Stray Feathers

Masked Plover breeding in New Guinea.—The Masked Plover, *Lobibyx miles*, has apparently not been previously recorded as breeding in New Guinea. Mayr (*List of New Guinea Birds*, 1941: 28) remarks that as most specimens of this species from New Guinea, except the south, were collected in winter, they were probably winter visitors from Australia. The range in New Guinea is defined as the southern portion, and in the north, the Sepik and Ramu Valleys—all areas that provide suitable habitat.

I have no knowledge of the species in the New Guinea Trust Territory, but so far as Papua is concerned it can be seen all the year round, both in groups and in pairs. The tropical vegetation growth naturally restricts suitable habitat for any bird that favours clear flat-lands, so the Masked Plover is usually seen on mangrove mud flats, coastal salt-pans, airfields and the drying margins of lagoons. Unfortunately no statistics are available to indicate a winter build-up of visitors.

The Masked Plover can now be listed as a definite breeding bird for New Guinea. On July 4, 1965, Roy Mackay and myself tried for some time to locate a suspected nest at Taurama Beach, Port Moresby. This was in an area of dried, caked mud behind a mangrove-fringed saline lagoon. Eventually Mackay tracked the parents to a tiny depression in the dry mud, where, "frozen" in a prone position, and difficult to see, were four young plovers. Covered with down, but with the primary feathers sprouting they were typical *Lobibyx* chicks with fawn upperparts, white underparts, a black band on the nape and three parallel black streaks running down the top of the head and the back. Small flesh-coloured wattles were evident. The young were successfully photographed, but a later visit, made for banding purposes, failed to locate the birds. However, predators are abundant in the area.

On September 3, at Kapa Kapa, near Rigo, a pair was seen on a ploughed field behaving in a suspicious manner. However, no nest was found.

At Balimo, in the western district, on October 25, a young bird was brought in for sale by local natives. This bird was almost fully plumed, but could not fly. The natives of the area insisted that the species bred locally and accurately described the eggs and young. This bird was also photographed. At that time the species was present at Balimo in flocks of up to 50, with, however, odd pairs throughout the lagoon system surrounding the station.

The closely-allied Spur-winged Plover, *Lobibyx novaehollandiae*, is also a likely contender for the New Guinea list, as a reliable field observation, made near Port Moresby, indicates its presence. This report, made by Michael Freer of the Bird Observers' Club, reads "very surprisingly one of these birds was often seen on the swampy ground at Kila Kila in the company of several Masked

Plover. It was often possible to observe both species through the glasses at the same time and thus make a thorough comparison." In view of the recent report of the Spur-winged Plovers in Tropical Australia (Warham, *Emu* **60**: 61-3) such an occurrence seems quite likely.

My thanks to Stephen Marchant for drawing attention to the significance of this breeding record.—H. L. BELL, 1st Battalion, The Pacific Islands Regiment, Taurama Barracks, Port Moresby, Papua.

The Dominican Gull in Tasmania.—Since the Southern Black-backed, or Dominican, Gull, *Larus dominicanus*, was first recorded in Tasmania, Wall (1956), little has been published on this species in the State apart from a reference to a bird at Risdon in Sharland (1958).

The Dominican Gull is well-established in the south-east of Tasmania although far outnumbered by the Pacific Gull, *L. pacificus*. The headquarters of the species is in Pittwater where it can be seen at all times of the year, particularly at the mouth of Sorell Creek. This area is particularly attractive to gulls, large waders and herons on account of the large expanses of mud and *Zostera nana* that are exposed at low tide. Additional attractions for birds with scavenging habits are the close proximity of the Sorell municipal tip and an abattoir. It is not uncommon to see six or more Pacific Gulls in this area from which they also visit Barilla Bay and Orielton Lagoon.

One or more birds can usually be seen in the Derwent Estuary at Ralphs Bay, where the first Tasmanian bird was recorded, and Lauderdale; in Pipeclay Lagoon; and at Blackman's Bay in the south-east. I have seen birds on the Derwent, up-river from Hobart, and it has been recorded as far up-stream as Bridgewater (Wall, pers. comm.).

Apart from a record in January, 1966, by D. Milledge from Rostrevor Lagoon the species has not yet been recorded from the east coast, and I am not aware of any records from the north, west or south-west.

