

A TRIP TO KOPPERAMANNA, IN THE FAR NORTH OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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A hurried trip was made by motor-car by the writer and a companion, leaving Wilmington on September 8, 1950. The first stop of note was made at Commodore Swamp, which is really a watercourse thickly grown with Acacias. A search was made for Wedgebills, and several were seen and heard. Four nests were discovered, from five to eight feet above the ground. Three were in mistletoe in Acacias, and one was in a Saltbush growing up in an Acacia. All the nests appeared to have been in use this season. A few miles further on, a Peregrine Falcon was disturbed on the side of the road, and carried with it what appeared to be the remains of a Galah.

A few miles south of Beltana three pairs of Wedgebills were seen along small creeks, and a number of old nests were found. One nest containing two heavily incubated eggs was also discovered. This nest was made of creeper stems, lined with rootlets and there were several fresh Bluebush fronds in the bottom. It was about the size and shape of the nest of a Black-faced Wood-Swallow, and was situated in a fork of an Acacia four feet from the ground.

Six young Ravens were observed in a nest a few miles north of Farina, this being the first time I have seen more than five young birds in a nest.

The night was spent on the east side of the Frome, four miles from Marree; Little Crows (*Corvus bennetti*) were seen in the vicinity. To the best of my knowledge this was the only species of *Corvus* seen during the remainder of the trip to Kopperamanna, and it was exceedingly numerous, several hundred being observed. These birds bred early in the season and many were using the same nests to raise a second brood when we passed through.

Whistling Eagles also appeared to be nesting for the second time.

At Lake Harry a stop was made to inspect a small island a quarter of a mile from the shore, as it appeared that a number of waterfowl were nesting on or near it. On reaching the island it was found that some Gull-billed Terns were nesting among a few

scattered pieces of limestone. Five nests containing one egg each and two nests with two eggs were examined. In some cases the eggs had been laid on the bare ground in a slight depression, while in others a few pieces of water-weed surrounded the eggs. These Terns were observed "hawking" for food in scattered ones and twos for several miles further along the track in the vicinity of lakes and water. It was also noted that some birds had black heads, while others had white heads with only a black mark from the bill through the eye. Other birds flushed on the island were: Black Swans, Grey Teal, and Banded Stilts. On the return trip the level of the water had fallen somewhat but no further nesting had taken place, nor had any additional eggs been laid, so that it is probable that frequently only one egg comprises the clutch of the Gull-billed Tern.

Two miles further northwards along the shore of Lake Harry, another stop was made to wade out to a large mud flat three-quarters of a mile from the shore. Here we found a flock of several hundred Banded Stilts, but there was no indication of their breeding. While walking back to the car a Gibber-Bird was flushed from a nest containing one fresh egg, this being the only occasion on which the bird was found breeding.

A few small flocks and pairs and an occasional single bird was seen of the Australian Pratincole between Marree and Kopperamanna. The birds appeared to be mated in many cases, but there was no sign of breeding activities.

The next camping place was at Clayton Creek, which may be classed as a veritable oasis in the desert. The Clayton Bore empties into the Creek about half a mile up from the main track, and around the large waterholes in the creek-bed, reeds, rushes and other herbage grow in profusion; in places the rushes are ten feet high and they are almost impenetrable. A pair of Brolgas was seen about 200 yards away, and White-breasted Wood Swallows were numerous. It was found that these last-named were nesting in Coolibah trees, at

varying heights from the ground. Most of the nests were in the discarded nests of the Magpie Lark, which were in abundance, but a few were found in the open. One was on the top of a Caterpillar's nest, several were behind bark and in the forks of trees, and one was found neatly fitted into a hole in the top of a large horizontal limb and its occupant was heard calling while sitting on the nest. The nests were generally similar to those of other Wood Swallows, but perhaps a trifle sturdier in construction, and it was thought that some may have been used and added to for several seasons. Is this a habit of these birds? A Wood Swallow was captured and found to have white "powder-down" among the feathers similar to that I have noticed in Cockatoos, and this powder was also observed in several nests. True powder-down feathers occur in Herons and Bitterns and other non-Passerine birds, but I am not certain that in this instance the condition is identical.

