

SOME NOTES ON BIRDS SEEN DURING A VISIT IN
SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER, 1927, TO THE MURCHIL-
SON AND GASCOYNE DISTRICTS, W.A.

By Dr. A. Chenery.

The past season in these districts had been an exceptionally favourable one, both for the agriculturists in the Geraldton district and for the graziers in the Gascoyne. At Port Hedland, further north, however, the rainfall had been well below the average. One therefore saw the country traversed under most favourable conditions; and no doubt bird life was correspondingly numerous.

From the "Trans" train, as the Transcontinental is usually abbreviated over there, one has little opportunity of noticing bird life, most of those seen flying or stationary being too far off for accurate identification. The Major Mitchell Cockatoo (*Kakatoe leadbeateri*) was seen near Wynbring, Pipits (*Anthus australis*); Brown Hawks (*Falco berigora*), Nankeen Kestrels (*Falco cenchroides*), and Wood-Swallows (*Artamus personatus* mostly) were identified, especially during the stop at Naretha early in the morning, and also the notes of the Crested Bellbird (*Oreoica cristata*), Brown Weebill (*Smicromis brevirostris*), and Purple-crowned Lorikeets (*Glossopsitta porphyrocephala*) were unmistakable when the timber on the far side of the Nullarbor Plain was entered. Rufous Songlarks (*Cinclorhamphus mathewsi*) and Masked Wood-Swallows (*Artamus personatus*) were numerous near Naretha. Here also the Sturt pea (*Cliaanthus dampieri*) was in bloom in quantities. No Plain-Turkeys (*Eupodotis australis*) were seen by me, although our conductor on the train stated that they were frequently met with on the trip across.

At Kalgoorlie, where there was a wait of a few hours, I took a tram out to the cemetery and beyond where the nearest scrub is met with and identified the Shy Scrub-Wren (*Hylacola cauta*), Crested Bellbird sitting on a nest in a low stump, and the more or less ubiquitous "Greenie" (*Meliphaga penicillata*).

During our railway journey of 300 and odd miles on the Midland Railway from Perth to Geraldton the wild-flowers, for which our Western State is justly famous, were a delight to the observer, most brilliant in colouring, and apparently endless in variety. My companion on most of this trip, Mr. Edwin Ashby, is an enthusiastic botanist and cultivator of our native flora, as most of the "Ornithologist's" readers well know. He gave me some thrills during this journey by leaving the train at every stop of five minutes and hastening off some distance after a coveted specimen. He, however, completed the journey without being left behind. From this train I managed to identify, mostly by sight, also in some cases by their distinctive notes, the Port Lincoln Parrot (*Barnardius zonarius*), Crow (*Corvus cecillae* or perhaps *C. bennetti*), Black-backed Magpie (*Gymnorhina tibicen*), not noted in numbers anywhere; Magpie-Lark (*Grallina cyanoleuca*), fairly common; Yellow-throated Miner (*Myzantha flavigula*), Nankeen Kestrel, plentiful; Straw-necked Ibis (*Threskiornis spinicollis*), odd birds seen in swampy country; Grey Duck (*Anas superciliosa*), Banded Plover (*Zonifer tricolor*), Black-throated Butcher-Bird (*Cracticus nigrogularis*), White-tailed Black Cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus baudini*), Galah

(*Kakatoe roseicapilla*), Corella (*Kakatoe tenuirostris*), Purple-crowned Lorikeet, Red Wattle-Bird (*Anthochaera carunculata*), Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike (*Coracina novae-hollandiae*), Brown Honeyeater (*Gliciphila indistincta*), and Major Mitchell Cockatoo.

When we reached Bluff Point, a station just outside Geraldton, we were met by friends with whom we stayed for a few days awaiting the arrival of the Fremantle boat to take us on to Shark Bay, another 200 miles north. During two or three excursions by motor around this district a fair number of species was noted. The coastal sand-dunes are covered by teatree, and along the Chapman River, which enters the sea at Bluff Point, the teatree was also dense. Inland various kinds of acacia scrub, with numerous flowering shrubs and occasional belts of gum along the creeks, predominated.

