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## THE BIRDS OF ELLIOTT AND NEWCASTLE WATERS, NORTHERN TERRITORY

By HOWARD E. A. JARMAN.

The writer spent from September to December, 1941, at Elliott. This locality is about 18 miles south of the tiny township and homestead of Newcastle Waters, being situated on No. 8 Bore. Banka Banka lies some 90 miles to the south, while Alice Springs is approximately 500 miles distant.

In moving northward through the Northern Territory, the gradual improvement in the vegetation is readily apparent, this improvement keeping abreast of the steadily increasing rainfall. The usual aridity of the country near the South Australian-Northern Territory border is in marked contrast to the close forest of the Darwin area, because of the border country's sparse few inches and Darwin's average of 60 inches. By the time one reaches Elliott, the subtropical influence is strongly asserting itself. The dominating mulga and 'spinifex' of the drier south are supplanted by open gum forests, groves of Bauhinias and, just a little north, dense forests of Lancewood. The very high humidity in summer, too, would have its effect. Both the rainfall and the humidity are brought about by the monsoonal rains of the summer months, the falls normally being between October and April. There is no rain in the "Dry" or winter months, that period being a succession of cloudless warm days with the south-east trade-winds usually stirring. From September, conditions become unsettled as the north-west monsoon becomes increasingly stronger. The heat and humidity are intense and electric storms violent. The "Wet" is then likely to "break" at any time up to December. Similarly, the cessation of the rains is un-

certain, occurring at any time between March and May. The period of the writer's stay was at the conclusion of a long "Dry," the "Wet" (incidentally a "dry Wet" in the local jargon) not setting in until the first week of December, just prior to his departure.

Elliott is situated on a low sandy ridge, the Ashburton Range, supporting a growth of *Bauhinia*, fine trees with refreshing green foliage, varying in height from 20 to 40 feet. In general appearance they are like the White Acacia. They are interspersed with "soft-woods" (*Atalaya hemiglauca*), a fairly big deciduous tree, leafless in the "Dry," and "Bullweddies" (*Macropteranthes Keckwickii*), which look like giant neglected briars or hawthorns. There are low scattered "witchetty" shrubs (*Acacia* sp.), and a good growth of annual grasses. The range runs roughly north and south. To the east is a great plain covered with low gums. This area was flooded by a shallow sheet of water many miles in extent, said to be the result of a cloud-burst two years before. It was receding slowly during my short stay. Two years later it had entirely gone. Around to the north-east this plain was treeless, extending at least 20 miles north as a vast area covered with the famed perennial Mitchell Grass.

Going west one passes through undulating country for several miles until the body of water known as Newcastle Waters, discovered by John McDouall Stuart, is reached. This is a broad sheet about 20 miles long, running down from above the township of the same name to Lake Woods (Bluebush Swamp). Large Red Gums and Boxes grow

in close order along the low banks. In parts there is thick lignum, while in areas subject to inundation the bizarre "Guttapercha" (*Excoecaria*) is dense. In some areas, usually on poorer soil, there are open forests of gums, quite tall in places. "Brush," probably an *Acacia*, grows densely in several localities, while 'spinifex' (*Triodia*) was only noted growing sparsely in a few stony places.

#### LIST OF SPECIES.

Emu (*Dromaius novae-hollandiae*).—Occasionally seen.

Quail.—Small quail were flushed at odd times from long grass. They showed whitish on the flanks when flying.

Diamond Dove (*Geopelia cuneata*).—Very plentiful around Elliott and the southern reaches of the Waters, but never noted at the town. They are dry-country birds.

Peaceful Dove (*G. placida*).—Was only seen once at Elliott, but several were usually about Newcastle Waters township.

Common Bronzewing (*Phaps chalcoptera*).—Rare. Only noted a few times.

Crested Pigeon (*Ocyphaps lophotes*).—In large numbers, breeding freely. An interesting find was a nest with two young, one a normal bird, the other an albino.

Black-tailed Native Hen (*Tribonyx ventralis*).—A few on the margin of the eastern swamp, 18/10/41.

Great Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*).—One only observed on Newcastle Waters, 2/11/41.

Little Grebe (*P. ruficollis*).—Of the few small Grebes noted, those identified were all of this species.

Little Black Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax ater*).—A flock of about 30 flew down Long Reach towards Lake Woods on 25/11/41.

Darter (*Anhinga novae-hollandiae*).—Individuals observed along Newcastle Waters from time to time.

Pelican (*Pelecanus conspicillatus*).—Always a few on Newcastle Waters, but on two occasions a flock estimated at 500 circled over Elliott, rising to a great height with but little flapping of the wings.

