

Billy Ho

I went to **Billy Ho** again today. I wonder why it is called "Billy Ho" and why do I keep going back?

I could go to **Moree Reserve** instead.

It's a lovely spot in Victoria's north-west with a large waterhole, huge old redgums and plenty of birds. There are nearly always **Peaceful Doves**, tiny **Diamond Firetails**, **Spiny-cheeked Honeyeaters** and many waterbirds to be seen.

And of course a drive north down **Smith's Road** towards **Telopea Downs** and the **Big Desert National Park** is always productive. Families of **White-browed Babbler**, **Variegated Fairy-wren**, **Yellow-throated Miners** and the striking **Mallee Ringneck** are certain sightings, while the brilliant, almost iridescent purple **Splendid Fairy-wren** and the aloof and stately **Australian Bustard** may be found there also.

During summer at **Miller's Bore** close to **Telopea Downs**, one of Australia's most beautiful birds, the **Rainbow Bee-eater** can be seen. I never tire of watching these birds perching quite still on an exposed branch or gliding and swooping, their dark outlined russet wings brilliant against the blue sky. I've read that the **Red-lored Whistler** is in this area, but I'm still looking.

And it's great at the **Diapur Flora Reserve**, where lots of tiny thornbills (**Buff-rumped**, **Yellow**, **Inland** and **Chestnut-rumped**) and **Brown-headed**, **New Holland** and other honeyeaters zip and dart noisily through the **Yellow Gums**.

Another top spot is **Broughton's Waterhole**, 25kms south of Kaniva in the **Little Desert National Park**. I call it the desert that isn't as the sandy soil is the only similarity to any desert.

The western fringes of the **Little Desert** has a wealth of diverse trees, shrubs and plants. There are about **680 plant species** and in Spring the park is ablaze with colour. The track (by **4WD**), to **Broughton's Waterhole** goes through an area of **low heath** and it was here I had my

first sighting of the **Rufous Fieldwren**, the elusive **Crested Bellbird**, heard but not always seen, can be spotted in the light timber of the **Little Desert**, and many birds such as the **Tawny-crowned**, **White-eared**, **New Holland**, and **Yellow-plumed Honeyeaters** are attracted to the permanent water.

But I keep going back to **Billy Ho!**

This small block with an easy, meandering 2.7km walk is privately owned, but open to the public all year round and just a 15-minute drive from town.

It is here the high-pitched whistle Of the **Southern Scrub-robin** is often heard. My friend Rod can whistle this wonderful creature to him, but sadly he has left Kaniva and so I have gradually learnt to do this. It's quite a thrill to see it hop through the low-growing **hibbertias**, rufous-based tail cocked, and large, beady eyes inquisitively seeking the source of the call.

In 1991 an eruption of **Blue-winged Parrots** occurred in September and October and one afternoon I walked through **Billy Ho** with its stately **Yellow Gums**, twisted old **Brown Stringybarks** and soft green **Oyster Bay** and **Slender Cypress**, and sighted six pairs of these quiet sedately coloured small parrots. That was quite something.

Early Spring is wonderful at **Billy Ho** as one by one the migratory birds return. Usually the conspicuous **White-winged Triller** is amongst the first to arrive, along with solitary **Pallid** and **Horsfield's Bronze Cuckoos**, which herald their arrival with mournful calls. The delicately-coloured grey, lemon and white **Cockatiels** are then noticed roosting quietly in the trees and when I hear distinctive churrs and "kee-kee-ees" "I search the branches for the small, large-billed, turquoise-green **Sacred Kingfisher**.

The rare, endangered, small sub-species of **Red-tailed Black Cockatoo** Is also an occasional visitor. They travel in pairs or small flocks, uttering coarse, trumpet-like calls in flight, and leave twigs, branches, and leaves strewn on the ground under the **stringybarks** where they feed. I've seen Evidence of their visits but my sightings of this small-billed race with strikingly coloured females were in the **Little Desert** further south of

Billy Ho. By Autumn 1995 the country was parched and most swamps dry. In the paddock beside Billy Ho, close to the fence, a large dam still held water and the area abounded with honeyeaters -fifteen species in fact. Some of these were the nomadic **White-fronted, Purple-gaped, Yellow-plumed, Black-chinned, Spiny-cheeked, Tawny-crowned, White-naped and White-eared.** On some days it was not uncommon to sight well over 30 species. What a bonanza!

One day in **May** I'd strolled **Billy Ho's** track drinking in the peace and beauty of the bush. Suddenly loud, clear trills and lovely birdsong stopped me in my tracks. Desperately I searched the bushes for this marvellous songster. Finally, in the centre of a small **Banksia** I spied a tiny brown bird with bold black streaks on its white breast and brilliant almost red rump- a **Shy Heathwren**, and he sang and he sang. A magic moment I'll never forget.

This lovely little bird was my **102nd** sighting in **Billy Ho.**

So that's why I keep going back! And why such a name for this captivating patch of bush? The owners, Barry and Elsa say that when Barry's grandfather was going out there in the late 1890's he'd say: "I'm off out there to billyho."

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