



The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)

(Founding in 1940 as the Parrot & African Lovebird Society of Australia)

Notes on a Field Trip to Barren Ground Nature Reserve

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By Graeme Phipps

During April 1974, Colin Percival and I went on a weekend trip arranged by the NSW Field Ornithologists Club, which has invited members of the Society to attend any of the many field trips they arrange. We left Sydney in really beautiful autumn weather and after two and a half hours steady driving we arrived at [Barren Grounds Nature Reserve](#). The Nature Reserve is a sandstone plateau 600m above sea level and covers an area of roughly 2000 hectares. It is almost a "lost world" - being completely surrounded by sheer cliffs which drop to farmland or rainforests below. The weather at Barren Grounds is unpredictable and after the pleasant conditions of the trip down, it was surprising to find the whole plateau shrouded in swirling mists with drizzle, which developed into showers. Throughout the entire day these miserable overcast conditions prevailed.



GROUND PARROT *Pezoporus wallicus*
Drawn by Peter Slater, from "Birds of Australia"
by J. D. Macdonald, Publ. A. W. & A. H. Reed

The ornithologists were not perturbed and some twenty people armed with rainproof clothing and binoculars set off across the moors after the birds which make Barren Grounds famous - [Ground Parrots *Pezoporus wallicus*](#), [Eastern Bristlebirds *Dasyornis brachypterus*](#), and [Beautiful Firetail Finches *Emblema bellus*](#)¹.

Eventually everyone tired of fighting through damp heathland and an old timber getter's track was followed. Surprisingly, in the old days red cedar felled in the rainforests below was hauled up the perpendicular cliff face and drawn by bullocks across the moors. Due to the weather conditions visibility was at times reduced to 50m or so, which made binoculars all but useless.

At approximately 11:00am someone sighted three Bristlebirds near the track. These rather drab little warblers were an overall grey with a noticeable rufous rump and far from frightened of the party, they stayed for some time allowing everyone to observe them. Shortly after this almost everyone decided to walk back to camp; however, the indefatigable Jim Francis set off into the moors again, reasoning that unlike Warblers, the Ground Parrot would not be found next to any track. Colin and I, having come to see Ground Parrots, went with him.

The vegetation was up to about a metre or two high and consisted of a prostrate species of [Banksia *Banksia paludosa*](#), many thick ferns and sedges forming a continuous and tangled ground cover interspersed with clumps of [Ti-tree *Leptospermum rotundifolium*](#), and many wildflowers. Shortly before noon Jim sighted a ground parrot and we spread out and flushed it a number of times getting a very good look at it.

The ground parrot is about 30cm, about the size of [Crimson Rosella](#); very stocky in build, and with colouration reminiscent of wild green [Budgerigars](#) being green with barring. We didn't see the red bar on the forehead so prominent in paintings and photographs of the bird. Contrary to some authors, the flight of a Ground Parrot is like a Ground Parrot and quite unlike a pheasant or quail. The parrot does not "explode" out of the heath, but takes off rapidly, flies rather clumsily some 2m above ground level and then glides down into cover at a shallow angle. The parrots were very easy to flush, since because of the wet conditions they tended not to drop into the heath and then run away under cover, but to remain very much at the place where they dropped.

It being lunchtime we returned to camp and on the way saw a party of Beautiful Firetail Finches, among other species of Robins and Flycatchers. The Firetails were feeding on low grasses growing on the track and allowed the approach of us up to about 5m. The red firetail was very noticeable, as was the black eye streak. The overall colour of the bird is grey with fine black barring. The Beautiful Firetail is not really beautiful when compared with other finches, or indeed, with others in the same genus as both the [Emblema picta](#) and the Diamond Firetail [Emblema guttata](#)² are far more beautiful than this bird which could more accurately be described as attractive in a subdued way. Both of us were rather surprised that we should see the three species of bird which we wanted to observe within the space of only an hour or so.

Shortly after lunch the weather cleared slightly and four Ground Parrots were sighted on an area almost right next to the camp site. These appeared to be two pairs with a definite territory as evidenced by their attempts to circle around and return to the area where they were originally flushed. An interesting thing noted was that when one bird was flushed and dropped into the thick cover and another one flushed, the second one would drop into cover very near the first bird, usually within a metre. I asked if anyone had heard a call from the Ground Parrots and some observers said that they distinctly heard calls similar to Honeyeaters. I also heard Honeyeater calls but there were numbers of [New Holland](#) and [Yellow-faced](#), and a few [White-eared Honeyeaters](#) around, so thought that the calls came from them; however no parrot-like call was heard. One would really expect to hear a warble similar to a Budgerigar. The musky odour of the Ground Parrots was not detected, once again, mainly due to the appalling weather conditions which set in. The Ground Parrot certainly appears to be a sedentary bird with a definite territory.

After tea, everyone went into the lodge at the Nature Reserve to make a composite list of birds sighted and to generally talk birds, although by this time most of the party had become fed-up and had left for better climes³. Purely for medical reasons ornithologist Jim Francis had brought a bottle of Scotch Whiskey and Colin and I, for medical reasons, helped him put it away.

The final bird list was quite impressive considering conditions, so I'll list them without Latin names if you don't mind.

Ground Parrot, Eastern Bristlebird, Beautiful Firetail, New Holland Honeyeater, Yellow-faced and White-eared Honeyeaters, [Red Wattlebird](#), [White-throated Treecreeper](#), [Emu Wrens](#) (many), [Scarlet Robin](#), [Grey Thrush](#), [Blue Wren](#), [Gang Gang Cockatoo](#), Crimson Rosella, [Variegated Wren](#), [Yellow Robin](#), [Eastern Spinebill](#), [Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo](#), [Chestnut-tailed Heathwren](#), [Silver-eye](#), [Brown Thornbill](#), [White-browed Scrubwren](#), [Black-backed Magpie](#), [White-browed Wren](#), [Spotted Pardalote](#) and we heard a [Lyrebird](#) in the rainforest below.

We thoroughly enjoyed ourselves and would recommend that members take a drive with the family to Barren Grounds, as it is quite likely that you will see these birds also. For the wives who may not be interested in birds, an added attraction would be the springtime showing of wildflowers which is spectacular, in fact Barren Grounds was dedicated largely for the sake of wildflowers some of which are found nowhere else.

¹**Other known scientific names:** *Emblema bella*, *Staganopleura bella*, *Zonaeginthus bellus*.

²**Other known scientific names:** *Emblema guttata*, *Staganopleura guttata*, *Zonaeginthus guttatus*.

³**Climes:** Climates (Colloquialism)

[Eastern Ground Parrot *Pezoporus wallicus*](#)

NSW Government - Environment & Heritage - Threatened Species.

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