



birds

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A NOTE ON VOCAL MIMICRY

In a booklet termed *Nature's Linguists* (1946), based on a series of articles discussing vocal mimicry by birds which I wrote for the Victorian Naturalist, reference was made to the fact that imitative ability in the little Mistletoe-bird had been detected by E.P. Ramsay, of Sydney, as early as 1866. Now I find, from another old diary, that the same keen naturalist heard mimicry from a Shriketit even earlier -- in 1862.

After remarking on the usual peculiar whistle of the Shriketit, the young listener (Ramsay was then aged 20) told his diary he was surprised to hear an example imitating the notes of the "Blackcap, Yellow Robin, Sacred Kingfisher, and Ubane"-- the last odd term being, apparently, a by-name of the day for the Yellow-tufted Honeyeater. "I was highly delighted by this discovery" Ramsay records, "for I have never heard the Shriketit mock any bird before".

In the booklet mentioned above I cited several notes on mimicry by the Shriketit, the earliest of them being dated 1932 and referring

to a specimen placed in an aviary. It is seemly, therefore, to acknowledge that Dr. Ramsay preceded us moderns by seventy years.

It may be added that I was asked recently for a list of papers dealing with vocal mimicry among Australian birds. This would be rather difficult to assemble, for in my own case (as one example) they are scattered throughout the Emu, the Victorian Naturalist, the Ibis (England), and some few popular journals. Perhaps the most useful examples, from my point of view, are Nature's Linguists (now out of print) and an article entitled "Further Remarks on Vocal Mimicry", which appeared in the Emu in 1965 (Vol. 65, pp. 57-64.)

The list of mimics recorded in that article numbers 54, excluding four introduced species. Since then I have been given these additions: Figbird, Brown Songlark, King Parrot, Crimson Parrot, and Palm Cockatoo.

Especially notable are the records relating to the three birds last mentioned, all tendered by reliable observers and concerned with free-flying specimens. For, of course, the question has frequently been asked, "Why is it that parrots can be taught to mimic freely in captivity and yet do not, apparently, ever use imitations in a state of nature?" Now, it would seem, they do so -- sometimes. A.H. CHISHOLM.

RING DOVES NEAR SYDNEY.

The Ring, or Collared, Dove (*Streptopelia decaocta*) has been a popular cage-bird for many years and aviculturists have bred a 'domesticated' variety in which the plumage is mostly white. Birds in normal plumage are generally pale-grey and fawn, with darker wings and a narrow black collar on the hind-neck; they are lighter in colour, and slightly smaller, than the spotted-necked Indian Turtle-Dove (*S. chinensis*) now well-established in the more settled parts of eastern and southern Australia.

It is surprising that the Ring Dove has not taken to the wild because numbers must have either escaped or been liberated from aviaries over the years. I remember seeing them breeding at the Currumbin bird sanctuary, southern Queensland, in 1965; these 'feral' individuals were said to remain mostly within the grounds of the sanctuary, there being no indication of any widespread colonisation by the species in that locality.

The first published record of a "wild" Ring Dove near Sydney is that by Arnold McGill who saw a single bird near Hurstville in August 1946, (Emu, 47, p. 232). Recently I saw three of these doves in the grounds of a home at Gordon, a northern suburb of Sydney. Two of the birds appeared to be courting, the third was uttering its pleasant "Kook-coo-kook" call from a nearby T.V. aerial. The householder (V. Kelaher) said he had seen about half a dozen of the doves in his garden on occasions and that originally, they had been liberated from a neighbour's aviary some twelve months previously.

During the past fifty years the Ring Dove has colonised western Europe and England, having spread westward from the Balkans. The ancestral home of the species seems to have been the Indian Region. Perhaps this dove may yet become a common "town" bird like its close relative, the Indian Turtle-Dove. K.A.HINDWOOD. 22.5.1967.

WHITE-BREASTED SEA-EAGLE

A lone bird was observed at Bayview, Pittwater, N.S.W., on 1st July, 1967. - L.C. HAINES.

GREY NODDY

A surf-washed specimen was collected on 20th January, 1967 at Long Reef, N.S.W. - D. SAWYER.

ALBINO MAGPIE-LARK

On the 13th May, 1967, six Magpie-Larks came to my garden for water. Accompanying them was a pure white bird possessing red eyes and black legs. Its call-notes and behaviour were similar to those of its normally-plumaged companions. Not at any time was the white bird regarded as an intruder by the other Magpie-Larks.
MRS. JUNE MIFSUD, PINE CREEK, N.T.

YELLOW-TAILED BLACK COCKATOO

This species was recently reported as occurring in the Neutral Bay District. The birds were observed as they fed on cones high up in pine trees. EDITOR.

NOTE:- The 1967-68 subscriptions are now due.

