

Stray Feathers

Eclipse Island Birds.—A further visit to Eclipse Island, Western Australia, from January 26 to February 11, 1956, has added a few species to those listed in a previous paper (*Emu*, 55, 164-169) and for completeness these are listed below.

Pelagodroma marina. The carcase of a bird of this species (White-faced Storm-Petrel), long since dead, was picked up near the lighthouse; doubtless the Petrel had been attracted to the light and killed there.

Sterna bergii. A colony of Crested Terns was found breeding on the South-west Islands in the same area as that occupied by Silver Gulls during previous visits. Birds carrying fish were seen to fly across to these islets, and sitting birds could be picked out by means of the lighthouse telescope and were to be found in precisely the same positions from one day to the next.

Tringa hypoleucos. A single Common Sandpiper was seen in the Hair Seal colony on January 31.

Apus pacificus. A Fork-tailed Swift flew over the island on January 26 and a presumed Spine-tailed Swift on February 7.—JOHN WARRIAM, Perth, W.A., 2 1 57.

Courtship Behaviour of the Eastern Spinebill.—In January 1956 a pair of Eastern Spinebills (*Acanthorhynchus tenuirostris*) made the garden of my home their apparent base of activities, spending the major portion of each day in and about the trees and shrubs, but retiring each night to sleep in a large coastal tea-tree (*Leptospermum laevigatum*) thicket about 200 yards away.

On July 10, 1956, it was noticed that the birds had commenced what appeared to be courtship activity, and this behaviour was observed closely during the period it lasted—eight days, at full intensity, with a further two weeks during which such activity was spasmodic and interspersed by lengthening periods of feeding and rest.

The birds would be observed to fly to a tree or shrub, and perch, generally a few feet apart. Activity was then initiated by one bird flying up to touch the others' tail with its bill, or by one giving a loud call, whereupon both took off and proceeded to swoop, through trees and scrub, bill to tail, at top speed, in an undulating flight which lasted generally only fifteen to thirty seconds, and which frequently brought them back to rest somewhere near the take-off point.

During the flights, a succession of acrobatics was performed, while the birds were flying so close that, for much of the time, the pursuer's bill appeared actually to touch the leader's tail. These included a straight vertical ascent of about five feet, followed by a tumbling swoop straight down for a like distance, then resumption of the undulating flight.

At times, the leader would turn suddenly to meet the follower head-on. Bills were then touched, being sometimes open and sometimes closed, for a moment: the birds were actually hovering for this short period, but the proceeding was so rapid that the leader, turning, appeared to be flying backward while the bill-touching was in progress. In mid-flight, the pursuer would sometimes move up and touch momentarily, as though alighting, on top of the leader's body, without any apparent slackening of speed. At all times, while airborne, the birds kept up a constant running call of short, sweet, high notes in the one key, more muted than the normal call, and audible only within a radius of 20 feet or so.

At rest, the birds perched within a few feet of each other. Feeding was spasmodic and rapid during these periods, which lasted generally under half a minute. At times during the day the birds sat quietly for much longer periods, in the manna gum (*Eucalyptus viminalis*) which appeared to be their base, or disappeared into the adjacent bush for upwards of half an hour to feed among the native shrubs (mainly *Banksia*, *Correa* and *Epacris* species). Occasionally they settled in a young *Acacia* in the garden, and from there dropped down to some *Erica* and *Correa* plants which grow beneath. A few seconds were given up to probing the blossoms, frequently whilst hovering with rapidly beating wings, and a return to the *Acacia* was made before resumption of the flights. Whilst in this tree, one bird—presumed to be the male—was observed several times to alight on the other's back, but no serious attempt to mate was observed at any time.

After July 18, it was noticed that the flights were becoming less frequent, and during the next two weeks the intensity lessened until, by the beginning of August, the birds were indulging in no more than their normal aerial activities. Some diversion was created by the flowering of the false tree lucerne (*Cytisus proliferus*) during this period, these flowers being most attractive to honeyeaters. While the pair under observation were spending a great deal of time at a nearby clump of lucerne trees, two more Spinebills appeared, one of which attempted to break up the pair by joining in the flights, or by initiating flights of his own with the female while the birds were feeding or at rest. The male invariably tolerated the intruder for a short time before attempting to drive him off. After three days this bird, slightly different coloration of which made identification possible, appeared to have been successfully discouraged, as the pair were left undisturbed, and the intruder spent more time with the fourth Spinebill.

Although, in the spring of 1955, a pair of Spinebills nested nearby and later brought two young to the garden; in 1956 the birds disappeared late in August and repeated searches

of the bush failed to disclose their whereabouts. In December a pair of Spinebills reappeared, but no trace of any local nesting activity was discovered.—BARBARA SALTER, Black Rock, Vic., 8 1/57.

