

Why Birds Disappear.

By J. Neil McGilp.

One reads many articles where it is stated that such-and-such birds used to be plentiful, but have been cleared out, and the writer has seen collectors, cats, fires, droughts, etc., blamed for the clearance.

For many years I have kept a close watch on many of our inland birds, and have noticed that numerous species leave a

district after a long residence for some unknown reason, and in some instances have not returned for several years. I have come to the conclusion that there is only one reason for this change of habitat, that is the food supply. The conditions of food supply are not always apparent to the human being; nevertheless this, in my opinion, can be the only reason why certain birds which have been numerous in a certain locality for many years are suddenly found to have deserted their usual habitat. Evidently the birds have found suitable conditions elsewhere, where they have hatched out their young and remain perhaps several years, or until such time as this new locality becomes poor in food supply, then perchance some of the disturbed birds, in searching for other more favourable spots, return to their old locality. I have had many instances of these happenings, and the field-worker must often wonder why in certain patches of brush birds are found plentiful, while in other, to him similar, spots birds are rarely found. We often wander over acres of country without disturbing more than an odd bird or two, and then, without there being any apparent change in the country, birds are found everywhere. How often have we gone to a certain locality where the previous year birds were plentiful, only to find that they had perhaps in the meantime passed along to a spot some distance away?

In the migration of our birds, such as the Fairy Martins and the Wood Swallows, in some years they arrive in great numbers, while in other years few if any are to be found at certain spots which had apparently been in the course of the migration from previous observation. I put this down to the food supply. From their winter quarters they follow the food supply in a southern direction, and in this way on occasions miss a well-known calling spot, though, so far as we can see, the food supply is there in plenty and in suitable condition.

For many years now I have recorded nine species of Hawks inhabiting a certain creek, where from year to year they have reared their young, but, through a continuance of drought conditions and the consequent depletion of rabbits and general food supply, these Hawks have been compelled to move a distance of over 120 miles. Here they are breeding, with a plentiful supply of food, and even when the rain comes and brings along a suitable food supply, I do not, from my experience, expect to see those Hawks return to their rightful home until they are forced to do so by similar happenings in their present quarters.

It is very misleading to say that certain forms of birds are wiped out because we do not find them to-day where yesterday

they were in great numbers. Again, the opposite contention that birds are increasing because we never saw them so numerous is also misleading. Just recently I have been unfortunate enough to have to traverse several hundreds of miles over country that has only had one good rain in five years, and no rain at all for over two years. The state of this country cannot be imagined unless one visits it. After passing over this drought-stricken area, a more favourable locality is entered. Here I saw Cockatoos, Galahs, Cockatoo Parrots, and Shell Parrots in enormous numbers, and so far as the Cockatoo Parrots are concerned, I did not imagine there were as many in the whole of Australia as I saw in that one small spot. I want to say a word here in justice to the pastoralist, who is frequently blamed for the depletion of bird and animal life through overstocking his country. I need only say that but for the waters put there by the pastoralists, few, if any, birds could live in that locality, where to-day they are in millions. The increase in water supplies made by the pastoralists enables the birds to spread or congregate to the spots where food supply is favourable. To-day the enormous area of Central Australia is practically void of natural surface water, consequent upon the record long drought that has for the past five years held sway over so much of our inland. Were it not for the waters conserved by human labour, I dread to think of the fate of our bird life in that part.

It may be true, as scientists tell us, that human interference with nature has brought about the drought-stricken conditions, but the question arises, are we to leave Australia as it was, or are we to develop it? So far our methods of development seem to be at fault, but, in spite of all the droughts and overstocking, I venture to say that I consider that individually there are to-day as many birds in the interior as there were when I first knew it, now getting on for forty years ago. Certain species, we know, have been depleted to such an extent that many claim that they are wiped out. This last claim, in view of the vast area of our country, much of it yet unknown, at least from an ornithological point of view if not true in fact, must be accepted with much doubt. We have for many years been told that certain Parrots were extinct, for instance the Scarlet-chested Parrot. In recent years, however, several records have been made of its existence, and during the last month two specimens have been secured by the S.A. Museum, verifying the claim of their still being about in fair numbers. If true with one supposedly extinct bird, it is only reasonable to suppose that some at least of the other birds labelled extinct

or nearly so are still residing in certain spots in Australia where the food supply suits them.

In a very interesting article in the "Emu," Vol. XXVIII, entitled "Bird Notes from Yarraberb," Mr. A. H. R. Wilson writes:—" . . . but the Straw-necked and the Glossy [Ibis], once the most common (especially the former, of course), have never returned," and concludes his article by saying:—"Having concluded this article with the last sentence, the writer went by car to one of the swamps and there, to refute one of his statements, was a flock of 21 Straw-necked Ibis"

This reminds me of a remark made recently when a party of field-workers, returning from a search in the scrub, were discussing observations made, when one of the party said, "Funny there are no *Podargus* here," which remark was almost interrupted by a remark from a companion, "Why, there is one on its nest," which proves how careful we must be in our statements.
