

SAOA Historical Series No 43

F. W. Andrews (cont)

The final three articles on birds by F. W. Andrews were published in the South Australian Chronicle and Weekly Mail on 19 May and 2 and 9 June 1877. The series show that Andrews had a great knowledge of our birds at that time, in an era before any kind of field guide. One further article, on frogs, appeared on 16 June. Unfortunately nothing was published on the mammals of South Australia, on which Andrews no doubt was also an authority.

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. VII.

By F. W. A.

Although we have not many birds in South Australia that we can call songsters, we have numerous examples conspicuous by their animated twitterings. The family *Ampelidae*, or mannikins [pardalotes], is well known as an occasional visitor to all the gardens in and around Adelaide. I may perhaps here remark that since the city and suburbs have been planted the number of birds has greatly increased, and very many handsome and interesting members of the feathered tribe are now located in our midst. The mannikin is very small, and handsomely though not gaudily marked, and spends much of his time feeding on minute insects. It feeds also on the gum of wattle trees, mallee, and other timber. When feeding, its actions are most graceful, easy, and attractive. It has a pretty manner of hanging to the under side of a leaf for any small insect. It is very active in its motions, and would at times almost tire the eye of the onlooker to follow its movements. It has a peculiar call or song of two notes of the same tone, a rise of a third, and then a drop again, all rapidly repeated, and from this monotonous though cheerful piping song, the boys have given it the name of "wit wat." This is the *Pardolotus Striatus*, or striped mannikin [Striated Pardalote]. In hot weather these birds feed early in the morning, and as the heat of the day comes on they resort to the hollow limb of a gum tree, where I have found several dozen of them having a siesta. On the approach of evening they turn out again, and afterwards return to the same holes they have taken shade in during the day. Being very diminutive, they can enter a hole of small dimensions, where no native cat or other midnight intruder has any chance of making an entrance. They make their nest in a hollow tree, making a domed-shaped kind of nest, lined with wool, opossum's fur, or feathers, as obtainable. They commence to breed about September, and the period of nidulation being of short duration, they generally have three or four broods between that time and January.

A smaller but much handsomer variety of the mannikin is known as the diamond bird (*pardolotus punctatus*.)

[Spotted Pardalote]. This is one of the gems of Australian ornithology, and is always admired by every one. Being insectivorous, it cannot be kept in cages, or it would be a most handsome pet. These birds have a very peculiar call, quite different to that of the *P. striatus*, and the collector who understands this can easily imitate their whistle, and fetch them often to within a few feet of him. They club together in the holes of trees as the other mannikins do, but differ altogether in their habits of nidification. They form a hole in a sandy bank of a creek or gully, and it is astonishing to observe the length of bore they make, considering the slender formation of their bill and claws. Having scooped out an entrance-hole, they make a good-sized bed-hole, and in this (in the dark) they take as much pains to make a neat nest as a chaffinch does on the bare fork of an apple-tree. There are six varieties of the mannikin, all found in South Australia, including our Northern Territory. It is extraordinary how local these little creatures are in their habitat. One of them was regarded by and spoken of by Gould in his work on Australian ornithology as a *rara avis*; this is the *pardolotus rubricatus* - the red-lore'd diamond bird [Red-browed Pardalote]. Look at it by the side of the others, and you only see a slight difference in the markings, which to a superficial observer would be easily overlooked; and yet you must travel hundreds of miles from Adelaide before you meet with one of the red lores. They have also a distinct call-note from that of any of the others. My attention was first attracted to this bird by its stridulous call. This was near the Darling River, and I afterwards found, travelling northwards, after leaving Government Gums, the *pardolotus striatus*, or Adelaide pardalotes get left behind, and *pardolotus rubricatus* takes its place; and on Cooper's Creek the Adelaide bird is as rare as the other one is here. This I consider a most interesting fact, as their habits and economy are identical. From the Ampelidae we now pass to the *Fam. Faniadae*. This includes the shrikes, which in their habits closely assimilate with the shrikes of Europe. For rapacity,

