

THE SOUTHERN STONE-CURLEW

(*BURHINUS MAGNIROSTRIS*)

By J. NEIL MCGILP.

My experience with the Southern Stone-Curlew dates back to my boyhood days, when as a lad I caught two young birds and gave them to an elderly aunt. She was most interested in birds, more particularly those that she could let run loose in her garden and paddocks. After a few weeks the young Stone-Curlews (often also known as Stone-Plovers) had grown sufficiently to permit of their wings being pinioned and they were given the freedom of the garden. They turned out to be a male and a female, and about twelve months later two eggs were laid and hatched out. These young birds and others reared in later years were never pinioned; they seemed quite satisfied with their home and other than by short flights over the property never left it. It is worthy of note that, although a number of young and older birds died from time to time, the flock had increased to sixteen birds in some 12 to 14 years.

At one time the Curlew was fairly numerous; it could be found wherever there was open forest or sparse scrub in most parts of the State. It stands about two feet high and has large yellow eyes and greenish, lanky legs. It is of a greyish brown color with quite a large conspicuous white dot on the wings; white forehead and eyebrow (extending well down the neck), and a few blackish longitudinal lines on an otherwise whitish breast and abdomen. It is seldom seen, but its remarkable call can be heard in almost every suitable locality during the night. Its flight is almost noiseless, but somewhat labored; the head is held at full length and rather below the level of the body and the legs are held straight out behind in line with

the body. When disturbed the Curlew does not fly any great distance; it soon settles to the ground, remains almost stationary for a few seconds and then sneaks away in a crouching manner. Under natural conditions the "Wer-loo" call is seldom heard during daylight, but in captivity no preference is shown. In captivity the bird is long-lived; there is a record of a bird in a garden in a suburb of Sydney celebrating its twenty-ninth birthday in 1934.

The weird wailing call, somewhat resembling "Wer-loo" and the loud piercing shriek of alarm are well known. The almost eerie call of "Wer-loo" is given whilst the bird stands, with the wings outspread and both feet "marking time." Several calls are made as the bird remains on the same spot, then it runs a few yards and repeats the performance. At other times a chuckling, almost cackling note is given as one bird calls to another.

What might be termed the courtship dance is very spectacular. The male runs, weaving and bowing from side to side until he is some ten yards, or even more from his mate, then he turns and in a similar, but more courtly and dignified slower manner returns to her. This routine is repeated twice and sometimes thrice before the female, who, although to all appearance has viewed his efforts with the utmost disdain, immediately leads her mate a merry chase through the undergrowth or low bushes before meeting his advances.

Many species of birds are known to show great bravery in seeking to protect their young from danger, but few, if any of them, could be more courageous than the Curlew.

The parents adopt a most threatening attitude without thought of their own peril in an attempt to drive the intruder away. The wings are spread outwardly and downwardly so that the primary feathers touch the ground, the feathers of the head and neck being ruffled extensively. The parents, with the wings scraping along the ground and thereby causing a hollow, drumming sound, rush towards what they recognise as a danger in an endeavor to distract attention from their offspring. In such attitudes they appeared to be quite fearsome creatures. They sometimes pretend injury (e.g., the "broken wing" trick) to lure the intruder away from the nest or young. Whilst this is going on the chicks, at their parents' bidding, have sought safety by crouching flat on the ground in any available herbage. In this position they are hard to detect, and when seen, do not look unlike large hairy spiders or caterpillars.

Mr. A. C. Minchin once reported (1) that in the Adelaide Zoological Gardens he and others had seen the female running along carrying one chick under each wing with the chick's heads protruding forward.

The Curlew does not build a nest; the eggs, two in number, are laid on the bare ground, generally amidst a few sticks or close to a fallen log. Both birds share in the incubation and sit fairly closely to the eggs, apparently relying upon their somewhat drab, but not protective coloration, to escape detection. The writer has passed within a few feet of a sitting bird without seeing her until it took fright at a dog which accompanied him.

When disturbed from the nest, the Curlew usually endeavors to sneak away in a crouching manner, and it will often, if it thinks it has been seen, particularly if the eggs are close to hatching or the young are just emerging from the shell, resort to the "broken wing" trick.

The eggs are very handsome, the ground color being of a greyish or stone color, with blotches and mottlings of darker grey, green, olive and/or umber. They are pyriform in shape, being somewhat sharply pointed at one end; and the surface of the shell is without lustre. The eggs vary a good deal in length, ranging from 2.2 inches to 2.5 inches; the width is more constant and ap-

proximates 1.5 inches. The foregoing description applies to the eggs usually found in South Australia. The writer has received several sets of eggs of quite a warm reddish color from the Northern Territory, and eggs from Kangaroo Island which were fairly consistently of a greyer color than those from the mainland of the State.

