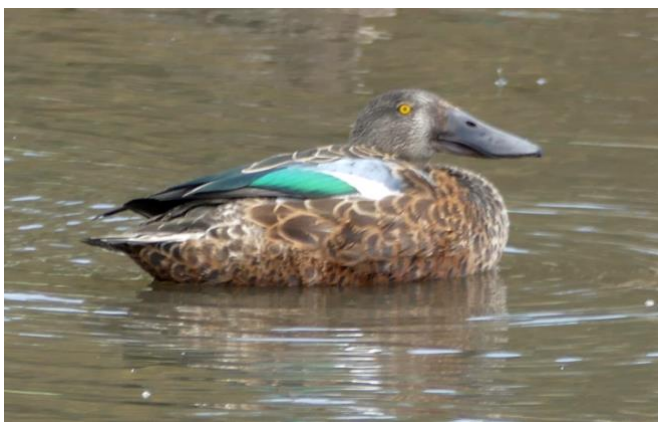


Dear Birdos4Eric,

Welcome to the last roundup. (Or perhaps the shootout at the OK Corral?) If you've been following along, you'll know that I came into December having seen 951 species, thus needing only 49 more to hit my target of 1,000 for the year. Piece of cake, right? Not if I stayed in California. So Susan and I got on a plane on December 2nd and headed for Australia. We planned to spend two weeks in Tasmania and then finish up our trip in Sydney, spending six days there. It shouldn't be too hard to pick up fifty species with this itinerary. But as Bob Lewis likes to point out, islands don't play by the same rules as other places, so amassing a long list in Tasmania might be tougher than one would expect. Tasmania is the state in Australia with the fewest number of species—305; Queensland by contrast has more than twice as many—661 (and the Australian Capital Territory, despite being 30 times smaller than Tasmania, has 286).

Our first stop in Tasmania was Gould's Lagoon Sanctuary, located 15 miles north of Hobart, Tasmania's capital. This small lake is rich in water birds, particularly ducks—Pacific Black Duck, Chestnut Teal, Gray Teal, Hardhead, Australasian Shoveler, and the Wood Duck (also known as the Maned Duck—it looks nothing like our North American Wood Duck). It's also got two rarities. The first is the Mallard (yes, it's a rarity here—but it's also considered a nuisance since it interbreeds with Pacific Black Ducks and the latter species is considered the worse for it). The second is the Freckled Duck, rare in mainland Australia and very unusual in Tasmania. We saw them all.



A somewhat familiar face—the Australian Shoveler



Wood (or Maned) Duck with chicks

We also saw our first endemic, the Tasmanian Native Hen, which looks like a big dull gray chicken, and is one of the easier endemics to see. (Tasmania has twelve endemic species and in my past trips I had seen eleven of them.) An equally large bird is the Australasian Swamphen, but it's much more colorful than the Tassie Native Hen and stands out more. The real find among the water birds was the Latham's Snipe. An eBird list from the previous week noted the presence of a pair of them, so I had a good look in the reeds at the water's edge, finally finding both. A life bird for me. But good things don't only come in the water. We also saw our first raptor of the trip, a Swamp Harrier, that made a pass over the lagoon, temporarily startling most of its residents. And we saw our first parrot of the trip, an Eastern Rosella, a blue and yellow bird with a bright red head and neck and a prominent white spot on its cheek. A bit garish.



Hen Party: The Tasmanian Native Hen & the Purple Swamphen

Latham's Snipe

That evening I visited Orielton Lagoon, which is much larger than Gould's. But whereas Gould's has wonderful access for birders, Orielton seems designed to keep you away from the water.

I began my visit from the top of a bluff, about 100 feet above the water. I spotted a flock of about 20 Musk Ducks. These are large, peculiar diving ducks—the males have a big dark lobe under their bills. When they do their mating display, they inflate this bag, cock their tails, and kick out jets of water on each side. (If you want to be amused, Google "Musk Duck mating display video"; watch the one from YouTube a year ago that's 46 seconds long.) We were lucky enough to see this once in southwest Australia. But today these ducks were floating serenely, mating apparently over. I noticed an equal number of smaller ducks near the Muskies, which proved to be Blue-billed Ducks, similar to our Ruddy Ducks. The difference in size between the two species of ducks was striking.

From the bluff I also spotted a Great Crested Grebe, a beautiful bird with a prominent crest, between the size of our Horned and Western Grebes. Overhead, I had a flock of a dozen or so Galahs, small pink and gray cockatoos. These birds are not native to Tasmania but once introduced here have spread rapidly so that many locals consider them to be pest birds. (In Aussie slang a "galah" is an idiot or a clown.) Hard to think that something as beautiful as a pink and gray cockatoo is a pest (though perhaps a clown?)



