

Stray Feathers

First record of the Leaden Flycatcher in South Australia.--

Beaumont is a suburb at the foot of the hills about 4½ miles south-east of Adelaide and about two miles from Waterfall Gully Reserve, which has the nearest natural vegetation. Until recently the intervening country was mainly grassy hills and paddocks with some self-sown olives. Now much of this has been built upon and, although the gardens are small, most of them have shrubs so that there is a more or less continuous green belt from Mt. Lofty to our property, which includes about 4 acres of olives and an acre of garden with fruit trees and eucalypts, and an apiary of about 30 hives.

At about 3.30 p.m. on December 12, 1964 my mother heard a bird in the olive trees that she did not recognize, and the next morning I saw near the apiary a bird about the size of a honeyeater but with a dark crest. The bird was seen again mid-morning and mid-afternoon, and again on the following day, by which time we had this description: a little smaller than a Willie Wagtail, similarly marked except that head and chest were an iridescent steel-blue and the back and tail grey, where the Willie Wagtail is black. The colour near the eye seemed darker than the rest of the head, and the bill was black. It was seen eating winged insects (?bees or moths). It had three distinct calls (two were heard on December 12): one a scissor-grinding note similar to that of *Seisura inquieta*, but more subdued; one a sort of trill reminiscent of the Dusky Wood-Swallow, *Artamus cyanopterus*; and a third, two piping notes rather like some of the honeyeaters, such as the Crescent, *Phylidonyris pyrrhoptera*. This my mother tried to imitate on the piano, and she thinks it was roughly upper C to F. When calling, the bird's tail flicked or almost quivered.

From the above, and with the help of Mathews' *Birds of Australia*, we were almost certain that it was either a Satin or a Leaden Flycatcher. Since only one of the former and none of the latter had been recorded in South Australia, we were anxious to make a positive identification.

My mother, who has a C.S.I.R.O. bird-banding permit, allowed me to erect mist nets in strategic positions, and early next morning (5.15 a.m. on December 14) we caught the bird low in a net set near a ripe plum tree. On capture, it chattered as much as a Willie Wagtail does. It was given C.S.I.R.O. band number 021-03410 on the left leg, measured, photographed, and taken alive to the South Australian Museum, where it was identified by comparison with skins as a male Leaden Flycatcher, *Myiagra rubecula*, by Mr H. T. Condon. While this bird was in the hand I thought I heard another (possibly a mate), but I am not sure. The bird was released at the

place of capture, namely 1 Dashwood Road, Beaumont, and was not seen for several days. However, it (or another male) was seen on December 20, and heard on December 18, 19, and 21. We then went away on vacation and did not see or hear it after our return on January 8.

With the bird in the hand it was easy to see the conspicuous rows of black bristles pointing forward from the gape. The colour on the crown was between deep green-blue grey and dark green-blue grey (plate XLVIII of Ridgway's *Colour Standards and Colour Nomenclature*), but more brilliant. The feathers between bill and ear were darker than the head. Total length 165 mm., weight 12 g; legs dull black, eye-skin grey, iris very dark brown, gape grey, bill 12 mm., dull bluish-grey along the sides and underneath but black along the centre and tip.

It seems extraordinary that a bird not seen before in South Australia should be found in an Adelaide suburb. It is unlikely that such an active and attractive bird should be unobserved. If its arrival is of recent origin, how did it get here?; and are there others? Is it more likely to have come along the Murray from New South Wales, or along our south-east coast from Victoria, eventually reaching the Mt. Lofty Ranges? I would like to know how close to the South Australian border this species has been seen in Victoria and New South Wales.—DAVID PATON, 1 Dashwood Road, Beaumont, S.A.

Some observations on the Red-necked Rail.—The Red-necked Rail, *Rallina tricolor*, is a difficult bird to observe because of its nocturnal habits and the fact that it inhabits the roughest, thickest and most inaccessible parts of the rain-forest (cf. Broadbent, in Campbell 1901: 744; Barnard 1911: 19; Macgillivray 1914: 139). On the rare occasions when it is seen in the daytime it blends perfectly with the dead leaves on the forest floor.

