

## STRAY FEATHERS

**The distribution and status of the Australian Magpie in Western Australia.**—The south-western subspecies, *dorsalis*, of the Australian Magpie, *Gymnorhina tibicen*, occurs north to the mulga-eucalypt line (D. L. Serventy and H. M. Whittell, *Birds of Western Australia*, 1967, 4th edit.) and east to the edge of the Nullarbor Plain and the Eucla area (W. S. McColl, *Emu*, **29**: 91-100). From the Gascoyne River north to the Pilbara there is a distinctive long-billed race, *longirostris* (D. Amadon, *Amer. Mus. Novit.*, No. **1504**: 1-33; G. F. Mees, *J. Roy. Soc. W. Aust.*, **44**: 97-143). The racial status of magpies in the highlands of the central eastern parts of Western Australia has not been determined but they are probably members of the central Australian population, *fincki* (see H. T. Condon, *S. Aust. Orn.* **20**: 25-68).

In view of the scarcity of records of the Australian Magpie from the zones between the various subspecies, I list the following localities where I have observed it.—(1) Miss Gibson Hill canyon in the Great Victoria Desert; (2) Elder Creek, near Warburton Mission; (3) Station Creek, 8 miles north of Leonora; (4) Doyles Well; (5) Tarmoola Station, near homestead; (6) Paynes Find, 9 miles north-east; (7) Pindabunna Station, 4 and 22 miles north-east; (8) Kirkalocka Station, 3 miles north, and 7 and 10 miles south; (9) Gnows Nest Range, 25 miles south-east of Yalgoo; (10) Austin, 9 miles south; (11) Cue, 5 miles south (12) Mt Magnet, 5 miles south (13) Meekatharra, 6 miles south; (14) Wiluna, 5 miles south, and 10 miles east; (15) Barwidgee Station, 30 miles north; (16) Cunya Station, 26 miles north; (17) New Springs Station, 19 and 23 miles north-west; (18) Carnegie Station, 7 miles west; (19) Murchison River, 13 miles south on Byro-Mullewa road; (20) Bullardo Station, 23 miles south; (21) Billabalong Station, one and 3 miles south; (22) Curbur Station, 5 miles north; (23) Mt Phillips Station, 12 miles south; (24) Glenflorrie Station, near homestead; (25) Kooline Station, 4 miles south; (26) Gorge Creek near Mt Vernon; (27) Mininar Station, 4 miles west.

North of the mulga-eucalypt line the inland habitat is the River Gum, *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*, woodland along the larger water-courses except in the Mt Magnet-Cue area where the only large eucalypt is the Cue-York Gum, *E. striatocalyx*.

The remark by D. L. Serventy (*Emu*, **53**: 131-45) that there is a distribution gap between *longirostris* and *dorsalis*, cannot be substantiated. However, it is correct that magpies are much less frequent north of the mulga-eucalypt line. It is probable that *longirostris* developed its long bill (Allen's effect) while an isolate in the north-west from which it has expanded its range thus coming into contact with *dorsalis*. The exact boundary between these two

forms and the width of any zone of intergradation needs to be determined. This can only be done by collecting.

The occurrence of the south-western form, *dorsalis*, of the Australian Magpie at Eucla and Madura was confirmed by I. C. Carnaby and me in September 1965 and January 1966 respectively. Carnaby found it nesting in tall mallee, *Eucalyptus oleosa*.

Since *dorsalis* occurs at Eucla, and the Eyre Peninsula population of *leuconota*, as far west as the Head of the Bight, the gap in distribution is where there is an absence of eucalypt woodland along the southern edge of the Nullarbor Plain. Magpies do not occur in the Marble Gum, *Eucalyptus gongylocarpa*, savannah in the Great Victoria Desert and the semi-arid mallee belt north of the Nullarbor Plain.—JULIAN FORD, 7 Pinner Place, Lynwood, W.A. 6155.

