

In The Fast Dwindling Mallee.

By C. E. Rix.

On 15th and 16th May, 1937, Messrs. H. T. Condon, R. E. Britten Jones, R. F. Brown, and the writer made what was intended to be a trip into the mallee country between Murray Bridge and Karoonda, but which became a somewhat extended tour. We left Adelaide by motor-car at 12.45 p.m., when a steady rain was falling, and arrived at Murray Bridge at 3 p.m., having left the rain behind in the Mount Lofty Ranges. After a few minutes' stay at that place, we set off along the Karoonda Road. Our object was only to proceed until we found a likely-looking place with plenty of virgin scrub. About two miles out from Murray Bridge small patches of native pine (*Callitris robusta*) were to be seen, and these patches became larger in extent and more numerous as we motored on until in the vicinity of eight miles from Murray Bridge there was a considerable area of good mixed mallee, pine, and teatree scrub with a sprinkling of porcupine grass extending on either side of the road. In covering that distance a number of species of birds had been noted from the motor-car, in fact, bird life was very plentiful, and this, combined with the fact that we were still less than ten miles from the River Murray, caused a feeling in the party that if it were like that at that point it would be even better fifteen or twenty miles farther on. So we went on past Chapman's Bore. About three miles east of that bore clearings began to show in the scrub and soon the only trees to be seen

were those along the road. The nature of the country was such that we could not see very far ahead and it was a case of "Let us see what is over the next hill." The view from that would most-likely show a dark patch of scrub at the top of the next hill, which, when arrived at, would be just a fringe of scrub left along a track leading off the main road, or left as a break-wind along a boundary-fence. We continued on in this fashion and, after crossing the railway line at Kulde, ran parallel up with the line to Wynarka. Rumour had it that there was some good scrub south of Karoonda; so we set off to Whyte's Well, which is about six miles due south of Karoonda, but, apart from a patch of dense whipstick mallee about 500 acres in area, situated three or four miles from Whyte's Well, we encountered no scrub other than that lining the track. By that time it was nearing sunset, and the thoughts of the party were turned towards finding a spot to camp, where we would be able to do some work first thing next morning. So on again, this time northward to Karoonda. Still no scrub. On arrival at Karoonda a sign-post informed us that by continuing on in the same direction Waikerie was seventy-four miles away. This sounded a long way, and surely there would be some good scrub in that distance. We hurried on with darkness rapidly falling and, when about two miles south of Perponda, with only cleared land on all sides, we decided to stop. We pitched camp in the scrub by the roadside and the writer at least had a very comfortable night (he had a small much-despised tent, and it rained during the night!) Next morning after about half-an-hour spent in the scrub fringing the road, we decided to return to the scrub we had passed by in the vicinity of Chapman's Bore. Our first real work commenced at a spot about two-and-a-half miles east of Chapman's Bore when on the return journey. However, in the 150 miles that we had covered to that point we had noted quite a variety of birds, and numerous short stops had been made now and then along the route. We spent the rest of the day working through various parts of the scrub between Chapman's Bore and Murray Bridge, and arrived back in Adelaide at 6.30 p.m., having motored in all about 250 miles.

We are very grateful to Dr. E. Britten Jones for so kindly letting us have the use of his motor-car on this and other trips.

Altogether forty-three species were identified, and notes concerning them are here given. It will be seen that there were several notable absentees from this list, such as the genus *Pachycephala*, the Whistlers, and *Plectorhyncha lanceolata*, Striped Honeyeater, of which no sign was seen or call heard during the trip.

Leipoa ocellata, Mallee Fowl.—A mound was seen in scrub abutting the road about three miles west of Chapman's Bore with a bird a few yards away. The car was stopped and it was found that the bird had been scratching out the centre of the mound. The mound was quite cold for a depth of ten inches below where the bird had been scratching. Another mound having an old and disused appearance was noted about a mile from the road two miles east of Chapman's Bore.

Phaps chalcoptera, Common Bronzewing.—These birds were noted all along the route. A nest, containing two eggs, one of which was chipped, was found about eight feet from the ground in a native pine.

Ocyphaps lophotes, Crested Pigeon.—These birds were very numerous, and at one place near Wingamin twenty were noted in a flock by the side of the road.

Zonifer tricolor, Banded Plover.—Small flocks and odd birds were noted at various places.

Haliastur sphenurus, Whistling Eagle.—One bird was seen near Chapman's Bore.

Glossopsitta porphyrocephala, Purple-crowned Lorikeet.—A small flock of eight or ten was seen between Murray Bridge and Chapman's Bore.

Kakatoe roseicapilla, Galah.—Three were seen at Urrbrae, Mitcham, and one at Murray Bridge.

Barnardius barnardi, Ringneck Parrot.—A small flock of about a dozen was seen near our camp at Perponda.

Psephotus varius, Mulga Parrot.—Numerous flocks of this species were noted from Kinchina on, all along the route. They were frequently seen on the telegraph wires or bathing in pools of water lying on the road.

Chalcites basalis, Horsfield Bronze Cuckoo.—One bird was heard calling about two-and-a-half miles east of Chapman's Bore and was located on a dead tree, where it was joined by another while we were watching.

Hirundo neoxena, Welcome Swallow.—These were noted in fair numbers all along the route.

Rhipidura leucophrys, Willie Wagtail.—Were commonly noted by the roadside, but were not seen very far therefrom.

Petroica multicolor, Scarlet Robin.—This species was frequently observed while travelling through the Mount Lofty Ranges, but one bird, ♂, was seen east of the River Murray, and that was about four miles from Murray Bridge.