Other birds seen near Clayton Creek were Whistling Eagles, one with young, and nests with eggs and empty but ready for a second clutch. Many Fork-tailed Kites, Reed Warblers, Little Grassbirds and White-plumed Honeyeaters were noted, and there were Teal and Black Duck in abundance, as well as other species which will be mentioned in the final list of birds seen on the trip. Possibly due to the absence of suitable hollows, very few Parrots and only one Owl were observed.

We left Clayton camp next morning for Dulkaninna, 20 miles further on, and after an uneventful trip, except for a stop to examine a Wedge-tailed Eagles' nest 150 yards from the road, Dulkaninna Creek was reached. The bore runs into the Creek a short distance up from where the track crosses in the same manner as it does at the Clayton.

Dulkaninna homestead is on the bank of the creek where the track crosses, and permission was sought and obtained from the owner before proceeding up the creek, which was lined with a thick growth of Coolibahs. Birds seen in the dry creek-bed beyond the bore were Fork-tailed Kites and Little Crows, both very numerous, a few Nankeen Kestrels and Whistling Eagles, one Wedge-tailed Eagle and one Spotted Harrier. Fifteen nests of

the Kite were inspected, most of them containing three young almost ready to fly, but one contained three eggs. Little Crows were laying for the second time this season, the nests in use being mostly fouled but freshly lined. The Spotted Harrier was flushed from a nest containing two eggs.

While in conversation with the owner of Dulkaninna Station, he described to us a bird which seemed to answer to the description of the Letter-winged Kite, which he said had been building a nest near the creek close at hand. This was the first time the species had been seen here over a period of forty years.

On reaching the patch of trees indicated we were delighted to find a pair of Letter-winged Kites, one bird being flushed from a nest in the top of a Coolibah, which proved to have one egg in it. The Coolibah clump consisted of rather stunted trees about half to a mile from the main creek, and many appeared to be on the verge of dying. The flat on which they were growing was riddled with rat-holes, the presence of these rodents no doubt being a great attraction for the Kites. Another pair of Kites were later seen at the edge of the clump of Coolibahs in a tree well out on its own. Many nests containing large young of the Fork-tailed Kite and Whistling Eagle, one nest with three young Spotted Harriers, and one nest with one large young Black Falcon were found in the creek opposite the site of the Letter-winged Kites' nests.

Continuing the journey, Cannuwalkanna Bore was reached at dusk, and we camped at this place for the night, when rats could be heard moving about and one was found drowned in the hot water from the Bore in the morning. There are some scattered Coolibahs upstream from the Bore, but none in the other direction for several miles.

Next day, after breakfast, a start was made to examine the trees near the Bore for a nest of the Letter-winged Kite which had been described to us. This nest was found, but no birds were seen and the eggs had been removed by a previous visitor. About one hundred yards away another nest was found and a Kite flushed from it; the nest was empty. Many rat-holes were seen here.

Leaving this place we moved on towards

the Cooper, and observed a pair of newly-hatched young Australian Dotterels alongside the track. Eventually we reached the Cooper—an immense stretch of water estimated at nearly four miles wide, and a most impressive sight. From the edge of the water out towards the centre of the stream were scattered Coolibahs, and several islands, some small, some large.

After lunch I set off in a canoe brought for the purpose and explored some of the smaller islands up to about a mile from the shore. Near the shore the water was not more than three feet deep, but about three-quarters of a mile from the shore it was deeper than I could reach with the paddle of the canoe. Four islands were visited, the largest being about 100 yards long and about two feet above the water-level. On three of the islands were numerous fresh rat-holes under the saltbush, but there were no signs of any breeding activity by birds, probably owing to the presence of these vermin. However, a pair of Kites was seen inspecting nesting sites in the trees growing out in the water. On the fourth island, which had recently been submerged and was still quite wet, there were no signs of rats, but a small flock of Banded Stilts was present and showed resentment at my presence. Indeed, one or two even took recourse to the "broken wing" trick, and I had high hopes of finding nests there, but without success. The only nest found was that of a Spur-winged Plover, which contained three eggs, while nearby in a dead tree was a large nest of the Whistling Eagle.

