

## *Eudromais australis* (Australian Dottrel).

(By J. Neil McGilp, R.A.O.U.).

Having resided for many years in the inland of South Australia, I have had a great opportunity of observing the Australian Dottrel in its homeland; for this bird loves to roam on the dry, open plains in our Far Northern country.

During dry times, which, unfortunately, occur all too frequently in the interior of our island-continent, the Dottrel is found scattered about in small flocks of four or five in number; but after a break-up of a drought this species congregates in large numbers, frequently by the hundreds, for a few weeks. The breeding season follows closely upon a good rainfall, when these birds are usually noted in pairs. They often nest very closely to each other, on favoured patches of country.

This species has the usual dottrel-like habit of running a few paces, then standing with its body motionless, but with an occasional upward jerk of the head; after standing for a few seconds, the bird will again run on a few yards, and repeat the neck-jerking motion. I have never observed this species run more than a few yards without this peculiar action. The Australian Dottrel does not fly readily, preferring rather to run out of one's way and stand with its back towards the disturber, in which position it is very hard to observe, on account of its protective coloring. I have on many occasions noted a single bird and, thinking she might be breeding, got out of the motor or trap to hunt for a likely nest, only to find that when disturbed, dozens of these birds started to run from within a hundred yards, or so of where my conveyance stood.

This splendid little bird does great work for mankind; being a great enemy to grubs and grasshoppers, and devours an immense quantity of these pests as it feeds by night as well as by day. I know this for a fact, for I have, with the assistance of the motor headlights, watched them at work on a thick patch of grasshoppers. At the first showing of the lights, the birds remained perfectly still, but after a few minutes began to feed about. At the slightest noise, all would stand bolt upright, till everything seemed safe again.

The Australian Dottrel will often squat down on the ground, and remain in this position for a considerable time, and one often passes them close by without their moving. Evidently

they rely for safety on their remarkable protective coloration, which so closely resembles the surroundings, that unless the bird has its breast towards one, which is very seldom, they are hard to discern.

They rarely seek shelter from the sun's fierce glare, seeming to enjoy the terrific heat of the "interior" summer. One does, now and again, see them standing or squatting in the shade of a fencing post, but it is seldom that one is disturbed from the shelter of a bush or tree. I have not observed the Dottrel in any timbered country; the open, sandy plains and stoney-topped tablelands, devoid of timber, is its true habitat. It runs with great speed, and flies very swiftly; I have, on numerous occasions found dead birds along the sheep fences, having been killed by striking the wires when in swift flight.

The Australian Dottrel is one of the earliest birds to commence breeding after the rain breaks up a drought, and in a good season usually brings out a second brood. It rarely lays at all in a bad season, even should it remain droughty for an extended period. I have observed this species breeding in every month of the year except December and January. These two months are usually very dry, and I have not the slightest doubt but they would breed then if the season was favourable, for, like most of the inland species, their breeding season is solely regulated by the season.

When breeding operations start, the birds scratch out a small depression in the ground, or resort to a deep horse or cattle track (made when the ground is soft, after rain). The earth that is scraped out is formed into a small ring round the depression, and a few small stones or short, dry twigs are usually placed on this ring. I have found the depression in this condition four days before any eggs were laid. The eggs are laid on consecutive days, and usually in the early morning. The clutch, almost without exception, is three eggs. I have only found one clutch of two eggs out of dozens that I have noted. One one occasion, when driving horses in from our home horse paddock, one of the horses smashed a perfectly fresh egg out of the three that were in the nest. Ten days later, I noticed there were three eggs in the nest, so took the clutch; one egg was only slightly incubated, whereas the others were in an advanced state of incubation.

I once found that the Australian Dottrel had made a very artistic nest, using the curled-up pieces of silt from a clay-pan,

and short pieces of grass and half-green herbage to form the ring round the nest; there were three eggs in the depression.

When the sitting Dottrel is suddenly flushed from the nest, the eggs are found bare in the depression; with the ring of pebbles, debris or earth, clear of the eggs. If one stands back a short distance, the bird will return by short runs, and gradually draw closer to the nest. When the nest is reached, she stands with her back to one, and with head turned over shoulder, to watch. To all appearances she is standing motionless, but, nevertheless, after a while, succeeds in completely covering the eggs with the contents of the "ring" round the depression, and sneaks quietly away, and stands still for a very long time, until she is satisfied the danger is past, when she again sneaks up to the nest, and this time one can plainly see her scratch out the covering matter from the nest, and form the ring again.

If one slowly approaches a dottrel on the nest, so that the bird sees the danger at some distance away, she will usually attempt to cover the eggs before leaving. When the eggs are covered it is a very difficult thing to find them, unless one cares to spend much time and patience in waiting for the bird to return. The eggs, when freshly laid, are of a greenish color, but this changes to yellowish-brown after a few days. They vary a good deal in shape, some being tapered abruptly towards the small end, others are more oval in form. The clutch is usually very uniform; and the average size of many eggs I have measured is barely  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches by a little over 1 inch. The eggs are always placed point in towards centre of the depression or nest.

The young leave the nest shortly after they are hatched, and can even then run very smartly. If a brood a few days old is disturbed, the parent will give a call, and the young will squat down on the ground with head outstretched, and in the herbage if possible. They are very hard to locate when they are in this position, as their mottled appearance makes them look like little clods of earth. The mother, in the meantime, pretends injury, and flutters about trying to draw one's attention to herself. After a little while she gives a different call, evidently assured the danger was past. If one watches carefully, each little chick will stand perfectly still for a second, jerk the head, and run a few paces, just as the parent birds do. Again at the danger call from the mother bird, the young will disappear altogether for some time, but at a "clear" call, the

youngsters jump up, and proceed as before mentioned. I noted that the mother did not let the young go far without a "danger" signal. The chicks do not run together, but each seems to take its own course somewhere towards the mother. After a considerable time the whole family is removed from danger. I would like to mention that I have never managed to follow the three young after the second danger signal, being fully occupied in watching one little chick, and in the majority of cases, I have failed to follow the movements of any of them at all, after the third "danger signal."

I regret very much to state that these grand creatures are having a bad time through the destructive agency of the fox, which accounts for a great many of the eggs and the young, and although the Dottrel is fairly numerous, the time will surely come when the end of this hard worker for mankind will arrive.

When over on Kangaroo Island recently, I saw some of the "Flinders' Chase" country, but I doubt if these splendid dottrels could exist over there, it being different from the dry, arid plains of their homeland.

The Australian Dottrel, together with the Black-breasted Plover, Straw-necked Ibis, and Bennett's Crow (not the Raven) are, I venture to state, of great value on account of their fine destruction of grubs and grasshoppers. There are other species that are individually as valuable in this respect, but they do not come along in the splendid flocks at the right moment, as those I have mentioned.

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