

The Condition of the Mutton-Bird Rookeries, Phillip Island, Nov., 1927

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The flying visit to the small rookeries did not reveal much beyond the fact that at the Reserve of eighteen acres, the Fisheries and Game Department have done excellent work in protecting and conserving the natural cover of the sand hummocks besides the planting of marram on the raw sand dunes. In great contrast is Dixon's (Murray's), where only about one acre of burrows was left of twenty-five, and Fletcher's fifty acres, which is nearly all cleared out owing to the marram being burned at the wrong time. It is pleasing to see one farm, Forrest's, well planted with marram, and the cattle feeding in an amphitheatre of pasture behind the sand hummocks, while the neighbour's block is little else but shifting sand. Here was noticed the King Island Melilot, which, with the spear grass, has done so much to make the pasture land of that island.

On Cape Woolamai there has been considerable change since my last visit in 1913, when observations were made on the effects of the eggng season (see *Emu*, Vol. XII, p. 271). While not pessimistic, or prepared to say that the numbers of birds have noticeably decreased, or that the total area of burrows is smaller than formerly, I, nevertheless, think the time has come to have some definite policy for the protection of the rookery as a whole. Burning, grazing, and, to some extent, eggng, have rendered the sand hummocks in many parts unstable, and they have begun to move from one portion and to deposit themselves on another, thus doing the Cape a double injury.

The sword-grass rookery, which we knew on the south coast immediately across the neck from the camping site, has been entirely denuded. I did not see a single blade of sword grass left, while the sand, darker in colour than ordinary sand-dune, is transported inland by the wind and distributed over an area of perhaps thirty acres to a depth of eighteen inches among the bracken fern. Birds have burrows all round the edge of this, but the sand is said to be moving forward at the rate of five chains per annum.

Compensation is found, however, in the fact that birds have gone into the Aster-covered hummocks to the west of this, and now occupy a strip about fifty acres from coast to coast, which from my notes I find was not part of the rookery in 1913.

Again, at the head of the pig-face rookery on the south coast was a considerable area, perhaps thirty acres, covered with scrub and much spinach (*Tetragonia*). This has all gone, and the detritus moved inland over the Cape, but at a higher level than the other blow. Fences are down, and all that remains of the hummocks are little islands with a tussock or two attached, in which an odd pair of birds may burrow. Birds also try their luck in the dark under-strata that is exposed, but the area is too windswept.

The lower part of pig-face rookery remains, and is an excellent example of the binding properties of that plant, *Mexembryanthemum australe*. The scene as shown in *Nests and Eggs* (Campbell), p. 892, is yet intact.

It should be noticed that the two sand-blows referred to have occurred since 1913, but there was then a blow about midway between, exposing the calcined roots and stumps of ti-tree and other scrub which once grew on the dark grey soil. These are still seen lying about, together with the detritus of birds and blackfellows' middens, but the whole area for the length of nearly a mile and an area of about fifty acres is the most desolate proposition on the Cape. Fortunately, there is much of the ancient dark grey dune-sand exposed (or old time soil), which is firmer, and which would quickly be covered by planting in a favourable winter. The marram grass has proved itself the best for loose sands, and should be planted without delay wherever rookeries are threatened. Excellent cover of marram can be seen near the central older portion of the south-coast blow planted years ago by Mr. Cleeland, Senr.

On the inner or north-eastern side of the Cape, rookeries are continuous almost from the granite brow to Red Point and Beacon Point, a distance of about sixty chains, and an area of about sixty acres, one-half of which is new since my last visit. But here the sand is also troublesome, being dislodged in easterly weather, and, like the sand from the other blows, being driven uphill on to the headland. The sand here has been planted with marram by the Fisheries and Game Department in conjunction with the owner of the land with the object of conserving the rookeries. There is much spear grass about this portion which also is an excellent sand stay. Lastly, from a pastoral point of view, I am strongly of opinion that the Cape has rapidly deteriorated and would not carry now a sheep to ten acres.

For the preservation of the rookeries it is necessary that all grazing be stopped. Marram should be planted on all loose sand, and when this has established itself in a year or two, effort should be made to resow the natural scrub like grey Aster, native spinach and largely pig-face, both native kinds and the showy introduced species, Boobyalla and Melilot

could also be introduced among the hummocks once they are bound by marram.

The enormous series of sand dunes on the neck of the Cape has not been mentioned. This appears to be a natural feature of great age originating in the wide ocean back beaches, the raw sand advancing into the bay on the other side. Nothing need be attempted with this until the smaller local blows above referred to are checked.

Night Voices.—While chatting recently with Dr. Young, who takes an interest in our native birds, he mentioned that on two occasions this season he has heard nocturnal calls, which he took to be those of Dotterels, shortly before an atmospheric disturbance. The birds seemed to be circling in the air; the first time was in February, and was followed by high wind and rain; the second occasion was at the beginning of the present month of May, when a similar disturbance occurred. The Doctor's house is close to the estuary of the Mersey River, and only a few hundred yards from the sea-shore, so that he is quite familiar with all our shore-haunting species, and seems convinced that the callers were Dotterels. It would be interesting to know whether any mainland member has noticed this trait in the *Charadrius* or *Agialitis* genus; there is not the least doubt that many birds feel approaching weather-changes long before we do.—H. STUART DOVE, F.Z.S., Devonport West, Tas.

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Elegant Parrots Visit an Orchard.—For some time past I have noticed a species of grass-parrot coming into our orchard; they seem to come for the seeds of the annual *Paspalum*, and do not touch the fruit. I got as close as I could to them, and compared them with the coloured plates that have appeared in the *Emu*, and they seemed most like the Elegant Grass-Parrot (*Neophema elegans*). The blue on the forehead and wing, however, did not seem to be present. They were yellowish underneath and light green above, and were yellowish about the cheeks. They had a soft call, and flew swiftly, like Lorikeets. As many as five of them came in from the south very early in the morning. They are intermediate in size, between the Western Rosella (*Platycercus icterotis*) and the Purple-crowned Lorikeet (*Glossopsitta porphyrocephala*). These are the first Grass-Parrots I have seen in the district to the west of Rojonup. The Painted Quail (*Turnix varia*) come into the orchard after the *Paspalum* seeds, too.—A. E. FOLEY, "Wodenbillup," via Kulikup, W.A.