

## SHORT NOTES

### Structural characters supporting the recognition of the genus *Eolophus* for *Cacatua roseicapilla*

Peters (1937, Check-list of Birds of the World) placed *Kakatoe* (= *Cacatua*) *roseicapilla* in the monotypic subgenus *Eolophus*, one of several subgenera he used in classifying this genus. Forshaw (1969, Australian Parrots) separated this species from *Cacatua* in a monotypic genus *Eolophus* on the basis of differences in flight, general behaviour and pattern of plumage.

Comparison of four *roseicapilla* skulls with skulls of all *Cacatua* species, except *C. haematurypygia* and *C. ducrops*, shows several other characters that support Forshaw in giving separate generic rank to this species. In all the skulls of *roseicapilla* the fossa at the base of the zygomatic process was larger than in the other species, the temporal fossa was consistently smaller, and the auditory meatus was consistently crescentic, not semicircular as in the other species.

These characters, along with the peculiarities in pattern of plumage (no other cockatoo has a pink cap on the forehead and crown, deep reddish-pink underparts, and no orange or yellow colouring at all) and the behavioural differences described by Forshaw, seem adequate to justify the generic separation of this species.

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20 April 1970.

### Feeding of Dusky Woodswallows

Dusky Woodswallows *Artamus cyanopterus* are normally aerial feeders, either soaring or sallying forth from a perch like flycatchers. They are also recorded taking insects from the ground (Rowley 1969, in *Birds in the Australian High Country*: 454).

On 29 March 1970 I watched a group of birds near Blackburn Lake, 18 km east of Melbourne. About eight birds were perched among the trees, and two were searching the bark on the main trunks of two eucalypts, like treecreepers. One flew up, perched on a thick branch, knocked an insect against it, ate it, continued along the branch searching the bark, and then flew down to the base of another tree. It perched there sideways, then hopped up the trunk, probing the bark. This continued during the ten minutes I watched, with at least three individuals, possibly more, feeding in this way.

Light rain at the time of this observation became heavy. Heavy rain had also fallen earlier, and pos-

sibly the rain caused aerial insect life to be scarce. Certainly no woodswallows were flying about.

I re-visited the area on 31 March 1970 in fine weather and the birds were soaring and feeding in the normal manner.

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29 April 1970.

### The White-eared Flycatcher in New South Wales

The southern limit of the White-eared Flycatcher *Monarcha leucotis* is recorded by Officer (1969, Australian Flycatchers: 39) as '... just across the New South Wales border at Murwillumbah'. Here, at Reserve Creek, Miss E. Pratt (*in litt.*) observed a single bird from 21 June to 21 August 1959. Between 11 and 20 May 1960, she again noted a bird in the same locality, but has not since seen the species in New South Wales.\*

Strong (1966, Gould League Notes 32: 5) recorded the species about 130 km further south, from the Iluka rain-forest. About the same time (November 1965) Messrs N. Chaffer and J. Purnell (pers. comm.) independently saw the species at Iluka, as have other naturalists more recently. All these observations have been between September and December, whereas Miss Pratt's sightings were in the winter.

An unusual occurrence, difficult to explain, is that of a specimen from near Lithgow in the Blue Mountains. The precise date of collection is not known, but it was probably in 1889. The skin (Australian Museum Reg. No. 0.17105) still has the original label attached; on it is written in pencil 'R. Grant, Lithgow'. Robert Grant (*ca* 1845–1923) came from Scotland and settled in Lithgow as a miner. Some years later, he became associated with the Australian Museum as a collector. He subsequently joined the indoor staff as an attendant, and in January 1898 became assistant taxidermist. In 1907 he became Taxidermist, a position he held until 1917. His son, Henry, was also a preparator on the staff of the Museum from 1907 to 1927.

The skin was acquired by Dr E. P. Ramsay, then Curator of the Australian Museum. In a published note Dr Ramsay (1890, Rec. Aust. Mus. 1: 35) stated: 'I have recently had an opportunity of examining a fresh specimen shot in a dense part of a damp scrubby gully in one of the gorges of the Blue

\* Miss Pratt has written to tell us that she again saw a White-eared Flycatcher in the same area on 30 June and 5 July 1970.

Mountains. The specimen is an adult male in full plumage. Several years ago I searched for this bird in the Richmond and Clarence River scrubs [north-eastern New South Wales] but found it not . . .

Dr Ramsay's private collection of bird skins and eggs, known as the 'Dobroyde' Collection, was acquired by the Australian Museum in 1896. The modern spelling of the name is Dobroyd, now part of the Sydney suburb of Haberfield. 'Dobroyde' was at one time the estate of the Ramsay family and there Dr E. P. Ramsay, as a young man, first studied and collected birds and their eggs.

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24 April 1970.

