

# BIRDS SEEN IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

## PART ONE

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The list appended below represents the sum total of recordings made over the period from January, 1944, to January, 1945, in the somewhat limited areas of the Territory which I was able to visit whilst stationed at Adelaide River and Darwin.

Observations made between Alice Springs and the rail terminus from Darwin at Birdum were, of necessity, restricted, since they had mostly to be made whilst the road-convoy was moving. A pause for half a day at Newcastle Waters gave improved opportunities for observation. Here, a flourishing vegetable garden, with plenty of water and shady Bauhinia trees, attracted a variety of birds, those predominant being Zebra and Banded Finches, Galahs, Masked Plover and Crows. Red-winged Parrots were also noticed coming to roost in the Bauhinias.

From this point north more abundant vegetation occurs, the road passing through open timber, comprising Lancewood, Box, Bauhinia and many types of Gum, in which occur such birds as the Black-faced Wood-swallow, White-winged Sittella, Rufous Whistler, Apostle Bird, Red-collared Lorikeet and Red-tailed Black Cockatoo.

At Birdum bird-life was diverse and plentiful, Long-tailed Finches and Banded Honeyeaters being two types which seemed to be peculiarly associated with this district.

Flowering native shrubs and gums were well patronised by several species of Honeyeater, and Great Bower Birds had the free run of an army encampment. Other species met with included the White-browed Tree-Creeper, Noisy Friar Bird, Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike, Red-backed Wren and Restless Flycatcher.

Adelaide River (by which is meant the settlement area) is some 70 miles south of Darwin, surrounded by fairly heavily-timbered hills of no great height, upon which gums predominate. Bauhinias and Pandanus Palms are scattered through the level areas and much of the low-lying ground is subject to annual flooding in the wet season from November to April.

These low areas are thickly covered with tall, rank grass, where the Pheasant Coucal may be found. They also sheltered a species of Quail which I was unable to identify (possibly the Red-chested Quail?).

Away from the hills the country merges into open, grassy Savannah, dotted with termite mounds. Birds found in the latter areas include the Forest Kingfisher, Red-backed Kingfisher, Silver-crowned Friar-Bird and White-breasted Cuckoo-Shrike.

For the purpose of clarity the locality in the immediate vicinity of Adelaide River settlement has been referred to in the notes which follow as Adelaide River Camp, to distinguish it from the river proper.

The river itself supports a considerable quantity of bird-life, being flanked on either side by tall, dense tropical tree-growth, with occasional thickets of Giant Bamboo. Shallow depressions on the flats adjacent to the river remain filled with water until evaporated in the dry season, and Brolgas and Jabirus may often be seen here.

Fairly dense timber-country prevails between Adelaide River and Darwin, and during the wet season the ground becomes covered to a height of four feet or so with a fast-growing "grass," which must either be burned off or left to fall before the violent winds which mark the close of the "wet." In this area small, isolated pockets of typical jungle occur, not unlike the rain-forests of North Queensland. Examples are Rum Jungle and Holmes Jungle in the tall, berry-bearing trees of which Torres-Strait Pigeons may be found.

Many streams and creeks intersect this area, Adelaide River being fed by several tributaries flanked by Pandanus, Gums and Paper-barks (*Melaleuca*).

The Manton River has been dammed by a weir to provide the water supply for Darwin, and a fine sheet of water results. At the dam-site the caretaker then in residence had done much to create a sanctuary for birds, and his tropical garden teemed with Honeyeaters, Wrens, Finches, Fly-

catchers, Bower Birds, Doves and many other species.

Darwin itself presents a strange mixture of civilised gardens, native trees and shrubs, Frangipanni and Poinciana, with its shores margined by dense Mangrove belts covering tidal mud-flats.

