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*MULES—Some Birds in Central Australia.*

### Notes on Some Birds in the Vicinity of Coniston Station, Central Australia.

By Marwood W. Mules.

This station is situated 150 miles north-west of Alice Springs, and is the property of Mr. R. B. Stafford. On 8th December, 1931, Mr. Stafford and I left Coniston with four camels and two horses with the intention of going to Central Mount Wedge, which is about 70 miles to the south-west. We took with us two aboriginals, one "Paddy" to act as guide, as he belonged to the tribe inhabiting the part of the country we intended to visit. The first day was very hot and we took the animals along steadily, arriving at Brooks' Well, 17 miles west of Coniston and 7 miles from Brooks' Soak, just before sundown. As the Well had a number of dead birds floating on the water we went on about a mile and camped at a rockhole, which had been filled by rain a day or two previously. Several Crested Pigeons flew away from the rockhole as we approached, and numbers of Chestnut-eared Finches were flying about in the mulga trees there. I also noticed five Diamond Doves, one Pied Butcher-Bird, four Crimson Chats and ten Plumed Pigeons. After tea I waited at the rockhole on the off-chance of seeing the long-lost Night Parrot; just at dusk a Common Bronzewing came in for a drink, and a little later a bird flying noiselessly alighted at the water. It appeared to me to be a Nightjar, but I could not make certain of its species, as the light was very poor. Next morning we started off at sunrise and going in a south-westerly direction for 20 miles we passed

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through scattered mulga (*Acacia aneura*) country with occasional outcrops of granite. The day turned out to be hot, so we camped about 4 p.m. After fixing up the camp, which was situated beside a native well on the northern side of a granite hill, I took a gun and walked round the side of the hill to try to secure a wallaby, which I had seen as we approached the place. Whilst walking along the edge of a small plain I heard a bird giving a peculiar call, and, on investigation, I identified it as a Western Bower-Bird. It was very shy and flew away over the hill as soon as I tried to get nearer. About 20 yards from the southern side of the hill I found a playground of the bird under a low scrubby bush. The bower consisted of a clump of very hard dense grass, which the bird had divided by some means and had made a perfectly straight track through the clump. The grass was dead, but I think that it was fresh when the bird constructed the bower in the first place, as there were pieces of grass, which were curved to some extent. At each end of the passage through the clump was a platform built up of small sticks to a height of between five and six inches. The length of both platforms and the bower was seven feet, and the passage was in a north and south direction. The length of the bower was 18 inches, and the top of the grass was from 12 to 15 inches above the floor of the passage. On the southern platform, some 18 inches from the end of the bower, and extending for two feet in a southerly direction, were a number of bleached wallaby bones—four skulls, and many smaller bones being noted. On the northern platform, 18 inches from the end of the bower, was a heap of bleached land-snail shells (*Helix* sp.). This heap was about three feet in circumference, and there were at least 250 of the shells neatly arranged therein. As the playground was open on the southern side I obtained photographs of it without disturbing the bush or bower. Next morning we had rather a late start, as the horses had made back about five miles during the night. We continued in a southerly direction, with the boy "Paddy" walking along in the lead, as he was to take us to a native well, which, he said, had "mob water." Very dense mulga made the going very slow, and we had to stop frequently to repair broken nose-lines on the camels. The bird life was practically nil in the mulga, only an occasional bird being seen. A Boobook Owl was flushed by the camels, and an occasional Crested Bellbird was noted. As the day was very hot no doubt the birds were in secluded shady spots. At 2 p.m. the mulga began to open out and we came into spinifex (*Triodia*) country with many clumps

