

## SHORT NOTES

### Notes on the birds of Bougainville Island

In a short paper on new sight-records for birds on Bougainville Island (1970, Proc. Papua New Guinea sci. Soc. 21: 20) I referred to recently published observations of birds in the British Solomon Islands, which I had not been able to consult. I have subsequently seen two of these publications, and find that for several species they implicitly support my observations.

Bradley and Wolff (1956, The Birds of Rennell Island) and Cain and Galbraith (1956, Ibis 98: 100–134, 262–295) discussed the distribution of the Australian Pelican *Pelecanus conspicillatus* in the Solomons, and the former suggested a mechanism for its invasion of the sub-region during 1952. Thus, my second-hand reports from Bougainville, Nissan and Feni Islands are more credible, possibly representing a second invasion. It would be interesting to learn whether Pelicans appeared further east at about the same time.

Cain and Galbraith reported that the Little Pied Cormorant *Phalacrocorax melanoleucos* is common at Tenaru on Guadalcanal. Mr K. Silva (pers. comm.) states that in recent years it has been seen close to Honiara on Guadalcanal. This lends further support to the report from Bougainville.

A specimen of the Plumed Egret *Egretta intermedia* was collected on San Cristobal in the Solomons in 1934, although it was not reported until Cain and Galbraith did so. Mr G. Dick (pers. comm.) reports that it is not rare at Vudal, Keravat, on New Britain.

The White Egret *E. alba* was recorded from Rennell Island by Bradley and Wolff; Cain and Galbraith had no record, but it has been reported to me from Honiara, as stated previously. My own observation of birds clearly identified at Numanuma was made on 2 August 1969, not 8 August (*op. cit.*).

Mayr (1945, Birds of the Southwest Pacific) reported the Oriental Hobby *Falco severus* only from Gizo, but Sibley (1946, Condor 48: 97 in Cain and Galbraith (*op. cit.*)) recorded a specimen from Bougainville Island. I saw a single bird at Aropa on 8 May 1970. The species is not uncommon at Port Moresby, where I have seen it fairly frequently.

During May 1970 I also observed the Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus* on the eastern side of Bougainville, thus confirming the record of Virtue (1947, Emu 46: 324–331) from the western side, and my confirmation of it. In a small patch of reeds at the mouth of the Pinei River near Rorovana several birds were singing on 7 May.

Cain and Galbraith noticed that the two swiftlets *Collocalia vanikorensis* and *C. spodiopygia* often fly together. My observations on Bougainville support this, but it may be necessary to modify my remark (*op. cit.*) that the White-rumped Swiftlet is much commoner than the Uniform Swiftlet, because white-rumped birds are conspicuous in a flock and may well mask the presence, or even preponderance, of the uniform bird. Certainly, the Uniform Swiftlet mixes freely with the other species; near Port Moresby it is commonly seen with the local pale-bellied form of the New Guinea Spine-tailed Swift *Chaetura novaeguineae*. The locality 'Pangoa' given in my previous paper (*op. cit.*) for the White-rumped Swiftlet (and for the Blue-faced Parrot-Finch *Erythrura trichroa*) should have been Panguna.

Apart from the Australian Pelican, Little Pied Cormorant, Plumed Egret, White Egret, White-rumped Swiftlet, and Blue-faced Parrot-Finch, the new records included the Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*, Sanford's Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus sanfordi* and Lesser Crested Tern *Sterna bengalensis*. Mayr (*op. cit.*) implied that the two raptors probably occur on Bougainville, but had no records of the Tern from the south-western Pacific, and King (1967, Seabirds of the Tropical Pacific Ocean) likewise omits it from the area discussed by him.

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### Torpidity in the White-backed Swallow

Serventy (1970, Emu 70: 27–28) reported an occurrence of torpidity in the White-backed Swallow *Cheramoeca leucosternum*. Another instance involving the same species was witnessed by Messrs K. and C. Gibbs, rangers of Yanchep National Park, and myself at Yanchep on the afternoon of 4 June 1971.

