

# SAOA Historical Series No 42

## F. W. Andrews (cont)

The following two articles by F. W. Andrews were published in the South Australian Chronicle and Weekly Mail on 24 April and 15 May 1877. The spelling, grammar and punctuation are reproduced as per the original. Current common names for birds are in square brackets.

Graham Carpenter

### NOTES ON THE ZOOLOGY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA — No. V.

By F. W. A.

The night-jars are a family of which the different members are oftener heard than seen, more especially the neat little "owlet" (*Aegotheles*, N.H.) [Australian Owlet-nightjar], whose comical, defiant kind of cry is heard by many a one who never saw the bird or took any trouble to ascertain what kind of bird it was they heard. This is the most attractive little fellow, like a small owl in the body; it lives in holes in trees, and early in the evening turns out for hunting, beetles (coleoptera) being its principal food. When first meeting with these birds I shot two or three of them in mistake for bats. They are crepuscular in their habits, or times of feeding, but they may be heard often during moonlight nights. They lay two white eggs in a hollow tree. I once found a night-jar in a piece of hollow wood about two feet long. He opened his eyes like two miniature saucers on being disturbed. I stopped up the holes in the log, and carried the owlet and its exemptore cage to my camp, where I tried to keep it alive by giving it fleshy food to eat, but it would not feed, like the morepawks, and I have always found it to be quite an insectivorous bird. I have met with them all over the colony. A very little timber suffices for a hiding place by day, and this is all they seem to care about. I have disturbed them, where I supposed one to be roosting, by hitting the tree a smart rap with a stick, when they will generally fly out and alight on another tree handy, at the same time looking daggers for or at the intruder.

The podargus is one amongst the extraordinary birds of Australia. There are several members of the family similar in habits. The one best known in the southern part of the colony is, however, the (*podargus humeralis*) tawny shouldered podargus [Tawny Frogmouth]. Being a night bird it lies concealed during the day, often on the ground in pairs. On being disturbed they fly to some tree near, and alighting on a branch they immediately assume a most amusing but watchful attitude, which nature prompts them to do, as securing them from the attacks of hawks, &c. In this attitude they place themselves so as to be almost indistinguishable from a piece of dead wood, bark, &c., and any stranger who had never seen one before would be sorely puzzled to find a bird in the tree where one of these had alighted. Go up to the tree, stand under the branch, and look up at him. He parts his eyelids carefully for fear he should open his eyes. Look steadily at him, and he will soon have his eyes half open, looking down at you with a most comical expression of gravity. They gather for the material for their nest a few mouthfuls of sheoak tops, fix it in a suitable fork, and lay in it two white eggs. In the absence of the sitting bird I have often seen the nest mistaken for a pigeon's. I once kept three of these birds alive with very little trouble for three months, and made them a present to the Botanic Gardens, then under the management of the late Mr. Francis. They

kept up their instinctive habits in their cage, of fancying themselves concealed by compressing their feathers close to their body, and imitating a piece of wood stuck on a log. They have a cry resembling "morepawk," and are in consequence often mistaken for the "*spiloglaux boobook*," or boobook owl.

The bee-eater (*meropo ornatus*) is another bird that seldom gets called by its right name, as it is nearly always called a kingfisher. This lovely plumaged bird has been always supposed to arrive in this colony from New Guinea, to where it has been traced, for the purpose of nidification. It generally arrives southwards by the end of September or end November, according to the season. When the bee-eaters first arrive they are gregarious and in the most gorgeous plumage, hence their name "*ornatus*," or gaudy. The two long filamentous feathers in the middle of the tail give to this bird a most graceful appearance, and render it so attractive that the attention of the most inattentive observer is at once excited to admiration. Shortly after their arrival they pair, and on making their nest they at once commence to lose their plumage, for they make a hole in the ground like a snakehole for a long distance, then make a turn, and make a "nesty" kind of hole, in which they deposit their eggs - six to eight. These eggs are of a globular form, like the kingfisher's. I have found the nest proper full of the wings of dragonflies, beetles, &c., doubtless pulled off by the bee-eater when feeding its young. These birds always select a sandy soil in which to make their nest. Anyone unacquainted with their habits would hardly credit that such a delicately-formed bird could make such a long burrow. After their nests are finished the birds present quite a different appearance, as the long graceful feathers springing from the tail get "worn out" by turning and twisting in and out of the hole they have formed for their nest. They leave the south for the north again between February and March.