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of mallee. Several Willie Wagtails were seen, there, as well as a Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike and a male Rufous Whistler. We could see a range of hills ahead of us, and Central Mount Wedge a little west from our present line of travel. Towards evening we reached some saltbush country, and after crossing about seven miles of this we found tracks of natives for the first time for the day. Several rabbits ran across in front of the camels, and tracks of Emus and Dingoes were also noticed. As we approached the hills we saw a dense line of trees, which turned out to be a teatree (*Melaleuca*) watercourse with a limestone bed. The teatree was very dense and in some places 14 to 15 feet high. On rounding a bend in the watercourse five aboriginals were seen at a native well. They immediately dived into the teatrees, but after we arrived at the well they came up to us and were quite friendly. The well was 12 feet deep in limestone, with very little water to be seen. The "boys" set to work cleaning it out, but we were unable to get sufficient water for the horses, so decided to camp and tie up the horses and camels for the night. They were very thirsty, having travelled about 25 miles, and would probably have made back if they were hobbled out. Crested Pigeons were watering at the well, in addition to Crows, Diamond-Doves, Magpies, and Chestnut-eared Finches. All these birds would drink by flying down the well and alighting probably on some mud at the sides. The well was just wide enough for a man to squeeze down. On making inquiries from the bush blacks as to water in the vicinity of Central Mount Wedge, which was about 15 miles west from us, Mr. Stafford found out there was no water ahead, but there was another well "close up"; so we started off in the morning with the five blacks walking ahead and soon arrived at the well and found an abundance of water, but of a very unpleasant taste, which left one's mouth dry after drinking. The blacks were shown pictures of the Night Parrot, and they seemed to know the bird and called it "Want." We told them we would give them some tucker if they would get one. They said they would go out next day and if successful would follow our tracks. Birds seen at and around this well were:—Purple-backed Wrens (a small flock), Crested Pigeons (20), Rufous Whistlers (several seen), White-backed Magpies (2), Willie Wagtail (1), Waxbills (Chestnut-eared Finches), many hundreds around and watering at all times during the day, Diamond-Doves (numerous). Owing to the bad water we packed up next morning and headed for Coniston, as it was not safe to go any further west on account of the scarcity of



.Bower of *Chlamydera guttata* (Western Bower-Bird).



Land Snail Shells (*Helix* sp.)

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good water. We returned along the route we had taken for the previous two days. I had another look at the playground of the Western Bower-Bird, but there were no signs of the birds. At sundown two of the bush blacks came to the camp and handed me five Mallee Fowl's eggs\*. The picture I had showed them of the Night Parrot represented the bird in flight, and they evidently thought it looked like their "Want," which they described as living in the spinifex and never perching. As they had travelled 25 miles with the eggs on a very hot day we gave them some tucker and "tobac." We journeyed back to Coniston via Brooks' Soak (Naval Action), and at the Soak the following species were noted:—Crested Pigeons, Chestnut-eared Finches, Spotted Nightjar, White-backed Swallows, Common Bronzewing, and Hawks. I went over to the Soak after dark and noticed the surface of the water being disturbed every few seconds by Bats, which were flying backwards and forwards over the water and touching it in the same way as the swallow does in drinking. We arrived at Coniston homestead on 14th December, having been seven days away on the trip, and having passed through a lot of very dry and uninviting country. We were glad to get back to the Station and obtain good water and vegetables. The majority of the birds noted on the trip were in close proximity to water. Miles of country were travelled over without a bird being seen, but this no doubt was due to the intense heat which was experienced on the whole journey. In the case of the Chestnut-eared Finches it was remarkable that such hosts of the birds that are to be seen at some of the soakages can obtain sufficient food to keep them going while the heat lasts. They have only about three hours in the morning before it gets hot to obtain food, and they seem to be continually drinking.

Emu, *Dromaius novae-hollandiae*.—Five were seen singly, but all at a distance. Many tracks were noted about all surface waters on the Station.

Mallee Fowl, *Leipoa ocellata*.—Five eggs were brought in by bush blacks on our way back from our attempt to reach Central Mount Wedge.

Button-Quail, *Turnix velox*.—Only a small number was seen in isolated places. They were flushed in each case from spinifex (*Triodia*).

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\* This appears to be the furthest northern record of the presence of the species.—Editors.

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Diamond-Dove, *Geopelia cuneata*.—Five were seen at Brooks' Well, and others at the furthest well camped at.

Common Bronzewing, *Phaps chalcoptera*.—Three came to Brooks' Soak just about dark. The light was so poor that the birds could only be distinguished at a distance of six or seven yards. Three were noted at a waterhole eight miles north of the Station. Specimen, ♂; iris brown; feet, scarlet; bill, black; inside mouth, flesh colour; total length, 13½ inches; spread, 22 inches; stomach contents, seeds.

Crested Pigeon, *Ocyphaps lophotes*.—Very common. They were seen at Brooks' Soak and the Station waterhole in great numbers. Specimen, sex ?; iris bright yellow; bare skin around eye, scarlet; bill and inside mouth, black; feet, purply slate; total length, 8½ inches; spread, 13¼ inches; stomach contents, seeds.

Plumed Pigeon, *Lophophaps plumifera*.—Ten were seen at Brooks' Well. Specimen, ♀; iris bright yellow; bare skin around eye, scarlet; feet, purple; bill and inside mouth, black; total length, 8¾ inches; spread, 13½ inches; stomach contents, small seeds.

