

Stray Feathers

Feeding of the Swamp-Hen.—Several members have written me concerning the habit of this bird of raising its foot off the ground and thus conveying food to its bill. Mr. Gilbert Whitley drew my attention, on May 1, to observations of the early naturalists on the now-extinct White Gallinule of Lord Howe Island—see *Aust. Mus. Mag.*, vol. VI, pt. 9, 1938, p. 291. As Blackburn's account, there referred to, will have been published in the *Emu* for July, 1940, before this note appears, I am not repeating it here.

In *The Victorian Naturalist*, vol. XXXVI, p. 163, there is a note referring to "a Bald-Coot in the Botanic Gardens, holding biscuits in its toes and eating them as a Cockatoo would do." Another reference occurs in vol. XLII, p. 194.

Mr. N. H. E. McDonald, of Caldervale Station, Charleville, Queensland, under date May 5, 1940, wrote me as follows:

"I read with great interest the article on *Porphyrio melanotus* in the April *Emu*, especially with regard to the question of the bird's conveying food to its bill by using one of its feet. I have twice observed the habit—only twice during numerous occasions spent stalking through the reed-beds of some of the swamps along the Murray River and tributaries.

"The first occasion was in March, 1935, on Spink's swamp, about 18 miles north of Swan Hill, Victoria. In this instance the bird, which I assumed was a male on account of its bright plumage and large size, was standing upon a large branch of a dead tree that had fallen into the water. While the bird was busy eating some aquatic plant, which it held up in its right foot, it did not appear to be unduly off its balance, as might be expected. The vegetable matter, which the bird appeared to be relishing, was held near the base of the first and second toes, which, by the way, were not clenched, but were rather held fairly stiffly, somewhat after the manner in which a person holds a cigarette holder between index and second fingers.

"On the second occasion I was unable to approach closely to the bird observed to be feeding in similar manner, because of the open nature of the swamp—a different one—there being little cover, and I cannot give a detailed description of the event. Members are doubtless aware that many, in fact most, birds, use their feet in feeding more than is generally supposed, the feet playing an important part in feeding. The Chough, for example, uses its foot to hold down any hard lumps of food, whilst the arched bill is used as a 'pick-axe'."

From Mrs. Blanche E. Miller, of St. Kilda, Victoria, comes this note—on May 21:

"Until a query was raised by you, in the April *Emu*, as to the frequency of the habit of the Eastern Swamp-hen of conveying food to its bill with its foot, I had not given the matter any consideration. My experiences of the feeding habits of the species were limited to 'tame-wild' birds eating crusts, etc., by holding the food firmly on the ground with one foot, and reaching down with the bill to eat it.

"As recently as May 19, 1940, however, at Werribee, whilst I was watching a Brown Bittern, the field glasses 'picked up' an Eastern Swamp-hen actually conveying food in the manner which was questioned in your article. The food was not lifted in parrot fashion, however, but the action was more that the foot and bill met half-way.

At the time two birds were feeding on short, green water-weeds growing in a small freshet that trickled towards the river. Both were in excellent plumage. The larger bird scratched the weeds vigorously, and lifted the foot—usually the left one—towards the bill. The weeds appeared to be wedged, rather than held, between the toes. The other bird pecked the weeds, but neither scratched nor lifted them. More than half an hour later, both were still feeding, each in its own fashion."

A third letter was sent to me by Mr. Eric H. Sedgwick, of Wellard, Western Australia, on May 9, 1940. It reads:

"Among my field notes I find the following: '9th May, 1937 (Peel Estate). To-day I spent some time watching three Swamp-hens among the rushes bordering the eastern shore of White Lake. I heard, but did not see, a fourth bird. The birds I saw appeared to have red or reddish legs. They were wading in the shallows, and from time to time one would draw up a submerged rush with one foot, and, holding it so poised, draw its bill along it.'

"This note refers to a habit which may be akin to the peculiar feeding habit of Swamp-hens discussed by you in your paper 'Photography in the Swamps: The Eastern Swamp-hen' (*Emu*, vol. XXXIX, p. 290). Unfortunately, I failed to realize that the act was unusual for a bird of this type, and consequently the note quoted above, written without any special object in view, lacks detail which it might otherwise have possessed."

This last record would refer to *Porphyrio bellus*.—C. E. BRYANT, Melbourne, Vic., 31/5/40.

Bird Movements.—The following bird movements were noted at Wellard, near Rockingham, W.A., during the year ending December 31, 1939.

The Pallid Cuckoo (*Cuculus pallidus*) arrived during the first week in June. No adults were noted after December 7, 1939. The Golden Bronze-Cuckoo (*Lamprococcyx plagosus*) arrived during the first week in August. Apparently few remained until the end of the year. The Fantailed Cuckoo (*Cacomantis flabelliformis*) was seen only once—in June.

Sacred Kingfishers (*Halcyon sanctus*) departed in mid-January and returned during the last week of September. Rainbow-birds (*Merops ornatus*) departed in mid-January and returned during the first week in October.

