

## Notes on the Birds of Central Australia, between Alice Springs and Macdonald Downs.

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In August, 1930, an expedition was arranged by the Board of Anthropological Research of the University of Adelaide to study the natives of Macdonald Downs, a station owned by Mr. Chalmers, on the outskirts of civilization, and situated by road about 160 miles north-east of Alice Springs. On the journey to and fro and whilst camped at Macdonald Downs, an opportunity was afforded of noting the various birds in the district without interfering with the main object of the expedition. Time did not permit of a systematic and detailed study of the avifauna. Nevertheless, the following notes may be of interest regarding a region seldom traversed by the naturalist:—

The party left Alice Springs late in the afternoon of 19th August by motor-cars and a motor-lorry, and followed the Darwin track for some 10 miles through the MacDonnell Ranges and then a further 25 miles northward over the Burt Plain to camp at Anthony's Well. Burt Plain was covered with mulga and very dry. The course then ran more or less eastwards for 125 miles to Macdonald Downs. The country in general consisted of extensive, somewhat undulating, plains, with scattered mulga, traversed at wide intervals by dry, often broad, sandy creeks, their beds usually a few feet to ten feet below the surrounding country, lined by redgums (*Eucalyptus rostrata*) and with the beautiful white-stemmed cabbage-gums (*E. papuana*), bloodwoods (*E. pyrophora*), beefwood (*Grevillea striata*), etc., in the adjoining flood-plains. Dry grass was mostly abundant, the relic of December rains. Bold sandstone ranges broke the monotony at times, and occasionally low hills capped with granite boulders. Native figs (*Ficus platypoda*) grew amongst the rocks. In places were thickets of gidyea (*Acacia Cambagei*). Excursions around Macdonald Downs showed bold and rugged ranges of considerable height and picturesque grandeur, amongst which, in the neighbourhood of Mount Ultim, were a few springs of water much frequented by birds, such as Finches.

The return journey was made by retracing our steps some 30 miles to the Bunday, at Kerr's holding. We then struck more or less southwards towards the MacDonnell Ranges, the outliers of which were reached after about 40 miles. We then ran over low spurs and along flats between the bold and bare

*CLELAND—Birds of Central Australia.*

rugged mountain masses in a more westerly course to Arltunga. From here, for about 70 miles to Alice Springs, we were amongst the ranges, running along gorges or flat valleys between the hills.

About 52 species of birds were seen in all, but the trip did not reveal anything specially rare. The following are notes on the species seen:—

Emu.—No actual birds were seen, but feathers were in use by the natives.

Quail.—These were flushed on several occasions from amongst the tall dry grass. They appeared to be Stubble-Quail.

*Ocyphaps lophotes*.—Crested Pigeons were numerous round Macdonald Downs. The blacks found two young birds in a nest—the iris was more grey than dead straw colour, the eyelids greyish fawn, the bill dark horn with a white tip, the pharynx fleshy grey, the legs greyish pink.

*Burhinus magnirostris*.—The Southern Stone-Curlew was heard calling once or twice at night.

*Eupodotis australis*.—During the journey out, about 60 miles north-east of Alice Springs, a Native Turkey was seen standing up in the long grass. It allowed the motor-car to drive right up to it and around it, so that photographs could be taken, merely walking slowly away and then squatting down.

*Dendrocygna eytoni* (Plumed Tree-Duck).—Some young birds had been reared at Macdonald Downs, but had taken flight and left the locality some while before our arrival. Whilst we were there they returned one night and came into the bower-shelter for food, as they had been accustomed to, when a cat, new since their departure, pounced on one and injured it. The others took flight, but returned to the water-trough next night, when we saw them by means of a torch. They were quite friendly, and allowed of a close approach. The whistling (? of their wings) was distinct.

*Haliastur sphenurus*.—A pair of Whistling Eagles had their headquarters at the Station.

*Milvus migrans*.—Black (Fork-tailed) Kites were present at Macdonald Downs and at Turner's Station, half-way to the first named. Some of the few Kites seen seemed to have square rather than forked tails, but probably were this species, and not *Lophoictinia isura*, the Square-tailed Kite.

