

SHORT NOTES

Emu incubating Paddy-melons

On 29 June 1973 near Ivanhoe, western New South Wales, I flushed an Emu *Dromaius novaehollandiae* from its nest. A typical flattened pad of dead grasses, the nest contained no eggs but seventeen fruits of the Paddy-melon *Cucumis myriocarpus* gathered together just like a clutch of eggs. These fruits are about the size of an Emu's egg, but round not oval, and of the same dark-green colour until ripe, when they become yellow. Fifteen of the melons being incubated were dark green, the other two yellow with wrinkled and collapsed skins, probably indicating that they had been incubated for some time. Numerous melon-vines were growing within one or two metres of the nest and no doubt the fruits came from them. Because the fruit does not normally part from the stem until over-ripe, the Emu had probably broken them off and manoeuvred them into the nest with its bill.

The bird was still sitting on the melons on 7 July, when I found a second nest about 200 m from the first, containing one Emu's egg and fifteen melons. On 16 August incubation at both nests had apparently stopped, the melons being scattered round the nesting pads, most of them yellowed or rotten. Large fragments of egg-shell lay in the second nest, a usual indication of successful hatching.

The nests were so far from human habitation or public roads that human interference need not be considered. Local property owners have told me that they also have seen melons in Emus' nests, but I have no knowledge of any such records in the literature.

These seem to be most remarkable examples of that type of redirection where broody birds incubate objects other than eggs (Tinbergen, Article 'Redirection' in A. L. Thomson (Ed.), New Dict. Birds). One can only speculate about why the Emus plucked and collected the fruit, as they must have done, because it is beyond belief that the fruits could have become fortuitously assembled in the nests while still unripe. The first bird may have been unmated, mated to a barren female or homosexual; the mate of the second may have died after laying one egg; or the eggs in both nests may have been entirely or almost entirely removed by predators. Such suggested reasons are given in an editorial comment to a reported occurrence of Oystercatchers *Haematopus ostralegus* incubating stones (Holt 1970, Br. Birds 63: 427-428). Northern Fulmars *Fulmarus glacialis* have also been reported (Collis 1971, Br. Birds

64: 126) to incubate floats from fishing nets and stones. Comparison of the Emus with these species may be misleading because the Fulmar lays one egg only and the Oystercatcher no more than three, so that not only would their efforts to replace their eggs by stones and the like be much less than those of the Emus, but the replacements could conceivably have been fortuitous.

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5 April 1974.

Southern Giant-petrel in New Guinea

Through the kindness of the Papuan Department of Agriculture, the British Trust for Ornithology received notification that a seabird bearing its band 5055231 had been found alive, in July 1973, on the Gulf of Papua at the village of Kamfo, near Kikori (07°25'S, 144°13'E). The bird was fed for a week on sago, coconut, potato and fish and, perhaps not surprisingly, it died seven days later. This band had been placed on a nestling Southern Giant-petrel *Macronectes giganteus* in early March 1973, on Bird Island (54°00'S, 38°03'W), South Georgia.

Bourne and Warham (1966, *Ardea* 54: 45-67) have shown that there are two sibling species in the genus *Macronectes*: *M. giganteus* breeding on islands at and south of the Antarctic Convergence, and *M. halli* on islands at and north of this Convergence. Identification of the two species in the field has been described by Johnstone (1972, *Aust. Bird-Bander* 9: 86-87; 1974, *Emu* 74: 209-218) and by Conroy and Johnstone (in preparation). An important diagnostic character is the colour of the end plates of the bill. In *M. halli* these are reddish, in *M. giganteus* greenish, and these differences are clearly identifiable in nestlings within a few weeks of hatching.

Although Conroy (1972, *Scient. Rep. Brit. Antarctic Surv.* 75) suspected that both species bred at South Georgia, it was not until November 1971 that this was confirmed on Bird Island (R. W. Burton, pers. comm.). During the season 1972-73 JWHC undertook a short-term study on the biology of the two species there; it was during this that 5055231 was banded. On Bird Island, as at most other islands where both are present, *M. halli* breeds about six weeks earlier than *M. giganteus*; the fledgelings of

halli leave the island in late February to early March and those of *giganteus* depart in late April or May. Thus 5055231 is presumed to have covered about 14,000 kilometres (east-about with the trade winds) to New Guinea in ten to twelve weeks from fledging.

The British Antarctic Survey (formerly the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey) has been banding Southern Giant-petrels since 1948, mainly in the South Orkney Islands, where only *M. giganteus* breeds. Very few have been recovered north of 25°S. At 07°25'S, this present recovery is by far the most northerly reported to date. The previous most northerly examples, all banded in South Orkney, have been from 17°19'S in Fiji, 17°30'S in the Society Islands, 17°10'S in Peru and 12°35'S in Angola.

Neither species of *Macronectes* is mentioned in Rand and Gilliard (1967, Handbook of New Guinea Birds); and this banding recovery appears to be the first record of the genus for New Guinea.

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Red-flanked Lorikeet in Gulf District, Papua New Guinea

Rand and Gillard (1967, Handbook of New Guinea Birds) record the Red-flanked Lorikeet *Charmosyna placentis* as far west in south-eastern New Guinea as the Angabunga River. The nominate race has been observed in the Western District by Mayr and Rand (1937, Birds of 1933–34 Papuan Expedition: 49) at the Oriomo River and by Bell (1970, Emu 70: 100) at Nomad River to the north. The species has not been recorded until now, in the Gulf District of Papua New Guinea. On 4 May 1974 I observed five on the edge of tall mangroves at the mouth of the Biar River, 150 kilometres north-west of Port Moresby in the Gulf District. The description was similar to that given by Rand and Gilliard, but the male appeared to have the forehead crimson instead of yellow. Three days later I saw two pairs near the village of Lese Oalai, eight kilometres to the north-west. These records extend the known range of

the species westward by about fifty kilometres from the Angabunga River.

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Sight-record of a species of swift new for Australia

On 29 December 1973 D. H. Close, J. B. Cox and I were scanning a passing flock of Fork-tailed Swifts *Apus pacificus* at False Bay, near Whyalla, SA. We noticed a bird that was obviously a different species. From our observations in the field, we took the following description of this bird:

It appeared only about two-thirds the size of *A. pacificus* and generally uniform black apart from a pale throat. The wings were shorter than those of *A. pacificus* and broader at the base. The flight was 'flappier' with more frequent wing-beats and the bird did not twist and turn sharply as does *A. pacificus*. The tail was short and square and did not project back beyond the wings in flight. No distinguishing marks were seen at any time.

We watched this swift for about two minutes as it passed south-west with the straggling flock of *A. pacificus*, and, when we lost it in the distance, searched the on-coming swifts for other small birds, but found none.

Searching the literature, we found that except for the Little Swift *Apus affinis* no other pale-throated black swifts with square tails occur in Europe or Asia. Both JBC and DHC have had previous experience of *A. affinis* in New Delhi and Nairobi respectively and consider the bird at False Bay was this species. However, we do *not* claim this record as proof that *A. affinis* occurs in Australia, but we *do* believe that it is proof that a third species of swift (excluding the swiftlets *Collocalia*) visits the country.

It has been suspected for some time that Asian species of swifts could get caught up in flocks of *A. pacificus* and *Hirundapus caudacutus* that annually migrate south. *A. affinis* is known to associate with migrating flocks of other species of swifts (Henry, 1971, A Guide to the Birds of Ceylon). It would be well to examine closely all flocks of swifts in Australia because the Little Swift or some other Asiatic species may turn out to be a regular visitor.

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