

Comprehensive  
and relevant  
information  
for bird people

# Talking Birds

**BIRD  
WORDS  
EVERY  
MONTH**

**\$10** parrots, finches, budgies, pet birds, australian & world news, fancy poultry, seabirds, raptors, ratites, conservation, threats **April 2024**



**Rainbow lorikeet  
most seen bird**

**Call for  
Territory  
action**

**Perch  
potato  
pet birds**

**Names  
can be  
confusing**

**Hospital  
for kiwi  
now open**

**PBFD bird  
does well  
at 11-y-o**

**Buildings  
killing US  
billions**

**NY owl  
release  
mystery**

**Parrots  
like tablet  
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**Swift  
plan is  
useless**

**Light rail  
threat to  
ACT birds**

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**T**HE Tasmanian Government's track record when it comes to ensuring the future of the swift parrot has been abysmal.

That stance has been further enhanced by that state's recently-elected premier promising to allow unrestricted logging in the little parrot's breeding habitat. **p11-12.**

■ **BIRD THREAT:** Endangered cockatoos and parrots' habitats are in the path of the proposed light rail extension to the Canberra suburb of Woden which the ACT Government is to start building in 2028.

The Federal Environment Department said there will be a significant impact on heritage values in the city's Parliamentary zone. **p15.**

■ **OWL MYSTERY:** Flaco the New York owl died a while back after being at liberty since being released from his aviary in the Central Park Zoo.

Investigations are underway to find out how he came to be freed, with suggestions that there is more to the story than the version put out by zoo officials and reports that his aviary was very tiny. **p32.**

■ **PBFD GOOD NEWS:** Most parrots with psittacine beak and feather disease don't live long so it was terrific to hear of a feather-less sulphur-crested cockatoo that is still with us at 11 years old with its beak still intact. **p22.**

## the blue box

■ **BILLION DEAD:** There have been many stories about birds dying when they hit buildings that were constructed with no regard to flight paths and US numbers suggest that a billion are dying annually.

Some architects are now designing new projects that incorporate features that make the buildings highly visible to birds so that collisions are avoided. **p46-47.**

■ **PIGEON PAL:** Abby Jardine has gone viral on TikTok after sharing her pet pigeon's luxurious New York City lifestyle consisting of designer handbags and visits to the city's best restaurants.

Pigeons can't converse like parrots but research has shown them to be super smart.

It's great to see this story and hopefully it will lead to a change of attitude to what are sometimes known as flying rats. **p23.**

■ **NAME CHANGES:** Some Australian scientists and birdwatchers have proposed a review, particularly of names with colonial associations.

Birdlife Australia prefers pink cockatoo to Major Mitchell's cockatoo because the major led a massacre of Aboriginal people. **p19.**

■ I hope you get something from this month's magazine.

— *Lloyd Marshall*



The park's closure notice and former Flying High Bird Park owner Ian Dodds with a red-tailed black cockatoo.

# Qld bird park future unsure

THE future of the Flying High Bird Park near Childers in Queensland is uncertain.

The fate of the park has raised questions in its community as uncertainty surrounds it.

The park opened in December 2002 under the stewardship of John Woodall.

The park grew to be the largest free-flight aviary in Australia with several thousand birds living under its canopy.

The business changed hands several times before being purchased by Ian and Tanya Dodds in 2019.

Its future looked bright with the new owners renovating and revamping the park.

In early 2024 the park closed and was listed for sale in February.

"The park will be sold as a walk-in, walk-out essential, with everything included to run the business daily," the listing said.

"The staff would like to stay on and are qualified and trained to run the business, allowing the owners to be involved as much as they like."

It is unclear if and when the park was sold but the colourful, signage fronting the Bruce Highway has been blackened.

A sign on the locked front gate said: "This business has been

SOLD. All animals have been relocated to a new facility being built.

"The location will be announced soon. We apologise for the inconvenience."

Signage on the front gate confirm the business has been sold but little is known about the location of the new facility.

The message was mirrored on the park's Facebook page with the site listed as temporarily closed.

The real estate agency that offered the park for sale would not comment.

According to the Australian Securities and Investment Commission the business name has been cancelled.

Social media has been rife with questions and theories on what occurred at the park.

The Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries said the park no longer existed under an exhibition licence and its closure was not related to actions by Biosecurity Queensland.

"Biosecurity Queensland provided assistance to the park during the closure and where possible animals previously held under the licence have been relocated to new licence holders," a spokesman said.



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## Oldest bat 26

NEW Zealand's oldest known long-tailed bat/pekapeka — at 26 years — was recorded this summer as part of a monitoring program in Fiordland.

Known as T7787 the tiny flying mammal was caught in a harp trap last month, given a quick health check, then released to rejoin her colony at Walker Creek in the Eglinton valley where she has lived her entire life.

## ODD SPOT

Department of Conservation principal scientist Colin O'Donnell who leads the bat monitoring work said T7787 is the oldest known long-tailed bat in New Zealand.

"I first caught her when she was a young mother in 2000 and again this month making her at least 26 years old but possibly as old as 28 years," he said.

COVER: RAINBOW LORIKEETS. SEE: RAINBOW LORIKEET MOST COMMON — PAGE 4.

## Kea-proof bins first

IN a New Zealand first the Westland District Council has designed kea-proof rubbish bins.

The council said it had come up with the new-look rubbish bins to keep the curious parrots away.

“The Department of Conservation approached us about getting some rubbish bins that kea couldn’t get into,” council operations manager Erle Bencich said.

“We are keen to support efforts to keep kea healthy.

“Investigating the market for rubbish bins we found that none of the bins available were fit for purpose.”

## Penguin numbers up

POLYAMOROUS little penguins on Phillip Island off Australia’s southern coast are having so much sex that there are now more than 40,000 of them thanks to climate change.

As sea surface temperatures increased so too has the number of fish in the surrounding coastal waters.

Phillip Island Nature Parks marine scientist and Monash University associate professor Andre Chiaradia said the influx of food meant the opportunistic little penguins had more time and energy to mate.

## Cricket bat problem

DURING the recent Wellington Test against New Zealand Australian cricketer Usman Khawaja faced another challenge with ICC regulations when he was asked to remove a banned dove sticker from his bat.

The incident was on day three of the first Test when Khawaja had to replace his bat due to a crack.

After selecting a new bat Khawaja resumed his innings but he was instructed to reconsider a sticker at the end of the bat — a dove logo with an olive branch — which had previously sparked controversy with the officials.

## Kiwi toys removed

MITRE 10 stores in New Zealand have removed dog toys shaped like kiwis from their shelves.

The move was prompted by an outcry from conservationists.

The smallest ratite, the brown birds cannot fly and conservationists warned that it makes them particularly vulnerable to being attacked by dogs.

That is what led to the kiwi-shaped toys being pulled from shelves.

Complainants found the toys offensive in light of the kiwi population decline and the birds’ significance to indigenous Maori communities.

## Miner rescues emu chick from muddy pit

QUICK-THINKING wildlife lover Brony Hummer jumped into a deep muddy pit to save a stranded and stuck emu chick.

When the 45-year-old Bowen Basin operator saw the distressed bird while on the bus back to camp at the end of a shift there was only one course of action.

“I jumped up and another two girls jumped up and were like no, stop, we’ve got to rescue this

baby,” she said.

The trio jumped off the bus and Ms Hummer said she was thinking, how am I going to grab it? Is it going to bite me?

“I just got the other girl to hold my hand, stuck one foot in, grabbed it around the neck and pulled it out,” she said.

“And then it ran straight back in, I was thinking oh my god are you serious.”

## Foreigners killing NZ albatross

By SALLY MURPHY

A NEW project is underway to save New Zealand seabirds including the Antipodean albatross, pictured right, from becoming victim to longline fishing boats.



country’s exclusive economic zone were not covered by New Zealand’s laws and that was where the birds were getting into trouble.

“The reason we started this project is because of the Antipodean albatross which is in real strife.

“A couple of scientists go out every summer to monitor the birds and they’ve found that the population is plummeting, that can’t be explained just by New Zealand fishing.”

Molloy said they knew the birds were getting caught in the high seas because some have satellites trackers which showed they undertook huge flights.

## Magpie surrendered

MOLLY the magpie whose best friend is Peggy the Staffordshire terrier has been surrendered to Queensland wildlife officials.

The surrender happened on the Gold Coast after the pair was featured on morning television.

Juliette Wells rescued Molly 12 months ago from a dog park near her home at Upper Coomera.

She and partner Reece Mortensen were walking Peggy when they saw a baby bird on the ground.

The pair took the bird home and nursed it to health.

It is illegal to keep magpies in Queensland.

## Kiwi tracking funding

FUNDING from New Plymouth District Council in New Zealand will make kiwi easier to track in Kaitake.

The \$3000 grant was given to the Kaitake Community Board which bought tracking gear to help care for the environment.

Katake Ranges Conservation Trust manager Pete Morgan said the equipment is used to track monitored kiwi.

“They also detect health issues and study their behaviour including feeding times and whether the males are nesting.”

Trust volunteers are tracking 14 kiwi.

## Girl’s magpie data

AN eight-year-old girl went viral after conducting cutting-edge research on magpies and who they prefer to swoop.

Emma Glenfield from the NSW Blue Mountains wondered why magpies swoop and who they target.

Encouraged by her teacher Emma watched resident magpie, Sir Swoopsalot swoop people then wrote down who the bird swooped.

“Then I got everything I recorded and I figured out that the people the magpie swooped were male, they were tall and they had thin or receding hair.”

## Parrot illness warning

AN Aussie wildlife page has reminded the public to stay alert after seeing a considerable number of cases of a highly contagious disease that kills native birds.

Psittacine beak and feather disease is commonly found in parrots like cockatoos and lorikeets but can infect other birds.

It weakens the immune system ultimately causes death.

“We’ve got a few threatened and endangered species of parrots now and the last thing we want is for it to kill chicks or parents that are threatened,” WIRES vet Dr Tania Bishop said.



If you would love to own and breed the most beautiful budgies ever developed, consider joining the Australian Heritage Budgerigar Association.

We have rescued the stunning Australian Clearwings and Rainbows that were nearly extinct. We are also working on other critically endangered varieties like Banded Pieds, Heritage Darkwings, Blackeyed Yellows and Whites and many more.

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# Rainbow lorikeet most common

By SEZEN BAKAN

WHEN one thinks of Australian birds kookaburras or cockatoos are likely the first to come to mind but a colourful parrot is reported to be a far more common sight in our skies and backyards.

The results of the 10th annual Aussie Bird Count revealed that the rainbow lorikeet was the bird most commonly seen in Australian skies since October.

The result came after more than 60,000 people across the country looked up to tally more than

3.6 million birds.

It is not the first time the rainbow lorikeet has been found to rule Australian skies.

When the Aussie Bird Count was first held in 2014 the rainbow lorikeet came in as first according to reports by the 9000 bird counters who took 20 minutes out of their week to do a survey where they lived, worked or played.

The results for the second and third most-common birds remain similarly unchanged over the past decade.

Those titles belong to the

noisy miner and the Australian magpie in 2014 and 2024.

Only one bird has climbed into the top 10 — the much-maligned bin chickens, the Australian white ibis, at the expense of the introduced common myna.

BirdLife Australia spokesperson Sean Dooley said if the Aussie Bird Count was conducted back in the 1950s or even the 1990s the top 10 would look quite different.

“Birds tell us a lot about the environment we live in,” he said.



The rainbow lorikeet was the most commonly seen bird.

# Magpie intelligence key is not genetic

By LIZZIE SPEECHLEY  
Behavioural ecologist,  
University of Western Australia

IF you've ever encountered Australia's magpies you know the birds are intelligent creatures.

With their striking black and white plumage, loud warbling voices and complex social behaviors magpies possess a level of avian brilliance that fascinates birders and scientists alike.

But what enables the clever birds to thrive?

Are their sharp cognitive abilities innate — something coded into their genetic makeup or are magpie smarts more a product of their environment and social experiences?

In a new study we shed light on the nature versus nurture debate — at least when it comes to avian intelligence.

Our study focused on Western Australian magpies which unlike their eastern counterparts live in large, co-operative social groups all year round.

We put young fledglings and their mothers through a test of their learning abilities.

We made wooden puzzle boards with holes covered by different-coloured lids.

For each bird we hid a tasty food reward under the lid of one colour and we tested each bird alone so it couldn't copy the answer from its friends.

Through trial and error the magpies had to figure out which colour was associated with the food prize.

We knew the birds had mastered the puzzle when they



Do fledgling magpies get their smarts from their mothers?

picked the rewarded colour in 10 out of 12 consecutive attempts.

We tested fledglings at 100, 200 and 300 days after leaving the nest.

While they improved at solving the puzzle as they developed the cognitive performance of the young magpies showed little connection to the problem-solving prowess of their mothers.

Instead the key factor influencing how quickly the fledglings learned to pick the correct colour was the size of their social group.

Birds raised in larger groups solved the test significantly faster than those growing up in smaller social groups.

Fledglings living in groups of 10 or more birds needed only around 12 tries to consistently pick the rewarded colour.

But a youngster growing up in a group of three took more than

30 attempts to learn the link between colour and food.

Why would living in a larger social group boost cognitive abilities?

We think it probably comes down to the mental demands that social animals face on a daily basis such as recognising and remembering group members and keeping track of different relationships within a complex group.

Magpies can learn to recognise and remember humans too.

The bird populations we work with live in the wild, but they recognise us by our appearance and a specific whistle we make.

A young magpie living in a group gets plenty of mental exercise recognising and remembering numerous individuals and relationships.

Working to make sense of this stream of social information may boost their ability to learn and solve problems.

Our findings go against the idea that intelligence is something innately “set” within an animal at birth based solely on genetic inheritance.

Instead we show how cognition can be shaped by the environment especially in the first year after leaving the nest when young magpies' minds are still developing.

While we focused specifically on Australian magpies the implications of our research could extend to other highly social and intelligent species.

# Penguin ready to moult

By TORY SHEPHERD

A KING penguin has made its way from the Antarctic region to the South Australian coastline where it is likely to stay on land to undergo a catastrophic moult.

Members of a birdwatching society were surprised when they spotted the bird on a beach thousands of kilometres from its usual habitat.

Each year the penguins lose all their feathers then over two or three weeks they replace them with sleek, freshly oiled, waterproof ones.

For those weeks they have no protection from the icy waters so they seek land but usually much closer to home.

Chair of Friends of Shorebirds South East, Jeff Campbell, was part of a group of eight doing a bird survey along the Coorong beach in South Australia when they spotted the bird.

“We came across a penguin coming up out of the water and on to the beach, a large penguin,” he said.

“It came right up to us, it was displaying to us, doing what birders call an advertising display.

“It put its head back and made a braying call, quite loud, then bowed to us.

“It did it several times, it came right up to us, right beside us, you shouldn't approach these things but it approached us.”

## Fowl intestines busted

SIX people were arrested in connection with a scheme to smuggle thousands of pounds of raw goose and duck intestines from China through Los Angeles and ultimately to New York City for sale to restaurants and consumers.

Five defendants live in Brooklyn and one lives in Queens.

They are charged with importing and selling illegal merchandise from China.

According to the criminal complaint shipments of the illegal products were falsely labelled in order to get them into the US.

## Dog alert to smuggle

A DRUG-SNIFFING dog followed his nose and alerted border officers at El Paso in Texas to a keel-billed toucan and 21 parrots that a woman tried to smuggle into the US.

Officers were conducting inspections when the dog alerted them to a sedan driven by a 35-year-old woman.

The canine team discovered the birds in boxes and cages hidden under a blanket in the trunk.

The birds were placed in a safe and secure area where veterinarians will keep them under quarantine.

## Gamekeeper banned

A FORMER Scottish gamekeeper who trapped and killed magpies in his back garden has been banned from keeping animals for five years.

Alexander Hamilton, 64, set up three traps to catch the birds before passing them on to friends to use as decoys in their traps.

He killed some of the birds when they became sick by clubbing them over the head with a stick.

Hamilton was caught after a concerned neighbour informed the Scottish SPCA which sent officers out to investigate the complaint.

## Pest pigeon move

BARCELONA faces a problem of pigeon overpopulation in its streets and public spaces with estimates suggesting there are 85,000 of the birds in the city.

Some 350 people have been identified as big feeders of pigeons who throw more than two kilos of food a day to the birds.

To deter the feeders the City Council has launched a pilot plan in seven areas of the city.

The goal is to convince those people to stop providing food to the pigeons which according to the municipal government would have a significant impact on the bird population.

## Twitcheer's 10,000th

A US twitcher has become the first person in the world to see 10,000 bird species.

Peter Kaestner, a retired diplomat, passed the milestone on a recent trip to the Philippines where he saw an orange-tufted spiderhunter in eastern Mindanao on February 9 which proved to be his magic 10,000th bird according to IOC taxonomy.

## Pigeon does backflips

A PIGEON that can backflip has surprised social media users.

A video of the acrobat bird quickly went viral.

The footage shows how the bird effortlessly does two backflips in a row, landing perfectly on its feet.

After watching the clip viewers joked that the pigeon could be sent to the Olympic Games.

## Statue for Flaco the New York owl

THE recent death of Flaco the beloved Eurasian eagle-owl has sparked a movement among New Yorkers to erect a statue in his honor in Central Park.

With more than over 3500 signatures the petition calls for a pedestal with a branch protruding and a life size Flaco near where the bird roosted.

The petitioners hope to memorialize Flaco who captured the hearts of many during his year of freedom in Manhattan after escaping from Central Park Zoo.



Flaco's ability to thrive in the urban environment despite being raised in captivity resonated with New Yorkers, symbolizing resilience and against-all-odds survival.

Petition author Mike Hubbard said Flaco's ability to inspire wonder and

unity among people from diverse backgrounds.

Installing statues in Central Park is complex and lengthy with few projects ultimately approved.

■ Flaco's release mystery, page 32.

## Bird flu kills seals

BIRD flu has made its way into fur and elephant seal populations for the first time on the sub-Antarctic island of South Georgia setting off alarm bells for conservationists because the highly contagious disease has killed millions of birds worldwide.

Scientists first suspected the presence of avian influenza near Antarctica in October 2023 after the death of several brown skua seabirds on Bird Island which is part of the British Overseas Territory of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands.

## Casino bird relocated

THE Nevada Department of Wildlife said a rare bird that caused a pause in the fountains of Bellagio casino was safely removed.

Bellagio Hotel and Casino said it paused the fountains as it worked with wildlife officials to rescue a juvenile yellow-billed loon that landed in the fountains.

"We are happy to welcome the most exclusive guests," the report said in a post on X.

The Nevada Department of Wildlife posted a video on X showing the bird being relocated to a "more suitable and remote location where it has space, food and quiet surroundings".

## No jail for swan killer

THREE months probation and 45 hours of community service was the punishment given in Onondaga County in New York State to an 18-year-old who pleaded guilty to a charge of animal cruelty in connection with the death of Faye the swan, the mother at the Manlius Swan Pond.

The unnamed 18-year-old did not have to pay a fine for killing Faye because prosecutors didn't ask for one.

The mother swan was taken from the pond, killed and eaten last Memorial Day. Faye's four cygnets were also taken.

## Egg collector's 2995

A PROLIFIC UK egg collector in Norfolk was found to have illegally hoarded thousands of rare bird eggs.

Daniel Lingham, 71, of Newton St Faith pleaded guilty to five offences including taking eggs from a non-schedule 1 wild bird namely a nightjar and possessing an egg or its parts of a non-schedule 1 wild bird.

The man who has two previous convictions for similar offences was caught after a wildlife trap camera filmed him stealing two eggs from a nightjar nest in Holt Lowes. There were 2995 eggs found at his home.

## New chinstrap colony

THE Viking cruise company's expedition team has found a new colony of chinstrap penguins not previously known to science on Diaz Rock near Astrolabe Island in Antarctica.

The find occurred in January 2024 by Viking Octantis at the island in the Bransfield Strait of the Trinity Peninsula.

During the visit Viking's scientific partner Oceanites conducted the first survey in nearly 40 years of the known chinstrap penguin colony and discovered the additional colony on Diaz Rock.

## Fourth peacock OK

A THREE-WEEK search for an evasive peacock at Willoughby in Ohio has come to an end.

The bird had been on a wanted list by local police since early February.

That's when officials said four peacocks escaped when their owner accidentally left a pen door unlocked.

Two white peacocks were recovered soon after in neighbors' yards.

A blue peacock was hit and killed half mile from its home but the fourth and final bird remained on the run.

## Starlings invade town

IN scenes reminiscent of Alfred Hitchcock's 1963 thriller *The Birds*, a UK village has been invaded by thousands of starlings which have covered everything in poo.

Residents of Great Gonerby in Lincolnshire are upset about the downpours of bird droppings since the flock started to appear in February.

At first locals were amazed by the sunset displays of clouds of birds circling but it quickly turned into a nightmare.

The birds have left behind a mountain of mess, covering cars and homes in droppings.

## Emu killed in Canada

ONTARIO Provincial Police in Canada are looking for two people who allegedly broke into an emu pen and killed a bird.

Investigators believe two people broke through a fence and got inside the enclosure.

They fatally injured the animal "by an unknown means", police said.

Investigators are reviewing video surveillance to try to identify the people responsible for the killing.

Police said causing unnecessary suffering to an animal is a criminal offence punishable by up to five years in jail.

# Karachi sparrows to be counted

WILDLIFE authorities in Pakistan have launched a campaign to count the number of sparrows in the country's largest city of Karachi where the human-friendly bird is fast disappearing.

The campaign will target specific urban and suburban hotspots of local sparrows in the metropolis which is home to 20 million people.

Joined by bird lovers and divided into several groups wildlife workers took positions at potential sparrow hotspots taking pictures and filming the birds.

Along with major South Asian cities like Mumbai, Kolkata, Dhaka and Lahore Karachi has a mix of glossy skyscrapers, bustling shopping centres, shanty slums and massive traffic jams.

Once a natural habitat for birds the metropolis has lost its precious wildlife through the ravages of time and because of increasing human influence.

According to Muhammad Moazzam Khan, technical adviser for the Worldwide Fund for Nature's Pakistan chapter, the sparrow population has dwindled by

between 60-70 per cent in Karachi during the past two decades.

Alteration of habitats which is a direct result of unplanned urbanisation and pollution has badly affected the population of urban birds in major South Asian cities.

Lahore and Karachi along with India's capital New Delhi, commercial capital Mumbai, Kolkata and Bangladesh capital Dhaka have topped the daily rankings of the world's most polluted cities owing primarily to escalating industrialisation.



Karachi's sparrows are being counted.

# Peafowl disappear with only one left

By NEIL SEARS

A UK village is all a-flutter over the mysterious disappearance of a flock of peafowl.

The 15 birds — collectively known as an ostentation thanks to their bright plumage — have added a flash of colour to East Winch in Norfolk for many years.

Suddenly 14 have disappeared and just one, known as Charles, remains.

Some locals are claiming fowl play saying several villagers had complained about the noise and mess made by the birds with damage done to cars.

Resident Andrew Chapman said he had nothing to do with the birds' disappearance after it was claimed a house he wanted to build would disturb the birds.

His planning application was rejected first by West Norfolk Council a year ago and similarly turned down on appeal a few weeks ago and the peacocks have since gone missing.

Mr Chapman said: "I love animals — I have rescued three in the last year, we love the peacocks.

"We certainly wouldn't cause them any harm, they don't live in my orchard, they never have — but they seem to wander through it."

He said that his love of animals was shown by the chickens, ducks and turkeys he keeps.

He observed that while objections to his plan to build a two-bedroom house on grassland near his home featured concerns about the peacocks that was not the deciding factor.

Instead the council ruled it was



Charles is the only one of 15 peafowl left in the village.

a "backland" development detrimental to the character of the village which dates back more than a thousand years and lies near King's Lynn.

Bird-lovers say East Winch's character has suffered because of the departure of the wild peafowl which had roosted in the trees around 14th-century All Saints church for more than a decade.

The ostentation is thought to have begun with a single peafowl which escaped from a Norfolk farm, one bird joined it and the flock grew.

It is possible the birds simply chose to leave as suddenly as they arrived and despite the size of their remarkable tail feathers they can fly.

Upset locals some of whom fed the birds in their gardens doubt that they left willingly.

Retired floor-layer Robert Baldwin and his wife Elaine have

named the last resident peacock Charles and are feeding him as they mourn the departure of the others.

Mr Baldwin said: "We think some people have been taking them, you don't have 14 or 15 peacocks and peahens and then have just one.

"It's bang out of order, people used to complain about the noise."

West Norfolk councillor for the village Michael de Whalley said he had approached the parish council to call for an investigation.

"I am sad to hear that the peacocks have disappeared, it is concerning," he said.

Support worker Adele Godfrey said the presence of the peafowl had prompted her to buy her home opposite the church 10 years ago.

"I'm very sad about it, they were ever so tame," she said.

# Eggs are Vincent's hustle

IF Vincent Carter isn't designing a spaceship out of his dozens of Lego sets, tinkering with his family's model train set or playing board games or video games on his Nintendo video game console he may be tending to his family's chicken farm.

In recent months, the nine-year-old from Cheyenne in the US has been pursuing a new project involving poultry pals.

Every morning Vincent strolls to his family's chicken shed to deliver leftover vegetable and meat scraps to the birds and before he leaves he recovers any eggs that have been left for him.

During the past several weeks Vincent has been tending to the 17 chickens roaming inside an enclosed pen.

Every day he recovers from 10-20 eggs which he's been selling as his new side hustle.

Through his mum Lola Rae Carter, Vincent has sold around 15 dozen fresh eggs to local residents since the beginning of March.

The third grader at Pioneer Park Elementary School has always been better with their family's chickens his mum said calling him a "chicken charmer".

Whenever she has trouble grabbing hold of one of the birds she calls her son to help her out.

