Stray Feathers

Unusual flocking of the Red Wattle-bird.—On May 20, 1962, in company with RAOU member Ron Boughtwood, I witnessed a massive flocking of the Red Wattle-bird, *Anthochaera carunculata.* The location was an isolated 50-acre forest of *Angophora costata* on a heathy plateau astride the Heathcote-Liverpool road in the Holsworthy manoeuvre area, New South Wales. (The precise locality is map square 9797 on the Camden one inch to one mile map.)

From 9.30 a.m., when we arrived in the area, until 11 a.m. a movement of Wattle-birds involving a total of 182 birds, was observed. Moving in small parties from the north-east at a height of about 50 feet, they flew along the ridgetop and into the forest. During this movement, two other groups (or some of the same birds?) totalling 44 individuals flew in exactly the opposite direction.

At 11 a.m. we noticed a new development in a shallow gully leading up south-east from the valley of Deadman's Creek to the very edge of the *Angophora* forest. Flying up this gully, only a few feet above the vegetation, was a continuous stream of Wattle-birds. On reaching the edge of the forest they would suddenly swoop up into the top branches of the trees. I counted at least 100 birds before the flight ended but the most impressive spectacle was the mass of birds already perched in the trees. The whole forest appeared to be smothered in Wattle-birds and resembled a starlings' roost. An attempt to count the birds proved impossible once 300 had been reached as it was not possible to distinguish individuals in the mass. After about ten minutes the flock, in successive waves, dispersed southwards through the trees and then disappeared.

On June 2, a similar flight up the same gully was observed, 243 birds flying into the forest in groups of about 20 from 10.15-10.50 a.m. However this flight was already in progress on my arrival in the area. This time many hundreds of smaller honeyeaters were included with the Wattle-birds. On June 10, at 9.45 a.m., a single group of 84 repeated the performance, apart from more flights of Wattle-birds arriving from the north-east. On June 24, two groups of 32 and 45 were seen and, on July 1, a group of 55, all headed up the same gully. On each occasion the weather was cool but sunny and calm. Of the two other visits made during the period May 27—July 1, one was on an overcast day and yielded no Wattle-birds at all. On the other, a sunny day, there was no movement in the gully but 223 birds were flying in from the north-east over a 1½ hour period.

The movements of the Red Wattle-bird around Sydney are as yet unproven, although there does appear to be a pattern.

K. A. Hindwood (*in litt.*) writes: "It has been thought over the

years that there is an east-west and west-east movement of this species, i.e. from the "inland", or rather the mountain forests and western slopes, to the coast in the autumn and winter and back again in the early spring, with some birds always present and breeding here (Sydney). This movement may be regular and fairly extensive. North (*Nests and Eggs . . .* vol. 2, p. 161, 1909), says 'In the coastal districts of New South Wales it usually makes its appearance in large flocks in April and May, retiring again inland at the end of winter to breed and remaining there throughout the summer. In some seasons it is scarce . . .' Of course, years ago gill-bird shooting was much indulged in. Also in my early bird days it was considered a very rare breeding-bird here—North apparently had no breeding records at all from the coastal areas. However, in recent years it breeds quite freely hereabouts".

I may add that in November 1962, at Mount Kindarum, 2800 feet high and 100 miles north-west of Sydney, I found the species in great abundance, apparently breeding. The preferred habitat was tall *Eucalyptus* forest with little undergrowth except moderately high *Casuarina torulosa,* in which were found the few nests I had time to discover.

No explanation can be given as to this large flocking of Wattlebirds and the strange flight pattern up the same small gully. There were no flowering eucalypts in the area and only a few other flowering shrubs, which the birds ignored. From these observations, and others on different species, I would think that the *Angophora* forest is a resting place on a migrant fly-path.—H. L. BELL, Australian Staff College, Fort Queenscliff, Vic.

