

Notes on Herons.

By W. H. FORD, R.A.O.U., FITZROY (VIC.)

In my boyhood days there used to be a pair of White-fronted Herons (*Notophoxyx novæ-hollandiæ*) nest every year in the cliff near the Cape Otway lighthouse. I robbed them twice—once for two and again for four eggs. They came every year to the same cliff, but after the second robbing they went to a hollow under a steep, overhanging rock, where they were safe from me. Two or three times in nesting season I saw a pair of White Reef-Herons (*Demigretta sacra*) about the same part of the coast, but did not find the nesting-place. These are the only White Reef-Herons I have seen.

In 1907 we were working 15 miles west of Bendigo, and near our work was a yellow box tree in which a White-fronted Heron, a Magpie-Lark, and three pairs of Spotted-sided Finches had their nests. One of the Finches was right under and against the Heron's nest, and was marked by Herons' excreta. When we started work the Herons had evidently just begun to sit. As we were only 20 yards from the nest they were very shy, but soon got used to us, and started to sit in turns, in 6-hour spells. At 9 a.m. the bird that was off duty would come quietly to the tree next to the nest and give a low croak. The bird on the nest would get up, walk quietly down the tree-limb, and fly away, to return at 3 p.m., when the same routine was gone through. They did this every day for a fortnight, when we left. I only know the time from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.—our working hours—and do not know how the birds shared the night duty. I saw these same Herons later near the tree with five young ones which were just able to fly a little.

In 1911, when camped on the Murray River bank near Gunbower Weir, I heard a great commotion, with angry Heron screams, on the New South Wales side of the Murray River, where a pair of White-fronted Herons had a nest. On coming out of my tent I saw the Herons attacking a Whistling-Eagle, the Eagle evidently trying to get away, with a Heron on each side of him. I then lost sight of them behind the fringe of the river-bank gums, but heard a terrible, agonizing scream from the Eagle and jubilant cries from the Herons. The Herons then came back to the nest tree, evidently pleased, by their notes. Five days afterwards I was over the river, and picked up a dead Whistling-Eagle with a hole under the left wing, very like a Heron's beak wound. It looks like a case of the Herons killing the Eagle, but as I did not actually see it done I do not state positively it was so.

The White-fronted Herons in nesting-time are very loving to each other, and do a lot of "smoodging," as humans say.