



plains-wanderer (female)

P Maher 04 Dec 2008

*Now is the winter of our discontent
made glorious summer ...*
Richard III (Shakespeare)

THE PLAINS-WANDERER STORY

The 17th of August 1980 was the start of my love affair with a small, enigmatic bird found on one of the flattest plains on earth.

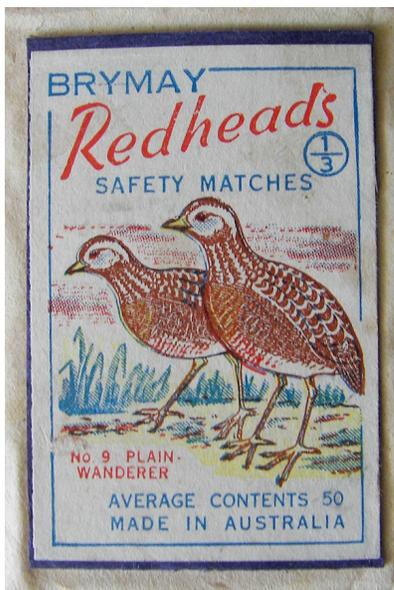
While I knew that our encounter with a female plains-wanderer that day was exciting, I had no inkling that it would change my life — completely. People often ask me how it happened.

IT HAPPENED LIKE THIS:

It was in the days of the first Atlas project¹: John and Glenis Nevinson and two of their three children: eleven year old Sandra and nine year old Robert, and my seven year old son Philip and I were travelling across the Nevinson's merino

¹ *The Atlas of Australian Birds*, published 1984, data collected 1977—1981.

sheep station to do some atlassing on a neighbouring property. John, Glenis and Sandra were leading the way in their ute²; the two boys and I following in mine about a hundred metres back. John slowed for some sheep that were crossing his path. I noticed, as John's vehicle passed, two small birds move off the track. I drove my vehicle up to where they were and, the grass being quite short, had no trouble seeing one bird clearly. I was looking at a magnificent female plains-wanderer, squatting flat on the ground a few metres from my window (The *Hallelujah Chorus* may have burst from the heavens at this point). I recall yelling plains-wanderer! and possibly some expletives and getting Robert and Philip to look out the window. Birds, including plains-wanderers, were depicted on matchboxes when I was a kid; drawing on this authoritative work I knew exactly what I was looking at.



BRYANT MAY matchbox
c early 50s, from the
Tom Wheller collection

The female squatted there for a short time before jumping up in unison with the male who had hunkered down a short distance away. They ran rapidly, stopping occasionally to look back at us. The female's bright yellow legs and bill were obvious as she scurried away.

We left them and rushed off to retrieve John, Glenis and Sandra. Miraculously, we relocated the wanderers and had good views of them before losing them in the grass³. (The paddock in which we encountered these two birds proved more marginal habitat than many of the other paddocks on the Nevinson properties and we have rarely recorded plains-wanderers there since).

² Pick-up truck

³ We would later discover how difficult this species is to find in daylight. Plains-wanderers are only close together at mating time and usually less wary during that period — over the years, our best daylight views have been when they are mating.

Both John and I had done a lot of spotlighting on the plains, mainly shooting foxes. We thought that spotlighting could be a good way to look for plains-wanderers as we knew that quails, which were similar in appearance and behaviour, were much more readily seen at night⁴. We were right.

We had an unsuccessful spotlighting attempt a month or so later, still not being aware of plains-wanderer's exact habitat requirements⁵. How to find them was important; where to find them was the quandary. John and I started thinking these two birds were merely passing through and we may never see them again.

THE FIRST BIRDERS

In April 1981 we had a visiting birder by the name of Chris Doughty up from Melbourne. I had mentioned the plains-wanderers and inland dotterels to Chris sometime previously and he was keen to see both. We went out spotlighting with John, I think mainly looking for dotterels, which can often be easier seen at night. We happened upon a male plains-wanderer. Chris was overjoyed and John and I grinned like cats. I don't think we ever did find a dotterel that night.

