



birds

Price 25c.

Published by the Gould League Birdwatchers.

Vol. 3. No.3

1st November, 1968.

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"FAMILY-PLANNING" by Birds

A remarkable instance of delayed breeding by a bird-species more or less the equivalent of family-planning in humanity came to notice recently. And when, quite by chance, I mentioned the matter to S.G. (Bill) Lane of Sydney, he proved to be, apparently, the one man in this country who had discussed such a subject in print.

The Lane item (which I should not have forgotten) appeared in "The Emu" in 1956 (vol.56, p.229). It related to the Brown Thornbill. In three different instances members of this species were recorded as having, in 1955, had a lapse of (1) at least 27 days, (2) 35 days, and (3) 10 days between completion of the nest and the laying of eggs. No abnormal weather conditions prevailed at the time and thus the reason for the delay remained obscure.

In my case (1968) the species concerned was the White-eared Honeyeater. At Kuring-gai Chase on July 10 John Ramsay and I found a nest of this enterprising bird virtually completed. We, in fact, assisted to round off the lining process by presenting the builder with scraps of cotton-wool, and we looked for results soon afterwards. Yet, to our astonishment, it was not until September 5

that eggs, obviously quite fresh, were observed in the nest, so that the lapse between nest-completion and egg-laying was approximately 57 days.

We ascribed this long holdup to food-shortage created by dry conditions, and the same cause, we surmised, was responsible for the disappearance of the eggs (by predation?) a few days later.

White-ears, however, are capricious housekeepers, and you never can tell how a particular pair will behave. Thus, under normal conditions in the same area two years earlier, one of these birds (which we named Susie) resolutely plucked hair from our heads at an early stage, but on a later occasion, when again building, she treated us with a fine disdain and had to be, as it were, forcibly fed with nest-lining material.

A.H. CHISHOLM, Sydney.

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THE MOORUK

Although the name Mooruk (or Moruk) does not rate a mention in Australian glossaries, it may well have been a household word in the Sydney of the 1850s. The inhabitants opening their Sydney Morning Herald on 1st September, 1857 would have seen the following advertisement on the first page:

"THE MORUK. ---

"Important discovery in Natural History, a gigantic Bird, from the South Sea Islands! WILCOX and Co., Hunter-Street, have just added to their Zoological Exhibition the first specimen of this extraordinary bird ever viewed by civilized man. It is now to be seen alive, together with the Orang Outang, the cheetah or Hunting Leopard, Emu, &c., &c.

"Admission --- adults, 1s.; children, half-price."

A shorter advertisement to this effect appeared in subsequent issues of the Herald. The Mooruk, a species of Cassowary (Casuaris bennetti) had been brought alive to Sydney from New Britain in August 1857: "The bird is very tame and familiar, and, when in a good humour, frequently dances about its place of confinement." George French Angas made careful drawings of it for Dr. George Bennett who purchased the Mooruk and sent the drawings and the live bird as a present for the Zoological Society of London. After a sea voyage of 80 days, the bird "made its appearance between the Ostriches and the Apteryx" in the London zoo and Gould named the species in Bennett's honour. Other examples were kept as pets by Dr. Bennett in Sydney, where "one or both of them would walk into

the kitchen, and while one was dodging under the tables and chairs, the other would leap up on the table, keeping the cook in a state of excitement....."

In his book, *A Gallop to the Antipodes* (1858), John Shaw wrongly referred to Angas as "the discoverer of the bird Mooruk". But the Mooruk and indeed cassowaries in general seem prone to error and confusion in their treatment by bird men, if a mere ex-ichthyologist may say so. One American ichthyologist even described and figured a cassowary as catching fishes on its spine-like wing-feathers!

Wilfred Powell, in his *Wanderings in a Wild Country* (1884) calls the New Britain cassowary the "morroop" and shows that its claws were used as spearheads. The Mooruk has been well featured of course in ornithological literature but has also made its debut in fiction (W.H.G. Kingston, *The South Sea Whaler*, 1882, p.329):

"Shure, now, if we had thought of throwing a noose over its head, we might have caught the baste; and it would have given us as many dinners as a good-sized sheep!" exclaimed a mundane character.

"Not for five hundred pounds would I have allowed it to be killed!" cried the doctor. "If we could have taken it to England, it would have been of inestimable value, and would have made ample amends for all the dangers and hardships we have gone through."