**Unusual feeding method by Tree Sparrows.**—On April 4, 1968, at 5.30 p.m. I witnessed an unusual method of feeding by Tree Sparrows, *Passer montanus*. I regularly feed twelve to fourteen of these birds on a commercially prepared Budgerygah mixture. Some of the scattered seed germinated near a small rose bush, and, as a result, was watered along with it. By the end of March the grass, Millet Panic, *Panicum miliaceum*, an introduced plant with heavy seed-heads up to eight inches long, was, because of the drought, the only seeding grass in our yard. As the seeds ripened I deliberately withheld the daily food ration to see what the birds would do. Needless to say that they were not long in discovering this new source of food, and three or four Tree Sparrows would perch on one seed-head at a time. Although this caused the seed-head to sag, the sturdy stalk bore the weight of the birds quite well.

However, on the date mentioned above a bird on the ground was seen to fly up at a seed-head—a distance of thirty inches—snatch at a seed, and land again at the base of the plant. An action which can best be described as “leaping”. It kept repeating this process, and after about five minutes it was joined by a second Tree Sparrow which fed in the same manner. After about five “leaps” the second bird flew off, but the first bird continued to feed for ten minutes, and in that time “leapt” forty-three times. It flew to a nearby trellis, but returned in three minutes to repeat the operation six more times before disappearing. During the ten minute feeding period, the Tree Sparrow hovered near the seed-head a few times before taking a seed, and on four occasions it clung upside down to the seed-head for three or four seconds. This proved that the stem could have easily borne the weight of the birds, so it is puzzling as to why they adopted such an energetic manner of feeding.

A later examination of that particular seed-head which had been intact before, (I had been watching them closely) showed that the first inch or so had been stripped of seed.

On April 5, at 9 p.m., a Tree Sparrow was again seen to feed in exactly the same way, executing five "leaps" before flying off.

I would like to thank Miss Helen Aston of the National Herbarium, Victoria, for identifying the plant.—Mrs. TESS KLOOT, 465 Murray Road, West Preston, Victoria 3072.

**The Spice Finch, *Lonchura punctulata*, in Northern Queensland.**—During a brief visit to Innisfail in April 1954 I encountered finches which puzzled me at the time. They did not appear to be Chestnut-breasted Finches, *Lonchura castaneothorax*, but because they occupied the same habitat—roadside and canefield verges—and did not resemble any other finch known to occur in the area, I concluded without conviction that they must be a plumage phase of the Chestnut-breasted Finch.

When I heard later that the Spice Finch was established in northern Queensland I was almost certain from my field description that this was the species that I had encountered. A more recent visit to Queensland in January 1967 satisfied me that this conclusion was correct.

*Australian Finches*, Klaus Immelmann, records the Spice Finch as having first appeared in Innisfail in April 1955. However, my observations suggest that the species was well established there in April 1954.

Immelmann further notes that "the species seems to stick to the coastal lowlands and has not yet reached the Atherton Tableland".

In January 1967, I observed Spice Finches loosely associated with Chestnut-breasted Finches just to the west of Yungaburra (altitude 2285 feet) and later found them well established at Kuranda (altitude 1061 feet).

When I came to transcribe my field notes to my permanent records, I was surprised to find that in 1954, in exactly the same locality at Yungaburra, I had recorded finches "of the sort seen at Innisfail", from which it would appear that the Spice Finch was present at Yungaburra as early as 1954 and that in the interim it has not increased markedly or spread locally.

I wrote recently to Mr Jas. Bravery of Atherton enquiring as to what experience he had of the Spice Finch on the Tablelands. His reply gave details of colonisation from 1962 onward.

From these observations it is evident that the Spice Finch is now established on the Tableland, and that the colonization almost certainly dates back to at least 1954.—ERIC H. SEDGWICK, Harvey, W.A.

**Co-operative fish drives.**—Lake Moondarra, a 17,000 million gallon water storage on the Leichhardt River 12 miles North of Mount Isa, supports a very large fish population and a very large population of fish-eating birds.

During the winter water temperatures or other factors at times cause the Hair-backed Herrings, *Fluvialosa* spp. to form large

near-surface schools. In summer, following the first flow of the stream into the lake, large numbers of Grunter, *Madigania unicolor*, and *Amniataba percoides*, and other small fish gather near the creek-mouths waiting for an opportunity to ascend the streams to spawn. The fish-eating birds have been observed to take advantage of both occurrences and undertake co-operative fish drives.

