

Stray Feathers

Australian Snipe.—It is not often that one sees Snipe (*Gallinago hardwicki*) flying to feeding grounds in broad daylight without they have been shot at just previously or otherwise flushed. It was my good fortune, however, to have this experience one afternoon towards the end of January of this year, 1932, when I was sitting on the running board of my car, idly waiting for a person whom I had taken to a homestead about two miles out of St. Mary's. It was a bright, hot afternoon, 4.30 p.m., and I happened to be looking out on to the road close by at a motor passing along, when a bird crossing my range of vision attracted my attention. It was flying along about 60 feet above the ground, and at first, with the sun in my eyes. I took it to be a solitary Starling, as the flight was much like that of one of those birds, but a second glance showed me plainly that it was a Snipe. There is a small swamp in a hollow just in front of the homestead, close to the main road, and the bird was making for it to begin its nightly search for food. I saw it clearly settle in some rushes growing along the margin only 110 yards or so from where I sat. Presently came an old Harrier (*Circus approximans*), hawking over the swamp, much to the annoyance of about 80 Spur-winged Plover (*Lobibyx novæ-hollandiæ*), which were feeding on the bank overlooking the swamp, and I thought to myself: "That old Snipe is laying low now." Snipe are very scarce nowadays in the settled parts of Tasmania, having deserted their old haunts on most of the farms, where one used to find them every year up to the first few years of this century. I did not disturb this now rare visitor to our valley.—R. W. LEGGE, R.A.O.U., Cullenswood, Tas.

Unusual Food of Yellow Robin.—At Glen Waverley during December, 1931, I noticed a Yellow Robin fly from the ground with an unusually large object in its bill. I could see that the object was white on one surface and dark on the other, and suspected that it was a lizard. Never having noticed a Yellow Robin attack a lizard previously, I chased the bird from tree to tree in the hope that it would drop the prize. This, however, did not occur, and eventually I lost sight of the bird amongst the timber. A few minutes later I noticed the bird slip quietly to a nest some twelve feet from the ground and heard young ones being fed. I climbed at once to the nest and was in time to retrieve the body of the lizard from the throat of one of the young ones. It did

not appear to me that the young bird would have any chance of dealing successfully with a meal of such proportions. When retrieved the tail of the lizard had been lost, but the portion remaining measured $2\frac{1}{4}$ inches. With the tail attached the lizard probably measured $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches in length.—R. T. LITTLEJOHNS, R.A.O.U., Melbourne.

***Calidris tenuirostris* in Western Australia.**—The only specimen actually received in the south-west of Western Australia of the Great Knot (*Calidris tenuirostris*) Horsfield, was one obtained by Mr. W. B. Alexander at Bremer Bay on the south coast in 1916. In January of the present year, 1931, when boating on the Leschenault Inlet at Bunbury with Messrs. W. V. and H. E. Meyer, we noted three large Sandpipers, two of which were collected. Both were females and were in fairly bright plumage. In each case the culmen measured 40 mm. in length, the tarsus 37 mm. in one case and 39 mm. in the other. The stomachs contained minute Gastropods. In January, 1926, I observed a single bird, which I attributed to this species, at the Pallinup Estuary on the south coast (*The Emu*, Vol. XXVI, p. 66). In December, 1922, during a Royal Society excursion to Garden Island, Mr. L. Glauert (Curator of the Western Australian Museum) and I saw three large waders at Collie Head, Careening Bay, in company with some Red-capped Dotterels. We observed the birds for some time with field glasses and were fairly confident they were Great Knots. As no specimen had been obtained on this part of the coast the occurrence was not referred to in my paper on new records from the Swan River district.—D. L. SERVENTY, Subiaco, W.A.

