Stray Feathers

Nesting Notes of the Mangrove Kingfisher.— The following notes were taken at Brisbane in 1956-57 where ample opportunity existed to study the Mangrove Kingfisher *(Halcyon chloris)*. The species is common in Brisbane wherever mangroves are to be found in any numbers, and may even be seen in the busy railway marshalling yards at Mayne Junction in the heart of the city, where Breakfast Creek cuts through the railway property. However, its local stronghold seems to be the extensive mangrove forests at the mouth of the Brisbane River, which are still largely in their original primary state, with consequent abundance of suitable nesting hollows.

A nest was found in this area at Myrtleton on the north bank of the river, on October 20, 1956. This nest was in a belt of mangroves about 50 yards wide. The actual nesting hollow was in the side of the main trunk of a mangrove and about three feet above the high-water level. The nest cavity was completely open to view and was filled with a lining of old fragmented shellfish and crab-shell grit, indicating its probable use in prior years.

The clutch was four white eggs, very soiled and stained. This number is interesting as available references (Cayley's *What Bird is That?* and Serventy and Whittell's *Birds of Western Australia*) state the clutch as three eggs only. On a subsequent visit (October 28) the four eggs were still present.

On the next visit, November 12, 1956, the eggs had hatched but only three young were present. These were blind and naked, but nevertheless extremely active, moving around the nest cavity. The nest was badly fouled with what appeared to be disgorged pellets of crushed crab-shell. Confirmation of this diet was later provided by an adult's returning to the nest with a live crab in its beak. Unfortunately the bird flew off without feeding the young and, as the birds would not return to the nest while anyone was present, it was not possible to ascertain just how the crab was fed to the young. It would seem possible, however, that the adult breaks up the crab and then disgorges the food to the young bird.

Unfortunately it was not possible to return until December 8. By that time two young birds were flying with the parents and one was still in the nest. This last was almost a replica of its parents except for shorter beak, stumpy tail and faint barrings on the under parts. It was capable of strong flight and when handled flew off to join the others. The nest by this time was completely fouled and was a seething moving mass of shell grit and insect life.

The following year, 1957, a visit was made to this area on October 5. A sitting bird was flushed from the same nest

hollow. Later in the day the bird was flushed again. There were no eggs. An interesting feature of this visit, however, was the offering, by the smaller bird to the other, of a lizard (*Amphibolurus* sp.) about ten inches long, which the larger bird swallowed head first, flying off with the tail of the lizard protruding from its beak.

On all visits the birds kept within a well-defined territory which, in the case of the foregoing pair of birds, was a mangrove belt 50 yards by 300 yards.

Another pair (in each year) occupied a territory 200 yards upstream from the nest of the original pair, and a third pair (again in each year) occupied a thicker belt of mangroves 100 yards downstream. Every approach by a bird of another pair into the area brought speedy retaliation by what was assumed to be the resident male, and, in fact, approaches by humans, cattle and large birds were followed by swooping dives on the intruder. The nesting birds incessantly kept up the distinctive call of this species and the areas of other pairs could easily be determined by their calls.—H. L. BELL, Greenwich, N.S.W., 10/9/59.

A Sight Record of the White-winged Black Tern in Victoria.—On December 29, 1958, we went, with Tom Lowe and David Dent, to observe waders on the shores of Lake Tutchewop, midway between Kerang and Swan Hill (Victoria). A strange bird soon attracted our attention and we approached it carefully, quite unable to identify it until Tom Lowe eventually was only about eight feet from it, with the others of us a few yards farther away.

The strange bird was squatting at the water's edge and appeared tired and distressed, as it moved very little, had its eyes closed most of the time, and seemed to ignore both our approach and the close attentions of a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. Outstanding features were the white face, small dark patch on the crown, and the rather short, black bill, but its hunched squat made it impossible to note other characteristics. Finally it stood, walked several steps, and then made a flight of a few yards. When we again approached, it rose and floated slowly away over the lake.

