

SOME OBSERVATIONS OF BIRDS IN THE REGION OF LAKE FROME AND LAKE CALLABONNA: WITH A NOTE ON MAGPIES

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Between November 23 and December 1, 1974, Stephen Walker and I made a trip into this area: some comments are felt to be of interest in view of the infrequency of observations in this region since those of J. Neil McGilp (McGilp 1919, 1921, 1923).

We travelled northwards from Yunta through Koonamore, Curnamona and Frome Downs Homestead, thence through country to the east of Lake Frome, containing sandhills of increasing height, and including several large fresh water lakes, to the overflow which drains from Lake Callabonna into Lake Frome at the point where it is joined by Hamilton Creek. Two days were spent on the shores and gibber plains to the west of Lake Callabonna and our return was via Moolawatana, Mt. Lyndhurst, Mt. Serle, Copley and Parachilna.

The years 1973 and 1974 have seen phenomenal rainfall: exceptional plant growth was therefore notable, and many normally dry salt pans were filled with fresh water. Under these circumstances an increased number of some species was anticipated, but others may have been less easily observed than in drier seasons. Of 110 species identified the following are of some interest.

LITTLE GREBE, *Podiceps novaehollandiae*: about 50 were seen on a dammed lake near Koonamore. Further north all grebes identified were Hoary-headed, the only species recorded by McGilp.

DARTER, *Anhinga anhinga*: several groups on Lake Callabonna, one of five birds. McGilp (1923) made only one observation of a solitary bird in 1918.

GLOSSY IBIS, *Plegadis falcinellus*: three birds on Koonamore dam.

DUCKS: **GREY TEAL**, *Anas gibberifrons* were the most numerous and widespread species, over 1000 being seen on one dam at Koonamore. **BLUE-BILLED DUCK**, *Oxyura australis* were present in small numbers on several lakes as were **CHESTNUT TEAL**, *Anas castanea*, both species having been recorded only once by McGilp (1923). **PINK-EARED DUCK**, *Malacorhynchus membranaceus* were widespread in small numbers.

MASKED PLOVER, *Vanellus miles miles*: a flock of 13 birds was seen at "No. 3 Bore"

east of Lake Frome: a few were also present at Lake Callabonna. I am uncertain whether McGilp saw this sub-species or differentiated it from the **SPUR-WINGED PLOVER**, *Vanellus miles novaehollandiae*, which we also identified east and south of Lake Frome.

AUSTRALIAN DOTTEREL, *Peltohyas australis*: only three birds, east of Lake Frome.

BANDED STILT, *Cladorhynchus leucocephalus*: small numbers at Koonamore and Lake Callabonna, almost all without breast bands. Though both species of Stilt were recorded, McGilp did not observe the Banded Stilt here until its historic breeding on Lake Callabonna was reported by him. (McGilp and Morgan, 1931.)

AUSTRALIAN PRATINCOLE, *Stiltia (Glareola) isabella*: very common on the gibber plains near Lake Callabonna but also present in the sandhills east of Lake Frome.

HORSFIELD BUSHLARK, *Mirafra javanica*: five dark form birds were noted on elevated grassy plains west of Moolawatana.

CINNAMON QUAIL-THRUSH, *Cincoloma cinnamomeum*: numerous in a narrow belt between Curnamona and Frome Downs Homestead (see also Ford, 1869), a few further north and none in the sandhill country east of Lake Frome or gibber plains west of Lake Callabonna: seen again near Lyndhurst, Copley and Parachilna.

CHESTNUT-CROWNED BABBLER, *Pomatostomus ruficeps*: all identified Babblers were of this species: recorded Koonamore, south and east of Lake Frome, and near Moolawatana and Mt. Serle.

LITTLE GRASSBIRD, *Megalurus gramineus*: recorded at the edge of a permanent lake supplied by "No. 3 Bore" east of Lake Frome: (not mentioned by McGilp).

RUFOUS SONGLARK, *Cinclorhynchus mathewsi*: another apparently new observation for the region: at "No. 3 Bore" and at Mosquito Creek, a Coolabah, *Eucalyptus microtheca*, lined creek which runs into Lake Callabonna from the west.

The **BROWN SONGLARK**, *Cinclorhynchus cruralis*, was widespread.

WHITE-FRONTED CHAT, *Ephthianura albifrons*: one bird at "No. 3 Bore."

CRIMSON CHATS, *Ephthianura tricolor*, and ORANGE CHATS, *Ephthianura aurifrons*, were both widespread; the GIBBER-BIRD, *Ashbyia lovensis*, was seen only on the gibber plains.

WEDGEBILL, *Sphenostoma cristatum*: only observed east of the southernmost one-third of Lake Frome.

RED-BROWED PARDALOTE, *Pardalotus rubricatus*: a number were seen at Mosquito Creek: this southerly recording of the species may correspond with the southern distribution limit of the Coolabah. McGilp (1923) records the species but gives no details of distribution.

AUSTRALIAN MAGPIE, *Gymnorhina tibicen*: it was anticipated that much of our journey should be through Black-backed country: it appeared however that many and probably the majority of birds seen had only narrow black back bands. This situation prevailed through the northern Flinders Ranges and as far south as Chinaman's Creek (Red-cliff) where an undoubted hybrid was observed. Our observations would suggest a much wider hybrid zone than is indicated by Condon (1954). The presence of a minority of white-backed birds in Central Australia (Parker 1969, Rix 1970) would be compatible with (though not proof of) a zone of hybridisation extending from Port Augusta to Central Australia. The view that the two forms remain separate in Central Australia is cited by Slater (1974 P.280) but Condon's (1951) retention of Mathews' subspecies *G. t. fincki* ("with a very narrow, black saddle and long bill") could be re-interpreted to show that interbreeding does

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occur, e.g. between *G. t. leuconota* and the long-billed form "*G. t. longirostris*," of the North-West of Western Australia.

It is felt from the above and from other unpublished observations that the distribution and hybridisation of the different mainland forms of the Australian Magpie are very inadequately understood. A description of hybrids is not readily available, and this must have hindered the recording of these forms by field workers. However, a variety of hybrids has long ago been illustrated in a paper by Cole (1921) who unfortunately considered his specimens merely to be "variations" of the Black-backed Magpie, thus obscuring the significance of his careful observations.

Further work is necessary on this subject and the author would be grateful for any material contributions of a definitive nature, either from field observations or from skin preparations.

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ADDENDUM by author.

The reference above to the Masked Plover should be regarded as a new observation. McGilp recorded the Spur-winged Plover which he would have differentiated from the above.

H. T. Condon (pers. comm.).