



Australian Pratincole.

Photo. by Norman Chaffer.

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Photographing the Australian Pratincole

By NORMAN CHAFFER, Roseville, N.S.W.

During November, 1948, a party comprising Messrs. R. P. Cooper and Jack Ramsay and the writer paid a visit to the Macquarie Marshes in north-western New South Wales. Of several birds met with for the first time the most interesting was the Australian Pratincole (*Stiltia isabella*). Excellent field notes on this bird have already been published in *The Emu*, particularly the following—'A Contribution on the Life Story of the Australian Pratincole,' by Dr. W. MacGillivray, vol. 24, pt. 2, Oct. 1924, pp. 81-85; and 'Field Notes on the Australian Pratincole,' by R. F. Bailey, vol. 35, pt. 1, July, 1935, pp. 1-10. Included in the latter is a coloured illustration of the bird. I am able to add very little to these field notes, but, as the bird is not often met with by bird students, the following may be of interest.

The haunts of the Australian Pratincole are the barren wind-swept plains of the interior. Migratory in habit, the birds arrive from the north in late September or October. The eggs, usually two in number, are laid on the bare earth without the preparation of a nest, and the young hatch out in about twenty-one days. The young leave the nest within a day of hatching.

We met with several pairs of the birds on the Warren-Carinda Road. About sixty miles beyond Warren the road traverses several wind-eroded plains so bare of top soil that no vegetation can subsist thereon. Skeletons of dead trees indicate that conditions have not always been so barren. Rabbits, which are extremely numerous in the surrounding areas, have undoubtedly played a leading part in this deterioration of the country. In patches some of the surface soil has not completely disappeared and scanty herbage manages to grow.

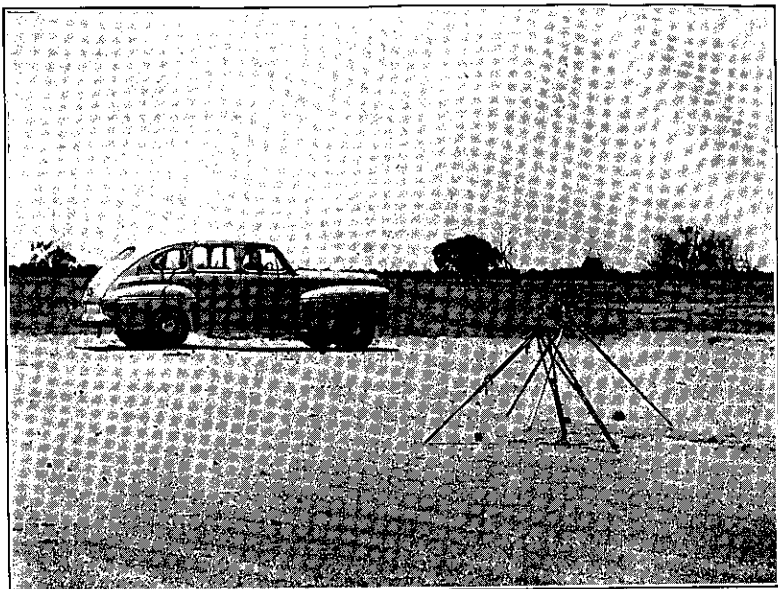
While traversing this area by car, on November 20, our attention was engaged by a pair of graceful birds running alongside the road and we immediately recognized them as

Pratincoles. One always experiences a thrill in seeing a 'new' bird, and we were particularly delighted to meet for the first time with such a graceful and striking creature. Eventually we located several other birds on the plain. It was not until they moved that they could be seen, as their wonderful protective coloration and habit of standing still renders them very inconspicuous. Their actions indicated nesting, so driving the car away some distance, we watched with field glasses and soon observed two small young emerge from a rabbit burrow at the approach of a parent. They scuttled back into the shallow burrow as we neared them, the parents meanwhile frantically endeavouring to lure us away by feigning injury. With crouched attitude and half-opened wings trailing and beating the ground, they scuttled away at a good pace. The white tail tips and upper tail coverts, contrasting with the black of the remainder of the tail, were conspicuous during these manoeuvres. The two young were only a few days old and their mottled fawn and dark brown colouring closely resembled the earth, forming a most effective protective colour pattern. They had much the appearance of young plover, particularly when running with miniature wings upraised. Later the actions of another pair of Pratincoles led to the discovery of a young bird, probably three or four weeks old, also sheltering in a rabbit burrow. This bird had already assumed much the same coloration as the adults, although duller.