Galah

Our birding pals Tony and Nancy joined us for a long weekend and we embarked upon the first of two local birding trips, this one to visit Bruny Island (Tasmania is Australia's pet island and Bruny is

Tasmania's pet—it's also the best place in Tassie to see endemic birds.) We caught the ferry and headed towards The Neck Rookery. As its name suggests, "The Neck" is the causeway that connects the two halves of the island, North and South Bruny. It's a rookery for various seabirds but particularly the Little Penguin. No luck with the penguins this day, however. Since it was already mid-morning, they had left their burrows and were out to sea fishing; they wouldn't be back until at least 9 PM when it began to grow dark. We did get a good look, though, at our first Superb Fairywrens of this trip (more about this species later.)

The weather got progressively worse. It had begun to drizzle, but we did a short walk at The Neck Campground where a few species were about, including a Black-faced Cuckooshrike and a pair of what became a signature bird of the Tasmania trip, the Gray Fantail. This species is one of those birds that seems to enjoy showing off for humans—this pair flitted about over our heads, coming closer and closer to us. As we were turning to leave, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a bird flying away from us. At first I thought it was some sort of falcon—it was the same size as a Peregrine. But it landed not far away and we quickly got our bins on it—a Yellow Wattlebird. This bird is another Tasmanian endemic—and one of the more unusual ones. These birds are large nectar-eating Honeyeaters that have long pendant wattles of skin hanging from their ears. The Yellow Wattlebird sets the record for wattle length.

Our next stop was Adventure Bay (it sounds like a fun park but it is named after one of Captain James Cook's ships.) It's an excellent place to see honeyeaters. At a pullout overlooking the ocean we saw two species—the New Holland and the Yellow-throated, the latter being our third endemic of the day (we had seen lots of Native Hens). By the time we got into the little village at Adventure Bay, the rain was coming down harder. We picked up lots more New Holland Honeyeaters but then had to stand under an overhang at the local lawn bowls club so that we didn't get soaked (Susan and I had brought raincoats, but, having come from Adelaide where heat records were being broken, Tony and Nancy had lighter clothes on.) While waiting for the rain to subside, we watched a Flame Robin using a nearby post as a vantage point to swoop down on insects on the wet lawn.



Gray Fantail fanning



Yellow Wattlebird



New Holland Honeyeater

An hour or so later we were on the other side of the island, having stopped for lunch at a winery (I should have a year where I try to taste 1,000 Tasmanian wines—heaven!). From our seats under the awning on their deck, we saw our first Laughing Kookaburra of the trip. It always makes me smile to see this iconic bird. Afterwards we visited the small pond near the

parking lot. Some interesting ducks, but the best water bird there was an Australasian Grebe, a beautiful small grebe, even smaller than our Pied-billed. And while we were watching the grebe, we noticed another Flame Robin flitting about a nearby farm building. But a closer look revealed it to be a different red-colored robin—the Scarlet Robin. Tony gave me a look because he knew I had been counting that day. “Is that it?” he asked. “Yup. My 1,000th bird.” I expected the heavens might open and I’d hear some celestial music, but instead the heavens opened, the rain came down, and we hurried to the car.

A lot of people I know (including Tony and Nancy and Bob and Hanno Lewis) have done organized tours of Tasmania with Tonia Cochran and have stayed at the Inala reserve, her place on Bruny Island. Since Inala advertises that all twelve endemics can be found on its grounds, we decided to visit the garden which is open to the public for a nominal fee. But when we got there it was raining harder than ever. I got out of the car to read the large interpretive boards about the Forty-Spotted Pardalote, Tasmania’s rarest endemic. When I realized no one else was even going to get out of the car, I got back in, and we headed to the ferry. Along the way, Nancy and I got a quick look at our fourth endemic, a Black Currawong, while Tony stopped at an ancient refrigerator by the side of the road to buy a loaf of sourdough.



Tony and the Bread-o-matic

That evening, I began to give a little bit of serious thought to seeing the twelve Tasmanian endemics on this trip. (I think my success with the endemics in Madagascar had gone to my head.) While ebird lists 257 species of birds for Madagascar (of which almost half are endemic), Tasmania has 307 species of which only about 4% are endemic. But given Tasmania’s smaller size (Madagascar is nine times larger), it’s not unrealistic to see all twelve endemics in a two-week trip—especially since I had

a day coming up where I would go out with a guide. Totaling up what I'd already seen, I realized I had a third of the endemics already. Four down and eight to go.

But first, I had another day of birding with my own Tasmanian coterie—Susan, Tony, and Nancy. We set out the next morning for Inverawe Garden, a native garden begun by Margaret and Bill Chestnut in 2001. Since we started coming to Tasmania shortly after the garden began, we've visited on each subsequent trip and watched the garden fill out and expand. On past visits, I had seen eight of the twelve endemics here, so despite another day of drizzly weather, I had hopes for the birds.

