

## Atlas maps our bird life

Since the arrival of Captain Cook in Australia, at least two bird species — the paradise parrot and a Tasmanian species of emu — have vanished forever. With increasing urban and pastoral development, the threat of extinction now faces other species, like the plains wanderer, the colourful orange-bellied parrot, and the freckled duck.

This information is contained in the recently published 'Atlas of Australian Birds'. Published by Melbourne University Press, the Atlas is the culmination of 7 years of library and field research carried out by more than 3000 volunteers under the direction of Australia's national bird-watchers organization, the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union (RAOU).

As the Director of the RAOU Dr Stephen Davies, formerly of CSIRO's Division of Wildlife and Rangelands Research in Western Australia, has pointed out, the Atlas contains records for the largest land area of any bird atlas in the world. Professional bird-watchers and amateurs including farmers, outback station managers, and city-dwellers recorded their sightings on data sheets, which were then checked and verified by regional organizers in each State.

Qualified volunteers and RAOU staff carried out more thorough searches in such remote localities as the Nullarbor Plain, the Great Sandy and Tanami Deserts, and the south-west of Tasmania.

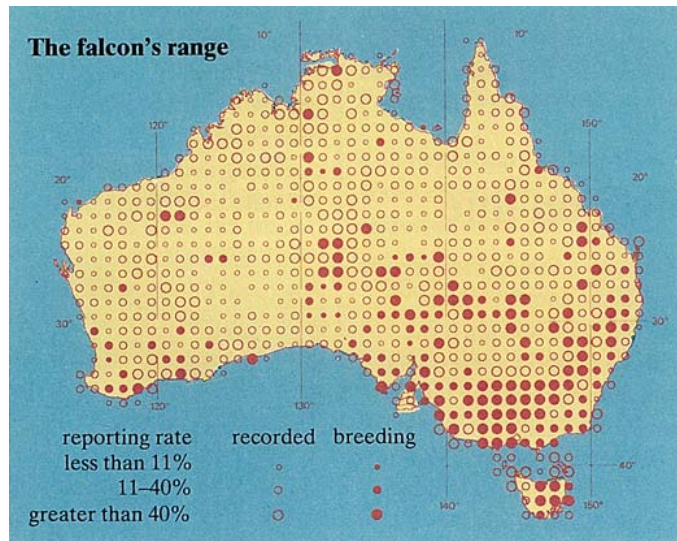
All of the more than three million records were directly entered into CSIRONET, CSIRO's Australia-wide computer network. Every 4 to 6 months, the computer produced a map for each



**The plains wanderer; its range has shrunk since European settlement.**



**Recording bird species in a wetlands area of south-western Australia.**



**The brown falcon is one of Australia's most widely distributed birds. The size of each circle shows the number of falcons recorded as a proportion of total bird sightings in each grid block.**

species and a list of the birds recorded in each map grid square. This enabled RAOU staff to monitor progress and identify the blank squares for further research.

The Atlas is set out in two sections. The main field atlas has large two-colour maps for the distribution of each of the 656 species recorded. The historical atlas sets out the way

in which the encroachment of European settlement has altered the ranges of birds. As a result of findings made during compilation of the Atlas, the RAOU has already begun a major study of wading birds whose feeding and breeding sites in swamps, wetlands, and beaches are being squeezed out by land development.

The 784-page Atlas contains 772 maps and more than 650 black and white sketches. It sells for \$49, and orders and requests for further information can be forwarded to: The Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union, 21 Gladstone Street, Moonee Ponds, Victoria 3039; Phone (03) 370 1272.

*Mary Lou Considine*