Eleven days later we had a group of well-known Sydney birders up for an Easter camp at Booroorban. My sister Susan, a student in Sydney at the time, had become friendly with some of these people; she must have mentioned plains-wanderer sightings to them because, if my memory serves me correctly, it was the main reason for their visit. Spotlighting, we located three plains-wanderers: a female and two males, probably immatures, over the 18th and 19th April and the Sydneysiders went home knowing they had seen a species few people in the world had seen.

⁴ Plains-wanderers are not related to quail although they were once considered related to buttonquail.

⁵ Plains-wanderers prefer a certain soil type and density of grass. There is a vast area of grassland out on the plains and without being in just the right country you could drive around for a long time and never see one.



plains-wanderer (male) 06 Sept 2008 P Maher

BANDING

My friend and mentor, Dr Graham Harrington, henceforth known affectionately as ‘Harrington’ an ecologist at CSIRO Rangelands in Deniliquin was eager to start a banding study. At that point little was known about plains-wanderers. There had only been sporadic sightings in the 20th century; they were thought to be very rare and possibly on the way out.

On the night of 25th April 1981 Harrington, the Nevinsons and I caught and banded our first plains-wanderer — a male, and a pair of inland dotterel in the same locality.

A few days later I had another daylight experience with a female wanderer, which flushed up and flew about three hundred metres before landing. I didn’t take my eyes off the spot where she landed. Driving over to where she squatted flat on the ground I put my hand over her. Astonishing! I caught several more by hand

in daylight in the banding years (as opposed to a net). Wanderers have quite a slow, direct flight and are vulnerable to black and brown falcons and spotted harriers. Relying solely on their camouflage they sit tight — the reason why it is possible to catch them in the daytime. This is particularly the case if they have already flown a short distance once. It is commonly but incorrectly assumed that plains-wanderers are nocturnal. It is only because they do not feel threatened by diurnal raptors that they are more easily seen after nightfall.

Over the next twelve years, Harrington, the Nevinsons and I banded roughly a thousand plains-wanderers. We stopped banding when we felt we were unlikely to garner much more information: we learnt that they moved around a lot. The recapture rate was low: about 10% within twelve months of banding and only around 2% after that period. All birds recaptured, except one, were caught within about 500 metres of their original banding sites irrespective of when they were banded. The one exception was a young chick banded on the Nevinson's property, recaptured about twelve months later 30 kilometres to the east. It seemed that when birds moved, they really moved. Not all moved, some individual birds were caught on several occasions; one adult female was caught six times in a two-year period.

Droughts and bushfires were probably the reason we didn't recapture more birds. Yet there were always plains-wanderers when the rains came — albeit unbanded birds.



Malties box c 1940s from the Tom Wheller collection

SURVEYS

In the mid 1980s, ornithologist, Dr David Baker-Gabb embarked on a comprehensive study of plains-wanderers, assisted locally by Harrington, the Nevinsons and me.

During the late 1980s and through the 1990s

I carried out numerous surveys for David,

Birds Australia and the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service,

