

The Genus *Phœbetria* in Australian Seas

By D. L. SERVENTY, Perth, W.A.

The winter of 1944 was an abnormally mild one in Western Australia, intense and prolonged gales being almost unknown. In consequence there was a remarkable dearth of storm-blown sea-birds on the beaches, and the number of such specimens received at the Western Australian Museum was a record 'low' since beach-combing for such material became an established custom. These circumstances emphasize and make all the more remarkable a discovery made on the Leighton beach on May 26.

On the evening of May 23 a rather heavy gale began to blow up, which raged all night and the following day, the wind velocity reaching 59 miles per hour. Boatsheds and small craft were wrecked and the well-known deep-sea fishing ketch *Stella* was driven ashore at Fremantle and piled up on the rocks. The conditions appeared promising enough for a patrol of the beaches, and Major H. M. Whittell and I went to North Fremantle in the afternoon and walked northwards. We had gone only as far as the southern end of Leighton beach when we saw a large dusky bird on the strand line. It did not arouse much interest when first sighted as we thought it to be a Giant Petrel, remains of which are common on these beaches in some winters. However, our excitement rose when the beak was seen not to be the pale heavy one of the Giant Petrel but a jet-black one, and then, as we neared it, the brilliant yellow stripe along the lower mandible became apparent. The bird was the Sooty Albatross, *Phœbetria fusca*, never previously obtained from the beaches of Western Australia, and a beautiful specimen, in fresh plumage and quite undamaged.

Description of the Specimen.—The bird was weighed that afternoon on return to Perth and it went 4 lb. 8 oz. The total length was 866 mm. and the wing-spread 2,033 mm. (approximately 6 feet 8 inches). The feet were light coloured, a greyish flesh, and the claws were light horn. The beak was jet-black with a bright yellow line along the mandibular sulcus (not orange as in the plate in Mathews and Iredale's *Manual*). The palate was flesh colour with a pinkish tinge. The bird was a male with pear-shaped testes 9.7 mm. long, with the pointed anterior end grey and the posterior portion buff or yellowish. The stomach was empty except for three medium-sized cephalopod beaks.

The following measurements were taken from the dried skin: culmen 114 mm., wing 505, tail 262, tarsus 74, middle toe and claw 115. These dimensions agree very closely with the averages given in Murphy's *Oceanic Birds of South America*, except the last two, which are slightly less than his minima.

Previous Records.—The only other specimen actually collected in Australia is an old skin in the National Museum, Melbourne, labelled 'Hobson's Bay' [northern part of Port Phillip Bay]. Concerning this Mr. Goerge Mack informs me that it belongs to the very old collections and "the locality must be considered doubtful." There is no other data with the specimen, which is registered as no. 6446. Murphy refers to two specimens he had examined "taken not far from the Australian coast."

The species has been frequently reported in the Great Australian Bight by ornithologists who have written accounts of their observations in *The Emu* and elsewhere, the months mentioned being January, March, April, May, June, July, August and September. Apparently the species is likely to be met with throughout the year, but more abundantly in the winter.

There are, in addition, some records from eastern Bass Straits and off New South Wales, which require confirmation. Thus in the former area Littler's observations (*The Emu*, 9, 1910, 147, and *Handbook Bds. Tas.*, 1910, 190) and those of Cleland (*Sth. Austr. Orn.*, 14, 1938, 217) perhaps apply to the Giant Petrel. MacGillivray reported odd birds off Port Stephens, Smoky Cape and Byron Bay in September, 1926, without supplying descriptions or adding any comment, notwithstanding that no previous records were known from the area.

Breeding Stations.—According to the literature the breeding islands of this species are Gough Island and Tristan da Cunha. Murphy adds "and perhaps at St. Paul Island," citing Pelzeln, 1869, and Studer, 1879, as authorities. In Falla's *B.A.N.Z.A.R.E. Report, Birds*, vol. 2, 1937, 136, St. Paul and Amsterdam Islands are included without any question. In response to an inquiry Dr. Falla kindly wrote: "My confident assertion that it breeds at St. Paul and Amsterdam was not so certainly founded as it might have been. It was based on Pelzeln's reference in which he refers to an example in the Leyden Museum taken in January, 1826. However, it appeared under the indefinite heading of *Diomedea fuliginosa* and there is nothing to identify it with *fusca*. A good account of the actual breeding of a Sooty Albatross on St. Paul is to be found . . . in Velain's paper ('Remarques generales au sujet de la Faune des Iles Saint-Paul et Amsterdam,' *Archiv. de zool. exp. et. gen.*, 6, 1878, 51)."

Status of Phaebetria palpebrata on the Australian List.—Dr. Falla in his report (*op. cit.*) indicated that observers in the past had overlooked the similarity of the immature plumage of *P. fusca* to that of *P. palpebrata*. The pale-naped immatures of *P. fusca*, he says, "are common in the

Australian Bight at some seasons and have undoubtedly been recorded by many observers there in error as *P. palpebrata*." Ornithologists who have made such identifications are E. W. Ferguson, W. MacGillivray and W. B. Alexander (see *The Emu*, 20, 1920, 72). On their authority the species has been given a place in the R.A.O.U. *Checklist*, 2nd edition, but in view of Falla's observations I would recommend that it be excluded from future lists. The species is a denizen of higher latitudes than *P. fusca*, being characteristic of the Antarctic zone, *P. fusca* replacing it in the sub-Antarctic.

Notes on the Broad-tailed Thornbill

By V. N. SERVENTY and S. R. WHITE, Perth, W.A.

The Broad-tailed Thornbill (*Acanthiza apicalis*) is one of the common birds of the coastal lowlands, frequenting the thickets of *Melaleuca*, *Acacia*, and peppermint. It prefers swampy localities and seldom ranges far into the banksia and marri gum forests. The birds feed mainly among the foliage and bark of the trees and bushes, and seldom on the ground. Insects are often taken on the wing. The erect wren-like carriage of the tail is a characteristic feature of the bird in the field. The following are notes made in the Vasse River area, Busselton, Western Australia.

The breeding season extends over the months of August, September, October and November, the earliest record of a nest with eggs being August 28, 1935, and the latest—a nest containing an almost fully-fledged young Golden Bronze-Cuckoo (*Lamprococcyx plagosus*)—November 7, 1942. Nesting situations vary a great deal—for example, one of our notes reads: "Oct. 22, 1933, a nest containing two eggs, situated in a peppermint tree, 30 feet above the ground"—although from two to five feet seems to be the usual height. Frequently a site overhanging water is selected.

In *Melaleuca* thickets, shreds of paper-bark often form the basis of the nesting material, supplemented by dried grasses, and lined with feathers and scraps of wool. Characteristic nests are notable for the presence of the egg sacs of spiders. The normal clutch constitutes two or three eggs. *Acanthiza apicalis* is commonly used by the Golden Bronze-Cuckoo as a foster parent, but a note taken on September 4, 1933, records a nest containing two eggs of *apicalis*, and one of the Fan-tailed Cuckoo (*Cacomantis flabelliformis*), located in a *Melaleuca* thicket.

Here are some extracts from field notes:

Oct. 14, 1935. This nest was built in a Victorian tea-tree hedge. The first egg appeared on the 10th, the second on the 11th, and the third on the 13th.