The country around Geraldton is undulating and picturesque, and some fine views are obtainable from the higher points. Birds noted at Bluff Point and during our excursions within a twenty-mile radius were Yellow-tailed Thornbill (*Acanthiza chrysorrhoa*), nesting in a pepper-tree in the garden, but nowhere plentiful; Willie-Wagtail (*Rhipidura leucophrys*), with fledged young; Singing Honeyeater (*Meliphaga virescens*), very plentiful; Western Shrike-Thrush (*Colluricincla rufiventris*), Spotted Scrub-Wren (*Sericornis maculatus*), in the teatree scrub; Brown Honeyeater, plentiful along the Chapman River, and seldom silent; Western Silvereye (*Zosterops australasiae*), plentiful, one pair found nesting in a flowering acacia; Groundlarks and the two Songlarks (*Cinclorhynchus cruralis* and *C. mathewsi*), numerous; White-browed Babbler (*Pomatostomus superciliosus*), Purple-backed Wren (*Malurus assimilis*), common; and Splendid Blue-Wren (*M. splendens*), seen a few times; Mistletoe-Bird (*Dicaeum hirundinaceum*), Rufous Whistler (*Pachycephala rufiventris*), Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater (*Acanthagenys rufogularis*), Yellow-throated Miner, Crested Bellbird, Fan-tailed Cuckoo (*Cacomantis flabelliformis*), Narrow-billed Bronze Cuckoo (*Chalcites basalis*), Pallid Cuckoo (*Cuculus pallidus*), a pair of Singing Honeyeaters feeding fully-fledged young one on the Gascoyne, Red Wattle-Bird flushed from nest in a *Casuarina*, Brush Wattle-Bird (*A. chrysoptera*) seen once along the Chapman River, White-tailed Black Cockatoo, Corella, Port Lincoln Parrot, Black-throated Butcher Bird, Red-backed Kingfisher (*Halcyon pyrrhopygius*), Dusky Wood-Swallow (*Artamus cyanopterus*), Crow (*C. ceciliae*), Whistling Eagle (*Haliastur sphenurus*), Welcome Swallow (*Hirundo neoxena*), Fairy Martin (*Hylochelidon ariel*), White-backed Swallow (*Cheramœca leucosterna*), and Banded Plover.

The day after our arrival at Geraldton we received the cheerful news that our boat the s.s. "Koolinda," instead of being on its way back from Fremantle, was well aground on a sandbank in Shark Bay on her trip south. After two days' delay we made arrangements with the captain of a fishing lugger, who was bound for the Abrolhos fishing-grounds, to take us up to the bay. We spent two nights and a day on the trip, and did not cost the crew much for our sustenance, as the seas along the Western Australian coast proved anything but smooth. However, on the morning of the second day we rounded Steep Point, which they informed me was the most westerly point on the Australian coast, and entered the narrow south passage, only one and a quarter miles wide, or less perhaps, between Dirk Hartog and the mainland. During the trip I noted only some Mollymawks, two varieties of Terns, one species of Petrel, Silver Gulls, an Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*), and an Eastern Curlew (*Numenius cyanopus*).

Mr. Walter Edwards, Fisheries Inspector stationed at Denham, came out from Brown's Landing, as they call the station jetty on Dirk Hartog, and took us and our luggage off the "Magnolia" ketch, and we bid a not altogether sorrowful farewell to our late hosts, who promptly set sail back to their lawful occasions at the Abrolhos, some 80 miles away. As my nephew is part owner of the Dirk Hartog Island sheep station we were soon comfortably settled at the homestead, where I spent the next ten days. The birds noted in the bay and on the island included Pelican (*Pelecanus conspicillatus*); Pied Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax varius*) nesting in great numbers on the Quoin Bluff, north of the homestead, on ledges in the limestone cliffs, young fully-fledged (I was there in the third week in September); Pacific Gull (*Gabianus pacificus*), Silver Gull (*Larus novae-hollandiae*), Crested Tern (*Sterna bergii*), Little Tern (*Sterna albifrons* ?), Eastern Curlew, Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*), or a wader resembling it, too shy to get a shot at; Little Stint (*Erolia ruficollis*), Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*Erolia acuminata*), Pied Oyster-catcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*), Reef Heron (*Demigretta sacra*), both the dark-blue and white variations seen. I do not remember noticing any Dotterels, but fancy they should be there. Osprey, common, nest seen on Monkey Rock at the south passage and another on the west coast of the island; White-breasted Sea-Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*); Wedge-tailed Eagle (*Uroaetus audax*); Nankeen Kestrel, fairly common (one bird flushed from a nest on the ground at the edge of an abandoned well, which had been fenced off with galvanized-iron and overgrown, four eggs in the

