

Heat in the Interior of South Australia and in Central Australia. Holocaust of Bird-life.

Mr. H. H. Finlayson, writing from Horseshoe Bend, Central Australia, 10th January, 1932, states:—"I got here yesterday from Marree on the hottest day they have known in the Centre for many years. It was 120 degrees in the verandah shade of the house here at 1 p.m., and I saw such an extraordinary thing at the Rumbalara siding that I thought I had better put it down on paper while it was still fresh in my mind When the train pulled in at about 3.30 p.m., the dining car and sleeper were invaded by scores of Waxbills (=Chestnut-eared Finches *Taeniopygia castanotis*.) They fluttered about in a feeble sort of way, or perched on the chairs and tables, gasping with wide open mouths. Many of them flew into the fans and were killed or maimed, and almost any bird could be taken in the hand, without resistance being offered. On leaving the train, I found that the sheltered spaces under the carriages and the floor of the shelter shed alongside the train, were occupied by massed

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hundreds of birds in various stages of incapacitation, and scores were lying dead. It was a pretty mixed assemblage, but the great bulk, 80 per cent. perhaps, was made up of two species, the Waxbill and the little Shell-Parrot (*Melopsittacus undulatus*) and these last were in the proportion of 2 to 1. I had no time to look carefully, but noticed prominently among the rest, a small very beautiful bird with a flame coloured chest and flame patch on the rump (=Crimson Chat, *Epthianura tricolor*), Murray Magpies (*Grallina cyanoleuca*), Willy Wagtails (*Rhipidura leucophrys*) and Bee-eaters (*Merops ornatus*). (By the bye, this seems to be a very common bird in the North. I saw more on the Diamantina in three weeks than I have in years down below, and they seem to be just as thick here on the Finke River). The Shell-Parrots and Waxbills kept apart in the shed and the former made a most gorgeous show when they took the air on being disturbed by someone walking amongst them. I noticed during every such forced flight a goodly number would fall and lie still—apparently dead. They were not always so, however, as several I picked up “came to life” with disconcerting suddenness. There was a distinct sour fetid smell about the place—not the ordinary bird-cage smell.

The condition of the birds was undoubtedly a true temperature effect, and not due to thirst, as the railway people had put out several pans of water, and only a small proportion were attempting to drink. I made an attempt to estimate their numbers by counting the Shell-Parrots on a small patch of flooring, but there was so much disturbance, and so many were in the air at any one time, that I could not carry it through—1,000 birds in and around the shed would be a moderate estimate. There was a storm late that afternoon, and in the comparative cool of the evening I went for a stroll up the bed of the Finke, following the foot of the clay cliffs. Waxbills were even then dying on the tops of the cliffs and were rolling down into the sand below. I met Mr. Mules at Finke Crossing—the birds there were in large numbers, but they were not dying as they were at Rumbalara. When the train went out dozens of birds—mostly Waxbills—were killed on the rails.

22/3/1932.—The following addendum would complete my observations on the bird mortality in the Centre:—“Later, on the way out to Mount Olga, about 200 miles west of Rumbalara, I found that similar conditions had prevailed over a very wide area; accounts of the bird mortality at Erldunda (70 miles west), and Wilbia, in the Basedow Range (130 miles west),

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agreeing substantially with what I have described, and quantities of dead birds round waterholes at Ayers' Rock and Mount Olga suggesting a similar holocaust. At the two latter places remains of hawks were particularly numerous."

Mr. L. R. Reese, Minnie Downs, S.A., in his letter to Dr. Morgan dated 1/2/1932, wrote:—"The dryness in the gibber country has driven most of the birds on to the River Diamantina), where a slight flood just got a mile or two from the channels on to the flooded country (Goyder's Lagoon). Birds are still dying in this district. The heat yesterday was 110 degrees (in the shade), and for the past two months has been over 100 degrees, except for a few days. 125 degrees was our hottest day, and, I think, thousands of birds died. Mostly only the small birds suffer, but the Galahs, Crows, Magpies, and (Stone) Curlews all suffered this time. Our plagues of mice and rats are lessening, and now a few cats have put in an appearance. I heard of their coming some months ago, but it is only during the last fortnight they have been seen here."

