

Stray Feathers

The Mutton-birds of Griffiths Island, Port Fairy, Vic.—After school on the evening of September 24, 1964, I walked around to Griffiths Island and found the Short-tailed Shearwaters, *Puffinus tenuirostris*, were back. Many burrows were being scratched out. The heavy winter and spring rains had brought tremendous growth, the like of which I had never seen before, to the island. Capeweed was matted and as high as my waist, rushes and coarse grasses were up to my shoulders and so matted that I could not push my way through in many places. However did the birds manage to get through this overgrown mass? By peering underneath I could see the heaped sand from the already excavated burrows.

The following night I went to the island and before I reached the Causeway I could hear a mighty gabbling and screeching. To me it was a most wonderful choir of thousands of birds just shrieking their heads off. On the island the birds were massed in pairs everywhere. Every part of the island was teeming with them and it was difficult to put my foot down without walking on them. And the terrific din! There they were at the mouths of the burrows preening each other and scratching. I watched them by torch-light hurl themselves on the ground and try to worm their way through the dense undergrowth. They sat up on their legs and flapped their wings madly on the bushes, gradually beating them down. I would have thought it was a hopeless task but indeed quite soon they made a flat place and slipped beneath the grass. Then an upheaval in the midst of the thick mat and you could see the bird's back pushing up and down. There was the sound of thumping and soon the back broke through the tangled mass, then the head poked out and then the sound of scratching sand. Occasionally they sat on the top of the grasses and scrub and screeched and gurgled and then underneath again for another spell of digging. In a few days they had left the island to return in late November to lay the eggs.—(Miss) GRACIE BOWKER, Port Fairy, Vic.

A Concentration of Spine-tailed Swifts.—April 3, 1965 was a mild, typical autumn day in Southern Tasmania, with a light north-westerly wind and slightly humid conditions. At about 4.10 p.m., driving down the Midland Highway about 12 miles north of Hobart, I saw a Spine-tailed Swift, *Hirundapus caudacutus*, cross the road ahead of the car. It was flying low in a south-easterly direction and was soon followed by others. As the numbers increased they appeared to cease a steady line of flight and commence circling, still at a low altitude, and often within ten feet of the ground.

Having crossed the Derwent River at Bridgewater I drove west along the Lyell Highway to New Norfolk and found the birds still with me and in ever increasing numbers, and they continued so until I reached the outskirts of New Norfolk at about 4.25. The distance covered in that time was about ten miles and I was never out of sight of them. Although at odd times only a few were sighted, mostly there were hundreds of them.

After a brief stop at New Norfolk I drove back to Hobart and as soon as I left the town boundary, they were sighted again. About two miles down the road I stopped and left the car, hoping to find some of the Fork-tailed species amongst them but without success. The birds were still circling low but appeared to be drifting slowly in a westerly direction. Many were so low that they had to "fence-hop" from one paddock to another. At this point at least there were many ants on the wing and I feel sure that this was the reason for the concentration of the birds. About two miles further on the birds were not seen, confirming my impression that they were slowly drifting westwards.

On March 20, 1960 about three miles east of Bridgewater, I saw a similar sight when hundreds of Spine-tailed Swifts were hawking around a bare hill feasting on a hatch of flying ants. In that case the birds were spread over a comparatively small area and the weather heavily overcast and very humid.—L. E. WALL, North Hobart, Tasmania.

Brown Gannet, *Sula leucogaster*: A new record for Victoria.—All organizations dealing with wildlife have many varied species of birds brought in to them. Usually these are the local fauna, but occasionally there is a surprise.

On May 26, 1965, an Officer of the Fisheries and Wildlife Department was called to Altona, a bayside suburb some eight miles west of the city, to rescue "a big dark bird found on the ground at the base of a bush". On arrival at the Department it was found to be an adult Brown Gannet, *Sula leucogaster*. It was alive, but one wing was almost severed: it appeared to have flown into a wire with some force. The bird had to be destroyed. The specimen was sent to the National Museum, Melbourne, where it is listed as B.8389.

The normal range of the Brown Gannet, or Booby, is the seas to the north of Australia. In *Handbook of Birds of New South Wales*, McGill records it only as far south as Port Stephens. It has not been recorded previously for Victoria. No abnormal weather conditions prevailed locally at that time.—INA WATSON, Fisheries and Wildlife Department, Melbourne, Vic.

Observations on the House Sparrow.—In the Hutt Valley in the south-west of the North Island, New Zealand, the adult and the juvenile House Sparrow, *Passer domesticus*, moult the wing- and

tail-feathers between summer and early winter (January to June), judging from examination of birds caught on my property for banding. The time each individual in each age group takes over that moult is not known. However two juveniles retrapped after banding the same season took more than two months and six weeks, respectively, to moult the primaries. Each age group replaces both primaries and secondaries mostly in the middle of the autumn in March, with replacement of the last primaries in the late autumn in May, or very occasionally in the early winter, in June. Also the main growth of the new rectrices takes place in the middle of autumn in April, in the case of the adults, but over March and April in the case of the juveniles. Although both old and young replace the last rectrices in the late autumn in May, none appear to do so in early winter in June.

As regards the "soft parts", the adult cocks change the bill from horn colour to black between late autumn and late summer, that is between May and February. The first year cock can get the black bill by mid-winter when it is about six months old. The bill of the hen turns greenish-brown from grey or brown from the spring to mid-summer, namely September to December. Also the hen's rictal membrane sometimes becomes bright yellow and swollen at that period.

