

Gould League of Bird Lovers

Australia, 1909-Present

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The Gould League of Bird Lovers of Victoria was established in 1909, followed by the Gould League of Bird Lovers of New South Wales in 1910 and similar bodies in other states. The Leagues proved very popular with school children and teachers alike. In annual celebrations of Bird Day, children sang, recited and performed plays about birds, entered their writing into competitions and learned bird calls. The Gould Leagues were introduced to state schools within a context of educational reform which had seen [nature study](#) become part of elementary school syllabuses. In the same period, naturalists and scientists were expressing concern over the disappearance of species, and began a campaign to address threats to Australian birds. The Gould Leagues reflected and influenced these early twentieth century contexts and continued, through the course of the century, to influence conservation education and environmental education.

Formation of the Gould Leagues

The first Bird Day was held in the state schools of Victoria on Friday 29 October 1909. In overcrowded city schools, schools of country towns, and tiny one teacher schools in remote rural districts, children looked forward to a day of observing and celebrating bird life. Bird Day had been suggested by the Australian Ornithologists Union and approved by the Minister of Public Instruction, [A.A. Billson](#), and the Director of Education, [Frank Tate](#), himself an enthusiastic naturalist. Teachers arranged special programs devoted to birds while ornithologists and naturalists visited schools throughout the state to talk about birds and lead the children on short excursions into the surrounding bush, parks and school grounds (*Victoria Education Gazette and Teachers Aid*, July, September, October 1909). The October issue of the *School Paper*, published monthly and distributed to every child, was devoted to information, stories, and poems about birds. It informed children that on Bird Day they would be invited to join a proposed new society which would allow them to study birds and become a 'bird lover'. The society would be called the Gould League of Bird Lovers, named after the English ornithologist [John Gould](#) who studied the birds of Australia in the nineteenth century.

The organisers of Bird Day were astounded by its success and the enthusiasm shown by teachers, parents and children. [J.A. Leach](#), lecturer in nature study at the Teachers' Training College and first honorary secretary of the Gould League in Victoria, enthused that Bird Day 'exceeded the most sanguine expectations of anyone interested'. Tens of thousands of children wanted to join the League and a membership card was in preparation (*Gazette and Teachers' Aid*, November 1909, 333). By June 1910, thousands had enrolled in the League, paid one penny for an attractive certificate featuring the Australian coat of arms, Australian birds, and Australian flora, and taken the pledge: 'I hereby promise that I will protect native

birds and will not collect their eggs. I also promise that I will endeavour to prevent others from injuring native birds and destroying their eggs' (*School Paper-Class IV*, June 1910, 73-75).

The Gould League of Bird Lovers of New South Wales was organised in 1910 with the first Bird Day held in October 1911. The founder and first Honorary Secretary was [Walter Finigan](#), a teacher based at Wellington Public School in the central west of the state. Finigan, a naturalist and ornithologist with special teacher training in nature study and elementary agriculture, had joined the Victorian Gould League and received its certificate. He discussed the formation of a similar League in New South Wales with headmaster [Edward Webster](#), and in October local teachers at Wellington met and formed a League. On 21 December 1910, the League was formalised in Sydney, enjoying the support of prominent educators, naturalists, scientists, and government officials. As in Victoria, the League was constituted as one for school children, organised by teachers and operating through state schools.

New South Wales children pledged: 'I hereby promise to protect all birds except those that are noxious and to refrain from the unnecessary collection of wild bird's eggs'. A pale green membership certificate rivalled Victoria's, featuring Australian birds and flora and listing the names of patrons and committee members. In October 1911, Bird Day was celebrated in schools throughout the state, supported by a week of lessons designed around birds. Teachers received a *Bird-Life Supplement* which contained poems, stories, photographs and articles to support their teaching. A concert in Sydney featured children singing and reciting, an address by the Minister for Public Instruction and a lantern lecture on Australian birds. In 1912 the League arranged literary competitions to which children and adults could contribute stories and songs. This year saw the introduction of bird call competitions with school teams and individual children trained to imitate the calls of birds. By 1915 there were 750 school based leagues in New South Wales, with 38,405 members and growing.

Bird Protection

The enthusiastic reception of the Gould Leagues of Victoria and New South Wales was influenced by two significant movements: one addressed to bird protection and the other to the teaching of nature study in schools. In 1906, the president of the Australasian Ornithologists Union addressed his annual lecture to 'The Protection of Native Birds'. He, along with many naturalists, was concerned at the numbers of birds being slaughtered: slaughtered by men for sport, boys with sling shots, farmers thinking to protect their crops, poison put out for rabbits, egg collectors, and perhaps most disturbing, by shooters collecting plumes to decorate women's hats. The international millinery trade in bird feathers was booming, at the expense of the most beautiful birds. President Ryan argued that the Union must press for revised legislation. Such legislation needed support by education, particularly of children, the coming generation. He suggested a Bird Day in schools (*Emu*, January 1907, 95-103). That call for Bird Day grew in popularity among naturalists and nature study advocates in the following years. An important connection had been made between effective legislation and the education of children.

