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Stray Feathers

An occurrence of the Long-tailed Skua, *Stercorarius longicaudus*, in Port Phillip Bay, Victoria.—On April 4, 1965, while aboard the ferry plying between Sorrento, Portsea and Queenscliff, near the entrance to Port Phillip Bay, Victoria, I saw an adult Long-tailed Skua, *Stercorarius longicaudus*. It passed about 150 feet from the ferry at a height of about 50 feet above the sea. In general size, leisurely flight and wing action, the Skua was similar to a Silver Gull, *Larus novae-hollandiae*, which was flying at the same height and preceding it by about 40 feet. The resemblance was such that the fact that the second bird was a Skua escaped my notice until just before it came abreast of the ferry. I then recognized it immediately as a Long-tailed Skua.

At the time of the observation light rain was falling, but there was little wind and the sea was calm. I was standing in the shelter of the "lounge" observing through an open door using 9 x 35 binoculars.

The Skua was of the light phase variety and possessed the extremely long central tail feathers which characterize the species. The projection of these elongated central tail feathers was one and a half times the length of the rest of the tail and, I estimated, about five inches. They were half as long again as those in the fully-grown Arctic Skua, *Stercorarius parasiticus*, and were more slender, lying together to form a single streamer.

In wing span and length (excluding tail extensions), it was only very slightly larger than the Silver Gull. By comparison with the Arctic Skua, the Long-tailed was smaller, of less robust build, had more slender wings and lacked the menacing appearance of that species.

The underwings appeared blackish with a small inconspicuous pale flash at the base of the primaries. The underside of the tail was also very dark, but the rest of the underparts were white. The forehead and crown were black, sharply cut off from the whitish cheeks and neck, giving a capped appearance. The little of the remainder of the upperparts visible appeared very dark. Inclement weather conditions did not permit a more detailed description of the plumage, but the bird presented a neater appearance than do Arctic Skuas.

The height at which this bird was observed is interesting and possibly of some significance, as both Arctic and Pomarine Skuas generally fly much closer to the sea except when in pursuit of a climbing victim. Less than a year prior to this observation, I had seen, in the Atlantic Ocean, five Long-tailed Skuas, three of which were flying at an estimated 100 feet above sea-level. *The Handbook of British Birds* states that the Long-tailed Skua is "fond of sailing and soaring high in air", and that this is one of the few ways in which its behaviour differs from that of the Arctic Skua.

Large numbers of sea-birds had concentrated in this part of Port Phillip Bay for the previous month, apparently attracted by successive influxes of whitebait and krill. On this day about 30 Arctic Skuas were seen and flocks of Silver Gulls, Crested Terns, *Sterna bergii*, and Short-tailed Shearwaters, *Puffinus tenuirostris*, were feeding voraciously where the sea was pink with krill and the surface disturbed by barracouta. Arctic Skuas had featured prominently in these gatherings, up to 50 being seen on a crossing, and even occurring in flocks of 15 or more. A total of five Pomarine Skuas, *Stercorarius pomarinus*, had been identified (and subsequently one other), one of which was in full adult plumage and possessing the long, blunt, twisted central tail feathers.

There is only one previous record of the Pomarine Skua in Port Phillip Bay, and the only other Victorian records are of birds seen off the south-eastern coast by L. Amiet. All occurrences are recent, within the last four years.

Apart from its very long, slender tail streamers, the Long-tailed Skua is distinguished from its larger relatives by its slighter build, more graceful flight, and, when adult, by the isolated neat black crown, greyer underparts and more cleanly marked plumage. Some writers have stated that juvenile Long-tailed Skuas, and adults lacking the developed streamers, are inseparable from the Arctic Skua, but the slighter build and more graceful flight should immediately arouse the interest of an observer familiar with the Arctic Skua.

The Long-tailed Skua breeds in the Arctic regions and has a continuous circumpolar distribution. Its wintering distribution is largely unknown, but the species extends far into the southern hemisphere in both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans off South America. In the western Pacific it occurs freely in the vicinity of Japan. I know of only one reference relating to the occurrence of the species in Australia. The Long-tailed Skua is included in the Provisional List in *The Birds of Sydney* by K. A. Hindwood and A. R. McGill (1958), on the strength of a communication by Tom Iredale that "he saw what he thought to be a Long-tailed Skua in Sydney Harbour about the year 1930".

