

Stray Feathers

Spinebill Honeyeater. — A pair of Eastern Spinebills (*Acanthorhynchus tenuirostris*) built their nest in my garden last season. A point that impressed me was the number of blow-flies they brought to their young. Apparently they experienced no difficulty in finding and capturing the flies, which greatly out-numbered the other insects caught. Another point noticed was that the parent birds always flew into the tree at a low level and ascended the branches to the nest at the top of the tree. They did that invariably, but it can scarcely be a protective measure because they always flew out of the tree at the top. One of the young birds had a pronounced malformation of the bill, the upper and lower mandibles being spread in the shape of the letter V—surely an unusual occurrence.—N. L. ROBERTS, Homebush, N.S.W., 30/4/35.

Notes on the Stubble Quail and Silver Gull.—I have studied the habits of the Stubble Quail (*Coturnix pectoralis*) and find that they are only found here on the edge of crops where the weeds are growing. I have never seen a Quail in a clean crop but have flushed them where the weeds had a better hold than the wheat. It has been said to me that Quail eat wheat, as it has been found in their crops when cleaned for eating. As the shooting season opens here after the wheat has been harvested they would no doubt pick up grain that has been dropped or spilled in harvesting. That, to my mind, accounts for any so-called destruction on their part. When burning off stubble in March I have seen clutches of young Quail just able to run about, which shows how careful our Governments should be in fixing the opening of the shooting season.

At the R.A.O.U. Congress at Adelaide on November 8, 1929, I was asked when speaking of Silver Gulls (*Larus novæ-hollandiæ*) if I knew that Seagulls at Port Victoria, Yorke Peninsula, followed the seed drills and ate the grain. As I had never heard of or seen that taking place I decided to find out if it was so. What I find is that they pick up odd grain that is not covered by the drill—the same grains would never germinate as they are left on the surface of the ground. What the Gulls are after is small white grubs which are in good numbers in the soil of this district, Port Victoria being only ten miles due south of here. I have seen a crop on Point Pearce Aboriginal Reserve, seven miles south of here, being eaten out by caterpillars. The Gulls attacked them and saved the greater part of the crop. My homestead is two and a half miles east of Balgouran, or Port Warreen as it is marked on some maps.—T. G. SOUTER, Maitland, S.A., 16/5/35.

Nesting Site of Peaceful Dove.—While passing through a patch of forest country at Cattai Creek, near Sydney, on October 28, 1934, my attention was arrested by the alarm notes of a Fuscous Honeyeater (*Meliphaga fusca*). On walking slowly towards the spot I noticed the bird in a paper-bark tree near the nest of a Yellow Robin (*Eopsaltria australis*); from its actions it seemed that it had a nest of its own in the immediate vicinity, so I watched it closely. What followed was interesting and unusual.

The Fuscous Honeyeater continued with its cries for a few minutes and then flew to a nearby gum tree in which a Peaceful Dove (*Geopelia placida*) was resting. I thought at the time that it was alarmed at the presence of the Dove, but it soon returned to the Robin's nest and, alighting on it, gave every appearance of brooding. Shortly it left the nest and hopped about the surrounding branches in such an excited and agitated manner that I became convinced that its own nest was placed in the "Yellow Bob's," and that it was afraid of the Dove. For more than a quarter of an hour the procedure continued, the bird sitting on the nest about every three or four minutes.

