

Economic Value of Birds

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Congratulations are due to Mr. Lance LeSouef for his fine suggestion that the R.A.O.U. should make a deeper study of the economic value of bird life.* The subject is not new, but up to the present little definite information is available, and I think the R.A.O.U. should gather all the evidence it can, sift it out carefully and give the people of Australia the benefit of its study. Much work on bird life has been printed under the names of individual members of our Union, but statements from the R.A.O.U., given after mature judgment, must have greater educational value in the public eye.

I agree with Mr. LeSouef that there is much to be done in teaching our people the value of our birds. I go further, and say that without such education all the laws of protection are of little value. What we need, and need badly, is an education of the community if we wish to save our valuable birds. Is this not a field in which the R.A.O.U. should seek glory? Might I suggest it is a field in which the R.A.O.U. should do its duty in so much that I consider the welfare of the birds is in its hands.

In giving a verdict on the economic value of certain birds, the R.A.O.U. should not be misled into thinking that because a bird is a pest in one part of Australia, it is a pest everywhere. The same applies to the valuable bird. In *The Emu*, vol. xxviii., part 4, p. 316, it is reported that the Galah or Rose-breasted Cockatoo (*Kakatoë roseicapilla*) is doing good by destroying "roly-poly" in New South Wales; this may be true in that particular part, but where I know the Galah in thousands the only "roly-poly" we know is a valuable fodder plant, and if our Galahs destroy any of it we can place another crime to its already long list.

Now, most of the statements printed in *The Emu* from time to time chiefly concern the home place of the author, or at best the area covered by a short visit to any certain locality. Such remarks can rarely refer to the length and breadth of the Commonwealth. None of us knows the conditions over all Australia. If we wish to get the support of people outside of our Union, we must be careful of our statements. Even Mr. LeSouef says that the Wedge-tailed Eagle (*Uroaëtus audax*) is misunderstood. I presume he means by those individuals who recognise them as pests and destroy them. Personally I have seen Wedge-tailed Eagles attack, maim, and kill lambs, but I would not say that this bird is a pest throughout Australia, though I know from experience it is a proven pest in the interior of our

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country where we try to produce sheep. Other members have claimed that we want a uniform close season for the protection of our birds. This, to me, seems absurd, for if protection through a close season is to be effective, it must be during breeding seasons, and this occurs at various periods in Australia.

With such different opinions amongst members, it seems to me that true protection can only come about through the people learning which birds are of value to them. As a commencement could we not start a propaganda for the protection of such birds as Ground Larks (*Anthus* and *Mirafra*), Magpie-Larks (*Grallina cyanoleuca*), Magpies (*Gymnorhina*), Plovers (*Lobibyx* and *Zonifer*), "Blue" Wrens (*Malurus*) etc.? These are in need of what help we can give them if they are to carry out the work they are fitted to accomplish. Birds such as *Amytis* (*Amytornis*), *Calamanthus*, Emu Wrens (*Stipiturus*), etc., need no protection, as they, by their elusive habits, take care of themselves. Why should we persist in saying that certain birds on unprotected lists in some parts should be protected? They were placed upon this list for some reason. Could we expect support from people who know these birds as pests, if we continually try to have these birds protected? Is it not better to try to gain more confidence and make a full time effort to preserve the valuable common birds?

The economic value of a bird is largely governed by its numbers, the greater the number improves or retards its value. One repeatedly reads that such and such bird has been so persecuted by man that it has become extinct. I have seen the Flock Pigeon referred to as being so exterminated, yet to-day I hear that it is back in its old haunts or nearby by the thousand. Where have the birds been? The list of supposedly-extinct Parrots is long, but in recent years most of them have been refound. Statements of a like nature must deal with only the country we know, and remain so until we can glean information from the almost, if not quite, unsettled country. We can only do this if we can get people in these parts interested in our work. For too long have we been considered "cranks"; we want to show that we can do some real good work.

As a suggestion, I am of opinion that the R.A.O.U. should, through the medium of the leading newspapers in each State, start a propaganda column, in which discussions on the merit or demerits of certain birds will bring forward letters from all parts of Australia. Say we start with the Murray Magpie or Magpie-Lark! I think most of us know that it is deserving of preservation, but if we can get sufficient limelight on its good qualities, it must lead to much good. Such a discussion will create interest in our birds, or at least those that are under discussion. It is

better to start on a well-known valuable bird than upon a "doubtful" one. If we can honestly say that our efforts have shown the people as a whole the value of two or three of our very common birds in a year much will be gained. I think that newspapers would respond to any enquiry such as my suggestion through their columns.

A general discussion will carry more weight with the public than any statements from ornithologists just at the present time, and we should encourage evidence from those who think they have a grievance from certain birds, for it must do good, and this, after all, is what we require if we want to protect our valuable birds.

Australian Pipit.—The Australian Pipit (*Anthus australis*) breeds very freely in the open grass fields around Port Phillip, and though a large number of nests are destroyed every year through being trodden on by cattle and horses, the bird continues to multiply in large numbers. The nesting season begins early in August and continues on into December, and in years when food is plentiful nests have been found in January. In good seasons the Pipit has been known to nest during the autumn.—D. DICKISON, R.A.O.U.

Crested Bell-Bird.—The Crested Bell-Bird (*Oreoica cristata*), although confined to Australia, is widely distributed over our continent. It is found in the three eastern States, but not in the coastal districts, and it extends across the dry interior of New South Wales and South Australia to Western Australia. It is not a shy bird, but is much more frequently heard than seen. Its beautiful notes can be heard a long way off when given in full volume, but the bird is an accomplished ventriloquist, so that when it is close at hand its call at times appears to come from a considerable distance. When incubating the bird usually sits most closely, and will allow one to approach very near before it leaves the nest. Reference has frequently been made to the habit of placing hairy caterpillars about the nest. On September 25, 1923, I found a nest containing three fresh eggs, and there were three caterpillars on the rim and fourteen inside, one of those inside being dead. The nest in the accompanying photograph was built in a broom bush, and was found by E. W. Bunn in company with myself on September 8, 1929. It then contained two slightly incubated eggs. Five days later we returned to secure the picture. The bird was on the nest, but left before the camera was placed in position. On the day on which the photograph was taken Mr. Bunn found two well-developed chicks in another nest of this species, but that same day a farmer rolled the belt of Mallee scrub which contained the nest.—J. A. ROSS, R.A.O.U., Melbourne.