# Stray Feathers

**A chestnut-backed Wren.**—In my district, Murphy's Creek, Queensland, a chestnut-backed Wren is quite common, although it was only on June 22, 1930, that I discovered the bird. As far as I can find, it is not known, unless it is the Variegated Wren (*Malurus lamberti*), which I doubt, as it has some distinctive markings in which I think it differs from that species. The Wren of which I write inhabits the brushes and dry mountain gullies, in which it resembles *M. lamberti*—also the female is similar to the female of that species, having the same red markings about the eye, which is a noticeable character with the female of *M. lamberti*. The general colouring of the mature male of this chestnut-backed Wren is as follows: Head, neck and cheek patches bright blue, similar to those of the Lovely Wren (*Malurus amabilis*), but the lower neck feathers are shaded a light purple; upper wing and across back rich chestnut; rump, throat, bill and eyes black, with black band over base of neck, which can only be seen when the neck feathers are raised; lower wing, legs and feet brown; a purple spot shows on each shoulder; tail greenish blue; abdomen white.

I have discovered several nests of the Wren, two containing young, and one which had apparently contained eggs, but which, I suspect, had been robbed by a "goanna," as the birds were attacking one of these reptiles near the nest, and from the nest's appearance it seemed as though it had been interfered with. The other nests were old ones. All the nests were placed near the ground in low bushes, or in the case of the last nest found, in brambles at the base of a tree. The last nest was discovered by A. C. Cameron, R.A.O.U., Max Miles and myself on November 26, 1933. It was composed of grass and lined with a few feathers and contained three young. When the opening of the nest was touched the male bird came at once and crept about the ground almost under our hands. Its behaviour was unlike that of any of the other members of the Wren family that I have seen. The bird looked very much like a beautifully-coloured mouse as it drew its tail along the ground. A few minutes later a partly-plumaged young male and a female came to the nest: each of these behaved in a similar manner to that of the adult male. The adult male was photographed by Mr. Cameron, when perched on a twig and not more than two feet from the camera.

On December 4, I again inspected the nest but found that the young had left—they were located not far away and were able to fly quite strongly. The parents were excited and endeavoured to keep the three young birds in the thickest brush. I was pleased to see that the immature male

bird was still with the family, but was rather surprised that the adult male bird showed no resentment at his presence. Only one female was observed.

When the young male bird was seen on November 26, he showed a little chestnut on the upper wing and the blue was showing fairly well on head and cheeks, and black was beginning to show on the throat; but a week later I could see little change in the colouring.

The mature of this chestnut-backed Wren, like the Blue Wren (*M. cyaneus*), appears to retain his bright plumage through the winter months, as I have seen fully-plumaged birds each month of the year.—E. A. R. LORD, R.A.O.U., Murphy's Creek, Qld.

**Devonport Migration Notes** 1933-4. 1933: Male Blue Wren (*Malurus cyaneus*) in moult on February 18. On March 19 a young Pallid Cuckoo (*Cuculus pallidus*) was sitting on overhead wire; quite silent. March 21, Wood-Swallows (*Artamus cyanopterus*) gathering at end of road near beach, previous to migration; had left by March 31. March 24, small party Spine-tail Swifts (*Hirundapus caudacutus*) seen near Mersey Bluff, heading towards east —the only party seen this summer. April 8, majority of the Pipits (*Anthus australis*) had departed, but later (May 10) one or two solitary birds were noted in paddocks. April 13, Welcome Swallows (*Hirundo neoxena*) had left by this date, but a pair stayed the winter, and were repairing their nest under shop-verandah on August 11. April 24, "Summer-birds" (*Coracina novæ-hollandiæ*) last seen. May 15, Male Blue Wren in full colour again. August 14, a Fantailed Cuckoo (*Cacomantis flabelliformis*) was uttering its trill-notes on this date. September 27, first "Summer-bird" was heard to-day. September 30, a Bronze-Cuckoo (*Lamprococcyx plagosus*) was uttering its peculiar ventriloquial calls this morning. (Welcome Swallows had returned by August 26.) December 24, on the way to Emu Bay this morning I noted a number of Dusky Wood-Swallows flying among the small white gums (where the birds build) just west of Firth River.

