

Exploration of the North-West Cape.

BY THOMAS CARTER.

WE left Point Cloates station on 10th June in buckboard buggy, with provisions (meat excepted) for three weeks, and bucket, rope, and shovel for procuring water. The morning was clear and bright, with a stiff north-east gale blowing, but when we had dinner at the N. paddock fence, 15 miles on the road, clouds began to rise from seawards. The road is level, but heavy at times, the coast sandhills lying on our left and the rocky range on our right, getting higher as we go north. Not many birds are to be seen on this part of the journey, as the country is open grass or soft spinifex. An occasional Little Quail or Ground-Lark is flushed, and now and again a Spotted Harrier sails past, out of gunshot, beating the ground for lizards. We called in at a sand well at 4 p.m. to get water, and arrived at the mouth of the Yardie Creek at sundown, where we had

purposed camping. But as it was then thundering and raining, with every prospect of a wet night, we decided to go half a mile further, where are some convenient caves. The other white man who accompanied me thus far to lay baits for troublesome dingoes (wild dogs) and our two natives here found snug, dry quarters for the night. Next morning we walked up the range near the creek to see if any Sea Eagles were nesting. The Yardie Creek contains sea water for about two miles, full of fish. The banks are level near the beach, but rise rapidly, and half a mile from the sea are sheer cliffs over 100 feet in height, with, in places, 40 feet of salt water at their bases. Above the salt water is a deep pool of "sweet" water, surrounded by bulrushes, and past this are two smaller pools of good fresh water. Beyond here the creek winds through the ranges, rugged cliffs on either side for miles to the eastwards, the bed of the creek being formed of giant boulders and gravel, with stunted gum trees and fig trees growing sometimes rather thickly. Though the highest range may not exceed 1,000 feet in height the place is extremely wild and romantic. Through our binoculars we inspected a White-bellied Sea Eagle's nest on a ledge of the cliff. It contained eggs last year, but repairing operations only were apparently in progress, as was the case with an Osprey's nest, built on the edge of a cliff, in a most convenient place to walk up and inspect. We proceeded on the range past the pools, then scrambled down into the gorge and visited a vast cave. Water drips from the roof, forming two basins of delicious cold water, which are much frequented by wild dogs. Here Painted Finches (*Emblema picta*) and Keartland Honey-eaters (*Ptilotis keartlandi*) were quenching their thirst, and we followed their example, preparatory to a rough walk back down the bed of the creek. Here the loud, rich notes of the Buff-bellied Shrike-Thrush (*Collyriocincla rufiventris*) may be heard all the way. Flocks of Bare-eyed Cockatoos (*Cacatua gymnopsis*) were flying overhead; Keartland, Singing, and Brown Honey-eaters abundant in the low trees, and occasionally a Flower-pecker (*Dicaeum*) seen, and small coveys of Plumed-Pigeons (*Lophophaps*) sunning on the great boulders and drinking at the little dubs left by last night's rain. We shot a rock kangaroo on the way to camp to serve as baits for dogs and tucker for the road.

After dinner my man returned to the station, and self and native started north again. We turned into the sand-hills to dig out water for horses, but it was very salty, though fortunately not deep down. Coming on, we kept a sharp look-out for the Carter Desert-Bird (*Eremiornis*), which has been frequently seen here, but failed to note one. Pied Honey-eaters (*Entomophila leucomelas*) were fairly common, and the cheerful notes of the Field-Wren (*Calamanthus*) heard from many a bush. A comfortable camp on a springy bed of soft spinifex, and next morning we reached another large creek, similar to the Yardie,