The years 1908 to 1910 were significant years for conservation and preservation in Australia. Public interest in the preservation of fauna generally, and in the protection of birds specifically, was strong. Particularly influential was an article by ornithologist A.H.E. Mattingley, and its accompanying state of the art photographs of birds and their nests published in *Emu* in October 1907 (65-73). Mattingley visited the swamp lands of the Murray

River to observe and photograph white egrets breeding and nesting. Before his second visit, however, the hunters arrived before him:

What a holocaust! Plundered for their Plumes! ... How could anyone but a cold-blooded callous monster destroy in this wholesale manner such beautiful birds, the embodiment of all that is pure, graceful, and good (72).

Mattingley's article featured in newspapers and journals, including the school papers. It influenced meetings in Victoria and New South Wales which called for the protection of birds. These meetings influenced the organisation of the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia in Sydney in June 1909 and the Gould League of Bird Lovers in Victoria in October 1909.

Nature Study

Enthusiasm for Bird Days and the Leagues was also due to the popularity and effect of nature study being taught in schools. Nature study had been introduced to the revised syllabuses of all Australian states by 1905. It stressed scientific observation and reasoning but also appreciation of the beauty of nature and a caring attachment to nature. Those who originally thought nature study a fad, were silenced by overwhelming support on the part of educational authorities. In Australia children were encouraged to know, love, and identify with indigenous fauna and flora. The introduction of education in relation to birds and the need for their protection fitted readily into nature study courses.

Publications of the Gould Leagues in their early years of operation, such as the annual *Bird-Life Supplement* in New South Wales, illustrate a commitment to knowledge and close observation on one hand and the aim to inspire affection, empathy and aesthetic appreciation on the other. Much was written about the 'usefulness' of birds as insect eaters and their value for agriculture, but the Leagues also believed birds should be protected because they had an intrinsic value. Birds were beautiful and worthy of human regard.

A Century of Gould Leagues

The Gould Leagues of Victoria and New South Wales thrived, despite the War and the Depression of the early 1930s. Belonging to the League and the activities organised in schools became an important part of children's lives. While Leagues were established in Queensland, Tasmania and South Australia, their fortunes fluctuated. The following sections provide 'snapshots' of the Leagues, each advancing 25 years.

Twenty-Five Years, 1934/1935

The New South Wales and Victorian Gould Leagues were proud of their achievements when they celebrated 25 years. In New South Wales, annual celebrations of Bird Day continued, with a largely attended concert in Sydney and smaller concerts in individual schools. Children entered stories, songs and poems into competitions, while the Bird Call competition aroused much interest. The League was enrolling over 100,000 children annually, and its finances were healthy. The early membership certificate had been replaced with annual post-card sized certificates in 1931, with an enamel badge also available for purchase. The certificates and badges were treasured by children, and today remain collectable items. Many

cards featured illustrations by ornithologist and artist Neville W. Cayley, author of *What Bird is That?* In the first edition of this popular and enduring classic of natural history, a short tribute to the Gould League declared: 'No finer thing has come out of our schools than this League of Bird Lovers' (1931, xvi).

The League built up a collection of songs and poetry from the literary competitions and published these as *Gould League Songs and Poems* (1934). A beautifully presented gift book, *Feathered Friends* (1935), illustrated by Cayley, contained contributions by well-known naturalists and ornithologists. *Gould League Notes*, an annual magazine, commenced in 1935, publishing reports from local branches, contributions by naturalists, teachers and children, and literary competition entries. Issues featured photographs of children who had enticed a native, wild, adult bird to land on his or her body, thus earning a special merit badge. Twenty-five years of the Gould League were celebrated at Wellington Public School where a memorial tablet was affixed to the legendary tree where Finigan and Webster had first discussed the League's formation.

In Victoria, Bird Day was also celebrated each October, consistently supported by material published within the *School Paper*. In 1935 and 1936 over one thousand children participated in large-scale Bird Day excursions to Toolern Bay. Naturalist Charles Barrett wrote enthusiastically about the achievements of the League: egg collecting had been reduced to a minimum, the sling-shot had dropped into disfavour, and the killing of birds had declined. The League was a powerful influence in the cause of protection (1938, 49).

Fifty years, 1959/1960

Over the next quarter of a century, the Gould Leagues continued operations in the two largest states, maintaining activities much the same as those of the mid-1930s. Meanwhile, Western Australia inaugurated a League in 1939. In 1956, this League changed its name from The Gould League of Bird Lovers in Western Australia to the Western Australian Gould League and extended its objectives to the study of all forms of nature. This move pre-empted a similar renaming and broadening in New South Wales and Victoria by more than ten years.

Gould League Notes continued as an annual publication in New South Wales. The 1960 issue fore-fronted the celebration of the League's golden jubilee. An historical article was contributed by Walter Finigan, now retired as Headmaster of the Correspondence School but still active in the League. Finigan was invited to attend concerts, open sanctuaries and unveil bird baths, the efforts of children's fund-raising. The League in 1960 demonstrated a continuity of objectives and activities, remaining viable, with healthy membership numbers.