Ornithologists in Hobart are convinced that the Dominican Gull breeds locally, probably on small islands in Pittwater and the Derwent Estuary, but there is no proof of this. Immature birds have frequently been seen in the area, and in March, 1966, a juvenile was present with a pair of adult birds on the mud flats at Sorell. The actions of this juvenile, which was persistently begging for food, suggests that it had been raised nearby.—D. G. THOMAS, 2 Lallaby Road, Moonah, Tasmania.

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Breeding Localities of Rock Warbler *Origma rubricata*—In an article by Hamilton-Smith on "Birds in Australian Caves" Vol. 65, part 2, *The Emu*, it is mentioned that the breeding of the Rock Warbler has not been confirmed at Wombeyan Caves.

In September, 1955, I reported it as nesting just inside the arch in a dark corner on the left hand side. The record was reported to the head guide and to Mr. Keith Hindwood, who later visited the area, but the guide had forgotten the position I had indicated.

It is a little hard to understand why this bird has been recorded as only breeding and living in sandstone country.

As a youth, in about 1912, in company with my father, who was then Secretary of the N.S.W. Naturalist Club, we were shown, by Mr. Wiburd, Rock Warblers nesting in the Lucas Cave at Jenolan Caves. Because of the popular habit of people collecting both eggs and nests at that time, the breeding in this area was not made public. Where there are numbers of the birds congregated in a caves area it seems rather evident that they will be breeding there. —E. O. EDWARDS, Menangle Park, N.S.W.

Xanthochroism in Scarlet Robin, *Petroica multicolor,* **and Flame Robin,** *P. phoenicea.*—On January 8, 1966, I was camping at the Meredith River, a mile north of Swansea on Tasmania's east coast, when I found a female, or immature, Scarlet Robin feeding among the trees lining the river banks.

On close scrutiny it was found to have two small patches of pink, one on the left side of the lower breast and the other a little higher up on the right side, and the central upper breast was light yellow. In all other respects it appeared to be quite normal. It remained in the immediate vicinity throughout our stay of two days and was observed critically for long periods.

This occurrence reminded me of a somewhat similar observation, but in respect of a Flame Robin, made on the eastern shore of Moulting Lagoon, about fifteen miles north east of Swansea, in September 1950. In this case the bird resembled a female Flame Robin in every way except that the entire breast was lemon-yellow. It was feeding with other Flame Robins among wattle trees.—L. E. WALL, 63 Elphinstone Rd., North Hobart, Tas.

A case of vocal mimicry under duress in the Speckled Warbler. —As Chisholm (1965) states that vocal mimicry during agitation appears to be rare, it seems worthwhile to record that *circa* 5 p.m. on March 25, 1966, when clearing a mist-net of small birds at Swan Vale, N.S.W., a Speckled Warbler, *Chthonicola sagittata*, was held in the hand prior to banding, and to my astonishment promptly launched forth into a superb imitative medley of call-notes of species common to the immediate locality. Fortunately, as in conjunction with banding operations I had been in the habit of tape-recording the standard distress-calls (in the hope that when sufficient material accumulated, comparative analysis may prove to be of taxonomic or biological value), a tape-recorder was handy and I was able to record *part* of the performance, containing in excess of 40 separate calls, of which some are repetitions of the same call, while others are representations of many different calls of single species. Although some calls remain to be identified, among those defined are the Brown Treecreeper, *Climacteris picumnus*; White-throated Treecreeper, *C. leucophaea*; Grey Thrush, *Colluricincla harmonica*; Rufous Whistler, *Pachycephala rufiventris*; Mistletoe-bird, *Dicaeum hirundinaceum*; Northern Yellow Robin, *Eopsaltria australis*; Crimson Rosella, *Platycercus elegans*; and twice the chatter of the Speckled Warbler is blended with others.

The seemingly incongruous behavioural processes that prompt a bird to pour forth a mimetic recital of most of the familiar bird-calls that are commonplace to its world of hearing, on duress of capture, are difficult of explanation without an understanding of the basic cause of vocal mimicry to begin with, and though deeply probed, this matter still remains to be satisfactorily resolved despite the very good cases and reasoned argument put forward both for and against the strictly utilitarian and functional concept by Marshall (1950) and Chisholm (*ibid.*) respectively.