but with a dry bed. I got out to walk as the buggy jolted over half a mile of boulders and coarse shingle. The sea reef comes close to the beach here, which is formed of shingle and broken shell. A pair of Large-billed Stone Plovers (*Orthorhamphus*) flew heavily away in company with several Reef Herons and Caspian Terns. There is always an Osprey's nest about here, and this year it is an immense structure, built on a prostrate log left by some flood. Standing on the log I was just able to see over the edge of the nest, which was more than 5 feet in height and about 3 feet in diameter. It contained no eggs, but fresh tufts of seaweed and coarse grass were being added to the lining. Close to the nest was a sheet of flat rock, with numerous cavities, which I was pleased to see were filled with rain water, and it saved us cleaning out the next "soak," which is in an awkward place, with only very moderate quality of water. I coo-eed to the native to bring the buggy, and we hobbled out, then walked over the flat to where the creek emerges from the ranges between great cliffs. We scrambled along the top on one side to inspect a Wedge-tailed Eagle's nest previously seen. It is built on a stunted tree growing out of the face of the cliff, but on getting above it we saw it was apparently deserted, so returned down the bed of the creek, shooting two handsome striped rock wallaby on the way. We went further north in the afternoon and camped early to explore another similar deep gorge, but without any result except temporarily losing my dog, who, seeing so many rock kangaroo, or wallaby, hopping towards the flat for their evening meal, could not resist a chase, but returned safely, and I shot a kangaroo to take on the road. Next morning the travelling was heavy, as the sandy ground was honeycombed by a species of rat, making the horses afraid to move. We passed a large belt of mangroves where novelties in the bird line have been previously procured, but had to proceed two miles further to procure water. This is about 10 feet down a cave, which was almost filled with kangaroo and wallaby bones and dung, sticks, sand, stones, &c. An hour's hard work with the shovel procured a supply of black, evil-smelling water, but our horses drank it. After dinner we took the water-bags and prospected the range in hopes of finding more rain water, and were successful. Camped in the dense thicket round the water. Wedge-bills' (*Sphenostoma*) and Spiny-cheeked Honey-eaters' (*Acanthochaera ruficularis*) songs were heard all over, but the birds were invisible. The sand-flies worried us dreadfully until sundown, then the mosquitos relieved them.

Next morning we went back to the mangroves. In one place a large open sheet of water is surrounded by mangroves and studded with patches of rock and dead logs. Pelicans, Curlews, White-fronted and Reef Herons, and Crested Terns were abundant. There were also a few Red-capped Dottrels (*Egialitis*

ruficapilla), Little Stints (*Limonites ruficollis*), and a great flock of Teal, the handsome *Nettion castaneum*. After some stalking I succeeded in shooting three, but retrieving them was troublesome work, as between the rocks and stumps one is liable to sink in unknown depths of mud. The native resolutely refused to attempt it. We decided to have ducks for dinner, and I handed to the native what I took to be a female to pluck, while I first skinned what seemed to be a handsome drake. However, his bird proved to be a young male, without a vestige of any glossy-green head or neck, while my bird, which could not be distinguished from an almost full-plumaged male, proved to be a female. The glossy-green head and neck and rich red-brown breast were not pronounced. On some flat rocks left bare by the tide a party of Waders was feeding. Not being sure of their species a charge of No. 6 shot proved them to be Grey-rumped Sandpipers (*Heteractitis brevipes*) by securing three. After dinner we forced our way into a very dense patch of mangroves, but for some time all we could see were Yellow White-cygs (*Zosterops lutea*) flitting above us and Western Fantails (*Rhipidura preissi*) hovering within arm's length to feed on the countless mosquitos that accompanied us, when my attention was attracted by a loud, clear song quite new to me. Keeping still, the bird came close to us, and was secured without being much mutilated, as is so often the case in shooting specimens in mangrove growth. It is what I take to be undoubtedly the Black-tailed Thickhead (*Pachycephala melanura*), and is a south and west record so far. We spent some time here, but failed to see more specimens. Two more Ospreys' nests were inspected, both empty, and what seemed to be a new nest of the White-headed Sea Eagle—at least, one of these birds came from it. It also was empty. Nankeen Herons were constantly roused out of their afternoon siesta, but nothing more of importance seen. Not a sign of any Shrike-Robins, as shot here last February. Next day we decided to attempt to double the North-West Cape, and accordingly proceeded slowly through the dense spinifex and rat holes. We camped close to the beach, near Vlaming Head, where a heavy surf breaks ceaselessly on the beach. Wild dogs' tracks were numerous, and we thoughtfully provided any comers with some supper. Just as I was dozing off my dog (tied under buggy) barked furiously. I looked up cautiously and saw a big dingo inspecting the camp from about 10 yards distance. I reached for the rifle, but he was off instantly. However, next morning he or another was dead close to the camp and several baits gone. As we approached Vlaming Head the going got a little better. Flocks of Pied Honey-eaters were constantly passing us, flying against the strong north-east wind, two or three Wedge-tailed Eagles were seen soaring over the range, and once a Black-cheeked Falcon whizzed past us. At Vlaming Head the high range ends