In Victoria, an annual magazine, *The Bird Lover*, began in the 1940s. It published children's essays, observations, poems, photographs and drawings, many of which had been contributed to the League's competitions, along with contributions by adults. In the late 1950s, the League was obviously active and enthusiastic, providing opportunities for children to be involved in enjoyable outdoor nature study. Ambitious field days allowed groups of one thousand children to experience an excursion to Toolern Vale Sanctuary or, from 1960, Eltham Park. In 1959, the League mounted a highly-praised exhibition at the Moomba Nature Show, an event visited by thousands. In 1961, the foreword to *Bird Lover* claimed record membership, a growing demand for more excursions to provide children with first-hand experiences, and an acknowledgement that the general public was becoming increasingly aware of the need for conservation.

Children who belonged to the Western Australian Gould League in 1960 pledged: 'I promise I will protect all birds, animals and plants, except those that are harmful, and I will not collect birds' eggs'. Western Australia published its annual *Gould League Notes* from 1941. In 1961/2, this magazine reported on the annual camp for children, field days, and a celebration of Bird Day at Rosalie School in Perth, attended by several schools and notable visitors, and involving a concert, displays, and a nature trail. The President's message addressed advances made in 'nature conservation' and the important role of public interest to which Gould League members could contribute.

Seventy-Five Years, 1984/1985

As the 1960s ushered in dramatic change to all spheres of life, it is not surprising to see a transformation within the Gould Leagues of Australia in the following decades. In 1967 both the Victorian and the New South Wales Leagues shortened their names and broadened their objectives to the protection of flora, fauna and environment. By the mid-1980s each state body was very much involved in the formulation of environmental education for schools and the provision of resources to support it.

Publications of the Gould League of New South Wales gradually shifted from talking about education for conservation to environmental education. From the late 1970s, the League was involved in the setting up of field studies centres. An education officer visited schools to assist teachers in providing environmental education, and the League supplied booklets and pamphlets on a wide range of topics (*History of the Gould League*, 1979). In 1985, when the 75th anniversary of the League was celebrated, its brochure proclaimed: 'Today the Gould League is interested in promoting the protection and preservation of the total environment'. The League was influential in the writing of *Environmental Education Curriculum Statement K-12* (1989), an important document which established environmental education as mandatory, to be introduced across the six Key Learning Areas. The League's activities in the mid-1980s included a Koala Count (1984), Operation Bird Watch (1985) and Urban Wildlife Survey (1986) (Roberts and Tribe 2011, 58-60).

The Victorian League followed a similar path to New South Wales, reflected in its magazine *Survival* (1972-1977). Western Australia in 1985 was focussed upon a state of the art field study centre at Herdsman Lake, a wetland area close to the city of Perth which had attracted the interest of the World Wildlife Fund. The centre became the headquarters of the League which began a series of booklets about the lake and its bird and animal life (*Nature Walkabout*, May 1982, May 1985, September 1985).

Centenary, 2009/2010

Problems emerged for the Gould League of New South Wales from the late 1990s. These included cuts in funding and support from the Department of Education, lack of support from individuals, and perhaps a prevailing sense that the League was now redundant in school education (Roberts and Tribe, 64-66). In 2010 a ceremony to mark its centenary was held at Wellington Public School, after which the Gould League of New South Wales disbanded. A small booklet about its history written by long serving members, Peter Roberts and David Tribe, proved remarkably popular, copies in excess of its printing being ordered by hundreds of ex-school children who retain strong memories of being part of the Gould League.

Victoria also experienced problems, yet it celebrated its centenary in 2009 and continued viable. In 2014 the [Gould League](#) developed a new website which is accessible, informative, and provides access for teachers and others to a range of resources related to education for sustainability. The League manages or is associated with several locations for outdoor learning excursions.

[Western Australian \(WA\) Gould League \(Inc\)](#) now operates as ‘a non-profit, independent environmental organisation that enables people to understand, appreciate and protect the environment’. It manages Herdsman Lake Wildlife Centre and maintains a strong relationship with Department of Education, Catholic, and independent schools.

For over one hundred years, Gould Leagues have been involved in the education of Australian children. In the first decades of their operation they appear unique in comparison with organisations for the protection of birds in other countries due to their organisation through state departments of education and their operation by state school teachers, for school children. Until the 1960s they played a role in the life of perhaps the majority of primary school children in Victoria and New South Wales. They influenced children to develop interest in protection, preservation and conservation. As environmentalism became prominent in the 1970s, the Gould Leagues shaped environmental education in schools. That role has continued, although the fluctuating fortunes of the Leagues perhaps reflect continuing ambiguity in the twenty first century about addressing environmental problems. The two surviving Leagues, now independent organisations, remain committed to supporting education for sustainability.

Note

Archival and primary sources consulted include: Papers of the Gould League of Bird Lovers of New South Wales held at the State Library of New South Wales, MLMSS 63 and MLMSS 8881; *Bird-Life Supplement*. Supplement to *Public Instruction Gazette* (1911-1915) and *Education Gazette* (1916-1921); Victoria’s *Education Gazette and Teachers’ Aid*; various periodical publications of the Gould Leagues; and *Emu: Official Organ of the Australasian Ornithologists’ Union*. (1906-1910, 1938).

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