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Stray Feathers

Red-capped Robin East of Melbourne.—In November, 1949, Mr. W. Heathcote reported that he had observed a male Red-capped Robin (*Petroica goodenovii*) in the bush near the railway line between Heathmont and Bayswater, Vic., during the previous week-end. This area is east of Melbourne and outside the normal range of the species. I visited the locality with a friend on December 4 and found the male, in full plumage, attending a female bird which was brooding a nest in a messmate (*Eucalyptus obliqua*) about 35 to 40 feet from the ground. We observed the brooding bird fly several times from the nest to the high branches of the other trees close by, where she was fed by the male.

It was just on dusk, however, and in the fading twilight we found it difficult to make certain that the bird feeding the female was actually a male Red-capped Robin. At least one pair of Scarlet Robins (*Petroica multicolor*) had been observed earlier in the same area. Eventually, however, we were completely satisfied that it was the former species.

At the time, and because the light was poor, I failed to realize that the female bird closely resembled a typical female Scarlet Robin, but it certainly appeared to have a fairly bright scarlet breast and a white forehead patch. Had I realized then that the female *P. goodenovii* is not so marked I would not have delayed in climbing the badly

fire-blackened tree to make a close investigation of the nest.

On December 10, a small party, including four R.A.O.U. members, visited the area, some bringing old clothes to cope with the tree, only to find that the nest had been destroyed. We found that a pair of robins had commenced to build a nest in a messmate nearby at a height of about 25 feet, the 'foundation' being just visible. The female was observed to visit the nest four times with nesting material; the male also went to the nest but did not appear to be carrying any material. Visibility was good on this occasion and both birds were observed at close range. It was realized that the hen was a typical Scarlet Robin hen, but the male was a Red-capped Robin. Another party visited the area on December 17 when the same two birds were apparently selecting another nest site. However the male could not be found on December 26 although some female Scarlet Robins were observed. It has not been seen there since.

All six people who saw both birds are of the opinion that the female was a female Scarlet Robin. That it was a male Red-capped Robin is undoubted. Apparently this bird, a considerable distance from its usual range, associated with a hen *Petroica multicolor*. We do not know whether the female laid eggs, nor, if so, how many, but the fact that she sat on the nest for extended periods after being fed by the male suggests that she was brooding. We also know that a further attempt at nest building was made, thus strengthening the evidence that the birds had mated.—F. WATTS, Elsternwick, Vic., 23/6/50.

Nesting Associations.—A. Graham Brown's record (*Emu*, 50, p. 64) of an associated nesting of Magpie-Lark, Willie Wagtail and Restless Flycatcher, recalled a nesting association I encountered at Bilbarin, W.A.

During the 1946 breeding season, i.e. August to November, a pair of Magpie-Larks (*Grallina cyanoleuca*) built three nests—breeding appeared to be rather unsuccessful—a pair of Wagtails (*Rhipidura leucophrys*) built at least one nest, and a pair of White-winged Trillers (*Lalage sueurii*) built one nest in a large roadside salmon gum (*Eucalyptus salomonophloia*). All three species were associated in October. It appears likely that the presence of a pair of Tree-Martins (*Hylochelidon nigricans*) occupying a suitable spout of the same tree, was accidental, but it adds a fourth species to the list.

A. R. Attiwill (*S.A. Ornithologist*, vol. 18, p. 30) lists Magpie-Lark, Willie Wagtail, White-browed Wood-Swallow and White-winged Triller (two pairs) nesting simultaneously in a roadside tree.—ERIC H. SEDGWICK, Leonora, W.A., 20/9/50.

Food-eating Tactics.—A writer in the current issue of *Australian Aviculture* (July, 1950) says that he has noticed that the Eastern Spinebill in an aviary "has a peculiar habit of throwing into the air all solid food before consuming same, be it cake, egg, or termite." This practice does not appear to have been recorded of the species in a free state, possibly because its normal food is nectar and soft-bodied insects. Presumably, however, various long-billed birds adopt a method of this kind on the occasions when they are coping with solid food. Some of us saw a Sickiebill Bird of Paradise doing so recently in Taronga Park. Dipping the tip of its long beak into an orange, the bird tossed each piece smartly and neatly into its mouth, so 'short-circuiting' the giraffe-like journey. The performance appealed to us as a clever example of adaptation.—A. H. CHISHOLM, Sydney, 22/7/50.

Flower Petals and Bird Display.—The use of flowers or flower-petals in display has been recorded in several species of birds, e.g. Red-backed Wren (*Malurus melanocephalus*), Superb Blue Wren (*M. cyaneus*), Splendid Blue Wren (*M. splendens*), Grey Thrush (*Colluricincla phaea* = *harmonica*), and the Koel Cuckoo (*Eudynamys orientalis*), (1, 2, 3).

An additional note concerns a male Superb Blue Wren in full colour observed by me at West Chatswood on June 13, 1949. The bird was moving about a clump of lantana and small bushes, holding a bright-yellow flower-petal in its bill; no posturing or plumage display was noticed. In the same bushes were two other Blue Wrens, a male in full colour and a male in eclipse plumage. The petal seemed to be from the flower of the 'catsear' (*Hypochaeris radicata*), a naturalized weed, common in the locality.

