

## Notes at a Camp on the River Murray.

By N. B. Tindale.

During November and December, 1929, a party from the South Australian Museum were engaged in excavating in the native rock shelter at "Devon Downs," River Murray, on Section 89, Hundred of Nildottie, and were camped for a month; from 18th November, on a narrow tongue of land on the left bank between the miocene cliff and the river, opposite old Devon Downs Station, which is situated about three miles south-west of Hermann's Landing (Nildottie). A few birds were observed during our sojourn, and some scattered notes were also made during various journeys in the surrounding district.

Four Bee-eaters (*Merops ornatus*) spent several days hawking insects in the vicinity of the camp, perching on the tops of the dead "tobacco"-bushes between swoops. Day-flying moths, such as *Deiopea pulchella*, a blue butterfly (*Zizina labradus*), flies, and gnats were amongst the insects captured. At times the birds fed unconcernedly within four or five yards of our camp-table, affording us splendid opportunities for observation.

A pair of Willie Wagtails (*Rhipidura leucophrys*) had a nest, built largely of "tobacco"-bush bark-fibre, placed against the wall of the cliff at a height of eight feet above the ground. Incubation had evidently proceeded for some time before we discovered the nest. About 28th November the eggs hatched and the parents became very pugnacious. All birds which approached within 25 yards of the nest were attacked. They were seen driving away Magpies, Peregrine Falcons, Honeyeaters, Bee-eaters, a Laughing Jackass, Crows, and numerous other smaller birds. The young grew with marked rapidity. On 6th December a short length of motion-picture film was exposed on the adults, who demonstrated and scolded within three feet of the camera. The female\* also attempted to lure us away by pretending to be injured, but the male\* contented himself with wild swoops and noisy scolding. Two or three days later the young ones left the nest and made a home on a ledge some ten feet higher up. Within a few days they became very tame and inquisitive, spending much of their time on the outskirts of our camp or near the shelter where we were working. They continued to be fed at intervals by their parents right up to the time of our departure. Shortly after the young ones left the

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\*The sexes cannot be distinguished without dissection.—Editors.

nest the male bird was noticed stripping bark-fibres off the "tobacco"-bushes for a new nest, situated high up on the cliff out of reach of direct observation. His ardour diminished, however, and during the remainder of our stay he contented himself with feeding the young ones and attacking passing birds. His special dislikes were a party of four Magpies which usually visited the vicinity of our tent about sunset. Single-handed he would attack them each in turn, and worry them so much that they would move off to the other side of our camp, which he seemed to regard as beyond his jurisdiction.

A pair of Laughing Jackasses (*Dacelo gigas*) reared a family in a hollow of the cliffs some 60 feet above our heads, about 100 yards east of our camp. The young ones were very noisy, keeping up a continuous wheezy squeak. About 10th December one of them was enticed by its parents into the branch of a redgum-tree opposite the nest. Here it remained for several days. There was at least one more in the brood, for we heard a nestling calling from the cliff hollow three or four days thereafter. The parents were noisy when feeding their young. During the early education of the youngster in the tree many efforts were made by the parents to entice it from one branch to another.

The behaviour of a pair of Sacred Kingfishers (*Halcyon sanctus*) was altogether different from that of the Laughing Jackasses. These birds had a nest at the back of a deep hole, two inches or so in diameter, situated in the cliff wall at a height of six feet just behind our tent. During the incubation period we saw little of the birds except at dusk and in the early morning. About 5th December eggshells were thrown out of the hole, and the parents became very regular in their feeding. The dead root of an upturned river gum overhanging the water was a favourite fishing-spot from which the bird dived to catch small fish. Grasshoppers (probably *Calataria terminifera*) were also identified as being carried to the nest. The homeward flight with food was always made in a bee-line, and without anything approaching the raucous demonstration made by the Jackass. The nestlings also were very quiet for long periods; at other times they made hissing squeaks which would be heard in our camp, ten yards away. Sometimes the male bird would swoop down past our camp on his departure from the nest, snapping his bill as he passed, and on one occasion made a smart attack on a visiting fisherman's dog. Just before we left on our return journey (18th December) we saw a young one perched at the entrance to the nest.