The weather remained uncooperative—we managed to get in a picnic lunch on one of the terraces but the drizzle kept coming and gradually increased. We saw over twenty species but few of them were new—most of them were familiar ones, including only two endemics, the Yellow Wattlebird and the Tasmanian Nativehen. I got excited when I found a pardelote down in the flat section at the bottom of the property (near where I had seen Forty-spotted on my first visit to Inverawe) but it proved to be a regular Spotted—a more beautiful bird than the Forty-spotted but also a more common and widespread one.

The next day Tony and Nancy were heading home, so we took the morning off from birding and visited a couple of wineries before dropping them at the airport. Tasmania isn't just all about birds, you know.

Six months before setting off for Tasmania I had arranged to spend my last day in Hobart with a professional bird guide. When I was birding in the Sierra Foothills in May, our guide had been Joan Parker, who introduced me by email to Denis Abbott, a Tasmanian local who was retired but still did some occasional guiding. Denis and I had been in touch about where to go for the day. Despite the current rain, the area around Hobart had been affected that spring by a local drought. Denis thought Bruny Island was the most promising spot near Hobart, so off to Bruny (again). I didn't mind—Bruny is about the best spot in Tassie for birds.

When we got off the ferry at Bruny, we pulled over to let the other cars go by (too many tourists are in a hurry on Bruny.) While they left, we got out and had a look around. It was an auspicious beginning—the first bird we saw was a White-bellied Sea Eagle, followed by two endemics, a Yellow Wattlebird and a new endemic, the Black-headed Honeyeater. Five down and seven to go.

Our next stop was back near The Neck again. This time the weather was drier and we got out and walked for a couple of miles, seeing some wonderfully diverse birds: Fan-tailed Cuckoo, Satin Flycatcher, Gray Shrikethrush, and Olive Whistler. After that—you guessed it!—Adventure Bay. (One thing I learned from Denis was that I actually know my way around Bruny Island pretty well.) We saw lots of honeyeaters, mostly New Holland but also a few more endemic Yellow-throated and Black-headed. Denis heard a Shining Bronze Cuckoo calling, and when he played a recording, it responded by coming closer. When we sat down to eat our sandwiches a few moments later, it landed in a nearby small tree and serenaded us as we ate.

Denis knew a spot on the beach where he thought we might see breeding Hooded Plovers, a species that's fairly rare in Tasmania. When we walked down to look for them, I noticed a Sooty Oystercatcher on a nest in the sand. Nearby was a Hooded Plover but it wasn't on a nest; rather, it was moving quickly, and wouldn't settle long enough for a good photo.

Next up was a spot that we hadn't bothered with on my earlier visit because of the rain, but one that's interesting because of its ecosystem—wet rainforest. Only about three miles from the coast at Adventure Bay, the Mavista track feels like a different world with its old growth trees and lush tree fern understory. Unfortunately, it was now after noon and very quiet. Denis had hoped to find me a Tasmanian Scrubwren (the only endemic I hadn't ever seen), but they were being silent despite his attempts to lure one out. What we did get, however, was an excellent look at a Tasmanian Thornbill, and Denis told me how best to distinguish it in the field from the similar Brown Thornbill (the Tassie has a throat more mottled than streaked and shows a white flank, as opposed to a buff flank.) That thornbill meant I was halfway to seeing all the endemics.

That may have been the only bird we got on the track, but when we got back to the parking lot, the Black Currawong made an appearance and was joined by a pair of Eastern Spinebills.



Sooty Oystercatcher on nest



Hooded Plover



Bruny Island wet forest

We headed back toward the ferry, seeing a pair of Brown Falcons on the way, and decided to end the day at McCracken's Gully, a hotspot where a young birder we met earlier in the day said he'd had very good luck, getting more than thirty species, including Swift and Blue-wing Parrots and the rare Forty-spotted Pardelote. What we hadn't expected, though, was the "No Trespassing" sign posted conspicuously on the locked gate. But Denis regards birding hotspots as places from which you couldn't (or shouldn't) be excluded. We squeezed through the fence and started climbing a steep hill. It was midafternoon, the first warm afternoon I'd had since coming to Tasmania. The time of day and the relative warmth didn't seem auspicious. I spotted a Gray Butcherbird in the distance, however. Things were looking up. Butcherbirds resemble our shrikes—they impale insects on sticks for easier consumption. But they also have beautiful songs, and, like Australian Magpies, they can become aggressive during breeding season and are known for their attacks on humans.

A few moments later, Denis got excited—overhead he had heard the shriek of a Swift Parrot, one of only three migratory parrots on the planet. These parrots winter in southern Victoria, cross the Bass Strait that separates Tasmania from the mainland, and breed on Tasmania. But since the introduction of Sugar Gliders (small, charismatic flying possums) to Tasmania, their numbers have declined significantly—not only do Sugar Gliders favor the same old-growth Blue Gums and Black Gums that the parrots like for food and nesting, but they also favor the parrots themselves, often eating the eggs, the chicks, and even the nesting females themselves. But there are no Sugar Gliders on Bruny, making it one of the best places to see Swifties.