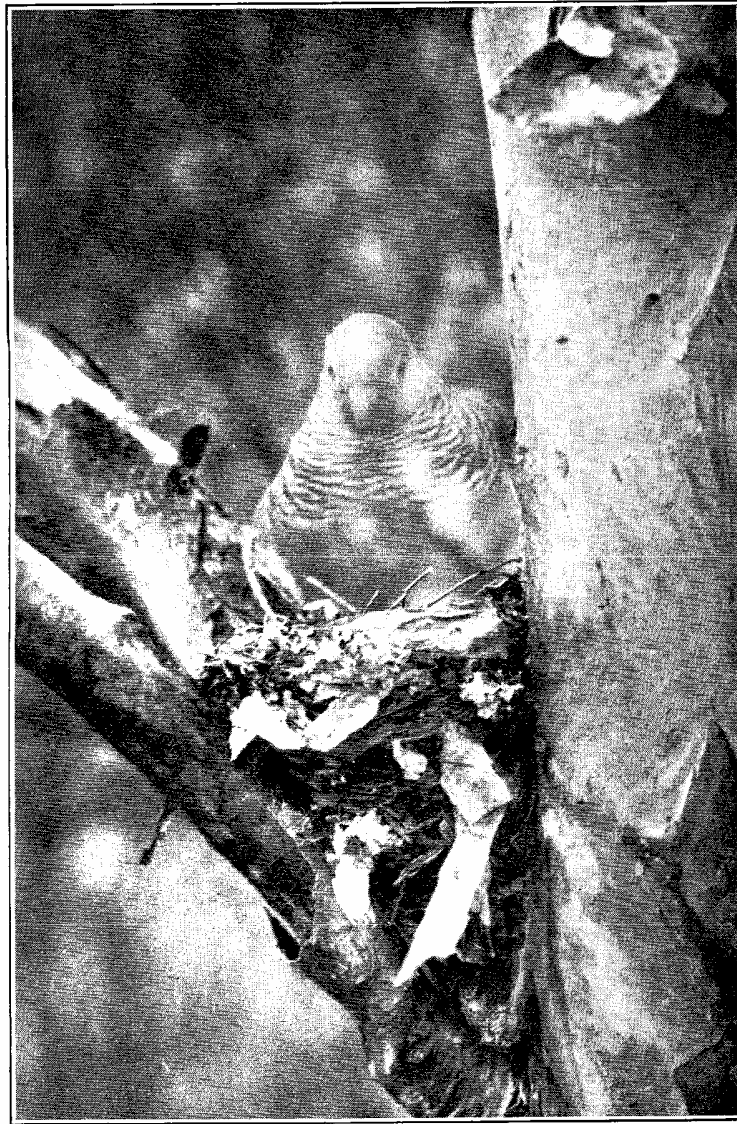
Eventually the Dove, which, throughout the whole of this period had not moved, flew to the paper-bark tree and alighted near the nest. I imagined that this would drive the Honeyeater into a greater frenzy, but, on the contrary, it became quieter and restricted its movements between the Dove and the nest.

After about ten minutes the Dove stirred itself and sidled along to the nest on which the Fuscous Honeyeater was then sitting. Instead of the outburst anticipated, the Honeyeater flew away, whilst the Dove settled down to brood. For the next half-hour no change took place, so to satisfy my curiosity as to which bird was the owner of the nest—Honeyeater, Robin or Dove—I climbed the tree and found that it was the Dove that had nested in the Yellow Robin's nest, and that the nest contained one egg.

The Dove had flown away during this interruption, but as soon as I had descended, the Honeyeater re-appeared and the whole procedure was repeated until the Dove commenced to brood once more. No further interest was manifested by the Honeyeater, which joined with its own species in a search for food.

Two weeks later (November) I revisited the locality with Mr. K. A. Hindwood, and found the nest then contained two eggs, one of which was slightly chipped. We erected a tripod for the camera and settled down to await the return of the Dove. As it was evidently afraid of the lens it would not approach the tree, neither was the Honeyeater seen, as on the previous visit.

Later in the afternoon a heavy rainstorm occurred and,



"Ghost" image of Peaceful Dove on nest of Yellow Robin.
Photo. by Roy P. Cooper.

after returning from procuring a raincoat, I found the Dove and the Honeyeater were both in the tree. Almost immediately the Dove alighted on the nest, but would not cover the eggs. The rain was so heavy that it was difficult to see what the bird was doing, although I approached as close as I dared. Moving restlessly about the nest it suddenly flew away with what appeared to be an egg in its bill; after flying only a few yards it dropped what it was carrying and returned to the nest. Owing to the small opening of the bird's bill and the largeness of the egg, I thought I must have been mistaken, for the bird continued to sit for a short time. It then arose, and after a further period of restlessness flew away and did not return.