"They just seem to like him ever since he's been a little kid," Carter said.

# Kingfisher courtship on camera

By ALEX GREEN

AN amateur photographer from Cornwall in the UK has captured the moment a pair of kingfishers began courting.

Martin Yelland from St Erth captured the photos of the birds in St Ives using a remote camera.

Kingfishers typically live in nests near lakes, rivers and streams according to the Cornwall Wildlife Trust.

Mr Yelland, who started photographing wildlife seven years ago, said the images gave him a

great sense of achievement.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds said kingfishers were vulnerable to hard winters and habitat degradation and they were vulnerable to hard winters and habitat degradation.

They are on the amber list for UK conservation status.

Mr Yelland said he was very proud of his kingfisher photos.

“It was a great sense of achievement because there’s been a lot of flooding in Cornwall and other parts of the country,” he said.



Mr Yelland captured this shot of kingfishers as they started courting.

# Brits must register for avian influenza

THE UK Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs has announced compulsory registration requirements for all bird keepers as part of a new measure to combat avian flu outbreaks.

Under the changes there will be new requirements for all bird keepers — regardless of the size of their flock — to officially register their birds.

Current legislation dictates that only those who keep 50 or more poultry must do so.

Owners will need to provide information including their contact details, the location where birds are kept and details of the birds, such as species, number and what they are kept for.

In England and Wales keepers have until October 1 2024 to register while in Scotland the deadline is September 1.

Keepers will also be legally required to update their information on an annual basis.

By registering they will receive updates relevant to them including data on any local bird flu outbreaks and information on biosecurity rules.

Defra said that would help to manage potential disease outbreaks such as avian influenza and Newcastle disease and limit any spread.

The information on the register will also be used to identify all bird keepers in disease control zones.

Defra said that would allow for more effective surveillance.

The changes come following the UK’s worst ever outbreak of avian influenza with more than 360 cases in poultry since late



October 2021.

Christine Middlemiss, the UK’s chief veterinary officer, said the new rules would enable the government to have a full picture of any disease situation.

She said: “This information will be vital in helping to inform future risk assessments and maintain our commitment to continually building our extensive avian influenza research portfolio.”

Sheila Voas, Scotland’s CVO, said that the changes to bird registration was a necessary step to help protect the health of kept birds and the general public.

“We have faced challenges during previous outbreaks in clearly communicating the changes

in both risk and mandatory biosecurity requirements to bird keepers particularly smallholders and backyard keepers.

“This approach will enable us all to be better prepared and protected against a future pandemic.”

The proposal follows a 2023 consultation and takes forward the recommendation from the 2018 Dame Glenys Stacey Review.

The new rules cover owners of backyard flocks, birds of prey and pigeon fanciers but do not affect caged pet birds.

Defra said the requirement would be set out in legislation shortly.

# Quail eggs for Kourtney

By JULIA NAFTULIN

KOURTNEY Kardashian said she’s eating daily quail eggs for baby-making as she tries to have a child with husband Travis Barker.

On episode nine of *The Kardashians* she has lunch with her friend Steph Shepherd eating a salad and several quail eggs.

While eating, she tells Shepherd that she has to eat quail eggs every day but wasn’t sure why they were more beneficial than chicken eggs.

“Quail eggs supposedly are useful when trying to have a baby but I’m not sure if that’s like, documented online, I haven’t looked it up,” Kardashian said.

“Quail egg sales are gonna go wild because of that interview byte,” an off-screen producer said.

There isn’t strong evidence quail eggs have fertility-enhancing abilities but they do contain the fertility-boosting nutrients choline and folate and other B vitamins, Tamsin Jordan, a registered dietitian specializing in women’s health said.

There’s limited research on fertility-boosting foods, she said but some research shows women who eat high-fibre and unrefined carbohydrates including brown rice, whole oats, quinoa and whole fruits and vegetables, have an easier time getting pregnant.

**Bird owners in the UK will need to provide information including their contact details and the location where birds are kept.**

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# Following feathered dancers in the desert

By MIKE GILLAM

FROM Munga-Thirri in the Simpson Desert to Kiwirrkurra in the Tanami I've followed budgerigar murmurations — the magnificent formations in the sky created by thousands of birds — over many years.

That obsession is mostly confined to summer months when flocks are boosted by fledglings, especially during high rainfall years.

The only form of luck I know is persistent searching, planning and imagining.

That involves long, meditative drives to check on the status of water in dams or claypans.

Follow the falcons and think like a flock of budgerigars.

Search out those plains of native oat grass and a safe place to drink, a daily requirement for the granivorous birds.

Hopeful stakeouts in the perfect location if only the budgerigars comply in the right light, from the right direction, in the right numbers.

Camping overnight in the mulga with a chirruping multitude I fight the urge to sleep and dream of success in the morning.

For weeks that quintessential image beckons like a mirage, just out of reach — hot sleepless nights, hypnotic days.

I resist the urge to record on video the balletic grace of the flock, a much easier path than trying to capture the perfect still frame.

Finally from the vantage of a dune crest I photograph a wide ribbon of budgerigars moving slowly over spinifex hummocks, the bright green birds contrasting sharply with a background pattern of shadows.

The feathered dance resembles a phalanx of stars and I return from the edge of madness sunburnt, exhausted and smiling to plan my next desert holiday.

Few photographic moments can compare with the euphoria I feel in the presence of a budgerigar host.

One early morning in late September I followed flocks on their way to drink at a dam where I sat for a while trying to analyse the best photographic options.

By 7.30am there were already thousands of birds roosting in



**Acrobatic budgerigars reacting to the threat of a black falcon looking for an easy meal.**

nearby trees and coming in to drink in turbulent waves.

For the next hour or two the numbers of budgerigars rose steadily as did the predators — black falcons an ever-present threat at the water's edge.

Rashly I estimated the number of budgerigars to be upwards of 100,000 birds occupying every tree for several hectares and filling the sky much of the time in a complex layering of flocks.

I'm reasonably familiar with flocks of 1000-5000 but greater numbers are beyond my comprehension so there could have been many more on the day but surely no less.

Avian predators watch from the tree tops, resting after each failed attempt, recovering and waiting for a fresh opportunity.

Hobby falcons seem to rule the outer approaches and black falcons command the water where they use the banks of the dam to conceal a low level attack, flying fast and hopefully seizing their chance in the panicked retreat and melee of drinking budgerigars.

A pair of black falcons appear to be working co-operatively — one bird driving flocks of budgerigars from the water's edge towards the second falcon in the act of breasting the earth embankment that encircles the dam.

Contemplating piracy, a pair of fork-tailed kites and a hopeful goshawk watch each manoeuvre intently, hoping to snatch up any young budgerigar felled and injured but not successfully clenched in falcon talons.

Sitting well back from the water's edge and remaining motionless I allow myself a smile as young birds attempt to land on my shoulders.

The predominant green plumage of the budgerigar constellation changes colour across three zones.

Top and bottom the water and the sky reflect cyan and that dulls the plumage of the birds while pushing forward the true colour and vibrance of the budgerigars flying through the centre of the frame where yellows are enhanced.

The final image needs only a shallow veil of sharpness to cope with the blizzard of detail.

Closer inspection will reveal that every leaf on the two trees is in fact a roosting budgerigar.

# Carnaby's fledgling rescued

AN orphaned Carnaby's white-tailed black cockatoo fledgling has the chance to join a wild flock thanks to an army of wildlife advocates.

The baby bird was spotted in Margaret River alone after its flock had flown away.

As fledglings cockatoos are very dependent on their parents and without human care the little bird may not have survived.

A member of the public kept watch from a distance and when no parents returned volunteers stepped in to rescue and transport him to Bunbury.

A volunteer from the Kaarakin Black Cockatoo Conservation Centre then drove him to Perth Zoo's Vet Hospital in South Perth.

Perth Zoo vet nurse Maddie Reid said: "Once the little fledgling arrived we gave him a thorough check over and while under anaesthetic we took X-rays and blood samples to check his overall health.

"He did have a couple of ruptured air sacs which can happen from the impact of shaky landings when learning to fly, but with the right care these heal up nicely.

"While he's absolutely adorable with young birds like this we have to be very careful not to be too hands on.

"The aim is to get it strong and independent enough to be released back into the wild and we gave him a microchip so that he can be identified again in the future.

"Getting a rescued bird to us for veterinary care all the way from the south-west is a huge collaborative effort from many passionate people and we're very privileged to play part in his recovery."

After four days in hospital the fledgling went to Kaarakin to continue his formula feeds until he's big and strong.

At Kaarakin he went through the extensive rehabilitation program where he can learn how to be a cockatoo from other rehab adult birds in the hope that he'll be released back into the wild.

The Carnaby's is just one of hundreds of birds that is cared for at Kaarakin and given the population has declined by more than 50 per cent in the past 45 years each individual bird rescued is a cause for celebration.

# Environment groups urge Territory action

NORTHERN Territory and national environment and conservation groups including BirdLife Australia have delivered a dire message to the NT chief minister advocating for urgent measures to protect the Territory's unique and irreplaceable wildlife and natural landscapes.

The groups allege that for too long the nature of the Northern Territory has been deprioritised compared to demands from the pastoral and agricultural sector and is suffering death by a thousand cuts from avoidable threats like indiscriminate land clearing, invasive species impacts and global warming induced changes to the already extreme climate.

The Top End of the NT is home to part of the largest intact tropical savanna ecosystem in the world.

It has been assessed as one of 19 ecosystems at imminent threat of collapse.

Brittany Hayward-Brown, convener of BirdLife Top End said the lack of biodiversity conservation legislation in the NT is failing to protect local birds and their habitats and does not value their contribution to the NT economy.

"Thirty-eight Northern Territory birds are now nationally re-

cognised as threatened, four of which are critically endangered, meaning they are one step away from extinction," Hayward-Brown said.

"Birds like the endangered red goshawk have had almost 550,000 hectares or the equivalent area of 78 times Uluru-Kata Juta National Park of potential habitat destroyed across the Territory since the year 2000 alone.

"Meanwhile some of the Territory's most valuable natural areas such as Lee Point in Darwin's northern suburbs or the famous Mataranka Thermal

Pools are on the chopping block because the legislation and planning foresight required to protect them is virtually non-existent."

She said the NT is the only jurisdiction in Australia not to have native vegetation protection laws, instead there are only guidelines.

"What we see time and time again is the short-sighted prioritisation of destructive industries over recognising the immense value that birds and their habitats can offer to our economy through alternatives like avi-tourism and I think Territorians have had enough of it," Hayward-Brown said.



**The red-tailed black cockatoo is one of the birds allegedly affected by alleged inaction of the NT Government.**

She said environment groups stand ready to work with the NT Government to genuinely protect the territory's unique nature.

She said environment groups stand ready to work with the NT Government to genuinely protect the territory's unique nature and are calling for:

- The Enactment of specific biodiversity conservation legislation which will address the unique conservation challenges by the Northern Territory and to provide a legal framework that prioritises the protection of its diverse

ecosystems and wildlife.

- The support for long-term conservation planning that is community-led, scientifically-grounded and that respect the rights and concerns of First Nations peoples.

- The launch of an NT biodiversity strategy to plan the action necessary to reduce threats and restore nature with transparent evaluation and reporting.

# No way plan will save threatened swift parrot

CONSERVATION scientists are furious over what they say is the watering down of a plan to save the world's fastest parrot and one of its most endangered.

The swift parrot was once relatively common in Australia's eucalyptus woodlands but it is now on the verge of extinction.

No one really knows how many are left, the best estimate is 750 mature birds but it could be far less than that.

Veteran scientists on the Swift Parrot Recovery Team say the biggest threat to survival is the ongoing loss and degradation of breeding grounds in Tasmania and critical foraging grounds along Australia's east coast.

The Tasmanian and NSW governments are continuing to log native forests that support the migratory parrot which moves around a lot and does not use the same patches of habitat from year to year.

When scientists were called upon years ago to draft a new national recovery plan they were very clear that the primary threat to survival was habitat loss driven by logging and other human pressures with predation by sugar gliders listed as a secondary threat.

But there's simmering anger over what one team member called a "secret revision process" that flipped the carefully worded hierarchy of threats from habitat loss to the glider which likes to eat swift parrots and their eggs.

Ornithologist Mark Holdsworth has served on the recovery team for 20 years and is deeply disturbed by changes that were made after the draft was handed to bureaucrats.

"The recovery team was blindsided by the process, someone decided 'let's blame the sugar glider' and distract everyone away from the real issue," he says.

"Certainly we identified the sugar glider as one of the threats to the species in some areas.

"But the continued loss of native forests in particular nesting habitat is the primary cause of decline for this species, until that stops this species is going to become extinct.

"No species expert on the recovery team is against this view."

Mr Holdsworth said team members would not have consented to



The swift parrot breeds only in Tasmania where logging is wrecking its habitat.

the changes but were never given an opportunity to object.

In his experience drafting recovery plans for other species the lack of close, ongoing consultation with species experts is extraordinary.

In June 2023 after years of delays a federal government representative told the recovery team there would be a "new opportunity" for relevant states to comment and seek changes to the draft before it was finalised.

It was made clear at that point that the scientists who wrote the plan wouldn't get another chance to review a document the recovery team last saw in September 2020.

"It is at the federal minister's discretion whether to include these changes and/or to address comments and feedback received from the states," minutes from that meeting note.

"There are no further opportunities for the Swift Parrot Recovery team to comment on the draft Swift Parrot Recovery Plan before it is finalised."

A few months later in September, to mark National Threatened Species Day, federal Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek issued a press release announcing the plan had been released.

When recovery team scientists got hold of it they choked.

Not only had the order of threats been reversed in key parts of the plan but Holdsworth and others say there was an obvious watering down and softening to references about logging impacts.

Veteran recovery team member Dr Dejan Stojanovic from the Australian National University said the plan as it stands "absolutely will not save the swift parrot from extinction".

"How is it a recovery plan?" he said.

"This plan scapegoats sugar gliders, it's just a big misdirect away from the obvious damage native forest logging is doing to the habitat of the swift parrot."

He says logging impacts are even more concerning given research has shown sugar gliders thrive in disturbed forests.

"We've shown a couple of times now that predation is worse in more disturbed forests and it's less bad — even if gliders are there — in intact old growth native forests."

Other recovery team specialists who declined to be named said there'd clearly been concessions to get state governments that still log native forests to sign up to the plan.

"There's policies that directly conflict with the plan so it's very difficult to get people to sign off and say yes we need to stop logging which is a bloody obvious thing," one said.

"Everybody knows and yet nobody will politically take that

■ *Continued next page.*

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Dejan Stojanovic  
from the Australian  
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# Global condemnation if forests destroyed

By MICHAEL DAHLSTROM

A PLAN to destroy 40,000 hectares of native forest in Australia will be met with global condemnation, conservationist Dr Bob Brown has warned.

The proposal could have damaging implications for Tasmania's famous devils and trash the state's clean green image, he said.

The proposal to log more than 10 per cent of 356,000 hectares protected under a 2012 deal struck between loggers and conservation groups was announced by Liberal premier Jeremy Rockliff.

If re-elected on March 23 he planned to capitalise on what growing international demand for timber after Labor governments in Victoria and Western Australia restricted native forest logging.

The announcement was made in the face of increasing international condemnation of Tasmania's forestry industry.

Actor and conservationist Leonardo DiCaprio recently called for an end to native forest logging across Australia and Tasmania.

In an Instagram post he highlighted the work of the Bob Brown Foundation in fighting the destruction of critically endangered swift parrot habitat which is being harvested by Tasmania's state-owned logging company.

The Liberal Party has promised to "unlock" the forests for harvesting within 100 days of re-election which it says could result in a 10 per cent boost in annual timber supply for the industry.

"Only a re-elected majority Rockliff Liberal Government has a 2030 Strong Plan to keep Tasmania's native forest industry strong," resources minister Felix Ellis said.

It cuts right across Tasmania's clean green image and it will lead to global condemnation for Australia in an age of extinction and climate crisis Bob Brown said.

Should the plan go ahead Brown has predicted hundreds could be arrested for opposing the logging.

In Tasmania protesters face fines of \$12,975 or 18 months in jail for a first offence while org-

In Tasmania protesters face fines of \$12,975 or 18 months in jail for a first offence while organisations risk a \$103,800 fine.



The world's largest freshwater crayfish *Astacopsis gouldi* would be threatened if logging goes ahead.

anisations risk a \$103,800 fine.

"I think with their draconian anti protest laws people are just going to turn out in bigger numbers because this logging threatens a whole range of rare and endangered creatures including the world's largest freshwater crayfish *Astacopsis gouldi* which grows a metre long and up to six kilograms," Brown said.

"If it was in the Mississippi or the Amazon everybody we would

be amazed by it but it's in Tasmania's rivers and they're just seen as logging catchments."

Independent think tank the Australia Institute also struck out at Rockliff's logging plan, saying it will drive threatened species closer to extinction.

"While today's announcement will have a minuscule effect on Tasmania's economy it will be hugely destructive for the environment," spokesperson Vanessa Bleyer said.

## No way plan will save threatened swift parrot

Continued from previous page. stance."

For now the plan remains in draft form, eight years after it was decided a new one was needed following the uplisting of the species to critically endangered.

A 2017 document from the federal environment department details why the fresh plan was commissioned.

It cites recent modelling suggesting that parrot numbers were declining "due to the combined effects of nest predation by sugar gliders and the ongoing loss of old growth forest within their breeding habitat".

It also lists the primary conservation actions needed to reverse the trajectory of decline.

The first is to prevent further

habitat destruction from land clearance, grazing and forestry activities in high quality nesting and breeding habitat.

The second is to develop and implement strategies to reduce sugar glider predation, something the current plan from 2011 doesn't cover.

Federal Greens Senator Janet Rice has long been asking questions about the new recovery plan and why it's taken so long to complete.

She scoffs at suggestions by federal bureaucrats that changes to the draft since the recovery team last saw it don't qualify as significant.

"They are very substantial and they are very much downplaying the impact that native

forest logging has," she said.

She says the minister cannot go ahead and jointly make the new plan with relevant states when "it's very clear it is not going to make any difference".

Asked if Ms Plibersek would consider sending the draft back to the recovery team for further review her office did not respond and sent the request to her department.

It said that while recovery teams "may support" the drafting of recovery plans the independent Threatened Species Scientific Committee was legally responsible for advising the minister on such matters.

Last year the then chair of that committee Professor Helene Marsh said it signed off on

the draft on November 11, 2020 and after making "minor" modifications it recommended to the minister that the plan be made.

"What has happened since then is a matter for the department," Prof Marsh told a parliamentary hearing.

She said she would have expected any substantive changes to come back to her committee.

"I can say to you that it has not been referred back to the committee," she said.

Tasmania's public forestry company which trades as Sustainable Timber Tasmania said it did not receive or review the final draft.

The NSW Forestry Corporation said it did not have any involvement in the plan.

# Amazons seized at US border

By YANTIS GREEN

US Customs and Border Protection officers and agriculture specialists stationed at the Arizona Port of Nogales intercepted a significant quantity of protected avian species, marking a crucial victory in combating wildlife trafficking.

The bust unfolded when port personnel inspected a passenger vehicle at the Mariposa Crossing.

Inside the vehicle officials uncovered a concealed crate containing 27 Amazon parrots des-

igned for illegal entry into the United States.

Among the seized birds were two lilac-crowned Amazons, and 25 white-fronted Amazons.

The estimated value of the birds was between \$800-\$3000 each.

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora affords protection to those species, recognizing the peril they face from illicit trade and exploitation.

The intercepted parrots represent a flagrant violation of

international conservation agreements and underscore the ongoing battle against wildlife crime.

Beyond the economic value of the birds there are broader implications at play.

Parrots and other avian species can serve as vectors for various animal diseases some of which pose a risk to human health.

The interception of the smuggled parrots safeguards biodiversity and mitigates potential public health hazards.

Upon discovery the case was

swiftly handed over to the US Fish and Wildlife Service which has initiated criminal proceedings against those involved in the smuggling operation.

That proactive response underscored the commitment of law enforcement agencies to combat wildlife trafficking and to uphold international conservation efforts.

“The successful interception of these protected avian species serves as a poignant reminder of the ongoing threats faced by wildlife trafficking worldwide,” an official said.

# Parrots love playing games on tablets

By DAMITA MENEZES

TOUCHSCREENS, ubiquitous in human life, are now under the spotlight for their potential benefits to animals, particularly parrots, in a recent study conducted by Northeastern University.

The researchers had 20 pet birds ranging from small parakeets to large macaws play a simple tablet game involving tapping colored circles.

The goal was to establish guidelines for designing touchscreen tech intended for parrots' use.

“Cognitive enrichment is a crucial component for parrot health and well-being and tablet games are one method of providing this enrichment,” said Megan McMahon, an undergraduate who worked on the study.

“Designing apps specifically made for birds and their unique touchscreen tendencies makes this form of enrichment more accessible.”

Over three months the parrots played the game at home with help from owners using their beaks and tongues.

Data collected showed parrots primarily use their tongues on

touchscreens meaning their eyes are much closer than humans.

That made them less accurate especially with small targets.

There was also high variation based on each bird's size with smaller parrots struggling more.

But some surprised researchers with their speed.

“Some parrots could touch the tablet up to 41 times in a row, resulting in a touch every few milliseconds,” Northeastern assistant professor Rébecca Kleinberger who led the study said.

“This is a good example of how studying animals' bodies can inform the design of new interfaces to empower animals,” she said.

The findings illustrate the potential of touchscreens to enrich parrots' lives and the need to adapt tech for their distinct traits and abilities.

Previous research by Kleinberger's team showed parrots can video call each other using touchscreens.

Owner surveys after the latest study found the tablet game was a positive bonding experience for birds and humans alike.

While cautioning against overuse the researchers see opportunities for parrot-friendly touch-

The findings illustrate the potential of touchscreens to enrich parrots' lives and the need to adapt tech for their distinct traits and abilities.



A young yellow-naped Amazon parrot bites a cell phone being used to record video at the Rare Species Conservatory Foundation.

screen tech which could bring more scientific data to the burgeoning pet tech market.

“My goal is for these insights not only to benefit the pet tech

industry but also to offer valuable guidance to the wider research community, technology developers and pet owners,” Kleinberger said.

# Indonesia parrots get assistance

By MAHMUD ICHI

ON most days Jamal Adam watches over 10 aviaries in Indonesia's Ake Tajawe Lolobata National Park with veterinarians and support staff.

During the holidays last December the 60-year-old farmer was in charge of ambitious conservation work.

"We rely on instinct and a love of birds," Jamal said as birdsong whistled in the background.

"We've been nursing and looking after these birds for several years."

Five years ago Jamal was earning a living as a local farmer and casual laborer on the west of the Halmahera mainland not far from a clutch of volcanic islands rising out of the Maluku Sea in eastern Indonesia.

At first he had only a cursory understanding about birds but an instinctive love for wildlife led him to sign up as a voluntary forest ranger in his spare time.

He then gave environmental talks in schools and worked as a guide in the national park.

In 2019 when local authorities opened eastern Indonesia's largest sanctuary for parrots and other birds near Jamal's home they recruited Jamal to join the project.

Since then Jamal has worked on a team of five to rehabilitate and release birds seized from the pet trade, affected by habitat loss or injured by predators.

The sanctuary has released more than 100 parrots since it opened five years ago.

Parrots are among the world's most at-risk birds with almost a third of 400 known species threatened with extinction on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's Red List.

"Parrots are the most threatened of any bird order of comparable size," George Olah, a Ph.D. scholar at Australian National University, said on publication of a study on parrots almost a decade ago.

Most parrot species rely on cavities in forest trees to build their nests but between 2001 and 2022 North Maluku province lost 274,000 hectares of tree cover or an 8.9 per cent decrease from two decades earlier.

The tree cover loss in North Maluku was lower than the 18.9 per cent average decline in tree cover across Indonesia during the same period but the region contains vast mineral reserves and new nickel mines have driven growth in economic activity and forest loss in recent years.

Researchers say they hope Jamal's bird sanctuary on Halmahera Island can catalyze positive impacts on the area's fragile bird populations.

A similar sanctuary established on neighboring Seram Island in 2004 recruited former wildlife traders to rehabilitate birds in the buffer zone of Manusela National Park.

A 2021 study concluded that the Manusela sanctuary had possibly played an important role in the increasing population of cockatoos in the region.

Jamal's day was interrupted by three visitors from a mining company who arrived carrying a yellow-crested cockatoo.

The Halmahera sanctuary is believed to be the only sanctuary in eastern Indonesia that will take in any birds for rehabilitation with no questions asked.

"If a bird is threatened by another animal or is sick from the sound of its call we really understand, we can immediately provide help," Jamal said.

The sanctuary has 10 enclosures which in December housed a patient population of 25 birds.

New arrivals like the yellow-crested cockatoo are triaged following an initial inspection.



Jamal and a veterinarian at the rehabilitation centre examining a white cockatoo that was handed over by a resident for care and treatment.

Usually a new patient will first go into a quarantine cage before being transferred later to a dedicated aviary for rehabilitation.

During our visit the birds at the sanctuary included four white cockatoos, five chattering lorries and five Tanimbar corellas, a bright white cockatoo native to this part of Indonesia.

In 2022 the sanctuary released a white cockatoo as well as a red-and-green chattering lory, both protected species in Indonesia.

The rehabilitation centre experienced diverse challenges in caring for the birds during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The team responded to difficulties accessing medicine and general supplies by using traditional local knowledge and forest products to nurse the birds under their care Jamal said.

On average a bird will stay for six months before it's considered ready for release but it depends on the species and the condition of the patient.

"If the bird is tame or it has been very close to humans it will take a long time to rehabilitate it for life in the wild," Jamal said.

Research has shown that habi-

tat loss and the illegal wildlife trade are the primary threats to bird populations.

The vulnerability of birds to the effects of climate change is expected to be more varied.

