

Stray Feathers

The Cattle Egret near Sydney.—The breeding colony of Cattle Egrets (*Ardeola ibis*) discovered near Ulmarra by M. T. Goddard in November 1954 was the first known occurrence of the species in New South Wales. Subsequent observations have shown that the colony is still in existence and that its numbers appear to be increasing.

Until recently, the species had not been noted in any other part of New South Wales, although it had been seen in Victoria. On June 11, 1960, with K. A. Hindwood and E. S. Hoskin, I observed a Cattle Egret in dairy farmland at North Richmond, near the Hawkesbury River and about 30 miles north-west of Sydney.

The Egret was with a herd of cows, in a grassy paddock adjoining a road. It was entirely white, without any trace of the orange-yellow breeding plumage. The bill was rather short and relatively thick, and the legs were greyish-black with the lower portions lighter in colour, a fact noticed when the bird was flying.

Every time we alighted from the car to observe the Egret more closely, it flew away and, with one exception, settled again near cattle. We followed (perhaps pursued is the better word) it over an area of about a square mile. Twice it returned to the original herd and on each occasion took up a position near the same cow. The beast to which the Egret seemed so attached was obviously unaccustomed to such attention. Whenever the bird came too close it would be hunted away and once it was pursued for a few steps by the cow.

When on the alert, the bird stood at its full height with its neck outstretched, but when moving among the cattle it adopted the characteristic hunched stance of the species. (In the latter attitude it was at times hard to see in the longish grass.) In flight, the neck was bent back and the legs extended, as is usual with herons. The wings appeared to be more rounded than in other species of egrets, and the wing-beats were rather slow, the general impression being that the flight was somewhat like that of the White Cockatoo. When on the ground, the Egret moved somewhat haltingly, quite unlike other species of egrets.

The Egret was present in the same locality until June 25, but has not been observed since that date. The surrounding dairying country is quite extensive and there is a similar belt, broken here and there by urban development, extending for 50 miles or more in a southerly direction.

Press publicity about the presence of the bird near Sydney resulted in a dairy farmer at Ourimbah, 50 miles north of Sydney, reporting that he had observed what was obviously a Cattle Egret among his cows for some weeks in May 1960. The bird seen at Ourimbah may well have been the one noted near Richmond.

The locality in the Hawkesbury district where the Egret was seen is about 270 miles south of the breeding colony at Ulmarra. It is possible that a few birds are present in the extensive dairying and cattle country between the two places. However, inquiries through newspapers circulating in the dairying and cattle country in northern New South Wales and eastern Queensland have, so far, drawn no response.

I may mention that in February 1960, I saw some hundreds of Cattle Egrets in the Ben Hole section of Marrakai Station on the Adelaide River, in the Northern Territory. There were more than 100 buffaloes in the locality and it was at the height of the wet season. Some of the Egrets were with buffaloes, but several groups were feeding around the borders of swamps in the company of Magpie Geese (*Anas semipalmata*) and Pied Herons (*Notophoxyx picata*). Most of them were in breeding plumage, the ginger coloration providing a striking contrast to the otherwise white plumage.

An earlier note on the Cattle Egret, with a discussion on its status in Australia, appeared in the *Emu*, 60: 99-102.—J. M. HEWITT, Sydney. 4, 8/1960.

Pink Cockatoo in Southern South Australia.—There has been a decided decline in the distribution and in the number of the Pink Cockatoo (*Kakatoe leadbeateri*) in the southern regions of South Australia since the commencement of European settlement about 125 years ago. John Gould, in his *Handbook to the Birds of Australia*, II, 5, stated that the species bred at Gawler, presumably when he visited the colony in 1838. Captain Charles Sturt in the *Narrative of an Expedition into Central Australia, etc.* 2: 35, records Pink Cockatoos frequenting pine (*Callitris*) forests near Gawler. In 1875, the species visited native pine scrubs at Neales Flat, south-west of Sutherlands, on occasions (Boehm, *Emu*, 59: 83). More recently, Pink Cockatoos occurred and bred on the Mount Mary Plains, but they disappeared about the time that a bird trapper operated in their area after the 1954 breeding season.