Colluricincla harmonica, Grey Shrike-Thrush.—Two were seen near Chapman's Bore.

Grallina cyanoleuca, Magpie Lark.—One bird was seen near Perponda.

Oreoica gutturalis, Crested Bellbird.—A number of pairs and odd birds were observed either running across the road or sitting on telegraph wires.

Coracina novae-hollandiae, Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike.—One flew overhead while we were standing by the road about eight miles east of Murray Bridge.

Cinclosoma castanotum, Chestnut Quail-Thrush.—One bird was seen in a patch of mixed scrub eight miles east of Murray Bridge.

Drymodes brunneopygia, Southern Scrub-Robin.—This species could be heard or seen practically every time we stopped after passing the River Murray.

Pomatostomus superciliosus, White-browed Babbler.—This species was well represented in nearly every patch of scrub we inspected.

Epthianura albifrons, White-fronted Chat.—Several noted in the cleared parts.

Smicromis brevirostris, Brown Weebill.—This was probably the bird most commonly noted on the trip. One could not walk many yards either along the road or through the scrub without seeing one or more busily feeding in the mallee trees.

Acanthiza hamiltoni, Red-tailed Thornbill.—One or two small parties were seen. A specimen was obtained by Mr. Condon from near Chapman's Bore.

Acanthiza chrysorrhoa, Yellow-tailed Thornbill.—Several noted in the pine scrub east of Murray Bridge.

Hylacola cauta, Shy Ground Wren.—Three birds were seen at a spot two-and-a-half miles east of Chapman's Bore.

Amytornis striatus, Striated Grass-Wren.—The finding of this species was the "highlight" of the trip for all members of the party. The birds were first seen at a spot about two-and-a-half miles east of Chapman's Bore in some reverted scrub containing a fair amount of small porcupine grass (*Triodia irritans*) clumps. Altogether five birds were seen at this place, and two specimens, ♂, ♀, were taken. Several good views of the actions of these birds were obtained, and it was noted that when flushed from a patch of bushes they appeared to bounce rather than fly to the next patch, the undulating flight taking them from an

inch or so from the ground to a height of two or three feet in a distance of about two yards. While doing this the birds appear to move in a somewhat side-on manner rather than head-on. When running along the ground the bird carries its tail erect and the head forms a straight line with the back in a manner that may be described as similar to that of a dog pointing; the legs are slightly bent. Both head and tail are held erect and the legs straight when the bird stops to observe the intruder or is surprised in the open. Another specimen, ♂, was obtained in a patch of mallee, pine, and teatree scrub with only occasional porcupine grass clumps situated about eight miles east of Murray Bridge. It was the only bird of the species seen in that spot. The soft parts of the three specimens were identical and were as follows:—Iris, brown; bill, dark grey with bluish-grey base, each mandible edged greyish-white; legs and feet grey.

Stipiturus mallee, Mallee Emu-Wren (?).—Two birds believed to be of this species were seen where the Grass-Wrens were first found—two-and-a-half miles east of Chapman's Bore.

Malurus assimilis, Purple-backed Wren.—These birds were also seen in the same spot as the Grass-Wrens. There were a dozen or so uncoloured birds, but no coloured adult male was seen. A specimen, adult ♀, was obtained; iris, brown; legs and feet, grey; bill, reddish brown; brown patch of feathers round eye.

Artamus cyanopterus, Dusky Wood-Swallow.—Several birds were noted at Nairne, Callington, and Perponda.

Honeyeaters.—These were represented by *Gliciphila melanops*, Tawny-crowned Honeyeater; *Meliphaga virescens*, Singing Honeyeater; *M. leucotis*, White-eared Honeyeater; and *M. cratitia*, Purple-gaped Honeyeater; and they were noted at various places along the route. *Myzantha melanocephala*, Noisy Miner, was seen through the Mount Lofty Ranges and near Kinchinda, while the quieter *Myzantha obscura*, Dusky Miner, was observed in flocks of up to twenty in number at various parts along the route between Chapman's Bore and Perponda. A specimen was obtained from near Mindiyarra—♂, iris, dark hazel; bill, light yellow; cere, yellow; front of tarsus and top of feet, horn colour; back of tarsus and soles of feet, orange yellow. *Anthochaera chrysoptera*, Little Wattle-Bird; some were noted near Kulde. *A. carunculata*, Red Wattle-Bird; several were met with at various places along the route. *Acanthagenys rufogularis*, Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater was also noted here and there throughout the trip from Kinchinda on.

Corvus spp.—Several birds seen near Perponda appeared to be *C. bennetti*, Little Crow, but attempts to obtain a specimen were unsuccessful. Either *C. ceciliae*, Crow, or *C. coronoides*, Raven (or both) were observed at various places.

Corcorax melanorhamphus, White-winged Chough.—A party of eight or ten birds was seen in a patch of pine scrub adjoining the Murray Bridge rifle range.

Strepera melanoptera, Black-winged Currawong.—These birds were fairly numerous and were noted all along the route east of the River Murray.

Cracticus torquatus, Grey Butcher-Bird.—This species was very numerous indeed, and in some cases a bird was seen on each of three or four successive telegraph poles.

Gymnorhina tibicen, Black-backed Magpie, and *G. hypoleuca*, White-backed Magpie.—These birds were very mixed east of the River Murray and even as far east as Perponda and Karoonda and were in about equal proportions. There were also a number of gradations between the two species.

One Black-backed bird was seen between Monarto and Callington (west of the River).