In December the heat outside the aviary was stifling, likely due to an El Niño system that sparked drought and wildfires across much of Indonesia in the second half of last year.

A 2023 study found that overall reproduction declined among 201 bird species from 1970-2019 but the impact of warming temperatures on bird populations was mixed.

The researchers found 57 per cent of bird populations showed declining reproduction, whereas 43 per cent of studied groups produced more offspring.

Staff from the regional conservation department last year recovered 35 different species of parrots from the pet trade, so far this year they've rescued 13.

Jamal said he remains focused on nursing the birds under his care.

Wearing a t-shirt with the national park's logo and a sun hat Jamal approached a perch in one of the enclosures and gently handed food to a parrot.

"As time has gone by," Jamal said.

"I've really come to understand the condition of the birds we're caring for."

"If the bird is tame or it has been very close to humans it will take a long time to rehabilitate it for life in the wild," Jamal said.

# Sanctuary chickens killed

By ISAAC NOWROOZI

POLICE in New South Wales are investigating the deaths of three animals at an animal sanctuary in Bywong, 24km north-east of Canberra.

About 9.30am on February 26 the owner of Lucky Stars Sanctuary found Usher the rooster and his flock of chickens dead in a coop and reported the incident at Queanbeyan Police Station.

Police confirmed that they are investigating the incident.

In a social media post the sanc-

tuary said it was clear the attack was done by humans.

"It is with heavy hearts that we announce the loss of Usher the rooster and his cherished flock," the post said.

"We discovered their pen open and tragically it became clear that their deaths were an act of human cruelty not a natural predator attack."

The sanctuary said it believed the chickens were killed by humans because of the way the animals were found and the way the pen was broken into.

"We have reported this incident to the authorities and hope for justice and the necessary support and intervention for those responsible," the post said.

The sanctuary provides care for injured, neglected or abandoned animals — and it relies on donations and volunteers to operate.

"Our sanctuary relies on the compassion and dedication of volunteers who work tirelessly to protect our animals from natural threats," it said.

"The thought of needing to defend our animals from deliberate harm is unimaginable."

The birds' deaths are a second blow for the sanctuary, whose co-founder Kerrie Carroll passed away last year.

Ms Carroll was a finalist for the 2023 Women of Spirit Award.

"Usher and his flock held a special place in the heart of our beloved founder," the sanctuary's post said.

"We are still processing what happened and our hearts are hurting."

# Canberra light rail is threat to native birds

By IAN BUSHNELL

ENDANGERED cockatoos, parrots, the golden sun moth, a grasshopper and lizard and their habitats are in the path of the proposed light rail extension to the Canberra suburb of Woden which the ACT Government is expected to start building in 2028.

The project referral to the Federal Environment Department under the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act says there will be a significant impact on heritage values in the city's Parliamentary zone.

That includes the loss of trees planted in the 1920s, particularly those in the median along Commonwealth Avenue.

The EPBC referral is an important step in the progress of the proposed Stage 2B light rail and precedes an environmental impact study that will be released later this year.

Chief Minister Andrew Barr has confirmed a timeline for the project saying the government was working towards a construction period of 2028-2033.

He said the project would be the most complicated infrastructure project the territory government had undertaken and required several unique steps to deliver the project.

"It will be the largest change to the landscape of the National Triangle since the construction of the New Parliament House



Gang gang cockatoos and superb parrots are in the light rail's path.

and a project that spans several districts of Canberra," he said.

Opposition transport spokesman Mark Parton seized on the announcement, saying it vindicated the Canberra Liberals' estimates on the cost and delivery of the project.

"Today's announcement confirms that we've all been taken for a ride by Andrew Barr, an exhaustively long, obscenely expensive ride," he said.

"The Canberra Liberals stand by our cost estimate of \$4 billion for the entirety of Stage 2 but all indications are that this may well be a conservative approximation."

Preliminary environmental and ecological assessments show



that the vulnerable superb and swift parrots and the endangered gang-gang cockatoo and their breeding and foraging habitats may be affected.

Some 104 hollow-bearing trees are identified within the project area, more the half of which are native.

The areas near State Circle and Adelaide Avenue had the highest number of hollow-bearing trees, mostly natives.

Gang-gang breeding areas are known to be within 200m of the project area in Hughes while the superb parrot has a potentially important foraging habitat between Launceston Street and Melrose Drive.

Golden sun moths are near

Commonwealth Park, around State Circle and along Adelaide Avenue near Cotter Road.

Other vulnerable species in the area are the Perunga grasshopper and striped legless lizard.

There are also areas of critically endangered grasslands.

The Preliminary Heritage Report says that both routes are likely to result in a significant impact on the Commonwealth Heritage values of the project area.

It would include the removal of established mature and culturally significant trees, individual trees or avenues of trees planted by Charles Weston in the 1920s.

There may also be impacts on Aboriginal heritage areas including original Molonglo River and associated sites now submerged in Lake Burley Griffin, Capital Hill which may be part of a landscape identified as a women's area and landscape connecting Mount Ainslie, Black Mountain and Stirling Ridge/Parliament Hill.

There could also be scar trees and unrecorded burial sites.

An Aboriginal heritage assessment will be included in the EIS.

Chair of the Public Transport Association of Canberra, Ryan Hemsley, said the referral was a positive, concrete step towards delivering light rail to Woden.

"The documents provided in the EPBC referral offer a closer look at many project details and we encourage everyone to take a look at what's proposed," he said.

# Eight poisoned bakery birds survive ordeal

By CHRIS MARRINER

EIGHT poisoned sparrows recovered from outside an Auckland bakery have been nursed back to health and released into the wild.

Nine birds were taken to BirdCare Aotearoa's hospital in Green Bay after they were found outside the Point Chevalier branch of Daily Bread.

Daily Bread said they contracted a third party pest controller two weeks ago but claimed that no further poisoning had taken place since and noted that the birds were found in carpark shared with neighbouring businesses.

Chelsea Crossley from BirdCare said one bird died in transit to the hospital but the birds they treated were healthy enough to be released into the skies above Green Bay.

She said BirdCare was told by the SPCA that a number of dead birds were found in the area when the survivors were initially transported.

Crossley said the birds received fluids and the poison appeared to have passed through them quickly but they did not know which specific poison had been used.

Daily Bread's Josh Helm said his pest control was done humanely.

Asked if she believed that was the case with the birds recovered Crossley said: "any kind of poisoning I would say is suffering".

The popular chain issued a statement on social media telling customers that their thoughts matter.

"We assure you that our pest control practices, commonplace in our industry, not only comply with stringent food safety standards but also specifically address potential health risks associated with bird population," the statement said.

"We're actively working with our partners to find alternative ways to handle pests."

An SPCA spokesperson said its investigation into incidents involving dead sparrows was ongoing and its inspectorate team was working to gather all information relating to this case including toxicology testing to determine cause of death.

"Anyone with information

about pest management measures being employed by businesses or individuals or who have witnessed attempts to eradicate birds is urged to contact SPCA," the spokesperson said.

A spokesman for the Pest Management Association of NZ said treating for birds was a difficult subject for pest controllers.

He said physical barriers were hard to maintain in restaurants and cafes, leaving two options — poisoning or shooting.

"Neither of which is particularly attractive," he said.

Jonathan Simes, general manager of Smash'ed Em Pest Control, said the furore over the video was a storm in a teacup but he understood why the public would be distressed by seeing injured birds.



A poisoned sparrow outside the Daily Bread bakery in Point Chevalier.

"But the other side is: Who wants to see bird poo in their bakery sandwich?" he said, noting that contamination from bird faeces was a major risk.

Helm said consequences of birds being on site could be severe and argued it was common practice in the hospitality industry to use third-party pest controllers.

Steve Armitage, chief executive of Hospitality New Zealand, said pest removal is a necessary measure to comply with strict food standard health and safety regulations but said Hospitality NZ understood that poisoning was not a widespread or common practice.

"If a business has an infestation that's potentially putting customers at harm businesses will generally try other avenues of pest control in the first instance with poison being a last

resort," Armitage said.

Videos of the sparrow struggling to move outside Daily Bread prompted a furious response from animal lovers but the bakery said the birds are pests and risk contaminating food.

Auckland woman Mimi Kelly was visiting the Point Chevalier branch of Auckland's Daily Bread Tuesday when she saw sparrows outside the business looking "very unwell".

Kelly said the small birds appeared poisoned, were struggling to hop about and were being targeted by seagulls.

She claimed a staff member told her the birds had been deliberately poisoned because the business had a health inspection due soon.

eons as pests that have been introduced into NZ," the response said.

"The pests are non-native meaning they are the most detrimental non-native bird species for our native biodiversity that we know, love and cherish."

The email said the birds also "risk the contamination of food, ingredients that we have stored in our venues and the general venue space where our guests dine."

"The birds built large nests which could also pose a fire hazard and spread bird lice, so we deem removing them from our venue a positive solution for the safety of our customers."

"We are continuing to work closely with pest control to find more humane ways of deterring the pests from our venues as many other Auckland businesses are having issues with."

"If you did have any suggestions we are completely open to hearing them."

Kelly posted the videos online where people expressed shock.

Kelly said she shared that distress and was devastated when she learned the poisoning was deliberate saying it was "hard to fathom that someone would be so cruel".

Asked how different this poisoning was to targeting other pests such as rats Kelly said "everybody loves sparrows" and labelled the birds "poor wee innocent souls".

She said there were other ways Daily Bread could have handled the situation.

Helm said contracting a third party to perform the pest removal was a last resort and was done under strict guidelines outside business hours.

It was incorrect to say the poisoning was done directly before a health inspection Helm said.

Helm acknowledged that the consequences of birds being on site during an inspection could be severe and said it was common practice in the hospitality industry to use third party pest controllers.

His business received an A grade after inspection but had a bird been seen inside it would be a D grade.

He said his top priority was maintaining a high health and safety standard and that the pest removal was done in a humane manner.



# Volunteers keep foxes at bay

By KATE LEAVER

A GROUP of volunteers has saved an entire colony of threatened birds by keeping guard over the nests in the early hours of the morning.

Volunteers clocked up more than 330 hours before sunrise guarding a colony of threatened fairy terns from foxes in Perth's south.

Western Australia's smallest seabird the vulnerable fairy tern is under threat from foxes, cats and human activity during the breeding season.

When a fox destroyed 150 nests on the sandbar at Point Walter a group of volunteers sprung into action, taking shifts starting at 2am to 5.30am every morning to guard the remaining nests when tides were low.

Researcher and WA Fairy Tern Network convener Dr Claire Greenwell said she was out of the country when a fox was spotted stalking the nests so had to call on the network of dedicated volunteers to keep guard.

"After the fox predation we had about 100 nests left so we lost 150," she said.

"People have been out here just trying to stop the fox from getting across and that has been successful so most of those chicks now have fledged.

"You think about all those birds are now going to be adding to the population for this threatened species, it's fantastic news.

"If we didn't do this fox watch and didn't have people standing on this sandbar trying to deter the fox from coming out in the first place we would have no colony."

In 2019 a group of 50 fairy terns was killed by a domesticated cat while nesting in Mandurah.



150 fairy tern nests were lost.

# Ute crammed with 150 foul-smelling cygnets

By MICHAEL DAHLSTROM

MORE than 150 black swan cygnets have been rescued from certain death in Western Australia after an extreme weather event saw their parents abandon them.

Dozens were crammed into a ute, trucked to a central location and reared to adulthood.

Cygnets started coming into care in November and continued to be admitted for three months.

The problem began after a series of weather events in Western Australia beginning with a rain bomb that saturated the state's Vasse-Wonnerup System Ramsar site.

"It was a real deluge and wiped out all the eggs," Suzanne Strapp the president of the For Australian Wildlife Needing Aid wildlife rescue group said.

After the devastation the swans returned and laid more eggs but by then it was too late in the season for the cygnets to survive.

"By the time the wetland dried up there would be no food or water for the birds and the adults made the decision to save themselves and they flew 50km away to the Leschenault Inlet near Bunbury," Strapp said.

The rescued cygnets ranged from two to five weeks old and were unable to fend for themselves.

"The trouble with most is their wings hadn't developed and if they had developed the birds



More than 150 young swans were moved in a purpose-built ute.

we picked up had no muscle on their breasts because they were too thin," Strapp said.

Once in care the swans were fed up and driven to the Leschenault Inlet.

"There are no words to describe the smell of the back of the ute, it's probably close to the smell of a pigsty," Strapp said.

Raising baby swans is not an easy feat, it's not the noise that's the problem — they make a whistling sound when they're happy — it's the terrible smell from their excrement.

Because of the stench created FAWNA has a special ute funded by WWF-Australia with a spe-

cial coating sprayed over its tray to allow for easy cleaning.

"I wish you could smell the clothes I'm wearing, they smell disgusting and the flies are horrendous," Strapp said.

"We wash the ute out every day, we used to put the birds in individual soft carriers and you'd have to throw them out because you couldn't clean them properly, they'd stink forever."

This summer has been a shocker with bushfires, a heatwave devastating wildlife and straining the meagre resources of the FAWNA volunteers.

It's not just swans they're helping, volunteers have also at-

tended to dozens of endangered western ringtail possums that have been discovered with severe burns from walking across roof tops or lying on the ground suffering from dehydration.

The worsening effects of climate change are expected to push the team beyond its limits.

"We've had the most horrendous heatwave on record," Strapp said.

"I'd like to hope that this is not what we can expect in the future but it's been consistently getting hotter,

"If it incrementally gets worse over the next 50 years we're stuffed, the wildlife is stuffed."

# Minister faces cockatoo threat

By GEETA PILLAI

WESTERN Australian Minister Reece Whitby faces a significant challenge as he navigates conflicting demands of energy transition and conservation.

A proposed power transmission line threatens the habitat of endangered Carnaby's black cockatoos in Perth's north.

The project encompasses a 29km Malaga-Neerabup powerline, part of a broader \$575 million network upgrade by Western Power.

Documents from the

Environmental Protection Authority reveal that the construction will clear more than 150 hectares of bushland including vital habitat for Carnaby's black cockatoos, species already suffering from extensive land clearing over the past 50 years.

The proposed powerline is a key component of the government's plan to enhance energy reliability and transition towards renewable sources, aiming to decommission coal power stations by 2030.

However the potential environmental impact on the cocka-

toos' foraging grounds has sparked a debate reminiscent of the Roe 8 highway controversy during the 2017 state election.

Western Power asserts that the powerline route was chosen to minimize social and environmental impacts with public feedback a crucial part of the decision-making process.

Meanwhile environmental groups and activists including the Save the Black Cockatoos campaign and the Urban Bushland Council WA have voiced extremely strong opposition to the project.



Carnaby's cockatoo habitat is threatened by the project.

# Thousands of chooks rehomed from farm

By DAVID CHEN

THOUSANDS of chickens were rescued from an egg farm in Queensland's south-east and authorities are investigating claims that they were abandoned.

The owners of a property in a rural community south of Toowoomba put a call out on social media last month seeking new homes for more than 3000 chooks.

"The tenants have now moved on leaving behind hens," the owners said.

Toowoomba resident Naomi Watts was among those who helped to rehome the laying hens.

Ms Watts said it was a confronting scene.

"It was pretty bad," she said.

"There were a lot of dead chooks everywhere, the smell was just unbelievable.

"I'm still reeling — it's like something out of a bad movie."

It is not known how many hens died but the thousands that survived were rehomed to locations around Toowoomba over six days.

Ms Watts said the community response was overwhelming.

"Everyone loves a free chook but most people I've talked to are really delighted to be able to

help," she said.

"If they hadn't been able to be rehomed the owners had no way of feeding them all so they quite possibly would have ended up dying."

An owner of the property declined to comment.

The property was leased at the time.

RSPCA Queensland said it had referred a complaint about the egg farm to the Department of Agriculture and Fishing.

A DAF spokesperson confirmed that an animal welfare report relating to a poultry establishment had been received but declined to comment further because the matter was under investigation.

RSPCA Queensland said it regularly received complaints about abandoned animals.

"It's best to report these animals rather than taking them into your own care," spokeswoman Emma Lagoon said.

"There can be issues around ownership, biosecurity risks, trespass and potential theft of animals along with appropriate care and costs associated with this."

She said for people considering rehoming chickens it was important to carry out several



Thousands of chickens were rescued from the property near Toowoomba but many birds perished.

checks including parasite control and vaccinations.

"Considerations do need to be made in regards to who they are rehoming animals to and contacting local livestock rescue groups to ensure animals are going to good homes that know how to care for hens," Ms Lagoon said.

Ms Watts said her family's four chickens which her daughters named Fat Chook, Sparkle Chook, Freckled Chook and Rhode Chook were settling into life as backyard chooks.

"It's been really nice watching them experience grass and sunlight, and they get in the sun and dust bathe," she said.

...issues around ownership, biosecurity risks, trespass and potential theft of animals along with appropriate care and costs associated with this."

# Names can confuse

By FELIX CEHAK

INFLUENTIAL ornithologist John James Audubon's ownership of slaves has spurred a debate about bird names in the US.

As a result the American Ornithological Society will change birds' common names referring to him plus all 152 eponymous bird names in North America regardless of good or bad perceptions of their namesakes.

The cultural conversation has arrived in Australia where dozens of species are named after people.

Some Australian scientists and birdwatchers have proposed a review particularly of names with colonial associations.

One Australian species has already been renamed — Birdlife Australia now prefers pink cockatoo to Major Mitchell's cockatoo as the common name.

Thomas Mitchell led a massacre of Aboriginal people in western New South Wales in 1836 that was condemned for its senselessness even at the time.

That change sparked a conversation in online birding communities.

The Albert's lyrebird, the topic of my PhD research, also bears a name with colonial overtones but without the direct violent connotations of Mitchell.

Should it and other Australian species named after people be renamed?

I'm not sure but I do know that the reclusive rainforest Albert's lyrebird has a fascinating and surprisingly complex etymology.

When English ornithologist John Gould suggested the lyrebird as Australia's bird emblem he was recommending the superb lyrebird that is found throughout south-east Australia.

Fewer people know of the Albert's lyrebird which is restricted to a tiny area on the Queensland-New South Wales border.

Fewer still know the story behind its naming — the Albert's lyrebird bears the moniker of Prince Albert, both in its scientific name and common name, bestowed by Gould himself.

That species was unknown to colonial scientists when Gould's landmark *Birds of Australia* was first published in 1848 — in part due to its remote, humid forest habitat.

Under taxonomic convention — the rules for classifying species — the credit for describing the species and assigning its scientific name would normally have gone to Gould when his 1850 supplement introduced the new

species.

Every listing of a species provides a scientific name, the name of the person who first described it and the date they did so.

So we might have expected to see the Albert's lyrebird listed as *Menura alberti*, Gould, 1850.

Instead next to *Menura alberti* we see a different surname — Bonaparte.

Not Napoleon but his nephew Charles, a naturalist who referred to Gould's description of the new species.

However Bonaparte's reference predated Gould's actual publication, a technicality that means Bonaparte is listed as the scientific describer.

That quirk of taxonomy tied the bird to two names deeply

associated with empires. Other common names have been used in the past.

Northern lyrebird is used in G. Matthews' *Birds of Australia*.

The volume is of the same name as Gould's by a self-funded author who was controversial for his own taxonomic renaming.

More informally "small lyrebird" has been used in relation to A.A. Leycester, the naturalist who shot the first specimen in 1844.

Those are both obscure, albeit more descriptive, alternatives.

Albert's is much more common.

Leycester added an even more royal connotation with "Prince Albert's lyrebird" but sometimes also "Richmond River lyrebird".

As for the bird being discov-

ered, One Bundjalung dictionary provides "galbuny" or "galwuny" with an outlying possibility of "wonglepong", "kalwun" or "kulwin" in the Tweed as meanings for "lyrebird" — with no clarification between the two species.

Indigenous health service Kalwun uses the name in reference to the rainforest lyrebird but uses an image of a superb lyrebird as its logo.

The superb lyrebird is also found within Bundjalung Country such as in Washpool National Park.

That variance and confusion between lyrebird species and language groups is before we even consider the Githabul area to the west, a sometimes contested distinction.

The Yugambah Museum allows for the variance by providing a different language resource for each location.

For example there is a different indigenous name on the national park sign at Tamborine to the one at Lamington.

As many language groups give the bird many names, only some of which are listed here, there isn't one obvious indigenous option if the bird were to be renamed.

Beyond these names the cultural significance of the bird which lives in rarely visited wet and leech-infested places seems to have been lost.

Over many hours of conversation about the species I have found the link to Prince Albert is always known.

I have rarely heard anything more about why the lyrebird has his name.

Besides his irrelevance to Australian ornithology I can't gauge a specific reason the Prince Albert moniker is inappropriate unlike Thomas Mitchell.

If a change is required to a bird's name the decision must be made with the relevant communities.

If they wish to counter a history of imperial naming by renaming, the new name should not spring from a similar desire for ownership.

It would also be wise to maintain broadness in this conversation.

In the Albert's lyrebird case that includes the birdwatchers, ecologists and conservationists who have contributed to our understanding of this little-known species.

We are about to see what happens in the United States and it would be wise to watch carefully what happens next.



The case for renaming the Major Mitchell's cockatoo the pink cockatoo is clear but what about other Australian birds named after people?

associated with empires.

Scientific names change only when species are reclassified.

The naming is more akin to record keeping and honouring people can be a secondary purpose.

In the lyrebird's case Gould cited the prince's "liberal support" and "personal virtues".

Birdlife Australia has an English names committee which deals with such changes.

Prince Albert is not directly linked to historical violence in Australia but he was Queen Victoria's spouse during its colonisation.

If *Menura alberti* requires the

ered, earlier indigenous names survive.

The bird has recently been described as a bird of the Bundjalung language area which is true but it is also a Yugambah and Githabul bird.

Its habitat on the Great Dividing Range might include Jagera Country too.

Archibald Meston inexplicably recorded a Kabi Kabi language name from the "head of the Mary River" — no lyrebird is known to occur that far north.

The Yugambah Museum has provided "kalbun" for national park signage in my home town, Tamborine Mountain.

# First hospital for kiwi opened

NEW Zealand has opened its first hospital exclusively treating kiwis and vets have already nursed the first patient back to health — a chick nicknamed Splash that tumbled into a swimming pool.

Rising numbers of the once-threatened national bird led to the construction of a purpose-built facility in Kerikeri, a three-hour drive north of Auckland.

The Department of Conservation said the kiwi hospital is the first of its kind in New Zealand.

The rehabilitation centre, built by local conservation group Kiwi Coast, is in the heart of the

Northland region which has a brown kiwi population of nearly 10,000.

Roughly 26,000 brown kiwi live in the wild across New Zealand — a thousand more than in 2008 when conservationists classed them nationally vulnerable. The bird is now listed as not threatened.

The population growth is mostly due to conservation groups culling predators like stoats and ferrets while dog owners have been offered special courses to teach pets not to attack the bird.

With numbers climbing Kiwi

Coast co-ordinator Ngaire Sullivan said a specialist hospital was needed for sick or injured birds.

“Some will be struck by cars so the more kiwi we have the more likely that there’s going to be the odd one that needs help,” she said.

“We wanted to make sure that stressed kiwi get the care they need.”

The centre treated its first patient before the official opening when a young kiwi named Splash managed to squeeze through a fence and fall into a swimming pool filter.



**Splash, who was found stuck in a swimming pool filter, is treated by retired vet Lesley Baigent.**

# Scientists seeking info on bats in backyards

By ZAARKACHA MARLAN

A CITIZEN science project that tracks insect-eating bats is uncovering how vital the tiny creatures are to farmers in western New South Wales.

The bats consume their own body weight in insects including cockroaches, mosquitoes and agricultural pests every night.

Department of Planning and Environment threatened species officer Jess Peterie said the diet provided a valuable service for farmers.

“Insectivorous bats provide natural pest control services worth \$63.3 million annually in avoided cotton yield damage to the Australian cotton industry which is huge,” she said.

“So they’re really important within our ecosystems but they have a huge benefit for our primary producers as well.”

But insect-eating bats in NSW are declining in number.

There are 34 species of bat in the state and 18 are listed as threatened or are thought to be extinct.

The Bats in Backyards project run by the Department of Planning and Environment is now in its second monitoring season and is being expanded to include Nyngan, Munangdi and Weemalah.

“Our understanding of bats in these regions is more limited compared with the coastal regions,” Ms Peterie said.



**Insect-eating bats play a vital role in ecosystems which benefits farmers.**

“Bats are under threat from habitat loss, human activity through urban sprawl and climate change.”

As part of a five-night study landholders in those areas will be equipped with bat detectors that will capture high-frequency echolocation calls from bats flying overhead.

“Knowledge is power so by learning about where they occur, what things in the landscape are important for them, landholders might be able to learn some-

thing,” Ms Peterie said.

Unlike fruit bats which move through pollinating plants and are known for their shrieking sound insectivorous bats are much smaller and quieter.

The insect-eating bats are among only a few groups of species that use echolocation to navigate, hunt and communicate with each other.

“Echolocation is an ultrasonic call and it’s inaudible to human ears so often we don’t know that the bats are around us and the

ecosystem services they’re doing,” Ms Peterie said.

“Bats have a signature call so we can use these calls to identify what species is present and then we’re able to share with the landholders exactly what bats were found on their property and some information about them.

“So everyone might have bats on their property but they just don’t know that they’re there.”

Last year 110 participants in Narrabri, Wellington, Western Sydney and the Pillar Valley recorded 95,996 bat calls.

The study identified 24 bat species including nine that were threatened and one believed to be extinct.

Wellington resident Tessa Ponder took part in last year’s survey and was astounded by the results.

“We were very surprised about how many bats were actually recorded because in my mind it was late in the season and I thought perhaps they’re not going to get anything,” she said.

Narrabri property owner Jessica Stuart also took part and uncovered nine species of bats surrounding her land.

“Two of them are quite endangered or rare species which was really interesting to learn about,” she said.