On March 1, 1964, a nest of the Red-necked Rail was found in rain-forest about five miles west of Innisfail, North Queensland, and situated about 50 yards from a busy road. The three white eggs were laid on undisturbed leaves between two root flanges at the base of a tree. The tree was on the bank of a small gully that is usually dry, but now in the wet season there were three or four inches of water making a small stream. During the afternoon, the bird did not take any notice while a few branches were cut and leaned against a tree about 20 feet away to form a hide for observation and photography.

On March 2, during observation from the hide, a strange loud grunting noise (reminiscent of pigs) was heard, coming closer from down the gully; then two Rails appeared, darting backwards and forwards. After a while they "grunted" off down the gully again. It is thought that these were not the owners of the eggs because a moment later a Rail slipped on to the nest from the opposite

direction. It was noted that the bird's bill, viewed from a few feet away, was a peculiar fluorescent-green in colour, especially near the base; from a distance the bill appears to be olive. On this occasion, and at most times later, instead of disappearing into the undergrowth when approached, the brooding bird slowly trotted down into the water, where it sat facing the nest, fluffed up its feathers, and spread its wings, which it fluttered with a shivering motion. When the wings were spread, each primary feather was seen to have two or three narrow white bars about an inch apart, giving a "staggered" effect. Head, neck and chest are a bright rufous colour, the rest of the body deep brown, legs olive, large red eyes, and the bird has the rail-like tail-flicking habit.

On another occasion (March 3) the grunting noise was heard down the gully, and within a few minutes a Rail was seen walking up the gully in the water. It seemed to be hunting for food. It walked right up to the hide, flicking its tail all the while, possibly in alarm.

At dusk the Rails were usually heard calling one by one all around, answering each other, their call "gurk, gurk, gurk, gurk" being repeated many times, on a descending note. They call about the same time each evening, and occasionally during the night—rarely in the daytime. They also have a monotonous "clock, clock, clock" call, which at times goes on for hours without a stop.

A fall of 8 inches of rain on the night of March 6 washed away the eggs, which were found abandoned on March 7. One egg was taken home and artificially incubated; it hatched five days later but the chick died the next day.—MRS. R. G. GILL, Mail Service 216, Innisfail, Q'ld.

REFERENCES

- Barnard, H. G. 1911. Field notes from Cape York. *Emu* 11: 17-32.
Broadbent, K. in: Campbell, A. J. 1901. *Nests and Eggs of Australian Birds*. Melbourne.
Macgillivray, W. D. K. 1914. Notes on some North Queensland birds. *Emu* 13: 132-86.

Yellow-nosed Albatross at Portland, Vic.—In a list of 54 seabirds recorded for Portland (*Emu* 54: 113-20, 1954), only five are dependent on sight records. One of these has now been backed by a good specimen. On June 4, 1964 Cliff Beaglehole and I walked on to the beach at the Fitzroy River (east end of Portland Bay) and picked up an albatross freshly washed up by the sea. An examination sent us home rejoicing: a Yellow-nosed Albatross, *Diomedea chlororhyncha*, at last. Knowing the pitfalls of identification, we anxiously awaited the verdict of Mr Allan McEvey; it supported our determination.

The only other specimens of this bird in the National Museum of Victoria are a mount of 1861 (no locality) and part skeletons from Queenscliff and Waratah Bay. Our sight record came from

H. E. Tarr on Julia Percy Island in 1949, a locality only 14 miles from the Fitzroy River.—NOEL F. LEARMONTH, 33 Must Street, Portland, Vic.

Birds at a honeyflow.—A seemingly unseasonable (mid-July) but abundant honeyflow from the eucalypts, ironbark, and white box has attracted many thousands of nomadic honey-feeders to my district (Inverell, north-eastern New South Wales), and I feel it would be of interest to list those that I noted during a 24-hour period of mustering in an area of about 1000 acres: Brown-headed Honeyeater, Striped Honeyeater, Brown Honeyeater, Regent Honeyeater, Fuscous Honeyeater, Yellow-faced Honeyeater, White-eared Honeyeater, Noisy Miner, Red Wattle-bird, Spiny-checked Honeyeater, Blue-faced Honeyeater, Noisy Friar-bird, Little Friar-bird.