Lubmilla Creek, running out to sea a few miles beyond Darwin, is a typical example of the tidal creeks with which this area abounds. The receding tide exposes a broad estuary of gravelly-sand, riddled with crab-holes, and here numerous sea and wading birds gather. Lack of binoculars made the identification of many of these difficult, since they proved extremely wary of approach. Mangrove-Kingfishers, Black Butcher-Birds, Whimbrels and Mangrove Herons are types met with in the surrounding Mangrove plantations. Some distance back from the water the Mangroves give way to thick, flowering bushes and scrub where Red-headed Honeyeaters and Yellow Silvereyes were found. Beyond the scrub are low-lying grass flats frequented by Finches, Bushlarks, Snipe and Fantail-Warblers.

To the east of Adelaide River lies Marrakai Station, and further east the Mary River, approached across open, undulating country in which fine, powdery, grey dust rises in the dry season from the cars' wheels to hang in choking clouds.

The tracks become impassable when the rains come. Marrakai and the Mary River are broadly similar in so far as bird-life tends to become concentrated in or around the fringe of dense Paper-barks (*Melaleuca*), undergrowth and Bamboo flanking streams and lagoons, of which there are a great number. In these localities Pied Geese, Burdekin Duck, Spoonbills, Ibis, Herons, White-breasted Sea-Eagles, Lotus Birds, Yellow Orioles, Shining Flycatchers, and White-breasted Honeyeaters are typical species met with. The intervening ground between one lagoon and the next is likely to comprise dried-out Buffalo "Stipple," bare of vegetation, and large tracts of which become immersed during the wet season.

Emu (*Dromaius novae-hollandiae*).—One only observed, when it was disturbed by the roadside south of Adelaide River Camp.

Rose-crowned Pigeon (*Ptilinopus ewingi*).—

A pair in Darwin Botanical Gardens.

Torres-Strait Pigeon (*Myristicivora spilor-*

*rhoa*).—Plentiful in tall jungle scrub such as Berry Springs and Holmes Jungle, feeding on berries; also seen in open country bordering Mary River. First observed in September.

Peaceful Dove (*Geopelia placida*).—Commonly found on margins of streams and in neighbourhood of Manton River Dam.

Diamond Dove (*G. cuneata*).—Seen drinking at bath-soakage pool at Newcastle Waters in company with Peregrine Falcon and Zebra Finches.

Bar-shouldered Dove (*G. humeralis*).—Observed in company with Peaceful Doves at Manton River Dam.

Crested Pigeon (*Ocyphaps lophotes*).—Seen in stunted scrub by roadside at Katherine.

Eastern Swamphen (*Porphyrio melanotus*).—Occasionally seen on muddy banks of Mary River and adjoining lagoons.

Little Black Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax sulcirostris*).—One only seen at Burrell's Creek, near Adelaide River Camp.

Pied Cormorant (*P. varius*).—Fairly plentiful in the vicinity of most lagoons and streams.

Australian Darter (*Anhinga novae-hollandiae*).—Once seen in flight at Burrell's Creek.

Australian Pelican (*Pelecanus conspicillatus*).—Common in the Mary River district.

Crested Tern (*Sterna bergii*).—Very common in Darwin harbour and on adjacent shores.

Silver Gull (*Larus novae-hollandiae*).—As in the case of the Crested Tern.

Masked Plover (*Lobibyx miles*).—Seen in small flocks from Newcastle Waters to Mary River.

Oriental Dotterel (*Charadrius veredus*).—First noticed in September, when they were found scattered over the open, grassy plains near Marrakai, east of Adelaide River. They stood erect and motionless when the car approached, and were reluctant to fly. These birds were in winter plumage, with no trace of chestnut and black markings.

White-headed Stilt (*Himantopus leucocephalus*).—Fairly common on margins of lagoons in the Mary River district.

Eastern Curlew (*Numenius cyanopus*).—Once observed on the shore at Fanny Bay, Darwin.