“There’s something we can learn about the piece of land we have that’s just really cool.

“Because we can’t see these creatures and to know that they’re hiding somewhere it’s really special.”



# Perch potato problem

WHEN considering exercise for our pet parrots we associate it with flying.

After all it's the foundation of being a bird yet some birds don't fly at all.

Ostriches can run at over 40mph and penguins can swim faster than humans.

Some may argue that companion parrots that are allowed access to flight are healthier.

Other caregivers feel it's much safer for everyone to always keep them in their cages.

The answer lies in finding a balance that works for the caregiver's lifestyle and the parrot's best interest.

Experts would agree that out-of-cage time is important for mental and physical health — most recommend at least four hours per day of out-of-cage time.

Bear in mind that flying is the healthiest and most dangerous activity for a bird — the potential for calamity is significant.

When out of the cage the entire home interior would still be a large cage so create the safest environment possible when your bird is flying around the house.

Ceiling fans can be deadly, there are many dangers in the kitchen, cover window glass and mirrors and use stickers so the bird learns it can't fly through glass.

Entryways to the home are escape routes for your parrot.

Avoid interaction with other household pets like cats and dogs — predator and prey are a deadly combination for companion birds.

Supervise your birds closely when out of the cage and have multiple play areas available.

Set them up in spaces where take-offs and landings are as clear as possible.

Independent and parallel play are crucial for a healthy parrot, they shouldn't be on your shoulder all the time they are out of the cage.

Training them to return to their cage when prompted is also crucial, chasing them around the house to capture them with a towel is a huge trust breaker.

Most captive birds have weak flying skills compared to their wild cousins, especially parrots that haven't fledged properly or have had their wings clipped.

Early wing clipping affects a parrot's flight skills, they may have depended more on climbing than flying which can impair flight-muscle growth and overall co-ordination.

The ultimate companion parrot exercise may be free flight training — the perfect balance of the comforts of captivity and the exercise of inherent freedom.

Allowing your parrot to fly outdoors takes specialised training, you should not attempt free flight training without the proper guidance, dedication and extensive training required to execute it safely.

It may not be workable for most parrot caregivers, it is recommended for large and medium-sized parrots.



Does your parrot spend too much time sitting on a perch?

The danger of predators attacking small parrots flying outdoors is much more likely and recall training in an aviary or in your home is a treat option to encourage your parrot to fly.

Flight is not the only exercise a parrot needs, an often overlooked form of locomotion is climbing.

Flying consumes a great deal of energy and many prefer climbing because it helps to conserve energy — just as they are designed to fly, climbing is also a parrot's forte.

Grasping beaks, muscular necks and especially-designed zygodactyl feet to assist with perching and climbing make them experts in treetops.

A recent scientific study with love birds looked at how they move when hanging.

They found the small parrots move in a method of locomotion that resembles the arm-swinging style of some primates like gibbons.

That movement is known as brachiation and the researchers wanted to find out more about how a parrot climbs when hanging under a thin branch that is too small for them to perch on top of.

The lovebirds would grasp the branch with their beak then let go of their feet and swing forward like a pendulum.

They use both legs to grab the branch again further along as they pivot at the beak's grip point.

You may have observed the same locomotion in your captive parrot as they move across the ceiling of their cage or on a thin rope.

Scientists have dubbed the motion in parrots as beakiation.

Also noteworthy is that the birds were not trained or rewarded to produce that movement.

They just hung them on the thin branch and off they went.

Each bird performs in the same fashion, a sign that it may be an instinctive behaviour.

A large outdoor aviary is the best choice for housing a companion parrot but that isn't an option for many parrot caregivers.

One way to help enrich your parrot's life is to take a critical look at the interior cage setup.

It's not unusual for caregivers to overcompensate and offer more toys in the cage than is necessary. Avoid cluttering and filling every area of the cage's interior.

Open spaces will allow room to spread wings and depending on the size of the cage maybe even space for a short fly.

If you have a large supply of toys consider rotating them from storage to the cage.

Placement of items in the cage interior is critical — set it up so that the parrot can climb around in the space like they would in a tree canopy.

You can provide foraging activity in the cage.

Set up the cage so that there are "paths" to and from various stations within the cage.

You can use ladders or seagrass

attached to the side of the cage to get from perch to perch.

Provide exercise opportunities within the cage.

For instance if you have a parrot that prefers to dunk food or pellets in water making "birdy soup" place the water bowl on the opposite side of the cage so the bird has to traverse his way over each time he wants to soak a pellet.

You might hang a shelf that can hold a foraging tray.

Place perches strategically under or by the side of various chew toys.

You may also want to challenge your parrot by hanging food skewers or baffle cages where there is no convenient perch to access the food.

Cages with play tops are popular, so by just opening the door your parrot has to make his way to the top of the cage.

You could also connect the cage to a nearby station with a rope.

Maybe use a ladder to the floor if you have a bird that enjoys exploring the ground.

Perhaps hang bird-safe branches from the ceiling so the parrot has a "bridge" from the top of the cage to other play stations.

If your parrot is target trained target it to various places to climb or fly from one point to another.

Enrichment activities, whether involving flying or climbing, should always have a clear aim.

Today obesity is a widespread issue among captive parrots.

Keeping a bird engaged in movement will encourage it to play and explore.

Engaging in flying and climbing activities can prevent long-term problems, not only to keep them in tip-top shape but also to avoid stressors and unwanted behaviours.

Do all you can to prevent your companion parrot from becoming a perch potato.



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# Missing pigeon back with Paul

By **FINN SMITH**

BEST friends have been reunited as Woodyly the pigeon — whose missing status sparked a social media frenzy — returned home from a week-long journey.

Paul Guy, 50 from Low Barugh in England lost his beloved pet rock dove Woodyly last month and spent the following days desperately searching for him.

Through pleas on Facebook with the offer of a £100 reward Paul did everything he could to get his friend home.

He said: "My wife took him to

her grandad who's a pigeon breeder for a check-up.

"A dog spooked him and he just flew up into the air.

"Rock doves have the best homing sense of all pigeons but it was getting dark and they're no good in the dark."

Paul jumped onto social media and made sure everyone was 'raring for Woodyly'.

While a pet shop owner was looking after another bird Woodyly rocked up out of the blue and he's now back home and safe.

"You don't get a happy ending very often," Paul said.

He hand-reared Woodyly after finding him while on holiday in Dorset four years ago.

In that time the two have become thick as thieves, watching TV and going on trips together.

"I was taking pictures of the sunrise on holiday," he said.

"I looked up and saw what I thought was a crisp packet falling from the sky.

"It was actually a baby pigeon seagulls had taken from the nest.

"I've nursed him ever since.

"I've never known anyone to have a pigeon live with them 24/7 like Woodyly does with us."



Paul Guy and his pigeon Woodyly.

# PBFD cockatoo living good life 11 years on

By **TOM FLANAGAN**

IN Sookie's eyes, he's just like any other sulphur-crested cockatoo.

"He can quite often see the wild cockatoos from his cage and he knows they're the same as him," his owner Carly said.

"As far as he's concerned there is no difference."

But the obvious difference is, of course, they have feathers and he doesn't.

Eleven-year-old Sookie has the untreatable psittacine beak and feather disease which in many cases can cause affected parrots, cockatoos and lorikeets to lose their feathers.

It can also cause abnormal beaks and claws but if only the feathers are affected as is the case for Sookie they can live a pretty normal life.

"It doesn't faze him, he's a beautiful boy, he's really intelligent and talks like a trooper, he does swear a lot unfortunately," Carly said.

The bird's cheeky personality has won over his fans online with Carly regularly taking to an Australian cockatoo Facebook group to share pictures and videos of Sookie which she says is a great way to educate people about PBFD.

"It took a while for people to understand what he had, some thought he was unhealthy and was plucking out his feathers," she said.



Sookie was fully feathered before he began to lose his feathers before his second birthday.

PBFD is highly contagious but Sookie doesn't interact with other birds and Carly and her husband take extra care cleaning hands and clothing to avoid any spread in Taree, where they live on the NSW Mid North Coast.

"He does like quite a lot of cage time as that's his safe space," Carly said.

WIRES Vet Dr Tania Bishop said earlier this year it can be devastating in the wild after an increase in sightings of cockatoos with PBFD.

"We've got a few threatened

and endangered species of parrots now and the last thing we want is for it to kill chicks or parents that are threatened," she said.

Because PBFD causes a lower immune system Carly feeds Sookie a meticulous healthy diet consisting of fruits, vegetables and nuts.

Carly said for the first 18 months Sookie was fully feathered.

They were told he was PBFD-free by their breeder however they later learnt that his mother had it.

"When he moulted for the first time he basically never grew back feathers," she said.

But they consider themselves lucky that Sookie has avoided symptoms including balance issues that have a much greater affect on the birds' quality of life.

Overall he has lived a relatively pain-free 11 years with many more to come Carly hopes, as well as his many admirers online.

"It warms our hearts that our little boy can possibly grab someone else's," she said.

# British pigeon head biter sought

By SANYA BURGESS

A MAN who appears to have bitten the head off a live pigeon is being hunted by the RSPCA in Britain.

Disturbing footage shows a white man in a yellow hi-vis jacket hitting the bird with a stick before using his teeth to decapitate it.

The animal charity said the pigeon would have been subjected to unimaginable suffering if the video footage is as it appears.

The man who looks to be in his forties is shown knocking the

bird from its nesting place with a stick before grabbing it flapping from the floor and biting its head from its body.

He then spits the head out of his mouth and throws the decapitated body to the ground.

The video shows the man picking up the bird which is still moving to pose before walking away.

Another man can be seen in the background and laughter can be heard.

Llewelyn Lowen, RSPCA wildlife expert, said: "This video seems to show a particularly callous and deliberate act of animal

cruelty.

"RSPCA officers across England and Wales investigate a wide range of cruelty complaints each and every day but an attack of this nature on a wild animal is thankfully exceptionally rare."

It is not known where the video was filmed, although the men appear to be on a building site and have been described as having northern accents.

The RSPCA said the footage had been sent in from someone in Wales.

"This is a deeply shocking, disturbing and distressing video,

appearing to show a man biting the head off a live pigeon," said Dermot Murphy, assistant director of the RSPCA inspectorate.

"If what this video seems to show is accurate, the pain and suffering caused to the pigeon is likely to have been unimaginable.

"We're very eager for information identifying the individual involved or providing related background to be brought to our attention as a matter of urgency.

"It has been suggested to us that the incident may have links to either the North of England or Wales."

# New York woman's pet her full-time companion

By ALICE SJÖBERG

A WOMAN named Abby Jardine has gone viral on TikTok after sharing her pet pigeon's luxurious New York City lifestyle consisting of designer handbags and visits to the city's best restaurants.

In 2016 New York City introduced a new rule claiming that all dogs travelling on the city's subway would have to fit in bags.

That led New Yorkers to get creative as even the biggest dogs are seen being carried in big backpacks or Ikea bags.

But what about other animals?

What would you do if you saw someone on the subway traveling with a pigeon in their bag?

That is exactly what Abby Jardine has done on a daily basis since adopting her black pet pigeon, Pidge and she's shared every moment of it on TikTok for millions to witness.

Speaking to the *New York Post* Abby said she'd found the pigeon scared and alone by some trash by her apartment.

Three weeks old at the time the tiny bird could not fly and shouldn't have been out of its nest.

When she found the bird Jardine took it to Wild Bird Fund, a critter rehabilitation centre on the Upper West Side for treatment and she soon decided to become its adoptive mum.

"I had never owned a pigeon as



Abby Jardine takes pet pigeon Pidge everywhere, even on planes.

a pet — I'm not even a bird person," she said.

"But I did know that pigeons can be domesticated.

"When I saw how cute and friendly she was I knew she was my forever baby."

Since Pidge was adopted by Abby they have become a TikTok sensation as Abby often shares clips of her "purse pig-

eon" in her collection of designer bags all across New York and even on the subway.

Most of Abby's millions of viewers have been confused as to how she managed to take Pidge all over the city.

According to Abby she has yet to have any problems with it.

"If I want to go out for drinks or dinner with friends I just put

her in my bag and she's down to roll," Abby said.

"She's super social and super chill so we've never been kicked out of any bars or restaurants."

But what most viewers are curious about is Pidge's bathroom habits because pigeons are known for being ruthless about where they do their business.

But Abby put all viewers' concerns to rest revealing that she's managed to potty train her pet.

She said: "If we're out somewhere I just take her to the bathroom every 30 to 40 minutes, hold her over the toilet and she goes."

"I've tried to make her go over trash cans and she's definitely wary of that, she prefers an actual bathroom."

Because of how well-behaved Pidge is Abby even managed to take the bird on a flight from New York to Pittsburgh to see her parents.

In her video documenting the experience Abby shows her parents petting Pidge, claiming they loved her.

Her dad even went so far as to build his grand-pigeon her very own house to sit in while they were pet-sitting for Abby.

"New BFFs," Abby captioned one clip showing Pidge sitting on her dad's shoulder, nipping on his cheek.

After months of living together the latest video on their channel shows Pidge chilling in Abby's Brandon Blackwood handbag, proving that even pigeons can live luxurious lifestyles.

# Birds cause lung illness

By SALIMAH SHIVJI

AT his clinic in a northern suburb of Mumbai Dr Pralhad Prabhudesai stared at an X-ray, flipped through a chart and quickly fired a string of questions at the patient standing before him.

“Are you around pigeons often? What else are you exposed to?” he asked

The pulmonologist is part of a group of doctors working in India’s most populous city who are increasingly alarmed over what they’ve observed during the past seven years — a fivefold increase in cases of a severe inflammation of the lungs called hypersensitivity pneumonitis.

It’s a steep spike that experts link directly to Mumbai’s exploding pigeon population.

The bird’s droppings contain fungi that if inhaled over a sustained period can cause the immune system disorder.

“It’s a terrible, progressive condition,” said Dr Prabhudesai, adding that in chronic cases hypersensitivity pneumonitis causes irreversible scarring to the lungs which can require the patient to be on a constant supply of oxygen or can even lead to a lung transplant.

“There are more than 300 reasons to get this hypersensitivity pneumonia and exposure to pigeons is one of them,” Prabhudesai said.

“Most importantly, this is the most common cause of the disease in our country.”

Other causes are allergens found in grains, feathers and air conditioning units that aren’t properly maintained but several recent studies monitoring newly-diagnosed patients identified exposure to birds as the leading link to the chronic disease.

Experts are calling for further data to be collected and the Indian Council of Medical Research has developed a registry to track cases of lung disease along with the identified causes.

The problem is acute in Mumbai, India’s most densely-populated city that has millions of apartment buildings with flat surfaces where pigeons roost.

The city has a robust cultural tradition of feeding the birds for religious reasons such as a deep-seated belief that caring for pigeons brings blessings and will help to wash away a person’s sins.

Mumbai is known for its kabutarkhanas — designated feeding parks often located near temples and other places of worship where thousands of pigeons gath-



Pigeon droppings contain fungi that can cause severe inflammation of the lungs after prolonged exposure.

er and are fed — it’s not uncommon to see people dragging large bags of grain to pour in front of the birds.

“In Mumbai a lot of feeding is being done near your house, near temples, everywhere you go,” Prabhudesai said.

He often fields questions from patients asking if there is a pigeon repellent or other technology being developed to drive the birds away from homes.

“Patient awareness of the danger of pigeons has started to increase over the past five years,” he said but many feel helpless because they are very stubborn birds,” he said.

A hypersensitivity pneumonitis diagnosis came completely out of the blue for Namrata Trivedi who just returned to work in the past year after more than a decade of battling the disease.

She began experiencing breathing problems and a persistent dry cough in 2011 and a string of doctors couldn’t figure out what she had.

“When I saw the X-ray from my CT scan I could see a black layer all over my lungs,” she said.

“The doctor looked right at my husband and my mother, and told me I had only three years left to live.”

Trivedi, 57, frequently used to feed pigeons and in one of her previous homes there were large nests of the birds tucked into a

windowsill.

She was floored when she was diagnosed and told the cause of her lung disorder was pigeon poo.

“I had no idea, I was completely unaware,” she said.

“I remember thinking how can pigeons cause such a huge problem! It’s not possible.”

Trivedi has defied the doctors’ predictions and her condition is now under control even though she still has occasional lung pain and has to take precautions to avoid large crowds when going out.

The hairstylist wishes more people in Mumbai knew how deadly pigeon droppings can be.

“People don’t understand, they keep saying feeding pigeons is jeev daya,” Trivedi said using the Hindi and Gujarati term meaning to help or show compassion to all living beings including animals.

“But humans are also worth helping,” she said, saying that it breaks her heart to see children suffering from the condition because the people around them insist on feeding the birds.

Prakash Punjabi, 68, who found out he was suffering from the chronic lung disease due to exposure to pigeon droppings last year is trying to process the same physical and emotional pain.

He spends at least four days a week exercising at a rehabilitation centre adjacent to Prabhudesai’s clinic in north Mumbai,

often hooked up to an oxygen machine.

“It’s very difficult,” he said, panting through his oxygen supply while on the treadmill.

“I find it difficult while breathing through my nose and I feel tired all day.”

Punjabi was not in the habit of feeding pigeons but he and his doctors suspect he got the disease after spending so much time at home during the Covid-19 lockdown.

“Where I stay there are a lot of pigeons,” he said.

“We have grills and aluminum siding where all the pigeons dance all day.”

These days Punjabi doesn’t leave his house without wearing a mask to protect him from dust and pigeon droppings but he said it’s often hard to avoid with Mumbai’s kabutarkhanas.

“People have a religious belief that if you feed them you get the pigeon’s blessings,” he said.

“You can’t ban it, you can’t do anything but people have to be very cautious when dealing with pigeons.”

The city of Mumbai technically does have fines of 500 rupees on the books for feeding pigeons in non-designated areas but residents say the bylaw is rarely enforced.

It’s left to chest surgeons like Prabhudesai to sound the alarm and repeat the same advice over and over.

“We always try to tell people, number one, don’t feed the pigeons,” he said.

...at least four days a week exercising at a rehabilitation centre adjacent to Prabhudesai’s clinic in north Mumbai, often hooked up to an oxygen machine.



# Rhea loose since Christmas

By **ALEKSANDRA CUPRIAK**

A SOUTH American rhea has been spotted roaming around the Suffolk countryside in the UK since its escape from a farm last year.

The loose rhea was spotted by drivers in Wetheringsett off the A140 and continues to evade capture since its escape in December 2023.

The largest species of South American bird rheas are native to the continent's eastern grasslands growing to 1.5m tall, weighing up to 30kg and reaching

speeds of up to 80kph.

They are in the ratite family of flightless birds which includes ostrich and emu.

On farms rheas are bred for exotic animal lovers or for their meat which is similar to beef but sweeter.

In addition to eating insects rheas mostly graze by eating broad-leafed weeds, clover and some grasses but have also been known to snack on eggs, earthworms and snakes.

Experts suggested that although a 1.5m sturdy fence will adequately contain most rheas

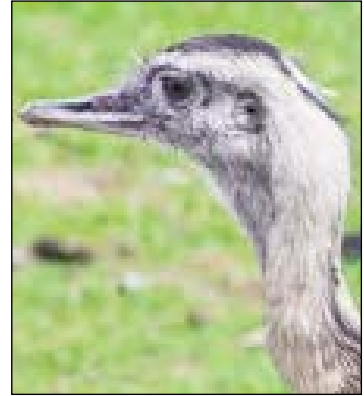
a 1.4m-2.4m fence is recommended to eliminate the possibility of a rogue bird jumping the fence.

Residents from neighbouring county Norfolk have seen not one but 12 rheas on the run.

Last summer the fleet-footed mob escaped from a farm on Common Road near Stalham.

They forced their way out of their enclosure and wandered around the area for three weeks before returning to the farm.

Drones and a rescue team were engaged in the rhea search.



Rheas can jump over 1.5m fences.

# The hidden secrets of songbirds explained

By **MAGGIE PENMAN**

TO a human ear the songs of all male zebra finches sound more or less the same but faced with a chorus of this simple song female finches can pick the performer who sings most beautifully.

Zebra finches are found in Australia and they usually mate for life making that a high-stakes decision for the female finches.

The zebra finch is among around a third of songbirds who learn a single song from their fathers early in life and sing it over and over raising the question of how female songbirds distinguish between them to choose a mate.

Scientists believe most male songbirds evolved to sing a variety of songs to demonstrate their fitness.

Under that theory the fittest songbirds will have more time and energy to work on their vocal stylings — and to attract females with their varied vocal repertoire.

New research using machine learning shows finches may be sticking to one tune but how they sing it makes a big difference.

Published in the journal *Nature* the study reveals the complexity of a single zebra finch song and what female songbirds might be hearing in their prospective mates' seemingly simple songs.

When researchers analyze



A zebra finch at Antalya Metropolitan Municipality Zoo and Nature Park in Turkiye.

birdsongs they're often not listening to them but rather looking at spectrograms which are visualizations of audio files.

"So I put together that 'Hey, what humans are doing is looking at images of these audio files, can we use machine learning and deep learning to do this?'" said Danyal Alam, lead author on new study and a postdoctoral researcher at the University of California in San Francisco.

Alam along with Todd Roberts, an associate professor at UT Southwestern Medical Center and another colleague used machine learning to analyze hundreds of thousands of zebra finch songs to figure out how they were different from each other and which variations were more attractive to females.

The researchers found one metric that seemed to get females' attention — the spread of syllables in the song.

The females seemed to prefer longer paths between syllables.

That isn't something humans can easily pick up by listening to the songs or looking at the spectrograms but based on how those algorithms mapped syllables the researchers were able to see them in a new way.

To check their hypothesis the researchers brought the findings back to the birds.

They generated synthetic bird songs to see if females preferred those with a longer path and they did, suggesting that the birds' intended audience picked up on the same pattern as the researchers' computers.

Alam and his colleagues found that baby birds had a harder time learning the long-distance song patterns than the shorter ones which suggests fitter birds would be more able to learn them the researchers said.

The study's finding is consistent with what's been shown in other species — the more complexity or difficulty in a song the more appealing it is to females.

"A lot of signals in animal communication are meant to be an honest signal of some underlying quality," said Kate Snyder, a researcher at Vanderbilt who wasn't involved in the new paper.

For example she said if you look at a peacock you see male birds with the longer and more beautiful tails are better at attracting mates.

Maintaining a tail like that is expensive for the bird so it must be good at finding food and surviving in its environment to have the time to devote to keeping its tail looking nice.

"Learning takes a lot of time, energy, brain space," Snyder said.

Only the fittest male birds will have the time and energy to devote to learning to sing.

Among finches that work has been harder to spot until now.

"We used to think of this single song repertoire as perhaps a simple behavior," said Roberts.

"But what we see is that it's perhaps much more complicated than we previously appreciated."

# Scientists study least seen bird

By COLLIN LEONARD

AS snow fell hard and heavy on the Wasatch Mountains in the west of the United States six wildlife scientists from the Department of Wildlife Resources crouched in the vestibule of a Powder Mountain ski lodge watching and waiting for an elusive species of alpine finch to wander into their trap.

Clark's nutcrackers called from the aspen grove across the street while chickadees darted in and out of the opening to the cages grabbing the seeds scattered as bait.

A string tied to a stick propped open the door to a green mesh trap ran about 20 feet to where Kristin Purdy a self-described bird nerd waited inside the door, ready to yank the trap closed when the time was right.

Purdy, a volunteer who oversees logistics at the Powder Ridge Condominium site said she puts out about 600 pounds of bird food in nearby feeders every year, a quantity hard to believe judging by the 30-gram animals hopping around.

The team was hoping to capture and tag as many rosy finches as they could — one of the least-studied birds in North America.

Inside the small entryway to the ski lodge they set up stations to place metal tracking ankle bands and radio-frequency identification tags on the captured birds as well as scales and calipers to measure demographic features.

Estimated age, weight, gender, feature sizes and more are recorded in a federal database so if they're caught again in Alaska or Montana scientists can access that data.

Birds cheerfully flew into the traps to supplement their winter

diets while the crowd of onlookers hoped winged predators like the falcons seen recently stayed away.

If they show up the birds on the ground become scarce and stay that way for hours.

A pair of chickadees got too rowdy, springing the trap on themselves and were brought inside for banding.

"When we're talking about rosy finches we're talking about a group of species, what are called a super species," biologist Adam Brewerton said.

The team is on the lookout for two of the species, the grey-crowned variety and the rare black rosy finch.

According to Brewerton, those "living dinosaurs" are very understudied for practical reasons.

They're highly nomadic which makes data collection and comparison difficult and many of the little birds that appear so carefree live in some of the most extreme environments on the continent.

The grey-crowned species is known to nest high above the tree line in crevices and cliff faces on the slopes of Denali and in alpine environments further north.

Just weeks after the birds hatch, usually in early summer, their flight feathers are grown in and the adolescents are learning to catch bugs and dig for seeds.

By autumn when it is time to migrate toward their wintering habitats in the western US they are fully independent.

Because they eat insects with keratin in their exoskeletons the coloration in the birds' wings and breast grows more red, the same way flamingos turn pink by eating brine shrimp and algae.

The biologists only spotted one black rosy finch in the



Volunteer Kristin Purdy removes a grey-crowned rosy finch from a trap near Powder Mountain.

dozens of grey-crowned birds caught in the traps.

It never entered the cage but had been tagged earlier this season.

The black mountain finches breed in the high-altitude environments of Utah and a handful of other western states making ski resorts an ideal location for bird observation and tracking.

Another location at Alta does the same work, capturing and banding birds from January until the end of March.

The Powder Ridge Village Condominium began hosting bird feeders for the Department of Wildlife Resources scientists starting in 2009.

The rosy finch project has grown since then — it has become a public-private collaboration with partners at the Tracy Aviary in Salt Lake City, the Sageland Collaborative and the US Forest Service.

