



Southern Stone Plover on eggs.

Photo. by A. D. Selby.

The Emu

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Photographing Some Birds of the Gunbower District, Victoria

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For a number of years I have paid annual visits to the farm of my brother-in-law, Mr. C. R. G. Reid, at Gunbower, and have had the opportunity of making a fair list of the local birds, as well as photographs of some of the more difficult subjects, as the Azure Kingfisher and Southern Stone Plover.

In November, 1948, I was accompanied by Mr. R. T. Littlejohns, and together we succeeded in obtaining pictures of both those species, and also of the Black-fronted Dotterel. Mr. Littlejohns obtained movies in colour of the three, and also of the Rainbow-bird.

Gunbower is an irrigation district, and the well-wooded Gunbower Creek is used as a main channel, and this and its various swamps and billabongs constitute a wonderful haunt for various water-fowl as well as providing feeding ground for many land birds.

In summer, the Sacred Kingfisher (*Halcyon sanctus*) is exceptionally common, and every few hundred yards there seems to be a nesting pair, though usually the nests are in inaccessible hollows. In November, 1950, I found a nest about eight feet high, containing three eggs, and I managed, with the aid of extension legs on the tripod and a petrol drum to stand on, to obtain a couple of not very satisfactory photos., and probably would have had success but for wind blowing down the camera, and puncturing the bellows.

Mr. Littlejohns and I had much better luck in November, 1948, with the Azure Kingfisher (*Alcyone azurea*). Local residents directed us to a burrow in a sand-bank close to the township, and there we found three young birds in occupation. The parents were at first very shy, but by dint of long waiting in sweltering heat, and alternately stopping up the burrow and opening it again to allow the young to be fed, we at last induced the parent birds to perch in front of the cameras. This was about 5 P.M. on the second day. Next day we were able to obtain plenty of

pictures. While we were working at this nest I noticed a pair of Sacred Kingfishers entering a spout in a dry tree not 25 yards from the burrow. Neither pair of birds interfered in any way with the other.

When foraging for food the Azure species dives under water after small fish and the freshwater shrimps which are so numerous in Murray waters. The fish appear to be fed whole: in the accompanying photo. it will be noted that the fish is held tail first, so that fledgelings will take it head first. Shrimps are battered till the pincher claws and most legs are knocked off.

On the Reids' property, a pair of these birds nests every year in a cut out bank where a large centrifugal pump is working. The tractor and pump make a terrific clatter, but the nesting birds are not concerned and actually fly through the gap in the moving belt when leaving and returning to the nest. They appear to rear at least two broods a season.

The Sacred Kingfisher is more of an insectivorous bird. I have watched them along the creek where they were capturing mostly dragon flies, but on two occasions I saw them dive in to the stream in the same manner as the Azure species. I was not able to see the result, but the catch looked like a small fish. Both Sacred and Azure Kingfishers savagely attack any goanna that shows itself on the waterfront.

The obtaining of photos. of the Stone Plover was unexpected by both of us, as the bird is very shy. Here again we were greatly helped by the kindness of local residents, who showed us the nest, and removed their tractor to a distant paddock while we worked. Mr. Littlejohns' car proved an excellent 'hide', as the birds took no notice of it. However, a long string was necessary.

We were able to obtain pictures of a Black-fronted Dotterel after about six hours' wait. The previous day was very hot, and Mr. Littlejohns worked on the Dotterels while I was still trying to persuade Kingfishers to 'sit' for their photos. Owing to the heat, the Dotterels did not long leave the eggs exposed, but spent a lot of time shading them. Next day there was a cool change, and the birds gave me only one chance—late in the afternoon—but it sufficed.

On December 8, 1949, two pairs of Crested Grebes were nesting on Longmore's Lagoon, and the well-grown chicks were seen by the Bird Observers' Club party at Easter 1950. November 1950 found me back at Gunbower in the hope of obtaining Crested Grebe pictures, but there were no Grebes to be found. To make matters worse the White-breasted Wood-Swallows, which I had hoped to picture, seemed all to have their young on the wing, and the White-backed Swallows, as usual, steadfastly refused to face the lens.



Azure Kingfisher with small fish.



Azure Kingfisher with freshwater shrimp.

Photos. by A. D. Selby.