

Stray Feathers

Strange Behaviour of a Spinebill.—Once while I was walking down an old bush track through thick Banksia country, a Spinebill Honeyeater flew on to the track and hopped about as though hurt. I knew it was not nesting time, so I watched him from a bush about 12 feet away. I had been seated about a minute when the bird flew down to a bare patch under a Banksia bush. Here I was surprised to see on the ground, a dead Spinebill, evidently the mate of the bird I was watching. As soon as he reached the dead bird he uttered that soft "chee-chee-chee," as these birds do when nesting. This he kept up for nearly a minute. As this had no effect on his dead mate, he lay down on his side and grasping the dead bird by the back with his claws, endeavoured to move it about. I was surprised to see that he did move the body six or seven inches along the ground—quite an effort for a small bird like a Spinebill.

The poor little bird was quite at a loss, and, after standing by, twisting his head on one side and looking at his dead mate for a time, he walked over him twice and flew off. I waited to see if anything else would happen. The bird came back, but, after approaching the dead mate from several different directions (always hopping along the ground, and not flying straight down), he at last gave it up. I was sorry I had not my camera, as I could easily have photographed the birds. There had been a cold wind for about a week, and in the last three days I had found a Barn-Owl, a Spinebill, a Lewin's or Yellow-eared Honeyeater, and a Peaceful Dove (*Geopelia placida*) all seemingly killed by the cold, as they bore no marks of injury, but all were very thin.—ATHOL F. D'OMBRAIN, R.A.O.U., "Hylacola," Somersby, Gosford, 6th June, 1923.

Giant Petrels in Sydney Harbour.—On the 17th June I saw on North Harbour (Sydney) two Giant Petrels (*Macronectes giganteus*); which were perched on the rocks at Dobroyde Point. They allowed me to come within a boat's length before they made off. I was close enough to see all distinguishing marks on the beak, legs and feet.—E. HUNGERFORD. (Communicated by A. S. Le Souef, C.M.Z.S., Taronga Park, Sydney).

New Snake Discovered on a Bird Expedition.—The Giant Venomous Snake—*Oxyuranus macleynani*, Kinghorn. The first note relating to the discovery of this new snake was published by Mr. H. L. White, Belltrees Scone, N.S.W., in *The Emu*, 1922 (vol. xxii., p. 103), as an item from the diary of Mr. W. Macleynan, R.A.O.U., who was its discoverer and collector in the Cape Yorke Peninsula. A complete skin, containing a skull, and a second beautifully cleaned and preserved skull (both from specimens about 9 feet in length) were presented to the Australian Museum. An examination showed that the fangs were so large they would easily penetrate through one's finger, if bitten; I found that there was only one small tooth following the fang (excepting those in reserve), and this, together with several cranial characters, gave me quite sufficient evidence on which to decide that the Snake did not belong to any known Australian genus, and wide comparisons with foreign snakes led me to conclude that it was a new genus and species, and undoubtedly the most dangerous snake in Australia. Full comparative characters, together with description, text figures and plate will be found, in the Records, Aust. Museum, 1922, Vol. xiv., pt. 1, p. 42. Venom was collected, but unfortunately, the tubes were corked up before the poison had dried, with the result that it fermented, and is of little use. There is no work being done on venom in Australia at present, and so (after proper drying of what remains) it will be kept aside or perhaps sent to Paris, if required. The fangs of this snake, which are enormous, are about equal in size to those of some of the Vipers, such as the Rattle Snake. When the specimen was opened it was found to contain the remains of a Dasyure.—J. R. KINGHORN, R.A.O.U., Zoologist, Aust. Museum, 24/7/23.

Black-shouldered Kites in Eastern Queensland.—On several occasions during the past winter I have had the pleasure of seeing Black-shouldered Kites (*Elanus axillaris*) in the coastal districts of Queensland. There can be little doubt that the drought prevailing at the time in the inland districts had driven them coastwards. On April 15th, 1923, I observed a pair hovering over a cotton-field at Gracemere, near Rockhampton. On May 12th, two were seen hovering over fields near the bank of the Brisbane River, near Indooroopilly, and, on May 29th, one was seen not far from the same locality at Yeerongpilly.