K. and C.G. were collecting sand from a pit in the park, when at about 13:15 they noticed some birds in the sand scooped up in the bucket. They searched this and found four swallows, strange to them. These must have been lying at the end of a nesting tunnel, about 1 m in from the sand-face. There did not appear to be any nesting material in the sand and no more birds were evident. After loading the truck they brought the swallows to me in an open tin. They were mature White-backed Swallows.

When first found they were inert and appeared dead and could be rolled about on the palm of the

hand. K.G. described them to me as being cold to touch, with their eyes shut, their wings closely folded, their legs and feet tucked in and their plumage dull and lifeless. I examined them at 13:35. By then they were beginning to move about, their eyes were open and their wings and tail spread. They had begun to use their legs, but still were unable to fly and could be picked up in the hand, showing no fear when lifted. I watched them, while the load of sand was tipped out. During the next fifteen minutes, with much quivering and fluttering of their wings, they slowly recovered their power of flight. At 13:50 we took them back to the quarry; during the drive, it became necessary to cover the tin to prevent them flying out. We released them at the quarry at 14:00. They flew straight up and circled about as though nothing had happened. During the period of recovery a remarkable transformation took place in their plumage, which changed from the dull and lifeless appearance, noted when first found, to feathers vibrant with life, the colour and texture taking on depth and translucence.

The period from 13:00 to 14:00 was possibly the warmest part of the day. During the previous eighteen days it had been cold and wet, with some rain falling on every day except three, 117 mm being recorded over the period. This wet spell was preceded by five weeks of fine cold weather, leading back to the squally weather that marked much of March and the beginning of April.

The White-backed Swallow was recorded at Yanchep lake in December 1902 (Milligan 1903, Emu 3: 20–22). I observed it on the outskirts of the park in February and July 1970 and during the last year others reported it in the park on a number of occasions. In the survey of avifauna of Yanchep National Park, presently being carried out, it has been noted as an occasional visitor, but possibly it is a breeding species, and some birds may be resident, spending the winter in a state of torpidity.

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## CORRESPONDENCE

### ABNORMAL BREAST-COLOUR OF CHESTNUT-SHOULDERED WRENS

Sir. — Harrison (1971, Emu 71: 37–38) plausibly suggests that violet-tipped feathers on the otherwise black breasts of Purple-backed Wrens *Malurus lamberti assimilis* are probably caused by a reduction in production of pigment during the start of moult. With the absence of excess black pigment, the hidden violet colour is revealed.

Unfortunately in referring to two of my publications on this topic (Ford 1966, Emu 66: 47–57; 1969, Emu 68: 283–284), some errors have occurred. First, Harrison states that I (1966) referred to two specimens having some violet-tipped feathers on their black breasts. In this paper I mentioned only one specimen, but in the second article (1969) I referred to a second specimen.

Second, Harrison states that I (1966) considered the occurrence of this phenomenon as evidence of *probable* hybridization between *M. lamberti* and the Blue-breasted Wren *M. pulcherrimus*. However, after considering the *possibility* of hybridization, I stated that the specimen was *more likely* (= probably)

slightly aberrant. In the section of this paper dealing with the abnormally plumaged bird, I presented substantial evidence to show that *M. lamberti* and *M. pulcherrimus* do not interbreed in their zone of sympatry in Western Australia.

Third, he states that I (1969) suggested that the violet colour resulted from fraying, causing structural changes enough to produce a Tyndall effect. However, he omits to acknowledge that I prefaced this remark with the fact that the cause was also moult.

Thus, Harrison has simply modified my suggestion on what causes the Tyndall coloration of some of the normally black breast feathers; violet on the breasts of Purple-backed Wrens is caused by a change in the amount of black pigment in the breast feathers rather than by changes in structure. I (1969) suggested that fraying was a contributory factor because some of the violet feathers appeared to have no or little interlocking of their barbules.

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