HISTORY AND BIRDS IN ILLAWARRA:

The first information relating to Australian birds is contained in a letter written by Haevick Claeszoon, Dutch sea captain employed by the East India Company. En route to the Dutch East Indies, these ships often took advantage of favourable winds and currents which brought them close to the west coast of Australia. In 1618 Claeszoon wrote: “... we saw many birds, among them several which seemed to be land birds, as a white pintail and some schaerstaertges so that I suppose that land is somewhere in the vicinity.” This original reference, which referred to the White-tailed Tropic-bird and one of the Frigate-birds respectively, was followed by many other reports by early voyagers including William Dampier.
With Capt. James Cook on the barque "Endeavour" were two naturalists, Banks and Solander, who, though concerned primarily with the collection of botanical specimens, described many new species of sea birds from Australian waters.

The Illawarra district, rich in diversified habitats, supports an avifauna of over 200 recorded species. Before white settlement the extensive rain-forests were a feature of the vegetation. These contained some bird species not occurring near the Port Jackson settlement, consequently the district has been visited by several naturalists and collectors over the years. The brief visits of Bass and Flinders in 1796 and the traverse through the district in the following year by the survivors of the "Sydney Cove," produced nothing of ornithological import. However, in 1804, before any white settlement had taken place, even before the cedar-getters had discovered the quick profits to be made from the big scrubs of Illawarra, Robert Brown, an eminent Scottish-born botanist, collected birds and botanical specimens from the vicinity of Mt. Kembla.

In 1800, Brown, as a young botanist who had come under the notice of Sir Joseph Banks, accepted the post of naturalist on board the "Investigator" which was about to leave for Australia on coastal survey work under the command of Capt. Matthew Flinders. Though concerned mainly with botany, Brown accumulated during his four years' stay in the colony, Australian birds representing 150 species. After his return to London he became botanist-librarian to Banks and later was appointed the first keeper of the botanical section of the British Museum. Brown's birds meanwhile had been deposited with the British Museum and the Linnean Society and it was not until 1820, after the collections had been reviewed by the Dutch taxonomist Temminck, that most of the birds were scientifically described and named. Amongst these skins were the type specimens of the Spine-tailed Log-runner (Orthonyx temmincki) and the Purple-breasted Pigeon (Megaloprepia magnifica), the former from "Hat Hill" (Mount Kembla) and the latter from the same general area.

The first Lyrebird (Menura novaehollandiae) was collected during the course of a strange expedition which left Parramatta on Jan. 14, 1798. Governor Hunter, to pacify Irish prisoners who insisted on the existence of a white population to the south-west of Port Jackson, sent out a small party consisting of four prisoners, two civilians, four soldiers and led by an ex-convict and vagabond bushman — John Wilson. A general account of this journey is provided by a diary kept by one of the civilians — youthful John Price, free servant to the Governor. All but Wilson, Price and the other civilian turned back after a few days and on Jan. 26, 1798, when the party was in the vicinity of Bargo, the diary records: 1. The existence of the wombat on the mainland; 2. the first occurrence of the koala and 3. the first description of a male Lyrebird and the shooting of same by the diarist himself; surely one of the most significant entries in the annals of Australian natural history. It is remarkable that these facts concerning the basic history of Australia's most famous bird were not brought to light till almost 100 years after the event and have since been involved in much historical confusion.

John Gould, zoologist, systematist, publisher and bookseller, dominated Australian ornithology up to the time of his death in 1881. Finding himself with insufficient data to continue his work on the "Birds of Australia," Gould, with his family and collector John Gilbert, sailed from London in 1838. Towards the end of his two-year visit he spent a couple of weeks at Wollongong and although he collected no "new" birds in that time he learnt much of the habits of the birds of the big...
In a letter of instruction to John Gilbert he mentions several of the species which he saw in this district. Three of the birds mentioned, the Bell Miner (Manorina melanophrys), the Brush Turkey (Alectura lathami) and the Purple-breasted Pigeon (Megaloprepia magnifica) have now virtually disappeared from the area.

Illawarra, which from earliest times has attracted naturalists of note, still possesses a varied and fascinating bird fauna, which should be as carefully conserved as any other valuable natural resource.

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