In each case the birds were hovering, poised in the air, with rapidly beating wings and widespread tails, just like Kestrels. I was not previously aware that the birds of this genus had this habit, associated in my mind with members of the genus *Cerchneis*, as observed in various parts of the world. Careful search through the literature accessible to me showed that the habit had been mentioned by a few writers, but the peculiarity does not seem to have been emphasised. Apart from the Humming-birds, very few birds are capable of hovering, or at least if they are capable of it, they rarely indulge in the habit. Apart from the hawks mentioned, the Brown Hawk (*Ieracidea*) occasionally hovers for a short time. The Little Terns (*Sterna*) constantly hover over shallow water, whilst watching for small fish, and some of the larger Terns make a more clumsy attempt to perform the same manoeuvre. Our Restless Flycatcher (*Scisura*) must not be forgotten, though when hovering it does not remain long stationary like a Kestrel. In South Africa, I watched a bird hovering over a pool, which I at first took to be a small Tern, but it proved to be a Pied Kingfisher (*Ceryle rudis*). I never saw any of the Australian Kingfishers do this. Can any readers of *The Emu* add to my list of hoverers?—W. B. ALEXANDER, M.A., C.F.A.O.U., Sherwood, nr. Brisbane.

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The type locality of the White-browed Tree-Creeper. —

There appears to be some misunderstanding as to the correct identification and locality of North's Allotype (type of the female) of the White-browed Tree-creeper (*Climacteris superciliosa*). The story is as follows:—In *The Ibis*, ser. 7, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1895, p. 341, North described the species as new, giving the habitat as Illara Creek, Central Australia. The next year, in the Report on the Horn Expedition, p. 96, he redescribed the species, giving the habitat as "Moolah, interior of N.S.W., Illara Creek and Bagot's Creek, Central Australia, and Queensland." The Bagot's Creek specimen bears a collector's label marking it as a female, but there is absolutely no doubt as to its being a male bird. North, in his Report on the Horn Expedition, II, p. 97, says: "Upon examining the reference collection in the Australian Museum, I find there are a male and female of this species obtained in July, 1883, by the late Mr. Kenric Harold Bennett, on Moolah Station, in the interior of New South Wales. The specimens procured by Mr. Keartland, at Illara Creek and Bagot's Creek, are alike in plumage, and are marked respectively male and female, but the examples obtained by Mr. Bennett, at Moolah, and shot together while nesting, vary as described above," etc. Later, in the year 1906, in his "Nest and Eggs," Vol. II., p. 51, North says: "During the journey of the Horn Scientific Expedition to Central Australia, in 1894, Mr. G. A. Keartland obtained two males, one at Illara Creek, and the other

at Bagot's Creek." This statement, together with the two facts (1) that the male and female differ in colour, and (2) that both the Central Australian birds were identical in colour, makes it plain that North described the female from a bird which came from a different locality from that of the male, and taken at a different time. All the skins are in the Australian Museum, and as they have been examined by us we can definitely state that the Holotype was taken at Illara Creek, and the Allotype from Moolah, N.S.W., both birds being registered and labelled as such. It is self-evident that in the original description the locality of the Allotype was inadvertently omitted, and just why North did not describe from *both* the Moolah birds is, and will remain, a mystery.—J. R. KINGHORN, Zoologist, and H. O. FLETCHER, Assistant Zoologist, Australian Museum.

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Some Masked Plovers on the Brisbane River. — On May 12, 1923, I visited a tidal sand bank in the Brisbane River, near Indooroopilly, which at high-tide is an island, though at low-tide it is connected with the river bank at one point. There were numerous birds feeding on this "island," as the tide was low, and amongst others a flock of Spurwing Plovers (*Lobibyx novae-hollandiae*). Close to them, but not actually mingling with them when first noticed, was a Masked Plover (*L. miles*). The birds were fairly tame, and with my glasses it was easy to make out the large yellow lobes on the sides of the face, with the lower angles hanging below the throat, and the complete absence of the black patches on the shoulders, which distinguish the northern bird from its better-known congener. Presently one of the Spurwings came and joined its relative, and fed alongside it, so that their differences could be contrasted even more easily. No difference in size was perceptible, but the Masked Plover appeared to be a rather lighter brown on the back.

