

**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

was found in getting seed. It was not until towards the close of the season that the reason for this free-seeding propensity here was realized. Early one morning it was noted that a little bird, not as large as a Canary, with a very long honey-eating bill, spent most of its time flitting back and forth among the flowers. As it reached to send its bill down the tube of the flower after the honey, its dainty breast was pressed against the stamens and pistils of the flower, the pollen being carried in this way from one flower to the next, thus ensuring complete pollination. Now, every year, while the cardinal climber is in flower, dozens of these little birds may be seen every day plying back and forth from blossom to blossom, getting the honey which is their payment for fertilizing the seed. The area planted with this dainty climber has been increased year by year, and quite a large amount of seed is exported annually; but, whatever number of flowers there are, it appears as if there were birds sufficient to pollinate them." Mr. Herbert J. Rumsey has been good enough to supply me, at my request, with the above summary of his remarks at the meeting referred to, for publication in *The Emu*. From his description the bird is, I believe, the Spinebill (*Acanthorhynchus tenuirostris*). It is of much interest to know that one of our purely Australian birds is assisting in the success of a commercial venture, is enabling an export trade (slight, it is true) to flourish, and is helping to set the seed of plants not only to adorn our own gardens but also those in America.—J. B. CLELAND.

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**Ibis at Kerang (Vic.)**—A rather interesting item is the value of the Ibis was told me at Kerang last month by a farmer who lives about 10 miles from the rookery, part of which is shown in the accompanying photograph. He had noticed that a small green caterpillar was eating his crop of green stuff. One morning he went out and saw about a dozen Ibises (Straw-necks) at work on the caterpillars; the following morning about 1,000 birds were there, having evidently been brought by the scouts of the previous day, and in a week not a caterpillar was to be seen in the crop. He said they lined up like a regiment of soldiers, about a yard apart, and took it in a fack, with the result that he had a splendid crop. He is now a firm bird-protector.—WALLACE R. PENNYCOOK. Bendigo.

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#### BIRDS AND INSECTS.

IN the report of the Queensland Agricultural Department for the year 1918-19 considerable space is devoted by the Government Entomologist and Vegetable Pathologist (Mr. Henry Tryon) to observations on the inquiries and work of his office in regard to birds. It is pointed out that "the usefulness of birds, by reason of their insectivorous habits, is not commonly impressed by

correspondents upon the office, since its special business is to redress obvious grievances personally experienced." Quotations are given, however, of correspondents' testimony to the value of the Magpie-Lark (*Grallina picata*) as a destroyer of green aphids among turnips and of the Silver-eye (*Zosterops dorsalis*) as an enemy to many kinds of small insects. Among other references to birds are the following comments:—

The Blue Bald-Coot or Red-bill (*Porphyrio melanotus*).—This bird has until recently been the object of the "close season" provision; but lately, in the Mackay district, where it has been found to be harmful to young sugar-cane, not only has this protection, in response to the application of local residents, been removed, but the Mackay Districts Flying Fox Destruction Board desired to constitute it a pest under the *Local Authorities Acts 1902-17*, and, moreover, to offer a bonus of 6d. per head for its destruction. Your representative felt it incumbent upon him to set forth the case for the defence of this bird in February last.

The Rainbow-Bird or Bee-eater (*Merops ornatus*).—In December, 1918, the Queensland Beekeepers' Association submitted a proposal that the protection accorded this bird under the *Native Birds Protection Act* be removed. In the interest of one of the gayest-liveried of our feathered friends, we have dissented from this proposal. This beautiful bird is a Queensland summer visitant, only coming here to breed; and, as it is to be shot with facility, any license to kill it would soon much reduce its numbers. It is strictly insectivorous, but its taste for bees is not commonly and persistently exercised, feeding generally as it does on beetles, *Neuroptera*, and winged ants. Where hives are few and swarms weak, or where there is a decline in bee-strength owing to a bad season, as was experienced in 1898 by apiarists here, its habit of capturing bees is noticed, and loss of bees is to an undue extent attributed to the bird; but, under other circumstances, its bee-feeding habit has little or no influence on reducing the numbers of bees. Its occasional weakness for these insects had always been remarked here, notwithstanding no such proposal as that in question had earlier reached us. And, unfortunately, it is now accompanied by one of like nature, emanating from another quarter, for slaughtering this gem amongst insectivorous birds in the interests of the millinery trade seeking still another plume—cost to bird-life what it will.

"Scrub-Magpie" or "Black Magpie" (*Strepera graculina*).—This bird of many useful propensities, including the exercise of a noteworthy insectivorous habit, is again condemned as a prickly pear disseminator without question in its case. A special memorandum, covering the feeding habits of this active bird, was prepared for the information and guidance of the South Coast Crows and Flying Fox Destruction Boards; but, being evidently impressed by the more obvious indirectly harmful habits of the bird rather than by the more predominant and directly useful

ones, they have decided that the "Scrub-Magpie" is a bird that should, if possible, be exterminated.