In *British Birds* is an account (4) of a Song-Thrush (*Turdus ericetorum*) using flower petals in what was presumably a form of autumn display. The author of the note, A. V. Cornish, remarks—

"On August 16th, 1949, at 7.30 (B.S.T.) I noticed a Song-Thrush . . . on the ground below my bedroom window. It was being chased by a second Thrush, and both appeared to be birds of the year. They remained about two feet apart, with alternate rushes and pauses. This happened several times, and then the leading bird ran up to a scarlet geranium, jumped up, and pecked off a petal. Still holding the petal in its bill it turned to face the following bird, and commenced to dance up and down flapping its wings, leaping up 5 or 6 inches each time, and dodging from side to side. When, after a moment or two, the other bird ran, it dropped the petal, circled the plant, picked off a second petal, and repeated the performance. After this both birds appeared

to lose interest. The leading bird dropped the second petal, and flew to the bird-bath, where it had a drink."—K. A. HINDWOOD, Sydney, N.S.W., 1/10/50.

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Grey-crowned Babbler and Pied Butcher-bird near Sydney.
—Two species of birds recorded from the Camden district, New South Wales, by John Gould (*Handbook, Birds of Australia*, vol. 1, 1865, p. 180, p. 480) do not appear to have been observed there since he visited that locality in 1839. Camden lies some 35 miles south-west of Sydney, close to the Nepean River and just beyond the border of the County of Cumberland. The birds in question are the Grey-crowned Babbler (*Pomatostomus temporalis*), and the Pied Butcher-bird (*Cracticus nigrogularis*). I have previously noted (*Emu*, vol. 42, pt. 3, Jan., 1943, pp. 187-8) the presence of the Babbler close to Sydney—at Lane Cove, on September 21, 1942. Other records then available indicated that the species was an extremely rare bird within fifty miles of Sydney. A more recent observation concerns a bird seen several times, between February and July, 1946, by Don. Miller at Glenorie, 25 miles north-west of Sydney.

The Grey-crowned Babbler occurs in small numbers, and breeds, in Howe's Valley near the source of the Macdonald River, a tributary of the Hawkesbury, which forms the northern and western boundary of the County of Cumberland. Howe's Valley lies some 80 miles north-west of Sydney.

The Pied Butcher-bird is also a rare straggler to the County. Norman Chaffer observed three birds at Echo Farm, now a picnic reserve, near Roseville Bridge, upper Middle Harbour, on June 3, 1917. Other records are: a single bird seen at Hornsby, 'about 1930,' by Mrs. C. A. Messmer, and a bird noted at Clareville, 'about 1934,' by Mrs. Messmer and E. J. Bryce.

I had not seen the species near Sydney, during more than twenty years of field-work, until my colleague, G. R. Gannon, 'phoned to say that he had observed a male at the Lynn Ridge Golf Course, Gordon. We visited the spot the following morning, July 9, 1950, and the bird was watched for some time. It remained in the locality until August 5, at least, and was 'visited' by several ornithologists during that period.

The bird was fond of perching on fence posts from which it would fly down to the fairway and greens of the golf

course, or to the thick grass of an adjoining paddock. It would both hop and run along the ground searching for earth worms, plentiful after a period of extremely wet weather, and possibly insects, such as beetles. It was remarkably tame and took little notice of the many golfers passing by. For that matter, it can also be said that the golfers, in the main ignored the Butcher-bird. A favourite perch was a sewer vent-pipe, some 40 feet in height; it would rest either on the top of this, or on a cross-arm about 15 feet from the ground, and fly down to the thick grass for food.

Generally the bird fed on the ground; it was also seen probing mortice holes in fence posts, apparently for spiders. The species is certainly more of a ground feeder than is the Grey Butcher-bird, which may have some bearing on the larger bird's preference for grasslands, open forests and partly cleared areas. The Grey Butcher-bird is quite common near Sydney—far too common in the opinion of many who like to have small birds about their homes and gardens.

The local Magpie-Larks were curious and slightly hostile at the presence of the stranger in their midst; their attitude seemed to be one of respectful dubiety. Not once during the many times the bird was under observation was it heard to call, though the Grey Butcher-birds in the area were vocal enough. It is pleasing to report that this rare straggler to the Sydney district was shot—with a camera. The image, though small, is clearly recognizable. In the present instance such evidence is more satisfying than would have been a stuffed specimen in a museum.—K. A. HINDWOOD, Sydney, N.S.W., 1/10/50.

Breathing of Birds in Hot Weather.—Various observers in different parts of the world have noticed that birds generally seem distressed in hot weather, having their bills wide open and apparently gasping for breath. During very hot weather in the interior of New South Wales early in January, 1832, Major T. L. Mitchell (*Three Expeditions into the Interior of Eastern Australia*, I, 67, 1839) noted that "the very crows sat on the trees with their mouths open." Dr. Brooke Nicholls (*Emu*, vol. 24, 53, 1924) and George Aiston (*Victorian Naturalist*, 48, 193-194, 1932) found that Little Crows (*Corvus bennetti*) suffer terribly during heat waves in the Lake Eyre Basin and that many fall dead out of trees.

