



Australian Dotterel brooding.

Photo. by C. E. Bryant.

# The Emu

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## A Note on the Australian Dotterel

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During several excursions to the Victorian mallee, and similar adjoining areas in South Australia and New South Wales, I had always kept an eye open for the Australian Dotterel (*Peltohyas australis*), but without success. The visits of the species to the north-western corner of Victoria, which is its south-eastern limit, appear somewhat irregular, being more nomadic than migratory, and the state of the country inland is apparently not an absolute criterion from which the southern sojourn may be judged. The bird is essentially an open-country form, and, in this State, its habitat is practically confined to the newer mallee wheat-farming areas, where it is to be found on the fallow paddocks, and occasionally on sparsely-grown saltbush flats. Generally speaking, however, the bird appears to move south in early spring, or even earlier, and to depart northwards again before the end of the year, although apparently it sometimes remains throughout the year in one locality. Farmers who know the bird say that it does not come down every year, but the unobtrusive demeanour and habits of the species could easily result in its presence being unknown. Those attributes have undoubtedly been the reason for the modicum of knowledge concerning the bird and its habits.

After leaving the R.A.O.U. Annual Camp in September, 1939, we moved westwards down the Murrumbidgee into the north-west corner of Victoria. Between the Murray river and the Mildura to Renmark road we spent much time looking for Dotterels. Farmers of whom we enquired said that the birds had been about some months previously, but hot and dusty traverses over fallow fields, and jolting car excursions over the like and grassed paddocks, proved fruitless. Searching for the birds in cars was not indulged in merely to prevent fatigue, but because it enables a closer approach, the birds, as is the case with many other

and varied forms, showing less apprehension towards vehicles than humans. The district (Karrawinna North) proved interesting, Crimson and Orange Chats (*Epthiana tricolor* and *E. aurifrons*), Little Quail (*Turnix velox*), Blue-and-white Wrens (*Malurus leuconotus*\*) White-browed Tree-creepers (*Climacteris affinis*) and other mallee or inland forms being found, whilst some photographs were obtained of nesting Cockatiels (*Leptolophus hollandicus*). But nothing was seen of the Dotterel.

We travelled westwards into South Australia, and then southwards and back into Victoria at Manya, where *Psophodes nigrogularis leucogaster* was first discovered. There we learned that a Dotterel with eggs had been seen a few weeks previously. Next morning we were out early searching. We could not locate the eggs that had already been noted, but we discovered two of the birds—and there were probably more—that appeared by their actions to be nesting. The mates of the two birds concerned were not observed at any time. Both birds were in a fallow paddock and one was in close proximity to where the eggs had been noted previously. I believe that this earlier clutch had already hatched out.

Whilst I worked elsewhere, Mr. Roy Wheeler concentrated on one of the birds, which showed inclination to return to the area where he was searching but which would not come very close whilst he was in the vicinity. He therefore retired to a distance and watched through glasses. The general colour of the Australian Dotterel harmonizes perfectly with the hue of the ground, and the pattern of white and black that relieves the general drabness of the plumage matches the small sticks and white stones that lie in the fallow paddocks. Consequently the bird motionless is so inconspicuous as to be virtually invisible, and, as it stops very frequently when suspicious, it is an exasperating task to keep it under observation. Although he watched the bird for an hour, Wheeler did not locate the eggs, but he marked the suspected site for later investigation.

When we returned to the place we tried to track the bird. Hundreds of tiny tracks, in delicate tracery on the sands, radiated out from the centre formed by the greatest concentration of footprints. Theoretically that should have been the nest site, but we could find no trace of the eggs. We followed the tracks away from and back to this particular spot, and the bird—its movements occasionally betrayed it—watched from a distance. Then suddenly, discovery. Three greenish dots, none larger than the nail of one's little finger, were noted poking through the sand.

\*See Mack: "A Revision of the Genus *Malurus*," *Mem. Nat. Mus.*, 8, p. 119, as to the use of this name.—C.E.B.

We knew of the bird's habit of covering the eggs, but did not expect that detection would be so difficult. How the eggs had escaped being trodden upon was remarkable, as they were in the centre of our search area and within ten feet of Wheeler's mark.

The usual ground colour of the eggs is that described as stone or buff. All eggs that I have seen have been of that general hue, and a description that means a brownish egg is that of all standard works on Australian ornithology or oology. North (*Nests and Eggs*, vol. iv, p. 289) says: "There is very little variation in the colour and disposition of the markings on the eggs of this species." But the ground colour of these three eggs was green, the markings being, however, of the usual style. In the first attribute the three eggs were all similar. The eggs of this species are almost abnormally large for the size of the bird.

The Dotterel would not come near whilst we were in the immediate neighbourhood, but I erected the camera and tripod whilst Wheeler went for sticks and hessian with which to construct a hide. Prone on a sandy ridge about two hundred yards away I swept the glasses around until I picked up the bird. It was moving rapidly towards the camera. About every twenty yards it stopped and remained motionless for a time. Finally it was within a few feet of the tripod, which did not appear to frighten it to any extent, and, after a very casual circling of the camera, it settled down upon the eggs. They were uncovered: I had blown the sand from them to provide an object upon which to focus. It is a curious fact that many birds of this type, which show great mistrust of humans, are far from apprehensive of photographic equipment.

We erected a "hide" near the eggs and set the camera. The bird's reaction to the hide was the same as to the camera, almost amounting to disregard. I was able, therefore, to obtain several photographs. Each time I required to reset the camera I signalled to my companions to come up so that I would not have to disclose my presence. I was intrigued at the speed and diligence with which the Dotterel, at the approach of the others, covered the eggs. The spreading of the sandy earth over the eggs was done entirely by the feet: I had considered that some might be brushed on with the wings. Instead of watching the intruders, the bird invariably turned its back on them and commenced an extremely speedy "dance," rising slightly off its feet as it used them alternatively in scratching the sand over the eggs. Then with a hasty look over its shoulder, it ran quickly away. I did not see the birds in the air at any time.