Not Guilty! Shag and Cormorant Acquitted.—"These picturesque frequenters of the Cornish coast, the Shag and Cormorant, were, not long ago, arraigned on the charge of being arch-enemies of fishermen, tried, found guilty, and executed. The Sea Fisheries Committees set a price upon them, and many hundreds of heads were sent in by claimants for the fee. Then the advisability of expert investigation was suggested. The matter was put into the hands of the Marine Biological Association, with the result that the birds have now received a free pardon and acquitted from all the crimes of which they were previously held to be guilty. The Cornwall Sea Fisheries Committee, one of the principal wagers of war upon them in the past, has now decided that they shall be included for protection under the Wild Birds' Protection Acts."—*London News-Chronicle*, 13/10/31. Communicated by H. STUART DOVE, R.A.O.U., Devonport, Tas.

Avian Wanderers.—Australian land birds, with the exception of recognised migrants, appear, for the most part, to keep pretty well to their normal ranges; records of the departure of species from those favoured areas are not at all common. Storm and drought appear to be the chief forces actuating the departure of otherwise stationary species; thus we have occasional records of strictly inland forms being found quite close to the coast, and of northern species being observed past their normal southern limit, and, naturally, *vice versa*. As it seems quite possible that some of our local bird migration originated by accidents such as these, it might be a good idea for bird students to record any abnormalities of this nature which from time to time come under their notice. Accordingly, a few observations of this character might not be out of place here.

During November, 1925, when on a visit to Kempsey, N.S.W., I discovered a small colony (perhaps fifteen) of White-backed Swallows (*Cheramæca leucosterna*) nesting in a sandy bank flanking the Macleay River—not ten miles from the coast. It was not until four years later that I realised that my observation was of an important nature. Even now there seems to be only three or four records of the birds having been seen east of the Great Divide in New South Wales. In the Spring of 1930 I wrote to friends on the Macleay and learnt that the “Bank-Swallows still breed near the river each year, but some hundreds of yards upstream from the old site.” My correspondent also stated that each year after rearing their young, the “White-breasts” disappeared, returning again in the following Spring. It would seem, therefore, that some of these Swallows at least have a migration of their own; perhaps leaving the more arid interior to breed in the damper coastal regions where the earth is softer and food more plentiful.

Whilst collecting Bats on the North Coast at Christmas, 1931, I determined to visit the old site to satisfy myself that the birds still returned yearly to breed. The old locality was deserted, but a few miles upstream I observed several White-backed Swallows soaring about above the river and adjacent paddocks.

In a small patch of scrub at the rear of my home (some ten miles south of Sydney) a few years ago, I saw a pair of Doves, which were, at the time, complete strangers to me. They were extremely shy, and as I could not get near them, I shot one for identification purposes. It proved to be a specimen of the Bar-shouldered Dove (*Geopelia humeralis*)—a bird the normal range of which extends from New Guinea, Northern Territory, Queensland, to far Northern New South Wales. Its appearance near Sydney synchronised with severe storms along the entire coast of New South Wales. Therefore, it is quite probable that the particular

pair of birds were driven a few hundred miles from their normal habitat by the inclement weather conditions.

During July, 1930, I was seated in a steam-tram at Carringbah, a small township about two miles from the fashionable seaside resort of Cronulla. Idly watching what I imagined to be a Sacred Kingfisher (*Halcyon sanctus*) sitting on a nearby electric wire, I noticed it fly to the ground and there secure a grasshopper. As it swiftly arose I saw that it possessed a warm-chestnut rump, and on leaving the tram I ascertained that it was the Red-backed Kingfisher (*H. pyrrhopygius*), a bird well distributed in the interior, but one the coastal occurrences of which are extremely rare.—A. J. MARSHALL, R.A.O.U., Penshurst, N.S.W.

Tree Martins Migrating.—At Tooradin on the evening of February 6, 1932, I noticed a considerable number of Tree Martins (*Hylochelidon nigricans*) on the estuary skimming about like Welcome Swallows, but distinguishable by the white rump. At 5.30 next morning there they were, about 200 in number, all perched on the railing of the local baths enclosure, where they must have spent the night. A few took wing and not long afterwards the whole party rose, circling together in the air, ascended well clear of the vegetation, then, with a slow movement, moved northward out of sight.—A. G. CAMPBELL, R.A.O.U., Kilsyth, Vic.