Under the North American model of wildlife management Brewerton said: "A lot of wildlife conservation has really been championed and pioneered by hunting and fishing."

Hunters and anglers have a long-standing tradition as con-

servationists but it has been geared toward populations that can be harvested like waterfowl hunting in wetland areas.

Non-game conservation projects have to take a different approach to find resources for study and observation.

"If we can answer questions about survivorship, longevity, demographics, find out where they go, where they come from, those are all little pieces of a puzzle that can tell us why the populations are declining," Brewerton said.

Ornithologists are still learning a great deal about migration patterns, lifespan and population sizes.

The super species' habitats are in some of the areas hypothesized to be most affected by changes in climate and research can provide early indicators of significant shifts in the environment.

"One of the things that make birds so cool is that they're a truly global species," Brewerton said.

"And if we can identify that their survival rates are affected by one part of their life cycle versus another we can focus our conservation efforts."

...the coloration in the birds' wings and breasts grow more red, the same way flamingos turn pink by eating brine shrimp and algae.

# Rescue eagles flourish

By JAMES HALL

SWADDLED in a sniper-style ghillie suit Gabriela Tavera watched from the shadows as the blue-gray blur of the harpy eagle swooped in for the kill.

Within seconds the bird's enormous talons had eviscerated the opossum that Tavera had just released.

The conservation biologist was wrestling with pangs of guilt over sacrificing one animal to feed another but something changed when the raptor fixed her in its fearless, obsidian gaze.

"I'd been an emotional wreck and was questioning the live feeding," she said.

"But at that moment I realized it was for something much bigger."

Taveras was feeding the bird as part of a project to which she and her colleagues had dedicated several gruelling years — an effort to return a pair of rescued harpy eagles to the wild.

In September 2023 their perseverance paid off with the first such rehabilitation of the world's most powerful eagle in Bolivia — a triumph that at times seemed unlikely.

Balefully beautiful with its tyrant's-crown crest, smoky plumage and colossal claws the harpy eagle once occupied a vast range that stretched unbroken from the tropical lowland forests of southern Mexico to northern Argentina.

An apex predator perched precariously at the top of the food chain the species was never very abundant — a breeding pair might need 20 square miles or more of healthy forest to find adequate prey and sites for nests which they build in canopies of the tallest trees.

As agricultural expansion and selective logging razed its home forests in Central and South America and persecution by humans followed in its wake the species was among the hardest hit and the first to disappear.

Listed as vulnerable by the International Union for Conservation of Nature the raptor has already lost around 41 per cent of its historic habitat and is locally extinct across much of its former distribution.

In Bolivia, one of the few South American countries still lacking a census of the species the harpy eagle's status remains unknown.

"We believe their population has declined but without an estimate we don't know how many are left," says Kathia Rivero, curator of zoology at the Noel

Kempff Mercado Museum of Natural History.

It was logging of the giant kapok trees that cradled their nests that led to the 2018 rescue in Bolivia of two unrelated harpy eagle chicks a month apart.

Roque and Luna as the male and female nestlings were named were brought to a wildlife rescue centre in the city of Santa Cruz de la Sierra and slowly nursed back to health.

The centre's chief biologist Raul Rojas had spoken of returning the birds to the wild — a challenging and costly endeavor that had been achieved with rescued harpy eagles elsewhere in South America but never tried in Bolivia.

The project stalled in 2020 when Rojas died of Covid-19 during the pandemic.

As time slipped away and the eaglets grew critical survival skills went undeveloped and

before but the situation with the eagles broke my heart so I signed up straight away," she said.

In 2021 the eagles were transferred to Bioparque Curucusí, a zoo outside the city where they were housed in a large flight enclosure secluded within a fragment of rainforest so they could build the muscles and co-ordination needed for flight in the wild and acclimatize to their natural habitat.

Tavera and her colleagues went to extraordinary lengths to reduce Luna and Roque's habituation to humans, wearing costumes carefully camouflaged to blend with the shadows of the trees whenever they entered the enclosure.

Readying the raptors for the rainforest would require priming their predatory instincts by feeding them live prey.

Following strict ethical guidelines the feeding started with



Luna the Harpy Eagle in rehabilitation at Bioparque Curucusí.

their habituation to human contact increased.

The narrow window for rehabilitation was rapidly closing.

A lot of people thought it was a lost cause and there are never any guarantees with rehabilitating wildlife," Rivero said.

"But some of us still thought it was worth a try."

Rivero consulted with raptor rehabilitation specialists and assembled a team of collaborators, funders, and volunteers.

Among the latter group was Tavera who had previously worked on a conservation program for the endangered Andean cat.

"I'd never worked with birds

wild.

The first location considered was the stretch of forest where the eagles had been rescued and in a strange twist while surveying the area Tavera encountered the man who felled the tree that brought down one of the nests.

"Speaking with him changed my mind, I couldn't see him as the bad guy," she said.

"He'd never had an education because of his poverty so he didn't understand the damage he had caused or even know what a harpy eagle was."

Logging pressures quickly ruled out that area and several others.

A suitable site was eventually discovered in Cinma San Martin, a sustainably managed area of forest in the Bajo Paraguá region of Santa Cruz.

The 295,000 acres of rainforest promised an optimal habitat with minimal threats from humans and plenty of prey.

On the day of their release the eagles fitted with radio transmitters were transported six hours by light aircraft to the release site where the team waited nervously on the ground.

The birds were then transported in boxes to a nearby clearing and set free.

Roque, the male, swiftly vanished into the forest while Luna perched on a high branch watching the humans assembled below before finally soaring out of view.

"I felt relief and sadness," Tavera said.

"And then you start to worry about the chances of them surviving."

Despite those fears the eagles haven't just survived, they are thriving.

The pair separated shortly after release, dashing the team's hopes that they would become a breeding pair.

Since September transmitter data show that they have been exploring the area to establish territories of their own.

The pace of their activity indicates that they've been acquiring enough energy by hunting.

In December after three months of careful observation the team declared the reintroduction a success.

The accomplishment fuelled optimism of achieving the same result with several other harpy eagles languishing in rescue centres in the country.

"With Luna and Roque we've gained the hands-on practical experience and skills needed to put more of these birds back in the wild," Tavera said.

# Schools help sunbirds to find their old routes

By ASHRAF HENDRICKS

A HISTORIC route for sunbirds between the Table Mountain National Park and the Boland Mountains in South Africa is being restored by Ingcungcu Sunbird Restoration, using fynbos gardens in schools across the Cape Flats.

Ingcungcu is an isiXhosa word meaning long-billed bird and is also used to refer to royalty.

Ceinwen Smith, executive director of Ingcungcu, said the birds travel between the mountain ranges of Muizenberg and Stellenbosch but the route has been broken by urban sprawl.

Sunbirds cannot fly for more than a kilometre-and-a-half without stopping to feed.

Establishing gardens at schools to act as filling stations for the little birds helps them to complete their natural movement.

Smith said the disruption of bird movement and the destruction of their habitat has endangered many species endemic to the Cape Flats.

It is not only about the birds but also about improving the well-being of children by getting them involved in nature.

The Cape Flats suffers from a lack of accessible natural spaces.

With the birds come educational classes and the formation of eco-clubs where primary and high school children do outdoor activities such as drawing, mapping, species research and bird monitoring, they also do field trips at least twice a year.

Smith said her group wants to inspire a sense of excitement about nature.

“Yes, it’s about the birds and about fynbos, but you can plant all the gardens and you can note all the birds but if people don’t care for those spaces they’re gone,” she said.

Smith said the birds are pretty and bring aesthetic value to the landscape.

“Everybody likes the sound of birds rather than traffic,” she said.

Doreen Vizant, a teacher at Floreat Primary in Retreat, who runs the school’s eco-club said that the outdoor classes help her to teach students about topics like photosynthesis outside rather



A southern double-collared sunbird perched on *Leonotis ocymifolia*.

than only in textbooks.

“This way learners can see, feel and even taste the subject matter,” she said.

Vizant says many learners live in flats without yards and gardens at the school teach them how to look after things and work as a team.

Joel Simons, schools program manager at Ingcungcu, said the students build the gardens to create care and custodianship.

“They do the site analysis, mapping, prepare the ground, plant and take care of the gardens,” he said.

“They don’t want it to feel like another planting project but to create a long lasting commitment to the space”.

The eco-clubs also introduce the learners to unusual subjects that aren’t offered at schools that could lead to career paths such as bird watching and mapping.

Field trips give them access to parts of the city that are otherwise inaccessible to them.

Simons says that many students who join the eco-club have some type of struggle.

“The club provides a space for them to be part of something,” he said.

At some schools the eco-club is the only extra curricular activity outside sports.

“Children are finding solace, community and belonging where maybe it’s not being provided to them, whether it be at home, on the streets or in school,” Simons said.

Ashlyn Lawrence, in grade six and an eco-club member, said he feels good when surrounded by nature.

“I feel like the plants are cuddling me,” he said.

But it hasn’t been plain sailing.

Smith says their involvement in Lavender Hill had to be pulled back because of gang violence.

The resources at some schools are limited and some struggle with thievery and vandalism — plants have been pulled out and

fencing removed.

“If the school does not have a secure perimeter it can be really challenging,” Smith said.

A masters thesis by Bongani Mnisi at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology provided the foundation in 2013 for the project.

Since then nine schools have established gardens and six are participating in the eco-club program.

In 2021 a report — *Nectar gardens on school grounds reconnect plants, birds and people* — was released.

It found a significant increase in birds over time and that over five years the sunbird population increased by 35 per cent.

Ingcungcu Sunbird Restoration receives funding from many sources including Table Mountain Fund-WWF, Cape Bird Club and Botanical Society of South Africa.

Recently it has got crowdfunding via BackaBuddy, as well as fundraising events.

# Poison suspected in Israel vulture deaths

By SUE SURKES

TWO adult members of Israel's endangered Griffon vulture population were found dead along with their chick in southern Israel last month, apparently after poisoned via drug-treated carrion according to the Israel Nature and Parks Authority.

The authority was alerted when a radio transmitter worn by one of the adult birds for monitoring purposes registered no movement.

The bird's partner and their chick were found miles away at the family's cliffside nest in the Judean Desert.

The tracked bird, whose corpse was found near the Negev town of Yeruham, was born at a special breeding facility at the Jerusalem Zoo six years ago.

Its partner was 20 years old and the chick's age was not given.

A fourth vulture died separately last month in the Ein Gedi area after colliding with an electric cable.

The bodies of the three birds from the nest are undergoing autopsies to determine cause of death.

The authority suspects that the birds may have consumed the carcass of an animal that had been treated with a veterinary nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug or NSAID while alive and had not been properly disposed of.

Uri Naveh, deputy chief scientist of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, said additional vultures might have died by eating from the same corpse but had not yet been found.

NSAIDs, which are used to treat livestock but can be poisonous when consumed in carrion have been blamed for killing most of India's wild vultures where some of the drugs have been banned.

The nature authority invests millions of shekels to breed Griffon vultures and to monitor and protect them.

The efforts helped the population of birds grow from 110 in winter 2012 to 184 in winter 2020 but the population remains in danger of extirpation.

According to Ohad Hazofe, the INPA's ecologist for birds of prey, Israel is currently home to 190 Griffon vultures.



The body of a Griffon vulture in its cliffside nest at the Judean Desert in southern Israel in March 2024.

"This is a drastic decrease compared to the distant past and as a result, the king of birds may become extinct as a nester in Israel," he warned.

By eating carcasses, the iconic birds perform a key role in the ecosystem as nature's cleaners.

They face a long list of dangers — from collisions with power lines and lead poisoning to habitat loss and food and water shortages in various parts of the region.

But their chief threat is the

contamination of carrion either with veterinary drugs, or with chemicals deliberately left on carcasses to kill wolves, jackals, and even feral dogs to protect livestock.

The nature authority fields mainly volunteer teams to protect vulture eggs in nests and has developed an elaborate way of removing and incubating eggs laid in captivity and feeding fledglings.

Its rangers help farmers to deposit the carcasses of farm

animals by providing special receptacles.

But the authority says still more needs to be done.

A spokeswoman noted that the Environmental Protection Ministry's Clean Fund had approved NIS 28 million (\$7.8 million) for a special program in July last year, but that the money had not yet been paid.

"We know where the problems are and created a detailed plan for each area, including where to distribute food" to divert vultures from potential poison, she explained.

The nature authority has long campaigned for an amendment to the Wildlife Act to make prosecution easier and punishments far more severe for wildlife poisoning.

Dr. Yehoshua Shkedy, the authority's outgoing chief scientist, has repeatedly called for reducing the use of poisonous insecticides, registering and regulating their ownership, and passing a law enabling authorities to arrest people suspected of poisoning wildlife.

At present, anyone can buy such poison and suspects can only be charged if they are caught in the act.



A Griffon vulture found dead with its chick in a nest at the Judean Desert in March 2024.

# Peregrines back at cathedral

THE UK's Worcester Cathedral has relaunched its peregrine falcon live stream on YouTube as the birds return to their nest.

The live stream will give the public an intimate view as Peter and Peggy make their nest — a hollow dug out of gravel.

While there may not be much action in coming weeks the Cathedral's peregrine experts hoped the first eggs will be laid towards the end of March.

If all goes well chicks might be seen hatching by late April or early May.

Thereafter viewers might wit-

ness exciting milestones including feeding, ringing and fledging of the chicks at the beginning of June.

Peter and Peggy moved to the cathedral in 2022 marking the first time in more than a decade that a mated pair of peregrines nested there, subsequently producing and fledging four chicks.

Last year a live hi-res camera was installed offering 24-hour coverage that received almost 400,000 views worldwide.

This year the team has brought back the cameras and will broadcast the live stream within the

cathedral.

Later in the breeding season the cathedral will host several drop-in sessions.

Experts will attend with cameras and scopes to offer closer views of the birds and share insights about the species.

Chris Dobbs, biodiversity adviser for the cathedral, said: "It's fantastic to see this pair back at the cathedral for what we hope will be another successful year.

"The birds love cathedral towers because they are similar in some ways to their natural habitat nesting sites which include

quarry faces, cliffs and mountainsides as they like to have a high prospect looking over the area of their territory which cathedral towers and other tall buildings in cities provide."

Tracing back several centuries peregrines have had a long history in Worcester, featuring in the cathedral's grand West Window and other stonework.

Peregrines, the fastest living thing on earth, reaching speeds over 200mph in hunting dives, are classified as green under the UK's Birds of Conservation Concern.

# Doors shut to birds in Canada

A WILDLIFE rescue organisation in Canada that takes in injured, sick and orphaned wildlife is closing its doors to sparrows, starlings, pigeons and raccoons.

Wildlife Haven said as a non-profit organisation it has faced challenges amid economic shifts while dealing with the pandemic and bird flu.

Because the organisation is dealing with strained resources in staff, volunteers and funding a moratorium on invasive species and a temporary one on raccoons has been put in place along with changes to rescues and pick-ups.

"Certainly this was a big decision for us and one we've been considering for a while now but the reality is we've got limited resources, limited staff and limited volunteers," said Wildlife Haven executive director Zoe Nakata.

"We really just want to make sure that all of the work that we're putting into protecting these wild animals is really having the largest impact in our ecosystems, in our communities, so that's what really drove these decisions."

Under the changes invasive species like pigeons, European starlings and house sparrows won't be treated.

University of Winnipeg biolo-

gy professor Craig Willis said some times when people think about invasive species they may think of plants or aquatic life forms like zebra mussels but it can also apply to animals he said.

"All these house sparrows and pigeons and starlings that are around are also invasive to North America so I think it's kind of a reasonable approach to prioritize species that really belong here and weren't introduced by people," he said.

A spokesperson for the province said there are a number of invasive plant and animal species established in Manitoba that threaten wildlife in various ways including direct competition for habitat and resources plus direct predation and disease.

He cited the European starling which will compete with and even displace the red-headed woodpecker — an at risk species — from nesting cavities in decaying trees.

House sparrows are another European species which competes with native bird species for resources such as food and nesting sites.

Willis said he also feels for the organization.

"I think it's maybe a little sad that such a fantastic place like



**Pick-ups of peregrine falcons will be limited under the new rules.**

Wildlife Haven is feeling the pinch as they are," he said.

Wildlife Haven is also putting a three-year pause on treating raccoons due to concerns about the high risk of disease transmission to humans and animals and the unsustainable cost to resources.

If someone accidentally brings an invasive species or a raccoon to Wildlife Haven they will inform them of the decision to not treat these species and provide guidance on alternative options an FAQ section of the organization's website said.

That could involve directing them to other facilities or agencies equipped to handle the animals or advising them on safe release if possible and if the animal is left with them by accident humane euthanasia will be provided the website said.

They'll also limit rescues and

pick-ups to specific categories of animals that could be dangerous when mishandled.

It said on its website those species are large raptors and owls, eagles, red-tailed hawks, long-eared owls, peregrine falcons, large waterfowl like adult geese, pelicans, swans, loons, heron and medium mammals like fox, coyote, beaver, otter and bats.

Nakata said in the past when people would call Wildlife Haven about an injured animal staff or a volunteer would go to just about anywhere in south-east Manitoba to retrieve it but that's no longer feasible so now the public is being asked to bring them to a drop-off location to Wildlife Haven directly.

"We've got a lot of partners in the community and we're going to work together to all try to protect wildlife as much as we can," she said.

# Owl stolen from aviary in UK

By RUTH STAINER

A TAWNY owl has been stolen from Wimbledon and Putney Commons in England.

Merlin, who is nearly 30 years old, has lived in a locked aviary in a stable yard on the commons since 2017 and was cared for by a specialist team.

Angela Evans-Hill who was duty officer on the night of his disappearance said that a keeper had gone to feed him and found him missing.

She said: "The person on shift radioed me to say we've got a

problem, Merlin's not here.

"He's just not the kind of bird who would have tried to escape, it does seem like he was targeted."

After searching the surrounding area the team ruled out the possibility of Merlin, a small owl with a unique crossed beak, escaping or being attacked by an animal.

Merlin's aviary was locked and there was no damage to the surrounding yard or animals.

Pam Broughton, zoo director at The Owl's Trust in Llandudno, North Wales believes that given

the popularity of UK tawny owls and that February is their breeding season anyone who stole Merlin with the goal of making profit would likely only make £30.

Alternatively if an individual has released Merlin as a perceived humanitarian deed both Broughton and Evans-Hill believe his chances of survival are minimal.

Evans-Hill said: "They've given him a death sentence really because he's not going to survive, he couldn't hunt for himself and can't fly far."

In a public appeal published on

their website, Wimbledon and Putney Commons said: "Please please, please, if anyone knows anything about his disappearance we implore you to get in touch.

"We are just desperate to get him back safely."

Angela Evans-Hill spoke of the distress that the team who cared for Merlin are feeling given his disappearance.

She said: "These birds become part of your family.

"We are all shocked and devastated, it's just awful not knowing what's happened to him."

# Bird to supply tribe's ceremonial feathers

By COURTNEY FLATT

BEFORE Jerry Meninick performed a wedding ceremony more than 30 years ago for his daughter and his soon-to-be son-in-law he told them they needed two center tail feathers from a golden eagle, also called *wayamá* in the Sahaptin language of the Columbia Plateau.

Meninick, now the Yakama Nation's deputy directory, had a special reason for his request.

"When *wayamá* hunts way up in the air and he sees his prey move on the ground he'll dive over 200 miles per hour, it's that tail that keeps him from hitting that dirt, hitting the earth," Meninick said.

In a marriage, he said, pitfalls happen and can come fast.

His prayer? That the feathers from this sacred bird would help protect the union.

"When I offered those feathers, before they were pinned on my daughter I prayed that during those times when their unity was challenged by whatever reason," he said, "I prayed to the bird that those feathers do the same for this couple as it does for the bird, bring them back up, rise again with them."

A young golden eagle recently assigned to the tribe's aviary will make it easier for tribal members to request feathers for ceremonies — big life events like graduations, weddings and funerals where people are laid to



The juvenile golden eagle rehabilitated by Washington State University wildlife vets takes flight in the tribe's aviary.

rest holding a golden eagle feather.

Caretakers will collect feathers when the bird molts once a year.

Meninick said the golden eagle represents physical and spiritual communication.

"It flies high enough according to our elders that it seemingly touches the spiritual side," Meninick said.

"During our prayers we understand it's a communication to everything that is here through its feathers."

Each healthy golden eagle, which the tribe considers to be of higher importance than a bald eagle, carries 36 feathers on each wing.

That number comes up time and again in sacred ceremonies,

Meninick said.

It has all its feathers but this golden eagle can't be released into the wild.

Before it came to the aviary a car likely hit it said Marcie Logsdon, a wildlife vet at the Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine.

A good Samaritan took the bird to WSU last October where Logsdon discovered a wing fracture and trauma to the bird's eye.

The wing fracture healed quickly in a splint, the equivalent to breaking a few bones in a person's hand, but the eye damage appeared permanent Logsdon said.

"He has partial vision in that eye but not full vision," she said.

"As you can imagine for a predatory species who has to be

able to fly and hunt at the same time, having two good eyes is really important."

After his injuries healed vets thought he would be a good fit at the Yakama Nation's aviary Logsdon said.

The bird is the third raptor housed at the tribe's aviary which includes a red-tailed hawk and a bald eagle.

In around five years the tribe hopes to expand to house around 40 birds of prey said Michael Beckler who is wildlife biologist for the tribe.

Prior to the aviary the tribe had to request every feather through the National Eagle Repository based in Colorado which only fills the requests of federally recognized tribes.

Now the tribe can distribute feathers without as much bureaucracy Beckler said.

In addition to having easier, legal access to feathers the aviary team plans to train the birds for educational purposes.

"We're constantly taught that we have to develop that trust bond, we can't go in and expect these birds to be like: 'Oh, we're best friends,'" said Alyssa Woodward, a biologist for the tribe's aviary."

Today Meninick said his daughter stores her two golden eagle feathers in a case hanging in her living room.

"She still wears them to traditional ceremonies," he said.

# New York owl Flaco's release still a mystery

By JAKE OFFENHARTZ

THIS New York love story begins with a criminal act of sabotage.

Under cover of darkness more than a year ago someone breached a waist-high fence and slipped into the Central Park Zoo.

Once inside they cut a hole through a steel mesh cage, freeing majestic Eurasian eagle-owl Flaco who had arrived at the zoo as a fledgling 13 years earlier.

Flaco immediately fled the park, blinking his big orange eyes at pedestrians and police on Fifth Avenue before flying off into the night.

After his dramatic escape Flaco became one of the city's most beloved characters before dying recently.

By day he lounged in Manhattan's courtyards and parks or perched on fire escapes, and he spent his nights hooting atop water towers and preying on the city's abundant rats.

To the surprise of many experts Flaco thrived in the urban wilds.

An apex predator with a nearly two metre wingspan, he called on abilities some feared he hadn't developed during a lifetime in captivity, gamely exploring new neighborhoods and turning up unexpectedly at the windows of New Yorkers.

"He was the underdog from the start, people did not expect him to survive," said Jacqueline Emery, one of several birders who documented the owl's daily movements and shared them online with his legions of admirers.

"New Yorkers especially connect to him because of his resilience."

Flaco entered his second year in the spotlight it was easy to forget that his freedom is the result of a crime, one that remains unsolved.

The break-in happened steps from the shared headquarters of the New York City Parks Department and the Central Park Zoo in the vicinity of at least one surveillance camera.

But if they have collected any evidence on a potential suspect police and zoo authorities have declined to share it.

Since the zoo suspended efforts to re-capture Flaco in Feb-

ruary 2023 there has been no public information about the crime.

The zoo sought to soften descriptions of Flaco's former living conditions in a minivan-sized structure decorated with a painted mountain vista, barely twice the width of Flaco's extended wings.

In internal emails obtained through a Freedom of Information request zoo officials urged the Parks Department not to describe Flaco as "raised in captivity" and the term "escape" should be avoided.

"That puts the blame on the animal rather than the perpetrator," the zoo's then-communications director, Max Pulsin-

petition against Flaco being returned to the zoo.

"His habitat was ridiculous, it was the saddest thing ever."

Break-ins and vandalism have long been tactics some activists have used to free animals and such actions are often made public by the North American Animal Liberation Press Office, an anonymous online database.

The group's spokesperson Jerry Vlasak said no one had come forward to claim responsibility for Flaco's escape.

"We never received a communique," he said.

"But we're certainly glad it happened."

A spokesperson for the Wild-

Center in Maryland.

"He's shown some good instincts to be able to make it this far, he's also lucky."

Flaco spent his initial months of freedom mostly in Central Park which is loaded with wildlife but then preferred more urban sections of Manhattan.

There was speculation that he was looking for a mate although he most certainly won't find one because Eurasian eagle-owls are not native to North America.

Stories of zoo animals breaking loose in the middle of the country's densest city have long captured the public imagination and often result in calls for reforms.

Following a series of bird thefts and "senseless" animal beatings in the 1970s administrators ordered immediate security upgrades and the redesign of some pens at the zoo which the city's parks commissioner at the time described as "Rikers Island for animals" because of poor living conditions.

A few years later when a group of vandals made off with a boa constrictor and a parrot named Peanuts officials accused the perpetrators of stealing the animals for voodoo rites.

Since those days the zoo has been substantially redesigned.

Wildlife groups have long warned that owls can be used as sacrifices in certain religious ceremonies, particularly birds like Flaco who has prominent ear tufts.

The Eurasian eagle-owl is also commonly used in falconry, selling for as much as \$3000.

But while some have suggested Flaco was targeted for financial or spiritual purposes such speculation would seem undermined by the fact that he emerged from his damaged cage and into the bustling cityscape unscathed.

One of the Flaco's most dedicated observers David Barrett struck an ambivalent tone when asked how New Yorkers should think about the crime that made him an avian celebrity.

