

the valley of the Isaac, he recorded the reappearance of "many old friends of the Coast, particularly *Corcorax*. . . ." This record extends the range of the species from 'southern Queensland,' as given in the *Checklist*.

Crow-Shrikes.—Both the Grey and Pied Butcher-birds (*Cracticus torquatus* and *C. nigrogularis*) were recorded several times, the former for the last time at the headwaters of the Suttor and the pied species as far as the Burdekin. A Magpie (presumably *Gymnorhina tibicen*, the Black-backed species) was seen from time to time between the Darling Downs and the head of the Suttor, and "a species of *Strepera*" (doubtless *S. graculina*, the Pied Bell-Magpie) was observed as far as the Burdekin.

[This completes the discussion of the ornithology of the Gilbert diary. Observations on mammals, fish, shells and plants remain to be discussed in other journals of natural history.]

Silver Gulls Breeding near Melbourne

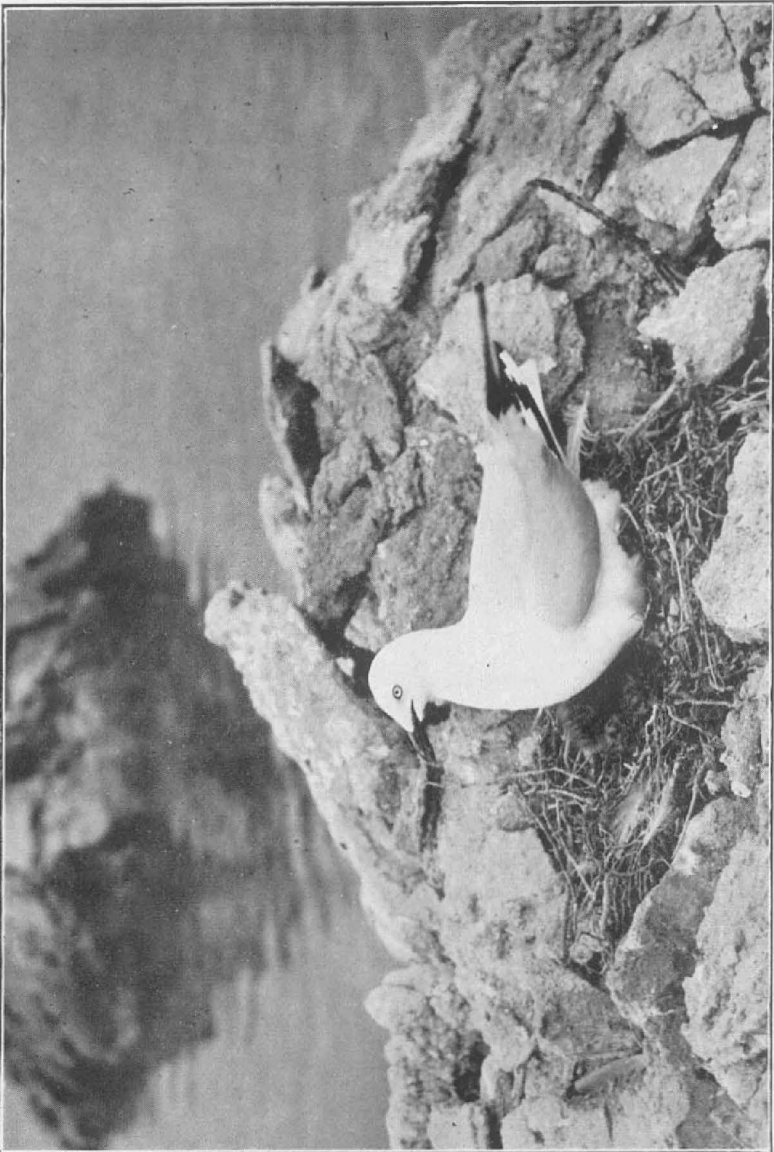
By C. E. BRYANT, Melbourne, Victoria

At the north-western corner of Port Phillip Bay, about four miles southwards from the town of Altona, and 15 from Melbourne, is an extensive, low-lying, samphire-covered waste. The Skeleton Water Holes creek, here a tidal estuary, further up its course a mere trickle, runs through the area. Salt marsh conditions prevail. In the course of its operations the Cheetham Salt Co. has cut up the swampland into salt-pans of varying size, flanked by built-up banks and connected by channels controlled by sluices.

For 20 years or more I have been visiting the area, and, in more recent years, most Melbourne bird observers have paid single or more numerous visits. Over the years a considerable bird list has been compiled. The migrant waders flock in each spring, crakes and rails frequent the creek edges, swans and ducks are common, White-headed Stilts are usually to be seen, and at present some hundreds of Banded Stilts have 'dropped in.' Like the Little River swamps, a few miles down the coast, where generally-similar conditions exist, there is always the chance of an unexpected straggler.

Silver Gulls are always numerous, and, having established the reputation of the district for unusual bird events, I always suspected that they might nest there, particularly as the Marsh Tern had once done so, a few miles away, although I do not know that I really expected my hope would eventuate.

In November, 1944, however, Mr. W. Heathcote reported that the Gulls were in fact nesting at the Salt Works, and



Silver Gull on nest.

Photo. by C. E. Bryant.

on November 25 I visited the place to see for myself. Well away from the coast and near where, the process completed, the salt is scraped and stacked, a large pan or pond that had evidently not been used for some time had been deepened during the preceding winter, presumably by ploughing up the then-dry bottom and piling the earth into mounds. This earth consisted of coarse, partly-sandy and partly-gravelly soil containing shell, impregnated with a heavy salt content, and had formed into a cement-like substance. The pond contained water from a foot to two feet in depth and each mound therefore constituted a small island.

It was the creation of these artificial conditions that had apparently attracted the Silver Gulls. About 150 pairs were nesting at the date of my visit. A workman told me that nesting activities had been in full swing for about two months. A few nests had chicks, but most contained eggs. About two dozen nests were empty. They appeared to have been used. No young birds other than those in nests were observed and I do not feel certain that any young had in fact hatched out and departed. Practically all empty nests were those nearest to the bank, and it is possible that eggs may have been taken from these, the most accessible nests.

The majority of nests in use contained two eggs. There were several with one, but I saw only one three—two chicks and a chipping egg. In many cases there was a marked difference in ground colour between the two eggs of a pair. The nests were constructed chiefly of dried-out pieces of pig-face weed and a little grass, with a few feathers.

I tried conclusions, photographically, with four different pairs. Two of them were timid; the others returned more or less readily. The 'victims' and neighbouring birds flew around complaining noisily and kept all nearby birds in a state of alarm. Time after time just as the chosen bird was on the point of settling down, a bird near me would fly up screaming and set off calling again the whole of the surrounding birds.

Although each earth islet formed the 'territory' of a pair of Gulls, birds would often alight on an occupied mound not their own, and were not always driven away by the birds in occupation. All birds that I noted were mature, having red bills and white eyes, and I did not see any breeding birds with black or brown bills or mottled wings.

The young birds were active and constantly scrambled out of the nests when I approached. They would hide their heads under cakes of the cement-like earth and then remain quiet. I saw adults brooding on one young bird while the other chick, or two in the one case, remained motionless a foot or so away, and making no attempt to return to the nest.