The adults evinced little fear of the car and would approach quite closely, giving us ample opportunity of admiring their beautiful stream-lined contour. With their long legs they run quite quickly, occasionally pausing and bobbing the head in much the same manner as a dotterel or plover. The tail and rear portion of the body was frequently swayed up and down in an effortless graceful manner while the head remained stationary. When standing still the posture of the bird is very erect, the head, breast and legs being held in an almost perpendicular straight line. The whole aspect of the bird is exceedingly neat and graceful. The wings are neatly folded and, crossing on the tips, project well beyond the short tail. Frequently as they move around they mount on some small eminence, such as a clod of earth, from which they make a survey of the surroundings.

We often noted the birds limping and found the cause was 'bindyeyes,' the sharp spines of which penetrated their feet. On these occasions the injured foot was raised and the offending spines extracted in an elegant manner, with the tip of the bill. Even on the bare ground 'bindyeyes' were numerous, as we found to our cost.

The birds captured insects on the ground with sudden quick dashes or leapt into the air and secured them in flight. When the bird is running, the tail is raised to an almost



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Young Pratincoles.

Photos. by Norman Chaffer.

horizontal position. As with all of the bird's movements the flight is graceful and charming to watch. It is swift with sudden short wing beats closely resembling those of a heron or plover. When the birds are gliding, which they do for a considerable distance before alighting, the wings are bent to form an exact right angle. The tail pattern of black and white is very conspicuous in flight and the long legs project beyond the extremity of the tail.

Cameras were set up near the burrow sheltering the two small young and release threads run out to the car some distance off. The birds were very wary of the cameras but took very little notice of the car. They often brought up food for the young, but would not go to the burrow entrance to feed them. They appeared to be endeavouring to entice the young out, but we had guarded against this by blocking the burrow entrance. Occasionally they would fly off to a small swampy area about half a mile away. Soon they would wing their way swiftly back and, after a long glide, alight a hundred yards or more away and gradually move up towards the young. Eventually, during a four-hour vigil, two photos were secured and a little colour film exposed as one of the birds passed a few feet behind the burrow.

The area was again visited three days later when it was found that both lots of young were still sheltering in the same rabbit burrows in which they were first found. The advanced young bird appeared to be still fed entirely by the parents and did not appear to make any effort to forage for itself. We attempted to photograph the parents of this bird but were not successful. Finally the young bird was removed from the burrow to take its portrait, but it broke suddenly away and, after running swiftly for a few yards, took off and flew for twenty yards or so and disappeared down a deep burrow.

Pratincoles Near Sydney

By K. A. HINDWOOD, Sydney, N.S.W.

In July, 1877, an Oriental Pratincole (*Glareola maldivarum*) was shot 'near Botany,' a few miles south of Sydney, New South Wales (specimen no. O.18411, male, Australian Museum, ex 'Dobroyde' Collection). The bird is either in eclipse or immature plumage, the narrow black throat band being indistinct, and there is less of the pale rufous wash on the foreneck and the lower breast than in fully-adult birds. This is the only recorded occurrence of the species for the County of Cumberland (Sydney district). The Oriental Pratincole (or Eastern Pratincole) breeds in Transbaikalia, north-eastern Mongolia and southern Manchuria, south to India, Ceylon, Burma, Siam, Indo-China, Hainan and the Philippines, and on migration occurs throughout the Malay Archipelago, south to Australia.