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Notes on some Birds seen on Flinders and other islands off the Eyre Peninsula coasts, February-March, 1937.

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The birds noted below were seen during a stay of some three weeks in February of the year 1937 on Flinders Island and during shorter visits to some other islands of neighbouring coasts and waters. The observations are of a random and desultory kind, being made incidentally to enquiry into the mammal fauna of the places named, and do not relate to more than a small part of the total avifauna, nor include even all the prominent forms.

With the exception of Prof. J. B. Cleland's paper on the birds of Pearson's Island (Trans. Roy. Soc. S.A., Vol. XLVII, 119/126, 1923), little seems to have been published on the birds of the smaller islands of the South Australian coasts, and even such fragmentary records as the following, provided they are made at first hand, may have value as contributions to the completed lists of the future.

Flinders Island has an area of about 9,000 acres, and lies about 18 miles west of Elliston on the Eyre Peninsula mainland. It has the structure, usual hereabouts, of a limestone platform resting on granite base, which is exposed at the waterline. The coastline is varied and is occupied by cliffs, boulder-shingle, and sand beach in about equal proportion. The soil is in general a shallow light sandy loam, although firmer red soils occur on the south-west side. There are two exposed natural waters, and two others artificially created—all semi-permanent in character. Apparently there has never been an aboriginal human occupation, but European settlement (following a period of exploitation by sealers) began over 70 years ago, and either agriculture or grazing, or both together, have been continued, with few interruptions, ever since.

Over the greater part of the island, the original vegetation has been destroyed either wholly or in part, and a considerable area of grass land has been developed. Add to these ravages of settlement the effect of frequent fires and of introduced pests such as the cat, and it will be appreciated that the time has gone for a direct comparison of the island birds with those of the nearby mainland. (The pest rabbit is absent; the so-called Belgian hare was introduced in the early days, but does not thrive, and at present is comparatively rare. It does not seem to have had any appreciable effect on the flora.) Nevertheless, systematic questioning of the earlier residents of the island, who are still living, would probably bring to light interesting data both on the birds of occupation and the absentees, in their time.

(Note: If a place name is not given, Flinders Island is implied.)

Eudyptula minor, Fairy Penguin.—This was very numerous on the north-east coast of Flinders Island from the lighthouse down to within half a mile of the homestead. Their burrows were plentiful in the belt of low tussocky vegetation between the thick teatree and the coastal boulders, but the bulk of their population seems to live in caves under the bigger rock masses which were formerly worked commercially for guano. In some of the larger caves the tracks and feathers and excrement seem to indicate very large numbers, although they are apparently all secreted in the furthest crevices. One morning, however, at 11, a party of nine was found, huddled together in a small space under a boulder on the beach in a very exposed position. They were photographed and seemed to be adult birds. They seemed to me to be extremely secretive and shy here, and unusually late in coming abroad; all possibly a result of persecution. The lessee of the island states that they can sometimes be seen in late afternoon taking to the water from the rocks, but, though I frequently waited until dark on the cliffs above these caves, I never saw Penguins emerge (February). Their subterranean gurgling noises, however, were plainly audible at such times. The Penguin mortality on the island is tremendous. Hundreds of carcasses are littered along the high ground overlooking this part of the coast; many of them are accumulated under the larger teatrees, and under several such I counted 15-20 sufficiently recent to show grease and soft tissue adhering, though few seemed to have been killed less than a week or two before. In most cases the head had been detached and the body had been little disturbed. Feral cats are numerous on the island,

and are perhaps responsible, but it is admitted that one of the house dogs frequents the locality, presumably to "kill for fun."

On Hardy and Lusby Islands a few carcasses were noticed also, but always near tide-mark. On Spilsby Island at the south end, where there is a heavy surf, I picked up a bird dead but a few hours. Curious as to the cause, as there was no external damage, I skinned it and found the whole ventral surface badly bruised. One wonders if an error in judgment in landing was responsible. The bird was very clean.

On the evening of 6th March, on a fishing cutter off Point Bolingbroke in Spencer's Gulf, a companion and myself were caught in a strong south-east blow and had to run for shelter to the west coast of Reevesby Island. At 11.30 p.m. the wind dropped momentarily, and suddenly high above the uproar of the sea (made noisy by an opposing tide rip), could be heard the cry of Penguins. It was too dark to distinguish anything in the water, but they seemed to be quite close about the cutter. At this time we were nearly two miles from the nearest land at Partney Island. There seems to be some evidence, both direct and inferential, that the diurnal feeding habit with a return to shore *en masse*, after sundown, is not an invariable rule with this species.

Puffinus tenuirostris, Short-tailed Shearwater (Mutton Bird).—A large party (some hundreds of birds) was seen at a distance on two occasions, feeding on the water, about five miles east of Topgallant Island.

Phalacrocorax ater, Little Black Cormorant; and *P. fuscescens*, White-breasted Cormorant.—Both were seen on most coasts visited. On Little English Island, in the Sir Joseph Banks Group, large mixed parties, 200-300 birds, were seen perched on rocks which are whitened with excrement. Guano was formerly taken here in some quantity. *P. varius*, the Pied Cormorant, may have been included in the parties.