Whimbrel (*N. phaeopus*).—Seen in flight above mangroves at Ludmilla Creek near

- Darwin. Call-note often heard in the same locality.
- Snipe (*Capella* sp.).—Several pairs were seen on the dry swamp-flats bordering Ludmilla Creek.
- Lotus Bird (*Irediparra gallinacea*).—Seen in pairs but infrequently. One pair was watched running over the water-lilies in a swimming-hole close to Adelaide River Camp regularly used by troops. On other occasions at Mary River the birds would crouch hidden in the lily leaves or vanish by submerging even when studied at a distance through binoculars. One pair brought out four young in October on a lagoon near Adelaide River Camp, but the nest was not found.
- Australian Pratincole (*Stiltia isabella*).—First noticed in October, when a party of half-a-dozen was seen on grassy plain not far from Adelaide River Camp.
- Southern Stone-Curlew (*Burhinus magnirostris*).—Heard at Adelaide River Camp in early April after cessation of rains. A pair seen by the roadside near Marrakai in June.
- Australian Bustard (*Eupodotis australis*).—All too infrequently seen, as a result of shooting by troops.
- Brolga (*Grus rubicundus*).—Parties of up to a dozen seen in Mary River district, often in company with Jabiru. Also fairly common on margins of Adelaide River.
- Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*).—Occasionally seen at Mary River on margins of lagoons.
- Australian White Ibis (*Threskiornis molucca*)—As in the case of the Glossy Ibis.
- Straw-necked Ibis (*T. spinicollis*).—Very common in large flocks by inland lagoons.
- Royal Spoonbill (*Platalea regia*).—Seen in pairs at Marrakai and Mary River.
- Yellow-billed Spoonbill (*P. flavipes*).—As in the case of the Royal Spoonbill. Both species tended to become wary and to be seen less with the extension of shooting at the close of the wet season.
- Jabiru (*Xenorhynchus asiaticus*).—Usually singly or in pairs. Observed from Katherine to Mary River.
- Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*).—One small Egret observed at Manton River Dam, fishing from half-submerged dead tree.
- White Egret (*E. alba*).—One observed at Lily Ponds, near Katherine.
- White-faced Heron (*Notophoxyx novae-hollandiae*).—Common in neighbourhood of rivers and lagoons.
- White-necked Heron (*N. pacifica*).—Seen in small groups on the shores of lagoons near Mary River.
- Pied Heron (*N. aruensis*).—Usually found singly or in pairs perched at low level over the water at Mary River.
- Nankeen Night Heron (*Nycticorax caledonicus*).—A heronry of more than a hundred birds was found in trees bordering Marrakai Creek. The birds were very noisy when disturbed during the day, squawking like domestic fowls and making clumsy landings in the outer foliage of the tree.
- Mangrove Heron (*Butorides striata*).—A single bird seen at Marrakai Creek. Quite plentiful in the mangroves bordering Ludmilla Creek, near Darwin.
- Black Bittern (*Dupetor flavicollis*).—One only seen at Burrell's Creek when it flew past to perch on an overhanging bough at the water's edge.
- Pied Goose (*Anseranas semipalmata*).—Shared with the Burdekin Duck the distinction of being the most plentiful of all birds on rivers and lagoons in the Mary River and surrounding districts. It was curious to see these big geese perching in the gums alongside a watercourse, where they often appeared to roost. Those seen at the Mary River had the white plumage on the breast stained a rusty brown all over, possibly due to heavy discolouration of the water.
- Green Pigmy-Goose (*Nettapus pulchellus*).—Small flocks seen infrequently. They were always shy and left the water with such speed that observation was difficult. A party of shooters brought in a specimen taken on a lagoon close to Adelaide River.
- White-headed Shelduck (*Tadorna radjah*).—This duck occurred in vast mobs, and a heavy toll was taken by shooters. Before the shooting began the Burdekin was quite tame in the Marrakai area, and two pairs fed confidently at the water's edge not twenty yards from our camp.
- Grey Teal (*Querquedula gibberifrons*).—Seen in small mobs at Marrakai and the Mary River.
- Swamp-Harrier (*Circus approximans*).—Occasionally seen over the swamp flats near Adelaide River Camp.