As it is hardly likely that mimicry upon stress of capture would have evolved as such by serving a useful purpose or possessing survival value, the most reasonable assumption is that mimicry under such circumstances is a secondary behaviourial trait, perhaps a simple displacement activity, and regardless of the reason why vocal mimicry was first evolved, or used, it is now capable of diversion into other channels than the original function. In turn, the intrusion of this secondary aspect suggests the possibility that the conflicting viewpoints previously referred to may well both be correct, in that while vocal mimicry may have evolved, and is still being used, for territorial defence (for the reasons advanced by Marshall, *ibid.*), it seems possible that Chisholm (*ibid.*) too, may have touched upon the truth in believing birds as sound-using and impressionable creatures are sound-lovers as well, and *sometimes* mimic as a pleasurable activity.

In acknowledgement I wish to thank the Division of Wildlife Research, CSIRO, for kind co-operation in granting me bird-banding facilities under the Australian Bird-Banding Scheme, without which this observation could not have eventuated. My thanks, also, to Geoff Millard, for expert assistance with mist-netting and banding techniques.—JOHN COURTNEY, "Ashgrove", Swan Vale, via Glen Innes, N.S.W.

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Distraction display by two species of Crakes.—Distraction display, in one or other of its forms, is known to be performed by birds of many different families. However, I have not previously associated this activity with the Rallidae family. In recent months I have watched two species of crakes, the Marsh Crake, *Porzana pusilla*, and the Spotless Crake, *Porzana tabuensis*, engage in this activity, the displays given being of the mammal simulation type.

In January 1965, I located seven nests of the Marsh Crake at a swamp near Buronga, New South Wales. These nests were visited by me at regular intervals. Usually the sitting birds would have left the nest prior to my examination, occasionally slipping off quietly at my immediate approach. In the latter cases the bird would slink quietly into the vegetation and disappear. Its progress through water or grass would be silent and betrayed only by very slight disturbances and an occasional "crek" of alarm. One particular nest, a fully-domed one, located just above water level in a bush of Native Licorice, *Glycyrrhiza acanthocarpa*, had an initial clutch of six eggs, one of which disappeared during incubation, predator or cause of loss being unknown. The sitting bird at this nest usually sat close, slinking away at the last moment. Five days before the eggs hatched, the response to my visit varied. The sitting bird did not leave the nest until I bent to lift up the roof of the nest to examine the eggs. It then slipped rapidly off the nest and ran quickly through open, shallow water for about twenty feet to the shelter of other bushes. It ran with head down low, body hunched and humped in the middle, tail depressed and wings very slightly open and drooped. The general impression of this brownish bird scurrying in this peculiar attitude under the bushes was that of a rat running away. It did not remain in shelter but several times scuttled out, ran around in open water and then dashed back under a bush again. The movements were quick and although outwardly furtive, were made conspicuous by the splashing of water as the bird ran about, in marked contrast to the usual quiet motions of crakes. Sometimes the bird would stand in the shelter of a bush, making a clicking sound before running out.

The performance continued for some two or three minutes before I started to examine the eggs. Whilst I was doing this, the bird apparently circled quietly through the vegetation to the rear of its nest, where it suddenly re-appeared, scuttled past my feet and gave a further accomplished performance of the "rodent-run" display, running away from the nest with the obvious implied invitation to be chased.

In November 1965, I discovered a nest of the Spotless Crake containing four eggs. It was an open platform constructed three feet above water level in dense, almost impenetrable cumbungi, *Typha angustifolia*, near Buronga. The nest was first visited on November 20 and then frequently until December 1, when the eggs hatched. The performance of the sitting bird was identical at each visit. It would remain on the nest until I parted the cumbungi stems immediately above it. It would then tumble over the side of the nest and drop straight into the water with a loud splash. This action was deliberately contrived as the cumbungi stems were so close and jammed with mace-fluff that walking from the nest would have been far simpler. The quick fall of a body, followed by the splash, could easily be mistaken for a frog jumping from a high perch, a regular feature in a reedbed, as other cumbungi explorers will know. A somewhat similar action has been described by Rowley for the Blue Wren, *Malurus cyaneus* (*The Emu*, **64**: 266). Rowley has coined the phrase "the falling stone display" for this action. Having hit the water the movements of the bird would then be lost to view, but the progress through the cumbungi was easily followed audibly. The bird would move away from the nest, splashing loudly in the water and rustling against the vegetation. This commotion occurred within a few feet of where I stood and in the opposite direction to the nest. Every now and then the bird would scuttle across the narrow stretch of open water of my access track, splashing noisily. Such trips were of very short duration, but the posture adopted by the bird appeared identical with that described above for the Marsh Crake, that is, a mammal simulation posture. The bird would approach very close and at times actually ran over my feet, before scurrying back into the cumbungi. Usually the bird gave a clicking note as it engaged in the display. The display would last for some minutes, when the bird would cease running around and move slowly in the near vicinity, silent as far as water splashing and vegetation rustling was concerned, but using its typical bubbling, pumping call.—J. N. HOBBS, Buronga, N.S.W.

