

Lowan Behold

Volume 1 Issue 2

May 1999

WELCOME

Welcome to the second edition of Lowan Behold, the Journal of the Ouyen Malleefowlers. For those readers who are not yet aware the word Lowan is a Victorian derivation of the Aboriginal name for the Malleefowl. The title of the journal is the result of a survey of our inaugural members.

This issue contains articles that readers will find extremely interesting. From the latest on voluntary work to the Aboriginal zodiac, we have interesting topics that all relate to Malleefowl and their research and management. The most important topic in this issue is that of incorporation for the group and this is detailed further below.

Anyone who wishes to contribute to this journal is encouraged to do so.

Malleefowlers Group to Incorporate

The Ouyen Malleefowlers group is required to incorporate itself. This is due to several reasons. Many group activities will be conducted in the field and with associated Occupational Health and Safety issues incorporation is wise and necessary. Incorporation is designed to protect the administration and

interests of all within the group. Therefore a meeting will be held on Friday the 25th of June 1999 at 7.30pm in the Old Church, 19 Cooper St, Ouyen to officially meet the criteria for incorporation.



Every member is encouraged to attend this meeting as the ongoing success of the group depends on it. The *Associations Incorporation Act* 1981 requires that a majority of members must authorise a person to incorporate the association (group), approve a proposed statement of purposes and approve proposed rules. This is a straightforward process but one that strictly complies with the Act.

Several other points must be raised in relation to the meeting. It has become obvious that having the word Ouyen in the group's title is not truly representative of the geographical spread of paid up members and the section of the Australian continent in which it

will work. Indeed most members do not reside in, or even near to, Ouyen. At the above meeting a new name will be chosen that reflects not only our commitment to Malleefowl community work, but also addresses the above points.

So please put your minds to thinking about your future active role in the group and what you think it should be called.

Several names that have been proposed are:-

The Victorian Malleefowl Society Inc

The North-west Malleefowl Society Inc

The South-east Australian Malleefowl Society Inc

It is important to note that the name should be simple, to the point and able to be reproduced well in a logo or title.

For anyone wishing to become a member of the group please fill out the attached membership form and return it to the above address as soon as possible.

Malleefowl Watch

Included again with this edition is a copy of the official Malleefowl Watch data form. Data collected on these is invaluable and is used for research purposes. The forms are simple and should be returned to the address attached.

Malleefowl Activities

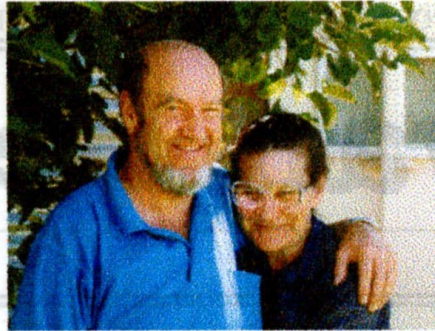
During 1999 field activities will be conducted. However due to constraints prior to incorporation these activities will be discussed at our meeting on the 25th of June 1999.

It is envisaged that projects this year will include official searches, nest assessment, photography and educational duties. See the next edition or attend the meeting for further details. □

Lowan Brochure

A new Victorian Malleefowl (Lowan) brochure is being produced and will be distributed after our incorporation and name change. Over the years many different brochures and information pamphlets have been produced that have educated and informed the general public about important Malleefowl facts and figures. As the understanding of Malleefowl has increased information must be updated and an updated brochure is required. The next edition will include a copy of it.

Again on completion of incorporation we will apply for a small grant to cover our initial costs including the professional printing of the brochure. □



Keith & Cynthia Willis

Malleefowler Profile

Some people in our community devote enormous amounts of time towards studying and observing malleefowl and Keith and Cynthia Willis are two of them.

For 12 years they have been intrigued and fascinated by the malleefowl that inhabit the area around Robinvale in Victoria. Yet before this their knowledge of the species was non-existent.

According to Keith, "I had lived in the Mallee all my life but knew nothing of the malleefowl."

This all changed when they visited a park and stumbled upon a nesting mound. The seed was planted and a life studying the unique incubator bird blossomed for them.

Indeed Keith's mother related stories of her childhood about the malleefowl once prompted by their interest.

"My mother used to eat the eggs that had been gathered from a mound," said Keith.

"My grandmother made omelettes with them.

"The biggest problem was getting the eggs home in one piece," he said.

Though eating the eggs Mrs Willis had never seen a malleefowl. At least not until 10 years ago when they showed her a male working an active

mound. She was 70 years old at the time.

Keith and Cynthia's first sighting of a malleefowl was when their daughter spied one from the window of their car. They tried taking some snap shots of it as it sneaked off into the bush.

