

## 2022 Plains-wanderer Report



### Climatic Conditions in 2022

The annual rainfall was recorded at seven localities around Deniliquin in 2022. They were Gulpa revegetation area (~20 km south of Deniliquin), our house in Deniliquin township, Monimail revegetation area (~26 km north of Deniliquin), Wanganella revegetation area (~40 km north of Deniliquin), Robert's property north of Wanganella, John's property north of Wanganella and David's property near Booroorban.

I am pleased to report that the whole district recorded above average rainfall in 2022.

The plains-wanderer country did particularly well with 654 mm recorded at Robert's, and 701 mm at John's in the heart of the plains-wanderer country; that is double the long-term annual rainfall.



The only lean rainfall months out on the plains were February, March and July. The late winter and entire spring rainfall on the plains was beyond fantastic, with around 40 mm in August, 70 mm in September, a massive 200 plus millimetres in October (8+ inches on the old scale), around 100 mm in November and a comparatively more modest 30 mm in December.

With the massive rains in October and November, undoubtedly some plains-wanderer nests were lost to flooding, and likely some chicks as well.

We were concerned that the vegetation would become too dense for plains-wanderers as it did in the big wet years of 2010/2011 but this didn't eventuate. I think the country had been so bare over the previous two decades, with the exception of 2010/2011, that it was still in recovery mode. Grasses, in particular *Austrostipa* and *Austrodanthonia*, had become quite sparse over those previous decades, with much of the plains-wanderer country being dominated by various forbs and herbs. (The 2017 to 2019 period was the driest ever recorded since European settlement for the Murray/Darling Basin). The native grasses have only just started to thicken up now after all the rain we received in 2022<sup>1</sup>. Some of the paddocks became so thick in 2010/2011 that it was two to three years before they again became habitable for plains-wanderers. Historically, plains-wanderers have generally done best in years of average or slightly below average rainfall but on this occasion they thrived on the way-above-average rainfall.

### **Numbers of visiting birders and plains-wanderer sightings in 2022**

We went out searching for plains-wanderers on 38 occasions in 2022, taking out 180 clients. We had sightings of 176 plains-wanderers including dependent young. However, some males were sitting tight on chicks and, not wishing to disturb them, we could not get an accurate count. Also, when the trios were on their breeding territories in the spring and early summer, we saw the same birds on many occasions over almost three months.



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<sup>1</sup> This report was written in late February 2023.



Due to the massive rainfall in October and November, we were severely restricted as to where we could search for plains-wanderers. Fortunately, there was an area close to an access road into which we could walk. However, even the access road was a problem at times as floodwaters breached the road in multiple places and one of the cattle grids collapsed. Robert's heroic efforts kept the road passable to 4WDs over this time. Only on one occasion (5 October 2022) were we unable to access the plains-wanderer country due to rain and flooding.

The year started off well with two successful outings in mid-February, followed by more success in March and April. Over the last twenty years, these months have been harsh for plains-wanderers with birds, for the most part, having had to depart the area due to dry conditions. However, in the late summer and autumn 2022, they were thriving, with a courting pair seen in mid-February and then males with chicks of various sizes seen on every outing during March and April. On 23 March, with Simon, Sarah and Michael on board, we recorded an incredible five males with chicks. On 30 April, with John, Alison and Scott, we had a massive haul of twenty-two plains-wanderers including a male with five large young and another male with three large young. Many of the other birds we saw were also independent juveniles. This could be our record for the number of plains-wanderers seen in a night.

There was about 70 mm of rain out on the plains in January, and about 50 mm in April. This no doubt stimulated the plains-wanderers to keep breeding and to have a high success rate in late summer and autumn of 2022. They had not produced many young in the spring and early summer of 2021 and they were making up for it.



After 30 April, we did not go out looking for plains-wanderers again until 20 September but I am confident that some plains-wanderers were present during the winter period as there was still plenty of cover to support them.

On our first spring outing on 20 September, we located a pair of plains-wanderers courting in a fairly low-lying part of the paddock. On 27 September we found the single female, indicating the male was probably on a nearby nest. On 4 October, that single female was again located. Also on 4 October, a male with three half-grown chicks was located some distance away, probably paired to a different female. This pair must have started breeding in August, as the incubation period is twenty-six days.

On 5 October, a massive rain flooded the area where the plains-wanderers had been nesting. Whatever nests were in that area would certainly have been inundated. It is not known whether the male with chicks survived. It is possible they were big enough to get out of harm's way.

Despite all the rainfall we received on the plains in October (214 mm) and November (112 mm), we only missed seeing plains-wanderers on one excursion (7 October). On that occasion, the plains-wanderers had been flooded out of the area where we had been finding them and hadn't yet settled back into anywhere accessible.

A couple of nights later we managed to find a male on higher ground, and from that point, things continued to improve, if not with the weather, at least with the sightings. Five days after that sighting, with Helmet and Ingetraut on board, we found three males before the heavens opened and we had to get out fast. I think my German friends will remember the hair-raising drive back out to the highway for many years to come. At times we were going sideways up the road.

