

Stray Feathers

Further notes on the nesting of the Red-browed Finch.—For five years now I have had the nesting of the Red-browed Finch, *Aegintha temporalis*, under close observation. The following notes are supplementary to my earlier paper (*Emu* 62: 177-80, 1962). In that paper I mentioned that the Red-browed Finches accepted our garden as a sanctuary and in the 1961-62 breeding season crowded most of their 17 nests into citrus trees and shrubs surrounding the house.

Up till that time very few losses from predators had occurred, but towards the end of the 1961-62 season a pair of Grey Butcher-birds, *Cracticus torquatus*, took up territory in the area and destroyed most of the late fledglings (see *Emu* 63: 413-4, 1964). In the season of 1962-63 it was therefore of great interest to note that, of 27 nests completed (or nearly so), 22 were built close to our home.

Investigation throughout the district disclosed that this tendency to nest near houses was quite marked when suitable nesting sites, particularly citrus trees, were available. In this connection it is interesting to note that I. G. Mitchell, in his paper on the Crimson Finch, *Neochmia phaeton* (*Emu* 62: 115-25, 1962), says: "Nesting in or near dwellings is uncommon in the Estrildinae." He was referring to the well-known habit of the Crimson Finch nesting in buildings. There is of course no evidence to indicate a general tendency for the Red-browed Finch to nest near buildings, but the fact that it does so under certain conditions is interesting in view of Mitchell's suggestion that the two species are near relatives. My own local studies suggest that it is *inhabited* buildings, in proximity to nest sites, that are favoured by the Red-browed Finch.

Though Red-browed Finches in my citrus area go to considerable trouble to hide their nests, three miles away in a more natural habitat of creekside vegetation they are not so particular.

In my area there is a marked tendency for the finches to use successful nesting sites again and again. I decided to test this by a small experiment. Choosing the favourite nesting tree in the orchard—an orange that had sheltered at least two nests every year for three years, I slightly altered the contour by clipping, taking care not to spoil the tree from what I believed would be the birds' security angle; but apparently something was amiss because, despite frequent inspections by pairs of finches, the tree was not used during the 1962-63 season.

Like most successful species, the Red-browed Finch does not readily desert its nest. But, about the middle of the recent season, breeding pairs came into conflict with House Sparrows, *Passer*

domesticus, themselves at a crucial stage in their breeding cycle. The sparrows kept up a constant attack on the smaller birds, hustling them from their feeding grounds, stealing material, and even laying eggs in the partly completed nests. When the assault commenced six pairs of finches were at work, with two nests well advanced; the others were only started. The two advanced nests were completed, a few feathers added, and eggs laid. The other four nests were continued to the stage where they were complete except for the feathers. My observations suggest that there is usually a pause of several days between the completion of the nest proper and the addition of lining. Most cases of desertion known to me for the species have taken place during this hiatus. On this occasion all four pairs deserted simultaneously, to be followed almost immediately by the brooding birds. Finches who nested later suffered little interference from the sparrows.

Of the 27 nests completed (or completed to the stage where only lining was needed) 15 had eggs, and some young were reared from these. Six were deserted, and the other six were destroyed, almost certainly by Brush-tailed Phascogales, *Phascogale tapoatafa*. These animals are plentiful and troublesome hereabouts, and at certain times do a lot of foraging for nest material.

In my previous paper I commented on the interest taken by temporarily 'unemployed' birds in the activities of early nesters. At the other end of the breeding season a similar interest in late hatchings was observed. Late in the 1962-63 season I saw a group of finches around a nest with young fledglings. As I watched, the birds moved up, one by one, to the nest entrance and inspected the occupants. When the spectators dispersed I noticed that several gathered nesting material, which they carried around for a while and later abandoned.—TOM JASPER, 38 Annangrove Road, Kenthurst, N.S.W.

Pelicans breeding in Lake Alexandrina.—Anxiety over the future of the Pelican, *Pelecanus conspicillatus*, in South Australia, due to the annual raiding of nests by fishermen at the breeding islands in the Coorong, led to a spate of press reports and articles in the spring of 1962. The direct result of this was total protection for the species and prohibition of entry to the islands by unauthorized persons. A more subtle result was that more people began to take notice of Pelicans to see for themselves if statements made about the species were, in fact, true.

In the south of South Australia breeding had been recorded only from two localities: Kangaroo Island, where it ceased before this century, and the Pelican Islands in the Coorong, where breeding proceeded under difficulty. Although a vast area of apparently suitable habitat existed close to the Coorong, e.g. Lakes

Alexandrina and Albert, nesting had not been officially recorded there.