However, Admiral Hubert Lynes (*Ibis*, series 12, vol. 1, 793, 1925) thought that as birds, the crow tribe in particular, may be seen 'gasping' alongside water (and not taking any) to the same extent as in waterless places, they are taking draughts of hot, dry, air into their lungs and enjoying it. Some little support for this view is given by the experience of Herbert Ringleben (*Ornithologische*

Monatsberichte, 47(1), 19, 1939) who records Carrion Crows (*C. corone*) and Hooded Crows (*C. cornix*) flying with wide open bills in spring and autumn months. Further, L. von Boxberger (*ibid.*, p. 15) noted the Great Bustard (*Otis tarda* L.) fly with open bill in cool weather.

The present writer has seen many kinds of Passeriformes and Psittaciformes apparently gasping for breath in heat waves, but has not observed the habit during cool temperatures. Possibly very hot or sultry weather makes abnormal demands on the oxygen economy of birds, with the result that the normal breathing proves inadequate.—
ERHARD F. BOEHM, Sutherlands, S.A., 19/10/50.

Birds and Louse Flies.—The family Hippoboscidae (louse flies) is poorly represented in all Australian collections and consequently is insufficiently studied. Only three genera are recorded, namely, *Ornithomyia* and *Ornithoctona* from birds, and *Ortholfersia* from a number of Macropodids. There are probably several more genera awaiting discovery.

The poor representation of Hippoboscids in collections is not due to their rarity but to their specialized habits. For collecting purposes, the entomologist is at a disadvantage as he cannot collect them on plants or soil, as he can other flies, nor can he breed them. He usually finds a few only by chance, on windows, or attacking him in error for their true host.

The ornithologist is more liable to see Hippoboscids, but probably has no interest in the group or no equipment to preserve the specimens collected. In addition to collecting birds, ornithologists visit birds nests and therefore have opportunities for catching Hippoboscids on nestlings, etc. Some Hippoboscids can be bred from birds' nests. However, probably the most important cause of the neglect of Hippoboscids by ornithologists is lack of information of our knowledge of this group.

The study of Hippoboscids is quite important for ornithologists because of great losses of birds caused by blood diseases transmitted by the flies. We do not know the magnitude of this loss under natural conditions, but experience in aviaries, e.g. of carrier-pigeons, shows that hundreds of young pigeons can be killed in one night. Naturally, the role of Hippoboscids could be a very interesting study for an ornithologist.

The entomologist is in an unsatisfactory position because the only practical method available to him of collecting the parasites, would be to shoot the birds. Ornithologists and naturalists generally, would be most unhappy about this kind of collecting, particularly as there would be no parasites on many of the victims.

The problem can be solved only by friendly co-operation between ornithologists and entomologists. Ornithologists

often handle freshly-killed or live birds, and they are kindly asked to remember the necessity for collecting parasitic flies. The collecting method is extremely simple.

Some glass tubes are all that is necessary. The flies should be put into a tube, together with a label giving the species of bird, locality, date, and collector's name. The tube should then be 'stoppered' with cotton wool.

Hippoboscids from wallabies, kangaroos, etc., would be most welcome, also.

The writer of this note kindly requests all bird students, bird-lovers and naturalists generally, to collect these parasites and send them to him (Dr. S. J. Paramonov, C.S.I.R.O., Box 109, P. O., Canberra City, A.C.T.) for identification and study.—S. J. PARAMONOV, Canberra, A.C.T., 23/10/50.

Correspondence

THE EUROPEAN STARLING: DATA ON BREEDING WANTED
To the Editor,
Sir,

Some readers of *The Emu* may have seen a letter from Dr. Robert Carrick of the Natural History Department, Marischal College, Aberdeen, Scotland, on the subject of the European Starling, which was sent to various Australian daily papers. (I assume that the letter was given space, though so far I have received no evidence of the fact). The letter in question ran as follows—

For some years I have been making a special study of the Starling, and I would like to have comparative information from those parts of the Southern Hemisphere into which man has introduced it, i.e. South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. In Britain the first clutches are laid during 15-30 April, which would be 15-30 October in the Southern Hemisphere. If any reader can give information from particular nests on the following points, I shall be most grateful.

When is the nesting time, as indicated by laying of eggs, hatching, feeding of young, and date when young fly?

What is the size of the completed clutch, and of the brood of nestlings? *This is the most important point.*

How common are second broods, i.e. being fed in the nest at Christmas or later?

Where is the Starling absent, uncommon or abundant, both as a nesting bird in spring and as a winter visitor?

I particularly wish to know how far it has spread as a nesting and wintering species, and whether its advance now seems to be halted.

I shall be very glad indeed to correspond direct, or through your office, with any readers who are interested enough to make these observations, or indeed any others on the Starling. Readers will appreciate that their own observations, however small, will all help to piece together the more complete picture of the Starling's nesting habits and present distribution.

While visiting Britain in 1948 I met Dr. Carrick, and was able to see something of his Starling investigations. Outside a few British ornithologists and some Scandina-