Full member \$1.50; Family member \$2.00 ;
Junior member \$1.00 ; Supporting member \$3.00

THE FIELD NOTEBOOK

The following suggestions regarding the field notebook will be of interest to those members who are beginners in the art of bird-watching.

FIELD NOTEBOOK. This is a most important item of the bird-watcher's equipment and some thought should go into choosing just the right kind of book.

Thin, cheap books with limp covers are of no use at all.

The field notebook should be a good, fat book possessing a hard cover and bound in black. The hard cover is important as it provides a firm backing when writing on the sheet, while the black binding seems to be the only colour that does not run should the book get wet. As an added precaution against riverside and marshland accidents the field book should be enclosed in a waterproof pouch. A book 6" x 4½", known in the trade as cap 8vo, is a handy size, slipping easily into one's pocket.

An ordinary lead pencil is the best to use when making "rough" notes in the field. On no account should indellible pencils, fountain-pens, or ball-point pens be used.

Keep the book in diary form, beginning each outing with a fresh page. Before starting, write at the top of the page the locality and date; followed by a short account of the type of country, e.g. "heathland adjoining wooded hillside"; "sand-dunes running down to sea" "reedy riverside" etc... Weather conditions and bird-watching companions should also be noted.

WHAT TO RECORD. There is one answer only - EVERYTHING. The most trivial observation may shed new light on some problem years later. Do not make the least attempt to list birds in taxonomic order, just record them as observed. If a bird seen cannot be determined for certain, a description should be taken and its call-notes recorded, phonetically if possible, as these are important. Other points to note include display, breeding activities, plumages, numbers and food.

Rough notes should be as full as possible. However, one should guard against wishful thinking. The fuller the notes the better the mental re-construction later when transferring observations from the field-book to one's permanent records. EDITOR.

FIELD NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

HAWKESBURY RIVER SWAMPS, N.S.W.

During two visits to the Hawkesbury River Swamps on 10th and 12th June, 1967, the following interesting species were observed.

PITT TOWN BOTTOMS

LOTUS BIRD: Two birds observed on 10th and 12th.
JARIBU: A solitary bird seen standing near cattle on 10th.
MANED GOOSE: Two recorded on each visit, 10th and 12th.
WHITE-NECKED HERON: Two seen on 10th, and four on 12th.
GLOSSY IBIS: Two observed feeding in water on 12th.
BLUE-WINGED SHOVELLER: Four observed on 12th.

LONG-NECK LAGOON

PELICAN: Two recorded on 10th.
COOT: Sixteen observed in the centre of Lagoon

BROADWATER LAGOON

STRAW-NECKED IBIS: Flock of twenty-four 10th.
WHITE IBIS: Six birds feeding in paddock 10th.
CHESTNUT TEAL: Sixteen standing along waters edge 10th.
GREY TEAL: A count of fifty in flight 10th.

BAKERS LAGOON

ROYAL SPOONBILL: Twelve feeding in shallow water 12th.
MUSK DUCK: Two observed swimming among reeds 12th.
BROWN HAWK: One watched as it ate its prey on the ground 12th.

WHISTLING EAGLE: Two flying overhead 12th.

Of interest at Pitt Town Bottoms on June 25, 1967, were the following birds: Cattle Egret (10), Glossy Ibis (2), Pacific Heron (about 12), Blue-winged Shoveller (between 40 and 50), Lotus-bird (2), Seagull (2), and several other species, such as Black Swans, Ibis, Spur-winged Plovers, etc usually to be seen in the locality. E.S. HOSKIN.

NORTHERN YELLOW ROBINS

In this part (Casino) of Northern New South Wales Yellow Robins inhabit small, dense brushes composed of grey ironbark, bloodwood, forest oak and white honeysuckle trees, usually well interlaced with lantana bushes and climbers, with ground cover of bracken fern. They also seek the seclusion of dense, black tea-tree stands having a ground-cover of tangled lantana and cockspar bushes.

These birds are permanent residents and by no means plentiful, usually keeping in pairs. They have the habit of frequently alighting on the upright sides of tree-trunks. The flight is quick and undulating and a wing-flapping "burr" can be heard. Food consists of various insects, mostly secured on the ground or from low bushes. One peculiar habit is that of staring at certain objects in a fixed manner, another habit is that of flicking the tail upright two or three times immediately after alighting.

The main call-note is a long succession of strong, clear whistle-peeps, not unlike certain notes made by the White-throated Tree-creeper. These notes vary in tone, making it difficult to locate the singer who appears to be something of a ventriloquist. When in low bushes, or when disturbed, the robins also utter a series of low, quick "tig-tig-tig" notes which can only be heard at close range. For much of the time, however, the birds remain silent.

