

## STRAY FEATHERS

**Colour of orbital ring in Partridge-Pigeon, *Geophaps smithii*.**—Some years ago Brigadier Officer (*Emu* 63: 72-73) made the interesting observation that the northern populations of the Squatter-Pigeon, *Geophaps scripta*, have the bare circumorbital skin tan, whereas in the southern populations it is known to be leaden-blue. It would be important to investigate if this difference is correlated with geographical variation in plumage and size as described by H. L. White (*Emu* 21: 163), and therefore confirms the validity of *Geophaps scripta peninsulae*.

In the same note referred to above, Officer states that: "the Partridge-Pigeon, *Geophaps smithii*, has the skin around the eye definitely red". It should be noted, however, that as early as 1912 Mathews (*Austral Av. Rec.* 1: 28) described from Western Australia a subspecies of *Geophaps smithii* on the basis of having the naked eye-space yellow, not scarlet. Mathews' subspecies has not been generally accepted; Peters (1937, Check-List of Birds of the World III: 120) regarded it as very doubtfully distinct, and Deignan (1964, *Rec. Exp. Arnhem Land* IV: 380-381) definitely rejected it with the somewhat scathing comment: "Mathews has named *G. s. blaaui* from the Kimberley Division; it is said to differ from the Territorian form by having the orbital region yellow. I cannot find that any collector has noted this in the field, and suspect that the describer was misled by the fact that the red orbital skin rapidly becomes yellow in the dried skin. In the circumstances, I treat the species binomially."

From the preceding quotations it is clear that the existence of geographical variation in colour of circumorbital skin in *Geophaps smithii* is at present being denied. Therefore I want to put on record that in June and July 1960, when collecting, on behalf of the Western Australian Museum, at Kalumburu in the northern Kimberley Division, I observed many individuals of *Geophaps smithii*, usually in pairs, and all birds seen, as well as one collected, had the circumorbital skin ochre-yellow. Kalumburu is topotypical of Mathews' race *Geophaps smithii blaaui*, and my observations fully confirm the character it was based on. In my opinion this striking character is certainly enough for nomenclatural recognition; therefore the Partridge-Pigeon can be divided in two subspecies:

*Geophaps smithii smithii* (Jardine & Selby, 1830)—Northern Territory.

*Geophaps smithii blaaui* Mathews, 1912—Western Australia.

It remains to be seen if and where the two subspecies are in contact; the difference is striking that one would expect them to be true isolates.—G. F. MEES, Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie, Leiden.

**Unusual feeding technique of Bald Coot.**—On March 31, 1966, near one of the lakes in Centennial Park, Sydney, numbers of Bald Coots, *Porphyrio melanotus*, were feeding busily on fallen fruits beneath the Port Jackson fig trees, *Ficus rubiginosa*, which line the nearby roadside. At first I thought that the birds were scratching their heads rather frequently, but observation with binoculars from a car showed this was not the case. What I had taken to be grooming was, in fact, part of an elaborate method of feeding which does not appear to have been described before.

First the bird picked up the fruit in the tip of its bill (Fig. 1a); it then raised its head and thrashed at its bill with part-splayed foot (Fig. 1b), wedging the fruit between two digits and then bearing it back to ground level. The fruit was now firmly held in the foot and was thoroughly pecked and eaten (Fig. 1c).

The process was quick, lasting no more than half a minute. Unfortunately it was too dark (1800 hrs) for photography under the trees. The birds were quite unafraid as long as no one left the car and at least ten different individuals were seen to feed in this way repeatedly.

Neither Bald Coots nor Port Jackson fig trees are familiar to me and so I sought the opinion of Keith Hindwood, who confirmed that this appeared to be a novel feeding pattern and promised to try and confirm my observations. The following is a transcript of Keith Hindwood's notes (reproduced here with his permission).