nest); Banded Plover, Southern Stone-Curlew (*Burhinus magnirostris*), one solitary bird seen near the station; Black-and-White Wren (*Malurus leucopterus*), fairly plentiful; Purple-backed Wren (*M. assimilis*), common; Spotted Scrub-Wren, very plentiful (making their scolding noise and coming very close if one sat or stood quietly in the acacia scrub, they appear to be inquisitive); Rocky Field-Wren (*Calamanthus montanellus*), also plentiful and constantly to be heard giving their sweet little song; Singing Honeyeater, the commonest bird on the island; Brown Honeyeater, only seen at Twelve-mile Well; where Carter camped when he was on the island; Western Silvereye, very common; Zebra Finch (*Taeniopygia castanotis*), also very common; Groundlark, plentiful; Crow (*C. bennetti*), nesting on all the windmills, one nest with six eggs (they are never allowed to hatch out, as the station hands pull the nests down when they oil the mill gear), heaps of nesting material six inches deep under most of the mills; Welcome Swallows, nesting at the homestead; White-fronted Chat (*Epthianura albifrons*), one small flock seen and one nest found with three eggs; Emu-Wren (*Stipiturus malachurus hartogi*), a very shy and retiring species, with high-pitched note resembling that of the *Malurus* family and hard to hear, never shows itself except for a second or two; and Bustard (*E. australis*), always on the island, protected, probably breeding at north end near the lighthouse, which now has no resident keeper. I could find no sign of the *Amytornis* species found by Mr. Whitlock, although I kept a careful watch for them in my extensive rambles over the island. On the fifth day of my stay at the island Mr. Ashby left us to keep an appointment with an Inspector of the rabbit-proof fence in the Murchison district out from Yalgoo. The eighteen miles to the mainland at Denham was crossed in the station sailing-boat, which is fitted with a good motor-engine as well as her sails. At the end of my stay on the island I caught the "Centaur," which was taking no chances after the "Koolinda's" misfortune, and was anchored some seven miles down the bay from Brown's Landing.

On leaving Dirk Hartog Island by steamer for Carnarvon, some hundred miles up the coast, we passed Dorre and Bernier Islands to the westward, appearing to be continuations in past time of Dirk Hartog. One would have enjoyed landing on these islands and spending some time in studying their bird life, but, from inquiries made at the station and at Shark Bay, there are no facilities for doing so except when the Geraldton fishing-boats are in those waters. When at Carnarvon, where I remained ten days, I was most kindly treated by Mr. Gerald

Foss and Mr. V. Stanley Low, of Elder, Smith, & Co., Ltd., who drove me into the surrounding country on their business visits to stations, and thus enabled me to see much more of the Gascoyne district than I would otherwise have done.

In these excursions I identified the Redthroat (*Pyrholaemus brunneus*), who is a fine songster; the Crimson Chat (*Epthianura tricolor*), very plentiful; the Crested Wedgebill (*Sphenostoma cristatum*), also plentiful and quite a ventriloquist; the White-plumed Honeyeater (*Meliphaga penicillata*), plentiful in the gums along the river channels and of a lighter plumage with yellow tints predominating, in fact locally known as the "Canary"; the Blue-and-White Wren (*Malurus cyanotus*) and the Purple-backed Wren (*Malurus assimilis*), Pied Honeyeater (*Certhionyx variegatus*), Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater, Singing Honeyeater, here again plentiful (one pair was seen feeding a fully-fledged young Pallid Cuckoo); Masked Wood-Swallow, very plentiful; Cockatoo Parrot (*Leptolophus hollandicus*), Shell-Parrot (*Melopsittacus undulatus*), White-backed Swallow (*Cheramoeca leucosterna*) (should not this be White-breasted?), Tree-Martin (*Hylochelidon nigricans*), Blue-winged Kookaburra (*Dacelo leachi*), Sacred Kingfisher (*Halcyon sanctus*), Red-backed Kingfisher (*H. pyrrhopygius*), Stubble Quail (*Coturnix pectoralis*, or perhaps it was *Synoicus australis*), Little Quail (*Turnix velox*), Western Silvereve (*Zosterops australasiae*), and Scrub-Wren (*Sericornis* sp.), the same as on the island, I presume, but I did not procure a specimen. At Rocky Hole—30 miles up the Gascoyne, and one of the few permanent pools—I saw a solitary Magpie (*Gymnorhina* sp.), a flock of Little Black Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax ater*), a solitary Darter (*Anhinga novae-hollandiae*), and a Pelican. Here also were many Bare-eyed Cockatoos (*Kakatoe sanguinea*). The sandy bed of the Gascoyne at this spot was over 100 yards wide. During another excursion in some gidyea scrub on sandhill country I noted the Red-capped Robin (*Petroica goodenovii*); Chestnut-rumped Tit (*Acanthiza uropygialis*), the only member of this family I saw since leaving Geraldton; White-browed Babbler, Chestnut-eared Finches, Peaceful Doves (*Geopelia placida*), plentiful; and Crested Pigeon (*Ocyphaps lophotes*), uncommon. On an extensive cane-grass swamp near our road I identified Red-kneed Dotterels (*Erythrogonyx cinctus*), a Crake (probably *Porzana fluminea*) (while standing quite motionless in the swamp watching the Dotterels one of these came quite close to me, too close to shoot it), Black-tailed Native Hen (*Tribonyx ventralis*), White-faced Heron (*Notophox novae-hollandiae*), Pacific Heron, Grey Duck, Grey Teal

