

Lighthouses and Bird Observations.

ABOUT twenty years ago the Zoological Society (Melbourne) distributed to the light-keepers on the Victorian coast schedules to record data regarding the movements of birds, chiefly those that struck the glass of the lantern.

The data collected were scant and meagre, such as, for instance:—
"Queenscliff, 30/10/85, 7.50 p.m.—Stormy-Petrel struck lantern, not killed; weather overcast." "Cape Nelson, 6/10/85, 11.25 p.m.—Parrakeet struck lantern; weather dull." "Wilson's Promontory, 25/3/85, 1.30 a.m.—Sparrow-Hawk struck lantern, killed; weather misty." "Cliffy Island, 18/11/85, 10 p.m.—Several Mutton-Birds struck light, one killed; weather misty." "Gabo Island, 9/10/85, 4.30 a.m.—Two Plovers struck light; weather very hazy."

Mr. W. E. Cordell, formerly for many years in the Department of Ports and Harbours, Victoria, has kindly furnished some reminiscent remarks on the subject. He states:—"I have come to the conclusion that migratory birds do not follow the coast line. If they do then they fly very high and by night. I am led to believe this by the small number of birds that have struck the various lights where I have been stationed. At Gabo Island, where I was for six years, the number was exceedingly small, and on no occasion was a body recovered. The lighthouse is built on an extreme point of land, and as the birds usually struck in stormy weather they were carried into the sea. At the Eastern Light, South Channel, Port Phillip, I was never troubled with birds. At Cape Otway I can only remember one instance of recovering a bird that had struck the light, and it was not a migratory one. But I have had Parrakeets in numbers sitting on the handrail for hours at a time, at night."

During the last twenty years ornithology, particularly field work, in a general way has made rapid strides, and it has occurred to the Australian Ornithologists' Union that the ever-watchful light-keepers might again be approached with regard to recording observations respecting birds, especially migratory ones. Handy schedules have been printed, with concise instructions, and have been kindly distributed in batches to all Australian lighthouses through the goodness of the various State Harbour or Marine Departments. Indeed, the Union's schedules have already reached extra-Australian parts, notably New Zealand and some of the Austro-Malayan localities.

The first acknowledgments of the schedules have come from Tasmania, through Mr. J. Adams, Secretary Marine Board, Hobart, with encouraging remarks and a willingness on the part of the light-keepers to meet the Union's wishes.

Mr. E. Neilson, Superintendent, Table Cape, writes:—"During the seven years I have been at this station the only time that birds come about the lantern at night is during the latter part of summer, when some come in foggy or misty weather. They

do not strike the light with great force, and usually remain about the lantern till daylight and then fly away. I have never found birds dead about the tower. The kinds that come are all land birds. I have never observed any sea birds near the tower, day or night."

Mr. G. P. Huxley, Superintendent, Currie Harbour (King Island), writes:—"It is very seldom that any birds strike this lighthouse other than small sea-birds, and then only in calm, thick, rainy weather. They chiefly strike it on the west side, but not hard enough to kill themselves."

Mr. Wm. Hawkins, writing from South Bruni, states:—"There are no migratory birds in this locality excepting the Mutton-Bird, which appears in September and departs the latter end of April or early in May. In reference to birds striking the light, there have only been two occasions that I recollect. On both occasions the birds were Bronze-winged Pigeons and were stunned by the impact."

From Cape Wickham (King Island) Mr. Superintendent G. Johnston writes:—"The direction of birds striking the light is varied; in fact, I have reason to believe that this will not be a guide as to the direction of flight. For instance, a bird may be flying north and raise or lower its flight until it gets into the focal plane of the light, when it flies straight at it, perhaps at right angles to its previous flight. This is accounted for by catching small birds (that gather round the light in fine overcast weather) and putting them low down under the balcony. No matter how they take off, when they rise to the focal-plane of the light they dash at it, sometimes from the opposite direction to that which you release them. Migratory birds that strike the lantern are Ducks of different species. Swans never strike the lantern, although they often fly past N.W. or S.E. about sundown—a sure indication of S.E. winds. Have made notes of this for 25 years and have never known it wrong. The half-caste islanders on the eastern side of Bass Strait always remove their boats for S.E. weather on seeing Swans fly over. The weather is always more or less overcast when birds strike the lantern; never to my knowledge in clear weather. The names of birds known to gather round the lantern in fine overcast weather are:—Flame-breasted Robin, Pink-breasted Robin, Dusky Robin, White-eye (*Zosterops*), Olivaceous Thickhead, Pallid Cuckoo, Bronze-Cuckoo, Larks, Ground-Parrakeet, and Summer-Bird (*Graucalus*), and on two occasions Bronze-winged Pigeons. Some larger birds flutter on to the lantern, but never strike hard enough to disable themselves. I will be pleased to forward any time information that the Union may request."

Mr. Tom Iredale, of Christchurch (N.Z.) writing under date 30/7/04 to the Hon. Secretary of the Aust. O.U., states:—"I noticed in the daily papers here that notices had been distributed to the lighthouses, and was very pleased, as I am certain much that is new will be the result. I am an Englishman, and have

only been out here two years, but all that I have observed tends to prove that much more migration takes place to New Zealand than is generally accepted. At Lake Ellesmere, in 1900, the first example of the Spotted Plover for the South Island was shot. The first specimen of the Little Whimbrel for N.Z. was also shot in June, 1900. In February, 1902, a specimen of the American Godwit was obtained; in March, 1902, a specimen of the Spotted Plover in breeding plumage; in July, 1902, the Red-necked Stint was added to the list, whilst in April, 1903, a specimen, or, rather, a pair of the Curlew Sandpiper was obtained. I believe I am correct in saying that these are all due to the efforts of one man, Mr. Edgar Stead. I think it would be too much to try to believe that the above are the only individuals that happen to reach New Zealand.

"Speaking of migration, on the night of the 5th May there was a migration of White-eyes over Christchurch. From 7 to 10 p.m. the air was full of their notes. It was a cloudy night, with an east wind, and the birds were flying very low, and next day odd parties were flying about and around the city. I saw 13 engaged upon the skull of a dead sheep one day the week after."

The information is still very meagre, and contrasts strangely with recorded observations from European lighthouses; but it is the first step in a good work. One fact is notable—the flight of the birds which do strike the lantern cannot be as rapid as that of the migratory species of the Northern Hemisphere. There many are killed by the impact; here, at most, but stunned. A question suggested is—Are the flights on this side of the equator as dense or as rapid as those on the northern one? Stray specimens only are here recorded. It is too early yet, however, to form a definite opinion on the subject. When returns from the mainland lights, more particularly those of the eastern coast of Australia, come to hand, fuller information will doubtless be available. But it will be a matter of years' observation before really definite conclusions can be drawn.

The South African Ornithologists' Union.

WITH reference to the formation of the South African Ornithologists' Union, Mr. A. Mattingley, hon. treasurer Aust. O.U., has received from Mr. Alwin Haagner, hon. secretary of the African Union, the following communication, the latter part of which is virtually the same as forwarded to some British publications:—"It is very good of you to take such a kindly interest in us, and I can assure you it is very greatly appreciated by us all. Your balance-sheet proves very interesting, and will no doubt be a guide to us in our initial efforts. Of course, printing out here (Transvaal) is much more expensive than in Australia; but we hope to have ours done