

BIRD NOTES

WOOD-SWALLOWS FEEDING ON STURT PEAS—On October 9, 1971, with my wife, family and friends, I was proceeding along a fence line near Jubilee Hut, Mutooroo Station (LN). Vegetation consisted principally of cassias, eremophilas and various acacias, including mulga. The season had been quite good, and annual plants were widespread and plentiful.

On stopping to examine some flowering Sturt's Desert Pea *Glianthus formosus* in a water-course, we discovered a dozen or more White-browed Wood-Swallows *Artamus superciliosus* walking among the pea plants, an unusual occurrence for a species that normally is not terrestrial.

With binoculars, we watched the birds carefully for ten minutes or so, and observed them moving from flower to flower, in the manner of a honeyeater feeding on prostrate honey-bearing plants. These bluey-grey birds moving among the red and black flowers were a beautiful sight. The birds inserted their beaks and part of their heads into the pea flowers, and their beaks remained in the flowers for several seconds. The method that the birds used to reach the blooms was simply to walk on the ground and the prostrate stems, and to feed on the blooms that were within reach. The plants were mainly prostrate—as is usual with wild Sturt Peas—and did not grow more than about eight inches high.

White-browed and Masked Wood-Swallows, sometimes in vast numbers, have been seen by other observers to feed on gum and citrus blossoms (ref: *Australian Bird Watcher*, 4 (7), December, 1972, pp. 205-6, 216). Dr. J. L. McKean has pointed out, with illustrations, that the Wood-Swallows (Artamidae) are unusual among passerines in possessing brush-tongues (ref: *Bulletin of the British Ornithologists' Club*, 89, (5), October, 1969, pp. 129-130). This feature would of course help to account for their nectar-feeding habit.

Over fifteen years, we have observed Sturt Pea blooms in several seasons in the North-East of South Australia, and we have also encountered various species of wood-swallow, particularly in the better seasons. However, we consider that Sturt Peas provide only a

minor source of nectar, for the only other birds that we have observed among their flowers have been a Spiny-cheeked Honey-eater on one or two occasions, and, on January 8, 1973, two White-rumped Miners *Myzantha flavigula* taking nectar from some Sturt Pea blooms in our garden at Lowbank (MM), by walking among the lower ones and climbing among the plants for the higher flowers.

Our sightings lead one to speculate whether wood-swallows and other nectar-ivorous birds assist in pollinating Sturt Pea flowers. — K. J. MACK.