plundering, and foraging, and all the sly concealed habits of their tribe, they may be justly regarded as true types of the same family. There are eleven varieties of them, and I shall here draw attention to a remarkable fact, which is, that all the members of this family are either black and white; that is, in some the snowy hue, and in others the sombre color, predominates. It would be desirable if my young readers would visit our museum and examine the different members of this interesting tribe. Humming birds, birds of paradise, and parrots are all noted for their beautiful plumage; here, however, we have a large family of Australian birds whose plumage, though only black and white, is very attractive.

Our well known and domesticated bird, the magpie (*Gymnorhina leuconota*), is one of these which are placed by some among the shrikes, and by others among the crows; but as the crow in the fable was proved unable to sing or chant, and as the magpie is decidedly musical, his talents would separate him from that despised group, even if his character were not somewhat different.

**NOTES ON THE ZOOLOGY OF SOUTH
AUSTRALIA. – NO. VIII.
By F. W. A.**

The magpie is at once musical, bold, and graceful, but has a great amount of pugnacity in its disposition. Mag is, however, a general favorite with young and old. The plumage of the male bird is very attractive, from the snowy whiteness of his back and the glossy blackness of the other parts of his plumage. In the month of July or beginning of August these birds commence to build, and make a large sized nest of twigs, neatly lined inside, in which they usually lay four eggs, dullish olive green, with rusty blotchy markings, the color often varying in two nests taken near each other. While sitting on her eggs the hen bird gets regularly fed by the male, and while taking the food he provides her with she makes the same pleased choking kind of noise in swallowing that the young bird does in receiving its food from the parent birds. In fact any stranger to their habits would at once conclude it was an old bird feeding its young; and it is very seldom the hen leaves her nest. When the period of incubation has, however, passed, the parent birds become remarkably pugnacious, and fearlessly attack any one, old or young; children going to or returning from school often being the objects of their assaults. In their mode of attack they take a backward circuitous turn from the approaching party, then take a rapid twist and make a dart at the head of the person or animal they thus pay their respects to. I was once requested by a lady friend who had a young daughter walking daily about a quarter of a mile to school to be her protector for the morrow, as magpies attacked her and frightened her so much that she often forgot in the morning what she learnt on the previous evening. I met the little lady next morning. She and I had only proceeded a short distance when the male bird came by us, with the evident intent of taking us in the rear. He passed from my side of the road to that on which my fair young friend was walking, making a sharp peck at her as he passed by, and

went on his way rejoicing; but only for a short distance, for a well-directed charge of shot brought him down, much to the delight of my little friend, who had been for days perfectly terrified by this magpie. The loss of the male was not missed by the family, the mother only having to do an extra amount of grub hunting. Magpie, in his own country, does not confine himself to hill or dale – he is with the poet who says-

“Try what the open glade, the coverts yield;
The latent tracks, the giddy heights explore.”