The parrots played a bit of hide-and-seek with us, but we eventually got good looks at them. I could tell that Denis was particularly pleased at having seen them—they are a favorite of his—and we headed back down the hill toward the car, with me stopping at each stand of White Gums to look for the Forty-spotted Pardelote. “Isn’t that one?” I called to Denis who was ahead of me. As he stopped to look, I picked out two more. “Yes, indeed,” he replied. I think he was dumbfounded that I had picked out these tiny birds near the crown of a large White Gum. He shouldn’t have been. He himself had told me which trees to look in—and, after all, as a graduate of the joint GGAS/California Academy of Sciences Master Birder Program, I *am* a trained observer. The pardelote made it seven down and five to go.

Heading back to the mainland, we joined a long line of cars; we missed the 5 PM ferry and had to wait 30 minutes for the next one. But remember that auspicious White-bellied Sea Eagle we had seen when we first arrived? It was joined by another, and Denis and I happily watched the pair of them flying together, circling higher and higher overhead, until, finally, they disappeared.

* * *

If you are going to Tasmania, you need to visit Cradle Mountain National Park. It’s one of the best places in all of Australia to see native wildlife, and it’s a particularly good place for hoppers—Tasmanian Pademelon (think miniature kangaroo) and Red-necked Wallaby (a slightly larger version of the pademelon) are common here and easy to see. As is what might be Cradle Mountain’s most endearing mammal—the Common Wombat. Two of Australia’s weirdest animals—both monotremes (if you don’t know what a monotreme is, you should look this one up)—are found at Cradle Mountain. The Short-beaked Echidna (sometimes called the Spiny Anteater) is relatively easy to see—we saw several on this visit. The Platypus (or Duck-billed Platypus, a semi-aquatic egg-laying mammal) is not so easily seen. Although in past visits we sometimes saw it swimming in the pond by the lodge, we didn’t spot it this time.

Cradle Mountain is also home to a couple of Australia’s elusive carnivores: the quoll (two species occur here, the Eastern and the Tiger) and the Tasmanian Devil. In the past we have seen both Eastern Quolls and Tasmanian Devils in the park, but on this trip we saw neither. One of the reasons for missing the devil is its population decline in this area (Devil Facial Tumor Disease has affected the animals on two-thirds of the island—it reached Cradle Mountain a couple of years ago, and the population here, as elsewhere crashed. There’s a reserve just outside the park, however, where you can still see devils—the evening feeding is a sight to behold.)



Common Wombat



Short-beaked Echidna



Tasmanian Devil (from an earlier trip)

Once again I've nattered on for two paragraphs without mentioning birds. So let me get to them. Like Bruny Island and Inverawe Garden, Cradle Mountain is one of the top places to go for the endemics. I would say it's the best place to go to see the Black Currawong. There are three species of currawongs in Australia, with two of them, the Gray and the Black, found on Tasmania. What makes this interesting is that, despite its name, there is a subspecies of the Gray Currawong (the "clinking" form) that isn't gray as all but looks a lot like the endemic Black Currawong. Both have white wing patches and white in the tail but the Gray Currawong also has a white vent. On one 5 km walk, Susan and I saw over a dozen Black Currawongs. They aren't shy around people—one sat on the railing next to us as we ate our lunch one day, while another hopped up onto the porch of our room, then jumped onto the window ledge, looking in at us. It remained in place when we walked up to the window to snap its picture, leaving only when it realized it wouldn't be getting a handout.

Although the lodge at Cradle Mountain is only at 2,700 feet in elevation (and the mountain itself is just over 5,000 feet), it's an alpine environment and some of the birds you encounter there are quite unexpected. One of the most beautiful is a favorite of Susan's, the Pink Robin. I saw this little gem on my first evening there, and Susan was envious when I reported back to her about it. But we picked it up on a walk two evenings later and she got great looks herself. Outside the lodge I also saw a pair of Yellow-Rumped Thornbills, a little bit out of their normal range here but a welcome sight since the species was a life bird for me. There was also a nice assortment of honeyeaters: Yellow-throated, Crescent, Eastern Spinebill, and Yellow Wattlebird.

Perhaps most unexpected in the alpine environment are the parrots—on my second visit to the "Enchanted Stroll" walk (where I had seen the Pink Robin), I saw three pairs of Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos settling down to roost for the night (Susan was envious once more, but we saw these birds again the next day.) Even better from my point of view was the morning we saw a pair of Green Rosellas feeding quietly by the side of the road on the grounds of the lodge. These birds are actually predominantly yellow with red and blue highlights on their faces (their backs *are* a dull green color but it's not the color that you usually notice first!) If a car hadn't driven within two feet of them, I would have gotten a photo to prove my point about the color. And these birds are endemics. Number eight.



