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*McGILP—Birds of the Nullarbor Plain.*

## Birds of the Nullarbor Plain and Far West Coast of South Australia.

By J. Neil McGilp.

Square-tailed Kite (*Lophoictinia isura*), 28/10/1931.—Whilst travelling along the old telegraph line between Nullarbor Station and Eucla I observed this strange species for the first time. I had often wondered during my observations of flocks of the Fork-tailed Kite (*Milvus migrans*) in the Interior whether I had seen a Square-tailed Kite among them, but can now unhesitatingly say I did not. There is no doubt about the bird when once seen. It has a pronounced deep forward thrust of the wing which is very long in proportion to the body and tail, giving it almost a Tern-like appearance. It was flying slowly when seen, and once, when flying over the motor-car, I could distinctly see that the head was lighter in color than that of the Fork-tailed

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Kite. The first bird was seen at Wigunda Tank, some 25 miles west of Nullarbor Station; about three miles further on this bird possibly appeared again, as we had stopped for a short period to clear grass seeds from the exhaust pipe of the car. About 30 miles further on another bird appeared, whilst at a distance of 27 miles from Eucla still another example was seen. They were searching for small birds in the tall grass, and I concluded that the motor-car attracted the hawk, as we were flushing quail and small birds continuously. Is this Square-tailed Kite more frequently found near the coast? I have had a great many years' experience in the Interior, and I have not seen it there. It was reported as common and nesting in Callabonna Creek, Lake Frome District, by Mr. A. H. C. Zietz, of the South Australian Museum, when he was a member of a party collecting fossil bones of the *Diprotodon* in Lake Collabonna in 1893, but I have searched that area in vain for it. Fork-tailed Kites are very common and breed in Callabonna Creek, so I think it was a case of mistaken identity. So far as I can gather the only Square-tailed Kite taken in South Australia was secured by Mr. Edwin Ashby at Blackwood (♀, 12/10/1913).

Quails.—These birds were extremely numerous during the trip. The Stubble Quail (*Coturnix pectoralis*) was seen and heard giving forth its "church-a-wit" call repeatedly. The Button, or Swift-flying Quail (*Turnix velox*) was very numerous. There is, I feel sure, another species of quail in this locality with which I had not come in contact until I visited Lake Everard Station, east of the Nullarbor Plain. This quail is very red in color, very wary, and gives a different call from *T. velox*. *T. velox*, when flying away from one, shows lightish at the flanks, whilst the red-quail does not. *T. velox*, when suddenly flushed, utters a "pip-squeak" invariably, but the red quail does not. The "boom" call of *T. velox* is very soft, but that of the red quail is much louder and has a much more metallic start of the "boom." That call, when first heard, puzzled me, so I made inquiries and was told by a bushman that it was the mating call of the Sleeping Lizard (*Trachysaurus rugosus*). That, however, is not correct, as the call is uttered by the red quail, and at night-time the call sounds eerie as it comes from all parts of the plain. There is a skin of a quail in the South Australian Museum labelled *T. velox* which closely approaches in general appearance this red quail of the Nullarbor. It was taken at the Fitzroy Crossing, N.W.A., in 1896. I am well acquainted with *T. velox*, and I think that the above speci-

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men is not of that species. I did not get a specimen, so would ask any naturalist who goes out west of Yardea in the Gawler Ranges to try to get a skin. If he has as much trouble to shoot the bird as I had without result he will have a deal of exercise, but a specimen will be worth while securing.

