

Notes on *Megalurus striatus* (Milligan).

BY F. LAWSON WHITLOCK, YOUNG'S SIDING, D.R., W.A.

THERE is a swamp which originally covered an area of nearly 40 acres, but is now only about half that size, the remainder being cleared and cultivated. The soil is chiefly true peat, which, when dried, burns readily. Some years ago, during a dry summer, the peat did take fire, and numerous holes, from 18 inches to 2 feet in depth, were burnt. From about the beginning of June till the end of November all the lowest parts are under water. A heavy growth of cane-grass still covers the unreclaimed portions of the swamp—sometimes in clumps of greater or lesser size, but often in one almost impenetrable reed-bed. This Western Grass-Bird (*Megalurus striatus*) is confined strictly to the cane-grass, and never resorts to the tea-tree or other scrub which grows on the margins or on the drier portions of the swamp.

The spring of 1911 was noteworthy for its light rainfall, and the shallow depth of water remaining on the swamp at the beginning of November gave me an opportunity of studying *Megalurus striatus* unaccompanied by the discomfort of wading nearly waist-deep through mud and water, as in previous years. On entering the cane-grass I could hear the plaintive but sweet notes of the Grass-Birds calling all around me. Never had I known them so numerous before. The usual call is "Tee, tī, tee, tee," uttered in rather a high-pitched, piping manner, or more slowly in a lower and more musical tone. The only other notes heard from these little birds are alarm notes, which are sharp and rather harsh, resembling the syllables "Chuck" or "Tcheck." One hears these when near a nest, or when young are concealed in the thick clumps of cane-grass. As I was anxious to see a nest *in situ*, I commenced a systematic search, selecting the larger clumps of cane-grass as the most probable nesting-sites. There I made a mistake. Certainly, I did find nests in the thicker cover, but later experience taught me that clumps of only 2 or 3 feet in diameter, growing in the more open portions of the reed-bed, were much more favoured for nesting purposes. Altogether, during the months of November and December, I must have discovered nearly two dozen nests, some with eggs, some with young, and again others from which the young had flown. As I write this (7th January, 1912) I have three nests under observation—one with one egg, a second with three fresh eggs, and a third with newly-hatched young. This last nest is in a very small clump of reeds growing on the margin of a large hole burnt in the peat. All the nests I found were very similar both in situation and in construction. The parent birds commence to build as low down in the reeds as the growth of the latter allows—none would exceed 18 inches from water-level, which would give an average of about 2 feet 6 inches from the solid peat.

I collected typical nests and eggs for Mr. H. L. White, Bell-trees, New South Wales, which he describes on p. 249.

The female is not a close sitter, and only once did I flush her from her eggs. However, it is almost impossible to walk quietly through the water, or where the reeds are growing thickly. I was never able to detect a female in the act of building, and the males do not appear to call in the immediate vicinity of the nest. When the young are in the nest, or hidden in the neighbouring reeds, both parents become very anxious, fluttering from clump to clump with harsh cries, or even shamming lameness, or a broken wing, where the peat is above water-level. In the nest the young are able to flatten themselves down in a remarkable way. One brood I was examining was so quiet and motionless that I was quite deceived, thinking they were all dead.

Megalurus striatus is a very jealous bird, and the greatest care is necessary to avoid disturbing an unfinished nest. One I found was just ready for eggs. I only gently felt to the bottom with one finger; but this was quite enough to cause its desertion. A new nest was built in a neighbouring clump, the lining of feathers being removed from the nest I had disturbed and utilized in the new one. All this was accomplished, and four eggs laid, within seven days.

About the end of January the birds appear to leave the swamp, returning towards the end of June. The males may be heard calling the following month.

To my thinking, *Megalurus* has some affinity with the Reed-Warblers (*Acrocephalus*). In the nature of its haunts and the situation and construction of its nest it has much in common with the latter. Also, there is a certain peculiarity about the flesh of both genera. It is remarkably soft, and has a peculiar smell. *Megalurus* is a delicate, loose-plumaged bird, and should be skinned quickly when preparing scientific specimens.

Young birds closely resemble their parents, and are very secretive, remaining hidden in the densest clumps of reeds.

Annotations.

BY A. J. CAMPBELL, COL. MEM. B.O.U., MELBOURNE.

New Sericornis.—At the Sydney session (1911) of the R.A.O.U., Mr. J. W. Mellor, Adelaide, exhibited a *Sericornis* which he procured in the Mount Lofty Ranges. It somewhat resembles the *Sericornis* frequenting the Victorian ranges, but differs by the dark sub-terminal markings of the tail, which markings are absent in the Victorian species. The South Australian bird is clearly Gould's *S. osculans*.

Comparing this mainland bird of South Australia with those collected by the R.A.O.U. expedition to Kangaroo Island (1905), it will be observed that the insular bird is generally darker (a feature peculiar to other kinds of birds inhabiting that island), except the abdomen and edgings of the primaries, which are lighter, while some of the tail feathers are slightly tipped with white.