

Photographing the Avocet — and Other Birds — at Lake Midgeon

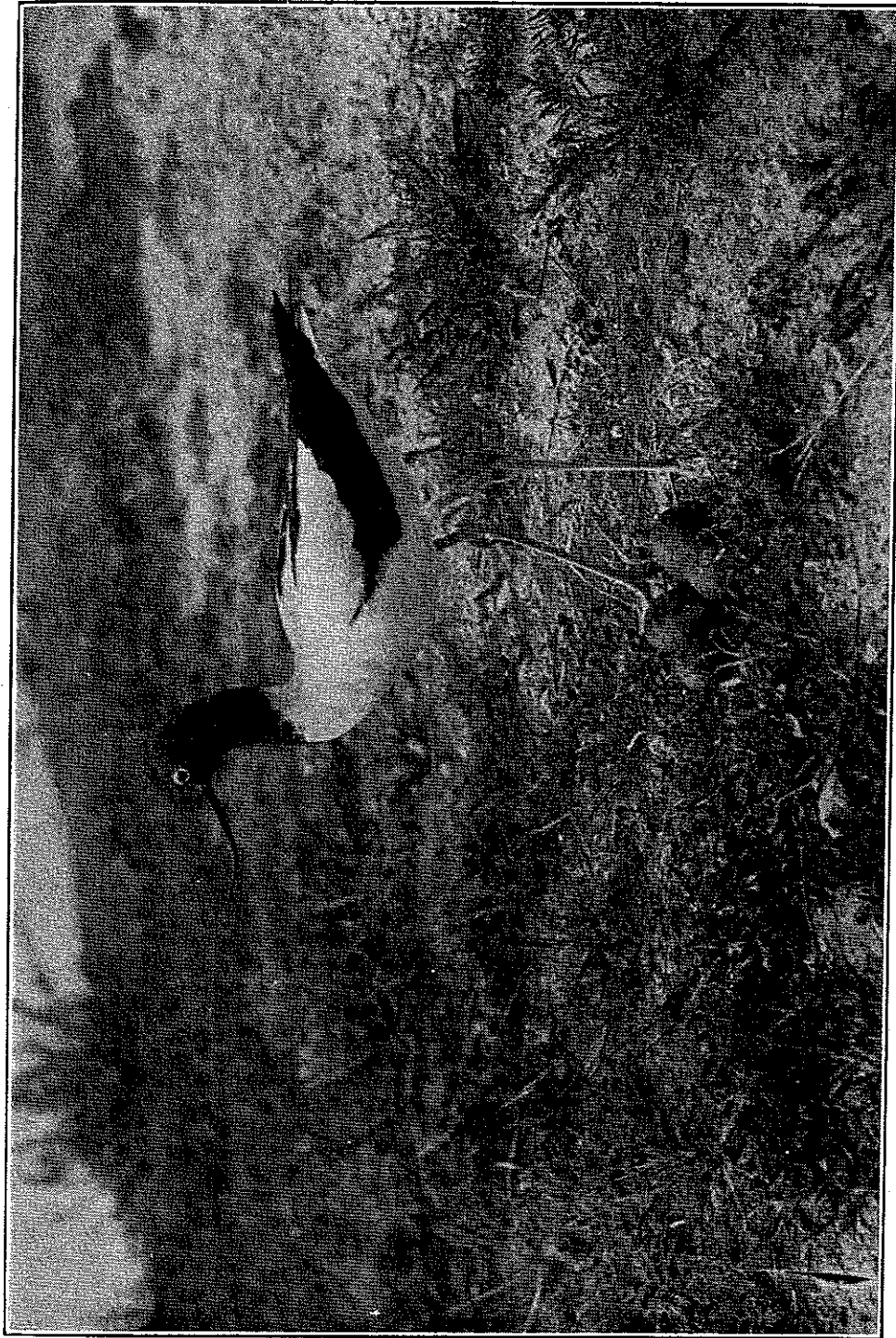
By NORMAN CHAFFER, Roseville, New South Wales

During the main bird camp at Leeton, an invitation was extended by Mr. Frank Austin to pay a visit to his property, "Lake Midgeon." The promise of the bird life to be seen, including the Avocet, quickly decided us to accept the invitation. A party comprising Messrs. A. J. Elliott, Ellis McNamara, Gordon Miller, W. R. Moore and the writer, proceeded to "Lake Midgeon," about ten miles from Narrandera, on September 22. The following is a brief account of the Avocet, in particular, and of some other of the most interesting birds met with during the week spent on the property, the notes being supplemental to those of Mr. Elliott appearing in this issue of *The Emu*.

The morning after our arrival we proceeded to the swamp, on which the Avocets had been seen, and where—so Mr. Austin informed us—the birds had nested during the autumn. This swamp was an extensive sheet of non-permanent water, devoid of timber, with the exception of a few scattered boree trees. Owing to the comparative absence of reeds and suitable cover, it did not contain very much bird life. Along the margin, however, large numbers of Plover, both Spur-winged and Black-breasted, were feeding.