This species gets a foot pox each year, a disease consisting of small warty tumors on the tarsus and toes with lesions sometimes where the culmen meets the skull. That disease appears from summer to late autumn, January to May, but it reaches its peak in March and April. The virus attacks a fifth of the population in some years, but it is not lethal, judging from birds banded when infected and later recaptured in good feather. In addition the species is infected occasionally with a virus resembling typical fowl pox, but that serious disease is rare.

The House Sparrow is noted for its communal displays involving cocks and a hen. Those displays occur mostly from the middle of the autumn to early summer, judging from 1573 observations made from 1957 to 1962, with the peak of such activity in the spring in September, but not in October, as recorded in my note published in the *Emu*, Vol. 58, page 154, based on 198 observations in 1957.

The number of communal displays is shown over that five-year period for each month, in parentheses, as follows:

July (150), August (276), September (411), October (254), November (101), December (63), January (25), February (4), March (14), April (103), May (89), June (83).

The individuals participating in the communal displays are of different ages, judging from four banded birds which flew into a mist-net in spring 1961. The hen was about two-and-a-half years old and in poor feather, having been banded as a juvenile in the

autumn of 1959. As regards the cocks, one was older than the hen but the others were younger, under one year old, having been banded in juvenile and first winter plumage in the autumn of 1961.—H. L. SECKER, Upper Hutt, N.Z.

Birds Feeding on Apple.—It has been the practice over the past few years for a dairy-farmer opposite my orchard property at Wantirna South, Victoria, to feed waste apple to his stock.

This waste is obtained from a cider processing factory. All the juice has been pressed from the apple leaving the dry apple flesh, seeds, core and skin. The dairy-farmer spreads this mash in patches of several square feet, two to three inches in depth, at intervals around his paddocks. Under normal circumstances two three-ton loads are spread each week, although on occasions as much as twenty-four tons may be put out. The cattle feed quite eagerly on this agistment, particularly after the apple has been freshly spread.

On October 9, 1964, a pair of Common Bronzewings, *Phaps chalcoptera*, and four Turtle Doves, *Streptopelia chinensis* were noted foraging on a fresh patch of apple. Since that time it has been customary to see both these species feeding on this waste. The maximum number of Bronzewings seen, at any one time, has been six on October 10, 1964, the maximum number of Turtle-Doves, thirty-two on June 6, 1965. The numbers present have been variable but it has been most unusual for neither species to be present.

No birds were seen during January, February and March, 1965. During this period no apple was spread on the paddocks adjoining the orchard.

Although it has not been ascertained for certain, it would appear that the birds feed indiscriminately on the apple and are not specifically after the seeds. Nor are the birds particular about the condition of the apple. The waste deteriorates rather rapidly, particularly if heavy rain falls. It then becomes a rotten, puggy mess, which is not improved by the cattle tramping about on it. However the birds feed quite avidly on this matter and the marks of many thrusts of the bill can be distinctly seen.

Several other species have also been noted feeding on the waste on occasions. Both Starlings, *Sturnus vulgaris*, and Ravens, *Corvus coronoides*, have been present in flocks of up to fifty birds. Infrequently, Noisy Miners, *Myzantha melanocephala*, and Eastern Rosellas, *Platycercus eximius* have been seen.

During the last two months large numbers of the Domestic Pigeon have been flocking to feed in the paddocks. Beginning with only half a dozen birds, the numbers had built up to approximately 200 by July 14, 1965. This species appeared to be feeding only on the seeds.

The interest of the foregoing species in this apple waste is considered the more remarkable when it is realized that these birds

rarely occur in the orchard. Eastern Rosellas and Starlings will sometimes attack the apples whilst they are on the tree. However none of the above species have been seen to feed on wind-fall apples.—DAVID NOONAN, Bushy Park Road, Wantirna South, Vic.

Tree Martin—Predation by Snake.—Tree Martins, *Hylochelidon nigricans*, are fairly common along the tree-lined creeks in the open areas about Jandowae, Queensland, and pairs may be found breeding during the late Spring.

On one occasion, on October 21, 1961, I examined a nest in the hollow limb of a River Red Gum. The birds had been under observation for some time and I had estimated well incubated eggs at the time of my climb. I was most surprised when I examined the nest in the reflected light from a mirror to find an empty nest and a dead Martin with the head missing.

In searching the nesting hollow for the missing head I found that the hollow was occupied by a Brown Tree Snake, *Boiga fusca*, about two feet in length and coiled up at the rear of the nest.

Probably the snake had crawled into the hollow while the Martin was brooding, killed the bird and devoured the eggs.—LLOYD NIELSEN, Jandowae, Queensland.

OBITUARY

George Herbert Barker

George Herbert Barker died in Brisbane on June 25, 1965, aged 85 years. He was a member of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union for nearly half a century. For 34 of these years, from December 1922 to September 1956, he was State Secretary of the Queensland Branch; few have served for such a term. For a long time too he was an active Vice-President and was elected President in 1940/41. It became axiomatic, not only with local enthusiasts but with visitors too, that his bookstore in Brisbane was the focal point for ornithology in Queensland.

Down the years he was a tireless worker not only for the R.A.O.U but for many kindred natural history clubs and the ideals these represented. He put much effort and persistence into the difficult and often unpopular field of conservation, covering all its ramifications. With his wide range of personal contacts he ever sought to have birds not only protected from direct violence, but also provided with suitable living areas such as National Parks and Reserves.

His experience with Scouts, Naturalists' Camps, and his own preference for camping out along the way, rather than under a roof, was a great boon to other members when R.A.O.U. Campouts were being organized. Naturally the Queensland Campouts were rated a great success. Those he organized at Byfield, near Rock-