Sanderlings in South-west Victoria.—In *A Field Guide to the Waders* Condon and McGill write, on page 22, under Sanderling—"One possible Victorian record (Warrnambool)". Late in 1953 Miss G. Bowker and Miss M. Brady recorded a flock of about 20 of this wader on Killarney beach about five miles east of Port Fairy and have seen Sanderlings many times since in the same locality. On October 1, 1955, several members of the Portland Field Naturalist Club, together with Miss Ina Watson and the two Port Fairy girls, went to the Killarney beach and saw a flock of twelve Sanderlings with other waders. The terrain is just as described by 'The Guide' authors—"a low flat beach where waves ebb and flow, behind reefs". We have one such locality in the Portland area, a beach eight miles east of the town behind the historic Minerva reef, and several times I have looked there for Sanderlings without success. However, on September 22, 1956, while 'beachcombing', Cliff Beaglehole and Eugene Finck came on a flock of 24 birds of this species on the Minerva reef locality just where we expected them. They were with Red-capped and Hooded Dotterels. This constitutes the first Portland record of the bird. The above appearances of this wader show that Sanderlings are not so rare as once thought on the most southern beaches of Australia.—NOEL F. LEARMONTH, Portland, Vic., 27/11/56.

The White-tailed Tropic-bird: Additional New South Wales Records.—The White-tailed Tropic-bird (*Phaethon lepturus*) is a rare straggler to eastern Australia. In 1952 I summarized the known Australian records and, at the time, suggested that the dispersal of the tropic-birds from their normal range was caused mainly by cyclonic disturbances or strong winds extending over a wide sector of the ocean.

Two additional occurrences of the species in coastal New South Wales are of interest. On February 9, 1956, an immature bird was found alive on the edge of the Pacific Highway about five miles south of Bulahdelah and some fifteen miles from the coast, with the Myall Lakes lying between the two points. Bulahdelah is 120 miles north of Sydney. The bird was lively enough, but it made no attempt to fly; possibly it was suffering from muscular exhaustion. It died within a couple of days and was sent to the Australian Museum, where it was prepared as a study skin (specimen no. O.39632).

The second record concerns a decomposed derelict (in much the same plumage phase as the bird found at Bulahdelah) picked up on north Cronulla Beach, ten miles south of Sydney, on March 3, 1956. The body was partly buried in

sand and may have been completely covered for some time as it was not noticed on the beach a week previously.

During the period February 8 to 11 a cyclonic disturbance was situated just north of Sydney. It was accompanied by strong easterly and north-easterly winds and heavy rain along the central New South Wales seaboard. Such conditions doubtless caused the wreck of the Bulahdelah bird and may have also blown the Cronulla bird, found three weeks later as a decomposed body on the beach, into coastal waters.

The general wind pattern for some weeks prior to February 1956 was that of a prolonged and extensive tropical air-stream extending south into the New South Wales region. Any birds at sea, and especially immature birds not tied to breeding grounds, would tend to drift with the prevailing winds. In the case of the two young Tropic-birds, it would seem that they were carried into eastern Australian waters and then caught up in the cyclonic disturbance early in February. In attempting to fight against such strong on-shore winds they would exhaust themselves and eventually become derelicts.

The closest breeding place of the White-tailed Tropic-bird to eastern Australia appears to be Walpole Island, a coral islet about 150 miles south-east of New Caledonia and about 800 miles from coastal New South Wales. It is likely, in view of the wind currents then existing, that the two birds found recently originated from that part of the south-west Pacific.

Five of the eight specimens of the White-tailed Tropic-bird recorded from eastern Australia are immature birds, as is the lone example collected on Lord Howe Island. The inference is that yearlings are more likely to be blown from the area of their normal wanderings than are adults, and this seems to be the case generally with pelagic species.

References: *The Emu*, vol. 38, July 1938, pp. 12-14, pl. 6, and *The Emu*, vol. 52, November 1952, pp. 257-8.—K. A. HINDWOOD, Sydney, N.S.W., 1/2/57.

Mimicry by the Song-Thrush.—In the immediate area surrounding our home, which is on the fringe of Melbourne suburban development, and where there are still some patches of native scrub remaining, there appears to be no Song-Thrush which occupies any well-defined territory. However, one or two birds are observed fairly often at some point within a radius of half a mile of our home, sometimes in scrub or grassland, and sometimes in the settled area. Occasionally one will enter our garden. Thus, on the morning of October 12, 1956, at 0630 hours, a Thrush commenced to sing from a position on top of one of our manna gum (*Eucalyptus viminalis*) trees. This bird proved to be the finest songster of the species that we have heard; in a session lasting without interruption until 0710 hours, the bird poured out a variety of calls, and repeatedly included in these were rendi-

tions of the calls of ten species—Eastern Rosella (*Platycercus eximius*), Magpie-Lark (*Grallina cyanoleuca*), Rufous Whistler (*Pachycephala rufiventris*), Blackbird (*Turdus merula*), White-browed Scrub-Wren (*Sericornis frontalis*), Blue Wren (*Malurus cyaneus*), Yellow-faced Honeyeater (*Meliphaga chrysops*), White-plumed Honeyeater (*M. penicillata*), Yellow-winged Honeyeater (*Meliornis novae-hollandiae*), and Indian Myna (*Acridotheres tristis*). All of these species are residents of the area, with the exception of the Eastern Rosella which is an occasional visitor.