The species has always been popular as a pet, and apart from those taken by commercial trappers, many must have been taken by the settlers. In addition, there has been the reduction of the available habitat by clearing of scrub and the disturbance of closer settlement.

A similar process has been in operation in the mallee areas south and east of the Murray River, and the last record of a number in the region was by F. E. Howe and W. Burgess (*Emu*, 42: 67) who observed the birds in the desert country south of Pinnaroo, in September 1941.

The Pink Cockatoo has never been very numerous anywhere in the State. Local gatherings of the birds involving more than 100 individuals have taken place in the dry north-

ern interior and on the Nullarbor Plain at times, probably as the result of unfavourable conditions elsewhere. Such flocks cannot be regarded as an indication of population stability, nor as an excuse for the large-scale trapping of the birds.—ERHARD F. BOEHM, Sutherlands, S.A., 11/7/60.

Mass Migration.—On the night of Saturday, September 24, 1960, just after midnight, numbers of birds were heard calling as they passed over Pine Islet Lightstation. The flight continued for three hours until just after 3 o'clock on Sunday morning, during which period many hundreds of birds were estimated to have passed over the area.

Light rain was falling most of the time, and the birds were confused by the great beams of light from the tower, and many flew about in the beams, and in the diffused light thrown back by the low cloud. It could be seen that the birds were of varying sizes, and calls were many and varied, but it was not possible to distinguish species under these conditions.

However, some birds came to rest against the tower and four different kinds were handled and then released. Those handled were:

Halcyon sanctus. Sacred Kingfisher. One bird caught against the glass of the light.

Cacomantis variolosus? Brush Cuckoo? Two birds caught alive at the light and then released. One* found soon afterwards, killed by impact with wall of tower. These were olive-grey above and rufous below, with some grey on the breast. There was a broad creamy-buff stripe under the wings. Tails were toothed white on inner webs only, and just tipped with white. Also the shoulder was edged with white. Bills dark, legs and feet yellow, with dark claws. One bird had a thin yellow ring round the eye.

Chalcites basalis. Horsfield Bronze-Cuckoo? One bird caught and released. This bird appeared to be barred right across the breast, but as it was wet and bedraggled it was difficult to tell with any accuracy. The eye was red-gold, bill narrow and dark. The second pair of feathers (from centre) of the tail showed much rufous brown.

Monarcha melanops. Black-faced Flycatcher. One bird caught alive. Another found dead below tower just after daylight on Sunday morning, and feathers, believed to belong to another of this species which had obviously been eaten by one of the station cats, were found nearby.

As soon as it was daylight the writer returned to the tower and looked for further victims of the flight past the light. The only one seen was the Flycatcher, but bird calls from a small patch of trees drew my attention to the presence of a party of mixed migrants in the sparse cover just below the tower on the south-western slope of the island.

* The skin was subsequently sent to the National Museum, Melbourne, where it was identified as the Brush Cuckoo.—Ed.

Here, in a small group, were the following birds:

Halcyon sanctus. Sacred Kingfisher. Two birds seen in native fig.

Halcyon chloris? Mangrove Kingfisher? At least two birds were present, but these were wary and would not allow a close approach. The colour of the upper surface was a dark greenish-blue. There was no noticeable buff on the breast or the collar. The birds showed a tendency to take cover in foliage, and they appeared to be larger than the Sacred Kingfisher.

Both the Mangrove Kingfisher and the Forest Kingfisher occur on nearby Percy Island.

Chalcites basalis? Horsfield Bronze-Cuckoo? One bird seen in trees. From its appearance this could have been the bird handled during the night. It was very docile and somewhat bedrabbled, but quite able to fly.

Monarcha melanops. Black-faced Flycatcher. A very lively and active bird in perfect plumage seen feeding in the fig and other trees and undergrowth, in close association with the following two species.

Monarcha trivirgata. Spectacled Flycatcher. Three birds feeding in and about the fig tree, and, as with the other two species of flycatcher present, sometimes descending to the ground in pursuit of insects.

Monarcha leucotis. White-eared Flycatcher. One very lively bird drew attention by its calls to the presence of the group. Later in the day my husband found a second bird. This one was inactive and obviously tired.

