The last bird observed was flushed from amongst the tussocks in a swamp. There appears to be a plague of rats and mice in this locality which is probably the food supply of these birds.

In early June, 1949, Mr. R. Littlejohns flushed a Barn Owl from some tussocks near a swamp at Fishermen's Bend. On June 4, Mr. F. Smith also flushed a bird there. As this locality is also teeming with rats and mice it seems probable these birds may be feeding during the day and not camping in the tussocks as was surmised. No pellets were located in any tussock incident.—HAROLD E. TARR, Middle Park, Vic., 14/8/49.

Reviews

Hill Birds of India.—Except for the purely parochial ornithologist, a popular, well-illustrated handbook on 'foreign' birds never fails to stimulate interest. It might be based upon the birds of a country, region or specialized habitat, and it might deal exhaustively or selectively with the subject. In the latter category is *Indian Hill Birds*, by Salim Ali (Oxford University Press, 1949, pp. i-lii and 1-188). Approximately 300 species are dealt with, these being "the most likely to catch the eye or the ear of the hot-weather visitor to the hill-stations of India." Though it refers primarily to the Himalayan region, some hill-birds of Peninsular India and Ceylon are included.

The present volume is an ideal companion book to the same author's *The Book of Indian Birds* (1941 and subsequent editions), which deals mainly with the common lowland species. The general arrangement of both books is the same: a 'moderate' treatment of genera and species is adopted and a small percentage of forms, as well as about a dozen species illustrated, are peculiar to both volumes. As would be expected, that heterogeneous group, the Timaliidae, is well represented. The eighteen illustrated (out of twenty-five described) emphasizes the diversity of the 'babbler' assemblage. For instance, upon appearance one would readily assume that the Red-winged Shrike-Babbler (*Pteruthius erythropterus*) was a typical member of the Laniidae. There are but five species, of those dealt with, found in both the Indian hills and Australia—the two Fantail-Warblers (*Cisticola*), Peregrine Falcon, and *Caprimulgus macrourus* and *Cuculus optatus*, and in *Chibia* and *Chalcophaps* the Indian and Australian representatives are sometimes considered conspecific.

Mention must be made of the excellent colour-plates, specially painted by G. M. Henry, who is well-remembered for his work in the album of *The Birds of Ceylon*. A contour map, a helpful recognition table and a comprehensive distribution guide are included.

One looks forward to more publications by this enthusiastic author, who has been described as "one of those fortunate people who spends all his time indulging his hobby—the watching and study of Indian birds."—A.R.M.

Cuckoo-Shrike Taxonomics.—The genus *Coracina* is well represented in Australia. It reaches its greatest diversity in the Indo-Malayan region, and extends throughout southern Asia and Africa. S. Dillon Ripley reviewed the Indo-Australian forms of the genus in 1941 (*Emu*, vol. 41, p. 312), and a further group-arrangement has now been proposed by K. H. Voous and J. G. Van Marle ('The Distributional History of *Coracina* in the Indo-Australian Archipelago,' *Bijdragen*

tot de Dierkunde, vol. 28, 1949, pp. 513-529), based "not only in accordance with their taxonomy, but also with the history of their distribution," and upon relative length and shape of the bill.

From the supposed origination of the genus in south-eastern Asia, five subsequent waves of population have radiated. In historical sequence, they are as follows—(1) The oldest Neogene group, containing *lineata* and *boyeri*, now confined to eastern Australia and New Guinea, (2) the second Neogene wave, now represented by four mountain forms in Malaysia and New Guinea, (3) the Pliocene wave, including *novæ-hollandiæ, caledonica, cæruleogrisea* and four Celebean-Moluccan islands species, (4) a Pleistocene speciation phenomena forming the distinctive *striata-bicolor* group, and (5) a backwardly directed wave radiating from eastern Australia resulting in *robusta, papuensis* and the only slightly distinct endemic *leucopygia*.

The uniting of numerous forms by Ripley under *novæ-hollandiæ* has been followed, but a perplexing distributional picture has evolved. The species in its broad sense extends from Tasmania to farthest India and south China, but the Asiatic and Australian groups are disunited by a broad gap, which is completely bridged by the *striata-bicolor* group now wholly representative of the supposed ancestral *novæ-hollandiæ* assemblage, except for an overlap in the Malay Peninsula and the Andaman Islands.