There was no very definite movement of either the Welcome Swallow (*Hirundo neoxena*) or the Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike (*Coracina novæ-hollandiæ*).

The Purple-crowned Lorikeet (*Glossopsitta porphyrocephala*) was plentiful during February and March when the marri trees were flowering, but relatively scarce during November, when an influx (coinciding with the flowering of the jarrahs and paper-barks) may usually be expected.

Red Wattle-birds (*Anthochaera carunculata*) were scarce during February, but increased in number during March until, by the beginning of April, numbers were normal.

The occurrence of waders here seems to depend upon habitat conditions. Greenshanks were present until as late

as June 6, when I saw eleven at one place. Red-capped Dotterels are more plentiful here in summer, when the lakes are low, than in winter, when they are confined to the sea beaches.—ERIC H. SEDGWICK, Wellard, W.A., 10/2/40.

Birds of Magnetic Island, Qld.—In August, 1939, I spent a week on this island, which lies seven miles east from Townsville. It has an area of nineteen square miles and a circumference of twenty-two miles. The centre culminates in a peak 1,680 feet high. From it rocky spurs radiate to the ocean, and the valleys between terminate in coastal plains flanked by sandy beaches. The soil in the valleys is largely derived from the denudation of the granite, which appears to be the prevailing rock, enriched by the leaf mould of centuries. There are no permanent streams, but there are channels which bear signs of carrying a good volume of water in the rainy season. On the east side of the island, at Horseshoe Bay, the coastal plain was sufficiently large for seventeen tropical fruit farms to be established. On that part of the island there was a fresh-water lagoon, but on occasions that has disappeared.

The island, I was informed, was a bird sanctuary. If the information was not correct, the birds enjoyed more protection there than in most sanctuaries in New South Wales, because of the jealous regard of the inhabitants. I noticed at one guest house the Doves (Peaceful, Diamond and Bar-shouldered) feeding from the hand of the lady who presided over the establishment. She informed me it was a daily occurrence. In Townsville I found the same feeling. In one street of the city I saw a flock of twenty-two Peaceful Doves being fed by taxi-drivers.

One resident informed me that he had never seen the Scrub-Fowl on the island, but had seen remains of old nests.

The Peaceful Dove (*Geopelia placida*) was very numerous, and, although several Diamond Doves (*G. cuneata*) were observed, that species was not so numerous as the Peaceful form. The Bar-shouldered Dove (*G. humeralis*) was fairly plentiful. A pair of Green-winged Pigeons (*Chalcophaps chrysochlora*) occasionally visited the establishment but were easily disturbed. A few Brown Pigeons (*Macropygia phasianella*) were seen.

The Dusky Moor-hen (*Gallinula tenebrosa*) was present on the swamp near Horseshoe Bay, and nightly the calls of numerous Stone-Plovers (*Burhinus magnirostris*) were heard. As the fox is unknown this latter bird should be safe from extinction. A pair of Jabirus (*Xenorhynchus asiaticus*) was at the lagoon near Horseshoe Bay. I was told that they were always to be seen there except on the rare occasions when the water in the lagoon dries out.

Birds of prey were the Wedge-tailed Eagle (*Uroaëtus*

audax), a pair being seen flying around the central peak; the Red-backed Sea-Eagle (*Haliastur indus*), several of which extremely handsome birds were seen in the air and on rocks near the sea-shore; and the Boobook Owl (*Ninox boobook*). This last bird was not seen but its cry was frequently heard at night in the scrub adjacent to Arcadia Bay.

A flock of about sixty White Cockatoos (*Kakatoë galerita*) was seen on the island, and Rainbow Lorikeets (*Trichoglossus moluccanus*) were numerous. At Horseshoe Bay I saw a pair of green Parrots about the size of, and in shape like, immature "Crimson-wings." Mrs. Keeler, a resident of Horseshoe Bay, informed me that they were only occasional visitors and that but few of them were ever seen. The form was known on the island as the Green Leek, but I was not able to identify it.

Two Dollar-birds (*Eurystomus orientalis*) were seen, and two species of Kingfishers were noted—the Blue-winged Kookaburra (*Dacelo leachi*), an inhabitant of the lowlands; and the Sacred Kingfisher (*Halcyon sanctus*), of which several were noted. Rainbow birds (*Merops ornatus*) were by no means rare. There were plenty of sandy banks for nesting places and, as there were no bee-keepers on the island, the birds were not molested.

Two or three Koels (*Eudynamis orientalis*) were observed and several Swamp-Pheasants (*Centropus phasianinus*) were noted at Horseshoe Bay on low-lying land. They were very tame.

Several Welcome Swallows (*Hirundo neoxena*) and the following flycatchers were observed: Leaden Flycatcher (*Myiagra rubecula*), Rufous Fantail (*Rhipidura rufifrons*), Spectacled Flycatcher (*Monarcha trivirgata*), and one which was either the Black-faced Flycatcher (*M. melanopsis*) or the Pearly Flycatcher* (*M. canescens*).

