
FINLAYSON—Birds in Central Australia.

Miscellaneous Notes on Some Species of Birds in Central Australia.

By H. H. Finlayson.

December, 1933. Re Speed of Falcons. On the afternoon of Christmas Day, 1933, when travelling by motor-car to Warrina, observed many Little Falcons (*Falco longipennis*) perched on the arms of telegraph poles alongside the railway line. Between the Coward Springs and Anna Creek I made the following observation: when the motor-car was almost abreast of a telegraph pole, a single Falcon swooped down from the side arm and flew straight down the track in front of the car and within three feet of the ground. It easily out-distanced us, and rising to another perch on a pole, several spans ahead, awaited our approach, before repeating the performance in exactly the same manner. It persisted in this exercise without variation, for eight miles, when it flew off at an angle from the track. The flights averaged six to seven spans, and the bird usually alighted two to three spans ahead. Over the eight miles our speed averaged thirty to thirty-three miles per hour, so that at times the bird must have attained at least sixty-five miles per hour.

January, 1934.—In the sandridge country south of the Musgrave Range (which continues with little change right down to the northern edge of the Nullarbor Plain), found birds to

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be very scarce. The birds most frequently seen or heard were the Crested Bellbird (*Oreoica gutturalis*), the Crimson Chats (*Epthiamura tricolor*), and Orange Chats (*E. aurifrons*), the former of which the blacks call "Meet-eet," the Black-faced Wood-Swallow (*Artamus melanops*), "Talpi Talpo"; Willy Wagtail (*Rhipidura leucophrys*), Diamond Doves (*Geopelia cuneata*), Crested Pigeons (*Ocyphaps lophotes*), Mulga Parrots (*Psephotus varius*), Port Lincoln Parrots (*Barnardius zonarius*), Zebra Finches (*Taeniopygia castanotis*), and Budgerygahs (*Melopsittacus undulatus*), the last-named species was much less numerous than in 1931-32. At Pundi Soak, on a small oasis of herbage surrounding a granite rock ninety miles south-west of Ernabella, I saw two flights of Little Corellas, or Bare-eyed Cockatoos (*Kakatoe sanguinea*), thirty-four and five birds respectively. Emu (*Dromaius novaehollandiae*) tracks were fairly plentiful in the sandhills, but none was actually seen, except at Murranuckna Rock Hole under the south side of the main range. In twenty-four days in the sandridge country no Wedge-tailed Eagles (*Uroaetus audax*) were seen, though they were common in the Range. At all the sandhill waters visited, however (Pinindi, Pundi, Kulpi, Ungarinna, and Illillinna) Crows (*Corvus ceciliae*) were extraordinarily numerous. On the way back to the Officer Creek I noted a single Red-capped Robin (*Petroica goodenovii*) on the Currie Swamp—the first I had seen in the Centre.

February, 1934.—In travelling from Oparinna Spring in the north-western spur of the Musgrave Range, through the Petermann Ranges to the Schwerin Mural Crescent across the Western Australian-Central Australian border, I again found birds generally very scarce. The weather for the whole of the month was consistently very hot.

In the lower portion of the Petermann Ranges a very fine Honeyeater with a yellow crescent mark on the neck (Yellow-plumed Honeyeater (*Meliphaga ornata*)) was rather common, being usually observed feeding (on insects ?) in ironwood trees. It occurred in pairs or small parties, and had a curious call, somewhat suggested by its Pitchenturra name—*Widd-door-roo-ree*.

At Piltardi, one of the biggest waters in the Petermann Ranges, 150 natives were camped, and were subsisting largely upon Emus. During my time there they were spearing the birds chiefly on the grassy flats south-west of the Range, where the birds were plentiful after a rain. Some weeks before this,

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however, they were being trapped at the waterhole itself. The lower water lies at the foot of a considerable quartzite cliff, and is flanked on two sides by buttresses from the hills. At a distance of about 100 yards from the water, a low brush fence had been built, with a gap to the north. The trap is worked by concealing a party of spearsmen under the brush, waiting till the Emus came down to water, and then, when the birds have overcome their first suspicions and begin to drink, rushing out on them and hemming them against the rocks.

Observation on the birds at Piltardi was difficult while so large a party of blacks was camped there, but three weeks later, when returning from the Western Australian Reserve, I found the place completely deserted, and was surprised to find that in the daytime very few birds, except Crows and a few Crested Pigeons, were watering there. The place was swarming with ants and the only spot where sleep was possible was on the shelving bank of gravel at the water side. On two occasions at about 10 p.m., when lying here, Stone-Curlews (*Burhinus magnirostris*) landed within a few feet and stalked nervously up and down on the bank above me, before going down to drink, and clearly visible on the skyline. I had often heard them about the Range at nightfall, but had not seen them before.

January, 1935.—In following up the River Finke from Horseshoe Bend to Palm Valley, I found birds (of well-known species) numerous—rains having fallen over all the James Range area a few weeks before. Reaches of running water of several hundred yards length were frequent in the bed of the Finke, and the permanent holes like Parkes' Water and Boggy Hole were showing splendid sheets of water. At these places water birds were numerous, especially Ducks and Black-tailed Native Hens (*Tribonyx ventralis*). Bee-eaters (*Merops ornatus*) were also in large numbers at all the big pools.

On leaving the Finke country and proceeding west to the Rawlinson Range over the wide sandhill belt north of Lake Amadeus, birds at once became scarce as soon as the James Range was left, and continued so, almost to Sladen Waters, where a small area had benefited by a flood rain. On the herbage about this water, Plain-Turkeys (*Eupodotis australis*) were rather numerous, but exceedingly wild, being constantly hunted by the blacks. Port Lincoln Parrots were plentiful amongst the saltbush, and a few parties of Cockatoo Parrots (*Leptolophus hollandicus*) were also seen, but Mulga Parrots

and Budgerygahs were scarce, and no Bourke Parrots (*Neophema bourki*), Scarlet-breasted Parrots (*Neophema splendida*), or Princess (Alexandra) Parrots (*Polytelis alexandrae*) were seen.

On the return trip, at a small water called Wytookarri on a sandstone ridge in a wide expanse of sandhills, I was surprised to hear one late afternoon the call of the Red-tailed Black Cockatoo (*Calyptorhynchus banksi*). I did not sight the birds, but do not think I could have been mistaken. Though numerous in parts of the James Range and George Gill Range, I had not seen it previously west of Quidjinta—fifteen miles west of Carmichael's Crag, on the eastern border of the Central Australian Reserve. I have not seen it so far in any part of the Rawlinson, Petermann, Musgrave, or Everard Ranges, and it appears to reach its southern limit also at about the George Gill Range. In February, 1931, at a water called Yaringa, a few miles south of Quidjinta, being short of meat, I shot considerable numbers of this species, and then noticed that in a proportion of adult birds (♀ ?) and in all immature birds, the red band on the two outer tail-feathers was much duller than on the central members, and the band itself was transversely barred with black. The birds were miserably poor, extraordinarily tough, and scarcely edible, except as soup!
