

Notes on Birds met with at Gosford and Port Stephens, in New South Wales.

By Edwin Ashby.

PART I.—GOSFORD.

It was my privilege to spend a few days of the last week in September, 1923, at Point Clare, near Gosford, N.S.W. Point Clare is situated on the western side of Brisbane Water. The land there rises gradually from the water for a few hundred yards, and here the grass grows down to the water's edge between scattered timber.

Behind this gradually sloping land, the grade rapidly becomes precipitous until the summit of the hills is reached many hundred feet above water-level.

The Hawkesbury sandstone forms the capping of all the hills, with the result that the scrub on the hill-tops is almost identical with that found bordering Middle Harbour, near Sydney. It consists of masses of low bushes remarkable for the beauty and diversity of their flowers; the timber is scattered and stunted, and is almost entirely composed of Eucalypts. On the other hand, the timber growing on the lower slopes of these hills and on the talus near the water is lofty and straight, and in places where the encroachment of settlement has not destroyed it makes quite a thick forest and in some respects quite a distinct bush from that which crowns the hills.

As may be expected, the bird life in this narrow strip of well-wooded country is much more varied and numerous than is the case on the hill-tops. The charming, though from its frequency becoming somewhat monotonous, song of the White-throated Gerygone (*Gerygone albogularis*) was heard continuously throughout the livelong day, the brilliant yellow of the underside of this little songster making it quite a conspicuous feature of the bush. Its near relative *G. fusca* (Brown Gerygone) frequented the thicker patches of forest, but its song was by no means as pleasing as that of the former species.

Close in front of the house where I was staying, a Dusky Wood-Swallow (*Artamus cyanopterus*) had built its nest on a loose piece of bark standing out from a tree-trunk about seven feet from the ground. One much enjoyed watching the birds feeding the young and sitting on the nest. In a clump of straight-trunked Eucalypts near by, a Sacred Kingfisher (*Halcyon sanctus*) was feeding its young, and the loud breeding call was heard throughout the day. A Caterpillar-eater

(*Campephaga tricolor*) evidently also had its nest near by, its querulous notes adding charm to the bird calls that could be heard from the veranda of the boarding-house. A small patch of Teatree bordering the swampy ground that margined the river which entered Brisbane Water near by was the home of *Acanthiza pusilla* (Brown Thornbill) and several pairs of Blue Wrens (*Malurus cyaneus*), which were clothed in their resplendent nuptial plumage. In the bushes and low trees near the house two species of *Geobasileus* were often seen hunting for insects. The yellow rump of *G. chrysorrhous* was exceptionally bright, and the buff rump of *G. reguloides* decidedly paler than is the case with its South Australian representatives.

In a patch of flowering Gums bordering the river there was a great variety of bird life, and one found it difficult to identify all the species. One, with a distinctive whistle strange to my ears, was found to be the White-cheeked Honey-eater (*Meliornis nigra*). The Yellow Robin (*Eopsaltria australis*) was numerous, and its young, fully fledged in striped plumage so different from the adult, was noted further up the hill-slopes almost up to the crags of outcropping Hawkesbury sandstone.

Peaceful Doves (*Geopelia placida*), Magpie-Larks (*Grallina cyanoleuca*), Jacky Winter (*Microeca fascians*), Laughing Jacks (*Dacelo gigas*), Silver-eyes (*Zosterops*), the N.S.W. Yellow-throated form, Cuckoos, and Butcher-Birds (*Cracticus torquatus*) all joined in the bird chorus that greeted the ears of the listener, more especially in the early morning and late afternoon.

The Oriole (*Oriolus sagittatus*) was only observed on the lower slopes where the heavy timber grew. The writer was able to watch one making its loud call from the top of a low tree; it did not mind one's approach and produced the loud notes. With each loud note the neck is stretched and the head pushed forward, creating a sort of bobbing action, the performance finishing with a series of chattering notes that were quite new to me. I think it quite probable that this ending is a common one, but owing to the habit of the birds choosing the loftiest trees from which to produce their song the concluding chattering notes are often inaudible to the listener.