Black-fronted Dotterel, *Charadrius melanops*.—A few were seen at the Station waterhole. Specimen, ♀; iris ?; eyelid, scarlet; feet and inside mouth, flesh colour; bill, bases flesh colour, tips black; total length, 6½ inches; spread, 14 inches.

Greenshank, *Tringa nebularia*.—Two were seen at the Station waterhole. Specimen, 6/12/1931; ♂; iris full black; feet, dirty green; bill, black; inside mouth, white; total length, 13¾ inches; spread, 22¼ inches.

Yellow-billed Spoonbill, *Platalea flavipes*.—A single bird was seen at the Station waterhole.

Nankeen Night-Heron, *Nycticorax caledonicus*?—Two large birds were flushed from a dense portion of a gumtree on the edge of the Station waterhole, but as I could not obtain a good view of them I must query the species.

Plumed Whistling Duck, *Dendrocygna eytoni*.—Approximately 200 were seen at the Station waterhole. They were very quiet and when flushed would just fly to the other end of the water and settle.

Grey Teal, *Querquedula gibberifrons*.—About 100 were seen at the Station waterhole. They also were very quiet.

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Collared Sparrowhawk, *Accipiter cirrocephalus*.—Not common. A specimen was taken at a soakage on the Station. ♂; iris bright yellow; legs and feet, pale yellow; bill, horn colour; inside mouth, sky-blue; total length, 12 inches; spread, 25½ inches; stomach contents, small lizard.

Wedge-tailed Eagle, *Uroaetus audax*.—Two were seen flying very low.

Brown Hawk, *Falco berigora*.—Two were seen about three miles south of the Station. Specimen, ♀; iris full black; feet, pale yellow (almost white); bill, horn colour; inside mouth, white; total length, 18½ inches; spread, 40 inches.

Hawks.—Many Hawks, and probably Kestrels, were seen, but I could not identify them with certainty.

Boobook Owl, *Ninox boobook*.—Seven of these birds were flushed from a large whitewood tree (*Atalaya hemiglauca*). There were numbers of pellets under the tree. Specimens, ♂; iris grey; legs and feet, sky-blue; bill, sky-blue at bases, tips horn colour; inside mouth, light blue; total length, 12½ inches; spread, 28 inches; stomach contents, beetles and small bones. ♀; iris dark brown; legs and feet, pale blue; bill, bases light blue, tips horn colour; inside mouth, sky-blue; total length, 12½ inches; spread, 29½ inches; stomach contents, insects.

Major Mitchell Cockatoo, *Kakatoe leadbeateri*.—Several small flocks were seen, approximately 100 birds in all.

Cockatoo Parrot, *Leptolophus hollandicus*.—Two were noted at the Station soakage.

Port Lincoln Parrot, *Barnardius zonarius*.—Noted in the gum creeks in the flowering corkwood trees (*Hakea lorea* and *H. intermedia*) from which they were drinking the nectar. Specimen, ♂; iris dark brown; feet, grey; bill, horn colour; total length, 15 inches; spread, 20¾ inches; stomach contents, nectar.

Owlet Nightjar, *Aegotheles cristata*.—I disturbed a bird from a hollow tree at Coniston. It flew across the creek bed and alighted on a branch of a gumtree. Before I could take aim I saw a flash of a Hawk diving down, and a small cloud of feathers coming from the Nightjar as it dropped to the earth. On picking it up I found the bird almost dead. There was no outward sign of its having been struck down, but on skinning the bird I found a clot of blood at the base of the skull, where it had evidently been hit by the Hawk as it flew past. ♀; iris brown; feet, white; bill, upper mandible, horn colour, lower mandible, white; inside mouth, flesh colour; total length, 9 inches; spread, 18½ inches.

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Red-backed Kingfisher, *Halcyon pyrrhopygius*.—Common in the creek gums. Some birds were seen 20 miles from water on one occasion. Specimen, ♂; iris brown; feet, grey; bill, upper mandible black, lower mandible base white, tip black; inside mouth, flesh colour; total length,  $9\frac{1}{2}$  inches; spread,  $12\frac{3}{4}$  inches.

Australian Bee-eater, *Merops ornatus*.—Were seen in every gum creek, but no birds were noticed away from the gums in the creeks. Specimen, ♂; iris crimson; feet and inside mouth, flesh colour; bill, black; total length,  $9\frac{1}{2}$  inches; spread,  $13\frac{1}{2}$  inches; stomach contents, insects.