260 years before Sydney saw its Mooruk, a living cassowary was brought from Ceram in the Moluccas to Europe by Dutch traders in 1597, coming to the Emperor Rudolf II of Hapsburg. A Belgian naturalist, Charles de l'Escluse (or Glusius) studied the cassowary at the Viennese court and his illustration of it has been reproduced by Herbert Wendt, *Out of Noah's Ark*, 1959, p.81.

Two accounts of the New Holland or Australian cassowary, which I have not been able to trace in Sydney, are: (1) Harrison's in *The Medical Times and Gazette* 13, 1845-46, p.480 and (2) Rolleston, *Medical Times and Gazette* 2, 1873, p.16. These references, neither of which is in Whittell, are quoted from *Tovell & Gandevia* (References to Australia in *British Medical Journals* prior to 1880), published in Melbourne in 1961. The former paper my refer to the Emu, because our mainland cassowary was not discovered until 1848 by the Kennedy expedition. An historical account of the latter bird was given by North (*Rec.Austr.Mus.* 10, 1913), supplemented by Somerville (*The Emu* 49, 1950, p.214).

Most of the books consulted for this note are in my own library,

but I have to acknowledge, with thanks, the resources of the Mitchell Library, Sydney, allowing access to newspapers, and various books and papers.

G.P. WHITLEY, Sydney.

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FIELD NOTES

PIRACY BY WOOD-SWALLOW. It is common for Frigate-birds, Skuas, Fulmars and other sea-birds to practice food-piracy. The habit has also been noted in some passerine birds and presumably in such cases, it is largely a matter of opportunity. Meinertzhagen gives (Pirates and Predators, 1959, p.12) instances, among others, of starlings robbing blackbirds of worms, blackbirds stealing snails from thrushes, and shrikes bullying rollers until they gave up their prey.

At Forster, N.S.W., John Hobbs saw a Drongo harassing Blackfaced Cuckoo-Shrikes until they dropped their insect food which was then quickly snapped up in the air by the Drongo. Recently, in western N.S.W., I was watching an Eastern Whiteface feeding on the ground: it soon captured a fairly large grub, the size of which caused the bird to pause before swallowing its prey. A White-browed Wood-Swallow that was perched nearby then flew down, rested momentarily beside the Whiteface, snatched the grub from its bill and flew quickly away with its prize.

K.A. HINDWOOD, Lindfield, N.S.W.

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Opposite the C. of E. rectory in Mona Vale, is a farm owned by Taronga Zoo and running through the farm are several reedy water channels in which Reedwarblers nest each year. During the spring and summer the birds frequently visit the extensive rectory garden where they feed amidst the scrubbery in company with Silvereyes, Blue Wrens, Bulbuls and the local House Sparrows.

The Tailor-bird occurs on the farm and also in marshy vacant blocks of land and I have observed that both the Reedwarbler and the Tailor-bird are crepuscular in their habits.

It is pleasant to listen to the singing of the Tailor-birds accompanying the quick movements of the moth-hunting Reedwarblers until dusk turns to night.

L.C. HAINES.

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In my article "Some Notes on the Little Grassbird", Vol.1, No.4 of "BIRDS", I mention that I had not heard the species call at night. Since the above was published, I have, on a number of

occasions late at night, heard the sad call-notes of the Little Grassbird emanating from a pond overgrown with sedges and rushes some little distance from my house here at Bayview.

The bird in this particular pond is silent during the earlier part of the evening but from 11 p.m., and into the small hours of the morning, it calls almost continuously and on one occasion it gave its call every nine seconds for an hour!

L.C. HAINES.

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FIELD NOTES
SOME ROBIN OBSERVATIONS

FLAME ROBIN: A pair seen on farmland near Baker's Lagoon, Richmond, 19.5.1968.

HOODED ROBIN: A pair found nesting near fringe of forest, Wirrimbirra Reserve, 7.1.1968. Four observed feeding along roadside near Luddenham. Three seen by roadside at Greendale, 7.10.1968.

ROSE ROBIN: The following observations were recorded along Quarry Creek, Northmead: two males 2.4.1968; one male and three females, 20.4.1968; two males and two females, 21.4.1968; two males and one female, 12.5.1968; one male 13.5.1968; two males 19.5.1968. One male recorded at Shaws Creek, Yarramundi, 10.6.1968; one male seen at Caddies Park, Cattai, 16.6.1968; one female seen in open forest at Scheyville, 23.6.1968. ROSE ROBINS seen in Lake Parramatta Reserve as follows: one male 11.7.1968; one male and one female 16.7.1968; one female, 23.7.1968; one male and one female, 24.7.1968; two females, 25.7.1968; and one female 29.7.1968.

