

## SHORT NOTES

### **The Letter-winged Kite and rats in the Northern Territory**

Blackburn (*Emu* 67: 233-234) recorded the Letter-winged Kite *Elanus scriptus* at Brunette Bore on the Barkly Tableland, where he also saw many rats, thought to be *Rattus rattus*. This prompts me to record my own observations on *E. scriptus* and rats from the same area. In March 1968 I caught 206 rats on Brunette Downs as part of an investigation into the plagues of rats which occur periodically on the Barkly Tableland. They were trapped near stockyards and at bores similar to the one mentioned by Blackburn. All were Long-haired Rats *Rattus villosissimus* and there can be little doubt that the rats Blackburn saw were also this species.

On 20 March a group of nests of *E. scriptus* was found 10 km south of Brunette Downs Homestead in No. 3 Stud Paddock. There were about 12 nests in an area of 130 hectares, built in Bloodwood *Eucalyptus* sp. and Rosewood *Heterodendron* sp.; Gidgee *Acacia cambagei*, dominant on the Barkly Tableland, was absent. Of five nests inspected, one contained a newly hatched young (yellow-white down) and three eggs; three contained four eggs each; the other was empty, but contained fresh green Bloodwood leaves. Skulls, tails, and hind legs of *R. villosissimus* were found in several old nests which were apparently used as feeding platforms. Pellets from the nests were made almost entirely of rat fur.

Brunette Bore is at Brunette Downs Homestead, but station hands who are familiar with *E. scriptus* had never seen the birds near the homestead. I suspect that Blackburn erroneously gave the name to one of the bores on the Cattle Road, because *E. scriptus* is a very local bird, always staying in the same locality during plagues of rats. Evidently *R. villosissimus* is important prey for *E. scriptus* in the area and the fluctuating populations of the rat could influence the distribution of the bird.

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5 September 1968

### **Galahs eating the corms of *Romulea***

On 11 August 1968 at Kuitpo, 50 km south of Adelaide, my daughter saw Galahs *Kakatoe roseicapilla* digging up and eating the corms of the iridaceous plant *Romulea rosea* which is an introduced species from South Africa. This plant is widely distributed in the settled parts of South Australia and grows on firm ground such as footpaths from which it cannot easily be pulled up. The Galahs seemed to be digging down into the soil with their beaks so as to seize the corm itself and were not merely dragging it up

by its leaves after loosening the soil. They then held the corm as usual with the foot and ate the fleshy inner part.

*Romulea rosea* was recorded in 1909 by J. M. Black in *The Naturalised Flora of South Australia* but it is not known when it was first introduced into this State. It is difficult to understand how the birds came to recognize and exploit this supply of food because the sense of smell is not supposed to be important in birds, and in any case the plants do not seem odorous. Presumably Galahs were adapted to digging up underground parts of plants for food before the introduction of *Romulea* and, if so, they could have discovered the new source of food simply by trial and error. However, their opportunity for useful previous experience in this regard seems small. James Backhouse (1843, *A Narrative of a Visit to the Australian Colonies*), referring to Tasmania, stated: 'A number of plants of this [orchid] family have small bulbous roots which were formerly eaten by the aborigines, as they still are by cockatoos, bandicoots, kangaroo-rats, etc. Little holes are often seen where the latter animals have been scratching for them.' Brough Smyth (1878, *The Aborigines of Victoria*) stated that the cockatoo fed almost exclusively on the tuberous roots of *Microseris forsteri* when this composite plant was in flower. Thus evidently Galahs were adapted to exploiting an underground source of plant food before introductions and one presumes they discovered the corms of *Romulea* because of this previous experience. Nevertheless few native plants have grass-like leaves and underground food stores for Galahs and it would be interesting to know how long it took the birds to learn of this new food.

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7 September 1968, revised 21 February 1969

### First record of the Australian Raven *Corvus coronoides* in the Northern Territory

In October 1966 I took three ♂♂ (ad., imm., and juv.) and two ♀♀ (imm.) of *Corvus coronoides* on Brunette Downs, NT (Fig. 1). The heads and necks of two of these were retained in the CSIRO collection (R773 and R774); the grey feather bases of both birds and the long lanceolate hackles of the adult are clearly diagnostic. Storr (1967, *List of Northern Territory Birds, Spec. Publ. WA Mus.* 4) does not mention this species and these specimens are probably the first record for the Northern Territory.

On 30 August 1967 D. Howe collected an adult female *C. coronoides* from Block Waterhole on the Nicholson River. This specimen is now in the NT museum, Alice Springs (NTM3722).

