

Stray Feathers

A Second Australian Record of the Corn Crane (*Crex crex*).—In the recent census of Australian bird species by Mayr and Serventy (1944, *Emu*, vol. 44, pp. 33-40) the Land Rail or Corn Crane was omitted as requiring further authentication. This species, which nests in Europe and western Asia, winters normally in Africa, but there are a few records of stragglers from nearly all parts of the world. For instance, there is one record from India and one from New Zealand but none from the Malay Archipelago or the New Guinea region.

Recently Mr. William C. Dilger showed me some water-colours which he had painted during the war, including an excellent likeness of a Corn Crane. This bird, a male, had been found on board a troop transport on December 9, 1944. The exact position of the ship was unobtainable for security reasons, but it was off the coast of Western Australia at about 30°s. One week earlier the ship had made its only stop in Australia at Melbourne. Mr. Edward Reilly of Ithaca, New York, also an ornithologist, was aboard ship with Mr. Dilger when the specimen was taken.

The new record of a Corn Crane in Australian waters confirms the authenticity of the first Australian record concerning which Mr. K. A. Hindwood kindly gave me the following information.

"The specimen was collected on June 14, 1893, in a scrubby part of what was until recently the Randwick rifle range, a few miles south-east of Sydney. The collector's name was Walter Higgs. The bird was a female and on dissection the ovaries were found to be 'fairly developed.' The specimen was presented to the Australian Museum by Henry Newcombe, Deputy-Registrar of Titles, in the flesh, the day after it was collected. Newcombe was a sportsman who shot over much of the scrubby and swampy areas a little to the south of Sydney during the closing decade of the last century. He presented a number of interesting specimens to the Museum; some of the species, e.g., *Turnix velox* and *T. maculosa*, have seldom been recorded from the Sydney area since that time. This is due partly to the fact that shooting is now prohibited, and to the additional fact that much of the country then favoured by sportsmen is now built over.

"A. J. North recorded this specimen (1893) in *Records of the Australian Museum*, vol. 2, no. 5, pp. 82-83. The problems associated with its occurrence near Sydney were discussed by North. We can now dismiss his suggestion that the bird may have been brought down on one of the foreign boats trading here. The bird was in full and 'perfect' plumage. It was mounted and on display at the Australian Museum for many years, until I suggested that it be saved

and placed in the reference collection. I have examined the skin on a few occasions and it is still in fine, almost 'mint' condition. The registered number is 0.6138."

It is interesting to note that in South Africa also some specimens were found in the (northern) summer and with enlarged gonads. However, there is no evidence whatsoever of any nesting in the southern hemisphere.—E. MAYR, New York, U.S.A., 16/9/48.

Distribution of the White-headed Sittella.—It is not quite correct to state that this species (*Neositta leucocephala*) occurs only east of the Great Dividing Range (*Emu*, vol. 48, pp. 39-40). In fact its principal stronghold, as far as I know, is the Darling Downs, a plateau extending west from the Dividing Range for about 100 miles, and from Warwick in the south to the Bunya Mountains in the north. Originally this whole area was well timbered, principally with open forest, the most typical trees being yellow box (*Eucalyptus melliodora*) and the round-leafed and narrow-leafed iron-barks (*E. melanophloia* and *E. crebra*). Demarcation of the Downs was fairly sharp on three sides, viz. rain forests and heavy scrub on the Bunyas and Main Range, east of Too-woomba, and granite belt to the south. On the west the boundary is less clearly defined. In recent years the westward spread of agriculture, as opposed to grazing, has led to practically all the country as far west as Roma being classed as 'downs.'

As *leucocephala* is essentially a forest bird, its distribution within these limits was formerly quite general. The gradual elimination of timber has caused a corresponding decrease in Sittella population, particularly as the species shows a very strong preference for small 'islands' of territory.

It does not overlap the territory of *chrysoptera* very much, if at all. During twelve months' residence at Tenterfield, 12 miles south of the Queensland border, I did not see it once, although *chrysoptera* was numerous and breeding. *N. chrysoptera* also extends over the western boundary of the Downs as far as Dalby, and I have breeding records from Thallon and Chinchilla.

