

Stray Feathers

Birds Drinking in the Dry Interior.—Anyone who has watched at the bores and wells of the interior when the birds come to water must have been no less intrigued by their behaviour than amazed at their numbers. There are many species which do not drink for months at a stretch, if at all, but others come regularly from as far away as ten or twelve miles.

The earliest arrivals in this district are Galahs and "Major Mitchells" or "Cocklarinas"—to give them their best-known vernacular name. In the hot weather the thermometer sometimes registers 90 degrees for a week or more at a stretch, and shortly after sunrise each day climbs over the 100 degrees mark. Consequently, I was not surprised to see these Cockatoos arriving well ahead of the sun. The presence of "Cocklarinas" is raucously announced long before they reach the water; they are mostly in flocks numbering from two to a dozen, and, if disturbed before drinking, have no hesitation in flying another eight miles or so to the next water. In common with most, if not all, other Cockatoos, the crest is flared immediately after alighting, but never whilst on the wing.

The Galahs arrive in pairs at first, then in small flocks, and later in thousands. Usually they are more or less silent before the morning drink, reserving most of their vocal energy for the late afternoon. I have seen mulga trees literally broken down with the weight of them, and a forty-yard long trough "disappears" when they settle on it. The troughs are easily favourites, as each bird gets a footing just a few inches above the water. When there is only a waterhole, the accommodation around the edges is often unequal to the demand. Some try—without much success—to settle on the backs of earlier arrivals, some cling to the sides of stumps in the water, reaching down and laboriously assuming upright positions between gulps; others, but not many, drink from the air, either hovering over one spot long enough to take a few sips, or flying back and forth, scooping it up with the lower mandible, like Swallows. A few alight actually in the water, taking off again without effort when their thirst has been satisfied. Any disturbance, such as a stick thrown into the water, launches into the air a screeching mass of pink and silver, but the alarm subsides as suddenly as it began.

Next in order of arrival and numbers come the little, whistling Mulga Parrots (*Psephotus varius*). In comparison, they are quiet and well-mannered, settling a few yards back and waddling forward to the water's edge. This habit of alighting on the ground persists even at troughs, to which they fly in a few moments. After drinking, they remain for half an hour in the vicinity, the brilliant plumage of the

males set off to advantage by the sombre grey-green of the females. The heat, rapidly mounting by this time, sends them, still whistling cheerfully, back to the bush. They are more seriously affected than most birds by a heat wave, and large numbers are so prostrated as to be easily caught by hand.

After them come Crested Pigeons in increasing numbers, hardy in condition as they are gentle in appearance. The fierce climate disturbs them not at all, and a few pairs may always be found breeding, no matter what the season. It is not surprising that they have spread from their original habitat, the dry interior, until they are to be found at present at many places within a few miles of the coast.

Most other birds visit the water singly or in pairs, and at any time throughout the day—Crows and Eagles, timid Zebra Finches and mimetic Bower-birds, and an occasional wary Buzzard, Singing and Spiny-cheeked Honeyeaters manifesting their relationship by spending more time in bathing than in drinking, quarrelsome Grey Jumpers, known throughout the back-country as "Lousy Jacks." Drought conditions, at present obtaining over much of south-west Queensland, destroy large numbers of birds, and mobilize the remainder to an extent which affords excellent opportunities for observation. In a wet season, when gilgars and melon-holes are full, the concentration, both of species and of individuals, does not take place. The small, shy denizens of the thick timber, the Thornbills, Wrens, Quail-Thrushes, Wedgebills and Grass-Wrens, seem to survive and even thrive in a waterless world, and the task of observing and recording their doings is infinitely more difficult and—human nature being what it is—more attractive.—A. C. CAMERON, Hungerford, Qld., 16/3/38.

Food of the Red-capped Robin.—In recent issues of *The Emu* Messrs. J. S. P. Ramsay (vol. XXXV, p. 347), and C. E. Bryant (vol. XXXVII, p. 280) comment on the food of the Jacky Winter (*Microeca fascians*). The accompanying photograph of a Red-capped Robin (*Petroica goodenovii*), taken at Doonside in November, 1936, shows a similar thread. The food that was being given to the young bird was made up of flies, spiders and a small white moth about an inch in length, all of which were pushed down the youngster's throat by the male. As each insect is fed to the young whole, and is swallowed in a similar condition, it is not possible for this type of food to cause the glutinous matter from which the "thread" is made.

