A Breeding Record for Sydney of the White-backed Swallow

By A. R. McGILL, Arncliffe, N.S.W.

In my Lower Cook's River District notes (*Emu*, XLII, p. 172), I ended my remarks on the White-backed Swallow (*Cheramœca leucosterna*) by stating ". . . at the time of writing they . . . . are showing distinct signs of an early breeding attempt." This statement was the result of an incident that occurred the day my article was completed and typed in readiness for despatch. I think it fitting therefore, that further details and the eventual outcome be published.

It is my custom to travel each week an unmade roadway that follows the East Hills railway in the vicinity of Wolli Creek, and distant approximately six miles south-west of Sydney's G.P.O. It is the favoured habitat in this suburban area of these conspicuously-plumaged birds. On August 25, 1942, a pair arrested my attention, so I stayed to note anything of interest. Whilst one (presumably the male) remained very quiet on the overhead wires, the other alighted on the roadway where it made quick movements to gather up what I considered were particles of food. It permitted a very close approach and I could then clearly see that the cause of the bird's actions was small dry pieces of grass that were gently blowing over the sandy surface. I watched the bird closely and on each occasion it flew leisurely towards a large sand-pit excavation about sixty yards distant, and, when immediately over it, dropped quickly, was lost to sight for a short time and then flew back to repeat the performance. It was clear that such actions were connected with nest-building.

I mentioned my observations to Mr. J. A. Keast, who immediately got in touch with the owner of the property, by letter, and permission to come and go as we wished was granted. We made an inspection a week later and had no difficulty in finding a nesting burrow tunnelled into soft sand near the top and about twelve feet directly above the bottom of the excavation. No birds were then present, but on returning an hour or so later one was noticed in flight, and, whilst remaining nearby, we saw it on several occasions enter the tunnel and emerge a few moments later. Judging by its actions we assumed that the nest now contained eggs and one (possibly the female) was busy with the task of incubation. Sand and loam were being taken from the pit constantly during week-days, so it was evident the birds had no fear of humans or the noise of numerous motor vehicles.

Unfortunately a bout of sickness kept me confined to

home for the two following week-ends, but Mr. Keast was able to visit the locality on September 20, and, equipped with a camera and ladder borrowed from the owner of the property, was eager to secure some photographs. However, after a good deal of perseverance, his efforts were not rewarded with success. It is difficult to attribute the reason of the birds' reluctance to face the camera, for it was expected that young would have been in the nest.

On September 29 I made a further inspection and found both birds going in and out of the nesting hollow frequently. I was then hopeful that a proposed attempt by Mr. Norman Chaffer with his cine-camera, would prove successful, but when I paid an extended visit on October 3 it was evident that, for some unaccountable reason, they had deserted the site and completely forsaken the locality. Whether the young had been successfully reared was problematical as only forty days had elapsed since the original signs of nest building had commenced.

Because of the nature of the environment, we did not interfere in any way during the breeding period, or after, to ascertain particulars of the general structure of the nest, what it contained, or the dimensions of tunnel or nesting chamber.

A pair was seen again on November 10 circling around the same spot, and the following week-end I found a new nesting burrow a short distance from the original one. Nothing eventuated, however, and since then there have been no further records.

It is difficult to say whether these movements are the commencement of a regular migration to the locality for breeding purposes each year. The numbers have always been small and four has been the maximum recorded at any one time. During the two seasons they have frequented this district, I have observed them on fifteen different occasions, but generally in pairs. They almost certainly nested here in 1941-1942, as three immature birds were seen late in the season (refer *Emu*, XLII, p. 175). The owner of the property on which the birds nested this season assures us that they have bred there for three successive years.

This extension of distribution right to the eastern coastline of New South Wales is remarkable for a species that had always been associated with the interior. It is not necessary here to give any details of their occurrences in the coastal districts of eastern Australia, for Mr. K. A. Hindwood has given all information in his interesting article in *The Emu*, vol. XL, p. 304.

The prominent white patches on the back, head, throat and chest, in contrast to the otherwise dark plumage, makes them the most prominent and attractive of the Australian Swallow family. The flight is joyous and free—a quick

fluttering of the wings and then an effortless glide, which resembles that of the two members of the genus *Hylochelidon* more than the Welcome Swallow (*Hirundo neoxena*), to which structurally it is more closely allied.

One can be fully assured that wherever their future colonization instincts lead them, they will be gladly welcomed, both as a source of general usefulness and an attraction to the locality.

Probable Occurrence of the Southern Black-backed Gull (*Larus dominicanus*) in Australia

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I think it might be said that it is generally regarded that gulls do not wander far from land, and in that respect they differ from most other sea birds. In recent years, however, the Common Kittywake (*Rissa tridactyla*) has been recorded following ships across the Northern Atlantic, often in large flocks, during the winter and spring months; likewise, the Glaucous-winged Gull (*Larus glaucescens*) has been noticed following ships from San Francisco to the Hawaiian Islands.

In Australia two species of gulls are common, the Silver Gull (*Larus novæ-hollandiæ*) and the Pacific Gull (*Gabianus pacificus*). The latter species is largely confined to the southern parts of Australia. New Zealand has three species of gulls, the Silver Gull (usually called the Red-billed) and two others, neither of which has yet been recorded in Australian waters.

Occurrences outside the normal distribution of the various species are unlikely and therefore must be considered as accidental. Consequently, it is with interest that I record the probable occurrence of the Black-backed Gull (*Larus dominicanus*) on the coastline of New South Wales. On two occasions, within the space of three weeks, a single specimen was observed on the foreshores of Botany Bay, near the entrance of Cook's River, a little to the south of Sydney. It was associated with the large flocks of Silver Gulls that habitually gather there. On the first occasion (January 31, 1943) I was in company with Mr. J. A. Keast. We concluded that the bird seen was the Pacific Gull. Three weeks later (February 20) Mr. K. A. Hindwood and I were again in the locality and we saw what we assumed was the same bird. Realizing that the earlier record was not certain, as Mr. Tom Iredale had pointed out that the Pacific Gull was the only gull with a black sub-terminal tail-bar and could be immediately recognized and identified by such