

A Trip on the Coorong and amongst the Bristle Birds on Younghusband Peninsula.

By S. A. White, M.B.O.U.

In the early morning of Monday, March 6th, 1916, the writer left by rail for Goolwa. I had two companions, Mr. Wylde, sub-editor of the "Register," and Mr. Rogers, Jnr. My two companions were out for a holiday, but my chief object was the procuring specimens and notes of the Southern Bristle Bird (*Macropygia broadbenti whitei*), Mr. Mathews having made the southern bird a sub-species of the Victorian one., from the material sent by the writer. Having parted with all the specimens I had at that time I was anxious to obtain some more to test the validity of the sub-sp. Not only was I able to do this, but had the great pleasure of spending many hours each day observing the strange birds. There has been very little written about the South Australian form, so that the notes incorporated in this paper upon the Bristle Bird should be of scientific interest.

Reaching Goolwa before noon, had our midday meal there, then boarded Wm. Buzzar's little motor-boat, the "Mary Ann." Having packed away all our luggage a start was made up the Coorong. Many who take this trip along the narrow strip of water with sand-dunes on one side, which shut out the ocean, on the other low lying limestone country on which grows in places mallee and pines, think it monotonous and uninteresting, this is not so with the writer, for the ever-changing aspect of sandhills, either covered in sword grass or current bush, or may be white drift sand, then the picturesque pines and dense mallee on the other side have for me the greatest charm, and needless to say the numerous water-birds which nearly always frequent these waters are of a great and absorbing interest. Not from the gunners point of view, for apart from a bird now and again for food, I have long ago given up that which is known as sport. I can watch the water-fowl with glasses or naked eye for hours, admire and take note of their habits without feeling that I want to destroy under the name of sport these more wonderful of God's creations. We passed the Murray Mouth and steamed on over the placid water, the sun was setting and threw long shadows from the highest peaks of the sandhills over the great salt-water way, then the shadows faded out, and only the sharply-cut edges of the sand-dunes remained sharply defined

upon an evening sky of bright blue, upon which many bright twinkling stars were showing.

It was 9 p.m. when we dropped anchor off our camping ground, we threw our blankets and a few things into the dingey and rowed ashore. Making our way to the tents which our friend Mr. Buzzar had pitched a few days previously. No time was lost in getting some supper and then to bed. In the morning it was found that our camp was situated on a narrow strip of land between the sandhills and the Coorong. A few lignum bushes were scattered over a flat, and at the foot of the sandhill and around our camp a number of straggling bushes of the introduced tobacco plant (*Nicotiana glauca*) were growing. After breakfast my friends were anxious to get a brace of duck for the pot, so I accompanied them along the shore, till we came to one of those places where the fresh water was percolating through the sand and finding its way into the salt. This was the means of attracting a good many wild fowl, the day was a bright sunny one in Autumn, and the sunlight went dancing out over the water which was like the surface of a mirror. Sitting on the clean sandy beach I watched the antics of a pair of Musk Duck, the female was intent on feeding, but the male bird amused himself by swimming in circles half on his side, giving forth the deep peculiar call every now and again throwing jets of water quite a distance with his feet. The little Red-capped Dotterel and Black-fronted Dotterel as well as the Stints formed subjects for thought and observation. Nets were set for fish that evening, and our guide ran them early next morning, and he had a nice dish cooked for our breakfast, after which I went into the sandhills to look the country out for Bristle Birds. A large depression quite a mile long by nearly half that distance wide opened out before me with an amphitheatre of high hills all round. Most of the sand both in the depression and on the hills around was covered in high "Sword Grass," (*Lepidosperma gladiatum*) with a few low shrubs such as the "Currant Bush," (*Leucopogon Richi*.) It was not long before I heard the unmistakable alarm call of the Bristle Bird, and I afterwards discovered this was their stronghold for some distance round. Search as I would not a glimpse of a bird could I get, they kept so tight to cover. A few brush Bronze-winged Pigeons, (*Cosmopelia elegans*) were seen, and a Goshawk, (*Urospiza fasciata cruenta*). Just before sundown Mr. Wylde came out with me, we sat still and watched, and my friend succeeded in procuring the first Bristle Bird. The days were very warm,

in fact hot, and the nights cool with heavy dews. I had seen and heard Scrub-wren in large lignum bushes near our camp, but for a long while in spite of all my efforts could not secure one, but after many attempts succeeded, and as soon as I handled it it seemed new to me (see "S.A. Ornithologist," Vol. II., P. 169.)

