Notes on Tasmanian Birds
By B. C. MOLLISON, Hobart, Tas.

IV. DUSKY WOOD-SWALLONS ON MIGRATION

On Monday, April 20, 1959, I was driving from Hobart to Burnie on the Midlands Highway, and making a record of the birds seen en route. At a point 18 miles south of Launceston I encountered a dispersed flock of Dusky Wood-Swallows (Artamus cyanopterus) gliding over the road. Although individual movements appeared erratic, the flock as a whole was moving northwards at a speed of from 12 to 15 m.p.h.

From the time I first encountered them I kept a tally of birds seen from the road, and the numbers noted were as follow: 2, 4, 6, 2, 2, 1, 3, 1, 1, 1, 3, 6, 4, 8, 3, 4, 5, 14, 24, 27, 3, 1, 3, a total of 128 swallows in 3·3 miles. My speed, relative to the flock, would have been about 15 m.p.h., and I calculated the extent of the flock to be about 1½ miles in diameter. The birds were all about 50 feet above ground level, and were uttering soft, infrequent calls which I rendered as “chui, chui”. No other records were obtained on this trip.

From April 3 to April 5, 1962, while travelling south along the west coast of Tasmania between the Arthur and Pieman rivers, I encountered several scattered flocks of Dusky Wood-Swallows, from 10 to 200 in number, travelling with Tree-Martins (Hylochelidon nigriventer), Welcome Swallows (Hirundo neoxena) and Spine-tailed Swifts (Hirundapus caudacutus).

There seems little doubt that the Wood-Swallows were migrating. There is some indication, from the road count, that larger parties of birds were near the northern perimeter of the flock. Like the Tree-Martins observed crossing Bass Strait on February 26, 1958 (Mollison, Emu, 60: 55-56), the Wood-Swallows tended to travel in small groups rather than in a continuous stream or front of birds. It is likely that most migrants use island chains at either end of Bass Strait to make their way to the Australian mainland during autumn.

V. SIMILAR BEHAVIOUR IN RAVENS, CURRAWONGS AND MAGPIES

On Tuesday, April 22, 1958, at 0745 hours, I was on Fisher Island, in the Furneaux Group, eastern Bass Strait, and, on locking out the window of the accommodation hut, I noticed two Ravens (Corvus coronoides) about 25 feet from the window.

One bird (A) was standing on a low tussock (Poa poiformis), the other (B) on a flat granite slab nearby. As I watched, bird B picked up a granite pebble about ½-in. diameter in its bill, hopped to the tussock, and rolled on one
side, holding the pebble. Bird A descended from the tussock and walked around the prone body of bird B. Bird B came to its feet and half ran to bird A, who retreated. Bird B then brought up one foot and pushed or stroked bird A on the chest, dropping the stone as it did so. Bird A commenced preening, whereupon bird B came closer and gently took the bill of bird A in its own, holding the bill a few moments before releasing it. Shortly after, both birds flew off together. The Ravens observed had the brown iris of sub-adults, and were alone at the time.

I witnessed similar behaviour, on two occasions, in the White-backed Magpie (Gymnorhina hypoleuca) on the Tasmanian mainland, but in flock birds. After a brief “attack”, one bird rolled on the ground and remained on its side or back, while others walked around it pecking or pulling at its feathers; one observer has told me of a similar incident, involving only two birds, and in that case both birds were so absorbed in their play that they permitted him to approach to within ten feet before flying, only to resume the behaviour about 100 feet away. Robinson (Emu, 56: 300-301) noted similar behaviour in G. dorsalis when at play, or when attacked by a dominant male.

T. O. Wolfe (pers. comm.) has given me a written account of two incidents of a similar nature in the Black Currawong (Strepera fuliginosa) flocks at Maydena, central Tasmania, on August 3, 1961. Two flock birds were observed play-fighting, when one grasped the other by the leg and forced it onto its back, keeping it there by pecking every time the prone bird moved. Another pair in the same flock, most of which showed the yellow gaps of sub-adults, showed similar behaviour. Currawongs commonly roll on their back when cage-trapped for banding, and in that position can inflict some damage with their feet. Both magpies and currawongs may roll on their backs and play with food particles. W. D. Jackson (pers. comm.) reports flock currawongs tossing pears aloft, then rolling over and playing with them with their feet. A magpie visiting a home in Hobart commonly does the same with bread crusts (M. Costello, pers. comm.).

Taking all accounts into consideration, it seems that the three species indulge in similar play actions, involving a curiously inert prone position; in this behaviour, as well as in gait and structure, the three species exhibit parallel features. I have not as yet witnessed similar behaviour in other groups of birds which form flocks.

VI. SEAL PREDATION ON SEABIRDS

While weighing samples of the extensive muttonbird wreck in southern Tasmania (October 14, 1961), tracks of a seal were noticed on the beach at The Neck, Bruny Island, and numerous seal scats were found at the tideline along
the beach. The scats were oval, about 80 x 40 mm in section, and up to 150 mm long. Each was composed entirely of the feathers and bones of Short-tailed Shearwaters (*Puffinus tenuirostris*) and subsequent inquiries revealed that a seal had been seen in that locality for some days. Although no clue was obtained as to its specific identity, it was probably *Arctocephalus poriferus*.

Muttonbirds had been drifting, most of them dead or in a moribund condition, in the offshore waters for some days. Anecdotal accounts of seals taking Fairy Penguins (*Eudyptula minor*) are fairly common, although no penguin remains were found in the scats examined. Most *Puffinus* spp. are well aware of the dangers from below and are often observed to rise from the water on the approach of a porpoise, large shark, or seal. Leopard Seals (*Hydrurga leptonyx*) are known predators of the larger penguins in the Antarctic, and local seals probably vary their diet with an occasional seabird, particularly when the birds are weakened, as in this case, by lack of food or by disease.

**Injuries among Waders.**—My stay at Ballina between February 4-9, 1961, produced much of interest, including the hand capture of a Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*), one of many waders frequenting, at low tide, the sand flats in North Creek, a tributary of the Richmond River, and only a few hundred yards from Miningham Bridge. An examination of the bird revealed an injury, only recently sustained, under the elbow of the left wing. The feathers and skin over a small area had been lost and, although it did not seem serious, it restricted the bird’s powers of flight; the muscles appeared to be injured and it could manage only a few wing beats. As there seemed to be ample food and cover in the area the bird was released.

Late on the evening of February 9 this year a Bar-tailed Godwit was observed bathing in a small pool at low tide in North Creek, preening its feathers and using its long, slightly up-curved bill with masterly effect. Minutes later it rose from its squatting position in the pool and, balancing itself with beak and right leg, began to scratch its neck with no apparent effect. A closer examination revealed that its left foot had been amputated at the ankle, and perhaps the impulse to check an irritating itch was still strong. On the following afternoon at approximately the same time and place the bird was again observed bathing and preening.

On February 8 this year I noticed a Golden Plover (*Pluvialis dominica*) that had lost the left foot. The amputation seemed not to affect the bird in any way because it used the “stump” to good purpose. Another Golden Plover was observed two days later with a broken leg. It was fractured near the thigh and in flight the leg dangled loosely.—L. M. HOLLAND, Woolgoolga, N.S.W., 14/2/62.