

Stray Feathers.

Efficiency of Camouflage.—In connection with the interesting note of Mr. R. T. Littlejohns in the April issue of *The Emu* under the heading of "The Efficiency of Camouflage," may I be permitted to state that I have found one or two forms of simple camouflage to work satisfactorily where it was necessary to photograph shy birds, and that fairly good pictures have been secured as a result. For instance, when I commenced the photography of birds about three years ago, I used a covering made of khaki cloth, blotched with ink and decorated with green linen, into which I fitted the camera, a lens hole being left, of course. This proved satisfactory for most of the smaller kinds of birds I attempted to photograph, and also served to keep out any light that might otherwise have found its way to the plate through long exposure of the camera in the bright sunlight. After a time I effected a little better disguise by tying leaves and grass to the tripod legs, and almost turning the whole outfit into a bush. The success of this can be gauged from the fact that the birds often perched on top of it instead of on the point where I desired them. Until I camouflaged the camera in this way I achieved no success with such birds as the Tang (*Epthi-anura*) and the Pipit or Ground Lark, and I spent many weary hours waiting for the birds to return to their nests. By painting the tripod in such a manner that it harmonised with the surroundings, particularly bushes and trees with the sunlight shining through in patches, I have had a fair measure of success among certain birds, but in the tree tops I discard the tripod and rope the camera to the branches or build a small structure to carry it quite free from vibration. While I have not gone into the more elaborate forms of camouflage, such as are used in other parts of the world, where men make bird photography a profession, I have employed for the purpose of photographing Banded Plovers a small hiding tent, constructed of bags, with which I achieved a certain amount of success. The tent is about 4ft. 6in. long, 3ft. high, and a similar measurement in width, with the opening at one end and at the opposite end two holes, one for the lens of the camera and the other for observation purposes. This looks very conspicuous out in an open field where the Plover usually nest, and one would imagine that not a bird would come within miles of it, but I found that the birds grew accustomed to it very quickly, and no difficulty was experienced in picturing them at the nest. On the sides of rocky hills, where the Ground-bird (*Cinclosoma*) nests, I have occasionally placed the camera close to the ground without the tripod among a heap of stones, but the Ground-bird is an exceedingly shy species, and no success has yet come my way. I am inclined to imagine that its moving reflection in the lens of the camera—a conclusion suggested by Mr. Littlejohns—has been responsible for my failure to secure its picture. — M. S. R. SHARLAND, R.A.O.U., Hobart.

Is There any Reasonable Limit to the Ability or the Intelligence of Australia's Bower-birds?—It is not to be wondered at, perhaps, that the mating impulse causes birds generally to display considerable skill in making nests for their eggs and young; but what is to be said of birds which, quite independently of that primal impulse, and with the beak alone, wedge sticks and grasses into playhouses in a fashion that would severely tax the skill of ten human fingers? And now we have to credit a Bower-bird with being not only a house-builder, but a house-painter. Whether this painting business is at all general seems doubtful. I have examined many bowers of the Satin-bird, but had no evidence of it until recently, when it was brought to notice by Mr. E. Nubling, R.A.O.U., of Sydney, and supported by a bushman, who told me he noted the same thing in a South Coast district many years ago. In one bower, observed by Mr. Nubling in the National Park, the whole of the inside wall was painted. That is to say, the aesthetic-minded bird had secured a vegetable dye of some kind, carried it to the bower, and laboriously blackened every one of those hundreds of sticks, from top to bottom. The dye, drying flat, resembled soot or the aftermath of fire, and superficial observation would have suggested that the sticks were burnt, had it not been that only the inside of the walls was thus treated. We saw some of this black substance in two bowers on Sunday last, but by that time rain had washed off the greater part of the curious decoration.—A. H. CHISHOLM, C.F.A.O.U., in *Sydney Daily Telegraph*.

* * *

Breeding Plumage of Birds.—At the recent congress of the R.A.O.U., in Hobart, the question was asked, "Was the nuptial dress acquired only at the moult, or did the bird's feathers change in colour at the breeding season?" The opinion was expressed that, though the change did, as a rule, occur at the moult, nevertheless feathers sometimes become brighter in hue owing to the stimulus of the breeding season. The latter idea seemed to me untenable for physiological reasons, but, being by no means sure of my ground, I refrained from comment. It would seem, however, fully grown feathers being dead things, having no organic connection with the bird, and having the nutritive pulp capsules dry and empty, cannot be in any way influenced by the vital processes of the animal. Apart, therefore, from such things as the rubbing off of dull edges exposing brighter colours beneath, as in the black throat of a House Sparrow, and such things as extra care in preening, etc., I am inclined to think that no change in the colour of mature feathers ever takes place. In this connection the writer of the article in *The Encyclopedia Britannica* says:—"According to some authorities, however, some birds acquire a change of colour without the moult by ascent of pigment from the base of the feather. The black head assumed by many Gulls, in, spring, is, for example, said to be gained in

this way. There is, however, no good evidence in support of the contention, but the whole structure of the feather is against such change taking place."—(Dr.) E. MURRAY ANDERSON, R.A.O.U., "Raggal," Clare-street, Hobart.