I acknowledge the assistance given by Messrs. F. Smith, W. R. Wheeler, and E. Whitbourn in the preparation of this report.—
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Some feeding habits of the Rainbow Lorikeet.—It is usually thought that the brush-tongued parrots of the genus *Trichoglossus* are predominantly eaters of nectar and fruit. The diet quoted in Cayley (1961) is nectar, fruit and flowers. However, Lendon (1951) records that both Australian races of the Rainbow Lorikeet, *T. haematodus* (*moluccanus* and *rubritorquis*) will exist in captivity on a seed diet alone, and Prestwich (1951) records the breeding and rearing of young on a seed diet by birds of both races.

Lea and Gray (1934) give a summary of stomach contents of what are presumed to have been seven specimens of *T. h. moluccanus*. All seven contained vegetable matter, largely the chewed up stamens of *Eucalytus*. Four of these also contained seeds, one a grub and one nectar. It does seem that unlike the smaller brush-tongued parrots, *Trichoglossus haematodus* is much more a seed eater than generally realized.

Further evidence of this propensity for seed-eating was afforded in 1965 at Taurama Barracks near Port Moresby, Papua. The race of the Rainbow Lorikeet here is presumably *micropteryx*, generally similar in appearance to the familiar *moluccanus* of south-eastern Australia, but with a blackish head and bright green nape. This bird is very abundant in the woodland savannah of the Moresby area.

During the wet season these birds started in December 1964 to frequent a 600 yards long row of planted 50 feet high *Casuarina equisetifolia* in the barracks area. At first these parties consisted of 6-10 birds scattered throughout the trees but gradually built up to at least 150 birds present all day and making considerable noise. They could be seen at any time tearing open ripening *Casuarina* fruits and consuming the seeds therein. As the fruiting ceased the birds turned their attention to the dried seed cases until late March 1965 when only empty seed cases could be found on the trees. At this juncture they turned for a week to the seed pods of ornamental *Cassia* until they too were gone. During all this period the birds would fly away at dusk to roost elsewhere. Despite a moderate flowering of *Eucalyptus papuana* in January only one party of Lorikeets was ever seen feeding on the blossoms. After March only the odd party of the species was seen in the area.

At the time of writing (September 1965) the *Casuarinas*, despite a bad dry season, are fruiting heavily and the Lorikeets are back, tearing open the green fruits. It is interesting to note that sugared water, so favoured by the species elsewhere, has failed to attract a single Lorikeet to at least two homes in the area where the "bait" was used. Unfortunately the matter cannot be followed up as the trees are to go in the sacred name of "progress", and although they are to be replaced it will be another decade before Taurama regains its Lorikeet flock.

Although eminently designed to consume nectar, the Rainbow Lorikeet, it seems is, under some circumstances at least, predominantly a seed-eater.—H. L. BELL, 1st Battalion, Pacific Islands Regiment, Taurama Barracks, Port Moresby, Papua.

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Anting in White-winged Choughs.—While on a visit to the Hattah Lakes National Park in Victoria in September 1965 I watched a party of ten White-winged Choughs, *Corcorax melanorhamphus*, foraging about on a dry lake bed. One bird picked up something from the ground, and suddenly all the others hurried to it until they were in a tight huddle. Each individual picked up something from the ground in its beak, which it then brushed under each slightly lifted wing alternately, in the manner of birds anting. The whole performance lasted for one and a half minutes before all birds dispersed, and during that time those birds clearly visible to me picked up something from the ground at least twice. Three individuals stayed longer than the rest of the group.

I pinpointed the exact meeting spot and when the birds had moved off and quietly resumed feeding, I walked over and found two ant holes, but I did not see any ants.

What was noticeable was the complete silence of all the birds. Even when they suddenly hurried together not one call-note was uttered. This took place on a fine warm day, at 6.5 p.m.—(Mrs.) ELLEN M. McCULLOCH, 6 Bullen Avenue, Mitcham, Vic.

A little-known feeding habit of the Red-backed Parrot.—On a small number of occasions I have observed what appears to be a little-known facet of the feeding habits of the Red-backed Parrot, *Psephotus haematonotus*, when adults of both sexes of this species were seen feeding on blossoms of the Yellow Box tree, *Eucalyptus melliodora*, at heights from six feet to nearly forty feet from the ground. The unusual nature of these observations is illustrated by the collective statements of recognized authorities, unanimous that ground-feeding only is the rule for this parrot.

