

## SOUTHERN BREEDING OF THE GROUND CUCKOO-SHRIKE

by JOHN ECKERT

The Ground Cuckoo-Shrike *Pteropodocys maxima* was not known in the Strathalbyn district until May 9, 1966, when G. D. Whittlesea reported two birds, which he thought to be this species, feeding on a paddock which he was cultivating near Langhorne Creek. I investigated the report and confirmed his identification. A week later, probably the same two birds were feeding on a grass paddock on my property, "Nappyala," and flew off to some nearby sheoaks when disturbed. On July 8, Len Potts observed a single Ground Cuckoo-Shrike feeding on the ground amongst vines close to the Langhorne Creek township. This bird frequented the same spot for several days.

In 1967 a pair were seen four miles west of Milang on May 15. Four days later a flock of four were present on my property and an adult female specimen was taken. The other three remained and four days later were joined by five more. This flock stayed in the vicinity until early June. On July 13, L. Potts again noticed a single bird in vines near Langhorne Creek.

In January, 1968, John Endersby saw a pair near Finniss, this being the only sighting for that year, while in 1969 the species was not recorded at all. However, in 1970, H. Laybourne-Smith saw five at Chauncey's Line on June 14, while on June 21, K. Burzacott sighted a flock of six which stayed for several days on his property at Mulgundawa. H. C. Harvey observed a pair near his home at Hartley on July 26; and the presence of a pair with spring approaching gave hope that the birds might remain to breed, but there were no further sightings that year.

That local breeding may have occurred seemed possible when on February 12, 1971, a flock of six visited my property and were closely viewed for some time by myself and Dr. J. Fairley. We considered that the party comprised two adults and four immatures. The younger birds had paler plumage and were still fed occasionally by the presumed adults. Four were seen about a mile away on February 26, and then no more sightings came until August 28, when L. Potts saw

three flying over Langhorne Creek, and eight days later noted a single bird feeding in the vines.

On October 31, C. Sim was told by E. Cross that a pair of what were obviously this species had bred on the property of his son, V. Cross, three miles north of Milang. They had first been noticed late in November and had been seen with a flying juvenile only the previous day. They had usually been seen in one particular paddock, and when disturbed had usually flown off towards an isolated Pink Gum. This gum had not been closely examined because the Cross's did not wish to unduly disturb the birds; but examination that day revealed a nest, built mainly of wool and fine material, placed in a horizontal fork some thirty feet from the ground. I secured the nest a week later and found some of the distinctive barred feathers of the Ground Cuckoo-Shrike present on the structure. The birds were not seen again in this locality after October, although two were seen near Langhorne Creek on November 11, by T. Potts and were still there until November 15. In 1972 a flock of five was seen near Milang by C. Sim on June 4. This flock stayed for about two weeks on the property of L. Deer, who found that actually six were present. A pair seen at Belvidere on July 19 by B. Eckert was the only other record. In the first half of 1973 a pair feeding at the side of the main road at Belvidere on March 31, and a flock of four seen about a mile east of this spot on April 28, completed the known occurrences in the district to that time.

The nesting near Milang seems to be the most southerly recorded in this State, E. F. Boehm's record from Sutherlands (90 miles north-north-east) being the previous furthest south. The Ground Cuckoo-Shrike has become recorded as a breeding species here a little over five years since its first known appearance. Because of its unobtrusive habits, it may have visited the district on odd occasions in former years and been overlooked. However, the area is sufficiently well covered by observers to suggest that the absence of records prior to 1966, and the

frequency since, is a definite indication of influx into this area in recent years. Although the species is basically a winter visitor, recent records at various other times of the year suggest that it is becoming more resident in the area. The situation appears to have affinity with that mentioned by E. A. R. Lord in the Murphy's Creek district of Queensland. Lord (*Emu*, 56, 117) stated, "First recorded on May 8, 1935, then for

some years they arrived in late autumn and left in September. They gradually became established and are now permanent residents, breeding from October to January." It is likely that the species, known as a nomadic inhabitant of the dry inland plains, has benefited by the clearing of mallee scrub for agricultural purposes and is able to expand now into areas which were formerly unsuitable for it.