

## Drought Notes from Western New South Wales.

BY DR. W. MACGILLIVRAY, EX-PRESIDENT R.A.O.U., BROKEN HILL, N.S.W.

WHEN I returned to Broken Hill at the end of last winter (1919) I found that no rain had fallen in sufficient amount to replenish dams and lakes since early in 1917, consequently most dams were dry, and the few large lakes were rapidly diminishing. By the end of the summer all surface water except that conserved in the Broken Hill reservoirs had disappeared. Fortunately for these latter, a strike had been in existence then for nearly a year, and no water had been required for the mines. This condition of things has had its effect on the local bird-life. Many species went elsewhere, and others put in an appearance that were previously strangers—no doubt forced to leave their usual haunts in a search for some more favoured locality. One species, the Red-winged Parrot (*Aprosmictus erythropterus*), came south-west from its usual habitat, appearing on the upper part of the River Darling, at Kallara station, in fair numbers. A few strayed down the Barrier Range to within a few miles of Broken Hill, and others were noted for the first time in South Australia by Mr. J. N. McGilp, in the neighbourhood of Lake Frome. The Common Silver-eye (*Zosterops dorsalis*) also appeared for the first time in Broken Hill; was also noted by Mr. McGilp, and became quite common, on the upper part of the Darling River.

The Bare-eyed or Blood-stained Cockatoo (*Cacatua sanguineus*), usually a common bird on all the creeks about here, disappeared from the district early in the drought; it went north to more fertile country in Western Queensland. The Galah (*Cacatua roseicapilla*), however, remained, congregating in immense flocks in the vicinity of water, whether the town supply or troughs supplied from wells. It fed on the shed seeds of grasses and salsolaceous plants.

The scarcity of rabbits resulted in most of the raptorial birds, such as the Whistling-Eagle (*Haliastur sphenurus*), Little Eagle (*Hieraaetus morphnoides*), and Kite (*Milvus affinis*), which usually live on this pest, leaving the district. A notable exception was the Wedge-tailed Eagle (*Uroaetus auidax*), which became, if anything, more numerous than in normal times, and, emboldened by hunger, harried and killed kangaroos and Emus weakened by want, and took toll from the immense flocks of Water-Hens (*Microtribonyx australis*) that congregated in the neighbourhood of the rapidly-drying waters of early summer.

Mr. J. Osman, who lives with his wife and six children at Stitt's Well, on the South Australian border of Yanco station, in South-Western Queensland, gave me an interesting note. His house is surrounded by mulga (*Acacia aneura*) scrub, and he has always afforded protection and encouraged the wild birds to come about the place. He rarely uses a gun, and never fires a shot within a mile of the house, and his children have been taught not to molest

the birds nor to rob their nests. When all surface water had about disappeared, towards the end of last summer, many wild birds, particularly grain-eaters, came to drink at a large camp-oven which held water for the fowls, and many of the smaller ones were being drowned in their eagerness to get at the water. Stones were placed in the oven to prevent this, and very soon the birds came in such numbers that three more receptacles for water were put down, each holding three gallons, making four in all, and yet all four had to be replenished two or three times before mid-day every day. The Mulga trees about the house were so crowded with birds, mostly Chestnut-eared Finches (*Taeniopygia castanotis*) and Budgerigars (*Melopsittacus undulatus*), waiting their turn to drink, that no part of the trees could be seen. These two species and the Crested Bronzewing (*Ocyphaps lophotes*) formed the greater number. But for Mr. Osman's humane consideration for these creatures, great numbers must have perished.

Mr. Clive Conrick, of Nappa Merrie station, tells me that four of the extremely rare Spinifex or Night Parrots (*Geopsittacus occidentalis*) were seen on the station early this year—the first noted for many years.

Although rain has fallen over most of this district since April, only in places has it been sufficient to fill dams, and all lakes are still dry. The Darling River is now in flood, and it is expected that the waters will almost reach the level of the last big flood, in 1890, when Boolaboolka Lake, on Tolarno station, a favourite nesting-place for Pelicans, was last filled. When filled this lake holds water for about seven years, and the Pelicans resort to an island in the lake to breed. Since they last nested there the fox has invaded this district, and it remains to be seen whether he will make a difference to the number that nest.

It has been lately quite a usual thing to see numbers of Ravens and Short-billed Crows waiting about the schools for the scraps of food left from the children's lunches.

### The White-fronted Chat at Home.

By DONALD F. THOMSON, R.A.O.U., CANTERBURY (VIC.)

DURING the past season I spent a good deal of time in the haunts of the White-fronted Chat (*Ephthianura albifrons*) on the quiet, grassy slopes which border the Yarra near Kew. Here the extensive open paddocks, studded as they are with numerous clumps of reeds, coarse grass, and dense thickets of gorse, form an ideal home for this singular little bird—at once interesting and useful. Apparently the White-fronted Chat is especially partial to that acclimatized pest, the gorse.

Even before reaching the usual nesting-site—a bush in an isolated clump of gorse—the birds would fly out into the open paddocks, uttering their peculiar wheezing note and circling with