Next morning a walk was made along the banks of the Cooper upstream for about two miles, but the variety of bird-life was very limited, only common species being observed. Indeed, the only small birds seen were Zebra Finches and Greenies. Whistling Eagles and Fork-tailed Kites were numerous, and a few Little Crows were present.

Next morning a start was made for home and a pair of Avocets was flushed from the edge of the water as we left. Near Beltana, half-way to home, a Ground Cuckoo-Shrike was seen as it went to roost one evening at dusk in a Swamp Oak. I had previously seen this bird twice near my home at Wilmington, but was not sure of its identity.

A few days after my return, an interstate visitor came to stay at my home for a few

days, and then we set out on a three-day trip back along the track to the Cooper. We set out on October 1 and returned on October 3, but rain spoiled the trip to some extent. Another visit was made to the nesting site of the Letter-winged Kites, and it was found that the nest which contained three eggs once again had three in it, but this time they were not so heavily marked. The adjacent nest which had only one egg now contained four eggs. Apart from the two nesting pairs, no other Letter-winged Kites were seen here, but it is believed that a solitary Black-shouldered Kite was present, as the black on the shoulder was more extensive than in the other species.

We also stopped to examine the nests of the Letter-winged Kites at Cannuwalkaninna Bore. One nest, previously empty, now contained four eggs, while about 100 yards away another very soiled nest, not previously noted, was found to contain two small chicks and two infertile eggs; one of the chicks was dead.

Description of Nest of Letter-winged Kite.—Basin-shaped, made of rather fine sticks and unlike any Hawk's nest I have ever seen. The thickest part of the nest is at the bottom, with a few gum leaves for lining; sides of nest frail and very loosely constructed so as to be seen through when viewed from below. The birds seem to eject pellets of fur (from rats which comprise their food), and this soon becomes incorporated in the lining of the nest. No new lining is added when a second clutch is laid. The nests become very soiled as incubation and the rearing of the young proceeds. All the nests examined were similar in construction and size, dimensions being: overall diameter at top 21 inches, overall depth 10 inches; egg cavity 18 inches diameter at top, 5 inches diameter at bottom, depth 6 inches.

Eggs.—Average size 1 11/16 inches long by 1 9/32 inches wide. Colour, white with red cap on some eggs and scattered red blotches, or else the entire egg blotched with brownish markings which completely obscure the white ground colour.

The following is a list of all the birds seen between Marree and Kopperamanna, but owing to the hurried nature of the trip it is not claimed to be a complete one, notable absentees being Pardalotés and Thornbills.

Little Quail (*Turnix velox*).—2.

Emu (*Dromaius novae-hollandiae*).—7. At the Clayton.

Diamond Dove (*Geopelia cuneata*).—A few at the waters.

Crested Pigeon (*Ocyphaps lophotes*).—Scattered few.

An unidentified species of Crake (*Porzana* sp.).—1. Clayton.

Black-tailed Native Hen (*Tribonyx ventralis*).—4. Cooper.

Eastern Swamphen (*Porphyrio melanotus*).—Several.

Black Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*).—3.

Pied Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax varius*).—1.

Pelican (*Pelecanus conspicillatus*).—1.

Gull-billed Tern (*Gelochelidon nilotica*).—Many.

Spur-winged Plover (*Lobibyx novae-hollandiae*).—Few.

Banded Plover (*Zonifer tricolor*).—Few.

Black-fronted Dotterel (*Charadrius melanops*).—Few.

Australian Dotterel (*Peltohyas australis*).—Small parties.

White-headed Stilt (*Himantopus leucocephalus*).—Few.

Banded Stilt (*Cladorhynchus leucocephalus*).—Many.

Red-necked Avocet (*Recurvirostra novae-hollandiae*).—2.

Australian Pratincole (*Stiltia isabella*).—Small parties.

Brolga (*Grus rubicundus*).—4. On bore drains.

Royal Spoonbill (*Platalea regia*).—2.

Yellow-billed Spoonbill (*Platalea flavipes*).—5.