SCARLET ROBIN: Two males and one female observed in open forest, Wirrimbirra Reserve, 7.1.1968; one male and one female at Murphy's Glen, Blue Mountains, 24.2.1968; one male and one female in open forest, Lucas Heights 4.5.1968; one male and one female seen in bushland clearing, Oberon, 10.6.1968.

RED-CAPPED ROBIN: Two males seen on roadside fence at Greendale, 7.10.1968.

ATHOL COLEMANE, Northmead.

N.S.W.

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NOTES AND NEWS

Mrs. Rumsey of Dural, N.S.W., reports that the Bush Curlew has been sighted in the northern section of the Glenorie District. Two eggs were also found and identified as belonging to this species. The Bush Curlew is a rare bird, particularly within the County of Cumberland (Sydney District).

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Enthusiastic members of the Club, Mr. & Mrs. Rice, and Miss Lucy Newson, had the pleasure of observing on one of the ponds in Centennial Park, two newly-hatched Musk Ducks which had taken refuge on their mother's back.

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Mr. Reg Fordham, who recently returned from the 1968 Gould League Camp-out at Jerildie, N.S.W., has sent me a list of the birds recorded. In view of the fact that "Gould League Notes" is no longer being published a report on the camp-out will appear in a future issue of "BIRDS".

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Mr. Alan Catford, Convenor, Bush Fire Sub-Committee, National Parks Association of New South Wales, has asked that the following circular be published.

Readers of "BIRDS" who feel that they can assist in bush fire control should contact Mr. Catford. His address is: 21 Kingsford Avenue, South Turramurra, N.S.W. 2074.

THE NATIONAL PARKS ASSOCIATION OF NEW SOUTH WALES

VOLUNTEERS are badly needed, to fight fires in National and State Parks, Nature Reserves, and other natural bushland, both near Sydney and beyond. The National Parks Association of N.S.W. is conducting a drive to recruit these, and place them at the disposal of the National Parks and Wildlife Service, or other authorities concerned with bushfires.

We want YOUR name on the list, as one who intends helping when he or she can. (This does not carry an obligation to attend fires.)

In the event of a bushfire at which our help is needed, key members of the organization will be notified. These will set in motion a contacting system which is designed to alert large

numbers of volunteers quickly. The member list will be divided in into north and south of Sydney Harbour and the Blue Mountains, and those living in the region of a fire will usually be phoned first. Transport, rendezvous etc. are arranged then.

Fire fighting is hard work, and volunteers should be in good health and reasonable fitness. Those who cannot or do not wish to fight fires directly can be of valuable service in the Support Force. This body backs up fire fighters by preparing food and drink, providing first aid, transport etc. These members may also care to volunteer for patrolling.

- EDITOR -

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FIELD EXCURSIONS

Sunday, November 24.

Hawkesbury Swamps.

Leader: E.S. Hoskin (88 2900)

Meet at Wilberforce, overlooking the reedy swamp next to the township, at 10 a.m. First step will be to inspect Bushell's Lagoon, which usually supports an interesting variety of water-birds. Next step will depend upon the prevailing weather conditions and whether any rain has fallen in the district, but Mr. Hoskin has a plan to fit almost all conditions.

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Saturday, December 7.

Lion Island, Pitt-water.

Leader: S.G. Lane.

Lion Island is a Nature Reserve, and the party is restricted to 30 members - places will be allotted in order of receipt of applications. It will be necessary to transfer from a ferry to a small dinghy, thence to the beach in water at least knee-deep, so baggage must be kept to an amount than can be carried in one hand.

Once ashore, there should be Little Penguins with eggs and young, and Wedge-tailed Shearwaters sitting on eggs. Possibly the rare Sooty Shearwater will be seen too. Mr. Lane will demonstrate

November 1, 1968.

banding techniques on these sea-birds.

Fare will be \$2.50 per person, to be forwarded to the Treasurer (10 Loquat Valley Road, Bayview. 2104) with application to attend. Meet at the Palm Beach Ferry wharf, 1017 Barrenjoey Rd., on the Pittwater side of Palm Beach, at 8.45 a.m.; we return to the wharf between 4.30 and 5 p.m. In the event of strong southerly winds, please check before leaving home with Peter Roberts (47 9240).

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