The White-eared Honey-eater (*Meliphaga leucotis*) was numerous everywhere, and Shags, Pelicans, Herons, and Coots were all noted on the water's edge; but the most interesting of all to me was the Little Mangrove Bittern (*Butorides striata*). This wader put in an appearance only a few minutes before I had to leave to catch my train. It was walking up and

down the row of piles or stakes that enclosed the bathing-pool connected with the boarding-house. These enclosures are considered a necessary precaution against sharks.

The Bittern was walking back and forth with a forward bobbing movement, the body, head, and neck being carried horizontally. A gentleman who resides at the same house that I was staying at, and who seemed a reliable observer, informed me that the Bittern is often to be seen walking up and down the same row of stakes, and that on more than one occasion when a number of Shags have been fishing off the same row of stakes the Bittern has been there with the Shags. From time to time the Shags were taking toll of the shoal of fishes that were close to the piles, and several times he had seen the Bittern plunge down on to the surface of the water with its wings spread, snap up the fish and flop back again to its perch. I thought that this departure from the Bittern's usual method of fishing was so interesting that it was well worth recording.

As before stated, the elevated plateau formed by the horizontally-bedded Hawkesbury sandstone has been cut through by the agency of water, forming wide valleys and exposing the underlying strata, which may have been "mud-stones," but of this I am not quite certain. The valley side becomes more precipitous as one ascends, becoming absolutely vertical in places near the summit, which is many hundred feet above the floor of the valley. Above the craggy summit the country is entirely sandy. The upper plateau is cut into laterally by the heads of numerous narrow valleys, the sides of which are in many places composed of huge piles of immense stone blocks, often piled one upon another, reminding one of the monoliths that formed the sacred circles of Neolithic man in Europe. Slender-Spinebills (*Acanthorhynchus tenuirostris*) were here very numerous, and a few of the other Honey-eaters that had been noted on the lower slopes were also present, but few other birds were seen. In more than one place the lovely cream-coloured epiphytic orchid *Dendrobium speciosum* was growing on the bare summit rocks, and a little way down one of the valleys the sides of these huge blocks of sandstone were thickly clothed with another epiphytic orchid, whose leaves look like a string of raisins. The plant is known by the name of *Dendrobium linguiformis*, from the tongue shape of its fleshy leaves. Many of these clumps were in full bloom with, in some cases, hundreds of sprays of creamy-white flowers.

These rocks are the home of the Rock Warbler (*Origma rubricata*), but the favourite locality was a little farther on, where the hill-top probably was nearly a thousand feet above

sea-level, and a rivulet had cut through the sandstone, forming a steep and narrow gorge. Palmtrees were growing in the narrow gully and pushing their crowns of fanlike leaves out into the sunshine through the tangled vegetation below. A great variety of timber trees grew along the creek-bed. Creepers of several sorts climbed over the tree-tops and formed ropelike cables amongst the rocks. With the aid of these natural ropes we were able to climb down to the creek-bed just below a horseshoe-shaped waterfall. A few Bird's-nest Ferns (*Asplenium nidus*) grew on the trunks of the trees, and many interesting ferns clung in the crannies of the rocks. Here the Rock Warblers were at home, running over the rocks with the same quiet mouselike movements that are so characteristic of the genus *Sericornis*, or Scrub-Wrens. Tits (*Acanthiza*) were numerous, finding plenty of insects amongst the damp bushes. Every now and again a Coachwhip-Bird (*Psophodes olivaceus*) would sound his low whistle, concluding with the familiar crack of the stockwhip; then for a moment he would show himself on the top of some tangled roots, the elevated crest, white cheeks, and long olive-coloured tail being visible but for a couple of seconds, when he was again lost to sight in the underscrub. A little lower down the gully from time to time came the querulous note of the Satin Bower-Bird (*Ptilinorhynchus violaceus*). Right overhead, hawking for insects amongst the tree-tops, was a Black-faced Flycatcher (*Monarcha melanopsis*). Its song recalled many pleasant memories, for I first heard it in the Blackall Range, in Queensland, more than 20 years ago. The notes are first two couplets of soft whistles, each with a rising inflection, the second pair rising in the scale and then concluding the song with a long-drawn-out soft whistle, commencing strong and descending the scale as the sound dies away. Lower down the valley, where it began to widen out, we were interested in watching a Frogmouth (*Podargus strigoides*) sitting on a nest of loose sticks placed in a most perilous position on the bare bough of a Gumtree fully 60 feet above the ground. The nest was not placed across a fork, although there must have been some slight twig that had been incorporated with the sticks that composed the nest. Anyhow, considering the slim branch upon which it was perched, it seemed the most unstable site I have ever known a Frogmouth to choose. Noisy Friar-Birds (*Philemon corniculatus*) were calling in the same patch of lofty Gums. An Oriole was whistling lower down the gully, and the flutelike notes of the Grey Butcher-Bird mingled well with the other bush sounds.

