

Photographing the White-faced Heron

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Many of the estuarine flats and quiet reaches of Sydney Harbour are bordered by extensive growths of mangrove trees. The ebb tide leaves uncovered an expanse of oozy, clinging mud and exposes the brittle, upturned breathing roots of the mangroves. Withal, a pungent odour rises from the slime. Little wonder, then, that such places seem unattractive to the naturalist; yet many birds find sanctuary and seek a nesting site among the foliage of these green-leaved forests. Apart from the smaller species, I have in mind a bird of considerable proportions and rare beauty, that sometimes builds in the fastness and the seclusion of mangrove swamps; in particular, the White-faced Heron (*Notophox novæ-hollandiæ*), commonly termed the "Blue Crane."

Trudging through a swamp late in August of this year (1930), I chanced upon a large depressed platform of sticks, built about fifteen feet up, in an old gnarled mangrove. Whilst empty, its apparent newness prompted future investigation. A week or two later it contained three greenish-blue eggs. At the time they were thought to be those of the Mangrove Bittern (*Butoroides striata*), a species with a fondness for mangroves, and known to breed in the same locality; however, when a companion and I approached the nest not long afterwards, an alarmed White-faced Heron rose uttering a hoarse croak.

The eggs probably hatched during the first week in October, for on October 12 three downy young birds lay huddled in their cradle of sticks. Occasionally they lifted their heads, uttering low-pitched croaks, and moving their lower mandibles rapidly. The youngsters grew apace; by October 19 they were able to squat and vigorously protest at our intrusion. It was well to avoid their snapping beaks. The nest was now fouled by excrement, a condition in no way inconveniencing the birds, as most of the waste matter passed through the platform. Soon most of the quills encasing the feathers had broken, and as one approached the nest the birds would adopt what may be termed a "protective" or "obliterative" attitude; with heads high in the air, they would remain motionless, and invariably facing the direction of the disturbance, in which position they were indeed difficult to see. After a few minutes they would relax and continue the almost ceaseless movement of the lower bill. Some four weeks after the youngsters had emerged from the eggs they could move about the branches near the nest with ease. When either of the parent birds happened to be near by, their lusty and loud-voiced offspring



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Young Herons about 3 to 4 weeks old.

Photo. by K. A. Hindwood, R.A.O.U.



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would crowd on to the nest. At the age of five weeks, and as yet unable to fly, they were visited by a colleague, Mr. Norman Chaffer, and on their perceiving his nearness, they forthwith jumped into the water (it being high tide and some three feet deep), and paddled away, much in the manner of ducks, and with as much ease.

In an endeavour to obtain a series of photographs of the adult, a "hide" of sacking and bushes was built round the base of a nearby tree, whilst a platform near the nest supported the camera. For two week-ends both Mr. Chaffer and myself were unsuccessful, but after a wait of not more than an hour the following Saturday, I happened to snap the old bird. I rushed home immediately to develop what promised to be a good photograph. Alas, by a curious mischance, the bird had been decapitated; everything was there in fine detail, excepting the head. The next afternoon another picture was taken, though this left much to be desired. Subsequently I again wended a laborious way through the swamp to the "hide." After fixing the camera in position, I entered the retreat. In about thirty minutes the old bird returned, and alighted on the edge of the nest. A photograph was then impossible, as a morning light opposed the lens of the camera; so I watched the manner in which the young were fed. Unmoved by the cries of her offspring, the old bird stood for a little while facing away from them, then turning, she squatted slightly, so that their beaks reached to her breast. One of the youngsters shuffled forward, and with upraised head, it seemed to press its rapidly-vibrating bill against the throat or breast of the parent, which, stimulated, no doubt, by the contact, suddenly placed its bill inside that of the youngster, and as suddenly regurgitated some food into the loose, pouch-like fold of skin near the base of the lower mandible. Thus it seemed to me, though I must confess that the whole process was done so quickly that an exact observation seemed impossible, despite the fact that I witnessed the two other birds fed.

Leaving the "hide" for an hour, I returned soon after noon and experienced a tedious wait of more than three hours, and even then the bird did not return. Perhaps it was because she had seen me enter the "hide," though on previous occasions, my disappearance did not influence her overmuch. Certainly the White-faced Heron is a shy bird at any time in the presence of man, especially thereabouts (Middle Harbour) for the "Blue Crane" is considered an attractive target by gun-mad vandals.