This altered in early October 1963, when Kevin Jones of Milang found a colony of Pelicans nesting on Reedy Point sanctuary, a property owned by his father. This finding may not have reached the attention of any but a few locals had it not been for Claude Sim, a member of the Strathalbyn Naturalists' Club, who realized the significance of the discovery and ensured that it was recorded.

Portion of Reedy Point was detached from the mainland by the 1956 Murray floods, and the colony was situated on the island thus formed. Some 300-400 nests were placed mainly on a low sandy bank near the water's edge. Several other groups of 12-20 nests were scattered along the shore, up to a quarter of a mile from the main colony.

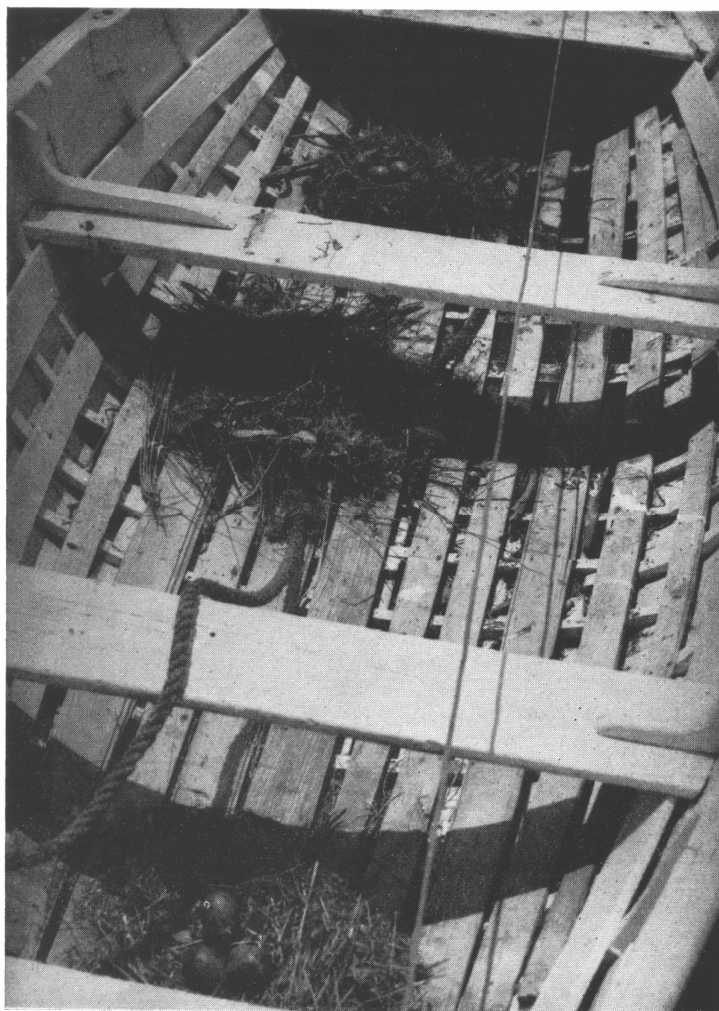
Although the Australian Pelican is usually regarded as a ground nester, seven nests in this colony were placed on lignum bushes, the highest nest being almost 5 ft above ground level. The actual material used in these was little more than the meagre amount used to line the nests on the ground; the tangled mat of lignum branches did most of the supporting of the eggs, the added material serving mainly to keep them from rolling away. I suspect that access to these nests was almost always gained by walking up from the ground; the sheltered side of the bushes was rather like a staircase, with nests being built at three levels, and the branches from ground to the top nest were well trodden down.

It is worthy of note that Pelicans visited the Coorong Islands in greater numbers during the spring of 1963 than for many years previously. Apparently conditions were exceptionally favourable for breeding and the Lake Alexandrina colony was one result of the situation.—JOHN ECKERT, Langhorne Creek, S.A.

Gulls' nests in boats.—Wheeler and Watson's comprehensive studies of the Silver Gull, *Larus novaehollandiae* (*Emu* 63: 99-173, 1963) bring to mind the rather curious practice of these birds sometimes to nest in boats. For example, the gulls that inhabit Pipeclay Lagoon, near Sandford, some 15 miles south-east of Hobart, have in recent years built nests in dinghies and on the decks of motor launches, as well as on jetties to which the boats have been tied. But in one case only did I know them to rear their young; in other cases the nests had to be dislodged when the owners wanted to use their boats.