Egg Laid containing Embryo.—The laying of an egg by a domestic hen with the chick partly developed in it is unusual, and hence is recorded as of some biological interest. The hen which laid the egg was one of several White Leghorn fowls which were kept by me in a fowl yard, and from which all eggs had been removed half an hour before the egg in question was laid. There were no brooding hens on the premises. Hearing a cackling in the yard, my wife, expecting to find an egg laid by the cackling hen, repaired to the yard and obtained a further egg, which had just been laid. Upon opening it for culinary purposes, she was surprised to find in it an embryo chick. The embryo was developed for about a quarter of its growth before it reaches the stage when it emerges from the shell. What does this portend? Is it the first stage of advancement by an oviparous animal to that of a viviparous one? Or is it simply a question of retarded depositing causing the embryo to develop in the fertilised egg?—A. H. E. MATTINGLEY, R.A.O.U., Melbourne.

Flock Pigeons.—After reading Dr. W. D. MacGillivray's very fine article on the occurrence of these "mystery" birds at Hewitt Downs, I thought that a few notes as to their distribution during 1931 might be of interest.

In September and October, 1930, fair numbers in small flocks were observed on Moolawatana, South Australia, that place being a little south of the latitude of Hewitt Downs. I also have received advice that the Pigeons had been noted at the following points:—On Cooper's Creek (Kanowna Station) they were commonly seen; on Diamantina Creek the birds were seen in fairly large flocks, and were nesting—birds were noted all along this creek to the South Australia-Queensland border—and farther north, at Roseberth and The Bluff Stations, where eggs were obtained. The eggs were found on the ground in tall grass. Two eggs form the clutch. The birds were also reported along the Strezlecki Creek, at Carraweena, in fair numbers. In every instance my informants did not think the birds were "moving along," and most of them expected them to remain while the season was suitable. The points mentioned are over a very extensive area, and the birds must be in very large numbers, as most of the area is similar country and almost devoid of human occupation, so that reports are not possible.

It is a mystery where these birds have been for several years past. It was thought that these splendid Pigeons were likely to become extinct, as little had been heard of them for so many years. Late in 1930 several reports came to hand from Queensland that the Pigeons were coming back in numbers, and these observations have been followed by many more in widely-distributed areas. The Flock Pigeon certainly has demonstrated to us that there is a great area of our continent that is rarely visited by white people (all of whom would be struck by the sight of this beautiful bird, and would certainly remark upon it when they returned to civilisation). Apropos of this, the Bourke Parrot (*Neophema bourki*) and the Scarlet-chested Parrot (*N. splendida*) have been fairly numerous out west of Oodnadatta for two seasons, whereas, previously, only a few scattered "Bourkes" were to be found. Both these birds, as also the Flock Pigeon, must have a suitable unknown spot in "the Never Never."—J. NEIL MCGILP, R.A.O.U., Adelaide, S.A.

Visitors to New Zealand.—In the list of regular visitors, as published in *The Emu* of last issue (Vol. XXXI, p. 234), the name of the Curlew Sandpiper (*Erolia testacea*) was omitted.—R. H. D. STIDOLPH, R.A.O.U., Masterton, N.Z.

Lotus-bird's Large Clutch.—On January 24, 1932, Mr. George Savidge found in a swamp in the neighbourhood of Copmanhurst on the Clarence River in New South Wales a nest of a Lotus-bird (*Irediparra gallinacea*), which contained an unusually large clutch of eggs, which he very kindly sent to me. In a letter which he posted at the same time he stated, "I am posting you to-day a set of Lotus-bird's eggs—seven of them—all found in the one nest. I have not previously seen or heard of more than four in a nest. They look very much as if they were all laid by one bird, but as one can hardly imagine a set of seven eggs, probably they were laid by two birds." From the similarity in size and shape and the uniformity of markings I lean strongly towards the belief that they were all laid by one bird.