* * *

Fluctuations in Bird-Life.—Much has been written in *The Emu* of late concerning possible causes of decrease among various species of Australian birds, particularly Parrots. Mr. A. J. Campbell is standing four-square against domestic cats gone wild. He dealt with the subject in January (*Emu*, Vol. XXIII, p. 175), and again in April (*Ibid*, p. 264, as a footnote to Whitlock's account of the search for the Night-Parrot). I agree entirely with our veteran as to the menace to bird-life created by these cats, and support his proposition for the appointment of a committee to report on the matter. But why only the cat menace? Why not examine the subject of bird conservation generally in relation to Australian progress, embracing at the same time Mr. E. Ashby's helpful proposals in relation to fauna and flora reserves? Indeed, should we not have a standing committee to watch this matter? Mr. Ashby (also writing in *The Emu*) differs from Mr. Campbell as to the primary causes of decimation of certain species, his idea being that encroachment of man is the chief factor and that killing by man and destruction by cats, foxes, rats, etc., "do not seriously count." Personally, while agreeing that direct human competition is serious, I consider (speaking from experience in Queensland), that the damage done by the factors cited has been gravely underestimated. Certainly it is possible, as the same writer suggests, that representatives of some species, supposedly very rare, may have escaped to localities undisturbed by man. This point, however, either as a possibility or an assurance, is not one to inspire confidence so much as zeal—zeal for examining and gripping the whole subject. So I suggest again that the R.A.O.U. (with the Check List adjusted) make a more definite attempt at this work, for the guidance of governments and public, to say nothing of bird-students generally. It is a many-sided subject, this question of fluctuation in our bird-population. When I discussed it with Mr. H. L. White some years ago (chiefly in relation to the *Psittacidae*), he suggested that the outlook for the ground Parrots was almost hopeless. Settlement of the country, he had noted, seemed to affect some species and not others. The Red-backed Parrot was cited as an example. It and the Budgerigah have greatly increased in the neighbourhood of "Belltrees" (Scone, N.S.W.), while other related species are dying out rapidly. It seemed to Mr. White that stocking of the country and bush fires were largely responsible, but he was unable to say why these factors did not affect all species of grass-feeders similarly, unless it was that certain seeds necessary to certain species had been burnt or eaten out. He added that the Magpie had increased

wonderfully near "Belltrees," while the Butcher-Bird, a near relative, had almost disappeared, though very plentiful thirty years ago. Curiously enough, the late Mr. E. J. Banfield encountered a similar problem at Dunk Island. On that sanctuary, where the competition or interference of man was very slight, he found that some species of birds increased noticeably, while others (for no apparent reason) fell away alarmingly. I do not consider that this strange fluctuation is satisfactorily explained by the suggestion (*vide Emu*, Vol. XXIII., p. 295), that various species have "disappeared into the great unpeopled spaces of this sparsely-populated continent." The point has been made previously, and it has not been greatly strengthened by the finding of a few "lost" birds here and there. C. H. Jerrard's discovery of the Paradise Parrot only slightly eased the tension in regard to this rare bird. And the shooting of a solitary Turquoise Parrot in South Queensland (not New South Wales) by the Wilkins expedition, certainly does not indicate that numbers of these birds exist. Yet it is only a generation ago that the Turquoise and Paradise Parrots were quite plentiful.—A. H. CHISHOLM, C.F.A.O.U., Sydney.

