



Pink cockatoos

and solitude

After taking up the hobby of nature photography during the COVID-19 pandemic, amateur birder Beverley Oliver braved the rugged roads near Cocklebiddy to participate in a unique photography course at the famous Eyre Bird Observatory.

by Beverley Oliver

Adventure out



I've driven across the Nullarbor a few times, noting the turn off to Eyre Bird Observatory (EBO) about 15 kilometres east of Cocklebiddy, and always thinking I'd go there one day when my four-wheel-drive skills and courage aligned. Well, last November a tantalising offer galvanised me into action. Through Birdlife Australia, I heard there was a spot available in the renowned EBO Photography Course. I was hesitant about the drive in, daunted by driving solo down the scarp and then through (possibly) deep sand and the risk of getting bogged. I was greatly relieved when course convenor Keith Lightbody offered to meet me at the scarp and drive in with me, in convoy with other participants. Turns out that, with Keith tutoring me, it was an easy run.

The course participants were a diverse bunch of six who had travelled from Victoria, South and Western Australia. We were joined by Keith and his mate Mark, and wonderful caretakers Margaret and John. Best of all, eight avid bird photographers with various levels of expertise had 'found their tribe' for the next six days.

RICH HISTORY

The observatory is more than a hundred years old, originally constructed as the Eyre Telegraph Station in 1877 before being relocated in 1897 and then abandoned in 1927. The site was restored in 1977 and now functions as Birdlife Australia's Eyre Bird Observatory.

It's well past its youth—it's very solid and rather stately, and I'd love the walls to share their stories. And yes, it's isolated.

Intrepid day visitors dropped in while we were on our photography course, which added to the tapestry of collected human interest. But most of the time, we ten residents enjoyed delectable meals and conversation—and many laughs—on the open back veranda. We knew that we had a telephone and emergency contact should the unthinkable happen, but to be so alone out there, and away from the clamour of the world, felt like a rare gift.

"Best of all, eight avid bird photographers with various levels of expertise had 'found their tribe' for the next six days."



THE COURSE

The course took the shape of conversational and interactive sessions each morning with Keith, who has been offering the course for many years with a suitably well-polished approach. He is a skilled nature photographer, an excellent educator, and a very generous and patient tutor.

Even though we were all at different stages in our journeys as bird photographers, and our kit was similarly disparate, we all felt as though we learnt a great deal. Like many others, I took up this great pastime during the COVID-19 pandemic. I've since joined in a few courses and events to try to improve my birding and photography skills, and there is no doubt that this was my best value experience to date.

I learnt so much about birding, camera technique and post-processing. I'm still returning to and working my way through Keith's excellent resources. One of the best aspects of the course was the nightly 'show and tell' where we each shared photos on which we were seeking

feedback on how we could improve. Tips were shared thoughtfully and respectfully—and this 'learning by doing' approach was really helpful.

SPECTACULAR SUBJECT MATTER

Of course, the subject matter of our photos was one of the most delectable aspects of the experience. Twice a day—morning and evening—we were in our outdoor studio photographing the pink cockatoos also known as Major Mitchell's cockatoos or Leadbeater's cockatoos (*Cacatua leadbeateri*) that came in for a drink (see 'Parrots out of place' on page 20). Sometimes there was a lone visitor, often they came in pairs, and occasionally in mobs.

We were particularly fortunate to see some 'biffo' one morning—two young male cockatoos were having a squabble. It didn't look serious, but our photos that day were much more interesting. These birds are so spectacular with their soft pink and white feathers, and their exhilarating red, white and yellow crests.