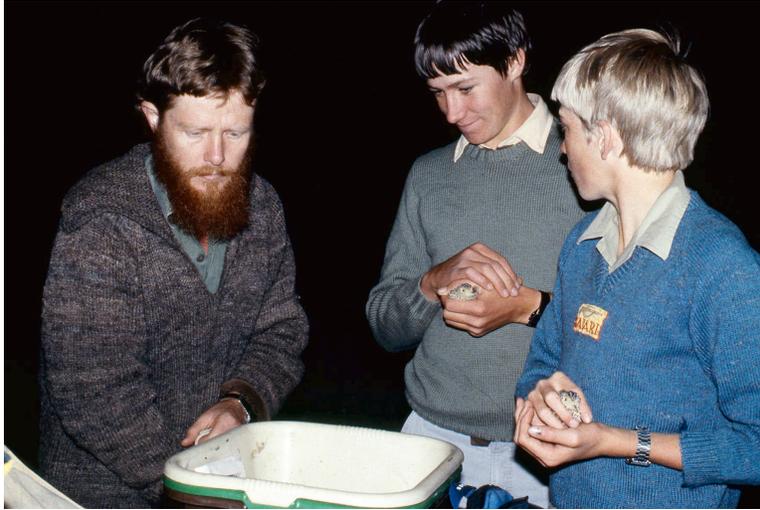
surveying properties for plains-wanderers throughout the Riverina and Northern and Southern Victoria. These surveys resulted in the purchase of properties by the Victorian and NSW governments in the Mitiamo area (Terrick Terrick, Victoria) and Oolambeyan Station in the New South Wales' Riverina⁶). The purchase of these properties has not only been good for plains-wanderers but also benefits the conservation of other plants and animals that share plains-wanderer habitat — habitat poorly represented in conservation reserves.

Also in the mid 1980s, David and I surveyed a large cattle station on the Diamantina River in Central West Queensland where a sighting of one plains-wanderer was recorded by Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service staff. A viable population was located in the area — a 1000 kilometres north of the Riverina birds.



female plains-wanderer

⁶ If making recommendations to the relevant State government departments to buy these properties seems to you like we were sabotaging our own Deniliquin-based business — you're right!



Dr David Baker-Gabb with David and Robert Nevinson in the mid 1980s



November 1983 plains-wanderer eggs



THE BIRDING MASSES

The internet as we know it today didn't exist, yet the word went out to the world birding community that a difficult to find, little seen species could quite reliably be shown to any birder who could get to Deniliquin, a town of 8000 residents, on the cusp of the outback.

To say birders 'flocked' to Deniliquin would not adequately describe the phenomenon of the world's twitchers descending on this rural town from the early 1980s. Plains-wanderers are a single species family so not only did we have the world life-list birders, we had the family twitchers — the birders who are after a representative of every bird family.

This influx of birders coincided with my acrimonious departure from the New South Wales Forestry Commission where I had been working as the forest ranger in the once mighty redgum forests in this district. Trisha and I set up an indigenous plant nursery in our backyard⁷ and I was shooting foxes commercially again but we needed to supplement this income with something else so we started charging birders to show them plains-wanderers and the other specialties of this district.

While never keeping a precise count of birders to the Deniliquin district, we know it is not far off 6000 birders. Perhaps only with the exception of North Queensland's cassowary have so many birders descended on one district in this country in the hope of seeing a single species. There were several incidences in the early days where world birders who had comprehensively 'done' Australia got back on planes to tick plains-wanderer. We've taken out the current world list record holders: Tom Gullick, Jon Hornbuckle, Hugh Buck and the late Phoebe Snetsinger and the vast majority of those who trail them. Many of the world's top scientists and thinkers have been to Deniliquin including the contentious

⁷ Again there is an indigenous plant nursery in our backyard; a few plants are sold but the vast majority are planted in the revegetation plots at Gulpa, Wanganella and Monimail.

Stamford academics Dr Paul Erhlich, author of *The Population Bomb* and Dr Stephen H. Schneider, consultant to seven US administrations from Nixon to Obama. Their mammoth environmental battles make mine look like schoolyard skirmishes. Great conversations are just one of the rewards for driving around vast paddocks for hours on end with your arm and a spotlight hanging out the window, searching for a highly camouflaged bird teetering six inches on her toes but more likely hunkered down to three.

Plains-wanderers have afforded us the enormous privilege of meeting scores of wonderful Australian birders including many of the grand old gentlemen of Australian ornithology — such as the late Brigadier Hugh Officer, Arnold M^cGill and my old mate Roy Wheeler who arrived on the bus one night with his set of North's *Nests and eggs of Australian birds* for me. Extant in the grand old men category are birdwatchers like Fred T.H. Smith and our friend and supporter, Dr Colin Officer.