The Lotus-bird as a Victorian (?) species.—An extraordinary scrap of ornithological history has come to my attention through reading certain manuscript material in the possession of Mr J. S. P. Ramsay of Sydney, son of the late Dr E. P. Ramsay, sometime Director of the Australian Museum. The material consists of two letters sent to Dr Ramsay in 1891 by Charles French, then Government Entomologist of Victoria. They bear on a subject first raised by A. J. Campbell in vol. 8, part 6, of the *Victorian Naturalist* (1891).

In that contribution (dated March 6, 1891), Campbell said he had then recently inspected a collection of specimens of Victorian insectivorous birds held by French, and among them had noted an example of the Comb-crested Parra—also called Jacana and Lotus-bird, and now known as *Irediparra gallinacea*—and had been told that this bird, with three others of the same kind, had been shot in the previous year near Boort, Vic. The collector was J. L. Ayres, a duck-shooter. "Therefore", Campbell commented, "it would appear that the specimen in the possession of the Government Entomologist is not a solitary example of this remarkable

water-surface walking bird occurring in Victoria, a fact not without interest to those who study geographical distribution".

Ten years later, however, Campbell withdrew that report. He did so almost casually—in a footnote at p. 773 of his book, *Nests and Eggs of Australian Birds* (1901)—merely stating that his report had been made in error, the fact being that although French's specimen of the Parra had been purchased as a Victorian species, "it really was procured on the Clarence, N.S.Wales".

Now, the curious matter is taken somewhat further by the Ramsay letters. Under date 11th March (1891) French wrote that he possessed a specimen of the Comb-crested Parra from the Boort area in northern Victoria, and as "this singular bird" had not previously been taken in Victoria he thought Ramsay would be interested. He added that he got the specimen "through Cole of Melbourne". Later, French forwarded a copy of a letter, dated 23rd March (1891), from A. Coles, taxidermist and furrier, 376 Elizabeth Street, Melbourne, which reads as follows: "In regard to your query regarding the Parra, I may state that the specimens I obtained were collected and skinned by Mr J. L. Ayers, who at the time of obtaining them was collecting at Boort. He is away at the present time on another shooting trip, consequently I can obtain no further information about them until his return . . ."

In the light of Campbell's retraction, it seems that Coles did obtain further information later, and that he found the record to be erroneous. If, in fact, he *was* misinformed—and the possibility of a batch of Lotus-birds occurring in north-western Victoria can only be regarded as very remote—it would be interesting to know how he got the firm impression, as stated in his letter, that the specimens he acquired were taken at Boort. In short, how was the apparent error made?

Both of the principals in the matter were experienced collectors. As stated in Whittell's *Literature of Australian Birds*, A. W. Coles was a professional taxidermist who in 1885 toured the north of Queensland with Campbell and others, and who afterwards figured on several occasions in the *Victorian Naturalist*; he was also a foundation member of the RAOU, and he passed on his interests to one of his many sons, Clifford Coles, who became a furrier and aviculturalist in Sydney. The lesser-known man, J. L. Ayres (not Ayers, as Coles wrote), appears to have been a freelance collector for museums. Among the Ramsay papers is a letter from him, dated November 26, 1888, and written at Perth, W.A., offering to collect birds and insects for the Australian Museum. He was then, he said, collecting for the museums of Melbourne and Adelaide, and had for some years supplied specimens to Coles of Melbourne.

It does not appear that Ramsay did any business with Ayres. Sydney's museum gave commissions, from time to time, to a considerable number of collectors, but, whatever the reason, Ayres'

name is not recorded among them. It *is* recorded on specimen lists of 70-odd years ago in the Melbourne museum, but Mr A. R. McEvey tells me that the relevant material (from Victoria, N.S.W., and Western Australia) is not extensive and does not include any examples of *Irediparra gallinacea*.

As far as I am aware, Ayres has not figured in any published writings. Personally, I had never heard of this collector before chancing upon the mix-up involving him, Coles, French, Campbell and the Lotus-bird.—A. H. CHISHOLM, 8 Young Street, Sydney, N.S.W.