An explanation may be found among the domesticated animals. Cows, horses, and dogs will leave a sticky form of saliva on whatever they touch with their tongues, and this is also customary among the mammals. With most of

the small insectivorous birds, it is usual for the adults to hold the food in the young bird's gape until a firm grip is obtained. That is not only effected by means of the bill and tongue, but also by a saliva in the mouth and throat. When withdrawing the bill, portion of the saliva would undoubtedly be attached, and at times, stretched out into a fine thread before breaking.

It was impossible to detect this substance with the naked eye, for the bird, contrary to usual habit, moved almost as fast as a Honeyeater, and five out of the six exposures made were spoilt by movement, although the camera shutter was set at a fast speed.—ROY P. COOPER, Randwick, N.S.W., 22/8/38.

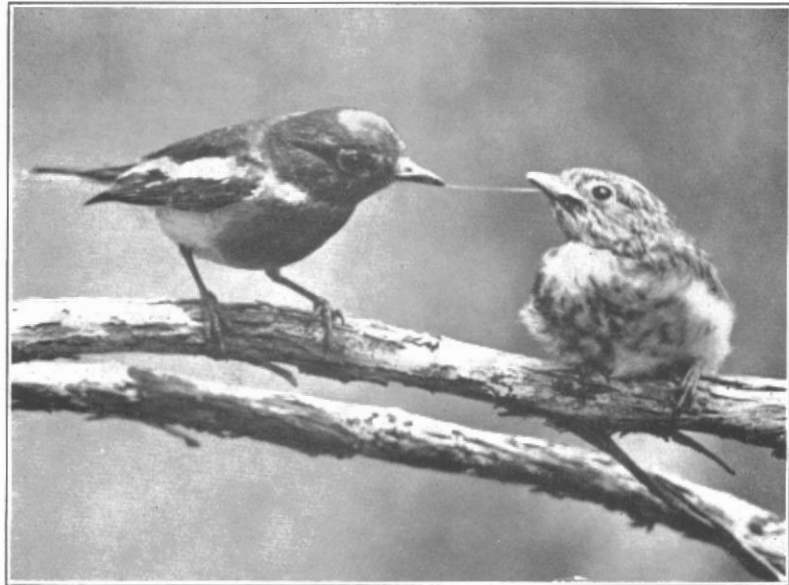
The Mallee Whipbird.—In September this year I visited Manya, Victoria, where Messrs. J. A. Ross and F. E. Howe procured, in September, 1932, a female of *Psophodes nigrogularis leucogaster*—see *The Emu*, vol. XXXII, p. 133. Ross had been there a week when we arrived, but the season was (and is) a poor one for nesting and very few birds were breeding. Telfer's block, where the Whipbird was secured, has been partly cleared, and, like so many other holdings in that part of the country, abandoned. New growth is coming but the Whipbirds have apparently gone and doubtless will not return.

On September 13, 1938, we (Messrs. Ross and Roy Ribbons and Mrs. Bryant and I) crossed into South Australia and proceeded northwards, just inside that State from Victoria, for about 18 miles to the vicinity of Peebinga. There, Messrs. J. N. McGilp and F. E. Parsons had, a few days before, completed an unsuccessful search, extending over a week or more, for the nest of the Whipbird, and an attempt to procure the male bird. After a search of some hours Ross discovered a nest with two well-incubated eggs. It was built on top of a porcupine grass clump under the protection of overhanging boughs of tea-tree—apparently a typical position. The hen bird was flushed from the nest but returned later. Hopeful of procuring a male bird, Ross and Ribbons remained in the vicinity all the afternoon, but without success. At about 6 p.m., when we were leaving, a photograph (of sorts), here reproduced, was obtained, but the lateness of the hour and the poor light afforded by a cloudy sky were not conducive to highly-successful photography.

Four days later the area was re-visited. Whilst proceeding through the scrub about a quarter of a mile from the site of the first nest, we surprised a Whipbird, which flew, calling in scolding manner, from a tea-tree shrub. In porcupine grass under this shrub I discovered a nearly-completed nest. My wife and I later heard the bird again, and observed

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PLATE 40



Red-capped Robin feeding young, showing
"thread" of glutinous substance.

Photo. by R. P. Cooper.



Nest and Eggs of *Psophodes nigrogularis leucogaster*.