Their early photographs were taken using a simple instamatic camera. They now photograph with a modern SLR and video equipment and have a fine photographic record.

Their most favourite moment was caught on film by a brand new video camera. It was of the first egg being laid for the season. This was very special for them as they had watched this nest for years and were very familiar with the birds here. It is an experience they fondly remember and will never forget.

Keith and Cynthia have since devoted themselves even more to malleefowl research. They collect scientific data in research grids near Robinvale for the ongoing monitoring program. This is very important work and they absolutely love it.

Their love of the 'Lowan' is easily demonstrated. When a fire swept through the Wandown Reserve 8 years ago it pushed their favourite pair from the nest. Saddened by this they still visited the mound regularly, difficult to find in the thick regrowth. It was with much joy that they discovered it was again active in 1998/99.

With such devotion it is not an understatement to declare that these two Malleefowlers are a wonderful example for all of us to follow. □

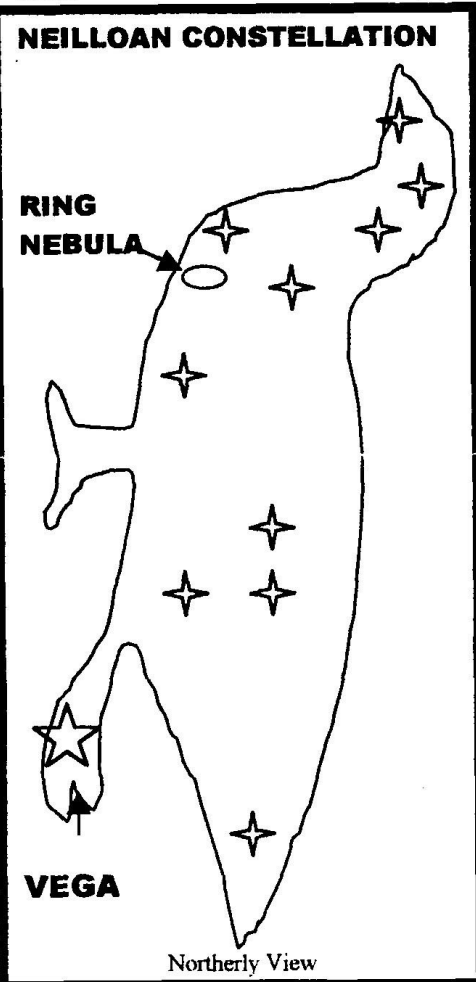
My First Malleefowl

by Gwyn Wiseman, Hopetoun.

Though I do not remember the first time I saw a malleefowl it was always exciting to catch a glimpse or see a nest.

Possibly my childrens' first sight of a malleefowl was a 'walk in the scrub with Aunty June'. Just too much excitement as we found all these wonderful wildflowers and were on a constant watchout for bobbys and snakes. There was a rustle under the shrubs and we all stood still with a sigh of relief as a malleefowl fed close to us.

After a quick discussion one person stayed and others ran as quietly as an excited kid could back to the others. We all ended up watching this fascinating bird feed. I guess the family has shown 100's of visitors our Mallee's magical bird. □



Neilloan

by John Morieson.

Let me tell you about the ancestral malleefowl found in the night sky. Called Neilloan by the Boorong people who lived at Lake Tyrell, she is the creator of all the malleefowl. Neilloan taught the Boorong clan when to look for malleefowl eggs. William Stanbridge said in 1857,

"When the Loan eggs are coming into season on earth they are going out of season with her. When she sits with the sun the Loan eggs are in season."

William Stanbridge took up the first grazing licence on the eastern side of Lake Tyrell in the 1840's and befriended the local Aboriginal people. He sat with them at their campfire at night and they taught him about their astronomy. He wrote it down and later it was published as an address to the Philosophical Institute in Melbourne. Because he knew Western astronomy he was able to state the equivalents to the major stars in the Boorong constellations. With one of them, Neilloan, he knew the name of the actual constellation. It is called Lyra.

Lyra appears in the southern hemisphere only between March and October, coinciding with the mound building period of the malleefowl. This is the first of a series of remarkable parallels between the bird in the sky and the bird on the ground.

But first let us look to where we can find Neilloan. The best approach is to look for Vega, a bright star appearing in the north-east sky between 3 and 4 AM and moving westwards until dawn obliterates this star from normal vision. Whilst I can see Vega with my naked eye, I need

binoculars to see the rest of the constellation. It looks remarkably like the outline of a malleefowl.

Vega, which is the fifth brightest star in the sky, coincides with the powerful kicking foot of the bird.

