

Hunting Trick of the Man-o'-War Hawk. (*Fregata minor*).

BY CHARLES HEDLEY, F.L.S.

THE position of Bramble Cay is easily described as being the most remote scrap of Australian territory in the right top corner of the map. Its name has nothing to do with blackberries, but keeps in mind a small vessel which served as tender to the "Fly" and the "Rattlesnake" and ultimately ended her career as a lightship in Sydney Harbour.

It is nearly a century since Jukes and MacGillivray wrote about Bramble Cay, but there has been no change in that desolate, treeless and waterless sand bank since then.

Landing in the breeding season, a visitor encounters a mass flight of Terns and Noddies. A thousand wings of frantic, dancing, diving, soaring birds beat close round him till the whizzing, screaming torrent almost makes him giddy. From afar, the effect is that of smoke streaming off a bush fire; but at hand, it is as if every leaf in the forest had suddenly started into life and spun off with a shriek into the whirlwind.

The Boobies do not share in the more intimate association of the smaller birds. Neither do the Silver Gulls join in the clamour, which for them means an opportunity for plunder.

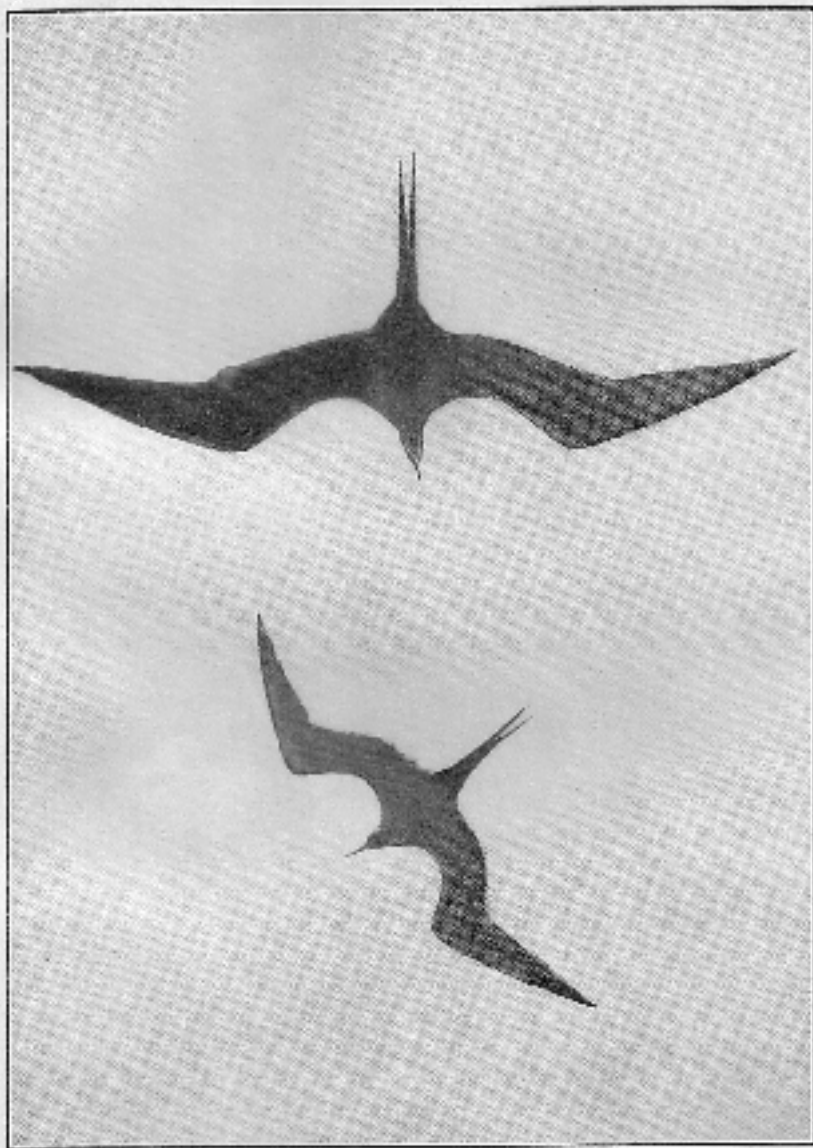
Like thieves working through a racecourse crowd, a solitary Gull, alert and impudent, will deliberately stalk along a given beat. One bird he will bully, but before a party he will quail. If a nest should be left unguarded for an instant that Gull will dart in and seize the egg or chicken.