Pink Robin



Tasmanian Pademelon with a joey

But for me the highlight of this trip to Cradle Mountain was my opportunity to sort out what I call the “little endemics”—the Scrubtit, the Tasmanian Thornbill, and the Tasmanian Scrubwren, the endemic I was missing. (Although the Forty-spotted Pardalote is a bird roughly the size of the other three, I put it in a category by itself—the hardest-to-see endemic because of its very restricted range and the fact that it feeds high in the tops of White Gum trees.) I’d already seen the Thornbill when I visited Bruny the second time with Denis. But the other two were a problem. They are both small squeaky birds that look a lot alike and favor the same habitats.

Twice in the evening (8 PM in December, the late Tassie spring!) I walked the short “Enchanted Stroll” track along the Pencil Pine River. Both times I played a brief recording of these two birds. Both times I nearly got bonked in the head by them. But they flitted about so much that it was difficult to get the binoculars—let alone the camera—on them. Same thing happened during the drizzly morning when Susan and I got very close to a pair of birds on the King Billy Track (a walk named for a type of pine tree not unlike our redwoods and sequoias, and up to 1,500 years old).

It wasn’t until I actually downloaded my photos to my laptop that I sorted the two birds, realizing that, among other things, both of these birds were actually pretty common at Cradle Mountain, and I had seen them both. After looking at my photos, I was able to easily recognize them in the field (another lesson about the vagaries of field guides—I had two with me, but the illustrations in both weren’t particularly helpful; on the other hand, the photos I found on eBird aligned very nicely with my own images.) Nine and ten down; two to go.



Tasmania Thornbill



Tasmanian Scrubwren



Scrubtit

* * *

Tasmania is familiar to us—this was our fourth visit—and we’ve got some favorite places there. The Tamar Island Wetlands Center is one of these places. It’s smack in the middle of the River Tamar—a series of small reed islands connected by boardwalks, ending at an island with a small hillock that’s crowned with old imported trees. It’s a great place for ducks, egrets, coots, and gulls, but strangely enough it never seems to have shorebirds despite an abundance of mud at low tide. (The exception to this rule is the Masked Lapwing, a bird that seems to be omnipresent on Tasmania.) This day we did indeed see lots of ducks—particularly Gray and Chestnut Teal—and all three types of Tasmanian gulls, the Silver, the Kelp, and the Pacific. And it was a great day for Black Swans—my conservative count for eBird was 60 birds.



Black Swans on the Tamar Estuary

But the stars of the afternoon were the Superb Fairywrens. We got out to the island in the middle of the estuary late in the day, and all of the fairywrens had come out to play. I recorded 20 for the walk (though that number, too, was conservative.) Not only did we see a few of the brightly colored males, but we also saw some fledglings huddled with a parent bird. If Susan had to pick a favorite Australian bird, it would probably be a tossup between the Pink Robin and this little delight.



Male Superb Fairywren



Female Superb Fairywren



Fairywren fledglings keeping warm

On our previous trip to Tasmania we visited a National Park that was new to us, Narawntapu. There’s a great walk there called the Springlawn Nature Walk that we wanted to revisit. When we arrived, we were dismayed to learn that this part of Tasmania had been experiencing a drought for some time, and the spring lawn looked like an end-of-summer lawn.

According to eBird, however, some interesting species had been seen there recently, so we set off, looking for the Pallid Cuckoo and the White-fronted Chat. We didn't pick up either of these species, though I did get two year birds, the Australasian Pipit and the Black-fronted Dotterel (the ranger told me where to find this latter bird—it blended into its environment beautifully, and without the tip, I'm sure I would have missed it.) But the best sightings on this walk (as had been true on our first visit), were the Eastern Gray Kangaroos. These are large Kangaroos—unlike some of the puny macropods we had been seeing elsewhere in Tasmania, these are the creatures most Americans think about when they imagine “kangaroo.” I gave up counting when I hit fifty of them.



Eastern Gray Kangaroos on the move at Narawntapu on the dry “Springlawn”

Occasionally in the evening on the trip I would dip into eBird for a little light reading. I'd look for sightings of the target species left for me to see, but I'd also check to see if anybody had seen anything unusual in my vicinity. I was surprised, then, one evening to find that somebody was reporting Royal Spoonbills only a few miles from where we were staying in Launceston. This is a species that I associate with Northern Australia and the tropics—the only time I'd seen them had been in Kakadu National Park more than twenty years ago. The location turned out to be a small lake mostly surrounded by private property, but it had one little park at the end where you could view the lake and the island at its center. There were lots of species of ducks here—including the rare Freckled Duck that I mentioned earlier. But the spoonbills were there, too, and were apparently nesting on the island in the lake. With their long, flattened spoon bills and their white Rod Stewart hairdos, they are pretty weird-looking birds! I love 'em.

Equally unusual was the sight of a pair of Rainbow Lorikeets in a nearby flowering gum. These birds are common on the Australian mainland but have only just arrived in Tasmania. In some places (especially places where they did not occur historically) they are considered a

nuisance species, but these colorful birds are hard not to like. With them in the gum tree vying for the flowers were a pair of Little Wattlebirds. Occasionally one of the birds would get into it with another, but mostly they seemed to agree that there was enough food for everyone.



