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Address: Box 386A, G.P.O., Adelaide.

Editorial Committee: F. M. ANGEL, J. B. CLELAND, A. G. EDQUIST.

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THE MURRAY MALLEE AND ITS BIRDS

By J. NEIL MCGILP.

During recent years my annual recreation leave has been spent in parts of the Mallee within easy reach of Pinnaroo, and this season (1942), it is pleasing to record, is one of the best experienced in this district for at least a decade. Moreover, it is an early one, for such shrubs as the Acacias, Bassias, etc., usually commencing to bloom in early September, were this year devoid of blossom but carried well formed seed pods. The Mallee was flowering profusely and glorious clusters of pink Mallee blossom were a sight to be remembered. Residents of long standing averred that they had never seen so much pink Mallee in bloom at any period of the year. The roadsides were clothed with a heavy sward of barley grass and introduced plants. These roadsides attract many birds which cannot really be classed as Mallee-scrub birds. The Crested Pigeon, first recorded in the district 8 years ago, has increased greatly in numbers, and they are mostly to be found along the roadsides, where many nests containing eggs or young were noted. Rufous Song Larks, White-browed Wood-Swallows and White-winged Trillers were also fairly numerous along the roads, which usually run between a strip of scrub left as a wind-break and a prevention of soil erosion. These strips of scrub are much in demand as nesting quarters for Black-backed Magpies, Kestrels, Bell-Magpies, Black-eared—now Dusky—Miners, Red-capped and Hooded Robins, and several of the Honeyeaters, whilst Black-backed and Purple-backed Wrens nest in the undergrowth.

With such a favorable season one would expect to find the birds much more numerous than in poorer seasons and that perchance new records of unusual birds would be made. Other than an increase in what we could class as "roadside" birds, there appeared no increase in the true scrub residents; in fact, these birds were more difficult to locate. In former years it had been very noticeable that many birds congregated on certain flats or valleys between the sand dunes where the herbage and (or) grass were more plentiful. The localities became known to us and proved very pleasant observation posts. This year, with good conditions prevailing generally, there appeared no necessity for the birds to foregather into these hitherto more luxuriant spots, with a result that a great deal more walking and keener observation were required to produce results in ornithology.

As with the flora the season so far as the birds were concerned appeared to be quite a month earlier than usual in the district. Many of the birds, particularly the early nesters, such as *Hylacola cauta*, had already produced their first brood of young, and at the time of our visit, extending from 12th to 22nd September, 1942, were interesting themselves in preparations for the second family.

As copious notes regarding distribution, nesting habits, etc., have frequently been published in respect to the Murray Mallee birds, it is not proposed to deal with the results of the trip in the usual way. There are, however, a few notes which appear to be of sufficient interest to warrant publication.

Mallee Whip-bird.—Though much country, particularly that where in previous years this bird had been located, was carefully searched, we saw no sign of and did not hear the never-to-be-forgotten call of the Whip-bird. It is quite possible that the bird, owing to the good season, did not have to return to its customary localities and that in future excursions the Whip-bird will again be found in these spots. However, as the Whip-bird is an extremely shy bird, it is quite possible that, due to the hunting that has taken place in this remarkable bird's haunts, it has sought fresh feeding grounds with more freedom from disturbance.

Mallee Emu Wren.—Rarely located this season. A pair of birds were heard in a patch of some twenty to thirty "porcupines" (Triodia). After watching for a while we decided that the birds were not nesting. One of the party, when leaving, struck a "porcupine" near the outside of the patch and the little Emu Wren flushed out, giving a shrill squeak as she did so. The nest was built near the top in the centre of the "porcupine." It contained 3 fresh eggs. As is frequently the case with this species, some pieces of cast snake-skin had been used in the formation of the outer wall of the neat domed nest.

Tawny Frogmouth.—A nest with 3 eggs was found; this was so unusual—the clutch is almost invariably 2 eggs—that this note is thought worth recording.

Scrub Robin.—Plentiful as usual, about the most common bird in the Mallee. Last year my friend Roy Ribbons, in company with Frank Howe, found two eggs in a Scrub Robin's nest. This is a first record of more than the one egg being found with this species. Ribbons, Howe and the writer this year visited the locality and within a few yards of the place where the two eggs were taken we found one young robin in a nest which from our experience undoubtedly belonged to the bird which last year laid the two eggs.

Spotted Nightjar.—These birds are very local, and can be found nesting in the same spot year after year. We visited a bird, which we had known to occupy a piece of rolled Mallee for several years, within ten minutes of our arrival. The bird rose from a beautiful greenish colored egg with a few black spots on the surface of the shell.

Chestnut-Tailed Thornbill.—Bird disturbed from an old honey tin with the spring lid still affixed but with a small hole rusted out near the bottom of the tin. The tin was one

of several in a rubbish tip where there was once a farm house. The whole of the inside of the tin was taken up with the nest. There were 3 eggs in a snugly lined egg cavity.

Black-winged Bell-Magpie.—All nests found had dry dodder or wait-a-while vine hanging from the nest. This is an invariable indication that the nest belongs to a Bell-Magpie, not to a Black-backed Magpie or Crow or Brown Hawk.

Chestnut-crowned Babbler.—Found about 18 miles north of Peebinga. This is believed to be the most southern record of the species. It occurs almost due east over the Victorian border. It was breeding freely, sets from 3 to 5 being observed. The nests are extremely bulky stick structures built in several small forks in the slender top branches of Mallee, occasionally in Murray Pines.

Red-lore and Gilbert Whistlers.—Not noted as frequently as usual. Several nests found, all of which confirm the fact that the Red-lore always uses green material with which to finish off its nest, whereas the Gilbert Whistler prefers dry material only—clutches 2 to 3 eggs.

Mallee Fowl.—Several birds seen. One was actually scratching with its feet on a mound in which it had apparently just deposited an egg. This mound had been located 3 days previously, and when opened up was found to contain one egg. The egg was in an upright position, with its point downward. The earth, much mixed with powdered vegetation, was quite moist and distinctly warm. The nest was carefully heaped up again and marked to see if the bird would operate on it. The mound was visited on the following day, but beyond fresh tracks on the mound the bird had not thought it necessary to improve on our effort in heaping up the sand to a cone. The following day we again called at the nest; there had been rain during the previous evening, and there were not even fresh tracks on the mound nor had the nest been opened out. When disturbed on the following morning, the bird had almost completed the cone. When opening up the nest we noted that a piece of cotton which we had placed across the mound below the sand had disappeared, and on opening up further we saw that the second egg had been laid—it was upright, with the smaller end downward. The second egg was about on a level with the first, but on the opposite side of what we call the "egg chamber." This "egg