Photo. by C. E. Bryant.

it in satisfactory manner as it called from and perched in a tree. The call in no way resembled the notes ascribed to the bird by Howe in the paper referred to. Insofar as any combination of letters can ever convey an idea of a bird's call, and despite the usually-absurd appearance of such attempts, I record the notes as sounding like "Wée-chiddle-ee-chip-chip." Ribbons considered this note to be the usual call of the female.

Ross wrote to McGilp advising him of the whereabouts of the "find." Now comes the newspaper report (October 11) that the latter has secured a male Whipbird and it is assumed that the bird taken was one of the pair the nest of which we discovered. A newspaper par. also mentions the intention of the Chief Inspector of Fisheries and Game in Victoria to afford the species absolute protection and to ask the like Department in South Australia to do likewise. Such a move appears to be good policy now that the eggs and both the male and female of the bird are known.—C. E. BRYANT, Melbourne, Vic., 14/10/38.

Notes on Swifts.—Almost immediately before the approach of thunderstorms in this locality, numerous flocks of both Fork-tailed and Spine-tailed Swifts are to be observed flying low over the tree-tops and open clearings in pursuit of the many flying insects that arise to seek shelter from the approaching storms. It is not uncommon to see both species flying side by side in dizzy circles, and diving and "zooming" with remarkable ease, at varying altitudes. The wing power, speed and judgment of these seemingly tireless birds is truly remarkable.

During January of this year (1938) I was fortunate enough to see a lone Spine-tailed Swift circling above a recently-filled dam on this station. Presently I saw it "dive" gracefully, skimming just above the surface of the water, and I naturally assumed it to be catching insects that rested on the water. Still watching, I again saw it "dive," but this time it skilfully ran its lower mandible just beneath the surface of the water for about three feet, and it was not until this performance was repeated three or four times that I realized that the bird was actually drinking. Each time on nearing the water the bird opened its bill to its utmost. After about half a dozen of these manœuvres, the bird rose steeply into the air and disappeared from sight.

The expert manner in which the Swift utilizes the wind and air currents to great advantage is worthy of study, and I fully intend making detailed notes of these aerial performances the next time a party of Swifts visits this area.—N. H. E. McDONALD, Charleville, Qld., 29/3 38.

Jardine Caterpillar-eater near Melbourne.—Records of this bird in southern Victoria, or indeed in Victoria anywhere, are rare, despite the initial discovery of a breeding bird at Somerville on the Mornington peninsula. Some years ago a pair, at least, frequented, each season, a gully in the Dandenong hills, but they were wary visitors. On Sunday, October 16, a bird of this species was noted at Balwyn, seven miles east of the city. It called once only during the time I had it under observation. Possibly this dry season in Victoria will result in many more-northern birds visiting southern areas.—J. J. BRYANT, Balwyn, Vic., 17/10/38.

The birds figured by Mr. Cayley in the colour plate in this issue are as follows: Upper—*Acanthiza murina* (De Vis), ♀. Collected by R. Archbold and A. L. Rand, Mt. Albert Edward (S.W. slope), British Papua. Date: June 20, 1933. Lower—*A. chrysorrhoa normantoni* (Mathews), sex? Collected by Robin Kemp—Kemp's Exploration in Australia. Locality—Normanton, Queensland. Date: April 3, 1914. Both skins from the American Museum of Natural History.

On page 26 of the July *Emu* (vol. xxxviii), under *Erolia testacea*, the fourth line from the bottom of the page is a repetition of the eighth preceding line. The line should read "plumage on August 20, and four, similarly garbed, appeared in a week." Editorial vigilance cannot prevent errors of this description, which occur after final proofs are returned to the printer. Under *Cladorhynchus leucocephalus*, on page 25, part of the fourth last line should read "during the third week," not "during the week." Dr. Serventy also wishes the alteration, on page 28, line 21, of "whether the birds" to "whether some of the birds," and the deletion of all references to the Wandering Tattler on pages 72, 73 and 75.

Mr. A. H. Chisholm, a Vice-President of the R.A.O.U., who is at present in England, where he has lectured to the British Ornithologists Union and showed films to the Zoological Society of London, has written some account of his experiences to the Editor. In Edinburgh, he says, he was taken to the Bass Rock, "a wonderful city of Gannets, Gulls, Guillemots, etc." In other parts of Scotland he saw "Crested Tits, Wheatears, Redstarts, Twites and many water-birds." He writes that there should be plenty of material in Gilbert's diary for future publication: we hope that the bird notes come to this journal.