The Plain-Turkey (*Eupodotis australis*).—This bird, also known as the Australian Bustard, has been reported to be again a notorious propagator of the prickly pear by distributing its seeds; but no mention has been made of its eminent service in consuming vast numbers of grasshoppers and even larger "vermin."

Exotic Animals—Proposed Introduction.—(1) Rats.—In order to control the rat plague, so serious in our northern sugar-cane plantations—those of the Mossman area especially—a proposal has been made to take steps to cause Australian species of Owls to congregate there, as well as to import rodent-capturing species from the United States, in order to supplement the efforts of our own birds in rat destruction. In a lengthy memorandum submitted in September, 1918, grounds were set forth that tended to show that this proposal was in one respect impracticable, and that, with regard to the other, it was not likely to be attended by practical results in securing the end in view.

Birds and the Tick Pest.—A former resident of Brisbane—a technical chemist, the late Leon Hermann—several years since suggested inquiry regarding the cattle-tick-eating habits of a special Egret that he had observed when living in Madagascar, and whose services therefore might, if thought fit, be possibly utilized in controlling this "pest" in Queensland also. . . Preliminary steps to secure living examples of these birds have temporarily failed, owing to disturbance in oversea relations with Madagascar consequent on the war; but, recognizing that the tick-eating habit on the part of Egrets is not confined to Madagascar, but is exhibited by *Ardeida* in West and East Africa alike, we have suggested that, failing Madagascar as a source for them, Natal might be drawn upon, since it has furnished two tick-consuming species—viz., the Little Egret (*Herodias garzetta*) and the Buff-backed Egret (*Herodias ralloides*). We have also instituted inquiries regarding the character and constitution of the Garceros or Egret preserves of Venezuela that might be of service in realizing the project of acclimatizing these tick-eating birds in Queensland.

Reference is also made to the destructiveness of certain introduced birds, to the results of inquiries into the charge that the Scrub-Turkey (*Cathartus lathami*) spreads prickly pear (*Opuntia*, sp.), and to a request made by bird-lovers for the total protection of the Redwing (*Ptistes*) and King (*Aprosmictus*) Parrots. This request was not supported by Mr. Tryon.

The report also contains the following note relative to birds and bush-fires:—"The greatest enemy to our native birds—one that seems to be lost sight of—is the bush-fire, that may extend continuously for miles and miles through country that many of the more useful ones frequent for nesting purposes. Not only are thus the ground-loving species, with their young or eggs, burnt or smothered in their nests, but with a 'good burn' (how fateful

for them!) smoke, heat, and flame reach those whose resort may be even the tree-tops themselves. True, the bush-fires account for the reduction of 'vermin and rubbish' (allusion is not made here to burning off fallen scrub), and they create the opportunity for much succulent herbage to shoot up; but there is reason to conclude that many of the finer grasses succumb to the repeated action of the fire-stick, whilst the bush-fires aid in destroying much of the surface humus—so difficult in a semi-tropical country to restore—on which the growth of pasturage generally of the better kind is dependent. This general conclusion, however, may be gainsaid; but the destruction of birds in this way is a fact that any close observation will substantiate."

### Correspondence.

*To the Editors of "The Emu."*

SIRS,—Referring to Mr. A. J. Campbell's paragraph in *The Emu* for April, 1919, p. 256, respecting *Chalcococcyx basalis* (Narrow-billed Bronze-Cuckoo), he says:—"For Dirk Hartog Carter records *plagosus*" (referring to my paper in *The Ibis*, October, 1917, on "The Birds of Dirk Hartog Island and Peron Peninsula.") Mr. Campbell is quite correct, but I made a mistake in saying "*plagosus*" instead of "*basalis*," which I failed to notice in correcting the proofs of my *Ibis* paper. With the exception of a few of the Wrens that I sent to England in 1916 by registered letter post, the collections made on my 1916 trip were left in the care of the Perth (W.A.) Museum on account of the marine war risks then prevailing, and I received them here only last week, and upon checking them over found (as I had suspected some time ago) that the two skins of *Chalcococcyx* obtained by me on Dirk Hartog are both labelled as *Chalcococcyx basalis* on their original labels. I have already written to the editor of *The Ibis* to have the correction made in the next issue of that journal, and shall be much obliged if you will have this letter printed in the next number of *The Emu*.—Thanking you in anticipation,  
yours, &c.,  
TOM CARTER.

"Wensleydale," Mulgrave-road, Sutton, Surrey (Eng.), 17/11/19.

### COLLECTING AND COLLECTORS.

*To the Editors of "The Emu."*

SIRS,—It seems desirable that attention should be called, through the journal of the R.A.O.U., to a matter directly affecting the birds of Australia in general and those of Queensland in particular.

Some three years ago I had a letter from an American collector of eggs, soliciting assistance in adding to his cabinets. The figures he gave to bear out his "*bona fides*" were startling, indicating as they did that among the many thousands of eggs