

been discussed by the writer (*Jour. Acad. Nat. Sci. Phila.*, xv., p. 313) and by the British Ornithologists' Club at a recent meeting (*Bull. B.O.C.*, No. 204, p. 68 *et seq.*) In some groups we have already reached the stage where a large number of genera contain but a single species each. The generic name has thus become of exactly the same significance as the specific name, and is superfluous. The ultimate outcome of this sort of thing will be a nomenclature wherein each species will have a name but no clue whatever to its relationship will be found in this name.

"Linnaeus's idea was that the 63 genera under which he arranged all the birds known to him represented 63 types of bird structure, and when the generic name was mentioned the general character of the bird was immediately known, while the specific name indicated a form of that type of bird.

"Of course, we cannot go back to Linnaeus, or anywhere near to him, but we *must*, if a name is to be maintained as a name, check the further subdivision of genera. Moreover, why is the discovery of a slight structural difference of such paramount importance that we should overturn our names to advertise it? Is it not just as important to emphasize relationship as divergence? Indeed, we are suffering at the present time in systematic ornithology for the need of some way to indicate relationship. We shall soon be forced to erect a lot of sub-families to indicate relationships formerly denoted by generic names which have now been degraded until they are perilously close to species.

"It should be borne in mind that a genus is not a definite thing in the sense that a species is; it is simply a group for convenience—sometimes it is sharply defined, more often it is not. This fact is well shown in the virtual agreement of the committees referred to above as to the number of species before them and their wide differences of opinion as to the number of genera.

"It is difficult to provide a means for bringing about the desired uniformity in the limits and number of generic groups, but the necessity for such action should be strongly emphasized and widely proclaimed."

## Observations on the Nankeen Night-Heron (*Nycticorax caledonicus*).

BY S. A. HANSCOMBE, SEAHAM (N.S.W.)

IN the swampy regions of the Port Stephens district (N.S.W.), extending from West Maitland and Newcastle north as far as Bulladellah, many Nankeen Night-Herons (*Nycticorax caledonicus*) are to be found. I have for three years lived in this remarkable district, the home of numerous water-fowl. Unfortunately, many gunners—I cannot in all cases say sportsmen—annually visit a number of the isolated swamps and ruthlessly shoot birds—not game birds, but anything with feathers. Night-Herons, at times,

seem to be killed in large numbers. Retiring as they mostly do to Cabbage-tree Island, to nest and breed in great colonies during November and December, many of the birds and their young fall an easy prey to ruthless bands of Christmas holiday makers. I sincerely hope that the R.A.O.U. will, at an early date, pay a visit to this region. Members would, I think, then be convinced of the advantages of having these extensive waste swamp lands declared sanctuary. The enormous tracts here that will not for generations be drained or used for agriculture would then be a fine national possession, as the home of water-fowl and other animals. Legitimate sportsmen also would doubtless approve of such protection being afforded rapidly disappearing species.

On visiting the locality on the first occasion I was surprised at the docility and habits of the Nankeen Night-Herons on properties where shooting was prohibited. The impression that the birds were nocturnal, and slept by day in some shady clump of trees overhanging the water, was soon altered. Reflecting that local circumstances or some strange weather conditions accounted for a temporary deviation from ordinary ways, led me to make a series of observations extending over two years. One naturally hesitates to question the observations of eminent authorities, and in venturing to do so I am not moved by merely a desire to criticise, but rather to induce a more detailed study of these strange and interesting birds. Nankeen Night-Herons are certainly not nocturnal in the same sense as the Owls and Frogmouths. During certain portions of the year, the Night-Herons can be said to be nocturnal, when living in colonies, but when congregated only in limited numbers, and undisturbed, they are usually diurnal.

It is to a pair of Nankeen Night-Herons that I will chiefly confine my remarks for the time being. Their period of activity—that is, of food-hunting—usually began at or about mid-day, and they worked incessantly till dusk. Their presence was still indicated by their noises till near midnight. Though their particular swamp was entirely surrounded by tea-tree or “paper-tree,” with very thick foliage, their resting-place was not near the swamp. After weeks of search I located the friendly clump of turpentine and eucalypts that provided the place of camp. This was on a hill-top, at least half a mile from the swamp, and here the birds could be found daily till about 10 a.m. They were regular in their hours until the approach of winter. About the beginning of April they became daily later, and by May would appear to have again become strictly nocturnal. These changed conditions prevailed then till the advent of spring, and by September the birds would resume their partly diurnal and partly nocturnal habits. So tame were they that I had full opportunities of observing them. In the first season two young birds were reared, but detailed observations were now broken by a band of gunners, who shot several of the birds. The others, probably wounded, were never afterwards recognized. However, the season 1914, with its prolific rains, brought great numbers of

Nankeen Night-Herons to the swamps of Seaham. They offered greater facilities for observations. During any hour of the day, from 10 a.m. till dusk, numbers could be observed catching fish, crickets, yabbies, and so forth, in the swamps. Upon one occasion, in January, when the thermometer in the shade registered 102 degrees at noon, some of the birds were at work. Even most diurnal birds at that hour are resting. The majority of the flock, however, was at that time half a mile distant, on a hill-top among the shady tops of tall eucalypts. After the opening of the new year gunners were plentiful, and the flock retired to the thick forests and scrubs further back. Here a discreet observer could see the birds feeding among the vine-tops and along the blackberry bushes at all hours of the day. Apparently they were eating the insects that the vines supported. By this time the birds had become very timid, and all observations had to be made by stealth. The least noise, and away the Herons would fly, always well above the tree-tops. Fortunately for themselves, after a few disturbances they usually fly too high for gunners. On the other hand, on protected areas they are exceptionally tame and trustful.

I cannot at present say with certainty the number of broods that a pair of Herons rears each year. One pair certainly had two broods—one in the spring and the other in early summer. In the great Heronry at Cabbage-tree Island the birds form big colonies in early summer. I saw large numbers of Herons in the mangroves along the banks of the Hunter River, but, as they appeared around Seaham in numbers during December, nesting had evidently ceased for the year. Not the least interesting features about these birds are the crest, and the varied stages preceding adult plumage. The colour of the legs seems to vary a great deal, ranging from yellow to pale green. It is doubtful whether the adult plumage is assumed before the third year. Nankeen Night-Herons, being heavy birds, often signalize their flight by the cracking of the dead limbs on which they perch. This is particularly the case with the young birds. When in their second year the birds assume some of the cinnamon tinge, but can still be readily distinguished, except when in flight overhead.

The nests of the Nankeen Night-Herons are not artistic structures. They are found in great rookeries, as at Port Stephens, or isolated. I have seen a nest built about 18 feet from the ground, but the usual height is between 50 feet and 80 feet. The eggs vary in tint, but are usually a light bluish-green.

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