

A Feeding Habit of the Silver Gull, ..

Larus novae-hollandiae.

By Oscar Symon.

On 22nd March, 1938, about noon, in the long, shallow pools left by the outgoing tide on the beach between the Semaphore and Largs jetties, four of these charming sea-birds were feeding in a way new to me. Each bird was the solitary occupant of a separate pool, the first and last of which were, I reckon, about 400 yards apart. My attention was drawn to the first bird by the sound of a series of quick watery splutterings like the noise made by tame ducks eating grain from a shallow pan of water, but, in the case of the Silver Gulls, this noise arose from the action of their webbed feet on the water, and not from their bills. First of all the Silver Gull would walk slowly along where the water was about one inch deep on the seaward edge

|| Collared Sparrowhawk. See footnote to page 161 of this Part.—
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of the pool. Then, at varying distances of a few feet, the forepart of the body would suddenly be tilted down towards the water and the head cocked on one side, as if it were peering hard or listening intently. After a moment or two the Silver Gull would swing round to face the wind and immediately begin to "mark time at the double," as it were, gradually working its feet and legs deeper into the sand from which were dislodged seemingly large numbers of some sort of small insect which were picked up as they reached the surface and were making off. This went on in each spot until the bird was almost knee-deep in the sandhole so made, when the process was repeated a little further on. In one instance, after the Silver Gull had gone knee-deep, it stood firm on its left leg and continued marking time with its right until the food supply ran out. All four Silver Gulls were adults. I do not know what they were eating, though I did notice a lot of transparent-looking insects skimming about the surface of the pools like fresh-water beetles. Nor did I discover anything when I made holes in the sand with my hand where the Silver Gulls had been feeding. It is remarkable that these particular four pools were practically in line with each other (the same distance above the low-water level) and that in all cases the Silver Gulls were only finding the insects along the *seaward edges* of the pools. It suggests, I think, that the relished insect, or whatever it was they eat in such numbers, confined itself to a definite tidal zone on this beach and under the conditions existing at the time. On the low sandbanks containing the four pools in question were flocks of Silver Gulls in varying numbers facing the southerly wind and occupied in ways other than the search for food. Most of them, apparently well fed, were set on the sand resting, a few were standing about preening their feathers and stretching their wings, while an odd nuisance or two, as is usual with these Silver Gulls, annoyed their companions by stalking up to them with a threatening gait and snaky attitude which generally ended in a raucous scream of salty abuse from an efficient bill down-drawn into an arched and swollen-looking neck. Yet the four solitary feeding Silver Gulls, which I had under observation, were not molested in any way, though they continued feeding on and off for about half an hour or perhaps three-quarters of an hour altogether. I have always regarded the Silver Gull's feeding habits as Micawber-like but, obviously, they do secure food by design and industry also.

[Mr. H. M. Hale, Director of the S.A. Museum, considered that the four Silver Gulls most probably were feeding on Amphipods (*Exoedicerus* and *Urohaustorius*) and Cumaceans (*Gephyrocuma*)—all sand-burrowing crustaceans.—Editors.]