



LETTER-WINGED KITES (*Elanus scriptus*).  
(Upper Fig. Male. Lower Fig. Female.)

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[PART 3.]

## The Letter-winged Kite (*Elanus scriptus*, Gould).

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FEW readers of *The Emu* have given so much thought to this bird. Ever since reading the paragraph in Gould's "Handbook," 1865, vol. i., p. 55, it has been my endeavour to confirm the late Mr. Samuel White's observations—viz., that he found this species "in great numbers on Cooper's Creek, between lat. 27° and 28°, always in companies of from 10 to 20 or 30 in number. It flies when near the ground with a heavy flapping motion, but occasionally flies very high, when its movements are very graceful. It is rather inquisitive, but not so bold as *Milvus affinis*. It nests in companies, as near each other as possible. The nest is composed of sticks, lined with pellets ejected from their stomachs, which are principally composed of the fur of the rats upon which they chiefly subsist. The eggs, which are four or five in number, have a white ground, blotched and marked with reddish-brown, darkest at the small end; they are one inch and three-quarters long by one inch and three-eighths broad. The markings are easily removed by wetting."

In view of Mr. Sid. W. Jackson's observations, the above is the most accurate description yet given of the breeding habits of *Elanus scriptus*, though a slight inaccuracy occurs in stating that the egg markings are darkest at the small end; in a very large series in my collection not more than 15 per cent. are so marked.

A. J. Campbell ("Nests and Eggs," page 28) does not improve upon Gould. A. J. North ("Nests and Eggs," vol. iii., p. 254) quotes G. A. Keartland as having noted the birds breeding in Central Australia, but gives no record of eggs being taken at the time. This is not to be wondered at. During a journey such as the Horn Expedition, very little time would be available for special prolonged observations. Mr. Keartland, however, confirms Gould's statements to a certain extent. North is incorrect in stating that eggs of *Elanus scriptus* are less heavily marked than those of *E. axillaris*. In a large series of both species before me I find there is practically no difference in coloration. In both species some eggs are lightly marked, odd specimens almost pure white, while others are simply a mass of colour, as if the egg had been dipped into blood.

Mathews, in "Birds of Australia," vol. v., p. 208, adds nothing to our knowledge of the bird; the colour of its eye and feet in his plate does not agree with Jackson's description of an adult. Jackson's observations, however, carry out the suggestion made in the concluding paragraph of Mathews's article—viz., "Most of its history has been detailed under the previous species (*E. axillaris*); but it seems unlikely to have any well-marked peculiarities of its own as regards habits. If such were ascertained, they would become valuable assets in the consideration of the relationship of these two species." Jackson's notes prove that the breeding habits of the two species are unlike in many respects.

My collectors, who have searched a considerable portion of Australia, are always told to keep a look-out for *Elanus scriptus*. With one exception they have not recorded the bird, the exception being S. W. Jackson, who in 1897 found a pair breeding in the Clarence River district and secured a clutch of eggs, the birds having been driven from the interior by drought conditions, probably. Curiously enough, as the sequel shows, to this collector is due the credit of finally dispelling all doubts upon the breeding habits of *Elanus scriptus*; he lived among the birds during six weeks of their nesting season.

Captain S. A. White, when consulted, informed me that he had noted very few of the birds during his trip to Cooper's Creek, but had great faith in his father's records, and felt sure they were correct in the main.

Four years ago I first saw a glimmer of light upon the subject—small, certainly, but promising, when a report came to hand that a squatter, lately in from far Western Queensland, had seen the birds' breeding-place and had taken a number of eggs. What became of the eggs is a mystery, as *very* few collections contained authentic specimens. Following up the clue, I wrote the manager of the station upon which the birds were said to breed, but, although anxious to assist, he was unable to supply much information. Nothing daunted, I wrote again the following year, and was told that the bird described appeared to be there, and was apparently of nocturnal habits (later on Jackson proved this partially correct). During 1917 I again troubled the manager by asking for a rough skin. This was supplied, together with information that the bird was extremely shy and difficult to shoot. The skin was that of an undoubted Letter-winged Kite. A few weeks later I was excited by the news that a set of eggs was on its way to me. In due course the eggs arrived, beautifully blown, but, alas! nothing better than *Milvus affinis*!

Feeling satisfied that *Elanus scriptus* existed in the locality (Diamantina River), I determined to investigate thoroughly, concluding, in my own mind, that the birds nested during June or July. After consulting with my friend, Mr. J. H. Bettington, of "Terragong," Merriwa, we decided to send Mr. Jackson out. The locality being an extremely out-of-the-way one (260 miles from the nearest railway), it was necessary to forward supplies,



&c., to Winton, so as to catch the yearly teams travelling to the station nearest to our objective. Some of the goods, purchased in Sydney, went by sea to Townsville, thence per rail to Winton. Communications beyond Winton being very uncertain, we decided that the party should travel per car, so as to have a vehicle always available. This decision was carried out in spite of warnings that the far end of the road was impassable for a heavily-loaded motor-car. Mr. Bettington provided a new 30 h.p. six-cylinder Buick, in which Jackson and an expert driver left Belltrees on the 8th June, reaching their destination on the 26th, travelling the 1,400-mile journey by easy stages without as much as a tyre puncture. Readers of *The Emu* may decide for themselves whether good luck or good management enabled the party to cover 1,400 miles without the slightest mishap, the greater part of the last 250 miles over tracks hitherto untravelled by a motor; to fix camp at its destination at a clump of timber in which the birds were nesting, and to secure eggs upon the very day of arrival.

Messrs. Bettington and son joined the camp later, having travelled *via* Townsville to Winton, thence per car.

The collecting trip was a success, skins, eggs, and much valuable data being obtained. I shall leave it to Mr. Jackson to supply particulars of his observations and experiences. All the skins obtained will join the "H. L. White Collection" in the National Museum, while the R.A.O.U. oological collection receives typical clutches of eggs.

NOTE.—In searching for a name for the beautiful little Wren discovered by Jackson and party (see *Emu*, ante, p. 121) I could think of nothing more appropriate than "*diamantina*," as I am an advocate for naming sub-species after their locality rather than after some relation or friend of my own. I selected *diamantina*. The river bearing that name was discovered by M'Kinlay in 1862, and was called after the wife of Sir George Ferguson Bowen, Governor of Queensland, 1859-1868. Lady Bowen was the Countess Diamantina Roma, daughter of Count Candiano Roma, President of the Ionian Senate, a nobleman of an ancient Venetian family, who possessed large estates on the Island of Zante.

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**Acanthizas.**—In my note on a northern form of *A. nana* mentioned in *The Emu*, ante, p. 122, I omitted to state that I received the specimens from our Queensland member, Mr. H. G. Barnard. Now he has been good enough to send me another specimen, this time *A. albiventris* (North)—an extension of locality, as I think this species has hitherto only been recorded for "interior of New South Wales." While on the subject of Acanthizas, I may state that my collector, Mr. F. L. Whitlock, has sent me from Sharks Bay, W.A., specimens of two interesting kinds—*A. morgani (iredalei)* and *A. whitlocki*. The former, I think, links up with *A. winiamida*, recently described by Mr. F. E. Wilson, from the Mallee, Victoria (see *Emu*, xvi., p. 169).—  
H. L. WHITE.