

## SOME NOTES ON THE BLACK-SHOULDERED KITE

(By G. B. RAGLESS)

The Black-shouldered Kite (*Elanus notatus*) is a handsome bird which is now frequently observed close to Adelaide. At Marion, a few miles south of Adelaide, I have had a chance to observe the birds frequently, as they often appear close to my home. In this article I intend to outline my experiences with them here and at other places where I have seen them.

The greatest number of birds that I have seen in one group was five, on August 25, 1952, flying over the house in a south-east direction at 8 a.m. Usually not more than two birds, presumably a pair, are seen at the one time.

A pair of Magpies (*Gymnorhina hypoleuca*) have been nesting for years in gum trees close to my house, and on June 29, 1954, just after they had commenced building a nest one of them attacked a pair of kites that were hovering over grape vines. There was a certain amount of noise made by the attacker and as the kites were flying away a Brown Hawk (*Falco berigora*) rose from the ground and was immediately set upon by the kites. Evidently the magpie held more qualms for the kites than the larger hawk!

During the same year the kites began showing an interest in a nest that had been used the previous year by the magpies and commenced lining it during September. After a short time one bird started brooding while the mate sat in sight of the nest in an adjoining tree. Towards the middle of November two young birds hatched out, whereupon the parents became more active and noisy. Then tragedy came. On December 15 one of the birds was shot while I was absent, and I wondered what effect this would have on the others. However, the one parent continued to feed the young and on the 27th one of the young moved out of the nest to sit a few feet away on a limb, and a few days later the other one did the same. When young, the birds have a buffy colored throat and breast. On January 9, 1955, both young were flying about, and a few days later, with the parent, disappeared.

During 1955, from April 1 to June 16, a pair of birds were frequently observed in the area, usually "hawking" for food. On October 26, four birds were in the area.

During 1956, from June 20 to August 7, usually two, and at times three, birds were

frequently in the area. They paid much attention to the top part of a neighbor's Norfolk Island pine, and for a while I thought that they were going to use it as a nesting site. They were not observed after August 7, but I was told afterwards that a pair nested and raised two young in a large Red Gum on the Sturt River about two miles away.

On February 6, 1957, four birds came over with much noise and stayed in the area for some days. Three birds were observed on April 11, one flying in an erratic manner, while the other two repeatedly "dive-bombed" it with a great deal of screeching going on all the time. These birds did the same on two occasions during the next two days, but on the 14th only two remained. Almost certainly the adult birds were driving away their young so that they could again commence breeding. When they were "dive-bombing" the young bird I doubt if they actually struck, but the attack combined with the noise was certainly fierce. On the 15th and 16th the two birds spent from 7 a.m. to 1.30 p.m. each day perching in an Aleppo Pine 20 yards from my house, as if resting from their previous exertions. At times they would have a bout of screeching, and often were giving a kind of call which I have termed "ticking." One morning they commenced this prior to sun-rise, and apparently it is a kind of mating call. They would leave the pine during the afternoon, presumably to go in search of food. During the month of May they were observed frequently in the area, and often were perched in the pine "ticking" and screeching. On June 3, both birds were observed perched close to the nest used in 1954, and this may indicate that the survivor of that year's nesting had returned with a fresh mate.

On June 19, one bird perched within 2 ft. and the other 12 ft. from a magpie's nest used the previous year. During July both birds were about the area, and on the 7th one bird was observed to fly to an Aleppo Pine with nesting material, and a nest could be seen just started. A few days later both birds left the area until August 10, when both were perched close to the 1954 nest. This hesitation about deciding upon the nesting site seemed strange in view of earlier actions. The Norfolk Island Pine then claimed the attention of the birds, and one was observed flying to it with nesting material

on the 24th, but owing to the thickness it was hard to detect a nest. Later events suggested that this was the finishing touch to nest construction. On September 8, three birds were flying about in an excited manner. Some boisterous weather occurred at this time, and evidently when the birds were absent the nest was raided by crows ("ravens"), as on September 9 I found egg-shell from the kites underneath a raven's nest. This nest was only about 100 yards away from the pine and contained several young ravens about to leave. This mishap to nesting operations resulted in the birds leaving the area for some time. During February of 1958, two birds were seen regularly in the district and at odd times since, but up to the present (May 1) no indication of nesting has been given.

Black-shouldered Kites have been frequently seen on the Adelaide plains and nearby country areas. From Gawler to Aldinga there are many birds, and this type of country seems an ideal habitat for them. I consider them much more numerous in some parts than the Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) which in many ways they resemble. Both species have often been seen hovering over the fields watching for any movement of mice or other potential food material, whereupon a quick swoop is made to the ground. The quick expansion of the outer suburbs does not worry the birds, as I have seen them at Edwardstown and Richmond, where only odd vacant blocks of land remain among the houses. During a discussion at a recent meeting of the Association, one of our members (Mr. T. Smith) mentioned seeing a bird over Victoria Square, in the heart of Adelaide. At the same meeting three members said that they had evidence of the birds attacking chickens in fowl runs. It is to be hoped that this is a rare event, as it would be a pity to see many of them destroyed. The kites do not appear to live in the hilly country to any extent. They seem to prefer the undulating or level country devoted to cereal growing. It is here that their chief item of food—mice—is found, particularly in the vicinity of haystacks. I have observed birds at Waitpinga, Victor Harbour, Middleton and Currency Creek, where the conditions are suitable for them.

It have observed the species south of the Willunga Hill. Twenty years ago the country stretching from the top of Willunga Hill to

Cut Hill, Victor Harbour, was covered with scrub for the most part, which would have few attractions for this species. Since the war thousands of acres of land have been cleared and pastured for the grazing of sheep and cattle. Many rough hills remain, but the undulating country would appear suitable for the kites.

The first record I have from this area is one bird observed a mile east of Mount Compass in December 1956, followed by two birds near this township in January 1958. The only other record I have is one bird south of Myponga, close to the turn-off to "Phewacres," in April of this year. It will be interesting during the next few years to see if the birds increase in this area, and I would welcome reports from any observations made.

The changing face of the country seems to have enabled magpies, ravens and plovers to become well-established. There is an increase in Wedgetailed Eagles (*Aquila audax*) and Whistling Eagles (*Haliastur sphenurus*). Fortunately many rough and swampy areas remain which should ensure the presence of the Ground Thrush (*Oreocincla lunulata*), Emu Wren (*Stipiturus malachurus*), Ground Wren (*Hylacola pyrrhopygia*), and Beautiful Firetail (*Zonaeginthus bellus*), all of which I have seen recently, and I have had a report of the King Quail (*Excalfactoria chinensis*) from a local resident.