The pursuit of the Hair-backed Herring schools has been seen on a number of occasions. The schools cover up to three or four acres and hundreds of birds take part in the drives. Little Black Cormorants, *Phalacrocorax sulcirostris*, Little Pied Cormorants, *Phalacrocorax melanoleucus*, and occasionally Pied Cormorants, *Phalacrocorax varius*, drive the schools, diving and surfacing to swallow. The birds on the surface, feeding, fall behind and continually fly forward to the front of the flock and commence to dive again. Silver Gulls, *Larus novae-hollandiae*, swim amongst the cormorants taking injured or panic-stricken fish that come to the surface. Caspian Terns, *Hydroprogne caspia*, and Gull-billed Terns, *Gelochelidon nilotica*, circle overhead and continually dive for fish.

Only one Pelican, *Pelecanus conspicillatus*, has been seen to join in these drives. The reason for this is probably the small numbers of Pelicans present during early winter. The Australian Darter, *Anhinga novae-hollandiae*, does not appear to take part either.

Flocks of Pelicans have been observed driving fish into the shallows at Karumba, on the Georgina water holes, and on Lake Moondarra. They normally appear to do so on their own. However in January 1968 a mixed flock of Pelicans and Little Black Cormorants was observed driving Grunter and other small fish into the mouth of Stone Axe Creek on the North end of Lake Moondarra. Approximately one hundred birds were involved, fifty of each species.

The Pelicans advanced in irregular line abreast across the mouth of the creek splashing and driving their beaks under water. The Cormorants moved in front diving repeatedly. They herded the fish into a shallow bay about 50 yards square and then circled amongst them feeding. They were joined by a flock of one hundred or more Marsh Terns, *Chlidonias hybrida*, which circled overhead and took small fish, insect larvae or shrimps that came to the surface. A mixed flock of White Egrets, *Egretta alba*, Royal Spoonbills, *Platalea regia*, and Yellow-billed Spoonbills, *Platalea flavipes*, about thirty birds in all, followed along in the shallows. It could not be determined whether the Spoonbills were actually taking fish or only shrimps, other small crustacea, insects etc. disturbed by the fish and the birds.

While discussing the subject of Pelican flocks herding fish it

is probably not too irrelevant to record here that the Lake caretaker, Mr. E. J. Watts, several years ago observed Pelicans herding and taking Grey Teal ducklings in a similar fashion.—R. K. CARRUTHERS, Mount Isa.

**Courtship display by Willie Wagtail.**—On October 8, 1966, at Lower Plenty, Vic., a pair of Willie Wagtails, *Rhipidura leucophrys*, were under observation feeding on the ground. The female flew up to a horizontal branch of a nearby tree and was shortly followed by the male. While she remained in the one spot, he cart-wheeled continuously from one side of her to the other, over and in front of her, landing on the branch about 6-8 inches on each side and sometimes swinging under it. All this time the usually dusty-white eyebrow lines were expanded to two snowy-white discs about  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch in diameter. These were continually directed at the female like headlamps. The display continued for a few minutes accompanied by the rattling call, then both birds returned to feeding on the ground.

Later the same male was mist-netted. The eyebrows appeared the usual rather thin and dusty-white lines but on lifting the surface feathers a mat of very tiny closely packed snowy-white feathers could be seen.—K. HOUGH, 27 Philip Street, Lower Plenty, Vic.

**Behaviour of White-backed Magpie.**—A family of White-backed Magpies, *Gymnorhina hypoleuca*, regularly gather at the approach of dusk to roost in a Yellow Box tree, *E. melliodora*, in Lower Plenty, Vic. They have been observed in the same position at intervals over a period of two years.

On January 24, 1968, I was watching the complicated procedure of settling in, which takes at least half an hour. The birds, at first widely separated in the tree, gradually converge until, at very last light, they are in a tight huddle high under the canopy of the selected branch.

In the early stages of closing in, one of the five birds, evidently of senior status, landed close beside another which protested and was given a peck. The pecked one then swung under the branch and clung crouching for a moment, then gradually extended itself vertically down, hanging by its two feet with wings closed. It then released one foot and remained stationary, hanging by the other, for about 30 seconds—exactly like a large fruit bat in appearance—before somersaulting on to a lower branch.