The breeding season commences during July or August and extends to November. The nest is a cup-shaped structure about three inches across and two-and-a-half inches deep. Made mainly of soft strips of bark with the inside walls lined with thin leaves. The outside is well decorated with lichen and soft green moss. Nests are situated either on the lower horizontal forked branches of large trees or the upright forks of smaller saplings or bushes. Bloodwood trees are often selected as nesting sites which are usually from nine to eighteen feet from the ground. The robins are rarely observed sitting on the nest because they quickly take wing when approached.

Two eggs are usually laid; they are pale-green with faint fawn blotches and reddish-brown spots sparingly distributed over the shell but mainly forming a zone at the larger end.

Like most fly catchers the immature robins are dark-brown, mottled with whitish streaks; they retain this pattern until they are about six months of age.

Altogether, the Northern Yellow Robin is a delightful, beautiful and attractive bird. A. BOND, Casino, N.S.W.

NOTES AND NEWS

It would appear that bird-tables are becoming more popular with Sydney bird enthusiasts. Miss Gwen Peden, of Roseville, informs me that all kinds of birds are now coming to her garden table for their daily food ration. In a future issue of BIRDS suitable foods attractive to birds will be listed.

Mrs. Bonser of "Valley Farm", West Pennant Hills, who is at present touring the British Isles wishes to be remembered to her Gould League Bird-watcher colleagues.

Miss Helena Doyle, a well-known bird-watcher living near Muswellbrook, has listed 161 species for the district since 1957.

From Pine Creek, N.T., Mrs. June Mifsud informs me of a successful Guinea-fowl-domesticated fowl cross. The hybrid, Mrs. Mifsud says, is not unlike a small white turkey, with White Leghorn feathering. The bird acts like a Guinea Fowl and has a blend of call-notes resembling those of a young Guinea Fowl and an ordinary farm-yard chicken. EDITOR.

OUTING TO LADY DAVIDSON PARK

Bird-banding Demonstration, 29th April, 1967.

Led by Mr. S.G. ("Bill") Lane, a most instructive and interesting field outing was enjoyed by about forty members and friends.

The venue was the upper reaches of Middle Harbour, near St. Ives, Harry Battam, Ray Lonnon and Peter Spurge had everything ready for a display of bird-banding procedure. Although the heat had

driven most of the birds into the undergrowth, the species banded included White-browed Scrub-wrens, New Holland, Yellow-tufted, White-cheeked and White-eared Honey-eaters, Brown Thornbills, Eastern Spinebills and Little Wattle-birds. Mist nets were set up over an area of several hundred yards where Banksia shrubs were flowering. As the birds were removed from the nets they were banded and details such as plumage, wing-span, tail length, date and place of banding, were recorded. It was interesting to note the behaviour of the different species; some were lively, others placid; some put on an act of exhaustion when held in the hand, but were off like a shot when released. They all seemed to enjoy a drink of sugar and water while held in the hand.

It was all so interesting and, as we wended our way up the hill in the cool of the evening, we expressed our appreciation to Bill and his helpers. E. J. GADSDEN.

FIELD DAY TO THE ROYAL NATIONAL PARK, MAY 27th, 1967

A party of 24 adults and some 8 juniors assembled at the Upper Causeway at 10 a.m. Mr. & Mrs. Dibley led the way to the bower of a Satin Bowerbird, close to the picnic area. The presence of small yellowish-green flowers, quite fresh, showed that the bower was in use.

Yellow-faced Honeyeaters and Eastern Spinebills were numerous and a female Golden Whistler and several White-throated Tree-creepers were seen. Across the road wandering parties of Buff-tailed, Brown and Striated Thornbills were noted; several Rock Warblers were hopping about the sandstone rocks. High up in a gum-tree a Mistletoe-bird was heard giving its high-pitched call.

After a couple of hours spent at this pleasant spot we moved further down the road and had lunch at a small, grassy clearing bordered by jungle. Here we had a look at another bower, close to the path under some low bushes. A couple of Lyrebirds were heard calling on the other side of the stream and, as we were leaving, another was calling in fine voice nearby.

During a short walk along the creek two Wonga Pigeons were flushed and Brown Warblers, a male Golden Whistler, and the Rose Robin were recorded. Several Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoos were observed cracking gum-nuts in the treetops. Other birds seen were the King Parrot, an Eastern Shriketit and a Large-billed Scrub-Wren.

Later in the day, in heathy country near Steven's Drive, Tawny-crowned Honeyeaters and Emu-Wrens were watched.

In all 36 species were listed for the outing. Our thanks to Mr. & Mrs. Dibley for a most interesting day. DAVID SAWYER.

FIELD DAY TO JERUSALEM BAY, JUNE 18, 1967.

The morning of this Field Day was so damp, and the weather so dull, that all the bird-watchers who arrived at the meeting place fully expected to find the place deserted. However, seventeen members attended, including Jim Gray who came from as far away as Blackalls Point, Lake Macquarie.

