

# Notes on Birds in the Gulf of Carpentaria

By H. J. LAVERY

Although there are a number of reports on the bird-life around north-eastern Australia, there remains little information on the situation in the Gulf of Carpentaria. Birds were recorded at sea in the eastern, southern and central reaches of the Gulf from aboard H.M.A.S. *Gascoyne*, November 17-23, 1962. In addition, five islands in the Wellesley Group and one in the Sir Edward Pellew Group were visited briefly during that time.

Observations are compared with those made earlier in the year (November 13-17) through the Great Barrier Reef north from Raine Island (including two cays visited) and Torres Strait (including four islands visited), and also with those made later (November 23-26) along the eastern coast of Cape York Peninsula south to Townsville and on the mainland.

The following species were recorded in the Gulf of Carpentaria.  
***Geopelia humeralis*.** Bar-shouldered Dove.

Several birds recorded on Pisonia Island, Wellesley Group.

***Phalacrocorax varius*.** Pied Cormorant.

Single birds or small numbers recorded off most Gulf islands.

***Sula leucogaster*.** Brown Gannet.

Observed throughout the Gulf, but not in the same numbers as on the Barrier Reef or even in Torres Strait. The Masked Gannet, *Sula dactylatra*, was far less common and was not actually recorded in the Gulf but probably was distributed similarly.

***Pelecanus conspicillatus*.** Australian Pelican.

Four recorded on Pisonia Island.

***Gelochelidon nilotica*.** Gull-billed Tern.

One bird seen off Sweers Island, Wellesley Group.

***Hydroprogne caspia*.** Caspian Tern.

Single birds (juvenile) recorded on Bountiful Island, Wellesley Group, and at sea 30 miles south-west of Booby Island in western Torres Strait.

***Sterna bergii*.** Crested Tern.

Commonly seen throughout the Gulf, although usually in small numbers. Remains of eggs were found amongst hundreds of nests not in use at a large breeding site on Urquhart islet, Pellew Group. Three eggs from nests on North Island, also in the Pellew Group, were of this species.

***Sterna sumatrana*.** Black-naped Tern.

Frequently seen throughout the Gulf, occasionally with Sooty Terns.

***Sterna fuscata*.** Sooty Tern.

Observed in small numbers on Pisonia Island and Urquhart islet; none recorded at sea.

***Larus novaehollandiae*.** Silver Gull.

Common on islands in the south of the Gulf. More frequently seen on the eastern coast of Cape York Peninsula.

**Haematopus unicolor.** Sooty Oyster-catcher.

Common on Bentinck Island, Wellesley Group; several also seen on Pisonia Island.

**Lobibyx miles.** Masked Plover.

Recorded in small numbers on Sweers Island.

**Tringa nebularia.** Greenshank.

Common on most islands.

**Erolia ruficollis.** Red-necked Stint.

Common on the rocky shores of Bentinck Island and Urquhart islet.

**Grus rubicundus.** Brolga.

Three birds seen over Sweers Island.

**Egretta sacra.** Reef-Heron.

Observed in small numbers on most islands; both colour phases present. (Of a flock of 36 in Torres Strait on November 16, 35 were white and one grey.)

**Tadorna radjah.** Burdekin Duck.

Two seen over mangrove swamp on Bentinck Island.

**Pandion haliaëtus.** Osprey.

Pair observed on Urquhart islet.

**Merops ornatus.** Rainbow-bird.

Recorded on Bentinck Island; also one at sea 32 miles south-west of Booby Island.

**Cuculus saturatus.** Oriental Cuckoo.

One bird seen on Pisonia Island, others about Torres Strait islands.

**Hylochelidon nigricans.** Australian Tree-Martin.

One bird observed at sea 30 miles south-west of Booby Island.

**Rhipidura leucophrys.** Willie Wagtail.

Occasional birds seen in open forest on Sweers Island and on Bentinck Island.

**Coracina novaehollandiae.** Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike.

On Sweers Island, also two at sea ten miles west of Weipa Mission.

**Megalurus timoriensis.** Tawny Grassbird.

Present on Pisonia Island.

**Chibia bracteata.** Spangled Drongo.

Two birds seen on Pisonia Island.

Some species of sea birds in small numbers in the Gulf occur more commonly in Torres Strait, and still more so on the Barrier Reef. Since the Brown Gannet breeds in north-eastern Australia from July to March (Warham 1961), the Gulf is apparently outside its breeding range. Of the terns, large numbers of Crested Terns breed on some islands, but the visit did not coincide with their autumn breeding season (Serventy 1959); probably some other terns nest with them. The absence of Bridled Terns, *Sterna anaetheta*, Noddies, *Anous stolidus*, and White-capped Noddies,

*Anous minutus*, within the Gulf, as opposed to their presence in Torres Strait, was noticeable. Habitats and general conditions on the islands for other species are similar to those of the adjacent mainland. Serventy and Whittell (1951) and Keast and Marshall (1954) state that many Australian birds breed after suitable rain. It is not surprising, therefore, that nesting was not recorded on the Gulf islands under the extremely dry and unfavourable conditions prevailing during this visit.

## REFERENCES

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Department of Agriculture and Stock, Townsville, Qld.  
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**Bushlark as "removalist"?**—When I read A. H. Chisholm's paper, "Birds as 'Removalists'" (*Emu*, 62: 197-8), it strengthened my suspicion that the Bushlark, *Mirafra javanica*, may be capable of this act too.

On December 20, 1961, at 8 a.m., I twice saw a Bushlark fly to a certain spot, hover for a few seconds, drop to the ground, then fly away about a minute later. My curiosity aroused, I investigated and found a freshly started nest. There had been heavy rain during the night and the earth was already sodden from previous rains, but the birds had a freshly scratched depression in the ground beneath a prickly weed and had it partly lined with very soft, dry grass, which I later observed them carrying in bundles.

Another visit to the nest at 5 p.m. on the same day found the nest completed and partly covered by a frail hood. On December 21, at 5 p.m., the nest contained one egg, and by December 24 there were four eggs.

I took some friends to see the nest on December 28 and, while inspecting it, we accidentally cracked one egg, which we left in the nest. The next day I returned and found the nest to contain only the cracked egg; but the nest was undamaged and quite intact.

I made a very careful search amongst the grass and weeds nearby but failed to find a new nest or any pieces of egg shell. The area I searched would extend only six or seven feet around the original nest.—JANICE CARLYLE, Warra, Qld., 8/12/62.