"To me the folk hero is Flaco," said Barrett, who runs the X account Manhattan Bird Alert, documenting the bird's whereabouts in real time.

"It's an amazing thing — he lives his whole life in captivity and in a matter of days he taught himself to fly and to hunt rats."



Flaco the Eurasian eagle-owl gathered thousands of supporters during his time flying free in New York.

elli wrote in one email.

"This was a crime."

In the absence of official information theories — a youthful prank perhaps or an attempted owl heist gone wrong?

For many invested in Flaco's fate the most plausible explanation is that he was freed for ideological reasons.

Proponents of the animal liberation theory point to the seemingly targeted nature of the crime as well as limitations of the owl's modest enclosure.

"I wouldn't be surprised if it was someone who loved Flaco and wanted him free," said Nicole Barrantes a wildlife campaign manager with World Animal Protection who started a

life Conservation Society which has operated the zoo since 1988 did not respond to the claims that Flaco's zoo habitat was inadequate.

"This was a criminal act that jeopardized the safety of the bird," the zoo said.

Even with his hunting skills Flaco faced many threats in the city including a grave risk of consuming rodenticide through a poisoned rat.

In 2021 another beloved Central Park owl, Barry, was fatally struck by a truck after ingesting a lethal dose of rat poison that may have impaired her flying.

"All the hazards are still there," cautioned Suzanne Shoemaker, director of the Owl Moon Raptor



# Top effort to save chicks

By CATHY FREE

ALASKA Airlines flight attendant Amber May was preparing for takeoff from Atlanta to Seattle last summer when a passenger's call light came on so May hurried over.

"She seemed pretty worried," May said.

"She asked: 'Could you help me to keep some eggs warm?'"

May, 52, was perplexed.

"I'd never been asked something like that before so at first I thought she wanted me to heat up some breakfast," she said.

The passenger explained her odd request — she was a zoo employee who was transporting six Chilean flamingo eggs from Zoo Atlanta to the Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle.

Her portable incubator had stopped working, endangering the eggs.

"She told me that to keep the eggs alive she had to keep them warm during the flight," recalled May, a flight attendant for 10 years.

May grabbed several pairs of blue rubber gloves from the galley, filled them with warm water and tied them up like balloons.

The zoo employee made a little nest around the eggs with the gloves and when neighboring passengers heard what was going on several offered their jackets, sweaters and scarves to wrap around the incubator for extra warmth.

"It became a team effort to help save these little flamingo eggs," May said.

She and other flight attendants took turns refilling the gloves with warm water during the five-and-a-half-hour flight.

"When the flight was over she thanked everyone and we were all really hopeful that the eggs would make it," she said.

A spokesperson for Woodland Park Zoo said May's fast actions saved the six chicks' lives.

Four females and two males hatched in September, around a month after the flight.

"We're so thankful for her quick thinking and kindness as well as the compassion of other passengers who also stepped in to help," zoo communications manager Gigi Allianic said, noting that the chicks were the first Chilean flamingos to hatch at the zoo since 2016.

The new additions have boosted the zoo's flamingo population to 48 — a number that is expected to help raise reproductive success, because many of its birds



A newly-hatched flaminglet enjoys its warm enclosure at Seattle's Woodland Park Zoo. It was taken from Atlanta to Seattle as an egg in an incubator that stopped working during the flight.

are older and not laying eggs.

The eggs wouldn't have survived for five hours in a nonfunctioning incubator Allianic said.

Chilean flamingos are a near-threatened species said another Seattle zoo spokesperson Craig Newberry.

"Loss of habitat is their major threat and they're also threatened by pollution, hunting and tourist activity," he said.

Mining and tourism has threatened native birds' nesting, feeding and breeding in Chile's northern Andean highlands according to the Zoo Conservation Outreach Group.

Illegal egg collecting has added to their diminishing numbers with around 200,000 Chilean flamingos estimated to live in the wild in South America and elsewhere according to BirdLife International.

The six new flamingos will join the Seattle zoo's Ambassador Animals program providing visitors an up-close, educational experience about the importance of

protecting the birds Newberry said.

"We definitely have an aging flock where half of the birds are at least 47 years old," said Newberry, noting that the average flamingo life span is 20 to 30 years, although some have lived as long as 50.

The eggs laid by younger flamingos at Zoo Atlanta were

flown to the Seattle zoo

as part of the Species

Survival Plan breeding

program operated by the

Association of Zoos and

Aquariums.

"Flamingos are certainly

more likely to breed in warmer

and sunnier climates so cities like

San Diego, Dallas and

Atlanta do have an advantage on us there,"

Newberry added.

May who lives at Spokane in Washington State said the zoo invited her to name one of the male chicks and meet all of them.

Four other chicks — Bernardo, Amaya, Rosales and Gonzo — were named by zoo employees, and another was named Magda-

lena by the winner of a zoo contest.

"My six-month-old granddaughter is named Sunny so I decided that was the perfect name for a flamingo chick," May said.

She took baby Sunny with her to meet Sunny the flamingo and the other fuzzy flaminglets and to learn about their care in the zoo's Temperate Forest enclosure that mimics their natural South American habitat.

May said she learned that animal keepers led the baby flamingos on daily walks after they were hatched to help them stretch and strengthen their lanky legs.

She learned that a group of flamingos is called a flamboyance and that it would take several years for the birds' grayish-white downy feathers to turn pink from their diet of algae and brine shrimp.

"Sunny really seemed to enjoy meeting the chicks — I hope to take her back to the zoo as often as possible as she grows up," May said.

When Sunny is older she said she's looking forward to explaining to her why she shares a name with a flamingo and how her grandmother helped save six flamingos at 35,000 feet.

May who lives at Spokane in Washington State said the zoo invited her to name one of the male chicks and meet all of them.

# Flamingo may become Florida's new state bird

By JENNY STALETOVICH

FLAMINGO fans are wading into Florida's perennial debate over whether to dethrone the noisy and occasionally combative mockingbird as the reigning state bird after nearly a century.

Two bills — SB 918 and HB 753 — now making their way around Tallahassee propose electing the graceful wading bird to the perch.

The move comes after more than a decade of research concluded flamingos, which once inhabited the state by the thousands and likely nested in parts of the Everglades and southwest Florida, are rebounding after being hunted to extinction in wetlands that were mostly reconfigured for flood control.

But to succeed team flamingo will have to beat team scrub-jay as well as a fan club vying to crown the bluish gray songbird found only in Florida's sandy oak hammocks.

"I love the Florida scrub-jays, the northern mockingbird? I have nothing against them, spoonbills are awesome," said veterinarian Frank Ridgley who has been working with a team of scientists studying flamingos since 2012 and is head of conservation and research at Zoo Miami.

But flamingos he argued could draw wider attention to all state birds and possibly be a boon for tourism.

"I went to Aruba just to go see the flamingos on the beach there," he said.

Elevating the bird from lawn ornament status to state bird could also help return flamingos to their rightful place as a native species that can once again call Florida home.

After Louisiana named the brown pelican as its state bird in the '60s attention helped support breeding programs that revived the state's disappearing population Ridgley said.

"State bird is free, it doesn't cost any money, doesn't come

with any new protections," said Ridgley.

"Pretty much everywhere the flamingo needs is already protected, the state and national parks are where they want to be so this is nothing but bringing attention."

It also could cement the bird's native status following decades where flamingos appearing in Florida were dismissed as vagrants from around the Caribbean or escapees from captive flocks.

After the plume trade wiped out most of the Florida flamingos along with vast numbers of other wading birds ornithologists beginning in the 1950s concluded that any found in the state had wandered over from the Caribbean and Yucatan.

Captive flocks at the racetrack at Hialeah Park, the Miami Rare Bird Farm in Kendall, Crandon Park Zoo or Bok Tower in Lake Wales routinely strayed.

Then in 2012 after a group of scientists spotted a flock in the Everglades scientists began to wonder if they were wrong.

Sightings across the state had increased since water management practices improved and southern flocks increased.

Maybe local birds weren't vagrants or escapees after all but were wild flamingos from down south reclaiming their territory.

"I remember we were having tacos in Homestead at one of those great Mexican restaurants," Ridgley said, recounting an early discussion during an annual meeting of Everglades scientists.

"We started talking about American flamingos because one of the people in the National Park Service had taken a photo.

"He had seen these juvenile flamingos and this small flock of about a dozen birds and we were like, are those even old enough to fly?"

Permits issued by the state to study the birds had listed them as non-native but evidence collected by the scientists and published in a study in 2018 argued



The public is being asked to report flamingo sightings as part of a survey to estimate the number of flamingos in Florida and the Caribbean.

that they were once native and should still be considered native.

Audubon Florida scientist Jerry Lorenz was one of the early skeptics won over by the findings after Ridgley and Steve Whitfield, a former zoo biologist who is now conservation director at the Audubon Nature Institute.

"Back in the '50s when the person who founded my office, Robert Porter Allen, was studying flamingos there were so few of them," Lorenz said.

"That's why he was studying, they'd been basically hunted to damn near extinction throughout their range."

When Allen started counting he found flamingos nesting in only four locations in Florida.

The dramatic drop from previous counts that estimated a population as high as a half million led Florida to conclude that any now birds found in the state were an introduced species from captive flocks.

The new research led Lorenz to reconsider flamingos he'd seen around Florida Bay going back two decades.

"I was like, you know if all those birds escaped from Hialeah somebody in Hialeah would be looking for them," he said.

He believes climate change pushing flocks in the Caribbean and Yucatan further north along with improvements in water

management across South Florida wetlands is driving flamingos to reclaim their historic range.

"We broke the Everglades which prior to the plume hunting era that was their major habitat," he said.

Now a growing number are showing up around the state and staying — flamingos regularly appear at a stormwater treatment marsh in Palm Beach County.

A juvenile flamingo found in the Keys and tagged by Ridgley remained in Florida Bay for months.

Hurricane Idalia blew over a bunch including one around Tampa Bay that Ridgley tagged and tracked for several weeks in the area.

"We still have a flock somewhere between 50 and 75 birds in Florida Bay," Lorenz said.

"And they don't seem to be anxious to go anywhere."

Smaller flocks have also been spotted near Marco Island and Charlotte Harbor on the Gulf Coast he said.

"Not only are they native but there is this confluence of their population numbers going up, habitat restoration and preservation in Florida and the changes in climate making Florida more appealing than it was back in the '70s and '80s," he said.

"And so here they are."

"He had seen these juvenile flamingos and this small flock of about a dozen birds and we were like, are those even old enough to fly?"

# Wrong feed turns birds pink

By **BARNEY DAVIS**

PARK visitors in England have been urged to stop feeding swans bread after several of the protected birds turned pink because they ate mouldy crumbs left in the water.

Visitors to Moses Gate Country Park in Bolton called the RSPCA after spotting the of birds looking tickled pink.

The charity said the group of birds were suffering from pink feather syndrome which can result in them struggling to swim and fly.

The condition is caused by a fungus which occurs when bread starts to decay in water.

People are being urged to feed the protect-

ed birds cabbage, spinach and lettuce or bird seed instead of bread.

RSPCA animal rescue officer Stephen Wickham, who collected the swans said: “We know how much people enjoy feeding swans, ducks and geese however it’s important to make sure they are given the right food.

“Unfortunately, bread fills them up without giving them the nutrients they need and it can affect their health.

“We’d encourage people to offer them finely chopped greens, such as cabbage, spinach and lettuce as well as mixed corn, grain, wheat or bird seed.

“Any feeding should also be done in moderation and only as a supplement to their natural diet.”



**Not so pretty in pink — swans are being transformed by their diet.**

# Grieving swan helped by human neighbors

By **KYLE MELNICK**

A FEW days after Charlie the swan’s partner died in an accident, the bird wandered into traffic in south-west England.

Nearby residents rushed out of their homes to help lead Charlie back to his pond where they hoped he would be safe.

But Charlie kept wandering back to the road and through alleyways honking in search of his mate Cassandra.

Residents of Devizes, a small town 50 miles west of London worried that it was only a matter of time until a passing car hit Charlie.

Sally Noseda who lives near Charlie’s pond contacted a swan rescue service but it wasn’t available to help for about a week.

So Noseda and her neighbors made it their mission to keep Charlie away from the two major roads surrounding his pond — sometimes resorting to blocking traffic so the swan could cross the street.

“That whole week we were on tenterhooks,” Noseda said.

Charlie was under nearly constant surveillance until Saturday when the Swan Support rescue centre took him in.

Wendy Hermon, Swan Support’s co-ordinator for rescues and treatment, said Charlie is receiving five-star accommodations.

“We can’t thank the public enough for caring for these birds



**Charlie and Cassandra had lived on a pond at Devizes in England for more than two years.**

because if it wasn’t for them we wouldn’t have rescued him,” Hermon said.

Charlie and Cassandra had been living in the Devizes pond for nearly two-and-a-half years along with geese and ducks.

Neighbors whose homes are near the pond named the swans and fed them corn, lettuce and carrots.

They also shared photos and videos of Charlie and Cassandra in a Facebook group.

But on February 24 a resident saw a tragic scene — Cassandra was lying on the grass and bleeding.

Noseda, 74, got a message from a neighbor and ran across the street. Cassandra was dead.

Neighbors saw on CCTV foot-

age that the swan had hit her head against the pavement while landing and managed to move to the grass before she died.

It had rained earlier in the day and Noseda thought Cassandra might have confused the blacktop for water.

As a vet picked up Cassandra’s body Noseda and her neighbors walked Charlie to the pond.

His legs were shaking.

Swans often mate for life so Charlie was quite shocked Noseda said.

The next day Charlie, who is estimated to be between five and 10 years old, barely ate or slept, he roamed the town.

Noseda shared her concerns for Charlie’s safety with Swan Support, which is 75 miles east of

Devizes in Berkshire.

Due to other rescues an employee couldn’t check on Charlie for at least three days.

That’s when Noseda and her friends formed their Charlie-watch party.

They posted updates every few hours on their Facebook group, they led him through crosswalks at intersections and steered him back toward his pond.

“It got to be more of an issue the longer it went on,” Noseda said.

Hormones might have played a role in fueling Charlie’s heartache and wandering because swans typically breed in March Hermon said.

At one point before Swan Support arrived Charlie had wandered a mile from his pond.

Noseda said she and others were panicked until Charlie was seen on a bridge — he was injured with cars driving around him.

He was treated at a nearby wildlife hospital where Swan Support eventually picked him up.

Charlie is still taking antibiotics for his injuries but is calmer and honks in excitement when Hermon greets him.

Noseda said Charlie is missed around the neighborhood, but his fans hope he will settle down in a safer habitat — and find love again.

“Once he’s finished his grieving time and nobody quite knows how long that’s likely to be I’m sure he’ll find another mate,” she said.

# UK catapult killers use WhatsApp

By AMELIA HARPER

CHILDREN are filming themselves using catapults to kill and torture animals in a UK-wide network on WhatsApp.

The youngsters — including some of primary school age — have been sharing footage and photos of their kills in groups on the messaging app.

In some videos injured animals are shown dying slowly after being shot with hand-held catapults.

In others young people kick and abuse the animals after shooting them — as well as pose holding their dead bodies.

There are nearly 500 members of catapult groups on WhatsApp in which more than 350 photos and videos have been shared of animals that have been killed or wounded with the weapons.

The RSPCA described the material in the groups as horrendous and said it was an emerging trend.

The sick attacks have attracted calls for a change in the law because catapults are not classed as an illegal weapon and can be bought and carried legally.

Animals targeted include pigeons, pheasants, geese, ducks, pigs, deer, foxes, squirrels and rabbits — with one charity saying it had seen an exponential rise in birds with catapult injuries.

The Swan Sanctuary which rescues swans and other waterfowl in Shepperton has around 20 birds in its care with catapult injuries.

Volunteer Danny Rogers said the devastating wounds are mostly to birds' heads and necks as a result of pure kill shots.

X-ray images show ball bearings lodged in the birds as well as shattered bones from the impact of catapult shots.

Describing the life-changing, death-causing injuries Mr Rogers said he had seen fractures to facial areas, eyes exploding and windpipes bursting.

"I get emotional about seeing animals in distress," he said.

"They're being targeted for no other reason than just pure evil fun."

In one incident Mr Rogers said he was rescuing a swan with catapult injuries when he was made aware that children with catapults were shooting in the area.

He later discovered a dead pigeon — freshly killed by a catapult — next to his vehicle which had been left as a trophy.

Journalists discovered 489 members including young children, teenagers and some young adults across 11 catapult groups on WhatsApp.

In one video shared on a group a deer lies twitching on the ground severely injured by a head wound after having just been shot with a catapult.

The young person who attacked the deer stands over the animal while holding a hand-held catapult in front of the camera for viewers to see.

Watching it on the floor the child then kicks the deer causing it to writhe around in distress.

In another video two teenagers have shot a fox with one heard saying: "Okay boys, steel shot in the head."

The catapult is then held up to the camera showing the weapon used to kill the animal.

In one video a teenager holds up a catapult while filming a Canada goose drowning having shot it from across a pond.

While filming the severely injured bird, the attacker is heard celebrating.

"One up for the new catapult, big Canadian goose dead as a dodo. Get up!" he said.

Other footage shows a child of primary school age filming himself picking up a heavily bleed-



An injured swan that was shot by a catapult-wielding WhatsApp member.

ing squirrel while saying: "Look at that boys, it's a ball bearing for ya, have that you prick."

The material in the WhatsApp groups also includes voice notes where children are heard describing their kills.

One boy said in a voice note: "Shot him straight in the head boys, smack bang in the skull, not one bit of kick, nothing, no little flinch before he died."

In another voice note a boy said: "Goes straight through the rabbit's head."

In a separate voice note a boy said: "I killed 16 things today lads."

Geoff Edmond, the RSPCA's lead wildlife officer, said the catapult killings were an emerging trend and children involved were deliberately and intentionally targeting animals for sport.

"We're seeing more and more injured animals being reported to us that are being hit by catapults," he said.

Police in London and Essex were also aware of increasing numbers of incidents, Mr Edmond said.

While it is not illegal to buy or carry a catapult when it comes

to shooting with one the law has a number of different pieces of legislation protecting animals.

The first is the Animal Welfare Act 2006 which says causing an animal unnecessary suffering is an offence.

In the material shared on WhatsApp a number of the animals are abused while still alive which again is illegal under the Animal Welfare Act.

Another piece of relevant legislation is the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 which protects wild birds and some animals in England and Wales.

This act lists weapons that a person must not use to kill an animal but catapults are not in that list.

Henry Smith, vice chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare said Parliament urgently needs to look at changing the legislation.

The MP believes the government should look at ensuring there is a criminal sanction for those who use catapults as a weapon to inflict injury and suffering and look at restricting sales to under-18s.

Catapults are readily available to buy online including on websites like eBay and Amazon.

In the catapult groups young people also trade, sell and make them by hand while some people promote knives.

"We're seeing more and more injured animals being reported to us that are being hit by catapults," he said.

# Officials seek bird's attackers

VICTORIA'S wildlife watchdog is hunting for three people accused of attacking a little penguin in the middle of tram tracks in Melbourne.

The Conservation Regulator on has pleaded for help to find the males, who were allegedly seen kicking the bird in the middle of tracks at Alfred Square and the Esplanade in St Kilda at about 11.30pm on December 8.

An onlooker interrupted the group and moved the penguin to the beach near St Kilda pier before reporting the incident.

The regulator, which is inves-

tigating, released CCTV showing the attack on the penguin.

Crime Stoppers Victoria chief executive, Stella Smith, described the incident as appalling, and said it was important that those responsible be found and punished.

"It's disturbing behaviour," Smith said.

"The community is always outraged when they see people hurting innocent animals.

"It's important that the alleged culprits are found because we wouldn't want this to happen again and they need to under-

stand that their behaviour is absolutely unacceptable."

People who injure wildlife in Victoria can be fined more than \$48,000 or jailed for up to twelve months.

Several little penguins have been violently attacked in St Kilda over the years.

The regulator sought help to find five men accused of another attack on a little penguin at St Kilda in 2021.

At the time authorities alleged the penguin was captured, thrown against a wall and kicked before it died.



Little penguins have been attacked at St Kilda.

# Sick-looking penguins OK, they're moulting

By PETER DE GRAAF

SCRUFFY, sick-looking penguins turning up on beaches around New Zealand during summer are undergoing part of their natural life cycle and nothing to worry about according to a bird expert.

However the birds — especially korora or little blue penguins — are extra vulnerable to dogs at this time of year so the Department of Conservation is pleading with beachgoers to keep their pets on a leash in areas where penguins nest.

DoC ecology adviser Bruce McKinlay said adult korora came ashore between November and March to shed old feathers and to grow a new waterproof coat.

While korora could turn up anywhere along the New Zealand coast to moult species such as crested penguins or tawaki could be spotted coming ashore in Southland and Otago.

The process of moulting and regrowing feathers takes two to three weeks.

McKinlay said DoC often fielded calls at this time of year from people concerned about scruffy, sickly-looking penguins.

"But they're almost always

moulting," he said.

"While it doesn't look pretty this is a natural part of the bird's life cycle.

"When you grow a feather it's only good for about a year then it loses its structure.

"In the case of penguins they also need to be waterproof.

"So the birds shed them all they then convert fat into new feathers which they push out through their skin and create a new coat.

"While they're doing it they're utterly miserable, they've got thousands of pinpricks going through their skin, they can't go to sea so they are starving and they basically look like a mess.

"But it's part of the normal annual cycle for penguins and they have to do it, it's part of their biology.

"The best thing to do is leave them be and ensure they're undisturbed during their moult."

However penguins are unable to swim while they were moulting which made them extra vulnerable to dog attacks.

As well as giving penguins plenty of space McKinlay urged beachgoers to warn other people nearby of the birds' location and to keep dogs away from nests



Kororā or little blue penguins look terrible when they're moulting but an expert says it's part of their natural life cycle.

and on a lead around penguin areas.

Anyone who saw unleashed dogs running around on the beach or people harassing penguins should call 0800 DOC HOT.

People could also call the 24-hour DOC hotline if they were worried about a penguin being in

an unsafe place McKinlay said.

Last month DoC staff and locals were shocked when two boys were seen kicking protected oystercatcher chicks at Mangawhai in Northland.

One chick died while the other was rescued by locals and returned to the beach when it recovered.

However penguins are unable to swim while they were moulting which made them extra vulnerable to dog attacks.

# Attenborough bird first of its kind without teeth

NO birds alive today have teeth. But that wasn't always the case — many early fossil birds had beaks full of sharp, tiny teeth.

In a paper in the journal *Cretaceous Research* scientists have described a new species of fossil bird that was the first of its kind to evolve toothlessness.

Its name in honor of naturalist Sir David Attenborough means “Attenborough’s strange bird.”

“It is a great honor to have one’s name attached to a fossil, particularly one as spectacular and important as this, it seems the history of birds is more complex than we knew,” said Sir David Attenborough.

All birds are dinosaurs but not all dinosaurs fall into the specialized type of dinosaurs known as birds, sort of like how all squares are rectangles but not all rectangles are squares.

The newly-described *Imparavis attenboroughi* is a bird and therefore is also a dinosaur.

*Imparavis attenboroughi* was a member of a group of birds called enantiornithines or opposite birds, named for a feature in their shoulder joints that is opposite from what’s seen in modern birds.

Enantiornithines were once the most diverse group of birds but they went extinct 66 million years ago following the meteor impact that killed most of the dinosaurs.

Scientists are still working to figure out why the enantiornithines went extinct and the ornithuromorphs, the group that gave rise to modern birds, survived.

“Enantiornithines are very weird,” said Alex Clark, a Ph.D. student at the University of Chicago and the Field Museum and the paper’s corresponding author.

“Most of them had teeth and still had clawed digits.

“If you were to go back in time 120 million years in north-eastern China and walk around you might have seen something that looked like a robin or a cardinal but then it would open its mouth and it would be filled with teeth and it would raise its wing and you would realize that it had little fingers.”

But Attenborough’s strange bird bucked that trend.

“Scientists previously thought

that the first record of toothlessness in this group was about 72 million years ago in the late Cretaceous,” Clark said.

“This little guy, *Imparavis*, pushes that back by about 48 to 50 million years so toothlessness or edentulism evolved much earlier in this group than we thought.”

The specimen was found by an amateur fossil collector near the village of Toudaoyingzi in northeastern China and donated to the Shandong Tianyu Museum of Nature.

Clark’s adviser and co-author on the paper Field Museum associate curator of fossil reptiles

O’Connor, Clark and their co-authors in China — Xiaoli Wang, Xiangyu Zhang, Xing Wang, Xiaoting Zheng and Zhonghe Zhou — undertook further study of the specimen and determined that it did indeed represent an animal new to science.

The unusual wing bones could have allowed for muscle attachments that let this bird flap its wings with extra power.

“We’re potentially looking at really strong wing beats,” Clark said.

“Some features of the bones resemble those of modern birds like puffins or murres which can

mal is more than the sum of its parts and we can’t fully know what an animal’s life was like just by looking at single components of its body he and his co-authors have been able to hypothesize about some of *Imparavis*’s behavior and ecology based on the details of its wings, feet and beak together.

“I like to think of these guys kind of acting like modern robins,” Clark said.

“They can perch in trees just fine but for the most part, you see them foraging on the ground, hopping around and walking.”

“It seems like most enantiornithines were pretty arboreal but the differences in the forelimb structure of *Imparavis* suggests that even though it still probably lived in the trees it maybe ventured down to the ground to feed and that might mean it had a unique diet compared to other enantiornithines which also might explain why it lost its teeth,” said O’Connor.

The researchers also revisited previously described fossil bird *Chiappeavis* which O’Connor named eight years ago after her Ph.D. adviser and suggest that it too was an early toothless enantiornithine.

This finding along with *Imparavis* indicates that toothlessness may not have been quite as unique in Early Cretaceous enantiornithines as previously thought.

