

Tasmanian Field Notes.

By EDWIN ASHBY, M.B.O.U.

The period covered is from 26th September, to end of first fortnight in October, 1916. Only a portion of my time was available for work amongst the birds. The travelling was done by motor.

*Lathamus discolor tregellasi*, Mat., (Swift Parrot), was during the period of my visit very numerous in the City of Hobart, feeding on the honey of the Tasmanian Blue Gum (*Eucalyptus globulus*), and also on another species of gum, a red flowering gum growing rather freely in the gardens. I was surprised not to meet with this bird in any of the localities visited outside of Hobart. On comparison with specimens collected by myself at Blackwood, South Australia, in July, 1914, I can find no difference, and conclude that the birds that visited South Australia had come from Tasmania. A female skin obtained in Hobart is in every respect similar, except a little brighter to the best male previously collected. There is evidently no difference in the sexes, either in colour or length of tail feather. In two short visits to the lower slopes of Mount Wellington (raining most of the time), a nest of *Cinclosoma punctatum dovei*, Mat., (the Tasmanian spotted ground bird), was met with. The bird was sitting on the usual deep cup-shaped nest placed at the foot of a grass tussock, the two eggs were quite fresh, and showed normal markings.

*Sericornis humilis*, Gld., (Brown Scrub Wren), was exceptionally numerous, many being in sight at a time quietly working for insects amongst the grass and leaves under dense tea-tree. Further up the gully amongst the tree ferns, although a few were noted, they appeared far less numerous.

Fine specimens of *Melithreptus validirostris*, Gld., (Strong billed Honey Eater), and *Melithreptus affinis*, Lesson, (Black-headed Honey Eater), were obtained. The note of the latter is very distinct from that of others of this genus. I took a lot of trouble to obtain a specimen that was feeding in the top of a lofty gum, thinking it was a bird I was unacquainted with.

The bush at the entrance of the gully was alive with birds, but as most of the species are noted from other localities, I will not refer to them now. The absence of *Myiagra nitida*, Gld. (Satin Flycatcher), which I had met with in the same localities in the first week of January some years ago, is interesting, showing that they had not arrived, or their striking notes would surely have been heard. While a few days were spent at Brown's River, between Hobart and the mouth of the Derwent, owing to a sprained ankle, I was unable to go into the scrub. Near the boarding house the two Diamond birds, *Pardalotus striatus*, Gmelin (Yellow-tipped Pardalot), and *Pardalotus punctatus leachi*, Mat. (Tasmanian Pardalot),

were working in the tall gum saplings, the note of the former was very similar to the South Australian bird, but one of the other species in addition to the familiar shrill double whistle, added a distinct double note, which neither Mr. W. L. May, R.A.O.U., or myself had heard anywhere else in Tasmania. We hoped that it would have turned out to be the rare forty-spotted pardalot, but on shooting, it was found to be an adult male *punctatus*.

On 5/10/16, at Sandford, Southern Tasmania, I found a beautifully-made nest ready for eggs, of *Calamanthus fuliginosus*, V. and H. (Striated Field Wren), it was about 18 inches from the ground in a bunch of "samphire" alongside the coach road, built of grass, well-lined with soft feathers.

A very interesting visit was paid to Lake Sorell, which is situated on the elevated plateau which occupies such a large portion of the centre of the island. I was informed that the elevation of Lake Sorell was about 2,300 feet. The locality is exceedingly wild, the boarding house at Interlaken being the only inhabited place, I believe, in the 18 miles from Oakland. The ground oozed water on the slopes as well as on the flats, and the road was so bad that we did not venture to spend more than the night and half day there for fear that further rain would make the road back impossible.

All the smaller Tasmanian Honey Eaters were exceedingly numerous, and a fine specimen of the great Tasmanian or Brush Wattle bird, *Dryobornis paradoxus*, Dadin, was obtained.

The trip to Lake Sorell had been especially undertaken with the hope of obtaining the *Neo-Strepera versicolor arguta*, Gld. (Hill Crow Shrike), a bird that is known to frequent the Great Lake at an altitude of over 3,000 feet. From some fishermen I learnt that a few pairs of this bird were in the district, but that they became much more numerous as one ascended towards the Great Lake; on the other hand the Sooty or Black Crow Shrike, *Strepera fuliginosa*, Gld., was very common, and occurred at the Great Lake as well. I think they called the former the "Squeaker", from its note. I was up the next morning before daylight, and followed along the track around the Lake Shore, and one of the first birds I noted was the Hill Crow Shrike making the usual squeaking call of our *Strepera melanoptera*, a species that Gould considered it was so closely allied to, that he doubted whether he was justi-

fied in making it a distinct species, though Mathews now places it with the grey Crow Shrike.