Tern.—A pair of large Terns were seen on three occasions. They were not Caspians (*Hydroprogne caspia*).

Red-kneed Dotterel (*Erythronyx cinctus*)—Little flocks seen on the edge of the eastern swamp in October and November.

Masked Plover (*Lobibyx miles*).—In large numbers on the eastern swamp.

Black-fronted Dotterel (*Charadrius melanops*).—Common along the margins of water.

Sharp-tailed Stint (*Erolia acuminata*).—Several small parties at the swamp in early November.

Australian Painted Snipe (*Rostratula australis*).—A few resting quietly, on the same dates as the above species.

Australian Pratincole (*Siltia isabella*).—Only seen on rare occasions.

Australian Bustard (*Eupodotis australis*).—These fine birds were always in the locality, usually in large numbers. They rest on the edge of the scrub during the day, moving out onto the grassy plains towards evening, when they feed in flocks numbering up to 50 birds.

Brolga (*Megalornis rubicundus*).—Common.

Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*).—Several were observed feeding out in the shallow waters of the eastern swamp. They are noticeably smaller than the other two species, and also much more shy.

White Ibis (*Threskiornis molucca*).—Not often noted.

Straw-necked Ibis (*T. spinicollis*).—In larger numbers than the White Ibis, and more given to feeding away from water.

Royal Spoonbill (*Platalea regia*).—Several were seen on one occasion only.

White Egret (*Egretta alba*).—Plentiful. In addition to this large species, there were smaller birds.

White-faced Heron (*Notophox novae-hollandiae*).—Rare here, as in all northern areas.

White-necked (Pacific) Heron (*N. pacifica*).—Occasionally noted.

Nankeen Night Heron (*Nycticorax caldonicus*).—At Long Reach, a lower part of Newcastle Waters which the writer often visited, Night Herons were numerous, roosting in the denser riverside gums. Sometimes odd birds were flushed away from bushy trees in scrub some distance from water.

Pied Goose (*Anseranas semipalmata*).—Observed in flocks of up to 50 birds along Newcastle Waters. At Lake Woods they roamed out for some distance from the water's edge feeding on vegetation. On October 26, 1941, an adult was seen at Long Reach with three young about three-quarters grown, which appeared to be almost black. I have not seen or heard of these Geese appearing any further south. They, along with most other species of water-frequenting

birds, would probably be much more numerous in the "Wet."

Plumed Tree-Duck (*Dendrocygna eytoni*).—In the last week of my stay, when temporary waterholes were filling up, these handsome Tree-ducks used to appear at dawn and in the evening. They favored the shallow pools formed in depressions among Mitchell Grass.

Black Duck (*Anas superciliosa*).—In small numbers.

Grey Teal (*Querquedula gibberifrons*).—Always to be seen in good numbers.

Blue-winged Shoveler (*Spatula rhynchotis*).—Noted occasionally on Long Reach only.

Hardhead, or White-eyed Duck (*Nyroca australis*).—Very rare.

Wedge-tailed Eagle (*Uroaetus audax*).—Only seen three times. They apparently favour mountainous country.

Little Eagle (*Hieraetus morphnoides*)?—A bird, thought to be this species, wheeled over Elliott once.

Whistling Eagle (*Haliastur sphenurus*).—Occasionally a pair would be seen with the Kites, but it was a rare species even along the broad permanent Newcastle Waters. Possibly the Whistling Eagle would be more plentiful here in the rainy season, as it was at Banka Banka.

Black (Fork-tailed) Kite (*Milvus migrans*).—Always present at camps and homesteads and also around Newcastle Waters township.

Little Falcon (*Falco longipennis*).—Noted twice.

Nankeen Kestrel (*F. cenchroides*).—Very rare.

Owl (*Ninox* sp.).—Owls were flushed several times from tree hollows along Newcastle Waters, in one instance there being two fledglings. They were probably Boobook Owls (*N. boobook*).

Varied Lorikeet (*Psitteuteles versicolor*)?—Early every morning for a week in mid-October a couple of flocks of Lorikeets were to be seen flying swiftly south. As they were of the same size and general colour, and had the same call as the Varied Lorikeet, which occurs in large numbers in the gum forests at Birdum, 140 miles north, it is assumed that these Elliott birds were referable to the same species.

Red-tailed Black Cockatoo (*Calyptrorhynchus banksi*).—Quite common in small mobs in the gums along Newcastle Waters.

Little Corella (*Kakatoe sanguinea*).—In large numbers. They had young in several hollows of the gums bordering Long Reach,

during October and November. The parents were never seen near the nesting sites. Nests were also found in Ghost Gums (*Eucalyptus papuana?*), several miles from water.

Galah (*K. roseicapilla*).—Plentiful. Young Galahs were flying in the flocks in November.