## CLELAND—Birds of Central Australia.

*Falco longipennis*.—The Little Falcon was seen at Macdonald Downs and at Turner's, frequenting the neighbourhood of the water-troughs and keeping the Chestnut-eared Finches and Budgerygahs in constant apprehension as they flew down in their thousands to drink. Frequently the alarm of danger was false, and the wild flight for safety unnecessary, but when, like a bolt from the blue—and the simile is truly justifiable—the Falcon seemingly at lightning speed dashed through their midst, some of the frightened and thirsty Finches even passed between two of us standing together beside the pool of water. It seemed, however, no easy matter for the Falcon to secure its prey, as we saw no birds struck after several attempts. As the Falcons passed us, some seemed very dark, but this was doubtless due to the back alone being seen, and they were probably not examples of the Black Falcon. A Little Falcon was secured at Macdonald Downs—♂, iris dark brown, eyelids greyish with pale yellowish edges, bill horn grey, cere waxy yellow, legs maize yellow, total length 12 in., span of wings 26½ in.

*Ninox boobook* (?).—An Owl was heard on several occasions at Macdonald Downs. The "more-pork" note did not seem quite the same as that of southern birds.

*Calyptrorhynchus banksi*.—Red-tailed Black Cockatoos were seen in flocks, sometimes as many as 30 in number, at Macdonald Downs and neighbouring parts. One was secured near the spring at Mount Ultim, 16 miles east of the station—♂, iris dark brown, bill dark grey horn, pharynx greyish flesh, legs pallid brownish and grey with undersides of feet pallid brownish, total length to the top of the head 21 in., span of wings 44 in.

These birds in Central Australia furnish an interesting example of adaptation in spite of extreme specialization. With their massive bills and enormous musculature for using these, they have obviously become specialized for opening hard woody seed-vessels such as those of Hakeas. Three species of *Hakea* (*H. lorea*, *H. intermedia*, and *H. leucoptera*) do occur in Central Australia, but are not numerous, fruit only occasionally, and in the cases of the first two the ripe seed-vessels soon open. The Black Cockatoos could not manage to survive in these parts in any number if dependent on Hakeas and the capsules of eucalypts such as the bloodwood (*Eucalyptus pyrophora*). Instead, they frequent the grassy plains and pick up the minute

## CLELAND—Birds of Central Australia.

grass-seeds (probably *Panicum* sp. and other species) that fall out of the dry heads and are often collected by small ants and piled up in handfuls round their holes. The great bill and thick tongue can pick up these as easily and as delicately as they can extract the seed out of the hard seed-vessels that they have rent asunder. The crop of the one shot was full of such grass-seeds.

*Kakatoe roseicapilla*.—Native (Iliaura) name, "ilunja."

*Leptolophus hollandicus*.—A few parties of Cockatoo-Parrots were met with "on the move" at Macdonald Downs.

*Psephotus varius*.—A few Mulga-Parrots were seen at Macdonald Downs and between there and Arltunga. One was secured at the former place—♂, iris dark brown, bill greyish-horn, legs greyish, total length 11½ in., span of wings 16 in.

*Melopsittacus undulatus*.—Native name, "atid'era."

*Podargus* sp.—The description given by Mr. Mac Chalmers of a bird seen near the junction of the Bunday and Fraser Creeks—that it sat lengthwise on a limb and looked like a short branch—evidently refers to a Frogmouth.

*Halcyon sanctus*.—A Kingfisher with rusty stains on the breast seen at Macdonald Downs north of Arltunga, and on several other occasions, was apparently the Sacred Kingfisher.

*Merops ornatus*.—Several Bee-eaters were seen north of Arltunga, and between there and Alice Springs.

*Cheramoeca leucosterna*.—A few White-backed Swallows were seen, as at Macdonald Downs, north of Arltunga, and at Turner's Station.

*Hylochelidon ariel*.—Deserted Fairy Martin's nests were seen in the rock shelters of the sandstone range at the junction of the Bunday and Fraser Creeks and at Mount Ultim. On the return railway journey inhabited nests were seen at Beresford (S.A.) and a dead young bird picked up.

*Rhipidura leucophrys*.—The onomatopoeic native (Iliaura) name for the Willie Wagtail is "tcejijirra." As elsewhere, the natives dislike the bird because it hangs round their camps, listens to their conversations, and then noises their secrets abroad and calls them names. Also they dislike anyone, even a bird, given to "nagging." They kill it at every opportunity.

*Melanodryas cucullata*.—Hooded Robins were occasionally seen, as at Macdonald Downs and, when the first ranges were reached, north of Arltunga.

## CLELAND—Birds of Central Australia.

*Pachycephala rufiventris*.—A good view of a male Rufous Whistler was obtained at Mount Undoolya. What was probably a hen bird was seen at Macdonald Downs. A beautiful singer in a gum creek about 40 miles north of Arltunga was doubtless also the Rufous Whistler.

*Colluricincla rufiventris*.—A glimpse of a bird with reddish breast at Macdonald Downs seemed to indicate this species, though it may have been a *Pachycephala*.