After the big rains in early October the plains-wanderers regrouped to higher ground and commenced trying to breed again. On 11 October, a courting pair was located and over the next couple of weeks, another three courting pairs on breeding territories were located nearby. Over the next two months, one or other of these females was located, sometimes with a male and at other times alone. We were still getting heavy rain over this period and I think this was having a negative impact on their breeding as no young were seen in late November or early December when we would have expected to see them had they been successful in October. Nevertheless, they were certainly





attempting to breed.

The heavy rain stopped in about mid-November and it gradually started to dry out from that point on.

On 9 December, we went out looking for red-chested buttonquail, which John and Robert had been seeing in the daytime while mustering. It had dried out by now, so we tried another paddock that had previously been inaccessible. We located four adult females and two male plains-wanderers in this paddock including a male on a nest with four eggs. That we saw four adult females and only two males also indicates that other males were also on nests at that time. Now it had dried out somewhat, breeding was in full swing.



On 23 December, I tried another paddock we had not been in this season and three adult female plains-wanderers, which were all calling, were located, suggesting that the males were on nests. A courting pair was also located in this paddock by Robert on 29 December. Plains-wanderers with chicks and many independent juveniles were seen in this paddock in late January and February of 2023, indicating that breeding occurred in December of 2022.

It is hard to determine how many pairs bred on the plains-wanderer properties in the spring/summer period of 2022. In the original paddock we were finding them in in October, November and December, I believe there were at least four trios of plains-wanderers attempting to breed. However, as we could only walk in off the road due to it being so wet, much of the paddock was not searched. When it dried out in December and we searched in another two paddocks, at least another seven females on breeding territories were located. This makes a minimum of eleven breeding trios on the property in the spring/ summer of 2022. However, Robert and John, while mustering sheep, also saw plains-wanderers during the day in three other paddocks so the breeding population could have been considerably higher than eleven. At a guess, there might have been as many as thirty breeding trios on the properties in the spring/summer of 2022.



It is difficult to be accurate due to multiple sightings of the same birds, but we probably saw around a hundred individual plains-wanderers including chicks. This is the highest number recorded for many years.

Nearly all the country suitable for plains-wanderers now has sufficient cover on it for the first time in over twenty years. It seems likely (at time of writing) that their population is at near capacity on the plains-wanderer properties, but we have not thoroughly searched all suitable habitat. If it stays dry in 2023 (no rain so far in February) dispersal is likely in coming months.

### **Breeding Success in 2022**

In the first half of 2022, plains-wanderers had incredible breeding success in the summer and autumn period, showing again their amazing ability to breed when conditions are suitable. The polyandrous breeding strategy of the female plains-wanderer mating with two males is brilliant for an erratic climate such as Australia's as it allows them to exploit the smallest window of opportunity to build their numbers up rapidly. (A characteristic they share with buttonquails). It appears that the plains-wanderers did not have much breeding success in the spring due to the heavy rain at that time, but they certainly made up for it over the summer period.

In the wetter cycle over these last three years, plains-wanderer numbers are probably the highest they have been since the 1980s and 1990s. It's likely they will be colonising the northern parts of the Riverine plain, which they have not inhabited for many years as it has been too bare for them.

What the future holds for plains-wanderers is almost entirely dependent on what the climate does in coming years.





## Acknowledgements

As always, Trisha and my heartfelt thanks go to the Nevinson family, who, for yet another year, have put up with my invading their properties with hordes of birders. The colossal rain in the spring of 2022 was a godsend but it also threw up some real challenges with road access. Without Robert's 'can do' attitude in repairing what is a public road, and which had become more wetland than road, and a collapsed cattle grid undermined by water, I, on any number of occasions would not have got onto the plains-wanderer property.



## Stats plains-wanderers, excursions & birders

Plains-wanderer sightings in 2022 including independent young + 4 incidental sightings by Robert and John + 6 birds seen on one night's reconnaissance	Number of dependent young	Number of PW excursions in 2022	Percentage of successful PW outings in the 2022	Number of clients in 2021
<b>127 birds</b>	<b>49*</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>99%</b>	<b>180</b>
<b>176 birds total including dependent young.</b>			Failed to find a PW on 7 October.	+ 14**

\*This includes the chicks seen with five males on 23 March 2022 where the actual number of chicks was not noted. For this report, we've calculated three chicks per male, which is an average clutch.

\*\* A total of 194 birders arrived in Deniliquin to see plains-wanderers in 2022 including fourteen international birders who were unable to venture out due to the weather and flooding on 5 October. We had several cancellations in the spring due to road closures enroute to Deniliquin and general trepidation about flood waters.

**Rainfall figures for the Deniliquin & Wanganella district in 2022**

	Gulpa revegetation area	Our house in Deniliquin	Monimail reveg' area	Wanganella reveg' area	Robert's property north of Wanganella	John's property north of Wanganella	David's property near Boorooban
<b>2022</b>	<b>577 mm</b>	<b>586.5 mm</b>	<b>496 mm</b>	<b>624 mm</b>	<b>654.5 mm</b>	<b>701 mm</b>	<b>594 mm</b>
Long-term average	442 mm Mathoura 13 km south of Gulpa	412 mm Deniliquin	Approx. 375 mm	366 mm Zara Station 12 km WNW	Approx. 350 mm	Approx. 350 mm	Approx. 350 mm Boorooban