As well as the constellation's shape being similar to that of the malleefowl there are some other remarkable parallels. One concerns the famous nebula known as the Ring Nebula. At present its magnitude is 8.8 which is beyond the reach of human eyesight. Given that celestial objects vary over time it is possible that the Boorong clans twenty thousand year occupation may have allowed them to see this nebula with their better than average eyesight. The significance lies in the fact that close-up pictures of this nebula reveal that it is not circular in shape as its name implies but rather more ovate or egg-shaped.

Another interesting celestial fact is the meteor showers which are associated with this constellation. From April 16 to 25, but especially on the morning of 23 April, a series of streaks radiate out from Neilloan. They are best seen if the sky is dark and without the moon appearing. They remind us of the bits of sand, twigs and other matter flying through the air as the malleefowl kicks material on or away from the mound. Meteor "shower" is a misnomer because the streaks are usually spasmodic.

The top hourly rate is around fifteen shooting stars per hour but the Lyrids have on occasion produced higher rates. In 1982 American observers noted a short peak of 90 per hour.

The malleefowl is a generous layer of eggs and the Boorong

people well knew this. Thus the last sighting of Neilloan just after sunset in early October would remind them of the egg-laying season about to commence.

When I first read the Stanbridge line quoted above, "When she sits with the sun...", I thought it might be a misprint, that it should be "sets" with the sun rather than "sits". But now I'm not sure. When constellations move from the eastern sky to the west they turn over. They move as though on the perimeter of a circle with the earth as its centre. When Neilloan is to the north she appears side on as in the illustration attached, as if she is climbing up the inside hole in the mound. As she disappears in the north-west she has turned a quarter circle and looks as if she is attaining a resting position, on the slope of the mound, thus "sitting" with the setting sun.

As well as providing food to the Aboriginal people, the malleefowl couple demonstrate excellent parental teamwork and strongly defined gender roles. The focus of their activity is the production of the next generation through the process of mound-building, egg-laying, food gathering and in defence of their mound against predators.

The Boorong parent and child observing the malleefowl would note all kinds of detail about the female role, the male role, the teamwork, the specialisation, the tenacity and the energy required during the whole of the breeding period. Observation of Neilloan in the sky would reinforce what is observed on the ground.

There is also the question of what is meant by the other

Stanbridge sentence quoted above.

"When the Loan eggs are coming into season on earth they are going out of season with her." Does this imply that there are eggs in the sky along with the mother bird? Is the Ring Nebula the only egg or are there others? The meteor shower is repeated again in June and July and we know that eggs are expelled by the hen with considerable force. Do the meteors represent the eggs being laid by the Malleefowl Creator Being?

Whatever are the original stories that were associated with Neilloan we can only guess because the Boorong people are not with us today. Their descendants are likely to have been separated from language and tradition through the hundred and fifty years of geographic and social dislocation that has occurred.

We do know from Louise Hercus some of the vocabulary of the Wergaia speaking people whose clans lived in country from Lake Tyrell south to Charlton, from there west to Serviceton and north to Murrayville. Ouyen is in border country between the Jari Jari to the north and Wergaia to the south. The grandchildren of the last speakers of Wergaia are among those today who are reclaiming the knowledge of the celestial sphere fortuitously recorded by William Stanbridge. "Lowan" or "Loan" (pronounced the same way) are age-old terms for the malleefowl and are still in use today. The county of Lowan, incorporating the Little Desert area, is named for the bird. The prefix, "nei", pronounced "nay", indicates something very special, very magical, a thing or person who

possesses great powers. The Creator Being Neilloan has such ancestral power.

Along with all the other creatures and people in the night sky that cover a range of seasonal and ecological phenomena and customary behaviour, Neilloan provides a potent symbol for the Boorong people. She is mother, parent and progenitor of all the malleefowl who instructs the people on the life and habitat of her own kind. Mnemonic (memory assisting) devices like these sustain and amplify knowledge from generation to generation which also means that writing is not required as a cultural support. With each successive visit to malleefowl country from a very early age the child learns more and more about the life cycle and behaviour, through adulthood and old age.

Thus Neilloan, guiding the people to a wonderful food source, a model of tenacious parenting and mutually supportive behaviour, lives in the night sky to this present day.

References

Hercus, L. (1969) *The Language of Victoria: a late survey*, ANU, Canberra.

Stanbridge, W.E. (1857) "On Astronomy and Mythology of the Aborigines of Victoria". Proceedings of the Philosophical Institute, Melbourne.

John Morieson is a lecturer at Swinburne University of Technology and spent four years studying the Aboriginal Zodiac. This work forms a part of a first-class Masters thesis and identifies 40 different entities including birds and animals of which the Malleefowl is one. □