

## Stray Feathers.

**The Starling as Mimic.**—A Starling frequently seen about the house has acquired an exact imitation of the "Pee-wit" call of the Magpie-Lark (*Grallina*), also the alarm notes of the introduced British Blackbird.—A. E. RODDA. Middle Brighton (Vic.)

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**Bronze-Cuckoo and Shrike-Robin.**—On Saturday, 8th Nov., 1919, at Ringwood (Vic.), I found a nest of *Eopsaltria australis* (*E. a. viridior*) (Yellow-breasted Robin) containing two eggs of this species and also one egg of *Chalcococcyx basalis* (*Neochalcites b. mellori*) (Narrow-billed Bronze-Cuckoo). This is, I believe, a new record for this Cuckoo.—A. CHAS. STONE. South Yarra (Vic.), 8/11/19.

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**Swiftlets on Land.**—I noticed on the sand-banks near the mouth of the Tully River a number of Swiftlets were resting. It was interesting to see them hurl themselves into the air in pursuit of flies. I did not think that such feeble, spider-footed birds could spring from such an almost flat surface, as I have never before seen them resting anywhere except in a nesting home cave.—E. J. BANFIELD, R.A.O.U. Dunk Island (Qld.)

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**Bird-of-Paradise Nesting in Captivity.**—In my aviary at Roseville, N.S.W., a female Lesser Superb Bird-of-Paradise (*Lophorkina minor*), mated to a male Coachwhip-Bird (*Psophodes crepitans*), commenced carrying nesting material about the first week in September of this year. By the second week she located herself 3 feet from the ground amongst some honeysuckle with a wire-netting background, built a round saucer nest of thin twigs, decorated it with scraps of newspaper, and abandoned it for a time. She resumed work on the nest on 1st December, laid one egg on 6th December, which she attempted to eat next day. One-half the shell alone remains, which I am preserving for future reference; it is cream-coloured, marked with reddish-chocolate and greyish dashes at the base, becoming lighter, with finer markings, towards the point, and is 1.03 mm. long. This is, I believe, the first record of a Bird-of-Paradise laying in captivity—at least in Australia.—CLIFFORD COLES.

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**Wren-Warblers in Captivity.**—In September, 1915, I secured a pair of Blue Wrens in Sydney and placed them in my aviary at Roseville, in company with many other birds, but with no other Wrens of any species. The male was in full colour at time of capture; he retained his plumage till February following, on the 17th of which month the first signs of moulting were noted. He made a rapid moult, finishing about 4½ weeks later. He then resembled his mate in colour except for his tail, which was still blue; this he retained till, on the 17th July following, I detected

the first black feather on the throat. This moult took four weeks to complete from the first apparent sign. I kept this pair of Wrens and no others until early this year, and the male regularly in February and July of each year moulted almost exactly as described above, being singularly regular in dates of coming in and going out. The pair escaped through a hole in the wire, and are now adorning my garden. I would like to add that while my bird was out of colour I frequently met male birds in full colour in the open, thus showing there is no apparent regularity of habit with the species.—CLIFFORD COLES.

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**Magpies Hatch Bantams.**—The following letter from Mr. A. Smith, Avonmore-avenue, North Norwood, was published in the *Mail* (Adelaide, S.A.) of 8th November, 1919:—"I have two hen Magpies. They started to build a nest about 18 feet high in an almond tree, and I helped them by making the frame of it with the wire, hay tie, string, &c., they carried up. They both laid three eggs each in the same nest, and tossed them all out but two, and sat on them for two or three days, when I placed two bantams' eggs in the nest. They tossed their own eggs out of the nest and sat on the bantams' eggs. Instinct must have told them that their eggs were not fertile. On Sunday, 5th October, I heard the chickens chirping in the nest, so I took them away. Both Magpies were very vicious, and flew at me when taking the chicks. They still kept on sitting, and on Monday, 6th October, I placed two more bantams' eggs in the nest, and on Sunday, 26th October, I heard the chirping again, and there were two more chicks, which I took away. The chicks are crossed between a White Leghorn and Grey Bantam. The Magpies sat most of the time on the nest together. They took it in turns to get off for food, and one would feed the other. These Magpies would kill the chickens the least chance they had, but on this occasion, being the foster-mothers, they protected them."

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**"Early Birds."**—Now that the days are so long, and light begins at such early hours, it is interesting to turn out at day-break and listen to the first voices of awakening birds. During the second week of October I was out at that time, and heard the first faint chirpings from the Crescent Honey-eater (*Meliornis australasiana*), located in scrub not far away, at 4.20 a.m. Its full voice was gained at a quarter to five. When living in a clearing surrounded by bush in the Table Cape district I generally noticed that the notes of this fine honey-bird were the first to break the morning silence. On the October day just alluded to, the Pallid Cuckoo (*Cuculus pallidus*) came in a good second, then the hurried strain of the Blue Wren (*Malurus longicaudus*) reached the ear, and almost at the same time the trill of the Fan-tailed Cuckoo (*Cacomantis flabelliformis*). Since then, on 30th October, the Pallid Cuckoo was calling at 4 a.m. while I was still in bunk,

and has done so just at daybreak on several subsequent occasions. This species can fairly claim to be the most persistent caller of any in the district, starting at daybreak and going on through most of the day, with an occasional "interval for refreshment," until darkness is falling; last night its final notes were at 8 p.m. I have also heard it occasionally give a single call at 2 a.m., and one or two more between then and daybreak. It is here in great plenty this spring, more numerous than any other Cuckoo, although the Fan-tailed is also present in good numbers.—H. STUART DOVE., F.Z.S. West Devonport (Tas.), 22/II/19.

