

Stray Feathers

A "red-tailed" quail in southern Queensland.—I would like to bring to the notice of observers who may pass through the Allora district, south-eastern Queensland, my experience with an enigmatic quail.

The bird first came under my notice during May 1959 while cutting lucerne at Inverramsay—16 miles east of Allora—in the Goomburra Valley. The lucerne was fairly thick and some 18 inches in height, and a dozen or more birds were flushed from it on that occasion.

A month later, while harvesting sudan grass, about a mile from the previous locality, 100 or more birds of the same type were flushed from a three-acre patch of clover growing in the same paddock. Throughout the remainder of the paddock, where there was no clover, a few individuals of King (*Excalfactoria chinensis*), Stubble (*Coturnix pectoralis*), and Little Quail (*Turnix velox*) were noted. I searched the area again on the following day but only a few of the red-tailed birds were seen. I left the district a few days later to go to Jandowae.

In January 1960, while walking across a paddock overgrown with weeds and self-sown wheat, four miles east of the area where the large flock was disturbed in June 1959, I saw three more birds. That was my last field experience with this quail.

The bird was very distinct from all other species of quail known to me (I am familiar with the Red-backed, *Turnix maculosa*; the Painted, *T. varia*, and the Red-chested Quail, *T. pyrrhothorax*, as well as those mentioned above). The most conspicuous feature was a brilliant scarlet-red rump which contrasted vividly with the dark-brown (or black) body; there appeared to be short, white, longitudinal stripes on the back. Some birds were lighter in colour than others, and these outnumbered the dark birds by about three to one. A white spot was visible in the region of the eye in the dark individuals, but not in the others. The birds appeared to rest communally during the day in parties of from four to eight birds. On flushing, the birds scattered and flew from 20 to 40 yards before dropping to cover. On those occasions they uttered a whistled "chit". They proved difficult to flush, and rose beneath one's feet or directly in front of the harvester.

Correspondence with the late Mr. E. A. R. Lord of Murphy's Creek, which is situated in the eastern foothills of the Great Divide, some nine miles north-east of Toowoomba, revealed that he also had observed a similar quail there. He stated (*in litt.* 5 7/59): "The base of the tail was blood-red in the dark bird . . . The call note was like that of a young kitten and was given very frequently when in cover. I found the birds with the King Quail in millet and panicum crops, but they had a very decided preference for green lucerne . . ."

Lord, in a letter to the Editor of *The Emu* (32: 127), mentioned the same quail, which he observed at Murphy's Creek between December 1929 and April 1930 (and a few birds again in October 1930). He suggested that they might be migratory flocks of the Malayan race of the King Quail (*E. c. chinensis*), and asked readers for any information on the winter range of that race; apparently he got no replies. As a matter of interest, Robinson and Chasen (*Birds of the Malay Peninsula*, vol. 3, 1936, p. 13) describe the adult male of *E. c. chinensis* as having the tail feathers (which are completely hidden by the coverts) and some of the upper tail-coverts "maroon-chestnut".

To summarize: Lord saw these quail between December and April, and in October (a few); I saw them during May, June, and January, with the largest number in June. Assuming they are birds of a northern race, these data would be consistent with pre-migratory flocking, and one could postulate that they are absent from southern Queensland between the months of July and October.

It would then seem desirable to obtain specimens for positive identification, and an appeal is made to any ornithologist (or quail shooter) visiting the range country of south-eastern Queensland to watch for this bird. I would be pleased to supply further details to anyone who is interested in my observations.—LLOYD NIELSEN, Jandowae, Qld., 7/4/62.

Spur-winged Plover in North Queensland.—On July 3, 1962, at the Leichhardt dam, about 11 miles from Mount Isa, I observed a pair of Spur-winged Plover (*Lobibyx novae-hollandiae*) with a three-parts-grown young bird. They were very tame, and seemed to be well used to people, because they did not fly when approached up to a distance of six feet.

The black marks down the sides of the breast of the adults were prominent and noticeable at a distance, but the black did not extend all the way down the back of the neck, being rather an extended point of the crown.

Evidently the pair had bred in the area, and they appeared to be permanently settled on the shores of the dam.

Our only other record of a Spur-winged Plover in North Queensland was at Cairns, on the esplanade, on June 1, 1961, when we sighted a single bird in company with a number of Masked Plover (*Lobibyx miles*). This bird was very noticeable because it was much darker on the back than its companions, the black cap came well down over the sides of the neck, and extended down the sides of the breast. The legs also appeared to be a much brighter and redder colour than those of the Masked Plover nearby.—Mrs. R. G. GILL, Innisfail, Qld., 11/9/62.