Pachycephala rufiventris. Rufous Whistler. A female of this species was seen with the party.

Coracina novæ-hollandiæ. Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike. One bird visited the native fig-tree during Sunday morning, staying only briefly. This bird occasionally comes to Pine Islet and occurs on nearby Percy Island.

Acrocephalus australis. Australian Reed Warbler. One bird seen in undergrowth at the fig-tree. Two more were in a clump of low trees and vine with some undergrowth of rough grass, further down the hill on the south-western end of the island. These three birds remained on the island for just over a week, one keeping to the strip of cover below the tower, the others remaining in the wattle scrub patch, and sometimes briefly seen in trees in the corner of the garden.

The mixed group of birds below the tower were under observation for some hours both morning and afternoon on Sunday, September 25. A search on Monday failed to reveal any of the migrants except for the Reed Warblers.

On the next two days (26 and 27) an Olive-backed Oriole (*Oriolus sagittatus*) was feeding on native berries in the wattle patch.

When my husband was on the balcony of the tower during the migration flight on the Saturday night a bird flew past, close to his head, and he recognized the chatter of the Broad-billed Roller (*Eurystomus orientalis*). Mr. Claude White of Percy Island visited Pine Islet a few days later and reported the presence of two Broad-billed Rollers on Percy Island.

Pine Islet is extremely rugged and, on this end of the island particularly, there is not a great deal of cover for bird-life. The larger northern portion is cut off from the rest by a deep rocky gorge. In a very dry time such as the present there is little or no fresh water. However, the rain which fell on the night of September 24 left some water in small pools on the rocks. This soon dried up.

The islet lies approximately 70 miles south-east of Mackay and some 40 miles from the east coast.—(MRS.) DOROTHY MAKIN, Pine Islet, N.Q., 14/10/1960.

Occurrence of the Little Bittern on Lord Howe Island.—E. P. Ramsay listed (1882, p. 88; 1888, p. 38) the Little Bittern (*Ixobrychus minutus*) from Lord Howe Island which lies some 450 miles north-east of Sydney and about 300 miles east of Port Macquarie on the Australian coastline. No information was given by Ramsay except an indication that a specimen, presumably from the island, was in the Australian Museum collection. A. F. Basset Hull considered (1909, p. 668) the record doubtful.

In my paper (1940, p. 77) on the Birds of Lord Howe Island I placed the species in the "doubtful records" section, mainly because I could not trace a skin from the island, at the same time stating that the species could occur there as a straggler. That such is the case has been proved recently by the receipt of a specimen in spirits but since made into a study skin. (Specimen No. O. 39841, Austr. Mus. Coll.) The bird, an adult male, was caught on October 1, 1960, by Mr. Roy Shick who has kindly sent me the following information:

I will be pleased to give you the necessary information about the Little Bittern but before I do so I will tell you something else that you might be interested in as it is about the same species.

Twenty years ago a strange little bird was caught near where the other one was captured a few weeks ago. It was given to me when I was a boy in my early teens and I carefully put it in a cage but it died overnight. I had never seen a bird like it before on the island and, of course, I did not take the trouble to have it identified.

On October 1, of this year, a nephew of mine was playing in the creek that runs past my home when he noticed the Little Bittern hiding under some rubbish in the creek bed. He called me over to have a look at it and as soon as I saw it I said it was like the bird I had twenty years ago. I caught the bird without any trouble as it was terribly thin and weak. My nephew took it home and put it in a box for the night, but it was dead in the morning. It was then put in spirits and I took it to Sydney on October 4 and gave it to the Museum.

The place where the Little Bittern was captured was in a cattle paddock where there are a few ferns, although, as I said before, the

bird was hiding under rubbish in the creek bed. I caught it very carefully with my hands. The two birds mentioned above are the only ones I have seen on the island and I have lived here all my life. (Roy Shick, *in litt.*, 30/10/1960.)

The movements of the Little Bittern are very little known. A note on the subject appeared recently in *The Australian Bird Watcher* (1960, p. 84).—K. A. HINDWOOD, Sydney, 5/11/1960.

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Oriental Dotterel in Victoria.—The few published observations of the Oriental Dotterel (*Charadrius veredus*) in Victoria make a sighting of this species worth recording.