* * *

Tasmanian Migrants in Summer of 1923-4.—Only two small parties of Spinetail Swifts (*Hirundapus caudacuta*) were noted on the N.W. coast this summer; very different from the many hundreds, and even thousands, which used to appear at migrating time twenty years ago! The first were seen on the afternoon of 2nd March, 1924, after a thunderstorm in the morning, accompanied by heavy rain; half a dozen of the birds went from west to east, singly, not flying together; they were making a direct course, not feeding. The weather had cleared somewhat, but the sky was still partly overcast, and the wind was light northerly. On 19th March a small number was seen from Ulverstone Show-ground, twelve miles west of Devonport; they were coming from the east, and were flying low; wind S.W.; weather fine. The wind had been boisterous during the night and early morning. Welcome Swallows (*Hirundo neoxena*), Wood-Swallows (*Artamus cyanopterus*), and Pipits (*Anthus australis*) all seemed to leave about 21st April, just previous to which date we had some windy, cold days. At the same date, and since, small parties of Summer-birds (*Graucalus nova-hollandia*) have been working along from eastward and passing westward in leisurely fashion, sitting about in trees and on fences, and taking such insect food as they could find. At the beginning of the 4th week of April I found the body of a male Blue-winged Parrot (*Neophema chrysostoma*, apparently), with the head taken clean off, lying under the electric wires by the roadside; it appeared to have flown violently against the wire while migrating by night, as the body was quite fresh when found in the early morning.—H. STUART DOVE, F.Z.S., W. Devonport, Tas.

Land Birds Visiting Lord Howe Island.—Lord Howe Island is a small speck on the ocean, four days' sail from Sydney, and yet it has been reached by certain of our land birds not noted as migrants, or specially gifted with sustained powers of flight. It is probable that these birds, caught by a westerly gale, find themselves over the water, and simply keep flying for several days, until this resting place comes in sight. If this is so, it illustrates that the wind is a factor in the distribution of birds, of which the well-known invasion of New Zealand by the Silver-eye (*Zosterops lateralis*) is a case in point. Messrs. P. Dignum and R. Wilson, residents of Lord Howe Island, now on a visit to Sydney, have supplied interesting records of Australian birds being seen on the island recently. They state that these birds generally appear after a heavy blow. The list of birds is:—Eastern Swamp-hen, or Bald Coot (*Porphyrio melanotus*), one bird; White-fronted Heron (*Notophox nova-hollandia*), one bird; Welcome Swallow (*Hirundo neoxena*), several occasions; Magpie Lark (*Grallina cyanoleuca*), two birds; Mistletoe Bird (*Dicaeum hirundinaceum*); Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike (*Graucalus nova-hollandia*), two birds; Black and White Fantail (*Rhipidura leucophrys*), two birds; European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*), in flocks of from 50 to 60 birds. Mr. Dignum states that none of the birds stayed for long, with the exception of the Fantail and Mistletoe Bird, and these unfortunately were collected for an English ornithologist.—A. S. LE SOUEF, C.M.Z.S., Taronga Park, Sydney.

* * *

Pallid Cuckoo in May.—On 30th May this year I saw a Pallid Cuckoo near the homestead on "Roseneath." The bird uttered the single note call two or three times as it flew away.—C. E. SIMSON, R.A.O.U., "Roseneath," Casterton, Vic.

* * *

The Moulting of the Blue Wren.—In *The Emu*, Vol. XXIII., I published a few notes on the moulting of the Superb Blue Wren (*Malurus cyaneus*). These notes were incomplete owing to my absence from home. This year I have attempted to fill in the missing record of the moulting. On the 28th January, the male bird in full plumage, together with the female and three young were always to be seen in my garden. This continued right up to the 10th of February, when the male had a slightly ragged appearance. From this on to 14th the male gradually became more untidy, grey feathers appearing amongst the blue; on the 15th few blue feathers were noted on the body, but the tail feathers had the bluish colouring. The male now began to keep more to the shelter of shrubs, creepers, etc., seldom joining his family; but he always came out under the sprinkler when I started it first thing in the morning. This spray the whole family thoroughly enjoyed, warbling and running about under the water shower to their hearts' content. By March 1st the male had lost all colour, and had joined his family. March 20th.—The family

of five grey birds are together, bathing under the spray from the sprinkler at 7 a.m., which is a daily performance with them when the sprinkler starts to spray. From close observation I have found that when the male bird moults the blue feathers are thrown off. I have actually seen one ragged blue feather thrown off when he shook himself during his morning bath, and have found numerous blue feathers in the garden. I have also come to the conclusion that when the male bird takes on his new coat of blue it is a colour-change of the feathers, none of which is cast off. Though this species more than probable the same pair of birds, have reared 17 young birds during my residence here (one brood a year only), and have kept their yearly brood with them till about the middle of April, I have found that only the one pair breed in my garden, which measures 110 feet by 220 feet, though there is plenty of cover for nesting. Another pair of birds nest in my neighbour's garden; but, though often seen on our adjoining fence, they seldom encroach on "my Blue Wrens' patch," I have on occasions noticed a battle royal, more or less friendly, when the intruding pair has hurriedly departed over the fence with our male bird giving his triumphant warble from the top of the fence before returning to his home.—J. N. MCGILP, King's Park, Adelaide.