Cockatiel (*Leptolophus hollandicus*).—Little parties sometimes flew over Elliott.

Red-winged Parrot (*Aprosmictus erythrop-terus*).—A female noted at Elliott once.

Budgerygah (*Melopsittacus undulatus*).—In small numbers. Breeding in November.

Tawny Frogmouth (*Podargus strigoides*).—Occasionally noted, sometimes with fledged young.

Owlet Nightjar (*Aegotheles cristata*).—Flushed twice from hollow spouts. The birds were rufous in colour.

Sacred Kingfisher (*Halcyon sanctus*).—Noted a few times at Long Reach. They had young flying in October.

Rainbow-bird or Bee-eater (*Merops ornatus*).—Rainbow-birds were numerous throughout my stay.

Pallid Cuckoo (*Cuculus pallidus*).—Occasionally seen or heard.

Cuckoo (*Cacomantis* sp.?).—A Cuckoo seen once only was probably a *Cacomantis*. A similar bird has been noted at Banka Banka.

Horsfield Bronze-Cuckoo (*Chalcites basalis*).—Rarely noted.

Fairy Martin (*Hylochelidon ariel*).—Plentiful, especially at Long Reach Waterhole, on Newcastle Waters. Here there were several nesting colonies under sloping tree-trunks.

Willie Wagtail (*Rhipidura leucophrys*).—Scattered pairs only.

Restless Flycatcher (*Seisura inquieta*).—One bird noted in 1941, and a pair on 21/4/43.

Jacky Winter (*Microeca fascians*).—In small numbers.

Rufous Whistler (*Pachycephala rufiventris*).—A plentiful bird with a beautiful song.

Magpie-Lark (*Grallina cyanoleuca*).—Numerous.

Ground Cuckoo-Shrike (*Pteropodocys maxima*).—Small parties were sometimes seen in the area, the species apparently being a nomadic one. However, during November a party of eight birds began to frequent the *Bauhinia* trees around Elliott. They were very noisy and acted in an excited manner, flying up into the air with exaggerated mannerisms or pursuing one another. Sometimes they assembled on the road, there persisting

in their loud arresting calls, and squabbling. Eventually a nest was located in a *Bauhinia* in a horizontal fork at a height of 30 feet. In the choice of site and general appearance the nest much resembled that of the Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike (*Coracina novae-hollandiae*), that is a broad, flat, saucer-shaped structure of fine twigs and grasses, lavishly bound with cobwebs. However, the Ground Cuckoo-Shrike's nest was broader than that of its Black-faced relative, this example being approximately eight inches in diameter. It was only with difficulty that the contents of the nest could be examined. There were three green eggs on 16/11/41. There were still three eggs on 28/11/41, but on 7/12/41, shortly before my departure, three naked chicks had hatched. During the brooding period one of the parents was always on the nest, rarely leaving until an intruder was scaling the tree. Then the bird remained in close attendance, returning as soon as the disturbing person was clear of the tree. In the meantime the second parent was usually nearby. Only two birds appeared to be interested in the nest, although the remaining members of the party remained in the vicinity.

Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike (*Coracina novae-hollandiae*).—Very common. Several nests were located, the average number of eggs being three. Some of the nests could be seen through.

White-winged Triller (*Lalage tricolor*).—These songsters were always present in large numbers. Towards the end of October they fell silent, after having sung strongly through September. Nests were found in October and November, also two on January 1, 1943.

Red-breasted Babbler (*Pomatostomus ruficeps*).—Common, in the usual noisy parties.

Weebill (*Smicromis* sp.).—Weebills were common in suitable habitats. They were distinctly yellowish in plumage.

Brown Songlark (*Cinchorhamphus cruralis*).—During November single birds were sometimes noted.

Rufous Songlark (*C. mathewsi*).—These Songlarks, too, appeared in November, but in much greater numbers than the foregoing species.

Fantail Warbler (*Cisticola exilis*).—Noted once only in thick grass near the eastern swamp. Their "buzzing" call attracted notice.

Red-backed Wren (*Malurus melanocephalus*).—These vivid little creatures were to be observed in small numbers in areas of thick

Mitchell Grass which were interspersed with scattered shrubs and low trees, such as occurred on the margins of the grass plains. The resplendent males were rather shy.

White-breasted Wood-Swallow (*Artamus leucorhynchus*).—These birds appeared from time to time in small parties, being partial to the margin of the eastern swamp. It was here that a pair scantily lined an old Magpie-Lark's nest with grass and there hatched four young.

Masked Wood-Swallow (*A. personatus*).—Flocks often hawked over Elliott.