My attention was first drawn to it in 1958. Mr L. C. Lazenby, a farmer at Sandford, reported that during December a pair of Silver Gulls had nested in his dinghy moored to an old jetty about a quarter of a mile from his house. He had seen no other nests in the locality.

PLATE 8



Three Silver Gulls' nests in dinghy.

Photo by Michael Sharland.

During the winter of 1959 he pulled the dinghy out of the water and left it resting on its keel on the end of the jetty. But in November when he went to put it back to reach his motor launch moored a little way out he was surprised by finding on the jetty a small colony of nesting gulls. Prompted possibly by the precedent established by one pair the year before, several others had now chosen the boat and jetty as a breeding site. He asked me to come and look at it, and I saw three nests on the floor of the dinghy, —one at the stern with three eggs, one under the middle seat with two eggs, and one in the bow with two eggs (Plate 8).

Built on the old timbers of the jetty about the dinghy's bow were three more—one with two eggs, one with one, and one with a broken fresh egg. Another nest with a single egg was wedged between two boards a few feet from the end of the jetty. At the opposite end, where the jetty came off the shore, there was a gull sitting on two eggs, and still another one on a broken and detached section of the jetty standing in deeper water.

A few days following my visit disaster struck in the form of a wind storm, which brought with it heavy rain. On December 12 I found the nests submerged in rain water and unhatched eggs floating around, but two nestlings from one of them had escaped by huddling in the only dry spot in the bow. Taking them out, I upended the dinghy to empty it of water and then restored them. All the nests on the jetty likewise were ruined, the eggs having apparently been blown into the water.

In January 1960 the gulls were nesting again, though not in the same number. One pair had a nest in the dinghy; another pair had one on the jetty beneath a winch. Mr Lazenby had to remove the nest to launch his boat—the previous year he had left it untouched until the young birds had left. Upon their nest being dislodged the pair resorted to the deck of his launch, and as the owner also found this nest inconvenient he also had to move it.

I have no record of what occurred in 1961 and 1962, being then absent from Tasmania, but in December 1963 I received advice that a pair of gulls were nesting in a dinghy at Cremorne, on the opposite side of Pipeclay Lagoon. So with this small group of birds that live round the lagoon nesting in boats appears to have become a habit.

Anything that looks like a piece of land surrounded by water, i.e., an island, seems to appeal to the Silver Gull as a breeding place. It is quick to make use of any change in its environment which may bring some advantage. This is demonstrated by its use of the artificial "islands", or mounds, that occur in the Altona salt-works area, as mentioned by Wheeler and Watson.

It is demonstrated further by the birds having in recent times established a considerable breeding colony on a small island in the

Pittwater estuary near Hobart. Before the character of this water was altered materially through the construction of a weir at a long causeway carrying the road from Hobart to Sorell the gulls shunned the islet for breeding mainly because it ceased in fact to be an island at low tide. Anyone could walk to it over the connecting sand flat. But the effect of the weir was to exclude the tide from this wide arm of the estuary, except at periods of extremely high water. As a result of the spasmodic inflow of seawater in spring tides and drainage from a river and a few creeks, the arm has in effect become a lake. The former connection to the islet is flooded permanently by between 18 in. and 2 ft., and this has been sufficient to preserve its identity and persuade the gulls to breed there. It is not far from Sandford.

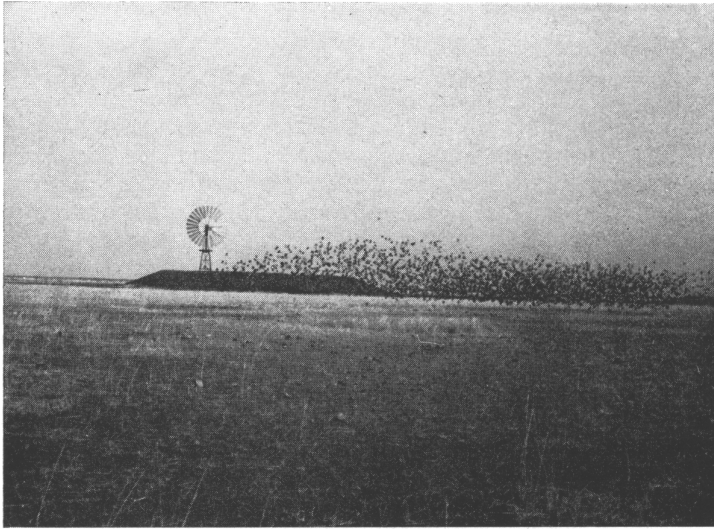
Observations by Mr Leonard Wall and myself show that the breeding colony is increasing each season, and the point was reached this year (1963-64) where congestion occurred. We estimated there were between 300 and 400 breeding pairs and considered that many of these reared two broods. The islet, small enough to enable a stone to be thrown across it at any point into the water the opposite side, had become a mass of moving birds, with young ones all over the place. The congestion, becoming more acute each year, has almost certainly been the reason for a colony of Crested Terns, *Sterna bergii*, vacating it as a breeding site.