Of these, only the Fuscous and White-plumed Honeyeaters and the Noisy Miner are permanent residents, but all the others, except the Red Wattle-bird, have been recorded from time to time in previous years. This is my first record of the last-named species for this particular property, although I have regarded it as a more or less stationary species 20 miles east, in the more heavily timbered slopes country.—A. C. HUNT, Culwulla Private Bag, Inverell, N.S.W.

Nesting of White-headed Stilts.—In the Windsor area, approximately 35 miles north-west of Sydney, the White-headed Stilt, *Himantopus leucocephalus*, has bred on quite a few occasions during recent years. I obtained what probably is the first-known instance of the breeding of this species within the metropolitan area of Sydney on December 29, 1963, when two juveniles, as yet unable to fly, were observed at Homebush Bay, eight miles west of Sydney. A fortnight later, at the same locality, four juveniles were noted in two family parties, but these could fly short distances. A watch will be kept next season, as the species has been present in the area since, their number being 82 when counted on June 20, 1964, and a raised ridge running through the saline swamp appears to be an inviting nesting place.—E. H. STOCKTON, 62 Ada Avenue South, Wahroonga, N.S.W.

Aberrant winter raptors.—Many observations have been published on the occurrence of hawks and eagles beyond the accepted limits of their usual distribution. The following three species are usually found in the more inland parts of New South Wales, so the records I have made for each over the past few years may be of interest. In July 1960 a Black Falcon, *Falco subniger*, was seen perched on a telephone pole near Cowra, about 200 miles west of Sydney. A Little Eagle, *Hieraaetus morphnoides*, was noted travelling east over Villawood, a suburb fourteen miles west of

Sydney, on June 11, 1963. It was being harried by a pair of Ravens, *Corvus coronoides*, which caused it to change course to north-west as it disappeared from view. On August 2, 1962, following a heavy westerly storm which brought snow to the Blue Mountains, a Fork-tailed Kite, *Milvus migrans* was observed in characteristic roving flight over Richmond, 35 miles north-west of Sydney.

Each of the two first-mentioned instances was apparently due to seasonal wanderings. In the third case the very strong wind was probably the cause of such an easterly observation at this latitude.—E. H. STOCKTON, 62 Ada Avenue South, Wahroonga, N.S.W.

The Common Sandpiper near Sydney.—Hindwood and Hoskin (*Emu* 54: 247-55, 1954) state that the Common Sandpiper, *Tringa hypoleuca*, is one of the least "common" of the waders found near Sydney, and two known occurrences up till 1954, both from Botany Bay, have been recorded. Since then L. C. Haines observed the species at Iron Cove, an arm of Sydney Harbour. In *The Birds of Sydney* (1958) Hindwood and McGill state: "Only a few isolated records are known from the County".

One bird was observed by me on March 18, March 28 and again on April 25, 1964, at Homebush Bay, eight miles west of Sydney. It could have been the same individual on each occasion although several trips to the locality between these dates did not reveal it. On April 26, 1964, Messrs Hindwood, Hoskin, Johnston and McGill visited the area and there were two birds present on that occasion. Both were watched for some time adjacent to a creek entering the Bay, on the banks of which were numerous scattered stones. This is usually a favourite terrain for the species and was the same spot where I made one of my previous three sightings.—E. H. STOCKTON, 62 Ada Avenue South, Wahroonga, N.S.W.

Jabiru in north-west New South Wales.—One Jabiru, *Xenorhynchus asiaticus*, was seen on a lagoon near Collarenebri, N.S.W., in October 1963 by Mr. J. B. Davidson (a visiting American), Mr. S. G. Morse, and myself. We were able to observe it for quite some time, but when we approached it to try for photographs it flew away. The bird remained in the vicinity for about one week. It is also of interest that another Jabiru was seen at the same place on August 9, 1964, so there is a vague possibility that it was the same bird.