Clark said that nature documentaries by Sir David Attenborough in which the renowned British naturalist narrates the behavior of different animals were pivotal to his own interest in science.

“I most likely wouldn’t be in the natural sciences if it weren’t for David Attenborough’s documentaries,” said Clark, explaining why he chose to name the new fossil after Attenborough.

Clark and O’Connor noted the importance of Attenborough’s messaging that not only celebrates life on Earth but also warns against the mass extinction the planet is undergoing due to human-caused climate change and habitat destruction.



Illustration showing the fossil skeleton of *Imparavis attenboroughi*, alongside a reconstruction of the bird in life.

Jingmai O’Connor first noticed something unusual about this fossil several years ago when she was visiting the Shandong Tianyu Museum’s collections.

“I think what drew me to the specimen wasn’t its lack of teeth — it was its forelimbs,” said O’Connor.

“It had a giant bicapital crest — a bony process jutting out at the top of the upper arm bone where muscles attach.

“I’d seen crests like that in Late Cretaceous birds but not in the Early Cretaceous like this one, that’s when I first suspected it might be a new species.”

flap crazy fast or quails and pheasants which are stout little birds but produce enough power to launch nearly vertically at a moment’s notice when threatened.”

The bird’s toothless beak does not necessarily tell scientists what it was eating since modern toothless birds have a wide variety of diets.

Like its fellow enantiornithines and unlike modern birds it does not appear to have a digestive organ called a gizzard or gastric mill that helped it crush up its food.

While Clark noted that an ani-

# Mayor targeted after turkey kill

By YARON STEINBUCH

IT was a real turkey shoot.

A Canadian vigilante used a slingshot to take down a wild turkey that had been attacking elderly people and children in a small town in Quebec.

With the blessing of the local mayor the unnamed hunter killed the turkey with a bullseye then took it back home to eat — freeing the town of its fowl terror and causing criticism from those who say the mayor did not have the authority to order the bird's assassination.

"This morning at 9am a man with a sling — like in the time of David and Goliath, he's very good with it — he hit the wild turkey with two metal stones in the head and he fell," Mayor Yvon Deshaies who ordered the hit said.

"He didn't suffer at all," he said adding that he was not happy that he issued a call to arms to blow the stuffing out of the bird.

"I would have liked the wildlife ministry to take care of it," the mayor said.

But he felt he had no choice when all wildlife officials told him

was that turkeys are not dangerous.

"When it's attacking citizens or children, a person in a wheelchair, it doesn't matter — that's not normal, I defend my citizens," Deshaies said.

"I'm not going to wait for the turkey to scratch a child."

It is illegal to hunt wild turkeys in Quebec before the hunting season begins at the end of April but Deshaies said police were present during the killing to ensure people's safety.

But some people cried fowl over the killing — threatening to

sue him and demanding that he should resign.

"They're saying I'm Putin, they said I'm worse than Putin," Deshaies said.

The mayor also faces possible sanctions from Quebec's wildlife ministry.

The problem reportedly began when wild turkeys descended on the town of around 5000 people 60 miles north-east of Montreal.

One bird attacked a woman in a wheelchair and pulled her shirt and Facebook showed an elderly gentleman being blocked by a large wild turkey.

# 'Ridiculous' trees move

By MICHAEL DAHLSTROM

COMPLAINTS about birds singing outside homes at an Australian aged care facility resulted in a response residents have said is ridiculous and utterly bizarre.

Rather than scare the offending Indian mynas away property owner Australian Unity decided to instead cover the 23 towering trees in giant nets sparking division in the small community.

Although the birds were kept away and the netting complied with state regulations the sight of trees coated in metres of plastic netting was deemed unsightly by elderly residents who wanted to enjoy a picturesque retirement on Victoria's Mornington Peninsula.

Others argued that shade caused by the netting was causing foliage to die but more worryingly some said small native birds were becoming trapped inside the net.

Australian Unity said it was responding to complaints from residents about the birds and it applied the most appropriate response at the time.

"We began trialling a netting system on a number of trees in an effort to deter a number of Indian myna birds which had been impacting some residents'

health and wellbeing, and causing stress over time," it said.

While residents who had previously enjoyed the sound of the birds were sympathetic to the needs of neighbors who were irritated by the noise it was the scale of Australian Unity's response that left them angry.

"We had the most terrible trouble because birds were becoming trapped," one 72-year-old resident said.

"It was the most ridiculous thing and many of us didn't feel like we were consulted."

Visitor to the property Katrina Larsen said the streets appeared like something from a dystopian film set.

"The trees were wilted, sad and ugly," she said.

"If you're going to plant trees you should expert birds, that's just nature."

Australian Unity said it consulted residents and bird control experts as well as wildlife management and control authorities.

"The netting was installed by professional bird control experts in line with Victorian regulations," it said.

"Following the completion of the trial period in late February the netting was removed.

"While we have seen a positive outcome regarding the Indian

"The netting was installed by professional bird control experts in line with Victorian regulations," it said.



Some residents said netting so many large trees was ridiculous.

myna birds we continue to monitor the situation as part of our ongoing commitment to the wellbeing of residents at Peninsula Grange."

Living with nature can be difficult for many people.

A childcare centre in Sydney claimed it was spending more than \$300 a week to clean up mess cleaning the area around its premises.

But efforts by humans to scare away offending birds frequently make headlines due to the division it can cause in the community.

In 2022 a Sydney council sparked anger after it fixed spikes to branches to stop ibis

from perching above park benches and defecating on them.

Bats too can often split communities and several city councils have used loud noises and lights to scare away flying foxes when they roost near areas inhabited by humans.

In 2023 Sutherland Shire Mayor Carmelo Pesce controversially took things a step further and called for bats in his community to be shot saying: "They're dirty and they've got diseases."

But not all moves spark alarm. In 2023 a man's efforts to create a DIY scarecrow to keep magpies away from a pet food bowl became a sensation after it drew the birds to his home.

# Conservation banker saving prairie chicken

By ODESSA AMERICAN

CONSERVATION banker Wayne Walker is on a mission to preserve lesser prairie chicken habitat.

Walker, the principal of Common Ground Capital LLC, said instead of trying to develop land his group is trying to conserve or restore habitat.

His group finds ranchers who have lesser prairie chickens.

“But we do other species, too,” Walker said.

“We spend a bunch of money to figure out the birds are there and what we can do to improve their habitat and we get the the land approved by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

“We sell mitigation credits to energy industry folks who are trying to offset their impacts,” Walker said.

Through the years the lesser prairie chicken has been on and off the endangered species list. It is currently on the list Walker said.

“The primary reason we think the prairie chicken and the dune sagebrush lizard and all these critters are in trouble is the ranchers can’t get paid enough money to really do things that that help them in a long term, meaningful way,” he said.

“A lot of the government programs will give him a few dollars an acre to remove some mesquite trees but then mesquite trees just come back or you’ve got energy development out there that pays a lot better than conservation programs.”

He said that you have to propose a proposition with good value that recognizes that ranchers are good stewards and may need more money to improve the habitat.

“That’s what we do, we partner with private dollars and invest private to work with the ranchers,” Walker said.

For someone drilling a well Common Ground will calculate how many conservation credits are needed.

“It’s probably going to be several hundred credits because it’s not just the physical pad,” Walker said.

“The vertical structure creates an avoidance zone for



The lesser prairie chicken has been on, and then off, protected lists.

prairie chickens.

“Let’s say the well needs 100 credits. You typically mitigate two to one, so if he needs 100 credits he buys 200 from us, he gets legal protection and that investment goes to part of a larger area we’re trying to serve, to ultimately build a conservation bank out to what they call a stronghold.”

It also includes things like reintroducing prescribed fire in a landscape, taking care of weeds and invasive species, monitoring the prairie chicken and habitat every year, writing annual reports which are required by the US Fish and Wildlife Service every year.

“That’s what the endowment does,” Walker said.

“The rest of it is, effectively, we recover our development costs, we split the rest with the landowner so that’s where the money goes.”

The money typically helps keep ranches in the families and it gets reinvested in paying off debt, buying equipment or expanding the ranch he said.

What made him focus on lesser prairie chickens is he spent summers and winter breaks south of

Ozona.

“My grandmother was a real big wildlife enthusiast and really got me to appreciate nature and why we need nature,” Walker said.

“It’s not just because it’s cool animals to look at, we all breathe the air and need clean water from nature.

“That was one thing, the other thing is that I was a wind developer for many years out of Houston but I covered the Texas

Panhandle, West Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado and New Mexico which just happens to be where the prairie chicken was, this is going back almost 25 years.

“I learned a lot about the prairie chicken, I wasn’t trying to learn about I just kept running into it.”

Wind developers for example made conservation efforts with Nature Conservancy but the situation was uncertain, Walker started to learn about conservation banking.

“I saw the future back in the late 2000s,” Walker said.

They knew about the Permian Basin and the Mississippi Lime

Play in Kansas and Western Oklahoma plus transmission was exploding. Solar wasn’t exploding he said but it is now.

“All of this is in these very remote areas which are the last of the last great places for the prairie chicken,” Walker said.

He said he works with landowners in places where there are prairie chickens or they can restore habitat for prairie chickens.

“We get these ranches approved by the feds, the Fish and Wildlife Service,” he said.

“They approve the ranches and they say OK, you can sell conservation credits.

“That’s how that’s why I call it conservation banking because we’re getting the credits approved in advance of needing to sell them and we bank those credits, they’re ready to sell.

“Then I go out and I find, mostly right now it’s renewables folks, who are using solar wind transmission, local co-ops who are building in prairie chicken habitat and they need to offset those impacts.

“We determine how many credits they need, they enroll in our habitat conservation plan,” Walker said.

“They get a permit to build their project and they’re in compliance with the law.

“They’re also getting really good value for the dollar, doing something actually helps separate chickens.

“I believe the way we get out of this is we got to actually grow back prairie chicken habitat.

“Because right now we’re a deficit.

“That will allow us to grow prairie chickens and once we’ve increased prairie chickens we can get away from this whipsaw listed not listed, down the road in the Midland courthouse stuff.”

In West Texas-Eastern New Mexico there were around 500 lesser prairie chickens as of 2021 but it ranges all the way up to 3000 which Walker said still isn’t good.

“It’s bad, we could we have another extended drought or some sort of wildlife disease,” he said.

“They could be gone in a few years.”

Wind developers for example made conservation efforts with Nature Conservancy but the situation was uncertain.



# Chukar released in Kurdistan

SHARIFI Haji Rasul, a passionate advocate for wildlife preservation from Sulaimani City in the Iraqi Kurdistan region, has taken another step in his ongoing commitment by releasing 100 chukar partridges, pictured right, into Hawari Shar Park.

Last month Rasul released 20 chukars and in 2023 he released 400 in the Mawat area's Shinkayeti, Safra, and Zeroni regions.

Expressing his deep connection with nature Rasul voiced concerns about the dwindling beauty of the environment.

He stressed the risk of extinc-

tion facing chukars and other animals due to what he labelled as unscrupulous hunting.

He aims to inspire wildlife conservation among others, initiating his bird release project to discourage hunting.

"Fortunately it has made an impact, convincing some to halt hunting activities," he said, adding that the initiative brings him immense joy.

Reflecting on last year's release Rasul said there were positive outcomes.

"The difference is palpable — one can now spot clusters of 10 or

15 chukars in these regions," he said, highlighting that chukars lay a minimum of 15 eggs annually.

To Rasul chukars represent a crucial element of the region's ecosystem, contributing to its biodiversity.

"Their disappearance from our surroundings would be a significant loss," he said.

Hunting is forbidden in Iraqi Kurdistan and legislation imposes penalties for unlawful hunting with a fine of US\$8700 for each deer killed and repeat offenders face doubled fines.



# Indian pitta discovered in China for first time

By CHEN LIANG

IN the depths of the tropical and subtropical forests in Asia, Australasia and Africa there resides a unique group of birds.

Adorned with resplendent, colorful plumage pittas are a highly secretive avian family of mostly nonmigratory species.

They have been considered by many ornithologists and bird watchers as precious gems amid the dim, dense woods, earning them the colloquial name jewel-thrush.

Taxonomically pittas belong to the Passeriformes order and the Pittidae family.

Among the most beautiful birds in the world most of the pitta species are shy by nature and elusive in their movements and many species have narrow distributions and low populations making them a sought-after target for numerous bird enthusiasts.

On the morning of June 15 last year an unexpected discovery was made when residents stumbled upon the body of an unknown bird in the urban centre of Tianquan county at Ya'an city in China's Sichuan province.

It was sent to local forestry authorities who then sought the expertise of Dr Que Pinjia, an ornithologist from the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding and the Sichuan Key Laboratory of Conservation Biology for Endangered Wildlife to

help in identifying the bird.

Upon examining its morphological features Que tentatively identified it as an Indian pitta, a bird that had never been recorded in China.

Molecular biological analyses confirmed its taxonomic status.

"It was truly a big surprise for us," Que said.

Since the bird's flight and tail feathers were intact, showing no obvious signs of captivity, Que said the possibility of an escape was ruled out and the research

*Bird Record in China: India Pitta.*

Previous records in China documented sightings of eight pitta species all of which have been put under state second-class protection due to their relatively scarce populations said Que, who is the article's first author.

Aside from the fairy pitta the other seven species have very narrow distributions in China, sporadically recorded in select locations near the southern border regions such as Hainan province, southern Yunnan province and

east.

The distance between its nearest recorded location and Tianquan exceeds 1000km, separated by grand mountain ranges from north to south.

"The origins of this bird have truly raised our curiosity," said professor Liu Yang from the School of Ecology at Sun Yat-sen University at Shenzhen in Guangdong province, a co-author of the study.

Liu said similar instances include the records of bay-backed shrike and rusty-tailed flycatcher in Sichuan.

Both of those species are typically found in South Asia.

"Their appearance in Sichuan seems like an anomaly in the middle of nowhere," Liu said adding that it seems like there's a wormhole between the bird's natural habitat and China.

While reasonable speculations can be made Que said, a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms behind the phenomena is dependent on the accumulation of more foundational information on bird distribution and migration coupled with the application of various technological methods to conduct integrated research.

There are 44 species of pittas in the world.

They are mostly found in forests but some live in scrub and mangroves.



A taxidermied India pitta made from a carcass found at Tianquan County in China's Sichuan province.

team concluded that the appearance of the bird in Tianquan was the first recorded instance of the species in China, adding a jewel to the country's avian family.

He and five other researchers published the discovery in the January issue of *Chinese Journal of Zoology*, a science magazine of the Chinese Academy of Sciences in an article titled *A New*

southern Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region with very few recorded inland.

"It further emphasizes the unexpected nature of the discovery," Que said.

According to the researcher the Indian pitta is mainly distributed on the Indian subcontinent ranging from Pakistan in the west to Bangladesh in the

# Partridge in fight against extinction

By ELLA McSWEENEY

ON a blustery day last winter I joined farmer Brian Dooley and agricultural adviser Michael Martyn in a field in Lea Beg near Boora in County Offaly.

Above us a small flock of lapwing swirled in the wind, wheeling back and forth, interspersed with a few golden plover.

It was a captivating sight but I wasn't there to look upwards.

We were there in search of the native grey partridge, a species so elusive and rare that the likelihood of seeing one was slim.

Dooley took us into his field of maize which forms part of a block of 100 acres of land that he bought in 1989 from Bord na Móna.

The land had previously been in his family's ownership but in the 1950s the semi-State compulsorily bought it for industrial peat extraction.

It paid £15 an acre for the agriculturally productive areas and 10 shillings for each acre of the bogland.

Today Dooley mainly uses the land to grow grass to feed his herd of cattle but during the past 15 years he has developed a fondness for the grey partridge whose last remaining wild outpost is here in County Offaly.

Grey partridges are equally fond of farming but not today's intensive model.

They are more suited to a type of mixed farming typical of Ireland in the 1960s when every inch of land wasn't put into production and artificial fertilisers and chemicals weren't common.

Back then tillage crops were sown in small fields and areas of rough ground at the periphery of fields — in some parts of the country known as hare's corners — were left alone.

Partridges peck grain from the harvest and use overgrown areas to hide from predators.

That is particularly important during breeding because they nest on the ground and are vulnerable to foxes and American mink.

The grey partridge was first surveyed in 1991 and wild populations were found in Wexford and Offaly.

By 2006 with just 20 pairs left and faced with the extinction of this bird the National Parks & Wildlife Service used public money to buy 600 acres of cutaway bog in County Offaly.

Since that time they have worked with the Irish Grey Partridge Conservation Trust and local farmers like Dooley to restore partridge numbers.

Around 15 years ago spurred on by a publicly-funded scheme called Glas operated by

the Department of Agriculture, Dooley dedicated a 12-metre margin around the outside of his fields to the partridge.

In a third of that ground he sows a mix of grasses that form a thick cover for partridges to nest and hide — in the

remaining nine metres he grows a "brood-rearing" mixed crop of winter-hardy Caledonian kale, alfalfa, chicory radish and linseed.

As the three of us walked along that margin Michael Martyn explained how vital these flowering plants are to the survival of partridge chicks who depend on a protein-rich diet of insects to grow.

Without enough insects the chicks will quickly become emaciated and die.

Martyn said farmers must also avoid spraying herbicides and insecticides on the fields.

In many ways the Green Low-

Partridges form strong family bonds and the parents and chicks are known collectively as a covey which occasionally can include a few cousins.



Grey partridge at Lough Boora near Tullamore in County Offaly.

Carbon Agri-Environment Scheme (Glas) for the grey partridge was an attempt at recreating aspects of how farms were managed in the past before intensification and monoculture took over.

Dooley walked ahead scouring the stubble for birds.

He told me he sees partridges most days.

He often goes up on his tractor to feed his cattle and would have to abruptly slow down because he'd spot a pair of partridges joined by a gaggle of chicks — they lay up to 20 eggs and can have up to 18 young — walking together in a line on the road.

Partridges form strong family bonds and the parents and chicks are known collectively as a covey which occasionally can include a few cousins.

The Glas scheme ended in 2022.

Public money was used to fund a new initiative called Agri-Climate Rural Environment Scheme and targeted actions for the grey partridge were removed.

The payments to farmers for measures such as growing winter bird food are about a third less than those under Glas.

For his efforts Dooley received an annual payment of €7000 under Glas — in the new scheme that has dropped by a third.

Not surprisingly there's been a significant exit from the scheme by farmers in Offaly who can earn more from farming for food.

With it goes the considerable weight of their expertise and enthusiasm for the species.

In 2019 about 900 pairs of birds were recorded.

Martyn, an indefatigable partridge enthusiast, is in no doubt that the numbers will decline.

We were nearing the end of our walk when eight partridges exploded out of the stubble into the air providing us with a short glimpse of their grey and auburn plumage.

The covey flew diagonally across the field low to the ground and landed about 40m away.

Unlike the aerial performance of lapwing in the skies above us that family of grey partridge quickly disappeared, blending seamlessly into the wild cover Dooley had sown for them along the field's periphery.



The wing, highlighting the flight feathers, of Temminck's lark.



The primary feathers of a penguin.

# Feather research shows which dinosaurs could fly

BIRDS can fly — at least most of them can.

Flightless birds like penguins and ostriches have evolved lifestyles that don't require flight but there's a lot that scientists don't know about how the wings and feathers of flightless birds differ from their airborne cousins.

In a new study in the journal PNAS scientists examined hundreds of birds in museum collections and discovered a suite of feather characteristics that all flying birds have in common.

Those "rules" provide clues as to how the dinosaur ancestors of modern birds first evolved the ability to fly and which dinosaurs were capable of flight.

Not all dinosaurs evolved into birds but all living birds are dinosaurs.

Birds are members of the group of dinosaurs that survived when an asteroid hit the Earth 66 million years ago.

Long before the asteroid hit some of the members of a group of dinosaurs called Penneraptorans began to evolve feathers and the ability to fly.

Members of that group began to develop feathers before they were able to fly — the original purpose of feathers might have been for insulation or to attract mates.

For instance Velociraptor had feathers but it couldn't fly.

Of course scientists can't hop in a time machine to the Cretaceous Period to see whether Velociraptors could fly.

Instead paleontologists rely

on clues in the animals' fossilized skeletons like the size and shape of arm/wing bones and wishbones along with the shape of any preserved feathers to determine which species were capable of true, powered flight.

For instance the long primary feathers along the tips of birds' wings are asymmetrical in birds that can fly but symmetrical in birds that can't fly.

The quest for clues about dinosaur flight led to a collaboration between Jingmai O'Connor, a paleontologist at the Field Museum in Chicago and Yosef Kiat, a postdoctoral researcher at the Field.

"Yosef, an ornithologist, was investigating traits like the number of different types of wing feathers in relation to the length of arm bone they attach to and the degree of asymmetry in birds' flight feathers," said O'Connor, the museum's associate curator of fossil reptiles who specializes in early birds.

"Through our collaboration Yosef is able track these traits in fossils that are 160-120 million years old and therefore study the early evolutionary history of feathers."

Kiat undertook a study of the feathers of every order of living birds, examining specimens from 346 different species preserved in

museums around the world.

As he looked at the wings and feathers from hummingbirds, hawks, penguins and pelicans he noticed a number of consistent traits among species that can fly.

For instance in addition to asymmetrical feathers all flighted birds had between nine and 11 primary feathers.

In flightless birds the number varies widely — penguins have more than 40 and emus have none.

It's a deceptively simple rule that has seemingly gone unnoticed by scientists.

"It's really surprising that with so many styles of flight we can find in modern birds they all share this trait of having between nine and 11 primary feathers," said Kiat.

"And I was surprised that no one seems to have found this before."

By applying the information about the number of primary feathers to the overall bird family tree Kiat and O'Connor also found that it takes a long time for birds to evolve a different number of primary feathers.

"This trait only changes after really long periods of geologic time," said O'Connor.

"It takes a very long time for evolution to act on this trait and change it."

In addition to modern birds

the researchers examined 65 fossil specimens representing 35 different species of feathered dinosaurs and extinct birds.

By applying the findings from modern birds the researchers were able to extrapolate information about the fossils.

"You can basically look at the overlap of the number of primary feathers and the shape of those feathers to determine if a fossil bird could fly and whether its ancestors could," said O'Connor.

For instance the researchers looked at the feathered dinosaur Caudipteryx which had nine primary feathers but they are almost symmetrical and the proportions of its wings would have made flight impossible.

The researchers said it's possible that Caudipteryx had an ancestor that was capable of flight but that trait was lost by the time Caudipteryx arrived.

Since it takes a long time for the number of primary feathers to change the flightless Caudipteryx retained its nine primaries.

Meanwhile other feathered fossils' wings seemed flight-ready — including those of the earliest known bird Archaeopteryx and Microraptor, a tiny, four-winged dinosaur that isn't a direct ancestor of modern birds.

Taken a step further the data may inform the conversation among scientists about the origins of dinosaurian flight.

"It was only recently that scientists realized that birds are not the only flying dinosaurs," said O'Connor.

Since it takes a long time for the number of primary feathers to change the flightless Caudipteryx retained its nine primaries.

# National symbols get much harder to see

By ELAINE CHEN

THE American tropics are uniquely blessed with birds — 36 per cent of the world's 11,000 bird species live in the region south of the border between the United States and Mexico, more than in Asia or Africa.

That diversity is reflected in the national birds chosen to represent the countries of Latin America, from the slight southern lapwing — Uruguay's avian symbol — to the 14kg Andean condor, the national bird of four countries.

Some birds carry indigenous cultural importance, others were once ubiquitous in or are endemic to their countries.

But an increasingly common characteristic is a decline in numbers sometimes even in the nations they represent.

Every child in Mexico learns the story — During nomadic times the Aztecs had a prophecy that they should settle in a place where they saw an eagle eating a snake while perched on a cactus.

That sighting led to the founding of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan which was later Mexico City.

The golden eagle can be found in Russia, Central Asia, Europe and the Americas.

Mexico is the eagle's southernmost range according to Ernesto Ruelas Inzunza, an ecologist at the University of Veracruz.

Although the bird is featured on items like coins and soccer jerseys it is endangered in Mexico and its population is probably shrinking.

Recent estimates suggest that there may be only about 200 adult birds left in Mexico, Dr Ruelas said although more formal nationwide surveys need to be conducted.

"It's a beautiful bird and it's well ingrained in our history," Dr Ruelas said.

"But we don't see them very often."

Habitat loss is a major factor in the decline of bird populations across the region.

Around 13 per cent of forest in Latin America and the Caribbean has been lost in the past 30 years, primarily because of agriculture and cattle ranching.

Brazil accounts for most of that loss but Guatemala alone



**An indigenous man near an Andean condor at Puracé National Natural Park in Colombia. The condor is sacred to many indigenous communities and is Colombia's national bird.**

lost more than 26 per cent of its forests 1.25 million hectares — from 1990 to 2020.

That change has had a stark effect on Guatemala's national bird the resplendent quetzal which breeds in high-elevation cloud forests and feeds in lower-elevation forests.

The quetzal's iridescent green feathers adorned Quetzalcoatl, the serpent-headed god of the Aztecs and the Maya and were once used as money and the currency of modern Guatemala is called the quetzal.

The quetzal's habitat requirements and reliance on varieties of avocado make it vulnerable to climate change and deforestation.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature has classified the resplendent quetzal's population as near threatened.

Across most of the world the Andean condor is identified by a version of its Quechua name kuntur.

It is one of the largest flying birds, has a three metre wingspan and weighs up to 15kg.

Bolivia and Chile are strongholds for the species but the population as a whole is vulnerable and the condor barely has a presence in Colombia and Ecuador.

A survey in 2015 by the Andean Condor Foundation estimated that only around 100 adults remained in

Ecuador. Despite the bird's importance in some indigenous cultures — it is thought that condors carried souls to heaven — it is hunted and poisoned, typically by farmers concerned about their livestock.

Condors compete with feral dogs to find carrion and have sometimes resorted to killing baby cattle.