*Pteropodocys maxima*.—A flock of four or five Ground Cuckoo-Shrikes were flying round Macdonald Downs, descending to feed on the ground. One was secured—♂, iris whitish, with a slight amber tint, bill glaucous grey, pharynx flesh-coloured, legs dark glaucous grey, total length  $14\frac{3}{4}$  in., span of wings  $24\frac{1}{4}$  in.

*Pomatostomus rubeculus*.—The Red-breasted Babbler was widely distributed.

*Aphelocephala* (?).—A number of small birds seen on the journey out were probably mostly Chestnut-eared Finches. Some were thought to be Whitefaces.

*Acanthiza* sp.—On one or two occasions, as amongst some rocks near Macdonald Downs, small birds were seen in bushes and appeared to be Thornbills, but the identification was uncertain.

*Acanthiza chrysorrhoa*.—A specimen of the Yellow-tailed Thornbill was obtained at Macdonald Downs—sex (?), iris with pallid periphery and light brown round the pupil; bill, pharynx, and legs black; total length  $3\frac{3}{4}$  in., span of wings 7 in.

*Malurus cyanotus*.—A Wren showing white, seen on the Burt Plain, was probably the Blue-and-white Wren.

*Malurus assimilis* (?).—A family of Purple-backed Wrens (?) was seen at the foot of Mount Ultim.

*Artamus melanops*.—Black-faced Wood-Swallows were common throughout the district.

*Neositta leucoptera*, White-winged Sittellas (?).—Were seen on a creek about 40 miles north of Arltunga.

*Pardalotus rubricatus*.—Red-browed Pardalotes were heard not infrequently. One was obtained at Macdonald Downs—♀, iris pale greyish yellow, bill dark greyish brown above and pallid below, legs dark grey, total length  $4\frac{1}{4}$  in., span of wings 8 in.

## CLELAND—Birds of Central Australia.

*Meliphaga penicillata leilavalensis*.—White-plumed Honey-eaters were fairly common.

*Myzantha flavigula*.—Native name, "umb'engba."

*Taeniopygia castanotis*.—Chestnut-eared Finches were present nearly everywhere, and extremely abundant near wells, where they frequently fell victims to the Little Falcon. At the spring near Mount Ultim the Chestnut-eared Finches were present in countless myriads, rising in clouds with a noise like a rushing wind from every shrub and tree within a quarter-mile of the water, clothing the leafless branches of dead trees with their quivering forms looking in the distance like grey butterflies as they sought a resting-place, and covering the rocks round the spring itself with their droppings till these at first sight and to uncritical observation looked as if a light mantle of snowflakes partly hid their texture from view. A bird picked up dead, probably wantonly killed by a native boy, had the bill buffy coral, legs brownish yellow, total length  $3\frac{3}{4}$  in., span of wings  $6\frac{1}{2}$  in.

*Cracticus nigrogularis*.—A beautiful songster that woke us nearly every morning at the first streak of day, but ceased his song before sunrise and was not seen or heard by us at all during the rest of the day, turned out in the end, when at last sleepy eyes located him, to be a Jackaroo, or Pied Butcher-Bird. A young one was a pet at the homestead, and used to rally to the defence of a young Magpie when this was caught and squeaked.

*Gymnorhina tibicen* and *G. hypoleuca*.—Most of the Magpies seemed to be the Black-backed, but near Arltunga a probable White-backed one was seen.

Crow (*Corvus* sp.).—Native name, "ung 'ula."

When travelling by motor-car, a tally was kept of the numbers of individuals of each species seen. The distance, as on previous occasions, has been broken up into "journeys," which are numbered. In the following list, the numbers in parentheses refer to the "journey" on which the birds were seen. The "journeys" number 10, and when a species was noted on nearly all of these, the figures are given consecutively for the birds alone, omitting the journey numbers to save space.

## CLELAND—Birds of Central Australia.

## —Details of the "Journeys."—

- (1) Stuart (Alice Springs) north to Anthony's Well; 35 miles; 19th August.
- (2) Anthony's Well easterly to Turner's homestead; 60 miles; 20th August.
- (3) Turner's homestead to Kerr's homestead; 35 miles; 20th August.
- (4) Kerr's homestead to Macdonald Downs; 28 miles; 20th August.
- (5) Macdonald Downs eastwards to the "Axe Factory" beside a sandstone range; 14 miles; 24th August.
- (6) Macdonald Downs northwards to Weir's holding beside a rugged sandstone range; 12 miles; 31st August.
- (7) Macdonald Downs north-eastwards to Mount Ultim, a very bold rugged sandstone range; 14 miles; 1st September.
- (8) Bunday Creek at Kerr's homestead southwards to the MacDonnell Ranges; 40 miles; 7th September.
- (9) Thence through the MacDonnell Ranges somewhat westerly to Kavanagh's homestead near Arltunga; about 42 miles; 7th September.
- (10) West of Arltunga, through the MacDonnell Ranges, to Alice Springs; 68 miles; 8th September.