Bird banding in the south-west of the North Island, New Zealand.—Between 1943 and 1962 I banded about 5000 passerines for bird movement inquiry, frequently with the aid of my wife or father. Species banded were as follows: Grey Warbler (*Gerygone igata*), Song Thrush (*Turdus ericetorum*), Blackbird (*Turdus merula*), Hedge Sparrow (*Prunella modularis*), Silvereye (*Zosterops lateralis*), Greenfinch (*Chloris chloris*), Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*), Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*), Yellow-hammer (*Emberiza citrinella*), House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*), and Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*). Recoveries a mile or more from banding places comprised less than one per cent of these bandings; but they established the existence of a limited movement of the House Sparrow from Upper Hutt to the Wairarapa, two areas that are separated by mountain ranges.

Catching experiences are worth recording. The banding was done chiefly in two small gardens, 20 miles apart, at Karori and Upper Hutt respectively. The Karori banding was carried out from 1943 to 1956, the Upper Hutt work from 1957 onwards. The gardens were located in suburban localities amid pasture, scrub and forest-covered hills. The Upper Hutt banding station had the greater interest in respect of bird movement because of its proximity to two river confluences (for a brief note on bird movement at one of the confluences see *The Emu*, 60: 284). The gardens comprised lawns, flower-beds, shrubs, small trees, and vegetable patch, with minimum concrete pavement. The Upper Hutt garden was designed specifically to attract birds by provision of limited "edge" effect.

In the gardens I used wire traps, supplemented after 1959 with a small-mesh mist net. The traps included a manually-operated drop type with hinged door, as well as automatic spring, chardonneret and funnel traps. For descriptions of these (excluding the spring trap, which was adapted from a commercial rat trap), see Fisher (1949, *Watching Birds*, pp. 82-84); Lockley and Russell (1953, *Bird-Ringing*); Low (1957, *Ringling with Mist Nets*). The spring, drop, and funnel traps were used both at Karori and Upper Hutt. The chardonneret trap and mist net were employed at Upper Hutt only. For best results the spring trap had to be set beside a hole in dug ground well clear of garden plants, except seedlings. The chardonneret trap also had to be sited near a hole in dug ground, but against a background or large vegetables or a garden incinerator. The bread baits and lures, respectively, in these traps lost moisture quickly in summer at Upper Hutt, and frequent replacement was necessary. Also, in summer at Upper Hutt, the soil about the traps had to be wetted. The drop trap worked successfully only on a closely-cut lawn, about five yards clear of plants, paths and buildings. The funnel trap was put on a bird table or hung in a small tree. Finally, the mist net could

be used with success only in the garden, in contrast to world experience. It could be set as a rule only for two hours in early morning when the local, strong winds were light or absent. The net caught few birds in conditions of dew, frost or bright light. It worked best, though not invariably, when the sky was dull and when there was little garden cover. Following the growth of small ornamental garden trees and development of the "edge" conditions referred to, it was less effective, catches falling by hundreds a year.

At Upper Hutt the chardonneret trap took the House Sparrow and Starling in summer, and the Silvereye in June and July. At Upper Hutt the funnel trap did not catch the Silvereye, although at Karori it did so from May to February. The spring trap took the House Sparrow and Starling throughout the year at Upper Hutt. I did not discover whether that was so at Karori. The Blackbird, seldom trapped at Upper Hutt, was taken at Karori in both the spring and drop traps, mostly between late October and February. At each place the Silvereye visited the drop trap in winter. The drop trap took the Greenfinch in numbers at Upper Hutt in late winter and early spring; it did not attract this bird at Karori. Finally, the drop trap caught the Starling in summer at Upper Hutt and from October to July at Karori. It took the House Sparrow from summer to early winter, and occasionally in spring at each place.

The birds' reactions to the mist net were of interest. The Pied Fantail (*Rhipidura fuliginosa*), an occasional garden visitor, always evaded capture. The House Sparrow rapidly became aware of the net's purpose and would vacate the garden when the net was being erected. When caught, the Silvereye, Blackbird, Song Thrush, Hedge Sparrow, Greenfinch, House Sparrow, Yellow-hammer, Goldfinch, and Chaffinch behaved well, as did the Starling between January and June; at other times it struggled. The Grey Warbler reacted most violently, nearly pushing its way through the mesh. A White-backed Magpie (*Gymnorhina hypoleuca*), caught by mistake, also fought the net. When released, it flew off singing, returning five minutes later to feed in the garden. Finally, the netting operations excited the interest of the Black-backed Gull (*Larus dominicanus*), a visitor from the coast about ten miles away. Up to three birds watched proceedings from nearby house-tops. The gulls made no attempt to attack netted birds. On at least two occasions a juvenile gull became alarmed, judging from its actions, on seeing a sparrow, just taken from the net, in my fist.—H. L. SECKER, Upper Hutt, N.Z., 28/8/62.