Mr. J. Neil McGilp, 29/1/1932.—Informed the members of this Association at the monthly meeting that he had received information of great mortality amongst birds from the great heat near Birdsville, Q., the Musgrave Ranges, and Mount Ive, (Gawler Ranges.) The species affected were Crows (*Corvus*), Magpies (*Gymnorhina*), Tawny Frogmouth (*Podargus strioides*), Yellow-throated Miner (*Myzantha flavivula*), Shell-Parrots and Chestnut-eared Finches, especially the last two.

Mr. J. Neil McGilp, 23/3/1932.—"During a tour of inspection of pastoral country in the vicinity of Tarcoola just after the record heat wave at the end of January, 1932, a great disaster amongst native birds was noted almost everywhere we travelled, within a radius of from 40 to 120 miles around Tarcoola. Further reports given to me are convincing enough to show that the destruction of birds by the terrific heat had extended almost throughout all our northern areas. The greatest loss appeared to have occurred where waters were in the vicinity of timbered country, for very few deaths are recorded from waters in bare open country, or on stony tablelands devoid of trees. The water supplies constructed by the pastoralist usually consists of a well or bore from which water is pumped by windmill or engine into

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from 10,000 to 30,000 gallon open-topped tanks, and from there into open troughs for watering the stock. Wherever these tanks were situated in timbered country the loss of bird-life was frightful, great heaps of decaying bodies still remaining at the time of our visit. The birds also got into covered tanks and wells, and died by thousands under verandahs, etc. One lady informed me that she filled up a 40-gallon petrol drum with Shell-Parrots that had died on her verandah during one afternoon. Though the thermometer readings varied at nearly every station, the average appeared to range from 116 degrees to 126 degrees for 16 consecutive days. It was not until the last five days of the heat-wave that the great loss of birds took place. The birds appeared to have become so stupefied by the heat that they simply dashed straight into the waters, became wet, and were unable to rise again. This is instanced by thousands being drowned in dams, at one of which it was estimated that, allowing five wet Shell-Parrots to the pound, over 60,000 Shell-Parrots were drowned. The reason for this leads one to the conclusion that the birds were stunned by the heat and simply smothered as they dashed into the water in great clouds. Many trees just near waters had many branches broken off by the birds, which, I was told, simply swarmed flight after flight upon one another till the boughs gave way. Every well had to be cleaned of dead birds, for, unless closely covered in, the Shell-Parrots and Chestnut-eared Finches swarmed into them. At one well I dropped down a fairly large stone as there did not appear to be water there. The stone landed on apparently solid earth. I said to the lessee of the well, "there is no water here." He got hold of a very large stone and its weight broke through the coating of dead birds on the water. The stench then arising was awful. I hunted through some of the remains of heaps of birds, and I noted the following birds:—Shell-Parrots, representing 65 to 70 per cent of dead, Chestnut-eared Finches, representing 25 per cent of dead, Mulga Parrots (*Psephotus varius*) in hundreds, Blue Bonnets (*P. haematogaster*) in hundreds, Cockatoo Parrots (*Leptolophus hollandicus*) in hundreds, Crows (*Corvus*) in hundreds. Others noted were Pink Cockatoos (*Kakatoe leadbeateri*), Galah (*K. roseicapilla*), Port Lincoln Parrot (*Barnardius zonarius*), Little Eagle (*Hieraetus morphnoides*), Whistling Eagle (*Haliastur sphenurus*), Brown Hawk (*Falco berigora*), Nankeen Kestrel (*F. cenchroides*), Australian Goshawk (*Astur fasciatus*), Diamond-Dove (*Geopelia cuneata*), Crested Pigeon (*Ocyphaps lophotes*),

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Stone-Curlew (*Burhinus magnirostris*), Crimson Chat (*Epthinura tricolor*), Orange Chat (*E. aurifrons*), Groundlark (*Anthus australis*), Singing Honeyeater (*Meliphaga virescens*), Red-backed Kingfisher (*Halcyon pyrrhopygius*), and Magpies (*Gymnorhina*). There were such heaps of dead, almost decayed beyond identification, so that only the common varieties were noted with certainty. I kept a good watch out for the Night Parrot (*Geopsittacus occidentalis*), but I did not see anything resembling it. It was of course possible that many rare birds would have been found had one interested in bird-life been on the spot at the time of the disaster.