One of the most remarkable magpies I ever met with as a pet bird was owned by a gentleman who some years ago resided in Hindley-street. This gentleman being an accomplished musician, taught his bird as follows: - He commenced to whistle the upper note of any key, whistled the notes down to the last but one of the octave, when he hesitated, and the interval was at once filled by the bird. He would then whistle on the ascending scale, and, leaving the upper note vacant, Mag would immediately fill up the interval as true as “a fork.” If a hawk happens to pass the selection which a pair of these birds may have secured for their nest, they give a musical hint for “Tommy to make room for his Uncle.” They have a peculiar habit when alighting on the branch of a tree of opening and shutting their wings alternatively several times before settling themselves. Travelling up the Murray, and passing over the border we soon lose our South Australian mag, and meet with another brother bird, slightly different in his plumage and having an altered name; the South Australian bird being named *Gymnorhina leuconota*, or white-backed crow-shrike, and the over the border one *Gymnorhina tibicen*, piping crow-shrike; but both birds are nearly identical in their habits. Although these birds make such nice pets they vary much in the pugnacity of their disposition, some having to be caged; and these caged ones are often very spiteful, and never miss a chance of having a peck at any one they can get near. I knew of one in the south that would call out from his cage on a hot day for “Water, water, “ and on the water being supplied it would be quiet again. If, however, it could only manage to get out of its cage it would viciously attack any one, young or old. Some of these birds have a hobby of their own to imitate poultry, and cock-crowing; others amuse themselves and their hearers by their laughing imitations; while many have “cooie” as their watchword. Take them altogether they are a most graceful, imitative, and interesting family, and something new may always be observed in their character and actions. Nothing appears to come amiss to them in the way of imitation, and no more agreeable pet can be had in a garden, where they are very useful in keeping in check many insects destructive to vegetation. Their beautiful, clear, and brightly developed tints form a great attraction to their admirers, and although their colors are only black and white, and they have no “painted breast to preen,” they are always delicately clean in plumage. During the breeding season, and for some time after, their attractive piping song may be heard at intervals all through the moonlight night. Many interesting notes might be made on this and other families of the feathered tribe, by those

having opportunities of doing so. Every one who knows that there is a pleasure, and not a few know something of what the pleasure is, originating in what is commonly spoken of as "making a collection." There are very few of us with eyes to note, and minds to be amused or interested by the matters which surround us in our daily doings, or goings out and comings in, who have not some sort of a collection, made or planned, more or less developed. It may be a collection of coins, postage stamps, photographs, minerals, fossils, shells, and other animals, beetles, butterflies, autographs, or something else for which the collector has taken a fancy. One of the collections, however, that takes up least space, and requires the least in the way of formal preparation and apparatus is just a collection of facts and dates connected with natural history, which furnishes amusement and material for instructive study.

**NOTES ON THE ZOOLOGY OF SOUTH
AUSTRALIA. – No. IX.
By F. W. A.**

In all the eleven members of the magpie family two peculiarities prevail; one, their black and white plumage; the other, their pleasing, piping song. Almost every member of the family has a remarkably attractive tune of its own. The bird known as the Tasmanian jackass (*cracticus nigrogularis*) [Grey Butcherbird – note butcherbird species names are reversed] has a wide reputation as a vocalist, and is also a very apt learner in imitating other sounds besides its own loud, vociferous, and attractive songs, for it has several different piping calls. These birds are not often seen in cages, although they are hardy, almost omnivorous in their diet and do not fret in confinement. They are, however, of a shy and retiring disposition, and hence it follows that their nests are not very often found. The nest is mostly made roughly, very little larger than the few twigs the pigeon places on a fork of a tree on which to deposit her eggs; and on the approach of any one near the nest the sitting magpie drops from the nest to within a short distance of the ground and skims silently away for some distance, then alighting on a tree sings out a vigorous round of notes, as if to attract your attention and distract your observation from the site of the nest. These magpies are usually found in thick mallee and melaleuca scrubs, and may often be seen about pineries. All along the banks of the Murray is a favourite resort for them. Proceeding up the river we meet with another of the family, rather larger than the last mentioned one. This is the *cracticus torquatus* [Pied Butcherbird] or collared-crow shrike, which is a very shy bird – I might almost say one of the shiest of the shy. It has only a few notes, with little variation, but every note it pipes out is of a grand resonant tone, and always attractive to a stranger who has not heard these notes before. The sound appears to come from everywhere around you, and all the notes are quite as deceptive as if issuing from the throat of the most accomplished ventriloquist. After this bird's feeding-time is over, commencing at the earliest dawn of day, it sits