We were "welcomed" at Cowan Station by a pair of Scarlet Robins, and soon afterwards we saw a male Mistletoe-bird.

As we walked along a wet and squelchy track in heathland to some aboriginal carvings we heard and saw many honeyeaters including the White-eared, White-cheeked, Yellow-faced and Lewin. Buff-tailed, Brown and Striated Thornbills were also observed. Perhaps the most interesting rock-carving, to a bird student at least, was one that appeared to represent a swimming penguin.

A highlight of the day was the sight of a Lyrebird which had been scratching in the damp leaf-mould when our presence caused it to fly into a tree where it remained for about a quarter of an hour preening itself, quite unconcerned. Finally, it glided to the ground and out of sight.

An Eastern Whipbird was heard calling in thick scrub, and two Rock Warblers were seen hopping over the rocks.

It was low tide when we reached Jerusalem Bay where a Mangrove Heron was observed in the company of some Silver Gulls on a sandspit. As we watched, the Heron stretched out its neck, poised for a moment, and then stabbed into the water catching a small, silvery fish which it promptly swallowed.

During lunch an informal meeting was held and two resolutions passed:- (1) Confidence in the manner in which Mr. Haines is conducting the "Gould League Bird-watchers", and (2) that first-aid kits be

obtained and carried on field excursions.

Thank you, Peter Roberts, for an enjoyable day during which 37 species were recorded. ROBIN BIGG.

FUTURE EXCURSIONS

Your Organizer of Excursions is running out of ideas and he would like to hear from members familiar with suitable places for excursions. Finding leaders is a problem, as it is not fair to expect the same people to keep on shouldering the burden. The main qualification is that he (or she) must be familiar with the proposed locality. It is not necessary to be an expert on birds and one is not required to deliver a lecture -- all that our members want is for someone to take them where the birds are: if a few nests have been located beforehand, then all the better.

If you know a good place but still feel diffident about volunteering to lead a group, please ring the Organizer (47-9240) and talk the matter over with him.

The solution might be to appoint a Leader who may not know the area with Y O U as a guide.

"BY THE WAYSIDE". with "SPURWING" (Jack Debert)

A flock of eight Royal Spoonbills, feeding in First Creek, Tuncurry, early on Saturday morning, January 21, was my first sighting of this species of wader for 1967. Normally, there are, at least, 26 Royal Spoonbills frequenting this particular area, and it will be interesting to see if these eight birds are the advance party.

These Spoonbills are terrific feeders and keep their peculiar 'spoon-shaped' bills almost continuously in the water of the lake whilst feeding. They wander along the shallow edges fairly shovelling small fish, molluscs and aquatic insects into their bills as they walk. At times, after long periods with their bills

immersed under water, I have noticed these birds vigorously shaking their heads. In response to my enquiries of this habit Keith Hindwood feels "they may be getting rid of moisture, or even shaking off flies or other insects that may be annoying them."

So far only Little Egrets have returned from their breeding grounds. Their reappearance has been some later this year. Discussing this matter early in January with Arnold McGill, he said reports revealed that these graceful, wading birds were finding an abundance of food in their breeding localities and were in no hurry to leave.

Elsie Gogerley and brother John reported flushing a pair of Nightjars from off the ground, Whoota way, early in January. Finding the remains of an egg they spent considerable time trying to locate the young bird without success.

Shown the cream-coloured egg with black marks we decided the birds were the White-throated Nightjar. This bird lays but one egg, does not bother to build a nest, but merely deposits its egg on the ground. No doubt a young bird was about, but according to Hindwood, "they are rusty brown and looking much like a reddish, rather shapeless stone, matching the surrounding ground so perfectly they are difficult to see. Young birds often move some distance from the site where they were hatched, but if the old birds are about then the young birds should be nearby."

extract from the Cape Hawke Advocate.

FORTHCOMING FIELD EXCURSIONS

Saturday, July 22nd, 9.30 a.m. MALABAR. Leader Harry Battam.

Wandering Albatrosses and Giant Petrels should be present in force and, with a little bit of luck, there may be a Black-browed Albatross or two to be seen.

Meet near the eastern end of Cromwell Park, off Dacre St., (Gregory's map 22, A. 14). This will be a morning excursion, and should be completed by mid-day.

PLEASE NOTE: The cliffs are dangerous - children must be closely supervised.

Sunday, August 13, 10 a.m. KURING-GAI CHASE. Leader J.D. Waterhouse.

The excursion that Mr. Waterhouse led to this area last year was all but washed out by rain. The heathland here is rich bird-country, and well north another visit.

Drive along Mona Vale Road to Terry Hills and proceed about one mile along McCarr's Creek Road to the junction of the Coal and Gandle Creek road (Liberator General San Martin Drive, on Gregory's Map 107, F. 2). Bring lunch.

If you have room in your car for someone without transport please ring Peter Roberts (47-9240).