In this context, Forshaw (1962) states: "It can be seen from the above list [i.e. seeds from analysis of crop and stomach contents] that the Red-backed Parrot is entirely a ground feeder confined to seeds found on the ground".

Brereton and Sourry (1959), referring to the Red-backed Parrot, state that: "It feeds exclusively on the ground . . .", also that ". . . unlike the Eastern Rosella, it appears to feed exclusively on grass seed and grasses".

Twice I made detailed notes on the spot, and these reveal that on June 21, 1964, from 11.10 a.m. to 11.20 a.m., a small flock of Red-backed Parrots was seen feeding in company with one pair of Little Lorikeets, *Glossopsitta pusilla*, numerous White-plumed Honeyeaters, *Meliphaga penicillata*, and a solitary Red Wattle-bird, *Anthochaera carunculata*. They chewed only the nectar-laden blossoms, not unopened buds, except one male which nibbled the tip off a leaf. They then flew down and appeared to feed on seed on the ground.

On the second occasion (October 20, 1964, 9.20 a.m. to 9.30 a.m.), I closely watched a fine adult male Red-backed Parrot, which frequently fed hanging head downwards in typical Lorikeet fashion. However, in typical platycercine fashion, blossoms frequently fell to the ground as he nipped them off, rotated them in his beak, then let them drop. Once, he pulled an awkwardly distant bunch of blossom to him with one foot, and held them close, an action unusual for a specialized ground-feeding species, which, unlike the related generalized *Platycercus*, does not hold seeds in the foot while eating. Brereton (1963), in regard to actual climbing while feeding and the holding of food in the foot in Australian Parrots, observes that: "Both types [i.e. generalized ground/tree-feeders and specialized ground-feeders] occur in the Platycercidae, for *Neophema* and *Psephotus* do not climb and do not hold food in the foot, in contrast to the remainder of the family".

In summary, it may be observed that it is not entirely correct to regard the Red-backed Parrot as a bird that always feeds on the ground, and is incapable of active climbing and rudimentary holding. The inference to be drawn here is that comparatively specialized creatures are sometimes capable of more generalized behaviour than is often realized, when the need arises.—JOHN COURTNEY, "Ashgrove", Swan Vale, via Glen Innes, N.S.W.

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Some observations on Little Grebes.—At 1115 hours, on November 19, 1965, while watching a Little Grebe, *Podiceps ruficollis*, on a dam near Murrumbateman, N.S.W., a sharp chittering on one side drew my attention to another Little Grebe chasing a third.

The first grebe joined in the attack, both birds scuttering after the intruder with shrill calls.

The third grebe dived, and the roused pair, still chittering and with plumage fluffed, swam around apparently looking for it. One, presumably the male, kept diving.

A short distance away the object of their wrath raised just its head above water and watched them for a few minutes. Then it submerged with hardly a ripple, to reappear close to the bank under an overhanging bush. This time it floated higher on the water, but it kept its head low and sat on the surface without sound or movement. Its plumage seemed to be soaked, and was sleeked back, in marked contrast to the fluffed feathers of the excited pair.

These latter appeared not to see it. Then I noticed that the male was surfacing closer to the hidden watcher after each dive. Finally he popped up just a few inches away, and attacked. The intruder fled, and the chase went back and forth across the dam, both underwater and on the surface.

Meanwhile the female was swimming around, chittering. Suddenly she shot up with a sharp cry, propelled by a jab in the belly from her mate who, coming up from below, had evidently mistaken his spouse for his enemy. Both grebes then performed a peculiar display.

They backed up to each other until their sterns were almost touching (see drawing) and floated thus, one or both trilling rapidly. This position was maintained for about ten seconds, the birds oscillating slightly as if round a central pivot. Then the male broke off to resume the search.

This mutual display resembles the second phase in the pivoting display of the Black-necked Grebe, *Podiceps nigricollis*, as described and illustrated in Palmer (1962). It is not mentioned by Armstrong (1947) as a component in the mutual courtship display of the Little Grebe.—ANTHONY D'ANDRIA, C.S.I.R.O., Division of Wildlife Research, Canberra.

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