"Centennial Park, 3/5/1966. 2.30 p.m. Fed native figs to Bald Coots who took them in their bills and then transferred them to the toes, grasping (sometimes after a few attempts) them in the closed toes near the joints; then the birds placed the foot, or rather the claws, on the ground and proceeded to eat the fig, bit by bit. Some of the figs had small stems still adhering to their bases; these they also ate as far as I could see. A few figs, perhaps not quite ripe enough, were discarded by the birds. In one instance a bird squashed a fig in its bill and ate it, but otherwise all figs were picked up in the bill, the leg lifted and the head bent a little and the fig transferred to the toes and then the foot placed close to the ground, the claws only touching. Observations from car and birds only three or four feet away."



FIG. 1

The majority of the Port Jackson figs were not ripe enough to be squashed in the bill and eaten, and were obviously too large to be swallowed whole, so that fragmentation by pecking was necessary before the food could be ingested. It appeared that the round fruit, between pea and marble in size, was elusive to peck when it lay unrestrained on the pavement or hard ground and that the species has evolved an efficient foot-vice to cope with this situation. Bald Coots use their feet to carry food to their mouths (Ridpath, in prep.; Bryant, *Emu* 39, p. 290) so that it is not surprising to find the use of this limb in a different method of feeding.

Fig fruits, bitumen pavements (or other unresilient surfaces) and good Bald Coot habitat, seldom coincide which probably accounts for the novelty of this type of feeding behaviour. It is suggested that by using this technique Bald Coots can feed on fallen figs at various degrees of ripeness instead of having to select only those which are ripe enough to squash in the bill.—IAN ROWLEY, Division of Wildlife Research, C.S.I.R.O., Canberra, A.C.T.

**Yellow-faced Honeyeaters on the Dividing Range.**—The Yellow-faced Honeyeater, *Meliphaga chrysops*, has been receiving quite a large amount of attention for a good number of years. The study of its movements was pioneered in Queensland by Jack Robertson, with the assistance of several field observers, of whom I was one. Generally I confined my attentions to the Taylor Range, which contains the Mt. Coot-tha Reserve. Most of us, I think, worked along the coast, east of the Dividing Range. A letter from Lloyd Nielsen, of Jandowae, some years ago, suggested he was paying some attention to the species west of the Range.

Some notes from Robin Elks (*Queensland Bird Notes*, June 1966) recorded a northward migration of Yellow-faced Honeyeaters at Mt. Mitchell, Cunningham's Gap, on April 25, 1966. Some time later I happened to be visiting Toowoomba on June 3 to 5, and recorded an unmistakable movement of the species along the Range, in very large numbers (*Darling Downs Naturalist*, Sept. 1966) recorded a northward migration of Yellow-faced Honeyeaters and one naturally asks the question: Just how far north along the Dividing Range do they normally go? Also, what are their movements west of the Divide?

Of the hundreds of Yellow-faced Honeyeaters I have seen on migration, I have not seen one bird carrying a band. Even if one does not hold a permit to "take" a banded bird, they come so close at times, particularly when bathing or feeding on low shrubs like *Hovea* and others, that a banded bird could be easily seen, even though the band could not be identified.—N. JACK, 54 Cochrane Street, Paddington, Queensland.

**The Grey Honeyeater *Lacustroica whitei* collected by Whitlock in 1903.**—In 1909, F. Lawson Whitlock, while collecting for H. L. White, at Lake Way, near Wiluna, Western Australia, obtained the nest and eggs, nestlings and adult specimens of an unknown honeyeater. White sent the skins, labelled "*Pseudogerygone*", to the Australian Museum, Sydney, where A. J. North (1910) described them as representing a new genus and species, *Lacustroica whitei*. The species was dedicated to the youngest member of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union, "Master Alfred H. E. White", son of H. L. White, (Campbell 1910), and not, as the latter's obituary states, to H. L. White himself (Anon. 1927).