On January 19, 1960, and again on the following day I saw four of these birds on Swan Island near Queenscliff.

They were standing, when first sighted on both days, on sand beside a small tidal stream and were not associated with other waders until after they were flushed, when on each occasion they flew to a flock of Golden Plovers. This subsequent association made a comparison of the two species easy and useful. There were other waders in the same area and they included Grey Plover, Bar-tailed Godwit, Sharp-tailed and Curlew Sandpipers and Little Stint.

There appeared to be two pairs of the Dotterels as two of the birds were slightly larger and more richly coloured than the others.

They were rather trusting for waders and allowed an approach to about 40 yards in full view. When disturbed they flew straight to some Golden Plover about 200 yards away. On being further approached they did not fly until the Golden Plover had flown out of sight. They only flew short distances on each occasion that they were flushed.

The habit of "bobbing" was not at all pronounced, in fact it was a great deal less obvious than in many other waders and they only "bobbed" a few times immediately prior to taking flight. When undisturbed their stance was upright and still, with head held high. Their flight was fast with strong wing beats and no call was heard at any time.

In size the two presumed males were slightly smaller than the Golden Plover, and the two presumed females quite considerably smaller.

The legs of all four birds appeared comparatively longer than those of the Golden Plover and were olive-green in

colour. The knee and a very short section above and below the knee was a darker shade. This marking shows up even in dry museum skins.

The bills of the four birds were brown and compared to those of the Golden Plover, longer and more slender.

The colouring of the back of each bird was plain brown with no visible markings even in flight. Examination of museum skins shows that the Oriental Dotterel sometimes has a few of the tail feathers tipped with white. This marking if present could be observed in flight, but was not seen.

In the two males (?) the breast was a rich brown colour washed with rufous, but in the females (?) the rufous colouring was not noticeable and their breasts appeared more grey than brown. In all birds the breast colouring terminated very sharply and low on the breast when joining the nearly white abdomen. However, in no case did the breast colouring terminate in a darker edging. Of the skins in the National Museum, Melbourne, only one specimen has this darker edging, which shows that it may not be a constant marking.

The very obvious eyebrow line in the two males (?) was almost pure white and carried forward to an almost white forehead. This marking was not so prominent in the females (?). A small area of the throat of each bird was noticeably paler than the breast.

Even though these observations disclose some variation both in behaviour and colour to the remarks on this bird in *Field Guide to the Waders* by Condon and McGill, I feel quite sure after examining the skins in the National Museum, Melbourne, that the birds were Oriental Dotterels.

However, Mr. A. R. McEvey, of the National Museum, has pointed out to me that some workers regard the Caspian Dotterel (*C. asiaticus*) as a separate species from *C. veredus*. As the two species would be indistinguishable in the field, the birds seen can only be referred to as *C. veredus* because it is the only species recognized as an Australian migrant.

These observations took place during a period of about one hour on the first day and slightly longer on the second day, from as close as 20 yards, with a small sand dune allowing an easy approach behind cover before the birds were disturbed.—CLAUDE N. AUSTIN, Coleraine, Victoria, 23/9, 60.

Welcome Swallow and Altered Land-use.—European occupation of the Mount Mary Plains, S.A., was almost certainly followed by an increase in the population of Welcome Swallows (*Hirundo neoxena*), as mentioned in my paper, "Perching Birds (Passeriformes) of the Mount Mary Plains, South Australia" (*Emu*, 57: 311-324).

It is worth recording, however, that a great reduction of the Swallow population occurred about 20 years ago. At about the same time there was a considerable reduction in the number of horses in the district through farmers aban-

doning wheat-growing, or leaving the area, or changing over to the use of tractors. This must have affected the population of Welcome Swallows. Horse stables are breeding grounds for stable flies, and the smaller population of horses would result in a decrease in the number of flies. Fewer stable flies undoubtedly resulted in a decrease in the available food for the Swallows. Similarly, the abandonment of many farm homesteads deprived stable flies of breeding grounds in cow sheds and pig-sties and thereby reduced the food supply of the birds.—ERHARD F. BOEHM, Sutherlands, S.A., 28 11 60.