The only place beyond this area where I have seen *leucocephala* is at Tarong, north-east from the Bunyas and close to Kingaroy. There is an undoubted gap in distribution over the mountains, which here run practically east and west, but the country at Tarong is mostly open forest.

Flocks of this species usually number less than a dozen birds, the nucleus being probably one fully-adult pair. Since it is normally single brooded and lays only three eggs, the lack of increase is to be expected. Usually all the individuals in the flock assist at building the nest, which then becomes the property of a single pair. The flock is perennial in its association, and partly nomadic in the winter. Even

then, however, the favourite patch of territory still exerts a strong appeal; possibly feeding conditions are specially suitable. It is worth noting that young birds, even in their second year, do not all possess the distinctive white head. I have known the species well for many years, but even now I would not be dogmatic about identifying it, except by using binoculars. On the other hand, some individuals of *chrysoptera* show such a light head that field identification necessitates much more than a fleeting glimpse of the subject.—A. C. CAMERON, Chinchilla, Q'ld., 15/11/48.

Reviews

A Western Australian Checklist.—Towards the end of last year *A Systematic List of the Birds of Western Australia*, by H. M. Whittell and D. L. Serventy, appeared. This was Special Publication No. 1 of the Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery of Western Australia, and was "carefully edited by the Curator of the Museum." Maybe 'edited' would have been sufficient: we thought all editors were careful. There are, in fact, a few slips—a wrong letter here and there and a stray capital instead of a lower case letter. These are few, and in any case, inevitable in a technical publication such as this. But "T. Ireland," as the author of *mathewsi* (of *Cinclothrupus*) should not have got by.

Generally, as is acknowledged, the systematic arrangement of the R.A.O.U. *Official Checklist*, 2nd edn., has been followed, for ready cross-reference, despite the suggested classification of modern ornithologists. But recent (chiefly overseas) taxonomic work has been consulted and, in the case of reviews of larger groups, at least, adopted. Thus the classification of the Anatidae follows the review of Delacour and Mayr, the former's groupings of the Ploceidae are observed, Peter's volumes so far as issued have obviously effected some decisions to change, though not followed consistently, and there is therefore quite a substantial number of alterations that are being 'officially' pronounced before the corresponding changes in the *Official Checklist* are established.

Most reviews of this type of publication are synoptic and this review will conclude with some observations of that pattern. For the Crested Penguin *chrysocome* is retained; *Anous tenuirostris* and *A. minutus* are combined; the Red-capped Dotterel is accepted as the local counterpart of the Kentish Plover; and a number of other species, such as *Himantopus leucocephalus*, are recognized as being but local races of, or the same birds as earlier-described forms with a much wider range than our earlier ornithologists (chiefly Gould) permitted them. Thus there is an adoption of such species names as *madagascariensis* (of *Numenius*), *himantopus* (of *Himantopus*), *fuliginosus* (of *Hæmatopus*); *benghalensis* (of *Rostratula*), *aethiopica* (of *Threskiornis*), *malayanus* (of *Lamprolaima*), *novæ-seelandiæ* (of *Anthus*), and a number of others.

The Pomarine Skua is given permanent and not 'accidental' status; *Platycercus venustus* is relegated to the synonymy of *P. adscitus*, *Barnardius zonarius* and *B. semitorquatus* are combined, under the former. Other 'combinings' are the two Weebills, *Pachycephala robusta* and *P. melanura* with *P. pectoralis*; *Pomatostomus rubeculus* with *P. temporalis*; *Aphelocephala castaneiventris* with *A. leucopsis*; *Falcunculus whitei* and *F. leucogaster* with *F. frontatus*; the two Ground-Wrens (*Hylacola*) under *pyrrhopygia*; *Calamanthus montanellus* with *C. fuliginosus* and *isabellinus* with *campestris*; *Amytornis purnelli* and *A. modestus* with *A. textilis*; the Western with the Eastern Bristle-bird, and a number of others. Many of these were adumbrated in the paper by Mayr and Serventy in *The Emu*, vol. 44, p. 33—"The Number of Australian Bird Species,"—C.E.B.