(*Querquedula gibberifrons*), Whistling Eagle, Swamp Harrier (*Circus approximans*), and Little Eagle (*Hieraetus morphnoides*).

After leaving Carnarvon I motored for about 100 miles, calling at stations *en route*, to the Gascoyne Junction, where there is a small store and an hotel. This was the first stage of the return journey to Mullewa and the Murchison, where connection was made with the railway to Perth. During this portion of the journey I saw and identified the Red-browed Pardalote (*Pardalotus rubricatus*), many Crested Pigeons, Red-plumed Pigeon (*Lophophaps ferruginea*)—these birds are plentiful further north about Port Hedland, Mr. Whitlock informed me, but I only met with them at this one spot, while waiting at the Junction store for the motor-car that was to take me another 300 miles on to Mullewa, on the Murchison. The country near the store is a stony open plain with shallow watercourses lined by low shrubs intersecting it. Just at sundown, while walking along one of these, I heard the whirr of wings and saw some half-dozen of these birds arise from under the shrubs, where they had camped during the heat of the day. With a rapid skimming flight, reminding one of the English Partridge, they made for the stony plain, where they landed rather abruptly, like a Quail appears to do, and ran rapidly along the ground for a short distance. Their long topknots were conspicuous. Other birds seen between Carnarvon and the Junction and not noticed before were the Bustard (*Eupodotis australis*); also served to us at dinner at the Junction Hotel, Mulga-Parrot (*Psephotus varius*), White-browed Tree-Creeper (*Climacteris affinis?*), Black-capped Sittella (*Neositta pileata*), Grey Falcon (*Falco hypoleucus*), Western Whiteface (*Aphelocephala castaneiventris*), Red-breasted Babbler (*Pomatostomus rubeculus*), and the Oriental Dotterel (*Charadrius veredus*) seen at a spot quite 18 or 20 miles from the nearest coast. I also had an opportunity of studying a Cuckoo-Shrike that sat over my head on a low gumtree under which I was resting. It seemed to me to answer the description of *Coracina hypoleuca*, the White-breasted species. It was certainly not the Black-faced nor *C. robusta*, the Little Cuckoo-Shrike. The habitat or distribution of the White-breasted species is given in our Check-list as "Northern Tropical Australia." I did not shoot the bird, the only one I saw, because I would have had no opportunity of skinning it. I must therefore leave it at that.

What struck me in this rapid passage over a large area of country was the scarcity of the Thornbill family, and also that of the Parrots. Flowering trees are plentiful at most seasons

over there, and seeding grasses were plentiful during the time of my visit, yet one pair of Mulga Parrots and odd pairs of "Port Lincolns" were the only members of this family seen since leaving the timbered country further south, with the exception, of course, of the Warbling Grass Parrakeets along the river gums. The Thornbills were also "conspicuous by their absence," as I never saw any but a few pairs of the Chestnut-tailed species in the Gascoyne country, not even the ubiquitous "Yellow-tail" until I returned to Mullewa, and there I saw a pair.

The Kennedy Range is passed through between Carnarvon and the Junction, and I should have liked to put in a day or two amongst its ravines and hills, but could not spare the time. Although the time of my visit was early mid-September there were no birds breeding as far as I could judge. They must nest much earlier in the year over there.