Next morning I was out at peep of day and took up a position to watch for Bristle Birds, the whole of the depression under me was filled with dense fog at daylight, and it looked as if the deep depression were half full of snow or cotton wool, soon it began to rise and envelop everything around me for some time, soaking the vegetation in moisture, then the sun arose and pierced the great white pall that hung over the hills and valleys, as it rose the bright rays fell on a sand hill a hundred yards or more away. Here the morning song of Bristle Bird burst forth and was carried on down the gully, soon afterwards by the aid of glasses I saw two fine birds coming out on the bare white sand, chasing one another in a most playful manner. Their long tails which swept the ground gave them more the appearance of mammals or reptiles than birds, they were well out of range, and when I shifted they were gone like a shot. Returning to the camp for breakfast, and went out again in the evening to sit listening to the Bristle Birds' evening song, just as the sun goes down one bird starts, then it is taken up and passed on till out of hearing. Sitting perfectly quiet a bird darted over an open space to make cover on the other side, but I was too quick and procured it. Each day I was out at daylight collecting and observing, returning to a late breakfast. We would then row over to the mainland. On the 12th we did this and worked out amongst the sheoak and tea-tree scrub, quite a number of birds was found there. A pair of fine Wedge-tailed Eagles were soaring high up over head. As would be expected in sheoak country, the Narrow-billed Tree-runner was plentiful, as soon as we reached the tea-tree the familiar call of the Singing Honey-eater could be heard in many directions. The New Holland Honey-eater was also plentiful, the rich full note of the Harmonious Shrike-thrush was often heard, and several birds seen. The twittering call of the (*Melithreptus brevirostris*) could not be mistaken, as they flew from tree top to tree top in small parties. Yellow-rumped Tits were very plentiful, and several large parties of Red-rumped Grass Parrots were met with in the she-oak country. Spink-cheeked Honey-eaters were plen-

tiful, and their strange gurgling note was often heard, the noisy Minah was in evidence, the White-browed Babbler was also seen, the 'Striated' Tit was moving about in large parties. A few Crows were observed flying over. We reached camp in time to have tea, and for me to get out amongst the Bristle Birds at sunset. There was a pair of Butcher-birds nearly always about the camp, and a fish was tied by the tail to one of the tobacco trees near our tents, every half hour they would come along, and have a great squabbling over the fish, pulling vigorously till they procured a good mouthful, then off they would go to a distant tree to swallow it, these birds were so bold that they would attempt to take the fish out of the frying pan, while the pan was on the fire. After a most successful time amongst the Bristle Birds I said goodbye to my friends, who were remaining, and at 4 a.m. on the 14th, boarded the motor boat with the owner, and we soon had the anchor up and on board, and were steaming for Goolwa. I witnessed one of the most wonderful sunrises I have ever seen, for the banks on either side were wrapped in a veil of mist, the sun like a ball of fire shining through this thick fog, appeared as if steeped in blood, and threw the most wonderful coloured lights upon the water, from which the fog or mist was rising in columns. Objects in the distance were magnified to many times their real size, stately old Pelicans looked like full-rigged ships, and when a party of these birds was swimming from one side to the other, they looked like a convoy of ships in full sail. A White-faced Heron standing on the bank appeared through the deceiving mists as large as an emu. The journey back was as full of absorbing interest for we were passing every few minutes some fresh species of birds, fine old Black Swans were seen feeding, their long necks thrust down, and their tails on end as they reached to the bottom for weed. Cormorants of several species, were sitting on the stones or the muddy bank, Gulls and Terns were continually passing up and down. One mottled black and white Tern was quite new to me, and I was unable to get a specimen. The motor boat grounded in the shallows, and we had to put my things into a dingey then pull on for a mile or more into deep water, where we found a motor boat going into Goolwa with a sporting party which we joined, and reached Goolwa in time to catch that afternoon's train to Adelaide. The weather all through had been very fine, the days rather hot at times, but cold nights often with dense mists, or fogs.

The following is a list of the birds taken or observed during the trip, with the writer's remarks and field notes. The nomenclature is that of Gregory M. Mathews, F.L.S.. "List of the Birds of Australia, 1913."