Masked Owl (*Tyto novae-hollandiae*).—The Nullarbor Plain abounds with limestone blowholes and caves, and in these the Masked Owl is generally found. When seen down a blowhole one is struck by its facial resemblance to Harold Lloyd, of horn-rimmed glasses fame. The edging of the facial disc has a very distinct dark outline, which gives the face of the Owl the appearance of having horn-rimmed glasses on. I disturbed one bird a few feet below the surface in a blowhole. It immediately dropped down 30 to 40 feet to another ledge. It fell with wings outstretched and turning or side-slipping. In a large cave I located a nesting site, a small cavity. I disturbed an owl from the cavity, but there were no eggs or young. A native told me that four eggs are often seen, but as later on he called to me that he had found four eggs of a kestrel (he did not say kestrel, but gave a name I could not pick up). I went over and found but three eggs. In this connection I would like to state that I have found the aboriginals most unreliable as regards ornithology, as also in most other matters. They desire to please, and in their endeavour to do so tell the most outrageous lies. Then again any leading question is answered in the affirmative. If you ask, "Does that bird lay in a hollow?" the black will invariably say "Yes." If you say, "That bird does not lay in a hollow, Jacky," he will answer, "No, boss," even if he knows that the bird does. I mention this because I have quoted that a native said he found four eggs usually with the Masked Owl. He also said they were white eggs. Kestrels (*Falco cenchroides*) use these caves and blowholes as roosting and nesting places. I saw a number of nests containing either young or eggs.

Redthroat (*Pyrrholaemus brunneus*).—Whilst searching the coastline at Eucla for a sign of the Western Bristle-Bird (*Dasyornis longirostris*) among the stunted teatree (*Melaleuca*) and low scrub I was surprised to see so many Redthroats. In habits they closely resembled Scrub-Wrens (*Sericornes*). I secured two specimens, but these and a specimen of the Nullarbor Quail-Thrush, taken on the Nullarbor Plain, met with disaster whilst we camped for the night at Cook, on the Trans-Australian railway line. I had injected formalin into them and placed the

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three birds upon a mantelpiece in a rest-cottage to dry, but next morning we could find nothing of them. I blame cats for their disappearance. Redthroats were frequently noted throughout the trip.

Thornbill (*Acanthiza* sp.).—Whilst at Eucla I came in contact with a remarkably small Thornbill in the low scrub. It was most cunning, and I failed to take a specimen, although I had two shots at it. I saw but the one bird, and its small size struck me as remarkable.

Nullarbor Quail-Thrush (*Cinclosoma alisteri*).—This species has been described by Mr. F. Lawson Whitlock, from the Western Australian side of the Nullarbor Plain. I shot a bird (specimen lost, see note above) about 45 miles south-west of Cook. There is not the slightest doubt it was *C. alisteri*, as it differs from all the other Quail-Thrushes, and is distinguishable in the field. It there appeared almost to have a white collar as a bird ran across the track in front of the car. About five miles further on towards Cook, we pulled up the motor-car in order to clear grass seeds from the exhaust pipe (we had to do this frequently to prevent the accumululating seeds from catching fire). As I stepped out of the car I nearly trod on a disused nest of a Quail-Thrush. The nest was close to the stem of a dead bluebush and was very similar in construction to that of the Cinnamon Quail-Thrush (*C. cinnamomeum*), but much more compact. In contained an addled egg almost completely covered with grass seeds blown into the nest. As I saw only *C. alisteri* on this portion of the Nullarbor Plain I consider the egg belongs to a bird of that species. The Chestnut-Quail Thrush (*C. castanotum*) does not appear to go out on the Nullarbor Plain far west from Ooldea, nor further north than 25 miles from the coast.

Fairy Martin (*Hylochelidon ariel*), 31/10/1931.—At Pidinga Tank, 35 miles south-east of Ooldea, a large shed has been erected as a catchment for water. Under the roof of this shed hundreds of these Bottle-nest Swallows were nesting. A set of five eggs was found in one nest; clutches of four eggs were very common. All the eggs were practically fresh.

Australian Dotterel (*Peltohyas australis*).—A good many of these birds were noted. They were in small flocks, so evidently the nesting season was completed.

Grey Butcher Bird (*Cracticus torquatus*).—Three pairs of these birds were noted at Eucla. They were the White-winged, or western form of *Cracticus* and had much more white feathering than the South Australian form.

