

Forgotten Feathers.*

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JAMES BACKHOUSE, who visited the colonies during the years 1832 and 1837, when on a mission with Rev. Washington Walker for the Society of Friends, frequently refers in his letters to objects of natural history.

When he came to Melbourne in November, 1837, he made several excursions up the Yarra to his friends, the Gardiners and Langhorns, and had opportunity of seeing nature in its original state round Melbourne.

On the 13th of that month he writes (after spending First Day with the Langhorns):—

"J. Gardiner conveyed us to Melbourne in his boat. The river is fringed with shrubs and trees the whole way and enlivened with the constant tinkling chirp of the Bell Bird; the shrill whistle, terminated by a jerking sound, something like the crack of a whip of a coachman, is also occasionally heard here; and we noticed the Nonkin Bird, a small species of Heron, cinnamon coloured on the back, sulphur on the breast, and with a long white feather in its head."

Again, on the 15th November, he writes:—"The number of blacks in the vicinity of Port Phillip, including its whole circuit with Western Port, is estimated from 300 to 500. . . . The plants which yield them sustenance are . . . Kangaroos, Emus and other birds, and opossums are also generally eaten by the blacks, and are abundant, though the Emus are fast retiring before the white population and their flocks and herds. The large bird of the Crane kind, colonially called the Native Companion, and the Bustard, denominated Wild Turkey, are also plentiful; and there are yellow-tailed and red-tailed Black Cockatoos, round-headed White Cockatoos, Parrots of various kinds, Pelicans, Black Swans, Ducks of various kinds (one large species has a white patch upon the wing), White Hawks, greater Laughing Jackasses, Kingfishers, Quails, and various other birds, not to omit the Piping Crow, with its cheerful note, and the Black Magpie. . . .

"Among the vegetable productions which mark this as an Australian settlement, and at once distinguish it from Van Diemen's Land, are the . . . and in the animal creation the tinkling voice of the Bell Bird is scarcely less striking and distinctive. . . .

"On the 16th November . . . after dining with John Batman, he presented us with some oval baskets, the manufacture of the blacks of this district. . . . The blacks often

* As the early literature on ornithological notes is scarce and scattered, the editors invite, under this heading, any interesting items that may have been overlooked, for want of reference, by recent authors—notes likely to be found in old accounts of exploration or in scientific magazines.

bring in the splendid tails of the Australian Pheasant, which are said to abound among the hills."—(*Backhouse, Letters*, part 5, 1839, pp. 6-10.)

"The blacks often bring in the splendid tails of the Lyre Bird, *Menura superba*, which is called in Australia the Pheasant or the Bird of Paradise. It is said to abound among the hills of this district. John Batman has some fine Emus captured here."—(*Backhouse, Narrative*, 16th November, 1837-1843, p. 506)."

Stray Feathers.

I AM indebted to Mr. Tom Carter for the skin of a Bare-eyed Cockatoo, *Cacatua gymnopsis*, from the region of the North-West Cape, which tends to prove that the bird I debited for that district* as the Long-billed Cockatoo (*Licmetis pastinator*) is really *C. gymnopsis*. Therefore, obviously, it makes a good note for "stray feathers." In 1890 I gave Western Australia as a habitat of *gymnopsis*,† but appear to have turned my back on myself without sufficient reason, except that I was swayed from the actual fact by Mr. Carter's fascinating field notes. Possibly the Cockatoo noted by Mr. G. A. Kearnland, of the Calvert Expedition, as having been noticed between Mullawa and Cue, and again seen in countless numbers near the Fitzroy River, was likewise referable to *C. gymnopsis*, and not to *C. sanguinea*, as stated.‡ It is to be regretted that a skin was not preserved for confirmatory evidence, especially from the Fitzroy, where the birds were so plentiful.

A Halcyon (*H. sordidus*) accompanied the Cockatoo, and was interesting from the fact that I have not noticed this species recorded previously for the Western Coast. Date on skin, 14th June, 1900; locality, Point Cloates.

Mr. Carter also forwarded another Halcyon, which he shot at Vasse, in the south-west, on the 3rd February last. It resembles closely the common *Halcyon sanctus*, but has decidedly a more bluish (bluish-green) coat, while the nuchal band and all the under surface are white, instead of being buff-coloured as in the *H. sanctus*. Should the examination of a series of specimens from Western Australia prove the bird to be a new or Western variety, I venture to suggest for it the name of *H. westralasianus*. The following are the dimensions in inches of a male of both kinds:—

H. sanctus.—Length, 8; bill, 1.45; wing, 3.55; tail, 2.25.

H. westralasianus.—Length, 8.5; bill, 1.6; wing, 3.7; tail, 2.4.

A correspondent while Quail shooting near Melbourne during midwinter (July) flushed a Pipit (*Anthus australis*) from a newly-hatched clutch of young.

* "Nests and Eggs of Australian Birds," p. 621.

† Proc. Roy. Soc. Vict., vol. iii. (new ser.), p. 4.

‡ Proc. Roy. Soc. S.A., vol. xxii., p. 169.