Is the Northern Scrub-Robin a quail-thrush?.—On a visit to Lockerbie, Cape York, in November 1963, Dr Norman Wettenhall and I were fortunate to be able to study the Northern Scrub-Robin, *Drymodes superciliaris,* on numerous occasions, because it was far from uncommon in the "vine scrub". Recognition of the bird was a simple matter as skins had been examined in the National Museum, Melbourne, before we went north.

On first seeing the bird in the field my immediate reaction was: "this is not a scrub-robin but a quail-thrush", and the more I studied it the more I was convinced of its close resemblance to *Cinclosoma*. The reasons for reaching this opinion were as follows:

1. The bird lacked the noticeably large, robin-like eye of the Southern Scrub-Robin, *D. brunneopygia*.
2. Whereas *brunneopygia* tends to have an upright posture, the northern bird generally held its body in a horizontal position, similar to that adopted by the quail-thrushes.
3. Observation of the gait of the Southern Scrub-Robin will show it to be a hopper, whereas this bird, like the quail-thrushes, is a walker or runner.
4. The more usual call of *superciliaris* was a thin sharp whistle, very similar to that of the quail-thrushes. On one occasion, however, it was my impression that one of the birds whistled in the manner of *brunneopygia*.

Possibly its only real resemblance to a scrub-robin was a tendency to cock up the tail.

The habitat of *superciliaris* was rather less open than the normal one for either scrub-robins or quail-thrushes, but the birds appeared to show a preference for the more open areas of the "vine scrub"—we found them on the edges of this where it began to thin out a little.

I hesitate to question the findings of taxonomists, but after studying the bird at leisure in the field I am convinced that it has closer affinities with *Cinclosoma* than with *Drymodes*.—H. R. OFFICER, Monbulk Road, Olinda, Vic.

Birds caught by octopuses.—Sea-birds face many hazards from predatory species such as skuas, large gulls, sea-eagles and other birds-of-prey. Carnivorous marine mammals, sharks and fish also take toll of birds resting on the water or those fishing below the surface.

A seemingly unlikely predator is the octopus. However, several instances of these Cephalopods attacking sea-birds have been noted in recent years, the victims being Silver Gulls, *Larus novae-hollandiae,* the Crested Tern, *Sterna bergii,* and the Little Penguin, *Eudyptula minor.* It is, of course, likely that octopuses seize unsuspecting birds more frequently than is indicated by existing records.

In February 1956 a commotion among Silver Gulls at Eaglehawk Neck, Tasmania, caused a boating party to investigate the disturbance. One of the Gulls was in the water, with the others hovering above it trying to strike at a small octopus that had a tentacle about each wing of the struggling bird. The octopus released its grip after being hit several times by an oar. ("Peregrine", in the Hobart *Mercury,* 18/2/1956).

Another instance of a Silver Gull being attacked was noted on the extensive rock-flats at Long Reef, near Sydney, on May 3, 1959. The bird was seen fluttering in a shallow pool left by the falling tide. Examination revealed that one of its legs was in the grip of a small octopus concealed under a low rock-shelf. The bird had apparently been thus held for some time because it staggered away in a weak state when released. Had it not been rescued it would probably have been drowned and feasted upon by its captor when the tide rose.

A Crested Tern was killed by an octopus at Coal Point, some 70 miles north of Sydney, in March 1960. The bird had been banded as a runner on nearby Moon Island less than four months previously. Mr W. Berwick, who reported the happening, sent the following details:

"I saw a flock of Silver Gulls and Crested Terns hovering and diving at what I thought might be a school of fish. I went along to have a closer look and saw a chap there hitting at an octopus with a fish scoop. The bird, a Crested Tern, was then floating in the water. I killed the octopus and recovered the Tern which appeared to be dead though its body was warm. I think it must have died from shock. Its feathers were not sodden so it could not have been submerged for any length of time. It did not appear to be injured in any way. The water was about eighteen inches in depth with a rocky and weedy bottom, a natural haunt of octopuses. What struck me most about the incident was the way the other birds behaved" (*in litt.,* 28.10.1963).

