

BIRDS OF ILLAWARRA

(What about the Robins?)

January 1697 marked the first recorded European sighting of a black swan - by Willem de Vlamingh who arrived off the coast of WA and explored and named Rottnest Island and the Swan River.

Fittingly, 1997 - the 300th anniversary of this sighting - has been one of the best years for Black Swans on Lake Illawarra in living memory.

I don't much enjoy rushing off to work, but as I drove past the Lake last week a flock of more than 100 swans suddenly all took off together heading west along the lake and it truly was a sight to behold.

So ignorant of birds am I that I had not realised that black swans are white on the underside of their wings and the sight of that many large birds lifting off together is remarkable. It certainly made my day. Today (23/9/97), there seemed to be hundreds of little black cygnets dotting the lake as I drove by.

These spectacular sights have also got me to thinking about the immense changes that have occurred in my little section of the northern suburbs in relation to birds.

Even as recently as the mid 1970s, I had never seen a white cockatoo or galah in Thirroul. Today both are exceedingly common.

The mythology is that they moved to the coast with the drought of the early 1980s and decided to stay.

With all the yuppies moving to Thirroul, nurturing their gardens and planting lots of flowering Australian species - most noticeable since electrification of the railway in 1986 - these human refugees from Sydney have also brought other migrants to the town. Rainbow lorikeets are almost as common as sulphur-crested cockies these days. The beautiful green of the larger King parrots and marvellous red and blue of rosellas are currently far more common than at any time I can remember in the past 30 years. Previously, I only ever saw them when a red-berry tree of whose name I am ignorant briefly provided something for them to nibble on. They are still not common in my backyard but its no longer just a berry-season visit.

And, of course, the Indian Mynahs and starlings are now as common as sparrows (who are getting slightly less common) in my backyard. Pee-wees too, while not uncommon, seem to be less frequent visitors than they once were.

And in the last month, there has been an invasion of large numbers of magpies - and even the odd butcherbird - something that I can never recall before at all. One or two, yes, but not whole families.

There are definitely more birds in suburban Thirroul than at anytime since the town became a suburb.

But all this profusion has perhaps had a cost.

Even though I've never had much interest in birds - despite the fact that house I'm currently living in (next door to where I grew up) once had a resident frogmouth owl underneath - there's something missing from my garden.

The prime ornithological joy of my childhood was to see the dazzling azure of a superb blue-wren and its grey mate dancing - as in the CJ Dennis poem - on my lawn. Never common was this joy, but I haven't seen a pair for some two years now.

I fear that all this other birdlife has forced them out.

Nearly all the newcomers are relatively large in comparison to the tiny delicacy of such bouncing creatures, flittering from lawn to raked pile of leaves to lowly branch. And the wrens may not have just gone elsewhere - there may now be few places for them to go in the new world bird order of suburban Thirroul.

The pressure is even being felt by the willy-wag tails: the only other bird I know who can dance so well as the superb-blue wren.

Wag-tails are now rare in my backyard too, but have not entirely vanished like the wrens.

Amazingly, the only place I regularly see them now are right on the beach - dancing on the sand next to a cliff every morning as I walk my dog. I cannot ever remember seeing such birds right on the beach before and guess that things must be tough for them to choose such a location as home.

The rainbow lorikeets go close - there's some in a tree not a hundred metres from high tide. But I've never seen any other non-seabird, even within Coo-ee of a crashing wave.

I have no idea what is happening but I think the small Australian species - our wrens and robins may well become exceedingly uncommon within a very short space of time.

I'd love to know the views of some informed birdwatcher, rather than a very casual and novice bird watcher like myself.

Joseph Davis