When the rain stopped I climbed the tripod and found that both eggs were gone. On searching the ground near the tree, I found one egg where the bird had dropped it in its first flight. It was intact with the exception of two small holes about a quarter of an inch apart, caused, apparently, by the bird's bill penetrating the shell. On breaking the egg open it was found to contain a young one within a few days of hatching; portion of the yolk was adhering to the abdomen.

As there was no further prospect of obtaining a photograph of the adult bird I decided to photograph the nest before dismantling the tripod, but discovered that the camera shutter had either not been set or had been released accidentally. Thinking that the former was the case through carelessness on my part, I re-set the shutter and exposed the plate.

When the negative was developed a "ghost" image of the Dove on the nest was shown. Evidently the weight of the rain on the long string release had "fired" the shutter when the bird was sitting. Thus when I photographed the nest, I unwittingly made a double exposure which had the effect of "fading out" the image of the Dove.—ROY P. COOPER, Eastwood, N.S.W., 24/5/35.

Birds Out of Season and Other Notes.—During July and August, 1934, Rufous Song-Larks (*Cinclorhynchus matthewsi*) were observed in three separate portions of the district, each distant about seven miles one from the other. On each occasion the birds were observed in well-sheltered valleys (narrow, grassy, and timber skirted). This is the first occasion I have known these birds to "overwinter." On August 12, a Black-eared Cuckoo was seen and kept under observation for over an hour. During the period I was watching the bird (a male) it was joined by the female, but she only stayed a few minutes. The birds were found in a ring-barked paddock adjoining green timber. The country in the ring-barked area is densely covered with stinkwort and blue-bell bush. The male Cuckoo was noticed busily

picking at the stinkwort and I thought at first it was searching for seeds. Closer examination, however, revealed the fact that the stinkwort was covered with a species of sand-fly. No difficulty was found in getting within nine or ten feet of the bird. The only note uttered was a fairly loud but rather mournful "keeo-kee," heard at intervals. On the same day a bird was heard singing higher up on the hill, and on investigation it proved to be of a species I had heard and seen the previous month in the same locality. After stalking the bird for some time a glimpse was obtained as it dropped to cover in the thick undergrowth of stinkwort and blue-bell bush. A glimpse of chestnut-red at the upper base of the tail inclined me to think it was either a Heath-Wren (*Hylacola pyrrhopygia*) or a Shy Heath-Wren (*H. canta*). As the type specimen of the former was obtained at Cobbora—distant thirty-five miles—I am inclined to think that my bird may have been *H. pyrrhopygia*. The locality these discoveries were made in is rich in bird life, and it was here that Orange-bellied Parrots (*Neophema chrysogaster*) and Spotted Quail-Thrushes (*Cinclosoma punctatum*) were first observed in this district. It seems a great pity that a considerable slice of this country could not be freed from the rabbit and fox menace, and set aside as a sanctuary for bird life.—GEO. W. ALTHOFER, Dripstone, N.S.W.

The Slaughter of Eagles.—Recently I noticed a paragraph in a provincial newspaper regarding an effective method of trapping eagles on a western station in New South Wales. A cage containing a white fowl (a rooster, for preference) is made of rabbit-netting and securely fastened to the ground. Rabbit traps are then pegged around the cage and Wedge-tailed Eagles are decoyed so successfully by the fowl that no less than 205 were caught in the first six weeks and more than 500 in a period of five months. As the Eagle is not protected it is impossible to stop such wholesale slaughter, pastoralists being divided in their opinions as to whether the bird is friend or foe. Mr. A. F. Basset Hull tells me he inspected an Eagle's nest at Cobbora, New South Wales, and counted the fresh skins of forty rabbits that had been killed subsequent to the departure of the young ones from the nest. It is Mr. Hull's opinion that, so far as concerns sheep, Eagles kill only weak lambs which would probably die in any case. Mr. Walter Froggatt examined a nest near Uralla and found the remains of three hares, one "o'possum," two rabbits, and the skins of two fox cubs about a foot long. There were many lambing ewes in the paddock where the birds were nesting. Surely it should not be difficult to collect evidence which will indicate definitely whether the Eagle should be protected

