

Stray Feathers

Waders around Port Phillip Bay.—Every spring brings to the shores of Port Phillip Bay great flocks of waders and the interest quickens when one of the rarer species makes an appearance. Strolling along the shore at Fishermen's Bend, at Altona, or farther afield, one is never sure what birds will appear next amongst the flocks of the more common waders such as Sharp-tailed Sandpipers (*Erolia acuminata*), Little Stints (*Erolia ruficollis*) and Red-capped Dotterels (*Charadrius ruficapillus*).

In September, 1943, at Fishermen's Bend, the Curlew-Sandpiper (*Erolia testacea*) was the predominant wader, and the White-headed Stilt (*Himantopus leucocephalus*) made its first appearance since 1938. A pair of these birds bred at the Bend towards the end of the year.

In October, at Altona one Sunday afternoon, a pair of Pied Oyster-catchers was seen contentedly feeding with the Silver Gulls in the shallows. A week later Lawrence Haines, of Sydney, spent a day with me at Altona. We noted a Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*) and a Sea Curlew (*Numenius cyanopus*), and in the afternoon saw eight Bartailed Godwits (*Limosa lapponica*) feeding in the tidal mud at Fishermen's Bend, with flocks of Stints, Sandpipers and Golden Plover (*Pluvialis dominicus*). I might add that one of our American friends noted a Turnstone at Fishermen's Bend towards the end of the year.

In November, Jack Jones and I visited the marsh where last year we had seen the Wood-Sandpiper (*Tringa glareola*). The marsh did not let us down: in fact, it exceeded our expectations. We soon noted a large flock of Red-necked Avocets (*Recurvirostra novaehollandiae*) and White-headed Stilts (*Himantopus leucocephalus*) feeding in the shallows. Closer investigation proved that some of the flock were Banded Stilts (*Cladorhynchus leucocephalus*). A careful count revealed 77 of these interesting and unusual visitors to this part of Victoria. Red-kneed Dotterels (*Erythrogonyx cinctus*) were about, but not in great numbers—approximately 15 pairs. Only three Greenshanks (*Tringa nebularia*) were noted. On a further visit to the area, in December (with C. E. Bryant), we recorded a dozen Little Greenshanks (*Tringa stagnatilis*). The Avocets and Banded Stilts were still there.

I have received from Jones a comment on the Little Greenshank. He writes: "I spent several hours at the swamp on January 1 last, and, while closely observing a mixed flock of White-headed Stilts and Little Greenshanks, was rather struck by the impression that the Little Greenshank in the field looks very much like a small Stilt. Such an impression is due to the Little Greenshank having a generally white appearance from a medium distance away, with the greyish-

brown wings offering a fairly strong contrast in the way that the black wings of the Stilt contrast with its white body; also to the fact that the Little Greenshank has particularly long legs for a bird of its body size, as with the Stilt. The Little Greenshank, however, carries its body more erect than the practically horizontal position usual to the Stilt. Ten Little Greenshanks were seen by me that day and with care were closely approached on several occasions."—ROY WHEELER, Windsor, Vic., 28/2/44.

Little Grass-birds.—I have been interested for some time in a group of Little Grass-birds (*Megalurus gramineus*), which I located on a small island in Port Sorell Inlet, about twelve miles east of Devonport, in 1942. The island, known locally as Penguin Island, is a typical coastal island, densely covered with tussocks, coarse grass, thistles, and low shrubs, with an area at high tide of about half an acre.

On my first few visits to Penguin Island, I had great difficulty in getting even a glimpse of these elusive small birds, though I could hear their plaintive calls around me. Finally, I found the best plan was to choose a position where I had a clear view under one or two shrubs and to lie prone waiting (sometimes half an hour) for a bird to appear in that particular spot. In that way I had some prolonged close-up views of the birds quietly foraging among the debris on the ground.