It was a very small tern, with a short, black beak, dark eyes, and short, reddish-brown legs. The forehead, lores and chin were white, the crown was very dark grey or black with an extension of that colour down the side of the head behind the eye to a point about in line with the lower edge of the eye. This extension gave much the effect of the 'sideburns' of an earlier generation. The marks were about one-quarter of an inch wide, and about that same distance behind the eye, which was set in a clear, white face, with no suggestion of the dark bill-to-eye smudging seen in many terns in various plumage phases. Its rather shortish tail

was not deeply forked although the central feathers were definitely the shortest. The wings and back were grey with darker 'shoulders', and the primaries were tipped narrowly with very dark grey or black, the tail seemed paler than the wings, whilst the underparts, including the underside of the wings, appeared to be white. On the ground the tern was slightly longer—perhaps an inch—than the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper which was attending it.

The bird was seen again on December 30, still solitary, flying over Lake Kangaroo, which is a mile or so east of Tutchewop.

We have discussed the observation with a number of ornithologists, checked all references to tern species in *The Emu* and in various standard works, including the *Handbook of British Birds*, and examined skins of small terns at the Australian Museum, Sydney.

The bill shape and size eliminated *Sterna albifrons* and *S. nereis*, whilst the tail was sufficient to remove *S. macrura* from consideration. We are familiar with the Whiskered Tern (*Chlidonias hybrida*) in its plumage phases.

It will be seen that our description (from the rough field sketches and descriptive notes made on the spot) agrees fairly closely with F. M. Hamilton's photographs of the White-winged Black Tern (*Chlidonias leucoptera*) in *The Emu*, vol. 57, plate 10. The only really important divergence is in the colour of the underwing. In spite of that, we feel as certain as is possible under the circumstances that the bird was a White-winged Black Tern, in non-breeding plumage.—P. A. BOURKE, Rand, N.S.W., and V. T. LOWE, Mystic Park, Vic., 31/12/59.

Grey Thrush taking Tree Frog.—On August 16, 1959, at Chichester, New South Wales, in a brush gully, my attention was drawn to a loud noise, reminiscent of one of the bower bird's calls, some thirty feet up in a tree. On investigation, I found it to be coming from a green tree frog (*Hyla caerulea*) which was being attacked by a Grey Thrush (*Colluricincla harmonica*). The frog was hanging from a branch by its two back legs. The thrush sidled up to the frog, made a hasty peck at one foot, and jumped back. The frog gave its loud cry and released its hold with this foot, but remained clinging to the branch with the other. The Thrush jumped across the frog and repeated its attack on the second foot, but by this time the frog had taken hold again with the first. The battle of the feet continued for some five minutes before the Thrush was successful in completely 'unfooting' the frog which dropped but was able to grab hold of a lower branch during its fall. So the attack continued from branch to branch, the tactics not varying, except that when the frog was suspended by

the front legs, the Thrush would take hasty pecks at the head or neck. The frog became progressively weaker, its cries fewer in number, and it was obvious that had the Thrush seized hold of it, it could easily have thrown it to the ground. However, this it was reluctant to do, and it continued its rush and retreat tactics for over fifteen minutes, when the frog was eventually dislodged from its last branch and fell to the ground. There the Thrush seized it by the toes of one foot and after much worrying was able to turn it on its back. Then, dragging it by one toe, it pulled it across a small buttress root, where it commenced to peck savagely at the soft throat. Some five minutes elapsed before this was punctured, and the Thrush was able to peck out minute pieces of flesh. It still treated the frog with caution, not seizing it and shaking pieces of flesh off, but just picking out little bits with its closed bill. The eating of its prey was obviously to be a long process.

I disturbed the bird, which perched on a branch some six feet away, uttering mournful, quiet notes, and checked the identity and size of the frog which proved to be adult with a total body length of 3½ inches. The Thrush returned to it immediately I left.

The Grey Thrush is known to take prey as large as a young Pygmy Glider (*Emu*, vol. 55, p. 161), so the size of this victim is not unduly exceptional. However, I knew that the English toads were able to exude a substance from the skin which was irritating to human flesh and an effective protection against attack from foxes and dogs. Dr. J. A. Keast, of the Australian Museum, confirmed that the green tree frog has a similar poisonous mucus and that there are records of kittens being killed by mouthing them. It was obvious from the wariness and the method of attack of the Grey Thrush, that it was suspicious of some danger. It is also obvious that the natural protection afforded the frog is ineffective in preventing predation by this particular bird species.—J. N. Hobbs, Dungog, N.S.W., 7/10/59.

Little Corella in Southern South Australia.—Little Corellas (*Kakatoë sanguinea*) have been known to occur along the Murray River in South Australia for many years. At times the species appeared in small flocks as far down the river as Blanchetown. Over forty years ago Little Corellas were established artificially at Buckland Park, near Port Gawler, on the Adelaide Plains.

