

Search for *Amytornis woodwardi* in the Northern Territory.

BY HARRY G. BARNARD, R.A.O.U.

ON Tuesday, 23/9/13, my companion and self left camp for some high sandstone ranges about 7 miles distant, and east of the junction of the Clyde River with the Macarthur, in the Northern Territory. The object of our quest was an *Amytornis*, or Grass-Wren, of which we had previously seen a single specimen, but which we had failed to obtain. As we intended to put in two days in the ranges, we carried provisions to last the time, also took camp mosquito-nets, as snakes are numerous in that class of country. We also carried a small-bore rifle and a 410-bore specimen gun, with plenty of ammunition, and skinning apparatus.

About 10 a.m. we arrived at a small pool under a high sandstone bluff. Here we established our headquarters, and, as it was still early, placed our swags on the sandstone shelves, and, taking the gun and rifle, spent several hours among the high sandstone bluffs and deep ravines, in which grew a few stunted bushes and great masses of "old man" spinifex or porcupine-grass. This grass is armed with sharp points, which penetrate one's clothing, also one's flesh, leaving a nasty stinging sensation. It is also covered with a sticky, waxy-like substance which blackens one's clothing and is very hard to remove. We returned to camp at mid-day, having seen nothing of the bird wanted. The only birds seen were a few Thrushes (*Colluricincla woodwardi*), "one old nest of which was seen placed in a round hole in the side of a cliff," a Honey-eater (*Ptilotis*) which is only found among the sandstone, and a small colony of Lavender-flanked Wrens (*Malurus dulcis*). After a short spell and lunch, we again set forth, this time following the ranges parallel with the Macarthur River; after going about 3 miles through very rough country we struck across to the river. We had seen no sign of the bird we were after, but found an old nest, placed on the top of a bunch of spinifex, which undoubtedly belonged to an *Amytornis*. On reaching the river we flushed a Winking Owl (*Ninox con-nivens*) from a hollow high up in a large melaleuca, and a clutch of two eggs was obtained. Tired of mountain climbing, we followed the river till opposite the camp, which we reached towards evening, weary and very disappointed with the day's work. After supper we rigged our nets, and, as it became dark, crawled beneath them. The night, however, proved very chilly and the ground hard, and long before morning we crept out and gathered what sticks we could find in the dark. After lighting a fire we lay beside it, waiting for dawn, and listening to the rock-wallabies, which kept hopping about on the rocks, wondering, no doubt, what strange beings had taken possession of their drinking quarters.

At the first sign of dawn the quart-pots were on the fire, and, after a hasty breakfast, we rolled up our swags, and, taking them

with us, made for some high ranges on the opposite side of the river and the place where we had seen the *Amytornis* on a previous occasion. After crossing the river we made for a pool of water about a mile from the river and on the top of the range. In crossing a low spur at the foot of a very high wall of rock a pair of *Amytornis* suddenly darted from under a rock close in front of us, and instantly disappeared among a mass of rocks. Our swags were dropped, and, creeping quietly forward with the gun ready, I gained the rocks, only to see one bird dart from rock to rock with such speed that it was impossible to get a shot, and in a few seconds it had gained the bluff, which was fully 50 feet high, and with a succession of short flights and hops quickly reached the top, over which it disappeared. I now turned my attention to the other bird, which had reappeared further down the spur. It made for the bluff. After much difficulty with rocks, &c., a shot brought the bird down. We were quickly on the spot, and for some time searched in vain; at last, when nearly giving up in despair, I climbed to the ledge of rock above our heads, and saw the bird wedged into a crack. In trying to get my hand in I touched the bird, which quickly fluttered out of the crack lower down and on to a rock close to my companion, who promptly caught it. Making our way to where we had left our swags, I left my companion on watch to see whether the other bird returned to its mate, and with some difficulty scaled the bluff. The top was fairly flat, and I searched for some time without result. In one place was a deep depression down which water evidently pours during the wet season, probably coming out again at some spot at the foot of the bluff. This depression had a few small trees growing in it, the tops of which just reached the surface, causing it to be dark within. In climbing down I disturbed a pair of Boobook Owls roosting in a shrub at the bottom; probably they nest in the hollows of the sandstone. Continuing my search for a quarter of a mile, I climbed down to a lower shelf of rock, and watched a family of *Malurus dulcis* feeding among the shrubs and spinifex below me. Several "Sandstone" Thrushes were creeping among the rocks like rats. I thought that if any specimens of *Amytornis* were about they would be feeding with the other birds. For about 10 minutes I remained still, watching the birds, when suddenly an *Amytornis* hopped on to a rock close to me. I fired at once, killing it. I kept quiet for a while, hoping that others would show out, but as none appeared I climbed down and secured the dead bird. Hearing a quick "chirp" behind, and turning quickly, I saw another bird hop on to a rock, and, firing before it could get away, killed it also. I now followed the Thrushes and *Maluri* lower down, and, after watching them for some time, saw three more *Amytornis* feeding among the rocks. I now returned to my companion, and we again shouldered our swags and made for the water.

The quart-pot was now boiled, and after a pannikin of tea I

proceeded to convert the dead birds into specimens. Great numbers of Plumed-Pigeons (*Lophophaps plumifera*) come to these water-holes to drink, but very few other birds except the *Ptilotis*. While hunting among these sandstone bluffs we came across several examples of so-called paintings by the blacks, but they were all of the same character—namely, hands and the arm as far as the elbow. Some of these paintings were out of our reach, and had evidently been done when the lower stone was far higher than it is at the present day. After dissecting the specimens (which were all males), and turning them into skins, we had lunch, and then commenced a long tramp homewards, reaching there just before sundown. A dip in the river and we were ready for supper, and shortly afterwards turned in for a needed night's repose.

The R.A.O.U. "Check-list."

SOME APPRECIATIONS.

QUEENSLAND MUSEUM,

Brisbane, 30/9/13.

The Hon. Secretary, Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union.

DEAR SIR,—At the last meeting of the Brisbane Field Naturalists' Club appreciative comment was made by several members on the "Official Check-list of the Birds of Australia," as published as a supplement to *The Emu* in January last. After discussion, it was unanimously resolved that the R.A.O.U. be heartily congratulated on its endeavours to protect time-honoured names of Australian birds, and its decision to adhere to the simpler form of nomenclature. As naturalists and bird-lovers, the members of the Club are gratified at the stand the Union has taken in this important matter.—On behalf of the Club, we are, yours very sincerely,

(Signed) H. A. LONGMAN, President.

(Signed) C. T. WHITE, Hon. Secretary.

Mr. Tom Carter, M.B.O.U., Western Australia, states:—

"Please accept my best congratulations upon having completed a work so useful as the 'Check-list.' I am indeed much pleased that binomials have been retained and that the law of priority has not been carried to excess. There are many ornithologists of high standing in England who are strongly protesting against the trinomial system, the hair-splitting of species, and the great confusion that is being caused by the extreme use (or, rather, abuse) of the law of priority. Personally, I fear that there will never be fixity of nomenclature. There will always be persons wanting to differ from the rest. Sooner than accept trinomials, I would give up ornithology altogether. I desire that my hobby