Wedge-tailed Eagle (*Uroaetus audax*).—Three or four were noticed perching in small, stunted scrub by the roadside south of Tennant's Creek. One tree not ten feet high was supporting three of the birds.

Little Eagle (*Hieraetus morphnoides*).—Occasionally seen in the Mary River district.

White-breasted Sea-Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*).—Several pairs could always be seen at Mary River, where an immense nest, constructed of large sticks, was found in a low tree. One of these eagles was seen to descend low over the surface of a lagoon and seize a fish that appeared to be floundering on the surface during the passage of a willy-willy. This eagle was also often seen over the coastline near Darwin.

Red-backed Sea-Eagle (*Haliastur indus*).—Seen singly on the coast at Fanny Bay near Darwin.

Whistling Eagle (*H. sphenurus*).—A pair was found nesting by the water's edge at Mary River, and on a later occasion three young were on the wing.

Fork-tailed Kite (*Milvus migrans*).—By July these birds were present at Adelaide River Camp in literal thousands, frequenting army camps as impudently as those in Egypt. By December they had ceased to be seen.

Black-breasted Buzzard (*Hamirostra melanostrerna*).—One only seen, flying low overhead at Burrell's Creek, when the striking white wing-patch was an easy clue to recognition.

Crested Hawk (*Baza subcristata*).—Seen once or twice at Adelaide River Camp, identification being founded chiefly on the unusual cry and tumbling flight action.

Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*).—A single bird seen at Newcastle Waters, as above mentioned, drinking in the midst of a flock of Zebra Finches and some Diamond Doves.

Brown Hawk (*F. berigora*).—Occasionally seen singly in the vicinity of Adelaide River Camp.

Nankeen Kestrel (*F. cenchroides*).—As in the case of the Brown Hawk.

Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*).—A fleeting glimpse only was allowed, as the bird rose at close range from the track in the headlights

of the car near Marrakai, but the white under-surface was plainly visible.

Red-collared Lorikeet (*Trichoglossus rubritorquis*).—From Birdum northwards these Lorikeets were very plentiful. On three occasions, in April, August and November, large flocks of these birds were observed on the wing after dark at Adelaide River Camp, under conditions which left no doubt as to their identity. The organised nature of their flight did not seem to correspond with their having been temporarily disturbed whilst roosting.

Varied Lorikeet (*Psittuteles versicolor*).—In January and February these were continually passing overhead at Adelaide River Camp, but ceased to be seen by March. Towards the end of August, one pair was seen; and by January they were again present in force, being particularly plentiful in the flowering gums near Katherine and Mataranka.

Red-tailed Black Cockatoo (*Calyptrorhynchus banksii*).—First observed in January flying in small flocks among gums near Birdum. Occasional birds were seen about Adelaide River Camp, increasing in number until by the end of March and in April they became for the time the most plentiful of all species. Large numbers passed overhead each morning at low level, travelling in flocks of a dozen or so, returning in the opposite direction at evening time. They were observed on the burnt-out plains near Marrakai, feeding on seeds or the shoots of the new grass.

White Cockatoo (*Kakatoe galerita*).—In flocks at evening time, coming to roost in tall gums flanking the Manton River. Also observed singly in tall trees in Holmes Jungle.

Little Corella (*K. sanguinea*).—Usually seen feeding on ground left blackened by fires lit to demolish rank grasses growing in the wet season. Flocks observed on the ground near Mary River, apparently rooting up grass shoots.

Galah (*K. roseicapilla*).—Plentiful about Katherine, where they were attracted by remnants of peanut crops. Vast flocks seen gathering at bore at Newcastle Waters.

