

BIRDS OF THE MULLIGAN RIVER AND ADJACENT SIMPSON DESERT AREA

D. M. CORNISH and R. ELLIS

Received August, 1973.

In June, 1973, we travelled in a party of 13, 130 km by boat down the Mulligan River from Lake Muncoonie in south-west Queensland to old Alton Downs homestead in South Australia. It was only the fourth time since 1900 that this unique journey was possible. Because of widespread rains in Queensland, the Mulligan River (also known as the Eyre, Georgina or Herbert in South Australia) flowed strongly across the border between the dunes of the Simpson Desert. In good seasons floodwaters from the Mulligan can reach Goyder Lagoon. Lake Muncoonie, is about 100 km north-west of Birdsville. The boat trip lasted six days, during which members of the party alternated between the boat and the vehicles, which followed the river.

The Mulligan flows through the eastern margin of the Simpson Desert, which here consists of numerous high parallel sand dunes, as much as 90 feet high and running in a N.N.W. direction. The dunes are separated by flat clay pans or gibber plains, and at the time were well covered with small shrubs and large clumps of canegrass *Zygochloa paradoxa*. The crests, however, were usually bare, and on windy days a plume of fine sand could be seen "smoking" from them.

Many ephemerals were growing on the claypans, which in places were carpeted with green. Towards the end of the trip, on the claypans which had only recently been flooded, there had not been time for vegetation to become established; and travel became impossible for the support vehicles.

The Mulligan is lined with Coolabah trees *Eucalyptus microtheca*, lignums *Muehlenbeckia cunninghamii*, Wattles *Acacia* spp. and occasional specimens of Sturt's bean tree *Erythrina vespertilio*. One fine specimen of the rare Waddy *Acacia peuce* was seen in the nearby desert just inside the Queensland border.

Most observations were made in the vicinity of the river. Because of the very favourable conditions, water birds were very common. Grey teal *Anas gibberifrons* were breeding and many day old chicks were seen from the boat. Many hawks were seen, including a pair of the rare Black-breasted Buzzards *Hamirostra melanosternon*. Other groups common in the area were the woodswallows and parrots.

A total of 67 species was identified with certainty. These species are listed below with comments on their status according to our observations. A thorough land search was not possible because of the lack of time, and not all species present may have been recorded.

List of Birds Seen on and near Mulligan River June 14-20, 1973.

		Status
Little Grebe	<i>Podiceps novaehollandiae</i>	B
Pelican	<i>Pelicanus conspicillatus</i>	D
Black Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	B
Pied Cormorant	<i>P. varius</i>	B
White-faced Heron	<i>Ardea novaehollandiae</i>	E
White-necked Heron	<i>A. pacifica</i>	E
Straw-necked Ibis	<i>Threskiornis spinicollis</i>	F
Glossy Ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>	B
Royal Spoonbill	<i>P. flavipes</i>	F
Yellow-billed Spoonbill	<i>Platalea regia</i>	B
Black Swan	<i>Cygnus atratus</i>	B
Freckled Duck	<i>Stictonetta naevosa</i>	D
Grey Teal	<i>Anas gibberifrons</i>	F
Pink-eared Duck	<i>Malacorhynchus membranaceus</i>	F
White-eyed Duck	<i>Aythya australis</i>	D
Wood Duck	<i>Chenonetta jubata</i>	F
Fork-tailed Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	E
Black-breasted Buzzard Kite	<i>Hamirostra melanosternon</i>	B (two)
Whistling Kite	<i>Haliastur sphenurus</i>	E
Brown Goshawk	<i>Accipiter fasciatus</i>	E
Wedge-tailed Eagle	<i>Aquila audax</i>	E
Black Falcon	<i>Falco subniger</i>	D
Nankeen Kestrel	<i>F. cenchroides</i>	E
Black-tailed Native Hen	<i>Gallinula ventralis</i>	E

