

STRAY FEATHERS

An historical record of the Burdekin Duck and other species in the Northern Territory.—Flinders' *Voyage to Terra Australis* contains what is probably the first published record of the sighting of the Burdekin Duck in Australia. It contains also what is probably the first illustration of this species (though the ducks are included somewhat irrelevantly in a water colour painting of a section of the Sir Edward Pellew Group of Islands).

Flinders spent the period December 12 to 27, 1802, exploring the Pellew Group and in his account made the following comment on the bird life. "In the woods were hawks, pigeons of two kinds and some bustards; on the shore were seen a pretty kind of duck and the usual sea fowl." He comments later that the ducks seen are illustrated in Westall's painting of the islands.

While Flinders' comments represent a rather scanty bird list for an area which is expected to produce a final list of 150 to 200 species, it is more extensive and more meaningful than those contained elsewhere in his account of his voyage. It appears that his interest in Australian bird life was minimal and this makes this record the more exceptional.

From the habitat, the illustration and the geographic location, there is little doubt that the duck sighted was the Burdekin Duck—*Tadorna radjah*. The species can still be found in the islands but is probably considerably less common than it was at the time of Flinders' visit.

The only other species that can be identified, without doubt, from Flinders' short comment, is the bustard, *Eupodotis australis*. This species is still to be found on the islands, and the Johnsons from Vanderlin Island report that it still breeds on their island on occasions.

The pigeons cannot be established with any certainty. The Nutmeg Pigeon would have been present at that time and is probably the most likely one to be seen. However, the Common Bronze Wing and the Rose-crowned Fruit Pigeon are plentiful as are the Peaceful Dove and the Bar-shouldered Dove. Flinders' comment could have referred to any of them.

The most indefinite references to hawks and sea fowl, unfortunately, give no clue to the species seen.—R. K. CARRUTHERS, Mt. Isa, Queensland.

REFERENCE

Flinders, M. 1814. *Voyage to Terra Australis*. II: 171-172.

Nesting Disturbance.—On March 11, 1967, while visiting one of the gun positions during an annual C.M.F. camp at Tianjara, about 25 miles south-west of Nowra, New South Wales, I found a nest of the New Holland Honeyeater, *Meliornis novae-hollandiae*, containing three nestlings.

The area consisted of sandstone heath partly burnt out during the extensive bushfires in February 1965. The vegetation was rather sparse, with open patches of rock and shallow soil. Some typical heathland vegetation, including *Banksia ericifolia* and *B. marginata* bordering the road and parts protected from the fires by swampy ground, had escaped burning. In other places burnt, or partly burnt, vegetation was rejuvenating or re-propagating.

The position was occupied by six field guns and a number of troops. The vehicle track through the position passed within three feet of the nest which was situated about 18 inches above the ground in a vertical fork of a dead *Banksia ericifolia*. A walking track passed within two feet of the nest site.

During the period of my visit, the adult (or adults) returned regularly with food, but most efforts to brood the three very small nestlings were disturbed by troops passing along the tracks. The nestlings were about four days old.

The position was occupied at about 8 a.m. and the weather throughout the day and during the following night was cold and bleak. Strong southerly winds with almost continuous rain, heavy at times, made conditions unpleasant. The position was evacuated (tactically) during darkness without lights, some guns leaving after 7 p.m. and the remainder shortly after 11 p.m.

Considering the amount of movement of guns, vehicles and personnel in close proximity to the nest during darkness, the brooding bird must have been disturbed, and was probably kept off the nest for relatively long periods during the first half of the night.

It was with some misgivings that I returned to the area five days later, expecting to find either the nest site destroyed or the nestlings dead. To my surprise the three young birds were not only alive but obviously in very good health and well feathered.

It is assumed that the brooding adult was disturbed from the nest during the night; also it must have returned rather promptly to brood the nestlings. It is extremely unlikely that nestlings of that age could have remained alive without being brooded at least for most of the night, particularly in such cold and wet conditions. It is even more unlikely that the adult would have remained continuously on the nest with so much movement and activity nearby.

In either event it shows the tenacity of these birds in protecting their offspring, a factor I have often noted with a number of species.

However, disturbance and destruction of the immediate nest environment often causes the destruction of nest and nestlings or eggs by predation. Unfortunately this has occurred in a number of

instances due to the thoughtlessness and carelessness of some photographers. Cutting and breaking concealing foliage to "open up" a nest for photography, trampling the area about the nest and leaving rubbish in the nesting area are habits which should be avoided. Predators, particularly Ravens, Currawongs and Kookaburras, are quickly attracted by the presence of humans and will rapidly locate exposed nests.

In the case of the New Holland Honeyeaters, there was considerable activity close to the nest site for some 15 hours. Vehicle and walking tracks passed within a few feet of the nest, yet the nestlings survived. It is noteworthy that there was no destruction of the nesting tree, no rubbish littering the site, and nothing unnatural to attract predators to any particular spot within the position occupied by the guns.—S. G. LANE, 65 Wood Street, Lane Cove, N.S.W.

The Bush-hen in south-eastern Queensland.—The distribution of the Bush-hen, *Amaurornis ruficrissus*, is given as coastal Northern Territory and northern Queensland. During the last few years it has been noted in various parts of south-eastern Queensland.

On February 2, 1964, a nest with seven eggs was found 15 miles from Brisbane beside a small stream fed by the Gold Creek Reservoir. The habitat is open forest on the nearby hills with scrub along the streambeds and bottlebrush, *Callistemon viminalis*, predominating. Rain forest remnants are noticeable, with hickory wattle, *Acacia aulacocarpa*, and Lantana as common plants.

A hide was set up and photographs were taken of the male and female during incubation.

The Bush-hen was observed for two hours on February 8, 1964, and for one hour on February 9, 1964. The second day we realised that a different bird came to incubate as it lacked the yellow-orange colour at the base of the culmen. It was not as clumsy at the nest and settled in to incubate without hesitation. We assumed it to be the female. On February 18, 1964, the seven eggs had all hatched and the chicks had left the nest safely.

Since this record of the Bush-hen nesting we have had reports of it having been seen in Gin Gin, at the Mooloolah River near Caloundra and along the Currumbin Creek on the Gold Coast. It was seen again in the Gold Creek area on May 16, 1965 about 300 yards downstream from the original nesting site.

We feel that the Bush-hen has not recently moved into this area but has always been here in small numbers. It was possibly not noticed, being a secretive and plain-coloured bird. BARRY and JOANNA MORGAN, Eastwood Street, Belmont, Queensland.



Bush-hen, *Amaurornis ruficrissus*, at nest. (See page 151.)



Bushhen at nest



Nest and eggs of Bushhen

August 1968

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PLATE 7



Habitat of Bushhen