Previous pages

Main Pink cockatoos (*Cacatua leadbeateri*) are a major attraction for photographers at Eyre.
Photo – Keith Lightbody

Opposite page

Top Looking west from the top of the dunes.
Photo – Mark Davidson

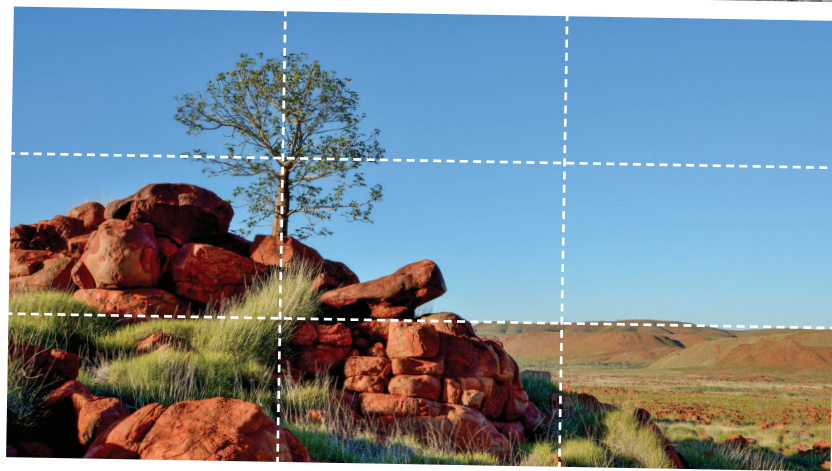
This page

Top Getting the hang of equipment on the course.
Photo – Keith Lightbody

Above Eyre Highway signage marking the turn off to the observatory.

Top right Pair of juvenile nankeen kestrels (*Falco cenchroides*) in a nest log.
Photos – Mark Davidson

Above right Millstream Chichester National Park, demonstrating the 'rule of thirds' principle.
Photo – Peter Nicholas/DBCA



Photography tips and tricks

Light is one of the most important considerations in photography. The amount and even the direction of light make a difference. The best time for natural light is the 'golden hour' between sunrise and 10am, and 4pm to sunset (depending on the season).

Shutter speed is the speed in which the camera captures the picture. Fast shutter speed freezes the subject, such as birds in flight and slow shutter speed will blur anything that is moving, such as flowing water. Slow shutter speeds are ideal for landscapes, especially during golden hour.

The **composition** of the image helps direct the focus to the interest point.

- The rule of thirds describes placing the interest point in a third of the image, either to the top, bottom, left or right, as opposed to the centre.
- Forced perspective refers to the depth of the image, putting the interest point in focus closer to the camera.
- The vanishing point refers to lines that lead your eye to a subject in the image.



Top Pink cockatoo on a weather vane.



Above A serious bit of kit.
Photos – Mark Davidson

Above right A bathing brown falcon (*Falco berigora*).

Below right Fringed lily (*Thysanotus baueri*).
Photos – Keith Lightbody



Eremophila species were just some of the plants in flower.

For photographers—and also for those who just want to experience the quiet and the wonderful environment, Eyre Bird Observatory has so much to offer. I'm so glad I girded my loins for the four-wheel-drive trek.

I know I will smile every time I pass that turn off in the future—what a wonderful experience with such excellent people. It was truly a once in a lifetime experience.



WA's beloved Bush Books series features publications about birds including *Birds in the Backyard* and *Australian Birds of Prey*. You can purchase one for \$6.95 from shop.dbca.wa.gov.au

"Incoming!" was the cry that went up several times a day when these wonderful creatures came for a visit—that was our cue to grab our camera and take up your position. As we spent so much time at this, I found I learned to know the bird's behaviour—which way it might land or take off, or when it was about to come down to a lower branch for a drink. It was a more studied approach to birding than walking through the bush hoping to chance upon an unsuspecting bird.

There was plenty of time for walking through the bush, and many species were seen and photographed on the walking paths around the observatory: grey butcherbird (*Cracticus torquatus*), brush bronzewing (*Phaps elegans*), red-winged fairy-wren (*Malurus elegans*), several species of honeyeaters and raptors. We also had a run to the beach where the birds were quietly going about their business: pied oystercatcher (*Haematopus longirostris*), pacific gull (*Larus pacificus*) and red-capped plover (*Anarhynchus ruficapillus*) were among them.

The flora around this area is also quite amazing: mallee fringe lily (*Thysanotus baueri*), flax lily (*Dianella* sp.), thick-leaved fan-flower (*Scaevola crassifolia*) and a blue



Beverley Oliver is an amateur photographer and bird lover, discovering her passion for capturing candid images of Western Australia's flora and fauna.