NOTES FROM THE NORTH
(By B. C. NEWLAND)

The bird population of the Flinders Range country seems smaller this year than in the more favorable seasons of the past few years. Dry creeks and austere vegetation have sent many birds to seek more bountiful conditions elsewhere. No doubt some of the numerous ducks of the upper Murray are refugees from the drying waters of the north, where few are to be seen. On a recent trip to Copley, Mt. Serle, Wertaloona, and through the Lake Frome country I saw only three. Even the galahs and corellas seemed to be fewer.

Though total numbers may be down, there is still much to interest the bird watcher in the activities of those that remain.

Crested Bronzewings (Ocyphaps lophotes) were in their usual not very large numbers. They seem to know that their habit of perching on dead trees in the morning sunshine displays their subtle and elusive coloring to the best advantage. One pair of Peaceful Doves (Geopelia placida) was seen, and others heard. Like the Crested Bellbird (Oreoica gutturalis), also present, it is more often heard than seen. On the flats surrounding Lake Frome, there are a few quail of undetermined species. They probably nest there.

The Wedge-tailed Eagle (Aquila audax) had not noticeably decreased; these harsh hills seem their proper domain. Rabbits are scarce, possibly due to trappers who have set up freezers at various points in the area. The eagles and the trappers are at war. The eagles rob the traps and the trappers retaliate. North of the Gammon Ranges I saw an eagle fast by both legs in a trap that had obviously been set and baited for it. Two other eagles were on the ground nearby. There was nothing I could do but kill the suffering bird. It seems a little hard that the eagle should be punished for both his vices and his virtues. While often shot for taking an occasional lamb, he is praised as a killer of rabbits, and now the trappers trap him on that account.

Of course, eagles are great carrion eaters. One morning I shot a kangaroo for meat. Before the job of skinning was well begun, the air was vibrant with the wing beats of the ubiquitous crow. After them came the eagles. Starting as mere specks high over the ranges three swiftly arrived in long, straight glides. The crows, now swarming over the carcass like ants, had to make way. Shortly afterwards, a fourth and truly magnificent eagle “zeroed” in, drove off the first arrivals, and feasted solitary until sated. It was a young bird, judging by its very pale plumage, and had a youthful appetite. For nearly three hours it gorged, and at last lumbered off, scarcely able to fly, leaving the remains to the lesser carrion eaters.

Meanwhile a Goshawk (Accipiter fasciatus) had surveyed the scene from on high and then sailed disdainfully away. This was the only goshawk observed.

Another carrion eater usually to be seen displaying its graceful aerobatics over the towns and homesteads is the Black Kite (Milvus migrans). This handsome bird, while less numerous than last year, was seemingly more widely distributed (or perhaps our eyes were sharper), for we noted one as far south as Giles’ Corner. Last year at Leigh Creek they were many as flies over meat. This year I cannot say, as we did not visit Leigh Creek.

Weight for weight, the finest of the birds of prey—so I think—is the falcon. Fearless of habit and swift of flight, it is an aristocrat of the air. We saw two. A Black Falcon (Falco subniger), glossy as a crow, passed us near Mern Merna; and at Erudina a Little Falcon (Falco longipennis) gazed at us steadily from the woolshed hoist. Perhaps there may have been a third; from the summit of Mt. Serle an eagle was seen, flying less stately than usual through a gorge below, and after it in aggressive pursuit a small grey bird. One or other was uttering a high chattering cry; we could not tell which. Was the pursuer the rather rare Grey Falcon (Falco hypoleucus)?

Small birds were fewer than last year, and more isolated. One or two Red-capped Robins (Petroica goodenovii), several Mistletoe birds (Dicaeum hirundinaceum), a Hooded Robin (Melanodryas cucullata), a few unidentified wrens, and two Blue and White Wrens in the saltbush country between Beltana and Copley.
There were, of course, the usual family parties of White-browed Babbler (*Pomatostomus superciliosus*) in the hills. Rain fell for days and they were always busy in the morning without regarding it.

At the Italowie Gap Butcher-birds (*Cracticus torquatus*) were numerous, and their notes sounded all along the creek. The only rival in song, the Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater (*Anthornis rufogularis*), was heard less often. Magpies, of either sort, were scarce.

One of the most interesting places we saw, where the activities of the animal kingdom could be watched in comfort, was a small fresh-water lake in the North-East. About half a mile to a mile across, it lay in a saucer-shaped depression, and was fringed with a belt of rushes. Here numerous waterfowl took their pleasure. Many Black Swans (*Cygnus atratus*), Maned Geese (*Chenonetta jubata*), Teal (*Anas sp.*), Black Duck (*Anas superciliosa*); some Ibises (*Threskiornis molucca*) and Grebes (small sp.); a few dotterels and herons (*Notophoyx novae-hollandiae*); these were the chief inhabitants, and we lacked time to seek the smaller denizens.

A Little Eagle (*Hieraaetus morphnoides*) soared aloft and swooped down, talons extended, upon a small group of teal; to our surprise, and theirs, too. Not seeming to care much, they scattered away for a few yards, easily avoiding the Little Eagle, whose attempt appeared only half-hearted. He then made a pass at a pair of dotterels, which likewise evaded him, and he settled disconsolately in the rushes, and that was the last of his aggressions that we saw.

At the lake shore a similar drama was taking place. A fox, emerging from the low bush beyond, began to stalk a White-faced Heron whose head he could see above some rushes where it fed. We could watch the whole play from the higher ground. The fox succeeded in crossing the opening space between the bush and the rushes undetected and in gaining the cover of the rushes. We could see his back as he gained ground on the heron. Suddenly the heron shot up his neck, saw his danger, and hurriedly taking to the air flapped off to safety. The fox slunk away, probably muttering about sour grapes, and perhaps he and the Little Eagle went hungry together.

The wide swamps where the Siccus River (so named by Frome because it was dry, and also called the Pasmore River and Wilpena Creek) floods out into Lake Frome were thick with small birds, but we lacked time to work on them. It is no place to be caught by rain; it was threatening as we passed, and fell next day.

The ranges themselves at this time are not attractive to many species of birds. Water is scarce, few flowers are in bloom, and much of the bird population appears to have moved away until better times.