Black-faced Wood-Swallow (*A. melanops*).—The resident species of Wood-Swallow, always present in large numbers. Several nests, of the typical flimsy Wood-Swallow type, were found. Both when attacking an intruder and when carrying nesting material, the birds would utter the "zit, zit" call which is employed by the Dusky Wood-Swallow (*A. cyanopterus*) in similar circumstances.

White-winged Sittella (*Neositta leucopetera*).—This northern Sittella was only observed a few times, either in pairs or threes. They seem to prefer feeding in the upper branches of the trees, not descending to the trunks or bigger branches. Their call is feeble and squeaky. The beak, legs and a ring (of flesh?) around the eyes are yellow, and the wing stripe prominently white, as is the rump. Whereas the female has a "hood" of black extending down to the lores and below the eyes, the male has only a black crown, the lores, nape and area above and below the eyes being white.

Black-tailed Tree-creeper (*Climacteris melanura*).—On two occasions Tree-creepers were flushed from the sides of tracks by moving vehicles. As the Black-tailed Tree-creeper is to be found at Banka Banka and at Birdum, localities respectively south and north of Elliott, it is assumed that the Elliott birds were of this species.

Mistletoe-bird (*Dicaeum hirundinaceum*).—Small numbers were usually present.

Red-browed Pardalote (*Pardalotus rubricatus*).—Common.

Golden-backed Honeyeater (*Meliphreptus laetior*).—Not very numerous. A pair were seen with young flying on 7/10/41. The juveniles' brownish heads showed a faint whitish band at the nape.

Rufous-throated Honeyeater (*Conopophila rufogularis*).—This small bird was the commonest Honeyeater around Elliott, it being always present in small parties through the

open *Bauhinia* forest. Its calls are not very loud, usually comprising weak, sparrow-like chirps, very similar to those when a flock of House-Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) is flushed from feeding. They are brown above and lighter underneath. The chin and upper throat are rufous in some specimens, but not all. Bright, waxy-yellow primaries are the most conspicuous features of the plumage.

Singing honeyeater (*Meliphaga virescens*).—Sparsely distributed.

White-plumed Honeyeater (*M. penicillata*).—A few were always to be noted in the gums along the permanent Newcastle Waters stream. In this locality, the furthest north in which I found these birds, they were very yellow.

White-gaped Honeyeater (*Stomiopera unicolor*).—A drab, almost featureless, bird, the sole variation in its sombre garb being a fleshy, creamy gape. It is also quite sluggish. That was my impression when several White-gaped Honeyeaters were observed feeding in flowering gums along Long Reach, Newcastle Waters.

Yellow-throated Miner (*Myzantha flavigula*).—Plentiful around the camp at Elliott. The "yellow throat" seemed to be quite lacking, the surest means of identifying this species being the white rump.

Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater (*Acanthagenys rufogularis*).—Rarely noted. Those seen seemed darker than the southern birds, the flanks being heavily and darkly striated.

Little Friar-bird (*Philemon citreogularis*)?—Friar-birds were first noted in stunted flowering gums in the eastern swamp on 22/11/41. By the time of my departure in early December they had spread up to the camp and were in fair numbers, though scattered. The Friar-birds were very wary and proved difficult subjects for observation. Most of them appeared uniform brownish, a blackish face being discernible in some. They were not at all noisy, having a subdued cackling call.

Australian Pipit (*Anthus australis*).—Not numerous.

Horsfield Bushlark (*Mirafrja javanica*).—Bushlarks were to be seen in large numbers during October, especially in long grass in the vicinity of the eastern swamp. Later in the year their numbers lessened, but they were still numerous.

Pictorella Finch (*Donacola pectoralis*).—Several little groups of Pictorella Finches were first noted on 13/11/41. With several

birds in the plain juvenile plumage among their number, they were observed in scattered bushes growing in thick grass along the edge of the Mitchell Grass plain. For the next fortnight small flocks of up to a dozen birds were seen, there being a definite southern movement. Flocks flew over Elliott, going south, each morning about sunrise. When the writer passed through Banka Banka on 10/12/41, the finches were there in great numbers.

Apostle-bird (*Struthidea cinerea*).—Only one flock of these gregarious birds frequented the Elliott area. Twenty miles north, at the Causeway near Newcastle Waters township, and from there on to Dunmarra, Apostle-birds were common. They apparently favour the dense growth of Lancewood forest which dominates that sector.

Pied Butcher-bird (*Cracticus nigrogularis*).—A common species, attracting attention with its fine song. Young in nestling plumage show a brownish colour in place of their parents' immaculate black plumage.

Black-backed Magpie (*Gymnorhina tibicen*).—Not very plentiful; in scattered pairs only. Nested in November.

Crow (*Corvus* sp.).—Common.