

SHORT NOTES

The nesting of the Chestnut-breasted Quail-Thrush in south-western Queensland

The nest of a Chestnut-breasted Quail-Thrush *Cinclosoma castaneothorax* containing two small young was found on 30 April 1967 near Eulo in south-western Queensland. There had been heavy rain over this area during the first half of March. It was located on the eastern side of a low hop-bush *Dodonaea adenophora* which formed part of a thick Mulga-Box association, *Acacia aneura*—*Eucalyptus polynea*. The nest was a shallow cup-shaped structure, loosely constructed of mulga leaves together with some mulga and hop-bush bark. It was set in a slight depression on the ground and measured about 15 cm across the top and about 5 cm deep. A thin apron of leaves and bark had been formed in front of the nest.

An adult male, an adult female and a juvenile male attended the nest although only the female was seen brooding. The juvenile was distinguished by its being smaller than the others and having an incomplete bar below the chestnut breast. When near the nest, the juvenile usually carried food but was not seen to feed the young and in one instance was chased from the nest area by the adult male. The attendants remained motionless and silent when Ravens *Corvus* sp. and Wedge-tailed Eagles *Aquila audax* flew over but actively chased Crested Bellbirds *Oreoica gutturalis*, Grey-crowned Babblers *Pomatostomus temporalis*, Chestnut-crowned Babblers *P. ruficeps* and Hall's Babblers *P. halli* from the nest area. The most common call was a piping whistle of two long and three short notes, not heard from the female. When alarmed, both sexes uttered one or two insect-like noises which sounded similar to the call of the Black Honeyeater *Myzomela nigra*.

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10 June 1967, revised 21 March 1969.

A note on the copulation of the Tasmanian muttonbird

Serventy (1958, *Aust. Mus. Mag.* **12**: 327-332) showed that the female muttonbird *Puffinus tenuirostris* first breeds when five to seven years old and the male at seven and eight years of age. Marshall and Serventy (1956, *Proc. zool. Soc. Lond.* **127**: 489-510) found that the peak of laying was between 24 and 26 November, though the range of laying was from 19 November to 3 December (Serventy 1963, *C.r. XIII Int. orn. Congr.* 338-343). No recorded account of copulation in this species has been presented. The following detailed observations were made on 16 October 1966 on Green Island in the Furneaux Group, Tasmania.

A pair of muttonbirds engaged in copulation was heard to give

a low, soft 'crukrukrukrukruk crooer crukcruk . . .' which I had not previously heard from the species. I observed them from about three metres by means of a torch beam at 2117 hr in good weather, with a three-eighth cloud cover, north-east wind force one and no moon.

The upper bird, which I took to be a male and which did not show an enlarged cloaca when examined later, was squatting on top of the presumed female, both crouched in grass near a burrow entrance. As the male became active, his head moved to the side of the female's head and the birds' bills were constantly lapped over each other, the male moving his head from side to side. At the end of mating the male extended his wings slightly, as if in a steadying movement, then slid off the female. Mating lasted two minutes and 40 seconds from first observation, though the activity had been broken by an interval of 45 seconds when the male remained inactive on top of the female. The birds were facing towards me throughout the observation.

After mating the male rested on the grass by the female's side for about two minutes, occasionally touching the female around the bill, then went behind the female. The female moved about 1.5 m away and returned to squat in the grass near the male, fanning her tail upwards and towards the male in what appeared to be a soliciting posture. The male displayed no interest and the female later moved away.

About 200 birds were present on the surface, many pairs resting close together in the rookery area (about 300 m²) but no similar noise was heard during the following half hour. Birds were quiet unless disturbed and little calling was heard from birds in the air. On 17 October three pairs were seen to be mating in the same area, but each pair stopped, probably disturbed by me, before reaching a climax. All gave a call identical to that given above. The male's feet, not seen on the previous night, were observed to be flattened along the female's wings with the toes over the carpal joints. Other pairs, though not copulating, were preening mutually and frequently lapping bills in apparent precopulatory display.

The display resembles that recorded by Gross *et al.* (1963, *Atoll Res. Bull.* 99: 1-11) for the Wedge-tailed Shearwater *Puffinus pacificus*. They observed a repeated bill movement by one of a pair in which the beak was continually run 'through the feathers of the neck and head of its mate' and considered that this was probably part of the courtship performance; courtship 'including copulation usually took place not in the burrows but on open ground'. Palmer (1962, *Handbook of North American Birds*, 1) says of the Great Shearwater *Puffinus gravis* that there is a mutual preening also associated with copulation which takes place on the surface and 'probably also in (the) burrow; preceded and followed by calling and display'.