Fairy Martins (*Hylochelidon ariel*) were common. On one occasion they were seen examining old nests on the roof of Devon Downs shelter, but our operations probably prevented their return.

We obtained much interest from watching the seemingly foolish antics of a solitary Yellow-plumed Honeyeater (*Meliphaga ornata*). At first we thought he was obtaining bark-fibre from a dead "tobacco"-bush on which he was perched (as the Willie Wagtail did), but, after moving anxiously about from limb to limb and performing many acrobatic feats, he left without any apparent spoil. No traces of insect or other food could be discovered by us.

A single Spotted Bower-Bird (*Chlamydera maculata*) was seen at close hand in a patch of mallee scrub some three miles north of Swan Reach near the eastern (left) bank of the river.

A small flock of Crested Pigeons (*Ocyphaps lophotes*) was usually to be seen feeding in the morning and evening on the dry lagoon margins to the south of our camp. The Peaceful Dove (*Geopelia placida*) was also noticed.

On several quiet mornings Silver Gulls (*Larus novae-hollandiae*) were seen disputing over stranded fish and other food on the river margin. Food was plentiful, for we estimated that on the average there were over 40,000 dead fish, principally "tukari" (Bony Bream, *Nematalosa erebi*), and a few Murray Cod (*Oligorus macquariensis*), to a mile of river-bank.

Three Caspian Terns (*Hydroprogne caspia*) were noticed on many occasions diving for fish in the river opposite our camp.

Several Nankeen Night-Herons (*Nycticorax caledonicus*) had their home in a willow-tree across the river, and a pair of Peregrine Falcons (*Falco peregrinus*) perched on a tree on the top of the cliff. We frequently noticed the latter harrying the Night-Herons, especially on windy days. They were much hampered in their hunting by the attacks of our pair of Willie Wagtails.

A pair of White Ibis (*Threskiornis molucca*) was seen perched on the top of a boxtree near Nildottie Lagoon. Black Ducks (*Anas superciliosa*) flew up and down the river on many occasions. A flock of white birds was thought to be the Yellow-billed Spoonbill (*Platalea flavipes*), and a mixed flock of at least two kinds of Egrets (*Egretta* sp.) was seen endeavouring to fly downstream on a very windy day.

The distribution of the White- and Black-backed Magpies (*Gymnorhina hypoleuca* and *G. tibicen*) has interested us on

several visits to the Murray Valley during the past year, and we have recorded the numbers of birds seen on each trip to the River. We divided the journey into stages representing roughly the four main types of country passed through—(1) the open forest land of the western slope of the Mount Lofty Range, (2) the grassland of the eastern slope, (3) the foothills of the range, and (4) the Murray plain (mallee).

	April.	May.	November.
(1) Adelaide to Mount Pleasant .. .. .	35 W.	19 W.	10 W.
(2) Mount Pleasant to Cook's Hill (top) ..	25 W.	68 W.	32 W.
(3) Cook's Hill to Sedan ..	40 W.	28 W., 3 B.	30 W.
(4) Murray Plains to Swan Reach .. .. .	3 W., 6 B.	6 W., 1 B.	8 W.

The November journey was made on a different track through cleared country from Cambrai direct to Swan Reach. During one journey from Devon Downs to Swan Reach on the western (right) bank, 14 Black- and one White-backed were noted. On the open country near Swan Reach "aerodrome" (landing-field) we encountered, on each of two separate journeys, more than a dozen white-backed birds. In the mallee scrub a little further north only black-backs to the number of seven were met with. During the month's camp at Devon Downs one white-backed bird was seen in company with several black-backed ones. The nightly encounters of this group of birds with the Willie Wagtails have already been detailed. All the other Magpies seen (perhaps 50 birds) were black-backs, except one doubtful "grey-back" noted near Wongula (Rhine Villa). Our general conclusion was that white-backed birds are rare on the mallee-covered Murray plains, and are largely replaced by black-backs, except where large areas of cleared wheatland exist. At Devon Downs they are decidedly in the minority.