Soon after the type description was published, Whitlock (1910) remarked that seven years previously, in 1903, he had collected two specimens near Lake Austin, Western Australia. These he could not identify at the time, but "from memory" they reminded him of the recently described honeyeater. The specimens, he states, "were sent down to the Perth Museum with other skins, but I never learned to what species they had been referred".

Until now no trace had been found on the skins to corroborate Whitlock's statement, but a recent search through the specimens and records at the Western Australian Museum, Perth and the American Museum of Natural History, New York has provided fresh evidence.

The original field label of the type specimen *L. w. neglecta*, Mathews (1916) now in the American Museum, proves that this is indeed one of the early Whitlock skins collected at Day Dawn, near Lake Austin, on May 18, 1903. The label bears the initials "F.L." indicating that F. Lawson was the collector, the names F. Lawson and F. Lawson Whitlock are synonymous. The collector published several papers in the early volumes of the *Emu* under the name F. Lawson, but in later years resumed the surname of Whitlock by which he is more usually known (Whittell 1954).

F. Lawson (Whitlock) collected another skin at Lake Austin on May 20, 1903, two days after *Lacustroica*. This was labelled "*Pseudogerygone*", as were the type skins which North received in 1910, but on close examination, the skin, now in the Western Australian Museum, is quite definitely *Gerygone fusca*, the Western Warbler, and not *Lacustroica* (Storr in litt.). The similarity, apart from size between the two species is remarkable, and could be confusing to the collector's memory, so that this is almost certainly the second specimen to which Whitlock referred in 1910.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Dr G. M. Storr, Western Australia Museum and to Dr C. Vaurie, American Museum of Natural History for providing information from specimens in their respective museums; also

to Dr D. L. Serventy for his comments on F. L. Whitlock.—G. S. COWLES, British Museum (Natural History).

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**The Spotted Dove, *Streptopelia chinensis*, and its subspecies in Australia.**—Derek Goodwin in the *Emu* Vol. 66 Part 4 referring to the Australian Columbidae raises an interesting subject: the correct subspecies and vernacular names of the various races of *Streptopelia chinensis* inhabiting Australia.

It has become almost a conditioned reflex among field observers to refer to the species as an "Indian" Dove. Since field observers outnumber taxonomists by about a hundred to one in this country, it is not surprising that any qualified taxonomist with different views on the matter is only like a voice crying in the wilderness.

The position regarding the Queensland birds is obscure. The late George Mack had very decided views on the matter. I have examined a skin in the Queensland Museum taken in 1947. It is labelled *Streptopelia chinensis tigrina*, the Burmese and Malayan subspecies. No local taxonomist has come forward to contradict his views, and most local field observers have clung on to the "Indian" vernacular through force of habit or sheer obstinacy. In fairness to them it might be pointed out that this habit goes back to the days when *suratensis* was used as the specific name in ornithological literature before *chinensis* was accepted and *suratensis* relegated to a subspecies.

In their own part of the world, possibly like many other subspecies, *suratensis* grades into *tigrina* through East India, Burma and Malaya and then into *chinensis* in South China. However, since the situation has now reached a stage where it should be stated "taxonomists only", it is suggested that some qualified ornithologists should examine the skins of *streptopelia chinensis* in the various museums. The matter should then be referred to the vernacular name committee.—N. JACK.

**Behaviour of Silver Gulls, *Larus novae-hollandiae*, on seeing a Fairy Penguin, *Eudyptula minor*, walk out of the sea at Manly, N.S.W.**—On July 20, 1967, when the Sydney newspapers were reporting the presence of Fairy Penguins in the Harbour and at the ocean beaches, one of the birds appeared on the eastern harbour

beach at Manly's Eastern Esplanade, about 20 yards from the Amusement Pier. The bird was first noticed through the behaviour of about 15 Silver Gulls gathered at the edge of the water. These birds were watching a dark object lying flat on the sea and moving towards the beach. The tide was on the ebb, and wavelets about four inches high were breaking on the shallow beach.