Dr D. L. Serventy informed me (*in litt.*) that Miss C. A. Nicholls has recorded calls of the muttonbird during copulation and heard similar calls from within burrows on Fisher Island as early as 12 October.

This note results from work on aspects of the ecology of the muttonbird which has been financed by grants from the M. A. Ingram Trust and the Frank M. Chapman Memorial Fund.

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22 July 1967, revised 13 February 1969.

Whistling Kite in Tasmania

On 1 October 1967 D. G. Thomas and the writer recorded the second Tasmanian occurrence of *Haliastur sphenurus* (*vide Emu* 65: 75-76 for first record). We were driving along South Arm Road, near Pipeclay Lagoon 16 km south-east of Hobart, when the bird was seen near some trees where it perched briefly. It then moved away southward soaring and circling slowly and allowing a good view of its characteristic wing pattern with rather square wings and separated flight feathers.

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28 October 1967.

The first Tasmanian specimen of *Haliastur sphenurus* was shot near Deloraine on 7 November 1968 and is now in the Queen Victoria Museum, Launceston (Reg. No. 1968.2.249) where it was received in an advanced state of decay. The bird had been near Deloraine for some days before being shot.

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29 November 1968.

First record of the Sarus Crane in Australia

On 13 October 1966, accompanied by E. E. Zillman and F. H. T. Smith, I came across a party of about 20 cranes in a dry depression near the east side of Glenore Crossing on the Norman River about 25 km south of Normanton, north Queensland. Most of the birds flew away, but half-a-dozen remained. A cursory distant view of the birds, both flying and standing, had given the impression that they were Brolgas *Grus rubicunda*, not uncommon in the area, but closer examination of the birds which did not fly away suggested that they were larger and greyer than Brolgas; five of them had the pappilose skin of the head, except the crown, extensively red, which colour extended down the neck in a complete collar for 15 cm. Being unaware of the plumage characters of the Sarus Crane *Grus antigone* of south-eastern Asia and Malaysia, at the time we took the birds to be an undescribed form of *G. rubicunda*, though no one of us had seen similar red collars in birds of that species. Two similar red-collared cranes were seen on 14



Sarus Crane, Magoura Station, near Normanton, Qld.
26 April 1967

Red upper-neck collar is well shown.

Photograph by B. Cook.

October at Woods Lake about 6 km west of Burketown, with a few Brolgas.

Four Brolgas and one Sarus Crane on exhibition in adjoining pens in the Melbourne Zoological Gardens were inspected on 28 October 1966. A glance at the Sarus Crane with its red upper neck was enough to confirm that the birds seen in north Queensland were this species.

I again visited the Normanton area from 25 to 30 April 1967, this time with Miss Jean Gill, Mrs P. L. Duve and Mr B. Cook, hoping to confirm the earlier descriptions, make more detailed field observations and photograph the birds. On 25 April we found a pair beside the Normanton-Burketown road on Magoura Station about 30 km west of Normanton. B.C. took 35 mm colour slides and some 8 mm colour motion film of birds at this spot from a hide on 26 April. On 28 April we found two pairs of *antigone*, each with two small flightless young, by the road a few km nearer Normanton, as well as another five adults. Probably then we saw 15 different individuals during the visit, while during the period we saw over 100 Brolgas in the same area.

The following notes on plumage, voice and behaviour were made during this second visit. The breeding adults of 28 April had a large whitish auricular patch and, below the bright red collar of the upper neck, a broad whitish collar which merged into the blue-grey base of the neck, giving a noticeable tricolor effect. The two birds at Magoura Station did not have this white collar, but appeared not to be breeding, as did not the rest of the birds seen on this visit. *G. antigone* of India has a similar white collar, but *G. rubicunda* is always described as having a monochrome bluish-grey neck. The breeding pair had the papillose skin of the head, except the crown, and the upper neck very bright red; the bill and crown greenish; long black hair-like plumes on the throat and sides of the neck; large whitish auricular patches; and a broad white collar below the red of the neck. The young were uniformly buff, though the larger of the two broods had rufous marks on the upper parts; none had a reddish hue on the head and neck; the bill was buffy and the legs yellow. Generally *rubicunda* has a lump or dewlap below the chin, but *antigone* had a smooth throat line; and this served to distinguish the two species in silhouette. In flight the legs of *antigone* appeared to extend further beyond the end of the tail than those of *rubicunda*, and they were pinkish or dusky pink as opposed to the dark legs of *rubicunda*. Generally *antigone* appeared slightly larger than *rubicunda*, though the two species were never seen in such close association that a good comparison could be made. In pairs of *antigone* one bird was always larger than the other and the larger bird had more red on the upper neck. No obvious difference was noted between the trumpeting calls of the two species.