Spotted Nightjar, *Eurostopodus guttatus*.—Two birds were seen at Brooks' Soak. Specimen, ♂; iris full black; feet, slate; bill, black; inside mouth, flesh colour; total length, 13 inches; spread, 26 inches.

White-backed Swallow, *Cheramoeca leucosterna*.—About 100 birds were hawking about Brooks' Soak. Specimen, ♂; iris full black; feet, brown; bill, black; inside mouth, white; total length,  $6\frac{1}{2}$  inches; spread,  $9\frac{3}{4}$  inches; stomach contents, remains of small insects.

Willie Wagtail, *Rhipidura leucophrys*.—Seventeen birds were noted. The blacks on the Station had a great dislike to these birds, and one of the boys said, "That one him all a time talk"; but I could not get any more out of the boy beyond the fact that he wanted me to shoot the bird.

Jacky Winter, *Microeca fascinans subpallida*.—A ♀ was secured on Coniston, iris dark brown; feet and bill, black; inside mouth, white; total length,  $5\frac{1}{2}$  inches; spread,  $10\frac{1}{4}$  inches; stomach contents, small insects.

Hooded Robin, *Melanodryas cucullata*.—A ♂ was obtained at Coniston. Iris full black; feet and bill, black; inside mouth, white; total length,  $6\frac{1}{2}$  inches; spread,  $11\frac{1}{4}$  inches.

Red-capped Robin, *Petroica goodenovii*.—This species was frequently seen in the mulga, and very often a long way from water.

Rufous Whistler, *Pachycephala rufiventris*.—Twenty-six were seen and about 20 individual calls were heard. Specimens, ♂; iris brown; feet, grey; bill and inside mouth, black; total length,  $6\frac{5}{8}$  inches; spread,  $11\frac{1}{8}$  inches. ♀; iris rufous; feet, slate; bill, black; inside mouth, flesh colour; total length,  $6\frac{1}{2}$  inches; spread, 10 inches; stomach contents, beetles and particles of sand.

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Magpie Lark, *Grallina cyanoleuca*.—A pair was seen at the Station waterhole, and another pair at the Station soakage in the Lander.

Crested Bellbird, *Oreoica gutturalis*.—Very common in mulga country. Specimen, ♂; iris yellow; feet, light slate; bill, horn colour; inside mouth, yellow; total length,  $8\frac{1}{4}$  inches; spread,  $12\frac{1}{8}$  inches; stomach contents, small insects. ♀; iris yellow; feet, slate; bill, horn colour; inside mouth, yellowish; total length,  $7\frac{1}{8}$  inches; spread,  $12\frac{3}{4}$  inches; stomach contents, insects.

Ground Cuckoo-Shrike, *Pteropodocys maxima*.—Four of these birds were seen in some ironwood trees (*Acacia estrophiolata*) in the vicinity of the Station.

Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike, *Coracina novae-hollandiae*.—These birds were often seen, and could always be found round the homestead. Specimen, ♂; iris full black; feet and bill, black; inside mouth, white; total length,  $12\frac{1}{2}$  inches; spread,  $23\frac{1}{2}$  inches; stomach contents, insects.

White-winged Triller, *Lalage tricolor*.—Only two birds were seen. Specimen, ♀; iris brown; feet, slate; bill, horn colour. base of lower mandible, white; inside mouth, flesh colour; total length,  $7\frac{1}{2}$  inches; spread,  $11\frac{1}{4}$  inches; stomach contents, insect remains and very small seeds.

Red-breasted Babbler, *Pomatostomus rubeculus*.—Seven birds were identified, but many Babblers were queried, as the birds were found to be very shy, and after following small flocks for sometimes half-a-mile I could not be sure of the species. Specimen, ♀; iris brown; feet, black; bill, upper mandible black, base of lower mandible white, tip black; total length,  $9\frac{3}{4}$  inches; spread,  $12\frac{1}{2}$  inches; stomach contents, insects.

Crimson Chat, *Epthianura tricolor*.—Approximately 1,000 were seen. They were very partial to the corkwood trees and nearly all the birds seen were in or adjacent to those trees. Specimens, ♂; iris white; feet, slate; bill, horn colour; inside mouth, flesh colour; total length, 5 inches; spread,  $7\frac{2}{3}$  inches; stomach contents, insects. ♂; similar soft parts, but inside mouth white; total length,  $4\frac{3}{4}$  inches; spread,  $7\frac{3}{4}$  inches; stomach contents, ants and some unidentifiable matter.

Weebills, *Smicromis* sp.—I did not identify any of the birds seen, but there were numbers of the genus noted\*.

