

Zoology Around You

By
Professor Paul McDonald

Lately I'm finding that there is always something, another job (or jobs!), in the waiting queue; grudgingly coming to the realisation that my 'To Do' list will never be finished, but rather should be seen as more of an aspirational goal list. This can keep me from spending as much time in the field as I'd like, but I have recently been reminded to keep an eye out for the little things, for small doses of zoology throughout the day.

Being aware of their surroundings and what is happening with the fauna in their midst is a very important skill for zoologists to practise – it might be hearing a new bird call following a flowering event, or noticing when the ants are active in that nest you pass on your way home. Putting these small pieces together gives you a better understanding of your environment, hones your observation skills, and also tends to make things a little more interesting on those days filled with less than ideal tasks!

We're lucky enough to have lots of very interesting and charismatic species on our Armidale UNE campus, including koalas, echidnas, lots of macropods and even barking owls of late, but recently I took some time to sit and watch some of our more common residents that are often overlooked: a local pair of masked lapwings. I was alerted to these guys thanks to the 'Superlab' meetings of research students and staff working in the Bower, Czenze, Nordberg, McDonald and Vernes groups, so a bonus from some scientific collaboration (thanks Brandon!).

There are several pairs of nesting 'plovers' on campus at the moment, and the species has a reputation as being highly aggressive to anything close to the nest. When you're offspring are flightless and bite-sized, this heightened nest protection is an excellent reproductive strategy. The species is part of the large taxonomic group known as wading birds that are closely linked to water, but masked lapwings are quite diverse in their habitat preference and take advantage of open grassy areas in semi-urban settings. This pair had taken that flexibility to heart, and chosen a parking bay island right in the middle of the very busy Western carpark as their nesting site (!).





My first visit coincided with incubation, before I was able to see the chicks hatching and then ultimately taking their first steps on the road to independence. Spending some time with them highlighted a number of interesting things to me. First was the parental response. Other pairs on campus used distraction to lead people away from their nests, quietly ceasing incubation and moving approximately 50m away before giving lots of vocalisations and distraction displays to confuse would-be predators. Perhaps due to the frequency of encounters with people, or maybe the lack of cover, the pair in the western carpark were far more aggressive, standing their ground and loudly calling towards me as soon as I left my car. Interestingly, they tolerated moving cars, and only started alarm calling when the doors to vehicles were opened. Thankfully by keeping my distance, or laying down fully on the ground, the birds ignored me and went about their business.

I was able to see an egg hatch and one of the chicks emerge, and also to watch the young forage. Interestingly they were unable to climb up and over the gutter, so were foraging on less than ideal bitumen road surface. The young didn't stray far, and kept in vocal communication with an adult who kept a close eye on them.

Once all eggs had hatched, the birds moved off quickly to more optimal foraging areas on grassed zones. Hopefully the four young all make it, but it's a tough gig for these small chicks, which routinely fall prey to predators such as cats or foxes.

So, the whole episode just reminded me to take a wee look around, even when parking in a desolate carpark, as you never quite know what is around. Further, we know so little about even our most common bird species that there is always something to learn as a zoologist if you just take the time to look.

Happy birding,

Paul

Dr Paul McDonald is a Professor in Animal Behaviour within the School of Environmental and Rural Science. Paul's research focuses on understanding behaviour and the impacts that this has on both fitness benefits, but also management and conservation decisions.

Paul has a particular interest for birds and, broadly, his research includes studying vocal communication in birds, using bioacoustics to passively monitor biodiversity, and studying the factors that shape sociality in complex societies.