My only previous acquaintance with the Masked Plover was at Mackay, where flocks of them were common in November, 1922. During my residence in Central Queensland, I examined every party of Spurwings I saw, and they are common about Rockhampton, in the hope of seeing a Masked Plover, but I never saw one. As far as I can ascertain, no one else has previously met with one south of Mackay. In his "Birds of Australia," Vol. III., page 45, Mr. Mathews writes, when dealing with the Spur-winged Plover:—"I have specimens of this and the next species, shot on the same day in Queensland." Since Queensland is a large State, and both species are well-known to be resident in it, there is nothing remarkable in this statement, as it stands. I presume Mr. Mathews meant to imply that they had been shot by the same person, or in the same locality. If so, it would be interesting if he would state in what part of Queensland the two species have previously been met with together.—W. B. ALEXANDER, M.A., C.F.A.O.U., Sherwood, nr. Brisbane.

Semi-Hibernation of Swallows.—A correspondent, M.F., in writing to the Sydney "Bulletin," of 12/7/23, says "that this is the third consecutive year in which Swallows have been found in N.W. Tasmania, in the months of June and July, packed away in cavities of dry trees felled for firewood. This year 16 were found in one tree. The first discovery of the kind was made between Wynyard and Mt. Bischoff by two prospectors in 1921, and last year two men cutting wood in the district felled a tree with 37 Swallows packed away in it. The jar of the falling tree killed some, the others fluttered about the ground for a while, and eventually took wing."

I do not know who M.F. is, and see no reason to doubt the statement, as a small number of Welcome Swallows (*Hirundo neorhena*) have stayed the winter in Launceston for a number of years, using deep crevices among the rocks of an old quarry in which to shelter, and coming forth on sunny days in June and July to pick up any available insects. On 26th July this season I saw a pair on the outskirts of Devonport, skimming about at a fair height, and evidently enjoying the warmth and sunshine of that fine afternoon. These had probably not crossed the Strait, but had been sheltering away in the bush until the unusual warmth called them out. It was not until 13th of present month (August) that any appeared in the streets of the town, and they were about a fortnight earlier than usual.—H. STUART DOVE, F.Z.S., R.A.O.U., W. Devonport, Tas., 15/8/23.

The Origin of Some Bird Names.—In that highly original and suggestive paper on the Granite Belt, by Roberts and Jarvis, in the April *Emu*, there occur, near the close, some remarks on the names *Acanthiza* and *Reguloides*. The latter means "Regulus-like," and the meaning of the noun is given as "a staff," but *Regulus*, in Latin, means "a little king," diminutive of *Rex-regis*—that old friend of our boyhood in the Latin Grammar. The name was given to the genus which includes both the Gold-Crest and Fire-Crest in Britain, simply on account of the crest adornment, which crowned them "Little kings."

Regarding *Acanthiza*, the most probable derivation seems to be from Greek *Acantha*—a thorn, coinciding with the vernacular "thornbill." In this connection may be quoted the wee "Rifleman," of New Zealand, which is known also as "Spinebill" in those islands, the general name *Acanthidositta* meaning "spine (bill) nuthatch." In Sir Walter Buller's "Manual of the Birds of N.Z.," 1882, the name of the genus is given as *Acanthisitta*, which brings it as close as need be to the *Acantha* derivation. This name was bestowed in 1842, by Lafresnaye, and why it was altered is difficult to say. Anyone who studies the admirable figure of the head of this smallest of N.Z. birds in Buller's Manual, will have no doubt as to the spine-like appearance of the bill, from which, as I believe, the naturalist mentioned above derived the name.

An instance from another class is the "Picked Dog-fish" of British shores, known as *Acanthias*, from the sharp spine projecting in front of each dorsal fin, with which the fish can inflict painful wounds.—H. STUART DOVE, F.Z.S., W. Devonport, Tas.