During the 1951-52 southward irruption of northern species of birds, Little Corellas increased in several southern districts, and they established themselves on the Murray much farther south than usual. A pair was reported by Mr. H. J. Morton at Langhorne Creek, near Lake Alexandrina, in October, 1951. Ref.: Brian Glover, *S.A. Orn.*, xx (8). 89, 1952.

A flock of 70 birds was sitting on a dead gum tree at the edge of the water of the swamp in the sanctuary at Moorook on February 5, 1958.

In the Swan Reach district a population of about 200 birds built up within a few years. This population was practically eliminated, however, by a bird trapper early in 1957, when he secured 190-odd birds in large double clap nets. Only three Little Corellas were seen by me, in the company of about 200 White Cockatoos (*K. galerita*) feeding on grassland in the area, on June 17, 1957.

It serves to illustrate how a local population of a species of native bird can be practically 'liquidated' by a trapper with one tug on the rope of his nets.—E. F. BOEHM, Sutherlands, S.A., 7/11/59.

A Record of the Pectoral Sandpiper in Western Australia.—The Pectoral Sandpiper (*Erolia melanotos*) was first collected in Australia at Albany, W.A., by Tom Carter, on March 23, 1910, but was unrecognized as such until Brooks examined the specimen at the National Museum, Melbourne (*Auk*, vol. 53, 1936, p. 81). The species was not reported again in Australia until W. B. Hitchcock collected a specimen in a freshwater locality at Geelong, Victoria, on January 18, 1952 (*Emu*, vol. 52, 1952, p. 281). L. Amiet (*Emu*, vol. 57, 1957, p. 251) made a probable sight recording in Raby Bay, Qld., on November 21, 1955, and subsequently J. N. Hobbs made no less than three separate observations (on December 8, 1957, March 23, 1958, and September 19, 1958) at freshwater localities in south-western New South Wales (*Emu*, vol. 58, 1958, pp. 56, 412; vol. 59, p. 210). Since Carter's time there has been no additional Western Australia report until E. McCrum and P. Slater sighted a bird at Reid (400 miles east of Kalgoorlie) on December 24, 1954 (*W.A. Nat.*, vol. 4, 1955, p. 193).

On November 1, 1959, we were fortunate in taking a Pectoral Sandpiper in the wader traps at the banding station we are operating at Pelican Point, Swan River estuary, Perth. At 7.45 a.m. Mr. T. Scott collected from the traps a mixed bag of waders—five Red-necked Stints (*Erolia ruficollis*), four Sharp-tailed Sandpipers (*E. acuminata*) and one Pectoral Sandpiper. The trap had been previously cleared at 6.15 a.m. I was present during the banding operation, and the Pectoral was easily recognizable. The breast was boldly streaked, the markings being sharply demarcated from the white abdomen; the dark brown bill had a conspicuously paler, yellowish-brown, base; the legs were much brighter than those of the Sharp-tailed, being a greenish yellow. The Pectoral was darker on the head than the Sharp-tailed, more extensively dark on the lores, and lacked any russet on the crown. The shaft of the outermost

primary was white along its entire length. The wing was in moult. The following measurements were taken—wing, 130 mm.; tail, 51; tarsus, 29; middle toe and claw, 28; exposed culmen, 28; weight, 49 gm. In both the Pectoral and Sharp-tailed Sandpiper the males are larger than the females, and this particular specimen would almost certainly be a female. After being ringed with C.S.I.R.O. ring no. 040-07136, the bird was photographed in colour and then released.

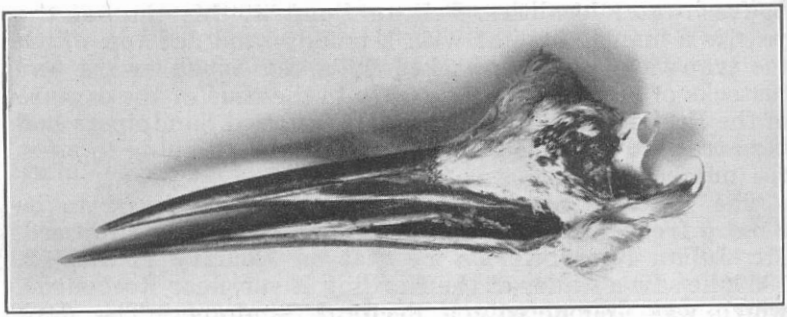
Most of the previous records of this species were made in freshwater localities. Pelican Point at this time of the year is a marine habitat with a muddy-sand flat (on which the traps are placed), backed by a *Salicornia* sward and tussocks of *Juncus maritimus*. Up to the time of the capture of the Pectoral Sandpiper, 124 Sharp-tailed Sandpipers had been trapped in the locality; up to the time of going to press the number trapped was 375.