The two birds photographed on 26 April, when disturbed, moved away through the grass with their heads below the grass tops (about 1 m high), occasionally jumping up to survey their surroundings; Brolgas in the same area were never seen to do this. They also gave a short dancing display like that of the Brolga, with wing flapping, jumping and bowing. One bird carried out a clockwise pirouetting of the body while the other watched.

Some authorities regard *antigone* and *rubicunda* as conspecific, but in the field they seem to be sufficiently distinct and moreover presumably breed alongside one another in this region, though it is not known whether or not they may interbreed. In view of the numbers of *antigone* recorded in this note the species is evidently established in the area and has probably been overlooked for some years. It is however quite doubtful when they first arrived in Australia. Since this discovery was first announced in the 'Bird Observer' (February 1967, No. 423) several other observers have seen the birds, even on the Atherton Tableland (*vide infra*) near the eastern Queensland coast.

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3 December 1967.

The Sarus Crane in north-eastern Queensland

On 29 July 1967, Mr Bruce Cook called on me and said that earlier in the day at Willetts' swamp about 6 km south-east of Atherton he saw approximately 40 Brolgas *Grus rubicunda*, and more than 20 Sarus Cranes *G. antigone*. The extensive red of the neck and head were quite evident; as the afternoon wore on and the sun became lower, the pink legs of the Sarus Cranes became more evident. They were very wary and difficult to approach, but the Brolgas were not so shy and were not unduly disturbed while he was in the swamp locality. Also the Sarus Cranes kept to the wetter and more remote areas of the swamp, while the Brolgas kept to the drier, more grassy areas.

On 30 July, I visited Willetts' swamp and was able to get within 70 metres of the birds. I counted over 80 Brolgas and 23 Sarus Cranes. Later Bruce Cook arrived and we observed together from a different part of the swamp. The Sarus Cranes were a little over a 100 metres away in the centre of the mixed flock of about 80 birds. Through 8 x 30 binoculars and a telescope the Sarus Cranes appeared darker on top, the lower back towards the rump being a little paler; the tail curved under more than in the Brolgas whose grey colour appeared more uniform; in the sunlight the legs of *antigone* showed up as pale pink and this colour appeared to extend to the thighs; the legs of the Brolgas were dark in colour and this was very evident when the birds left the ground to fly. In flight the primaries of *antigone* appeared more extensively darker on top and also below than in the Brolga. The Sarus Cranes when standing

erect appeared a little taller than the Brolgas, and, when moving about and displaying, appeared to be a more elegant species.

The Sarus Crane is evidently established in north-eastern Queensland. Atherton is over 480 km east of Normanton in a direct line and the range may extend further south to the Townsville and Ayr coastal regions, which numbers of cranes visit.

I wish to extend my sincere thanks to Bruce Cook of Mareeba who so promptly informed me of the presence of the new cranes in my district, and also for his permission to quote from his field notes. Also to Mr and Mrs Gordon Willetts of Atherton who for many years have given me and my friends access to their properties in the Wongabel and Scrubby Creek areas.

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A new bird for New Guinea

On 21 August 1966 a party comprising Evan Cleland, Roy D. Mackay and myself from Port Moresby and J. R. Wheeler of Geelong were observing at Brown River some 30 km from Moresby. The area is one of dense riverine rain forest bounded by *Eucalyptus* savanna. Along an almost dried-up tributary of the Brown River we came upon a large clump of seeding bamboo overhanging the creek-bed. In the clump, and feeding on the seed-heads were four, or possibly five, Spice Finches *Lonchura punctulata*.

Both Wheeler and myself are familiar with the species and I have kept them in captivity. The others of the party, although unfamiliar with the Spice Finch, were quick to note the heavy grey bill, brown head and the closely-patterned, cinnamon-coloured 'half-moon' markings on the breast. The birds were watched for almost 30 minutes, making no move to leave the area and feeding almost continually on the bamboo seeds. There was no opportunity for us to take a specimen but one can not easily mistake this species. There is, of course, no known New Guinea species of finch that resembles *Lonchura punctulata*.

The possibility of the birds being aviary escapes seems fairly remote. There are few cage-birds kept in the Territory and many predators are present to take toll of any that are freed. However, the habitat is most suitable and the bird is quick to increase its numbers once it establishes a foothold.

Should the Spice Finch increase its numbers in the Port Moresby area it will be interesting to see the effect on the extremely abundant Grey-headed Mannikin *L. caniceps*. There is evidence to indicate that the increase of the Spice Finch in Australia has had an adverse effect on native species.

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