INLAND BIRD TOURS

In 1987 my experience with inland birds must have reached the ears of Geoff Sainty, a wetland ecologist from Sydney who was organising his own commercial nature-based camping tour around western New South Wales and asked us to help with guiding and logistics. On our return, Inland Bird Tours was born. Over the next sixteen years or so, Trisha and I did birding camping tours all over

the Australian mainland and most of our Territories, seeing nearly all of this continent's bird species and wearing out several 4WDs. On several occasions we did massive thirty-day marathons from Deniliquin to Darwin and back, camping all the way. Out of respect for our aging bones, in more recent years we've run gentler tours, flying to our starting points, hiring vehicles and staying in good accommodation. Trisha, still passionate about food, no longer cooks for the big tours, rather outsourcing to my brilliant sister Susan — spoken of with reverence and gratitude by all who enjoy her wares on tour.

We went on to lead tours for many of the large birding tour companies from the States and the UK and ran our own offshore tours to New Zealand, New Guinea, New Caledonia, Sub-Antarctic Islands, Sulawesi, Northern Borneo, Thailand, Vietnam and Malay Peninsula.

THIRTY YEARS ON

Plains-wanderers put us on the radar of world birders. Trisha's and my life, as well as the lives of our children, Philip and Amber, took a different course. None of it would have happened without the support of the amazing Nevinson family.

Thirty years after a pleasant afternoon atlassing out on the Hay plains, my son Philip is a senior hydrographer in Melbourne; the gracious and much-missed Glenis is no longer with us (Glenis has a plains-wanderer depicted on her grave stone); John, along with his sons David⁸ and Robert, and brother Paul, continues to grow wool out on the plains as his father and grandfather did before him. He is not only our rock but he can often be found traversing his own paddocks to help us find a plains-wanderer. Sandra did veterinary science; has two children and lives in South West Western Australia. Robert is co-leader on the plains-wanderer weekends, assists with the big international groups and lends a hand when wanderers get too elusive. He steps into the breach, taking birders plains-

⁸ David was away at school in August 1980

wandering when we are away on tour. Robert and his wife Rhonda have three little children.

The Riverine Plain is big sky country. I am blessed that my workplace has a ceiling of countless stars. The sun was still high in the sky on a winter afternoon in 1980 when we set off to do some atlassing but the stars were preparing to line up in a spectacular way.

Philip Maher assisted by Patricia Maher, Feb 2010



plains-wanderer habitat

14 Oct 2009

P Maher

Surveys and reports pertaining to Plains-wanderers

1988

'The biology of the Plains-wanderer *Pedionomus torquatus* on the Riverine Plains of New South Wales during and after drought', published in *Corella* 12: 7–13 Dr Graham Harrington, Dr David Baker-Gabb, Philip N Maher.

1990

'A revision of the distribution, status and management of Plains-wanderer *Pedionomus torquatus*' *Emu* 90:161-168 (1991). Dr David Baker-Gabb, Joe Benshemesh, Philip N Maher

1992

Department of Conservation and Environment

A five-month survey on the northern plains of Victoria mapping the distribution and status of the Plains-wanderer, which resulted in the report **Surveys and conservation of Plains-wanderer in northern Victoria**. Dr David Baker-Gabb and Philip N Maher

1992

Department of Defence

Survey of Plains-wanderers on land purchased by the Australian Navy for construction of the Navcommsta Receive Station near Morundah, NSW. P.N. Maher

1993

National Parks and Wildlife Service (NSW)

Survey for the distribution of Plains-wanderers at several sites in the Riverina. P.N. Maher

1995 —1997

Birds Australia

Surveys and reports on the conservation, distribution and status of the Plains-wanderer on the Riverine Plain of NSW. P.N. Maher

1997

Twynam Pastoral Company

Survey for Plains-wanderers on *Gundaline* and *Toganmain* stations (NSW) to determine that species' status and distribution for EIS purposes. P.N Maher



plains-wanderer (female)

29 Sept 2009

P Maher

Amber Maher with her father in about 1983 looking at a
plains-wanderer