Four years ago another bird was seen on Welltown Stud, Goondiwindi, by Mr. F. B. Morse.—C. M. MORSE, Franxton, Collarenebri, N.S.W.

Terek Sandpipers at Botany, N.S.W.—An uncommon species anywhere in Australia, the Terek Sandpiper, *Xenus cinereus*, is particularly rare in the Sydney area. Hindwood and Hoskin (*Emu*,

54: 242, 1954) give the only Sydney records as a specimen in the Australian Museum from Botany dated 1912, a sight record at North Cronulla, near Boat Harbour, on December 20, 1947 by J. A. Keast, and another sight record at Boat Harbour on December 7, 1952 by E. Hoskin.

Until recently I had never seen this species, but on December 9, 1963 there were two birds on the sand flats near the old Cook's River estuary, Botany Bay. Following this initial sighting the birds were present in small groups on a number of occasions before, and on December 12, after which date they were not seen again.

The greatest number of birds seen at any one time was six, recorded during the afternoons of December 10, 11, and 12. Surprisingly, all these observations were made at high tide, suggesting that the area in question may only have been of secondary importance to the birds as a feeding place, being resorted to when they were forced out of other areas by the rising tide.

The following description has been compiled from notes taken while observing the birds: Size: that of a Curlew-Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*. Bill: long, upturned slightly; black with basal quarter orange. Legs and toes: bright orange, slightly shorter than those of a Curlew-Sandpiper. Eyes: appeared dark. Upper-parts: forehead, lores and eyebrow white; ear coverts and nape light grey; crown dark grey; mantle, back and wings light grey with a pale brownish wash; there are a few dark marks on the back and mantle, and the wing has a dark border, when closed, from the shoulder to the tip of the primaries; the tail is light grey with very thin and indistinct white edges. Under-parts: chin and throat white, merging into light grey farther down; breast and remainder of under-parts white. Upper-wing pattern: the primaries and primary-coverts are dark grey; secondary, median and lesser wing-coverts are pale grey, and the secondaries have a distinct white bar on their trailing edge. —B. A. SPEECHLEY, 12 Edgehill Avenue, Botany, N.S.W.

Sunbathing by birds.—The notes by C. P. Humphries (*Emu* 63: 72, 1963) and J. A. Tubb (*Emu* 63: 418-9, 1964) concerning raised wing postures in pigeons and doves demonstrate both that the behaviour known as sunbathing is relatively infrequently observed in the wild in pigeons, and that the few summary articles dealing with sunbathing are not well-known. Two papers in particular are useful to persons interested in sunning behaviour, to wit:

Hauser, D. C. 1957. Some observations on sun-bathing in birds. *Wilson Bull.* 69: 78-90.

Nicolai, J. 1962. Über Regen-, Sonnen- und Staubbaden bei Tauben (Columbidae). *J. f. Ornith.* 103: 125-39.

Nicolai's work concerned observations on caged columbids, and he recorded sunbathing in 18 of 19 species available to him. Adding to Nicolai's total the four species additionally mentioned by

Humphries and Tubb, and eight species I have observed (see below) there are no less than 30 kinds of columbids that regularly sunbathe. Among these pigeons there is no geographic or taxonomic consistency, and it seems permissible at present to assume that such behaviour is characteristic of pigeons and doves generally.

The species that I have seen sunbathe (additional to those recorded by Nicolai) are: *Zenaida asiatica*, *Caloenas nicobarica*, *Leptotila verreauxi*, *L. jamaicensis*, *Ducula bicolor*, *Streptopelia risoria*, *Columbina passerina*, and *C. inca*. All of these species were seen to engage in sunbathing, all assuming the high-intensity posture (Nicolai *loc. cit.*), on June 19, 1960, at the aviaries at the zoological park at San Antonio, Texas, U.S.A. I have elsewhere seen *C. inca* sunbathing under unconfined conditions.—RICHARD F. JOHNSTON, The University of Kansas, Museum of Natural History, Lawrence, Kansas 66045, U.S.A.