1934: January 25, Pallid Cuckoo's final call-notes heard this afternoon. The Fantailed Cuckoo has not been heard for the past three weeks. A Butcher-bird (*Cracticus torquatus*) was heard warbling his whisper-song in a wattle-tree near the house during the heat of the afternoon. The same tree has been used by the bird for this subdued song in previous summers. January 29, had a close view of a young Fantailed Cuckoo (fledged this summer) in a dry wattle behind the cottage. Upper surface and head brown; underside whitish with brown mottlings; reddish tinge on upper-breast and throat; under tail-coverts white;

underside of tail-feathers barred brown and white. The young bird sat quietly in the tree for a long time, making no sound. February 1, adult Pallid Cuckoo flying along the road near the beach, quite silently; the adults leave about this time. Two or three young "Pallids" have been seen lately in their beautiful silvery plumage, sitting on fences or overhead wires.—H. STUART DOVE, R.A.O.U., Devonport, Tas., 7/2/34.

**Mutton-birds on Phillip Island.**—A visit was made to Phillip Island, Victoria, during the Easter holidays this year, the principal object of which was to see the "Mutton-birds" (*Puffinus tenuirostris*). It was found that fully 95% of the birds that had bred there had left and it was estimated that by the end of April all the birds would have departed.

The flight feathers of the young appeared to be fully developed in almost all cases of birds examined, the remaining down on the underparts and back giving the young the appearance of being a much larger bird than the adult. The young were being fed inside the burrows—in some instances, outside. In most cases those in the burrows had their heads just inside or outside the entrance ready to receive the food—if any. The first parent birds to arrive came, each night, about 7.30 o'clock, and fed the young on small whitish crustacea. A young bird, held head downwards, oozed a reddish fluid (the well-known Mutton-bird oil). In some cases birds, having been fed, had their heads turned down the burrow.

In great contrast was this scene with that at the end of any November, when the birds return in full numbers for the annual nesting. All then is rush, bustle, and noise, the "swish" of probably half a million wings, with the accompanying noises and excitement of the birds finding their respective homes. At Easter it was almost noiseless—the noise of a pair of wings of an occasional bird flying close to one's head, and the usual gurgling and crooning of the few birds during feeding operations alone breaking the silence. The same conditions obtained both at "The Narrows" and Cape Wollomai.—MISS M. L. WIGAN, R.A.O.U., Toorak, Vic., 30/5/34.

**A Nesting Record of the Glossy Ibis.**—Mr. R. F. Bailey, in referring to the early records of the nesting of the Glossy Ibis (*The Emu*, Vol. xxxiii, 1934, p. 279), makes no reference to the clutch of three eggs in the "H. L. White Collection." National Museum, Melbourne (No. 196A). Originally these eggs were in the possession of S. W. Jackson and the following information is extracted from the *Catalogue of the Jacksonian Oological Collection*, 1907, p. 158.

"The nest was constructed of sticks, placed on a small tree leaning out over a narrow creek. Several others containing eggs were taken in the same locality. Taken by S. Scotney, at Kidnapper Creek, South-West Queensland, on the 13th of October, 1900."

Almost a year previously M. K. H. Bennett had taken eggs (the first nesting record of the species for Australia) at Yandembah Station, Lachlan district, New South Wales, as mentioned by Mr. Bailey in *The Emu*.—K. A. HINDWOOD, R.A.O.U., Willoughby, N.S.W.