wholly or partially, or slaughtered indiscriminately. Another point worth investigating is raised by Messrs. Lucas and Le Souef in their book, *The Birds of Australia*. According to these authorities the destruction of thousands of Eagles annually does not affect their numbers for they appear next season "as numerous as ever." The birds are supposed to gather from the fastnesses of the Australian Alps. Considerable ornithological exploratory work has been undertaken since that book was written in 1911, and more reliable information should be available to determine whether the Eagle can continue to hold its own in spite of the heavy toll exacted by pastoralists.—N. L. ROBERTS, Homebush, N.S.W., 30/4/35.

Bendigo (Vic.) Notes.—The following are extracts from my diary for 1934:—

3 2 34.—A young Fantailed Cuckoo (*Cacomantis flabelliformis*) visited garden, occupying a green wattle for a few hours.

10/4 34.—An Oriole (*Oriolus sagittatus*), which visits me each year, arrived and sang in an orange tree all day.

25 4 34.—First Scarlet Robin (*Petroica multicolor*) for the year noted.

14/7 34.—Saw a Restless Flycatcher (*Seisura inquieta*) and heard it "grinding" both when hovering and when perching. Stood within ten yards of it and saw it emit three "grinds" in a low key with its mouth partly open, and then three more in a higher key with the mouth as wide as possible. It then started again with the low notes. For some interesting notes on the calls of this bird see *The Emu*, Vol. xv, pp. 53, 147.

29/7 34.—Several birds nested early this year; but the greatest surprise was a pair of Crested Bellbirds (*Oreoica gutturalis*) that I saw, on this day, carrying strips of weather-blackened calico to a partly-built nest. Two young were reared. This is at least one month earlier than usual.

1/8/34.—A pair of Noisy Miners (*Myzantha melanocephala*) building on this early date.

4 8/34.—Large flock of Diamond Doves (*Geopelia cuneata*) arrived at the back of the White Hills Cemetery, remained for a few days, and then disappeared. I was unable to find the birds again or to find out if they bred in the district. This is the only occasion on which I have seen or heard of Diamond Doves in the Bendigo area.

19/8/34.—This day I found my first nest of a pair of Shy Ground-Wrens (*Hylacola cauta*). I had despaired of finding one in the dense "whipstick" scrub, although the birds are fairly common and are often seen. I almost trod on the nest, which was made of the leaves and bark of the green mallee (*Eucalyptus viridis*) and was the size and

shape of a football cut in half through the longer axis. It looked like a heap of rubbish at the foot of a tree, but the sitting bird disclosed it as a nest by flushing. The opening was right on the ground and well hidden. I extracted the three beautiful mauve-coloured eggs with a tea-spoon which I carry for inspecting eggs in domed nests. The eggs hatched sometime between this date and September 2. After the birds had reared their brood, I pulled the nest to pieces and found a small hollow, about one inch deep and three inches in diameter, filled with a large quantity of rabbits' fur over which was a larger quantity of small, soft feathers. The fur when rolled in the hand was about the size of a tennis ball.

25/8/34.—A pair of Yellow-tailed Pardalotes (*Pardalotus xanthopygus*)* were excavating a tunnel for their nest. They perched in a tree near the tunnel; then the male descended branch by branch and flew to the hole, looked around cautiously, and "went below." Hardly was he out of sight when a spray of sand came out of the hole, indicating some vigorous kicking. After about half-a-minute, the female descended in the same manner from the tree. The male came out, flew to the tree, shook and preened his feathers, and wiped his bill on a branch. While he was doing this the female went below, sent out a spray of sand, and then the male changed places with her. Sometimes they brought out small stones in their bills. From the fact that sand was ejected immediately a bird entered the hole, I concluded that it was sand loosened by the previous excavator and that the birds kicked all the time until they reached the end of the tunnel, and so gradually worked the sand towards the outlet without having to make a special descent.