Notes from North Queensland.—J. A. Boyd is mentioned in Whittell's bibliography, *The Literature of Australian Birds* (1954), as a man who sent natural history material from Fiji to Sydney in the early 1880s, and afterwards supplied notes and specimens to both William Macleay and A. J. North from Ripple Creek, Ingham, north-east Queensland. He was in fact a canegrower, a naturalist of wide interests, and a close friend of Dr E. P. Ramsay of Sydney, whom he addressed as "My dear Ned", and to whom he wrote frequently over many years.

A considerable number of Boyd's letters remain in the possession of Mr J. S. P. Ramsay (Dr Ramsay's son) and from these I have drawn some few ornithological notes. The letters from Ingham began in 1885. At that time the Pied Goose, *Anseranas semipalmata*, was abundant in the area, and Boyd sent to Ramsay 79 eggs of the species, together with the following notes:

The eggs of these birds vary greatly in size, as also in the number laid. I have this year taken several nests with 10 eggs, some with 8 and 7, and one with 6. The eggs in almost every case were slightly incubated, showing that the goose had finished laying. Breeding commences about the middle of January and I fancy that some pairs rear two broods. The nest is built among thick rushes *in the water*. The rushes on the site are bent over and trampled down to form a foundation, on which a quantity cut close by is placed until a floating conical structure some 18 inches high is formed, the top of which is the nest. No lining is used. I believe the gander does a portion of the hatching. From the nests are seen small tracks through the rushes leading to the nearest clear water, and on one side is a platform by which the bird ascends to her eggs.

Boyd asked that some of the eggs he had forwarded be sent on to a collector named H. W. Marsden of Gloucester, England, and later he commented that Marsden was "like all naturalists at home", who "keep on writing until they get specimens and then you hear nothing of them."

Also in 1885, Boyd sent down two eggs of *Tyto longimembris*, the Grass Owl (which he termed *Strix candida*), a species con-

cerning which relatively little has been written and which appears now to be rare. He had found two nests in May of the previous year, he said, and each contained three young and an addled egg. No actual nest was made, the Owl contenting itself with making a chamber in a tall and thick cluster of grass and laying the eggs on the bare ground.

A third species of which Boyd sent an egg was a bird which rose from the ground, in front of a gin, when he was out wallaby-shooting with a band of aborigines. The bird, he reported, was "a species of Goatsucker", known to the natives at "Tako" and to the bushmen as the "mallet-bird" from its monotonous note of "tok-tok-tok", which it kept up nearly all night. This, no doubt, was the Large-tailed Nightjar, *Caprimulgus macrurus*, now known also as the "axe-bird" and "hammer-bird" so that, with mallet-bird added, it ranks as a complete "carpenter-bird"!

Other letters contain references to the Black Swan (very rare in the district), the Sunbird, the Shining Starling, the Nutmeg Pigeon, the Lotus-bird, and the Crimson Finch, but none of the notes is now significant. Both in 1888 and 1890 Boyd complains of the scarcity of birds, this being mainly due, he says, to the fact that "hundreds of Kanakas with bows and arrows have killed or frightened almost everything away."

For the rest, the letters discuss more general matters—such as a bad drought late in 1888, serious floods early in 1890, and another drought late in 1892—and, on the personal side, there is a reference to a visit paid to the district in 1885 by A. J. Campbell, who is labelled "Egg" Campbell.

The last two of the letters are dated April and July 1895. Boyd had then returned from a visit to England, and he reported to Ramsay that Sharpe, Gunther, Ogilvie and others had asked, "What has become of the Dr?" In that period Ramsay was meeting trouble, not only through ill-health but because of affairs at the Australian Museum, and Boyd was anxious to free him from his depressed state. He urged Ramsay to draw on his large store of knowledge by writing, perhaps making a start by editing a modern edition of Gould's *Birds of Australia*. Such a work, he suggested, "would last to the Battle of Armageddon, and possibly stand the 1000 years of peace afterwards."

