

The Position of the Australian Bustard To-Day

By A. J. MARSHALL, R.A.O.U., Sydney, New South Wales.

The Australian Bustard or "Plain Turkey" (*Eupodotus australis*), one of the most distinctive of Australian birds, has long been a subject of pessimistic comment amongst ornithologists. Reports are to hand which indicate that each year the Bustard is becoming rarer, and now, in New South Wales at least, the species is said to be approaching extinction. In view of that fact, I was continually on the lookout for "Plain Turkeys" during recent peregrinations in Queensland, and by dint of numerous queries, was able to elicit some information concerning the alarming decrease of this noble species. In the face of my own observations, I consider that some reports concerning the scarcity of the Bustard in Queensland are somewhat exaggerated. True, in many localities where twenty years ago Bustards were numerous, they are almost extinct to-day, but in other localities I found they were even common. This disappearance from some areas seems to be primarily due to three factors: Encroaching settlement, sportsmen, and the imported fox. I propose to confine my remarks to the first two menaces.

The first factor is unavoidable. Our vast "out-door Australia" must be developed at all costs, but I do not think that our sole representative of the valuable Bustard family need necessarily become extinct because of increasing settlement. Records which indicate that Bustards are not greatly perturbed by the presence of sheep stations or railway lines are not rare. I quite often flushed Bustards from the home-paddocks of sheep stations, and I also found that a train rattling noisily over the downs, in the majority of cases fails to make them "take-off". They also appear to take very little notice of motor vehicles, for in many localities I found the Bustards most unwilling to fly at the approach of a car or truck: in most instances they would merely run with wings outstretched some hundred yards or so and then resume foraging operations.

That the Australian Bustard is still actually plentiful in many Queensland localities I do not doubt. Whilst passing through one western district I saw fourteen "Plain Turkeys" from the train window in a few miles; within the same area there were also observed six Emus (*Dromaius novæ-hollandiæ*) and about twenty kangaroos (*Macropus giganteus*). The Bustards were usually disinclined to take to the air. Occasionally, one ran perhaps one hundred yards, but generally they merely stopped feeding and gazed at the train as it went rattling over the plains.

If protection laws were rigidly enforced and the birds themselves left alone, the inevitable onward march of settlement would, in my opinion, not materially affect the species. But in the lack of enforcement of such laws lies, it would appear, the factor governing the birds' increasing scarcity. The protection laws of Queensland (in relation to the Bustard) are not only inadequate, but seem to be rarely enforced. Here are some personal experiences in support of this contention:—

I was conversing with the manager of a station near Augathella, Western Queensland, where Bustards appear to be fairly plentiful. The manager explained that if hunted by car towards dusk, "Plain Turkeys" were comparatively easily shot on his particular property. I was invited to participate in a forthcoming hunt, and when I inquired regarding protection laws concerning the Bustard the manager seemed considerably surprised. He explained briefly, if vaguely, that "Ducks are protected in the breeding season, but it's always 'O.K.' to shoot Turkeys"! Yet on almost every railway platform in Queensland is a birds and animals protection schedule issued by the Government of that State. The schedules show briefly and concisely the position of most Queensland birds, and the Australian Bustard is no exception. The "Bustard or 'Plain Turkey' (*Eupodotus*)" is included in schedule II—birds partially protected. In "District No. 1" the Bustard is protected from September 1 to March 31 of the following year, and in "District No. 2" from December 1 to June 30 of the next year. The dividing line between Nos. 1 and 2 districts is roughly from Bundaberg, Emerald, Tambo and east of Jericho, to about Prairie; and then west, roughly 100 miles below the main central railway line. Augathella and Blackall are in the lower (No. 1) district.

The protection laws are flouted with impunity in many western towns. For instance, the man in whose truck I travelled from Tambo to Blackall last February shot, on the outskirts of the latter town, a Turkey from a "mob" of six. He carelessly threw the bird into the back of the truck and continued his journey, leaving the head and neck hanging ungracefully over the tailboard. A number of people, including two police constables, grinned when they saw this strange sight as we passed through Blackall.

If that sort of thing is openly countenanced by the authorities, how can we hope to keep the Bustard with us? The birds are comparatively easy for anyone possessing a car to secure, so it seems that it will be only a matter of a few years—especially as the fox is reported to be encroaching—before Bustards, in central-western Queensland, are quite unknown.

In *The Emu*, Vol. XXX, p. 101, Dr. C. Sullivan remarks

on the position of the Australian Bustard in north-western New South Wales. Dr. Sullivan's remarks on the situation are most enlightening, particularly with regard to the foxes' depredations, the "man with the gun", and laxity on the part of the police. Dr. Sullivan tells of a New South Wales policeman who stated that he "shot two ['turkeys'] last week". I can report even more flagrant cases than that.

It appears that the local police lock-up keepers in Queensland are paid at the rate of about $1/3$ per meal for all prisoners they have in their charge. According to recently-discharged "train-jumpers" with whom I conversed at Charters Towers, the fare provided in most lock-ups is far below the value of $1/3$ per meal. Consequently, we at once see why most lock-up keepers are anxious to keep their particular "institution" well filled. "But — is all right," grinned one young train-jumper, concluding his remarks on the poorness of gaol "tucker". I naturally inquired why — was all right, and my informant replied that "Sergeant — always feeds the 'hoboes' on 'Turkey'." It did not take me long to obtain the full facts of this extraordinary case. According to these people, Sergeant — goes regularly himself, or sends one of his constables out each week-end, to shoot "Turkeys" on which to feed prisoners during the following week.

No wonder — lock-up is said to be invariably full! The place is famed among swagmen throughout Queensland as the lock-up where one may get "Turkey" dinners all the year round. I was told the above not by one person, but by half-a-dozen in different parts of Queensland. Whilst such a state of affairs is allowed to exist how can we possibly hope to save this noble species from extinction? In Blackall, I saw two constables disregard entirely a flagrant breach of the protection laws. Dr. Sullivan stated that a police officer told him of shooting Bustards, and offering as an excuse that if he didn't get them [Bustards] the fox would! In Sergeant —'s district the Bustard is still fairly plentiful. But how long will it remain so, when the local police chief sets such a bad example for his charges?

Although, as I have remarked, the Bustard is not uncommon in many parts, yet I venture to state that the bird could well be totally and rigidly protected throughout Queensland all the year round—not for about one-half of the year as it is now. At present anyone living near the border of the two districts may shoot Bustards for eight months of the year and be within the law!

The Bustard's only "crime", so far as I can see, is the extreme delicacy of its flesh. Surely, therefore, something can be done to prevent a wholesale destruction, which, if continued, must ultimately lead to the extinction of one of our most distinctive birds.