Royal Spoonbill



Rainbow Lorikeet



Little Wattlebird

Later that same afternoon I visited a park even closer to where we were staying, Cataract Gorge, where the South Esk River plunges down into the Tamar River at the site of a Victorian public park. This was another place we had discovered on our previous visit where we had seen some of the endemics. Because our days were growing fewer and I was still missing a couple endemics, I decided to go take a hike. Within the first few minutes of my arrival I spotted a Beautiful Firetail. This small finch—a life bird for me—has a restricted range in Southeastern Australia and Tasmania. Although it had appeared on a few recent eBird lists, I had just about given up on seeing it. By the time I registered that this was the firetail, it was gone—no photo.

Next I searched for another colorful species, but a much larger one, Indian Peafowl. I had read about a population that was thriving in Cataract Gorge. They weren't hard to find—I just followed their loud screeching calls across the river. (They weren't the only loud birds at the park that day, however; on my way to see the peafowl I was overwhelmed by a family of five Laughing Kookaburras calling back and forth to one another—or perhaps they were just joking around.) I found over a dozen adult peafowl, and two of the hens had chicks. As I added this bird to my list, I realized that, with these and the firetail, I was getting close to 100 species for Tasmania—a pretty good number for my visit. (I found it ironic, therefore, that an eBird reviewer stripped me of the peafowl, claiming these were descendants of domestic stock and therefore should only be noted as such and not treated as a viable species. I also saw these birds back in July in Orange County; even though that population is no doubt also descended from domesticated birds, they have species status in California. Go figure.)



Pair of Laughing Kookaburras



Male Peafowl (yes, a peacock!) putting on a show

I might have been drawing close to 100 species for Tasmania but worrying for me was the fact that I still hadn't gotten all twelve endemics. From eBird I learned that the missing two—the Strong-billed Honeyeater and the Dusky Robin—had been seen at a couple of places about an hour away from us. One guy in particular, Ramit Singal, seemed to have good luck with these two species.

So our last day in Tasmania we were up at dawn, heading to Warrawee Forest Reserve, where we were so early that we were the only people there. We set off on a side track running parallel to the main road, following the bank of the Warrawee River, because I had read that the Warrawee was a good place to see a platypus. Like the echidna, the platypus is a monotreme (have you looked that up yet?) And sure enough, within minutes I spotted one frolicking in the river below. We got a great look at this most curious creature. (In 1798 the second governor of New South Wales, Captain John Hunter, sent a stuffed platypus to his pal, the British naturalist George Shaw, in London. Shaw originally thought it was a hoax and purportedly spent a lot of time examining the creature for the stitches that he believed held the disparate parts together.)



Duck-billed Platypus

But no sign of either the honeyeater or the robin. Then I spotted something else of interest—two people walking on the main road through the forest. She was leading a huge dog and he was carrying some very sophisticated-looking sound equipment. I had a suspicion about this

fellow. I walked up to him and asked, “Are you Ramit Singal?” He said that he was and wanted to know how I knew his name. “I’ve been stalking you on eBird,” I replied. I was impressed that he seemed unfazed by this, and a lovely conversation ensued. He told me that I should be able to see both birds a few hundred yards down the road I was on. He said he was sorry that he couldn’t take me there himself now but that he was running late, but that he’d be glad to meet me at Warrawee the following morning. I explained that I would be catching a plane to Sydney then but thanked him for his kind offer. He added that if I missed the birds at Warrawee, I should try the Tasmanian Arboretum which was only about twenty minutes away from Warrawee. I said that because of my eBird stalking, it was the other place on my radar.

Well, we didn’t find either bird at Warrawee, but I think that in looking up high in old growth eucalypts for Strong-billed Honeyeaters, I might have set the record for number of Yellow-throated Honeyeaters seen—eight of them—and I also saw a couple of Black-headed Honeyeaters, thus two of the three endemic honeyeaters, but not the one I needed.

Although the Tasmanian Arboretum features trees from around the world, it has a particularly rich native garden. Ramit had given us very specific instructions that we should skip everything else (including the Platypus pond—not too tough in this instance since we had just seen the one at Warrawee), and go directly to the Tasmanian wet forest section where we were to sit on the first bench we came to. We followed his directions and within a minute of sitting on the bench, I said to Susan, “There’s the robin!” Sure enough, the dumpy little brown bird we sought was sitting on the end of a low-hanging branch about 25 feet in front of us. We both got our binoculars on it, but in the excitement of actually seeing it, I didn’t manage a photo. Within about a minute, I noticed movement about fifteen feet off to my left, and I turned to see a Strong-billed Honeyeater with a mouth full of fluff for nestbuilding. But it was gone in a shot, so no photo on that one, either. Still, it was remarkable seeing the two remaining endemics within seconds of one another. I left Tasmania the next morning very satisfied.