The object proved to be a Fairy Penguin. When it was about two yards from the beach it stood up and walked, through the miniature "surf", the remainder of the way to the sand, which was wet and flat. At intervals of a few seconds it paused and looked ahead. As the penguin came out of the water the gulls formed a rough semi-circle, and appeared as if they might obstruct it. However, the bird kept walking forward, pausing only now and again to shake the water from its flippers. At the last moment the gulls gave way and the penguin passed through their ranks. It ignored the gulls; behaviour characteristic of many animals and birds in the presence of other species when there is no aggression or food competition.

One is tempted to say that the penguin continued "slowly and deliberately" up the beach to the sea wall, because that is an exact description of its demeanour. At the wall it looked closely at the stones, poked its beak between some of them, apparently found nothing interesting, and started to walk back to the sea.

The gulls watched the penguin for some time; only three followed it to the wall. During this period, none of the gulls made any sound and all were passive. But when the penguin was on its way back to the water one of the three gulls moved behind it and adopted the "upright hostile" posture noted by N. Tinbergen (*Scientific American*, December, 1960) when another gull threatens a territory. The penguin continued to walk on, seemingly unaware of the gull's presence, and the gull subsided. This was considered to be what Tinbergen describes as comparable to the clenched-fist posture of a man whose anger is aroused, but whose action is restrained by fear or social convention.

When the penguin re-entered the water most of the gulls were scattered over the beach, having lost interest in it; but the gull which had made the "hostile" display moved forward as if to "peck and pull" it (Tinbergen) but desisted—probably because the penguin was walking away in the manner of gulls when so menaced.

Two comments seem justified. (1) The gulls were on their own territory, which they share amicably with a number of domestic pigeons (*Columba livia*). They did not adopt an aggressive attitude to the penguin because they did not recognize it as an intruder, and its presence created no signal of danger. As the Fairy Penguin's colouring is not unlike that of the pigeon, they may have regarded it as another species of that bird. (2) It is likely that they had never seen a penguin, the presence of these birds in the Harbour

being rare enough to produce reports in the newspapers. It is also likely that they had never before seen a bird wading out of the sea! Their attitude was therefore one of curiosity, possible because there was no sign of aggressive intent. The penguin was indifferent to the gulls, probably because it was familiar with sea-birds of like appearance. The "attack" and "peck and pull" attitudes adopted by only one gull was individualistic action, such as one can see in congregations of birds and animals, but which does not always have an obvious explanation.

Some time later it was learned that a colony of Fairy Penguins was living in burrows and crevices in the rocks at Smedley's Point, about half a mile or so round the corner seawards from Manly East Esplanade. The rocks are at the foot of a large block of unit flats, whose occupants complained that the cries of the penguins at night (mating cries?) kept them awake. Local children tried to find the birds' burrows, without much success. It is to the credit of the residents that they did not make the birds' presence public, and thereby possibly saved the penguins from serious disturbance by the curious. Why a solitary penguin found its way to the East Esplanade cannot be explained, unless one is prepared to admit that the bird embarked on "a voyage of discovery". Clearly, it found nothing interesting in the place!—HUGH ELLIOT, Flat 3, 8 Wood Street, Manly, N.S.W.

**Rufous Owls near Atherton.**—While wandering through the Wongabel State Forest 7 miles south of Atherton on May 30, 1965, Mr Jim Bravery and I had the good fortune to observe a pair of Rufous Owls, *Ninox rufa*, under ideal weather conditions. The birds were first observed to fly into some trees near us but because of the density of the foliage it was several minutes before we realized their identity. Eventually they moved into the open where perfect views were obtained. The manner in which the birds had pursued us and had returned our stares indicated that they possessed some measure of curiosity. The barring on the whole of the underbody was very conspicuous and, added to the deepness of the rufous colouration, made a very pretty sight. Time of observation was 1 p.m.