It has been said that the Curlew lays eggs of a color closely conforming with the general color of their nesting environment. If this were so, one would expect to find reddish colored eggs in the northern areas of the State, where the soils are very distinctly reddish, but so far as the writer is aware, this does not happen. The difference in color is probably due more to the climatic conditions or to the available food supply, rather than to the bird's ability to lay the different colored eggs at will.

Although two eggs form the usual clutch, there have been several records of three eggs having been found in a sitting. Mr. A. F. Lashmar (2), when out hunting on Kangaroo Island, disturbed three Curlews out of a small patch of open scrub, and when passing the same spot several days later, he again put up the three birds. He searched about and found a set of four eggs. He suggested, and he is probably correct, that two of the birds were females and that they had laid a combination clutch.

When hatched the young are clothed in a soft greyish down. There is a darker line of grey running along each side of the back, with the ends of the lines converging towards the head and tail. Another dark grey line runs along the wings. The young are able to leave the nest (?) a short time after they are born, and even at such early age, can move about quite strongly. When alarmed or warned by the parents, the chicks seek to escape detection by lying flat upon the ground, usually in herbage should it be available.

For many years the Curlew has gradually decreased in numbers, and has almost disappeared from its customary haunts, and it was feared that this once fairly common bird might have to be written off as almost extinct. The reason generally given for the birds' disappearance is that the fox is the main agent in the destruction.

There are no foxes on Kangaroo Island where the Curlew is holding its own. Mr.

H. T. Condon reported (3) that Curlews were numerous on Reevesby Island off Eyre's Peninsula, which is also free from foxes. Mr. H. H. Finlayson, on his return from the Petermann Ranges, Central Australia some 12 years ago, informed the writer that he had found Curlews very numerous at Piltardi Rockhole in the Ranges, but he mentioned, in the course of conversation, that he had seen no evidence to indicate that foxes, although present, were at all numerous. These facts supports the contention that the fox is the main destroying agent, but if this is so, why have the plovers, both Spur-winged and Banded, not only held their numbers, but are (in the writer's opinion) definitely on the increase? It must be admitted that the plovers are lovers of open grassy plain and cleared land, and the clearing of scrub has increased their natural feeding grounds. Curlews, on the other hand, delight to roam amongst timber and open scrub. The development of land by the removal of trees and shrubs has consequently reduced the usual habitat of the Curlew, and apparently it has been unable or slow to adapt itself to the altered conditions, and seek out more suitable areas. Both the Plovers and the Curlew are ground-nesting birds, and in the writer's opinion, the fox—unless he has a keener palate for Curlew meat—would be unlikely to select the Curlews' nests in preference to robbing Plovers' nests. It should be remembered that whilst Plovers move about in the daytime, the Curlews prefer the hours of darkness, and as the fox is a "night raider," he would have more opportunity to hunt up Curlews.

Many years ago, when out hunting and accompanied by a red setter dog, the writer noticed the dog stop suddenly and "point" towards a clump of small shrubs, from which a few seconds later a Curlew was disturbed. Perhaps the dog had seen the bird rather than had scented it, but the thought arose that possibly the Curlew carries with it a "scent" which is alluring to a dog. Many of our game birds have a scent or spoor, and maybe the Curlew can be added to that group. If this is the case, it would provide a clue as to why the fox apparently chooses the Curlew as his prey more frequently than he takes a Plover.

The writer has for many years been very interested in the way in which Curlews have continued to become less numerous, and has always ventured to hope that the retrogression is but a passing phase in the birds' history. It will be remembered that about thirty years ago the Red-rumped Grass Parrot (*Psephotus haematonotus*), previously very numerous, with startling suddenness, became a very rare bird about Adelaide and Mid-Northern areas, only in more recent years to have increased to its former population.

From personal observations made during the past three or four years when quite a few Curlews were seen or heard, the writer expresses the opinion and the hope that the Curlews are likely to become more plentiful than they have been for many years.

REFERENCES.

- (1) Zeitz, F. R., 1917, S.A. Orn., 3 (2), 44.
- (2) Lashmar, A., 1937. *Ibid.*, 14 (3), 60.
- (3) Condon, H. T., 1938. *Ibid.*, 14 (7), 190.