On 2 March 1968 Peter Hanisch (CSIRO) shot an adult female at Boundary Bore on Andado Station (Specimen No. CSIRO 10263).

These records suggest that the species is scattered uncommonly throughout the eastern part of the Northern Territory in suitable habitat. In this connection it is worth mentioning that *C. coronoides* was common in Oodnadatta, SA, during August 1966 and specimens were collected in the town by L. Moore (R689 and 690); 30 km south-east I collected a nesting pair (R691 and 692).

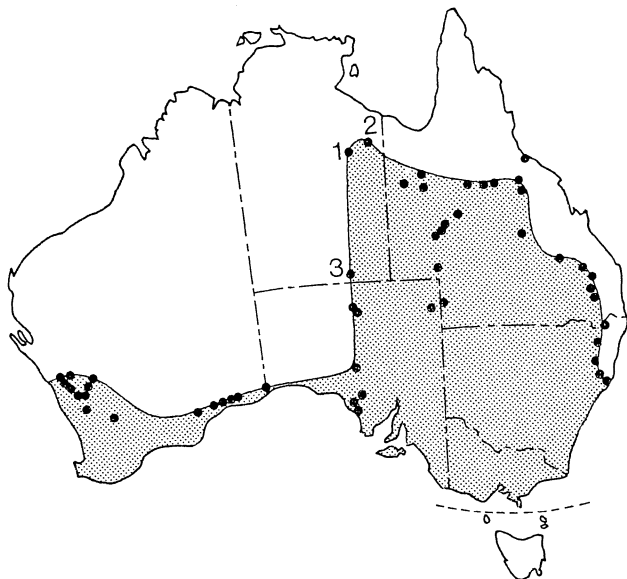


FIG. 1.—Distribution of the Australian Raven, *Corvus coronoides*. The numbers refer to localities where the species has been collected in the Northern Territory:—

- 1. = Brunette Downs
- 2. = Nicholson River
- 3. = Andado Station.

The western limits of distribution of *coronoides* is therefore approximately 135° E longitude as far south as near the Transcontinental Railway. South of the railway there is a narrow corridor of distribution linking the eastern and western populations. The distribution and taxonomy of *C. coronoides* and the other three members of the genus *Corvus* found in Australia will be dealt with in detail elsewhere (Rowley, in prep.).

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11 September 1968, revised 20 February 1969

### Red-necked Phalarope in South Australia

Phalaropes were unknown in Australia before 1962 although two species had been recorded as vagrants to New Zealand before this (Falla *et al.* 1966, *A field guide to the birds of New Zealand*).

The first Australian record was a Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus* in breeding plumage at Werribee, Victoria, on 22 December 1962 (Smith 1963, *Aust. Bird Watcher* 2: 1-4). In the summer of 1966-67, single *lobatus* occurred near Langhorne Creek, SA, on 19 November and at three Victorian localities: Werribee 27 December to 7 January; Altona 15 January to 25 February; and Seaholme 28 February. Smith (pers. comm.), who studied all the Victorian birds, considered that there were at least three because of plumage variation. The South Australian bird was collected, so presumably four individuals occurred during 1966-67. The skin is now in the South Australian Museum, Reg. No. B27,425.

The Langhorne Creek Phalarope was found at the Boggy Lake, the most northerly arm of Lake Alexandrina, among a flock of about one hundred Sharp-tailed Sandpipers *Calidris acuminata* and Red-necked Stints *C. ruficollis* resting at the edge of a swamp. Attention was first attracted to the bird by its white head. Seen through binoculars, the wings were dark while much of the head, neck and underparts were white, giving the first impression of a black and white bird. It was intermediate in size between a Red-necked Stint and a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, the head appearing rather small in proportion to the body. The thin black bill and dark eye-patch suggested a Phalarope, as did semi-circling movements made in the water.

When the wings were raised, the white underparts showed prominent dark streaks on the flanks and sides of the body normally hidden by the folded wing. A white wing-bar was evident and the upper parts were sooty grey. Eventually the Phalarope flew to a mud-spit about 200 yards distant uttering a call noted at the time as 'chick-chick-cher'.

The body was held horizontally when wading in soft mud and shallow pools, and food was obtained with a single forward thrust of the bill. Food was mostly taken from the mud. The bird was not confiding and after almost an hour's observation, when most of the other waders had departed, the Phalarope also exhibited nervousness and was collected before it could follow.