In 1942 I found two disused nests, indicating that the species breeds on the island, and again, on October 30, 1943, a nest which had just been vacated. While I examined this nest, a parent bird behaved very aggressively, so I judged there were young concealed not far away. The species is evidently stationary on the island. I found it there in January, March and August to December, 1943, and again in May, 1944. There are obvious difficulties in determining the size of the colony, but, from various indications, I would make a tentative estimate of about ten birds.

Penguin Island is separated from a smaller island to the south by a narrow channel. The smaller island has little cover. Both islands are roughly equidistant a third of a mile from the eastern and western shores of the Inlet. Inland from the region of the islands, the western shore makes a wide sweep to the east, and from that direction both islands can be reached on foot at low tide, the small island dry-shod, Penguin Island by wading the narrow channel separating the two. The distance from the high tide mark to Penguin Island by this route is about half a mile.

Penguin Island is well known locally as a breeding place for Little Penguins (*Eudyptula minor*), and both islands are excellent resorts for waders and shore birds generally.

But except for small visiting flocks of Goldfinches (*Carduelis carduelis*), and preying Swamp-Hawks (*Circus approximans*) and Brown Hawks (*Falco berigora*), the Little Grass-birds are the only land birds I have met with on either island. After discovering Little Grass-birds on Penguin Island, I fully expected, sooner or later, to find the species on the neighbouring shores of the Inlet where there are very suitable habitats. However, after many weeks spent in the locality during the last two years, I have failed to do so. Throughout the observations I have been intrigued by the occurrence of the species on Penguin Island and its obvious rarity, or possible absence, in similar habitats nearby. Indeed, the only other record I have for the species in the Devonport district is a very doubtful one from a place many miles distant from Port Sorell. Presumably, a few hundred yards of water or sand would not be a very serious barrier even to birds as fond of cover as this species. It is possible, of course, that a small party has become temporarily isolated in favourable conditions. However, I think a good deal of further investigation is necessary before any theory of isolation can be seriously entertained.—C. C. LAWRENCE, Devonport, Tas., 24/5/44.

Choosing the Nest Site.—In a previous issue (*Emu*, vol. XLI, p. 162) I described the behaviour of a male Spotted Pardalote (*Pardalotus punctatus*), which appeared to be inviting the female to inspect a nesting hole in a bank. A few days later I noticed the birds carrying material to the hole, and eventually a family was reared successfully.

Similar behaviour was observed last October in a bush-house at my home. The side beds are supported by a brick wall about 2 feet 6 inches high and the centre bed is surrounded by a wall of about the same height. At intervals in the sides an opening has been left in the bricks for pendulous plants, and I noticed that soil had been scratched out of one into a little pile on the floor. Later, I heard a familiar call and soon a male Spotted Pardalote—as dainty and beautiful a bird as one could wish to see—was cocking an eye at me from the edge of a flower-pot. Deciding I was harmless, he flew to one of the openings and, after tunnelling for a few seconds, repeated a little ‘clucking’ note rapidly. The female then appeared and when the male flew out she made a quick inspection of the site. This behaviour was repeated several times in a few days, during which excavations were made in five of the openings. Whether the female disapproved of the soft soil, or whether both birds sensed instinctively that the risk of interference was too great, I do not know, but, to my disappointment, all the sites were rejected and the birds disappeared. I think these incidents furnish definite evidence that the male Spotted Pardalote

takes a very active part in seeking and, perhaps, choosing the nesting site, and has a special call note associated with this objective.

The behaviour of a Willie Wagtail (*Rhipidura leucophrys*) early this year is also worthy of record. Male and female were building a nest at Beecroft on an overhead wire of the electric railway, the site being only a foot or eighteen inches above the funnel of the railway engines that passed. In the early stage one of them was adding material when I noticed the other spreading its wings over a similar site on an opposite wire—the platform is an island one—and sustaining a subdued chatter.

Mr. K. A. Hindwood informs me that on one occasion he observed a female Leaden Flycatcher (*Myiagra rubecula*) fly to a dead branch, under a living one, and squat on it. Shortly afterwards the male squatted on the same branch in the same place. A week later the birds were building on the spot. On another occasion Mr. Hindwood observed a male Leaden Flycatcher calling on a dead branch. It left the branch and flew to a sapling. After an interval of about 45 minutes the male bird again visited the same spot on the dead limb and called, being answered by the female. The male again squatted on the limb and sometimes touched it with its bill. There was no sign of cobwebs or nesting material on the branch, but the birds began to build the following day.