A Tasmanian record of the White-winged Black Tern.—On December 16, 1961, I saw a small tern flying low over a waterhole between Clear Lagoon and Rushy Lagoon about 10 miles south-east of Hobart. Before I was able to examine it closely the bird flew towards Rushy Lagoon and I lost sight of it behind some trees. About a quarter of an hour later it returned and carried on to Clear Lagoon, where I watched it for about 30 minutes as it flew just above the water, frequently dipping to the surface, not diving in the manner of other terns found in Tasmania. During this time it alighted twice on the shore for short intervals.

I was unable to get a close look at the tern but I estimated its length to be 12 inches, and I noted the white rump and the frequent fanning of the tail. From its habit of hawking low over the water I suspected that it was a Marsh Tern (*Chlidonias hybrida*), but I was puzzled by the white rump, a character not mentioned in the reference books that I later consulted. I considered the possibility of the White-winged Black Tern (*C. leucoptera*), but there was no black on the undersurface and the only occurrences in Australia of which I had read were on salt water, while this bird was feeding over freshwater lagoons. Subsequent reference to W. B. Alexander's report on the occurrence of these birds in Western Australia (*Emu*, 17: 95-100) showed that a number of occurrences at that time were on fresh water, and that in some plumage stages the entire undersurface is white.

The area was visited again on December 23, and the bird was found hawking low over the water on the east side of Rushy Lagoon, repeatedly patrolling a section of about 100 yards and often dipping to the water, presumably to pick up insects on or near the surface. The following description was taken: length 12 in.; forehead and crown to above eyes white; rest of crown, ear patch and nape blackish; hind-neck, mantle, back and wings grey; primaries dark grey; rump white; tail white or very light grey (not forked); underparts all white; bill black.

On December 24, B. C. Mollison and A. M. Hewer, both of Hobart, accompanied me on another visit to the lagoons and we had the bird under close scrutiny for about two hours, including a considerable period when it was resting and preening on the shore. It was seen again on January 27 and 28.

The bird was shot at Rushy Lagoon on March 3, 1962, by J. R. Cunningham, of the Tasmanian Museum, and a study skin prepared by G. A. Davis. Details are: wing span 584 mm; length 220 mm; wings 200 and 202 mm; tail 70 mm; bill 23 mm; tarsus 20.5 mm; middle toe and claw 24 mm; weight 2 oz; bill black; legs and feet brownish; sex female. With the skin in the hand the slightly greater length of the outer tail feathers can be seen, but in the field this would not usually be apparent. A black spot before the eye can also be seen.

The skin was forwarded to K. A. Hindwood for identification. His report includes the following comments: "The tern is the White-winged Black Tern (*Chlidonias leucoptera*)—also called White-winged Marsh Tern. As the skull is stated to be fully ossified the bird is apparently adult. However, some of the markings of the wings and on the tertials suggest immaturity . . . Eclipse-plumaged terns of this species don't always have black on the under-wing; a study of the literature indicates that in certain plumage stages the entire undersurface of the wing is white, as are the underparts. Alexander (*Emu*, 17: 99) records such a plumage, as do Bourke and Lowe (*Emu*, 60: 66) for a bird from inland Victoria; see also *The Handbook of British Birds* (vol. 5)".

My attention has since been drawn to a paper by Kenneth Williamson, "Juvenile and winter plumages of the Marsh Terns", in *British Birds*, vol. 53, pp. 243-252 (1960), in which the differences between (a) the White-winged Black Tern, (b) The Black Tern and (c) the Marsh or Whiskered Tern are discussed at length. Flight patterns and head markings are illustrated.

Williamson points out that the rump in (a) is clear white in juveniles and pale grey in adults (but sometimes white in moulting adults); in (b) it is pale brownish-grey in all stages, and in (c) it is pale grey in all stages. In all three species the tail is grey, but sometimes white in moulting adults of (a), and it always "looks forked" in (c). However, in both (a) and (b) the tail often "looks square".

The markings on the head are also diagnostic. In (a) the crown is flecked with black, but not forward of the eyes; in (b) the black cap extends over the crown almost entirely; and in (c) the black flecking extends forward of the eye and on to the forehead. There is a distinct area of white between the eye and the flecking on the crown in (a) but not in (c).

The above is the first recorded occurrence of the White-winged Black Tern in Tasmania.

I wish to record my appreciation of advice and comments given by K. A. Hindwood and W. B. Hitchcock during the preparation of this paper.—L. E. WALL, Hobart, Tas., 4/8/62.