Eudyptula minor undina (Gould). Fairy Penguin.—A specimen was picked up on the 90 mile beach, having been blown ashore, it agrees with other specimens I have seen, which makes me feel sure that there are two species of penguins off the Victorian and South Australian Coast, this being a much smaller bird in every way. Length 300 m.m.; bill, 26 m.m.; depth of bill, 9 m.m.; tarsus, 18 m.m. The bill is very much lighter in construction and the blue of the back is a very light bright blue.

Cosmopelia elegans neglecta (Mathews). Brush Bronze-wing pigeon.—Small family parties of these birds were met with in the sand-dunes, some so young that they were hardly able to fly.

Podiceps cristatus christiana (Mathews). Australian Tip-pit Grebe.—Not many of these birds were seen. I was told by a fisherman that they are often found in their set nets. One specimen taken ♂ measured—length, 508 m.m.; wing from body to tip, 355 m.m.; spread of wings from tip to tip, 756 m.m. Stomach contents—Weed, particles of shells, three small fish, and a great many feathers. All the Grebe seem to be feather eaters.

Gelochelidon nilotica macrotarsa (Gould). Australian Gull-billed Tern. These birds were often seen in large parties skimming over the water.

Hydroprogne taschegrava strenua (Gould). Australian Caspian Tern.—Solitary birds were seen all through the day passing up or down the Coorong uttering their harsh calls, and more often than not they had their bright-red bills pointing downwards as they patrolled the waters in search of food.

Thalasseus bergii poliocercus (Gould). Crested Tern.—Small parties of these birds were seen continually passing up or down the Coorong, ever on the look out for food. When sighting a fish they shut up their wings and plunged into the water like a stone.

Sterna nereis (Gould). White-faced Ternlet.—These beautiful and graceful little birds were often seen, and their plaintive call heard.

Bruchigavia novaehollandiae ethelae (Mathews). Southern Silver Gull.—Plentiful all along the Coorong.

Haematopus ostralegus longirostris (Vieillot). Pied Oyster-catcher.—A good many of these birds were met with on the flats or along the shore.

Haematopus niger fuliginosus (Gould). Eastern Black Oyster-catcher.—Only a single specimen seen of this species.

Lobibyx novaehollandiae (Stephens). Spur-winged Plover.—These plover were numerous they were seen along the shore, on the flats when the tide was out, also on the grass land, a long way back from the water. They are most wary birds, and many other species depend upon them for the call of alarm. I have seen hundreds of birds of many species feeding contentedly, but upon the alarm note of the plover every bird had its head up and was ready for flight.

Leucopolijs ruficapillus (Temminck). Red-capped Dotterel.—Numbers of these birds were met with on the flats at low water, and were also seen running along the sandy beaches.

Elseya melanops (Vieillot). Black-fronted Dotterel.—These birds were often seen, but not nearly as numerous as the preceding species.

Numenius cyanopus (Vieillot). Australian Curlew.—Met with all along the Coorong, and their weird calls were heard all through the night.

Vetola lapponica baueri (Naumann). Eastern Barred-rumped Godwitt.—Several birds seen along the shores and on the flats.

Pisobia minuta ruficollis (Pallas). Red-necked Stint.—Quite large flocks of these little birds were met with in many places. No doubt they were congregating prior to migration.

Erolia ferruginea chinensis (Gray). Eastern Curlew-Sandpiper.—A few examples seen in company with the last-named species.

Notophox novaehollandiae (Latham). White-fronted Heron.—Numbers of these birds were seen silently watching by the water.

Chenopsis atrata (Latham). Eastern Black Swan.—A good many of these stately birds were seen in the swamps off the Coorong, they were very timid, due to being shot at most likely.

Casarca tadornoides. (Jardine and Selby). Mountain Duck.—A few observed flying low along the water and at night their deep-toned call, the male bird answering the female was often heard.

Anas superciliosa (Gmelin). Black Duck.—These fine ducks were not numerous, and moved about in pairs or three to four at the most.

Virago gibberifrons (Muller). Grey Teal.—These were by far the most numerous ducks on the Coorong. They congregated in numbers on the shallow waters covering the flats, when fresh water comes out of the sandhills and meets the salt water of the Coorong.

Biziura lobata (Shaw and Nodder). Musk Duck.—An old bird or two was often seen sailing about the inlets, the male birds submerged to the pouch under the bill.

Hypoleucis varius hypoleucis (Brandt). White-breasted Cormorant.—These birds were not as numerous as one would expect, great numbers are destroyed by the fishermen each year under the mistaken idea that they are injurious to the fishing industry.