The authors consider *Edolisoma* distinct from *Coracina*—"sufficiently defined by the different shapes of the bill." *C. abbotti*, of Celebes, thought to be a close relative of *C. parvula* by Ripley, has "the feeble and sharply pointed bill characters attributed to the genus *Edolisoma*." Otherwise, the remaining eighteen forms of Ripley are accepted by Voous and Van Marle.—A.R.M.

Gannets and Pilchards.—In the *Fisheries Newsletter*, vol. 8, no. 5, August, 1949, pp. 12-13, D. L. Serventy has made an appeal to the crayfishermen to give the nesting Gannets (*Sula serrator*) on Cat Island a 'fair go.' In Australia the pilchard industry is yet in its infancy, but data indicates that "supplies are sufficient to expect a relatively immense fishery." The Gannet has been found to be a most conspicuous indicator of the presence of shoals of pilchards. This association was early utilized to their advantage by New Zealand fishermen.

A brief history of the Cat Island gannetry is given since the time of Matthew Flinders in 1799. Three striking pictures illustrate the gannetry in 1904, 1938 and 1948 respectively, all taken from the one angle. Of five known gannetries in Australia, Cat Island is the most important, but it is "so accessible that it is peculiarly vulnerable to human interference." The reviewer looked forward with keen interest when an opportunity came to visit Cat Island in March, 1948, but the plunderers had apparently reached the island just previously, for there was ample evidence of mass slaughter and not one young bird remained. The author describes that visit graphically and states that just twelve months later he found a similar state of affairs.

Dr. Serventy has made a sane and opportune plea, which must be heeded or total annihilation will quickly eventuate.—A.R.M.

The Status of Steller's Albatross.—Under this title in *Pacific Science* (vol. 3, no. 4, October, 1949, pp. 283-295) Oliver L. Austin, Jr., has gathered the available literature concerning Steller's, or the Short-tailed Albatross (*Diomedea albatrus*), the largest of the three north Pacific albatrosses. Much of the material has been translated from the Japanese for the first time and a sad and distressing story is revealed. The former breeding places and the winter range of the species are discussed, and all important records critically examined. In recent years Austin has landed on, or cruised around, many of the islands once frequented by the birds, without finding any trace of them. The best known and largest breeding colony was on the island

of Torishima, which was settled in 1887 by about 50 Japanese who killed the birds for their feathers. The dreadful slaughter continued each breeding season: one writer estimated that the inhabitants had taken at least 5,000,000 birds by 1903. In that year a volcanic eruption killed all the Japanese. The island was settled again after a few years and the decimation continued. In 1933 the residents, anticipating protective legislation, exterminated what remnant was left, said to be about 3,000 birds.

The decline in numbers and the probable extermination of Steller's Albatross has been caused entirely by human persecution which commenced about 1885. The first feather hunting was more or less casual but, as the trade proved to be remunerative, it was taken over by big business interests. It is now some sixteen years since a Steller's Albatross was killed. Perhaps a few pairs may still exist on some isolated and unfrequented island, though such a possibility is remote. Austin remarks that it is only too likely that the species has become one of the more recent victims of man's thoughtlessness and greed.—K.A.H.

Correspondence

GENESIS OF THE R.A.O.U.

To the Editor,

Sir,

When recently looking through the files of the Melbourne *Argus*, for 1896, I came upon a report (18/8/1896) of a meeting that had been held on the previous night at Britannia House, South Yarra, at the invitation of Mr. A. J. Campbell. Reference was made at the meeting to the work on Australian ornithology on which Mr. Campbell was then engaged, and the view was expressed that the gathering should "form the nucleus of an Australian Ornithological Union on similar lines to the British Ornithological Union and the American."

The foregoing statement, which varies somewhat both in date and phraseology from a newspaper report quoted in *The Emu* (vol. 1, part 1, page 1, 1901), seems to mark the genesis of the movement that blossomed into the Australasian Ornithologists Union on July 1, 1901. It is of interest in view of the fact that the fiftieth birthday of the Union is to be celebrated in 1951.

Yours, etc.,

A. H. CHISHOLM.

Sydney,
15/11/49.

The date of publication was January 31, 1950.