

Stray Feathers

Strange Behaviour of a Cuckoo.—On October 23, 1948, a party consisting mainly of members of the R.A.O.U. and Field Naturalists Club of Victoria visited the late Mr. V. R. Davey's bird sanctuary at Toolern Vale, Victoria. Six of the company had the good fortune to witness, at very close range, a most interesting incident. A nest of the Yellow-tailed Thornbill (*Acanthiza chrysorrhoa*) was found which contained eggs, but no attempt was made to examine them. It was the usual type of domed nest, placed about seven feet from the ground in a young and bushy yellow box tree (*Eucalyptus leucoxylon*).

Just as we were about to leave the spot a Golden Bronze-Cuckoo (*Lamprococcys plagosus*) suddenly made its appearance. It was flying among some trees nearby and darting about in a seemingly agitated manner until, finally, it alighted on the nesting tree on the side farthest away from the onlookers. Then, to our amazement, it approached quickly and boldly through the thick foliage to where the nest was hanging. It clung by its feet to the lower part of the nest and rapidly searched for and found the entrance, into which it thrust itself, leaving only the end of the tail exposed. In a split second it withdrew itself backward from the nest with the egg of the Thornbill in its bill. This it cast to the ground. A second time it plunged into the nest and repeated the act, except that the second egg thrown out proved, on our investigating it, to be that of its own species. The Cuckoo then flew away.

The whole occurrence occupied only a few seconds. Upon examination of the eggs as they lay upon the ground, both were found to have been in an advanced state of incubation, so that they would certainly have been hatched out in two days, or perhaps sooner. The bronze egg of the Cuckoo was seen to be completely broken in two as it fell but the egg of the Thornbill was only dented on each side from the pressure of the Cuckoo's beak. The embryo Cuckoo was full of movement but the Thornbill's egg was not quite so far advanced. As a matter of interest, both eggs have been preserved.

After the raid we again felt inside the nest, which then proved to be empty. Perhaps the strangest feature of this incident, was the way in which the Cuckoo completely disregarded the presence of the humans, some of whom were standing within three feet of it. Apparently this brightly-plumaged little bird was so obsessed by its work of destruction that nothing else mattered. While it was in the nest, I could quite easily have reached up and placed my hand over the nest-entrance and made a prisoner of the bird. The Thornbills did not appear during the episode.

A few of us visited the scene a week later and found, as expected, that the nest had been deserted, although the Thornbills were still in the vicinity. From what we saw, it seems certain that this species of Cuckoo can force itself sufficiently far into the nest of the particular species of Thornbill to be able to deposit its egg therein in the ordinary way. It seems evident that the Cuckoo knew of this nest, and suddenly decided to commit this act of destruction. When the Cuckoo first arrived at the nest, we had expectation of seeing it depositing its own egg therein. Instead, we were confronted with something entirely different but equally astonishing.

The reason for such actions on the part of the Cuckoo can scarcely be conjectured. They seem to run contrary to the usual methods employed by cuckoos for the purpose of propagating their race. It would be interesting to know whether any other observer has had a similar experience or has grounds for suspecting cuckoos as marauders of nests of birds which they usually 'parasitize'. Do cuckoos, for example, bear any responsibility for the damage sometimes done to the rear portions of certain domed nests?

Kookaburras and certain other carnivorous birds usually get the blame for ravaging both the domed and open nests of the smaller species, but in view of this incident, it would seem that cuckoos also may now be 'suspect'. I have at times found the deserted nests of the above-mentioned species of thornbill, also those of *Acanthiza pusilla* and *A. lineata*, with the eggs on the ground beneath, but have never suspected a cuckoo to be the vandal.—A. S. CHALK, Melbourne, Vic., 18/6/49.

Wrens at the Murchison.—With reference to the controversy concerning the identity of the wren (*Malurus*) seen during the R.A.O.U. camp at the mouth of the Murchison River last year (1948), it will interest members to know that on a recent visit to that locality I collected one specimen (male) of *Malurus lamberti* = *assimilis*, and three specimens (all males) of *Malurus pulcherrimus*. These skins are now in the study collection of the W.A. Museum; it would therefore seem that both species are present at that locality, and that all those taking part in the discussion were probably correct.—KEN. BULLER, Perth, W.A., 28/7/49.

Sea-birds near Land after Storm.—On August 6, 1949, after a night of gales lashing the southern coast and with the wind gradually abating and seas running high, I observed many Black-browed Albatrosses (*Diomedea melanophris*) from the Bluff, Barwon Heads, Victoria. Also present, for most of the day, were the Giant Petrel (*Macronectes giganteus*), Australian Gannet (*Sula serrator*) and Shearwaters (*Puffinus tenuirostris*). Most birds came close

enough inshore during the day to enable one to identify them without glasses.—HAROLD E. TARR, Middle Park, Vic., 14/8/49.

