

Notes on Migratory Birds in North Queensland

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The movements of the Australian north/south migratory birds are still not satisfactorily known. Do they go to New Guinea? Is there a movement of the whole species-population with each group retaining its relative position, or do the southernmost birds migrate the farthest, leaving the tropical population of their species more or less sedentary? These and related questions will only be solved by continuous observation by resident observers, combined with banding.

The following notes were made during a visit to North Queensland in April-May 1960.

Hirundo neoxena. Welcome Swallow.

North of Rockhampton this species was met with in sizeable flocks, individual pairs, and small parties. The last-mentioned were possibly the resident population and the flocks were presumably north/south migrants. Among the flocks recorded were 50 at Ayr and 40 at Home Hill on April 20, 60 at Tully on April 21, 30 at Cairns on April 29, and 40 at Mossman on April 30. The largest group was of 250 to 300 birds at Proserpine on May 7. To an observer used to the usually modest autumn flocking of Swallows in New South Wales, this group was more reminiscent of the massing of *H. rustica* as witnessed in the Northern Hemisphere.

The Mossman record is of interest, the area being 40 miles north of Cairns. As far as I can ascertain, the Welcome Swallow has not yet been recorded between Cooktown and Cape York. It will be interesting to have the actual limits of the northern migration of this species known, particularly as the Torres Strait area is a "junction point", so to speak, of the three closely related species, *rustica*, *tahitica* and *neoxena*.

At the same time as the recording of the 60 birds at Tully (April 21) I located a pair feeding young in a nest under a roof awning. In all places where the flocks were observed the pairs and small groups suspected of being the resident population made no attempt to associate themselves with the flock.

The main problem seems to be: Are these flocks migrants from Tasmania and the south of the continent, where Swallow migration is more pronounced than in New South Wales and southern Queensland, or are they part of a gradual northward movement of portion of the whole continental population?

Incidentally, the Fairy Martin (*Hylochelidon ariel*) was found breeding in two colonies—one of 100 birds at Proserpine on May 9, and a larger one of at least 200 birds at the Herbert River, Ingham, on May 6. In the case of the Proserpine colony, nests were in a very early stage of construction, with the birds busily carrying mud to them.

Halcyon macleayi. Forest Kingfisher.

The movements of this species appear to be as yet little known. Its migration does not appear to be complete; a proportion of the birds apparently remain during the winter. I recorded the species consistently present, in small numbers, at Brisbane in the winters of 1956 and 1957. Where a pair was located the species was subsequently met with in that area throughout the winter; perhaps they were the same birds and not merely a succession of stragglers. I also have

notes of an attempted nesting by this species in the autumn at Ferny Grove, Brisbane (May 17, 1956).

On my recent trip I first recorded one bird at Ballina, N.S.W., on April 16, and a pair at Caloundra, Queensland, on April 17-18. From Rockhampton northward the species was commonly seen in pairs or singly. The greatest concentration was in the high rainfall belt, from Ingham 100 miles northward to Cairns. A count taken of birds, invariably pairs, seen along the 100-mile stretch of road totalled approximately 2,000—and that number comprised only birds visible from the road. The winter population must be very large for, throughout my stay in Cairns, it was always possible to see this species in every area of open country.

Were these birds migrants from southern Queensland and New South Wales, which had moved into the area after the local breeding population had gone to New Guinea?

***Merops ornatus*. Rainbow-bird.**

Like the Forest Kingfisher, this species seems to remain in southern Queensland, in small numbers, throughout the winter. Rainbow-birds were recorded in odd pairs or small parties in most of the coastal areas visited. The only large party observed was roosting in a large fig-tree at Ingham on May 6. It consisted of at least 100 birds, which arrived at the roosting site in small parties, from all directions, at about 30 minutes before sunset. They could have been a roosting concentration of a resident winter population, or a migratory flock resting overnight during its northward movement.

***Artamus leucorhynchus*. White-breasted Wood-Swallow.**

From Maryborough northward this species was often seen, being especially abundant in the "sugar belt" between Ingham and Cairns. References in *The Emu* indicate that the bird is normally common in the Cairns district, but the numbers seen by me appeared to suggest a winter concentration of southern migrants. On April 28 I observed, at dusk, at least 200 birds going to roost in a mango tree, and on April 29, at about one hour before dusk, at least 100 in the same tree.

***Acrocephalus australis*. Reed-Warbler.**

This species was met with only at a small, reed-covered lagoon near Marlborough, some 60 miles north of the Tropic of Capricorn. The birds were in full song and from this I gathered the impression that the population was denser than is normally the case in breeding localities to the south, so it may be possible that the singers were a party of north-bound migrants. The time of this observation was shortly after sunset.

***Chlidonias leucoptera*. White-winged Black Tern.**

A flock of 16 birds was seen over a large freshwater lake at Mount St. John Zoo, Townsville, on May 7. Under observation for three hours, they continually wheeled in a group over the lake, odd birds swooping down near the water and then rejoining the flock. Observation was difficult, but it was noted that only six birds showed any black; the other ten appeared to be in the grey eclipse plumage. These six black birds appeared to be in full breeding plumage, with the tail wholly white and the body black. The plumage of the wings could not be accurately noted. Another small tern seen over a lagoon near Ingham, on April 20, may also have been referable to this species.

The location and date of the above observations appear to fit into the migration dates given by F. M. Hamilton (*Emu*, 57: 150), and the all-grey birds noted may well have been juveniles of the previous breeding season in the Northern Hemisphere.