concealed in some darkly-shadowed nook in a thickly-leaved old gum tree. The nests of these magpies are very difficult to find. There are several fine examples of this family of birds peculiar to the northern portions of our colony, at which place a wide field of observation and research lies open to the enquiring mind of the observer of natural history. The pied grallina (*granillo picata*) is the last one of the family we have to speak of. They are known to colonists as the "magpie-lark," and arrive in flocks at the commencement of the winter season. I once met with a large flock coming down the Murray River at the commencement of a very rough winter. As soon as their journey south had ended they "paired off," and in a few days pairs were to be seen in almost every creek and waterhole all over the south. They are pretty, attractive birds, but have not that tuneful ability to whistle that the upper members of the family have, their notes being rather discordant than otherwise. They feed on insects about the muddy banks of creeks and waterholes, and are very good eating. They make a nest of clay affixed to the branch of a tree. On the approach of hot weather, and after their young are strong enough for flight, they follow the advice of Daniel Tucker the elder, and "get ober de mountains" into the interior again, and we seldom see anything more of them until the following winter. The Botanic Gardens in Adelaide are generally selected as seasonable quarters by a pair or two of these birds.

Fam. Campepaginae. - There are ten members of this small but interesting family, whose habitat is South Australia proper, and seven more peculiar to the northern portions of the continent. One of these is about the size of a small pigeon, with bluish plumage, and black about the head and throat. They arrive in small flocks, and, though not strictly gregarious, are most sociably inclined, and keep together for some time after their arrival for the season. This bird is usually called by settlers the summer bird (*granculus melanops*) [Black-faced Cuckoo-shrike], deriving its colonial name from its seasonable visits. By some these birds are called doves, blue pigeons, &c.; but the pigeon only exists in imagination, as they are quite unfit for food. There are three varieties – the black faced, the white bellied, and the ground one; but any one who did not pay attention to them would hardly notice any difference between them.

Then there is the family of thickheads, of which we have four in the south and two in the northern parts of South Australia. The thickhead (*pachycephala*) always renders itself attractive by its pleasing song. The singing thickhead (*pachycephala gutteralis*) [Golden Whistler] is often met with in gardens in the southern parts of the colony. It has a musical, varied song. Its plumage is very handsome, the breast being a bright yellow, the throat white, and head black. The *pachycephala rufiventris* [Rufous Whistler] is rather smaller, plain but pleasing in its plumage, having rich shades of brown where the other one has yellow, and has a song almost exactly similar to the singing one. The others have all the same attractive vocal habits, and appear to take delight in warbling to themselves when feeding; for, on meeting with a moth or grub, they have a song before they go on hunting for

insects again. When feeding-time is over they retire to the thickets, and are quiet until feeding-time comes on again. One other bird of the family is well known in nearly every garden where there is a thick growth of timber, as instance the gardens in the hills and ranges. This is the *collariocincla harmonica* [Grey Shrike-thrush], a bird that domesticates itself, builds its nest, and sings for your garden without being caged. Its habits are as familiar to householders here as those of the robin are at home. As their name indicates, their song is very harmonious, although short; but they have a peculiar metallic strength of tone which is very pleasing when heard at early morn or “dewy eve:” their plumage is of sombre grey and brown tints, but they have a graceful form, and are always welcome visitors to a garden. A similar bird is found in the Far North (*collariocincla rufiventris*), [buff-bellied crow shrike-thrush] and three more varieties are found north.

We have now to note a remarkably fine, attractive, and handsome member of this family – the fronted-shrike thrush (*falcunculus frontatus*) [Crested Shriketit]. This bird has no song, but a few twittering notes, and a quick, chuckling, chirruping call to its mate. It is rather larger than a sparrow, but the greater fulness of plumage makes it appear larger than it really is. The breast is of a bright lemon yellow, the throat (in the male) glossy jet, black, and it has graceful crest of black feathers. These birds are active in their motions, and are good friends to the gardener, as they methodically strip off all the larvae of numerous varieties of insects that infest our gardens, plantations, and orchards. They are now getting common about Adelaide as a grove of green saplings is the place they prefer to any other. In these situations they usually build their nest, which is a marvel of bird-building skill, being beautifully formed and matted together, and is usually in the upper part of a gum sapling. Gould, in his “Notes on Australian Ornithology,” gives little or no information regarding the nidification of this bird. There are very few museums having specimens of their eggs, and there is altogether much to admire and observe concerning them.