White-faced Heron (*Notophoxyx novae-hollandiae*).—A few.

White-necked Heron (*Notophoxyx pacifica*).—3.

Nankeen Night-heron (*Nycticorax caledonicus*).—5.

Maned Goose (*Chenonetta jubata*).—2.

Black Swan (*Chenopsis atrata*).—Many.

Black Duck (*Anas superciliosa*).—Many.

Grey Teal (*Anas gibberifrons*).—Many.

Pink-eared Duck (*Malacorhynchus membranaceus*).—Many.

Spotted Harrier (*Circus assimilis*).—2.

Australian Goshawk (*Astur novae-hollandiae*).—1.

Swamp Harrier (*Circus approximans*).—4.
Wedge-tailed Eagle (*Uroaetus audax*).—A few.

Little Eagle (*Hieraaetus morphnoides*).—1.
Whistling Eagle (*Haliastur sphenurus*).—

Many.

Fork-tailed Kite (*Milvus migrans*).—Many.
Black-shouldered Kite (*Elanus axillaris*).—

2.

Letter-winged Kite (*Elanus scriptus*).—7.

Little Falcon (*Falco longipennis*).—1.

Black Falcon (*Falco subniger*).—2.

Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*).—1.

Brown Hawk (*Falco berigora*).—A few.

Nankeen Kestrel (*Falco cenchroides*).—Many.

Boobook Owl (*Ninox boobook*).—1.

Little Corella (*Kakatoe sanguinea*).—5.

Galah (*Kakatoe roseicapilla*).—Many.

Cockatiel (*Leptolophus hollandicus*).—4.
Blue Bonnet (*Psephotus haematogaster*).—

4.

Shell Parrot (*Melopsittacus undulatus*).—Many.

Red-backed Kingfisher (*Halcyon pyrrhopygius*).—1.

Pallid Cuckoo (*Cuculus pallidus*).—3.

Horsfield Bronze Cuckoo (*Chalcites basalilis*).—Heard.

Tree Martin (*Hylochelidon nigricans*).—A few.

Fairy Martin (*Hylochelidon ariel*).—Many.

Willie Wagtail (*Rhipidura leucophrys*).—A few.

Brown Flycatcher (*Microeca fascians*).—A few.

Red-capped Robin (*Petroica goodenovii*).—6.

Magpie Lark (*Grallina cyanoleuca*).—Many.

Crested Bellbird (*Oreoica gutturalis*).—Heard.

Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike (*Coracina novae-hollandiae*).—5.

Ground Cuckoo-Shrike (*Pteropodocys maxima*).—A few.

Chestnut Quail-Thrush (*Cinlosoma castanotum*).

White-browed Babbler (*Pomatostomus superciliosus*).—A few.

White-fronted Chat (*Epthianura albifrons*).—A few.

Crimson Chat (*Epthianura tricolor*).—A few.

- Orange Chat (*Epthianura aurifrons*).—
A few.
Gibber-Bird (*Ashbyia lovensis*).—A few.
Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus australis*).—
A few.
Eastern Whiteface (*Aphelocephala leucopis*).—A few.
Brown Songlark (*Cinclorhamphus cruralis*).—A few.
Rufous Songlark (*Cinclorhamphus mathewsi*).—Heard.
Little Grassbird (*Megalurus gramineus*).
—A few.
Purple-backed Wren (*Malurus assimilis*).
—A few.
Blue and White Wren (*Malurus cyanotus*).
—A few.
White-breasted Wood Swallow (*Artamus superciliosus*).—A few at Clayton.
Black-faced Wood Swallow (*Artamus melanops*).—A few.
Singing Honeyeater (*Meliphaga virescens*).
—A few.
White-plumed Honeyeater (*Meliphaga penicillata*).—Many.
Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater (*Acanthagenys rufogularis*).—2.
Yellow-throated Miner (*Myzantha flavigula*).—Many.
Pipit (*Anthus australis*).—Many.
Zebra Finch (*Taeniopygia castanotis*).—
Many.
Little Crow (*Corvus bennetti*).—Many.
White-backed Magpie (*Gymnorhina hypoleuca*).—A few.