The foregoing incidents occurred within a hundred yards of each other at Roseville, Middle Harbour, Sydney. As the nest of the Wagtails was under construction it seems improbable that the squatting bird was trying to divert the attention of its mate to another similar site. Its behaviour, no doubt, was induced by strong emotion and had value as a stimulus to nest-building.—N. L. ROBERTS, Beecroft, N.S.W., 22/2/44.

Lyrebird Display.—On Sunday, February 13, about 9.30 A.M., I witnessed an unusual display by Lyrebirds in the north-eastern portion of Sherbrooke Forest. Two male adult birds were feeding near me when a chestnut-throated juvenile male, with crest erect, quickly joined the two stationary birds. Soon afterwards one of the adults moved to a near mound and gave good song (v. 5), display and dance, before retiring. The second adult now hastened to the same mound and gave a corresponding performance. I noted two plain feathers among this bird's filamentaries. The juvenile now moved in to within four feet from the mound and started to display. Not satisfied, he too got on the mound—for a joint display. Soon the birds clashed. The young one hopped off, but, evidently not content, he got on again. The birds took opposite sides of the mound and

followed around once in display before meeting again in mid-round. The older bird gave up and left while the juvenile continued with song (v. 3), display and some very energetic dancing, before hurrying away. Later I could see his white upturned tail in display on the forest floor.

Before dawn that day I had entered the forest to check up on regional and seasonal roosting places. Day was breaking when the first song came down faultlessly on the crisp air. One bird I noted planed from tree to tree, singing in each before settling on a branch twenty feet overhead. The distance travelled was fully one hundred yards. He preened, then sang, and performed a 'dummy dance' ere descending to breakfast.

On more sustained aerial travel, body and tail are 'streamlined' whilst the two appending central tail feathers are suspended under the body. One-third of the length from the tips is curved, nearly semi-circular, towards the objective in travel.—ALEX. GRAY, Bentleigh, Vic., 14/4/44.

Reviews

Birds—and the European Situation.—There may be some who would cavil at the inclusion of a review of *The Incredible Year*, by A. H. Chisholm, Angus & Robertson Ltd., 1944, in this journal, but the fact that not only is the author a prominent member, but that, like the coloured weft that patterns a fabric, a 'streak' of ornithology runs through it, is the justification. It is a volume that the bird-lover would class as a contribution to pleasant books about birds in green places, and which the man who prefers books of travel would place in that category. An inquisitive (in the sense of enquiring and recording) Australian goes abroad and gives us his impressions of a fomenting continent at a tense time. His 'pryings' are as exhaustive as those of that Hugh Miller of whom he writes, exploring the Bass Rock and "wandering all over the island and meditating upon each article, from cannon-ball to pipe-bowl, that meets his roving eye."

Impressions of dictators and princes, of politicians and historic towns, we merely mention to mark that they are included. Like the author we look (as he is always looking and listening) for birds—and find them. They were there, in England, Scotland and continental Europe, leavening the ominous atmosphere of that incredible year. And they break through the more historical—geographical—biographical—political—topical parts of this book in the same way—from the sublime in the cherished memory of "the Dartford warbler, his breast illumined by a shaft of sunlight, singing bravely amid the flowering furze," to the ridiculous in the brewery employee who mistook the author's statement that he was looking for a dipper, along a likely stream for that curious bird, for a too eager acceptance of his invitation to sample the local bitter.—C.E.B.

Pacific Waders—No. 1248 *American Museum Novitates* is 'Northern Shore Birds in the Pacific,' by Eleanor Herrick Stickney. The winter ranges in Polynesia of seven species are discussed, the Golden Plover being the only one of the three circumpolar species which is common throughout. What factor prevents birds from overshooting the mark