It would take a fairly large octopus to engage a Fairy Penguin with any chance of success. One instance, in which the octopus

was killed before it subdued the Penguin grasped in its tentacles, happened at The Spit, Sydney Harbour, early in 1963. Norman Fearnley kindly obtained details from Olaf Sice, a Latvian, who witnessed the struggle.

One day a party of four Water Board employees were working on a superstructure over the water near a retaining wall of stones close to the Spit Bridge when they noticed a Little Penguin struggling in the clear water and occasionally coming to the surface and then being pulled down again. The bird, whose flippers were free, was seen to be in the grip of an octopus which anchored itself to the rocky wall with its other tentacles.

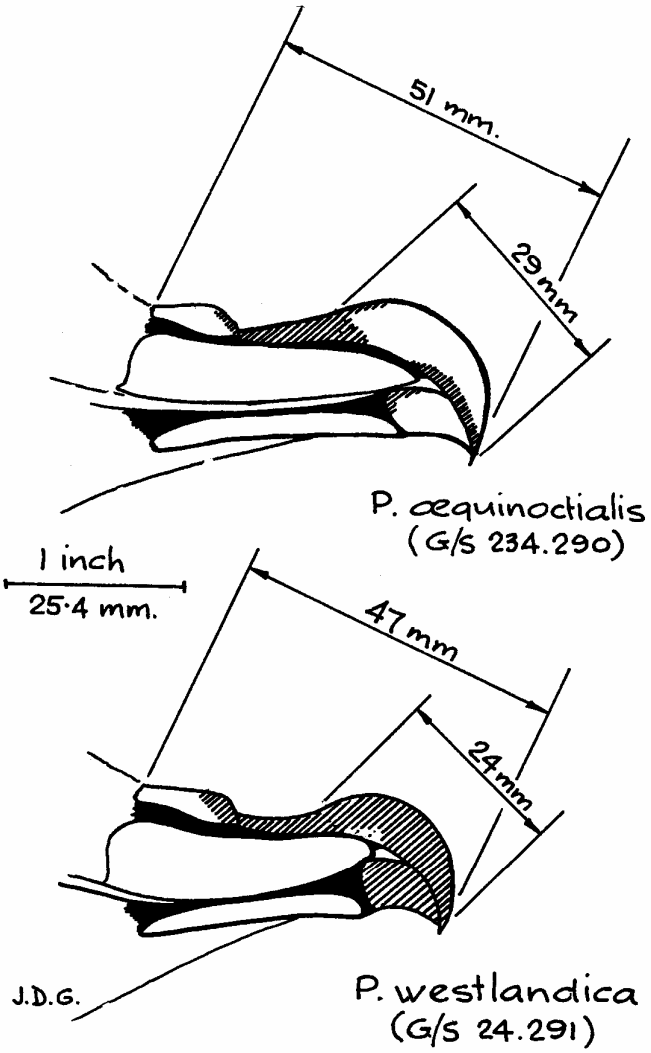
The octopus was bashed with a piece of wood until it released the Penguin which "shot along the surface, no doubt feeling happy", as the men remarked. The octopus was killed and taken home to eat by an Italian. Its tentacles were between three and four feet from tip to tip.—K. A. HINDWOOD, 105 Middle Harbour Road, Lindfield, N.S.W.

The White-chinned Petrel: second Australian specimen.— The first definite Australian specimen of the White-chinned Petrel, *Procellaria aequinoctialis,* was found in March 1959 at Discovery Bay, Victoria (Learmonth, *Emu* 60: 103). To further consolidate its Australian status we record the details of another specimen, this time from a New South Wales beach.

