

## Notes on the Black-banded Pigeon

By C. N. Austin, A. G. Brown, H. R. Officer and  
H.N.B. Wettenhall.

In July 1959, the above party made a trip to the Northern Territory. One of the hopes of the party was to find again the Black-banded Pigeon (*Leucotreron alligator*). The information they had, at that time, was that the species was first found at the "sources of the South Alligator River" when Knut Dahl collected a specimen of each sex on June 15, 1895 (Collett 1898). On May 22, 1903, J. T. Tunney collected a female "in jungle near sandstone cliffs at the head of the west branch of the South Alligator River", and on August 10, 1903, a male specimen in "granite ranges ten miles east of the South Alligator River" (Whittell 1938).

It was obvious from the above that the headwaters of the South Alligator should be investigated. For this reason, it was fortunate that a uranium mine—El Sherana—was situated exactly on the spot, so that there was reasonably easy access to the area. On Saturday afternoon, July 25, the mine was reached and the party had afternoon tea with the staff, to whom they explained their purpose. Mr. Geoff. Fisher, son of the manager of El Sherana, immediately claimed that he knew the bird and directed the party to Obstacle Creek, some few miles from the mine. The creek was reached at 4.30 p.m. and found to be a dry sandy bed with a few rock pools. Watch was kept around one of the larger pools.

Shortly afterwards a pigeon, dark grey above with white below, flew onto the branch of a tree about 250 yards away. Its description exactly fitted the Black-banded Pigeon except that its chest, where the black band should have been, was obscured by a bough. For some ten minutes the bird sat quite still and the watchers did not dare move. Eventually the bird moved along the branch and its black band was immediately evident.

On that evening at least five birds were seen. The next morning at 8 a.m., five birds were seen sunning themselves after which they retired into the eucalypts. Mr. Fisher led us to another gully where he had seen the birds, but a scrub fire was burning fiercely and none was seen. He then led the party to Plum Tree Creek, where three birds were seen in the evening, high up in the gully. On the morning of July 27, four birds were seen in the same gully, all sitting in the same tree.

The South Alligator River lies between sandstone escarpments about half a mile apart. Creeks feeding the river, such as Obstacle and Plum Tree Creeks, form deep gullies in these escarpments. The gullies are steep and rugged, and filled with boulders up to the size of a house; trees grow where they can get a foothold. Only in these gullies were the pigeons found.

The tree on which they were seen to be feeding was a species of native fig which was not positively identified. The call of the pigeon was similar to that of the Common Bronzewing (*Phaps chalcoptera*). It was a similar deep booming, but slower, and continuing for up to one minute. The flight was a very noisy 'whistle', again like the Bronzewing.

The part of west Arnhem Land where the pigeon was found is typical of many square miles of that country—sandstone plateaus and ridges with gullies eating deeply into them. At least nine birds were seen in only two of these gullies and the party was of the opinion that the Black-banded Pigeon would prove to be reasonably plentiful over a wide area. However, no birds were collected, and as a result of our representations when we returned to Darwin, a complete ban on collecting of specimens was made until further investigation had been made of its status.

Examination of specimens in museums after the party returned showed that the pigeon had been collected again, later than was at first thought. Baldwin Spencer, in June 1912, collected ten specimens at Oenpelli (Oenpilly) East Alligator River; these went to the National Museum, Melbourne. Two of the skins, a male and a female, were sent on exchange to the Australian Museum, Sydney, in March 1913. P. Cahill, in June 1914, collected four skins, and in April 1920, three skins, from the East Alligator River; these are now in the National Museum, Melbourne. Data on the skins give: "Food-berries, seeds, figs." It has not been possible to trace any publication of these collections.

Humphries (1947) states: "I observed a small flock of six on a very isolated point of the coast [of Melville Bay, N.T.] just after our arrival in the area" (presumably July 1944).

Mayr (1944), writing on bird colonization from Timor, referring to *Ptilinopus cinctus* (= *Leucotreron c. alligator*), states: "the subspecies *alligator* must have reached the Northern Territory a considerable time ago, since it has now reached almost specific distinctness."

However, Cain (1954) includes *L. alligator* in *Pt. cincta* with a distribution of "Lesser Sunda isles, except Sumba, from Bali to Teun, Damar and Babar, and Northern Territory of Australia."

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would particularly like to thank Mr. C. Archer, at that time Administrator of the Northern Territory, for putting at our disposal two vehicles in which we were able to reach our destination. Also two members of the Agricultural Division, Mr. D. G. Tulloch and Mr. John Saxby, who accompanied us and helped greatly by their experience and enthusiasm. Finally, we owe a great deal to Geoff. Fisher who, through his interest in the natural history of the area, was able to lead us directly to the bird we were seeking.

## REFERENCES

- Cain, A. J., 1954. Subdivisions of the genus *Ptilinopus* (Aves, Columbae). *Bull. Brit. Mus. (Nat. Hist.) Zoology*, 2 (no. 2): 273-4.
- Collett, R., 1898. On some pigeons and parrots from north and north-west Australia. *Proc. Zool. Soc. London* (1898), p. 354.
- Humphries, C. P., 1947. Among the birds at Melville Bay. *Emu*, 47: 132.
- Mayr, E., 1944. Timor and the colonization of Australia by birds. *Emu*, 44: 116.
- Whittell, H. M., 1938. Notes on field-trips of J. T. Tunney. *Emu*, 38: 325.

**A forgotten record.**—Neither the R.A.O.U. *Checklist*, nor to the best of my knowledge any scientific journal, records the occurrence of the Black-tailed Native Hen (*Tribonyx ventralis*) in Tasmania. The Queen Victoria Museum, Launceston, holds a mounted specimen which was taken at Epping in the north of the State on June 19, 1916. The specimen is in good condition and is still on display in the public gallery.

The circumstances relating to the acquisition of the specimen were published in *The Australasian*, July 22, 1916, page 185, under the heading 'Bush Notes' by F.R.. Following are the relevant details:

**A New Bird for Tasmania.**—Mr. Frank Littler, of Launceston, Tasmania, writes:—'Through the courtesy of my good friend, the curator of the Victoria Museum, I am able definitely to record for the first time the appearance of a new bird for Tasmania. Mr. A. T. Gibson, of Epping, forwarded to the museum a bird he had just shot, and which on examination Mr. Scott and I identified as the black-tailed native hen (*Microtribonyx ventralis*). On dissection the bird proved to be a female, and in very good condition. The dimensions of the specimen were: length 340 mm; bill 27mm; wing 191 mm; tail 71 mm; tarsus 52 mm. On making a microscopical examination of the stomach contents I found that they consisted of short lengths of a water-growing grass, minute quartz gravel, and a little mud. A careful search failed to disclose any evidence of insect remains. Mr. Gibson stated that the bird shot was the only one seen. I am given to understand that some 23 years ago a large flock of what are now thought to have been this species were seen on Tamar Island, a few miles from Launceston. As is well known, this bird is a great wanderer, suddenly appearing in unexpected places in large numbers and as quickly leaving . . .'—R. H. GREEN, Queen Victoria Museum, Launceston, 8/10/62.