

THE WEEBILL IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

By H. T. CONDON, South Australian Museum.

The Weebill (*Smicrornis*) is widely distributed in South Australia, particularly in the drier areas—the mallee districts, Flinders Ranges, Eyre Peninsula, and the interior. It is usually seen in small parties in the leafy outer branches of eucalypts, where it is busily engaged in seeking food. More usually, however, its presence is indicated by the loud, sharp call "Willie-wieldt," "O'Grady Winnie," or "Wee-Bill"; when feeding the bird utters a low, simple song. Seldom seen on the ground, Weebills are extremely tame and with care an observer may approach them very closely.

Two species of Weebill are generally quoted as occurring in Australia—*Smicrornis flavescens*, the Yellow Weebill, in the Tropics, and *S. brevirostris*, the Brown Weebill, in the south. Because birds from the centre of Australia are intermediate in colouration between these two, some confusion has arisen as to the forms which occur in South Australia. In the past it has been customary to regard these interior birds as *flavescens* and those from the southern mallee as *brevirostris*. As the northern and southern forms intergrade, it would seem that only one species should be recognised, namely *Smicrornis brevirostris*. This proposal is not new, having been suggested by G. M. Mathews in 1912 (*Novitates Zoologicae*, XVIII), and by Mayr and Serventy in 1944 (*Emu*, XLIV, p. 36). I have seen Weebills along the Finke River, at Alice Springs, and at many points along the overland route to Darwin, and also east of that town, and consider that their actions, call and habits are the same as those of the birds of the southern mallee. Measurements published by North and others show that there is practically no difference in size between birds from northern and southern Australia.

The question now arises as to what these intermediate central birds should be called. Of the 39 skins of *Smicrornis* in the Museum, five are from localities in the Interior—Nonning (Eyre Peninsula, South Australia), Moorilyanna (near the Alberga River, S.A.), "C.A." (collector C. Winnecke), Hermanns-

burg and Cockatoo Creek (Northern Territory). S. A. White (*Trans. Roy. Soc. S. Aus.*, xxxix, 1915, p. 749) has furnished a good description of this form. He says: "Differs from *S. brevirostris* in being much lighter on the back, and the yellow of the breast and abdomen being much brighter, the ear coverts being of a much darker buff and larger. Differs from *S. flavescens* in having a much deeper yellow breast, much larger ear coverts of a darker buff and the colouration of the back much darker. Most resembles *S. b. melvillensis*, but differs in having a rich yellow breast and abdomen, while the Melville Island bird is almost white beneath."

To this bird White gave the name *Smicrornis brevirostris mathewsi*, with the distribution as ranging from Oodnadatta to the MacDonnell Ranges and west to the Musgrave Ranges. From material examined by the writer, the range may be extended to Cockatoo Creek in the Northern Territory and southwards to Nonning, on northern Eyre Peninsula. White's type specimen was collected at Wantapella Swamp, which is near the Alberga River in the far north-west of South Australia, and near the border of the Northern Territory.

The specimen collected by the writer near Mt. Daer Station, S.A., and referred to as *flavescens* in the pages of this journal (XIV, 1938, p. 150; XVI, 1942, p. 45), also belongs to this group; although yellower above and below than birds from further south (including the Flinders Ranges), it is not *Smicrornis flavescens sensu stricto*. Flinders Range birds resemble those from the southern mallee.

The first two sight records of *flavescens* also undoubtedly refer to this form (Hill, *Emu*, XII, p. 239; Parsons, *S.A. Orn.*, VII, p. 103). J. N. McGilp is not correct in suggesting that a specimen of *flavescens* was taken by F. E. Parsons on the Birdsville track. (*S.A. Orn.*, XVI, p. 9, 1943.) Reference to Mr. Parsons' skin collection shows that he collected a specimen of *flavescens sensu stricto* at Diamantina Gates Station, Queensland.