The spotted nightjar is not seen by one bushman out of twenty who can properly

describe what bird it is. After nightfall it is very often heard making a noise that I can only compare to a fountain trying to vomit. It lies on the ground all day, and if disturbed only flies a short distance and alights again. The spotted nightjar (*europodus guttatus*) is however often turned up in the day time by shepherds, stockmen, and others in the bush, and is always remarked as being "a curious bird." Often it is called a "ground hawk" and other names to the fancy of the observer. It may immediately be recognised by the white round markings on the wings, which are at once seen when it is flying. After being disturbed, and on being marked down to the place where it alights, it is almost impossible to distinguish it from the surrounding grass or stones. Its plumage is beautifully mottled, and the centre claw has a comblike appendage, similar to that noticeable in the centre claw of the heron, sometimes known as the fern owl.

## NOTES ON THE ZOOLOGY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA. — No. VI

By F. W. A.

There is perhaps no more interesting family of birds in the colony than the *alcedinidae*, or kingfishers. The laughing jackass is well and widely known all over the colony, but is mostly met with in the finest parts of the province, and as soon as we leave the park-like patches of country we lose the welcome cachinnation of our bush companion we are speaking of. To the traveller on returning from the distant wilds the sound of the voices of several of our birds is most agreeable, and especially so is the laughing chorus of the jackass and his family, or the wattle-bird's enquiry of "what's o'clock?" The laughing jackass is a species of kingfisher known to naturalists as the *dacelo gigas*, or giant kingfisher [Laughing Kookaburra]. The outward anatomical appearances of this bird at once shows the family to which it belongs. Inwardly, it has the smallest brain for the size of the bird of any of the feathered tribe with which I am acquainted, thus illustrating the poet's reflection upon "the loud laugh that speaks the vacant mind." There is one true kingfisher which feeds by plunging into the water after small fishes, and occasionally tadpoles. But the other kingfishers can obtain their food away from water altogether. The azure-colored one (*alcyon azurea*) [Azure Kingfisher] is found on the Torrens, Murray, Hindmarsh, and other rivers of the colony, and the beautiful tints of its plumage place it as the handsomest of the family. It is most amusing to observe the laughing jackass seated on the low branch of a tree quietly watching for something movable - a small lizard, large beetle, young snakes not objected to, and, if he is on the bank of a creek and sights a crawfish, he will soon peg it out of its hole.

Centipedes and scorpions are favorite food with the laughing jackasses. I once observed one sitting on a tree with its head erect, and what appeared to be a snake in its mouth. Throwing up a stone to try to satisfy myself whether it was a snake or not, it dropped to the ground a large jew-lizard