We came upon several pairs of the Avocets occupying one corner of the swamp. We all made our first acquaintance with these birds, and paused for some time to admire their beautiful plumage, and singular, long, up-curved bill. The rich reddish-brown of the head and neck showed up to advantage against the contrasting black and white of the remainder of the plumage. In flight, the pattern formed by the black and white of the wings and back is particularly striking and beautiful. The long, up-curved bill is admirably adapted for the bird's method of feeding. As the bird walks rapidly forward, the bill is swept from side to side in the soft mud, frequently with the head submerged in the water. The bill must be extremely sensitive, as the bird apparently relies entirely on touch in locating the worms and other creatures that form its diet. The long legs are well-suited to wading in the shallows, and the webbed feet permit the species to swim quite readily. In fact, it is equally at home on the land, water, or in the air. It alights readily on the water, where it floats very much like a gull, swimming with the same motion.

As we approached, a pair of birds flapped about in the water in feigned distress, and then trailed flapping wings



Avocet at nest and eggs.

Photo. by Norman Chaffer.



Black-tailed Native-hen at nest.

Photo. by Norman Chaffer.

on shore, in an endeavour to lure us away from the water's edge. Presently we located four young, a day or two old—the evident cause of all this display. They were covered with soft greyish down lightly mottled with dark brown. The bill was almost straight, but slightly upturned at the tip. They took to the water readily, and swam quite well. When danger threatened they flattened out in the water or mud, and lay quite motionless. Against the grey of the mud they were very inconspicuous.

About one hundred yards off shore were two islets formed by the earth thrown up during the excavation of a tank, and birds could be seen sitting on each. We waded out and the sitting birds rose in the air, flying excitedly around, calling in notes resembling the cries of the White-headed Stilt, but less puppy-like in character. On one islet were two nests each containing four eggs, and on the second islet two nests with four, and one with three eggs. The young hatched in one of these nests before our departure a week later. A single nest was also located on an islet about a mile away in the same swamp. The eggs varied in ground colour from a medium stone colour to light brownish olive, and were plentifully spotted with blackish markings. A shallow scrape in the ground, scantily lined with a few twigs, comprised the nest. Some nests were placed within a few inches of the water's edge, whilst others were near the centre of the islets, several yards from the water.

Hessian hides were erected on the islets, and the next couple of days were spent in photographing the birds. They took some time to accustom themselves to the presence of the hide, frequently swimming around the islet. Sometimes, for long periods, they slept standing on one leg in the shallow water off one end of the islet, with the head lying along the back. At the slightest alarm they rose, with loud cries, and flew off to the "mainland." Gradually approaching closer, they eventually became more accustomed to the hide, and photographs were secured.

On a small islet close by Lake Midgeon homestead, a nest of the Black-tailed Native-hen was located by Mr. Austin. It was well hidden amongst a tangle of grasses and herbage, and was formed of reed stems placed in a shallow depression in the ground. The five eggs were pale greenish blue, sparsely spotted with fine dark brownish spots. While it was running about on land the bird reminded me of a bantam. The tail is frequently flicked as the bird moves about. In the water the forepart of the body is held low, and the tail high. It quickly became accustomed to the presence of the camera, and proved an easy subject.

We rowed about the lake behind the homestead, and located several nests of the Grey Teal in hollow trees. Some

birds would not flush from the hollows when we looked in. Nests of the Pacific Heron with eggs were found, one so low that it could be reached from the boat. Although they are rather timid subjects, Mr. Elliott succeeded in photographing one of these birds. Mr. McNamara found a nest of the Yellow-billed Spoonbill with large young. Several of the pretty Pink-eared Ducks were seen swimming about attended by broods of young. The Maned Goose was numerous, and parties of fifty or more were seen.

In another small swamp were two nests of the White-headed Stilt, built on small mudbanks some distance from shore. These also formed subjects for the photographers. Several Hoary-headed Grebes and the Blue-winged Shoveller were seen here.

A day was spent in an unsuccessful attempt to photograph a Wedge-tailed Eagle. Its nest was in a eucalypt, about 25 feet from the ground on a high hill commanding an extensive view of the surrounding country. It contained two young a couple of weeks old. On the same hill were found fair numbers of the Purple-backed Wren. They were elusive and difficult to observe.

I wish to record my appreciation of the hospitality and help extended by Mr. Frank Austin and to the folk of "Lake Midgeon." Mr. Austin could not do enough for us, and drove us for many miles about his property introducing us to many interesting birds.

Resourceful Magpie-Larks.—The dainty Magpie-Lark (*Grallina cyanoleuca*) often shows great resource in choosing a nesting site in a tree overhanging water. Almost every nest of this species observed by me during the past twelve years or so has been built either on the branch of a tree beside water, or in a tree growing in the water itself. A pair of these immaculate birds living in these dry, timbered uplands of central west Queensland have, perhaps, seldom, if ever, seen a natural body of water, as the creeks and the Nive River, which head here, seldom contain any amount of water for long. This did not deter the Magpie-Larks; however, for they solved the problem by building their nest on the tail of a thirty-foot mill some sixty feet above the ground. Beside the mill is a 30,000 gallon galvanized tank of sub-artesian bore water, and, as the winds blew from various points of the compass, the nest was over the water at least for part of the time. I am pleased to report that they were successful in rearing two of the four nestlings that were hatched out in this unusually-placed nursery.—N. H. E. McDONALD, Caldervale Station, via Charleville, Qld., 5/5/40.