"That's a big problem with raptors in places where local communities are close by," said Eliana Montenegro, a conservation officer based in Ecuador with BirdLife International.

The intimidating features and

■ *Continued next page.*

# Rare white-tailed eagle dead

THE National Parks and Wildlife Service in Ireland is investigating the discovery of a dead white-tailed eagle near Cranberry Lough in County Roscommon.

The NPWS confirmed the bird was shot.

It is awaiting the results of forensic tests for more data.

The two-year old female was released on the shores of Lough Derg in 2022 as part of a reintroduction programme.

Satellite tags are attached to the chicks at birth to track their

progress.

Data from the satellite suggests the eagle died on March 11 or 12.

Irish Minister of State for Nature, Heritage and Electoral Reform Malcolm Noonan said he was devastated by news of the death “of one of our beloved white-tailed eagles”.

“These majestic birds have been part of a reintroduction project to restore their populations in Ireland and to think that one would be shot is unconscionable,” he said.

Mr Noonan appealed to anyone who has information to contact the NPWS or Gardai Irish police.

Data from the dead eagle’s tags showed that since her release the bird travelled from the river Shannon estuary in Limerick headed north up through the Burren in County Clare before arriving in Donegal in mid-April 2023.

In 2024 the eagle spent most of its time along the borders between Galway, Offaly and Roscommon before it died.

White-tailed eagles are Ireland and Britain’s largest birds of prey with a wingspan of up to 2.5 metres.

They are known to play an important role in nature and balancing natural ecosystems.

Last year an Irish police investigation was launched after two white-tailed eagles were found dead in County Antrim.

NPWS officials said the birds had no obvious signs of injury but suspicions were raised given the unlikely location where they were found.

# National symbols get much harder to see

Continued from previous page. size of raptors such as the golden eagle, the condor and Panama’s harpy eagle make them charismatic national symbols but can also attract human persecution.

In Uruguay southern lapwings are called teros which is also the nickname for the Uruguayan international men’s rugby team.

The southern lapwing and the rufous hornero both of which prefer grasslands and pastures have benefited from the conversion of woodlands into farms and cattle ranches.

Common birds like those still have a role in mobilizing support for conservation efforts said Luis Miguel Renjifo, a conservation biologist at the Pontifical Javeriana University.

Most Argentines can easily find their national bird the hornero — named for its oven-like clay nests or horneros it builds — even in the parks of Buenos Aires.

“They get people excited,” Dr Renjifo said.

“It brings that connection between birds and people.”

With so many beautiful birds in Latin America poaching for the international pet market has become a significant problem including for the scarlet macaw.

The ancient Maya believed macaws could travel between Earth and heaven and their colorful feathers adorned the Maya and Aztec elite.

Today those feathers — as well as the bird’s tolerance for captivity and its ability to mimic human voices — make macaws a desirable pet.

Populations are dwindling in much of Central America and the scarlet macaw is vulnerable in Honduras.

But it has made some recent progress in the region thanks to



The resplendent quetzal migrates between forests at higher and lower elevations to feed and breed so it requires a contiguous habitat to thrive.

forest preservation efforts — programs like Macaw Mountain which combines tourism with conservation and arrangements like one in the Mosquitia region that pay former hunters to become stewards.

But those accomplishments remain tenuous.

Understanding species population trends requires long-term data collection and conservation efforts can take decades to yield

results.

“It has required resources that have not been available in a lot of the countries where most biodiversity exists,” said Viviana Ruiz-Gutierrez, co-director of the Center for Avian Population Studies at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

The decline of a species in one country is less likely to attract international funding if the bird’s global population is not of con-

cern.

Dr Ruelas and other scientists hope that the local decline of bird species especially those that are national symbols will prompt the public to participate in monitoring efforts or support research and conservation policies.

“A symbol of national identity should be something that makes us work together,” Dr Ruelas said.

# Buildings in US killing billion birds each year

CHICAGO'S 82-storey Aqua Tower appears to flutter with the wind.

Its unusual undulating facade has made it one of the most unique features of Chicago's skyline, distinct from the many right-angled glass towers that surround it.

In designing it architect Jeanne Gang thought not only about how humans would see it dancing against the sky but also how it would look to birds flying past.

The irregularity of the building's face allows birds to see it more clearly and avoid fatal collisions.

"It's kind of designed to work for both humans and birds," she said.

As many as a billion birds in the US die in building collisions each year and Chicago, which sits along the Mississippi Flyway, one of the four major north-south migration routes, is among the riskiest places for birds.

This year at least 1000 birds died in one day by colliding with a single glass-covered building.

In New York which lies along the Atlantic Flyway hundreds of species traverse the skyline and tens of thousands die each year.

As awareness grows of the dangers posed by glistening towers and bright lights architects are starting to reimagine city skylines to design buildings that are both aesthetically daring and bird-safe.

Some are experimenting with new types of patterned or coated glass that birds can see.

Others are rethinking glass towers entirely, experimenting with exteriors that use wood, concrete or steel rods.

Blurring lines between the indoors and outdoors some architects are creating green roofs and facades, inviting birds to nest within the building.

"Many people think about bird-friendly design as yet another limitation on buildings, yet another requirement," said Dan Piselli, director of sustainability at the New York-based architecture firm FXCollaborative.

"But there are so many design-forward buildings that perfectly exemplify that this doesn't have



The New York Times building uses fritted glass clad with rods which make its facade more visible to birds.

to limit your design, your freedom."

For Deborah Laurel, principal at the firm Prendergast Laurel Architects, the realization came a couple of decades ago.

She was up for an award for her firm's renovation of the Staten Island Children's Museum when the museum's director mentioned to her that a number of birds had been crashing into the new addition.

"I was horrified," she said.

She embarked on a frenzy of research to learn more about bird collisions.

After several years of investigation she found there was little in the way of practical tips for architects and she teamed up with the conservation group NYC Audubon to develop a bird-safe building guide.

The issue, she discovered, was that technological and architectural advancements over the

past half-century had in some ways transformed New York City — and most other US skylines and suburbs — into death traps for birds.

Before the 1960s much of the large sheet glass used in buildings was made via a painstaking and costly process of casting and polishing.

The glass often contained bubbles or other imperfections that obscured its clarity.

Then in the 1960s float glass — made using a new technique that created uniform, clear sheets — became widely available.

"This new glass is very perfect — perfectly flat, perfectly smooth and it's also more reflective," Laurel said.

In the following decades builders increasingly installed double-paned glass which was intended to help insulate buildings and conserve energy but had the additional effect of making the

glass more reflective.

"These two steps in technology have really affected birds significantly," Laurel said.

At certain times of day tall glass towers almost blend into the sky.

At other times windows appear so pristinely clear that they are imperceptible to birds which might try to fly through them.

During the day trees and greenery reflected on shiny building facades can trick birds whereas at night brightly-lit buildings can confuse and bewilder them.

In an unfortunate turn for the birds in the 1970s the lustrous glass look became a popular design aesthetic and the look has stuck around ever since.

"It started with the good intention of wanting light-filled spaces to help people feel a sense of openness," said Piselli.

"But the material has these

■ *Continued next page.*

# Bird brains match mammals

By WOJCIECH ZYLM

RESEARCHERS at Ruhr University Bochum have made significant strides in demystifying the cognitive capabilities of birds despite considerably smaller brains and lack of structures similar to mammals.

The study showed that parrots, corvids and pigeons possess cognitive skills on par with mammals including chimpanzees, challenging longstanding beliefs about brain size and intelligence.

Contrary to the belief that a large brain and a cerebral cortex

are prerequisites for high intelligence the study illustrated that avian brains, though small, are remarkably efficient.

The researchers discovered that birds have evolved four key innovations that allow for complex cognitive functions.

They include a higher density of nerve cells, a brain structure akin to the mammalian prefrontal cortex, a dopamine-based feedback system for decision making and a sophisticated working memory.

The study highlights the parallel evolution of cognitive mechanisms between birds and mam-

mals, suggesting that neuronal properties independently evolved to fulfill cognitive requirements.

That insight challenges conventional wisdom about the relationship between brain size and intelligence, showing that different evolutionary paths can lead to comparable cognitive capabilities.

The findings underscore the importance of the structural and functional adaptations that have occurred in the avian brain, enabling feats of planning, tool use and even self-recognition.

The ground-breaking research

opens new horizons in the understanding of cognitive evolution across species.

By demonstrating that birds achieve high levels of cognition with a brain architecture vastly different from that of mammals the study paves the way for a re-evaluation of the fundamental principles of intelligence.

It suggests that focusing on functional capabilities of brain structures rather than their size or presence of specific anatomical features could provide deeper insights into the neurobiological basis of intelligence.

# Buildings in US killing billion birds each year

Continued from previous page. multifaceted consequences.”

Around a decade ago Piselli's firm worked on a half-billion-dollar renovation of New York's Jacob K Javits Convention Center, a gleaming glass-clad space frame structure that was killing 4000-5000 birds a year.

“The building was this black Death Star in the urban landscape,” Piselli said.

To make it more bird friendly, FXCollaborative reduced the amount of glass and replaced the rest of it with fritted glass with a ceramic pattern baked into it.

Tiny, textured dots on the glass are barely perceptible to people but birds can see them.

The fritted glass can also help reduce to heat from the sun, keeping the building cooler and lowering air conditioning costs.

“This became kind of the poster child for bird-friendly design in the last decade,” Piselli said.

The renovation included a green roof, monitored by the NYC Audubon.

The roof now serves as a sanctuary for several species of birds including a colony of herring gulls.

Living roofs have since become popular in New York and other major cities in an inversion of the decades-long practice of fortifying buildings with anti-bird spikes.

In the Netherlands the facade of the World Wildlife Fund headquarters, a futuristic structure that looks like an undulating blob of mercury, contains nest boxes and spaces for birds and bats to live in.

The use of fritted glass has become more common as a way to save birds and energy.

Early this year Azadeh Omidfar Sawyer, an assistant professor in building technology in the Carnegie Mellon School of Ar-



The fritted glass used in Studio Gang's expansion of Kresge College at the University of California at Santa Cruz depicts animals in the local ecosystem.

chitecture, developed open-source software to help designers create bespoke, bird-friendly glass patterns.

A book of 50 patterns that Sawyer published recently includes intricate geometric lattices and abstract arrays of lines and blobs.

“Any architect can pick up this book and choose a pattern they like, or they can customize it,” she said.

Builders have also been experimenting with UV-printed patterns which are invisible to humans but visible to most birds.

At night conservationists and architects are encouraging buildings turn off lights especially during migration season

when the bright glow of a city skyline can disorient birds.

Architects are increasingly integrating screens or grates that provide shade as well as visibility for birds.

The 52-floor *New York Times* building uses fritted glass clad with ceramic rods.

The spacing between the rods increases toward the top of the building to give the impression that the building is dissolving into the sky.

Gang's work has incorporated structures that can also serve as blinds for birders or perches from which to observe nature.

A theatre she designed at Glencoe in Illinois is surrounded by a walking path made of a

wood lattice, where visitors can feel like they're up in the canopy of trees.

Rejecting the idea of the iridescent, entirely mirrored-glass building “where you can't tell the difference between the habitat and the sky” Gang aims for the opposite.

“I always tried to make the buildings more visible with light and shadow and geometry, to have more of a solid presence,” she said.

Gang has been experimenting with adding bird feeders around her home in an effort to reduce collisions with windows and she encourages other homeowners to do the same.

“I've found that birds slow down and stop at feeders instead of trying to fly through the glass,” she said.

While high-rise buildings and massive urban projects receive the most attention homes and low-rise buildings account for most bird collision deaths.

“The huge challenge is that glass is everywhere,” said Christine Sheppard who directs the glass collisions program at the American Bird Conservancy.

“It's hard to know what I know and not cringe when I look at it,” she said.

Tips for improving homes include using stained glass or patterned decals that can help birds see a window Sheppard said.

ABC has compiled a list of window treatments and materials, ranked by how bird-safe they are.

Whether they're large or small the challenge of designing buildings that are safe for birds can be liberating, said Gang, who has become an avid birdwatcher and now carries a pair of binoculars on her morning jogs.

“It gives you another dimension to try to imagine,” she said.

# Irish birds in African odyssey

By ELLA McSWEENEY

FROM the top of Prince William's Seat in Dublin which straddles the Wicklow and Dublin Mountains, the dark green belt of native trees that extends the length of the Glencree Valley stands out from the surrounding patchwork of fields and mountain peat.

On a Sunday last April as I descended the hill after an early morning run I stopped on a wide granite outcrop halfway down and heard a clear, singular sound from inside the wooded greenway below.

It was the call of a male bird, one who had just arrived from Africa, repetitively and rhythmically calling his name to nearby females — cuck-oo! cuck-oo!

That call will soon be heard again in the valley because the cuckoos are on their way a few weeks ago they left their wintering grounds in Africa's largest tropical rainforest reserve,

deep in the Salonga National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and embarked on their mammoth migration to breeding sites across Ireland.

Last May researchers attached miniature solar-powered tracking devices to three male cuckoos and their movements are being logged online as part of a joint effort between the National Parks & Wildlife Service and the British Trust for Ornithology.

Sam Bayley, a wildlife ranger leading the project for the NPWS, said we know little to nothing about cuckoos in Ireland.

What migratory route are they taking?

Why has Ireland's population decreased so much in the past two decades?

How many return to breed

here from Africa?

While they're here what are they doing and where are they going?

The three birds — called KP, Cuach Torc and Cuach Cores — were tagged at Incheens in Killarney National Park.

When adult cuckoos leave Ireland in the summer the biggest challenge they face during their journey to Africa is the epic crossing of the ever-expanding Sahara Desert which they do in one go.

To prepare for that journey cuckoos often spend a few weeks in the Mediterranean eating as much food as possible to build up their strength.

Last year KP and Torc had a successful and straightforward migration to the Congo.

They left Ireland in June and within a few days had crossed the Alps and reached northern Italy where they spent time feeding.

Crossing south-east to Montenegro and Greece before flying south across the Sahara they arrived in the Congo Basin in September and October.

Females of many bird species sing complex songs and understanding them will help conservation efforts

Cuach Cores's journey could have been smoother — last June he left Ireland and landed in Italy but instead of continuing southwards to Africa he flew in the opposite direction towards north-west France.

Researchers following his movements needed to figure out what he was doing — they wondered whether he couldn't find enough food in Italy and instead looked elsewhere.

But then, to their relief, after eight weeks in France Cores



Sam Bayley, conservation ranger and director of the Cuckoo Tracking Project holds cuckoo Cuach Cores, ready for satellite tracking, at Derrycunihy in Killarney National Park.

took to the air and crossed the Sahara without landing, arriving in the Congo a few days later.

The call of the male cuckoo is familiar and famous but the female's call is equally distinct.

It's a bubbling call, often described as bathwater gurgling down a plughole which she makes before she lays her eggs — up to 20 in a season — in the nests of other bird species.

In Ireland the meadow pipit commonly will be fooled into rearing the young cuckoo after it hatches.

Birdsong has historically been viewed as a distinctly male trait with female songs understudied and overlooked.

That has led to an unconscious bias in ornithology and a gaping hole in knowledge especially given that half of all birds are females.

Females of many bird species sing complex songs and understanding them will also help conservation efforts.

Scientists are quickly trying to catch up, leading to efforts such as the annual Female Bird Day in May and the Female Bird

Song project which encourage bird enthusiasts to identify and collect data.

The free Merlin bird ID app will identify within seconds the bird species singing.

I recently began using it, and it's revealed a whole world of birdlife for amateurs like me.

The Merlin app was developed a few years ago by researchers at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

They harnessed the power of artificial intelligence, machine learning and a global network of volunteers who have submitted recordings to their database of 1218 species worldwide.

Alli Smith, the project's manager, said they have 15 million users of which 82,000 are in Ireland.

Last year almost a million birds were identified here by the app.

As we head into spring and our early mornings and late evenings are filled with birdsong I cannot recommend the Merlin app enough.

If you're lucky enough to live near cuckoos you might even begin to identify the female and her tropical, frog-like call.

...to figure out what he was doing — they wondered whether he couldn't find enough food in Italy and instead looked elsewhere.



# US cockfighters push to weaken penalties

By SEAN MURPHY

BEFORE Oklahoma became one of the last places in the United States to outlaw cockfighting in 2002 it was common to see hundreds of spectators packed into small arenas in rural parts of the state to watch roosters, outfitted with razor-sharp steel blades, fight until a bloody death.

More than 20 years after the ban took effect some worry that Oklahoma is starting to waver after a proposal to weaken cockfighting penalties cleared the Oklahoma House.

A political action committee is raising money to support farmers who raise game fowl and in a video since pulled from YouTube, Republican Governor Kevin Stitt recorded a message supporting the group known as the Oklahoma Gamefowl Commission saying he would “cheer you on from the sidelines”.

“They’ve tried to make an official sounding name,” said Wayne Pacelle, president of Animal Wellness Action, which two decades ago worked to turn out Oklahoma voters and outlaw the activity.

“But they’re just a bunch of cockfighters,” Pacelle said.

He said before the ban rural Oklahoma counties were peppered with cockfighting arenas set up in large barns with stadium-style seating, overhead lights and concession stands.

Events attracted hundreds of spectators, even children and families.

After major events it was common to see properties littered with bird carcasses after fights to the death.

“We went from 42 arenas to maybe there are 10 or 15 pits in the state,” he said.

The re-emergence of cockfighting as an issue in Oklahoma is frustrating opponents who until recently considered the matter long settled.

Rooster fighting is illegal at the federal level, punishable by up to five years in prison for some offences.

But a spate of recent cockfighting-related arrests in Oklahoma and elsewhere is a reminder that the practice has not been eliminated so much as driven underground.

Police in Hawaii have vowed to

step up enforcement after one of the most serious mass shootings in that state’s history happened last year at a cockfight where five people were shot including two who died.

Stitt said he records dozens of videos each week and didn’t give his participation much thought.

“Of course I’m not for gamecock fighting in the state of Oklahoma,” he said but he said he is open to reducing penalties if the state’s GOP-controlled Legislature sends him a bill.

The video unleashed bipartisan blowback across Oklahoma including from former Governor Frank Keating, a fellow Republi-

and Mississippi.

Devore said he and others raise the birds to participate in poultry shows and sell them as breeding stock overseas.

Cockfighting is illegal in many countries but it remains legal and popular in some Mexican states, the Philippines and some countries in south-east Asia.

“We represent game fowl farmers who breed and raise game fowl but not for fighting purposes,” said Devore, himself a game fowl breeder.

But Devore acknowledged a former district director for his organisation who has since resigned was arrested and charged with



The Oklahoma Governor supports weakening cockfighting penalties.

can.

Oklahoma football legend Barry Switzer — whose nickname in the state is simply The King after winning three national championships and a Super Bowl with the Dallas Cowboys — also came after Stitt.

But the backlash doesn’t faze Anthony Devore, head of the Gamefowl Commission who said his group has 15,000 members and described them as mostly hard-working rural Oklahomans.

His group has raised more than \$70,000 to lobby lawmakers and is seeking to replicate the same model in several other conservative Southern states including Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky

facilitating a cockfight after authorities in Carter County raided a cockfighting pit with more than 100 people in attendance. That criminal case is pending.

Devore and other members acknowledge that they’re operating in a grey area of the law and say reducing penalties would remove fear of felony criminal charges hanging over their heads.

The effort is welcome news to Troy Thompson, a former high school teacher and coach who now works full-time raising thousands of birds every year on his 22.26 hectare ranch dotted with white, tent-like structures near the town of Wilson in far southern Oklahoma 48km north of the Red

River border with Texas.

Thompson said the chickens on his farm, which are kept on foot tethers so they don’t fight with one another, are given vitamins, green grass year round and get the highest quality feed he can buy.

He said his chickens have a much better life than they would on a typical poultry farm where they are raised in a tiny cage and slaughtered at six weeks old.

“I had a rooster pass away last week that was 10 years old,” he said.

“They have a lot better life living here than they’re going to have on a Tyson poultry farm.”

Thompson said he grew up during a time when rooster fighting was legal and dozens of farms dotted the rolling hills of southern Oklahoma.

The name of his boyhood T-ball team was the Dillard Fighting Cocks.

“Would that go over today?” he asked.

“It’s mind blowing that you went from perfectly legal to facing a 10-year prison sentence.”

Some law enforcement officers and prosecutors have been cracking down recently on those who raise and fight birds with busts recently in both urban and rural communities but prosecutors say it’s unlikely anyone has been sentenced to prison for cockfighting.

“I would say there’s probably almost none in prison,” said Greg Mashburn, the top prosecutor for three central Oklahoma counties.

“In the 18 years I’ve been DA we’ve only had two cases.”

Mashburn said it’s important to enforce anti-cockfighting laws because there is often a criminal element engaged in the activity that often involves illegal drugs and gambling.

“It’s also cruel to the animals,” Mashburn said.

“And where do you draw the line? If we allow that with chickens why not dogs or other animals fighting to the death?”

Some animal rights supporters say other local sheriffs and prosecutors often turn a blind eye to the practice.

Although the cockfighting ban passed in 2002 with 56 per cent of the vote 57 of the state’s 77 counties were in favor of keeping cockfighting legal.

# Nest rocks a mystery

By ALICE SUN

FROM stones to bones and other random objects, birds have been found to incubate seemingly anything that looks like an egg.

Last spring the internet went wild for a male bald eagle that incubated a rock.

The bird, named Murphy, is a permanent resident of a rehabilitation centre in Missouri.

Earlier in the year the raptor had raised eyebrows by building a nest on the ground of his outdoor enclosure but soon after that he did something even more surprising — he found a smooth beige-colored stone to sit on.

For the next three weeks Murphy became increasingly protective of his rock, aggressively defending it like a real egg until staff at the sanctuary swapped the stone with a rescued eaglet which Murphy promptly took under his wing.

Murphy's antics delighted his many online followers but his seemingly odd behavior was an example of a quirky phenomenon in the avian world.

Scientists have long documented gulls sitting on pebbles, geese cuddling golf balls and shorebirds tending to roundish bones — objects that experts refer to as pseudo-eggs.

But researchers have yet to reach a satisfying answer for why birds incubate objects that are not their own eggs.

The existence of pseudo-eggs was first documented in scientific literature in the early to mid-1900s.

Scientists kept finding items in nests that didn't belong, ranging from rocks and bones to eggs from other species.

The behavior was especially well-documented in ground-nesting birds.

Terns for instance sometimes had smooth stones in their nests on the beach.

Gulls were often seen with duck or pheasant eggs, large shells or pieces of driftwood.

Shorebirds and geese were observed rolling eggs and egg-like objects near or into their nests, an act researchers call egg retrieval.

During the past several decades scientists have come up with various theories to explain pseudo-eggs but most only address certain scenarios.

The incubation-stimulus hypothesis proposes that stones and other foreign objects may induce terns and gulls to incubate more



Bald eagle Murphy incubating a rock on the ground at the World Bird Sanctuary in Missouri.

attentively because researchers found that they had better hatching success with three eggs rather than two.

There's also the mistaken-food hypothesis, which posits that predatory birds like gulls confuse eggs of other species for their own after eating and regurgitating them near their nests.

Or it may be that some birds are just young and inexperienced, unsure what they are supposed to be incubating in the first place.

The theory that has garnered the most interest is the mistaken-egg hypothesis — perhaps birds just aren't that good at separating their own eggs from other similar eggs and objects.

It's the idea that birds don't have a perfectly dialed mechanism "to actually recognize the egg and distinguish the eggs from objects," said David Ocampo, an evolutionary biologist at Princeton University.

Research has shown that birds use certain cues to distinguish between eggs and other objects but it's unclear how foolproof their instincts are.

Mark Hauber, a professor at the City University of New York, studies why American robins, a frequent target of brood parasitism by brown-headed cowbirds, reject cowbird eggs but not their own.

He has found that robins can use visual indicators like color to tell if something is off.

Robin eggs are bright blue so anything that falls outside that color scheme is typically thrown out.

Hauber said birds will also reject eggs that are too small or large because small eggs might indicate that a chick might be too weak to survive.

Shape is a factor as well.

Robins tend to see flatter, more angular objects as not eggs according to a recent study by Hauber where he and colleagues 3D-printed eggs of various shapes and angles and put them in nests.

In other words when in doubt don't throw it out.

But the closer an object gets to resembling an egg of a certain species the harder it is for a bird to tell the difference.

The threshold where the bird ends up rejecting the egg is blurry said Hauber and often pseudo-eggs do look a lot like real eggs.

Ocampo cited nightjars with brownish acorns and terns with snail shells as two examples of objects that look deceptively similar to eggs.

As to why birds might opt to gather and incubate pseudo-eggs scientists think it could be related to how much energy gets in-

vested in those packets of life.

If birds are overly skeptical and reject objects too readily they might fail to raise a new generation of chicks.

"So if there's an egg-shaped object in a nest the rule of thumb should be to incubate it said Hauber.

"It's better safe than sorry," agrees Lillie Langlois, a biologist at Clemson University who stumbled across a long-billed Dowitcher nest full of large vertebrae in 2011.

She said hormones could push a bird to incubate any round object during the breeding season.

People underestimate how strong hormones are in those time periods she said.

For instance male pectoral sandpipers will rarely eat and sleep for three weeks during the breeding season Langlois said.

"All they care about is maintaining their territory and copulating with females," she said so it's likely that urge will translate to nesting.

Examples of pseudo-eggs seem to be endless and the list continues to grow — a common loon with two rocks in 2011, albatrosses with orbs of vegetation in 2015, a captive condor with a skull in 2020.

"We are still just reporting those cases without much insight into what is happening," said Ocampo.

"There's still a lot to learn about this natural and interesting and rare phenomenon in bird-life."

Ocampo cited nightjars with brownish acorns and terns with snail shells as two examples of objects that look deceptively similar to eggs.