The bird in question joined another, and I had almost stalked it within gun shot, in fact was raising the gun for a shot, when a third bird not before observed, gave the warning, and the three flew on to the top of a rocky knoll. Owing to the condition of my ankle I was unable to follow, and as no more put in an appearance later in the day, I am still without this species in my collection. The other species also peculiar to Tasmania, *Strepera fuliginosa*, was most numerous, its loud and weird cries reminding one more of the call of the Black Cockatoo than that of a Crow Shrike.

The common Tasmanian Tit, *Acanthiza pusilla diemanensis*, Gld. (Brown-rumped Tit), was numerous, but although a sharp look out was kept there was no sign of *A. cingii*, Gld.

The country here near the lake is open forest country, with clumps of dense small bushes, and in places a heath-like shrub belonging to the "*Epacridae*", probably a *Brachyloma*, was densely covering the ground under the larger timber, this shrub being 2 feet to 3 feet in height, and covered at the time of our visit with bright red berries, upon which numbers of the Green Parrot, *Platycercus caledonicus*, Gmelin, were feeding. *Sericornis humilis*, Gld. (the Brown Scrub Wren), were numerous, mostly either on the ground or in low dense bushes. From the restlessness of a pair, I concluded that they must have a nest, and after searching carefully through all the possible bushes in the immediate neighbourhood, bethought me that it was possible that they might choose a similar nesting place to that of *Hylacola cauta*, Gld., which almost invariably selects a fallen branch with dead leaves still attached, as a nesting place. I quickly found a sapling that had been cut down, and on lifting up the fallen branches, there was the nest close to the ground buried in the fallen branch, and in construction a typical *Sericornis* nest containing three fresh laid eggs. This nest is now in the S.A. Museum.

After leaving Lake Sorell it had been our intention to spend a day at Ross, or one of the central townships for the purpose of endeavouring to obtain Tasmania's species of Grass Parrots, *Neonanodes chrysogaster*, Latham, (Orange-bellied Parrot), and *Neonanodes chrysostomus*, Kuhl; (Blue-winged Parrot). The neighbourhood had until recent years been a well known breeding place for both these species. Whereas until

recent years these parrots, especially the latter, used to appear at harvest time and after, in hundreds, right through the centre of the island as far south as Sandford on Frederick Henry Bay. Particular enquiries made in a large number of the townships elicited the fact that instead of hundreds only a few pair now visit their old feeding grounds. Several of my informants ascribed this decrease to the methods adopted in the free distribution of poison for killing rabbits. On going north we saw no sign of these parrots, but Mr. W. L. May saw a pair alongside the main road in Epping Forest, on the return trip.

A hasty visit was paid to Scottsdale, in the north east of the island. At an altitude of nearly 2,000 feet, on what is known as the "Sidling", bird life was most numerous. *Acanthornis magnus*, Gld. (Scrub Tit), was here first met with. Several Pink-breasted Robins, *Erythrodryas rhodinogaster*, Drapiez, were noted, and more Olive Thickheads, *Timias olivaceus*, V. and H., were heard whistling at one time than I have ever heard before. The *Acanthiza* was still the common one, and not *A. ewingii*. There was a bare hour available for searching this scrub so rich in bird life, and drenching rain precluded any further search if more time had been available.

The night was spent at Scottsdale, and a visit was paid to one of the many swamps in this district next morning. The grunting notes of Rails were heard in the Cutting Grass about five feet high, and although they could have been only a yard or so away, some times only a few feet, only once was the bird seen, apparently *Porzana plumbea maculata*, Swainson, (Eastern Spotless Crane), and I was fortunate enough to find a nest of this species containing five eggs almost fresh. The nest was neatly made of grass about two feet above the water in the centre of a tussock of cutting grass; the cutting grass well overhung the nest, screening it from view. The photo taken of the nest was unfortunately a failure. Of the eggs, four were covered with fine spots and lines, and one with much larger blotches. The parent bird kept within a few yards of the nest for half an hour, sometimes on one side, and sometimes on the other, but not once did I get a glimpse of it. Another interesting bird met with in this swamp was the Tasmanian Emu Wren, *Stipiturus malachurus littleri*, Mathews. Several were seen, both cocks and hens, and one cock bird secured. Only about two hours was spent here, but it would have well repaid a stay of a few days.

Near Myrtle Bank in the heavy timbered country large numbers of the Tasmanian Black Cockatoo, *Calyptorhynchus funereus alathanotus*, Gld., were seen, their wailing cries as they flew from tree top to tree top, were quite in keeping with the lonely wildness of the big forest scenery.

The next collecting was done in the neighbourhood of Latrobe, North-West Tasmania. I stayed with friends whose home is on the banks of the river Mersey. At early dawn the flute-like whistle of the Grey Butcher Bird, *Bulestes torquatus cinereus*, Gld., was heard, a pair having built in a tall gum on the property; also the loud cry of the Native Hen, *Tribonyx mortieri dubius* in the adjoining swamp, and one was seen on the green flat just below the garden.