Goot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	D
Bustard	<i>Ardeotis australis</i>	D
Banded Plover	<i>Vanellus tricolor</i>	E
Black-fronted Dotterel	<i>Charadrius melanops</i>	D
Red-kneed Dotterel	<i>C. cinctus</i>	D
Australian Dotterel	<i>Peltohyas australis</i>	F
Avocet	<i>Recurvirostra novaehollandiae</i>	C
Silver Gull	<i>Larus novaehollandiae</i>	D
Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne tschegrava</i>	C
Crested Pigeon	<i>Ocyphaps lophotes</i>	D
Little Corella	<i>Cacatua sanguinea</i>	G
Galah	<i>C. roseicapella</i>	G
Cockatiel	<i>Nymphicus hollandicus</i>	E
Budgerygah	<i>Melopsittacus undulatus</i>	G
Pallid Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus pallidus</i>	E
Horsfield Bronze Cuckoo	<i>Chrysococcyx basalis</i>	B
Barn Owl	<i>Tyto alba</i>	B (heard)
Boobook Owl	<i>Ninox novaeseelandiae</i>	B (heard)
Owlet Nightjar	<i>Aegotheles cristatus</i>	E
Red-backed Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon pyrrhopygius</i>	B
Rainbow Bird	<i>Merops ornatus</i>	B (one)
Fairy Martin	<i>Petrochelidon ariel</i>	G
Black-faced Cuckoo-Shrike	<i>Coracina novaehollandiae</i>	E
White-winged Triller	<i>Lalage sueurii</i>	G
Cinnamon Quail-Thrush	<i>Cinclosoma cinnamomeum</i>	D
Rufous Songlark	<i>Cincloramphus mathewsi</i>	G
Crimson Chat	<i>Ephthianura tricolor</i>	E
Orange Chat	<i>E. aurifrons</i>	D
Desert Chat	<i>Ashbyia lovensis</i>	D
Yellow-tailed Thornbill	<i>Acanthiza chrysorrhea</i>	C
Blue and White Wren	<i>Malurus eucopterus</i>	E
Purple-backed Wren	<i>M. lamberti mastersi</i>	E
Willie Wagtail	<i>Rhipidura leucophrys</i>	E
Red-browed Pardalote	<i>Pardalotus rubricatus</i>	E
White-plumed Honeyeater	<i>Meliphaga penicillata</i>	E
Yellow-throated Miner	<i>Manorina flavigula</i>	E
Zebra Finch	<i>Poephila guttata</i>	E
Magpie Lark	<i>Grallina cyanoleuca</i>	E
White-breasted Wood Swallow	<i>Artamus leucorhynchus</i>	E
Masked Wood Swallow	<i>A. personatus</i>	E
White-browed Wood Swallow	<i>A. superciliosus</i>	F
Magpie	<i>Gymnorhina tibicen</i>	E
Corvids	<i>Corvus spp.</i>	E

Status Ratings:

A—one bird recorded

B—under five recorded once

C—under 10 recorded once

D—under 10 recorded occasionally

E—in small numbers throughout

F—in large numbers throughout

G—in hundreds throughout

The records above seem to extend the known range of some species. Although neither the Little Pied Cormorant *Phalacrocorax melanoleucos* nor the Little Black *P. sulcirostris* was recorded, the Black *P. Carbo* and the Pied *P. varius* were seen on Lake Muncoonie, north-west of Birdsville. C. E. Rix (pers. comm.) saw both species nesting on Coongie Lakes (also in the Far North-East) in September, 1973. The sighting of the Yellow-tailed Thornbill *Acanthiza chrysorrhoa* near the border of S.A. and Queensland seems also to be an extension of range (Storr, 1973, *Handlist of Queensland Birds*).

General Observations

From the boat we saw a large bird apparently floundering in the water. As we neared it a Whistling Kite *Haliastur sphenurus* flapped heavily out of the water, leaving behind a half-drowned but very relieved Coot *Fulica atra* which quickly swam to the safety of the bank.

We were very disturbed at the presence of feral cats in this remote area. We saw at least eight, all a tan tabby colour, possibly an established breeding population. One was seen in a Whistling Kite's nest, indicative of the toll they exact on birdlife in the area.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

W. E. Matheson prepared the report of this trip for publication. C. E. Rix and S. A. Parker critically examined the bird-list and made helpful comments.