

NOTES ON THE BREEDING OF THE SOUTHERN STONE CURLEW ON THE ADELAIDE PLAINS

by (Mrs.) M. J. ARTHUR

Having received information that a Southern Stone Curlew *Burhinus magnirostris* was sitting on eggs at the R.A.A.F. Edinburgh Airfield, Mrs. M. R. Daley and I went there and identified the bird on July 18, 1972.

Referring to the *S.A. Ornithologist* and *The Emu*, I was unable to find a breeding record on the Adelaide plains since 1914, when R. Crompton in a bird list in 1915 stated that the "Eastern Stone Plover has nested last year at Stonyfell." Although no breeding record was noted, it was stated in July, 1915, in a bird list in the *S.A. Ornithologist*, "Birds noted by members in the city of Adelaide and the Parklands." Then for many years there were no records of this species on the Adelaide Plains. The most recent reference to their occurrence was by Mr. H. G. Brooks, who recorded a flock of 16 at Buckland Park on July 16, 1944, and heard them calling on August 23, 1944. Mrs. Daley and I found the bird sitting on eggs on a site between disused railway lines. Permission had been given by the Commanding Officer for photographs to be taken. This was done quite easily from the car, as the bird froze when we approached. I left my photographic equipment with W/O Max Newell and L.A.C. Ken Cole, and they were permitted to take a series of photographs of the successful hatching of three chicks.

The following details were given me by L.A.C. Ken Cole:—

SITE OF NESTS

When first observed, the bird was sitting between disused railway lines. On the night of July 17, 1972, the eggs were transferred (evidently by the bird) to another site on the line, with a drop of 0.450 metres at the back of the old sleeper upon which they were placed. Mrs. Daley photographed the bird sitting there. (See plate on p. 136.) Three days later the bird was missing. Some feathers were found nearby; and it was presumed that a cat had taken her. As no

eggs or shells were found, a further search was made, and the bird was found sitting about 50 metres further up the curving line. It stayed on this site for three weeks, then disappeared 24 hours before the eggs hatched. With great difficulty, Ken located it again. Although most references state that a Stone Curlew does not make a nest, it had put some sticks roughly together on a sleeper of the same line, about 0.400 kilometres from the previous site. To reach this nesting site from the previous one, the bird had to get under a mesh fence and go over a main road. When found, the three eggs were hatched. The intriguing question that arises from these observations is: how did the parent bird move the eggs? Owing to the relative size of the eggs, the bird seems most unlikely to have picked them up with its bill. A Stone Curlew in the Adelaide Zoo has been observed by Mr. A. C. Minchin (see Zietz, 1917) to carry one chick under each wing. Could the eggs have been carried in this way too? Alternatively, the bird may have rolled them; though on this rough terrain, such a feat must have been difficult.

EGGS

On July 17, 1972, the bird was sitting on three eggs, but on July 18, there were four eggs. The usual number of eggs laid by the Southern Stone Curlew is two; but H. T. Condon, author of *A Handlist of the Birds of South Australia*, informed me that three or four eggs are laid sometimes.

When the eggs were transferred to the site where the bird sat for three weeks, only three of the four eggs survived the journey; although no shell was found. Each time the eggs were seen when the parent was absent, the eggs were turned with the slightly pointed part to the centre. Once Ken turned one egg the other way; but the next observation showed it turned again to the centre. Special commendation has been given L.A.C. Ken Cole by the South

Australian Ornithological Association for refusing to accept an offer of 40 dollars for the eggs, and for refusing to reveal the whereabouts of the bird after he knew that the eggs were wanted for a collection. He was unaware of the fact that it was not legal to sell eggs of native birds.

YOUNG

The three eggs hatched at much the same time. When the young were found, one chick was dry, one slightly damp, and one quite wet. Their cryptic markings made them almost invisible in the resulting photographs. When they were three days old they could not fly, but could run with great swiftness; and the family left the area.

DESCRIPTION AND BEHAVIOUR OF THE SECOND BIRD

This bird had distinct dark marks down the back, which were not very well defined in the first. Although the second was about the same height and length as the first, it was not quite so heavy in build. During the month, it spent more of the day in scrub and casurina tree country between 0.400 and 1.609 kilometres from the sitting bird. It apparently did not help with the incubation or feed the latter; and Ken managed to get only one photograph of it.

OTHER OBSERVATIONS

A Willy Wagtail was seen on occasions to attack the sitting bird, but it did not

greatly disturb it. When off the eggs, on some occasions, this bird half sat down as if completely exhausted (and was photographed in this posture), but when approached ran quickly away. This behaviour by a Southern Stone Curlew was recorded and photographed by Harry Frauca in the Expedition Ranges in central west Queensland. When photographs of the chicks were being taken, this bird twice spread its wings full width, and with head low made angry runs at Ken, veering off when only two metres away.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

After the transparencies were shown at the September, 1972 meeting of the S.A. Ornithological Association, the President thanked the Commanding Officer of the Edinburgh Air Base, Warrant Officer M. R. Newell, and L.A.C. Ken Cole for this breeding record of a bird on the Rare list of the National Parks and Wildlife Acts 1972. I would like to add my thanks to these people, especially Ken Cole for his keen co-operation and help. I would like to thank Mrs. Daley for her help and encouragement, and David Condon for preparing and sending me the index to *S.A. Orn.*

REFERENCES

- Bird list for Adelaide (1915), *S.A. Orn.* 2, 65.
- Brooks, H. G. (1944), Bird Notes, *ibid*, 17, 31.
- Grompton, R. (1915), Birds observed at Stonyfell, S.A., *ibid* 2, 37.
- Frauca, H. *Birds from Seas, Scrubs and Swamps of Australia*, p. 81.
- Zietz, F. R. (1917), Note on the Stone Plover. *Burhinus magnirostris*, *S.A. Orn.* 3, 44.



*Incubating Stone-Curlew.
From colour slide by M. R. Daley.*