Mr. Savidge referred to Mr. Sid. W. Jackson's experience with Lotus-birds, and wondered if he had ever found more than four eggs in a nest. That matter was set at rest by referring to *Catalogue and Data of the Jacksonian Oological Collection*, for at page 37 Mr. Jackson wrote, "The eggs are always placed with the pointed ends turned inwards, and are usually four in number for a sitting, though on two occasions we have taken five eggs from each nest." A third clutch of five eggs, taken at Darwin, is mentioned in *The Emu* (Vol. XXXI) at page 92, in Mr. N. J. Favaloro's article on this species. Apparently no clutch larger than five has been previously recorded.

Further interesting observations by Mr. Savidge were mentioned by him as follows:—"Although these birds don't look like it they have very extensive powers of flight. I happened to go to this same swamp one evening just before sundown. The swamp was nearly dry, and I saw fully half a dozen birds flying up and down the water course, about the height of the taller gums. I thought, what an interesting sight, these birds are gathering in the air to go to better feeding grounds. But no! I soon discovered they were feeding on insects. There was no darting about, but they varied their course a little to grab anything they wanted. Odd birds came down for a rest, but others went up, and they were still at this performance when I left."

When a collection of eggs of Australian birds is inspected there are certain items which always claim attention by reason of their beauty. Pride of place must, in my opinion, be given to the eggs of the Paradise Rifle-bird (*Ptiloris paradiseus*) and the Victoria Rifle-bird (*P. victoriæ*). Other species, the handsome eggs of which are conspicuous, are most of the Bower-birds, and the Painted Snipe (*Rostratula australis*), and among commoner varieties the dark red eggs of the Speckled Warbler (*Chthonicola sagittata*) and the dainty bluish-green products of the Golden-headed Fantail-Warbler (*Cisticola exilis*), but the intricate patterns of

black twisted and interlacing lines which embellish the yellowish-brown ground colour of the eggs of the Lotus-bird grace them with a dignity which places them high on the scale of beauty, and when seven of them are grouped in one clutch they command close inspection, even by casual observers, so that the unique clutch found by Mr. Savidge is and will be highly esteemed not only for its rarity, but also for its beauty.—J. A. Ross, R.A.O.U., Malvern, Vic.

Birds at High Altitudes.—Mention in the current *Emu* (Vol. XXXI, p. 254) of a Pipit (*Anthus australis*) being the only bird in sight on the summit of Mt. Scott (3125 feet), Tasmania, calls to mind that when on the overland walk from Lake Te Anau to Milford Sound, New Zealand, and passing over McKinnon's Saddle (3500 feet), the highest point of the track, I sighted a Pipit, quite alone, squatted on the cold wet ground amid patches of snow, and looking the very picture of solitude. How hardy must this little brown bird be to exist in the bleak desolation of a mountain "pass." Yet he is just as much at home at sea level, being quite plentiful in the paddocks and on the roadsides of this coastal town.

Like the Pipit, some of our Honeyeaters, notably the Crescent (*Phylidonyris pyrrhoptera*) and the Yellow-throated (*Meliphaga flavicollis*), seem able to adapt themselves to any altitude. They are frequent visitors to our gardens in Devonport, yet the Crescent is seen and heard in numbers at Cradle Valley (3050 feet) and on the high hill which backs it, and I have noted the Yellow-throated on the summits of both Mt. Barron (4644 feet), east of Launceston, and Mt. Roland (4047 feet), south of Devonport. It is very pleasing to listen to the notes of this fine Honey-eater amid the rocky masses of our mountain-tops.—H. STUART DOVE, R.A.O.U., Devonport, Tas.

Bird Moistening Food.—I noted the following rather unusual behaviour of a Magpie Lark (*Grallina cyanoleuca*), which has a nest and two young ones near the homestead. It was during a very severe heat wave. The female used to come into the garden and catch grubs and grasshoppers, and invariably flew up to a tin dish that I had for the birds to drink at, and dip whatever she had in her bill several times into the water. She then flew up to the young ones. I was wondering if this is their method of giving the young birds a drink during very hot weather. Ordinary days she does not worry about doing this. This pair of birds have nested every season for the past 12 years in the one clump of trees. I note they feed and care for the young up to a certain point and then hunt them away.—N. GEARY, R.A.O.U., Dalby, Qld.