Cockatiel (*Leptolophus hollandicus*).—Small flocks were seen dipping over a lagoon near Katherine and settling on dead logs

- at the margin to drink in the evening. One or two pairs also noticed at Burrell's Creek.
- Red-winged Parrot (*Aprosmictus erythrop-terus*).—Singly or in groups of four or five in all districts visited north of Newcastle Waters. Adult males very conspicuous by dark blue back and rump when about to settle. The usual note, uttered on the wing, is rather like that of the Musk Lorikeet. Another call takes the form of two sharp and high-pitched notes. Even at a distance the bird is conspicuous in flight, due to the peculiar wing-action, the wings being swept very low and to the rear in the down-beat. This suggests something of the buoyant flight of the Galah. It was found feeding in berry-bearing shrubs within a hundred yards of the coast at Ludmilla Creek.
- Northern Rosella (*Platycercus venustus*).—Observed singly or in pairs at Adelaide River Camp, passing in swift zig-zag flight through open gum country.
- Mulga Parrot (*Psephotus varius*).—Seen in the gums scattered through Alice Springs staging camp.
- Budgerygah (*Melopsittacus undulatus*).—Flocks observed in company with Cockatiel at lagoon near Katherine. Also seen in numbers close to Banka Banka in January taking possession of hollow spouts in scrub.
- Tawny Frogmouth (*Podargus strigoides*).—Seen in characteristic posture in low gums at Adelaide River Camp. One entered my sleeping quarters at midday and settled momentarily on a rafter.
- Eastern Broad-billed Roller (*Eurystomus orientalis*).—First observed near Elizabeth River in April and subsequently seen singly, perched motionless on topmost exposed bare twig of tall tree, or performing characteristic flight evolutions.
- Azure Kingfisher (*Alcyon azurea*).—Common on most streams and lagoons. At Adelaide River one plunged under water to seize a small minnow which I was spinning for barramundi.
- Blue-winged Kookaburra (*Dacelo leachii*).—Singly or in pairs in open gum country about Adelaide River Camp. Raucous, unmusical notes generally uttered at dusk.
- Forest Kingfisher (*Halcyon macleayii*).—The commonest Kingfisher met with. Usually frequenting open gum country, where evidence of nesting activities in the shape of tunnels excavated in termites' nests was prominent. These were termites' nests formed against tree-trunk thirty or forty feet from ground level. The female bird can be distinguished by the absence of the white collar.
- Red-backed Kingfisher (*H. pyrrhopygius*).—Singly at Adelaide River Camp, perched in low gum uttering monotonous and plaintive note.
- Sacred Kingfisher (*H. sanctus*).—Observed singly on Adelaide and Mary Rivers.
- Mangrove Kingfisher (*H. chloris*).—Common in mangroves adjacent to Darwin, displacing the Forest as the commonest species of Kingfisher.
- Rainbow-Bird (*Merops ornatus*).—Common in all districts visited. Nesting burrow found in December in low sandhill at Darwin with birds in occupation. This burrow proved to be no more than six inches above the level reached by a "king tide." These birds were mercilessly destroyed by the Army in the interests of bees brought up from the South to supplement the efforts of the Native Bee in pollinating crops on Army farms.
- Fork-tailed Swift (*Micropus pacificus*).—In September a large concourse of these birds was seen in the sky at Adelaide River Camp.
- Pallid Cuckoo (*Cuculus pallidus*).—First heard at Adelaide River Camp on July 29. Observed at Mary River in company with Little Bronze Cuckoo.
- Little Bronze-Cuckoo (*Lamprococcyx minutillus*).—Singly at Mary River in September and subsequently at Ludmilla Creek in December.
- Koel (*Eudynamys orientalis*).—A pair seen at Adelaide River Camp early in October, when they flew low across the road. Subsequently seen (mostly male birds) and heard calling noisily in jungle scrub at Berry Springs and Holmes Jungle. Several male birds were noticed in close proximity to the nest of an Olive-backed Oriole, which is a known foster-parent. The Koel was often found associating with the Spangled Drongo.
- Channel-billed Cuckoo (*Scythrops novae-hollandiae*).—Usually observed singly, advertising their presence in heavy timber by