abruptly, though the land still trends on about three miles further in sand-hills and salt marshes. We carefully skirted the edge of the treacherous marsh, but in spite of all care the horses broke through the crust several times, but luckily did not get absolutely bogged. In the centre of the marsh were four reddish rounded objects, which suddenly stood up as big specimens of the great plain kangaroo. They looked immense on the bare flat plain, and were evidently having a siesta, with no cover for dogs or other enemies to approach. By noon we were at the Exmouth Gulf, and stopped for dinner. I may mention a "record" of another description was here made, as no wheeled conveyance of any kind had previously been round Vlaming Head. In the afternoon we had to proceed along the beach, as everywhere else seemed to be dense thicket. Fortunately the tide was low and the going hard. A large white patch ahead of us proved to be a flock of Bare-eyed Cockatoos taking a siesta on the bare beach. Towards sundown we judged we were opposite a watering place, and forced a way to it through the dense scrub. This is a place shown to me by a native 12 years ago, after promises of much tobacco, as he said no white man had ever seen it, and the natives did not wish them to know of it. The hole at surface is in solid rock (cement conglomerate), about 18 inches in diameter. This aperture opens out below into a large cavern, with a large, deep pool of splendid water at one end. The third time the bucket was lowered the rope slipped off the handle, and, as the native declared the cave full of snakes, it fell to my lot to descend and rescue the bucket. My stay below was not long enough to see if snakes were plentiful or not. They used to be there in previous years. Next day we left the buggy and rode about ten miles south towards where are a pool and spring of fresh water. On the way through the thicket many Singing (*Ptilotis sonora*) and Keartland Honey-eaters were feeding on the yellow pendent blossoms of the cork trees (?). One bird among them seeming to differ by its bright yellow back, I shot it, but unfortunately failed to find it in the tangled undergrowth. A little further south an Osprey was uttering its plaintive whistling, aloft in the air. The nest was a conspicuous object high up in a gum tree, and about a mile from the beach, the greatest distance I have yet seen one. It also proved empty. Proceeding south we saw an immense nest in a low gum tree, which could only be an Eagle's. Deciding to visit it on returning, we went on to Quailing Pool to water. Two White-eyed Ducks rose hurriedly at our approach, and flew straight to sea out of sight, apparently none the worse for two barrels discharged at long range. Just as we were leaving after dinner an Emu came in to drink, the first one seen. Returning we looked at the Eagle's nest. A noble White-bellied Sea Eagle slipped quietly off the nest while we were still at some distance, and, taking a wide circuit, flew close over-

head silently. This looked promising, but on swinging myself to the nest it was without eggs, though apparently ready, being neatly lined with fresh gum leaves. It was a large structure, fully 6 feet in diameter and 4 feet in depth, and was only 10 feet from the ground. On previous instances I have noted both this bird and the Wedge-tailed Eagle sitting on empty nests. Crossing a stony creek, near where I lost the strange bird in the morning, my attention was called by a strange loud song, somewhat resembling that of the Red-capped Robin in its grating sound. I was lucky enough to secure the bird, and it was a Golden-backed Honey-eater (*Melithreptus laticor*)—so far, I believe, a farthest south and west record. The naked skin over the eye was gamboge-yellow in front, emerald green posteriorly, but this faded to a dull purple soon after death. The following day saw us again at the same spot, when another specimen was procured, a male, apparently breeding, as was the first. The yellow of the rump on both birds was almost as bright as on the nape of the neck. About six of these birds were seen, but they were very shy.

Next day we decided to spell the horses, and had a long walk through more open timbered country, with large spinifex growth. The native was sure we should find Emu nests there, but we saw no birds or tracks. Pallid Cuckoos (*C. pallidus*) were numerous, and Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrikes (*Graucalus melanops*) in some numbers. Returning a fine kangaroo fell to the rifle, to replenish the larder, which was getting low again. The afternoon we spent in exploring the dense thicket round the water. Another Osprey's nest was found, in the topmost twigs of a white gum. They were so thin and looked so brittle we decided the nest was, like the others, empty. It is the first Osprey's nest I have found that was not easy of access. The thicket yielded nothing new. A beautiful *Malurus assimilis* was secured, and Wedge-bills, Spiny-cheeked Honey-eaters, and Western Fantails noted. We paid another visit to the Eagle's nest the following day, but it still contained no eggs. On watering at the pool the native said he saw a Duck behind a mangrove bush. Thinking there might be more, I crawled cautiously up and could see a bird in the water through the leaves, but it looked very small. However, I fired, and picked up an unfortunate Black-throated Grebe.