* * *

Gould's Description of the Brown Warbler.—Copied from E. Ashby's note-book. Description of *Gerygone fusca*, Gould's Hand-Book, Sp. 156, page 268; amended E. Ashby, R.A.O.U. Congress, Adelaide, 1922. The word "white" should be amended to "brown." Description: "Two centre tail feathers brown, the remainder *white* (substitute brown) at the base, succeeded by a broad band of deep blackish brown, round which is a broad stripe of white, which entirely crosses the outer feathers, but only the inner webs of the remainder, the tips pale brown." (In some specimens the outer feather is white right across, in others barely so.)

I have this moment got down my specimens of *G. fusca*, and find that, with the substitution of "brown" for "white" where indicated above, the description is absolutely accurate for my specimens. On the other hand, the description as it stands is not accurate for the Western Australian bird that we have known as *culicivora*, and rightly so, I believe, for in that bird the white is carried across the outer web in more than the pair of outer feathers. I think that if you refer to Gould's plate you will find that *fusca* is applied to the bird with a brown base to the tail feathers, and *culicivora* to the bird with the white base to the tail feathers; if so, the plate is quite correct. To make Gould's description accurate, the word *brown* needs substituting for *white* in the one place. In no other way can Gould's work be made accurate whichever way you take it.—E. ASHBY, C.F.A.O.U., "Wittunga," Blackwood, South Australia.

Seasonal Influences on the Breeding of Native Birds.—

In the interior of the Australian continent, the seasons are very erratic; this affects the breeding of the birds of that region. In bad seasons the birds do not breed to any extent, and should they do so, the clutch laid is usually below normal. In good periods, when the supply of food is suitable, the birds lay large clutches, and continue to breed while "the going is good." The years 1921 and 1922 on Moolawatana were very bad, and few, if any, of the birds bred in the usual way. In April, 1923, we had a break-up of the drought, and within three weeks from the first rainfall, the birds were hard at work preparing for future families. During July, I noted some abnormally large sets of eggs. The Bare-eyed Cockatoo was invariably sitting on four eggs, whereas its usual clutch is 3. The Galah had also added another egg to its usual 4-egg set. The Ground Lark, whose 3 eggs were generally incubated, had preferred to hatch out 4 eggs as a rule, though sets of 5 eggs were noted. The Orange-fronted Tang had also taken 4 eggs as a fair thing; this also applied to the Crimson and White-fronted Tangs, which were nesting in larger numbers than recorded previously. The Brown Song Lark was sitting on 4 eggs, instead of its usual complement of 3 eggs. The little Red-capped Robin invariably had 3 eggs in nest, though this is unusual with this bird in the interior in normal times. The greatest increase noted was with the Cinnamon Ground-Bird, which was sitting on four eggs. Two eggs is usual, though 3 eggs have occasionally been found. Kestrels were endeavouring to hatch out 6 or 7 eggs. The Spotted Harrier had taken 4 eggs as its complement instead of 3 as usual. Though dozens of Australian Dotterels and Gibber-birds were observed nesting, none has exceeded the 3-egg clutch. The Black-banded Whiteface, which invariably has adopted the standard of 2 eggs in our part, had in one instance reared 4 young, and a 3-egg set was noted, though 2 eggs were the more often found. The foregoing serves to show that the birds realise their responsibility and lay more eggs when all things are favourable.—J. NEIL MCGILP, R.A.O.U., King's Park, Adelaide, 5/12/23.

* * *

The Curlew, an Annual Visitor.—It is the usual custom of the Australian Sea Curlew (*Numenius cyanopus*) to nest in Siberia during June. A point of this kind should always excite one's interest, not only because it is a flight of 8000 miles each way to and from the tundra, but because the young return with the adults. At this abnormally late moment there is a flock of fifty on Pittwater, and we wonder why. What are the food and climatic conditions in the frozen north, and could we make this flock of birds a weather bureau? There certainly is a reason, because Godwits are mixed with them, making a further sub-

stantial interest. These migratory birds are feeding on the mud flats of a small islet a few hundred yards from the main shore. When the tide rises and covers their food bed and shelter, they too suddenly rise and make for the sandspit of Milford, a few hundred yards from the mainland. A hunter tells the story that one of this flock was large and fat, and made good eating. The present writer considers he was in good company when he fed on the same flats with these birds some 8000 miles from Hobart. He now feels there is something lacking in southern hospitality. The hunter was referred to the close season of the Game Act, with much misgiving as to the result of the next high tide.—R. HALL, H.F.A.O.U., Hobart, 16/6/24.