PART II.—PORT STEPHENS.

Port Stephens is a large inlet of the sea, situated about 20 miles north of Newcastle, in New South Wales. The township we stayed at, Nelson Bay, is situated a few miles in from the Heads, on the south side of the harbour. The harbour on that side is a succession of small, sandy bays, with rocky points of felspar porphyry. Except in the hollows of the small bays, the country rises abruptly from the harbour for 50 or 60 feet and then less steeply. The soil is consistently sandy and the country inland is broken up into small sandy hills rising here and there as conical hills of several hundred feet elevation.

The bush, which I am thankful to say is up to the present quite unspoilt, except for a few patches that have been burnt, is composed of a wonderful variety of flowering shrubs growing beneath the partial shade of scattered Eucalypts. "The Anchorage," the house we stayed at, is on the outskirts of the small township, overlooking the harbour from a wooded rise.

One steps into a wealth of wild flowers from the garden gate. Numbers of graceful-foliaged Christmas-trees (*Ceratopetalum gummiferum*) are growing both inside and outside the garden fence, and must in their season be a glory of delicate pink. Then there are a *Comesperma* (*C. ericinum*) with delicate mauve-coloured flowers; a low shrub with highly decorative leaves and charming white flowers, much like a *Grevillea*, by name *Lomatia silaifolia*; another shrub, called "Golden Pea Bush" (*Gompholobium latifolium*), about four feet high, covered with very large, deep rich yellow, pea-shaped flowers, and with dark-green leaves that make a choice background to the deep-yellow flowers; and pink *Boronias* of several species, of which the most common was *B. pinnata*, a dwarf shrub which is rightly one of the chief favorites of the N.S.W. native flora. It surely should find a place in every garden; the sprays of lovely pink flowers and pinnate leaves have a charm all their own. In peaty swampy places we met with another pink-flowering member of this genus (*Boronia pilosa*), that is a little taller in growth and bears a greater abundance of pink flowers, so much so that the countryside where they grow is of a brilliant pink colour. It is simply impossible to describe the wealth of native flowering shrubs that surround "The Anchorage." Blue *Dampieras* and *Scaevolae*, *Acacias* (several dwarf forms with graceful foliage), *Styphelias* of several species, some of which are distinguished with strange vernacular names of "Five corners," "Seven corners," &c., the terminology being due to the shape of the fruits; *Bossiaeas*, *Goodenias*,

Tetratheca, Hibbertias, white Epacris and Flannel Flowers—indeed, the "Bush" is a veritable garden.

Close to the house a number of Miners (*Myzantha garrula*) were feeding on the flowers of a tall Honeysuckle (*Banksia*). The local name of "Soldier-bird" certainly was somewhat appropriate, for they seemed to have a chronic feud with the Brush Wattle-bird (*Anthochaera chrysoptera*). Both species were attracted by the honey-bearing flowers of the *Banksia*.

From the balcony at sunrise and in the quiet of late afternoon one could now and again hear the crack of the Coachwhip-Bird (*Psophodes olivaceus*). These birds frequented a deep dell with a wet, swampy bottom, in which a mass of tall ferns and tangled undergrowth grew under the shade of a variety of trees that had found a foothold in this damp hollow.

