and Fryers Ranges forests. Another food plant is the native Clammy Goosefoot, *Dysphania pumilio*, which is very widespread and often a weed in people's gardens. This butterfly is quite small with a wingspan of 18 mm.

To guarantee the survival of butterflies, we need to pay attention to their larval food and ensure that we do not inadvertently destroy the plant species that are critical for the breeding cycle. ■

Saltbush Blue Butterfly.

Wombat Forestcare

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By becoming a member you will have input into our activities and projects, and give support to caring for our forests.

For memberships and further information contact Gayle Osborne, (03) 5348 7558 or email info@wombatforestcare.org.au

Membership fees: $15 single and $20 family. Visit our website - www.wombatforestcare.org.au

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