

OLIVE STONES, STARLINGS AND FOXES

I have long assumed that the dispersal of olive trees over the previously grassy slopes of the Adelaide Hills had been due to birds muting the seeds during flight. The situation of the olive trees in open places is such that the stones could not have been egested whilst the birds were perched on trees. Starlings certainly frequent olive trees in fruit and are numerous, but do they mute the stones in flight? It would be interesting to know if anyone has ever observed this. Magpies also have been suggested to me as possible vectors but the seedings are far too numerous for these birds to be alone responsible. Is it possible that other animals can be blamed for distributing some of the trees and bushes that have succulent fruits within their reach (or are on the ground)? I have been reliably informed that fox droppings have been seen at times to contain boxthorn berries and they have been seen eating blackberries. In March 1968 at Woolshed Gully in the Cleland National Park my grandson, David Paton, noted olive stones in a dropping almost certainly belonging to a fox. Therefore it seems possible that foxes, too, could assist in the dispersal of potentially noxious plants that happen to produce fruits attractive to them. One wonders also about sleepy lizards as vectors. But presumably birds still remain the main agents, so further observations on the species of birds involved in this egestion of comparatively weighty stones in flight would be welcome. An olive growing in the top of the Cathedral at North Adelaide must have been from a stone passed by a Starling, or possibly a pigeon.

J. B. CLELAND.