The Pectoral Sandpiper will probably be found to be a more frequent visitor than has been commonly supposed. Mr. Julian Ford informs me that on January 11 and 12, 1959, he saw a wader at the Harding River, near Roebourne, which was undoubtedly a Pectoral Sandpiper. The dark breast was sharply marked off from the pale abdomen and the legs were yellow-green. When seen with three Sharp-tailed Sandpipers it appeared to be generally darker. The bird was encountered on two occasions at a small fresh-water pool. Several Wood-Sandpipers were also in the vicinity.—D. L. SERVENTY, Nedlands, W.A., 31/12/59.

Observation on a Storm-Petrel.—Alexander, in his *Birds of the Ocean*, states that storm-petrels have the habit of swimming or walking along the surface of the water, supported by their outstretched wings. Occasionally they may hop on only one foot, dragging the other behind.

During February we were studying a pair of Lesser Frigate-birds at Norah Head and happened upon a White-faced Storm-Petrel (*Pelagodroma marina*) washed up on the beach, saturated and unable to fly. The bird was taken home, dried out overnight, and released on the beach next morning, about 30 yards from the water. The legs appeared too weak to support the bird on land. With wings outstretched to gain buoyancy from the breeze, it made no attempt to fly, being content to hop along on one leg, dragging the other, until it gained the water, where it was promptly engulfed by the first wave encountered. Whether this form of progress is normal on land or was due to the weakened condition of the bird is a matter for conjecture. However, the legs and wings were perfectly normal, and the bird itself quite active although its feathers had lost the ability to shed water.—D. S. STRINGFELLOW, Baulkham Hills, N.S.W., 3/11/59.

Bill Abnormality of a White-fronted Tern.—The head illustrated in the accompanying photograph was found on August 27, 1959, amongst fragments of several Crested Terns (*Sterna bergii*) on the western stone groyne protecting the ocean entrance of Lakes Entrance, Gippsland, Victoria, by Ted Nixon and the writer. The remnants suggested recent destruction by a bird of prey, probably the White-breasted Sea Eagle (*Haliæetus leucogaster*), three of which were seen in the immediate Lakes area.



Skull of White-fronted Tern referred to in the text, showing abnormality of the lower mandible.
Photo. by Miss Cecily Finlay

The head is that of a White-fronted Tern (*Sterna striata*). The lores, chin and forehead are plain white. Black mottling occurs in a small region immediately anterior to the eye, running back above and below it. Insufficient of the individual's plumage remains to determine accurate age or plumage phase. The bill is black, the extreme tip of each mandible being translucent horn-coloured. The skull has been severed in an approximately vertical plane through the orbit. Some slight twisting of the mandibles relative to each other has occurred, due probably to uneven tissue shrinkage during desiccation after death, this being visible when viewed from above. No other portion of this particular specimen was found. Length of the exposed culmen, 44·8 mm.

The lower mandible is produced by 6·00 mm. anterior to the tip of the upper mandible (measured in vertical plane) and this is apparent in the photograph. Although longer, it appears quite normal in continuity of shape. No distortion since death, however, can account for its extra length.

Culmen measurements cited by K. A. Hindwood ('The White-fronted Tern (*Sterna striata*) in Australia', *The Emu*, vol. 45, pt. 3, January 1946, pp. 195-199, pls. 15, 16,

17, 19 and 20), of 16 Australian collected specimens now held in various institutions, range from 34·5 mm. to 46·5 mm. The culmen of the specimen being considered falls within this considerable range, and may be regarded of normal length. Examination of seven skins selected at random from the National Museum, Melbourne, collections indicates that in normal birds the tip of the upper mandible actually overhangs or protrudes beyond the lower one for distances ranging from 0·6 to 2·5 mm. The lower mandible is therefore normally shorter than the upper. Examination of drawings and photographs from various sources confirms this. In the specimen concerned, the extra length of the lower mandible must therefore be considered an abnormality. The cause of this abnormality, and its effect on the Tern during life, must remain a point for conjecture. —KEN G. SIMPSON, Heidelberg, Vic., 4 11 59.