Quail.—(5) 3. Total, 3.

Dove.—(1) 2, (3) 2. Total, 4.

Bronzewing Pigeons.—(7) 2. Total, 2.

*Lophophaps plumifera*.—(6) 5. Total, 5.

*Ocyphaps lophotes*.—(2) 60, (4) 5, (5) 1. Total, 66.

*Eupodotus australis*.—(2) 1. Total, 1.

*Uroaetus audax*.—(5) 1 (on return journey). Total, 1.

*Haliastur sphenurus*.—(2) 3, (5) 1, (10) 1. Total, 5.

*Milvus migrans*.—(2) 2, (4) 2, (6) 2. Total, 6.

*Falco longipennis*.—(2) 1. Total, 1.

*Falco cenchroides*.—(4) 1, (5) 1. Total, 2.

Hawks.—2, 6, 1, 0, 2, 2, 1, 1, 0. Total, 15.

Lorikeets (?).—(4) 2. Total, 2.

## CLELAND—Birds of Central Australia.

- Calyptrorhynchus banksi*.—(5) 30, (10) 2. Total, 32.  
*Kakatoe roseicapilla*.—2, 6, 0, 7, 1, 16, 0, 2, 43, 0. Total, 77.  
*Barnardius zonarius*.—(4) 1, (8) 4, (9) 2, (10) 2. Total, 9.  
*Psephotus varius*.—(8) 4, (9) 5. Total, 9.  
*Melopsittacus undulatus*.—0, 46, 17, 20, 21, 3, 20, 8, 31, 58  
Total, 224.  
*Halcyon sanctus*.—(1) 1, (6) 1, (10) 2. Total, 4.  
*Merops ornatus*.—(10) 1. Total, 1.  
*Cheramoeca leucosterna*.—(6) 1. Total, 1.  
*Rhipidura leucophrys*.—(3) 2, (4) 1, (6) 1, (10) 2. Total, 6.  
*Melanodryas cucullata*.—(2) 2, (3) 4, (5) 1, (10) 2. Total, 9.  
*Pachycephala rufiventris*.—(8) 1. Total, 1.  
*Grallina cyanoleuca*.—(6) 1, (10) 1. Total, 2.  
*Oreoica gutturalis*.—(1) 1, (3) 1, (4) 2, (9) 1. Total, 5.  
*Coracina novae-hollandiae*.—(9) 1, (10) 2. Total, 3.  
*Pomatostomus rubeculus*.—(1) 2, (2) 3, (8) 10, (9) 9, (10) 8.  
Total, 32.  
*Aphelocephala* (?) (perhaps Finches).—(2) 4, (4) 2, (5) 3.  
Total, 9.  
*Acanthiza*.—(3) 1.  
*Malurus* (Blue and White).—(1) 2  
*Artamus melanops* (probably all).—6, 12, 23, 26, 4, 8, 3, 4,  
19, 2. Total, 107.  
*Meliphaga virescens*.—(5) 1, (8) 3, (10) 7. Total, 11.  
*Meliphaga* sp.—(9) 7, (10) 3. Total, 10.  
*Myzantha flavigula*.—(2) 1, (7) 1, (9) 1, (10) 10. Total, 13.  
*Anthus australis*.—3, 4, 2, 0, 0, 2, 0, 2, 5, 7. Total, 25.  
*Taeniopygia castanotis*.—8, 60, 42, 16, 64, 29, 109, 0, 25, 0.  
Total, 353.  
Crows.—0, 28, 17, 0, 4, 12, 2, 0, 56, 12. Total, 131.  
Black-backed Magpies (probably).—0, 1, 0, 2, 0, 1, 1, 0, 2, 0.  
Total, 7.  
White (?)—(10) 1. Total, 1.  
Unidentified (probably many Finches).—14, 38, 18, 30, 17, 4,  
5, 8, 26, 23. Total, 183.

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*Bird Notes.*

- . Flock of unidentified birds.—(2) 1 flock.
  - Kangaroos.—(4) 2.
  - . Total distance, approximately 348 miles.
  - Number of species seen, about 38.
  - Number of individual birds seen, about 1,380.
  - Number of kangaroos seen, 2.
-