Frauca (1965) writes of death-feigning among some finches which adopted a similar attitude. This would seem a possible explanation of the behaviour of the Magpie.—K. HOUGH, 27 Philip St., Lower Plenty, Vic.

#### REFERENCE

Frauca. H. *Book of Australian Wildlife*, 1965. Page 73.

**The Range Limits of the Blue-breasted Wren in Western Australia.**—In my contribution on the taxonomic status of the members of the *Malurus lamberti* complex in Western Australia (*Emu*, 66: 47-57) two localities where I collected specimens of *M. pulcherrimus* north of its range as given by D. L. Serventy and H. M. Whittell (*Birds of Western Australia*, 1962, 3rd edit.) were listed. Since the two collecting localities, viz. 21 miles north of Galena and the Tamala sandplain, are probably at the actual distribution limits of the species, further details are provided. A significant eastern extension of known range along the south coast is also reported.

Two parties of Blue-breasted Wrens were seen 21 miles north of Galena in sandplain country on December 15, 1964. A male in moult was collected. The vegetation is predominantly low heath scrub consisting of *Eucalyptus jucunda* (a mallee), *Banksia scep-trum*, *Casuarina* sp. (thickets) and *Acacia* sp. (in the form of low rounded bushes). In places, the sandplain heath is very open. Other birds typical of the area are *Drymodes brunneopygia*, *Malurus leuconotus* (in the more open scrub) and *Calamanthus fuliginosus* (also in the more open heath).

Several parties were seen in thick low scrub on the Tamala sandplain at points 17, 20 and 24 miles north-east of the homestead on December 17-19, 1964. Male specimens were collected. Where the wrens were seen, the sandplain scrub is composed of scattered mallee (*Eucalyptus eudesmioides*, *E. oldfieldi* and *E. decipiens*), *Banksia victorise*, *Calothamnus* spp., *Hakea* sp. and *Acacia salicina* with a substratum of *Melaleuca*, *Acacia* and *Plectrarchne*. Other birds which occur in this sandplain habitat are *Drymodes brunneopygia*, *Malurus lamberti*, *Sericornis maculatus* and *Meliphaga plumula*. The Tamala sandplain lies just within the extreme northern part of the South-West eucalypt zone.

A party of Blue-breasted Wrens was seen in coastal-dune scrub within a few yards of the ocean, 23 miles south of the Mundrabilla homestead. A male specimen was collected so as to confirm the field identification. The dune vegetation consists of immense, isolated clumps of *Nitraria schoberi* and scattered bushes of *Acacia cyclopis*, in addition to *Rhagodia baccata*, *Atriplex cinereum*, *Zygodium billiardieri* and *Scaevola calendulacea*. Spotted Scrub-Wrens, *Sericornis maculatus*, and a flock of about 60 Western Silvereyes, *Zosterops gouldi*, were also seen in the dune habitat.

The Mundrabilla record of the Blue-breasted Wren is interesting because it extends the known range eastwards from Israelite Bay. In addition, it suggests that the actual eastern limit of the South-West population is Eucla since the habitat in which the species occurs on Mundrabilla station is continuous to where the Hampton Scarp meets the ocean at Eucla. There is a distribution gap between the South-West and Eyre Peninsula. In view of the absence of the

Variegated Wren, *M. lamberti*, south of the western half of the Nullarbor Plain, there is reason to believe that the Blue-breasted Wren penetrates into the dense mallee, *Eucalyptus oleosa*, *E. incrassata*, *E. gracilis* and *E. umbrageous*, tea-tree, *Melaleuca pubescens* and *M. quadrifaria*, vegetation belt on the narrow coastal plain between Eyre and Eucla.

The opportunity is taken to comment on a specimen (W.A. Museum No. A.8865), collected at Guilderton on October 3, 1959, which I (*loc. cit.*) suggested could represent a rare example of hybridization between *M. pulcherrimus* and *M. lamberti* or a slightly aberrant *M. lamberti*. The specimen is identical in all respects to *M. lamberti mastersi*, except that a few feathers on an otherwise black breast are violet on the tips. A further specimen (W.A. Museum No. A.9551) with this coloration, collected near Tamala on November 15, 1964, shows that the hybridization hypothesis is incorrect. All of the violet tipped breast feathers are otherwise grey instead of being entirely violet or black. The violet colour appears to be due to some moult on the breast and fraying which has produced slight structural changes sufficient to induce the Tyndall effect.—JULIAN FORD, Lynwood, Western Australia.