Several pair of the splendid Tasmanian Yellow-throated Honey Eater, *Nesoptilotis flavicollis flavigula*, Gld., kept up their song (full melodious notes can be described as a song), throughout most of the day from the saplings and wattles along the river bank; but a careful search did not disclose a nest, may be it was a little too early. On donning a pair of "waders", a swamp situated between the Mersey proper and an old channel, now a start of backwater, was explored. A number of old nests or "seats" of the Native Hen were noted on little islets or large tussocks standing out of the water; in only one were eggs found. Later in the day a second visit was paid, and in spite of the greatest care, no sight was obtained of the bird, which must have been sitting, as the eggs were quite warm; three eggs were in the nest and two floating in the water near-by. At first I thought the hen in hurrying off the nest must have dragged them out, but as all the five eggs were badly rotten, I think a recent flood that had taken place some fortnight, or nearly so, before, must have drowned the eggs; in spite of their condition, fair specimens were made of the eggs. The next day a swamp higher up this old river channel was visited, and I found another nest also in a tussock, containing the usual clutch of five eggs, the bird was sitting close. This nest which was made of grass similar to the previous one, was exceedingly well screened with the long blades of the cutting grass which arched right over the nest, the birds having made a means of ingress and egress both back and front of the nest, so that from which ever direction the disturbance came, the sitting bird could slip out by the other door. This, it was able to do so effectively, that several attempts failed to reveal the bird. These eggs

were bad, although a dead chicken in a fairly advanced state of development was found in several of them; no doubt the same flood was accountable for this. One wonders how long the birds would continue to sit on rotten eggs. Several Tasmanian Bald-Coots, *Porphyrio melanonotus fletcheræ*, Mat., were seen in the swamps, but none obtained.

During my stay at Latrobe, a gorge of the Don river, was visited. Near the entrance of the gully feeding on the grassy flats along the banks of the stream were numbers of Dusky Robins, *Amaurodryas vittata*, Quoy et G. A nest of one was found containing three chicks and one unhatched egg. The nest was placed at the base of a few shoots coming out of an almost dead tree, about five feet from the ground. The parent bird was quite undisturbed at our presence, and allowed itself to be photographed without any concern, its great black eyes watching us with keenest interest. It only left the nest when one's hand was almost touching it, and returned again to the nest while we waited. A number of brilliant plumaged Fire-tailed Finches, *Zonæginthus bellus*, Lath., were in some thick trees and brambles growing along the banks of the creek, but neither of these birds were met with in the damp precipitous sided gorge itself; the sides of the gorge were covered with tall timber and dense undergrowth and ferns, some of the timber being myrtle. In the gorge were Olivaceous Thickheads, *Acanthornis magnus*, Gld., and Pink-breasted Robins were in considerable numbers. Always close to river itself I should think there must have been a fresh pair every hundred yards. A lovely nest of this species was found in a fork of a sapling overhanging the stream. The nest was beautifully made of moss, ornamented with lichen, the moss exactly corresponded with the mossy covered boughs to which it was attached. The moss of the nest was as moist and green as was the growing moss on the tree stems. I left the nest till the day before I was leaving Tasmania, but no eggs were laid; no doubt it was a little too early in the season.

Perhaps the most important find in this gully was that of *Acanthiza ewingii*, Gld., the Tasmanian or Ewing's Tit. Four nests were found all in forks of tea tree overhanging the running water (a typical mountain trout stream). Mr. W. L. May, who was with me, and who was very familiar with the nests, notes, and habits of the common Tasmanian Tit, *Acanthiza diemenensis*, told me that these nests were absolutely different.

both in construction, material, and situation to the nests of the common bird; the note is also distinct, but the bird itself requires a close inspection to distinguish it. The most marked difference is the absence in *ewingii* of the pale freckled marks on the forehead, and the more rufous crown of the head. Two of the nests contained young, one was empty, and one contained four fresh eggs, three of which are sprinkled with reddish spots chiefly at the large end, and one egg was quite white. The male bird and eggs are in my collection, and the nest in the S.A. Museum. The birds with young were not interfered with.

In the neighbourhood of Latrobe most, if not all, the commoner scrub birds of Tasmania were noted. Specimens of the North Tasmanian Blue Wren, *Malurus cyaneus fletcheræ*, Mat., were secured, but on comparison with skins taken by myself in the south part of the island, I can find no difference; although Mr. Mathews separates the two into separate subspecies. Dates of nests referred to as under:—

7/10/16.—*Sericornis humilis*, Lake Sorell.

8/10/16.—*Pozanoidea plumbea immaculata*, Mat., Scottsdale.

27/9/16.—*Cinclosoma punctatum dovei*, Mat., Hobart.

10/10/16.—*Tribonyx mortieri*, Latrobe.

11/10/16.— " "

12/10/16.—*Acanthiza ewingii*, Latrobe.

12/10/16.—*Erythrodryas rhodinogaster*, Latrobe.

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