* * *

Susan and I planned to spend our last few days in Australia in Sydney, staying at the home of our friend Lindsay Hardingham. When Lindsay picked us up at the airport, we were shocked to see that the wildfires hadn’t abated; in fact, they’d grown much worse. There were dozens of them out of control to the north and west of the city, and the air quality was much like that in the Bay Area last year when the Paradise Fire and all of the others were burning out of control.

Lindsay was going to see her sister Lois the next day in New Zealand and seemed glad to be getting out of it. Susan and I did what we always do when we arrive in Sydney—we headed for the Sydney Botanical Gardens to look for the Powerful Owl. But, alas, this was probably the most unproductive trip we’ve ever made to the garden. Needless to say, no Powerful Owl, but not much else, either. Only twelve species for the day, including a record number of Australian Ibises (which many Aussies hold in even lower regard than feral pigeons). We did get a nesting pair of Kookaburras, but the bird of the day was actually a lizard—or to be accurate, I should say an Eastern Water Dragon, the males of which can grow to be three feet long. We saw a couple of these beauties that can change their skin color as camouflage. They are normally very

shy in the wild but at the Botanical Garden, they have become habituated to humans and you'll be surprised how close you can get.



Eastern Water Dragon in two color phases—an expert at camouflage!

For several days afterwards we hunkered down at Lindsay's house, poor air quality and extremely high temperatures forcing us to shelter in place (one day my weather app showed that it was 112° in Sydney, but that it "feels like 104°." "What a deal!" I thought. I had plans to visit Ku-ring-gai Chase, a national park I had never been to, but these plans were abandoned when the National Park Service announced that every national park in the state of New South Wales was "closed until further notice due to catastrophic fire danger."

By my last day in Sydney I was going stir crazy indoors, so decided I should get up early and visit Centennial Park, one of the birdier spots in central Sydney. It was a good decision. Centennial Park is a particularly good place for waterfowl and the morning did not disappoint. Lots of ducks, swans, grebes, egrets, coots, ibises, cormorants, many of which had fledglings, including some year birds, Australasian Darters (think Anhinga) that were feeding their young (which appeared to be bigger than the parents.) And more Royal Spoonbills!



Australian Pelicans



Beak of the Month: Spoonbill or Ibis?

But there were some pretty good non-water birds, too. Not only did I see Sulphur-crested Cockatoos and Rainbow Lorikeets, but I also got two kinds of corellas—the Little and the Long-billed—both year birds. Other year birds included Crested Pigeons, a small colony of Fairy Martins, and an Australasian Figbird, a stocky oriole with an olive green back, black head, and bright red skin around the eye.



Sulphur-crested Cockatoo



Long-billed Corella



Crested Pigeon

* * *

I got home to Berkeley two days before Christmas. I thought about doing some more birding at home, but just couldn't manage to shoe-horn it in. I arrived in San Clemente three days before New Year's, hoping to at least go look for the California Gnatcatcher or one of those exotic parrots that seem to hang around an eBird hotspot called the "Parrot Roost" a few miles from Disneyland. (One of the things I really took to heart this year was Eddie Bartley's exhortation that if I really was going to see 1,000 birds this year, I should make a goal of getting 300 in California; it was great advice—before this year began I'd seen only 257 life birds in California. My life count now stands at 323 birds, thanks to the 310 I saw in California this year—including 64 life birds.) But I wasn't to get out birding again this year, parrots or no parrots

So just how *did* the last month shape up? And the year as a whole? Remarkable. As I mentioned earlier, I did very well in Tasmania, getting 101 species and all twelve endemic birds. And, despite the horrendous bushfires, I added another 15 species in Sydney, making it 116 year birds in December. And my total for the year? 1,057 species, including 317 life birds.

So who won December's contest: how many birds would I finish with for the year? It was an exciting competition and the three finalists were within 10 species of one another. In third place was Justin Faggioli with a guess of 1,100 (thanks for the optimism, Justin!)—off by 43. In second place was Dawn Lemoine, with a guess of 1017, off by 40. And the winner...drumroll, please...is Josh Kemp, with a guess of 1023—only 34 birds off! Each of them will receive a free copy of my next bird book—it should be coming to one of your favorite bookstores in the next five years.

Bird of the Month. Another tough choice, especially considering the fact that I'm a sucker for parrots of all sorts, and I saw lots of 'em in Australia. But if you were to ask Susan, she'd tell you that it was no contest. So I'm picking one of her all-time favorite birds, the Black Currawong. If you've been paying attention this month, you'll know that the Black Currawong is one of the

Tasmanian endemics. It's a corvid (related to crow and ravens) and has a beak like a butcherbird (like butcherbirds, it's known to use its beak to impale prey—one was actually observed impaling a dead rabbit so as to facilitate tearing the bunny apart). It's also a big sucker as my pal Tony would say—about 20 inches in length. And omnivorous. They will eat berries, all sorts of insects (including wasps), lizards and small birds. A Black Currawong that was being harassed by three Scarlet Robins (my 1,000th bird!) was seen to turn and eat one of them. And, as Susan and I have observed, it's not impervious to the temptations of a French fry. They are gregarious birds and can be quite comfortable around humans—just ask that one that flew up to our window at Cradle Mountain and seemed to want to come indoors, sit around the warm fire, and perhaps have us fix it something to eat.