**A Second Red-crowned Pigeon in Tasmania.**—The Red-crowned Pigeon, *Ptilinopus regina*, is a sub-tropical species which normally ranges from New Guinea to northern New South Wales (R.A.O.U. checklist 1926). Lord and Arnold (1922) give the first account of its occurrence in Tasmania. That specimen was received at the Tasmanian Museum, Hobart, on May 15, 1922, and had been shot at Bothwell in the northern midlands "some days before".

On April 29, 1968, a second specimen was collected from a garden at Exeter, 15 miles north of Launceston. It was found to be a male in sub-adult plumage, with the skull only partly ossified and was of the following proportions: Weight 80 gm, total length 220 mm, wing 121, wing spread 380, tail 71, tarsus 21, middle toe 22.5, bill 20.6. The iris was yellowish-brown, bill dark green and legs grey. There were some subcutaneous fat deposits and the stomach contained ripe cotoneaster berries. The specimen was prepared as a study skin (No. 21.1).

Inquiries made at the Tasmanian Museum revealed that the first specimen is no longer available. It was in bad condition when acquired and had been spirit preserved. It is interesting to note that the two birds were taken at almost the same time of the year, through 46 years apart. It appears that its "accidental" occurrence in this State may be the result of abnormal seasonal movement.—R. H. GREEN, Exeter, Tasmania.

#### REFERENCE

Lord, Clive, F.L.S., R.A.O.U. and Arnold, J. (1922), *The Emu*, 28: 75-76.

**Peregrine Falcon a probable migrant.**—A somewhat persistent inquiry addressed to me as writer of a nature column in the Hobart *Mercury*—a column published weekly since 1921—is whether the Peregrine Falcon, *Falco peregrinus*, is a migrant species. Owners of homing pigeons believe it is. While I have not been able by observation to confirm their opinion, I have retained an open mind on the question, though interested to hear what they have had to say in support of it.

The subject cropped up again a few weeks ago (July, 1968). Two experienced field shooters familiar with the species told of having counted "twenty-seven falcons", fairly high over marginal country—trees and pasture—in the Bothwell district. They said the birds were cruising together, and they saw one knock down a domestic pigeon flying over a paddock.

While I was inclined to question the number, I did not regard their identification as at fault, because most field shooters know the species well enough, having in mind the bounty on its head paid by homing societies in Tasmania. It was a quick count, they admitted, conceding the number was "about 27".

However, the fact remains that the Peregrine does appear in Tasmania in numbers and at irregular intervals. Pigeon owners seem to have nearly all nesting sites well tagged. Since they shoot most of these out they feel convinced that the sudden irruptions at certain times cannot reasonably emanate from local breeding birds, but are due to migrants crossing Bass Strait from continental Australia.

The shooters say they suffer a considerable measure of frustration when, after arduous raids on breeding birds during the summer months, on cliffs and in deep ravines, they unaccountably find the falcon in numbers through the country.

The evidence points to the strong possibility of the Peregrine's being a migrant, though whether a casual visitor from the mainland or a regular migrant has yet to be proved. Most reports of these gatherings, or irruptions, relate to early spring, though some to the autumn months.—MICHAEL SHARLAND, 1 Erina Place, Hobart, 1/8/68.

**Yellow-faced Honeyeater in an unusual habitat.**—On March 15, 1968, a Yellow-faced Honeyeater, *Meliphaga chrysops*, was observed amongst a loose flock of Pipits, *Anthus australis*, close to the summit of Mount Kosciuszko, 7314 feet, New South Wales. It appeared to be foraging for food as it flitted unconcernedly about the rock-strewn slopes. Although a common bird in the forested areas of the lower slopes, this individual was present in completely open grassland, at about 1000 feet above the tree line.—

ALAN ROGERS, Sydney, N.S.W.