The Swamp Harrier in North-west Queensland.—The Swamp Harrier is a comparatively rare hawk in the interior of north-west Queensland, probably due to the virtual non-existence of suitable habitat for most of the year. Following several recent articles concerning the migration of this species (Sharland, *Emu*, vol. 58, p. 75; Hobbs, *Emu*, vol. 59, p. 87; Mollison and Green, *Emu*, vol. 59, p. 258), I checked my notes covering north-west Queensland for the period July, 1954, to December, 1958. I have only six records of the species, all concerning single birds.

March 17, 1957, over Lake Canellan, Camooweal.
November 2, 1957, over Lake Frances, Camooweal.
November 3, 1957, over Lake Canellan, Camooweal. (Same bird as over Lake Frances previous day?)
March 9, 1958, over Leichhardt River dam, Mount Isa.
March 29, 1958, over Leichhardt River dam, Mount Isa.
August 31, 1958, over Rifle Creek reservoir, Mount Isa.

These records merely emphasize the relative rarity of the species in the area, and are too few to show any significant seasonal variation in occurrence.

The Spotted Harrier (*Circus assimilis*) was not seen by me, although it probably occurs in the area, and I rather expected to meet it sooner or later.—JOHN LIDDY, Riverside, Tas., 9 12/59.

Little Friar-bird in South Australia.—The Little Friarbird (*Philemon citreogularis*) has seldom been reported in South Australia, and all records are for localities in the Murray River Valley. Morgan is the farthest down-stream record. In that locality, the species was reported by Dr. D. W. Brummitt (*S.A. Orn.*, XIV, 44, 1937) as occurring occasionally.

Two birds were seen by me in eucalypts beside a large lagoon one mile east of Morgan on December 22, 1959. I had previously met the species and collected a bird for the South Australian Museum at Moorook, farther up the river, in October, 1954. The specimen has been reported by R. Schodde and Brian Glover (*id.* 21 (6-7), 71-72, 1955), in an account of an excursion to Moorook.

On December 13, 1959, I saw three Little Friar-birds at close range in trees along the river bank in the town of Renmark. One of their varied calls sounded like 'oriole'. The Olive-backed Oriole (*Oriolus sagittatus*) was recorded from Renmark by S. E. Terrill and C. E. Rix (*id.*, XIX, 98, 1950) on the authority of the latter author. I have previously questioned the record (*id.* 21, 48, 1954), and now think that the call of 'oriole' mentioned above, if heard by Rix, could possibly have misled him.—E. F. BOEHM, Sutherlands, S.A., 18/1/60.

Letter-winged Kite Record from the Murray Valley.—November 12, 1958, was the date of our first and only visit of a Letter-winged Kite (*Elanus scriptus*)—a day of light breeze and sunshine, though cold. On the Murray Valley Highway fifteen miles south of Swan Hill we saw the kite sitting on the roadside ten feet from the bitumen. It cocked a quiet eye as a truck roared past and then surveyed us calmly. With me were John McKean, David Dent and Tom Lowe. The bird proved to be extremely tame though quite healthy so far as we could judge. Appearing loath to move as we returned to investigate closely, it finally decided that four men at less than twelve yards was just too close and it swung to a fence-post fifteen yards off. Curiosity seemed mutual and we remarked on its close likeness to *Elanus notatus*, the Black-shouldered Kite, and decided that, at rest, it would be difficult to separate them in the field. We noted the similar black markings on the whitish bird, and the same red eye, and we agreed that the legs and feet were not a good yellow but a putty-biscuit colour. To test its tameness I made a steady step-by-step approach to within twenty-four feet when the bird rose above the observers and soared away to a fence-post a further thirty yards and settled—to tolerate us watchfully once more.

Still not satisfied we moved the bird yet again, remarking on how easy it would be in the future to recognize any Letter-wing which displayed so trustingly its 'letter' as boldly marked as this one. It alighted yet again at one hundred yards, on still another roadside post, and there we left it in peace, all of us warmed with such a satisfying study (for us) of another rare species for the district list.—V. T. LOWE, Mystic Park, Vic., 1/8/59.