The Rufous Whistler (*Pachycephala rufiventris*) was noted along the road from Arcadia Bay to Horseshoe Bay. Magpie-Larks (*Grallina cyanoleuca*) were seen near the bed of a stream that flows into the former bay. The Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike (*Coracina novæ-hollandiæ*) was one of the most common birds on the island. Both Figbirds were there. The Southern form (*Sphecotheres vieilloti*) was noted in the open scrubs on the coastal plain, and two or three Yellow Figbirds (*S. flaviventris*) were seen in the same habitat as their congener.

A pair of Mistletoe-birds (*Dicæum hirundinaceum*) was seen on a tree growing amidst rocks close to the shore. The Yellow-breasted Sun-bird (*Cyrtostomus frenatus*) was

*The Pearly Flycatcher is confined to a small area north of the Claudie River.—ED.



Western Spinebill (male) sheltering young from the sun.

Photo. by S. R. White.

common and extremely tame and one could not travel on any road without encountering it. It was my first acquaintance with the species.

There were two Honeyeaters—the Dusky (*Myzomela obscura*), which was by no means rare; and the Noisy Friar-bird (*Philemon corniculatus*), which was certainly one of the most numerous birds on the island. There were also two Finches—the Red-browed Firetail (*Ægitha temporalis*), noted as rare, and the Double-bar Finch (*Steganopleura bichenovii*), a recent arrival which appears to be increasing.

The list is completed by the Olive-backed Oriole (*Oriolus sagittatus*), of which three or four were seen; the Pied Currawong (*Strepera graculina*), the most numerous bird on the island; and the Pied Butcher-bird (*Cracticus nigrogularis*), which was also exceedingly numerous.

The dryness of the season would account for the paucity of freshwater birds. I was informed, however, that numerous ducks came from the mainland to feed at night in a bay on the west side of the island. I saw some form of *Acanthiza* but was unable to distinguish the species. Few sea-birds were seen at the time of my visit and those were not close enough to make identification certain. As practically the only tracks were around the island close to the shore it would take more time than I had at my disposal to cover the whole area and there are probably more birds there than I have listed. I am indebted to Miss Coleman, of Arcadia Bay, a great protector of the bird life, for assistance in preparing this list.—W. J. ENWRIGHT, West Maitland, N.S.W., 27/2/40.

Note on the Western Spinebill.—Western Spinebills (*Acanthorhynchus superciliosus*) are particularly numerous in King's Park, Perth, and the manner in which they defend their territorial rights is very marked. During the latter part of 1939 I had several pairs under observation in that area. They could always be found in their own apparent, respective territories, and, whilst tolerant of other birds such as Silvereyes (*Zosterops australasiæ*), were definitely aggressive at any encroachment on the part of other Spinebills. The flower-spikes of the blackboy (*Xanthorrhœa*) appeared to be greatly favoured by them. As nests suitable for photographing were not located in King's Park, activities were transferred in early November to the extensive areas of brush and banksia country which still remain intact in the vicinity of Applecross on the other side of the

Swan estuary. Photographs were obtained without difficulty. Whilst the male was, in this instance, distinctly the bolder parent, both shared in food-gathering and feeding the nestlings. Many of the insects fed to the young were captured by the parents on the wing.—S. R. WHITE, Perth, W.A., 20/5/40.

Our member Mr. L. Macmillan, who is at present in south-west Queensland, carrying out an ecological survey for the American Museum of Natural History, would be pleased to hear from members residing along the eastern coast of Australia, or inland, south of lat. 27°S., who keep a continuous diary of bird events. He desires data relative to dates when the following species, viz. *Petroica goodenovii*, *Artamus leucorhynchus*, *Cinclorhamphus mathewsi* and *C. cruralis*, have been noted, also particulars of numerical strength and noticeable behaviour or displays, especially flocking. The dates on which the birds were last seen and of appreciable decrease in numbers are of importance. All reports will be of interest if of reasonably continuous recording, although notes made only at week-ends would hardly be of value, as the gaps would be too great. Information should be sent care of the Hon. Editor.

Proceedings of Council

Since the last report, the following have been included in matters dealt with by the Council:—

Following the appointment of a sub-committee for the purpose, an illustrated folder has been prepared with the object of interesting the public in birds and thus obtaining more members. Names of prospective members should be sent to the Hon. General Secretary, who will arrange for folders to be sent to them.

As reported previously, it was decided not to hold an official camp-out in conjunction with the annual meeting to be held in Melbourne on October 15: unofficial outings may be arranged on the spot as opportunity offers.

Following representations made at the request of members to the Trustees of the National Museum, Melbourne, through the Director, in respect of the H. L. White collection of skins, it was found impossible to arrange for the inter-Museum loan of skins from the collection for the use of workers in other States. It was finally resolved "That the Council reluctantly decides that no further action be taken for the present, as it appears that the Trustees are in no way compellable."

The R.A.O.U. will co-operate with the Bird Observers Club and the Leach Memorial Club in a bird-watching project in the Altona district (Vic.).

Preparations are being made for the submission of a request to the Victorian Government to extend the Wyperfeld (Mallee) National Park towards the South Australian border.