- loud and harsh cries. Their arrival at Darwin in December, 1944, preceded the break of the season, the summer rains commencing a fortnight or so afterwards.
- Pheasant-Coucal (*Centropus phasianinus*).—Frequently heard calling and occasionally flushed from tall-grass swamp flats at Adelaide River Camp. The peculiar "bubbling" notes resemble water being poured from a flagon and were mostly heard in the early morning. The birds became almost silent during the dry season.
- Australian Tree-Martin (*Hylochelidon nigricans*).—Plentiful at Adelaide River Camp.
- Fairy Martin (*H. ariel*).—As in the case of the Tree Martins.
- Grey Fantail ? (*Rhipidura flabellifera*).—It is probable that this was sometimes confused with the Northern Fantail, to which it approximates rather closely in appearance.
- Rufous Fantail (*R. rufifrons*).—Seen infrequently as single birds, usually in thick scrub or brush adjoining rivers.
- Northern Fantail (*R. setosa*).—Fairly common both in the open timber and dense growths near water. Very similar in behaviour to the Grey Fantail and rather alike in appearance, though lacking the white in the wings.
- Willie Wagtail (*R. leucophrys*).—Found in all parts visited.
- Leaden Flycatcher (*Myiagra rubecula*).—In pairs at Manton River Dam and Adelaide River Camp, the male bird exhibiting tail-tremble. A pair at Adelaide River Camp were seen persecuting a cat in much the same manner as the Wagtail does.
- Restless Flycatcher (*Seisura inquieta*).—Singly at Birdum, Katherine, and Adelaide River.
- Shining Flycatcher (*Piezorhynchus alecto*).—Always seen in pairs and never away from water. Observed at Manton River, Mary River, Adelaide River and Berry Springs. The uniform lustrous black plumage of the male contrasts strongly with the female, in which the iridescent black is repeated on the head and nape only, the rest of the upper surface and the tail being rich chestnut and the under-surface white. A male bird at Mary River gave its call notes fearlessly when perched two yards from me. These resemble the croaking of small tree-frogs, interspersed with a series of "dog-whistles." Two male birds were also observed at this spot displaying in the presence of the female.
- Jacky Winter (*Microeca fascians*).—Seen in tent-lines at Katherine. Stated to have been found nesting at Mataranka.
- Brown-tailed Flycatcher (*M. brunneicauda*).—A single bird once only in low foliage of gum at Manton River Dam.
- Lemon-breasted Flycatcher (*M. flavigaster*).—A few pairs noticed at Ludmilla Creek.
- Hooded Robin (*Melanodryas cucullata*).—Male only seen near Pine Creek in scrub by roadside.
- Buff-sided Robin ? (*Poecilodryas cerviniventris*).—Considerable doubt was experienced as to the identity of a bird of which the following is a description made at the time: upper dark chocolate verging on black; prominent white stripe over eye, black patch on side of head extending from the gape past the ear-coverts; plumage immediately below this black patch, white; under surface dirty white; wings blackish-brown with white patch and white marking at shoulder; tail tipped white; length 6 inches. It was usually observed singly (once a pair at Adelaide River), and always on the bank of a stream in fairly thick scrub. Call-notes rather resembled the last three in the scale of the Pallid Cuckoo, generally uttered at dusk. Other notes suggestive of spring call of Grey Thrush given very softly. The bird responded readily to imitation of its call, being extremely inquisitive, a pair approaching to within four feet on one occasion, when they showed considerable agitation, cocking and spreading their tails when the call-notes were imitated.
- Rufous Whistler (*Pachycephala rufiventris*).—Seen in open timber country by roadside south of Birdum. Occasionally familiar Whistler call-notes were heard at Adelaide River Camp and elsewhere, and provisionally attributed to this species.
- Shrike-Thrush (*Colluricincla* sp.).—Noticed at Katherine in scrub flanking the river; very like *C. harmonica*.
- Brown Shrike-Thrush (*C. brunnea*).—One only seen at Birdum.

(To be continued)