**The Cuckoo's Secret.**—Some interesting correspondence is going on in the columns of that high-class weekly, the London *Spectator*, on the ever-green subject of Cuckoos and their ways. The well-known naturalist and bird-photographer, Oliver G. Pike, supports very strongly Edgar Chance's contention that no Cuckoo ever places her egg in a nest, domed or otherwise, with her bill. "In every instance which has been carefully investigated, it has been found that it was possible for the Cuckoos to lay direct into the nest. Many observers forget that, when the Cuckoo lays, the whole action is so rapid that she might be said to project the egg into the nest, and by doing this she is able to lay into domed nests. Competent observers have now watched the Cuckoo lay her egg direct into the nest of the fosterer on over 100 occasions, the fosterers consisting of seven different species. Cuckoos are confirmed egg-thieves, and I have on several occasions watched one steal an egg from a nest and fly off with it in her bill. It is because observers have seen Cuckoos carrying stolen eggs that the old theory of depositing eggs with the bill has held ground for so many years." This is Mr. Pike's opinion, but Capt. Bernard Acworth comes out with an entirely new and astonishing theory, the correctness of which he is prepared to back financially. His idea is that the male Cuckoo mates with the female fosterer, and not with the female of his own species. In this way he explains the close similarity of the markings on Cuckoo's eggs with those of the host-bird, as may be seen in the large collection in the Natural History Museum, South Kensington. The theory also disposes of any difficulty about the introduction of eggs into domed nests, seeing that it is the hostess herself who lays them! To an Australian observer, the idea of a bird the size of a male Fantailed Cuckoo making up to a female *Acanthiza pusilla* savours somewhat strongly of Lewis Carroll.—H. STUART DOVE, R.A.O.U., Devonport, Tas., 16/5/34.

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Particular attention is drawn to Articles 9, 10, 15, 31, 34, and 62, of the Union's Articles of Association, which are printed on the outside back cover of the present issue.

**"Koolides".**—Reading the word "Koolides" in Mr. Iredale's interesting article on Thomas Skottowe (*The Emu*, Vol. XXXIII, page 275), brought back memories of a holiday spent at the Grampians seven years ago. Staying at the same boarding-house was a lady, who, when she heard that I was interested in birds, told me that years ago, when she lived at Port Lincoln, South Australia, hundreds of small grey Kingfishers with long bills used to visit the town. They were called Koolides, and the townspeople used to trap them, keep them in cages, and feed them on meat. I told her that there were no grey Kingfishers in Australia, and I showed her all the birds in Dr. Leach's book. She could not recognize the Koolide amongst them, but persisted that it was a "small grey Kingfisher with a long bill". On returning to Bendigo, I hunted through all my bird books, dictionary and encyclopaedia, with no result. I asked the late Dr. Leach and other ornithologists if they knew the Koolide, but could learn nothing about the mysterious bird. Now, after nearly seven years, this name crops up as the aboriginal name for a Parrakeet. Was my informant's bird "a small grey 'Keet with a long tail"? I feel sure now that the Rock Parrot (*Neophema petrophila*), formally called Rock Parrakeet, is the Port Lincoln Koolide. Its colour is dull enough to be called grey.

For notes on the Rock Parrot see *The Emu*, Vol. IX, page 133, and for a coloured plate see *The Emu*, Vol. XXVII, plate 22.—MARC COHN, R.A.O.U., Bendigo, Vic., 21/4/34.

**Skottowe's "Sparrow".**—I am not surprised that Skottowe's "Sparrow" mystified Mr. Iredale, but there must be some explanation of the mystery. Is it not possible that this "Sparrow" is the Parrot Finch (*Erythrura psittacea*) of the South Sea Islands, and that it was brought to Sydney, and painted by Skottowe from memory after he had seen it in a cage and thought it was an Australian bird? The red on the wing instead of on the rump would be quite an easy mistake when painting from memory.

What do we know of the characters of these early painters? I suggest that some of them were probably not scientific and merely wished to produce something which would sell well, just as some people to-day rush into print after only a short sojourn in any country. The late Freeman, of Stamboul, states, in his book just published, that he saw crocodiles in Gippsland. These were probably monitor lizards.

Skottowe may have noticed how like a Sparrow the Finch was, but not realized that it was the bill that made it so. He made one mistake with the Emu-Wren's tail, and has not drawn that of the Blue Wren in its most usual position. If the "Sparrow" is not the Parrot Finch, then it may be the

Nests of Fairy Martins in the harness room of an old stable.

Photo. by K. A. Hindwood.

Red-browed Finch (*Ægintha temporalis*), which was first described in 1801 as from Sydney. The name "Sparrow" would indicate one of our Finches.

A search through books on aboriginal bird-names may enlighten us as to whether Minyan is their name for a Finch. For coloured plate of the Parrot Finch referred to see *The Emu*, Vol. XXV, plate 11.—MARC COHN, R.A.O.U., Bendigo, Vic., 21/4/34.