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Honeyeaters.—The only Honeyeaters seen on the Nullarbor Plain, and this, of course, only in dongas, were the White-fronted (*Gliciphila albifrons*), the Singing (*Meliphaga virescens*) and the White-plumed (*M. penicillata*). At Eucla a Singing was sitting on two heavily incubated eggs within 50 yards of the sea. A pair of Yellow-plumed Honeyeaters (*M. ornata*) was seen at Nullarbor Station just outside the Nullarbor Plain.

Field-Wren (*Calamanthus* sp.).—I was unable to secure a specimen, but many of these birds were seen throughout the Nullarbor Plain. I consider them to be the Rufous Field Wren (*C. campestris*). The song in the early morning and at sunset is very beautiful.

Parrots.—Shell Parrots (*Melopsittacus undulatus*) were in mobs even on the bare plains; Cockatoo Parrots (*Leptolophus hollandicus*) at Euria Waterhole and on the Nullarbor Plain. Rock Parrots (*Neophema petrophila*) were seen on the coast near the Head of the Bight; Mulga Parrots (*Psephotus varius*) were observed at Ooldea, and Port Lincoln Parrots (*Barnardius zonarius*) at the southern end of the Nullarbor Plain. No Cockatoos were met with after leaving Yalata Station, but several Major Mitchells (*Kakatoe leadbeateri*) and Galahs (*K. roseicapilla*) were seen between Yalata and Fowler's Bay.

Thornbills.—Many small Thornbills taken to be the Slender Thornbill (*Acanthiza morgani*), and the Yellow-rumped (*A. chrysorrhoa*) were noted in low bushes in the dongas on the Nullarbor Plain, as were also the Brown Weebills (*Smicrornis brevirostris*).

The Eastern Whitefaces (*Aphelocephala leucopsis*) were numerous throughout, nesting in low salt and blue bushes. They were very wild, and seem to have a slightly different call from the birds further east.

The following species were also noted:—Bustards (*Eupodotis australis*).—Several were seen on the Nullarbor Plain. Brown Songlarks (*Cinclorhamphus cruralis*) and Groundlarks (*Anthus australis*) were very plentiful. Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrikes (*Coracina novae-hollandiae*) were seen near a donga. Wedge-tailed Eagle (*Uroaetus audax*).—Only one, soaring overhead near Cook. Black-eared Cuckoo (*Owenavis osculans*).—Was seen near Watson Railway Station. Crows (*Corvus* sp.).—Odd parties were seen on the Plain. Orange Chats (*Epthianura auri-*

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frons) were numerous. White-fronted Chats (*E. albifrons*).— Only a few were seen. Blue-and-White Wrens (*Malurus cyanotus*) were not numerous.

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[The name Nullarbor was evidently made up from the Latin words *nulla arbor* (no tree) by Edmund A. Delisser, a member of the firm of A. and E. A. Delisser, surveyors, of Adelaide. In 1865 he crossed the Plain from the Head of the Bight to ranges approximately 60 miles north of the present Deakin. In 1866 he was employed in surveying the 'western boundary of the Province,' and a Plan showing his surveys and exploration accompanied Parliamentary Paper, No. 137 of 1867. In his report dated 12th January, 1867 (original in the Archives Department of the Public Library), he stated that he left Eucla on 13th October, 1866, with the intention of cutting the sheaoak country he discovered in 1865. After passing round the cliffs for three miles he went in a north-west direction for 32 miles, then north for 20 miles, and returned to Eucla by another route. On changing from north-west to north he wrote:—The "Nullarbor Plain I met here—as not a tree did I see from hence to the north

Printed across the Plan easterly at this change of direction are the words—"The Nullarbor Plain extending eastward to the Bight, and thence nearly to the Meridian of Fowler's Bay"—and beyond his farthest north on this trip—"vast Plain of Grass and Saltbush, not a tree visible.—" The words "Nullarbor Plain" also appear on the Plan about 15 miles north-west of the Head of the Bight.

Eyre in 1841, Egerton-Warburton in 1860, and John Forrest in 1870, were other explorers in those parts; the two latter saw some of the Plain country. The Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, South Australian Branch, Volume XIX, 1917-18 contain much information about the Nullarbor Plain.—J. SUTTON.]