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**Wood-Swallows and Ants.**—When rambling through a paddock at Cheltenham (Vic.) on 15th November, 1919, I noticed a number of Wood-Swallows congregated above a low mound of reddish earth. Their actions showed that the birds were excited, but whether by pleasure or anger I was too far away to decide. They were gliding or hovering over the mound, and every minute two or three would swoop so low as almost to brush it with their wings. But none ever alighted. I thought, at first, that the birds were mobbing a snake; but a closer view revealed that they were taking toll of the teeming population of a citadel of mound ants (*Iridomyrmex detectus*). "Workers," fierce and resentful, were swarming over the mound, and numbers of winged males and females (the Wood-Swallows' chief victims, I fancy) were issuing from its "doors." The birds dispersed when I drew near, but as soon as I walked a few yards from the mound they gathered again to the feast. Each time when one swooped it snapped up an ant, perhaps more. The Masked Wood-Swallow (*Arlamus personatus*) and the White-browed Wood-Swallow (*A. superciliosus*) were both abundant in the paddock, but in the flock at the ants' mound the former predominated. It was pleasant to watch their manoeuvres and to hear their sharp notes mingle with those of other birds. The paddock—20 acres of uncultivated land, with tea-tree thickets, a swamp, and sandy ridges—was rich in bird-life; but the Wood-Swallows were like an army of occupation. The sky was flecked by their gliding forms; they were perched on branches of every tree; and the scrub was loud with their voices. I discovered a nest of *A. personatus* breast-high in a dead *Hakea* bush; it held two nestlings about a week old. Within coo-ee of the spot Mr. L. Thorn, my companion, who was insect-hunting, killed a large copperhead snake; so, after all, there was a serpent in this little paradise.—CHARLES BARRETT. Melbourne.

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**Cormorant and Eels.**—While waiting for the steamer to come along last week, a black Shag came to the top with an eel about 18 inches long, swallowed it, and in a little time afterwards came up with a smaller one; this also went down. I drew the attention of most of the people on the jetty to this.—E. R. HOSIE, fisherman. Metung (Vic.)

**Cormorant and Eels.**—While standing on the bank of the Yarra, close to the Prince's Bridge, I noticed a Black Cormorant (*P. carbo*) which had just captured an eel which appeared to be about 18 inches long, and, although the bird was a large one, it seemed to have difficulty in dealing with its wriggling prey. While the bird was endeavouring to get an end of the eel into its bill, preparatory to swallowing it, the eel twisted its body with snake-like coils around the bird's beak and head. During this process, which lasted for some minutes, the bird swam round in the water, apparently not quite sure whether to deal with its prey in the water or on land. However, it decided upon the former, and proceeded to find the "end" of the eel. Several times the eel nearly escaped, but was always recaptured and finally swallowed whole. The eel was seemingly not content to die without a struggle, for, to judge by the contortions of the Cormorant, the eel must have had a very "rough passage" down its throat. The bird, apparently in some distress, continued to swim around and gulp and stretch its head and neck, at intervals drinking water as if to aid the downward passage of the lively meal. Eventually, however, the eel evidently subsided and resigned itself to its fate (or the Cormorant's digestive system), for the Cormorant at last moved off in search of fresh prey. Mr. A. Wilkie saw one of these Cormorants trying to swallow one of these slippery customers in the Botanical Gardens here not long ago, but the Cormorant had a large eel, and had it on the bank. The trouble was that, no sooner was the eel safely swallowed, than it popped out again and had to be swallowed again. This game went on for twenty minutes or more, until finally the eel had to remain below exhausted.—DONALD THOMSON. Canterbury (Vic.)

#### ECONOMIC SECTION.

**The Spinebill as a Flower Fertilizer.**—"There is a very free-flowering annual climber, the botanical name of which is not very euphonious—*Ipomœa quamoclit*. A recent variety of it is better known as the cardinal climber. This vine runs to a height of 8 to 10 feet, and is covered with beautiful cardinal-coloured flowers, with long, tubular corollas. At a recent meeting of the Agricultural Section of the Royal Society of New South Wales Mr. Herbert J. Rumsey gave some interesting information in reference to this plant. He said that when in America in 1916 he visited a seed farm, where his attention was drawn to this beautiful climber. The manager of the farm reported that, though free flowering, and daily as each flower faded this was followed by another one, yet the amount of seed produced was very small. The manager asked Mr. Rumsey if he thought it would be possible for it to set its seed better in Australia. Arrangements were made at once for a trial, and in the summer of 1916 and 1917 a nice length of it was planted, and no difficulty