Sterna bergii, Crested Tern.—Was seen on Reevesby, Hareby, and Lusby Islands.

Sterna nereis, Fairy Tern.—Noticed particularly on Reevesby Island, off Tumbay Bay, where it was in large numbers, above the shelly beach towards the north end of the west coast.

Larus novae-hollandiae, Silver Gull.—Common on all coasts visited. At Flinders Island it creates a nuisance by taking feed from the fowls at the homestead.

Gabianus pacificus, Pacific Gull.—Small numbers on all islands visited. Dark plumaged birds of size equal to the black

and white adults were numerous. Several examples were noticed when on the wing to have apparently lost a leg. Fishermen here say it is a frequent mutilation in this Gull, and they attribute it to attacks by predatory fish, when the bird is swimming.

Haematopus unicolor, Sooty Oystercatcher.

Lobibyx novae-hollandiae, Spur-winged Plover. — A few are always to be seen on the south-east coast of Flinders Island, but are much less plentiful than on the adjoining mainland coast.

Charadrius ruficapillus, Red-capped Dotterel. — Seen — especially on Spilsby Island.

Numenius cyanopus, Eastern Curlew. — One only seen on rocks at the south end of Flinders Island.

Demigretta sacra, Reef-Heron. — Seen on the south end of Spilsby Island.

Cereopsis novae-hollandiae, Cape Barren Goose. — Not seen on Flinders Island. Six were seen on the wing off North Pearson Island; a dozen on the outer Waldegrave Island; and a large flock (50 to 60 birds) on Spilsby Island, where they were very timid and would not permit of an approach closer than 100 yards. On the outer Waldegrave Island the Geese were feeding on the red saline currant-like fruits of a bush (*Nitraria Schoberi*, Nitre-Bush), which grows in some quantity there. The birds' dejecta consist almost entirely of the pits of this fruit, cemented together into a conical pellet.

Pandion haliaetus, Osprey. — A pair of these birds was frequently seen about the island and a large nest was situated on top of a detached columnar mass of limestone off the south-east coast, but there appeared to be no young. Several of the tabular masses of granite which occur on the coast were daily found sprinkled with the fragments of a very massive-shelled mollusk, and this bird was quoted by a resident of the island as the chief author of the destruction.

It is stated to secure the shell fish (which is the size of a small orange) from nearby reefs at low tide, when it is but loosely attached to the rocks. The bird carries it to a considerable height and allows it to fall on the granite slabs below; it then quickly descends to seize the animal exposed in the shattered shell. Some of the biggest of these "anvil" rocks are situated near the guano-caves on the north-east coast, and the amount of debris scattered on them is astonishing, so much so that I doubt whether one pair of Ospreys could be responsible for it, and it is possible that Gulls and other sea birds participate in the harvest. This particular group of rocks is washed at high

tide and the shell fragments are rapidly building up a considerable deposit at the extremity of a little beach nearby. On Hareby Island, in the Sir Joseph Banks Group, two kinds of sea-urchins (a green and a purple) are treated similarly. It seems a very "intelligent" habit and could scarcely have been acquired other than by observing the effect of an accidental fall and then deliberately repeating it. Apparently the old name of "Ossi-fragre" as applied to this bird is less inappropriate than has been stated.

Hawk, sp.—A smaller dark hawk had a nest and young on a cliff edge at the north point of the island. Both young and old birds were excessively noisy and called incessantly while I was near.

Neophema petrophila, Rock Parrot.—Two only were seen on Flinders Island. Two or three pairs were on North Pearson Island. It was numerous and very tame on the outer Waldegrave Island. It was seen also on Reevesby, Lusby, Hareby, Little English (an almost bare rock), and Spilsby Islands. On the last it was very abundant, and during a warm afternoon's ramble over the south, low-bushed part of the island, its thin tintillating unparrot-like notes, were heard on all sides. Its feeding habit here upon the bush tops is quite as described by Cleland (*loc. cit.*).

Hirundo neoxena, Welcome Swallow.—This species was in large numbers over the grass country.

Petroica goodenovii, Red-capped Robin.—

Epthianura albifrons, White-fronted Chat.—

Zosterops halmaturina, Grey-backed Silvereye.—

These were the common small birds of the more heavily bushed portion of the island. The Silvereye seemed more brightly coloured than the mainland bird.

Anthus australis, Pipit.—Was in large numbers over the grass country.

Corvus sp.—Crows are numerous and are said habitually to cross from the mainland. On Spilsby Island they occur, but seldom more than a pair at a time. A curious story is locally told of the Crows on this island. It is said that if one or both birds are killed, a party of Crows will shortly appear from the mainland. They hold a series of "meetings," during which a new pair is elected from their number to stay on the island. This done, the main body returns. One is tempted to suspect more of entertainment than instruction in this quaint account.

Strepera sp.—A Currawong is stated by the lessee to occur.

Gymnorhina hypoleuca, White-backed Magpie. — They are not indigenous and are said not to cross from the mainland. But in 1911 a former lessee introduced a pair and one of these is still extant; an interesting life-span record of at least 26 years.

Sturnus vulgaris, Starling.—Has been introduced on Flinders Island where it thrives, and is plentiful too on Reevesby and Spilsby—all settled islands.