One of the most interesting birds that was particularly numerous was the Leather-head or Friar-Bird (*Philemon corniculatus*). In the early morning and the latter part of the afternoon the birds made a speciality of showing off their great vocal powers. Many of their loud notes are not unmusical, but some of them are certainly not harmonious. (I could not lose the impression that the birds were talking in a foreign language. I tried again and again to put some of these sounds into English words, but was invariably forced to admit that they were untranslatable.) The strange black bare head and neck and the great frontal protuberance are not seen by the naked eye when the birds are in the tree-tops. One needs to have them almost in hand to discern these weird characteristics.

Gerygone albigularis was common, but I did not note its relative, *G. fusca*. White-eared Honey-eaters and Slender Spine-billed Honey-eaters were very numerous, and the rich whistle of the Yellow-breasted Whistler was heard continuously. Although not so common, its relative *Pachycephala rufiventris* (Rufous-breasted Whistler) was also present. Blue-Wrens (*Malurus cyaneus australis*) were fairly common, and belonged to the southern form as far as the blue shades of the plumage were concerned, but the throat and breast were less purple than specimens from South Australia or Tasmania; whereas a little further north in the same State, at Malanganee, I found this form was replaced by the Silvery-blue Wren (*M. cyanocephalus*), a very distinct pale-crowned subspecies). *Meliphaga chrysops* (Yellow-faced Honey-eater) was amongst the larger timber. The underside is greyer than that of the South Australian form, otherwise they are similar. I was pleased to note the Little Green Pigeon (*Chalcophaps chrysochlora*), but it was not numerous. Several *Acanthizas* were noted and *Sericornis*

longirostris parvulus (Gould) (White-browed Scrub-Wren) was noted in several places. The almost entire absence of streaking on the throat and paler underside makes this a distinct subspecies.

One of the more interesting birds was *Graucalus robustus* (Little Cuckoo-Shrike). I had noted what I supposed was the Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike flying over the tree-tops once or twice, but on a later occasion my attention was attracted to a loud call that was quite new to me and found it was made by a Cuckoo-Shrike that had settled on the loftiest gums. There were three or four in the flock, and they proved to be the Little Cuckoo-Shrike. This loud call is very distinct from that made by the common species.

The Rosella (*Platycercus eximius*) was noted in small numbers only, and a single specimen of the King-Parrot (*Aprosmictus scapularis*) was seen in a small patch of tangled forest growing in the bed of a small creek that had cut out a shallow valley near the base of one of the elevated conical hills before mentioned. Lofty Eugenias and other trees were here mixed with Eucalypts. Ropelike creepers had found their way over the tree-tops, forming splendid shelter for bird life. To me the most interesting bird of all was a very fine Powerful Owl (*Ninox strenua*) (Gould). Disturbed by one's intrusion into its retreat, it flapped noisily from its perch into a tangled mass of creepers near by, making as much noise, with its great wings beating the branches, as one would expect from a huge turkey. It had been feeding exclusively upon native birds. A pair of Leaden-Flycatchers (*Myiagra rubecula*) were hawking for insects from the tops of the lower trees, my attention being called to them by the utterance of a hoarse, wheezy note. By the aid of one's field-glasses, the great contrast between the leaden throat and breast of the male and the rufous throat and breast of the female was very apparent. In the same gully the Coachwhip-Birds were numerous and their resounding crack was frequently heard. Of Cuckoos, the Pallid, Fantail, and Bronze were all noted, but the Square-tailed seemed to be absent. Among other birds noted were the Yellow-breasted Robin, White-shafted Fantail; Red-browed Finch, Diamond-Bird (*Pardalotus punctatus*), and Silver-eyes. The White-bellied Sea-Eagle (*Haliaetus leucogaster*) was seen on most days and towards evening. It flew over the house where we were staying and on one occasion it held a large fish in its talons. Fortunately it flew so low that had we been familiar with the fish of that locality, it would not have been difficult to determine the species. It reminded me of the fish we know in South.

Australia as Rock-Cod. The white underside and head of the Eagle contrasted finely with the grey back and wings in the rays of the afternoon sun. On the whole the district cannot be considered a good place for land birds. The timber is not sufficiently dense and diversified. Of the sea birds I cannot speak. There were practically none inshore, and we had not time to visit the islands which lie both inside and outside the harbour.