During a previous trip in this locality I was astonished at the great flocks of Shell-Parrots, and bird-life was remarkably plentiful, but, alas, this trip there is a different tale to tell—only isolated small flocks of parrots and very very sparse in comparison.

—References in the Press.—

"Rufus," in "The Advertiser," Adelaide, 27/1/1932.—"Terrific Heat. We were talking about the heat, and Harry Colman said:—'I have never known anything like it has been this year. For 52 days it averaged 99 at Tarcoola. The birds died in thousands. A little girl at Bon Bon caught seven different wild birds which had become tame with the intense heat.' Prim Whyte said:—'I put dishes of water out and set the sprinkler going on the lawn for the birds, and parrots, magpies, crows, and hawks came and drank and bathed' . . ."

"The News," Adelaide, 6/2/1932.—"Parrot Holocaust. The endurance of wild birds has its limits. A report from the railway stationmaster at Rumbalara, near Oodnadatta, dealt with the recent day when the temperature was 124 in the shade. 'When the last train went through Rumbalara,' he says, 'the birds, seeking shelter from the sun, swarmed around and underneath the carriages. The train, moving off, killed quite a number, but most of them tried to find shelter against the railway buildings. They perished so rapidly that the railway men were forced to carry them away. In places Shell-Parrots were lying two feet deep. One man estimated 150 to each kerosene-tinful they removed, making a total of 12,000 birds of all sizes, but mostly small parrots."

"Rufus," in "The Advertiser," 10/2/1932.—"Birds and the Heat. Malcolm McGilp, of Moolawatana Station, east of Copley, called to see me yesterday to tell me that he had

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received a letter from his manager, Rex McKay, to the effect that the thermometer rose to 126 degrees at the homestead. When they went out in the morning the verandah was swarming with thousands of Shell-Parrots. Toward evening hundreds of the pretty little green birds were dead. The manager went down to a tank and cleaned out about 400 dead Waxbills, along with Crows, Magpies, and other birds.

"The Bulletin," Sydney, 2/3/1932.—"Oollarinna," wrote:—"Centralia has broken all heat records by averaging at Oodnadatta a shade temperature of 111.5 for January. Fifty-one days from December 15 averaged 110, and on two occasions the thermometer registered 122. The youngsters, hardy though they are, were glad when school hours were cut down to three—7.30 to 10.30 a.m. We had 125 points of rain early in February, but King Drought still hovers on the horizon. During 1931 only 3 inches of rain fell, yet we had 24 "wet" days. The birds have been the greatest sufferers from the heat. At Abminga siding, on the Alice Springs railway line, thousands lie dead around the water-tanks. From all the stations comes the same report; the manager of one 150 miles west of Oodnadatta had to come to town for bird-netting to cover his wells and enable him to pump water. Not content with drinking from the troughs, the birds fell into the wells in such numbers that the pumps were choked with them. Overpowered by the heat, they were quite fearless, and one might catch them anywhere they fell and carry them to a damp, shady spot until they revived. Practically every bushman is a bird-lover, and everywhere are placed tanks and troughs of water for their feathered friends. The animals also have perished in hundreds—under the shade of gidya and myrtle bush are the bodies of emus and kangaroos which, seeking the shade, have died from exhaustion where they lay."

"The Bulletin," Sydney, 9/3/1932.—"FY7" wrote:—"The hot blast has been disastrous to the birds in Western Queensland as well as the Northern Territory. (Bulletin, 2/3/1932). In the Central West thousands fell dead amongst the trees, while many more sought refuge in houses. Many others perished in the bore drains, flying into water in which a human being could not bear to dip a hand. The effect of this paralysing dry heat has to be experienced to be understood . . ."