It is also likely that some of the gulls themselves, mainly younger birds, have been prompted to seek alternative sites, and their immaturity probably causes them to mistake for islets dinghies and launches that remain moored and unattended for some time. Norman Favalaro, Mildura, has recorded Silver Gulls nesting on stumps in Lake Hawthorne, Victoria (*Emu* 47: 352-6, 1948). The same kind of thing has occurred with the species in Great Lake, Tasmania (Sharland, *Birds of Tasmania*, 1958)—MICHAEL SHARLAND, 141 Hampden Road, Hobart, Tas.

The recent occurrence of the Flock Pigeon in North Australia.—

During the last century the Flock Pigeon, *Histriophaps histrionica*, was one of the commonest birds of the Australian interior. From Gould's description of the species in 1841 until the turn of the century, overlanders and collectors described "immense flocks", "multitudes" or even "countless myriads." Yet, by 1908, travellers were reporting only "a few." Thereafter, the species became an extreme rarity.

In 1958 a party from the Western Australian Museum encountered several small flocks in the Hamersley Ranges (see Serventy, *Birds of Western Australia*, 3rd ed., 1962), and in the same year Serventy, Carnaby and I (Marshall and Drysdale, *Journey Among Men*, 1962, London) took a specimen from a flock of perhaps 2000 at Mardie Downs, at the mouth of the



Flock Pigeons on the Barkly Stock route, Northern Territory.

Photo by Beverley Geddes.

Fortescue River, Western Australia. At about the same time smaller flocks of about 400-500 were seen by others not far away in the Onslow area.

The purpose of this note is to record the occurrence, in the mid-winter of 1962, of the Flock Pigeon in "several thousands" on the Barkly stockroute perhaps 1500 miles from Mardie Downs. The species was positively identified (by means of a specimen) by Mrs. Beverley Geddes, who provided the accompanying illustration. It seems certain, then, that the Flock Pigeon, which was perhaps legitimately thought to be close to extinction, is strongly re-establishing itself over a wide area of inland Australia.—A. J. MARSHALL, Department of Zoology and Comparative Physiology, Monash University, Melbourne.

The Common Sandpiper in Tasmania.—The paucity of any positive sight or other records in Tasmania of the Common Sandpiper, *Tringa hypoleuca*, has caused many ornithologists to doubt the place accorded this bird on the Tasmanian list.

The first mention of it appears in W. V. Legge's paper, 'On the Geographical Distribution of the Australian Limicolae,' read at the Fourth Meeting of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science held at Hobart in January 1892, in which he described it as a rare visitor. He did not state that he had seen the bird or quote any date or place where it had been seen.

In his *Handbook of the Birds of Tasmania* (1910) F. M. Littler commented on the general habits of the species and added 'I have seen this on the North-west Coast', but gave no other detailed information. Hall (*Emu* 23: 285-93, 1924) did not mention this bird as having been recorded in the Derwent estuary.

Doubts in my own mind were increased when I inspected, in the Queen Victoria Museum, Launceston, a mounted specimen labelled 'Common Sandpiper' and found it to be a Knot, *Calidris canutus*. Could it be that Littler's record was based on this specimen or on sight records of a similar bird? This specimen has been in the museum for probably 50 years but no data are available, and it is quite possibly a skin obtained from another State or country.

At Christmas 1961 a junior member of the Burnie Field Naturalists' Club, Warren Boyles, told me that he and his school-teacher had seen a Common Sandpiper near the mouth of Black River, between Wynyard and Stanley, on November 22, 1961. The teacher, Mr. Peter Davidson, confirmed this in a letter (27/2/62) in which he stated: 'It was undoubtedly a Common Sandpiper—I have seen them frequently in England . . .'