There is another bird, well known as the bell bird, belong to the same tribe, and reversing the order of things between it and the preceding one. The bell bird (*orosica cristata*) [Crested Bellbird], or crested-shrike thrush, has no song but a very handsome plumage; but the crested bell-bird has a dull-colored plumage, and a song almost too well known to need much description. The plumage of the male is, however, more attractive than the female by a marking on the throat. Their song savours of a command, as they ask you in the plainest manner to “go - and fetch me the reaphook; go - and fetch me the reaphook.” After a short interval this is repeated in a pianissimo ventriloquistic manner, so that the hearer is much puzzled to tell where the sounds come from; but they generally increase the tone and rise up to their former sounds. They are met with in the most sterile parts of the country, and by their well-known song add cheerfulness to the situation. I have met with them from the Goolwa Scrub to a considerable distance up Cooper’s Creek.

The flycatchers (*muscapidae*) are met with nearly all over South Australia. The white-shafted fantail [Grey Fantail] is generally seen in pairs in stringybark or gum ranges, or the edges of swamps where there is a thick growth of teatree. Their attitudes when feeding are of the most sprightly kind; they are up and down, and here, there, and everywhere, all around you; having no fear, and often alighting, with their handsome tail spread out like a fan, a foot or two from you. The body of this bird is very small, having light fluffy plumage. They make a most elegant nest, shaped like a wineglass with the bottom or stand knocked off, leaving the glass and neck. The materials of the nest are composed of the fine inner bark of the stringybark or teatree, lined with a little fine wool or fur of the opossum, and firmly bound together with spiders’ webs, by which the nest is securely fixed to the straight branch on which it is built. I once found a nest and met with a pair of these birds at the very bottom of the basin of Mount Schank in the South-East.

The black fantail (*hipidura motacilloides*) [Willie Wagtail] is well know everywhere, and is always called in the bush the shepherd’s companion, as it often follows sheep a long distance, riding on their backs, and catching small moths, &c., disturbed in their concealment amongst the grass by the sheep as they are feeding. These birds make a very pretty nest of a cup shape, well matted and worked together with spiders’ webs. They are remarkably tame, and often go right into the huts in the bush after flies and insects. When their nest is made and the eggs laid they almost always let you know where it is by the chatting noise they make about it. They have a pleasing, chirruping song, and in warm weather sing away all through the moonlight nights. There is another similar bird called in the bush the dishwasher. This is the restless flycatcher (*seizura inquieta*), and is too well known to need much or any description. They make a similar nest to the shepherd’s companion, but usually build higher up in the tree they build on than the other one, and I have, on more than one occasion, found the egg of the bronze cuckoo in their nest with two of their own eggs.

The family of robins (*saxicolidae*) is well known, and always attractive, as one or other of the five mostly known members are to be found in almost every garden of any size, especially in the suburbs of the city. The pink-breasted [Pink Robin], or, as it is mostly called, the puce robin, is now rather rare in South Australia, and is mostly found in thickly teatree-bordered creeks and rivers. The white-capped robin (*multicolor*) [Scarlet Robin] is found all around the City of Adelaide; and in the suburban gardens, especially, they fearlessly take up their quarters, and their presence is always gladly welcomed. They make their nests, which are prettily formed, in holes in trees, on a thick branch, and often in curious places. During the hot summer season they are very rarely seen, as they migrate to the cooler parts of the interior, and return with the growth of green grass and herbage when insects are abundant, for where there is no grass you will find a scarcity of insects – hence follows a scarcity of birds of the insectivorous tribe.