The clanging call of the Magpie-Lark and the entire vocal range of the White-plumed Honeyeater were particularly good. Inclusion of the melodious song of the Rufous Whistler was rather surprising, as the first bird of this species arrived this spring on September 29, giving the Thrush only 14 days to learn the song—unless it were a remembered one from earlier in the year (the Rufous Whistler departs from this area late in March).

After 40 minutes in the gum tree, the Thrush moved off to a post some 100 yards away, where the concert continued until 0735 hours.

On three further occasions, to the present date, a Song-Thrush—assumed to be the same bird—was heard singing within, or in the immediate vicinity of, our garden. On these occasions, calls of the Magpie-Lark, Rufous Whistler, Blackbird and Yellow-faced and White-plumed Honeyeaters, were noted, but the bird sang for only a few minutes on each visit.

The singing of this bird would appear not to be a proclamation of territorial rights, as it was seen or heard only on these four occasions during a period of three months in the spring—unless, of course, the territory is so extensive that normal song-posts are beyond our auditory range.—BARBARA E. SALTER, Black Rock, Vic., 8/1/57.

Southern Scrub-Robin and Purple-backed Wren. Extension in Range.—Mr. A. H. Chisholm, in 'Observations and Reflections on Birds of the Victorian Mallee' (*Emu*, vol. 46, p. 179) recorded the Southern Scrub-Robin (*Drymodes brunneopygia*) nesting at Nhill, and near Mt. Arapiles, which he thought would be the southern limit of its range. Last year (1955) I discovered a reasonably large group of this species at Wonwondah North, nine miles south-west of Horsham, and about sixteen miles east-south-east of Mt. Arapiles. This is a small range extension, but is away from the recognized mallee area (see map, vol. 46, p. 170). I discovered five nests, all containing a single egg. One egg I watched hatched, but the tiny black chick had disappeared the next day. Where mallee trees were growing, the nests were in debris in the central clump of the trees, but in other areas the nest was in a slight hollow in the ground, and lined with grass.

In the article previously mentioned, Mr. Chisholm assumed (p. 183) that the East Winiam district would be the southernmost portion of the range of the Purple-backed Wren (*Malurus assimilis*), although he thought it might extend farther south or south-west. The Purple-backed Wren occurs in the same patch of scrub in which I saw the Southern Scrub-Robin, but its numbers are apparently very small. This is about fifty miles south-east of Mr. Chisholm's record. No evidence of breeding has been obtained, but the birds have been seen on three widely-separated occasions.

Mr. Gordon Binns accompanied me to the area on October 27, 1956, when the weather was cool and showery. Scrub-Robins were calling but were not seen, while male Purple-backed Wrens allowed me only two fleeting glimpses. I have noticed that the Scrub-Robins seem more active on warmer days, when most of my observations were made last year.

Half of the area where the Scrub-Robins occur contains scattered clumps of mallee and other leafy shrubs, and the other half contains *Melaleuca*, *Hakea* and other shrubs (about eight feet tall) with occasional clumps of mallee. The Purple-backed Wrens occur in the latter area.

This dwindling scrub patch is surrounded by paddocks cleared for grazing and cropping purposes. This isolated pocket is well away from the main mallee area.—ALAN M. BALD, Horsham, Vic., 20/12/56.

News and Notes

NOTE TO CONTRIBUTORS

The present cost of printing *The Emu* is £3 per page of 10-point type. (The charge for half-tone illustrations is £4 per page—in addition to the cost of block-making). Upon the ground of economy the Editor appeals to contributors to reduce the use of tables in their papers to a minimum, expressing in some other form, if that be possible, what tables are intended to convey. Tables are not set by the usual linotype method, but constitute special setting on a monotype machine, being 'sent out' by the printer for the purpose. The cost is greatly in excess of linotype charges, and is all extra, the standard £3 per page being an over-all charge applicable in any case as it covers ordinary type-setting, running heads, locking up, paper, etc. The Union cannot afford the outlay inseparable from monotype setting.

ANNUAL CONGRESS FOR 1957

The 1957 Annual Meeting will be held in Melbourne on Monday, October 21, (time and place to be announced later). A field excursion will be arranged for the preceding day. The 'Camp' will be at Portland, and members will leave for that place on Tuesday, October 22. Accommodation in Port-