Nesting notes on the Frill-necked Flycatcher.—The Frill-necked Flycatcher, *Arses telescophthalmus*, is a common bird in almost all New Guinea forests up to 2,000 feet, and sometimes higher. It is also found in Queensland (the race *lorealis*) from Cape York to the Rocky River. Further south, from Cooktown to Cardwell, it is replaced by the Pied Flycatcher, *A. kaupi*, from which it may be distinguished by the absence of a black breast band. If my observations are any indication it is much less prone to the "tree-creeping" habit so well known of *kaupi*.

Several descriptions of the nest in New Guinea are known. Rand (1942) (*Bull. Ameri. Mus.* LXXIX, Art IV: 338) describes four nests as all being small cups, made of small stems, bound by animal silk and lined with fine rootlets. These were all built into two parallel hanging vines, at heights from 10-40 feet, in open situations. Watson, Wheeler and Whitbourn (1962) (*Emu* **62**: 82) also describe similar situations of two nests, at heights of 9 and 15 feet respectively. My own notes are of two nests, Lonidari, Rigo, January 2, 1965, at a height of 10 feet and Iadobu, Rigo, February 7, 1966, at 20 feet. Both references quoted give good descriptions of nest-building, in which both sexes share.

Two nests examined by Rand contained two eggs each, whitish-pink with brown and grey markings, thickest at the larger end. The nest at Iadobu also contained two similar eggs. Rand observed the birds at one nest and noted that the sequence of sitting was: female 33 minutes, unoccupied 38 minutes, female 40 minutes, male 51 minutes, unoccupied 4 minutes—then the female. He concluded that both male and female take turns at incubating.

Observations at the Iadobu nest confirm this and also indicate that the female may sit during the night. These observations were made at 30 minute intervals, with a 10 minute wait at the time of observation.

January 7, 1966. 1300 hrs., male sitting; 1330 hrs., female sitting; 1400 hrs., male sitting; 1430 hrs., female sitting; 1500 hrs., no bird present; 1645 hrs., male sitting; 1700 hrs., female sitting; 1730 hrs., male sitting; 1800 hrs., no bird at the nest. At 1830 hrs. the female was sitting and remained until darkness fell.

January 8. At first light, 0545 hrs., the female was sitting and remained until 0615 hrs. No further observation was made until 1310 hrs., when the male was seen to fly up and perch near the nest, the sitting female then leaving it.—H. L. BELL, 1st Battalion, The Pacific Islands Regiment, Taurama Barracks, Port Moresby, Papua.

White-winged Black Tern, "regular" visitor to Moreton Bay, Queensland.—In the conclusion of an article "The White-winged Black Tern in Moreton Bay, Queensland" published in *Emu* **57**: 147, it was stated that "the question as to whether the White-winged Black Tern is a regular visitor to Moreton Bay has not been answered and can only be answered by subsequent observations during ensuing seasons".

Since that time, up to April 25, 1965, I have made at least one visit per year to the Luggage Point outfall in order to check on the presence of the species. The visits were generally made during March or April and on all visits the White-winged Black Terns were in the area, generally feeding as a flock at the outfall. The number of birds in a flock, wheeling and diving over the water is hard to judge, but the flock seemed to be about the same size each year and would have consisted generally of anything from 100 to 300 birds.

It is therefore, now known that the White-winged Black Tern has been in the Moreton Bay area each summer season for ten years since the time of the first sighting of the species by L. Amiet at Raby Bay in 1955. It is, therefore, felt that the White-winged Black Tern should now qualify as a "regular" visitor to the area.

It might be mentioned that sand-pumping in connection with the establishment of one of the Oil Refineries at the mouth of the Brisbane River had made the land access to Luggage Point all but impassable in April, 1965. It is to be hoped that any future Port developments in the area will not interfere with the sewer outfall itself and its very obvious food-source for the White-winged Black Terns.—F. M. HAMILTON, 8 Ironside Street, St. Lucia, Brisbane, Queensland.