This is the slave community over which the Man-o'-War Hawk tyrannises.

During September and October, 1924, the Government set up a beacon on Bramble Cay. By the kindness of the Lighthouse Department and of the officer in charge, Mr. I. M. Cowlishaw, I received permission to accompany the construction party for the purpose of scientific observation.

Strolling along the beach, a Tern hopped painfully away from me and I observed that it was dragging a broken wing. It lingered around for a few days and then disappeared, having died, probably, from starvation. Its place was soon taken by a crippled Noddy, which also shuffled about in misery for a few days and then vanished. Almost as often as not there might be seen on the beach a bird with a broken wing, usually a Tern or a Noddy, and rarely a Booby, but not a Gull.

At first I supposed that the workmen engaged in erecting the beacon had attacked them, but on enquiry I found that these men had kindly feelings for the birds and did them no harm. Reviewing the injuries, it seemed as if they were not the result of a chance blow, or from stone throwing, because the legs, the head or the body were never hurt, only the wings, either left or right, were injured, and the



THE AERIAL HUNTERS: "MAX-OF-WING HOWES" ADULT.

PLATE BY CHARLES HEDLEY.

injury of numerous wounded birds was confined to a dislocation of any joint of either wing.

At almost any time a Frigate-Bird could be seen from Bramble Cay, sometimes a pair, sometimes a dozen, sometimes sailing almost out of sight overhead, sometimes sweeping down almost to the beach. Poles erected by our party were accepted as perches, but their usual roost was on high volcanic rocks a little distance from the sand bank.

Now and then a tyrant was seen levying his due. Detecting a laden fisher bringing home a catch for his family, the Man-o'-War Hawk would dart at his victim. Generally the demand was met by the vomit of a fish or two. Then, quick as lightning, the Frigate-bird would drop and catch a fish in mid-air. Another he would perhaps scoop off the surface of the water while still in flight.

But when his demand is refused, the robber takes stern measures. I saw close at hand a Booby being thus handled. At the speed of a hundred miles an hour the Frigate-bird swept down, overtaking him and crossing him close above. Just before his pursuer reached him, the Booby folded his wings and fell, not dived; he tumbled into the sea as awkwardly as a bag of coals. That so superb a diver, so finished an acrobat, should drop headlong anyhow was a curious reversal of form. But the Booby had saved himself, for he immediately struggled out unhurt.

The attack of the Frigate-bird seems to be explained by the defence of the Booby. Since the eye could not follow the rapid dash of a hundred miles an hour, the detail must be deduced.

It was obvious that the Booby feared for his wing and withdrew it at all cost, and that in the second place he felt safe upon the water. Evidently the Booby anticipated that when passing across his back the Frigate-bird would snatch at a wing and break a joint with a jerk of his beak. Such had been the cruel fate of all the birds seen to perish miserably on the beach.

Elsewhere it has been recorded that a Frigate-bird induces his prey to yield him a fish by snatching with his beak and tipping up the pursued bird by the tail. Such an action is analogous to that of seizing the wing-tip, but less dangerous to the victim.

A Death-trap for Albatrosses. "On the Australian coast there is a valley ending in a cliff-wall which is a regular death-trap for the local Albatrosses which pass over it on their way home to a breeding-ground. If, when coasting over this hollow, they dip between the walls, they lose the wind, begin to drop, and not having sufficient strength of wind-beat to 'get up steam' in the limited space in front of them, end by colliding with the cliff at the end of the gully, when they fall to the ground to die a lingering death from hunger, for the walls of the valley are too steep for them to climb, and they have not enough intelligence and enterprise to explore a cave at the cliff-foot which would lead them out into the open again."—F. FINN, B.A., F.Z.S. in *Bird Behaviour*, London (no date), page 25.

[Can any reader say where this death-trap is situated or vouch for the truth of this story?—EDITOR.]