This is the third record Bravery has for the Atherton Tableland. His previous two observations were of single birds and were both made late in the afternoon. The species is not mentioned in Bourke and Austin's paper "The Atherton Tablelands and its Avifauna", the *Emu* 47: 87-116. Our observations are probably referable to the sub-species *marginata*. (See "A Revision of the Australian Owls, Strigidae and Tytonidae" by G. F. Mees, *Emu* 64: 8-9.)

In a letter dated July 14, 1965, Bravery writes "sightings of the Rufous Owls are a rare event indeed and previous to your visit I had not observed these Owls in company of any visiting ornithologist, although we always visited rain-forest areas. I would say these

Owls are quite rare." Bravery has been observing casually in the Atherton district since 1919, but it has only been in recent times that his observing has become extensive.—LES. HOLLAND, Box 25, P.O., Woolgoolga 2.c., N.S.W.

**Migration of the Swift Parrot, *Lathamus discolor*.**—During the winter of 1966 a large scale migration of Swift Parrots was witnessed in SE. Queensland.

I first noted them at Mt. Coot-tha, on the Taylor Range in Brisbane, late in May. They were subsequently seen by quite a number of local bird watchers.

Their appearance was put on record by Phil Hamilton (Hamilton, *Queensland Bird Notes*, October 1966).

Early in July they seemed to be at their peak. In company with two local birdmen, John Gee and Tim Kenney, we estimated over 70 birds in the flock on this occasion. They disappeared early in August. Robin Elks informed me that they had also been seen around Caloundra.

Although theirs is probably a regular migration their appearance in such numbers during 1966 is quite unusual around Brisbane. I do not know if other local bird watchers went looking for them but I failed to witness a similar migration during 1967.—N. JACK, 54 Cochrane Street, Paddington, Queensland.

**A case of colour variation amongst Galahs.**—On a visit, in July, 1967, to Oorindi Park, a sheep property 40 miles East of Cloncurry, the Manager, Mr S. Wharton, told of two white Galahs amongst a flock of four to five hundred normal birds congregated near the property wool shed. The flock had been present for some weeks and he had been able to observe the two variants on a number of occasions. On the day of the visit we could find only one of these two.

The bird retained the pink throat and breast but the tops of the wings, the back and the crest were white. Due to the massed flock and shortage of time, it was not possible to observe the under wing, sides, etc., as the individual bird could not be followed in flight.

In size and form the variant was identical with the normal birds and there was no indication that it might have been a Galah/Little Corrella hybrid.

The reason for the concentration of the flock in the wool shed area is probably also worthy of note. The sheep had only recently been brought into the wool shed paddock and were trampling the heavy growth of grass. This trampling, apparently, flattened the grass and liberated the seed, making conditions ideal for the birds. The main grass in the paddock was Button Grass, *Dactyloctenium aegyptium*, and the seeds of this grass appeared to be the main attraction.—R. K. CARRUTHERS, Mt. Isa, Queensland.



## CONGRESS AND FIELD OUTING, 1968

## PRELIMINARY NOTICE

The 1968 Congress of the R.A.O.U. will be held in Canberra from October 12 to October 15. The annual meeting which will commence at 10 a.m. on Saturday, October 12, will be opened by Lady Cassey. The venue for the annual meeting will be Becker Hall, Australian Academy of Science Building, Canberra.

A full programme for Congress has been planned including seminars on Australian Ornithology, on the nest record scheme, and on Australian ornithological publications, and outings are planned to the Division of Wildlife Research station at Gungahlin, the Canberra Botanic Gardens and to the Tidbinbilla Fauna Reserve.

The Field Outing will be at Mount Hope, N.S.W., from October 16 to October 27, where it is planned to make a systematic study of the Round Hill Mallee Fauna Reserve. Camping gear for ten days will be required. Water for drinking and cooking will be provided but participants may have to carry washing water some considerable distance by private car.

Inquiries as to accommodation at Canberra and details of camp-out organization and requirements should be addressed to the secretary of the A.C.T. Branch, Mr G. S. Chapman, Gorman House, Canberra, A.C.T. 2600.