**Nesting of Fairy Martins.**—Several unusual nesting sites of the Fairy Martin (*Hylochelidon ariel*) have been recorded in the pages of *The Emu* (see Vol. XXIX, 1930, p. 251; also Vol. XXXI, 1932, p. 286-7). Usually these birds nest in caves or on the sheltered parts of old buildings. At St. Peter's Church, Richmond, some thirty-odd miles west of Sydney, Fairy Martins have nested for many years, and in considerable numbers. More than 100 nests are in occupation during the breeding season—the nesting Martins and the presence of a hive of bees in one of the towers of the church have caused it to be called "the Church of Nests". Aggressive Starlings and noisome Sparrows persistently oust the gentler Martins and take possession of their bottle-shaped nests. Other birds that have been noticed occupying Fairy Martins' nests are Pardalotes (*Pardalotus ornatus*) (North, *Nests and Eggs Austr. Birds.*, Vol. II, 1909, p. 246), and the Little Wood-Swallow (*Artamus minor*) (*The Emu*, Vol. VIII, 1909, p. 187). In this latter instance the spout was missing from the nest used by the Wood-Swallows. Not only do birds occupy Martins' nests for snakes have been found coiled up inside them (see Mathews, *Birds of Austr.*, Vol. VIII, 1920, p. 56; also *The Emu*, Vol. XXXII, 1932, p. 58).

The photograph reproduced on the opposite page shows three nests which were built against the whitewashed wall and ceiling of an old disused harness room on a farm near St. Mary's, west of Sydney. The birds entered the room through the open doorway. When the photograph was taken the nests were almost completed. On a later visit, it was noticed that two of the nests were in occupation, whilst the spout or entrance of the third nest was blocked by the body of an immature bird, which was facing inwards, but dead. Several more nests were then in the room. One cluster of five was built on to the ceiling in such a way as to form a star with the entrances of the nests radiating outwards.

In the neighbourhood of Sydney the number of Fairy Martins to be observed varies somewhat throughout the year. During March and April many birds appear to leave for warmer parts. They return again to breed, sometimes in July, though more generally in August. While some of

the Martins migrate, others remain, not necessarily in their breeding areas—this is especially so if the winter is at all mild. Dr. D'Ombrain quotes (*The Emu*, Vol. XXXI, 1931, p. 123) some interesting notes by Mr. C. Rhodes regarding a large flock of about 1000 birds which, on two occasions, remained throughout the winter months at Abbotsford, about six miles from Sydney. The birds used to cluster about the cooling chamber of a zinc paint plant, not to be cooled, but to enjoy the warmth given off by the structure.

Fairy Martins seem to resemble Welcome Swallows (*Hirundo neoxena*) in their movements: of the latter species there appears to be a small resident population hereabouts with a numerous spring influx of breeding birds from the north.—K. A. HINDWOOD, R.A.O.U., Willoughby, N.S.W.

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# Correspondence

## MARGARET CATCHPOLE.

To the Editor.

Sir—May I thank Professor Cleland for pointing out, in the cause of scientific accuracy, that Margaret Catchpole's letter from which I quoted, is a "fake"; produced by her biographer entirely from his imagination, or from documents no longer in existence. Although what I am about to say in no way affects the main issue, namely the letter from which I took extracts in all good faith, it is sad to learn that a heroine, still enshrined in the hearts of Ipswich people, was a woman "who drifted through life".

It is curious that her after-life in Australia should have so completely belied her youth in England, for, the principal events of her life until she went to Australia prove her to have been a determined character, capable of making the most of her opportunities; witness her rescue of a member of the Cobbold family and her bold escape with her lover (in the course of his story the narrator claims that she three times saved the life of members of the Cobbold family).

Very few noted characters of the past appear to stand up to the searching light of modern critical research and apparently Margaret Catchpole must join the list of failures. Those of us, however, who have lived in her neighbourhood, would wish to believe that although illiterate, she possessed true naturalist gifts, fostered in her childhood days on the beautiful Orwell River amongst the fascinating Suffolk birds: and therefore Cobbold may have based his "faked" letters on some written home to Dr. Stebbings and others. Perhaps in the future fresh light may be shed upon the subject.—Yours etc.,

PERRINE MONCRIEFF.