Black Currawong at our window



Are you ready for your closeup?

Some final words. I'd like to end this last issue of my big year newsletter with some thank you's. First, thank you to my remarkable readers. I never imagined at the outset what I was going to afflict you with. That first January newsletter was three pages. And that's how I imagined the rest of them would be. But they got out of hand pretty quickly, culminating with that October monster—25 pages! I'm grateful and humbled that you have stayed with me for the journey (well, some of you, at least). Back in the spring Jack Dumbacher said that to him it appeared I was writing a book (Thank you, Jack, for the encouragement!) Well, at this point it certainly feels like that's what I've done. It's been a pleasure to write; I just hope that for you it's been a pleasure to read. Thanks for taking this journey with me.

Thank you to December donors Jared Hayes and Bob and Hanno Lewis (second time this year for these two!) And a big thank you to John Palo and Heidi Rackley for their extreme munificence (this was actually a November donation but somehow the thermometer on my big year page missed them—sorry for that.) Thank you to everyone who made a donation to the Golden Gate Audubon Society on my behalf this year. And thank you to those who pledged per bird—your bill is in the mail. Since GGAS was my inspiration for doing this crazy undertaking in the first place, I'm pleased to support the good work they do (I should probably say "we do" at this point since I'm currently holding down two of the four officer positions for the organization). My goal was to raise \$5,000 for GGAS, and when the last per-bird pledges are paid, the total donated will exceed \$6,000. I'd

like to particularly thank Bruce Mast and Pat Kirkpatrick, who each pledged a buck a bird—you are both so generous. I'm sure you didn't expect me to run up your tab as much as I did. And for those of you who feel guilty about not having donated, it's still not too late—just paste this URL into your browser and then dig deep!

<https://goldengateaudubon.z2systems.com/np/clients/goldengateaudubon/campaign.jsp?campaign=449&>

Thank you to my friends and mentors in the birding world who helped me with this big year. On my organized bird tours I had some wonderful guides: Eddie Bartley and Noreen Weeden in the California Deserts, South Texas, and the Sierra (along with Bob Lewis in the mountains); Juan-Carlos Solis in Baja California; Bruce Mast and Dave Quady in Northeastern California, looking for the elusive Sage Grouse; Miya Lucas and Wendy Beers at the GGAS Birdathon trip to Garin Regional Park in search of the Grasshopper Sparrow; Mark Pretti in Southeast Arizona; Joan Parker in the Southern Sierra; Marie Kennedy and Ray Belding at Sharon Audubon in Connecticut; Alvaro Jaramillo on two pelagic trips off the California coast; Dominic Rollinson with Birding Ecotours in Namibia and Botswana; Jason Boyce and Harry Rakotosalama with Birding Ecotours in Madagascar; Denis Abbott on Bruny Island in Tasmania.

Thanks, too, to some special birding pals. On my trip to the east coast, I went birding with old UC Davis friends John Currie and Jared Haynes. In Mexico I was joined by my oldest pals, Bob and Margie Gomez. Mari and Michael Havens took me and Susan to see the Heron rookery in Napa, a very special afternoon. Mike Scott and Vicki Piovio joined me on the trip to Yosemite to look for the Great Gray Owl (or Ghost, as it's rightfully called). And thanks to my local birding buddies, Clay Anderson, Pat Kirkpatrick, Sandy Steinman, and, in particular, Dawn Lemoine, who's always up for an outing. Finally thank you to two couples who I was able to spend a lot of time with this year—my Aussie pals Tony Read and Nancy Bombardieri and my Berkeley pals Bob & Hanno Lewis—you guys are the best! Power couples of the birding world.

Once again I want to thank a remarkable trio of teachers—Jack Dumbacher, Eddie Bartley, and Bob Lewis—for their extraordinary efforts in teaching the year-long Master Birder Program that's sponsored jointly by GGAS and the California Academy of Sciences. I'm reminded of some of those Disneyland rides that seem so great when you are a small child: ones that if you don't measure up to the posted height limit, however, you aren't allowed to ride. Well, truthfully, I was an inch or three under the minimum, but these guys let me ride anyway. I spent a year hanging on for dear life, but it's proven to be one of the best rides of my life.

Lastly, thank you so much to the person who made it all possible, who put up with my absences and obsessions—my editor, my friend, my wife, Susan. You are an extraordinary partner. And not a bad birder, either.