#### Royal Albatross off Sydney Heads

On 25 October 1969 a seabird census was carried out from a fishing boat off Sydney Heads, NSW. A good variety of birds was recorded including five species of shearwaters *Puffinus* spp., Cape Petrels *Daption capensis* and Wilson's Storm-Petrels *Oceanites oceanicus*. Albatrosses *Diomedea* spp. were also plentiful with Wandering Albatrosses *D. exulans*, Black-browed Albatrosses *D. melanophris* and occasionally a Shy Albatross *D. cauta* often feeding close to the boat. When about 10 km offshore an unusual albatross landed on the water some 50 m from the boat. In general appearance it resembled *melanophris* or *cauta*, being white with dark wings; however, it was much larger than these species and clearly similar in size to *exulans*. Using 10 x 50 binoculars the bird was identified as a Royal Albatross *D. epomophora* by the prominent dark cutting edges on the large pale bill. It was less confiding than the other species and did not approach the boat closer than about 25 m. At this range photographs were taken that confirmed the diagnostic features.

Description. Complete body plumage, white. Underwing, white narrowly tipped black; upperwing, uniformly dark. In flight the wings appeared solid black from tip to tip apart from a small white area on the back. Bill, pale-pink, horn-coloured towards the tip, the mandibles having black cutting edges.

This is the third recorded occurrence of the Royal Albatross in Australia. By the uniform coloration of the upperwing it can probably be referred to the smaller northern race *sanfordi* breeding in the New Zealand region at the Chatham Islands and at Taiaroa Head on the Otago Peninsula. The two earlier records, at Bellambi, NSW (Gibson and Sefton, Emu 62: 166-8) and near Lancelin, WA (Aust. Bird Bander 4: 80), were both examples of the nominate race.

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13 May 1970.

#### Behaviour of Horsfield Bronze Cuckoo at nest of Red-backed Wren

While photographing Red-backed Wrens *Malurus melanocephalus* at the nest at 08:40 on 7 September 1969 at Cash's Crossing near Brisbane in company with Mr B. Harris, two Horsfield Bronze Cuckoos *Chrysococcyx basalis* were noticed nearby. Shortly afterwards one bird, presumed to be the female from its dull plumage, approached the side of the nest remote from the photographic hide by moving on foot through the short grass, and appeared to examine the area for approximately two minutes. After moving from one side of the nest to the other she approached the nest-entrance, and at the same time the other bird, presumed to be the male from its relatively brighter plumage, closely approached the nest. The female then darted to the nest-entrance and rapidly removed a chick with her bill. She then appeared to shake the chick vigorously, but was disturbed by the observers at the hide whereupon both cuckoos flew off, the female having first dropped the young wren below the nest-entrance. The chick appeared unharmed and it was replaced in the nest by the observers. It and the other young wren in the nest were fed by the parents which returned shortly afterwards. During the intrusion by the cuckoos, the adult wrens were noticed nearby, calling agitatedly, although they did not attempt to interfere.

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2 June 1970.

[Predation of this sort by cuckoos is rarely recorded, though it certainly happens occasionally, for instance in *Cuculus canorus*. What is a pity is that observers equally seldom are prepared to observe the events without interfering. This applies to all activities of cuckoos at the nests of their hosts and accounts for the fact that we know so little about such activities (cf. Harrison, Emu 69: 178-181). Because it is usually a matter of great good luck to see a cuckoo at the nest of another bird, it is most important not to upset the course of events on such occasions, but to observe carefully and impartially everything that happens. Ed.]

#### Torpidity in Australian birds

Since I prepared my previous communication on torpidity (1970, Emu 70: 27-28) I have been reminded by Mr J. D. Macdonald that significant earlier references to the phenomenon had been published in the 'Emu', but had failed to arouse any contemporary interest.

Credit for first drawing attention to the habit lies with H. Stuart Dove, of Devonport, Tasmania. In an item, 'Semi-Hibernation of Swallows' (1923, Emu 23: 149), he cited seemingly reliable accounts of individual *Hirundo neoxena*, which had failed to

migrate from northern Tasmania, seeking relief from intense wintry conditions by being 'packed away in crevices of dry trees' and using deep crevices among rocks in an old quarry. Later (1926, *Emu* 26: 138) he returned to the subject when commenting on the sudden, but temporary, appearance of a few swallows at Devonport during a mild and sunny interval in mid-winter. Actual torpidity of the 'tree'd' swallows was not specifically mentioned by Dove, but he inferred it.

Quite remarkable evidence of torpidity in a different species was provided by the aviculturist G. A. Heumann, of Sydney, but it was concealed, without special comment, in an article headed 'Mistletoe-Birds as Plant Distributors' (1926, *Emu* 26: 110). It is so pertinent, and indicates so clearly that the Mistletoebird *Dicaeum hirundinaceum* in Australia has the attributes of torpidity, demonstrated afterwards in swifts and hummingbirds, that he may be quoted in full: 'These birds are exceptionally sensitive to cold . . . One may be found sitting on a branch and clinging to it so tightly that it can only

be removed by using force. The bird seems to all appearance dead, and it may remain in that condition for days; but if brought to the warmth of a stove, little by little the muscles relax, and within less than a quarter hour the bird is as healthy as ever. A friend who, before the war, took six Mistletoebirds to America, told me afterwards that they had been frozen to death and resurrected four times! I have had similar experiences with my own birds.'

In view of the discoveries since made in America and elsewhere on the phenomenon of torpidity one can only regret that Australian biologists of the time had not followed up such golden leads. The scientific opinion of the time apparently was not favourable, the observations probably being dismissed as anecdotal and allowed to lapse. Had they been quietly investigated in a scientific manner when proved authentic, they would have brought great credit.

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15 June 1970.