(*grammatophora barbata*), which I have no doubt the bird would have gorged had I not disturbed it. Yarns innumerable have appeared in the public prints from time to time about the laughing jackass killing snakes; but, during many years' experience I have dissected numerous examples, but I never on any one occasion found any remains or portions of snakes in their stomachs. I firmly believe, however, that they do kill snakes, but I have often found mistakes made by those who were describing some of these snake encounters, having assured myself that it had been a lizard they had killed. I once met with a pair of laughing jackasses that had a brood of young ones, and the two old ones killed several out of a family of young ducks, with which they had fed their young; and it was several days before the real robbers were discovered. They are very good at destroying noxious insects, &c., in gardens, and they very often catch mice. They beat all their prey to death before they swallow it, and when in captivity, and fed on meat, they have the habit of knocking it about as they would any live object. There is a very handsome kingfisher that arrives in the colony about July, staying in parts where there is plenty of timber, where it breeds in hollow trees; this is called the sacred kingfisher (*todorhamphus sanctus*). These birds leave the colony again about December, but an occasional straggling pair may sometimes be found to have stayed behind their migratory brethren. A similar bird, with a red back, arrives about the same time. This is *todorhamphus pyrrhopygia* [Red-backed Kingfisher], but it is more confined to the northern parts of the colony; though not very large, it has a loud piping monotonous note that I have often heard at the distance of two miles. These make their nests in the bank of some creek, digging a good-sized hole out for their young ones to grow in, as they are of a fair size and well fledged before they fly. I have found the crops of these birds and the sacred kingfishers full of crawfish, as, although they do not dive in the water for fish like the azure kingfisher,

they dig the crawfish out of their holes on the banks of creeks. The sacred kingfishers generally associate in several pairs together, but the redback is more solitary.

The next family to claim our notice after the kingfisher is the *artamidae*, or wood-swallows. These graceful and remarkable birds are quite Australian, and by their singular habits, their graceful aerial evolutions, and their gregarious lives, they are always regarded with interest even by the least attentive observers of nature. The one that is the most common and the oftenest seen is the common wood-swallow (*artamus sordidus*) [Dusky Woodswallow]. These may often be seen about the Park Lands and gardens near Adelaide. About gardens, newly-ploughed ground, and scrubby country, where insects are plentiful, they may nearly always be seen, sometimes in hundreds, at other times in small mobs of a few dozen or so. They feed principally on beetles (*coleoptera*), but small moths and gnat-like insects are hunted by them for hours of an evening; high in the air, where the swallows would be unnoticed only for their constant chirruping cry one to another. On coming downwards again, they generally alight several together on the dead branch of a tree, where they fraternise like love birds, for if one perches itself another one, or three or four, are almost sure to join company. They make a very temporary kind of nest in the overhanging leafy bushes of some tree, generally low-sized gums or saplings, laying four blotchy rusty red-colored eggs, on which and their young ones crows, morepawks, opossums, native cats, and other enemies make much havoc. The most peculiar habits possessed by these birds is in the manner of their roosting, which has been noticed and greatly exaggerated from time to time. On the approach of twilight they gather in a mob, and having selected a tree with a hole in, or a crevice under a piece of bark, suitable for their purpose, they, after some curious gesticulations amongst themselves, and amidst some amount of chattering and chirping, suddenly commence to cling to the

support and protection which they have selected for their night's roost. Those behind cling tenaciously to those which are in front, and so they hang like a swarm of bees. I have heard boastful stories made by those who ought to know better of the number of starlings they have killed at two rapid shots, one with each barrel of their gun; such shooting is cowardly and cruel in the extreme; but, fortunately, the places they select are mostly isolated, retired spots, so that they seldom get disturbed. They are insectivorous and not edible, so that the killing of them when roosting is sheer, wanton cruelty. Some of the other members of this family are very handsome, as, for instance, the white-eyebrowed wood-swallow (*artamus superciliosus*) [White-browed Woodswallow], whose prettily colored chest of a rich chestnut hue, and beautifully white-striped head, together with its graceful contour, renders it at once a most pleasing object of admiration. These are generally seen in large flocks, with another very handsome one, the masked wood-swallow (*artamus personatus*). Another beautiful species, which is peculiar to the north, is the black-faced one (*artamus melanops*) [Black-faced Woodswallow]. There are altogether seven members of this family in South Australia, the habits of which are nearly identical. The *artamus superciliosus* and *artamus personatus* are more roving in their habits, and move about from place to place according to the abundance of insect food and different climatic influences. The smallest (*artamus minor*), or little wood-swallow, has its habitat in the far north, and specimens of this bird would be regarded as valuable acquisitions to any museum.