On November 24, 1963 I was walking along a causeway at Pittwater, about 15 miles east of Hobart, in search of a tattler, which has frequented it for a number of years, when I disturbed four tattlers and another sandpiper which was somewhat smaller and showed a prominent white wing-bar in flight. They flew ahead of me for about 100 yards and alighted on rocks at the edge of the causeway. The sandpiper was very nervous and watched me carefully as I approached, but I could not see any bobbing of the head or tipping of the tail, which is so characteristic of the Common Sandpiper. The upper parts were deep olive-brown and the under parts pure white, but I was unable to obtain any other details before it flew across the causeway and was lost to sight.

Six days later I returned to the spot and found four tattlers and the sandpiper feeding among the rocks. By keeping out of sight I was able to approach to within 15 yards of them and had the sandpiper under close scrutiny for about a quarter of an hour. The following details were entered in my notebook: 'length 8½"-9"; culmen/tarsus 1.1 or 1.2; upper parts deep olive-brown; under parts pure white except for lightish brown wash on sides of upper breast (in front of wing); bill brown, straight and long; legs yellowish-green and fairly short (like tattler); eye dark with fine white ring about it; eyebrow lighter but not well defined. Flicking of tail very noticeable as it searched for food among rocks. More active and quicker in movements than tattlers. When flushed it flew low over water with a few swift wing-beats, then short glide. I could not see under-wings. Rump dark; tail, centre dark, sides white

barred brown. No call was heard.' There could be no doubt that this was a Common Sandpiper.

On another visit on January 5, 1964, I found the Common Sandpiper, but not the tattlers, and again on February 5, when I was accompanied by J. R. Napier, we found all five birds and had close views of them. It was noticeable that as the weeks passed the brownish wash had spread and was almost uniform across the whole upper breast.

P. Bolger, who knew Common Sandpipers well in Britain, also saw the bird during January and was able to confirm my identification.—L. E. WALL, 63 Elphinstone Road, North Hobart, Tas.

Reviews

An Asian Bird-Banders Manual, edited by H. Elliott McClure and published by Migratory Animal Pathological Survey, Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, Box 6119, APO 323, U.S. Forces, Tokyo, 1964; 113 pp., 71 text-figs.

This informative well-illustrated manual, with its common-sense approach, has been prepared to aid the groups co-operating in the Migratory Animal Pathological Survey (MAPS), a unit of the U.S. Army Medical Corps operating (initially) in south-east Asia. In its compilation the editor has drawn on a number of sources—mainly North American but also the 'Australian Bird Bander'—for information on traps and techniques. The manual is 'for distribution to anyone interested in co-operating with a bird-banding project.'

The manual includes chapters on the use and care of mist nests; traps; banding kits; collection of specimens (including parasites, with drawings); record keeping; and an extraordinarily useful chapter, 'Trapping and Banding Idiosyncrasies'; this is a pithy guide, by orders and families, to all the tried and suggested methods for catching birds, and in many cases includes information on baits, nesting habits, and even warnings on the potential danger of handling some species. One example:

Rallidae, Rails, Gallinules, and Coots. Most of the rails are secretive and skulkers and they are difficult to net or trap. Live-rat traps or small automatic traps baited with living grasshoppers or crickets will take them. Coots can be trapped in numbers in clover-leaf traps set in shallow water. The Malays make a bamboo flute with which they imitate the call of the water hen. This is used at night behind nets into which the attracted males will fly.

A 16-point statement (by Dr. Paul H. Fluck, President Eastern Bird-Banding Association, 1959), 'The Bander's Ethics', printed at the beginning of the manual, should be pasted in every bander's hat.

This reviewer has nothing but praise for a manual that will surely catalyze banding in Asia—and elsewhere; it is equal and good value for the novice and the professional.—W. B. HITCHCOCK.

Bird Migration in Malaya. Bird Report: 1963, compiled by Lord Medway and D. R. Wells. Malayan Nature Journal 18: 133-67, 1964.

The purpose of this short review is to draw the attention of Australian ornithologists interested in bird migration to the existence of this useful report—the second to be produced; the first covered the year 1962 and both are obtainable from the Hon. Secretary, Malayan Nature Society, P.O. Box 750, Kuala Lumpur, at \$2.50 (Malaysian) each. The 1963 report contains news on current ornithological activity, a bird-banding report, details of several species new to the Malaysian bird list, observations on migrant raptors, waders and terns, and notes on the status, breeding, and movements of other selected species.—JOHN L. McKEAN.