Willie Wagtail in Tasmania.—The Willie Wagtail (*Rhipidura leucophrys*) is usually stated to be of accidental occurrence in Tasmania, and as pointed out by Michael Sharland in his *Tasmanian Birds* (1945), rarely crosses Bass Strait from the mainland. While travelling by bus from Beauty Point to Launceston on September 9, 1949, I observed a single bird flying over an open grassy paddock. It settled on a fence wire, swaying its large tail and body from side to side in typical Wagtail manner. Though able to note the dark upper breast, distinguishing it immediately from the Restless Flycatcher (*Seisura inquieta*), I was unable to see the white eyebrow from the moving bus. However the bird's colour pattern, size, movements and habitat can leave little doubt that it was of this species, with which I had recently hitherto become very familiar.—J. M. CUNNINGHAM, Masterton, N.Z., 31/10/49.

Willie Wagtail in Tasmania.—I have read the foregoing note of Mr. Cunningham's, and, whilst not doubting its correctness, I would mention that two further reports about the presence of the Willie Wagtail in Tasmania were received from northern Tasmania about the same time, though the localities were not the same. These two reports came from the North-West Coast. In each instance, after due investigation, it seemed that the observers had confused the bird with the Satin Flycatcher (*Myiagra cyanoleuca*). Incidentally, the Restless Flycatcher mentioned by Mr. Cunningham does not occur in Tasmania.—MICHAEL SHARLAND, Hobart, Tas., 14/11/49.

Seasonal Prevalence of Owls around Melbourne.—On eight different occasions recently I have observed the Boobook Owl (*Ninox boobook*) in Melbourne suburbs. Under one roosting tree was found the skeleton of a House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*).

On May 8, 1949, a male Masked Owl (*Tyto novæ-hollandiæ*) was noted in a thick blackwood tree at Bundoora. On June 5, I observed three Barn Owls (*Tyto alba*) and found two dead specimens at Bundoora. At 5.30 p.m. on June 12, I noted a bird fly on to the ground and alight on a fence post with a mouse in its talons. The next day I noted one bird in an open pepper-tree about eight feet from the ground. On July 29, I noted two birds in Katani Gardens, St. Kilda. On July 31, in company with F. A. Watts and R. Ferguson, at Bundoora, I found two dead specimens and flushed eight different birds during the day. With two exceptions they were camped in very thickly foliated trees.

The last bird observed was flushed from amongst the tussocks in a swamp. There appears to be a plague of rats and mice in this locality which is probably the food supply of these birds.

In early June, 1949, Mr. R. Littlejohns flushed a Barn Owl from some tussocks near a swamp at Fishermen's Bend. On June 4, Mr. F. Smith also flushed a bird there. As this locality is also teeming with rats and mice it seems probable these birds may be feeding during the day and not camping in the tussocks as was surmised. No pellets were located in any tussock incident.—HAROLD E. TARR, Middle Park, Vic., 14/8/49.

Reviews

Hill Birds of India.—Except for the purely parochial ornithologist, a popular, well-illustrated handbook on 'foreign' birds never fails to stimulate interest. It might be based upon the birds of a country, region or specialized habitat, and it might deal exhaustively or selectively with the subject. In the latter category is *Indian Hill Birds*, by Salim Ali (Oxford University Press, 1949, pp. i-ii and 1-188). Approximately 300 species are dealt with, these being "the most likely to catch the eye or the ear of the hot-weather visitor to the hill-stations of India." Though it refers primarily to the Himalayan region, some hill-birds of Peninsular India and Ceylon are included.

The present volume is an ideal companion book to the same author's *The Book of Indian Birds* (1941 and subsequent editions), which deals mainly with the common lowland species. The general arrangement of both books is the same: a 'moderate' treatment of genera and species is adopted and a small percentage of forms, as well as about a dozen species illustrated, are peculiar to both volumes. As would be expected, that heterogeneous group, the Timaliidae, is well represented. The eighteen illustrated (out of twenty-five described) emphasizes the diversity of the 'babbler' assemblage. For instance, upon appearance one would readily assume that the Red-winged Shrike-Babbler (*Pteruthius erythropterus*) was a typical member of the Laniidae. There are but five species, of those dealt with, found in both the Indian hills and Australia—the two Fantail-Warblers (*Cisticola*), Peregrine Falcon, and *Caprimulgus macrourus* and *Cuculus optatus*, and in *Chibia* and *Chalcophaps* the Indian and Australian representatives are sometimes considered conspecific.

Mention must be made of the excellent colour-plates, specially painted by G. M. Henry, who is well-remembered for his work in the album of *The Birds of Ceylon*. A contour map, a helpful recognition table and a comprehensive distribution guide are included.

One looks forward to more publications by this enthusiast^a author, who has been described as "one of those fortunate people who spends all his time indulging his hobby—the watching and study of Indian birds."—A.R.M.

Cuckoo-Shrike Taxonomics.—The genus *Coracina* is well represented in Australia. It reaches its greatest diversity in the Indo-Malayan region, and extends throughout southern Asia and Africa. S. Dillon Ripley reviewed the Indo-Australian forms of the genus in 1941 (*Emu*, vol. 41, p. 312), and a further group-arrangement has now been proposed by K. H. Voous and J. G. Van Marle ('The Distributional History of *Coracina* in the Indo-Australian Archipelago,' *Bijdragen*