26/8/34.—The Pardalotes struck a root, so started a second tunnel.

1/9/34.—Another root confronted the persistent Pardalotes, and so a third hole was started.

2/9/34.—A fourth attempt by these birds was evidently successful, because at a later date I saw them carrying food to a hole.

9/9/34.—A pair of Brown-headed Honeyeaters (*Melithreptus brevirostris*) stole, from a Yellow Robin's nest, some material with which to build their own.

9/9/34.—I found an Owlet-Nightjar (*Egotheles cristata*) in a log and hoped for a nest, but although flushed from the same place on subsequent days, the bird did not lay there.

6/10/34.—Whilst standing near a wire fence a Wren alighted on it within a few feet of me. I was not very interested at first, thinking that it was *Malurus cyaneus*,

* A mallee form—was this bird also in the "whipstick" country?—Ed.

but it stayed long enough for me to identify it as the rare (here) and beautiful Purple-backed Wren (*Malurus assimilis*).

20/10/34.—In the nest of a Blue Wren (*Malurus cyaneus*) I found an egg of the Golden Bronze-Cuckoo (*Lamprococcys plagosus*). Nearby I saw and heard a Bronze-Cuckoo but was unable to identify it.

21/10/34.—At 4.30 a.m., whilst lying awake, I heard a Sacred Kingfisher (*Halcyon sanctus*) calling from somewhere nearby.—MARC COHN, Bendigo, Vic., 26/4/35.

Beautiful Firetail.—This beautiful Finch (*Zonæginthus bellus*) is of comparatively rare occurrence in southern Victoria, and certainly within 50 miles of Melbourne is not often seen. Members of the Leach Memorial Club record seeing two small parties of these birds at Woori-Yallock, on March 17, 1935. Other Melbourne records are Cardinia Creek Beaconsfield, Mt. Waverley, and Melton.—M. L. WIGAN, Melbourne, 23/3/35

Scrub-Wrens at Eucla.—It was surmised that *Sericornis maculatus* was distributed around the head of the Australian Bight. I have seen it in fair numbers at Eucla, near the border of Western Australia with South Australia. I know the species well and many times had a good view of it in the coastal scrubs there.—J. N. MCGILP, Adelaide, S.A., 18/5/35.

Swifts and Weather.—A very interesting note has been sent me by Dr. Bruce Anderson concerning the Spine-tailed Swift (*Hirundapus caudacutus*) in Launceston, Tasmania. On March 23, at half-past five in the evening, Dr. Anderson was on Windmill Hill, when he noticed overhead a party of about 150 of these fine birds, slowly circling at heights of from 100 to 200 feet or even more. They were not using the wing-stroke at all, but wheeled in unison, and at one moment, against the background of dark cloud, one wing would appear (the sun being low in the west) as if illuminated by an electric light. The next moment scores of "lights" would vanish. They disappeared to the north, travelling very deliberately, the wind being moderate from west-north-west. There had been a cyclonic disturbance from that quarter the previous day, which did a good deal of damage in the north of Tasmania. The previous week (March 18) we had a party of Swifts over Devonport, between 2.30 p.m. and 4 p.m., circling at heights of from 50 to 200 feet or so, the wind being from the north-east, fresh. They did not appear to be migrating, but circled about as if feeding. Rain started in this instance just after they disappeared, and continued all the evening and until after midnight. This was the first and only party of Swifts noted

this summer in the Mersey district.—H. STUART DOVE, Devonport, Tas., 30/3/35.

