

A Review of the Altona Survey Group

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PRECIS OF PAPER READ TO CONGRESS, 1951

During the early part of 1950 a number of interested people, mostly members of the R.A.O.U. and of the Bird Observers Club resident in Melbourne, combined to form what is now known as the Altona Survey Group. The main reason behind the formation of such a group was the general desire to undertake field work of a really worth-while nature.

The Salt-works at Altona was chosen as the area in which such work could be carried out most conveniently. This district has for long held a great attraction for ornithologists, as large numbers of water birds and migratory waders visit the area. It contains several nesting colonies of the Silver Gull (*Larus novæ-hollandiæ*); is a bird sanctuary; is within reasonable distance of Melbourne and is an ideal spot to watch seasonal changes in bird population.

The group decided that the main objective would be the life history of the Silver Gull. At the same time they would keep a complete census of the birds found in and about the Salt-works, not only recording the numbers seen, but keeping records of nesting, food, habits, displays—in fact covering all branches of field ornithology as fully as possible.

To organize this, a committee was formed consisting of W. R. Wheeler as Convener, Miss Ina Watson as Secretary, and a number of group leaders.

Each group consists of a leader, a deputy leader, and other members who from time to time help in the field work. The Committee meets once a month, and at the meetings problems are discussed, suggestions considered, reports read, and literature on various aspects of field work distributed. A roster is drawn up and each week-end a group leader is detailed to visit the area, make a complete check of the Silver Gull colonies, record the number of birds present in each area, ring all young birds, measure and weigh eggs, note nest measurements and construction, egg colorations, report on dead birds, collect food pellets for identification of remains, report on displays, etc. All the information that can be amassed is reported weekly.

In May 1951 a more or less permanent hide was built overlooking one of the colonies, and hours have been spent in this stout little hut by members working on displays and the nesting habits of the Gulls.

When the Gull colonies have been covered, a circuit of the area worked out by the committee and taking in the most interesting features of the Salt-works is made—either by the leader or his deputy, or if possible by both together with any others present. This report covers the various

species seen in the area, the number noted and where, feeding, roosting, displays, nesting. Weather is a big factor in this work and notes on changing conditions at the time are furnished with each report. Sometimes there are sufficient helpers for as many as three different groups, and the areas covered are worked in such a way that at no time do they infringe on each other. This gives a complete survey for the day. Each report is sent in to the Convener who enters all notes on a card index system.

(Charts covering the nest and density of the various species, together with sample reports, were on display at the Congress).

The acquiring of rings with which to band the young gulls presented the first real problem to the group. The group started activities on June 4, 1950, and early in July signs of nesting activity in the colonies caught them unprepared. Correspondence with the Fisheries and Game Department, Victoria, Wild Life Section of the C.S.I.R.O., Ornithological Society of New Zealand, British Trust for Ornithology, and Doctor D. L. Serventy of Western Australia brought offers of help and sympathy, but nothing of the nature desired, that is aluminium bands. Finally, through the Fisheries and Game Department of Victoria help came. The Director, Mr. A. Dunbavin Butcher, gave permission for the use of the Department's name die held by a firm in England. Miss Watson, and Mr. McNally, biologist with the Department, measured Gull specimens at the National Museum, and finally one thousand rings of size 2 were ordered from the Greenrigg Works in Essex, England, to be air-mailed to Melbourne as soon as possible.

In the meantime, young Gulls were ringed with a white plastic ring of which only a limited number could be procured. In November, the awaited rings arrived from England, to be further delayed when the Customs Department placed a heavy duty on them. Fortunately an appeal to the Minister of Customs succeeded and the duty was reduced considerably. In all, due to the late start, 130 birds were banded with numbered aluminium rings in the first season. Reports of ringed birds have been received from Albert Park, Port Melbourne, Sorrento, Mud Island, Queenscliff and San Remo. The Queenscliff bird was caught under unusual circumstances and later released.

This season (1951) the birds are being banded with a yellow plastic ring as well as the numbered rings, and members of the group hope that results will prove as interesting as in the 1950 season.

The group gratefully acknowledges help given by the National Museum, Melbourne. Mr. Warren Hitchcock, Ornithologist at the Museum, has instructed group members on bird anatomy, correct methods of measurements, etc.,

and other members of the staff have identified contents of food pellets regurgitated by adult and young Gulls (containing mostly various types of fly larvae, insects, beetles, crustacea, fish and frogs), and identified other specimens found in the area. The helpful co-operation by the management and staff of the Cheetham Salt Company has been outstanding at all times.

Without transport, the work could not have been carried out as it has been. Melbourne members of the R.A.O.U., Bird Observers Club, and other interested folk have been most kind and helped the Survey immensely by supplying cars and petrol throughout the year.

A grant from the M. A. Ingram Trust Fund was an unexpected benefit and a great encouragement to the group. With part of the money, wading gear and instruments required by field workers have been purchased.

The group leaders and their assistants have stuck to this work with a zest which speaks well for the future, and when the results of this Survey are published in *The Emu* it will do justice, it is expected, to the work they have put into it.

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The group still needs assistance—the more observers that are in it the better it can function. If you can assist in field work or with transport, please make contact with Miss Watson at FA 8555.

Keep a watch for any banded Silver Gull and let the Survey know the full particulars.

The Convener would also like to know of any records of Silver Gull colonies throughout Australia, past or present, other than those already referred to in the pages of *The Emu*.

Stray Feathers

Publication of the first four 'Strays' has inadvertently been held up for some time.

Notes on the Reed-Warbler.—Dr. Ernst Mayr in an article on geographic variation in the Reed-Warbler (*Emu*, vol. 47, part 3, page 208) says—"The majority of birds from South Australia and Victoria are reported to leave their breeding range during the winter (although some of the supposed emigration may be due to the cessation of singing), but the winter quarters of this population has not yet been reported."

The Australian Reed-Warbler (*Acrocephalus australis*) is definitely migratory in southern Victoria. Birds arrive usually in early spring (September), their cheery song making the reed-beds ring. The main breeding period is