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\* *Smicromis flavescens*, Yellow Weebill, is the only species as yet recorded from that part of the country.—Editors.

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Brown Songlark, *Cinclorhamphus cruralis*.—A bird was seen at Coniston in a corkwood tree and was extracting the nectar from the flowers. On being secured it turned out to be this species. ♂; 4/12/1931; iris light brown; feet, grey; bill and inside mouth, black; total length,  $9\frac{3}{4}$  inches; spread,  $13\frac{3}{4}$  inches; stomach contents, portions of a grasshopper, a small spider, and nectar.

Turquoise Wren, *Malurus callainus*.—Forty-six were noted. These birds were often met with and were very tame. Specimens, ♂; iris full black; feet, brown; bill and inside mouth, black; total length,  $4\frac{3}{4}$  inches; tail,  $2\frac{3}{8}$  inches; spread,  $6\frac{1}{4}$  inches; stomach contents, small seeds and insects. ♀; iris and bill brown; feet, dark brown; inside mouth, flesh colour; total length, 5 inches; spread,  $5\frac{1}{8}$  inches; stomach contents, insects.

Blue and White Wren, *Malurus cyanotus*.—A small party consisting of a male and four others were seen in thick spinifex (*Triodia*) at Coniston.

Purple-backed Wren, *Malurus assimilis*.—A flock seen included one male and several birds in brownish plumage. Specimens, ♂; iris full black; feet, slate; bill, black; inside mouth, white; total length,  $4\frac{3}{8}$  inches; spread, 6 inches; stomach contents, insects. ♀; iris full black; feet, light slate; bill, light brown; inside mouth, white; total length, 5 inches; spread,  $5\frac{1}{2}$  inches; stomach contents, small insects.

Black-faced Wood-Swallow, *Artamus melanops*.—These birds were very common and were to be seen all over the Station. They seemed to get together among the flowering corkwood trees and apparently were obtaining food of some kind from those trees.

Mistletoe Bird, *Dicaeum hirundinaceum*.—Only two birds were seen, both males.

Black Honeyeater, *Myzomela nigra*.—Only one bird was seen. ♂; iris brown; feet and bill, black; inside mouth, white; total length,  $4\frac{3}{4}$  inches; spread,  $7\frac{7}{8}$  inches; stomach contents, insects and remains of very small beetles.

Singing Honeyeater, *Meliphaga virescens*.—Very common in the creek gums (*Eucalyptus rostrata*).

Yellow-throated Miner, *Myzantha flavigula*.—Sex ?; iris ?; feet, pale yellow; bill and inside mouth, yellow; total length,  $9\frac{1}{8}$  inches; spread,  $13\frac{3}{4}$  inches; stomach contents, small insects.

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Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater, *Acanthagenys rufogularis*.—Thirty-four birds were noted. Specimen, ♀; iris grey; feet, slate; bill, bases, white; tips, black; inside mouth, yellow; total length,  $8\frac{7}{8}$  inches; spread,  $12\frac{3}{4}$  inches; stomach contents, remains of small insects.

Australian Pipit, *Anthus australis*.—This species was very seldom seen, only 15 birds being noted.

Chestnut-eared Finch, *Taeniopygia castanotis*.—Very common. They were seen at all surface waters in large numbers. There were thousands at Brooks' Soak.

Painted Finch, *Emblema picta*.—Twenty of these birds were seen at the Station waterhole in company with Chestnut-eared Finches. It was noticed that after having a drink the Painted Finches would fly on to some high rocks, whilst the Chestnut-eared would fly into some small bushes near the water's edge. Specimen, ♂; iris white; feet, light brown; bill, upper mandible, black at base, tip scarlet, lower mandible; scarlet; inside mouth, flesh colour; total length,  $4\frac{1}{2}$  inches; spread,  $7\frac{3}{8}$  inches; stomach contents, small seeds.

Western Bower-Bird, *Chlamydera guttata*.—See the narrative.

Crow, *Corvus* sp.—They were very numerous and cheeky at the Station. A blackboy had to stop at the killing yards until dark, after a bullock had been killed, in order to keep the Crows from the carcass.

Pied Butcher-Bird, *Cracticus nigrogularis*.—Fourteen birds were noted. As far as I could judge this species seemed to be confined to the gums on the Lander.

Black-backed Magpie, *Gymnorhina tibicen*.—This species was seen on several occasions at the Station.

White-backed Magpie, *Gymnorhina hypoleuca*.—Noted at the Station waterhole, but I was unable to get close to the birds.