The Wedgebill as a Victorian Species.—For many years the Crested Wedgebill (*Sphenostoma cristatum*) has been included in literature as a Victorian species. Hitherto there appears to be no evidence of actual records to support that. The Mallee area which was considered to be its Victorian habitat has been extensively searched for many years by experienced ornithologists such as F. E. Howe, J. A. Ross, A. H. E. Mattingley and others, without the species being definitely recorded. The recent discovery by the first two and E. Bunn of the Black-throated Whipbird (*Psophodes nigrogularis*) in the Victorian Mallee has led to statements that the Wedgebill had probably been erroneously recorded, the Whipbird being the species actually seen.

That the Wedgebill is a Victorian breeding species has, however, been definitely established by me, as on October 1, 1930, a typical nest of this species containing two eggs was discovered within 200 yards of the Werrimull railway station, about 14 miles south of the Murray in north-western Victoria. In that area the mallee scrub is of an entirely different nature from that inhabited by the Black-throated Whipbird—growing, in fact, to a height of about 30 feet. The area, however, in which the Wedgebills were breeding contained only second growth where the scrub had been cut down and allowed to spring up, the nest being built among the suckers springing from a stump four feet above the ground.—R. S. MILLER, Bentleigh, Vic., 24/6/35.

Types of *Sericornis*.—Seeing that the types of many Australian birds, including all those collected by Gould, are not in Australia, it becomes increasingly necessary to have something to represent them in their country of origin. For such a purpose the R.A.O.U. Council sent three specimens of *Sericornis* to the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, U.S.A., where some of Gould's types are deposited. The following extracts from a letter received from the Director, Dr. Witmer Stone, show how interesting and important is the matter. The specimens referred to now become definite standards for comparison, and will be of greatest value to students.

"The specimen of *frontalis* agrees very well with the type, though the throat is more streaked, the type having only a few small stripes on the sides of the throat, the middle portion being unstreaked, while the yellow tinge on the breast extends over the throat as well, which in your bird is whitish.

"The type of *osculans* is more heavily streaked than any of yours, the streaks running down on the breast, which is decidedly grey in colour.

"Your third specimen seems to be different from any of the types and unlike anything that we have. If not already named I should

think it an unnamed subspecies. The types were exposed for a number of years in exhibition cases previous to my coming to the museum in 1888, and have in consequence become a little duller in colour than fresh specimens. I have taken this into consideration in comparing them with your birds. It is hard to make a satisfactory comparison of the female type of *laevigaster* with the male which you send, but so far as I can see they are the same.

"I am at any time very glad to make comparisons of the Gould types with specimens which you may care to send for the purpose.

"The types were unmounted soon after 1888, and are now preserved in tight steel cabinets where they are safe for all time from light, dust or insect pests. They are still for the most part in excellent state of preservation, although the brown birds are a bit gray, a change which I am inclined to think takes place even when they are kept in the dark."

The Council has decided that General Meetings of the Union are to be revived. Meetings will be held every two months (first Tuesday) at the Union's Room. Members are urged to attend and make the meetings a success. The first meeting will be held in July, and the following one in September.

Mr. Jas. Drummond, F.L.S., F.Z.S., of Christchurch, New Zealand, in an article published in several Dominion newspapers dealing with a collection of birds' eggs, indicates that Mr. Edgar F. Stead intends publishing a book on the eggs of New Zealand birds. There is no book on the subject at present and little literature. The book contemplated will be illustrated in colours and will contain appropriate notes, mainly from Mr. Stead's studies of eggs and observations of nesting birds. Mr. Stead is apparently desirous of obtaining or examining eggs not already in his collection, and members with rare New Zealand birds' eggs might care to communicate with him.

Country Life has forwarded a notification to the effect that, by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum, it is intended to hold a comprehensive exhibition of natural history photographs, to include birds and mammals, in October-November, 1935, in the Whale Hall of the British Museum (Natural History), Cromwell Road, South Kensington, London. The object of this Exhibition is to bring together under one roof the finest collection of Nature photographs that has ever been gathered together and show the general public the advancement and improvement that has been made during recent years in photographing birds and mammals. It is hoped to show not only the work of nature photographers in England but also that of the principal photographers in all parts of the world. Details are being arranged and a prospectus will be available later on application.