Unfortunately, Ramsay was not able to follow this well-meant advice. He did relatively little work after resigning from the curatorship of the Australian Museum late in 1894, and so (as Whittell's bibliography bears witness) his ornithological eminence through published work rests on the numerous articles, including description of new species, which he contributed to journals in Australia and England between 1865 and 1891, together with his *Catalogue of the Australian Birds in the Australian Museum*, 1876-94.

If, however, E. P. Ramsay did not leave any standard publication, it remains true that his broad knowledge, his collecting zeal, and his extensive correspondence made him a dominating figure in Australian zoology, and particularly ornithology, during almost 30 years.—A. H. CHISHOLM, Nenagh, Milson Road, Cremorne Point, N.S.W.

Reviews

The Sea Swallow. Under this title the Royal Naval Bird Watching Society publishes its annual report, a well-printed journal that is growing in size and importance year by year. Formed originally to stimulate an interest in sea birds amongst Royal Navy personnel, the RNBWS now has, in addition, many experienced observers in the merchant and fishing fleets and enjoys a unique potential for gathering and co-ordinating distributional data, both specific and quantitative, from all the oceans.

The various report sheets used by observers are designed to ensure accuracy, and considerable cross-checking through correspondence is often undertaken to establish the validity of unusual records. A systematic analysis of these reports, expertly prepared by Dr W. R. P. Bourne, appears under specific headings in *Sea Swallow*, together with his informative comments on field identification. This last aspect is, naturally enough, given due prominence and field characteristics, including flight and behaviour, are inevitably becoming more reliable as a result of accumulated experience. All sightings are precisely located geographically.

Contributions from eminent ornithologists often enhance the report, e.g. Dr. E. G. Franz Sauer's "Star Navigation of Nocturnal Migrating Birds" and Dr Bourne's "Petrels of the Indian Ocean" is an excellent comprehensive summary containing much new information. In publishing the ocean reports however *Sea Swallow* probably performs its most important function and it is up to those interested in a particular area or species to extract that which is relevant. In the most recent issue, Vol. 16 published March 1964, references to Australian waters include May reports of concentrations of Black-browed Albatrosses between Sydney and Melbourne, Shy Albatrosses off Cape Everard and Cape Howe, a Yellow-nosed Albatross off Sydney and a Grey-headed Albatross and Pomarine Skua outside Port Phillip Bay, prions (probably *P. nutteri*) from Cape Howe to Bermagui, Great-winged Petrels (over 500 in two hours) east of Evans Head, White-headed Petrels 70 miles off Sydney, a Brown-headed Petrel and five Wilson's Storm-petrels 40 miles off Evans Head.

Sea Swallow is taking its place amongst the recognized regional journals as a source of avian data for the world's oceans which still remain, in many respects, the "dark continent" of ornithology.—J. D. GIBSON.

The Taxonomy of Australian Owls.—It was a fortunate day when G. F. Mees was appointed to the R.A.O.U. Checklist Committee and assigned the owls, for it has resulted in 'A revision of the Australian owls (Strigidae and Tytonidae)' (*Zool. Verh.*, no. 65, 62 pp. + pl., Leiden, 1964). In preparing this valuable work, Mees examined most of the material in Australian collections and many series in overseas museums. The subspecific characters, distribution (amplified with excellent spot-maps), and material examined, are listed for each Australian taxon and also for extralimital races of *Ninox rufa*, *N. novaeseelandiae*, *N. connivens*, and *Tyto tenebricosa*.

Five races are recognized in *N. rufa*, three of them Australian, including the newly described *marginata*, which is confined to the rain forests of northeast Queensland south to Cardwell, and is separated by a small gap from the unique *queenlandica* of Mackay, and by a much larger gap from the nominate race of far northern Western Australia and the Northern Territory. *Ninox strenua* which replaces *N. rufa* in southeastern Australia is undivided.

Ninox novaeseelandiae is split into sixteen races of which the following