

My favourite birding spot: Lake Linlithgow (Jenawarra) and adjacent wetlands

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What defines a favourite birding spot? There are so many possibilities across Australia but if the prime criteria is time spent then Jenawarra and nearby wetlands must rank first. Along with many bird observers from the Hamilton Field Naturalists Club (HFNC), I have spent more time observing birds there, and undertaking habitat restoration works, than at any other place.

The wetlands have long been noted for birdlife. A writer in *The Western Agriculturalist* describes Lake Linlithgow in Feb. 1882, then almost dry after a drought: '*...as for game, there are myriads of ducks, hundreds of swan, geese, plover, pelicans and native companions in great number. Unfortunately no shooter can get near enough to them to shoot'...*and 2 months later... '*... the burnt fields are now the haunt of native companions and plover. These can be counted by the thousand and can easily be brought in range by the sportsman creeping up to the bank of the lake...and native companions, if properly bled, buried etc. are not bad eating...in one flock of native companions seen on Thursday week, there could not have been fewer than a thousand birds*'.

HFNC formed in 1958 and these wetlands were of interest to the group, although at that time all were badly degraded and widely regarded as useful only for water sports and grazing. Murray Gunn was a budding bird observer at that time and he, with Lionel Elmore and others, made the first birdlist for the area. With the assistance of Murray Gunn and Steve Clark, I have recorded the '*History, fauna and flora of Lake Linlithgow (Jenawarra) and associated wetlands in south-west Victoria*' (Feb. 2008), for the 50th Anniversary celebrations of the club in Aug. 2008. That report details seasonal water levels, salinity, tree-planting efforts, bird records, flora, historical references and photographs.

The lakes host 12 species listed by either the *Japan Migratory Bird Agreement* or *China Migratory Bird Agreement*: Red-necked Stint, Latham's Snipe, Cattle Egret, Great Egret, Greenshank, Marsh Sandpiper, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper, Curlew Sandpiper, Bar-tailed Godwit, Pectoral Sandpiper and Glossy Ibis. We list 58 species of waterbirds for this wetland complex. Cape Barren Geese were seen regularly up to 1977, but not since then.

Jenawarra is situated 15 km east of Hamilton, on the Chatsworth Rd. The backdrop to the north is the Serra Range of the Grampians/*Gariwerd* National Park; the scoria cone of Mt Napier (*Tappoc*) rises to the south and Mt Rouse (*Collorer*) to the east. Even without water or birds this landscape has beauty. The water area is 1015 ha, or 1477 ha with its foreshore and the saline Boonawah Ck flats. Jenawarra is a major resource for water birds, which also use nearby very saline Lake Kennedy (210 ha), Salt Swamp (~12 ha), the fresher Krause Swamp (27 ha) and Bullrush Swamp (155 ha).

Jenawarra has a catchment of about 140 km², fed by Boonawah Ck. It is shallow in most years, usually less than 1.5 m, and not more than 4.9 m when it overflows across Chatsworth Rd into the catchment of the Grange Burn. Overflow has been recorded 6 times – 1893 & 1894, 1946, 1951 & 1952 and 1956 – the usual condition of the lake has been for it to dry out over each summer. That was generally the case between 1902 and 1946 when fences sprouted across the lake. The small Krauses Swamp nearby can usually be relied upon for birdwatching when all else is dry.

The lakes on the basaltic plains were once regarded as being formed by slumping of the thick lava crust resulting from lava flows ~4 Ma ago. That lava overlay Tertiary or Late Miocene sediments of limestone, sandstone and shales. It is now thought that Jenawarra sits on the 1st Phase basalts surrounded by 2nd Phase basalt flows of ~2 Ma. Tappoc and Collorer are results of 3^d Phase eruptions some 32,000 years and 500,000 years ago, respectively.

The weathered 2nd Phase basalt flow at Jenawarra displays impressive spherical weathering of boulders at the base of the cliffs. The whitish splotches are felspar. The occurrence of quartz pegmatite in some rocks, and free quartz lying on the lake bed, may indicate relics of the deep bedrock ejected during the eruptive phase, since quartz does not occur naturally in basaltic rock. However, Aborigines may have been imported the quartz from the Grampians or Glenthompson area, to make scrapers and spear points.

Over the last 10 years the lake has been dry on 7 occasions in late February during the annual HFNC excursion. It was dry then in each of the last 4 years. The most water seen was 0.45 m in Feb. 2002. Contrast that with a 15-year run from Feb. 1984 to 1998 when the range was 0.85-2.45 m (ave. 1.58 m depth). As a result grass grew prolifically on the bed, particularly in 2007 when the lake did not accumulate water until spring. That may account for the great flocks of birds seen in spring 2007 and this summer.

In October 2007, Jane Hayes, Mollie Herrmann and I had observed a mass of birds on Jenawarra – including 11,000 Grey Teal, 2,000 Black-winged Stilt, 1,400 Sharp-tailed Sandpiper and 1,100 Whiskered Tern. The water depth was nominally 11 cm. Black-tailed Native Hen, once a rare visitor, were also seen at The Point. In December, following more than 120 mm of rain in November that kept the water depth at about 13 cm, I counted 2,000 Whiskered Tern, 1,000 Black-winged Stilt, 250 Banded Stilt and 400 Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. In January we saw a Black Falcon and White-bellied Sea-eagle at Jenawarra, 6 Glossy Ibis at Krause Swamp, and 10 Pied Geese, 2 Brolga & 22 Yellow-billed Spoonbills at Soldiers Swamp.

A memorable spectacle was on 25 Jan. 2008 when 5,000 or more Sharp-tailed Sandpipers (and a few Pectoral Sandpipers) arose from Bullrush Swamp and descended on Jenawarra, settling on the remaining shallow pools in the lake, among mainly Australian Shelduck and Black Swan. I had trudged through the mud to near the centre at about 3 pm and was lucky to witness – and photograph – this event. The same happened on the 29 January – had I been there at another time I would not have seen the birds.

Steve Clark and I had some notable sightings (and some cold, windy days) in our seasonal survey from 1987 to 1993 during the wet phase. These included 2190 Eurasian Coot in Apr. 1988, 2480 Hoary-headed Grebe in Feb. 1990, 2300 Australasian Shoveller in April 1990, 440 Great-crested Grebe in Oct. 1991, 610 Australian Pelican in Feb. 1992, 965 Blue-billed Duck & 2360 Pink-eared Duck in Jun. 1992.

Shooting on Lake Kennedy is prohibited but our efforts over 30 years to have duck shooting banned on Jenawarra and adjacent reserves and has not been successful (the 1975 amendment of the Wildlife Act left this lake vulnerable, despite its sanctuary status). Shooting on any one of these wetlands affects all others and makes the birds flighty, easily disturbed and difficult to watch.



Photograph

Black-winged Stilts & Whiskered Terns on Linlithgow in Dec. 2007