Microcarbo melanoleucus (Vieillot). Little Cormorant.—Quite a number was seen sitting on the edge of the water, and on the stakes and posts in the water.

Urospiza fasciata cruenta (Gould). Lesser Goshawk.—A few birds seen, one taken a ♀ measured—length, 482 m.m.; spread of wing from body to tip, 449 m.m.; spread of wings tip to tip, 915 m.m.

Uroaetus audax (Latham). Wedge-tailed Eagle.—One or two birds seen flying high up.

Haliastur sphenurus (Vieillot). Whistling Eagle.—Only one bird seen.

Cerchmias cenchröides (Vigors and Horsfield). Nankeen Kestrel.—Occasionally seen hovering over the long grass.

Psephotus haematonotus (Gould). Red-backed Parrot.—These birds were numerous in the open scrub on the mainland. Three specimens taken showing no variation with the more northern bird. No. 1 ♀, total length, 258 m.m.; wing from body to tip, 171 m.m.; spread of wings, 380 m.m. No. 2 ♂, length, 279 m.m.; wing from body to tip, 171 m.m.; spread of wings, 380 m.m. No. 3 ♂, 279 m.m.; wing from body to tip, 177 m.m.; spread of wings, 380 m.m.

Neonanodes elegans (Gould). Grass Parrot.—A small party of these birds was feeding on grass seeds in the sand dunes, between the Coorong and the sea. One bird taken, ♂ measured—length, 229 m.m.; wing from body to tip, 152 m.m.; spread of wings, 337 m.m.

Hirundo neoxena (Gould). Welcome Swallow.—Quite a number observed.

Hylochelidon nigricans caleyi (Mathews). Tree-Martin.—A few birds noted.

Morganornis superciliosus (Vigors and Horsfield). White-throated Babbler.—These birds were numerous on the mainland. Upon comparing skins with the northern ones it is found there is little or no difference in colouration. The bill of the southern bird seems to be shorter, and not so curved, still the bill of the northern form varies at times. The measurements of these specimens taken—No. 1 ♂, length, 215 m.m.; wing from body to tip, 114 m.m.; spread of wings, 265 m.m. No. 2 ♀, length, 223 m.m.; stretch of wing from body to tip, 120 m.m.; spread of wings, 254 m.m. No. 3.—♂, length, 190 m.m.; wing from body to tip, 110 m.m.; spread of wings, 253 m.m.

Epthianura albifrons (Jardine and Selby). White-fronted Chat.—Great numbers of these birds were hunting diligently over the flats where the fresh water gravitates into the salt, when the tide came in they went back into the sandhills, and returned when the tide went out.

Acanthiza lineata (Gould, sub-sp?) Striated Tit.—A few birds observed in the scrub on the mainland. In comparing them with the Mount Lofty Range bird the bill is not so stout and more pointed, the brown on the forehead and the striations are almost absent, and the green on the back is not so pronounced. A ♂ measured—length, 100 m.m.; wing from body to tip, 63 m.m.; spread of wings, 153 m.m.

Geobasilus chrysorrhous (Quoy and Gaimard). Yellow-rumped Tit.—This bird agrees with the southern form, and G. M. Mathews is right in making the northern form a distinct sub. sp., for it is a brighter and larger bird. One specimen a ♂ measured—length, 108 m.m.; wing from body to tip, 84 m.m.; spread of wings, 285 m.m.

Sericornis longirostris wyldei (S. A. White.*) Coorong Scrub Wren.—These birds were very rare and shy, and it was only after many attempts that I was able to procure them, they keep to the lignum creeks, sing a low sweet song morning and evening, otherwise one would never know they live there, the type specimen measures—length, 120 m.m.; wing from body to tip, 75 m.m.; spread of wings, 170 m.m.