On June 9, 1963, Sefton found the headless and eviscerated corpse of a large, dark petrel on Port Kembla beach, N.S.W. This was considered to be of the genus *Procellaria* but in the absence of the all-important bill we could not proceed with its precise determination. On the following day we both returned to the locality and were fortunate in finding the damaged skull close by and even most of the bill plates, which had become detached and scattered. The bill was carefully reconstructed and on comparison with that of a *Procellaria westlandica* in our possession, and with the illustrations of *P. aequinoctialis, P. westlandica* and *P. parkinsoni* accompanying A. R. McGill's notes on the occurrence of this genus in Australia (*Emu* 59: 259), the identity of our specimen became clear.

The remains were shown to Mr McGill and also to Mr K. A. Hindwood, who compared them with examples in the Australian Museum. Both confirmed the find as *Procellaria aequinoctialis*—the second specimen from an Australian beach.

The dimensions in millimetres are as follow: exposed culmen *c.*51 (the condition of the specimen allows some doubt on the position of the proximal terminus); wing 386; tarsus 65; middle toe and claw 88·5; sex male. Reference No. G/S 234.290. As mentioned above the viscera had been removed by some scavenger but the gonads, measuring 7 mm, were still attached to the back of



Comparison of the bills of *P. aequinoctialis* and *P. westlandia* illustrating points mentioned in the text.

the body cavity and the proventriculus was present and contained several small cephalopod beaks, small black stones and pieces of seaweed. No feathers remained where one might expect to find the white chin patch so its differentiation from the other *Procellaria,* particularly *westlandica,* was achieved mainly by comparison of the bill forms. There were, however, a couple of minute white feathers remaining in the inter-ramal space.

Some points of difference between the bills of the present specimen and that of the *westlandica* mentioned above are illustrated in the figure and might prove useful in the identification of future beach remains when other diagnostic features are wanting. All the standard measurements of these two species overlap to a large degree whereas the other two members of the genus, *parkinsoni* and *cinerea,* are separable on that score. The differences are (1) more robust dertrum (hook) in *aequinoctialis* (2) difference in contour of the culmen (3) disposition of the dark areas (shown shaded in the diagram) and (4) general shape of the bill plates.

Probable sight records of the White-chinned Petrel summarized in McGill's paper (*loc. cit.*) had, up to that time, all occurred in the south-western quadrant of Australian seas. Since then Peakall (*Emu* 60: 199) claims to have seen the species in the Tasman at approximately 33°57′S, 158°23′E, in June 1959, while one of the writers (J.D.G.) has a record of a probable sighting 20 miles off Eddystone Point, north-eastern Tasmania, in December 1958—certainly a *Procellaria* but a view of the white chin was not obtained.

Finally, reference should be made here to a further skin from the region of Australia which has not previously been mentioned in the pages of this journal. Mr. Hindwood informs us that there is in the Australian Museum a skin of *Procellaria aequinoctialis* (No. A 13461), sex female, obtained at 39°01′S, 124°12′E, by a Lieutenant Hemming on December 8, 1881. The position is roughly 400 miles south of the Recherche Archipelago.—J. D. GIBSON, 12 Redman Ave., Thirroul, N.S.W., and A. SEFTON, 15 Station St., Thirroul, N.S.W.

Spine-tailed Swift in Central Australia.—A male Spine-tailed Swift, *Hirundapus caudacutus,* flew into a window of a business premises in Alice Springs on November 26, 1963. The injured bird was handed to the Animal Industry Branch of the Northern Territory Administration by Mr C. Wallis, a resident of Alice Springs. A study skin was made, and this was registered in the collection that is being accumulated for the Northern Territory Museum. The gonads measured $3{\cdot}6 \times 1{\cdot}2$ mm.

This record adds weight to the sight records for the western part of the continent. So far as I know there are no specimens from the State of Western Australia.—K. R. SLATER, Animal Industry Branch, N.T. Administration, Alice Springs, N.T.