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Courtship of the Gould Harrier. — Each year, at the season of early spring, my attention has been attracted by a short, oft-repeated scream, apparently coming from the sky. On looking upward, there, in the high empyrean, glides the male Harrier, and as he glides, ever and anon, turns a complete somersault, at the same time uttering the short, penetrating note to which reference has been made. Some distance away, in great circles, glides his mate; at times their paths approach, only to separate again. These manoeuvres are repeated several times a day, especially in fine, windy weather, as at present; it is quite fascinating to watch the easy gliding flight, often at an immense height, of these powerful hawks, and to note the frequent graceful somersaulting of the male. At whatever height he may be, his scream is of a sufficiently penetrating nature to be audible to the ear of a terrestrial observer.

Small wonder that Lord Lucas found delight, during furloughs in England, in watching the graceful flight of Harriers over his Norfolk estate, and that, himself an intrepid airman, he should leave, at his premature death, a sum of money for the protection of the Hawks and their breeding-grounds on that estate. Some of the landed proprietors of Australia and Tasmania might well follow this example, and protect their valuable allies. — H. STUART DOVE, F.Z.S., W. Devonport, Tas., 8/9/23.

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The Cuckoo Problem. — That well-known English naturalist, E. Kay Robinson, writing in the "Countryside" on the question as to whether the Cuckoo ever inserts her egg with the bill, says: "So many instances of the eggs being found in nests with entrances much too small for the bird to have entered, have been given, that one cannot suppose that all the writers were mistaken; but what puzzles me is that Nature, which in other respects appears especially careful of the Cuckoo's interests, should allow the bird to make what appears to me the fatal mistake of putting its egg in a nest with so small an entrance that the young bird could never get out, but would be condemned to a lingering death."

Our colonial Cuckoos, at any rate, do not wait for death to overtake them, but cut the gordian knot in Alexander-like fashion. An instance came under my notice of a young Fantailed Cuckoo (*Cacomantis flabelliformis*) in a nest of the Brown Thornbill (*Acanthisa pusilla*). He pitched out the eggs of the host through the diminutive circular entrance at the side near the top, an entrance which just allowed the passage of an average forefinger: when he grew so big that the nest became too stuffy,

he worked his head through the aperture, then the neck and shoulders, and sat there in state, while consuming all the insects brought by the Thornbills. There was no difficulty in working the body out when the time came, but the nest was left in a very disintegrated condition. — H. STUART DOVE, F.Z.S., R.A.O.U.

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The Northern Range-Limit of the Royal Albatross.—Perhaps it may be of interest to report what appears to be an unusual northern range of *Diomedea regia*.

On May 28th, 1923, from 15 to 20 of these regal birds were following the s.s. "Tofua" on her customary Auckland-Suva route. The majority of the flock were old birds, the remainder younger and of (probably) varying ages. The wind was southerly; it was distinctly cool, and the sea was quiet.

At noon the chart-room temperature was 73° F., corresponding to a (calculated) outside or ocean temperature of 70°; location, 22° 5' 0" S. Lat., 177° 27' 0" East Long. Some time during the following night all the albatrosses disappeared.

The moon was nearly full, and the night was very clear, but no bird could be seen after nightfall. The next morning no *Diomedea* was in sight, and during the day none was visible on the horizon. However, on the following morning (May 30th), a young individual appeared, and flew about the ship all day until 5.30 p.m., when it, too, disappeared. No others were subsequently seen.

The temperature on board at this date was 72° F. at noon, and we were then at 20° 3' 0" S. Lat., 177° 54' 0" East Long., about 120 miles south of Viti Levu. Officers of the "Tofua" who have been following the course Auckland-Suva for five years assure me that they do not remember having observed any albatross so far north before.

The foregoing observation tallies with Le Souef's report in a recent number of *The Emu* that *Diomedea exulans* uniformly deserts a ship and flies south when the temperature at 4 p.m. rises to 70° F. In other words, the temperature of the air more than any other factor determines the range of the South Sea albatross.—CASEY A. WOOD, F.Z.S., R.A.O.U.