Next day we packed up for our return journey. Apparently the same flock of Cockatoos was basking about the same spot on the beach again, and we found two Pied Oyster-catchers' nests (hollows in sand), close together, empty. The question arises, do these birds make several nests, as does the English Lapwing, whose antics are described by Mr. Selous in an article in *The Zoologist* for last April? Soon after we were on the west side of Vlaming Head three big dingoes came galloping straight for the buggy. I hastily got out with the rifle, but the

native said—"Wait a little, they will come close." This they did, getting within 80 yards, when, getting our scent, they turned and bounded off through the spinifex, apparently escaping the two bullets sent after them. However, we camped not far away, and left some kangaroo for them. Several wild cats (domestic variety) were seen about here, and no doubt they account for the destruction of many small birds. Next day a small bird fluttered out of a tuft of samphire close to the wheel. The native was sure it was a "brown one"—as I have taught him to distinguish the Desert-Bird from other small varieties. Getting out I found a nest built in a hollow in the ground, but it was domed, and the three eggs seemed to me to be those of the Field-Wren. However, there is nothing like being sure, so the buggy was sent on a little and I lay down. It was an hour before the bird showed itself on a low bush some 50 yards distant, but it carried its tail erect. A minute later it appeared at the nest, having crept unobserved through the surrounding vegetation. A charge of dust shot proved it to be a Field-Wren. The nest was thickly lined with feathers of the Desert-Bird, so they must be about there, though so far we had failed to see one.

We went on to the next water, dropping matches as we went to improve the road of spinifex for the next comer. When on the range in the afternoon the wind veered, and looking towards the camp we saw a furious fire apparently burning all the thicket where the buggy was left. We hurried back, and as things looked pretty bad, the fire burning fiercely within 100 yards of the camp, we harnessed up and went on to the mangroves. Nothing much of interest was found the following day. The supposed White-headed Eagle's nest was apparently in possession of two Crows. There was a small flock of Red-necked Avocets, and an extremely shy Wader, which was there before. All efforts to get within gunshot were futile. It flew away every time, uttering a cry of "pe-pe-pe," almost exactly like a Redshank. It possibly was a Greenshank. There was the flock of Teal in the same place, and, thinking a few ducks would be a treat after so much kangaroo diet, the native was sent round to drive them towards me concealed. After a long interval, in which the ducks came no nearer, I heard the native shouting, but, taking no notice, walked in opposite direction till I heard there was a note of emergency in his cries, so hurried round to his side, to find my dog in fits, having evidently picked up a bait. We gave it tobacco, and it recovered after two hours. In the meantime an Osprey was fishing close to us. Once we distinctly saw it emerge from the water, only about 20 yards from us, with a fish in each talon.

We concluded we had had enough of mangroves, and made our way south again in afternoon to the Yardie Creek, only once seeing a Desert-Bird. Our efforts to find its nest or flush

it a second time were unavailing. There is no mistaking the flight of this bird. It flutters along with rapid wing-strokes, the short, rounded wings being very evident, and the tail drooping and expanded. During the four days of our return strong east and north-east winds blew, and for the greater part of the day constant flocks of Pied Honey-eaters, Black Honey-eaters (*Myzomela nigra*), Tri-coloured Chats (*Ephthianura tricolor*), Grey-breasted and Masked Wood-Swallows (*Artamus cinereus* and *A. personatus*), and another small bird, whose species I could not determine, were flying against the wind. The Pied Honey-eaters were in flocks at times of fifty or more. The Chats were all female or immature birds, no full-plumaged ones being seen. Two Orange-fronted Chats were noticed. In *The Emu* for April last Mr. Hall (or Mr. Rogers) remarks it singular that the Black Honey-eater has not been recorded for North-Western Australia. It is mentioned in *The Zoologist* for March, 1899. Arrived at the Yardie we made one more attempt for a nest of *Eremiornis*. Ascending a high part of the range, we systematically beat down a gully filled with huge bunches of "buck" spinifex—most unpleasant "wading." This spot had often held these birds before, and as we neared the end of it one of them darted out before the native. I thought my snap-shot missed it, but we found it lying dead, in perfect plumage, the first I have seen with upper and under tail coverts complete. A long search for the nest found nothing, and indeed a nest would be difficult to discover in such growth. On skinning the bird it proved to be a male, apparently near breeding. It had the usual remains of black beetles and small grasshoppers in its gizzard. A White-fronted Honey-eater (*Glycyphila albifrons*) was secured after much trouble on returning to camp. They are excessively shy birds. We should have liked to search on the table-land country lying behind the ranges here, where Striated Grass-Wrens (*Amytis*), Rufous-crowned Emu Wrens (*Stipiturus ruficeps*), and Desert-Birds have been noted, but my boots were worn out on the sharp rocks, and our flour, sugar, and tobacco almost exhausted; so we returned to the station, feeling somewhat disappointed in the matter of eggs, but well satisfied with adding two new species to the list of birds for the locality.