* * *

Cuckoo and Emu-Wren.—When I called upon a Devonport resident who indulges occasionally in Quail shooting, he showed me, as a great rarity, a Narrow-billed Bronze-Cuckoo (*Chalcites basalis*) and a male Emu-Wren (*Stipiturus malachurus*), which he had taken together. While traversing some tussocky, swampy country not many miles away, towards the end of March last, he noticed a pair of the Wrens alternately bringing food to their foster-child. As my friend approached, the pair vainly tried to induce the young Cuckoo to descend into the tussocky tangle in which they themselves took refuge. Mr. A. J. Campbell, in his fine work on the "Nests and Eggs of Australian Birds," mentions that, when in company with Mr. G. E. Shepherd, of the Victorian Field Naturalists' Club, he saw a nest of this Wren containing an egg of the Narrow-billed Bronze Cuckoo. This is the first instance I have met with in Tasmania of the Emu-Wren fostering the usurpers.—H. STUART DOVE, F.Z.S., W. Devonport, Tas.

* * *

The Birds of the Camp-Out.—In *The Emu*, Vol. XXIII., on page 293, Miss Fletcher, writing from a long experience in the Scottsdale district of Tasmania, states that the Crake noted "calling" there was most likely the Spotless Crake. As one of the compilers of the list of birds seen in Tasmania, I wish to express my thanks to Miss Fletcher for the correction, and I would like to say that Mr. Parsons and myself heard the call and were a little dubious about recording it; in any case, we showed that our observation was from the "call." This shows the need of care in recording birds. In dealing with many of our birds, records can be reliable only from skins actually collected on the spot. The information that Miss Fletcher gives in reference to the Emu-Wren is interesting. Judging by the weather we experienced in Tasmania, the Island birds evidently do not expect fine weather until late in the season and commence nesting operations earlier than a mainlander would expect.—J. NEIL MCGILF, R.A.O.U., King's Park, Adelaide.

Nests of the Gang-gang Cockatoo.—In Mr. Howe's article on the Gang-gang Cockatoo in the July number of *The Emu* there are one of two statements that are not quite correct. Mr. Howe quotes me as saying the birds invariably breed in a hollow, dead spout. This is not correct, as of the three nests I have noted two were in such a position and one was in the main barrel of the tree. The first nest contained one egg, and was found on 2/11/1922; the second, with two young birds just hatched, was found on 30/11/1922, and the third with two young about a week old on 7/12/1922. With regard to the presence of the Glossy Black Cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus lathami*) in the Casterton district, there is a Black Cockatoo with a red-tail here, but I have never taken a specimen, and it may turn out to be the Red-tailed Black Cockatoo (*C. banksi*). I hope to spend some time with the Gang-gangs this spring, and later to obtain a specimen of the local "Red-tail." If successful I shall write up my notes for *The Emu*.—C. E. SIMSON, R.A.O.U., "Roseneath," Casterton, Vic.

* * *

Bell Miners in the Casterton District, Western Victoria.—On the 7th May of this year I noted a flock of perhaps 40 or 50 Bell Miners (*Manorhina melanophrys*) on the Glenelg River, about eighteen miles north of Casterton. They appeared to be feeding amongst the leaves of the red gums, and were travelling in a south-westerly direction. This must be a western record for the birds, and it will be interesting to see if they establish themselves in the suitable country that starts forty miles further down the Glenelg River.—C. E. SIMSON, R.A.O.U., "Roseneath," Casterton, Vic.

Reviews

[A List of British Birds prepared by the Special Committee Appointed by the British Ornithologists' Union, and published by the authority of the Union.]

[*Systema Avium Ethiopicarum*.—A systematic List of the Birds of the Ethiopian Region. By William Lutley Sclater, M.A., M.B.O.U. Prepared in conjunction with Special Committees of the British and American Ornithologists' Unions. Part I., pp. 1-304. Published 30th April, 1924. Price, £1/1/-.]

A hearty welcome was given to these very important works which reached Australia practically together.

Curiosity ran high as to the standards of the *Systema Avium* (A.O.U. and B.O.U.) committees. It must be confessed that disappointment was keen, as it was realised that there was still much to be done before a uniform list of birds on uniform standards could be prepared.

Mr. Sclater is to be congratulated on the fine work he has done in dealing so effectively with the birds of so important a