Maccoyornis broadbenti whitei (Mathews). Southern Rufous Bristle Bird.—There is quite a number of these birds scattered over the sandhills of Younghusband Peninsula. They were exceedingly shy and difficult to secure, darting

* "South Australian Ornithologist", Vol. II., page 169.

with lightening-like rapidity from one bush or clump of sword-grass to another. They seem to be perfectly silent during the day, but at sunrise and sunset they sing a most remarkably sweet song. The prelude is a loud ticking note, like the ticking of a clock, but loud and sharp, and after being repeated three or four times, they burst into a beautiful soft melody, which increases in volume then softly dies away. The song is taken up and carried on, from one depression in the sandhills to another and lasts for about two minutes. With this exception the birds are silent without their hiding place is approached, then an alarm call is given of two notes, resembling very much the alarm call of some of the honey-eaters, but louder and shriller. They depend upon their feet to escape from danger, as a rule only once did I see a bird take to flight, and that was when I flushed it from a patch of sword-grass which stood out in the open. I found by experience that it is quite correct that these birds will run down a rabbit burrow till the danger is past, and have repeatedly tracked them down the burrows. They are extremely local birds, and if a pair be marked down in a clump of bushes, or rushes they will be heard singing morning and evening at sunrise and at sunset, within thirty yards of first discovery.

Measurements of specimens taken—

No. 1. ♀ length, 253 m.m.; spread of wing from body to tip, 114 m.m.; spread of wings, 270 m.m. No. 4 ♂, length, 265 m.m.; spread of wing from body to tip, 113 m.m.; spread of wings, 278 m.m. No. 6 ♂, length, 273 m.m.; spread of wing from body to tip, 112 m.m.; spread of wings, 279 m.m. No. 01 ♀, length 253 m.m.; spread of wing from body to tip, 114 m.m.; spread of wings, 279 m.m.

No. 1 bill, 15 m.m.; tarsus, 34 m.m.; Iris, bright reddish-brown, top mandible, greyish-brown; lower mandible, light grey; feet, slaty brown.

No. 4. Iris, bright reddish-brown; top mandible, dark brown; lower, greyish brown.

No. 6, bill, 17 m.m.; tarsus, 33 m.m.

Colluricincla harmonica victorica (Mathews). Victorian Grey Shrike Thrush.—These birds were fairly numerous, and were found both in the sandhills and on the mainland. Upon comparison with skins taken round Adelaide, showed no variation.

No. 1 ♀ Length, 265 m.m.; spread of wing from body to tip, 164 m.m.; spread of wings, 381 m.m.. Iris, rich brown; bill, blackish brown; feet, slaty black.

No. 2. ♂, length, 265 m.m.; spread of wing from body to tip, 164 m.m.; spread of wings, 381 m.m. Iris, rich reddish-brown; bill and feet, black.

Bulestes torquatus ethelae (Mathews). Southern Butcher Bird.—A pair of these birds was so quiet in camp that they would take food from the hand.

Neositta pileata tenuirostris (Gould). Slender-billed Tree-runner.—A family of these charming little birds was met with in the sheoak country. One bird, a ♂ taken, measured—length, 126 m.m. Wing from body to tip, 70 m.m.; spread of wings, 158 m.m.

Melithreptus atricapillus (Latham). Brown-headed Honey-eater. Small parties were moving about from tree top to tree top on the mainland. One bird taken, ♂—length, 133 m.m.; wing from body to tip, 95 m.m.; spread of wings, 210 m.m.

Meliphaga sonora (Gould). Southern Singing Honey-eater. These birds were numerous on the mainland, and were occasionally seen in the sand dunes, two male birds were taken, which measured as follows. No. 1,—length, 203 m.m.; wing from body to tip, 127 m.m.; spread of wings, 298 m.m. No. 2—length, 203 m.m.; wing, 127 m.m.; spread of wings, 293 m.m.

Meliornis novaehollandiae subassimilis (Mathews). South Australian White-bearded Honey-eater.—Numerous on the mainland, a ♂—length, 178 m.m.; wing, 105 m.m.; spread of wings, 241 m.m.

Myzantha melanocephala whitei (Mathews). Southern Black-headed Minah.—Numbers of these noisy birds were met with on the mainland, mostly in the scrub or open forest country, two specimens taken. No. 1. ♂—length, 290 m.m.; wing from body to tip, 178 m.m.; spread of wings, 412 m.m. No. 2. ♂—length, 280 m.m.; wing, 190 m.m.; spread of wings, 430 m.m.

Acanthagenys rufogularis cygnus (Mathews). Southern Spiny-Checked Honey-eater.—Fairly plentiful on the mainland, not seen on the sandhills between the Coorong and the sea. The specimen taken was a very dull bird, showing but little rufous on the throat, it was a ♂, and measured—length, 254 m.m.; wing from body to tip, 228 m.m.; spread of wings, 344 m.m.