Starling's Nest on a Sheep's Back.—Strange nesting-places are sometimes chosen by birds. Welcome Swallows (*Hirundo noexena*), for instance, have been known to build their mud nests in sheltered sites on punts, launches and other water-craft that may be in constant use and which often travel considerable distances over fairly regular courses.

Some years ago a fireman at the railway station of Somerville in Victoria showed Mr. G. E. Shepherd a Welcome Swallow's nest containing five eggs on the iron framework of the underparts of a carriage. The train travelled at least 15 miles and, on occasions, 23 miles each way twice a day. The birds took about five weeks to build their nest. The fireman did not notice that they followed the train, but they appeared to join it at various places during the journey. (*Emu*, 11: 211.)

In Denmark recently a pair of Great Tits (*Parus major*) built a nest behind the front plate of a locomotive that had been standing in an area of forest for some time. The Tits had completed their nest and were sitting when the engine was taken into use for the hauling of clay in a brickworks. It moved back and forth all day over a distance of about 200 yards. After the eggs hatched the adults used to sit on a special line-shifting pole and wait until the train came past, whereupon they jumped on and fed the nestlings, which eventually grew up and flew away from their unusual home-site. (*Dansk Ornithologiske Forenings Tigsskift*, 54: 162.)

While the use, as nest-sites, of structures that are often in motion is of considerable interest, what can be said in a case where a bird nests on a living animal? The instance referred to concerns a Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) that built its nest on a sheep's back.

A recent newspaper report headed "Birds Build Nest on Sheep's Back" (*Sunday Telegraph*, Sydney, October 23, 1960) states that Mr. Eric Foord, a grazier of Mount Benson, South Australia, found a nest containing three baby Starlings embedded in the wool on the back of a sheep. Mr. Foord was preparing sheep for shearing when he noticed a cluster of twigs on the back of a Border Leicester in the catching pen. In trying to brush the twigs away he found the nest

built into the wool. Closer inspection revealed the baby Starlings.

On reading the newspaper account of this strange happening I wrote to Mr. Foord, who kindly replied to a number of questions seeking to clarify certain points.

The nest was built in the wool, which was some four inches in length, on the central part of the sheep's back. The animal was in a paddock with other sheep. It had no obvious distinguishing marks though the nesting material protruding from the wool could have been an "indicator" to the Starlings. The adult birds were not present when the nest was discovered, nor were they observed at any time to follow the sheep.

A sheep, when resting, usually maintains a fairly upright position, and thus the contents of a nest on the back of the animal would not be tipped out, or unduly disarranged.

The material forming the nest was not bulky, possibly because the long wool on the back of the sheep formed, in itself, a suitable nest.

Mr. Foord remarks: "On seeing what, at a glance, I took to be twigs and grass lying on the sheep's back, I thought that someone must have thrown a handful of rubbish which lodged in that position. To my surprise, when I caught hold of the material to remove it, portion of the nest and one baby starling, only a day or two old, came away, and investigation revealed two more baby starlings in the remaining portion of the nest. I was so interested that I did not take particular notice of the nesting material but my impression is that it consisted of twigs or coarse grass and fine grasses.

"I have noticed that it is customary for Starlings to congregate in large flocks and that they frequently gather where sheep are grazing. Often they will alight on the backs of the animals, which take no notice whatever of the perching birds."

No observations are available on the brooding activities of the Starlings. Even if the birds abandoned their nest because of the unpredictable movements of their animated nest-site, the eggs could possibly hatch from the body-heat of the sheep. It will be remembered, also, that the baby starlings were only "a day or two old" when found, so that they could possibly have survived to that stage of their lives without having been fed by their parents.

Fifty years ago a similar happening was reported from southern Victoria. In that instance the species of bird nesting on the sheep's back was not identified. The newspaper account, which appeared in the *Argus* of November 24, 1910, reads:—"Birds nest in fleece. Portland, Wednesday. While shearing at Mr. S. H. Malseed's farm, at Drik Drik, one of the shearers found a bird's nest on the sheep's back, the bird having built its nest in the wool. There was an egg in the nest." This record was kindly made available to me by Mr. D. Dickison, K. A. Hindwood, Sydney, N.S.W.