

OBSERVATIONS OF THE FLOCK PIGEON IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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INTRODUCTION

The endemic Flock Pigeon *Phaps histrionica* appears to have declined in number since settlement (Frith 1982). Early records speak of the Flock Pigeon in "countless multitudes, immense numbers" and "countless myriads". In 1931 flocks estimated at 20,000 and 80,000 to 100,000 were reported from Queensland (Blakers *et al.* 1984). Today even in their stronghold of the Barkly Tableland and adjacent Northwest Queensland flocks comprising of up to 1,000 birds are considered large (Williams 1970, Slater 1987).

In response to good seasons the Flock Pigeon extends its range east as far as Townsville in Queensland, west to the Kimberley region and south into western New South Wales and NE South Australia (Pizzey & Doyle 1980, Frith 1982).

The records of the Flock Pigeon detailed here are my recent personal observations in the Far North and Far North-East of South Australia.

OBSERVATIONS

In all cases the observations were made in "good seasons" and in similar habitat ie. gibber and sand plains covered with native grasses adjacent to Cane Grass *Zygochloa paradoxa* covered sand dunes.

MOOMBA REGION

Approximately 40 km NE of Moomba, June 1984.

Late in the afternoon I observed three flocks of Flock Pigeons flying fast and high in a south-east direction over the Moomba to Innamincka road. There were two flocks of *ca* 20 birds and one of *ca* 60.

Habitat — Open grassy plains fringed by well vegetated sand dunes.

Rainfall for Moomba 1984 — 315 mm (190 mm average).

Approximately 50 km NE of Moomba, September 1984.

In early morning, accompanied by Sue Fraser and Mr. and Mrs. M. Rohrlach, I again sighted Flock Pigeons on the Innamincka to Moomba road. Four birds flushed from a shallow pool of water beside the road, one (an adult male) allowed us to observe it for several minutes from *ca* 25 m before flying off in a north-west direction.

Habitat and rainfall as in the June 84 observation.

Moomba to Tirrawarra Road, October 1987.

Accompanied by Gil Coulthard, I observed eight Flock Pigeons on the Moomba to Tirrawarra road. The sightings comprised of two separate pairs, both observed in the early morning and a third flock containing four birds observed in the late afternoon. The pigeons were drinking from clay "borrow pits", excavated near the roadside.

Habitat — grass covered sandy plains fringed by sand dunes.

Rainfall for Moomba 1987 — 263.2 mm (190 mm average).

WITJIRA NATIONAL PARK

2-10 July 1988.

My first sighting of Flock Pigeons for the Park was on the morning of 2 July 1988 on the Dalhousie to Purnie Bore road at the eastern end of the Spring Creek Delta. At this location I observed many flocks of Flock Pigeon both on the ground and flying, most comprising between 20-50 birds. During the following week I revisited the area on two occasions and obtained photographs of several adult pairs.

July–November 1988.

During this period I returned to the Park on three occasions. On each visit I located Flock Pigeons in various areas of the Park including the Gibber Plain country north and north-west of the Spring Creek Delta and on the western side of the Park in the vicinity of the Federal Waterhole. The largest flock encountered was near Boomina Dam approximately 20 km east of Mt Dare Homestead, this flock contained between 120–150 birds.

On the morning of 13 October 1988 at Dalhousie Springs campground R. Young and I observed an immature Flock Pigeon. Flying in from a southerly direction, the bird landed approximately 20 m from our position and walked a short distance to the edge of the main spring. After drinking it walked within 20 m of us occasionally pecking at the ground, quite unconcerned at our presence. The bird appeared to be of female plumage but duller than usual, and was considerably smaller than the adults which I had previously observed from similar distances. After several minutes the pigeon flew off in a southerly direction, displaying the inexperienced flight behaviour of an immature bird that had only recently learnt to fly.

Habitat — Gibber and sand plains predominantly covered with Mitchell Grass *Astebula sp.* adjacent to sand dunes covered with Cane Grass.

Rainfall — Hamilton Station (adjoining the Park to the west) 285 mm — 1988 (average rainfall 100 mm).

January–July 1989.

Although access to the Park during the first half of the year was limited due to severe flooding, I made several visits and on each occasion Flock Pigeons were present in good numbers.

October 10 1989, specimen from Mt Dare Homestead.

Rhonda Hellyer of Mt Dare Homestead found a Flock Pigeon in the back yard of the homestead during the afternoon of 9 October 1989. Examining the bird several hours later I noticed that it was extremely weak and reluctant to fly. Attempts to revive the bird with food and water were unsuccessful, it was dead the following

morning. Later identified as a sub-adult female, the specimen is now lodged with the Adelaide Museum, registered number B45943. The description below has been made from the prepared specimen.

Plumage: Bird moulting from worn juvenile plumage to adult female plumage. Belly dark blue-grey. Chest, flanks and mantle new plumage, all dark reddish-brown (as in adult females), a few slightly faded and worn feathers remaining in mantle.

Alula and primary coverts new, grey, edged white. Innermost five primaries new, grey with fine pale-brown edge. Outermost primaries, secondaries, median and greater coverts worn with traces of light brown tips remaining.

Facial markings as for adult female plumage (as illustrated in Slater 1989) but its forehead is a similar colour to its crown (instead of pale) and its throat area is white, speckled blackish, instead of the dark adult female pattern.

Age: Despite some juvenile plumage characteristics, during the preparation of the skin it was noted that the oviduct was 'enlarged and convoluted'; an indication that the bird had bred.

July 1988, Ross Creek, Hamilton Station adjoining Witjra N.P.

Paul Jonas (pers. comm.) saw a single flock of between 200–300 birds at Ross Creek.

GOYDERS LAGOON

Approximately 20 km S of Goyders Lagoon, 5 July 1989.

At mid-morning, Hilda Hewitson, Ruth Aspley and I observed a small flock of Flock Pigeons flush from a large pool of water beside the road. Other small flocks were sighted flying low and fast while circling in our vicinity. Concealed behind Cane Grass near the water we observed several small flocks land nearby. The birds ran quickly to the waters edge, drank nervously and then flew off. In total about 30 Flock Pigeons were observed in flocks of six to eight birds.

Habitat — Sandy plains and dry Lignum Swamps intersected by low sand dunes.

Rainfall — No record for the area.

DISCUSSION

Most records of this species for South Australia come from the north-east, particularly the Upper Cooper and Diamantina Rivers (Blakers *et al.*

1984; Reese 1924, 1927a, 1927b, 1927c, 1931a, 1931b, 1932, 1933; Cox and Pedler 1977). There is also a breeding record from Lake Hope on the Lower Cooper by Samuel White in 1863 (in Parker 1980) and a specimen from Lake Palankarina also on the Lower Cooper (Lawson 1958).

It is possible that a small population of Flock Pigeons exists in the north-east even in times of drought, increasing dramatically with an influx of birds from the Barkly Tableland and Western Queensland during good seasons.

My observations during 1988 and 1989 suggest that significant numbers of Flock Pigeons may also occur regularly in the Far Northern region of the state. It is therefore possible that given a series of good seasons perhaps we could once again see Flock Pigeons in large numbers.

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