Mr H. T. Condon, who identified the specimen at the South Australian Museum, noted two doubtful points; first the large amount of white on the head and secondly, when compared with two skins of *lobatus* from America, that the bill was slightly shorter and broader at the base than either. No skins of *fulvicaudus* were available for comparison at the South Australian Museum and the specimen was sent to the National Museum, Melbourne, for comparison with that species. Mr A. R. McEvey advised, 'that it is *P. lobatus* as you believed. Its bill, by the way, is slightly smaller than in other *lobatus* here but it is the typical slender *lobatus* bill just the same'. Similar variation among individuals was also

noted by Smith in the Victorian birds, of which only the Seaholme bird showed streaking of the flanks and sides.

The Red-necked Phalarope has so far occurred in Australia only in midsummer between 19 November and 28 February. The seas to the north of Australia have long been considered a wintering ground for the species, so it seems odd that to date the only records have come from southern Australia.

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11 September 1968, revised 24 March 1969

### Feeding Behaviour of the Pied Currawong

Pied Currawongs *Strepera graculina* have been fed on bread and meat at Hornsby, NSW, and up to mid-July 1968 had come to this food in large numbers, but in the last two weeks of July only single ones came.

On 2 August at 0820 h one bird came, picked up a piece of meat and, flying into a bush of *Callistemon linearis*, placed the meat in a forked branch 60 cm from the ground. After pausing it glided to the ground, picked up another piece of meat, returned to the shrub and placed the meat on top of the first piece, pressing it down firmly with its beak. This was repeated until six pieces were stacked in the fork. The currawong then flew to the roof of the house, perched there for more than a minute, and flew back to the bush, where, after looking at the meat for a few seconds, it knocked it to the ground with a sideways swipe of the beak. It then glided to the ground, picked up one of the pieces of meat and flew away with it. On 4 August at 1720 h a bird carried out the same performance, but wedged only four pieces of meat into the same fork of the bush and did not fly away before knocking the meat to the ground. On 5 August at 0810 h a bird came, picked up a slice of bread and flew with it to the top of a wire netting fence about 4 m high. It hung the bread on the top wire and pushed and pulled with its beak seven times through a distance of no more than a few cm at a time. It then flew away and did not return.

On 16 September a Pied Currawong arrived at 1620 h, picked up a piece of meat from the ground and flew to the same fork of the *C. linearis* previously visited. Placing the meat in the fork, the bird almost immediately removed it and placed it in another fork slightly above the first. This was repeated six times, the bird systematically moving up spirally to the top of the shrub which is about 2 m tall. Then the bird placed the meat four times in different forks at the top of the shrub without releasing it. Finally, it flew away with the meat.

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2 October 1968

### Extension of Range of the Chestnut-breasted Cuckoo

On 4 August 1968 the writer and Dr. Norman Wettenhall observed a cuckoo for over 20 minutes on 'Fletchervale' property, approximately 65 km north of Charters Towers, Queensland. We identified it as the Chestnut-breasted Cuckoo *Cacomantis castaneiventris* for the following reasons.

It was first seen sitting facing the observer in the lower branches of a fairly thick casuarina and eucalypt scrub at less than 20 m range. The startling chestnut underparts extending from below the faint grey throat to the under-tail coverts were most obvious. When the bird moved and sat sideways to the observer the chestnut became less obvious and Dr. Wettenhall, who had not previously seen the bird facing him, thought it might be a Fan-tailed Cuckoo *C. pyrrhophanus* which was common in the area. However subsequent observations showed that the chestnut underparts were obvious only when seen from the front and appeared much duller when observed from the side. Compared with the Fan-tailed Cuckoo it was smaller and its back a much darker grey. When perched, it sat with its tail carried straight from the body not drooping, as does that of the Fan-tailed Cuckoo. The bars of the under-tail were very prominent and wide, with great contrast of light and dark, but later observations of skins at the National Museum showed that this feature is also apparent in some specimens of the Fan-tailed Cuckoo. During the whole time we were watching, the bird remained in the thicker foliage of the lower branches of the densest part of the area. It dropped to the ground to pick up caterpillars, returning to its perch to eat them. Unfortunately at no time did we hear it call.

During the latter half of the time we watched the bird was harried by an Olive-backed Oriole *Oriolus sagittatus* which was calling frequently in the area and which is possibly a host to this cuckoo. There does not appear to be any previously published record of the Chestnut-breasted Cuckoo in Australia south of Cape York Peninsula.

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8 October 1968.